

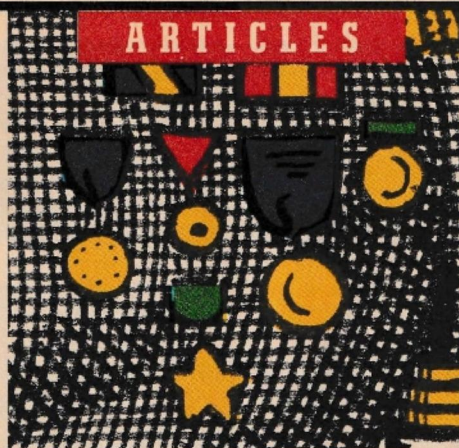
The Nation.

DOLE'S WAR RECORD

THE FIRST CASUALTY OF POLITICS IS TRUTH **ROBERT B. ELLIS**



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DOLE'S WAR RECORD

The first casualty of politics is truth.

ROBERT B. ELLIS

Bob Dole's war record—and Bill Clinton's lack of one—has become a major theme in Dole's drive for the presidency. According to Katharine Seelye in *The New York Times*, the G.O.P. strategy is to portray Clinton as “the baby boomer in the White House, who was not born until 1946, a year after Mr. Dole had earned two Bronze Stars, and who skirted service in his own generation's war.”

Dole doesn't talk much about his wartime exploits, beyond his references to the grievous wounds he suffered and his long, painful course of rehabilitation. Despite his reticence, and to some extent because of it, the widespread belief has grown up that his military service was exemplary, even heroic.

The Republican Party propaganda machine blows wind on the flame. In a recent

G.O.P. fundraising letter that Dole signed (though surely did not write), the following statement appears: "And when I was asked to lead my men up a rocky hill in Italy into the roaring guns and mortar fire of the German *Wehrmacht* my sense of duty never wavered." The Dole for President homepage on the Internet describes his feats in thrilling terms.

Most journalistic accounts of Dole's wartime experience pass along, without questioning, the versions from several biographies, some based on interviews with him; some from interviews with the same soldiers who were interviewed for those books; some from the autobiography Dole wrote with his wife, Elizabeth, *The Doles: Unlimited Partners*, an updated version of which was published in time for the campaign; and some from G.O.P. campaign literature. Although these sources sometimes contradict one another, the following composite picture of Dole's combat exploits emerges:

§ In 1942, at the age of 19, Dole immediately answered his country's call. He joined the Reserves but soon asked to be placed on active duty.

§ His unit was constantly under fire.

§ Dole's company was known as a "suicide squad" because of the unusually heavy casualties it took.

§ His men considered him an aggressive, "recklessly brave" leader.

§ Slightly wounded on a night patrol by a grenade, he returned to lead his platoon on a second patrol only two days later.

§ In a major offensive on April 14, 1945, Dole's platoon sergeant was ordered by the company commander to lead a rifle squad in an assault on a German machine-gun nest, but Dole ignored the order and led the attack himself.

§ He was gravely wounded by enemy shrapnel while trying to drag his wounded radioman into a shell hole.

§ Dole's leadership qualities played a significant role in cracking the Germans' mountain defenses.

§ For his "heroism under fire," he was awarded two Bronze Stars.

Yet all of the above is either untrue or exaggerated. Dole's first wound, in the night patrol, was self-inflicted (a story the candidate once told himself), but that fact does not appear in an extremely laudatory profile the G.O.P. distributes with a cover letter by Dole. And the factoid that Dole got two Bronze Stars for heroism is circulated without evidence of dates and citations. All this is not to suggest that Dole failed to perform his duties honorably, or that he does not deserve respect and sympathy for the terrible wounds he suffered and his courage in living a productive life in spite of the resultant damage. But as a veteran of the 10th Mountain Division and the 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment in which Dole served, I have grown increasingly uncomfortable with efforts to

As a veteran of the division in which Bob Dole served, I have grown uncomfortable with efforts to cast him as a wartime hero.

cast him as a wartime hero. Let's examine the Dole military myth piece by piece:

§ *Dole rushed to the colors.* As David Corn and Paul Schemm report [see page 14], Dole put off being sent to the combat zone until 1945. His reason for joining the Army's Enlisted Reserve Corps was in all probability the same as mine and other college students': to defer induction into the military.

§ *Dole's unit was constantly under fire.* In *Senator for Sale*, Stanley Hilton quotes Dev Jennings, one of the sergeants in Dole's platoon, as saying that I Company was "pretty much under fire all the time" from the day Dole joined the unit to April 14, the day he was wounded. Hilton goes on to say that "I Company served as the spearhead of attack [the forward troops who always push ahead of the rest of the army], often encountering Germans ensconced in dugouts on the sides of the rugged mountains."

What does Dole say? He writes that he arrived to take up his assignment on "the morning of February 25." But he never mentions that the 10th Mountain Division went on a second offensive March 3-6, suffering 549 casualties, among them the famed U.S. ski-jump champion Torger Tokle. I/85 played only a reserve role in this advance, which may explain Dole's failure to mention it. Dole's 3rd Battalion suffered virtually no casualties.

At any rate, the 10th, which had been badly bloodied in the major February 19-25 offensive that dislodged German troops entrenched on Monte Belvedere, was gearing up for another attack on the still formidable German lines. Dole writes in his autobiography that his "chief task was finding ways to keep everyone busy: cleaning weapons, doing calisthenics, going on patrol." For the next month and a half we were hunkered down in foxholes and bunkers, rarely seeing anyone, even good friends, outside our own platoon or squad (one reason I never met Dole). During this time, I Company was subjected to shelling and machine-gun fire while on front-line duty, but it was not under constant fire, any more than were the other companies in the division. The commanding general instituted a policy of rotating one battalion at a time to a rest area; individual soldiers were also given one-week leaves to cities like Rome. As for Sergeant Jennings's description of I Company as the "spearhead of attack," during March and early April of 1945, the division was in defensive positions and hardly "spearheading" anything.

§ *Dole's company was known as a "suicide squad."* Citing Dole as a source, Hilton writes that I Company was known as a suicide squad because of the high rate of casualties it suffered. Recently, *The Dallas Morning News* passed along this legend, describing Dole as "a young lieutenant with a crack combat division...known as the 'suicide squad.'... [He was] a particularly brave and even reckless officer." But Capt. John Woodruff, in his official history of the 85th Regiment, writes that in the fighting up to this point it was the 2nd Battalion of that regiment that suf-

Robert B. Ellis, a retired Central Intelligence Agency officer, is now a wildlife photographer and environmental activist. One of the original ski troop volunteers, he received a Bronze Star for his service with the 10th Mountain Division in World War II. He is the author of a memoir of that service, See Naples and Die (McFarland).

Front Man?

At the official Dole campaign Web site, a section titled "World War II: Heroism and Tragedy" describes Dole's entry into the military thus: "In 1942 at the age of 19, Bob Dole answered the call to serve his country by joining the Army to fight in World War II." Many press accounts have presented a similar story line: The young Dole leaves school and heads right off to war. Yet Dole, as reflected in Army records, answered the call reluctantly and then held a series of positions that kept him far from combat until the final months of the war.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, millions of Americans volunteered for service. Dole, an 18-year-old freshman at the University of Kansas, did not. On December 1, 1942, the Selective Service mailed Dole a questionnaire that would be used to determine his classification. Days after receiving that questionnaire—essentially a pre-draft notice—Dole signed up. But, according to Selective Service records, he entered the Army's Enlisted Reserve Corps, not the regular Army. In *Unlimited Partners*, Dole acknowledges but doesn't explain how he ended up in the Reserves. His campaign declined to respond to a query on the matter. By joining the Reserves, Dole could remain a student at a time when no general education deferment existed.

As the war continued, Dole was able to finish his sophomore year. Then on June 1, 1943, he was ordered to active duty. In November, after finishing basic training for the medical corps, Dole joined the Army Specialized Training Program, open to soldiers under the age of 22 who scored well on the military intelligence aptitude test. His military records do not indicate whether he was assigned to the A.S.T.P. or applied for entrance. This is another question his campaign would not answer. As an A.S.T.P. participant, Dole studied engineering at Brooklyn College until the spring of 1944. Dole next moved to Camp Polk, Louisiana, and then transferred to Camp Breckenridge, Kentucky, for more training, now as an antitank gunner. He applied to officer training school in Fort Benning, Georgia, and finished the program as a second lieutenant, entering active duty again in November 1944. The next month, he shipped off to Italy.

Once in a theater of war, Dole, by his own admission, sought to duck combat as an infantryman. He told his friend Noel Koch that he longed for a posting to an Army sports unit in Rome; a former Kansas University trainer tried but failed to get Dole into this unit, according to Richard Ben Cramer's *Bob Dole*. Unfortunately for Dole, the Army already had plans for him. In February 1945 Dole was handed one of the war's lousiest assignments: replacement lieutenant for a combat unit. Seven weeks after he took over a platoon, he was gravely wounded.

The unvarnished record shows that Dole did not rush off to war, as the compressed legend presented by his political allies and lieutenants has it. Taking a hesitant approach to war is not uncommon, nor is it necessarily a character flaw. But apparently in this instance it's a reality unsuitable for inclusion in a campaign bio. DAVID CORN AND PAUL SCHEMM

ferred the heaviest casualties. In the April 14-15 offensive in which Dole participated, L Company of the 3rd Battalion took the worst beating, experiencing "more casualties than any other Company in the Division from the time the Division arrived in Italy until the surrender," though I Company was certainly hard hit. Both Frank Carafa and Al Nencioni, sergeants in Dole's company, deny that it was ever referred to by others in the 10th as a suicide squad, though both were shocked by the casualties suffered in the April offensive.

§ *Dole's men considered him an aggressive, courageous leader.* In talking to Hilton, Nencioni (who told me he was responsible for directing mortar squads in the 4th platoon—the weapons platoon) recalled Dole as an especially brave officer who showed no hesitation in going into combat. Jennings told *Kansas City Star* reporter Jake Thompson that "the lieutenant was brave. . . he'd walk out to men on post at the front line even though he did not have to." Stan Kuschick, for a time the platoon's senior sergeant, called Dole "the best combat leader the platoon had." But at this point, Dole's combat leadership qualities were still undemonstrated.

The only truly aggressive actions Dole is known to have engaged in after his arrival and before the April 14 attack were two night patrols for the purpose of taking prisoners. Neither accomplished its mission. According to regimental historian Woodruff's account, "Co 'I' sent out an ambush patrol at 1900 17 March of 16 men, led by Lt. Dole. An ambush was set. . . with part of the patrol and the rest moved forward. Enemy MG [machine gun] and mortar fire suddenly opened up on the patrol, inflicting 4 light casualties. No prisoners were taken but one German was killed or badly wounded. The patrol was forced to withdraw because of mortar fire." Two nights later, Woodruff states, Dole led another patrol but ran into a Company K patrol engaged in a firefight with the enemy and halted. "Later they were fired upon, and thinking it might be the Co 'K' patrol, Lt Dole withdrew to prevent a clash of friendly forces."

The three men quoted above, along with Frank Carafa (who served for a time as Dole's immediate subordinate), are the four people most often interviewed about Dole by biographers; all agreed that he was a good guy, unassuming, respectful of their advice, popular with his men. There is no reason to dispute this. Dole was evidently soft-spoken and willing to listen to those with greater combat experience. As a green replacement taking over a unit that had been through some severe fighting, listening to the veterans and learning from them was in his own interest.

§ *Dole's first wound.* It was in the first of these night patrols that Dole received the wound for which he was awarded his first Purple Heart. He ruefully confesses in his 1988 autobiography that his wound was self-inflicted: "As we approached the enemy, there was a brief exchange of gunfire. I took a grenade in hand, pulled the pin, and tossed it in the direction of the farmhouse. It wasn't a very good pitch (remember, I was used to catching passes, not throwing them). In the darkness, the grenade must have struck a tree and bounced off. It exploded nearby, sending a sliver of metal into my leg—the sort of injury the Army patched up with Mercurochrome and a Purple Heart." The wound was so minor that he led another patrol two nights later. He does not

mention that others were also injured by his misguided throw—which Woodruff's account attributes to an enemy machine gun.

Dole's version seems to have gotten chewed up in the myth-making machinery. Richard Ben Cramer, in his book *Bob Dole*, is the only one of the biographers to give Dole's account. Hilton says only that Dole "suffered a slight leg wound in March 1945, and earned a Purple Heart, but he went right on leading his platoon." In his 1994 biography *Bob Dole: The Republicans' Man for All Seasons*, Thompson, the *Kansas City Star* reporter, who had interviewed Dole, says, "One of his group pulled the pin on a hand grenade and threw it.... A small grenade fragment cut into Dole's leg and lightly injured several others. The men were patched up and each was awarded a Purple Heart."

Most significant, in a 1982 *Washingtonian* article currently being distributed by the Dole campaign, which Dole praises in a cover letter as "events brilliantly captured in print by my friend Noel Koch," Koch says nothing about Dole's errant toss of the grenade. Rather, he quotes Dole as saying, "I think one of ours might have bounced off a tree and rolled back.... Sometimes it was like a shooting gallery in the dark. You didn't know where the stuff was coming from or whose it was." Apparently, Dole approved this revisionist version.

§ *In opposition to his company commander's orders, Dole led an assault on a German machine-gun nest.* There are conflicting versions of how Dole came to lead the April 14 assault in which he was wounded. First, there is strong disagreement over who was Dole's platoon sergeant, his second in command. Dole, who should know, identifies him in his autobiography as "my second in command, Platoon Sergeant Stan Kuschick." But Thompson and Cramer write that Dole took over from Sergeant Carafa, who has told various biographers and journalists that he had been acting platoon commander for sixteen months, which is difficult to believe since normal Army procedure would be to send in a replacement officer well before that time—particularly if the platoon was going into a major battle, as it did in the drive for Monte Belvedere. When I raised this with Carafa in a recent interview, he stuck to his story.

The reason the identity of Dole's number two is important is that Carafa is the source of the oft-repeated story establishing Dole's courage and fighting spirit. Carafa has told biographers that the company commander had ordered him to lead an attack on a machine-gun nest, with Dole providing covering fire, but that Dole volunteered to lead it instead. Carafa, now 74, recently gave a somewhat modified version of the circumstances under which Dole came to lead the attack. Carafa now says that the company commander merely suggested that he command the squad because he had been acting platoon leader before Dole arrived. When they returned to the platoon and explained the mission, "Dole said he would take the squad and I would give *him* covering fire." Carafa agreed that it was Dole's duty to lead the attack, since he was the platoon leader. Yet in an interview, another member of Dole's company, who prefers to remain anonymous, characterized Carafa's memory of the incident as containing inaccuracies.

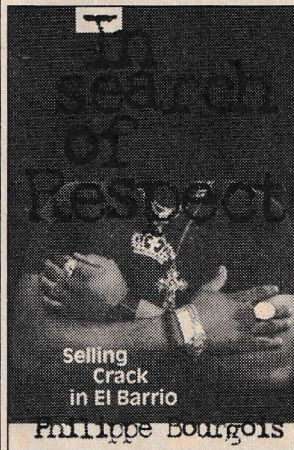
Cramer makes no reference to Carafa's story in his description of the same action. He says simply, "Dole could have stayed in the middle [of the platoon], too. But he knew his job, and he

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did it." Out of modesty, perhaps, Dole is reticent about the incident in his autobiography, quoting Carafa's account and then saying, "I don't remember the exact sequence myself."

§ *Dole was wounded while trying to drag his fallen radioman into a shell hole.* Company I's objective was to capture Hill 913, but as the men proceeded down a slope, they immediately ran into mine fields and intense enemy fire raking a clearing they had to cross. The time was about 10:30 A.M. on April 14. Dole writes that in the course of the attack various members of his platoon were hit, and he threw a grenade at the machine-gun nest, then dove into a shell hole for protection. "From where I crouched," he continues, "I could see my platoon's radio man go down.... After pulling his lifeless form into the foxhole, I scrambled back out again. As I did, I felt a sharp sting in my upper right back." Thus, his wound came after he had pulled the radioman into the shell hole.

The "Bob Dole Story" on the Dole for President homepage on the Internet gives this account a slightly more heroic twist: "In the middle of heavy shelling, Lieutenant Dole saw his radioman go down. As he crawled out of his foxhole to try to rescue the wounded soldier, he was hit by Nazi machine gun fire." Katharine Seelye, writing in *The New York Times* on the fifty-first anniversary of the incident, relates a similar version, only she says he was hit "by a shell or bullet or cannon fire—there was too much flying metal to know." These versions make Dole's commendable action more admirably sacrificial.

Since Dole says he does not remember what happened next, perhaps because he was given morphine, we must rely on the accounts of Nencioni, Kuschick, Carafa and Jennings. But the recollections of fifty years after the event must be approached with caution. Kuschick, for example, was quoted in a 1992 book, *Soldiers on Skis*, as saying the wound that crippled Dole occurred when their platoon was sent out on a night patrol to capture a prisoner. "It was dark, we took them by surprise, and then there was a firefight.... Bob, in what was a gutsy move, led the platoon up front with two scouts. Machine-gun fire killed the scouts and hit Bob. I went to him and saw he was barely alive. He looked gray." Dole, who wrote the foreword to this book and presumably saw the galleys, for some reason failed to correct Kuschick's story.

§ *Dole's heroic leadership helped the 10th Division crack the German mountain defenses.* Summing up Dole's achievements,

Hilton extravagantly claims, "Dole's leadership qualities were an important ingredient in the 10th Mountain Division's relentless drive to mop up the tail end of German troops still clinging desperately to the mountains of northern Italy." The truth is that Dole's company took heavy casualties from mines and enemy fire—without achieving its objective. Two of the four platoon lieutenants were killed in action. The regimental historian, Woodruff, mentions Dole was "seriously wounded during the attack" but gives no indication that he did anything remarkable in that combat. The battalion commander ordered Company K to pass through Company I and attack Hill 913 from another direction. Dole was put out of action so quickly that his contribution to the 10th Division's smashing of the German Gothic line was tragically brief.

§ *Dole was awarded two medals for heroism.* Dole's homepage on the Internet and handouts from the Dole for President campaign credit him with two Bronze Stars without producing any citations. The Army's Personnel Records Center says he received only one, and his separation notice confirms this. It appears that if Dole received two Bronze Stars, the second would have been awarded under a policy introduced in 1947 in which the medal was automatically given to all holders of the Combat Infantryman's Badge. In other words, Dole's second award was simply for being in combat—not, as with Bronze Stars awarded in wartime, for "heroic" or "meritorious" conduct.

In the April 14 attack Dole did his duty, but his actions were hardly the stuff of heroism. It was his job to lead his platoon, and dragging a wounded (or dead) comrade into one's shell hole was a common occurrence in the heat of battle. Even the friendly chronicler Noel Koch wonders why a war wound invests the bearer with an aura of heroism. "Heroism," he says, "involves choices, and Dole perceived no choice between leading his men and not leading them." As a member of Dole's platoon, Stanley Jones, put it in a recent interview, Dole "was a good soldier, but no more a hero than any other soldier."

Dole was promoted to first lieutenant in April 1946 and to captain in February 1947 even though he had been undergoing operations and rehabilitation in hospitals for the past two years. Hilton says that Dole referred to the second of these advancements as a "bedpan promotion."

And so the truth about Dole's war record is considerably less than awe-inspiring. Yet the myth endures, and with the candidate running on the contrast between his and Clinton's military record, his campaign isn't eager to give a more accurate account. Dole, at the behest of his handlers, is less reticent about his service than in the past, but he mainly speaks about his wound and rehabilitation. He has passed up several opportunities to correct the exaggerated versions in biographies, and in the case of his self-wounding has even approved a sanitized account in which his maladroitness hurled grenade goes unnoted. Journalists continue to portray him as a hero, winner of two Bronze Stars. Joe Klein, for example, writes in *Newseek* that Dole knows "what guns do. He also knows what politicians do, which is rarely anything quite so dramatic as leading an army into battle." Such attempts to make political capital out of Dole's war service go beyond the respect due him for the role he played as a soldier with the 10th Mountain Division. ■

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