

THE CONFLICT Reporter

**Susannah
Walden '06**

confronts challenges and
shares stories with the world
as Kabul bureau chief for
Agence France-Presse.

BY ZACH SCHONBRUN '05

WALDEN HAS MADE A CAREER RUNNING TO PLACES
IN THE WORLD THAT OTHERS WOULD GLADLY FLEE
FROM, TO SHARE STORIES ABOUT LIFE AND DEATH.



It was, for all intents and purposes, a dream assignment for Susannah Walden '06. She started working in Washington, D.C., in 2021, a stone's throw from the White House, covering the Biden administration for the global news service Agence France-Presse (AFP).

It was her first time back living in the United States in 15 years. The newsroom was abuzz with activity and excitement at every bit of news coming in.

"People were standing up and shouting across the room, 'We're alerting this, alert this!'" Walden explains.

Then a war broke out in Ukraine. When AFP asked for volunteers to cover what was happening at the front lines, Walden raised her hand. Walden was no stranger to international conflict.

Currently, she is the AFP's bureau chief in Kabul, Afghanistan, covering the radical upheaval taking place since the Taliban rose again to power in 2021.

Opposite page: Susannah Walden '06 next to a destroyed bridge in Donetsk, Ukraine, after reporting on a Ukrainian tank brigade

Above: Walden on assignment for AFP at the White House covering a visit by Colombian President Gustavo Petro in spring 2023

Left: Walden on assignment in the northern Afghan province of Badakhshan reporting on child malnutrition

Walden in the city of Bamiyan, Afghanistan, in autumn 2024, overlooking the hollows once filled by the ancient Buddha statues that were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001

She lives and works with 23 others in a guarded compound with razor wire along the perimeter and bars on the windows. Talking via Zoom from Germany, where she took a holiday in November, she chooses her words carefully. Most of her daily energy, she says, is spent worrying about the “what ifs” for her reporters attempting to cover life in a police state.

Adding to the unease, she is a woman in a country notoriously restrictive to women. But then Walden has made a career running to places in the world that others would gladly flee, to share stories about life and death.

Walden didn’t intend to work in journalism, but she studied abroad in France during her junior year at Taft, which made her want to look at colleges overseas. She wound up at the University of Edinburgh,

where she studied Persian. Her love of languages and Middle Eastern history brought her to Beirut in 2015 to learn Arabic. Needing a job, she started writing for the local English language newspaper, *The Daily Star*.

Within a few years, she was running the national desk. “It was sometimes trial by fire and being in the deep end and a lot of feeling way in over my head,” Walden says, “but I guess that’s how you learn.”

One thing that paid dividends for her was a life-long love of languages. She speaks French fluently, her Farsi/Dari is advanced, she speaks some Arabic, reads Cyrillic, and can “get around in German, Spanish, and Italian.” Her polylingualism has enabled her to report stories about real issues faced by real people—not bureaucrats—such as Afghan refugees searching for warmth and security on the Pakistan



“At what point do you decide that this is too close, or this is too risky, when you’re already in a very risky situation?”

border, or the obsession among Iraqi youth with a mobile video game made by a Chinese tech giant.

After the pandemic, she accepted what she calls her first “grown-up” job in America in 2021 and moved to Washington. Her office was in the AFP’s North America bureau on K Street. For the first time, she got to experience the rush of a newsroom during a frenzied and exciting period—when AFP’s global readership wanted every bit of news that was coming out of Washington.

But her brief stint in the Washington press corps didn’t last long. War erupted, and with it a chance to cover a truly world-altering story.

“The crazy and naïve thing was that I was more afraid of just doing my job well [in Ukraine],” Walden says.

She flew to Warsaw and took a train to Kyiv, then another train filled with soldiers to Kramatorsk, not far from the front lines. She did much of her reporting from Bakhmut, a heavily battered eastern city, talking to civilians and volunteers hunkered down there. She embedded with a tank battalion traveling to the front, which was the only time she really felt conflicted about balancing her safety (and that of her team of photographers and video

journalists) and her journalistic responsibilities.

“The scariest thing for me was deciding: where do you draw a line?” Walden says. “It’s very hard to know. At what point do you decide that this is too close, or this is too risky, when you’re already in a very risky situation?”

During one particularly dicey moment, Walden found herself across the street from a “Grad,” or truck-mounted multiple rocket launcher, in the midst of an assault. The sound of the artillery cannon was less impressive than the *feeling* of it firing.

“I’ve never been near any kind of weapon that massive,” Walden says. “And when it fires, it just felt like I didn’t exist, like I was hollow. The whole feeling of the impact went right through me.”

She couldn’t help but think about the impact such a weapon could have on the other side. Then she was

Walden on assignment in spring 2024 visiting a UN project in a village in the northern Afghan province of Badakhshan with one of the UN’s armed Taliban escorts in the background



“Conflict reporting is something THAT I FIND IMPORTANT. IT’S VALUABLE TO HAVE SOMEBODY WHO’S REALLY COMING IN FROM THE OUTSIDE TO BE A WITNESS AND TELL HUMAN STORIES.”



told to leave the area immediately unless she wanted to experience the fearsome retaliatory force herself.

The risks of the assignment were made more evident in May 2023 when Walden’s colleague, an AFP correspondent named Arman Soldin, was killed by rocket fire near Bakhmut, the same city where Walden had been sent (she was not there at the time). “Another one of my friends who was working there was injured not long after,” Walden says. “He was lucky that the security consultant was there and could get a chest seal on him.”

It’s reasonable to wonder what compels a reporter to volunteer for an assignment at the nexus of a war. “Conflict reporting is something that I find important,” Walden says. “It’s valuable to have somebody who’s really coming in from the outside to be a witness and tell human stories.”

She says she met courageous, uplifting people simply trying to go about their lives, including doctors and teachers who refused to evacuate.

“It was a privilege to meet people and listen to them talk about why they were there and what they were feeling and what was important to them,” Walden says. “I would do it again.”

In Kabul, she is now trying to report on what daily life is like for the Afghan people and how rules are being enforced on the ground. In June, her team’s coverage of Afghans exiled from Pakistan was recognized by the Society of Publishers in Asia, the most prestigious journalism awards organization in the region.

She was drawn to the assignment partly because of the region’s fraught association with the United States.

“I was 13 when 9/11 happened,” Walden says. “It has such a place in our generation’s history that [I was attracted to] being able to see it and experience it, and also tell the next chapter of its story.”

At a time when fake news travels much faster and further than the truth, she says she feels fortunate that her wanderlust and penchant for languages led her toward a career as an international correspondent.

“There aren’t many jobs where you can see the world and meet people the way that you can in journalism,” Walden says. “I also think it’s a very important human trait that we share stories. The combination of that, for me, is perfect.” ■

Above: Walden, in Wilmington, Delaware, covers the Dominion v. Fox News defamation lawsuit for AFP.

Opposite page: Walden at the top of the ruins of the Shahr-e Zohak fortress near Bamiyan

Opposite page inset: Walden while on assignment in Ukraine, near Bakhmut in Donetsk in January 2023

Photographs provided by Susannah Walden '06.