

The world was his beat

From the 1969 Battle for Hamburger Hill to the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, journalist David Lamb has brought global events to life and into perspective for millions of Americans.

By Jim Frick '44H

YOU COULD GET jet lag just thinking about the number of countries that David Lamb '62 worked in during his brilliant career as a journalist—145 in all. Some of those countries didn't even exist when he graduated from the University of Maine in 1962—many that existed then, no longer do today.

But even more impressive than the dizzying number of countries he covered is the list of major world events and conflicts he witnessed. That list includes the 1969 Battle for Hamburger Hill in Vietnam's Ashau Valley, the fall of Saigon, the Iranian Revolution, the landing of Marines into the turmoil of Beirut in 1982, the fall of Idi Amin, the Rwanda Massacres, the First Gulf War, the 1998 uprising in Indonesia, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Lamb did much more than just report on the headlines. His colorful and insightful writing brought world events to life, and into perspective, for millions of American readers. And in the tradition of all great journalists, he never settled for second-hand reports, but insisted on being an eyewitness, often putting himself in harm's way. Over the span of his career Lamb was nominated for eight Pulitzer prizes.

In addition, his experiences eventually led to six critically acclaimed books, ranging in subject from his cross-country journey by bicycle to his late 1990s discovery of a Vietnam he never knew as a young correspondent covering that country's civil war in the '60s.

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"I was completely stunned," he said. "But the folks who are really stunned are my classmates! I know they're all saying, 'that guy's getting what award?' I wasn't exactly known as an model student."

Although he grew up in Massachusetts, choosing UMaine was an easy decision for Lamb. His father, Ernest, was a loyal member of the Class of 1910.

"My dad loved the university," he noted. "I gave him a lot of cause for concern when I was a student at UMaine,

but I know he would have been extremely proud of my getting this award."

At UMaine, Lamb joined Beta Theta Pi fraternity, served on the staff of the *Maine Campus*, and studied journalism under the tutelage of legendary professor Brooks Hamilton.

"I think we had maybe eight journalism majors back then, and I believe all of us went into print journalism," he recalls. "Brooks taught everything the department offered—he *was* the journalism department. We all loved him—and in turn he nurtured our love of journalism."

After graduation, Lamb was commissioned and served a two-year stint in the U.S. Army. When his military obligation was over, he headed west in search of a newspaper job. He found one, albeit for \$90 a week, with the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. A year later he moved on to a slightly better paying job at the *Oakland Tribune*.

Exhilarating and horrifying

His first foreign assignment came in 1967, shortly after joining United Press International. Lamb was sent off to Vietnam to cover what would turn out to be the most intense period of that long war. As a front-line reporter he was never far from the action. Indeed, he covered some of the highest profile events of the war, including Hamburger Hill. In fact, it was Lamb who gave that battle its name.

"Vietnam was both exhilarating and horrifying," Lamb explained in an earlier *MAINE Alumni Magazine* interview. "I often felt the futility of the war. It was a haunting experience, knowing what the Marines and soldiers had been through, and that in the end it was all for nothing."

In 1970, Lamb began a 34-year association with the *Los Angeles Times*—America's second-largest daily newspaper. When reflecting on the numerous battles, uprisings, and invasions he covered in that career, he says that being in Beirut in 1982 probably ranks as the scariest experience.

"When the Israelis invaded in '82, there was absolute anarchy in the city," he remembers. "More than 100 militias were running around, and the Israelis were dropping bombs everywhere. Some of

those militias didn't like the American press. There was literally nowhere to go where you could feel safe. Things happened without warning or reason."

How does a reporter function under such conditions? "It's tough and scary," he admits. "It was a time when my life was in danger on an almost daily basis. But you're so intent on getting the story that you just deal with it. Even when the diplomats from the U.S. Embassy were evacuated from Lebanon, and advised us to leave too, we journalists stayed. We stayed because it's sort of a time-honored tradition—journalists are the first in and the last out."

Lamb now looks back on those harrowing times in Beirut as well as other assignments all over the Middle East, Africa, and Asia and realizes just how different the world of journalism is today.

"When I first went to Africa in the '70s there were no computers, no faxes—heck, our telephone almost never worked," he remembers. "Most communication was done by telex. One good thing about that was that your boss couldn't contact you instantaneously, at any time from the home office—we worked pretty independently. Now reporters are connected to the home office literally 24 hours a day."

Lamb doesn't think that all of the big changes in journalism are for the better. He's especially sad about the demise of American newspapers.

"Occasionally when I talk to high school or college students about journalism, I'm asked if I think they should go into print journalism," he says. "I have to admit that I'm hesitant to give them an answer, because the newspaper industry is in such abysmal condition."

He believes newspapers remain important because the major networks have really given up covering the world.

"When I first became a foreign correspondent, the networks had reporters everywhere in the world," he says. "Now they just jump in for crisis stories, but overall the networks have no world coverage anymore. Lots of fluff stuff now. We really need broad news coverage to be able to obtain a rational understanding of what the world is about."

David Lamb has certainly made his contribution to our understanding of the world—through outstanding reporting and his insightful books such as *The Arabs: Journeys Beyond the Mirage*, *The Africans*, and *Vietnam, Now: A Reporter Returns*. The latter book was the result of one of Lamb's last assignments with the *L.A. Times*, opening one of the first American news bureaus in Hanoi. It was an assignment that Lamb believes is his favorite. It was also one that brought his career full circle.

"I think probably the nicest and most satisfying assignment was my last one—going back to Vietnam—which I had only known as a country at war when I covered it back in the '60s," he says. "Most of my time was with the Marines at the DMZ. It was really the discovery of a brand-new country. I knew nothing about Vietnamese history or culture. I had spent almost all of my time during the war with American troops."

Discovering the real Vietnam

Lamb says that when he went back in '97 he discovered the real Vietnam and he made friends for life.

"Both my wife and I loved it," he says. "We loved the people, the food, and the culture. My career really came full circle. The war had been my first overseas assignment and then to come back and discover the Vietnam I'd never known toward the end of my career—well, it was very special."

In addition to his book, Lamb's return to Vietnam led to three critically acclaimed documentaries for PBS, produced and directed by his wife, Sandy Northrop.

Although officially retired from the *L.A. Times*, Lamb is still in demand as a freelance writer and a speaker. Despite having dealt with some serious health issues, he's returned to Vietnam numerous times in the past decade, often being featured as a speaker on cruise tours to that country.

You might expect a 50-year newspaper veteran who has witnessed more than his share of war, rebellion, and injus-

tice to be something of a curmudgeon and cynic. In David Lamb's case, nothing could be further from the truth. He remains enthusiastic and curious about everything going on in the world. Most of all he's appreciative of a career that was a perfect fit for his wanderlust, his personality, and his abilities.

"I never woke up a single day wishing I was doing something else with my life," he says. 🐾

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