

STILL FOCUSED

LEGENDARY LENSMAN **PHIL STERN** RECALLS HIS DAYS AS A COMBAT PHOTOGRAPHER IN NORTH AFRICA AND SICILY

By Phil Stern, as told to Liesl Bradner

I joined the Army on December 7, 1941. I was only 22, but I had already been a professional photographer working in Hollywood, so instead of putting me in boot camp, the Signal Corps sent me to England. My job was printing photos of the brass attending parties. I was bored silly—until I talked my way into the Rangers, one of the first special forces units, as a combat photographer. There were 500 of us. I served with the Rangers under Colonel William Darby from training in Scotland with British commandos until partway through North Africa.

At El Guettar, Tunisia, in March 1943, we went up against the 10th Panzer Division. I had just exposed a frame when a German 88mm round landed. Purple Heart stuff. I was sent back to Morocco and spent three months in a military hospital. While I was there, someone showed me a picture of mine in an issue of the army paper. The caption read, "This is the last photo by Sgt. Phil Stern that will appear in *Stars and Stripes*," and went on to say what great pictures I'd taken and how much I'd be missed. After *Stars and Stripes* found out I wasn't dead, I was put on limited duty and assigned to photograph the invasion of Sicily.

I landed with Seventh Army. We had some casualties, though we weren't barraged as bad as they were in other sectors. Except for some fighting at the airport near Palermo we didn't encounter much resistance; the Germans were retreating. Even so, I saw some really horrible things—the aftermath of bombings that caught civilians, dead mothers and babies. Combat is for the young and very adventurous. No way would I do anything like that again. I was lucky. If I hadn't been wounded, I might not be alive today. After Sicily, I needed more surgery on my wounds, so they loaded me on a hospital ship and I headed home. I found out later that at Anzio and Cisterna, on the Italian mainland, a lot of the Rangers I had served with were killed. When the unit came home in late 1943, only 190 of the original 500 Rangers were alive.



ARZEW, ALGERIA, NOVEMBER 8, 1942 This was the first day of the invasion; we were trying to secure the city. The 1st Ranger Battalion was assigned to clear the port and to make sure that we had knocked out the enemy guns located up high so that the 1st Infantry Division, Patton's troops, could come into Arzew.

TUNISIA, 1943 It was winter, but we were in the desert, so it was still plenty hot. To wash, we'd have to find empty gas cans, fill them with water, dump it in those little tubs, and take baths in the open. We didn't really care how we got clean; it was nice to feel seminormal.



EL GUETTAR, TUNISIA, MARCH 23, 1943 I had just exposed this frame when an 88mm round blew up right where I was. The explosion knocked me out, shattered my leg, and left a big flesh wound. Shrapnel lacerated my neck and tore up my right hand, but I was able to rip open a sulfanilamide pack with my teeth and left hand and pour antibiotic on my wounds.



GAFSA, TUNISIA, 1943 One of my favorite photos. Fritzi was a cute puppy, not a little Führer. She'd been a mascot for a unit in Rommel's Afrika Korps. We called her Nazi Bitch. I worked up a Hollywood background with the barbed wire and sign and she went to work posing.



TUNISIA, 1943 Colonel William Darby (left) and General Terry Allen knew one another from West Point. Darby was handsome, and he knew it. He had the looks and demeanor of a Hollywood leading man. One night I was summoned to his tent. He was at a typewriter. I came in and stood at attention. "Relax, Stern," he said. "Tell me about those girls in Hollywood." And that was it. He just wanted to know about the girls.



LICATA BEACH, SICILY, JULY 11, 1943 We got most of the equipment and vehicles in without a problem. There was a little resistance from the Italians. Some guys were shot but luckily not too many. Fate had a big hand in this.

EN ROUTE TO COMISO, SICILY, JULY 1943 It was hot as hell. We'd broken up into squads and were walking toward Comiso when we came upon this German weapons carrier. American gunfire had set off the explosives and ammo it was carrying. I'd seen bodies like this so I was used to it. It was abominable and horrible but you move on. I did whatever I could think of to protect my well-being.



APPROACHING SICILY, JULY 11, 1943 I exposed this frame at about 5:30 that morning. We weren't too far out. The Germans knew we were coming but they didn't know exactly where we planned to land. When we headed to shore, the Germans fired special rounds that filled the beachhead with smoke so you couldn't see where you were going.



ENTERING COMISO, SICILY, JULY 1943 We were riding on a tank. There was no resistance. The Italians were waving and cheering. They were pretty happy to see us.

SICILY, JULY 1943 Me at the Palermo airport. I handed my Leica to a guy. "Here's a camera," I said. "Just push this button."

PHIL STERN went on to photograph everyone who was anyone in Hollywood. He shot portraits and candid, stills for more than 100 films, and many classic jazz LP covers. He documented his career in the books *Phil Stern's Hollywood* and *Phil Stern: A Life's Work*.



COMISO, SICILY, JULY 1943 As we were entering the piazza, loudspeakers were telling residents of Comiso to report immediately and turn in all their firearms. That word "Vincere" stenciled on the wall means "to win," or "victory."