Rite Of Passage

A PHOTOGRAPHER'S JOURNEY

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- The war in Vietnam was, in large part, what defined my generation of young Americans. Just about every generation in this country's history has been in a war that has provided this rite of passage.
- I sometimes measure my own life in terms of before and after my time spent in Vietnam..
- Now a new generation of young Americans are beginning, if they survive, their own rites of passage in Afghanistan and Iraq.
- Like Vietnam and every war before it, the experience will most likely either make them stronger or cripple them for life.

- Even after all these years the sound of a helicopter will stop me in mid-thought, accessing a very private part of my mind.

- The war in South Vietnam crept into my college oriented life through the black and white television images in my parent's living room.

- The day my student deferment ended, my life changed forever.

In Processing

- Basic Training was where the Army turned you inside out, replacing your independent civilian attitudes into those of a soldier ready to take orders without question.

- For me, basic training was one of the most intense experiences of my life.
- When it was over, I feared sergeants more than I feared God.

Over "There."

- The first time I jumped out of a Huey helicopter on a combat assault, I had this strange sensation of déjà vu.
- I could almost hear CBS newsman Walter Cronkite doing a television news voice-over as I jumped.

My first time in combat was with the 25th Infantry Division based at Cu Chi.

- Mixed among the adrenalin pumped sensations of heat, thirst and fear, I knew I had to come to grips with doing my job despite those feelings.
- For the individual soldier, the field of battle is a very small place, limited to the perimeter of your own, very personal involvement in that action.
- Mine was no different.

- The night before the operation, I bunked with a group of soldiers from the 25th Division's Public Information Office. As we settled in for the night I noticed that, despite the stifling heat in the tent, none of the other guys took off their uniforms or even their boots. Thirty minutes later I found out why as a series of mortar and rocket rounds slammed into the huge Cu Chi base camp.
- Seconds later I joined my hosts in a race for a nearby bunker.

Seeing the Elephant was an expression that dated back to before the American Civil War. It was a way of explaining the incredible jolt that you felt when you experienced combat for the first time.

- Vietnam was many things to many people. The experience for each GI serving there was unique and different.

- One wise sage once described war as eons of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror.

- Guarding a bridge on a road to nowhere could be good duty, especially compared to humping in the bush.
- There was time to even relax and sort of forget the war.

Outside the main gate of any American base camp in South Vietnam you would be able to find some guy selling Zippo cigarette lighters that had the inscription, "Yeah though I walk through the valley of

the shadow of death I fear no evil. Because I am the baddest son of a bitch in the valley."

The post Tet offensive, 1968.

- There came a moment, while covering house-to-house street fighting in Saigon during May of 1968, when I was able to capture the true nature of war, that thing old soldiers used to call Seeing The Elephant. It became the narrative focal point of this single photograph.

On that same day I saw a fellow photographer and good friend, SFC Harry Breedlove go down after he was hit by a piece of shrapnel. Three days later, I was wrapping a tourniquet around the arm of the other man in this picture, 1LT Rick Griffith, after he was wounded.

As often happens in war, we had to destroy a neighborhood in order to liberate it from the enemy.

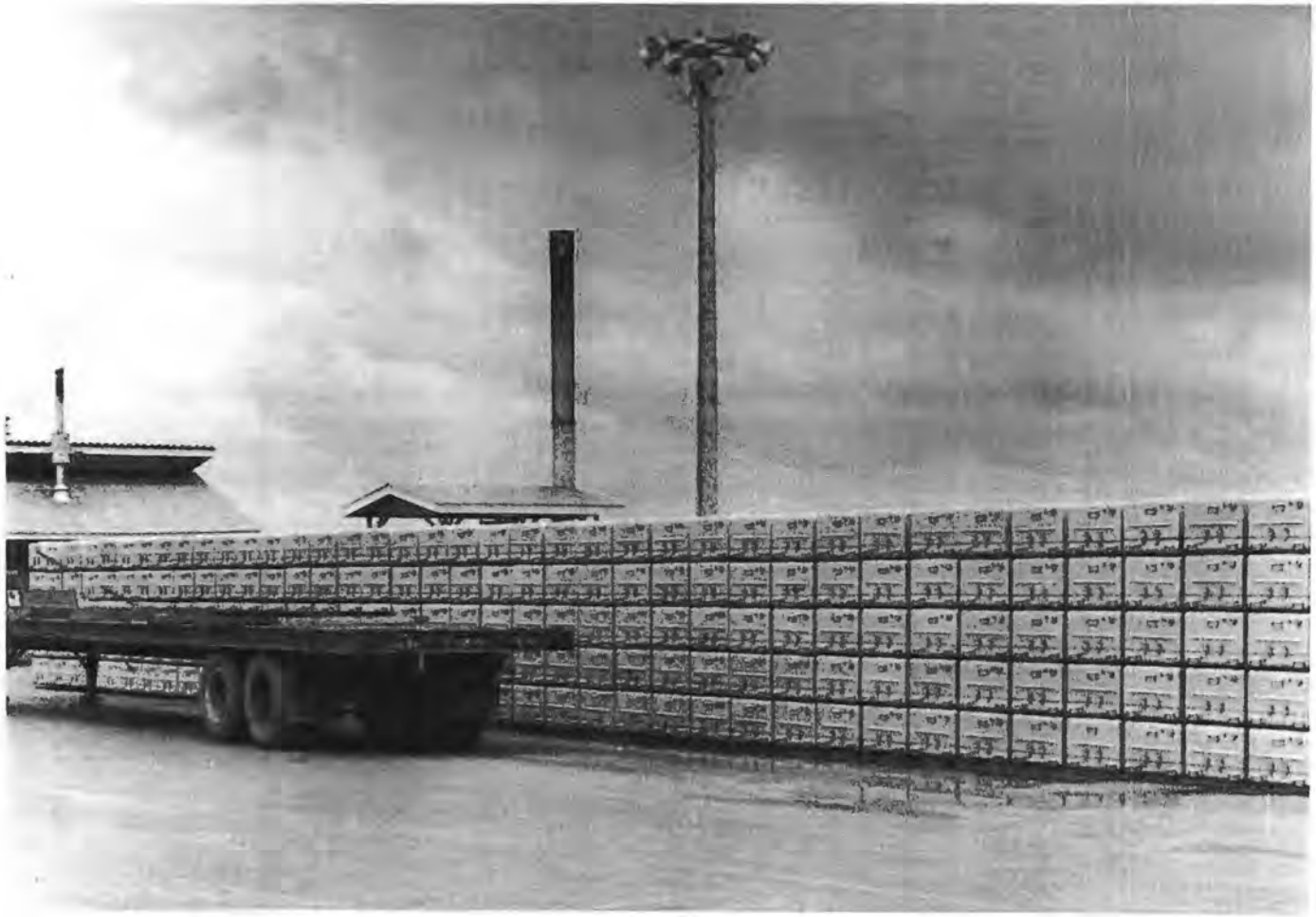
South Vietnamese remove the body of a soldier killed in a firefight in the French National Cemetery. Years later the North Vietnamese forced the relatives of South Vietnamese soldiers buried there to remove the bodies of their loved ones so they could build a traffic interchange there.

A captured soldier from the NVA/VC 9th Infantry receives food from his South Vietnamese Army captors. His chances of surviving capture were iffy at best.

- There was a place at the end of the runway at Tan Son Nhut airbase that, if in the neighborhood, most soldiers tended to avoid. It was the place where combat casualties were brought to begin their voyage home. Unlike past wars, the bodies of those killed in combat in South Vietnam were usually brought back to the rear, identified, embalmed, and shipped home within days of getting killed. Weeks later their personal effects were also shipped home, sorted, catalogued, laundered, and sanitized.

Out Processing.

Shipping caskets for a weeks dead during 1968.



- The embalming room was a warehouse size space, with two long rows of stainless steel tables that stood facing each other along the two opposing sides. Technicians would open the dark green body bags, unzipping them to reveal new horrors to an untrained mind like mine. The place smelled of embalming fluid and the stench of death.
- The bodies that bothered me the most were not the ones that were torn to pieces, but rather it was the remains of those young men who appeared so normal that they looked like they could get off the table and walk away.

Zero Defects

- At the personal property depot, clerks worked in air conditioned comfort, sorting through the usual private stuff people carry with them. Even in a war zone, soldiers had razors, tooth paste, soap, pens, pencils, socks, shoes, skivvies, radios, snap shots and letters from home. All was carefully sorted through and sometimes censored.

- Articles the military deemed bad for moral on the home front were left behind or destroyed.
- In the Finance Section of the Personal Property Depot I met a young lieutenant who proudly told me that the average GI who died in Vietnam generally got a better quality casket than he would have in civilian life.
- My first thought was, yeah but that might be fifty or sixty years from now.

Meanwhile, out in the bush…

Members of Battery "B", 1st Bn., 83rd Arty, take part in supporting Operation Jeb Stuart, from their base at Camp Evans.

Life in the bush was exhausting. Soldiers rested when and how they could.

On any given day, little human vignettes were taking place all over South Vietnam.

I remember a saying that was popular during the war. “In time of peace the young bury the old, and in time of war, the old bury the young.” We had barely begun to experience life, but we already knew too much about death.

- On night, an American civilian security agent exploded through the front door of our team's villa and announced that we were in danger of being attacked by a Viet Cong sapper squad.
- The man took one look at SFC Al Batungbacal (left) and started talking him in a Filipino dialect that "Bat" understood.
- Later we learned the guy had served behind Japanese lines in the Philippines during World War Two.
- Fortunately, the sapper attack never happened, so we went up on the roof of our villa and got drunk instead. So passed the night of my 26th birthday.

Winning their hearts and minds.

- A navy dentist with Military Advisory Group 36 pulls a tooth in the village of Thuy Phu, located near the Marine Corps military base at Phu Bai.
- Despite these attempts at winning their hearts and minds, at night the village belonged to the enemy.

God was, of course, on our side.

On one assignment we photographed the spraying of the chemical, Agent Orange in the Mekong Delta. Back at their base in Can Tho, I over heard a conversation between the commanding officer of the unit doing the spraying and another officer in which he said that for a professional soldier Vietnam was the only war he had and he had to make the most of it.

Operation Quyet Thang. 4 April 1968. A group of South Vietnamese soldiers are carried by a Armored Personnel Carrier from "L" Troop, 3/11th Cav. 3rd Sqdn. 11th Armored Cavalry Division near Phu Loc.

Faces in the crowd. For the South

Vietnamese life went on as usual, a mixture of guarded anxiety and banal everydayness.

Meanwhile, back home.

PROTEST!

- As the war droned on, hundreds of caskets started to come home from the war zone every week, and the draft started to intrude more and more on the lives of young men. Then opposition to the war began to grow.

- Despite the optimism of the military, and even though the surprise Tet Offensive of 1968 ended in a decisive defeat for the enemy, the American public could see no victory in sight.

- Even some of the soldiers who had served there began to speak out against the war.

Vietnam Veterans Against the War

The Trial of the Gainesville 8

- In early August of 1973, as the last American forces departed South Vietnam, the small college town of Gainesville Florida became the focus of the national media as eight members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) were put on trial by the Federal government for allegedly plotting to violently disrupt the 1972 Republican National Convention.
- After a three week trail, the eight men were found innocent on all charges.
- Years later their leaders admitted that the charges had been correct.

- A odd assortment of people descended on the VVAW campsite outside of Gainesville. Some were veterans, others were not.
- The veterans understood the need for good public relations with the press. The government lawyers prosecuting the Gainesville 8 did not.

Since the action in the courtroom was off limits to cameras, the VVAW used street theater to gain the attention of the press.

There were two main arenas for pictures. The VVAW campground located outside of town near the Gainesville Airport, and the area around the Federal Building in downtown Gainesville.

- The government's loss in the courtroom was overshadowed by the fact that President Richard M. Nixon had other problems to deal with.

"Sorrow" a sculpture by Nguyen Thanh Thu, was located in the Vietnamese National Military Cemetery just north of Saigon. When North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces entered Saigon in April of 1975, they tore the statue down. During the final days of the war, there were stories that the statue had attempted to warn South Vietnamese soldiers of dangers that were ahead of them.

During early May of 1975, the first refugees from South Vietnam arrived in the United States at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida.

Those first days in the camp were a time for emotional highs and lows. This woman was being comforted by two Red Cross workers after she had been told her former GI husband did not want to see her.

This was a strange new world for the incoming refugees. A city of tents and American flags.


CHÀO MỪNG CÁC BẠN ĐỒNG HƯƠNG
WELCOME VIETNAMESE FRIENDS

After the war.

- After the fall of Saigon, Vietnam veterans attempted to deal with the emotional and physical aftereffects of the war. There had been no parades, no cheering crowds, no bands playing "When Johnny Comes Marching Home." Some vets told of being spat on as they passed through the airport on their way home.

- Movies, television and other popular culture depicted the average Vietnam vet as criminals and psychotic baby killers. Newspapers wrote about vets who were either homeless or in jail. Even the popular movie hero, Rambo, was a one dimensional cartoon character. The popular movie "Apocalypse Now" was more about movie surrealism than reality.

- It was not until November of 1982 that the Vietnam veteran finally gained some kind of mainstream public respect. Since nobody had thrown them a welcome home parade, they threw one for themselves at the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C.

Welcome Home.

- The dedication of The Vietnam Memorial was a bittersweet affair. An emotional catharsis for some, and a excuse to find old friends and party for others.

- Like the war in Vietnam, the design of the memorial itself did not come about without heated debate.

The raw emotions that I witnessed that day were intense, however it was the faces of the older women who were obviously Gold Star moms that affected me the most. As I focused on their faces I began to cry.

Vietnam Memorial dedication, top left and right.
Philadelphia Memorial dedication bottom left.

- The dedication of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. was the beginning of a kind of public reconciliation with the Vietnam veterans.

- Other events in other towns and cities followed over the years.

Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

- On May 26th 1984 the remains of what was then believed to be the unknown soldier from the Vietnam War, was buried at Arlington Cemetery. Later, DNA tests showed that those remains belonged to Air Force 1st Lieutenant Michael J. Blassie. His remains were later reburied at his home town of St. Louis Missouri.

- Vietnam Memorials began to spring up all over the country as the public and the veterans pushed memories of war into the realm of history .
- Philadelphia Vietnam Memorial dedication. (Right.)

One ongoing controversy after the war was the belief that there were American soldiers still alive and in captivity in Southeast Asia.

As the years rolled, veterans and their families continue to grieve for the wounded, the missing, and the dead.

As I continued to photograph these events I began to notice that more fathers were bringing their young sons. Some of the little boys were dressed in military uniforms. Other kids carried toy guns. I began to wonder just what was the lesson they were learning from all of this.

I began to wonder, what had we learned?