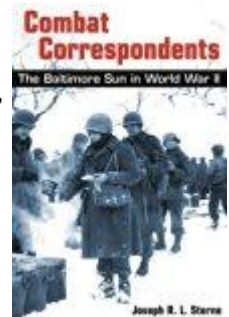


Joseph R. L. Sterne. *Combat Correspondents: The Baltimore Sun in World War II.* Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 2009. xviii + 281 pp. Illustrations. \$34.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-938420-14-9.



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From the Newsroom to the Trenches: The Baltimore Sun Newsmen Who Covered WWII

For the scholar researching the *Baltimore Sun*, there are two histories to first consult when starting a new research project. Neither are very helpful on the subject of World War II. The first, Gerald Johnson's *The Sunpapers of Baltimore* (1937), was published two years before Germany launched the September campaign, invading Poland and launching six years of total war and over seventy million casualties. The second, Harold A. William's *The Baltimore Sun 1837-1987* (1987), contains just four pages on the ten *Sun* correspondents who covered the war's American campaigns, scoring world scoops and sending home news of the Maryland GI Joes overseas.

In *Combat Correspondents*, former *Sun* reporter and editor Joseph R. L. Sterne expands that brief history to 256 pages, extensively quoting the *Sun* men on the war's front lines: Mark Watson, Lee McCardell, Price Day, Holbrook Bradley, Thomas O'Neill, Howard Norton, Philip Heisler, Robert Cochrane, Thomas O'Donnell, and Philip

Porter. The majority of the book focuses on the four men who covered the bulk of the European war. Watson received a 1944 Pulitzer Prize and a 1963 Presidential Medal of Freedom for his war coverage, and became the namesake of the Pentagon press room. McCardell was one of four newsmen to observe Normandy from the air on D-Day and often filled his copy with intimate and emotional details. Day, a future *Sun* editor in chief, covered the Italian campaign and the fall of Rome (and later became the last newsman to interview Mahatma Gandhi before his assassination, for which he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1949). Bradley, a daredevil who always seemed to find his way to the front lines, covered the war literally from the trenches with the Twenty-Ninth Infantry Division.

The book begins with coverage of the September campaign and ends with the *Sun*'s coverage of Japan's surrender on the deck of the *Missouri*. In between are twenty-five more chapters on the major developments of the war, particularly focusing

on the *Sun's* strongest coverage of the American campaigns in the European theater from D-Day onward. "It was a war in which accredited correspondents wore uniforms, supposedly carried no firearms, got Purple Hearts if wounded, were ranked as officers even though newsmen were always addressed as 'Mr.,' and often had to find their own transportation by flagging corporals or privates driving jeeps," writes Sterne. "They slept, often on the ground or in bombed-out buildings, wherever their chosen battles took them" (p. 86).

Aside from excellent chapters on the coverage of D-Day, the fall of Rome, the race to Paris, and the Holocaust, notable chapters include coverage of U.S. internment camps and the embarrassingly pro-German columns of H. L. Mencken, who voluntarily discontinued his column from 1941 to 1948. This chapter will particularly interest journalism historians who specialize in wartime commentary. Sterne explains Mencken's isolationist rhetoric as a reflection of "the strong views of a strong minority of Americans eager to avoid involvement in another European conflict" (p. 22). Still, it is difficult to see how a man noted for his intellectualism felt that "it is hard to take seriously the doctrine that it was an act of aggression for the Germans to try to get their property back," and that England and Germany "will look precisely alike in history. If there is any preponderance of rationality, it manifestly runs in favor of Hitler" (p. 22).

Despite Mencken, the rest of the newspaper was interventionist and editors gave correspondents a loose leash. Sterne writes that correspondents were "free to follow not only the obvious stories, the ones stressed in official communiques, but the human side of the greatest war in history. They were free to express their personal feelings and opinions with total disregard for wire-service 'objectivity' or for the editorial stands of their own newspaper. They were free to pursue scoops and features, even disappearing for days at a time,

with a confidence born of their professional competence" (p. 269).

Sterne's principle source is the *Sun* itself, especially the issues between September 1939 and September 1945, the "actual, ink-on-paper copies," which he accessed at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (p. 275). He draws also from conversations with Bradley, as well as his memoir in addition to a number of other secondary sources, but these are clearly secondary to his use of the *Sun* stories themselves. Sterne's narrative principally guides readers from one campaign to the next and one news article to the next, quoting extensively so that the reader becomes acquainted with the voices of the correspondents. Thus, Sterne creates a kind of roadmap or guided tour of the *Sun's* coverage, stopping only here and there to add historical context or, on occasion, personal experience or descriptive narrative.

The book is at its best when the extensive use of quotations preserve particularly poignant war-time moments, such as Watson's description of a London air raid ("An air raid is largely sound. First the far-way ululation of the sirens as the raiders cross the coast, a howl that grows steadily closer until the moment when the city is enveloped by the wail" [p. 53]) or Day's report of the obstacles along the road to Rome ("We did not choose to be here. It was the roses that fooled us. As we came up the road in the dewy dawn, Italians lined along the road with great masses of rambler roses. From the cheers of the Italians we felt certain everything in front was clear" [p. 76]).

Bradley's firsthand experience in the trenches of the Twenty-Ninth comes through in his exasperated description of frontline tourists: "sightseers and visiting firemen and one-day journalistic wonders pour into the ice-cream front, usually arriving by upholstered plane ... they wear neckties and sleep in pajamas and complain about the shortage of clean towels. They demand--and usually get--a private jeep and a chauffeur to take them rubber-necking to Bayeux or Valogneso. They bring back

German helmets as souvenirs and tell hair-raising tales about the shells they heard explode in the distance" (p. 96).

But, as Sterne rightly points out, it is McCardell's heartfelt copy that shines, whether he was describing the death of a colleague ("an honest, gentle, genuine man," among many who "die here in a world awash in tears" [p. 97]) or the similarity of Anzio to the Eastern Shore during the off season: "We landed within what is left of Anzio's stone breakwater. Sunken hulks, shattered buildings, shellfire and swarms of soldiers—all were earmarks of war, but there was a slightly nostalgic atmosphere about the place, something of the same feeling you have in arriving at Ocean City, Maryland, out of season. Even in ruins of war, walking along waterfront streets, strewn underfoot with picture postcards from bombed out souvenir shops, you missed the summer vacationists who normally should be part of this scene" (p. 65).

For McCardell, it was impossible to be brief, personal, and objective, "because war is a matter of individual life and death and not merely a list of names, general facts and mass figures. We are aware of this. The kids who fly these ships are more than names and faces to us. They're guys with whom we have lived and talked and come to like and even love as friends" (p. 56).

Sterne's narrative voice is best when he explains what he puts before his readers. In one instance, he offers a compelling comparison of the newspaper's coverage of the Holocaust, from Day's initial restrained, dark, and detailed description of a Nazi death camp near Natzviller in November, 1944, to a contrasting story the following April that describes a mass execution in the first paragraph. Sterne notes that "the two *Sun* war correspondents were addressing an audience much changed and increasingly outraged. Whereas Day took a slow pace in leading up to the shock of Nazi horror ... McCardell had no hesitation in slamming

home the stark reality of what he saw in his very first sentence" (p. 182).

Sterne's narrative again shines when he describes the *Sun*'s major scoops, and particularly his description of McCardell and Watson's race into Paris. McCardell got there first by befriending members of the French resistance who dashed into the city a day ahead of Charles de Gaulle. Watson followed the next day in a car of U.S. officers at the head of an armored column hoping to join the victory parade. Watson, the only French speaker in the group, usefully asked for and interpreted directions to the Eiffel Tower. "That is the sort of thing a newspaper correspondent dreams of but usually only encounters in the movies," Watson wrote (p. 112).

What makes this section particularly compelling, however, is Sterne's account of the whereabouts of the *New York Times* reporters. According to a *New Yorker* magazine article published after the war, A. J. Liebling and Harold Denny had first been caught in traffic jams, then a public relations officer lost their exclusive eyewitness story, causing the *Times* to run an Associated Press account of the victory. Such comparisons are missing throughout the rest of the book, leaving the reader room to wonder about the veracity of claims that *Sun* reporters provided distinguished, groundbreaking coverage of the war in comparison to the rest of their colleagues.

But Sterne should not be blamed for this shortcoming. The mission of this book is to describe the *Sun*'s coverage, and Sterne does so effectively and compellingly. This book will be valuable for students new to World War II history who are seeking a brief and fascinating overview of the major European campaigns. It is also useful for historians studying the *Sun*, or wartime press coverage and censorship. Those interested in the history of public relations in the military will also find ample material (including a case study in a sure way to generate bad publicity on page 107). The book is also useful for professors of literary

journalism looking for examples of wartime narrative or pre-new journalism reporting that eschewed objectivity.

The reader should note though that Sterne describes what he sees in his page-by-page reading of the *Sun's* papers, not what he does not see. He does not ask about what is missing from the *Sun's* coverage strategy. For example, why did the *Sun* not send any women correspondents, when even the Baltimore *Afro-American* sent a woman, Elizabeth Phillips, to England?[1] And what about black GIs? Why are they missing from the *Sun's* coverage? Sterne leaves these questions to future historians.

Another weakness of the book, which reflects the weakness of the source material rather than Sterne's treatment of it, is the relative paucity of material on the Pacific theater as compared to the European theater. Because the *Sun's* coverage focused on American campaigns and the European theater, the book does, too. The bulk of material on the war in the Pacific is left for the final four chapters.

Nevertheless, the quality of the narratives included here, and Sterne's historical comments on them, will cause readers to wonder why no other historian has taken up the subject in the last sixty-five years. Why have these works not been recognized before now? Why was Bradley's in-the-trenches reporting or Watson's Pulitzer Prize-winning stories not included in comprehensive works, such as the Library of America's *Reporting World War II* (1995)? On this, too, Sterne is silent, leaving the issue for future historians.

Note

[1]. *This is Our War* (Baltimore: The Afro-American Company, 1945), <http://www.demovisions.com/afro2/OurWar/intro.html>.

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