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Book Review: The War Journal of Major Damon "Rocky" Gause (1999)

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Editor's Note:

Many UGA law students in the late 1940s and early 1950s served our nation in World War II and the Korean War with bravery and heroism. They returned from these wars to lead Georgia with great distinction through the remainder of the 20th Century and into the new millennium. They also played substantial roles in making Georgia into one of the nation's most dynamic and prosperous states. Below, Professor Wilkes reviews a book about a UGA student from Jefferson, Ga., who was part of this "Greatest Generation."



Professor Wilkes with his personal copy of The War Journal of Major Damon "Rocky" Gause.

An Epic Tale of Heroism and Daring Flight

"This magnificent book fills one with pride just for being a human being," wrote noted World War II historian Stephen Ambrose in the foreword to a fabulously interesting book, which is impossible to read without immense pleasure and I want to tell you about. *The War Journal of Major Damon "Rocky" Gause* is the unspeakably exciting, true story of a 5-foot-6-inch, 165-pound Georgian who as an American soldier in World War II not only survived a series of heart-pounding adventures combating the Japanese but also carried out one of the greatest escapes of the war and, indeed, of all time.

Rocky Gause was born in Jefferson, in Jackson County, in 1916. After graduating high school in Jefferson, he attended the University of Georgia while also taking flying lessons at the Athens airport, then called Ben Epps Field. In 1941, with America poised to enter the war, Rocky enlisted in the Army and qualified as a pilot in the Army Air Corps. On Nov. 7, 1941, he departed San Francisco aboard a troop ship bound for the Philippines, then an American possession. He arrived in Manila three weeks later.

On Dec. 8, 1941, immediately after Pearl Harbor, Japanese planes began bombing military bases in the Philippines. Although several bombs exploded close to him, spraying shrapnel everywhere, Rocky was unhurt and telegraphed his Georgia bride (who he had married less than two months previously), "Am alive and giving them hell – Rocky." Two weeks later, 43,000 Japanese troops invaded the Philippines.

From then until April 1942, Rocky was a foot soldier with the American and Filipino troops who, although short of ammunition, food and medical supplies, engaged in fierce combat with the Japanese Army on the Bataan Peninsula. On April 11, 1942, Rocky was captured and placed in a prison pen but escaped the same day by stabbing a Japanese guard to death and fleeing through a hail of bullets. He then swam three miles through shark-infested waters to the island fortress of Corregidor where the Americans and Filipinos were making their last stand against the invaders.

For the next month, he endured the terrors of siege warfare with enemy artillery shells and bombs continually raining down on the island. On one occasion, a shell burst immediately above Rocky, killing a Marine with whom he was conversing - "a piece of shrapnel the size of a fist struck the man in the back and came out through his chest, leaving an ugly gaping hole as big as a water glass." On May 5, when the island's defenders surrendered, Rocky received permission from his commanding officer to try to escape to Australia. He left the underground tunnel where he was quartered minutes before the occupying Japanese troops arrived. Using a native outrigger canoe, Rocky fled Corregidor, narrowly avoiding the Japanese searchlight beams sweeping the waters and the patrol boats circling the island. Behind him, Rocky could see parts of Corregidor enveloped in a sea of flames.

For the next three months, Rocky hid out in various places in the Philippines, helped and guided by Filipinos, barely eluding the Japanese soldiers in hot pursuit. After many amazing adventures and close calls with death or capture, Rocky and another Army officer named Osborne commandeered a 20-foot native-built wooden motorized skiff (which they christened the *Ruth-Lee*, in honor of their wives). In this leaky, rickety craft, they set out on Aug. 20 for Australia, more than 3,200 miles away.

Rocky's account of their incredible 52-day journey through Japanese-controlled waters in the exotic Pacific – the South China Sea, the Sulu Sea, the Celebes Sea, the Makassar Strait, the Sagu Sea and the Timor Sea – occupies about half of his 183-page book. They encountered and dodged enemy patrols. They ran aground on coral reefs. They struggled through typhoons and monsoons. They came under machine gun and cannon fire from Japanese aircraft ("a bullet

zinged so close to my ear [that it] grazed Osborne in the shoulder”) and the *Ruth-Lee* was raked with bullets and once caught fire. They ate coconuts, bananas, rice and raw fish and drank rain water. The blazing hot sun blistered their skin and they were tortured by mosquitoes and other biting insects. Nevertheless, on Oct. 11, 1942, they arrived in Wyndham, Australia. It had been 159 days since Rocky had escaped his captors at Bataan. Ten days later Rocky and Osborne were personally decorated with the Distinguished Service Cross by General Douglas MacArthur “for extraordinary heroism in action.”



The Ruth-Lee in which much of Rocky's heroic tale took place.

On returning to America, Rocky, using the *Ruth-Lee's* log and a diary he had kept on his sea journey, sat down and wrote *The War Journal of Major Damon "Rocky" Gause*. The book did not appear in print during his lifetime, although excerpts of it were published in a New York magazine in 1943 under the headline “An Epic Tale of Hopeless Heroism and Daring Flight.”

Rocky's orders on his return to the United States were to spend the duration of the war traveling around the country, talking about his escape and appearing at war bond rallies. In the summer of 1943, however, at his own request, he was allowed to return to active duty and assigned as a pilot to a fighter squadron stationed in England. Shortly before shipping out, he paid one last visit to his home state, coming to St. Mary's Hospital in Athens on Dec. 9, 1943, to visit his wife and two-day old son. It was the only time he saw his son and the last time he saw his wife.

Rocky arrived in England in late December 1943. In January and February 1944, he flew five daylight missions over Germany in his P-47 Thunderbolt fighter, serving as one of the escorts for American bombers. On March 9, 1944, while practicing dive-bombing in preparation for D-Day, he put his plane into a vertical dive at a height of 30,000 feet. Then he apparently lost consciousness and his plane plunged headfirst into the countryside south of London. He is buried in the American Military Cemetery in Cambridge, England.

The War Journal of Major Damon "Rocky" Gause is much more than a book of high adventure. It is also a book about the unforgettable people Rocky encountered in the Philippines and on various Pacific islands. Some of them were Georgians. For example, James Oestricher, an 18-year old Army private from Quitman, who constructed a movable machine gun emplacement disguised as a haystack to ambush attacking Japanese planes. He shot down two enemy dive bombers this way. “About two days before Bataan fell, Oestricher was killed by a direct bomb hit that was dropped from a plane as he fired point-blank at it.”

Another Georgian was Millie Dalton, an Army nurse on Corregidor who had gone to high school with Rocky in Jefferson. The last time Rocky saw her was shortly before he escaped the doomed island fortress with the Japanese closing in. “I'm horribly afraid of what will happen to us when the Japs arrive,” were among the last words Rocky heard from her lips. Later, Rocky learned the day the Japanese took over the island, three American nurses and one Filipino nurse joined hands, walked into the ocean and “drowned themselves rather than endure the ravishes of the barbarous Japs.” Was Millie one of them?

But, and Rocky would have emphatically agreed with this, the most admirable people in the book are not the Georgians or other Americans but the Filipino people. No one can read this book without being filled with respect for the Filipinos. Their courage, their honor and their loyalty is a central theme of the book. While the fighting was going on, the Filipino troops loyally adhered to the American side, volunteering for the most dangerous assignments and fighting with superhuman valor. Shortly after the Japanese had subdued the Philippines, when American soldier prisoners were suffering agonies at the hands of the Japanese, Filipino civilians would bravely risk shooting, bayoneting or beating to bring the prisoners of war food and water. Without the Filipinos' unselfish assistance, provided by young and old at great risk to themselves, Rocky could never have avoided capture or been able to set sail for Australia. “They were all my friends,” Rocky wrote of the people of the Philippines. “Yes, every man, woman and child ... I felt a personal duty to every one of them. ... It was not by expert navigation or favorable winds or even courage, but by the grace of God and the Filipinos, that I [made it to Australia] ... Mabuhay las Filipinos! [Long live the Filipinos!].”

– Professor Eugene Wilkes