



Grit Backstory

Not many actors become a household name. Even fewer become the embodiment of determination, toughness and doing what is right—the very definition of grit. John Wayne did just that over a 50-year acting career that put him on screen in 175 movies—and made him a legend.

Most people envision John Wayne in his trademark Western garb and Stetson hat. Yet the 6'4" Wayne—named Marion Morrison when he was born in 1907—was a Renaissance man. As a child, he hung around a local fire station, where fire fighters gave him the nickname “Duke” after his Airedale terrier.

As a teen and young man, he was talented at chess and bridge. In high school in Glendale, California, he received recognition for high school essay and newspaper writing, debating, the Latin Society and serving as Chairman of the Senior Dance. After a bodysurfing injury ended his football career at USC, he found work in props in Hollywood. Soon, movie directors discovered his acting chops, and the rest is history.

A versatile actor, Wayne starred in movies of many genres, from Westerns to war movies, and from romantic comedies to police dramas and histories. He was nominated twice for the Academy Award—for “The Alamo” in 1960 and “Sands of Iwo Jima” in 1949—before he won the Oscar for Best Actor in 1969 for “True Grit.” He received numerous awards for his other films, and earned a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1960.

Perhaps his most inspiring role, however, was off-screen. In 1964, Wayne was diagnosed with lung cancer. At the time, cancer was considered a private matter, but Wayne defied this convention with typical gusto, telling the press, “There is a hell of a lot of good image in John Wayne beating cancer.” Despite battle wounds that included the removal of a lung and several ribs, he did indeed beat cancer for fifteen years. Wayne became a passionate advocate for early checkups and made numerous public service announcements for the American Cancer Society.

Eventually, in 1979, stomach cancer took his life. Posthumously, Wayne was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, and a year later, in 1980, President Jimmy Carter awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America’s highest civilian honor, placing Wayne among only a handful of individuals who have received both honors. Civilians, too, admire Wayne. In the annual Harris Poll of America’s favorite movie stars, Wayne has never been out of the top 10.

In 1985, Wayne’s seven children established the John Wayne Cancer Foundation (JWCF) in his honor. The JWCF brings Wayne’s qualities of courage, strength and grit to the fight against cancer, with support for awareness programs, education programs and support groups, as well as groundbreaking cancer research and education at the John Wayne Cancer Institute. Bringing the effort full circle to Wayne’s youthful beginnings, the JWCF has launched Team Duke, a fundraising effort for athletes of any level focused on a goal who want to fight cancer along the way.

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