

### **Telegraph Obituary**

Sandy Gall, intrepid ITN foreign correspondent who for 20 years was the face of News at Ten

His weatherbeaten face was etched with devil-may-care lines, and though best known as a newsreader, Gall was first and foremost a reporter



Gall always demanded more funds to finance coverage and after ITN dispatched him to Vietnam in the mid-1960s, head office sent him a cable saying: 'You supposed to be reporting Vietnam, not buying it' Credit: Jonathan Wong/South China Morning Post via Getty Images

Sandy Gall, who has died aged 97, was one of the vintage faces of Independent Television News (ITN), having earned his journalistic spurs as a war correspondent for the Reuters international news agency.

Gall was everyone's idea of the dashing front-line reporter: tall, self-confident and easygoing, his weatherbeaten face etched with devil-may-care lines of tension, fortitude and laughter. Although he later became one of the most familiar newsreaders on British television, he was first and foremost a reporter.

Whether diving into a trouble spot or scrambling out of it with his latest scoop, he covered almost every war and uprising since the Suez crisis in 1956. He first made his mark on television in Vietnam in 1965 when he witnessed the first American marines go ashore at Da Nang, and filed the first aerial pictures shot from inside an American helicopter gunship, Washington's latest war machine deployed for the first time.

Ten years later he watched North Vietnamese tanks roll into South Vietnam's presidential palace as the last Americans beat an ignominious retreat. Although he remained in Saigon with a French camera crew to film the North Vietnamese in their moment of triumph, Gall discovered that back in Britain ITV was on strike, and his report languished untransmitted for many days.

He was one of a small group from ITN flown to South Africa in 1978 to welcome back a film crew headed by the reporter [Michael Nicholson](#) who had been ambushed in Angola on their way to interview the rebel leader [Jonas Savimbi](#). After 110 days and walking 1,500 miles on foot with Savimbi's forces, the exhausted trio returned to Johannesburg to be greeted by Gall bearing a bottle of Dom Perignon.



Gall with Ahmad Shah Massoud, subject of his last book, *Afghan Napoleon* Credit: IAN JONES

In the 1970s heyday of ITN's flagship bulletin *News at Ten* he was regularly paired with the unpredictable and alarmingly refreshed Reginald Bosanquet. The duo lent an air of conviviality to the proceedings, the *Sunday Telegraph* critic Philip Purser noting: "Even if the heavens are falling there should be time for a quick one before last orders."

Having given up studio newscasting in 1990, Gall turned in one of his most audacious scoops the following year when at 63 he accepted a new brief to present special reports on the Middle East, Africa, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, the wartorn country he knew best and with whose people he intensely sympathised.

In the 1980s as a television reporter, he had engaged with the mujahideen guerrillas fighting the Russians during the Soviet occupation. In 1986, he spent two months dodging Russian patrols in search of the guerrilla leader, [Ahmad Shah Massoud](#).

After a month's delay in Islamabad caused by blizzards, Gall and his camera crew, disguised in baggy trousers and long, floppy shirts, were taken across the border by mujahideen rebels. For two weeks they trekked through the Panjshir Valley to Farkhar, travelling in a captured Soviet jeep, on horseback, or walking for 10 hours at a time. They survived on rice and goat meat augmented by their own supplies of corned beef, tinned sardines and tinned cheese.



Gall in the ITN studio Credit: Keith Waldegrave/ANL/Shutterstock

In Farkhar they found Massoud planning to attack an Afghan garrison of some 300 troops a few miles to the north. Massoud's followers overran their target after pounding it with rockets and heavy machine guns.

So appalled was Gall at watching thousands of Afghan civilians crippled by the fighting, and realising how little was being done to help maimed men, women and children, that he set up his own charity to supply them with artificial limbs. It was run by his wife and two of his daughters.

During the 1991 Gulf War, Saudi Arabian tanks set off through a desert packed with mines to liberate Iraqi-occupied Kuwait. Behind them, just out of sight, Gall, his cameraman Steve Harrow and producer Michael Gillings drove between the Saudi tank tracks as Allied rockets pounded the front line.

Fifteen miles into the mined area they saw the first signs of battle, and Gall achieved his ambition to be the first reporter to witness the initial stages to free Kuwait. He also brought out the first pictures.

Whenever possible, Gall avoided officialdom and preferred to work either alone or with a small team. He would not have seen the opening phase of Kuwait's liberation so soon had he asked permission to make the trip. On the other hand, Gall was often consulted by Foreign Office staff wanting to pick his brains, and he regularly exchanged information gathered on his foreign assignments with British Intelligence.



But when, in his 1994 memoir *News from the Front*, he described lunching with the head of MI6 after returning from one of his reporting trips to Afghanistan, some former ITN colleagues voiced misgivings. A scathing review in *The Guardian* described him as “an ageing, grey-haired reporter” now revealed as “one of the secret weapons used by MI6 to force the British public – otherwise cosmically uninterested – to take some notice of the anti-Soviet battles going on in Afghanistan”.

Although he knew only too well the difficulties and dangers of shooting combat footage for television, Gall accepted that the end result could seem disappointing. Everything seemed smaller, the sound of battle never coming across. “I am always let down when I eventually see my footage and think: ‘Is that all?’” he told *The Daily Telegraph* in 1968. “The sense of danger never comes across on television, and you, the correspondent, always look as though you had an easy time of it.”

Henderson Alexander Gall was born on October 1 1927 in Penang, Malaya, where his Scottish father, Henderson Gall, managed a rubber plantation; his mother was the former Jean Begg. Returning to Scotland with his family when he was four, he was brought up in Banchory near Aberdeen and educated at Glenalmond College. After National Service in the RAF, he graduated from Aberdeen University with a degree in modern languages in 1952.





Gall presenting the news live from Iraq during the Gulf War, 1991 Credit: ITN/Shutterstock

He joined Reuters in 1953, covering the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya and reporting from Hungary on the anti-Soviet uprising. In Budapest he met Eleanor Smyth, who was working in the British Legation's visa section. The couple married in 1958.

With Reuters, Gall reported from Germany, East Africa (where he was briefly held in a Ugandan prison death cell), and the Congo at the height of the civil war after the departure of the Belgian colonialists, and South Africa. "Coverage superlative. Costs transcendental," ran one cable from London.

Gall was always demanding more funds to finance coverage. Moving to ITN in 1963, he was dispatched to Vietnam two years later, taking a characteristically freebooting approach to his exploits in the field. "You supposed to be reporting Vietnam, not buying it," said a cable from head office.

During one Congo assignment, Gall was seized by rebels and driven to the airport at Stanleyville to be expelled. He was led past rows of prisoners lying on the floor, hands bound behind their backs, awaiting execution. Hearing one of them calling his name, Gall recognised ITN's Kenyan stringer. After a fierce argument, Gall had him freed and boarded the aircraft with him.

Gall's canvas widened to cover the Vietnam war, China and the Middle East. He returned to Afghanistan, but by then his wife Eleanor was becoming highly edgy about his long absences. While he was with the guerrillas and under fire from Soviet forces, he received a cable from Eleanor, stating bluntly: "If you stay out there any longer I will divorce you."



Gall and his wife Eleanor Credit: Ken Towner/ANL/Shutterstock

Within a couple of years, the marriage was in dire trouble. He left his converted oasthouse home in Kent for a bachelor apartment in South Kensington. He was having an affair with Georgina Gillan, a widow with two teenage boys; her RAF pilot husband had died 10 years before from cancer. She and Gall had met in the St Moritz ski resort, where he was a tobogganer with the Cresta Club.

Eleanor, a Roman Catholic, refused to divorce her husband despite her earlier threat. To her the affair was a minor matter, although she insisted that he could only return if he gave up Mrs Gillan. When Gall abandoned her, Mrs Gall dumped several of her husband's Savile Row suits, his golf clubs and a case of his favourite Château Lafite on the doorstep of his mistress's home in Fulham.

The affair lasted a year. Gall returned to his wife Eleanor, and at the age of 65 took over as host of Radio 4's weekly travel show, *Breakaway*. He also contributed to the BBC's television series *A Great Journey*, trekking across the deserts of the Middle East on a camel.

In 2012 he published his 10th book, *War Against the Taliban: Why It All Went Wrong in Afghanistan*, then in 2021 came his final book, *Afghan Napoleon*, his biography of [Ahmad Shah Massoud](#), who was assassinated in 2001.

Sandy Gall was appointed CBE in 1988 and CMG in 2011. He served as rector of Aberdeen University between 1978 and 1981 and was awarded an honorary degree on his retirement.

His wife died in 2018. Their son and three daughters survive him. One of his daughters, Carlotta, worked as Afghanistan correspondent of The New York Times.

**Sandy Gall, born October 1 1927, died June 29 2025**