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WWII Cameramen Risked Their Lives To Get the Perfect Shot

Combat Camera



Canadian troops storming Ortona. Photo: Library and Archives Canada

The Italian campaign was a brutal and costly slog for the Allies pushing up the length of Italy in December 1943. The capture of Ortona and its deep-water port was the responsibility of the Canadian 1st Infantry Division. The town was staunchly defended by elite German paratroops and although it was finally liberated, intense house to house fighting resulted in 2,300 Canadian dead and wounded. Cameraman Sgt. Jack Stollery, armed with nothing more than a pistol, binoculars and a Bell and Howell movie camera, was one of the first to storm the German defenses.

Stollery and the advance column soon encountered heavy resistance. Seeking shelter, he crouched beside the relative safety of a Sherman tank and continued shooting movie film. Suddenly he scampered to the other side of the street to get another angle because that's what combat cameramen did, get your wide-shot and then your medium-shot and always edit in the camera.



“The tank crew sees this crazy photographer dodging bullets to get his shot and says ‘if he can do it, we can too’ so they closed the hatch and revved up the engine. Jack climbed on top of that Sherman, set up his tripod behind the turret and kept shooting film, a sitting duck, as the tank engaged the enemy. Jack got a Military Medal for that,” says Quick.

Stollery and Quick were members of the newly formed 73-member Canadian Army Film and Photo Unit or CFPU. The Unit was comprised of two streams, stills and movies. Stollery and Quick shot movies.

Every country had its own version of the CFPU. Britain also called its military photographic team the Army Film and Photographic Unit. In the United States, the job largely fell to the U.S. Army Signal Corps. Nazi Germany created SS Kriegsberichter Kompanie (war reporters company) in 1941 and assigned its members to the four SS units operating in the European theatre at the time.

They all had the same mandate — to take photographs and movies as a matter of historical record and to gather footage that could be edited into newsreels for the folks back home.



Combat cameramen were courageous but exposed. Photo: Library and Archives Canada

Preparing for combat

They all had military training and, in the Canadian Army at least, all had transferred into the Film and Photo Unit from other branches of the service. Some, like Lieut. Gordon Aitkman, originally a press photographer with a local newspaper on civvy street, volunteered because of their photographic background. Others joined out of boredom or curiosity. Twenty-two-year-old Sgt.



During the lead-up to D-Day, Weeks and his colleagues learned movie-making at England's Pinewood Studios, where in a bizarre example of life imitating art, English movie technicians making heroic war movies for besieged Britons taught the fledgling cameramen the tricks of the trade — composition, exposure, and editing in the camera. Six weeks later, Weeks found himself in Normandy, attached to the First Canadian Army as it swept through France and Holland.



In the thick of it. Photo: Library and Archives Canada

Under fire

“There was a photo unit assigned to each Division,” recalls Sgt. Quick. “Every morning one of us would go to brigade headquarters and find out where the action was going to be and then go to the action. The C.O. would say ‘the front’s 400 yards up, do you want to go up?’ Yeah, I want to go up, so we’d be there with the troops.”

Teamed up with a driver and a jeep, combat photographers and cameramen were highly mobile two-man units which darted from location to location. They were largely self-assigning, responsible to no one except their commanding officer. They were “cowboys”, earning reputations for fearlessness. Some might say recklessness.

Sometimes they got so far ahead of the troops that they found themselves behind enemy lines. Sgt. Weeks remembers racing into Paris with deGaulle’s Free French only to come under attack from the German rear guard which had not yet left the city.

Weekes, Quick, Aitkman and Stollery survived the War, but six of their number — four photographers and two drivers — did not. Lieut. Gordon Aitkman recounts a particularly bizarre incident in which combat cameraman Sgt. Barney Barnet recorded his own death:

“He was a passenger in an unarmed reconnaissance plane flying low over Germany in the last days of the War,” says Aitkman, “when suddenly his plane was attacked by Messerschmitts. Usually, the Germans didn’t attack unarmed spotters but, in this case, they did, swooping in for the kill. Barney had no option but to photograph their approach. He kept on taking pictures until his plane was shot down and he was killed.”



A modern combat photographer. Photo: Canadian Forces

Combat photography today

Today, Canada’s Film and Photo Unit has morphed into a combat support force.

“In the old days, you shot what was going on,” says Lew Weekes. Nowadays, it’s far more complicated. Photographers have become “imagers,” engaged in tactical reconnaissance using cameras, computers and satellites to send battlefield intelligence back to HQ. Images are used to affect the outcome of a battle, not merely record it.

Still cameras have gone digital and video has replaced film but regardless of the technology, regional flare-ups and U.N. missions still require cameramen and photographers on the ground. Weeks says his modern counterpart will encounter the same dangers as he did — equipment breakdown, visibility problems and enemy fire. And he predicts the same outcome, “there’s no time to get scared, you just get on with it.”