WOMEN ON THE VERGE OF A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN

D-Day set the template, both for the news in General and the brand-new War Report programme it christened. Nothing could be the same. Officially sanctioned accounts from days after the fact, recited dutifully by BBC announcers, would never suffice again. Immediacy had arrived, and broadcasting was now expected to match, if not exceed, the pace of life. This wasn't necessarily good news for the people working on it, such as John Snagge.

Snagge had been appointed BBC Director of Presentation at the war's outset, over a decade into his career at the Corporation, and was by now practically the living archetype of the dinner-suited, nasal-voiced BBC English announcer. As such, he was the voice of War Report, reading out the latest developments on all the various Fronts, almost every single day. He was therefore among the first and hardest affected by the newfound urgency of the news that the War Report programme canonised. Previously, he had had plenty of time to read and absorb his script at his leisure before going live. Now the news was coming in hard and fast (by comparison - though of course still snail-like compared with the modern day). Now he was lucky if the final draft was delivered within half an hour of broadcast. This sudden spike in stress levels almost led Snagge to leave the programme altogether, as expressed in a tooth-grinding internal memo written by him two months into its existence:

"*So far as I myself am concerned, I would like it to be understood that I do not wish to continue doing War Report at all under the present arrangements. I do not think it is fair on the performance or myself. It is only on very rare occasions that a completed script is available before 9 p.m. Normally it is somewhere about five or ten past nine. During the last few days there have been two mistakes - one of which was in fact my own. But I believe that mistakes will occur, and continue to occur, so long as the script is arranged as it is. In addition to this, when I do make a mistake, I am treated in an off-hand and rude manner by responsible officials, and this adds to my wish to withdraw from War Report.***"

The last sentence suggests the high pressure was not just getting to Snagge (although in the event he stayed on right to the end), but to everyone involved in the process. Not that anyone was surprised even at the time. The War Reporting Unit was an idea ahead of its time, forced into existence by necessity before a lot of the technology or infrastructure existed yet. Photocopying, for example, was yet to be invented, so the BBC had to make do with the Duplicating Section: a room full of women carefully typing out scripts and dispatches in triplicate, twenty-four hours a day in shifts until they collapsed altogether, necessitating a massive recruitment drive and highlighting perhaps the biggest problem with Haley's massive reform and rebuilding: that it was too much, too

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quickly, with too little consideration given to the functionaries at the bottom of the ladder. Looking back in 1978, the Duplicating Section's head Mary Lewis (by then a BBC veteran) highlighted this tendency as possibly endemic to the Corporation as a whole:

"*[...] Nobody really had thought through the problems of what would be involved at the lowest end, and - riding a particular hobby-horse - I've always had a feeling that the BBC has tended to undervalue the people at the lowest end, who are a very vital part of the whole machinery. They don't always think through the effects of some of their new proposals…"*

This is not to discount the stress faced by the War Correspondents themselves, of course. Endless speed-typing on terrifying deadlines could (and did) often lead to nervous exhaustion and breakdowns, but being on the front lines of the Invasion of Europe could achieve the same result even quicker. The Correspondent's job, it soon became clear, was to bear witness, to the most terrible things if necessary, on behalf of those who otherwise would not. And that's if it didn't just kill you outright: two War Reporting Unit members, Kent Stevenson and Guy Byam, were killed during the Invasion, both on bombing raids over Germany from which their planes never returned.

And even when they weren't being shot at by the enemy, they still had to deal with their own Generals. Who were almost as difficult.

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