

TESTAMENT
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CHRIS
HONDROS



TESTAMENT

Photographs and text by Chris Hondros

Edited by Alexandra Ciric, Francisco P. Bernasconi, and Christina Piaia

Introduction by Jonathan Klein

Foreword by Régis Le Sommer

Afterword by Greg Campbell

Published by



To be released: **April 2014**

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Published in the United States by powerHouse Books,
a division of powerHouse Cultural Entertainment, Inc.
37 Main Street, Brooklyn, NY 11201-1021
telephone 212.604.9074, fax 212.366.5247
e-mail: info@powerHouseBooks.com
website: www.powerHouseBooks.com

First edition, 2014

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013956138

ISBN 978-1-57687-673-2

Printed in China by Everbest Printing Company
through Four Colour Imports, KY.

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Book Design: Triboro

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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FRANCISCO P. BERNASCONI, AND
CHRISTINA PIAIA

INTRODUCTION BY JONATHAN KLEIN
FOREWORD BY RÉGIS LE SOMMIER
AFTERWORD BY GREG CAMPBELL

—

For you, Chris.

We, too, walk among many things as we begin to discover how much remains untranslatable. Then, we return to you: your images, words, and unsparing heart — and find ourselves among the world you longed for us to see.

INTRODUCTION

—

JONATHAN KLEIN IS
CO-FOUNDER AND CHIEF
EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF
GETTY IMAGES.

Chris was never short of words, stories, or anecdotes, yet my most powerful memory of him occurs whenever I look at the overall body of his work and also at an image of Chris himself that sits on my desk. It is impossible for me to choose a “favorite” Chris image as the essence of the man and his humanity, and deep warmth always came through no matter how terrible the situation or the circumstances in which he found himself.

I was fortunate to count Chris as a friend, to have shared stories, drinks, music, and laughs with him for more than a decade. I smile when I think about his stories of his encounters with Liberian rebels and government forces, who would ask, among other questions, why Chris was there. Chris knew exactly why he was there and, for that matter, in every other place he went to capture the story on the ground.

Chris was one of the first photographers we hired when we decided to invest in and support photojournalism. His insights and ethics helped form the foundation of our news organization, and he took tremendous pride in what we were able to achieve since those early days.

Chris’ death in Libya was a seismic event for every one of us who had come to know and love him over the years. He is the first Getty Images photographer to be killed while on assignment. Only a few weeks before Chris’ death, our colleague, the photographer Joe Raedle, was captured and tortured by Moammar Gadhafi’s forces in Libya. Through the efforts of the international journalism community, Joe was released. Chris felt strongly that it was important for him to be there to greet Joe when he crossed the border to safety. This was typical of the man.

When they arrived in New York, the three of us, together with Pancho Bernasconi, our director of photography, met in my office and discussed the risks of going back into Libya at that time. Chris was resolute that the story had to be told. This is the challenge and dilemma at the core of conflict photography. We know and understand the risks; we stress that no picture is worth a life. Yet Chris, like so many in photojournalism, believed that it is critical to cover stories in depth, educate society about the wider world, and, if necessary, be at the front line.

Chris’ life taught me so much about photojournalism; his passing taught me even more. The competition, while intense, is greatly outpaced by collaboration. There is incredible dedication and integrity within the people who have chosen this life and career. I am humbled to work alongside this remarkable community, with long-standing

bonds that make them seem less like colleagues and more like a family.

We held a memorial service for Chris in Brooklyn at the church where he was to be married a few months later. There was a profound sense of loss — many of us still in a state of shock and disbelief — as well as a sense of a community coming together. A couple of days later, we all went to Chris’ hometown in North Carolina for his funeral. The contrast between the two places could not have been starker — busy, noisy, cosmopolitan Brooklyn and the small military town of Fayetteville near Fort Bragg. There was no difference, however, in the love, regard, and esteem that people felt for Chris.

People from all parts of the world and all walks of life mourned Chris’ death. Several senior military friends of his traveled to Fayetteville to pay their respects and attend his funeral. Tributes came from the White House, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and major politicians, as well as from those who had known Chris since he was a child. They all admired him and recognized that the work that Chris had chosen was important and that he was one of the best in the world.

Since that devastating day in April 2011, Chris’ indelible spirit and influence have sparked needed conversations about the importance of protecting journalists in conflict zones, inspired emerging and veteran photojournalists alike, and affirmed the importance of a free press in society. I am personally committed to ensuring that this impact endures.

Chris believed that his work could and would make a difference. He dedicated and ultimately lost his life in pursuit of that belief. I have no doubt that Chris was correct. Images can and do influence public opinion, galvanize people and societies, and force governments to change. They bring much-needed focus and attention to the suffering of people who are otherwise unable to communicate their plight.

Chris’ deep well of empathy and humanity have had a lasting impact on me. We at Getty Images are lucky to be a small part of his legacy and are proud to have supported him and made sure that his work was seen around the world.

I heard from Chris a couple of days before he died. He was happy, focused, motivated, and, as his work on the morning of his passing shows, at the top of his craft. Our conversation, as well as the knowledge that Chris died while doing what he loved, provides a small measure of comfort.

I miss him, his stories, the twinkle in his eye, his warmth, his smile, his encyclopedic knowledge, and the pictures that he had yet to make.





A VERSION OF THIS ARTICLE
WAS ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED
ON THE GETTY IMAGES
BLOG, OCT. 9, 2009.

It’s now 2009, and everyone is asking me if things have changed in Afghanistan since 2002, when I was last here. Well, they have, and they haven’t.

Kabul is still dirty and exotic, full of tan old shepherding men with white beards and wrinkled faces. Of course, now they might be chatting on cellphones as they guide their flocks around town with long sticks. Some new buildings have gone up, but not that many.

On the military side, the U.S. Army is still stocked with an endless parade of energetic young men and women. Now as ever, they are fitness fanatics and will work out every day, even if they have to run laps through some muddy field on the edge of their base as the sun rises. But they’re more jaded now than they were in 2002, after so many tours in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

The central military hub in Afghanistan is Bagram Air Base, an hour’s drive from Kabul across a spectacular plateau nestled between mountains. When I stayed at Bagram in 2002, all the press slept in one large tent located next to the barbed-wire perimeter of a now-infamous detention facility. Opportunistic Afghans had set up impromptu bazaars just outside the front gates, and we’d discreetly purchase incredibly bad Uzbek vodka and other supplies for our nightly rabble-rousing party in the press tent. (Sometimes off-duty soldiers would walk by, peek in, and find themselves downing a quick beer and flirting with reporters for a few minutes – then dashing off into the night again.)

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Those days are long gone. Bagram today has evolved and changed in spirit; everything is far more organized and uptight, and the base has spread out, like a California town exploding into a tangle of urban sprawl. Troops now stay in long rows of stacked housing units that look more like apartment complexes than tents. MPs hand out tickets to drivers who are speeding or not wearing a seat belt. I once saw a flier touting free swing dancing classes.

One recent morning, I laced up my shoes and went for a run with the troops along Bagram’s broad main boulevard. The street ends after a few kilometers and opens up onto a broad flat plain. From there, I stopped and watched all manner of military aircraft taxi down a runway and then roar into the sky: stately C-130 workhorses, massive C-17 cargo carriers, strange Russian-looking planes, and the incredible fighter jets, lithe wedges of physics-defying magic that scream overhead louder than a train thundering by.

Bagram is a small city with a big airport, all built from scratch in the middle of this inhospitable countryside, for billions upon billions of dollars. And there are hundreds of other bases, more or less like it, across Afghanistan. The scope of it all is staggering. If there’s anything I wish I could convey to the general American public who will never visit this place, it is the enormous scale of the undertaking being done here in our name – photos never seem to quite capture it.

A VERSION OF THIS ARTICLE
WAS ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED
ON THE GETTY IMAGES
BLOG, NOV. 2, 2009.

The Army had this elaborate plan to drop soldiers via helicopter into a valley in Taliban country, with each man carrying supplies for days of marching in search of caves that had been reconnoitered by air. It sounded fun, so I tagged along and jumped off the helicopter and onto the muddy field. Almost before we hit the soil, the Black Hawk lurched up, the rotors’ roar fading away. Soon it was quiet. The sun began to peek over the horizon.

Led by Steven Caldwell, an ebullient, witty staff sergeant from Indiana, the platoon comprised young men from across America. They irreverently cracked jokes while marching, mostly banter about girlfriends back home. Also along were Staff Sgt. Justin Schwartz, an Air Force dog handler, and his pride and joy, Bleck, a German shepherd trained to sniff out explosives.

The first day was for finding the first two caves. After a short walk, it turned out they weren’t caves, just ridges resembling caves from the air. Caldwell shrugged and entered the information into a GPS-type device he used to find targets. We continued in search of the rest.

As we passed through villages, Pashtun tribalists stared curiously. A few hours of hiking brought us to a road hugging the base of an imposing cliff. Caldwell glanced down at his computer and back up at the mountainside.

“Looks like the next few caves are right up there,” he said, pointing to a spot far above. He looked at his men. “Who’s coming with me?”

No volunteers. Caldwell rolled his eyes and muttered several unprintable things. Then he dropped his pack onto the dirt.

“Fine. Just watch the road. I need the K-9 though.” He started clambering up the mountain, and Schwartz and Bleck scrambled after him. Soon they were over the ridge, out of sight.

I hesitated, trying to convince myself I could productively photograph right where I was, without venturing up. The platoon resumed joking. I sighed, slung my camera over my shoulder, and headed up the mountain.

It was dangerous. The route ranged from steeply inclined

to nearly vertical, and the shale tended to disquietingly disintegrate as I searched for footholds. Eventually, I caught up with Caldwell, Schwartz, and Bleck. They were barely sweating.

“Caldwell, you’re from Indiana,” I said, panting. “Where did you learn how to climb mountains?” He smiled without looking up from his computer.

“Man, I’ve been stationed in Alaska for five years. We do this stuff all day.” He bolted off and crossed the base of the long vertical crack that wound down the cliff. Schwartz and Bleck gamely followed.

This route seemed impossible, so I hiked up, looking for a better place to cross. Before long, I couldn’t go up anymore. The sides were nothing but a slope of loose pebbles. I was stuck.

After minutes of self-pity, I lunged leftward and quickly danced across the crumbly slope like a barefoot teenager bouncing on the hot sands of a vertical beach. I made it to the crevasse, awkwardly landed on my rear, and instantly started sliding down. But inside the crack I could slow myself with my feet, and it was kind of fun, like a water slide. (My shredded pants would disagree. An Afghan tailor later laboriously repaired them.) Finally, I tumbled to a stop at the bottom, landing with a cloud of dust next to Caldwell.

“Hey there,” he said. “Man, this ain’t no cave here either. You about ready?”

“Whenever you are.”

Moments like these prompt me to get philosophical: Why am I here? How did this happen? Why am I hanging on the side of an Afghan mountain? I’m not in the Army; I didn’t sign up for this. I should be back home, watching TV or canoodling in bed or having an espresso.

But in the end, things usually work themselves out, and the satisfaction of photographing our era’s most important issues far outweighs any discomfort, or even fear.







A VERSION OF THIS ARTICLE
WAS ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED
IN THE RALEIGH HATCHET,
JUNE 20, 2005.

I’m looking for the music that best conveys the tragedy of Iraq. This isn’t a theoretical question, writing, as I am, from a dusty Marine base on the edge of Fallujah, in 120 degree heat and surrounded by madness. I’m fingering my iPod at night, while mortars crunch all around, searching for the songs that can help make sense of it all.

Once I thought the answer self-evident: the compositions of Gustav Mahler. Mahler’s symphonies, with their grim marches and bombastic brass, might reflect Iraq’s epic chaos. Especially his Sixth Symphony, which might almost be a soundtrack for armies on the move, tanks rolling, and fighter jets swooping through the sky. But now I think there isn’t really much Mahler in Iraq. This war is too ambiguous for Mahler. Mahler wrote in the first decade of the 20th century and died in 1911, but the mood of his music foretold the world wars before they happened. Mahler’s world was one of uneasy nationalism and firm absolutes, of conventional armies squaring off on titanic battlefields. And that world, long gone, was nothing like the confusing later battlefields of Vietnam, Algeria, and now this mess in Iraq. (Well, maybe Mahler hinted at it in his Ninth Symphony. If you had to look for the smoking ruins of Fallujah in Mahler, you’d find it best in the finale of the Ninth Symphony.)

So I’m searching elsewhere on my iPod dial. Bartok? Perhaps. Maybe some of the more nihilistic Stravinsky?

Almost. Shostakovich would seem like another natural match, but there’s an apprehensive quality to his music that’s not quite right – it better fits the Cold War era than our own.

Perhaps the answer is the late Beethoven string quartets. Certainly the relentlessness of the Grosse Fuge works as well as anything to recall the swirling fury of urban battle (believe me), while the sonorous harmonies of the sixth movement of the profound Opus 131 quartet used to run through my mind, unbidden, whenever I photographed one of Saddam Hussein’s exhumed mass graves. And the long, ambiguous, introspective elegies so characteristic of these late quartets – like the lento assai movement of the F major or the lovely cavatina of the B flat – oddly, in their stillness and intimacy, might come as close as we can get to comprehending the madness of war.

Probably this quest is hopeless: finding the right music for Iraq, as the war is still raging and the outcome unknown.

But one night last week, I was out with the Marines before an offensive in an utterly remote desert of Anbar province, sleeping in the open on the sand, my flak vest spread under me as a pillow. The moon had set and it was ethereally dark and quiet, and I listened to Beethoven’s cavatina as I stared up into a black sea sprinkled liberally with the lights of the cosmos. And I felt, for just a moment, that I almost understood why I was there and what it all meant.

AND THE LONG, AMBIGUOUS, INTROSPECTIVE ELEGIES SO CHARACTERISTIC OF THESE LATE QUARTETS – LIKE THE LENTO ASSAI MOVEMENT OF THE F MAJOR OR THE LOVELY CAVATINA OF THE B FLAT – ODDLY, IN THEIR STILLNESS AND INTIMACY, MIGHT COME AS CLOSE AS WE CAN GET TO COMPREHENDING THE MADNESS OF WAR.







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