

THE VOICE OF FREEDOM

—Story of the BBC at War

DURING the last war a woman in Germany heard from official German sources that her submariner husband had been killed in action. She arranged for a memorial service, but on the morning that it was to take place she, listening to the banned BBC, heard the British announcement that her husband was, in fact, a prisoner of war. Not daring to act on information received from this forbidden source, she decided to go on with the service, but, on reaching the church, she found that she was alone—the other mourners had not turned up. They, too, were listeners to the BBC.

The story of the BBC in wartime is told in a special programme *This is London*, broadcast first at the time of the twenty-first anniversary of the establishment of the Empire Service, and to be heard here in a recorded transcription on April 24. While broadcasting from London was a weapon of war, it was at the same time cementing friendship between allies and linking together all the forces

of the Commonwealth. It was also stimulating and extending the resistance to Nazi domination.

Even the leaders of the Third Reich paid their unwilling tribute by the very fact that they so strenuously jammed the voice of London. Goebbels himself who, in 1942, described the BBC broadcasts as "childish, stupid, short-sighted" by 1943 was speaking of the "masterly skill" with which "poison for the German people" was concealed behind a mask of "objective-seeming news."

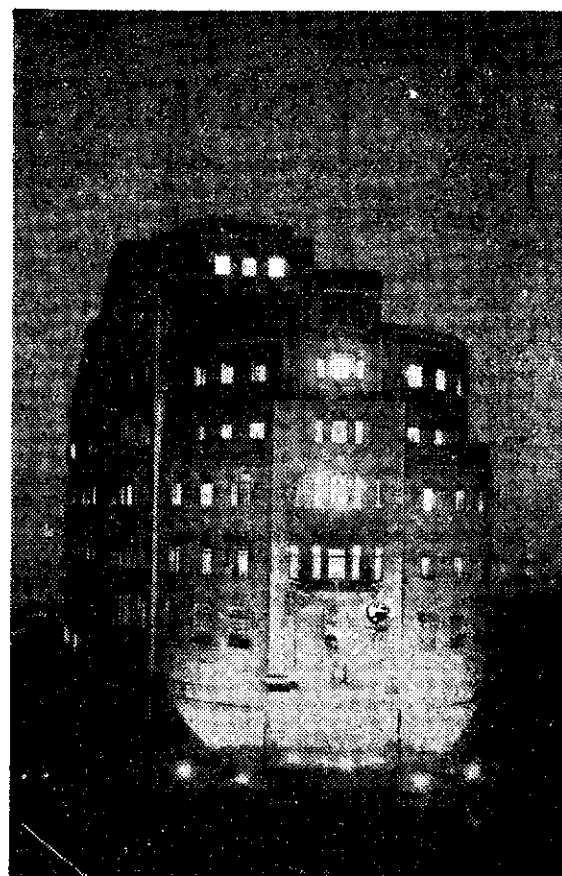
The authority that the BBC came to have during the war years was gained because, despite the violent temper of the times, it still tried to be objective in its news. In the long run, it was thought, a case is best argued from events that could be proved to have happened and not from lies which, however plausible at the time, would inevitably be discovered. At the beginning of the war the

BBC had to fight to get an absolute minimum number of transmitters and the General Overseas Service with foreign language broadcasts was only in its infancy. The Latin-American and Arabic services had begun only in 1938 and the other foreign language broadcasts had not been undertaken because it was felt that the dictators would be irritated. In the end a decision was taken precipitately, and only a few hours before Mr. Neville Chamberlain's return from Munich the BBC was asked to begin broadcasts that same night in French, German and Italian. Their first broadcasts were translations of his own message.

With the establishment of foreign-language broadcasts it became important that the staff should know what the other services—especially those of Germany and Italy—were saying, and thus the famous Monitoring Service was born. Monitoring is still today an indispensable source of information for broadcasters all over the world.

The BBC's broadcasts to Europe during the war were of four kinds. There were the masses of ordinary listeners who listened to keep up their spirits in the twilight of German occupation; the active listeners who became members of the Resistance groups or contributors to the clandestine press. As more was learnt in London about the underground organisations, the BBC undertook special broadcasts for the clandestine press, delivered at dictation slowness so that each word could be written down and passed on. Then again there were allied agents who listened for directly operational reasons. The code messages for them, the orders to be translated into direct acts of war against the occupying forces were at first a mere trickle, but by D-Day had grown to a flood.

The BBC did a great deal to strengthen morale at home as well. Their Variety Shows and Outside Broadcasts carried on under conditions of extreme difficulty. All the programmes to Forces overseas were sent from London's only underground theatre, the Criterion, almost directly below Eros's empty plinth. The stage became a studio, the Royal Box a Control Room, and the Royal Retiring Room an audition room. A rope hanging from the circle to the stalls was there in case the producers had to come down in a hurry. The Criterion stage was old, and when two grand pianos were put on it, they sank through like waterlogged cows. Every evening Vera Lynn arrived at 6 o'clock and settled down to sleep before being awakened at 2.15 a.m. for her *Starlight* programme and later Anne Shelton did the same. One of the most dramatic wartime programmes ever pro-



BBC photograph

When the lights went on again—Broadcasting House floodlit on VE Night



THREE famous voices of the BBC's wartime years. From left, the American commentator Raymond Gram Swing; Douglas Ritchie (alias "Colonel Britton"), and the beloved Tommy Handley

(continued from previous page)

served with distinction both on the executive staff and as an airman, rising to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel.

Bébé Daniels became commère of a BBC feature entitled *Here's Wishing You Well Again*, and in addition to starring in *Panama Hattie* at the Piccadilly Theatre, she had a "spot" called *Purple Heart Corner* in a programme recorded in Britain for broadcast in America. It was in her capacity as the interviewer and commère of this "spot" that she was asked to follow the American First Army to Normandy soon after D-Day. She was unable to accept owing to her stage commitments; but when, a few days later, the Piccadilly Theatre was badly damaged by a buzz-bomb—fortunately not during a performance—she packed a few clothes and a typewriter and landed in Normandy on D-Day plus 20, gaining the distinction of being the first civilian woman there. For this and other work, she was awarded the American Medal of Freedom, the second highest decoration that can be bestowed on a U.S. civilian. Bébé, a civilian woman, and Ben, her airman husband, who was awarded the

Legion of Merit, had the unusual distinction of being decorated at the same ceremony.

After the war, the Lyons spent some time in Hollywood, where Ben was appointed a Director of Casting for 20th Century-Fox, discovering a number of potential stars, including an unknown actress for whom he chose a new stage name. It was Marilyn Monroe. A year or two later he was promoted to the position of London Executive Director of Casting, and Bébé and Ben with their children returned to Britain where, first, in a revival of *Hi Gang*, and later in their family show, they attained new heights of comedy entertainment.

I have tried to give some idea of the lives and the character of the Lyon family, mentioning only a few of the highlights of their careers. I hope I have succeeded in conveying the warmth, integrity, outstanding ability, and loveableness of this real-life family. Their radio show is heard each week by over ten million British listeners. If *Life with the Lyons* by its fun and comical situations, based on some of the many common foibles and conceits of the human race, brings pleasure and laughter to you in New Zealand, Bébé, Ben, Barbara and Richard will be well satisfied.

duced was a "live" broadcast to North America on August 24, 1940. It was a round-up of London actually produced from the Control Room at Broadcasting House and roving from point to point in the blitz outside. There was a distinguished list of British, American and Canadian commentators, and to them the following grimly amusing instructions were issued: "In the unlikely event of bombs falling within range would commentators (assuming they are still in one piece) please observe the following points: (1) Be truthful but discreet and remember that impromptu remarks made in the excitement of the moment are liable to exaggerate rather than to minimise distress; (2) avoid horrors. In fact, unless there is overwhelming reason to do so, do not mention casualties; (3) use the utmost discretion in assessing damage."

Those instructions may be taken to indicate the kind of broadcasting the BBC gave the world in wartime—level-headed, realistic and unafraid.

Famous voices will be heard again in *This is London*. They include King George VI and Princess Elizabeth; Sir Winston Churchill; Neville Chamberlain; Tommy Handley; the American commentators Ed Murrow and Raymond Gram Swing; and the mysterious Colonel Britton, who was later revealed as Douglas Ritchie, Head of the European News Department of the BBC. Lastly, and perhaps most important, there is the great voice of Big Ben himself.

The narrator of *This is London* is Robert Harris, with Marius Goring and Lindley Fraser. The programme will be heard in ZB Sunday Showcase at 9.35 p.m. on April 24.