

A good man to know in a crisis



Jon Ashworth

Harold Burson created a world leader in PR, now a thriving part of WPP's growing empire

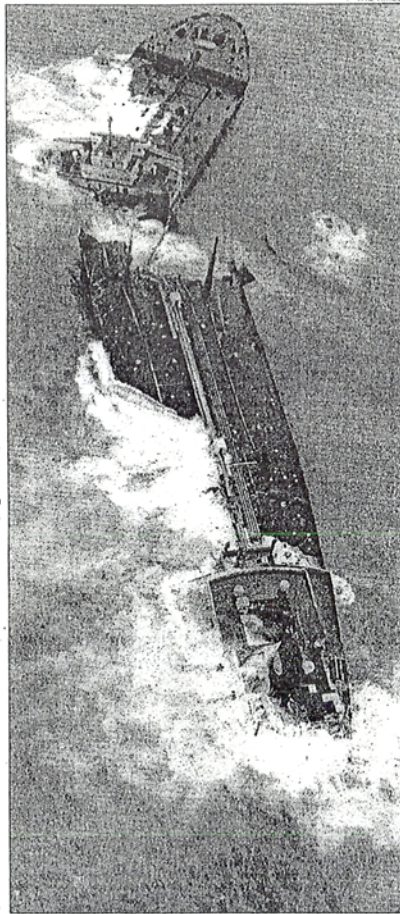
AS A young PR man in America in the Fifties, Harold Burson had an unwelcome encounter with the "client from Hell". W.F. Rockwell Jr, chief executive officer of the giant Rockwell Corporation, was obsessed with appearing on the cover of *Life* magazine with his new executive toy, a company helicopter.

Burson knew there was no way he could pull it off, but he had an idea. "I knew the company was coming out with a very interesting new product for home workshop use called Delta Shop that combined several tools into one — a saw, a planer, a drillpress — and in those days, six, seven years after the Second World War, there was a 'big do-it-yourself movement'."

Burson persuaded *Life* to devote three pages of its Thanksgiving weekend edition to an article on the product. "Literally there has not been a medium, whether its television, advertising, the Super Bowl, that has ever had the impact on readers that *Life* magazine had. Within a week, there wasn't a Delta Shop to be bought in the United States."

These days, at 79, it is Burson who gets to fly in helicopters. His name is one half of Burson-Marsteller, which has grown over the years into the world's biggest public relations firm. It is known for its work in crisis management, acting for BP over the *Torrey Canyon* oil spill, for Union Carbide over Bhopal and for Pan Am over Lockerbie.

Burson-Marsteller was bought in 1979 by Young & Rubicam, which is itself being bought by WPP, the London-listed media services group, for £3.1 billion. The deal creates the world's biggest advertising group. WPP this week reported first-half pre-tax



Burson-Marsteller acted for BP over the *Torrey Canyon*

profits 22 per cent higher at £137.7 million.

Burson took to the skies over London en route to the Farnborough Air Show, where his firm was sponsoring a conference for aerospace executives. He went into public relations at a time when it had few of the connotations of today. "There's always been a love-hate relationship between public relations people and journalists. Talk to most journalists and they say, public relations generally is terrible, but certain people are 'great guys' and very helpful."

The problem, he believes, is that PR people today do not understand journalism. "Twenty years ago, if you were an applicant for a position and you

had not had journalism experience we would not consider you. I would say today, less than 10 per cent of the people we hire have journalism backgrounds."

Burson was born in Memphis, Tennessee, in February 1921 to English parents. His father was gassed at Ypres in the First World War and relations who had moved to Memphis encouraged the Bursons to join them.

Burson began contributing to the Memphis newspaper, the *Commercial Appeal*, while still at school and used his writing to pay his way through college. He spent his summers working at the *Appeal*, including a stint writing obituaries.

Burson duly joined the newspaper's staff, hoping that someone would "discover" him and whisk him away to New York. War broke out, and Burson broke the story — big news locally — that the Army was to build a vast ammunition facility just outside Memphis. The site was in prime farmland and involved displacing up to 4,000 families.



High-flyer: Harold Burson's career in PR took off when he persuaded *Life* to run a feature for his client, W.F. Rockwell

The construction contract went to a unionised company, to the exclusion of local contractors. There were ugly confrontations. The owner of the company telephoned Burson — who had interviewed him — and asked for his help. "He called me one day and said, 'my people don't know how to deal with the press down there. Can you take a leave of absence and handle this thing until it blows over?' Also he offered to double my salary. I was making \$25 a week and he offered to double it to \$50."

The dispute resolved itself, but Burson was persuaded to stay on. He spent three years travelling around America with his boss, winning deferments from the army because his work was assisting the war effort. The company built successive military facilities, including the atom bomb plant at Oakridge.

In late 1943 Burson decided it was time to do his bit. "I did not want the war to end without my having been in it —

but it wasn't setting the world on fire." A journalist on *The New York Times* told him of an advertising man in Chicago who was looking for a PR firm to publicise a project. His name was Bill Marsteller. "He and I immediately clicked. His background was a lot similar to mine. He grew up in an impoverished family. He had paid his way through school."

Marsteller's client was none other than the helicopter-obsessed W.F. Rockwell Jr. "He loved having his name and picture in the paper and he had visions of being on the cover of *Life* magazine — with the helicopter. Bill Marsteller was a smart guy and he wasn't going to touch this thing himself. He figured, 'I'll hire a PR firm. Let them go down in flames.'"

Marsteller pushed more and more work Burson's way, and there was a case for closer ties. The pair decided to form a new company. "The legend is that I let him have 51 per cent of the control to get my name in front of the hyphen. We did talk about the 51 per cent, but there was never any discussion about whose name was going first." Burson-Marsteller opened for business in March 1953.

In 1961, Burson-Marsteller opened its first overseas office in Geneva, elevating it to the firm was up to five people. "It

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status of bigger rivals such as Hill & Knowlton. Burson calls this a defining moment for the firm. A second came in 1970 when the firm won a large contract with General Motors, then at the pinnacle of its success.

"In those days, General Motors was the epitome of any company ever in industrial history," says Burson. "Microsoft never achieved what General Motors was back then. But one of the things that this bred was a lot of arrogance. They considered themselves totally infallible. We said, 'you guys are on the wrong track.

You ought to be supporting the airbag and the seatbelt rather than fighting it. There's going to come a day when your best customer's going to be a woman. You should clear up your dealerships and put nice restrooms in.' We got the business."

The General Motors endorsement brought business flooding in. "If you look at Burson-Marsteller after 1970, you see that curve just going up and up."

Burson stepped down as CEO in 1988 but remains founder chairman. He still comes into the office from his home in Scarsdale in Westchester, some 20 miles north of Manhattan. He and his wife, Bette, have lived in the same house since 1954 and are soon to celebrate their 52nd wedding anniversary. Their home has a television room with a 50-inch screen — "my wife is a big fan of old movies" — and is patrolled by a rather pampered West Highland white terrier, Geoffrey.

The Bursons have two sons, each with families of their own. One, Mark, is executive director of the Ronald Reagan Foundation and lives in California. The other, Scott, is an attorney with the National Labor Relations Board in Boston.

Firms such as Ogilvy & Mather, J Walter Thompson and Hill & Knowlton have largely outlived their founders. David Ogilvy is dead; John Hill has gone. Bill Marsteller died 12 years ago. Burson's few surviving peers include Dan Edelman, now 80 and living in Chicago.

Harold Burson represents a lost age of public relations; an era when PR was free of the nasty overtones it has today. But at least when he wants to go for an airborne spin these days, there is always some deep-pocketed client around to pick up the bill.

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