

A Horizon exercise in diplomacy on the rules of engagement

War games

Television

Hugh Hebert

IN THE words of a senior officer, "I think what we've got here is one positive and three negatives. We've got the positive, we have the capability. The negatives are it doesn't seem to make military sense, there are no indications they're preparing to do it, sustainability is going to be very difficult."

Got that? Here we are in the middle of a programme allegedly de-mystifying the military and being served up gobbledygook in a greasy mess tin.

Capability we surely have. For **Purple Warrior** (Horizon, BBC-2), the producer Alec Nisbett and his crew were given what was apparently unprecedented access to the Northwood HQ which ran the Falklands war, and also ran this large scale exercise last November.

The first of this two-part Horizon was about the rules of engagement. The negatives are that whether it makes military sense or not, it made a damn confusing first programme, and that sustaining interest into a second would be difficult without the come-on of an air attack on the Kaig airfield right at the end of programme one. What makes it even more like Alice-land is that it is impossible to see how far the decision-making in this exercise reflects real conditions in a crisis. After the preview I heard one critic mutter that if there had been rules of engagement in 1815, Wellington would have lost at Waterloo.

The scenario of exercise Purple Warrior was this. The Government are sending a task force to evacuate British nationals from the fictional island of Kaig, which has been invaded by the forces of the neighbouring but unneighbourly republic of Orange. The rules under which the task force is sailing cover most contingencies, from whether the Blue (British) forces are allowed to point their (unloaded) weapons in the direction of Orange forces, to when and whether Blue warplanes can overfly Orange positions on reconnaissance.

Sometimes the commanders in the field want to be allowed to move further up the scale of tension and response, sometimes they decline to use one of the options that have already been made available to them. But at the top of the chain of command is the Prime Minister and whoever she plays sardines with in the kitchen cabinet at the crucial time.

The rules of engagement, in other words — and this programme illustrates this pretty well — are whatever the Government and Northwood wants them to be at any particular moment. And the most famous recent example of this was the interpretation of the rules during the last cruise of the Belgrano.

This first programme was in essence a 50-minute public relations exercise for the idea that the 22 rules of engagement with which Purple Warrior was run are the best assurance that full-scale war does not break out by miscalculation. It sanctifies the

doctrine of graduated response. The fact that it is going out just when Exercise Fire Focus is screwing up the South Atlantic tension is not going to do much for the BBC's defence against allegations that it has become a Government poodle. The message is clear — don't worry about all that shenanigans round the Falklands, you can see how frightfully careful we are not to set a match to this blue touchpaper.

They are resurrecting Steptoe and Son, and they brought back Alf Garnett. They have now turned **Andy Capp** (Thames) into television. This may seem like turning the black and white Daily Mirror strip into a moving colourful series. But for the first couple of weeks it looked more like setting its feet in concrete and then seeing if it would swim.

Is all this part of the fabled Fifties revival, arriving a bit late? Is it a new ennobling of the working classes on the grounds that they are now an endangered species?

In his mane-tossing lecture on LWT a few week's ago, Colin McCabe talked about how much closer to working class life comedy series used to be, and how at the same time they



Convincing: Paula Tilbrook

were able to make valid social comment before they went in for lip gloss and designer aprons. Really? Steptoe and Son, in one clip, were arguing about whether they should install a bathroom, with Son explaining the foot-washing function of a bidet. This clip seems to say — in those days, geddit, the working class were not just poor, they were dirty and ignorant too.

When they adapted another Mirror strip as television — Jane, a year or two back — the producers at least let boldness be their friend. It was a genuine attempt to translate the strip into a televisual equivalent. The only gesture in that direction with Capp is the tiresome habit of having characters address the camera directly.

Capp is essentially a one-joke strip that you read in five seconds flat. Stretching it to half an hour a week, even with Keith Waterhouse on the typewriter, busts its 1950s knicker elastic. Do you really believe James Bolam as Andy in an impeccable check cap suitable for a Florida golf course, and a biological white vest? If it is not too hurtful to her, I'm more convinced by Paula Tilbrook's Flo, who clearly gets her outfits from Oxfam. But then curlers do wonders for a class image.