

Robert Pierpoint (1925-2011)

By Mel Lavine

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I got the news that Robert Pierpoint, the CBS News correspondent, had died in Santa Barbara at 86 on Sunday morning from a friend in Florida. She had just heard it on the TV from Bob Schieffer in a tribute at the end of "Face the Nation."

It was 8 a.m. in my house when the phone rang. The Lady Friend and I were still in bed. Not quite awake, I couldn't understand what the friend in Florida was saying and then it was painfully clear.

I'd known Bob Pierpoint so long it didn't seem true. We'd kept up over the years, long after we'd both been gone from the network. It was hard to imagine him gone for good. I knew he had health problems (don't we all after a certain age?) but he always bounced back or seemed to. The cause, the network said, was complications from hip surgery.

Bob's career in reporting the news for CBS on radio and television spanned more than 40 years. He broadcast many of the top stories of his time, notably the Korea War, the Kennedy assassination, and Watergate. One of the longest-serving White House correspondents, he covered six presidents, from Eisenhower to Carter. He was a regular for many years on the team of reporters working with Walter Cronkite on "The CBS Evening News." As best I remember, Bob moved to "Sunday Morning" with Charles Kuralt; sometime around 1980. Anyway, that's where he and I met and began working on stories together.

Bob had been at CBS since 1949, hired by Edward R. Murrow, the great news broadcaster and commentator. That Bob had no newspaper experience mattered little to Murrow. Young Pierpoint had a natural gift writing for the ear, and this is what counted a lot with Murrow.

I didn't sleep very well Sunday night. It wasn't just because I missed Bob, and that yet another friend had taken his leave. I worried because I knew I would have to do a piece about him, and I was trying to figure things out in my mind..

Funny thing, Bob's death brought some people back in my life.

One of my old bosses at CBS called. We hadn't really spoken in a long time. I'd done a sketch of him in a memoir a few years ago. It was critical in parts but true; still I've always felt lousy and maybe a little guilty about it because he'd done me some good turns. But I had to write what I wrote. Sunday night he was on the phone. And we talked about Bob and had some great laughs, the kind of laughs you miss when you're gone from a world you once knew so well.

The death of friends can fool you. They take a lot away but they can also give some life back.

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