



CreditCamille Lepage/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

# Bearing Witness, Losing Her Life

<http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/13/bearing-witness-losing-her-life/?smid=fb-share&r=0>

By Nicholas Kulish May. 13, 2014 May. 13, 2014 [49](#)

I got to know [Camille Lepage](#) on my first trip to South Sudan last summer. A jaunty young Frenchwoman who toiled around the rutted dirt roads of Juba on the back of a beat-up old motorcycle, she was hoping to work with me on the story I had come to town to cover, and I had received a slew of email messages from her.

When we met at the outside patio at the Logali House, a popular haunt for journalists, I had to tell her I had already been assigned to work with another photographer. She was characteristically blunt in letting me know that she was disappointed, but then immediately began sharing beers, contacts and safety tips with me.

Optimistic, generous, hard-working and relentless are all qualities I would come to associate with Camille. I would add fearless to that list as well. A young woman, just 26, as small of stature as she was large of heart, she was

willing to go anywhere at any moment, an attitude that in spite of grave danger had taken her all over the Central African Republic in recent months.

The news traveled quickly through the tight-knit community of photojournalists and correspondents in Africa on Tuesday that Camille had been killed. [Reuters](#) reported that she was found in a car driven by members of the mainly Christian anti-balaka militia near the town of Bouar. It is unclear if she was murdered or caught in a crossfire, but either way it doesn't change the loss, the vacuum left by her absence.

The French presidency said in a statement: "All means necessary will be used to shed light on to the circumstances of this murder and to find her killers."

Photo



Dozens of people were taken to the general hospital in Bangui, Central African Republic, to be treated. Dec. 5, 2013. Credit Camille Lepage/Polaris  
Shedding light on a tragic event in a faraway place was the sort of thing you expected of Camille. In an application for a portfolio review sponsored by the Lens blog, she wrote, "My interest takes me to places in the shadow, where crisis take place but where the media often remain silent."

Though she had been living in South Sudan, that sense of duty took her to the Central African Republic last year, at a time when few Western journalists were there. "As the world was looking away, I decided to go in October," she wrote. "I stayed 3 months covering the unfolding of what is now complete chaos." For many people that might have been enough, but, she continued, "I'm about to go back to CAR for 3 months again, to continue documenting the story of a country that sinks deeper everyday into a circle of violence that seems endless."

She made an impression on her peers with her work but also with her dedication.

“Here you have this very discreet yet inquisitive and incredible journalist doing her job,” said [Jerome Delay](#), the chief photographer for Africa for The Associated Press, after he heard the news. “She’s always been kind of a loner in the sense that she liked to do things by herself. In a way she was not a cowboy. She reminds me a lot of Corinne Dufka. She took the legacy of people like her.”

Mr. Delay called her a “journalist who really went the extra mile and took the extra time to really tell a story the way it should be told. And now where many people get the news from Twitter and Facebook, she decided that no, that was not the right way, and that she had to spend time to understand.”

Her last message posted on [Instagram](#) a week ago, with a picture of armed men standing on a red dirt road in the mist, gives a vivid picture of the way she worked and the peril she exposed herself to: “Travelling with the Anti Balaka to Amada Gaza, about 120km from Berberati, we left at 3.30am to avoid the Misca checkpoints and it took us 8 hours by motorbike as there is no proper roads to reach the village. In the region of Amada Gaza, 150 people were killed by the Seleka between March and now. Another attack took place on Sunday killing 6 people, the anti balaka Colonel Rock decides to send his elements there to patrol around and take people who fled to the bush back to their homes safely.”

In the photos that began cascading down her Facebook wall as news of her death spread, Camille’s big, bright smile was everywhere, as was the disbelief on the part of her friends. “Camille was brave. Her photos became better and better, her work more serious,” recalled Andreea Campeanu, her fellow photographer and roommate in Juba. “We worked together in C.A.R., we jumped on the back of pickup trucks together in war-torn South Sudan, and she always got the best photos.”

As far as that missed assignment for The Times went, Camille was undeterred and had begun peppering me with story ideas almost immediately. Before I knew it we found ourselves covering a [Juba fashion show](#) together. It was a bright, colorful, cheery story in a country not known for those things.

She was as comfortable photographing civilians as she was soldiers, displaced people but also people at work. There is a photo she took of wounded people hooked up to IVs and sleeping on the floor and benches of the general hospital in Bangui where she captured not just their suffering but also the relief at finally finding treatment and a place to rest.

“I try and show the human side in every story, show the people I photograph as my brothers and sisters,” Camille said in her portfolio application. It came across in her work just as much as it did in her personality.

As a result of the violence that she considered it her duty to tell the world about, we have lost Camille, a rising photographer at the very start of her career. We mourn her as we are left with only our memories, her work and the lost promise of many unwritten chapters.

***James Estrin contributed reporting.***