# Filming the Fight: An Interview with L. Bennett Fenberg

*By Steven Fenberg*

*Steven Fenberg interviewing Elby Fenberg*

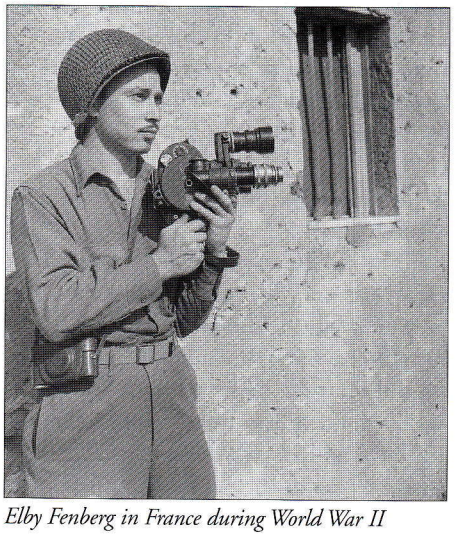
*L. Bennett (Elby) Fenberg is one of many unknown World War II heroes living among us in Houston, Texas. He captured on film one of the most iconic and enduring images of World War II and with other members of the Signal Corps recorded and preserved visual images of a momentous and pivotal period in history. Immediately after the war, Mr. Fenberg moved from Detroit and joined the great migration to Houston. Steven Fenberg sat down with his Uncle Elby in November 2004 to listen to more stories about the war and his family's move to Houston.*

*Steven Fenberg: To begin, tell me a little about your life in Detroit.*
Elby Fenberg: I was born in Detroit in 1919. My father was one of the original owners of the Colonial Department Store in downtown Detroit. He died in 1933 while I was still in high school. My mother died in 1928, and my Aunt Eleanor and Uncle Ben essentially adopted me, my brother Morton, and my sister Shirley after my dad died. Uncle Ben, who was my father's brother, also took over management of the department store.

*SF: You grew up in Detroit, attended Wayne University (now Wayne State University) and established a camera club there. Were you hoping to use your camera skills when you enlisted?*
EF: One week after Pearl Harbor, Morton—your father—and I went at the same time to enlist. I had had surgery on my ankle for a tumor and the Army turned me down. They took Morton, who was in one year before I was. I rode with him when he went out west, and he dropped me off in Los Angeles. I had seen an article in *Popular Photography* magazine asking for Army photographers. So I went to Paramount Studios where they were doing the interviews and they were amazed that I would come all the way from Detroit just to try to get in. I was accepted by the studio, but when they sent me to the Army for a physical, I got turned down again. But the people at the studio who had interviewed me gave me a letter stating that I should be put into a photographic unit. I took the letter back with me to Detroit and it was shortly after that that I was drafted and accepted.

I was put in the Signal Corps of the Army and was sent first to California for basic training, then to the old Paramount Studios in New York City where I took my motion picture training. From there our company, the 163rd Signal Corps, was sent overseas. We went first to Africa where we stayed one month and then to Italy, which is where I started my actual photo work. I was considered a combat motion picture cameraman. We worked in teams of three: a motion picture photographer, a still photographer, and a driver of a jeep. Everything was left up to the photographers as to what we photographed.

You have to remember that they did not know what a photographer should do or how he should work, because this had never been done before on such a scale. For instance, we were issued tripods that stood about 5½ feet high. We couldn't carry those ourselves. So, we put them in the jeep and they stayed there. We were issued rifles. We couldn't carry a 15-pound motion picture camera, 7 or 8 100-foot rolls of film, and a rifle. We also had to carry a gas mask and a canteen. So we put the rifles in the jeep and they stayed there with the tripods. I picked up a pistol finally but I never shot it. They didn't tell us what to photograph because they themselves did not know what would work. In fact, the hotter the area was—I mean in activity—the less there was to see and photograph because people don't stand



*Elby Fenberg in France during World War II*

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER: Steven Fenberg wrote and was executive producer of the Emmy award-winning PBS documentary *Brother, Can You Spare a Billion? The Story of Jesse H. Jones*. He currently is community affairs officer at Houston Endowment Inc.


*As an official war photographer, Fenberg (left) and forty other photographers from the 163rd Signal Corps traveled across Europe documenting the war.*

up when they are being shot at. They lay down or they're in foxholes. And we couldn't stand up and take pictures because we'd attract enemy fire. Even so, we lost 8 fellows in our outfit and many more were wounded.

*SF: How many people served in your outfit?*
EF: There were about 40 photographers but about 200 people all together in the 163rd. There were lab men, clerks, mechanics, drivers, cooks. The lab mainly did nothing but process film. Other men made enlargements. Others wired the photos back to the United States, and they often appeared in the papers the next day. We had no facility for developing motion pictures, and the film had to be sent by air to the United States, where it was processed and released for newsreels. I didn't see any of my motion pictures for almost 1½ years. We'd get critiques that said if our exposures were good or if we shook the camera. We couldn't use exposure meters because we didn't have time. We were trained not to use them, so we were always relieved when we found out our exposures were OK.

*SF: How were the films used back in the United States?*
EF: The motion picture photography had three purposes. The main purpose was newsreels, which were produced by Fox Movietone News, Paramount News, and so on and shown in movie theaters. Second was for training. Say I photographed bombing by mortars—those films would be shown to troops back in the States who were learning how to use and protect themselves from mortar fire. The third purpose was propaganda. For instance, I photographed a convoy of jeeps that had just been bombed by airplanes. Tires on the jeeps and parts of the jeeps were still burning when I filmed them. These films were shown back in the States at the factories where tires were produced, where jeeps were produced, and they helped increase production and employee morale. We were told in our critiques how the films were used.

*SF: You made your first films in Italy. How long were you there?*
EF: I was in Italy for about two years. I photographed all the big battles there: San Vittorio, San Pietro, and the Battle of Casino, which was the biggest one. The Germans held a monastery at the top of the mountain and the Allies were at the bottom. That was on the road to Rome. I also photographed the liberation of Rome.

Incidentally, John Huston, the famous director, also filmed the battle of San Pietro. But it was partially what we would call fake. He would go up and poke the back of the cameraman and shake him while he was shooting pictures so it would look like an explosion had just occurred. Well, this was fake photography. It was Hollywood stuff. That is not what we did.

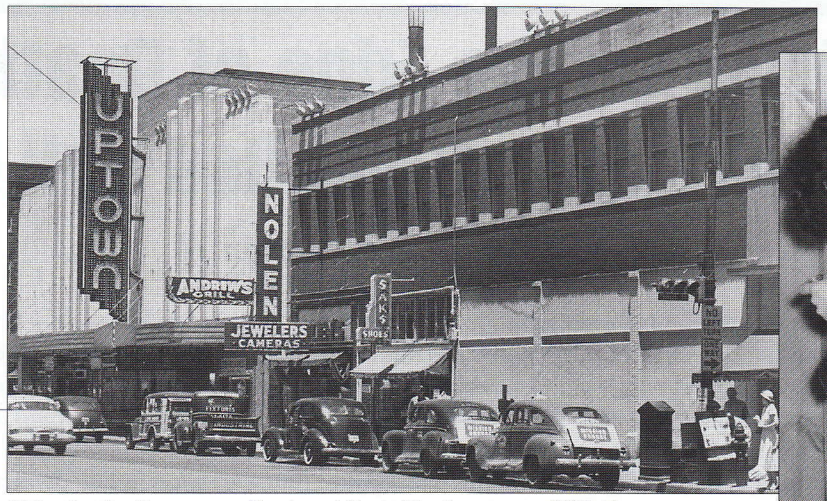
*SF: Where did you go after Italy?*
EF: To France and then Austria, where I photographed the taking of Berchtesgaden and the Eagle's Nest, Hitler's house. I went up with the infantry—they were fighting to win Hitler's house—and when I photographed it, it was burning. From there, I went to Germany.

*SF: That's where you made the film that is seen today in movies and documentaries.*
EF: Yes. Audie Murphy—the most decorated soldier in the war—and two other men were going to receive medals of honor at a ceremony in the Nuremberg Stadium, where Hitler had held all of his big rallies. It was a huge stadium with an enormous swastika above the podium. I was asked to photograph the ceremony. I heard an engineer say that after the ceremony, they were going to blow up the swastika. I said, "Don't do it until I am ready. I want to photograph it." He said, "Okay, you let me know when you are ready."

The swastika was about fifty feet across, stood way up high, and was made of metal. I laid down on the floor of the stadium and had my camera fixed on a tripod that I had the engineers make for me out of a machine gun stand. I pointed my camera up at the swastika, waved to the engineer to tell him I was ready, and they blew it up. I kept my finger pressed on the trigger of the going camera and I had my eyes closed the whole time. The explosion was so huge, a piece of metal about 10 feet long dropped right in front of me. If it had hit me, it would have cut me in half. About a dozen fellows got injured from flying metal. The complete film of the explosion shows metal dropping right in front of my camera, but that's usually edited out when it's shown on films or on TV. When I got back to headquarters, they knew I had been in the area and they wanted to know if anybody had taken pictures. I said, "Yes, I took pictures." Well, they were amazed because they hadn't assigned anyone to photograph it. They did not even know it was going to happen.


*"V-Mail." This Christmas card was sent home in 1943 from Elby Fenberg to his brother Morton.*

I never saw that film until the 163rd had its first reunion in 1951 in Chicago. Remember, we didn't get to see our film after we took it because it was processed back in the U.S. Now I see it frequently. *Judgment at Nuremberg*, starring Spencer Tracy, was just on television. The movie begins and ends with the blowing up of the swastika. I've seen quite a few times in different World War II documentaries the film I took of the bombing of Casino.




*Nolen Jewelry Company, at Travis and Capitol in the two-story Wells Fargo Building, now the site of JP Morgan Chase Tower, Houston's tallest building.*
Courtesy Houston Endowment Inc.

*Elby Fenberg's brother Morton and new bride Lenore try to put the war in the back of their minds while celebrating their wedding in 1943.*

*SF: Are there any other memorable films you'd like to mention?*
EF: While waiting for the road to Rome to open up, I snapped a picture of General Mark Clark with my Roloflex still camera. He had his own photographer who traveled with him all the time. He only allowed photographs of one side of his face. If anybody tried to take a picture of the other side, he'd have a fit. I also photographed the pope coming out on his balcony for the first time after the liberation of Rome.

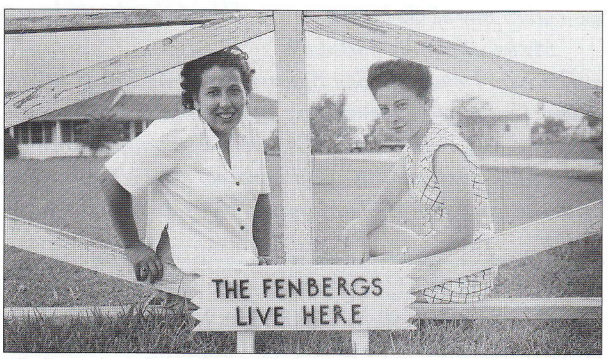
*Mr. Fenberg also filmed the fall of Nuremberg, for which he received a Bronze Star Medal. The award citation read in part, "Technician Third Grade Fenberg voluntarily accompanied an advance patrol of infantry as they attacked the bitterly defended city. In the face of heavy enemy sniper, mortar, and artillery fire, he photographed the complete action of the patrol without regard for personal safety. Upon completion of his mission, Technician Third Grade Fenberg returned alone through areas not yet cleared of the enemy and delivered his film to higher headquarters thereby furnishing the War Department with timely and accurate information of events leading to the fall of the city."*

*SF: You received the Bronze Star on April 18, 1945, shortly before the end of the war. Once the war ended, you were discharged. What happened next?*
EF: I received orders that I was supposed to fly back to the States and at the last minute, there was a big storm and they canceled all flights. I was sent to Marseilles and got on a boat that landed in Boston. I got discharged there and was given travel papers to go to Detroit. In 1944, Uncle Ben had resigned from the Colonial and moved to Houston with his wife, Eleanor, his daughter, Rhoda, and my sister, Shirley. A business colleague of his who had already moved to Houston saw how the city was growing, learned that Felix Nolen was trying to sell his store—Nolen Jewelry—and convinced Uncle Ben to buy it. When your father and I got out of the army everyone had already moved to Houston, so we came here too. Uncle Ben also bought a house that sat on two acres on Post Oak Road, which is now part of the 610 Loop. Their house was near what is now the Evergreen exit.

In 1949 the Colonial Department Store went on the market and Uncle Ben decided to return to Detroit and buy it. He put Morton in charge of the store here and I started a camera department. While I was on a buying trip to Rochester, New York, and Chicago, I went back to Detroit and married my girlfriend, Marilyn. We've been in Houston ever since.

*Like so many who arrived in the area during and immediately after World War II, the three Fenberg siblings—Elby, Morton, and Shirley—prospered in Houston. Morton Fenberg turned Nolen Jewelry Co. into a statewide chain and established subsidiary wholesale operations. His wife Lenore, who he married during World War II before going overseas, worked with him in the business and became an active community volunteer. Shirley Fenberg, who earned national renown as a Jewish educator, married Marvin Barish in Eleanor and Bennett's Post Oak Road home. Marvin, who worked in the family business for a period of time, went on to develop Chair King from one small store into a successful chain of furniture stores. Elby Fenberg, who continues to enjoy photography, remained with Nolens until it was sold in 1992. For quite some time, Elby and Marilyn worked together at Nolens on University Boulevard, where the store was known for its personal service and its wide selection of charms when the bracelets were popular in the 1950s and 60s. Between them, the three couples raised eight children, who all grew up in Bellaire not far from their original family home.*

*Until a few years ago, the 163rd held well-attended and greatly anticipated reunions every two years. When asked why they no longer meet, Mr. Fenberg said, "There just aren't enough of us anymore." When asked about his contributions during World War II, he quietly and justifiably said, "I feel I made my mark in history."* ★




*Rhoda Fenberg (Krauss) and Shirley Fenberg (Barish) at the Fenberg family home on Post Oak Road, which is now 610 Loop near Evergreen.*