Vietnam War through the Lens

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Vietnam War through the Lens

Editorial Introduction
Vietnam was a brutal war which strained the American public. It was a war against communism where information was largely held back from the American people. Dr. Bill Allison explored the Vietnam War in his class HIST 3151 The American War in Vietnam and one of his assignments was a photo analysis essay. This allowed his students to find deeper meaning to the war through researching iconic photos. As you will see, the papers below display the excellent work done in the Georgia Southern History Department.

The Marine on the Tank

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The iconic Vietnam war photograph, *The Marine on the Tank*, was taken during the heat of the Tet Offensive in the old capital city of Hue in central Vietnam. The picture, captured on February 17, 1968, shows the horror and bloodshed of the offensive, which had been fought for a month at the time of the photograph. “If there’s anything close to hell, it had to be Hue,” Staff Sergeant Rob Thomas of Delta Company remarked.\(^1\) The photographer of *The Marine on the Tank*, John Olson, shot for three days with the Marines of the Third Platoon of the Charlie Company of the First Battalion.\(^2\) Olson, who entered the service at nineteen, was shooting photographs for the *Stars and Stripes*, “the official newspaper of the United States military.”\(^3\) The war photographer finished his service at the age of twenty-one, but

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chose to stay in Vietnam as a civilian. On that February day, unbeknownst to the young Olson, he had just captured one of the most iconic images of the war.

_The Marine on the Tank_ was featured on a two-page color spread in _Life_ magazine on March 8, 1968, less than a month after the photograph was taken. The photograph was “part of a six-page…portfolio of powerful images from Hue.”

The Marines in the photograph were not identified by _Life_ magazine at the time, despite their focus in the picture. For this powerful image, photographer John Olson was awarded the prestigious Robert Capa Award.

The image of _The Marine on the Tank_ is striking and busy. The picture shows a number of wounded Marines on a tank, with the main focus of the photo being on one particular Marine who is laying on a door and has apparently been wounded in the chest. The young soldier has a bandage wrapped around his chest and an IV in his arm, and his eyes are closed with his head slumped, making the viewer ask themselves if this man is dead or alive. Other soldiers in the background of the photo are also wounded, such as the soldier directly behind the man with the chest wound, who has his bandaged arm in a sling and another bandage covering his face. The young man behind him has blood covering his left leg. Still more soldiers can be seen, such as the soldier with an octopus tucked in his helmet who is holding up the IV for the man with the chest wound and the soldiers in the front and rear of the photograph also providing assistance. The picture has a feel of general chaos, and those that were there remember the event as being chaotic, too. John Olson blocked out the calamity of the scene, claiming, “I have very little memory of the moment. It was all a blur.”

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The initial public perception of *The Marine on the Tank* was inconsequential: it was just another image of the Vietnam War in a sea of harrowing photographs. “It is one of the…photos from that most-photographed war, when reporters and photographers had more freedom to document combat in any war before or since.”6 Individuals remember having strong reactions to the photo, such as journalist Steven A. Smith, who was only seventeen at the time the photo was published in 1968. Then only an aspiring journalist, Smith realized the photo “wasn’t that well known,” despite the fact that it was an “extraordinary photo.”7 However, the photograph has reached an iconic status in recent years over the debate of the identity of the young soldier with the chest wound whom the photo is centered around. Since the picture’s rise to fame, it has “become emblematic of the Battle of Hue.”8

While recovering from a bullet to the chest in 1968, Pfc. Alvin B. Grantham’s brother-in-law showed him the spread of *The Marine on the Tank*, convinced it was the wounded young man.9 Alvin Bert Grantham, an eighteen-year-old boy from Mobile, Alabama, was a part of the Charlie Company in the First Battalion of the 5th Marine Regiment when he fought in the Battle of Hue of the Tet Offensive in February of 1968. The soldier was shot in the chest on February 17, a day that saw all five members of his machine-gun squad hit.10 After a lengthy recovery, he returned home to civilian life in Alabama. Across the country, in Moscow, Idaho, the sisters of the fallen soldier Pfc. James Blaine also saw the spread in *Life* and recognized the Marine with the chest wound as that of their brother, Jimmy, who had

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7 Smith, “What’s in a 50-Year-Old Photo?”

8 Bowden, “The True Story of ‘The Marine on the Tank.’”

9 Bowden, “The True Story of ‘The Marine on the Tank.’”

10 Bowden, “The True Story of ‘The Marine on the Tank.’”
recently been killed-in-action. Jimmy Blaine was born on March 22, 1949 and enlisted in the Marines in May of 1967. Pfc. Blaine was a rifleman of the Charlie Company in the First Battalion of the 5th Marine Regiment who was also present during the Battle of Hue, but he succumbed to his chest wound. The two families kept their self-identifications a secret until 1985 when People magazine ran a special on the photograph, identifying the five other men in the picture as Jim Beals, Richard Schlagel, James Richard Rice, Dennis Ommert, and Clifford Dyes. However, the identity of the soldier on the door was unknown, so the magazine tracked down a Navy corpsman named Octaive Glass who claimed the man on the door was Blaine, as he had treated him after he was shot.\textsuperscript{11} After interviews were conducted, two out of five of the identified men did not remember Blaine, but the other three did, one of them being Schalgel who had the rubber octopus in his helmet.\textsuperscript{12} However, photographer John Olson had his doubts, as he found the eyewitness testimony of the battle to be shaky. In 2016 Olson met with Grantham, whom he had been notified of through a recent Marine reunion, and “as [Grantham] told [Olson] his story, the hair stood up on the back of [Olson’s] neck.”\textsuperscript{13} Author Mark Bowden was writing a book on the Tet Offensive at the time and interviewed Grantham as the soldier on the door, claiming he had no knowledge of any previous identification of the soldier with the chest wound.\textsuperscript{14} British author, Anthony Loyd, and Vietnam War photographer, Don McCullin, contacted Bowden after his book’s publication, and McCullin claimed he had photographed the treatment of Blaine by Glass. However, Bowden replied that there was no possible way Blaine was the soldier on the door, as Olson shot the photograph on February 17,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12] Smith, “What’s in a 50-Year-Old Photo?”
\item[14] Shaw, “The True Story Behind an Iconic Vietnam War Photo.”
\end{footnotes}
the same day Grantham was shot, while Blaine was shot on February 15. However, currently, the US Marine Corps recognizes Blaine as the man in the photo, not Grantham. Despite this, the identity of the soldier is still currently a large debate.

In my opinion, the identity of the soldier on the door doesn’t matter, not for the sake of history, anyway. Yes, the soldier on that door was a brave soldier, certainly, and deserves to be honored for his sacrifice for his country, whether he lived or succumbed to his devastating injury. Maybe the soldier is Grantham, or maybe he’s Blaine: evidence supports both. Whoever he is, he is a symbol of the everyman, of every soldier who went to Vietnam and brought back scars, physical or mental, or who was killed in the name of America. Every veteran who saw combat can recognize the chaos The Marine on the Tank embodies, and that is what makes the picture so iconic, so terrifying, and so hard to look away from. Olson described the photo he took in the “three days of hell” he spent with Charlie Company, acknowledging “it’s hard for…anyone who has not been in combat to have any idea of what it’s like.” I don’t know what it is like to serve in combat, and God willing I never know, but The Marine on the Tank shows a small glimpse of what it means to experience an intense battle and the immense sorrow it can bring.

The Burst of Truth

Abby Noonan

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15 Shaw, “The True Story Behind an Iconic Vietnam War Photo.”
16 Kindy, “A Doctor Saved a Marine’s Life in Vietnam.”
17 “The Army Photographer behind the Harrowing Images of ‘Marines and Tet.’”
The “Burst of Joy” is a popular image symbolizing the end of the United States involvement in the Vietnam War. The image was photographed by Slava “Sal” Veder at the Travis Air Force Base in California. Veder is a photographer for The Associated Press, who published the iconic image in 1973. When Sal captured the image, he “rushed to a makeshift darkroom located in the ladies’ bathroom on the base while his colleague Walt Zeboski processed the film.” Sal realized the potential of his picture and wanted to ensure he was the first to have it published. The Associated Press is the original publisher, but various newspapers and magazines printed the photo, such as The Daily Herald and The Leader-Times. The photograph gained widespread recognition and became a popular image of the Vietnam War. The image even won a Pulitzer Prize in 1974 because of its powerful symbol of hope and

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humanity in the face of adversity.

Claire Barret wrote an article discussing the story behind the image, which reveals the truth behind the family reunion. Robert L. Stirm was a Lieutenant Colonel who became a prisoner of war after his plane was shot down in Hanoi. In the image, Stirm is depicted reuniting with his wife and four kids after “enduring nearly six years of mock executions, torture, illness, and starvation while living in Hanoi.”\(^{19}\) The family believed that Stirm had been killed, however he was fighting to stay alive. This image shows the pure joy and excitement of a family reuniting with their presumed dead father. Stirm’s daughter, Lorrie, has her arms out wide and is running to hug her father. There is something so childlike about the image that shows how truly happy everyone is to be reunited. However, the image has a depressing story to go with it. A few days before Stirm arrived back in California to meet his family, he received a Dear John letter from his wife. A Dear John letter is a correspondence that comes from a wife telling her husband that she no longer wants to be with them. In the message Stirm received from his wife she stated; “I feel sure that in your heart you know we can’t make it together – and it doesn’t make sense to be unhappy when you can do something about it. Life is too short.”\(^{20}\) Storm expected a happy homecoming, but instead was served with divorce. Despite the picture depicting a happy wife running to hug her husband who came back from the war, it is not the truth. The wife “took 140,000 of his pay while he was a POW, took [the] two younger kids, house, car, 40% of his future pension, and $300 a month in child support.”\(^{21}\) Stirm attempted to get his belongings back in court, but lost and was forced to move back in with his mother. Stirm states in an interview that he has “several copies of the photo, but [doesn’t]
display it in the house.” The picture serves as a reminder of how much pain she caused him after coming back from a terrible situation. Certainly, Stirm realizes how amazing the picture is, but cannot get over his wife’s deceitful behavior.

The image immediately became popular because it represented all the Vietnam homecomings. In the article by Dean Lucas, the author states that the image “was published across the country and because Lt. Col. Stirm had his back turned towards the camera,” people were able to relate their own homecomings to the image. Since you cannot see the face of the soldier, one can insert themselves into the photograph. The initial response to the image was overwhelmingly positive. People praised Veder for capturing a moment of happiness. There are still many people out there who view the picture and have no clue about its backstory. The picture is significant from a historical perspective because it symbolizes the resilience and joy that came out of a long and devastating war. It is a reminder that there is still a time for celebration and happiness in the face of brutality. The picture provides an interesting perspective on the war and its impact on individuals and their own experiences with it. It humanizes the war by evoking a range of emotions in viewers, making it a powerful historical artifact.

I believe the image still shows a happy ending because the children were able to reunite with their father. Even though the wife betrayed Stirm, he was still able to see his children grow up, which is what kept him going while he was being held captive. The image is iconic because it shows a happy moment of a little girl getting to see her father after believing him to be dead for the past six years. The image is important because it produces a powerful essence of pure joy after a devastating war. Analyzing the image allows one to appreciate the power of

22 Barrett, 2.
23 Dean, 2.
capturing genuine emotions. The photo serves as a timeless reminder to find happiness in the world in the midst of chaos.

**Fall of Saigon**

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Photo 3. *Fall of Saigon* by Hubert Van Es. April 29, 1975.

Dutch Photographer Hubert Van Es took the photo entitled *Fall of Saigon*. On April 30, 1975, Saigon fell to North Vietnamese forces, marking the end to the Vietnam War. During
the conflict, Van Es worked for United Press International (UPI).\textsuperscript{24} He was at the headquarters of the UPI in Saigon on April 29, 1975, when Operation Frequent Wind began.\textsuperscript{25}

Considering that Van Es rushed to take \textit{Fall of Saigon}, it’s impressive that it turned out well. The photo accurately shows the desperation that Saigon was facing. The photo \textit{Fall of Saigon} depicts a helicopter resting on the roof of an apartment complex along 22 Gia Long Street. The platform that the helicopter is on is the elevator shaft reinforced with steel.\textsuperscript{26} The residents of the apartment are attempting to surge up the ladder, hoping to escape the oncoming collapse of Saigon. Pilot Bob Caron is seen helping the people on the ladder up to the helicopter.\textsuperscript{27}

The photo highlights the paradoxically organized and chaotic nature of the evacuation process. The crowd clearly seems panicked, as they are trying to force their way up to the helicopter. Although the elevator shaft was reinforced, it was not designed to hold the chopper's weight. Both these highlight the dual nature of the evacuation. On the one hand, preparations had been made in advance for whenever the signal to leave was given. The choice to land on the apartment was not a last-minute decision, but rather an intentional choice influenced by time constraints. With only two days for the evacuation, it would have been costly to have the employees moved to an airfield or a designated pickup zone. On the other hand, the crowd is clearly in panic over the imminent collapse of Saigon. Across the city, civilians scrambled to

get aboard the helicopters heading for US aircraft carriers. Van Es’ photo shows that evacuations preparations did not prevent chaos from taking over.

*Fall of Saigon* has been misidentified in the past as being outside the United States Embassy in Saigon. Van Es joked that “Apparently, editors didn't read captions carefully in those days, and they just took it for granted that it was the embassy roof, since that was the main evacuation site.”28 This mistake wouldn't be corrected until recently. Almost all reports or articles discussing the evacuation of Vietnam mention that the building in the photo is not the US embassy. Van Es’ photo may also be remembered due to the developing scholarship on the Vietnam War. To the revisionist school on the Vietnam War, the United States had given up the conflict just when they were on the brink of success. The photo seems to play into the revisionist narrative that the US had abandoned South Vietnam to save itself.

Since the photo was released, it has been met with mixed opinions on its importance and contents. Historian Amanda Demmer in a blog post asserted that Van Es’ photo has resulted in a misrepresentation of the war.29 Her criticism is not aimed at Van Es himself, but rather the popular narrative the photo seems to embody. Decades later the pilot of the helicopter in the photo, Bob Caron, made comments during a live interview. He said that the photo “wasn’t a big deal.”30 Since Caron was involved in the evacuation, he wasn’t surprised to see the photo.

Van Es’ photos show that even when plans are made, they are much harder to execute on the field. Even with months of planning, order broke down under the stress created by the oncoming North Vietnamese forces. The photo also highlights that with time and distance, an

28 Hubert Van Es, “Thirty Years.”
image loses its impact. It lacks the same destruction and suffering that marks Vietnam, so people will forget why a photo was impactful. During Operation Frequent Wind, everyone was horrified at the prospect of being left behind. With fifty years of distance between now and the end of the war, most people don’t have the same emotional connection to the scene as someone from 1975.

About the authors

Caitlyn McCranie is a junior at Georgia Southern majoring in history and minoring in criminal justice. She will be graduating in December of 2024 and plans to gain her paralegal certification and work in the law field; Abby Noonan is a third-year student pursuing a major in History and a minor in Psychology. Her research journey began in Dr. Bill Allison's course, "The American War in Vietnam," where she delves into the history of the image "Burst of Joy." Sutton Patterson is a sophomore majoring in History and minoring in Japanese. With an interest in East Asian History, Sutton hopes to attend graduate school and eventually work in Japan.