

Reunion in London demonstrates dedication

Community's armed forces reunion in wartime England will hit silver screen 65 years after original showing

by Paul Galinski | reporter@prpeak.com

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Reruns rarely inspire but a one-of-a-kind film featuring Powell River service personnel that was originally screened at the Patricia Theatre will be a big draw when it illuminates the theatre's big screen 65 years after its first showing.

More than 1,100 Powell River people viewed the film on the day it was first shown, Sunday, March 5, 1944. Powell River Museum and Archives representatives are hoping that the rerun will elicit a similar response on Saturday, November 14, just three days after Remembrance Day.

Reunion in London, a 22-minute Powell River Company film, documents the second reunion of Powell River armed forces personnel during the war. The first reunion was a radio broadcast recorded in 1942, which was then followed by the movie, filmed in January 1944.

"This is a one-of-a-kind event," said Michael Thoms, Vancouver Island University historian and museum volunteer. "What's absolutely extraordinary about 1944 is they filmed it with the intention of bringing the film home to be aired at the Patricia Theatre so that families and the community could see their overseas men and women. "I've spoken with the curator at the National War Museum in Ottawa and actually showed him the film. He was quite astonished. This person is an expert in military history; he had never heard of community members from anywhere in Canada actually assembling for a reunion in the middle of the Second World War."

Thoms said in the curator's words, it must have required very high level orders to release so many men and women from so many branches of the armed services to get the reunion together.



GETTING THE PICTURE: Highlighting a photograph of a Powell River reunion in London, England, during the Second World War are Powell River Museum and Archives representatives [from left] Michael Thoms, Teedie Kagume and Lee Coulter. The photograph was taken when dozens of Powell River service men and women assembled for Reunion in London, a film produced by the Powell River Company, originally shown in 1944, and being screened once again at the Patricia Theatre. (paul galinski photo)

According to written material from the museum and archives, the film was conceived by the management of the Powell River Company as an exchange of greetings between the men and women overseas and Powell River residents. The opening sequences were shot in Trafalgar Square and outside the Beaver Club in London, England. The sequences were filmed with a silent camera, and a musical background and running commentary by Don Wilson, a Vancouver radio personality, were later added.

The 35-millimetre film then features full sound, showing a procession of men and women at the Beaver Club going to a microphone and giving their names. Also in the film, small groups gather to talk about old times and the cameraman moves in to catch many of the conversations.

The film draws to a close with scenes taken in the club after dinner. The ones who needed to leave early are caught saying farewell to old friends. Teedie Kagume, museum and archives coordinator, said mill president Harold Foley initially got together with the BBC in 1942 and decided to record a radio program that Powell Riverites would be able to hear from their homes.

Lee Coulter, a museum volunteer, said another reunion was scheduled for 1943 but the invites didn't get out, so it was rescheduled for 1944, when the film was made.

Thoms said the film speaks powerfully, not only about the overrepresentation of Powell Riverites in the war effort, but also about the influence of the mill and the significance of this community within Canada at the time. He said armed forces personnel now serving in Afghanistan are using modern technology to communicate with loved ones, and the reunion film is really the vanguard of this kind of thing, with men and women speaking to a camera with the expectation that in a short period of time, their loved ones would be assembled to see them healthy and well.

"It's 50 years ahead of its time," Thoms said.

Kagume said the whereabouts of the original film are not known. MacMillan Bloedel had the film transferred to VHS tape. That has since been digitized and transferred to DVD, which will be the source of the Patricia Theatre screening.

Coulter said the film features a lot of social chit-chat. Thoms said the camaraderie of the Powell River residents is evident during the film, with many of them getting together and reminiscing about home and hearing about the well-being or loss of others from the community.

Coulter said at one point in the film, one of the Powell River men introduces his new English bride. "That is a huge sub-story," he said. "There were a number of English brides that came back to Powell River because of the war."

Thoms said the film serves as a historical document for the community, but researchers do not have the complete picture. If any residents have anything to add they should contact Kagume at the museum.

Thoms said that when he showed the National War Museum curator the list of names of people from Powell River serving during war that Kagume had given him, the curator asked him twice about the population back then.

“I’ve been told that for a town this size, this was by far the greatest percentage of its young men and women that served compared to any other community of its size in Canada,” Coulter said.

Kagume said she has contacted some families whose loved ones are in the film and told them it’s going to be shown. “We were hoping on that day to honour them,” she said.

Kagume, Coulter and Thoms will be available after the film to receive any relevant historical information from the viewers for follow-up.

The Patricia Theatre showing will be held at 11 am on Saturday, November 14, and admission is by donation.

The film will be also shown at the museum at: 10 am and 2 pm on Monday, November 16; 10 am, 2, 5 and 6 pm on Tuesday, November 17; 10 am and 2 pm on Wednesday, November 18; 10 am, 2, 5 and 6 pm on Thursday, November 19; 10 am and 2 pm on Friday, November 20.

“This film’s of national significance,” said Thoms. “It’s about a nation, and as one event in Canadian history, it does reveal something about the Canadian spirit and the efforts of a small, single-industry town at this time.”