

## *Combat Photographer with the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment*

### *Staff Sergeant Reuben A. Weiner*

I was born in Los Angeles, California July 14, 1920 and became a professional photographer working in the motion picture industry at Columbia Pictures, Hollywood, California. I enlisted in the Army shortly after Pearl Harbor through the industry which was providing professionals to the Army, Navy, and Marines. I initially was assigned to the Army Reserves and activated in mid July 1942 reporting to Fort McArthur at San Pedro, California before shipping to Camp Crowder, Missouri for basic training. There was no photo equipment to work with so I went through basic training several times. I was transferred to Fort Sam Houston, Third Army, at San Antonio, Texas for some more basic training routines such as, rifle range qualification firing the Enfield rifle, the Springfield M1 rifle, Thompson Submachine gun, hand grenades, Bazooka, gas mask drill with gas, and long marches, etc. I participated in maneuvers in Louisiana where I used some newly acquired photo equipment.

I underwent my physical examination in preparation for shipment overseas before moving to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey via rail and then overseas on the troop ship Louis Pasteur in December 1942. The English had captured this ship during the battle of Oran, North Africa. The ocean voyage was rough and the food was lousy. On landing in England I was taken to a small city named Chipping Sodbury, about 20 miles from Bristol. Here there was more basic training and hikes through the countryside.. Finally, we received our photo equipment and were broken up into many small units for attachment to various Army infantry regiments and divisions, but we were never attached to Army Air Force units. We were sent to the Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> Signals to do a training film on a special type of bridge. We were billeted with the Canadians and worked at the famous racetrack, Epson Downs.

Next I went to the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division to photograph large parachute training drops both from the ground and the air and took lots of photos of individual troopers. I then volunteered for parachute training with 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne instructors who taught us the basic techniques of parachute jumping and parachute packing. After completing six jumps I was sent to the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment and attached to Regimental Headquarters Company under Captain Bob Abraham at Nottingham, England just prior to the Normandy invasion. I did not get to see much of Nottingham. I shot a lot of still photos as requested and got to know Leon Mason (Israel).

Around the end of May 1944 we loaded buses at our base camp at Wollaton Park in Nottingham and were dropped off at the Saltby Air Base to make final preparations for the invasion of Normandy. We lived in a large airplane hangar, ate our meals there, and slept on folding canvas cots. The hangar was sealed with armed guards and barbed wire around the perimeter to provide security for the operation. When we walked from the hangar to the C47 troop carrier planes waiting near the runways, I was carrying all the normal equipment for a trooper, such as, a gas mask, grenades, steel helmet, musette bag with rations for three days, toilet articles, first aid kit, main parachute, reserve parachute, etcetera, and I was armed with a Colt 45 automatic pistol although I had no training with this weapon, plus two well-padded bags for my photo equipment which consisted of

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about 12-15 rolls of 35mm black and white film for a Leica 35mm still camera and one Leica still camera, one Bell & Howell "EYEMO" motion picture camera which took a 100 foot roll of film. I also carried about 15-20 100-foot rolls of black and white film for the "EYEMO," which had one normal lens but could accommodate three lenses--a wide-angle lens, a normal lens, and a telephoto lens. All the photo equipment went into the two bags which measured about 12 inches square and were attached to my legs about an inch or two above the knees. With all this equipment I had trouble climbing the few steps to get up into the C47 jump plane.

It was about 2:15 am, June 6, 1944, as we approached the drop zones, about 10 miles west of the beaches where the Allied ground troops would be coming ashore at dawn, there were heavy, loud explosions all around the jump planes from the German anti-aircraft fire, and I could see a heavy volume of tracer ammunition from the German automatic weapons lighting up the sky as I floated to the ground in my parachute. Because of the darkness I could take no pictures. I landed in a large cow pasture and my chute was draped over one of the many pointed wood poles the Germans had erected in the fields to damage the gliders that would follow us into Normandy. I was lying on my stomach and could not turn over to get up because of the two camera bags attached to my legs. It was extremely dark below the tree line but I could see the German anti-aircraft shells exploding in the sky all around the C47 jump planes.

There was a heavy machine gun firing at the C47's from the end of our field. I could not get my chute harness off because it had become so tight due to the opening shock. I did not have any quick release device on the harness and I had lost a large pocketknife when my pocket ripped open on the opening shock, and could not reach my trench knife strapped to my boot. As I laid there helplessly I could see some figures running along the side of the field but did not know if they were friend or foe. Fortunately for me, my friend Leon, who jumped right behind me, saw me and cut me out of my chute, otherwise, I probably would still be there, six feet under.

I shot mostly motion pictures. All the film we shot was sent for processing to London, and later to Paris after it was liberated. There were four of us who jumped with the 82<sup>nd</sup> on D-Day. I was attached to the 508<sup>th</sup> and was the only one who got pictures of the airborne operation. Jimmy Bates, was with the 507<sup>th</sup>, and he landed in a flooded area and lost all his equipment. Joe Legault was injured on the jump, lost his equipment also, and was captured, but later freed when we took Cherbourg. Lieutenant Witscher, who was in charge of the photographers, got into a firefight and did not get any photos. We were each of us with different regiments. As far as I know there were no photographers attached to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division during the Normandy invasion. Our duties as combat photographers were to get pictures of any action we encountered. When the units we were with pulled out of the line, we were reattached to whatever units replaced them. I was at the Merderet River crossing with the 325<sup>th</sup> Glider Infantry Regiment of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. When the 508<sup>th</sup> went back to England after 33 days of fighting in Normandy, I was sent to Cherbourg with the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. I did not see the 82<sup>nd</sup> again until the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium.

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I was in battle at St. Lo with a tank destroyer unit, then in the Falaise Gap battle. From there I was with the 2<sup>nd</sup> French Armored for the liberation of Paris, then I was in Belgium with the 5<sup>th</sup> Armored Division when the 82<sup>nd</sup> took off for Market Garden. I did not know about Market Garden until later. I understand that a combat photographer flew into Holland with a glider unit to cover Market Garden but I don't know who it was since he came from a unit based in London (good duty).

I was assigned to the 165<sup>th</sup> Signal Photo Company which was a combat photo company and spent all of my Army service as a member of this company while attached for duty to other units. The 165<sup>th</sup> was scheduled to go to the Pacific for the invasion of Japan but these plans were cancelled when the Japanese surrendered. I was recommended for a battlefield commission from Staff Sergeant to 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant. Awards and decorations include two Bronze Star Medals, Parachute Wings with one (bronze) star, Combat Infantry Badge, African-European Campaign Medal with four bronze battle stars and one bronze invasion arrowhead, American Campaign Medal, National Defense Medal, WWII Victory Medal, WWII Occupation Medal, Good Conduct Medal, Distinguished Unit Citation, and the French Fourragere with palm for service with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. Also the French Croix de Guerre with palm for service with the Second French Armored Division for the push into Paris and the battle or liberation of Paris.

After the war I returned to Columbia Pictures and worked there for a couple of years before going into business with my dad. I decided to leave Columbia because union activity there created difficult working conditions. My wife and I were married in 1946 and we had three children--one boy who became a doctor, and twin daughters--one a beautician and the other a paralegal. We have three grandchildren--one boy who is an attorney, another boy who is studying engineering, and one granddaughter.