

Radio News Coverage of D-Day

The following is an excerpt from News on the Air by Paul White of CBS News. Thanks to John Ross for providing this excerpt.

In anticipation of "D-Day," four-network conferences among the various network news directors . . . together with Army public relations officers . . . were weekly and semiweekly occurrences. Our Army-installed and operated circuit to London passed through all four network offices. In that way everyone knew the business of everyone else. It was customary for one of us in New York to take down and pass along important messages to our rivals; the same thing happened in London. In the height of the excitement "pool" broadcasts--those available to all networks--were the rule rather than the exception. The teamwork and sportsmanship were, in a word, magnificent.

All of us knew, of course, that the invasion of continental Europe from the west was coming. The only question was when. The preparations were of all types--covering personnel, technical installations, advice to everyone who might possibly be concerned. Late in February I sent out a memorandum which said in part:

Military experts have warned us that a frontal attack on Hitler's fortress may cost a record number of casualties. But bad handling of the news may cost plenty of casualties, too, either because the workers at home may believe prematurely that the war has been won and take it easy, or because they worry unnecessarily and are not able to do their jobs. Accordingly, as far as Columbia is concerned, let's stick to these few general instructions:

1. No matter what the general tenor of the news, keep an informative, unexcited demeanor at the microphone.
2. Give sources. Be sure to label every report that is not officially released. Recently there have been at least two

instances where this practice has paid off. One was at the Anzio Beachhead, where German claims of victory proved to be unfounded. The other was at Truk, where the Japanese tried to make the world believe that American forces had landed. As a rule of thumb, let us in every case "lead" with the latest Allied communique or report from one of our own correspondents and then, if there are contrary reports either from enemy or friendly sources, label them and subordinate them. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that accuracy should never be risked for the sake of a prospective "beat".

Should the flash come between 2:00 AM and 5:00 AM on weekdays, call Master Control. Order up the network. A recorded program of music is set to run for 55 minutes; cut in and out of it as you wish . .

Call all key personnel. Miss Gauss [my secretary] will check on arrangements for delivery of coffee to news staff.

Advise the AT&T and RCA to set up monitors for us on their London circuits . . In addition to the London circuits, we will have an Army Signal Corps circuit from London (handled through the AT&T) and known as "FAX". This circuit will not begin to function for us until the invasion has actually begun, but thereafter we will maintain a constant 24-hour monitor on it in Studio 9. Most of our coordination messages will be handled over FAX. But if the West-to-East FAX circuit is tied up when we want to get a service message to London, we can send such a message through the War Department Signal Center in Washington . . 50 words . . address "ARL 470 FOR RELAY TO MOI."

In addition, keep a constant monitor on BBC through an extension from the short-wave listening post. The listening post is to be fully manned. Attached you will find a list of foreign expert-consultants in New York, to be called at any hour.

Less than three weeks before "D-Day," there appeared on the wall of Studio 9 a pine cupboard that looked like a medicine cabinet. It was locked, and there were 11 numbered keys given to 11 newsmen, at least one of whom was scheduled to be in the newsroom at any hour, day or night. Inside the cabinet was a microphone attached to a good deal of wire that would stretch to a view of any of the 13 automatic printer machines in the newsroom, or any of 5 other machines linking us with cable companies in the adjacent network traffic office. There was also a switch. At any time that switch was depressed a fraction of an inch, the entire network would be shunted aside and that microphone would become the main-line express. All intermediate controls would be abolished and whatever was said into that "flash mike" would have the complete right of way.

Representatives of advertising agencies were called in and told our plans, were asked to have special "D-Day" scripts available in case their programs weren't cancelled out.

On June 1, this communication went out to all affiliates:

Confidential and unpublishable. Beginning tonight, June 2nd, and nightly until further notice, we will operate our full network until 3:05 AM EWT. The decision to start this overtime operation is not based upon any military information, but it will provide additional protection to you in case extraordinary news does develop.

Monday, June 5, was quiet, and no news of any possible invasion had leaked. Actually, I went to bed that night with a pretty fair idea I would have a good night's sleep. The War Department had told me that Ed Murrow had been selected as the radio voice to read General Eisenhower's proclamation, and that night at 6:45 PM EST (which was 12:45 AM on D-Day itself in London) I talked with Murrow on a two-way "cue channel". These conversations are not usually heard by the general public, although at the time all

conversations were listened to carefully by censors in New York and London.

Mindful of this censorship and still trying to get a hint from Murrow, I said:

"Well I suppose I may be talking with you later tonight."

"No," he said, "I'm pretty tired and planning to get to bed early."

That was enough for me. I told the staff it was improbable we would get any action that night, and I went to my hotel room two blocks away from the studios prepared to do some sleeping while the sleeping was good.

But the sleep for a good many hours come ended violently at 12:37 AM. The AP machine carried a bulletin that began:

New York, June 6--(AP)--The German transocean news service has announced that the Allied invasion has begun.

Jesse Zousmer, the editor on duty, dialed extension 694--my hotel room was on the inter-office communication system in order to by-pass switchboards and thus save precious seconds--and told me the news. I said I'd be over within 10 minutes. Then still tieless but otherwise dressed, I called him back.

"Any confirmation?" I asked.

"Nope" said Zousmer, "but INS is now carrying the German report, too."

"Oke," I said, "put it on the air."

Ned Calmer, who had finished his own day's work at the microphone, but had stayed on to write a script in French for the Office of War Information, sauntered into the newsroom just as Zousmer hung up. Calmer said later he had never

seen anybody as frightened as Zousmer. There was no announcer on hand at the time, and Zousmer was about to make his debut on the air with one of the most important stories of all time.

"What in the hell is the matter with you?" Calmer asked.
"You look like you're going to sneeze or die."

Zousmer held out a trembling hand.

"Here," he said, "put this on the air." And these were Calmer's first words into the microphone:

We are interrupting this program to bring you a special bulletin. A bulletin has just been received from the London office of the Associated Press which quotes the German Transocean News Agency as asserting that the invasion of Western Europe has begun.

This report--and we stress it is of enemy origin with absolutely no confirmation from Allied source--says that American landings were made this morning on the shores of northwestern France.

There is as yet no reason to believe that this report is anything more than a German propaganda move or a fishing expedition for information. You will recall that Prime Minister Churchill warned us not long ago that the actual invasion would be preceded by feints and diversions. Nevertheless, until confirmation or denial of this German report is forthcoming, the CBS World News staff is standing by and will bring you developments as reported.

Thereafter both Calmer and a hastily summoned announcer, Ed Darlington, kept putting on news at intervals, carefully qualifying every German report. I arrived in the office, called Washington on the 24-hour-a-day private telephone that linked the New York and Washington offices, and tried to see if there were any sign of confirmation. No word except

that "more lights than usual are on at the War Department" and that some public relations officers could not be reached at their homes. Presumably, they too had been routed out of bed.

Zousmer was still on the telephone, as were others of the overnight staff, calling in the personnel necessary for the night. Soon after 1:15, fearful that some of the stations might be planning to leave the air, I had Darlington tell the public (and the stations themselves) that we were planning to stay on the air all night, regardless of whether the news was confirmed. Then I tried all available circuits to London. I pressed button after button, hauled over the small microphone on my desk, and kept up a monotonous chant, "Hello London . . Hello London . . CBS New York calling London . . Hello London." No answer.

Then the short-wave listening station picked up a clue. The BBC in London, speaking to Europe, was overheard to tell citizen who lived along the Atlantic coast within 18 miles of the beach to stay off roads and railways and bridges . . It was still more bewildering when, from somewhere, came a report that the invasion was in the vicinity of Cherbourg, and a few minutes after that the BBC started warning Dutch listeners in their native language. Some or all of this was certainly a smoke screen. We simply couldn't be attacking all the way from Cherbourg to Holland.

At 3:07 the loud bell rang on the War Department special phone. This, I thought, was it. I picked up the phone only to hear an unidentified voice saying the War Department was making a routine check of the circuit.

"Come in, one at a time, all network," said the voice. "Give the name of your company and your own name." Four frantic persons in four frantic newsrooms answered the roll-call. "Thanks," said the voice. "When are you going to have anything definite?" I asked. "Get back to you later. Good-bye," said the War Department.

The coffee and sandwiches had arrived. One of the first persons called that night was a caterer. Trout talked on and on. The minutes were lumbering tortoises hanging with all their weight to the red second hand of the clock. Then, at 3:27 the War Department bell clanged a single, long imperative. Once more, a roll call. Then said the voice:

"Stand by for an important message over the FAX Army Signal Corps Channel at 3:32:zero. Repeating, stand by for an important message over the FAX Army Signal Corps Channel at 3:32:zero. Come in and confirm please."

We all confirmed. I wigwagged to Trout to give his microphone to Major Eliot, and let the later talk for a few minutes. Then I explained to Trout that he was to switch to London at 3:32:00, but not to say anything about the War Department's call before switching. Enemy ears might be listening and if, in fact, there were no invasion, I didn't want anyone tipped off ahead of the announcement.

There was time to tell Jimmy Sirmons of network operations what was going to happen, and he in turn told the control room. Someone popped his head in the door and said the phone company had reported all 143 stations still on the air and waiting. I nodded and watched that red second hand.

I vaguely heard Trout, who had taken back the microphone from Major Eliot. Just ahead of 3:32 there came the words, "And now, for a special announcement, we take you to London."

One second. Two. Three. Four. At five seconds after the minute the senior public relations officer of SHEAF, Col. R. Ernest Dupuy, began to speak. In 26 words he tells the story:

"Under the Command of General Eisenhower, Allied Naval Forces, supported by strong Air Forces, began landing Allied Armies this morning on the northern coast of France."

D-Day Coverage, Additional Notes

The first word of the Allied invasion came from Berlin radio about 12:30 a.m. Eastern War Time. CBS quoted from Berlin Radio's 1 a.m. EWT broadcast to North America, monitored by Columbia's shortwave listening station:

Here is a special bulletin. Early this morning, the long-awaited British and American invasion began when paratroops landed in the area of the Seine estuary. The harbor of LeHavre is being fiercely bombarded at the present moment. Naval forces of the German navy are off the coast, fighting with enemy landing vessels. We have just brought you a special bulletin.

For about three hours, the American media were unsure whether the German reports were true. The CBS announcer cautioned "Please remember two things. Prime Minister Churchill has warned us that there will be many allied feints - deceptive moves - and we've also been told to expect an invasion story similar to that we're now relaying to you from the Germans. In this way, the Nazis might hope to make the patriots in the conquered countries reveal themselves, and thus reduce the effectiveness of these groups when our landing does actually start."

The announcer then quoted other German reports and said, "Please remember that the War Department in Washington has no information on these German reports. Although there is no reason to believe the enemy reports, CBS will remain in operation overtime tonight until the facts are known. We repeat: this network will operate beyond regular time until the German report has been verified or has been proved erroneous."

CBS broadcast band music in the early morning hours and Robert Trout, who anchored the overnight coverage, read

from the various wire services, which were quoting German radio reports. At about 3:30 a.m., CBS switched to London to broadcast the communique from the Allies which confirmed that the invasion was underway. Trout then read the same announcement on the Office of War Information wire:

OWI-2

FLASH

SUPREME HEADQUARTERS ANNOUNCES ALLIES BEGIN
OPERATIONS
ON NORTHERN COAST OF FRANCE.

BULLETIN

THE COMMUNIQUE SAID "UNDER THE COMMAND OF
GENERAL EISENHOWER
ALLIED NAVAL FORCES, SUPPORTED BY STRONG AIR
FORCES, BEGAN
LANDING ALLIED ARMIES ON THE NORTHERN COAST OF
FRANCE."

3:34AM WASHINGTON

Trout was assisted by CBS's military analyst, Maj. George Fielding Eliot. There were numerous broadcasts from Europe by Edward R. Murrow and pool reporters for the U. S. networks. Trout was relieved later in the morning by Douglas Edwards.