

HOW I GOT STARTED ...

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After completing basic training at Fort Ord, California and Fort Sill, Oklahoma, I arrived in Baumholder, Germany, (southwest of Frankfurt) in late 1954, with an Argus C-3 which I had picked up at the Fort Ord PX. My father had bought a C-3 around 1948, so I suppose it was natural for me to get one.

I had expected to be assigned to a fire direction control center in a 280mm self-propelled artillery battalion, because I had trained in this specialty at Fort Sill. But the army decided they needed medics more, so instead I was assigned to the medical detachment of the 868th Field Artillery Battalion.

I had never trained to be a medic, but I was sent to supply school in Southern Germany to learn to keep the property books and order supplies. We all helped with sick call and had to stand CQ. By the time I left in early 1957, I was the detachment sergeant.

The detachment commanding officer was a young doctor who believed in being one of the "boys", and he was an amateur photographer. I didn't know much about cameras then, and when I decided to buy one he convinced me to buy an Exakta rather than a Leica or some other camera, mostly because the Exakta was an slr.

At the time, or at least in our little circle, Exaktas were the only slr considered, although there must have been others. We figured it would be easier to take action shots with an slr, and we often had the opportunity since we had to send two men and an ambulance with a battery when they went out to fire on the range. We liked to "catch" the round on film. The round was a good size, weighing 500 pounds and standing close to three feet high. You could stop it at 1/300, about as fast as we could shoot and still use Kodachrome.

I still have my original VX-Varex (version 2) #754741, which I bought with a waist-level finder, a prism (no serial number, only "Germany" on the front), and Meyer Primoplan 58mm f1.9 preset lens #1446697. The whole package cost 800 marks, or \$200 -- which was two months' pay for a PEC! At the time, I couldn't afford a better lens, but the dealer assured me that the Primoplan would do as good a job as most other standard lenses.

He was right, incidentally. I liked the Meyer then and I still like it even after using other lenses considered to be better.

My Exakta had to be purchased outside the PX because it came from East Germany. No doubt it would have been cheaper if I could have gotten it at the PX. Most of the soldiers I knew then bought their cameras at the PX, which sold Voigtlander, Contax, Kodak Retina, and others. A few of them bought Leicas, but I knew no one else with an Exakta.

I can't remember much about the shop in Baumholder where I bought my Exakta, other than that they carried a pretty good variety of German-made cameras, especially Leicas and Rollei TLRs. I don't recall that there was a lot of other Exakta equipment, but I later purchased a couple of sets of extension tubes and a Novoflex bellows with a Noflexar 105mm bellows lens. I still have all these things.

We used to shoot a lot of black and white film when we were close to home and fooling around with closeups, using tubes and bellows. We used to go to Idar-Oberstein (about 70 kilometers southwest of Frankfurt), which was about 20 kilometers away, because there was a church, dating from the 1100s, built in a

cave in a high cliff above the town. It was well lit at night, so we'd get on the other side of town and take time exposures.

For scenery we generally took slide film, especially on vacations and weekends when we could get out. I took my Exakta over most of Germany, as well as to parts of France, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Spain, and a couple of the principalities. I still like to get out my old slides once in a while.

I had used the Exakta a lot in the service, but after getting out I used it less, probably not more than 10 rolls a year most of the time. I take a lot more now, what with my renewed interest in photography and an occasional new Exakta to try out.

About three years ago I bought a late VXIIa at a motorcycle swap meet, along with a few photo magazines, which led to more Exaktas and some telephoto lenses I had always wanted. The book Exakta Cameras 1933-1978 was also very interesting, and quite an eye-opener. Before I knew what was happening, I was collecting Exaktas as well as using them.

At about the same time, I noticed that the cocking lever on my original Exakta had become slow to return and even needed help. Also, the film counter was sticky and not keeping up. I had it fixed, but I should have waited until I knew more about who could fix one right.

It also survived about an eight foot fall onto a linoleum floor when one of my boys pulled it off a shelf, denting the filter ring on the lens. But it still worked as well as ever.

I have never had a desire to own another brand of 35mm camera. I suppose it would be easy enough to get used to a more modern camera with metering and the works. Even using an Exakta prism meter is quite an improvement over a hand-held meter, though hardly automatic.

But I like the looks, feel, and heft of the left-handed monsters I have, even to the fact that not all lenses and prisms will fit all bodies. Some of the auto lenses won't work on some bodies, especially in the manual mode.

And it's nice to have at least one or two cameras and some of the smaller old lenses. Then I don't mind throwing them in the saddlebags of my Harley and going riding and picture taking. Doesn't seem to hurt them, but I wouldn't try doing that to some of these new electronic bodies.

So ... long live Exaktas!