

Remembering “Stormin’ Norman”

By Mel Lavine

Special to the Times

The death of Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf last week at 78 put me in mind of the first day of the Persian Gulf War. I spent it (Sunday, February 24, 1991) in a videotape room at the CBS News Broadcast Center in New York.

The general’s briefing for the press in Riyadh in Saudi Arabia was already being recorded when I took my seat. We were ten minutes and a few seconds before airtime; the large hand of the clock slicing through time as the general was addressing routine matters.

My assignment was to find a world-shaking sound byte for the top of the show. Joe and Bob, my videotape editors, and I were saying, “My God, isn’t he ever going to say something worth racking up?” Every second seemed like an eternity.

The big second hand on the wall sliced off the seconds: 8:52:30...8:53...8:54. The thought hit us that we were not going to make it for airtime at nine a.m.

We’d recognize a headline when we heard it: bells wouldn’t go off but our guts would. Then:

SCHWARTZKOPF: Ten hours into the ground offensive more than 5,500 prisoners have been captured...many hundreds north ...surrendering...Friendly casualties have been extremely light...remarkably light.”

We made the top of “Sunday Morning” with seconds to spare, a pure and joyful moment. However, the euphoria was short-lived. No sooner had I returned to the chaos of the newsroom than I was dispatched to videotape again. The mission this time was to put together a piece that touched on major points of the Schwartzkopf briefing for Charles Kuralt to talk about.

By now turmoil had hit videotape. The usually unflappable female supervisor said, “You’ve got six minutes before air! Can you do it? Do you know what you want?” “Want?” I was thinking. I wanted a drink of water and a moment to visit the men’s room.

There being no time to edit, we had to “hot switch” – taking elements of what Schwartzkopf said and relaying them, on time cues, to a second machine that would be playing on the air. It was a mine field; one false move and we were all casualties. An interminable minute was spent searching for “Stormin’ Norman’s” wondrous remark that the allies were “to go around, over, through, on top, underneath, and any other way it takes to beat them.” We wouldn’t score without that byte. We were thinking maybe we could live without it. But we really couldn’t, and show our face upstairs in the newsroom.

All at once up comes the byte – kaboom! – and the supervisor was on the line to the director in the control room with the outcue, a piercing cry: “the mucking outcue is ‘and any other way it takes to beat them.’ That’s the mucking outcue, at a minute and four seconds!” A split second later “Stormin’ Norman” was on the air declaring, “and any other way it takes to beat them.”

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