

Hugh Aloysius Mulligan

106th Infantry Division

AP reporter Hugh Mulligan dies at 83

By RICHARD PYLE – Nov 26, 2008



NEW YORK (AP) — Hugh A. Mulligan, who in a half-century with The Associated Press covered everyone from presidents and popes to astronauts and combat soldiers, reporting the news in eloquently crafted, fact-packed dispatches laced with wry humor and humanistic touches, died Wednesday. He was 83.

Mulligan died at Danbury Hospital in Danbury, Conn., his brother John Mulligan said. He had been recently diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, according to his family.

Tom Curley, president of The AP, called Hugh Mulligan "a legendary storyteller. His wit was as penetrating as his humor was revealing. He was a friend and mentor to many at AP around the world. He will be missed immensely."

Insatiably curious and able to find story potential in almost anything, Mulligan roamed the globe, visiting nearly 150 countries from Europe to equatorial Africa to Tibet. He made 28 trips with the pope and covered more than half a dozen wars, including three reporting tours in Vietnam.

In 1970 stories about war's sudden impact on Cambodia, he described a novice army that "rode to war on Pepsi-Cola trucks" and the naive courage of a young soldier who "walked down the road carrying the big red and blue flag, and came home in a body bag."

In Mulligan's words, the riverboat Delta Queen wasn't just plying the Mississippi, she was "spinning rainbows from her stern wheel." The streets of Saigon before the war were "a whisper of bicycles."

Visiting the biblical city of Sodom, he found the modern-day version "without sin," although "one might see a Bedouin three sheets to the wind" in a sandstorm.

"Hugh's beat was mankind," former AP President Louis D. Boccardi said. "He had a love affair with the world, and we of the AP loved him for it. There won't be, there can't be, another Hugh Mulligan."

Born in New York City on March 23, 1925, Hugh Aloysius Mulligan served in World War II as a rifleman in the Army's **106th Infantry Division**, after that unit was decimated in the 1944 Battle of the Bulge.

After the war he completed a bachelor of arts degree at Vermont's new Marlboro College and was the only member of its first graduating class in 1948, addressed at commencement by poet Robert Frost. He later earned simultaneous degrees — journalism at Boston University and a master's in English literature at Harvard — and taught Greek and Latin at Boston Latin prep school.

Mulligan joined AP in December 1951 in Baton Rouge, La., and after 1956 was based in New York, except for a 1970s stint in London. He retired in 2000.

Having studied early for the priesthood, Mulligan was more than prepared for his favorite assignments — trips with Pope John Paul II. Meeting the pontiff for the first time, he was so nervous that he dropped a bag of rosaries. But the pope blessed them, "even the broken ones," Mulligan wrote later.

Colleagues joked that Mulligan could find a way to mention the Catholic church in any story, no matter the subject. He said the first person he visited in any new place was the local priest, because "they always know what's going on."

In all, Mulligan visited 146 countries on assignments that included wars in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Ireland, Cyprus, Angola and the secessionist Nigerian region of Biafra. He covered President John F. Kennedy's Cold War visit to the Berlin Wall in 1963 and was there again in 1989 when the wall was torn down.

He wrote about space shots and political conventions and was in a blimp overhead when a nuclear submarine flashed its historic message from the North Pole: "Nautilus 90 degrees north."

During the October 1973 war between Israel and Egypt, he was the only American correspondent with Maj. Gen. Ariel Sharon's surprise tank counterattack across the Suez Canal.

Among those he interviewed were Marilyn Monroe, Margaret Thatcher, the shah of Iran, John Glenn, Joe DiMaggio — during a baseball game in Rome — and a bevy of writers including Brendan Behan, Tennessee Williams, John Steinbeck and James Jones.

He went to Ireland with presidents Kennedy and Ronald Reagan and to China and Russia with Richard Nixon, toured with jazz great Louis Armstrong and comedian Bob Hope, carried a spear at the Metropolitan Opera and rode a camel caravan in Oman.

He covered the royal wedding of Charles and Diana in 1981 by invitation and her funeral 16 years later. The princess, he wrote, "seems destined ... to enter the elysian fields of eternal celebrity that already enshrines Marilyn, Jackie O and Elvis."

In a quest to report from the planet's most remote datelines, he visited the south Atlantic island of Tristan de Cunha, which claims to be the point on earth farthest from any other land, and finally made it to Antarctica in 2004.

Competing with AP colleagues in New York for choice feature assignments, Mulligan drew the short straw — a weekend in a Pennsylvania nudist colony. "Oh, great," his hostess-to-be said by phone. "You'll be here in time for the square dance."

Mulligan later described her as "5-feet-2 in any direction and barefoot all the way up to her harlequin sunglasses" and said the July 4 barbecue was "about the same as any other place except that people tend to stand a little further away from the fire."

Though celebrated most for feature writing, Mulligan was proudest of his war reporting, especially his three years in Vietnam and one in Cambodia. He rode on a helicopter mission to rescue a downed Navy pilot in North Vietnam and was one of three AP staffers covering the last American POW release in Hanoi in March 1973.

Among his favorite Vietnam stories, Mulligan said, was one that consisted of a single paragraph:

"SAIGON (AP) — Rama Dama Rau, Premier Ky's personal astrologist who predicted five years ago that the war would be over in six months, was drafted today."

"That explained more of the war than any other story I wrote," he said later.

In a 2005 interview about his career, Mulligan said he was "most happy that I never became an expert on anything — I never became a space writer, a science writer, a political writer — not being anything allowed you to cover everything."

An intellectual without pretense, Mulligan was a voracious reader and diligent researcher who gloried in finding obscure nuggets of fact and history. His home in Ridgefield, Conn., which he named "Hardscribble House," featured a wall-size bookcase with the works of Irish writers.

Despite a lifelong stutter, he also was a brilliant raconteur, delighting audiences with witty observations drawn from his journalistic adventures.

With other AP staffers he co-authored books on the Kennedy assassination and the 1967 Six-Day War, and he wrote his own books on Vietnam, the racehorse Kelso and Sherlock Holmes. In 2005, he published a memoir, "Been Everywhere, Got Nowhere," drawn in part from a lifelong diary.

Survivors include his wife of 60 years, the former Brigid Murphy, whom he married in her home parish in Armagh, Ireland, in 1948; brothers Andrew, of Las Vegas, and John, of Saugerties, N.Y., a former AP reporter and New York City assistant fire commissioner; and several nieces and nephews.



Page last revised

James D. West

www.IndianaMilitary.org

jimdwest@centurylink.net