

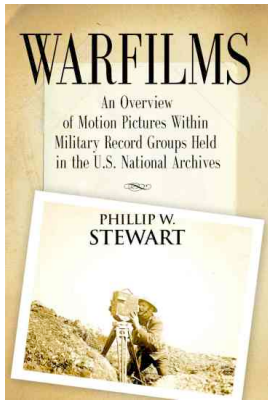
# WARFILMS

An Overview  
of Motion Pictures Within  
Military Record Groups Held  
in the U.S. National Archives



PHILLIP W.  
STEWART





*In my continuing effort to promote, what I consider to be an underutilized visual resource of historical importance, I share with you this short volume (a primer if you will) about the motion pictures of twentieth century warfare held in the film vaults of the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.*

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by Phillip W. Stewart

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Compiled and Edited  
By

Phillip W. Stewart

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Cover Photo: Lieutenant Cooper, 26th Division, operates a movie camera near Chateau Thierry, France, 19 July 1918. An Official Army Signal Corps photo. (Courtesy of NARA, ref. no. 111-sc-16397)

# CONTENTS

Preface.....pg. x
Chapter 1 - America's Film Vault.....pg. x
Chapter 2 - Documented Conflicts of the 20th Century.....pg. x
Chapter 3 - Military Motion Picture Records.....pg. xx
Chapter 4 - Finding Military Motion Pictures at NARA.....pg. xx
Chapter 5 - The U.S. Army.....pg. xx
Chapter 6 - The U.S. Navy.....pg. xx
Chapter 7 - The U.S. Air Force.....pg. xx
Chapter 8 - The Online Public Access Catalog.....pg. xx
Chapter 9 - Viewing Options.....pg. xx
Chapter 10 - That's a wrap!.....pg. xx
Alphabetical Title List .....pg. xx
About the Author.....pg. xx





## Preface

In my continuing effort to promote, what I consider to be an underutilized visual resource of historical importance, I share with you this short volume (a primer if you will) about the motion pictures of twentieth century warfare held within the film vaults of the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

This book is a synopsis, a summary, an abbreviated finder's aid of the subject as stated in the expanded sub-title, below. While it does not list all military films this volume does identify and describe over 350 of them for your review. My hope is to pique your interest so that you will explore many more reels of military action.

Many professionals in the non-fiction book writing business say that for a book to be successful an author needs to have a catchy title. They also say that if a sub-title is needed it should be kept short and to the point. Well, I think I did very well with the title, *WARFILMS*, and came close with the subtitle, *An Overview of Motion Pictures Within Military Record Groups Held in the U.S. National Archives*.

As good as it is, a more precise sub-title would be...

*An Overview of the 119,000-Plus Reels of Classic and Historic Motion Picture Film Produced, Acquired, or Captured by Twentieth Century American Armed Forces at Peace and at War, Located Within the 35 Military Record Groups at the United States National Archives and Records Administration, Archives II Facility, in College Park, Maryland, USA.*

I know, that's a bit of a run-on sentence, but it's a great deal more descriptive and is what this book is all about. But alas, it's too long and wordy for the title page.

Oh, by the way, "Military Record Groups" is not a NARA term or category. It is a phrase I use to describe a NARA record group whose originator is (or was) a subordinate to the War Department or to the Department of Defense. For this reason, hundreds of NARA held war films, produced by non-military activities (i.e., the State Department or the Office of War Information) are not within the scope of this volume.

It's one thing to read about, or see a photograph of an Army, Navy, or Air Force action or event. However, to see historic moments with the added element of motion is enlightening, instructive, and often rather dramatic. The motion pictures of the Military Record Groups are truly a visual time machine. They are well worth adding to your research toolbox.

Phillip W. Stewart  
www.pwstewart.com  
On the Emerald Coast



## Chapter 1

# America's Film Vault

You're sitting on the couch. The television is on and you're watching the latest historical military documentary. Tanks are firing; soldiers are shooting; battleships are shelling; and bombers are, well, bombing. Then suddenly, scenes flash before your eyes that you've never seen before and you wonder, "Now, where in the world did they find that footage?"

If the program was produced in the U.S., then chances are that the film sequence was discovered at the National Archives.

Over the years, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) has amassed one of the largest, most historically rich, celluloid-based, moving image collections in the world. This growth is based upon NARA's statutory authority under the Federal Records Act and other laws and regulations, which clearly define motion pictures made by, or for, federal government agencies as federal records. These laws require that government agencies transfer non-current or retired records to NARA. In addition, since opening its doors in 1934, the National Archives also has had the authority to accept from organizations and individuals donations that relate to American history. As a result of the periodic transfer of films from agencies and the generosity of individuals and organizations, the National Archives has acquired more than 108,600 titles consisting of over 360,000 reels of motion picture film dating from the 1890s to the end of the 20th century.

While the exact numbers change frequently as NARA adds, deletes, culls or combines records, the collection today is cataloged into over 365 Record Groups (RGs). These RGs consist of papers, maps, photos, graphic materials, and moving images (motion pictures and video). The motion picture records are predominately of a documentary style, however, educational, informational, instructional, and newsreels are also contained in the overall collection. There are a few theatrical titles as well. About 95 percent of the films are in the safekeeping of the Motion Picture, Sound, and Video Branch of the Special Media Archives Services Division, located at Archives II in College Park, Maryland. The rest are housed in the National Archives' Presidential Libraries located around the country.

As federal records, most titles in NARA's film collection are in the public domain. However, it's important to note that there are a small number of films which are currently under copyright or have proprietary restrictions for uses other than for research purposes. The Motion Picture, Sound, and Video Branch staff will provide information about any known restrictions, but rights determinations and clearances for any subsequent use of the images are ultimately the responsibility of the user.



## Chapter 2

# Documented Conflicts of the 20th Century

Let's take a look at the major conflicts of the last century and quickly glance at some of the films that documented them.

### The Great War

Contrary to some widely held beliefs, large, heavy wooden boxes with crude brass-encased glass lenses, metal hand cranks, and ungainly tripods were indeed filming the events of the First World War. In fact, all the major combatants exposed millions of feet of 35-millimeter film. Unfortunately, due to factors such as nitrate decay and arbitrary disposal, only a relatively small percentage of the original footage can be found in the world today. During WWI, the Army Signal Corps was directed to make the photographic record of America's military participation. The Navy also produced various titles, but many were lost in a flood during the early 1930s.

Approximately 500,000 feet of 35-mm black-and-white (b/w) silent film survive that show war preparations in the U.S. and the training, operations, and occupation activities of the American Expeditionary Forces throughout Europe. There is also footage of the Allied intervention in Northern Russia and Siberia. *Aviation Training in the U.S.*, *The Saint-Mihiel Offensive*, *Manufacture of Gas Masks*, and *Aerial Views of N.Y. City and Great Lakes Training Station* are but four titles representative of over 650 WWI film titles held within the military RGs.

### Combat Camera in WWII

During World War II, motion pictures were used for every conceivable purpose: reconnaissance, staff information, campaign documentation, research and development, troop indoctrination, etc. The military services created a vast motion picture series of essentially unedited film documenting many significant aspects of the war.

Army combat cameramen shot an extensive 35-mm, b/w film record of the European and Pacific Theaters of Operations that resulted in films such as *Machine Gun Tactics*, *DUKW: The Sea Going Truck*, and *Rolling to the Rhine*. Also, incorporated into this huge category is documentation of major ground operations, as well as the original 80,000 feet of film that shows the Allied liberation of German concentration camps.

The Army Air Force (AAF) created a massive 16-mm, b/w and color record of the war in and above Europe, from the invasion of Normandy to the defeat and occupation of Germany. Titles like *Conquest by Air* and *Resisting Enemy Interrogation* are examples. Included with the AAF films is a large quantity of color outtakes from William Wyler's documentary, *Thunderbolt*, which illustrates the aerial campaign over Italy during 1944. In addition, the AAF Strategic Bombing Survey teams shot extensive color footage of the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the occupation of Japan.

The Navy and Marine Corps created an enormous 35-mm color and b/w film record of primarily the war in the Pacific, with titles like *Motion Picture Film of Marine Corps Activities in Guam, Hawaii, and the Johnston Islands* and *Fury in the Pacific*.

Our armed forces also made numerous film productions during WWII. The “Training Films” series covered technical and combat instruction. “Staff Film Reports” contained classified campaign updates for officers, while “Combat Bulletins” showed unclassified updates for the enlisted troops. “Combat Reports” consisted of in-depth information on military campaigns. “Orientation Films” offered an educational and political foundation for understanding the war’s aims. The “Army-Navy Screen Magazine” series offered military personnel a mixture of war updates, Private Snafu cartoons, and performances by the era’s leading entertainers such as Abbot and Costello, Lena Horne, and Judy Garland.

Military films of the Second World War are perhaps best known by the documentaries made by Hollywood filmmakers who joined the services. For example, Frank Capra, who joined the Army, made the “Why We Fight” series and other orientation films about Germany and Japan. As a naval officer, director John Ford made *The Battle of Midway*, among others. John Huston joined the Army and made the films *Battle of San Pietro*, *Report from the Aleutians*, and *Let There Be Light*. AAF Major William Wyler made *The Memphis Belle* and the previously mentioned *Thunderbolt*. Another AAF officer, Pare Lorentz made more than 200 briefing films for pilots about how to fly unfamiliar air routes for the Air Transport Command. Later, as head of the Film/Theatre/Music in the Civil Affairs Division of the War Department, he also produced a film about the 1945-1946 Nazi war trials titled *Nuremberg*.

### **Documenting the Korean War**

Action in Korea was not as well documented as WWII. The Army Signal Corps, however, added to its collection with coverage of military operations, refugees, campsites, recreational activities, maneuvers and patrols, prisoners of war, and the peace talks. Air Force films predictably covered aerial operations, while Navy films showed offshore shelling, troop landings, and naval air operations. *Partnership for Peace*, *Chinese Reds Enter War*, and *Korean War POW Atrocity Footage* are representative examples. Although John Ford made the film *This is Korea*, the conflict was not noted for its great documentaries.

### **“...and the latest from Vietnam, Film at Eleven.”**

Almost every evening while watching TV during the late 1960s and early 1970s, one would hear those or similar words. The war in Vietnam generated a vast number of film titles, and thousands survive today. Army combat cameramen shot 16-mm and 35-mm color and b/w film, and documented many subjects, such as military operations, pacification programs, VIP’s, and refugees. *Mobile Riverine Force* and *The First Infantry Division in Vietnam* are illustrative titles. Air Force films covered aerial operations with titles like *The Indispensables: KC-135 Air Refueling* and *Air Strikes for January 1965, Bien Hoa, South Vietnam*. Navy and Marine films generally related to recruiting, training, military lifestyles, civic actions, aircraft recognition, and weapons systems, as shown in *Planes in the Sky*, *Ships in the Sea*. Many productions in all the

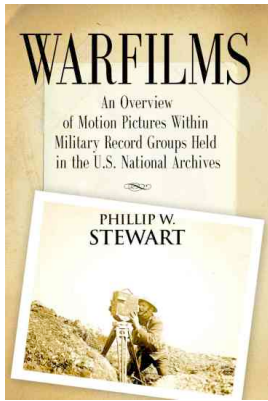
services were organized around specific campaigns such as Cam Ne, Hua Loc, Danang, and Chi Linh.

### **The Gulf War**

About a year before Operation Desert Storm began in 1991, the Department of Defense (DOD) transitioned away from 16-mm film to analog video technology (Betacam SP and Hi-8 formats) as its preferred combat camera media. Therefore, while this conflict produced miles upon miles of videotape, there are just a few feet of motion picture film. In fact, there is a limited amount of Desert Storm era motion media at NARA because a vast majority of it is still in the custody of the DOD. The same is true for more recent military engagements.







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