THE WAR GAMES

In some respects it's quite shocking that the war had been raging for four years and was approaching its business end by the time the BBC convened its War Reporting Unit, but in others it's unsurprising considering the Corporation's constant internal bickering and a succession of post-Reith leaders who ran the gamut from poor to inexperienced to sickly. Now they had a veteran newsman in charge in William Haley, and he was determined to revitalise and modernise the BBC's coverage of the war.

This is not to suggest that the BBC News department had no idea what they were doing until Haley showed up like a Christ figure to point the way. He doesn't even get the credit for inventing the War Reporting Unit, which came into being under Foot in May 1943. It was largely a process of natural evolution. War deforms society, and accelerates progress (certain kinds of it at least), and the larger the war the more true this becomes.

World War Two was and is the largest war ever fought (and long may it remain so). Its scope, and its historical timing, had combined to bring forth the concept of the embedded reporter, with Dimbleby, Talbot and company reporting from as close to the centre of the action as seemed prudent at the time. Before long, the traditional Press, sensing the wave of the future were accompanying them, and even the armed forces themselves were starting to learn lessons in broadcasting and propaganda. Initially the Air Ministry was so slow on the uptake that one major bombing raid in Berlin, with BBC and newspapermen in tow, wasn't ultimately reported to the general public until the following night, by which time London listeners were already cowering in their shelters from the Luftwaffe's reprisal.

The idea of the War Reporting Unit was already gestating six months before Haley's arrival, when the BBC, with the Army's backing, staged a series of wargames, including a full-scale mock battle (designated Operation Spartan) as an exercise for reporters, technicians, and basically the entire newsgathering machine. As well as recorded reports on the "battle" as it unfolded - which were played back after the fact to the Governors, who found it surprisingly exciting - a thorough report on the entire exercise was written up by Richard Dimbleby, carefully pointing out the correct lessons. Specifically that there was a need for the reporters to be, or to make themselves, more like soldiers - not only in the sense of requiring training and physical fitness, but also for the sake of reportage itself, to blend in with and be accepted by the army men: "a sense of military discipline and bearing" was necessary, in order to "fit ourselves into the landscape and conduct ourselves in accordance with the rank whose privileges we enjoy." Dimbleby also argued that the advent of mobile warfare had changed the nature of reporting such that one person couldn't be expected to

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provide both “situation” and eyewitness material. The idea of the “war correspondent” was born - lean, physically fit, unflappable, an athlete and a wordsmith.

Haley entered this shifting landscape with the War Reporting Unit technically in place but not yet quite fully formed. Howard Marshall was chosen as its first Director, and immediately discovered that they were chronically understaffed: “we have not even two full teams, let alone a reserve team”.†† The Press were another worry, hissing like Siamese cats at the BBC’s threat to an industry they hadn’t just dominated before they’d come along, but which had essentially consisted solely of them. The Corporation’s hiring of Haley placated them a little - maybe he was a traitor to Fleet Street, but on the other hand at least he understood their needs as much as his own.

Meanwhile, the wargames continued with Operation Pirate in October 1943, shortly after Haley’s appointment as Editor in Chief. This was the first full-scale dress rehearsal for the actual invasion of Europe. Again, the BBC had embedded reporters studded throughout. The following March, Haley arranged the first of several special military training courses for his war correspondents, where the lessons learnt from the wargaming and carefully identified by Richard Dimbleby were put into practice. Here, he and other wide-eyed journalistic types were taught how to live rough, read maps, work in the field and even fire weapons, alongside crash courses in semaphore, orienteering and plane and tank recognition. They were deliberately being trained and conditioned to think of themselves as a specialised branch of the armed forces in themselves.

The changes were most visible to the British public in the form of a new programme: a supplement to the daily news on the Home Service entitled “War Report”. The first edition went out on the evening of June 6th, 1944 - D-Day.

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