



Why were journalists threatened with execution in World War One?

Video transcript – Embedded correspondents

Frank Gardner: Life as one of just five official British war correspondents, based at the British Army general headquarters in France, presented its own challenges.

Stephen Gibbs: “It appeared that GHQ was nervous of us. They suggested that our private letters should be tested for writing in invisible ink between the lines. They were afraid that, either deliberately for some journalistic advantage, or in sheer ignorance as “outsiders,” we might hand information to the enemy about important secrets ... They believed that war was the special prerogative of professional soldiers ... therefore as civilians in khaki we were hardly better than spies.

“It seemed that GHQ were drawing up rules for war correspondence and censorship; altering rules made the day before, formulating new rules for tomorrow, establishing precedents, writing minutes, initialling reports with, “Passed to you,” or, “I agree,” written on the margin. The censors who lived with us and travelled with us and were our friends ... had to examine our screeds with microscopic eyes and with infinite remembrance of the thousand and one rules. Was it safe to mention the weather? Would that give any information to the enemy? Was it permissible to describe the smell of chloride-of-lime in the trenches, or would that discourage recruiting?

“One of the censors working late at night, with lines of worry on his forehead and little puckers about his eyes, turned to me with a queer laugh, one night in the early days. ‘They want us to waste your time,’ said the officer. ‘Those were the very words used by the Chief of Intelligence. Waste their time!’”

“The limitations of censorship were of course irritating. We could not give the figures of our losses – the immense sum of our casualties, as on the first day of the Somme battle. That was inevitable because that was what the enemy would have liked to know. But the worst handicap we had the prohibition of naming individual units who had done the fighting.”