

Trailblazing Photographer

Margaret Bourke-White



Imagine this: You are an adventurous young woman, and you want to do all those things that women never do. Your passion is photography, but this is a man's field in a man's world, and you are not a man. So what do you do?

Your name is Margaret Bourke-White, and you become the first female war correspondent and the first woman to be allowed to work in combat zones during World War II. You become one of the most important photographers of the twentieth century, and you do, in fact, end up attaining your dream of doing a man's job in a man's world!

Margaret was born in the Bronx, New York, on June 14, 1904, the second of three children. Her father, Joseph White, was an inventor and

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"Work is something you can count on, a trusted life-long friend who never deserts you."

—Margaret Bourke-White
(1904–1971)



They Stood Alone!

an engineer, and her mother, Minnie Bourke, was a forward-thinking and loving mother.

In keeping with their religious philosophy, the Whites created a mentally stimulating and moral home in which to raise their children. They encouraged their children to read books, study nature, and think for themselves. In fact, one night the whole family stayed up to watch a butterfly slowly emerge from the chrysalis.

As a child, Margaret was shy and serious and, unlike her classmates, she loved bugs and snakes. One day, she took her pet snakes to school and caused such a panic in the school that the principal forbade her from bringing them ever again.

In addition to being a mechanical engineer and an inventor, her father was an amateur photographer in his spare time, and the White home was filled with his photographs. Margaret often followed her father around the house pretending to take photographs with an empty cigar box, and she helped him develop his prints in the bathtub.

On Sundays he took her on trips to factories. He told her that the beauty of machines was as great as that of nature and that their beauty was in their usefulness to humans.

Once he took her to a foundry where workers melted metal and poured it into molds. She never forgot the power and beauty of that scene with its fiery colors and wished that she could share it with others.

She loved nature as much as her parents and dreamed of one day being a scientist, perhaps a herpetologist (an expert on reptiles and amphibians). She even thought she might some day go into the jungle and bring back animals for natural history museums. She told herself she would do all the things that women never do.

While at the University of Michigan she married an engineering graduate student, but the marriage didn't work out.

She then enrolled at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, where she took up photography.

After graduating in 1927, she returned to Cleveland, Ohio, where her family was living and opened her own photography studio in a one-room apartment, specializing in architectural photography. She set up her stack of developing trays near the kitchen sink, did her printing in a tiny breakfast alcove, and rinsed photos in the bathtub.

The money she made from shooting elegant homes and gardens by day was spent on photographing steel mills at night and on the weekends.

Her adventurous nature and her dedication to her craft led to her becoming a world-famous photographer by age twenty-five. She took great risks whenever necessary to get just the picture she wanted.

She often climbed high scaffolds, exposed herself to extreme temperatures, and set up her camera in dangerous places to take her photos. She was determined to get the pictures no one else did.

She gained great success photographing for architects and landscape artists, which brought her to the attention of Cleveland's biggest industrial tycoons.

The industrial pictures she took to be used in the book *The Story of Steel* created a sensation, making her famous almost overnight. At the same time, *House and Garden* magazine began publishing some of her landscape photos, and orders began pouring in from industrialists, estate owners, architectural firms, and advertising agencies.

In the spring of 1929 she was recruited by Henry R. Luce as staff photographer for *Fortune* magazine, which was a new business magazine that would make use of dramatic industrial photographs.

The first lead story was to feature Swift & Co., a hog processing plant. She worked with Parker Lloyd-Smith, her editor, until he became too sick from the stench to continue. After she finished photographing the hogs, she left most of her camera equipment behind to be burned.³⁹ Her documentation of the activity at a hog processing plant was a major step in the development of the photo essay.

In 1930 she made a trip to Russia, becoming the first Western photographer allowed into that country. For five weeks she traveled all over Russia capturing dams, factories, farms, and their workers. She took nearly three thousand photographs; in 1931 she published her book *Eyes on Russia*.

In 1936 Luce hired her as one of the four photojournalists for his new pictorial magazine *Life*. She was the only woman and the only one of the photographers to use her big, heavy camera with tripod instead of the newer, smaller 35-millimeter cameras.

A new way of thinking about her photographs was emerging. Looking beyond patterns and shapes that she could record on film, she now sought to capture emotion.

She made history with the publication of her haunting photos of the Depression in the book *You Have Seen Their Faces*, a collaboration with the best-selling novelist Erskine Caldwell whom she married in 1939 and divorced in 1942.

In early 1941 tensions were running high in Europe, and *Life* asked her to return to Russia to make a comparison between the current Russia and the one that she had seen ten years before when she had traveled there on her own.

She and Caldwell entered Russia through China, and on July 22 they were there when the first bombs fell on Moscow. She was the only foreign photographer present, and the resulting pictures were a major scoop for both her and for *Life*.

She was a war correspondent for the next four years—the

first female war correspondent, the first woman to be allowed to work in combat zones during World War II, and one of the first photographers to enter and document the death camps.

She recorded events from the air, on the battlefield, and as the war wound down, she was one of the first photographers to record the horrors and atrocities of the concentration camp at Buchenwald.

While serving as a war correspondent, she survived a torpedo attack while on a ship to North Africa, and she flew in American bombers on their bombing raids, taking serial pictures of the destruction.

She had become a trailblazing photographer who photographed the major events of the day. She showed Americans the beauty of industry and its machinery in the 1920s, documented poverty and suffering during the Great Depression in the 1930s, and brought home World War II in the 1940s.

Her assignments took her around the world, and she is probably best remembered for her work for *Life*. One of the magazine's original photographers, she helped develop the photo-essay style of news reporting that proved so popular with readers across the nation.

At one point in her life, a rumor had spread that she was really a man using a woman's name to get extra publicity because of some of the daring feats her photographs required. To document that she was indeed a woman, she had her assistant photograph her while she was actually taking some of her more daring photographs.

She died on August 27, 1971, at age sixty-seven after spending the last seventeen years of her life fighting her Parkinson disease (a degenerative illness which attacks the nervous system) with the same bravery and determination that had made her a great photographer.

They Stood Alone!

She was a woman doing a man's job in a man's world, from the foundries of Cleveland to the battlefields of World War II.

She was an original staff photographer for two of the most prominent magazines of her day, *Fortune* and *Life*, and she led a life full of adventure, pioneering a new art form: photojournalism. She was, and still is, one of the most important photographers of the twentieth century.