

The TV Column

By John Carmody
Washington Post Staff Writer

Bill Moyers next week returns to the network news wars when he joins NBC News as a regular commentator on "NBC Nightly News With Tom Brokaw" . . .

"I think it's a good thing to do at this stage in my life," Moyers said yesterday . . .

His new job has the title of senior news analyst and he is free, under the terms of what is believed to be a two-year contract with NBC, to continue production of major programs for the Public Broadcasting Service, although he said he expects to reduce his workload with the public network . . .

NBC News has been without a regular commentator since John Chancellor retired in July 1993; Moyers is not expected to fill quite the same role . . .

"I'll do two or three commentaries a week eventually but I expect to start slowly. TV is changing and I have to find the right thrust and pace—it's been nine years, after all," he said, since he left network news . . .

Unlike Chancellor, Moyers probably will not join anchor Brokaw on the news set but will report "maybe from an office, like Andy Rooney." Moyers said he will contribute "essays . . . hard-hitting, Bill Safire-like reportage and analysis." He will also have a role in coverage of the national political scene through the 1996 elections and recalled yesterday that in 1992, PBS and NBC collaborated in coverage of the political conventions . . .

Moyers also plans to travel, "I still consider myself the reporter" . . .

According to sources at NBC, Moyers has been wooed by NBC News president Andy Lack for at least a year. The two have been friends for years. "We've shared the same foxholes," Moyers said Lack yesterday . . .

Lack, then a CBS producer, worked with Moyers on a documentary on abortion in 1977 during the latter's first stint with CBS News. Moyers said that Lack was instrumental in talking him back to the network in 1981 as the senior news analyst, replacing Eric Sevareid . . .

The restless Moyers left CBS News for a second time in 1986 amid turmoil at the network but said yesterday he has missed the opportunity "to be topical," as well as the "regularity and stability" of daily broadcasts. He called NBC News "a good place and a perfect match for me" . . .

The 60-year-old Moyers had a bypass operation in May 1993 and, despite "a false alarm" this past Thanksgiving, said he has been feeling well . . .

For PBS, Moyers's Public Affairs Television,



Bill Moyers, who's returning to network news as a commentator for NBC.

which is run by his wife, Judith, is completing an eight-part series due to air this summer called "The Language of Life," a survey of the poets of our time, and a 90-minute special for the fall on Bill T. Jones, the celebrated African American dancer. Down the road is a study of the Book of Genesis . . .

"We've produced over 250 hours of television for PBS over the years," he said yesterday. "But I decided at the time of the bypass to cut back" . . .

Moyers was deputy director of the Peace Corps in the Kennedy administration and special assistant to President Johnson from 1963-67. He left the White House to become publisher of Newsday. His 1971 book, "Listening to America," was a bestseller, as were four books based on his TV series, including "Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth" . . .

In recent weeks, the liberal Moyers has been something of a lightning rod for conservatives eager to cut back or even "zero out" funding for public broadcasting and he has not hesitated to return fire . . .

He said yesterday there is nothing in his NBC contract that bans him from speaking out on the controversy; "there are no conditions on my voice. As needs be, I will speak to that and other issues." However, he said he's laid aside "the ax—I don't grind it anywhere" . . .

Moyers predicted that public broadcasting will survive. "I think the people in Washington understand that Americans didn't vote for a wrecking team. The challenge is to deliberate on the future and how it can be funded" . . .

Lack, in a conference call yesterday, called Moyers "the last of a breed. There are precious few individuals who can have a dialogue with the country every week about the soul of America. It takes an extraordinary mind to be able to embrace that kind of dialogue. You need a lot of wisdom under your belt" . . .

Live from the Battlefield



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Acknowledgments

My daughter, Elsa Arnett, contributed more to this book than I can adequately credit. Elsa put her own promising journalism career on hold to help me tackle the project. Without the intuition, the discipline and the encouragement of the daughter, the father would have drowned in the minutiae of his reporting life—and never completed this account of it.

The Gulf War was the most controversial story of my life and I am indebted to my fiancée, Kimberly Moore, for encouraging me to go to Baghdad in the first place and urging me to stay on during the bombing. Kimberly has been invaluable in proofreading both the hard-cover and paperback editions of this book.

Old friends weighed in with indispensable support. Not only did David Halberstam defend my controversial television reporting while I was in Baghdad, but on my return home he introduced me to the skilled literary agent Lynn Nesbitt. She secured me this book contract with Simon & Schuster, where editor Alice Mayhew took me in hand, testing the skills she had honed in twenty-five years of nurturing reporter-authors and overcoming their shortcomings. Alice and editor Eric Steel brought the project to fruition and I owe them both my heartfelt gratitude. Nina Arnett was encouraging from the beginning, and with her family helped me try to unravel the tangled threads of the Vietnam experience.

I am appreciative of Ted Turner and Tom Johnson of CNN for unhesitatingly granting me two years' leave to write this book, and for the support that they and other CNN executives have given me,

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us, and the medics began their work. Three of them worked over a seriously wounded paratrooper. "Keep pounding his heart, keep it beating," one medic urged as another applied mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. They stayed with it for an hour as bullets ricocheted around them but the paratrooper died.

Don Pratt, Chaplain Yavrin and I did the best we could to help comfort the other wounded, checking their compress bandages and bathing their heads with wet cloths. There were over thirty wounded lying there by noon, including Sergeant Gerald Mahoney, who had been hit in the knee and the thumb on the first assault. "I'll be nineteen years old on October 17 and I'll have my birthday in the hospital and I don't like that," he said. Chaplain Yavrin patted his head and said to me, "They are terribly brave boys and I'm glad I'm here today," and then crawled over to soothe a delirious soldier wounded in the thigh.

By early afternoon despite the best efforts of all, two of the troopers with serious sucking chest wounds had died, and a sweat-soaked medic in a blood-stained jacket said what everyone was thinking: "We need helicopters to get these people out. Can't we get helicopters?" The problem was that the jungle had a triple canopy, towering two hundred feet over our heads. We would have to blast a clearing out of the trees with dynamite and that took time. By late afternoon the company engineers had carved out a landing zone scattered with broken trees and stumps, and overhead a gap had been left in the canopy that let the first rays of sun into that dark jungle. The landing zone turned out to be too small for the army evacuation helicopters and one that tried to come in slapped its rotor blades against the trees. The smaller air force HH-43s were able to come in and Pratt and I helped load the wounded.

By early evening the battalion commander, Colonel John Tyler, had brought in two companies of reinforcements from behind the Vietcong positions. They searched the crest of the hill, where they found trenches and tunnels and the bodies of eleven of the enemy.

The colonel was not happy to see me. He told Pratt, "The general told us this guy is not welcome around here," but he talked with me anyway. "This is how it has to be in D Zone. There is no other way to rout them out. We have been here before and we'll be back again. If they want to fight like this then we'll fight."

I pointed out to the colonel that eleven paratroopers had been killed, forty wounded, and to continue to fight that way meant establishing a one-to-one kill ratio at best, which did not bode well for the future.

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The colonel smiled confidently. "Look, son, we're going to get better at this and the VC worse." In the early evening Pratt and I climbed on the last helicopter out. My trousers were wet—I discovered that we were sitting in two inches of blood, trapped by the lip on the metal floor from the dead and wounded of earlier flights.

I wrote my story late that night. Because we were restricted from detailing specific numbers of dead and wounded, I mentioned that the unit had sustained heavy casualties, reasonable enough, I assumed, because nearly half the company had been hurt. The next day, at the daily military briefing by American and Vietnamese officials in Saigon, which we nicknamed the Five O'Clock Follies, military officials quailed with my numbers, describing the casualties as light. When I objected, they explained that for a company-sized unit the losses were indeed heavy, but when assessed against a whole battalion they would be considered light and that's how they were looking at it.

I was infuriated at the sleight of hand and there was nothing to prevent it happening in the future.

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THE JOHNSON ADMINISTRATION grew alarmed at Vietnam news coverage and tried to limit it. The AP was a prime target. My graphic battle reports and stories of riot gas experiments on military operations, and equipment failures and weapons shortages in U.S. Army combat units had so angered Washington that President Johnson ordered the FBI to take through my life and try to come up with some dirt to silence me. AP headquarters was aware of the generalities, but only much later did we learn the extent of White House unhappiness.

Press secretary Bill Moyers observed in a 1965 memo that the coverage of CBS reporter Morley Safer and me was "irresponsible and prejudiced" and because we were foreign born we did not have "the basic American interests at heart." Moyers promised to "tighten things up" and Johnson scrawled "good" on the memo. Presidential assistant Jack Valenti wrote a memo to Johnson prior to a meeting with Wes Gallagher and other AP executives: "You may want to bring up the problem of Peter Arnett, who has been more damaging to the U.S.

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the camp holds out. If the Vietcong drives us away I will go to another camp.'"

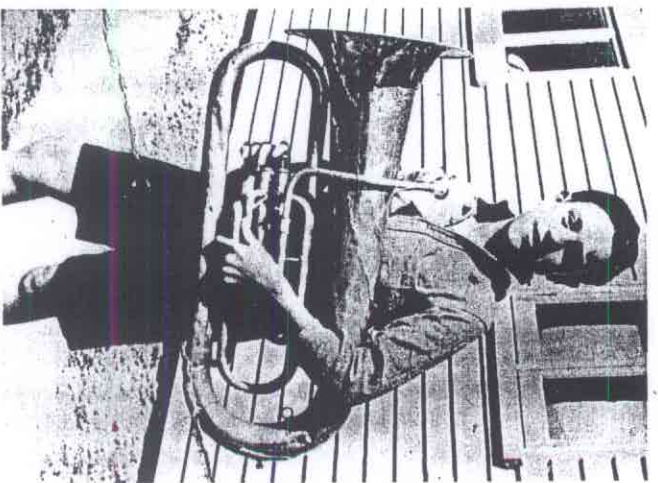
Ed White suggested I call the story "The Angel of Duc Co." I favored any title with the name Florence Nightingale in it, and we left it up to editors, who used both ideas in their headlines. Readers sent bundles of clothes and cosmetics to the Pentagon to pass on to the needy nurse. When I returned to Saigon, John Wheeler kidded me about my corniness. Horst commented on the story with unconcealed merriment, "Dat's what happens when I leave him alone in the field at night."

The 173rd

THE U.S. ARMY buildup was concentrated near Saigon and they were inundated by reporters and photographers. We drove out to the U.S. Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade camp at Bien Hoa each day, traveling the distance in half an hour or so, bumping across the final stretch of dirt road that wound through an old Vietnamese cemetery with rust-colored headstones. Olive drab ponchos were strung between the graves to shelter soldier sentinels from the searing sun. The camp tent lines were spread out across a small plateau of scrub-covered sand dunes, and by design overlooked the busy Bien Hoa air base in whose defense the brigade had been deployed. The paratroopers were reputed to be among the elite of U.S. military forces, and I was eager to see how they would fare against Vietcong guerrillas.

Their commander was Brigadier General Ellis W. Williamson, whose lean, ramrod stance and crew cut graying hair merited the nickname "Butch" his men used out of his earshot. Williamson had strode off the plane with his troops like General MacArthur wading ashore in Leyte in World War Two. The unit's information sergeant, Don Pratt, had been warned by Westmoreland's chief spokesman, Colonel Ben Legare, to caution restraint: "Get to your general before the press does, and make sure he knows that he is to emphasize the defensive nature of your mission. The 173rd is here to defend air bases and not to fight a war. Make sure he knows that." But Pratt missed Williamson at the airport and the general told the press that he had come to Vietnam to fight World War Three.

I spent my youth in Bluff, New Zealand, until my father sent me to a prestigious boarding school to further my education. But I rebelled against the strict authority and played the double B-flat bass tuba in the school band instead of cricket and rugby. I longed for adventure, to see the world. I still do.



A rainy day in the coastal province of Binh Dinh in Vietnam in February 1967.

