LIGHT AIRCRAFT ON FIRE

William John Haley was born in Jersey on the 24th of May, 1901 - making him the first DG to be born in the 20th Century. He was a newspaperman almost from birth, starting down the journalistic road in 1918 at the island's premier (and only) public school, Victoria College. Three years later he was working for the Times, stationed in Brussels. He turned out not to be cut out for the life of a reporter due to an unfortunate level of social anxiety, so he soon went into subediting instead, starting at the Manchester Evening News. Within eight years he'd risen up the behind-the-scenes ranks to become a director at Manchester Guardian and Evening News, Ltd - the precursor to the modern Guardian Media Group. He might have been too shy for field work, but woe betide anyone who mistook that for weakness.

The BBC certainly didn't. By the time they came headhunting in 1944, he was joint Managing Director of MGEN, as well as serving on the Boards of Directors of both Reuters and the Press Association. It was as if he was trying to fuse himself with the concept of news, to create some kind of symbiotic relationship. By the time he took charge of Britain's biggest, and still effectively only, national broadcaster, the biggest news event in several lifetimes was upon him: the business end of the Second World War, beginning with the re-invasion and (albeit a hope rather than a certainty at this point) liberation of Europe. It was being planned before Haley even became BBC Editor-in-Chief (a role he now combined with DG). By his ascension in the spring of 1944, it was imminent, and Haley was determined that the BBC should be ready.

The BBC's war reporting had already garnered much acclaim, thanks to the efforts of the likes of Godfrey Talbot, Frank Gillard and the legendary Richard Dimbleby. Chaos is the mother of invention, and four and a half years of global conflict had forced great leaps in technology and technique. The early exchanges in the Battle of Britain led to the first marriage of still-relatively-new motor vehicles with cutting-edge recording equipment, as Charles Gardner sped through blacked-out London with a microphone giving a disturbing, ghoulish cup-final running commentary on an overhead dogfight, which fortunately for the BBC ended with a Messerschmitt going down in flames:

"*Oh! That was beautiful. He's coming right down. I think it was definitely that burst got him. Yes, he's come down. You hear those crowds? He's finished! Let's move around so we can see him a bit more…*"♀

To the modern eye, the transcript tends to come across like a fragment of script from a dystopian black comedy along the lines of Death Race 2000. Even at the time (without sports programming

© MATTHEW HARRIS 2019

to provide some kind of context) it turned stomachs. But at the same time, it quickened pulses. Nothing like it had happened before: live, real war, described (with relish) as it happened. Soon there was an entire fleet of cars and vans with recording equipment attached.

Before long, the war gave birth to the foreign correspondent as we recognise it today. Richard Dimbleby and Godfrey Talbot couldn't yet report live from so far away, but they could record semi-improvised and highly visual, even visceral, reports of a squadron of Lancasters pounding Berlin into rubble, or breathless exultations of victory at El Alamein, backed with the rumbling of the tanks themselves.

The very nature of information had changed. Hitherto, even in the previous World War, the news was something that was told to you after the fact, and required a combination of wordsmithery on the journalists' part and imagination on the readers' - because there was no other way to imbibe it short of town criers and word-of-mouth. Now you could experience the actual sounds and atmosphere of the battlefield. You couldn't quite do it live as it happened yet, but that was clearly the next logical step. The radio even democratised the news, making it available to a larger population, in a far more immediate and, for some, even comprehensible form, and even for free at the point of delivery (once you'd bought a wireless and paid the licence).

Now the war was reaching its boiling point. Haley knew he was in at the deep end here. One of the first memos he ever issued as DG included the words:

"*The reporting of the invasion will be one of the biggest and most responsible the BBC has ever faced. We will be judged by our success or failure for years to come."*

However unlike his predecessors, particularly Ogilvie, Haley approached his task not with apprehension, but relish.

© MATTHEW HARRIS 2019