



Why were journalists threatened with execution in World War One?

Video transcript – Reporters as outlaws at the Western Front

Frank Gardner: Once the war was over Sir Philip Gibbs, now finally free of the censor's dreaded blue pen, was able to write freely of his wartime experiences. Now his great grandson, Stephen Gibbs, himself a journalist, reads extracts from his writings. In his books such as *Now It Can Be Told* and *The Pageant of the Years*, Gibbs explained just how difficult it was to be a journalist outlaw on the Western Front.

Stephen Gibbs: "Pains and penalties were threatened against any newspaper which should dare to publish a word of military information beyond the official communiques issued in order to hide the truth."

Frank Gardner: In his description of the way in which the British press was controlled by the censors Philip Gibbs pulls no punches.

Stephen Gibbs: "It was the most astounding thing in modern history, the secrecy behind which great armies were moving and fighting ... By one swift stroke of the military censorship journalism was throttled."

"...For the first few months of the war we had no status whatsoever. Indeed, to be quite plain, we were outlaws, subject to immediate arrest – and often arrested – by any officer, French or British, who discovered us in the war zone."

Frank Gardner: During a post-war lecture in the United States, Gibbs explained how his time spent reporting undercover in France and Belgium nearly came to a sticky end.

Stephen Gibbs: "I was arrested before I left the boat at Havre and taken by two detectives to General Williams, the camp commander. He raged at me with an extreme violence of language, took possession of my passport and credentials, and put me under open arrest at the Hotel Tortoni ... It looked as though my career as a war correspondent had definitely closed. I had violated every regulation. I had personally angered Lord Kitchener. I was on the black books of the detectives at

every port, and General Williams solemnly warned me that if I returned to France I would be put up against a white wall with unpleasant consequences.”