

WE DEPEND ON them for truth, for glimpses into human vileness, even as we cut their jobs and cut their space and treat their work as if it's the most disposable part of the ever-shrinking media. When photojournalists Tim Hetherington and Chris Hondros were killed last week in Libya, it made you furious. First, furious at the madmen who took their lives. Then furious at a world so bloody fatigued by war that Tim and Chris were two of the last on the scene to see it to its horrible conclusion. War correspondents—in particular, combat photographers—have always worked with their lives on the line. But in the last few decades the body count has risen dramatically. Since 1992, 861 journalists have been killed in the field, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. The worst years were 2006 and 2007, when more than 200 journalists died, most of them in Iraq. But this year is shaping up to be morbidly historic in its own right. Of the 21 media deaths so far this year, almost half were photographers or cameramen, many of them freelancers.

New York Times photographer João Silva lost both legs to a land mine while embedded with U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Speaking from Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., where he is recovering, Silva recalled his first firefight—the exhilaration, the terror, and the clarity that kept drawing him back to the front lines. “My motivation was always to be on the edge of history, to get the message out,” he said, even as he admitted that this reason was an attempt at self-justification. “If I could go back and do it all again, would I do it? Yeah, most certainly, because this is what I do . . . I’m fortunate enough to get to see people’s lives in some of the most intimate moments, and record history.”

The deaths of two vital young photographers serve as reminders of mortality—and reminders, too, that in the chaos of war, not even the most experienced combat journalists are safe. On the murky front lines of contemporary conflicts, they are no longer considered untouchable observers but rather legitimate targets for kidnappings and killings. “When something like this happens, of course I pause and think, is it worth it?” says Lynsey Addario, a close friend of Hondros and a longtime war photographer who was captured with three *New York Times* journalists in Libya last month and held under often brutal conditions for days. “Do people really care? Is it worth one of our lives? Is it worth anyone’s life?”

Both Hetherington and Hondros would undoubtedly have answered yes. They were surely motivated by many things: wanderlust, the thrill of seeing history through the shutter, a curious feeling of comfort in conflict zones. But above all, say colleagues, they were driven by a sense of mission, dedicated to the principle of truth-through-proximity.

Hetherington, by birth a Brit, was nominated for an Academy Award for *Restrepo*, an impassioned 2010 documentary about American troops in Afghanistan’s Korengal Valley. But

he first attracted notice almost a decade earlier in Sierra Leone, where he won a World Press Award for a moving photo essay about blind children. “A lot of the children had their eyes gouged out or were blinded by the rebels,” recalls Corinne Dufka, a former photojournalist. “[Tim] had a relationship with these kids . . . He kept going back there for years.”

James Brabazon, a documentary filmmaker who met Hetherington in Liberia in 2003, recalls the photographer’s steady nerves. “I’ve seen people witnessing combat for the first time soil their pants . . . run away, scream, melt down, have terrible and understandably normal visceral reactions to the prospect that they’re about to get killed,” Brabazon says. “He just kept working.” After days of being ambushed while filming close-range combat, Hetherington and Brabazon leapt from a vehicle that had come under machine-gun fire. Ducking behind a wall, Hetherington remembered he’d left videotapes in the car, containing all his footage. “He jumped over the wall and ran into an arc of fire,” Brabazon says. “As far as he was concerned, if we didn’t have the tapes, there was no point being there in the first place.”

Hondros, an American whose career spanned war zones from Kosovo to Baghdad, was also in Liberia during the 2003 meltdown. Known for his intimate, empathetic images of both victims and perpetrators, Hondros later wrote about being on a bridge with a platoon of “drugged-up . . . militia-men” who were firing on rebels on the opposite bank of the river. Hondros’s photo of a commander jumping for joy after shooting a rocket-propelled grenade catapulted him to the top ranks of combat photographers. Two years later, he returned to Liberia during peacetime and tracked down the 28-year-old commander, Joseph Duo, now decommissioned and jobless. Hondros revisited the bridge with Duo—then



On the edge of history: Hondros clowns around in the “spider hole” where U.S. forces captured Saddam Hussein in 2003.

found him a place in a computer-training school and paid his tuition. “Maybe the scars of a lifetime of horror and bloodshed are too deep to heal,” Hondros wrote in an essay for *The Digital Journalist*. “But maybe not. And in any case, the future of Joseph Duo is, for the first time ever, in his own hands.”



War is hell: In a bunker at Restrepo, Hetherington shot the photograph above, which went on to be named the World Press Photo of the Year. The shot below was taken by Hondros in Tal Afar, Iraq, in 2005 after U.S. troops fired on a vehicle bearing down on them, only to discover they had killed the parents of 5-year-old Samar Hassan. Neither picture is easy to look at, but the intense human moments they capture also make it difficult to look away.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: TYLER HICKS; PHOTOGRAPH BY TIM HETHERINGTON—PANOS; CHRIS HONDROS—GETTY IMAGES