



DANIEL PEARL AWARD

for courage and integrity
in journalism

A View from the Front Lines

CAREER
REPORTING
FROM THE
MIDDLE EAST
EARNS
NBC NEWS'
RICHARD ENGEL
THE DANIEL
PEARL AWARD

BY TED JOHNSON

THE VIDEO FOOTAGE ran throughout the day of March 23: It was a report from Libya of Richard Engel, NBC's chief foreign correspondent, ducking and falling to the ground in the face of incoming fire.

What can't be forgotten is the rest of the story, or why he was there: To give a dramatic yet nuanced report from the front lines of the rebel forces against Muammar Gaddafi's army. As Engel showed, the rebels were so outmatched that one had a plastic toy gun.

It's this ability to explain the fog of war and uprising that has long enlightened American viewers, most recently in his coverage of the Arab Spring revolts.

Engel, 37, is being honored with the Los Angeles Press Club's Daniel Pearl Award for Courage and Integrity in Journalism for a broad and insightful career spent largely in the Middle East. Ruth and Judea Pearl, the parents of Daniel Pearl, say that his

coverage "has been pivotal to our understanding of the people of the region, their aspirations and their struggle for freedom and dignity."

What is unusual is how Engel got to a place where his home country would feel like "just somewhere else."

Engel was raised on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. After graduating from Stanford in 1996 with a degree in international relations, he stunned his family by moving to Cairo. His reason was a notion that the Middle East would be "the story of my generation."

After freelancing there, he landed a job with the *Middle East Times*, an English-language paper where he reported on all aspects of Egyptian life—even restaurant reviews. One challenge was avoiding Egypt's censorship laws, one of the reasons that the paper was printed in Athens. When they ran into trouble, usually over stories involving President Hosni Mubarak and his family, or pieces on the problems between Christians and Muslims, the

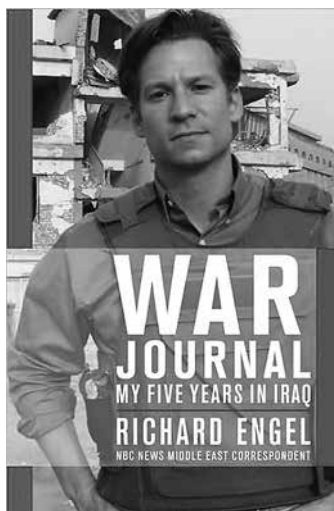
paper would do "cheeky things" like simply run blank space, Engel recalls.

During this period, Engel took classes to learn Arabic. He eventually picked up enough to move between dialects, something few other American correspondents have the time or inspiration to do.

He later went to Jerusalem to cover the conflict with the Palestinians, and worked for a number of outlets including Agence France Press, Reuters and *Jane's Defense Weekly*, and was Middle East correspondent for "The World" from BBC World Service, PRI and WGBH Boston.

As the drumbeat to war in Iraq

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began sounding in 2002, he sought to go to Baghdad as a freelancer. He even bribed an Iraqi official with a few hundred dollars to get an illegal visa.

What he didn't realize is that he would be one of the only American reporters left in Baghdad as the U.S. began the "shock and awe" campaign. Major news organizations had moved their staffers out for safety reasons. He freelanced for ABC News until he joined NBC News in May 2003.

The network says that Engel was one of the only Western journalists to cover the entire war, in which he witnessed the initial euphoria after the fall of Saddam Hussein, the descent into chaos and the challenges facing U.S. forces in the middle of a civil war, and the last combat brigade pulling out last year.

The endless onslaught of roadside explosions and attacks were so frequent that they became difficult to distinguish. Bomb blasts drove him from three hotel rooms. Engel says he first realized that he was getting "compassion fatigue" when, after covering a suicide bombing, he began to wipe blood off of his shoes "like it was just mud."

"You will get desensitized," he reflects. "It's like being someone employed in an emergency room, where you are seeing people have the worst experi-

ences of their lives, where you see every possible human emotion exposed. But for you it's just another day at work."

That doesn't mean "you can't be human," Engel says.

That sentiment was evident in a video journal that he kept throughout the war, which became the subject of the 2007 NBC documentary *War Zone Diary*. Along with two books he wrote on his experiences, *A Fist in the Hornet's Nest* and *War Journal: My Five Years in Iraq*, the documentary is a personal look at the life of a foreign correspondent in one of the most dangerous places on earth. The

Engel in Cairo with Brian Williams.

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— Richard Engel

project went on to win the 2008 Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Award and the Medill Medal for Courage in Journalism.

In a 2003 entry, as many reporters had left Baghdad and he had sought comfort in a phone call to

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the United States, Engel tells the camera, “You speak to the family and it brings it home and makes you look at the bigger picture. It makes you wonder, ‘Am I going to end up looking like some foolish cowboy?’”

On the contrary, Engel has now spent so much time away that the U.S. has become “another stop on the endless road trip.” It is even a bit of a surprise that he keeps an apartment in New York, where he’s spent just a week so far this year.

His parents do not ask why he’s chosen a career covering war and conflict, and have even “encouraged the ‘why?’” he says. But they are still cautious in knowing the dangers, as is Engel. “You have to stay that way,” he says.

He also hasn’t lost sight of what war is—something you can only know “when you live it.”

“I do think sometimes the use of force is essential,” he says. “But war is atrocious. I hate war. I loathe it. When societies go to war it sometimes brings out the best in some people. More often than not, it brings out the absolute worst in human nature.” 🖐

Engel broadcasts live from Iraq with the Bloommobile, an armored mobile satellite truck.

CONGRATULATIONS RICHARD ENGEL



Recipient of the 2011 Daniel Pearl Award for
Courage and Integrity in Journalism

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