



One of three prizes awarded each year in memory of Kurt Schork is dedicated to the work of 'news fixers.' In this article written especially for the Kurt Schork Memorial Fund, The Times' Senior Foreign Correspondent Anthony Loyd - who first met Kurt in Sarajevo in 1993 - reflects on the work of fixers and their vital role in news gathering.

By Anthony Loyd

When the wounded fighter noticed a New Zealand TV crew filming a group of Bosnian children playing in garbage at the height of the Sarajevo siege, the sight drove him wild.

It was early 1993. The war was in its second year. Neven already had two gunshot injuries and a knife wound from fighting on the front alongside Bosnian government troops, as well as a reputation for being a hothead.

“Motherfuckers! You come to film our kids playing in rubbish in a city where we had hot water systems a thousand years ago, at a time when for your ancestors a bath was a once-in-a-lifetime experience,” he shouted at them. “If you’re so brave, why don’t you go film on the frontline?”

Taken aback, the crew claimed they were unable to find anyone to take them to the front.

“I’m your man,” replied Neven, never slow to take a chance. They hired him on the spot.

In this way Neven became a ‘fixer’, though it was several more months before he even heard the term. By the time the war was over the former fighter was among the most widely known fixers in the city, his reputation – or notoriety depending on which way you look at it – hanging not only on his connections to the military in the Bosnian capital, but also on his personal knowledge of the Bosnian underworld and his propensity for wild story telling.

That reputation became enshrined after the war, when Neven became the anti-hero whose own story is the focus of Joe Sacco’s cult non-fictional book ‘The Fixer’.

The Fixer is in fact a comic. Sacco, an American-Maltese artist and journalist, eschews the pretension of the term ‘graphic novel’ and prefers to describe his work in wars, which includes ‘Palestine’ and ‘Safe Area Gorazde’, as comic journalism.

Nevertheless, the book affords a rich, alternative portrayal of a series of figures during the Bosnian war, more nuanced in imagery than mere words could achieve, as described to Sacco by Neven across the friendship between the two men, which began when the artist chanced across Neven in the foyer of Sarajevo’s Holiday Inn in 1995 as the war drew to its close.

Though many of its main characters are gangland figures, the relationship between Neven and Sacco is the story’s central narrative through which gangsters’ stories are woven, so that more than merely being another account of war, in essence the book charts the play between

the complex personal and professional needs that lie at the heart of every fixer-client symbiosis.

Some of the story was already familiar to me, long before *The Fixer* was first published in 2003. The prologue to the tale which shows Sacco, a solitary and untested figure, walking alone through the brooding Sarajevo streets to the Holiday Inn without a business card or money in his pocket, is a scene I know only too well.

I took a similar route in February 1993 as a wannabe freelancer, sprinting across Sniper's Alley in that earlier stage of the war, looking for advice from a journalist I had been told to see in the hotel. Just as he observed Sacco's vulnerable solitude when he entered the hotel foyer, Neven noticed my aura of clueless innocence and engaged me in conversation as he sat drinking coffee and smoking in the very same place. It was there that I first heard Neven's tales of fighting and killing in Sarajevo's hills and streets, of his wounds and gambling debts, of his gangster commander, and of his exploits destroying Serb tanks that even I, in my naivety, doubted may be true.

It was in the Holiday Inn too, the tawdry, emblematic hub of the Sarajevo press corps, that I first met with the journalist whom I had been recommended to see, knocking nervously on his room door with much to ask and nothing to offer.

"Come in," a voice called distractedly. I opened the door. At the end of the room a compact, intense man sat behind a table tapping furiously at a laptop. He peered up at me curiously through round glasses.

"Er..." I began by way of introduction. In this way I met Kurt Schork. It was quite a moment. Twenty-nine years later I still wear a locket of his ashes around my neck.

Long after Sacco's own meeting with Neven in the Holiday Inn, the term 'fixer' is the subject of increasing challenge within the journalistic profession, facing a variety of charges ranging from clumsiness, simplification, and undervaluation, through to the more specious claim that the term is somehow colonialist.

Some of this debate is already outdated, as much of the media has adapted with time to recognise the varying roles and skill sets of the local employees hired by reporters in war zones, crediting them with 'additional reporting', or as researchers or producers. Others described as fixers remain proud of the term and are keen to be known purely for their work as enablers, rather than having any deeper involvement with a profession that they do not necessarily admire. Some, including a few highly skilled fixers, wish to be linked to journalism only by business transaction.

Moreover, there is usually a clear set of definitions marking the progressive stages of an individual who might be hired initially just for their translation skills, who may later become a fixer with a wider array of tasks and contacts on which reporters rely, some of whom then become journalists themselves.

For others, however, the word fixer is seen as outdated and crass, like the way 'hack' and 'snapper', both terms with negative connotations, came to be seen as derogatory despite once being widely used to describe journalists and photographers. Though both these words remain in play as casual slang within the profession, their use is jarring and in decline.

As a blast of relief from the headiness of this semantic debate, Neven's tale is worthy of revisiting as a story not just of war and its myriad ambiguities, but of a man whose own experience of violence, business, and the media is told with a delicious and unswerving directness.

"I never minded the term 'fixer'," Neven told me, laughing, when I called him in Paris last month. "I had a lot of fun fixing and that was just what I did: I fixed things. I did everything for reporters, I got them whatever it was they wanted or wherever they wanted to go."

Neven had already had his own journalist experience before the war, working for 'Youth Radio' in Sarajevo long before Yugoslavia fell apart. He told me that he never confused that experience with his job as a fixer.

"I had the journalist experience before the war," he added. "I knew how it worked. I didn't want to do it again in the war. I liked fixing. Sure, the word has other connotations, both criminal and political, but I never minded it."

Before he ever became known as a fixer, he had also been a soldier in the Yugoslav army; a gangster in Marseilles; and then a fighter on the Sarajevo frontline serving under Ismet Bajramovic, aka 'Celo', one of the most infamous gang leaders of the war. So, if Neven lacks a little primness, it should come as no surprise. His story is replete with all the violence, bad-assery, casual drug-taking and heavy boozing that accompanied the war, its great adventures, fleeting pleasures and many miseries.

Sacco is equally clear eyed in his own use of the word fixer.

"Neven was totally comfortable with the word," he told me on the phone the other day when we discussed the term. "I've worked in many other places in the world where I would describe someone I worked with as a guide, or maybe as a local journalist, or just a translator. It can be different in different scenarios. But in Neven's case he was a fixer. The word was really appropriate. He told me who it was I needed to see or speak to or where to go, and he fixed it."

In the present era, amid a very real fight not just for facts but for the understanding of truth itself, it is increasingly unfashionable for journalists or their local staff to make any open admission of the adventurism, the vices and ego that so often lies at the core of their motivation: flaws that were once almost celebrated within the profession as if the twin qualities to excellence.

With this in mind, the moral ambiguities and complexities so wonderfully inked by Sacco in the world of *The Fixer* may riff uncomfortably with a newer generation of reporters. Personal truths might be the casualties of this redefinition.

For all his flaws, for all the men he shot, weed he smoked, tanks he may or may not have blown up, tales he told, stories he helped break and fixing he did – all of which are wreathed forever in inky glory in the *Fixer* - one thing is for sure: Neven has never tried to deny being the man Sacco described. His sense of truth endures.

"I like that Joe represented the real me," he said to me, "and not some super cool guy who did no wrong. He portrayed me as a normal man in that war, with good and bad sides. He showed me as I am, a real human being."