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"Freedom of the Press belongs to those who own one."

A. J. Liebling of the New Yorker

May 16, 2001



Taking the Point Position...

The Kerry situation seems to have quieted, leaving everyone with the opportunity to discuss the subject of war atrocities, real and imagined, with a bit more dispassion.

It is interesting that men who have experienced war seldom talk about it. You can bet the men you hear bragging about their experiences were not there.

It was a common occurrence in the wardrooms of submarines on extended submerged patrols (50+ days), to discuss "what if" scenarios. One of the common ones was some variation of the following:

You are on a war patrol in World War II. You get a message to the effect: "A major ship, heavily escorted by five destroyers, will transit your patrol area from the Northeast corner toward the Southwest corner tomorrow morning. SINK IT WITHOUT FAIL."

To a submarine commander, those last words mean lose your submarine if necessary, but get that ship!

As the commander, you detect the predicted traffic the next morning, exactly where it is supposed to be, and on the course it is supposed to be. You identify the sonar signals as five fast ships and one "heavy." You silently penetrate the screen of destroyers and make your torpedo approach on the large ship at the center. When you are just seconds from firing, you raise the periscope for a verification of the (mechanical) computer-generated solution to the torpedo track, and see a large, white hospital ship with a large red cross painted on the side.



Commentary

You now have 10 seconds to make a decision. What is your decision? (Mine is at the bottom of the column.)

Different people everywhere have different answers, and invariably different officers in the submarine wardroom also have different answers. Some officers have different answers on different days! It isn't easy. (War is not tidy!)

In 2000, Jim Lehrer wrote a great short novel which fictionalized the subject of the atrocities of war. In the novel, which I sincerely recommend, Lehrer discusses the torture of American bomber pilots held in Japanese captivity and the rationalization the Japanese commanders used for such torture – the American fire-bombing of Tokyo which purposely burned hundreds of thousands of women and children to death.

All nations routinely target civilians. The Mutually Assured Destruction policy of the past 30 years is DESIGNED to destroy entire civilian cities, it is NOT aimed at military targets. The Rape of Nanking was not perpetrated on soldiers! The V2 bombing of London was NOT aimed at military targets, nor was the Allied bombing of Dresden, or Tokyo, or Nagasaki or Hiroshima.

American POWs in the hands of the Germans were hardly well treated, but 96% of those POWs survived. Japanese-held POWs lived only at a 50% rate. Of those “Special Prisoners,” so-called because they were the crews of bombing raids over Japan, only 5% lived. All Japanese prisoners were horribly tortured before they were killed or finally released.

*Lehrer's book is appropriately titled, *The Special Prisoner*. It is a great read, but more importantly it is a great look at war in general, and the atrocities (and counter-atrocities) of war in particular. It is written in terms of World War II, which was a “good war” – so-called because we were attacked. That war is sufficiently distant to permit relatively unemotional analysis of both sides of the atrocities of war.*

(My answer is: “Bearing, Mark! Range, Mark! Set speed high, set running depth 15 feet. Set, shoot, FIRE1. FIRE 2. Reload 1, Ready aft tubes, FIRE 3, FIRE 4, Reload 2, Up Scope, rig for Depth Charges, new fire control solution on escort, FIRE 5...” BTW -- my answer is based on the message and the escorts. If the hospital ship was less escorted and there was no "sink" message, I would not shoot. In submarine discussions there are MANY scenarios presented.)



"Anyone who cannot cope with mathematics is not fully human. At best he is a tolerable subhuman who has learned to wear shoes, bathe, and not make messes in the house."

Robert Heinlein

