

David Beresford On bully-beef tin scuds & what is "really" happening

The sweetest moments in the life of a journalist must be those occasions when a scandal of major public interest drops into one's hands out of the blue. Perhaps the sweetest in my years covering the South African story came in 1991 when I settled down for a beer with a young man clutching a handful of documents at a bar in London's Soho.

We had arranged by telephone to meet and had agreed that he would use a pseudonym and that I would make no attempt to discover his real identity. The documents he had were all I needed. Their contents are now well known – they were the top secret police files detailing covert payments to Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi in what was to become known as the Inkathagate scandal.

Recently I spoke to him again and this time he revealed his identity: Brian Morrow, a former warrant officer in the Durban security branch. The reason why he had decided to come out into the open was that he had been unable to get indemnity against prosecution for the "criminal" act he had committed by feeding me the documents – a breach of the Official Secrets Act. He was incensed at this and wanted to express his indignation in print.

His indignation was understandable. He had, after all, rendered a signal service to South Africa, exposing a major abuse of power by the government and the police as well as the political corruption at the heart of the power struggle in KwaZulu and Natal. And yet his only reward for this selfless act (he sought no payment, or other reward from me) was to have a criminal prosecution hanging over his head, which has effectively left him stranded in exile in England.

Whistle-blowers, unfortunately, rarely get their just rewards. Eschel Rhoodie (admittedly not as selfless an informant as Brian Morrow) paid for the Muldergate scandal in exile. The "Deep Throat" who was responsible for Watergate has never been identified, probably maintaining his, or her anonymity in recognition that there was a price to be paid for exposure – quite possibly career-threatening, if not life-threatening.

Talking to Morrow about Inkathagate brought home to me the ignorance in which journalists labour, without the rare appearance of the whistle-blower. He recounted how he had filed the documents when some closely-guarded filing cabinets were briefly moved to a less secure room during building operations at Durban police headquarters, CR Swart Square. Under suspicion of "disloyalty", he had to grab the little that he could in the time available. "There was far more there. There were other documents with Buthelezi's name on and documents with (FW) De Klerk's name on," he told me. "I didn't have time to read them."

It leaves one wondering what other "Inkatha-gates" lay in those cab-

inets and, for that matter, in other filing cabinets in other regional police headquarters; in those of Military Intelligence, the National Intelligence Service and the State Security Council. Grounds for speculation are endless. What was the Third Force? Does conspiracy lie behind Inkatha's electoral victory in Natal? How did Samora Machel really die...?

Wisdom, so it is said, lies in the discovery of one's ignorance. But the acquisition of such wisdom does little to alleviate my growing disquiet at the realisation of how limited is the ability of journalists to inform the public as to what is "really" happening.

My current angst on this issue was born, I suspect, of my experiences covering the Gulf War. I clearly remember the sad farewells my family bade me, assuming there was a good chance that I was not going to return from this assignment. Chemical warfare was certain; the only question was whether the Iraqis would use their biological weapons.

My sense of impending doom was reinforced by a SAS captain who regularly went snooping about the trench positions and was able to give me a detailed breakdown of the chemical weapons the Iraqis had stockpiled and how precisely they planned using them.

There were moments of doubt, as when a Scud missile crashed behind our hotel and I went to inspect the wreckage. I was handling a piece of the rocket casing, marvelling at the ingenuity of the Iraqis at having constructed such an awesome weapon out of bully-beef tins, when a Saudi secret policeman threatened to charge me with spying.

But such moments were swept aside by the knowledgeable, like CNN, pumping out to the world not only confirmation of the chemical weapons threat, but details of the immense and sophisticated fortifications prepared for the Allied land invasion; the massive underground labyrinths constructed to protect the heavy armour against aerial bombardment; the giant artificial sanddunes making miniature Maginot lines



across the desert; the huge canals of oil that would be set ablaze when the tactical moment came.

As it turned out I went to war with the Egyptians. We swept right across Kuwait, through the battlefields. Maginot lines there were none. There was one oil moat which I jumped across. The only underground fortification I saw was a single line of trenches, the sophistication of which would have had a World War I combatant scoffing. An American communications expert who examined their equipment shook his head, saying he did not think the Iraqi radios were capable of transmitting to neighbouring trenches, much less headquarters. It is now a matter of record that there were no chemical weapons in the Kuwait theatre of operations.

I finally "liberated" Kuwait City, after being captured twice. First by the US 7th Army Corps and then by the US Marines who had little else to do to fill their time.

When I arrived in the city in the company of hordes of other journalists, we were mobbed as "liberators". The Allied armies were waiting to make sure all the television cameras were there before they actually marched in.

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I left the Gulf suspecting that the real story of what I had experienced was not war as such, but a massive "psychops" operation – an exercise in the deployment of what Churchill referred to as a "bodyguard of lies" – on a scale and with a sophistication which the world has quite possibly never previously experienced. Certainly it had me questioning whether journalism – our attempts to "tell it like it is" – does not in fact render society a disservice, by misleading the public into the belief that "the truth" is actually discoverable, particularly when governments are determined to conceal and mislead.

The thought brings to mind a column in the Spanish newspaper, *El Pais*, by Gabriel Garcia Marquez in the aftermath of the Falklands war. The article purported to tell the inside story of that miserable little conflict – including hair-raising accounts of the savagery of the Gurkha troops who, according to Marquez, spent their time chopping people's heads off, as well as the perversions of British officers whose predilection for sodomy had, again according to Marquez, landed large numbers of young Argentinean POWs in hospital nursing their rear ends.

My initial indignation at this obvious travesty of the truth began to fade as it dawned on me that Marquez had come closer than any journalist to communicating the "truth" of the

Falklands. With the magical power of caricature and parody he had encapsulated the essential savagery and obscenity of war. It was, to use the phrase with which Marquez will forever be associated, "magical realism".

Is caricature and parody then a better way to discover and communicate "truth"? Does the likes of the "Dear Walter" column, run by the *Weekly Mail & Guardian*, come closer to capturing the quintessentials of South African public life than the acres of print to be found in the "news" columns?

Clearly the press cannot abandon its attempts to discover what is happening in the corridors of power. But if it is to do its job it needs help. Which is why I watch with intense interest the momentous battle being waged by civil rights activists to preserve the idealistic commitment to "freedom of information" entrenched as a right in South Africa's new constitution. Because, without help, journalism is in danger of becoming nothing more than the handmaiden of ignorance. To get at the truth we would do better to play the part of jester.

Twice the winner of the International Journalist of the Year Award, and author of the acclaimed book about the Irish hunger strikes, *Ten Men Dead*, David Beresford is currently the Johannesburg correspondent for the *Guardian*.

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