

Pulitzer Prize awarded to report on US atrocities in Vietnam

Patrick Martin
7 April 2004

The Ohio daily newspaper *Toledo Blade* won a Pulitzer Prize for its series on Vietnam War atrocities committed by the Tiger Force, an elite US Army unit, it was announced April 5. The series, by reporters Michael D. Sallah, Mitch Weiss and Joe Mahr, examined the record of the platoon during a seven-month period in 1967 when its members killed hundreds of civilians.

The report was unusual, not only in exposing atrocities by American soldiers—murders known about and covered up by higher authorities in the military—but in linking the killings to official US military policy in Vietnam, which declared large parts of the country to be “free-fire” zones in which soldiers were authorized to kill anything that moved.

The series took a compassionate approach both to the Vietnamese victims and to the soldiers who belonged to Tiger Force, many of whom suffered mental and emotional breakdowns as a result of their wartime actions.

The *Blade* series was doubly significant because it ran in the newspaper during the US occupation of Iraq, when new atrocities were being committed against innocent civilians. The timing of the award is also appropriate—coming during the week that the US military launched its biggest search-and-destroy mission since Vietnam, targeting insurgent guerrillas in the city of Falluja, while also engaging in street-by-street combat with Shiite insurgents in Baghdad and in southern Iraq.

The series of articles on Tiger Force, entitled “Buried Secrets, Brutal Truths,” was triggered by the decision of several veterans of the unit to come forward with their accounts. Some had witnessed the atrocities and been unable to stop them; others had directly participated and are now remorseful and haunted by the

memories. Nine of the former soldiers suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

The reporters found that an Army investigation had found substantial evidence that 18 soldiers had committed war crimes by killing unarmed and unresisting Vietnamese civilians, but the Nixon and Ford administrations failed to prosecute anyone. Weiss told the *Blade*, according to an account on the newspaper’s web site, “I’m glad we won, but it’s really a somber victory. Tiger Force killed innocent men, women, and children and the men who committed these acts continue to go unpunished.”

Sallah added, “What’s important to me is the Army get to the bottom of who killed this investigation 29 years ago.” The records of the official investigation still remain classified, and no official, civilian or military, has been held accountable for the killings or the cover-up.

The work of the three reporters included interviewing 43 former Tiger Force members and traveling to Vietnam to talk to the families of the victims. This clearly involved a substantial commitment of resources for a regional newspaper in a city of 300,000, which has never before won a Pulitzer Prize. Managing Editor Kurt Franck told the *Blade*, “We had a moral obligation to report this news. Where the government failed, *The Blade* closed that chapter.”

The award is an implicit rebuke to the bulk of the American media, which ignored the *Blade* series at the time. There was virtually no television coverage of this major exposure of wartime atrocities and most daily newspapers—including the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*—ran only brief and perfunctory accounts.

Several other Pulitzers awarded Monday went to reporting and commentary that was critical of the agenda of the Bush administration and corporate

America, in what is perhaps an indication of more fundamental political shifts in the United States.

The prize for international reporting went to *Washington Post* foreign correspondent Anthony Shadid, a descendant of Lebanese immigrants who is fluent in Arabic and provided vivid, on-the-spot reporting from Baghdad throughout the US invasion. The Pulitzer Prize committee praised Shadid's "extraordinary ability to capture, at personal peril, the voices and emotions of Iraqis as their country was invaded, their leader toppled and their way of life upended."

None of the myriad reporters who were embedded in US military units during the war was nominated for an award, nor were any of the editorial writers or columnists—the overwhelming majority—who backed the Bush administration's drive to war and enthused over the swift US military advance.

Shadid's reports were noteworthy for detailing the impact of the US bombing campaign on Iraqi civilians in Baghdad during the war. As an Arab-American who previously covered the Palestinian *intifada* on the West Bank for the *Boston Globe*—where he was shot and wounded by Israeli troops—he clearly was more sensitive to the suffering of the Iraqi people than most of the US press corps.

This was reflected in front page reports like these: "In a Moment, Lives Get Blown Apart," on March 27, 2003; "'The Whole World Cries': Crowded Market Turns Into Scene of Carnage," March 29, 2003; "A Boy Who Was 'Like a Flower': 'The Sky Exploded' and Arkan Daif, 14, Was Dead," March 31, 2003. The Pulitzer committee clearly focused on these reports, since they gave the award to Shadid only, and not to his *Post* colleagues who joined him in Baghdad after the US conquest of Iraq and co-authored much of his subsequent reporting.

While many of these later reports were standard coverage of the actions of the US occupation regime and the American military forces, Shadid was one of a handful of journalists—and perhaps the only American—who interviewed guerrilla insurgents on why they were fighting the US, as well as profiling ordinary Iraqis with a wide range of views on the occupation and the future course of their country.

The *Los Angeles Times* won five Pulitzer prizes, including an award for national reporting for an

examination of the methods used by Wal-Mart in its rise to the status of the world's largest corporation. This included a clear picture of how the company drives down labor costs, both by squeezing its own workers in the United States, and by building a huge network of low-cost suppliers, mainly in China.

The *New York Times* won the Public Service Award for a series examining the problem of workplace safety. The Pulitzer committee noted that reporters David Barstow and Lowell Bergman "relentlessly examined death and injury among American workers and exposed employers who break basic safety rules."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact