THE PRICE OF COAL

To this end, one of Haley's first assignments at the BBC was to visit the front, in Italy, and interview the Allied Generals posted there, chief among them Harold Alexander, future Field-Marshal and Earl of Tunis, who apparently had some questions he'd been wanting to put to a BBC man for some time. These - whatever they were - he managed to put to the new Editor-in-Chief, but Haley's main concern in Italy was not with him but with the rank and file, canvassing the opinions of the regular British post-Tommy under fire in a faraway land.

The information he gleaned from this experience - mostly that they were understandably concerned with links to the home front, with information and messages going to and from - fed into the first of many innovations Haley brought to, or at least midwifed for the BBC: the revamp of the Forces Programme as the General Forces Programme. Such a change was already on the cards when Haley arrived at the Corporation, by request of General Dwight Eisenhower. By now there were GIs stationed all over Britain, and their tastes in radio were very different to the rest of us here on the home front. They were unused to the genteel dramas, polite parlour games and deadpan absurdist satire of the likes of ITMA or Monday Night at Eight, had no interest in the Brains Trust and their unscripted cerebral chit-chat, and would much rather tune into the hot swing jazz of Count Basie or Duke Ellington of an evening than Vera Lynn. Given the choice, they'd just as soon switch the radio off and go out and impregnate a few 19-year old British girls. The new General Forces Programme was a conscious effort at some kind of wireless prophylactic.

ITMA, the Brains Trust and the rest remained - there would have been mass uproar if they hadn't - but they were now joined by several brasher entertainments, explicitly aimed at those American soldiers used to the likes of the Jack Benny Program, Abbott and Costello and the two-fisted adventures of Doc Savage or Tarzan. In amongst the British music and comedy - some of which were so incomprehensible to the foreign ear they might as well have been transmitted in code - there were little islands of home, such as recitals from Tommy Dorsey and his Orchestra, or a comedy half-hour with Edgar Bergen and (ostensibly, although what use the actual doll himself was on the radio is anyone's guess) Charlie McCarthy. The BBC even eventually managed to import episodes of the Jack Benny Program, albeit spelled with an extra -me on the end. Don't want the GIs to completely forget what country they're in, after all.

Alongside all this home-from-home material, thanks to Haley taking the time to talk to the rank and file in Italy, were a host of programmes aimed at providing a link between the home front and the actual front. These included regular news bulletins, various magazine programmes centring, in one way or another, around the four corners of the war-torn globe, from Palestine to South Africa to

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Canada, and “Greetings From” programmes in which actual British soldiers were able to speak directly to their loved ones back home, if only briefly.

Foot was impressed. He looked forward to a potentially long and fruitful working relationship with him, followed by Haley’s inevitable accession to replace him. In the event, only half of this dream would be fulfilled, as early in 1944, the Mining Association found itself in need of a new chairman. The coal industry was at something of a crossroads. The war was still a long way from over (France hadn’t even been liberated yet), but with the entrance of the Americans, the exit (and subsequent side-switching) of the Italians and German army in tatters after its disastrous invasion of Russia, an end - and even a victorious one - was actually within sight at last. The future of coal in a notional post-war world was up for grabs, with Labour increasingly enthusiastic and vocal about the socialist programme they hoped to implement once peace was achieved - and, of course, ultimately did, including the nationalisation of the coal industry. The Mining Association wanted to be prepared for such an eventuality. They wanted someone who knew coal back and front, and had a proven track record as an administrator. They wanted Robert W. Foot.

After much careful consideration on his part, they got him. Ironically by now he was settled in at the BBC and didn’t necessarily want to leave; but at the same time he couldn’t shake the feeling that coal was his true calling, and that the industry truly needed him. And so at the end of April 1944, Foot - to the surprise of the Governors and the Press alike - stepped down as Director-General of the BBC and finally moved back to the fossil fuel industry where he’d made his name. He stayed until 1952, unsuccessfully fighting against nationalisation and eventually rising to the title of President. He would go on to manage collieries in South Africa and Rhodesia, and ultimately died in Surrey in 1973 at the age of 83, content in his achievements but all but forgotten by the BBC. Like Ogilvie before them, neither he nor Graves have an official portrait in Broadcasting House. Their successor, however, does. For the first time, the Director-Generalship passed on with absolutely no fuss whatsoever. William L. Haley was hired from the start as a future successor. The future had arrived sooner than anyone was expecting.

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