DISCOVERING THE PROCESS OF CREATING
AN ANIMATED BIOGRAPHY

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Master of Fine Arts in the
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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents an analysis and documentation of the process of creating an animated biography where the filmmaker has a personal relationship to the film’s subject.

As a contextual foundation for making the film, three existing animated biographies in which their filmmaker has a personal relationship with their film’s subject are analyzed. These works are examined for their use of animation and graphic techniques in strengthening the storytelling aspect of the film. Also examined is how the relationship and tension between the filmmaker and each film’s subjects influenced their design processes. Following each film analysis is a summary of their relationship to the author’s filmmaking process for this project’s film Alone in the 475th.

A methodology for creating the animated biography is then detailed and includes how the visual design of the animated film is developed to express the discovery of found artifacts and to support the filmmaker’s story intent. Each of the six sections in the film are detailed to demonstrate how journal entries written by the film’s subject, Sam Cerra, are matched with the visual design choices of the filmmaker.

The thesis document concludes with a summary of the filmmaking process, next steps for the filmmaker and a short discussion of the current state of the animated biography and the context of Alone in the 475th within that film category.
Dedicated to all the teachers, past and present, who encouraged me to observe the world from alternate viewpoints.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Thesis Focus</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Research Process</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Extending the Depth of Biographical Filmmaking</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: DRAWING FROM EXISTING ANIMATED BIOGRAPHIES</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Project Context</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Ryan (Chris Landreth, 2004)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 The Moon and the Son (John Canemaker, 2005)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Waltz with Bashir (Ari Folman, 2008)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Analysis</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH AND FILM DESIGN</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Discovering Sam Cerra</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Biographical Research</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.1 Character Research</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.2 Character Analysis</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.3 Journal Summary</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2.4 Spatial and Historical Analysis</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Filmmaker’s Relationship to the Film’s Subject</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4: PRODUCTION METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Film Objective and Overview</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Story and Film Design</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2.1 Storyboarding.................................................................46
4.2.2 Character Design..............................................................49
4.2.3 Set and Prop Design ...........................................................52
4.2.4 Render Design and Process ..............................................56
4.3 Concepts of Visual Story......................................................61
  4.3.1 Enthusiasm – Sequence 1..................................................63
  4.3.2 Realization – Sequence 2..................................................65
  4.3.3 Awareness – Sequence 3....................................................69
  4.3.4 Fatigue – Sequence 4........................................................72
  4.3.5 Strain – Sequence 5..........................................................75
  4.3.6 Solitude – Sequence 6.......................................................78
4.4 Of Sight and Sound, The Final Edit.........................................81
  4.4.1 Voiceover, Diegetic and Non-Diegetic ................................81
  4.4.2 Visual Transitions............................................................82

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS.........................................................89
  5.1 Summary..............................................................................89
  5.2 Contribution.........................................................................95

List of References........................................................................98
Endnotes.....................................................................................102
### LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Landreth shows how his lack of ability to manage finances has affected him physically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>As Landreth acts preachy a halo sprouts from his head in the film <em>Ryan</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Landreth begins to be consumed by the roots or threads of his doubt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Shows a range of stylizations that change throughout Canemaker’s film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>‘The man’ separates John Canemaker from his father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>Canemaker has drawn over an image of himself adding in animated elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>This frame from the film shows Folman’s false vision of the Lebanon massacre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>Fore, mid and background elements are animated adding to the film’s fluidity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>One of Sam’s photographs which captured a B-17 Flying Fortresses in action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Themes are used to filter and reduce the number of journal entries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Green and orange pins indicate Sam’s location before and after D-Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Flow chart of the research and analysis phases used to develop the film’s story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Storyboard based on a fabricated relationship between my grandmother and me</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4.3. A storyboard depiction of Sam’s journal entry “Our camp was like a night football game”...........................................................................................................................................48

Figure 4.4. The final realistic design of Sam Cerra’s character is meant to honor his memory .................................................................................................................................................50

Figure 4.5. Photo and texture references used to design the final character ......................51

Figure 4.6. The building photograph on the left side exists within a virtual 3D set ..........53

Figure 4.7. Stacked 2D layers for a set design used in Adobe® After Effects® .................54

Figure 4.8. Applied deformers create two building variations by bending and squashing.....55

Figure 4.9. The graphic novel Torso, by Brian Bendis uses photographs for the background .................................................................................................................................................56

Figure 4.10. Subtle and broad explorations of rendering style .............................................58

Figure 4.11. Example of render layer template applied to Sam and hero props ..............59

Figure 4.12. Sam becomes static as a stylistic render is applied to the shot .......................60

Figure 4.13. A inspirational painting generated by meditating on the emotion awareness ....62

Figure 4.14. Shot 1 from Sequence 1 isolates Sam from the rest of the men aboard the boat .................................................................................................................................................64

Figure 4.15. Shot 2 of Sequence 1 shows men aboard the boat without the virtual Sam......65

Figure 4.16. Shot 6 of Sequence 2 changes to resemble a football game .............................67

Figure 4.17. In Shot 8 of Sequence 2 colorful explosions invoke fireworks as per Sam’s description .................................................................................................................................................68
Figure 4.18. A low camera angle was explored during the sequences development to accentuate importance of the event.

Figure 4.19. In Shot 1 of Sequence 3 Sam looks up at a sky full of planes on D-Day.

Figure 4.20. In Shot 2 of Sequence 4 Sam travels toward France as destroyed tanks line the road and their barrels become limp.

Figure 4.21. In Shot 1 of Sequence 4 Sam smokes a cigarette implying the passage of time.

Figure 4.22. An inspirational painting shows journal pages as a ground texture.

Figure 4.23. In Shot 5 of Sequence 5 Sam swats at a cluster of buzz bombs as if it is a swarm of flies.

Figure 4.24. Shot 1 of Sequence 6 Sam looks onward in contempt as men are being shipped home and he remains.

Figure 4.25. In Shot 2 of Sequence 6 Sam watches the men turn into point values as they board a boat.

Figure 4.26. The film's opening shot is of an open ocean during the dark of night.

Figure 4.27. The next sequence is revealed as the frame beads up like water.

Figure 4.28. A bomb shatters the frame revealing the next shot in the film.

Figure 4.29. A shot transition reflects changing the channel on an old T.V.

Figure 4.30. One shot burns away as the next sequence is revealed.

Figure 4.31. An overexposure effect is used in Sequence 6 of the film.
Figure 4.32. A photograph that accompanies the final credits of the film ........................................88

Figure 5.1. Nazi buzz bombs are void of the Nazi swastika icons.........................................................91
LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1. Part one of the side-by-side event comparisons of Sam and World War II</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2. Part two of the side-by-side event comparisons of Sam and World War II</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Thesis Focus

This thesis examines the process of developing an animated biography by exploring how the filmmaker’s personal relationship with the subject material influences the design decisions of the film. This project is very personal to me, the filmmaker, as the Staff Sergeant whom this film is about, is my grandfather. Sam Cerra is the father of my mother and a man whom I never had the opportunity to meet. Never having met Sam my understanding of him has come from childhood stories, photographs and interviews with living relatives. I am also adopted so there is no real genealogical connection between Sam and me. By not personally knowing my grandfather, my understanding of him as a person is somewhat detached. When his World War II journals were discovered I was offered a unique opportunity to discover aspects of Sam’s life through his own words. This thesis examines how biographical artifacts like journal entries and photographs can be used as research and as elements within an animated biography. To accomplish this I based the animation *Alone in the 475th* on the content of three hand written journals and photographs from the World War II soldier. These journals were carried by my grandfather, an American Staff Sergeant stationed in the European theatre, between 1942 and 1945. Due to his
immersion in the Second World War the journal entries often vary in their detail and temporal consistency, this became another aspect that affected the film’s design.

This coupled with the lack of a genealogical connection added tension to process of interpreting Sam’s experiences. Eventually these tensions led to the exploration of universal truths and emotions shared by me, the filmmaker and my grandfather. To address this tension, the visual representation of Sam’s experienced is augmented with dreamlike images and animation. A voice over recites Sam’s journal entries retaining his exact wording while the animation, becomes the filmmaker’s subjective view of the written words.

1.2 Research Process

As an overview of this film’s research and development I will outline the major steps taken to synthesize and complete the film Alone in the 475th. In the first stage of research biographical artifacts were collected to add to the core material of the three journals written by Sam Cerra. These biographical artifacts consisted of related photographs, postcards, military uniforms and news clippings. Biographical information about Sam was collected through character interviews of Sam’s living relatives and in-laws. In the later part of this stage his written journals and other biographical information was organized in relation to time and places in which they took place, thus giving a broad understanding of Sam’s complete World War II experience and who he was as a person.

The next stage of story development proved to be a challenging step. Early on, a traditional story arc was applied to the biographical research but this revealed more problems than solutions. This was mainly because the frequent time lapses between his
journal entries caused the story arc to collapse by leaving major plot points unconnected. The end solution was to treat each journal entry used in the film individually and then a story arc was created from the emotional stages that I interpreted through his writings. The final stage of the film’s development consisted of designing the look, feel and animation style that would address the story structure. The visual style for the film was greatly influenced by the look 1940’s comic art and graphic novels because of their mixed use of illustration and photographs. This specific style was chosen as a way to best visually merge photographs and animation into compositions that consisted of visual interpretations (CG elements). Adding to the film’s visual look and animation was the mixing of 2D and 3D elements. This mixing technique helped to achieve a dreamy quality of motion by allowing animation to be applied in two separate stages of the film’s development. Often this resulted in a parallax type of effect. Mixing 2D and 3D also helped to achieve the desired look of the film which is meant to call attention to layering. Thus reflecting how much of the film’s subject material of journal pages and photographs was discovered.

1.3 Extending the Depth of Biographical Filmmaking

Traditionally biographical filmmaking falls under the film genre of ‘documentary’. In order to understand what constitutes a biographical film we must first understand the essential qualities required for a film to be considered ‘documentary’. Theoretical orthodoxy postulates that the goal of documentary is to find an absolute way of representing the real so that the difference between the two becomes invisible (Bruzzi 2006). However this is difficult to find when examining the history of documentary filmmaking. Alternate approaches to this type of filmmaking are constantly challenging the boundaries of
documentary making its definition and essential qualities a “fuzzy concept” (Nichols 2001). In 1971 Peter Weiss, a documentary dramatist, defined documentary theatre as ‘taking authentic material and putting it on stage, unaltered in content and edited in form’ it also ‘presents facts’ and ‘takes sides’ (Bruzzi 2006). This suggests he believes that the imposition of a structure such as editing does not result in the loss of objectivity. This approach by Weiss drove him to extract from his documentary material ‘universal truths’ (Bruzzi 2006). This is the idea of a shared experience, one person may experience grief differently than another but the universal truth between them is the shared experience of grief. This thesis approaches documentary and biographical filmmaking in the context of Weiss’s examination, treating the succession of a character’s emotions as a universal truth.

The qualities of animation can be a powerful tool for a biographical filmmaker as it can drastically free them from the constraints of live action filmmaking. Live action filmmaking is required to comply with the laws of gravity, logic and physics. This is well enough when capturing the world around us but it’s very difficult for live action to capture the world within us. Animation, unbound by the laws of physics, becomes ideal for communicating the inner cognitive and emotional landscape of a subject. Since the inherent process of animation is to tend to each individual frame the concept of image objectivity must be reconsidered in the context of an animated biography. Drawings are received as one’s personal view of the world and an image captured by a camera lens is considered to be more objective. While an animator explores the relationship between the personal hand created image and objectivity a connection is made to the truth of experience, and experience is personal and true to all of us. This positions the animated biography to focus on the universal truth of experience thus exemplifying Weiss’s definition of documentary.
Through this, animation adds depth to how the audience experiences a film. As the internalized self becomes visualized in an animated biography the audience sees different facets of a character. This can intensify the character for an audience by illuminating deeper layers of cognitive and emotional truths of that character. As thoughts, emotion and dreams become personified through animation the audience is brought closer to the true nature of a character. Even with varying approaches to directing a film the common result of an animated biography is a visually poetic version of historical and personal experiences.
CHAPTER 2: DRAWING FROM EXISTING ANIMATED BIOGRAPHIES

2.1 Project Context

One of the earliest examples of an animated documentary is *The Sinking of the Lusitania: An Amazing Moving Pen Picture by Winsor McCay*. McCay released this film in 1918 as a response from being shocked by the sinking of a passenger ship. The torpedoing by a German submarine resulted in the loss of 1,198 lives as the *Lusitania* sank in 1915. This was widely believed to be a turning point in World War I and there was no photographic record of the ship sinking. This fueled McCay to depict the event through animation. To the audience this short film played out like a newsreel and gave them the opportunity to visualize a tragic event the whole nation was talking about. In addition to being an early example of an animated documentary, this film also shows how a filmmaker can use animation to address a serious topic.

In the years since McCay’s film there have been many other animated documentaries, biographies and autobiographies. Many of them are focused around historical and personal events while addressing a serious aspect of the topic. A number of these films, *Ryan* (Landreth 2004), *The Moon and the Son: An Imagined Conversation* (Canemaker 2005) and *Waltz with Bashir* (Folman 2008) are also centered around the relationship between the filmmaker and the film’s subject.
In this chapter these works will be examined for their use of animation and graphic techniques, highlighting how they strengthen the storytelling aspect of these animated biographies. Also examined is the relationship and tension between the filmmaker and the film’s content as well the influence of these films on my creative process in making *Alone in the 475th*.

### 2.2 *Ryan* (Chris Landreth, 2004)

*Ryan* is an animated biography by Chris Landreth about Ryan Larkin who was a brilliant young animator in the 60’s. Eventually Ryan Larkin fell from his success and chose a homeless life filled with drug and alcohol abuse. In the film Landreth relates to Larkin through his fear of becoming a failed artist, he also relates to loss and addiction through his mother’s alcoholism. To visually tell this story Landreth uses realistic looking characters that have been augmented by his style of “psycho-realism”, a term coined by Landreth himself. Landreth’s style can be described as the externalization or personification of inner thoughts and emotions. This means that a character's thoughts and feelings have changed their physical appearance (Figure 2.1).
Figure 2.1. Landreth shows how his lack of ability to manage finances has affected him physically.

This psycho-realism technique employed by Landreth strongly demonstrates how the medium of animation can be used to enhance a nonfiction story. In parallel to showing animated versions of interviews with Ryan Larkin and friends we see a real time story of each person’s feelings as they change, affecting them physically right before the audiences eyes. In one of the film’s sequences Landreth tries to convince Larkin to stop drinking alcohol. As Landreth preaches about alcoholism a small boom extends from his head and revolves to create a florescent light that resembles a halo (Figure 2.2). Here Landreth uses psycho-realism and specific imagery to visually personify the situation. The fact that the
light looks like a halo visually dramatizes how Landreth envisions his act of preaching and his use of a florescent light seems to indicate false light or a lack of sincerity.

In a more abstracted example of psycho-realism Landreth begins to visually personify his doubt about becoming a successful artist by animating threads resembling hair or roots extending from his head (Figure 2.3). As Landreth dwells deeper into his doubt these roots begin to bind his body and many microphones move toward him. It is a visual metaphor for his seeds of doubt which grow stronger as he achieves success and which then begin to bind and inhibit him. This treatment adds a layer of visual complexity to the story.
To an audience this visually represents how one’s own fears and doubts can hold you down and prevent one from accomplishments. This effect continues to add to the act of storytelling by personifying the internal emotions of a character.

Figure 2.3. Landreth begins to be consumed by the roots or threads of his doubt

In Ryan the filmmaker, Landreth, includes himself in the story as he does not separate himself from the film and its process. He draws direct attention to himself documenting part of his life and becoming every bit a part of the film as Ryan. This is important to the story as it ultimately shows how Landreth is sympathetic toward Larkin as an artist and though alcohol abuse. As Landreth interviews Larkin he uncovers the common
connections between Larkin and himself. He finds that they share in the fear of failure and that both of their lives have been impacted by a significant relationship with alcohol. This relationship between Landreth and Larkin ultimately affected the story development of this film. Early in this film’s development Landreth struggled to establish a story arc as his intent was to keep himself out of the film (Green 2004). However in time Landreth allowed his personal relationship to enter the film’s process. The outcome of this added a duality to the film that placed both men in the spotlight once the film’s plot included both Larkin and Landreth. The film serves as an autobiography for Chris Landreth and a biography for Ryan Larkin. This film is an excellent example of how an animator can use animation and surreal imagery to make visible internalized feelings, thoughts and events. It also gives insight into how a personal relationship between the filmmaker and the film’s subject can shape the nature of the film itself.

One major influence Chris Landreth’s film Ryan had on the production of my film Alone in the 475th, was that it demonstrated how surreal images can communicate a degree of personal truths. In Ryan this is carried out by a style Landreth refers to as psycho-realism. This style is the visualization of characters thoughts or emotions as they change over time, these internal emotions also change the outer physical nature of a character. In Alone in the 475th, surreal imagery is used in the reverse way of Landreth’s psycho-realism. In this project’s film surreal representations are used to change the environment according to a character’s internal state.

Ryan is proof that the use of animation and surreal images offer new possibilities in visually expressing the story of a character’s internal experience. Unlike Landreth’s choice to include himself in the story and to represent himself in the visuals, in Alone in the 475th the
filmmaker is intentionally not represented within film’s voiceover or animation. This is done in order to keep the film’s focus on the subject Sam Cerra. This decision also reinforces the film’s theme solitude by isolating the main character within the story structure.

2.3 *The Moon and the Son* (John Canemaker, 2005)

John Canemaker explored dark subject material in his film *The Moon and the Son* as he believes no subject is off limits for animation (Interview with John Canemaker and Peggy Stern 2005). This animated autobiography plays out as an imagined conversation between Canemaker and his deceased father. This film tells the story of how Canemaker grew up and how the troubled life of his father affected their family. The film is loosely based on an interview Canemaker did with his father two years before his death (Interview with John Canemaker and Peggy Stern 2005). Unresolved memories from Canemaker’s past also find their place in his autobiography as many positive and negative feelings get absolved during the film. The production worked as a type of creative therapy for Canemaker as he was able to exercise his demons of unconcluded issues. Beyond the animation, artifacts like photos and videos also influenced the production of the film. Many photos appear throughout the entire film as Canemaker takes these artifacts from his past and repurposes them within the film’s world. This technique adds to the visual diversity of film while also reminding the viewer of the film’s reality.

By using animation Canemaker was able to visually express his thoughts and feelings through graphic and abstract representations. In the opening sequence we are first shown a video of Canemaker’s family with some upbeat music, this opening tone of the film feels light and hopeful. The video clip then cross fades into animation and we see a very graphic
representation of Canemaker’s family shown as basic shapes like squares and circles. Canemaker then uses this visualization to communicate his family dynamic, showing his mother defending the children when his father would get angry. These basic shapes also morph throughout the scene to visually describe the emotions of a character. The shape that represents Canemaker’s father as he gets angry the shape morphs into what looks like a red lightning bolt therefore graphically communicating the sharpness and color often associated with the emotion of anger. The film’s structure evolves from its story but the visual treatment makes the strongest point by personifying emotions and thoughts in a graphically simple way (Figure 2.4).

![Figure 2.4. Shows a range of stylizations that change throughout Canemaker’s film](image)

The use of animation allowed Canemaker to morph his visualizations as he explored his imagination and the conflicting views of his father. By using morphing techniques
Canemaker was able to communicate a series of disjointed feelings by seamlessly juxtaposing different views. As the graphics visually morphs from one idea to the next it is as if the audience is shown two stories, that of Canemaker’s and of his father. Canemaker also uses animated visual metaphors to illustrate his story even as the style of the film changes. One example of his visual metaphors is seen in the sequence where Canemaker describes his father’s imprisonment. Instead of illustrating a jail house or bars we are shown his father separated from his family by a glass wall that is actually a prison guard (Figure 2.5). This type of visualization adds depth to how the story and image can be interpreted; one such interpretation could be that ‘the man’ or ‘the law’ is keeping Canemaker’s father from his family.
The entire story of this film is driven by Canemaker’s memories and photographs which often serve as a jumping off point. Canemaker takes media like video footage and photographs and repurposes them within the film. These function as biographical artifacts from his life and are typically personal photographs of him and his family. The mixing of these videos and photographs with animation add realism to the film by reminding the viewer that behind the stylized drawings are real people, events and experiences. Other films like *Ryan* and *Waltz with Bashir* mix videos or photographs with animation but Canemaker’s film depends on the technique. As he illustrates his memories Canemaker often draws directly on top of a photograph to repurpose it into the animation.
The Moon and the Son is the main film that inspired Alone in the 475th. The first point of influence from Canemaker’s film was the highly personal relationship he had with the subject matter. This illuminated for me the idea that no subject matter is off-limits, too complicated or too personal for animation. Canemaker’s level of stylization and use visual metaphors also demonstrate how animation allows a filmmaker to personify emotions and thoughts. This film strongly shows how animation can become a powerful medium for the biography as it allows a filmmaker to illustrate raw thoughts and emotions.
John Canemaker’s film *The Moon and the Son: An Imagined Conversation* brought great value to the production of *Alone in the 475th*. It first and foremost encouraged me as a filmmaker to get deeply close to the subject matter and the research for my film. Canemaker’s film explores how tensions with the film’s subject material, be it positive or negative can influence the story development. By following Canemaker’s example and not avoiding my personal feelings about the film’s subject matter I was able to more intimately relate to the character, my grandfather, in my film. *The Moon and the Son* also provided a great example of how artifacts like photographs and video can be intimately integrated into an animated film. The film’s use of artifacts mixed with animation shows how gravity can be added to an animated film by revealing the true face of a character through photographs. This helps to continually remind the audience that this film is more than a story, that it in fact represents the real life experiences of real people. By drawing on top of the photographs in the film, Canemaker combined photography and animation thus mixing realism with imagination. In *Alone in the 475th* I try to accomplish the same effect by adding photographs into the virtual space of the film’s imagined situations.

### 2.4 Waltz with Bashir (Ari Folman, 2008)

Ari Folman’s first feature film, *Waltz with Bashir*, is an animated biography about Folman’s quest to regain lost memories and distinguish them from a single illusive vision. This search eventually leads Folman to discover the truth about the 1982 Lebanon War massacre and his role in it (Folman 2008). Folman stresses that this film is not a political film about the war but rather a personal story of how war can change people (Parish 2008). A central theme to this film is how the mind has the ability to shape itself by omitting events
from its own memory. Early in the film Folman admits that he never experiences dreams or flashbacks from his time in the war. Other than a single reoccurring vision (Figure 2.7), Folman describes this lack of memory as a black hole. In this film Folman uses animation to seamlessly shift between the two worlds of reality and his dream-like memories. In Waltz with Bashir Folman takes a journey to recover the lost relationship to the man he was when he entered the war. As the film progresses Folman uses animation techniques such as color and motion to further distinguish between his fabricated memories and actual events.

As Folman moves through his mission to discover lost memories he comes to realize that his one existing vision is largely imagined. In the film, the process of interviews eventually activate Folman’s mind and he slowly begins to recover his lost memories. However, one memory Folman has difficulty recovering is what happened during the day of the Lebanon massacre. Why he cannot remember this is revealed within the film itself when Folman interviews a psychologist, it is referred to as a process called “dissociative events”. The psychologist tells Folman that this occurs when a person feels outside and disconnected from their current situation so they dissociate themselves from reality to create an augmented memory of the event (Folman 2008). For this film the medium of animation was useful to the filmmaker because it allowed him to fluidly mix elements which suggest both reality and dream. The hazy distinction between reality and dreams is essentially what a dissociative event is in a soldier’s memory and for Waltz with Bashir animation functions as a metaphor for that blurry line between dream and reality.
Waltz with Bashir is an autobiography that fluidly moves between the two worlds of reality and dreams. The quality of the animation itself is used to add to the dreamy sensibility of the film. When the production for this film started Folman only had 80,000 dollars available to invest (Parish 2008). From the start Folman wanted to take advantage of his limited budget by pushing the downsides of a low budget to the front. This meant that much of what was invented for the film had to be simple and in terms of motion much of it would have to be uncomplicated. This approach however began to present its own set of problems. As scenes with less motion and action were animated the visual imperfections of that scene would become more pronounced. To remedy this, techniques from 3D, 2D and classic animation were mixed together. Folman explains that sometimes this meant the top
half of character was created by digital 2D techniques while the bottom half would be done with classic hand drawn techniques. Mixing 3D, 2D and classic animation techniques also allowed Folman to animate many of the elements in a scene beyond the characters (Figure 2.8). This visually made the film appear very fluid and slow adding to its dreamy sensibility (Parish 2008).

Figure 2.8. Fore, mid and background elements are animated adding to the film’s fluidity.

Folman's film *Waltz with Bashir* is a distinctive example of how the medium of animation offers the potential to visualize dreams and the imagination. It exhibits how by visualizing the imagination one can express the deeper cognitive and emotional changes a
character may experience. It also draws attention to how a filmmaker can use animation to seamlessly move and morph between different worlds. John Canemaker used this ability to morph between photographs and different representations of his family in his film *The Moon and the Son*. Folman used this ability to seamlessly move between reality and the dreams of Folman and other soldiers. The film also begins reveal how the quality of motion can add to the intended experience of a film.

*Waltz with Bashir* serves as a great example of using animation to show how reality and memories or dreams can be visualized differently than with live action. Much of Folman’s film is a quest to recover lost memories and to distinguish them from his dreams and dissociation. Much of the production of this project’s film, *Alone in the 475th* is similar to what Folman did in his film. In *Alone in the 475th* I created my interpretations of Sam Cerra’s memories and dissociation based on the journals he had written. Since *Alone in the 475th* is rooted in the filmmaker’s imagination I wanted to extend the dream like qualities of memories into the motion and color of the film. At times Folman does just this, in his dream sequences the motion becomes slow and the colors become bolder. *Waltz with Bashir* served as a guide when determining the how quality of motion and color is used in *Alone in the 475th*.

### 2.5 Analysis

The fore mentioned animations all played a part in inspiring and influencing the production of *Alone in the 475th*. They share similarities in how they influenced this project and each one influenced different aspects of *Alone in the 475th*. In all three of these films the filmmakers have a personal and complicated relationship with the film’s subject matter. This
personal relationship with the film’s subject also guided each filmmaker to make decisions which effect how each story is told. All three of these animated films also include photographs or videos in some way. Even though the personal relationship with the film and their use of biographical artifacts vary, all three films show how these elements can effect and merge with the filmmaking process to change how a story is told. From *Ryan* I discovered how surreal imagery can be used to communicate the inner changes of a character and *The Moon and the Son* demonstrated how biographical artifacts like photographs can be repurposed in a film to add depth and realism. I was also able to relate the production of my film, *Alone in the 475th* to *Waltz with Bashir*. Both films visualize the imagination and memories of a character. However Folman does this first hand with his memories while I am making visual interpretations based on the hand written journal entries of Sam Cerra. However the most important aspect of each film is the filmmaker’s personal relationship to the subject. This is major point to reference with all of these films as it inspired, me the filmmaker to embrace the personal relationship I have with the subject matter and artifacts seen in *Alone in the 475th*. 
CHAPTER 3: BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH AND FILM DESIGN

3.1 Discovering Sam Cerra

When I had first discovered my grandfather’s biographical artifacts my grandmother, Sam’s wife, had already passed away. I had found myself in a dusty old basement with my mother and I came across a photograph that caught my eye. It captured a B-17 Flying Fortress in mid flight. This photo (Figure 3.1) seemed rare and unique as it caught a B-17 dropping its bombs. I was instantly intrigued, I never knew my grandfather Sam and the stories I heard about him were all steeped in his small town family man persona. This photograph proved to me that he was part of something much bigger than himself during his life.
Growing up I remember being told that my grandfather was in World War II but that was always the extent of the conversation. This photograph began to actualize his war time experience for me and this only furthered my curiosity. In time I found a total of two shoe boxes and two photo albums full of images documenting Sam’s time in World War II. Also discovered was an artifact that utterly bewildered me. It was a military issued journal which Sam used to chronicle his experiences. I felt that this journal could help me connect with Sam and learn more about him as a person since I never had the opportunity to meet him. Around this time I saw John Canemaker’s film *The Moon and the Son* I realized the potential for using these biographical artifacts for generating an animated story about my grandfather. I thought that this might develop a more intimate relationship with my deceased grandfather.
Much like the way Chris Landreth and John Canemaker became more intimate with their subject material through their film’s process.

Though I never met my grandfather he was always held in high regard by my grandmother, mother and uncle. Growing up I remember times when I would overhear my family reminiscing about Sam. At the time these comments seemed rather expected and common for someone to make about a loved one. It’s not that I dismissed these comments but rather I just assumed that my family was simply being a loving family. The comments that stuck with me over the years were about how Sam was an emotionally strong and hard-working man. As a youth and even into adulthood I never truly felt the gravity of these comments the way my family did. Perhaps this was because I never had the opportunity to meet Sam or perhaps because I did not know all of which he went through during his lifetime. In producing this animation two separate journeys were achieved. One was to document and artistically interpret Sam’s experiences. The other was to use the production of this film as a way to grow closer to my deceased grandfather.

3.2 Biographical Research

3.2.1 Character Research

Before I synthesized a story from all of the World War II biographical artifacts left behind by Sam it was necessary to research and profile his character. This was important because it provided insight into the type of person Sam was during his life. Was he a nervous or calm person? As a father was he strict or kind? Was he religious? When answering these types of questions a filmmaker can gain insight into a character’s
background information. This background information helped to understand the
motivation and feelings of Sam. This understanding became preeminent in the
interpretation process of the journal entries. In this case creating a summarized profile for
Sam was challenging since he is deceased. Interviewing and observing Sam first hand was
not an option. To remedy this, focus was put on interviewing the living relatives of Sam.
These people included his daughter (my mother), son, in-laws, cousins and sisters.

These living relatives participated in extensive interviews with a full range of
questions. The questions covered all aspects of Sam’s life including pre and post-war. The
interviewees broke down into two groups of people. The first group included people such
as Sam’s cousins and sisters; these are people who knew Sam before and after the war. The
second group consisted of people like Sam’s children and in-laws. These people knew Sam
after his time spent serving in World War II. In the interviews it became clear that no
detailed information about Sam’s personal relationship with the war would be gained because
everyone acknowledged that he never spoke about the war. Any details had to come directly
from the journals he had written. The interviews did however reveal information about
Sam’s common demeanor, his outlook on life and his relationship with a god and his loved
ones.

3.2.2 Character Analysis

After completing the interviews with Sam’s living relatives a character sheet
summarizing Sam’s life and experiences was generated. In this film’s process the character
sheet defined the personality, life and gave pertinent background information about Sam. A
character sheet is useful to a storyteller because it offers insight into a character’s motivation. This helps the storyteller to understand what kind of decisions a character makes and why. In the case of this film the character sheet aids the filmmaker in interpreting the emotions and motivation of Sam during the war. The remainder of this section summarizes the interviews and character sheet. It also summarizes *475th Engineers*, a book published by the army just for the men in the 475th Battalion (Unknown n.d.).

Samuel Cerra was born on October 3rd in 1911. After reaching maturity he had brown hair, weighed 168 pounds and was 5 feet 8 inches tall. His hometown was Benwood West Virginia and his parents were Italian immigrants. Sam’s parents raised him to have strong traditional values and as a result Sam grew up becoming very proud of his Italian heritage. Since his parents were first generation Americans they often struggled with language and cultural barriers. This made it difficult to support their growing family. As a result Sam and his older brother grew up fast as much responsibility to support the family financially fell on their shoulders. During this challenging time in his youth Sam displayed a sense of service while he and his brother worked as prison guards for the state of West Virginia. Despite the harsh challenge of this job Sam also worked in a steel mill. Nearly every dime that Sam had made working both of these jobs went back into supporting his parents and siblings. Before Sam enlisted in the military he sought to capture the heart of a young Italian woman whose parents were also immigrants. During the wooing of this woman Sam illustrated traditional values by going to ask the woman’s farther for permission to take her on a date. After some time these two formed an intimate relationship. Unlike many soldiers during this period Sam did not ask for her hand in marriage.
After joining the military Sam was sent to a base in Columbus Ohio and then shipped oversea to Great Britain. Once overseas for the war, Sam’s journals and letters become the only record of his thoughts and feelings. However, other documents also informed me about Sam’s service during the war. Sam started the war as a Private but very rapidly he rose in ranks and spent the vast majority of the war serving as a Staff Sergeant. During the Battle of the Bulge Sam had worked so hard for so long that he developed a frost bitten left hand. Though Sam never discussed the war he would joke about the cause of his permanently damaged hand. Sam claimed that it was a result of sticking his hand in a pile of cow manure, this expression showed how Sam dissociated himself from the war long after its occurrence. His joke about his hand was the only verbalization Sam made related to his time in the war and it shows that there is light hearted side to Sam even in the most severe of situations.

After arriving in Britain Sam and the rest of his company (the 475th) were responsible for the construction and maintenance of numerous air fields. These air fields gave the Allies the ability to execute air raids and bombing missions. These bombing missions and the D-Day invasion proved to be key elements for the Allies eventual victory in the war. To add to this, the Axis powers understood the importance of air fields so they became common targets for the Nazis. Just weeks after Sam’s arrival in Britain he realizes how common it is for these fields to be targeted. After the air raids get a little too close to Sam he realized the full severity of his situation.

Another responsibility of the 475th was the repair and maintenance of transportation vehicles such as trucks, jeeps and planes. By the end of Sam’s first year in Europe his diligent work gets noticed and he is promoted to a Staff Sergeant. In taking this position he
became responsible for overseeing the maintenance of these air fields and transportation vehicles. By August of 1944 Sam found himself organizing what became one of the largest convoys of World War II. This convoy acted as a final sweep moving and gathering troops as it moved from Great Britain into France and then into Germany.

When Sam left America he was not alone, his cousin Tony and his younger brother Victor had joined the service with him. Sam and Tony were split up once they arrived in Britain and Victor was stationed New Guinea. Tony however did not last long and he received a medical release from the war due to shell shock and Victor was sent home after nearly losing a leg. In a letter discussing Tony, Sam wrote “he couldn’t take it” while Victor was awarded a purple heart. In regards to Tony and Sam this situation shows how Sam possesses an ability to cope that Tony must not. Perhaps it was this strength that carried Sam through the war and often fueled him to relate his surroundings to more common, less traumatic experiences.

After the Allies officially won the war Sam and his company were instructed to head into Germany. It is also believed that his infantry was the last to return to America. Just a few months after his return to America Sam married Angela (my grandmother), the woman he dated before his departure. Angela waited for four years for him to return and when he did he played pranks on Angela which continued to support his light hearted nature. Sam had a diligent approach to work before, during and after the war. In all of his years of work and marriage he never once missed a single day of work. After Sam’s passing, Angela added only one line to his grave stone ‘Sam Cerra When he left this place his work was completed’.

As a filmmaker this background information on Sam gave me a foundation for understanding who he was. It gave me the insight into his character and spirit needed to
interpret the journals he had written. Sam was kind, gentle, hard working, understanding and valued family. This intimate knowledge of Sam acted as a reference when imagining Sam’s viewpoint of the war. It also enriched the story development of the film by infusing more empathy into the process. As Sam Cerra’s grandson this research brought me closer to the type of person he was. This gave me insight into my family and into the way my mother and uncle were raised. It brought me closer to the man that my grandmother had loved and married. A greater sense of gratitude toward my grandfather was discovered through Sam’s character analysis.

3.2.3 Journal Summary

After generating the in-depth character analysis of Sam, the next step in the process was to summarize the three journals filled with hundreds of journal entries down to just a few pages. The purpose of this was to create an outline of Sam’s experiences and activities during the war. This summary helped to put individual journal entries into context by giving a broad stroke understanding of Sam’s entire experience. It was vitally important to know the context of each entry because only a few would be selected in the end due to the limits of this short animated film. There was a wide range of interesting entries to choose from and despite how graphic or engaging they were the summary aided in selecting specific entries that exemplified Sam’s over all World War II experience.
In the process of summarizing all three of these journals I began to organize the entries into three reoccurring themes which acted as a filter to reduce the possible number of entries which could later become a sequence in the film (Figure 3.2). These three themes were: the immensity or gravity of a situation, a sense of duty, and a longing for the familiar. Immensity was chosen as a theme because it encapsulates pivotal and historical World War II events and more importantly events that deeply affected Sam. A sense of duty was chosen as a theme because it represents values important to Sam as learned from the character analysis and it also acts as a way of documenting his daily tasks. The third theme was a
longing of all things home, which had two dimensions. The first dimension is Sam wanting to be home with loved ones. Family was another value important to Sam and showed his desire to be home by always writing letters and continually mentioning loved ones in his journal entries. The second dimension may have very well occurred subconsciously to Sam. His depictions of events would often draw parallels to the things back home and this may be Sam’s way of disassociating himself from his current events. An example of this would be his comparison of his camp getting bombed to the nighttime football games he was familiar with. The use of these three themes also allowed me to simultaneously document and map central war events, Sam’s daily responsibility and his personal experiences during the war. It also allowed me to use two of Sam’s most important values as guides in this outline, work and family. The following is part of the summary created while keeping these three themes in mind.

- In July of 1942 Sam gears up for his trek into Europe to battle with the Allied forces. In August Sam leaves America by boat and heads toward Iceland. At this point Sam is devoted to his sense of duty and ready to serve his country.

- After a brief stop in Iceland Sam boards the boat and heads for the United Kingdom. Here Sam is still focused on his sense of duty. He is concerned about his responsibility while he has excitement about this new stage in his life.

- Once Sam plants his feet on UK soil near London he finds himself in a world unlike any he has experienced so far. Everywhere in London seems dark and there is no electricity anywhere. He spends the first couple of meandering around London following orders and sleeping in bombed our ruins. In this
estranged place Sam takes note to how hard people are struggling to survive. Despite this depressing scenario Sam seems more than hopeful, he is almost excited and more than willing to go deeper in to this mess of a war. In one entry Sam explains how enthusiastic he is to take a bath after many weeks of not bathing. He exuberantly notes how the bathtub was in a ruined building and shared by his entire battalion, he even seems happy that he had to use a dirty old sock as wash cloth. In these early journal entries he writes as if he is on some kind of camping trip and his enthusiasm is high. With his excitement high Sam still is concerned about his sense of duty. Sprinkled throughout the journal entries Sam begins to talk about his responsibility. He often notes how much concrete or wood he thinks it will take to build the airfields and buildings. The task he is charged with.

- About one month after Sam’s bath, an event happens and the severity of situation starts to sink in. Sam was stationed on the east coast of Britain building airfields and one night as he writes a letter to his love Angela he hears the air raid alarms go off. At this moment Sam runs outside into the darkness of night and hears the roar of German planes approaching. In this moment the men on watch flip the spot lights on and for Sam the atmosphere is transformed into something he can more easily relate to - the setting of a night football game. Here Sam maintains his sense of duty but this is also the first time he realizes the immensity and severity of his current situation.

- As the time and journal entries begin to pass such air raids become common to Sam and he writes about them with less and less intensity. Sam maintains his
sense of duty while he has now become aware of the immensity and importance of the war and his situation.

- In November of 1943 Sam is ecstatic at his chance to radio home to America; he does not even bat an eye to the 50 dollars he had to pay to make this call. During many of the journal entries during this time Sam begins to show and express a longing of home. In rare entries he is excited, like in the case of radioing home in other cases Sam’s longing for home manifested in a melancholy way as he often feels isolated.

- In 1944 Sam has became completely numb with all of the grand events that one may see during war. On a daily basis he notes to how the skies are filled with planes and alludes that he no longer bothers to look up at them. At this point Sam Cerra is still aware of the immensity of his situation however he slowly begins to ignore these grand events as they are overshadowed by his longing for home.

- Until 1945 Sam occupies himself with endless hours of work and thoughts of home as he’s now unconcerned about any near threat like bombs. Sam continues his sense of duty but all of his thoughts are focused toward home.

- As soldiers are now being sent home Sam is ordered to stay as he watches less experience men being shipped home. Sam is frustrated as all of his energy is focused toward getting home.
3.2.4 Spatial and Historical Analysis

To gain further insight into Sam's experience I plotted out his journey through Europe with the virtual map of Google Earth. This was done by placing virtual pins on a virtual globe. Each pin's title contained the name of the location and the date at which Sam was there. Taking full advantage of what Google Earth has to offer I tagged each one of my pins with all of the data I had retrieved relative to a journal entry. Once complete I was able to further analyze Sam's experience by freely navigating around on a virtual globe to trace his path. One click on any pin would expose more data about that particular date and location. This contained everything from journal entries, photographs, postcards and even web links to outside sources like Wikipedia or World War II research websites.

This mapping research informed me both as filmmaker and as Sam's grandson. This research helped to piece together more information about Sam's entire war experience. This virtual globe educated me as to when and where my grandfather was during World War II. This brought a more complete sense to Sam's overall war story. Since my grandfather never spoke about his war experience knowledge of his experience was very limited within my family. This research brought forth a more complete sense of his experience and the virtual globe put the journal entries into context and associating them to a specific time and location.

From a filmmaker's point of view Google Earth's virtual globe proved to be very useful. As each journal entry was put into location context new information about each entry was revealed. For example June 6th 1944 was the infamous D-Day and it is apparent that this was a historically important day for the Second World War. By placing a marker on the globe I could get a better idea as to how many airplanes came from his camp and how
came from surrounding bases. In Sam’s journal entry for this day he notes how the sky is full of hundreds of planes all day, Sam also implies that this is a rare and important event. This journal entry alone offers no more insight into this day or Sam’s relationship to it. However once this entry was plotted on a virtual globe an association between Sam’s personal experience and the greater event of D-Day was established. This began to reveal Sam’s role in D-Day as it illustrated the importance his airfield played in launching planes that attacked Normandy during this battle. Figure 3.3 shows a number of these pin points, all of the green pin points indicate Sam’s territory before D-Day and orange pins indicate where he traveled to after D-Day.

Figure 3.3. Green and orange pins indicate Sam’s location before and after D-Day\textsuperscript{11}
This interactive globe proved to be very useful in reconstructing a temporal and spatial story of Sam’s overall experience. This put into perspective the distances Sam traveled and the time it took for him to travel to these places. This allowed for a deeper analysis and conjecture of his psychological state beyond the journals themselves. As discussed earlier Sam had a strong work ethic and because of this he rarely mentioned being tired and worn out in his journal entries. However, by analyzing the virtual globe and his journal entries I could imagine, what portions of his experience were more exhausting and demanding than others. This kind of information later guided the story development process by informing me just how dangerous his situations were.

Next I began to further analyze his temporal relationship with the war by analyzing the chronological order of many major World War II events. I looked at many events that effected the war in some way it may have been something infamous like D-Day or something covert like the launching a special missions and air raids. In order to relate these war events to Sam personally I generated a document that shows a side-by-side comparison of Sam’s personal timeline and the timeline of the war at large. This document (Table 1 and 2), starts at the top with events leading up to the war and progresses downward ending with events right after the war.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sam Cerra’s Activity</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Word War II Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1934</td>
<td>Adolf Hitler becomes Führer of Germany.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>Britain, France, Australia and New Zealand declare war on Germany.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Nazis invade France. Battle of Britain begins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Sam leaves New York and reaches Nova Scotia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1943</td>
<td>European destination reached, South Wales, England. First all-American air attack in Europe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>Sam works in the United Kingdom building an air field and maintaining transportation vehicles. First bombing raid by Americans on Germany (at Wilhelmshaven). Many air raids like Operation &quot;Gomorrah&quot; continue on a regular basis. Germans occupy Rome and rescue Mussolini. A Fascist government is re-established.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>Sam works non stop in the UK maintaining air fields and equipment. British drop 3000 tons of bombs during an air raid on Hamburg, Germany.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>The second invasion is noted. Operation Dragoon begins (the Allied invasion of Southern France).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>Sam works sleeplessly in England preparing his section for an overseas convoy. Liberation of Paris.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Part one of the side-by-side event comparisons of Sam and World War II.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25-Sep</td>
<td>Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-Jan</td>
<td>U.S. 1st and 3rd Armies link up after a month long separation during the Battle of the Bulge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-Apr</td>
<td>Sam leaves Orly, France.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-Apr</td>
<td>3 years in the service and Sam reaches Mannheim, Germany.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-Apr</td>
<td>Allies liberate Buchenwald and Belsen concentration camps.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-Apr</td>
<td>While shocked by the news of our Presidents death Sam is ordered to keep a close eye on Hitler’s Youth’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-Apr</td>
<td>President Roosevelt dies. Truman becomes President.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27-Apr</td>
<td>Germans attempt to bomb the Rhine Bridge where Sam is at.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-May</td>
<td>Preparing to move again. Rejoiced over the news of Hitler’s death heard on the radio.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-May</td>
<td>After tensely waiting for days good news is finally announced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-Aug</td>
<td>V-E (Victory in Europe) Day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-Aug</td>
<td>First atomic bomb dropped, on Hiroshima, Japan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-Oct</td>
<td>Japanese agree to unconditional surrender.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-Nov</td>
<td>United Nations is officially born.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-Oct</td>
<td>Sam arrives home in America. His boat arrives in New York.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-Oct</td>
<td>Sam marries Angela.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hermann Göring commits suicide two hours before his scheduled execution.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Part two of the side-by-side event comparisons of Sam and World War II\textsuperscript{13}
In the majority of Sam’s journal entries he is brief. During the war the United States government led a campaign to inform citizens and soldiers about the dangers of giving away secrets. These dangers were taken seriously by Sam as seen in his writing in which he provides few details of coming events. He would use terms like “big” or “important” to describe secret and coming projects.

Using the dates and locations of the major war events from the comparison I then added as another set of pins. The result of this gave another layer of insight into the impact that Sam’s small part played in the war at large. With the major war events plotted out the events that he was prepping his base for became clear. In most instances these were bombing missions into Germany. This comparison gave me evidence that Sam’s role in the war, like many others was important. As a filmmaker this allowed me further interpret the journal entries and relate Sam’s personal experience to the larger historical events of the war.

3.3 Filmmaker’s Relationship to the Film’s Subject

There are solid similarities in how Sam and I were raised but there are also major differences in how we grew up. Sam was raised in a 100% Italian family which valued a strong sense of morality. Sam’s parents instilled in him a strong work ethic, strong family values and solid religious beliefs. As an example of Sam’s religious values, every Sunday he would take a vow of silence and not speak for the entire day. The work ethic instilled in him is seen throughout his life. Before the war Sam worked as prison guard for the state of West Virginia, during this time every bit of money he earned went right back into supporting his family. The majority of this insight into Sam’s work ethic comes directly from the family
interviews. However there are also journal entries which illustrate his commitment to a strong work ethic and the desire to excel his duties.

I was raised in a somewhat similar fashion as Sam but my upbringing was much less rigid. Both parents that raised me came from hard working families and this was reflected in how I was raised. My father ran a home remodeling business and in my early days I began to work for him. This continued throughout my high school career and even occasionally after that. While working for my father the pay was minimum wage and only a small part of each check went in to my pocket while the rest went back toward the family. Family values were also important in how I was raised. Growing up, nearly every weekend my family spent time visiting grandparents and cousins. During these visits the idea of a strong family first was continually re-enforced.

Despite the similarities in how Sam and I were raised, I did not feel a connection with Sam. As family members would reminisce about Sam’s life I would maintain a feeling of disconnection. The root of this disconnection comes from the differences between Sam and me. I believe that some of our differences no matter how subtle can be attributed to the general shift of moral focus a society experiences over time.

The difference that specifically impacted the filmmaking process was one of family. Sam and I were raised to cherish the same family values but the difference was in the depth at which these values were grasped. As mentioned Sam came from a 100% Italian family so the concept of tradition and even genetics solidified his family values. I was adopted so I have always felt disconnected from the tradition and genetic side of family. For me this disconnection led me have doubts about the loyalty and trust in family that Sam and I both
were raised to value. These doubts have been carried around with me my entire life and were never dealt with until the production of this film.

The result of this film’s research however gave me a newly found respect and adoration for Sam. This adoration also began to influence the design of the film itself and of Sam’s virtual animated character. Out of respect for Sam’s memory it was decided that Sam’s character is to be realistic in design and journal entries would be used for the film’s narration. This research and the analyzed existing animated biographies guided me to also repurpose and re-contextualize Sam’s biographical artifacts. Part of the film’s design was to then include these journals, photographs, postcards and uniform into the animation.
CHAPTER 4: PRODUCTION METHODOLOGY

4.1 Film Objective and Overview

The objective of this film is to explore the process of creating an animated biography in which the filmmaker has a personal relationship with the film’s subject and where interpretation drives the visual development. It was also an objective to repurpose and include Sam’s biographical artifacts in the animation. There was an overwhelming supply of photographs and journals recorded by Sam and it was a difficult process to synthesize and compress a story from all of these biographical artifacts. To streamline this task a theme for the film was chosen to help guide and focus the direction of story development. This theme became ‘solitude’ and it comes from common experiences and feelings shared by Sam and the filmmaker. In analyzing Sam’s journals it became apparent that during World War II his emotions dwelled on loneliness as he consistently thought of family and the familiar things back home. The filmmaker’s feelings of solitude stem from the lack of genetic grounding in the midst of an adopted family.

Before beginning the story development process a great deal of time was spent analyzing the events of World War II and the emotional experiences of Sam Cerra. Much of this analysis (discussed in chapter 3) and its conclusion helped to put Sam’s specific journal entries into context. The story development of *Alone in the 475th* flowed through two major
phases of analysis. The research discussed in chapter 3 is considered to be the first phase of analysis for the story development. This first phase analyzed aspects of reality which include army documents, the physical journals, photographs, maps and historical context. The second major phase of analysis revolves around the filmmaker’s interpretation of Sam’s experiences; discussed in this chapter. An overview of the story developments flow and analysis can be seen in Figure 4.1.
Figure 4.1. Flow chart of the research and analysis phases used to develop the film’s story.
4.2  **Story and Film Design**

4.2.1  **Storyboarding**

The personal differences between Sam and I effected the story development in the film’s production pipeline. As each version of the storyboards was drawn my disconnected feelings were explored by injecting them in different ways into the story. In an early iteration of the storyboards I explored a storyline which had a focus on a grandparent-grandson relationship. I imagined that a closer relationship with my grandmother existed and that she was still alive during the discovery of Sam’s biographical artifacts. This imagined relationship was a fictional part of the story that acted as a thread, holding together the biographical aspects of the story (Figure 4.2). This approach of a fabricated relationship was an attempt to fill the holes in Sam’s story while also bringing me closer to the main character. This approach however had the opposite effect of pushing my relationship with Sam further away. By fabricating a false relationship with my grandfather I shifted the focus of the story toward an inaccurate representation of how I experienced Sam’s biographical artifacts.
In a close to final version of the storyboards a different approach was taken. Instead of creating a false relationship to bridge the disconnection I felt and the disconnection between journal entries, I embraced it. By integrating my personal feelings into the design processes of the film, a deeper layer of truth was revealed. As this version of the story was developed I abandoned the need to fill any holes found in the journals or existing relationships. I did not limit myself by trying to fit the story into a conventional story arc of exposition, rising action, climax and resolution. Being experimental with the story structure I was able to focus completely on the words written in the journals and the character.
analysis. This resulted in a more personal and truthful interpretation of the biographical research done on Sam. When I ignored the assemblage of a conventional story arc I was free to create images out of context and base them on my personal interpretations of Sam’s personal experience.

Figure 4.3. A storyboard depiction of Sam’s journal entry “Our camp was like a night football game”16

As decisions were made about the visual representation of Sam’s journal entries in the storyboards the idea of dissociative events (discussed in chapter 2) became a guideline in determining the direction of a sequence. If Sam disassociated himself from a given
situation it would be reflected in his writing, such as comparing an air raid to a football
game. Then, the resulting visualization of a journal entry would be executed literally making
Sam’s war environment resemble of football game. An example of this is found in the entry
where Sam first realizes the true risk of being at war. In this entry Sam’s dissociation is
clearly seen as he relates an air raid to the likeness of being at a night football game (Figure
4.3). In the entries where Sam is more disconnected I took more liberties in visualizing my
interpretation of the situation for the storyboards.

4.2.2 Character Design

Early in the character development stage different visual representations of Sam was
explored. The majority of these concepts were caricaturized as their intent was to parallel a
bizarre world of wartime experiences. However as my respect for Sam grew I was decided
that the 3D representation of Sam Cerra should be realistic in order to respect and honor
his memory (Figure 4.4). A realistic design for the character benefits the story by pointing
out that these events in a way really happened. The realistic design of Sam is intended to
actualize Sam’s experiences. Abstracted and exaggerated environments became symbolic of
the filmmaker’s interpretations and imagined memories of Sam’s life. When a realistic Sam
juxtaposes the imagined world of the filmmaker a visual dynamic is created. This
relationship suggests that the real life experiences of Sam are being played out within the
world of the filmmaker.
Figure 4.4. The final realistic design of Sam Cerra’s character is meant to honor his memory.
References were crucial in creating the realistic design for Sam’s virtual model. In order to achieve a facial likeness of Sam in the 3D model, a photograph from his military identification card worked as the primary reference. All of the textures used in the character’s clothing came from actual scans of Sam Cerra’s military uniform. Fabric samples, patches and buttons were all scanned in and then translated into an image-based texture used in the virtual model (Figure 4.5). This process serves the goal of creating a realistic military design for Sam’s character but it also serves to further document Sam’s personal World War II experiences within the film.
4.2.3 Set and Prop Design

Essential to this film’s design is the weaving together of 2D and 3D elements. This applies to animation, compositing, rendering and props. In this section I will focus on how I combined both 2D and 3D assets to achieve both biographical and visual concept goals. In some shots photographs are added directly into a 3D virtual set and in others, a 2D set. This serves to inject more biographical records into the film and begins to call out the intimate relationship this film shares between the 2D and 3D. 2D photographs are repurposed and added into the film’s sets or stages. When the flat 2D images were added into the 3D set they served as elements which document Sam’s experience. In one shot (Figure 4.6) there is a photograph of a building in the left side of the frame. Since it is placed in the 3D virtual space it matches every camera movement as it moves deeper into the space. In other cases a shot’s set was completely made up of 2D layers arranged in z-space to aid in creating an illusion of depth (Figure 4.7).
Figure 4.6. The building photograph on the left side exists within a virtual 3D set.
In *Alone in the 475th* Sam is a virtual 3D character so any objects that he directly interacts with need to be a 3D asset. These assets include the ground, trucks and so on. There were also other textured and shaded 3D props added to the environment that Sam did not interact with. These 3D props were used to build up the virtual world and they include planes, boats and buildings. The props help to bring a fuller feeling to the environment by adding a feeling of natural clutter. In a number of cases props that were common got reused over and over again filling out the set. These props offered me the opportunity to add more motion within the background of the film.
Once a prop was modeled and textured, deformers were then applied to provide new control over the props by allowing me to bend, twist, squash and stretch them (Figure 4.8). As 3D props are used over and over again the application of deformers helped to break up the uniformity of all duplicated props. This was simply done by altering the deformer before duplicating a prop. Deformers were also used to enhance time-based changes. I deform the props over time and a visual instability is created which is intended to invoke a sense of memory or dream. This animation technique helps to visually reinforce the analysis and interpretation of the journal entries that make Sam’s world feel disconnected from him.

Figure 4.8. Applied deformers create two building variations by bending and squashing²¹
4.2.4 Render Design and Process

Visual references came from graphic artists like Brian Bendis and his graphic novel *Torso* (Bendis 1999). This novel is about Eliot Ness in Cleveland Ohio during 1935. Ness was there for years chasing the man responsible for the torso murders. *Torso* was a reference for its approach of mixing photographs, news articles and illustrations. *Torso* (Figure 4.9) mixes together a photographic background with an illustrated foreground. The vast majority of shots in *Alone in the 475th* have inserted in it photographic artifacts. Part of the motivation behind this is to reinforce the art direction of the film which is to mimic a general photographic feeling.

Figure 4.9. The graphic novel Torso, by Brian Bendis uses photographs for the background\textsuperscript{22}
With *Alone in the 475th* render layers play a key role in establishing the visual look of the film and in some aspects of the film’s animated qualities. The visual goal of the rendering design was to develop a look for the 3D assets that resembles a graphic novel. In developing this style, techniques like color halftones, high contrast and cartoon lines were applied to the 3D assets during the exploration. These render layers allowed for photographs to easily composite into the final image and for the exploration of the look of the film. In the first stage of this development I explored a broad range of different styles for the film. Render layers allowed me to do these explorations relatively quickly. As certain render layers began to get the desired result those layer were maintained and saved. Render layers then continued to aid in the development process by allowing me then to fine tune and add more subtle layers. An iterative process, going from broad to subtle changes, helped to narrow down to the final look and feel of the film (Figure 4.10). The final solution uses a mix between cartoon lines, ambient light and full shaded renders. When these layers are flattened through compositing they achieve a graphic novel quality.
Technically speaking each shot in this film is unique in its final execution. A base template of render layers for the 3D character and set props was established. First assets were divided into objects such as Sam, jeep, building, clouds, etc. Then each object like Sam and hero props gets divided into sub layers. These sub layers become the core render layers needed to achieve the final look of each object. The output of these sub layers was then taken into Adobe® After Effects® where a post processing composite was done to achieve the final look.
The template of sub layers applied to each objects had a default of five or six separate layers. The five layers (Figure 4.11) that Sam had at all times was two for color, two for cartoon lines and one for his eyes. One color layer was a 3D rendering of Sam fully lit while the second color pass was done with one ambient light with an ambient shade of zero. This visually flattened the layer and when the light and shaded render was added to the composite it resulted in the desired color fill to be used for Sam. The cartoon line render layers were simply two different types of cartoon lines. The two different cartoon lines composite together, to get a loose and sketch-like quality to the lines and along the edges of
the character. The fifth layer of Sam's eyes was created to maintain control over their visibility in compositing.

The sixth render layer is one classified as expressive. This layer was used infrequently to insert a more graphic expression (discussed in Chapter 2) in certain shots. In the D-Day shot this render layer is used as static, dream-like imagery used to fill the holes of memories that emit from the outlines of Sam. This static begins to radiate as Sam gets lost in the overwhelming sound of planes and endless radio chatter (Figure 4.12).

Figure 4.12. Sam becomes static as a stylistic render is applied to the shot.  

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25 Figure 4.12. Sam becomes static as a stylistic render is applied to the shot.
As the designer my goal was to mix 2D and 3D assets and to create a visual style that is reminiscent of a graphic novel. In order to achieve this task all 3D objects had to be rendered and flattened. These layers made it possible to achieve the desired graphic look of the film by allowing me to flatten the three dimensional look of the renders and easily insert biographic artifacts. The compositing of photographs and journal entry voiceovers become the representational documentation of Sam Cerra’s World War II experience.

4.3 Concepts of Visual Story

A major step during the interpretation phase was constructing a sequence of emotional states which Sam may have experienced during World War II. My intention was to build the story on these states as Sam experienced them overtime. This sequence of emotions is enthusiasm, realization, awareness, fatigue, strain and solitude. Each emotion has a specific journal entry tied to it. However each emotion may not be evident by one journal entry alone. When interpreting each journal entry they were put in context by also examining the numerous entries before and after each selected one. Through this process my interpretations of Sam’s feelings were developed.

In response to these emotions and their related journal entries I generated inspirational paintings (Figure 4.13). The inspirational paintings informed and guided the visual direction of a sequence within the film.
These inspirational digital paintings became very important to the film’s process technically and aesthetically. One initial function of these paintings was to explore the mood and symbolic function that each sequence could embody. For some journal entries the inspirational painting further functioned as concept art for the art direction of a sequence influencing its level of stylization and color palette. The process for the selection of each accompanying journal entry, the development of each visual sequence and its symbolic function related to the story is discussed in the following section.
4.3.1 Enthusiasm – Sequence 1

The first category, enthusiasm, is accompanied by the August 6\textsuperscript{th} 1942 journal entry. In the film this became the first animated sequence, Sam was on the S.S. Uruguay sailing across the Atlantic Ocean to begin his wartime service in the European Theatre. That journal entry is as follows:

“August 11\textsuperscript{th} 1942

At the end of top deck father gave out rosaries and prayer books.

We stayed alert as we passed through dangerous water zones.

There was movement! Sailors ran for the anti-aircraft guns.

It was only whales! Thank God”\textsuperscript{27}

During this entry Sam was excited to serve his country. Like many men during this time Sam was eager and excited to serve his country without reflecting upon the possible horrors of war time.

This August 11\textsuperscript{th} 1942 journal entry was specifically chosen for its potential to be visually symbolic. Temporally it occurs during the beginning of his wartime journey and it also takes place on the infamously crowded transport boat, the S.S. Uruguay. Symbolically this represents the passing from one world to another and in Sam’s case he is moving from a known world to the unknown one. Though Sam is excited to step into this new world, this journal entry also illustrates his growing awareness of the true nature of war. This journal entry also takes place during the dark of night, which adds to the symbolic nature of the
sequence. It allows me, as the filmmaker, to use a darker and more monotone color palette to help communicate that there is an unknown change coming to Sam’s worlds.

Figure 4.14. Shot 1 from Sequence 1 isolates Sam from the rest of the men aboard the boat.
The crowded boat allowed for a visual juxtaposition by separating the Sam character from the crowd. This is important to the film because its intent is to communicate and universalize the internal feelings of Sam as opposed to focusing on the relationship bonds formed during war. This juxtaposition (Figures 4.14 and 4.15) displays only the Sam character and in the other, a crowd is shown without the virtual Sam character.

4.3.2 Realization – Sequence 2

The next emotion, realization, is exemplified by the September 7th 1942 journal entry, in the film this became sequence 2. Here Sam has his first shell shattering experience as his camp is attacked by German bombers. The journal entry was written as follows:
“September 7th 1942

Its 24 hours that will rest in my mind forever.

I started in the a.m. and worked hard all day.

At 11:00 p.m. I just finished a letter and the Gerry’s started the fireworks.

Many pills or eggs as the Brits say were dropped.

All soldiers hit the ditches and I took off in a hell of a hurry with my rifle.

Our camp was like a night football game as the bombers flew overhead.

I began to realize, I was at war.

I can’t say I was brave and I can’t say I was yellow, but I did not feel good at all” 30

When examining the journal entries that fall before and after this one, it was determined that this entry best illustrates a pivotal change in Sam’s character. As his camp is bombed Sam runs for cover and he comes to terms with the severity of his situation. Sam’s initial excitement for the war finally fades away after this entry. This entry was selected because of this important character change in Sam. This entry was also selected because of how it was written. Sam is dissociating in his description of the event. Sam relates the falling bombs to eggs and his military camp to a night football game. Within the context of the story this entry serves to communicate a change in character and in the visualization of Sam’s world. Sam’s environment (Figures 4.16 and 4.17) resembles a football game and not a camp. Also as bombs fall and turn to eggs they explode with firework like colors as described by Sam within the journal entry.
Figure 4.16. Shot 6 of Sequence 2 changes to resemble a football game.
Symbolically this sequence represents the change in how Sam relates himself, to the war, and the world around him. This is a turning point for Sam’s character and the visual story as he becomes more and more withdrawn. From this point on the story continues to visually highlight these withdrawn moments with the intention of placing less importance on Sam’s physical environment and more on his internal emotion state. The color palette used is also intended to add symbolically to the sequence, particularly the sky. The sky was composed with shades of orange and is meant to imply the time of dusk or a time of transition. In this sense the sky visually personifies Sam’s emotional transition and the story’s visual transition.
4.3.3 Awareness – Sequence 3

The third emotion is awareness and a journal entry that embodied this was from June 6\textsuperscript{th} 1944 also known as D-Day. Here Sam watches hundreds of planes in the sky as he becomes aware of just how important his small role is in the war. This journal entry is quoted here:

\begin{quote}
\"June 6\textsuperscript{th} 1944

Hundreds of planes are going over.

The sky is full of planes all day.

All radios are going full blast and everyone is on the alert.

D-Day has begun\" 33
\end{quote}

Debarkation Day better known as D-Day is considered a historical turning point in the war. This operation was carried out in an amphibious and air assault which gave the Allied Forces a firm foothold in France. This advancement ultimately allowed the Allied Forces to cross the River Seine and lead to the battle which ended the war. It seems from Sam’s perspective he was able to watch as all of his labors, and that of many other men, come together in one combined action.

One reason why this journal entry was selected is because of the date’s historical relevance to World War II. Where the previous sequence is pivotal to Sam’s character this sequence is pivotal to the war itself. This specific journal entry documents Sam’s perspective of a historical day and the grand sight he saw. For Sam this is a moment of awareness. In
the journal entries leading up to this one Sam makes reference that he and his men are working tirelessly toward a goal which is to be secret. Sam never mentions the final goal in his writings but in the entry on the night before D-Day he mentions that “tomorrow is the day we’ve been working for”. On D-Day Sam is able to look up to the sky and witness a historical moment which he helped to create.

Figure 4.18. A low camera angle was explored during the sequences development to accentuate importance of the event.\textsuperscript{34}
Symbolically this sequence seeks to put awareness into perspective. Since the previous sequence Sam has become fully aware of the importance of being at war and he has worked hard to keep his focus on daily duties. Then on D-Day Sam looks up and finds the sky filled with planes (Figure 4.19). For Sam, this brings a sense of awareness, allowing him to see how his daily duties are, in fact, making an impact in the war. In order to visually communicate Sam’s sense of pride from this awareness, a low camera angle was explored even in the sequences inspirational painting (Figure 4.18). This low camera angle highlights Sam presence within the frame making him look heroic while also exposing the plane filled sky giving the composition a sense of grandeur. To add to the visual effect natural muted
colors and browns are used to conjure a palette reminiscent of a sepia stained photograph. This is meant to add to the historical sense of the day and moment.

4.3.4 Fatigue – Sequence 4

The fourth emotion is fatigue and its accompanying journal entry is from September 11th 1944 and this became sequence 4 in the film. Here Sam travels from Great Britain to France in one of World War II’s largest convoys. The journal entry of September 11th 1944 is as follows:

“September 11th 1944
Instructed to move over seas into France.
We were one of the largest convoys to cross Europe.
The move was slow with all trucks overloaded.
Along our path we encountered hundreds of tanks with parts sticking about.
Many destroyed German tanks littered the road through battle areas.
Reached destination 6 miles from Paris.”

In the journal entries after D-Day Sam spends his time preparing for another big mission which is in part executed on September 11th 1944. This mission was the advancement of the War’s largest convoy moving into France where new stations and camps are to be set up. By this point Sam is exhausted from constant preparation and traveling, not to mention a severe lack of sleep. Along his journey he encounters nothing but
destruction and notes numerous broken ships in the English Channel and endless destroyed tanks on the land. Once Sam reaches France the men set up camp and tour the surrounding area fixing up other camps and vehicles. This journal entry was in part selected to communicate the passage of time and the fatigue that comes with an endless work schedule and lack of sleep. This sequence also serves to place the story in a new location. Up until this sequence the film has been staged in Great Britain and after this convoy Sam is stationed in France and Germany. So the selection of this particular entry also works to move Sam to a new location while also communicating the idea of time and fatigue.

Figure 4.20. In Shot 2 of Sequence 4 Sam travels toward France as destroyed tanks line the road and their barrels become limp.
Symbolically this sequence focuses the passage of time as mentioned above. In the film this is accomplished by showing two separate shots. The first shot of the sequence (Figure 4.20) shows Sam leading the convoy toward France. The second shot of the sequence (Figure 4.21) is an extreme close-up shot of Sam smoking a cigarette. These two shots are similar in that nothing really happens in them, Sam is accomplishing nothing. They both show Sam doing a mundane task which does nothing but take up time. Another layer that symbolically adds to the first shot is the animation applied to the tanks. As Sam drives the barrels of the defeated tanks begin to sag as they become limp. The intention behind this is to simply symbolize the growing impotence of the German army within the war. A
color palette of muted colors, also help to muddy up the composition making it more visually consistent and even across the frame. The purpose is to reduce the overall contrast of the sequence so that one element in the frame does not draw attention away from another.

4.3.5 Strain – Sequence 5

The fifth emotion, strain, became sequence 5 in the film. Its companion journal entry is from October 5th 1944. Here Sam is strained from the grueling work of repairing destroyed airfields and is now numb to the constant annoyances and hazards that occur daily. One such hazard was the infamous buzz bombs developed by the German forces. Buzz bombs were designed to glide slowly in the air and then drop with the expiration of a timer. This selected journal entry is as follows:

“October 5th 1944

Working hard all day repairing buildings and airfields.
The mechanical killers’ buzz bombs hover overhead.
A few of them fell and shook us.
Later I visited Paris and bought perfume.” 39

The numerous journal entries that occur before and after this one were factored into its visual interpretation. In many entries Sam reports being exhausted from working nearly twenty hours a day and the continued presence of buzz bombs. Sam is just going through
the motions and seems unconcerned about threats like the buzz bombs. To Sam the buzz bombs are more of a nuisance. This interpretation that the world is faded away from Sam was visually meditated on to generate an inspired digital painting. During this phase I developed an environment based on the concept of Sam becoming so numb to the world that it seems to of disappeared. In the absence of Sam’s world I insert an aspect of how I have personally experienced his world, which is through the journal itself. I used the journal pages themselves as an environmental ground texture (Figure 4.22). This decision made in the initial inspirational painting was also executed in the final visual development of the sequence.

Figure 4.22. An inspirational painting shows journal pages as a ground texture
As the production process unfolded so did new ways to visualize elements in the sequence like a buzz bomb. In the journal entry prior to this one Sam merely notes the presence of buzz bombs indicating indifference. To Sam the bombs have become so common place that they are more of an annoyance than a threat. To visually personify Sam’s indifference the buzz bombs in the film are represented as a swarm of bugs which just pester him. In one shot Sam even swats at them trying to shoo them away like flies (Figure 4.23). During this period Sam was also working twenty hours out of the day, so he was working well before sunrise and well after sunset. To visually emulate a muddled sense of
sunrise or sunset a color palette of pinks and purples is used. The intent is to create a sense of magic time, that time of day when the lighting could be interpreted as dusk or dawn.

4.3.6 Solitude – Sequence 6

The sixth emotion is solitude and the journal entry that typifies this is from August 14th 1945. During this period the Second World War is officially over and many men are preparing for their return home. Sam however, despite his seniority, continues to be neglected as one of the men chosen to return home. The journal entry for this sequence in the film is as follows:

“August 14th 1945

The rotation plan is put into action.

Men are being sent home based on a point system.

Despite more than enough points and the advancement of our return date 4 months had passed and I am still here.”

In a handful of journal entries prior to this one Sam excitedly mentions that he will soon be heading back home to the America. In these entries he often even gives a specific return date, then in the following entries he complains about the delay of that date. Throughout this period a point system was established in order to determine who gets shipped home first. From the beginning of this point system Sam is rewarded more than enough points to be shipped home. However, his personal return date continues to be
postponed and this begins to frustrate Sam as it seems to exacerbate his solitude. To make this situation worse Sam is stationed near a port where men are being shipped home while he is left to work and watch them leave. In the first shot of this sequence the audience simply sees Sam looking onward to something off frame (Figure 4.24). As Sam looks off frame in this shot he flashes an expression of contempt and this stems from his frustration of watching others being sent home when it should be him.

Figure 4.24. Shot 1 of Sequence 6 Sam looks onward in contempt as men are being shipped home and he remains43
The second shot for this sequence is an over the shoulder shot as Sam’s field of view is revealed to the audience. In the shot Sam is watching men load onto boats so that they may return home. In developing this shot I wanted to externalize the element which is driving Sam’s frustration and this is the use of a point system. The more points a soldier had the sooner he is sent home and this system should be favorable to Sam. However it is not so Sam is left watching soldiers with fewer points than him get sent home. Similar to the technique Canemaker used in his film The Moon and the Son. I use it here to visually personify this situation by having men literally morph into numbers representing their point value (Figure 4.25).
In order to offset a seemingly hopeless ending the sequence was designed to occur during a specific time of day and uses a precise color palette. The intended time of day and color palette work together, to generate a visual sense of hope during this somber moment. Both the time of day and color palette are meant to imply a bright sunrise in order to invoke hope within the audience. To achieve this, the color palette for the sky consists of yellow tones with a starburst effect at the edge of the frame to represent the sun. As the sequence comes to an end Sam mentions that he is “still here” and though Sam seems stuck the audience should feel a sense of hope due to the fact that the war is over and there is a bright sunrise on the horizon.

4.4 Of Sight and Sound, The Final Edit

4.4.1 Voiceover, Diegetic and Non-Diegetic

The visualizations in *Alone in the 475th* are often based on concepts of surrealism, psycho-realism and the personification of thoughts, emotions and situations that come from the three films discussed in Chapter 2. The quality of motion applied to Sam and elements within the film work to construct a dream or memory like state similar to that which Ari Folman explored in his film *Waltz with Bashir*. The film is an interpretation of Sam’s journal entries. These interpretations often embellish and exaggerate the written words. While journal entries inspired the visual distortions of Sam’s experience they also bring balance to the film by declaring a firsthand account of his experience. The exact words that Sam had written in his journals were used as the script for the voice over. The voice over was then performed by actor Alex Lefeld and recorded by Kevin Petrilla at WOSU. So while Sam’s
reality is visually being warped within the film the voice over anchors the film to the truth. The truth being Sam’s written account of the film’s events.

Beyond the non-diegetic sound of the voice over, a music composition by Matthew Davis provides a soundtrack for the film. Throughout the film ambient sounds and sound effects are used to support the imagery and add dramatic effect. Diegetic sound effects contribute to the film’s performance and are mostly effects for cars, boats, planes and bombs. The voice over, diegetic and non-diegetic sounds all combine with the visual editing and transitions of the film to complete its experience.

4.4.2 Visual Transitions

During the final stage of the film’s editing special attention was paid to the transition of one sequence into the next. This is important to the film since its intent is to invoke a sense of memories. The transitions also provide an opportunity to enhance the story. There are many missing dates and entries throughout the series of journals and often the things Sam mentions go unresolved. By fashioning custom transitions for sequence changes, the film visually uses Canemaker’s idea of morphing to transport the viewer from one memory to the next. It also is suggestive of linear holes that exist between each sequence in the film. Discussed in this section is each transition and how it is relative to its relating journal entry.

In the film’s opening, a shot of an open sea is shown to the audience as the camera pans slightly to the right. This entire sequence occurs on a boat heading toward Great Britain. Since this sequence happens over water and during the night, blue was chosen to be a dominant color for the sequence. This ocean was chosen as the dominant element (Figure 4.26) because in numerous religions water can symbolize a transition. Sam mentions that a
priest is on board handing out prayer books and rosaries. In the final shot of this sequence Sam is in the foreground overlooking the ocean from the boat. The foreground of this shot quickly fades away leaving only the ocean background. The frame, now similar to the opening shot, begins to pull in from the edges and bead up like water in the center of the frame. As the edges of the frame pull in, an image of the next shot is shown in the absent spaces (Figure 4.27).

Figure 4.26. The film’s opening shot is of an open ocean during the dark of night.
In the second sequence Sam comes to realize just how serious his situation is. Sam is writing in his journal as German bombers begin to attack his camp. Sam then grabs his rifle and runs for a ditch as he flees from falling bombs. In this entry Sam also states that this is when he realizes he is at war. In the last shot for this sequence the audience sees Sam running from bombs as they fall and explode behind him. To make the transition to the next sequence a shatter effect is applied to the frame. So as one final bomb falls and explodes behind Sam the frame simultaneously shatters revealing the next sequence (Figure 4.28). This particular transition is used as a metaphor for the crashing of Sam’s consciousness as he can no longer treat the war like a camping trip.
Figure 4.28. A bomb shatters the frame revealing the next shot in the film. 47

Figure 4.29. A shot transition reflects changing the channel on an old T.V. 48
The third sequence of the film takes place on D-Day and Sam becomes acutely aware of this moment’s significance. Historically this is a defining moment in World War II and for Sam who is able to see the manifestation of his hard work. He looks up to the sky and becomes aware of how his small role is still important. As a metaphor for the awareness theme, this sequence transition is a ‘tuning out’ type of effect. This ‘tuning out’ is meant to juxtapose Sam’s awareness as the film moves to the next sequence. This style of transition is inspired by the static experienced when one changes the channel on a vintage television. Ghosted during the transition (Figure 4.29) is an image from both the previous and upcoming sequence.

The theme for the following sequence is fatigue and this is where Sam is in a convoy heading toward France. As mentioned earlier in section 4.3.4 the concept of time passing was incorporated into the sequence to reinforce the fatigue theme. This is accomplished in two shots, one of which is an extreme close-up of Sam smoking a cigarette. Playing off the device of smoking to pass the time, a film burn effect was used between shots in this sequence and to transition into the following sequence. For this effect (Figure 4.30) the frame burns away in spots as if sparked by a cigarette and then the following sequence is revealed.
Figure 4.30. One shot burns away as the next sequence is revealed

Figure 4.31. An overexposure effect is used in Sequence 6 of the film
The design of the transition from Sequence 5 into Sequence 6 channels the concept of dreams and memories. It is designed to address the fact that much of this film is inspired by photographs. This transition is a mix between a cross fade and an exposure adjustment effect. Figure 4.31 shows this effect midway through its process as Sequence 6 opens. As Sequence 6 ends and the credits begin the influence of photographs again guided the film’s design. Through the film’s credits and dedications actual photographs of Sam are repurposed shown (Figure 4.32). This is to remind the viewer that Sam was a real person and these events really took place but not in the way visualized in the film.

Figure 4.32. A photograph that accompanies the final credits of the film51
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Summary

This thesis presents the process of producing an animated biography in which the filmmaker has a personal relationship with the subject matter. It details the process of gathering biographical information through character interviews, hand written journals, historical outlines, photographs and other found artifacts. Interviews with Sam's family members helped me to discover information about Sam's personality and to build his background story. As well, Sam's journal entries were summarized and organized into emotion categories to guide the story development process. A historical summary of major World War II events then assisted in putting Sam's overall personal experience into a larger context. A result of this research brought a greater understanding about the kind of person Sam Cerra was and the kind of life he lived. This understanding of Sam was invaluable to the film's development because it laid the foundation for how I, the filmmaker would interpret Sam's journals. This intimate understanding was crucial to the film's process because it determined how I would visualize the personal and emotional experiences of Sam. The level of realism for the character design was influenced by my gained respect for Sam as I discovered more about him. As the designer I chose a more realistic rendering of the character in order to honor Sam's memory. This decision then led me to juxtapose the level of realism for Sam's environment by representing it in a surreal and dream-like way.
This thesis documents the decision making process used to extrapolate a story from fractured source material. Many large gaps exist within the journals making it difficult to generate a traditional story arc. As the filmmaker, I eventually embraced the disconnection found within the journal entries and I began to relate to this disconnection and disassociation found in the journals. This approach began to solidify the common feelings of loneliness between Sam and me and in turn I directed the film focus to universality of emotions. From this the film’s theme of solitude was forged.

*Alone in the 475th* may not follow the conventional narrative arc of conflict, crisis, falling action and resolution, as defined by German playwright Gustav Freytag (Kercheval 1997). None the less this film tells a story by using a sequence of emotion states which the character Sam moves through. These emotion states (enthusiasm, realization awareness, fatigue, strain and solitude) emerged from analyzing the reoccurring themes found in the journals. These emotions have a universality that can be shared by all viewers. This concept of universality drove the film’s story development by emphasizing specific emotions which every human regardless of race, creed, culture, wealth and age may feel.

Aesthetically specific identifiers were striped from assets within the film. During World War II Sam was an American fighting against Nazi Germany but in the film there are no visual indicators that an airplane soldier or bomb (Figure 5.1) belongs to the Nazis. The motivation behind this is to universalize the idea of an exterior threat for the audience. The emotion story thread is loneliness or solitude and the emotion states are used to develop a story which progresses through the amount of loneliness Sam feels.

*Alone in the 475th* is successful in communicating it’s theme of solitude though the filmmaker’s use of composition and a single character. However the film could further
support the theme if it included more journal entries in which Sam directly addresses his feelings of solitude.

Figure 5.1. Nazi buzz bombs are void of the Nazi swastika icons

Over the course of the film’s development the filmmaker’s relationship to the subject was affected. As the subject’s grandson very little was known by me about the man Sam was in the beginning of the film’s process. Before developing this film all knowledge about Sam came from stories and memories verbally handed down. These stories were mostly reminiscent of Sam’s good willed nature and never went into detail about the experiences he had. As the film was researched and developed, morsels of information about Sam were
revealed. Through the interviews and specifically through the careful interpretation of journal entries the internal landscape of Sam began to be exposed. Prior, Sam was merely an ambiguous figure who my family greatly respected. As the film developed my understanding of how Sam coped with his stress also grew. This film brought me closer to my grandfather by affirming to me that even he had feelings of being disconnected from family and the world. In researching a biographical film’s subject the filmmaker, like in this film’s process, may learn about themselves and not just the film’s subject. As a subject is studied one may discover new shared experiences or personal habits that bridge empathy between them. As an artist I believe that the more a person knows themselves the better they can communicate their thoughts, opinions and imagination. As a filmmaker I support this process of learning about oneself through the research of another as this may lead to more rich representations and communications.

As the filmmaker I designed aspects of disconnectedness into the film and one of these aspects was to not include representation of myself within the film. The idea of disconnection and dissociation also guided the visual development of each sequence in the film to relate Sam’s dangerous and troubling experiences to everyday things. A voice over with little inflection is also used to further disconnect the viewer from how Sam may have felt when he wrote a journal entry. This begins to disconnect the viewer from Sam and allows them to experience each entry in a similar way the filmmaker did.

Animation offers a unique way to communicate truth by allowing one to express oneself in a much different way than live action can provide (Documentary Animation 2008). The illustrative quality of animation can highlight internal aspects of a character that live action cannot capture. Animation allows a filmmaker to accentuate the internal
landscape of a character's thoughts, emotions, personality or essence. As the internalized self becomes visualized by animation an audience is offered the chance to see different facets of a character that lie beyond the surface. Chris Landreth’s film *Ryan* is an example that typifies the visualization of internal experiences. Landreth illustrates the main character with twisted or missing parts which represents the result of his broken life.

A filmmaker can use animation to create more empathy for a character, thus adding more breath to a viewer’s experience. The use of animation, considered a “friendly” medium, may also contribute to expanding the audience of biographies (Documentary Animation 2008). An animated version of a character may also allow a viewer to identify with that character more easily. If a hyper-realistic design is avoided then a character’s representation is more streamlined or iconic which broadens the way an audience can relate to the character. When comparing abstraction to realism we naturally suspend our disbelief more readily with abstraction. By suspending disbelief an audience puts up fewer barriers and therefore opening themselves up to a more emotional and personal experience.

For *Alone in the 475th*, the design of Sam Cerra’s virtual character was a realistic representation of him. However the renders of Sam were altered in the post-production process specifically to expand his appeal by making the representation of him much more graphic and generic. The final style of Sam’s character was successful in achieving this generic and graphic style. The rendering style resembles that of a graphic novel and allows the film to appeal to a wider audience.

The attention to each frame, when generating images for animation, also provides an opportunity to make a biographical animation more visually potent. One aspect of this project explored how a particular design aesthetic of the film can serve as a tool to further
express the intent of the filmmaker. The subject material for *Alone in the 475th* was primarily discovered through photographs and handwritten journals. And as the look and feel for the film was developed, part of its intention is to reflect the discovery of these biographical artifacts. As the filmmaker I want to share with the audience fragments of how I discovered the film’s material. To reinforce this, some of the discovered photographs were directly included in the film mixing together 2D and 3D assets.

The use of layered visuals became a crucial tool in merging the 2D, 3D and photographic assets into one cohesive vision. Separate layers of images were important in manipulating the look of 3D objects as they aided in flattening out the 3D look making these assets appear more graphic. Layers were used to composite together 2D, 3D and photographic assets to better mesh their color differences. These layers were exploited by applying drop shadows on them to create a shadow box or stacked paper effect. This stacked paper look that draws attention to the layers is meant to be reminiscent of stacked photographs or even journal pages. Layers help this film to achieve a graphic look and aid in mixing biographical artifacts within the film. They also help this film in achieving its quality of motion through the addition of background animation. In conclusion the intent of this film could not have been achieved without the use of layers. However the film’s intent could further be supported if more photographs and other found artifacts were incorporated into the animation. Because of time and production constraints imposed on this film the filmmaker was unable to fully take advantage of this layer system. To fully take advantage of this layer system I would have added more background elements and repurposed artifacts, yet these layers are still crucial to the film’s success.
This idea of adding another layer of personal truth to the film through its own design may not be applicable to every animated biography. However it does illustrate how the time and care required by an animated film offers more detailed ways for a filmmaker to express themselves.

5.2 Contribution

During the progression of this project there were factors of the current animated biography/documentary movement that affected the development of *Alone in the 475th*. Two full length animated feature films were released in theatres. The animated biography *Persepolis* (2007) by Marjane Satrapi and the animated documentary *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) by Ari Folman. Until 2007 the vast majority of animated biographies and documentaries took the form of short films. The public release of both *Persepolis* and *Waltz with Bashir* began to draw global attention and appeal to this type of filmmaking while also validating the medium of animation as a way to share historical and personal events.

Now more than ever the genre of biographical and documentary filmmaking is being debated, especially in terms of animation. One major concern in this debate is if a purely animated biography or documentary can even be considered a biography or documentary. When Ari Folman sought funding for his film *Waltz with Bashir* he was constantly told to ask another entity. When Folman first approached his country’s film board for a grant they claimed that his film was an animation not a biography and that he should apply for a animation grant. Folman then was denied a grant because they claimed his film was a documentary (Parish 2008). This episode demonstrates how there is not yet a standard definition of what an animated biography or documentary is. While the nature of the
animated biography/ documentary continues to be debated one thing is certain. Animated biographies and documentaries are widening the definition of the documentary genre. And animation is literally illustrating how it can add value to this type of filmmaking. One contribution of this thesis is that it supports the widening definition of what an animated biography can be. *Alone in the 475th* continues to challenge what rudimentary elements are required for a film to be considered a biography.

To define “documentary animation” one would first have to define what essential qualities need to be present in an animation to label it “documentary” or “biographical”. This is where the problem lies as there are different answers as to what essential qualities need to exist. Joanna Priestley says that actual images and sounds are necessary while Bob Sabiston says that sound and telling a “true” story is the main part (Documentary Animation 2008). Paul Fierlinger however says that documentary or biographical animation must have a personal touch and that animation is better at documenting emotion.

For *Alone in the 475th* the concept of communicating the true emotions of the filmmaker and film’s subject is essential. The film’s theme is an emotion and its entire development revolves around the filmmaker’s interpretations of Sam Cerra’s experiences, emotions and words. To many filmmakers the essential qualities needed for this animated film to be considered a biography may be absent. However, this film’s focus on revealing true emotion supports Fierlingers school of thought that documenting emotion is what’s important. *Alone in the 475th* functions to further expand the definition of animated biographies and helps to push this type of filmmaking deeper into the exploration of personal experience.
Throughout the development of this film, I have become increasingly fascinated by the concept of dissociation and how this can affect the individual internally and socially. The dissociation of an individual is most common in war veterans and is visualized in films like Waltz with Bashir or Alone in the 475th. However I personally believe that everyone experiences dissociation in some way or another, thus making dissociation a universally shared experience. As a filmmaker my next steps and future animated films will have the intent of exploring this universality of dissociation. In using animations power and flexibility of communicating inner thoughts and emotions I will aspire to generate films that draw people closer through their recognition of shared experiences. Despite the differences in how that individual experience occurred.
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16 George Gantzer, Football storyboard panel, JPG.

17 George Gantzer, Final character design, JPG.

18 George Gantzer, Character reference and design, JPG.

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21 George Gantzer, 3D models with deformers, JPG.

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45 Alone in the 475th.

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52 Alone in the 475th.