

## **The Stars Turned Gold**

by Mariana Tosca

They came from cornfields and corner stores, from soda shops and steel mills. They were farmers and factory workers, clerks and coal miners. Many had never traveled beyond the periphery of their hometown. Some had been called up. Others volunteered. But, all of them were stepping into an experience that would forever alter the course of their lives.

Left behind were sweethearts and parents, children and friends. In windows throughout the land, blue stars wilted on white banners bound by crimson borders. With one star, worry presided. With more stars, it multiplied. Families did their best to persevere in the absence of those who had gone to war. They lived, they worked, and they continued on, girding their spirits against the possibility of that unwelcome day when the stars turned gold.

Flags and flowers cover national cemeteries across the country, identifying the final resting place of the hundreds of thousands who gave their last full measure of devotion. One of those flags marks the modest memorial stone of a 22-year-old US Army Air Corps pilot from Ellwood City, Pennsylvania. His name was Royal Stratton.

By all accounts, Royal was a sweet kid—the kind who would do anything for you. His youthful days were spent dreaming of becoming a pilot. His nights were spent dreaming of Mary Ellen. To further both ambitions, he took flying lessons at Newcastle airport and in the summer of 1943, at the age of 20, he married his true love. The following year, they welcomed daughter Vickie. On his fourth day of fatherhood, Royal dressed in his military flight suit and set out to join his squadron in the war-torn South Pacific. He never returned home.

I first learned of the 4<sup>th</sup> Emergency Rescue Squadron when my production partner, Christopher Johnson, spoke of the mission that claimed the life of his great-uncle Royal. This valiant group of young men were stationed on the island of Iwo Jima and had been tasked with flying, mostly unarmed, through perilous combat zones in order to locate and rescue downed airmen who were adrift and unprotected in enemy waters.

On May 29, 1945, just twelve weeks before the end of the war, Royal and his crew received instructions to search for the men of the Dragon Lady, a flak-damaged B29 that had been forced to ditch and whose exact coordinates were unknown. After hours of searching hundreds of nautical miles over the open ocean, nine of those crew-members were located and rescued, but during that effort Royal's life was lost.

As it is for so many families who have lost a loved one to war, questions remain and reverberate for generations. What could have been, if only...? To assuage his family's lingering grief and bereavement, Christopher decided to find out exactly what happened to his great-uncle on that ill-fated day. And I decided to help him.

We traveled the world to locate and interview the surviving members of that rescue squadron. Their stories, replete with epic valor, were not diluted through derivative sources, nor eroded by the passing of time. Each of those irreplaceable firsthand accounts underscored the resilience of the human spirit and revealed a service and heroism that helped forge the most unified era of America's history.

The culmination of our decade-long undertaking is the documentary/narrative hybrid film *Journey to Royal: A WWII Rescue Mission*. This film is our final salute to the Greatest Generation and to all who served in the global conflict of the Second World War. It is our letter of ineffable gratitude to those who answered the call of duty and made the ultimate sacrifice.

The world is full of heroes whose stories we may never know, but that doesn't diminish or invalidate the value of their contributions. The story of the 4<sup>th</sup> Emergency Rescue Squadron's noble service was not an uncommon one. From front lines to assembly lines, an inherent sense of duty and commitment pervaded that era when America - and its allies - had a unity of purpose. Despite differences in background, personal beliefs or politics, millions banded together to overcome seemingly insurmountable adversity.

As we approach the eleventh day of November, let us stop to remember and honor those servicemen and women who left their final footprints on the battlefields of the world. Let us remember to give thanks for the freedom and opportunities their sacrifice has afforded us. For all of us who are beneficiaries of their service, every day should be Remembrance Day.

\*

***Rescue Squadron: A WWII Rescue Mission*** will be released in the UK on **September 27, 2021** and will be available on streaming and cable platforms, including: Amazon, iTunes, GooglePlay, Microsoft and Virgin. DVD and Blu-ray retailers include Amazon, ASDA, Morrisons, Gardner's and Simply Media.

\*

*Rescue Squadron: A WWII Rescue Mission*  
featuring Earl Holliman, Marsha Hunt, Janis Paige  
written and directed by Christopher Johnson [www.ChrisJohnsonFilms.com](http://www.ChrisJohnsonFilms.com)  
produced by Mariana Tosca, p.g.a. [www.MTosca.com](http://www.MTosca.com)