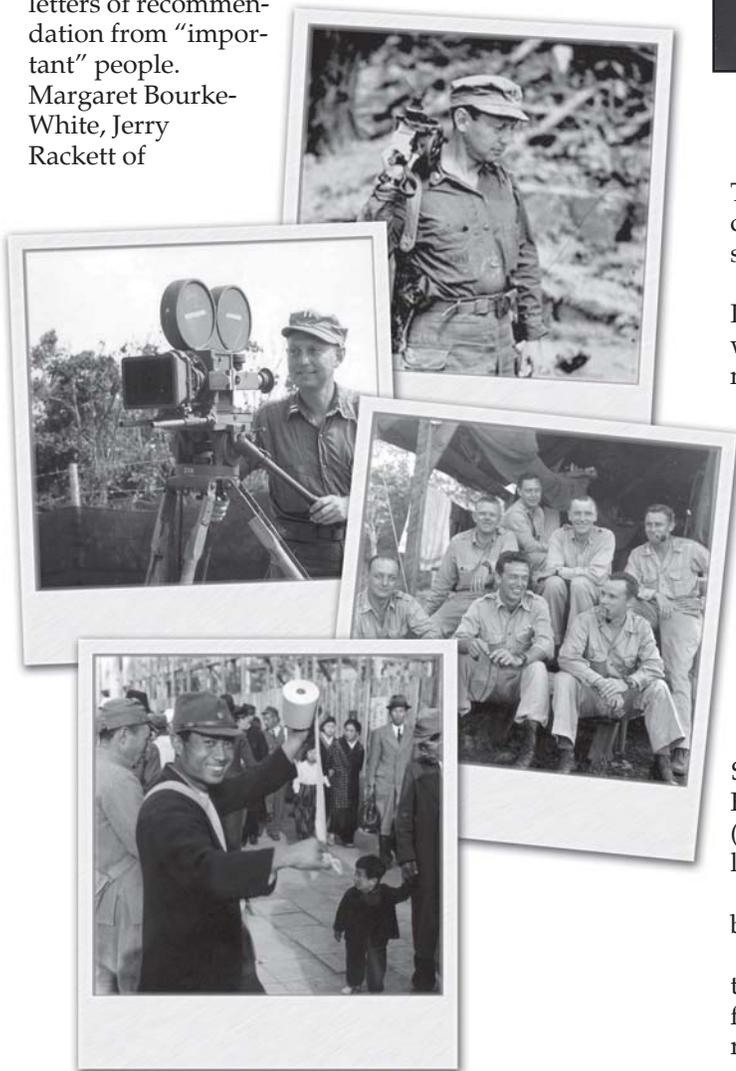


# WWII photographer Peter Keane recounts living Signal Corps history

By Peter Keane

**Editor's Note:** Peter Keane and his remembrance of his service for the Signal Corps is conversational in tone, as it was written for his children. Some first names of the World War II military personnel are not recalled by the author and thus not included.

Soon after Pearl Harbor, I went to Fort Monmouth, N.J., and offered my services in photography to the Army Signal Corps. Because of my photographic experience and the fact that I had taken ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) at college, I was offered a direct commission in the Army. I had to fill out many forms and get information from Cornell. Also, I had to get letters of recommendation from "important" people. Margaret Bourke-White, Jerry Rackett of



(Above) Peter Keane and World War II members of Signal Unit A.

Technicolor, and Navy Commander Edward Steichen cooperated. (In fact, Steichen wrote on his own Navy stationery.)

With all this sent to the adjutant at Fort Monmouth, I was told to wait for a reply from Washington. After six weeks I phoned the adjutant and obtained the phone number of the officer in Washington to whom he had sent all my papers. I called that number and spoke to an officer who actually looked up my file and told me that it would take several weeks more for an answer. I made that call around 5 or 6 p.m. and I believe that there was a change of shift very soon after that (because of what happened next).

I think my file had been left at the top of the pile so that when the next shift officer came on duty he picked up my application and processed it. (I believe this is what occurred) because the next morning I received a telegram addressed to LT M. P. Keane.

With the telegram, I went as ordered to the new Signal Corps Photo Center occupying the old Lasky Famous Players Studio (Paramount) in Long Island City, (N.Y.). (The building is still there and it is the present location of the Museum of the Moving Image.)

Afterwards, I went to Saks Fifth Avenue and bought the complete (Army) uniform.

At the Signal Corps Photo Center I was, for eighteen months, the assistant officer in charge of training film production. That was largely a desk job and required reporting progress of some 400 films in various stages of production to the General Chief Signal Officer

# WAR-NEWS FILMS

## Contrasting 'Attack! The Battle of New Britain' and the Invasion Newsreels

By BOSLEY CROWTHER

IT is more than a little amazing that the most impressive war-news film of the past three weeks has been "Attack! The Battle of New Britain," the War Department's report on a six-month-old event. And the reason it is so amazing is that this fifty-four-minute document arrived almost simultaneously with the first invasion newsreels. You would think, considering the moment, that the invasion pictures would pack more punch than any other news film, no matter how eloquent it might be, and that a lengthier picture, especially, would pale by comparison. Yet "Attack! The Battle of New Britain" is the one that knocks you out of your seat, while the clips on the Normandy invasion have had no more than moderate sock.

This odd and surprising contradiction may be reasonably explained by a number of observations, which we will herewith proceed to make. And we don't want to give the impression that we are not disposed toward them ourselves. But behind them, still challenging argument, is the growing suspicion that the screen, by its physical nature, is unsuited to "spot news" reporting today. And, more particularly, there is the constant evidence that our present commercial structure for handling films is not geared to offer the public an aggressively journalistic screen. Keep this in mind. We'll come to it after stating the affirmative's side.

### Clearly and Whole

The most obvious explanation for the sharply anomalous fact that "Attack! The Battle of New Britain" has it all over the invasion newsreels is that it happens to be a fine picture in every possible way. It is a frank, graphic, lucid illustration of an amphibious operation from beginning to end, photographed in most eloquent detail and put together with exceptional skill. It was filmed by Signal Corps photographers—and by Army Air Force camera men—who went from the staging areas right onto the beaches with the troops that stormed Arawe and Cape Gloucester last December in a historic thrust. Their cameras caught all the grimness and reality of those assaults—the attitudes of men in landing barges, the beach-head charge, the toil of jungle infighting. They caught the whole

thing—the strength of character of those American fighting men, the breathless excitement of actual battle, the hard realization of death. And this film gives a smashing conception of modern warfare on those far Pacific isles, of the perils and sacrifices of our young fighters thousands of empty miles from home.

### It Still Happens

Obviously a picture of this nature is going to hit you between the eyes, packed as it is with action and dramatic reality. But more than that it is currently momentous, quite apart from the history it records, because of the present operations on Saipan and on islands elsewhere. Change the names (which make no difference to folks who are geographically dull) and these same things may be happening this minute somewhere out there beyond the seas.

Furthermore, this War Department picture is the first comprehensive screen report on a beach-head operation, and as such it has great immediacy. The earlier "With the Marines at Tarawa" was a slashing, breath-taking two-reel film, which left a sobering impression of a beachhead landing and its cost. But it lacked the patient thoroughness and reflection of this new film. "Attack! The Battle of New Britain" is the "Desert Victory" of this year.

Those are pretty good reasons for the present pre-eminence of this film over the Normandy invasion newsreels. It might now be remarked that the latter are an inadequate illustration of the nature and immensity of the blow. Except for one tense and vivid sequence, photographed from a landing boat as it ran its men onto a drab beach, the lot of the films seemed strangely routine. They were no more than unrelated glimpses of a vast action which remains to be disclosed.

### Mechanics

And that brings us down to the question of whether the screen, dependent as it is upon transport and other physical factors, is able to do a quick reporting job. The Normandy invasion pictures had to pass through censorship, be flown to this country and then edited, with sound tracks prepared, before being shown. By that time most of the same scenes had been published here in still photographs. And even then there was little opportunity—or inclination—to give the films a "story line." Scenes were variously lumped together in newsreel fashion, with commentaries—and that was all.

And further, the Normandy pictures, through a curious

Hollywood who had been drafted and others who, because of professional film experience, were given direct commissions: Jesse Lasky Jr., Franklyn Coen, Jerry Hopper, Garland Meisner. In fact, I supplied the names of other Hollywood friends who, after being drafted, contacted me for help in getting assigned to our photo unit.

Our personnel officer took my list of such names and went to California with authorization to select them for SCPC. Fred Detmers and Charlies Benes of Technicolor were among those. Also with my job at SCPC, I was tasked to prepare a monthly progress report of all of our training film projects. This took several stenographers many days to type the constant changes in each subject. I designed a graph that would show each project's progress with a line that would rise sharply if the progress from script writing to photography through editing and all the film laboratory stages occurred without delay. Years later I learned that the graph system still was in use.

After a year I was reassigned to expedite camera and

developing equipment to be located and shipped overseas. This was done at a control center near Philadelphia. Also, I was assigned to prepare a table of equipment for a new unit to be sent to Australia to join COL Bob Presnell, who was

assigned to GEN (Douglas) MacArthur. In fact, I was in charge of that unit even though there were officers of higher rank. My job was to assure the delivery of my 70 crates to Brisbane and safeguard from confiscation enroute.

In Australia, I was assigned to select a motion picture processing laboratory to process all motion picture footage from our unit. In Sydney, I selected a lab called Cinesound, where I found they were not washing the film properly after the hypo and I had to procure Revers Lendlease Funds for additional tanks for that lab. Under COL Bob Presnell, we produced a 28-minute film of the action in New Britain, titled *The Battle for New Britain* which was used to open the Fifth War Bond Drive in the United States.

Among the crew that produced this film were Jesse Lasky Jr., the son of one of the founders of the movie industry; Bud Small, son of the famous director; Jack Hively, son of a well-known movie editor; and others.

After approval by MacArthur's Signal General, Stanley Akin, Presnell took the negative to Hollywood to prepare for release to the theatres. This film was re-released with the same title but with added footage from the Air Force and Navy. It was re-edited on videotape and released on TV. The credits on the tape were only for the people involved with the video tape and there was no mention of Presnell, Lasky, and Hively.

While in Sydney we had the good fortune of meeting a number of (significant) people. The first was Neal Ackland who had a job representing in Australia the American movie film producers and who was most helpful in advising us on the best ways to get cooperation from the local companies and government officials. I met Neal in New York when he was on a trip to meet the movie producers. I met him again about 30 years later when HBO (Home Box Office) sent me to Australia during the production of *All Rivers Run*. Neal was in contact

of the Army in Washington.

Every two weeks I would alternate with a colonel delivering the completed films to Washington for final approval. While at SCPC, I met a number of friends from

with Cecelia Presnell, COL Bob's wife. From her I learned a year or so later that Neal had died.

Another local contact was American Consul Palmer and his wife, Eno, who had a great recipe for a party drink which was served to me on a very hot Christmas Eve: one quart of vanilla ice cream and one quart of gin.

With that job done I was sent to Port Morsby in New Guinea and then to Finchhaven on the north coast. While there I took a still cameraman to Arawe at the south end of New Britain, (which was) recently captured from the Japanese. The Signal officer there sent us immediately by small boat north to Gasmata where the Japanese had built an airfield and now had just retreated towards Rabaul at the northern end of the island. On arrival at Gasmata at dusk we found an Army unit reclaiming Japanese anti-aircraft guns and leaving at once. A coded radio message was received at that moment addressed to me ordering me back to Finchhaven.

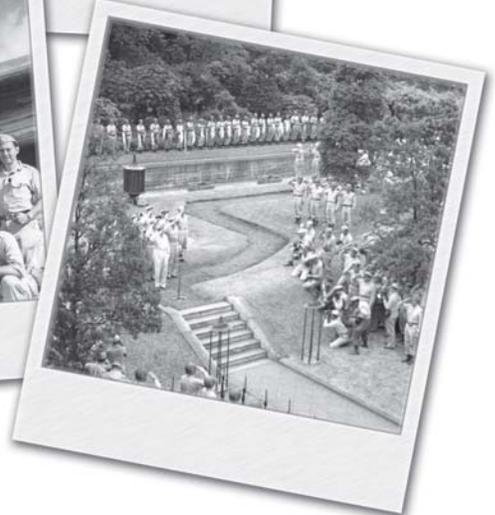
By coded reply I requested to be picked up by a PT (Patrol Torpedo) boat which I knew were making nightly raids on Rabaul. I needed one day to complete the picture assignment and then asked to be picked up the following morning. At the time I expected the PT boat I found we could not launch our own small craft because of low tide. Using "pidgin" English, I got the services of some natives in a dugout canoe. When, after hours of waiting in the open water, the PT boat did not come, we returned ashore and found we could now launch our own boat. We rode back toward Arawe, arriving at the large fuel tank for the PT boats late that day.

The next morning we heard the arrival of the PT boat we had expected the day before. The commander of the PT boat called out my name and explained that Rabaul no longer had targets for PT torpedoes and so they had not run the day before. The commander was most courteous showing me the very powerful twin engines that moved

the PT boat with great speed and speaking in a very broad Boston accent he offered me a meal in his tiny galley. (Since then) I have forgotten his name.

Arriving at Finchhaven, I was told to attend a meeting with LTG (Walter) Krueger at which he outlined the landing order for all photographers and newsmen for the next assault on Hollandia, about 100 miles west. This was to be a leapfrog operation bypassing Aitape which was known to contain many Japanese soldiers.

Hollandia was not strongly defended and our landing was easy under the heavy bombardment from our Navy. However, after two days unloading tanks, fuel, ammo, and all other supplies, the Japanese sent one small plane at night and dropped a stick of their bombs right onto our fuel and ammo. The result was a "Fourth of July" explosion and fire for two days on the beach. Fortunately, I had moved my unit off the beach the afternoon before. We then set off following the infantry moving inland until we were stopped by a continuous barrage from the enemy who fired air-bursting shells ahead of us. It was late in the day when we were stopped by that barrage. Everyone watched the show but to get a better view I climbed up on one of our DUKWs (WWII six-wheeled amphibious trucks, commonly known as "Ducks"). Then the Japanese changed the timing on their fuses and shells burst right over us.



Since I was exposed and heard the whizzing of a shell fragment, I started to get down from the deck of the DUKW which was about 8' off the ground. In doing so, I put out my hand and touched the hot fragment burning my hand slightly. I still have that fragment. The next day we advanced by DUKWs on Lake Santini, thus avoiding the road where we were halted the day before.

The DUKWs landed us at a dirt road leading to the airstrips. On the ground were many aluminum curved strips with larger lumps at each end. These were about 3" long. The infantrymen, seeing these, called out, "Mines!" (then) left the road, and struggled in the swamp bordering the road. I had been told that these aluminum strips came off our own anti-personnel bombs. I took my crew with me along the road, not entirely trusting my information, and avoided stepping on or near the aluminum strips.

With no resistance we reached

the small airfields built by the enemy. The ground was full of holes caused by our bombs dropped in advance of our landing. Until the arrival of machines our troops filled in the holes with entrenching tools. A few days later, after we settled at the airfield, someone again came shouting, "The area was mined!" I went to look with the man who brought the alarm and saw that these again were the aluminum strips just lying on the surface. I took my knife and slowly slid it under the strip to make certain it was not being used as a booby trap. When my knife met no resistance, not being attached to a buried bomb, I picked up the aluminum strip and tossed it away.

The people watching scattered and then later remarked that I was involved in the most dangerous service, bomb disposal. Little did they know that I was just a photographer. Our unit spent two weeks taking movies and still pictures by which time our own planes could land and I arranged to fly my men back to Finchhaven.

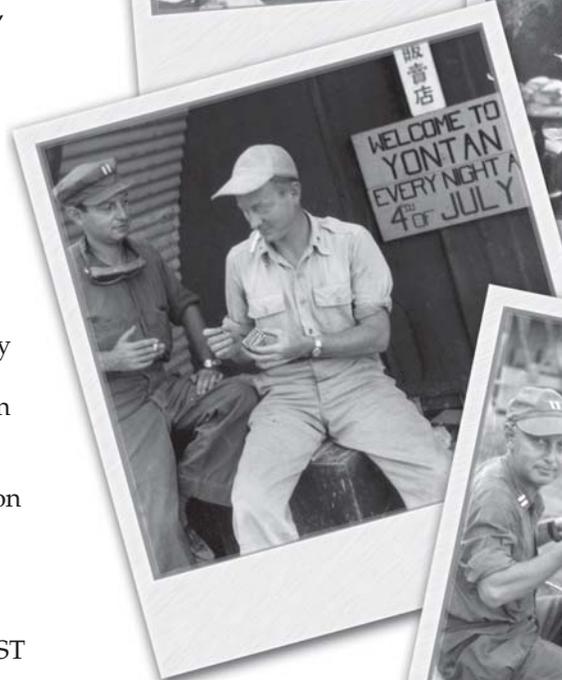
There I learned that Lenny Fields, an old family friend, was on a landing ship tank as chief petty officer. His LST was one of the many supplying us at Hollandia. We had a fine reunion and I arranged the film showing on his LST of the movie that had just been completed in Sydney called *The Battle for New Britain*, the subject of this film having involved Lenny's LST only a few months earlier. The film print was made from a dupe 16mm negative made from the work print, since COL Bob Presnell had taken the 35mm negative to the states.

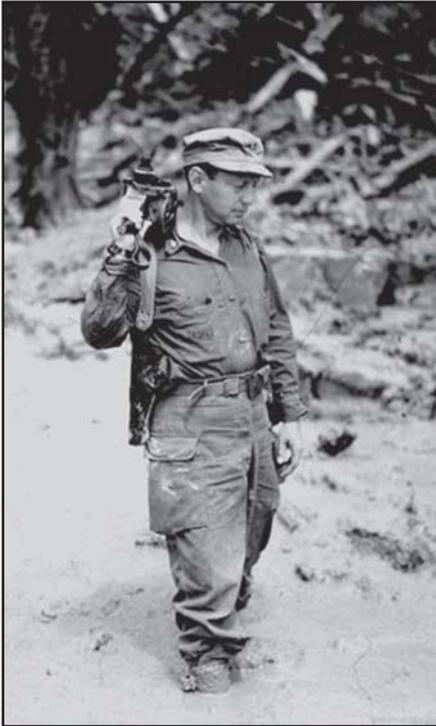
I was then ordered back to Sydney to organize a production unit to produce a newsreel for MacArthur's troops to be sent to the fronts every two weeks. I hired civilian film workers to assist the Army Signal Corps to develop, edit, narrate, and record sound for this project. I needed a standard opening sound fanfare to head each bi-monthly edition. I obtained the

services of a Soldier in Special Forces who was a graduate of Juilliard. He composed the fanfare with parts for all the instruments for the Sydney Symphony which I hired to record the piece. His name was Di Cong Lee.

After the second newsreel was finished, I had orders to fly to Honolulu to join Frank Capra who was planning a major film covering the Central Pacific action. By that time we had new personnel from the States. COL Presnell, who also was assigned to the Capra unit, and I laid out the disposition of our several

units and went to the Navy for assignment of these units to various ships. As Bob was outlining our plan the rear admiral he was talking to suddenly shouted, "You don't tell us, we tell you!" The several units went to sea presumably headed for the island of Truk. While (We were) enroute, the General Staff in Washington turned over the whole operation to MacArthur for his landing on Leyte in the Philippines.





**Peter Keane standing in the mud with a camera. Photo taken in New Guinea circa 1942.**

At that news, Bob asked me to drive him to Pearl Harbor for a meeting with Admiral Chester W. Nimitz. I waited outside the Nimitz office and when Bob came out he quoted Nimitz's response: "What's the matter, son? Did they pull out the war from under you?"

With Capra's project eliminated, he returned to the states and I was given the task of making a film for the local Army general since the negatives of actions under the Honolulu general were already at the Signal Corps Photo Lab in Long Island City. I took a large relief map of the island of Anguar and much written material back to New York to produce a film eventually titled *Action on Anguar*.

When it was completed I took the print back to Honolulu for GEN Richardson. The next month was spent organizing another special unit, which included captains: Charles Kaufman, Len Hammon, Cullen Landis, Lieutenants: Wilfred Zogbaum, Bill Galloway, and SGT Burt Reinhardt, who many years later became president of CNN

(Cable News Network) in Atlanta.

While I was finishing the production of *Action on Anguar*, COL Barrett, commanding officer of the SCPC, remembered that more than a year before he had proposed me for promotion to captain which was not approved only because of the standing rule that anyone on orders to another unit cannot be promoted. Now that I was back under his command he immediately prepared the papers for my promotion.

However, by the time those papers got to Washington I had completed *Anguar* and was on orders to present the film to GEN Richardson in Honolulu. COL Barrett then gave me orders to go to Washington and present "my case" to GEN Lyman Munson the CO of the Photo Division of the Signal Corps. In Washington, GEN Munson reviewed the fact that there were already three captains in Honolulu assigned to this new unit although the unit was designed for only one captain. At that point I called to his attention that CPT Kaufman was a professional Hollywood script writer and not best used at the front in combat photography. The same for CPT Len Hammon, and the general agreed they should be brought back to the states.

GEN Munson thought that CPT Landis seemed right for the job until I pointed out that Cullen was an old silent movie film star and was at least 10 years older than the general. Some time later Cullen also was recalled.

This time I was given sound recording equipment as well as professional movie cameras. The unit was most unusual: six specialist enlisted men and eight officers who were trained as directors, writers, and sound recording specialists. In the middle of April, 1945, we landed on Okinawa. We spent over four months shooting scenes for rough scripts on a variety of subjects. The films were to be used in the states to make completed movies.

On Okinawa there were nightly kamikaze raids including having our camp strafed by low-flying enemy

planes. Bill Galloway, who was my executive officer, was reading a book in our light-proof tent and somehow turned the gas refill cap instead of turning off the light. The escaping gas under pressure blew up the tent. The ball of flame caught the attention of a Japanese plane who dipped down and strafed where the tent had been. The plane was flying from my right to my left and only his right wing gun was firing. I could clearly see bullets hitting the ground in front of me. When the tent blew up Bill ran out as I was running toward him. I kicked his legs out from under him throwing him to the ground, and rolled him in the dirt to put out his burning clothes. I then had Bill evacuated to a hospital on another island. He returned a few weeks later, all recovered.

At one point on Okinawa we ran low on photographic supplies. I learned that the Navy had a freighter anchored off our island as a supply ship. I got orders to obtain what we needed and took a small boat out to the supply ship. After selecting what we needed, I was invited to spend the night on board. I was given my first decent meal in weeks, a hot shower, and a comfortable bunk. I also was told that should an alert occur I was to move to a position underneath the raised forward gun platform.

At dawn the next morning an alarm was given. I dressed and ran to my assigned post. Within a few minutes, a single enemy plane came toward us and all the guns on all the nearby ships started firing. The plane kept coming straight toward our ship but then turned, looking for a better target. As the plane passed to our right the ships to our left kept firing with their shells almost going through our rigging. Finally, the plane was hit and went down into the water. As the gun above me was in action, the hot shell casings were dropped around my feet, something that really kept me dancing.

My unit also was supplied with a movie projector and except during raids, we ran a theatre for all the nearby troops showing entertain-

ment films from Hollywood.

After a few weeks I received a wire from the Office of the Chief Signal Officer in the Pentagon promoting me to captain. I had two previous promotions that were cancelled each time I was ordered to move to a new theatre of operations, first when I was ordered to Australia and then when I was ordered back to Honolulu after completing *Action on Anguar*.

On Aug. 11, 1945, our Signal Corps monitoring station heard on Japanese radio the first information concerning the proposed surrender. The next day, a small Japanese plane landed on Kadena Yonton airfield and a tall Japanese officer carrying a bouquet of flowers approached one of our officers who was expecting the arrival. Our officer accepted the flowers, threw them to the ground, and then directed the Japanese officer to one of our larger planes to fly the officer to the Philippines to meet with GEN MacArthur. I believe that the actual surrender took place on the 14th (*Editor's Note: Aug. 14, 1945, Allies received the message from Japan accepting terms of surrender*).

President (Harry S.) Truman sent a team of professional movietone cameramen to Okinawa to prepare for the signing of the formal surrender to take place on the battleship *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay (Sept. 2, 1945). I sent several of my crew with the new team by plane to Yokohama airfield. Then I signed off a number of heavy motor units and a generator before I could move the rest of my unit up to Japan on Sept. 4. There I did an on-camera interview with pictures and sound of Iva Tergay, the infamous Tokyo Rose.

After a few weeks I arranged to move my unit down to Nara. There I made up our photo assignments, forwarding the exposed film to the states (for processing). The local police assigned an interpreter to our unit. He was an older gentleman whose English was perfect, and in fact, he had graduated from Harvard, class of 1922. At first the local police housed us in the best hotel but soon

the arrival of generals to this historic city moved us out. We were relocated to a real Japanese inn where we were required to remove our heavy Army boots before entering. My supply sergeant however, arranged exchanging food to have all of our meals at the main hotel.

The people at the inn were most friendly, perhaps because I insisted that every one of us respect the property of the inn. I have pictures of the inn and my room there. At one point I was interviewed by a reporter from an Osaka newspaper. We sat Japanese style on our folded legs around a fine low table. I wanted to keep up the position as I answered his questions, but after about 20 minutes I gave up the pretense, rolled off my legs, and that concluded the interview. When I finally left Nara the inn owners gave me a sake serving bottle and a set of tiny porcelain cups and saucers.

We were in Nara for about three months when I received orders to return to the states for separation from the military. I had been overseas a year longer than any of the others in my unit and had acquired many more discharge points. I was able to be home in time for Christmas 1945.

In all, I spent two years in the Pacific area starting in Australia, then New Guinea, New Britain, Honolulu, several of the islands, Ulithii, Guadalcanal, Johnson, Guam, though

*Mr. Keane is a World War II Signal Corps veteran. He was born and raised in New York City. Photography has been his life-long interest. After graduation from high school he went on to Cornell where he graduated with a degree in Ornithology.*

*He worked for a short time as Margaret Bourke-White's lab assistant in her studio in the Chrysler Building. He worked as a still photographer in New York city before going to Hollywood*

*where he worked as an assistant cameraman at Technicolor on several films including *Gone with the Wind*, *Wizard of Oz*, and *Robin Hood* (with Errol Flynn). When the United States entered World War II, Peter received a direct commission and was assigned to the U.S. Army Signal Corps. After the war, he returned to NYC where he worked as a still photographer again. For several years, he worked for a series of companies in Hollywood and NYC. Eventually, he joined the fledgling Home Box Office and retired from HBO as director of tape quality control.*

some of these for only a short time. I am sure that Hollandia was the place where a special mosquito bit me. All of us took daily doses of Atabrine to ward off malaria and it worked as long as we continued taking the medicine. However, when I was transferred to Honolulu I was told that I could quit taking Atabrine. Just six weeks later I came down with a full blown case of malaria and was hospitalized at Kam Hospital which had been converted from a private boy's school in the hills above Honolulu. I was given Atabrine after discharge from the hospital but again quit taking it when I returned to the states to make *Action on Anguar*. Again, about six weeks later I found myself back at Kam Hospital. At my discharge from the hospital I was given a very large supply of Atabrine which lasted through Okinawa and when I returned to the states for actual separation from the Army. The malaria has never returned but I was ordered never to participate in a blood donor drive.

#### ACRONYM QUICKSCAN

DUKW ("Ducks") – WWII six - wheeled amphibious vehicle  
LST – landing ship tank  
NYC – New York City  
PT – Patrol Torpedo  
SCPC – Signal Corps Photo Center



**Peter Keane with his wife, Elizabeth.**