

AT WAR

The Man Who Told America the Truth About D-Day

By David Chrisinger

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Most of the men in the first wave never stood a chance. In the predawn darkness of June 6, 1944, thousands of American soldiers crawled down swaying cargo nets and thudded into steel landing craft bound for the Normandy coast. Their senses were soon choked with the smells of wet canvas gear, seawater and acrid clouds of powder from the huge naval guns firing just over their heads. As the landing craft drew close to shore, the deafening roar stopped, quickly replaced by German artillery rounds crashing into the water all around them. The flesh under the men's sea-soaked uniforms prickled. They waited, like trapped mice, barely daring to breathe.

A blanket of smoke hid the heavily defended bluffs above the strip of sand code-named Omaha Beach. Concentrated in concrete pill boxes, nearly 2,000 German defenders lay in wait. The landing ramps slapped down into the surf, and a catastrophic hail of gunfire erupted from the bluffs. The ensuing slaughter was merciless.

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But Allied troops kept landing, wave after wave, and by midday they had crossed the 300 yards of sandy killing ground, scaled the bluffs and overpowered the German defenses. By the end of the day, the beaches had been secured and the heaviest fighting had moved at least a mile inland. In the biggest and most complicated amphibious operation in military history, it wasn't bombs, artillery or tanks that overwhelmed the Germans; it was men — many of them boys, really — slogging up the beaches and crawling over the corpses of their friends that won the Allies a toehold at the western edge of Europe.



Pyle was beloved by readers and service members alike for his coverage of the war through the eyes of the regular infantrymen on the front lines. Bettmann Archive/Getty Images

That victory was a decisive leap toward defeating Hitler's Germany and winning the Second World War. It also changed the way America's most famous and beloved war correspondent reported what he saw. In June 1944, Ernie Pyle, a 43-year-old journalist from rural Indiana, was as ubiquitous in the everyday lives of millions of Americans as Walter Cronkite would be during the Vietnam War. What Pyle witnessed on the Normandy coast triggered a sort of journalistic conversion for him: Soon his readers — a broad section of the American public — were digesting columns that brought them more of the war's pain, costs and losses. Before D-Day, Pyle's dispatches from the front were full of gritty details of the troops' daily struggles but served up with healthy doses of optimism and a reliable habit of looking away from the more horrifying aspects of war. Pyle was not a propagandist, but his columns seemed to offer the reader an unspoken agreement that they would not have to look too closely at the deaths, blood and corpses that are the reality of battle. Later, Pyle was more stark and honest.

For days after the landing, no one back home in the States had any real sense of what was happening, how the invasion was progressing or how many Americans were being killed.

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Nearly impossible to imagine today, there were no photographs flashed instantly to the news media. No more than 30 reporters were allowed to cover the initial assault. The few who landed with the troops were hampered by the danger and chaos of battle, and then by censorship and long delays in wire transmission. The first newspaper articles were all based on military news releases written by officers sitting in London. It wasn't until Pyle's first dispatch was published that many Americans started to get a sense of the vast scale and devastating costs of the D-Day invasion, chronicled for them by a reporter who had already won their trust and affection.

Before World War II, Pyle spent five years crisscrossing the United States — and much of the Western Hemisphere — in trains, planes and a Dodge convertible coupe with his wife, Jerry, reporting on the ordinary people he met in his travels. He wrote daily, and his columns, enough to fill volumes, were syndicated for publication in local papers around the country. These weren't hard-news articles; they were human-interest stories that chronicled Americans during the Great Depression. Pyle told stories about life on the road, little oddities and small, heart-lifting triumphs and the misery that afflicted the drought-stricken Dust Bowl regions of the Great Plains.

Pyle honed a sincere and colloquial style of writing that made readers feel as if they were listening to a good friend share an insight or something he noticed that day. When the United States entered World War II, Pyle took that same technique — familiar, open, attuned to the daily struggles of ordinary people — and applied it to covering battles and bombings. Venturing overseas with American forces in 1942, Pyle reported the war through the eyes of the regular infantrymen on the front lines. He wrote about the food, the weather and the despair of living in slit trenches during the rainy late winter of 1943. He asked the soldiers their names and their hometown addresses, which he routinely included in his articles. Soon millions of readers were following Pyle's daily column in about 400 daily and 300 weekly newspapers across the United States. In May 1944, Pyle was notified that he had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his dispatches.

On D-Day, as the invasion force fought for the beach, Pyle was trapped just offshore, on a ship transporting tanks. He had boarded with a kit bag heavy with liquor bottles, some good-luck talismans and a Remington portable typewriter. As eager as he was to witness the landing, Pyle wasn't allowed to go ashore at Omaha Beach until the morning after. For a couple of hours that

day, he walked alone on the beach, along the ragged line where the ocean meets the sand, with his eyes trained downward. Weighing just over 100 pounds, Pyle resembled “a short scarecrow with too much feet,” as one Army historian described him.

Pyle’s war reporting won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1944, a few weeks before he arrived in Normandy.
Bettmann Archive/Getty Images

Pyle landed on the beach of Normandy with a kit bag filled with liquor bottles, some good-luck talismans and a Remington portable typewriter. Bert Brandt/Acme Newspictures, via Associated Press Photo

Puffing on cigarettes and probably drinking a fair amount, Pyle spent the following days pecking away on his typewriter. His readers needed his words to make sense of what “our boys” were enduring in France. After he had written enough material for a few columns, he wondered if his plain-spoken prose would be enough to help anyone back home understand what it was to be contaminated with so much death.

Pyle’s first column about the D-Day landings, published on June 12, 1944, gave his readers an honest accounting of how daunting the invasion had been — and what a miracle it was that the Allies had taken the beaches at all. “The advantages were all theirs,” Pyle said of the German defenders: concrete gun emplacements and hidden machine-gun nests “with crossfire taking in every inch of the beach,” immense V-shaped ditches, buried mines, barbed wire, “whole fields of evil devices under the water to catch our boats” and “four men on shore for every three men we had approaching the shore.” “And yet,” Pyle concluded, “we got on.”

Pyle's intent with this first column seems to have been simple: to elicit appreciation for the huge achievement and gratitude for "those both dead and alive" who had clawed their way up the beaches and taken down the enemy.

This kind of dispatch was well-trod ground for Pyle, whose wartime columns tended to omit certain facts on the ground and reassure readers back home that the Allies were on the path to eventual victory. Tell the truth of it but offer reassurance too. Pyle used this same strategy when he began covering the war in 1940, and it served him well when he followed inexperienced American troops into ground combat in North Africa in 1942 and 1943, only to see them battered by the German army. After 1,600 men were killed or wounded by Germans in a trap at Sidi bou Zid in Tunisia, Pyle described the withdrawal of the remaining American forces as "a majestic thing." Describing the fast-moving convoys of trucks and tanks, he wrote, "it was carried out so calmly and methodically" that it "was hard to realize, being a part of it, that it was a retreat." He didn't mention the 100 American tanks that were destroyed, or the loss in confidence the rank-and-file soldiers were feeling toward their command. Though he didn't entirely whitewash the American defeat, which he called "damned humiliating," Pyle's artful narrative lent purpose and dignity to events that perhaps should have been probed more critically.

Pyle's second report from the Normandy beaches, published 10 days after D-Day, was markedly different from anything he had ever previously filed. "It was a lovely day for strolling along the seashore," he wrote, reeling the reader in with a cheerful opening. "Men were sleeping on the sand, some of them sleeping forever. Men were floating in the water, but they didn't know they were in the water, for they were dead." Pyle cataloged the vast wreckage of military matériel, the "scores of tanks and trucks and boats" resting at the bottom of the Channel, jeeps "burned to a dull gray" and halftracks blasted "into a shambles by a single shell hit." Some reassurances followed to soften the unvarnished fact — the losses were an acceptable price for the victory, Pyle said — but he hadn't shied away from showing his readers the corpses and "the awful waste and destruction of war." Pyle was working up to something he hadn't done before.

The next day, June 17, newspapers across the country published Pyle's third column describing the D-Day beachhead. By allowing the objects he saw in the sand to tell an eloquent story of loss, Pyle showed his readers the true cost of the fighting, without explicitly describing the blood and mangled bodies. "It extends in a thin little line, just like a high-water mark, for miles along the beach," Pyle wrote about the detritus of the battle. "Here in a jumbled row for mile on mile are soldiers' packs. Here are socks and shoe polish, sewing kits, diaries, Bibles and hand grenades. Here are the latest letters from home. . . . Here are toothbrushes and razors, and snapshots of families back home staring up at you from the sand. Here are pocketbooks, metal mirrors, extra trousers and bloody, abandoned shoes."

Pyle often included himself in his stories, addressing his readers directly and letting them see him in the scene, a reassuring presence who was keeping his eye on things for them, reducing sprawling events to their digestible essentials. But here Pyle depicted himself as stunned and

confused — a dazed witness to gambles and losses on a scale that *nobody* could comprehend. “I picked up a pocket Bible with a soldier’s name in it, and put it in my jacket,” he wrote. “I carried it half a mile or so and then put it back down on the beach. I don’t know why I picked it up, or why I put it back down.”

By the end of the column, Pyle’s readers were confronted with outright horror: “As I plowed out over the wet sand of the beach,” Pyle wrote, “I walked around what seemed to be a couple of pieces of driftwood sticking out of the sand. But they weren’t driftwood. They were a soldier’s two feet. He was completely covered by the shifting sands except for his feet. The toes of his G.I. shoes pointed toward the land he had come so far to see, and which he saw so briefly.”

Omaha Beach had some of the fiercest fighting of the invasion. Pyle came ashore here the next day and walked alone on the beach. Bettmann Archive/Getty Images

This was a different Ernie Pyle from the one millions of Americans knew from the newspapers that kept them company at the breakfast table or on the train home in the evening. If his reporting before D-Day was aimed at comforting the disturbed readers back home with optimism and tales of the soldiers' endurance, his reporting from the beaches of Normandy was aimed at disturbing the comfortable.

To his own surprise, his dispatches about D-Day's losses were not met with rejection or censorship. In addition to the newspapers that ran his columns, Life magazine requested permission to run an excerpt, and radio programs quoted Pyle in commercials imploring listeners to buy war bonds. In Washington, two of the columns were reprinted in the official Congressional Record. "It's getting so you can't pick up any damned publication at all without seeing you mentioned," Lee Miller, Pyle's editor, wrote to the reporter on June 19, 1944.

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Until D-Day, war had largely been an exhilarating experience for Pyle, terrible but often uplifting. Ten days after the landings, the awfulness of all the death he was witnessing in the "thousands of little skirmishes" in the hedgerow country of Normandy was carving away at his mental state. He reported having knots in his stomach from "constant tenseness and lack of sleep." In a letter back home, he confided that he had to "continually fight an inner depression over the ghastliness of it all." "Sometimes," he wrote to Miller on June 29, "I get so obsessed with the tragedy and horror of seeing dead men that I can hardly stand it. But I guess there's nothing to do but keep going."

Less than two weeks after witnessing the jubilant liberation of Paris, Pyle wrote his final column from Europe. "I'm leaving," he told his readers. " 'I've had it,' as they say in the Army. I have had all I can take for a while." After spending 29 months overseas, writing around 700,000 words about the war and surviving nearly a year at the front lines, Pyle confided that his spirit was faltering and confused. "I do hate terribly to leave right now, but I have given out," he wrote. "I've been immersed in it too long. The hurt has finally become too great."

Pyle returned home to New Mexico. After a few months back in the United States, overwhelmed by mountains of mail, invasions of his privacy and his wife's attempted suicide, Pyle's dread of war was outweighed by his unease in civilian life. Life on the front line was simpler. Pyle missed it. Shortly before Christmas 1944, he began making final preparations to report to the Pacific, where American forces were "island hopping" their way toward Japan.

The grim view of the war that overtook Pyle in Normandy — the sense that perhaps the losses were simply beyond bearing — seemed to follow Pyle to the Pacific, but it showed up differently in his reporting there. Interviewing bomber pilots on islands far from the fighting and sailors on Navy ships who seemed safe and comfortable compared with infantrymen on the front lines, Pyle

felt that he was seeing a softer, easier war, and he let it show. “The days are warm and on our established island bases the food is good and the mail service is fast and there’s little danger from the enemy,” he wrote in a column titled “Europe This Is Not.” Worried that he wasn’t doing his part for the war effort, Pyle arranged to go with the Marines when they landed on Okinawa, where the fighting was expected to be intense. It was no D-Day — the Japanese had retreated inland, and Pyle was amazed to see a beach landing with no carnage — but the Marines soon found themselves mired in bitter fighting for every hill and cave. On April 18, 1945, 20 days before the war in Europe ended, Pyle was shot through the left temple by a Japanese machine-gunner and died instantly in a ditch on the tiny island of Ie Shima, off the northwest coast of Okinawa.

"I'm leaving," Pyle wrote in his final column from Europe. "I've had it, as they say in the Army. I have had all I can take for a while." Alamy Stock Photo

Before Pyle's body was buried under a crude marker in the 77th Division's cemetery, a draft of a column he was writing was discovered in his pocket. It was not so much a dispatch as it was a meditation on the end of the war. "Last summer," Pyle said, "I wrote that I hoped the end of the war could be a gigantic relief, but not an elation. In the joyousness of high spirits it is so easy for us to forget the dead." That was a relief that he knew was simply unavailable to many and a forgetting that shouldn't be allowed to any.

The draft went on: "There are so many of the living who have had burned into their brains forever the unnatural sight of cold dead men scattered over the hillsides and in the ditches. . . . Dead men in such familiar promiscuity that they become monotonous. Dead men in such monstrous infinity that you come almost to hate them. Those are the things that you at home need not even try to understand. To you at home they are columns of figures, or he is a near one who went away and just didn't come back. You didn't see him lying so grotesque and pasty beside the gravel road in France. We saw him, saw him by the multiple thousands. That's the difference."

During his four years as a war correspondent, Pyle was embraced by enlisted men, officers and a huge civilian public as a voice who spoke for the common infantryman. With his trauma in France, he had become one of them. After sharing so much of their experience, he understood how gravely war can alter the people who have to see it and fight it and live it. He knew that the survivors can come home with damage that is profound, painful and long-lasting. It was a truth that he found hard or even impossible to communicate to the readers back home — and it is a truth that is still difficult and troubling now, 75 years after D-Day.

We accept that our wars are different now — more scattered, seemingly never-ending, against a more diffuse and elusive enemy — but those wars are still presented with the promise that we are fighting for our way of life or the survival of our values, and that we'll enjoy greater peace and security when those wars are won. War reporting has become more honest and unsparing about tallying the death toll — at least on our side — but politicians making the case for deployments and invasions still don't invite the public in advance to decide whether the promised benefits will be worth the losses.

Seeing and reporting the vast losses on the beach at Normandy and watching war's meat grinder in action in the vicious battles that followed, Pyle was evidently forced to recalculate the arithmetic of victories and losses. By the time he was killed, 10 months later and on the opposite side of the world, the lesson seemed to have solidified for him. Not even the war ending, not even victory — which his previous reporting usually kept in sight as the great goal of the war — would be able to bring back all the people killed or counteract the damage done to the survivors. Pyle had written about battles and war in a way that promised hope. By the time victory was actually in sight, he had come to feel that there was no way the war could be a story with a happy ending.

Opinion | Ben Mankiewicz

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David Chrisinger is the director of the Harris Writing Program at the University of Chicago. His 2016 book, “See Me for Who I Am,” is a collection of essays written by student veterans. He is writing a book about the lessons he has learned from a career of helping others write about trauma.

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