

**STEVE MCCURRY
LESSON 12 – STORYTELLING: CONFLICT
ZONES**

DOCUMENTING WARS

“What I wanted to do was to witness and photograph. I wanted to document it...I wanted to actually show the story of the people...a sequence of pictures which would really describe the destruction and the civil war that was unfolding in Afghanistan.”

As a photojournalist, Steve’s job is to tell the stories of humanity’s biggest disasters; nowhere is this more profound than in wars. In this lesson, Steve discusses his documentation of the war in Afghanistan.

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Telling the story of war is not simply about the war itself, but about the innumerable lives that are touched by war. In this lesson, Steve talks about his journeys and photographs from warzones he’s bravely entered and the importance in taking risks in order to shed light on the catastrophes of war.

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TRANSCRIPT

Whatever kind of photography you enjoy doing, I think it's important to think of it as kind of a long-term project, something which you can add to and go through and select and maybe go back and do things better. But really think of your photography as a body of work, which perhaps may end up being an exhibition, or a book, or something which you have this overview, this project, which will, bit by bit, add up to something very significant.

Early in my career, I made this clandestine trip in Afghanistan, walking through the mountains, secretly, with these fighters called mujahideen. What I wanted to do was to witness and photograph. I wanted to document it. And I thought, as opposed to just shooting single pictures, or a one-off picture, I wanted to actually show the story of the people of the place, a sequence of pictures which would really describe the destruction and the civil war that was unfolding in Afghanistan.

In addition to the conflict, I wanted to show the daily life of the people, how they lived, where they lived, the landscape. I wanted to show everything about their lives. Even in a war zone, it's important to keep your eye on the mundane, ordinary life, because even in an area of conflict, life goes on. People eat and sleep and go about their business.

One of the things I photographed was these two boys testing a rope, which they had just made out of a cord and they were swinging back and forth. I thought it was a bit dangerous, testing this cord in a rope over these really jagged rocks. I thought if the rope broke, somebody could be killed. Another picture I made was of these fighters as they were walking through a particular village. They decided to have a water break, and they started drinking out of this almost animal trough, which, I guess, when you're thirsty, you'll take water from anywhere.

I was invited into Afghanistan by these mujahideen. I think they wanted their story told, and they thought that me being a photographer, I would be able to make this happen. So I was actually given access to all of their operations and everything that they did, and I was able to travel with them and pretty much photograph at will.

This picture of these three fighters, these mujahideen, were perched on this mountaintop. And they were surveying, they were watching this army convoy travel below them, and they were positioning themselves to attack this convoy. This was a very common occurrence in

Afghanistan. Convoys and army vehicles were attacked on a daily basis. And these men were poised to attack this convoy below.

I'm sure if I had been captured by the Afghan army, or the Red Army, I probably would have been used for propaganda purposes, maybe killed, certainly imprisoned. So it was a real risk being there. I think sometimes in life, you have to take risks. I think you never want to be timid. I always think you need to take a calculated risk and then let the chips fall where they may.

After my time in Afghanistan, I went back into Pakistan. I smuggled my film out by putting it in strategic parts of my clothes. These pictures were eventually published in the New York Times and various magazines all over the world.

In the early 90s, one of the worst catastrophes in human history happened, where Saddam Hussein lit more than 600 oil wells on fire, and it completely polluted the entire Middle East. There were fires burning. There was oil running into the Gulf. I went there to document this environmental disaster. It was not only the water which was polluted, there were thousands of migratory birds that perished as they passed through the Gulf, due to the smoke and to the water, which was all covered in oil.

So when I got to Kuwait early on in the conflict, as you drove into these oil fields, it was like going from 11 o'clock in the morning to midnight. It was so dark. You needed your headlights. It was literally like the middle of the night at 11 o'clock in the morning because of the thick, dark smoke billowing up from hundreds of oil wells.

I rented a vehicle in Saudi Arabia and drove up into Kuwait and spent a month traveling around Kuwait and southern Iraq, documenting this terrible disaster. I slept in abandoned hotels. I ate army rations that I found on the side of the road. And it was really like an end of the world scenario, everything was destroyed. There was no electricity. There was no running water. There was no police force. Literally, the whole place looked like a movie set.

There were tens of thousands of migratory birds, which traditionally flew over the Gulf. And during this period of all these oil wells being on fire, many of these birds perished due to the oil pollution. I photographed this one bird. It was completely covered in oil, completely black except for his red eye, which opened up. And it really broke your heart to see these wonderful birds, which you knew were going to die because they had ingested too much oil. It was a complete tragedy. And thousands of

birds died, these migratory birds died on their way flying from Africa up to Central Asia.

The Iraqis left a trail of destruction on their way out of Kuwait. One of the photographs I made was of a Kuwaiti man sifting through the rubble. He came across a textbook, or a book, and he sat down and started to look through it. Perhaps he thought he might salvage it, or he was curious of what the contents of the book were. But it was kind of an ironic picture of somebody there sitting down reading very peacefully, yet there is this kind of death and destruction all around.

One afternoon, I went out with these scientists who were doing soil samples in the oil fields. They were dressed up in these chemical suits with a respirator they could breathe through. And they were doing these tests on the soil. I, of course, was photographing them, but I had no protection whatsoever. I was just there with my photo vest and cap, and so it felt very odd to be there, totally vulnerable to the smoke and the fire when they were dressed up in their fire retardant suits. But this is what we do, and I had to get the picture. I thought it was important to document this.

So I went in there. We were very close to the fire and it was extremely hot, as you can imagine, but I think it turned out to be a worthwhile picture. You have to be careful not to get too close to dangerous situations, but sometimes you do need to take a certain amount of risk. You never want to be too timid, and sometimes you want to take that calculated risk and go for the picture.

One of the saddest things I saw in Kuwait during the Gulf War was the zoo before the Iraqi army withdrew from Kuwait. They went into the zoo one afternoon and started shooting all the animals. Some of the animals, they opened up the cages and let them escape, but they machine gunned the elephants. The lions survived, but they weren't fed. They were on the verge of starvation. There are many animals which were actually burned alive. So this was a terrible, evil act, but I felt it was important to document it and show the world what had happened.

The aftermath of the Gulf War was like an enormous movie set. There was all sorts of destruction, and oil fields were on fire. There were all these very odd situations, which you would see constantly, every day. And one was this dairy cow, which had somehow gotten lost and wandered into the field of battle. And there he was, just sort of standing there motionless next to this tank. And it create this very odd sort of juxtaposition, where you have this instrument of war on the one hand, and yet you had

this dairy cow just sort of standing there. It was such an unlikely site, which I was compelled to photograph.

As we were driving through the oil fields one morning, we came across this destroyed tank. And next to the tank was this corpse. And clearly, the soldier, who had been operating the tank, had been hit by some kind of a bomb and the tank exploded. He was literally burned to death. But he was there, lying next to his tank. And it was this really eerie, heartbreaking scene of this human being who had been burned to death.

I had just come back from China on the evening of September the 10th, only to wake up on September the 11th to find out that both the Twin Towers had been attacked. I grabbed my camera bag, which was still sitting by the door, and after I made a few pictures on the roof of my building, which happened to be very close to the World Trade Center, I ran down with my assistant to Ground Zero and we spent the entire day, and some of the night, documenting this terrible tragedy.

There are buildings still on fire. A building collapsed while we were there, and it was just the most horrific scene that happened, almost in my neighborhood. The planes that attacked the World Trade Center had come down the Hudson River, very close to my home on Fifth Avenue. And we could hear screams on the street of people who were witnessing what was happening. There were many policemen and firemen who were blocking traffic and directing people to go in other directions.

But we were really persistent and we were able to evade these cordoned-off areas. And eventually, through a lot of persistence, we were able to find ourselves right down at Ground Zero. I realized that this was so important. I got up 3 o'clock in the morning and went back, again and continued to photograph well into the morning before I was, basically, arrested and made to leave. Sometimes the situation is so overpowering that you decide that it's better to take that risk than to be timid and always regret that you hadn't done what you thought was important at the time.