

Norman Rockwell's ***“Willie Gillis: An American Soldier”***

Created and Written by
Carolyn Kennedy Graupner
with J.R. Weatherford

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Author's Note

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2021 marks the 80th Anniversary of America's entrance into World War II. It was the last “Great War” – hopefully – as the World Allied Forces fought a protracted battle against an enemy bent on world domination through violent aggression, territorial conquest, and oppression. WWII was the horrendous event in human history accounting for over sixty million casualties and the attempted annihilation of an entire people.

World War II was the last major war in which the American People arguably experienced not only great pain, but also great pride in the defense of this remarkable nation and its allies. Many were encouraged to keep silent about the truth of that war's horror. Subsequent conflicts may not be able to say the same.

“WILLIE GILLIS,” a character brought to life in the inspirational illustrations of renowned American artist, Norman Rockwell, first appeared on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* on October 4, 1941. “Willie” was a young recruit, whose experiences came to life throughout eleven different “Post” covers, (spanning the years America was at war). He was an ordinary man living in extraordinary times. Eighty years ago.

Norman Rockwell infused this character with an integrity and decency that was consistent with his belief in the traditional values of family, community, and country. His rich and resonant illustrations of “Willie Gillis” – Rockwell’s only recurring character of more than 4,000 original illustrations, in a career that stretched across five decades – tell the story of one man’s journey and the people whose lives were touched by his. The story of “Willie Gillis” lets the audience experience what many a WWII veteran would later try to push to the recesses of mind and heart.

Carolyn Kennedy Graupner created this story about “Willie” because she believes, as did the late J.R. Weatherford, that Rockwell’s character epitomizes still this unique personality of our American Soldiers. Their strengths, their optimism and dreams, their sense of duty, and their courage are an extension of us all. As a nation, America hates the inhumanity of war. “Willie Gillis” accepted the intrinsic need to follow orders and defeat the enemy; to put his country’s needs before his own, as our modern soldiers continue to do. In telling these stories of the past, we must now be ready to free our soldiers of the guilt that they have carried in their hearts in the sincere effort to protect them from judgment and disdain.

As a society, we must respect, value, and support these types of callings to a higher duty as expressed then, and now. We must honor and tell the stories of our defenders, and of those who bravely keep the home fires burning.

“WILLIE GILLIS” is a celebration of the enduring human spirit.

ACT ONE EXCERPT: BLACK SCREEN, SOUND ONLY

Deeply resonant chimes of some ancient clock slowly begin counting down the hour.

FADE IN:

EXT. UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT CAMPUS

A caption appears over a view of the main Campus Square, which is filled with bustling students who move through the morning light, alive with energy and anticipation: **“October 5, 1946.”** The bell tower of the formidably colonial Administration Building ceases chiming. It is already 9:00 and yet an early morning frost is still in evidence upon the thick grass and brilliant amber and red leaves holding on so tenuously against the impending Vermont winter.

A team of students works together to string a large banner across the pillars, which line the facade of the building: “STUDENT ELECTIONS NOVEMBER 1”. Up over the sounds of this busy activity comes the deep and resonant voice of a MAN, speaking slowly as he reflects.

MATURE MAN (V.0.)

“Only a true-blooded New Englander can fully appreciate that sliver of time which more southern people stumblingly refer to as “Fall”. True New Englanders know it as “Autumn,” whose radiance

overtakes our region, our Vermont, dazzling us. Nature's glorious golds and vermilion reds explode above our heads, startling us and exciting us, even as we know winter's bitter onslaught will soon be at our door. Like fireworks in the darkness that fill us with an odd mix of giddy anticipation and a sobriety that helps us buckle down for that which always comes. Yet, the autumn of 1946 knew little sobriety because The Great War had ended and we who had gone to fight, had come home. Our lives, interrupted by our crusade against the Axis powers, had resumed once again on familiar ground. Our personal dreams, suspended for so long by the greater dream of world freedom, once again were made possible. And here, at this Yankee bastion of education, where the sap of promise and anticipation ran high, we who had returned, embarked on our own hopeful, individual campaigns."

TIGHT ON WILLIE GILLIS

WILLIAM CLAYTON GILLIS dashes across the campus green, his right arm overburdened by textbooks as he navigates through the clusters of students. "Willie" is twenty-three years old, a handsome and solid-looking man with cropped dark brown hair and light blue eyes. His stride is strong and smooth. Suddenly,

WILLIE AND HAZEL MEADOWS

Collide! And her books fly to the ground. Willie hastily puts his stack of books down and gathers her things up. HAZEL, a freshman, stands above him, transfixed, as her best friend, BERNADETTE, strains to see Willie over her shoulder. Willie rises and places Hazel's books back into her arms, flashing her a slow, winning smile.

WILLIE

I'm sorry. There ya' go.

Hazel can't find her tongue; her eyes wide, she nods, and so Willie turns and continues on his way.

HAZEL (swooning)

Willie Gillis is what I call a real man.

Hazel's just man-crazy.

BERNADETTE

He's so old, Hazel! He must be pushing twenty-three!

HAZEL

He's seen the world, Bernadette. He knows what he wants and he just makes me tingle!