George E. Rooney, 71, of Longwood Avenue, an award-winning Journal-Bulletin photographer for 41 years, died early yesterday at Rhode Island Hospital. He was the husband of Vera A. (Sullivan) Rooney.

Mr. Rooney was born in Providence in 1926, a son of the late William T. and Amelia (Keroack) Rooney. He served in the Navy in World War II in the Pacific Theater of Operations before joining the newspaper as a photographer in 1950. He retired in 1991 after working 26 years as a photographer and 15 as chief photographer.

"George was the irrepressible, bigger-than-life, classic tough-guy photographer with a heart of gold," said Michael J. Delaney, chief visuals editor at the newspaper, who replaced Mr. Rooney after he retired. "He was known for his high-velocity approach that amazed young reporters and photographers as they started their careers in Providence."

"He was a classic old-time news photographer who knew the cops and knew the firemen and knew where to get a sandwich at 2 in the morning," he said.

"George thrived on breaking news," said Carol J. Young, deputy executive editor of the Journal-Bulletin. "He was on a first-name basis with many of the state's movers and shakers and seemed to know intuitively how to illustrate all of the holidays and memorable occasions in our readers' lives."

Mr. Rooney would tell how he got started in the newspaper business, after his stint in the service. He had taken a photograph of the Point Street Bridge and the photo editor at the paper asked him: "Do you want $3 or your name under the photo?"

"He said, 'Put my name under the photo,' and his career was launched," Delaney said.

During his tenure at the Journal-Bulletin, Mr. Rooney received numerous photography awards. He also had a number of adventures in his career, including a shootout at a Pawtucket house in 1958 in which two police officers were killed. Mr. Rooney flattened himself on the front porch to dodge the hail of bullets.

"George would always get right into the middle of the action. He was fearless when it came to hard news," said Andrew Duehring, a long-time picture editor who retired recently.

"He made his mark as a photographer," Duehring said. "That's when he was at his best. . . . He did fires and floods and features of every description. He was one of those people who could do anything."

"You could send him out in the morning and you'd be guaranteed that he'd come back with a picture that was good enough to put on page one of the (afternoon) paper," Duehring said. "I always said, when I was picture editor of the (Evening) Bulletin, that if I had to rely on a staff of just one photographer, I'd want that photographer to be George Rooney."

Mr. Rooney and his twin brother, William "Bill" Rooney of Narragansett - another veteran photographer at the Journal-Bulletin - were known statewide as the Rooney Brothers.

George Rooney lived in Warwick for the past 41 years. He was a member of the Rhode Island News Photographers Association, the National Press Photographers Association, the Providence Lodge of Elks 14, the Pawtuxet Athletic Club, the West Warwick Country Club and the Providence Newspaper Guild.

He was a communicant of St. Peter's Church in Warwick.

Besides his wife and brother, he leaves four children, William E. Rooney of North Kingstown, Cheryl Ann Baeszler of Warwick, Karen Lynn Walmsley of Warwick and George David of Marlboro, Mass.; another brother, Everett T. Rooney of North Kingstown, two sisters, Gloria Manning and Elsie Jackvony, both of Warwick, and seven grandchildren. He was the brother of the late Bernice Rooney.

The funeral will be held Wednesday at 9 a.m. from the Thomas and Walter Quinn Funeral Home, 2435 Warwick Ave., Warwick, with a Mass of Christian Burial at 10 in St. Peter's Church, Fair Street. Burial with full military honors will be in Pawtuxet Memorial Park, Warwick.

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