

CNN - THE INSIDE STORY

How a Band of Mavericks Changed
the Face of Television News

HANK WHITTEMORE

1.

"I just wanted to see if we could do it - like Christopher Columbus. When you do something that's never been done before, sail on uncharted waters and don't know where you're going, you're not sure what you're going to find when you get there, but at least you're going somewhere."

- Ted Turner

Robert Edward Turner III was born on 19 November 1938 in Cincinnati, Ohio. His father, Ed Turner, had built from nothing a billboard advertising company in Georgia. By the time Ted was twenty-two years old, his father's company - Turner Advertising - had grown to have a turnover approaching \$1 million.

His father achieved all this despite the fact that he suffered from clinical depression. His condition worsened until Ed Turner killed himself with a pistol in 1963. At the age of twenty-four, Ted Turner became President and Chief Executive Officer of Turner Advertising.

"I came out of a Depression family, where my father started with absolutely nothing. He thought that the way to be successful was to make a lot of money and have a lot of riches and power. When he was fifty-three years old, he had a nervous breakdown and blew his brains out. I loved that man desperately; he was my father and we were very close; but I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what it was he did wrong. He put too much emphasis on material success. I can tell you it's fools gold...."

I really grew up with a tremendous work ethic and it was pumped into my head to "be a success, be a success." And all during my life, I had this gnawing feeling that maybe I wasn't going to be a success. My father died when I was twenty-four and he was the one, really, that I had expected to be the judge of whether I was successful or not.

So when I finally got on the cover of Success magazine, I held it up and said, "Dad. Do you see this? I made the cover of Success Magazine! Is that enough?"

- Ted Turner

By 1970, Ted Turner had built his father's billboard advertising business into a multi-million dollar conglomerate. He decided to purchase Channel 17, an Atlanta, Georgia based television station that was losing \$600,000 per year. Less than six months later, he also bought Channel 36 in Charlotte, North Carolina.

"When I bought Channel 17, everybody just hooted at me. The station was really at death's door. I didn't bullshit anybody. I told them I didn't know anything about TV. My accountants told me we were going to go broke. They said I was crazy...."

I just love it when people say I can't do something. There's nothing that makes me feel better, because all my life people have said I wasn't going to make it.

The secret of my success is this: Every time I tried to go as far as I could. When I climbed the hills, I saw the mountains. Then I started climbing the mountains..."

- Ted Turner

Turner was also putting together a team of guys who would be prepared to go all out with him. Some of his team included:

- Paul Beckham, Corporate Controller:

"One time I went with Ted to a bank where we were trying to get a loan. The executive listened and finally said, "That's all very well and good, Mr. Turner, but what if you drop dead?" In the next second, Ted dropped to

the floor and lay there as if he were dead. Then he slithered up the side of the desk, grinned at the banker and said, "Fooled ya, didn't I?" We got the loan."

- Gene Wright, Chief Engineer:

"There were maybe forty-three people in the whole corporation when I arrived. We had absolutely no equipment at Channel 17, and no real engineering or maintenance being done. We had all kinds of technical problems and kept going off the air. I bought a cot and basically moved in and stayed there. The operators would sit around playing banjos and smoking pot while the film would run out. Nobody really knew there was a Channel 17 in those days.

One time our transmission line blew all the way to the top of the tower. It took about seven days to get back on air. I worked on the tower for that entire week and never got any sleep and my shoes were full of blood. If I had time to look for another job, I wouldn't have been there. I thought Ted was crazy..."

- Gerry Hogan, Sales Manager:

"I was twenty-five when I started working there and I thought to myself, what have I got to lose? Every year, from then on, I've said the same thing. It's like you're halfway up the hill and you've got to see what's on the other side. Every year, something crazy or wild came up. Eventually, you take on the attitude that you're like guerilla fighters. Or a bunch of pirates going after an armada. You accept the tough parts because there's a sense of mission. I got to the point where I really enjoyed living on the edge, which is what Ted always did. And he would do anything, like stand on a table or take a guy by the throat or kiss his feet. Whatever was called for in the situation."

"When I got to Charlotte to head up sales, I wondered what the hell I'd done. The second night I was there, I was watching our big prime time movie. It was some Maureen O'Hara movie about the desert. Here it comes on, and you see these camels with Maureen O'Hara, and they're walking upside down and backwards! This goes on for about three minutes and they shut it off. It's just black. For five more minutes. Then the movie comes on again, but the camels are still upside down, so it goes off again. But this time, instead of a black screen, they run about seven minutes of straight commercials. Finally it comes on and we try once more - but now it's a different movie!"

- Bob Schussler, Sales:

Channel 17 went from fifth in a five station market to fourth in a four station market when one of the other stations went broke. Turner held a big party to celebrate. Someone mentioned that it seemed like a hollow victory, but Turner would have none of that and declared it as one of the biggest feats ever achieved in the history of broadcasting. The party went all night.

Turner started running repeats of *Star Trek*, *Gilligan's Island*, *Leave It To Beaver* and *Andy Griffith* while the other stations ran news broadcasts - and got an immediate ratings boost.

By combining salesmanship with belt tightening and a simple philosophy that the way to succeed was to keep increasing the value of the product, Channel 17 was showing a profit within one year of Turner taking over. In 1972, he acquired the rights for Channel 17 to broadcast the Atlanta Braves baseball games - an incredible coup for a tiny UHF station.

Turner became adept at selling his station. When advertisers complained UHF audiences were small, Turner said that was offset by the fact that they were

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