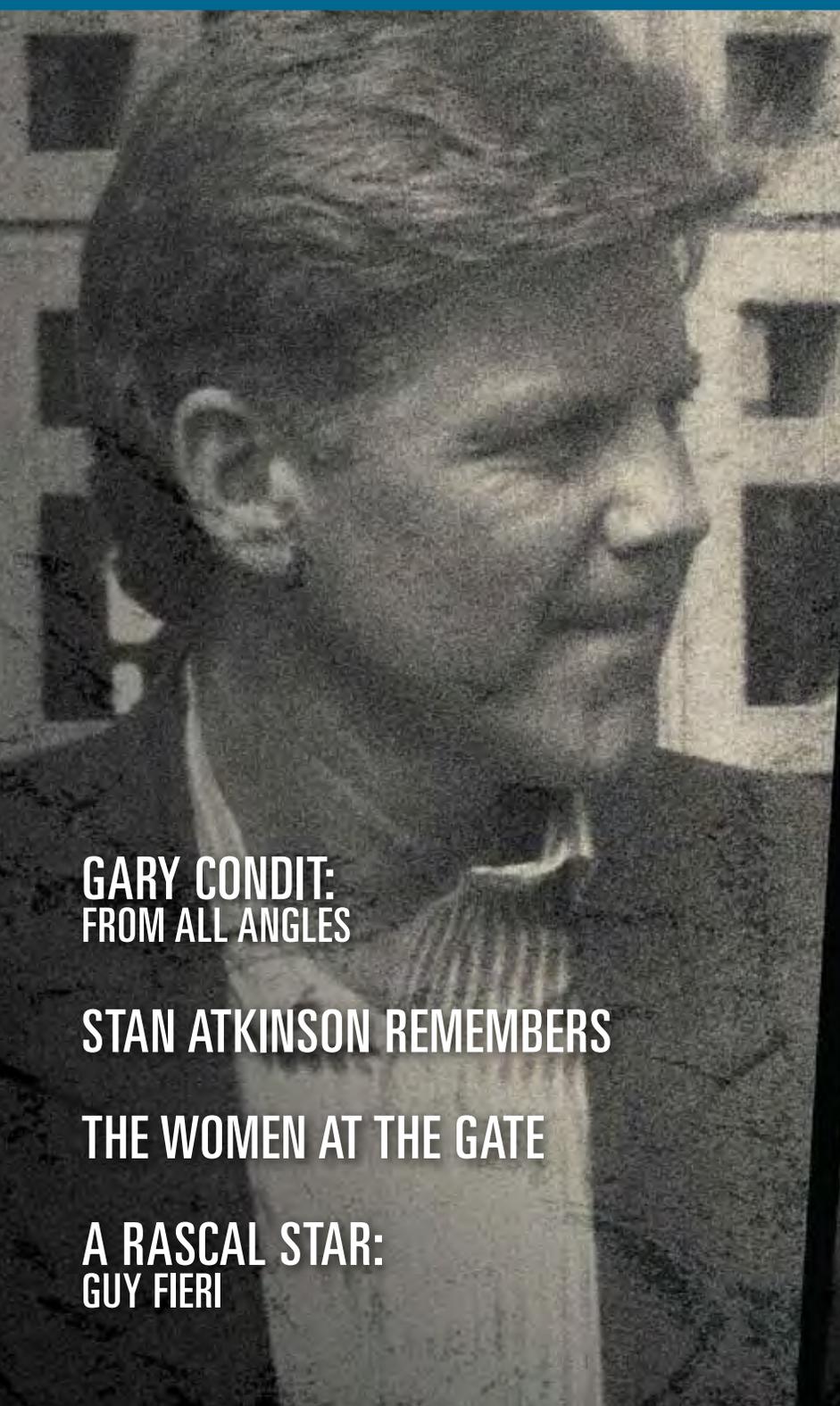


CALIFORNIA CONVERSATIONS

WINTER 2008

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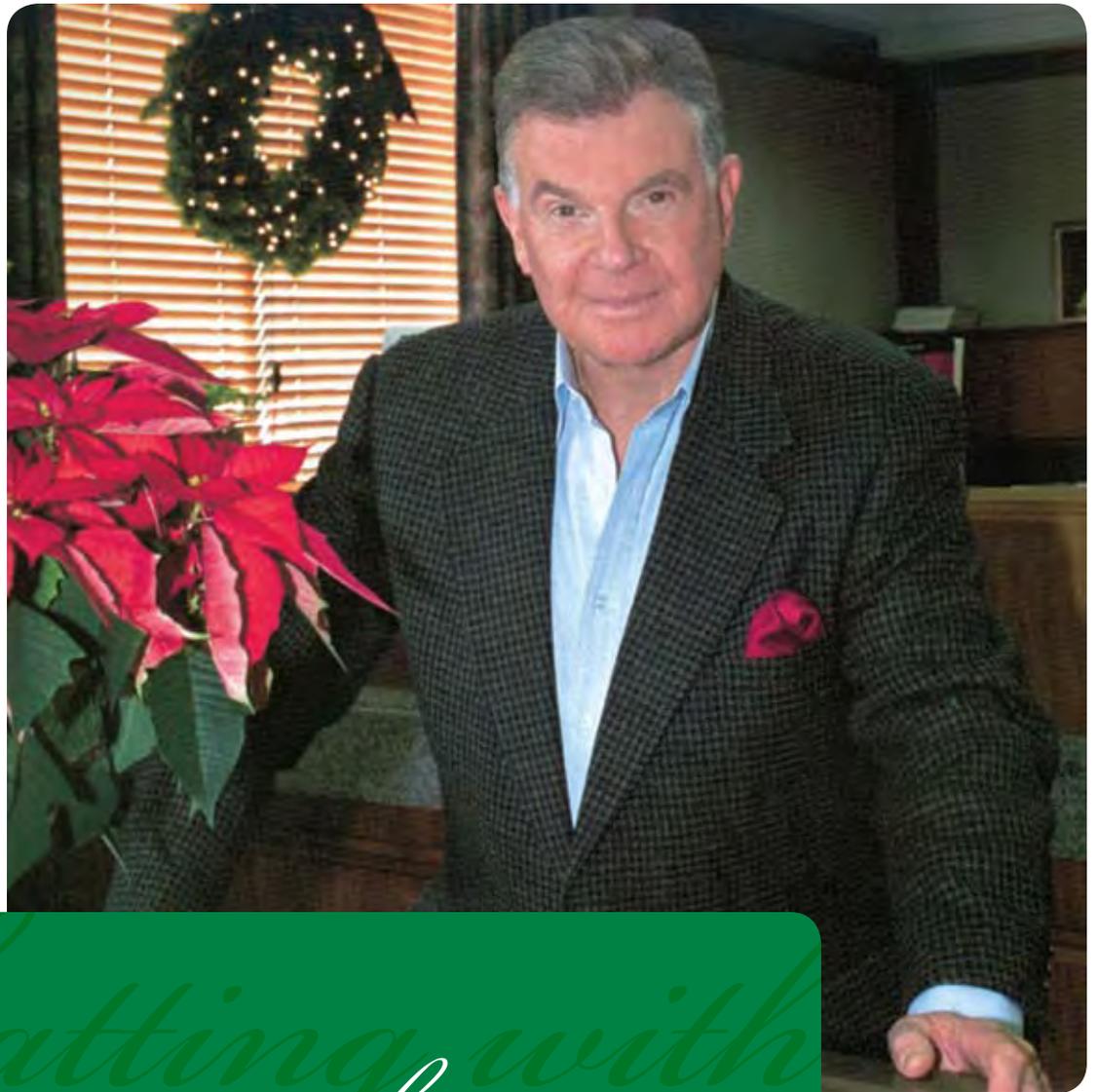
GARY CONDIT:
FROM ALL ANGLES

STAN ATKINSON REMEMBERS

THE WOMEN AT THE GATE

A RASCAL STAR:
GUY FIERI





Chatting with **Stan Atkinson**

BY STEVE BAKER

Over a period of almost forty years, Stan Atkinson was the consummate TV personality and one of the most likeable figures in California's Capital City. His following at a local level often exceeded that of national anchors Walter Cronkite and Tom Brokaw. An award winning writer and producer, Atkinson managed invincible ratings.

We met Stan at a small eatery. He was almost on time, pulling up in his car with plates reading “Old News,” the plates appearing to be the only vanity he allows. He was dressed casually in workout clothes. Atkinson is tall, tan, and trim, still with a healthy head of hair. His calm, clear voice hasn’t changed since he stepped away from the camera and retired in 1999.

The relationship between the viewer and a television personality is fickle, usually tenuous at best, a short-term affection that wears out when times and trends take on new colors. Stan beat the odds. He was a mainstay in people’s lives. He fit in our living rooms, and when he wanted to get away, he won Emmys taking us with him to scarred countries like Vietnam and Afghanistan and Somalia.

California Conversations: Did you grow up in California?

Stan Atkinson: I grew up in Santa Barbara. I was adopted by family friends. I was fortunate to be raised in a home with parents, although old enough to be my grandparents, who were loving and provided me a lot of opportunity.

CC: What did your parents do?

SA: My father was a multi-faceted man. He was a civil engineer. He was a pioneer American forester. In fact, with the National Park Service his assignment was to put Lassen Park together. That was his first introduction to the West. He grew up in Philadelphia. He ended up in Santa Barbara after running rubber plantations for U.S. Rubber. He planted avocados and lemon trees and did really well at it in those early days of modern California.

CC: I imagine Santa Barbara was a beautiful place to grow up.

SA: It was, but for most of us, we had to go away to start a real life. There wasn’t much job opportunity.

CC: Did you work growing up?

SA: I got hooked on radio as a kid. During high school I focused on high school sports reporting, and worked on a weekly radio show in Santa Barbara. I was totally enamored with radio.

CC: You chose a competitive business.

SA: Well, not really. Not then. (laughs) It was the early fifties and all you had to do was get an FCC first class license. We didn’t really have news people in those days, not at the local level anyway. I went to school for my license and that opened up opportunities all over the country. I took my first job in Los Alamos, New Mexico. It was a great job. The station was built when the Atomic Energy Commission was spending money in Los Alamos, so it had all the bells and whistles.

CC: Was the military looking for young guys in those days?

SA: Yes...I got drafted and sent to Fort Ord during the Korean War. I applied for Officers Candidate School, and served a term on base in what they called Leadership School. It was kind of a prep school for OCS. They said, “You’re a radio announcer, so you’ll make a good instructor.” (laughs) I learned a lot back then about military rationale.



STAN AS A CHILD GROWING UP IN SANTA BARBARA.

“They said, we think you’ll work well in television. I said I don’t even own a coat and a tie. They said, go get one.”

CC: Were you at Fort Ord your entire military career?

SA: Yes, with Clint Eastwood, actually. We were in the same unit as instructors. My job was standing on a stage teaching military courses to unhappy new recruits. I’d had a little bit of dramatic training through school, but not a whole lot. I seemed to have a natural flair for it. You had to keep ’em awake.

CC: What was Clint like back then?

SA: He was just a nice kid. We’ve run into each other over the years, and he’s still a nice guy. When he got out of the service, he took off with a guy named Bob to make their names in Hollywood...don’t know what happened to Bob. We were all very jealous of Clint and his team because they were swimming instructors, and their uniform was tennis shoes, khakis, and a sweatshirt. We had to be spit and polish role models working in front of 500 trainees at a time.

CC: You didn’t follow Clint to Hollywood?

SA: Nah. I knew the draft was coming so I had gotten that FCC license first. If you were going to work in a small radio station where an engineer wouldn’t be on duty 24/7, if you had an FCC license, you could operate the station by yourself. God forbid the station would go off the air. You’d be on the phone lickety-split with the engineer, in a panic.

CC: When did television enter the equation?

SA: I took a job at a radio station in Spokane. They were in the process of building a TV station at the time. They said, we think you’ll work well in television. I said I don’t even own a coat and a tie. They said, go get one. (laughs) I realized quickly that standing

on a stage at Fort Ord in front of 500 disgruntled, unhappy, desperately sleepy trainees turned out to be good training for television.

CC: How did you get back to California?

SA: I left Spokane in 1956. Both my former wife and I were from Santa Barbara. We had thin Southern California blood, and it got bitterly cold in Spokane. We crammed everything into our little VW. We stopped at a gas station in Redding to fill up and as I was getting back in the car, I hollered to the guy, are there any TV stations around here? He said there was one opening up by the junior college. So I drove a dusty road to this new little building. Everyone was running around the studio like chickens with their heads cut off. They had just gone on the air and were having trouble getting the signal to the transmitter at the top of Shasta Baldy, 5,600 feet above Redding. They were really preoccupied and here is this stranger walking in. Someone asked me what I wanted. I said, well, I’d like a job. I said I do television. I’ve been working at the ABC station in Spokane for two years. This was 1956—and they said, “You’ve been in television for two years? You’re hired.”

That’s what it was like in those days. It was nothing but breaks, timing, and persistence. I think every job I got after that was all about not giving up, always believing I’m going to get something I want to get.

CC: Did you know then you would stay in television?

SA: By 1957, I had moved to KCRA in Sacramento and I loved my job. I’d made a couple of documentaries... one about a terrible forest fire, and it got a lot of play.



A YOUNG STAN; STAN AND LBJ.

And I'd been to Vietnam and on an around-the-world trip with Vice-President Lyndon Johnson. I got on the trip because I won a national award and Johnson presented the award. I was fascinated by Vietnam. I did a documentary about a Chinese Catholic priest who had his own little army fighting the Viet Cong, and he was beating the hell out of them. Anyway, I pitched David Wolper in Hollywood to create a documentary unit in Sacramento for a new series. We had a lot of good subjects up here. Anyway, I quit at the television station. Then the series was never renewed, so I only got one show in the first year of the series and the idea of being a Northern California unit went up in smoke.

I went to Pat Brown's inaugural and had a few drinks with Gordon Winton, a popular cow-country democratic Assemblyman from Merced. The State of California was going from a part-time Legislature to a full-time one. After a few drinks, he said, "We've got this new thing starting that's being called an AA—administrative assistant. I'm not quite sure how it's going to work out, but I'd like you to take the job."

It was incredible. I covered the Capitol as a reporter and never did see the inner workings the way I began seeing them once I was an AA. I worked with

Rose Byrd (controversial California Chief Justice under Jerry Brown) and Ken Corey (former State Controller), who were committee consultants. It was a fascinating time because Jesse Unruh was bringing the professional Legislature into reality.

CC: All of the early colleagues go on to bigger things?

SA: (laughs) Ed Loftus went in a different direction. He was a spicy, triple-A character, always full of energy, funny, a jokester, smart as a whip, a good looking little guy. Everybody loved him. In those days, we did a lot of partying and it was pretty unrestrained. Everybody joined in, including legislators. Ed was one of the main organizers of the extracurricular events that took place.

Well, Ed and I both ended up in LA. I had been called by Wolper to do another series, so I moved to LA. I did a show with Bing Crosby and one with Bette Davis. From there, I went on to partner with a guy in a production company.

Ed Loftus began running the Nelson Rockefeller presidential campaign in Southern California.

Ed came to my house for dinner a couple of times. My father had died, and I showed Ed the old 45

service revolver from WWI my dad left me. I came home one night, and the front door was unlocked. I got a spooky feeling. It had obviously been entered by somebody. Nothing was touched—somebody had gone directly to the bedroom where I had the revolver, opened the drawer and took it.

Now, Ed's roommate was Paul Brown, the lobbyist for the California Medical Association. He was originally the press guy for the state fair, which was a very prestigious job at the time. He was sitting in their living room reading the paper and all of a sudden the front door goes down and 20 of LA's finest burst in, stand him up, and put him in cuffs. Where is Ed, they ask.

Ed was robbing banks in his spare time. (laughs) He only got caught when he went on a date, needed a few bucks, so robbed a Western Union office for dinner money.

CC: He used your gun for the robberies?

SA: Yes, in the end he did.

Ed Loftus was convicted of several bank robberies and sentenced to 80 years in prison. His two accomplices, both college students, committed suicide rather than be taken into custody. Stan thinks Ed was released sometime in the '70s.

CC: (laughs) You didn't follow Loftus either, but you didn't stay in Los Angeles.

SA: My partner wanted to be making movies or TV shows, which he ended up doing and had a very

successful career. We had put together another documentary about an inspirational bunch of people trying to do the right thing in the early days of Vietnam. Let me tell you, we went through the tortures of hell with that. We made a really good half-hour program. We then spent one Saturday and Sunday in the conference room at the State Department with their lawyers ripping it and us apart—word by word. They took the meat out of the program. It was such a battering experience, I just said screw it. No more production-by-committee. I went back to news at KTVU Oakland. Later, I applied for a Ford Journalism Fellowship and for almost a year I studied environmental science at Stanford. It was a delightful experience. I was working with remarkable journalists, people in mid-career wanting to stretch out a bit. I finished there and went to work at NBC. Of course, LA was the market for covering environmental matters. I was the second in the country to cover that specific assignment, my beat.

CC: What were the big environmental issues?

SA: Smog. Smog, Smog, Smog. Those were the days when the basin was just plugged. They've made a lot of improvements since then. We lived on the hillside, above the strip and I would look down on this thick black stuff and think, I am spending my day working there. Then the Sharon Tate murders occurred. I happened to be nearby, so I got called to the house. The La Bianca killings were the next night. I spent the next 16 months on the Charles Manson case. And that was the end of my environmental reporting career.

**“But, there's always the story,
getting the story and sharing what you've seen
and what you've experienced with others.”**



ON THE JOB.

CC: Does covering murder and the gritty things that happen to people wear on you after a while?

SA: I don't think so, and I don't think you become numb to it either. I remember with all of the foreign assignments I did, a lot of them were centered on refugee relief and what was being done trying to save lives and give people hope. Every refugee camp was a dismal and hopeless place, and I always thought when I left that country, I don't ever want to see another one again. But, there's always the story, getting the story and sharing what you've seen and what you've experienced with others. That is what this business was about to me. Every single day was fresh for me.

CC: Didn't you try starting your own television station?

SA: I met these guys at NBC, and we started Channel 50 in Santa Rosa. In the end, it turned out to be heartbreak. We lost it after a year on the air. We were great TV people. We ran a fabulous little station. We did

some terrific stuff. We were local, local, local in the purest sense of the word, which is what we set out to do. But we were terrible businessmen. We passed on offers to merge because we wanted to maintain a majority percentage, and that just doesn't happen in the business world. It really changed my view of the world. I was depressed. It was a terrible time. We had 30 wonderful kids we taught television. We had to sit down one day and say good-bye. We brought them all along, including Jon Miller, the guy who does the Giants games. We gave him his first job. It was just heartbreaking after all that work and all the effort, money spent and lost. So, that came to a tragic end.

CC: Any other Atkinson business ventures?

SA: Of course. (laughs) We planted Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes in Sebastopol. I went to school and took some courses in viticulture. Then I got a call from Stanford, and they said they were starting up

a summer graduate program in journalism. Do you want to come teach? I said, “Absolutely, that sounds like fun.” It was wonderful. There were 20 primo kids from all over the country that came to Stanford for a two-and-a-half month program. We met twice a week. I put a text together on television journalism because there really was no text then. This was in 1973. I had a ball and in the process, it was like the drowning man going down for the last time and seeing his life flash past him. I had been going down for the last time after Channel 50. Luckily, my life flashed past me in this teaching role and I saw what a precious opportunity the profession afforded me... how I loved every single day. I’ll tell ya, when I came back to work, I came back with fervor and passion I never had before. The night in 1999 when I walked out the door of the studio for the last time, I was as excited and energized about the business as the first day I ever walked into a television station.

CC: Talk to us about what it’s like to be a television celebrity.

SA: In the early days, I didn’t know how to deal with it. I did not make the people in my personal life very happy. I have wonderful children and a fabulous family. But, I finally did grow up and do the right

thing and be a really good dad. And I am a good dad. I’m proud of that. At the time, I was so consumed by what I was doing that like a lot of young husbands, I screwed up. I didn’t think much of myself. I didn’t have much self-esteem. When people would talk to me about being this special person because I was doing this special thing, it just didn’t compute. It made me feel worse. After losing Channel 50 and the vineyard, and then putting my head straight, I haven’t missed a beat. I take it as a true compliment when somebody would say, “Wow, I watch you all the time,” or now it’s “We used to watch you and we really miss you.” I’ll say thank you. I deeply appreciate it. I don’t take it for granted.

CC: I’m sure you get recognized wherever you go.

SA: Yes, because I’m still on the air doing commercials. I just don’t have any pretense because of what I did.

CC: At one point you were anchoring the most popular station and you shifted to the rival...how did that happen?

SA: I’d been there for 18 years, and the pencil had grown sharper on the bottom line. We had a contract dispute and the opportunities for me to do more foreign assignments were petering out.



AFGHANISTAN.



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: EL SALVADOR; CAMBODIA; SOMALIA.

CC: You ended up in Afghanistan twice.

SA: There is a lot of sadness associated with my memories of Afghanistan. The concept of a Muslim state in its rawest form, as it is in Afghanistan, is to step back in time into the middle ages. And that's the way they want to preserve it. They didn't want to change it. When I first went there in 1981, they were putting up an incredible fight against the Soviets. When I went back in 1985, everything was devastated. All of the roads were gone, the irrigation systems were gone and the country was just blown to smithereens. If we could have done any kind of minimal Marshal Plan like we did in Germany after World War II in Afghanistan, I am convinced the crisis would not have spread to Iraq today. For one thing, we would have been seen as good guys who follow through on our convictions. Instead, our foreign policy lives day-to-day. We do not pay regard to the long term. I think about all those little kids I talked to, and showed how to throw a Frisbee and took snacks and little treats to, beautiful children, wonderful children who would follow you everywhere. Many became the ferocious Taliban because they could not grow up into a normal life of farming or transportation. There was no infrastructure left. In that vacuum, the jihadists took over and that was the beginning of the end.

CC: You've been to countries controlled by Marxist governments. Where are they going now in this post Soviet Union era?

SA: The end of the Soviet empire brought an end to the devilment going on in these countries. Now they face the age-old problems of deprivation and seeking opportunity that to some degree they might have had before the Communists took a foothold.

CC: What was the most dangerous moment in your years of traveling?

SA: In Afghanistan, we got chased into a cave by a Soviet gunship once. There were lots of harried times because we had to hide frequently. Even though we had our disguises, you could tell we were Westerners. I had to put mascara on my gray beard so I would look like an Afghan. Life expectancy is about 40 years and if you're 50 years old, you don't have a gray beard, you have a white beard, and you look like you're 70. In El Salvador we were robbed by some rebels. El Salvador was always dangerous. I was able to arrange a meeting with a leader inside Cambodia, and he was friendly, but as we drove away, they started firing mortar rounds at us. (laughs) Maybe they meant to use fireworks, I don't know.

Somalia was the worst. We got there not long after the American Black Hawk helicopter went down and the soldier was dragged dead through the street. There was no law. There still isn't. It's absolutely the most troubled nation on this earth. Nobody ever talks about it but there is nothing there—no law, no banking system, the tribes run the whole thing, and they constantly fight one another. Life is constantly violent and dangerous. Al Qaeda found this place a fertile ground for training new recruits. We had all kinds of incidents. We always went everywhere with two vehicles because if one hit a mine or got knocked out by a grenade, there was always another one to hopefully get us back to safety. In the back of each vehicle, we had four armed gunnies. One of our gunnies went for lunch and was shot and killed off the back of the truck. They wanted the truck; the sniper picked him off and stole the truck. Then the

“I’m thinking if one of those bullets comes through the window and kills me, I know the headline—Anchorman killed in Somalia combing his hair.”

tribes started fighting around our hotel. The fighting went on all night long. In the morning, I’m in the bathroom combing my hair and bullets were ricocheting off the outside walls. (laughs) I’m thinking if one of those bullets comes through the window and kills me, I know the headline—Anchorman killed in Somalia combing his hair.

The world is full of stories.

I was doing a standup on the border in Thailand, and all of a sudden there was a foray going on between the Cambodian resistance and the Vietnamese who occupied Cambodia at the time. It ran over into this refugee camp with two hundred thousand people living in it. All of a sudden everybody starts running past me. You could hear the bullets. I heard a bullet zip right behind my head, but we finished the standup.

CC: Iraq?

SA: Yes, we went to Iraq just before the Gulf War broke out. That struggle is with us for our lifetime. I worry about it for my grandkids. Whatever is going to bring that country together escapes me.

CC: Can we get back to Lyndon Johnson?

SA: Lyndon was fascinating. The trip I took with him around the world was a tough trip. We were maybe two days at a stretch in one place, and oftentimes it was day-to-day. He had this ability to sleep standing up. We were doing a news conference, and I was standing up against the wall and I looked over and his eyes were closed. I swear he was sleeping. He had no couth at all. We were in the Taj Mahal being

shown the throne room where the king put his princess in a coffin. The holy man was very emotional in describing the details. Everybody was hushed. He started doing this holy chant. Lyndon looks over at Lady Byrd and says, Lady Byrd, how about that—he then proceeded to do a Texas cattle call. (laughs) That was Lyndon—irrepressible in every sense of the word. I remember I got to ride one leg on Air Force One because there was a pool on each leg of the flight from wire, radio, TV and print, so I got to do the TV leg to India. Nehru was the Prime Minister. One of the Asian correspondents asked this very involved question about a foreign policy issue that Lyndon was going to discuss with the Prime Minister. Lyndon looks at him and says, don’t you worry about that for a minute son. I’ll be with him for about three minutes, and I’ll have my hands up his dress, and then I’ll have him by the balls.

CC: What is the future for television journalism?

SA: Well, it is ever widening, ever expanding, and ever changing. The largest body of opinion is that the Internet is the way people will choose to get their information. I’m not so sure. Maybe it’s because I’m an old fart, but sitting there watching television on my computer screen is not necessarily something I want to do. Unfortunately, our country is getting seriously dumbed down. It’s been a gradual process. We have no or little awareness of what is going on in the world, outside of Iraq. There are concerns we need to have about other places in the world, but we don’t have a good information source because no television station, network, or newspaper is going to do it. Magazine circulation is reducing as well.



LEFT TO RIGHT: REPUBLICAN GUARD: STAN WITH RUSH, TOM SULLIVAN AND FRIEND; STAN WITH FAMILY

The news business is reshaping itself constantly, and I am afraid in the process it is leaving the intellect of the nation behind.

CC: What do you think is the biggest story you ever covered?

SA: Probably the Manson story. The two that meant the most to me personally were Afghanistan and a trip I took to Vietnam with the raconteur and former assemblyman and chief of staff to Jerry Brown, B.T. Collins. It was his first trip back since he lost an arm and a leg in the war.

CC: The funniest thing that happened to you during your career?

SA: There are many. When Clinton came to our station to do a Town Hall, the Secret Service went through the news room and when they got to my desk, there was a lapel pin I had stuck up on the wall of my cubicle. Some vets gave it to me the day we dedicated the Vietnam Memorial. The pin said "F**k Jane Fonda." The Secret Service guy saw the pin and wanted to know who the hell sat at that desk. Our news director and my boss, said, "Oh, that's our house Republican, Stan Atkinson. He's the main anchorman, and he's going to be doing the interview with Clinton." So, Clinton arrives late, and I had to vamp for a while. He comes up on the stage. I start asking him questions but he's aloof. Now I had heard he was friendly, very outgoing and I'd seen him at work many times and thought this is going to

be fun. Well, it wasn't fun. It was uncomfortable. All of a sudden my microphone went dead, and we went to a commercial break. During the break, I said, you know, when I come back in my next life, I am going to carry a pencil and pad, and I am going to work for a newspaper. He started laughing. That broke the ice. We chatted, and from that point on sailed right through. It was comfortable when he realized I wasn't going to try sharpshooting him. (laughs) The Secret Service guy had told him everything.

CC: What are you doing these days?

SA: I am helping raise the last \$2 million to build a new safe house for WEAVE, an organization for women escaping domestic abuse. And a buddy and I started a project about four years ago to build a \$2 million baseball field for disabled youngsters. They want to play baseball, but have a hard time on existing fields because base paths are rutted out, and the kids can't navigate them safely. This new field has a flat, rubberized surface, and it's just really neat. It was a big project. Art Savage and the Sacramento River Cats really helped a lot.

I'm also active in the First Tee of Greater Sacramento, and with the Mercy Foundation. I've been on their board for 28 years.

CC: (laughs) You haven't lost any of your enthusiasm.

SA: That's not going to happen.