



OHIO'S EXTRAORDINARY HEROES

**MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE
AND RODGER YOUNG**

BETTE LOU HIGGINS

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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"

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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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THE STORY OF RODGER YOUNG

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During World War II, many remarkable Ohioans became heroes and this story is a tribute to all of them.

When Rodger Young of Green Springs joined the Ohio National Guard with his brother in 1939, it was simply a part-time job to provide a little extra income. Born with an abnormally large heart, suffering from worsening sight and hearing from a high school basketball game, Rodger was an unlikely soldier, but the National Guard provided him a way of helping to support his family and an opportunity to serve his country. But the part-time job suddenly became full-time with the attack on Pearl Harbor. By the summer of 1943, Rodger and most of the rest of his former Ohio National Guardsmen were sent to Guadalcanal for planned assaults on the Solomons. By this time, Rodger had worked his way up to Staff Sergeant, but the preparations for war in the jungle made it clear to him that his physical problems could put his fellow soldiers in jeopardy. Though he was proud of the yellow sergeant stripes he wore, he knew he needed to do something to protect his men. So in late June, 1943 Staff Sergeant Young went to talk to his Regimental Commander. “Sir, I would like to request permission to be reduced to the rank of private.” The commander was a bit shocked at the request and asked why the Sergeant wanted to be busted. Swallowing his pride, Young replied that his ears were going bad, “I can’t hear very well any more and I don’t want any of my men killed ... because of me.” But the Commander did not consider the struggle the young Sergeant had gone through to come to this decision and thought he merely wanted a way out of the fight. Rodger said that if he thought he would be left out of the fighting because of this he would just drop the whole thing. So

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the company physician was asked to check out Young's condition. He reported to the Commander that indeed the Sergeant was approaching deafness. He even recommended that Young be sent to a field hospital. The Commander apologized for doubting him, but Young refused to be sent away from his unit and rejoined his friends in the field and his boyhood friend, Sergeant Walter Rigby, became the new private's commander.

By July 27th the Infantry had battled its way to the foot of Horseshoe Hill. Private First Class Frank Petrarca from Cleveland was kept busy with calls of "medic" all around him. Four days later Sergeant Petrarca watched as two soldiers from the old Ohio National Guard huddled in a muddy foxhole as mortar fire rained over them. The Cleveland Medic soon heard cries from the wounded. Grabbing his aid bag, he started off – knowing he would have to move over a barren hilltop, fully exposed to the enemy to reach the wounded. He went anyway. On PFC Frank Petrarca's 25th birthday he met the enemy head on. His subsequent Medal of Honor read, "Even on the threshold of death, he continued to display valor ... [as he] made a last attempt to reach his wounded comrade and fell in glorious death."

A short distance from where Frank Petrarca lay dying on that July 31st, the other Ohioans under the command of Platoon Sergeant Walter Rigby were working their way along a seemingly deserted trail. Soon the sixteen men were trapped by a Japanese emplacement. Rodger Young headed out on a suicide mission to try to save his companions. As he slithered toward the Japanese with his rifle, a burst of machine gun fire cracked into his arm

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and splintered the stock of his rifle. Dropping the useless weapon, Young pressed on. Another burst of fire tore into his leg from thigh to ankle -- but still he kept going. Finally he reached a shallow hole about five yards from the machine gun where the Japanese couldn't depress the muzzle of their gun far enough to get a good clean shot at him. Painfully he reached for his grenade in his belt. He pulled the pin with his teeth, reared up and lobbed the grenade toward the machine gun -- which blasted him full in the face. Rodger Young died as the grenade left his hand and landed in the center of the machine gun crew killing all five Japanese manning the weapon.

At least five Ohioans died that day – but because of Rodger Young, some came home. To the Young family in Ohio, only a letter of condolence came home along with the Medal Of Honor. Mrs. Young then sent a special request to the army asking that the family be allowed to put up a monument in the Clyde, Ohio cemetery with his old rank of Staff Sergeant listed with his name. The request was denied.

Later Broadway composer Private First Class Frank Loesser was asked to compose a song for the Infantry by his friend, E.J. Kahn, Jr., who was working as a public relations officer for the Infantry. Loesser read the Medals of Honor citations for Army PRIVATES for inspiration. He only had to read Private Rodger Young's file once. “The Ballad Of Rodger Young” became one of the most recognized hits of WWII. Ironically, had Mrs. Young’s request to have her son posthumously promoted back to Staff Sergeant been successful, his story would never have been seen by Loesser and these words would never have been written:

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“No, they’ve got no time for glory in the Infantry.
No, they’re got no use for praises loudly sung,
But in every soldier’s heart in all the Infantry
Shines the name, shines the name of Rodger Young.”

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