

Lowy Institute Media Award 2013

"Untaking Risks: Denis Warner - Six Decades Reporting Asia's Conflicts and Asia's Rise"

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***Check against final delivery**

It is a special privilege to have been asked to talk today about the career of my father, Denis Warner, as a war correspondent and foreign correspondent.

I warmly welcome this initiative by the Lowy Institute to establish a media award and to pay tribute to foreign correspondents like my father. It is no less important now to have Australian journalists reporting on global events and contributing to the national discussion of international affairs than it was when my father began his career in the 1940s.

Thanks also to the National Archives for help in searching their files.

I deeply loved, admired and greatly respected my father. But he is also a man who through taking incredible risks, year after year to tell stories of life and conflict in our region helped, I believe, to shape the country we are today and especially how we see ourselves.

"Untaking risks" the telegram from my father to my mother would read, sent from almost anywhere - Kashmir, Kabul, Hanoi, Saigon, Seoul, Rangoon, Tokyo, Jakarta, New Delhi. She was at home in Singapore with three young kids, and had no good reason to believe him.

My father spent almost six decades reporting the conflicts of Asia and Asia's rise.

My mother called her first book, published almost 60 years ago, Don't Type in Bed, and complained that she shared her married life with a portable Hermes typewriter - a flat, battered machine dad had won from an American correspondent in a craps

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game on Saipan towards the end of World War Two. He took it with him everywhere, tucked under his arm - mum only losing her patience when he popped it up on his knees to type a story in bed. And one of my most enduring memories is dad sitting in his office at home, just up from my bedroom, tap tapping at speed on his manual typewriter, the tip of his tongue touching his upper lip in concentration.

He wrote well and fast and in great volume: endless article for the London Daily Telegraph, newspapers in Australia (mainly for The Melbourne Herald and its associated Australian papers and syndicated to the Sydney Daily Telegraph and later the Sydney Morning Herald) and around the world to diverse newspapers in the US, Japan, Canada and New Zealand.

He also wrote long, deeply researched, stories for magazines - The Reporter, Look, The Atlantic Monthly, The New Republic and others - for which he won a number of international press awards.

And from 1981 until 1995 he edited The Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter.

Somehow he also found the time to write 16 books, some with my mother, and on anything from his experiences in the Army in World War Two, the rise of China in the 1950s, and why the US lost in Vietnam, to a book on the Russo-Japanese war, and another based on Hiroshige's wood-block prints of the Tokaido highway.

And then there was radio and TV, including Meet The Press that he hosted for a few years on the Seven Network, and ABC news commentaries.

As he wrote in his first book, Written In Sand, published in 1944, "I never was amenable to discipline; I was never subservient". And maybe that's why he spent most of his career as a freelance journalist, out of the office, travelling through Asia for two, three or four months a year; his own boss. After the war, apart from a year in Melbourne and a few years in Tokyo, he managed to never work in an office again.

Born in 1917 to apple and hop farmers in Tasmania's Derwent Valley, and sent to boarding school when he was just nine, dad seems always to have had strong and independent views. As school captain, he proudly imposed his then pacifist views on his fellow prefects - none of them he said proudly years later had joined the cadets: "The idea of training youths to kill, before they had been taught to live, appalled me".

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In 1941, having seen firsthand the evil potential of Hitler's Germany in Berlin five years earlier, dad left The Herald and joined the Army. Having described his build as "substantial" on his enlistment form - and weighing 15 stone and with bright red hair - in April Private Warner, with only rudimentary training, sailed for the Middle East with the 9th Division.

Some years later he described his first year at war as "tommy-gun practice and peeling potatoes", guarding a brothel in Aleppo, "and now and then a bit of fighting". Hoping to contribute more, in 1942 he joined the 1st Australian Commando regiment, and spent months trying to infiltrate German lines near el Alamein.

Surprisingly, during those two years in the Middle East dad wrote columns for The Herald and The News in Adelaide, initially with permission and later without - but always to the fury of his officers. Writing under the by-line "By a Commando" and "By a Cavalryman", his Army salary supplemented by the newspapers, dad wrote colour pieces, nothing too serious, poking fun at the army - "a simple tale of what it was like", as he later put it. To avoid the worst of the strict censorship regime he sent these stories as long private letters to a friend at The News.

Written In Sand tells the story of those years. He wrote it in pencil, in scrappy shorthand, on old envelopes, the backs of letters and on toilet paper. "My writing table", he wrote, "was usually the ledge of a sandy, hot and fly-infested dugout". He put it all together as the Division sailed back to Australia in early 1943, while also - for a fee - drafting love letters for some of his besotted if less literate friends.

Later that year Keith Murdoch wrote to the Department of the Army and asked for dad's release from the Army: The Herald needed someone to replace a journalist who had just been killed as "operational War Correspondent in the South Pacific". "Warner", Murdoch wrote, "did a good deal of sketch and descriptive writing for us while he was in Libya, and he should make a good correspondent for this job".

Dad spent the next two years accredited to American forces as they moved through the Pacific towards Japan - Bougainville, Saipan, Guam, Peleliu.

Saipan in June 1944 was his first major operation as a war correspondent. He went in as part of the fourth wave of US forces. Here is how he described it years later in an article for The Sunday Herald Sun.

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FOR INTERNATIONAL POLICY

"The executive officer of the Marine battalion and I stood in the belly of the amphibious tractor with our heads above the armour plating and waited for 'go' ... 'Shit, look at the mortars and artillery', he yelled. Ahead of us hung a curtain of foam as Japanese shells threw up giant waterspouts in our path. We made it to the shore, though others did not, and into a battle for which I was totally unprepared.

"I can never forget the last great Japanese kamikaze charge: hundreds of Japanese clutching bottles of sake in one hand and any sort of weapon they could find in the other, burst through the American lines. The next day more than 4000 Japanese lay dead in the line of the charge. Along a railway line ... I counted more than 100 officers, among perhaps 1000 men. Almost without exception the officers had committed Harakiri by detonating hand grenades against their stomachs ... Almost all the remaining soldiers and civilians - men, women and children - took poison, killed themselves with grenades or threw themselves over the cliff at Marpi Point."

Communications from the Pacific were a nightmare. From Saipan, to file a story, he had to find a boat going to the command ship off shore and take the story personally or entrust a courier. There the story was censored, and then sent by a destroyer to an aircraft carrier, then by plane to the Marshall Islands, where it was put on a plane for Pearl Harbour. Then if he was lucky the story would be transmitted by cable to the paper. All this meant that there were many days delay, and often a week's worth of stories would arrive at the same time and be published together.

A few months after the Saipan landing dad was one of very few correspondents who flew on the mass Superfortress raids from Saipan targeting Tokyo - his first sighting of the Asian mainland. Sitting on a stack of field packs and flying boots he wrote most of his story on the long journey back. This is how he described it, scribbling in his note book.

"We bombed the city of Tokio ... and now are fighting a bitter battle to get back to Saipan. The tail gunner is unconscious with a wound to the head; we have lost altitude, our gasoline tanks are more than dangerously low. It hardly seems worthwhile writing this story. If we have to make a night landing in the sea there is not much chance for any of us ... Night is closing in, and we have hundreds of miles to go. An hour ago it looked as if we might make it. Now there seems to be so little chance that I'm giving up writing my story. One can't write when he's as tired and scared as I am."

To dad's surprise, they made it back and his story - uncensored - ran on page one of The Daily Mail.

After the war Keith Murdoch said to dad "I think you should go back immediately to Asia and spend the next six months traveling wherever you can, right through the areas where the Japanese have been; go to China, go to Korea, go anywhere you feel disposed". Dad travelled widely - Hong Kong, Japan, Korea and the Philippines - writing long stories about the new Asia that was emerging from the destruction of the war - and an Asia that was so different to that of today: poor and undeveloped, and much of it still under colonial rule.

In 1947 he became the Reuter-AAP bureau chief in Tokyo: travelling through the ruins of Japan - Hiroshima and Nagasaki; reporting on the war crimes trials; befriending Prime Minister Yoshida by bringing him copies of The Economist and The Times each week; covering the situation in South Korea (where the commander of American forces in the South told him that anyone who didn't think there was going to be a blood bath was crazy); and getting to know General MacArthur (who told him that four events had changed the world - the birth of Christ, the Magna Carta, the American Civil war, "and my occupation of Japan").

Our family moved to Singapore in mid-1949. A few weeks after I was born, a year later, a cable arrived from The Telegraph: "cabled you a thousand pounds. Proceed immediately Korea". He arrived a week after North Korean tanks had broken through the South's defences on the 38th parallel.

"The dangers were immense and never ending", he wrote. He was with US forces when they were first attacked south of Seoul in July 1950. He fell asleep one night in the intelligence room of the Cavalry division advance headquarters, asking his colleagues to "wake me if there's trouble". At daylight, when he woke, the building was empty; the whole headquarters had fled. He was lucky to survive: of the 30 or 40 journalists who covered the early stages of the war 17 were killed.

Filing copy was a challenge: there was only one telephone line to Tokyo on which the journalists could file their stories. So, as dad later recounted, they queued up and went to sleep on the floor, and as each correspondent finished dictating his story he'd wake the next man.

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Only days after dad had returned to Singapore from Korea in 1951 another cable arrived from The Telegraph; "India Pakistan on brink of war. Proceed immediately Karachi or Delhi". That was his life - always on the move, from crisis to crisis.

My father is best remembered for his writing on the war in Vietnam, which he first visited in 1949. He was a regular visitor for the next 26 years, spending months there every year. He knew everyone - the Vietnamese Presidents and Ministers, the French, American, Vietnamese and Australian Generals, the Ambassadors, the spooks, and the staff at his favourite hotels, the Metropol in Hanoi and the Continental in Saigon.

Hopefully a few snapshots in time will paint an adequate picture of what he did and saw and what he wrote as first the French and then the Americans and their allies stumbled to defeat in Vietnam.

In late 1952 dad cabled a long leader-page article to The Telegraph in London: "French reverses ... have changed the whole aspect of the military and political situation in Indo-China ... The position is grave. It is clear the French no longer have any real hope of defeating Ho Ch Minh and the Communist forces ... Neither the French people nor their government will tolerate forever such losses as are now being suffered in a war which holds out no promise of victory and no prospect of reward".

In 1954 he flew into Dien Bien Phu a few days before the battle began. He was appalled by the vulnerability of the French position. "Whatever one may have felt about the way the French fought the war, Dien Bien Phu was an agony that had become hard to bear. I wept that night as I wrote my report." To his anger he found that The Telegraph was playing down the seriousness of situation. "To write hundreds and hundreds of words every day in these circumstances only to have most of them thrown away seemed to be asking too much of me", he later wrote. He resigned (renewing his association with the paper a few years later).

In October 1954 he was in Hanoi as the Viet Minh took the city: "The victors came in sand-shoes, trudging through the mud with ammunition slung on bamboo poles, signals wire in tricycles, despatch-riders on push-bikes ... a melancholy ending to an inglorious war".

In mid-1963 Jules Roy, the author of the definitive account of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, wrote that dad told him how astounded he was to find the American Generals in South Vietnam deluding themselves with the same false optimism the French Generals had professed. "Warner", he wrote, "had just returned from a trip through

the villages and rice paddies of the Mekong Delta ... Warner noted sadly that the Saigon government's position was crumbling there just as rapidly under the hammer blows of the Viet Cong guerrillas as the French position in the Tonkin Delta in North Vietnam had eroded under pressure from the Viet Minh insurgents in 1952".

In 1965 dad was one of several journalists who exposed how the US army in Saigon was inflating the body count of Viet Cong dead. In the Sydney Morning Herald under the heading "Untrue Story of the Vietnam War" he wrote about the "singularly unfortunate emphasis on the kill ratio, the yardstick by which trends are so unwisely measured ... both the kills and the counts themselves are highly suspect... What no one will accept indefinitely, and especially in a war of this sort, is the persistent attempt to win by pretence what has not been won on the ground".

He left Saigon four days before it fell in April 1975 with Ambassador Geoffrey Price, Michael Richardson, Embassy staff and UN officials with a basket of cats - infuriated that Embassy locally engaged staff and friends had been left behind, "although there was space for many of them". In The Herald he wrote: "For many Vietnamese I know it will be death, or fate worse than death, and I grieve now that there is nothing more I can do for them".

He had seen his last shot fired in anger. His days as a war correspondent were over.

While dad exposed much about how badly the war was prosecuted he saw the strategic value in it. He believed - and wrote - that the war in Vietnam bought time for the non-communist countries of South East Asia to strengthen themselves and to concentrate on reform and economic development, so that they stood firm rather than crumbling (he referred to this as the "termite theory" rather than the domino theory). In response to an article he wrote in April 2000 on the 25th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, Lee Kuan Yew wrote to him and said

"You put it well. I was, and still am, convinced that if LBJ had not got US forces to stay in Vietnam in 1965, but had bowed out, the will to resist in South East Asia would have melted. The Thais would have yielded to the seemingly inevitable, and Malaysia and Singapore would have been chewed up. Indonesia would also be overtaken. What a joy and a relief to have a living witness speak out the truth, although it is unpopular with the liberal media."

While Vietnam had drawn dad back year after year, he was also covering the rest of Asia.

Based in Singapore from 1949, he got to know Lee Kuan Yew as he started his long political career. At a party in 1954 Lee said to a group of journalists including dad, "In seven years the communists will have this place". Dad asked, "And what will your role be, Harry?" He looked at dad coldly, "I'll be a party functionary" he said, "responsible for refusing visas to correspondents like you". They became good friends.

In 1957 dad was in Iran, Afghanistan, and India (where he interviewed Nehru).

In 1960 he was in Cambodia interviewing Prince Sihanouk for an article in The Reporter titled "The Prince on the Tightrope": "Small of stature and chubby, he has clear, dark eyes, a high, irritating voice, and the pleasant custom of offering his pre-noon visitor a brimming glass of iced dry champagne ... As long as Sihanouk is able to continue the astonishing balancing act he has chosen to perform, Cambodia may survive. But as he would be the first to admit, it's a tricky business and there is no safety net below". And there wasn't. Sihanouk stumbled, the Americans bombed the Viet Cong sanctuaries, and years later Sihanouk and Cambodia fell into Year Zero.

In the mid-1960s dad spent a lot of time in Indonesia covering the failed coup and the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Chinese and the elimination of the Indonesia Communist Party, and later the fall of Sukarno.

In 1971 he was back in Phnom Penh, watching the bodies of Vietnamese killed by Cambodian marines floating down the Mekong – and after months of work broke a major story of the atrocity. "We walked from the shade of the presbytery", he wrote, "near the peeling grey church to the river. First, two bodies drifted past, then far upstream in the distance we saw a dozen, then fifteen. Then another twenty drifted into view with their hands tied behind their backs. Some came close to where we were standing. They were hideously swollen and distorted."

In 1978, he travelled up and down the coast of Malaysia writing about the boat waves of refugees. And in 1980 he was covering the Kwangju massacre in South Korea.

Most of my family are or were journalists: my father, my mother, a sister for a while, and my son who is now annoying the AFL in Melbourne. I opted out, with one brief and unsuccessful exception.

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It was in 1970, the height of Australia's involvement in Vietnam. I was 20, and had been conscripted but had a student deferral. All things being equal I would be deployed to Vietnam in the next year or two. Unlike the reaction of a lot of parents at the time to their own sons' call-up, Dad saw my conscription as a great opportunity for us to film a documentary together in Vietnam.

In December we arrived in Saigon from Phnom Penh. Long-haired and scruffy, I was detained at the airport. The authorities had been expecting a group of Australian anti-war protesters and thought I fitted the bill.

Dad's plan was that I would interview a few key Vietnamese officials and Australian military personnel and then go on patrol with the Australians. It had all been agreed and arranged before we got to Saigon. (Gary Cunningham, who was killed at Balibo in 1975, was our cameraman.)

Young, naive and nervous, I made a hash of the interviews and somehow - probably because of the way I looked and some of my comments to the Australian commander - we got the Australian military off-side. So when we got to the Australian base at Nui Dat the gate was locked to us. We weren't welcome and the interviews and the planned patrol were cancelled. In order to try and save the documentary we interviewed Diggers as we drove down to Vung Tau on the coast. And there, having been escorted to a nearby base, we were told we had been detained. Dad was furious. He rang Canberra, trying to get in touch with Malcolm Fraser, the Defence Minister, and Andrew Peacock, the Army Minister. After many calls, many arguments and a wait of a few hours we were allowed to go.

With this incident and others in mind, in a speech almost 20 years later on the changing role of war correspondents, and in a message to the ADF, dad had this to say.

"If you know what's good for you, you'll embrace a small corps of responsible correspondents and clutch them to your unwilling breast ... Stop placing ridiculous barriers in the way of them doing a job ... Treat him as a friend in whom you have confidence and you may just be surprised. Harness him and you'll suffer in the end".

The last story dad wrote as a foreign correspondent was in late 1999. He and I travelled to Torakina, a small and remote village on the west coast of Bougainville,

some months after the Australian led Peace Monitoring Group had been deployed to the island.

On the blackboard of a dilapidated school house dad found a poem written in English and Pidgin, which in part read "Let peace be found here. Let love abide. May our hearts be filled with happiness". That became the centre piece of his article, run in The Australian a week later, reflecting not only his hopes for Bougainville in 1999, but also for the island which had been ravaged during the World War Two.

He knew well what the island had been through because he had visited Torakina before. In 1944 60,000 Japanese and about the same number of American forces were locked in bloody conflict on Bougainville. The night he arrived at Torakina the Japanese attacked the perimeter of the US base, launching waves of suicide attacks, with some succeeding in getting through into the American lines. His story in The Herald ran under the heading "They'll Butcher No More". The Japanese infantry that at Nanking had "committed atrocities unheard of since the days of Attila ... children raped and bayoneted to death" had now "sacked their last town". "Hundreds", he wrote, "lay dead along the Torakina wire". What dad didn't write at the time, couldn't write at the time because it wouldn't have got through the censors, was the behaviour of the US commander. The morning after the attack on the perimeter dad went out with the commanding General, and was appalled as wounded prisoners were executed.

My father was a man of principle. He joined the Army in 1941 because he understood the threat of Nazi Germany. He stood for election in the Federal seat of Franklin in 1943 because he believed the country and the Government weren't doing enough to help the soldiers fighting overseas. He confronted President Diem with photos he had taken of prisoners being tortured because he deplored cruelty and barbarism. He was at the forefront of the fight against the White Australia policy. He railed against communism and against any form of repressive government, whether it came from the left or the right. He was opposed to the invasion of Iraq. He thought the way the current war was being fought in Afghanistan was foolhardy (just like the wars he covered in Indo-China).

Along the way, over these 60 years of researching and reporting, by fighting hard for what he believed in and writing fearlessly, he made many close friends but also some important enemies: he received death threats through the mail; Wilfred Burchett

sued for libel - and lost; he was at various times banned by the French from returning to Indo-China and later by South Vietnam's President Diem, blacklisted by Sihanouk, and placed with other Western correspondents on an assassination list in Saigon. Some of this worried him, some he regretted, some he resented, and most he shrugged off. It was the price for writing what he thought was right.

And running through all of this, through his career as a journalist, indeed through his life, was Asia.

My parents fell in love with Asia, its people, its culture and its history. They lived in Japan and Singapore, travelled widely for work and as tourists, and wrote about Asia's problems, politics, conflicts, and hopes. As Michael Richardson has put it, they helped "to break down the barriers that divided Australia and Asia", and "were amongst the first Australians to understand Asia, its strategic significance and its importance to Australia". Or as Anthony McAdam wrote in *Quadrant*, dad was "the English-speaking world's most reliable guide to Asia's political transformation for the thirty years following the Second World War".

Much of my father's early writing, both for newspapers and also in books, was aimed at educating Australians about Asia. As he once wrote, in the 1940s Australian ignorance of Asia was almost bottomless. In *Near North: Australia And A Thousand Million Neighbours*, published in 1948, dad and his co-editor wrote that "Australians are living museum pieces - white men living under American protection in what nature pegged out as the domain of the brown, yellow and black men". Australians needed to learn, to adapt, to change and to understand Asia and Australia's place in the region.

Through his books, newspaper and magazine articles and his radio broadcasts and TV appearances my father played an important role in making Australia the country it is today: cosmopolitan; multi-ethnic; more tolerant; fairer; better informed; more secure; and with a much greater understanding of Asia and its importance to our future.

The risks were worth taking.