

## The Media and Modern Warfare

by  
Max Hastings\*

Professional soldiers through the past century and more have seldom thought well of the journalists who have accompanied them to war. William Howard Russell of *The Times*, who is generally recognised as the father of modern war corresponding for his dispatches from the Crimea, was sometimes feared by the generals, but never admired by them. In the early days of the American Civil War, an idealistic Union general named Irvin McDowell said that he had arranged for correspondents to take the field with the army, "and I have suggested to them that they should wear a white uniform to indicate their purity of their character." It was not long before any delusions of that sort were shattered. By 1898, when General Kitchener led his expeditionary force up the Nile to defeat the Mahdi, he was best remembered among the accompanying journalists for his answer when they besieged his tent one morning in search of news: "Out of my way, you drunken swabs!"

In the nineteenth century, an image was forged among professional soldiers and many civilians of the behaviour of journalists reporting war which has persisted in some measure to this day: of a band of anarchistic, untrustworthy, ill-conducted men, owing loyalty to nothing save their own careers. On the walls of my apartment in London, I have drawings from *The Graphic* and the *Illustrated London News* from colonial wars of the 1880s and 1890s, depicting correspondents advancing to war armed with cases of whisky, riding while better men walked, looting while better men fought.

The relationship between this image and the reality in the nineteenth century was very much the same as it is today. Soldiers fight wars because it is their duty to do so. Although they are too gentlemanly to say so too loudly or too often, most hunger for the opportunity to distinguish themselves in action, because war for the professional soldier offers the same career opportunities as a major sales campaign to the corporate executive. Civilians, in modern times, take pains to avoid the battlefield whenever they can. The old voyeuristic instincts that brought ladies and gentlemen in their carriages to the field of Waterloo, and to the great battlefields of the American Civil War, have gone. Modern weapons make the scenes of conflict between armies too uncertain and too dangerous to encourage casual bystanders.

But most men, most civilians, harbour somewhere in their bosoms a curiosity to discover what war is like, and how they themselves would respond to the experience of it. It has been accepted by western societies since the nineteenth century—however reluctantly—that journalists must be allowed to tell their peoples something of what is being done by the armies in their name when they go to war. Therefore, in almost every modern war, anything between a handful and some thousands of media correspondents have been authorized to attend the battlefield as privileged

spectators. Some—like Russell and G.W. Steevens in the first generation—have been men of high intelligence and literary gifts, who treated their responsibilities very seriously, and filed dispatches that are still read and admired today as models of informative reporting. Russell, after all, was hounded out of the United States for telling the world after Bull Run that the Union forces had broken in rout, when the Washington administration and the Union command recoiled from admitting the truth.

Yet in addition to the serious, objective and dedicated reporters, from the beginning there have also been the voyeurs, the sensation seekers, the political propagandists, the drunkards, the louts, the cowards. And yes, on the whole throughout the history of war corresponding, these men have outnumbered the serious reporters: perhaps not in their influence upon the public, but in the perception of the professional soldiers on the spot, and in later legend. Vietnam, more than any war, attracted a host of cheap thrill seekers, war lovers, women war “groupies,” reporters who never left the bars of Saigon.

That great military analyst S.L.A. Marshall wrote bitterly of the lack of national loyalty among the new breed of reporters in Vietnam: “In the days of yore the American correspondent . . . was an American first, a correspondent second. This old-fashioned standard seems to have been forgotten in south-east Asia. Some old-timers still play the game according to the rules. There is a new breed that acts as if it believes a press ticket is a licence to run the world.” I shall say a little more later about the danger to the profession of journalism, never mind to a nation in arms, that is posed by the hubris of not a few modern war correspondents.

Yet I do not believe that we should any more allow the undoubted existence of some reporters of the most indifferent qualities in modern military theatres to define our entire picture of the media at war than we should let the knowledge that armies possess rather more stupid and indifferent officers than distinguished ones determine our view of their military performance. Most armies, like most societies, produce just sufficient able or competent professionals to do their business. Journalism, since the nineteenth century, might say the same.

Now, while I am still sketching some of the background of modern war reporting, I should like to focus briefly upon two historical points that seem to me important. The first concerns the British experience in World War I. In August 1914, British military commanders and politicians felt that they had seen sufficient of newspapers and newspapermen over the past half century to be certain that the war then commencing would be carried on far more agreeably and efficiently without the presence of those whom they termed with wholehearted irony “the gentlemen of the press.” Thus it was that for many months, information reaching the British public from Flanders was both negligible and often wildly inaccurate. No journalists were afforded opportunities to visit the front, or given significant access to even the most pedestrian and incidental military information. Yet as the war dragged on, as the losses mounted horrifically and victory seemed further and further away, with

the utmost reluctance the directors of the British war effort were compelled by their political masters to review policy. They began to understand that the public's ignorance of what was happening in France, of what its millions of men in uniform were doing, was seriously sapping the nation's morale. Here was the country engaged upon the greatest military effort in its history. Yet its people knew nothing, literally nothing of the lives their sons and husbands were enduring in the trenches. The decision was made that it was essential to accredit some correspondents to G.H.Q., to allow newspapers to give the public some vision of the British war effort. Now, the quality of British reporting remained poor to the end of World War I, and the degree of access granted by the generals was pathetically limited. But a central reality was acknowledged, which I believe has permanent significance. To sustain the will of a modern democracy for a war which lasts any length of time, it is essential to tell its people what is being done in their name. One of many pernicious consequences of the war in Vietnam is that it has caused some soliders, above all in the United States, to suppose that they can do their business better if the prying eyes of the media are kept at a distance. Yet I would argue that in a modern society, this is a misjudgment. I would make a further point, equally often disputed by professional soldiers. The men of armies affect, in public among each other, a scorn for publicity. Yet I never cease to be amazed by how deeply in reality they crave recognition. When they are risking their lives daily in the face of the enemy, it is of the utmost importance to them to feel that their own people know and understand and appreciate what they are doing. Soldiers and sailors in action are infuriated and disgusted by press exaggerations, or reports that unreasonably frighten or dismay their families at home. But they want their kin to know all that can be told about what is happening to them. I will offer two stories to illustrate this point, each derived from the Falklands war. In the early days after we landed at San Carlos, it quickly became apparent that the battle between the Argentine air force and the Royal Navy was critical. Yet there was no reporter aboard any of the front line frigates. I flew out to the command ship, and harassed the naval staff to be allowed to visit one of the frigates bearing the brunt of the battle. They were dismissive, arguing that there was no time for nonsense of this sort. I turned eventually to the captain, an uncommonly thoughtful man, who at once saw the point. Between Argentine sorties, he had me sent to the frigate *Arrow*. When I got there, I was besieged by rude remarks from the sailors, who demanded to know where all the reporters had been, because they were weary of turning on the BBC World Service, and hearing so much said of the activities of the landing force, amid nothing from the navy's frigates at the centre of the storm. Without doubt, this silence had been demoralizing to them.

A second story in the same vein: the Ministry of Defence censors normally deleted all mention of which units were engaged in operations from reporters' copy. But after the Parachute Regiment's triumph at Goose Green, for morale reasons it was decided to let it be known that 2 Para had been responsible for the British victory. Once that unit's presence was on record, 2 Para's further activities continued to be

reported and referred to. Then, on the night of June 11th, 1982, three Royal Marine Commandos carried out exceptionally gallant and successful attacks upon Argentine hill positions overlooking Port Stanley. I filed a long report on the experience of 42 Commando, with whom I climbed Mount Harriet. This was duly carried in full in most British newspapers. But the MoD censors deleted all reference to the unit's identity, and even to the fact that its men wore green berets. To their bitter rage and fury, therefore, the Marines heard and later saw extensive reporting of 2 Para's activities elsewhere, while their own achievements gained no identifiable publicity. Now, some soldiers and especially some generals will declare that publicity does not matter. But I would submit, both from personal experience and from the study of recent military history, that it is of real importance both for sustaining the will of the nation at home for the fight, and that of the soldiers on the battlefield. The fact that both causes are sometimes injured by adverse or hostile publicity does not, in my view, outweigh the basic validity of the case, the balance of advantage.

Closely related to the point I have just raised, of course, is that of censorship. One reason I have always possessed a special interest in military affairs and in journalism is that my father, in World War II, was the war correspondent of a well-known British weekly of the period, named *Picture Post*. A collection of his dispatches was published in Britain in 1942 under the half ironic title "Passed As Censored." When I was around 20 years old, and just becoming conscious of some of the realities, as distinct from the boyish illusions of war, I read again my father's account of accompanying a Bomber Command raid upon the German battlecruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* at Brest. I challenged him: "Why have you written about something like this as if it was an exciting adventure on which the pilots enjoyed embarking? This isn't what war is really like." My father answered me by saying simply: "We were at war. What I was doing was part of the war effort. You start to tell people the truth about what happened when the blackout curtains come down, and it's all over." His remarks had a considerable influence upon me, and later created a significant division between myself and some of my media colleagues. Over some years during which I was reporting wars abroad for British newspapers and for the BBC—in Indochina, the Middle East, Angola, India and so on—I regarded it as my responsibility to tell as much as I could discover to readers about what was going on, to circumvent military censorship in these countries by any means. If, in Israel, this meant flying to Cyprus from Tel Aviv with film in my shoes, so be it. But when the Falklands came, and I was accompanying the British task force southwards, I made a conscious decision: I was British, and this was a British war. I believed that it was the duty of those at home to conduct the public debate about whether the war was a good thing. I thought that, as one of only 20-odd correspondents reporting the war from the scene, I should tell the tale as sympathetically and yes, as patriotically as I could.

In reality, on the battlefield, I was confronted by only one test of conscience, if one can dignify it as such. In the days after the landing at San Carlos, I sent dispatches that presented our morale as much higher,

our confidence rather greater, than in truth it was, when we were watching our ships take such a battering at the hands of the Argentine air force, and when we were operating in this desolate wilderness so very far from home. I admitted that I had done this when we began the media postmortems after the war, and I have been roundly rebuked for it by some of my professional colleagues. Now, they knew that in any event, the censors with absolute control of our communications would never have allowed me to file a dispatch declaring that the Task Force was deeply disheartened, and that one more good push by the Argentine air force might prove decisive. But even had I been able to, should I have aspired to do so? Some of my British colleagues, and a great many of my American ones would say yes, I should have done. I never cease to be amazed by the fashion in which many American journalists—some very distinguished—declare a loyalty to our trade which is thought to outweigh that which they owe to their country, or any other institution. E.M. Forster, the novelist, may have declared that he hoped to possess the courage to place loyalty to his friends above loyalty to this country. But I cannot say that I believe the argument for placing the cause of the press or the supposed support of free speech above that of country should command the same transcending respect. In Britain, there have been many debates about censorship in future wars since the Falklands conflict ended. Some journalists, and even some editors, continue to declare that they reject the notion of any controls of any sort upon what they can or should report in a national conflict. I take the opposing view: that no sane government engaged in military operations can fail to impose restrictions upon the reporting of these—where it is feasible to enforce them. This last is a large reservation, given the progress of modern technology, and I shall return to it later. But while there is immense scope for debate about how censorship should operate, and how tightly it should be enforced, I believe that it would greatly enhance the credibility of the media in the eyes of government, and of military authorities, if journalists freely recognize the principle that national secrets, and above all, news of forthcoming military intentions, must be protected from enemy eyes, and thus from those of the public at large. At present, in both Britain and America, I believe that public respect for the media is severely damaged by its arrogance on this issue. Winston Churchill, as Britain's Prime Minister in 1944, told the House of Commons that he was causing censorship to be tightened, after the publication of some dispatches from the Italian front which declared that "desperate" fighting was taking place. Churchill said: "Such words as 'desperate' ought not to be used about a position in a battle when they are false. Still less should they have been used if they were true."

Whether or not one chooses explicitly to accept Churchill's view on this issue, I believe that democracies can reconcile censorship with their traditional allegiance to free speech in one important manner: by drawing a distinction between a policy of withholding the truth for a time—while it is tactically important—and withholding it forever. I lost some of the military friends I made in the Falklands campaign by writing very frankly, both for my paper and in a subsequent book,<sup>1</sup> about some

of the mistakes that had been made in the campaign, once it was over. I am saddened by the loss of the friends, but I have no regrets. Once hostilities ceased, I saw nothing improper about reintroducing the traditional principles of revelation that play such a large part in journalism. Indeed, I deplore the fashion in which some regiments and individuals have sought to distort the history of the campaign, since it ended—above all, the manner in which it is discussed in military teaching establishments—solely for reasons of pride and prestige. Only by frankness after the event can important military lessons be learned. In this process those of us who are outside the military hierarchy possess a freedom of speech and action which can be beneficial.

Yet one of the greatest problems we face in reconciling the demands of the media with those of modern war, is the speed of the transition that may nowadays prove necessary between the ethos of peace, and that of conflict. Something was learned in World War I about news management in national conflict. But in 1939, all the lessons had painfully to be learned again. It was not until 1941 at least that the British press and the government settled down to a reasonably satisfactory professional relationship, which endured until the end of the Second World War. Not only was there a vital learning process for the institutions concerned, for editors and ministers. It was also necessary for a generation of journalists in the field to learn about the realities of war, and of armies, navies and air forces. Over the months and years, they did so. Some of the greatest war reporting of all time was carried out by such men as Alan Moorehead and Ernie Pyle.

Yet in the future, it is highly unlikely that a major western democracy which becomes engaged in a conflict will have time for the “learning curve” experienced in the world wars. Media organizations and their staffs, who have spent their entire professional lives devoted to the concept of publishing everything that comes their way, to preserving chronic skepticism about the activities of governments and institutions, may suddenly be called upon to think in a wholly new way about the news that is coming in to them, which might represent the greatest and most important national story of their lives. It will not be easy. All their deepest instincts about the handling of government requests or directives will demand that they should kick against the pricks. In my view, it is essential in peacetime for government to maintain a constant dialogue with news organizations about the possible demands and requirements of conflict situations, to keep politicians and soldiers, journalists and bureaucrats thinking hard and carefully about what such armed contingencies could mean for them.

And a further serious difficulty obtains today: the resolution of perceived media ethical dilemmas amid journalists’ military ignorance. In the nineteenth century, military operations were conducted sufficiently slowly to give civilian journalists a great deal of time to learn, if they chose, about armies and their affairs before a crisis came on the battlefield. Between 1914 and 1960, a very large number of British journalists—like their American and Canadian counterparts—learned much at firsthand about soldiering. Many correspondents, well into the 1960s,

possessed some national service experience, which could inform their reporting. Yet today, only a very small number of journalists in any Western nation possess personal experience of military affairs. And of all human activities, war is one which requires a high degree of knowledge, to make a sensible appreciation of what is taking place on the battlefield. In my own experience of journalism, I have found nothing more difficult than to make a strategic judgement based on the very fragmented, inadequate and usually inaccurate information garnered on bumpy jeep rides around the front, casual conversations with junior officers, glimpses of a tiny portion of the wider reality.

To give an example: in October 1973, I flew to Tel Aviv to report the Yom Kippur War imbued with the same confidence as most of my colleagues in the absolute supremacy of the Israeli army. Having attended a characteristically arrogant press conference given by the Chief of Staff in Tel Aviv, I made my way the next morning to the Golan Heights by taxi, via unauthorized roads through the kibbutzes. This was a time honoured fashion for foreign journalists to get close enough to report Israel's wars, since we were normally accorded no official facilities worth mentioning to go to the front under escort.

Within a very few minutes of getting onto the Golan, it was self-evident that the picture painted for us in Tel Aviv had been wildly optimistic. The scale of damage and military wreckage, matched by fierce gunfire both incoming and outgoing, made plain that a desperate battle was in progress. I made my way over to a group of Centurion tanks that were rearming in haste, and talked a little to their crews, who were at the limit of exhaustion. Later that morning, I returned to Tel Aviv to file as strong a story as the censor would allow about the seriousness of the battle upon which Israel was plainly engaged. But I did not know then, and I could not know until I read the books years later, that the group of tankmen I talked to that third morning on the hills represented, at that time, about a third of Israel's remaining tank strength on the Golan. Context—a sense of perspective—this is what is hardest for a journalist to come by on the battlefield. Yet the problem becomes near insuperable if, like some journalists who accompanied the British task force to the Falklands, one is driven to asking soldiers en route to the front the difference between a company and a platoon, a battalion and brigade, the range of a 105mm gun. Even given determination and honourable intentions on the part of the journalist, it is very difficult effectively and accurately to report military affairs without some background of knowledge.

Yet defence in peacetime is not a fashionable subject in which many of the best young journalists want to specialize. Since the Falklands, the British services have consciously sought to cultivate closer relations with journalists, in the hope that thus a cadre of informed correspondents will become available to report in conflict situations. The army has the easiest task, because it is in most frequent contact with journalists, not least in Northern Ireland. In recent years, it has also displayed the greatest skill and astuteness in its public relations. Yet the Royal Navy has the same

problem as the United States and in some measure the Canadian armies: the remoteness of most of their bases and training areas from centres of population and journalistic activity. The American army has tried hard to address the problem of improving mutual understanding between journalists and soldiers by creating the Defence Information School at Fort Benjamin Harrison, where some 1500 persons a year learn the basics of journalism and news management. But the problem remains, and there will always be a deep gulf of trust and understanding between soldiers and reporters. When I, like other British journalists, have been asked to give evidence to the various committees studying relations between the services and the media in future wars, I have urged a measure of caution about hoping for too much from cultivating peacetime connections. In peacetime, frankly, those reporters who are most readily available to spend two or three weeks on exercise with a naval task group are not those most valued by their news organizations. I believe the armed forces will do better to aim to take to war the ablest and brightest of the available generation of journalists, regardless of their military experience. They will seek to compensate for military ignorance by providing journalists in a theatre of war with the best possible escort officers, pre-selected for this role by a high command which recognizes the critical importance of achieving a high standard of news coverage. Civilian press escorts employed by the Defense Department or the Ministry of Defence are perfectly adequate for arranging routine peacetime visits. But they will not do in war—indeed, they failed miserably in the Falklands. Unit press officers of a high standard, however, have been an immense success for the British both in the Falklands and in Northern Ireland. Commissioned press escorts command the appropriate respect both from journalists and from the military command. The Israeli Defence Force also employs this system, to good effect. I believe that both the armed forces and the general public will profit more in a conflict from seeing the work of high-quality reporters assisted by high-quality military escort and guidance, than giving pole position for facilities at the front to more pedestrian reporters whose only merit is that they have covered the defence beat for years. That is not to deny that there are some superb professional defence correspondent in all our countries. Partly because *The Daily Telegraph* has a large military readership, when I became its editor almost three years ago, I took on our finest military historian and strategic analyst, John Keegan, as Defence Editor, and an exceptionally able ex-Falklands BBC correspondent, Robert Fox, as Defence Correspondent. But few other British newspapers are anything like so well served in this field. The tabloid papers, of course, bring to defence the same instinct for mindless sensationalism that informs their coverage in other fields. But it is naive not to acknowledge that they too expect to be able to feed the appetites of their vast readership in conflicts. The cynicism about the press of naval officers with the British South Atlantic force in 1982 was in no way diminished by discovering that *The Sun* and *Daily Star* correspondents aboard were almost solely preoccupied with the activities of Lieutenant Prince Andrew; and that the most famous headline of the war, and one of the most dreadful of all time, ran across the front page of *The Sun* the



day the heavy cruiser *Belgrano* was sunk: "GOTCHA." Yet it is not enough for others of us, as professional colleagues, or for the military command, merely to ignore the existence of the tabloid press. For better or for worse, it reaches a vast readership. Somehow, its strange needs must be acknowledged and met, even at a moment of national crisis, when matters of life and death are being decided.

Returning once again to wider issues: most armies still have an enormous amount to learn about the importance of creating, and maintaining, their credibility with journalists. In Vietnam, the phrase "credibility gap" entered the language. An old friend and outstanding war correspondent who was killed in the 1973 Middle East War, Nicholas Tomalin, gave me some parting advice before I left for my first trip to Vietnam early in 1970. "Remember," he said: "They lie, they lie, they lie." Some American soldiers would say that this was a classic example of journalistic arrogance and lack of understanding. But I am afraid that Tomalin's warning was confirmed by all my own subsequent experiences in Indochina. A belief that one's own side's word can be trusted is a priceless asset. Yet day after day in Vietnam, American officers squandered it. I, like most journalists, regard it as our duty to clamour constantly for information, and to rage when it is denied to us. Yet in a sense, our rage is ritualistic. We are doing our duty, yet we recognize—or we should—the duty of those who deny it to us. Silence can always be honourable, even if it is sometimes imprudent. But systematic deceit is self-destructive, and its re-employment during the Grenada operation suggests that the U.S. armed forces have not yet lost faith in its efficacy. That is not to say that I support the extraordinarily arrogant behaviour of the U.S. media when they were denied the opportunity to participate in the Grenada landings. But it seemed gratuitous for the U.S. Command to go beyond denying access, and to tell the media untruths about small things as well as large. These have been chronicled in some detail in the study of the media and the Grenada operation conducted by the Cardiff Centre of Journalism Studies for the Ministry of Defence.<sup>2</sup> I do not believe that U.S. officers behaved as they did as part of a concerted propaganda effort by the U.S. forces. I am a great believer in the cock-up, rather than the conspiracy theory of history. I think U.S. behaviour was born of an indifference on the part of commanders deeply embittered by the Indochina experience as to whether they told the media the truth or not. Self-interest by a nation's armed forces should cause them to hesitate before providing misinformation, or for that matter disinformation. On May 19th, 1982, the senior British civil servant at the Ministry of Defence, Sir Frank Cooper, told assembled editors at an unattributable briefing in London that there would be no large-scale landing in the Falklands, more likely a small-scale series of harassing operations. Less than 48 hours later, after British papers had headlined this story in every edition, a full-scale British brigade landing took place at San Carlos. Now, I happen to think that this one-off piece of disinformation, in pursuit of an important strategic objective, was fully justified. But I think it was wise that a civil servant accepted the odium for disseminating a deliberate lie, rather than allowing a member of the armed forces to do

so. I also believe that this is a game which must be played with the utmost restraint. Do it once in a campaign, and its purpose will probably be understood by the public and by the media, and official credibility can recover. But if it becomes a systematic weapon, then a chronic "credibility gap" is created, which it may take years to bridge. The Cardiff study of the Grenada operation and U.S. media response to it noted that many of those who are today editors and decision-makers in the U.S. media served as reporters in the Vietnam era. They concluded in the 1960s that the word of the military could not be trusted. They will not trust it now.

But whether for the Americans, the Israelis, the British, or the Canadians, the same problem obtains in handling the modern media at war: there are far more journalists who want to report than there can be facilities available to handle them. It seems essential to accept the inevitability of this situation from the outset, and plan accordingly. Vietnam was unique, in providing a large and semi-static war zone whose parameters shifted little for fifteen years. Thus, for a time, a large number of journalists could roam more or less at will, with the aid and vast transport resources of the U.S. armed forces. It should be said as an aside, however, that some odd myths prevail today about Vietnam as a place where a reporter could whistle up a helicopter at will. One of my own lasting memories of the theatre is of waiting for days, sometimes, for a helicopter or fixed wing ride to my chosen destination. Vietnam could be a tough place to get around. Yet American generosity and willingness to provide transport was never in doubt. This is not a situation very likely to obtain in a future conflict. Most major world military crises today attract up to 2000 journalists and broadcasters. Some of these people, it must be said, have no desire to leave the capital, and are perfectly happy to do their reporting from press centres and hotels. So be it. But others—including all the good ones—will want to go to the front.

There is only one possible approach from the point of view of the military command: ruthlessly to recognize the limitations of what can be done, and to organize a pool for selected reporters and TV crews, who are afforded transport, escorts and information as appropriate, together with the highest degree of access. It is not difficult for the government or military command of a nation to determine which news organizations must be represented or allowed to ballot for places in a pool. The British government—frankly, rather foolishly—decreed the numbers but imposed no other restrictions on the composition of the Falklands Task Force press pool, which it preferred to leave to Fleet Street. As a result, some reporters embarked who proved quite unable to work once in the South Atlantic, as a result of professional inadequacy or physical unfitness.

If I am ever offering advice to armed forces members new to handling journalists, it is first, to restrain the impulse to succumb to revulsion about our group behaviour. There are few uglier spectacles in the modern world than that of a mob of competitive media people turned loose upon a hot story. The fisticuffs, the cynicism, the inhumanity towards suffering, the stupidity and selfishness and ignorance displayed by college-educated journalists who, at home, treat at least their second

wives quite decently, make all of us, at times, ashamed to be journalists. I know. I have been among those baying throngs, willing to go to almost any lengths in pursuit of a story. Even soldiers for whom war is a profession tend to recoil in disgust from the animal behaviour of journalists in bulk.

It is impossible to dispute that, since the nineteenth century, news organizations have ruthlessly exploited the fact that war can be good for business, can add millions of viewers and readers. I have to say that my own reputation as a reporter in Britain chiefly rests upon a certain notoriety gained in covering conflicts. In the course of these, to get somewhere or to file a story, I have done my share of things that have provoked disgust among military witnesses. I have schemed and lied to gain places on helicopters, shouted down junior officers and sought to intimidate signals or transport personnel. My defence would be that, faced with petty military bureaucracy, I should never otherwise have been able to file my stories. Armed forces rest for their very survival upon obedience, group loyalty and coherence. Successful journalism relies upon the remorseless pursuit of self-interest. For those in military or government authority who have to live with journalists, it seems to me essential to focus not upon the means being employed by the reporters, but upon the ends to be served. It is a mistake for officers to spurn journalists because they are dismayed by what they see of their personal behaviour. Instead, they need to remember that some of those same journalists possess remarkable gifts for conveying to the public at home what is being done in the field and why; that sometimes, some of those same scruffy reporters have formed shrewder assessments of what is going on than the military high command—their independence of thought and action can, therefore, on occasion be of the utmost value; and that their function can be of immense importance to the armed forces and the country. From among the struggling rabble at the press conference, pick out the handful who are good—really good—and concentrate upon working with them. The good journalists, the good war reporters, do have something to be proud of, not least a measure of courage. For those who have to work with them, merely remember that you don't have to like the singer. You must merely judge the quality of his song. Few successful military commanders have been agreeable men socially. Military gentlemen, admired for their manners, often fail on the battlefield because they lack the killer instinct. The same might be said of journalists.

It is often remarked that, on a future European battlefield, it will be impossible physically to prevent large numbers of reporters roaming freely, with access to their own satellite communications. This may be true. Yet military authorities will always be in a position to offer news organizations a trade of transport, protection, and privileged access and information, in return for a measure of censorship of film or copy. I believe that this is an exchange which it is strongly in the interests of both governments and news organizations to accept. As a former foreign correspondent, I have often had to make my own rather frightened way across foreign battlefields, to which as a reporter from a non-combatant

nation, I cannot expect official access. I do not resent this, because from the point of view of the combatant nation, it makes sense. No sensible government is likely to give much privileged access to journalists over whom it has no control. Israel sometimes grants special facilities to American correspondents, because of her special dependence upon U.S. goodwill. Since the Falklands, it has sometimes been suggested that the British government's pronouncements, and British reporters' dispatches, would have possessed greater credibility if one or more foreign journalists had been with the Task Force, adding their own voices. I have some doubts how well this would have worked, in the specially difficult physical environment of the South Atlantic, where those of us who reported on the ground often had to walk for hours or days with the marines. In one case, I remember that in return for being permitted to take up a helicopter place on our night landing on Mount Kent, I volunteered to carry a Blowpipe missile. Some of my colleagues would have found this morally repugnant. Yet I considered it a fair trade, when a valuable load-carrying marine was being left behind in order to take me. As an Englishman, I felt no great moral burden about thus making a small contribution to the war effort. But had I been an American or a Frenchman, I might well have done so.

In the propaganda struggle that is now an essential part of every conflict, many governments are above all preoccupied by the television pictures seen by the world. It must be said that the difficulties of conveying accurately, effectively, or even remotely truthfully what happens on the battlefield remain enormous, and are likely to continue to do so, because of the intrinsic nature of the television medium. This is, I am afraid—and I speak as a practitioner with some direct experience—the most distorting of information channels. Television companies give most airtime to the stories of which they have best footage. Yet again and again and again, the result grossly misrepresents what has taken place. A viewer who looks at the assembled television footage of the Falklands war would have a quite false impression of what the campaign was like, because all the film was shot in daylight. Yet most of the military activity, and almost all the land fighting, took place at night. I have now in my mind's eye the most vivid picture of the Battle for Mount Harriet. Yet this action taking place in the last generation of the twentieth century is recorded only in the watercolour impressions of a war artist painting after the event. This state of affairs will obviously recur, given the importance of night fighting in modern war.

One of the first films I made for BBC TV was shot in Cambodia with the U.S. army in the spring of 1970, during the American drive to clear the North Vietnamese sanctuaries. In one of these, I was interviewing a U.S. colonel beside a captured rice cache when suddenly a few incoming shots were fired over our heads. All of us took cover with speed, and after a few seconds of confusion, the Americans returned fire. Peace soon broke out again, and we all clambered to our feet. "How much of that did you get on film?," demanded our producer. "Not much," said the cameraman, "because we were all under that truck." The producer brooded for a moment, then turned to the U.S. colonel: "Tell me," he

asked, "do you think you could do that again? You know, get somebody to fire a few shots, everybody take cover and return the fire, and so on . . . ." Now, that colonel and even my innocent self were fairly appalled by this exchange. Yet to that producer, a fine television professional, the proposal merely reflected the normality of what is done daily in peacetime documentary film making—the attempt to recreate for the camera the resemblance of what has taken place. Again and again all over the world, I have seen artillery or automatic weapons asked to open fire at the behest of television crews. Indeed, after the 1972 Indo-Pakistan war, it emerged that the CBS crew with the Indians had nearly destroyed their colleagues filming with the Pakistanis at the same time, while playing this game. The pressure upon TV crews to produce for New York—or, happily in lesser measure, London or Toronto—the nightly dose of "bang bang," the only footage editors really want from a war zone such as Beirut, has often cost men's lives, and represents the lowest denominator of media activity in modern conflict. The U.S. networks' cynicism in this was highlighted in the latter days in Vietnam, when it became common practise to employ so-called TCNs—Third Country Nationals such as Koreans—to film the most dangerous battles, because their deaths were so much less expensive for their employers. Television, that marvellous medium of impression, and fatally flawed medium of analysis, has exercised a baleful influence upon modern war corresponding. It has brought unforgettable, terrible images into hundreds of millions of homes. It has exercised an overwhelming influence upon political attitudes to some conflicts, above all Vietnam. I do not believe that it has contributed much, if anything, to real understanding of the conflicts upon which its lenses have fallen. Television can convey only what stands before the camera's eye: nothing else, not the atrocities of the enemy, the successes or failures outside the cameraman's focus, the night battles or the feel of the theatre of war. I remember the dismay I felt, on first viewing films I had made in Cambodia in the air-conditioned comfort of a viewing theatre in London months later. I saw nothing there of the heat, the dirt, the incessant physical discomfort under which we had laboured. Colour, even in the hands of a skilled practitioner, I believe to be an inappropriate means of conveying war. Only black and white film can do justice to its reality.

Yet television—colour television—will stay with us, and we must live with its shortcomings. The only course open to military commands and government is to ensure that they have a thorough understanding of its practices and failings as they watch its troubled meandering across the battlefield. We can no more disinvent or even banish it than we can the atomic bomb. In Britain at least, I am sometimes encouraged by a growing public understanding of television's weaknesses, and a reduced susceptibility to its least rational, most emotional appeals. I would like to add, also, that I reject the view sometimes advanced by American military men, that the media in general and television in particular lost them the war in Vietnam. This is a myth which is strongly against the real interests of the U.S. military to nurture. The media were sometimes bitterly unfair to the U.S. armed forces in Vietnam, for instance in

projecting the 1968 Tet Offensive as an American defeat. I warmly supported America's objectives in Vietnam, and have lamented their defeat ever since I was helicoptered out of the U.S. Embassy compound in Saigon one evening at the end of April 1975. But I am convinced that America lost that war for cultural and military reasons that would have been decisive without any intervention by the media.

Ten years ago now, an Australian journalist named Philip Knightley wrote a history of war corresponding entitled *The First Casualty*.<sup>3</sup> It was his thesis that war correspondents, and especially British ones, have persistently failed their societies through the ages, by failing to tell the truth from the battlefield, for reasons of either incompetence or political corruption. Knightley cited among his own credentials the fact that he had never reported a war himself. His work sold very well, and achieved something of a cult following at that period when anti-institutionalism in the West generally, and Britain in particular, was at its height. I disagreed profoundly with the book, and find it reads as absurdly today as it did when I first reviewed it. First, in his contempt for the contemptible practitioners of war corresponding, of whom we have all seen plenty in bars from Beirut to Phnom Penh, Knightley ignores the long roll call of great reporters. In writing my own books on World War II, I have often looked back with immense admiration on the writings of Drew Middleton, Alan Moorehead, Alexander Clifford and others, men of the greatest gifts, who have exercised them to the highest purpose on the battlefield.

But beyond mere personal debunking, I believe Knightley misses the essential point about war reporting. All proper journalism is about trying to build jigsaws with many of the pieces missing. This is why we are doing so well, even in peacetime, to get the story half right, when most of our sources of information, including official ones, lie or distort routinely. This is part of their trade, just as it is ours not to be bamboozled. But in war, far more of the jigsaw pieces are absent. It is seldom remotely possible, during a conflict, to learn the other side of the story from the enemy. It is difficult enough even to paste together enough fragments from the side one is accompanying to create a plausible image. To get it right 40% in wartime is a remarkable achievement for a journalist. One is groping, fumbling in darkness. The choice is not whether to tell the public, the reader, lies or the truth, but whether to tell him what portion of the truth one can garner—or nothing at all. One is struggling for insights. I shall always remember the sudden flash of understanding that came to me and a colleague in Sinai in October 1973. For days the Israelis had been telling us that their cross-Suez operations were mere commando raids. Suddenly, we perceived that in reality, these represented the Israelis' major thrust against the Egyptian front. We were then obliged to go to tortured lengths to find our way through the dark to the Canal, at an hour when in the movement of forces there was least chance of two journalists on illegal business being intercepted, to confirm our guess. We were proud, when we filed a version that we somehow got through the censors—the first foreign reporters' dispatches from the Egyptian bank of the Canal—that we had managed to find out as much as we did. Yet if

I looked up that dispatch today, I know that I should find that we were wrong on a host of points, that what I wrote contributed nothing of the slightest value to a military historian. Our readers had to be content that we had conveyed one simple fact—that the Israelis were across the Canal in strength, and that this was plainly their major counter-offensive. And if you detect in the above a sharp contrast between the attitude to revelation that I have described in myself and others when we reported the Falklands, our own nation's war, and that which we adopted in the Middle East, then of course you are right. That is why I believe that sensible governments work with their own nation's journalists in their wars, and not with other peoples'.

Armed forces, the most disciplined element in their own societies, will seldom or never sit comfortably with journalists, the least disciplined and most anarchic breed of men and women. Nor will it ever be easy to reconcile the fact that in peacetime, it is the duty of editors and reporters to maintain a constant degree of tension between ourselves and our governments, while with the outbreak of conflict, a sense of common purpose must be forged. There can never be a universally applicable formula for relations between governments and the media at war, because despite all that I have said about the proper demands of patriotism, a good journalist will also be faced with a constant dilemma, about how far he is justified or truly patriotic if he conceals military incompetence from his readers, from the public. Throughout my own war corresponding career, I was blessed with one advantage which few of my colleagues—and especially few of my American colleagues—possessed: my own liking for soldiers. I respect them, get on pretty well with them, and count a good many of them among my friends. That is a great help if, on the battlefield, one is totally dependent upon their goodwill to do one's job, and sometimes even for one's own survival. In one sense, I was very fortunate in the Falklands. I always possessed confidence in the British command, and was never troubled by doubts about whether the campaign was being efficiently conducted. Had major difficulties or failures have arisen, I might have found myself faced by much more testing professional and moral dilemmas than I encountered. As it was, these never arose. Indeed, I found that war a very moving experience, for a 36 year-old Englishman who had grown up in a long period of decline, and post-Suez trauma. Perforce, I had spent a substantial part of my career reporting on and reflecting about British shortcomings and British failures. Now, suddenly, I found myself part of something that I thought the British were doing very well. Some of my colleagues have since reproached me for losing my objectivity, for sacrificing my sense of detachment. Yet in truth, I felt then what I still feel now—a sense of intense pride and pleasure in having had the opportunity to play a small part in, and to record, one my nation's greatest modern successes. The reporting of military operations by journalists need not always be a tale of bitterness, alienation and castigation of the armed forces. It can also be a story of respect, affection and admiration, as it has often been for me.

**Endnotes**

\*This paper was delivered as a keynote address at the Media and Modern Warfare Conference at the University of New Brunswick on September 30, 1988.

1. Max Hastings and Simon Jenkins, *The Battle for the Falklands* (London: Michael Joseph, 1983).
2. Derrick Mercer, Geoff Munghan and Kevin Williams, *The Fog of War: The Media on the Battlefield*, (London: Heinemann, 1987), Chapter V.
3. Philip Knightley, *The First Casualty—From the Crimea to Vietnam: the War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker* (New York and London: Collins, 1976).