Ernie Pyle, the legendary World War II reporter, reminded his readers that although journalists “were usually under fire only briefly,” they “never caught up on sleep, rest, cleanliness, or anything else normal … We’d drained our emotions until they cringed from being called out from hiding.” Although Pyle did not claim that combat correspondents were heroes, he noted that they, “too, can get sick of war and deadly tired.”

Just after 10 a.m. on April 18, 1945, on an island west of Okinawa, Pyle took cover in a ditch, lifted his head to look for a companion, and was shot dead.

In “Reporting War: How Foreign Correspondents Risked Capture, Torture and Death to Cover World War II,” Ray Moseley, a former foreign correspondent with United Press International and the Chicago Tribune and the author of two books about Benito Mussolini, tells the stories of dozens of correspondents from the United States and Allied nations. Moseley’s richly detailed narrative celebrates these men — and women — who put their lives on the line (and, all too often, lost them) to inform the folks back home about the day-to-day existence of infantrymen, slaughter on the beaches, bombers over Berlin, and concentration camp survivors.

A deeply human and humane book, “Reporting War” is about fear and courage, competition for a scoop, pettiness and patriotism. Moseley tells us, for example, that Richard Dimbleby, the first BBC correspondent to go on a bombing raid, vomited as the plane turned for home — and subsequently flew on another 20 Royal Air Force missions. And Eric Sevareid, one of Edward R Murrow’s “boys,” wrote movingly about how reporters could never tell what happens inside a man: “That is the tragedy and perhaps the blessing … A million martyred lives leave an empty space at only one dining room table. That is why, at bottom, people can let wars happen, and that is why nations survive them and carry on.”

Moseley acknowledges that World War II journalists were subject to censorship. He wishes that then —
and later — the reporters “would have assessed the effect of news that was withheld or deliberately distorted by military communiques.” He does not, however, take that task on himself, confining himself to the observation that his book is “replete with examples of political and military mistakes that correspondents on the spot were not allowed to report” but that “maintaining public morale was rightly seen by Allied leaders as a vital necessity and, in any case, they and not the correspondents suppressed the news. Whether that and later acts of suppression were always correct may be doubted.”

Defining the appropriate roles and responsibilities of the press in a democracy is as important now as it was then. Perhaps, as Moseley suggests, “the demands of war, of Western survival,” necessitated that journalists serve as cheerleaders for the Allied cause. But these days, amidst pervasive claims about protecting national security, we are left with a question as urgent as it was in the 1940s: What is the proper balance between government censorship and the public’s right to know?

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