

Carsten Stormer

DPP looks into the life of a professional photojournalist, Carsten Stormer. Read on as he brings us to war fronts, war crimes, and the desperation of poverty.

A picture of a child wrapped in a worn out blanket shows on the screen, he is protecting himself from the raging heat of Darfur, Sudan. Surrounding him are the ruins of what could have been his home, destroyed by a civil war that has been raging on since 2003. This scene is only one of the images from Carsten Stormer's portfolio; his work requires a lot of courage for viewing. After being heartbroken by the scars of war in Darfur, a viewer must stomach the heartbreaking (yet terrifying) sight of missing limbs. "Everywhere, in small villages in the Mekong delta, in the mountains of the north, in the central highlands, in cities like Hanoi, Saigon and Hue, countless old people, children and babies are condemned to a twilight existence in hospitals and care homes. These are the forgotten victims of one of the biggest war crimes of the last century: the victims of Agent Orange," reporter/photojournalist Carsten Stormer observes in his piece *A War Which Still Goes On*.



◀◀ A FORGOTTEN WAR VICTIM

A girl in the To Do hospital of Saigon, Vietnam. Decades after the end of the Vietnam war, people still suffer from the side effects of Agent Orange.
Shot details: Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 1/50 sec, f/4.0, 35.0 mm, ISO400

GETTING TO KNOW...



Carsten Stormer

Website: www.carstenstormer.com

Kit: Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Canon 35mm, 1.4, Canon 28mm to 70 mm 2.8

Qualifications: I studied journalism in Germany and India, and did a one year course on feature writing in Germany.

First job: I did an internship at the Phnom Penh Post in Cambodia.

Most memorable assignment: Spending weeks with rebels in Burma; I also did a story about the surf scene in Gaza.

Big break: I simply try to deliver quality; by doing so, I build up a good reputation.



▶▶ REBEL IN SUDAN

A rebel of the Sudanese Liberation Army (SPLA). Taken in Darfur in 2004.
Shot details: Canon EOS 20D, 1/15 sec, f/5.6, 48.0 mm, ISO 1600

◀◀ IN RUINS

A girl stands in the ruins of her home in the town of Musbet, Darfur (2004). The Sudanese airforce bombed the village, and Arab militias came riding in, killing most of the residents.
Shot details: Canon EOS 20D, 1/200 sec, f/8, 18.0 mm, ISO200

▶▶ When one is faced with a dreadful reality, most people run; others talk themselves into denial. But a journalist—whether for a coverage witnessed through words or photos—must stay on the scene to keep the rest of the world aware. And such a duty is all part of a day's work for reporter-slash-photojournalist Carsten Stormer.

Carsten is a man of the world, in a literal sense. A German now based in Manila, he studied journalism in Bremen, Germany and in Chennai, India. "I stumbled into journalism because I wanted to do something useful with my life, such as telling stories and adventures," he tells DPP. He has lived in Cambodia and Burma, having worked for the Phnom Penh Post and the Myanmar Times. "I came to Asia as a backpacker 13 years ago," he recounts. "I chose Asia because it was exciting and new; it's a place full of traditions and values." He initially arrived in Manila for a piece on informal settlers in local cemeteries. Since then he has settled in the Philippines, enjoying its challenge of having both "the good and the bad."

The printed word was his first medium. It was the need to get by that led him to record history with a camera. "I guess I was a reporter at first, but soon realized that taking photos and writing would have a positive impact on my bank account." He elaborates on the financial sacrifice the job entails by saying, "Journalism is such a horribly paid profession that you need to multitask in order to make a living." But passion is necessary to keep going, and thankfully, taking photos is one of Carsten's favorite pursuits. "It came as a big but pleasant surprise that people are willing to pay for my pictures," he quips.

Carsten's job is a matter of assessing what he observes. No creative process is implemented when he captures each photo; he just reports what is happening in front of him: "I don't go to a place with a set story in my head. I want to base my opinion

REFUGE FROM WAR

Just this year, Carsten was in Sudan to cover the area's war. In this shot, he captures children hiding in the caves of the Nuba mountains while a Sudanese aircraft flew over them, bombing the surrounding area.
Shot details: Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 1/60 sec, f/2.2, 35.0 mm, ISO320



▶ on the things I have seen, learned, and witnessed." It can't be avoided, however, that he has his own opinions on certain matters. When it comes to war crimes or human rights abuses, his allegiances lie with the victims, and not with the perpetrators. Carsten keeps it professional by not letting his feelings affect the way he takes a picture. "I will take sides in that case," he says. "I don't believe in objectivity. Everything is subjective." The gravity of what he covers, has an effect on the kind of person he wants to be. He simply wants to make a difference despite the risk of failure that comes with his profession.

When asked what has been his most controversial coverage, Carsten answered that he has reported on wars, conflicts, poverty, human rights abuses, so in effect "every story is kind of sensitive." The time of this interview, he had just come back from his second trip to Sudan, where he had to enter illegally. He had to take such a risky measure since the Sudanese government does not issue a visa for visitors and does not allow journalists

into the war zone. On his first trip in 2004/2005, he traveled for almost four weeks with rebels of the Sudanese Liberation army (SLA) and later visited the refugee camps in Chad. For his second trip, he went to the Nuba mountains in South Kordofan. "If I had been caught, I would be in jail or dead by now."

His work often focuses on the "so-called forgotten wars," which are not seen as much in the mainstream media. "Back then, [the forgotten war] was Darfur," he observes. "But now it's Burma, Uganda, East Timor, and Mindanao. I believe journalists have a responsibility to pick up the stories that are not sexy and do not just give the reader brain candy." He and his editors often disagree on this matter since the latter party stresses that "brain candy sells." But Carsten stands firm on the issue, insisting that "we have to raise awareness and educate readers not only about war and conflict, but also about social issues." And to reinforce the discussion, he asks: "What else is the purposes of journalism?"



◀◀ **KAREN STATE, BURMA (2009):**

A member of the Free Burma Rangers (FBR) is giving medical treatment to villagers and refugees in the war zone of eastern Burma.
Shot details: Canon EOS 5D, 1/800 sec, f/5.6, 24.0 mm, ISO400

◀◀ **RAMADI, IRAQ (2007):**

Carsten captures US soldiers that are under attack by a sniper.
Shot details: Canon EOS 20D, 1/60 sec, f/5.6, 16.0 mm, ISO400

▶ **AFGHANISTAN (2007):**

Afghan soldiers are picked up by a helicopter after battling the Taliban in the mountains of the Uruzgan province.
Shot details: Canon EOS 5D, 1/4000 sec, f/5.6, 35.0 mm, ISO400



▶▶▶▶ **BOMBED HOUSE**

A civilian house in Sudan that was hit by a bomb. This photo was also taken in 2011.
Shot details: Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 1/320 sec, f/5.6, 24.0 mm, ISO400

▶▶ **INCOMING**

A rebel of the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) points to the sky as a Sudanese war plane flies above. (Taken in 2011)
Shot details: Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 1/2000 sec, f/3.5, 38.0 mm, ISO400

▶ In pursuit of this higher purpose, it's important for Carsten to keep himself composed: "I just take things as they come; I have to be prepared and simply hope for the best." Of course, one cannot report a story without coming back alive, so he carries a bulletproof vest and a helmet during trips to Afghanistan or Iraq. "That's basically it. And I travel a lot with the military in armored cars and helicopters because that's the only safe way for foreigners to get around." To keep his gear safe, he keeps "a good camera bag and a cleaning kit. And insurance, just in case."

Luck also plays a role in staying alive on the job. Carsten recounts several instances wherein the country and/or the subjects did not want to cooperate, but he was lucky enough to return and report on the story. "I was shot in the leg in Iraq. I almost got blown up in Afghanistan. I was arrested in China. I was threatened with kidnapping and execution in Somalia." He even had hookworms in Sudan.

Apart from all the necessary life-saving preparations, Carsten also ensures that he comes to an





MOTIONLESS

A photo from Carsten's photo essay, *The Living Dead of Phnom Penh-The Survivors of Acid Attacks in Cambodia* (2010). Here a young man lies motionless at the Cambodia Acid Survivor Charity (CASC), waiting for the treatment of his wounds. He was attacked with acid, while riding a motorcycle, affecting his face and his back.

Shot details: Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 1/50 sec, f/3.5, 35.0 mm, ISO 400



◀ **SURVIVOR**

Sok Thy, 50, was attacked with acid by a relative after an argument about money. He now works as a motorcycle driver and beggar in Phnom Penh. (also from *The Living Dead of Phnom Penh-The Survivors of Acid Attacks in Cambodia*, 2010).

Shot details: Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 1/60 sec, f/2.0, 35.0 mm, ISO400

◀◀ **MOTHER AND DAUGHTER**

Carsten also photographed Srey On, 30, with her daughter Naomi for his photo essay, *The Living Dead of Phnom Penh-The Survivors of Acid Attacks in Cambodia* (2010). Since the attack, her daughter has lived with relatives. Srey and Naomi only see each other every few weeks. Srey On was attacked by a jealous business competitor

Shot details: Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 1/80 sec, f/4.0, 35.0 mm, ISO400



▶ assignment prepared. "I read the news, and all that comes with it—feature stories, analysis, essays, etc. I usually choose what I want to work on, so I need to dig and find the story." He also brings a lot of books to calm him down and to nourish his mind during the long weeks of his travels.

Carsten has also had his share of inspiring experiences. He found hope in the grim situation of the acid attack victims in Cambodia. His photo essay, *The Living Dead of Phnom Penh - The Survivors of Acid Attacks in Cambodia*, sets a quite disheartening mood to the Cambodians' situation: "2010 has been the year with the most number of acid attacks in Cambodia—one of the cruelest forms of violence to destroy a human life. The Cambodian society has never been given the opportunity to reconcile or deal with the consequences of the genocide by the Khmer Rouge or civil war. As a result, people often solve problems such as jealousy, family or business disputes or neighbor quarrels with violence. The victims are mostly left alone with their fate." Despite this report, he tells DPP how he was blessed to spend time with these people. "I was amazed by their ability for forgiveness. For most people, life would have ended the moment acid would hit their skin—but these people look towards the future with hope and courage. There was a lot of love within them—where one would expect hate. Their lives had been destroyed and yet hardly anyone spoke of revenge."

How many of us are willing to go to Darfur to witness war or bring ourselves face to face with the acid attack victims of Cambodia? Not many, which is why the unrelenting zeal for the calling is necessary for a journalist. "Don't become a professional photojournalist unless you have great passion and are willing to give up a lot for your profession," he advises. "It takes hard work to become successful, and it usually does not pay off."

Apart from the willingness to pursue each story, Carsten describes his work as part of a bigger plot: "Photojournalism is my way of shaping the world—to show things that go wrong, and to create awareness. It's not necessarily to make a difference, but to be part of it."