



Telling the story of conflict

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY/WAR

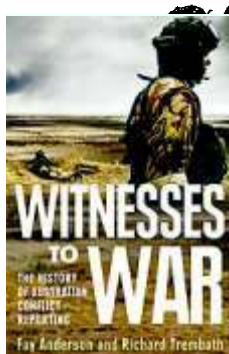
WITNESSES TO WAR: The History of Australian Conflict Reporting. By Fay Anderson and Richard Trembath. Melbourne University Press, 500pp, \$36.99.

Reviewer: JUDITH IRELAND

The mess of war breeds all kinds of stories and with Anzac Day we have been knee-deep in tales of daring, hardship and tragedy. But what about the story about the storytellers? Media reports are one of the basic ways we learn about conflicts, and yet, according to Melbourne University historians Fay Anderson and Richard Trembath, Australian coverage of war "has never been fully examined".

Anderson and Trembath provide a comprehensive history of Australian war-reporting in *Witnesses to War*. Beginning with a battle near Waikato, New Zealand, in 1863 (covered by Howard Willoughby for *The Argus*), the authors detail Australian conflict-reporting from colonial days to the two world wars, the Cold War conflicts and more recent wars in Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East and Afghanistan.

War-corresponding is a high-profile but niche profession – only about 750 Australians have reported on international conflicts. And despite its glamorous and romantic image, it is not without its drawbacks. Famous World War II journalist Alan Moorehead described his experiences in Tobruk as "strange". "We typed on the backs of trucks, on beaches, in deserted houses in gun emplacements and tents. We hoisted our typewriters on kerosene cases, on bathtubs and rolls of kit . . . And in the end we could write anywhere at any hour of the day or



night – anywhere that is, except during a bombardment, for I tried it and I failed miserably."

While the makeshift conditions have not changed much for war reporters (more commonly known today as "foreign correspondents"), there is a growing acknowledgment that journalists can be scarred by their experiences of conflict. Some reporters still cling to the old gung-ho stereotypes, but

others are open about the consequences of their work, which include "substance abuse, relationship breakdowns, emotional nihilism, depression, dissociative episodes, gambling and shoplifting".

Based on the accounts of reporters, photographers and cinematographers – including contemporary interviews with more than 40 journalists – *Witness to War* maps a dramatic change in the ways wars have been reported, from the early days of photography in World War I, to newsreels and broadcasts in War II, television in

Vietnam, cable news in the First Gulf War and the round-the-clock internet and satellite reporting of 21st-century conflicts.

As in other areas of the media, war coverage after 2001 has been distinguished by the "expectation that the journalist was always available" – compared with Vietnam days when journalists had days to follow a lead. "We have to move so fast that reporting has suffered. It's nowhere near as meticulous as it was," UPI's Kate Webb observes. There is also a dangerous reliance on syndication and public relations material. Even though there are many more Australians journalists covering conflicts today (as opposed to the 11 journalists and two photographers who covered World War I), they tend to parachute in for a short time only.

While war reporting is deadly by nature, the occupational hazards have frighteningly increased since the Bosnian war. There's no such thing as journalistic



Occupational hazards: Australian combat cameraman Neil Davis, who was killed in Thailand in 1985.



immunity any more. Apart from random roadside bombs and suicide bombers, there is the risk of abduction and deliberate killings. The ABC's Trevor Bormann told Anderson and Trembath that the Taliban in Afghanistan "despise foreigners so much that even if you're a journalist, to them you're still a legitimate target".

But of course, the more things change, the more the issues are exactly the same. The censorship of the world wars, where copy was edited, changed and distorted at the military's behest is eerily familiar when compared with the military's active management of the media in the Gulf and Afghanistan. Anderson and Trembath interview disgruntled journalists who observe it was possible to cover the First Gulf War from bed in the hotel, such was the US military's control over information.

The Australian Defence Force is also accused of remaining obstructive and opaque to journalists. Fairfax's Paul McGeough is harshly critical of the "appalling, shameless" way the Australian military have imposed restrictions on reporting Australia's basic role in Afghanistan. "The ADF media doctrine makes the media their number one enemy," McGeough says. As Anderson and Trembath note, the public still don't know exactly how many Australian soldiers have been injured or harmed in Afghanistan. The information gap is a funny contradiction for a nation devoted to upholding the Anzac legend.

Witnesses to War is a valuable new history of Australian journalists in conflict zones, full of anecdotes and personalities. However, it falls short when drawing the stories together. Only the brief introduction and conclusion expand upon the detailed account to think about what it means, both for the journalistic profession and Australians' understanding of war.

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