

Robert Merriman, American Hero, Live Oak Hero

Robert Hale “Bob” Merriman lived in the home on this Live Oak site when he attended high school. He earned a degree in Economics in 1932, but by 1937, he was fighting in Spain’s civil war, leading the Abraham Lincoln Brigade of American volunteers. He was Chief of Staff of the XV International Brigade when he was killed in 1938.

How did a promising young fellow from a poultry ranchette on Capitola Road come to this end?

Bob was manager of the Santa Cruz High School newspaper and enjoyed debating and public speaking. After graduating in 1925, he worked in lumbering¹, then in 1927, enrolled in the University of Nevada, Reno, and joined the ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corp), soon becoming a Lieutenant.

After graduating in 1932, Bob and Marion Stone married and moved to Berkeley where he became a graduate student in economics and teaching fellow. As recipient of a Newton Booth Traveling Scholarship, Bob and Marion traveled to Moscow in 1935 to observe the economics of collective farms in Russia. They both found work to extend their visit.

Merriman was motivated to volunteer for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in Spain after an excursion to Vienna offered he and Marion a firsthand view of Nazism.² Spain had become a republic in 1931, but various factions struggled for dominance, causing severe suffering from riots, strikes, and economic stagnation.

After a Nationalist military coup in July 1936, Nationalists controlled western Spain and Republicans (sometimes called Loyalists), the east. Nationalist party leaned Fascist and the Republican, Socialist/Communist. Nationalists sought help from Germany and Italy, while Republicans received help from Russia and foreign volunteers from fifty-three countries organized into International Brigades.

On January 11, 1937, Merriman entered Spain by train, declared himself an anti-Fascist, and traveled to the International Brigade guerrilla training base in Albacete.³ Because of his ROTC training, he was soon involved in organizing the volunteers.

Merriman’s first battle was February 1937 at Jarama Valley. On the 27th, he was shot in the shoulder and sent to a hospital where he stayed a month.⁴ Marion came from Moscow to

¹ Marion Merriman, “American Commander in Spain,” 1986, Reno, Nevada, Univ. Nevada Press: 8.

² Biography: Robert Hale Merriman, Tamiment Library, NYU

³ Raymond M. Hoff, Merriman’s Diaries: Exegesis, self-published January 2018, p. 6.

⁴ *ibid.* 98.

attend him in his recovery. Bob spent the year near Albacete⁵ and was promoted several times. Marion stayed and worked for the International Brigades.

The Merrimans became acquainted with journalist Ernest Hemingway during a visit to Madrid in April 1937,⁶ and it's believed that Bob was the inspiration for Robert Jordan in Hemingway's celebrated wartime novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940).

In November, Bob and Marion agreed that she would return to the U.S. to raise funds for the Brigades. When she left, Bob handed her two diaries to take home.⁷ The diaries document Merriman's Spanish civil war experience as Commander of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.

Marion visited Santa Cruz in February 1938 as part of her fundraising campaign.⁸ Two months later, on April 2, Merriman went missing near Barcelona and was presumed killed by Nationalist forces. He was 29 years old.

Eighty years later, on April 7, 2018,⁹ the University of Barcelona placed a commemorative plaque in the old village of Corbera d'Ebre where Merriman was likely killed:¹⁰

***Per la vostra llibertat i las nostra [For your freedom and ours]
En memòria de Robert H. Merriman.***

From rural Live Oak to the war front of the Spanish Civil War, Bob Merriman embodied our local values of social equity and service on behalf of the greater good.

- Norman Poitevin and Linda Wilshusen, Live Oak History Project, April 2020

⁵ *ibid.* 17.

⁶ Merriman, *American Commander in Spain*, 1986, p.133.

⁷ Hoff, *Merriman's Diaries*: p. 707.

⁸ "Young Wife of Santa Cruz Loyalist Officer Pleads for Civilian Mercy" *Santa Cruz News*, February 2, 1938.

⁹ Xavier Hernandez Cardona "Plaque Honors Robert Merriman" *The Volunteers*, July 2, 2018.

¹⁰ "Where is Robert Hale Merriman?" *Universitat News*, Universitat de Barcelona, April 4, 2018. A duplicate memorial plaque is located on the University of California, Berkeley campus.