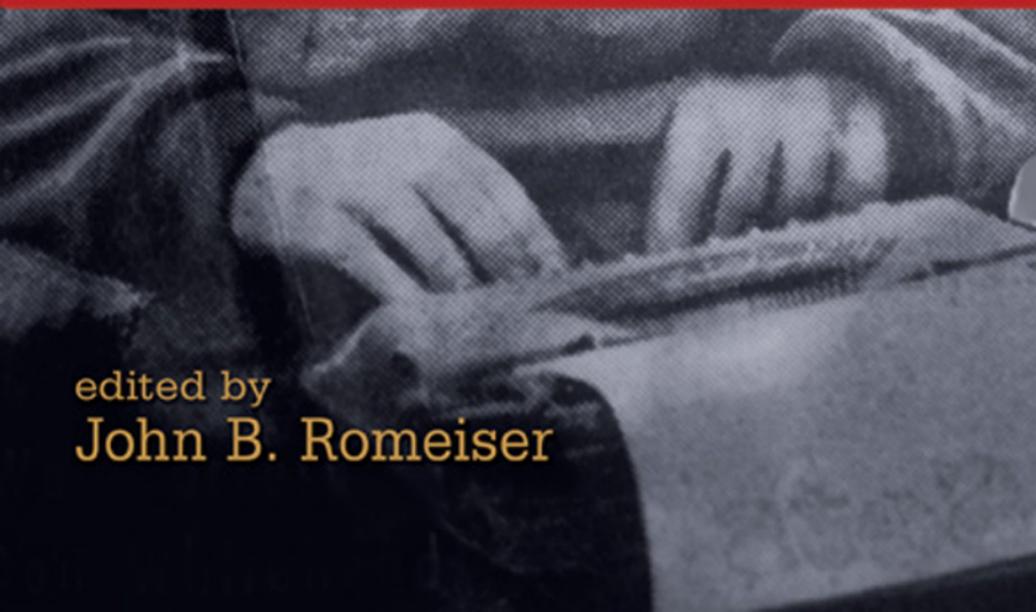




# COMBAT REPORTER

*Don Whitehead's World War II Diary and Memoir*



edited by  
**John B. Romeiser**

# Combat Reporter



# Combat Reporter

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DON WHITEHEAD'S  
WORLD WAR II DIARY AND MEMOIRS

*Edited by John B. Romeiser*

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## *Editor's Note and Acknowledgments*

**T**HE Donald F. Whitehead war diary covers an eight-month span, from September 1942 to April 1943, and provides the primary source material for this book. My transcription has retained the original spelling and punctuation. Interpolated or clarifying material is bracketed immediately following. The second source for this project is an unfinished typescript of a book that Whitehead was clearly planning to write on his World War II experiences. The text covers only his assignments in North Africa and Sicily and omits his coverage of the fierce combat on the Italian peninsula, the Normandy invasion and battle for France, and the subsequent liberation of Nazi Germany. In the case of the unpublished book, I have done some modest editing to correct misspellings and make the text more consistent.

Home once again and able to verify his AP stories and other sources, Whitehead had the time to check the accuracy of his spelling of certain place names and individuals, as well as to shed additional light on his diary's material, which might not have been apparent to him at the time he wrote it. It is not clear why he never finished what would have been a magnificent contribution to the understanding of the press during wartime. I suspect that being called to Korea to report the war for AP diverted his attention. By the time he returned from Korea, he had been assigned to Washington, where he began working on a book on J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI, a topic made much more relevant and marketable by Cold War fears.

The Whitehead war diary was found in his personal possessions in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where his only child, Ruth Whitehead, had moved near the end of her life. I am grateful to her daughter, Marie Weidus, Don Whitehead's granddaughter, for making this precious journal available to me so that I could complete this project. Moreover, she was patient in allowing its use for almost two years as I moved forward on this book, a privilege that permitted me to verify the accuracy of each word on multiple occasions. That is not to say that Don Whitehead's handwriting was

not clear and legible, especially considering the precarious circumstances under which he wrote. When a fountain pen was not available, he would sometimes record his entries in pencil, then go back and retrace the words in black ink. As he points out, German bombers were all too often plying the skies above him and his fellow correspondents, dropping their deadly payloads and shaking the ground for hundreds of yards just as he was sitting down to write.<sup>1</sup> On other occasions, he had to contend with the bitter cold of the Libyan winter or sudden deluges that penetrated his shelter and left inky splotches on the ruled pages of his leather-bound diary.

For those who are interested, the bulk of the Whitehead papers, letters, and photographs, spanning a five-decade-long career that included two Pulitzer prizes, can be found in the Special Collections of the University of Tennessee's Hoskins Library.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Kurt Piehler, director of the University's Center for the Study of War and Society, for his steadfast support and encouragement. I would also like to thank Command Sgt. Major Ben Franklin (First Infantry Division, Sixteenth Regiment), who helped me understand many of the abbreviations and terms found in the diary. His effervescent and eternally hospitable wife, Ute, deciphered some of the more troublesome words. Even though born and educated in Germany, she said that the handwriting was not that different between German and English. She and Ben have been my constant inspiration throughout my research on Don Whitehead.

## *Foreword*

RICK ATKINSON

**N**o one bore witness better than Don Whitehead. Among World War II combat correspondents, he was one of the few whose powers of observation and literary sensibilities remain vibrant generations later. A self-effacing former advertising manager for a newspaper in Harlan, Kentucky, Whitehead possessed the priceless impulse to go to the sound of the guns. As a reporter for the Associated Press, he covered the invasions of Italy and Normandy and the campaigns across France and Germany through the end of the European war. He distinguished himself further in Korea, and he won the Pulitzer Prize twice.

When Whitehead went off to war, the professional and independent combat correspondent had been in existence less than a century. Until the Crimean War in the 1850s, those who wrote about battle tended to be either participants, like Julius Caesar and Thucydides, or fiction writers, like Stephen Crane and Leo Tolstoy. It was up to Ernie Pyle, Edward R. Murrow, John Hersey, Whitehead, and other great reporters to disprove or at least mitigate Senator Hiram Johnson's grim 1917 aphorism that "the first casualty when war comes is truth." The professionalism, skepticism, and courage of those World War II correspondents set the bar very high for the journalists following in their footsteps, such as David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan in Vietnam.

Whitehead put himself in harm's way for months and then years at a time. He had an ear for irony and an eye for the telling detail—the first American gun to fire across the Messina Straits from Sicily into mainland Italy in August 1943, he tells us, was dubbed *Draftee*. He also possessed a knack for metaphor, describing how a battered seaside villa "trembled like a palsied old gentleman" during a heavy shelling at Anzio in 1944. We see Whitehead homesick and weary, poignantly pining for his wife, yet pressing on to do what had to be done. If at times he could be cynical and appalled by war's waste, he had earned those moments of disgust as

surely as had any GI with a sleeve full of chevrons and years of overseas service. This volume, deftly combining his diary and a previously unpublished memoir, brings Whitehead and his reporting back to life, and twenty-first-century readers are the richer for it.

# Combat Reporter



## *Introduction*

**T**HROUGHOUT his distinguished career as a journalist, Donald Ford Whitehead always aspired to be where the action was. From the time he was a young boy growing up in Harlan, Kentucky, where he once witnessed a murder between feuding families, Whitehead not only understood the necessity but relished the opportunity to witness the breaking news he was charged with reporting. Like his friend and fellow journalist Ernie Pyle, whom he first met during the Sicily campaign, Whitehead assumed the considerable risks of frontline reporting, so that he could get a more authentic story for his readers back home. Years later, he explained that the reason he wanted to leave the safety and security of reporting out of the Associated Press headquarters in New York City was that he “wanted to be up front where the fighting men were.”

Born in Inman, Virginia, on April 8, 1908, newsman and author Don Whitehead became city editor of the *Harlan Daily Enterprise* in 1929 and covered the labor wars of the early 1930s in Harlan County, Kentucky. Whitehead’s affiliation with the Associated Press began when he joined the wire service in 1935 as night editor in Memphis, Tennessee, and then became an AP correspondent in Knoxville from 1937 to 1940. In early 1941, Whitehead was transferred to New York as a feature writer. His pay increased from \$65 to \$85 per week, but only after he informed his boss in New York that he could not make ends meet on his Knoxville salary.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Whitehead increasingly saw his assignments shift, as he began to cover the preparations for war stateside, including the Lend-Lease shipments of bombers to England via Newfoundland and military maneuvers in the Carolinas, where recruits trained with logs on wheels in place of artillery and shouldered pieces of wood instead of rifles. Like many, he knew that the army had a long way to go before it would be ready to tackle the disciplined, well-equipped troops of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. In August

1942, he was notified that he would be going overseas and began the process to be accredited as a war correspondent.

Upon his arrival in the Middle East to cover the British Eighth Army's pursuit of General Erwin Rommel for the Associated Press, Whitehead quickly learned the difference between the war correspondent and the combat correspondent. As he wrote in his unpublished autobiography in the early 1950s, the text of which is incorporated in this book: "Here was the opportunity I had been seeking, the chance to become a combat correspondent. Those of us in the trade developed a snobbish pride in drawing a distinction between a 'war' correspondent and a 'combat' correspondent. WE righteously considered our combat status a step higher in the correspondents' caste system and, consequently, we had the same clannish feeling that bound combat troops against the rear echelons who had never heard a shot fired in the war."

On a personal level, staying in Manhattan to work for the largest and most prestigious wire service in the world surely must have made good sense to Whitehead. He was thirty-four, and he, his beloved wife Marie, and their young daughter Ruth had moved to a nice home on Long Island. At a time when many women did not normally pursue careers, Marie Whitehead had taken a job with a Manhattan advertising agency. Don Whitehead's career path looked bright as well. But there was a war that needed to be covered, and Don was convinced that he was just the man to do it. Despite warnings of the considerable personal risk he would undergo and the uncertainties as to when he could return home to his family, Whitehead did not blanch. In his usual gung-ho manner, he acknowledged these pitfalls and challenged his cautious higher-ups, "Time's a-wastin. When and where do I go?"

While Whitehead referred to the supportive role that his wife played in his switch to the hazards of frontline war reporting, it is abundantly clear from her letters to him in North Africa that she missed him deeply, just as he so profoundly missed her. Some of his most poignant entries relate to their separation. On December 4, 1942, Whitehead wrote from Cairo, a city that he found both enticing and maddeningly frustrating: "I found seven letters from Marie waiting for me at the office. It was wonderful to hear even though hearing has made me blue." Just under two weeks later, he marked their anniversary while writing from Marble Arch, Libya: "Fourteen years ago Marie and I were married—our fourteenth anniversary and I'm sitting in a tent in the desert 10,000 miles from home." In Médenine, Tunisia, in March 1943, he wrote in a similar

vein: “There was a letter from Marie, too. She was feeling so blue when she wrote it. And I can do nothing to help her. It’s such a helpless feeling. All I can do is pray that this goddamned war will be over before many more months have passed.” Later that same month, still wandering in the desert and pursuing Rommel in what seemed an endless “fox and hound” chase, Whitehead wrote despairingly: “Most of my thoughts of the future revolve around one person—and that is Marie. God, how I want her—how I long to hold her in my arms—that will do it. But I can see us in each others arms without actually feeling ourselves together—but we’ll be in a heaven of our own—a timeless boundless space beyond understanding. That time will come because of our love—and then there can be no loneliness or heartaches or pain.”

The narrative that follows chronicles Don Whitehead’s journalistic trek from New York City through Sicily. The diary itself focuses solely on his time in North Africa. It is unclear why Whitehead stopped writing his impressions and reflections one month before Allied troops captured Tunis and expelled the Germans and Italians. Perhaps once he had been assigned to Sicily to cover the U.S. military operations there in July 1943, the Associated Press expected him to devote all his attention to reporting the American side, leaving him less time to keep his journal current.

The Sicily portion of this narrative is drawn from his unfinished book typescript, written almost a decade later. The source for some of the Sicily narrative can be found in the dispatches Whitehead wrote for the Associated Press. Both the diary and his unpublished war memoirs are relatively short, so I decided that it would make more sense to combine them, with the diary serving as the primary source. The alternating voices of the frontline reporter and the more seasoned correspondent, writing six years after the war has ended, are woven together in such a way that the reader will, I hope, gain from the richness of their complementary perspectives. In order to distinguish these two narratives in the North Africa section, I have chosen to italicize the nondiary sections. While a certain amount of duplication can be found in several entries covering similar events, they are, for the most part, written from entirely different viewpoints.

The diary records the heartaches, triumphs, and tribulations of a frontline reporter coming of age and acquiring the skills needed to compete against rival journalists and to please the higher-ups at the Associated Press, while always keeping the scoop in mind. It also provides graphic slices of life in a combat zone, including the daily battles with thirst, the

cold, the heat, fleas, sandstorms, and bland rations. Cognizant of the dangers of war reporting, Whitehead and his colleagues speak openly of their fears but shake them off with a great deal of stoicism and good humor. The shared cigarette, unearthed cache of red wine, or swig of smooth Kentucky bourbon from a flask in a buddy's knapsack often give them the necessary courage to face another day of fatigue, discomfort, and pervasive boredom.

In many ways, Whitehead's unfinished World War II memoirs offer a gloss on the earlier diary, by providing a retrospective historical view that would have been lacking in the journal. One of the most striking examples can be found in reference to Benghazi, Libya, on November 22, 1942, where Whitehead records: "We toured the ruins of Bengasi today, poking about in dark, silent buildings lettered with trash and discarded clothing and household odds and ends. In the Jewish quarter the rabbi said the Germans had hung four Jews as a warning not to be friendly to the English. The word 'Jew' was printed on the doors of their homes and the little stalls in which they had their shops." Several months later after the British entered Tripoli, Whitehead gained a greater sense of how the Jewish population had suffered under German and Italian rule:

In the afternoon Tucker, Zinder Lloyd Williams of Reuters and I went down to the Ghetto. Never have I had such an experience—it was embarrassing and shocking. As soon as the Jews learned we were American and English, they mobbed us. Men threw their arms around us and kissed our faces. Women patted us. Children clung to our legs and kissed our shoes. Everyone wanted to shake hands. A husky fellow grabbed us by the arms and pulled us through the crowds down a dark stairway into a room where a patriarch in a white robe sat at a bare table. Dozens crowded into the room. The doors were barred. They gave us wine, nuts, candy. We were given a royal welcome as though we personally had liberated them. They told us the Italians had treated them worse than the Germans.

Writing almost a decade later, he offers an expanded and more poignant account of the Tripoli experience:

The torrent of people flowed after us until the room was jammed and no others could squeeze their way inside. Women brought us wine and bread and cheese. Everyone, who could, reached out to touch us or to

grasp our hands as though we were Messiahs and a touch would heal the wounds they had suffered in body and spirit.

They were laughing and crying and shouting. We were the symbols of liberation to these people. We represented the hope that had burned in their hearts for so long. We were freedom come at last.

And suddenly I felt humble and ashamed . . . ashamed that any human being could suffer the indignities these people had suffered. Ashamed that they should have reason for such gratitude.

I felt like weeping. And I did.

Having witnessed the horrors of the Nazi death camp Buchenwald later in the war, Whitehead was perhaps better able to articulate more explicitly the joy and gladness of an oppressed people and to share in their emotions.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike his wire dispatches for the Associated Press, the writing in the diary and war autobiography is more personal and less dispassionate. Whitehead is able to vent his frustrations with the petty politics of the command structure or with the bureaucratic hurdles he often had to clear just to be able to report. His complaints are more numerous in the diary, which he probably never expected to see the light of day. Cooped up in Cairo for weeks before he is able to join the Eighth Army in the desert, he grouches: "Cairo becomes more nerve-racking as the days go by. This place gets on your nerves, in your hair and rasps like a file. It's the politics, the gossip and the petty problems, which only hamper any effort to get a job done. I'm still waiting for the British to come through with my credentials."

Moreover, he expresses the horror of combat and its attendant destruction of innocent lives and property in graphic terms, using language that would most likely have never made it past the censors at Associated Press headquarters in New York. At Mersa Brega, on December 16, 1943, Whitehead writes: "The bodies of Scotsmen lie in the minefields where they were caught by exploding traps, growing black in the sun. Mines are everywhere. I saw a desert burial of a young Scot beside the road, while the bagpipes played in the distance. The padre said a few words and the soldiers stood silent with their heads bared. On the road a few yards away rolled the tanks, guns and trucks. Planes roared overhead—but the group at the grave seemed oblivious to all the noise and uproar." The terseness of this brief entry in the diary contrasts sharply with the more lyrical yet darker description from his unfinished war memoirs.

Again, the perspective of ten years and much more dying along the way transforms the event into a compelling vignette of war:

The bodies of Highlanders lay in the minefields growing black under the sun. Sappers were busy clearing the roads for the advance and could not take the time to recover the bodies. The stench of death lay heavily over the desert.

Once we stopped and watched the burial of a young Scot beside the road. Across the sands rolled the high, reedy wailing of the bagpipes, a thin and mournful dirge in the roar of planes overhead and the rumbling of tanks and trucks along the road. Soldiers stood with heads bared while the chaplain intoned a prayer. The body was lowered into a shallow grave and covered with sand. The white cross looked lonely and incongruous marking the mound already being rippled by the wind.

While in Sicily covering the battle for Mount Brolo, Whitehead takes aim at General George Patton, a man who, though a brilliant tactician, epitomized for him the vanity and arrogance of an individual with no empathy for the sacrifices of the common soldier:

A short time later General Patton came riding up in his command car. His varnished helmet shone in the sun and the famous pearl-handled revolver glinted at his side. He was accompanied by young Senator Lodge of Massachusetts.

The command car stopped at the base of the hill where the tired, filthy infantrymen were filing down from fire-blackened Mount Brolo, dragging their feet like gaunt zombies. Along the roadway and on the sides of the mountain lay the bodies of scores of Americans cut down in the bloody twenty-four-hour battle. There were more bodies in the lemon grove below the road but we couldn't see them.

"All you men from Massachusetts fall out over here!" Patton ordered.

A few weary doughboys trudged over to the roadside and stood listlessly waiting. The senator from Massachusetts walked over to them and made a little speech. Lodge may have delivered an excellent talk there among the dead on the slopes of Brolo. But for the life of me I cannot remember what he said. All I recall now is Patton standing tall and straight in his command car.

"The American soldier is the greatest soldier in all the world," the general said. And then he pointed to the mountains. "Only American soldiers can climb mountains like those."

All at once the whole little tableau sickened me. I wanted to get away from the voices of the general and the senator. The dead scattered on the hillside and in the lemon grove spoke eloquently enough.

On a less somber note, Don Whitehead often enjoys regaling his readers with amusing anecdotes and yarns. Sometimes the joke is on Whitehead himself as, for example, the time he met an officer who shared his enthusiasm for the Bluegrass State and for horse racing. Writing in his diary, he recalls: "I hadn't heard his name when we were introduced. We were sitting on a cot in the semi-darkness and I poured him a slug [of Canadian Club] into his canteen cup. The talk turned to horses. I began giving him pointers on racing and sharing my knowledge of the turf." As it turns out, the unknown officer is none other than Lieut. Col. C. V. "Sonny" Whitney, a famous and wealthy horse breeder. As Whitehead remembers: "Even in the darkness, Lieut. Col. Whitney probably could see the blush that suffused my burning face. But he was a gentleman. He didn't laugh."

After the campaigns in North Africa and Sicily drew to a close, Don Whitehead went on to cover the invasion of Italy, the landings in Normandy on D-Day, the race across France (getting a well-deserved scoop on the liberation of Paris), and, finally, the arduous slog across Germany as the Allies moved toward Berlin and V-E Day, May 8, 1945. The bulk of his World War II reporting for the Associated Press can now be found in *Beachhead Don: Reporting the War from the European Theater, 1942–1945*. He was fortunate enough to have survived almost three years of harrowing reporting and countless close calls with no more than a few scratches. Soon thereafter, he was on the trail of the big story once again, and in 1946, he covered the explosion of an atomic bomb at Bikini Atoll. A few short years later, he joined American forces in Korea, where he provided distinguished coverage of that conflict for the AP. His efforts were rewarded, at long last, by the awarding of two Pulitzer prizes for distinguished journalism.

During the 1950s, Whitehead served as Washington bureau chief for the *New York Herald Tribune* and wrote the first of his five books, the best-selling *The FBI Story*, which was later made into a popular movie starring James Stewart. He returned to Knoxville in 1959 to begin writing a column for the *News Sentinel*, a pleasant change of pace from the grueling war reporting and working in Washington. Whitehead died in Knoxville on January 12, 1981, at age 72.