

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS WITH BULLETS IN THEIR CELL PHONES



The Frontline Club, London

by Lew Toulmin

I ate at the Frontline Club and attended a fascinating lecture on “Mafia Life and Death across Five Countries” in September 2017. The club is housed in two four-story brick buildings near Paddington Station in northwest London.

HISTORY

The Frontline Club has a history much different from most London membership clubs. It was founded in 2003 by Vaughan Smith to honor fallen members of his Frontline TV News organization, which began in 1989 in the chaos of the Romanian revolution. Smith (right) is a former Grenadier Guards officer, conflict TV journalist (Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya) and organic farmer who realized that freelance and other conflict journalists had nowhere to meet in London, and usually met in abysmal dives when on assignment overseas. He wanted a place for such working journalists to “sit around the fire and tell stories.” The goals of the club are to promote free speech, good investigative journalism, train young journalists, and facilitate journalistic research and networking.



MEMBERSHIP

Membership is open to women and men who are working journalists, stringers, freelancers, diplomats or other persons who have “an interesting resume.” Nomination requires support from two existing members. There are about 1500 members, and membership costs 375 pounds per year (225 pounds for overseas, over 65, or youth), with a 100 pound joining fee. The fees go to support the Frontline charity, which offers training and grants in journalism.

FACILITIES, ACTIVITIES AND DRESS CODE

The main club building at 13 Norfolk Place W2, is a three minute walk from Paddington Station and tube station, and the express train to Heathrow Airport. The neighborhood has numerous small restaurants and eateries, but is not filled with major London sights or glorious architecture. The Club is about a third of a mile from the north side of Hyde Park.



The main building of the Club is located in a former tool factory with plain, purple-brown brick siding. It was fully refurbished in 2016. It has an attractive restaurant on the ground floor open to the public, a mezzanine with more restaurant seating, a first floor with a members-only lounge (about 45 x 45 feet), a second floor with a meeting/lecture/filming room that holds about 160 people, and a third floor with two bedrooms. Across the street is the Annex with 10 additional bedrooms.

The Club has held over 1200 events since its founding, including talks by Alexander Litvinenko (former Russian spy and Putin critic assassinated in London via Polonium 210 in 2006), Benazir Bhutto (assassinated in 2007), and Julian Assange (who stayed in the Club before giving himself up to police in 2010). Not all Club speakers are murdered or are in trouble with the law. Most are working journalists covering British or foreign topics. I attended a lecture by an Italian investigator cum Oxford don who has examined the Mafia and Mafia-like organizations for over 30 years, and he is still alive, kicking, and fascinating.

In addition to weekly (or more frequent) talks, films and discussions, the Club offers all-day or half-day seminars in media topics such as film editing, ethics, camera equipment, writing for the web, data-driven journalism, and that vital topic: first aid.

Most Club lectures are open to the public, but all workshops and seminars are only for members. The Club sponsors the Frontline Freelance Register for member networking.

The club and lounge are filled with large classic photos taken by journalists over the years. There is a display in the lounge of objects that have saved the lives of journalists, such as the cell phone of owner Vaughan Smith, with a bullet still lodged in it from the 1998 battle and massacre at Prekaz, Serbia.

As you might expect from young, mostly left-wing and libertarian journalists, there is no dress code, although a surprising number of members and visitors do wear jacket and tie.

The Club has a small number of reciprocal clubs around the world, including The Explorers Club in New York City.

FOOD

I had a quick dinner of a salmon salad before the seminar in the 50-seat restaurant. It was excellent, was listed as starter but was quite filling, and cost only nine pounds. I told the server that I had to be upstairs at the lecture in 25 minutes, and made it with a minute to spare. Very impressive, fast and friendly service.



Owner Vaughan Smith owns a large organic farm and 300-year-old manor house in Norfolk, and regularly supplies the club with produce and a rare breed of pigs.



BEDROOMS

There are twelve bedrooms at the Club. I was not able to inspect one, since they were all full, but found some illustrative pictures on line. All bedrooms are en-suite, and the price is 90 to 110 pounds per night, VERY reasonable for London. It appears that the rooms average about 12 x 15, moderately large, with a simple white décor, large windows, and large black and white “foreign correspondent” photos for decoration. A waiter described one room in the main building as “an attic room, with a sloping ceiling, about 20 feet long by 10 feet wide, en-suite, cozy but with plenty of room.” Only members and reciprocals can reserve bedrooms.

Of all the various London clubs we have stayed in or inspected, these bedrooms appear to be an excellent value.

Other photos of the club are shown below.





The lounge on a crowded evening



The south half of the restaurant



The lounge when not so crowded



Julian Assange at the Frontline Club receiving files from a Swiss banker. Owner Vaughan Smith posted bond for Assange and lost his money when Assange fled.



The exterior of the restaurant



Event in the Club lecture hall