HISTORY
Memoirs

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT MILITARY SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNDER THE COMMAND OF MAJOR GENERAL ROBERT FREDERICK IN EUROPE DURING WORLD WAR II

Abstract. The purpose of the research *is to enrich and preserve world-class historical and cultural heritage, including historical evidence of the events of World War II.* ***The research methodology*** *defines bibliographic, analytical, comparative, descriptive, deductive methods, as well as the method of historical reconstruction, which allowed to clarify some details of the life and work of a prominent historical figure.* ***The scientific novelty*** *of the obtained results is the development of a topic that has not been the subject of a special comprehensive study in historical science. For the first time, information has been revealed about the author of the painting depicting the area where Major General Robert Frederick led the operation to liberate southern France from German troops in the summer of 1944, which was presented to him at the time. The detail established during the research of the topic complements the portraits of personalities and reveals the prospects for further interdisciplinary investigations.* ***Conclusion.*** *Thanks to scientific research methods, the historical fact of the period of World War II is supplemented and described, and directions of further scientific research related to the topic are determined. It is established that the author of the painting, which is stored in the home archives of the family of Major General Robert T. Frederick, is not a German prisoner of war, but a French painter René Robert Jaeger, better known as Le Veneur.*

Keywords: *Major General Robert T. Frederick, painter René Robert Jaeger, Le Veneur, World War II, military operation, south of France*

The sketch hung on the kitchen wall for as long as I could remember, the tile roofs and distant church bearing a familiar Mediterranean style I'd come accustomed to growing up in California. The blue and yellow colors matched the

Spanish tile in our kitchen; to my child eyes, that seemed a good enough reason for it to be a fixture through the years.

My mom mentioned at some point or another that the sketch had been given to my grandfather by a German prisoner during WWII. From what I knew at the time about her father, that made sense. In fact, it made perfect sense. The German prisoner's name was even signed in black in the lower right corner: R.R. Jaeger.

It wasn't until my mom died in 2019 that I carefully lifted the perennial picture from its hook on the wall for a closer look. The 40cm x 48cm landscape lay behind glass, nested in a blue wooden frame which complemented the rich blue leaves in the foreground, and the soft blue mountains in the distance.

Robert T. Frederick was born in San Francisco in 1907, the only son of a medical doctor. The military, however − not medicine − tempted him as a teenager. Lying about his age, he talked his way onto a merchant marine ship bound for Australia before he was 16. Upon his return, he left California to finish his secondary education at a military academy on the east coast, followed by four years at West Point. After graduating, his career was like that of many young Army officers; transferring from assignment to assignment for fourteen years, until one day in early 1942 when a docket landed on his desk in Washington, D.C. Upon closer inspection, there was more. Below the artist's name, in parentheses, a word that defied easy translation. It appeared to be French, but its secret message alluded me: Perhaps "Le Veueur" (The Viewer). That seemed like a reasonable conclusion; the artist was the viewer of this village scene, so that was the name he gave it. Adjacent to the presumptive title, the date the prisoner used his pencil to preserve the memory: 30.3.4__. Was it '41? '42? '44? The last number disappeared into the dark shadow of a stucco building, robbing me of ertainty. Unbeknownst to me, shadows also camouflaged another key clue in the ower left: The location of the sketch. But I would only realize this later. At the

time, I could make out Magagno. I knew my grandfather had been near Mignano in central Italy during the war. It seemed reasonable − given my utter lack of Italian language skills − that a town called Magagno might not be far away, perhaps just a bit more toward the coast as there seemed to be ocean or fog in the distance beyond the pale blue mountains. The battle in which my grandfather fought near Mignano was well known to me, even as a child. When I was five years old, a Hollywood movie had been made about it. The battle had launched my grandfather into the lofty realm of legends.

Frederick, now a Colonel, was tasked with reviewing and critiquing war plans. And inside that docket, he didn't like what he saw. Operation Plough, conceived by an eccentric British writer and inventor, called for a midwinter airborne invasion of Norway by specially trained commando troops, who in the cover of winter darkness would destroy Germany's heavy water treatment

facilities, and stop Germany from developing a nuclear bomb. The main problem Frederick saw was the complete lack of any method to get the men out once they'd achieved their objectives. It was a suicide mission.

Lord Mountbatten, an ardent proponent of Operation Plough, saw in the plan's biggest critic the man he believed could best carry it out. He convinced General Eisenhower that Frederick should begin work at once forming and training the secret joint U.S.-Canadian commando force, what Frederick called the First Special Service Force.

A year later, after the most grueling and intensive training an American Army unit had ever endured, the Norway invasion was suddenly cancelled. Frederick's force was sent to Italy instead, to support the struggling 5th Army.

For weeks, the 5th Army had been unable to break through the Mignano Gap, a narrow valley north of Naples controlled by German forces from the mountain tops overlooking the plain below. Pushing northward through the gap was essential if the 5th Army was to ever break through Hitler's Gustav Line and iberate Rome to the north. The first mountain the 5th Army encountered proved to be insurmountable, its name a testament to its historic role as guardian of the gap: Monte La Difensa. From the top of La Difensa, German gunners were able to beat back every attempt to pass through below.

To rectify this, Frederick proposed a plan: His small group of highly trained men would follow a creek during the night to the base of the mountain; silently bivouac during the day; then the next night circle around to the north side of the mountain where sheer cliffs led to the crest. They would scale the cliffs in the darkness, and attack the Germans on top of La Difensa at daybreak. His commanders thought it impossible. Frederick believed the Germans shared that assessment, and thus the attack would be a complete surprise.

On a cold rainy night in early December 1943, several hundred men from Frederick's First Special Service Force put their ropes in place, scaled silently to the top, and after hours of bloodshed vanquished the Germans from the stronghold that had repeatedly repelled the entire 5th Army. The battle of La Difensa is considered one of the greatest tactical successes in American military history. In the following weeks, Frederick led his First Special Service Force to a series of victories clearing the Germans from the rest of the mountains controlling the Mignano Gap. His habit of heading out on patrols ahead of his men and behind enemy lines added to the awe and adulation his men had for his cool leadership under fire; and to the angst his superiors suffered, certain he was going to get himself killed. Promoted to General at age 36, he was then tasked with defending a line around Anzio that normally would have required an entire Army Division. By painting their faces black, sneaking behind enemy lines at night, and silently killing the enemy, the First Special Service Force deceived the Germans into

believing they were a much larger unit than they were. The diary of a dead German soldier noted the ”Black Devils“ were all around them, but they could never hear or see them coming.

The Germans most certainly saw them months later, however, when Frederick and his First Special Service Force spearheaded the liberation of Rome. It was on a bridge over the Tiber River in the city where Frederick was shot in the leg. He refused treatment, and continued his command, making sure once again his men achieved every objective. After Rome and recovering, Frederick was promoted to Major General, and handed another seemingly impossible task: The youngest two-star general in the American Army had just four weeks to create and organize a force for the airborne invasion of southern France. Upon receiving his orders, he asked his commander where the paratroopers were. His commander replied, ”So far, you’re the only one we have“. Frederick had jumped once in his life, and that had been nearly two years prior during training for the Norway invasion that never happened. The airborne invasion force was cobbled together with whatever units Frederick could find. They had to be jump-ready; there was no time to train them. Operation Dragoon was set to begin August 15, 1944.

For the 7th Army to successfully land on the shores of the Côte d’Azur, the German forces inland needed to be cut off from supporting their coastal defenses. The job fell to Frederick and his hastily formed First Airborne Task Force. Frederick and his planning staff determined the city of Le Muy, 20 km inland from the coast, was the linchpin connecting the German forces across the Riviera. Through it passed the key east-west highway, and the main roads north-south to coastal cities of Sainte-Maxime and Fréjus/Saint-Raphaël. Take Le Muy, and the Germans would be fragmented.

In the pre-dawn hours of August 15, General Frederick stood in the doorway of a C−47 transport plane somewhere over southern France, gave the simple command, ”Follow me boys“, and stepped out into the unknown darkness. Thick low cloud cover required the planes fly higher than originally expected, and with pilots unable to see their appointed drop zones, the first wave of men from the First Airborne Task Force blindly landed in fields and vineyards (and trees) far and wide, much farther and wider than planned. The scattering of forces had an unanticipated outcome: The Germans were confused. The paratroopers seemed to be everywhere. As had happened at Anzio, they estimated Frederick’s force to be much larger than it actually was. General Frederick navigated his way to a farmhouse in Le Mitan that had been preselected for his command post. His men started connecting, coalescing, and clearing out the German defenders. Within 48 hours, Le Muy had been taken, Germany’s regional general in Draguignan had been captured, and freedom from years of Nazi oppression began to take a foothold in the south of France.

After the large scale landings along the coast, as the 7th Army began driving up the Rhone, the First Airborne Task Force spread out eastward. The Germans were well established in the coastal enclaves as far east as Menton, and were well entrenched in the mountains from Fayence to the Italian border. Frederick's orders were to protect the right flank of the 7th Army by removing this threat, and preventing German reinforcements from entering France from Italy.

One of the early targets during this eastward push was the perfumed city of Grasse. As I studied a map of the region one night I noticed a name just 4km up the road: Magagnosc. I quickly pulled out the mysterious sketch, took a photo of the lower left corner, and zoomed in. There, blending into the dark pencil strokes of a tree trunk, I could make out the letters "sc." The sketch was of Magagnosc, France! I was now determined to discover who the German prisoner was who drew it. I wanted to find out if he had family still living, so I could give it to them as a gift. But there was a problem. Whether the sketch had been drawn in March of '41, '42, or '44, there were no German POW's at that point. And the condition of the piece was too good for it to have been carried around in some soldier's knapsack for five months until August 1944. There had to be another explanation. (I eventually removed the sketch from the frame and discovered an inscription on the back which would have answered the original question long ago: Magagnosc: Route de Grasse vers Nice au les Monts de l'Esterel.)

But who was R.R. Jaeger? Was the story handed down from my mom about the German prisoner incorrect? I found a clue that seemed to answer the question. There was an American paratrooper named R.R. Jaeger who had survived a plane crash on D-Day during the Battle of Normandy. Given my grandpa had just four weeks to pull together all the available paratroopers he could find the following month, surely the artistically inclined American paratrooper R.R. Jaeger was one of them. Renoir had painted Magagnosc landscapes. Army Private R.R. Jaeger was probably a fan.

My hopeful excitement quickly ran into the roadblock of reality: March 30th. The Americans hadn't even arrived in southern France at that point in 1944. R.R. Jaeger may have jumped out of planes, but he apparently had no skills with a pencil. I pointed my camera at the lower right corner, to magnify the letters below the artist's name. Le Veueur (The Viewer), truth be told, was just a guess. As skilled as the artist was, his penmanship on this particular point was suspect. The "u" could be an "a" or an "n". And the "eur" at the end could be "eir" or "dir" or "our" or… I must credit a friend in Canada who does historical research with solving this part of the puzzle. "Le Veneur", he emailed me. "There's a French artist named Le Veneer!" René Robert Jaeger (Le Veneur) (1890−1976) sometimes signed his name Jaeger. Sometimes, as in this case, he signed it both ways. As I have studied the front and back inscriptions closer, it appears the sketch

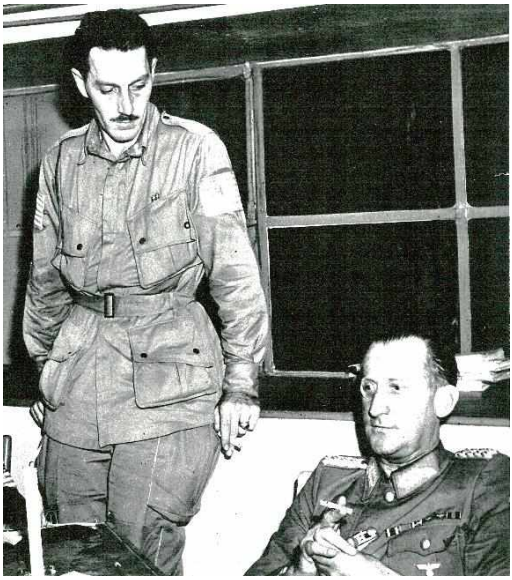
was completed in 1941 or 1942. I now believe my mom, convinced it was a gift from a German POW, changed the date to '44 to better match the timeframe.

So now, I ponder what may prove to be an unanswerable question: If my grandpa didn't get it from a German prisoner, how did he get it? While the story he was given the sketch by a prisoner now seems implausible, it's not improbable that the sketch hung in the headquarters of the German general in Draguignan. When General Ludwig Bieringer was captured, the American soldiers helped themselves to his stash of wine. Perhaps they also plucked a picture from the wall, and gave it to their commander as a keepsake. "He got it from a German POW" could easily be mutated through time into "A German POW gave it to him". But I doubt it.

After taking Grasse on August 24, the First Airborne Task Force cleared the Germans out of Châteauneuf and Opio 6 km to the east. Frederick's command post was moved to Grasse, and the most direct route from there to Châteauneauf passes right through Magagnosc. The force was moving rapidly eastward at this point so there likely was no time to dilly dally if he passed through the quaint hillside town, but perhaps the view looking out at the distant Mont de l'Esterel left an impression. Perhaps it reminded him of the views in his native San Francisco.By the end of August, the First Airborne Task Force had crossed the Var, and Frederick set up headquarters at the Alhambra Hotel in the hilly, tree-lined Cimiez neighborhood of Nice. This would be his base for the next three months, as he juggled the military missions in the Maritime Alps and the sensitive civil affairs issues unfolding among the French. Was the sketch already at the Alhambra, and packed away as a prize? Was it a gift from a grateful French patriot? Is it possible Le Veneur himself presented the picture to my grandfather? (Le Veneur's descendants are currently researching the artist; their investigations may uncover if he was in Nice during this period).

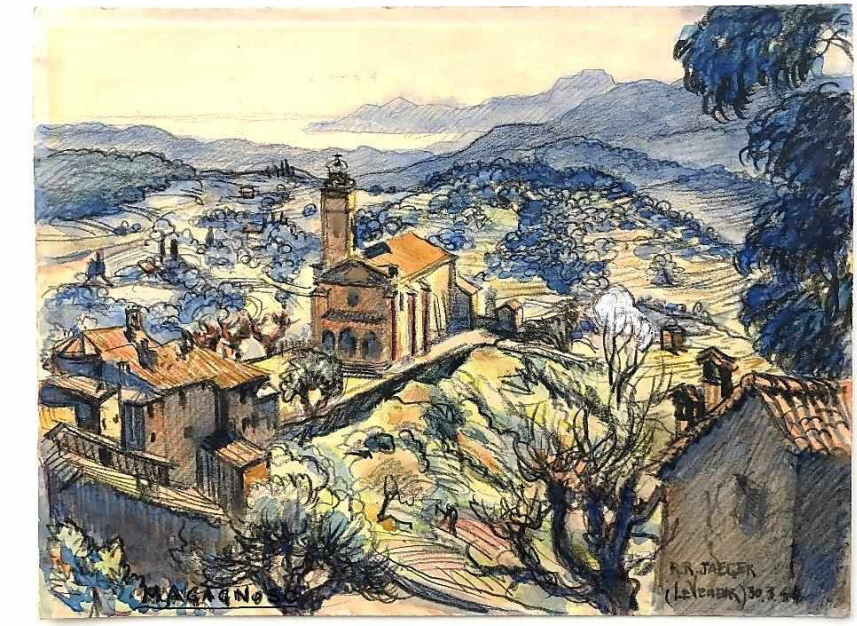
In late September, several weeks after arriving in Nice, my grandfather travelled back to the United States on a one week leave. This is most certainly when he brought the sketch home. There was still too much war ahead for the fragile paper to have travelled with him as he led the 45th Division through the battles in the Vosges and across Germany. Frederick also brought home from the war a body of scars and eight Purple Hearts. The Purple Heart is the award given to U.S. service members when they're wounded. By the time WWII was over, General Robert T. Frederick had more of them than anyone. He received them because he led his men into battle, never asking of them what he wouldn't do himself. Winston Churchill said if there had been a dozen men like him, the allies would have crushed Hitler in 1942. He called Frederick quite simply, "The greatest fighting general of all time".

Robert T. Frederick Escorting Bieringer to Interrogation

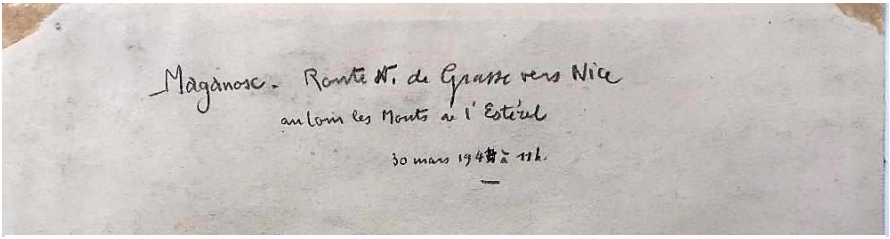


Robert T. Frederick Interrogating Bieringer

Frederick Receiving the Flag of Le Muy



R. R. JAEGER (Le Veneur), Maganosc 30.3.42



Maganosc. Route N. de Grasse vers Nice
au loin les Monts de l'Estérel
30 mars 1942 à 11h.
(Magagnosc. National Road from Grasse to Nice
in the distance the Esterel Mountains
March 30, 1942 at 11 a.m.)

René Robert JAEGER (Le Veneur). 1920

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