

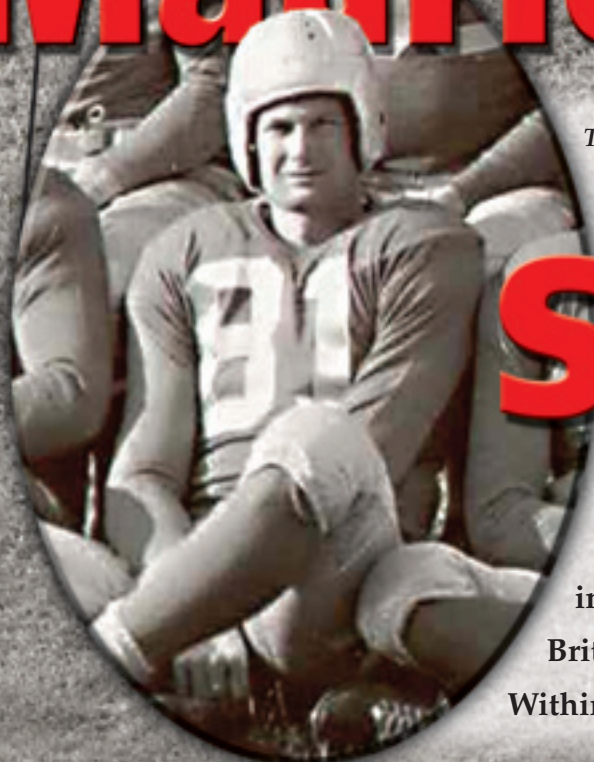
# My Favorite Lion,

By Lt. Col. Jack C. Mason



# Maurice Britt

*Teammate of future Supreme Court Justice Byron (Whizzer) White, Maurice Britt was the first member of the U.S. Army to be decorated with all four medals awarded for heroism under fire.*



**S**unday, November 16, 1941, was a partly cloudy, crisp fall day in Detroit. The *Detroit News* carried several headlines: "Jap Envoy Arrives in Capital; Has Hopes" and "France Nears Decision on Full Collaboration with Axis." In Europe, the German Wehrmacht was approaching Moscow and, at the same time, pushing the British army back across Africa towards Cairo. Within the next several days, half a world away,

*Team photograph above: 1941 Detroit Lions. Top row: Byron White (44), Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court, 1962–1993. Middle row: Steve Belichick (30), Naval Academy assistant football coach: 1956–1989 and father of current New England Patriots head coach Bill Belichick. Bottom row: Maurice Britt (81), Medal of Honor, Distinguished Service Cross, Silver Star, Bronze Star and Purple Heart recipient and lieutenant governor of Arkansas, 1966–1970. Photo courtesy of Detroit Lions.*



warships of the Japanese Imperial Fleet would start to assemble in the desolate anchorage of Takan Bay in the Kurile Islands, soon to embark on a mission they had been secretly training for since spring 1941.

But in Detroit, on this Sunday afternoon, all attention was focused on football. More than 16,000 fans were packed into Briggs Stadium to watch the Lions play the Philadelphia Eagles. In the typical hard-hitting play that both teams were known for, Detroit went into the half holding a slim 7-3 lead, only to see the lead quickly disappear when play was resumed. Philadelphia scored two quick touchdowns, dominating the game almost exclusively with rushing plays straight up the middle. Aided by Detroit penalties, the Eagles maintained a comfortable 17-7 lead with less than eight minutes remaining on the clock.

But the Lions were not going down today. Suddenly they came to life after being pushed around for three quarters by Philadelphia's T-formation attack. With time waning, Detroit was forced away from its conservative game plan. Deep in the Lions territory, quarterback Dick Booth heaved the ball to Byron (Whizzer) White, the Lions' star running back, who had already scored once in the first half. Booth's pass hit White in stride on Detroit's 31 yard line. White, the league's rushing leader, was able to sidestep four defenders, break a tackle and race the remaining 69 yards to score.

On the next series, the Detroit defense stiffened, and the Eagles were forced to punt, giving the Lions the ball back on their own 28 yard line. On their first play, Lion fullback Steve Belichick threw to White for a 12-yard gain. On the next play, Booth rifled a deep pass to Maurice Britt, the rookie All-American end from the University of Arkansas, who had just entered the game. Britt hauled in the 45-yard pass on the 15 and galloped into the end zone for the go-ahead points. Detroit staved off a ferocious Eagles comeback attempt, and the game ended as Philadelphia ran out of time near the Lions goal line.

The game was described as a "classic" by the area media, even though the outcome had no real importance in terms of the league standings. Britt and White were the local heroes of Detroit's comeback. Leading the league in rushing, it was rumored that White—a former Rhodes

Scholar and eventually a Supreme Court Justice—was the highest paid player in the National Football League. "There were stories in the paper that [White] was making \$1,000 a game, which was fantastic money," said Britt. "None of us knew if it was true and no one asked. We were just glad to have him on our side. ... It wasn't hard to see that this was a man who was going places."

These were gifted athletes who excelled; beyond their discipline and work ethic, each had a personal individual drive to be the best at his profession. As world events were beginning to be played out—much faster than anyone would be able to anticipate—the true character of these men, their selflessness and valor, would be demonstrated to the nation in a way in which their professional football exploits would only be a footnote to their true legacy.



Byron (Whizzer) White

**T**he Lions would finish the season on November 30, with a disappointing 4-6-1 record. A week later, the nation found itself plunged into a world war, and the Lions football team disintegrated as young professional athletes moved on to greater responsibilities. The following year, the franchise would struggle to a 0-11 mark. At the conclusion of the 1942 football schedule, Britt, who had trained in the ROTC program while at Arkansas, immediately reported to the Army as a second lieutenant and was assigned to Com-

pany L, 30th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division. This infantry company of approximately 200 men became the home he would never leave during his entire stint in the Army.

After training at Fort Lewis, Wash., and Camp Pickett, Va., Lt. Britt was shipped overseas and landed as a platoon leader with Company L at Casablanca, French Morocco, in North Africa, on November 8, 1942. His regiment quickly secured the left flank of the 3rd Infantry Division and silenced Fort Blondin, a French position that had been accurately firing artillery onto the American beachhead. By November 11, Casablanca had been secured. As the rest of the regiment moved east toward Tunisia in pursuit of Rommel, Lt. Britt's battalion stayed behind, serving as the personal guard detail for President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill during the Casablanca Conference.

After the capture of North Africa, Lt. Britt's next campaign was the invasion of Sicily. He landed on July 10, 1943, on "Blue Beach," between Licata and Gela, with the mission of driving north to the city of Palermo. Overcoming initial resistance, Lt. Britt's 3rd Battalion, 30th Infantry Regiment, set out on a tactical road march at a phenomenal pace, moving 54 miles in 33 hours, over mountain trails and without food or water resupply, in order to reach the

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staging area for the successful assault on the town of San Stefano.

With the capture of Sicily, Lt. Britt enjoyed only a short rest before his next assault landing at Salerno, September 19, on the mainland of Italy. When his company commander was wounded and evacuated just after the landing, Lt. Britt assumed command. His first test as company commander came three days later as he led his men on the assault of the Italian town of Acerno, 10 miles east of Salerno. The attack ran into stiff opposition in a grove of chestnut trees just west of the town where a German machine gun was holding up his company's advance. Lt. Britt grabbed a rifle grenade and crawled forward 50 yards to an exposed position before firing and knocking out the gun, killing two Germans. For this action, and for aggressively leading his company forward that day, he was awarded the Silver Star. He also earned his first Purple Heart, when later during the advance, a mortar shell landed nearby and his arm caught a piece of shrapnel.

On October 29, Lt. Britt earned his Bronze Star at Pietravairano, for directing the combined fires of two companies' machine guns on enemy positions on Monte San Nicola, enabling an adjoining unit to launch a successful limited objective attack. When one of his men was wounded by sniper fire and fell down a steep, rocky hill, Lt. Britt immediately climbed down to the exposed position and carried the man to safety, rather than waiting for the cover of darkness.

Lt. Britt's battalion was part of the 30th Regiment's bitter assault on Monte Rotundo. Fatigued, wet, cold and miserable, the regiment was ordered to seize and hold the strategic enemy position on Monte Rotundo, which allowed the Germans to control a major highway leading to Rome. For days the regiment, and particularly Lt. Britt's battalion, fought its way up the heights of the hill. The weather had turned colder; in addition to the continuous rain, Lt. Britt and his men had to contend with sleet and snow, along with the ever-present German shelling. The unit was poorly equipped for the winter weather, and all the men were soaked to the skin. On the morning of November 8, having received neither food nor water resupply for two days, they took the hill and won for their battalion the Presidential Unit Citation.

The importance of this high ground was critical to the Germans' strategic position, and they immediately began counterattacking in a determined effort to throw the Americans off the mountain. By the morning of November 10,



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*Capt. Maurice L. Britt returns to the United States on board a hospital ship. Veteran of four amphibious combat missions, he lost his right arm below the elbow at Anzio in 1944. The first American to earn all four medals awarded by the Army for valor under fire, he was one of the most decorated soldiers of his day.*

Lt. Britt's company had been reduced to just 55 men, responsible for covering an assigned position of 600 yards on the eastern slope of the mountain. Battalion commander Lt. Col. Edgar C. Doleman recalled that the extended defensive position "made it impossible to maintain contact across the terrain of densely wooded slope except by patrols and listening posts."

**A**t 8:30 A.M., a German company, approximately 100 soldiers, counterattacked over the north nose of the mountain and slipped through a gap between the positions of Company L and the adjacent Company K. The Germans managed to capture an isolated American machine-gun section and four riflemen who were forced to walk ahead of the Germans—a virtual human shield—who continued their advance toward Lt. Britt's position.

Cpl. John Syc recalled, "We couldn't see the Americans, but we could hear them shouting down to us not to shoot." Lt. Britt spotted the trick when the group was 50 yards out. He shouted back to the captured soldiers, "Take off! They can't hurt you! We're going to fire anyway!" As the Americans scattered and dove for cover in front of the Germans, Lt. Britt's men opened fire. Cpl. Syc added, "During the firefight, which was intense, a mortar section ammo man near me was wounded and his weapon knocked out. Lt.

Britt, while firing his carbine, suddenly yelled, 'Ow,' and put his hand on his side saying he thought he was hit, but ordered me to fire my machine gun faster."

As the Germans continued their advance, the vicious fight ensued at close range. At 6 feet 3 inches, Lt. Britt was a conspicuous target as he moved back and forth to rally his men. He fired 75 rounds from his carbine, changing clips five times before running out of ammunition. PFC Fred E. Marshall reported later that Lt. Britt "ran from side to side of our machine gun, firing at every sound and sight of Germans; later I saw Lt. Britt, slightly bleeding on the face, having run out of carbine ammo, grab the M1 rifle from a badly wounded man lying near me and continue to fire with it. He also grabbed some hand grenades and with his rifle and grenades went ahead into a wooded area ahead of our position looking for Germans. A few minutes later, I saw him throwing grenades, disregarding machine-pistol bursts hitting all around him. I marveled that he wasn't hit. Concussion grenades, too, were bursting all around him ..."

Sgt. James G. Klaes recalled, "All in all, I saw him [Britt] throw approximately 10 to 12 grenades, with German automatic fire and grenades coming back all the time."

His face, chest and hands were covered from wounds caused by three German "potato masher" grenades that he managed to kick away just before they exploded. With the initial German assault faltering, the remainder of the enemy force faded back into the woods in front of his position. Realizing the danger, Lt. Britt called for his men to follow as he moved into the woods to clean out the threat.

Cpl. Eric B. Gibson, from Chicago, and Pvt. Hunter Schimer, from New York City, followed their commander forward. Cpl. Gibson recalled, "I saw his canteen was pierced with bullet holes and his shirt covered with water; his field glasses case, too, was pierced with bullet holes. I was throwing hand grenades at the Germans, and Lt. Britt asked me for some as he had thrown all he had. During the morning he must have thrown at least 32 hand grenades ... After the battle was over, we counted 14 German dead. A lot of them Lt. Britt killed himself. ... Throughout the entire morning, the Germans and Lt. Britt were exchanging fire from as close as 15 yards apart.

"Lt. Britt was all over the draw and woods that morning, he was a one-man army, and his actions and bravery undoubtedly had much to do with routing the German counterattack. Had he failed, the company would have been isolated on Monte Rotundo. That afternoon, when reinforcements arrived, he went into the woods to get the rest of the Germans." While in the woods, Cpl. Gibson also credited Lt. Britt with saving his life during yet another encounter with an enemy machine gun.

Battalion headquarters personnel, along with 20 mortar men, were thrown into the fight as a last-ditch reinforcement. When they arrived, Lt. Britt and four others were all that remained at the core of the American defense. Fourteen dead Germans were counted in the immediate vicinity and another 21 in the brush and woods to the front of

the position. Lt. Britt's actions also resulted in the capture of four Germans and allowed several of the previously captured Americans to escape.

After reinforcement and consolidation, battalion commander Col. Doleman listened to Lt. Britt's report, while observing that he was bleeding through his uniform in four different places. Col. Doleman had to issue an order to the unwilling subordinate to report to the aid station for treatment. The battalion medical officer, Capt. Roy Hanford, recounted the treatment. "'Go ahead and finish with your other patients,' said Britt, 'I've got a little scratch here I'd like you to look at when you have the time.' That scratch turned out to be a half-inch-wide gash down to the muscle on the left side. And, apparently the lieutenant had overlooked the sundry face and hand wounds left by German grenades."

**C**apt. Hanford wrote, "Lt. Britt's behavior was, I believe, an inspiration, both to the other casualties and the tired medical personnel." Capt. Hanford asked Lt. Britt if he wanted to go to the hospital. "No, Doc," he replied, "I've got to get back up the hill and help my boys." Sulfa powder and a multitude of bandages were enough for him as he returned to his men. "Lt. Britt didn't show me a piece of hand grenade embedded in his chest muscle until after we were relieved several days later," Capt. Hanford said.

For his military gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty in the Monte Rotundo battle, Lt. Maurice Britt was awarded the Medal of Honor, the Military Cross of the British Empire, the Valore Militare Merit from the Italians and his second Purple Heart. He was also promoted to captain. As the fight up the Italian peninsula stalled because of stiff German resistance, the 3rd Infantry Division was pulled off the line for a short rest before attempting an amphibious end-run landing at Anzio, farther up the coast, in an attempt to break the deadlock and push into Rome.

Leading Company L, Capt. Britt and the 30th Infantry Regiment landed at Anzio on January 22, 1944. In an attempt to expand the beachhead inland, the next day two companies, commanded by Captains Britt and Burleigh Packwood, moved forward across the Mussolini Canal into the Pontine Marshes with a mission to seize two key road junctions. This was an area that had been almost entirely free of enemy troops the day before. Fifteen minutes after their movement began, the fighting started and continued all day long. The Yanks drove the enemy back from house to house to reach their objective, even though the Germans threw in reinforced units in an effort to halt them. Capt. Britt, scouting from atop a brick stairway, had his observation post shot out from under him by an enemy tank, but he stayed on and directed tank destroyer fire until the German tank was forced to retreat.

Accurate fire from one particular hidden German machine gun had stalled the American attack. In a daring attempt to locate the German position, Capt. Britt stood up and performed two jumping jacks, clapping his hands over



his head in order to draw the machine gun's fire. Fortunately, he was able to spot the machine-gun nest before it opened up on him, and moved to a point 75 yards away to direct the fire of friendly mortars and artillery on to the target. From that moment, with this feat, the road intersection became famously known to the American units operating in the area as "Britt's Junction."

**M**oving forward with his company, Capt. Britt placed a machine gun in the second story window of a farmhouse and aided in the firing until all the Germans had been killed or forced to take cover. Directing mortar and tank destroyer fire, Capt. Britt helped in knocking out three machine-gun nests, two personnel carriers and several mortars. During the night, the enemy brought troops in by truck and dropped them behind the doughboys on lateral roads, but in each case, Capt. Britt was able to send men back to wipe out these penetrations.

*A Medal of Honor ceremony was conducted for Capt. Britt at the University of Arkansas on commencement day, June 5, 1944.*



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After being initially caught off guard by the Anzio landing, the Germans were moving men and equipment in rapidly in an attempt to seal off the landing beach. The next morning, January 24, Capt. Britt and two other officers went forward on a scouting mission to observe half a dozen enemy tanks approaching. As they were trying to direct an artillery-fire mission from their observation post in a stone farmhouse, a German tank moved within 300 yards of the building before firing an armor-piercing shell that struck the farmhouse and penetrated several walls before exploding in Capt. Britt's room. The blast tore off his right arm at the elbow, fractured his leg and broke three toes. As he sat there amid the shambles of the farmhouse, he picked up his severed arm with his left hand and said, "I always figured it would happen this way."

With his third Purple Heart, Capt. Britt was medically evacuated back to the United States for treatment at Lawson General Hospital in Atlanta. On June 5, 1944, at a ceremony at the University of Arkansas on Commencement Day, Capt. Maurice L. Britt was awarded the Medal of Honor. In his speech, Capt. Britt accepted the medal in the name of all infantrymen who had fought and died in Italy and the Pacific and for all who were still fighting there.

While recuperating from the loss of his arm, Capt. Britt was sent on a national tour to support the War Bond drive. During this tour, for his actions of January 23-24 on the Anzio beachhead, he was presented with the Distinguished Service Cross in New York City on December 7, 1944. At that moment, the veteran of four amphibious combat landings became the highest decorated soldier of his day, the first American to earn all four medals awarded by the Army for valor under fire.

Britt was discharged from the Army on December 27, 1944, and returned to the University of Arkansas to study for a law degree. As the war continued and infantrymen like Audie Murphy, Leonard Funk and Matt Urban continued to collect awards for valor and publicity, Britt's record became no more than a footnote barely remembered by the general public today. Britt entered Arkansas state politics and was elected lieutenant governor for two terms, from 1966-70. Choosing not to stand again for reelection, Britt served for the next 15 years as the Arkansas district director for the Small Business Administration.

Of all of his awards, it was his Purple Hearts for which he paid the highest price: 52 years of constant daily pain, the loss of his right arm and right lung, a scarred torso and a piece of shrapnel in his left foot. In October 1995, when his diabetic condition warranted the need to remove the aggravating piece of metal from his foot, an onset of further infection called for three additional surgical attempts, all within a week, to stop the infection. These three surgeries undoubtedly were more than even this great soldier could endure. He died on November 26, 1995, at the age of 76.

Product of the "Greatest Generation," Maurice Britt in many ways was characteristic of the many millions of young American men and women who answered their nation's call during World War II. He may not be the bravest American soldier who ever lived; that is a distinction that can never be measured. But he can lay claim to the title of being the "First of the Bravest." The motto of Britt's unit, the 30th Infantry Regiment, is, "Our country, not ourselves." It was a motto he lived by, and for that reason, Maurice Britt will always be my favorite Lion. ★