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Combat ready

(Davie E. Scherman)

Indelible images, unforgettable man

By Howard Rosenberg

Here's the obvious: Robert Capa, an admired war photographer and man about town whose beautiful lovers included actress Ingrid Bergman, is a movie begging to be made.

Fame always fit his thick-browed, swarthy good looks and his adventures as a journalist. His courage, talent, passion, fame, glamour and romances offer a titillating package: Ernie Pyle with testosterone and double the wattage.

Hollywood, where have you been?

More significantly, a PBS documentary on Capa and his nearly 20 years of memorable combat photography -- from the Spanish Civil War to Indochina where he died in 1954 -- says nearly as much about the culture of today's TV as about the timeless still photojournalism it salutes.

This subtext is unspoken and surely unintended. Nonetheless, Anne Makepeace's fascinating film, "Robert Capa: In Love and War," which airs Wednesday night, is a fierce counterpoint to modern TV's readiness to prematurely confer greatness, most notably when anointing its own.

"Unforgettable images," CNN boasts daily in a promo featuring its Iraq footage. Oh, sure. Most unforgettable is the self-serving hype.

Capa's own long, historic body of work includes one of the most famous war photos: a loyalist soldier falling in Spain in 1936, his rifle slipping from his hand a millisecond after he's fatally pierced by a bullet.

And Capa's pictures of the first wave of Allied troops being cut to pieces on Normandy's Omaha Beach, June 6, 1944 -- chaotic images likely gorier than ones U.S. networks withheld during the war in Iraq supposedly because Americans couldn't handle them -- inspired the opening sequence of Steven Spielberg's "Saving Private Ryan."

Capa's life was brief, but his résumé was thick, rich and enduring. Today, a TV quickie atop a tank in the desert, and you're a champ.

This instant adulation fulfills a lust in media-quickenened times when hitting the accelerator is instinctive, pausing abnormal and pit stops to reflect are more and more infrequent. We're an impatient public, from Monterey to Maine. We want our American Idols, from former POW Jessica Lynch to teenage cager LeBron James to song-belting Ruben Studdard.

And we want them fast.

Capa rose swiftly, too, but with cause. He was just 25 when a newspaper declared him "the greatest war photographer in the world." If not the greatest, surely talented and among the most colorful.

The subject of this "American Masters" film evolved circuitously and highly unusually. "Robert Capa was born in Paris at the age of 22," we hear about this Hungarian who got famous only after inventing a new identity for himself in the mid-'30s. Endre Friedmann was born in Budapest to Jewish parents. To impress editors, biographer Richard Whelan explains here, Friedmann fabricated a successful American photographer called Robert Capa, someone who supposedly was so busy that no one could reach him because he was always off on assignment. Friedmann submitted work as this faux person, and it was accepted. When the ruse was discovered, Friedmann and Capa officially merged.

"In Love and War" muses that the photographer may have been thinking of director Frank Capra when choosing Capa as a name, and that his striking companion and collaborator, the apparent love of his life with whom he shared a flat near the Eiffel Tower in the mid-1930s, possibly had Greta Garbo in mind when she began calling herself Gerda Taro.

As alluring as his story and photographs are, Capa here is not quite a fully formed figure behind the Leica, as if a light had been turned on in the darkroom and the negative ruined just as he was taking shape. Yet this is a beautifully organized film that evokes history fluidly through seamless re-enactments, wonderful old newsreel footage (who were *those* shooters?) and testimony from such Capa intimates as the great Henri Cartier-Bresson, with whom he and others founded the Magnum Photos agency in 1947.

Capa's indelible photos occupy center stage, though.

Many show the impact of war on ordinary people, affirming that a suffering face, not just any picture, is worth a thousand words when memorializing the human wreckage.

Capa taught Gerda how to take pictures, and they worked as a team in Spain during the civil war, also shooting newsreel pictures for "The March of Time." It was a journalistic cause they were willing to die for, we hear. And Gerda did. She was 25 when crushed by a tank during a battle just west of Madrid, making photos of her, including one of her putting on her stockings in Paris, seem all the more poignant.

Survival one moment and death the next, Gerda's fate was part of the crap shoot of war that Capa sought to capture. On the screen is Capa's World War II picture of an American gunner on an apartment balcony in Leipzig, pumping rounds at German snipers. The next photo shows the same young soldier, this time on the floor of the balcony, dead. Would that have earned time in a U.S. newscast in 2003? Too gruesome.

Capa spent seven months with U.S. troops driving through Italy, and was with Gen. George S. Patton in Sicily when Palermo fell. We hear the photographer was well liked by U.S. troops, and that he parachuted into Germany's Rhine Valley with 17,000 of them, more than a third of whom died there.

All of which is noteworthy, given concerns in some quarters that journalists embedded with U.S. combat units during the fleeting action in Iraq were too closely aligned with them to report objectively. What would Capa, who processed war through a lens, have thought about that?

He was 32 when this war ended, and again in Paris when he began a relationship with Bergman, whose daughter, Isabella Rossellini, says here that the famous actress was ready to divorce her husband and marry Capa. But he rejected her,

saying he couldn't tie himself down and wasn't "the marrying kind."

Capa wasn't only a combat photographer. He spent some time in Los Angeles with the Hollywood crowd, which he equated with stepping into excrement.

He had become the man he invented, someone observes, "a successful American photographer, always away on assignment, photographing and hobnobbing with the rich and famous around the world."

In 1954, Life magazine assigned him to cover the French war in Indochina, where he stepped on the land mine that ended his life at age 40, but not his legacy.

Howard Rosenberg's column appears Mondays and Fridays. He can be contacted at howard.rosenberg@latimes.com.

'Robert Capa: In Love and War'

Where: KCET

When: 8-9:30 p.m. Wednesday

Rating: The network has rated the documentary TV-PG (may be unsuitable for young children).