# DYING FOR THE TRUTH

## THE CONCISE HISTORY OF FRONTLINE WAR REPORTING

PAUL MOORCRAFT

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## *The Concise History of Frontline War Reporting*

PAUL L. MOORCRAFT

'For journalists who cover conflict zones, luck is like a blind trust fund. You can make withdrawals, but not deposits and you never know how much is left.'

Allen Pizzey, CBS News

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‘The author and the book defy all metrics … he is a national treasure. The book is really that good. An anthropological primer to the warzones of the world, their peoples and cultures.’ Steve Johnson, *CBRNe World*

***Shooting the Messenger: The Politics of War Reporting*** *(2011)*

‘*Shooting the Messenger* should be high on the reading list of aspiring strategists.’ David R. Mets, US Air Force Research Institute

'… a cracking history of war reporting and its political impact, unreservedly recommended reading for practitioners, scholars and journalists alike.' Kenneth Payne, *RUSI Journal*

'… well-written, well-researched, accessible study … highly recommended.' *Choice*, national US library journal

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'I must admit I thought it was rather good, and enjoyed the read. Some welcome deadpan humour from time to time … . With input right up to the Libyan war, this book covers a lot of ground in an accessible way. Recommended as a reader for the more serious student of journalism, but also for those less serious but interested in their news all the same.' Guy Gabriel, Albany Associates

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'A great overview of the current Islamic threat.' Five stars. Army Rumour Service.

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# About the Author

**Professor Paul Moorcraft** is an internationally respected expert on crisis communications, especially relating to security issues. He completed his studies at six British, Middle Eastern and African universities, thereafter lecturing fulltime (consecutively) at ten universities in the UK, US, Africa, Australia and New Zealand in journalism, politics and international relations. He was most recently a visiting professor at Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies. He worked fulltime for *Time* magazine in Africa, then for the BBC and most of the Western TV networks as a freelance producer/correspondent. He has worked in thirty war zones in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and the Balkans, often with irregular and, sometimes, jihadist, forces. Most recently he has been operating in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine/Israel, Nepal, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Syria, Turkey, Sri Lanka and, for a pleasant change, the Maldives.

Dr Moorcraft spent five years as a senior instructor at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, and later the UK Joint Services Command and Staff College (JSCSC). He also worked in Corporate Communications in the Ministry of Defence in Whitehall; the MoD recalled him for service during the Iraq war in 2003. One of his main roles in Whitehall and as a member of the directing staff at JSCSC (later the UK Defence Academy) was advising on and teaching media operations (media ops). Dr Moorcraft also worked in media ops in Bosnia, Kosovo and Iraq.

Dr Moorcraft is a regular broadcaster (BBC TV and radio, as well as Sky, Sky-Arabic, Al Jazeera, etc.) and op-ed writer for international newspapers (including the *Guardian, New Statesman, Washington Times, Canberra Times, Business Day,* etc.). He is the author of a wide range of books on military history, politics, crime and mathematics. He co-authored *Axis of Evil: The War on Terror* (Pen and Sword, 2005). His *Shooting the Messenger: The Politics of War Reporting* (Potomac, Washington, 2008) was co-authored with Professor Philip M. Taylor. An updated version was released in 2011 (Biteback, London). The first of many editions of *The Rhodesian War: A Military History* (with Dr Peter McLaughlin) was published by Pen and Sword books in 2008. *Mugabe's War Machine* (Pen and Sword) came out in 2011. *Total Destruction of the Tamil Tigers: The Rare Victory of Sri Lanka's Long War* was released by Pen and Sword in 2012. Three volumes of memoirs have been published; the most recent

was *Inside the Danger Zones: Travels to Arresting Places* (Biteback, London, 2010). He is an award-winning novelist as well as the author of a publication related to his charity work (*It Just Doesn't Add Up: Explaining Dyscalculia and Overcoming Number Problems for Children and Adult*s (Tarquin, St Albans, 2015). *Omar al-Bashir and Africa's Longest War* was released by Pen and Sword in June 2015; *The Jihadist Threat: The Re-conquest of the West?* (October 2015) was shortlisted for the British Army Military Book of the Year, 2016.

Paul Moorcraft is the director of the Centre for Foreign Policy Analysis, London, founded in 2004 and dedicated to conflict resolution. He was Head of Mission, for example, of fifty independent British observers at the Sudan election of 2010. He lives in a riverside cottage in the Surrey Hills, near Guildford.

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# Introduction

How wars are reported is a long-running and fractious element of modern democracy. This book probes a deep-rooted struggle: the contest between the media and the military in which one side waves the banner of freedom of speech and the other trumpets the security of the state. Is this a result of a clash of cultures, or are the high-profile problems that sometimes occur in military–media relations the result of other pressures? As a much older institution, the military sometimes – often – resents the way the more modern mass media cover military activity. In peacetime the media seem uninterested, unless a barracks murder, a scandal over women at sea or some other 'bad news' intrude. While soldiers are training for war, enduring what few other human beings have to undergo physically and psychologically, journalists appear anarchic, anti-establishment, sceptical, disrespectful of authority, competitive to the point of 'dog eat dog', and what Kurt Vonnegut described as 'voyeurs of strangers' misery'. When war breaks out – a phenomenon that modern societies regard as a last resort and a failure of peacetime politics – the reporters flock to the scene like packs of wolves, revelling in the killing fields. From the military point of view, you now have civilians on the battlefield; to the men and women in uniform, reporters are a bloody nuisance, ignorant of what soldiers have been training for and ill-versed in the art of war.

The military preoccupation with secrecy and 'OPSEC' (operational security) clashes with the journalistic necessity for publicity and even sensationalism. The resultant tensions bubble over into post-conflict relations until the next war, when the cycle of resentment and mutual incompatibility begins once again in debates over the *need* to know versus the media's claims to a *right* to know.

Behind the rhetorical flourishes, however, war correspondents and frontline officers, often despite themselves, are frequently similar in temperament and background and sometimes even in patriotic objectives. They share many of the psychological characteristics that come from experiencing the reality of combat. This band of brothers experiences what the rest of humanity usually observes only from a distance, through the 'prying lenses' of television. Interestingly, radio correspondents and newspaper reporters tend to attract less opprobrium; we live in a visual society in which the camera is king, the 'camera never lies' and 'seeing is believing'. Of course, in our modern society – characterised by digital technology that disseminates all sorts of information and images

instantaneously and globally, 24/7 – we know that in the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. And journalists are the Cyclopes of a kingdom so saturated with information that ordinary observers can barely make sense of the world in which they live.

In war zones, far from the norms of civilian culture, death is a common denominator. Both soldiers and journalists accept the possibility of death. Indeed, upon it they build their careers. Wars are the ultimate audit of a state, although Western democracies no longer fight each other. For all its faults, so far the European Union has achieved its primary purpose: to outlaw war among member states. Previously, in the two world wars and then in the Cold War that stemmed from them, governments forced citizens to accept censorship in exchange for the promise of national survival. The fall of the Berlin Wall – and UN peace enforcement in particular – introduced the so-called wars of choice, in which citizens have demanded to know precisely what their soldiers were doing in their name. Ten years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 'global war on terror' reintroduced ideological warfare between different belief systems, the purported clash of civilisations characterised by constant war abroad and heightened terrorism alerts at home, while draconian anti-terrorism measures prompted increasing evasion and secrecy in Washington and London.

All Western governments pay lip service to the theory that the media can audit their warriors and the politicians who send them off to war, but the publicity surrounding the disclosure of the Abu Ghraib prison abuses, for example, showed that sometimes theory becomes practice. This book examines how military forces, sometimes under government orders, have circumvented democratic accountability. They have done so for a number of reasons, including instinctive military secrecy, reflex aversion in the defence ministries to public disclosure to civilians, and downright political chicanery, as well as the purported rationale of disguising vital information from the 'enemy'. The evidence comes mainly from wars fought by Western states, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, although sometimes instructive examples are taken from more authoritarian polities.

In 2012 Pen and Sword published my book about the recent termination of an Asian war (*Total Destruction of the Tamil Tigers: The Rare Victory in Sri Lanka's Long War).* In 2009 the government in Colombo completely defeated or physically destroyed the Tamil Tigers. This was one of the few occasions in modern history when a major guerrilla army had been conquered militarily. And cynics in uniform liked to point out that this may not have been unconnected to the fact that journalists, especially foreign ones, were kept away from the war zones. A few Westerners who tried to gain access often got a rough ride. For example, my colleague Marie Colvin, reporting for the *Sunday Times,* lost an eye to government artillery. Others were jailed and sometimes local Sri Lankan

Sri Lankan special forces in the last stages of the Civil War before government troops wiped out the remnants of the Tamil Tigers. The government kept journalists away from the final *Götterdämmerung*. (Sri Lankan Ministry of Defence)

correspondents just disappeared. Those who are interested in this special case should read my book. Here I have concentrated mainly on Western democracies that have been expected to allow the media access to the wars conducted in their name.

This book covers various elements of the media, including print, radio, television, cinema and still photography. For a generation after the Crimean War, correspondents and war photographers served complementary but different roles. By the 1890s new technology, especially more portable cameras and better printing processes, allowed them to merge into a single profession: the photojournalist. While soldiers took cover, the photojournalists had to keep their heads up and take pictures – the closer, the better. Some of the best, such as Robert Capa, were killed in the process. For most of the twentieth century journalists tended to specialise: snappers (photographers), scribblers (print media) and radio and TV reporters prided themselves on the demarcation between them. But more recently cost cutting and technology (especially ultra-

light digital cameras linked to laptop computers) as well as social media have again fused the different crafts of the wordsmith and the image maker. Technology, no matter how advanced, was never a substitute for good journalism, however.

Since modern war reporting began in the mid-nineteenth century the central questions have always been: how much should be told? And when? At one extreme is the American censor who reputedly said, 'I would tell the people nothing until the war is over. Then I would tell them who won'. Conversely, it could be argued that TV viewers *should* be permitted to see the 'splatter shots' – blood and gore, smashed bodies, bayoneted babies, raped women – in order to expose the wrongdoers and excite sufficient moral indignation to prompt the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or the United Nations (UN) to deploy forces, as happened in the Balkans during the 1990s. In the final analysis, war correspondents and their editorial bosses at home must forge their own individual compromise between evading censorship and wallowing in total licence. They walk the tightrope between voyeuristic 'war pornography' and the dangers of 'compassion fatigue', or desensitising audiences to what real war can do to real people.

Striking this balance is crucial for the simple reason that the war correspondent's job is quite different from domestic reporting, not only because it is so personally dangerous and professionally demanding, nor even because only a small minority of journalists graduate into the profession by being good (or crazy) enough to cover conflicts effectively. Rather, war reporting can have a very real impact on the numbers of lives lost – or saved. Domestic reporting may sometimes topple governments, but it rarely plays God.

In the face of such moral burdens, how should journalists deal with military and political authorities who may try to suppress information that should be disclosed to the electorate? Jeremy Paxman, one of the most hard-nosed of British television journalists, famously re-quoted the remark that a broadcaster's attitude towards politicians should display the same degree of respect that a dog reserves for the lamp-post. That's fine for the decorous rancour of a TV studio, but it wouldn't always be recommended with, say, a Chechen or an African warlord. Flying bullets, the crump of mortars or even a punch on the nose teach rapid lessons in interview etiquette. In war zones, facing mutual dangers and sharing information, journalists and soldiers often learn to compromise. To survive they must strike a deal. Correspondents frequently self-censor their reports to keep their vital military sources 'on-side'; news is fudged. The individual tactics of war reporting can be as complex as the strategy of national propaganda campaigns. War is often hell, and war correspondents are not angels, despite the former fashion of white suits and the current one of pious rhetoric.

This book attempts to explain how democracies report wars. First, it provides a narrative account of how the media have covered nearly all the major and some minor wars of the twentieth and early twenty-first century. Second, it offers a frontline analysis from the perspective of soldiers and of humble 'hacks' (as journalists call themselves). The story frequently zooms out from the front line and into the corridors of power to consider the vantage point of generals and government ministers. Third, and more implicitly, it evaluates the debate over the impact of media coverage on foreign and defence policy.

The book also explores some media myths. Ever since the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s, the military has tended to display open hostility to journalists (even though war correspondents were by and large 'on-side' during that conflict, as indeed in most previous conflicts). More recently, however, journalists have become a crucial element of war planning, not least because of extensive 'embedding' and new military doctrines such as information operations. Public affairs, or what the British call 'media operations' (media ops), has become a key part of contemporary military doctrinal thinking and war fighting.

This shift is, in fact, a return to historical norms. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, military–media relations were generally co-operative, not conflicting, especially during wars of national survival. Despite their pretence that newspapermen were scum nearly all British prime ministers in the nineteenth century privately courted the influential among them, even writing secretly for newspapers, and also owning papers, especially in Ireland.[1] Provocation of public anger and dissent at home was the exception, epitomised by the father of all war correspondents, William Howard Russell, and his critical coverage of the British army's conduct during the Crimean War. More contemporary exceptions are the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the Iraq War of 2003, which deeply divided public opinion, especially in Britain and Europe.

If co-operation is generally the rule, what are the reasons for this, bearing in mind the intrinsic dichotomies of media disclosure and military secrecy? How does the interface between the reporter's right to know and the military's almost knee-jerk commitment to 'operational security' actually work? Does this create a gap between images of war and the harsh realities of the battlefield? Is modern embedding a Faustian pact for journalists, whereby reporters trade off freedom to say what they like for security and access to dangerous, newsworthy places? And, in the process, do journalists evolve from simple observers to actual participants? Usually, three or four days shared under fire can turn individuals into the best of buddies (and occasionally worst enemies). How has modern technology – especially live satellite broadcasting from the front line and the use of mobile phone cameras – influenced journalism, military conduct and even the public's perception of what is occurring?

A warning is necessary here. Journalists are more prone to subjectivity than most professionals precisely because they believe they are uniquely immune to its seduction. Of course, total objectivity is clinically impossible, especially after witnessing a massacre or two, but journalists should strive for it and reject the temptations of advocacy journalism. War correspondents may bond (or pretend to bond) with the warriors who share their food or armoured vehicle. Ultimately, however, hacks must refuse to take sides, especially when they are covering wars fought by their own nationals. This is the prime imperative of war reportage.

I need, therefore, to inject a personal note. I worked occasionally as a staffer or full-time 'stringer' but usually as a freelance correspondent for print, radio and TV networks in many of the conflicts of the last forty years. I also worked inside the military machine during various separate stints in the UK Ministry of Defence: as an inmate of the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, later at the UK Joint Services Command and Staff College, in defence procurement, then in Whitehall, and also in media operations in the field in the Balkans and the Middle East. Being a poacher turned gamekeeper (or perhaps gatekeeper) was sometimes uncomfortable. Occasionally senior military and politicians were a bit wary of my journalism background; more often my hack friends (wrongly) assumed I was a spook. I hope this extensive first-hand experience brings a fresh perspective to this latest examination of war and the media. And, with all the keyboard courage I can muster, I shall attempt to apply Paxman's dictum not only to deserving politicians but equally to journalists and military personnel.

*Chapter 1*

# The Early Days of War Reporting

The famous British war correspondent Charles à Court Repington once remarked, 'The history of mankind is the history of war.' Warfare has been a permanent condition of human existence, rather than a temporary aberration from the supposed 'normality' or ideal of peace. Yet a fundamental point to remember is that the experiences of those who actually fought in battles and of those who merely read about them or watch them from afar have been quite different. The gap between image and reality is huge. In the process of description, the sheer brutality of warfare goes through a form of mediation, or filtration, that turns it into something quite different – an epic poem, a painting or, more recently, a film, a television documentary or a news report. Modern journalism is a relatively recent phenomenon. An eventual by-product of the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, newspapers, as we understand them today, began to appear several hundred years later. The mass circulation of newspapers is really a twentieth-century phenomenon, as, of course, is broadcasting and the cinema. Indeed, the arrival of these truly *mass* media is what distinguishes the twentieth century from all periods before it. Because the gap between image and reality has narrowed somewhat that does not mean that it has been eradicated. It is important to understand the historical antecedents of contemporary war reporting, not least because so many aspects of today's military–media relationship were experienced long before the century of 'total war'.

### *Shooting the messenger*

According to some ancient sources, the Greeks disliked bad news so intensely that the runners carrying it from one point to another were sometimes murdered. Thus began a long history of 'shooting the messenger', a history that extends to the modern-day media, which thrive on bad news. It is frequently said that history is written by the victors and, usually, victory in war is the source of national celebration and commemoration of those who have lost their lives. In the classical Greek period scribes eulogised wars rather than reporting them, often many years *after* the event. So the surviving accounts are riddled with

The Trojan War may not have happened. Homer's *Iliad* was more myth making than historical record.

myth and propaganda and are based on oral tradition passed down through generations of storytellers. Written five hundred years after the event, Homer's *Iliad* devotes more than half of its space to depictions of battles and the heroes who fought them. Together with his other epic poem, the *Odyssey*, Homer tells us less about the actual events of the Trojan War (indeed the war may not even have happened and 'Homer' may never have existed) and more about how later Greeks used this 'event' as the historical moment that defined their unity, culture and national character. Writing about the history of war is often more about the present than the past and, until the arrival of the war correspondent in the mid-nineteenth century, it was less a matter of record and more a matter of myth.

Virgil, writing in Latin at the height of Roman power, followed the Homeric tradition in his famous masterpiece, the *Aeneid*. The Asian equivalent, the *Mahābhārata*, reworked between 400 and 200 BC, describes the tremendous

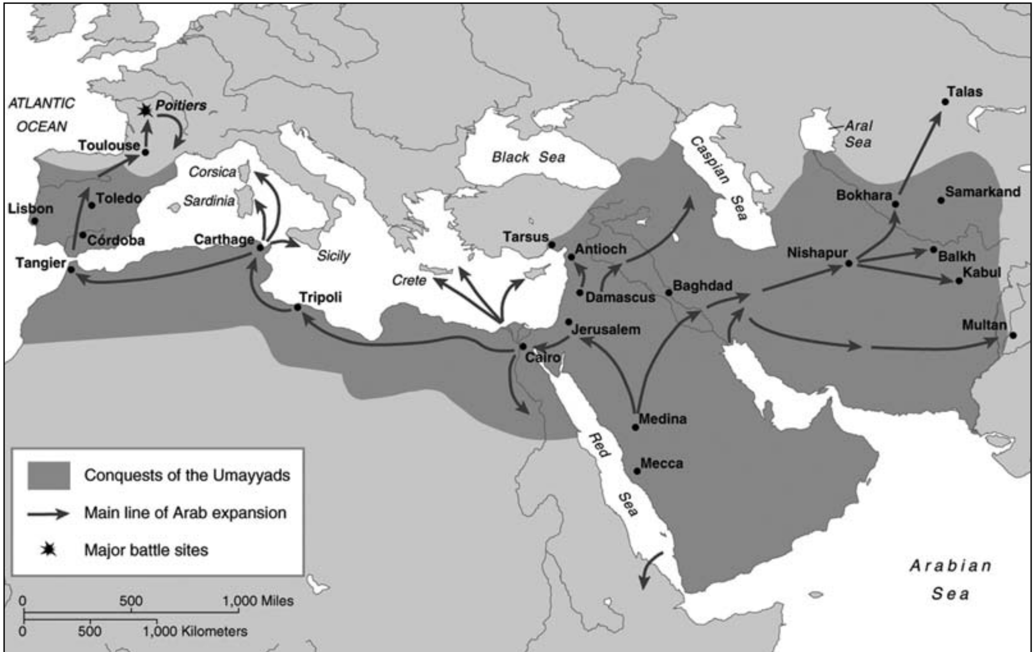
struggles that resulted from the Aryan invasion of the Indus Valley more than one thousand years earlier. Its one hundred thousand couplets make it probably the longest poem ever written (ten times the works of Homer combined). The *Mahābhārata* is also one of the greatest surviving accounts of primitive war, fought almost exclusively by foot soldiers armed with bows and arrows.

These were poetic interpretations of military history and popular myths, however, not factual reporting; they lack the authenticity and stylistic immediacy of eyewitness accounts. The Athenian historian Thucydides was a general who was exiled from Athens following his failure to prevent the city of Amphipolis falling into Spartan hands. Although his *The History of the Peloponnesian War* must also be treated with some caution given his background, the first-hand accounts he personally collected during the rest of the conflict in his history of the Athenians' disastrous war against Sparta in the fifth century BC can legitimately be seen as a compelling forerunner of modern war reporting.

Military commanders themselves have written some of the most powerful and immediate war records. In 401 BC Xenophon led his army of Greek mercenaries in an epic retreat. His detailed description of directing his troops through the snows of modern Kurdistan contains 'human interest' details reminiscent, for example, of accounts of the Nazi siege of Stalingrad. Likewise, Julius Caesar's understated style contains many of the elements of modern war reportage; for instance, in his description of his landing on British soil in 55 BC, he adds what journalists today would call a 'sound bite'. The Roman landing force, accustomed to fighting on land, encountered stiff resistance from the natives massed on the beach. Caesar records the standard-bearer of the Tenth Legion shouting, 'Jump down, comrades, unless you want to surrender our eagle to the enemy; I, at any rate, mean to do my duty to my country and my general.'

The Jewish historian Josephus, who sympathised with the Romans, indulged in what nowadays would be termed sensationalism. In his portrayal of the siege of Jerusalem in AD 70, he writes in almost tabloid style of a woman, driven by hunger and anger at her inevitable death, committing a crime against nature: 'Seizing her child, an infant at the breast, she cried, "My poor baby, why should I keep you alive in this world of war and famine?"' Then she kills her baby son, roasts him, eats half of the body, and keeps the rest for a later meal. Although Josephus is considered an unreliable witness by modern historians, and the contemporary parallels should not be overdone, nonetheless elements of continuity stand out not only in the abiding fascination with the detailed horrors of war but also in the overall aims of the stories. Right from the outset, epic poems and prose chronicles of war had a political purpose: to bolster the authority of the current ruler, which, for both Virgil and Josephus, was the embryonic Roman Empire.

After the collapse of the centralising power of this Empire, myths and legends of military prowess became even more integral to the survival of warrior societies in the flux and chaos of the so-called 'Dark Ages'. A central core of early medieval war stories centred on the various versions of *La Chanson de Roland*, based on Roland's defence of the rearguard of Charlemagne's army as it marched through the pass of Roncesvalles in the Pyrenees in AD 778. Roland's self-sacrifice in the fight against the 'Saracens' became the prime motif of chivalric literature and arguably the Arthurian legends. Roland and his men were probably killed by pagan or Christian Basques not Muslims, however. The battle assumed an inaccurate reputation as the major clash between Islamic and Christian forces. Charles Martel's earlier defeat of invading Muslim armies in central France at the Battle of Tours in 732 has a far better claim to this accolade.[1] The Muslim incursions into central France flowed from the amazing military expansion that followed the death of the Prophet Muhammad in AD 632. Except for night-fighting and rapid mobility, the small Arab armies had no tangible advantages over the more technologically advanced Byzantine and Persian empires. The Muslim military leadership was, however, impressive – within one hundred years Islam had conquered much of the known world. Hugh




Muhammad died in 632 and within 100 years Arab armies had conquered much of the known world.

The Arab armies had no technological advantages but they outfought the two existing superpowers, the Byzantine and Persian empires. Hardly any contemporary Arab accounts survived.

Kennedy's book, *The Great Arab Conquests,* captures much of the drama, but it was Tom Holland's iconoclastic work, *In the Shadow of the Sword*, that cast doubt on the provenance of many of the stories of the early Muslim period, not least because so few Arabs provided contemporary histories.

In Anglo-Saxon and Celtic tradition bards accompanied warriors into battle to add firsthand piquancy to their prose and poetry. In an illiterate tribal society, the oral traditions recorded genealogical and political legitimacy as well as flattering princes with praise-poems. From these stories and myths emerged the Arthurian legends, that later melded into chivalric traditions based on Roland and other knights. In a historical example from a later period (1400–1409), Owain Glyn Dŵr led the last major Celtic rebellion against English rule in Wales, while his faithful bard Iolo Goch proclaimed his lord's prowess.[2]

From Charlemagne to the time of Owain Glyn Dŵr, 'war reporting' consisted largely of heroic combats between individual knights or sagas of noble leaders spearheading competing armies. One of the last flowerings of this tradition was the papal propaganda to support the crusades in the Holy Land from 1095 onward. The Church fused religion and reportage to buttress Christendom's wars with the Muslim world.[3] The Islamic tradition did not undergo the renaissance and reformation that transformed Christendom. Although the influence of the popes lingered in some measure in the more secular age, and various later crusades were launched against the Ottomans, Latin Christianity receded from state authority in the West. Knights who had

Much of medieval warfare was recorded by bards as single combat between kings and princes. Iolo Goch faithfully recorded the last uprising of the Welsh, led by his master, Owain Glyndŵr, at the start of the fifteenth century.

Despite four major crusades and a series of smaller ones, Christian control of the Holy Land lasted just two centuries.

The Crusader castles were built to last – this is the Krak des Chevaliers castle in northern Syria, controlled by the Knights Hospitaller. It fell to Muslim forces in 1271. (Author, Paul Moorcraft)

once worn the red cross became officers in national and imperial armies. Many of the old religious and chivalric traditions became redundant just as full plate armour was worn more as a matter of social prestige in the seventeenth century. Unlike the Islamic world, the separation of church and state in Christendom allowed for a modernised international and secular political order, epitomised by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, a period of some peace after the ravages of the Thirty Years' War. The Church essentially gave up its attempt to control all civil society as law replaced divine sanction. The temporal power of the papacy, accentuated by the Crusades, eventually shrunk to the tiny Vatican City, the only church state left in Europe.

As the honour of individual swordsmanship gave way to the more mechanical and massed warfare of the bullet and cannonball, the annals of war became less heroic and the literature began to present more realistic portrayals of combat. In 1609, for example, Samuel Daniel wrote of 'artillerie, th' infernall instrument, new-brought from hell' in his account of England's Wars of the

Roses in the fifteenth century. His readers were perhaps as appalled by his detailed descriptions of the human impact of the latest engine of war, artillery fire, as modern generations were affected by written and photographic accounts of the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Improving technology was bound to influence not only warfare but also the means of reporting it. In the mid-fifteenth century, Johann Gutenberg pioneered printing by movable type, and this revolution, by initially producing more accessible Bibles, changed not only religion but also government and commerce. Printing prompted the Reformation and the beginnings of the press; the first newspapers written in English appeared in the 1620s. Spurred by demand for news during the Civil War, fourteen newspapers were on sale in London by 1645. Many of the early newspapers were highly polemical, and successive governments imposed restrictions on them.

A tax on paper limited many eighteenth-century newspapers to four pages; also a tax on advertisements and a stamp duty were imposed. Some of the local information was founded on gossip and imagination or copied from rival publications. Writers lifted international news from foreign journals or based their accounts on travellers' letters and reports.

If sometimes newspapers said too much editors were fined and imprisoned; at other times they said too little. The British forces' defeat at the Battle of New Orleans in January 1815 received little coverage in British papers, and the few that did mention it declared it an English victory. Soldiers fought this bloodiest battle of the Anglo-American War of 1812 more than two weeks *after* a peace settlement had been concluded in Ghent. Some journalistic ignorance might be excused, however, as news then travelled at a slow pace. English newspapers were too concerned with the escape of Napoleon and the events that culminated in Waterloo to be diverted by embarrassing American victories in faraway places. As ever, the press processed news that immediately concerned its readers.

Continental Europe enjoyed a period of relative peace for the rest of the nineteenth century. True, revolutions and short wars broke out, though nothing to compare with the upheavals of the French Revolution and Napoleonic conflicts. This 'Long Peace' and the spread of the industrial revolution spawned a series of media advances. In the newspaper industry, mechanical typesetting was developed in 1838 and the rotary press in 1846. These technologies, combined with linotype composition, devised in 1844, would allow 30,000 copies of a newspaper to be printed in one hour. Early newspapers were composed of dull, dense columns, although magazines were spiced by artists' impressions of wars. In the late 1830s Louis Daguerre developed photography; John MacCosh, a Scottish surgeon in the Bengal Army, used an improved process known as the calotype. MacCosh was one of the first war photographers,

managing to take small portraits of officers and men during the Second Sikh War (1848–49), but it was technically impossible to reproduce these pictures in newspapers. It was not until 1880 that a photograph printed by the halftone method (in the *New York Daily Graphic*) allowed the slow phasing out of the laborious process of engraved wood block and line drawings.

Rapid printing was all very well, but how could foreign news be transmitted more effectively from faraway war zones to newspaper offices? Previously, messages depended on the fastest horse or sailing ship. Balloons had been tried, and in 1832 an English paper, the *True Sun*, carried news of French troops moving on Antwerp with the headline of 'Just arrived by a carrier pigeon'. Pigeons could travel at 35 miles per hour; the newly invented steam trains were reaching speeds of 50 miles per hour. What accelerated communications in the nineteenth century – with a similar effect to that of computers in the late twentieth century – was a process that could send information at 186,000 miles per second: the telegraph.

In 1844 Samuel Morse, an artist and portrait painter, opened the first telegraph line, between Baltimore and Washington. One early witness of the first telegraphic transmissions declared: 'Time and space are now annihilated.' In 1851 a submarine cable linked Britain and France, and a line spanned the Atlantic successfully in 1866.

Surprisingly, many of the early war correspondents seemed extremely reluctant to use the telegraph; the same could be said for Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the telephone in 1876. Bell himself refused to have a phone in his study as he said he found it distracting. Moreover, most of the colonial war reporting in the second half of the nineteenth century took place far away from telegraph lines and certainly far from the newfangled telephone. Journalists either undertook long journeys by horse (or camel) or used despatch riders. This, of course, added much colour to their often highly personalised accounts of colonial warfare. By the end of the century, radio developed from the wireless telegraph invented in 1896 by Guglielmo Marconi. I grew up with the Marconi story, as I lived close to where, on 13 May 1897, the Italian Nobel laureate sent the world's first ever wireless communication over open sea. The experiment, based in South Wales, witnessed a message transmitted over the Bristol Channel from the small Flat Holm island to Lavernock Point near Penarth, a distance of 3.7 miles. The message read 'Are you ready?'

Allied to inventions in printing, photo reproduction, telegraphy and radio were important social developments in Europe and North America: urbanisation, the extension of the franchise, compulsory education and, hence, improved literacy. The expansion of rail networks and later development of the petrol engine enhanced distribution of newspapers. The age of mass newspaper circulation had arrived. So, too, had an electorate, especially in Britain, that was

highly sensitive to the political nuances of the imperial wars that fascinated the Victorian press.

Military defeats had presaged the collapse of governments and rulers throughout history though it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that colonial battles could be dissected so quickly in the metropole because of improvements in communications technology. The disastrous defeat of an army at the Battle of New Orleans could be almost ignored in London, but seven decades later the killing in Sudan of one man, Major General Charles George 'Chinese' Gordon, could actually threaten the British government's survival. The advent of the modern war correspondent – the so-called 'specials' – would play a role in bolstering or undermining the stability of governments. Whereas, in the Greek tradition, chieftains and kings may sometimes have killed messengers bearing bad news, democracies resorted to censorship. Although formalised military censorship was not introduced until late in the nineteenth century, the key issue – whether to withhold military information in the perceived national interest or allow the Fourth Estate to tell the general public – predates the revolution in mass communication.

### *The Rise of the Specials*

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, war reporting consisted of official despatches, travellers' tales, diplomatic gossip, direct plagiarism from foreign periodicals and occasional, usually self-serving, letters from officers in the field. *The Times* of London then came up with a revolutionary idea: why not employ someone to actually visit 'the seat of war' and send back eyewitness reports as rapidly as possible?

The man the paper chose was a barrister, Henry Crabb Robinson. He was also a student of German culture. In 1807 he was sent to report on Napoleon's campaigns along the Elbe. Robinson set a template for indolence by never visiting any battlefields, but he sufficiently satisfied his employers for *The Times* to send him in the following year to report on the Peninsular War, where he read local papers and picked up some tittle-tattle while again staying well away from the battlefield.

His despatches even managed to omit the famous Corunna victory in 1809 and the death of British commander Sir John Moore. Although he set a journalistic precedent for hype, absenteeism and lack of curiosity, *The Times* failed to re-employ him. Nevertheless, the future doyens of war reportage were destined to work at the heart of the battlefield. As the distinguished combat photographer of the twentieth century Robert Capa used to say: 'If the picture wasn't good enough, you weren't close enough.' Whereas Capa was killed on assignment, Robinson wisely returned to legal practice and died in his bed at the ripe old age of ninety-two.

In 1809 the *Morning Chronicle* smuggled a journalist on to a warship that was accompanying a British expeditionary force to Antwerp, but Lord Castlereagh (soon to become foreign secretary) had him removed. In revenge, the irate journalist, Peter Finnerty, lambasted the politician, an outburst that earned Finnerty a year in prison for libel. Newspapers continued to rely on letters from serving British officers until the commander in chief, the Duke of Wellington (as he later became), clamped down on the practice, claiming that even the much-delayed appearance of such news could provide information to the enemy. Nearly eighty-five years passed before Military Intelligence formally censored such letters, but Wellington's actions had established a precedent for military suspicions of the press. The 'Iron Duke', however, did make one concession: he allowed civilians to act as official war artists.

From 1815 to the mid-nineteenth century numerous small imperial wars and revolutions erupted in Europe where foreign correspondents worked harder at securing eyewitness accounts. The *Morning Post*, for example, sent its music critic, Charles Lewis Gruneisen, to cover the Carlist War in Spain (1835–37). Gruneisen did well, penetrating and reporting on the battle zones, but he was eventually captured and almost shot as a spy. This was more like it, as far as the late Victorians' romantic image of the war correspondent was concerned. And this image was fashioned largely by one man: William Howard Russell.

*Russell and the Crimean War*

Russell, born in Ireland in 1820, had wanted to be a doctor but couldn't stand the sight of dead bodies. Presumably he overcame his phobia because, after training to be a lawyer, he eventually became the father of all modern war correspondents or, as he dubbed himself, 'the miserable parent of a luckless tribe'. Like many of his tribe, Russell was deeply insecure, but he was fortunate in securing the constant support of the youthful editor of *The Times*, John Delane. For decades Delane massaged his employee's ego and encouraged him to develop a crisp, accurate, frontline style (although it might appear a little too flowery for modern tastes). Russell reported on the conflict over Schleswig-Holstein in 1850, but he first made his name in the Crimean War.

Britain and France had allied with Turkey to prevent the feared expansion of Russia into the Dardanelles region. In 1854 Britain sent an expeditionary force – 57,000 strong, probably the largest force deployed by sea to date. The British Army, however, had changed little since its victory over Napoleon; indeed, the genial commander in chief, Lord Raglan, was seriously handicapped by his inability to grasp the notion that the French were now his allies, not his enemies. British troops also had little love for their secondary allies, the Turks. As one officer put it, 'everybody would rather go over to the Russians and help them' fight against the 'wretched' Turks.

William Howard Russell, the father of modern war reporting.

If the grand strategy of the war appeared confused so were the logistics. Poor planning meant that supplies were lost or totally inadequate. It was a standing joke among the ordinary soldiery that, of the 3,000 miles between the British armies and Plymouth, the most difficult were the last six. Poor food and unsanitary accommodation invited disease; after a year's campaigning fewer than 50 per cent of the men were fit for duty. Russell and other correspondents described the makeshift hospitals for the diseased and wounded: '[T]here was

not the least attention paid to decency or cleanliness – the stench was appalling ... the sick appeared to be tended by the sick and the dying by the dying.'[4]

Russell carefully noted the conditions of those who could still fight:

> Hundreds of men had to go into the trenches at night with no covering but their greatcoats, and no protection for their feet but their regimental shoes. The trenches were two and three feet deep with mud, snow and half-frozen slush.

British troops were unquestionably brave, but no amount of courage could compensate for the appalling leadership, most egregiously displayed in the disastrous charge of the Light Brigade against Russian guns inspired by a poorly communicated order. Russell recorded the event with great panache in *The Times* of 14 November 1854:

> With diminished ranks, thinned by those thirty guns, which the Russians had laid with the most deadly accuracy, with a halo of flashing steel above their heads, and with a cheer which was many a noble fellow's death cry, they flew into the smoke of the batteries; but ere they were lost from view, the plain was strewn with their bodies and with the carcasses of horses.

Although the fighting came to an inconclusive end in 1856, it had many long-term repercussions. Already the political shock waves had toppled the British government. As the Duke of Newcastle remarked to *The Times* correspondent when he visited the Crimea, 'It was you who turned out the government, Mr Russell.' *The Times* had also set up a fund to support a team of nurses led by Florence Nightingale, who had been sent to reform the hospital system. More important, Russell's revelations of the 'fatal cocktail of indifference, incompetence and senility' in the military command led to demands for the reorganisation of the army. In the longer term, the medical and military reforms benefited the ordinary soldier, but the reactions among many of the senior officers toward what the press had done were extremely hostile. Despite his bluff Irish charm, which won over his fellow journalists and some of the officers, Russell suffered all sorts of petty harassment from the military, including personal jibes that he was a 'mad-dog Irishman' who hated the English, and he suffered constant 'mishaps' to his supplies and baggage.

The generals in the Crimea took up what was to become the perennial complaint of the British military, namely that newspaper reports undermined national security. Lord Raglan wrote, 'The enemy need spend nothing under the heading Secret Service … that enemy having at its command through the

English press and from London to his Headquarters by telegraph every detail that can be required.' The military establishment was so incensed that Sydney Herbert, the former secretary of war, declared: 'I trust the army will lynch *The Times* correspondent.' After the war it became clear, not least from Russian sources, that the claims of security breaches by *The Times* were almost entirely groundless.

The military and government supporters exerted great pressure on *The Times* to silence or recall Russell, but the editor of '*The Thunderer*', Delane, stood by his correspondents in the field, even in the face of the ultimate snub by the London establishment (several leading gentlemen's clubs banned the newspaper from their smoking rooms). Russell had always crosschecked the facts in his reports and based them on careful interviews with officers, men and verified eyewitnesses, but he now also offered to have his despatches cleared by the military. This voluntary system of censorship was, however, rejected. Russell, acutely sensitive to the security dilemma, wrote: 'Although it may be dangerous to communicate facts likely to be of service to the Russians, it is certainly hazardous to conceal the truth from the British people.' In February 1856 the high command in the Crimea issued an order that was to set an important precedent for military censorship: it banned the publication of any details that might benefit the enemy and authorised the expulsion of any transgressors. This was the embryo of a censorship system that was later to crush almost all independent reporting during the First World War. Throughout the twentieth century Western governments would parade what became known as 'operational security' as an all-purpose device to stop pieces of information from being inadvertently released by journalists and later relied on accusations of deliberate espionage to muzzle correspondents.

Russell, however, had simply been doing his job in the Crimea. It was the first time that a British military campaign had been subjected to continuous and close scrutiny by a civilian reporter. He had uncovered incompetence that had cost many lives. Revealing what he saw was surely in the public interest and the very foundation of the investigative reporter's task in a democracy. In addition to his role as an unintentional reformer, Russell also pioneered the essentials of all good journalism: energy, curiosity, bravery, accuracy, compassion and an eye for detail. And he was lucky in finding an editor who was equally determined and prepared to back him despite the furore his reports created. Yet Russell was no crusading radical. In professional terms, for example, he was initially reluctant to use the telegraph that (for a time) connected London to Varna in Bulgaria. Nor was he a radical in the social sense. Despite his moving portrayal of the ordinary soldiers' hardships, he did not generally condemn those whom he regarded as his own class, the officers. (He did, however, occasionally refer to their 'aristocratic hauteur'.) Despite his

Because of Russell's reportage of the Crimean War, some originally considered him a 'mad-dog Irishman', but in later life he was lionised by the British Establishment.

detailed analyses of the abysmal conditions of the rank and file, he did not elaborate on the lavish lifestyles of the commanders, which even included a private yacht and accompanying wives. Indeed, he saw himself as part of the military establishment, rarely criticising the strategic weaknesses of the war.

Later, in conflicts in Africa, India and Europe, 'Billy' Russell earned five campaign medals and even an Iron Cross, awarded personally by Prussia's crown prince. The correspondent became a close friend of the Princess of Wales, was awarded a knighthood and, after he died in 1907, a memorial to him was erected in St Paul's Cathedral. Despite Russell's earlier role as a hate figure for the military, Field Marshal Sir Evelyn Wood, who had served in the Crimea, declared many years after the war that Russell 'incurred much enmity, but few unprejudiced men who were in the Crimea will now attempt to call in question the fact that by awakening the conscience of the British nation to the suffering of its troops, he saved the remnants of those grand battalions'. Regardless of the initial calumnies he endured from the military and politicians, the final verdict on Russell must be that he pioneered the role of informing the British public of the harshness of wars waged in their name. His career started with his being accused of treason, yet in the end he was praised as a patriot. His obituary in the *Manchester Guardian* noted, 'He was an honourable and patriotic journalist.' His successors would aspire to that ideal, but few were to match Russell's achievement.

Russell was not the only talented journalist in the Crimea: another *Times* man, Thomas Chenery, ably assisted him. In addition, French correspondents were busy scribbling, but they were closely censored by their military. There were also more *Times* correspondents, including an admiral with the Baltic Fleet, which was enforcing a crucial economic embargo of Russian ports. But this aspect of the war has received little attention, perhaps because in February 1854 the Royal Navy issued an order that stopped journalists sailing with the fleet and prevented serving officers from contributing to newspapers. So, in Britain's 'first newspaper war', the traditionally 'Senior Service', the Royal Navy, that did so much to weaken Russia's economic power, received few public accolades, while the Army, which reluctantly allowed journalists, garnered many brickbats.

The campaign also witnessed the advent of the first war photographers, in particular Roger Fenton, another lawyer and the royal photographer, who was sent to record 'a clean, ordered war in which the troops looked happy and healthy'. Comparing Fenton's photographs with the overwhelming body of critical press coverage should raise alarm bells about that old axiom that the camera never lies. Fenton's royal connections made him *persona grata* with the military, unlike Russell. When he dined with the commander in chief, Fenton was placed on Lord Raglan's right, and because he was thus 'embedded' in the

system Fenton – despite his many private criticisms of the military mismanagement – practised rigorous self-censorship in public. Fenton's pictures were exhibited throughout Britain and were even made into postcards, the images designed to counter Russell's critical despatches. The war will always be associated with Russell, however, because of the impact his despatches had on British public opinion. Although he did not stint on the heroics, he displayed the war's brutal horrors in a way that Fenton's anodyne photographs did not.

For much of the nineteenth century, the press was allied with jingoism and wartime nationalism: 'Reporters functioned as frontline poets, scratching the first impressions into the culture's consciousness.' [5] How much of the realities of war actually reached the public, even after Russell's breakthrough despatches, must be open to debate. Perhaps it would be fair to say that the major difference was the speed with which these mediated reports reached their audience. The military expected journalists to be patriots first and to keep their negative comments to themselves. So, in the immediate aftermath of the Crimean War, the military thought that it had made a grave mistake in tolerating the presence of Russell and his colleagues. In particular, many officers regarded the criticisms of Lord Raglan as grossly unfair, especially as the commander in chief had waged a ceaseless war with the London bureaucracy to ameliorate the logistical crises. Raglan had never allowed Russell to interview him; indeed they never met. Raglan's situation illustrates a perpetual paradox for military leaders: was it better to work with war correspondents, especially the elite members of the tribe, and secure their tacit approval and perhaps printed praise, or ignore and ban them and possibly risk harming one's military career? Throughout the age of new imperialism British generals were to adopt different, often idiosyncratic, solutions to this conundrum. Making a historical judgement, Russell's pioneering investigative achievements could be said to partly compensate for the war frenzy – whipped up by the press – that had helped to precipitate the war in the first place. Even then it must also be noted that his independent approach to reporting was subsumed within a hidden political agenda: *The Times* upheld an anti-government stance that was distinct from the issues of the Crimea. Meanwhile, Russell's popular acclaim had established a new, distinct breed of journalists: a special group of men, and later women, who became fascinated by the stark challenges of combat. The era of the modern war correspondent had arrived as hundreds of specials flocked to the American Civil War. Billy Russell was among them.

### *The American Civil War*

In the first great American war, its struggle for independence from Britain, press objectivity was not at a premium: 'The pens, like the muskets ... were driven by passion and pamphlet.' [6] There were no formal correspondents; the American

press relied on rumours or letters from what today would be called ‘stringers’ (freelance, occasional contributors). Opinion, not news, was the media currency. War reporting improved immeasurably, however, during the war with Mexico (1846–48); this time professional newspapermen entered the fray, while regular army officers also doubled as correspondents. The penny press (so-called because the papers cost one cent) took full advantage of the telegraph and hired small ships to speed the news from the south; the New Orleans *Picayune* even installed a typesetter aboard its hired vessel. And, according to Sir John Keegan, the first-ever war photograph was produced: a daguerreotype of American cavalry in a Mexican street.[7] In terms of comprehensive press scrutiny, the Mexican war paralleled the British coverage of the Crimean campaigns. The American press was also active in the war at home against the Indian tribes. Humanitarians, led by the Quakers, were vocal in their criticism of military methods used against Native Americans. Conflict between the army and Indian Bureau agents was a permanent feature of civil–military relations in the ‘Wild West’.

During the Civil War (1861–65) American reporting reverted to the partisan style of the War of Independence because it was seen as a similarly mortal struggle for national survival, unlike the successful and relatively minor war against a weak Mexican adversary. Both sides indulged in crude propaganda. The North alleged ‘Johnny Rebs’ made necklaces of Yankee eyes as gifts for their womenfolk, while Southern propaganda asserted Union soldiers played football with Confederate heads. Reporters from the Confederacy described the North as ‘the cursed, cowardly nation of swindlers and thieves’ that fought ‘drunken with wine, blood and fury’. The Northern papers, swept up in frenzied circulation wars, were just as bad: the *Chicago Times* editor ordered one of his reporters to ‘telegraph fully all news you can get, and when there is no news, send rumours’.

The propaganda even extended to the United Kingdom, where both sides curried favour. The Confederacy went as far as secretly financing a British paper, the *Index*. When William Russell accurately reported on the Northern defeat at the Battle of Bull Run in the London *Times* uproar ensued. He was extensively libelled and received numerous death threats. Despite the relative objectivity of Russell’s reportage, *The Times* tended to be pro-Confederacy, while the *Daily News*, for example, leaned towards the North. Harriet Martineau, possibly the first woman in Britain to become a professional journalist, supplied the *Daily News* with regular articles. There was no shortage of American war correspondents: 500 worked on the Northern side alone. On both sides, however, the quality was poor. As one of the exceptions, Henry Villard, put it, ‘Men turned up in the army as correspondents more fit to drive cattle than to write for newspapers.’ For the most part, journalists were

incompetent, biased, poorly paid and often corrupt; some took bribes from officers who wanted to see their heroics hyped in print. Although Russell, frustrated with his loss of accreditation from both sides, left America at the height of the war, some local journalists carried on his investigative tradition. In the South, for example, Peter Alexander, a lawyer from Georgia, campaigned for better medical attention for the troops and castigated the drunkenness of some officers.

The war witnessed many innovations: the widespread use of breech-loading, repeating small arms and the machine gun, as well as the first clash between ironclad ships. The most notable media developments, meanwhile, centred on the telegraph and photography. It is possible that as many as 250,000 images

During the American Civil War, the sight of photographic wagons pioneered by the nearly blind Mathew Brady were considered an ill omen by the troops, because it indicated the likelihood of serious combat.