



WENDELL PHILLIPS

"Just Passing Through"

By Carole Fawcett



"... a good photojournalist is someone who genuinely likes people and who is curious about the world," says Wendell Phillips, the celebrated Kelowna-based photographer whose poignant images say it all.

Camera in hand, Phillips has travelled the world, capturing stunning images of people and life, and recording the atrocities and pain human beings inflict upon one another.

In a career that spans close to a quarter century, Wendell Phillips has covered two wars; rubbed shoulders with prime ministers and presidents; and focused his lenses on professional sport.

Along with dozens of monthly news competitions, Phillips has won seven Picture of the Year awards with Canadian news associations. His documentaries on China and Nicaragua were each named Picture Story of the Year and in 1988 he was voted Canada's Newspaper Photographer of the Year. This award, sponsored by Canadian Press, is based on a year's output of about two hundred published images.

Not surprisingly, I was somewhat nervous about interviewing such a celebrated talent. Being a photographer myself made it somehow more stressful.

I needn't have worried. The stocky fellow with the shock of stubborn hair, who greeted me at the home he shares with wife Nancy, was not intimidating at all. I found him easy-to-talk-with and possessed of a delightful sense of humour. He is a very quiet spoken, articulate individual whose photos and words have a depth and intensity rarely seen.

As a young lad, Phillips' mom kept him from getting into mischief by directing him toward art. By high school, this had developed into a passion for telling stories with a camera.

Around the same time Phillips was strongly influenced by some people with a lot of life experience. The budding photographer's grandfather, John, and some of the elder Phillips' nursing home friends, advised the youth to take hold of every opportunity that presented itself. They told Wendell not to be among those who look back and wish they had done more – the would've, could've, should've set. Their wise words made an obvious impression.

"What attracted me to photojournalism," says Phillips, "was the challenge of capturing the human condition under normal and extraordinary circumstances."

"What intrigued me about being a photojournalist was the fact that I was part of history as it was happening. My cameras led me to adventures I never dreamed of, but also to inexplicable tragedy."

His career began with CKX TV in Brandon, Manitoba, where he worked as a news cameraman. On weekends Phillips shot for the Brandon Sun newspaper. He then spent six years with the Kamloops Daily News before moving on to the Winnipeg Free Press.

In Winnipeg, Phillips learned how to shoot under pressure as he covered a wide variety of stories. His book, *Just Passing Through*, a compilation of his work during the Free Press years, was published in 1993.

"What intrigued me about being a photojournalist was the fact that I was part of history as it was happening," he says. "My cameras led me to adventures I never dreamed of, but also to inexplicable tragedy."

He illustrates the point with a wrenching story.

"In Nicaragua (1986) we entered a makeshift hospital, standing alone in the war zone, that housed over a dozen women and children, injured when a Contra mine blew the truck they were in – killing 17.

"The smell of burned skin and death permeated the room and the people trying to help seemed overwhelmed. Our hearts were broken to see children screaming in pain while lying in water bloodied by their own wounds. One boy died before I let go of his hand.

"It was all very emotional and painful to watch, but the workers encouraged us to shoot pictures to show the world what hell this war was bringing them."

In counterpoint, there is also a lighter side to Phillips work, including assignments in Lima, Peru where he shot commercials for Coca Cola and Pampers for the South American market. His work in Greenland resulted in both magazine stories and sales to the government of Denmark to promote Greenland in 2003. He has just returned from shooting in Cuba.

For a man of 40, Phillips has accomplished a great deal. His images have appeared in *Time Magazine*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The London Times*, *McLeans Magazine* and various publications in Asia and Spain. And his success is not limited to his skill with a camera.

Phillips' second passion – skin on frame kayaks – is about as far removed from the rigors of battlefield photography as you could possibly imagine. But his knowledge of traditional skin boats and Inuit technology has made him a sought after expert in this field.

His primary interest lies in narrow (17-inch wide) Inuit skin boats, which he builds himself. He worked four winters as a kayak instructor and guide for a Canadian company on the South China Sea. And this unique interest has resulted in invitations to lecture on Inuit technology in Florida and Washington State.

Founder and coordinator of Canada's largest kayak symposium, Phillips was featured as a kayaker on a Philippine documentary (ABS-CBN) which was the top rated national show every week.

Phillips' philosophy of life is one of giving back. Over the years he has raised \$6,000 for different charities by creating slide shows and inviting the public, for a nominal fee, to view his work.

Young people in the Okanagan benefit from his expertise and experience through school presentations on the art of photography –

something he finds personally fulfilling. Phillips also taught for a summer at the Okanagan Summer School of the Arts, in Penticton.

Currently focussing much of his attention on magazines, the photojournalist is also working with the Deputy Editor of the *South China Morning Post* on a book about Hong Kong and surrounding areas. He will travel to China three times this year to shoot images for the project.

Summing up, Phillips recalls the worst of his experiences and his hopes for the future.

"There have been some atrocities I have witnessed in the past that many would not want to believe are true. Dismembered bodies lying in pools of their own blood from bombs that indiscriminately severed their lives for reasons unfathomable. I continue to be haunted by those memories and hope one day we can find a way to all live in peace. I don't have the answer, but I have that dream."

For more about the man and his work, visit www.wendellphillips.com

