

SOMEWHERE IN THE PACIFIC

*Master Sergeant John W. Black, Marine Corps Combat Correspondent,
Formerly of the Associated Press*

CHIEF problem of aerial photographic units covering widespread Marine and Navy combat action isn't the enemy; it's the weather.

"That's the only thing that stumps them," declared Harrison L. Currey of Elmhurst, N. Y., technical representative for the Fairchild Camera & Instrument Corp., now on his second tour of overseas duty as a photographic equipment maintenance man. "And like people," he added, "although they're always talking about the weather, they don't succeed in changing it any."

Except that it's still impossible for an aerial cameraman to get good pictures when there's a layer of clouds between his plane and the earth, Currey believes the men of the photo squadrons and the "tech reps" have circumvented nearly every other problem which the muggy atmospheric conditions of the tropics have imposed.

"Photographers have learned to be as ingenious as other branches of the fighting forces," he said. "If they don't have what they need they improvise. As each new quirk develops they work on it until they have it licked. And taking a tip from the ground crews, they've become adept at 'cannibalizing' (i.e., stealing parts from someone else's equipment) to keep their cameras in service."

This inventiveness, he thinks, is one of the reasons why photo reconnaissance and photo-mapping are responsible for at least 90 per cent of military intelligence in World War II. Also, new methods and equipment are continuously improving technique. Use of color films and night photography have been boons in the planning of ground campaigns and naval and serial strikes.

After serving at nearly every base in the Pacific War Theater, Currey is convinced there is no substitute for continuous inspection and cleaning of equipment to maintain it in serviceable condition. Several 'dope' preparations have been developed by scientific researchers to combat jungle damp and fungus which attacks photographic gear as well as all optical and electronic equipment, but none seems to work under all conditions.

One protective method which Currey helped develop in the field is now widely used by photo units of all services. Hermetically-sealed chambers, heated with electric light bulbs to keep humidity at a minimum, were constructed for the storage of the aerial cameras, which weigh up to 100 pounds apiece and are up to four feet in length.

On the other hand, the only known method of keeping film from deteriorating in the tropics is refrigerated storage.

A shortage of film dryers resulted in a very serviceable one being devised with a galley stove and a 50-gallon drum as the component parts. At another base, manpower was at a premium. Suggestions were pooled and a fully automatic contact printer to handle the long rolls of aerial camera film, which ranges up to 400 feet, came into being. It was built from a standard printer, bladder, oxygen bottle and electric motor rigged with micro switches to supply the automatic feature. One man could operate it, where two had been necessary before.

Flying reconnaissance missions to test equipment have provided Currey with his biggest thrills—and a commendation from Rear Admiral Dewitt C. Ramsey, Chief of the Bureau of Aeronautics.

"Also my biggest scares and a few more gray hairs," he added.

In a pre-invasion sweep over Peleliu, his plane sustained several ack-ack hits but limped home safely with its film. Automatic fire ripped into the wings

of the Mariner from which he was taking pictures of Guam prior to the Marine conquest of the old Navy base. Again Currey and the crew came through the melee without injury.

And over the northern tip of New Guinea in a Liberator, two Jap Zeros played tag with their plane but refused to trade shots. As a parting gesture the enemy airmen climbed overhead and tried to knock out the photographic plane with magnesium bombs. Fortunately none of the missiles found their mark.

Married and the father of three sons, Currey taught in the Fairchild Corporation's Navy and Marine maintenance and repair school for photographic personnel in New York before volunteering for overseas duty. Last December he returned to the states to recover from fungus infection and also take a refresher course in the Fairchild factories before going back into the field.

Currey is a veteran of the last war. He enlisted with the Army in 1917. However, at training camp it was discovered he was poor at arithmetic, and finally he admitted he was only 15, and was discharged. He went back into the Army two years later.

"They told us we were to form an honor guard for President Wilson," he said. "Instead we wound up in Siberia with the Army of Occupation."

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