

# Braving the **UNKNOWN** From Behind the **LENS**

Marcus Yam, Recipient of the LA Press Club's Daniel Pearl Award, Has Learned That 'You've Got to Make the Picture'

BY JOHN GITTELSOHN

Last year, Marcus Yam chronicled the fall of Afghanistan for the *Los Angeles Times*. The photographer was one of a handful of foreign correspondents to stay and document the aftermath of the U.S. military's humiliating exit and the Taliban's takeover. In May he won a Pulitzer Prize for what the award committee called his "raw and urgent images."

This year, Yam rushed to photograph another battlefield: Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Tonight brings something different: As the Los Angeles Press Club pays tribute to all journalists risking their lives to cover the war in Ukraine, Yam is receiving the Daniel Pearl Award for Courage and Integrity in Journalism. The prize is named for the *Wall Street Journal* reporter who was killed by terrorists in Pakistan in 2002.

While war is always hell, the 38-year-old Yam said the stories he is telling differ in Afghanistan and Ukraine. The fall of Kabul was a drama of defeat and abandonment. Ukraine is a tale of courage and grace under fire.

The Ukrainian journalists covering the fighting "have balls of steel," Yam said in a Zoom interview in May from Kyiv. "They have to watch their country, their homeland, rolling in turmoil, burned in the physical sense, and still do their jobs."

He has photographed women making Molotov cocktails and mothers delivering babies in an underground maternity ward while bombs

fell. Yam said he has witnessed "raw courage and a sense of humanity that's sweeping through this country because of this war. People have become the best versions of themselves."

Sometimes the challenges are unexpected. In Afghanistan, Yam struggled to persuade his editors to let him stay, including after he was beaten up by Taliban soldiers. He convinced them he had an emergency exit plan and that the story was too important to leave behind.

His work is powerful and penetrating. One photo in Yam's Pulitzer portfolio shows the hardened faces of men looking down at the wreckage of a family van hit by a U.S. drone strike, a crumbling wall at their backs. Yam heard a U.S.



C-17 roaring through the air, and knowing he had seconds to frame the scene, he lowered his camera to capture the contrast of the departing flight and the men stuck on the ground.

"I wanted to try to illustrate the sense of betrayal that all these Afghans have basically expressed to me that they felt left behind," he said.

The picture of shadowy figures backlit by the bright sky exemplifies Yam's photographic style

and his eye for using light to create drama and empathy.

"It's a way of carving out a scene and painting the scene differently," he said. "You've got to not just take the picture. You've got to make the picture."

Yam does not need to go overseas for visionary images. During a 2017 fire in Ventura, he shot an iconic photo of flaming palm trees. In the

Above: Members and neighbors of the Ahmadi family gather to examine the wreckage caused by a "tragic mistake" when a U.S. drone launched a strike meant to target ISIS-K militants for an airport bombing but took the lives of 10 members of Emal Ahmadi's family, including seven children.



Left: A military transport plane departs overhead as Afghans hoping to leave the country wait outside the Kabul airport. Since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan earlier in August 2021, more than 120,000 people were airlifted out of Afghanistan in one of the largest mass evacuations in U.S. history.

Opposite page: Marcus Yam from somewhere in the Donbas region, Ukraine, wearing his usual black, to avoid decision fatigue.

## DANIEL PEARL AWARD MARCUS YAM

Anti-Taliban protesters mark Afghanistan's independence day by attempting to hoist the red, green and black national banner. They were often beaten by militant fighters, who newly controlled the streets of Kabul. About 200 people rallied towards the city center on Aug. 19, 2021, chanting "Death to Pakistan, God Bless Afghanistan, Long Live the National Flag of Afghanistan."



After the stroke of midnight, Aug. 31, 2021, Taliban fighters from the Fateh Zwak unit storm into Hamid Karzai International Airport while wearing American-made uniforms and brandishing American M4 and M16 rifles and riding in U.S. pickup trucks.

a sunset tucking into the horizon." Yam knows his photos or stories will not bring peace on Earth. He goes to the battlefield because he feels compelled to share the horrors of violence and human suffering, hoping he can help bend history in a better direction.

"War is not something you should look forward to," he said. "If you've been around death, you know the smell of death and the idea of death. It does not just linger around, but it stays with you, in your memory. It's like a scab on your soul."

Yam grew up in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and came to the U.S. at 19 to attend New York State University at Buffalo. He majored in aerospace engineering and aspired to be a civilian astronaut and live a comfortable life. "Get a job, buy a boat, a house, hang out with buddies on Sunday—like the American Dream," he said.

*New Yorker*, Vinson Cunningham wrote, "The charred silhouettes of the trees stand like reminders that even paradise, unwatered, passes away. The picture, with its violence of color, is a kind of counterpoint to the classic SoCal image:

He started working for the university newspaper because he thought it would be an easy way to earn the English credit he needed to graduate. He bought his first camera, and his work caught the attention of a photo editor at the *Buffalo News*, who invited Yam to join the paper. It was a career move that alienated him from his Malaysian family but a decision that tapped into a passion he had never felt before.

"It was a weird feeling, that feeling where the hair on the back of your neck was starting to stand and you just knew this was the road ahead of you," he said. "And it felt like all the planets were aligned and you're like, 'I need to do this.'"

He worked as an intern for the *New York Times* and the *Seattle Times* before joining the *Los Angeles Times* in 2014. Since then, his work has been diverse. He took photos of Black Lives Matter protests and a mass shooting in San Bernardino. He slept on his floor because he wanted to be ready to work at any moment, to avoid going soft. Editors know Yam can dive into high-stress situations and bring back the goods.

"He outshot everybody," Calvin Hom, the *Los Angeles Times* photo editor, said in an interview. "He's relentless."

Yam went to Iraq in 2017, where he shot photos of drone strike victims that helped change military policies for targeting attacks. In 2019, he won a Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Journalism Award for his coverage of deadly clashes

## Congratulations Daniel Pearl Award winner Marcus Yam!

We're proud to see you recognized for your brave and outstanding work as a foreign correspondent and photojournalist.

**Los Angeles Times**  
The state of what's next.



Nabih Bulos / Los Angeles Times



# Congratulations

## LA Press Club 2022 Honorees

sagaftra.org    

**DANIEL PEARL AWARD**  
MARCUS YAM



Women and children crouch in the sweltering heat at a Taliban-controlled checkpoint near Abbey Gate, an entrance to the Kabul airport on Aug. 25, 2021. A day later, a patient lies in the recovery unit at Wazir Akbar Khan Hospital after a suicide bomber from terrorist group ISIS-K struck the Abbey Gate entrance. The blast ripped through crowds of Afghans and foreign nationals, killing at least 170 civilians in addition to 13 U.S. service personnel.



in the Gaza Strip. In December 2020, he was promoted, becoming the *L.A. Times'* first foreign photo correspondent. Then came Afghanistan, Ukraine and a Pulitzer.

That honor poses its own unique challenge. "Now that you've scaled Mt. Everest, what do you do?" Yam said. "I had a conversation with my boss about this and he laughed, and he told me, 'Well, you keep doing that. You rinse and repeat. You keep proving that you're consistent.'

And that's it. That's all there is to do." Receiving the Daniel Pearl Award is another spur to keep going, Yam said. "This award serves as a reminder that we have a responsibility to create work that fosters a better understanding of the world and can leave an impact on our readers, even in the face of danger," he said in an email. "I hope I will be able to continue honoring Daniel's life by striving to never shy away, and brave the unknown."



*Christine,  
Thank you for  
all you've done!*

**Pritzker  
Foster Care  
Initiative**

**CONGRATULATIONS**  
TO ALL THE LA PRESS CLUB HONOREES



OUTSTANDING SERVICE SINCE 1979 **BBB**

**EXECUTIVE LIMOUSINE**  **310.823.5466**

[www.executivela.com](http://www.executivela.com) TCP # 23109B

A sincere congratulations to FOX 11 News Anchor

*Christine Devine*  
**2022 President's Award**  
For Impact on Media



THE *Ones* TO WATCH.  
**FOX 11**