The Signal Corps goes Hollywood

by Carol Rios

Though the Signal Corps' first photographer, Sgt. George Rice, did volunteer for one of two arctic expeditions in the late nineteenth century, the Army's interest in photography really began shortly before World War I when the Medical Corps pioneered the use of motion pictures on subjects such as locomotion and social hygiene. By the time the "great war" ended, the Signal Corps had produced some 63 reels of training films on topics ranging from basic discipline to bayoneting. During World War I, Signal Corps photographers filmed what some have termed the "most valuable collection of historical motion pictures on military activities in existence." At the height of the first world war, the Corps had 38 division photographic units in Europe and one in Siberia. In all, Signal Corps photographers produced some 10 million feet of motion pictures and a million still photographs. The average number of Signal Corps photographs taken per day in France exceeded the total taken during the entire Civil War!

Army photography, in spite of its impressive World War I statistics, was still considered a luxury until World War II. However, when the Army had to quickly convert thousands of civilians into fighting men and women, the Army chief of staff, Gen. George C. Marshall, was among the first to realize motion pictures' usefulness in the mass teaching and indoctrination process. After Pearl Harbor, the Signal Corps was charged with making both still and motion pictures for information, training, and historical record. Technical advances in motion picture photography, such as the development of the 16mm sound-on-film equipment, allowed Signal photographers to get closer to the field of battle than ever before; Signal photographers, for example, went ashore with the first assault waves in the invasion of North Africa.

Many movie greats—including producer-directors Frank Capra, Darrell Zanuck, and John Huston—made orientation films such as the "Why We Fight" series and historical films such as "Report from the Aleutians." The latter contained exact details of a bombing mission. By the end of the war, Signal Corps photograpahy, besides being the recipient of an "Oscar" award, had been instrumental in training thousands and acting as the "eyes" of the people at home.

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A Signal Corps cameraman of the 77th Division "shoots" among the ruins of Mareuilen-Dole, France, in 1918. WWI combat cameramen pose with the bulky equipment they had to carry. Signal Corps cameramen record ARVN troops searching caves in Vietnam in 1971. Signal Corps cameraman, loaded with equipment, treks through the jungles of Vietnam in 1968. A WWI cameraman shows off his equipment.