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Chapter 1

The Hero, The Symbol

Okay, you're wondering, so what's Captain America all about, anyway? Sure, he wears the flag and stands for American values — but what does that really mean? What exactly has made this character so resonant with people over the decades?

I'll get to that! But in order to understand *what* Captain America is, it helps to look, first, at *who* he is. There's a human being under that helmet, with needs and drives and formative experiences that combine to make him the fighter he is.

Actually, that's not quite right. Two guys have worn the battle-armor of Captain America. In fact, there are more than two — see Chapter 6 for more on that! But two heroes have carried the shield for longer than any of the others and proven themselves time and again.

Steve Rogers is the original, the Super-Soldier, the “classic” Captain America (also known simply as Cap). But as shown in Figure 1-1, another figure has recently risen to prominence in that role: Sam Wilson, also known as the Falcon. They're very different people, who came of age in vastly different times and places. In this chapter, you look at them one at a time and see what forces have shaped them into such fierce warriors for freedom.



FIGURE 1-1:
The two
Captain
Americas!
Three faces of
Steve Rogers,
and — front
and center —
Sam Wilson.

Art by Paul Renaud.

Steve Rogers: Forged in Hard Times

When you first look at Steve Rogers, what do you see? A classic square-jawed hero; a perfect physical specimen, a man who stands up for what he believes is right. Wearing the stars and stripes, carrying that shield, he looks almost invincible. (See Figure 1-2.)



FIGURE 1-2:
Steve Rogers
is Captain
America!

Story by John Ney Rieber, art by John Cassaday.

But while Steve has always had a passion for justice, he didn't always possess the physical power to fulfill his dreams. And deep inside, he's not quite as invincible as he looks. . . .

Childhood: The Depression and hope

The year: 1929. The Great Depression falls over the world like a shroud, plunging America into poverty, desperation, and despair.

Steve Rogers, the future Captain America, is barely seven years old, a gentle boy with a spark of artistic talent. After his father's death, he struggles to survive while helping his mother as best he can. Even as a child he displays a strong passion for justice, a drive to help people that makes his frail body a constant frustration.

When Nazis hold a rally in his neighborhood, the teenage Steve tries to stand up to them, as shown in Figure 1-3. But his physical abilities can't match his fighting spirit, and he suffers a terrible beating.

FIGURE 1-3:
Young Steve's
first encounter
with Nazis.



Story by J. Michael Straczynski. Art by Jesús Saiz.

Soon after, Steve receives terrible news: His short lifetime of childhood illnesses and brutal fighting means he has, at most, five years to live. Desperate to give his life meaning, he vows to enlist in the army and spend his remaining time serving the country he loves.

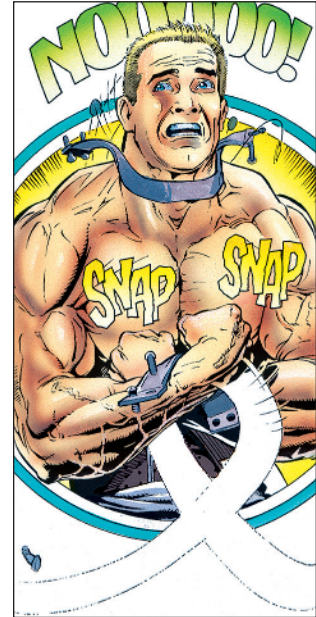
Enlistment: Becoming an icon

In a crushing blow to Steve's self-esteem, the army declares him 4-F — “disabled and unfit for military service.” So he's assigned to paint WPA murals, based on a childhood talent for art that plays a big part in his life, much later. But fate has other plans. . . .

So what happens next? To make a long story short: Steve takes an experimental Super-Soldier Serum—and becomes Captain America! (How's that for the world's most obvious spoiler?) As shown in Figure 1-4, it doesn't go smoothly. For more on Steve's origin, see Chapter 2.

Donning the stars and stripes doesn't exactly give Steve a purpose in life. He already has that, a commitment to equality and justice that runs deep in his bones. The people behind the Captain America project could see that in him: Steve's childhood, marked by hardship and filled with raw evidence of the unfairness of life, has made him the perfect person for this job.

What the Super-Soldier Serum gives him is the power, the physical ability to live out his dream of helping the unfortunate and freeing the world's peoples from tyranny wherever it may rise up. Within minutes of receiving the Serum, he makes a solemn vow to pursue that dream. (see Figure 1-5).



Story by Fabian Nicieza. Art by Kevin Maguire, Joe Rubinstein, and Tom Christopher.

FIGURE 1-4:
Wha ? Muscles?



FIGURE 1-5:
The newly forged Captain America declares his noble mission.



Story by Stan Lee. Art by Jack Kirby and Syd Shores.



TIP

As you read through this book, you may notice some jarring differences in the visual storytelling of comic book panels from different eras. Older comic books tend to be more direct, more likely to tell you outright what lesson they expect you to take from the story. They also employ a brighter, more primary color palette, due to the limitations of engraving and printing in the days before computers. Finally, the different writers who've handled Cap over time bring different perspectives to the book — a variety of approaches to depicting the American Dream.

Steve Rogers serves his country with honor for many years — until a quirk of fate takes him out of action, literally freezing him in suspended animation. Over the years, new heroes rise up to defend the world: Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four, the Avengers. When the Avengers find Steve and revive him, he has to find his way all over again — without the threat of the Axis powers to give his life purpose. Again, see Chapter 2 for more on all of this.

Steve struggles to adjust to a world that, at times, seems to have passed him by, as shown in Figure 1-6. To become a symbol of America for a new, more complex age, he must rediscover the inner fire that led a scrawny teenager to volunteer to help his country. With help from his new teammates, Steve gradually finds his way.

Out of time: The two sides of Steve Rogers

In between missions with the Avengers, Steve sets out to build a civilian life for himself — something he never really had before. An urgent call from New York's police commissioner leads him to take a one-time assignment as an undercover police officer. To his surprise, he finds himself considering law enforcement as a career, as shown in Figure 1-7.



Story by Stan Lee. Art by Jack Kirby and George Roussos.

FIGURE 1-6:

Wracked with doubt, Steve even forgets to take off his costume when he goes to bed!



Art by John Romita.

FIGURE 1-7:

Steve's choice isn't quite as dramatic as this cover makes it look! He does manage to be both a cop and Captain America, at least for a while.

Walking a patrolman's beat gives Steve some of the same satisfaction he got by serving in the army. He strives to help people in need to ensure that the citizens under his jurisdiction are treated fairly under the law. Over time, though, the pressures of police work prove difficult to balance with his duties as Captain America.

So Steve chooses a different profession. This one allows him a more flexible schedule, making it easier to put work aside when S.H.I.E.L.D. or the Avengers come calling.



Have I not mentioned S.H.I.E.L.D. yet? That's because it's top secret! S.H.I.E.L.D. is a globetrotting super-spy organization run by Cap's fellow war veteran, Nick Fury. For more on Cap's rocky relationship with this team, see Chapter 4. But keep it to yourself, huh?

Harkening back to a childhood passion, Steve Rogers becomes a commercial artist. He experiences some difficulty learning modern computer programs, as shown in Figure 1-8; and sometimes the deadlines keep him up all night! But the work proves soothing to him, a welcome respite from the death-defying tension of his life as an Avenger.

FIGURE 1-8:
In the old days, we used to draw with a pen!



Story by Jackson Lanzig and Collin Kelly. Art by Carmen Carnero.

In the end, Steve Rogers finds a way to balance the two sides of himself. His work as Captain America satisfies his thirst for justice, his need to fight against tyranny and oppression. But inside this fierce warrior lives an artistic soul, whose heart sings whenever he sits down, all alone, to create something new.

Sam Wilson: A New Era

Sam Wilson didn't set out to be a hero — at least, not the kind who wears a costume. But he always wanted to do good, to help the people of his community. That urge, that instinct, grew in him from an early age, as strongly as it did in Steve Rogers a generation earlier.

At first, Sam's efforts are confined to the neighborhood of Harlem in New York City. But a chance meeting with Steve catapults him into a new life as a super hero — and then, inevitably, to becoming the new Captain America (see Figure 1-9).

Childhood: Inspiration and tragedy

Unlike Steve Rogers, Sam Wilson remembers his father. A respected minister, Paul Wilson instills a strong sense of morality into his young son. People come from all around to hear Paul's sermons, including Sam. And the lessons Sam learns in that New York City church shape his character for the rest of his life.

Of course, like any kid, Sam has his own hobbies. Even as a child, he's fascinated by birds. "I used to have the biggest pigeon coop on any rooftop in Harlem!" he recalls, much later.

Then, one terrible day, Paul Wilson is shot down in the street while trying to stop a fight. Soon after, Sam's mother meets a similar fate. In a matter of months, he finds himself an orphan (see Figure 1-10).

At first Sam's anger almost gets the better of him, but the lessons instilled in him by his parents give him strength. He decides to take on the demanding, difficult job of social worker, to help the people of his neighborhood (see Figure 1-11).

And then, one fateful day, Sam takes a vacation to Rio de Janeiro, where he sees falcons, up close, for the first time. He's immediately fascinated and sets out to learn all about them. Eventually he meets a very special bird and names him Redwing.

Taking flight: Life as the Falcon

From the beginning, Sam Wilson and the real-life falcon Redwing seem to share a special bond. "He's more than a bird," Sam says. "It's like . . . he's a part of me!" Over time, Sam manages to extend this empathy to other birds, allowing him to see through their eyes as they soar through the air.

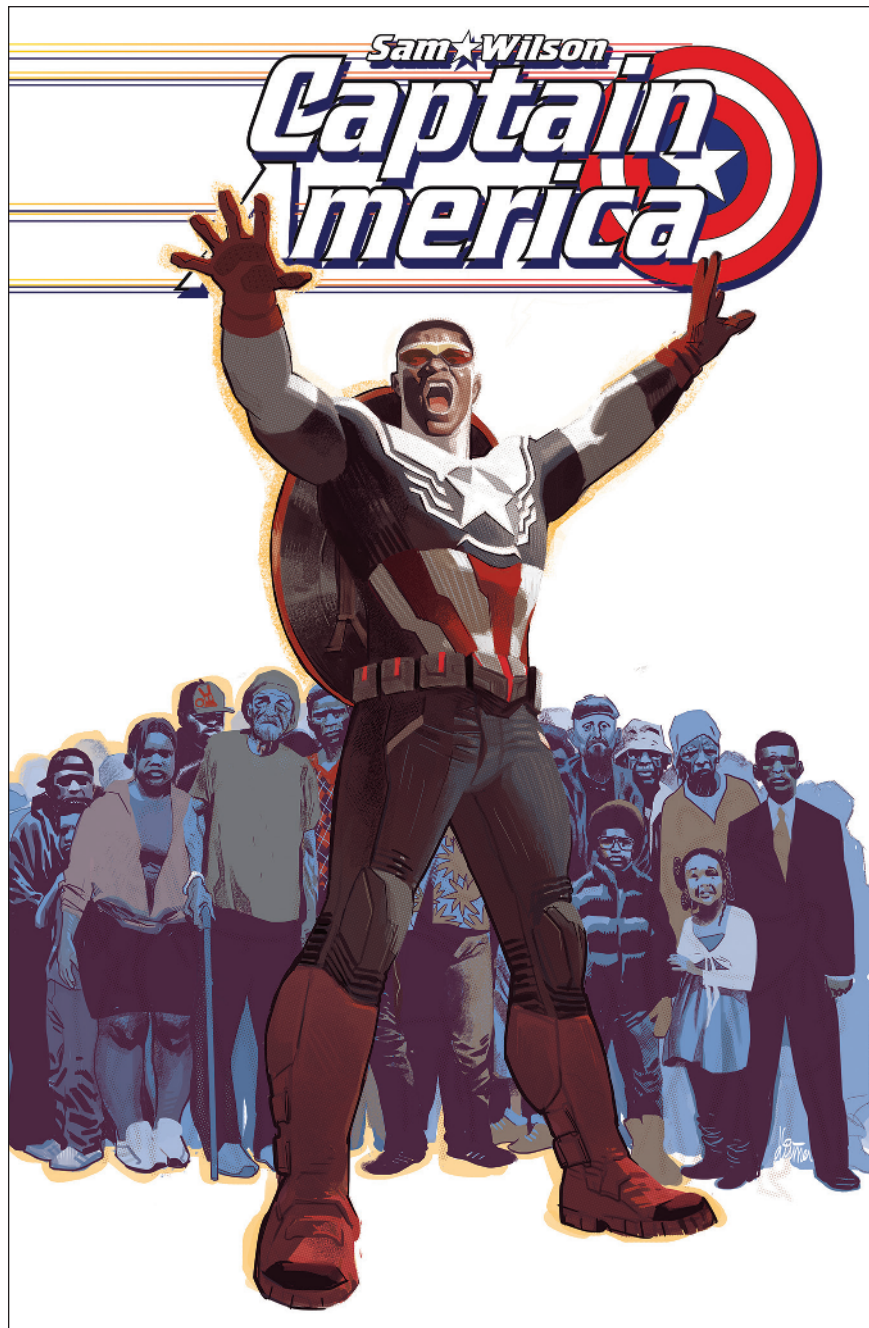


FIGURE 1-9:
Sam Wilson
is Captain
America!

Art by Daniel Acuña.



FIGURE 1-10:
Young Sam's
faith is tested
by tragedy.

Story by Rick Remender. Art by Stuart Immonen and Wade von Grawbadger.



FIGURE 1-11:
Sam Wilson's
day job:
Tougher than
super heroing?

Story by Christopher Priest (writing as Jim Owsley). Art by Mark Bright and Mike Gustovich.

While stranded on a remote island, Sam meets Steve Rogers, who trains him in a variety of combat skills. Donning a bright green costume, Sam becomes the Falcon (see Figure 1-12) — launching a partnership that spans many years and countless adventures.

As Sam grows accustomed to the life of a super hero, his Falcon identity changes and grows. He trades in his original costume for a sleeker, more attractive red-and-white outfit. The Black Panther, ruler of the kingdom of Wakanda, builds him an actual pair of glider wings, upgrading them in time to an actual powered flying harness. (See Chapter 12.)

FIGURE 1-12:
Birth of the
Falcon!



Story by Stan Lee. Art by Gene Colan and Joe Sinnott.

And all throughout Sam's adventures, both alone and alongside Captain America, the bird called Redwing is right by his side, as shown in Figure 1-13.

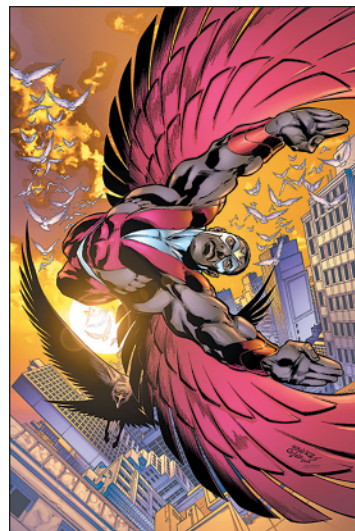


TIP

Have you heard of the Red Skull? He plays a big part in Chapters 2 and 5, but for now all you need to know is that he's Captain America's longest-running, most persistent nemesis.

To the skies: A new Captain America

Unlike Steve Rogers, Sam doesn't undergo a dramatic transformation when he becomes Captain America. He's already earned the trust of the Avengers and the general public — although, as you see in Chapter 6, that trust isn't always easy to keep.



Art by Ivan Reis and Oclair Albert.

FIGURE 1-13:
Sam and his very own falcon,
Redwing.

And Sam can do one feat that Steve Rogers can't. He can fly. His bond with Redwing gives him a unique perspective as, together, they patrol the skies. (See Figure 1-14.)



FIGURE 1-14:
The new,
high-flying
Captain
America.

Story by Rick Remender. Art by Stuart Immonen and Wade von Grawbadger.

When America is conquered by Hydra (see Chapter 10), Sam faces the toughest challenge of his career. As always, he rises to the occasion — literally! — and proves he's every bit as much of a Captain America as his friend and partner, Steve Rogers. They continue to share the stars and stripes, each serving their country in his own unique way.