



An American Darkroom in Paris

Kelley Wilder

fig. 1

Unknown photographer, Hull Wilder working at a Recordak Machine in the London Darkroom, Davies Street, 7 November 1944, silver gelatine print 4 × 5 inch. Author's collection.

It is too easy to reduce our thinking about the darkroom to something that is a fixed architectural space, with sinks and walls and enlargers and safelights. We have been to these spaces, experienced the red light, processed the prints, smelled the hypo. But the darkroom can also be a liminal space, and in some cases, one where both governments and companies exert political and economic power. So it was with the American Signal Corps darkroom operating in Paris in 1944. The Signal Corps, developed during the American Civil War, had contributed to war communications throughout most of the conflicts in which the USA took part. By the time the USA entered the war in December 1941, the Signal Corps' remit had diversified to cover all supply, procurement, logistics and communications (including radio, radar, photography and film) across the various 'theatres', as the geographic locations of fronts were called. The photographs and films taken, processed and censored by the many divisions of the Signal Corps, constitute millions of private and professional photographs.¹ Perhaps the most famous are those taken by photojournalists at the different fronts, which exist in their thousands, and are often studied and generate numerous exhibitions, books and essays.² The darkrooms through which they passed are less known, practically undiscussed, and unacknowledged as a crucial location of meaning. Admittedly smaller than some areas of war communication, like radio, it still seems that the role of darkroom services and the darkroom itself has been unnecessarily neglected. In the exhaustive sixteen pages about the Normandy invasion communications, in a notable three volume work on the Signal Corps in WWII, photography receives a little over a page, transmission of films by carrier pigeon a paragraph, and the photographic services, just a single line.³ The darkroom of this essay, the American darkroom in World War II (henceforth WWII) Paris, staffed in part by drafted or volunteer Kodak employees, functioned both as an American political tool and as a Kodak corporate enterprise. It was part of the ETO, the European Theater of Operations, as photographs coming out of it were sometimes labelled. It was also the hub for processing amateur films and airborne mail, known in the USA as V-mail. Although fascinating and important, this essay is not about the photographs nor the photographers embedded with troops, but rather about the darkroom and the darkroom technicians of the Signal Corps unit numbered 3908.

One member of Unit 3908 was my great-uncle and a Kodak employee, Hull H. Wilder (1914–2002) originally from the village of Akron, N.Y. (— fig. 1). According to his draft card, Hull was already working at Kodak in nearby Rochester by the age of 26.⁴

1 — The Signal Corps consisted of many services, all with special names, and too many to list here.

2 — See for instance Richard Cahan, Mark Jacob, Michael Williams, and Carol Guzy, *AfterShock: The Human Toll of War: Haunting World War II Images by America's Soldier Photographers*, Chicago 2019. More scholarly books like Mary Louise Roberts, *Sheer Misery: Soldiers in Battle in WW II*, Chicago 2021, also concentrate largely on the soldiers of the front line. Images taken by war

photographers have been widely exhibited since the war began in notable locations like MoMA, New York, where Edward Steichen curated the famous *Road to Victory* exhibition in May 1942.

3 — George Raynor Thompson and Dixie R. Harris, *The Signal Corps, The Outcome*, Washington 1991, 112.

4 — I am indebted to Rose Teanby for finding and sending me this card. 'Hull H. Wilder' *US World War II Draft Cards Young Men 1940–1947*. 2907 (1940).

His name appears on a 1943 list of serving employees published in the Rochester, N.Y. newspaper, the *Democrat and Chronicle*, as well as in a hand-written list of names in the British Library Kodak collection.⁵ This information is complemented by a family collection consisting of one notebook, several examples of V-mail sent to Akron, N.Y., Wilder's personal 35mm and 4 × 5 in. negatives and transparencies, and hundreds of personal and Signal Corps prints. It is sometimes difficult to tell the personal photographs from those made by official Signal Corps photographers on assignment, as members of the darkroom also carried the standard Speed Graphic camera used by many frontline photojournalists.⁶ In my collection of the Signal Corps official prints, there are two distinct 'groups'. They are both 4 × 5 in. gelatin silver prints, but the first group consists of prints of rephotographed Signal Corps prints, in which the printed labels have been reproduced. The others appear to be official (let's call them 'first run') Signal Corps prints with labels affixed to the back, as if for publication. The darkroom series discussed in this article belong to this second category.

Kodak in the darkroom

It is important to address both the darkroom and the technician, Hull Wilder, as they present ways to tease out the meaning of this darkroom for both the American war effort and for Kodak. The biography of H. Wilder directly connects Kodak employees to the darkroom supplied by Kodak materials in a war in which Kodak contributed on all fronts, from photographic materials through to scientists contributing to the American development of atomic weapons, the Manhattan Project.⁷ Although little is known about Kodak employees in the war effort, their considerable involvement indicates an aspect of what President Dwight D. Eisenhower would in his farewell speech of 1961 name the military industrial complex.⁸ While Eisenhower was concerned about the political power of the American arms industry, the notion of a complex is useful for talking about the photographic industry, and in particular Kodak's involvement in the defence industry, which was wide ranging through both world wars and generated immense proceeds for the company.⁹

While it has been long understood that Kodak's chemists, physicists and mathematicians were deployed in various ways during WWII, the example of the darkroom indicates Kodak's commitment to the markets of the war effort not only at the level of research but by the extensive involvement of drafted staff from all levels in wartime communication.¹⁰ Beginning in 1940, American men aged 21–40 were required to sign up to the draft. This included many men of working age, and many Kodak employees. Not all of them had special photographic assignments, but many drafted men and women were given posts aligned with specialist expertise. At Thanksgiving in 1944, as they had also done the previous year, Kodak used four full

5 ____ I am indebted to Jayne Knight for asking me about his name on this list she found in the British Library, which occurred about the time his photographs came into my possession. See Hull H. Wilder, 'Kodak Men and Women in the Armed Forces,' in: *Democrat and Chronicle*, 25 Nov. 1943, 80.

6 ____ In Hull's case, some of his personally made photographs are 4 × 5 in. format but many of the later photographs, including a series of Kodachromes are 35 mm, made with a Leica he acquired some time in Paris.

7 ____ The first test near Alamogordo, New Mexico, was code-named 'Trinity' and took place on 16 July 1945. The books on the atomic project in the USA are too numerous to count, but a useful overview from different perspectives can be found in Mark B. Chadwick (ed.) 'Special issue on the Manhattan Project Nuclear Science and Technology Development at Los Alamos National Laboratory,' in: *Nuclear Technology*, vol. 207, issue Sup1, 2021.

8 ____ Farewell address by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, January 17, 1961; Final TV Talk 1/17/61 (1), Box 38, Speech Series, Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower as President, 1953–61, Eisenhower Library; National Archives and Records Administration. The transcript the Address (1961) is available on the US National Archives website: <<https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-dwight-d-eisenhowers-farewell-address#transcript>>, (20.11.2023).

9 ____ My own approach is heavily influenced by James L. Hevia, 'The Photography Complex: Exposing Boxer-Era China (1900–1901), Making Civilization', in: Rosalind Morris (ed.) *Photographies East: The Camera and Its Histories in East and Southeast Asia*, Durham 2009.

10 ____ See Tom Allbeson and Pippa Oldfield special issue on the business of war photography in: *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, May 2016.

pages of the *Democrat and Chronicle* to list and thank the 11,250 Kodak employees serving in the armed forces.¹¹ In a city that in the 1950 census counted its population at just over 320,000, it is easy to imagine how large Kodak's role was in Rochester employment, and the deployment of its staff.

Wilder, affectionately known as 'Bun', would have shipped out of New York for England as one member of the US Signal Corps Division 3908. His older brother Lot Wilder, a mathematician working at Kodak's Research Labs, seems to have remained in the USA.¹² Most of the photographers and filmmakers of the Signal Corps were trained at the headquarters in Astoria, in New York City.¹³ The Astoria training studio, once run by Paramount, tested and trained filmmakers in particular, some of whom were sent overseas while others remained in New York, making propaganda films for the war effort. No information about training Kodak staff has yet been discovered as the notebook only begins in London in November 1943, but it is perhaps telling that later in his professional life Wilder worked in the cine processing area for Kodak, Rochester.¹⁴ The first half of the notebook is written in several different hands, and may have been a shared job book for the team, or a personal one, in which others also wrote jobs. For this essay, the ambiguous authorship helps to imagine the tasks as the generalised work of the group, rather than any individual. Amongst the usual notes and jottings of jobs to do and people to contact, several entries corroborate that the darkroom in London was fully operational in the year before transferring to Paris.

2 Nov 43	Thalchum
Directory Services	
APO #640	Pow wow at 9 ¹⁵ 3 Nov. on security.
Get Receipts Mimeographed	Get Inventory of Paper & film on hand
Commanding Officer	
1 st Base P.O.	Make station log.
APO 640. U.S.Army	
	Laurence Williams Claridges.
Personnel can be located by serial	Turn right go 2 blks turn left at
number	2 nd turning Watch repair
Republic 5493	Photograph stuff for Maj. C.
Will give information on any serial	
number or name. (only 2 at once)	

The American darkroom was not the only war related darkroom in London, as the headquarters of the British War Office Photographic Section at Curzon House in Westminster had been fully operational since at least 1941. Several photographs in the collection indicate that the American darkroom was based on Davies Street,

11 ____ 'Kodak Men and Women Serving in the Armed Forces,' in: *Democrat and Chronicle*, Thursday, 23 November 1944, 83–86.

12 ____ Lot's work during the war remains unclear, and he is not listed in the ranks of serving Kodak employees.

13 ____ Haemer, Laurence F. Oral History Interview, February 7, 2003, by Shaun Illingworth and Nicholas Ferroni, Page #, Rutgers Oral History Archives.

<<https://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/interviewees/30-interview-html-text/549-haemer-laurence-f/>> (25.09.2023).

14 ____ The British Library document has 1944 against his name, and a record of enlistment also states 1945. This may point to a discrepancy in the sources, or it may corroborate that Kodak collaborated with the Army in supplying staff for processing V-Mail. Although this is asserted in newspaper articles, no evidence has yet been found in the various Kodak archives.

just behind the main Signal Corps headquarters located at 20 Grosvenor Square, and within a short walk of the British operation at Curzon House. A hand-written caption on one photograph dated Nov 7, 1944 reads “Davies st. fire. Another part of the lab caught on fire & we all had to leave the building ...”. The ‘we all’ is quite likely the group of men (—fig. 2), who all wear the Signal Corps insignia and appear and



fig. 2
Unknown photographer, Group of
Signal Corps Staff, ca. 1943, gelatine
silver print 4 × 5 inch. Author's
collection.

re-appear in many of Wilder's photos. Hull Wilder stands in the middle of the front row. The notebook they shared as well as the photographs allow connections to be drawn tightly between the British photographic service, the American Signal Corps darkroom, and Kodak both at Harrow and in the headquarters of Rochester, New York.

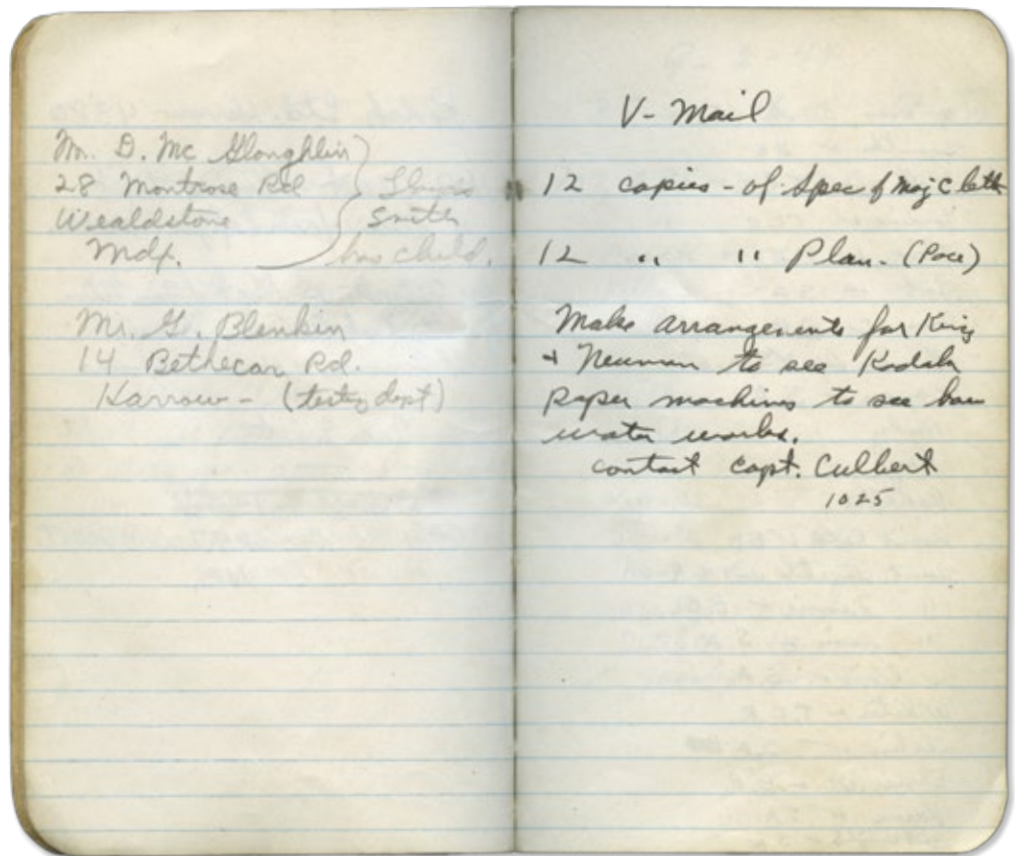
Wilder's notebook records many of the daily incidental jobs technicians in these darkrooms were expected to fulfil to keep war communications running smoothly. Captions on the personal photographs suggest that Wilder and his colleagues spent much time in St Albans as well as London. St Albans, a small market town northwest of London, had easy access to Kodak Ltd at Harrow, which was being used for Signal Corps work.¹⁵ Jobs recorded in the notebook confirm the traffic in photographs and equipment between

Harrow and London. Entries like ‘pick up prints from Curzon House’ and ‘make arrangements ... to see Kodak paper machines to see how water works’, interspersed with names and numbers of American Army contacts, Kodak Harrow contacts and London suppliers, give a glimpse of the daily work of the darkroom technician. A typical double page spread (—fig. 3) shows something of the variety of entries: a note taken about the birth of a child, an address for G. Blenkin in the Harrow testing department, V-mail orders to be filled, and a contact number for Captain Culbert to set up a viewing of the Kodak paper machines.

The everyday entries in the notebook give a sense of the varied tasks of servicemen in London awaiting deployment to France. There are security training session reminders, directions to the nearest watchmakers for repairs, useful numbers to call for gaining service ID numbers, shopping lists, and names and addresses of other servicemen, new friends, and colleagues. Several lists of things to order give a picture of the minutia of the darkroom equipment: 7 flashlites [sic], 6 chairs, 2 thermometers, 2 numbering machines for dark room, 2 chamois, 2 black stamp pads, 2 locks & hasps, pill boxes, pen holders, mailing bags. The apparatus and small detail fill out the picture of thousands of prints flowing through the space, which was, in addition to military communications, a hub for the V-Mail, or Victory Mail system. In spite of the name, V-mail should not be seen as just a vehicle for communication. V-mail was a Kodak innovation based on George McCarthy's 1927 patent for the copying of bank documents, especially cheques, in a system that eventually became known as the Recordak system, a machine that can be seen in figure 1. As Estelle Blaschke has convincingly argued, photographs and the economy became linked not just through

15 — Thompson and Harris 1991 (reference 3), 84.

fig. 3
Two pages from Hull Wilder's
Notebook, 1943–44. Author's
collection.



the acquisition of photographic images as capital, but through connections between banking and images brought about by systems, including the Kodak Recordak system.¹⁶ The use of Kodak trademarked processes in the war effort is a reminder of the immense profits that were to be made off the back of war imaging.

The American V-Mail (and the British Airgraph) system ostensibly saved space in shipping and, according to the advertising, presented a more secure way of sending the mail.¹⁷ It worked in the following way. A letter, written on a special form (— fig. 4) was photographed onto microfilm using the Recordak machine. First each page had to pass the censors for content and receive a stamp in the upper left corner. The microfilm was then transported overseas to another darkroom, and using the machine again, enlarged and printed onto photographic paper. Darkrooms for the V-mail service thus formed a distinctive network of connected processing rooms of communication. Their connections not only bound them up with the logistical machinery of the Signal Corps, they also formed a distinctive method of doubling and sometimes tripling the amount of photographic material and manpower. The photographically printed letters were collated, folded, placed in envelopes, and sent to the addressee. V-Mail forms were not only plain paper forms but were often themed to fit the season and the sender, as illustrated in Kimberly Guise's blog.¹⁸ Lest the reader wonder why such a simple thing as the mail should merit teams of darkroom

16 — See Estelle Blaschke, *Banking on Images: From the Bettman Archive to Corbis*, Leipzig 2016; Estelle Blaschke, 'Installed for your Protection. Mikrofilm als Medium der Bürokratie,' in: *Archiv der Mediengeschichte*, vol. 16, 2016, 151–162; and Estelle Blaschke and Armin Linke, 'Image Capital,' Intercom Verlag 2022, <<https://image-capital.com>>, (25.09.2023).

17 — While these two attributes are true, given the extreme caution with which Kodak controlled the supply of transparent film stock, there was also significant financial gain for Kodak, as pointed out by scholars like Alice Lovejoy 2019 (reference 23).

18 — Kimberly Guise, 'Mail Call: V-mail', <<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/mail-call-v-mail>> (26.09.2023).

technicians, it is important to point out that the volume of the mail can easily be counted in the billions of pieces of mail per year of the war. No precise count exists, but to translate a billion letters to microfilm would require 625,000 reels of microfilm (at the standard advertised rate of 1600 letters per microfilm roll). These numbers reflect just the microfilms that were used for mail, not the considerable amount used in photojournalism or aerial reconnaissance. Although there were machines that could flatten the letters for microfilming, it seems that most of this work was done by hand.

The entire enterprise required darkrooms at both ends of the operation, for microfilming as well as printing. These mail stations were the subject of several photo-essays, often with the implication that the staff was largely composed of women.¹⁹ However, the darkroom technicians headed to Paris appear to be entirely male, suggesting perhaps a division of training and labour. It was an enormous undertaking, coordinating supply lines of photographic material as well as people and served to extend both photographic profits and Kodak branding.

In the inter-war period, photographic companies proliferated, but Kodak was already emerging as a monopolising force that could use war operations to consolidate its market share. During WWI, it had acquired enough of the US market to fall foul of the antitrust legislation for market domination and subsequent price fixing.²⁰ Undeterred by court judgements against them, Kodak continued to exploit both military supply lines and organisation, as well as other industrial innovations in fields like aviation. As Emily Doucet points out, microfilming and the Recordak machine coincided with civil aviation advances, making shrinking the mail, and delivering savings of weight and bulk in air cargo, a lucrative prospect.²¹ The contracts for the air mail operations – both the Airgraph and V-mail,

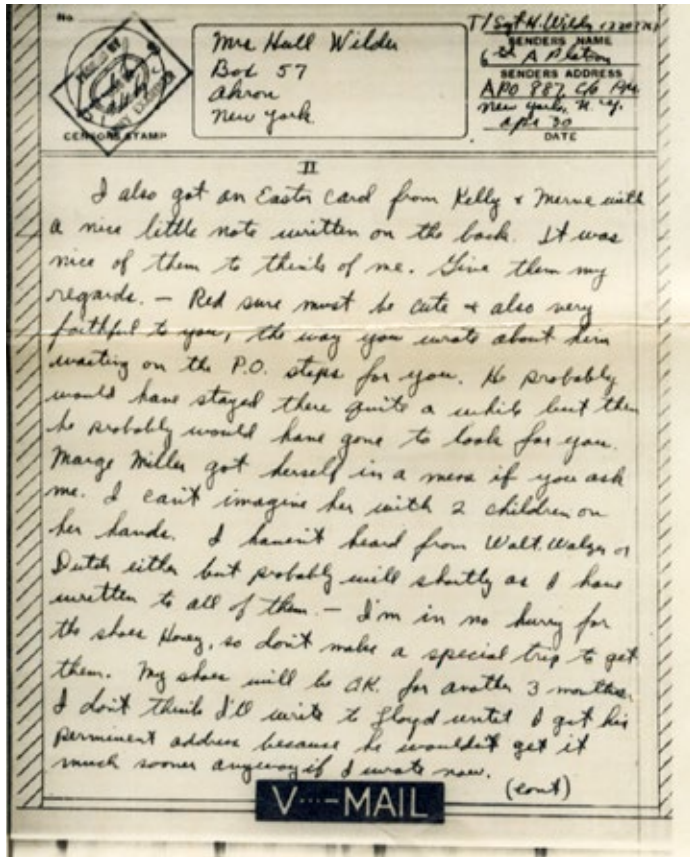


fig. 4
V-Mail to Mrs Hull Wilder, April 30,
gelatine silver print, 4 × 5 in. Author's
collection.

along with other materials distributed for the war, were extremely valuable for Kodak.²² Alice Lovejoy has quantified the rapid growth of Kodak's profits at this time:

*... chemical and optical products became central to Eastman Kodak's multiplying and increasingly lucrative military contracts, leading, at the end of 1941, to a thirty-eight per cent increase in sales over the previous year. By 1945 the company's net profits had ballooned to \$32,715,632 – forty-two per cent higher than the 1944 figure and sixty-three per cent higher than 1940.*²³

Keeping this profit motive in mind, it is clear that V-Mail is a history that has less to do with philatelic interests or war communication, although it intersects both, and much more to do with capital and the rise of the Kodak brand. Doucet and others

19 — Guise (reference 18).

20 — See the district court's opinion *United States v. Eastman Kodak Co.*, 226 Fed. 62 (W.D.N.Y. 1915), and the decree in *United States v. Eastman Kodak Co.*, 230 Fed. 522 (1916).

21 — Emily Doucet, 'Les airgraphs comme support médiatique. Microfilm, aviation et culture de la communication transnationale en Grand-Bretagne

lors de la Seconde Guerre mondiale', in: *Transbordeur photographie histoire société*, vol. 7, 2023, 160–173, 164.

22 — Doucet (reference 21), 163.

23 — Alice Lovejoy, 'Celluloid Geopolitics: Film Stock and the War Economy, 1939–47', in: *Screen*, vol. 60, no. 2, Summer 2019, 224–241, 22

like Blaschke and Henning have already brought attention to the ways in which the V-mail and Airgraph systems, and photographic innovation in general, intersect with the history and culture of microfilm, as well as the infrastructure of Empire.²⁴ In its V-Mail enterprise, Kodak was also playing an active part in the American aim of militantly expanding democracy through photography.²⁵ Rachel Snow details how Kodak engaged with American democratic expansion through institutional advertising that built a brand and corporate image of the company as a public good.²⁶ It was on the public service front that Kodak intended to earn its returns, marketing the V-Mail service as one of its innovations in the ‘serving human progress through photography’ campaign.²⁷ Clearly Kodak’s investment of people, resources, training and materials requires more thorough attention in all its aspects. But there is another important area to examine. As well as revealing the history of corporate profiteering, wartime branding and intellectual histories of photography, the American darkroom installed in Paris also highlights an important political history of the postwar moment.

The darkroom in Paris

When Paris was liberated in 1944, the Unit had been in England for nearly a year. Following the late August liberation of the city, and the initial months of Signal Corps setup, the operation moved to the French capital, and set up a new darkroom some time between November 1944 (the date of the Davies Street fire) and January 1945 (the date of the photographic series discussed here). It is here that the political manoeuvring of the Allies can be seen extending to the darkroom. The new unit took over the building at 93 rue Lauriston, the recently vacated headquarters of the French Gestapo, who called themselves the Carlingue. Americans moving in may have known them as the Bonny-Lafont gang, named after the two leaders, petty criminal Henri Chamberlin, known as Henri Lafont, and disgraced former police Inspector Pierre Bonny. Between their extravagant party lifestyle and ruthless killing of both personal enemies and members of the French resistance, they made the address of their headquarters infamous. The building in the 16th arrondissement is identified today with a plaque clearly indicating its infamous war history. With its ties to organised crime and to the occupiers, 93 rue Lauriston seems a complicated address to choose for a darkroom. It was, on the one hand, conveniently vacant, large enough to house an entire darkroom setup and its staff, and was located just a short walk from the Majestic Hotel (at 30 rue la Prouse) and the blockhouse nearby that served as the American Signal Center. On the other hand, it linked the Americans and other allies indisputably with the criminal underworld and German collaboration. Mention of this past is entirely absent from the Signal Corps histories, the Wilder notebook, and the photographs. There is, however, a series of formal, staged photographs of the darkroom dated 16 January 1945, numbered to indicate a sort of photo essay (___ figs. 5–12).²⁸ In themselves, the photographs do not show anything other than routine operational photos. However, given the location of the darkroom and the timing, they can also be seen as an attempt to reassure civilians living in

24 — For connections to microfilm and Empire see Doucet (reference 21) and Blaschke (reference 16). For other photographic innovations and Empire see Michelle Henning, ‘The Worliding of Light and Air: Dufaycolor and Selochrome in the 1930s’, in: *Visual Culture in Britain*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2020, 177–198.

25 — I am indebted to Tom Allbeson for incisive comments on this essay, and for allowing me access to his forthcoming book chapter Tom Allbeson, ‘Photjournalism Mobilized: The Allied War Effort in the Second World War’, in Stuart

Allan and Tom Allbeson, *Conflicting Images: Histories of War Photography in the News*, Abingdon 2024. It is here he discusses the ‘Arsenal of Democracy’.

26 — Rachel Snow, ‘Photography’s Second Front: Kodak’s *Serving Human Progress Through Photography* Institutional Advertising Campaign’, in: *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2016, 151–181.

27 — Snow 2016 (reference 26).

28 — No publication of this photo essay has yet been found.



fig. 5
#1 Exterior of Photo Mail Station,
93 Rue Lauriston, ca. 1944,
gelatine silver print, 4 × 5 inch.
Author's collection.

fig. 7
#3 Drying Room section of Photo
Mail Station, ca. 1944, gelatine
silver print, 4 × 5 inch. Author's
collection.

fig. 6
#2 Sorting and Distributing Room
section of Photo Mail Station,
ca. 1944, gelatine silver print,
4 × 5 inch. Author's collection.

fig. 8
#4 Printing Room Section of Photo
Mail Station, ca. 1944, gelatine
silver print, 4 × 5 inch. Author's
collection.





fig. 9
6 Recording Room of Photo Mail Station, ca. 1944, gelatine silver print, 4 × 5 inch. Author's collection.

fig. 11
8 Printing and Washing Room at Photo mail station, ca. 1944, gelatine silver print, 4 × 5 inch. Author's collection.

fig. 10
7 Film Developing Room of the Photo Mail Station, ca. 1944, gelatine silver print, 4 × 5 inch. Author's collection.

fig. 12
Untitled Photo Showing Printing and Washing Room, ca. 1944, gelatine silver print, 4 × 5 inch. Author's collection.

Paris that the space of the terrorising Carlingue had been thoroughly sanitised into rooms filled with purposeful and benign activity, in the form of a state-of-the-art darkroom, disciplined military staff, and the humanity-serving occupation of delivering the mail. To comprehend how the visual narrative of the darkroom photos worked, the series is reproduced here in the order set by numbers in their captions, along with one unnumbered, uncaptioned photo that appears to be part of the set, placed at the end.

Each photograph except the untitled one has the following information, along with its caption, stamped on the back:

'US Sig Corps 3908, 16 Jan 45, Series Photo Mail' appears at the top, then the title and number, then two lines, blacked out. The second line blacked out can be read on one photograph *'... until unclassified by censor'*.

Although these images do not seem to have been published, they nonetheless are made in the well-known style of the photo essay so prominently published in magazines like *Life* and *Picture Post* during the war. It makes sense that the reader is taken through by the front door, so to speak, in figure 5, showing the façade of the building with its large distinctive windows.²⁹ There can be no mistaking the building, and this deliberate beginning represents a methodical approach to activate readers' curiosity and identify the building that many would have known from the exterior only. The remaining photographs take the reader through rooms treated like stage sets, with Signal Corps technicians seated at their desks in the sorting room (H. Wilder sits at the middle desk in figure 6.), loading printed mail into drying apparatus in the drying room (fig. 7), operating the copy stand in both the recording and the printing room (figs. 8 & 9), standing over tanks in the film developing room (fig. 10), and standing at the enlarger in the printing and washing room (fig. 11). The untitled image is the only one taken in darkened lighting, and shows a letter enlarged, washing tanks and sinks (fig. 12). The photographs are staged and declarative in a way that makes it almost possible to hear an advertising newsreel voiceover: 'Here are the men carefully printing your letter, ready to send to his local APO for delivery. Remember, V-Mail is always delivered!'. Each room is clearly shown to be used meaningfully and deliberately, with appropriate Kodak machines and materials in evidence, and without showing details of any documents. Each space is clinical in its tidiness, creating an impression of the neutral bureaucracy of the war service industry. Most Signal Corps official photographs carry an ETO number – a locally assigned field number that identifies the photographer and the location, and possibly the unit. The photo mail series reproduced here carries none of these markings, nor do any of the photographs have an SC number that would track its location in the National Archives collections. Given the abilities of the darkroom staff, it seems safe to assume that the lack of a 'number' for the photographer indicates that they were taken 'in-house' by the men themselves. The darkroom technicians were not classed as photographers and were not known to have taken any images that would have been circulated as photojournalism. However, they were no less part of the pictorial

29 ____ We can only speculate as to the intended readership, but the photo-essay format made famous by *Life* and similar magazines is closely adhered to in this essay as well, making it suitable for a number of photographic magazines carrying more anodyne news of the war to audiences 'at home'. If, as I suggest here, the essay was intended for local consumption, there were a number of local circulating magazines in Paris at the time.

war effort, shown here securing and re-occupying a formerly enemy space, while advancing the American, and ultimately, their employer's interests of both democracy and capitalism.

Step back to think for a moment about the other images that were processed in their thousands alongside these anodyne work photographs and the mail: liberation of concentration camps and portraits of their victims; street trials of French conspirators; battlefields recently vacated; funerals; rural and urban buildings in ruins; photos made by Germans captured or killed on the battlefield. The tension between the safe space of the darkroom and the actual contents moving through it are covered by the presence of the mail. Mail which, it needs perhaps not be said, was anything but neutral and emotionless to the individuals involved. Hull Wilder used no less than 15 pages of the notebook for noting letters and parcels sent and received.

It is not so clear how many photographs of the interconnected mail darkrooms in Europe survive. Certainly, there are several groups of images from various locations, showing the V-Mail service in action.³⁰ The darkroom in Paris, though is more clearly delineated, the men professional, the activities benign. Its absence in the National Archives catalogue or any magazines may not hold any meaning, as photographs from the Signal Corps were not systematically sent forward for printing or archiving.³¹ What is clear is that the purposeful staging of the darkroom was intended to demonstrate the neutralising of a politically charged and potentially dangerous space. This essay has argued for some close examination of the darkroom (or rooms) as a hidden player in the war zone, full of activities that promoted both Kodak corporate and American political aims. It is also just the sort of space that, without seeming to be overtly political, could be used to sanitise and distance war activities under the guise of a service. In the case of the American darkroom in Paris, there was a double safety in providing a service so arguably benign – delivering the mail.

30 ____ See for instance the anonymous blog, 'V-Mail: The WWII Program that Scanned Letters onto Microfilm, 1942–1945', showing compiled photographs from the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and other areas. <<https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/v-mail-photos/>> (23.11.2023).

31 ____ 'WWII Photographs at the US National Archives' <<http://www.digital-historyarchive.com/wwii-photographs-at-the-us-national-archives.html>> (26.09.2023).