

LA Herald Examiner 10/30/88



Bob Greene

True heroics on that dark day in '63

THIS IS GREAT — finding something out that is completely unexpected.

You may recall that several weeks ago I mentioned an upcoming television program on the A&E Cable Network. The program — "JFK Assassination: As It Happened" — will be broadcast on the cable network on Nov. 22, the 25th anniversary of the killing of John F. Kennedy. The program consists of a videotape of NBC News' live coverage that day. The program will go on the air at exactly 1:56 p.m. Eastern Time on Nov. 22 — the precise moment NBC interrupted programming in 1963.

In the first column, I mentioned that people probably think they remember the NBC coverage that day to have been anchored by the then-popular team of Chet Huntley and David Brinkley. In fact, Huntley appeared at the beginning of the coverage, but was called off the air soon after. He appeared befuddled and out of his element, as if he could not deal with the breaking story.

The day's NBC coverage — and you will see this if you watch the A&E cable presentation — was anchored by Frank McGee and Bill Ryan. McGee was one of NBC's most prominent and respected correspondents. Bill Ryan, though, I had never heard of. He was magnificent — he did as steady and professional a job of anchoring that coverage as any network executive could ever hope for. The A&E producers, at

place that would give London that "very Far Eastern look." This time it was Thailand and the tiny resort island of Phuket.

"We selected all the sights there, then went back to Sydney to start shooting the interiors," London says. "About three weeks in, the Thai government got wor-

THE OTHER FAMOUS reporters who appeared on the air that Nov. 22 have become a part of broadcast journalism history. CBS' Walter Cronkite, of course, is sort of a one-man Mount Rushmore, the standard against whom everyone else is measured. Chet Huntley is dead. Frank McGee is dead. David Brinkley is ... well, David Brinkley is David Brinkley. For several generations of Americans, those broadcasters are as familiar as family members.

And Bill Ryan? The man who may have done the best job of anyone that day?

"I'm here and I'm working and I like it," Ryan said the other morning.

Ryan — now 62 years old — is a senior producer-reporter for WNPB-TV in Morgantown, W. Va. WNPB is a public television station serving a number of West Virginia counties. Twenty-five years later, Bill Ryan is on public TV in West Virginia and says he's happy to be doing the best job he

can.

"On Nov. 22, 1963, I was preparing a radio broadcast," Ryan said. "In addition to working for WNBC, I did several broadcasts for NBC radio each afternoon. The first bulletin from Dallas came over the wires. Somebody yelled for a correspondent. I threw my radio copy down onto a desk and ran down the hallway into the flash (emergency) TV studio. I was the first person on camera. Then Chet and Frank joined me."

As Ryan recalls it, breaking into the full network was not as easy in 1963 as it is today. "I think they had to plug us in to different sections of the country as soon as they could technically do it," he said.

EVEN NOW, HE IS unable to recall what was going on inside him for those hours as the whole nation tuned into the networks — those hours when TV news came of age. "I've gone over it so many times in my head," Ryan said. "I've tried to come up with some human or emotional reaction. I try to dig up the memories, and they're not there. I was mainly conscious of the fact that I was having to work with not much more than AP and UPI copy — they were handing it to me in takes. You know, 'first lede, third add,' stuff like that. I remember seeing the wire copy and trying to figure out, 'Did I say this before? Do I give this information again?' And of course I remember thinking that I absolutely could not say the president was dead until I was 100 percent sure."

Ryan has one vivid memory of that incredible day in 1963. After going off the air at the end of the night, he was walking alone down the hallway when a top NBC executive stopped him and said, "Nice job."

"I just said, 'Oh, shut the — up,'" Ryan said. "I put my head against the wall and I fell apart. I just stood there sobbing for five or 10 minutes."

Ryan has never seen a videotape of his coverage that day. "NBC never sent me a copy," he said. "I have nine children and 10 grandchildren, and I'd like them to see what I did. But I've never seen it myself."

I said that I had — I got a copy of the tape from A&E cable, and I have watched it a number of times.

I told Ryan that when his children and grandchildren see the coverage played back on Nov. 22, they will be very proud indeed.