

World War I Comes to Life in ‘They Shall Not Grow Old’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on February 1, 2019 - 5:58pm

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The First World War took place (1914-18) in conjunction with the early days of film, with enough cameras available to actually capture it. For years, that dusty and silent celluloid was used in documentaries, but never has it come to life the way that director Peter Jackson presents it in “They Shall Not Grow Old.”

The title is taken from a poem (“For the Fallen”) written during the war by Laurence Binyon ... “They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old...” I bring that up because Peter Jackson (he of the “Lord of the Rings” trilogy) has brought these early 20th Century soldiers back to life. He took the vintage footage – in a deteriorating state and at different film speeds – cleaned it up, put it at a normal speed, colorized it and even made it available in 3D. The results are stunning, and a breakthrough in documentary making, as now the places, events and men in the film seem available to us right now. This is not a history lesson, there are no dates or battles, but a plunge into a British soldier’s life during the Great War, fraught with the danger of battle and the specter of death with each new fight. The film’s power is that it provides a new perspective on a long gone international killing field.

In 2014, director Peter Jackson was approached to create a World War I documentary by the British Imperial War Museum. This was in anticipation of the 100th anniversary of the end of the war (11/11/18), and there were no restrictions as to what the final film should be. Because Jackson was intrigued with the possibilities, and had a grandfather that fought in the Great War, he took on the assignment for free.



Restored Versus Original Film Stock in 'They Shall Not Grow Old'

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

He had access to the complete film archives that the museum possessed, but found the footage to be degraded, out of sync motion-wise and desperately unwatchable. With access to the finest digital filmmakers in the world, he came up with the idea to enhance the film and give it new life. The result was a colorized and wide screen 3D effect, stunning in its immediacy. Add in veteran memories as recorded by the BBC in the 1960s and '70s, and a new archive of WWI is not longer relegated to dry documentaries or more importantly, forgotten.

The mind-blowing footage has been seen (hopefully on the big screen) to be appreciated. To realize that all of the men depicted in these old films are now dead, whether during the war or afterwards, is to realize that shadows of history can still be brought back to vivid life. Jackson also added key sound effects, including (no doubt) the hiring of a lip reader to figure out and add dialogue for the soldiers. The stunning result is also both fascinating and somewhat eerie ... could this be a stealing of their souls?

The audio memories of the vets – taken from archives of 40 to 50 years ago – were done, according to Jackson, so there would not be the faded perspective of old men, but strong voices to narrate the restored film. The memories were also fresher then, the voices more authentic. It's not just the battle they talked about, but the recruitment, the training, the down time and even the first visits to French brothels. The survivors were defined by their time in the War, but also had the stiff upper lip of British dryness. It was the perfect match for the footage.



Q: What Did You Do in the War, Daddy? A: ‘They Shall Not Grow Old’
Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Jackson pulls no punches on depicting battle casualties, combining the vintage footage with colorized photography of rotting corpses and horrific injuries. It is said that in each new war, the technology that kill people outpaces the strategy to prevent those deaths. World War I had new instruments of death and destruction ... like tanks, airplanes, munitions and biological agents (mustard gas). The number of military and civilian deaths were a ghastly 17 million.

Peter Jackson has, through his timing and talent, brought to our eyes and memories a new perception of The Great War ... “They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old/Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn/At the going down of the sun and in the morning/We will remember them.”

‘They Shall Not Grow Old’ has a continued limited release, including Chicago, on February 1st. Check local listings for theatres and show times. Directed by Peter Jackson. Rated “R”



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