USD alumnus Scott Heidler '90 reporting live as snow falls near Tiananmen Square in Beijing.

Covering Crisis, Capturing Truth

On July 17, 2014, Scott Heidler '90 (BA) arrived at a horrific scene in eastern Ukraine. Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17, headed from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, had been shot down by a surface-to-air missile, killing all 283 passengers and 15 crew members on board. As teams worked to sift through the wreckage, residents of a nearby farm village had begun to place candles nearby as a makeshift memorial. It was a grim, heartbreaking experience, but Heidler recognized this moment for what it was — history unfolding in real time.

As a correspondent for Al Jazeera, Heidler had already been stationed nearby, covering the escalating tensions between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists. When the news broke of the downed airliner, he and his team were among the first journalists on the ground. "We got there when it was still a graveyard," he recalled. "And because this was an international flight with citizens from many different countries onboard, including Americans, we knew immediately this was going to change everything."

Heidler's path to global journalism wasn't always clear, but in hindsight the signs were there. As a student at Chaparral High School in Scottsdale, Arizona, there was a major drug bust that revealed a connection between high school students and Mexican drug traffickers, working together to move cocaine stateside. As student body president, Heidler was thrust into the spotlight as a spokesperson. Heidler fielded questions from reporters and saw firsthand how narratives were shaped — and often, misrepresented. "I realized, I can do this better," he said. "That moment solidified my interest in journalism."

Following the lead of a trusted friend who was already attending the University of San Diego, Heidler knew it was the place for him. "Alcalá Park just has a unique feeling," he said. "When I was on a tour of the campus, I could see myself getting very involved in the community, and I knew that would help with my educational experience."

Although USD didn't have a formal broadcast journalism major at the time, Heidler found a healthy balance of theory and practice in the communication studies program. His job as a tour guide for the admissions office helped him develop his public speaking skills, and courses ranging from interpersonal communication theory to philosophy gave him a powerful foundation for his future. His USD education set the stage for a career that would take him to war zones, political hotspots and natural disaster sites around the world.

After graduation, Heidler landed an internship at CNN in Washington, D.C., an opportunity that led to a permanent position. Starting in the video library and working his way up to newsroom production, he found himself at the epicenter of breaking news. His liberal arts background proved to be a differentiator, helping him stand out from his peers who had more of a traditional broadcast journalism education. "Even when I was still an intern, I was able to connect the dots more — like how a story should be

Heidler on assignment with the Pakistan Army and at NASA's Kennedy Space Center.

formed or what other aspects of the story that we should be looking for down the line," he recalled.

His desire to be in the field, telling stories firsthand, pushed him to explore new opportunities. He transitioned to working in communications for international aid organizations such as Mercy Corps before returning to journalism, working for Fox News and Al Jazeera English, covering conflicts in Afghanistan, Israel and Ukraine, among other global hotspots.

"With Fox, I got incredible access to U.S. military bases," he said. "With Al Jazeera, I had a great deal of resources and support to cover a story. I went to Mongolia to cover elections, and I climbed on the beginning of the Everest trail for the 60th anniversary of the first summiting." While there were differences from network to network, Heidler found that in the field, the journalists were the same — "We were all there to tell the most accurate story possible."

Heidler's reporting has taken him from war zones to natural disasters to humanitarian crises. Whether covering the Arab Spring in Egypt, the war in Afghanistan or the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in China, he has always prioritized storytelling that reveals the human impact of world events.

One of his most memorable experiences was working with his wife, a photojournalist, on a book project in Afghanistan. Together, they documented the stories of 50 Afghan women who were rebuilding their lives after the fall of the Taliban. "It was a way to show resilience and change in a place so often depicted only through conflict," he said.

Throughout his travels, Heidler has seen how journalism can deepen understanding of complex topics. He has interviewed world leaders, everyday citizens, and those caught in the middle of major conflicts, always striving to bring nuance to fast-moving stories.

After years of covering the world's biggest stories, Heidler has recently transitioned into new roles, from feeding his interest in aviation on Florida's Space Coast to serving as a communications advisor for Chef José Andrés' World Central Kitchen. Reflecting on the industry, he acknowledged the challenges of a rapidly changing media landscape dominated by 24-hour news cycles and digital platforms. "It's becoming a content machine," he said. "The fundamentals of journalism — objectivity, depth, investigative rigor — need to be protected."

Despite the shifting tides, Heidler remains optimistic about the future of journalism. He believes that the industry's core mission — truth-seeking and storytelling — will always have value. For students and aspiring journalists, his advice is clear: "Focus on the basics. Be a great storyteller, whether in print, broadcast or digital media. And remember — there's always another side to the story."
— *Ben Peterson*

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