

# Death photo of WWII reporter Ernie Pyle surfaces, historians surprised



**This photo Ernie Pyle after being killed in World War II has surprised historians who never knew it existed.**

(Strasser/AP)

BY [Richard Pyle](#)

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Monday, February 4, 2008, 12:29 AM

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.

“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.”

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, 88, 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.”

Strasser recently provided his photo — a still-pristine contact print from the 4-by-5-inch negative — to the AP. 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.”



## **This photo Ernie Pyle after being killed in World War II has surprised historians who never knew it existed.**

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."

*Richard Pyle, who has covered six wars for The Associated Press, is no relation to Ernie Pyle.  
AP researcher Rhonda Shafner contributed to this story.*