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OU alumnus Ed Turner has stocked his CNN staff with aggressive Sooner go-getters.

The Other Mr. Turner

at 

When calling the executive offices of the Turner Broadcasting System in Atlanta, it pays to enunciate. A mumbled request can get you either Ted Turner, the flamboyant, controversial favorite son of the South who heads this communications/sports empire, or Ed Turner, the hard-driving transplanted Sooner whose considerable journalistic talents have made him the number two operative at Cable

News Network, TBS' most ambitious and surprisingly successful venture.

While Ted Turner is busy making news, Ed Turner concentrates on making the news available, 24 hours a day, to 31.5 million cable viewers worldwide. They are both very good at their jobs.

Four-and-one-half years ago, when

Ted Turner launched his full-time news experiment, the media skeptics were unanimous. Labeling CNN "Turner's Folly" and "Chicken Noodle News," the major networks predicted abject failure. No one would talk to CNN, they reasoned; no one would advertise; no one would watch. Turner's profitable WTBS, Atlanta's cable-wise Superstation, would never be able to sustain the losses sure to be incurred by CNN. *Continued*

By **CAROL J. BURR**

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The most recent of the OU journalists to join Ed Turner's Sooner "twang" sessions at CNN in Atlanta is Bella Shaw, '76, now the weekday afternoon anchor.

But amid these dire predictions, a group of hard-news TV journalists were preparing to join Ted Turner's crusade. Among them was a 1957 University of Oklahoma journalism graduate from Bartlesville, Eddie Sims Turner, who, after more than 20 years as one of the broadcast business' peripatetic newsmen, was ready to make a long-term commitment.

"There were about a dozen of us," Ed Turner recalls, "400 million years ago — or yesterday. I'm not sure which. It was a crusade. Absolutely. No one knew whether it would work, but the challenge was too great not to have a go at it. The game was really worth playing to see if we could make it work, and so far, we have."

Ed Turner had some unique professional qualifications which made him an ideal addition to the hardy band of broadcasting pioneers. He had started news services from scratch before.

His first job out of Oklahoma, after a stint with Channel 9 in Oklahoma City, was with the Metromedia outlet in Washington, D.C., WTTG-TV, a station with no news department of its own whose news broadcasts were of the rip-and-read variety straight from the teletype machines. Turner

talked himself into the job of news director and put together a staff of newcomers, many of whom have gone on to become major names in the broadcast business. He hired NBC's Connie Chung right off the University of Maryland campus, brought CBS' Bob Schieffer from Dallas, and recruited "CBS Morning News" movie critic Pat Collins, Bis-Net anchor Merrill Comer and Mike Buchanan, former Oklahoma Cityan now an Emmy Award-winner in Washington.

He pioneered the 10 o'clock news in EST Washington, where prime-time shows end at 11 p.m. when most Oklahomans are heading for bed. An old buddy from OU days, Washington public relations man John Campbell, jokes that Turner received all kinds of credit for being innovative when he actually was just an Oklahoma boy who thought that the news was supposed to come on at 10 o'clock.

"Within a couple of years, we had the highest-rated news show in town, local or network," Turner recalls. "We beat all of them — even old Walter (Cronkite)."

Soon Turner was corporate news director for Metromedia, repeating in New York and elsewhere what he had

done in Washington. At United Press International Television News in New York, his next professional stop, he found a news organization of sorts already in place, but one which "had not yet entered the electronic world."

"In this day and age, you ordinarily don't have a chance to build a news group from nothing," he explains, "because they're usually in place. You come aboard, and you run it, add to it or take away from it. I was fortunate to have the experience of setting up an organization from scratch."

When UPITN was sold, Turner moved to "CBS Morning News," back to Channel 9 in Oklahoma City and again to Washington, but his two bosses in New York, Reese Schonwald and Burt Reinhardt, remembered his knack for organization when they signed on to turn Ted Turner's visionary CNN into reality.

"Burt and Reese introduced me to Ted at halftime of an Atlanta Hawks basketball game," Ed Turner says, recalling that the team's owner was jumping up and down on the bench next to the coach. "He was a better show than the game. He just assumed that I was already working for him, although we hadn't talked salary or even what my job was going to be."

The job was CNN managing editor, in charge of setting up news bureaus in Washington, New York, Los Angeles, Dallas, Chicago and San Francisco, hiring assignment editors and reporters, finding stations that would exchange their local coverage for CNN's worldwide service. Today 170 stations in the United States have such an arrangement with CNN, but the first ones were hard to come by.

"A lot of stations didn't want anything to do with us because we were cable, i.e. the enemy," Turner says. "Others didn't think we'd last, so why bother? It really amounted to calling on old friendships made over 20 or 25 years around the country."

CNN was selling a whole new concept in news programming, all day every day — in-depth interviewing and background features, scheduling so flexible as to allow staying with a story until it was told completely whether it took minutes, hours or days, an emphasis on professional news gathering and reporting rather

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Mike Boettcher, '78, who now covers El Salvador for NBC, was one of Ed Turner's first Oklahoma City recruits at CNN.

Tony Clark, three-degree OU graduate, went from Oklahoma City's Channel 9 to Dallas, where he is CNN's bureau chief.

than media superstars in the anchor booth. Ted Turner's dream was hard to put together and even harder to sell.

Ed Turner encountered his greatest obstacles in his old stomping grounds of Washington, D.C., where to this day there is no cable television.

"Washington is really behind the times," Turner insists. "It's like being a foreign correspondent in your own capital. We finally had to give the Pentagon a satellite dish so they could see us — this little bitty company in Georgia and the Pentagon with all the trillions of dollars they've got."

Turner Broadcasting had to file lawsuits to combat CNN's exclusion from the White House pool coverage. "It's much easier now that we've got 31.5 million subscribers and worldwide exposure," Ed Turner admits, "but we're still the new kids on the block. With four or five thousand journalists in Washington all clamoring for interviews, it's a question of 'Who are they? Why do I need to give them my time?'"

When a satellite dish went up on Capitol Hill and congressmen discovered how easily the voters back home could turn in to cable and to

them, CNN experienced sudden acceptance. "We could give them time that they just simply couldn't get on the other networks," Ed Turner explains.

"The networks do 22 minutes and 30 seconds of news at night. Their morning shows have gone from being hard-news shows to very soft, fluffy, featurey kinds of broadcasts with five or seven minutes worth of news in

"CBS has three or four thousand people, and they all shoot for that half hour with Uncle Dan. Anything else is failure."

them. When I produced the "CBS Morning News," it was one hour of hard news with Hughes Rudd. We didn't get the ratings, but we had news. Now it is chitchat and lengthy interviews — which is fine — but not the way it was.

"Working journalists in television at the network level today don't have a great outlet for their wares," Turner

insists. "CBS has three or four thousand people, and they all shoot for that half hour with Uncle Dan (Rather). Anything else is failure. You can imagine that a lot of them never make the air."

By way of contrast, CNN emphasizes the message instead of the messenger. "We have 49 anchors," Turner says. "If we paid them all Rather's salary, we could bankrupt Switzerland. People don't watch us for our anchors; they watch us because the news is there, they trust it and it's convenient to them."

And at CNN the employees learn the broadcasting business from start to finish. At the entry level, Turner likens working for CNN to going to graduate school and getting paid for it.

"I wish CNN had been around when I got out of college," he says. "These kids can be here a few months and all of a sudden they're in Cairo with cameras on their shoulders chasing some army, or they're in the Sudan, or they're in the Antarctic. You can't do that working for the other networks, and CNN attracts a lot of journalists for that reason." *Continued*

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Pam Olson, who left the OU campus in 1972 to join Oklahoma City's Channel 9, is the CNN Washington bureau's correspondent on the House side of Capitol Hill. This photo was taken as she covered the Reagan re-election campaign last fall.

Turner receives from 500 to 1,000 job applications a week for the 700 to 800 jobs in the Atlanta headquarters and the 1,000 to 1,200 assignments worldwide. He feels that being non-union gives his organization an advantage over the competition in developing a highly competent staff with a wide range of capabilities.

"We can be a lot more flexible, because one person here can sit down at a typewriter and write the story, run the camera in the field, bring that tape in and edit it at the electronic edit bench — and for all I care, go on the air and report it. That can be eight different union jurisdictions in New York. If we have to move fast on a story, we've got people who know how to do four or five or a dozen different things. If everybody is marshaled on a major story, nobody can touch us."

Flexibility doesn't stop with the capabilities of the staff at CNN, however. For all practical purposes, the cable newsmen have thrown away the clock in an industry enslaved by split-second timing. With what Ed Turner calls "major-major stories," such as the Solidarity uprising in Poland or the Beirut barracks massacre, CNN can broadcast 30 hours straight with

only an occasional break for a headline or a little bit of weather.

"That's when it's really a great challenge. It's fun to do what we do because the others just can't do it," Turner says. Even the commercials take second billing. "We try to get the commercials in whenever we can — and if we can't, we can't. On some of the live trials we've done, we've just had to drop them right and left."

With such a view of the broadcasting industry's lifeblood, it is understandable why the "experts," took a pessimistic view of CNN's life expectancy. With an initial investment of \$50 million and an operating budget estimated by *Time* magazine at one-fourth that of any other major network, CNN faced a monumental task in holding on until cable subscribers and advertising could erase a monthly deficit variously reported at between \$2 and \$3 million. Even the staff had uncertain moments, although Ted Turner himself claims never to have lost confidence in CNN's ultimate success.

"For the first three or four months, we all talked among ourselves and wondered," Ed Turner admits. "But once we got over that 10 million sub-

scriber mark and Madison Avenue accepted cable as a fact of life that they'd better learn how to use, no one internally has had any doubt."

CNN was still in the red when Ted Turner took another big gamble to stave off a competing service which one of the major networks had designed to put him out of business. In June 1982, he launched CNN2, a separate 24-hour headline news service available to both cable operators and individual television stations. CNN2 went head-to-head with a similar service, Satellite NewsChannels, offered as a virtual give-away by ABC/Westinghouse. TBS won the war in October 1983 just as CNN had begun to turn a profit. Ted Turner bought out SNC for \$25 million to take it off the air and absorb its subscribers. Temporarily back in the red, CNN took just over a year to regain its money-making status.

"We'll be one of the surviving cable services," Ed Turner says confidently. "We've got 31.5 million subscribers and a 35 percent penetration of the U.S. By 1990 we should be right at 60 percent in the U.S. plus the worldwide."

Efficiency of CNN's operation was

cited by Ted Turner in a *Penthouse* magazine interview as a major reason for the cable service's survival. The cable entrepreneur insists that while the networks have thousands of employees packaging 12 hours of news a day to be fed to 200 affiliates at a cost of \$700 to \$900 million annually, Turner Broadcasting uses hundreds of employees to feed out 48 hours of news a day to almost 4,000 affiliates for \$70 million.

"Because we don't have all the money in the world, we're forced to think differently," Ed Turner explains. "CBS or NBC can charter 15 Learjets, keep them on a runway just in case — at \$4,000 a day. I gotta figure out a way to get that picture some other way."

His favorite story of CNN news gathering ingenuity stems from the uprising in Poland when Russian "winter maneuvers" cut the country off from the world, shutting down the wire services, even replacing Warsaw's local news anchors with tunic-clad military announcers.

"We found two guys living near the Polish border with a little TV set with rabbit ears who could get the Warsaw TV picture," Turner says. "We took that picture off their rabbit ears, microwaved it to Copenhagen, landlined to Rome, uplinked on the satellite from Rome to Maine, downlinked to landline through New York through the Washington bureau, where we had a translator, then to Atlanta and back up on the satellite to the world. And it came up like that!" Turner snaps his fingers.

"People watching CNN could get just what the people of Warsaw were seeing and hearing about the fate of their country. That's real drama. And however long the Warsaw newscast was, we ran it."

Such worldwide coverage is becoming more and more routine for CNN. With bureaus already established in London, Rome, Cairo, Tel Aviv, Damascus, Moscow and Tokyo, CNN is in the process of adding bureaus in Paris, Bonn and Peking. And with worldwide coverage comes worldwide broadcasting outlets. "We're already in Australia, all down through the Caribbean into Latin America," Ed Turner says. "We're seen in Tokyo,

and shortly we'll be in Hong Kong, Singapore and Manila. We are getting ready to lease two more transponders for the Pacific Basin and Africa and a transponder for Europe, so we'll be broadcasting to the United Kingdom and the Continent.

"We just started serving Canada the first of September," he adds. As a part of that deal CNN picked up trade-out coverage from the CBC, a huge broadcasting organization much like Great Britain's BBC. "We got their coverage, live, of the Pope's 12-day visit there at no cost to us when the other networks were spending a million dollars plus."

The journalistic decisions on what to cover and how are left largely to Ed Turner. He moved up to the senior vice presidency at CNN when Burt Reinhardt succeeded Reese Schonwald as

"Oklahoma journalists pioneered the use of the camera in the courtroom. The camera is quickly forgotten . . . Courtroom sketch artists are far more distracting."

the company's president. Turner and Reinhardt, who sets CNN's business policy and makes the financial decisions, have worked together in one way or another for years. "Burt was my boss at UPITN," Turner says, "and before that, when I was head of news for Metromedia, I was his biggest client. He gives me a lot of leeway on what to cover. Of course when the price tag gets to the 5,000-10,000 buck level, I damn sure talk to him about it.

"Two years ago I began lobbying for more gavel-to-gavel, all-out coverage of the two conventions, and he said 'O.K.' We budgeted \$15 million for that, and for a small company, that's a lot of dough. But it paid off. The others didn't do much, and if you had any interest at all in politics or the conventions, CNN was the place to watch. And the ratings doubled and tripled, which was nice. Four years from now, I don't think you'll see the anchors down from New York. They'll

just cover the conventions like any other news story, and it will be left to CNN and C-Span."

Some of Turner's journalistic decisions have brought him considerable public attention. He has appeared on ABC's "Nightline" and the PBS "McNeil-Lehrer Report" to defend CNN's live coverage of the New Bedford gang-rape trial and ongoing efforts to take cameras into the courtroom for the McMartin child abuse trial in California.

CNN sought an exception to the ban on cameras in federal courtrooms for the Westmoreland vs. CBS libel trial, but the network's request was denied. The McMartin case is still in the preliminary stage, and camera coverage has yet to be determined. However, CNN did carry the Carol Burnett vs. the *National Enquirer* libel trial.

"Is the presence of the camera so intrusive that it distorts?" Turner asks. "Oklahoma journalists pioneered the use of the camera in the courtroom. They know that's not the case. The camera is quickly forgotten after idle curiosity. Most of the critics have not seen the camera in a courtroom or watched the coverage at home. They don't know what they are talking about. Courtroom sketch artists are far more distracting than a single camera over in the corner shooting with natural light."

Turner believes that the media itself will be the sternest watchdog of video courtroom coverage when and if it is permitted. "No one is going to be a tougher guardian than those of us who are trying to get this thing accepted," he insists, pointing out that to protect the victim's privacy, CNN didn't photograph the New Bedford rape victim entering and leaving the courthouse as the other networks did. "We're not about to create a monster that makes the public despise us when we're really looking for public support."

For all its public attention, Ed Turner maintains that sensationalism is a small fraction of the broadcast month for CNN when compared to "the hour after mindless hour of Congress and God-knows-what" that his network carries. But even that small amount seems somewhat out of sync with the widely publicized

assumption that Ted Turner, in his crusade against the anti-family, anti-patriotic major networks, was establishing CNN as a "good news" network.

"We never talked about that," Ed Turner insists. "News is news. People see a lot more good news than they think; it just isn't labeled 'good news.' If you get into that trap, does it mean that everything you don't label as 'good news' is 'bad news'? You don't come out with some silly grin and say 'This is good news!' You just report it."

Ted Turner's well-known tendency to "coach" as evidenced in the management of the athletic teams he owns apparently does not spill over into the day-to-day operation of his broadcasting empire. "Ted gives us the money and leaves us alone," Ed Turner insists. "He does not interfere with the editorial product at all. And that's pretty wise. He couldn't attract very many professionals if he did. I don't want to sound like a sycophant, but he's a wonderful boss.

"We have a staff meeting once or twice a week with Ted. He wants to know what kind of problems we have, the big projects we've got going, and he keeps us posted on what he's doing. He has some pretty good story ideas because of the kind of life he leads. He meets a lot of interesting people and goes to a lot of interesting places. We take some of his ideas, and when they are bad, we argue with him."

Any one of the J-School establishment of the mid-'50s would be quick to testify that Ed Turner has never hesitated to state an opposing opinion. Although he came into journalism late by way of drama and broadcasting/speech, he was the *Oklahoma Daily's* best-read columnist by his senior year.

"One of the wittiest guys I ever knew," recalls former *Daily* editor Campbell, who was Turner's college roommate and Phi Gamma Delta fraternity brother — and who takes credit for guiding Ed into journalism. That career choice led eventually to a Sigma Delta Chi national journalism award for distinguished reporting, the Cannes Film Festival award for documentaries, eight Emmys and several United Press International reporting awards.

"The journalism school didn't

know quite what to do with hybrid journalism/television news majors," Turner recalls, "so I had a lot of straight journalism courses."

After completing his degree in 1957, Turner worked at OU under Ned Hockman as a producer of documentary films, where he learned film and film editing while sharpening his writing skills with Dwight Swain. He still feels that the education and experience he gained at the University of Oklahoma gave him an advantage over other television journalists of his age elsewhere in the country.

"I always swore that if I ever got in a management position, I would hire from Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, Nebraska, all down through the middle strip where I know the best people

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come from," he says emphatically. "The competitive environment teaches you to be an aggressive go-getter for a story. Coming out of states like that, somehow you're more clear-headed. You're not afraid of work, and you usually don't come into a situation or a story with a lot of built-in prejudices.

"A lot of my friends come from New York," he explains, "and I worked in New York and Washington for 20 years. I'm continually astounded by how you go block to block there and the Serbians hate the Croatians, who hate the Greeks, who hate the Turks. Mental blocks are very harmful in the company of decent journalists."

Ed Turner has hired dozens of Oklahoma-educated or Oklahoma-trained television journalists for CNN, and he claims that all of them have excelled, without exception. He cites the news departments of television stations in both Oklahoma City and Tulsa as prime sources of personnel for the networks.

"Each station in those two markets wants to have the top news operation

in town," he explains. "They spend the money for the equipment, for the reporters and the production staff. One wants to beat the other, and that breeds excellence. The quality of the reporting and visual production from Oklahoma City and Tulsa is better than New York, better than Los Angeles. And the weather forecasting in Oklahoma is used as the benchmark around the U.S., generally acknowledged to be about the best there is."

One of his first recruits from Oklahoma City was Mike Boettcher, '78, who left CNN this year to cover El Salvador for NBC, but the general turnover rate in middle-level personnel on up is slight. Among the Sooners currently in CNN staff positions are Pam Olson, '72, Capitol Hill correspondent in Washington, D.C.; Bella Shaw, '76 B.A., weekday afternoon anchor; Charles Hoff, '67 B.A., national assignments editor; Tony Clark, '71 B.A., '73 M.A., Dallas bureau chief; and Neal Jones, '62, producer-writer. Other Oklahoma recruits include CNN executive producer Larry Lamont, producer of special events John Hillis, news anchor Sasha Foo, Los Angeles bureau reporter Brian Jenkins and sports anchor Mike Cowman.

Turner admits to a special personal interest in the career of one former OU student, however. Chris Turner, Ed's son, started as a "copy ripper" at CNN, then went next door to CNN2 Headline News, where he worked up to supervisor before being picked as a field producer traveling with the Mondale, Hart and Ferraro campaigns.

To hear Turner talk about the future of television news broadcasting — the impossible made possible by technology — it is easy to understand his pleasure in having a son follow in his professional footsteps. And in his enthusiasm, the network executive is reminiscent of a much brasher Eddie Turner nearly 30 years ago conspiring with the campus movers and shakers in the old *Daily* newsroom across from the Oklahoma Memorial Union. Back then his college cohorts could not have predicted his career in cable news — they didn't even know what cable was — but they knew that Ed Turner would make it to the top. 