

1st MOTION PICTURE UNIT



LINEAGE

1st Motion Picture Unit, Jul 1942

STATIONS

Culver City, CA

Bari, Italy

Bolling AFB, DC, 2 Sep 1950-2 Sep 1951

ASSIGNMENTS

WEAPON SYSTEMS

RA-29

RA-25A

ASSIGNED AIRCRAFT SERIAL NUMBERS

RA-25A

42-79872

RA-29

41-3955

ASSIGNED AIRCRAFT TAIL/BASE CODES

UNIT COLORS

COMMANDERS

Jack Warner

Cpt Ronald W. Reagan

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

The 1st Motion Picture Unit mission was still, mosaic and motion picture photography. The still photographer documented action in the air and on the ground. The mosaic photographer did the mapping photos wherein many photographs, taken at regular intervals, were meticulously joined together to form a composite map. The motion picture photographer, or cinematographer, was similar to a newsreel photographer, utilizing motion picture cameras to document the war. General Ira Eaker considered the training, orientation and combat documentary films as helping save lives and training thousands of recruits.

The films were put to use as propaganda, training, documentary and combat evaluation motion pictures. Volunteers for the combat camera units were trained to use many motion picture cameras by Hollywood professionals. Both 16 and 35 millimeter units were used. Sixteen millimeter Auricon and Filmo cameras were frequently used, but 35 mm was the standard. For sound movies, Mitchell studio cameras were used, but the most ubiquitous machine was the 35 mm Eyemo. This was a handheld unit that filmed most of the war documentaries.

During the time the First Motion Picture Unit was in existence many experienced still photographers were to pass through its doors, and be subjected to intensive training in motion picture skills. All of these men had volunteered for Combat Camera Units, and were subjected to further rigorous training in combat tactics. Training in Judo, hand combat, rifle, grenades, .30 and .50 caliber machine guns, desert survival, etc. were part of the curriculum. Flight physicals, whirling chairs, depth perception, eye charts, and a series of arm wrenching shots qualified them for flights above 30,000 feet. Tours in the decompression chambers at Santa Anna, and aerobatic flights eventually qualified many to man a 35mm motion picture camera and hold it on target to record aerial combat in all theaters of the war.

Combat camera units often comprised 23 men, 15 of which were on combat/flying status. Camera repair men were important, keeping the delicate cameras in running order. At high altitudes the oil in cameras congealed to stone, a fact all-to-apparent to the cold, weary

cameramen on his return home. If you flew as a substitute gunner, time passed; otherwise you worried about your films.

Many of the first films were shot at the defunct Vitagraph studios in Hollywood. Later when Hal Roach closed down his studio in Culver City, FMPU moved in at \$1.00 rental per year.

The flying arm of the unit was headed up by then Major Paul Mantz, who borrowed an A-29 from Lockheed as a camera ship. Later, Col. Mantz was to take us on hair-raising aerobatic flights designed to get us used to keeping fighters in the Eyemo camera viewfinder.

One of the First Motion Picture Units productions was "Learn & Live." Guy Kibbee played St. Peter. Pilots were accessing Kibbee's domain by committing one of 12 major pilot errors. A first showing upset the Army Air Corps' director of education. He ordered a scene cut that showed an A-20 pilot killed in a belly landing, stating that he didn't want any boy to feel that this practice carried any danger with it. Another scene showed a pilot who was killed in a ground-loop. "Please, he cried, "take out the scene that has the smoking foot in it!

The First Motion Picture Unit produced a film entitled "Rear Gunner." It was designed to dispel the then-persistent rumor that a tail gunner's life was just three seconds. The film "Earthquakers", a story about B-17 missions, earned the First Motion Picture Unit an award.

Another project of the First Motion Picture Unit First Motion Picture Unit was a huge scale model of the entire route to Ota, Japan complete with landmarks such as rice paddies, geisha houses, factories and cemeteries. Nakajima was producing engines for a new fighter and the film made with boom and wire cameras laid a visual route for the pilots. The 90 x 90 foot model constantly being up-dated by recon reports that were flown in daily from the Pacific. The film was uncannily accurate as reported by the returning B-29 pilots. Some pilots said they felt they had flown the same mission before.

First Motion Picture Unit had seven casualties amongst the 15 members on combat duty. Two men were shot down over Ploesti, a third was shot down near Venice while flying in a PBX photographing a sea rescue mission. The fourth, was killed in Northern Italy and a fifth was killed during the invasion of southern France. A sixth was interned in Switzerland when their plane was heavily damaged in northern Italy. A seventh member of the First Combat Camera Unit was shot down in the Bulgarian area. While descending in his chute, he was repeatedly shot at by civilians. On reaching the ground, he was immediately beset upon by a crazed crowd bent upon his destruction. Lt. Resce was cruelly beaten and had his groin bashed in by rifle butts. German soldiers having spotted his descent arrived just in time to rescue him from the civilians. He spent time in a German prison hospital until his release. He was still to spend many months in Walter Reed hospital after the war's end.

On 8 Dec 1943, RA-25A 42-79872 flown by Ivor Witney, crashed due to structural failure at Metro Airport, Van Nuys, CA.

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Sources

Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.