

## **Africa Loses a Friend – Tim Hetherington**

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The acclaimed British photojournalist and film maker, Tim Hetherington, died in a mortar attack in the besieged city of Misrata, Libya, on 20 April 2011. He was aged 40.

I had the privilege of knowing and working with him during my time as the British High Commissioner to Sierra Leone and subsequently. His death came as a deep shock. I did not even know that he was in Misrata but it did not surprise me. Tim was always in one of the “hot spots” of the world, fearlessly bringing the “human touch” to the most appalling conflicts. The last time we had been in touch earlier this year was to congratulate him for being nominated for an Oscar for the documentary he and his colleague Sebastian Junger had produced, *Restrepo*, which documented the lives of US soldiers in Afghanistan, after they had spent a year embedded with a group of US soldiers in one of the most advanced and dangerous “hot spots”.

Tim possessed the “human touch” in abundance. It was what gave him his special skills as an acclaimed photographer and film maker but more importantly his unique compassion as a friend and humanitarian. He saw himself more as a storyteller than a reporter. Always sensitive to those around him, as *The Times* obituary said of him, “his interest was not so much the inhumanity of war as in the humanity of those caught up in it.”

Just days before his death he was making thousands of cheese sandwiches on board the vessel taking him into the port of Misrata for those fleeing the horrors of the Libyan conflict. The image brought back fond memories to me of the two of us washing and ironing the stage costumes for the 40 blind children we had brought across from war ravaged Sierra Leone before they went on to sing in their concert in Westminster Abbey.

The blind children adored their “Uncle Tim”. It was this involvement with the Milton Margai School for the Blind in Freetown which first brought us into contact with one another. He was arranging to link the school with a blind school in Sevenoaks, Kent, which we pursued vigorously and successfully. The children of the respective schools wrote to one another in Braille - Tim often acting as the “postman” – and this led to the Sierra Leone school’s choir touring the UK on two separate occasions. Again Tim was on hand to help. A very tall man, I remember him stretched out on the floor of the overnight bus from London to Inverness because he could not fit into the cramped seats! We established a charity to help these deprived but gifted children. He then started working on a book of photographs which the blind could “see” through the sense of touch.

**Tim had already worked in Kenya and Angola before coming to Sierra Leone. In Kenya he had become briefly the manager of a taekwondo team and took them to an international competition in Korea so as, as he said, “to show that Africans could compete with the world on equal terms.” After Sierra Leone he, and his fellow journalist, James Brabazon, joined the rebel LURD movement in neighbouring Liberia and documented their harrowing journey from the bush to the capital Monrovia, eventually toppling the Liberian warlord president Charles Taylor, who is now facing a war crimes court in The Hague. Tim’s photographs of this bloody campaign represent some of the most iconic images of an African conflict.**

**Tim received many awards for his work. Not only did his film Restrepo receive an Oscar nomination but it won the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival. He won the World Press Photograph of the Year and in 2008 he was presented with the Rory Peck Award. He contributed camera work to the film “The Devil Came on Horseback” about the genocide in Sudan and published the book “Infidel” based on his experiences in Afghanistan.**

**He had achieved so much, but we are now deprived of what would have been so much more to come. Sadly he is deprived of his loving relationship with his girlfriend, Idil Ibrahim, the Somali born film maker now based in New York. She has said that Tim “was a life-changing individual who will live in her heart forever”. Tim was certainly an inspiration to countless friends and individuals and a role model for many budding photojournalists, including my own godson, Jack.**

**Even in this modern world, to many Africa remains a dark and savage continent, beset by bloody inhumane conflicts. Tim Hetherington brought this world into our living rooms but he showed the human and compassionate side of the terror. He encouraged us to strive for better in the face of adversity. He will be sorely missed by all those who knew him, not least his family, to whom NAA sends its sincere condolences. Africa has lost a friend.**

**Peter Penfold**