

PHILIP KUNHARDT INTERVIEW
LIFE TURNS 50
LIFE STORIES

**Philip Kunhardt, First Managing Editor of Life Magazine as a Monthly
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Total Running Time: 27 minutes and 16 seconds**

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Philip Kunhardt

First Managing Editor of Life Magazine as a Monthly

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INTERVIEWER:

You are responsible for bringing life back as a monthly. How do you think the new life differs from the old life? But how is it a different magazine?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

Well, it, it can't cover the news anymore. And therefore it's lost one of its largest franchises. It can do a large amount of what the old life did. I mean, can use photography in an incredible way. It can, it can deal with very moving and, and marvelous essays, and it can, it can delve behind the news and, enlighten people and in ways that the old magazine really didn't do. It can be funny. It can be sad. It can look back and look forward. It can move you. It can be serious. It can inform and do all kinds of things just as a human being can. I mean, the reason I work so hard to bring it back, I worked on the old life for



22 years and then put out, ten special issues during the time it wasn't around, all the time working to bring it back. The reason I work so hard is because I always figured that, life magazine was just about the best magazine idea that had ever come along. To tell pictures, to tell stories and pictures. Not to have any set format to be able to do anything. To have a magazine with a real personality which, which felt things which could laugh, which could cry, which could, inform, marvelous format to get to people and, and to interest the world. And I felt that it should not be away from the American scene for good.

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INTERVIEWER:

Can you state for me an overview of of the of the changing, status of life, the fact that it was around as a weekly. What happened to it and then. And what it is today?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

Well, it's a much smaller operation today. It used to be, of the the national organ. You you hadn't, finished your week unless you'd read life magazine in the old days. That's no longer true. A lot because of television and a lot because of its monthly status. But it's still a, a very interesting magazine.

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INTERVIEWER:

What is the project that you've been working on for the last year and a half?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

Well, it's a it's a it's a fascinating project. And, it kind of caps my career of 33 years of working in a magazine. I was asked to, go through every single issue of of life from the very beginning in 1936 until today, almost 2000 issues. And, try to create a book out of what I found. And, the wealth of material, almost drowned me. But, I did come up with a format, and the book is done, and it's going to be published, in September by little, Brown. I, I learned a lot about the magazine that I didn't know before.

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INTERVIEWER:

All right. Well, from what you saw in putting the book together, did life take stands and things? Did life ever go out on a limb and take an editorial stand, or was it wishy washy, or where did it? Where was it?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

Life was anything but wishy washy, and it definitely took stands. It had an editorial page to, to discuss the rights and wrongs of different issues. But it stories themselves hit hard, and there was no question about, what side it was on.

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INTERVIEWER:

Where would, the subject of race fit into that?



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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

Well, Life decided early on that, race was one of the most important subjects. Most important things in the American scene. And got behind the race movement, like crazy.

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INTERVIEWER:

All right. On that same line, how do you link or how would you discuss Martin Luther King as a part of its race coverage, the violence and the the bloodshed on one hand, and his pacifism on the other. Was king a hero of of life and and and it didn't he go against the type of reporting that they were doing on the racing.

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

We were. We weren't, participants in the, in the violence. We were photographing it and writing about it and, applauding, Martin Luther King for not striking back. I mean, most natural thing to do would be to, raise arms against all this, dogs and clubs and guns and, that were being used against black people in the South, and, which is great restraint. What is, belief in God? And with his, calm approach to everything, he he overcame. He really did.

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INTERVIEWER:

As far as Life taking stands, though, do you think race was one of the strong stands it took?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

I think it was. Yes. I mean, certainly back in, certainly in, in, in the, dealing with crime, in the 1960s, the investigative reporting was, fiercely anti mafia. There was no question about that. In, in politics, we were either for somebody or against somebody on our editorial page constantly. I think that the staff probably believed in the, the racial struggle, more than more than any other issue.

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INTERVIEWER:

Do you think it made any difference to coverage?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

I think that life's coverage of the of the racial struggle in the United States made a huge difference. At least I hope so.

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INTERVIEWER:

We're doing a story on Jill Ken today. What are the elements that make that such a poignant, successful story? What are those ingredients?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:



Well, a certain kind of life essay, a very emotional human one had, had ingredients, such as, calamity and then great strength to overcome that calamity. A very good example of that kind of story was, Jill Kim on the Olympic skier who crashed and was paralyzed and, and, still made a life for herself with unbelievable courage.

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INTERVIEWER:

Good. Was would that be considered a a photo essay?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

A, a typical life essay is a story told in a series of pictures. None of which can really tell a story alone. But the sum total tells it very strongly. A good example of such a story, which Jill Kidman's accident and, the years that followed, we we covered Jill several times. She was a hopeful Olympic skier who crashed, was paralyzed and fought a way back. It was heart wrenching, but it was uplifting as well.

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INTERVIEWER:

In going over all of Life's World War Two coverage. It seems that a lot of those stories were not just written about soldiers, but for soldiers. You think that's true? And.

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:



Well, I think it became evident to the editors early on that life was, part and parcel of, of, a soldier's life. He would come out of the, the front lines. And one of the first things he'd ask for along with his mail, was a copy of life magazine, which showed him what was going on at home. He didn't have to read any long essays to tell. He just looked at those pictures and gobbled them up. And I think I think the areas of life felt this and started aiming some of their stories. To the fighting men. One good example of that was when when they actually, showed them the kind of kisses that awaited them when they got home.

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INTERVIEWER:

What about give me give me another example of what they might do for the soldiers?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

Well, I did a whole special issue for the soldiers. It was called letter to G. To the GIS, and, it it really summed up America for the for the, soldiers and sailors and Marines overseas. Tell him what was going on, what was changed. Changing how they could expect to to view their, families and their friends, when they got back, how they had changed. And. In general. Aim right at him.

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INTERVIEWER:

There was so much of that early coverage of the war. Was life a war magazine? How would you define life during that period?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

Well, I define life during World War two as a war magazine. Its pages were absolutely filled with not only war, but war. Related stories. Henry Luce, founder, once said that we did not start out, making Life of War magazine, but it certainly ended up as a war magazine. I don't think it ended up as a war magazine. I think it ended up as the War magazine.

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INTERVIEWER:

Because in going to those pages. Lives coverage of early man or man in nature. Was that something they would follow up on?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

Yeah. That's, the subject of, of early man. Intrigued the editors of life from the start. A there's something mysterious and and wonderful to look back before history and, and see how man lived at that point. And whenever they could find examples of this, they leapt on them. One of the one of the best stories of this nature was done by our great photographer, Eliot. Else off him.

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INTERVIEWER:

Great. What about something that life did better than anybody? Which is stopping the action? Using the camera to illustrate. Stop the action. Can you tell us about that?



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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

Stopping the action was an absolute, basic ingredient of the magazine from the start. Showing people what, they could not see with the naked eye. The I think some of the very first, pictures of, of stopped action were the early strobe light pictures when a, a boat was caught in midair, fired from a gun or drop of milk hitting a pail of milk. And the beautiful design it made. Well, ripple Rock was a very good example of stopped action. Or an enormous explosion. When they were clearing rock out of a river. Even more so was the, the nuclear blast at Yucca Flats where we were live. Built a tower and put. How is it? Very thick glass housing around its automatic cameras and actually caught the, shockwave as it hit a eight room house that had been constructed to see if it could, possibly stand to blast. The pictures of that are extraordinary.

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INTERVIEWER:

What about snuck pictures? Sneaked pictures? Was it something that life did or like to do?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

Snake patches. Could have could be fun. And they could be serious. The earliest one I can remember is, a thief, a minor thief, I guess, stealing a bottle of milk. And the the bottle had been rigged up so that, it set off the camera if it was moved. There were pictures of. Of a cremation of, guillotine of, a a duel,



which was not allowed. All those pictures were sneaked. There were other kinds of pictures that were smuggled out of countries, that were also sneaked when they were taken. The arrest of a dissident behind the Iron Curtain, and of Eichmann, the Nazi killer stomping around his cell, in Israel before his death sentence. There were many.

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INTERVIEWER:

And another thing, like in life, like to do was list things. Is that true? Did you find that.

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

Life is always, delighted in being encyclopedic? And its approach on, a lot of subjects, to show all of something is, is fun and, they at one time or another, have shown all the food of fat American family, each year in one picture or all the, license plates, denoted states are all the capitals are all the, birthplaces of all the presidents? They don't have to do that. On a more serious note. We have we have we have treated war in in a similar manner. In 1943, my friend, 26 pages, a story that that had no pictures in it that had 26 pages of solid print. The names, the telephone book listing of 1300 people, the men, every man who had died. So for every American who had died so far in the first 18 months of the war, 26 years later, as the Vietnam War raged, there were they would they would repeat the technique.

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INTERVIEWER:



We have a piece on D-Day and the man crawling offshore that Robert Capa photographed in Normandy. What else did life report on in that issue?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

The issue, issue that that had the D-Day story and it was extraordinary pictures by Robert Capper, of men landing on the shores of Normandy. Had other stories in it that complimented them and enriched them. One was, one was a story on Eisenhower's son graduating from West Point. Maybe he was there, and he was going through all the traditions that his father had gone, gone through decades before, while his father, at that very moment, was, in charge of this monstrous invasion, the largest invasion in history. And I think that that kind of of, although they weren't played side by side, they happened to be in the same issue. That kind of, of thing enriched both stories tremendously.

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INTERVIEWER:

Let's talk about anniversaries. This is the 50th, but life has had many others. Does it almost seems like life delights in its own anniversaries?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

Well, life has had, quite a few anniversaries. Not many anniversary parties, but it it's had it has noted. Take a note of its anniversaries on its cover, starting with, you know, when it was one years old, it had a, a one year old baby. And, when it was ten, it had a ten year old blowing out, ten candles,



later on it, it did have some lavish parties, and it usually turned to the great entertainers of the day, the great favorites of life to, to to help them celebrate.

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INTERVIEWER:

Life has had a tradition of turning towards those performers. Can you link lights and anniversaries in the past with turning to performers for help?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

There have been in the past when television was young, in life, 20th year in its 25th year, there were extensive television shows on those birthdays, and life at that time turned to some of their favorite performers to to help with the celebration.

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INTERVIEWER:

If you could state for me, life had the greatest staff of geographers on earth, and yet a lot of the pictures were freelance pictures. How would you justify calling a picture that was not taken by a light photographer a life photograph?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

Once, I think it was in the early 1960s or late 1950s. Ed Thompson, the great managing editor of life, convened all the staff photographers from all over the world remarkable staff. At one point, they were all called in in New York for a meeting, and a marvelous picture was taken of them at that time. But that



staff, no matter how much of it it was, could not cover the world. Things happened in faraway places that, that their cameras could not see. And, for life was also picked up pictures, bought pictures from agencies and freelancers and services. It published in Henry Lewis's words, early words, the cream of the world's pictures. And as soon as those pictures were who whoever took them had the pages of life, they became life pictures.

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INTERVIEWER:

What about children, said a subject matter that life took a special interest in?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

Well, it would be. It would be impossible to do life magazine, in my opinion, without covering lots of children, in miniature. They show us what we're all about. They make us laugh. They make us see the future. They make us optimistic, and, they're the most wonderful creatures in the world.

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INTERVIEWER:

What about the miscellany page? Well, how would you describe that to someone who had not ever heard of it before?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

The mystery page was a way to say goodbye each week. Amazingly enough, most of the readers said hello by it, by turning to it first. And it was it was so,



immediate and its effect, it really needed no, no writing or captions to explain it. It was a picture of an animal or a child or a, a happening that was, amusing. Some of them were side spending. Some of them were poignant. All of them were interesting and, and, wonderful little images of of life in this world.

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INTERVIEWER:

Last category. Animals. That's something that I took an interest in.

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

Life was always, entranced by animals, especially wild animals. And it mounted, enormous safaris and, and, and trips into the wilderness to try to capture the life, the lives of these animals on film. Those trips brought, brought, brought us some of the some of the great stories.

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INTERVIEWER:

Finally, life in Hollywood. It seemed to be able to do anything with actors. What was that relationship?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

The relationship of between Hollywood actors and life magazine was. Was was a two way relationship. We we gave those actors enormous amount of publicity, by putting them on our cover and by doing stories about them inside magazine. And they, in turn cooperated with us, and did some pretty,



pretty amazing and outlandish things, too. In 1957. Host of them, gave up their time and energies into creating a wonderful package for entertainment issue. Cary Grant imitated Charlie Chaplin. Bing Crosby and Bob Hope played gangsters. Frank Sinatra was there. Just about everybody. Who was anybody in Hollywood at that point? Said yes to our entreaties.

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INTERVIEWER:

Life was known for a lot of different types of stories. What what do you think the ingredients were that that were. What were some of the favorite ingredients of of a life story, and what's an example of that story?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

The ingredient, the ingredients for a, for a moving human essay. Of which life published many and and certainly was the best magazine ad doing so that ever came about, were triumph over adversity. Were courage in the face of, catastrophe, overcoming great odds. A good example of this would be the, the story we did on Jill Kinman. The Olympic skier who crashed was paralyzed. And over the years, for her way back in the most courageous way.

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INTERVIEWER:

Can you can you one more time? Tell us about life's coverage of race and specifically Martin Luther King, the violent side of the race war, as opposed to his pacifism and life taking a stand?

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

Well, in the 1950s and especially in the 1960s, when the race wars and in the United States were at their height, life covered the the violence thoroughly and and well and courageously, and and and was most impressed, I think, by the courage of the pacifist Martin Luther King, who, instead of fighting back, instead of leading his his troops against the antagonists, turn the other cheek.

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INTERVIEWER:

And in in bringing life back as a monthly, we made a point about life actually having a personality. What what is the personality of life magazine? Because you see it.

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PHILIP KUNHARDT:

The the person, the personality and character of life magazine is, is and has been many cited. And that's that's one of the wonderful things about the magazine that it can be one thing one minute and another thing another minute. It can be humorous. It can look at the world with a wry eye. It can be stern. It can be informational. It it can, rap knuckles. It can show the most awful scenes and then the most tender. Oh, George.

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INTERVIEWER:

Cut!



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