



Journalists under Fire: The Psychological Hazards of Covering War

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Foreword by Chris Hedges



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Journalists under Fire

1

A Hazardous Profession

* * *

Meanwhile, all across Rwanda murder, murder, murder,
murder, murder, murder, murder, murder, murder.

Philip Gourevitch

The patient who entered my office on a frigid December morning came with an interesting history. The referral note from the hospital's senior neurologist laid out the clinical details. The woman suddenly took ill in a restaurant while dining with family and friends. Her husband noticed her ashen appearance and the beads of sweat on her brow and nose. When asked what was the matter, she was unable to reply coherently. Alarmed by his wife's garbled speech, he called for an ambulance.

En route to the hospital, the woman lapsed in and out of consciousness, and by the time she arrived in the emergency room it was feared she'd had a stroke. The neurology service was consulted and the patient sent for a brain CT scan. To the surprise of the medical staff, no abnormality was seen, despite the persistence of her moribund state. She was admitted to the hospital for further tests, but by the following morning had made a spontaneous and complete recovery. At her own request, she was discharged. She left the hospital smiling and in good spirits.

A week later, before she could keep her first outpatient appointment, the symptoms returned, suddenly and dramatically. One moment she was fine, calm, and intelligible; the next, agitated, tremulous, and incoherent. She was again rushed to the hospital, where she was readmitted for more tests: scans that revealed the cerebral anatomy with postmortem-like clarity and showed how much blood was flowing to individual brain areas, electrodes that picked up the intensity and frequency of brain waves, multiple tubes of blood drawn. All test results were normal. With methodical tenacity, the neurologist-in-chief worked his way through a long list of possible

neurological causes for his patient's symptoms. Each was definitively ruled out. This done, he called in a cardiologist for an opinion. If there was nothing wrong with her brain, perhaps the problem lay with her heart and its ability to keep sufficient blood flowing to the brain. More tests followed. A mountain of computer printouts representing thousands of health care dollars were distilled into a terse comment, scrawled in the patient's chart: "No abnormalities found." By this time, the patient had, as before, made a full recovery.

At this point, the woman was referred to my neuropsychiatric service. The typed letter from the neurologist-in-chief echoed Conan Doyle, whose lucid, deceptively simple prose and keen analytic mind he had long admired: "The physical examination is normal, the laboratory results are normal," he wrote. "When we have excluded the possible, whatever remains, however improbable, is the answer to the diagnostic riddle. I have therefore concluded there is nothing physically wrong with the patient." And then, almost as an afterthought, he penned below his signature, in a beautiful flowing cursive, the following: "I wonder if it all has anything to do with her work? You may recognise the name. She's a war reporter."

* * *

It is not uncommon for patients to present with neurological symptoms with no obvious physiological cause. Neurologists see many thousands of such patients a year. These patients are said, in psychiatric parlance, to have a *conversion disorder*. This is, in effect, a rerouting of emotional distress into physical symptoms, an unconscious process that changes, or *converts*, emotional dysfunction into any of a variety of neurological abnormalities. Patients with conversion disorder may be unable to speak, move limbs, or experience sensations such as touch and pain. What they all have in common, despite the disparate set of complaints, is the absence of a neurological disorder that could account for their condition.

In the past, these patients were given a diagnosis of hysteria. The sometimes bizarre and florid nature of their symptoms would seize the physician's attention and even make for good theater. The great nineteenth-century French behavioral neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot routinely displayed such cases before a rapt audience at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris. A famous painting by Pierre Andre Brouillet, exhibited at the Salon de Paris in 1887, shows Charcot and a swooning patient surrounded by an assortment of onlookers: physicians, students, journalists, artists, and even Charcot's twenty-year-old son.

The often dramatic presentation, coupled with the neurologist's sense that he may be missing some underlying disorder, frequently leads to a slew of unnecessary investigations. Test after test is ordered, cementing in the patient's mind a belief that she is afflicted with a serious physical illness. And there is a compelling, albeit false, logic to that belief, often unwittingly reinforced by the medical profession. "Why do so many tests if you do not suspect something is seriously wrong?" reasons the patient. If symptoms begin suddenly, if there is a clearly identifiable stressor, and if the patient is open to psychological explanations, the prognosis is improved.

In the case of the female journalist, the neurologist-in-chief made the correct diagnosis. By the time she came to see me, there was no trace of any language impediment and the history I obtained was an articulate, compelling narrative of a career spent in war zones. For years, I learned, this woman led an itinerant lifestyle, following in the wake of armies and relief organizations, recording events that were for the most part brutal and desperately sad. A decade of cumulative stress, which included a number of near-death experiences, reached an apogee when, in the span of a few days, her cameraman was killed while on assignment with her and, in a separate incident, a close colleague was badly wounded in an assassination attempt. Deeply shaken by these experiences, she took to medicating herself with tranquilizers and alcohol, two drugs that were readily available on the black market in war zones. She thought this would calm her nerves and give her a few hours of peaceful sleep, but instead her anxiety became acute; it was soon accompanied by a host of physical symptoms such as uncontrollable fits of shaking, sweating, a rapidly beating pulse, and tightness in her chest. Frightened by these attacks, which she attributed to heart problems, she consulted a physician in Khartoum, who advised her to return to Canada for treatment. When she got back to her family in Toronto, however, some of her symptoms spontaneously disappeared. Buoyed by this improvement, she never went to see a physician. It was a week after her return that she took ill in the restaurant.

It soon became clear in our conversations that while she loved her work as a war journalist, she found the job stressful and at times terrifying. The death of her cameraman and the shooting of a close friend were not isolated events; she had seen colleagues killed and wounded at depressingly frequent intervals over the years. Still, although she counted many of those colleagues as friends, death had until recently bypassed her own immediate circle. She saw it as something that happened to others, never to her. This charmed belief system suddenly disintegrated with the mortar shell that fell

out of a clear blue African sky and took the life of her cameraman, someone with whom she had worked closely for five years.

As I gained more insights into her profession, I began to realize that the tragedy that overtook my patient was not unusual for a war reporter. So I was surprised when she told me that psychiatric help, even in the form of basic counseling, was not readily available to her. She was employed by one of the world's major news organizations, but she had no access to this type of assistance.

"There is an unspoken view within the profession that you either cut it or else get out," she told me. "There are no half measures. Reporting war is all about having the 'right stuff.' Sure we know that we drink too much and at times our emotions are all screwed up, but that comes with the turf and if you find that hard to deal with, then there is always the royal family to follow or a Wimbledon to report on, heavens forbid." She shuddered. She had by that time made the decision to give up working in conflict zones, but it was clear that domestic reporting had little appeal for her.

In the months after her first visit to the emergency room, I persuaded her to cut back significantly on her alcohol consumption and begin exercising. These two measures — coupled with medication to alleviate residual, at times intense, symptoms of anxiety — brought about a considerable improvement in her mental state. She judged herself almost back to her old normal self, and her husband concurred.

But despite deciding not to return to front-line reporting, she remained haunted by her past and revisited these events in her therapy sessions with an obsessional regularity. The more I listened, the more I came to realize that her profession, for all its allure and excitement, was practiced at a cost to both emotional equilibrium and physical health. After a session in which she recalled, in moving terms, the famine in Sudan and how the images of that disaster refused to leave her, I turned to the medical literature to see what had been written about war journalists and their particular susceptibility to psychiatric distress. I imagined that a subject of such descriptive power would surely have stimulated a considerable body of work. No doubt I would be able to find some guidelines to long-term management and outcome, two variables that were of interest to me given my patient's good early response to treatment.

A second surprise was in store, however. Not only had most of the news organizations neglected to provide for the psychological welfare of their war reporters, but trauma researchers had ignored them too. Trawling

through the literature, I could not find a single reference to the subject—no articles, chapters, or abstracts. I had stumbled on a virgin topic, lying unrecognized within a larger literature devoted to the emotional consequences of traumatic events.

Matters could have been left, quite satisfactorily, at that. After all, the patient had recovered, and I had learned from an interesting case. But the stories and images my patient conveyed to me over the course of six months had more than piqued my curiosity. They'd instilled within my researcher's mind a need to know more about this group of individuals—journalists who, if my patient was any yardstick, chased wars, revolutions, and famines with a tenacity both impressive and alarming. My contact with her stimulated a host of questions. What kind of people choose war journalism as a career? What motivating factors make them decide on such a dangerous profession? What are their backgrounds? What are their family lives like? Why had no one researched this area before? And, central to the whole topic, how do war journalists react psychologically to the stresses and dangers of the job? In the case of my patient, the presentation was florid; work-related stress masqueraded as a constellation of neurological symptoms suggesting a stroke. Such a reaction struck me as extreme. But was it? I had no way of knowing. There were no data out there.

* * *

War journalists loom large in the public's consciousness. These intrepid men and women appear on prime-time television news against a backdrop of conflict and mayhem. The locations are frequently exotic and the visual images imbued with all the tension and drama that accompanies war. Any recent major conflict—Kosovo, Bosnia, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the Gulf War—brings to mind images of flak-jacketed, helmeted reporters clutching microphones, while all around smoke billows, buildings lie in ruins, and explosions punctuate the dispatches. Their faces disappear and reappear as the media focus shifts from one part of the globe to another. But despite all the uncertainty and danger associated with war, their familiar presence remains one of the few constants. Somehow, they appear untouched by the death and destruction that surrounds them and forms the heart of their *métier*.

This belief that war journalists are removed from the events they report on is captured perfectly by Jules Verne. His richly imagined novel *Mysterious Island* begins with the escape of four Union soldiers by balloon from a

military prison in Richmond, Virginia, during the American Civil War. After surmounting many hazards, the men find themselves marooned on an island, where their fight for survival is aided by Captain Nemo of the submarine *Nautilus*. On meeting the group for the first time, the mysterious captain tells one of the escapees, Gideon Spillet, a war correspondent with the *New York Herald*, "I know you. You specialize in war news. You supply the ink, the soldiers supply the blood." Spillet does not challenge the captain's opinion, and his silence may be construed as tacit agreement that this is, indeed, how his profession operates. Soldiers may bleed and die, but journalists emerge unscathed. And is this not how it should be? After all, war journalists are not combatants—the conflict is not theirs and they do not bear arms. They simply have a job to do, which is to report the news. Night after night their presence in millions of homes is testimony to Nemo's trenchant opinion.

Jules Verne is not alone in his view. Over the past twenty years, a burgeoning literature has focused on how individuals deal with potentially life-threatening stressors. A formidable psychological trauma industry has been spawned, leaving few traumas unexplored. Researchers have examined how veterans respond to the dangers of combat and how civilians cope with man-made and natural disasters. Rape victims, assault victims, refugees, policemen, firemen, abused spouses and children, survivors of motor vehicle and industrial accidents—all have been studied in depth and their psychological response to trauma documented. Yet, as I discovered, nowhere in the countless pages of journals devoted to psychological trauma is there a single piece of research on war journalists.

To a degree, the profession itself has helped foster this silence. Embedded within the persona of the war journalist is an element of self-deception: the idea that he is someone who can confront war with impunity. It could be argued that this is a necessary prerequisite that allows war journalists to practice their profession. The news bosses are not immune to this way of thinking either, for it affords them a degree of comfort when dispatching journalists to wherever the latest conflagration erupts.* The profession has been so effective in fortifying these constructs and perpetuating a very public myth that researchers in the field of psychological stress have, to date, passed them by.

*There has been a concern on the part of journalists that, although assignments are in theory voluntary, refusal to accept a dangerous posting could have a negative impact on their career.

But cracks have started to appear in the well-constructed defenses. Organizations such as Reporters sans frontières and the Canadian-based International Freedom of Expression Exchange now keep statistics on the number of journalists arrested, tortured, wounded, and killed. Their communiqué for 2000 lists sixty-two journalists who were assassinated that year. (Sixty-three journalists were killed in 2005.) Although most of these were local reporters killed for exposing crime and corruption, the names of war journalists also figure prominently. The deaths in Sierra Leone of two celebrated and very experienced journalists, Kurt Schork of Reuters and Miguel Gil Moreno of Associated Press Television News, have helped dent the myth of invulnerability that has so tightly enveloped the profession.

* * *

Chris Cramer is just one journalist who has suffered work-related psychological trauma. What makes him different is that he has written with candor about his experience. In 1980, when he was a reporter with the BBC, Cramer went to the Iranian Embassy in London to apply for a visa. He wanted to go to Tehran to report on the American hostage drama that was then unfolding. He had been standing in line for only a few minutes when six terrorists stormed the embassy and took him and others hostage. Held for thirty-six hours, he escaped by faking a heart attack. The remaining hostages were freed by the Special Air Services six days later. After the siege ended, Cramer was offered stress counseling by the BBC and the United Kingdom's Home Office. He rejected both, a decision he later came to regret. "It wasn't the done thing, but I think if I knew then what I know now I would have taken myself off to a shrink."

Like many individuals exposed to hazardous situations, Cramer found that the event lived on in his mind in the weeks, months, and years that followed, not only influencing his emotions and behavior but also serving as a catalyst for life-changing decisions. "It fundamentally changed my ability to do my job," he recalled. "In other words, I lost my bottle. I did not want to be knowingly anywhere that was unsafe — at one point that could even be a restaurant or the underground. I didn't want to be anywhere that put things outside my control." Six months after the siege, he moved from reporting the news into a management position at the BBC.

Today Cramer is managing director of CNN International. Sensitized by his own experience, he uses his present position to facilitate debate on what can be done to help war journalists traumatized by their work. He is

not alone in his concern. The BBC established a policy of offering counseling to employees in the 1990s, and other news organizations are starting to follow suit. An overall concern for journalists' physical safety seems to have led to a newfound willingness to discuss their psychological safety as well.

The time seemed right to initiate the first organized study of the effects of stress and trauma on war journalists. Before I could even begin to assess the extent of the problem — if indeed there was one — I needed to develop an understanding of what war journalists experience in bringing the news to the public. Many in the profession are wordsmiths, and their accounts of what they have endured are frequently articulate and imbued with all the passion of the events witnessed. Accordingly, letting them speak in their own words has certain important advantages: better to hear this direct than have it filtered through the word processor of the researcher.

As an aside, I was initially uncertain what to call the study's participants. The terms *foreign correspondents* and *war correspondents*, while widely used, do not capture the stills photographers, television cameramen and camera-women, and producers covering conflict. For similar reasons, the label *war reporter* seems too limiting. In the end, I opted for *war journalists*, but I recognize that journalists such as John Simpson dislike the term. In his memoirs, he describes an episode in which, in the presence of Martha Gelhorn, he berated his colleague Max Hastings for using the words. Simpson's objection is that some journalists may use the "war" descriptor as a means to self-aggrandizement. In certain cases he is probably correct, although none of the journalists in my study used the term this way. And while the journalists I studied did not confine their work to war zones, war and conflict formed such a large and defining part of their careers that the term seems appropriate.

* * *

Anthony Loyd is a journalist working for the London *Times*. He is the author of a painfully candid memoir, *My War Gone By. I Miss It So*, and his career has taken him to Bosnia, Croatia, Albania, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Syria. But the conflict that stands out for him as the most dangerous was Chechnya.

"Chechnya was the most shocking because the violence was so intense and the war so encompassing," he told me. "There was a guarantee that if you scrambled out of your basement and went out in the day in the city center, you either saw people getting killed or people who had just been

killed or were terribly wounded. Or you would have a near-death experience yourself.”

Loyd arrived in Chechnya in the winter of 1994 and stayed for six weeks. The level of violence in Russia’s breakaway republic was so extreme that many journalists opted to stay away. In besieged Grozny, he found a city under such intense bombardment that there was no place for journalists to hunker down and wait out the danger. Loyd explained:

I can generally expose myself to violence for a period of time if I want to and then go back to some place safe at the end of the day. Once you were in Grozny, however, there was none of that, and the image I have taken away is one of the sudden explosion of shells and then people sprayed all over the walls.

One experience particularly sticks with me. There was a heavy barrage going on outside the basement I was holed up in with four or five colleagues and then it stopped and this young Russian girl came rushing in and was shouting in her broken English, “Help us, help us.” We ran off with her into the snow and not very far away we run smack into this woman, a big woman covered in blood and wearing a fur coat—I don’t know if it is her blood or not—and she is dragging a sledge and on the sledge was, I don’t know who, her husband or brother or whatever. He was dead, in bloody shreds, twisted torso—with one leg dragging off it. They must have been walking along and must have had the sledge with something else on it and then he must have been killed by the shelling and she must have just rolled him on to the sledge and in her hand she had his leg—a big leg—with the boot right on the side and she was completely unhinged by what had happened maybe half a minute before and she was screaming at us, as close as I am to you, with this leg going back and forth, this big fucking leg—and you could just see in the gap between her gloves and coat, her skin, taut with the effort from the weight of the leg, and she was screaming at us. We were transfixed and just behind her where this barrage of shells had landed there were about six or seven people—her own people actually—who were just blown into bits lying around with bits of head and limb and everything.

Groznyaya. The word in Russian means “terrible.” And terrible indeed were the sights that Loyd confronted. Amid the carnage an old man lay facedown, covered in dust. Both legs had been severed, one above the knee, the other below. As Loyd walked past the stricken man, a hand reached out and grabbed his ankle. “He was still alive! The heat of the blast had actually

cauterized his wounds. He was not even bleeding. I was just in shock,” recalled Loyd.

What the fuck to do? I mean you are in this place where there is no hospital and there is no car, there is heavy fighting everywhere, there were no people on the streets that you can see because of the fighting and even the fighters are inside taking shelter and then you confront this horrible mutilation and this one old guy is still alive without his legs! We could hear the raining barrage of shells which were sort of fixed in lines to fire and were going off all over the place. Maybe there were thirty shells which were suddenly exploding all over the place and which might be coming closer to us . . . or might not, it was impossible to gauge.

There was this really heavy fear between me and these other three guys and we just looked at each other and this old man could tell what was happening. I can speak a bit of Russian and could understand what he was saying. He kept grabbing at my legs, saying, “My legs, my legs, please don’t leave me, please don’t leave me,” and we ran because we were fucking frightened. I think we were really shell shocked and mutilation itself is really distressing to witness — so we ran back to our cellar and a couple of the other journalists were trying to say that the Russian girl had come because she wanted us to film what had happened because she felt that it was bad and wanted journalists to show the world what was happening. I am fucking sure that she did not come for that reason. I am sure she came because she wanted us to help.

For Anthony Loyd, six years later, the memories of that terrible scene in Grozny remained vivid. He had seen many people killed in conflict before, but that day, and particularly the image of the woman waving the leg, was engraved in his memory. “It is like looking at a light bulb and then looking at the imprint. Days after it, I could still see that woman. Literally for several days after it, there was this serum of an imprint. I still think of it very often. I certainly have not forgotten it.”

One of the other journalists who was in Grozny on that fateful winter’s day was Jon Jones. A veteran of photographing conflict over a fifteen-year period, Jones, too, regarded Grozny as his most dangerous assignment, but it was not the actual fighting or even his own near-death experiences that disturbed him the most. Rather, what moved Jones was the fallout of the fighting — that is, the effects of war on the local population and the destruction it brings to their lives.

On one occasion, Jones and some other journalists were taken to a hospital to view the victims of a Russian bombing attack on a Chechen farm.

There he met two sisters. The older one, who was about nine, was badly wounded, but it was the younger one, about eight, who really affected him.

She was unscathed, covered in mud, but she was crying blood. She had blood running down her cheeks from the concussion effects of the bombs. After that visit, we were taken to the farm [where the bombing had occurred] and it had been devastated. They took us into this little room and there was this bed just full of dismembered children. There were about eight or nine of them under these blankets. They were in pieces, literally in pieces. You can't shoot it. You can't. What I used to do was shoot a frame or two in acknowledgment that I had been there and had seen it and as a way of showing my editors I had been there. But I knew it wasn't going to go anywhere. Nobody is going to publish it. So you do it because you are there to record it, but you don't make a thing of it . . . the picture I have is of a child's head and just a blanket, but they took the blanket off and it's like . . . you can't do that, put the blanket back on. That and the image of the girl crying blood stay with me.

* * *

Why repeat stories like these? What is there to be achieved by describing the minutiae of a massacre? Is it not sufficient to state that war journalists are exposed to danger and see gruesome sights? After all, a degree of self-imposed media censorship is already taking place, as alluded to by Jon Jones. Even as he focused his lens on the bed of dismembered children, he knew the few frames he shot were going nowhere. The images were simply unprintable, the horror of the episode deemed beyond the threshold of what the public could stomach. However, when news organizations sanitize the content of news, pandering to their viewers' sensitivities, they also inadvertently cleanse the image of the working lives of war journalists, obscuring the many risks and dangers they confront.

The experience of war defines the profession and the very essence of those who practice it. This is what captures the public's imagination so vividly, but also what drives the symptoms that live on for journalists long after the events they documented. However, maintaining a balance between factual description on the one hand and sensationalism on the other demands vigilance. Fascination with what the war journalist endures in war zones can very easily slip into voyeurism. This does the profession and any study of it a disservice. Conversely, to back off from describing the full magnitude and breadth of the dangers confronted by war journalists

would leave the impression that ink was more likely to be spilled than blood. Extending an anodyne to the lives of war journalists would also make any meaningful psychological study of the profession impossible. For the reader to discern the significance of war journalists' dreams or flashbacks — to comprehend the strains placed on their relationships and the difficulties many have in adjusting to life back in a society not racked by conflict — war, and the “pity of war,” in Wilfred Owen’s memorable words, must be laid bare. It is a theme that will reappear throughout this book; to understand what war journalists do, the sanitized wrapping placed around war must be stripped away.

The lives of war journalists are, to varying degrees, bound to the lives of the perpetrators and, especially, to the victims of war. And being war’s amanuensis can come at a cost. In Bosnia in 1989, Jon Jones experienced firsthand the terror of being cast as a target by Serbian paramilitary forces.

On a number of occasions I was taken into the wood at midnight and had a mock execution. On two occasions I was dragged out of a car and put up against a wall. I thought that was it. They stripped me of all identification. You can tell, you know, that you are in trouble when you hand over your passport and a guy spits on it and throws it into the bushes. We couldn’t speak Serb or Croat and they thought we were spies. They were hassling us, intimidating us, trying to force us into speaking Serb or Croat, which you would do the more scared you got [when people tend to revert to their mother tongue]. But we couldn’t speak the language, so in the end they let us go and I remember climbing into the car and I was shaking. I couldn’t drive. It was a real effort.

It happened in Grozny as well. Pro-Russian rebels took me into a wood in a car and I tried to get out and they kicked the door shut. I thought, this is it. They’ll just waste me in the car. They didn’t. I was there for about an hour. They put me into the car and made me drive to the frontline at two o’clock in the morning, which is even more dangerous, and luckily I was fine. Those kind of things would just happen.

While there is an element of brinkmanship on the part of these rogue militia, at times, threats translate into action. The case of Fred Cuny is a tragic example of this. William Shawcross, in his book *Deliver Us from Evil*, calls Cuny a “great American — a sort of universal Schindler, a man with lists of millions of people . . . whose lives he succoured and saved.” Cuny combined his technical expertise in urban planning with a remarkable gift for improvisation and force of character to spearhead humanitarian relief oper-

ations, first in Biafra and thereafter wherever conflict or disaster demanded the attention of the world's non-governmental organizations: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Guatemala, Armenia, the Gulf War, Kuwait, Somalia, Bosnia, Albania, and finally Chechnya, where he went missing with two Russian Red Cross doctors and an interpreter. Despite the efforts of many, from President Clinton down, he was not found until years later some Chechens claiming to have his body offered it as ransom to his family. Such is the randomness of war. On a whim, on a callous and, to us, inexplicable impulse of a bandit warlord or one of his minions, a life embracing a quarter-century of the most remarkable humanitarianism can be snuffed out.

Sitting captive in his car in the Chechen woods, Jon Jones knew this. Those who kill so easily seldom weigh the scales of justice. "Where there is anarchy you can do anything you want," he said in an interview with me. "That's why soldiers just go berserk. If soldiers take a town they don't stop killing. Once all the defenders have gone they kill everything, you know, birds, dogs, cows, chickens. They don't stop until it's all gone."

We paused in the interview and Jones lit a cigarette. Having listened to him relate several other harrowing escapes, I asked an obvious question: Had experiences like these ever made him think of doing something else for a living? In response, he got up from the kitchen table and walked over to a notice board, removed a pin, and handed me a photograph that showed a room with a hole in the wall, the faint pattern of wallpaper, smashed furniture at the head of a bed. He told me quietly:

The only time I thought of that was when I had a shell in my bed. I was lying in bed at night — this is Sarajevo — and a mortar tank from the local army pulled up outside my front door and started firing at the Serbs. This is a regular thing they do. But normally they fire four or five rounds and then run. This time it was kind of eight, nine, ten, eleven rounds. The first round of returning fire hits the building next to me . . . and the second round comes through my wall. It is an artillery round, it comes through the wall into a chest of drawers that my bed is up against and explodes and blows me right across the room into another wall. And I haven't got a mark on me, not a scratch. But I am wet. I started panicking because I thought it was blood. A friend of mine ran in from the next room with a torch. It was milk. A big carton of milk had exploded. So I was covered in milk, covered in plaster dust, just standing there.

* * *

I came to observe that the violence inflicted on war journalists, by either accident or intent, was at times of a level indistinguishable from that endured by the civilian population in the areas of conflict. What befell the photographer John Liebenberg on the battlefields of northern Namibia and Angola in the late 1980s and 1990s illustrates both the randomness and the premeditated nature of this threat. Liebenberg was on the staff of the *Namibian* newspaper, a vocal and barely tolerated opponent of South African occupation. His photographs of atrocities committed against SWAPO (the South West Africa People's Organisation) fighters by members of Koevoet, a lawless Namibian police group closely allied to South Africa, led to his frequent arrest and maltreatment. On one occasion he was incarcerated in a room with a wild baboon. "The animal was really savage," he recalled. "It had bitten people and sat there snarling at me . . . and that fear . . . that sweat . . . it is still with me." Despite such intimidation, he persisted in his work, even after a bounty was placed on his head. When independence finally came to Namibia, Liebenberg turned his attention to the civil war in neighboring Angola. His personal archive of horror accumulated in Portugal's erstwhile colonial jewel is of an extraordinary magnitude and unsettling to record.

I was very fortunate to have known some of the generals in Luanda who gave me access to the front lines. One day I flew into an area recently captured from UNITA [National Union for the Total Independence of Angola] and the MPLA [Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola] general gave an order that looters would be shot. That afternoon two boys were brought to him. They had been caught raping some women. They were angry that UNITA people had been living in their house. The general just took out his pistol and shot one of the youngsters in the groin and the other in the stomach and then he sat back in his chair. The boys were in agony, asking for water, crying "oh my God," and the commander looked over at me and said, if you give these guys water, my friend, I will fucking kill you now.

A shocked Liebenberg ignored the threat. He was fortunate. The general did not shoot him too. His penalty was to be placed back on the helicopter and banished from the front lines for a week. But the episode, like many others, stayed with him. "Instead of trying to describe how I feel about it today, let me just say I don't photograph weddings and I won't photograph baptisms, because I cry," he confided.

In Liebenberg's tortured Angolan narrative, there is a hurried sense of the inevitability of future calamity.

In 1997, the plane I was traveling in crashed near Huambo, one of the districts in central Angola . . . we were coming in to land, in a tight spiral. UNITA had just left the fringes of the city, but elements had stayed behind and a group fired a missile at the plane. It hit a wing . . . the plane crashed quite badly . . . the pilots were killed and some of my colleagues were really badly injured . . . after the crash, the plane exploded . . . it was quite close to a battalion of young MPLA soldiers, tank soldiers and they immediately started looting the plane . . . and there I was with a serious bang on the head, trying to get my equipment and stuff out.

The events that befell Anthony Loyd, Jon Jones, and John Liebenberg are not unusual. They are repeated time and again for war journalists, with a relentless intensity over the course of many years. Greg Marinovich, João Silva, Ken Oosterbroek, and Kevin Carter were four South African photographers who experienced just that. Traveling the unpaved streets and alleys of the sprawling black ghettos of Johannesburg, they produced a series of shocking, startling images documenting their country's transition from shame-faced polecat to regional powerhouse. "The time of greatest danger is when a bad regime starts to reform," observed Alexis de Tocqueville. South Africa in the early 1990s was the perfect affirmation of this. Rampaging mobs, murder by stabbing or necklacing, the panic of crowds fired upon by the security police, the summary roadside execution of white supremacists by a black soldier: these images gained the photographers national and international prominence. Awards followed, including a Pulitzer for Marinovich for an image of a man stabbed and set alight by a crazed mob. The four photographers quickly became known as the "Bang Bang Club" and were the subject of articles and photographs that recorded their hazardous lives. By the time South Africa limped into her first multiracial general election, the toll exerted by the unremitting violence on the Bang Bang Club was appalling. Oosterbroek had been killed, Carter had committed suicide, Marinovich had been shot. Only Silva emerged physically unscathed. Adding to the attrition, an unofficial fifth member of the group, the photographer Gary Bernard, also committed suicide. The two surviving members told their story in a book that became the vehicle for a cathartic outpouring of pent-up grief and anger.

Marinovich's career is an example of the risks war journalists encounter.

He has been wounded four different times, once during the same confrontation that claimed the life of Oosterbroek. On that fateful day, the Bang Bang Club had gone to Thakosa to photograph a looming showdown between rival militia. Members of the National Peacekeeping Force, a conglomeration of troops from the South African police, apartheid homeland armies, and the South African Defence Force, were meant to storm a hostel occupied by Inkatha fighters. But the poorly trained peacekeepers panicked, firing their weapons indiscriminately, killing Oosterbroek and seriously wounding Marinovich.

It was a day Marinovich would never forget, but his initial reaction was not what we might expect. “The most interesting sensation was, after the pain and the shock of those first few minutes, when I thought I was going to die, there was this massive relief. Because of all these feelings I was telling you about, this guilt, this voyeurism, this profiting through the whole thing. Always escaping unhurt, having covered various conflicts, not just South Africa, by then, and with varying degrees of caring about what you’re doing. So there was this relief of having finally paid my dues, making up for what I’ve photographed. Scared was no longer there. It wasn’t there.”

Marinovich was rushed to the hospital where his condition deteriorated and fear returned, intermingled with grief for his dead friend who was lying nearby: “My pulse was dropping, and I couldn’t breathe properly because the lung had collapsed. Some friends came into the hospital ER with TV cameras and they just, instead of rolling, they were just looking at me. Very experienced people and I thought, ‘Fuck, I’m going to die.’”

When we met, I encountered a large, pleasantly disheveled man with an open forthright manner. His answers came quickly, emotionally. There was a no-nonsense warmth to him. Like many of the journalists I interviewed, his descriptions of events were often scatological. Marinovich liked the word *fuck*: fuck this, fuck that, racist fucks. We chatted on the rooftop of a Johannesburg hotel. After the trauma of the past decade, it was an exciting, happy time for him and João Silva. Their photographic skills had received international acclaim, their book, *The Bang Bang Club*, was about to be launched, and there was talk of a movie. His cell phone rang constantly. After he spoke to his fiancée, who phoned from Switzerland, he turned the phone off and we resumed talking.

Three months after he was shot, financial pressures pushed Marinovich into an ill-timed assignment, and he developed a series of lung infections and gout, all complications of his initial surgery. He needed almost a year to

recover fully. Another shooting followed five months after the first. (“The police opened up with birdshot and I was wounded all over. Not traumatic.”) Marinovich was shot a third time three years after that, during the South African invasion of Lesotho. This injury was more serious.

That was terrifying. João [Silva] plus myself and Suzanne [Daley, the chief correspondent from the *New York Times*] got caught in ambush after ambush with these South African soldiers. We got Suzanne into a safe spot and we went up to the armored vehicles that were pinned down under ambush. We were doing very good pictures. There’s bullets around and it’s quite scary, but there was this excitement because they were soldiers, not civilians. There’s a difference, you know what I mean? Then we got out of that situation and parked the car quite a distance away and decided not to take further chances, just wait for the South Africans to finish mopping up and then go in. And a machine gun opened up on us where we were parked. So I started the car, drove off, and stalled, or the anti-hijack device kicked in. And we just kept taking this machine-gun fire. As I stalled I got hit in the leg, [but] . . . I didn’t say anything as I had to keep the car going. We drove another kilometer under constant fire, completely terrified, and that magic bubble had disappeared yet again, that bubble of invincibility. ’Cause until you’re hit, you’re immortal, right? That’s what happened in the first shooting. Once you’re hit, you feel very vulnerable to this kind of stuff. That magic bubble is gone.

Listening to Greg Marinovich, I discerned a common thread linking his thinking to that of Loyd, Jones, Liebenberg, and almost all of the other war journalists who spoke to me of their experiences. They operate within a unique belief system, one that defines the concepts of threat and danger quite differently from any other group of subjects I have studied. It is not that their appreciation of what constitutes danger is absent, but rather that their threshold of what defines risk has been shifted so far along the continuum of our shared beliefs as to make it difficult to detect. How else to interpret what João Silva had to tell me? “I’ve been injured. Twice in fact. But all minor details. I’ve never been shot. I was injured in a grenade explosion and took a bit of shrapnel in my lower elbow. The second incident was during a riot. I got smashed in the face with a brick. It took me out of commission for a couple of days. I’ve never been injured in the sense that I’ve been hospitalized for months, so it doesn’t really count.” Or the immediate reaction of Jon Jones to the mortar shell that smashed through his

wall: "I was furious, really kind of angry about the whole thing, you know. Saturday night. Midnight. I don't mind it during the day when I'm looking for it."

* * *

Fergal Keane was one of forty war journalists whose names were given to me by the BBC. My initial contacts with him had been via email, and in those brief exchanges, as we passed messages back and forth trying to set up a date and time for an interview, I became aware of his articulate, eager voice. He was impatient to share his thoughts on why journalists choose war as their subject and the consequences of that choice on their psyche. We finally met in his west London home on a blustery, wet, and cold winter's morning. My first impressions of the man were confirmed. He brought an intensity and energy to the discussion that demanded attention. We spoke of many topics pertaining to war journalists, including the physical dangers they confront; their relationships with family, friends, and news bosses; the question of whether the profession is becoming more dangerous over time; the difficulty of maintaining journalistic neutrality in a conflict; and the problem of substance abuse within the profession. For the most part, the conversation flowed easily, but whenever it derailed, the reason inevitably was Rwanda.

Keane had already covered several African conflicts, including the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea and the run-up to the first multiracial general election in South Africa, by the time he went to Rwanda in 1994. But nothing could have prepared him for the genocide he encountered there. It was clear to me, almost eight years later, that his Rwandan experiences had left an indelible impression. Even for Fergal Keane, the most articulate of men, the horror was on a scale that made it ineffable.

We lived out in the field. There was no hotel to go back to at the end of the day. So, we lived with them, the victims, in abandoned villages with the smell of the corpses around you. And I suppose I found it incredibly frightening because half the journey [from the border to the town of Butari] was through areas controlled by the genocidal forces, the Interahamwe [the Hutu militia responsible for the genocide], and that was the kind of fear I've never experienced before . . . it was more than just personally dangerous. The tensions were frightening, but this was a level beyond. There was a degree to which the whole moral order was gone, so killing was the right thing to do. There were no boundaries and everyone around you had this

kind of blood frenzy . . . We felt very threatened. There were like thirty roadblocks between the Burundi border and Butari and negotiating those roadblocks was just petrifying. The [Interahamwe] would come up and hold grenades in the window, by the pin, and you were trying to persuade them you weren't Belgian because they wanted to kill any Belgians. That was terrifying.

Keane's first Rwandan visit lasted three weeks. He came to look back on it as the most difficult and frightening period of his career. When he returned to the country soon after the slaughter had abated, the emotional residue of that first experience clung tenaciously.

When I was first in the country we saw a group of Tutsis, survivors who had not been killed, outside the mayor's office. We went and we filmed, and then we went back again that night to try and film them again. [But] we were turned away at gunpoint. We were told by a priest that these people had been taken and killed that night, and we were too scared to go back and do anything about it. I felt a lot of guilt about that.

On the last day of my second trip, we met a woman who had been in Butari at the time, a Tutsi survivor. She turned out to be one of those people who was in front of the mayor's office and she said that she remembered us coming. She then said something that was really devastating. She said, "we thought you were with the militia because you did nothing to help us. We thought you must be with them." And she said that three busloads of them were taken away and the militia killed two busloads and then they ran out of energy for killing. I said to her, "Look, I want you to know I'm sorry, but I was too afraid at the time." We were too afraid to do anything. I mean it's hard to convey to you the level of fear in a situation like that.

I had completed twenty-six interviews with war journalists by the time I interviewed Mr. Keane. For the most part, the interviews took place in the journalists' homes or a local café. There had been no prior contact between my subjects and me, other than an exchange of letters, faxes, or emails. To begin my study, I collected detailed questionnaires from 140 war journalists, out of 170 names given to me by respected news organizations including CNN, the BBC, Reuters, the Associated Press Television News, NBC, ITN (Independent Television News), and the Rory Peck Trust (an organization of freelance camerapeople named for one of the most admired freelancers of his generation, a man killed in crossfire while covering the October coup and demonstrations outside Moscow's television center in 1993).

The thirty journalists who did not respond to the questionnaire either could not be traced or politely refused, save one who wrote:

I happen to be just amazed about the questionnaire I found in my mail. The first sheet happened to ask me how much beer cans I could drink in a week and if I was a cocaine addict.* You might know we are a very small community of war correspondents, and my friends might have the same feeling: are we all supposed to be neurotic, alcoholic, overstressed depressed jerks, permanently flirting with suicidal ideas? Should I rush to a psychoanalyst's couch if I consider myself—and am widely considered—a well balanced father of two, normally stressed in a stressful profession, enjoying parties like any average 36 years old human being? Anyway, I am retired from the job now, being a correspondent in Washington. So you won't be offended if I don't answer your questionnaire. At least it did have a positive impact on my depression: a huge laugh. Respectfully yours.

The second phase of my study involved face-to-face interviews with a random sample of one in five of the war journalists who returned the questionnaires.† These twenty-eight interviews took place in London, New York, Paris, Madrid, Barcelona, and Johannesburg, and together with the information from the questionnaires they form the basis of this book. To control for the stressors generic to journalism, such as getting the scoop and pressured deadlines, a group of 107 domestic journalists who had never been to war or disaster zones underwent the same assessment procedure (questionnaires for all and interviews for one in five). When discussing the findings reference will be made to this group as well.

Most of the journalists who took part in my study were male (more than 70 percent) and in their late thirties or early forties. Those in the “war group” were also experienced, having spent, on average, fifteen years covering wars. Between them, they had written about or filmed every late-twentieth-century conflagration, big and small. More than 70 percent had been to the Balkans, making this region the most widely covered of the many conflict zones listed. (Contrast this with the 33 percent who went to Rwanda, the less than 20 percent who covered Sierra Leone, or the single photojournalist who found his way to Angola, Africa's longest running war. Clearly, reporting on Africa was not a top priority for news organizations and their journalists.) Other trouble spots visited by the journalists

*The questionnaire did neither of these things.

†The data from questionnaires and interviews were collected in 2000 and 2001.

included Lebanon during the civil war of the early 1980s, Iraq during the Gulf War of the early 1990s, Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabakh, East Timor, Israel, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, Afghanistan, the Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, South Africa, Namibia, and El Salvador.

All the war journalists contacted for interviews were willing to speak with me. After a decade or more in combat zones there was much to tell, but every journalist had, in his repository of literally hundreds of traumatic memories, a particular event that stood out with an eidetic quality. Most of these fell into one of two categories. The first, applicable to the majority, involved near-death experiences: getting wounded, or being shot at, or having their plane shot down. What intrigued me, however, was the second type of response. Here the event (and it was seldom more than a single event), did not necessarily involve anything life-threatening. Nor did it involve witnessing scenes of mutilation or wide-scale destruction. Rather, it centered on the survivors of war, the victims who, through some peculiar twist in fate, had been spared death only to confront a shattered existence. It was the plight of the distraught — people who had lost their children, families, livelihood, homes, and communities, overtaken by events often not of their making, devastated by the magnitude of their loss — that shocked the journalists' sensibilities, outraged their morality, and triggered compassion and pity. And it was one or any combination of these reactions that coalesced around the image and seared it into their consciousness.

Thus, for some of these men and women who had witnessed death and dying of almost biblical proportions, it was not death itself but the consequences of death on those who lived that provided the most memorable and troubling recollections. Jeremy Bowen, the BBC's Middle East correspondent, told me:

At times I felt like an undertaker seeing the number of bodies. After having seen [a body] for the first time in El Salvador, going from that to the ridiculous, with piles of corpses, terribly mangled. I remember an event, the missile attack on the Amiriya shelter in Baghdad during the Gulf War, the so-called Command Bunker . . . We got to the site a couple of hours after it happened. They were pulling out the most horrendous bits of bodies, not just bodies, but bits of bodies, and later we went to the morgue where they had taken them. You walked into the building, the corridors were full of bodies. There was a big lecture room, which was a pathology lecture theater, with two slabs at the bottom and tiered seating, like in a university. The slabs had bodies on them, the floors and the tiered seating of the lecture

theater had bodies on them. We were literally walking around like this [and here Jeremy Bowen rose on his toes to demonstrate the absence of floor space], picking our way around the things. So going from not seeing bodies at all to that place and watching the cameraman trying to put his tripod up, trying to find place on the floor for his tripod, and literally between the legs of the tripod was a corpse. And you know, horrible things! They were terribly mangled a lot of them, but what was worse was the grief of the survivors. I always find that is the case. Death is nasty, but it ends there for the dead.

When sympathy for the survivors merges into personal identification with them, the resultant image assumes a different emotional valence, becoming even more moving, disturbing, and, thus, unforgettable. It often takes very little to bring this about. “Dead is dead. It’s all the same really,” confided Jon Jones. “Sometimes the worst things aren’t the carnage. The worst things are people you can relate to, people who look like your mother or sister.”

Having to varying degrees become habituated to death and the misery of whole populations displaced, journalists may find that suddenly confronting something familiar in one of the bereaved or dispossessed — and it may be no more than the shape of a mouth or nose, a particular tilt to the head, or some subtle, idiosyncratic mannerism — is enough to shatter the cocoon of detachment and force the tragedy of some nameless victim into that well-defended, inviolable frame of personal reference. With the wall breached, an array of fears and anxieties, previously held at bay by fortified psychological defenses, may be let in, further magnifying the emotional impact of the image. This, then, is the memory that some war journalists select, with little hesitation, from a decade-long catalog of traumatic experiences as the one that stands out the most. And the speed with which they make their choice, coupled with the clarity of their recall, highlights the power of the personalized image to capture their imagination.

There is also a third type of experience, one that I have touched on only briefly thus far. It concerns loss — the death of a colleague who also may have been a close friend. It is the most emotive of topics, and it has affected every war journalist I interviewed. No one has escaped it, everyone is conscious of it, and the threat posed by it hovers over them all, introducing an additional tension to the work they do. In this small, tightly knit group of men and women, the death of one is felt collectively. The loss of colleagues, introducing as it does guilt and self-reappraisal, is a theme central to the

profession, one linked inextricably to the nature of the war journalist's experience.

In time, I also came to realize that the experience helps explain who war journalists are as people. In my correspondence and in the many hours of taped interviews, the drama of lives devoted to recording war, with all its excitement and wonder, tragedy and pathos, was laid bare. What a heady concoction it is. An unknown source sums it up well: "Call war damnable — there is nothing too bad that can be said about it — and yet, it has a knack, which peace never learned, of uncovering the splendour in commonplace persons."

That insight is applicable, in varying measures, to both war's combatants and victims. It holds true also for war journalists; their anecdotes are testimony to the extraordinary lengths to which they go to document the news. Therein lies their paradox: war is the catalyst, not the nemesis, to their creativity. In this chapter, I have relayed but few of the many experiences conveyed to me. For the men and women of my study have not only led dangerous lives, they have been busy, too, in a decade (the 1990s) that, according to the International Red Cross, saw over fifty-six wars, resulting in 17 million refugees and 26 million people left homeless.