

“To the everlasting glory of the Infantry, lives the story of Private Rodger Young.” (The Ballad of Rodger Young)

On July 31st, 1943, an infantry company lay pinned down under heavy fire from a Japanese machine gun pillbox. Four members of the company had already been killed, and several more wounded following bursts from the pillbox. When the company leader ordered a retreat, knowing that more would be lost to ensure the rest could escape, Private Rodger Young crawled toward the pillbox, being wounded a second time before destroying it with hand grenades. For Private Young's heroic actions, he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor in 1943.

Born in Tiffin, Ohio, on April 28, 1918, Rodger Young spent much of his childhood in Green Springs, Ohio. In high school, he tried out for the football team. Initially rejected, Young's enthusiasm led the coach to permit him to play football and later basketball. During one basketball game, Young received a severe head injury that left him nearly blind and deaf, eventually forcing him to drop out of high school in his sophomore year.

In 1939, believing he wouldn't pass the normal Army entrance exam, Young applied for the Ohio National Guard and was assigned to the 148th Infantry Regiment of the 37th Division. By October 1940, he had been promoted to corporal and became an instructor teaching recruits how to handle small arms. When his regiment was activated in the lead-up to America's entry into World War II, he was promoted to sergeant.

Soon after activation, Young requested demotion to private because his hearing and eyesight loss had progressed to the point where he was nearly blind and deaf. Although told he should go to a field hospital for treatment, Young refused, stating that he didn't wish to miss the New Georgia landing.

Once on New Georgia, Young's squad was caught in heavy fire from a machine gun pillbox. The first burst killed two members of the squad and injured many others, including Young. The squad attempted to flank the enemy, losing two more men. As the squad leader called a retreat, Young crawled into the open space between the squad's position and the pillbox, instantly being wounded by another burst before responding with fire from his rifle. After reaching the pillbox, Young destroyed it with hand grenades, being killed by a final burst from the enemy.

In 1944, Young's family was presented his Medal of Honor for his heroic actions to save the lives of the rest of his squad. In 1945, songwriter Frank Loesser wrote “The Ballad of Rodger Young,” memorializing his bravery. In 1949, Young's body was returned to the United States and buried in McPherson Cemetery. In the years following his death, Young was memorialized in more ways than just the ballad, including a small arms range in Camp Perry, Ohio.

The moment in which Rodger Young sacrificed himself sparked a genre of writing that inspired debates and questions across the nation. Robert A. Heinlein's 1959 novel *Starship*

*Troopers* was the first major work to take up this theme, with the values and missions of the Mobile Infantry reflecting the spirit of Young's valor. Although now decades old, *Starship Troopers* still shapes the way the nation views the often overlooked infantry divisions.

Heinlein's novel was written partially because of how he learned Young's story and the infantry divisions that were often looked down on. Rodger Young, however, represents the heart of the infantry. Glory may not be guaranteed in the infantry, but the pride of being those on the front line—the ones trusted to win the fight—is what the infantry holds for people because of Young's sacrifice.

Rodger Young, although not widely known or honored, is the epitome of the infantry, and the nation's values. "Always I fought on – through the foe, to the objective, to triumph over all. If necessary, I fight to my death" (The Infantryman's Creed). These values formed Young's conviction in the face of the enemy, driving him to fight and die for the men he had walked among for years.

Although set far in the future, Heinlein's novel—shaped by Young's values—challenges common perceptions of service and sacrifice. Most of all, *Starship Troopers* stands to recognize that the people who often fade into history are the ones who change the course of the future.