

The Hazards of Journalism



(Photo courtesy of Lynn Sweet)

By Jennifer Cendrowski

The job of a journalist often conjures up the image of late-night phone calls from a secret source followed by typing comfortably at the computer, exposing corruption from a cozy distance.

In fact, the profession didn't even come close to making the *Forbes* 2006 list of the most dangerous jobs in America. Commercial fisherman, loggers, construction workers, farmers and truck drivers topped the list, which was based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. But the job of a journalist, which involves traveling frequently, speaking to strangers daily, and running into the middle of the action regularly is often no more safe. Occupational hazards, from the obvious, such as venturing into war zones, to the overlooked, such as riding in a car, can incur injuries and even invite mortality.

Although the profession has always combined behind-the-desk writing with on-the-street reporting, today's working journalists are faced with the added risk of reporting in a post-September 11th world.

Boston University journalism professor and senior special writer for the *Wall Street Journal* Steve Stecklow



(Photo courtesy of danielpearl.org)

worked closely with fellow *WSJ* reporter Daniel Pearl for seven months, from June 2001 to January 2002. Pearl, who was captured and eventually beheaded in Karachi, Pakistan, in 2002, while investigating the link between shoe bomber Richard Reid, Al Qaeda, and September 11th became an icon for the many journalists who have been kidnapped and killed on the job.

"It was shocking and incredibly disturbing," says Stecklow of the incident. "It affected me seriously for months. When you talk to someone every day for seven months and then they're gone in those kind of circumstances, it really does affect you."

Stecklow, who has been a journalist for 31 years, is a recent Pulitzer Prize winner, and is especially experienced in foreign reporting, has not written off working in notoriously dangerous areas, but now thinks twice about voluntarily traveling to certain regions of the world. He recalls a week he spent reporting in Baghdad five months after U.S. invasion in 2003: "When I was there I was lucky because I was writing a story on the United Nations and I spent most of my time at a place called the Canal Hotel, which is where the UN was based. Two weeks after I left it

was blown up by Al Qaeda." What can journalists nowadays do to not only maintain the purpose of the profession, but do it safely?

"I think people need to use the same kind of common sense they use in their every day lives when they go places they're never been to before," says Stecklow. "I would hope that this wouldn't deter people from aspiring to be a foreign correspondent. I think it's extremely worthwhile. There's a greater need than ever to report news in foreign locations. People need to just think about the kind of incidents that happened, like with Danny, and just be extremely careful and try and make sure that doesn't happen to them."

Sometimes, regardless of how careful reporters are and no matter what precautions are taken, accidents still happen. Author and BU journalism professor Ellen Shell broke her ribs in November 2006, while in China reporting for *National Geographic*. "I was being driven around Shanghai," she says, "and I jumped out of the car to get a quick snap of a side street, tripped over a cement barrier and went sprawling. A very kind, elderly woman rushed to my side to help. The break took six weeks to heal, but my ego remains thoroughly bruised."

Lynn Sweet, Washington D.C. bureau chief for the *Chicago Sun-Times* cracked two ribs and injured her back while reporting in Nairobi, Kenya in August 2006, with Barack Obama.

"We were riding in a van in a slum in Nairobi," said Sweet in a phone interview. "I wasn't wearing a seatbelt, and I was at the edge of my seat. There were thousands of people around the van, and the driver slammed on the brake to avoid hitting someone."

Sweet went flying and sustained a painful injury that is currently still healing. "I didn't take the time to go to the hospital, and I don't think that was necessarily very smart," she says. Her advice to journalists embarking in the profession, "Wear your seatbelt," she says.