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Robert Ruark and World War II

by Lucy Ann Glover

December 7, 1941

On the Sunday destined to be known as Pearl Harbor Day, Robert Ruark, top sports writer for the *Washington Daily News*, was seated in the press box of the old Griffith Stadium, where, in the normal scheme of his profession, he was covering the football game between the Washington Redskins and the Philadelphia Eagles. The public address system in the stadium suddenly came alive with summonses for newspaper executives, high military officers, and even the resident commissioner of the Philippines, to report to their offices. No matter the commotion, the game continued without interruption. The fans were not apprised of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Ruark was directed that afternoon of December 7, 1941, to round up all editors, reporters and linotype men who were in the stands and form a crew to put out an extra edition of the paper. He reported to his office, not to go to bed for two and a half days. No story bearing a Ruark by-line appeared until December 16, by which time he had left the sports desk, become assistant city editor, and top feature writer. He remarked in later years that he never learned the score of the game.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor set in motion for Robert Ruark a series of experiences that propelled him into the top ranks of newspaper columnists, magazine writers and book authors.



*Lieutenant Robert Ruark in service dress blue uniform.
Picture courtesy of Southern Historical Collection, Wilson
Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.*

Again and again he used the experiences in works of both fiction and nonfiction, often weaving personal incidents into events in a character's life.

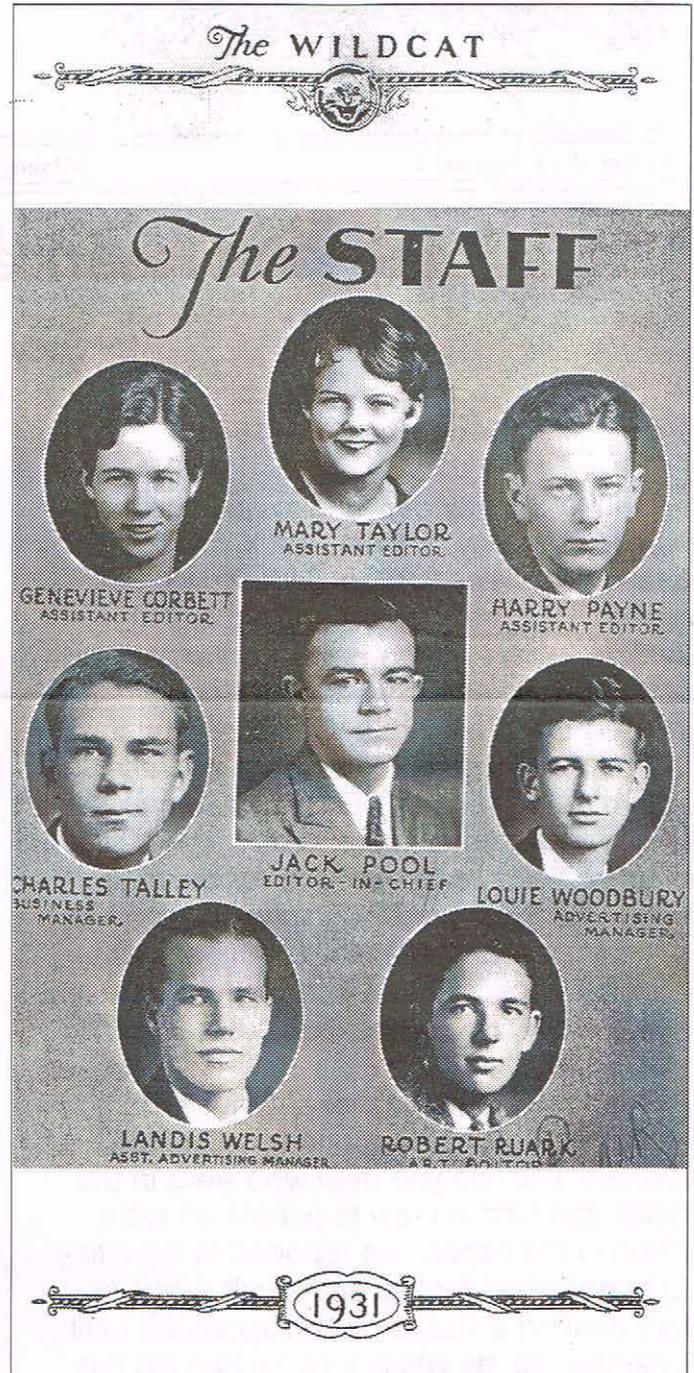
Determining where the line exists between fact and imagination inevitably creates some problem for the reader who is aware that Ruark successfully combined two grandfathers into one to create "the old man" of *The Old Man and the Boy*, a book which shows a gentle side of this writer who established himself as cocky, brash and arrogant.

On Pearl Harbor Day, Robert Chester Ruark, Jr., a native of Wilmington, North Carolina, was twenty-five, married to Virginia Webb, and had no children. Although he received his education in the New Hanover County school system, he experienced the less formal but hardly less influential segment of his education in the Brunswick County town of Southport. In 1931, at the age of 15, Ruark graduated from New Hanover High School, where he distinguished himself as art editor of the school yearbook, *The Wildcat*. No mention is made of any literary talents for which he would one day gain national prominence. Ruark attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where, once again, he worked as art editor of a campus publication. He took up writing for *The Daily Tarheel*, campus newspaper, "because I fell in love with a girl named Nan Norman, who was taking journalism . . ."1 From there he took the short step to a journalism class where his promise as a writer surfaced.

Upon graduation, in 1935, Ruark began his journalism career on the *News-Messenger* in Hamlet, North Carolina, where he not only acted as reporter/editor, but also sold subscriptions and advertising and, on occasion, delivered the paper. Six months later, he transferred to the *Sanford Herald*, but as that job proved unsatisfactory, he took an accounting job with the Works Progress Administration.

He quit the WPA job to go to sea with the merchant marines on the *Sundance*, which sailed from Savannah to Liverpool and

1 Hugh W. Foster, *Someone of Value: A Biography of Robert Ruark* (Agoura, CA: Trophy Room Books, 1992) 25.



Robert Ruark served as Art Editor on the staff of The Wildcat at New Hanover High School. He is pictured here with other staff members of the class of 1931. He carried his skills on to the campus of UNC, where he also served on the newspaper, The Daily Tarheel.

Hamburg. Upon his return, he made an unsuccessful attempt to persuade the editor of the *Wilmington Morning Star* to hire him. With a bus ticket he had won in a crap game, plus \$4.24 in his pocket, he returned to Washington in 1937.²

Ruark worked first as a copy boy on the *Washington Post*, then moved to the *Star*, and finally to the *Washington Daily News*. In a few months' time, he rose to the position of top sports writer, no matter that he was not particularly interested in sports.

Indoctrination

Joining the Navy in the summer of 1942, Ruark was ordered to report for active duty September 18. By then he had transferred to the Newspaper Enterprise Association Service (NEA), which handled feature writers. He reported to Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, for eight weeks of indoctrination. Ruark was described as "the most mediocre recruit in his platoon -- a platoon which, nevertheless, was the start of the very pleasant promotion which he could not prevent, ending at the head of the final classification."³

At the end of the instruction, service representatives solicited volunteers for the then extremely hazardous branch of the naval service call the Armed Guard. The Armed Guard was a relatively small part of America's Naval Reserve, made up of volunteers who sailed on merchant ships and tankers as gunnery officers, a duty for which the regular Navy did not have the men available. The duty was hazardous because of the high mortality rates associated with accompanying the vessels that sailed in convoy with supplies and munitions. Ruark was among the first in his class to volunteer for this service. His orders to report for active duty assigned him the rank of

ensign. Just after Thanksgiving, he attended an Armed Guard school in Mississippi for the final four weeks of training before he moved to the Armed Guard Center at the United States Naval Station in New Orleans.

He reported to Jacksonville, Florida, on March 3, 1943, to take command of the Armed Guard unit assigned to the *SS Eli Whitney*, a 7100-ton cargo ship with a top speed of eleven knots. Four days later he sailed.

On the *Eli Whitney*

"When the Navy went into business with Pearl Harbor, it took a horrified look around and discovered that it was studded with square pegs. There were lawyers and newspapermen and teachers and insurance salesmen, and they didn't even know how to do nothing. They couldn't even swim," Ruark later wrote. "So the Navy invented something called the Armed Guard. The AG was shoved aboard merchant ships to annoy the merchant seamen and encourage the guns to rust. . . . We were very probably the most raggedy-assed heroes ever to put to sea. We didn't know a binnacle from a barnacle, or port from starboard."⁴

Of the crews who formed the Armed Guard, he wrote: "The Armed Guard complements were generally drawn from the dregs of recruitment -- callow farmer lads from Iowa, bullyboys from New Jersey, street fighters from Brooklyn. Destroyers and DEs and cruisers got the cream. The ragtag went to a service nobody wanted, under officers . . . who still called the bulkheads 'walls' and ladders 'stairs' and decks 'floors.'"⁵

Ruark described his crew as ". . . a naval complement aboard merchant ships to see that the merchant marine don't run off to Russia if they sign a separate peace treaty with the Germans, and also to shoot at these people who keep dropping things on you all the time I am technically in charge of the ship during action, but it is a merchant marine run ship. My boys were getting \$60 a month, the Chinese

² Typescript, Box 314, in the Robert Chester Ruark, Jr., Papers #4001, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

³ Michel Renouard, "Robert Ruark (1915-1965), a Journalist and Novelist, the Failure of a Success," trans. Vivian Schultz Bates, [Ph.D. diss., University of Paris, 1987], 37.

⁴ Robert Ruark, *I Didn't Know It Was Loaded* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948), 150.

⁵ Robert Ruark, *The Honey Badger* (New York: McGraw-Hill), 23.

mess boy that served me was making \$550 a month, with bonus areas and extra bonuses for bombing, so my morale problem was tough for a cadre of thirty guys and me.”⁶

Among Ruark’s favorite tales of his *Whitney* experiences was the incident in which he dealt with a New Jersey enlisted man whom he later named Zabinski in his novel *The Honey Badger*. “Every ship has its problem child, and Zabinski was Alec’s cross. If anybody was drunk and in trouble ashore, it was Zabinski. If anybody was smoking in the magazine while the Baker flag was up for ammunition loading, it was Zabinski. If anybody was smoking on watch, or asleep on watch, or overleave, it always seemed to be Zabinski, whose pockmarked flat face wore a constant air of stupidity combined with sullen arrogance.”⁷

In a conversational account of the effort to cope with this real-life character, Ruark related, “. . . one day I said ‘I have tried to reason with you, I have tried to love you, I have punished you, I have . . . You got me bugged, except the word wasn’t in use then. There’s nothing to do but beat the hell out of you,’ I said. ‘It so happens we have boxing gloves on board issued by the Navy for morale and sports. You and I are going out on the hatch and I am going to peel off my pins and I am going to beat the bejesus out of you.’ And he just sort of licked his lips and said, ‘Yessir, I always wanted a crack at a goddamned officer.’”

No one told Ruark that his opponent had been the runner-up light heavyweight champion of New Jersey Golden Gloves. Ruark later noted, “I never ate so much leather in my life, he could have knocked me out at any time with his jab and my face is moving around and I am bleeding to death. He didn’t hit me very hard, he’s got sixty merchant marines and my guys looking at this fat-assed Lieutenant . . . Ensign, getting the hell tromped out of him. So I said cut.”

Using his position as commanding officer of the ship in a battle zone, Ruark went to his quarters to repair his wounds and also to get a roll of quarters from the safe (he was also the

paymaster), which he shoved into his glove. “You know what a roll of quarters will do to a man’s jaw? You could hear that jaw break in Murmansk. I went upstairs to take the glove off so nobody could see what I had in my hand and came back down and said ‘There’ll be no more nonsense on this ship’ so we wired a tube through (the guy’s) jaw and you know we had the most orderly ship.”⁸

How often Ruark saw action is unknown, for he recorded only one specific event which happened toward the end of his last cruise. The convoy included almost ninety ships which German submarines and aircraft noticed “a little east of Oran” and attacked from a base “around the Balearics.” A ship behind the *Whitney* was blown out of the water by a bomb. A gun crew on a ship off the *Whitney*’s port side panicked when shrapnel started to fall and raked the decks of another ship with cannon fire.

Several other convoy ships sank during the attack, but the ships were still in line and zigzagging when Allied fighter aircraft appeared and the Germans began to retreat. A last German bomber made a run at the *Whitney* and one of its torpedoes crashed into the boat near cargo holds filled with detonators, aviation gas and seven thousand tons of bombs. The torpedo fortunately was a dud and did not explode. The ship successfully reached the Isle of Malta.⁹

Ruark made references to the Murmansk Run, the extremely dangerous direct Allied effort to keep Russia supplied with material during the early days of World War II. Stretching from England to Russia, Murmansk was a fifteen-hundred-mile convoy route by way of the Arctic Ocean above Norway. “No day or night passed that failed to record the massive display of exploding ammunition ships or the flaming greasy-smoking destruction of tankers,” Ruark wrote. “Slightly hit ships and vessels two-blocking the blackball for engine trouble drifted back and out of convoy and were left sorrowfully to be picked up at leisure by the submarines. There was no attempt to rescue the survivors of stricken ships. In that ice-floed

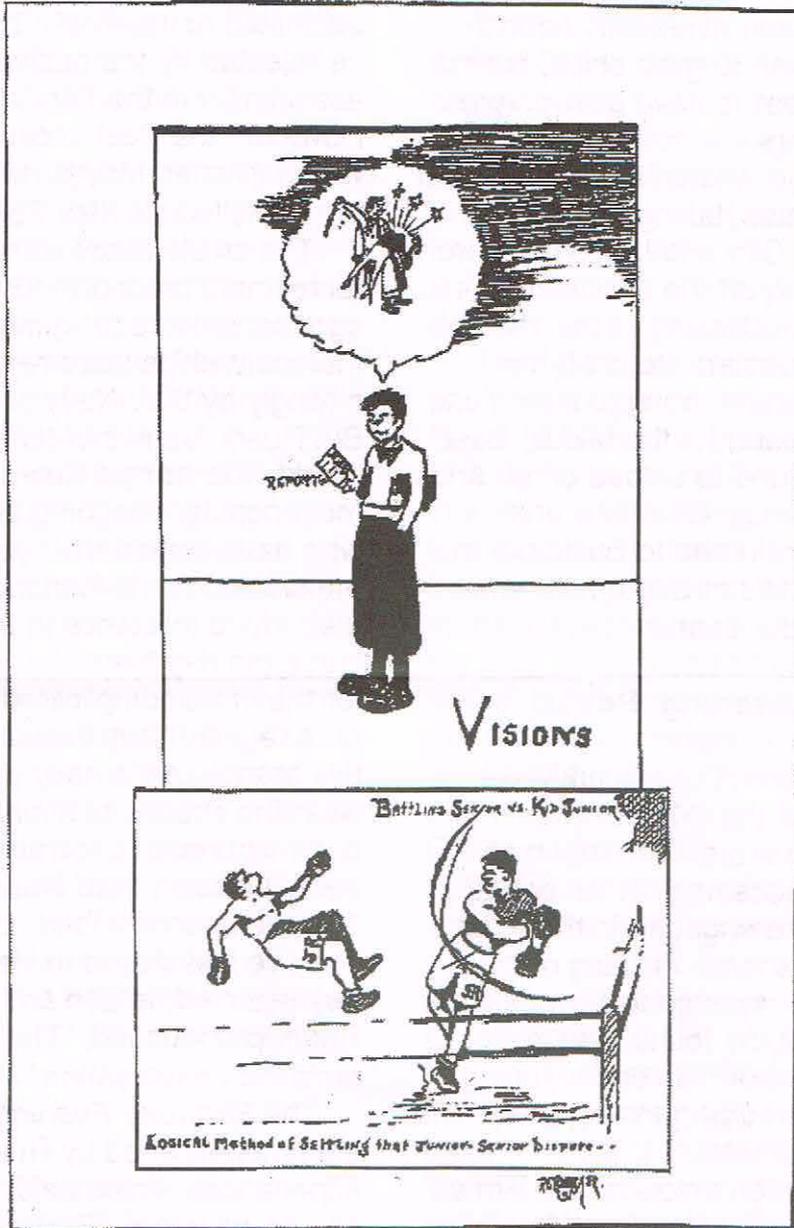
⁶ Foster, 40.

⁷ Ruark, *Honey Badger*, 23.

⁸ Foster, 41-43.

⁹ *Ibid.* 42,43.

The WILDCAT



Ruark's cartoons, drawn for his high school yearbook, seem to foreshadow events of his adult life.

water life expectancy was something under five minutes."¹⁰

But no matter how knowingly he wrote of the Murmansk and no matter the references he made in later life to having made the "death run," the *Eli Whitney* appears never to have been part of this effort. She carried supplies to England, which may have eventually been delivered to Murmansk in English ships, but the *Whitney* does not appear to have ever entered Russian territorial waters.

With Ruark in charge, she cruised up the east coast of the United States, taking on cargo in Charleston, Morehead City and Norfolk, before joining a convoy forming off the Delaware coast. She sailed into London, docking in the Thames estuary after two intermediate stops off the English coastline. Upon returning to New York, she joined a convoy bound for the Middle East. She stopped in early June to unload cargo and ammunition in Casablanca, Gibraltar, and Bizerte (Tunisia), and returned to Baltimore in late August. In the middle of September, she sailed back to the Middle East.¹¹

Saturday Evening Post

After ten months at sea, LtJG Ruark was relieved of command of the *Whitney* on December 8, 1943. With orders to report to Brooklyn, New York, December 29, in perhaps typical Ruark fashion he engaged in three fist fights on his first day ashore. Wishing not to return to sea, when he reported to New Orleans for his next assignment, he found help in delaying the inevitable from his commanding officer, who had learned that gunnery officer Ruark was Ruark the writer.

Asked if he could do an article on the Armed Guard for the *Saturday Evening Post*, Ruark, who had never written for the *Post*, replied, "Well, I'm very slow writer -- temperamental, too -- couldn't get up early enough to make muster, if I were writing. Have to get better quarters . . ."

Given a suite in the officers' quarters, he slept until noon each day, had breakfast in bed, and

¹⁰ Ruark, *Honey Badger*, 20-21.

¹¹ Foster, 41-42.

strolled around the streets "researching" until late afternoon. Then he returned to quarters to write one paragraph. He took three months to write what he could have written in three days. Surprised that his commanding officer never objected to his lengthy time span, he submitted the article, which his superior loved and, in turn, submitted to the *Post*. Thinking the article would be rejected by the publication, Ruark requested assignment in the Pacific as a gunnery officer. However, the *Post* accepted the piece, which was published May 6, 1944 under the title "They Called Us Fish Food."¹²

The article reads something like a recruitment brochure: "Even so late as a year ago, candidates for gunnery jobs aboard merchant ships were regarded and spoken of pityingly by their Navy comrades as 'fish food.'" But Ruark found that times have changed. "Today the Armed Guard is probably the Navy's most popular seagoing assignment. Officers who have served their year, and have been transferred to the fleet, sometimes sigh over their idyllic existence in the Armed Guard, and curse the day they left the good old SS Rustpot for the more complicated, less comfortable life on a regular Navy vessel." And why wouldn't this branch of the navy appeal? After all, "They wear the ribbons of every theater of war, they've been wounded, decorated, and they've been in every invasion from Guadalcanal to Salerno. They've been bombed, strafed and torpedoed. They've spent days in life rafts, and they've been starved, frozen and broiled in the sun" Ruark pronounced, "Their experiences make fantastic conversation."¹³

The *Saturday Evening Post* article was not the first published by Ruark about his war experiences. In describing the ascent of his career, he wrote, "During the war, as a journeyman Naval officer on sea-and-island duty, I had more or less provided my poker money by writing pieces for *Collier's*, *The Post*, and *Liberty*. I had no agent, but I had plenty of material, and a kind friend had once drawn me

¹² Typescript, Box 1, Folder 1, Southern Historical Collection.

¹³ Robert Ruark, "They Called 'Em Fish Food," *Saturday Evening Post*, 6 May 1944, 24.

a picture of what a magazine piece looks like, skeletally, and I had no trouble selling blind.”¹⁴

Ruark had previously published an article in *Collier's* on August 7, 1943, entitled “We Man the Deck Guns.” The material was essentially the same as the *Post* article with more narrative and less salesmanship. “Our set,” he wrote, “is called, variously, ‘The Sitting Ducks,’ ‘The Clay Pigeons,’ and ‘The Sea Scouts.’ Our coat of arms bears the motto: ‘Sighted Sub - Glub, Glub.’”

His description of the night as the ships of the convoy cut through the Atlantic lacks the glibness so often associated with his writings. “The wind yowled like a tortured tomcat, and the new Liberty Ship’s stays were thick with ice. Tons of freezing water smashed across her decks, as she groaned under a 30-degree roll. The Atlantic, but for curling streaks of phosphorescence, was indistinguishable from the night, and the lookouts, straining their eyes into the blackness, shuddered into their sheepskins as the wind chewed through felt face masks.

“Then depth charges rapped against the ship’s skin, and the night was set afire by flares. ‘Snowflakes’ the British call those flares, but ‘snowflake’ is a pale approximation of the hovering hell-fire that illumines square miles of sea, indicating one thing - a submarine attack . . . the sky, so recently velvet-black, was red and pink and white against the silhouettes of the convoyed ships. . . . I have not yet read one good description of what it is like when a tanker takes a torpedo in her guts. She just goes sky-high in a sheet of flame”¹⁵

On the *Afoundria*

Ruark’s respite came to an end with the submission of his article to the *Post*. Later he wrote that the commanding officer, impressed with his writing, asked what type of ship he would like to be on, “. . . and I told him I sure

would like to run the guns on one of them new fast transports what didn’t carry no nasty old ammunition but only heroes . . . and in a couple of days I was assigned to a lovely thing called the *Afoundria*, an eighteen-knot sweetie pie with a leather-and chromium cabin for the junior gunnery officer, which was little me.”¹⁶

In March 1944, Ruark took command of the Armed Guard crew on the 6,000-ton troop carrier, which had a top speed of 15 knots. She left on her maiden voyage on March 16 for the Pacific theatre by way of the Panama Canal. Stopping first at what was then the New Hebrides port of Espiritu Santo, she proceeded to Guadalcanal where she unloaded troops destined for the thrust toward Japan.

During the several days unloading the ship and preparing for the return trip to the States, Ruark joined some other officers on a tour of U.S. facilities on the Russell Islands. The jeep in which he was riding overturned, his shoulder was crushed and his left arm was nearly torn from his body. One of America’s top orthopedic surgeons reconstructed his shoulder bones with the only set of metal screw-in splints on the island, but he was relieved of command when the *Afoundria* docked at San Francisco several weeks later. He spent four months recuperating and undergoing therapy at Oak Knoll Hospital in Oakland, California, and then was moved to Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland.

While he was recovering, Ruark began writing, in earnest, for the *Saturday Evening Post*. He described this return voyage in an October 14, 1944 article entitled “Return Trip.”

“So much has been written about troop transports on their outbound trips that by now most Americans must know what it is like to be hustled aboard a troopship, bound for some nebulous flyspeck on the globe. But this is a story of the return trip, of a cargo that transports now are hauling back to America. There is a vast difference between the rollicking craft heading for the unknown adventure and the salt-streaked scow butting her way slowly homeward with her holds crammed with weary men who have spent long, tough months in the enemy’s back yard.”

¹⁶Ruark, *Loaded*, 156.

¹⁴ Robert Ruark, *The Lost Classics of Robert Ruark* (Long Beach, CA: Safari Press, 1996), 242.

¹⁵ Robert Ruark, “We Man the Deck Guns,” *Collier's*, 7 Aug. 1943, 11.

He told of the ship's population, which numbered roughly 2000 white men who returned from the Southwest Pacific "commissioned and enlisted, black, white and yellow, sane and insane, sick and well . . . We had men aboard who had spent two years in the theater without seeing a Jap, and others whose ears were deaf with battle sounds and whose nostrils were sick with the stench of blood. In the sick bay were jeep casualties and Jap casualties, and the brig was chocked with court-martial cases, going home to sweat out the war behind bars. There were heroes who had developed a port list from the weight of their decorations, and others whose inability to adjust themselves to combat conditions and island privation had earned them a 'psycho' ticket and the loose designation 'jungle-jolly.' Name it and we had it -- including one kleptomaniac who successfully stole an airplane.

"But all the passengers had one thing in common. No man aboard was the same chap who had left home a couple of years ago. Something had happened to all of them -- something which will make them more than a trifle hard to understand."¹⁷

Ruark's recuperation came to an end in October when he was deemed able to return to duty. He wanted to be a war correspondent, and written correspondence between him and Peter Edson of NEA Service attests to the military's need of widespread publicity.

In defining the type of column proposed for Ruark to write, Edson remarked, "The idea for this column stems really from the Secretary of the Navy Forrestal and from Admiral Merrill of the Navy's Bureau of Public Relations, both of whom have expressed concern that once the war in Europe is concluded the public may be inclined to forget about the war against Japan.

"NEA believes that you are just the man to help overcome this loss of interest."¹⁸

Ruark, however, was unable to persuade the Navy to put him on inactive duty so that he could

take the assignment. Instead, he was ordered to Hawaii and put on the public relations team the Navy was then forming to publicize its Pacific islands push.

He was assigned to the staff of Admiral Chester Nimitz where he censored news dispatches. In the entourage of Nimitz, he crossed the Pacific, where he was transferred to the forward area command of Admiral John Hoover on a seaplane tender at Saipan, and then was land-leased to the marine command on Guam, and finally sub-leased to the B-29s which were making their first strikes on Japan.

Bored with the Pacific islands, he heard of a position available on the staff of the U.S. Navy's public relation liaison officer in Australia. He pulled every conceivable string to get there, and landed in Melbourne, courtesy of a twin-engine plane, the end of February.

In Australia

Ruark arrived in Melbourne to work under Admiral Sir Bruce Fraser as part of the Royal Navy office that dealt with matters relating to censorship. For the most part, the U.S. Navy and the Royal Navy got along well together, but censorship was one of the areas in which problems existed.

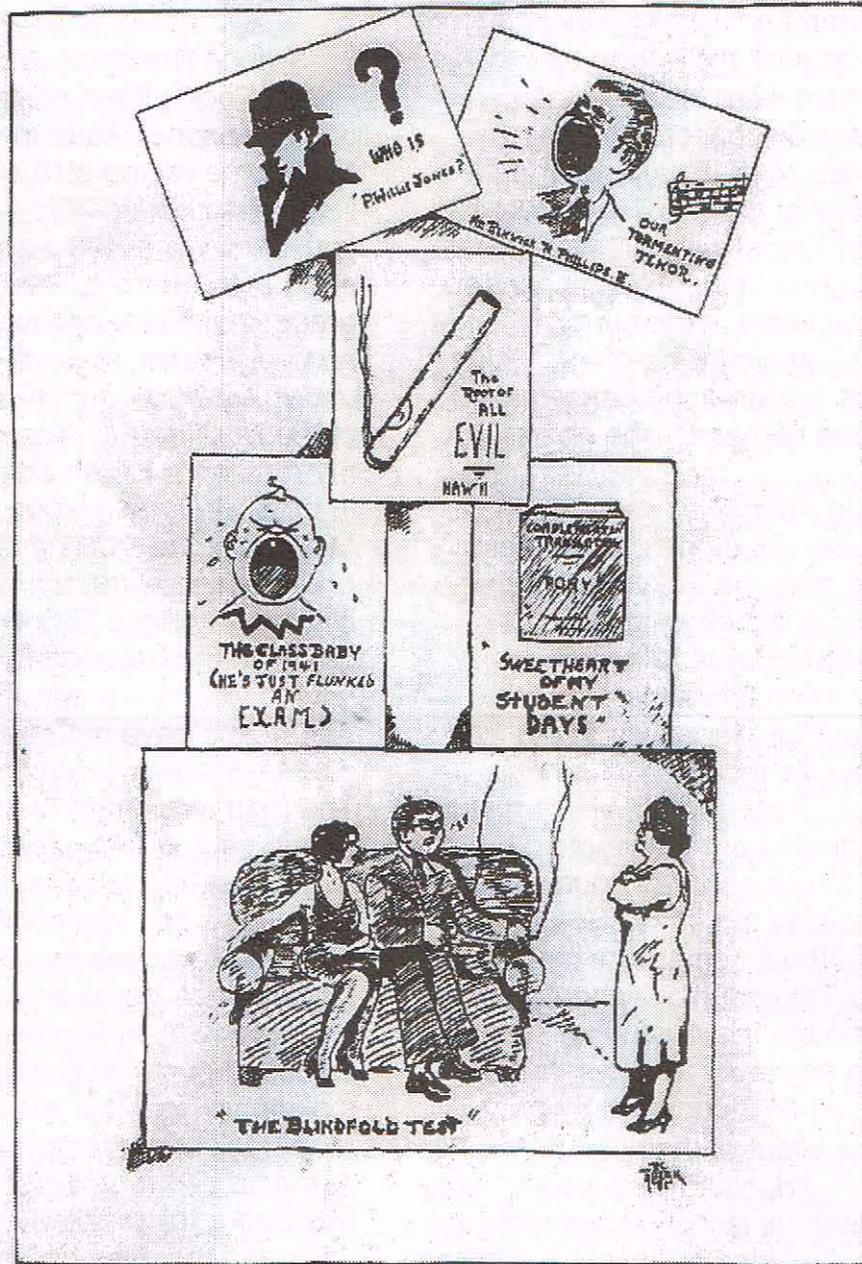
A primary problem concerned the Japanese kamikaze attacks which disrupted the flow of Allied soldiers and materials toward Japan. The United States wanted to make these attacks public but did not want the British taking the same license.

The United States needed to release information about the attacks because dock workers on the West Coast were walking away from their Navy shipbuilding jobs in search of more lucrative jobs, expecting the war to end. The kamikaze stories were released to appeal to the dock workers' patriotism so that they would continue to work for governmental purposes. Complications arose, however, when the British released information that showed that British ships were included in the statistics. It seemed possible that the stories would have less impact if the dock workers realized that non-Americans were included in the statistics

¹⁷ Robert Ruark, "Return Trip," *Saturday Evening Post*, 6 May 1944, 20.

¹⁸ Peter Edson to Lt. Robert C. Ruark, jr., 20 Sept. 1944. Anne Russell, "Robert Ruark vs. Rosie-the-Riveter," unpublished essay, 1998.

The WILDCAT



Other cartoons, drawn by Ruark for his 1931 yearbook, anticipate an approach to life that he would embrace.

of the casualties.

Ruark's job was to make sure that his English counterparts did not release or print the stories, and he often took criticism for this policy. Contributing to the censorship problem was the Australian media, which had its own sources of information and often announced attacks before censors could kill or alter the information.¹⁹

Furthermore, there were breaches of censorship by stateside censors. In a communique of April 1945, Ruark reported: "Recently on the eve of the Iwo Jima operation our retired Admiral Yarnell was allowed to say in Washington that Iwo Jima, Okinawa, and the China Coast, in that order, were our next operations. I sent you a clipping of this with a notation that it was a shame the gentleman did not include the code names for the operations too."

And problems in Australia: "Yesterday's afternoon papers carried stories, headlines ostensibly plucked from the Tokyo radio, that 'huge fleets of special attack corps aircraft trained in suicide diving were taking off for Okinawa to attack allied fleets there and that the roar of their motors from Japanese bases had been heard for days as they took off on this hallowed mission.'" Ruark continued, "I realize that this is only a quote from Tokyo radio but it still runs contrary to our policy of squelching all mention of the one-way trip boys. Scarcely a day passes here without some reference -- always credited to Tokyo radio -- about the kamikaze, even though the Australian censors will not allow such comment to originate here. They just feel that when it comes in by beam wireless the matter is out of their hands."²⁰

Nevertheless, Ruark clearly enjoyed his stay in Australia. "I spent the last six months of the war delightfully surrounded by lovely Australian women, lovely Australian beer and lovely Australian race horses."²¹

Verses written to his wife Virginia testify to

¹⁹ Foster, 44.

²⁰ Lieut. R. C. Ruark to Commander Murray Ward, 11 April 1945, typescript, Box 1, Folder 6, Southern Historical Collection.

²¹ Typescript, Box 1, Folder 1, Southern Historical Collection.

the truth of his comment:

"So pretty, pretty, pretty please,
Don't take offense at afternoon teas.
And if of me your view is dimmin,
I'll speak no more of Melbourne wimmen."²²

In June Ruark moved to Sydney to join the British Pacific Fleet office where he had the same responsibilities that he had carried in Melbourne on the staff of the U.S. Navy's Public Relations Liaison Office. As technical chief of joint security for the combined English American effort in the Pacific, Ruark, a reserve senior grade lieutenant, actually outranked the fleet admiral, Fraser, in clout, for the British were under American supervision in the last months of the Pacific war. Ruark wrote: "There I pulled my rank on a British admiral, was driven around in great style by Sergeant Cullen, a Royal Marine, in one of the three cars at my disposal, and brooded about the horrors of war in a flat overlooking Rose Bay in Sydney. The British gave me the traveling rank of a four-striper, a double whisky allowance, and a fine time. The Americans gave me seven dollars per diem, a double whisky allowance, and sweet peace. The food was horrid there -- nothing to eat for month after month except filet mignon, avocados, fresh mushrooms, eggs, bacon, chops, oysters, shrimp, lobster, grapes as big as golf balls, oranges as big as footballs, and grapefruit as big as basketballs. Rough."

Ruark was in Sydney when the atomic bomb exploded over Hiroshima in August. "I was looking up from the tote board at the Randwick race track one afternoon when some stranger came up and muttered casually that we had dropped a thing called an adam bum on the Japs and the Japs had quit and the war was over."²³

Ruark wrote a scathing attack on the dropping of the bomb: "This is the day when the first atomic bomb dropped on Japan, lightly floating from an aircraft, and landing with a sort of sigh -- a sigh that blew 300,000 and some

²² Typescript, Box 23, Folder 314, Southern Historical Collection.

²³ Ruark, *Loaded*, 158.

extra odd citizens into space, melted metal, scorched the earth, fouled the air and forever interrupted life, love and the pursuit of happiness for every man, beast and insect which infested the area."

An uncharacteristic fury emerges from his pen: "He had to fiddle around with the atom, when cancer was still uncured, and hunger, hate, and avarice still strode the earth untouched, unharmed, and nearly unnoticed by this ignoble animal, Man.

"And now he has the atom just where it wants him. He can compress, into six square inches, enough hate and malignity to kill half a million people, blot out the sun, uproot fertile fields and steal the smell of peach blooms from the air."²⁴

The Return Home

With the bombing, Ruark noted, "I put two and two together . . . I got on the telephone, called a RAF friend of mine in Melbourne, and he pushed a buck general off an aircraft bound for Washington, D.C. He put me on it, instead, after I had thoughtfully sent a signal to Guam, expressing my intent to return home. Naturally, nobody saw the message on Guam. Nobody was on Guam. They were all at Tokyo Bay, signing the surrender. That's why I sent the message to Guam in the first place."²⁵

Admiral Nimitz was in Tokyo, thus enabling this hasty departure. A departure so hasty that Ruark left some of his clothes behind, among them some shirts in the closet of an engaged woman whose fiance almost called off the wedding.²⁶

"Three days later," Ruark related, "I strolled into Admiral Miller's Washington office. He had a small attack of apoplexy but decided not to court-martial me."²⁷

He signed his separation papers from the service October 3, 1945, was released under honorable conditions, and set about finding a gimmick to propel him to the national ranks of

columnists. "I would be a cosmic columnist -- a belt-level journalist -- and anything that made me mad, glad or sad was bound to react on a vast belt-level audience. That was the gimmick, and a glorious gimmick it was. It only needed a few things: a fast kickoff, and then a succession of follow-up attention-getters, and somebody would be coming around with a fat contract for syndication."

With the boys coming home, Ruark found the gimmick in women's fashions. "Mary, bereft of Johnson, had been dressing for other women for the last four years. She had nine-inch nails, wore Dolman sleeves, flat-heeled shoes, and hauled her hair either into an Iroquois Indian topknot with a rubber band around it, or let it flop in a net like a sack of mud. She wore purple lipstick and looked like the wrath of God."²⁸

Ruark's article appeared November 16, 1945 in the *Washington Daily News*. His comments were less than endearing to the female population whom he described as looking "like something Salvador Dali might muster up after a mid-night snack of welsh rabbit." Of shoes, he wrote, "What I see now makes me long for the Ubangi country. Our dames crowd their feet into spiked shoes that make them totter like unreconstructed Chinese women. Or they slop around in heelless ballet slippers that endow their walk with all the winsome grace of an Okinawa coolie." And of four inch fingernails - ". . . Australian aborigines leave their nails long for purposes of scratching those parasites of the order Siphunculata."²⁹

The gimmick worked. An immediate celebrity, he appeared on a network radio show with Ilka Chase and received -- or so he estimated -- in excess of two thousand letters. But most important, he attracted the attention of Roy W. Howard, head of Scripps Howard Newspaper Alliance, who contacted Walker Stone. "Please tell Bob Ruark for me that if he can keep to the line and maintain the humor altitude attained in his story on how our gals look to returning men he will prove God's

²⁴ Typescript, 7 Aug. 1945, Box 23, Folder 314, Southern Historical Collection.

²⁵ Ruark, *Loaded*, 158.

²⁶ Foster, 45.

²⁷ Ruark, *Loaded*, 158.

²⁸ Robert Ruark, *Lost Classics*, 243.

²⁹ "Now He Wants to Go Back to the Wars," *Washington Daily News*, 16 Nov. 1945, Photo Album S-2, Southern Historical Collection.

greatest 1945 gift to Scripps Howard Circulation Managers.”³⁰

By 1946, Ruark was writing a column for the Scripps Howard Newspapers and United Feature Service in New York. Eventually his column was syndicated in 104 newspapers. Known for his lampoons, Ruark wrote a 650-word column five days a week, 50 weeks a year. “All those words,” he commented, “have got to be pleasin’ to Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, Negroes, Jews, Republicans, Democrats, Communists, old people, young people, Westerners, Easterners, Southerners, Texans, male people and female people. They got to be inspirational, educational, sarcastic, funny, serious, and full of zip. And they got to get past editors who might have mortgages, ulcers, wives, labor trouble, sick children, parking tickets, and an overdraft at the bank.”³¹

He also wrote a regular column for *Field and Stream* magazine, and the combination of many of these columns formed the background of his well-received *The Old Man and the Boy* (1957) and *The Old Man’s Boy Grows Older* (1961). Having drawn heavily on his experiences as a youth in the region of the Lower Cape Fear for these companion volumes, Ruark also wrote two novels, *Poor No More* (1959) and *The Honey Badger* (1965), which were autobiographical in nature.

Something of Value (1955) and *Uhuru* (1962), both studies of race relations in Africa, are among his most famous works. *Grenadine Etching: Her Life and Loves* (1947) and *Grenadine’s Spawn* (1952) satirized historical novels.

After 1952, Ruark lived in Spain, Africa and England. He kept a penthouse in London, but his primary residence was in Palamos, Spain. On April 30, 1965, he discontinued writing his United Feature Syndicate column. He died in London on July 1, 1965, at the age of 49, of internal bleeding. His remains were taken to Spain and were buried in the Colina LaFosca

Cemetery near his home.

It was in *The Honey Badger*, published posthumously, that Ruark summarized the effects of his life in WW II. When asked where he went, *The Honey Badger’s* protagonist, Alec Barr, responded, in true Ruark fashion: “North Atlantic. Mediterranean. South Pacific. Islands. England. Australia. Hawaii. Just places. Kept fairly busy packing and unpacking. Sometimes scared out of my wits when I wasn’t being bored to death. Not nearly enough whiskey most of the time. But the war gave me something to do with my hands.’ . . .

“The War, Alec Barr often thought when he was thrashing a depressing bathroom combination of bank-deposit inadequacies and plot problems, had been the greatest single boon of a short and very lucky professional life.”³²



Ruark strikes an unusual pensive mood. Picture courtesy of Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

³⁰ Roy W. Howard to Walker Stone, ca. 16 Nov. 1945, typescript, Box 1, Folder 1, Southern Historical Collection.

³¹ Ernest Havemann, “Robert Ruark: Brash Country Boy Makes Good as Columnist, Gets Plenty of Caviar.” *Life*, 14 Nov. 1949, 69-70.

³² Ruark, *Honey Badger*, 11.

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ETCHING

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GRENADINE ETCHING

HER LIFE AND LOVES

ROBERT C. RUARK



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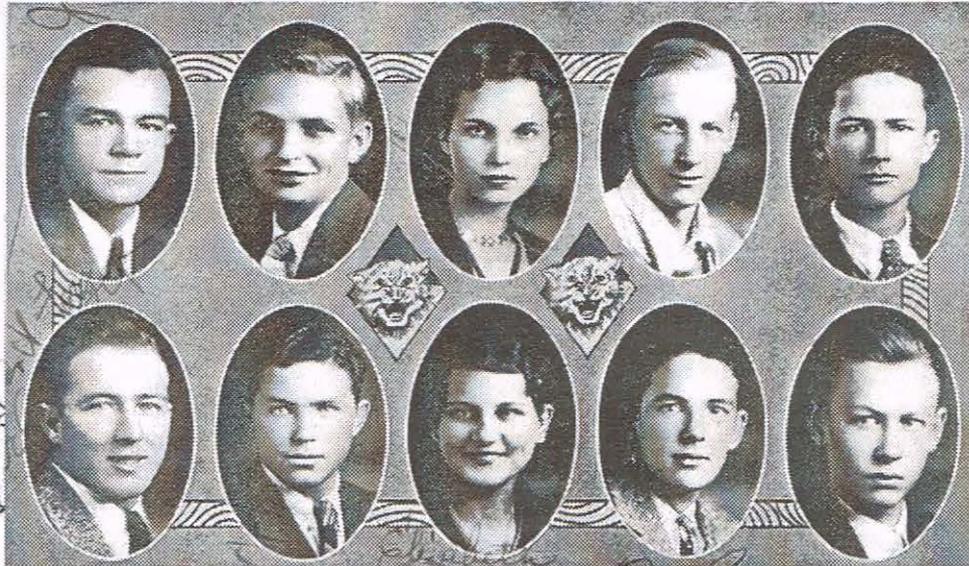
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A perfect woman, nobly planned;
To warn, to comfort, and command.

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He's made of the real stuff

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Wrightsville Beach; football star; Page

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1931

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