

Veterans say media are pro-military in coverage

By Scott McFetridge
Of the Emerald

When Ron Phillips and John Lawrence think of war, they remember the blood and pain they witnessed while serving in Vietnam. But they are afraid others don't share this image because many people are beginning to think of war as a glorious and necessary occasion.

Phillips, who served in the Marine Corps in Vietnam, is especially critical of the media, which he believes are guilty of spreading propaganda provided by the U.S. military establishment. The media broadcast and print an increasing amount of stories with a pro-military viewpoint, while largely ignoring those speaking out against a military build-up, says Phillips, who is now involved in a draft and pre-enlistment counseling project.

Lawrence, who was a medic in Vietnam in 1969 and now is a Eugene word processor, says the government is putting the press into a no-win situation — a situation where the press must choose between government officials and individuals who stand up and refute the government's figures.

"The press wants to believe its government," Lawrence says. "But the press has to go against the government if it wants true information to go out."

While Lawrence was stationed at a direct casualty receiving unit where he would identify and classify dead bodies, he says he observed the military's methods of manipulating figures to appear more positive than they actually were. After an assault, the bodies coming into Lawrence's unit within the first 10 minutes would be classified as "killed in action." After 10 minutes had elapsed, a whistle would be blown and all following bodies would be classified as having "died of wounds."

"This is an important distinction because the media reported the number of soldiers 'killed in action' as the actual number of Americans killed that day," Lawrence says.

The problem was not that the media withheld information from the American public, but that nine out of ten reporters completely relied upon information from the military, Lawrence says. Only a small fraction of the reporters actually attempted to verify the government's figures, he says.

The government is not at fault for attempting to get good publicity and create public support, but the media should take this into account when covering events featuring military officials, he says.

"You can't blame people for wanting to create good public support," Lawrence says. "We can't exert power and force without the will and conscience of the public behind it."

Lawrence and Phillips both were upset by the heavy media coverage of a speech by Air Force Colonel Calvin Johnson earlier this month, in which Johnson called for a military buildup to ensure a balance of power with the Soviet Union. And during the last several years, the two men believe the local and national media have been printing and broadcasting an increasing number of stories that portray the military in an unrealistic manner.

In some ways, the film industry, which has produced such movies as "First Blood" and "Rambo," has been even more detrimental than the press, Lawrence says.

"Most of the Rambos I dealt with were in body bags," Lawrence says. "We want people to know the reality of the war and focus on that."

Steve Johnson, a military analyst, says the Air Force colonel is part of a team that regularly tours the country and presents the Air Force's position on U.S. defense matters. Johnson says the U.S. military establishment manipulates figures in order to create a perceived threat from the Soviet Union and maintain large military expenditures.

"You have to have some threat and that's the Soviets," Johnson says. "The Air Force has a vested interest in keeping that threat alive."

The Air Force likes to use numbers when giving presentations, but there is a statistic disputing every statistic Col. Johnson gave during his speech, Johnson says.

"Either side always can find measures and statistics to back up its point of view," Johnson says.

The massive military budget, and the positive feelings toward the military increase the likelihood that the United States will become involved in another war — a war unlike any other war the country has been a part of, Phillips says.

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