

1945 October 1-7

The Hollywood Story of G.I. Joe

"... Just guys from Gillette and Main Street"

This is their story!

Sometimes tender...

Often funny...

But always human!



Lester Cowan presents

ERNIE PYLE'S
"STORY OF
G.I. JOE"

Starring **BURGESS MEREDITH** as **ERNIE PYLE**

with

Robert Mitchum as **The Captain**
Freddie Steele as **The Sergeant**
Wally Cassell as **The Private**



Directed by
WILLIAM A. WELLMAN
Released thru **UNITED ARTISTS**

Starts
TOMORROW!

HOLLYWOOD

Shows at:

1-3-5-7-9

This week the Hollywood Theater is touting its premiere of *The Story of G.I. Joe* on Friday, October 5, 1945. It is the story of war correspondent Ernie Pyle and the World War II infantrymen he lived with and wrote about in his columns distributed to newspapers in the United States.

I wrote about war correspondent Ernie Pyle back in [Week 6](#) of this project when his column first started appearing in the *La Crosse Tribune* in early February 1945. Pyle, the best-known and most popular of the many World War II correspondents, had followed American infantrymen through North Africa, Sicily, Italy, and France. He wrote in a simple, folksy style that endeared him to both soldiers and civilians.

After taking a break in the United States, Pyle headed to the Pacific Theater to report on the war there. This is when the *La Crosse Tribune* started carrying his column. His stint covering the war in the Pacific was tragically cut short. After writing about ship and airplane crews for a few months, he joined the American invasion of Okinawa on April 1, 1945.¹



Ernie Pyle, in the center with the balding hairline, sharing cigarettes with Marines on Okinawa

(Indiana Historical Society)

Following his time with the Marines on Okinawa, Pyle went to a small island west of Okinawa called Ie Shima on April 17. The Army's [77th Infantry Division](#) had invaded it the day before. On April 18, Pyle rode in a jeep with the commanding officer of the 305th Infantry Regiment, another officer, and two enlisted men who were scouting for a new location for their regimental command post. When their jeep was slowed down by traffic, a Japanese soldier with a machine gun opened fire on them. They all bailed

out into the ditches beside the road. When Pyle stuck his head up to see if anyone had been hit, a second burst from the machine gun put a bullet in his left temple and killed him instantly. Ernie Pyle, just 44 years old, was buried on Ie Shima with the rest of the American dead from the battle.²



Ernie Pyle's body at the spot where he was killed, 1945 April 18

(Indiana Historical Society)

As I wrote in the earlier article about Ernie Pyle:

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.³

The movie was based on Pyle's 1943 book, *Here Is Your War*. Pyle requested that [Burgess Meredith](#), a professional actor serving in the Army Air Corps, play him in the movie. An aide to President Roosevelt arranged for Meredith's discharge so he could make the movie.⁴ The movie was released after Pyle's death, and the first showings were to troops overseas.⁵

The civilian premiere of the movie was at the [Loew's Theater in Indianapolis, Indiana](#), Pyle's home state, on July 6, 1945.⁶ It made a couple of "ten best movies of the year" lists and received four Academy Award nominations, including the only one that [Robert Mitchum](#), who plays the commanding officer of the unit in the film, ever received in his long acting career.⁷



Loew's Theater, Indianapolis, Indiana, 1945 July
(Cinema Treasures)

Now in early October 1945, the movie played for the first time in La Crosse. As a promotion for the local premiere, Harry Greene, manager of the [Hollywood Theater](#), put out a call for any veterans who had talked with or seen Ernie Pyle in person. The *La Crosse Tribune* joined in the effort, and any veterans who could attend the premiere were to be honored guests of the Hollywood and the *Tribune* on opening night.⁸

During this time, Camp McCoy was processing transfers and discharges for tens of thousands of service personnel returning to the United States from Europe and the Pacific. Some of these veterans were the

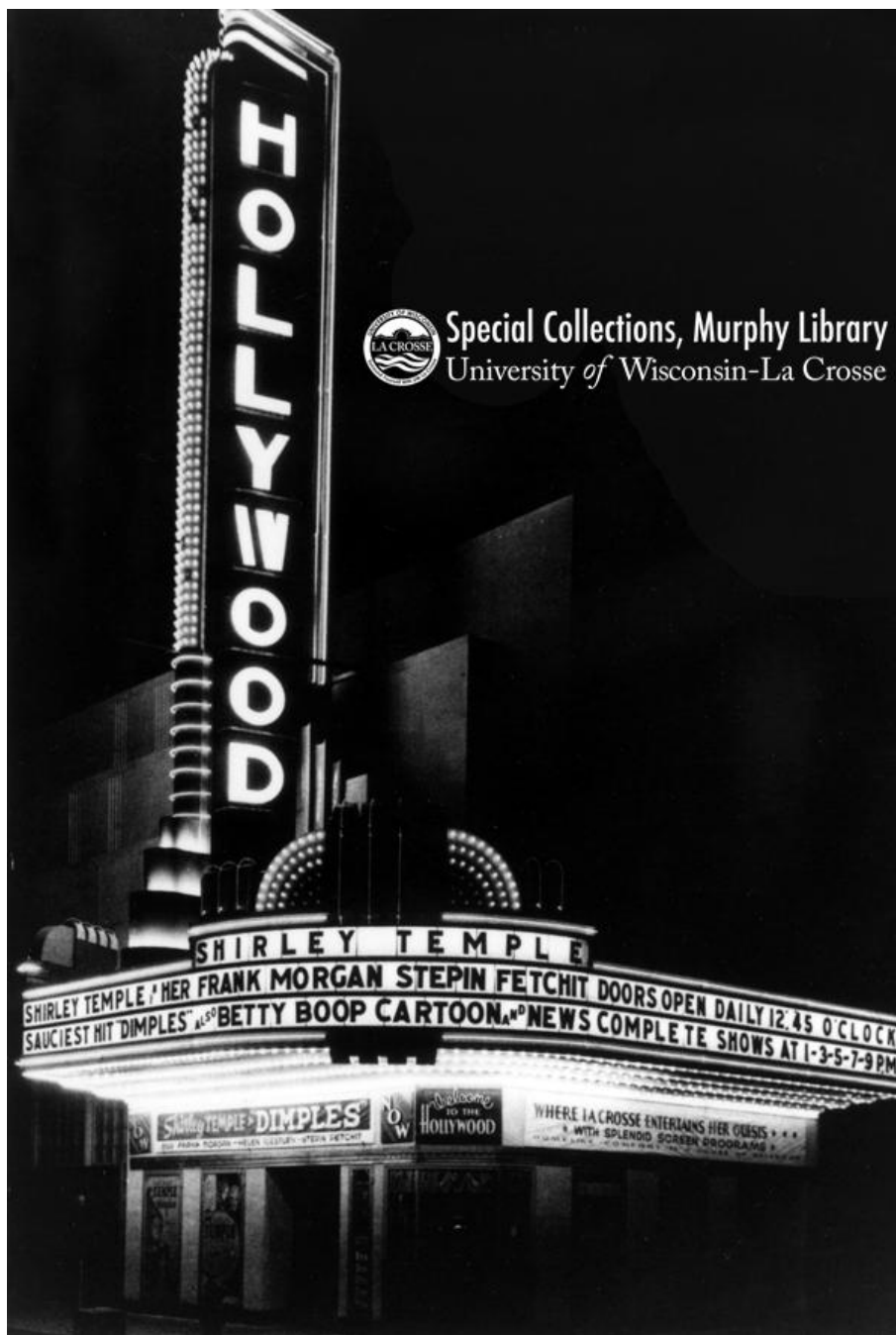
first to contact Greene during the last weekend in September. They were in the [36th Infantry Division](#), and Ernie Pyle had been with their company during the Italian campaign. When their commanding officer, [Captain Henry T. Waskow](#), was killed, Pyle had written one of his [best-known columns](#) of the war. The soldiers said they had called the war correspondent "Old Man Pyle." But their affection for him was evident: "They recalled many a time they teased him, the way he disregarded danger to pound out a column and his determination to get the names and home towns of fighting men." Unfortunately, these men could not stay in town for a week to attend a movie premiere. They left on Monday, October 1, for Camp McCoy to receive their discharges and head home.⁹

A couple of local veterans were able to take advantage of the free dinner and free movie admission offered by the Hollywood on October 5th. Alton Erickson of La Crosse, who was a sergeant in the signal corps for the [3rd Infantry Division](#), saw Ernie Pyle on a command ship before the [invasion of Sicily](#). Erickson said that all the soldiers admired Pyle for going to the beach at Sicily, within hours of the first landing, while fighting was still going on. Pyle did not worry about the danger and was a very observant listener. Thorvald Peterson of Viroqua was wounded twice while with the [34th Infantry Division](#) in Italy. Peterson said Ernie Pyle watched the men during battle and "wrote what he saw." Both Erickson and Peterson thought Pyle's books and columns were a true depiction of the war, and the movie was a good portrayal of the war they knew.¹⁰



—Tribune Photo
Looking At a Picture of Ernie Pyle with Harry Greene, manager of the Hollywood theater, are Alton Erickson, La Crosse (left), and Thorvald Peterson, R. 5, Viroqua, Wis. (right). Erickson, a member of the 3rd infantry division and Peterson, who was in the 34th division, both saw Pyle overseas. They were guests of the Hollywood theater management at dinner Friday night and then saw "The Story of GI Joe."

(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 October 6, page 8)



The Hollywood Theater in 1936

One La Crosse soldier with an Ernie Pyle connection could not make it to the Hollywood Theater on October 5th. Pvt. Bud McCray was back home in La Crosse later in October 1945, after being overseas for 33 months with the [77th Field Artillery](#).¹¹ McCray joined the Army on June 16, 1942.¹² His unit saw its first action in [Tunisia](#) against German General Erwin Rommel's Afrika Corps. After fighting in [Sicily](#), McCray's unit was attached to the 3rd Infantry Division and fought at [Salerno](#), [Cassino](#), and [Anzio](#). Bud McCray shared a tent with Ernie Pyle for a week. McCray referred to him as "Skinny Pyle," and he said everyone in the camp loved Pyle because he shared the dangers and deprivations of war right along

with them. The 77th Field Artillery then participated in the invasion of southern France and fought in the [Vosges Mountains](#) campaign through the winter of 1944-1945. They were with the [103rd Infantry Division](#) in the Alps Mountains near the border of Austria and Italy when the war ended. McCray was in the occupation forces until a flare-up of war wounds put him in an Army hospital and on a ship back to the United States, arriving on September 28, 1945. He was going to spend his 30-day convalescent furlough with his wife at their home on French Island.¹³



(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 October 21, page 11)

The Story of G.I. Joe may not make any list of greatest war movies, or even the greatest World War II movies, of all time, but it is notable because it was produced during the war with the intent of telling an authentic story of infantrymen in combat. Many other films made during the war were largely propaganda intended to inspire and motivate the people at home to support the war effort.

When a Hollywood war movie wraps, everyone goes home alive. Not so for the real soldiers who were essentially playing themselves in *The Story of G. I. Joe*. Many of the 150 veterans of the Italian campaign who performed in the film were transferred to the 10th Army in the Pacific Theater for the [Battle of Okinawa](#). Various sources state that some, most, or all of these men were among the [12,281 Americans killed](#) in the last major land battle of World War II, the same one that claimed Ernie Pyle's life.¹⁴

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Sources & Notes:

¹ Ray E. Boomhower, "The Last Assignment: Ernie Pyle on Okinawa," *Indiana Historical Society*, 2020 August 23, <https://indianahistory.org/blog/the-last-assignment-ernie-pyle-on-okinawa/>.

² Boomhower.

³ Ernie Pyle, "The Story of G.I. Joe," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 February 15, page 6.

⁴ Robert Davenport, *The Encyclopedia of War Movies: The Authoritative Guide to Movies About Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2004), 333-334.

⁵ "Pyle Picture to Go Ahead," *New York Times*, 1945 April 19, page 14.

⁶ "Ernie Pyle Movie Clicks," *Lodi News-Sentinel*, Lodi, California, 1945 July 7, page 3. By this time, Robert Mitchum, who played the commanding officer of the unit in the film, was actually in the Army. He had to hitchhike from Camp Roberts, where he was stationed, to a town so he could see a preview showing of the movie. (*The Wilkes-Barre Record*, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, 1945 June 30, page 7.)

⁷ Amy Dunkleberger, "The Story of G.I. Joe," Library of Congress, accessed 2020 October 11, https://www.loc.gov/static/programs/national-film-preservation-board/documents/g_i_joe.pdf.

⁸ "Secure Some GIs Knowing Ernie Pyle," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 October 4, page 21.

⁹ "Returning War Veterans Tell Of Seeing Ernie Pyle In Italy," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 October 2, page 12. Robert Mitchum played the role in the movie that was inspired by Captain Waskow.

¹⁰ "GIs Tell of Famed Writer," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 October 6, page 6.

¹¹ "La Crosse Soldier Knew Ernie Pyle, Maudlin; Tells Of Troop Ship Sinking Near Bermuda," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 October 21, page 11.

¹² U.S., Department of Veterans Affairs, *Beneficiary Identification Records Locator Subsystem (BIRLS) Death File*, *Ancestry.com* (<http://www.ancestry.com> : accessed 2020 October 11).

¹³ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 October 21.

¹⁴ James Steffen, "The Story of G.I. Joe," *Turner Classic Movies*, 2020, <https://www.tcm.com/watchtcm/movies/91522/Story-of-G-I-Joe-The/>.