

**Ray E. Boomhower.** *Dispatches from the Pacific: The World War II Reporting of Robert L. Sherrod.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017. 254 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-02960-7.

**Reviewed by** Toby Clark (University of Wolverhampton)

**Published on** Jhistory (January, 2020)

**Commissioned by** Robert A. Rabe

The United States entered the Second World War after a period of global isolation, and yet by 1945 it had become the most powerful country in the world. Providing the impetus for this transformation was the civilian population. Men and women, whose war work did not call for them to leave their state, let alone their country, were still crucial to Allied victory because they built the tanks, manufactured the uniforms, and grew the food. Recognition for their efforts is common in the historiography, with John Ellis going as far as to claim, “Many battlefields have been cited as being particularly significant in Germany’s defeat in the Second World War. Not the least of them should be Detroit.”[1]

However, is there no explanation for what motivated these civilians to work for the war effort? Fortunately in this book Ray E. Boomhower has begun to fill this scholarly void. Boomhower has followed one of the journalists whose job was “to bridge the gap separating ‘the pleasures of peace from the horrors of war’” (p. 8). This man was Robert L. Sherrod of *Time* and *Life* magazines. Sherrod wrote news reports, books, and magazine articles that not only motivated American civilians to get behind the war effort but also showed them why it was so important to defeat the enemy. This book is the record of Sherrod’s time in the Pacific embedded with the United States Marine Corps in

the war against Japan. At the beginning of Sherrod’s time in Australia, the US war effort was a mere twenty-five thousand men. Sherrod accompanied the US forces right through to Okinawa, by which time the transformation was complete and the US forces had naval, land, air, and nuclear strength on a huge scale.

At the time, Sherrod wrote articles that were subject to military censorship, but this book can, with the benefit of eighty years of scholarship, recount the whole story. It is not a pretty story, but it is one that I believe will satisfy Pacific War veterans. For instance, Sherrod was understandably prevented from writing about the cowardice of American servicemen in articles and books. However, not all men can withstand danger on the battlefield and this book presents graphic evidence for why men broke. The contribution this book makes to the Pacific War historiography is well timed. While the First World War has now become separated by the centenary milestone, the Second World War is still intrinsically linked with the American public. Veterans are still with us and that is why Boomhower needs to be read.

As a history of wartime journalism, *Dispatches from the Pacific* shows the tenacity with which a reporter must attack their subject. Sherrod was constantly boarding ships, planes, and trains in order to catch the next story. Further-

more, this constant energy was matched by the fear of Japanese attack; in Australia Sherrod witnessed preparations for the anticipated Japanese invasion, and ships and planes on which he traveled could easily have been sunk or shot down. In some instances, Sherrod flew combat missions with dive-bomber pilots. It is important that Boomhower's book be read by journalists and historians, because it reveals the lengths to which reporters would often go to report the truth. Each of the journalists was a volunteer, and whether the censors allowed the truth or not, it is incredible to see the lengths that journalists went to, so that the American people could be informed.

Reading Boomhower's book I could not help but view the Japanese as a mystery. The only certainty that the reader gets is that the Japanese were willing to die, but even this is contradicted by Boomhower's own account of the invasion of Kiska. This island was attacked by the American troops who then discovered that the Japanese had withdrawn. This suggests that Boomhower does not provide a nuanced description of the Japanese. If Japanese troops could surrender an entire island without a fight, surely Japanese soldiers, either as individuals or as small groups, might have attempted to surrender. Boomhower states that very few Japanese soldiers were taken prisoner but does not entertain the idea that American troops may have killed prisoners. Prisoner killing was common in the Second World War and particularly in Europe where the Waffen-SS executed civilians and prisoners alike; if caught, however, some of them were in turn executed by French, British, Russian, or American troops. One difference in the Pacific War was the racism among American troops. Boomhower focuses on racial segregation within the American ranks rather than the ubiquitous racism leveled against the Japanese.[2] American troops frequently dehumanized the Japanese, which in turn made it easier for atrocities to be committed.[3]

Nevertheless, this is a biographical piece on Sherrod, not a history of the Pacific War, although it would be fascinating to learn if the Japanese also sent reporters to the islands. It is well known that increasingly fervent Nazi propaganda forced the demise of the German free press, but questions over Japanese news reporting during the war remain unstudied. Was there a Japanese equivalent to scrupulous American reporters such as Sherrod? As an accomplished writer on wartime journalism, Boomhower could perhaps take this on as his next subject.

Students of the Pacific War will appreciate this book because Sherrod viewed the fighting through the trained eyes of a reporter. Unlike official reports from the marine corps or army, Sherrod's writing focused less on military details, such as which units were fighting and which weapons and tactics they employed, and more on the stories of individual men. Sometimes this story was tragic, as with the slaughtered artillerymen of the 10th Marine Artillery Regiment on Saipan. On other occasions, he showed racist divisions within the US forces, though all men fought together out of necessity when the Japanese banzai charges cut their way through the American defenses on Saipan. There are details, although they cover familiar ground, that still surprise the reader with their savagery: encounters with poisonous snakes, freezing weather on the island of Kiska, and cold nighttime temperatures on Iwo Jima. Combat also received Sherrod's attention. He captured the intensity of the marines' existence, for instance, as Americans settled in their foxholes knowing full well that because there was no defined frontline, Japanese soldiers could use the cover of darkness to attack anywhere on the island. There is something of the Jurassic Park about Sherrod's experience in the Pacific. The feeling of being trapped on an island in the dark with a skilled enemy makes the reader hope Sherrod will board a boat and escape through the surf back to the safety of the ships waiting offshore.

After moving from a background in civilian journalism into military surroundings, Sherrod had to contend with the journalist's nightmare, censorship. American senior command understandably wanted negative aspects of the Pacific War covered up so that civilian morale at home and military morale in the war zone could be maintained. As a result, censorship teams were charged with reading all outgoing material so that any story that might threaten morale could be stopped. Boomhower reveals the inner workings of military censorship by showing, for example, how stories about friendly fire incidents that killed Americans were blocked. On another occasion, it was not overeager troops that caused problems but rumors of cowardice. In the course of reporting the fighting, Sherrod wanted to inform the Americans at home that not all men were capable of withstanding war, but American censors prevented this story being told. Boomhower makes the astute observation that rumors of cowardice usually originated within the marine corps and were aimed at the army units who fought alongside them. This, the American commanders realized, endangered the bond between the marines and army, which was crucial if the islands were to be successfully captured.

Throughout this book, Sherrod is shown traveling back and forth between America and the Pacific. These journeys were part of the routine but did give Sherrod the opportunity to spend time with his young family. It is this personal detail that endears Sherrod to the reader. Furthermore, Boomhower balances his tale between office work in New York and island hopping in the Pacific.

The frontline reporter first gained acceptance and recognition during the Second World War. Ernie Pyle is often considered the first of this type of reporter, but in this book Boomhower adds new and often graphic evidence to the Pacific War historiography. While Sherrod's time in the Pacific ended with a flight home, for Pyle the end was tragic. Dealing with as much tragedy as he already

does, you would expect Boomhower might not add more to this tale, but the reader is surprised. In a vignette that shows the skill of the author, Pyle's own awful foreshadowing of his demise and the description of Sherrod's reaction to the news of his death is masterful.

With *Dispatches from the Pacific*, Boomhower has undertaken the unenviable task of writing the history of a great wartime journalist. Students of the Pacific War may find political, economic, or strategic insight to be lacking, but the importance of Sherrod's role in motivating the American public is clear. Ultimately though, Boomhower has offered an introduction to the life and literary output of Sherrod during the Pacific War. This will encourage veterans, academics, students, and casual readers alike to rethink the human side of that conflict. Further information on Sherrod and other combat journalists can be found at [Rayboomhower.blogspot.com](http://Rayboomhower.blogspot.com).

#### Notes

[1]. John Ellis, *Brute Force: Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War* (London: André Deutsch, 1990), 353.

[2]. Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (London: Granta, 1999), 204-5.

[3]. James Weingartner, "War against Subhumans: Comparisons between the German War against the Soviet Union and the American War against Japan 1941-1945," *The Historian* 58, no. 3 (March 1996): 557-73.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

**Citation:** Toby Clark. Review of Boomhower, Ray E. *Dispatches from the Pacific: The World War II Reporting of Robert L. Sherrod*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. January, 2020.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54662>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No  
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.