

# DIALOGUE

## Peter Kent: the man in the safari suit is always hunting for a story

Interview by Ian Bailey—photos by Jules Xavier.

That Canadians have few homegrown journalistic figures to hold up for consideration may be due to the fact that we haven't heard much about people such as Peter Kent.

A CBC publicist described Kent as, "more than just a pretty face", and glancing over his credentials one realizes that there is more to the man than having been, at 33, one of the youngest readers of "The National".

At 39 Kent has managed to work in enviable positions at the CBC, the CTV network, and Global Television News. Until last year he was reporting on African affairs for NBC. He has come a long way since he began freelancing in Vietnam in 1966 after leaving the small Calgary TV station where he got his start in broadcast journalism.

Kent covered the Quiet Revolution in Quebec, the fall of Idi Amin's Uganda, the evolution of Southern Africa, and the 1973 Middle East War. Along the way he picked up an Actra in 1975 as the best Canadian newscaster and an Annie for a Newspecial on Cambodia. Now Kent has joined the CBC's big roll of the dice, "The Journal" as a producer-journalist.

Excalibur's Ian Bailey spoke to Peter Kent at the Carlton Street newsroom of "The Journal". Kent apologised for not wearing his characteristic Safari suit.

You are quoted in Macleans as saying that American television news has a tendency to be preoccupied with covering war...

As one of the superpowers the Americans seem to get involved in almost every war that takes place these days. American television is different than Canadian television is or should be. They're selling commercials in a multimillion dollar business and war attracts an audience. In the 60's, on Saturday afternoons ABC, NBC, and CBS would have half-hour programs like, "This Week at War," or "This Week from Vietnam". It was not a really terrific analysis of what was going on. It was a John Wayne movie in real life. TV audiences will watch that. People are fascinated by explosions and struggle and conflict and disaster.

If American nightly news programs have a shortcoming it is that they too often present the spectacular picture without enough of the background. They don't explain either what happened before the event or what happened afterwards.

When you began reading The National in 1976 there was some suggestion that your role as commentator would be expanded to make it more journalistically satisfying, did this occur?

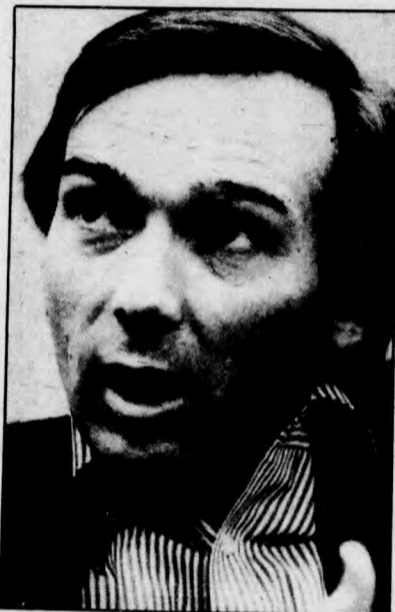
Journalistically I found The National very satisfying. I was able to write copy despite previous Union restrictions. I was hosting and writing newspecials on "Newsmagazine" and I was travelling fairly regularly to do field stories. In that sense I was really satisfied with The National.

Why did you leave?

What got me and the rest of the Unit depressed, and prompted my criticism at the CRTC hearings of the CBC Licence Review, was that the CBC was treating The National like a third rate program. First of all, The National was produced in a tiny, inadequate 30-year-old studio which we shared with "The Friendly Giant". Our set would be knocked down and night and his set would go up in the morning. We couldn't get in and work during the day because they were taping "Friendly". The studio set-up was just not good. The equipment we were using was inadequate.

The News was constantly being bumped by American programs like the Academy Awards which were already available on cable to most of 8 Excalibur February 11, 1982

Canada. We were also being delayed by sports events — not that sports aren't good. Our coverage was being disrupted all the way across the network. I thought if the taxpayers are paying for the news — and it's a fairly big part of the budget — they should get it.



The third irritating factor was that there was political interference in the sorts of newspecials that we were covering at the time. We weren't supposed to cover Rene Levesque, but we were to cover Pierre Trudeau. Not that I have anything against Trudeau, or that I think Levesque is any better than Trudeau, but I thought that we were covering too many political events from one point of view and not enough of the alternatives.

I spoke out about each of these problems at the CRTC hearings. Having said these things it was decided that I could not be allowed to continue reading The National. Fortunately it coincided with the development of the CBC's African bureau and I was sent off to Africa, which was fun.

When you left NBC you were quoted as saying, "When they lost interest in Africa, I lost interest in them." What makes Africa interesting to you?

It's a huge continent — an important continent. People in the West are too preoccupied with themselves and their societies and not with the parts of the world like South Africa, Africa and Asia which really has the population that is going to make global survival a very iffy thing 20 or 30 years down the road. The superpowers and some of the lesser powers like Britain, Germany, Italy and France are fighting proxy wars for their different ideologies. Every country on the African continent is torn by pressures between East and West; the

modern and the ancient; survival of civilization, and the destruction of civilization. There are a lot of very important stories and I don't think that Westerners, particularly Canadians, should ignore the Third World. Africa is the biggest and most ignored part. If we don't start educating ourselves I think that one day we could receive quite a shock.

The National has experienced cosmetic changes, but has it, as a result of the creation of the Journal, undergone policy changes to improve the problems?

The most important thing that happened this year is that The National is at a more reasonable hour. The basic news service of the CBC is now available at an hour when more Canadians can be reasonably expected to watch it; and be wide awake enough to understand some of the more complicated stories. Ideally, I would like to see it at nine o'clock, or eight o'clock, or even seven o'clock. But the Journal has been added and it is a complementary program to The National. Now a lot of the issues that we couldn't cover on the National in proper depth, which had to wait until — let's say a Monday night, "Newsmagazine", or a Tuesday night, "Fifth Estate" or a newspecial — can now be developed on a nightly basis as a complementary story to the National. You hear the important information of the day for the first part of the hour, then you get an amplification or development of it in the Journal.

### I was covering the Middle East as a Fireman.

The development of that complementary hour is the best thing that has happened to the CBC in 20 years. What we've got to do now is get more time and develop further. While the CBC depends on commercial broadcasting for part of its annual budget I think we've got to continue to downgrade the pre-occupation with commercial revenue in prime time and do a little bit more alternative programming. We should offer things that people can't see on the other 20 channels available on a cable converter. I think that's what the CBC should be doing.

What happened in Africa?

I went to open the African bureau for CBC. I was in Africa



Journalist Peter Kent has circled the globe looking for stories.

for a year when NBC came to me and said, "We need a new correspondent to cover Africa. You're here, are you interested?" I told them I was, and I talked to the CBC people and told them I wanted to do this. I told them that, since they picked up stories off NBC I would still be doing stories for them. They agreed and we amicably parted.

I found that towards the end of the year that I was with NBC, I was covering the Middle East as a fireman. I was covering the Iran/Iraq War or sitting in Oman, Jordan as back-up in case the area blew up and they needed reporters to cover the story. I was sitting in a hotel in Frankfurt for a month as back-up for the release of the American prisoners in Iran. Those are perfectly respectable jobs and someone has got to do them but at the time there were stories in Africa I thought we should be covering and said to them, "look, what's happened to Africa?" They said, "It's there and we'll go back. It will come full circle and we'll start reporting there again." They wanted me to move and live in Beirut or Cairo. I wouldn't mind living in either place, but when I asked them if they were going to give me time to figure out who was who in this particular game, they said, "No." They said, "you don't have to know that — just move there and you'll pick it up." I said, "no" believing that to do that you'd have to make an investment responsibility of at least two

years, and then make an effort to learn the language. I was not prepared to make another two year commitment to start at the beginning again after five years of doing the same thing in another part of the Third World. Coincidentally, the Journal started to develop.

How did you become involved with the Journal?

I was in Johannesburg wondering what I was going to do about NBC, and whether I was going to stay there and freelance. At about that time Mark Starowitz called me and said, "Hey, we've got the go-ahead for the Journal, are you interested in coming back?" I said yes.

### It was a John Wayne movie in real life.

I just wanted to be part of this whole thing. It took a long time to blueprint it and get it past the different levels of CBC administration, but it seems to be working. I think it will be much better six months from now than it was when we first went on the air. We'll find our pace, but that commitment is there. To cover the world had not to measure a story by a \$200 trip to Montreal as compared to a \$2000 trip to Kampala. But if the Kampala story is a good one then it is covered.

You've made great advances in the media. What has allowed you to progress so far, so fast?

A fair amount of luck. I've only been married a year and being single, and not having any large responsibilities, allowed me to take advantage of opportunities that came along.

What are your longterm goals? Are you finished in the field?

These last few stories are the last expedition type stories I'll get involved in. We're expecting a baby in May and I think I'm going to put the suitcase in the basement except for the occasional holiday.

