The Strange and Curious Life of Chas Gerretsen

I tried to live the adventures I'd seen in the movies

A true Adventure Story by Chas Gerretsen

In gratitude to all the girls who traveled with me and passed through my life. Girls, because in my memories, we never grew old. I loved all of you however imperfect it may have been. Without you I would not be where I am today, would not have had the experiences and cannot imagine the lack of growth, and emptiness in me. Memories, the good ones still alive, the bad ones stunted over time; present but faded. I regret not one moment.
Chas

Special Thanks,
To Monika, my partner, without whom this book would never have seen the light of day.
To Irene who traveled with me the longest and to
And Yvonne and Gerard for their constructive criticism.

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1973 CHILE

In Salvador, Bahia, the purser told me, “For a hundred Dollars, I can arrange for you both to continue to Buenos Aires.”

We didn’t know anybody in Salvador nor in Buenos Aires, but we would have three more days of relaxation, food and lodging. We paid the hundred dollars.

Michele and I arrived in Buenos Aires on the 1st of January 1973. Immigration and customs barely looked at us. Ten minutes later, our bags safely in the trunk of a yellow cab, I asked the driver, in broken Spanish, for a cheap hotel downtown.

“Si, si, no hay problema.” He asked us, “Where are you from?”

After we’d told him, he said proudly, “I’m from Italy.”

“Where in Italy?”

“No, no. I was born in Buenos Aires.”

“So, you’re Argentinean?”

“No, No. I am Italian.” He was getting excited and pounded his chest. “I am Italian!”

The hotel, where he dropped us off, was a little sleazy. We decided to look for better accommodations; I took my cameras with me not trusting them to be there on our return. Apart from the hotels, everything was closed. Aimlessly we roamed around, looking at the sites. Buenos Aires was a beautiful city with stately, old European style architecture; a mix between Madrid and Paris.

The next couple of days I visited UPI, AP, *Newsweek* and *Time Magazine*, but the answer was everywhere the same, “No, we don’t need anybody.”

It felt a little, like I was back in Southeast Asia. All the journalists were close to my age, but there was a big difference; here they wore ties and slacks, instead of open shirts and jeans and their hair was cut short. The Bureau Chief for *Time Magazine* told me, "We have no need for you here, but if you go to Chile, we will use you." He gave me his card, "Send me a telex when you're settled in."

A couple of days later we left Buenos Aires and boarded the train to Santiago, Chile; a 1300 km, one and half day journey, across the Andes mountain range. At Mendoza, still in Argentina, the train stopped; we had to get off, take our luggage and walk across to another train; a three track, cog wheel railway, especially build to climb and descent the steep Andes mountain range.

Santiago

We arrived In Santiago in the early morning, tired from the trip but excited and had breakfast in the huge market across from the train station and planned our immediate future. We had to find a hotel, contact journalists and change money. I asked the waiter if I could pay breakfast in US dollars.

"No problem." He said. "I'll give you eight times the official rate."

I paid less than $.25 US for a generous breakfast for two. I calculated that, with this rate of exchange, we should be able to survive without finding work, for at least six months.

We explored downtown; like Buenos Aires, Santiago's architecture had a strong Spanish influence. It felt, like we were in Europe.

I went to the largest newspaper, *El Mercurio*, to find out which foreign magazines and news agencies had representatives. *Newsweek* had a Stringer,

Dwight Porter, a sympathetic American my age. Michele had gone shopping for groceries; looking for something we could prepare in the hotel room.

That evening she described her afternoon, “The super markets are nearly empty. Canned fruit is about the only thing available. No bread, no cheese, no vegetables, no meat, no chicken, hardly anything.”

She rolled her eyes in exasperation. “I bought the last glass of jam. Bread is supposed to be available in the morning. I also looked for cigarettes for you. I passed a line of about 50 people waiting in front of a newspaper kiosk; they said that the kiosk was supposed to get a supply of cigarettes. But it seemed that nobody knew exactly when; I didn’t feel like waiting in the hope of getting two packs of cigarettes for you. Apparently, that’s the limit you can buy.”

I told Michele about Dwight. He had explained, that everything was rationed. The way to find out if the supermarket had food, was by the appearance of a ‘cola', a line of people, standing, sitting, or sometimes sleeping in front of a shop.

If you had money, everything was available on the black market at 10 times the price. Which for us would be the normal price, but for the locals it was real hardship.

I could see that Chile offered plenty to photograph and lots of stories to be tell.

We found a spacious apartment on Carlos Casanueva in Providencia, the upper middle-class district in Santiago. The landlady, a well-dressed, elderly woman explained that all her finest dinnerware had been put in the upper cabinets and we were not allowed to touch them; they were very valuable.

We agreed on the rent, US$15 a month; afterwards we learned that we probably could've had it for $10 or less.

Dwight Porter

On Friday night we had dinner with Dwight and his British-born wife, who had prepared a simple meal. During dinner they explained the curiosities of life in Santiago under the present Socialist Government of dr. Salvador Allende.

"There are two camps. On the left, you have the 'Rotos', the workers; on the right, you have the 'Momios', the middle-class. The upper class have all fled to Miami, Paris or Madrid. The

word 'Momio' is derived from the word momia, meaning mummy, and I don't mean mother. He laughed. There are 13 newspapers, they mainly write propaganda. You have to read all 13 to get any idea of what is more or less happening."

"We have been in Chile more than two years and really enjoy it. We love the people and the culture. Chile makes some of the best wine in the world, and the girls are the prettiest in Latin America." said Dwight.

"And the most liberated." His wife added. She glanced at him sideways and got up to look after their young son who was crying.

We learned how to survive and maintain a pleasant standard of living in socialist Chile, under the embargo by the United States.

"Most important, you need connections." Dwight introduced us to their maid. The maid, a girl from the countryside, had connections to a farmer for

vegetables. Someone else's maid had connections for beef, pork or chicken. You needed connections for everything.

Kodak Tri-X film was only available in hundred-foot rolls; but I could buy film bobbins and load them myself. Color film was hard to come by, sometimes there were a few rolls of GAF 400 to be found, but no Ectachrome or Kodachrome. There were inconveniences, but overall, if you had access to US dollars, life was very pleasant.

It was the hardest for the middle class; the engineers, architects, doctors; all those on a fixed income, which did not keep up with the rampant devaluation of the Chilean currency, the Escudo.

For a while there was a rumor that ration cards would be issued to every individual. But I never saw one and was never asked for one, when standing in line for cigarettes, two packets each no more, or while queuing for groceries. Although, most days of the week there was nothing available. When a shop received a delivery, the news would spread like wildfire. Hundreds would stand in line, sometimes spending the night, waiting for the shop to open in the morning. With luck, when it was your turn, you paid and collected one item of each of whatever was still available.

The 'cola' became a reasonably good source of income for the unemployed, who had the time to stand in line for hours. For example, each member of a family, from baby to grandfather, if they were physically present, was entitled to one government subsidized food item. One kilo rice, one kilo of sugar or very occasionally a chicken. Although the grocer did not always agree to this and those waiting in line for hours did not always allow this. A family of 6 could get 6 items, sell 4 or 5 on the black market and have a larger income in one day than a professional in a week or a month. (Depending if it

was rice or chicken) Of course, this increased the resentment and hatred between the classes.

Chile did not have oil, but it was the largest producer of copper in the world and the US-owned mines were ‘insured’ against nationalization by the US government. If there had been any lawmakers in Washington, who had been opposed to overthrowing the democratically elected government of Chile, they changed their minds after President Allende nationalized the mines in 1971. They were now unanimous; Allende had to go.

1975 HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA

“Please fasten your seat belts.” I looked out of the window. All I could see was a bright blue sky; but as we were descending, this turned into a solid brown-grey mass. The infamous LA-pollution. “Welcome to Los Angeles.” It was a warm day in February 1975, the air smelled sharp and burned the throat.

We rented a car and checked into one of the cheap motels on Sunset Blvd. Our fellow tenants were working girls, plying their trade on the Boulevard. The whole area looked as seedy as it had in the 60ies.

I contacted *Time*, *Newsweek* and all the other major magazines in the US. John Durniak, the photo-editor of *Time*, replied, “I will give you work, if you cover the war in Nicaragua, but not in Hollywood.”

Browsing the newspapers, we found a fully furnished apartment on North Orange Grove Ave. It was inexpensive and had a great view overlooking Los Angeles. The drawback was that it was only for six months. Now we had to let the studios and the publicists know that Gamma had arrived.

In the beginning, I photographed movie stars at film premieres, as the actors walked the red carpet entering Grauman’s Chinese Theatre. I disliked waiting outside with a group of other photographers, trying to get a mediocre picture of a celebrity.

Most publicists were not really familiar with the concept of a Photo Agency. We explained, that I would do a photo layout free of charge; Gamma would sell the images worldwide, making money for us and publicity for the actor. After a while we were able to show clippings from around the world. Now,

instead of me standing outside, we were invited as guests to the Film Premieres. I enjoyed doing home layouts; Michele did short interviews accompanying the pictures.

I was getting a 'name' in Hollywood. My first movie as a 'Special Photographer' was 'A Star is Born' with Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson. When I saw the Premiere of the film, I noticed that they had filmed me photographing; my face filled the entire screen for a full 2 seconds. Really too short for others to notice.

I did any story which piqued my interest: The COYOTE hooker convention in San Francisco, with Jane Fonda and Margo St James; or a couple who made clothes for frogs and dressed them for a hobby.

My financial problems with Gamma continued, they either paid only partially or not at all.

Special Photographer

Of the hundred or so movies I have worked on, only a handful stayed in my memory: 'Apocalypse Now' (1976) with Marlon Brando, Martin Sheen and Dennis Hopper; 'Smokey and the Bandit II' (1980) with Burt Reynolds and Sally Field; 'Continental Divide' (1981) with John Belushi and 'Romancing the Stone' (1984) with Michael Douglas, Kathleen Turner and Danny DeVito.

While 'Apocalypse Now' was the highlight of my career, the others were also fascinating to work on. As a 'Special Photographer' in Hollywood, I got my work through advertising agencies, publicity agents or the film-studio PR departments. I was lucky to get along with a couple of Hollywood's best, foremost Ronni Chasen.

In 1975, Ronni proposed a layout on an unknown actor. She believed that the pilot for the television series 'Welcome Back Kotter' would be a big hit and John Travolta would become a huge star. I photographed John on spec; the show became an enormous success and the exclusive pictures I had taken, sold all over the world. After that, I photographed many budding and famous personalities for Ronni.

Twice I accompanied her clients to parties at the White House to be photographed with the President. The more I learned about Hollywood, the more it reminded me of the politics I'd left behind. Actors talk a lot, but have nothing to say. Politicians have a lot to say, but don't talk. Both, actors as well as politicians, surrounded by their flunkies, use each other for publicity and neither of them can relate to the average person. The public, barraged by the overwhelming, usually false PR, has no idea what the people they admire and follow, are actually like.

My big break: 'Apocalypse Now'

In May 1976, Francis Ford Coppola was searching for a new photographer; I wanted the job badly. I submitted my portfolio, pictures from Vietnam, Cambodia and the French photo book: *Chili - Spécial Reporter-Objectif*. My coverage of the coup d'état in Chile and the portrait of General Pinochet had brought me temporary fame in 1973.

I had won the 'Robert Capa Gold Medal' for "best published photographic reporting from abroad requiring exceptional courage and enterprise." Francis Ford Coppola chose, in typical Hollywood fashion, a combat photographer for a combat movie.

I arrived in Pagsanjan, Philippines, on the 21st of July, 1976. Many of the crew were returnees and knew each other from Iba, on the East Coast of Luzon. They had worked there, till the set had been destroyed by Typhoon Olga. Lee Beaupre, the publicist, told me that I was expected to attend the welcoming party that evening and take some pictures of Francis with members of the crew.

The next morning, I was on my way to take a look at the future home of Colonel Kurtz; an 'Ankor Wat' style temple, which was still being built. I noticed Francis Ford Coppola, heading straight towards me.

He stopped, “I had a dream about you last night.” He looked at me, expressionless. “I was hanging, by your camera strap, from the highest balcony of a 30-story skyscraper.” He turned and walked off.

What did he mean? It was the first day of my one-month trial period!

The rest of the morning I kept thinking about what he had said. Lee Beaupre explained: “Don’t worry about it, you’ll find that Francis is an unusual man. He believes in omens. Just go with the flow.”

I had worked on movies as a 'Special Photographer' but never as a 'Set Photographer'. A 'Set Photographer' was an employee of the film company and photographed the scenes as they were being filmed.

As a 'Special Photographer' I worked with the actors, directing them in poses representing the theme of the movie and I retained the copyright. On 'Apocalypse Now' I was hired as 'Set- and Special Photographer'. I kept the rights on a set of images of my choosing, free to distribute and sell worldwide.

Since I had never photographed during the actual filming of a movie, I had no sound boxes to silence the noise of the camera's reflex mirror. On my first day, I clicked away and was told by Francis to only shoot during the spaces

between the actor's dialog and to get some sound blimps. They are big, awkward, unwieldy boxes and it takes time to change lenses. I ordered two from Los Angeles, but afterwards, the soundman still complained about the muffled thuds of the reflex mirror clapping inside the box. Francis gave me permission to continue shooting without the blimps.

The 'Apocalypse-Now' war was fought without major casualties; discomfort yes: rain and mud, at times knee deep; smoke, hot lights at night - surrounded by clouds of bugs and mosquitoes, oppressive humidity, infections and an occasional heat stroke or a nervous breakdown.

Somebody decided to create an atmosphere of utter madness surrounding the Col. Kurtz temple compound. 'Crucified bodies' were tied to palm trees; 'blood' was generously applied to the 'victims' and instead of creating artificial limbs, someone went to the morgue and made a deal. After some crew members complained about the smell and rats, a story about human body parts on the set of 'Apocalypse Now' appeared in the local paper. The police investigated; soon thereafter a hearse arrived and the body parts were removed.

A month after I'd arrived, Francis again approached me. Without wasting words, he said, "I don't particularly like you, but I think you're a good photographer. You can stay." He left me wondering what had just happened.

During the filming of the scene of Francis Ford Coppola, playing a TV correspondent, Vittorio Storaro (Director of Photography) as a cameraman and Dean Tavolaris (Production Designer) as a soundman, Francis tells passing grunts: "Don't look into the camera."

The scene bothered me; most TV correspondents were 'Establishment' journalists; straight and narrow. Francis was always open to suggestions

from those amongst the crew, who had served or worked in Vietnam during the war. There were four or five of us.

I asked Jerry Ziesmer, the first Assistant Director if he could set up an appointment for me with Francis. It was set for lunch the next day. Sitting opposite each other at the wooden trestle table, I said, “The scene, yesterday, where you portrayed a war correspondent …”

He raised his eyebrows.

“What I meant to say, if you want to make the press look ridiculous, take one of us freelance photojournalists as an example, we were all a little crazy.”

“I hate the press,“ he replied, ”not you in particular, but in general.” For the rest of the lunch we talked generalities.

Two days later, Jerry Ziesmer came up to me: "Francis wants to know how to dress a combat photographer.”

The Actors

Martin Sheen was the opposite of what I'd heard about Harvey Keitel, who - because of 'artistic differences' and demanding a limo to be taken to the jungle location - had been replaced by Martin in the lead role of Captain Benjamin L. Willard.

Martin had a powerful feeling for right and wrong. When he arrived, he hired a maid. She expected to be paid: $2 a day, plus food and lodging.

Martin said, “It has to be at least $2 an hour.” The result? Every maid in Pagsanjan went on strike and every Filipino in the area who had a maid, turned against the film company.

Filming the now famous scene of him waiting for orders, where Captain Willard's desperation demanded an escape from reality; Martin's escape became real. Not used to alcohol, he was soon drunk; so drunk, that he was no longer in control. The script asked for desperation, and he became desperate. Something happened, he snapped and the cameras kept rolling.

And then Dennis Hopper arrived! His role of Captain Richard Colby had changed to that of 'The Photojournalist'. On his first day Dennis wore regular military fatigues and a black beret. Each day Francis changed his look.

Several days later Francis ask me, "What do you think?"

The lenses in Dennis's sunglasses were broken – according to Francis, he saw the world 'fragmented'. He wore an *Ifugao* (local hill people) shirt and 'tiger stripe' pants; five aluminum film canisters were taped to the strap of his one and only Nikon F camera.

It made me laugh. "I don't know about the sunglasses or the outfit, but he definitely would not have those film canisters taped to his camera strap, and he should have three or four cameras."

The next day, the prop master came up to me, "We need your cameras for Dennis."

"No problem, you buy me new ones."

"Of course," He looked at my watch, "Is that a Rolex?"

"Yes."

"I need that too. Brando has a Rolex and I need a spare, in case he loses his."

"Sure, but I'll have to go to Hong Kong to get new cameras, lenses and a new watch."

"Just give me the bill."

It took Francis a week, to convince Dennis not to tape the film canisters to his camera strap. “I'm an established photographer, my pictures hang in the Museum of Modern Art in Washington, DC and that’s how I carry my film,” said Dennis Hopper.

A couple of days later, I was able to get away for two days. I flew to Hong Kong, bought all new equipment and was back on Sunday evening in time for next week’s shoot. When Marlon Brando arrived, he wore a different model watch.

I don't know why, but Francis allowed me to be one of only six people who were permitted to see the dailies. It was fascinating to watch the scenes we had filmed the previous week. How Vittorio played with light! In the beginning, Vittorio had once stopped the filming, told everybody to hold their positions and pulled me over to the other side of the camera.

“I’ve lit the scene for this side, I want you to photograph from this side.”

At the time, it embarrassed me. But now, on the screen I saw the difference. It was like painting with broad strokes or with a pencil brush.

And, how Francis manipulated the actors, to get the best performance out of them. On the screen, I could see the difference between one take and the next.

Only one actor could not be managed. Dennis would start his lines, but often stoned or drunk and caught in the fog of his mind, he’d continue to blabber the most outrageous nonsense. Watching Dennis Hopper on the dailies, the six of us, would laugh uncontrollably, sometimes with tears running down our cheeks.

I wondered if, with Francis, they were also tears of desperation; it was costing him tens of thousands of dollars. Many scenes with Dennis were shot

with three cameras: wide-angle, medium, and close-up, since the dialog could never be repeated.

It has been written that ‘The Photojournalist’ was based on, Sean Flynn (son of actor Errol Flynn), Tim Page and others. I personally have never heard Francis, or Lee Beaupre, mention that the character was based on anybody. There was no need; Dennis Hopper was, by his nature, the true original freelance ‘Photojournalist’.

Marlon Brando arrived ‘slightly’ overweight and full of good cheer.

Both Lee Beaupre and Francis had warned me, “Marlon does not like to be photographed. He once took the camera from an old lady, during the filming of ‘The Godfather’, and smashed it on the ground.”

With Brando came a pretty, 19-year-old Chinese girl. Rumors were rife, but nobody knew who she really was.

She came up to me, “Hi my name is Stefani," we shook hands. "Marlon likes you. You’re allowed to photograph him. But you have to ask permission first.”

That was good news. Half an hour later, I saw a nice shot: it was late afternoon, Francis, his wife with her documentary film camera on her lap and Marlon Brando, sitting under a tree framed by the canopy of the leaves.

I waited till there was a break in the conversation and walked up to them, "Excuse me, Mr. Brando, could I…"

He looked up. “No.”

Francis told me later that Brando had also not allowed his wife, Eleanor, to film him.

We did not see Marlon for the next three days. The crew, idle, wondered when filming on ‘Apocalypse Now’ would continue. The first day we were told that "Mr. Marlon Brando has ‘pain' in his big toe. He does not like the lines Francis has written for him.”

The second day, "…he has ‘pain' in his stomach." The third day Francis and Marlon rewrote the scenes.

I had witnessed the sheer madness of Vietnam, where after a firefight deep in the jungle, soldiers were resupplied by helicopter with ammunition, sometimes accompanied by steaks, baked potatoes, vegetables, milk and ice-cream. 'Apocalypse Now' was the War; without the body count. Vietnam had been crazy; working on 'Apocalypse Now' was just slightly less crazy.

When I left, in November 1976, it was with sadness. Like most of the crew, I would not come back in the New Year. It had been one of the best experiences of my life. I had learned more from Francis Ford Coppola about film making and how to work with actors, and from Vittorio Storaro about light and cinematography, than I would learn for the next 13 years working on over a 100 feature films.

One thing Francis said stuck with me: "To make a successful film, it needs violence, politics, and sex." The Vietnam War as well as 'Apocalypse Now' had plenty of that. (Although, in the last version, AND the Final Cut, all the sex scenes were cut).

With my earnings from ‘Apocalypse Now’ I bought a house in the Hollywood Hills.