

REPORTING AMERICA AT WAR

CLASSROOM MATERIALS

Analyzing a Primary Historic Source: Ernie Pyle's "The Death of Captain Waskow"

SUBJECT:

History, Journalism,
Language Arts

ESTIMATED**TIME REQUIRED:**

One class period.

OVERVIEW:

Possibly no war correspondent was more able to depict the day-to-day life of the ordinary World War II foot soldier than Ernie Pyle. A columnist for the Scripps-Howard newspapers, Pyle's columns covered almost every branch of the armed service – from quartermaster troops to pilots. Pyle followed American troops through North Africa, Italy and France. After the end of the war in Europe, Pyle traveled to the Pacific theater of war, where he was shot and killed by a Japanese sniper on the island of Ie Shima on April 18, 1945, during the Okinawa campaign. Of all Pyle's columns, possibly the most famous and widely reprinted was "The Death of Captain Waskow". Written in January 1944, Pyle put as human a face on war as possible in the worst conflict of the 20th century.

RESOURCES FOR THIS LESSON:

Episode 1 of the *Reporting America at War* series is highly recommended but not required.

Ernie Pyle's column "The Death of Captain Waskow"

<http://www.pbs.org/reportingamericaatwar/reporters/pyle/waskow.html>

SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES FOR THIS LESSON

Indiana University School of Journalism Web site

<http://journalism.indiana.edu/news/erniepyle/waskow.html>

The Texas Military Forces Museum interview with Riley Tidwell, a veteran of the U.S. Army who served with Captain Waskow, can be located at <http://www.kwanah.com/txmilmus/36division/archives/waskow/tidwell.htm>. Tidwell talks with Ernie Pyle about Captain Waskow's death and his feeling for his beloved captain.

The Texas Military Forces Museum highlight of Riley Tidwell's homecoming at the end of the war. <http://www.kwanah.com/txmilmus/36division/archives/waskow/appendb.htm>.

Excerpts from *Appointment at Hill 1205*, written by Michael S. Sweeney, 36th Infantry Division Association. <http://history.acusd.edu/gen/WW2Timeline/erniepyle3.html>

Indiana Historical Society feature on Ernie Pyle

<http://www.indianahistory.org/heritage/pyle.html>

Scripps-Howard feature on Ernie Pyle <http://scripps.com/foundation/programs/pyle/pyle.html>

Ernie Pyle State Historic site <http://www.in.gov/ism/HistoricSites/ErniPyle/Historic.asp>

STRATEGY FOR THIS LESSON:

Before beginning the lesson, the teacher should open with a short biographical sketch about Pyle — his background, as well as representative columns. Ernie Pyle is featured 42:00 into Episode 1 of *Reporting America at War*, and at various points through the remainder of the first segment.

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Frequently modern media tends to look at the “big picture” of a battle, in terms of the number of casualties, and objectives achieved or lost, rather than the human terms of the men who fought or died in the battle. Ernie Pyle tended to focus more on the “human side” of war...the men who fought or his own personal experiences with the troops. The question Pyle sought to answer was “what was it like” for the ordinary GI? Next, the teacher should direct students to the main resource for the lesson; Pyle’s column entitled “The Death of Captain Waskow”. Teachers should distribute copies of the column to students along with the question sheet.

Allow sufficient time for students to answer the questions. (Please note: There are two versions of the question sheets posted. One with possible answers and one for distribution.)

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

Student Can:

- Speculate in class discussion whether Pyle’s style of war reporting would be effective in electronic media. Would he have been a good television personality? Have students justify their answer.
- Read another column written by Pyle and compare it to “The Death of Captain Waskow”. Is the column similar in tone and word pictures to “The Death of Captain Waskow”? If so, describe them and justify your belief.
- Question Sheet for “The Death of Captain Waskow” (with possible answers)

1) Describe the “word picture” Ernie Pyle develops of Captain Waskow.

(Pyle writes, “Never have I crossed the trail of any man as beloved as Captain Henry T. Waskow of Belton, Texas.” He adds, “Captain Waskow was a company commander in the thirty-sixth 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.”)

2) “The Death of Captain Waskow” is a primary historic source. Why do you think it is?

(Primary historic source data gives historians and students a different “perspective” of an event. The Death of Captain Waskow is a primary historic source because it is a first person account.)

3) Pyle was very descriptive in his columns, and he had the ability to help the reader visualize the scene he was describing. As you read *The Death of Captain Waskow*, list four phrases or sentences that describe the scene.

(Answers will vary. For example, some students will recall the moonlight, the legs of the dead men as they were taken down the mountain, how the men looked as they were taken off the mules, the shadows or the low stone wall.)

4) As Pyle describes the first man that is brought down the mountain, he writes, “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.” Ask the class to reflect on this statement, and speculate what message Pyle may have been trying to convey.

(Answers will vary. Some students may note that soldiers tended to be very respectful towards dead comrades, and therefore they would feel sadness toward the dead and would want to honor their memories. Other students might believe that Pyle felt they were lucky to survive, while soldiers like Captain Waskow did not.)

5) As Pyle sought to “humanize” World War II, he tended to “blur” the distinction between enlisted man and officer. Give examples from the column that illustrate this point.

(Rarely does Pyle note a person’s rank (except for Captain Waskow), frequently using the word “soldier”. Also, he notes in the column that “It was hard to tell officers from men in the half light, for all were bearded and grimy dirty”. Pyle also notes that all the dead men were placed in a row, and there is no mention of placing them by rank.)

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5) Pyle recounted how the men paid their respects to Captain Waskow after his body was retrieved from the mountain. How did Pyle describe this action? In your view, why do you think it was important for Pyle to add this to his column?

(Pyle notes that when Waskow's body is removed from the mule, the men talk in hushed, reverent tones. The men seemed reluctant to leave. He also notes that one soldier sat next to Captain Waskow for a full five minutes, looking into the dead man's face and holding his hand. Some soldiers swore. Another soldier straightened Captain Waskow's shirt collar and rearranged the tattered edges of the uniform around the wound. Pyle felt these facts were important to add because it gave a human touch to war and painted a word picture of the scene.)

7) Using a dictionary, find a definition for the word "irony". Write it below. Throughout Pyle's column are several instances where he uses irony. List at least three specific examples.

(Depending on the dictionary used, as well as the definition the students select, answers will vary. Dictionary.com defines irony as:

- 1. The use of words to express something different from and often opposite to their literal meaning.*
- 2. An expression or utterance marked by a deliberate contrast between apparent and intended meaning.*
- 3. A literary style employing such contrasts for humorous or rhetorical effect.*

Students may note several instances of irony. Examples might include soldiers showing tenderness, love and respect in the face of war, Pyle conveying the similarities between enlisted men and officers in their grief and reverence for Pyle as an old chap when he was in his mid-twenties.)

8) Andy Rooney, a reporter for *Stars and Stripes*, was a contemporary of Pyle. He noted that "Pyle was not doing much war reporting as feature stories about people in the war." In your view, is that sort of reporting as valuable and needed as reporting that told readers about the battles and losses in the war? Justify your answer.

(Answers will vary. Some students will feel that Pyle's type of reporting is necessary because the civilian population needed to be reminded that the war was fought by real men. Students will also point out that Pyle's work was just as important to reporting what happened in the war as the statistics. Other students may feel that Pyle's "feature work", although interesting did not really convey the facts about what was happening in the European theater.

9) Assume you are a censor in 1944, and it is your job to ensure that reports from the front are accurate and without "security leaks" that may hinder the war effort. Would you approve this column "as written" (according to the rules of censorship)? Explain your answer. How might you suggest the column be edited for release?

(Since the column was released, most students might suggest that there were no leaks. They might note that there was no real mention of where the military action was occurring, and other than Captain Waskow, there was no mention of anyone's name or rank. However, students may also note after viewing Reporting America at War, that the U.S. government worked to ensure that the great majority of the civilian population did not see specific casualties.)

10) Do you think this sort of column would be as effective in a more modern war as it was in World War II? Explain your answer.

(Answers will vary. Some students will site the work of "embedded reporters" during Operation Iraqi Freedom as an example of humanized stories. (For example, the rescue of Army Private Jessica Lynch.) Other students may feel that most people today would be more interested in hard, fast, capsulized news coverage.

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QUESTION SHEET FOR "THE DEATH OF CAPTAIN WASKOW" (PAGE 1 OF 2)

(for student distribution)

1. Describe the "word picture" Pyle develops of Captain Waskow.
2. The Death of Captain Waskow is a primary historic source. Explain why it is.
3. Pyle was very descriptive in his columns, and he had the ability to help the reader visualize the scene he was describing. As you read "The Death of Captain Waskow", list four phrases or sentences that describe the scene.
4. As Pyle describes the first man that is brought down the mountain, he writes, "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." Ask the class to reflect on this statement, and speculate what message Pyle may have been trying to convey.
5. As Pyle sought to "humanize" World War II, he tended to "blur" the distinction between enlisted man and officer. Give examples from the column that illustrate this point.

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6. Pyle recounted how the men paid their respects to Captain Waskow after his body was retrieved from the mountain. How did Pyle describe this action? In your view, why do you think it was important for Pyle to add this to his column?
7. Using a dictionary, find a definition for the word “irony.” Write it below. There are several instances where Pyle uses irony in his column. List at least three.
8. Andy Rooney, a reporter for *Stars and Stripes*, was a contemporary of Pyle. He noted that “Pyle was not doing much war reporting as feature stories about people in the war.” In your view, is that sort of reporting as valuable and needed as reporting that told readers about the battles and losses in the war? Justify our answer.
9. Assume you are a censor in 1944, and it is your job to ensure that reports from the front are accurate and without “security leaks” that may hinder the war effort. Would you approve this column “as written” (according to the rules of censorship)? Explain your answer. How might you suggest the column be edited for release?
10. Do you think this sort of column would be as effective in a more modern war as it was in World War II? Explain your answer.

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RELEVANT STANDARDS:

This lesson addresses national content standards established by the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) <http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/search.asp>.

United States History:

Understands how World War II influenced American society (e.g., how the war fostered cultural exchange and promoted nationalism and American identity, the effects on gender roles and the American family).

Understands significant military aspects of World War II (e.g. major turning points of the war; Axis and Allied military campaigns in the European and Pacific theaters; the financial, material, and human costs of the war and their economic consequences for the Allies and the Axis powers; the locations of the major theaters of war in North Africa, Europe, and the Pacific; the diverse contributions of men and women during the war).

Historical Understanding:

Understands the impact of World War II on civilian populations and soldiers (e.g., the roles of women and children during the war and how they differed in Allied and Axis countries, the hardships of the war on soldiers from both sides).

World History:

Understands the impact of World War II on civilian populations and soldiers (e.g., the roles of women and children during the war and how they differed in Allied and Axis countries, the hardships of the war on soldiers from both sides).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Michael Hutchison is Technology Curriculum facilitator for the Vincennes Community Schools in Vincennes, Indiana. In 1996, Michael was named a national winner of the 21st Century Teacher competition, a recognition which was repeated in 1997. In 1998, Compaq named Michael a first-place prizewinner in its Teacher Lesson Plan contest, and in 1999, Michael was named the Midwest regional winner in Technology & Learning magazine's Teacher of the Year program. In 2002, Michael was named "Teacher of the Year" by the Indiana Computer Educators and "Technology-Using Teacher of the Year" by the International Society for Technology in Education. In addition, Michael hosts a weekly social studies forum for TAPPED IN and serves as a faculty member of Connected University, as well as a member of the PBS TeacherSource Advisory Group.