



# Photographer Al Bullock

**Class of 2003**

*Silver Circle Profile*  
By: Kevin Wing



Most 89-year-olds aren't likely to be seen driving around town in a 1969 Ford Mustang let alone thinking about *not* wanting to be retired.

Then again, most 89-year-olds aren't like **Al Bullock**.

For someone who's been retired as a television news photographer for nearly two decades, Bullock has the energy and savvy to, in all probability, keep up with today's photographers.

In fact, Bullock – who worked at San Francisco's KGO-TV for 30 years – misses the business.

"I do miss it," Bullock says. "I miss it terribly. One day, I went over to visit (KGO-TV anchor) **Cheryl Jennings** at the station. I got homesick. She told me I was "Mr. KGO."

In the interest of full disclosure, Bullock, who was inducted in 2003 to the *Silver Circle* of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences' San Francisco/Northern California Chapter, has nearly seen it all in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Born in 1923, Bullock hails from Utica, New York. His childhood was, for the most part, fairly average and uneventful like most kids growing up during the Great Depression.

But then, at 17, that all changed. He was given the opportunity to leave home to join the U.S. Navy.

"My first job was washing airplanes on a base in Pensacola, Florida," Bullock recalls. He also worked in the photography lab, developing and processing photographs.

Eventually, Bullock realized he had a knack for taking excellent photographs, and he entered Navy photography school.

"You had to be chosen to get in there," he says. "If they had an opening in the school, they'd pull people from the photo lab. One day, they had an opening, and they picked me."

From that experience, Bullock says he received "the best education of photography, motion pictures and navigation."

Like all of his fellow students, Bullock graduated from photography school as a second class photographer's mate. He wanted to be a topographer. The government hired graduates immediately, and it hired Bullock.

By fate, he was shipped to Pearl Harbor. The year was 1941.

Pearl Harbor was bombed on Dec. 7 of that year, signaling the entry of the United States into World War II.

"I was there the day they bombed it," Bullock says. "I was in the thick of the action."

He was on Ford Island, in the middle of Pearl Harbor, filming the carnage with a hand-cranked 16mm camera. He was a "flag cameraman", assigned to the cruiser, the USS Santa Fe. Bullock spent the entire war moving from one campaign to the next. In other words, wherever the admiral of the USS Santa Fe went, Bullock followed.

"The skipper of the ship was a photo nut," Bullock recalls humorously. "He was the best skipper I ever had."

In March 1945, the USS Santa Fe made history, coming to the aid of a stricken aircraft carrier, the USS Franklin, 50 miles off the coast of Japan. Bullock took still and motion pictures of



USS Franklin, Photo by Al Bullock

the heroic efforts to save the burning aircraft carrier. Many of his still photographs were eventually published in stories about the USS Franklin. His movies can be seen in segment of the now-famous documentary, *Victory at Sea*.

In 1946, and with the war finally over, Bullock returned to civilian life. He moved to San Mateo, working in a variety of jobs, including taking photographs of children for their parents and selling advertising for a Bay Area radio station. While he did all of that, Bullock had loftier aspirations: he wanted to be in the news business.

In the early 1960s, Bullock spent his spare time filming auto racing. He also shot the Indianapolis 500.

Once, Bullock filmed a race that ended in a fiery crash. He kept filming.

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Someone was watching him work that day. It was **Roger Grimsby**.

Grimsby, or "Grim Grimsby," as Bullock called him, was news anchor and news director at KGO-TV in the 1960s. Grimsby was known for his gruff, no-nonsense style of delivering the news.

"You have any blood in your veins?," Grimsby asked me," Bullock says. "He tells me, 'You just stood there, taking pictures. Can I use that film on the air?' I said, 'sure'."

Grimsby loved the film, and the station gave Bullock \$25 for his trouble.

He later filmed a house on San Francisco's Telegraph Hill which collapsed, tumbling down the hillside to the streets below.

"All of the stations were there, but the cameramen were in the wrong place," Bullock says. "I knocked on the door of a house nearby, asked the woman who was home if I could climb on her roof to shoot the house. The old house began to creak, and then, the house collapsed and went down. I shot it all. None of the other cameramen got it."

Bullock was hooked. He wanted to be a part of the business, and he wanted to work at KGO-TV. He was relentless, persistent and pesky, hounding Grimsby continually until one day the hardened newsman gave in.

"Roger says to me, 'we could use a guy like you. I can depend on you.'"

That was 1962. And so, Bullock was hired at the ABC station, remaining there for the next 30 years. And, the major events that Bullock covered began almost immediately: the assassination of President **John F. Kennedy** in 1963, the Vietnam War, the nation's free speech movement which began in the Bay Area in the late 1960s, the kidnapping of newspaper heiress **Patricia Hearst** in 1974, the Jonestown massacre and the assassinations of San Francisco Mayor **George Moscone** and San Francisco Supervisor **Harvey Milk** in 1978. In later years, he covered the Loma Prieta earthquake, in 1989.

"I shot the last picture of (Congressman) **Leo Ryan**," Bullock says, speaking of the Jonestown massacre and the cult started by the **Rev. Jim Jones**, in Guyana.

"I was on the plane with Ryan during his visit to Guyana to see what was going on there," Bullock

adds. "I took a picture of him at the airport, and flew back to the Bay Area in another plane. I returned after learning that Ryan had been shot to death at the airport shortly after I left. I went back there, covered that, then covered the Jonestown massacre." More than 900 of Jones' followers were found dead, the victims of cyanide poured into Kool-Aid.

Bullock worked with many of the Bay Area's most prominent television news journalists of the era, including **Fred Van Amburg, Jerry Jensen, John Lester** and **Peter Cleaveland**.

Finally, in 1992, Bullock decided it was time to retire after three decades at KGO-TV. It was an illustrious career, to say the least. He was on the scene for many of the most memorable news events in Bay Area history.

In a career that spanned from the late 1930s to practically the dawn of a new century, Bullock witnessed the transition from 16mm black and white film to live mini-cams.

His Bay Area home is adorned with awards and honors from colleagues and competitors alike. Among Bullock's most treasured awards are his two California Press Photographer of the Year honors and his plaque commemorating his induction into the *Silver Circle*.

Bullock is also quite a collector. Besides awards, his home is also adorned with many collectibles, from vintage still, TV and movie cameras to a plethora of duck decoys of different shapes and sizes. He also has a room devoted to old TV news editing equipment, including: 3/4" editing machines, One-inch editing machines and old microphones. Ever wonder where they are? Just ask Bullock.

Bullock has three children: **Candice**, who lives in Shasta County; **Bob**, a television cameraman in Portland, Oregon; and **Georgette**, who lives in Pleasanton. He has seven grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Besides keeping busy with his family and his hobbies, you just might find Bullock behind the wheel of that classic Ford Mustang, driving around town, with one eye trained on the road, and perhaps, the other eye trained on the next news story that could pop up in front of him.

Al Bullock is one of a kind. They don't make 'em like him anymore.