



## The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman  
Columnist

### Baron Von Ripper

Occasionally, in the heat of summer, life will throw us a gift. Such a thing happened to me the other night, as I sat on the back porch in the golden light, watching a squadron of swallows dive-bombing around the barn and reading from Ernie Pyle's magnificent collection "Brave Men."

Many folks know of Ernie Pyle, the humble journalist who followed American GIs throughout World War II. He wrote about them so endearingly that he was embraced as a comrade in arms by "the violent, common men who wash their socks in their helmets" and by millions of Americans at home who eagerly awaited his columns.

In "Brave Men" Pyle touches briefly on an extraordinary man with whom he was acquainted. Baron Rudolph Von Ripper. "He was so fabulous," Pyle wrote, that "a man might have been justified in thinking him a phony until he got to know him."

It isn't hard to see why, as Von Ripper, even before his legend grew in the Second World War, had already compiled the kind of résumé that would be difficult even for Hollywood screenwriters to imagine.

Consider: In 1905 Von Ripper was born into Austrian aristocracy. His father was a general in the Imperial Austrian Army; his mother a baroness. Von Ripper eschewed the potential for luxury his family wealth afforded and ran away from home when he was 15. He worked variously in sawmills, as a garbage collector, a circus clown, and a coal miner. He studied painting at the Dusseldorf Art Academy before joining the French Foreign Legion, where he was wounded in action while fighting Druze tribesmen during the Great Syrian Revolt.

Shot in both the knee and the chest in Syria, Von Ripper deserted the Legion and left for Berlin. He took up with a German actress. Wanting to make documentary films, Von Ripper skipped off again, this time to China where, instead of making movies, he joined a syndicate of gunrunners in Shanghai. Ultimately, and only after his American gang-leader was killed by rivals, he returned to Austria, married the daughter of a playwright, indulged all of the vices of the Weimar epoch, and was ultimately arrested by the Gestapo in 1933 on charges of treason.

Von Ripper had used his

prodigious artistic talent in drawing cartoons satirizing the ascendant Nazis. He was tortured mercilessly during his interrogation and sent to a concentration camp, where he was repeatedly beaten, and languished for months until the Austrian government secured his freedom.

The baron then fled to Amsterdam and Paris, and finally to Majorca, in Spain, where he continued to work on his art, which a critic called "horrific" because of the stark depictions of Nazi brutality.

In 1936 Von Ripper joined the Republican Army in Spain, fighting against General Francisco Franco and his Nazi and Italian allies. Though he had no love for communists, Von Ripper became a machine gunner on a Soviet bomber, and in 1937 was shot down by German anti-aircraft fire, receiving 21 shards of metal in his leg before parachuting into the city of Madrid.

He abandoned the field hospital when doctors suggested they would need to amputate his leg.

He landed in Greenwich Village, in New York, where he won a fellowship to the famous Yaddo artist's colony in Saratoga Springs. From there, Von Ripper moved to Connecticut and lived in a barn, working on his drawings, until the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, when he enlisted in the U.S. Army as a private.

Von Ripper's German made him an ideal interrogator for the 34th Infantry

Division, then gearing up for the invasion of Italy. Von Ripper made the landing at Salerno, and fought continuously at the front during the horrible slog up the Italian peninsula.

For his leadership of a patrol that involved intense, close-quarters combat, the capture of 11 prisoners and numerous weapons, he was awarded a Silver Star and a battlefield commission.

"He was a bit of John Wayne, Ernest Hemingway and Vincent van Gogh, all wrapped up into one avenging presence," wrote Colonel Robert J. Berens.

After leading numerous patrols Von Ripper was wounded again in an ambush. He was shot four times by a German wielding a machine pistol, bullets tearing into his hand, his leg, and disfiguring his face.

By this time Von Ripper was a notorious individual. The "Bravest man I've ever seen," said General Lucian Truscott.

And then he disappeared from the front, and no one really knew where he had gone.

Von Ripper had joined the OSS — forerunner of today's CIA — and parachuted into Nazi-occupied Austria with a radio and a cyanide capsule in order to organize resistance and make reports about the conditions on the ground to higher headquarters. Von Ripper worked diligently behind the lines, was captured and released by the Gestapo, and his final official evaluation summed

up his career this way: "Outstanding in fieldwork, but too restless for staff work" — which is perhaps the perfect professional epitaph, and one I might like to borrow.

When the war ended, Von Ripper divorced his wife and married a California blonde, won a Guggenheim fellowship for his artwork, and finally moved back to Majorca, where he was ultimately arrested by Spanish police and accused of smuggling gems in what appeared to be a revenge scenario for his role in the Civil War.

In July of 1960, out on bail, his wife found him dead in the garden, the victim of a heart attack. He was 55.

Von Ripper's artwork today is highly prized and valuable. And it isn't hard to believe that this is the legacy that would mean the most to him, if we could ask. It was why he fought, after all, against the book-burners and assassins and the corruption of ideologues.

Watching the swallows from my porch, gobsmacked by a life so thoroughly lived, I thought you should know about Baron Von Ripper, just in case you didn't.

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