

Conger, Clinton B. Book review of First Casualty

CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM
RELEASE IN FULL
2 JULY 96

UNCLASSIFIED

THE FIRST CASUALTY. By Phillip Knightley. (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York and London, 1975. 425 pp, notes, bibliography and index.)

A full generation before Churchill insisted that truth in wartime should be shielded by "a bodyguard of lies," Senator Hiram Johnson was asserting in 1917 that "the first casualty when war comes is truth."

The main thrust of Knightley's history of war reporting seems to be that from the Crimea in 1854 through Vietnam, war correspondents have been so censored, misled, or patriotic that they have never shown war to be horrible enough to be outlawed.

Along the way, he analyzes in great detail how:

—during the Civil War "Sensationalism and exaggeration, outright lies, puffery, slander, faked eyewitness accounts, and conjectures built on pure imagination cheapened much that passed in the North for news;"

—in World War I, the British by and large kept correspondents far from the front lines and prevented any criticism of the conduct of the war;

—in Ethiopia, correspondents confined to headquarters on either side knew nothing of what was really going on;

—in Spain, balance could be achieved only by pairing biased reporters on either side;

—in World War Two, correspondents were not only censored, committed to their own side in most cases, and cooperative with the censors in muting the horrors of war, but made no effort to circumvent censorship and tell the public when things went wrong.

—in Vietnam, correspondents were not censored, and in many cases were not only *not for* but strongly *against* the side they were covering. They were too caught up in combat news, however, to put their main emphasis on the horrors of war.

Before going into any further detail, it should be noted that Knightley's competence on the subject of both war correspondents and the horrors of war is qualified by the dust-jacket statement that "He has never heard a shot fired in anger, and hopes he never will."

Knightley has researched his book in depth, and he includes enough case histories to cut the ground from under some of his contentions listed above, but in regard to both censorship and propaganda — the two subjects which bring this book into the intelligence purview — he ignores important distinctions.

Firstly, no accredited war correspondent has any right to expect, let alone demand, that he be allowed in wartime to acquire and publish information unknown to the enemy which will aid the enemy. Where there is mismanagement, bumbling, or failure, *and it is already known to the enemy or of no use to the enemy*, however, censorship stands on shaky ground in pleading "home front morale" and "comfort to the enemy." If Knightley is aware of this distinction he never makes it.

Secondly, with regard to propaganda, the best role for the correspondent and that which best serves the truth is *objectivity*. Herbert Matthews admits that in Spain he went overboard in his bias in favor of the side he covered — the Republicans. Similar advocacy journalism reached its peak in Southeast Asia with those correspondents who were working from the South Vietnamese side but were critical of everything the South Vietnamese undertook. In these two examples, there is one sharp difference: the pro-Republican correspondents in Spain wrote at length about atrocities perpetrated by the opposing Franco side, but ignored those on their own side; in Vietnam there was quick, lurid, and widespread reporting of alleged South Vietnamese atrocities, but very little about those committed by the Communist forces.

In dealing with the first point — excessive censorship — Knightley on occasion saws off his own limb. He notes that William Howard Russell of the London *Times*, reporting from the Crimean War, described the catastrophic "Charge of the Light Brigade" graphically and accurately. Press dispatches from the Crimea were also responsible for the work of Florence Nightingale and the first efforts to provide nursing services for the wounded.

In World War One, as early as August 20, British correspondents who presumably had no access to the front lines nevertheless managed to report the British defeat at Mons. Press reporting on the fighting at Gallipoli cost the Commanding General his job.

In World War Two, Kasserine Pass and the Battle of the Bulge were accurately reported as American defeats. *Stars & Stripes*, over the anguished complaints of General Patton, came up with such "dogface" stories as the interception of the shoepacs and jump boots which could have been used at the front in Southern France by the quartermaster echelons of Peninsular Base Section back at the Mediterranean. Much of this, Knightley either ignores or doesn't know about.

He notes, quite correctly: "Correspondents were not allowed in the theatre of war unless they were accredited, and one of the conditions of accreditation was that the correspondent must sign an agreement to submit all his copy to military or naval censorship." And that, Knightley thinks, was that. He goes into some detail about the men who evaded censorship, smuggled the news home, or wrote books or magazine articles or lectured when they were no longer accredited and subject to censorship. But one of the few instances he cites where a reporter supposedly went to the mat with the censors is a freak case: my own eyewitness report of the *Queen Mary's* collision with an antiaircraft cruiser, *HMS Curacoa* on Oct. 2, 1942. The *Curacoa*, which we would now call an AA-frigate at best, was a type the Royal Navy desperately needed for the Murmansk and Malta convoys. There was no way the Germans could know she had been sunk. Hence, it was not in the Royal Navy's interest to release the story.¹ A CI operation was mounted, in fact, against the five correspondents who had been on board the *Queen* to determine whether they were inclined to talk about the incident, and one was soon "slowboated" home. In my case, I had access to the Admiralty censors because I was subsequently assigned to the Home Fleet at Scapa Flow, so I wrote the collision story, left one copy with the Admiralty, and the other in the United Press London safe. I then forgot

about the story until VE-Day, when the Admiralty censors promptly released it with nary a prod from me or the United Press. So much for my going to the mat with the censors.

There is a sequel to the release of the *Queen Mary* story which demonstrates the subtler forms of censorship. Deciding that the Admiralty now appeared to be of a mind to "tell all," I dug back into my memory for a classified Royal Navy account I had read of the hunt for the *Bismarck*. On May 26, 1941, when the *Bismarck* was finally relocated south of England and making for the French coast, Admiral Somerville of "Force H" coming up from Gibraltar had detached the fast light cruiser *Sheffield* to close (staying just out of range of the *Bismarck*'s guns) and shadow. Somehow, nobody informed the pilots of the Swordfish torpedo planes aboard *Ark Royal*, also in Force H.

The 14 Swordfish, searching for *Bismarck* by radar, found *Sheffield* instead some 20 miles to the north — weighing about 9,100 tons to *Bismarck*'s 45,000. As any silhouette recognition expert will understand if he still remembers that WEFT meant "Wrong Every Fool Time," they promptly dove through the clouds to press home a determined but unopposed attack, and scored several hits before realizing their mistake.² Fortunately the torpedoes, according to the account I had read, were all armed with a new magnetic "pistol," or detonator, and failed to detonate properly, so no harm was done. Three hours later, a second attack by Swordfish found the proper target, and disabled *Bismarck*'s steering action in the key encounter of the entire chase. By this time, "The failure of the magnetic torpedo pistols caused them to be replaced by contact pistols,"³ and *Bismarck* was brought to bay.

Back in New York on leave in June, 1945, I wrote the story and turned it in with an explanation of how I had come by it. Harrison E. Salisbury, then heading the UP Cable Desk, was concerned that it might still be subject to censorship — the war still being on in the Pacific — and he sent it to Washington to be cleared with the British Naval Attach. That worthy — whose name I never learned or I would pay him homage here for his one-upsmanship — knew he no longer had any censorship power, but replied to Salisbury: "There is no security objection but I've never head of this." Salisbury, grunting something about overreaching for stories, killed the report. Sir Winston Churchill's war histories⁴ subsequently confirmed the Swordfish attack on *Sheffield*, but implied that all of the torpedoes had missed.

I can recall, on the other hand, flying with a B-24 squadron assigned to bomb Monte Cassino (the town, not the Abbey) which toggled bombed instead on a similar village near Venafro, five miles behind our own lines. I filed the story, the Fifteenth Air Force censors killed it, and UP headquarters in Naples appealed it to Theater Headquarters, which released the story some three days after the incident. The point is that when correspondents felt censors had overstepped the bounds, the press appealed, and the appeals in many cases worked. Criticism of the conduct of war *per se*, or of defeats, or of snafus, did not constitute valid grounds for censorship; of this Knightley seems to be unaware.

Postwar novels aside, the finest creative writing to emerge from combat is probably the expense account. There is Bob Casey's classic explanation of "\$50 miscellaneous" which auditors ordered him to itemize after an Alaskan assignment: "Replacement of lead sled dog, killed by wolves, \$49.50. Flowers for bereft bitch, \$0.50. I believe it was H. R. Knickerbocker who in Ethiopia accounted for several hundred dollars gone astray by dreaming up and describing a desert safari attacked by bandits, leaving Knickerbocker responsible for replacement of killed and stolen camels and carts. Knightley's book charitably overlooks this particular brand of creativity, but concentrates effectively on the inventive correspondent and his phoney reporting for publication — particularly in the propaganda field.

The First Casualty documents at considerable length the contributions of correspondents to anti-German atrocity propaganda in World War One — the violated Belgian maidens, the Belgian babies with their hands cut off,⁵ the German factories for converting bodies into glycerine — and to anti-Franco propaganda in Spain. The thrust of the account is that eager correspondents and newspapers probably did as much as the official propagandists, not only to circulate these stories, but to invent them. One correspondent, Claude Cockburn of the English *The Week*, scolded Louis Fischer, reporting for *The Nation*, for writing that in one action Republican troops were demoralized and bewildered. When Fischer protested that the readers had a right to the truth, Cockburn exploded: "Who gave [the readers] such a right? Perhaps when they have exerted themselves enough to alter the policy of their bloody government and the Fascists are beaten in Spain, they will have such a right."

There is less stress on the pure fakers, who invented not to advance their cause, but to grab headlines or column space. One correspondent in Italy, when the Allied advance reached San Marino, reported that tiny

San Marino had forthwith declared war on Germany. It made such a good story that several days later the San Marino government went along with the gag and did so. The censors, who might have known better, did nothing to stop the original story; after all, they were not concerned with accuracy, and the story gave no aid or comfort to the enemy.

Knightley, in urging correspondents to circumvent censorship, apparently has little knowledge of censorship in depth. For a period of nine months from October, 1942, I covered naval operations around the British Isles. For five months of that period, working for United Press but carrying orders signed by COMNAVEUR Adm. Harold R. Stark which assigned me as U.S. Navy pool correspondent at Scapa Flow, I sailed with British warships on a total of seven Murmansk convoys, in everything from destroyers to battleships. Counting every hand at Scapa, in the Admiralty, and in Admiral Stark's headquarters that got a crack at my copy, I was working through a total of six censorships.

I managed to get off a second-hand description of the Christmas 1942 action between a British cruiser force and the *Hipper and Luetzow* (I was at sea with the wrong task force;) a number of features ranging from winter weather on the Murmansk run to the loveable qualities of the ungainly British catapult amphibian, the Walrus; the differences between life aboard a U.S. and a British warship; and the plight of U.S. troops perched on a glacier at Akureyre above the Arctic Circle, the jumping-off point for Murmansk. But I wasn't exactly covering the war.

Early in March, returning from RA53, my final convoy operation aboard *King George V*, and about to be relieved by an AP man as the pool correspondent, I was summoned by the Home Fleet Commander-in-Chief, Adm. Sir John Tovey, who wanted to talk about Murmansk convoys in general. He invited me to use what he told me on a background basis.

Over the next few days, I wrote a series of five articles, summarizing just about everything I had experienced on the Murmansk runs, topped off with the conclusions I had drawn from Admiral Tovey's remarks: (a) The Murmansk convoys required 40 percent of the Home Fleet destroyer strength at a time when escort ships were desperately needed for the Battle of the Atlantic; (they were also needed for forthcoming offensive operations in the Mediterranean, but that didn't belong in a news story); (b) Murmansk, the only Arctic Russian port open all winter, could barely handle 12 to 18 ships a month; (c) with only a single-track railroad to haul

the stuff away, it sat on the Murmansk dock vulnerable to destruction by any German bomber free to hedgehop the few miles from the Norwegian border; and (d) as for the summer, when Archangel was available, the convoy route was exposed to German daylight air attacks 24 hours a day. The message was that the Persian Gulf Route — which in the course of the war handled 77.3 percent of all Allied aid to the USSR — was a far better way of getting help to the Russians.

Sure, I was used, but it would have made a legitimate story and an excellent series. What I didn't know was that because of all the reasons outlined by Tovey, plus the mid-March arrival of *Scharnhorst* to reinforce *Tirpitz* and *Luetzow* in northern Norwegian waters, Churchill on March 30 sent a message to Stalin informing him that the Murmansk convoys were being suspended following RA53, which had left Murmansk homebound on March 1.

It was late April, and I was back in London before the kindly chief censor at Admiralty summoned me to receive the remains of my Murmansk run series. There was about enough left to make one good feature story, but none of Tovey's remarks. In consolation, the censor pointed at some brown squiggles in the margin, in addition to the half-dozen spoors of my usual censors.

"Those," he said with a sort of hushed solemnity, "are the personal comments of the Prime Minister, and the whole shooting match was translated into Russian and flown to Moscow."

A couple of months later I was home briefly with a U.S. Navy task force which had been based at Scapa Flow, and I would have been able to write whatever I wanted in the New York office. I wonder if Knightley would say I should have written that the convoys had been suspended (the Germans could have used their forces in northern Norway elsewhere had they been sure) or that I had in effect been "used" by Admiral Tovey and the PM against the Russians.

"The point about censorship," Knightley notes, "is that while it can prevent a correspondent from sending a story the military does not want published, it cannot force him to send a false or exaggerated one." He shows that some correspondents can be misled; others will go along; but he fails to show that — given a conscientious objective press — Truth becomes the first casualty. *Whole Truth* may be wounded, maimed, or captured at times. *Nothing But The Truth* will report sick from contact

with official communiques and briefings — the Bodyguard of Lies — plus the occasional faker. *Truth*, however, is the combat-wise NCO who will still be around when all the other casualties are gone.

Clinton B. Conger

Footnotes

1 Conversely, the British realized that the *Queen Mary* could hardly limp into Glasgow with her prow curled like a sardine can without some word reaching the Germans, so they "carelessly" ordered the dockyard navvies to clean the only drydock in England which would accommodate QM. Several days later, QM plodded off around Northern Ireland to Boston in a slow but heavily guarded convoy while British destroyers scragged several U-boats waiting eagerly on the approaches to the Southampton dockyard.

2 The aircraft then signalled the cruiser: "Sorry for the kippers."

3 Roskill, Capt., S.W., RN, *The Navy at War, 1939-1945*, H.M. Stationary Office, London, 1954, p. 513.

4 *The Grand Alliance, 1940-1941*.

5 This one was invented by *The Times* of London, embellished and given wide circulation by the French, and gave the German government fits. My father, S. Beach Conger II, was at that time chief of the Associated Press bureau in Berlin (1912-1917) and was given *carte blanche* by the German General Staff to go anywhere he wanted to in Belgium and talk to anybody without supervision; the incident was "widely known" to the Belgians, but had always happened in the next town down the line or over the hill. Proving a negative was, is, and remains difficult if not impossible.

UNCLASSIFIED

Posted: May 08, 2007 08:46 AM