

Journalism
in WWII:
on the Front
with Bill
Mauldin &
Ernie Pyle



BILL
MAULDIN

Journalism, World War II

By all measures, war reporting came of age between 1939 and 1945. The global conflagration of World War II elicited a massive response from the free press around the world. In countries under repressive regimes, print journalism and radio continued as well, but their effectiveness was compromised by rigid central control and the dictates of party propaganda.

In the United States, newspapers and radio broadcasting were already covering the war in Europe beginning with the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, and the declaration of war two days later by France and Great Britain. Likewise, in the Far East correspondents were fanning out to chronicle the territorial aggressions of Imperial Japan. Even though America did not go to war officially until after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the press was by that time deeply involved in reporting the impending conflict for the United States.

Wartime print journalists fell into roughly three categories: 1) wire service reporters for the two major organizations, the Associated Press and United Press; 2) stringers and correspondents for the large metropolitan daily newspapers like the New York Times, Chicago Tribune, and Los Angeles Times; and 3) correspondents or freelance writers for weekly magazines like Life, Time, Newsweek, and the New Yorker. The majority of these journalists were sent overseas to cover the battles from the frontlines after receiving press accreditation by the War Department. They wore uniforms, yet they were considered noncombatants and not allowed to carry sidearms or to fire any kind of weapon at the enemy. Because of their proximity to the actual fighting, a number of American journalists were killed, wounded, or captured. Some who were captured were later executed by the enemy.

Journalists during the war in Europe were allowed to cover virtually all phases of the military operations, including actual combat. Usually, this consisted of “hitching a ride” in a jeep with officers and enlisted men and going up to the front where the fighting was taking place. Typically, they would interview the soldiers and jot down what they saw in terms of the casualties and battlefield successes, then return at the end of the day to press headquarters to type up the story, clear it through censors, and send it back by radio via London for cable transmission to New York and other cities. Each reporter signed a pledge to clear all stories through military censorship. Journalists who failed to do so were subject to military tribunals, but were more likely to be sent home. Most correspondents honored the pledge and scrupulously submitted all stories to censors who would use blue pencils and razor

blades to eliminate words that might “give aid and comfort to the enemy.” Thus, important stories were often delayed several days to a week before they appeared in American newspapers and magazines.

In 1942 President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Office of War Information (OWI), and under the leadership of Elmer Davis it served to promote public support for the American war effort at home and abroad. Davis and the OWI played an instrumental role in prodding the American military to divulge greater information to journalists and to release more graphic imagery related to the cost of war. At the same time, the OWI, along with the military, actively encouraged journalists to report favorable stories supportive of the war effort and guidelines on what reporters should avoid covering. Although Second World War journalism would be marked by greater objectivity and depth of reporting than the bombastic coverage of the First World War, many journalists responded to the calls of military officials and the OWI to produce coverage that remained supportive of the war.

Bill Mauldin and Ernie Pyle

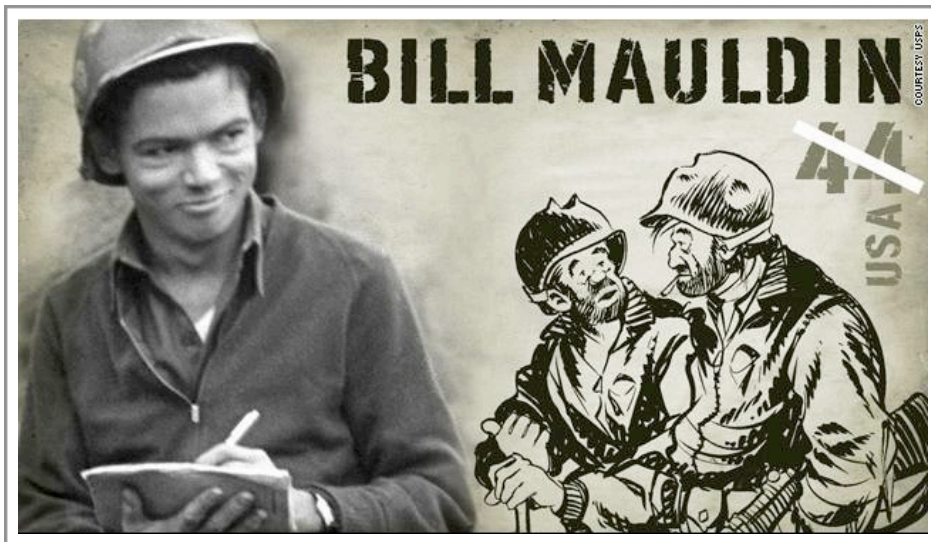
Two of the most famous World War II journalists were Bill Mauldin and Ernie Pyle. Mauldin, an army enlisted man, was actually a gifted cartoonist for Stars and Stripes, the army’s free daily newspaper. Mauldin’s “Willie and Joe” drawings, later collected in *Up Front*, made him the favorite of GIs and their families back home. The Willie and Joe car-

War correspondent Ernie Pyle (second from right) on Okinawa in 1945. Ernie Pyle was one of the best-known journalists during World War II. © CORBIS



toons depict grizzled, dog-faced soldiers who retain the will to fight but who have grown weary of the numbing routine of cold, hunger, and the bureaucratic mindlessness of the army. As Mauldin wrote, they were men “who are able to fight a ruthless war against ruthless enemies, and still grin at themselves.”

Ernie Pyle was probably the best-known journalist of World War II. His weekly columns for Scripps-Howard newspapers were entitled “The Roving Reporter.” Pyle won a Pulitzer prize for his eloquent reporting during the Italian campaign. His famous “Captain Waskow” story, describing the anger and sadness of the men when their beloved captain’s body is brought down from an Italian mountain, was the centerpiece for this recognition. Pyle’s close friend and fellow journalist Don Whitehead, who covered the war for the Associated Press, remembers how the story was created: “He [Pyle] was absolutely whipped physically and men-



Bill Mauldin with his characters Willie and Joe.

tally. I was with him in the room where he wrote the story. He asked me to read it, because he was afraid he had lost his touch. He said, ‘I don’t think it’s worth a damn. I’ve just lost my feeling.’ I read it and then told him, ‘My God, Ernie, if you’ve lost your touch writing that story, I hope I can lose mine!’”

Pyle was shot dead by a Japanese sniper

on the island of Ie Shima, near Okinawa, on April 17, 1945, fulfilling his premonition that he would not live through the war.

Stars and Stripes and Radio

The U.S. military provided its own unique coverage of the war in the Pacific and in Europe through Stars and Stripes. This soldier’s newspaper originated in 1861 during the Civil War and resurfaced in World War I in 1918, but its publication was short-lived and did not continue after 1919. Stars and Stripes reemerged as a tabloid on April 18, 1942, with its primary aim as a morale booster for U.S. troops, and has been published ever since. Multiple editions of the newspaper during the European campaign reflected the far-flung operational theaters of the war against Hitler and Mussolini—North Africa, the Mediterranean, Europe. A Pacific version of Stars and Stripes was inaugurated in May 1945 as the war moved closer to the Japanese mainland.

Another essential perspective in the media coverage of World War II was afforded by radio. The major broadcasters, ABC, CBS, and NBC, all sent journalists to report the war. Some of the most famous of these reporters were Edward R. Murrow, best known for his poignant broadcasts from London during the Nazi air raids; William L. Shirer, whose riveting reports from Berlin and Paris described the Battle of Britain and the fall of Paris in 1940; and others such as Eric Sevareid, Charles Collingwood, and Howard K. Smith, who would go on to have successful careers in television news. Live radio provided an immediacy in the living rooms of Americans back home that anticipated the “television war” of the Vietnam conflict in the 1960s and 1970s.

Although wartime journalists covered campaigns and the men who fought in them, they could not entirely practice freedom of the press. Journalism was censored and carefully controlled to support the war effort by reinforcing an image of Americans at war that would maintain morale on the homefront. Thus in journalism, as in other facets of American life, war redefines, and often restricts, liberties taken for granted during peacetime.



Memorial to Ernie Pyle, who was killed in Okinawa by machine gun fire in April 1945. © CORBIS

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