

The Legend of Grantville Whithers

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Last week, while covering the visit of President Clinton to London, Newsweek photographer Wally McNammee and I found ourselves parked in a pool bus in front of the Churchill Hotel in Mayfair.

We both found ourselves saying the same thing.."do you remember Grantville Whither's last appearance ?"

As we all know, news photographers spend lots of time waiting for their next picture. No matter

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how big the story, those long hours of tedium often lead to mischief. The White House Press Corps can be the naughtiest of the lot. For the past two decades, one of the legends of the group has been Grantville Withers.

Sir Grantville Withers is one of the most distinguished photographers in the world. A member and former President of the British Royal Photographic Society, he has been an intimate of Kings, Queens, Prime Ministers, and Presidents. His access to the rich and powerful is unsurpassed.

Grantville Withers also does not exist.

Nobody knows for sure when he first appeared on the scene of major events around the world, but we suspect he may have been the concoction of photographer Robert Doherty, until recently the Washington Photo bureau chief for the Associated Press. Created out of boredom, Lord Withers was designed to test the mettle of young photographers on the first foreign Presidential travels.

At least one of his targets quit the business following his encounters with Withers.

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Over time, Doherty found accomplices in spinning his web, including McNammee, and I must admit, me.

In 1982, Nancy Reagan journeyed to England for the Royal Wedding of Diana and Charles. In her press corps were Doherty, McNammee and me. Also making his first overseas trip was a young United Press International photographer, Chaz Cancellare.

Chaz was the nephew of famous UPI White House photographer Frank Cancellare, and had only been covering the White House for a few months.

Chaz found himself tossing and turning on his first night in London. Shortly after dawn his bedside phone at the Churchill Hotel rang. The groggy Chaz picked it up to hear the following lucid tones of a British gentleman.:

"Mr. Cancellare..Whithers here ! Sir Grantville Whithers

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"I am a great admirer of your late Uncle Frank Cancellare. We were comrades in the press pool during the war, and his kindnesses to me , I must say I have never forgotten. I wonder if it would be possible for the two of us to meet for a bit of tea this morning ? I am very near your hotel, and if you could possibly be so kind as to meet me down in your coffee shop in the next half hour, and I would be most grateful."

Chaz stumbled out of bed, and threw on his clothes and made his way to the coffee shop. For the next hour he sat at a table waiting for his visitor. Finally, he went to the cash register to inquire if anyone knew of Whithers, and the waitress handed him a note that read, "I'm frightfully sorry, but I have been detained, but I will try calling you in the next few hours."

Chaz returned to his room, where he sat by the phone until finally it was time to join the pool for the first photos of the day.

By late that night, jet-lagged, Chaz went to bed, but no sooner had dozed off than the phone rang again.

"Mr. Cancellare, Whithers, here, I must offer you the most abject apologies, but Lady Diana required my presence almost all day, and I'm just now free. I know you must be exhausted, but if you will be so kind as to meet me in the bar, I would like to make you a proposition".

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Chaz again got dressed and stumbled into the lobby bar. It was deserted. He sat down at the bar to wait. In a few minutes the bartender handed him the phone.

"Mr. Cancellare, Whithers here again. I'm just so dreadfully sorry for my rude behavior, but I was called at the last minute by the Palace, and had to scurry off."

By this time, Chaz was steaming and he was about to say so, when Whithers continued.

"Mr. Cancellare, as I told you this morning, I have always felt an obligation to your wonderful uncle, and perhaps, with your indulgence, I have a way to repay my obligation. I must request your utmost discretion on this matter for reasons which I will soon make clear."

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By now, Chaz didn't know what to think, as Whithers continued, " as you may know, as a past official of the Royal Photographic Society, I have been fortunate over the years to obtain the patronage of the Palace. As a consequence, I have been privileged to be allowed to put a remotely operated camera in the Royal Coach as Lady Diana and Prince Charles ride to the Palace from the wedding ceremony. My purpose of course, is to be able to record the event not for commercial purposes, but as my wedding gift to the Princess.

However, there is no reason why I could not allow your organization to process the film, and use the photographs, with the explicit understanding that you may never reveal how you obtained the photographs. You may claim all credit for them, provided that you return the original negatives to me later in the day. Of course, if anyone should discover that such a camera exists, the repercussions would be dreadful.

So, Mr. Cancellare, does this offer sound interesting to you ?"

Chaz's head was now spinning.."oh my God, the most important exclusive of all time !! And it can be MINE ! "

As Chaz burbled how pleased he would be, Whithers concluded "Magnificent, Mr. Cancellare, your Uncle would have been very proud."

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At this point in our story, accomplices were enlisted. The first was Charlie McCarty who was then in charge of UPI pictures in Europe. Charlie was filled in on the Withers caper, so he would be prepared for the next developments.

After another sleepless night, Chaz called the London UPI bureau to tell them about the good fortune that had befallen him.

McCarty, who took the call, was suitably impressed, but he warned Cancellare, "Don't let this one fall through your fingers, kid!"

For the next few days, Cancellare was, to say the least, distracted.

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Another accomplice who was drafted was Brenda Draper, the London picture editor for TIME magazine. Brenda became Grantville Whither's loyal secretary, who was now calling Cancellare regularly with updates on his movements, and why it was that Whithers kept missing appointments with him, due to the pressures of conferring with the Royals in their country estates.

As the wedding day approached Cancellare was becoming frantic. No matter how hard he tried, he kept missing his appointments with Whithers. He would pace back and forth in his hotel room, not going out for meals, as he began to see his future slipping through his hands.

In desperation, he called the UPI bureau, and this time reached Ted Majeski, the pictures managing editor. Majeski had not been alerted to the scam. Chaz blurted out that no matter how hard he had tried, he had been unable to get back to Whithers to make the final arrangements.

Majeski suspected that another organization had somehow gotten wind of the big exclusive, and they had made a better offer. At this point afraid that UPI would be scooped he called the Palace press secretary to demand access to Whither's photographs.

Now, Scotland Yard was called in to the case. Who was Grantville Withers, and how he had he managed to infiltrate the Royal coach? Calls went out from Scotland Yard to all news

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organizations trying to find out who this Grantville Withers was dealing with.

I got a panicked call from Brenda Draper, who had been called into the office of TIME bureau chief Bonnie Angelo, to find out what she knew about this plot. Her instructions were if possible to get the exclusives for TIME, and if that couldn't be done to expose Withers.

Now with the Royals, Scotland Yard, and all news organizations frantically trying to find Withers, and Chaz Cancellare near nervous exhaustion. Withers decided to disappear.

He hasn't been seen since, but you never can tell, he might surface again one of these days.

Chaz Cancellare eventually went on to law school, and today he is an attorney, specializing in fraud cases.

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<http://www.zonezero.com/magazine/articles/halstead/dhalstead.html>