



KEVIN CARTER

A DEATH UNRECORDED is a death forgotten

SALLY ROPER discusses the death of Ken Oosterbroek.

PHOTOGRAPHERS, I've discovered, can be prickly interview subjects. "I'm not interested in the idea that we are heroes out there," replied one prominent local photographer nastily, when, soon after the Boipatong massacre I asked to talk to him about his work. "That hero stuff is bad enough, but the anti-hero stuff is even worse," snapped another photographer equally contemptuously.

There are many reasons why the photojournalists whose names we seem to see continually beside graphic shots of death and destruction sometimes feel defensive. One reason, perhaps, is they react to public assumption that violence and horror are their only subjects. Greg Marinovich, much experienced at documenting South Africa's violent paroxysms, and known for his extraordinary Pulitzer-winning photograph of a township-dweller silhouetted and arched in agony after being set alight, resents the epithet 'conflict photographer'.

"I am a photographer, not a conflict photographer," he corrects. "Most of my time, in fact, is spent doing documentary work. For example, right now I'm doing a story around circumcision rites and village life. And even when I am taking conflict pictures, I look for ways to show how the conflict is affecting people. Men shooting guns is boring."

He's right, of course, yet the powerful, glamorous image of the flak-jacketed photojournalist,

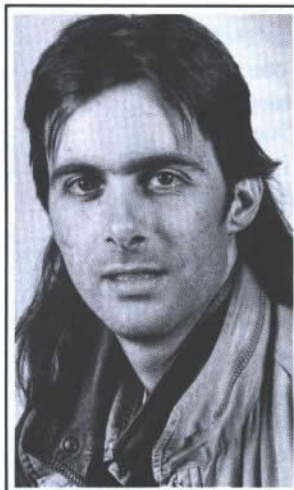
sweating it out on the frontline persists, though as with all clichés, the truth is much more complex.

T J Lemon, a senior staff photographer at *The Star*, feels this perception of glamour has much to do with the immediate status and power that simply having a camera can impart.

"There is a saying, 'Have camera, will travel'. A camera can be, in effect, a passport. You can go almost anywhere. You have the opportunity to have such a world of experience. It really is a privilege to be able to experience so much in life, to see so many extremes in a day. One minute you are in a township working, then later you might have to be in Houghton. It is actually your job to inquire, to see, and to experience."

Sometimes photojournalists are the only witnesses to something (since by definition they must physically be at the scene of the action). That, ultimately, is the essence of the job: bringing back the story, be it in images or words, or both. The prerequisites for success seem to be endless patience and iron nerve. Take Joao Silva, who with another journalist drove unprotected for several weeks around Rwanda, where close on a million people are rumoured to have died in three months.

"You see a lot of weird shit. There were constant roadblocks. They would dangle a hand grenade inside the car while talking to you. They would kill you if you were French or Belgian. You have to



KEN OOSTERBROEK

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bide your time — or you'll have a hand grenade thrown at you very quickly. We were the first reporters to do this, then others began to come. They realised it was possible."

Says Marinovich: "Really good photographers are serious about their fellow human beings, about the effects of what they are seeing on the communities. To do this involves the utmost commitment, sensitivity and involvement."

Sensitivity might seem a handicap in someone whose job it is routinely to witness scenes of extreme human depravity, and herein lies the nub of a giant contradiction faced by these photographers. How are they to manage the tension of preserving the innate sensitivity needed to produce a really good image, when their lives seem literally soaked through with horror, to say nothing of the exhaustion resulting from the tension and tedium that often attend conflict and war, topped up often with acute physical danger?

In a revealing autobiography remarkable for examining some of the difficult issues around war photography, British photographer Don McCullin, whose searing pictures of the Vietnam conflict are sometimes credited with turning the tide of US public opinion, and whose extraordinary career is reflected in his chapter headings (With the Mercenaries, Rain Forest Genocide, Prisoner of Idi Amin etc) says:

"You sleep with the dead, you cradle the dead, you live with the living who become the dead. Seeing, looking at what others cannot bear to see, is what my life as a war reporter is all about..."

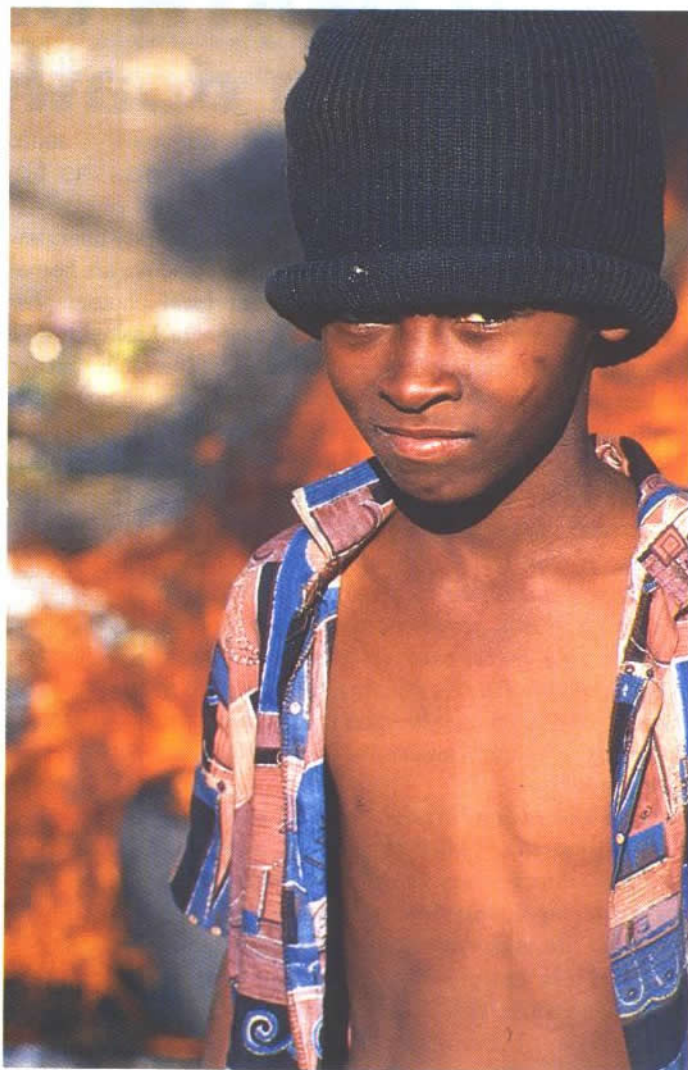
"Even with all my years of watching, I have never been able to switch off my feelings, nor do I think it would be right to do so. Few are equipped to remain unmoved by the spectacle of what war does to people. These are sights that should and do, bring pain, and shame and guilt. Some sights heighten feelings to an unbearable pitch."

The photographers I spoke to said that even if you don't get used to it, you learn to put a distance between yourself and the events you witness, as you would be unable to function at all otherwise. Nonetheless, many spoke of stress, reporting recurring violent dreams and other disturbances, and there is no doubt that destructive burn-out, exacerbated by abuse of drugs and alcohol is a real danger for some.

Sometimes the horror quotient is too much, even for those well used to it. On Tuesday, April 18 in the East Rand flashpoint of Tokoza, the close-knit 'pack' of news photographers had to witness the death of close friend Ken Oosterbroek, *The Star's* chief photographer, lauded by many locally and overseas as one of the most talented and versatile photographers to have come out of South Africa.

His death came hard on the heels of an earlier tragedy, the killing of promising young photographer Abdul Sharif, an event that prompted Oosterbroek to speak out about the dangers photographers routinely face, and call anew for "continued press freedom to allow us to do our job in covering the tragic, monumental events taking place in South Africa today".

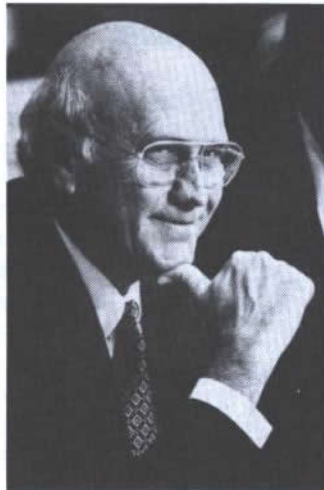
The grief of those who knew Ken well is still palpable. Aside from his photographic brilliance it is his generosity and professionalism, particularly when it came to looking after his colleagues, that were most discussed in the weeks after his death. "Have you got your flak jacket?" he would harangue people. "Get it!" Ironically, even had he taken his own advice that day it probably



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Photographs by
**KEN
OOSTERBROEK**



would not have saved him. The bullet entered his side, an unprotected area with many models of jacket.

There will continue to be controversy about the way in which photographs of violence are used, and this is highlighted by the feelings that were stirred up by the front-page use by *The Citizen* of a close shot of Ken's terrible, still face as his body is supported by his colleague, *Star* photographer Gary Bernard.

Joao Silva took the picture, after doing what he could to assist Ken and Greg Marinovich, who took three bullets in the same incident. "I was worried about Monica's (Oosterbroek's wife) feelings," says Silva, "but it's important to know when (in the sequence of events) I took the picture. I had done what I could. I knew that it had to be recorded, and that Ken himself would not have wanted his death to go unrecorded. After all, he gave up his life for this kind of work."

With a trace of anger he adds: "There is a saying: a death unrecorded is a death forgotten. And the controversy was begun by people who actually had nothing to do with it. You don't do any of these things for fun. We are fulfilling an important part of a crazy situation, informing the world. It has been very hard to get over Ken's death."

The controversy uncovers in turn another issue: the reaction of the white reading public to pictures of a dead white person as

opposed to pictures of a dead black person, a consequence of South Africa's still separate worlds. "This is an indication of people's racism," says Marinovich.

And if those who photograph conflict, ultimately for mass consumption, are put in the dock for doing so, should not a mirror be held up to the masses apparently demanding ever more sensational images?

Says Lemon: "People want to see this stuff. That bothers me. There is a curiosity about drama and tragedy. We see it in entertainment. It is almost as if seeing the real thing makes it more exciting." Perhaps this is also the genesis of the image of photographer-as-superhero, fulfilling the wet dreams of countless desk-bound men who once dreamed of derring-do.

Photojournalists will probably continue to field flak for daring to walk into the heart of darkness whilst the rest of us prefer to look at it over our morning orange juice. In the end these people do a job that we simply cannot.

And yet it's often the images that don't make the front page the ones of a lover curled dozing in bed, or Oosterbroek's beautiful shot of a field of flowers that drew your eye in *The Star's* full page obituary — it's those that tell, another, just as important, side of the tale.

■ Sally Roper is a freelance journalist.