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# MARGARET BOURKE- WHITE GOES DOWN WITH THE SHIP

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From: "Ordinary People In Extraordinary  
Times: Stories of WWII"

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By: Bette Lou Higgins

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**MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE**  
**GOES DOWN WITH THE SHIP**

*From: "Ordinary People In Extraordinary Times: Stories of WWII"*

By: Bette Lou Higgins

Based on the Eden Valley program MEET MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE by Shelley Pearsall

Illustration by: Mary McHale

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Margaret Bourke-White was the first accredited female war correspondent. During World War II, she set out to get a real picture of war. Along the way, Margaret was torpedoed with 400 nurses off the coast of Africa.

None of it would have happened if the top military brass had not made the decision to send her by troop ship to Africa. Margaret wanted to fly with the heavy bomb group, but they were determined that she should travel with the troops and nurses in a convoy of ships. “Who knows what kind of resistance we'll encounter in the air,” they argued. If she wanted to go to the front, she would have to travel by sea. The decision was final.

So, she was billeted on the flagship vessel with 6,000 British and American troops and 400 nurses. There were several troop ships, an aircraft carrier, and a number of destroyers in the convoy. The ill-fated voyage began with a series of fierce storms. The wild weather raged for five days with sixty foot high waves.

One benefit of the five-day storm was that there was no danger of being torpedoed. No sub could hold its aim long enough to hit anything. But all of that changed once they sailed through the Gibraltar Straits. The weather calmed and the sea flattened. There were many hints of dark and dangerous mysteries underwater. The protective destroyers circled like a school of sharks. Sensing that something was amiss, Margaret went to check her travel bag one last time. They all kept one ready, packed with soap, extra socks, concentrated chocolate. Margaret threw out the socks and most of the chocolate, so that she

could fit in a camera and a few rolls of film. She hated to leave behind the telephoto lens that had photographed almost every famous person in the world: King George, Churchill, the Pope, Chang Kai-shek, Roosevelt. Throwing the soap out, Margaret crammed the lens in. Then she visited the commanding officer of the troops and received permission to go up to an area near the Captain's bridge and cover any sort of attack on the convoy from there.

That evening, the torpedo came softly, penetrating the ship with a dull thud. Instinctively they all knew that their ship was gravely wounded.

The sudden sharp list catapulted Margaret out of bed. Scrambling into clothes, she wished her cabin mates good luck and made a dash for the bridge area to take pictures of the attack. It was midnight and the moon was so bright that it gave the illusion of morning light. Wonderful light for photographs.

The ship tilted underfoot like a giant silver tea tray. A solitary crewman ran toward Margaret and told her to get to the lifeboat station, and ran off before she could explain that she had permission to be there from the commanding officer. Suddenly a blurred voice came through the loudspeaker. At first Margaret couldn't catch the meaning, and then the words became clear -- "Abandon ship!"

Thoughts of work gave way to thoughts of survival. Lifeboat No. 12 suddenly seemed like the most important place in the world to be, and during Margaret's long journey down the deck, she dreaded reaching the station only to find it had already

been launched.

In reality, Lifeboat No. 12 **would** have been launched, if it hadn't been flooded with splash from the torpedo, and the crew members were afraid it wouldn't stay afloat. They stood on the deck and discussed what to do. One of the nurses was trembling with such intensity, that her entire body was shaking from head to foot. Margaret realized how dry **her** mouth was and thought, "This is one time in your life when you don't have the faintest idea what is going to happen to you. There's a 50 percent chance you will live and there is a 50 percent chance you will die."

The crew decided to take the risk and climbed into the lifeboat to find themselves up to their waists in water. During the quivering, rocking descent, the photographer could think of nothing but the magnificent pictures she could **not** take. For her, the most indelible image that could **not** be photographed was the one of the sinking ship viewed from the dangling lifeboat -- with a backdrop of moonlit cumulus clouds. It is a scene that would always haunt her.

Their rudder broke when they reached the water, and it seemed as if they would never pry themselves from the suction of the big ship. When they were finally free, they drifted helplessly as they bailed water with helmets.

It was like a waterborne theater on the ocean that night. In other boats, nurses sang "You are my sunshine" to keep their spirits up. One nurse was pulled from the water, her leg broken and her face covered in oil from the ship. A voice from a nearby destroyer echoed across the water telling them they were going to drop depth charges. It was an eerie thought that

submarines still lurked beneath. Then the voice announced, that for safety, they were going to sail away, and Margaret and the rest of the nurses were left in silent darkness.

Margaret wondered what would happen if they were washed up on enemy shore. She thought about the tasty chocolate she had foolishly discarded, and the one tin of food she had **not** thrown out when she packed her cameras. The can was marked: “To be consumed when rations of any kind are not procurable.”

When morning came, Margaret took a photograph of their boat -- if she had thrown out her precious food for cameras, by gosh, she was going to take pictures. By mid-afternoon, she had an even better picture to take: a photograph of them waving to an English flying boat which rescued them.

Margaret never learned how many died and how many were saved in the attack. The flagship went down the following day. She watched as her portholes melted in the heat and ran down her sides like tears.

Margaret later said that she found it hard to describe the way she felt during this experience, especially as they waited on the deck of the doomed ship, not knowing what would happen. It was a dividing time in her life, a time that made Margaret feel a much deeper connection with her fellow man. This was a moment in which people drew upon their own secret strength and went to meet whatever fate they had to meet -- for some life, and for some, death. During the attack, two Wacs stayed to comfort the soldiers who were injured. They got out their lipsticks and their powder puffs, and put on their makeup until the

men were laughing, "If a girl can put on her lipstick at a time like this, you know there isn't much for a fellow to be afraid of."

And that was true.

Margaret was to recount that story many times during her life noting that all of those who **flew**, including the top brass who ordered her onto the ship, arrived safely on the African continent with their feet dry while she and the rest of the women had to sit waist-deep in water and row part of the way.

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