

Q&A

with **Jim Lo Scalzo**



You've been all over the world and seen many awe-inspiring places—I'm thinking of the temples in Burma, the blinding white ice in Antarctica, the incredible fish markets on the Amazon. It seems like these locations would be naturally photogenic, but are there places you've visited that are for some reason too difficult to photograph?

Actually, I didn't find the Amazon photogenic. Rain forests are so tough; they're dark and difficult to traverse. Animals are impossible to see unless you sit in a blind for weeks at a time. Even temperate rain forests, like the Tongass in Alaska, don't surrender visual rewards easily. Like many photographers, I'm a desert person. They're elegant and austere and easy to photograph. The landscape changes color throughout the day and every bit of life stands out.

The places I hate to photograph the most have nothing to do with geography but with economic class: upscale shops, neighborhoods, and parks. It's not because the wealthy are more aware of their rights, but because they think they are. Anyone can be pictured legally in a public place and even in a private place if it's open to the public, i.e., shopping malls, hotel lobbies, etc. But try explaining that to an uppity Georgetown. Or the security guard who's summoned.

Your career as a photojournalist seems to have succeeded based on a blend of ambition, wanderlust, talent, good fortune, and, as you note in your book, a type A East Coast personality. Is there any ingredient in particular that a photojournalist must have to make and keep a career?

Three things come to mind: the motivation to do personal projects, the ability to endure rejection, and the ability to spell.

The last item is not a joke. I coordinate the internship program here at *US News* and every year I receive a cover letter with my name misspelled. Every single year. If you can't get the spelling of a person's

name right, a person who could give your career a great big boost, then maybe you should take up accounting.

As for personal projects, they're essential to displaying your abilities. No news outlet is going to give you a camera, an airline ticket, and a pat on the back. You have to be a researcher and reporter and go do it on your own. Even after 13 years at *US News*, I still pursue personal projects. If I can get the magazine interested in my project, great. If not, then I do it anyway and try to sell the piece to another news outlet.

Which brings me to the third ingredient: rejection. I save all my rejection letters in a file cabinet at home—and the folder that holds them is now an inch thick. They are a reality of the profession, even for those of us who consider ourselves established.

I found it amazing that there aren't many staff photojournalists employed in the U.S.; it seems as if only a few positions exist at a handful of magazines. Yet the media are saturated with images. What's the lay of the land for an aspiring news photographer?

Buy a video camera. The profession is morphing from photojournalist to videojournalist—or something in between. The circulation of nearly every major paper, and the three news mags, is falling every year. And the cost of paper and distribution is a terrific drain on their resources; it's only a matter of time before some of these publications become Web only. And with that transition come visual opportunities. News Web sites are rightly eager to display video as well as still imagery. And any photographers who don't embrace that transition are going to watch the industry move down the tracks without them.

Which is why we photographers at *US News* are more than eager to put a little video camera in our photo bag. And frankly, I love shooting video. It's a natural extension of my job—and a creative new outlet. I also think photojournalists will bring a lot

to that medium with their visual sensibilities. And in return maybe these publications will keep us around. Remember that Buggles song “Video killed the Radio Star”? Well, video might just save a few photo jobs.

There seems to be a lot of camaraderie among the press corps—in Afghanistan you share a home with a Boston Globe photographer, in Morocco you lend equipment to a friend in need. Can you talk about how you both cooperate and compete with other photojournalists for images and stories?

There is some intra-genus competition. The wire photographers (AP, AFP, Reuters), for example, are in friendly competition—and they have to be. They work for organizations who demand resolute coverage of each and every event. Compared to that, we magazine photographers have it easy. We have the freedom to gamble, to risk missing the safe picture for a more aesthetically challenging one, as we have the wires to fall back on. And in my experience that liberty takes competent photographers in different directions, without worry of what the other magazine photographers are shooting.

So as you suggest, camaraderie seems to trump competition. Though I can’t say the same for shooting overseas. Foreign press corps—the French, the Russians, the Chinese—are notoriously competitive. And physical—they’ll knock you on your ass to make a picture. And then laugh about it. I remember one time in Tehran, where I was covering a wrestling match, of all things, an Iranian photographer was all over me; pushing, elbowing, etc. I’m not a shrinking violet, and I shoved him hard enough to knock him down. A few minutes later his revenge came in the form of a gob of Vaseline, which he smeared on the front of my lens. And how could I complain? He gave me a great story to tell.

Your description of official events and press briefings makes it sound like the press corps is not exactly treated with respect by political handlers. You are herded, transported, hollered at, and provided with poor positioning. What’s behind this tension? Is it the logistics? Is it driven by politics, class, pressure, or any other underlying motivations?

It’s about control. The Bush White House, like others before it, wants to control its public image. And it shouldn’t be faulted for that—that’s what politicians do. Photojournalists and picture editors, however, should be faulted for allowing them to get away with it.

Here are two examples: The Bush White House is

notorious for allowing only selective photographic coverage of presidential events or meetings—and then distributing handout photographs of these meetings taken by their own photographer. And why not? The major newspapers and magazines—*Time*, *Newsweek*, *US News*, the *New York Times*, etc.—run them. Though these publications have gotten better about it in recent years, they still do it from time to time and that makes little sense to me. These publications would never run a press release distributed by the White House. So why is it okay to run a press-release photograph? It also ensures that photographers aren’t going to get any access in the future.

Photojournalists, too, share the blame—and I include myself in that category. I remember being in a van outside the guest house on the president’s ranch in Crawford. Bush was about to make a televised statement about why he was vetoing the stem cell bill. After the speech, the press handler was going to squire in the still photographers to make a picture of the president. The press handler said we were only allowed to make a picture of the president from the chest up, looking as if he was still making his speech. In other words no wide shots and nothing creative. Every photographer agreed—including me—and to this day I regret that decision. The White House already controlled the setting, the timing, the light, and here I allowed them to control the angle. I wish I had stayed in the van.

*The title of the book, **Evidence of My Existence**, works two ways. On the one hand you’ve made a living by taking photographs, documenting your travels and world events. But there’s also your family life, a story that is poignantly told alongside the professional one. How has an established family affected your job, if at all?*

By choice, I’ve allowed having an established family to inhibit my job. I choose not to travel much—especially now, as I have a second child, a three-month-old, at home. I know photographers who haven’t abated their travel for their kids, but I don’t want to be that kind of person, that kind of father. My wife is also a journalist, and it wouldn’t be fair to stick her with all the parental duties. Nor would that be fair to my kids.

And yes, surrendering the get-up-and-go has been extremely difficult, for me the hardest part of parenting. I just keep telling myself that I got to see the world, and I will again soon enough.