

“REEL STUFF”

COLONEL DEAN HESS

AND THE REAL “BATTLE HYMN” STORY

Cinema historian/filmmaker documents hero's tale of war, faith, and compassion.

by Ron Kaplan

It was the true-story stuff of Hollywood lore, with a strong dose of divine guidance, for good measure. An American World War II pilot and ordained clergyman, Dean Hess, salvos a hung bomb from his P-47, only to watch in disbelief as it tumbles into a German orphanage. Years later, in 1950, Hess is an F-51 squadron commander leading South Korean pilots on airstrikes against the invading North Koreans. Hess finds his ill-equipped air base and nearby towns overflowing with pitiful orphans that tug at his heart. Without immediate intervention, they will suffer a horrible fate at the hands of nature or ruthless Communists.



Between treacherous combat missions, “The Flying Preacher” and his men construct a makeshift tent orphanage using CARE packages, rations, and material shipped from the USA in response to appeals for help. When the mix of 400 orphans and an operational air base becomes too hazardous, they set up the “Fifth Air Force Orphanage” in downtown Seoul. With advancing Chinese about to overrun them, only a miracle can save the orphans. Hess and the squadron chaplain lay siege on Fifth Air Force headquarters, pleading for air transport to evacuate the children. Amidst the smoke and chaos of retreating U.N. forces, Air Force cargo planes wing their way onto Hess's field. “Operation Kiddy Car” as it became known, hauls hundreds of waifs to safety at a new orphanage set up with Hess's help on Cheju-do Island.

This summarizes the plot of “Battle Hymn,” the 1956 classic war movie starring Rock Hudson as Dean Hess. Not surprisingly, Hollywood's artistic license pales to the *real* story. No one is as familiar with that backstory than aviation cinema historian and author, James Farmer. His forty-year phone and mail correspondence with Hess resulted in numerous features in a variety of publications. After the retired Col. Hess accepted my invitation to screen “Battle Hymn” at the 2008 Reel Stuff Film Festival of Aviation in Dayton, Ohio, I was further delighted that Farmer agreed to moderate Hess's screening and Q&A session.

Upon meeting Hess for the first time, Farmer was inspired to produce a documentary that would accurately tell the *real* Dean Hess story. In combat, this included discovery of a massive column of Russian-built T-34 tanks that Hess and his wingman attacked and halted, preventing an allied disaster. In peacetime, Hess, then at the Pentagon, learned the orphanage he so caringly established was in decay and in threat of closure. Miraculously, a book and the “Battle Hymn” movie deal materialized, providing royalties Hess contributed to yet again save “his” orphanage.

Enlisting the help of filmmaker and fellow historian Chuck Carson of Up In The Air Pictures, in 2009 the pair returned to Dayton to capture hours of interviews with Hess and three former squadron-mates. Farmer and Carson, who funded the reunion, correctly feared it would prove the last time these old comrades would unite. Sadly, on Monday, March 2, 2015, the last surviving member of the group, Colonel Dean Hess, the compassionate and humble warrior, passed away peacefully at age 97.

Farmer and Carson's ongoing work has turned up rare color footage of Hess and his unit in Korea, the actual Kiddy Car evacuation, and additional photos from the participants' collections. The production calls for filming re-enactments and flying scenes, editing, and scoring the film for distribution. An estimated \$95,000 is needed to complete the project, so they plan to launch a crowd-funding campaign this summer. Readers interested in helping may visit www.upintheairpictures.com or watch for updates on my website. ☒

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