How Did WWII Afftect Newspaper Editors?

Description

Jim Sr. and I went to hear of the exploits of two men who served as armor officers in PattonÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s 3rd Army during the fight across Europe, but we got something different.

On December 1sth, a lecture was sponsored by the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg Campus, that featured Eugene Patterson and John Germany. Eugene spent from 1943 through the end of the war as a platoon leader in tanks as part of the 10th Armored Division. John arrived later in the war as a replacement platoon commander in the 13th Armored Division, taking the place of a Lt killed in action, for a unit that had seen plenty of action prior to his arrival. Both men had grown up in the southern part of the country, and after the war, Eugene went on to be the editor of first the Atlanta Constitution, the Washington Post and later the St Petersburg Times. John became a lawyer, and later a judge in the Florida.

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Eugene began the evening by reading us a letter he had written to his granddaughter, who was working on a paper for her journalism class. Her question to her grandfather was how did the war experience shape the newspaper editorsÃ¢â‚¬â„¢ perspective? As he read his response, I heard some interesting things and I believe a key to why the MSM is how they are today.

Eugene began by saying what had really changed was they came back from the war as Americans, that the southern legacy of the Confederacy no longer held itÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s allure for them as Southerners. Next he said the GI Bill had Ã¢â‚¬Å“emancipated the ignorant of the South.Ã¢â‚¬Â• I understood this, but that short sentence put it in a better, more far reaching perspective for me. Those both are huge issues in the growth of our nation. First is that having had the depth of bonding between men in combat, they had begun their training as strangers from all over the country, and ended up with deep friendships, now with the shared stories of their fellow soldiers from all parts and economic backgrounds. The second part of that opening indicated the GI Bill brought college to many who would have never had the opportunity otherwise. It seems to be common wisdom that that great plan gave us the men who helped continue the economic improvements that made us the unequaled world leader we have become.

Eugene went on to say the men changed as a result of their experiences of the terrible battlefields. They came to be able to recognize straight talking leaders easily and also had known real fear. They took this â€œeducationâ€• from the war zone to their professional and personal lives after the war. He then went on to list a number of major newspaper editors who had served in the Army, Marines and Navy. Following these statements, he next said something very interesting. He then began telling the story of the desegregation movement, from the view of a major newspaper editor. He said they (the editors he mentioned earlier) had been around the world and seen things done differently, and it was time for a change in our nation. I then heard a story of how he and his reporters became a supporting organization for the desegregation movement. I think this is wonderful, certainly from a moral position, but the sense I got was he, and these other editors, decided they were going to use their papers to make this change happen. He didnÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t speak as though he made sure his reporters reported the news, but that they went out of their way to make the news. His story came more from the perspective

of an engaged participant, rather than an objective observer.

I think this is a key to todayÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s media â€œactivismâ€• in the war with Iraq. Could this generation of editors, the men who had gained a new life perspective from WWII have even preceded the activist leanings we saw from the press in opposing the Vietnam War? I think that when there are allusions about the media seeking their Ã¢â‚¬Å“glory daysÃ¢â‚¬Â• of the Vietnam era, I suspect it goes further back to the 50Ã¢â‚¬â„¢s when these WWII vets became the people in the influential news media.

During the Q&A period, Eugene went on to comment that â€œwe must have newspaper journalismâ€• for â€œwe tell you what the Government is doing.â€• He made these remarks with great emphasis, as though he viewed the government as something to be consistently under suspicion. In doing a little research tonight, as I cleaned up this post, I found Eugene Patterson was the Washington Post editor when the Pentagon Papers were published. IÃ¢â‚¬â„¢d certainly say it was his passion to be an agent of change in our society.

I think this holds another key to the attitude of the media. Rather than a vehicle to consolidate news from all over, they have decided they are self-appointed watchdogs for the people. I have long objected to this philosophy, which I first heard come from the mouth of Fred Francis, then with CNN, at a conference on media relations held at the Naval War College in the fall of 1987. Fred stood in the auditorium and announced that he worked for the American people and if he asked one of us a question, we were obligated to answer him, no matter what the security implications may be. Trust me, in a room full of military officers, he didnÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t get a warm response. At least he was balanced by presence of Tom Brokaw and Carl Rochelle, who had recently returned from the Persian Gulf in the middle of the Iran-Iraq Tanker Wars. The two of them expressed a desire to get the news out, but understood it was sometimes necessary to hold the release until American/allied troops were no longer at risk.

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As I consider this set of circumstances, and the philosophical positions taken, I thought of how the current set of conditions around the GWoT will shape our future leaders. Last week, on a talk show, a caller said his son had generally been apolitical all along, but in the last few weeks, once the Democrats began calling for a withdrawal from Iraq, he told his dad many of he and his fellow soldiers were so disgusted, that they were becoming Republicans. I suspect, after having the battlefield experiences, they, too, will return with a healthy appreciation of straight talking leaders, coupled with a real knowledge of fear. TheyÃ¢â‚¬â„¢ll know how to peg those people quickly, and the others they will detect for their lack of loyalty and self serving attitudes. Consider our young soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines will come home and be able to attend college, and then enter the professional world, knowing there are those who did not support them when they were in a war. With the legacy of activism established by the veterans of WWII, our modern day warriors have ample precedent to do the same thing, but from the right side of the political perspective, IÃ¢â‚¬â„¢d venture. Possibly, and I can only conjecture, they will come home with a burning desire to ensure the country supports itÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s warriors.

All in all, it was a night when Jim Sr. and I expected to hear some war stories, but the talk and discussions afterwards almost exclusively focused on social change and the role of Ã¢â‚¬Å“print journalismÃ¢â‚¬Â• in affecting that.

Update: HT to Mudville Gazette Dawn Patrol for a post by They Call US â€œDocâ€• about the 278th RCT Commander from their local paper, the Tessessean. It conveys a little piece of what people get as

a new perspctive on life from war zone experiencesâ€¦

> â€œThings here are important, obviously, but in the grand scheme of things, Iâ€™m not going to lose my life if I miss a deadline. There, you lose your life for something similar. I think everybody who was over there is going to have that same attitude.â€•
> â€“ LtCol Jeffrey Holmes

Full disclosure: IÃ¢â‚¬â„¢m no journalist. I just enjoy sampling life and believe I stumbled across something worth â€œreporting.â€• My own thoughts are blended in, so this is my editorial on the topic, and not â€œnews.â€•

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