

# MEDIA STUDIES JOURNAL



## Front Lines and Deadlines

PERSPECTIVES ON WAR REPORTING

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Harold M. Evans, Tad Bartimus, Edith M. Lederer, Jacqueline E. Sharkey  
on the long view ♦ George C. Wilson, James Kitfield, Jane Kirtley,  
Robert Sims, Peter S. Prichard, Patrick J. Sloyan, Derald Everhart  
on the pen and the sword ♦ Tom Gjelten, Judy Woodruff on right and wrong  
Timothy J. Kenny, Donatella Lorch, Gary Knight, Susan Moeller on the price paid

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SCOTT PETERSON/LIAISON

Photographers document massacre of Tutsis in Rwanda, 1994.

# SURVIVING THE FIVE DS

*A writer struggles with the emotional aftermath  
of covering brutality in Africa.*

D O N A T E L L A L O R C H

**A** NEW YORK WINTER CAN BE cold and grim. But to me, in early 1996, after three years of covering conflict in Africa, it was like a prison. It didn't help that the city was battered by one of the worst snowstorms on record. For those first few months back in the United States, I struggled with an emptiness that I nursed alone at night in my darkened living room, watching the lights of New Jersey across the Hudson River, wine in hand, deeply lonely, anxious and unhappy. I lived

with insomnia and jumbled nightmares that even today occasionally intrude. I felt deeply alienated. My sister complained about my temper and constant impatience.

Back then I chalked it up to missing my Africa friends and disliking my new assignment. But over the years I have talked to many colleagues who shared the same experiences and realized that my emptiness that winter was very real, just as powerful as withdrawal from any drug.

We all dealt with it at different levels and

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in differing degrees. Some friends claim they are immune. Many say they can't give up that thrill of being in war zones and find that life back home is just too pedestrian and boring. I was guilty of that for a few years. At the other extreme, I have watched many drink heavily and at least one slip into alcoholism, while others suffered from bouts of depression. In my decade and a half in journalism, I know of two who committed suicide.

In Africa my colleagues and I joked that we covered the five Ds: the Dead, the Dying, the Diseased, the Depressing and the Dangerous. In three years there, I reported on six civil wars, genocide and massive refugee migrations. I walked over thousands of corpses. I was shot at, carjacked, arrested and contracted cerebral malaria. It was a roller coaster of intense emotions, an adrenaline high that included raw fear and anger and horror and pure, extreme fun. I loved it. I hated it.

The Africa reporters were a close-knit elite, a weirdly snobby clique; we differentiated between those who had covered the genocide in Rwanda and those who hadn't, between those who lived in Africa and those who didn't. We joked about dead bodies over sushi at a Japanese restaurant in Nairobi (much to the shock of neighboring tables). Yet we took Africa very personally. Many of us were deeply angered by the West's inaction over Rwanda. One British reporter even resigned in protest. A common litany and ingrained frustration was that our editors

just didn't understand what our lives were like and what we did to get a story.

I AM NOT QUITE SURE WHY I CHOSE to be a reporter and a foreign correspondent. My first television memories are of the Tet offensive in Vietnam—I was hooked. I must have been about 14 when I decided I wanted to write about war. It took another 13 years and many detours before I made it to Afghanistan and began traveling with the Mujaheddin guerrillas. At first, adventure and curiosity drew me there, but I remained in the field for other reasons. I felt privileged to witness and write about history as it unfolded, to become part of people's lives and to make it real for others thousands of miles away. Sometimes I even felt I made a difference. Gradually the strands of the story weave in and around your own life and affect the way you view everything else.

I have no favorite defining moment, no great incident of utter fear or sadness or happiness. Thankfully, colleagues have not been killed or wounded in front of me. The most dangerous stories are not necessarily the ones that have stayed with me. Certain events have remained as mental snapshots. And I remember smells.

Take Nyarubuye. The utter quiet. Small pink and white flowers grew along a red brick wall near the church, and the dust of the dirt road smoked up around my shoes. Once it must have been an idyllic little hamlet in eastern Rwanda, but when I

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COURTESY DONATELLA LORCH

Donatella Lorch with U.S. soldiers in Somalia

walked through it in May 1994 it was just bodies. The church and school complex lined by those beautiful flowers was piled with corpses—about 800 of them. Two colleagues and I spent a few hours walking over them and around them, peering into dark rooms so that we could count them, mentally separating the women and little children, leaning over desiccated, broken limbs and cracked skulls to guess how they had been killed. We didn't talk. The smell and the stillness were too overwhelming. I'd put Vicks VapoRub on my nose and a bandanna over my mouth and tried hard to gulp little breaths. The rain had left scattered puddles, and bodies had rotted in them. It was

impossible to escape that sickly, gagging stench. This place, I knew, had witnessed true evil, an evil that I could see and smell. Yet it floated about, untouchable, and all I could do was take notes.

Less than an hour's drive from Nyarubuye was the paved road. There we stopped the car and did what I had done after visiting other massacres in Rwanda and Burundi: We pulled out whatever food we had and ate lunch. Months later, a British army psychiatrist reassured me that I was not being callous but rather subconsciously reaffirming that I was still very much alive. In *The Things They Carried*, author Tim O'Brien says there is no greater feeling of aliveness

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than after a firefight. I think many of my Nairobi-based colleagues expressed this by creating a small baby boom.

**T**HE CULTURE OF WAR JOURNALISTS differs significantly from that of those covering the military or law enforcement because our war lacks institutional structure. This void boosts the feeling that one is alone. Many of us created our own inner circle of on-the-road friends. After covering the genocide in Rwanda and the cholera epidemic in Zaire, Michael Skoler, a close friend and award-winning Nairobi bureau chief for National Public Radio, found it hard even to share experiences with his family. "There was no way to really share the experience, to put it into logical, analytic terms," he said. "So the feelings never got resolved, they just sort of sat."

Especially in Goma, as he watched thousands of people die around him, Skoler said he went back and forth between wanting to help and wanting to hide behind his work. After three weeks of constant work, when his editors told him a colleague would relieve him, he found he couldn't leave the story. Instead, without telling his wife or his editor, Skoler volunteered for two days in one of the refugee camps. He then returned to Nairobi and spent a couple of weeks lying in his living room, unwilling to talk or go out.

Africa is still very personal and very present in his life. Years after Goma, in the incongruous setting of an ethics class at business

school, Skoler said the death and destruction resurfaced and hit him with waves of emotion. One image still haunts: Amid the filth of the cholera epidemic, a tiny 6-year-old girl clung to him; she was orphaned, and aid workers said she would die unless he took her out of the camp. That would have meant taking her to his home in Nairobi. "I had a chance to save someone's life and I walked away from it," he said. "That image comes back a lot. I'm pretty sure I made the wrong choice." Skoler said reporting the Rwanda story left him feeling guilty because he could go home while those he covered were caught in the midst of terror with nothing to protect them and nowhere to escape.

Editors back in the States were often clueless about what we had witnessed or how it might have affected us. At *The New York Times*, after my stint in Rwanda, I was debriefed by a psychiatrist with a long list of abbreviations after her title. My great

memory of the session, before I zoned out, was that she asked me where Rwanda was. Yet I was luckier than many of my colleagues. *The New York Times* went to bat more than a few times for me, turning the world of U.N. peacekeeping upside down to get me out of Rwanda, getting me the best care for my malaria.

**F**EAR IS AN ISOLATING EXPERIENCE, one that is difficult to share. It is also an underestimated emotion. Most people experience fear in spurts, but what happens

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GILLES PERESS/MAGNUM PHOTOS

Bodies left to rot in the sun, Rwanda, 1994

if you are constantly exposed to it day after day, night after night?

Roberto Suro, who covered the 70-day siege of Beirut for *Time* magazine, described it with awe. “It boosts your senses,” he said of the heart-pounding adrenaline. “It makes you hyperperceptive. It turns up the volume. You see and hear things much more vividly.” He believes the effects last for years. Even living in Rome, he felt constant apprehension—scanning the roads around him, looking for snipers, avoiding untraveled routes.

Living in Africa was very similar. I spent long weeks in Mogadishu, a city where you could travel only in a car with armed guards; where reporting often meant running the gantlet between warring subclans; where potholes were mined at night; where bullets pierced our hotel walls and snipers

took pot shots at us on our roof. In a year and a half, six of my colleagues were killed there, several others were shot, and one was kidnapped by her driver and held for several weeks. We drank heavily. Many smoked dope; at least one did hard drugs.

The tension never fully dissipated back home in Nairobi, where armed burglaries and carjackings were commonplace. Even now I catch myself, for brief moments, looking for danger, wary of walking on unmarked trails because of land mines or just checking out people to see if anyone looks suspicious. And if smell can trigger memories, all I need is to catch a whiff of road kill before I remember the churches of Rwanda and the hills of Burundi.

**O**N JULY 12, 1993, FOUR JOURNALISTS were stoned and shot to death by a

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mob in Mogadishu. Accepting a last-minute flight offer, I had left the night before and headed home to Nairobi. The death of photographer Dan Eldon and the three others filled me with an overwhelming feeling of loss. Maybe it was because we had spent the evening before laughing and clowning on the hotel roof, or maybe it was because I was alive and they weren't. Maybe it was because I always thought death wasn't supposed to touch us. But it brought home my own mortality and underscored my fear of losing people close to me.

Nearly a year and a half ago, I decided to give up the road and the wars and the adrenaline. I moved to Washington and am learning how to live in suburbia. According to a Freedom Forum-sponsored study,<sup>1</sup> female war correspondents drink five times as much

as their counterparts in the general journalistic population. I do drink more than before I went to Africa, but I like to think that it probably would compare to a European male counterpart's consumption.

I still miss the years on the road and the intense emotions I experienced. The stories I covered dug deep into my heart and soul. They filled me with awe when I witnessed the courage of some of the people I met. They filled me with anger over the corruption and greed of others. I became intimately acquainted with fear, desperation, cynicism and total vulnerability. They remain my companions today.

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<sup>1</sup> *"Risking more than their lives: The effects of post-traumatic stress disorder on journalists," published by The Freedom Forum European Center, 2001. Available at [www.freedomforum.org](http://www.freedomforum.org).*