

Reporting on the G.I. Joe:

Ernie Pyle as America's Eyewitness to World War II

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Historical Paper

Senior Division

2,491 words

In the spring of 1945, just three months before the United States ordered the use of atomic bombs ending the war with Japan, a few American soldiers gathered silently around a small makeshift memorial pushed into the ground on the Japanese island of Ie Shima that read, “At this spot, the 77th Infantry Division lost a buddy, Ernie Pyle, 18 April 1945.”

These soldiers grieved not only the death of a comrade but the popular chronicler of common American folks at home and soldiers in the field.<sup>1</sup> A small town farm boy from Dana, Indiana, Ernie Pyle’s columns offered a “worm’s-eye view” of the fighting in North Africa, Europe, and the Pacific against the enemy forces of Nazi Germany and Japan. Despite persistent self-doubt, Ernie Pyle reached publishing fame conveying the triumphs and struggles of the American soldier in World War II through a series of “everyman” columns syndicated across the nation.<sup>2</sup> Pyle’s death while reporting in the Pacific Theater exemplifies the tragic loss of potential in all young soldiers whose lives are cut short in battle. Today, Pyle’s triumphant legacy resonates in the stories of soldiers whose contributions would otherwise go unknown and the journalistic writing that still bears his name.

### **Roots and Rising (1900-1935)**

Born on August 3, 1900, Ernie Pyle grew up on a tenant farm in Dana, Indiana.<sup>3</sup> Though not prosperous, Pyle’s parents were hardworking and passed on to their son a compassionate sensitivity toward others. Ernie read about the world outside of Dana and dreamed of his life beyond as he felt his intellect and big dreams were not appreciated in his rural community.<sup>4</sup> His

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Boomhower, *A Soldier’s Friend: The Life of Ernie Pyle*, (Indianapolis, Indiana Historical Society Press, 2006), 2-6.

<sup>2</sup> “World War II.” History.com. <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii>. (accessed January 30, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> “Ernie Pyle WWII Museum.” Erniepyle.org. <https://www.erniepyle.org/>. (accessed January 29, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Hendrix, Nellie. “James Tobin Interview with Nellie Hendrix.” Interview by James Tobin. June 24, 1994. Accessed January 6, 2019. Pyle Mss. V, 1994.

self-doubt about his abilities that haunted his entire career cultivated here, verging on bitterness.<sup>5</sup> Throughout his childhood, Pyle was told he would succumb to nothing greater than a lowly farmer like his father. Pyle wrote of his home, “I don’t know whether you know that long, sad wind that blows across the hundreds of miles of Midwest flatlands in the summertime. To me, it was one of the most melancholy things in all life.”<sup>6</sup>

As Pyle graduated from high school in 1918, he faced an uncertain future. World War I was ending, so Pyle chose to enroll at Indiana University (IU) in Bloomington in 1919 where he began exploring what would later become his signature craft: news reporting as a storyteller with a passion to see the world.<sup>7</sup> Pyle left IU without graduating and worked first for an Indiana paper, the *LaPorte Herald*, before moving in 1923 to the *The Washington Daily News* in D.C.<sup>8</sup>

### **Roving Reporter (1923- January 1943)**

Although he presented himself as a “run-of-the-mill” writer, he showed equal portions of ambition and insecurity, both emerging from his upbringing.<sup>9</sup> While assigned to the copy desk at the *Daily News* where he wrote headlines and revised long, boring stories into short, interesting pieces for the next day’s edition, Pyle sharpened his style. For a writer of his temperament, the task held hidden satisfactions. He learned to convert droning stories into a few taut paragraphs. “He was never one to spend half a dozen words on an idea when one little action verb would do it,” commented Emerson Martin, a fellow reporter at the *Daily News*.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> James Tobin, *Ernie Pyle’s War: America’s Eyewitness to WWII*, (New York, Free Press, 1997), 5-9.

<sup>6</sup> Pyle, Ernie. "That Long, Sad Wind." *Daily News*, September 23, 1935.

<sup>7</sup> Tobin, 13.

<sup>8</sup>Tobin, 17.

<sup>9</sup> “Reporting America at War.” PBS. <https://www.pbs.org/weta/reportingamericaatwar/reporters/pyle/>. (accessed January 6, 2019)

<sup>10</sup>Boomhower, 29-30.

Pyle remained restless and unable to “sit still.” Perhaps the only long-term commitment he made was his decision to marry Geraldine Siebolds (Jerry) in the fall of 1923. Marriage not only failed to curb Pyle’s desire to travel, but accentuated his sense of wanderlust.<sup>11</sup> Jerry traveled with him as he spent the next sixteen months exploring the United States as Pyle wrote columns for the *Daily News* that were distributed across the United States in the Scripps-Howard syndicate.

From 1935-1942, Pyle traveled the country and published under the persona, “Hoosier Vagabond.”<sup>12</sup> The column became popular among readers seeking relief from America’s economic struggles of the Great Depression and the possibility of war in Europe. While the real-life Ernie Pyle was riddled with anxiety and depression, the columnist “Ernie Pyle” was a figure of warmth and reassurance who shared his sadnesses, exhilaration, and dreams with American readers. He wrote about charmingly abnormal people living in more or less normal settings and people whose accomplishments were rarely monumental.<sup>13</sup> He told stories of interesting people like a man who played “Home on the Range” instead of hymns on the civic carillon, an upbeat coal miner, and a national champion ice cream maker. Similar to the people themselves, each column was different. In an era of narrowed opportunities and disappointed hope, Pyle symbolized freedom and fresh starts.

His earliest writings set the precedent for his future columns in that his quirky charm and cumulative power sharply distinguished itself from dime-a-dozen interest features. In 1935, Pyle

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<sup>11</sup> Tobin, 17.

<sup>12</sup> “Ernie Pyle Biography.” IMDB. <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0701505/bio>. (accessed January 13, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> “A Journey Through 1930s America with Ernie Pyle.” Chicago Tribune. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1989-08-27-8901070986-story.html> (Accessed January 20, 2019.)

was merely a skilled writer, but by 1940, he was a skilled craftsman of short prose and shaped a role for himself: “An American Everyman” ready for war.<sup>14</sup>

### **First Mission (England, December 1940- March 1941)**

As Pyle traveled around the U.S., Europe became engulfed in WWII. Pyle, now forty years old, felt an overpowering urge to be in the midst of the war. The feeling he came not from a journalistic need to report on a story, but because he “simply wanted to go privately-- just inside myself I wanted to go.”<sup>15</sup> Because of his previous success as an aviation columnist, Pyle convinced Scripps-Howard to allow him to become a war correspondent in 1940:

“For it seemed to me that in London there was occurring a spiritual holocaust-- a trial of souls-- that never again in our day should be reenact... to live your span in this time of ours, and to detour around an opportunity of sharing in the most momentous happening of that time, was simply to be disinterested in living.”<sup>16</sup>

Exchanging the security of his civilian career to report on the war in England, Pyle traveled to London to observe WWII. On December 29, 1940, the German Luftwaffe sent more than one hundred planes to drop incendiaries on the English capital. Rather than retreating to the hotel’s bomb shelter, Pyle went out on a balcony to catch a glimpse of the city burning. One of his first columns, *Ringed and Stabbed with Fire*, reflects his experience with the turmoil and ghostly rustles of destruction brought upon by the Blitz:

“I shall always remember the monstrous loveliness of that one single view of London on a holiday night... London, stabbed with great fires, shaken by explosions, its dark regions along the Thames sparkling with the pinpoint of white-hot bombs... all went together to create the most hateful, most beautiful scene I have ever known.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Tobin, 28-29.

<sup>15</sup> Ernie Pyle, *Ernie Pyle in England*, (Ernie Pyle, 1914), 12.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ernie Pyle, “Ringed and Stabbed with Fire,” December 14, 1940. Accessed February 2, 2019.

Pyle returned back to the United States in March of 1941 to find his career surpassing any expectation of small-town boy. His columns from London succeed tremendously with American readers. Characterized by gentle wholesomeness, compelling imagery, and wide-eyed country-boy absorption, Pyle's writing style brought war home to Americans in a new way.

Because of his success, Scripps-Howard's executive editors waxed enthusiastically about a twice-weekly Pyle column written from inside the Army after Pearl Harbor. Pyle revived his aviation column and concentrated his reporting on the war, becoming America's unofficial recorder of the country at war.

#### **North Africa (November 1942- May 1943)**

Pyle's popularity led his editors to assign him to the European Theater once more. In November 1942, Pyle followed the Americans landing into North Africa.

In his early columns, Pyle reported his experiences on the frontline and the stories of troops who made the initial landings. His modest upbringing drew him to report on American soldiers who, similarly, went unrecognized to the public. Although he believed his stories to be "confusing and inadequate," Lee Miller, Pyle's friend and Scripps-Howard editor, said they were "exciting" to read back in the United States. He chronicled the daily hardships and struggles that the soldiers encountered. In one of the first columns, *Killing is all that Matters*, he painted a vivid picture of the harsh conditions experienced by the average soldier whom he famously dubbed "G.I. Joe":

"From now onward, stretching from months to months in the future, life is completely changed for thousands of American boys on this side of the Earth... they are in the fighting. The last of the comforts are gone. From now on you sleep in beds under little tents... You dig ditches to hide from the bullets and the chilling north wind off the

Mediterranean. There are no more hot water tabs. There are no post exchanges where you can buy cigarettes... Swinging first and swinging to kill is all that matters now.”<sup>18</sup>

The North African columns described dreary life in the field, the most brutal of truths. Side by side with the recruits, Pyle exchanged his own comforts and safety to report the daily realities of the American war effort. He used his easy nature and modesty to get close to the G.I.’s. Rather than talking, Pyle listened attentively and carried around a small notebook to only write down names and hometowns. The columns Pyle wrote about the soldiers’ lives away were popular with military families in the United States. His writings made readers feel that they were witnessing the action on the frontlines in a voice that spoke to each reader personally.<sup>19</sup> “I wish you could see just one of the ineradicable pictures I have in my mind today.”<sup>20</sup> As time passed, one of Pyle’s greatest triumphs was in the way G.I.’s trusted Pyle as a friend who could tell their story to the folks back home.

Pyle produced powerful columns blasting the American policy of leaving French officials in power who sympathized with the Nazis. Another column detailed a soldier’s suffering from shell shock. Pyle managed to slip his reports by Army censors through a bit of luck and chance. “The censors are so bored that when I bring my column in the entire office... grabs for it and reads it hungrily.”<sup>21</sup>

After the North African columns, Pyle’s fame was so great that he was triumphantly welcomed by high-ranking officers and enlisted men alike. Readership at home soared, and by April 1943, Scripps-Howard distributed Pyle’s columns to 122 newspapers nationwide.

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<sup>18</sup> Ernie Pyle, “Killing is all that Matters,” December 1, 1942. Accessed February 14, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Tobin, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Ernie Pyle, *Here is Your War*, (Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1943), 137.

<sup>21</sup> Boomhower, 65.

### **Captain Waskow (1943-1944)**

For the next six months, Pyle followed the U.S. forces as they advanced into Italy. He was now recognized as one of the most outstanding front-line reporters. During the Italian Campaign, Pyle wrote *The Death of Captain Waskow*, for which he received the 1944 Pulitzer Prize. He described the grief felt by a group of infantrymen when the body of their company commander returned from the front line. It captured the essence of the meaning of death on the battlefield:

“Two men unleashed his body from the mule and lifted it off and laid it in the shadow beside the low stone wall. Other men took the other bodies off. Finally, there were five lying end to end in a long row, alongside the road. You don’t cover up dead men in the combat zone. They just lie there in the shadows until somebody else comes after them.”<sup>22</sup>

With his Waskow column, Pyle reached the height of his career. His work appeared in approximately 200 newspapers across the country. His sincere description of the effect that the loss of a comrade had on a group of G.I.’s touched readers everywhere.

Despite reaching the top of his profession, Pyle’s inner demons destroyed any sense of satisfaction. He drowned himself in liquor in an attempt to erase his memory of the war dead and was overcome by fatigue. He wrote, “I’m not worried about what anyone thinks of my stuff; I’m worried about the fact when I sit down to write I haven’t any emotion or enthusiasm... maybe I’m just a flash in the pan and I’m all written out.”<sup>23</sup> He apologetically returned to the U.S. in mid-May 1944, but a sense of duty drove him back to the frontlines in late December 1944.

### **The Last Assignment (Japan: January- April 1945)**

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<sup>22</sup> Ernie Pyle, “The Death of Captain Waskow,” January 10, 1944.

<sup>23</sup> “Tight, swollen up feeling.” Ernie Pyle to Lee Miller, January 15, 1944. Pyle mass 1929-1944, Lilly Library, Bloomington, Indiana.



This time he would report on the Marines in the Pacific Theater. On April 18, 1945, the Allied troops gathered offshore of Okinawa Island for what would be the last amphibious landings in the Pacific War. Pyle traveled with the 77th Infantry Division moving toward the front line on a small island called Ie Shima. A Japanese machine gun bullet struck Pyle in the head and he died instantly.<sup>24</sup>

Pyle's tragic death, similar to the soldiers he wrote about, occurred suddenly and in the heat of battle. He was buried with his helmet in a long row of graves among other soldiers on the island. Markers were erected in his honor as America paid tribute to the man who became the voice of the G.I. Joe.<sup>25</sup>

His death was mourned by millions of readers. President Truman issued a statement of condolence stating, "No man in this war has so well told the story of the American fighting man as American fighting men wanted it told. He deserves the gratitude of all his countrymen."<sup>26</sup>

### **Triumphs and Tragedies**

Although Ernie Pyle reached the top of his profession and left a legacy of writing that resonates far beyond his columns, he died tragically at the peak of his career. He was the curator behind the creation of a particular type of war reporting, what can be called "the Pyle style" after its foremost practitioner and remembered in the School of Journalism at Indiana University. Such reporting looked not to explain the larger strategic landscape or the progress of specific battles, but rather focused on the small picture and the ordinary soldier, depicted as stoically heroic

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<sup>24</sup> "Ernie Pyle Eyewitness Death Account Letter." Brigadier General William G. King Jr., January 1999. Collection # SC 2989, Manuscript and Visual Collections Department William Henry Smith Memorial Library Indiana Historical Society.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> "Ernie Pyle Is Killed on Ie Island; Foe Fired When All Seemed Safe," The New York Times. Accessed December 30, 2018.

under trying conditions. This style of war reporting has heavily influenced American journalism to this day and has shaped the image of the American soldier at war ever since. Present-day war correspondents, World War II veterans, and historians still recognize Pyle's World War II dispatches as "the standard to which every other war correspondent should strive to emulate." His talent lay in telling the story of "G.I. Joe," someone's son, brother, or husband. He befriended the infantryman and brought great triumph to them in representing the common man in battle.

Despite all of his professional triumphs, he endured many personal tragedies such as self-doubt and alcoholism. However, the tragedies lingering in his heart never ceased his desire to report on the war. Similar to the loss of potential felt when a young soldier dies in battle, Ernie Pyle's death symbolizes the tragic loss of his future writing potential. Killed by a sniper just like the soldiers, Ernie Pyle now occupies a place in American journalistic letters which no other correspondent of WWII achieved. With his keen ear for harmonies between the ordinary man and the sublime and his country-boy style, he came to symbolize "the people" in its entirety. He succeeded in bridging a gap between soldier and civilian where written words usually fail.

## Annotated Bibliography

### Primary Resources

Pyle, Ernie. *Ernie Pyle in England*. R.M. McBride & Company, 1945.

Written by Ernie Pyle himself, this is a collection of Ernie Pyle's columns from December 1940 to March 1941 when he reported on the war in England. I used this book in the early stages of my research to provide an outline of Ernie's time in England through his eyes.

Pyle, Ernie. *Here Is Your War*. World Publishing, 1943.

This book is a compilation of articles Pyle wrote about and during the Allied invasion of Africa in 1942 through the defeat of the Axis armies there in mid-1943. I used this book at the beginning of my research to outline Ernie's time in Africa.

Pyle, Ernie. *Home Country*. Amereon, 1987.

This is a collection of articles written by Ernie Pyle for Scripps-Howard Newspapers between 1935 and 1940. It was compiled and published by William Sloan Associates, Inc., after his death in 1945. I used this book to highlight Ernie's career as a roving reporter and the role he played in the Great Depression.

Pyle, Ernie. *Last Chapter*. Holt, 1946.

This is the final book of Ernie Pyle's war reporting. It is his story of what he saw in the Pacific from early 1945 until his death on Ie Shima in April 1945. I used this source to contextualize Ernie's death.

'The New York Times. Accessed March 04, 2019.

<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/0803.html>.

This is Ernie Pyle's obituary written by the New York Times in 1945. This source included many quotes from General Eisenhower which assisted in my research on Ernie Pyle's significance.

## Secondary Sources:

Boomhower, Ray E. *The Soldier's Friend: A Life of Ernie Pyle*. Indiana Historical Society Press, 2006.

This book offers a look at Ernie Pyle through a magnifying glass. Written by an Indiana author, I used this book throughout my entire research as it analyzed Ernie's life and provided many primary source quotes.

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Battle of Okinawa." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. June 25, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Battle-of-Okinawa#ref1257882>.

I used this website later on in my research to highlight the big picture of Ernie's life.

Burke, Matthew M. "War Correspondent Ernie Pyle's Legacy More Important than Ever, Officers Say at Memorial." *Stars and Stripes*. Accessed March 04, 2019. <https://www.stripes.com/news/war-correspondent-ernie-pyle-s-legacy-more-important-than-ever-officers-say-at-memorial-1.523523>.

This website assisted immensely in researching the legacy of Ernie Pyle. It discusses how war correspondents today utilize the "Pyle Style" of writing.

Editors, History.com. "The U.S. Home Front During World War II." *History.com*. March 24, 2010. <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/us-home-front-during-world-war-ii>.

This website places America in the context of WWII and highlights the daily struggles of the G.I. I used this to place Ernie's columns in a historical context.

"Ernie Pyle." *Indiana Historical Society*. <https://indianahistory.org/education/educator-resources/famous-hoosiers/ernie-pyle/>.

I visited the Indiana Historical Society to research for my paper. There I found valuable primary resources including an eyewitness account of Ernie's death and searched through files of his old diaries. This website assisted greatly in that as it provides a general outline of Ernie's significance to Indiana.

"Ernie Pyle Legacy Foundation - Home." *Ernie Pyle Legacy Foundation - Home*. Accessed March 04, 2019. <http://www.erniepylefoundation.org/>.

The Ernie Pyle Legacy Foundation, established September 11, 2013, is a very viable organization to continue the legacy of Ernie Pyle. This website highlights Ernie Pyle's legacy.

Indiana University School of Journalism. "Ernie Pyle: 60 Years After His Death » Ernie Pyle." Indiana University Media School.

<http://mediaschool.indiana.edu/erniepyle/ties-to-the-school/ernie-pyle-60-years-after-his-death/>.

This website proved valuable to my research because it discusses Ernie Pyle's life 60 years after his death. Written by the college he attended, Indiana University, the website helped lead me to some of the resources I found when I researched at IU's Lilly Library.

Military History Matters. "Blitz WW2 – The Battle of London." Military History Monthly. February 09, 2017. Accessed March 04, 2019.

<https://www.military-history.org/articles/world-war-2/blitz-ww2.htm>.

This website outlines the history of the Blitz and helped me place Ernie's trip to England in context.

PBS. <https://www.pbs.org/weta/reportingamericaatwar/reporters/pyle/>.

I used this website significantly in the middle stages of my paper because it analyzes some of Ernie's most famous columns including *The Death Waskow*.

Rice, William. "A JOURNEY THROUGH 1930S AMERICA WITH ERNIE PYLE." Chicago Tribune. September 03, 2018.

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1989-08-27-8901070986-story.html>.

Published by the Chicago Tribune, this website places Ernie's life as a reporter during the Great Depression in context. It also analyzes how Ernie's childhood and upbringing played a role in his reporting.

Tobin, James. *Ernie Pyle's War: America's Eyewitness to World War II*. Free Press, 2006.

This book was by far the most valuable resource in my research. It is the most well-known biography of Ernie Pyle as it provides countless primary quotes and an in-depth analysis of Ernie's life and legacy.