


1945 February 5-11

A Window on the War



Ernie PYLE
— In *The*
La Crosse Tribune

This newspaper has signed up with Ernie Pyle, to bring to its readers the down-to-earth stories which the war's best-loved correspondent has gone to the Pacific to ferret out. Releases start tomorrow on the editorial page.

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 February 7, page 1)

Radio broadcasts, newsreels in theaters, and newspaper articles, gave the people back home a peek at what their loved ones were experiencing in the war overseas. War correspondents also tried to share their view of the action with the parents, wives, brothers and sisters still in the United States. To boost morale, these stories sought to reassure the folks back home that our side had the people and tools to win the fight and bring the troops back home alive. Other stories offered a glimpse of the horrors perpetuated by the Axis that provided justification for the sacrifices being made by so many. Correspondents often tried to provide names and hometowns of the service people they wrote about so the people back home could see familiar names in the newspaper.

Ernie Pyle was one of the best-known, and possibly most beloved, of all the war correspondents. The *La Crosse Tribune* was already running a regular column by Hal Boyle, but Hal Boyle was no Ernie Pyle.

Ernie Pyle was born in 1900, the only child of a tenant-farming couple at a small town in east-central Indiana, not far from the border with Illinois.¹ He joined the U.S. Navy in 1918, but World War I ended before he saw any action. Then he studied journalism at the University of Indiana because he had heard it was an easy major, but he quit college a few months from earning a degree and went to work for a newspaper in his home state.²

Pyle got married and then worked for a succession of newspapers. He became a “roving reporter” for the *Washington Daily News* in 1935, and he wrote about his travels around the United States. His columns were carried in almost 200 newspapers.³

He was also an aviation reporter and became acquainted with Amelia Earhart.⁴

In the *New York Times Magazine*, David Chrisinger wrote:

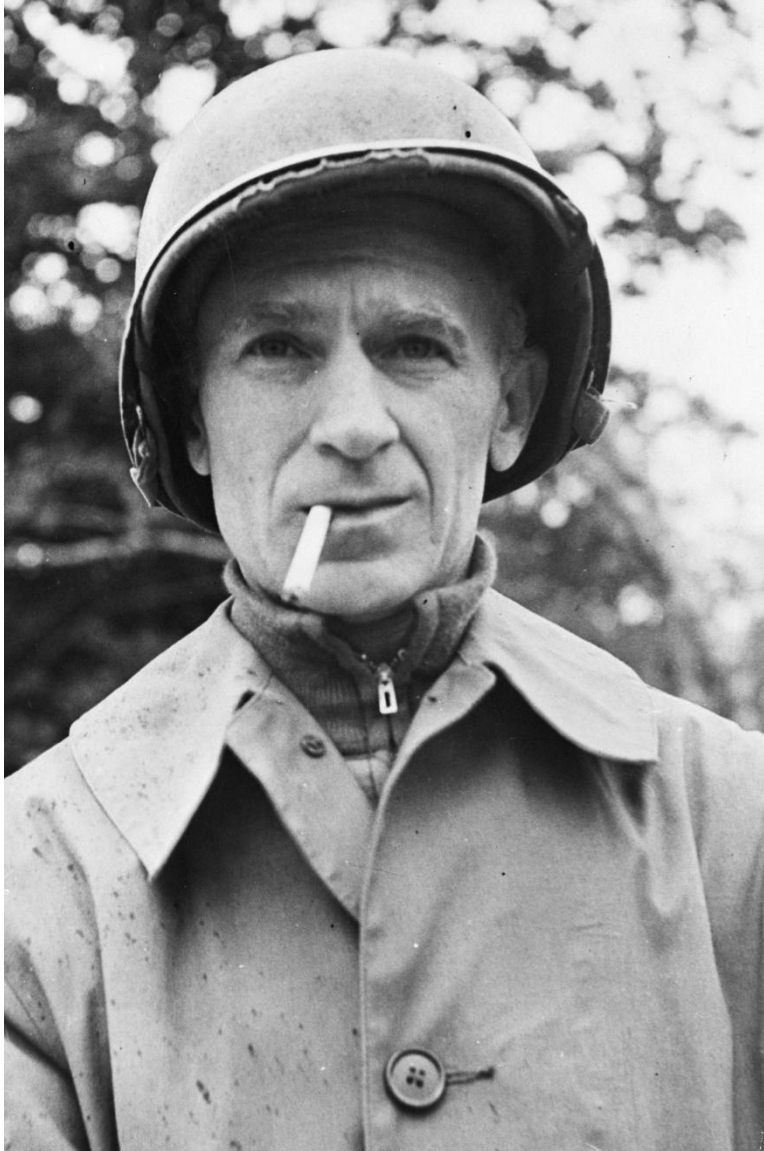
Pyle honed a sincere and colloquial style of writing that made readers feel as if they were listening to a good friend share an insight or something he noticed that day. When the United States entered World War II, Pyle took that same technique — familiar, open, attuned to the daily struggles of ordinary people — and applied it to covering battles and bombings.⁵

Pyle went to England in December 1940 to report on the German bombing campaign. His stories were compiled as a book entitled *Ernie Pyle in England* (1941).⁶

He returned to the United States in March 1941. His wife, who suffered from severe depression, alcoholism, and drug abuse, attempted suicide. After helping her recover, Pyle divorced his wife in April 1942.⁷

He returned to England where he wrote about American soldiers training for the invasion of Europe and their cultural adjustment to England.⁸

In the fall of 1942, he joined American forces invading North Africa. He became attached to the Army infantrymen and did most of his writing about their lives and what they faced in combat.⁹



(Bettman Archive/Getty Images; *New York Times Magazine*, 2019 June 5)

Pyle was not the type of war correspondent who would make a brief visit to the front, get a few interviews, and then retire to a safe rear area to write a story. He accompanied the troops, lugging his portable typewriter, out in the elements, eating canned food, getting a little fitful sleep, and risking the almost constant danger of sudden death. The infantrymen he wrote about respected him because he shared their existence.



Ernie Pyle eating C-rations
(National Archives)

He went with the Army for the invasion of Sicily in 1943. His work had already been published in a book entitled *Here Is Your War: The Story of G.I. Joe*. When the campaign in Sicily ended, Pyle went back to the United States to do publicity appearances for the book.¹⁰

Things were not going well, however, on Mr. Pyle's personal home front. He and his wife had remarried in early March 1943 ("by proxy"), but her mental and substance abuse problems required hospitalization.¹¹

Late in 1943, Pyle returned to Europe for the bitter, hard-fought campaign in Italy. His reporting there would earn him a 1943 Pulitzer Prize.¹² Winston Churchill had called Italy the "soft underbelly" of Europe, but the reality of it was an uphill battle against successive lines of stalwart German defenses complicated by the mountainous terrain and foul weather.

In one of his best-known columns, Ernie Pyle describes a night in 1943 when five American soldiers' bodies were brought down from a mountain on mules. The bodies were laid out on the ground, uncovered, as some men from the company gathered around. One of the bodies was that of Captain Henry T. Waskow, the company commander.¹³ Here is an excerpt:

The uncertain mules moved off to their olive groves. The men in the road seemed reluctant to leave. They stood around, and gradually I could sense them moving, one by one, close to Capt. Waskow's body. Not so much to look, I think, as to say something in finality to him and to themselves. I stood close by and I could hear.

One soldier came and looked down, and he said out loud:

"God damn it!"

Another one came, and he said, "God damn it to hell anyway!" He looked down for a few last moments and then turned and left.

Another man came. I think it was an officer. It was hard to tell officers from men in the dim light, for everybody was grimy and dirty. The man looked down into the dead captain's face and then spoke directly to him, as tho he were alive:

"I'm sorry, old man."

Then a soldier came and stood beside the officer and bent over, and he too spoke to his dead captain, not in a whisper but awfully tender, and he said:

"I sure am sorry, sir."

Then the first man squatted down, and he reached down and took the Captain's hand, and he sat there for a full five minutes holding the dead hand in his own and looking intently into the dead face. And he never uttered a sound all the time he sat there.

Finally he put the hand down. He reached up and gently straightened the points of the Captain's shirt collar, and then he sort of rearranged the tattered edges of his uniform around the wound, and then he got up and walked away down the road in the moonlight, all alone.¹⁴

After getting his fill of Italy, and probably realizing that the main action would soon be shifting to the invasion of France, Pyle returned to England in early 1944. He landed on Normandy one day after the invasion on June 6. He was with French troops when they marched into Paris. His dispatches from the front were compiled into the book *Brave Men* (1944).¹⁵



Ernie Pyle writing a story on his typewriter
(National Archives)

Pyle's columns appeared in about 400 daily and 300 weekly newspapers, making him "America's most widely read correspondent."¹⁶

When Pyle went back to the United States, his wife attempted suicide again. It required yet another hospitalization, with this one including shock treatments.¹⁷

Hollywood made a movie about Ernie Pyle that finished shooting in early 1945. It was called *The Story of G.I. Joe*, and it was directed by William Wellman, who was one of the most prominent directors at the time. The six main characters were played by professional actors, including Burgess Meredith portraying Pyle, but the rest of the soldiers in the movie were real soldiers. The War Department loaned out two companies of men to play the infantrymen, and it also provided trucks, tanks, and guns for the movie. Great effort was taken to make it an accurate depiction of American infantrymen at war. Overseas combat veterans and a veteran war correspondent were advisors on the set. One of the combat vets told Pyle, "At least I think it will be the most authentic war picture ever made." One of Pyle's friends from Indiana was also on the set to make sure the character of Ernie Pyle was realistic. Pyle wrote that he never cared for the title of the movie, but he was "too lazy" to think of a better one.¹⁸

The movie was scheduled for release in July 1945. The producer promised that the first showings would be to troops overseas.¹⁹



The movie may have been authentic, but the promotional poster was pure Hollywood.
 Robert Mitchum is in the center; Burgess Meredith is to the right.
 (Internet Movie Database)

Ernie Pyle had already seen enough death and destruction to last a lifetime. But his wife's struggles made his homecoming more stressful than relaxing. There was still the rest of the story of World War II to finish---out in the Pacific---so in February 1945, Ernie Pyle was going back to the war. He states his reasons in his first column to appear in the *La Crosse Tribune*.

Ernie Pyle:

'Well, Here We Go Again'

Editor's Note: Ernie Pyle is with the navy in the Pacific. Pending receipt of his dispatches from that war theater we are publishing a few articles he wrote before his take-off from San Francisco, of which the following is one. After today's introductory, Pyle's dispatch will be found on the editorial page.

By ERNIE PYLE

San Francisco—Well, here we go again.

It has been four months since I wrote my last column, from France. In four months of non-production a writer gets out of the habit. He forgets the rhythm of words; falls into the easy habit of not making himself think or feel in self-expression.

This first column is a man-killer. Your mind automatically resents the task of focusing itself again. Your thoughts are scattered and you can't get them together to put onto paper. Words come hard. You have to think again. You curse the day you ever took up writing to make a living.

So until I'm once more immersed in the routine of daily writing, and transported once more into the one-track world of war, I'm afraid you'll have to be tolerant with me.

There's nothing nice about the prospect of going back to war again. Anybody who has been in war and wants to go back is a plain damn-fool in my book.

I'm certainly not going because I've got itchy feet again, or because I can't stand America, or because there's my mystic fascination about war that is drawing me back.

I'm going simply because there's a war on and I'm part of it and I've known all the time I was going back. I'm going simply because I've got to—and I hate it.

This time it will be the Pacific. When I left France last fall we thought the war in Europe was about over. I say "we" because I mean almost everybody over there thought so. I felt it was so near the end I could come home and before the time came to go again, that side of the war would be finished, and only the Pacific would be left.

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But it didn't turn out that way. Now nobody knows how long the European war will last. Naturally all my friends and associations and sentiments are on that side. I suppose down in

my heart I would rather go back to that side. For over in Europe I know the tempo of the battle; I feel at home with it in a way.

And yet I think it's best to stick with the original plan and go on to the Pacific. There are a lot of guys in that war, too. They are the same guys who are fighting on the other side, only with different names, that's all. It is not belittling my friends in Europe to desert them and go to the Pacific for a while.

I'm going with the navy this time, since the navy is so dominant in the Pacific, and since I've done very little in the past on that part of the service. I won't stay with the navy for the duration—probably two or three months, and then back ashore again with my noble souls, the dough-foots.

Security forbids telling you just what the plans are. But I can say that I'll fly across the Pacific, and join ship on the other side. Aboard ship I'll be out of touch with the world on long cruises. It may be there will be lapses in the daily column, simply because it's impossible to transmit these pieces. But we'll do our best to keep them going steadily.

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I haven't figured out yet what I'm going to do about seasickness. I'm one of those unfortunates with a terrific stomach on land, but one that turns to whey and jelly when I get aboard ship. I know of nothing that submerges the muse in a man as much as the constant compulsion to throw up. Perhaps I should take along my own oil to spread on the troubled waters.

Friends warn me about all kinds of horrible diseases in the Pacific. About dysentery, and malaria, and fungus that gets in your ears and your intestines, and that horrible swelling disease known as elephantiasis.

Well, all I can say is that I'm God's gift to germs. Those fungi will shout and leap for joy when I show up. Maybe I can play the pied piper role—maybe the germs will all follow me when I get there, and leave the rest of the boys free to fight.

So what with disease, Japs, seasickness, and shot and shell—you see I'm not too overwhelmed with relief at starting out again.

But there's one thing in my favor where I'm going: one thing that will make life bearable when all else is darkness and gloom. And that one thing is that, out in the Pacific, I'll be damned good and stinking hot. Oh boy!

(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 February 8, page 1)

Now the readers of the *La Crosse Tribune* would have the privilege of viewing the war through Ernie Pyle's window.

Jeff Rand
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La Crosse Public Library

Sources & Notes:

¹ *The Ernie Pyle WWII Museum*, accessed 2020 February 6, <https://www.erniepyle.org/>. Also: *Commercial Atlas & Marketing Guide 2009, Volume 1* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 2009), 175.

² "The War: Ernie Pyle," *Public Broadcasting System*, accessed 2020 February 6, https://www.pbs.org/thewar/detail_5242.htm.

³ Robert L. Gale, "Ernie Pyle," *American National Biography*, accessed 2020 February 5, <https://doi.org/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.article.1601336>.

⁴ Rebecca Maksel, "Byline: Ernie Pyle," *Air & Space Magazine*, 2011 November, <https://www.airspacemag.com/history-of-flight/byline-ernie-pyle-76396157/>.

⁵ David Chrisinger, "The Man Who Told America the Truth About D-Day," *New York Times Magazine*, 2019 June 5, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/05/magazine/d-day-normandy-75th-ernie-pyle.html>.

⁶ Gale, "Ernie Pyle."

⁷ Gale, "Ernie Pyle."

⁸ Gale, "Ernie Pyle."

⁹ Gale, "Ernie Pyle."

¹⁰ Gale, "Ernie Pyle."

¹¹ Gale, "Ernie Pyle."

¹² "The War: Ernie Pyle."

¹³ Captain Henry T. Waskow was a 25-year-old college graduate from Texas who commanded a company in the 36th Infantry Division. On December 12, 1943, he was leading his men attacking German positions in the Battle of San Pietro when fragments from artillery fire killed him instantly. His body remained on the battlefield for three days before it was recovered. Pyle's story about Waskow was not published until January 10, 1944. ("The Words of War," *National World War II Museum*, 2018 December 12, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/words-war-37>.)

Waskow had written a letter to his family in the event that he was killed in action. It read, in part: "If you get to read this, I will have died in defense of my country and all that it stands for---the most honorable and distinguished death a man can die. It was not because I was willing to die for my country, however---I wanted to live for it---just as any other person wants to do." ("This One Is Captain Waskow," *Library of America*, accessed 2020 February 9, <http://storyoftheweek.loa.org/2011/05/one-is-captain-waskow.html>)

¹⁴ Ernie Pyle, "The Death of Capt. Waskow," 1944 January 10, *The Ernie Pyle WWII Museum*, <https://www.erniepyle.org/waskow/>. This event is portrayed in the movie, *The Story of G.I. Joe*, with Robert Mitchum whose character was based in part on Captain Waskow. Mitchum was nominated for an Academy Award as best supporting actor for what was his first important movie role. After the movie was made, Mitchum was drafted into the Army, but he served only eight months. (Louie Estrada, "Film and TV Star Robert Mitchum Dies At Age 79," *Washington Post*, 1997 July 2, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1997/07/02/film-and-tv-star-robert-mitchum-dies-at-age-79/2c7c3de9-3293-4d7c-bee6-3124b3d73d4c/>)

¹⁵ Gale, "Ernie Pyle."

¹⁶ "Reporting America at War: The Reporters: Ernie Pyle," *Public Broadcasting System*, accessed 2020 February 7, <https://www.pbs.org/weta/reportingamericaatwar/reporters/pyle/>. For a selection of his columns, see: The Indiana University Journalism website; <https://sites.mediaschool.indiana.edu/erniepyle/wartime-columns/3/>.

¹⁷ Gale, "Ernie Pyle."

¹⁸ Ernie Pyle, "The Story of G.I. Joe," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 February 15, page 6. Burgess Meredith left his career as an actor to enlist in the Army Air Corps in early 1942. He rose to the rank of Captain and made recruiting films. He was discharged in 1945 to work on *The Story of G.I. Joe*. ("Meredith, Oliver Burgess,

Capt," *Together We Served*, accessed 2020 February 9,
[https://airforce.togetherweserved.com/usaf/servlet/tws.webapp.WebApps?cmd=ShadowBoxProfile&type=Person
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¹⁹ "Pyle Picture to Go Ahead," *New York Times*, 1945 April 19, page 14.