

Media

Description

Twentieth century America was an ever-changing atmosphere for women in many different ways. One of these areas of change was in the media. As early as World War I, the media used women as propaganda, although they were still portrayed as gentle homemakers making life better for their soldiers when they returned. However, these women in used in propaganda were few and far between. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, women's role in media was beginning to take a more prominent position. The most widely recognized WWII woman in the media was Rosie the Riveter. She was a figure that encouraged women to work for themselves during the war and not just stay home to be mothers and housewives. Even with great strides towards strong female representation in the media, women are still greatly underrepresented and objectified to this day. Women are used to sexualize advertising and sell product, not to show an encouraging and activism-inspired image of women in the world. Margret Polk, better known as The Memphis Belle, and her ex-fiancé Bob Morgan's story is a perfect example of the role of women in 20th century media.

Margret Polk was a high society lady who lived in Memphis, Tennessee. Robert Morgan was a Lieutenant in the United States Air Force. The pair met, fell in love, and announced their engagement in 1942, just as World War II was reaching its most volatile time. The two wrote numerous letters to each other expressing their deep love and affection for one another. Bob calls Margret "My Dearest" and signs his letters "Forever Yours" while Margret tells Bob "I do hope I will see you soon". Their engagement was a popular topic of media coverage, incurring headlines such as "And So They'll Be Wed!". They seem very much in love until something goes horribly wrong. Bob was away fighting the war and they pair hardly saw each other, so they began to drift apart. In a letter Bob wrote to Margret, he pleaded with her to change her mind, saying "I need to Margret and I want you to become my wife", yet Margret had already made up her mind not to follow through with the engagement. Margret felt as though they had lost their "old feelings" for each other and that they could not be recovered. The finality of the separation is felt in a telegraph Bob sent that said "RETURNING RING UNLESS YOU ADVISE NEED YOU TRULY LOVE YOU = BOB." This seems to be their last communication of this time.

So where does "The Memphis Belle" come into play? While Margret is called The Memphis Belle, this name was not originally given to her. This was the name Bob Morgan gave his fighter plane in Margret's honor. This plane was used all throughout World War II as one of the many fighting the Axis Powers. Bob even flew the plane to Memphis on multiple occasions to visit Margret. The actions of "The Memphis Belle" as a strategic piece of military equipment was not what brought attention to it, nor was it the actions of the brave crew, including Lieutenant Morgan, and the many missions they flew. The media attention was almost primarily focused on the romance between Bob and Margret. There were a select few newspaper articles about the actions of the plane and its crew, however there was not a single article about "The Memphis Belle" that did not mention the love story the plane's name was based on. One article's opening sentence is "'The Memphis Belle' was over German-held France yesterday" and then, instead of expounding upon the importance of the mission or if it was successful, it went on to give a

thorough description of Margret's activities the previous week and her family tree as well as her relationship with Bob.

The media attention surrounding "The Memphis Belle" was completely misplaced. It was focused primarily on the romance, not on any politically or militaristically important information. Even Margret was involved in political activism that was not mentioned in the newspapers at all. Henry Metz, an Advertising Manager in Memphis, sent Margret a letter firstly expressing his sympathies about her split from Bob, but secondly he mentioned meeting Margret at a rally with her mother. This rally is not mentioned in any newspapers or media sources, and Mr. Metz did not go into detail about the purpose of the rally, however this small detail shows that Margret was doing more than being a romantic figure in a classic World War II love story. In June of 1943, Margret did an interview with WMC, a radio program, called "Memphis Today and Tomorrow". Instead of asking questions about Margret's contributions to the war or even about Bob's missions and military experiences, the interviewer asked her exclusively about her relationship with Bob and things like how they met and when they got engaged. The interviewer even mentioned a war bond tour "The Memphis Belle" was taking and the only questions he asked about that was if Margret went with Bob on tours like that. It seems as if the media only wants to focus on trivial things instead of the major events of the war.

Many years later, the story of "The Memphis Belle" resurfaced in the media. The articles were mostly regarding the plane and its crew, however newspapers still managed to cover the reuniting of Bob and Margret after so many years and how their romance was such a major portion of the plane's story. In fact, without the love story, the plane would not have been given any recognition in popular media. It is encouraging to read more current articles and see that they have moved past the romance enough to give much deserved recognition to the crew of "The Memphis Belle" and to the plane itself. While this love story between Bob and Margret is charming and entertaining, it does not give justice to the bomber's record or either of the pair's individual actions or any activism they were involved in. In the words of Henry Metz, Margret was "a fine soldier - made of the real stuff!" and she was not portrayed in the media as such. Instead she was objectified as a romantic figure in a beautiful romance, much the way women are portrayed today. Women's portrayal in media has come a long way, but there is still many more strides to be taken.

Further Reading

Fox, Jo., "Women in World War One Propaganda." British Library. <http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/women-in-world-war-one-propaganda>.

"Rosie the Riveter: Real Women Workers in World War II" Library of Congress, 2007. Film.

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