



Al Burt Papers

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Florida's Roving Reporter and *Miami Herald* Columnist

“Detail in News Reporting”

(No Place or Date)

I am not an instructor by trade, so I hope you will excuse me if I wander and stray a bit. My assigned topic is detail in reporting; a good one, because detail and reporting are one and the same.

I think good writers, and good reporters, use detail as an artist does – to suggest the whole, using the particular to paint a picture of the general.

The best way to do this is to work from example. My favorite examples are not Bob Woodward or Carl Bernstein of the *Washington Post*, but Homer Bigart a two-time Pulitzer winner who worked for the old *New York Herald-Tribune* and the *New York Times*. He covered World War Two, Vietnam, Korea, and civil rights in the South.

I met him late in his career and visited his New England farm, joining him in a Polish vodka before breakfast from the freezer. In retirement, he spent a couple of months each winter in the Florida Keys. Once, he and his wife spent the night with us en route; what a good memory I have of us sitting up late at night drinking Spanish brandy lakeside in Melrose.

But anyways, the best way to learn to use detail in your reporting is to look at examples from the people who were masters. Bigart was one of those and his work is instructive for all of us.

Dec. 2, 1945 – from the battleship Missouri:

“Japan, paying for her desperate throw of the dice at Pearl Harbor, passed from the ranks of the major powers at 9:05 a.m. today when Foreign Minister Mamoru Shigemitsu signed the document of unconditional surrender. If the memories of the bestialities of the Japanese prison camps were not so

fresh in mind, one might have felt sorry for Shigemitsu as he hobbled on his wooden leg toward the green baize covered table where the papers lay waiting. He leaned heavily on his cane and had trouble seating himself. The cane, which he rested against the table, dropped to the deck of the battleship as he signed.”

The news right at the top was the perspective offered by remembering the Pearl Harbor beginning for Americans and the detail provided, one individual signing a paper, meant more – the fall of a great power.

It was all there, those compelling details of a defeated foreign minister hobbling on a wooden leg to a green-covered table and dropping his cane to the deck while he signed those humiliating papers.

A beautiful lead, all the news, and important details added which made it powerfully human and understanding at the same time.

In 1943, during the war, after taking a troop ship to London, Bigart wrote about the crossing and ended it with these words:

“You woke up one morning and the ship was very steady and you knew she had entered the harbor. You had arrived. You had crossed the submarine-infested Atlantic without sighting even a porpoise. A helluva thing to have to confess to your grandchildren.”

Again, the humanizing detail was there: waking up in the morning and feeling the boat sit steady rather than rocking in the water, references to submarines and porpoises, and the warm, immediately understandable, note about the grandchildren.

This is great stuff from a great reporter.

During World War Two, from Italy in 1943 Bigart wrote:

“Generally, there is no mistaking the dead. Their strange contorted posture leaves no room for doubt. But this soldier, his steel helmet tilted over his face, seemed merely resting in the field. We did not know until we came within a few steps and saw a gray hand hanging limply from a sleeve.”

In 1963, he wrote about unemployed coal miners in Kentucky facing a grim winter:

“Creeks are littered with garbage, choked with boulders and silt dislodged by strip-mine operations. Hillsides that should be a solid blaze of autumn color are slashed with ugly terraces, where bulldozers and steam shovels have stripped away the forest to get at the coal beneath.”

Great imagery and detail set the scene and make it all an understandable piece of human history. The details are informative, pertinent and interesting.

It’s an art, not a science. It requires judgment as to what is usefully descriptive without being cluttering detail that means nothing. The detail must further the process of passing the information to

the reader, not get in the way of it. The detail must concentrate on the information purposes of the story more than on the reporter.

Back in the 1960s, I was city editor of *The Miami Herald*. Even now I remember a story that came to the desk about a young woman who had been killed in an auto accident while on her honeymoon. After a couple of false starts, the story lead came out something like this:

“The white satin dress that Mary Doe wore at her wedding on Friday became her burial gown Monday.”

I always thought that was a compelling example of elevating the story of an auto accident into something special. The color and material of a dress that linked a wedding and a death was the key. The reporter was Gene Miller, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner for *The Miami Herald*. Miller was a master at picking out small, immediately understandable things that made his stories graphic and compelling.

That’s how the all-stars do it. But let me take it down to a more ordinary level, and I will recall some of my own stories, most of which I remember well enough to talk more about.

Feel free to interrupt me if you have a question or want to make a point.

Once in 1962, I was in Paraguay as Latin America editor of the *Herald* writing about Alfredo Stroessner, then regarded as the last of the old-time dictators in Latin America.

It was his custom periodically to have a citizens’ day, at which ordinary folk could come to his palace and plead their cases for special treatment. A number of Latin America leaders had days like that; it was a day of the peasants, more or less.

I sat in a chair at the side of the room while Stroessner greeted his people, one by one. He was not a dictator, he had told me at our first meeting, no matter what the press or other people said. Prominent on his desk was a small sculptured stone bust of himself.

I wrote about that day and about President Stroessner, and the story began this way:

“A white stone bust of Don Alfredo Stroessner sits on his desk and oversees his work as president of Paraguay. No one else does. Yet Don Alfredo insists he is not a dictator.”

That set the framework of the story. Before the day was over, he talked to me about his place in Paraguayan history. Without being harsh or accusatory, the story put Paraguay and Stroessner into perspective.

Another memorable occasion for me came in 1961 when Hurricane Hattie hit British Honduras, now known as Belize.

The hurricane almost destroyed the coastal capital, Belize City. Later, it was moved inland. The streets were covered in a muddy slime that ranged from ankle to knee deep. The water supply was

contaminated. Dead bodies littered streets and huge rats began to scramble among them. Out on the edge of the city, at a place called Lord's Ridge Cemetery, I found a bizarre scene. Bodies were being stacked in piles, layers of bodies alternating with layers of wood. They were being burned for health reasons.

My story began this way:

"A gravedigger named William Coote poured kerosene on Hattie's dead today, and touched a torch to them. The blaze lit up Lord's Ridge Cemetery on a hazy afternoon, and the stench drove away the curious. It was an incredible sight: William Coote, his head swathed in a white handkerchief, throwing wooden debris from the hurricane on burning, blistered bodies. The wood came from Coote's own house on the cemetery grounds, blown down by Hattie, and when he tossed it onto the flames it sometimes came in the shape of a crude, wooden cross. A half-dozen horses prowled among the white tombstones and nibbled grass which was turning brown from the heat of the fire. Two boys with bottles in their hands, searching along the cemetery ditch for drinking water, held their noses at the stench – and then turned and ran when they saw the burning bodies."

The use of detail to set a scene told the story of a hurricane's destruction.

Another story of natural disaster came in San Pedro Sula, Honduras in 1962.

It went this way:

"Each year when the rains fall, the Pellillo comes and the brown little kids in the barrios get bellyaches, and a few die. This year more than 2,000 curled up in pain and at least 125 died. They call it the Pellillo, or short hair, because it happens when the new grass forms on the hillside pastures after dry season burnouts. It came, like always, early in May when the peaks of the Sierra de Omoa combed the black clouds and rains swelled Rios Piedras and Santa Ana and they flowed muddily down into the valley. Wastes seeped into the water reservoir. By the time the kids began doubling up with pain, an epidemic was underway."

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