

# War re-enacting with an Exakta (and other cameras)

By Daniel Delcroix

Re-enacting may have several purposes: remember the way our parents and grand-parents lived, honour men and women who passed through such tough events, teach history to children, perform shows, meet very different people, make friends, recreate accurately an era...



USARG, our re-enactment association, ranges from Napoleon to nowadays. We re-enact in three main circumstances: exhibition of equipment and uniforms in military camps for educational purposes, ceremonies and shows with battle. We never re-enact battles of some periods as Indochina, Algeria, Lebanon. People of every country may re-anact in every

army and period: Russians or British as Napoleans, British as Germans, French as Americans etc.. German WWII re-enactments have to follow different laws according to the country where we re-enact. The War and Peace show, in Kent, England, is Europe's - or maybe the world's - greatest military re-enactment show.

Re-enacting as a photographer is the chance to use old cameras, in the matching period, in the way people did and feel issues photographers had then to deal with. It's also the chance to be appreciated by people taken in picture with oldies, rather than be laughed at by friends and family, as during my last vacation, when I only took pictures with a complete Varex set: Angénieux R11 3,5/28mm (N°303651), Steinheil Culminar 2.8/85mm (Nr1008408) and (red)T Tessar 2,8/5cm (Nr3655320). These lenses are very nice ; but I was disappointed by the Enna (red)C Super-Lithagon 2,5/35mm (Nr2193244) and Schneider-Kreuznach 3,5/135mm (Nr2806846).



When I began re-enacting, I

had very little information and very few pictures of war photographers. I was mistakenly mixing civilian war correspondent, military correspondent and military photographer patches on the same uniform. Later, I met French, English, Italian and Belgian photographer re-enactors and visited several photographer re-enactor websites from England, the Netherlands, Poland, USA, Australia... and we shared information. Now, I'm far more accurate with equipment and uniforms.



I found my first Varex in an auction. It was far before the internet era. I didn't know anything about Exakta except they made the first 24x36 single lens reflex camera. Later, thanks to the internet, I got more information about Exakta history and models, first thanks to "captain Jack" then to [exakta.org](http://exakta.org) to whom I wrote. Hugo Ruys answered me and got me in touch with Jacques

Dalbera, who got me in touch with Raymond Nicolas. Raymond repaired my Varex using a VX IIa mechanism. When sending the camera back to me, he wrote "I would never do this again!" That is why this camera is so dear to me. I'm now a friend of Marc, Raymond's son, who repairs my Leicas. Although a Kine-Exakta would be historically the good choice, I use a Varex in WWII re-enactment for safety reasons: if damaged in action, I could change the waist level viewfinder, on which I took off the magnifier chrome hood for historical appearance.

In WWII re-enactment, my four favourite cameras are Leica IIIa, Contax II, Exakta and, for special "still" events as ceremonies, the Graflex Anniversary 4x5" camera (which was the WWII official US army camera, named PH-47E in US Army),

When re-enacting in a show, I always use original silver-based roll films which are scanned after processing. As a war correspondent re-enactor, I use two Contaxes, just as Robert Capa did. As a US or British military official war photographer re-enactor, I use two or three Leicas II or III, as commonly done at the era. In both situations, I carry my Exakta in a small bag, always ready for extra shots. When re-enactors are mixed into the public (i.e. "liberation" of a city), I use a digital camera hidden in a 4x5" Speed Graphic or in a Contax III (don't panic,





they were wrecks beyond repair), depending on whether I'm re-enacting an army photographer or a civilian war correspondent. In rainy conditions, I use Russian Leica and Contax copies of bodies and lenses. In cold weather (battle of the bulge) I use Russian copies but genuine lenses. I never use my Exakta in bad weather condition!



When using 30's cameras for fast action pictures, it gets quickly obvious to you that Leicas and Contaxes are far more convenient than Exaktas, and even more than 4x5" cameras. You immediately understand why WWII photographers were very interested in "borrowing" a German officer's Leica as soon as possible.

About using the Exakta: the waist level viewfinder, supposed to be a ideal range-finder, often gets you into a nightmare. In sunshine, you can only see your silhouette outlined in the sky. In cloudy weather, you can't focus at all (a good way to understand why Exakta later put a cover on the magnifier...) For accurate focus, you must use the magnifier, that is leaning your head downwards to keep your eye close on the viewfinder, which delivers a reversed picture. Doing that, you're totally cut from what's going on around you and it's absolutely impossible to take

pictures of moving targets although, for show purposes, the photographer has to walk, run and crawl along with soldiers supposed to be under enemy fire (a good way to understand why the actual success of 24x36 reflex cameras began with the penta prism...). The only way the Exakta camera is usable for action pictures is to use it with the sport viewfinder. And I haven't yet spoken of the non preset aperture...

I tried, in re-enactment situation, my "Kine-ized" Varex fitted with several pre-war lenses.

-Any standard non-preset aperture 5cm lens is less convenient, as told before, compared with any 5cm lens fitted on a Leica or a Contax.

-A longer focal lens, compared to a rangefinder camera, could have interesting features as focusing and centring more accurately. Unfortunately, pre-war long focal lenses weren't fast enough to allow focus their dark image through the viewfinder. The most terrible situation you can imagine is having to take a picture of a moving target, even without moving yourself, in a portrait format, with a long focus lens, through a reversed waist level viewfinder without any pre-set aperture. I discovered that with my Meyer Görlitz Telemegor (Nr 989573), which has neither sharpness nor contrast at full aperture. It only gives acceptable results in sunny weather, a few steps closed down.

-The last remaining focal length I tried is a wide angle. As Mr Pierre Angénieux didn't create the retrofocus formula until the early 50's, the shortest pre-war available focal length lens was 4cm. The Tessar 4.5 aperture doesn't allow, as previously told, to focus on the focusing screen. So, in re-enactment action, I only use my Varex fitted with a 4,5/4cm Tessar on a pre-set aperture allowing enough depth of field, using the sport viewfinder, or just taking the camera in one hand and shooting to an approximate direction with an approximate angle. Another interesting way I couldn't try because my Varex's delayed action doesn't work, would be to take pictures with the camera fitted with a wide-angle lens, held on a monopod above a scenery : You then totally lean on fate for centring and decisive moment, but it could give an original point of view... I've got two Tessars 4,5/4cm: a 1940 uncoated one (Nr2658815) which is quite good for sunny pictures but lacks contrast and is slightly less sharp than a pre-war uncoated Elmar 3,5/35mm, and a 50's (red)T coated one (Nr3313932) which is pretty good even in the shade. I use them without any hood as the front lens is very far back from the front ring of the lens.



*please visit my website <<http://djdwarphot.free.fr>>  
military cameras sites <<http://graflex.coffsbiz.com/index.html>><<http://www.warfoto.com/>>  
biography of US official war correspondent  
<[http://www.508pir.org/nott\\_notes/weiner\\_ra.htm](http://www.508pir.org/nott_notes/weiner_ra.htm)>*