

Eisenhower portrayed in color

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Retired colonel, artist collaborate on color rendering of iconic war photo

by John Gessner
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It's one of the most iconic World War II photos: General Dwight D. Eisenhower, supreme commander of the Allied forces in Europe, chatting with a group of 101st Airborne Division paratroopers hours before the Normandy invasion. The majority of the men in the photo would be killed or wounded.



Leonard Kloeber enlisted Burnsville artist Julie Wildgen to produce this color rendering of the famous black-and-white photo of General Dwight D. Eisenhower chatting with paratroopers on the eve of the Normandy invasion. Photo by John Gessner

A Burnsville artist and a retired colonel from Prior Lake have teamed up to produce what they believe to be the first color painting of the black-and-white photo, taken on June 5, 1944, at Greenham Common Airfield in England.

Artist Julie Wildgen spent more than 730 hours rendering the scene in watercolor pencil and watercolor.

Proceeds from print sales of the painting will benefit America's Vets, a foundation recently launched by Leonard Kloeber, a retired colonel from Prior Lake. America's Vets aims to assist groups that support veterans and veterans memorials.

Kloeber and Wildgen (who worked for free) will unveil the painting Wednesday, May 12, from 7 to 8 p.m. at Burnhaven Library, 1101 W. County Road 42, Burnsville.



Artist Julie Wildgen's painting of the famous black-and-white photo of General Dwight D. Eisenhower chatting with paratroopers on the eve of the Normandy invasion.

The chance collaboration between them started in April 2009, when Kloeber spotted Wildgen working on watercolor pencil art at a cafe table in the Burnsville Barnes and Noble bookstore.

He asked the mostly self-taught artist, who took up the craft in 2003, if she'd do a rendering of the Eisenhower photo for the nonprofit he was launching, whose first beneficiary will be American War Memorials Overseas.

"As it was," said Wildgen, a technical writer by trade who at the time was a compliance manager for Ameriprise Financial, "I got laid off the next week, so I had a lot of time on my hands, and thankfully, had this project to work on, which made me feel, quote-unquote, employed."

The Eisenhower photo has deep meaning for Kloeber, a West Point graduate who served five years of active duty and 26 years with the Army Reserve before retiring as a colonel in 2002.

He was a 101st Airborne paratrooper himself. So was his son-in-law, who served when the 101st helped lead the Iraq invasion in 2003. Kloeber's father served in North Africa and Burma during World War II, and his father-in-law was killed at Normandy, six days into the battle.

A former vice president for GMAC and for TCF Mortgage, Kloeber is the author of "Victory Principles: Leadership Lessons from D-Day." The photo is on the cover of his book.

Kloeber retrieved a print of the photo from the National Archives for the color rendering, dubbed "Full Victory."

"This photograph, even though it is very famous, is poorly composed and out of focus," Wildgen said. "I think that's why it really hasn't been painted, because it's not aesthetically pleasing, even though it's a famous moment in history."

She and Kloeber salvaged images from other sources and exchanged many e-mails while trying to render the scene with details missing from the poorly exposed photograph.

For one thing, Army censors had blacked out the "101st Airborne" patches on the men's sleeves. Kloeber supplied a replica, which Wildgen applied in six places.

He scoured the Internet for authentic photos of 1940s paratrooper boots; in the photo, the men's boots were largely blackened by underexposure.

To complete the rendering of a paratrooper whose body was mostly cut off in the photo, Wildgen used an image of a similarly outfitted soldier that she took from a documentary on the making of the TV miniseries "Band of Brothers."

"I freeze-framed it, because I had it on DVD," Wildgen said.

Kloeber used photos from the Internet and a book of World War II color photography to help Wildgen recreate the sepia, tan and olive drab color scheme. Wildgen added facial details not
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apparent in the original photo.

“I call it painting,” she said. “Some people call it drawing. I think it’s a combination of both. To me, this is almost forensic art, because it was black and white.”

Wildgen, herself the daughter of a World War II veteran, finished the painting only a few days ago. She’s weary of poring over the “tan-and-drab” color scheme, but still moved by the image of the powerful general at ease among this tiny handful of international forces he commanded.

“He knows a lot of these guys are going to be either seriously wounded or killed,” Wildgen said. “He just felt he should go talk to them.”

For more information, visit www.americasvets.org or www.victoryprinciples.com.

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