

MICHAEL NELSON

# CASTRO AND STOCKMASTER

A LIFE IN REUTERS



“Russian translation”

*The Economist* 12 February 2011

Mikhail Gorbachev’s quote that “the BBC sounded the best” while he was under house arrest in 1991 is not exactly right (“*Dosvidaniya, London*”, January 29th). That was the BBC’s take from the Russian. This is the translation used by Reuters: “We got BBC, best of all... they were the clearest signal.” Mr Gorbachev was referring to the technical quality of the radio transmission, not to the content. However, he did pay this tribute to the BBC at a press conference when he could not see its correspondent: “The BBC knows everything already.”

## NEWS

“Rudolf Hell; Lives remembered.”

*The Times* 21 March 2002

In the Sixties I visited Rudolf Hell [the German inventor](obituary, 18 March) in Kiel and thanked him on behalf of Reuters, for whom I worked, for the great contribution he had made through the Hellschreiber to making Reuters a leading news agency.

Reuters pioneered the use of broadcast radio for news dissemination by morse in 1923. It started to use the Hellschreiber in 1935 and it soon became the agency’s principal means of news transmission by radio. It was this German invention which enabled Reuters during the Second World War to transmit from London an accurate and objective news service, by the best means possible, which had the effect of countering the lies of German propaganda.

The reason the Hellschreiber was the best system for many years was that each character was a miniature facsimile made up of 49 impulses, compared with up to six in other codes such as Morse or Baudot used in Teletype. So even if a few of the impulses were lost through radio interference, the character on the paper tape could still be deciphered, which was not the case with the other techniques.

Only in the latter part of the last century, when communications were improved by the use of cable and satellite, did Reuters finally stop using the Hellschreiber, which it replaced with Teletype.