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Japanese Officers Consider Everything a Military Secret

Position of Correspondents Within the Army is an Anomalous One of Interloper and Honored Guest – "Examiner" Correspondent's Experience

ANTUNG (First Japanese Army), June 2.—It is all very well, this long-range fighting; but if the range continues to increase, and if other armies are as solicitous for the welfare of the correspondents as are the Japanese, war correspondence will become a lost art and there will be a lot of war correspondents entering new professions late in life.

In the first place, when the front of battle extends for miles and miles, no correspondent can see of his own eyes all that is taking place. What is happening to the right, miles away, behind the mountains where the Yalu curls into the east, and what is happening to the left, miles away, behind the mountains where the Yalu curls into the west, is beyond him. He cannot understand what is taking place before his eyes (or his field-glasses, rather, for his eyes show him nothing), without knowing what is taking place on right and left; and there is no one to tell him what is taking place on right and left. The officers may not tell him, because, in their parlance, it would be an exposure of a military secret.

This would not be so bad if they did not consider practically everything a military secret. Apropos of this, a correspondent, on his way up country, arrives at the village of Kasan. A skirmish had once taken place at Kasan. A month had passed. The front had moved up a hundred miles. The correspondent saw a few graves on the hillside. "How many Japanese were killed?" he asked an officer. The officer was a major. He replied, "I cannot tell you. It is a military secret."

The above may seem far-fetched, but it is not. It is merely typical. On every side is the military secret. The correspondent is hedged around by military secrets. He may not move about for fear he will pop on to a military secret, though what he may do with a military secret only the Japanese know. First, in order to get a military secret out of the country, he must show it to the censor and get permission. This obtained, he must dispatch it by Korean-runners to Ping Yang, a couple of hundred miles to the south, where it may be telegraphed by his agent to Seoul and from there be cabled, via Japan, to his paper. But granting that the military secret has survived all the vicissitudes of the journey to Ping Yang and not lost its time-value, it is not yet out of the country. Seven or eight days later a runner arrives with a note from his Ping Yang agent telling him that all cables arc being held up. So the military secret, like the peasant who started for Carcassonne, dies unobtrusively of old age upon the way.

The position of the correspondent in the Japanese army is an anomalous one of interloper and honored guest. The restrictions which stultify all his efforts show the one, the solicitude of his hosts shows the second. If a skirmish or demonstration is to be made, word is sent to him to that effect—also, a further word to the effect that he is to assemble with his colleagues at a certain place and proceed and be directed under the management of an army officer told off for

the purpose. He is further warned that neither he nor his colleagues may go individually. Still further, he has fresh in his mind the previous day's instructions from headquarters as, for instance, those of April 29th, from which I quote the following:

"There is no official news to communicate concerning military operations now proceeding or pending.

"Headquarters (unofficially) is aware that artillery has been engaged on both sides of the river.

"For the present and until further notice the transmission of any dispatches from the front where wireless telegraphy is employed is forbidden. The necessary steps are being taken to see that this order is obeyed.

"It may be found necessary to enforce a still stricter censorship than that already existing.

"From today and until further notice it is forbidden to take photographs or make sketches of any kind within the area now occupied by the Japanese troops. It is useless to apply for permission to do so, as applications of this kind will not be entertained.

"Correspondents may witness all military operations. They must keep well in the rear of the firing line. They are forbidden to approach certain (unspecified) works."

The peculiar force of this last order lies in that the correspondent who ventures out for a 'look see" all by himself finds that just about everything in the landscape is unspecifiedly forbidden. The nearest I have succeeded in getting to a Japanese battery, and one not in action either, was when I crawled to the top of a hill half a mile to the rear and gazed upon it through field-glasses in fear and trembling.

Even before the taking of photographs was absolutely forbidden I once had the temerity to take a snap of an army farrier and his bellows. "Here at last was something that was not a military secret," I had thought in my innocence. Fifteen minutes' ride away I was stopped by a soldier who could not speak English. I showed my credentials and on my arm the official insignia of my position in the Japanese army. But it was no use. Something serious was pending. I was ordered to remain where I was, and while I waited I cudgeled my brains in an endeavor to find what military secret had crept in unawares.

I did not know of any, but I was confident that one was there somewhere. After much delay an officer was brought to me. He was a captain, and his English was excellent—a great deal purer and better than my own.

"You have taken a photograph of an army blacksmith," he said accusingly and reproachfully.

With a sinking heart I nodded my head to acknowledge my guilt.

"You must give it up," he said. "It is ridiculous," I burst out.

"You must give it up," he repeated.

Then, after some discussion with the soldiers, he said I might keep it; but he added that the road was one of the unspecified forbidden places, and that I must go back. Back I went, but the field telephone must have beaten me, for they knew all my transgression at headquarters before I got there.

The functions of the war correspondent, so far as I can ascertain, is to sit up on the reverse slopes of hills where honored guests cannot be injured, and from there to listen to the crack of rifles and vainly search the dim distance for the men who are doing the shooting; to receive orders from headquarters as to what he may or may not do; to submit daily to the censor his conjectures and military secrets, and to observe article 4 of the printed First Army Regulations—to wit:

“Press correspondents should look and behave decently, and should never do anything disorderly, and should never enter the office rooms of the headquarters.”

With one exception, the correspondents with the first army are what is called “cable” men. Theirs is the task to cable, telegraph, use runners and whatever means to hand to get news out of the country as quickly as possible. There is the censor to begin with. What little news they do manage to glean is pretty well emasculated by him before it is allowed to start. At the very earliest it will arrive in Japan five days later. From Japan it radiates to the rest of the world. But the headquarters is connected directly with Tokyo by wire. That is to say, the headquarters news beats the correspondents’ news to Tokyo by five days. Not only that, for it has full details and is correct. In addition, the powers that be at Tokyo are more liberal than the first army censor, so that Tokyo makes public to the world a full account five days before the “cable” men’s accounts begin to arrive. If other nations in future wars imitate the Japanese in this, the “cable” men would cease to exist. There would be no reason for them to exist. The regular news-gatherers in the capitals of the contending countries would serve the purpose just as well and a great deal better.

Remains the writing man. Long-range fighting, supervising officers who lead him about in the rear as Cook’s tourists are led about Rome and Paris, military secrets, and censors do for him. When he has described two or three invisible battles and has had his conjectures trimmed down by the censor, he is done for. He can’t go on describing the sound of rifles and guns, the bursting of shell and shrapnel, and the occasional moving specks for a whole campaign. Nor can he go on describing the transport trains in the rear, the only things he sees too much of and which, as yet, have not been placed under the taboo of military secret.

Personally, I entered upon this campaign with the most gorgeous conceptions of what a war correspondent’s work in the world must be. I knew that the mortality of war correspondents was said to be greater, in proportion to numbers, than the mortality of soldiers. I remembered, during the siege of Khartoum and the attempted relief by Wolseley, the deaths in battle of a number of correspondents. I had read “The Light that Failed.” I remembered Stephen Crane’s descriptions of being under fire in Cuba. I had heard—God wot, was there aught I had not heard?—of all sorts and conditions of correspondents in all sorts of battles and skirmishes, right in the thick of it, where life was keen and immortal moments were being lived. In brief, I came to war expecting to get thrills. My only thrills have been those of indignation and irritation.