



Charles H. Green III

January 27, 1937 - February 12, 2019

Chuck Green

As an AP foreign correspondent in South America and chief of bureau in Mexico City, Caracas, Albany and Detroit from 1960-84, Chuck lived out his childhood fantasy and covered many of the most important stories and interesting people of his time.

Then after leaving AP, in the second half of an extraordinary career, he was instrumental in strengthening the quality of journalism throughout Central America. For 10 years the former AP newsman headed a multimillion-dollar project for Florida International University that was credited with helping bring stability to a turbulent region and, in the opinion of one government official, even helped an invigorated news media take a hand in restoring peace.

Without doubt, the personable Texas native brought to the bold project a wealth of experience built up over 24 eventful years of pride, achievement and sometimes grave danger with AP.

He reported on high-level diplomacy at the U.N. and scored a major beat during coverage of the Kennedy assassination.

Berlin, Beijing, London, Havana, Moscow and Mexico City are just some of the world capitols that bore his byline.

Old-fashioned shoe-leather reporting, rarely seen in these days of slashed budgets and staff cutbacks, brought Chuck's first great triumph. Still in his early 20s, he traveled several weeks with impoverished itinerant farm workers and authored an eye-opening series that sparked debate all the way to Washington and led to reform legislation in Congress.

Covering various wars and uprisings out of Mexico City, the tall Houston native also dodged bullets and mortar fire and nearly choked on tear gas. Once during the infamous soccer war between El Salvador and Honduras he was even strafed by a World War II vintage airplane.

He loved practically every minute, especially when living out his childhood dream as a

foreign correspondent. But while few journalists could have enjoyed their career as much as Chuck, fewer still matched the far-reaching impact he would later have on his critical but oft-despised calling.

“Chuck had great influence on journalism throughout Central America,” said Dr. J. Arthur Heise, who hired him to launch and manage the Central American Journalism Program.

“We were trying to build a school of journalism and one of the ideas was to focus on Latin America and Spanish-language journalism,” said Heise, professor and dean emeritus at Florida International.

“Chuck headed a team that spent six months down there trying to figure out what was needed. And on the basis of that report, we ended up getting a total of \$18 million over a 12-14 year period from USAID to put into action what Chuck and his team had found.” The program proved immensely popular in Central America, where formal education in journalism was sometimes scant.

“We had 7,000 participations in different seminars and workshops. Chuck managed it on a daily basis and did a magnificent job,” said Heise.

Chuck wound up leading the hands-on project from 1988-1998, a turbulent time when civil wars throughout Central America threatened to bring Castro-like communism to the region.

The project had been going full steam for several years when Costa Rica President Oscar Arias scored a diplomatic triumph and persuaded Central American leaders to sign the Esquipulas Peace agreement. With that as the framework, bloody civil wars were brought to an end.

“The information minister for President Arias said if it hadn’t been for what we had done training all these journalists (resulting in) better reporting about the negotiating process, it would have never happened,” said Heise.

“I think that’s a hell of a compliment about Chuck’s work. If it hadn’t been for Chuck Green’s vision, skill, leadership and management ability, the project would never have succeeded.”

Another crisis erupted in 1993 when Jorge Serrano Elías suspended the Constitution, dissolved Congress and declared himself president of Guatemala for life.

Elías also strong-armed newsrooms, including the country’s main newspaper, Siglo Veintiuno (21st Century), which was staffed by many of the project’s former students. Editors immediately changed the name to Siglo Catorce (14th Century) and made sure any story or picture tampered with by censors ran in black, flagging it for readers. As the Elías agents increased pressure, newsmen would stuff copies of the paper into their clothing and distribute them throughout Guatemala City.

Facing growing opposition among the people, Elias eventually fled. Constitutional government was restored. It was one of the project's proudest moments.

"I have a framed copy of page one of Siglo Catorce hanging over my desk," said Heise. Throughout this second phase of his life, Chuck was almost constantly on the go, serving as visiting lecturer at universities in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Ecuador, Peru, Paraguay, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Colombia.

There was hardly a skyline in South America that could have fooled him.

"He knew Central America inside-out," said Heise. "He spoke the language perfectly. He knew everybody in the business of journalism down there."

A young Chuck Green was having way too much fun as a writer, reporter and foreign correspondent to worry about weighty issues the future held.

He covered Houston's first regular-season Major League baseball game as well as the first \$100,000 Grand Prix race. AP's story on the last lunch counter sit-in before segregation was ended as official policy carried his byline.

He knew Arnold Palmer before there was Arnie's Army. He was in charge of preparing AP's coverage of the 1968 Mexico City Olympics.

He floated down jungle rivers on rickety canoes and bantered with prime ministers in luxurious government suites.

"It was what I always wanted to do," he once said.

Grave danger also proved an inescapable part of Chuck's dream job. One foggy night while snipers were shooting out of windows directly across the street, a Mexican army lieutenant forced him at gunpoint to stand against a wall and trained headlights on him.

When he got trapped between opposing armies during the Soccer War and the aging fighter plane opened fire, he and two other reporters hot-wired a car and "left town in a big hurry."

Fortunately, those attackers never landed so much as a punch on the tall Texan with the itch for adventure. But that drunk who thought the U.S. was on the wrong side of the Falkland Islands War, he did land a punch.

"I still loved it," Chuck once said with a big smile. "I decided as a very young man that being a foreign correspondent in Mexico City sounded very exotic and sexy."

He also volunteered for South Vietnam, but Wes Gallagher nixed that.

"He said I had too many kids."

Speaking in a rich, resonant voice and standing 6-foot-4, Chuck projected what the

military calls “command presence.” But when dealing with heads of state, beauty contest winners and practically everybody in between, a gift for good-natured repartee probably served him better.

“As a kid, I saw myself riding the Orient Express, wearing an English trench coat with Lauren Bacall at my side, solving mysteries and breaking big stories,” he once recalled.

Luscious young Cuban women who came on to him in Havana were the closest he got to Miss Bacall. To Chuck, they might as well have handed out business cards stating “I compromise Americans for Fidel.”

“I never left with any of them. Maybe that’s why the regime didn’t seem to like me,” he said.

“But I bought a trench coat in London. And I did ride on the Orient Express, as well as the Trans-Siberian Railway.”

An estimated 400 people died in anti-government riots in a Mexico City neighborhood known as Tlateloco the night in 1968 the lieutenant set him up to be shot. That was his scariest experience.

“My entire exposure lasted less than 10 minutes but it seemed like hours,” he recalled. “I didn’t realize it that night, but Tlateloco was a watershed event in my life.”

Also harrowing was that barbaric Cuban jail.

The trouble started when a Reuters cameraman in a taxi with Chuck ignored his shouted warning and began photographing a Cuban Army column, a very definite no-no. An Army captain immediately pulled them over and hauled them to jail. This was a time when Castro was “disappearing” Cubans and foreigners alike who offended him.

But after sweating out the longest seven hours of his life, Chuck walked free. He remembered an overwhelming sense of relief.

“Nobody knew where I was,” he recalled. “They only knew I was somewhere in Cuba. They could have ‘disappeared’ me and nobody would have had any idea where I was.”

For sheer shock value, nothing beats the time he realized with a start that the guy he’d been casually chatting with was one of the most powerful men on earth.

Accompanying the president of Mexico on a round-the-world tour, Chuck paused on his way to a meeting one morning to admire a huge wall mural. Quietly, a solitary man approached from behind. He began explaining the stunning artwork. Chuck listened with interest, offering a few comments but keeping his eyes on the mural. Then he turned toward the stranger and for just about the only time in his life felt tongue-tied.

“I’m Charles Green with The Associated Press,” he quickly said, reaching out his hand. “I know. I approved your visa,” said Chou En-Lai, the first premier of the People’s Republic Of China.

It was just the sort of adventure Chuck dreamed about when Dallas bureau chief Bill Barnard hired him for Houston in 1960, one year after he’d married college sweetheart Sylvia Golden. He soon transferred to San Antonio and at 24 became AP’s youngest full-fledged correspondent.

Hoping for a South American assignment, Chuck and Sylvia had been studying Spanish since college. They even hired immigrants from different Hispanic nations to “refine our ears” for different inflections of speech.

Finally proficient in his second language, he joined itinerant farm workers in 1963 on a working tour, living with them in their hovels and picking crops with them in the fields. His shocking series more or less shamed lawmakers into passing federal legislation mandating improved conditions.

A few months later Chuck walked the wooden floors of the Texas School Book Depository just hours after last rites were said over President John F. Kennedy. He inspected the sniper’s nest at the window overlooking Dealey Plaza. He saw the cheap rifle Lee Harvey Oswald used to grab a nation’s destiny by the throat and hurl it down a different path.

“All I had to do was tell them I was with the press, and I could go anywhere I wanted,” he said. “Shows how much things have changed. Today you couldn’t even get in the building, or even close.”

Minutes after Jack Ruby shot Oswald in the garage of the Dallas police station, Chuck rushed to Parkland Hospital.

He found the room where doctors would soon give an update and carefully located the nearest pay phone. Then he dialed up the Dallas bureau and found a kid willing to stand there and keep the line open for \$5.

A short time later, a doctor gave the startling news to Chuck and a reporter for UPI: Oswald died.

“The UPI guy and I took off running for the phone. He didn’t know exactly where it was and he didn’t have his coins out,” Chuck said. “As we rounded a corner, I ran him into the wall and he tore the pocket off my coat. I got to the phone and gave the dictation to Bob Johnson.”

Oswald’s death was flashed around the world while the competition was still digging for pocket change. Thanks to resourcefulness, hustle and the sacrifice of a perfectly good suit coat, the young reporter from San Antonio had delivered a major news beat, AP’s only one throughout the entire history-packed week.

He and Sylvia and three small kids were soon headed for New York and a job on the

World desk. Two years after that, they were house-hunting in Mexico City, the assignment they'd hoped for all along.

Of course, there were plenty of happy experiences as well. Covering the Miss Universe Pageant and interviewing the winner, a striking and flirty Miss Finland, was fun. So was hosting a luncheon in his home for the president of Mexico. Talk about your neighborhood status taking off like a rocket!

Even as the years crept up, Chuck's yen for travel and discovery burned bright. He and his beloved Sylvia climbed aboard motorcycles on the southern tip of Florida and rode north to the Canadian border, west to Oregon, south through California to the Grand Canyon, then back east and home.

Altogether, they traveled about 6,000 miles. They were in their late 60s.

Devoutly religious, Chuck and Sylvia were both ordained ministers in the interdenominational church Voice for Jesus. After retiring to North Carolina, they were chaplains as well as active fire fighters in their volunteer fire department.

"Chuck is proud of and relished all he did in his career," Sylvia said a short time ago. "But he is absolutely the proudest and the most grateful for the love and support of his friends and family that he has had through the years. That is a gift from God!"

The family includes Sylvia, his devoted wife of nearly 60 years, daughter Catherine Huebner (Martin), Ypsilanti, Mich., and sons Dr. M. Sean Green (Dr. Amy Greenstadt Green), Portland, Ore., Timothy Green (Michele), Ypsilanti, and Charles H. Green (Elizabeth), Tacoma, Wash., sister Bettye Green Peterson (Pete), Willis, Tex., six grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

As finally health did go into decline, Chuck's children urged him to write down for them his thoughts on a life well lived to the fullest.

"I achieved the goal," he wrote. "It seemed then to take a very long time. But, now, through the mirror of more than seven decades, it happened in a flash. Reality turned out to be less romantic than a ride on the Orient Express but to me it was still the best job in the world."

In lieu of flowers: Donations may be sent to The Associated Press Sally Jacobsen Scholarship for Third World Journalists at www.apme.com/donations or Intercessors for America at www.infapray.org

A memorial service for immediate family and friends will be held Feb. 22, 2019.