

## Frank Gardner

As a BBC security correspondent, one is expected to put themselves in the firing line. [Liv Evans](#) and [Mia de Graaf](#) speak to someone willing to do anything for the story

Tuesday 22 June 2010



It is unsurprising if you know Frank Gardner as the man who was left in a wheelchair after being shot six times by Al-Qaeda sympathisers. The BBC Security Correspondent attracted great media attention when, in 2004, he became the subject of the political conflict he was reporting on. The attack has left him partly paralysed and dependent upon a wheelchair for life.

The cameraman accompanying him on the trip to Saudi Arabia, Simon Cumbers, was killed. The Saudi government had forced Gardner to use official minders, but they ran away once the firing started.

But to reduce his long career to just this one unspeakable horror is to do him a disservice. This act of terror, to him, was apparently just a minor blip in the grand scheme of things.

His nonchalant attitude is apparent as he casually describes his career over the phone. "Since then, I have been to Afghanistan, and Borneo. I will probably get back to Afghanistan before too long to cover some more of the operations that are going on there, and next year I will hopefully go to the North Pole."

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It is this relentless stamina and admirable courage that has generated Gardner the reputation of a heavyweight journalist. Having studied Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter, he started out in banking jobs in New York, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia itself. Gardner then moved into travel journalism, before Middle Eastern correspondence.

In 1995 he joined BBC World as a producer and reporter, and became the BBC's first full-time Gulf correspondent in 1998, setting up an office in Dubai. In 2000, Gardner was appointed BBC Middle East correspondent in charge of the bureau in Cairo, but travelled throughout the region. After the 9/11 attacks on New York, from 2002 Gardner specialised solely in covering stories related to the War on Terror.

When first discussing his interest in travel, it is clear that his approach is adventurous. Again, his light tone, though clear cut and precise, hardly reflects the persona one imagines of someone that has been to the far depths of 94 "unusual" countries.

"Everybody - like all university students, for example - wants to do a bit of travelling and get around unusual places. I kept diaries while I was there, and sketches and wrote down conversations, which is incredibly geeky but we went to such unusual places, and climbed these volcanoes through the jungle, and it was kind of traumatic - got chased by hornets and wasps up there, covered in leeches and things," he explains, matter of factly.

This genuine passion was the thing that led him inadvertently into journalism, as it appeared to be the only access point into such a difficult industry. Gardner is well aware that the career path he chose was a difficult one to crack.



"I always thought what I really wanted to do was to be a journalist but I wasn't really sure how to get into it. All the time I was in banking I was doing the occasional freelance bit of travel writing for magazines like Time Out and The Sunday Times, so if I went somewhere interesting like Yemen or Bulgaria I would write it up as a travel piece."

Travelling to each country, he strove to build his experience in televised reporting too, one of the biggest obstacles to his ideal career: "Because I hadn't yet reported for television, there was an assumption that I wasn't yet reporter material because I hadn't come through some big training programme.

"I then had to set out and prove it. The only way I could do that was to send myself out on trips, to film reports myself and bring them back and get them put to air, so that was a bit of a hill to climb."

It is evident that his fascination is still fresh, as he falls into gushing about the "lush tropical foliage" of one country and the volcanoes of another. It is now, having achieved great success, that he has decided to publish a book documenting by chapter the 94 countries he has been to recreationally. "I've just realised, wow, I'm lucky enough to have gone to nearly 100 countries - so I've put the more interesting ones into chapters of my book.

"There are two messages really: one is to push the envelope in terms of adventure travel. I know the options are far bigger now that people go out travelling independently rather frequently. It was all fairly unusual in the early 80s to do that sort of thing, but now adventure travel is big business.

"But I would encourage people to push the envelope; push the limits a little bit, but without being dangerous. And also that you can get over a catastrophic blow, and still go on travelling," he adds, poignantly.

He emphasizes that this latest work is more than just a memoir.

“My first book, *Blood and Sand*, I wrote in hospital still recovering, so that was about getting shot and the recovery process.

“I also wrote about how I came to be in the Middle East. This book I wrote much later – over 2008 and 2009 – and it was published last year. This second book is a travel book and nothing to do with the shooting.

“I mean, I can’t avoid the elephant in the room, but, of course, it was written by a guy who was shot and has spinal injuries because of it.

“This second book is not about that at all, and I absolutely don’t want this to be seen as a *Blood and Sand 2*.”

Gardner talks about travel in the double sense of the word; exploring as a visitor and as a journalist are very different activities.



He uses Egypt as an example. “I visited there under lots of different guises: I started there as a student, and had a great year learning Arabic, with no responsibilities. I spent a year laughing with the Egyptians – they have a fantastic sense of humour and were really fun people to be with.

“It was very different when I went back in 2000 running an office for the BBC and also having a family out there with all the responsibilities of that.”

With a job that stretches to all parts of the world, surely he has hit the nail on the head in terms of the ideal profession?

“Yeah, there’s a bit of travel in my job but I wouldn’t call that travelling because when you’re sent on an assignment to go and report on somewhere, you’re not at liberty to kind of explore that place; you’ve got deadlines, you’ve got schedules you’ve got people to interview, you’ve got certain stories to report ... you’re not travelling really.”

In fact, as a Middle Eastern Correspondent, travel is not always imperative.

“When I got shot in 2004, it was the first trip I did that year. All the stuff I was reporting on before I did here in London. London is the capital of so many worlds.

“I’m sure there’ll be some people who might whistle a bit at that, but it is certainly a centre for shipping.

“For example, when covering acts of piracy that I report on, London’s a very good place to do that: I can pick up more information here than I could say in Dubai or Mombasa.”

Furthermore, he has now to locate a family base: “Our kids were born in Dubai, we live in the Emirates, and then we moved to Cairo and we lived there for a couple of years when I was Middle East

Correspondent. And then we moved back to London.”

So, as someone who has previously travelled extensively for pleasure, what was his favourite destination? Somewhat surprisingly, he opts for Oman.

“It’s a really fabulous place. It’s got a very colourful culture, and they are gentle and kind people. It’s not a particularly rich country; it’s not gone down the glitzy high-rise approach Dubai has.

“It’s got fabulous beaches, lovely weather, mountains, vineyards, rugged valleys, peaks. The people wear colourful clothes, they’re not all dressed in black and white like in Saudi Arabia, which is a very monochrome place. Oman is not like that – it is an amazing country.”



Aside from his freelance passion of travelling, his job has been security correspondence for years, having worked for the BBC since 1995. This is a very different field to journalism, one which comes with its own dangers.

When hearing that a loved one is about to head off to a war zone, any friend or relative would be forgiven for questioning the safety and the need for such a mission.

But there is more to it than this; war reporting requires very specific skills and information. There is potentially a paradox to be found – between declaring the truth to the public, yet maintaining confidence of others.

“I do get to meet or interview people sometimes who say things that they want not get to reported or they would lose their job, but I wouldn’t call them secrets.

“We might agree that things are off the record, and they’ll say ‘right well, actually this whole thing has been a whole shambles or a fiasco’, but please don’t quote me on that.

“I wouldn’t call it a secret but it’s more something which might inform you about something, and then you can weigh it up with lots of other things from other people – and then decide what you agree with.

“It’s like a soup, you’re throwing lots of different ingredients in by interviewing different people or speaking to them on the phone, and then you make up your own mind independently as to what you believe and what you don’t.”

So, to this end, does he find that security journalism has changed? With the advent of freer information and a more inclusive media, it seems that this is the case.

Even twenty years ago, the amount of sources for information were only a fraction of what they are today, thanks to the internet.

But has not been the only change for war reporting, with the security services subject to changes of their own. “Yeah, you have to remember up until 1994 MI6 and MI5 didn’t actually exist. It was only through an act of Parliament that they were publicly acknowledged for the first time. They’ve moved through these

16 years to becoming more publically accountable for their actions and their policies.”

Is this a positive thing? “I think as long as its not making their jobs impossible, I think it’s a good thing. I think they should be publically accountable.”

But even with these developments, he would not change the field of journalism he works in if he were to start out afresh today. He sees these changes as beneficial, and feels it important that we continue to increase accuracy, and scrutiny.

“It’s definitely an interesting area – it’s one where there are a lot of myths and a lot of people get it wrong.”

“We have to continue trying to make sure that we don’t get it wrong. Back in 2002, some of the paper headline about terror plots in London were absolutely ridiculous,” he says firmly.

“What they were accusing suspects of even before they’d come to trial was terrible and they wouldn’t get away with that now. I think people are much more careful now about not prejudicing trial.”

However, it is hard not to return to the shooting. Aside from the personal difficulties of returning to working in a war zone, the physical aspect of his injuries severely hampered his work practices.

And he could be forgiven for finding the incident as a rather big obstacle to his objectivity when reporting on Afghanistan. He insists his enthusiasm for the job remains undimmed.

“I’ve been able to preserve my objectivity, and that’s very important to me. Particularly working with the BBC, we have to be objective,” before adding that he “wasn’t particularly fond of murderers even before my injuries so that really hasn’t changed anything”, which lightens the tone somewhat.

Frank Gardner has faced numerous uphill struggles throughout his career, but it is these struggles which make it so fascinating.

Not many people would have headed straight back into a warzone after being shot. He can give a unique insight into the dangerous, complicated and intriguing world of war reporting, a world which is increasing in potency as the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan rumble on.

Combine this with a passion for travel, and you have one very formidable figure able to do anything.

*Image credits: Random House, Frank Gardner*



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## One comment

Yacine

13 Oct '15 at 2:26 pm

, despite a suosrvieipn report which states what a wonderful dad he is and makes clear who is bad mouthing who by reporting things the children said that were observed. Yet he has got the 2 hours extended to 4 increasing to 6 hours fortnightly with hand over no longer supervisedd. Not allowed to see on birthday weekend of daughter but given a tuesday instead. No allowance for it meaning missed day at work. A 5 hour car trip for each visit that mum insists starts at 10am. No visit on fathers day. Objection to him taking children to local park or shopping center in case children seen by their friends as they are known as a family and boyfriend does not want kids heard calling their father daddy. He insists they call him dad and tried to get them to refer to their father by his christian name. Older child said daddy you are still my real daddy arnt you . Not allowed to see grandma or parental family for a further month. They are forgetting who we all are. DISCUSTING.

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