

Into The Light

A veteran political photojournalist brings readers out of the dark

Michael (Mickey) Kienitz is a freelance photojournalist whose assignments have taken him to the deserts of Africa and into the bunkers of Beirut. He has gravitated toward "the shootouts" of this world and has covered them in Ireland, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Afghanistan and his "favorite place of all," Lebanon.

Born in Madison in 1951, he graduated from West High School and then received a degree in philosophy at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. "I enrolled in an Art Education photography course and the professor began by dropping the camera on the floor to show how durable it was. I asked myself, 'Gee, why is he doing this?' Then I dropped the course." His own father was also a professor — in Art History — his parents divorced and Mickey, the youngest of four children — three boys and a girl — was raised "pretty much" alone by his mother, Bonnie. One brother was a photographer for Car and Driver magazine, the other was a photographer for the Daily Californian in Berkeley. "So," he concludes, "maybe it's in the genes." While at the university, Kienitz was a photographer for the Daily Cardinal and a copy boy for the Wisconsin State Journal, "keeping the AP photo machine fed with chemicals and paper" and learning from News Editor Joe Capossela what news photography was all about. "I came back from a tornado," Kienitz recalls, "with a lot of photos. Destruction. Damage. Devastation. Joe looked at them all and said, 'Well, you need the human element in there.' I didn't have it. I've tried to put it in there ever since."

Kienitz's work has appeared in the Capital Times of Madison, The Milwaukee

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Innate curiosity: Mickey Kienitz with Salvadoran farm children.

Journal, the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, the London Times, Newsweek, Geo, Forbes, U.S. News and World Report and Der Spiegel. His picture stories have twice won awards from United Press International.

"Mickey," a long-time friend says, "is going to wind up very famous or very dead. Or both."

"I guess the reason I've chosen what I do for a living is innate curiosity about political things.

"Originally, I got interested in journalism when I saw — and sometimes participated in — anti-Vietnam War demonstrations. I'd read about the demonstration the next day or see accounts of it and I could barely recognize the same event that I had participated in.

"I decided I could do a better, more accurate job than that and that's when I started doing it.

"What was true of American media then is still true. It's a pack of jackals jumping on a story and it's always reported in some kind of vacuum. Just the incident itself. Not what led up to it, not what happens afterward. The media feasts on the incident sometimes for as long as a week and then it jumps to a fresher carcass as soon as one appears. I think this leaves most of the American public very uninformed about what's going on. And it's not just Americans at home.

"I remember coming back from a day of heavy fighting in Tripoli to the airport in Beirut to photograph the U.S. Marines there.

"They were all kind of scrunched into those tiny bunkers that were lined with sandbags and Kevlar and I was telling them there was heavy fighting in Tripoli. Then they asked me their questions: 'Well, who's fighting who? Are we with the Christians? Are we against the Christians? What are the Syrians doing here?'

"While we were having this conversation, some more shelling started up in the Chouf Mountains and the Marines wondered, 'Who was fighting up there?'

"I came away with the impression that the Marines' knowledge of what was going on in Lebanon was probably proportional to the U.S. public's knowledge. In other words, the Marines didn't understand the factionalism in Lebanon. They didn't understand who was aligned with whom.

"That was really strange to me, that people could place their lives on the line, armed with nothing but small-caliber machine guns, representing one of the world's great powers, and have no knowledge whatever as to what it was they were involved in.

"That was the first time I covered them, when they saw themselves as 'peacekeepers.' The second time I went, the Marines had seen that the whole thing was kind of a farce and that they were nothing but targets, sitting out at the end of the airport and being shot at all day. They were just crossing out the days on their calendars until they could leave.

"Now, when you went to the main press office and got reports from the officers there, there'd be no way that you'd get that sense of frustration that the common men in the bunkers had. By going out there and sitting in the trenches with them, you obtain that truth, and I think a

lot of journalists aren't willing to do that. Therefore, the information comes back kind of stilted, kind of distorted.

"Then, of course, there's the hostility toward the press. I believe that the military is largely still holding the media responsible for their loss in Vietnam and as a result, whenever they had a chance to in Lebanon, they kind of stuck it to the media by trying to control our movements by withholding transportation.

"It seems to be a superpower strategy to keep people in the dark when it comes to armed conflict."

"I think that explains why the media was excluded completely from Grenada until things had been mopped up and kind of sanitized.

"There is this view, you know, that Vietnam was the first 'living room war,' where Americans could come after a day at work and see villages totally destroyed by their tax dollars and little kids on fire from napalm. It's hard to fight a war when you get that kind of coverage. I mean, who can go along with that sort of brutality?

"That, unfortunately, is the nature of war and I guess the Reagan administration felt that by keeping people out of Grenada — press people — until things were totally under control, then it might not be so horrible a thing.

"I must also say here that the Soviet Union in Afghanistan is pulling the same kind of — for lack of a better word — shit.

"I had a really hard time getting into Afghanistan, but I did. It's just really sad when these superpowers try to manipulate the press. As a result, everyone suffers because nobody really knows what's going on in Afghanistan except for a smattering here and there when somebody spends a week or two with some rebel units.

"It seems to be a superpower strategy to keep people in the dark when it comes to armed conflict.

"One of the real problems in getting people an overview of what's going on is that the newspapers — and media in general — in the U.S. concentrate on that all-important 'local angle' and they do it to the point of the story dying on the vine.

"The actual significance of the story is buried by the fact that the attack dogs stationed in front of the Marine barracks 'were trained in Milwaukee' — or something like that.

"It seems that U.S. reporters bring a

lot of political baggage — unintentionally — to the scene, whereas sources like the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the French news agencies have the ability to wade through the public relations, the press releases, and get to the meat of the story.

"Overseas, my experience has been that U.S. journalists are generally kind of lazy, complacent, not willing to take risks. As a result, people who get a steady diet of that kind of reporting are incredibly misinformed.

"I can appreciate that journalists are always fearful of being manipulated by the very people they are covering. People do manipulate media and it can be a problem.

"My approach to getting the truth has been to spend a week with a Christian Phalange family and with the Christian Phalange forces. Then, go over and spend a week with a Palestinian family and the Palestinian forces.

"Granted, that first 10 minutes you spend with them won't be entirely genuine, but after a week of living with them — if you're any kind of journalist — you'll come away with a more accurate view of the situation than the simple black-and-white view most people have of it.

"It's going to be a more complex view and you have to get that across to your readers. You have to act as a narrator for those people who shared their lives with you. If you're doing your job, your readers share those lives, too.

"So, I go. It's what I have chosen to do.

"When I was in El Salvador, a photographer I knew, John Hoagland, was killed. I had seen him that morning, and coming back to our hotel that afternoon, it was strange to hear that he was now dead.

"The entire hotel consisted primarily of journalists and that evening we all got together because John Hoagland was dead. I'll never forget the eeriness of those moments.

"We all looked at each other and we all kind of knew that it could just as easily have been one of us.

"On the one hand, that, I think, caused us to question what it was we were doing in El Salvador. But on the other hand, John's death somehow motivated us to keep going and keep doing it. I don't think that means I have a disregard for life, nor do I think I'm overly concerned about my life. I've put those sorts of thoughts 'on the shelf,' so to speak. I believe that if it happens, it happens.

"I must tell you that philosophy is not original with me. I obtained it from a 14-year-old Sandinista. I asked him the question, 'Well, what about dying? Do you contemplate that?'

"He was very matter-of-fact and said, 'When you go, you go.'

"So, you try not to think about it too much, because if you do, it affects your work." ■