In the news

Last year, GTC member news cameraman **Bhasker Solanki** left the BBC after an incredible 38 years. The summary of his remarkable career reads like a resumé of world news over the past four decades. Not only have his images (gathered in more than 100 countries) been responsible for the fact that we can recall – or were aware in the first place – of many of these stories but, along the way, have also picked up many awards. It's difficult to distil such a long and eventful career into one short article but Bhasker here picks out some of the moments that have particularly stayed with him for Zerb.

At the age of 19, I joined the BBC straight out of college for what would be my first and, to date, only job. After three months of intense technical training in a classroom and studio, I started at BBC Pebble Mill as a trainee cameraman, cutting my teeth on programmes such as *Pebble Mill at One*, *All Creatures Great and Small* and *Angels*, the hospital-based soap forerunner to *EastEnders*. After the four years it took to qualify as a TOTSI trained cameraman, in 1983 I took an opportunity to join News on attachment. I started there as a recordist – after all the most important first step was to learn the craft of being on the road.

Highs and lows

My first taste of foreign travel came after just three weeks in News. We were sent in a specially chartered plane from Heathrow to cover a siege in Paris – but the siege was over by the time we landed. With no story to cover, the cameraman (Bernard Hesketh of Falklands war fame) arranged dinner at a top restaurant and we spent a pleasant evening eating salmon steaks overlooking the Champs-Élysées. It's not very surprising that I quickly decided News was for me!

Of course, it's not all been that way – far from it. War has been an occupational hazard: I have been shot at, bombed, witnessed a human being chop up another human being, and lost count of the number of dead bodies I have seen. On the other end of the scale, I have had the privilege to meet some amazing people including the Queen and many other members of the Royal family, countless world leaders including all the British Prime Ministers since Harold McMillan, as well as numerous celebrities doing their bit to make a difference such as Bono and Angelina Jolie.

To start with, I mainly did the rounds of UK-based stories with plenty of waiting around outside Downing Street and the High Courts. Some memorable early events included the Lockerbie plane crash, Hungerford massacre, Hillsborough and being the first crew at the M1 Kegworth plane crash.

News cameraman Bhasker Solanki

Breaking into news camerawork

The first major breaking news story I covered, long before the advent of 24-hour news, was the 1984 Brighton bombing. We were there to cover the Tory Party conference when a bomb exploded in the middle of the night at the Grand Hotel, where members of the British government, including the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, were staying. Our accommodation was in a holiday flat around the corner and my colleague Phil Warren had to bang on my door for some time to get me out of bed! The two of us ran to the back entrance of the hotel just in time to see the Prime Minister being whisked away to safety.

Meanwhile, another BBC crew of three (they had a spark with them) were at the front of the hotel. Norman Tebbit and his wife were trapped in the rubble and the rescue services needed extra light, so the crew was invited onto the site with their battery-operated light – as a result, they would scoop exclusive pictures of the rescue.

From 1985 I was beginning to get some chances on camera whenever there was a shortage of cameramen, but I was to get my really big break in 1987 when Richard Branson made his record-breaking balloon crossing of the Atlantic. ITN had an exclusive deal with Virgin to cover the crossing, which gave special access to the planned landing site, but we took off from Humberside airport in a Sikorsky 76 helicopter. The freelance recordist working with me, Allan Smith, happened to have a new gadget – a mobile phone (the brick type). On the advice of the two excellent ex-Navy pilots, we flew to Belfast to refuel (incidentally creating a security scare as this was still the time of the Northern Ireland troubles and our stop was unscheduled). While we up in the air, the drama of the crash unfolded right in front of us, as Branson crashed into the sea. We got some amazing pictures while the other helicopters had to leave the area to refuel. We were able to report live into the *Six O'Clock News* using the brand new phone and the coverage of the event contributed to my promotion at the age of 27.

By 1990 a big debate had blown up with the unions about moving from two- to one-person crews. This had been made possible because you could now dock a camera directly to a recorder which took the smaller Beta tapes. This wasn't a camcorder as such but we were getting there.

Albania and the Order of Mother Teresa

One of my first assignments as a one-man band was in Albania in 1991 with reporter Bill Hamilton. Communism was falling and through the charity Feed the Children we had been alerted to a dilapidated children's home, where children were living with broken windows and no electricity. We got exclusive pictures of children covered in their own excrement, existing with hardly any food, furniture or support. People were used to seeing similar images from Africa but not from Europe, and there was a huge audience reaction. The Sunday Times picked up the story and headlined one of my photos on the front page of the paper – I was so excited I bought four copies of the paper!

A couple of weeks later we were back in Albania to cover aid arriving, but while filming at the warehouse I lost my footing carrying the camera on a tripod over rough ground, meaning I had either to let the camera go or fall with it. The lens went into the body and, as I had no spare, we drove three hours back to the capital, Tirana, to try to borrow one from the TV station. Not much luck there but our local fixer knew a cameraman so we called in at his house. Out of sheer luck, he had just taken delivery of a second-hand Sony camcorder. He agreed to lend it to us if he could come along too and get a lesson on how to use his new camera.

Albania: Presenting a book we published about the country to Mother Teresa

> Being born in Nairobi, I had grown up street wise. Doing errands for my mum as a child meant I experienced some harsh realities very early on, including a couple of muggings.

As the story carried on, celebrities got involved, including Norman Wisdom, whose slapstick films were popular in the country as they were not political, and HRH Sarah Ferguson working on behalf of her charity Children in Crisis. She travelled with us and, apart from the exclusive TV coverage, my photos got an eight-page spread in Hello magazine. She also organised a fundraiser with the likes of David Hasselhoff, Richard Branson and Rula Lenska. We stopped counting the aid after £10 million had been raised for Albania. Later, we were awarded the Order of Mother Teresa, Albania's highest civilian award, and a special commendation from the RTS.

Stranded in Somalia

Language is one of the biggest assets for working in the field. In fact, I used to find it difficult to work in Europe as I couldn't speak any European languages – I even had to ask people to translate menus, which I found frustrating. On the other hand, we covered a lot of stories in Africa in the 1990s and I actually found it easier working there, even though so many of the stories were distressing reports of death and destruction. Having been born in Nairobi and learnt Swahili in school, I had grown up street wise. Just doing errands for my

Somalia: Guarded by the US military while we pack (top) and move our kit in pickup trucks (bottom) to the US Embassy compound

> On one occasion I came back from a story in Europe, landed at Gatwick airport and got a taxi to Heathrow to immediately board an overnight flight to Zimbabwe.

mum as a child meant I had experienced some harsh realities early on, even including a couple of muggings.

In the 1990s Somalia was one of the most dangerous places in the world and I was asked to go there just before Christmas 1992. The first rule when you hired a car at Mogadishu airport was also to hire some gunmen for security. The story we were to cover was that US Marines were going into Somalia. The media got there first and then the Marines landed on the beaches of Mogadishu in the full glare of the lights and cameras as the networks took live pictures.

Then we flew to a town called Bardera with NBC (our sister American network) in their Antonov aeroplane, specially chartered to carry their large satellite dish. Bardera would be the next town the Marines entered. We took over an abandoned Save the Children compound with hardly had any furniture but plenty of cockroaches.

We had no problems moving around the town before the Marines arrived, but as soon as they turned up on Christmas Day, within 20 minutes our vehicle had been attacked by a mob of around 50 people brandishing knives and sticks as the Marines had taken the guns away from the local security personnel. Luckily, in all the commotion, we managed to save the kit from the back of the car just before we lost the vehicle.

The owner asked for $30,000 – where there is no law and order, there is no insurance. We evaluated our options: if we handed over the $30,000, it could result in other media cars being hijacked; if we left the country, the next BBC team coming in might be killed. We spent 5 days negotiating and got him down to $13,000 in the face of death and kidnap threats. By New Year's Eve, the threat was increasing and we had to call in the US Marines to guard us while we concluded the negotiations and were escorted to safety in the compound of the US Embassy. We were relieved and grateful when the RAF sent in a Hercules from Mombasa to get us out of the country on New Year's Day.

Around 1993, BBC News wanted to try out a newly created role of 'video producer' and I was asked to volunteer. This meant working as a cameraman as well as producer entirely on foreign stories – literally going from story to story. On one occasion I came back from a story in Europe, landed at Gatwick airport and got a taxi to Heathrow to immediately board an overnight flight to Zimbabwe.

Rwanda and Burundi: massacres

The Rwandan massacre started in April 1994 but there had been a similar problem in the neighbouring country of Burundi a few months earlier. I flew to Burundi in November 1993 with George Alagiah for a long weekend to cover fighting between two major ethnic groups, the Hutu and the Tutsi. Unexpectedly, we came across a village where a headmaster had tricked some students into taking shelter in a small building for safety and then set fire to it. We were led to the scene through the stench from the 24 young bodies we found lying there. Some of the students had managed to break through the corrugated roof but were too badly injured to survive. We traced a sole survivor to a Red Cross hospital who had managed to escape with 90% burns.

I had to shoot this story very sensitively and on our return to London edited it very carefully with a great deal of editorial input. Some of the news crews had started shooting and editing as soon as laptop-type edit machines came out. Initially, I was reluctant to do this, as I felt the extra pair of eyes viewing the pictures I had shot was useful, but when I found I was missing out on stories, I had no choice but to take up editing. The Burundi story led the news bulletins, prompting a lot of complaints but also winning two Amnesty International awards.

By April, the Rwandan massacre had also started. I flew to Nairobi on an overnight flight and met up with the correspondent Roger Hearing, who had managed to get us on a military flight to Burundi. We landed in Bujumbura where we found a taxi willing to drive us to the border. The driver was not prepared to make the crossing but he would trust us with his car, so we bought a visa and drove into Rwanda, while he awaited our return at the border.

We were the first western crew into the country. As we drove towards the capital, we passed through some checkpoints where militia were checking the ID papers of the locals. At one such checkpoint, there were thousands of people trying to get out of the city. They all had to show their ID cards, which identified their ethnicity as Hutu, Tutsi or Twa. If they were Tutsi, they were asked to sit on the other side of the road, which was shielded from my view by the queue. As it was not safe to spend much time there, after grabbing a few shots of the militia, we made to get back in the car. As I did so, a gap opened in the crowd, allowing me to get some shots of what was happening to the Tutsis. A man with a machete was hacking through the people – there was no sound from them but at the end of the line a toddler was sitting, seemingly oblivious to what was going on.

We drove back to Burundi, then flew to Nairobi to edit and feed the pictures to London via a local TV station satellite. The output editor of the programme wasn't at all happy with showing any dead bodies and we got into a very heavy debate about how to show a massacre taking place without giving any indication of dead bodies. We found out later the reason for this caution was the number of complaints generated by the Burundi coverage six months earlier.

On my return home, I awoke startled one night after dreaming I was guiding my wife through corpses lying on the ground. I very rarely remember my dreams and felt something was wrong, so I went for a counselling session provided by the BBC. I was asked if I was going back to Rwanda to which I replied, "Yes, in a few days". The counsellor responded, "There is no point in opening you up as you will see the same thing again and it could just make matters worse." That was the last time I went to a counsellor but since then I have been acutely aware of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Beaten up in Zaire

The Rwanda killings carried on for around three months. On one occasion the only way of getting the pictures back to London was to charter a small plane and fly to Burundi just to feed the rushes. In June 1994, as the Rwandan Patriotic Front was advancing into Kigali, around a million people left Rwanda and walked into Goma in neighbouring Zaire. I would make a total of eight trips into Rwanda and Goma over six months: I saw corpses in burnt buildings, floating in rivers and strewn around on the roadside.

The massacre was compounded by a cholera outbreak: those who had died from cholera were left on the side of the road wrapped in straw mats. On one drive through the refugee camps, we estimated we saw around 5000 bodies. I also filmed a banana plantation being cleared and the bodies dumped from the back of a dumper truck like garbage into a mass grave.

Two years later there were reports that the same Goma refugees were on the move again, so we went looking for them near a town called Kisangani in Zaire (now DRC). We got to Kisangani after spending a lot of money getting all the filming permits but couldn't find the refugees anywhere. Before we left, I needed some shots of the town to prove there were no refugees. While I was doing some GVs, I noticed some soldiers at a distance walking towards us and decided to pack up the tripod and move on. By the time we

> Before I could get any money out of my pocket, the soldier started punching me. He had an old grenade in his hand and was using it as a knuckleduster. I later found out that, because of its age, this could easily have exploded as he was hitting me.

Rwanda: Militia checkpoint near Kigali in Rwanda – the Tutsis were moved to the side and then killed

Technology changes in news coverage

Recording formats in News

Up until the early 1980s, news footage was shot on film and, unlike today, the purchase of a camera was always a big investment. The film stock came in lightproof tins and a 400ft reel would last just 10 minutes, meaning news cameramen had to be extremely disciplined, editing in camera. There was also time and skill involved in changing the film in the magazine. The film had to be processed, or if shooting abroad, 'pidgeoned' back to London, usually just once a day. The BBC also had mobile film processing trucks, equivalent in role to current-day mobile satellite trucks, but even so it usually took foreign stories two or three days to reach the TV screens at home.

In the studios, video was recorded on 2-inch tapes, with a 1-hour reel weighing around 20kg. Then 1-inch machines came out – but they were still the size of a cupboard. The first cassette-type format, which used ¾-inch tape was Umatic, developed by Sony. These cassettes lasted 20 minutes and the tape could also go in a portable machine, the Sony BVU 50, which could be used on the road.

Camera kit in the boot of the car; my suitcase went behind the driver's seat

In the early 1980s the BBC invested in the quite revolutionary Ikegami HL79, the same size as a large shoulder-mount camcorder today. You could connect this with a BVU 50 recorder via a cable – hence, ENG (or Electronic News Gathering) was born. The cameraman could now afford to take more shots as there was no processing time or cost involved and, if you wanted to cover a football or cricket match, you could use a larger recorder, which took 1-hour tapes.

By the time I joined News in 1983, they had already switched over to ENG but were still working as two-person crews. Instead of carrying a sound mixer, the recordist would now carry the Sony BVU 50 weighing about 10kg, which took a video cassette the size of a book. The other reason for retaining a two-person crew was safety – you needed someone to watch the cameraman's back as they walked backwards.

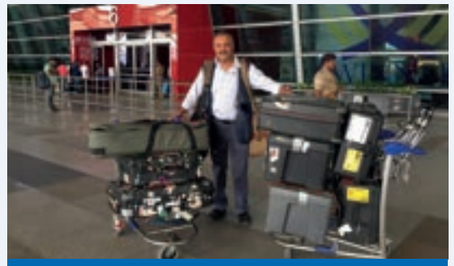
We then progressed to the Beta format (Beta SP and SX), which reduced the size of tapes to ½-inch, with 30 minutes duration in the smaller cassettes. At last you could combine the camera and recorder as one unit and call it a camcorder. All the video so far had been 4x3 in aspect, until in the late 1990s, 16x9 (or 'wide screen') was introduced. The DV format had also arrived and BBC News in the UK started switching to Sony DVCam in the late 1990s.

Mobile editing in a hotel room in Djibouti in 1986 – the Umatic edit suite weighed around 200kg and took a while to set up

Editing

Editing had always been a separate job in film and was initially so in ENG too. This was partly due to the size of the editing kit. Editing was tape to tape, with each machine weighing more than 30kg. You had to carry two Sony BVW 75 machines, two CRT monitors, a controller and a sound mixer for the audio. The total weight of the flight cases was over 200kg.

In the late 1980s, the portable, laptop-type Sony DNW A25 Beta edit machines, with a built-in LCD screen and controller, came out. The total weight of flight cases dropped dramatically to around 50kg.



At the airport leaving India with the full kit

The dawn of the digital age came in the late 1990s with the arrival of DV. To start with, the DV machines were similar to the A25 but later a FireWire port was added to the edit machines as well as the cameras. We tried out Avid Express on a PC but this constantly crashed, meaning edits were lost if they hadn't been regularly saved. People started trying out other non-linear editing (NLE) systems and I switched to Pinnacle Liquid as I found it more user-friendly. In some BBC bureaus they went for FCP on a Mac. At the start of this decade, the BBC standardised and started going tapeless and went HD – editing on FCPX on a Mac.

So, after starting out with a camera that took four people to lift, it's now possible for just one person to walk around with a camera, edit system and transmit/live WMT kit providing virtually instant footage from almost anywhere in the world.

got into the car with the equipment, the soldiers were right next to us demanding money. I was in the front passenger seat and before I could get any money out of my pocket, the soldier started punching me. He had an old grenade in his hand and was using it as a knuckleduster. I later found out that, because of its age, this could easily have exploded as he was hitting me.

We had to go to the police HQ to make a statement and missed our flight. We then spent four days under house arrest at the hotel because the authorities were concerned we were going to give the country negative coverage. It got very stressful just staying at the hotel as there were soldiers going in and out and, as outsiders, we weren't sure how safe we were. At one point I nearly took up smoking as I genuinely felt I was not going to come back home alive.

Other scary times

Some other life-threatening stories include the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which was one of the largest conventional wars between two of the poorest countries. This story won a Prix Bayeux award for war coverage. In Sarajevo, during the Bosnian war, we came under mortar attack at a cemetery while covering the funeral of a child who had been killed by a sniper. There were also frequent close shaves with gunfire while driving around this city at high speed to avoid snipers or covering the fighting at night from the balcony of a flat we were using.

In southern Turkey, after the first Gulf war, there was a large refugee crisis. One day there was a demonstration in the middle of Diyarbakir between local Kurds and the police. At one point I ended up between the demonstrators, who were throwing things at the police, and got some great pictures of the missiles flying over me. Suddenly the people moved away and, before I could assess the situation, a man in plain clothes came over to me saying he was from the police, pointing a pistol at my head and demanding the tape. I was no hero and handed over the tape.

Logistics and coping psychologically

Often the shooting and editing is the easiest part of an assignment, the harder aspects being getting in and out of a country, clearing customs and finding local transport, etc. Being resourceful is therefore a crucial quality. Over the years, I have effectively become my own travel agent and earned the nickname 'Baz Air'. I love haggling, so I actually enjoy

Iraq; Wearing a flak jacket and helmet, essential even in summer when the temperature was over 40ºC

landing at an airport and trying to negotiate with a driver or get the excess baggage reduced or making a deal with a hotel.

Experience has taught me that, psychologically, News coverage is very demanding and you have to think differently. It is crucial to stay positive and to keep in mind, for example, how the images you are capturing may help other children even though those in front of you are dying. The world will only react if the cameras are there. Out of sight out of mind.

In Ethiopia, we used to charter a plane to go to the Gode region. After a day of witnessing children dying from starvation, we would fly back to Addis Ababa and, after editing and sending the story back to London via the local TV station, would eat and sleep in a five-star hotel. We would then return to the site of so much death the next morning.

No two days the same – a privilege

Although I am writing this article from my own perspective, it has always been a team effort, working with so many people, often in very difficult circumstances. I have been humbled by the people I have met and truly view this job as a privilege.

On the darker side, I've interviewed various warlords: Charles Taylor in Liberia, Riek Machar in South Sudan and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, but there have been many lighter-hearted times too. On a trip to South Asia with John Major to promote British business, the CEOs of a lot of major companies were onboard the British Airways flight. They had configured the plane to have a cocktail party in the middle

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of the plane while flying. Unlike the commercial companies, BBC policy is to travel in economy unless it's an emergency. Travelling with dignitaries is part of the job but this also means going on a private plane. I have travelled with Bono to Ghana, the Queen to India and Pakistan, Prince William and Kate in Bhutan and India, and received an apology from Prince Harry in Nepal after I fell over walking backwards with Nick Witchell doing a piece to camera.

It's safe to say, no two days are ever the same: I've travelled at short notice when riots have happened, been arrested in Iran, attended a coup in Pakistan, covered a few earthquakes, the tsunami in Sri Lanka, the Arab uprising in Egypt and Libya, and, when Princess Diana died, I was the only cameraman on the island where she was buried.

Gujarat earthquake

The story that has affected my personal life the most happened in 2001. I was in central India to cover the biggest gathering of humanity – 20 million people attending the Hindu pilgrimage of Kumbh Mela. While the festival was in full flow, there was an earthquake in Gujarat in western India, which killed 25,000 people. As I descend from Gujarat, and therefore speak Gujarati, I was sent to cover the story and was also able to help look after the BBC teams. We had to camp out rather than stay in a hotel for fear of more aftershocks.

It took a couple of days before the satellite dish arrived from London but there was a new bit of kit available to send pictures back called the TOKO. With the TOKO, you could dial in and send the story over a satellite phone. It took nine hours to send a two-minute standard definition package and I hate to think how much it cost. It was a stressful, rather hit or miss affair, but a minor miracle in technology terms. These days I can send a high definition package from India to London over the internet in less than 10 minutes

Students at Rushey Mead School in Gujarat, India

The story was big in the UK as there is a large Gujarati community here. On my return to Leicester, I teamed up with my former school, Rushey Mead, and we started a charity, the Rushey Mead Foundation. The Foundation now runs a school for underprivileged children in India, which is changing lives and has added a different dimension to my life.

Many changes

The technology used in News has evolved very rapidly over the 38 years (*see the 'Technology changes' box*). When I first started in the studios it took four people to lift a TV camera

Nepal: With Prince Harry in the mountains

but now I can capture 4K pictures on an iPhone. Editing has moved from tape-to-tape to non-linear (NLE). The advent of 24-hour news (as it now celebrates 20 years) has increased expectations for instant pictures. Technology for streaming pictures has moved increasingly to the internet and mobile phones. Recently, I was able to do a live from a war zone using just an iPhone from near Mosul in Iraq while just a few miles away heavy fighting was going on.

During the British general election earlier this year, I got some amazing pictures doing lives from a moving bus with the camera connected to a small back box made by Mobile Viewpoint. This WMT box bonds the 4G signal from six mobile phone sims together and the company is already working on a system whereby you can stream video from four cameras together back to the studio.

News for most cameramen is not a job but a lifestyle – a lifestyle that only suits certain people and circumstances. You can get a call any time of day or night and have to make an instant decision whether to say yes or no to that story/location. One of the reasons I have carried on going to hostile places is because I took the view that most of my colleagues who have died have actually done so in road accidents rather than due to violence.

My family has sacrificed the most as I have missed numerous birthdays, family gatherings and children's school events. Since leaving the BBC, I have been able to spend more time with the family and am beginning to realise just how much for the last two decades I have been running with my life; now it's time to start walking again.

Fact File

Multi-award winning GTC member Bhasker Solanki left his staff position with BBC News last year after a remarkable 38 years covering many of the most memorable news stories from the last four decades.
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See more about the Rushey Mead Foundation: www.rusheymeadfoundation.com/trustees.html