Dear Jim,

I enjoyed talking with you on the phone several weeks ago. I'm glad Marc Gilbert suggested I call. It sounds like you are developing an exciting facility.

You expressed interest in the manuscript I'm working on about Vietnam, so here is an offering for your collection. This is the seventh draft, unpolished and without photographs.

My best wishes to you for the growth of your archive,

Lawrence Holmberg Jr.
DESCENDING FROM THE PASS OF CLOUDS

A VIETNAM MEMOIR

LAWRENCE HOLMBERG, JR.
Introduction

In 1971 I went to Vietnam as a photographer for the U.S. Army. I was twenty-six. As much as I have diminished my experience in the intervening years by saying things like: "Not that much happened to me," "I was just a photographer," or "That was over twenty years ago," nonetheless Vietnam has stubbornly remained with me sometimes far beneath the surface, other times throwing me for a loop, but always there. It finally occurred to me that looking directly at the place Vietnam holds in my life might be more helpful than avoiding it.

In the fall of 1990 I attended an international television buyer's market in Cannes in hopes of finding a European distributor for Mending Hearts, a documentary on AIDS my company had produced. After my film partners went home I was left with a few days to unwind and drove to Nice. I enjoy walking in unfamiliar cities. Every block can hold a surprise. I have always been fascinated by bookstores, but coming upon a used bookstore in Nice, I wondered if it would be as interesting. I needn't have worried. The corridors stacked from floor to ceiling in a vaguely musty atmosphere worked their magic. I felt at home even though I was only able to glean a hint of the books' subjects with my vaguely recalled 25 year old secondary school French. Each volume was carefully wrapped with a folded glassine cover, making them somehow more precious than new volumes. There were no second, third, or fifteenth copy; each was unique. Some were obscure treatises, others were the elegant plain paper volumes of the Editions Guillimard. The owner smiled expectantly and smoothed the pale blue apron tied neatly twice across her generous stomach. "Bon jour, monsieur."

"Bon jour, madame. Est-ce que vous avez des livres sur l'Indochine?" I surprised myself.

It didn't, however, bother madame, she had even understood my question. She wasn't sure, but she asked me to please follow her. Walking slowly, she paused occasionally to check titles. After several minutes she stooped over and pulled out a dusty paperback. To gain some time alone with it I asked if she had any books with photographs of Vietnam. She asked me to wait and bustled off. I looked at the cover, Voyage aux Indes et en Indochine par Eugene Brieux.
The book was published in 1910. I flipped to the section on Vietnam. "Monday, the 29th of November (1908)," I began to laboriously translate, "Early in the morning we entered the delta of the Red River, and soon, at a bend in the river there was Haiphong, which looked quite agreeable." I was surprised that I could see a picture through my nearly forgotten French. Images of Saigon drifted erratically across my mind. Here was a French writer who explored this country some sixty years before me, yet I felt strangely connected to him. Flipping through the book I find "Tuesday, the 17th of November . . . the spectacle of arriving in Saigon. Going in that deep, wide river, which is one of the mouths of the Mekong, the river snakes its way through the city, and as you approach the dock you are able to see sometimes on your right and sometimes on your left the bells of the cathedral."

The shopkeeper returned with Les Colonies Francaises published in 1931. I was so excited I could hardly bear to turn the pages on Vietnam. I looked at a few pictures and knew that I had to purchase them both. With my books elegantly wrapped in lustrous pearl grey paper I hurried back to my hotel.

Vietnam was returning to me on my trip to France in several other strange ways. I immediately noted an odd familiarity with the architectural styles in both Nice and Cannes as I recalled similar French buildings which I had seen in Saigon and Danang. Even the palm trees in southern France seemed eerily familiar to the tropical scenes floating in my memory. Events which seemed insignificant a few days ago now seemed part of a web of Vietnam connections.

A few days earlier in Cannes, I had come across a small house built in the 1830's and used by various writers including Victor Hugo as a vacation retreat. A wall surrounded the little house and at the top of the wall was a barrier of broken glass set in concrete, a threatening and implicitly bloody scene not terribly remarkable in itself, but one of the most common features of middle class homes in Saigon. Then, walking up the street from Victor Hugo's vacation cottage, I came upon a large sign directing me to the nearby Saigon restaurant.
Inspired by these apparent coincidences, I finally resolved to write about what I had avoided, or had been told to get over, or had made into humorous stories for others. I began a nearly five year period during which I spent an hour or so each morning letting whatever memories associated with Vietnam float to consciousness. These writing sessions formed the raw material for the present book. I am not fully clear why I have been so determined to make a book of these accounts. I think the story is an interesting one, but more importantly, I hope others may be encouraged by what I have done to explore their dark places and share their discoveries with readers, friends or family. I wish to any who may begin this long and arduous work the grace which has come to me and which leaves me saddened to be writing the final words of this memoir.

A note about the photographs. They were made by me in Vietnam in 1971, except where I have indicated otherwise. In the Army my photographs were documentary records, however, in this book I have sought to create a more personal rendering. I have selected those pictures which interest me now without attempting to convey historic or journalistic objectivity, should that noble quality actually exist.
1. Greetings, 1969

Vietnam was where I began an independent life. What do I mean by independent? A life driven from within as opposed to a life of expectations. There were many points along the curve. One was my draft notice. My life was in shambles. I had had a deferment for teaching English to 8th and 9th grade boys in Brooklyn, but I quit my job in a theatrical protest. I was married, but the marriage was collapsing. Now I had no income. Drawn into a downward spiral, I watched with obsessive fascination as my life fell apart. My solution was to escape. With my savings I purchased a motorcycle and rode from Brooklyn to Florida.

When I returned, I was not surprised to find that my wife had left. Sitting at the swirled grey and white formica table in the miniature kitchen of our apartment I read the letter she had left. I wished I was dead. An official looking letter stuck out from the other mail and I knew instantly what it was. It could have been from the IRS or State Comptrollers Office, but if you were a male under 26, you knew it was your draft notice. I was numb. Should I go to jail, go to Canada, or go to war?
2. Dad and the Draft Board

After another month and a move back to Chicago to stay with my parents until I could decide what to do, I received a further notice from the draft board informing me that I was to report for my physical. But Dad said he'd been doing some "checking" and in good old Chicago fashion had found a way to have my draft notice "taken care of." I couldn't believe it, Dad who had been in favor of Nixon and the war, and a conservative Republican from his English suits to his Italian wing tips was going to get me out of the army. My moral dilemma was solved. It was all "fixed." Dad said he had gone to see a senator I knew he disliked and had swallowed his pride. My life was slipping out of my grasp. Why shouldn't I be drafted? Why should someone whose father didn't know a senator go to Vietnam in my place? I was furious that my father had preempted my choice, so I decided on the spot to go through with the draft.

When I refused his offer of help, I got the feeling my dad didn't think I was smart enough to tie both shoes. From then on he and Mom never spoke to me about Vietnam. For the next few weeks I felt a frigid tension. When it was time for me to leave for my Army physical, Mom said she wasn't able to face going to the train with me, so I said goodbye to her the night before. Dad took me to the Davis Street "L" station in Evanston at 5:30 in the morning. A drizzly grey day. He got out of the car and gave me a hug. There was a catch in his voice. "Good luck, Son. I guess there's not much point in my waiting around." So he got back in his Buick and drove away. That
night I and a group of other young men from Chicago flew to Ft. Lewis, Washington to begin basic training.

3. Cherry and Me and the Spirit of the Bayonet

The first Sunday of basic training our company formed up after breakfast and our drill sergeant explained that church call was coming up and that our company had always had a perfect attendance record. With that he asked who was going. All raised their hands but me.

So the company got into dress uniforms and marched off to church. I anticipated relaxing with a Sunday newspaper. This was not how it turned out. One of the other drill sergeants, a huge Hawaiian whose only memorable phrase was "You want to play Fuck Around with me? I'll show you Fuck Around," stomped up to me and asked if I wanted to play Fuck Around with him. I innocently replied that I'd rather read the paper, thanks. In a rage he ordered me into my dress uniform and to report to the company area in five minutes. In swelling anxiety I hurried to the deserted company area. The sergeant marched me up and down then took me to the low crawl pit, a field of dirt which he ordered me to traverse on my stomach continuously for half an hour. And when the company marched back from church there I was covered in dirt and sweat crawling on my knees and elbows. Our company's religious attendance record the next week returned to its sterling 100%.

There were other attempts to confront my independence. My footlocker was once thrown over and its contents scattered over the floor of the barracks. Another time the captain of the basic training company called me to his office. While I stood at attention he held my personnel file.
"You think you're pretty smart, don't you?" I was stunned how could this young man have borrowed the exact lines my father had confronted me with on more than one occasion. I flushed with anger, however learning the military response to independence I replied, "No, sir." "That's good, soldier, because you don't know shit about survival in this man's army." Undeniably true. He dismissed me only weeks later to humiliate me again, this time in front of the entire company for trying to help my bunkmate, whose name I remember only as Cherry. I was accused of being a "jail house lawyer," then blamed for Cherry's troubles. If I had an independent streak, Cherry had one ten times bigger and the mouth to go with it. He was always in trouble and was locked up when our company graduated.

But somehow Cherry and I got along. I don't know why. He was my first black friend. Our company was split along racial lines - half were white farmers from downstate Illinois and the other half were homeboys from Chicago. I ended up in the middle of the barracks. Neither of us wanted to bunk with the other, but all the other beds were taken. Out of bored indifference we'd talk a little at night before falling asleep. His life seemed to be filled with women who were always wanting to "give me some head." That sounded exotic, no one ever wanted to give me "some head." I was just going through a divorce and Cherry's exploits sounded like dreams fulfilled. He also had an inexhaustible supply of "reefer back at the crib" and an astounding collection of jazz records.

In my world, jazz was the province of sophisticated intellectuals, in Cherry's, it was part of street life in Chicago.

At night sometimes his fellow homies would call out an album track, say give the title of the album the side and the number of the track: Miles Davis' "Porgy and Bess" first side, third cut, 'Gone.' These self-proclaimed pimps and drug dealers would listen in their minds for the exact length of time of that song. Then someone would suggest another. One evening during a pause I gave a selection from my own favorite jazz album, Miles Davis' Kind of Blue. It might have been "So What" the first track on side 1. There was an awkward silence, yet the song choice was perfect and irresistible - they all listened. Later one guy even whispered, "That was nice, man."
During regular daily instruction one of the drill sergeants was constantly talking to us about life on the "outside." His message was that the Army was offering us one last opportunity to redeem ourselves - to at last become men and be given the opportunity to choose the honorable calling of arms. To me as a draftee this sounded bizarre. While I did permit myself to be drafted, it was an unbridgeable gulf to believe that I had chosen a military career.

Yet it is true that when I returned from Vietnam and looked for a job on "the outside," I had tremendous anger and seriously thought about "re-upping" to a place where life was predictable and since I would be due for a promotion to sergeant soon, where life would be tolerable.

But when Cherry and I went through basic training, "the outside" was where I wanted to be. The sergeant's description of the terror that awaited us should we not make it in the Army or God forbid, actually leave the service when our term was up, seemed comical.

Much of basic training was a caricature of a bad World War II movie. "All right you bunch of girls, Sergeant X here is going to turn you into killing machines." We ran around singing songs with such inspiring lyrics as "I'm goin' to kill me a Viet Cong," and "When I die put me in a box and ship me home," not to mention the ever popular "I know a girl named Bony Maroni." At any moment I expected guffaws and elbow pokings, but this was serious stuff to these buzz cut non-coms.

It really hit me that I was in this strange military world was when I learned about "the spirit of the bayonet." Our company was formed around a drill instructor standing on a 10 foot high platform. With his wide brimmed World War I hat, leather strap tight behind his neck, he began screaming at us. Surely, there's some mistake, I thought. No, he was screaming about the spirit of the bayonet which was "to kill." I was becoming more uncomfortable by the second. This high school dropout was urging us to partake of the spirit of the bayonet. Soon I found myself screaming when he shouted, "WHAT'S THE SPIRIT OF THE BAYONET?"

"TO KILL!"

"I CAN'T HEAR YOU MOTHER FUCKING PUSSIES." I SAID WHAT IS THE SPIRIT OF THE BAYONET?"
"TO KILL!" "TO KILL!" "TO KILL!" I screamed as my throat became sore. I became terrifyingly aware that not only was I not in control of my life - my personality was being broken while I watched in just a few short weeks. What's happening to me? I talked to Cherry at night in our bunks. He wanted out. I couldn't shake the passion with which I had run at a straw dummy and rammed my bayonet into his heart.

I who thought my intelligence, education, sarcastic irony would hold me above the stupid games played around me found myself thrown into a maelstrom whose force was way beyond my control. Who was I? - the patient and humorous 9th grade English teacher, the photojournalist or this monster with a knife attached to his rifle. My previous life seemed to fade like cheap outdoor housepaint after two years in the rain.

In the morning banging trash can lids alerted us to the shouted instruction, "drop your cocks and grab your socks." Things began to change. I learned how to be tough and push myself to do, just as they say in the ads, more than I ever thought possible, even as my own sense of individual identity melted into that of a generic G. I.

Out of our basic training company most were sent to infantry AIT (advanced infantry training) and from there to Vietnam. One of the leaders of our company was rumored to have gone AWOL to Canada when he received his orders to AIT. He thought being a good leader would get him a break. Since I had already illustrated a book on the Civil War with my photographs (Strike the Tent, 1971) and I brought an advance copy with me to basic training, I was sent to the 221st Signal Company in California to make movies of missile tests. But I hope, Cherry boy, that you got out of going to The Nam.

'All Blues,' man.
4. The Friendly Skies

A chartered 707 from an unknown airline waited at Travis Air Base outside San Francisco to take two hundred soldiers including me to Vietnam. It made the first stop in Anchorage in the middle of the night. I got off and wandered around the half darkened terminal. Here I was in Alaska flying to a jungle war in a chartered jet. The feeling was strange, even silly. I imagined summoning a stewardess. "I'm sorry to trouble you, but I've had a change of plans. At our next stop I'd like to shift my destination from Saigon to Fiji, please. Thanks." Why not? I'd be better protecting the investment taxpayers had already made in me. And wouldn't I return a more cheerful, productive member of society?

We stopped again in Tokyo. Again I got off and walked up and down a shiny corridor. This war was so different from what I thought. Here were stewardesses serving us hot meals on plastic trays. It seemed like we should at least get rental cars and sun tan lotion when we arrived in Vietnam.

But after Tokyo, things began to change. A fresh cabin crew talked about what they planned to do that night in Hong Kong. All of us, of course, were going to be in Vietnam. No dates with the crew. No fancy restaurants or ferry rides to Kowloon or shopping sprees.

As we approached the coast of Vietnam the mood changed again. Our plane had turned from a charter jet into a target. The crew began preparations for landing at Saigon's Ton Son Nhut Airport. The pilot was circling to make sure the runway was safe. Of course sappers could wait till we touched down and have a perfect slow moving target. Or they could hold their fire till the plane stopped and then fire mortars at their leisure. We'd be incinerated immediately. As the plane
rolled to a stop there was a touch of panic while we waited for the cabin door to open. It swung aside and one by one we hurriedly filed down the steps into heat so thick I had to stop and catch my breath. By the time I reached the tarmac my shirt was already damp with sweat. The flight crew was as eager as we were for us to get off the plane. The air was thick with smells of vegetation, garbage, diesel exhaust. We were a group of nearly two hundred men huddled under a tarp, another target. A stewardess trying to be cheerful called out "see you in a year," as she swung the cabin door closed. The ground crew frantically signaled the big plane to start moving. It began to roll. No mortars. I was in Vietnam.

A heavy fatalism dropped over us moments after we landed. The chartered jet that had taken us halfway around the world started picking up speed. I found it hard to picture making the return flight. The plane was on the ground a total of 15 minutes and then it was gone. They'd made it, their Vietnam tour was over and now the Peninsula Hotel in Hong Kong and a few days sightseeing were on the minds of the crew as the pilot lifted off.

The ominous feeling I had when first breathing the damp, heavy air was intensified that night as we were put up in temporary barracks on the air base before we received orders to our various units. Shortly after midnight we had a rocket attack. A few Soviet rockets thudded into Ton Son Nhut with impressive explosions. I woke up, in panic, but others who'd been there a around a few days, said -- "Take it easy, man. They're way off." I lay awake trying to figure out how to tell by the sound when the rockets were "way off" or not.
5. Jeep to the 221st

After three days in the barracks at Ton Son Nhut waiting for my orders to catch up with me, they finally did. I was to be picked up by the 221st Signal Company which housed SEAPC, the Southeast Asia Pictorial Center which included both film and still photographic units.

The driver of the jeep was a smiling Italian Spec 4. After tossing my duffel bag on the back seat, he asked me if I wanted to do some heroin. I had been well prepared for the incredible Vietnamese marijuana, but none of my friends mentioned heroin. Stunned, but without thinking, I said, "Sure." He pulled out a cigarette, lit it and passed it to me. The heroin had no characteristic taste or smell. He had taken the tobacco out of regular cigarettes and refilled them with a mixture of heroin and tobacco. Having never smoked tobacco before, I choked. I was more worried about the tobacco in my lungs than the heroin. Gradually, I began to feel groggy and nauseous. "That's enough for me, man."

We drove along Highway 1 to Long Binh where the 221st had its headquarters. An amazing scene unfolded around me. We rode in an open jeep and faced a convey of trucks going into Saigon, their diesel engines belching black foul smelling smoke against a deep blue sky. To our left, toward the mountains in the west, huge cumulus clouds of fantastic proportions climbed far into the blue. The sun was turned up all the way to broil, but a hot breeze from the motion of the jeep helped. The driver fancied the combat look for the jeep and so had the front windshield folded down which made it feel like riding a motorcycle.

In front of us rolled trucks, army buses, small three wheeled Lambrettas covering a tiny rear compartment which enclosed perhaps 16 people many carrying both chickens and plastic mesh
shopping bags. Oxen paced sedately along the side of the road. Thousands of bicycles hugged the right side trying to avoid the gravel on the shoulder until a truck or bus forced them off the concrete. Passing was risky to avoid bicycle and motor scooters on the right, but to not stick out so far as to run into the huge diesels going the other way.

An old man riding on ancient moped cut in front of our jeep to avoid a group of children playing by the side of the road. In an instant the front bumper of the jeep hit the moped and the old man went down in the gravel on the shoulder of the road and soon arose screaming and pointing at us. My driver pulled up just past him. In a moment a crowd surrounded our jeep so densely that we couldn't get out.

The crowd began to shout in increasingly angry tones. We were trapped and I was scared. I could feel my .45 pistol under my hand, but drawing it would increase the growing frenzy of the crowd. I clutched the handle anyway. I was shocked that this random collection of people so agitated by what was clearly a minor mishap with no injury. I didn't know that our jeep was just an available flashpoint to release widespread hatred for Americans.

With blood pounding in my temples, the nausea was gone as I saw with the kind of clarity you have in a traffic accident, when your car starts to skid and you know there's nothing you can do, but you watch and in that fraction of a second everything seems to move in slow motion until you crash. Adrenaline flooded my system. The crowd was grew larger and angrier. Something ugly was going to happen very soon.

Another jeep was honking and forcing its way through the crowd. Two American MPs pulled up next to us. "Hey! What going on?" the driver shouted. The MP in the passenger seat pointed for us to follow them bumper to bumper. But weren't we leaving the scene of an accident?

"Get the hell out of here now or you'll never make it. Move out!" He turned forward and signalled his partner who had kept honking the jeep forward. Vietnamese started to wedge themselves between the two vehicles. My driver restarted our jeep. More people got between us and the MP jeep. "Move it!" My hand was still gripping my pistol, which I didn't want stolen.
People were yelling at us, leaning into the jeep, grabbing on to it trying to hold it back. My driver look terrified. We were losing contact with the MP jeep. They weren't going to stop.

"Let's go!" I yelled. He engaged the clutch. The jeep jerked forward and scared some of those in front. Slowly he eased into first gear and started aiming the jeep back toward the highway and its continuing flow of buses, trucks, cars, motorcycles, mopeds, bicycles and animals. By nosing out we risked getting hit by the trucks rumbling past us at 40 mph. Men and women in cone shaped hats screamed at us.

The jeep bumped and we were up on the asphalt. Diesel air horns blasted behind us as a military water truck was forced to slow down to let us on. Suddenly we were on the highway again and the crowd, several hundred by now was falling behind. I could see some scrambling to get motorscooters and follow us, but the traffic kept moving. I slumped back into the worn canvas seat.

The clouds, still beautiful in the west, provided no relief from the heat. It was hard to take a deep breath not laced with the blue or black smoke of gasoline or diesel engines. Finally the jeep approached the barbed wire fence and perimeter guard towers that marked the U. S. base at Long Binh, at that time the largest American military base in the world. We were once again in the womb of Army, safe from angry crowds, but surrounded by those who wanted all of us out of their country.
6. Grips and Grins

To test my ability to operate a camera, I was issued a 4" x 5" Speed Graflex, a camera more commonly found in photography museums than in daily photojournalism. I wasn't given a light meter, but I was told what film I was using and was issued a film pack. For someone who loves cameras, a chance to operate a clumsy old 4x5 was far more a treat than a test. I longed to use one. I enjoyed pulling open the lens board, clicking it into place, then raising the lens standard, setting the aperture of the lens, setting the shutter speed, and cocking the shutter. These old Graflexes had dim, dusty rangefinders that focused the camera by superimposing two faint images. When it was determined that I could operate the most clumsy and recalcitrant of the army's still photographic cameras, I was given assignments. Largely these were what we called "grips and grins" or award presentations.

One morning in February, shortly after my arrival in country, I was assigned an outdoor presentation that required three 12 exposure film packs and thirty-six flash bulbs to fill the dark shadows under helmets in the sun. The ceremony was to be on a landing strip. A colonel would walk up to a soldier then reach toward an aide who would be holding a small velvet pillow with the award resting on top. The colonel would read a short citation, present the award, salute, shake hands and move to the next. A second aide carried the other awards and replenished the pillow. I had perhaps two seconds during the colonel's handshake of the award recipient to make the picture. After the exposure I took out one flash bulb, put in another, pulled the tab to advance the film, recocked the shutter, stuffed the still hot used bulb in my fatigue pants and moved on to the next person getting an award stopping at the right distance to include both faces and make sure that
the image would be in focus. After the several exposures I realized that I couldn't fit all the used flash bulbs back in my large uniform pockets with the rest of the unused bulbs because in a hurry I couldn't tell which ones were used. Instead, I carefully placed each fired bulb on the ground, then let the colonel's staff pick up the flash bulbs one by one after me. The pictures turned out fine. My status rose at headquarters because officers giving awards detested being asked by an enlisted photographer to "try that one again, sir." So my reward was more of the same. In our unit boring, repetitive work was considered a plum and for the first few ceremonies I enjoyed the excitement of the band music as well as remembering all the steps necessary to make a good exposure. Gradually, however, these assignments were so monotonous that I found myself thinking of volunteering for our smaller field unit which was covering the last major American military operations of the war, Lom Son 719, support for the invasion of Laos and Dewey Canyon III, the continued harrassment of the North Vietnamese Army units in the Ashau Valley north and west of Danang.
7. The Magic Carpet

The first assignment which put me in a helicopter was the order to photograph a base stand down in Tay Ninh province, north and slightly west from Saigon. The helicopter was a Bell (LH-1) light observation helicopter, known as the Loach, a tiny two seater surrounded by a bubble of plexiglass, it was a ferris wheel seat that flew off the wheel. I met the pilot at the small helipad near the Long Binh command buildings. He flew first to a refueling point where I was able to examine the machine. Its delicate shape looked like it could be shot down with a BB gun, yet it also looked quick and agile.

I made some pictures of refueling and recognized my fascination for the new visual world that slow speed low elevation helicopter flight opened for me. I couldn't get enough of the endless details of the countryside, rice paddies, villages, dikes, roads, water buffalo that passed beneath me.

The stand down itself was a ceremony much like a grip and grin award ceremony with speeches, and a marching band. I recorded the ceremony, but hadn't been in Vietnam long enough to feel the futility and bitterness of the troops.

The pilot waited for me and flying back to Long Binh I talked with him. He was a warrant officer out of a college ROTC program. He was twenty three and he loved to fly. We flew over jade green rice paddies, the sun glinting off the water covering each one.
8. Two Day Pass

Robert Louis Stevenson (yes, related to the author) was one of the photographers from the 221st who went onto the field. We became friends and after a few weeks when I was able to swing a weekend pass we made a trip to Saigon. We went to the Star Hotel in Cholon which was well recommended by some Australians Stevenson knew. The hotel elevator was simply a moving platform with a folding metal screen. As the lift slowly ascended at each floor we saw ten or fifteen women gathered in the hallway smiling and waving to us. Their dresses were fitted to the waist and slit to the thigh, but none wore the traditional white silk pants of upperclass women. It was like a vision from Stag magazine which I bought surrepticiously for a quarter as a boy and brought home to ravish under the covers. It is true that these women were not the achingly beautiful upper class women I'd seen in their flowing ao dais, these were plumper friendlier peasants from all over Vietnam, yet they looked so inviting I wanted to bring them all into our room. I would have been perfectly happy not to leave the hotel, but we were hungry and looking for adventure. A smiling maid asked us if we'd like to have some of the girls come in before we went out. But we were resolute and said we'd be back soon.

Saigon, despite its pungent odors was beautiful as it grew dark. On the sidewalks windows were lit with small electric bulbs or with an occasional neon sign, restaurants and cafés were plentiful. I looked up and saw a roof restaurant decorated with colored paper lanterns. An elegant woman smiled at me from the railing. I nudged Stevenson and indicated with my glance. "I think I found a spot for dinner." As we walked out onto the roof we were immediately joined by two lovely slim women in ao dais smiling and slipping their arms around us. I could get to like
this war. I ordered more wine and looked out over the lights of the city. I couldn't believe my luck. New York, Chicago - they were part of a different, duller world.

Stevenson and I enjoyed a wonderful dinner. Laughing faces, glowing in the multicolored lights of the paper lanterns strung around the awning that shielded the tables from sun during the day, and on each table a candle covered by a glass chimney. Mystery was in the air.

When the slender woman in the pink silk ao dai sitting next to me smilingly suggested we return to her apartment I could only say, "yes" with the thought of the earthy women at the Star Hotel and our prepaid room but a flickering memory.

The blend of Eastern and Western features in these women was remarkable. The full and slightly curled black hair, remarkably long eyelashes, and a fuller figure that I had seen on many Vietnamese women.

After dinner we walked down to the street and hailed two cyclos. These were open seated contraptions much like a motorcycle side car attached instead to the front of the motorcycle. The effect was an exhilarating ride through a rapidly shifting urban kaleidoscope. Multicolored neon signs in shops, bars, and discos with strobe lights pulsated and cool deep purple black light spilled into the street as we roared by. Of course I had no idea where we were going or if these women had a deal with the drivers to deliver us to some of the thousands of Viet Cong that had infiltrated Saigon.

But to me this was Paris. I was sitting next to a lovely woman and watching a fascinating city sweep past as we pulled behind elegant French Citroen touring cars from the 1930s or the countless tiny Renault Dauphins taxis clogging the narrow streets. Slowed at intersections by men pedalling loads of lumber or bricks on rolling platforms with bicycles attached, the cyclos would hesitate then dart forward.

After driving though a labyrinth of narrow back alleys both cylos stopped before the entrance to a narrow three storied cinder block and stucco building. Entering on the first floor, a bare light bulb dangled by a single cord from the ceiling. A view partially obscured by the curtain of strips of translucent blue plastic hanging across the door. An old woman was tending a baby
inside. She was dressed in black silk pants and white cotton blouse. Squatting next to a wall, she looked up without expression. Stevens and I walked passed her and followed our companions up a spiral metal stairway to the third floor.

A low wattage bulb in a small desk lamp made a circle of light on dark mahogany. The tile floor looked cool. I imagined the feeling of walking on it barefoot.

The fee for the evening was negotiated, settled and paid. While Stevenson was attending to the financial negotiation, I looked around the room. I was struck especially by the two large polished and carved wood bed frames. Each bed had four posters with mosquito netting draped at the top of each post. The beds must have been family heirlooms from better times. The only other pieces of furniture in the room were a simple desk and a high backed polished mahogany chair. Wooden trunks were lined up along one wall.

That Stevenson and I would be having sex in adjacent beds sunk in with an awkward shock. While embarassed, I was also what in real estate is called "a motivated buyer."

The wooden bed frames shone in the lamp light. Once the transaction was complete each woman went to one of the beds and began to unroll the mosquito netting, moving from post to post as the gauzy netting fell around the bed. My choice smiled then turned from me and began a transformation that left me both agitated and fascinated. First she removed a wig and with it the long elegantly curled hair which in the restaurant had synthesized for me the blend of East and West. Next came the lovely long eyelashes placed in a receptacle for this purpose which she kept next to the bed. Then she unzipped her dress and carefully removed a plushly padded bra to reveal at last a figure quite different than the one I thought I had contracted for, but at this point the ruse was complete.

She got into bed and pulled a sheet around her. I could hear myself bickering like an old Asia hand in a Graham Greene novel. I thought of the simple but friendly women back at the Star, and grudgingly removed my clothes. Having been an unhappy listener to grotesque illustrated lectures about the horrors of venereal diseases, I had purchased my first condom, a slickly
packaged blue plastic capsule which I proceeded to open to the surprise and at first interest of the young woman already under the sheet.

First, my prior enthusiasm having wilted I was unable to wear the device, but in my nervousness did not quite think this through. I went ahead and broke the seal on the capsule. To my further embarrassment and disgust a slimy length of pig intestine fell from my hands. Suddenly grasping its meaning the young woman recoiled drawing the sheet up around her neck. I grabbed the thing off the bed in what I hoped was a suitably manly gesture and threw the whole thing, capsule halves and all skittering across the tile floor. Having thus dispensed with public health concerns, I turned to my once again smiling partner.

In the middle of the night and I awoke and went to the bathroom which consisted of a tiled room with a hole in the floor and two raised concrete foot shaped steps on either side of the hole. The powerful odor made me feel suffocated and nauseous. I stepped outside the little room onto a narrow concrete balcony. This third floor was the same height as most other buildings and so I had some view of both the city and the sky.

Huge pale clouds visible in the moonlight rose over the city in front of me. Lightning flashed in the distance and seconds later the low rumblings of thunder. For the first time I instinctively compared the sound to what I heard at Long Binh -- rockets or bombs? I saw the lightning. It was just thunder. I went back to bed, put my arm around a stranger, pulled the mosquito netting around the bed and sheet up under my arms.

Walking down the concrete steps in the morning, I watched the city through the patterned cinderblocks that shielded the outside stairway from the monsoon rains. Fortunately one of us kept a card from the Star Hotel so we knew where to return to pick up our overnight bags, but with several hours on our hands before we needed to leave for Long Binh neither of us was in any hurry to get back.

The city was much quieter Sunday morning. The markets were closed. As we walked we came across a building under construction. No work was going on, but two women who evidently lived at the site were preparing tea.
The crumbling French colonial buildings and the Vietnamese adaptations of 19th century French architecture were fragments reminiscent of a former life. Wide boulevards now had many trees cut down because snipers too often took refuge in their branches.

Windows had X's of masking tape across them to reduce the dangers of flying glass from bomb explosions. Downtown hotels often had bunkers made of oil drums and sand bags around them. With guard towers for machine guns and heavy mesh wire fences topped with concertina wire eight feet over the bunkers of motorscooter riding VC couldn’t easily fling explosives over the top. Around the garden walls of homes were pieces of broken glass set in concrete.

We ended up at Saigon University where a street photographer made a Polaroid of us. At last it was time to eat from a pho (soup) stand in the street and get a ride back to Long Binh. Despite our misadventures, Saigon had fired my imagination. A real city, however dirty and overcrowded, was magic compared to the red dust oven I was returning to.
9. **Surprise Package**

Sometimes photographers hung around the photo lab in the evening because the building was air conditioned unlike the sweltering quonset huts called "hootches" where we slept. In February and March SEAPC's field photographers were documenting Lom Son 719, in the north near Khe Sanh and Dewey Canyon II in the Ashau Valley. American artillery and air power supported a South Vietnamese attack into Laos from just below the DMZ intended to cut North Vietnam's army supply lines along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. News of the attack reached the North Vietnamese who were prepared, and the South Vietnamese troops fell into a trap. As a result the operation crumbled and south Vietnamese began to steam back across the border. When SEAPC photographers returned to have their film processed, they told of confusion, miscommunication and mutiny in an unraveling military operation.

One February evening I was talking with one of the photographers recently returned from the field when he asked me to come to his storage locker. He reached under some papers and pulled out a packet of 4x5 Polaroid copy negatives. "Here," he said. "Take these. I'm going out again and I don't have anyplace safe to keep them. You'll know what to do with them." I tore a page out of the *Government Photography* magazine I was reading and folded it around the negatives, then stuck the packet back in the magazine. The negatives followed me to the field and back to the States.

They were copies of photographs and captions made from the recent fighting. One picture showed a gasket for a tank creatively improvised by a soldier with a caption in which the
photographer reported a soldier's complaint that the new Sheridan tank broke down more frequently than the old model. At the bottom of the caption one of the staff sargeants wrote a warning to the photographer not to make "statements" and further not to make photographs that show the Army negatively just because the photographer may not like the Army.

The second was a photograph of a skull which American soldiers had mounted on a stick and placed on their bunker. The caption suggests that the men in this unit were more alert on guard duty to protect the skull of a former NVA soldier than they would have been under usual conditions.

The third photograph shows a pile of discarded but still useable artillery shells and the caption on the back explains that the photographer who was covering the campaign remembered the apparent waste of the abandoned shells near Khe Sanh when he heard desperate pleas for more ammunition closer to the border.

The attack was mounted along Vietnam Route 9 which went from Dong Ha near the coast, just south of the DMZ though Khe Sanh about 15 miles from the border of Laos, and on into Laos passing near Tchepone, the target goal of the campaign about 25 miles inside Laos. The purpose of the campaign was to block the flow of supplies on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and thus buy time for South Vietnamese forces to gain strength as American troops were being withdrawn.

The last negative reproduced a memo written by one of the staff sargeants of the 221st to Major January, Commander. In it he draws attention to both the photographs and the captions and suggests that these pictures could easily fuel the flames of anti-military sentiment in the States with adverse effects on the careers of officers and non-commissioned officers in charge of the unit.

The lesson of these photographs and the worried suggestions of censorship in the sargeant's comments seem to hold up after all these years: If the truth is unpleasant, we'd rather not know it. But the lesson really seems to be that those truths that are most unpleasant are the ones we most need to hear. So in the spirit of sharing a moral tale and keeping a commitment made twenty-three years ago, I reproduce the photographs. I must also acknowledge that I have blacked out the name of the sargeant who wanted these pictures repressed. Then he was a "lifer"
and I a rebellious draftee, but now we're both Vietnam vets and I have no wish to embarass him. The point is not his mistake, but a warning about future attempts to stifle military journalists. While I don't know what ultimately became of the originals, my guess is that they never left the 221st when they should have been sitting on a general's desk in the Pentagon.

10. Mopic

The E-6 sargeant stood sweating in the heat in front of the SEAPC photo lab early one Saturday morning. His olive drab T-shirt was already darkly stained under his arms. Although I had only been in country a few weeks, I felt trapped in this company area about the size of two football fields surrounded by barbed wire. Even one pass to Saigon hadn't helped. One morning on my way to the lab I saw a young soldier sitting in the dirt in his underwear, so strung out on heroin that mucus dripping from his nose mixed with spittle leaking from his mouth. He had no idea where he was.

I told Sarge I wanted to go up north. He said MOPIC was the only slot open. "Fine," I said. I'd made several films in college and the army camera, a hand crank Bell and Howell 16 mm turret camera, was compact and easy to use. I would be shooting silent color documentaries.

"I don't know, it's pretty soon to have someone so new sent to the field."

"Sarge, I can do it. This place is driving me nuts."

"I'll see what I can do."

A few days later I received orders to head north to our support base at Phu Bai and from there ordered to cover field operations of the 101st Airborne Division.

Memories of Long Binh are disconnected fragments. The screen door slamming in the mess hall. Relentless mid day heat. Bakelite composition plastic coffee cups stained dirty brown.
Even in the heat I drank a lot of coffee. In the evenings my friend Bob Lovejoy always had fresh music tapes from the states and in the evening I'd join him and other friends. Someone would bring speakers and a cassette tape player outside to the sand filled oil drums which surrounded our hoochies. Just because I'd been upset by seeing some of the worst of heroin addictions didn't mean that I wasn't using drugs. I had been warned about the potency of Vietnamese marijuana. My first week, I fell asleep each night after sharing a single joint. Later I stayed up until the cooler hours of the night getting high, listening to music and talking.

It seemed to me that about one third of our unit smoked odorless heroin laced cigarettes throughout the day. These were graphic artists and the guys who worked in the lab. My photographer friends smoked marijuana most evenings. On weekends we often smoked a joint before breakfast then took a hit of mescaline or LSD if we had it. I still remember the sweetness of the smell in my fingertips from rolling joints. And I liked the ritual of passing them from person to person around a circle. Even though marijuana was cheap, five dollars for a grocery bag full of world class weed, we still liked to smoke each joint to such a tiny nub that basically you were passing a small burning coal wrapped in rapidly disintegrating paper from finger tip to finger tip. At the end they were too small really to smoke, but we wouldn't give up until someone finally ate the last of the roach. My favorites were called Mama Sans. They were prerolled joints dipped in opium. The marijuana went to my mind inflaming the imagination, spinning vivid sensations that sent me gliding inside the music. The opium bathed my body in a warm glow. But much as I enjoyed these evening rituals, I was restless, bored by photographing the same award ceremonies day after day. Flying North to join field units sounded exciting, a chance to photograph in the field, the real stuff. It never occurred to me that being a combat photographer might be dangerous.
11. Out of the Frying Pan

When the SEAPC sargeant talked about sending me "up country" there was no particular meaning attached for me. I was not a steady newspaper reader then and even if I were there were no newspapers to be had but the Stars and Stripes and a unit newspaper. I had no idea what was going on, that I was sent up to document the final phases of the last major American operation of the war, Lan San 719. The plan was a risky gamble General Abrams took to possibly cut the Ho Chi Minh trail or at least seriously disrupt its function to buy time for South Vietnamese troops to function on their own independent of the American aid which was rapidly being phased out. The idea was that the South Vietnamese army would make an assault toward the town of Tchepone about 20 miles inside Laos at a point where the attack could be prepared relatively close to the final objective. Tchepone was dramatized to the press as the headquarters of the Viet cong. If the North hadn't heard of the plan from inside sources which were usually effective an inadvertant press briefing tipped off the build up outside Khe Sanh which was on the highway going to Tchepone from Vietnam. In any case the North Vietnamese were prepared. The Americans were to supply support, artillery, air strikes, intelligence, supplies. The South Vietnamese were to finally take control of the war, although this operation was planned by the Americans.

After initially falling back into a trap the North Viets decisively defeated the ARVN troops, sending them hurrying back across the border. There had been some gains, supply lines were disrupted for several months. Perhaps the final end of the war was delayed for a year.

In March when I arrived at our base at Phu Bai, about fifty miles south of the DMZ, the ARVN troops had already been driven across the border, but there were North Vietnamese units in the nearby A Shau Valley which also served as a Ho Chi Minh Trail tributary. The 101st Airborne Division had their base at Phu Bai. The Rangers had a tradition going back to before the Revolutionary War. They sent small units to scout English, French and Indians. In Vietnam rugged countryside covered with dense foliage made an ideal opportunity for Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols, dropped by parachute in World War II, but by helicopter in Vietnam. These short patrols were called Eagle Flights as the 101st was known as the Screaming Eagles.
These 8 to 12 man operations were usually short patrols to scout for sign of NVA troops' caches of supplies, or indications of heavy traffic along trail arteries.

I had no idea who the 101st were, that I was essentially going on Green Beret style covert operations to gather intelligence. For me I was just going outside the base to photograph something other than grips and grins. By that time I had not heard the 101st marching song, "I want to be an Airborne Ranger. I want to live a life of danger." To me this was just camping. None of the missions were explained to me. I carried a 16mm film camera to document in film what my colleague Al Rockoff was doing in still pictures. I don't mean to portray myself as a total naive in this situation, but very naive, not really grasping what was going on would be an accurate description.

The truth is that at some level I didn't want to know what was going on. A few months before I had been with friends at Fort Ord filming missile tests. Basically I changed film in gun cameras mounted on targets. Missiles would be fired at the targets and I would be in a bunker under the targets. The missile would hit and I would try to retrieve a camera mounted on the target to show the missile coming in. The biggest danger was running out of dope to smoke in the bunkers or running out of water as the temperatures ran over 130 (degrees) F in the sun. Somehow I never could really accept that if given an opportunity a V.C. or NVA troop would eagerly kill me. Hey, man, couldn't we just do a joint together. I was partially aware of the danger. In Vietnam there was no dope smoking in the field. All the field troops I went out with as well as I did our best to be alert, carry extra ammo for the machine and film whatever activity I could. But another part of me kept thinking this was happening to someone else. It kept reminding me of a war movie. Slowly without understanding much, I began to develop a taste for the adrenaline rush of sneaking in the jungle close to Main Force North Vietnamese units.

In the morning I began repeating the Plains Indian prayer, "Today is a good day to die" and imagined my most likely end, stepping on a mine or in a variation being able to actually see the enemy and shoot them before they shot me or even while they were shooting me. I remember
consciously doing this to reduce the shock in case my fantasies came true. My imagination grew
darker and I assumed that eventually something bad would happen.

12. In the Field

Life was simpler in the field. My mind wasn't full of thoughts churning in endless spirals.
It was focused on paying attention to what I had to do to stay alive for another day. Fear was
potent enough to wipe out distractions. I looked into the darkness at night trying to spot moving
figures assaulting our position. Or looked up at the stars which were just stars. They weren't the
constellations I knew from home and they didn't remind me of that other world.
Biting my lip hard to stay awake and staring at the jungle eight feet away. Only able to see vague black shapes a few feet further down a path that had been mined with a claymore before dark which had to be dismantled at daybreak. The claymore was about 25 yards away -- a few seconds warning. Keep my eyes constantly moving or I'll start seeing shapes in my mind. Notice movement in peripheral vision. Stay awake.

Night in the jungle was waiting for morning. Then moving down a trail aware of every sound. Pieces of metal that might rub together were tied down. Reflective surfaces were covered or hidden. Alone in the world, there was a comforting sense of the absolute. There were no lawyers in the jungle, no divorce, just the jungle itself and the wet heat and the ache of carrying 70 pounds all day.

13. Short Timer

A Special Forces green beret sergeant had been due to leave Vietnam in three days. Idiotically he was assigned to lead a reconnaissance patrol which I accompanied as photographer. The unit felt cursed with bad luck. Team members muttered "it don't mean nothing" to themselves and to each other. The objective of the mission was to plant electronic sensing equipment along the Ho Chi Minh Trail inside Laos, where officially we had no troops. Further it was learned that if
we were caught, we were on our own, since officially we weren't there in the first place. Every
member of the small team was tense.

Two helicopters brought us to a clearing near the border. The one I was in floated just
above violently waving grasses. Each man in front of me sat for a moment on the open deck of the
Huey, then pushed himself off, disappearing into the grass. Until I got to the edge, the jump
didn't seem so far, the grass looked close. I sat with my feet over the edge. I couldn't see the
head of the guy who jumped before me. Looking over my shoulder I saw one of the door gunners
step forward for me to jump. he wanted to get the chopper out of target range as soon as possible.
I realized he was about to throw me off. I jumped. Sprawling after a hard thump into the ground, I
picked up the movie camera I had been holding which had somehow become half buried in soft
mud. Wiping dirt from the lens with my own dirty thumb, I would the spring a few cranks and
tried the release - the camera was working perfectly. Now I had to find my way through the tall
grass to the tree line where the team was to regroup. I hurried to find the others gathered at the tree
line. But there was a problem. The sergeant leading us couldn't get the map out of his back pack
without his hands shaking so much he couldn't unfold it. Despite our sense of fatality about this
mission, another soldier reached in and quietly got the map out and spread it out on the ground.
He looked at it and said, "Sarge, it looks like we got to go this way." The sergeant nodded. The
other soldier stuffed the map back in the sergeant's pack and the unit spread out and moved along
the trail into the trees.

Our leader's confidence seemed to return, but I felt a dark wrongness about this mission.
After each step I expected to hear fire coming at us from snipers in the trees. My ongoing fear in
the bush was that I would trip a mine. I didn't have as much field experience as the others. I
knew my eyes were not trained to distinguish a two pound test fishing line stretched across the trail
six inches above the ground, plus I wore glasses which were smeared with sweat and dirt, that
continually wanted to slip off my nose. Perhaps it wouldn't be a trip wire, but a small metal firing
pin sticking just above the ground and covered with leaves. I'd find myself desperately looking at
my feet, knowing I couldn't see under every leaf, then aware I wasn't paying attention to the trees
and bushes on either side of the trail. My heart pounded because our lives depended on all of us being alert to the subtlest hints in the jungle. But after hours in the heat with sweat streaming down my forehead and stinging into my eyes, I became so tired carrying the heavy pack that I would let my head sink down and devote all my energy to just putting one foot down after the other.

The sergeant held his hand up. Stop. Silently we gathered around. He pointed to the ground. I saw only a tiny clearing, but one of the other men knelt down and seemed to pluck grass stem by stem. Carefully he revealed a small burn mark in the grass. The kneeling soldier held his palm over the mark. "Still warm," he whispered.

A wave of adrenaline shot through me. They know we're here. We're just prey waiting to be taken. It's over. There was no way out. Even if we could have radioed for assistance and birds came within five minutes, a virtual impossibility, we could still have been wiped out. And then there was the possibility that the choppers would be doing other work, taking wounded to hospitals, delivering supplies or in some units delivering pizza. The helicopters were sometimes a colonel's personal limo service. Wounded men had been left in the field because the "pizza chopper" was "busy."

As the fact that our mission was compromised sunk in, something began to happen to the sergeant. He motioned us forward. At least we were a less obvious target spread three meters apart along the trail. I felt something change in the others as well. When we first got off the Hueys there was some whispering along the trail. Occasionally a twig would snap. Now when it looked like we were dead meat, we became alive as a unit. Each man double checked his equipment to make sure every loose piece was tied down so it wouldn't make noise. There was no whispering along the trail. No twigs snapped. I was desperately afraid not only of being killed in an ambush, but of nervously revealing our position by making a noise and getting the others killed as well. My glasses kept sliding forward. I took them off. They were too grimy to be much good anyway. My whole concentration was devoted to softly touching my heel to the ground then gently rolling forward to the balls of my feet. Not to make a sound. I was no longer tired. Each
foot carefully forward. Delicate with the heel. Don't shift your weight forward until you're sure no sticks are under your heel. If you feel something, slide the foot forward, as in Tai Chi, barely touching the ground until it is soft again and you can shift your weight then bring the other foot forward. But not too slowly, so those in front of me don't disappear in the bushes. Step. Step. Step.

The man in front of me stopped. I stopped. Something's wrong. Then the grunt in front of me motions me forward. I turn and signal the man behind and gently push aside a tangle of grass and leafy branches. The sergeant motions us down and points ahead. I sink to my knees and low crawl forward on knees and elbows. We are on a ridge overlooking a river in the jungle that reminds me of a travel poster for an expensive "adventure" tour to a small village on an Amazon tributary. As I watched through the grass, the radio operator leaned toward me and whispered that the sergeant had seen something he had to check out. Maybe an NVA regular sitting by the water across the river. I couldn't see what he was talking about, but my chest tightened. Next I saw the sergeant stripped to his olive drab underwear, put a black knife between his teeth, and start to climb from rock to rock across the river without making a splash or a sound. He was low to the water like a cat hunting in grass. He got to the other side, then I saw him take the knife from his mouth and collapse against a large rock breathing hard for several minutes. He got his breath, put his knife back in his mouth and came back across the river. It wasn't a NVA soldier, just a lighter colored rock beyond the darker one he leaned against. He couldn't be sure unless he checked.

We still don't know if we are an ambush target, waiting for the trap to spring. The sergeant changes our direction constantly. We can't risk the noise of a meal break, but he stops to let us catch our breath and sit in our sweat in the early afternoon.

We stop again. We've finally reached the map coordinate where we are to deploy our electronic sensing equipment. The technical crew begins to assemble the apparatus. The rest of us waiting impatiently think of each additional minute the NVA would have to relocate us and spring
their ambush. It's hard to believe we fooled the Vietnamese in their own jungle, but why hadn't they attacked? Perhaps to let us get our gear in place.

"Shit" hissed one of the tech people. The sergeant looked as if he would rip the head off the soldier who was holding out an empty cylinder. "No fuckin' batteries," he hissed. No batteries. No batteries. Instantly flooding with blood-lust hatred I want to kill someone. This green beret non-com should have been at Ton Son Nhut with a two inch thick folder of orders, taking a urine test and drinking beer before his flight home. To me it seemed like we were a bunch of misfits in one of Clint Eastwood's Italian westerns. It was all over, the cavalry were galloping up, outnumbering us ten to one, but each of us was strapping on our weapons for an insane suicidal fight. Not a word was spoken. We just started packing up. The sergeant stood up and jerked his fist with extended thumb. We got up and started moving to the pick up point. When we got there, the radio operator called for our choppers. There would be a delay. We'd have to spend the night. The sergeant grabbed the handset and promised to personally disembowel the operator. Half an hour later a dull wop, wop, wop drifting over the trees meant we would actually survive this disaster.
14. I Like War

What do I mean when I say that I like war? A chilling thought for a teacher of English and photography. Does this refer back to the fourth grade and enraptured reading of the biographies of Chief Blackhawk and Jim Bridger, scout, as well as Guadalcanal Diary and Thirty Seconds over Tokyo? War was about adventures in exotic foreign countries, with lots of girls who loved you because you were a soldier. You had to seize the day because there might be no tomorrow. War was about noble Indians, brave scouts, guys who did the impossible through grit and determination. As a boy, one of my favorite books was my father's illustrated history of World War II. It was nearly 600 pages long with five or six sections of photographs. Dad also had a book of military rifles which I loved to slowly read and decide which one I wanted most. One was better looking, another carried a larger clip, another could fire faster. It was an agonizing choice. Finally after hours I'd triumphantly decide on one only to make a different selection a week later.

But what does it mean to like war when you're 50 years old and have seen that reality has little in common with fourth grade fantasy. War was where I felt intensely alive. Sharing the terror of death creates a bond with room for everyone, cool and uncool, black, white, rural, urban, oddball, normal, intellectual, jock. In war I was accepted. I was the photographer who carried extra bandoliers of machine gun ammo, I was trusted to do my part. I took my turn of guard duty behind the machine gun in the jungle at night. War is a great equalizer for the different. If you shared the danger, you were one of "us." For someone who had been an outsider, the last one chosen on the baseball team, awkward and shy, being a combat field photographer was O fucking K.
Later, when I came out of the field, was was not an adrenaline rush, but, frequently each
day bore no connection to the one before. One day in Saigon, another in a helicopter at 85 miles an
hour six feet over a river following it to a provincial capital to do a story on a small medical center
or to live and photograph for several days in a Montgnard village. The next week hitching a
helicopter ride back to the city and that evening smoking the finest marijuana in the world and
sipping cold "33" beer sitting in the steam room of a local massage parlor.

Steam wrinkling the label on the beer bottle. Talking with friends leaning against the white
porcelain tile, my bare feet on damp wood. Summoned by a smiling girl to make my body so
loose and relaxed that I was just barely able to walk out. Then, languid on the street, easily
summoning cyclos for myself and friends we flew howling through the humid night to the site of
some neon enflamed phantasmagoria to sit in a darkened room illuminated only by the purple
glimmer of black light tubes until a flashing stobe froze dancers and band into living snapshots. A
room so dim that the gin and tonic in my hand glowed with a pale blue ghostly phosphorescence.
15. A Mad Minute

In the monsoon season from May to November, a late afternoon thunderstorm would soften the heat and raise the smell of plants and the earth. It was cooler for awhile. In Phu Bai a group from the 221st would occasionally commandeer a 3/4 ton truck and drive to the base perimeter to practice with our weapons. From here there was an open spot of jungle with a bulldozed section of hill opened for shooting. There was a circus quality to these afternoon shoot outs, "mad minutes" they were called. With the machine gun the challenge was to perform such tricks as writing your name in the dirt at 50 feet. With the .45 pistol the challenge was to hit anything. The kick from a .45 is an involuntary upward jab of surprising strength, its sound a stunningly loud report. I was fascinated to discover that I could hit a beer can and make it jump. Childishly excited I shot clip after clip. When I finally paused I noticed that everyone around me had stopped shooting. I looked around. I thought maybe they were watching my performance. However ten feet away another guy was holding an M-60 machine gun and blazing away into the hill. I could see the shells popping out, but there was no sound. On the other side someone was firing a quad 50 - four machine guns mounted on a post in the rear of a jeep. I could see the smoke and the growing pile of spent shells, but I heard nothing. I was deaf. My ears were ringing with a high pitched bell like sound that wouldn't stop. My head ached.

That evening I joined my friends in the local cemetery where we often listened to music and smoked dope. I watched the sun set accompanied by bell ringing in my ears and smoked
marijuana until I fell asleep. My hearing was better the next morning and by the third morning was fully restored.

In addition to the .45 pistol, the M79 grenade launcher was the other weapon I practiced with. I sawed off the shoulder piece from one and found I could tie it to my leg, leaving my hands free to use a camera. This left a hand held weapon that looked like a pilgrim's blunderbuss. The recoil of this weapon, while substantial, was much smoother than the jerky punch of the .45. Since shots from an M-79 travelled in an arc, it was about as accurate to hold it in one hand, point it up and imagine the trajectory as it was to hold it to the shoulder as military designers intended. And I discovered it was faster to operate the M-79 in its modified form. The short barrel broke like a shot gun and a shell about the size of a can of orange juice concentrate was inserted, then the breech was slammed shut. The artistry of the M-79 was to keep as many shells in the air as possible before the first one hit. I could keep three in the air at once, but those who were expert could fire five shots before the first one hit.

There was something about the graceful arc of the shell on the way to its target that I liked very much. I enjoyed learning how to aim by visualizing the full arc of the shell rather than pointing it directly at the target as you would a rifle. It was an awkward, ugly looking thing -- a large mouthed barrel about 18" long attached to a stock and trigger. It did, however, have the advantage of compactness and once in its modified form and laced to my leg, made no noise as I walked. I'm thankful that the only times I fired the M-79 were during the pyrotechnic orgies of the mad minute.