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# **OHIO HERO**

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**THE STORY OF RODGER  
YOUNG**

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**BETTE LOU HIGGINS**

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During World War II, many remarkable Ohioans became heroes and this story is a tribute to all of them.

When Rodger Young of Green Springs joined the Ohio National Guard with his brother in 1939, it was simply a part-time job to provide a little extra income. Born with an abnormally large heart, suffering from worsening sight and hearing from a high school basketball game, Rodger was an unlikely soldier, but the National Guard provided him a way of helping to support his family and an opportunity to serve his country. But the part-time job suddenly became full-time with the attack on Pearl Harbor. By the summer of 1943, Rodger and most of the rest of his former Ohio National Guardsmen were sent to Guadalcanal for planned assaults on the Solomons. By this time, Rodger had worked his way up to Staff Sergeant, but the preparations for war in the jungle made it clear to him that his physical problems could put his fellow soldiers in jeopardy. Though he was proud of the yellow sergeant stripes he wore, he knew he needed to do something to protect his men. So in late June, 1943 Staff Sergeant Young went to talk to his Regimental Commander. “Sir, I would like to request permission to be reduced to the rank of private.” The commander was a bit shocked at the request and asked why the Sergeant wanted to be busted. Swallowing his pride, Young replied that his ears were going bad, “I can’t hear very well any more and I don’t want any of my men killed ... because of me.” But the Commander did not consider the struggle the young Sergeant had gone through to come to this decision and thought he merely wanted a way out of the fight. Rodger said that if he thought he would be left out of the fighting because of this he would just drop the

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whole thing. So the company physician was asked to check out Young's condition. He reported to the Commander that indeed the Sergeant was approaching deafness. He even recommended that Young be sent to a field hospital. The Commander apologized for doubting him, but Young refused to be sent away from his unit and rejoined his friends in the field and his boyhood friend, Sergeant Walter Rigby, became the new private's commander.

By July 27<sup>th</sup> the Infantry had battled its way to the foot of Horseshoe Hill. Private First Class Frank Petrarca from Cleveland was kept busy with calls of "medic" all around him. Four days later Sergeant Petrarca watched as two soldiers from the old Ohio National Guard huddled in a muddy foxhole as mortar fire rained over them. The Cleveland Medic soon heard cries from the wounded. Grabbing his aid bag, he started off – knowing he would have to move over a barren hilltop, fully exposed to the enemy to reach the wounded. He went anyway. On PFC Frank Petrarca's 25<sup>th</sup> birthday he met the enemy head on. His subsequent Medal of Honor read, "Even on the threshold of death, he continued to display valor ... [as he] made a last attempt to reach his wounded comrade and fell in glorious death."

A short distance from where Frank Petrarca lay dying on that July 31<sup>st</sup>, the other Ohioans under the command of Platoon Sergeant Walter Rigby were working their way along a seemingly deserted trail. Soon the sixteen men were trapped by a Japanese emplacement. Rodger Young headed out on a suicide mission to try to save his

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companions. As he slithered toward the Japanese with his rifle, a burst of machine gun fire cracked into his arm and splintered the stock of his rifle. Dropping the useless weapon, Young pressed on. Another burst of fire tore into his leg from thigh to ankle -- but still he kept going. Finally he reached a shallow hole about five yards from the machine gun where the Japanese couldn't depress the muzzle of their gun far enough to get a good clean shot at him. Painfully he reached for his grenade in his belt. He pulled the pin with his teeth, reared up and lobbed the grenade toward the machine gun -- which blasted him full in the face. Rodger Young died as the grenade left his hand and landed in the center of the machine gun crew killing all five Japanese manning the weapon.

At least five Ohioans died that day – but because of Rodger Young, some came home. To the Young family in Ohio, only a letter of condolence came home along with the Medal Of Honor. Mrs. Young then sent a special request to the army asking that the family be allowed to put up a monument in the Clyde, Ohio cemetery with his old rank of Staff Sergeant listed with his name. The request was denied.

Later Broadway composer Private First Class Frank Loesser was asked to compose a song for the Infantry by his friend, E.J. Kahn, Jr., who was working as a public relations officer for the Infantry. Loesser read the Medals of Honor citations for Army PRIVATES for inspiration. He only had to read Private Rodger Young's file once. “The Ballad Of Rodger Young” became one of the most recognized hits of WWII. Ironically, had Mrs. Young’s request to have her son posthumously promoted back to Staff Sergeant been successful, his story would never

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have been seen by Loesser and these words would never have been written:

“No, they’ve got no time for glory in the Infantry.

No, they’re got no use for praises loudly sung,

But in every soldier’s heart in all the Infantry

Shines the name, shines the name of Rodger Young.”

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