

Death Photo of Famed War Reporter Ernie Pyle Surfaces after 63 Years

By Richard Pyle, Associated Press
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NEW YORK — (Note: After this article was published, The Associated Press learned that the death photo of Ernie Pyle was published at least twice, in a 1979 newspaper article and a 1982 book).

The figure in the photograph is clad in Army fatigues, boots and helmet, lying on his back in peaceful repose, folded hands holding a military cap. Except for a thin trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth, he could be asleep.

But he is not asleep; he is dead. And this is not just another fallen GI; it is Ernie Pyle, the most celebrated war correspondent of World War II.

As far as can be determined, the photograph has never been published. Sixty-three years after Pyle was killed by the Japanese, it has surfaced — surprising historians, reminding a forgetful world of a humble correspondent who artfully and ardently told the story of a war from the foxholes.



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"It's a striking and painful image, but Ernie Pyle wanted people to see and understand the sacrifices that soldiers had to make, so it's fitting, in a way, that this photo of his own death ... drives home the reality and the finality of that sacrifice," said James E. Tobin, a professor at Miami University of Ohio.

Tobin, author of a 1997 biography, *Ernie Pyle's War*, and Owen V. Johnson, an Indiana University professor who collects Pyle-related correspondence, said they had never seen the photo. The negative is long lost, and only a few prints are known to exist.

"When I think about the real treasures of American history that we have," says Mark Foynes, director of the Wright Museum of World War II in Wolfeboro, N.H., "this picture is definitely in the ballpark."

Not just any reporter

"COMMAND POST, IE SHIMA, April 18 (AP) — Ernie Pyle, war correspondent beloved by his co-workers, GIs and generals alike, was killed by a Japanese machine-gun bullet through his left temple this morning ..."

The news stunned a nation still mourning the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt six days earlier. Callers besieged newspaper switchboards. "Ernie is mourned by the Army," said soldier-artist Bill Mauldin, whose droll, irreverent GI cartoons had made him nearly as famous as Pyle.



He was right; even amid heavy fighting, Pyle's death was a prime topic among the troops.

"If I had not been there to see it, I would have taken with a grain of salt any report that the GI was taking Ernie Pyle's death 'hard,' but that is the only word that best describes the universal reaction out here," Army photographer Alexander Roberts wrote to Lee Miller, a friend of Ernie and his first biographer.

But Ernie Pyle was not just any reporter. He was a household name during World War II and for years afterward. From 1941 until his death, Pyle riveted the nation with personal, straight-from-the-heart tales about hometown soldiers in history's greatest conflict.

In 1944, his columns for Scripps-Howard Newspapers earned a Pulitzer Prize and Hollywood made a movie, *Ernie Pyle's Story of G.I. Joe*, starring Burgess Meredith as the slender, balding 44-year-old reporter.

Typically self-effacing, Pyle insisted the film include fellow war correspondents playing themselves. But he was killed before it was released.

In April 1945, the one-time Indiana farm boy had just arrived in the Pacific after four years of covering combat in North Africa, Italy and France. With Germany on the verge of surrender, he wanted to see the war to its end, but confided to colleagues that he didn't expect to survive.

At Okinawa he found U.S. forces battling entrenched Japanese defenders while "kamikaze" suicide pilots wreaked carnage on the Allied fleet offshore.

On April 16, the Army's 77th Infantry Division landed on Ie Shima, a small island off Okinawa, to capture an airfield. Although a sideshow to the main battle, it was "warfare in its worst form," photographer Roberts wrote later. "Not one Japanese soldier surrendered, he killed until he was killed."

On the third morning, a jeep carrying Pyle and three officers came under fire from a hidden machine gun. All scrambled for cover in roadside ditches, but when Pyle raised his head, a .30 caliber bullet caught him in the left temple, killing him instantly.

Roberts and two other photographers, including AP's Grant MacDonald, were at a command post 300 yards away when Col. Joseph Coolidge, who had been with Pyle in the jeep, reported what happened.

Roberts went to the scene, and despite continuing enemy fire, crept forward — a "laborious, dirt-eating crawl," he later called it — to record the scene with his Speed Graphic camera. His risky act earned Roberts a Bronze Star medal for valor.

Pyle was first buried among soldiers on Ie Shima. In 1949 his body was moved to the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific at Punchbowl Crater, near Honolulu.

Roberts' photograph, however, was never seen by the public. He told Miller the War Department had withheld it "out of deference" to Ernie's ailing widow, Jerry.

"It was so peaceful a death ... that I felt its reproduction would not be in bad taste," he said, "but there probably would be another school of thought on this."

Prints kept

Eight military museums and history centers queried by AP said the negative and photo were unknown to them. This included the National Archives & Records Administration, the most likely repository.

"Considering all the photo research done on World War II, and thousands of letters requesting information about our holdings, my guess is it would have been 'discovered' by a researcher or staff member by now," said Edward McCarter, NARA's top still-photos archivist.

Prints taken from Roberts' negative at the time of Pyle's death "would appear to be the only record that the photo was actually made," McCarter said.

At least two such prints were kept as souvenirs by veterans who served aboard USS Panamint, a Navy communications ship in the Okinawa campaign. Although the two men never met, they came by the photo in similar ways, and both later recognized its importance to posterity.

Retired naval officer Richard Strasser, 84, of Goshen, Ind., who recalls Pyle visiting the ship just before he was killed, said a friend named George, who ran the ship's darkroom, gave him a packet of pictures after Japan surrendered in August 1945.

Months later, back in civilian life, Strasser finally opened the envelope. "I was surprised to find a picture of Ernie Pyle," he said. "At the time, Ernie's widow was still alive and I considered sending the photo to her, but had mixed feelings about it. In the end I did nothing."

It was Strasser's photo, a still-pristine contact print from the 4-by-5-inch negative, that came to the AP's attention late last year. He since has made it available to the Newseum, a \$435 million news museum scheduled to open in Washington this year.

Margaret Engel, the Newseum's managing editor, says the photo is "of strong historic interest," and because Pyle died at the height of his fame, "the circumstances of his death ... remain a compelling story for students of journalism and the war."

Ex-Petty Officer Joseph T. Bannan, who joined USS Panamint's crew in May 1945 after his own ship was damaged by a kamikaze, said his Pyle photo came from a ship's photographer he remembers only as "Joe from Philadelphia."

Bannan, 82, of Boynton Beach, Fla., said "Joe" told him he had been ordered to destroy the negative "because of the effect it would have on the morale of the American public."

In 2004, Bannan donated copies of the photo to the Wright Museum, the Ernie Pyle State Historic Site at Dana, Ind., and the Institute on World War II and the Human Experience at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Fla.

Yet another copy was acquired by the Indiana Historical Society at a 1999 auction. Historian Susan Sutton said she had no information on its origin or the seller.

Both Strasser and Bannan assumed a Navy photographer had made the picture. Only Roberts, however, is known to have visited the death scene, and with no Army Signal Corps photo lab nearby, his film went to the nearest ship offshore — USS Panamint.

This was "standard procedure" in the Pacific, says retired AP photographer Max Desfor, 96, who covered Okinawa and later won a Pulitzer Prize in Korea. "No question that's what happened."

In tracing the picture's history, AP learned of a second photo, showing Pyle's body on a stretcher. The fatal wound, unseen in Roberts' photo, appears as a dark spot above his left eyebrow.

That photo, of unknown origin, appears to be an amateur snapshot, said Katherine Gould, assistant curator of cultural history at the Indiana State Museum in Indianapolis, which acquired it and Bannan's photo last year from the Dana historic site.

As war photographs go, neither could be considered grisly, but they were never displayed at Dana. "We get a lot of kids here," spokeswoman Janice Duncan said.

One who did see the Roberts photo there is Bruce L. Johnson, 84, of Afton, Minn., a nephew and one of the few surviving relatives who knew Pyle.

In April 1945, Johnson was a sailor aboard the seaplane tender USS Norton Sound, which by a quirk of fate was a few miles away when Pyle was killed. In fact, the two had been writing letters home, trying to figure out a way they could rendezvous.

"We were in the mess hall and the news came over the ship's loudspeaker," he recalled. "It was just a shock."

Contributing: Associated Press researcher Rhonda Shafner



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