

Richard Waugh: Australian News Photographer

Over the past twenty-eight years, Richard Waugh has been employed as a news and editorial photographer for an array of Australian publications. He currently works for Brisbane News as a permanent part-time photographer while also photographing food, architecture, arts and theatre, fashion, functions, still life and weddings on a freelance basis.

Waugh first gained employment within a Kodak packing operation not long after graduating from the Queensland College of Art, with a Diploma of Photography in 1984. As the only male employee and also one of the youngest within the operation, Waugh worked night shifts from 9pm until 5am, helping to pack film negatives and prints, which were then allocated into pigeon holes and later into large sacks, ready for delivery to their designated town or pharmacies. Waugh did not particularly enjoy working in such an environment and therefore, when the opportunity to work as a darkroom manager for the Sun Newspapers in the Brisbane Valley arose, he did not hesitate to apply.

During the first two weeks of employment at the Sun Newspapers, Waugh felt as if he was on an alien planet. He learnt to quickly adapt his knowledge of correctly developing and printing when introduced to the fast paced darkroom environment of the news industry. All stages of processing and creating a print were sped up in order to shorten the turnaround period between receiving the negatives to delivering a print. This system of processing therefore created incredible wastage rates, where large bins would be filled with full size wet prints that were considered no good. The darkroom was a place where most journalists didn't go, whereas in the current workforce, the distinction between photography and journalism areas has been blended. Although the darkroom environment was exceedingly busy, Waugh thoroughly enjoyed the company of animated co-workers whom which he worked with.

One of Waugh's most noteworthy press photographs was created on the day in which prisoners had set areas of the Boggo Road Prison on fire as part of the riots held in 1986. Waugh was sent out as a developer, assigned to process other working photographer's photographs. He recalls arriving at the scene, as most of the senior photographers were packing up ready to move on. When looking up towards a burnt out wall of the high security section, he spotted two hands arise, gripping the heavy bars and a face looking out the window. By this time, Waugh was the only one at the scene. Waugh quickly set up his camera with an equivalent 800mm lens, attached to a tripod and positioned himself to photograph the prisoner. Moments later the prisoner raised one fist and clenched it tightly as a sign of victory - Waugh knew he had nailed the shot. When back in the darkroom, the picture editor saw Waugh's print developing and immediately hurried the processing, ran upstairs to have the image published and Waugh's photograph was printed on the front page of The Sun, The Australian, Sydney Morning Herald and The Age newspapers with by-lines on every publication.



A high security prisoner of the Brisbane Jail, clenching his fist after prisoners started fires in parts of the jail, 1986. Photographed using a Nikon fm2 with 600mm lens and convertor, Tri-x pan 400 film pushed 3 stops to 3200. Image supplied by photographer, Richard Waugh.

Waugh was not only proud to be published on the front page of newspapers for the first time, but also glad to have gained recognition for his work. As a result, he gradually received more frequent photography assignments and continued working with Sun Newspapers as an editorial photographer and darkroom manager until 1992.

Between 1993 and 1994, Waugh was employed as a Senior Press photographer at the Sunday Telegraph bureau in Brisbane. During the same time frame, Waugh managed the Channel Seven photography studio at Mt. Coot-tha, organising publicity shots for magazines and billboards, photographing various cast members and television presenters. Waugh was also a freelance photographer contributing to The Australian, Sydney Morning Herald, Reuters, AAP and the Melbourne Age.

In 1994, Waugh and his family moved to New South Wales as employment for news photography in Brisbane was limited. Waugh recalls money at the time being very tight and can remember spending numerous evenings rearranging and tailoring portfolios for interviews at various agencies in hope of finding work. After quite some time, he eventually gained employment with The Australian, mainly because he had completed a few assignments for them while previously in Brisbane. This was a great step forward and opened opportunities to also work with the Sunday Telegraph, Daily Telegraph and the Australian Magazine covering features, fashion, news and sport until 2000. Living in Sydney was part of a valuable learning curve for Waugh and he learnt to adapt to situations quickly.

From 2000 onwards, Waugh worked in Brisbane for the Courier Mail, The Sunday Mail, the Australian newspapers and travelled extensively around Queensland for the Queensland Country Life newspaper between 2008 and 2009, before settling back in Brisbane, where he is currently based at Queensland Newspapers working for Brisbane News.

Having worked for news publications since 1985, Waugh has experienced first hand the effect of technological change. When Waugh first began work as a photojournalist, in order to send images, black and white 10x8 prints were wrapped around a slow moving light scanner that ran across a print within machines called United Press International Photo Transmitters. The scanner would convert black, grey and white tones into sound tones, which were then received at the other end of the telephone line and converted back into images. These suitcase sized machines, weighing up to 10kg, as well as portable darkrooms containing paper, chemicals, enlarger and easel plus camera equipment were taken into the field on assignment.



Early 1970's era United Press International UPI Model 16-S black and white drum print transmitter, with vintage rotary phone showing how transmitter was hooked up to phone lines. (Andy Scott/Staff Photographer from The Dallas Morning News)

Source: <http://photographyblog.dallasnews.com/2012/07/photojournalist-or-pack-mule-a-look-back-at-the-good-old-days-of-wire-service-photography.html/>

When travelling to towns, Waugh would convert his hotel room into a darkroom and enlarge images in the bathroom. Waugh saw a digital camera for the first time just before the year 2000 while in Sydney working as a freelance photographer. Over the past twenty-eight years, he has watched the news industry transition from having not a single computer within the company and using film exclusively, to now working with laptops, tablets, mobile phones and digital cameras. Even though the older forms of technological processing were slow, Waugh felt they were quite fun to work with - he still occasionally shoots film and develops in his own darkroom.

Waugh believes that there are currently many avenues for the public to access news and sees boutique publications as stronger and more prepared to produce information for the digital world. This is because they quite often skip the printing process altogether, delivering directly online. In saying this, Waugh believes that newspapers will still be around for at least five years, but beyond that time period, they will most likely shift from hard copy publications to more condensed, digital forms in order to accommodate for the digital revolution. He also sees these changes as generational and feels that the greatest transition within his career was when computers and digital cameras were introduced.

The digital revolution in Waugh's opinion has caused the hierarchal structure between news photographers and the public to become less distinct, especially with the increasing avenues for images to be shared. Waugh finds the 'everyone's a photographer syndrome', that many hobbyists or amateurs have adapted is greatly influenced by the advancements in social media and mobile phone applications. This 'syndrome' in Waugh's opinions is a problem within the news industry. News photographs are created to accompany a news story and in order to maintain integrity for historical archives and also to serve as truthful records of events, the content within those photographs cannot be changed - only cropping or minor levels adjustments are allowed.

In contrast, the use of editing software for hobbyists, the general public and fine art photographers is endless, providing ample opportunity for their images to become more illustrative and interpretive. In saying this, Waugh appreciates an array of photographic genres and owns a diverse collection of photography related books but is often drawn towards photo documentary works, particularly those of Sebastiao Salgado and Trent Parke.

The news industry in Waugh's opinion is extremely competitive and ego driven to an extent. Unlike full time or part time news photographers, freelancers are not required to arrive at work every day for assignments, however their income can become unstable depending on the fluctuation of workload each year. Waugh believes the unpredictability of assignments is what makes his job so interesting and fun. He strongly believes in photographers exhibiting their work in galleries where possible and also maintaining personal photographic endeavours, in order to find a balance between work and life and to also keep the love for photography alive.

Valuable advice that Waugh would pass onto emerging news photographers and photojournalists is to be fearless and confident towards covering an event or story, regardless of whether they are employed to be there or not. The most important task is being able to capture the right moment but also keeping in mind that no photograph is worth dying for. Always look beyond the main subject because every action has an equal and opposite reaction and quite often those reactions provide vital information about the story. Finally, one should have an open mind, allow their instincts flow and not forget to travel!

Interview held at News Queensland, Bowen Hills on April 25th, 2013