



‘What we achieved is almost unimaginable’ - Second World War filmmakers and photographers tell all

The AFPU shot the defining images of the Second World War. Here, the unit’s five survivors tell their story for the first time

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It's been called the greatest photograph of the Second World War, but hardly anyone knows who took it. An image of British soldiers alighting at Normandy on D-Day, 1944, the picture conveys powerfully both the confusion of combat and the chore of lugging kit over sand. One soldier in the frame cannot help but steal a glance at the camera. He seems eerily familiar – like someone you might know from work.

The photograph was taken by a soldier, too. His name was Jimmy Mapham, and he was one of 11 men from the Army Film and Photographic Unit, or AFPU, who went in at dawn with the first wave of British troops, clambering down the ramps into the surf, their cameras in waterproof sacks. Mapham, Jimmy Christie and Peter Handford were shooting stills. The others – Ian Grant, Billie Greenhalgh, George Laws, Richard Leatherbarrow, Ernest Walter, Norman Clague, Derrick Knight and Desmond O'Neill – cine film.

All wore special rimless helmets that would not obstruct their cameras, and were trained to shoot with both eyes open. Even so, things did not run smoothly. Grant, who had been filming throughout the night of waiting, ran out of film moments after he hit the beach, and had to reload on the run with wet, sandy fingers. O'Neill's camera jammed and seconds after he got it running again, he was hit by a shard of mortar. His extraordinary footage shows troops storming past, the camera tilting, then upside-down, boots kicking sand into the lens.

Unpolished and soundless though they are, the AFPU D-Day reels – which are now kept in the Imperial War Museum, London, along with the rest of the unit's film and photographs – remain capable of making the hair on the back of your neck stand up.

Most of us are unaware that cameramen even filmed at D-Day, but the footage they collected is exceptional testimony. You might have seen a little of it at one remove: Steven Spielberg used AFPU reels as the basis for the opening sequence of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) – still considered a landmark in the realistic depiction of combat. English director Joe Wright also consulted AFPU material for his 2017 film *Darkest Hour*.



Jimmy Mapham's shot of the D-Day landings | CREDIT: James Mapham/AFPU

Formed in 1941 to produce an official record of the British Army's role during the war – and to provide visuals for contemporary newsreels and newspapers – the AFPU amassed a staggering amount of material. In their five years of operation, and with just 397 men, they covered every

operation and major battle: El-Alamein, Anzio, Monte Cassino, Caen, Calais, the crossing of the Rhine, the liberation of Paris and of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Seventeen AFPU men died in the process. A further 22 were wounded and six captured. And yet, to this day, their contribution has gone largely unrecognised.

“The War Office is not one for advertising its activities,” says John Aldred, a former AFPU sound engineer, now 98, when we meet at his home near Goring-by-Sea. “We are rather a forgotten part of the Army – a very small part, but an important one.”

“What the AFPU achieved, with basic training, basic equipment and usually with muck and bullets flying overhead, is almost unimaginable,” says Paul Clark, who filmed in the Far East and Allied-occupied Vienna, and who, at 93 (“and a half”, he presses), is secretary of the AFPU veterans association.

From his home in Garforth, West Yorkshire, Clark works hard to secure the unit’s place in history, tending to a heartbreaking mass of clippings, diaries, letters and snaps. When a former cameraman dies, he tells me, the bereaved family post him parcels full of once-treasured memorabilia. So much of it is spread out in his living room when I visit that I struggle to find a place to sit.



Paul Clark in his jeep in Allied-Occupied Vienna, 1946 | CREDIT: Courtesy Paul Clark

Misconceptions concerning the AFPU's material are rife. It has often been used in books, newspapers and documentaries such as Thames Television's *The World at War* (1973-4) but almost always without credit. As recently as 2012, the correspondent John Simpson wrote that our idea of the 1940-43 North Africa campaign (the Allies' first victory against the Germans) comes mostly from footage "shot in studios rather than on location", when in fact, the opposite is true.

"If even newsmen show no interest in how the shots were obtained," says 93-year-old Desmond Davis, who filmed in Singapore and Palestine, "what

hope do we have?" From his cottage in north London, he continues to write to publications every time AFPU material is miscredited.

Today, just five members of the unit survive. Besides Clark, Davis and Aldred there is Rex Ebbetts (95) and Jim Pople (93), who processed and edited the film back in Britain. Davis is one of the great number of AFPU veterans who went on to enjoy outstanding careers in film, broadcast or photography. Best known for directing the 1981 film *Clash of the Titans*, he also worked as a camera operator on *A Taste of Honey* (1961), *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) and the Oscar-winning *Tom Jones* (1963).

When I ask how what he learned in wartime might have contributed to his subsequent success, he says: "It was handy that post war there was a vogue for hand-held footage in the movies. But I was also rather well versed in anticipating movement."

Other films in which AFPU alumni had a significant hand include: *Brighton Rock* (1948), *The Railway Children* (1970), *Ice Cold in Alex* (1958), *The Italian Job* (1969), *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), *Billy Liar* (1963) and *Out of Africa* (1985). The unit's photographers, meanwhile, went on to shoot for *Vogue*, *Harpers & Queen* and *Picture Post*. Sidney Bernstein, who founded Granada Television, was ex-AFPU, as was Alfred Black, the theatre impresario. "He'd turn up to reunions in a black Roller," smiles Clark, "driven by his wartime driver, no less."

The late TV presenter Alan Whicker served with the AFPU, chiefly in Italy, where he photographed Mussolini's corpse. In his memoir, *Whicker's War*, he recalled how difficult it could be to persuade officers to allow cameramen in the first wave of an assault. "It was hard," he says, "to compete against fighting units, gunners or ambulances."

Generally, though, the AFPU were welcomed by their fellow soldiers, who nicknamed them the “Mickey Mouse Brigade” for the resemblance their shoulder flash, with its embroidered cine camera, bore to the Disney character.

To ease relations, the cameramen were given the rank of sergeant. “Any lower, and the top brass wouldn’t talk to you,” explains Nigel Smales. “And if you were top brass, the lower ranks wouldn’t talk to you.” Smales’s father, Eddy, filmed in Europe and North West Africa; his footage of the second battle of El-Alamein can be seen in the Oscar-winning 1943 film *Desert Victory*.



Sergeant Eddy 'Smiler' Smales with his cine camera | CREDIT: Courtesy Nigel Smales

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The men were also aided by special “go anywhere” passes signed by President Eisenhower. Grant referred to these as “solid gold” and Aldred’s saved his life after he was caught at the liberation of Calais by Canadian soldiers and mistaken for a German in disguise. “They were the most marvellous things to be armed with,” agrees Davis.

The AFPU was formed in October 1941 on the urging of Ronnie Tritton, publicity officer for the War Office. Pre-war experience as head of PR at the Savoy Hotel had left him far more savvy about the public value of combat film than was common among the “muddled, haphazard operation” he joined at the War Office, for whom, he said, “an Army cameraman is a more sinister figure than a whole regiment of Germans.”

“We were miles behind Germany at this point,” says historian and senior IWM curator Toby Haggith. “As early as 1936 they were crowding the field with skilled propaganda.”

The military’s reluctance is strange. Photographing combat wasn’t a new idea: cameras had served as a witness to war as early as the 1850s, for the Crimean and Opium conflicts. And *The Battle of the Somme*, a compilation of front-line footage released in cinemas in 1916, remains one of the most successful films ever made. “This is what war means” read one contemporary review, “and it is right that our people should be made to feel the horror of it.”



Sergeants Duggy Wolfe, Dennis Fox, Reg Morris & 'Smiler' Smales with driver Ray Bate in the Western Desert, Cairo, 1942 | CREDIT: Roy 'Tubby' Palmer/courtesy Nigel Smales

Things began to look up for Tritton when he recruited David MacDonald, formerly assistant to the Hollywood director Cecil B DeMille, and Hugh Stewart, a film editor whose credits included Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934).

They prevaricated over whether to recruit experienced cameramen or soldiers, before settling on men who were already in the Army but, prior to joining up, had worked in film or photography as clapper boys, projectionists and other junior roles. Stewart identified the chief qualities they looked for in their recruits as “self-reliance, initiative and courage... a certain solidity of character.”

Davis, who as a child had built his own darkroom and spent weekends watching Humphrey Bogart films with his father at the Putney Palace, recalls how delighted he was to be transferred to the AFPU: “I had been sent to the armoured corp, where they were training me for tanks nicknamed “Ronsons” [after the cigarette lighters] because they caught fire so easily. It was one of the best days of my life when the sergeant

major said, 'Right, Trooper Davis, you're to report to Pinewood, with all them film stars.' ”

Pinewood Studios, in Buckinghamshire, was where the AFPU underwent training, and where the film and photographs they sent back from the front line were later edited. The studios and grounds had been requisitioned for their use (along with the Crown Film Unit and the smaller Royal Air Force Film and Photographic Unit) by the wartime government.

In a six-week course, they were taught the principles of newsgathering, how to load and set up a camera on the run, and the building blocks of a conventional sequence: establishing shot, mid-shot, close-up. Stewart's recruits stuck to it religiously. “In the middle of incoming fire,” Davis explains, “having to think about all that was a distraction.”

He recalls how strange it was to be dropped off, quite alone, in Singapore, where preparations for the surrender ceremony were under way. “The place was mayhem. The prisoners had got out of Changi [jail] and were busy killing the Japanese. I'd be scared out of my wits now, but when you're 19, you feel immortal. I simply walked through the city with my camera.”

Those cameras – either the American DeVry or the British Vinten Normandy – had to be wound up by hand every few feet of film, and weighed between 10 and 20lbs. “At one reunion,” says Clark, “someone brought a Vinten and I couldn't believe I used to be fit enough to chase around with it. But the camera was part of me.”



AFPU cameramen Sgt Harry Oakes (left) and Sgt Bill Lawrie kneeling with their stills and movie cameras alongside a jeep. | CREDIT: AFPU/IWM

The men were also supplied with a pistol, though none used it. “The most I shot was tin cans,” says Davis. “I had seen what bullets did to a six-year-old boy.”

Stewart always denied having issued guidelines on filming the dead and wounded (and the cameramen back him up), but Haggith points out that the cameramen “were always aware of the editors when they were

shooting” and had a sense of “what would or what not be acceptable to cinema audiences.” Generally there are very few shots of the dead in the early years of the war, but before long, sensibilities hardened. “I won’t say they didn’t find it upsetting, but they became more used to it,” says Haggith.

In an interview recorded by the IWM, Walter tells how he began including bloody bodies in his films because, “I knew it would be shown at least once... And I wanted somebody to share that with me.” Laws felt the same: “I didn’t think it would hurt people sitting in their comfortable armchairs at Pinewood to see what some of the horrors were.”

It was photographs and film of Belsen that broke the mould. Stewart, Martyn Wilson, Harry Oakes, Harold Haywood, Bill Lawrie, Mike Lewis, Charles Hewitt and Roy Parkinson were at the liberation of the camp in April 1945, confronted with thousands of unburied dead and 60,000 starving prisoners. Oakes could bring himself to look on the scene in front of him only through his viewfinder. To look with the naked eye was too much to bear.

“Not long afterwards, he joined us in Vienna,” says Clark, “and he’d sit in the mess, chatting, but he never once told us. I only found out years later he had been in there 16 days – can you imagine?”

Not all of the footage was quite so punishing or dramatic. For every tank battle there are whole days with the catering corp. In these humdrum scenes, the men sometimes jostle to be on camera. “Oh, they liked it,” said O’Neill. “It was a great divertissement, you know, the Missus is going to see me back home in Wigan.”

It wasn't until 1944 that anyone thought to capture sound in the field. "The War Office were quite happy with the silent footage that came back day after day," says Aldred. "It was Stewart who wrote advising them to get some [sound]." As Lawrie pointed out: silent footage of troops crossing the river looked, uncannily serene, as if they were going for a picnic. "You don't see or hear the bullets, you don't get the atmosphere," he told the IWM.

Recording sound was no easy matter. The "portable" equipment that Aldred and fellow sound engineer Handford required was so large it had to be hauled about in a Ford utility truck. Their machine was lent free of charge by Western Electric, with the proviso that they didn't damage or lose it, which, says Aldred, "was quite an ask, all things considered". Behind him on the wall are two framed Oscar nominations for *Anne of the Thousand Days* (1969) and *Mary Queen of Scots* (1971), though he is too modest to mention them.

He and Handford (later best man at his wedding) compiled an astonishing audio archive. "German machinery makes a different sound to English," he tells me, warming to his subject. "Tanks on different surfaces – ice, road, in a field. Mortars make a nice sound, and the Germans had this special machine gun that fired twice as fast as ours. That sounded fearful."



John Aldred in his sound truck

Aldred came up with some nifty tricks, including a windshield for the microphone made from strainers and a stocking which was actually, he says proudly, “extremely efficient”.

After such excitement, it’s no wonder that for many of the men postwar life was a comedown. “It took a lot of settling,” admits Clark, who eventually found his footing as a commercial photographer. “It was a sad time for me,” says Davis. “England was a mess. I had no money, I had to live with my parents. The Army is your mother, your father, your sister and brother. It clothes you, feeds you; tells you when to get up and to go to bed. It can be hard to leave.”

The first AFPU reunion was in 1957, and was held for many years at the White Swan, off Fleet Street. Clark shows me in a notebook the names of those who have attended each year. Page by page, the lists shrink. Last year, he and Aldred were the only veterans present.

More recently, reunions have been held at Pinewood, where a memorial plaque commemorating the AFPU has been installed. “The IWM showed some of our footage, and I was quite delighted by the quality of it,” says Clark. “Not proud,” he clarifies, when I ask, “more the satisfaction you feel about good work. That was what we were there for.”

None of it makes the lack of acknowledgement over the years any easier to bear. “These guys were making all the important decisions on the ground, setting the agenda for the editors, in really dangerous, pressurised conditions,” Haggith says. “Why they’ve gone unrecognised for so long, when their contribution to our understanding of war is so great, is beyond us.”

“The scribblers get the bylines, why not us?” Clark says, “and this has been a great source of resentment, great bitterness. Des tried for years to get a documentary made, but you know what? It’s too late now. There are so few of us left.”

**Find more information about the AFPU and watch archival footage at:
film.iwmcollections.org.uk**