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BBC History: Martin Bell MP (9.12.97)

Table of Contents

	Page
Recruitment 1962 at Norwich	1, 2
Move to BBC TV News, London	3
Bi=media Radio/TV News setup inadequate	3
Alexandra Palace: "Museum of Television"	3
Early Television News personalities	4
News/Current Affairs separation unsatisfactory	4
C.A. the Officer Class; News the O.R.s	5
His two Panoramas	5, 6
Basic makeup of BBC TV News	5, 6
Becomes "Reporter of the Year", and a BBC Foreign Correspondent	6
Technology putting editing into the Reporter's hands	7
Only slight connection with BBC Radio	7
17 years as Foreign Correspondent. 12 years in USA	8
First with minicam, and Electronic News Gathering	8
Covering American elections, campaign, politics	8
RonaddReagan as President, a Reporter's delight	9
What American broadcasters taught BBC	9
The American view of the BBC	9, 10
The three categories of Gulf war reporters	10
Accrediation, uniform, basic training	11
Sacrificing some freedom for access	11
Filing facilities. Censorship	12
Falklands war lessons applied	12
Priority to stories about soldiers, not weapons	12, 13
Size and composition of the BBC team	13
No need for a Producer	14
Main sources of News	14
Information which could not be broadcast	15
Reporting 'facts' without evidence	15
Reporters seeing little of the fighting	16
Other BBC reporters in the Zone	16
The Generals as spokesmen	17
Trust between Generals and Correspondents	18
Getting the story back: the satellite dish	18
Relations with Editors in London	19

Under copyright

	Page
Success of BBC's work in Gulf War	20
Reporting bad news	20
Length of items; his standard 1 min. 42 secs.	20, 21
His desire to explain, as well as report	21, 22
Differences, Gulf War and Bosnian War	24
The four accreditations required	23
Relations with the British forces in Bosnia	24
Special value of U.N. accreditation	24
Refusal to wear uniform; his white suits	25
Acute dangers in Croatian war	25
Excellent performance of BBC satellite communications	25, 26
Serb forces seize BBC equipment; still use it	27
The Reporter/Cameraman relationship	27 - 29
Seven different BBC bases as battle lines shifted	29
No soldier/Civilian difference in this war	30
Five different fighting factions in Bihac	30
Constant attempts to manipulate correspondents	31
Personal protection; demanding armoured vehicle from BBC	32
Body armour too heavy: inhibiting mobility	32
How he came to be wounded: rapid recovery	32, 33
Fairness, impartiality OK, objectivity difficult	34
His 1993 Panorama on persecution of Serbs	35
War reporting primarily about people requiring sympathy	36
Keeping personal anger out of reporting	36
Sparing home audiences the worst horrors	37
Moral issues versus requirements of good taste	38
BBC News developments in his time	38
Accuracy more important than speed	39
His appearance before International War Tribunal	39
Retrospective comments on BBC during his years	40
The Birt revolution in BBC Journalism	40, 41

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BBC History Archive

Transcript of Interview with Martin Bell Former BBC Correspondant (Currently, Member of Parliment)

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Interviewer and Producer
Frank Gillard

— Transcript by: Heather Reynolds Tel/Fax 01275 333 675 —

BBC History Archive

Transcript of Video Interview with Mr Martin Bell *(Former BBC Correspondent)*

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FG = Frank Gillard
MB = Martin Bell

FG: BBC History Archive, it's December 9th 1997 and this is Frank Gillard talking today to Mr Martin Bell in his Westminster office.— Mr Martin Bell OBE, who a year or so ago retired from the BBC and became a politician and is now a Member of Parliament. Earlier in the course of his BBC career, he reported from 80 different countries and covered eleven wars - that's a record that nobody will ever, ever beat.

You came in, in 1962 to Norwich. Norwich was, what nowadays is called, an 'island station'. There was a very small little set up there - can't have been very well resourced?

MB: It was about the smallest operation the BBC ran. I think I can say without hesitation that we put out the most amateur news programme ever in the history of the BBC.

Short Break in Filming

(re-start)

FG: Tell us about Norwich?

MB: Norwich was small, Norwich was pretty amateurish.

I think we put out the worst daily News programme in the history of BBC Television.

It was so bad, that the then Director General, **Sir Hugh Green**, who lived in Bury St Edmonds, saw it one evening and was so appalled that he at once delegated the Editor of Panorama to come up to Norwich and instruct us in the basics of Television.

FG: Of course you were up against Anglia Television there, which was a pretty well provided institution, was it?

MB: I have to thank Anglia Television for my BBC career. The BBC suddenly had to match the original ITV companies who were well

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resourced. They did it with Rolls Royces and we, with string and sealing wax.

FG: Well, anyway, you were there for three years or so and you came down to London into BBC Television News - this is really getting into the story that I want to hear more about.

What was the state of BBC Television News in 1965?

MB: Actually, I came into the BBC News, would you believe there was a bi-media operation - Radio and Television together, which was stopped about four or five years later because it simply didn't work. Then of course revived as if it was a magic new invention, a generation later.

It was relatively small then and an exciting place to be in.

It was the new medium - we were moored up on Alexandra Palace which is like the 'museum' of television.

We were a long way away away from where things were happening - which was down in Television Centre but there we produced our little bulletins - 10 or 12 minutes a night, a lot of voice-over and there we learned our craft.

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FG: Who were the big personalities of Television News in those early days?

MB: The main men on screen were **Robert Dougal**, **Richard Baker**, and **Michael Aspel**.

I think the first reporter who was noticed, became a TV personality of any kind, was **Peter Woods**. In those days he did the big bank robberies in the West End and I did the small bank robberies in Wood Green.

FG: But BBC journalism was a divided empire, wasn't it?

MB: It was a terrible and dreadful situation - most inefficient, in which News was a separate Department from Current Affairs and they waged this territorial and turf battle 'up hill and down dale' and all across the world for something like 40 years.

Until finally, **John Birt**, bless him, put an end to it - whatever else he did that was one thing of benefit that he did.

We competed, we feuded - it was a dreadful waste of resources.

FG: And which regarded itself as the senior and the junior?

MB: It was very much like the Army.

I concluded that Current Affairs was the 'officer class' - they had the air time, they had the fancy titles, they had the big salaries. We were

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definitely the 'other ranks' in News and we were certainly made to feel that way.

FG: But even though you were a news man, you did at least one Panorama to my recollection, didn't you?

MB: I've done two Panoramas in my life. Every 17 years I did a Panorama. I didn't enjoy doing it because the long form worried me and I always had tensions with producers. I loved operating alone.

Yes, I did one after the first five years of the conflict in Northern Ireland and my second one was after the first seven months of the conflict in Bosnia. That was 17 years later.

FG: What were the basic principles of BBC Television News in those days? Can you enunciate them briefly?

MB: It was a rather more international agenda than later. We had a lot of foreign news - we attempted to tell the Nation what had happened in the Country and in the World that day.

If you can imagine, if you tried to do that in 12 minutes there were a lot of short cuts you have to take.

Technically? Not very exciting. The graphics? There were hardly any graphics - there were bits of cardboard. If you wanted to show a still

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picture you stuck it on a piece of black cardboard and pointed a camera at it - so technically it was very, very antique.

FG: You became the Reporter of the Year, if I remember rightly, in 1977, the RTS Reporter of the Year. Then a year later, or there about, you became Chief North American Correspondent. Is that true?

MB: Yes. The Reporter of the Year was one of these titles confirmed by the Royal Television Society and it usually means the reporter most shot at.

In this case, I happened to be covering a trial of British mercenaries in Angola, which found favour with the jury.

I'd always wanted to be a Foreign Correspondent, based abroad, and I finally got there right at the end of 1977, beginning of 1978.

I was based abroad then for 17 years which was something of a privilege.

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FG: Any disadvantages though? Were you getting out of the general run of things at home - not able to make much input into the development of news policy and that sort of thing, at home?

MB: I never wanted to have much input into the development of News policy. I just wanted to get on with my business and we were allowed a blessed degree of freedom - a freedom which actually increased over the

years because the technology put the editing in our power, rather than back at Television Centre or Alexandra Palace.

So I loved freedom, I never wanted to be a manager. I wanted to be a Reporter and I was always amused when Reporters, sort of, liked to have fancy titles for themselves, like Special Correspondents or Editors.

My hero, journalistically, was **James Cameron** of the News Chronicle and if Reporter was good enough for him it was certainly good enough for me.

FG: As Chief North American Correspondent, I think that was the title, you had radio as well as television?

MB: I did a little bit of radio on the side but by that time they had split the radio and television functions - you know, what goes around comes around - but I did find if I was dashing off to report some war in El Salvador, for instance, that I could write better pieces for having done television because doing television forced you out there where things were happening. You could actually describe things you saw, which I find is a very rare art in radio reporting these days.

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FG: Essentially, of course, you were based in Washington. Where you down there in M St? In the CBS building?

MB: We started off in the CBS building. CBS expanded and pushed us out very politely to our own facilities house next door, where we ran a little empire quite successfully.

We were technically very ahead of what they were doing in London. We were the first to use the minicam. We were the first to use electronic news gathering.

It had to be disguised because of the Unions. For a year I stayed off camera so I could always claim that what we shot had actually had been shot by an American network.

It's amazing but those were the times we lived in.

FG: Was there a good market in this country for American material?

MB: I think it was probably the heyday.

Looking back I think maybe we were too much interested in American politics, American elections, American campaigns.

Plus, there was the BBC's man at the Court of King Ronald, **Ronald Reagan**, who was a wonderful communicator, provider of terrific sound bites and wonderful gaffs. He would stand under the wing of Air Force 1

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in Chicago and unilaterally recognise the PLO - having to retract this under pressure from his staff 10 minutes later.

So, for someone like me it was absolutely wonderful.

FG: Did you feel that the Americans had much to teach us in BBC Television?

MB: I think they may have done initially.

They certainly did technically because they understood the new technology and they understood the possibilities of satelliting before we did.

They were out of film much earlier than we were. Then I think they really lost their way - they disappeared into a commercial jungle.

What really clinched it for me was the dreadful OJ Simpson case which really proved that American news values were about nothing but money, nothing but commercials. It appalled me.

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FG: What was their view of the BBC?

MB: They thought the BBC was rather stuffy and ponderous. It is an institution much more admired in just about every other country in the world than it is in its own country - something about 'profits prophets without honour' comes to mind here.

You would find that the BBC was given credit for programmes it hadn't made. They thought that Benny Hill came from the BBC. They thought that Brideshead Revisited came from the BBC.

FG: Upstairs Downstairs.

MB: Yes and I was far too polite to disabuse them of this notion.

FG: Now we'd better move on to some of the wars. I particularly want to talk about the Gulf War of course. Then the Croatian/Serbian war. Let's take the Gulf war first.

You had to be accredited as a War Correspondent, had you, formally?

MB: There were two kinds of reporters covering the Gulf War. Those who were the sort of freelancers - three kinds really. The people who just trying to get in on the action, which was very difficult when the military were controlling the battlefield, but they would go up until they were stopped at a roadblock, try to get round the roadblock and so on. There were those who were covering the briefings in Iran. With the British there were two pools of seven reporters each, each attached to the two armoured brigades.

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Yes, we were issued with the authorisation of a War Correspondent attached to an army on operations. It was supposed to give us some protection in case we were captured - I rather doubted that.

We were put in uniform. We were given the basics of training - in my case, second time around. Such things as battlefield First Aid.

When we went off into the desert we had to pull our weight. They were not going to carry us. So we dug our own trenches - did we ever dig trenches!

We were schooled in anti- biological and chemical warfare drills. So it was like being a soldier, except unarmed.

FG: Yes, you've taken me back to my own years when I was constantly told "we're not going to take a passenger."

What restrictions did you have to respect?

MB: I think in all wars where you're travelling with an army, you sacrifice freedom for access.

We were, in this case, with the front line of the British 7th Armoured Brigade as it rolled into the liberation of Kuwait.

For that you sacrificed all your freedom.

The filing was under the strictest censorship. Filing facilities were with us or a little bit of a way behind, and two Colonels controlled those. So there

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was no question of evading the censorship nor would I would say was there was any question of wanting to evade the censorship because if you wanted to broadcast the plan, there were 60 pages of it - we knew it - it would have endangered the lives of the soldiers we were with. It would have endangered our own lives - you wouldn't have done it anyway.

FG: So you were self-censors?

MB: I would have been self-censored if I hadn't been censored.

FG: Had the military learnt lessons from the Falklands' experiences which was so dreadful?

MB: I think the military thought long and hard after the Falklands, which was a peculiar war of course because the communications were so appalling but they thought of a better way to do it.

The better way to do it was to get the press with the soldiers in such a way that it would allowed for a certain amount of bonding between them.

So we did understand them better. I think what we did was we humanised the reporting of war. That's happened consistently over the 35 years I was doing it.

We talked, not just about the victims of war but about the soldiers as people, rather than as numbers.

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Less about military formations, less about weapons systems - more about soldiers as people.

FG: What crew did you have? What was the total strength of the BBC party?

MB: We had three which was...., actually there was a Radio reporter as well, we needed a crew of two .....

Short Break in Filming

FG: What crew did you have?

MB: The total number of BBC people was 4.

There was a Radio reporter, operating separately, and myself, and a crew of two.

In fact we only needed one because when push comes to shove in the final drive there was only space for one in the armoured vehicle which was our transport through the battlefield - and he was a big tough South African and could do all the business himself - my favourite man.

From that point on we always went to war, essentially, with one camera person because it's safer like that. If you're in a dangerous situation you take as few people as possible.

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FG: Did you have anybody in the nature of a producer?

MB: No, I don't do producers. I'm not good with producers. We were cutting things down to the minimum.

You do not need a producer in war zones - a fact which I tried to impress on many producers in many wars, sometimes with more success than others.

FG: Do I take it then that the BBC wanted producers but Martin Bell didn't?

MB: Even the BBC didn't try for producers in the Gulf War, though it did try later on when I did a Panorama in Bosnia.

I really had to be quite severe with the producer. I said 'Sorry this is a trench line. I know about trench lines - you don't. Stay back and I'll go forward and get the stuff and come back.'

FG: What were the main sources of news in the Gulf War?

MB: Our main sources were daily briefings from the military, which we couldn't use, and talking to the soldiers.

Censorship was so great that before the actual ground attack ..... there was very little we could do except profiles of our boys in the desert. I think

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I read somewhere, it was as tabloid as I've ever been. Things like a profile of a military policeman who had a desert rat in his pocket, directing the traffic - that's the kind of thing I was doing.

FG: But you said there were things you couldn't use. Why couldn't use them?

MB: I couldn't use them because I wasn't allowed to use them.

These were the things that the British Army was telling itself. They were straight off intercepted signals and the like - it was thought that if we had broadcast them they it would have been of too much benefit to the enemy.

FG: Were you in the position where you had to report facts without evidence?

MB: The reporters of the briefings were. Yes, you had to believe the briefings and there was no way of verifying or corroborating.

My main report actually was done on the four day sweep through the desert. By the time that was over the censorship was lifted. I was only doing what I prefer to do which is to report things that I can see and talk to people I can trust - and you can verify it by what's going on around you.

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FG: How much of the fighting did you actually see for yourself?

MB: Very little, because there wasn't very much fighting. It was not a war in that sense. It was more like a 'live fire' exercise with surrendering Iraqi extras and very little resistance indeed.

The officers ran away the night before - drove away leaving the soldiers to the trenches. They simply surrendered.

Now, it may have been different in other Sectors, that's how it was in ours.

FG: How much coverage did the BBC give to the other Sectors?

In other words, what other BBC people were operating there?

MB: They had only myself with the troops but there was a pool operation which was available to ITN and Sky as well. ITN stuff was available to us.

There was also **Brian Baron** back in Dhahran, sort of scooping up all the American material that returned and giving a bit of an overview.

Also for a while **Jeremy Bowen** was in Iraq and so was **John Simpson**.

So there was somebody on the other side of the lines but not when the ground war started.

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FG: What about the attitude of the Commanders, the Generals? Did you have access to them? Did they talk to you freely?

MB: **Rupert Smith**, the Divisional Commander was an interesting man - I sometimes felt he would rather face a firing squad than a press conference. He's only ever given one television interview in his life and that mysteriously got lost in the desert but he understood the media.
He delegated two very good deputies. **Patrick Cordingly**, who was the Brigade Commander and **Auther Dinario**, commanding the Regiment I was attached to, were excellent spokesmen for the Army.
So you don't need the top General so long as you have people under him who enjoy his confidence.

FG: Would they confide in you material over and above material which you were going to use and would they trust you not to use it - but still let you know what was going to happen?

MB: Absolutely, I think even if they hadn't trusted me, they knew I couldn't use it because of the censorship system but as it happened they did trust me and both became friends.
I don't believe in the necessary adversarial relationship between soldiers and journalists. I just don't believe in it.

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FG: In my war the job was only half done when one had got the story and recorded it. Getting the stuff back to London was one enormous headache always. How was it with you?

MB: It started as a terrible headache for me.

In Vietnam for instance, in the late Sixties, we were shooting film - you put the film in a parcel on an aeroplane, the aeroplane flies to Paris, the film may get lost, it may get delayed by fog, there may be a baggage handlers strike at Heathrow, it can take four days.

Now, we have our satellite dish with us, almost parked on the front line. The stuff is almost live, edited very fast, within minutes of it happening. This gives more urgency, more immediacy. It places much greater responsibility on the reporter to get it right.

Frankly, intolerable burdens when you're asked to do the same thing four, five, six times a day - you don't really have sufficient time to go out and find the news, you spend too much time packaging it or parked on a roof top answering inane questions from an 'anchor man' in London.

FG: London did have that access back to you then? They could issue orders or instructions all the time?

MB: They didn't try instructions on me. They occasionally offered a little 'wish list'. I would commonly tell them what I was going to get.

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I would plead for air time and I would plead for length and I would tell them what it was and why it mattered - and if Harold Wilson had just died? Well, please could they trim the obituary back because I had a war going on here. Or if the Duke and Duchess of York had got divorced - sure it was important but there were other important things going on in the world as well. These are the arguments you have every day.

Short Break in Filming

FG: Looking back on it now do you think the BBC did a reasonable job with the Gulf War?

MB: I think so.

The constraints were strict and there was no way the Army was going to be persuaded to do it any other way than it did it. I think it actually got it right.

I think if the BBC had its time again it would try to put in more resources on the Iraqi side - no I feel the coverage there was all right - nothing to be ashamed of.

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FG: What lessons did we learn, did BBC Television News learn?

MB: I think we learnt that soldiers and journalists don't have to be sworn enemies for all their days - that they can trust each other but we also understood that they have different instincts and different agendas and different interests.

The real test, of course, is whether you can report bad news and a defeat - something like a Dieppe, of which you know.

We had a negotiation in a tent in the desert about this before the ground war began, that we would be allowed - in the event of a blunder or heavy casualties, casualties are a different case of course, but after due notification - to report the bad news. We were told that 'Yes, this was understood and we would be able to.'

If course it was never tested because the bad news never happened.

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FG: What was the average length of time that you would have?

Two, three minutes, in order to convey a vast amount of information.

MB: The Gulf War report was different, I had about 10 minutes because it was four days.

Generally, in order to avoid arguments about length, I put everything in at a minute and forty two seconds. I had a little kind of computer in my head

which could do this for me. So it became a bit of a standing joke - everything was a minute and 42 - and so it was.

FG: What was magic about one minute and 42.

MB: It's the minimum length in which you can tell an interesting and slightly complicated story. The difference between a minute and a minute and 42 is putting in a little bit of texture and analysis - the odd word here and there, letting the script breathe, letting the natural sound run, making it more interesting.

FG: But you've always been known as a reporter who wanted to tell people, not just the information but the explanation, the clarification. Doing all that - telling people what happened and then giving the background - in a minute and forty two seconds?

MB: I would say it's a little bit like writing sonnets. It's a very constricted art form but you can say a lot in a sonnet and in a more prosaic way you can say a lot in a minute and 42 seconds of television news.

FG: It is a fact though, is it not, that you always wanted to give more than just the bare information?

MB: Yes I wanted to give some explanation.

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I've been accused sometimes of being didactic and argumentative - I never was.

Very few words, sparely used, low key, especially if you are in a war with civilian casualties or really a war of any kind, a dramatic event, it doesn't need dramatic prose. In fact a lot of the time the best thing to do is to shut up - this is what I call the art of writing silence.

End of Tape 1

FG: Let's talk now about the Bosnian war - a different war altogether. What were the differences?

MB: A number of differences.

First of all, it was the longest war I had ever covered. Consistently, it lasted for three and a half years.

Second, it was a free-fire zone for reporters. That is, there were initially very few restrictions on our freedom ... if you wanted to go out and get killed, you go out and get killed.

Third, we were so close up to the suffering of innocent people, day in and day out. It was impossible not to be moved by it.

In other wars, we were lodged in fairly comfortable hotels the Camina Royale in El Salvador, the Continental Palace in Saigon.

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Here? We were at ground zero. The Holiday Inn was 200 metres from an active front line.

When I came to write a book about it all I wrote the last words with the sniper fire whistling past the window, just as it had three and a half years earlier. So it was different in every respect to the other wars.

FG: Were you accredited to anybody?

MB: We tried to be accredited to everybody.

Initially, we could motor around fairly freely. Then the road blocks came down and the obstacles and obstructions.

Yes, I had Croat accreditation, I had Bosnian Government accreditation, I had Serb accreditation, which lasted for four days at a time and cost me 20 Deutschmarks - but it became increasingly difficult to cross the front line to the Serb headquarters at Pale. After the first two years I think it became impossible.

FG: What about the United Nations Commander? Were you accredited to them?

MB: Yes, we all had UN accreditation.

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When the British arrived in October 1992 they were outstandingly helpful to the press, allowing us to eat with them, even to lodge with them occasionally when things got dangerous.

We developed a very close relationship - again soldiers and journalists not as adversaries but actually as partners because we wanted the peacekeeping to succeed.

Where we got upset and indignant was where we thought ... we weren't criticising the soldiers, they were magnificent - but where we thought that the mandate was impossible and then the whole thing would be a failure. I didn't want it to be a failure, I wanted it to succeed.

FG: Given the freedom, what did this accreditation amount to?

MB: The UN accreditation was very important because it enabled us to get through a lot of people's roadblocks - just waving that blue card. It was respected most of the time by the Muslims and the Croats and some of the time by the Serbs. So in fact it was the most important single piece of plastic that we carried.

FG: Did you have a variety of uniforms to wear or would one uniform do for the lot?

MB: Well, I always wear my white suits. I wear white suits.

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Because I've been an official War Correspondent in the Gulf, had to wear the uniform I said to my-self, 'I don't want to dig anymore trenches. I shall soldier no more. I want to wear something that says this man is an un-reconstructed civilian'.

When the war in Croatia started I happened to be wearing white - it was incredibly dangerous, a lot of bullets flying around. We had no armour, we had no armed vehicles, we had no body armour - we just went in on a wing and a prayer. I realised I was being extraordinary lucky and associated the luck with what I was wearing and I've wore nothing since.

FG: What about communications back home? Again satellite?

MB: Everything satellite. No land lines worked for the first three years of the war.

There were satellite phones from the start. There were satellite dishes - we got a bullet hole in one of our satellite dishes, another one broke down because it couldn't rattle around the mountain roads as it had to do from one location to another. Everything was satellite and it worked.

We actually had better communications than the Army. There would be an incident, which the Army would report back through their chain of command to Vitez and then maybe Zagreb and then back to London.

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Well, we would have it in London about 9 hours before. This was a source of great irritation to the Generals back in London.

FG: BBC equipment was captured at one point, wasn't it? By the Serbs?

MB: Our first base was a hotel in Illegia {check Spelling} in Serb held territory. The Serbs were extremely hospitable. It was a good base - it came under heavy attack from Muslim forces in April 1992. Then it got mortared. Some of our vehicles were mortared and some of the equipment actually was damaged.

A decision was taken - I'd left, in rotation, four days earlier-to evacuate the place. They had very few vehicles. So we didn't have the set of wheels to take this damaged equipment out - whereby the Serbs liberated it, repaired it and it became the foundation of their own television service in Pale. There are BBC labels, BBC tapes and BBC equipment, to this day - we tried to get it back but it wasn't possible.

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FG: What about the size of the crew, the same again?

MB: We got smaller and smaller.

Again it was nothing to do with the Unions, it was to do with safety.

I did not want to have a sound man with me - I'll carry the extra microphone, I'll carry the extra gear, I'll carry the tri-pod. We had one,

two, three cameramen who could really do the business - and were willing and they were wonderful.

What happened later was that we got a second person in the team who was mainly the video tape editor but would sometimes double up as reserve cameraman - so essentially it would be a team of three and an interpreter, who was very important.

FG: So four altogether.

Tell us a bit about this relationship between the reporter and the cameraman. I mean it's a very sensitive one, I know.

MB: Even after we lost the umbilical cord and went to radio mics I would say we had a spiritual sense, an umbilical connection with the cameraman - camerawomen by now as well- and things had to be understood. Like the level of risks that we were willing to run. Like how we did our business. Simple things like working well together and you agreed to start at a certain time and we all started at a certain time - a lot of input into each other's work. It became very comradely, if you a share that degree of danger.

You don't care about the bosses, you don't care anything about them but you care a lot about the people you work with and because I was, I suppose, the senior person in the crew, I was always responsible for them.

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I've had one cameraman wounded. I was slightly wounded when I was with him on the Golan Heights in 1973 but apart from taking an injury myself I've always put the crew through safely and I'm proud of that.

FG: Were there occasions when you and the cameraman differed about the coverage of an item?

MB: Never, never, never. I never worked with the kind of people with whom I would differ.

I've seen terrible rows going on with other Networks and other crews. They once sent me in Croatia a cameraman who clearly wasn't up to it. I sent him home for his own good. He shouldn't have been anywhere near a war zone like that - you can know in 10 minutes.

I was very picky about with whom I worked, as they should have been with whom they work.

What they don't want is a reporter, a young chap, who wants to make a name for himself in a war zone - they really don't want that - who aims to be Television Reporter of the Year by ducking and weaving under the gun fire. Me? I never ducked and wove because I feel you can as easily duck into the bullet as out of it.

Under copyright

FG: What about this question of personal profile - you were the guy on screen. You were the guy who got the name and you were the guy that got the recognition, the cameraman hardly ever mentioned by name?

MB: Only when they did extraordinary things.

I always thought this was a bit unfair. The French mention them by name all the time but I wasn't very happy with that. They accepted that - it's the way things are.

People in the business knew - not just in our Network but in others - that this huge South African cameraman I had was the mainstay of the whole operation. All I did was point him in the right direction at the beginning of the day and provide the words at the end.

FG: Presumably during this war you were moving about all the time and always having to find new bases?

MB: We had about seven different bases as the battle line shifted and the main point of activity moved from one part of Bosnia to another.

Towards the end we were mostly in Sarajevo.

FG: What about the involvement of the civilian population? Tell us a bit about that .

MB: We were reporting some terrible things happening to people.

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This was a war in which there was no distinction between soldiers and civilians. In fact I felt that civilians were targeted with peculiar ferocity - you had to feel for them.

Most of our coverage of the war, I suppose, was more about civilians than soldiers. We didn't really share their terrors and their ordeal because we could leave it and they couldn't - but we understood it better for living alongside them.

FG: This was a war of many armies - in my war, most days I knew where I ought to go to see what going to happen but you couldn't have been in that position.

MB: There were some very difficult decisions to take about what story you go for.

There were three peoples of Bosnia, broadly speaking, (I simplify) each with its own army. There was the UN which would have Units of about a dozen other armies. There was a rebel Muslim outfit in Bihac'. In fact there were five different fighting factions in Bihac'.

Now, you didn't have to report all this because it would confuse people but you had to know it so you didn't get things wrong.

Under copyright

FG: Did you feel that attempts were being made to manipulate you by one army or the other army?

MB: Oh sure. The more powerful and influential television becomes the more people will try to manipulate it or obstruct it - that's reasonable and that's their right. The most effective censorship unfortunately is censorship by exclusion - but yes, people would want you to see things from their point of view - 'Come to the scene of this massacre. See what they've done to us.'

So in times like this they would open up. If they would close down and drive you off the streets, it would merely mean that that side had started something.

FG: You got to recognise these attempts when they came along?

MB: I knew if I was being personally threatened - whoever was threatening me had probably just done something they wanted to hide - you didn't have to be a rocket scientist to work that out.

FG: And you were daily personally exposed to danger - flak jackets and that sort of thing, what protection did you have?

MB: When we started the war we had no protection at all.

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One day I took a ride over the airport in a Vauxhall car, soft top car and somebody opened up on us. Two bullets came in at head height, just missed me. When I got back I said 'This is not on'. I called up the BBC and said 'We've got to have an armoured vehicle.'

Normally with the BBC they go into a 6 week's seminar in a country house hotel or something before they decide anything but they got us one within two weeks - a second-hand vehicle from Northern Ireland which we called Miss Piggy and was the original of many, many armoured vehicles. We had five at one time.

We had body armour as well but it didn't help me when I got [redacted] hit.

Body armour is always a trade-off of safety for mobility and you've got to have mobility. My body armour was too heavy. We couldn't move fast and I came to the conclusion that it was actually a bit of a handicap and burden.

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FG: I want you to tell us about your actual wounding experience?

MB: I was doing my business in Sarajevo one day and my friend Curt (surname ?) came to me and said 'There is a battle going on down the street - I think you ought to have a look at it.'

Instead of going down the main road, I went down the back road and I paused at a kind of a dog-leg where there is a raised platform, I don't know

what it was but I used it as a vantage point on a number of times because it had the protection from sniper fire with some big blocks of flats.

I could hear a lot going on but couldn't see anything. I really didn't know what was going on so we stayed there longer than we should have done.

I just got back into the car and said 'This is useless'. There was another great salvo of gunfire so I said 'OK, let's get out and make some sense of this.' - and that is when the mortars came in and I was hit by the second one and went down - but it wasn't a very bad injury.

I was rushed off to the hospital, rushed by air ambulance to London and within six days I was out of the London Hospital.

It was actually no big deal.

FG: Do you have any symptoms of it now?

MB: I have a piece of shrapnel inside me still. I walk with a pronounced limp but I think that's because of the body armour did me some damage. Otherwise I'm fine.

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FG: Did you find objectivity difficult? Obviously you wanted to be accurate, trustful, as far as you could but in that very confused situation, it must have been frightfully difficult to be objective.

MB: I was brought up in a BBC tradition of fairness and impartiality and objectivity. Now, fairness and impartially I stand by.

Objectivity? I'm not so sure. I don't know what it means because a reporter is not an object, a reporter is a human being and you report through your senses and the store of your experience which are subjective.

I developed a theory that as reporters we had no business to be neutral between good and evil - we shouldn't back one side against another but I think generally we were on the side of the victim against the aggressor and generally on the side of the unarmed against the armed.

I didn't have any great speeches and scripts about it because the pictures did that for us - the pictures made the argument.

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FG: Bit against the normal BBC practice? There was some difference between your attitude and the BBC's traditional standard attitude.

MB: A few raised eyebrows. A lot of it was in the tone with which you deliver a report. When they analysed the words they couldn't actually find anything wrong with them. The furthest I went in this direction was in a

Panorama, in February 1993, in which I was invited to do a video prosecution of the Serbs.

I thought, 'I'm not going to do that.' Of course they've done terrible things and we showed the terrible things they'd done.

I used it to set out the case for Western intervention. I think that case stands, although the Western intervention didn't actually happen for two and a half years - but I was right to make it.

I did it in very careful prose so that they couldn't pull it from the schedule. I set out the case for intervention and I set out a parallel exposition of the risks and problems of intervention - and that was ok.

FG: I read somewhere, or heard you say somewhere, that you cannot report genocide in the same sort of way as you report a flower show.

MB: That is partly a matter of the tone and language with which you do it - you have to understand that it's about people.

This business about war reporting is about people and you have to express in some way your own feelings. There is an appropriateness, as with the Dunblane Massacre, you cannot report it in the old sort of 'Movie Tone' style of way - you have to sympathise and empathise a little bit with the people whom you've been dealing. Reporters do that that now all the time.

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So we should because we're not apart from the world, passing judgement on it, we are a part of it.

FG: This was a war in which you saw very large numbers of innocent people massacred. It must have had a profound psychological effect on you? Did you feel that you wanted to campaign against this kind of evil?

MB: I saw people having been massacred and I was horrified that this should happen in our Europe, in our time.

I didn't make many speeches about - I suppose I did make a few speeches towards the end when I was talking to school children and I did blame the Western democracies for letting this happen - it didn't have to have happened.

It was a result of indifference and the politics and diplomacy of national interests and that made me angry. I don't think the anger seeped over into the scripts. I tried to keep it out.

To this day you couldn't show me one of those scripts and say 'Martin that was over the top, you shouldn't have said that.'

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FG: The campaigns I covered didn't involve civilians casualties to any enormous degree until we came to open up the German concentration camps. Then I found it extremely difficult to keep control of myself. What one saw there was so utterly evil and horrible and dreadful, dreadful.

The BBC actually suppressed one of my reports - wouldn't use it because it would cause too much grief, concern, indignation, I don't know what. This was right at the end of the war, there was no question it wouldn't have any bearing on the outcome of the war, but the BBC's policy was 'We're simply not going to inflict this kind of horror on people in their homes.'

MB: Same thing happened to me.

We had to be very careful what we showed of the horrors of what was going on around us because there was a faction in the BBC Newsroom which didn't want to upset people - but guess what, wars are an upsetting experience.

I'd quite a battle with them during the Bosnian war to be allowed to show, not everything, because you don't want to show everything, you can't, people won't take it, but at least it's something symbolic you put in, of the horrors that you leave out - otherwise you give the impression that war is an expectable way of settling differences, which it is not.

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So there is a moral issue here and they thought it was just a good taste issue.

FG: Can you identify any changes in BBC journalism, particularly at the policy level in your time.

MB: I can identify a lot - some I don't approve of.

We've gone down the route of 'rolling news' and for me more means worse.

Some I do approve of. We finally brought together the clashing empires of News and Current Affairs.

Some we, in the field, did for ourselves. We felt out a new way of doing things and a new way of reporting - and I think a new way of writing which I think was slightly less 'establishment' than the old day - and a way of reporting wars which is more about people than about military formations and weapon systems. So it evolved, yes.

I think the fundamental principles are the same - fairness and the sanctity of the fact.

FG: The priority of speed over accuracy?

MB: I'm very worried about the priority of speed over accuracy.

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I would much rather get it second and get it right. This is one of the perils and pitfalls of 'rolling news', that rumour substitutes for news - and it has to be very, very carefully reigned in.

FG: You were called on to give evidence to the International War Tribunal in the Hague on a couple of issues. I made a note that Croatian prisoners disappeared when the Serbs took Vukovar . Is that right? What happened there?

MB: I gave evidence.

I gave written evidence and oral evidence to investigators in various cases who came and talked to me, both in the Vukovar case and in the case of (check name) a Croatian General who gave himself up - as he hoped to clear his name.

I will go there and in person if they wish me to.

Most journalists who were asked have refused to do this. I think I put my responsibilities as a human being first. I did this when I was still a journalist.

I think everybody has a responsibility like this - you would in a civil case in Britain. If you'd seen a crime being committed or just having been committed, well, it's not less so internationally and certainly not less so with a war crime.

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FG: How do you feel now about the BBC after all your years in it and coming away from it and looking back over that long period of time?

MB: I'm affectionate, I'm sometimes angry, sometimes proud.

I think it still tells truth to the world. It has some funny old habits.

Its programmes are good, on the whole - I go to America and look at that vast wasteland where you've got the most inventive nation in the world producing the worst television.

I think the most important thing to remember about the BBC is that it sets standards and keeps others honest.

*MB: That's a phrase that **Michael Grade** used on one occasion. I think it's a very important principle.*

[redacted]

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[redacted]

I've had 35 years in the best broadcasting organisation in the world.

So, no regrets, no apologies.

FG: That's a statement I welcome. Thank you very much. Most grateful to you for giving us the time.

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Interview Ends

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