

HOW FAITH ON THE FRONT LINES  
HAS PROTECTED AMERICAN TROOPS

# Under His Wings



EMILY COMPAGNO

COHOST OF OUTNUMBERED



# Under His Wings



*How Faith on the Front Lines  
Has Protected American Troops*

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# Frontispiece

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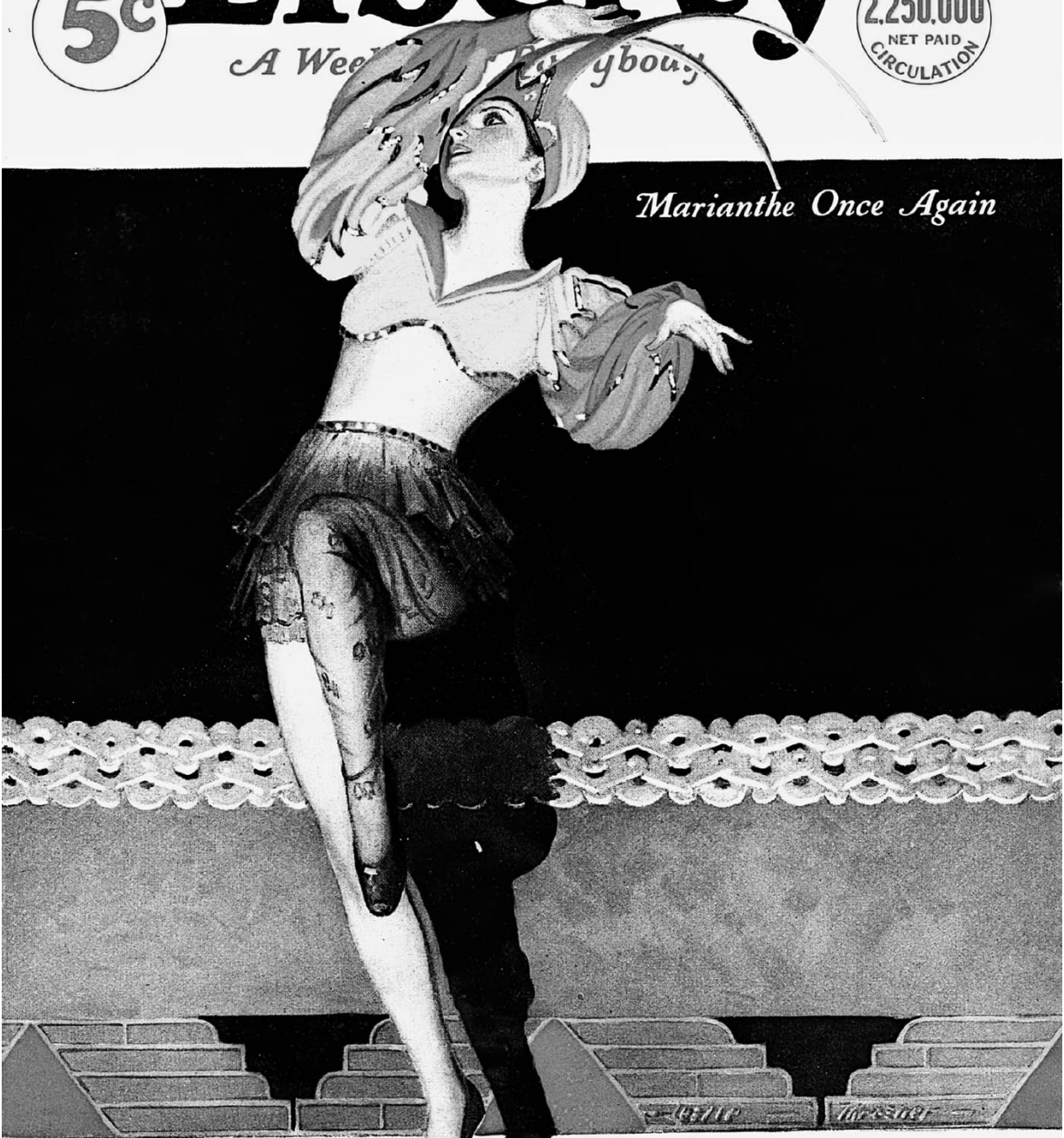
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# Liberty

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# Dedication

FOR MY PARENTS

*My strong, inspiring mother, whose encouragement has known no bounds, and whose loving dedication and meticulous research as a collector of stories has blessed generations of families, especially ours.*

*And my father, whose steadfast service and honor continue well beyond the commander's uniform, and whose unfailing love and leadership have guided me to where I am today.*

*The two of you gave me wings. I'm so proud to be your daughter.*

*I love you both.*



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# Epigraph

*Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High*

*will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.*

*I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress,*

*my God, in whom I trust."*

*Surely He will save you*

*from the fowler's snare*

*and from the deadly pestilence.*

*He will cover you with His feathers,*

*and under His wings you will find refuge;*

*His faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.*

*You will not fear the terror of night,*

*nor the arrow that flies by day,*

*nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,*

*nor the plague that destroys at midday.*

*A thousand may fall at your side,*

*ten thousand at your right hand,*

*but it will not come near you.*

—PSALM 91

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# Introduction





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**H**istory books chronicle the ferocity of war; portraying the details of battles; describing successes and failures and close calls; setting forth the courageous and honorable actions by soldiers who exceed duty and secure freedom in the thick of combat. But what those black-and-white details don't reveal is the unseen force at work: the origin of tide-turning courage, the source of the invisible protection, the embrace in which the soldier found comfort. Historians may question: In the depths of fear and despair, amid the brutality of violence, in the throes of pain, and in the moments of jubilation, Who do soldiers turn to? Who protects them? The saved know.

It is the Lord Who goes before us, Who is always with us, Who will never leave or forsake us. From Samson using the mere jawbone of a donkey to slay a thousand men to a simple slingshot equipping David to overcome Goliath, the Bible is replete with examples of His faithfulness shielding soldiers in battle. Yet Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

The warriors in this book each experienced intimate connections with God on the battlefield. The stories within reveal the most profoundly life-changing moments soldiers had while serving on the front lines: a Green Beret heard God's voice in the middle of a firefight in Iraq; an infantryman felt His direction during an ambush in the jungles of Vietnam; a Ranger realized His calling on a tarmac in Mogadishu; a prisoner of war had his prayers answered during torture sessions. Firsthand, riveting accounts of God by the side and in the hearts of soldiers, getting them through torture, pain, despair, separation, fear, anger, and grief. Through prayer, through miracles, through interactions with angels, these remind us "What is impossible with man, is possible with God" (Luke 18:27).

There is joy in these memories too. Deeply touching accounts of rejoice and worship in the unlikeliest of circumstances, reverence within the humblest settings. God promises us He will strengthen us and help us, uphold us with His righteous hand. These warriors' souls are saved, their spirits cared for.

Some of these accounts are personal to me. My family's extensive military service has left imprints all over the world, with my relatives fighting overseas and far away in past wars and conflicts and up through modern history, from Italy and England to France and Germany, from the Pacific Theater and the Philippines all the way to Afghanistan and Iraq. My blood carries the blood of those in my family who died on European battlefields like Flanders Fields and the Russian Front, and of those who served in our American, British, and Italian forces, and even the Sudetenland resistance. They are a part of freedom's history, just like all who serve, and are a part of my history too.

My father was a commander in the US Navy, an elite pathologist in the Medical Corps. I was born in a naval hospital and raised on a tight, loving ship. Lining our hallways were our family's military medals and awards, in between citizenship certificates and photographs from generations past, all thanks to my genealogist mother. On my bedroom wall, surrounded by photographs of F-117s, F-22s, and B-2s, proudly hung a poem by John Gillespie Magee Jr.:

## High Flight



*Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth  
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;  
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth  
of sun-split clouds—and done a hundred things  
You have not dreamed of—wheeled and soared and swung  
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,  
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung  
My eager craft through footless halls of air . . .  
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue*



*I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace*

*Where never lark nor ever eagle flew—*

*And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod*

*The high untrespassed sanctity of space,*

*Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.*

As I dreamed of one day slicing through the heavens in a fighter jet, I wondered—would I, too, be able to soar close to God?

I wasn't aware that, in December 1941, just four months after Magee began writing *High Flight*, he died after colliding his Spitfire VZ-H with a RAF training aircraft. At the young age of nineteen, Magee was already a combat veteran, having been the lone survivor of a Luftwaffe dogfight with leading German ace Joachim Müncheberg. His gallant service ended that same year, before he saw twenty, and more than three years before the world saw V-E Day. He lies buried in a small village in England, his coffin laid to rest by other pilots in his squadron, the verses of *High Flight* adorned on his tombstone.

Less than five hundred miles away in Suresnes, France, lies another young soldier in his final resting place, a casualty of the prior World War amid similar global grief. Private First Class Joseph Lorenz was a member of the US Army's American Expeditionary Force, Rainbow Division, who made the Ultimate Sacrifice at the age of twenty-one after sacrificing one of his legs earlier in the war. His tombstone has no verse on it, no poetry; only his name, rank, and battalion details, and the date of his death: NOV. 21, 1918.

But the memory of his mother's hand remains on the top of the tombstone after she visited his grave alongside three hundred and fifty other Gold Star mothers in 1930; his sister's, when she visited twice during her

deployment with the US Army Nurse Corps during World War II; and years later, his great-niece's—my mother.

So it seemed a natural fit that the allure of service and duty beckoned me, too, from the glory of the sky. The long story “short” is that I was too small to be a fighter pilot, which required a minimum height of five feet, four inches. Thus I “peaked” at my Cadet of the Quarter Award while in the US Air Force Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) at the University of Washington.

But a different accolade was just as impactful to me at that young age, which came in the form of a simple anecdote by the detachment commander, a colonel. He told me he had gone to the renowned Tulip Festival in the Skagit Valley and noticed in a field of all-red tulips, there was one single yellow tulip growing proudly. “Cadet Compagno, you remind me of that yellow tulip,” he declared. I brimmed with pride. In an environment where being or looking different was discouraged, I knew what he meant.

He meant Christ’s light was visibly shining through me. What else could it be?

The psalmist tells us the Lord is our refuge and our fortress, our God in Whom we trust, under Whose wings we will be protected, His faithfulness our shield and rampart. For our warfighters, there is no greater test than the brutal demands of war. Violent battles and long deployments test resolve and courage; the anguish of loss due to the Ultimate Sacrifice and family separation distresses even the strongest hearts. Every role soldiers play in the constellation of combat requires above-and-beyond perseverance, determination, and bravery. Sometimes miracles are required. But with God, all things are possible. The stories you are about to read reveal just that.



## **Part I**



# **The Global War on Terror**



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