



Dispatches from the Pacific: The World War II Reporting of Robert Sherrod by Ray E. Boomhower.

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Dispatches from the Pacific is, strictly speaking, a study of the career of World War II correspondent Robert Sherrod (1909–94). Its author, the prolific biographer Ray Boomhower, briefly sketches Sherrod’s life before and after the war, highlighting its importance for understanding the moral agent he became while risking his life to get the “true” stories of both common soldiers and their commanders as they fought the ghastly battles in the Pacific theater.

American infantrymen, sailors, and airmen were fighting fiercely dedicated Japanese soldiers (and the civilians who supported them) who had promised their divine emperor to kill Japan’s enemies or die trying—surrender was simply not an option. And die they did, in their tens of thousands on fly-speck Pacific islands, often in banzai attacks and or individual and mass suicides. The “divine wind” strikes by kamikaze pilots (177–80, 199–205), in a frightening number of cases, succeeded in hitting their targets, especially early on in their use during the last three months of 1944 and into 1945.¹

Boomhower concentrates throughout on revealing what makes Sherrod’s reporting so exceptional, and what moral questions he raises in his articles, private letters, notes, and interviews with such American governmental and military leaders as Marine Corps General Holland Smith, Adm. Chester Nimitz, a young Texas congressman named Lyndon Baines Johnson, and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, as well as Time Inc. vice president Allen Grover and publisher Henry Luce. His chief concern was what American civilians knew—or *avoided knowing*—about what combat soldiers were enduring. He wanted them to know and feel the human costs of war. He once asserted that “through their own wishful thinking, bolstered by comfort-inspiring yarns from the war theatres” the American public believed that “many machines alone would win the war for us” and that it “came as a surprise to many people” that the “road to Tokyo would be lined with the graves of many a foot soldier.”²

Boomhower’s readable narrative highlights Sherrod’s main goals as a reporter, especially his astute exposés of flaws in American political and strategic decision-making. His readers will learn of the terrifying realities of war in the Pacific as front-line soldiers and Sherrod himself experienced them. In the end, they will also realize that it is not easy to discern the whole truth about what US military forces have been directed to do in America’s wars, declared and undeclared. There have been very few Robert Sherrods reporting on US military actions.

Ernie Pyle is a much better known war correspondent than Sherrod, likely because he covered mainly the European theater of operations. Europe was closer, more familiar, and included many

1. At Okinawa, the last major battle in the Pacific, facing overwhelmingly superior US sea, land, and air forces, five hundred Japanese planes launched kamikaze *kikusui* (floating chrysanthemums) attacks; twenty-two struck their targets (204).

2. *Tarawa: The Story of a Battle* (1944; 3rd ed. rpt. Fredericksburg, TX: Adm. Nimitz Foundation, 1993) 149.

American families' countries of origin, whether Axis or Allied. Pyle wrote regular syndicated stories, often about ordinary GI Joes, for Scripps Howard newspapers nationwide. They reached the United States quickly and carried profound human interest. Sherrod's longer, more analytic pieces for *Time*, though no less humanly grounded, appeared irregularly and often concerned controversial issues. The longer time it took for them to reach the States meant they were sometimes shelved temporarily or permanently as outdated or undesirable news.

Still, Pyle and Sherrod are the patron saints of all later embedded reporters in modern mechanized warfare. Both made deep moral commitments to the soldiers they befriended and whose wartime lives they captured with paper and typewriter. The two men met up when Pyle arrived in the Pacific in April 1945 to cover what would become the charnel house of the battle for Okinawa, the last defensible island en route to Japan's home islands.

Before Sherrod left for New York on 11 April, Pyle swore he would play it safe for once and cover the fighting by staying "back around the airfields with the Seabees and engineers" (198). But, like his friend Sherrod, Pyle wanted to witness the fighting on Okinawa that military planners had predicted would be "horrendous—worse than Iwo" (199). E.B. Sledge called Okinawa an "environment so degrading I believed we had been flung into hell's own cesspool" (199). William Manchester, then a Marine sergeant, used the same metaphor: "You could smell the front long before you saw it; it was one vast cesspool" (199). The Americans took 49,000 casualties (ca. 12,500 killed), while over 100,000 Japanese soldiers died during the eighty-day battle of Okinawa.

Sherrod praised Pyle as "better than anyone at registering the feeling of the average man about the war" (198–99). He also recognized that he and Pyle were birds of a feather, rare songbirds of war.

Chapter five, on the capture of Betio Island, Tarawa Atoll, by the 2nd Marine Division in "seventy-five hours and forty-two minutes" in November 1943, features many examples of Sherrod's riveting and sobering prose style. The statistics from Tarawa shocked an American public accustomed to selective, heavily censored accounts of heroism and easy successes. Now they read of 997 dead and 2,233 wounded Americans (a 19 percent casualty rate) and 4,690 Japanese killed and only 17 taken alive (132).

Sherrod had been there on the ground through most of it, though he missed "what seemed like an overwhelming banzai charge" (132) at the close of the battle, when Marine B Company suffered forty men dead and a hundred wounded while killing three hundred Japanese soldiers. By mid-December, Sherrod had a contract for a forty-thousand-word book about Tarawa (137). He wrote it using his own notes and firsthand accounts by those who did the fighting. Within two months of its publication (7 Mar. 1944; see note 2 herein), it went through three printings and sold fifty thousand copies (139). *New Republic* hailed it as "the most descriptive account of American men in combat" (136).

Sherrod's, lean, Hemingway-like style and moral sensibilities sharply counteracted more naïve accounts. The *New York Times*, for example, printed an account claiming the Marines at Tarawa were "surprised" by the fierce Japanese defense; having gone in "chuckling," they discovered "swift death instead of easy conquest" (133). The Marines had done no such thing. Sherrod had observed as early as 1942 in Australia the overconfidence of the American public and government officials that the war could be won from the air. Censorship and the shelving of Sherrod's stories made the inferiority of US fighter planes to the Japanese Zero a dirty little secret (57–59). Also suppressed were the cover up of a racial mutiny among African American soldiers (16, 61–63), the lack of cooperation and communication between branches of the military (63–68), and the friendly fire casualties (twenty-five dead and thirty-one wounded) on the Aleutian island of Kiska, evacuated

by all 9,500 Japanese soldiers before American troops invaded (85–86). The president of Funk and Wagnalls wrote to *Time* asking how his son, Lt. Wilfred Funk Jr., could be awarded a Purple Heart for being “killed in combat against the enemy” if there were no enemy combatants anywhere on the island (86). For six months, there was censorship of any mention in the press of Japanese kamikaze attacks (177–80).

After the initial reports about Tarawa, one mother wrote accusing Admiral Nimitz of “murdering my son,” prompting lawmakers to threaten a congressional investigation. General Douglas MacArthur, who was, according to Sherrod, “no hero to his men at Bataan,” rather a brooder, dreamer, and “the world’s greatest actor” (50–51, 59–60), wrote a self-serving complaint to the Secretary of War that “these frontal attacks by the Navy, as at Tarawa, are a tragic and unnecessary massacre of American lives” (133–34). MacArthur’s alternative plan, focused on first attacking the Japanese force of over 300,000 soldiers in the Philippines, may have been no less bloody in the event.

Sherrod argued (against FDR) that the military motion picture footage of the battle of Tarawa ought to be released as a documentary. Far from being “morbid sensationalism” as some critics had called a *Life* magazine photo of “three nameless infantrymen lying dead” on the beach (136), Sherrod convinced Roosevelt that “that’s the way the war is out there, and I think people are going to have to get used to that idea” (136). Boomhower quotes a 2nd Marine Division sergeant’s ironic remark, “If Marines could stand the dying, you’d think the civilians could stand to read about it” (134). Sherrod’s firsthand accounts certainly gave them the chance to do so, but, as he lamented, “the peacetime United States (i.e., the United States as of December, 1943) simply found it impossible to bridge the great chasm that separates the pleasures of peace from the horrors of war.”³ What an astounding sentence to write of a citizenry that had been fighting a formally declared world war on two major fronts since December 1941!

Sherrod was born in 1909 into a well-to-do family in a county of Georgia that had escaped the ravages wrought on much of the South during and after the Civil War. Three of his great-grandfathers had, however, died in the war. His father ran timber mills, but Sherrod came of age just as the Depression closed most of them down. The futility of trying to find a job gave the highly educated and talented Sherrod a taste of hunger and poverty. He recalled his time “starving” in New York as “probably the most valuable experience in human understanding I could have had” (28–32). That human understanding would later animate his powerful reportage from the front in the Pacific War.

The closing chapter, on Sherrod’s postwar life and career, is as crisply paced and well documented as the rest of Boomhower’s splendid book. Two of its pages (217–19) draw on an article⁴ Sherrod wrote following a two-month assignment in Vietnam in late 1966.⁵ Like an Old Testament prophet who knows his jeremiads will fall on deaf ears, he uses the words of many soldiers, officers (including a captured Viet Cong senior officer), diplomats, political leaders, and intellectuals in a searing chapter-and-verse condemnation of all that was wrong with the Vietnam War. All this in a popular, illustrated, plainly written magazine that came regularly into many American homes, not some secret top-level report by the Pentagon, a congressional committee, or a team of presidential advisers—a *full year before the Tet offensive*.

3. *Ibid.*, 147.

4. “Notes on a Monstrous War,” *Life* (17 Jan. 1967) 21–29.

5. He had also seen firsthand the Viet Minh attack on Hanoi (19 Dec 1946) and the “bitter end of French colonial forces just before Dien Bien Phu in 1954”—*ibid.*, 21.

Dispatches from the Pacific will stick in the minds of its readers and compel them to reflect carefully upon and share with others its distressing insights into the costs exacted from the men and women that American citizens send off to fight their wars.