Twenty Tales from the War Zone:

The Best of John Simpson

John Simpson

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Extract

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Preface

John Simpson, who has been one of our best television journalists for forty years, was born in south London towards the end of the Second World War. He had rather a lonely childhood, being mostly brought up by his father in London and Suffolk after his parents separated. After school, he went to Cambridge University and from there to the BBC. He joined the BBC as a sub-editor in the Radio Newsroom in 1966 when he was only twenty-two. He soon became a political reporter and attracted his own publicity when Harold Wilson apparently punched him in the stomach after John had asked him if was going to call an election. He became the BBC's Ireland correspondent, based in Dublin in the early 1970s, covering the Troubles in Northern Ireland, but he then switched to foreign affairs. He was sent to Angola, a country in south-central Africa, where he covered the vicious civil war of the

1970s – an experience he has said was the most terrifying of his entire career. After that, John was the BBC's man in South Africa for a number of years, before becoming the BBC's main correspondent in Baghdad, the capital of Iraq, during the first Gulf War. Despite often being in great personal danger, John stayed in Baghdad throughout the war, even after the BBC ordered him to leave. He has since covered nearly all the major events in recent world history. He was in Berlin when Communism fell and was back in South Africa to see Nelson Mandela released from prison after serving a twenty-seven-year sentence. It is almost as if major events just can't happen unless he's there to report on them. This book looks at the exciting places he has visited, the strange people he has met and some of the dangerous times he has lived through.

20. Nelson Mandela

I'VE SEEN A LOT of wars and violence in my career. I've watched people being tortured, without being able to do anything to help them. I've seen people injured and killed in front of my eyes: Kamaran, in Iraq, for instance. Yet I have also seen wonderful, unexpected things – forgiveness and kindness and love defeating hatred and bitterness. To end with, let me give you an example of the better side of my job.

A friend of mine, Mark Billinge, is a senior figure at the college at Cambridge University where, back in the distant 1960s, I was a student. Some years ago, he and other people at Magdalene College had a daring idea. The college had strong links with South Africa, and they decided to honour Nelson Mandela with a special degree.

When Mark told me, though, I didn't believe it would happen. Mandela was getting frail, for one thing. On his previous visit to Britain,

people from all the universities that wanted to give him honours had to go to London, and do it in a single ceremony, so as not to tire him out. The idea that he would go all the way to Cambridge to visit one small college seemed highly unlikely.

Then, at the start of 2000, I started getting messages from Mark that it really was going to happen. The college offered to let me cover the event for the BBC, and I grabbed the chance. On 1 May, I arrived with my wife Dee (who is South African, and often works as my television producer) to get ready for the big event the next day.

It must sound like a very easy story to cover. Everything was laid on for us, and there was no question of having to struggle or take risks. And no competition, either. We had the story to ourselves, since the college wanted it that way.

And yet there was one very real difficulty. The South African officials in London said they didn't want me to interview Mandela. There were political problems in South Africa, and they were worried that Mandela might say something critical of the man who had taken over from him as president. But I knew we had

to have an interview with him. Our report would look very strange without it. Anyway, I had promised the BBC I would speak to him, and I didn't like to let them down.

I explained all this to Mark, who promised to do what he could to help me. I also had a good team. I was still nervous, though.

On the morning of the big day, we all gathered in a café across the river from the college and made our plans. Then we moved into the garden at the back of the college, where Mandela's helicopter was due to land.

I looked around the lovely lawn. When I was a student, I had danced till four in the morning and partied here. That was just when Nelson Mandela was starting his long jail sentence, which lasted twenty-seven years. At the time I was too young, and too happy, and too unaware of the outside world, to spare him a thought. And too selfish, I suppose.

But then, a decade later, in 1976, I became the BBC correspondent in South Africa during the darkest period of apartheid, the cruel system they had there which meant that the blacks and whites were kept separate by law. For instance, there were notices on the park

benches to tell black people they couldn't sit there, and anyone who protested against the system could be beaten up, jailed or even killed.

Ten years after that, I returned to South Africa to watch as apartheid started to crumble. I was there in 1990 when Nelson Mandela walked out of prison a free man. I was there when he became president after an election which almost everyone had forecast would be a bloodbath. And I was there when the election turned into a wonderful, inspiring occasion instead, because of Mandela's willingness to forgive his enemies.

There was the faint sound of a helicopter in the clouds above us. It settled down on the grass of the college garden, and the door opened. Slowly, Nelson Mandela stepped out. People moved forward to shake hands and welcome him. He was grinning his infectious smile the whole time.

My wife Dee and her sister Gina (whom we had smuggled in) came forward to shake his hand. He spoke to them in their own language, Afrikaans, which had once been the language of apartheid but which he had encouraged and supported as president. I knew from my own experience how

good he made you feel when he spoke to you. Helped by his aides, Mandela walked towards the college buildings. He stopped and joked with the people who had gathered there, waiting to see him. You could see their faces light up, as Dee's and Gina's had. The smiles stayed on their faces for a long time afterwards.

After a brief ceremony in the college chapel, Mandela was brought into a grand room nearby. It was here that we were waiting. Mark Billinge had organized things cleverly, so that I could ask Mandela some questions. Mandela always enjoyed speaking on camera, and he was perfectly happy to do it now. But his press minder, a tough blonde woman, started to get angry. She urged the South African High Commissioner, who was also a woman, to move in and stop me. The High Commissioner tugged at my jacket the whole time I was interviewing him, trying to make me keep quiet, but I took no notice. These officials get too big for their boots sometimes.

After we'd got our interview, I felt a lot more relaxed. Which was good, since the climax of the ceremony was about to take place in the college hall.

In this hall, two centuries earlier, the master of the college had spoken out against slavery and had promised to do what he could to get it stopped. It was the place where, in October 1963, I had first met my fellow students, and many of the friends I made here at that time are still friends of mine today. Now, at the age of fifty-six, I was back here in the presence of this amazing man.

It seemed to me that, although I had never realized it, Mandela and everything he stood for had been an important part of my entire life. And this occasion was to be the high point of it all.

Mandela stood up and began to speak. He felt rather nervous about being here, he said.

'This is for three reasons. Firstly, I am an old-age pensioner.'

There was a quiet little buzz of amusement from the audience.

'Secondly, I am unemployed.'

The laughter was louder this time.

'And thirdly, I have a very *baaaaad* criminal record.'

A huge wave of laughter and applause followed that.

The end of the ceremony was the most magical part of all. Up in the gallery, above our heads, the choir began singing a beautiful African song. Mandela got slowly to his feet, smiling and moving in time to the music.

One by one, the professors of the college also stood up in their brilliant scarlet, gold and purple gowns. They began dancing to the music too – some embarrassed and ill at ease, others not self-conscious at all. You could almost hear the joints creaking. As for me, I was so full of happiness and pleasure that I could hardly speak.

But I had to. The one thing that was missing from our report was a piece to camera, and I had to do it while everyone was still in the hall. I pulled myself together as best I could, straightened my tie, and looked into the camera lens.

'This college has been in existence for 573 years,' I said, 'but it's never seen anything like this.'

It really hadn't. An African leader, who had endured the worst treatment imaginable and had emerged from it to forgive his enemies and govern them in love and peace, had come to my

own small Cambridge college and danced for joy with us all.

I promise you, all the bad and cruel and unhappy things I had seen in my life just seemed to fade away when I saw that.