



History frozen in black and white Worcester man chronicled WWII with his camera

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WORCESTER – Don Wiedenmayer has captured history in a cardboard box.

The silver-haired 89-year-old, a technician 3rd Class for the 196th Signal Photo Company, went to World War II with a camera. He keeps a stack of images he shot during four active years of service in a nondescript box in his Worcester home. The black and white photographs offer a candid glimpse at some of history's giants.



"That's Patton," Wiedenmayer says, holding a black-and-white 8-by-10 of an intense man staring down the lens. Wiedenmayer, his memory a steel trap of dates and names, recalls the then-three star general holding his hand out to stop Wiedenmayer from snapping the shot.

"He said 'You hold on there, and held his hand out to block my shot,' Wiedenmayer says. "I thought, oh God, I've done it now."

In fact Patton wanted to remove his glasses before submitting to posterity. The picture shows the general's offending eyewear in his right hand.

"They all had their quirks," Wiedenmayer says of the World War II generals. "Some didn't want you to shoot them with a drink." Others, he said, insisted on being photographed at certain angles.

More than 60 years after D-Day, some of Wiedenmayer's work has been published in a book of memoirs penned by his late colleague, Edmund Burke O'Connell, a fellow photographer for the 196th.

Wiedenmayer's gallery-worthy images had sat dormant for decades until he saw a tiny ad in the back of American Legion Magazine. Tom Sullivan was searching for members of the 196th who may have known Burke. Wiedenmayer, conveniently enough, happened to be Burke's partner.

"It was literally a shot in the dark," Sullivan, a Pacifica, Calif., resident said by telephone. Sullivan and Burke's stepdaughter, Julie Whitman Jones recently self-published Burke's memoir, "The Last Farewell – A journey of the heart."

"To find somebody with such a remarkable memory and attention to detail, and who supported the project, was really a blessing."

Burke's memoir recalls a love story between him and Tina Calamai a Florentine woman he met during the liberation of her city in 1944. Wiedenmayer was able to fill in historical gaps for Sullivan and recount the specifics of their work.

The 196th Signal Photo Company's three-man units set out with various infantry and armored divisions in World War II to record, in newsreels and stills, the exploits of soldiers. Wiedenmayer has pictures of downed German planes, bombed out tanks and soldiers firing on enemies. His collection also includes lighter shots of young Italian girls posing for the camera on a rock wall, American G.I.s. shirtless on an Italian beach and various high-ranking officials posing with their foreign counterparts.

His pictures, and those of his colleagues, were disseminated in American media and used by military strategists to plan attacks and bombing raids.

Wiedenmayer himself wasn't terribly keen on joining the war effort, but when Franklin Roosevelt instituted the draft in 1940, he figured his time would come. Once he received word he had been drafted in early 1941, the graduate of the Clarence H. White School of Photography tried successfully to join the photo company. The group trained together in Arkansas.

"Basically, we were photographers and didn't have a lot of use for all this gung-ho G.I. stuff," Wiedenmayer says. He'd taken up photography as a hobby in high school. "We spoke photography and that was mainly it."

Wiedenmayer and his artistic brethren were preparing to head out for a Sunday evening on the town in Little Rock, Ark., when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941.

"We said, there goes our Sunday," he says. "In fact, there goes a lot of things."

Wiedenmayer, a Worcester resident for 43 years and longtime employee of the Agency of Transportation in Montpelier, was there to photograph the Algerian and Tunisian campaigns in 1942 and 1943 and later went into Italy to capture the culmination of the U.S. effort there.

Wiedenmayer's work has graced the front page of Stars and Stripes and is also included in a biography of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Many of his images are included in the National Archives, but Burke's memoir compiles numerous Wiedenmayer images in a single publication. The book is detailed on the web site thelastfarewell.net.

© *The Last Farewell - A journey of the heart*

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