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In My View

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IN MY VIEW . . .



Ian Oliver

A Flawed Press?

Sir,

In his review of Daniel C. Hallin's *The "Uncensored War." The Media and Vietnam*, L. Edgar Prina cites evidence that has surfaced so often that by now you would think writers and commentators on the subject would begin to notice that it is more than a coincidence: Through misreporting and misinterpretation, American journalism was a major cause of the Vietnam disaster, not because of its impact on the general public, but because of what key decisionmakers *thought* was the media's impact on the public.

Two crucially important examples are cited by Mr. Prina: the impact on President Kennedy from *The New York Times'* daily vilification of President Ngo Dinh Diem, inferring that his Catholicism made him a foreigner in a land of Buddhists. In fact, of course, Diem had far more substantial Vietnamese nationalist credentials than did Ho Chi Minh, who was, until his death, an avowed functionary of the international Communist movement. We know now, to our sorrow, that the Buddhists, whose cause the *Times* daily espoused, were no more representative of the Vietnamese people than the Weathermen were of the American public. Yet there was a time, too, when the Weathermen, at least in their nascent form, were held up by American journalism as the purest examples of American youth.

The other example, the reaction of President Johnson to Walter Cronkite's misassessment of the post-Tet situation, cited by Mr. Prina, tracks with the findings of Peter Braestrup and Burns W. Roper in *Big Story*, that the post-Tet collapse, induced by misreporting and misinterpretation, occurred not in the general public, but among those key Johnson advisers, largely inherited from the Kennedy administration, who spent their early years in the Pentagon ridiculing military judgment and the value of military history, only to collapse in panic exactly as did the two young soldiers in *The Red Badge of Courage* in their first true moment of crisis.

In short, the subsequent collapse of will that occurred in the public was not a loss of faith in U.S. ability to bring the war to a successful conclusion, but a loss of faith in the people who were running the war.

The failure was less one of individual journalists than it was of an institution that continues to believe, or at least to assert, that no specialized knowledge or training is required to report any given story, war included. At first the principals in American journalism fairly boasted of having brought about the American defeat in Vietnam. Having found out in the aftermath of Grenada that the public did not think much of that, they have been busy ever since, denying that they played a significant role in Vietnam.

What is sad and frightening about these illusions and delusions is that they have kept the press from any rigorous self-examination and the drastic restructuring that would result. Consequently, the flaws in the press that helped to bring the United States to disaster in Vietnam are still present. Left uncorrected, the press will fail again in the next crisis, just as most assuredly it did in Vietnam.

Sincerely,

William V. Kennedy
 Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania

More on "Pioneer Warrior"

Sir,

The purpose of this letter is to clear up the matter regarding whether or not Fletcher refused to send destroyers back to attempt the rescue of downed air crew in the aftermath of the strike on the Marshalls and Gilberts on 1 February 1942.

Fletcher's detractor in this instance was "Jocko" Clark who was then the executive officer (not Air Group Commander) of the carrier *Yorktown* (CV-5). *Yorktown's* Air Group Commander at that time was Commander Curtis S. Smiley. Clark maintained that Fletcher had refused his entreaties to send destroyers back. Commander Butcher's source for this is Edwin P. Hoyt's *How They Won the War in the Pacific*, which apparently drew upon Clark's book, *Carrier Admiral*. The facts, however, are these:

En route back to *Yorktown* from the Jaluit strike, Lieutenant (j.g.) Thomas B. Ellison and Lieutenant Albert B. Furer, each flying a TBD from Torpedo FIVE, spotted a downed TBD in the water about 20 miles astern of Task Force 17. Upon receiving word of this, Fletcher ordered one destroyer, *Russell* (DD-414), back to look for the downed TBD. Given the bearings by the airborne TBDs, *Russell* proceeded on her search. As the weather worsened, Fletcher detached two additional destroyers to help: *Sims* (DD-409) and *Hughes* (DD-410). This left only one destroyer, *Walke* (DD-416), as his screen, along with the heavy cruiser *Louisville* (CA-28) and the light cruiser *St. Louis* (CL-49). Unfortunately, because of the prevailing poor weather, the search was unsuccessful, and the three men spotted by the crews of Ellison's and Furer's TBDs were never found. An additional TBD crew vanished without a trace. The three destroyers engaged a snooping Kawanishi "Mavis" flying boat, briefly, before rejoining the task force. Fighters from *Yorktown's* VF-42 splashed a second snooping "Mavis."

All told, the bad weather over Jaluit resulted in poor results for the attacking planes; lack of targets at the other locations (Mili and Makin) proved equally disappointing, although a seaplane tender and two seaplanes were damaged and destroyed, respectively, at Makin.

The losses for the strike: the two TBDs and their crews referred to above, two SBDs (two men each) which vanished en route to Jaluit in a squall; in addition, two TBDs ditched off Jaluit and their crews (six men total, including the XO of Torpedo FIVE) were made prisoners of war.

Readers may be interested to know that Fletcher also used destroyers to attempt rescue of downed air crew after the Tulagi strike on 4 May 1942. He detached *Perkins* (DD-377) to look for a downed TBD from Torpedo FIVE and *Hammann* (DD-412) to look for a pair of VF-42 pilots whose F4F-3s went down on the south coast of Guadalcanal. Missionaries and coastwatchers aided the two men from the TBD to reach American hands, ultimately, (*Perkins* did not locate them) and *Hammann* rescued the two VF-42 pilots after some splendid seamanship.

For a fuller account of the above incidents, you may wish to consult *That Gallant Ship*, published in December 1985 by Pictorial Histories, Inc. of Missoula, Montana.

Robert J. Cressman
Wheaton, Maryland

No Axe to Grind

Sir,

My compliments to Commander Butcher on his excellent article dealing with the reputation of Vice Admiral Fletcher. I have no axe to grind, I am not a specialist on World War II in the Pacific, etc., but I am concerned with the rather careless way in which wartime journalism and command decisions made in the absence of full information can unjustly destroy reputations or, conversely, create heroes. It seems to me there is a definite place for studies, such as Butcher's, in our professional journals, reassessing careers and reputations in the light of objective scholarship sufficiently removed from the event to insure detachment. I for one would welcome more articles of this genre in the *Naval War College Review* and trust you will suggest topics along these lines to incoming students at the War College.

I.B. Holley, Jr.
Durham, North Carolina

Banana Fleet Marines

Sir,

I read with interest and nostalgia Professor Donald Yerxa's account of the activities of the Special Service Squadron 1920-1940, in the Autumn 1986 issue of the *Review*.

My father, then Lieutenant Colonel Robert Blake, USMC, served as Squadron Marine Officer from July 1935 through June 1937, a period addressed at some length by Dr. Yerxa. The squadron was based in Balboa at that time and our family took up residence in Panama, as there were no Navy quarters for squadron personnel in the Canal Zone. My recollection of the scope of the squadron's mission varies in some details from Dr. Yerxa's article. For another account I refer you to a 1938 article in the *Marine Corps Gazette*, "Campaigning Around the Caribbean," by Lieutenant Colonel Blake. The tenor of that article may be judged by its title as submitted, "Champaigning Around the Caribbean." The editors of the *Gazette* chose to take a more serious line.

It is my understanding that the decision to move the squadron base from St. Petersburg to Balboa was actually made by Admiral Meyers when he took command in January 1934. He wanted to be more centrally located in his arena of operations which extended from Mexico, south to Peru in the Pacific, and Brazil in the Atlantic. Admiral Standley's directive merely confirmed that decision. During those two years, the squadron did visit every country within those bounds and most of the islands of the Caribbean. It also participated in fleet exercises and landing exercises in the area, but had no occasion to exercise force in the manner of the previous decade.

The squadron in those years consisted of one *Omaha*-class light cruiser and two World War I flush-deck destroyers. There was a Marine detachment on all three ships to provide a trained landing force. As there were no secondary batteries for them to man at sea on the DDs, they supplanted bluejackets as the engineering crew of those ships. In 1938 the older fleet-type ships were replaced by specially designed gunboats, the *Erie* and the *Charleston*, which remained on station until the squadron was disbanded.

To the best of my knowledge, the squadron's mission of showing the flag was considered at the time to have been accomplished very well. The ships were welcome in every port, particularly in the smaller ports where a larger fleet could have presented social problems. Yerxa's quoted comment that the arrival of an American naval vessel was "largely a negative gesture" is quite incorrect for the era of the 1930s. I note that his footnote justifying that statement is dated 1927, when the squadron had a very different mission. The good relations fostered by the squadron in the ports of Latin America during the 1930s surely eased the way for the Navy's expanded presence among our American neighbors during World War II.

As stated by Sir James Cable in the 1984 Naval Institute *Proceedings* article, "Showing the Flag," the objective of a visiting naval mission is "to produce one of three impressions on . . . the host country: power, smartness, or friendliness," hopefully all three.

The tiny Special Service Squadron of the 1930s could not project a lot of power, but it could and did show smartness and friendliness. In 1939, when the Italians sent a major naval fleet to South America to impress the Argentines and others with the

strength of Fascism, a little more American muscle was called for than two small gunboats.

As a result, the U.S. Navy sent Cruiser Division Seven, three new 10,000-ton, 8-inch gun ships, the match of any cruisers in the world at that time, on a goodwill tour entirely around South America, through the Strait of Magellan, visiting every naval country. It too was a great success and took the wind out of Mussolini's sails. But the ground had been laid by the visits of the old four-stackers of the *Omaha* class in the years before.

There is an organization that calls itself the Banana Fleet Marines, all veterans of the 1920-1940 Special Service Squadron, which holds an annual reunion, usually in May, in either Florida or California. Perhaps Professor Yerxa would like to call in at one of these gatherings for the real flavor of the times about which he writes.

Robert W. Blake
Lieutenant Commander
U.S. Naval Reserve (Ret.)

