

Peter Calamai

This is a When-We story that begins in Algiers in March 1982. A “When-We” is what foreign correspondents call the tales they tell one another – often embellished tales – about their exploits in the field.

Such as “When we were roughed up at that political rally by Robert Mugabe’s thugs.”

As you might expect, Jim Travers had some delightful When-We tales.

And they all started back in Algiers when Jim was taking over from me as Africa correspondent for Southam News.

We were trying to get to a fly-speck of a place, called Tindouf, way down on the Western Sahara border, where the Polisario Front had been waging an independence war for decades. The only flight that week was horrendously overbooked and Jim and I were standing despondently on the tarmac at the Algiers airport looking at the plane about to depart.

But a spook from the Interior Ministry had been shadowing us for days and he desperately wanted us to be exposed to the Algerian propaganda machine at Tindouf. So he bounded onto the plane . . . and tossed two passengers off.

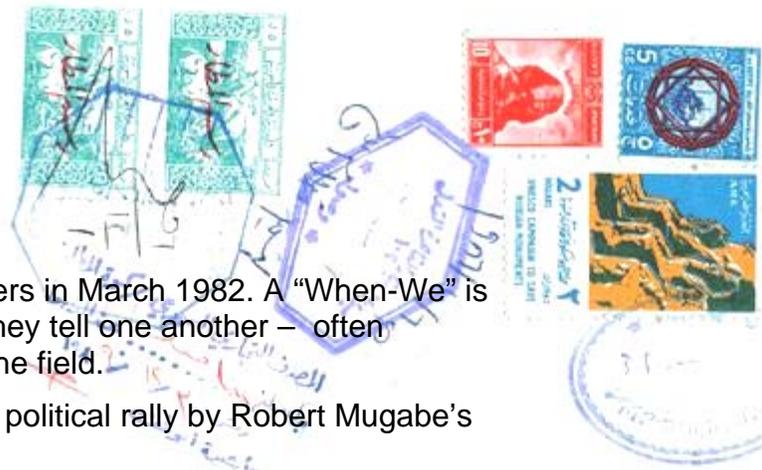
Jim turned to me and deadpanned. “Toto, I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

Lots more When-Wes followed. For example, Jim relished describing how a gang of white mercenaries showed off their toughness by diving into a slime-covered swimming pool at a Kinshasa hotel during the Congo war. He even play acted out their spluttering.

Many of Jim’s When-We stories were self-mocking, making light of the dangers of being a foreign correspondent. And very real dangers they were too. Here’s what Jim wrote for Southam News when he was with the first group of journalists to reach an important battlefield in the Iran-Iraq war in 1987:

“Another mortar exploded nearby, a guard was hit by shrapnel and the sprint back to the trucks was on. There was shouting and honking as one of the four-wheel-drive Toyotas blocked the road. A shell ripped into the nearby palm forest, uprooting a tree and starting a smouldering black fire. Packed tightly into the open vehicles, the group of about 40 reporters and photographers from around the world huddled on the floor as the trucks bucked wildly down the road and the heavy machine gun opened up again.”

Of course being a foreign correspondent was a lot more than just “When-We” stories to Jim. Time and time again he sought out and wrote about the plight of the exploited and marginalized. Time and again he reminded readers that much about the so-called Dark Continent was positive and that many people in the Middle East yearned for peace.



Without a doubt Jim was an inspiring news manager and a gifted and insightful columnist. But more than once he said privately that the most vital and life-changing period in his journalistic career were his six years as a foreign correspondent.

For Jim Travers it was an article of faith that Canadians deserve first-hand, in-depth coverage of important stories outside our borders. He argued passionately that it is crucial for Canadian reporters to "bear witness" -- because in our interconnected world, "foreign" news is local news.

So that is why here tonight – with a heavy heart but a buoyant spirit – I am honoured to announce the establishment at the Carleton School of Journalism of the R. James Travers Foreign Reporting Fellowship. The Fellowship will confer a \$25,000 award annually to finance significant foreign reporting projects by Canadian journalists – staffers, freelancers or students – working in any medium.

We intend that the successful proposals will perpetuate the spirit and dedication that characterized Jim's foreign corresponding.

To endow the Fellowship will require \$500,000. About \$150,000 of that has already been pledged by corporate and individual donors, including the Angus Reid Foundation, Vision Critical, Post Media and several of tonight's speakers.

Gifts to this fellowship are welcome and donors will receive a charitable tax receipt from Carleton University.