

TELEVISION AT WAR: THE LESSONS OF BALIBO

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The price of truth is high, and in the world of conflict reporting, it's rising. No recession here, and none in the business of war itself. Right now there are at least twenty conflicts big and small raging on the planet. Barely a month goes by somewhere in the world when a TV correspondent or camera operator, or sound person or fixer or translator, isn't killed or seriously wounded, simply doing their job: going to the edge of danger, of human darkness, attempting to capture those few critical images that tell the world about its unpalatable self. The world wants and needs those images; it's our job in television news to provide them. But it's also our job to make sure that people don't get killed in the attempt.

This savage reality is familiar to those of us who've worked in TV news, who've been through fire, who've been news managers and had to make difficult decisions about who to send in where, how far to push that envelope, and when to pull people out. It's also become frighteningly real, I suspect, to Australians who've seen Robert Connolly's new feature film *Balibo*, which captures unvarnished the horror of young men caught up in, trapped and ultimately doomed by their own efforts to capture what we might call 'darkness visible'. To capture - back then on film, now on video - the darkest side of life, and make it visible to millions.

In March 2007, the Brussels-based International News Safety Institute, INSI, of which I'm a member, released a report called 'Killing the Messenger'. This is no dry document filled with stats, but a veritable catalogue of horrors: both of the many victims of worldwide conflicts and crime, and of those media workers who died investigating their stories, attempting to get to the bottom of what happened, trying to report the truth.

There *is* one statistic worth quoting: in the past decade, more than 1,000 media personnel have died on the job - an average of about two every week. Yes, some died by accident - stepping on a mine, caught in the crossfire, mistaken for combatants - but a terrifying number, the majority, were assassinated, deliberately targeted and eliminated in cold blood. Some were high profile media figures, like Russia's Anna

Politkovskaya, who doggedly investigated abuses by her country's troops in Chechnya, but most were anonymous workers in the news game.

There's another, perhaps equally disturbing stat in the INSI report: in more than eight out of ten of these cases in the past decade, the killer or killers have never been investigated. Not arrested, questioned or prosecuted, but not even investigated. To do so, in many countries, as a reporter or as a police officer, is to invite your own death. In these dark places, the notion that news correspondents are to be treated as neutral observers is treated with utter contempt.

It comes as no surprise of course to hear that insurgents, gangsters, rebel armies have no respect for the rule of law. But it might come as a shock to learn that our own government would dismiss the murder of an Australian journalist as not worthy of investigation. That as it happens is the case of Roger East, who was eliminated by invading Indonesian forces in Dili, East Timor, on the 8th December 1975. An Australian citizen, a media worker, a freelancer. To the best of anyone's knowledge, no Australian police force has ever developed a file on his death.

The fates of Roger East and the Balibo Five are, of course, far more than statistics for me. Having begun my ABC News career in 1967, I found myself eight years later flying into East Timor to report a grim situation, the upheavals in what had been for 400 years a depressed Portuguese colony and was about to become a target for Indonesian invasion and occupation. I was 26 years old, I had never been near a war zone, I was accompanied by a cameraman and soundman, and within a week we would all be shelled and terrified and targeted for death.

For a few minutes let me give you some sensation of what happened to me in East Timor, if only to give context to the issues I'd like to raise and what I think needs to happen if we're to continue to cover wars openly and freely, and still keep journalists and other frontline media workers alive. ...

We left Dili bound for Balibo, on the border with Indonesia. A kind of fatalism infused the journey: we were woefully ill-prepared for war, or even a minor skirmish. We had neither medical kit nor emergency supplies nor protective

clothing nor radio communications of any kind. We were a band of minstrels wandering into a war. We had no emergency plan other than to stick with the Fretilin troops who themselves seemed unsure what was likely to happen. We were three television newsmen exposed to whatever the Indonesians wanted to throw at us, and they did...

In my book *Shooting Balibo*, I summed up my feelings as we headed towards Balibo, where we anticipated there'd be trouble. Of course we were looking for trouble, trouble was what we sought - we were in the trouble business. The trick was knowing how to capture trouble, serious trouble called war, on news film, and to get away with both the film and our lives intact:

"There was considerable confusion, five big trucks grinding noisily into a convoy, yelling that may or may not have been the issuing of orders in the Fretilin revolutionary army, and kids everywhere, not children but boy soldiers with sticks and old Mausers from the Second World War, cutting a ragged fringe around the Fretilin regulars.

We rumbled on the dry road towards our objective, happy to have something to film. The boys were cheerful, filled with good spirit, but the regulars were edgy, their safety catches off and ready for contact. Alex my cameraman had stopped singing, Roger the soundman was silent and I felt my insides tighten. The paralytic fatalism of war: we were about to cross an invisible but very real line, beyond which there was no easy escape. Balibo, I knew, was the outer limit of Fretilin's operative strength, and beyond waited a vastly more powerful enemy.

The growth to the sides was thick, shadowy, and branches scraped the roof. I saw nothing terribly lethal in the dark green vegetation, but nothing reassuring either. By crossing the Nunura River, we had passed a critical barrier; we had entered the border zone, a few kilometers from Indonesia and its massive army. After this there would be no quick exit, no speeding down a sealed road to safety, no evacuation by chopper, no ability to hide until trouble passed. Even our Fretilin protectors could not be entirely counted on.

In a few minutes we would be there, in Balibo."

We made it to Balibo and filmed whatever we could, but it was strangely empty and there was no fighting, just lots of outgoing mortar but oddly nothing coming in. To beginners like us, the illusion of nothing going on, of safety even. We began to relax, as the Balibo Five would relax a few days later.

And then, on 11th October 1975, as I began my piece to camera at the old fort at Balibo - a moment I recall with chilling clarity - a strange sound filled the morning air from somewhere behind my ears, and grew louder, terrifyingly loud over our heads, and the artillery shell slammed into the earth behind the village, and as we ran another shell came and exploded, we were under fire - an Indonesian chopper came overhead looking for us, we took cover, it went away and we roared out of Balibo as fast as we could, suddenly transported into a deathly scenario that none of us in the crew really expected to survive.

We all knew the dictum of the great Magnum agency photographer Robert Capa - 'If your pictures aren't good enough, you aren't close enough' - but we also heard those angels inside our heads telling us to pull back or die. As it happened, Capa stepped on a landmine one day in Vietnam and was blown away. He died clutching his camera. Our whole mission at this point was to stay alive.

Somewhere past the Nunura River we saw a vehicle approaching, trailing dust, and we took cover. It turned out to be the Channel Seven crew - Shackleton, Cunningham and Stewart. They wanted to get up to Balibo as fast as we wanted to get out. In one sense this was crazy, and Fretilin added their warnings to mine, to no avail. Yet it was also the basic reason we were all here in East Timor; they were television newsmen and filming the conflict was part of the job. We had just been shelled and were badly shaken; by contrast, they were fresh and ready for anything.

Driving on, we had a head-on collision with a truck; we were almost killed, and my crew was badly injured, the TV gear wrecked. We made it somehow back to Dili, through a night filled with random shooting and distant fires. By now the message was abundantly clear that our lives were in deep danger. There we met the Channel Nine crew, Mal Rennie and Brian Peters. Same story - they wanted to get up to Balibo as fast as possible.

I sent my crew back to Darwin, stayed on in Dili, and five days later came the awful news: Balibo had been overrun by the Indonesians, the Five were gone, presumed dead. Instead of filming armies clashing, I was writing about the probable deaths of five of my television colleagues.

It's a story no journalist ever wants to write.

We now know that the Australian government of the time, the Whitlam government, made some efforts through the Jakarta embassy to find out what happened, but Canberra itself was preoccupied with the Constitutional crisis and, I think it's fair to say, a mindset grew whereby successive governments took the attitude that little could be done, the Five were dead, the broader strategic interests of Australia were not served by making waves with Jakarta's generals, and time would hopefully erase any discomfort. The fact that by then, not five but six Australian-based newsmen were dead, had in fact been murdered, was attributed as often as not to professional misadventure. The subtext there was clear enough: if you want to cover wars and get yourself killed, well, don't blame us. You went there of your own free will, you've only got yourself to blame.

At this point we need to remind governments of a not terribly subtle distinction: the difference between being killed accidentally and being deliberately singled out for execution, i.e. murder. Now that we have the results of the 2007 New South Wales Coroner's report into the death of Channel Nine cameraman Brian Peters - results which to date no government in Canberra has challenged - there is almost no doubt that the six newsmen who died in East Timor were in fact executed in cold blood.

Which of course brings us back to where we started: the reluctance of governments, for whatever reason, to pursue the investigation and prosecution of those responsible for the killing of media workers. And, allied to that, the need to ensure that war correspondents are themselves aware of the dangers they face, and that media organisations also take their share of responsibility for training the journalists who are most likely to be heading off to war. In that bundle of needs, of course, lies enormous scope for passing the buck. INSI, the International News Safety Institute, was formed in 2002 to address these very real dilemmas.

Is the safety and battlefield survival of media workers the responsibility of individuals, employer organisations, the military or governments? How much can any government, or for that matter any army or employer, prevent reporters in the field from taking what might be unacceptable risks? What *is* an unacceptable risk in a war zone? On the other hand, how to *prevent* individual war correspondents, in particular freelancers, from taking excessive risks to get dramatic footage, the very reason they enter war zones? When journalists are killed overseas, what responsibility do their own national governments have to prosecute the killers? Just how much access should the military allow the media to the battlefield, and under what controls?

These are very complex issues, so complex that a typical reaction is to place them all in the too-hard basket. But the situation we now face is critical. Journalists and other news workers are being targeted and killed at an alarming rate. If we care about getting the truth, if truth is to remain the absolute cornerstone not only of journalism but also of democracy, we need to protect those who seek it out. We need to adopt new strategies to ensure TV crews and other media workers have access to the story, have adequate safety training and protective gear, and since some will inevitably be deliberately targeted for doing their job, and die in the pursuit of truth, we need to know that governments will not stand idly by but will investigate and prosecute forcefully, with all the means at their disposal.

Let me address that last issue first. There should now be no reason not to proceed with AFP investigations that aim to make arrests and prosecutions in the cases of both the Balibo Five and of Roger East. Yes, these events happened long ago: they are closer in time to the D-Day landings at Normandy than they are to today. Does that matter? If we still find the resources as a nation to chase and prosecute Nazi war criminals, why shouldn't we do likewise in regard to the murder of Australian citizens? These are no longer political matters between nations, they are - as they always have been - criminal matters demanding investigation by police and the application of the rule of law.

It's interesting to note that in 2007 a cross-party group of British Members of Parliament tabled a motion in the House of Commons, condemning attacks on journalists and seeking to end impunity for such killings. The motion urged the British

Government to help resolve a number of unlawful killings of media workers, including those in East Timor. It's strange, at the very least, to think a government on the other side of the world should have to consider doing the job our government seems reluctant to do. Kevin Rudd, whom I regard as a very decent Australian, is fond of beginning his sentences with the phrase, 'Let me make this clear.' It really is time for the Rudd government to make its position on this matter clear.

Another aspect of TV reporting of warfare is the often vexed relationship between the media and the military. Interestingly, digital technologies and the growth of mass communications have made strange bedfellows of these two parties - leading to the growth of the military-media complex, as powerful an entity today as the military-industrial complex was in the age of Eisenhower. New communications technologies have given warfare a public dimension, and the media a vital role in it. To paraphrase the business mantra that 'all companies are now media companies', all wars are now media wars.

One example. On 9 April 2003, two former high-ranking American soldiers, Bing West and Ray Smith, were among the first to enter Baghdad with the Marines - accompanied by CNN's Hummer vehicle, relaying the advance to the world. What they witnessed was not only modern technological warfare in action, but the emerging alliance of the 21st century: the television news media, far from simply reporting events as they happened, had become fully integrated into the Pentagon's strategic and tactical ops, a template for war coverage to come.

As West and Smith note in their book, *The March Up: Taking Baghdad with the 1st Marine Division*, 'CNN was filming as 1/7 went down the street... Lieutenant General Conway, who was watching the live feed in his combat operations center, was so impressed by the wide-open friendliness and lack of opposition that on the spot he approved the division's request to let the battalions roll until they hit a defense... Similar video was coming back via Fox News with Rick Leventhal, who was with 3rd LAR Battalion to the northeast. Conway got together with other generals for a video teleconference. They would forget the plan for methodical advance, they agreed. "That's OBE - overtaken by events," Conway said.' In the next war, the authors conclude, every battalion will probably be required to carry a video camera or a reporter with a live feed.

So here we have the rather unnerving spectacle of American generals running a war through the lens of CNN and Fox News' live cameras. As they say, intelligence is where you find it.

This image contrasts rather sharply with the relationship between Australian television media and the Australian military, which has been notoriously keen since the days of Vietnam to keep the media away from its battlefield forces. Tim Bowden, an ABC veteran who covered the war, noted Australian forces were far from happy to see him. 'Their instinctive response to visiting news men,' he noted, 'was to accord them the status of the Viet Cong.'

Thus by default - and despite Australia's relatively strong commitment of troops - the television coverage in Australia of the Vietnam War proceeded largely without the appearance of Australian 'Diggers'. This scenario was repeated in the 1991 Gulf War, and the Iraq War a generation later. Australia's coverage of the Iraq war was intense and comprehensive. The only element 'missing in action' was Australia's own contribution to the war: significant coverage of the 2000 members of the ADF sent to fight terrorism and of those who allegedly supported it.

In recent weeks we've seen a welcome shift in focus.

Currently both the ABC's Sally Sara and News Corp's Ian McPhedran are embedded with Australian forces in Afghanistan, and sending back strong coverage, none of which seems in any way to have compromised Australia's efforts. Which raises the question, why has it taken six years to get to this point? And what exactly have Australian forces been doing, unreported, in all that time? A shroud of secrecy is unhealthy for both the ADF's own public image and, not to put too fine a point on it, for Australian democracy. Since we are funding the military to the tune of billions of dollars annually, coverage of its significant operations might be a reasonable shareholder expectation.

At the height of Boer War, in 1899, 'Banjo' Paterson went to cover the fighting for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Sydney Mail*, and the Melbourne *Argus*, thus becoming Australia's first 'embedded' correspondent. The terms of reporting the South African conflict from within British ranks were made abundantly clear by then-Captain Douglas

Haig (subsequently Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in World War I): “Everything you write has to be censored by me. If you try to send anything away that isn’t censored, then you’ll be sent away. You’ve got to play the game. [...] Don’t try to be too clever, and you’ll get along all right.”

Paterson survived to write passable poetry. He wasn’t even the first of his breed. William Russell launched the genre with his rousing coverage of the Crimean War for *The Times* of London, reporting the charge of the Light Brigade “...with a halo of 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...” Russell described himself modestly as “the miserable parent of a luckless tribe”, but his writing changed not only the notion of reportage but also of war: as his colleague Edwin Godkin of the *Daily News* noted, having a special correspondent in the Crimea “...brought home to the War Office the fact that the public had something to say about the conduct of wars and that they are not the concern exclusively of sovereigns and statesmen.”

Many in Canberra and Washington and London still prefer the mindset of Douglas Haig, that the media needs to be put in its box so the military can get on with its job. That view of war and its coverage is as outdated and dangerous as the Charge of the Light Brigade. Much of that is a legacy of Vietnam, which produced deep mistrust and scepticism between the military and media that influenced coverage of major conflicts to come. In the absence of victory, TV news especially became the scapegoat for strategic and policy failures elsewhere. The syndrome lingers to this day.

Finally, a few words about TV war reporting and the networks themselves. All these years later, we still refer to Vietnam as the gold standard for television war reporting. What made Vietnam so different in terms of war coverage? There was TV, of course, and the freedom to go anywhere on the battlefield, but also the ability of TV correspondents - largely out of touch with head office, certainly by today’s standards - to pursue the news as they saw fit, unfettered by instructions from afar. If the military imposed almost no restrictions on their movement or subject matter, why should a news executive 8,000 kilometres away?

This 'renegade' factor - the inverse of today's regulated, homogenised pool coverage - gave audiences some of the most memorable, disturbing and critically acclaimed stories of war. It troubles many in the business today that stories of that nature and caliber are increasingly unlikely to be seen, as control moves from the battlefield correspondent to the producers and program editors 'back at base', often on the other side of the globe. Advances in communications technology mean field reporters can no longer disappear 'upcountry' as they did in Vietnam - chasing leads, using their intuition, producing unique eye-witness coverage that offer viewers diversity, greater textures and a challenging range of viewpoints. Real-time connections and live crosses now mean correspondents are always on call, forever responding to the demands of program producers, constantly 'in the loop' of news agency cover and military handouts, informed of what other networks are up to, and expected to match their output. The ABC's Eric Campbell in Afghanistan found himself in remote places having, as he said, to "fudge it by writing something to accompany pictures you haven't seen of events you didn't witness". It's an increasingly common complaint from reporters in the battlefield.

What we are seeing less and less of is authentic television journalism, the art of finding and relating a self-contained story. Instead, we get information - most of which could just as easily be relayed from the studio-based news reader directly to the viewer. This relentless demand for content - not stories, but content, volume, mass, anything to fill the empty minutes and hours - will possibly kill off any decent coverage of war. War is like making movies: endless hours of nothing interspersed with minutes and even seconds of intense everything: blood, guts, explosions, bullets, mayhem and chaos. To fill the on-air hours, to justify the satellites, we increasingly get live crosses to what in the trade are known as 'dish monkeys', reporters on rooftops commenting on a war they can't see, speculating on events they're read about in agency reports on their laptops.

In Balibo, in 1975, of course, there was never any question of updates. There were no satellites, no phones even, it was hard enough just to get the story, the germ of what was happening around us, some clue to the nature of what might transpire.

Which brings me finally to the ultimate issue: staying alive. When to stay and when to go is the question that never leaves a war correspondent's head: if there's one thing more

important than getting the story, it's having a good exit strategy. Through the work of INSI and here in Australia, the News Safety Group representing most of the major media organisations, a rigid code of training and standards is now in place.

Duty of care is a way of life, far removed from those days in Timor when, as totally inexperienced and ill-equipped young journalists, Maniaty, Shackleton and Rennie led their TV news crews into a war zone. A couple of weeks after reporting the disappearance of the Balibo Five, facing death threats of my own, I rang the ABC in Sydney and told them I was getting out. I couldn't take the pressure any more. 'Tony,' I was told, 'a good correspondent stays on the job.' These days, thankfully, such a line would be viewed more as a potential lawsuit than a blunt admonition to a young, keen but very stressed reporter.

The trouble now exists elsewhere, closer to my current role. Australia's universities and colleges are filled with hundreds of young aspirants to journalism, many of them eager to get into the hot zone. Operating as freelancers outside the system, many will leave institutions like UTS, walk around the corner, buy a laptop and a handycam and cheap air ticket to Kabul, and two days later find themselves in precisely the same lethal situation as we found ourselves in Balibo, 34 years ago. We can't stop them going, and indeed we shouldn't: the world needs TV war correspondents, the world needs these images of war, to make the darkness visible. But we also bear a moral responsibility as lecturers to give these young players every chance of survival, and to that end I think it's not unreasonable to propose that we run compulsory news safety training modules, funded by the Australian government, in all tertiary media courses.

To my knowledge, that would be a world first, and would signal in a very positive way that the government of this country was at last serious about the difficult, dangerous and very necessary business of conflict reporting. As the INSI report notes, conflicts are inherently dangerous. But good training and education and the provision of protective gear can make the job infinitely safer. At the moment, journalists frequently are the only professionals on a field of conflict to be completely unprepared for what they encounter. That simply has to change.

A world without war is a wonderful dream, but really, an impossible dream. A world without well-informed, close-up *coverage* of war is quite possible, and dangerously so - a world descending into likely hell, unaware of the descent or its causes. If we don't take action to slow the number of news workers being killed, it is a strong reality. We must accept the fact that there'll always be armed conflict, and that journalists will be required to report conflict, to place themselves in danger. In extreme cases, some will die on the battlefield. But we should never accept that price as part of doing the job.

Governments, including ours, should heed that message - TV journalists are not soldiers, not paid to take up cameras and possibly die, nor are they wild cowboys filming war for fun. They are an integral part of the truth machine, of our democracy, and they need our support.

Thank you.

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