

HIS 1306

Fall 2014

Professor Bunin

WORLD WAR II HANDOUT

THE WAR ACCORDING TO BILL MAULDIN AND ERNIE PYLE

Guiding Questions:

- What is Mauldin's impression of war and how does he try to convey this to Americans at home thousands of miles away from any battle? Is his message pro war? What can you interpret was his intended goal while drafting the story of his experiences at Anzio? What can we, of another generation of Americans, take from this lesson?
- After reading "The Death of Captain Waskow" how does author Ernie Pyle structure this epitaph to this soldier? What examples of symbolism can you draw from the way he describes how the Captain is represented and how his soldier's mourn his passing? Why would this, of all the several articles Pyle wrote, become his most famous? How does he view and sacrifice and how may we, the students of history, use this story to better understand what that generation went through?
- How does Ernie Pyle characterize the Battle for Normandy? What were the obstacles that Allied soldiers encountered and how, against all numerous odds, could they, the soldiers at Omaha Beach, prevail that day, June 6th, 1944? Is this only another chapter of the war, or does Normandy come to represent something else to Pyle? Explain.

Excerpt from Bill Mauldin's *Up Front* (1945)

Of the Fighting in Anzio, Italy, November, 1943.

No Rear ... Anzio was unique.

by Bill Mauldin

It was the only place in Europe which held an entire corps of infantry, a British division, all kinds of artillery and special units, and maintained an immense supply and administration setup without a rear echelon. As a matter of fact, there wasn't any rear; there was no place on the entire beachhead where enemy shells couldn't seek you out.

Sometimes it was worse at the front; sometimes worse at the harbour. Quartermasters buried their dead, and amphibious duck drivers went down with their craft. Infantrymen, dug into the Mussolini Canal, had the canal pushed in on top of them by armour-piercing shells, and Jerry bombers circled as they directed glider bombs onto L.S.T.s and Liberty ships. Wounded men got oak leaf clusters on their Purple Hearts when shell fragments riddled them as they lay on hospital beds. Nurses died. Planes crash-landed on the single air strip.

Planes went out to seek the 'Anzio Express', that huge gun which made guys in rest areas play softball near slit trenches. The planes would report the Express destroyed and an hour later she would come in on schedule.

The krauts launched a suicidal attack which almost drove through to the sea. Evacuation was already beginning in the Harbour when a single American battalion broke the point of the attack, then was engulfed and died. Bodies of fanatical young Germans piled up in front of the machine-guns, and when the guns ran out of ammunition the Wehrmacht came through and was stopped only by point-blank artillery. One American artillery battalion of 155s fired eighty thousand rounds of ammunition at Anzio, and there were dozens of these battalions.

You couldn't stand up in the swamps without being cut down, and you couldn't sleep if you sat down. Guys stayed in these swamps for days and weeks. Every hole had to be covered, because the 'popcorn man' came over every night and shoveled hundreds of little butterfly bombs down on your head by the light of flares and exploding ack-ack. You'd wake up in the morning and find your sandbags torn open and spilled on the ground.

The krauts used little remote-control tanks filled with high explosives. You wondered how Jerry could see you and throw a shell at you every time you stuck your head up, until you climbed into the mountains after it was all over and were able to count every tree and every house in the area we had held. Tiger tanks grouped together and fired at you. Your artillery thought it was a battery and threw a concentration of shells at the tanks, and by the time your shells struck the Tigers had moved away and were firing at you from another place.

Four American tank destroyers crossed the canal and bounced armour-piercing shells off the turret of a Tiger until it turned its massive gun and disintegrated them with five shells.

German infantry rode their tanks into battle and the dogfaces shot them off like squirrels but they didn't get them all - some came in and bayoneted our guys in their holes.

This wasn't a beachhead that was secured and enlarged until it eventually became a port for supplies coming in to supplement those being expended as the troops pushed inland. Everything was being expended right here. It was a constant hellish nightmare, because when you weren't getting something you were expecting something, and it lasted for five months.

Ernie Pyle, award winning war correspondent of World War II.

The Death of Captain Waskow



IU Archives

Photo of a Dean Cornwell painting depicting Ernie Pyle at a grave.

AT THE FRONT LINES IN ITALY, January 10, 1944 – In this war I have known a lot of officers who were loved and respected by the soldiers under them. But never have I crossed the trail of any man as beloved as Capt. Henry T. Waskow of Belton, Texas.

Capt. Waskow was a company commander in the 36th Division. He had led his company since long before it left the States. He was very young, only in his middle twenties, but he carried in him a sincerity and gentleness that made people want to be guided by him.

"After my own father, he came next," a sergeant told me.

"He always looked after us," a soldier said. "He'd go to bat for us every time."

"I've never knowed him to do anything unfair," another one said.

I was at the foot of the mule trail the night they brought Capt. Waskow's body down. The moon was nearly full at the time, and you could see far up the trail, and even part way across the valley below. Soldiers made shadows in the moonlight as they walked.

Dead men had been coming down the mountain all evening, lashed onto the backs of mules. They came lying belly-down across the wooden pack-saddles, their heads hanging down on the left side of the mule, their stiffened legs sticking out awkwardly from the other side, bobbing up and down as the mule walked.

The Italian mule-skinner was afraid to walk beside dead men, so Americans had to lead the mules down that night. Even the Americans were reluctant to unlash and lift off the bodies at the bottom, so an officer had to do it himself, and ask others to help.

The first one came early in the morning. They slid him down from the mule and stood him on his feet for a moment, while they got a new grip. In the half light he might have been merely a sick man standing there, leaning on the others. Then they laid him on the ground in the shadow of the low stone wall alongside the road.

I don't know who that first one was. You feel small in the presence of dead men, and ashamed at being alive, and you don't ask silly questions.

We left him there beside the road, that first one, and we all went back into the cowshed and sat on water cans or lay on the straw, waiting for the next batch of mules.

Somebody said the dead soldier had been dead for four days, and then nobody said anything more about it. We talked soldier talk for an hour or more. The dead man lay all alone outside in the shadow of the low stone wall.

Then a soldier came into the cowshed and said there were some more bodies outside. We went out into the road. Four mules stood there, in the moonlight, in the road where the trail came down off the mountain. The soldiers who led them stood there waiting. "This one is Captain Waskow," one of them said quietly.

Two men unlash his body from the mule and lifted it off and laid it in the shadow beside the low stone wall. Other men took the other bodies off. Finally there were five lying end to end in a long row, alongside the road. You don't cover up dead men in the combat zone. They just lie there in the shadows until somebody else comes after them.

The unburdened mules moved off to their olive orchard. The men in the road seemed reluctant to leave. They stood around, and gradually one by one I could sense them moving close to Capt. Waskow's body. Not so much to look, I think, as to say something in finality to him, and to themselves. I stood close by and I could hear.

One soldier came and looked down, and he said out loud, "God damn it." That's all he said, and then he walked away. Another one came. He said, "God damn it to hell anyway." He looked down for a few last moments, and then he turned and left.

Another man came; I think he was an officer. It was hard to tell officers from men in the half light, for all were bearded and grimy dirty. The man looked down into the dead captain's face, and then he spoke directly to him, as though he were alive. He said: "I'm sorry, old man."

Then a soldier came and stood beside the officer, and bent over, and he too spoke to his dead captain, not in a whisper but awfully tenderly, and he said:

"I sure am sorry, sir."

Then the first man squatted down, and he reached down and took the dead hand, and he sat there for a full five minutes, holding the dead hand in his own and looking intently into the dead face, and he never uttered a sound all the time he sat there.

And finally he put the hand down, and then reached up and gently straightened the points of the captain's shirt collar, and then he sort of rearranged the tattered edges of his uniform around the wound. And then he got up and walked away down the road in the moonlight, all alone.

After that the rest of us went back into the cowshed, leaving the five dead men lying in a line, end to end, in the shadow of the low stone wall. We lay down on the straw in the cowshed, and pretty soon we were all asleep.

A handwritten signature in dark ink on a light-colored background. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style and appears to read "Ernie Pyle". There is a long, sweeping underline that extends from the end of the signature.

Source: *Ernie's War: The Best of Ernie Pyle's World War II Dispatches*, edited by David Nichols, pp. 195-97. Pictures courtesy of The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

A Pure Miracle



IU Archives

Ernie Pyle, pictured in Normandy not long after the invasion of Europe. Pyle (left) is shown with Gordon Gammack (center) of the *Des Moines Register and Tribune* and Don Whitehead of the Associated Press.

NORMANDY BEACHHEAD, June 12, 1944 – Due to a last-minute alteration in the arrangements, I didn't arrive on the beachhead until the morning after D-day, after our first wave of assault troops had hit the shore.

By the time we got here the beaches had been taken and the fighting had moved a couple of miles inland. All that remained on the beach was some sniping and artillery fire, and the occasional startling blast of a mine geysering brown sand into the air. That plus a gigantic and pitiful litter of wreckage along miles of shoreline.

Submerged tanks and overturned boats and burned trucks and shell-shattered jeeps and sad little personal belongings were strewn all over these bitter sands. That plus the bodies of soldiers lying in rows covered with blankets, the toes of their shoes sticking up in a line as though on drill. And other bodies, uncollected, still sprawling grotesquely in the sand or half hidden by the high grass beyond the beach.

That plus an intense, grim determination of work-weary men to get this chaotic beach organized and get all the vital supplies and the reinforcements moving more rapidly over it from the stacked-up ships standing in droves out to sea.

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Now that it is over it seems to me a pure miracle that we ever took the beach at all. For some of our units it was easy, but in this special sector where I am now our troops faced such odds that our getting ashore was like my whipping Joe Louis down to a pulp.

In this column I want to tell you what the opening of the second front in this one sector entailed, so that you can know and appreciate and forever be humbly grateful to those both dead and alive who did it for you.

Ashore, facing us, were more enemy troops than we had in our assault waves. The advantages were all theirs, the disadvantages all ours. The Germans were dug into positions that they had been working on for months, although these were not yet all complete. A one-hundred-foot bluff a couple of hundred yards back from the beach had great concrete gun emplacements built right into the hilltop. These opened to the sides instead of to the front, thus making it very hard for naval fire from the sea to reach them. They could shoot parallel with the beach and cover every foot of it for miles with artillery fire.

Then they had hidden machine-gun nests on the forward slopes, with crossfire taking in every inch of the beach. These nests were connected by networks of trenches, so that the German gunners could move about without exposing themselves.

Throughout the length of the beach, running zigzag a couple of hundred yards back from the shoreline, was an immense V-shaped ditch fifteen feet deep. Nothing could cross it, not even men on foot, until fills had been made. And in other places at the far end of the beach, where the ground is flatter, they had great concrete walls. These were blasted by our naval gunfire or by explosives set by hand after we got ashore.

Our only exits from the beach were several swales or valleys, each about one hundred yards wide. The Germans made the most of these funnel-like traps, sowing them with buried mines. They contained, also, barbed-wire entanglements with mines attached, hidden ditches, and machine guns firing from the slopes.

This is what was on the shore. But our men had to go through a maze nearly as deadly as this before they even got ashore. Underwater obstacles were terrific. The Germans had whole fields of evil devices under the water to catch our boats. Even now, several days after the landing, we have cleared only channels through them and cannot yet approach the whole length of the beach with our ships. Even now some ship or boat hits one of these mines every day and is knocked out of commission.

The Germans had masses of those great six-pronged spiders, made of railroad iron and standing shoulder-high, just beneath the surface of the water for our landing craft to run into. They also had huge logs buried in the sand, pointing upward and outward, their tops just below the water. Attached to these logs were mines.

In addition to these obstacles they had floating mines offshore, land mines buried in the sand of the beach, and more mines in checkerboard rows in the tall grass beyond the sand. And the enemy had four men on shore for every three men we had approaching the shore.

And yet we got on.

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Beach landings are planned to a schedule that is set far ahead of time. They all have to be timed, in order for everything to mesh and for the following waves of troops to be standing off the beach and ready to land at the right moment.

As the landings are planned, some elements of the assault force are to break through quickly, push on inland, and attack the most obvious enemy strong points. It is usually the plan for units to be inland, attacking gun positions from behind, within a matter of minutes after the first men hit the beach.

I have always been amazed at the speed called for in these plans. You'll have schedules calling for engineers to land at H-hour plus two minutes, and service troops at H-hour plus thirty minutes, and even for press censors to land at H-hour plus seventy-five minutes. But in the attack on this special portion of the beach where I am – the worst we had, incidentally – the schedule didn't hold.

Our men simply could not get past the beach. They were pinned down right on the water's edge by an inhuman wall of fire from the bluff. Our first waves were on that beach for hours, instead of a few minutes, before they could begin working inland.

You can still see the foxholes they dug at the very edge of the water, in the sand and the small, jumbled rocks that form parts of the beach.

Medical corpsmen attended the wounded as best they could. Men were killed as they stepped out of landing craft. An officer whom I knew got a bullet through the head just as the door of his landing craft was let down. Some men were drowned.

The first crack in the beach defenses was finally accomplished by terrific and wonderful naval gunfire, which knocked out the big emplacements. They tell epic stories of destroyers that ran right up into shallow water and had it out point-blank with the big guns in those concrete emplacements ashore.

When the heavy fire stopped, our men were organized by their officers and pushed on inland, circling machine-gun nests and taking them from the rear.

As one officer said, the only way to take a beach is to face it and keep going. It is costly at first, but it's the only way. If the men are pinned down on the beach, dug in and out of action, they might as well not be there at all. They hold up the waves behind them, and nothing is being gained.

Our men were pinned down for a while, but finally they stood up and went through, and so we took that beach and accomplished our landing. We did it with every advantage on the enemy's side and every disadvantage on ours. In the light of a couple of days of retrospection, we sit and talk and call it a miracle that our men ever got on at all or were able to stay on.

Before long it will be permitted to name the units that did it. Then you will know to whom this glory should go. They suffered casualties. And yet if you take the entire beachhead assault, including other units that had a much easier time, our total casualties in driving this wedge into the continent of Europe were remarkably low – only a fraction, in fact, of what our commanders had been prepared to accept.

And these units that were so battered and went through such hell are still, right at this moment, pushing on inland without rest, their spirits high, their egotism in victory almost reaching the smart-alecky stage.

Their tails are up. "We've done it again," they say. They figure that the rest of the army isn't needed at all. Which proves that, while their judgment in this regard is bad, they certainly have the spirit that wins battles and eventually wars.¹

¹ Source: Ernie Pyle *Archive*, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, <http://journalism.indiana.edu/resources/erniepyle/wartime-columns>, (accessed October 22, 2014).

A handwritten signature in dark ink on a light-colored, slightly textured paper. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first part of the signature is 'Ernie' and the second part is 'Pyle'. A long, sweeping horizontal line extends from the end of the signature across the width of the text area.

Source: *Ernie's War: The Best of Ernie Pyle's World War II Dispatches*, edited by David Nichols, pp. 277-80. Pictures courtesy of The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana