



Chronicle

Americans could appear brash and maybe occasionally juvenile to the Allies during World War II. Yet the vigor with which the US prosecuted that war to victory, punctuated by two atom bomb drops that astonished even Americans who had closely followed the war, produced a postwar atmosphere that was at once heady and sobering.

It would be decades before pundits began calling the 20th century the American Century. Nonetheless, in 1946 the United States was the world's sole nuclear power, and unlike most combatants it had emerged from the war with its industry and infrastructure largely intact.

The fact that the Soviet Union had at least nominally been a US ally during the war could not deflect a growing postwar concern that the Soviets wanted expansion of their sphere of influence and would use military means to achieve this. It has been suggested the two atomic attacks on Japan in August 1945 had a pointed secondary goal of impressing the Soviets, who declared war on Japan only in the closing spasms of the Japanese empire.

When Japan surrendered unconditionally at the end of World War II, only three atomic bombs had exploded. The original test device near Alamogordo, N.M., followed by two combat drops over Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Atom bomb No. 4, nicknamed Gilda, would alter the seascape of Bikini Atoll in a peacetime 1946 test that promised closer scientific scrutiny than had been possible with the previous missions. Gilda also offered the opportunity for sufficient media coverage to ensure that the world understood the portent of the weapon only the United States had—at the time.

Gilda would plunge toward Bikini Atoll's lagoon on Able Day, as part of Operation Crossroads. The United States put great thought and planning into the photographic coverage of Operation Crossroads and recruited cinematographers and still photographers with impressive and colorful résumés. Crossroads proved to be

Crossroads

By Frederick A. Johnsen

Photo and film adventurers of the day recorded the Bikini Atoll atomic tests.

The Baker explosion, shown here, was the first underwater nuclear detonation. The bomb was placed deep beneath the surface of the Bikini Atoll lagoon, suspended from a mechanized landing craft.

the next great adventure for many whose lives had slipped back into a peacetime routine less demanding than the recently concluded world war.

TIME-HONORED TRADITION

Operation Crossroads was a joint Navy-Army effort; the Army Air Forces was still part of the Army in 1946. While other aspects of the military were winding down in the postwar months, by February 1946, the trains steaming into Roswell, N.M., were filled with men recruited for a secret mission. Roswell was home to the 509th Composite Group, the same nuclear-equipped B-29 outfit that had delivered the two A-bombs over Japan.

At Roswell, the organization that would document Operation Crossroads coalesced as Air Photo Unit 1.52 (Provisional).

In 1946, people could not pull a smartphone from a cargo pants pocket and show hundreds of images of the shared event, even if they had been allowed to photograph the scene—which most were not. A tradition, an expectation, grew. That expectation was the creation of a yearbook-style leatherette hardbound volume with many photos, to commemorate a shared event among the participants.

Air Force bomb groups, fighter groups, training schools, and all manner of organizations produced these, typically by subscription since they were not to use

official funds. The books enjoyed greater or lesser degrees of official sanction.

The volumes answered a basic human desire for photos to say, “I was there.” The photo operations officer for Crossroads’ air photo unit was Lt. Col. Richard J. Cunningham, whose brief biography in the Army Air Forces Operation Crossroads book says tersely: “Film editor in movie industry before war.”

By May 1, 1946, no personal cameras were allowed on Kwajalein or Eniwetok, the islands hosting Operation Crossroads. The book would have to be the memory-keeper for everyone.

For books like Operation Crossroads, the official photographers and their files

were indispensable, after they ran the gauntlet of security reviews and censors. It is said more than 300 official cameras were trained on the Able Day bomb drop of July 1, 1946.

“The purpose of these tests was to determine the effect of atomic bombs against naval vessels,” the book explained, “to gain true appraisals of the strategic implications of the atomic bomb.”

The AAF Crossroads book had official blessing. In addition to a morale memento for participants, it may have been viewed as a positive unclassified document of the scope and magnitude of the Army Air Forces’ efforts to support the operation.

Maj. James L. Gaylord led a team of 13 officers, enlisted members, and civilians in compiling and publishing what they called the “Crossroads Yearbook.”

The book used abridged accounts and cleared photos to tell the stories of the two atomic blasts of Operation Crossroads.

The men chronicling Operation Crossroads today appear almost as time capsules

Below: An iconic mushroom cloud begins to form after a nuclear explosion at Bikini Atoll in 1946. Of the ships surrounding the atoll, many were sunk, and those that remained afloat were twisted and torn and contaminated by radiation. Below right: Hundreds of officially sanctioned cameras were trained on the action in the Pacific, including movie cameras such as these two mounted in a modified C-54.



Maj. James Gaylord
Executive Officer



Maj. John Craig
Deputy Movie Director

of 1940s flamboyance and of Hollywood’s golden age—individuals who were looking for their next great adventure and who found it with atomic bomb tests at a remote Pacific atoll. The adventure wasn’t limited to recording atomic bomb blasts. As the book notes, the chroniclers were also “batting rain, flooded streets, decayed and coral-filled buildings.”

A COLORFUL CAST

The outfit’s deputy movie director, Maj. John D. Craig, was described in swashbuckling terms that put 21st century descriptions to shame: “Former adventurer, deep sea diver, and author. Veteran of 36 combat missions in Europe.” Who wouldn’t want to list “adventurer” as one’s

occupation? It conjures lost images of globe-trotting travel before the Internet and the airlines diminished the luster and panache of such endeavors.

One of the grand old men of the operation was aerial movie photographer Louis Hagemeyer, a civilian whose bragging rights included “aerial photographer since World War I.” Hagemeyer “photographed General ‘Billy’ Mitchell’s bombs vs. ships experiments in 1921 and 1923,” the Crossroads book noted. How could he possibly stay back in Dayton, Ohio, when the most titanic airplane-vs.-ships test of all time demanded documentation?

For Able Day, “at 0430, exactly on schedule, the command plane, with Generals LeMay and Power aboard ... rolled



DOD photo



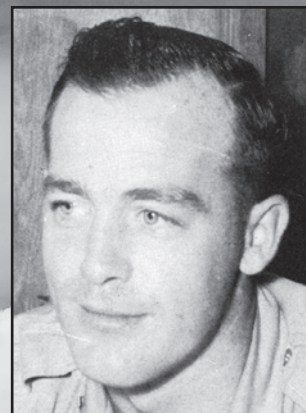
Photo from the Gene Furnish collection



Lt. Col. Richard Cunningham
Photo Operations Officer



Maj. Daniel Forbes Jr.
Deputy Operations Officer



Capt. Norman Dick
Reports Officer

down the field and took off into the dawn, followed, one by one, by the eight F-13 photoplanes (modified B-29s), responsible for recording on film the appalling effects of the atom bomb when dropped on the target fleet," the book noted with characteristic flair. At 5:54 a.m., the B-29 *Dave's Dream* "took off on its awesome mission into the morning sun, with 'Gilda,' its frightening cargo, secured in its bomb bay."

The book described the events as vividly as words ever could:

"A blinding flash which virtually blotted out the morning sun marked the detonation of the world's fourth atomic bomb. ... A brilliant fireball emerged, supported by a flaming stem which reached down into the water. As the flaming fireball subsided, the mushroom cloud development began, ... completely dwarfing the entire lagoon and target fleet. ... Clearly seen was the smoke issuing forth from every ship in the array. Drones, guided by their mother planes, flew directly into the center of the radioactive cloud which, after 10 minutes, had risen to a height of over 12 miles. ... Cameramen, cameras grinding, photographed the towering cloud and array from all angles."

Movie film and color film were flown back for processing. Thousands of black-and-white still images were developed and catalogued in a special photo lab created on Kwajalein in the face of harsh temperatures and little fresh water. Crossroads had all the trappings of a huge bonding buddy flick as these men of action united. Their temporary service must have thinned Tinseltown.

Maj. Gilbert Warrenton left Hollywood to join Crossroads. His bio reads: "Formerly a cameraman for Paramount-Universal in Hollywood. Recalled to Active Duty to serve with Crossroads."

Dapper Capt. Rene Dussaq's dossier included prewar time as a Hollywood motion picture technical advisor. Liaison officer

Maj. Henry G. Ross of Santa Monica, Calif., worked for MGM in a former life.

Capt. H. Clark Ramsey's rakishly trimmed mustache belongs on a man who "entered the Army July 1942, right out of the motion picture industry." Ramsey's biography in the Crossroads book says he "makes his home in Hollywood and plans a return to motion pictures."

The even-toothed smile of 1st Lt. Edward J. Guill, the group's assistant lab commander, captures all the hope and pride of postwar Americans. His bio tells us: "Prior to entering the Army, he was employed by Technicolor in Hollywood and plans to return."

Not everyone was a confessed Hollywood insider or an adventurer, but the ranks were filled with manly men of the day. Capt. Norman W. Dick's photo countenance gazes calmly into the distance

above the notation: "Plans to open hunting and fishing lodge after discharge."

The Crossroads book is part Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" movie, part "South Pacific" musical camaraderie, and thoroughly reassuring about the grit of those who came before.

ABLE, BAKER, SORRY CHARLIE

The first underwater nuclear detonation took place July 25, designated Baker Day. "Several fathoms below the surface of the lagoon, suspended from an LCM [mechanized landing craft] anchored in the midst of the Guinea Pig Fleet, the atomic bomb awaited radio-controlled detonation. At 0835 a.m., the vast area of Bikini Lagoon arose with terrific speed and boiling violence. The first sign of detonation to aerial observers was the emergence of a fireball from the surface of the water," the AAF book recounted.

The fireball "was almost immediately hidden by the spherical dome of the water column as it opened up, forming a crown.

Official Crossroads photographers horsing around on the island.



Photo from the Gene Furrish collection



Dwarfed by the towering pillar of water, which reached a mile into the air ... were the target ships, standing out in bold relief against the eerie background of the turbulent waters. The LCM disappeared immediately." Of the Baker Day ships that managed to remain afloat, "many had been twisted and torn by the devastating force unleashed by the bomb."

The anticipated third test, Charlie Day, was then scrubbed, but the hefty yearbook preserved the memories and gave the deployed AAF air photo unit at Crossroads an opportunity to tout its accomplishments.

The volume's dark blue embossed cover shows a hypothetical white crossroads intersection on the water's surface, with a mushroom cloud rising from it.

In what might be either wry humor or merely idiosyncratic coincidence, the mushroom cloud does not rise from the exact intersection of the crossroads. It is visibly off center. The Able Day airburst was more than 2,000 feet laterally from its intended detonation point.

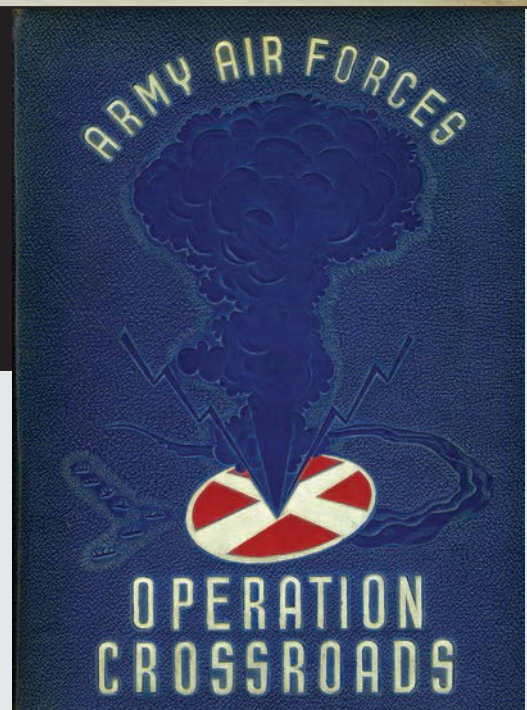
The panache of this yearbook echoes the confidence of those who had just survived and won a world war and who now stood on the brink of a world that would antiquate that war rapidly. The photo organization's deputy operations officer was a smiling young flier from the Midwest, Maj. Daniel H. Forbes Jr. He could not have foreseen at that time that his life would end two years later in the wreckage of the experimental YB-49

Above left: An unidentified public information officer strikes a classic skyward-looking pose in front of a B-17 used in Operation Crossroads. Note the airplane's emblem. Above: B-17s, drones, and mother ships at Eniwetok, one of two islands that hosted Crossroads operations. Right: The cover of the operation's book. It would serve as a souvenir for those who worked on the classified mission since personal cameras were forbidden.

Flying Wing, strewn across the Mojave Desert in California.

Unique among the photographed men of Crossroads, sound technician 2nd Lt. Walter L. McDougal Jr. is framed by the Bakelite headset he wears. "As a civilian, he was a cameraman for Universal Picture Corp. of Los Angeles," the book tells us. There's another of those dapper '40s mustaches on Navy liaison officer Lt. Fred Terzo, who told the book's publishers he was a former cameraman for Warner Brothers studio, where he intended to return after Crossroads.

The grinning mug of civilian movie cameraman Albert Alwood basks beneath the upturned brim of a GI cap marked "Mickey." Before the war, he logged 14 years with Paramount in Hollywood. Robert Bartlett, looking almost Gregory Peck-like in his photo, lists his Crossroads occupation as "movie writer," although he evidently had a day job in real estate back home. A resident of the



Southern California mountain resort playground of Big Bear Lake, Bartlett is said to have opined that after Crossroads, "I'll never leave California again."

If you called Central Casting for a studious camera repairman, you'd want to get someone like civilian Ove S. Bryhn from Beverly Hills, whose intense visage supports wire-rimmed glasses. "Before joining Crossroads, he was camera repairman for 20th Century Fox in Hollywood and previous to that had worked for Paramount 13 years. Will return to studios."



A BYGONE ERA

Carl Burmahln was another civilian Ohio transplant whose credits included “13 years in special effects department of Warner Bros. studios in Hollywood.” For Operation Crossroads, Burmahln was a movie cameraman aboard an orbiting C-54.

Adrian Geoffroy left Los Angeles for the rigors of Kwajalein as an air and ground photographer. The brief write-up for Geoffroy says: “On ‘loan’ to Crossroads from Paramount, Hollywood, where he is sound engineer.”

Civilian Alpha Hart was photographed wearing a necktie and sporting a trimmed goatee not long enough to be a Vandyke. A civilian Army Air Forces script writer, Hart is characterized as a “fiction writer, photographer, poet, and former newsman” in an era when apparently versatility may have been more appreciated than it would later be in the compartmentalized warrens of some government agencies.

Hart’s contemplative gaze contrasts with another writer’s mug shot, the openly grinning Don Christiansen, director of documentary stills, from a suburb of Salt Lake City. Christiansen was a veteran combat photographer in the Mediterranean who, according to the epic photo book about Crossroads, came to this task “as ‘vacation’ from job as storyteller, confidence man, and newsman in Salt Lake City.”

Another print-media recruit was Charles E. Nerpel from Los Angeles.

For Crossroads, he was a director cameraman primarily assigned to the B-17 drone operation on Eniwetok. Almost as an aside, his book bio mentions: “He formerly was chief photographer for Scripps Howard newspapers.”

The world was a larger place when movie camera maintenance man I. Robert Holland brought his pencil-thin mustache to Crossroads. His credits included “several years in Africa as a cameraman and sound technician shooting native and animal life.”

Stanley E. Johnson slipped away from his Hollywood home and Paramount Studios to be a Crossroads film editor.

The grand old man of Crossroads motion picture work had to be civilian Reginald E. Lyons, employed by the Army Air Forces at Wright Field in Ohio. If Crossroads seems only a faint and distant glimmer on a Pacific wave to readers today, imagine that in 1946, Lyons’ résumé stretched back to 1908 when he worked for pioneer motion picture company Vitagraph in Brooklyn, moving west to Hollywood in 1916 to work for Keystone, Christia, MGM, Fox, and Warner Brothers. By the way, he became the officer in charge of the camera crew for a squadron in World War I. Photographed against a backdrop of some of the few palm fronds still waving on Kwajalein in the immediate postwar era, Lyons’ visage shows the experience gained in 38 years of film work. He looks like the person others would turn to when things went sideways.

Harry F. Perry brought aerial movie photographer skills to Operation Crossroads. A cinematographer in Hollywood going back to 1918, his credits included “The Virginian,” “Wings,” “Hell’s Angels,” and European pieces including “Rebecca,” “Bluebeard’s Eighth Wife,” and “Dodsworth.” For the three years running up to Crossroads, Perry worked in the camera department at Paramount.

Fellow Crossroads aerial movie cameraman Paul P. Perry directed photography on about 40 movies filmed on the Paramount lot. From 1931 to 1943, Perry “made a series of world travel pictures released under the title of Perry Color Pictures.” His ringside seat for Crossroads was operating a movie camera aboard an F-13 on Able Day.

Ground movie photographer Earl Rossman listed his address as the Beckel Hotel in Dayton, Ohio, in an era when that was not uncommon for

entrepreneurial professionals. The bio on Rossman backs him up: “Writer and world adventurer, who has taken his camera to the Arctic with the Wilkins expedition, to the ocean bottom off Nassau, into the jungles of South America and Africa, and was first to fly over Mt. McKinley. Author of *Black Sunlight*. Cameraman at Wright Field, Ohio, last four years. Married.”

Thomas W. Scott of Los Angeles, a civilian movie cameraman at Crossroads, was a Paramount film editor. Vladimir Svancara brought 20 years’ experience as a “sound man on radio and motion pictures.” He was working at Wright Field when picked for Crossroads duty.

Film editor John R. Truppe had worked for Warner Brothers in Brooklyn, declining to follow the studio to Hollywood.

Thomas E. Tutweiler was first cameraman for Warner Brothers in Hollywood when he agreed to be part of Crossroads.

Before his Army service, Elmer L. Whiles of Hollywood was a writer for Warner-First National, where he planned to return after Crossroads duty.

Some of the men traveled to Crossroads in Navy ships. Others flew there in “Green Hornet” C-54 transports.

Gene Furnish was one of the photographers who answered the call. Turned down for wartime military service due to a prior respiratory condition, Furnish was hired on at Wright Field as a civilian photographer. Never shy of adventure and risk, Furnish made parachute jumps as a photographer to test German ribbon chute technology before he made the journey to the Pacific.

Fortunately, photographers are notorious pack rats and Furnish kept images from throughout his career, offering a brilliant window into Operation Crossroads through news-like black-and-whites and the occasional gorgeously rich Kodachrome color transparency. Crossroads was the Big Show. Furnish’s candid images serve as a posthumous nod to his skill, enthusiasm, and engagement with life.

The old Crossroads book published for the participants occasionally surfaces in the collections of the men or their descendants, and it compels viewing. Seasoned veterans and happy-go-lucky kids look back from its pages, frozen in time in images from 1946, truly a bygone era. ★

Frederick A. Johnsen is a frequent contributor to Air Force Magazine. His most recent article was “Ice Boxes” in the December 2014 issue.