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JOINING A "BAND OF BROTHERS"

It was certainly not what I had imagined.

In my mind's eye, as I arrived at the global headquarters of CBS News in late June 1957, a raw recruit only recently hired by the legendary Edward R. Murrow, I envisaged a news room bustling with energy, of immense influence and power, with dozens of desks arranged in clusters (one for national news, another for Europe, a third for Asia, and a fourth for local news), each desk cluttered with at least one telephone, a typewriter, a pile of newspapers, and an abandoned cup of coffee, reporters writing, editors yelling, producers in pained anguish for copy, walls covered with maps and bulletin boards, banks of tickertape machines tagged "Associated Press," "United Press International," "Reuters," and "Agence France-Presse," all standing side-by-side, like soldiers on parade, belching forth news and information about this, that, and everything else—in other words, the normal noisy chaos of a news room, only more so. This was, after all, CBS News, the home base for the "Murrow Boys," a special "band of brothers" formed during the bitter days of World War II to provide solid, reliable

news and information for network viewers and listeners. And, on this night, on the seventeenth floor of 485 Madison Avenue, as the hallway clock inched toward midnight, I was joining this "band." I was thrilled.

On the train ride from my parents' home in Queens, where I had spent the weekend, to midtown Manhattan, where I was now to start a new chapter in my life, I thought about the steps that had brought me from my pursuit of a PhD in Russian history at Harvard to the midnight-to-8 a.m. shift at WCBS Radio. Of crucial importance, without doubt, was my brother's advice years before to major while in college not in English literature, which was tempting, or American history, which was equally tempting, but in a subject of burning contemporary relevance—one that offered me a realistic shot at an interesting job after graduation, no small consideration for someone raised during the Great Depression. Bernie thought, given my interest in journalism and the Cold War, that the subject might be "Russia," meaning the language, the history, the literature, the politics, the culture of the country that at the time posed a set of crucial strategic challenges to the United States. Not for the first time, Bernie was right, and, while a senior at City College and a graduate student at Harvard (and while serving in Army Intelligence during the Korean War), I plunged into the grim, but rich and fascinating history of America's principal adversary during the Cold War. When the State Department urgently needed a Russian-speaking attaché at the American Embassy in Moscow in January 1956, I was one of a small number of candidates who had a top-secret clearance, was unmarried, and could leave in a week. After a few interviews at the State Department, I was one of two selected for the job. For the next thirteen months, I worked as a translator, interpreter, and a kind of press attaché at the embassy, met many Russians, including a number of Soviet leaders, among them Communist Party chief Nikita Khrushchev, who nicknamed me Peter the Great (I was, he laughed, almost as tall as the

noted tsar), and traveled, most of the time by myself, from one end of this vast country to another. It was the equivalent of a crash course in modern Russian history.

On my way back to Cambridge, where I picked up my pursuit of a PhD, even though, in a corner of my mind, I always considered journalism to be a more promising prospect, I detoured to Southeast Asia where Bernie was covering the rise of anti-imperialist nationalism in Indochina and Indonesia for the *New York Times*. My visit to Vietnam ignited an interest in that remarkable country that has never left me. Back at Harvard, I resumed my studies, absorbed at the time with the subject of my dissertation, a biography of Sergei Semyonovich Uvarov, the nineteenth-century classicist who authored the populist Russian slogan, *Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality*. Though busy with research and teaching, I still found time to write essays and book reviews about Russia for the *Saturday Review of Literature* and occasional articles for the *New York Times Magazine*. One of those had obviously caught Murrow's eye. It focused on Soviet youth. The famous broadcaster, much to my surprise, called and invited me to his New York office, where we engaged in an impromptu seminar on Russia. He, like an eager graduate student, asked many questions, and I, like an equally eager professor, tried to answer them. Toward the end of a three-hour conversation, which was supposed to run a half hour ("he's a very busy man," his secretary reminded me, unnecessarily), Murrow offered me a job at CBS News. I thought for a moment that I had arrived in heaven.

The reason was that for a few years I had played with the far-out possibility of becoming the Harry Schwartz of CBS News. Schwartz was a scholar, a specialist on Soviet affairs, who worked for the *New York Times*, and he deepened the paper's daily coverage of America's major adversary by adding his analysis to the paper's hard news coverage from Moscow. Let us say, the Kremlin announced a shakeup of leadership. The story would obviously be reported from Moscow, and

Schwartz would often add a "what does this mean?" analysis. Might CBS be interested in a similar analysis from me? Though I never raised this idea with Murrow, the possibility of a Schwartz-like assignment at CBS News suddenly seemed to shimmer on the not-too-distant horizon.

Bye, bye scholarship; hello journalism!

So, in June 1957, a new adventure beckoned—but, only to acknowledge the obvious, it entered not with clashing cymbals but on cat's paws, so quietly and unobtrusively that you would have been excused for thinking CBS News was, at least on the night of my arrival, a monastic retreat rather than an elite, trend-setting news operation.

Maybe I should have noticed the distinction the moment I walked out of the elevator onto the seventeenth floor at the beginning of my early morning shift. No one was there, no one leaving, no one arriving, except me. The arrow to the main newsroom pointed to a long, dimly-lit corridor—office doors shut and dark on my left, an editing room and Studio 9, also dark, on my right. As I walked into the newsroom, a chubby man with graying hair hurriedly pushed past me, grunting what sounded like a "hello" but not stopping, nor looking back. He was gone before I could respond. The newsroom, at first glance, was no larger than my mother's living room. It had half a dozen desks, as I recall, one of them placed in front of a window covered with a Venetian blind hanging at an odd angle. The tickertape machines were all standing, one next to another, like robots, on the right side of the room, but they were uncharacteristically silent, as though nothing was happening anywhere in the world. Which could not be true, I told myself. Separating the newsroom from Studio 9 was a large rectangular window, which looked as if it had not been washed in months. If the original idea was to flash signals of late breaking news from the newsroom to the studio, I doubt that anyone

in the studio could have seen them. An unnatural, ghostly silence seemed to have settled over the newsroom. Strange, I thought, that no one was manning the phones, no one barking orders, no tickertapes ticking, no bustle—no nothing.

What I'd confronted was the midnight stillness of an empty newsroom. In the dead of night, there is probably nothing more still than an empty newsroom.

I was alone, and I was a bit puzzled.

I knew I was to write a string of early morning news broadcasts—the 5 a.m., the 5:30, the 6, and the 6:30 a.m. newscasts for WCBS Radio, the local outlet of the CBS radio network, but I was never told how to write a radio newscast. I guess CBS management had simply assumed that anyone who was a PhD candidate from Harvard could write a radio newscast, a local one at that. John Day, the news director of CBS News, an ambitious, grouchy ex-newspaperman from Louisville, Kentucky, had clearly made that assumption when, at Murrow's suggestion, he hired me and gave me my marching orders—"your job will be to write the morning newscasts" for WCBS, he told me on the phone a week or two earlier; and I did not have the wit, nor did I wish to display my inexperience in daily journalism, to ask how does one write a morning newscast. After we agreed on when I would start (as I write now, I'm not absolutely certain, but it was a week or ten days before the July Fourth weekend—of that I'm sure!), what my shift would be (midnight to 8 a.m., at the beginning), and my salary ($7,600 a year), Day mumbled "good luck," and quickly got off the phone. Aside from his hurried order about writing the local newscasts for WCBS Radio, he imparted no further insight into my new responsibilities. Worse, I didn't ask. I learned later that I was not his choice for this job at CBS News. He wanted a reporter with lots of ink-stained experience. I was Murrow's choice. He wanted someone who knew about Russia. Learning to write a local newscast, in his judgment, could and would come later. Murrow won this contest, and I was to ride

his coattails through my time at CBS, which lasted twenty-four years, even though Murrow himself resigned in January 1961, four years after I had come on board. I later learned that he had become disillusioned with broadcast news (was it "merely lights and wires in a box?" he wondered) and accepted President John F. Kennedy's offer to head the United States Information Agency. Murrow left behind an unparalleled legacy of professionalism, decency, and integrity, a banner for every journalist to hold high, a model for every student of this challenged craft.

Since there was no one in the newsroom to point me to a desk I could call my own, I took the one closest to the news tickers. For the better part of an hour, maybe longer, I just sat there in a state of wonder and disbelief. I knew I could write a dissertation. But a newscast? I was not at all sure. Occasionally I would get up to look at an incoming story on the Associated Press or check the other tickers, some of which had finally begun to clatter with their reports. Also, figuring there might be some elaboration of my responsibilities, tagged to a bulletin board, or left on the cluttered desk near the window (the editor's, I assumed), I walked around the newsroom, reading one CBS memo or another, many dated, some new, learning little to nothing about the organization or my job. Carefully I combed through CBS's impressive collection of newspapers, from the *Times* to the *Daily News*, available on a long table, certain that in this harvest of print I'd find a gem I could hijack for my morning newscasts. I didn't want my newscasts to sound like the morning newspapers, but in time I came to rely on the newspapers more and more.

Then, back to my desk. Sometime between 1 and 2 a.m., with the newspapers having been read and the ticker tape machines having been scoured for nuggets of news, I checked my watch and realized, with a start, that I could wait no longer. I would have to begin what was for me the uncharted task of writing my first radio newscast—the one that was supposed

to air at 5 a.m. But I really did not know how to write a radio newscast. I knew the length—three minutes and fifty seconds. But, for a local newscast, what was to be my lead? How would I select it? I needed help, but none was available at the time. I knew an editor would have to review the copy—but when would he arrive? And who was the announcer who would actually read the script? I began to worry like my mother, the apple having fallen not too far from the tree. Suppose the editor got sick, or the announcer had an accident? What would I do? To whom would I turn? I looked up from my desk, feeling flushed and thinking I was seeing the walls closing in on me. I needed to splash some iced cold water on my face. I went to the bathroom.

On the way, I passed a few of the offices of CBS's top brass. First, Day's office, which looked small and scruffy, like the man himself. Day, in a huff, would later quit CBS in 1961, when he was not promoted to be president of the network, a job he thought he deserved. Then Sig Mickelson's spacious, orderly office. His responsibility was television news at a time when radio was still CBS's main moneymaker. In the early 1950s, Mickelson brought Walter Cronkite to New York, named him "anchorman," and changed the format of all evening news shows. Then Robert Skedgell's office, warm and pleasant as the man himself proved to be. Skedgell, once a copy boy at fledgling CBS News, was now director of Radio News, but he earned his wings a few years earlier when he helped set up the network's first TV news studio on the fifth floor of the Grand Central Station building on 42nd Street. "Hell," he said at the time, "I hardly know what television is."

The water in the bathroom was warm but still welcome, and, feeling only slightly better but, ready or not, realizing I could no longer procrastinate, I hurried back to the newsroom, sat down at my desk and looked up at the clock: "2:47 a.m.," it mercilessly screamed.

I slipped a sheet of paper into my typewriter and wrote an

identifying preamble, "June 27 [as best I recall], 1957, 5 am, WCBS Radio, Kalb." At that instant, as though ordered by a cruel, distant deity, my fingers froze: I had no idea what my lead sentence would be.

I had options, of course. Because I had recently returned from the Soviet Union, my interests naturally flowed toward foreign news. Rumors had circulated in Moscow about a pending change in Soviet leadership. Affecting Khrushchev? No one was certain. Columnist James Reston of the *Times* wrote about President Eisenhower's concern about a possible agreement with the Soviet Union on banning or limiting atomic weaponry. The Senate was deliberating another increase in defense spending. And two local stories seemed interesting: a subway train had jumped the tracks at 108th Street in Manhattan and delayed more than 50,000 commuters on their way to work, and twenty-one people were injured, none seriously, when two buses crashed into a parked car.

Which of these was to be my lead?

It was, I noticed, 3:32 a.m.

For what seemed like an eternity, I looked at my typewriter, then at the newspapers, and finally at the unusually quiet ticker tape machines; and then back at the typewriter, urging the keys, on their own, to type out a story. Suddenly, the British news agency, Reuters, shattered the nighttime quiet with bells ringing a bulletin. I jumped from my seat like a rocket shot from a silo, rushed to the Reuters machine, and, yes, there was a bulletin. It was from New Delhi, India, and it reported that twenty-seven people had just been killed when their boat capsized in the Ganges River.

Twenty-seven people dead!

"Thank God," I shouted.

Quickly, as if I had been writing radio newscasts for decades, I dashed off my lead. "Bulletin from New Delhi, India," it began. "Twenty-seven people died today, according to the Brit-

ish news agency Reuters, when their tourist boat capsized in the Ganges River. The director of the tourist agency expressed sorrow for the loss of life, adding his agency would start an immediate investigation. This was the second time a tourist boat had capsized in the Ganges in the last four years. Meantime, in Moscow," I continued, writing one news story after another in descending order of importance—in my judgment anyway—until I reached the two essentials of local news: sports and the weather. My Moscow story was speculation about an upcoming Kremlin shakeup, then Ike's reservations about a ban on atomic weapons, then possible increases in the military budget, before I concluded with the two traffic accidents in Manhattan. I was (and am) a devoted Yankee fan and would, most contentedly, have written a long story about that day's Yankee-Cleveland game. The Yankees were pitching Johnny Kucks, the sinker-balling righthander who had shut out the Brooklyn Dodgers in the concluding game of the 1956 World Series. The weather was warm and humid, typical for New York in late June.

I read and reread the script. I wanted to see lyrical lines leaping off the pages, lilting melodies of news and information resonating like Mozart in a Viennese newsroom.

I looked up at the clock. "4:45," it shouted.

"Where the hell is the editor?" I asked myself, feeling my anxiety mushrooming into panic. At which point, the gods sent a jolly warrior to my rescue. Harold (Hal) Terkel bounced into the newsroom, a round man with a broad smile on his face, a Yankee hat perched on his balding head, a lunch box in his right hand and a crumpled newspaper in his left. "Ah," he grinned, "you must be Kalb." Carefully, he placed his lunch box on the editor's desk and then extended his hand in a warm, very friendly way. "I'm Hal Terkel," he said in an accent that had never left the Bronx. "In case you were wondering, I'm your editor." Terkel, I later learned, was a relative newcomer to

CBS, having joined the network in 1955 as a writer and editor after years with two small radio stations, WLIB and WHLI, and briefly with the New York office of the Voice of America.

I was relieved, but still quite uncertain about whether I had written a script bound for the wastebasket or one good enough to be read on air. Though Terkel had not yet sat down at his desk, I handed him my script and quietly withdrew to watch and wait.

It was 4:50 a.m.

Terkel, though clearly overweight, moved with surprising lightness. He took my script, smiled again, and, now comfortably seated, read through it very swiftly.

"Very nice," he sighed, resorting to this utterly meaningless expression to avoid saying what he really thought. "Very nice." Then, casting a quick glance at the clock, he asked, "Were there any Americans on board?"

"Any Americans?" I echoed.

"Yes, you know, on the tourist boat, the one that capsized."

"Let me doublecheck." I raced to my desk, read the Reuters copy, and shouted back, "No, Mr. Terkel, no mention of Americans."

"Hal," Terkel said, "and thanks."

He waited only a second or two before putting a fresh sheet of paper in his typewriter and banging out a radio script for the 5 a.m. newscast. He was rewriting my script. It had not measured up. I'd failed. Terkel, on the other hand, resembled a remarkably explosive bundle of energy and spontaneity. It took him less than five minutes to rewrite the script, finishing at 4:56 a.m., when a short man in a seersucker suit walked into the newsroom and gingerly made his way to Terkel's desk, ignoring me en route. Hal handed him the script. He softly whispered, "Mornin', Hal," and made his way to Studio 9, where, a few minutes later, he delivered the 5 a.m. news with a smooth professionalism that suggested CBS was, as always, an efficient, smooth-running news organization.

Terkel was listening intently to the newscast. When it ended, the seriousness on his face melted into a warm smile of satisfaction. "Well, did it again." He pumped his right fist. I could not share his satisfaction. The script was not mine, and I must have looked as I felt, an unhappy rookie who, when tested, had flunked. Terkel approached me and, placing his right hand gently on my shoulder, said, "Marvin, please don't worry. You're a good writer—that's clear. You just don't know how to write a local newscast." He paused before adding, "and it's my job to help you."

Again, looking up at the clock, a constant reminder of the time left before the next broadcast, Terkel plunked himself down behind his desk. "Look, we have about twenty-eight minutes before the next broadcast. Let's talk for a few minutes, and then I'll write the top of the 5:30, and you write the weather and sports. I want to know what you think about Johnny Kucks. I think he's over-rated."

"Yes, of course," I replied. "Let's talk."

Terkel steepled his fingers, a sign he was engaged in serious thinking. "Suppose you were a mailman, and you lived in Queens," he began. "You get up at, say, 4:30 in the morning, you shave, shower, and then put on the 5 a.m. news." He looked at me, wondering if I was seeing the picture he was painting. "What do you think I'd be interested in?"

"I don't know. What?"

"Well, do you think I'd really be interested in that boat capsizing in the Ganges? Especially when there were no Americans on board? I doubt it. Maybe the accident yesterday, holding up people getting to work? You know, no one was killed, no one really hurt, but if you have nothing else, maybe you could lead with that. That's what I did."

"I'm not sure I agree," I objected. "Twenty-seven people were killed, and if not that story, then surely the shakeup in Moscow. Seems to me that's more important than an accident in Manhattan."

"It's a judgment call, I agree," Hal replied. "But my gut tells me that for a *local* newscast, I've got to go with local news. That's why my mailman turns to WCBS. For local news. If he wanted network news, national or world news, he'd go to CBS. Right?"

I still had a question mark on my face. I was not sure I did get it.

Terkel, again glancing at the clock, abruptly dropped his teacher pose and became an editor with a broadcast on his near horizon. No nonsense in his voice or manner, he repeated, "I'm doing the top stories. You do the weather and sports, and add some analysis about starting Kucks today. OK?"

"OK," I replied.

It was 5:24 a.m.

I went back to my desk and quickly wrote the weather report and then an analysis of the Yankee-Cleveland game, stressing, "Among Yankee fans, there appears to be a difference of opinion about today's starting pitcher for the Yankees. On the one hand, those believing right hander Kucks has shown he's a great pitcher, but among more traditional Yankee fans, an equally strong feeling that Kucks may be overrated. Yes, he pitched a great game during last year's World Series, but so far this year he has been disappointing."

Terkel and I finished our assignments at roughly the same time. I read Hal's contributions to the 5:30 newscast, noticing he did add a brief item about the Ganges accident. He read mine, sporting an especially big grin when he came to the Kucks item.

It was 5:28 a.m.

At that moment, the man in the seersucker suit returned, carrying a container of coffee. He appeared to be remarkably tranquil. Terkel, with a smile, handed him the script. He made his way to Studio 9, where once again he delivered a smooth rendition of the local news.

"What about the 6?" Terkel asked. "Game to try it yourself?"

"Yes. Game indeed."

For the 6 and again the 6:30, I wrote the whole script, modeling both on Terkel's 5 a.m. masterpiece and his informal teaching class, which I appeared to pass. Terkel seemed pleased. I was too. From Terkel, I had learned how to write a local newscast, and I had met my first real friend at CBS. He had heard that I was Murrow's "boy," a reporter-in-the-making who had recently returned from a year in the Soviet Union. He apparently shared Murrow's belief that CBS needed someone on its staff who knew about the Soviet threat and challenge. After the 6:30 newscast ended, a few other writers and editors began showing up to prepare the 7 a.m. local newscast and then the network's 8 a.m. *World News Roundup*, CBS's pioneer radio news program dating back to 1938, when Murrow and his colleague, William Shirer, started reporting regularly on Hitler's relentless march toward World War II. Terkel, as though taking a cue from an invisible director, took me protectively by the arm and steered me into an empty, nearby editing room. Just as Murrow had done during our first meeting, Terkel asked me a series of questions, most especially about Soviet youth: their schooling, upbringing, their outlook on life, religion and marriage, their approach to parenting.

An hour passed quickly. Terkel had opened his lunch box and was nibbling on a sandwich when, looking at me like a solicitous parent, he put his hand on my knee and pronounced, "Marvin, you look beat. On your way." At which point he swooshed me out of the room. "Get some sleep," he added unnecessarily. "I'll see you tomorrow morning."

Though I had entered CBS at midnight, imagining a busy newsroom but finding an empty one, I left a little after 8 a.m. the next morning, just as the newsroom was beginning to fill up, feeling more attuned to the reality of broadcast news and determined, if at all possible, to persuade CBS that what it really needed at the height of the Cold War was another Harry Schwartz. And his name, I hoped, would be Marvin L. Kalb.