

20  15

## WHITE HOUSE NEWS PHOTOGRAPHERS ASSOCIATION LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD LARRY DOWNING

Larry Downing considers it a blessing to have spent the last four decades recording world events with his camera during what he calls the golden years of photojournalism. His passion for photography was sparked in the 1960s during high school in Sudbury, Mass., when the world not only turned but, in part, burned.

"I remember waiting anxiously for school to end before racing home to open up the Boston Globe to look at historic moments brought to life ... graphic images of U.S. soldiers fighting and then dying in the Vietnam War displayed next to pictures of human suffering during the heated battles for racial equality on America's streets."

Downing could only daydream then of the rewards of traveling around the world with a camera. "I knew before I left high school I wanted to be a wire service photographer," he says, "and I followed that dream."

His journey to work inside "Still Country" at the White House began shortly after he served in the Air Force as a police officer. Late in 1976 Downing joined the Los Angeles Herald-Examiner. He listened intently to the stories of crusty, colorful news photographers who used 4x5 cameras during the glamorous 1940s and 1950s. He knew immediately that he had chosen the right career path.

In his career Downing has worked on staff for other top-tier news outlets including United Press International, Newsweek and Reuters. Thirty-eight years ago he started out in Washington with UPI and was assigned to President Jimmy Carter, thus beginning a career of flying around the world as a "Guest of the President" aboard luxurious Air Force One.

"It remains to this day the most thrilling part of my job. It's like sitting on a modern-day magic carpet," Downing says.

Despite the rigorous challenges of keeping up with the president's schedule, he still finds the travels photographically rewarding. He saw places he dreamed about as a kid: India, Afghanistan, Baghdad, Kuwait, Bangkok, London, Paris, Moscow, Beijing and so many more.

The most prestigious flight came when President George W. Bush secretly left his Texas ranch on Thanksgiving 2003



and streaked across the Atlantic Ocean and Europe into Iraq to visit U.S. troops.

"What an honor to have been picked for that daring mission, and it was pulled off flawlessly by the U.S. Air Force," Downing says. "The most heartfelt moment of that emotional trip was when I asked one of the soldiers waiting in the chow hall why he was quietly seated and he responded with a huge smile, 'The Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders are coming ...'"

A footnote to flying with the president: After he joined President Barack Obama for a trip to North Dakota last year, Downing noted that

he had landed aboard Air Force One in all 50 states.

Two more challenging assignments came while Downing worked on staff with Newsweek. In 1990-91, he spent 10 weeks covering the first Persian Gulf War. He says, "War is, well, harmful to everything in its path." In contrast, Downing shot the 1994 Winter Olympics in Norway, and the cold was unforgiving. "Most major-league baseball pitchers couldn't throw a baseball as fast as an Olympic skier throws himself down a mountain," he says.

Downing believes most successful photojournalists are not born with immense talents but, instead, accept the idea that hard work and a willingness to challenge themselves will make living with a camera very rewarding.

The recipient of several awards, he is most proud of being named Reuters Journalist of the Year for his five-month multimedia story on Arlington National Cemetery's Section 60, and sharing the National Edward R. Murrow award for news documentary with co-producer Jason Reed. Together they showed how wounded veterans from the Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan defined their lives with souvenirs of war in a project including video, audio, editing, writing and photography.

For Downing, receiving the White House News Photographers Association's Lifetime Achievement Award caps what he calls a "privileged career," and he is grateful to the organization for this recognition.

"A professional photojournalist is the greatest job on the planet -- period," Downing says. "I am the luckiest man alive."