

Erik Jung

Behind the Lens: A Correspondent's Journey Through Vietnam

Editor's Note: These fragments were written in response to *Requiem: By the Photographers Who Died in the Vietnam and Indochina War* (Random House, 1997). Horst Faas and Tim Page, two photographers who worked and were wounded in Vietnam, gathered thousands of pictures by those who were killed. Their gathering resulted in a sequence of some 300 photographs which follows the course of the war through the eye and camera lens of war correspondents from many nations, including France, the United States, Japan, and North Vietnam. The list of the dead includes some of the greatest photographers of the century, such as Robert Capa and Larry Burrows. Each fragment Jung has penned corresponds to a specific photograph in the book. The page numbers refer to page numbers in *Requiem*.

***You!*, pp. 178-179**

"You! What're you doing here?! Get over here and help with this mess."

No military training. No boot camp for reporters, but all the same I drop to the ground and kiss the dirt. I crawl over to a crouching man holding an IV. He motions me to come closer and hisses into my ear.

"We can't do anything for this guy. He's been dead for 20 minutes."

"But *he* said..." I jerk my head in the direction of the captain.

"I know what he said, but he ain't ready to let go just yet."

I perform CPR on a corpse until the medics arrive.

***All Alike*, pp. 78-79**

"Get that piece of shit out of my face!" His eyes flashed death at me, but I knew what was really at stake. I was blocking his shot.

"Man, get that fucking thing away from me or I'll take your head off!"

I paused a moment, took careful aim and squeezed off a round. I didn't get cover quick enough and Huynh's fist impacted with the back of my skull. I rolled onto my side into the mud. I let myself sink . . . deeper . . . farther. The mud made my head feel better so I just lay there while fire rolled on without me.

"Sorry I hit you like that, but I missed my shot cause of you". I said I understood and I really did. Huynh was competitive about getting film into the AP, and so was I. In his shoes I would've done the same thing. Stupid reporters, we're all alike.

Baby Killers, p. 118

I had been tagging along with the 2nd ARVN Battalion for a week or so with almost no action. We had been outside Ban Me Thuot for a little over a day when we came upon an abandoned village.

There wasn't a living thing left in the village. Even the jungle was holding its breath. It had been a VC base camp, and when they heard the ARVN was coming they decided to pack up and take off. The Vietnamese Marines secured the perimeter and cautiously filed to the center of the village.

Rustling in the tall grass caused the entire column to drop to their bellies. The column commander sent ten men to flank the position. The first man on the assault started laughing and soon after the entire group was rolling. He lifted up a child of about two and paraded it over his head. I half expected the baby to explode, raining shrapnel and fire. Instead, the soldier set the baby in the center of the village, fed it some peaches from a C-ration, and walked on. The baby stared up at him. The ARVN Marines moved out of the village. For the first time in weeks I watched Marines quietly leave a VC village without burning it to the ground.

Johnson, pp. 94-99

"I never felt anything like it. Riding up here, nothing but sky and hellfire. I've got the wrath of God streaming from my hands right into the guts of every one of those dumb gooks. Gives me comfort to know that God is riding with us."

I didn't answer. The wind scream made my voice seem insignificant. The only things that had any power up here were the chopper blades and the two M-60 machine guns. It was no mistake that Bill Johnson

felt like God up here. I got the feeling that they wanted you to feel that way. The Marines aren't going to get people to hurl themselves at death unless you give them a feeling of superiority. Flying fast and high caliber machine guns were all it took for Lance Corporal Johnson.

Later that day I fell into a weed induced sleep and dreamt about hunting on the African Savannah. I had stalked a tiger for days, was ready to take *the* shot, when elephants stampeded onto my head and I fell from my cot. The roaring beasts had refueled and were heading out for another sortie without me.

I saw Johnson later that day. They got a call to rescue a downed pilot north of Da Nang. The pilot was in an area crawling with Viet Cong, and two gunships never made it back. All the VC had to do was shoot down one plane, wait for the search party, and get four more. He told me he watched the pilot die. They were 100 yards from the LZ when his gun jammed and a VC shot the downed pilot in the back of the head.

Back at Da Nang, stripped of his helmet, flak jacket, machine gun, and helicopter, Lance Corporal Johnson was human again. No god, just Bill.

***Super Chicken*, pp. 264-265**

“Super Chicken to the Rescue!”

“Shut the fuck up you dumb shit.”

“Man, don't be talking that way about Super Chicken.”

“More like Super Chicken shit.”

PFC Mark Simpson had been pretty much all over, but he still wasn't catching on. He was a sucker for slogans and nicknames. They made him feel like anyone he wanted to be. On top of that, if a buddy got greased you didn't have to think about Mrs. So and So back home grieving for her husband. It was just, “Yeah man, Bloodhound got wasted out on Route 9.” The man had special meaning for you, but you didn't have to think about all the extras tied to the man. Mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, dogs, and cats they didn't matter cause only you knew Bloodhound. They knew Lawrence Caldwell.

So, Super Chicken was his *nom du jour*. He scrawled it on his flak jacket, his helmet, and even the back of the APC we rode in. It drove me crazy, but every now and then you had to forgive the occasional eccentricity.

Richards, pp. 146-147

David Richards had been a star linebacker on his high school football team. He told me that colleges were banging on his door to get him to play for them.

“I tell you what, these guys just couldn’t leave me alone. I told ‘em they needed to talk to me when I was done with the Marines. My daddy was a Marine and never made it back. I owe it to him to finish what he started. There’ll be plenty of time for football and college when I get back.”

The Marines saw that linebacker physique and instantly knew they had a man who could hump a rocket launcher. He never complained, and the frustration that came from being attacked by shadows had not made him a cynic. He plodded along, bearing his load with the kind of understated duty that was always there even if you didn’t know what it was. I knew what it was, and I knew it was the only thing that now kept him from running back to football and college.

Road to Nowhere, pp. 312-313

I knew we weren’t going anywhere the moment I stepped off the truck. Human waste was scattered along the path bearing witness to the louder carnage that passes through every so often. Paint cans, C-ration tins, shell casings, broken plates, the arm of a child’s doll, and remains of a human spine. They all said the same thing, and they had been saying it all along. Turn back boy, this road leads to nowhere.

Erik Jung is a cadet second class (a junior) at the United States Air Force Academy. This is his first publication.