

Obituaries

Barrie Dunsmore, globe-trotting ABC News correspondent, dies at 79

By [Harrison Smith](#)

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Barrie Dunsmore, a veteran newsman who delivered elegant dispatches from Berlin to Baghdad for three decades, reporting on the collapse of the Soviet Union and wars in the Middle East as a senior foreign and diplomatic correspondent for ABC News, died Aug. 26 at a hospital in Washington. He was 79.

The cause was congestive heart failure, said his wife, Whitney Taylor Dunsmore.

Raised in poverty in Western Canada, Mr. Dunsmore played hockey on a feeder team for the Montreal Canadiens before establishing himself as a journalist in the mid-1960s, when his friendship with Canadian-born news anchor [Peter Jennings](#) helped him move from Canada's CTV network to ABC News.

He went on to become one of the leading foreign correspondents of his era, reporting from more than 100 countries and developing a reputation as an expert on the Soviet Union and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, an abiding interest ever since he traveled to the region in 1967 to cover the Six-Day War.

Mr. Dunsmore was among the “last of his breed,” said his colleague Ted Koppel, the former anchor of “Nightline.” He personified the “old-school foreign correspondent: elegantly dressed, exceedingly well-informed, a voracious reader who knew people in government in most of the countries he covered.”

When war broke out or a dictator fell from power, it was often Mr. Dunsmore who was dispatched to the scene — to Danang and Saigon, where he tracked the last moments of the Vietnam War; to Santiago, Chile, to cover the plebiscite that heralded the demise of [Augusto Pinochet](#); to Berlin, as the wall dividing East and West was finally opened; and to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, at the onset of the Persian Gulf War.

“Barrie would take a complicated diplomatic problem and make it understandable to his audience in 82 seconds, or however much time he had,” said journalist Marvin Kalb, who competed and sometimes collaborated with Mr. Dunsmore in the 1970s as chief diplomatic correspondent at CBS News.

Mr. Dunsmore spent much of that decade working in the Middle East, where he scored the first American television interview with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and later received an Overseas Press Club award for his coverage of Sadat's assassination in 1981. He also tagged along for Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's “shuttle diplomacy” in the early 1970s and became one of the first reporters to break the news of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

For perhaps his biggest story, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, a [trenchcoat-clad Mr. Dunsmore](#) was interviewed for “Nightline” while standing in front of a crowd of Berliners atop the wall. “Are we really getting carried away by all the champagne bottles and those wonderful young people there, clearly having the time of their lives?” Koppel asked him.

“We sometimes haven’t been willing to accept the fact that Mikhail Gorbachev has a very different plan for his country and for the world than any other Soviet leader, and I really think we are beginning something very different,” Mr. Dunsmore said.

Asked for any closing thoughts, he delivered a typically erudite and cautious remark: “At a time like this, I’m haunted by that old expression that the Gods punish us by giving us what we want. We’ve wanted this for a long time, now we’ve got it, and really now we have to do something about it.”

The first of three children in a Scottish Canadian family, Robert Alexander Barrie Dunsmore was born in Regina, Saskatchewan’s capital, on Feb. 13, 1939. His mother was a homemaker, and his father ran a small snowplowing and landscaping business.

Mr. Dunsmore [later recalled](#) that, when he was a child, his family lived in a shack heated by a wood stove, with “frost on the windows that was two inches thick from mid-December through March,” before upgrading to a home with a furnace and electric stove.

His introduction to journalism came at a Regina radio station, where he worked part-time in high school before advancing to become an announcer and DJ. Unable to afford college, Mr. Dunsmore embarked on a television career that included stints in Manitoba, Ontario and ultimately Toronto. It was there that he met Jennings, one year his senior, who later served as the urbane anchor of “World News Tonight.” When Jennings moved to ABC in 1964, he helped Mr. Dunsmore get a job at the network the following year and later served as the best man at his second wedding.

“When Barrie came on board, ABC News was fourth in a three-network race,” Koppel joked. That soon changed, as the network’s stable of young talent, and the arrival of [Roone Arledge](#) as president of the news division, helped it emerge as a serious rival to CBS and NBC.

Mr. Dunsmore was based in Paris and then Rome and spent a decade covering the State Department in Washington before moving to the network’s London bureau. He was named senior diplomatic correspondent in 1992 and retired from ABC News three years later.

His departure followed an overall decline in international reporting by the major networks, where time devoted to foreign stories dropped from 45 percent in the 1970s to 13.5 percent by 1995, according to an analysis by former Agence France-Presse chairman Claude Moisy. To Mr. Dunsmore, that decline was part of an overall deterioration of the news media in the United States, where opinionated columnists

seemed to have supplanted the more straightforward reporters of his era — what he called “the dinosaur age.”

His own career followed that shift toward commentary, as he retired for several years to Vermont and contributed opinionated radio stories and columns on international affairs, many of them collected in the 2011 book “There and Back.”

Mr. Dunsmore’s marriage to Marlene Finlayson ended in divorce. In addition to his wife of 31 years, the former Whitney Taylor of Washington, survivors include two children from his first marriage, Timothy Dunsmore of Brookeville, Md., and Leeanne Dunsmore of Crownsville, Md.; a daughter from his second marriage, Campbell Dunsmore of Brooklyn; two brothers; and four grandchildren.

Mr. Dunsmore was “neither a prima donna nor a showboat,” said Hodding Carter III, who was assistant secretary of state for public affairs during the Carter administration. But off camera, he established himself as “the best singer in the diplomatic press corps,” a vibrant tenor who could belt out requests for old standards from the 1930s and ’40s.

“He would sing at restaurants with live bands,” Carter said. “As the dinner was winding down, it would suddenly become obvious that the band needed to hear a great American — or, rather, Canadian — singer. And in the interest of truth, justice and the American way, we offered him up.”

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Harrison Smith



Harrison Smith is a reporter on The Washington Post's obituaries desk. Since joining the obituaries section in 2015, he has profiled big-game hunters, fallen dictators and Olympic champions. He sometimes covers the living as well, and previously co-founded the South Side Weekly, a community newspaper in Chicago.

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