



# ARISKY CALLING

Paralysed from the shoulders down after an accident in Sri Lanka, Reuters' Peter Apps reflects on the calling that took him there and asks if it was all really worth it.

Peter Apps overlooks the Indian Ocean south of Oman from the ocean liner RMS Queen Mary 2 on January 2, 2013. He took the liner to Dubai through the pirate waters of the Gulf of Aden [Eva Tomsic]



Words by  
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When Britain's journalists gathered in November 2010 to commemorate their losses of the century so far, it felt like they had put me somewhere between the living and the dead.

The great and good of London's media scene filled the pews of St Bride's, Christopher Wren's 17th century church mere yards from Fleet Street. I was parked at one end by the altar commemorating those killed in the field. Much of it, I suspect, was a matter of practicality – it was one of the few places my wheelchair could go. But it also felt irritatingly appropriate.

In September 2006, I was a Reuters reporter based in Sri Lanka, as it was being sucked back into civil war.

One morning, as I was heading out on the eastern front to report on stories about child soldiers and refugees, the minibus I was riding in hit a tractor. I was thrown forward, shattering my third, fourth and fifth vertebrae and paralysing me from the shoulders down.

When I woke up, my initial thought was that I was lying on a dead body. Seconds later, I realised that the body beneath me that I could not feel was wearing my clothes. After that, it didn't take long to work out what had happened.

And then, I am afraid, I wanted to die.  
I was 25.

I'd always known that journalism could be a risky calling. When I reported to Reuters for a job interview in February 2003, the first thing I saw on the front desk was the memorial book of the dead. Outside the interview room, journalists were collecting equipment for Iraq. Two of our staff would die there in the seven months between my interview and my first day as a graduate trainee.

Like my colleagues, I had no intention of dying and we did everything we could to keep the dangers down. When we identified risks, we worked to minimise them.

Most news organisations – including Reuters, now Thomson Reuters after a merger – genuinely take safety extremely seriously. And yet when I turned up for the job interview, there were already 21 names in that book of the dead, starting with 'Frank Roberts: dysentery, Sudan, 1885'.

Another 10, almost all local staff, have been added in the 11 years since, most recently Sabah al-Bazee in Iraq in 2011.

The simple truth is that having journalists, local or international, out in conflict zones and less developed countries brings with it risks. They can be reduced, even minimised, but never removed.

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Reuters correspondent Peter Apps aboard a Sri Lankan navy assault boat on the last day of the battle of Muttur, on August 4, 2006

[Reuters/Anuruddha Lokuhapuarachichi]



The prospect of a disability on this scale, however, had never occurred to me. I knew no shortage of other journalists who had been hurt. Frank Gardner at the BBC, his back broken by al-Qaeda bullets in Saudi Arabia; Marie Colvin, her eye lost in a firefight; Reuters' own Samia Nakhoul, wounded by a shell at the fall of Baghdad.

But the sudden and apparently permanent loss of use of all four limbs? A life and future of near total dependence, perhaps unable even to end it? As far as I knew, I was the only journalist ever hurt like that to survive.

As far as I know, I still am.

And yes, there are still times on dark, sleepless nights when I ask myself whether it was worth it.





As a Reuters correspondent based in Sri Lanka, on September 5, 2006, Apps was heading out on the eastern front to report on stories when the minibus he was riding in hit a tractor [Reuters/Budhikka Weerasinghe]



## Gradually back to work

As soon as I was flown home to the UK, some things became very clear. If I didn't die or get better – and the prospect of either seemed to be diminishing by the week – no one knew what to do with me.

My career, the general assumption went, was likely finished – and along with it, probably much of the rest of my life.

It wasn't a narrative I liked. I felt I had just found something worthwhile to do that I was good at, and it was suddenly being dragged away from me.

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Peters Apps is lifted into a helicopter after the crash that left him paralysed from the shoulders down [Reuters/Budhikka Weerasinghe]



On one occasion, an exclusive story on extrajudicial government-linked killings seemed to actually prompt them to fall off. Reports of intransigence by both the government and Tamil Tiger rebels sometimes pushed forward genuine diplomacy. And even without that, bearing witness and recording events somehow felt important and right.

Now, it was beginning to look as if I might spend the rest of my life in my parents' sitting room.

Intellectually, I knew I had been lucky. My local colleagues had been there to lift me from the vehicle, call for help, perhaps save my life.

My home was Britain, with the resources to care for me and where I had the right to receive state-funded support. The surgeon in Colombo had made clear what fate awaited those with a similar injury left there: permanent hospitalisation, and an early lingering death.





Reuters political risk correspondent Peter Apps prepares for an interview with CNBC from Washington DC in May 2012 [Eva Tomsic]



After years of work, voice recognition software had finally reached the stage where it was genuinely usable. UK law made me difficult to pension off if I dug my heels in. Ultimately, it would also help me to win a measure of compensation that would give me much more freedom.

Nine months after the injury and a day after leaving hospital, I was wheeled up to my new desk in London's Canary Wharf. Barely three months after that I was travelling through Norway and Sweden. Early the following year, I was hoisted into a toboggan-like ski cart and speeding down the Swedish mountainside with – I assumed – someone who knew what they were doing steering from behind. Gradually, life got better.

Last year, I was appointed our global defence correspondent. Of the 19 countries I have reported from, over half have been since the injury.



In January 2013, I took the liner Queen Mary 2 to Dubai through the pirate waters of the Gulf of Aden – although the risk of attack was already low and falling, and any macho pretense of serious danger was somewhat undermined by 2,500 largely octogenarian passengers enjoying their holiday.

After a couple of relationships and some other encounters, I'm also happy to report that that side of life does not seem as out of reach as initially feared.

### **A complicated condition**

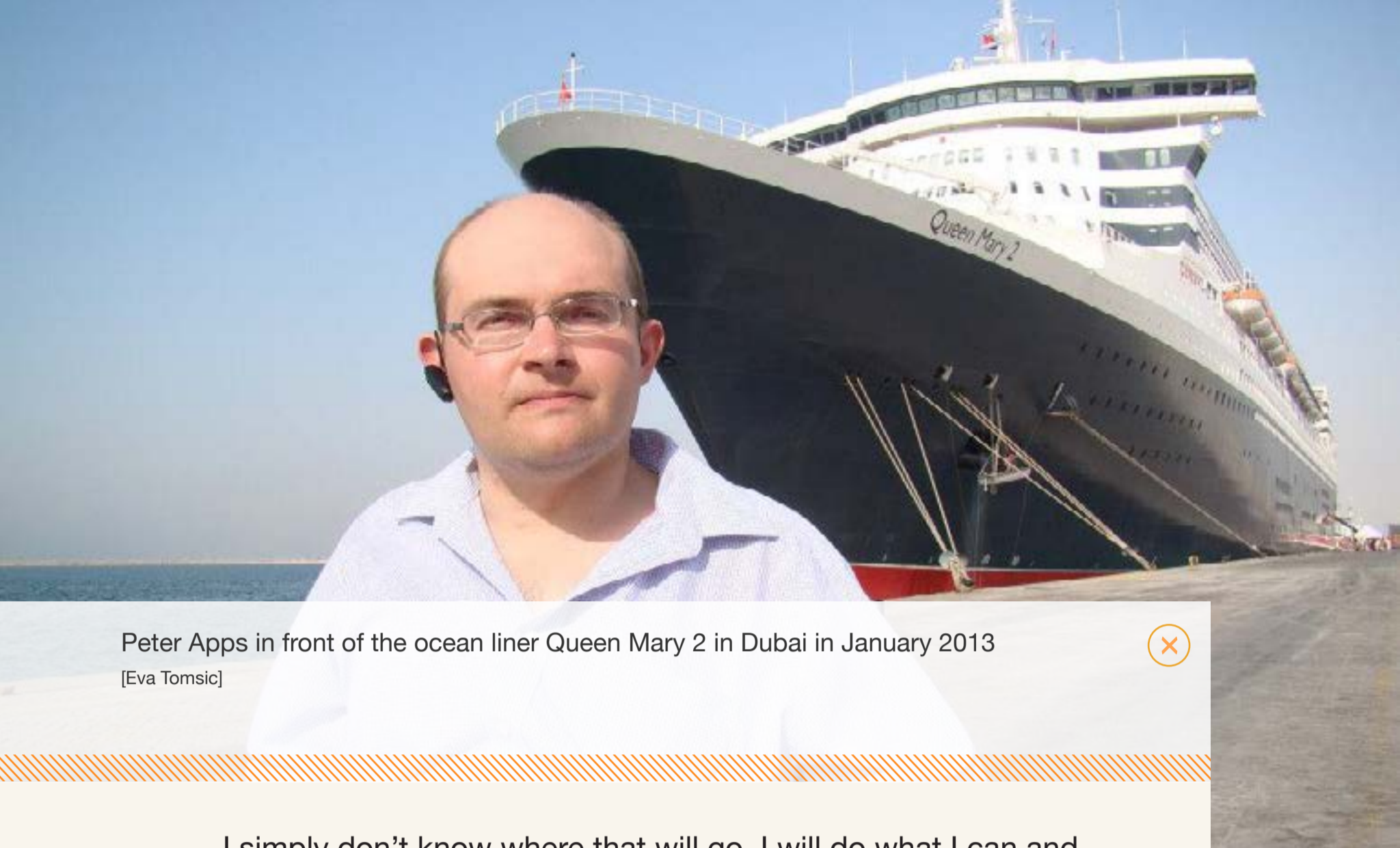
Whether or not this is a condition worse than death, I do not know. What I do know after seven-and-a-half years is that it is a lot more complicated.

I live permanently with a rotating set of two full-time carers who look after me at home, accompany me to work and must be accommodated when I travel. I need them to feed and wash me, along with a frankly intrusive collection of other tasks.

For sure, I've learned to adapt to my physical situation. But with an injury like this, physical situations change.

In the last year or so, I've been pleasantly surprised to see what had been tiny flickers in my arm muscles strengthen sharply. After increasing exercise and physiotherapy, I now have a decent range of movement and motion in my left arm, even if my hands remain rather less useful.





Peter Apps in front of the ocean liner Queen Mary 2 in Dubai in January 2013

[Eva Tomsic]



I simply don't know where that will go. I will do what I can and hope I don't burn out joints and muscles inactive for more than half of my adult life.

I certainly don't expect a miraculous complete recovery and I would appreciate not receiving several dozen emails telling me it is coming.

Not all change is for the best. Man was not designed to sit on his tailbone in a wheelchair forever. Over the last seven months, I've had a range of issues that have seen me spending far too long in bed and too little time in the wheelchair.

I can work from bed. I can prioritise meetings. I can get people to come to me. But after such an active lifestyle, it has been phenomenally tough.

Will that get better? Perhaps, probably, I don't really know. I certainly hope so.



But even if it does, the gradual but accelerated decline from ageing with spinal cord injury is rarely a pleasant thing.

I simply don't know how many active years or decades I might have ahead of me, and the potential range is very broad. At 32, I'm not sure I've quite acquired the maturity to deal with that.

### **Wrong place, wrong time**


So was it worth it? We always say no story is worth a life, but that is simply not the way these things work.

I certainly can't imagine any individual story being worth dying for. In any case, getting killed or seriously injured rarely gets a story told better.

All breaking my neck achieved was that the stories I was most hoping to tell were barely covered for months. As the war worsened, my absence merely depleted the already meagre Colombo press corps further.

In my experience, there is nothing particularly heroic about most of the deaths or injuries – if anything, they almost invariably appear tragically squalid and pointless, often down largely to bad luck.

With a handful of exceptions, it is not the story that kills you. It's the being there at all.



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If anything, I think newswire journalists based permanently in risky countries take far fewer risks than those who fly in and out for only a few days or weeks. If you know you might have several more years to survive, you act accordingly. But you can't stay locked inside forever. Sometimes you have to get out.

Every decision about where to go and what to do is simply about judging risk. You work with advice from experienced colleagues – particularly local – and perhaps professional security advisers.

In my extremely limited experience of firefights, they are best avoided and rarely add much to the understanding of a conflict. On your belt buckle on the floor, you can rarely if ever tell what is going on.

The best stories and insights I found were in hospitals and refugee camps where there was time to talk.

But inevitably, you only discover too late that you are in the wrong place at the wrong time.

In my case, it wasn't even the conflict directly that did for me. It has long been established, of course, that road accidents, bad driving and poorly maintained vehicles are more common in war zones.

Although, without the war, it seems unlikely that a military helicopter would have been armed and crewed to get me swiftly to hospital.



Peter Apps on temporary bed rest in his London apartment in February 2014 [Eva Tomsic]



## It means risks

Is it still worth getting people in such places to run such risks? As I still struggle to gauge the damage this injury has done – and will yet do – to my life, I'm not sure I have a personal answer.

At that memorial service in St Bride's, I watched from the side as legendary *Sunday Times* journalist Marie Colvin gave the keynote address. She looked spectacular, dressed in black with a blood red poppy and rakish eye patch.

Afterwards, she rather sweetly said she had worried about what I thought. I said I thought it good. In reality I remember thinking it perhaps a little overly bombastic – and that some of the risks she had run in her career I would certainly not have taken.


But she certainly believed – and lived – it. She was, of course, dead just over a year later, killed in the opening months of the siege of Homs.



“Covering a war means going to places torn apart by chaos and destruction and death and trying to do this,” she said. “It means trying to find the truth .... And yes, it means taking risks.”

In recent years, there is no doubt that journalists have become targets. And other ways of doing the job have also emerged. My personal hero of the Syria war, with apologies to Marie, is Eliot Higgins, a blogger and stay-at-home father in Leicester. Working through large numbers of social media video clips at phenomenal speed to identify conventional and chemical weapons alike, he has brought at least as much understanding to the war as anyone else.

And yet, sometimes there is no substitute for hearing from someone there. Local journalists will always feel compelled to keep working just as outsiders are to join them. It’s a human urge, a human need and ultimately, probably, a good thing. For myself, what I thought I had achieved in my year in Sri Lanka seems rather less impressive now. Anyone who benefited from any brief dip I might have influenced in extrajudicial killings would have had to get out fast to avoid the conflict that followed.



“Either you give up or you step up. If the latter is not possible, then Switzerland and its assisted suicide laws are only 10 hours away by train.”

No one knows for sure how many really died at its end. Tens of thousands of people at least found themselves trapped on a tiny stretch of beach as government and rebels fought their final battle. It makes my attempts to chronicle the earlier stages feel somewhat pointless.

Still, if the years in front of me truly are set to be more difficult than those behind, I suspect the same fundamentals are true. Either you give up or you step up. If the latter is not possible, then Switzerland and its assisted suicide laws are only 10 hours away by train. It's been a while since I checked the details.

As flying has become increasingly tough, in May I set sail once again by ship for the US and a stay in Washington DC. Beyond that, I'm still pulling together my plans.

We'll just have to see.

Peter Apps is Reuters' global defence correspondent.