

Philip Pulella, Assisi, Sept 19, 2016

"The first casualty when war comes is truth."

That phrase --- attributed to the U.S. Senator Hiram Johnson in 1917 -- was first uttered nearly 100 years ago during world war one.

Twenty-five years later during world war two, Winston Churchill said "In wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be protected by a bodyguard of lies."

Those two phrases, each very true in their own day and in their own historical contexts, were perhaps never more true than today because of the great advances in communications.

In World War One - correspondents used pigeons, telegraphs or slow messengers to get their stories out. Today, they are using satellite communications and smart phones.

But while technology has made quantum leaps - truth -- while still the objective of honest, independent war reporters - is still far too often a casualty.

This is in part because social media has allowed both sides in a conflict, particularly those conflicts in complicated areas such as the Middle East to bypass the media and post propaganda directly for public consumption.

Islamic State can post video of a beheading directly. Just a few years ago, such groups had to deliver a videocassette - remember those? They were as big as a book - at a television station.

This makes reporters who are seeking the truth more necessary but at the same time it has increased the dangers they face, often making them a target because they are not wanted by either side.

The war correspondent is a special breed, people I admire and respect and thank.

I have not covered any wars but I have known a number of journalists who have covered them. Ken Shork of Reuters was killed in Sierra Leone in 2000, another friend, David Blundy of the The London Sunday Times, was killed in el Salvador in the early 1980s.

One of the most challenging things facing war reporters - and many of them consider it a duty - is to recount how wars affect normal people.

Shork, the Reuters war reporter who was killed in Africa, became famous in part for his coverage of the Balkan wars in the 1990s, and particularly for his story that went down in journalistic history as The Romeo and Juliet in Sarajevo.

Their names were Boško Brkic and Admira Ismic. They were both 25. He was an Eastern Orthodox Bosnian Serb and she was a Muslim Bosniak. They had different faith -- one Christian, the other Muslim, - and so their story fits in very well with what is being discussed these days here in Assisi.

They were killed by snipers in 1993 while trying to cross the Vrbanja Bridge. They were trying to escape together. Their bodies lay there for days because no one was able to recover their bodies because of sniper fire.

They are buried together in Sarajevo's Lion Cemetery. Kurt was killed seven years later while covering another war, this time in Sierra Leone. He was cremated, and,

according to his wishes, half of his ashes were buried near those of Boško and Admira.

As I said before, war reporters are a particular breed.

One of the things that seem to link them together is the desire to tell the truth, even if it means risking their own lives

And then there is also the adrenaline component.

It may seem perverse but some reporters get a high from covering wars or being in a dangerous area. After that, everything else - political campaigns, business, culture - seem boring. They are often the first people to raise their hands when there is a need to cover conflicts.

But without them the world would be ignorant of what is really going on.

Jeremy Bowen of the BBC, who has covered many wars, and, in my opinion, is one of the best television reporters in the world today, wrote the following two years ago about Syria.

(quote) "Most journalists who regularly risk their lives to do their jobs are not foolhardy. They don't want to die. They might say that no story is worth their lives. But they might add that you're asking the wrong question. Because they're not going to die today.

"War journalists can usually find reasons to predict why they will survive ahead of their more impulsive colleagues.

"In every war, being in the wrong place at the wrong time will get you killed. Everyone I know who does this particular kind of journalism has a whole list of near-miss stories." (end quote)

Some people would say that people are crazy to do this kind of work. Why do they do it?

I'll let Jeremy Bowen respond in his own words from the same article he wrote in 2014

(quote) "I wanted to report the worst things that were happening in the world. I liked being a witness, sometimes to what seemed to be important historic events. But the excitement never went away. I liked living on the edge." (end quote)

Living on the edge means risking your life, and all good war correspondents know it. I'm talking about correspondents who go to the conflict zones and try to get close to the front line and amid the people, not those who write about wars from the comfort of their hotels.

In 2011 Rosie Garthwaite wrote a book called "How to Avoid Being Killed in a War Zone." Much of the advice in it comes from journalists.

One of the interesting things it warns against is the danger of seasoned war correspondents feeling that - because they have so much experience - they are invulnerable and so they will always cheat death.

Rageh Ommar, now with Al Jazeera and formerly of the BBC, writes in the introduction of that book: (quote) "The list of highly experienced dedicated and profession reporters who have been killed on assignment is every bit as tragically long as the one of young inexperienced journalists who go to war zones in search of a

break in foreign news reporting. For war correspondents, the next assignment is always the first assignment." (end quote)

A number of the intrepid ones have been kidnapped.

One of the most well known is James Foley, who in 2014 became the first American citizen killed by Islamic State. He was kidnapped in northwestern Syria along with others and he was later beheaded.

Terrorist groups raise a lot of money from kidnappings and ransoms. In Foley's case, they reportedly asked for 100 million euros from his family, his employers. The U.S. government refused to pay, in my opinion, rightly.

After Foley's death, Stephen Kizner, a former war reporter for the New York Times, wrote that the U.S. government was correct in not paying a ransom because it would produce more kidnappings in the future.

Kizner wrote that if government paid ransoms for journalists kidnapped in wars (quote) "that would make me afraid to pursue some of my reporting in the Middle East. I'd feel that whoever paid that ransom had essentially painted a target on my back. Now I can at least hope that in some desert hideout, terrorist organizations are calculating that it doesn't pay to kidnap Americans because Americans won't pay ransom." (endquote)

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, so far this year 16 journalists have been murdered, most of them were covering wars. These were not killed covering combat or in accidents but targeted for death because they were an irritant to those who wanted them out of the way.

I have been taking so far mostly about the print media but now I want to turn to another side of war reporting - photography - because the camera can often tell a story better than words or even film.

It was the war in Vietnam that first brought the horrors of conflict home the public quickly when transmission of pictures across the world became quicker.

We all remember that famous 1972 picture of crying children, including a naked girl, running away from a napalm attack in Vietnam.

That is one of the most powerful pictures ever to show what war does to ordinary people. As the American author and journalist Pete Hamill said, what photographers in Vietnam were seeking and what mattered most to them was (quote) "the truth, the elusive, frustrating truth" (close quote).

Time has moved on since the Vietnam era but unfortunately not much has changed regarding civilian casualties – both direct and indirect – of war.

A year ago in September of 2015, the picture of Alan Kurdi, the 2-year-old Syrian boy whose body was found on a beach in Turkey was seen around the world shortly after it was taken. We all remember it. As the New York Times said in an editorial, it put a human face on the refugee crisis.

That also holds true for images of the root cause of the refugee crisis - war - in this case the war in war in Syria.

Recently, Sebastian Junger, author of "The Perfect Storm" and who covered the war in Afghanistan, wrote an article for the magazine Vanity Fair saying war photographers are more important now than ever.

He writes: (quote) "At a time when images of inhumanity overwhelm us — and people the world over walk around with cell-phone cameras— the role of the war photographer might seem obsolete. But no. Today's conflicts demand experienced chroniclers to record a nuanced truth—and to counter the rampant distortion and propaganda of the Digital Age." (quote)

These images can shock - they should shock.

In concluding, perhaps to shock is the ultimate goal of all war reporting, whether is it written, television or photography. To shock people into doing something to end wars, to force us to get off our couches and break out of our comfort zone.

The ultimate goal of war reporting should be help us fight the so-call "sympathy fatigue" that can easily result from an abundance of bad news. The sympathy fatigue that makes it easier for us turn off the TV, turn the page of a magazine or newspaper and just go on with our daily lives and block out the reality of so many people suffering.

Without war reporters, war television crews, war photographers, we would remain ignorant. Ignorant of what is really going on, and more importantly, ignorant of the realization that we all have a duty to seek the truth.