

The Autograph That Went to Eternity

A Lesson from RAY BOLGER

As told to Mary Cremen



**It took this nameless Marine
to pay Bolger his finest tribute**

■ IT IS A FRIGHTENING kind of tale the way it proves how so little can go so far.

In 1943, Little Jack Little and I spent seven months touring the South, Southwest and Central Pacific war areas. Our show lasted about three hours. When we hit Guadalcanal the enemy was occupying part of the terrain. Our show, however, still ran more or less according to the usual pattern. I always asked if there was anyone in the audience who would like to come up on the stage and dance or tell jokes with us. After that, with Jack Little accompanying, I would sing a few songs and get everyone to join in.

When it came time for me to dance, during this particular show, I decided to do a routine with a rifle as prop. I took a long look down into the audience and right in the front row sat a kid from Brooklyn. I can't explain how I knew he came from there; I just guessed it.



I looked at the boy for almost a minute. The audience quieted down and then I called, "Hi ya, Brooklyn!"

He shrugged.

I said, "Cheest it's good ta hear ya verce."

The boy sat straight as a poker.

I danced around the stage pretending I was a sergeant and then back to the kid. I pantomimed three stripes

on my sleeve and ordered, "Hand over your piece (rifle to the uninitiated)."

With a little more urging from the rest of the crowd, the boy gave it up. I used the rifle in my act for a few minutes and, after it was over, I passed it back to him.

By the time the whole show ended we were already overdue at our next spot. We had packed our gear on the double and were making a run for the plane when some of the men started crowding around to say goodbye. There was so much talk and noise that I almost didn't notice the boy from Brooklyn when he stepped up to me and asked if I would autograph his piece.

I'll remember this second as long as I live because it is so typical of the hundreds, maybe thousands of moments of decision that come to every life. You are asked to do a favor. You are in a hurry. Should you bother to take the time? Will you or won't you? What difference could it possibly make, anyway?

In all honesty, I tell you that it was not wisdom but something no deeper than impulse that made me drop my gear on the ground. I reached for the boy's piece and, with a penknife, scratched my name on the stock.

FIVE YEARS passed.

I was having lunch on the other side of the world in New York's 21 Club. Just as the meal was ending a young Marine lieutenant stopped at my table and asked if he could have a few words with me. He sat down and explained that he had been on Guadalcanal and seen our show. It seems that soon after our departure the enemy had attacked with new fury and terrible fighting had gone on for weeks.

The lieutenant shrugged, "But you probably read about it in the papers. What I really stopped to talk about was that young Brooklyn kid. You see, I saw you sign his piece. And I thought you would like to know he was the kind of boy who never said much, never showed it when he was pleased.

"Maybe signing your autograph didn't mean much to you but it certainly did to the kid." The Marine explained, "Somehow, in the midst of all that fighting, he had traced your signature on a piece of paper, etched it onto a fragment from a



3
Ray Bolger

The Lieutenant spoke very quietly, "A little can go a very long way, Mr. Bolger. At the end of the War, I went to Guam and spent a day there before starting the trip home. That was time enough to see a good part of the island. I jeeped along and one of my stops was the huge American cemetery."

The Lieutenant said there were thousands of new graves. There had not yet been time to mark them all with white crosses and the graves that were still bare seemed to stretch endlessly.

He walked up and down past the rows of white crosses and continued to the undecorated section. In the noon day glare, he suddenly began to wonder if he were seeing things. A solitary marker seemed to be standing in the distance.

After walking over, he understood what had happened. The buddies of a fallen Marine had made a monument of his prized possession—his rifle.

The Lieutenant knelt under the broiling sun and read from the butt: "This piece was used by Ray Bolger, August 1943." ■ ■

