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Preserving Ernie Pyle's Legacy 70 Years After His Death

April 18 marks the 70th anniversary of the wartime death of Ernie Pyle, the journalist frequently described as Indiana University's most famous alumnus.

When the 50th anniversary of numerous World War II events arrived two decades ago, Pyle's legacy received well-earned attention. Hordes of veterans, appreciative citizens, and a few celebrities came for activities staged at Pyle's birthplace in Dana, Indiana.

There was Andy Rooney, who made his way to the tiny town near Terre Haute to remember the fellow war correspondent with whom he once shared a tent and a friendship. Burgess Meredith, the actor who portrayed Pyle in the 1945 film *The Story of G.I. Joe*, came, as did Riley Tidwell, the soldier responsible for the most poignant scene in Pyle's most famous column, "The Death of Captain Waskow."

It was a remarkable event commemorating a journalist whose dispatches from the war appeared in 700 newspapers across the country. Pyle "bought the farm" — to use the expression common at the time — after the infantry unit he was traveling with came under attack from Japanese machine gun fire on the Pacific island of Ie Shima.

The tributes to Pyle, who died at age 44, included this from President Harry S. Truman: "More than any other man, he became the spokesman of the ordinary American in arms doing so many extraordinary things. It was his genius that the mass and power of our military and naval forces never obscured the men who made them."

Gen. George C. Marshall, then-U.S. Army chief of staff, said, "He did not glorify war, but he did glorify the nobility, the simplicity, and heroism of the American fighting man."

Before the war, Pyle developed a reputation as the first columnist to shine light on the emerging field of aviation

and greater fame as the beloved roving correspondent — almost always writing about common people — for the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain. "Ernie is looking over the shoulder of everybody who writes feature stories," said the late Charles Kuralt. The National Society of Newspaper Columnists recognizes the date of Pyle's death, April 18, as National Columnists' Day.

Although some voiced objections about IU's diminished recognition of Pyle when it announced that its School of Journalism would vacate Ernie Pyle Hall when integrated into the new Media School, the university wisely commissioned a handsome and already popular Pyle sculpture that now sits in front of the school's future home in Franklin Hall.

A group of Pyle's distant relations has taken up the cause of preserving his place in history by establishing the Ernie Pyle Legacy Foundation. Led by California resident Jerry Maschino, the foundation is actively raising funds to sponsor speakers, scholarships, and events to maintain the ongoing public awareness of the Hoosier writer. Working with the *Honolulu Star-Advertiser* and others, the group has put together a ceremonial event and will dedicate a memorial stone April 18 at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu, Hawaii, where Pyle is buried.

"Delving deep into Ernie's history, it became clear to me that his time as a war correspondent, as significant as it was, only captures a part of the man," Maschino said in a visit to Bloomington last fall. "I like to tell people, he was a writer. A columnist. Probably the best one there ever was."

For more information, visit erniepylefoundation.org.

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