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Max Nash, AP photographer who covered war, dies at 77

LONDON (AP) — Photographer Max Nash, who covered conflicts in Southeast Asia and the Middle East and helped nurture a new generation of female photojournalists during more than 40 years with The Associated Press, died Friday after collapsing at home. He was 77.

Known in his youth for a mop of flaming red hair, eccentric color combinations in his clothes and the Gitanes he smoked until giving them up later in life, Nash also shot Formula One auto racing, celebrity Red Carpet events and politics before retiring from the AP in 2004.

He didn't want to hang up his cameras, though, and continued working as a freelancer for more than a decade.

"Because I never found the job boring and still don't, I continue at 70," Nash wrote on his LinkedIn Page.

Born in London on Sept. 3, 1941, Nash first studied photography under his father, former Paris AP photo editor Michael O'Reilly Nash. His formal education took place in Switzerland, France and finally England, where he graduated from the British Merchant Marine Officers' school aboard the HMS Conway. After a stint in the North Atlantic, Nash decided to pursue photojournalism.

He worked first for The New York Times before joining the AP bureau in Brussels in 1963, a posting that gave Nash his first experience in a war zone as conflict gripped Belgium's former colony in the Republic of Congo.

Nash arrived at Saigon's AP Bureau in late 1968, joining Horst Faas and Carl Robinson as the bureau's photo editors. Robinson remembered him as rather eccentric, but with a high level of technical knowledge that helped him set up remote film processing and transmission operations and made him "an invaluable member of the Saigon photos team."

Nash told colleagues he often wore a helmet in Saigon — not out of fear of bombardment, but because Faas would hit him over the head for mistyped captions.

Nash later worked in Cambodia in the uncertain days after U.S.-backed Gen. Lon Nol overthrew Prince Norodom Sihanouk in 1970. Some 24 foreign journalists were captured and killed by Khmer Rouge guerrillas after the coup, and former AP correspondent Jeff Williams recalled an incident in which he is certain that Nash saved his life due to his fluency in French.

The pair had heard there was fighting in the Elephant Mountains in southwestern Cambodia, and unlike journalists who traveled with military escorts, Nash and Williams set off on their own, with the windows of their rented Mercedes rolled down and music blaring from an 8-track tape player.

They eventually stopped in a small village and Nash went to talk to the local leader, who spoke French.

"After just a few minutes of talk, he said 'Get in the car now. Turn around. Let's go,'" Williams said. "As we started back down the road the way we had come, Max said that the headman had told him there was a Khmer Rouge force by the water tower less than 200 meters farther down the road."

Williams said "had we continued down the road as planned, we likely would be just statistics today."

Nash took those instincts and his lack of interest in sitting in an office to Israel, where he covered the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, the Palestinian uprising and riots in the West Bank and Gaza in the late 1980s. Those heavy combat assignments were followed by the First Gulf War and a rash of bombings in Israel in the mid-1990s.

He was "forever roaming" the backroads in his Alfa Romeo, looking for images that defined the life of the country and picking up hitchhikers — who often expanded his network of sources, said former Jerusalem bureau chief Nick Tatro.

"He always tried to be first on the scene of major stories, and since speed was rarely an object, he usually was," Tatro said. "I remember a few white-knuckle rides."

Nash met his second wife, Clara, on an elevator in Jerusalem, as she worked on a floor above the AP office. Instantly smitten, he asked if he could take her picture. She said no but agreed to lunch, and a romance was born.

He was gone a lot, working. But Clara knew he adored her and their children, Michael and Eleanor, and that was enough.

"He thought if he stopped taking pictures he would die," she said. "He thought taking pictures sustained him. It was his raison d'etre."

Besides his love for speed, Nash also had an eye for talent and became known for developing the skills of younger journalists.

Among his hires was Heidi Levine, who became an award-winning photojournalist. The Massachusetts-native was a college student in 1983 when she raced off to the Middle East, hoping to gain some experience during a six-week visit. She called Nash from a pay phone on a kibbutz near the Jordanian border and asked him to meet her. Nash gave her a job.

"He really changed my whole life," she said. "He was ahead of his time in giving female photojournalists a chance."

Rina Castelnuovo, who worked for The New York Times for 26 years before becoming a documentary filmmaker, remembers Nash arguing on her behalf when editors in New York were angry that she had accidentally put a photo on the wire of a veterinarian taking the temperature of a camel in a way that wasn't suitable for family newspapers.

"He feared no one except his dad," Castelnuovo said, recognizing that the editors were probably right. But Nash knew a good picture.

"When he took a strong photo, I could hear him whistling down the corridor walking towards the AP office," she said.

He later transferred to London, covering the British royals, the violence in Northern Ireland, Red Carpet events and car racing. Former bureau chief Myron Belkind remembered one special overriding trait that Max had: enthusiasm for his profession.

"He never slowed down," Belkind said. "Even when he finished an assignment, he would return to the bureau and stay late to see what he could do to help his colleagues."

Nash is survived by his children, Eleanor and Michael; his brother, Tim; and his grandchildren, Benjamin, Livi and Shelley.