

BRANDON LINGLE

Carefully scripted Vietnam, 1969 a conversation with Jack Beeler

Artist's Statement

I've made films and photographs and written film scripts and short stories, but somehow I'm not inclined to call myself an "artist." I submerged many of my "creative urges" and practices when long ago I became a businessman, husband, and father, a time-honored story. Now I'm off those hooks and am enjoying fiddling with photos I shot 50+ years ago, in the creative frenzy of my youth. The intervening decades have brought me perspective and various mellowing agents such as gratitude and compassion. After all the hard work of getting to where I am now, I find myself more interested in "having fun" than in crafting a story or hunting down another photograph. Learning to "have fun" is plenty enough a challenge...

Brandon Lingle: *How'd you end up in the Air Force and then Vietnam?*

Jack Beeler: Several minutes after my 1966 college graduation ceremony, my 1-A draft status arrived from the Army. *Good morning, Vietnam?* Having zero desire to put myself in harm's way, and not being supportive of the war effort, I looked to the Air Force as a means of staying well removed from Vietnam. A college friend's father was a rising star in the Air Force, and a letter to him resulted in his assurance that I'd be instantly accepted if I applied. I'd asked about Air Force filmmaking possibilities, and he spread icing on the cake by suggesting that I'd be a shoo-in to that field.

BL: *What drew you to photography and film?*

JB: During my senior year at Wesleyan University I'd taken two film courses (the first two they'd ever offered) and was head-over-heels in love with the idea of film-making; this was the first time in my young life any passion other than sexual had been awakened, and I was on fire! Here, at long last, was *the* place for my tiny voice to be heard. I felt that I'd heard the clarion call to my life's work; wasn't I a born storyteller? Most attractive to me was the naïve notion that my films would stand in for me—that once my case was artistically made through this medium, it would be irrefutable, incontrovertible; I'd be honored and respected without having to verbally battle my way up the ladder. It never occurred to me that I'd have to fight tooth and nail to get *any* film produced! Also propelling me forward was the self-serving notion that I had somehow magically inherited a keen sense of aesthetic that, once manifest in my film work, would show the world that I had a valuable contribution to make.

Once in the Air Force I was informed that my academic record *didn't* qualify me for assignment to audio-visual work; however, I was assured I'd make an excellent Air Police officer (which work horrified me on every level *and* foreshadowed a tour in Vietnam). Before too long, however, my crisp salute and spit-shined shoes won me the position of Wing Commander's Aide at McGuire AFB, and as any young officer who's held that position knows, that job ensures your writing the ticket for your own next assignment, in this case as apprentice director/producer of films at Lookout Mountain Air Force Station on Wonderland Avenue in the Hollywood Hills, then the Air Force's film-making/propaganda center! This place was chock full of long-time civilian filmmakers, writers, and technicians who'd had careers in Hollywood and who'd "retired" into Air Force filmmaking jobs.

Lookout Mountain fairly pulsed with creative energies. Within four months I was writing, directing, and producing documentary, training, and other films, and couldn't have been happier or more productive! I fondly regard the year I spent there as a once-in-a-lifetime experience, the apex of my young creative life.

Ah, but the Air Force had other ideas for my future ("rounding out" the education and experience of a hopefully career-minded young officer). And so at the end of my Lookout Mountain assignment, I was ordered to Minot, North Dakota to serve in the bottom of a missile silo. I freaked and stridently complained. A choice was presented: Minot/missile silo, or Saigon/photo squadron. My instantaneous decision: Vietnam!

Fate? Karma? Little did I know that my year in Vietnam would propel me into "manhood/adulthood," and ultimately top my list of "life's most significant experiences."

BL: *What was a Combat Motion Picture Team? Tell us about your time leading one of these teams in Vietnam in 1969?*

JB: The DoD had formed five in-country, Saigon-based “Combat Motion Picture Teams” (2 Army, 1 Air Force, 1 Navy, 1 Marine), each consisting of four or five men, to create 2-3 minute “news clips” that would tout the military’s Vietnam objectives and accomplishments and most significantly, counter the often negative and critical TV coverage by the three major networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC. The teams were ordered to fan out into the country (also to the Philippines, Taiwan, etc.) and shoot military “news” stories (each team’s quota: four stories a month). Regardless of a team’s military branch, teams were allowed and encouraged to shoot stories about the other three branches. A short script, shots description, sound captured, and the raw film footage for each story were sent straight to Washington where they were reviewed and then accepted or rejected by the Pentagon. If accepted, they were edited (by Fox-Movietone or some such civilian entity under contract to the Pentagon) into the aforementioned “news clips” and disseminated, for free, to TV stations throughout the United States (and elsewhere, for all I know). Thus was the military’s point of view of the war effort presented in the living rooms of America.

BL: *What kinds of stories did you cover in Vietnam? What guidelines were you working under? How did those guidelines influence the art?*

JB: A perplexing, irritating dilemma immediately presented itself: how could I morally justify myself, a passively anti-war advocate, a lover-not-a-fighter, by feeding the military’s propaganda machine? It was 1969, and the U.S. public was screaming for an end to the war. I figured that the more hard-core military action I could get placed into U.S. living rooms, the sooner the revolution would take place and the war be abandoned. Bonus: my military bosses would *love* my depicting their war machines in action. And so I decided to shoot as many war-machine stories as I could. Caveat: I would stage my “combat,” keeping myself and my team as safe as possible, while producing footage guaranteed to win the hearts and minds of my military superiors.

BL: *Tell us about your creative process in a warzone?*

JB: Insofar as my commander had been my commander in Hollywood, he knew I’d produce what he needed without any prompting or close supervision, and our *laissez-faire* relationship began. This basically meant that I had “carte blanche” to choose the stories I wanted to shoot, as well as on-site directorial autonomy. I quickly noticed that the *Stars and Stripes*, our military newspaper, had already done the hard legwork—they’d researched, written, photographed, and published the exact type of stories I

wanted to tell, complete with locations and names of the units and commanders! From my office in a downtown Saigon hotel, I got on the horn and made arrangements with the local commander.

“Sir, I’d like to put you and your outfit on nationwide TV.”

“Uh, how fast can you get here, Lieutenant?”

BL: *Did you feel constrained by bureaucracy or free to explore your craft? How did you balance your creative desires within the boundaries of a military production?*

JB: Once in the field, during my initial interview with the local commanding officer, I expressed preference that the story be filmed without the confusion and distractions of actual combat.

“You sure don’t want my photographers in your way, do you, Sir? If we’re going to get the kind of shots that will make this story TV-worthy, I’ll need your help in re-creating a typical operation. It would be best to do the filming on, shall we say, a quiet day. I’ll work up a shot list, OK?”

I didn’t need to fill in the blanks. These commanders jumped right on board for my Hollywood-style, structured movie-making, salivating at the opportunity to have their units splashed across TV land. Firepower would be out-going, not incoming, while the cameras were rolling.

My Washington-bound scripts simply, and truthfully, stated that we were witnessing “typical operations” by such-and-such Army, Navy, or Air Force units. As for the Marines, I assumed their activities were far too dangerous, and I steered clear. In fact, the Marine Combat Motion Picture Team was *enraged* that their stories weren’t being published! They complained that the “combat” footage of the other teams amounted to so much milk toast—that *they* were the only ones getting down-and-dirty war footage. They embedded themselves in an actual Marines combat operation and then invited all the other team leaders to see their footage, vivid footage which they thought would establish a new benchmark for our teams’ story telling. From the edges of their chairs in the darkened theater they bellowed interpretations of their shaky, headache-inducing footage.

“See that!? That’s when a mortar blew up TWENTY FEET AWAY!! Oh, man, Charlie was everywhere around us!!”

We other team leaders furtively rolled our eyes, thanked the Marines for the showing, and left the theater. Their story was rejected by Washington as... well, unworkable.

My measured, carefully scripted combat stories were scarfed up by the Pentagon and my Air Force team was usually near or at the top of the accepted-and-published stories

chart. Little wonder! First, I distilled the story from my *Stars and Stripes* “research;” then, once on-site, I compiled a shot list and wrote up a scenario, collected sound, and conducted interviews as appropriate. Last, I directed the basically storyboarded action (it helped to have *excellent* cameramen on the team!) Angels must have been hovering over us, because not once during these field outings were we drawn into the fighting that raged around us, sometimes only kilometers away! The most jarring example of this: we extensively interviewed a young rising-star South Vietnamese Army major in the field. Throughout our full day of filming, this handsome man had positively *radiated* intelligence, intention, and character. Two days later we learned (from the comfort and safety of our Saigon office), that he had been killed the next day! The story was killed as well.

Sample (published) stories by my Air Force team included:

- “U.S. Navy Cruiser, USS St. Paul, on Fourth Tour in Vietnam Waters” (Sept 5, 1969)
- “U.S.-South Vietnamese Forces Patrol Enemy Infiltration Routes” (Oct 1, 1969)
- “Republic of Vietnam Aircraft Mechanics Whiz Through Aircraft Conversions” (Nov 7, 1969)
- “Sailors, Marines Aid ‘Boys Town’ in the Philippines” (Nov 19, 1969)
- “South Vietnamese Fighter Pilots Fly F-5 ‘Freedom Fighter’” (Nov 28, 1969)
- “South Vietnamese Forces Guard Island in Siam Gulf Against Viet Cong” (Dec 2, 1969)
- “South Vietnamese Pilots Take On Larger Combat Role in Delta Area” (Dec 17, 1969)
- “Santa Claus Hitches Ride on Helicopter to Reach Troops in Vietnam” (Dec 23, 1969)
- “Seabees’ Build Naval Repair Base for South Vietnamese” (Jan 9, 1970)
- “Air Cushion Vehicles Patrol Infiltration Routes in ‘Plain of Reeds’” (Jan 26, 1970)
- “U.S. Navy Blasts Deep Water Channel in Record Time in Vietnam” (Feb 16, 1970)
- “Rice Control Program Denies Rice to Viet Cong” (Feb 26, 1970)
- “U.S. Army Helicopter ‘Hunter-Killer’ Teams Patrol Enemy Infiltration Routes in South Vietnam” (Mar 13, 1970)
- “Converted Junks Patrol Border Rivers in South Vietnam” (Mar 20, 1970)
- “U.S. Navy’s ‘Black Ponies’ Add Punch to Delta Security” (Apr 3, 1970)
- “U.S. Army Engineers Build Highway Through Mekong Delta in South Vietnam” (Apr 6, 1970)
- “Australian Troops in South Vietnam Backed by RAAF ‘Bushranger’ Gunships” (May 29, 1970)

BL: *How did observing the war through a lens impact your experience and understanding of the war?*

JB: What?!! “Santa Clause Hitches Ride on Helicopter to Reach Troops in Vietnam”?? I can’t take credit for this clever idea; it was one of the rare assignments I was given. Apparently “The Brass,” from the seclusion of their Pentagon offices, decided to generate a heart-warming story of how Jolly Old St. Nick turned his attention from millions of expectant children to the handful of lonely, fun-starved G.I.s at Firebase Vivian, 55 miles north of Saigon. Santa, a bag bulging with “special gifts” slung over his shoulder, rappelled from a Huey chopper into this desolate, slimy mud bath. He slogged his way from one wide-eyed soldier to the next, bringing a “flood of ‘Merry Christmas’ greetings” as he dispensed his gifts. Santa’s long white beard and full-on Macy’s red and white velvet outfit, wringing wet from another scorching, humid South Vietnamese day, delighted the shirtless, predominantly African-American grunts he’d come so far to see. At least, that was the impression I got, from the abundant hoots and giggles. The story aired two days before Christmas, 1969, on the stations that dared show it.

This is perhaps an extreme example of what it was like to “observe the war through a lens,” and how it “impacted my experience and understanding of the war,” but an example nonetheless. The photographer-reporter is, by his/her position and often by his/her nature, constantly making observations and judgments along with his/her recordings. “Disillusionment” might sum up my personal experience. By 1969 it was already emerging that the American presence in Vietnam was largely the consequence of lies and deception by self-serving politicians; the full, raw truth of this would eventually come out. “Through the lens” I witnessed a top-heavy, out-of-its-element war machine in Vietnam—which in my mind reflected America’s fixation with technology and materiel, cornerstones of the military-industrial complex. U.S. Government/Military agendas such as the “Vietnamization” of the war seemed trumped up and out of touch with on-site realities—like the discernible passivity of the South Vietnamese soldiers in the face of our overwhelming, controlling and often racially arrogant presence. Those and other U.S. “character flaws,” in spite of the massive firepower unleashed (hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian civilians died), fairly ensured our alienation from the South Vietnamese and eventual defeat by their tenacious, dedicated countrymen to the north. I certainly wasn’t the only “reporter” to come to these conclusions.

BL: *Tell me the backstory of one of these images that your mind returns to?*

JB: I personally experienced the Vietnamese as friendly, gentle, cooperative people—both in Saigon where I lived and in the countryside where I worked. I was extremely averse to exploiting these people in their war-ravaged circumstances, particularly on the infrequent occasions when I walked around Saigon looking for special “photo moments.” My military uniform potentially cast one strike against me, but I always had a smile ready for my intended subject, and often pantomimed taking a photo before actually doing so, a wordless request for permission. In photographing the begging monk (I’m presuming he was a monk, based on his fuchsia-colored robe and black turban) in Saigon, I contradicted my standards, however. The results are evident—a look of disdain and contempt on the face of the young boy in the upper left hand corner and a startled, quizzical look on the face of the old man himself (he hissed at me as he turned his head, having been alerted by the boy). I was transfixed by the vivid image of this beggar and “couldn’t resist” the moment (I literally had to crawl through the concertina barbed wire to get the best angle). This photo, to me the most compelling of all I took that year, represents an artistic triumph but at the price of my feeling a sense of having violated my subject.

In the field, surrounded by my team of photographers and sound men, in circumstances that were pre-arranged and sanctioned, my subjects, whether U.S. military, South Vietnamese military, or Vietnamese civilians, were compliant, tolerating my own still photography and my team’s motion picture photography as part of whatever bargain had been struck.

BL: *How do you think popular culture has represented your war over the years?*

JB: My understanding of the arc of the (American) cultural response to our involvement in Vietnam is that it has recently undergone a significant shift. For decades after the war ended in humiliating defeat in 1975, and after the hearings and academic investigations which followed—with the conclusions that the war was essentially an immoral, self-serving *invasion* of another country, which brought massive pain and suffering to all parties—the most prevalent national emotion was guilt, closely followed by denial, the more so among those Americans who served in Vietnam, and most acutely those who lost friends and family and bore survivor’s guilt. Now, with the 50th year anniversary of the war being touted, it seems that what’s being stressed is the heroism of the individual American men and women who served, even extending to some of our South and *North* Vietnamese allies/adversaries (a recent NYTimes article

highlighted Vietnamese women and their war experiences). In Vietnam, the war is referred to as the “American” war. To my amazement, when I visited about 15 years ago (including a trip to Hanoi, the very nexus of the enemy lair), I was met with unqualified friendliness. I never experienced any resentment, even in conversations with those who had suffered tremendously during or after the war. A friend, an ex-Marine who fought in Vietnam in 1965, related that he had a similar experience when he travelled from Hanoi to Da Nang and Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City in 1998.

Ken Burns’s upcoming work might just blow the doors off any of my basically personal opinion about American cultural attitudes toward the war.

BL: *I started thinking about Apocalypse Now the first time I looked at your photos. What are your thoughts on that?*

JB: *Apocalypse Now* in my estimation isn’t really about the Vietnam War, insofar as it doesn’t address any of the real issues about the war; the war serves only as a backdrop for Coppola’s fantasy exploration of the dark side. That said, various sequences certainly evoke the Vietnam war scene, the most vivid being the *Ride of the Valkyries*-backed helicopter attack sequence, an unapologetic glorification of men at war (handily winning, of course). My team and I had, years earlier, filmed an Army helicopter operation which, without the operatic music, surfboards and rockets, might easily have served as the storyboard template for Coppola’s stirring sequence. There we were, my humble, meagerly paid Combat Motion Picture Team and myself, laying the groundwork for an Academy Awards nomination for Francis and his gang.

BL: *Ken Burns & Lynn Novick’s The Vietnam War documentary and Mark Bowden’s book Hue 1968 appeared this year. What lessons are we still learning from the Vietnam experience?*

JB: Sadly, thanks in large part to our long-standing culture of American Exceptionalism, history has already repeated itself in various ways (Iraq, Afghanistan). Lessons are learned by people in countries where experience, intelligence, and high principles are brought to bear—not where malfeasance, partisanship, and self-aggrandizement dominate. In my opinion the fighting and wars that America has generated since World War II have served the primary purposes of testing and improving various weapons systems and keeping the men and women of the military in practice and improving. These activities benefit the military-industrial complex and, with the exception of 9/11, have kept the killing fields abroad.

BL: *There are no Combat Motion Picture Teams roving around our wars today yet technology has advanced significantly since Vietnam. In some ways the logistics would be easier. What stories do you think we're missing?*

JB: Congress initially responded to the CBS “documentary” *The Selling of the Pentagon* with a firestorm around the networks’ then commonly accepted practice of editing together bits of interview material to make for a smoother and more concise presentation; various entities sought to slander and discredit the makers of the documentary by citing this “transgression” in a barely concealed attempt to quell the perceived threat to the Pentagon’s autonomy and budgets. As difficult a pill as it was to swallow, Congress ultimately recognized the wisdom of the documentary’s premise and constricted the military’s creation of media propaganda to inform and win over the taxpayer/civilians whose dollars were being spent to foster such messages. However, Pentagon-to-Population propaganda still continues today, with the added complication that the Pentagon now hires civilian media experts (e.g. Booz Allen, Hamilton) to craft and disseminate their pro-military messages (and by extension, protect their budgets).

I think it’s appropriate for the military to spend *limited* (and monitored) resources to create propaganda whose target audience is primarily *internal*, for the purposes of morale-boosting and member retention. Likewise, I consider it appropriate for the Pentagon to spend (again, *limited*) funds on media for recruitment. I have every confidence that military stories needing to be told *will* be told to their pertinent audiences. Social media, the ubiquitous phone-cum-camera, and other technological devices all but guarantee the capture, treatment, and publishing of such stories. So-called Combat Motion Picture Teams were a flash in the historical pan of the Vietnam War; ultimately their integrity was challenged and disproven, and frankly I’m proud to have been a player, in my own small fashion, to that end.

On the other hand, I think it’s vitally important that the military engage in audio-visual documentation of their operations. Both current and future generations deserve access to such material to see what has been done with the blood and treasure of its citizens, to promote and ensure accountability and transparency going forward, not to mention perspective. A better-functioning democracy, flawed as ours is, and a society that at least has a chance to learn from its failures and successes, deserves that.

JACK BEELER, Wesleyan University 1966, USAF 1966-1971 (Vietnam 1969-70), is the 29-year veteran of a small men's group, now called "The Elders." He shamelessly devotes his time to playing bridge, golf, traveling, and other pleasurable pursuits. He still dabbles in the world of selling Art Deco and other antiques at decorumsanfran.com.

BRANDON LINGLE served in Iraq and Afghanistan as an Air Force public affairs officer. He's published photos or essays in various publications including *The American Scholar*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times At War*, *Guernica*, *The North American Review*, *The Normal School*, and *The Southeast Review*. His essays are "Notables" in four editions of *The Best American Essays*. Views are his own.



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