

This Day in History... October 17, 1913

Birth of George Polk

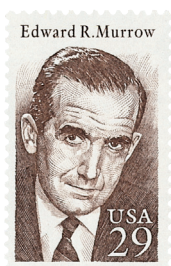
Journalist George Washington Polk Jr. was born on October 17, 1913, in Fort Worth, Texas. He was related to US Presidents James K. Polk and Andrew Jackson.

Polk attended the Virginia Military Institute but left during his junior year. After returning briefly to Fort Worth, he grew restless. Polk spent some time in California before going to Alaska, where he attended the University of Alaska.

After graduating with an English degree in 1938, Polk worked as a reporter in China and France. After the US entered World War II, he joined the Naval Construction Battalion (Seabees). During the war, he volunteered as a dive-bomber and reconnaissance pilot. In a battle near the Solomon Islands, Polk was searching for a downed pilot when two Japanese fighters attacked his own plane. He got away from them but had to land his plane in the ocean and spent a week with friendly villagers before an American plane passed over to help him. Polk also contracted malaria and was in the hospital for nearly a year.



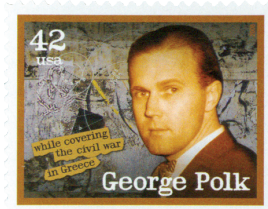
Polk's unit was stationed at Henderson Field on Guadalcanal.



Murrow called Polk a "34-year-old, tall, lean, blonde American, full of courage and an insatiable appetite for truth."

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During his short life, Polk also reported for the *Fairbanks Daily News*, the *Shanghai Evening News*, and the *Herald Tribune* in Paris and New York. He wasn't the first or the last reporter killed maintaining his journalistic integrity, but he set an example for others to follow. Since 1949, the prestigious George Polk Awards have honored journalists who have reported on issues vital to the American public.



Polk stamp from the 2008 American Journalists issue

After the war, Polk was one of the elite reporters recruited by Edward R. Murrow for CBS radio. By 1948, he was in Greece reporting on the civil war there. As an outspoken critic of the Greek conflict, Polk exposed corruption in the US-backed Greek government, finding evidence that they had stolen US aid. The Greek government requested that CBS reassign him, but CBS refused. Colleague William L. Shirer remarked, "George was more passionately involved in his work than most... I wondered if he realized whom he was playing against."

Polk stood by his convictions, putting the story before his personal safety. He was found dead on May 16, floating near the port of Thessaloniki, with his hands and feet bound and a bullet wound to his head. Three Greek communists were convicted of his murder; the Greek government claimed Polk was killed while trying to get a meeting with a leader of the group. Few, if any, historians believe that to be the real story however. Polk's younger brother William thought, "The trial was a joke. The defense attorneys never raised any of the issues they could have raised. They never called witnesses they could have called. It was like a Soviet show trial."

Following his death, Edward R. Murrow spoke highly of his journalist, saying, "George Polk was a reporter who had worked in half a dozen capitals and flown both fighters and bombers for the Navy during the war, was wounded in the Solomon (Islands) and decorated for bravery. George Polk had that honesty and integrity, the reverence for fact, and indifference to criticism which gave him the respect of the men of his trade..."

"Those who knew George Polk think first of his heart and courage. He was intrepid in his pursuit of a story. He was uncompromising in his determination to tell it. He reported the truth



Polk was killed in Greece while reporting on the Greek Civil War – he was just 34 years old.



The George Polk Award "focuses on the intrepid, bold, and influential work of the reporters themselves, placing a premium on investigative work that is original, resourceful, and thought-provoking."

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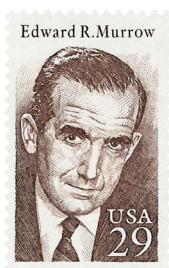
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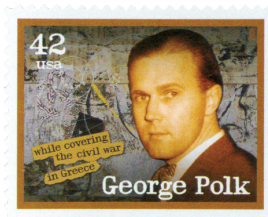
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