



The War Beat, Pacific: The American Media at War against Japan

by Steven Casey.

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In *The War Beat, Pacific*, historian Steven Casey (London School of Economics) examines press coverage of the war against Japan in a companion volume to his award-winning *The War Beat, Europe* (2017). Both are shrewd and comprehensive accounts of the US military's interactions with the media during the Second World War. Casey states his thesis in a brief introduction. Specifically, he contends that news coverage of the Pacific war was markedly inferior to that from Europe for several reasons: (a) the remoteness of the fighting and communications problems that made timely reporting problematic, especially in the war's first years; (b) the paucity of the press corps and its inexperience in the theater; and (c) the Allied decision to prioritize the war against Germany, which often led editors to neglect stories from the Pacific. Casey stresses the "dynamic rivalry" of the services in the Pacific. The Army and the Navy constantly competed for public attention and limited resources. More than in Europe, the press in the Pacific was entirely dependent on the services for transport and communication. While the Army and Navy headquarters in the Pacific developed different approaches to publicity and the press, neither was successful.

Most accounts of war reporting concentrate on the combat experiences of individual reporters.¹ Casey, too, is keen to portray the dire straits war correspondents found themselves in at the front, but he is even more interested in "uncovering the main contours of what actually made it into print" (5). Hence, much of the book concerns how various institutional pressures—from military censorship and communications difficulties to staffing policies and editorial judgments of various news organizations—shaped those stories. Defeats were often portrayed as draws and draws as victories in order to shield the American public from the war's worst horrors.

As in his earlier book on Europe, Casey capitalizes on his extensive research into government archives, records of media organizations, and papers of individual journalists. His narrative proceeds chronologically from Pearl Harbor to the Japanese surrender, toggling between Gen. Douglas MacArthur's Army command in the Southwest Pacific and the Navy and Marine Corps actions in the central Pacific directed by Adm. Chester Nimitz. One chapter also deals with the China-Burma-India theater and the press coverage of Gen. Joseph Stillwell's ill-fated expedition into Burma as well as his subsequent ouster as head of the Chinese Army by Chiang Kai-Shek.

The book comprises three parts: "The Shrouded War," "Lifting the Veil," and "Endgame." These reflect the author's overarching thesis that, while the military, especially the Navy, kept a stranglehold on military information early in the war, once the Americans turned to the offensive, restrictions were eased and Americans received richer, more accurate (if sobering) accounts of the brutal fighting on the island-hopping slog toward the Japanese home islands.

1. See, e.g., Ray Moseley, *Reporting War: How Foreign Correspondents Risked Capture, Torture and Death to Cover World War II* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2017), and Timothy M. Gay, *Assignment to Hell: The War against Nazi Germany with Correspondents Walter Cronkite, Andy Rooney, A.J. Liebling, Homer Bigart, and Hal Boyle* (NY: New Amer. Library, 2012).

Casey plows some ground familiar to those knowledgeable about media-military relations at the time: for instance MacArthur's obsession with personal publicity, reporter Stanley Johnston's 1942 dispatch that may have revealed that the Americans had cracked Japanese naval codes, and the circumstances of AP photographer Joe Rosenthal's iconic shot of Marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima.

There is much that is new here as well. Casey points out, for instance, that news organizations were as unprepared for the war in the Pacific as were the armed forces, having committed most of their reporters and news space to the war in Europe. He also treats at length the Marines' deployment of their own combat correspondents to compensate for the dearth of other reporters on the scene. The experiences of one or two specific reporters are skillfully used to frame a given chapter or section. For example, he centers his discussion of the reporting on naval operations in the six months after Pearl Harbor on Stanley Johnston of the *Chicago Tribune* and Robert Casey of the *Chicago Daily News*. In another instance, he places *Time* and *Life's* Robert Sherrod at the center of the chapter on the fighting (and poor news coverage) of the bloody battles on Tarawa and Saipan.

Casey is at his best in detailing how both censorship and poor communications thwarted timely and accurate reporting from the Pacific. Early in the war, Casey writes, public relations officers "spent the bulk of their time explaining [to the press] why they were unable to discuss future operations in any way" (45). Even once the tide of battle had turned and the Navy in particular went to great lengths to overhaul its approach to press relations, both services continued strict censorship regimes, giving American readers a rosy view of the progress on Okinawa, for one example, and the dimmest sense of the havoc the conventional bombing campaign wreaked on the Japanese in 1945 for another. Communications problems plagued war correspondents in the Pacific throughout the war. In some cases, reporters with the troops in the field or at sea were scooped by those at Army or Navy headquarters thousands of miles away. Those "communiqué commandos" relied on vague, vacuous, and overly optimistic official statements (232). Casey details how Nimitz and MacArthur tried to control the domestic news agenda through official communiqués and briefings, if with only partial success.

Casey's concluding paragraph is perplexing. After clarifying at length the many factors that hamstrung reporters and misled the American public, he declares that

these war correspondents did a tremendous job of bridging the huge gap between the battlefield and the home front. To do so, they had to survive hair-raising journeys, fight debilitating illnesses, and brave bitter battles We are unlikely to see reporting of *this type* [my emphasis] ever again.
(301)

After three hundred pages of a meticulously documented and skillfully narrated account of how the services strove, with great success, to control the flow of information from the Pacific to the home front, Casey himself may be painting too rosy a picture of correspondents' achievements in the Pacific. Worse yet, he also adopts the inflated and reverential rhetoric typical of previous accounts of reporting during the Second World War. Consequently, it is not at all clear what Casey means by "this type" of reporting in the passage quoted above.

A couple of cavils: Casey argues early on that while racism figured in depictions of the Japanese throughout the war, initial reporting from the theater contained surprisingly little race baiting.

We therefore need to revise our image of how the Pacific War battles were reported at the time. In the dispatches that appeared in the nation's newspapers, the Pacific War was less a race war than a shrouded war, particularly in the months immediately after Pearl Harbor. (8).

Casey leads one to think this thread concerning racist attitudes toward the Japanese (or their absence in early coverage) will be central to his study but then largely drops it. This is unfortunate since it would add nuance to our understanding of such racialized depictions during the war. Casey might also have put his considerable knowledge of press coverage in the European theater to better use. His allusions to or comparisons with the European theater are rare, even though communications snafus and censorship obstacles also plagued the press in Europe, for example.

These quibbles aside, *The War Beat, Pacific* is an impressive achievement. Media-military relations in the Pacific were, it shows us, a world of paradoxes and conundrums reflecting the competing agendas and institutional frictions within the military and between it and the media. Casey composes a lucid narrative out of disparate archival materials and secondary sources. While he captures the terror, misery, and frustration reporters felt in the Pacific, his eyes are on the bigger picture, the forces in both media and military that determined what the American public knew of the war and what it did not. Now the definitive account of US war reporting in the Pacific, *The War Beat, Pacific* promises to have a long shelf life.