

**THE STAR-SPANGLED AVENGER:
Captain America in the Wold Newton Universe**

- by Jason Shepherd

In both the Marvel and Wold Newton Universes, Captain America is revered as a symbol of patriotic idealism, a defender of truth, justice and honor. Created in the dark days of World War II, "Cap" first fought Axis spies and saboteurs at home, then took the battle to the Nazi military in Europe. He vanished shortly before the end of the war, only to return decades later and resume his relentless battle against the forces of evil. His legend looms large as one of the greatest heroes of any era.

The adventures of the Marvel Universe Captain America are well known, both as a solo operative and as part of the Invaders and, later, the Avengers. Readers have seen many men assume the mantle of Captain America (the exact number is open to debate), seen him work with a number of different partners, have romantic relationships with many different women and defeat countless foes and threats. They have watched him struggle with his place in a modern world where many of his ideals seem antiquated, and witnessed his triumphs.

In comparison, we know little about the Wold Newton version of Captain America (hereafter, I will use the abbreviation MU for Marvel Universe and WU for Wold Newton Universe). There is scarce information on him, especially compared to the wealth of material on the MU Captain America. But, through the magic of investigation and imagination, perhaps I can shed some light on this important figure in the annals of the Wold Newton Universe.

Note: I will refer to the MU Cap throughout this piece, but mainly in contrast to the WU Cap. The exploits of the MU Cap are numerous and widely available; my purpose is to explore a much less publicized version of the character.

THE ORIGIN

We have two conflicting versions of the WU Captain America's origin. They agree in general: that Steve Rogers was rejected for military service as 4-F, and allowed to volunteer for Dr. Erskine's Operation Rebirth, which made him America's sole super-soldier. But the details in the two accounts vary widely.

First, there is the more traditional version, "Meet Captain America!" by Jack Kirby and Joe Simon (presented in *Captain America #1*, Timely Comics 1941). This is the same basic origin as the MU Captain America. Steve Rogers was a young man who attempted to volunteer for military service just before World War II, but rejected as physically unfit. He was allowed to volunteer for Operation Rebirth, working with Dr. Abraham Erskine to create a super-soldier. Before an audience of military and intelligence officers, Erskine injected Rogers with his super-soldier serum. Rogers rapidly gained muscular mass, becoming the ultimate human

physical specimen in seconds. A Nazi spy in the audience immediately shot Dr. Erskine, murdering him before he could commit the super-soldier serum to paper, so there would be no more super-soldiers.

(The MU Cap would find out this was not strictly true – others had access to the formula and would use it to try to create their own super soldiers with varying results.)

The alternate origin comes from *Captain America: The Great Gold Steal* by Ted White. It also gives us a great deal of background on Steve Rogers.

According to White, Steve Rogers was born July 9, 1917. His mother died in childbirth, leaving Steve in the care of his father and seven-year-old brother, Alan. The boys' father died in World War I, leaving them in the care of an aunt and uncle for the next decade. Alan was a very athletic and popular boy, while Steve was gangly and sickly (twice confined to bed with tuberculosis, for up to a year). The family lost everything in the Stock Market Crash of 1929. Alan and Steve were separated, and at the age of twelve Steve was placed in a city-run orphanage. Picked on because of his awkward physique and glasses, Steve threw himself into his studies. He graduated high school as an honor student and went to Columbia to study law.

(This portion of the origin is very different from the MU Cap. Here, Steve Rogers was an only child; his father died of alcoholism when he was young, his mother of pneumonia when Steve was a teenager. One story claimed Steve Rogers was instead the son of a diplomat and that his brother Mike died at Pearl Harbor, but these were false memories hypnotically implanted by Allied Intelligence in case Captain America was captured and tortured for information.)

With the coming of war, Rogers tried to enlist but was rejected on health grounds. Some time later, two FBI agents arrived at Rogers' boardinghouse and offered him the chance to participate in a secret experiment. Rogers agreed and was taken to an isolated lab for extensive tissue samples and testing. After a week, he was transported to another lab hidden in New York's Lower East Side, where he began work on Operation Rebirth with Dr. Anton Erskine:

"Steve Rogers had been analyzed. His entire body chemistry had been analyzed. The very genetic structure of his chromosomes had already been broken down and catalogued. Dr. Erskine had already unlocked the science of DNA and RNA – a secret which science would not penetrate again for two decades.

"Now Steve Rogers' body structure would be *changed*. It meant days of careful preparation. Everything followed the necessary sequence."

Surgeons implanted stainless steel tubes inside the marrow of his bones "adding enormous rigidity," then a calcium-heavy diet increased his skeletal mass,

making Rogers' bones "less brittle, more resistant to impact, and capable of carrying greater weight." He underwent chemical injections and exhaustive exercise with Max the physical trainer, building up his musculature to peak condition.

Finally, Dr. Erskine injected Rogers with an experimental variety of LSD that allowed him access to portions of his brain not normally used. He was able to fine-tune his own body's nervous system, to increase his sensory abilities. He could retain vast amounts of information. He could speed up or slow down his metabolism at will, withstand extremes of temperature, increase his body's strength and speed for short times. However, after the successful conclusion of the experiment, Max the trainer revealed himself as a Nazi spy, shooting Erskine after his abduction attempt failed.

The question occurs: which version of Captain America's origin is more accurate? How did the WU version of Cap come to be?

I lean towards *The Great Gold Steal*. First, it has an element of novelty. Being different from the comics origin of the MU Cap, it drives home that this is a different world than the Marvel Universe. Second, I think the gradual development of Steve Rogers fits much better with the rest of the WU – much accelerated from the training of, say, Doc Savage, but more realistic than the nearly instantaneous transformation of the MU version. It has a nice "pulp" feel, not too out of place in an issue of *Amazing Stories* circa 1940.

Both versions agree that after the death of Dr. Erskine, the military decided the best way to use Steve Rogers was as a highly visible special operative in the service of his country. Outfitted with his colorful uniform and a "high-alloy titanium-steel" shield (the MU Cap carries an indestructible shield made of an exotic "adamantium-vibranium alloy"), the newly christened Captain America battled spies and saboteurs on the home front and had his first encounters with the Red Skull. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor and America's official entry into the war, Steve Rogers was enlisted in the Army. There, he met Bucky Barnes, who stumbled upon his secret identity and became his partner.

WORLD WAR II

The WU Captain America's wartime activities are largely unknown. The MU Cap spent 1941-1945 in the European Theater, fighting solo, with his partner Bucky, and with the superhero team The Invaders. All the WU sources agree on Bucky, but The Invaders' existence in the WU is doubtful. We know from *The Sting of the Green Hornet* that Prince Namor, the Sub-Mariner, has a counterpart in the WU, but we do not know if he and Cap ever met, let alone worked together. To date there has been no Human Torch counterpart (the third and final founding Invader), nor counterparts to any other Invaders members (which is a pity, because Union Jack would make a great addition to the WU, sort of a cross

between Captain America and the Phantom). Finally, the adventures in Marvel's monthly *The Invaders* series are in the distinct Marvel style, only slightly in the pulp vein, so we must conclude there were no Invaders in the WU.

This also dismisses the majority of Captain America's comic book adventures set in World War II. I have access to very few of them, and the ones I have read fall into the same category as the Invaders stories, more comic book than pulp.

The only comic book stories we can definitely include in the WU Cap canon are *Sting of the Green Hornet* and *Batman and Captain America*. Captain America and Bucky appear in these stories with WU perennials the Green Hornet and Kato, the Shadow, Superman and Batman and Robin, and help introduce WU counterparts of the Sub-Mariner, Sgt. Rock and Easy Company and the Blackhawks. The way Batman and Commissioner Gordon react to Captain America's presence in Gotham City and isolated statements in *The Great Gold Steal* lead me to conclude the WU Cap had many more adventures than we have access to, resulting in quite a reputation. We can only hope that somehow, we might be able to include individual stories from the MU canon into the WU, to better appreciate Cap's place in the War.

"DEATH" AND REBIRTH

Once again, the circumstances surrounding Captain America's disappearance and return differ in the MU and WU versions. The MU Cap and Bucky were captured by longtime foe Baron Zemo and strapped to an experimental British drone plane, which he planned to send back to Berlin. Cap and Bucky escaped; the plane took off with the two of them clinging precariously to the skin. Bucky tried to gain control of the plane, instead setting off an explosion that killed him and flung Captain America into the frigid North Atlantic waters. Cap went into suspended animation and remained frozen in a block of ice until rescued by the Avengers.

The WU version is different, but we must look in two different places for the whole story. It begins in *The Great Gold Steal*: Steve Rogers and Bucky were at "an experimental Army base" holding a number of captured Nazi buzz bombs. Saboteurs attempted to use the bombs to destroy the base; during a scuffle between Rogers and Bucky and the saboteurs, one of the bombs began to take off. Desperate to defuse the bomb before it struck anything, Rogers and Bucky leapt aboard as the bomb gained altitude and flew out over the ocean. The subsequent explosion killed Bucky and threw Rogers into the North Atlantic and suspended animation again.

The Great Gold Steal goes on to have Captain America found and revived by the Avengers, as in the MU version. However, the epilogue of *Batman and Captain America* resumes the WU events: twenty years later, Batman II and Robin II (Dick Grayson and Bruce Wayne, Jr., respectively) were in the area aboard the

Bat-marine searching for Joker Jr. when they encountered a mysterious object on their sonar. Bringing it aboard, they discovered Captain America and revived him, then brought him to the Batcave and reintroduced him to the retired Bruce Wayne.

We only have access to one post-return adventure, the remainder of White's *The Great Gold Steal*, where Cap battles a plot by longtime foe the Red Skull to steal \$12 billion in gold from the Federal Repository in New York. If one ignores the portions dealing with the Avengers, the story fits firmly into the WU mold. There is even an appearance by what appears to be the son of Doc Savage aide "Monk" Mayfair, who unfortunately has turned to a life of crime.

(One more thing to note, parenthetically. In the MU, when Captain America and Bucky vanished and were presumed dead, President Truman was worried that the loss of the two great costumed patriots would be a dangerous blow to Allied morale. He arranged for another costumed hero, William Naslund, alias the Spirit of '76, to take over as Captain America, and New York Yankees batboy Fred Davis became the new Bucky. Together, they finished the war, operating as a team and with the Invaders. Naslund was the first of three men who would operate as Captain America until the return of the original, Steve Rogers. However, in the WU, there does not seem to be any replacement Captain Americas. It is possible that with the sheer number of heroes operating in the WU during World War II, costumed and otherwise, Captain America was not considered as important to the nation's morale.)

SUCCESSORS

But the story of the WU Captain America doesn't necessarily end there.

In 1972, we have the story *Just Imagine Jeanie* by Forrest J. Ackerman, which Jeanie Rogers, the daughter of Steve Rogers, likewise enters suspended animation and sleeps until the year 2071. I have yet to find a copy of this story, which is included in the WU. The Wold Newton Chronology lists Jeanie Rogers' birth as late 1945 – one can assume she was the daughter of a girlfriend of Cap's. Again, not having read the story, I do not know if Ackerman deals with Steve Rogers' twenty-year disappearance, or how well Jeanie knew her father.

But, what if Captain America had more than one child? Like, perhaps, a son?

The year was 1944 or 1945. Steve Rogers became close to a WAC on an Army base in England. Their relationship became intimate, and the unnamed woman, who knew Rogers was Captain America, returned to the United States without telling Rogers she was pregnant. She returned home to Southern California, assumed the name of Rogers and gave birth to a son, Steve Rogers, Jr., in 1945 or 1946.

In 1965, Steve Rogers Sr. returned. His former girlfriend, learning he was alive, made contact with Rogers in 1967 and revealed he had a son. By now, Steve Jr. was preparing to leave military school to join the Marine Corps. He was more than a little surprised to meet a father he had been told died in the war, a man who looked scarcely older than he did (Rogers Sr. was chronologically fifty years old at the time, but physically less than thirty). The two gradually formed a relationship but maintained limited contact over the years for Steve Jr.'s protection.

Feeling out of touch with the 1960s and 1970s, a world where the ideals he had fought for were increasingly ridiculed, Captain America decided to follow up on the work of his benefactor Dr. Erskine by analyzing the super soldier treatment he had been given. Semi-retiring from crimefighting, Rogers recovered what records he could of his training and began thorough self-examination and research. After years of work, partially underwritten by the Wayne Foundation and assisted by a young doctor named Simon Mills, Rogers isolated a hormone he named FLAG (Full Latent Ability Gain), which would give any human Captain America-like physical and mental ability. Rogers wanted to offer FLAG to the American government and affiliated intelligence agencies such as U.N.C.L.E. to combat international criminal and terrorist organizations such as SPECTRE, THRUSH and GALAXY. He and Mills continued their experiments, but with limited success: the FLAG hormone was based on samples from Rogers' own adrenal gland, therefore it responded best to Rogers' DNA. Lab animals injected with FLAG showed enormous increases in their abilities, but cellular rejection killed the animals in two weeks or less.

During the development of FLAG, Rogers continued his crimefighting role on occasion, but he abandoned the Captain America costume as anachronistic. However, he still fervently believed in the American ideal, causing many of his opponents to label him "Captain America" as a joke. Simon Mills, who continued to work with Rogers as his liaison to the government, never learned that his mentor had been the real Captain America decades before.

It appears the original Captain America, Steve Rogers Sr., died sometime in the late 1970s at the hands of an unknown enemy. We know virtually nothing about his death, only that Simon Mills called it a great tragedy for the whole country and that Steve Rogers Jr. received a letter of condolence from the President (likely his mother had died by then). However, considering both the total absence of information and the traditional survival abilities of heroes in the WU and elsewhere, there is the strong possibility that the original Captain America somehow escaped or faked his death and could still be alive, perhaps operating under another name.

After Rogers Sr. "died," Mills contacted Steve Jr. and told him about his father's work. At first Rogers was reluctant to follow in the footsteps of a father he barely knew. However, he soon became involved in an extortion plot that led to

attempts on his life. Critically wounded in a motorcycle accident and dying on the operating table, Mills injected Rogers with FLAG. Rogers rallied immediately, his wounds healing at an accelerated rate. FLAG likewise enhanced his strength, resilience, senses and reflexes to levels superior even to his father's, and because he shared the same basic cellular structure he suffered no rejection. Steve Rogers Jr. joined Mills and his assistant, Dr. Wendy Day, as a costumed operative using his father's old code name, Captain America. He wore a costume similar to his father's, and likewise carried a circular shield, this one made of bulletproof transparent Plexiglas. We know of only two of his missions: foiling a plot to threaten the city of Phoenix with a neutron bomb, and battling a terrorist with a premature-aging chemical compound (similar to a form of radiation poisoning encountered by the crew of the USS *Enterprise* in 2267). How long Captain America II operated, or whether he shared any adventures with other WU characters, is unknown.

The legacy of Captain America looms large. He is a man whose power comes not merely from a serum or training, but from the depth of his will and the strength of his principles, from heart and soul. He is the embodiment of the American Dream, the man who can succeed against any odds because he refuses to surrender. He is not motivated by mere patriotism or nationalism, but by the belief that all men are created equal and are equally deserving of peace and freedom. That makes him a hero worthy of respect and imitation, not only in the Marvel Universe or the Wold Newton Universe, but in our universe as well.