

Remembering journalist Ernie Pyle, and his boys

Something came for me in the mail the other day. I don't remember what it was exactly, but up in the right-hand corner of the envelope a familiar face stared out at me. Finally, after 30 years, I thought, they've gone and put an old friend of mine on a postage stamp. The stamp read, "Ernie Pyle, Journalist."

I didn't know Ernie personally, but like a lot of people my age and older, his writings of the day-to-day life-style of the World War II foot soldier were a must for those of us who followed the war in newspapers in the early '40s.

Then, as now, battles were being fought in places with strange names. Places like Guadalcanal, Saipan, Iwo Jima, Anzio, Palermo, Tobruk, Leyte Gulf, Omaha Beach. And those of us who read the papers in those days and listened to the radio remember a particular landing or battle on some far-off island somewhere by one of these names, or by the name of some famous general who directed the show.

Occasionally, a private soldier or marine would distinguish himself by an unusual act of heroism and perhaps die in the doing, and his comrades went on living and fighting because of what he'd done. If by chance the account of his bravery reached the attention of some high-ranking officer, the hero sometimes received individual recognition in the form of a commendation for valor or a presidential citation, or occasionally the big one — the Congressional Medal of Honor. His name was linked with a certain campaign, a medal was pinned to his chest and, except for the very few "Audie Murphys," he was all but forgotten in a month or two.

But what about the tens of thousands of men and boys who were never noticed as individuals? The ordinary Joes who made muster every day. The ones who hit the beaches and crawled through the jungles and sloshed along the miles of muddy roads; the ones who slept in foxholes or hedgerows and washed in their helmets; the young men from Wichita Falls and Albuquerque, Syracuse and Birmingham, Fort Smith and San Pedro and Walla Walla.

Who were those dirty, malaria-ridden, tired foot soldiers who waited and fought and died alone, or grew old on a single afternoon and went on to win a war? They were Ernie Pyle's boys.

Ernie Pyle wasn't a soldier. Born near Dana, Indiana, in 1900, he studied at Indiana University and worked on newspapers in Indiana, Washington, D.C., and New York City before becoming a columnist in 1935. When the war broke out, he became an overseas correspondent for Scripps-Howard Newspaper Alliance. He was a thin, balding, quiet-spoken little man, haunted by personal problems. He was 42 when he made his first landing in North Africa. His only weapons were a beat-up portable typewriter, some notepads and pencils.

He lived close to his boys, ate with them, slept with them and sweated with them in the desert heat. He asked them about their hopes and ambitions and what they thought about the war and things. He got them to talk about the towns they came from and their folks back home and the names of the girls whose pictures they carried. He listened and made notes and sent his stories back to the States, where

they were circulated through his syndicated column. People everywhere read Ernie Pyle. Mothers and fathers came upon the names of their sons. Ernie had talked to them and they worried less, for a while anyway.

From then on, Ernie was around for virtually every major campaign of the war. After Africa came Italy, and

later on, D-Day and the long haul through the European continent to the fall of Berlin.

In the early days of 1945, Ernie was attached to the Navy, and was with his boys in the Marianas and lived with those who flew the B-29s in the initial assaults on the Japanese homeland. He was on a carrier with the troops heading for Okinawa, made the landing with the marines and saw the island secured.

During his early days in North Africa, not knowing how long the war would last, Ernie wrote of his feelings of the months that lay ahead:

"On the day of final peace, the last stroke of what we call the 'Big Picture' will be drawn. I haven't written anything about the 'Big Picture' because I don't know anything about it. I only know what we see from our worm's-eye view, and our segments of the picture consist of tired and dirty soldiers who are alive and don't want to die; of long, darkened convoys in the middle of the night; of shocked, silent men wandering back down the hill from battle; of chow lines and atabrine tablets and foxholes and burning tanks and Arabs holding up eggs and the rustle of high-flown shells; of jeeps and petrol dumps and smelly bedding rolls and C-rations and cactus patches and blown bridges and dead mules and hospital tents and shirt collars greasy from months of wearing; and of laughter too, and anger and wine and lovely flowers and constant cussing. All these it is composed of; and graves and graves and graves . . . When we leave here for the next shore, there is nothing we can do for those beneath the wooden crosses, except perhaps to pause and murmur, 'Thanks, pal.'"

Ernie didn't live to see that last stroke. Having reported the wars from Africa to Okinawa, he was killed one morning by a Japanese machine gun bullet a mile or so from a command post on Ie Shima, a small atoll in the Ryukus Islands. They put up a sign: "At this spot the 77th Infantry Division lost a buddy. Ernie Pyle. 18 April 1945."

Much is made of war in the headlines and in the history books. Even as we talk of abolishing war, new wars erupt from old ashes and we're at it again, and for every imaginable reason. It's as if man needs war, that he thrives on the conflict and killing. It is odd how often war brings out the best in men. Perhaps without war we would have no Washingtons or Lincolns, no Davy Crocketts or Alvin Yorks. And if World War II had never been, maybe Ernie Pyle would have lived to an obscure old age behind a desk somewhere, a million miles from the Pulitzer Prize he won in 1944 and the postage stamp that reached my desk the other day to start my memory wandering.

This column was written in 1972 by Tom Harvill, 81, now living in Forest City, N.C. He was a Navy hospital corpsman attached to the Marine Corps during World War II and Korea.

COMMENTARY

Tom Harvill