

# Let There Be Light

By Bryce Lowe

In the days and months immediately following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Hollywood studio executives, directors, actors and film industry professionals either volunteered or accepted commissions to enlist in the armed forces. Many members of the Hollywood motion picture community were assigned to either the First Motion Picture Unit, a division of the Air Force, or the Signal Corps Army Pictorial Service creating training films for enlisted personnel as well as producing short subject and documentary films aimed at manufacturing and sustaining public support for the war effort.



*Frame enlargement of a US Army psychiatrist treating a traumatized veteran with hypnotherapy. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

John Huston was among several notable film directors who served in the military during World War II. In April 1942 Huston reported for active duty in Washington, DC at the U.S. Army Signal Corps headquarters. In a 1981 televised interview Huston remembered being “immensely honored” to receive a commission to serve in the Army. “When the invitation to get a commission and get into the Army came to me... why, I couldn’t act quickly enough. Captain Sy Bartlett, was kind of an envoy from Washington, also a Hollywood writer... there was a list of people... Anatole Litvak, [William] Wyler, [John] Ford... Frank Capra... a number who were asked to come into the service. And I was the least of these.” Itching for action and hoping to make combat films, his first months proved frustrating as he languished in an empty office. “They [the Signal Corps] put me behind a desk... and it was, it was ghastly, it was terrible. What I wanted, you know, I wanted to be out with a camera in the field.

Huston directed three documentaries during the war years – “Report from the Aleutians” (1943), “The Battle of San Pietro” (1945) and “Let There Be Light” (1946). Huston’s second film for the War Department, “The Battle of San Pietro,” was not well received upon its initial screening for high-ranking military brass in Washington. Huston recalled the screening: “I knew they were in for something of a surprise. But I wasn’t prepared for the shock with which they received it. A three-star general got up and walked out and that set the pattern. The next thing, a two-star general walked out. And then the one-star generals began to leave and the colonels, the lieutenant colonels... And finally I was left alone

with the lowest ranking officer in the Pentagon next to me ...” In his autobiography “An Open Book,” Huston claimed the War Department rejected the film because it was perceived as promoting an anti-war message. “The Army argued the film would be demoralizing to men who were going into combat for the first time”. Only after the personal intervention of Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall was the film rescued from obscurity and released theatrically.

The provocative and poignant documentary style Huston favored culminated in his third and final film for the War Department. However, the military’s visceral opposition to “Let There Be Light” proved too insurmountable to overcome. The Army successfully suppressed public exhibition of the film for nearly thirty-five years. Unfortunately, Huston lamented, “there was no George C. Marshall around to save this one.”

In 1945 as the Allied forces advanced in Europe and in Asia, the War Department approached Huston to make a film with the intent of educating the American general public about psycho-neurosis and, more significantly, the business community that servicemen who had undergone psychological treatment were competent and employable. According to Huston, with the war coming to a close, the military wanted “a film to show industry that nervous and emotional casualties were not lunatics; because at that time these men weren’t getting jobs.”

“Let There Be Light” is arguably the most personal of the three documentaries Huston made during World

War II. Having been subjected to perpetual German artillery shelling and prolonged aerial bombing operations during the filming of “The Battle of San Pietro,” Huston would experience reoccurring nightmares and psychological distress. “For months I had been living in a dead man’s world... Emotionally I was still in Italy in a combat zone. I couldn’t sleep because there was no guns going. I’d been living for months with the sound of artillery in the background, all night long, every night. In Italy, when the guns stopped, you’d wake up and listen. Here [in New York City], I was missing them in my sleep. I was suffering a mild form of anxiety neurosis.”

Possessing a directorial preference for filming factual, unscripted documentaries “Let There Be Light” was shot on location by Huston and Stanley Cortez at Mason General Hospital, Long Island, New York over several months. In his autobiography Huston recounts the reasons behind the selection of Mason General: “I visited a number of Army hospitals during the research phase, and finally settled on Mason General Hospital on Long Island as the best place to make a picture. It was the biggest in the East, and the officers and doctors there were the most sympathetic and willing.”

Huston elected to document the psychotherapy treatment and rehabilitation of a group of servicemen from their arrival at Mason General until their discharge. In collaboration with screenwriter Charles Kaufman, Huston authored the script for “Let There Be Light” as the picture was being filmed, and recruited his father Walter Huston to narrate. Huston described the condition of the men as being “deplorable.” He recalled, “there were people who couldn’t walk who had to be carried in and who were not paralyzed for any functional reason... who had hysterics, and men who couldn’t talk and men who couldn’t remember... amnesia, aphasia, stammerers and men with terrible, violent ticks and so on.” The three month film shoot would have a profound and lasting personal impact on Huston. Thirty-five years later Huston described filming “Let There Be Light” as a “religious experience.” “It made me begin to realize that the primary ingredient in psychological health is love; the ability to give love and to receive it.”

Huston was not present when “Let There Be Light” was initially screened at the Pentagon. The reaction to the film was swift and decisive: they shelved the project. The primary reason cited by the military for suppressing the film was that it violated the privacy of the patients. Huston countered the claim by informing the War Department that releases had been signed by the soldiers depicted in the film, only to

discover that the forms had “mysteriously disappeared.” Huston further contested the privacy arguments made against releasing the picture, asserting that the soldiers represented in the film “were enthusiastic about the picture” and “wanted very much for it to be seen.” In his autobiography Huston offered a personal assessment of why the film was scuttled: “I think it boils down to the fact that the [War Department] wanted to maintain the ‘warrior’ myth which said that our American soldiers went to war and came back stronger for the experience, standing tall and proud for having served their country well. Only a few weaklings fell by the wayside. Everyone was a hero and had medals and ribbons to prove it. They might die, or they might be wounded, but their spirit remained unbroken.”

By 1980, support for the film’s release grew among prominent Hollywood figures including Huston collaborator and producer Ray Stark as well as Jack Valenti, President of the Motion Picture Association of America and Washington political insider, himself a combat veteran who observed, “This film is something I would want my son to see.” Vice President Walter Mondale joined the movement to rescind the ban, and in late December, Secretary of the Army Clifford Alexander authorized the release. The film had its first public exhibition at the Thalia Theatre in New York on January 16, 1981.

In 2006 the National Film Preservation Foundation facilitated the preservation and sound restoration of “Let There Be Light” using the best surviving elements, in this case a composite fine grain master. Sound restoration services were provided by Chace Audio by Deluxe in Burbank, CA. The picture was preserved to a new wet-gated duplicate negative by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). In 2012, NARA produced a restored 2K DCP (Digital Cinema Package) utilizing the new negative and restored magnetic soundtrack master.

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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