

*Open Letter to Winners of the George Polk Award for Excellence in Journalism.*

March 14, 2007

Dear Friends,

You possibly have read Richard B. Frank's attack on my brother George Polk in *The Weekly Standard* edition of February 26 which was subsequently put on the web. As a winner of the award given in his name, I imagine that you were nearly as disturbed by it as I was. It is astonishing to me that 59 years after his murder George has been subjected to this character assassination. So one must answer two questions: first, why after all these years did Mr. Frank write this article and *The Weekly Standard* publish it and, second, are the allegations he brings forward true?

I have never met Mr. Frank and have no sense of his politics or ambitions. However, he himself implicitly answers the first question: the object of his attack is the award given in George Polk's name for outstanding journalism and indirectly, by listing a number of the winners of the award, the journalism profession itself. In another place, he mentions that his article was turned down by *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Washington Post*, *Slate Magazine*, *Harper's*, *The New Republic*, *the Wilson Quarterly* and *The American Scholar*. One can see why: the article is long on innuendo and short on facts. Only *The Weekly Standard* would publish it in America.

In his article, Mr. Frank equates George Polk with Jayson Blair, the *New York Times* reporter, charging that "both incurred shame for practicing deceit on their employers..." As he writes, Jayson Blair was "exposed for fraudulently concocting all or important parts of more than two score of stories."

How does Jayson Blair's action, as Mr. Frank describes it, compare to the reporting of George Polk? Mr. Frank does not mention -- much less discuss or attempt to refute -- a single story that George published in his years of reporting for *The Herald Tribune* (before and after the War) and CBS. The one item that he brings forward is that George received a tip on corruption in the highest level of the Greek government. Frank does not mention that George did *not* publish the tip. Obviously, as a practicing and respected journalist, you know better than I that a good reporter should try to find out if a tip is true or not. George's attempt to check the tip may have led to his death. But, surely attempting to track down the truth of a story is hardly the same as "practicing deceit."

Yet, Mr. Frank ends by writing that "...it is clear now that no award honoring excellence in journalism should bear the name of George Polk."

So much for Mr. Frank's view of journalistic integrity.

What is he left with: nothing to do with journalism but my brother's service during

World War II in the great battle for Guadalcanal.

Frank's argument is that Guadalcanal "forces us to reexamine his standards. It also bears upon his status as a symbol of journalistic integrity." How are the two episodes related? Frank alleges that "Polk shared accounts of his exploits [and] deployed them to help him secure employment with CBS, where his tales of heroism as a fighter pilot enthralled his colleagues, notably Edward R. Murrow."

I knew George's two CBS bosses, Edward R. Murrow and Howard K. Smith, quite well. Neither ever mentioned, until after George's death, anything about his wartime service. Moreover, it stretches the imagination to believe that Murrow or Smith would hire a reporter and ultimately make him CBS's chief correspondent in the Middle East on account of whatever he may have done during the war. The CBS news team was then among the most professional in the world and surely would not have appointed a man on grounds other than his journalistic skills and personal integrity. To suggest otherwise involves charging Murrow and Smith with being fools.

Since I plan sometime to write an account of George's life, I have read through George's correspondence with CBS and find no mention of his wartime service. If Mr. Frank actually knows of any instance when George "deployed them to help him secure employment with CBS," he does not mention when or where he got this information. The reason is simple: it does not exist.

So Mr. Frank falls back on two unrelated charges: first, that George claimed to have shot down 11 Japanese aircraft. That is untrue. In her book on his murder, Kati Marton makes that claim. Note that George *did not make this claim; it was made for him after his death*. There is no such mention in any of his correspondence and having spent half a year with my brother in 1946 and 1947, I never heard him say what Mr. Frank alleges. The mistake was pointed out to Ms. Marton when her book was published by George's cousin, Jeff Price who was later the Foreign Editor of *The Baltimore Sun*.

And, second, Mr. Frank says that "he reported he won the Purple Heart medal for 'shrapnel' wounds received in action." Mr. Frank correctly points out that at that stage of World War II, the Purple Heart was given not for wounds. It was, however, given for bravery.

So what does the official record actually show? In summary, just to take two issues, from official records in my possession that 1) George was one of the earliest Naval officers to land on Guadalcanal where he helped to establish the air field upon which the success of that desperate campaign depended; for this and other actions, he participated in the award of the first Presidential Unit Citation which, as Mr. Frank admits, was "at the level of an individual award of the Navy Cross." And (2) he received the Purple Heart medal on behalf of the unit he commanded, the "Airplane

Cruiser Scouting Detachment...for heroic work during the Battle for the Solomans.” The decoration was awarded by Vice Admiral John McCain (father of the Senator of the same name) on November 30, 1943 in a ceremony photographed by the Navy. I have the photograph and the citation. There are other records – which Mr. Frank chooses to dismiss. But, surely, these two were enough to show that George did not need to embellish his record: it was outstanding enough.

Of course, all this is irrelevant to George’s work as a journalist. He regarded his wartime service as simply the duty of a patriotic American. Like many thousands of others, he did what he could to help win the war. For him, being a reporter was his real life work. It is that on which his reputation among his colleagues rested. It was of the very highest as Edward R. Murrow, Howard K. Smith and many others then commented. It is that reputation which the George Polk Awards recall. In his attempt to destroy this reputation, Mr. Frank’s attempt at character assassination is almost as evil as the physical assassination 59 years ago.

William R. Polk

P.S. I apologize for addressing you in this impersonal way, but the organization that manages the George Polk Awards informs me that it does not have the addresses of the winners who now number several hundred of our finest journalists.