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# The New York Times



## Vietnam War Photos That Made a Difference

By Richard Pyle Sep. 12, 2013 Sep. 12, 2013 12

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A group of people are huddled together in a jungle clearing, some with arms reaching toward a light from above. At first glance, perhaps an allegorical painting from the age of da Vinci. But on closer examination, it's a black and white photograph. The people are soldiers, and the divine deliverance they seek is a medevac helicopter, coming in to pick up wounded men.

Given the subject matter, that image, by Art Greenspon, might never have made it past the censors of World War II, which was nearly into its third year before Americans first saw photos of dead G.I.'s on a Pacific beach. Today, it is on the cover of "Vietnam: The Real War," a new history of America's military and political misadventure in Southeast Asia, built around nearly 300 photo images from the archives of The Associated Press.

More than a century after the first murky photographs of soldiers on horseback were made during the United States' 1846-48 war with Mexico, the depiction of conflict by the

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camera finally came into its own in Vietnam. By then, the once-static snapshots of men in camps or posing with their cannons had become museum curiosities.

Robert Capa had famously captured the image of a “falling soldier” in Spain’s civil war in 1936, and during the next decade photographers in World War II wielded their cumbersome Speed Graphics to record war from Europe to the Pacific. Joe Rosenthal’s hasty shot of Marines raising an American flag on a sulfurous island called Iwo Jima became the war’s best-known photograph, and a metaphor for the impending Allied victory.

As other wars flared and faded, photographers made pictures — many excellent, but few as arresting to the eye or mind as Rosenthal’s. Then, in the early 1960s, came Vietnam. It was there, in the jungles, fields and French colonial cities, that still photography became the great medium for telling the story of war. Even television, making its own battlefield debut in Vietnam, lacked the impact of the small 35-millimeter camera, the tool of choice for photojournalists.

Journalism in Vietnam, however, was different for more reasons than that. For the first time since the early days of the Republic, Americans were in a war without censorship. Correspondents were subject to “ground rules” that protected military security, but, unlike in World War II and Korea, officials did not screen news copy or vet photographs.

Founded by New York newspapers in 1846 to provide speedier battle reports from Mexico, The A.P. has long been a dominant force in American and global journalism. This is especially true in wartime, when it always marshals the staff and the means for full-bore coverage. At its Manhattan headquarters, a reporter who died with Custer at Little Bighorn in 1876 leads a wall-of-honor display of 31 A.P. reporters and photographers lost in wars.

In Vietnam, The A.P.’s Saigon bureau was the largest and most experienced news unit covering the war, brimming with exceptional talent and a professional commitment that helped it earn six Pulitzer Prizes, four of them for photography, during the 15-year conflict.

For those of us who reported that war with notebooks, typewriters and cameras, it’s not easy to grasp the reality that a half-century has passed since then, not to mention how advances in technology have revolutionized combat reporting. No journalist in Vietnam ever sent a story or photo to the home office from atop a moving tank.

For many, even those who went on to cover more wars (five, in my case), Vietnam will always be memory’s Main Event, with an inexplicable magnetism that keeps an aging fraternity of “old hacks” in regular contact to this day.

As the intrepid and oft-wounded photographer Tim Page has written, Vietnam was for journalists “the ultimate in experience, laden with a magic, a glamorous edge that no one who went through it can truly deny.”

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What made it so? And what prospect is there that another book filled with evocative text and pictures will not only remind surviving Vietnam-era journalists of that experience, but also draw the attention of younger generations that, we are led to believe, are pretty much oblivious to that turbulent part of American history?

As this photographic history — a joint project of A.P. and the New York-based publisher Abrams — dramatically suggests, the key to understanding Vietnam in its own time lay not in the battlefield reporting or the first-time presence of television, and certainly not in “news analyses” by Washington pundits and politicians making military-guided V.I.P. visits to the “front.”

“Dramatic as it was, television footage in what was called the ‘living room war’ never matched the compelling still photos that, over and over, revealed the bitter nature of the Vietnam conflict,” said Hal Buell, who was A.P.’s director of photography in New York during that era. “The still photograph will always be part of the historical record.”

Mr. Buell, the author of several books on photojournalism, said The A.P.’s history showed “the singular quality of Vietnam’s combat photography, and can help put down the nonsense that so-called citizen journalism is a meaningful source of fact about strife, or any other subject.”

“The expertly framed scenes in the book trivialize the journalistic mishmash from phone cameras, seen more often on television than in print media,” he said.

What the still camera managed to do better than words or film was both to tell a story as it occurred and to create a permanent record of events important and mundane — but especially what Pete Hamill, in a eloquent introduction, describes as “the thing that mattered most ... the truth. The elusive, frustrating truth.”

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Horst Faas/Associated Press A farmer helplessly held the body of his dead child as South Vietnamese troops looked on. March 19, 1964. The child had been killed as government forces pursued guerrillas into a village near the Cambodian border. This photograph was included in a portfolio that received the 1965 Pulitzer Prize.

It is there, that truth, in a handful of exceptional photographs featured in this heavyweight collection, images already more than familiar to those who have their own memories of that time, or have studied it since:

Malcolm Browne's shocking photo of a Buddhist monk dying in a grisly suicide by fire on a Saigon street in 1963, to protest the harsh policies of the United States-backed South Vietnamese regime. Mr. Browne, A.P.'s Saigon bureau chief at the time, was the only Western journalist present with a camera because his colleague, the photo editor Horst Faas, had insisted that A.P. reporters always carry one.

Mr. Faas's photo of a Vietnamese farmer showing the body of his dead infant to a group of South Vietnamese soldiers on an armored vehicle, as if to say, "Look here, see what you have done." This image (*above*) was one of many in a 1965 prize-winning portfolio.

Eddie Adams's picture of South Vietnam's police commander summarily executing a captured Vietcong guerrilla officer on a Saigon street during the 1968 Tet Offensive — an image widely considered the picture of the war, but one that Mr. Adams would not display in his New York studio in later years because he felt it didn't tell the whole story.

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Nick Ut's unforgettable image of 9-year-old Kim Phuc running down a road, her clothes burned off and her skin peeling, as she and others fled a napalm bombing attack by South Vietnamese planes on an enemy position — widely regarded as the other picture of the war. Mr. Ut now works in Los Angeles, taking pictures of Hollywood celebrities and sports, and often joins Kim Phuc to recount their Vietnam story to audiences.

Henri Huet's photo series about a United States Army medic, though wounded himself, caring for another badly injured G.I. during a daylong firefight. The main photo (*below*) was on the cover of Life magazine and earned the supremely talented Mr. Huet a Robert Capa Award, given by the Overseas Press Club for courageous photojournalism. Mr. Huet, whom Mr. Faas described as going to war "the way other people go to the office," died in a helicopter shootdown over Laos in 1971.

Sal Veder's image of an American prisoner of war greeting his family on his return to freedom in 1973 — a Pulitzer Prize winner and the only one of these photos with a purely American theme.

Dang Van Phuoc's picture of a burly American soldier helping a tiny, aged Vietnamese woman, ignored by other villagers who feared having to take responsibility for her. Mr. Phuoc, utterly fearless and wounded so often he lost count, once carried a wounded G.I. twice his weight to safety but never caught up with the communist thugs who killed his father, a village chief. Today he heads a three-generation family in California, the American immigrant dream incarnate.

The book is also sprinkled with kernels of history perhaps most recognizable to old Saigon hands. A 1964 letter from Browne to The A.P.'s New York bureau describes American officials in Saigon as naïve "babies turned loose in a tiger's cage," while cautioning editors not to let that personal opinion "get anywhere near a teletype machine."

There is the typewritten page in which the ace reporter Peter Arnett quotes an anonymous United States Army major at Ben Tre as saying, "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it" — arguably the most famous quote of the war.

If any single individual's ghostly presence is felt in this book, it would be that of Horst Faas, who, while compiling a personal portfolio of stunning photographs and earning the first of two Pulitzer prizes, was rewriting the how-to book on war photography. Anyone who worked closely with him would not quarrel with David Halberstam's description of him as "nothing less than a genius."

It was Mr. Faas who recruited Saigon's street photographers and freelancers into "Horst's Army," doled out free film and told them to come back with pictures, for which he paid in United States dollars; who demanded that A.P. writers carry cameras and know how to use them — something

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not done in previous wars — and that his staff photographers take accurate notes and get names, ages and hometowns. Their bylines also appeared regularly on A.P. newswires.

Mr. Faas and Mr. Arnett formed a dynamic duo to double the coverage on major stories, a tactic that paid off in headlines and became common practice for A.P. staffers.

His own work “was clear, precise and storytelling,” said Mr. Buell, the former A.P. photography director. “His understanding of war, combined with his talent, delivered images of lasting impact.”



Photo courtesy Richard Pyle/Associated Press The Associated Press staff photographer Henri Huet, left, and Richard Pyle, A.P.'s Saigon bureau chief, on bicycles in Cambodia. 1970.

Some of the impact echoed at the top. When President John F. Kennedy saw the photo of the burning monk, he reportedly remarked, “We’ve got to do something about that regime.” Nine years later, President Richard Nixon and an aide speculated about whether the “napalm girl” photo was somehow faked.

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But for all their dramatic effect, and despite some who insist otherwise, none of the photos had enough impact to end, or even shorten, a war that went on for three more years after Nick Ut's shutter clicked.

There were other truths, not necessarily elusive but not widely known, either. One was that — despite the much-advertised animosity between the military and the news media, which degenerated into groundless accusations of press “disloyalty” and occasional shouting matches at the daily “Five O’Clock Follies” military briefings — the Pentagon recognized that the press belonged on the battlefield, and made every effort to get us to and from action we could not reach on our own.

The troops in combat regarded us with a mixture of awe, curiosity and contempt for being there voluntarily. But we learned that they wanted us to be there, to show and tell people back home what they were enduring. At the same time, some United States officials privately resented the press and discussed ways to impose censorship, ultimately conceding that it was impossible without World War II-type control of communications and a compliant media.

What ultimately resulted from post-Vietnam deliberations was the new policy of “embedding” journalists with specific units, a ploy that actually restricts the press while silencing any complaints about being denied access.

Another little-known fact was that, according to the author William Hammond of the Army's Center of Military History, only about a third of accredited journalists in Vietnam actually covered combat operations. The news agencies, led by A.P. and United Press International; major newspapers and magazines; and, not least, the television networks were always there, with support staff, spouses and others holding down the media rear. Virtually all who did go to the field, even television crews encumbered by their own equipment, carried still cameras and sold film to the wires and newspapers. Given their unique access and freedom to report, it would have been insanely foolish not to.

The reality was that, by the nature of their craft, the professional photographers were exposed to the greatest risks. All four A.P. staffers killed in combat in Vietnam, for example, were photographers. Bernard Kolenberg, a former upstate New York newspaperman, was killed in a midair collision of Vietnamese aircraft shortly after joining A.P. in Saigon in 1965. Ten days later, Huynh Thanh My, the older brother of Nick Ut, was killed in the Mekong Delta; he was the first Vietnamese journalist to die in the war. Oliver Noonan, working for A.P. while on leave from a Boston newspaper, died in a helicopter shootdown near Da Nang in August 1969.

And Henri Huet, a French-Vietnamese photojournalist acclaimed by some as the war's finest, perished with three other photographers in a February 1971 helicopter shootdown over Laos.

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A.P.'s photo staff was not alone: U.P.I., various newspapers, and magazines like Life, Time and Newsweek also paid a price in blood. Notable losses were Robert Ellison, an American killed in a plane crash at the besieged Marine base at Khe Sanh in 1968, and Kyoichi Sawada, a Pulitzer winner for U.P.I. who was killed in Cambodia in 1970. Larry Burrows, the great Life magazine photographer who, like Henri Huet, was idolized by colleagues; Kent Potter of U.P.I.; and Keisaburo Shimamoto of Newsweek were killed along with Mr. Huet in the Laos shootdown. Trace remains of those four and seven Vietnamese soldiers were ceremonially interred at the Newseum in Washington in 2008.

François Sully of Newsweek died the same month in another helicopter crash. A fellow Frenchman, the Gamma photographer Michel Laurent, was killed two days before Saigon's surrender in April 1975, the last journalist to die in the Vietnam War.

But, while the book mentions some of them, its focus is not on how war photographers died, but on how they distinguished themselves in a dangerous and demanding profession — and what they showed the world.

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*Photos from "Vietnam: The Real War" will be on view at the Steven Kasher Gallery in Manhattan from Oct. 24 through Nov. 26.*

*Richard Pyle covered the Vietnam War for The Associated Press from 1968 to 1973 as a field correspondent and, from 1970-73, as Saigon bureau chief. He is the last survivor of seven who held that post during the 15 years of American involvement in Vietnam. He is a co-author, with Horst Faas, of "Lost Over Laos," the story of a helicopter shootdown that killed four news photographers and seven Vietnamese military members on Feb. 10, 1971.*