

RISKING IT ALL to Report on Ordinary People and *Extraordinary Conflicts*

CNN'S CLARISSA WARD RECEIVES THE DANIEL PEARL AWARD FOR COURAGE AND INTEGRITY IN JOURNALISM

Clarissa Ward knew that the Russian drones could return at any time.

Traveling down empty streets in the Ukrainian town of Kherson, she hoped the clouds above would offer cover from the drones that routinely target residents who venture outside. The CNN chief international correspondent and her crew filmed and interviewed residents during critical deliveries of food before getting word that a fleet of drones may be taking flight.

Ward has spent more than two decades taking such risks while reporting from conflict zones around the world, chronicling wars, regime changes and societal upheaval. She has reported from Iraq, Russia, Afghanistan, Syria, Georgia and Ukraine, to name a few, at times working as one of the few Western journalists on the ground.

"I care about ordinary people. Ordinary people

in extraordinary situations. I recognize that I can't get to those stories without taking some risk," Ward said.

Tonight, Ward is receiving the Los Angeles Press Club's Daniel Pearl Award for Courage and Integrity in Journalism at the Southern California Journalism Awards. The prize is named for the Wall Street Journal foreign correspondent who was killed by terrorists in Pakistan in 2002.

Born in London, Ward initially thought she wanted to be an actress. She was 22 and studying comparative literature when the planes hit the World Trade Center.

"My whole world changed in a moment," Ward said of 9/11.

She wanted to try to get to the root of how and why the attack happened. That included trying to better understand America's role in the world and how it is perceived by others.

"I understood implicitly that I had a calling," she said. Ward added that she had a "very idealistic notion of wanting to go to the tip of the sphere and act as a translator between worlds."

After graduating from Yale, she moved to New York City in search of a job in a newsroom, joining Fox's overnight desk. It was a grueling two years, with shifts starting at midnight, but one that involved frequent communications with Fox's Baghdad bureau.

There were moments of boredom and periods of "incredibly intense pressure," she said. Her responsibilities included alerting the news organization of major global events, like when Saddam Hussein was found in 2003.

After nearly a year in the role, Ward began

Ward on the ground in Ukraine in 2022.



begging her bosses to allow her to go to Baghdad. They ultimately said yes, and she went for six weeks before quitting to become a freelancer in Beirut, traveling back and forth to Baghdad.

In Iraq, Ward found herself motivated by the stories of ordinary people swept up in war.

Pearl's work and death loomed large in her mind early in her career, both as a reality check on the dangers involved in the field she'd chosen, and as a reminder of the ideals of being courageous in the name of pursuing the truth.

Early in her career, Ward worked long hours and hustled to prove herself. She made herself useful, finding mentors and thinking ahead about ways to help her colleagues, whether it was getting them coffee, or printing wire copy and putting it under their doors.

"Anything I could do to make people in this industry realize how serious I was about wanting to learn," she said.

Ward joined ABC in 2007 and worked as a correspondent in Moscow and Beijing, before

Top: Interviewing a man with his baby in Yemen; Left: Covering how a flood damaged a village and its people; Above: Walking an isolated area in Israel.



Top: Ward and crew cool their heels on the snow in Greenland;
Above: Preparing for a report in 2025;
Right: Ward speaks to women on the street in Myanmar, 2021.

becoming the CBS News foreign news correspondent in 2011.

Later that year, she posed as a tourist and slipped into Syria, giving viewers a look at a country headed toward civil war. Ward traveled alone with a hidden camera, and interviewed members of the Free Syrian Army as well as a protester crippled by government security forces.

She had an extensive backstory prepared, had gone over her packing list many times, created clean technology devices and accounts, and even sewed a pocket into the lin-



ing of her underwear to carry her camera's memory cards. She ultimately won a George Foster Peabody Award for her dispatches.

Ward joined CNN in 2015, and less than three years later became chief international correspondent, succeeding Christiane Amanpour. She reported on life under Taliban rule in 2018. When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, she went to Kharkiv and Kyiv. More recently, she traveled to Syria after the fall of the Assad regime, reporting from inside a prison known for torture and a morgue. Earlier this year



In 2024, Ward found herself surrounded by women in Syria and was able to speak in depth with a young woman dressed a little less conservatively.

she was with Ukrainian families as they waited for their loved ones to return as part of a prisoner exchange with Russia.

Ward has a knack for and fascination with language, using it to deepen her coverage. She speaks—to varying degrees—French, Italian, Russian, Arabic, Spanish and Mandarin.

A mother of three, Ward said she has a sober approach to risk. She knows she can't do her job without taking some risk, but contrasts it with detailed planning and teamwork.

"You're just sick with nerves," she said of her time in the field on dangerous assignments. "Fear and nerves, they're very normal and they're very important. They're not something you should ignore, but they can't be in the driver's seat."

She said her job is harder than ever: many people are turning away from news and mainstream media, and social media can add complexity and toxicity.

But time in the field has helped crystalize her style and strengths. Ward's goal is to be human in her reporting and to tell stories in an accessible way.

When she makes mistakes, "I'll own up to it. We're not perfect," she said.

Ward says she's learned the steps she needs to take after returning home from assignments in high-risk areas. She now has discipline around spiritual practices from meditation to breath work, prayer and yoga.

"I understand that when I come back, I need to crash," she said. "Even if you don't feel it intellectually, it's written in the body." 🙏



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