

# A photographic humanitarian activist

**Emily Hough** speaks to Giles Duley, a documentary photographer and photojournalist who is working on a project to document the lasting effects of war around the world, years after the fighting has ended

**G**iles Duley thinks of himself as a storyteller and his photos are a form of activism: “I use other people’s stories to get important issues in front of policymakers, doctors – those people who can actually bring about change.” He tells me that it is important to get politicians in whatever country, whichever theatre of conflict, to sit and listen to the stories of people from their country. “They listen to business, they listen to polls, and consultants. But how often do they listen to the people of the countries who are directly affected – often negatively – by the results of their policies?”

Duley spent the first ten years of his career as a fashion and music photographer before taking a five-year hiatus and becoming a care worker, looking after a young man with autism and a man with multiple sclerosis. “The two experiences – photography and care work – combined to create the photographer I am today,” he says.

Photography is a conversation, a really good photograph is never taken: it is always given, he explains: “On more than one occasion I have spent a day with somebody and walked away without taking a photograph because it didn’t feel right. Sometimes I go back, sometimes I don’t.

“In this kind of work you have to be responsible; these are people in very vulnerable situations or who have gone through extremely traumatic events. Often, they are children, people with disabilities or learning difficulties. Pointing a camera in someone’s face is a very intrusive act, so it is something I only do when I have spent time with them and it feels appropriate.”

In 2012 Duley took photos of civilians injured by both sides of the Afghanistan conflict: “This is the only set of photos where I think I completed my job.” The pictures were published in *The Observer*, but were also exhibited in the Members’ Gallery in the British Houses of Parliament. “This is a private area, where MPs go before they vote, so I knew that they would see the images.”

Duley is clear that he isn’t going to take a photograph that will change the world, but it is about reaching individuals, motivating them to effect change. He recently received a letter from a young man in Australia who wrote to tell him about his really difficult final year at school, when it seemed his problems would stop him fulfilling his dream of becoming a trauma surgeon. “He worked incredibly hard, got through his problems, and told me he was in the top one per cent of his class at Brisbane Medical School,” he says.

“I wasn’t quite sure why he was telling me this, but at the end of the letter he thanked me because every day when he

*Giles Duley, pictured here in a self-portrait, is a photojournalist. In 2011, while on patrol with the 75th Cavalry Regiment, United States Army in Afghanistan, Duley stepped on an IED and was severely injured, losing both legs and an arm. Duley says of his work: “For me, a story doesn’t finish because I’ve taken a photograph and it gets published. I’ve still been campaigning for those people years later to try to find ways to support them.” Visit [www.gilesduley.com](http://www.gilesduley.com) to see his work (one of his photographs also appears on page 54)*

Giles Duley



was struggling at school, he would look at a photograph I took in Afghanistan and this inspired him to carry on.”

Duley is currently working on *The Legacy of War*, documenting the long-term impact of conflict on communities around the world. The project is supported by a number of NGOs, including UNHCR, War Child and MAG International, and will explore the issues of long-term refugees, PTSD, disability, sexual violence, Agent Orange, UXO and landmines and rehabilitation of child soldiers.

This is more than just a photographic project: Duley is collaborating with poets and musicians; he envisions exhibitions around the world, a book and an educational element, taking *The Legacy of War* into schools.

“It is a bit of a monster,” he laughs. “Crowd funding was a great starting point and I’ve already travelled to Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Gaza and Lebanon. I’ve carried out a lot of research into the other places I will go to.”

Yet this is an onerous task. “It is hard work for me, missing my legs and arm. The only reason I keep on doing it every day is because of anger about people’s situations and empathy for what they are going through.

“It is a duty, an opportunity to make a small difference, whatever it might be, so I have to keep going.”

