SNAPDRAGON

THE WORLD WAR II EXPLOITS OF DARBY'S RANGER AND COMBAT PHOTOGRAPHER

PHIL STERN

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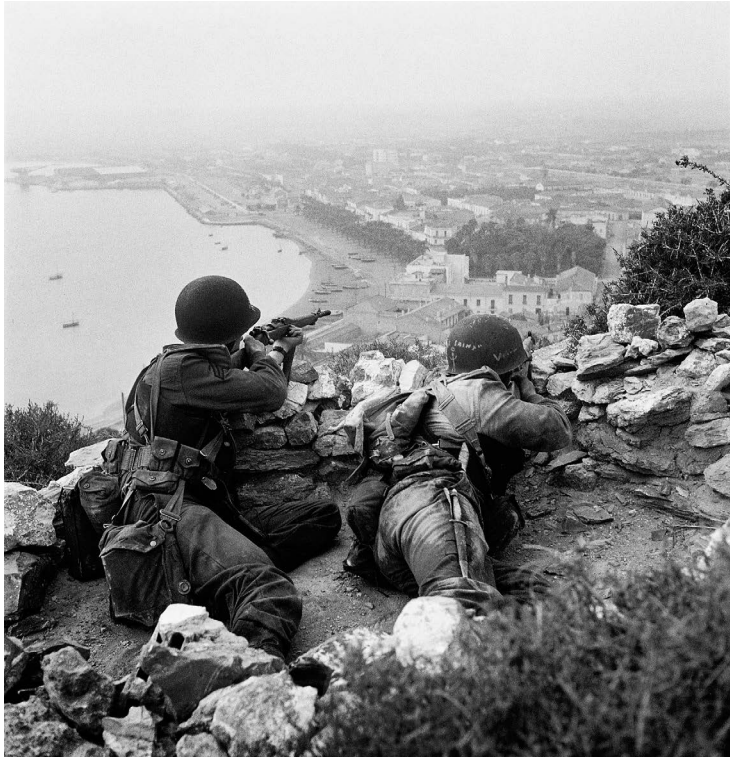

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OSPREY
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
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E-mail: info@ospreypublishing.com
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Front cover and title page: From a strategic vantage point above the port town of Arzew, Ranger Corporals Robert Bevan and Earl Drost engaged snipers barricaded in warehouses along the waterfront. (Phil Stern)

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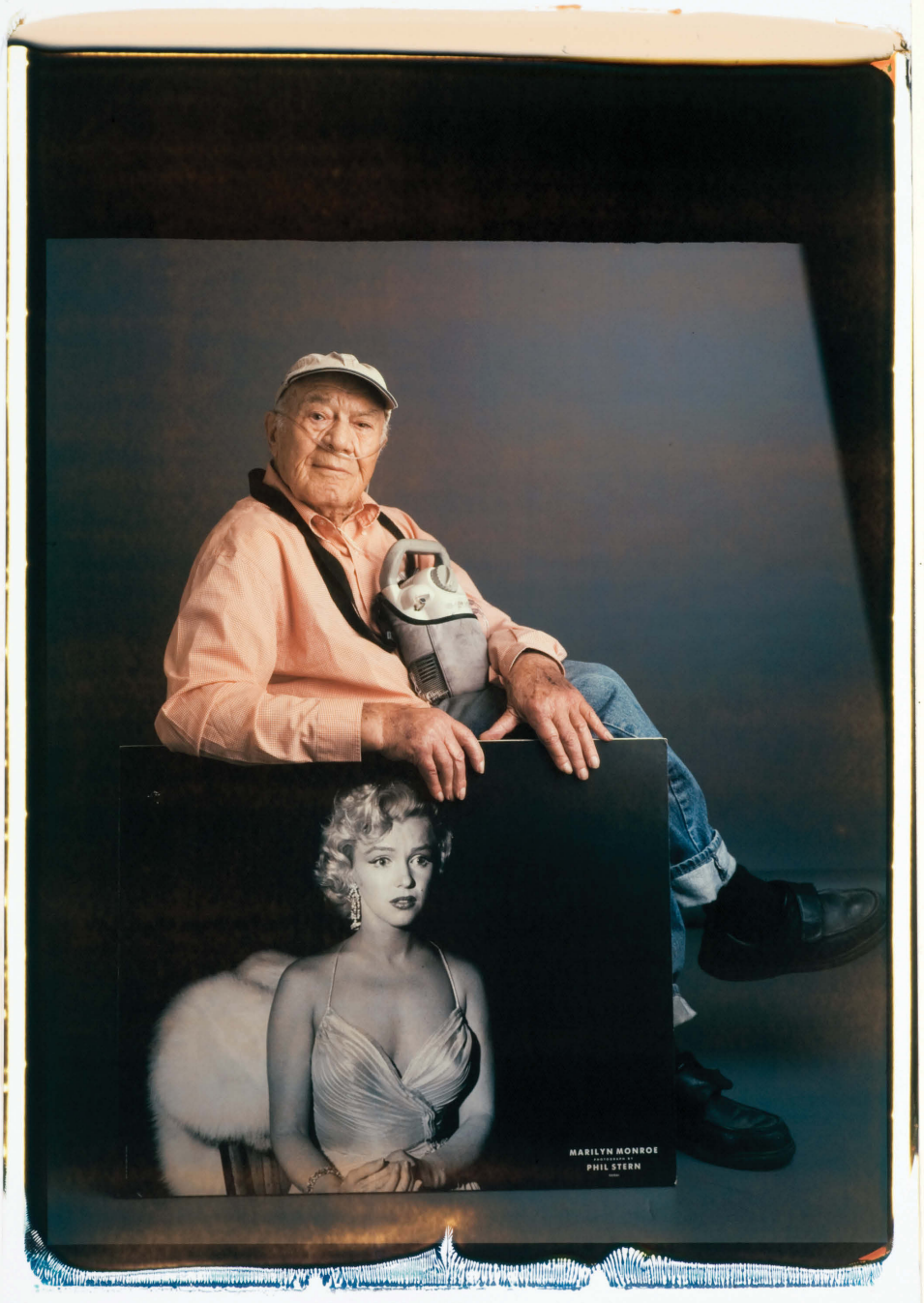
DEDICATION

For Greg, Mia and Sonny for their constant support. Thanks to the Stern family, David Fahey and staff at Fahey/Klein Gallery, the descendants of World War II Rangers, and my editor Kate Moore whose shared vision made this book possible.

To Phil, thank you for leaving me those little gems along the way that filled in the missing links to your story.

PHIL STERN
1919–2014
In war and in peace, he always remained a Ranger at heart.



NO.. I DON'T KNOW WHAT SHE WAS THINKING –

1953 AT L.A. HOSPITAL BENEFIT.

Phil Stern

PREFACE

On November 14, 2014, I received a voice mail from my dear friend Phil Stern. He was on a rant. The former Ranger was still cursing Old Blood and Guts, 70 years after General Patton's death. The 95-year-old snapper had been reading *Killing Patton*, and wanted to discuss some discrepancies. "Liesl, call me. This guy O'Reilly doesn't know what the hell he's talking about!" he fumed. Stern should know. As a member of Darby's Rangers, the elite Army unit, the World War II vet had a few run-ins with the colorful general in North Africa and Sicily. "The S.O.B. got me on the rear lines in Tunisia without a helmet, fined me $25 bucks and a night in the military slammer!"

Taking a brief pause, he continued with his tirade: "Patton was a piss poor general filled with braggadocio. He had two pearl handle pistols with naked girls on the handle. I'll never forget his shrill voice that spewed profanities. He took over the best hotels and homes and had big parties. In Casablanca he took over a great mansion owned by a French industrialist on the beach."

Phil proposed writing a book with his version of the events, along with other related topics including the invasion of Sicily. I reminded him about his World War II book we'd recently discussed finishing. "What about your

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Phil poses with his famous subject, Marilyn Monroe. In his later years he mined his vast archives for prints and gallery shows around the world.

TIM MANITONI

memoir?" I reminded him. "Oh, yes, get that published too."

A few months earlier Phil and his son Peter had asked me to spearhead an exhibit of his classic photos, a donation to adorn the empty white walls of the recently built Veterans Home in West Los Angeles. The show would also be a celebration of Phil's 95th birthday that September.

While digging through his extensive archives in his quaint, cluttered Hollywood bungalow across the street from Paramount Studios, I unearthed his original, unfinished, tattered wartime manuscript, buried deep in the bottom of a box underneath a stash of old newspapers from the 1940s. Ignoring the delicate paper disintegrating in my hands, I breezed through the 76 pages, wishing for more. I immediately scanned the crumbling manuscript, then prodded Phil about his memoir and why he never got it published. After being seriously injured during the invasion of Sicily he was medically discharged and sent back to the U.S. With events still fresh in his mind, he began writing his accounts when Hollywood came calling. His career quickly took off with nonstop magazine assignments and work on movie sets as a still photographer. He soon had a large family to support and his manuscript was set aside, forgotten for decades.

What distinguishes Phil's memoir is that, unlike other war photographers on assignment with various news outlets, Stern was a bona fide member of an elite Army unit, allowing him unrestricted access to the front lines, training and behind the scenes of the daily life and shenanigans of the regular G.I.s.

Because Phil was required to do his share of the fighting, his fellow Rangers and other soldiers felt comfortable around him. He was one of them, which allowed him to capture candid moments, intimacy and familiarity in his photographs.

Phil's writing is of the time ("*It's really swell to have pals who will take time out to show a guy how to field strip a gun*"), expressive, comical, sentimental and brutally honest. The boy from Brooklyn admits early on not knowing one end of a rifle from the other. Stern's catchy 1940s lingo, intimate observations and humor transport us back in time, experiencing the horrors of combat and the brotherhood forged during war. Stern introduces us to the hardscrabble Rangers set against the backdrop of the grey, sodden countryside of Scotland, the desert oases of Morocco and the muddied beaches of Mussolini's Italy.

His own photographs reveal a visual timeline of his inevitable transformation from a fresh-faced, enthusiastic G.I., grinning from ear to ear, riding a donkey and skinny dipping in the Mediterranean, to a hardened veteran who has seen the depravity of war. By the time Phil got to Sicily, he didn't expect to make it out alive.

Phil's time in the Army with the Rangers deeply influenced his photographic style and career for the rest of his life. It also put him in good stead with the

alpha males of Hollywood: Bogart, Brando, Wayne and Sinatra. They saw him as a man's man and put more trust in him than other photographers. He was seen as a tough guy. They let him into their inner sanctums, snapping photos of unguarded moments.

"I was never interested in the glamour," Phil once said. "I was interested in the tears and agony behind it."

***

Phil began writing his memoir while recuperating from his wounds in Sicily in late 1943, continuing through the fall of 1944. Soon work and family became his priorities, taking up the majority of his time so the manuscript was put aside and never completed until now.

When Phil passed away on December 13, 2014, I took up the reins in finishing his wartime memoir as per his wishes. In addition to countless interviews and intimate conversations with Phil and his family through the years, I also spoke with relatives of the 1st Battalion Rangers who knew Phil, acquaintances, coworkers and longtime friends he confided in. In addition to Phil's original text, chapters also include quotes from fellow Rangers, reporters and photographers culled from his archives, research, personal interviews and notes.

In order to understand the different voices being expressed by the authors throughout the book we have retained Phil's original memoir in a typewriter style font to closely reflect the era in which it was written.


RESTAURANT
GRILLE

PROLOGUE

DECEMBER 1943, U.S.A.

This is about a guy that gets shot up in the war and gets back to the U.S. on a medical and turns out to be a sort of oddity in his hometown. People fling questions at him. "Howdya feel under fire huh? What's your reaction when the slugs hit ya? Lots of pain?" When these queries are reasonably answered there follows a group of questions not quite so bloodthirsty such as, "What are the Germans like? The Italians? How about the girls in North Africa and Sicily? What about the cities? Tell us some funny experiences you've had," and on and on and on.

So naturally our hero develops a hoarse throat and glib story-telling technique derived purely from the weight and number of questions fired at him. After a few months he wonders whether half the yarns he tells really happened. Also, he starts to get sort of bored with himself and accuses himself of being a long-winded so and so. Of course a guy that's as hammy as me will get a big bang out of being in the center of all such questioning.

This local café was a popular haunt for the Rangers to relax and knock down a couple libations. Located near the middle of the town square in Nemours,Algeria, they could take in the local scenery while dining alfresco.

PHIL STERN ARCHIVES

I must confess a growing delight with every new questioner especially when they say, "Gosh, but you've sure been around and we people here at home know so little about the hardships of you boys overseas."

Another problem comes up: getting enough sleep. All of his globetrotting G.I. friends invite him to dinners, parties, gatherings and bars just for the poor guy to relate stories and answer questions. They want to know all the gory details and then some. And this routine has simply gotten me sort of sick, underweight and generally bleary eyed from the lack of sleep. Despite my love and satisfaction of supplying gratification to all my friends' curiosity, I just can't take it anymore. Hence this book. I'll just carry copies around and throw them at people. Maybe now I'll get some sleep.

INTRODUCTION

BUDDING PHOTOGRAPHER 1938–1941

FROM NEW YORK CITY TO HOLLYWOOD

Growing up on the gritty streets of New York City, the one thing Phil Stern decided early on was that he would never be a salesman, à la Willy Loman, like his father. Born September 3, 1919, in Philadelphia to Russian Jewish emigrants Alexander and Mae, Phil was an infant when his parents and two older brothers packed up and moved to Brooklyn. "During the days of the very acute depression, we moved around the boroughs a lot," he recalled. "We were always two steps ahead of the sheriff in paying the rent."

Phil's lifelong passion for photography began when he was 12 years old. "My mother found an Eastman Kodak advertisement in the newspaper. They were offering any 12-year-old kid a free, brand new Kodak camera. It was one of those box cameras. I was fascinated with the images it made. I thought it was pure magic. Photography became my life."

12-year-old Phil found his calling early on when he got a Kodak Brownie Box camera. Honing his craft as an 18-year-old apprentice in photo labs on Canal Street, he was quickly discovered by editors for the *Police Gazette, Friday* and left-leaning *PM Magazine*. Later sent to Hollywood, he landed his first assignment of many for *Life* magazine.
PHIL STERN ARCHIVES

As a teenager, Phil worked after school in photo labs and art studios sweeping the floors and getting an education in cleaning photographic dark rooms, mixing chemicals and loading film-plates for bulky cameras. “I was an all-around gadabout.”

Soon he began working in a cheap, grimy photoengraving shop on Canal Street. At night he took photos of dead bodies for the *Police Gazette* at $3.00 a pop. Phil’s career got a big boost in 1939 when 23-year-old millionaire publisher Dan Gillmor strolled into his shop one day and hired Phil on the spot as the staff photographer for his new left-wing magazine, *Friday*. Seated around a huge oval table for his first staff meeting, Phil was dumbfounded when he realized he was in the company of literary and artistic greats Richard O. Boyer, Erskine Caldwell, artist John Groth and photography scholars Eliot Elisofen and Lewis Hines. For his first assignment he would accompany *New Yorker* writer Ruth McKenney to Harlan County, Kentucky, for a feature on the plight of coal miners.

In early 1941, Gillmor sent Phil to California to open their Hollywood office, earning $60 a week. He took jobs on the side as a set photographer, starting at the top with Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons*. On set he met Welles’ Director of Photography, Gregg Toland, who became his mentor of sorts along with Chinese-American cinematographer James Wong Howe, a master of film noir-esque lighting. The two men shared a belief in the importance of light and shadow, which greatly influenced Phil’s shooting style throughout his career.

When *Friday* folded in September 1941, Phil approached magazine editors and was quickly hired, working freelance for *Life*, *Colliers*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Look*, *Photoplay* and another recently launched progressive daily titled *PM Magazine.*

On the day that would go down in infamy, December 7, 1941, Phil was on assignment for *Popular Photography*, shooting the San Bernardino, California, unit of the Women’s Ambulance and Defense Corps of America (WADCA). Phil recounted the eerie scene that later became the Picture of the Month in June 1942.

> *Taking this shot was a weird experience for me. It was early Sunday morning, December 7, 1941. This realistic scene with gas masks was enacted for practice purposes. Suddenly the field radios blared out, “The Japs have just bombed Pearl Harbor! The West Coast Army Command orders all Officers and National Guardsmen to report to their post at once!” A very quiet period followed and the drills proceeded in the same manner but a more determined look was draped across everyone’s face.*

Starlet Rita Hayworth on the cover of the *Police Gazette*. For a brief time Phil worked for the periodical made famous by reporter/photographer Weegee. His job consisted mainly of taking photos of dead bodies and risqué gals.

POLICE GAZETTE

The Women's Ambulance Corps of Hollywood don gas masks in the early morning sun amid a backdrop of smoke from smudge pots. The movie studios supplied the smudge pots, special effects and stretchers. Phil took this shot during the first demonstration under air-raid conditions on December 7, 1941.

PHIL STERN

A reserve officer at Paramount Studios recommended Phil enlist right away. "Look Phil," he said, "You're young and healthy so why don't you volunteer so you can continue photography and we'll make sure you get to do what you love doing, photography, instead of driving some truck." At the time Phil was 21 years old. "I believed I was invincible," he said. "I wanted to go to war to destroy Hitler." He soon found himself on a train bound for Astoria, Long Island, to enter the Army Signal Corps. Because of his prior training as a professional photographer, Phil was given a noncommissioned officer's ranking of staff sergeant. He was shipped off to the Signal Corps Replacement Training Center at Camp Crowder, a military installation near Neosho, Missouri. Soldiers were trained in 40 different military communications specialties involving radio, radar, telegraphy, photography, maintenance and even pigeon wrangling. After a few weeks' paperwork delay, Staff Sergeant Stern was sailing through thousands of miles of U-boat-infested waters in the Atlantic, eventually steaming safely into the United Kingdom.


PHILIP STERN
42091020 T42
MRS MAY STERN
540 W 189 ST
NYC, NY
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CHAPTER 1

LONDON

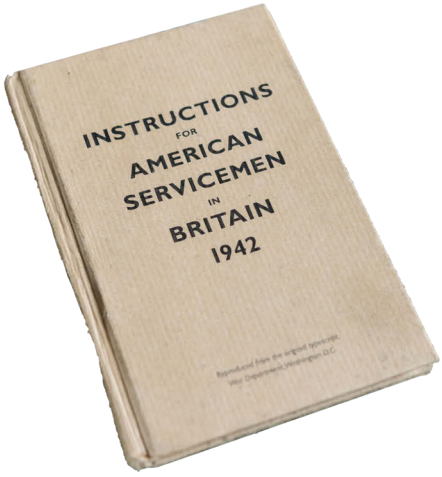
YANKS INVADE THE UNITED KINGDOM

By the time the first American troops set foot on the shores of the United Kingdom on January 26, 1942, the Allies had been at war for nearly two and a half years. While the United States had remained neutral at the onset of the war, the Germans were storming across Europe, conquering enemies at lightning bolt speed since first invading Poland in 1939. Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, hastened America's entry into the war. U.S. forces were immediately deployed to Great Britain, which served as a critical base for American operations throughout the next four years. The 34th "Red Bull" Infantry Division and the 1st Armored Division were the first American contingents to cross the Atlantic, landing in the northern cities of Belfast, Glasgow and Liverpool.

The Eighth Air Force arrived in June and began training at Bushy Park, 15 miles west of London. Phil would join his compatriots in London in the summer of 1942 and eventually some 1.4 million Americans were posted around the United Kingdom, from Scotland to Cornwall, in preparation for D-Day.

"He's in the Army now." With dog tags and a United States Army Signal Corps card, Phil became an official Army photographer. After a short stint at the Signal Corps Replacement Training Center at Camp Crowder in Missouri he was shipped off to London. Now to make good.

PHIL STERN



The War Department provided American G.I.s with a slim, six-page pamphlet: *Instructions for American Servicemen in Britain 1942*. It discussed culture, lingo, history and essential advice such as "Never criticize the King or Queen, their food or coffee."
STEPHEN BARNES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

A few months after signing up with the Signal Corps, Phil was shipped overseas to London where he worked in the dark room, taking portraits of stuffy generals and elite social life. Here he takes his chances near an unexploded bomb in Westminster.
U.S. ARMY SIGNAL CORPS

Even if stationed in northern England and Scotland, sooner or later all eager young American servicemen would make their way to London. Young men from small town U.S.A. rarely wandered out of their own neighborhoods, let alone traveled abroad. So walking through the streets of bustling, wartime London was exciting but overwhelming. To help familiarize servicemen with their new surroundings, the War Department provided them with a slim, six-page pamphlet: *Instructions for American Servicemen in Britain, 1942*. It discussed culture, lingo, history and essential advice such as: "Never criticize the King or Queen, their food or coffee." It also clarified how the British were reserved, not unfriendly, and might appear soft-spoken and polite. They were not "panty-waists" (slang for effeminate or weak), noted the manual.

While some boys wrote home about the lack of sunshine and the warm beer, attention lavished on them from zealous English girls soon made up for the grey skies and fog. They heard that Yanks came bearing gifts of chewing gum, nylon stockings and cigarettes, and tossed money around like kings, much to the dismay and resentment of their British comrades. Indeed, the average

salaries for American G.I.s were five times what a British Tommy was paid. Brash, clean shaven and smartly dressed in new, modern uniforms, it was no wonder women swooned over the Americans with their movie-star looks. Their British counterparts were poorly kitted out, forced to wear their sack-like battledress and hobnail boots at all times. They'd grumble that American G.I.s were "overpaid, oversexed and over here."

Food rationing, which began in 1940, was a shock for some: however, many American boys had grown up during the Great Depression and were quite familiar with hard work and living on scraps. What they weren't accustomed to was seeing bombed-out homes and air-raid shelters.

The British were grateful and welcomed their Allies with a "Salute the Soldier" week, with parades of American servicemen marching through the streets of London. Local pubs and dance clubs were simply overflowing with Yanks. On the corner of Shaftesbury Avenue and Denman Street, "Rainbow Corner," the American Red Cross Club near Piccadilly Circus, was one of the most popular hangouts. Open 24 hours a day, the club served up all the comforts of home: waffles, hamburgers, doughnuts, coffee and endless Coca-Colas. G.I.s introduced British hostesses to jazz and the jitterbug with music performed by bands with names such as The Flying Forts, The Flying Yanks and the Hepcats.

Phil soaked up the heady atmosphere, but after several weeks in the capital, Staff Sergeant Stern had had his fair share of sightseeing and carousing during his time off from the Signal Corps Photo Lab in northeast London. He was ready for action, something more challenging so he could get on with the war and go home. Enter the Rangers.

***

JULY 29 - SEPTEMBER 23, 1942

Seems like everything started at 35 Davis Street in London. What a city. Just like back in New York. England's Capital has a subway system called the underground which I think is better than the New York tubes. The cars have plush seats, are cleaner, quieter and generally more comfortable even if the cost is a few pennies more. Department stores like Selfridges on Oxford Street correspond to Macy's and Gimbels. There's Hyde Park with its screwball orators who yell at you saying that the reason for war and misery in the world is because people eat meat. Trafalgar Square where the little kids and old guys come along for the day

just to feed the pigeons and watch all the people and vehicles go by. And Piccadilly Circus, the amusement area - movies, plays, vaudeville, pubs, stores and throngs of soldiers, sailors, civilians pacing the streets as well as the sidewalks. A New York kid sort of feels at home in a place like this. Anyway, most of the time was spent working. Sightseeing only took place at night and Sundays (can't kick about that). My work consisted of helping out in the Signal Corps photographic dark room and going out on picture taking jobs.

Major Cuthbertson was the boss and one day he sent me to 20 Grosvenor Square, Allied HQ, to make some headshots of a two-star general. I can't mention his name because of military security. Don't remember it anyway. This general turns out to be a very soldierly looking man with gray hair and distinguished and just what I always pictured a general to look like. Of course, Sergeant Stern had just been in uniform about forty or fifty days up to this point and many civilian habits remained intact. Our general was on the real high end of the military ladder and me at the other end. "General," I said. "You have a dead pan expression. Couldn't you loosen up a bit? Perhaps a light conversation with your aide would help?" The General, the Colonel and a few visiting admirals gave me a funny look and the whole bunch began laughing. I shot two flashes and got some pretty good photos. On the way out, a press relations officer cut into me for action so un-G.I. with the high command. He may have been right but the two-star General didn't complain, nor did any of his high-ranking associates. And STARS AND STRIPES ran a highly satisfactory picture of the General. No harm done at all, I figured. Such is the kind of work I get tied up with. When I didn't shoot pictures, there was plenty of dark room work.

Seeing the sights of London was a lot of fun. But where was the war, the excitement, the shellfire, the Nazis and all the combat scenes I joined the Army to photograph? So far, the closest I get to war is the beautiful apartment part of my company is billeted in. You see, we have a scene from the living room window, which shows the adjacent building leveled by a big German bomb. A guy should get the Purple Heart for the feeling he gets after seeing that. I should add that these apartments used to be occupied by wealthy Londoners who left for the suburbs immediately following the blitz. Also, I might say that these

General Eisenhower's chief of staff, Lieutenant General Walter Bedell Smith, was probably the top-secret general that Phil was assigned to photograph at Allied Headquarters in July 1942. Postwar, Smith was an ambassador to the Soviet Union and director of the Central Intelligence Agency.
PHIL STERN

flats had fancy wood work and big mirrors but that was all nullified by strictly G.I. furnishings - army cots, barracks bags, ash trays, cartons of Camels and ESQUIRE gals (wall pictures of course). So my spirits are pretty low until I read in STARS AND STRIPES about the Rangers asking for volunteers. My decision was to become a Ranger by hook or crook. I developed a plan of action and carefully planned a song-and-dance to hand Major Cuthbertson who would be the final say in any transfer I might make.

THE STARS AND STRIPES

Men Wanted For Tough Job

Volunteers Face Rigid Qualifications

Anyone interested in coming to grips with the enemy—personally—has only two days to sign up. But the requirement says you can't be higher in rank than a private first class, unless you're a technician.

In terse notification, the Base Headquarters Commandant let it be known that any enlisted man "desiring to volunteer for hazardous combat duty" should report to the Sergeant Major at Headquarters. The announcement called for the following qualifications:

1—at least five feet six inches in height.
2—normal weight.
3—not over 35 years of age.
4—excellent condition.
5—no record of trial by court-martial.
6—character rating of excellent.
7—not over grade of private first class (unless technician).
8—completed basic infantry training (but need not be infantryman).
9—no applications will be accepted after 1200 May 21.

If you can fill these requirements, and are anxious to get nasty with those Nazis, walk, do not run to Headquarters.

Seeing the sights of London was fun but Phil was anxious to see action and fight the Germans. As fate would have it he spotted a notice in the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper looking for volunteers "anxious to get nasty with those Nazis … in an elite hit-and-run unit" that would send him on a life-changing adventure with the Rangers.

STARS AND STRIPES

A very ironic situation turns out of this. While I'm conniving all this stuff, the Major decides to send a photographer to the Rangers and can't find any volunteers. Seems some high-ups want a photographic record of the First Ranger Battalion. Major Cuth was probably a bit worried about the Ranger detail and since it was a volunteer group no man could merely be ordered to join up. So I walked into Cuthbertson's office completely unaware of his desire to get a man for the Rangers. I was seething a bit and had a hard time getting started.

"Sir," I said, "I would like to join the Rangers. I'm young enough, healthy, I like rough living, have a flair for excitement and besides I have a thorough belief in our war cause and want to help fight for it a little more concretely than by photographing military big shots." I expected to be thrown out on my ear. I hardly believed it but the old Major put his arm around me and says, "Son, how're you feeling lately? Did you get all your rations? Here have some of these Nestles bars" (tough stuff to get, by the way). "So you want to join the Rangers my boy? Of course you realize it's a rough 'n tough outfit. And it's not so easy to get into their group. Of course with a lot of effort and knowing the right people, it might be arranged. Now are you sure you really would like to tie up with Colonel Darby's Rangers?" "Absolutely, Sir," was my reply. My C.C. picks up the phone, makes a call, and within fifteen minutes the paperwork gets started and shortly after Mrs. Stern's little boy officially becomes a "Ranger."

CHAPTER 2

SCOTLAND

THE FORMATION OF THE RANGERS

When the United States finally entered the war after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, President Roosevelt realized American troops lacked combat experience and were ill equipped to successfully strike back against the battle-hardened Axis powers. In a meeting with military leaders, Major General Dwight D. Eisenhower proposed the establishment of a hit and run unit, similar in formation to the British Commandos who had been racking up victories in raids against the German-held Lofoten Islands in Norway.

The formal origins of the World War II Rangers commenced in the early spring of 1942. General George Marshall, Chief of Staff of the United States Army, visited Great Britain for a meeting with Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, the charismatic head of British Combined Operations Headquarters. Impressed by the Commando training center in Scotland, Marshall sent Colonel Lucian K. Truscott, a former cavalry officer in World War I, to England to coordinate the formation of an elite American raiding force to be trained by the battle-proven British Commandos as soon as possible.

A group of fresh-faced Rangers enthusiastically charge through the mud with rifles and guns wearing old-style M1917 helmets from World War I, often referred to as shrapnel helmets or Tommy helmets by the British and doughboy helmets in the United States.

PHIL STERN

Darby shells out orders while American Rangers trudge through the muddied campground past their pyramidal tents. Phil arrived at Corker Hill just as the Rangers were returning from their comfortable accommodations in Dundee, September 1942.
PHIL STERN

European theater commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower impressed upon Truscott that the new unit should be named something other than "Commandos," "for the glamour of that name will always remain and properly so – British."

Truscott chose a name steeped in American military history. The term Ranger harkens back to the early 17th century and the Colonial and Revolutionary war era. The moniker is most commonly associated with Rogers' Rangers, who fought for the British during the French and Indian Wars. Famous American Rangers include Daniel Boone and Abraham Lincoln.

The officer Truscott chose to lead the new battalion was 31-year-old Captain William Orlando Darby, described by Truscott as "outstanding in appearance, possessed of a most attractive personality … keen, intelligent, and filled with