SOME THOUGHTS IN PASSING:
AFTER THE VIETNAM WAR
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As I approach the age of sixty, my past life experiences now stretch out much further than my possible future ones. I guess this is a natural reaction to the order of things in one's life. In hindsight I know that my time in the Army took up only a small portion of my past, and yet I also know that the experience and the lessons I learned during that time have followed me very closely during my life since then. While serving in DASPO I found my life's work, and I also began to develop the craft necessary to following my profession as a photojournalist. The photographs I shot during that period were the baby steps that led me to my career in newspaper journalism.

Now, more than thirty years later, I can look back on my career and at some of the stories that unfolded in front of my camera lens during that time, and how they related back to those beginning images I recorded in South Vietnam. As I grew more confident with the camera, my eye and my heart learned to work together when recording the events that played out in front of me.

My first journalism job out of college was at my hometown newspaper, The Gainesville (Fla.) Sun. Within a few months of starting that job in the spring of 1973, the war in Vietnam followed me to the streets of that small college town. Eight members of the anti-war group, Vietnam Veterans Against the War (V.V.A.W.), were brought to trial there by the federal government. Seven of the men, Scott Camil, John Kniffen, Alton Foss, William Patterson, Stan Michelsen, and Peter Mahoney were combat veterans of the war. The eighth man, Donald Perdue, was a non-veteran sympathizer. All eight men had been charged by the government with plotting to violently disrupt the 1972 Republican National Convention in Miami Beach. For three weeks in August of 1973, the federal prosecutors brought out a parade of witnesses to prove their case. Most of these witnesses had made deals with the government to testify against the veterans in return for reduced or dropped charges in other cases the government had against them. In the end the eight men were found not guilty by a jury that came out from behind the jury box at the end of the trial and embraced the defendants. It was a trial mixed with group paranoia over government wiretapping and colorful anti-war theater provided by the hundreds of V.V.A.W. members and sympathizers who traveled to Gainesville from around the country.

I learned some important lessons about the importance of media public relations during that trial. The defense and prosecution teams viewed the media in different terms. The government prosecutors saw the press as the enemy and a force to be avoided. The defense saw the media as a tool for influencing public opinion. While the government witnesses and attorneys avoided being photographed and talking to the national press corps that had assembled outside the federal building in downtown Gainesville, the veterans and the defendants made every effort to be photographed and talk to reporters. In the end the government came off looking secretive and sleazy, while the defense

looked brave and inspired. Ironically, the veterans actually had plotted to disrupt the Republican National Convention, but not through violence. Covering the trial visually was difficult because photographers were not allowed inside the courtroom and were therefore left with whatever happened outside the federal building. What "news" that did transpire outside the courtroom was merely a series of staged media events, and while interesting visually, did little to tell the story of what was going on inside. It was the last of a series of the government versus anti-war group cases that had also taken place in Chicago, Illinois and Camden, New Jersey, as the war wound down.

My next encounter with the war in Vietnam came about a few weeks after the fall of Saigon in April of 1975. After a brief stay on the island of Guam, thousands of South Vietnamese refugees came to the United States, landing at refugee camps at Fort Chaffee Arkansas, Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania and Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. I managed to wrangle an assignment to cover the arrival of the refugees at Eglin and hence my second major story concerning the aftermath of the war.

The U.S. military at Eglin was reluctant to give the media unrestricted access to the Vietnamese in the tent city camp they had constructed prior to the arrival. The first day or so cameramen were kept busy shooting images of air force personnel erecting the tents. Eventually over ten thousand people would pass through this camp. The first refugees were tired and still pretty stunned from the events of the past few weeks. Their government had fallen so fast they still hadn't processed the idea that their country no longer existed. The military's attempt to impose censorship eventually fell apart as the members of the national media spread out through the camp in search of stories. For the most part the press respected the privacy of the Vietnamese who chose to stay inside their tents. I wandered through the camp, watching both the refugees and the other photographers who darted here and there looking for pictures. The popular picture subject of choice seemed to be the cute kids who for the most part were enjoying the adventure of this strange new land they were in. The adults were more difficult to capture, and only in cases of emotional breakdown was any picture of the true nature of what these people were feeling possible. A red cross worker came out of one tent and advised me that she and another volunteer were comforting a refugee woman who's supposed American sponsor had refused to come see her. In other situations emotions were more subtle and less evident. After a couple of days the refugees were pretty much settled in and beginning the process of being absorbed into their new country. At that point national interest in the story began to cool and the media began to leave.

After the end of the war, interest in Vietnam and Vietnam veterans was nil. Aside from the occasional story about deranged vets killing themselves and their families, or stories about the large number of vets who were city homeless, or solitary men living in remote sections of the country or part of the general prison population, there was no real media or public interest in the war or its veterans. During these years my career took me from Florida to a newspaper in Springfield Missouri and then in 1982 I moved to The Philadelphia (Pa.) Inquirer.

On November 13, 1982 public attention took an immediate about face with the dedication of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC. Thousands of veterans from around the country converged there that weekend to honor the dead of that war and to also give themselves the Welcome Home parade their countrymen had failed to do. It was an extremely emotional event.

Looking into the sea of faces that attended that event, I could not ignore my own feelings and reasons for being there. Sure, I was there representing my newspaper, The Philadelphia Inquirer, but I was also there for some more personal reasons as well. Besides the documentation of the dedication itself, I was also interested in extending my record of the aftermath of the war as well. I was also there to dig deep into my own feelings as a Vietnam veteran. I hadn't suffered as a result of my service there. Although I had seen some combat, it had not left me emotionally bruised or depressed. I wanted to see how it felt to acknowledge my connection to that place and event, and I wanted to honor the memory of one of Daspo's own, Rick Rein, who had died there in 1968. I searched the crowd for emotion. My telephoto lens roved across the audience that faced the names on the wall. Many of the veteran's faces were sad and tear stained. These I could merely accept and photograph, as I had some of the horror I witnessed in Vietnam. The faces who did move me and sometimes brought me to tears, were not the faces of the veterans who were there, but rather the faces of the older women who I could identify as the mothers of the men who's names were chiseled on that wall. When I looked into their eyes, my own eyes began to cloud up with tears. For me that was the hardest part about photographing that day. Even today when I look at some of those photographs I still feel the emotions I felt that day.

On May 26th 1984 large numbers of Vietnam veterans returned to Washington DC to attend the burial at Arlington Cemetery of the unknown soldier from the Vietnam War. President Ronald Reagan attended along with high-ranking military officials in dress uniforms in contrast to many vets wearing tattered remnants of their jungle fatigues. After a short ceremony the coffin containing those remains were laid to rest next to the remains of unknown US soldiers from World Wars One, Two and Korea. Fourteen years later, DNA tests showed that those remains belonged to Air Force 1Lt. Michael J. Blassie. On July 11, 1998 1Lt. Blassie's remains were reburied at his hometown of St. Louis Missouri. Modern medical technology has made it possible that there probably will be no more unknown soldiers buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

The city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania lost over 600 citizens in South Vietnam. On October 26th, 1987 a memorial to those young soldiers was dedicated. This ceremony was much more intimate than the one in Washington DC. Here there were more friends and family of the names listed on this memorial wall in attendance. For a few moments, Philadelphia was no longer a large, sprawling northeastern city, but more like an intimate gathering of people in a small rural town where everyone knew everyone else. Many had gone to high school and college together. There were few strangers at that gathering.

Over the years I photographed other gatherings of Vietnam veterans such as smaller memorial dedications or prisoner of war memorial gatherings held at public events

around the Philadelphia metro area. I began to notice that the veterans in my pictures were growing older…like myself. For most time had not dimmed memory or the need to gather and remember with other vets. I'm often troubled by the public impression given by these sad-eyed, tearful individuals. The vets wearing old jungle fatigues get the most attention from news photographers. They make good copy. Former soldiers dressed in suits and ties seem to blend in with the crowd. They don't make for compelling or interesting images. They don't make for good copy. And this is sad too. I don't think it is fair to remember the Vietnam veteran as a burnt out, shattered shell. I think most of us went on to live productive, useful lives after our service in Vietnam. Pictures offer compelling evidence of past events, but I believe that photographs are only shadows of the things they depict. It is my hope that there is enough truth in the photographs that I have passed along to this archive to make them useful windows into that experience for future students and historians of the Vietnam War.