

The story of Dan Coggin

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DAN Coggin, the celebrated journalist, has penned stories of other people in the leading magazines, newspapers and wire services of the world during his long career spanning over 40 years and now it is our turn to write the story of his life, or rather the tragic final days of his life. This is not the story of how he lived but how he embraced death while making a journey back to the country whose birth he witnessed and chronicled, and also made his humble contribution in its emergence, the land of the Bengalis, Bangladesh. Dan Coggin was the Foreign Correspondent of the TIME magazine, from 1965 to 1972; those were the days when few weekly magazines dominated the world media and a passing reference in TIME or NEWSWEEK could ensure a person his place in posterity. Those were the days before the emergence of CNN and global reach of television, and Foreign Correspondents were well-known to the readers and respected by the politicians and policy-makers every where. Those were the days of Middle-East crisis unfolding itself, Vietnam war gradually escalating to become bloody and Foreign Correspondents Club or FCC was the sought-after place

in various cities like Beirut, Saigon, Phnom Penh, Bangkok, Singapore, Jakarta, Hong Kong and Tokyo. Asia was the hotbed of conflict and Dan was stationed in Asia, since 1964, first as Associated Press representative and later on from 1965 to 1972 as the Foreign Correspondent of TIME.

It is quite understandable that Dan told many stories and he also had many more to tell. He was responsible for TIME magazine's news coverage at various periods in nearly 40 countries from North Africa eastward to Middle East and Asia. He covered the Vietnam war during the crucial 1966-1968 period, the 1970 invasion of Cambodia, Indonesia's 1965-66 anti-communist bloodbath, various Middle East turmoils, two India-Pakistan conflicts and the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. He had numerous important contacts with Presidents and revolutionaries like Sukarno, Nasser, Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Yasser Arafat and others.

Needless to say, what interests us most in Dan's long journalistic career is the 1971 episode. But one can also point out that while covering the 1969 mass upsurge in the then East Pakistan, he interviewed Maulana Bhasani, the firebrand socialist, and

depicted him as "The Prophet of Violence". In the report with the same title published on 18 April, 1969 issue of the TIME he wrote: "Wreathed by a wispy beard, his face reflects an almost other-worldly serenity. As he plays with his grandchildren in a tiny village 60 miles north of the East Pakistan capital of Dacca, Abdul Hamid Bhasani, 86, looks the part of a Moslem maulana or guru and to millions of Bengali peasants, he is. But the kindly grandfather is also Pakistan's most outspoken advocate of violence". The report had long been forgotten but the title, given by the Foreign Correspondent, endured the test of time. What more can a Foreign Correspondent cherish!

But there were more to come as history unraveled itself with the brutal and treacherous attack by the Pakistan Army on civilian population of Bengal in March 1971 and the subsequent declaration of independence marking the beginning of Muktiyuddho, the liberation war. Dan was among the Foreign Correspondents who were thrown out of the country by the army on the first available flight to Bangkok. The terror unleashed by Pakistan Army was continuing unabated as East Pakistan was successfully cut off

from the outside world since there was no one to report and no way to send news outside the country. In these circumstances Dan quickly returned to India and took the risk to cross the open border to be inside the country to collect news about the massacre as well as the homegrown resistance. Dan followed in the footsteps of Simon Dring of the Daily Telegraph in reporting the war that the Pakistan army forbade to cover. Simon was the first journalist to provide eyewitness account of the genocidal atrocities and Dan was first to report about the nature and extent of popular resistance. Dan reached Kushtia in the early days of April, when the people's spontaneous resistance overpowered the Pakistan Army stationed there and made Kushtia a liberated town, waiting for massive counter-attack by the Army. His report published on the 19 April issue of the international newsmagazine, carried the message of Bengali resistance to the people of the world and was an inspiration to the Bengalis everywhere. This was the first eye-witness account of reality inside the occupied territory of East Pakistan and showed how the determined civilians transformed their non-violent struggle for national and democratic rights into an armed resistance of the people. The battle of Kushtia was the first major victory of the Bengali resistance and the ignominious defeat of the Pakistan Army sent the signal that all was not going well for the Pakistani rulers. Introducing Dan's report the magazine wrote: "The army controlled the capital of Dacca, the vital ports of Chittagong and Khulna, and several other towns. But a ragtag resistance movement called Bangladesh Mukti Fauj (Bengal State Liberation Forces) was reportedly already in control of at least one-third of East Pakistan, including many cities and towns. West Pakistani authorities have almost completely succeeded in obscuring the actual details of the fighting from the outside world by expelling all foreign newsmen from East Pakistan. But last week TIME correspondent Dan Coggin managed to cross the border from India into East Pakistan, where he visited the embattled town of Kushtia (Pop. 35,000). After extensive interviews with townspeople and captured West Pakistani troopers, Coggin was able to reconstruct an account of brutality that took place in Kushtia during the first fortnight of the civil war."

Dan described in detail how 147 men of the Delta Company of 27th Baluch Regiment took control of Kushtia town to be eventually overwhelmed by massive attack of the peasants and policemen. Only 13 members of the Company survived and the Bengali militiamen took them as POW to be detained at Kushtia jail. The final words of the report had resonance from the Spanish civil war days where the popular struggle was ably depicted by the journalist and

author Ernest Hemingway.

At the end of his report Dan wrote: "All last week, the green, red and gold flags of Bangladesh fluttered from rooftops, trucks and even rickshaws in Kushtia. Bengali administrators were running the region under local party leader, Dr. Ashabul Huq, 50, a forceful physician who packs a Wellby & Scott revolver and a Spanish Guernica automatic. At week's end, two army battalions established an outpost a few miles from Kushtia. They were reported, however, to be making little headway against furious resistance. Even if the soldiers managed to reach Kushtia, the townspeople were more than ready to fight again."

In a different time and place, during another April in 1937 Ernest Hemingway in his dispatch from Madrid wrote: "Then there was a great shelling again and we watched for the arrant while the light failed and you could see nothing through the glasses but the plaster-shattered smoke of the houses where the shells were bursting. Government troops were within fifty yards of the houses when it was too dark to see. The outcome of the offensive designed to free Madrid from fascist pressure depends on the results of tonight's and tomorrow's action."

Like Kushtia, Madrid was also waiting for a battle and as a journalist Hemingway stood strongly behind the Republicans in their struggle against the Fascists. The same was true of Dan Coggin and this was eloquently expressed in the brilliant report published in TIME on October 25, 1971 titled

'East Pakistan : Even the Skies Weep.' He again entered the occupied territory with the Freedom Fighters and wrote : "Leaving the road behind, I entered a strange world where water is seasonal king and the only transport is a large, cane-covered canoe known as the country boat. For seven hours we plied deeper into Gopalganj sub-division in Southern Faridpur district. The two wiry oarsmen found their way by taking note of such landmarks as a forlornly decaying maharajah's palace and giant butterfly nets hovering like outsized flamingos on stilt legs at waters edge.

As darkness approached, we were able to visit two neighbouring villages, with about 25 guerillas living among the local folk in each. The guerillas were mostly men in their 20s, some ex-college students, others former soldiers, militia-men and police."


Dan was in Dhaka again when Bangladesh became victorious paying a high price. He interviewed Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib after his return to Bangladesh as a free man.

Then in mid-1972 Dan Coggin resigned from TIME, the reason is not known but that also brought to an end his illustrious role as a Foreign Correspondent. Coggin tried to build a different career, launched Beirut-based Middle-East newsmagazine Sketch, which was short-lived as the hostilities in Lebanon forced its closure in 1974. He moved to Jakarta as a correspondent of Far Eastern Economic Review, not a magazine


to be compared with the aura and glory of TIME. Finally in 1982 Dan joined ESCAP as Special Advisor on Information and worked under Shah M.S. Kibria, whom he always remembered very fondly. Gradually Dan the reporter got lost into oblivion. After retirement he went back to his home state of California to live a quiet life.

In June 2011 a young Bangladeshi film graduate Anindo Atik working in New York came across the name of Dan Coggin and his reports in TIME. Anindo hails from Kushtia and was planning to make a documentary film on Kushtia's resistance. He searched for Dan's contact and finally could talk to Dan living a secluded life in San Francisco, California. Dan was overjoyed with the enquiries made by a young Bangladeshi about reports he had written 40 years ago. As a friend of Liberation War Museum (LWM) Anindo informed us about Dan and LWM invited him to come to Bangladesh in December 2011 to deliver a lecture during the Victory Day Celebration. That is how we came in contact with Dan Coggin and enthusiastically started to exchange e-mails developing ideas about how he could effectively contribute to Bangladesh's struggle to memorialize the past. He heartily accepted our invitation to be among the people he came so close to in 1971 and humbly stated, "I do hope you can take into account my wishes for no special treatment and as much time as possible to enjoy the company of ordinary people, like me, and all


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