

## Life behind the lens: A cameraman describes the scramble to Seoul when news breaks

Tom Pawson, Camera Operator. September 9, 2017

“Can you go to Seoul?”

“F--- yeah I can!”

That’s how it started. One minute 9NEWS reporter Tim Arvier and I were on a stakeout near Ipswich, the next we were both racing off in our separate cars to get organised for a breaking news trip to South Korea.

My first phone call was to my wife, to tell her I wouldn’t be home this afternoon but that I was coming to pack a bag. I couldn’t get through to her so I called the chief of staff [COS], to tell him I was coming back to the office to pack my camera and lighting gear and to pick up a Dejero (a piece of technology that allows me to send live vision and audio back to the studio). While I was on the phone with my COS I had my deputy news director, Tony Fabris, on call waiting, so I took his call. Fab told me the flight was booked for 10.50am, it was 7.30am.

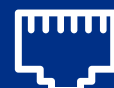
“Will you make it?”

“I’m stuck in morning traffic, but I’ll absolutely make it.”

Crunch time. I had to decide whether to head home and pack or go straight to work. I made a decision. I called my wife again and asked her to pack my bag, my passport and meet me at the airport. She is always supportive and was happy to rush to help. Next I rang my COS again to see if there were any cameramen available that could help me by bringing the Dejero and its Pelican case of accessories, an empty Pelican case and a tripod bag to the airport. A Pelican case has a hard outer shell and foam on the inside, and is great for protecting camera, audio and lighting equipment. Camera crews use these cases regularly.

By this time, I was in the Legacy Way Tunnel, between western Brisbane and Bowen Hills and I got onto a cameraman that was free at work, Gibbsy. He scrambled to get the gear together and would leave the office soon for the airport. My wife had called me back and said she had my passport and clothes packed and was heading towards the airport.

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Fab rang again: “How you going? Will you make it?”

I told him my plans and he was happy. Tim called and told me he was also on the way to the airport. The plan was coming together.

I arrived first, followed by my wife and son. She handed me my packed duffel bag, complete with a supply of vegan snacks because she knows that I usually don't have time to stop and buy food on trips away. I gave Buddy, my son, a big hug and said goodbye, and had a quick chat with Kirsty and gave her a kiss and a cuddle before they left.

Gibbsy pulled up and started unloading the Pelican cases and tripod bag I needed. Frantically we worked together to pack camera, audio and light gear from my car into the empty cases. Having an experienced camo like Gibbsy assisting me made all the difference. I had a total of six pieces of luggage, this included my personal bag and six cases full of gear. The biggest case held two lights, battery chargers, spare discs for recording, power adapters and audio gear. The Dejero accessory case also has audio cables and equipment, known as IFB equipment, that makes it possible for us to hear the studio talk to us when we are on location. My tripod bag contained my tripod, light stands and a wet weather cover for the camera. I also had a spare long lens in a smaller Pelican case with me and the last case held a MacBook Pro and its various accessories.

Tim arrived shortly after we loaded the last case onto a trolley. Then the three of us weaved through the car park to the departure hall.

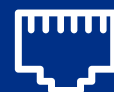
We arrived with 45 mins to spare before the check-in desk closed. Without colleagues that know exactly what is needed, a supportive family and trust from the bosses this would have been a difficult task.

Fab called me again: “Are you there yet?”

I'd forgotten that I'd told him during one of our brief conversations earlier that I would let him know when I got to the airport. He didn't mind, he was happy we made it.

Getting through Australian airport security can be slow at the best of times. But it drags out even more when I am putting a broadcast camera and multiple spare batteries through an x-ray machine. I point out to the security personnel that I am able to carry as many batteries that I need provided they are under a certain watt hour rating. Each battery also has its terminals taped and is stored separately in my backpack.

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Next was a nine-hour flight to Hong Kong followed by six-hour layover then a four-hour red-eye flight to Incheon, Seoul.

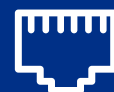
When I'm flying into a new country with a bunch of luggage and camera gear, I'm always worried about if I will get through customs and immigration without any hassles. Especially a last minute trip like this. If it's a planned trip I have to organise paperwork, called a carnet. This is a document that tells customs in Australia and the country I am travelling to that the gear I'm travelling with is for business use only and that I won't be selling it. Luckily this time in South Korea, it was smooth sailing through customs and immigration. Tim and I were through in record time. We were met by our fixer, Jay, and driver, Eugene, at the arrivals hall. A fixer is someone who can speak the local language and provide us with local knowledge that we wouldn't normally have on the ground in a foreign country. Without them we would be lost and it would make our job of news gathering difficult.

A Dejero is basically a large mobile phone. It uses mobile data, and WiFi to transmit vision and audio. It contains four SIM cards, and can be used overseas, but it's very expensive to only use Australian SIMs. The first thing I have to do is source a few local SIM cards, which in this case was easy. There was a Korea Telecom desk in the arrivals hall and I was able to buy two Korean SIM cards and hire a WiFi dongle.

Tim and I had to set up for TODAY Show crosses straight away, so we did them right outside the airport. Meanwhile, our fixer came up with a plan for us to hike up a hill so we could get shots of South Korean missile launchers. It was a four-hour drive to the location. Along the way we stopped at a roadhouse for lunch. For me, being vegan, it can be challenging to find something to eat. Luckily Jay was able to translate for me and I ate some delicious local cuisine.

We made it to North Gyeongsang, where we began a 45-minute hike up a steep slippery hill. Jay carried my tripod in its case on his back. I hiked with my camera slung by a strap across my chest and shoulder. Tim carried a backpack with a spare long lens, batteries and audio gear. The hike was steep and slippery at times. We had to clamber over boulders and constantly duck under low-lying branches. But it was totally worth it for the view at the top. I changed my wide-angle lens over to my long lens and got shots of the missile launcher in the distance. It was a windy day and when my lens is at full zoom it amplifies the wind wobble on the tripod. I shot a piece to camera with Tim and then we hiked down to Eugene who was waiting at the bottom of the trail.

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The next day, once we were finished with our TODAY Show crosses, Jay was able to secure permission for us to go into part of the DMZ and get some vision of North Korea at a distance. We made it through the checkpoint with no issues and drove to the Peace Observatory where I got a bunch of shots of North Korea using my long lens. We wrapped up and left the area for lunch.

However, when we tried to return for some afternoon news crosses, we were stopped at the checkpoint. The military had now changed its mind and didn't want to let us back in. Somehow our fixer got us over the line and we were let through the checkpoint.

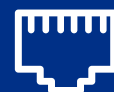
I set up for our first live cross for the afternoon news and that's when it started to go pear-shaped. Tim was about four minutes from going on-air for a live cross into an afternoon bulletin back here in Australia, when a soldier started telling us that we didn't have permission to shoot and we must turn the camera off. Our fixer was frantically calling his contact to smooth things over and our driver was talking to the soldier and telling him we were going to on air soon. Tim and I stalled as best we could but when we went live and Tim started talking to the camera, the soldier started waving his hands in front of the lens. I had to shut down the camera mid-live cross. I've never had to switch off a camera mid-live cross, and for me sending black to air is a huge no-no. We ended up missing three of our scheduled live crosses. The network understood what was happening, so it wasn't a huge deal. The issue at hand was whether we were going to get out of this unscathed.

At the checkpoint to get out of the DMZ area we were detained by the military and they inspected my discs and vision. The soldier inspecting the vision told me to format the disc. Fortunately for me, I had already sent the vision back to Australia. It was a very hairy situation and for a moment there I thought that we might end up in a South Korean military jail or worse, deported. Thankfully, nothing came of it and we were allowed to leave with a military escort.

This isn't the only time that I have been sent away for work with a moment's notice. It happens often. I usually keep an overnight bag with me, packed with a few pairs of socks, jocks, shirts and toiletries, along with some snacks for these occasions. I have been caught out in the past and sent away with only the clothes on my back and my camera gear. When time permits, usually at the end of the day, I'll swing into a local grocery store and buy underwear and toiletries.

Back home, life behind the lens has its fair share of ups and downs. Drive by any major courthouse in a metro city and you're bound to see one or two camera crews sitting there waiting for something to happen. Days at court involve hours of waiting for two minutes of go-time. I'll be chatting to a camo from another network about the latest Xbox One game and the next we're chasing somebody as they walk out of the courthouse.

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I have no problem with chasing alleged criminals down a street to get shots. But the worst part of this is when we have to get shots of family members, when they have done nothing wrong. But my job is to get the shot, and it's got to be done regardless of how I feel about it.

The absolute pit of the job is what's known as a "death knock". A person has died in an accident or similar and the journalist has tracked down a family member's address. We drive to their address and ask for an interview. Some people react with open arms and are happy to talk to us. But the most common reaction is we are told to "piss off". This makes me feel like a scumbag.

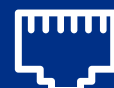
Earlier this year I was in Bowen, North Queensland covering Cyclone Debbie. This was by the far the most intense experience I have had during my career as a news cameraman. A category 4 cyclone was going to cross the Queensland coast during daylight hours. Every crew on that job was armed with a Dejero or satellite link. We knew that the network was going to want all the crews scattered up and down the coast to go live whenever and however we could.

In Bowen we had a crew of four. Myself, another cameraman, Craig Smith, and two journalists, Darren Curtis and Tessa Hardy. The night before the cyclone, Darren scoped out a safe area for us to do live crosses the following day. It was near the hotel we were staying at. We would have our backs to a strong and solidly built building that was 100 years old. We would have a clear view up and down the street so we could see and avoid any flying debris that may come our way. Both our hire cars were pulled up onto the sidewalk as extra barriers. In the event that it became too dangerous for us to do our jobs we also had safe passage back to our hotel rooms.

Once the sun was up the TODAY Show wanted live pictures and crosses from us and every other crew tasked to cover the cyclone. When TODAY show finished the network went to a live rolling coverage of the natural disaster. We had to do multiple crosses during the day. While at the same time gathering shots to use as vision overlay for our 6pm news stories.

At one point while the cyclone crossed, Darren and I wandered up the street from our safe location to the corner of the street. I left my camera with the car and only had my phone with me. From the corner where we were standing we could see the rain; it was falling in heavy sheets and blowing down the street. It literally looked like waves of rain up and down the street. Sheets of metal ripped from roofs were flying up the street, thankfully not near us. Then we heard an almighty rip and crack. Between us and the car and other crew, a shade sail had ripped and was now flailing around like a giant whip. It had a chain link on the end that was clanging into the ground loudly. It was far too dangerous for Darren and I to run around this obstacle. We were stuck on the corner for the remainder of the day.

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We still had to file for the rolling coverage. I have a Dejero app on my phone. I was able to get shots with that and then send them back to work. Darren also recorded a piece to camera and I sent that back to studio. Despite being without my broadcast camera, I was still able to get great shots of rain, wind and debris flying around. But eventually my phone battery died. Darren and I knew we had to get back to the other crew. When the wind changed direction, it became too dangerous for us to stay on the corner. There was a slight break in wind speed and we made a run for it out into the street, well away from the flailing shade sail, and made it back to the other crew.

There were moments when I was standing on that corner that I said to myself, “what am I doing here?” I thought of my family at home, knowing if anything were to happen to me it would be devastating. My wife even said to me before I left for this cyclone: “Be safe, don’t do anything stupid.” But I knew we were safe, our backs were to a wall and we could see up and down both streets easily. Being outside in the middle of a category 4 cyclone was as enjoyable and thrilling as it was scary.

I’m a cameraman and ultimately, I have a job to do. I get the shot in pressure situations. I can quickly set up lights and cables for interviews and live crosses. I can communicate with both journalists and talent. I know how to keep myself safe in large crowds or dangerous weather events. But only through years of experience has this become second nature.

The original article can be found at: <https://www.9news.com.au/national/2017/09/08/16/34/tom-pawson-camera-operator-in-south-korea-scramble-to-seoul>

## About Dejero

Driven by our vision of reliable connectivity anywhere, Dejero blends multiple Internet connections to deliver fast and dependable connectivity required for cloud computing, online collaboration, and the secure exchange of video and data.

With our global partners, Dejero supplies the equipment, software, connectivity services, cloud services, and support to provide the uptime and bandwidth critical to the success of today’s organizations.

Headquartered in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, Dejero is trusted for broadcast-quality video transport and high-bandwidth Internet connectivity around the world.

