

Armed Forces Network newsmen battle censorship

# VIETNAM



**MADAME NHU**  
The Dragon Lady and  
Diem's assassination

## JUNGLE BUSTERS

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tanks to the rescue

### All the News That's Fit to Air

In their quest to "tell it like it is," young newsmen with the American Forces Vietnam Network raised important questions about the nature and limits of military censorship. By Rick Fredericksen

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ALL THE NEWS  
THAT'S FIT  
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In their quest to “tell it like it is,” young newsmen with the American Forces Vietnam Network raised important questions about the nature and limits of military censorship **By Rick Fredericksen**

**O**N A NOVEMBER MORNING, 50 years ago, two young military broadcasters arrived for their radio shift in Saigon. The wire machine held news that would unsettle the world: President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated. Newsmen Bob Andreson quickly pulled some copy. Lee Hansen, host of the *Dawn-buster* show, opened Andreson’s microphone so he could read the bulletin to listeners. Or so they thought. In their haste, they’d neglected to turn on the transmitter. So they quickly signed on Armed Forces Radio Saigon (AFRS), and Andreson announced the news again, this time over the air. According to Hansen, he and Andreson were both “bawling like babies” and had simply forgotten to flip the switch. Throughout the morning, they provided news updates on the unfolding tragedy.

Just three weeks earlier South Vietnam’s President Ngo Dinh Diem had been assassinated in a coup. That day, rather than broadcasting the news, the radio staff was on the roof watching the action at the nearby Presidential Palace. Gunfire could be heard when announcers opened the microphone and instructed Americans to stay off the streets because of a “civil disturbance.” But that was it.

Why cover one assassination and ignore the other? The uncomplicated explanation is censorship. Or, if you prefer, “news management.” As Hansen remembers it, “We were told by headquarters not to run that news.”

**THIS JUST IN**  
Radio-television  
announcer Spc. 4  
Danny Drobnick of  
the American Forces  
Vietnam Network  
(AFVN) makes a  
spot news broadcast  
from Saigon on  
April 30, 1970.

In subsequent years, the fledgling AFRS radio operation grew into a far-reaching broadcast system renamed the American Forces Vietnam Network (AFVN), providing news, music and entertainment to the U.S. armed forces, along with a huge shadow audience of Vietnamese and other nationals. AFVN's on-air jingle made a powerful declaration: "From the Delta to the DMZ." No other unit could make that claim. And no other unit had the power to shape public opinion quite like AFVN. As more troops arrived, more affiliates signed on to serve them, including television stations. Fighting intensified and the war became increasingly political; there was more sensitive news, more controversy, and news management became more like censorship.

When I arrived in March 1969, destined to be a teenage war correspondent, the censorship controversy was still a simmering internal matter. I would soon become entangled in the most unabashed military protest of the Vietnam War. It had nothing to do with being antiwar and everything to do with being anti-censorship, a cause championed by a young, idealistic band of military newsmen, all enlisted, except for one young captain.

Later, as I revisited those chaotic days with former colleagues, one thing stood out: Intensive, sometimes questionable, oversight of the newsroom began soon after the first transmitter became operational in 1962. Some of it was borderline ridiculous. Army Pfc Steve Sevits was a newsman before the original station was even one year old. He said he was not allowed

**READY IN 3...2...1** From left, Specialists David Kieffer, Toney Brooks and Joe Moore broadcast from AFVN's Saigon studio.



to say "White House" to describe 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. "The reason explained to me was that even to English-speaking people in Asia, the term 'White House' could intellectually become 'Crystal Palace.'" That would have made the Oval Office the throne room, the president a monarch and U.S. troops in Vietnam the king's soldiers. Kind of a stretch. Sevits said that "White House" became the chief executive's or president's "official house."

**I**n the early days of Saigon radio, the news staff did not complain. "All stories dealing with our military in Vietnam had to be approved and cleared by the MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] Office of Information," remembered Craig Prosser, another early broadcaster. "I don't recall being under a bridle of censorship. I recognized Armed Forces Radio Saigon was the military's radio station and felt they had the right to control the content." A policy initiated in the pioneering days of AFRS was maintained throughout the war: a list of banned words and terminology. Perhaps the first directive was to refer to the host nation as the "Republic of Vietnam," never "South Vietnam." As the AFVN nomenclature expanded, the so-called No-No List became more restrictive and sometimes misleading. "Napalm" had to be replaced with "selective ordnance." "Search and destroy" missions became "search and clear." The fierce battle for "Hamburger Hill" was too descriptive, so AFVN used the map reference of "Hill 937."

One of the most celebrated names associated with Saigon radio was Adrian Cronauer, the early morning disc jockey who welcomed listeners with his signature greeting, "Gooooood morning, Vietnam!" It became the title of the movie starring Robin Williams, who portrayed the Air Force broadcaster as a zany DJ. In fact, Cronauer's first job was in the newsroom. "The Pope's Christmas message we could not carry because somebody thought it contained a prayer of peace and could be construed as a criticism of our efforts in Vietnam," Cronauer recalled. Asked if anyone complained, the former news director said: "What good would it do? In the military there is an invisible line. You go over it and you're in deep dog doo."

Captain Randall Moody was in charge of the newsroom at a critical juncture, and had been jousting with MACV information officers since mid-1968. "There were 550,000 Americans there, and my feeling was we were more than just another public relations arm," said Moody, who still gets a little rankled. "This was just after Tet [the 1968 offensive], which sort of shot a hole in the idea we were winning the war, so by just reporting what was going on, something that didn't make the military look good, there was a lot of push-back." Moody was regularly called down to MACV's Office of Information (MACOI) when his newscasters strayed too far.

One day at the daily press briefing, the loss of six helicopters was confirmed, and on that night's TV broadcast war news editor Toney Brooks reported that "the U.S. Command was having helicopter problems again." Several other helicopters had crashed earlier in the week. An irate MACOI deputy called Moody the next morning. "He told me the 'helicopter problems' statement was editorializing and made General [Creighton] Abrams very unhappy," Moody recalled. "He said the story didn't put the U.S. in a very good light, because we're really having helicopter problems." The 24-year-old captain stood his ground: "I'm not in the business of putting anyone in a favorable light; that would be editorializing." Moody admits he pushed the envelope. "I never asked for permission. I asked for forgiveness. I survived because Lt. Col. Ray Nash [AFVN's officer in charge, or OIC] protected me."

Internal dissension worsened in the newsroom during 1969, in part because of the sheer volume of sensitive stories: the secret peace talks in Paris, U.S. planes bombing targets in Laos, the first troop withdrawals and intensifying antiwar protests back home. The officers running AFVN were under a lot of pressure to keep the stories grounded in truth but also presented in the most positive light. But AFVN news relied heavily on the commercial networks for content: ABC news film, videotapes from CBS, the wire services and all the major network radio newscasts. Their war coverage tended to be grimmer and not always attributable to "official sources."



**HIS NO-NO LIST** Rick Fredericksen in the radio news booth in Saigon, capital of what he could not call "South Vietnam."

Bob Lawrence was a solid newscaster from the get-go. He came to AFVN with seven years in the business and quickly opposed MACOI's news intervention. If there was a badge for press freedom, Lawrence would have worn it next to his SP5 patch.

"I was called into the office every day, practically," Lawrence remembered. "When there was a sensitive story, something critical of the Vietnamese military, the Vietnamese government, you know, the shadow audience, they would put 'Do Not Use.' I got in trouble because I ran it." When Ho Chi Minh died, Lawrence lifted the story from CBS and aired it on AFVN. "All hell came down on me the next day," he said. An editorial in the

**I AM NOT IN THE BUSINESS OF PUTTING ANYONE IN A FAVORABLE LIGHT; THAT WOULD BE EDITORIALIZING**

Vietnamese newspaper run by President Nguyen Van Thieu's brother-in-law called for the ultimate form of censorship, suggesting that Lawrence should be hanged for treason.

Outside interference, much of it trivial, is part of the territory for any broadcaster, including those at AFVN. Our TV weather girl, Bobbie Keith, would put on a bikini and have temperatures written on her body to mimic the popular *Laugh-In* TV show, where phrases were scrawled on the go-go dancing Goldie Hawn. Apparently U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker called in to complain, worried about upsetting the Vietnamese audience. Another



**HOT AND HOTTER** Weather girl Bobbie Keith's take on *Laugh-In's* Goldie Hawn drew a complaint from a U.S. ambassador.

time, Saigon City Hall initiated a laundry request. "We ran an announcement saying the mayor wanted our maids in our hotel not to hang out uniforms so they could be seen from the street," said Paul Bottoms, who hosted the overnight *Orient Express* show. "It ended with something like, 'For a better-looking Saigon.'"

The bigger issue at AFVN was the core group of troublemakers who were airing dirty laundry. Our bosses took steps to rein us in, even requiring that all newscasts be prerecorded, an impractical policy that proved unworkable. Gradually, I joined the war news desk, as a backup for Mike Maxwell. All of a sudden, Vietnamese Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky had pre-announced another troop pullout. But we were prohibited from airing the story until the White House or Pentagon had officially confirmed it. We could see the bulletins on

THERE ARE PROBLEMS THAT COME WITH FREE SPEECH. I'VE ALWAYS FELT THE SOLUTION MIGHT BE MORE FREE SPEECH, NOT CENSORSHIP

the newsroom wires and hear it on the AFRTS (Armed Forces Radio and Television Service) radio feed, but because the brass at AFVN and MACOI did not consider Vice President Ky to be official enough, we had to sit on the story. The outcome was

embarrassing; the very men who would finally be leaving Vietnam were the last in the world to know. The list of words that we were forbidden to use now included "withdrawal" and "pull-out." A "Sensitivities" memo said, "Both terms are negative, carrying the connotation that we are deserting the Vietnamese people... [instead] use 'redeployment, replacement, reduction.'"

This incident infuriated the war news editors, and Maxwell became the first dissident to go public. In an interview on CBS, he called for an investigation into AFVN for tampering with the news. Maxwell was pulled from the air and given a dead-end desk job in the music library. Then, 10 days after I replaced him, I asked to be reassigned. I was transferred to AFVN's mountain-island detachment off the coast of Nha Trang and had to sign a statement promising not to cause problems.

In fact, we were only upholding the McNamara Doctrine. Two years earlier, the defense secretary had proclaimed: "Members of our armed forces... are entitled to the same unrestricted access to the news as are all other citizens. Interference with this access will not be permitted." AFVN's own standard operating procedures seemed to prohibit censorship: "The maximum disclosure of information, except that which would be of material assistance to potential enemies, will be made... the calculated withholding of unfavorable news stories and wire service reports is prohibited... meddling with the news will not be tolerated." We felt our commanders were regularly violating that protocol.

Ingenious broadcasters found ways to work around censorship, especially at remote stations with less oversight. Saigon would hold back any sensitive news film and videotapes before sending shipments upcountry. Specialist 4 Michael Goucher, stationed at AFVN Da Nang, remembered the street protests and racial tensions back home. "Our military thought they could filter [them] out of our awareness, but not so," Goucher said. He recorded AFRTS radio newscasts from the Philippines and Okinawa, and sometimes aired them on AFVN TV, as a way to "spice up our coverage of home news."

The Army's own inquiry into AFVN, requested by Maxwell, cleared the network of any wrongdoing. The inspector general said, "Allegations by AFVN personnel regarding such actions have arisen through misunderstanding on the part of young and inexperienced broadcasters."

Actually, all of us had either experience or formal journalism schooling. I was the rookie, with only a degree from the Defense Information School. Some of the officers were the least prepared, including Peter Berlin, who became the OIC at AFVN in Quang Tri. "I had absolutely no experience," said Berlin. "I had basically just shipped in from Fort Gordon as a new ROTC officer." Captain Bruce Beebe was put in charge of the Saigon newsroom at

its most unruly time. He acknowledged that "news at AFVN was a new concentrated subject for me." On-the-job training for the unprepared ROTC officer made him a poor match for the group of rebellious free-speechers populating his news department.

Bob Lawrence and Air Force Sergeant Hugh Morgan were the co-hosts of our Apollo 12 coverage, and both were disciplined not long after the second lunar landing. For Morgan, it was a case of "editorializing" in the way he introduced an Eric Sevareid commentary. Opinion pieces were potential trouble; even Paul Harvey's news and commentary was deleted on those occasions when he referred to Vietnam as "the dead-end war." Morgan's infraction was minor, but he was taken off the air in Saigon and sent to the Da Nang station.

Christmas and the New Year came and went, and Lawrence had seen enough. Armed with a manual typewriter, he prepared the most audacious public protest in U.S. military history. I noticed something unusual: He wrote his late television newscast from a secluded workplace near the darkened front offices. It was Saturday night, Jan. 3, 1970, and Lawrence shared the set with sportscaster Tom Sinkovitz. At the end of the news, Lawrence calmly looked into the camera and read a shocking personal indictment charging commanders in Vietnam with censorship. As thousands of U.S. citizens watched, with an even larger secondary audience, Lawrence said, "I have found that a newscaster at AFVN is not free to tell the truth,

and in essence, to tell it like it is." He spoke with conviction, blamed MACV and appealed to the audience for help. "We've been suppressed and I'm probably in trouble tonight for telling you the truth. I hope you'll help stop censorship at AFVN and any American station under military rule."

The only man who could have stopped it was Ron Bartlett, who was directing the newscast in the control room. "All hell broke loose," said Bartlett. "I was asked why I didn't censor Bob [by fading to black, or turning off his mic]. It was over before I knew what was going on." Lawrence's profane indictment was a live earthquake, but there was another shockwave to come. Marine Corporal Sinkovitz, the sportscaster, provided this exclamation point: "Thank you very much, Bob, in more ways than one."

The news ended, and a nervous pall settled over the compound. The officers at AFVN and MACV went into damage control, while civilian reporters gathered outside the station gate asking for Lawrence. It wasn't long before a news bulletin went worldwide. We gathered around our own wire machines and watched the story print out. CBS correspondent Gary Shepard had filmed the statement on television, and Walter Cronkite used it on America's highest-rated newscast. The story was too public to be censored, and at 3 o'clock the following morning, newscaster Jim Allingham read an AP story about the incident on AFVN radio, but only after it had been approved by MACV.

The next day, Lawrence was questioned for four hours at

**NO EDITORIALIZING** Marine Sgt. Kim Peterson (left) and Army Sgt. Nick Palladino anchor AFVN's 1968 election special.



OPPOSITE: BOBBIE KEITH; ABOVE: RANDALL MOODY

"WE'VE BEEN SUPPRESSED AND I'M PROBABLY IN TROUBLE TONIGHT FOR TELLING YOU THE TRUTH."

### Bob Lawrence's statement after his TV newscast, Jan. 3, 1970

"In a closing note tonight, and looking into the decade ahead, as a broadcaster I find myself making a self-evaluation of my experience in radio and television newscasting. And, in making this evaluation, I am compelled to rededicate myself to the job that I'm trying to do. As a newsmen, I am dedicated to giving the public the news and events, worldwide and in Vietnam.

"I am pledged to tell the truth at all times and I am always telling the truth, either in the military or as a civilian. In the military in Vietnam, I have found that a newscaster at AFVN is not free to tell the truth, and in essence, to tell it like it is. MACV, and the MACV Office of Information, have seen to it that all newscasters who are dedicated to their work are sent to other areas. In some cases, off the air completely.

"Former newsmen Mike Maxwell charged that there was censorship at AFVN, and now he's doing menial tasks in the record library and on FM radio. Hugh Morgan's gone too, sent upcountry and is also off the air. That was another MACV request. Rick Fredericksen leaves Tuesday. Rick tried to tell it like it is. Rick is a dedicated broadcaster. We've been suppressed and I'm probably in trouble tonight for telling you the truth. I hope you'll help stop censorship at AFVN and any American station under military rule. Thank you and goodbye."

"THANK YOU VERY MUCH, BOB, IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE."

### Tom Sinkovitz's response on AFVN, Jan. 3, 1970

After Bob Lawrence read his statement, Tom Sinkovitz, a young Marine sportscaster, gave his brief on-air response (above) prior to reviewing the sports scoreboard. To use a basketball metaphor, Lawrence passed the ball to Sinkovitz, Sinkovitz dunked it and commanders whistled a penalty.

"My sense was I could, in some way, signal my support publicly," said the former corporal, who also happened to be Lawrence's roommate. "To a certain extent it was reflex." The ranking officers were in no mood to overlook the supportive remark by Sinkovitz, even if it was impromptu. "They took us off the air and I stayed in the dayroom for a couple days. After three weeks they sent me southwest of Da Nang to Landing Zone Baldy. I started to think to myself, they could so easily kill me up here. How many of these poor bastards will die with me to make this look like a legitimate combat loss? I was fearful for my life."

The concise 10-word sentence Sinkovitz uttered never blemished his professional success—it might have enhanced it. He went on to a rewarding television career as a news anchorman, most of it in the San Francisco market. In 1999 Sinkovitz returned to Vietnam to produce an eight-part news series that won multiple awards. Just like all the other newsmen who were reassigned, "Sink" was never formally charged. "I have tempered over the years," he said. "It's a watermark event in my life that led to everything I did. It's part of who I am." —R.F.

MACV headquarters. With his request for an attorney initially denied, Lawrence resisted answering questions. At one point, he was threatened: "The chief of investigation is going to take you upstairs and interrogate you until you give us the information." According to news reports at the time, Lawrence was escorted to a bleak room with blanketed walls, a tape recorder and a mattress on the floor. He said interrogators told him they questioned one guy for 20 hours, "but we cracked him." "I can believe you're doing this to spies, but not American people," Lawrence replied. "I can't believe General Abrams knows about this—and the president."

To avoid further charges of trying to silence us, they actually allowed *Time* magazine to photograph Lawrence, Sinkovitz, Maxwell and me on the wood-paneled AFVN news set. The *Time* story concluded, "What AFVN probably needs is some supervision that can separate public relations from news." Meanwhile, Rep. John Moss of California initiated a congressional inquiry. As for Lawrence, he was shipped to Kontum to become a chaplain's assistant and was never formally charged. All together, the brass at AFVN "redeployed" seven of their young newscasters to downgraded assignments during 1969-70.

Editorial writers debated, including Jack Anderson, the most widely read columnist at the time. He blamed the Pentagon in coming down on our side. So did columnist William R. Frye, who opined, "News cannot be made into propaganda without a severe counterproductive effect." On the other hand, former Brig. Gen. S.L.A. Marshall wrote, "No newscaster in the land is free to go on the air and tell the story as he pleases. [AFVN newscasters] have about as much perspective on how news is handled... as a gaggle of hot dog peddlers." On that count, Marshall was correct. I cannot imagine why we thought we should be able to write and present the news without being reviewed and fact-checked by an editor. This is common practice in modern newsrooms. I reflect on that first investigation and think that, yes, I was young, inexperienced and impressionable.

The day before Rep. Moss arrived for his field investigation, our group of young, principled military broadcasters had been summoned to Saigon. We understood that this was our last chance to clear our names. A stenographer took down oral testimony as we presented our case during a two-hour session. Later, Moss told reporters that our charges did "have merit," but added, "I did not find censorship as it is defined by law." The congressman cited middle management problems at AFVN and an inadequate set of guidelines. We accepted the Moss summary as a partial victory.

Two years later, Lee W. Hauser at the University of North Carolina published an academic thesis that analyzed the AFVN mission and commented at length on the censorship question. His findings were clearly sympathetic to the military point of view, including this blunt conclusion: "There is something inherently wrong with criticism that feels the military should have

little to say regarding war news, broadcast over its own network, to its own troops."

Obviously there was censorship, and it violated stated policy. But I now believe the interference was well intentioned, aimed at protecting the American mission in Vietnam. Consider what negative media coverage was doing in the States. The stories that we were "cleansing," or forbidden from airing, were commonplace back home, and public support for the war effort was eroding badly. The prevailing theme of the American media was that the war was not going well—and it wasn't—but this relentless narrative undoubtedly played a major role in the outcome. A year before my arrival in Vietnam, Walter Cronkite declared the conflict a "stalemate." So I can't blame the PR officers for wanting to present a positive picture, to shield the men and women fighting the war from demoralizing news.

As the 44th anniversary of that defiant newscast approaches, the topic of censorship remains divisive. I asked Bob Lawrence if he had any regrets. "None," he answered. "I would do it again." Adrian Cronauer also remains steadfast: "There are problems that come with free speech, but I've always felt the solution might be more free speech, not censorship." In Hugh Morgan, I detect some reservations. "Was there censorship at AFVN?" he asked, then answered, "Yes, but I'd call it news management by those with responsibility to keep faith with a host country at war." Former war news editor Toney



RICK FREDERICKSEN

Brooks insisted: "Troops who watched and listened to AFVN were well informed and entertained. The censorship issue has been way overblown."

AFVN's presence faded as the audience of U.S. troops withdrew. Intense control of the news was no longer necessary. Jim Sandt, the last NCO in charge of the Public Information Division, said, "I don't remember any time when our office overtly censored news that should have been released." Army Spc. 5 Robert Morecook, who read AFVN's last TV newscast, said he was given a free hand. "I was astonished at how uninvolved leadership was."

Ask Americans who served in Vietnam to list their most unforgettable AFVN moments, and the censorship uproar would probably rank down there with the "test pattern." Veterans are more apt to recall watching *Combat* in their hooch, the pride of seeing those first steps on the moon or feeling nostalgic over Peter, Paul and Mary singing "Leaving on a Jet Plane." AFVN's legacy is bigger than Bob Lawrence's bombshell newscast. Its broadcasts were a welcome distraction from the hardships of war, as comforting as mail call, as satisfying as a hot shower. Reporter Keyes Beech even wrote a wistful story about the death of AFVN in 1973, for the *Chicago Daily News*: "Like a faucet run dry, there is no sound where AFVN used to be. Can this be Vietnam without AFVN?" ★

**AFVN REBELS** From left: (standing) Bob Lawrence, Paul Baldrige, Lynn Packer and Rick Fredericksen; (seated) Tom Sinkovitz and Hugh Morgan. All but Baldrige, who was not involved in the protest, were taken off the air or reassigned.