

# A Boy Named Rodger Young

By CWO E. J. KAHN, JR.

## BIRTH OF A LEGEND

The United States, like every nation with a folk tradition, cherishes its ballads based on the deeds of heroes—John Brown's Body, Casey Jones, The Death of Floyd Collins, and others. The central figure in each of these is a dead man about whom, with the passing of the years, fact and legend have become inseparably merged. In the war just ended, an American doughboy was immortalized in song—Rodger Young, subject of Pfc. Frank Loesser's new infantry ballad. Rodger Young has been dead for two years, but the memory of his heroism is destined to live on. This is his story.

—The Editors.

*Shines the name, Rodger Young,  
Fought and died for the men he marched among:  
To the everlasting glory of the infantry,  
Lives the story of Private Rodger Young.\**

NOBODY has ever succeeded especially well in defining the qualities that make a man a hero. In the infantry, where, merely to survive, a soldier had to do things that, by lesser standards, would be considered remarkable, gallantry was commonplace. But even the infantry had its special heroes, and the long list of their names is headed by that exclusive group—one out of every 50,000, say—who have been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, our country's highest reward for military achievement. By the very fact that they have earned this decoration, these few men must be exceptional individuals. And yet, on examination, many of them appear to be very ordinary people.

Rodger Young was a very ordinary man who became a great one. There is no typical American foot soldier—our doughboys rightly deny the existence of any such insult to their individuality—but in a

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Rodger's mother and father receiving the Medal of Honor awarded posthumously to their son.



DRAWING BY ROBERT RIGGS

Portrait of Rodger Young, idol of the infantry, who modestly asked demotion from sergeant to private because of failing hearing, and then died gloriously to save his comrades of the 37th.

nation where type casting has become an institution, both on the screen and off it, Rodger Young could be said to have borne a pretty close resemblance to the average soldier. Perhaps his peacetime lack of distinction is in itself symbolic of the incredible change so many Americans made from obscure citizens to artful practitioners of a difficult and dangerous trade. Rodger Young did not look like a storybook soldier. He was short and light, with poor eyes and poorer ears, and yet he was an expert marksman who never faltered on the longest march. He had never been a particularly dashing young man, and he deeply loved his small-town life in the heart of the United States. And yet he elected to die violently on a remote and ugly island he had probably never heard of until a few weeks before he was buried there.

In every conceivable way, he was an average man. He was only fair in his studies, and left high school after his junior year. He was far from well-to-do, but never so poor as to be hungry. He was devoted to his family. He went to church, but only now and then. He was fond of children. He was fond of dogs. He liked to play practical jokes on his friends, but would readily admit that he had an inferior sense of humor. He worked hard and faithfully at an unskilled job. He played a middling game of poker and pinochle. He went out with a variety of girls, owned a battered old car, was an eager, though inexperienced, photographer, was punished by his mother for smoking at too precocious an age, and was so utterly inconspicuous that, after he became nationally recognized as a hero, the home folks

in Sandusky County, Ohio, trying to reminisce about him, could not say for certain whether they recalled ever having seen him or not.

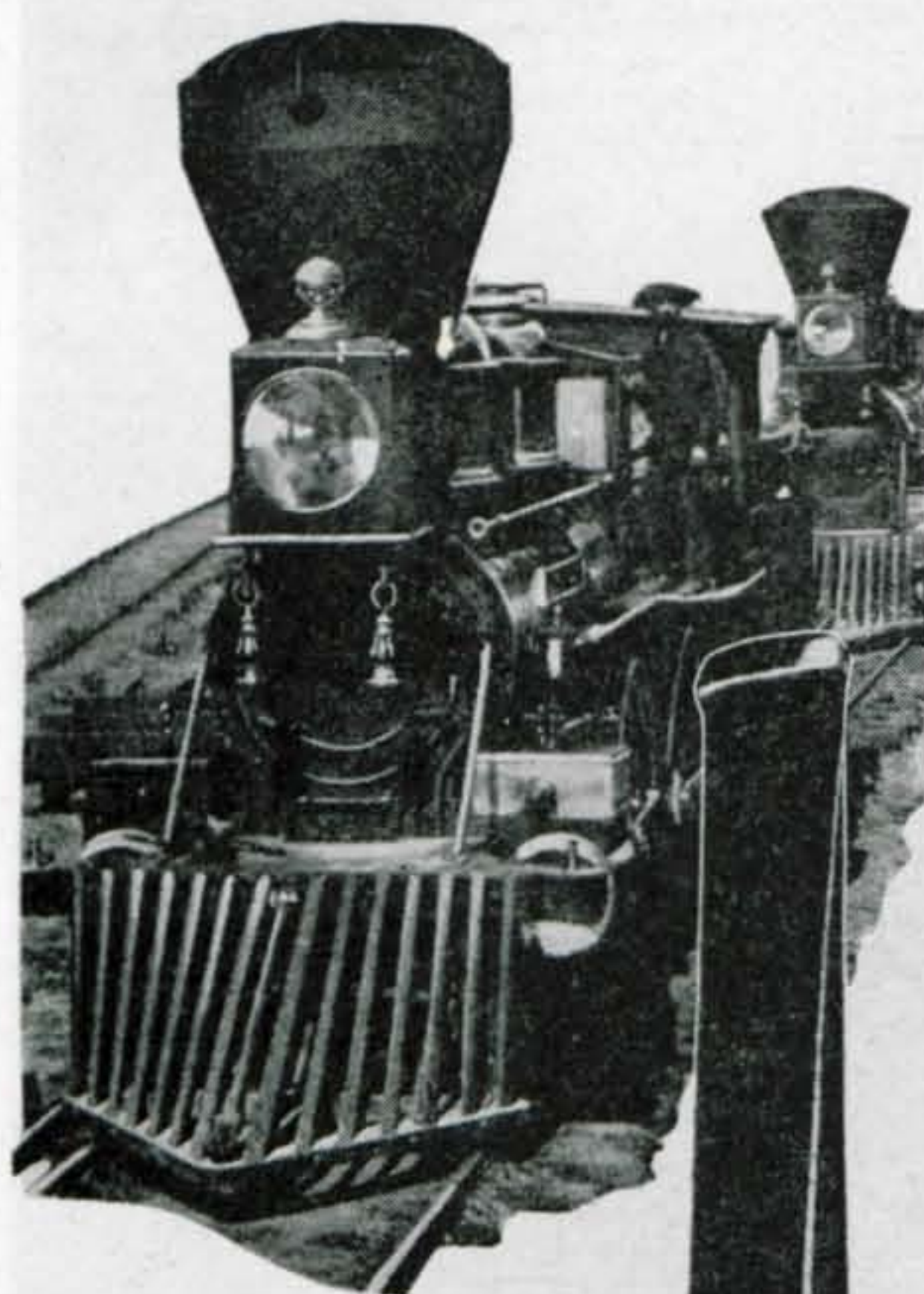
And yet, after his death, his mother received letters from the late President Roosevelt, Secretary Stimson, General Marshall and other high-ranking Army officers, a congressman, a number of amateur poets who have composed verses in his honor, and a flock of people unknown to her who feel they have a bond with her because her son, like their sons, did more than could reasonably be expected of any normal man.

Like other Americans, too, Rodger Young loved sports. His nickname, "Fuzz," was the result of an impulsive remark—"Gee, look at the fuzz fly!" is the official family version—he made while observing the explosive demise of a cottontail on one of many hunting trips with his father. Rodger liked fishing too—so much that he devoted an entire letter from the Pacific to an elaborately detailed description of a tropical fishing excursion, a typically American one in that he had only one strike, lost that, and was happy anyhow. While in training in this country, he contentedly devoted an entire short furlough to joining his father in the pursuit of the bass, catfish and perch residing in Sandusky Bay. He had a 165 bowling average, could directly attribute his eye-and-ear trouble to an injury sustained on a basketball court, and was a great baseball fan. He was never big enough or good enough to play on any first-string teams, but his enthusiasm for sports was unaffected by his limited proficiency. When he went on active military

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IN KAYWOODIE. LOOK FOR THE CLOVER LEAF

## A BOY NAMED RODGER YOUNG

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service with the 37th Infantry Division—Ohio's Buckeye Division—he used to hang around the outfit's baseball team, take snapshots of the players and send the pictures home as valued souvenirs. It probably would have made him very proud to have known that on Bougainville, where the 37th fought some months after he was killed on New Georgia in the summer of 1943, a ball field was given his name.

Late this past March, the citizens of Fremont, Ohio, seat of Young's home county, celebrated Rodger Young Day. It was generally voted by its participants to be the biggest thing that had ever happened in Fremont—bigger, even, than the visit of President McKinley or the marriage of President Hayes' daughter. From the surrounding countryside, enough people came to the town nearly to double its population of 16,000. It was quite an occasion.

In one of the corridors of the Fremont High School, that day, an exhibit of Rodger Young memorabilia reposed in six glass-topped showcases. There were the musical instruments—guitar, banjo and harmonica—Rodger had played in a family orchestra notable for its spirit and versatility. There was the prize ribbon he won, along with a free trip to Chicago, in a newsboys' contest conducted by the Toledo News-Bee in the fall of 1934. There were his ice skates, a batch of his letters home—all the trivia posthumously assembled by a loving family who might have collected more had they been able to tell in advance their boy would be a hero.

Rodger went to war in the fall of 1940 along with the other thousands of Americans who, up to then, had comprised our National Guard and had had little thanks for it. He had joined the guard while in his teens, and belonged to Company B of the 148th Infantry, with headquarters in Fremont and personnel drawn largely from Fremont, Clyde and Green Springs, where the Youngs had lived for some years. The Ohio National Guard became the 37th Infantry Division, whose commander, Maj. Gen. Robert S. Beightler, had the distinction of being the first guard leader in this war to take his division into battle.

Company B's roster contained seven sets of brothers. Rodger's oldest brother, George Webster, was in it, and they traveled together as far as the Fiji Islands, where Webster—as the family calls him—was transferred to a quartermaster outfit and assigned to raising onions and other vegetables for the tasty implementation of the Army ration in that area. Among the brothers in Company B were the Rigby boys, Albert and Walter, of Green Springs, both close friends of the Youngs. Albert was mess sergeant of the organization, and Walter was leading the platoon Rodger saved from annihilation at the moment of his death. It was Walter Rigby, platoon sergeant, who filed the principal affidavit that eventually resulted in Rodger's getting the Medal of Honor.

Having boyhood chums at your side is pleasant on training marches and in the barracks. But the system has its disadvantages in combat. When a company is hard hit and suffers many casualties at once, the effect is the same as if a blockbuster were to land on a school playground. It is not only your

military buddies who are wiped out; it is your lifelong friends, the men you would ordinarily expect to be reunited with when the war is over. Company B was particularly hard hit; scarcely a dozen of the old men were still on the roster at the war's end. The remainder were not all battle casualties—an Army can no more function without transfers than can a streetcar line—but there are many heavy hearts in Sandusky County today.

Being in a National Guard outfit affected Rodger Young in one other way. As a part-time soldier when the emergency arose, he was ushered into full-time service with comparatively little of the scrutiny that embellishes the induction of a raw civilian. In his junior year of high school, while playing basketball with some boys who were stronger, heavier and had longer reaches, he was bumped in a competitive scuffle and struck his head on the floor of the court. Some weeks later, his ears and his eyes began to bother him. He quit school because he had trouble reading. He had to wear glasses all the time, and became slightly deaf. If he had had as thorough a pre-induction examination as selectees have had, he might have been declared ineligible for general military service. Rodger Young, who won the Medal of Honor for gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty, may well have been a legitimate 4-F.

Private Young was promoted to corporal on October 14, 1940, the day before he went into Federal service. During nineteen months of training at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, and Indian-town Gap, Pennsylvania, he earned a sergeantcy and leadership of a squad. He was a dependable, conscientious noncommissioned officer, who appreciated the value of his training to himself and to his country.

Occasionally, during his training, he had to take a written examination on the military knowledge he had acquired. His family still has one test he sent home. It was a regimental quiz, divided into four sections. He scored 80 per cent on Articles of War and Army Regulations, slipped to 70 on Interior Guard, and came back strong with a couple of 92's on Scouting and Patrolling and Military Courtesy, for a respectable over-all grade.

The 37th Infantry Division sailed out into the Pacific in May, 1942, when the Japanese were still advancing and our resisting efforts were so far from strong that the invasion of Australia was regarded as by no means improbable. First, the Buckeye Division went to the Fiji Islands, a key point on our

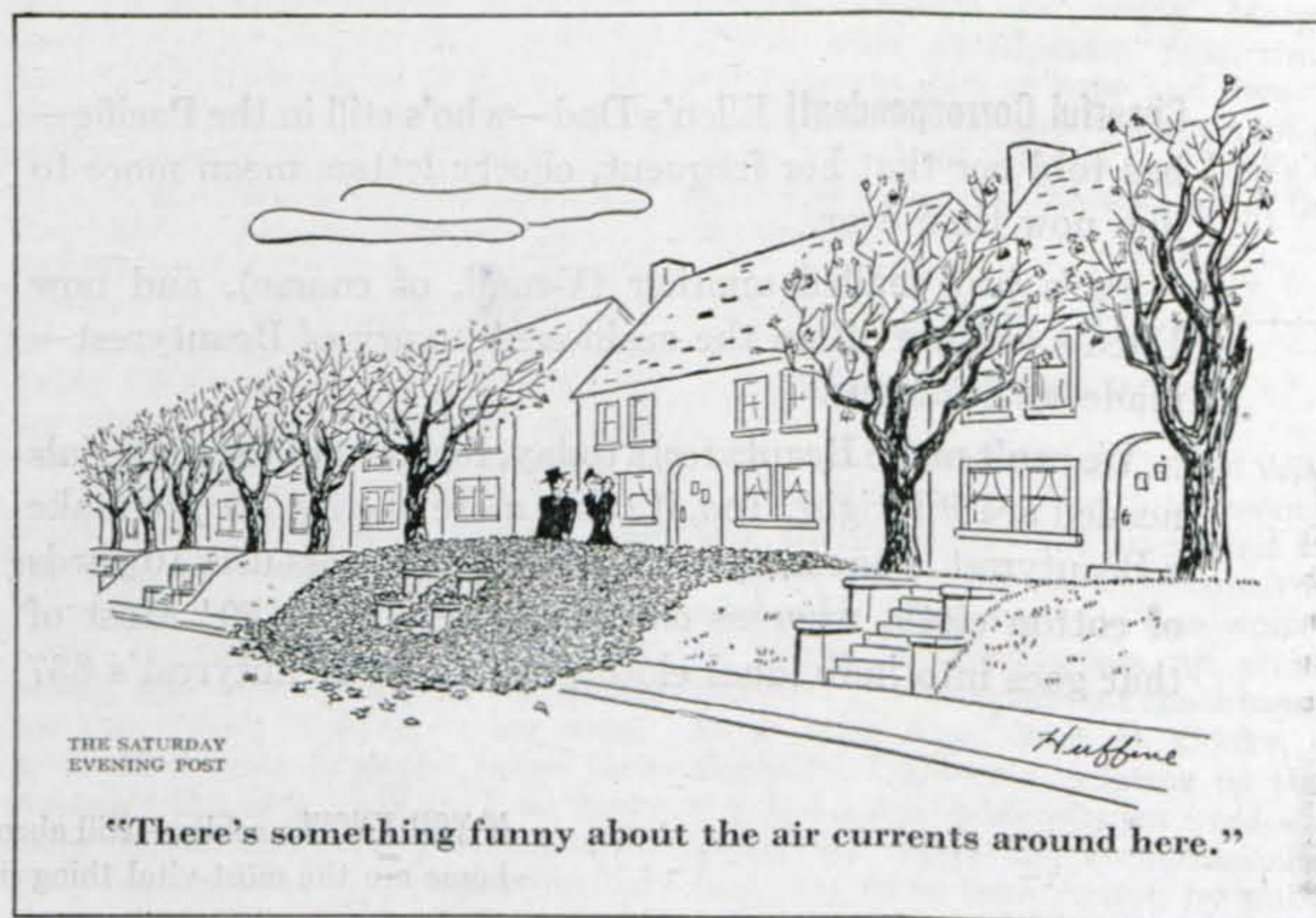
main supply route to the Southwest Pacific. The 37th set up beach defenses and continued its training. It was a healthy enough life, and Rodger reported home that he had gained thirteen pounds. He became friendly with the family of an Australian sugarmill employee who lived out there, and used to drop in at their house on Sunday evenings for tea—the usual Australian metonymical term for supper. He was impressed, like most tourists, with the size and splendor of the tropical moon. He sent home a few picture post cards of the moon, as well as, of course, photographs of some of the handsomer native belles, to whom his reactions were those of the normal American boy face to face for the first time with a living, startling illustration for a travel brochure. Sometimes, during hours of leisure, he entertained the men in his company by playing a guitar he had picked up out there or a harmonica.

After ten months in the Fijis, which by that time were altogether out of danger, the 37th moved on to Guadalcanal, transformed from a scene of action to a forward training base. Rodger wrote home that he had had a few rides in aircraft—a B-17, a Navy dive bomber and an Army transport—and had enjoyed the experiences. He put on a little more weight, perhaps because of his singular attitude toward Army food. He is one of the few soldiers, for example, who are known to have expressed a positive affection for powdered eggs. It was his one tiny deviation from the norm. He was cheerful and not in the least apprehensive about his prospects. He refused to worry about himself and, in letters home, good-naturedly scolded his parents for worrying about him. "I can run faster than any Jap," he used to say, "and I'll be all right as long as I see the Japs first."

From Guadalcanal, Young moved on to the Russell Islands, where his outfit made the final preparations for action on New Georgia. A few days before his own D day, Sergeant Young became seriously concerned about his hearing. Long hours on the firing line back in the States and the aggravating humidity of the tropics had combined to increase his deafness.

Brooding over this deficiency, Rodger Young went to his company commander shortly after landing on New Georgia and requested that he be reduced in rank. It must have been a hard decision to make. He had been on active duty for more than two and a half years and was proud of his status

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"There's something funny about the air currents around here."



# How do you look to a Hero?



**Like a Rhinoceros?** ... Thick-Skin doesn't need any little hints about meeting veterans. Not him, he Knows How To Handle Men. Forget about vets needing rest before they go back to work, he says. Just yell, "What's wrong with you, Soldier? Get up! Get to work! Be a man!" A few hours in a foxhole would be so good for the Rhinoceros.



**...a Ferret?** She'll get The Details if it kills her... or the officer. And the gorier the details, the better. Doctors may spend months helping a soldier forget a bad battle experience. The Ferret can bring it all back in minutes.



**...a Crocodile?** Her tears flow like wine when she sees a wounded service man. And her sympathy flows over him like carbolic acid. She turns a high-powered spotlight on a veteran's disability. No better morale-wrecker exists.

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**...a Lion?** Most civilians are pretty modest about what they've done. But not the Lion. He practically won the war with his Victory Garden alone. And the bonds he bought...! Veterans begin to wonder if maybe draft dodgers didn't have the right idea.



**...a Fox?** Veterans want to feel proud of the people they fought for. But it's hard to be proud of the Fox. He's done pretty well in this war and he doesn't mind telling you about it. "Know those lots I bought in 1937? Well..." Veterans who saw land traded for lives don't enjoy this kind of talk.



## Or Star-spangled Citizens!

They see the returned veteran as an able, capable citizen. They're proud of him, anxious to help. They weep no tears over him, ask no questions, listen when he talks—they make him think, "Boy! What a wonderful country!" Most of us are like them... let's help the rest to be like them too!

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and responsibilities as sergeant and squad leader.

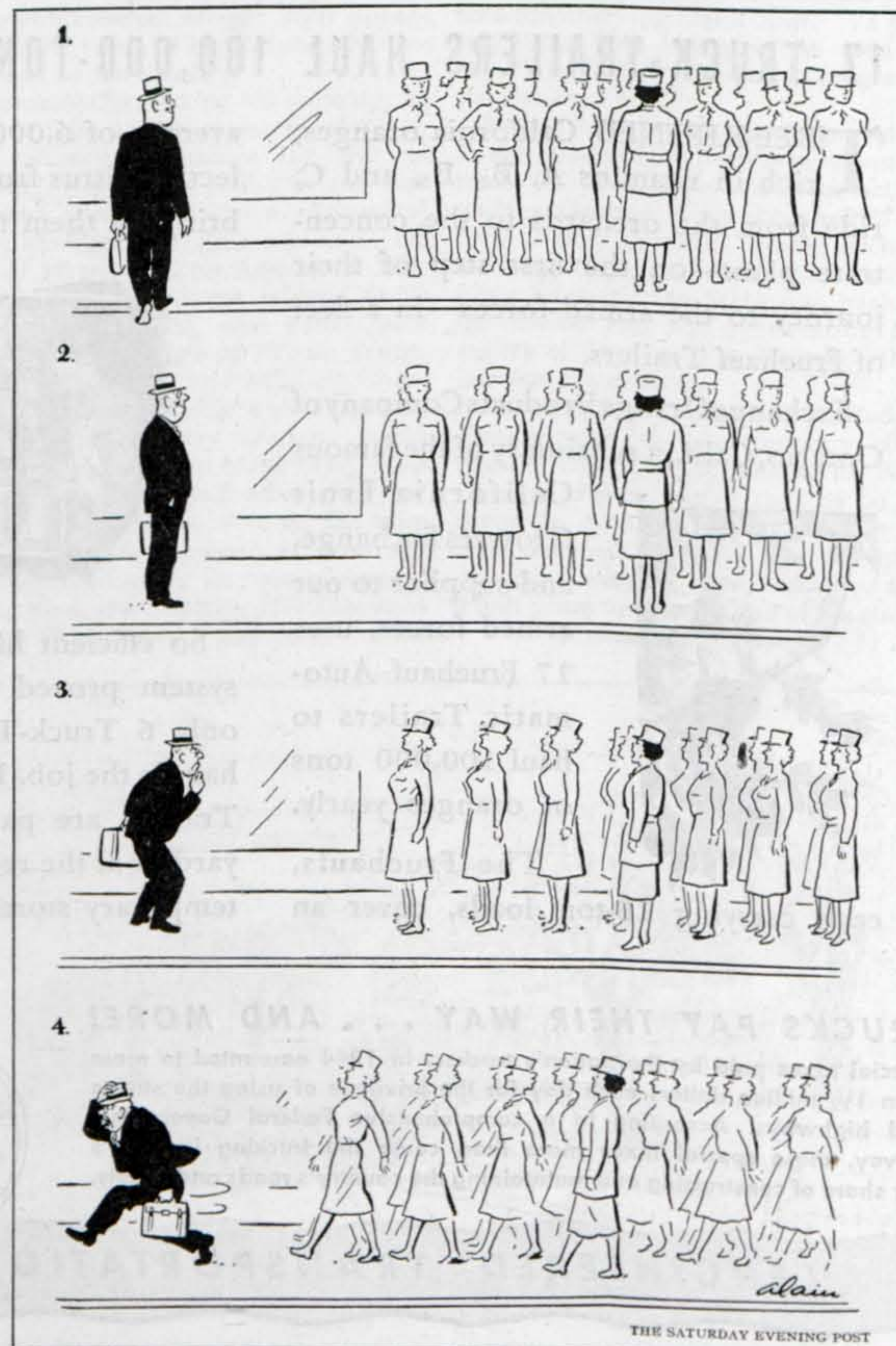
He felt, however, that in the noisy confusion of battle, his failure to hear correctly some order he would have to pass along or his failure to detect some significant sound might endanger the lives of his men. His wish was granted with reluctance, and Sergeant Young, squad leader, became Private Young, ordinary rifleman, directly responsible for the welfare of no one but himself.

Rodger Young was the kind of person who always took the least comfortable chair in a room, went out of his way to be considerate to his elders, and didn't have the capacity for holding a grudge. "He would take a slap in the face," a childhood acquaintance recalled after his death, "and go on about his business and forget it." For a man who never made the first team, he had a lot of team spirit, and never demonstrated it better than on the day he died. July 31, 1943, was his company's second day in battle. The doughboys had a rough introduction to the practical side of war. They had scarcely gone into the line when, three miles from the Jap-held airfield at Munda, they found themselves cut off. An order came through to withdraw. Sgt. Walter Rigby, commanding the platoon Young was assigned to, got the word and passed it along to his men, scattered throughout the jungle and under rifle fire from Japs close by. The order was relayed from man to man. A private lying near Young, suspecting that he might not have heard the order, poked him with a stick and, drawing his attention, motioned to the rear.

Just about then a Jap machine gun opened up on the platoon, raking it with fire. The men tried to pull back, but movement was virtually impossible under the deadly surveillance of that gun, shooting from a hidden jungle position. Withdrawal seemed difficult; so, for that matter, did survival. Then the soldier who had announced gaily months before that he would be all right as long as he saw the Japs first got a chance to confirm his prediction. He saw them first. He called out that he had spotted the gun. According to the role he had elected to play in his own combat story, he should have beaten the hastiest possible retreat. But Rodger Young forgot his cue. He forgot that he was only a private and had no official responsibility for the men around him. He opened fire with his rifle. The Japs answered with a burst in his direction, and hit him. Then Rodger Young went into action.

With his rifle in one hand and a few grenades in his uniform pocket, he began crawling slowly toward the machine gun. Nobody can say what he was thinking. Perhaps he figured that his skill as a marksman gave him the best chance of all his buddies to knock out the gun. Whatever he figured, he must have had a pretty good idea that he was going on a one-way trip. The Japs saw him coming and turned the gun on him. They hit him a second time and he flinched. But he didn't stop. He kept on inching forward and, as he got closer to the Japs, they ignored the rest of the platoon and concentrated their whole murderous fire on Rodger Young. That was the break the men needed to get out of the trap.

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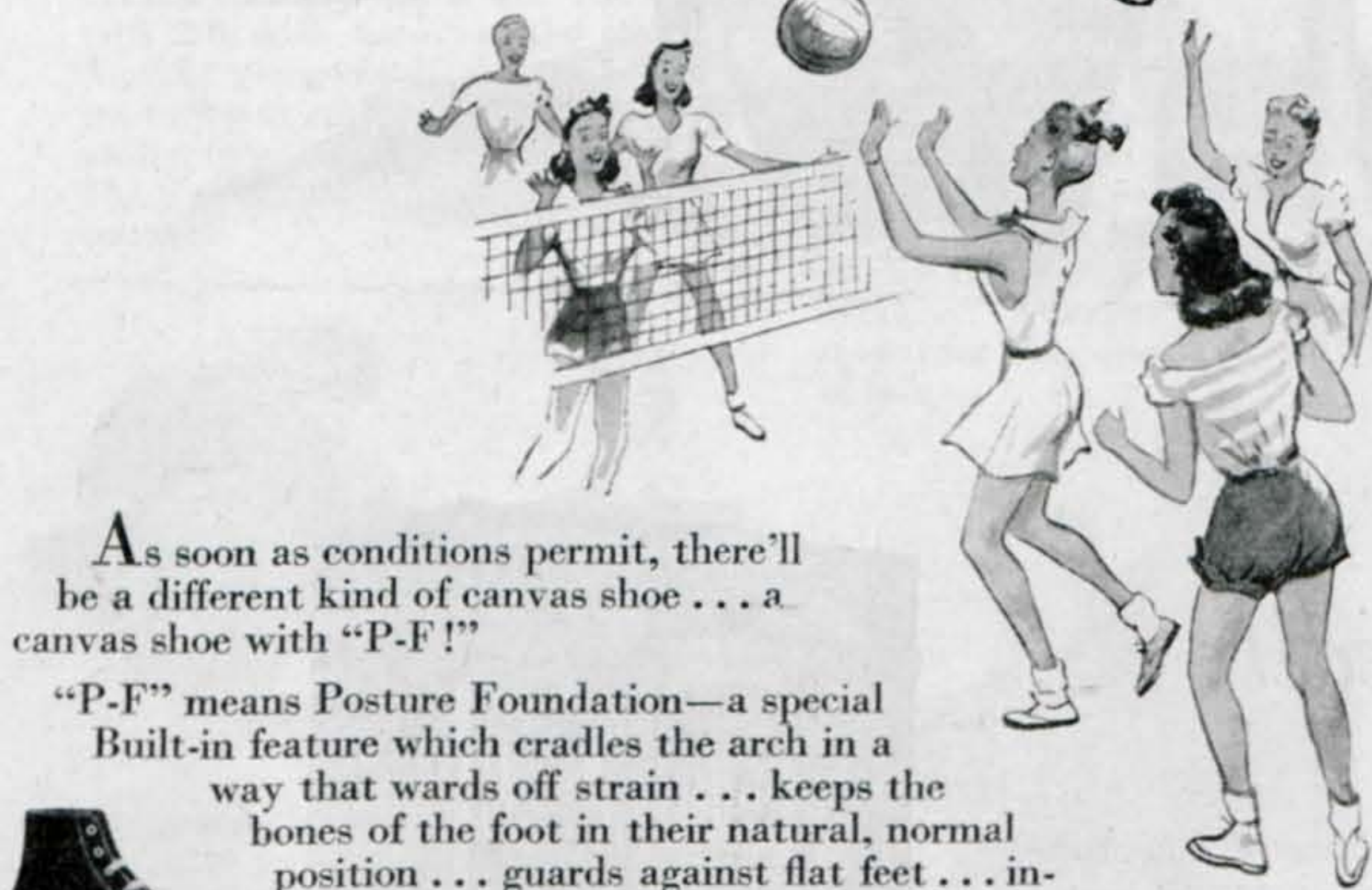
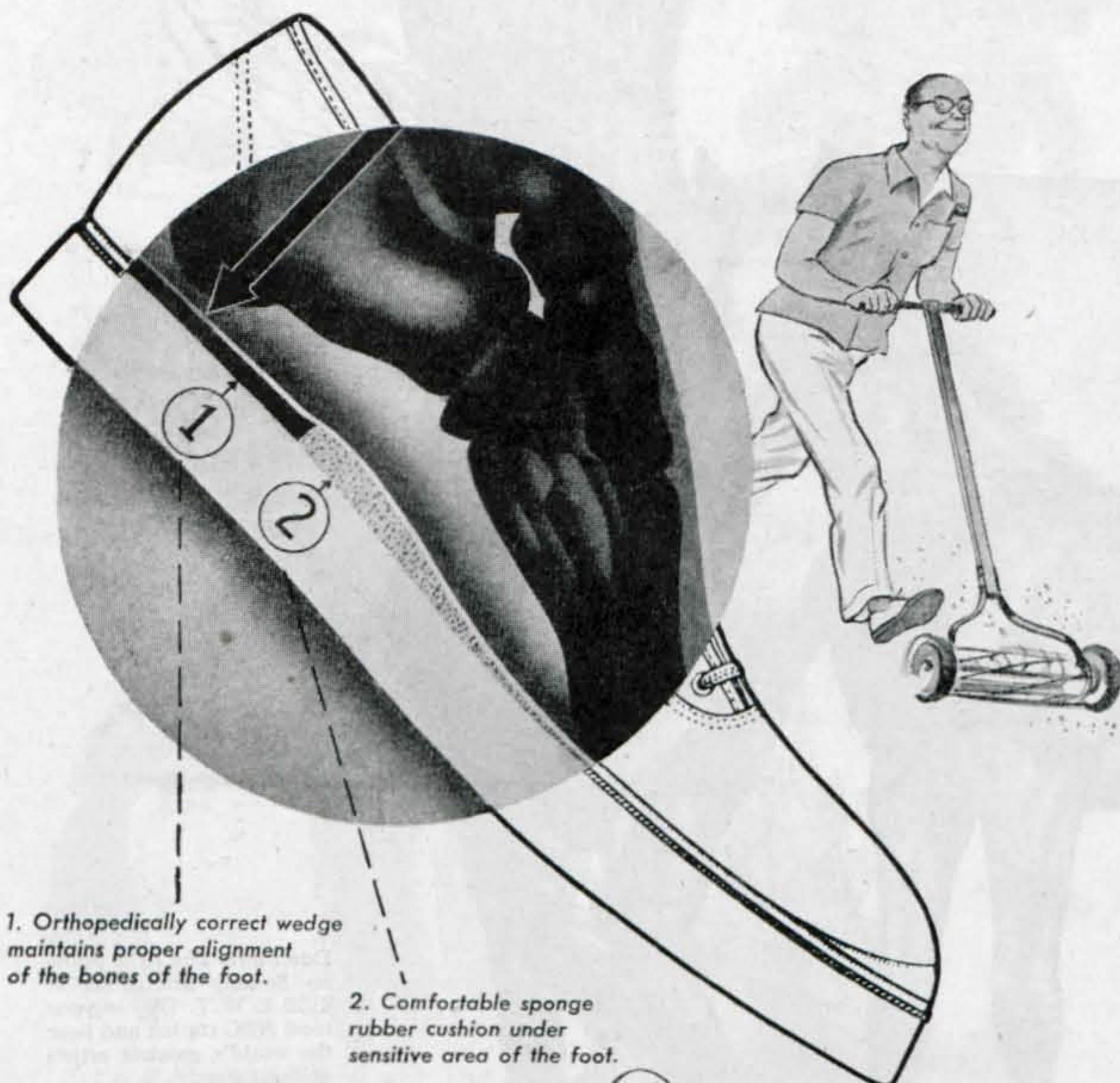


THE SATURDAY EVENING POST



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## A different kind of Canvas Shoe!



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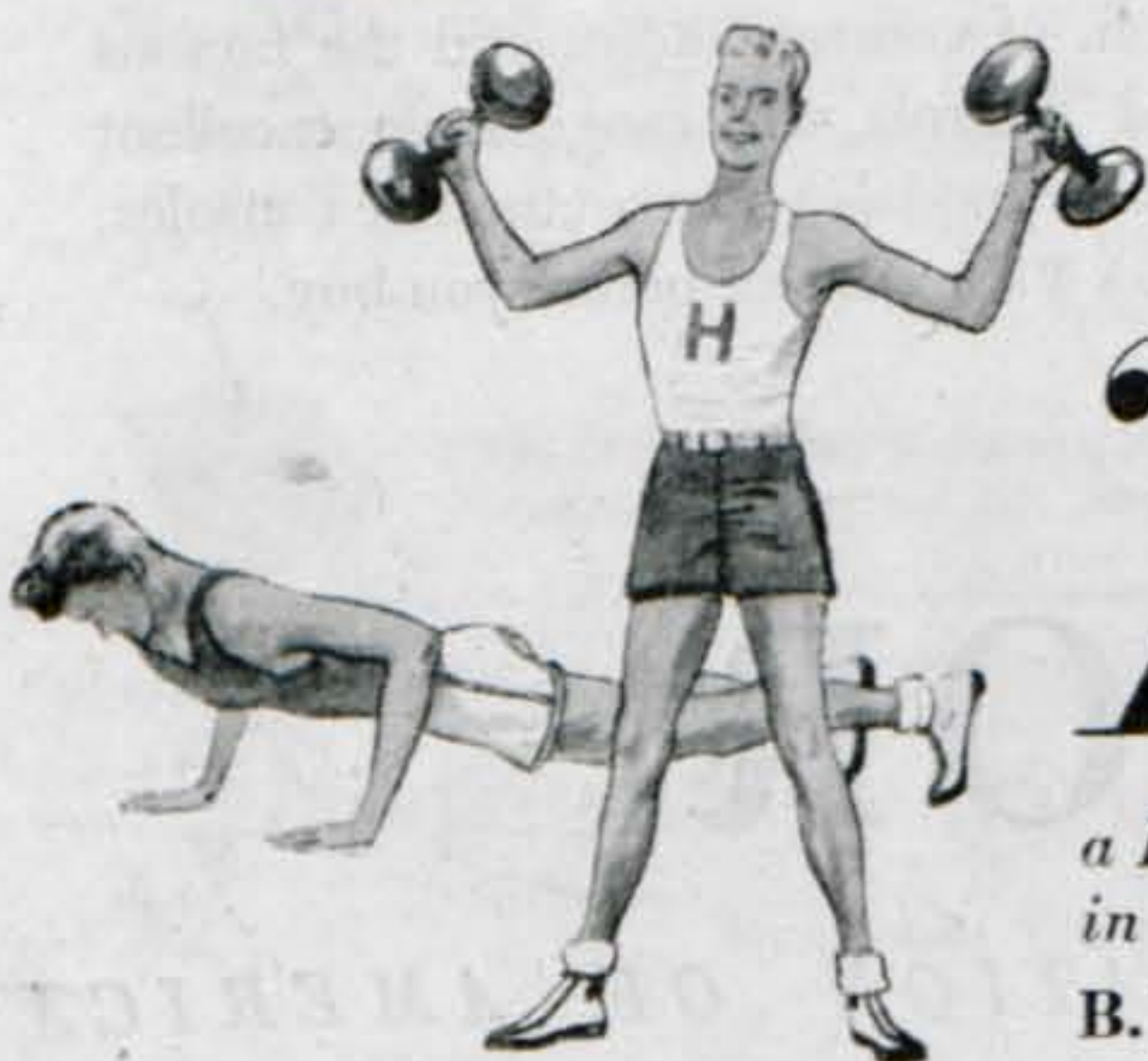
"P-F" means Posture Foundation—a special Built-in feature which cradles the arch in a way that wards off strain... keeps the bones of the foot in their natural, normal position... guards against flat feet... increases "staying power" during active exercise... provides safe, correct, comfortable foot support for men, women, and children.

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**"P-F"** \*means Posture Foundation...

a Patented Feature found only in Canvas Shoes made by B. F. Goodrich or HOOD RUBBER CO.



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As they crawled back successfully, Rodger Young dragged himself even nearer to the Jap position, and began tossing grenades into it. He was too close to the Japs, by now, for them to miss, and they didn't. They hit him a third time and stopped him for good, just as one of his grenades fell into their position and stopped their gun.

It was the next day before the platoon could get back in and recover his body. They buried him where he fell, wrapped in his shelter half, with a rough wooden cross over him and his helmet mounting the cross. His regimental chaplain gave a talk and said a prayer, and the mourners bowed their heads extra low because Jap bullets were still flying around the area. Later, when there was time for it, they gave him a more dignified funeral. A few souvenirs of the South Pacific he had planned to take home himself—a Jap compass, some assorted sea shells and a sailor hat—were mailed back by his friends. A knife he had prized was never found. "It had his name on it," his mother says. "I hope that whoever gets it makes the best use of it. That's all I ask."

The men in his outfit were quick to recognize his heroism. "It happened in a very critical moment," one of his fellow soldiers wrote his father, "and if that bit of strategy had failed, we would all have been sunk." It was nearly five months after he died that, his bravery having been progressively recognized by higher and higher military headquarters, he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. On January 17, 1944, at Fort Knox, Kentucky, a major general hung the medal around his mother's neck, while an officer stood at attention and read the official citation:

For distinguishing himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty in action with the enemy on New Georgia, Solomon Islands. On 31 July, 1943, the infantry company of which Private Young was a member was ordered to make a limited withdrawal from the battle line in order to adjust the battalion's position for the night. At this time Private Young's platoon was engaged with the enemy in a dense jungle where observation was very limited. The platoon suddenly was pinned down by intense fire from a Japanese machine gun concealed on higher ground only seventy-five yards away. The initial burst wounded Private Young. As the platoon started to obey the order to withdraw, Private Young called out that he could see the enemy emplacement, whereupon he started creeping toward it. Another burst from the machine gun wounded him the second time. Despite his wounds, he continued his heroic advance, attracting enemy fire and answering with rifle fire. When he was close enough to his objective, he began throwing grenades, and while doing so was hit again and killed. Private Young's bold action in closing with this Japanese pillbox and thus diverting its fire permitted his platoon to disengage itself, without loss, and was responsible for several enemy casualties.

The 37th Division went on from New Georgia. "I know that if Rodger Young were alive and with us today," his division commander said last March, "he would be proud of his old comrades; proud of the way they have carried on the infantry tradition; proud of the way they proved his sacrifice was not in vain; proud of the way they stood, time after time, against the finest forces the enemy could produce, and annihi-

lated them." Rodger Young's old comrades were proud of him too. It was his regiment—the 148th Infantry—that led the march of all American doughboys into Manila, and later helped to exterminate the Japs holed up in the smoking rubble of Intramuros.

Rodger Wilton Young was born in Tiffin on April 28, 1918. His parents, Nicholas and Esther Young, were both Ohioans, and the family has deep roots in that region. Three of Rodger's grandparents are alive in Ohio today. His father, formerly a mechanic, became an engineer on the staff of the Clyde Porcelain Steel Corporation, in Clyde, which manufactured bathroom tiles, washbowls and the like, but turned to making tank parts during the war. For the past several months, Mr. and Mrs. Young have been living in Baltimore, where Rodger's father was sent to take charge of war production at a subsidiary of the Clyde plant.

The Youngs stayed in Tiffin till Rodger was ten, and then moved to Green Springs, in the next county. They never had too much money, but they always managed to get along comfortably. The children were encouraged to pick up spending money by doing odd jobs and, as soon as they had any independent incomes, they turned over part of their earnings to their mother for board. Rodger acquired a newspaper-delivery route and won a substantial number of bonuses for diligent duty, including a couple of trips and a balloon-tire bicycle. He worked seasonally picking raspberries, for which he received from five to eight cents a box. Mrs. Young kept house, made many of her children's clothes—

even long trousers and shirts—and found time to sing as a soloist at six churches in the vicinity.

The Youngs are a close-knit family, notable for mutual affection. When the children were small, the entire household would go off together on week-end fishing and swimming trips. As they grew older, they would play cards or go bowling with their parents, and they also liked to sit around the house and entertain one another with stories.

Rodger's feelings about his family and his home were never better expressed than in a letter he wrote home from the Fijis on Christmas Day, 1942:

Dear Folks and All: I can just picture everyone gathered at Betty's or maybe Dick's—anyway, you all are together. Mom, you and the girls and Grandmother Young are in the kitchen preparing the big dinner. The men are all in the front room listening to dad comment on the new job at the shop.

Warming up to the imagined scene, Rodger described the call to the family dinner table, and began seating the participants:

At the long table we have mom at one end and dad at the other. Down one side we have Dick, May, Chuck and Betty. The other side we have grandmother, Grandfather Young, Grandfather Crall and Joe. Then, of course, goodhearted Cleo [his sister-in-law] has volunteered to care for the children at a small table for them. Before dinner is started, Grandmother Young is elected to give a short prayer. This done, dad really digs in, with the rest following just as fast. The dinner, of course, is the most delicious of any an American family could ask.

That's the sort of man Rodger Young was.

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### Head-on Collision

It's not difficult to meet expenses these days; one meets them everywhere.

—ESAR'S COMIC DICTIONARY, Harvest House, New York, 1943.

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