

ROCKY

MARCIANO

A black and white photograph of boxer Rocky Marciano celebrating a victory. He is shirtless, wearing a white towel draped over his shoulders, and has a joyful expression with his mouth open. He is holding up his right arm, which is wearing a red boxing glove. Behind him, a man in a military-style cap and uniform is visible, and to the right, two other men are looking on, one with glasses. The background is a dark silhouette of a city skyline against a reddish-brown sky.

THE
**BROCKTON
BLOCKBUSTER**

JOHN JARRETT

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INTRODUCTION

YOU COULD knock Rocky Marciano out with a two-by-four but not with a boxing glove, and I still wouldn't bet on the two-by-four. The man was impervious to punishment – you could knock him down, only twice recorded in fights and twice in sparring bouts. But you couldn't knock him out.

He could knock you out. In an unbeaten run of 49 professional fights, Rocky only required judges to render a decision in six of those contests. In the other 43 fights his opponent was either saved by the referee, counted out by the referee, or scraped off the canvas by his handlers.

When Rocky died in a plane crash, *Washington Post* columnist Shirley Povich wrote, "He'd gotten there as heavyweight champion of the world in 1952 through absolute courage. It was the font of his success, a flaming valour that was the biggest thing he took into a prize ring. In style he was as unlikely a heavyweight champion as ever showed in boxing trunks and in physical stature he was too small for the task. Yet nobody ever walked out of the ring a winner over Marciano.

"Once it was written of him by an author who shall be nameless, 'Rocky Marciano can't box a lick, his footwork is what you would expect from two left feet, he throws his right hand in a clumsy circle and knows nothing of orderly retreat. All he can do is blast the breath from your lungs or knock your head off.' It was fairly descriptive."

Yet when he retired from boxing in 1956, Rocky Marciano could rightfully claim to be the only undefeated heavyweight champion of the world. He knocked out Jersey Joe Walcott in a 13-round thriller in 1952 to become world champion. Defending his title six times he brought

ROCKY MARCIANO

the million dollar gate back to boxing in 1955 when he crushed Archie Moore in what would be his last fight.

As an ex-champ, he criss-crossed America making public appearances. He travelled any way he could without spending a cent, building a network of friends, businessmen and mob guys who willingly paid his way, fed him, dressed him and flew him from here to there and back again. Which is how he died, hitching a ride in a small plane that crashed in an Iowa cornfield in August 1969, on the eve of his 46th birthday.

He lived and died by his mantra, "If you want to live a full life then live dangerously."

A FLIGHT TOO FAR

ON THE evening of 31 August 1969, a green and white single-engine Cessna 172 took off from Chicago's Midway Airport and set a course for Des Moines, Iowa, a distance of some 310 miles. There were three men on board, including the pilot, who had been given a weather briefing that warned of stormy skies over Iowa with a low ceiling. At 8.50pm the pilot, who had decided to divert the plane to Newton, Iowa, contacted the Des Moines Radar Approach Control saying he was stuck in a cloud bank and was unable to find the Newton airport. Moments later, he radioed that he had broken through the clouds and was setting up to land. A flight service official at Des Moines stated that the pilot told him at about 9.00pm that he intended to land at Newton but gave no indication of trouble.

Mrs Colleen Swarts, aged 39, who lived across the road from the Henry Eilander farm, said she saw the lights of the plane as it passed overhead. She said the plane appeared to have reversed its westward course and 'seemed to be swinging toward the airport' when she lost sight of it behind a grove. But the sound continued. She said the plane's engine stopped, then 'kind of sputtered again. Then I heard this awful thud and I knew it had crashed.' Mrs Swarts's husband ran into the field where the plane had come down but couldn't find it in the dark. Mrs Swarts notified the police, and the sheriff's deputies arrived shortly afterward and found the plane.

It had hit a lone oak tree in the middle of a cornfield and skidded into a small creek bed. One wing had sheared off and wreckage of the

plane, flight maps and weather charts were strewn all around. Federal Aviation Administration officials, who quickly sealed off the site, refused to speculate about the cause.

Deputy Sheriff Jim VeWere, with the aid of other deputies, found the bodies of two men who had been thrown forward more than 30 feet. Pilot Glenn Belz, aged 37, was found with the plane's motor on his chest. The other man was 23-year-old Frank Farrell. Under the smashed fuselage, still strapped in his seat, was the third man, later identified as the retired former undefeated heavyweight boxing champion of the world Rocky Marciano, aged 45. Debris had pierced his skull. Jasper County Medical Examiner Dr John Maughan stated all three men had been killed instantly.

The National Transportation Safety Board accident investigation concluded that the probable cause of the mishap was 'the pilot attempted operation exceeding his experience and ability level, continued visual flight rules under adverse weather conditions, and experienced spatial disorientation in the last moments of the flight.' Sheriff Darrell Hurley said simply, 'The engine conked out and they went down.'

The bodies of the three were taken first to the Toland-Wallace funeral home in Newton and later to the Dunn funeral home in Des Moines. Friends of Farrell said he and Belz, both of Des Moines, had flown to Chicago to pick up Marciano for a surprise birthday dinner party in his honour on Sunday night at the Charcoal Room in Des Moines. Rocky was to have flown home to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, the following day, Monday, 1 September, to celebrate his 46th birthday at a party organised by his 16-year-old daughter Mary Anne. An added surprise would have seen Rocky's adopted 17-month-old son, Rocco Kevin, showing his father how he had learned to walk since Rocky had left home.¹

'It was late evening in Fort Lauderdale when the doorbell rang on North Atlantic Boulevard, Mary Anne heard her mother answer the door. She bolted to the staircase after she heard the scream. Jack Sherlock, the Fort Lauderdale police chief and an old friend of the family, was standing inside the door. "Are you sure it's him? Are you sure it's not Rocky Graziano?" [Marciano's wife] Barbara was saying, referring to the former middleweight champion of the world with whom her husband was often confused. "It can't be, are you sure?"

¹ *Des Moines Register* 2 September 1969

Mary Anne started down the stairs. "Is my dad dead?" she asked. "I'm sorry," Sherlock said.²

A *United Press* man reporting from Brockton, Massachusetts, wrote, 'Rocky Marciano, the man who put this town on the map with his nickname, "The Brockton Blockbuster" comes home tonight. In the past it was a time for happy reunions with the old friends and his parents who still live down on Dover Street. Now it will be a time for sadness and last farewells. The people got up on Labour Day morning and read about it in the papers. At first there was only shock when they read about the plane crash and then the memories came pouring back. The Hickey Funeral Home, where Marciano's body will lie, can be seen through the windows of the Brockton Café, and the people cast uneasy glances towards it as they washed down their doughnuts with cups of hot, black coffee this morning.

"Sure, everybody in town knows Rocky," said Frank DiBarri. "He lived up the street. I used to play baseball down at Edgars Playground, and he would be there, too. You couldn't find a better guy."

'Naomi DeMaine was a schoolgirl when she'd watch him run down the street training to be a fighter. It's the same memory that others have. He was a fighter even in his youth. "There isn't any boxing here any more," one man said. "They used to have them down at the A.O.B. Hall, but not any more. Nobody's interested in fighting any more."

'Whenever Rocky would have a fight, the crowds would gather on Main Street and listen over speakers. "The place would go absolutely wild when he'd win," one old-timer said. "There were quite a few wild nights I can remember when he was fighting. We never went away sad because he never lost."

'Toni Costa didn't grow up in Brockton and she's too young to remember Rocky's bloody, hard-pitched battles. But she answers the telephone for the *Brockton Enterprise* and was learning a lot about him from the calls flooding the office. "I haven't had time to do anything but answer the phone all day," she said. "A lot of people heard it on the radio and don't believe it. They call and say 'I heard a rumour that Rocky Marciano was killed.' They really know, it's not just a rumour, but they don't want to believe it. And some of them break down when I tell them it's true."³

2 William Nack *My Turf: Horses, Boxers, Blood Money and the Sporting Life* 2003

3 *Las Vegas Sun* 2 September 1969

A light rain was falling on 4 September as 11 priests participated in the solemn requiem high mass for Rocco Francis Marchegiano at St Colman's Church – site of his marriage – in Brockton. The service attracted a capacity crowd of 2,000 – including such pugilistic personalities as Joe Louis, Willie Pep, Paul Pender and Tony Zale – while another 1,000 mourners waited outside to pay their last respects. The sun also stayed away two days later for the funeral procession as Rocky was laid to rest in the Lauderdale Memorial Gardens Mausoleum at the Queen of Heaven Cemetery in his adopted hometown of Fort Lauderdale, Florida. About 500 mourners were on hand for this service, which concluded as Rocky's wife Barbara kissed the casket and then wept openly as workmen lowered it into the ground.⁴

The world in general, and the boxing world in particular, were shocked at Marciano's death. 'Joe Louis, the 55-year-old former champion, who was in Charlotte, North Carolina to referee some wrestling matches, said, "This is the saddest news I have ever heard. Everything I remember about him is good. When he defeated me, I think it hurt him more than it did me. He just had a good heart. Something's gone out of my life, but I'm not alone. Something's gone out of everyone's life." "No one can really appreciate at this point what Rocky Marciano has done. He was a man all youth looked up to, and a personal friend of mine," said Jersey Joe Walcott, mourning the death of the man who took away his world heavyweight title in 1952.'⁵

Columnist Shirley Povich wrote in the *Washington Post*, 'He'd gotten there as heavyweight champion of the world in 1952 through absolute courage. It was the fount of his success, a flaming valour that was the biggest thing he took into a prize ring. In style he was as unlikely a heavyweight champion as ever showed in boxing trunks and in physical stature he was too small for the tasks. Yet nobody ever walked out of the ring a winner over Marciano. Once it was written of him by an author who shall be nameless, "Rocky Marciano can't box a lick, his footwork is what you'd expect from two left feet, he throws his right hand in a clumsy circle and knows nothing of orderly retreat. All he can do is

⁴ *Boxing Illustrated Special* November 1969

⁵ *Post Herald* Beckley W. Va. 2 September 1969

blast the breath from your lungs or knock your head off.” It was fairly descriptive.⁶

‘Bob Girard, now a fireman in Lynn, Mass., was one of Rocky Marciano’s biggest fans and one of the only four men who ever defeated the Brockton Blockbuster. It is only 15 miles from Lynn to Boston’s Prudential Center, where glass and steel have replaced old Mechanics Hall. Girard beat Marciano in the finals of the 1947 State Amateur heavyweight championship at the old arena. Girard reminisced, “I knew he’d be a champ that night. He was fantastic in the ring. If the fight lasted long enough, he was bound to get you. He could at any time – with one punch. I wonder to this day how I ever took his punch.”

‘In Weehawken, New Jersey, Emile Griffith, former welterweight and middleweight champion of the world, fought back tears when he heard the news. “I came back from the movies; my friend asked me, ‘Emile, why are you crying?’ And how could I explain. Rocky and myself were always good friends – that’s what hurts me, and why I’m crying, because this man was a gentleman with me, a great champion and a perfect gentleman.”’⁷

‘Rocky’s daughter Mary Anne knew well the perilous edge on which he lived. In 1965, on a trip from Los Angeles to Honolulu, Rocky had hitched a ride on a cargo plane and loaded Mary Anne and a friend of hers in the hold. “They put little jump seats in for my friend and me, and my father and his friend were sitting on top of the luggage,” Mary Anne recalls. “A window blew in and we went into a nosedive and a red light came on and I thought, I’m 12 and I’m going to die. My father kept saying, ‘Don’t worry. You’re gonna be OK.’”⁸

Mary Anne would later disclose that the fatal crash wasn’t the first time Rocky had been involved in an airplane accident. ‘He walked away from two others,’ she stated. ‘He would fly in a tin can. My father was a fatalist and would say, “If it’s your time to go, you go; everybody’s number comes up.”’⁹ On that murky Sunday night in August 1969, Rocco Francis Marchegiano’s number finally came up.

6 Shirley Povich *Washington Post* 2 September 1969

7 *Wisconsin State Journal* 2 September 1969

8 William Nack *My Turf: Horses, Boxers, Blood Money and the Sporting Life* 2003

9 *Boxing Illustrated Special* November 1969