All CENSORED on the Western Front

The Sanitization of War by the Censorship of Combat Photography

Introduction

Why do governments and military chiefs insist on censoring the photographs taken by reporters in the theatre of war? Is there a justification for the banning of journalists completely in order to fight wars in secret? Is the reasoning behind it to protect soldiers from the enemy or the public from the horror?

To try and answer these questions I shall be examining the case of Zoriah Miller, whose pictures of dead servicemen in Iraq not only led to him being barred from many American held areas of the country, but also brought the issue of wartime censorship into the public domain. I shall also examine the connotations of embedding journalists within military units and the role that the media and the public play in the issue of censorship.

To aid me in my investigations I shall be looking at editorials from the *New York Times, The British Journal of Photography* and *Military Review,* the thoughts and opinions of photographic luminaries such as Philip Jones Griffiths and the, contentious, issue of embedding journalists in military units.

Part 1

On the 26th of June 2008, the American freelance photographer, Zoriah Miller was embedded with a squad of US Marines in the city of Fallujah, Iraq. The squad he was with were patrolling a part of the city, which was approximately a block away from the council offices. Suddenly an explosion, caused by a suicide bomber, ripped through the building killing three marines, two interpreters and 20 Iraqis.

Miller, and the squad he was with, ran to the scene of the attack and were greeted with a scene of utter carnage. In a telephone interview with the Inter Press Service (IPS) he related how he could see "...human pieces – a skull cap with hair, bone shards". He said that of the Marines he went in with, one stared vomiting whilst others just stood staring, not knowing what to do. "It was completely surreal".

Miller explained that he photographed the scene because "Nobody in the U.S. has any idea what it means when they hear that 20 people died in a suicide bombing. I want people to be able to associate those numbers with the scene and the actual loss of human life, and to show why soldiers are suffering from PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder],"
Kamber M & Arango T. (2008). *4,000 US Deaths, and a Handful of Images.* Available:
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/26/world/middleeast/26censor.html?_r=2.

After the bombing Miller was debriefed by NCIS and gave them copies of his photographs to aid in the investigation. Miller also showed the pictures to the other marines and was assured that they were okay with them being published. However, after placing the images that he took onto

his website he was informed that he had broken him embed contract by showing the dead marines in their boots and their uniforms. But the rules for embedded journalist as issued by the Secretary of Defence states in section 4.H.2 that 'Battlefield casualties may be covered by embedded media as long as the service members identity is protected from disclosure for 72 hours or upon verification of a NOK (next of kin) notification, whichever is first'.
US Dept. of Defence. (2003). *Ground Rules for Embedded Reporters in Iraq.* Available: http://www.tallrite.com/weblog/blogimages/refs2004/groundrules4embeds.htm.

Unknown Author. (2010). *Zoriah Miller.* Available: http://plurk-pics.blogspot.com/2010/06/zoriah-miller.html.

Miller was then flown back to Baghdad and was informed that he was no longer allowed to work in any US controlled area of Iraq, and Major General John Kelly tried to have him barred from all US military facilities worldwide.

Miller remarked that this was "…absolutely censorship. I took pictures of something that they didn't like and they removed me. Deciding what I can and cannot document, I don't see a clearer definition of censorship."

Later a senior military official in Baghdad said that "while his (Millers) photographs were still under review, a preliminary assessment showed that he had not violated any ground rules established by the multinational force command. But while he was still credentialed to work in Iraq, several military officials acknowledged that no military unit would have him."
Kamber M & Arango T. (2008). *4,000 US Deaths, and a Handful of Images.* Available: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/26/world/middleeast/26censor.html?_r=2.

But it must be noted that this reaction is not endemic within the US military, but is still a problem with some of the older generation of military officials who have a 'Vietnam mentality' when it comes to dealing with the media.

General Wesley K Clark, US Army, Retired, who is now a military analyst believes that 'denying media access to military action is a mistake'. He related how one US Army officer had remarked to him that in the war in Afghanistan, "There was nobody there to tell the story of the youth of America going out and doing this great mission with such success in real tough terrain".
Miracle T.L. (2003). *The Army and Embedded Media.* Available: http://www.iwar.org.uk/psyops/resources/embedded-media/miracle.pdf.

It is understood by the media that some form of censorship of images has to be enforced in times of war. Any photograph that may give the enemy an advantage or may put soldiers security and/or lives at risk have to be withheld from publication. But politicians and military officials have also been accused of censoring images that could endanger the public support for military action. Prior to the Normandy invasion in 1944, General Dwight Eisenhower wrote a memorandum stating that, "Correspondents have a job in war as essential as military personnel…fundamentally, public opinion wins wars." And it is apparent that this media mentality is still part of military tactics. Colonel Rick Long of the US Marine Corps was quoted as saying, "Frankly our job is to win the war. Part of that is information warfare. So we are going to attempt to dominate the information environment."

Some critics claim that the embedding of journalists within military units is part of the military strategy to control what the media sees and reports The American journalist Guy Talese remarked that "…correspondents that drive around in tanks and armoured personnel carriers are spoon-fed what the military gives them…"
Jacobson .C. (2009). *Enemy Within.* Available: http://www.bjp-online.com/british-journal-of-photography/report/1645945/enemy.

And perhaps the media representatives also exercise a modicum of self censorship, for as Los Angeles Times reporter John Hendren noted, "When you're living in tents with these guys and eating what they eat and cleaning the dirt off the glasses, it's a whole different experience. You definitely have a concern about knowing people so well that you sympathise with them."
Miracle T.L. (2003). *The Army and Embedded Media.* Available: http://www.iwar.org.uk/psyops/resources/embedded-media/miracle.pdf.

But it is not just the military and governments that are to blame for the censorship of war. The press must also shoulder some of the blame. During the Korean War the photographer Bert Hardy was working for the Picture Post. He took this picture of a suspected opponent of the South Korean regime but the picture was banned by the magazines owner, Edward Hulton, as he felt that it would "undermine the anti-communist war effort".
Mitchell S. (2002). *Beyond the Lens.* Available: http://www.worldpress.org/Europe/665.cfm#down.

thequintessential. (2010). *Korea Picture Post.* Available: https://iconicphotos.wordpress.com/tag/bert-hardy/

Conclusion

So who is to blame for the censorship and sanitization of war? The truth is everyone is to blame. The military would have us believe that war has become surgically precise. They would have us believe that with the technology they have to hand death is kept to a minimum. They want to show us that only the enemy is killed or wounded and the chances of civilian deaths are negligible.

The media themselves are to blame. Philip Jones Griffiths, the photographer and once president of Magnum Photos, declared that media conglomerates posed a dangerous threat to photojournalism. He said that "What we get to think and know about is in the hands of a very few…A truly informed public in antithetical to the interests of modern consumer capitalism.

This capitalism is at the heart of what the media will print. Theirs is a business, and they have to give their readership and viewers what they want. In 1988 the *Daily Telegraph* printed pictures of two soldiers were murdered by a mob at an IRA funeral. This led to a stream of complaints from their readers, one of which complained that the photographs had distressed her and had "put her off her Sunday worship, Sunday lunch and had disturbed her sleep".
Mitchell S. (2002). *Beyond the Lens.* Available: http://www.worldpress.org/Europe/665.cfm#down

When we ask about who is to blame for media censorship we have to look inward. We can blame to government and its agencies for trying to hide some of its more distasteful practices. We can blame the media for counting the pennies at the cost of the truth or we can blame ourselves for not really wanting to know the truth, just in case it upsets our Sunday lunch. Perhaps this "self censorship in the name of social cohesion", really is in our best interests.
Wells L (1997). *Photography: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge. p276

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