WWI Signal Corps scoop!

by B. E. Loper, Jr.

The incredible story of how Lt. Eddie Jackson shot the only photograph in the world of the historic meeting at Versailles May 7, 1919.

When the Armistice ending World War I, November 11, 1918, was signed, I was in Audenarde, Belgium, as a member of the 91st Division Photographic Section. The unit, of which I was in charge, consisted of three men: Sgt. John T. Seabrook of Franklin, Pennsylvania, PFC John Thompson of Los Angeles, and myself, also from Los Angeles.

We spent several days in and around Audenarde, photographing various scenes to be used in compiling the history of the 91st Division.

November 20th, Maj. Charles L. Wyman, division signal officer, handed me a telegram ordering the unit to proceed to Brussels, Belgium, immediately to cover the return of King Albert and Queen Elizabeth to the Royal Palace on November 22nd. Afterwards, we were to return to the Argonne and take pictures of the destroyed churches and houses and of the terrain, which could be used in compiling a book on the activities of the 91st Division. Then the unit was to return to the Signal Corps Photographic Laboratory in Vincennes, a suburb of Paris.

We arrived in Vincennes December 22nd and reported to Maj. E. J. Hardy, officer in charge of the laboratory. He suggested we find quarters in Paris, as we would not be assigned again until after the Christmas holidays. He said that a friend of mine, Lt. Edward (Eddie) Jackson, Photo Division, Signal Corps, was downstairs and that he wanted me to stop by to see him. I was indeed surprised that Eddie was in France and told Maj. Hardy about meeting him in March at Camp Lewis, Washington, when he and Lt. Robert Durborough visited Camp Lewis for three weeks to make pictures of the progress in training the soldiers there. I also mentioned that Durborough had told me one day that Eddie was one of the most aggressive photographers he had ever known, one who would go to great lengths to get a picture. I decided to see Eddie immediately, so I left after thanking the major for the Christmas vacation in Paris.

I went downstairs, and Eddie and I had quite a reunion. He said that he had come overseas with President Wilson on the SS *George Washington*. The purpose of the President's trip was to meet with our allies and work out a treaty agreement to be presented to the Germans based on his 14 points. I suggested we go to dinner and a show the next night, but he said he was leaving in the morning. The President was to visit American Expeditionary Force headquarters, Chaumont, and he wanted to have Christmas dinner in the field with the troops. Eddie wouldn't be back until after New Year's; he was heading to the south of France to see some people he had met in New York.

"Well, Eddie," I said, "my unit will remain here in Paris for the holidays and leave on January 2nd to photograph American activities in southern France. I expect to return to Paris the first week in March, at which time I will get in touch." I wished him a Merry Christmas.

When I returned to Paris on March

Gen. Pershing and Secretary of War, Newton Baker, decorate the colors of the 113th Infantry, 29th Division, at Fresnes, Haute-Marne, France, March 24, 1919. (photo by B. E. Loper, Jr.)

"There is also a rumor," he continued, "that when the meeting is held there is to be no picture taking. I can't believe this is ture, especially for an event of this importance. However, true or not, I'm going to prepare for such an eventuality and try to figure some way to get a picture."

1st, I contacted Eddie and we met at a sidewalk cafe near the Opera House for lunch. During the conversation, he reported that the President's Christmas dinner with the men in the field made quite an impression and that the cooks went all out to prepare a sumptuous meal of turkey and all the trimmings. He also had a pleasant visit with his friends in Dijon.

I asked how the President was making out in his preliminary talks with Clemenceau, Lloyd George, Orlando and the other allies, and he replied: "Not good at all. It's rumored that some deals had been entered into between the allies before we entered the war, and Clemenceau is trying to cut the 14 points to shreds. The allies are asking for reparations from Germany, which the President can't accept as they are entirely outside the 14 points which the Germans accepted before signing the Armistice. In fact, the President became so unhappy, he ordered the *George Washington* to return to France and pick him up. You probably read in the Stars and Stripes that he sailed for home February 16th, but I understand he is returning this month to try again. No one knows when the squabble will cease, nor when the Germans will be called in for the final reparations draft. Hearsay is it may be last of April or the first part of May.

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Lunch over, I said, "Eddie, as Maj. Hardy always says, 'I wish you luck,' and I'll see you when we get back. The unit is shipping out tomorrow."

The next afternoon, we reported to Maj. Gen. Henry T. Allen at the 8th Army Corps, Montigny-Sur-Aube. Margaret Wilson arrived, and pictures were taken of Miss Wilson and Gen. Allen in the Octagon Club. On March 20th, King Albert and Queen Elizabeth of Belgium, accompanied by several Belgian dignitaries and Gen. Pershing, arrived for a three day stay, during which Gen. Allen arranged reviews, and wound it up with a Gymkhana, in which expert horsemen from the 8th Corps' divisions competed.

Shortly after the Belgians' departure, Allen was transferred to the 9th Corps, and since we were assigned to him, we also made the change. April 19th, Secretary of War, Newton D. Baker, and Pershing arrived in Gondrecourt, Meuse, France, to inspect the 88th Division. Pershing decorated Maj. Gen. William W. Weigle, commanding general of the 88th Division, with the Distinguished Service Medal, and Secretary Baker decorated the colors of the 349th Infantry.

Orders were received May 5th for the unit to return to the Photographic Laboratory for assignment.

We got to the lab on May 7th and found ourselves in the midst of a large crowd of civilians going in and out of the building, which was unusual. On my way upstairs to report, I saw Eddie. I asked him who all the people were and why they were here. He smiled and answered, "They're from the news

The king and queen of Belgium visited the 8th Army Corps at Veuxhalles, France, March 20, 1919. Left to right: King Albert, Gen. Pershing, Queen Elizabeth, Maj. Gen. Tilson (in charge of the Belgium mission in Chaumont), Maj. Gen. Gordon (Commanding General of the 6th Division), Brig. Gen. Drum (Chief of Staff, 1st Army), Brig. Gen. Upton (29th Division) and Maj. Gen. Allen (Commanding General, 8th Army Corps). (photo by B. E. Loper, Jr.)

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service in Paris, requesting copies of the picture I got at the meeting with the Germans this morning."

"You mean they finally gave permission to take pictures?" I asked.

"No, I stole it. It's a long story, and if you can make it to my hotel tonight at seven, we'll have supper and I'll tell you everything."

I was there at six forty-five. After supper, he leaned back and began his story: "When I left you at the sidewalk cafe, my first thought was to see Maj. Hardy. While riding on the subway to Vincennes, I kept thinking about what I could do if they did prohibit pictures and if I could devise some way to get one. When I got to the lab, I contacted the major and told him that I had heard, unofficially, no pictures would be allowed of the meeting between the allies and Germans when the reparation terms were deliverd. He said that he had heard the same thing. But I had formulated a plan on the subway ride, and — sketchy as it was — I presented it to the major. He agreed it was worth a try and as for printing pictures and furnishing cigarettes, there would be no problem. Then he wished me luck.

"Two days later, using a Graflex, I started taking pictures of the gendarmes on the Palace grounds, and after each picture, I handed the gendarme a pack of American cigarettes. Later, I went back with the finished pictures and mentioned that I would be back Sunday. I said that if they wished to be photographed with their families or girl friends, they should have them there Sunday afternoon. Numerous families and friends accepted my invitation. Of course, no one really knew why I was doing all this. To them I was just an American lieutenant who liked to take pictures. I kept this up for about six weeks. Finally, I learned that the meeting with the Germans would take place in the Trianon Palace Hotel, Versailles, on May 7th, the fourth anniversary of the sinking of the Lusitania. I also knew that the 'no-picture' order was still in effect."

"I had never taken pictures of the gendarmes inside the hotel, so one day I went inside and located the gendarme in charge and took his picture; afterwards I gave him a carton of cigarettes. I also made pictures of the other gendarmes stationed inside."

"On May 1st, I contacted Maj. Hardy and told him I had made my move inside the Trianon so I could get a camera inside. He approved of my ideas and, as usual, wished me luck."

"I contacted the head gendarme, who, fortunately, spoke some English, and when I started to explain what I wanted to do, he wanted no part of me or what I planned. In desperation, I told him that President Wilson and General Pershing had ordered me to get a picture for them. After a while, I could see that he was weakening and finally he asked, 'What can I do?'

"We went inside the hall where the meeting was to be held, and I asked if he could get a small, portable screen and

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place it in the rear of the hall a day or two before the meeting so it wouldn't cause suspicion. He agreed to try."

"Back at the lab I asked Maj. Hardy for a 5 x 7 camera, tripod and carrying case, since a Graflex would be too noisy. I could take it out the day before the meeting, set it up, and leave it overnight behind the screen, which I was fairly certain would be there. I mentioned that we would run the risk of losing the camera if we left it overnight, but it was worth a try. He agreed."

"May 6th, the day before the Germans would be called in to hear the reparation's terms, I casually walked into the Trianon with the camera and my gendarme friends looked the other way. In the hall, the screen was there as I had requested. I stepped behind it, set up my camera and made a test picture to get an idea of the light quality and exposure requirements. I left everything in place and simply hoped that no one would find it. Then I went out a different exit and took a taxi to the lab. I developed the test negative, and it was good. I briefed Maj. Hardy and told him I would bring him a picture tomorrow — if I wasn't in jail."

...Clemenceau slowly arose to address the delegates. I moved the screen enough to expose the lens, took a picture and put the negative in the carrying case.

"That brings me up to this morning," he continued. "I took a cab to Versailles. I saw a group of Army officers waiting for the President and his staff. I joined them and when President Wilson got out of his car and started up the walkway toward the Trianon Palace, we all fell in behind him. There were delegates from thirty-two countries attending, so it was easy for me to slip behind the screen without being noticed. Everything was just as I had left it. I breathed a sigh of relief. Inwardly, I was nervous and could hardly wait for things to start happening."

"Seated at the head table was Premier Clemenceau of France. On his right sat President Wilson. On his left, Premier Lloyd George of Great Britain. I watched through a crack in the screen and when the meeting was called to order, Clemenceau slowly arose to address the delegates. I moved the screen enough to expose the lens, took a picture and put the negative in the carrying case."

"As I started to take a second picture, I must have made a noise. Just as I was about to put another negative into the camera, a Frenchman stepped behind the screen, saw the camera, took the negative holder from my hand, pulled the slide and exposed the negative. He motioned to me to pack up and get out. He probably thought he had ruined my chance of getting a picture when he exposed the negative a few moments before, but he didn't know about the negative in the carrying case. I got out quietly and hailed a taxi for Vincennes to see if I had a picture. After anxious moments, something started to show on the negative. One of the boys in the lab called upstairs to the major. When he saw the negative, he yelled so all could hear: 'The Signal Corps has a scoop. As soon as the negative is dry, make lots of prints. I'm calling the American and French news representatives in Paris now.' The news spread like wildfire. Soon representatives from the rest of the world began arriving and asking for copies. That was the crowd you saw when you came in. After lots of anxiety, worry and help from the major and the boys in the dark room, we got the picture. Now, Bernie, here is a copy for you, from the only negative in the world, of the meeting."

I congratulated him, thanked him for the picture and said I would treasure it always as a momento of Eddie Jackson, who never took "no" for an answer.

It was getting late and I would be leaving Paris for Normandy in the morning, so we shook hands and parted. But before leaving, I thanked him again for the picture, shook my head and said, "Eddie, I don't believe it."

Riding in the cab back to my hotel, I thought back to Camp Lewis, a little over a year ago, and Lt. Durborough

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saying, "Eddie is aggressive and will go to any lengths to get a picture." The Trianon photograph had to be Eddie Jackson's greatest picture.

After 61 years, I still have the picture.

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88 year-old B. E. Loper retired from a long and interesting career in motion pictures 25 years ago. He now lives in Sun City, California, with his wife, Rose. Nearby are his children, his grandchildren and his two great-grandchildren — all of whom, Loper says with a chuckle, "are alive, well and asking for money."

Loper began his career in filmmaking as a cameraman for Pathe News. When World War I broke out, he decided to join a photography section being organized by the Signal Corps. Before he could enlist, however, he was drafted, assigned to the 91st Division as a private and sent to Camp Lewis, Washington (now Ft. Lewis). He naturally brought his photo equipment with him, and his pictures of maneuvers and other kinds of training caught the eye of Signal Corps officer Maj. Charles Wyman, who needed a photo officer. Wyman arranged for Loper to take the appropriate exams. Meanwhile, Loper was given the temporary rank of sergeant. By July 5, 1918, Sgt. Loper was on his way to France and destiny. His commission was waiting for him when he arrived. Lt. Loper left the service 1½ years after he was drafted, and worked in the motion picture industry until his retirement.

His motion picture creed is simple: "Keep it clean."