

Photographer Plus

I WITNESS. By Norman Alley. New York: Wilfred Funk. 370 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by LINTON WELLS

THIRTY years ago, Norman Alley went to work for the *Chicago Tribune* as a copy boy. His ambition was to become a reporter. Then he decided that "a picture is worth 10,000 words" and became a photographer. His autobiographical "I Witness" seems to justify the shift. Alley has demonstrated his right to an honored niche in the newsreel photographer's hall of fame. "I Witness" is good writing but poor reporting, even of his own courageous exploits.

Norman Alley's first newsreel feat was to photograph the Eastland steamship disaster in Chicago in July, 1915. His last (recorded) was to depict on celluloid the German army's invasion of the Low Countries and France.

In between these assignments, Alley was under fire with Pershing's Mexican expedition and a member of the Army Signal Corps, chronicling AEF activities in France. For 13 years thereafter, he covered football games, prize fights, prohibition raids, and gangster activities, and September, 1932, found him marooned on the coast of Greenland, after an ill-fated attempt to fly the Atlantic.

Several "prosaic years" of picture chasing followed this adventure, then, in 1937, Universal Newsreel jumped Alley to China and fame. He was aboard the United States Yangtze River Gunboat *Panay* when it was bombed by Japanese airplanes and his exclusive cinematographic record of this inexcusable act of aggression enabled the United States Government to force an apology and indemnity from Japan. Alley's "I Witness" account of his splashing through the blood which flowed in the wake of Japanese aggression against China is the most interesting part of his autobiography and covers almost one-third of its contents.

After the *Panay* incident, Alley returned to more peaceful photographic pursuits in Los Angeles. Then came the war and Hearst's Newsreel sent him to Berlin. This part of "I Witness" is little short of dull, even though Alley was in Holland when the Nazis invaded the Low Countries. He went through the bombings of Holland and bicycled through Belgium and part of France in the wake of the German army, but about all you learn is that German successes were achieved through "foul trickery."

After the collapse of France, Alley went back to Berlin, then came home to America, bringing with him the

conviction that the German people are behind Hitler because they feel they have everything to gain and nothing to lose; that the subjugated nations will overthrow their present masters; and that democracy will triumph.

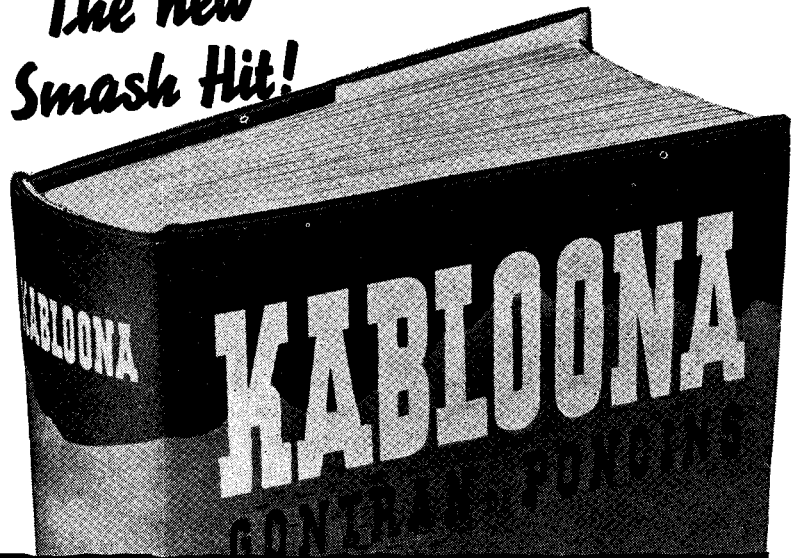
The impression left with the reader is that Mr. Alley was bored with his own life before and after the *Panay* adventure.

It is unfortunate that the publishers did not illustrate "I Witness" with some of the author's notable photographs.

It is also unfortunate that the author chose "I Witness" as a title, because it definitely conflicts with a recently published volume titled "Eye Witness," written by members of the Overseas Press Club.

Linton Wells is a news commentator for the Columbia Broadcasting System.

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