



Guinea Pig Club

The Reconstruction of Burned Airmen in WWII

46:45 historical documentary

Through the eyes of the most painfully exclusive club in the world, this documentary tells the WWII story of two pioneering plastic surgeons, Sir Archibald McIndoe and Canadian Dr. Ross Tilley, whose revolutionary and holistic approach to reconstructive surgery cajoled back into the world of the living airmen so horribly burned and broken they believed they might as well be dead. This is a wartime story that is not about having the courage to die, but finding the courage to live. It is the story of the legendary society of WWII airmen who, in their own brand of black humour, had been “fried”, “mashed” or “hash-browned”, and had been lucky enough to end up at the Queen Victoria Hospital in East Grinstead, just south of London, England.

Plastic surgery was in its infancy. Burn treatment consisted mostly of using escharotics like gentian violet and tannic acid to close wounds and prevent infection, creating thick scar tissue that often resulted in horrific and permanently-crippling deformities. Amputation was common. But McIndoe and Tilley were about to change all that with revolutionary innovations in post-burn treatments. Saline baths, unconventional at the time, prepared the skin for grafting, keeping limbs and facial features mobile, preventing scar tissue from forming. It was a practically heretic defiance of established medical procedures, for which McIndoe and Tilley fought roundly. For the first time in medical history, skin grafting and the restoration of lost function and features did not begin with scarred and immobile tissue. With this new beginning, McIndoe and Tilley skillfully modified an array of established skin grafting techniques, eventually perfecting methods still used to this day.

And mindful that their patients were healthy young men before their accidents, with hopes, dreams and desires, the two doctors set about restoring their confidence and will to live with radical changes to the hospital environment. There was an unwritten code that the mobile did whatever they could to help those confined to their beds. There were no psychiatrists and no self-pity. When someone was feeling down, they were quickly reminded that there was always someone worse off. Beer was on tap at all hours of the day and there was no shortage of young and attractive nurses.





The disfigured young men had to get on with life and the doctors' philosophy was to get them up and socializing as soon as possible. East Grinstead became the testing ground. No matter what stage of reconstruction they were at, patients were dressed in their uniforms and sent out into the town. Severely disfigured, but looking for a bit of fun, they would join the locals at the pub. The generosity of the townsfolk earned them the sobriquet "the town that never stared."



The Guinea Pigs converged on East Grinstead again in September 2001 where GUINEA PIG CLUB filmed them as they reunited for what was likely their final gathering. Interwoven with startling archival footage and still photographs, Canadians and assorted British members of "the old sty" tell the dramatic stories of their accidents and injuries and no less compelling accounts of the long and painful treatments that gave them back their lives. Nurses tell of the physical and mental condition of the men as they arrived, the psychological impact of their injuries, treatments and surgeries performed, and the influence of the Club on their recovery. Expert plastic surgeon Dr. Leith Douglas, protégée of Dr. Tilley (now deceased), gives us insight into the groundbreaking contributions of Tilley and McIndoe to burn treatments and to modern plastic surgery.

GUINEA PIG CLUB was shot on 16:9 digital betacam by a team of creative storytellers, including award-winning director Shel Piercy (Leo's Journey: the Story of the Mengele Twins).



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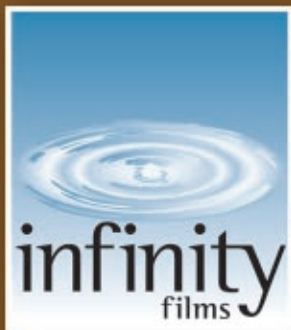
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AN INFINITY FILMS PRODUCTION — "GUINEA PIG CLUB: THE RECONSTRUCTION OF BURNED AIRMEN IN WWII"

NARRATED BY GERARD PLUNKETT PRODUCED BY CYNTHIA CHAPMAN PAT O'BRIEN ASSOCIATE PRODUCER VALERIE HOUGHTON EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS DAN CARRIERE SHEL PIERCY

PRODUCTION EXECUTIVES FOR HISTORY TELEVISION SYDNEY SUISSA JANICE TUFFORD EDITOR ALLAN PINVIDIC MUSIC COMPOSED & ARRANGED BY ED HENDERSON PETER BERRING DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY BRUCE CLARK WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY SHEL PIERCY



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