

## Photographer Pioneered Aerial Reconnaissance 'For the Lives of Men'

BY DR. GARY E. WEIR

"I [finally] have an opportunity to get off a letter to Paris.... [T]he railroads are being used by the military—I only know that war is inevitable now," the American photographer Edward Steichen wrote to his friend Alfred Stieglitz in New York in one his letters now stored in the Steichen Archive of the Beinecke Library at Yale University.

It was 1914—the year the European Great Powers initiated a war that changed the world forever—and that momentarily stranded Steichen with his family in the French village of Voulangis.

That summer Steichen sent his loved ones to relatives in Great Britain and departed himself for New York City via Marseilles on board the steamer SS Sant'Anna. The location of his French home permitted him to see some of the early fighting, to sense the change of mood in France, and to witness the effect of mobilization. He certainly had no illusions about the horror unfolding before his eyes.

When the United States entered the war in 1917, Steichen received a commission from the Army and shipped out with the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) to France as a specialist in aerial reconnaissance. Unlike many of his fellows in the art world, Steichen, a naturalized citizen from Luxembourg, felt a strong compulsion in both world wars to serve his adopted country close to the front. He also felt that his extraordinary skills with a camera would both aid the American cause and vividly demonstrate the waste and absurdity of war.

### From Pigeons to Airplanes

Armies had long since realized the advantages of photographic aerial observation. In 1903 the Germans developed a 70-gram homing pigeon camera that took 38-millimeter negatives automatically every 30 seconds. When the United States entered the Great War in 1917, the Army followed suit with a pigeon system that took pictures of the enemy lines.

The First World War also provided the opportunity to combine airplane technology with the still-image camera. This step gave the armed forces the ability to move, see and record the Earth in a more systematic manner. The reliability, regularity and responsiveness of the airplane



Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Center for Military History.

*Aerial reconnaissance captures a gas attack on the Western Front. An accomplished artist striving to make photography an art form before World War I, Edward Steichen led the wartime effort to transform aircraft photography into reliable and timely intelligence.*

permitted conversion of the data gathered into reliable and timely intelligence.

Under Steichen's direction the AEF in France successfully made the transition to aircraft photography. An accomplished artist in oils who struggled just before the war to raise photography to an art form, he now advised the Army on the best way to use the large, aircraft-mounted cameras. In short order he significantly improved the results presented to Army senior leadership, as he regularly moved between AEF headquarters and the front lines. Of course, security regulations and access to classified methods and materials permitted him to tell his friends via his letters home only a small part of what he did for the warfighter.

Greeting Stieglitz in one of his letters, Steichen remarked, "Well, here I am in the famous 'somewhere in France'—hard at it . . . and once again for photography—only this time . . . photography and plus. I suppose that means the lives of men. I wish I could tell you about it but that is naturally taboo...."

### Imagery Reconnaissance Operations

Steichen eventually commanded a reconnaissance unit on the Western Front consisting of 55 officers and 1,111





Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Center for Military History

An aerial photo of Vaux, in northeastern France, shows damage after its capture by the U.S. Army's Second Division July 1, 1918. Photographer Edward Steichen commanded an aerial reconnaissance unit on the Western Front that could place, on demand, as many as 4,000 black-and-white prints before the American Expeditionary Force leadership.

enlisted soldiers. The unit daily provided Gen. Billy Mitchell's air staff with imagery intelligence, recounts Catherine Tuggle in "Edward Steichen: War, History and Humanity," in the *History of Photography*, vol. 17, number 4 (Winter 1993). Before America's two years of war concluded, Steichen had implemented image gathering and overnight processing procedures that could daily place, on demand, as many as 4,000 black-and-white prints of the Western Front before the AEF leadership, Tuggle writes.

Aerial photographs not only revealed troop movements and enhanced cartographic services but also offered more reliable battle-damage assessments based upon images captured before and after bombardment from the air or by artillery. Steichen and his staff helped military leaders standardize many other techniques, including the use of multiple images to produce three-dimensional effects, enhancing detection further.

This aerial intelligence pioneer always viewed his part in the Great War as simply part of life, always keeping it in perspective. He clearly realized the war's excitement, its value to his personal development and its terrible absurdity.

"It's a great game—life—when it goes at such a pace and when the price [of life] counts as little as it does here," he wrote Stieglitz. "And whether it's the thump thump thump of marching troops or a delicious Sole frite [fried fish] with a bottle of Barsac—what's the difference—or freezing up in the air [gathering imagery] or feeling like a corpse in a cold, damp has been a bed—it is full and rich with meaning—even though [it is] the result of human imbecility."

After the war concluded in 1919, Steichen returned to New York City and worked for Condé Nast publications, virtually defining American fashion and portrait photography while gaining a reputation as one of the world's great imagery artists. P

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