July 20, 1990

Howard Breedlove

Dear Harry,

I am enclosing a draft of the introduction for Vietnam: Images from Combat Photographers. I've marked the quotations taken from my interview with you in yellow. These quotes appear on the following pages:

Page 4, lines 2-5
Page 8, line 20 and following
Page 10, line 3 and following
Page 14, line 24 and following
Page 18, line 6 and following

After looking the quotations over, please give me a call if you feel I've misconstrued your remarks or misrepresented what you meant. Also, if you have any other thoughts about the introduction, I'd be interested to hear them. From July 25 until August 1, I will be at I will be at my home number --after August 2.

I've also enclosed a transcript of the complete interview, in case you'd like to have it for your files.

Thanks once again for meeting with me and discussing your experiences as a photographer in Vietnam.

Regards,

Owen

Owen Andrews

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Breedlove

Between 1962 and 1975, military photographers for the United States Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force took millions of photographs of the American war in Vietnam. The record they left, winnowed down today to about half a million images at the Department of Defense's Still Media Office in Washington, D.C., serves publishers of magazines and histories about Vietnam as an accessible source of inexpensive, well-made images of every aspect of that war.

When published, these photographs carry simple credit lines: "US Army," "US Navy," "USMC." Rarely is the name of the photographer given. Even more rarely does the photographer know in advance that his image has been used. Many of the photographers I interviewed told of flipping through books on Vietnam and discovering images they took as young men a quarter century ago.

They seem amused, even a little proud that their work still finds its way into print. But perhaps it is unjust that their photographs are presented as merely military property, without any sense of the individuals who brought them into being. As Chuck Cook, a former lieutenant in the 221st Signal Company, remarked, "Every photograph you look at, there's a photographer right there....If you see pain in the photograph, a photographer recorded that pain in the heat, the humidity, the mud, the leeches, and all the rest." Only recently, in books like Dick Durrance's Where War Lives, a collection of personal photographs from his tour of duty as an Army photographer, and Nick Mills' Combat Photography, a compilation from all the services, has the

work of military photographers in Vietnam received closer attention.

The military's photographic record does raise one question: trust. How much can we rely on images commissioned and selected by an organization which underplayed the extent of its early commitment to the Diem regime, exaggerated the Tonkin Gulf incident, and consistently misled itself and the press about the war's progress in press conferences?

We can do so for the same reason that we feel compassion for the young men who were drafted, were unlucky and healthy enough to be assigned to combat units, and carried the burden of the war. Like those foot soldiers, service photographers included every sort from unquestioning patriots to angry skeptics. As Dick Durrance's work shows, the personal vision of a military photographer could diverge sharply from the wholesome, orderly official view.

Whether they supported the war or questioned it, military photographers could find sustenance in their work as servants of the historical record. As Chuck Cook puts it, "What the photographers did was worth doing--maybe not for the reasons the military said it needed to be done. They just felt that what the soldiers were going through was worth saving."

Whatever a photographer's official mission might be, the reality of combat imposed its own perspective. For example, information officers at the United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), directed the 221st to come up with images that would counter the negative tone of press coverage.

But in a war with no clearly defined front and no tangible objectives beyond a body count, an upbeat story line could be elusive. The images that came in from combat operations did not show winners and losers. They showed soldiers--often teenagers--coping as best they could with unrelenting heat and humidity, heavy packs, heavy guns, and an invisible enemy whose mines, booby traps, and snipers could cut life short without a moment's warning.

To get their images, combat photographers had to suffer the same hardships as the men they documented. Their perspective was the GI's perspective--with two differences: their primary mission was to photograph, not fight, and they enjoyed the luxury of leaving an operation (if transport was available) when they had the pictures they needed and their film had run out. They could go back to a base camp, clean up, eat hot food, and prepare for a different, perhaps less dangerous mission elsewhere.

These two differences made their Vietnam experience somewhat more palatable than the average GI's. Summing it up, one photographer says, "We saw it all. We saw the best of it, we saw the worst of it. And that gave us an overall picture that the average guy who went over there and spent 12 months in the bush couldn't have." For another who didn't get along with a superior officer in a desk job, the officer's idea of punishment--assignment to a combat photography unit--was in fact exactly what he wanted. He preferred being in the field, doing something active, to the surreal tedium of paperwork behind the lines. Serving as witnesses, not participants, has often made

the moral aftermath less painful too. Howard Breedlove, a ~~staff~~ SGT 1ST CLASS (HARRY) sergeant for the Dept Army's Special Photo Office, (DASPO) puts it this way: "I don't have the burden of having killed somebody. A lot of other vets feel that burden."

Like every aspect of the United States' involvement in Vietnam, the services' photographic operations expanded and grew more complicated as the war progressed. When American military advisors began stepping up their active role early in 1962, the Army Pictorial Center (APC) dispatched a series of teams for brief visits. Soon they were organized into DASPO, the Department of the Army Special Photo Office, rotating photographers into Vietnam for three-month tours of duty from a base in Hawaii. DASPO was intended to cover American military news worldwide, and throughout the Vietnam War, teams from Hawaii also went to Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, and other places in the Far East. Until 1965, DASPO teams provided most of the military photographs of Americans in Vietnam.

DASPO's mission was primarily historical rather than journalistic. DASPO photographers were creating a visual record of operations, equipment, and personnel for the Pentagon archives. Therefore, all DASPO film was shipped to Washington with captions soon after teams came in from the field, and decisions about which photographs to keep and which to throw away were made there. After processing, photographs became available to military publications, the press, and the public at a photographic library in the Pentagon.

One of the first Marine correspondents to reach Vietnam was a writer named Steve Stibbens, who went to Saigon in December 1962 to cover Cardinal Newman's Christmas visit for Stars & Stripes. Operating like other members of the press, Stars & Stripes correspondents straddled the military and civilian worlds, and Stibbens soon met up with Horst Faas, the legendary bureau chief for the Associated Press. Faas persuaded Stibbens to join him on helicopter patrols, and then asked him, "Where's your camera? You don't risk your life without taking pictures." Stibbens began carrying a camera, and in January 1963, he photographed the battle of Ap Bac--a crucial turning point in the Kennedy Administration's Vietnam policy--circling the scene in an L-19 observation plane. Neil Sheehan (who was also there) would find Stibbens' aerial photographs very helpful in later years when he wrote an account of Ap Bac for A Bright Shining Lie. (A Stibbens photograph of an American advisor at a Montagnard camp in 1962 appears on page 19.)

The Marine photographic effort picked up speed after Marine combat divisions began to arrive in Vietnam in 1965. In the Air Wings (MAW), photographers and journalists operated out of each division's Public Information Office (PIO). In the ground divisions, photographers were with a separate photographic office which coordinated their work with the journalists in each PIO. Much of the Marine Corps' photography also came from the staff of Leatherneck magazine, based in Tokyo.

Marine photographers had more say about which photographs were chosen for official use than their DASPO counterparts, and

they distributed them as quickly as possible after each operation. "We didn't think about whether the pictures would be used beyond tomorrow," says Russell Savatt, a career Marine photographer who worked with the First Marine Air Wing in 1965 and 1966. "We just thought about getting them into the papers." When they came in from a mission, they prepared the negatives, chose the best shots, printed 125 copies of each, and sent them out immediately to Stars & Stripes, Leatherneck, their division publications, the wire services, Marine posting stations worldwide, and, in some cases, hometown newspapers.

Because of the heat, says Savatt, "we ran our labs in the middle of the night, when it was coolest. We didn't get much sleep." Lab work would have been difficult in any case after long days in the field, and given the primitive darkroom setups available, the quality of the work that survives is remarkable. (A Savatt photograph appears on page 24.)

The Army set up a second photographic group in Vietnam in 1965 and 1966, the 221st Signal Company. Where DASPO answered to the APC and the Department of Defense at the Pentagon, the 221st was an incountry operation linked to MACV headquarters in Saigon, and from 1967 on, it worked under the direction of the Southeast Asia Pictorial Center (SEAPC). At its height, the 221st maintained five to seven photo teams at its headquarters in Long Binh, and also six base detachments at Phu Bai, Pleiku, Can Tho, Saigon, An Khe, and Cam Ranh Bay.

To process their film, the 221st built darkrooms and labs at Long Binh--no easy task, as they had no authorization for much of

the equipment they needed. Desperate for air conditioning to preserve their large supplies of film, the 221st struck an undercover deal with a group that repaired air conditioning units from all over the country. After being repaired, these trailer-mounted units rotated through the 221st, spending two or three quiet weeks parked outside their building before heading back to an authorized user.

Film was prepared, reviewed, and released incountry, and also went back to the Pentagon for the archives. Part of SEAPC's mission was to offer the media an alternative to what MACV saw as negative press coverage, so film footage and still photography were made readily available. As the SEAPC operation grew, the 221st largely took over responsibility for day-to-day combat photography from DASPO, freeing DASPO to work on a wide range of special projects.

The Army also posted photographers with the Public Information Offices of battalions, divisions, and brigades. Although DASPO and the 221st were the Army's elite photographic units, PIO photographers also made some notable contributions. None is more famous, perhaps, than the work of Ron Haeberle, who went on his first combat photography mission in the closing weeks of his tour of duty in 1968. The place he photographed was the village of My Lai 4, and the operation turned into a massacre of villagers which would seize the world's attention when Haeberle's color images--which he never turned in to his PIO--appeared in Life the following year.

In smaller numbers, the Air Force and Navy also sent

photographers into the field. Working out of the major Air Force bases in Vietnam, Air Force photographers assisted in aerial reconnaissance, documented strikes, and made portraits of newsworthy pilots. They also compiled portfolios of combat aircraft in flight and recorded every aspect of aircraft maintenance and combat preparation.

The work of Navy photographers paralleled the naval role in the war. From the carriers of the Pacific Fleet, photographer's mates followed every aspect of naval air operations over North Vietnam. Incountry, photographers from the Combat Camera Group--Pacific (CCGPAC) accompanied the Navy's hazardous river patrols, and the often secret counterguerilla missions of naval combat assault groups, the Sea, Air, and Land teams (SEALs)

The stated missions and command structures of each photographic outfit differed, but in all the services, the men who found their way into photography shared certain similarities. Early in the war, they tended to be career soldiers who had chosen to specialize in photography. As with other career soldiers, an assignment to work in Vietnam was a chance to prove their skills in a combat environment.

For Howard Breedlove, who joined the Army in the 1950s and spent four years with a tank ~~division~~ Company, photography was a chance to get away from tanks, which had damaged his hearing. He took to it enthusiastically, and after photography school at Fort Monmouth (where many Army and Marine photographers trained), he

spent four years in the early sixties at a small photographic unit in Naples, Italy. He recalls how his commanding officer there gave him free access to the darkroom, encouraging him to experiment and improve his photography. In his spare time, he made portraits and photographed weddings. After he returned to the States, the same officer told him about DASPO, which was then being formed as an elite Army photo unit. Breedlove applied, was accepted, and was posted to DASPO headquarters in Hawaii for a three-year tour of duty. He began his first three-month rotation in Vietnam in December 1965, replacing Kermit Yoho, the first DASPO photographer to be killed in action. (A Breedlove photograph appears on page 48.)

Early Marine photographers were equally seasoned; Russell Savatt had joined the Marines in 1946, got out in 1948, went to the New York Institute of Photography, and reenlisted for Korea in 1951. When he arrived in Da Nang in 1965, where the Marines would soon construct a major press center with facilities for civilian and military journalists, he was joining others with long service records and plenty of published photographs. Photography was a low priority then, but Savatt remembers a meeting between correspondents and higher-ups where photographers were invited to explain exactly what equipment would work best in the field. They spoke up for 35 mm Nikons, flash units, and Rollieflexes, which the Marine Corps soon supplied. It seemed to Savatt that Marine photographers were better equipped early on than their Army counterparts, many of whom were still working with the Speed Graphic, a 2 1/4-inch-format camera with a view

4x5 inch

finder--which could be troublesome if you were trying, for example, to take a picture of a landing zone from a moving helicopter.

Note: This is from Grigsby's interview, but I thought I'd call your attention to it.

As the services increased their photographic staffs, men like Savatt and Breedlove would guide younger, less experienced soldiers. Some were enlisted men who applied for communications jobs; some had been drafted and singled out for photography because of a college background in journalism or broadcasting. Bryan Grigsby, who joined DASPO in 1968, learned a lot from Breedlove when they went on patrols together. He recalls that Breedlove could be trusted in combat to look out for his men and help them do their work without needless risk.

A bit of college, an interest in journalism, and a feeling for the techniques and aesthetics of photography made the people who ended up as photographers in the years of the United States' heaviest involvement slightly different from other GIs. An infantry company might contain people from widely varied backgrounds, people with little in common. For them, the war was a detour--a nightmarish one--from the lives they hoped to lead. Combat photographers often shared aspirations; many of those I interviewed recalled close friendships and long, late nights when they were in from missions, arguing the finer points of the work they tried to do.

Grigsby remembers that when he joined DASPO, he didn't care all that much about photography. Staying alive was more important, and taking pictures seemed like a good way to keep out of trouble. Sitting up one night over beer with a friend,

Grigsby declared that all good photographs are accidents. And his friend said, "No, they're the result of thinking--that's how you make consistently good pictures." Other DASPO photographers also encouraged Grigsby to develop his understanding of the camera. He worked with Dick Durrance, who was "an inspiration to me....Wwatching him work gave me an early insight into what it took to do this business right." His experiences in Vietnam led Grigsby into a career in photography; he is a photo editor with the Philadelphia Inquirer today.

Others deliberately made use of their Army years to learn the photographic trade. Durrance was one; Don Critchfield, a lieutenant in the 221st Signal Company was another. He joined the Army after getting a degree in broadcast journalism in college. "I was lucky," he recalls, "first of all in not getting shot, and secondly, in doing in the military what I had hoped would be my profession." Critchfield got a job with NBC in Saigon as soon as he was discharged, and still works with them today, producing stories from Washington for the national news.

Critchfield and the other officers were mostly in their mid-twenties. The soldiers on their teams were younger and less experienced. "What we're talking about," says Gary Krull, another lieutenant in the 221st, "are young kids, with lots of freckles, who at 17, 18, 19, learned how to use a camera. And we sent them out to watch the war, told them to be careful, asked them not to get hurt, and by the way, bring back some good footage, because that's what Uncle Sam's paying you to do. And 99 out of 100 times, they brought back damn good footage."

However much these men appreciate what they learned about photography in Vietnam, one hard fact remains--their experience was gained in combat, in situations more trying, more terrifying, than anything they had ever imagined. Bryan Grigsby describes it well: "In the Army, making pictures under very difficult circumstances...one of the big things I learned was that I could do it. I could go out and make pictures when I was scared, so scared that my hands would be shaking and I could hardly load film into the camera."

Photography teams got to combat zones in a variety of ways. Marine photographers based at Da Nang worked with the PIO to determine which operations they should cover, then hitched rides with assault helicopters and transport aircraft. Photographers of the Air Wing took along a writer to do the captions and the story; those with ground-based divisions went alone.

Hitching a ride could be a challenge. The Marines were loathe to sacrifice a seat to someone for whom fighting was not the primary mission. Russ Savatt describes how his knowledge of aircraft sometimes helped him talk his way aboard; he'd point out to the pilot of a C-34B that his plane could carry 150 pounds more than other C-34s. Or his writer would volunteer to take the waist gunner's place. "The waist gunner didn't appreciate that, but maybe his wife did. Or maybe she didn't!"

Savatt and his colleagues were also prepared to fight if they had to: "Marines are always infantrymen first." As the troops became aware that photographers would fend for themselves,

carry their own food and water, and take on combat duties when necessary, they learned to respect them--even to encourage their presence, if it meant a chance of appearing someday in Stars & Stripes or Leatherneck.

Striving to meet press deadlines and to cover as many different events as posibble, Marine photographers preferred not to get caught in operation, but to get in, get their pictures, and get out as soon as their film was gone. Savatt liked to ride in with the first wave of helicopters, photograph the action, and get a ride out again with the last wave. Sometimes that didn't work; he recalls the day when he landed in elephant grass taller than he was, disappeared from view, and lost contact with the helicopters. "I walked out with the infantry that time."

Photographers of the 221st Signal Company had high-priority clearance for transportation. Once a mission was assigned, they could get seats on aircraft pretty quickly. Commanding officers attended briefings at MACV headquarters in Saigon to find out "where the war was going" and then assigned their teams. Typically, teams included five men: two still photographers, a motion picture photographer, and a commanding officer, who might be a lieutenant or an NCO.

Civilian journalists mocked the accuracy of MACV information, and even for military personnel, MACV briefings could be misleading; teams often arrived at combat command headquarters, looking for a ride to the combat zone, only to find that the war had moved on somewhere else. Experienced team leaders learned to find potential stories on their own. As in

all aspects of the Vietnam War, the closer you were to the fighting, the better your sense of what was really happening. To Don Critchfield of the 221st, it often seemed that people higher up "didn't know what was going on out there. And I did." When assignments weren't handed down from above, Critchfield would obtain approval to follow stories on his own.

To protect the lives of their men, officers of the 221st encouraged them not to go into a landing zone with the first helicopters, but to wait until the LZ had been cleared and a perimeter established. A hot LZ was no place for a photographer whose only official weapon was a .45-calibre pistol--which, as one veteran remarked, "is not much use in a firefight." After some bad early experiences, many members of the 221st packed unofficial carbines or shotguns. And there were many occasions when these teams had need of weapons, when units got into situations where resupply helicopters could not reach them. Precautions were not always successful. The 221st suffered its worst day of casualties, losing an entire five-man team, when they were mistakenly sent in on the first wave of an assault during the Cambodian invasion.

DASPO photographers also went out in teams of five or six men, including still photographers, motion-picture photographers, and sound men carrying Niagara tape recorders. With a team of that size, it was impractical to cover small operations such as night ambushes or secret squadron patrols. And in these clandestine situations, photography often became impossible. As Howard Breedlove says, "ambushes were usually at night, and you

couldn't get any pictures." Small jungle patrols could be equally futile. The tension of walking a potentially mined and booby-trapped trail left no time to think of anything else. As the unit moved in single file, a photographer who dared shift his thoughts to making pictures had only the man in front, the man behind, and foliage as subjects.

Larger operations offered the safety of numbers. "That's how the military works," says Don Critchfield. "Except where we had to run out in front and get pictures looking back, I didn't feel the danger--probably the same logic that a school of ducklings feels about a predator. Somebody's going to get eaten, but it won't be me."

Once a firefight began, numbers ceased to matter. To many photographers, the experience seems beyond photography's power of expression. "You can't photograph combat," says Bryan Grigsby.

> You can't get it on film. It's not there. The only thing you can show is its results--its effect on people, the wreckage, the wounding. Moviemakers give you the perspective of an omnipresent being seeing everything all at once. But when you're in combat, you're really just a tiny little spot, very much alone, very fragile, very much aware of your vulnerability.

To work at all in those conditions, to keep the camera functioning and to keep looking for images, was no small accomplishment. Photographers often found that the camera and the photographic mission could be a kind of filter that made it possible to forget themselves continue functioning when

everything had turned to chaos and horror.

To give their teams a chance to recuperate after stressful combat assignments, officers looked for a variety of missions away from the fighting. Documenting the war meant covering everything from visits by dignitaries, politicians, and entertainers to the stand-down of an infantry division departing for the United States. Combat teams photographed temples, showed the use of geese as early-warning systems at ARVN bases, toured pacified villages, recorded the use of trained dogs to sniff out guerillas, searched in the highlands for elephants used as pack animals by the Viet Cong, and provided footage of weapons and equipment. Ray Goddard, who went to Vietnam on a series of three-month missions with a DASPO team from 1964 to 1967, explains that there was no typical mission. From one to the next, "the only thing that was the same was your equipment, the people that you worked with for the most part, and the fact that you were going to go someplace."

Wherever they worked in Vietnam, photographers contended with an unrelentingly hot, humid climate that fouled cameras and damaged film. To counter the effects of humidity, Marine photographers dried out their cameras in a hot box every three or four days. Keeping equipment dry in the wet season was virtually impossible; all military storage lockers in Vietnam required a constantly burning light to retard mold. And when it was dry, dust penetrated everything.

The harsh tropical light imposed limitations as well. In sunlight, the shade cast by a hat brim could black out all the

features of the face beneath. In a triple-canopy jungle, the shutter had to be set for available light, and if a few rays of light reached through the foliage, they formed sharply contrasting tiger stripes that obliterated detail. Looking at photographs neatly printed in a book two decades later, these difficulties can be hard to grasp. Every day during the war, photographers dealt with them as best they could, and at its peak, their efforts yielded thousands of pictures a week.

A final obstacle faced by military photographers was the uncertain fate their images met in official hands. When images from DASPO, the 221st, and other Army photographers reached the Pentagon, they were reviewed by a small pictorial staff and filed for release, classified, or rejected. Conscientious and thorough as they were, the pictorial staff faced a virtual avalanche of images at times, and the criteria they applied could be mystifying and frustrating to the cameramen in the field.

Above all, the Department of Defense did not smile upon photographs which showed American soldiers in an unfavorable light. Photographers understood this, and generally refrained from photographing GIs in bars and brothels, or GIs burning villagers' huts, or GIs using overly harsh methods to interrogate prisoners. Photographs of wounded and dead Americans were also handled with extreme caution. A caption was required for every photograph, and the services did not wish for families of dead and wounded Americans to unexpectedly encounter images of their sons in newspapers and magazines.

Other restrictions, conveyed in written critiques sent back to the field by Pentagon officers, were harder to grasp. For example, where press photographers might shoot dozens of frames of a newsworthy situation, military photographers were discouraged from expending more than one or two frames on a particular soldier or group or scene.

There was also the problem of clothing. Howard Breedlove, whose much-published photograph of 1st Air Cavalry soldiers jumping from a helicopter onto a hilltop LZ became the basis for the design of the Vietnam ~~Memorial Medal~~ Veterans National Medal, still can't believe that he was sharply reminded to make sure that the soldiers he photographed in combat had their shirts on and looked presentable. "Out there in the field, crawling around, with guys were getting shot at, it was absolute chaos sometimes. What are you going to do, stop the men and say 'Look now, button up your shirt, roll down your sleeves?'"

To military photographers, documenting the war meant showing, as one said, "the pain, the anguish, and the struggle" of the soldiers. Under pressure, picture editors in Washington couldn't always look for the most emotionally powerful or technically accomplished image. One week, they might be advised to concentrate on selecting photographs of tanks. Another week, it would be Huey helicopters, and a third, M-16 rifles. These were difficult criteria for men who were risking their lives to accept.

Some responded with a shrug, went on learning their trade, and hoped their best pictures would be saved. Some accepted the

military view and went on taking the pictures that would serve the war effort best. Many quietly rebelled and carried personal cameras or held onto images they didn't want to lose.

Looking through our selection of photographs from the official files, the veterans I interviewed often alluded to those personal collections. As they spoke, I sometimes sensed that it isn't the overt content of those pictures that matters most--though many undoubtedly deserve to be seen. What matters is a shared experience, private and inexpressible, which those of us who weren't there will never fully grasp. Few photographs can show it. We hope, in publishing the fine work that exists in the official record, to recognize the importance of the images these men made for the nation, and the trials they endured along the way.