

## **AFFIRMATION**

It has now been exactly two months since our get-together in St. Louis. On the way driving back to the Chicago burbs, many things were going through my head and I was trying to process it all. Trinh (Tina) is a good listener (she would have to be with my verbal excesses, albeit those who thought of her as quiet and shy never married her!). I bounced a lot of thoughts, not even yet ideas, off her that night.

The words that were going through my head were things like Validation, Ratification, Confirmation and Justification. I don't think I'm the only one with these thoughts and a phone call with Kit Kramer last week led me to believe that we are, many of us, of a similar mind and that you may recognize some of your own thoughts here.

I have to digress a bit to set forth a basis for my postulate. There is a term that began in psychology called "cognitive dissonance". Like most psychological concepts, it has been heisted by the advertising industry for purposes of selling us more stuff, with the force applied by advertisers in inverse proportion to our actual need for the product or service.

In the sales context, "cognitive dissonance" works this way: when the car manufacturers produce an ad, their motive is 80% to attract new customers. That seems fairly straightforward. But the other 20% is to dispel the cognitive dissonance in the minds of previous buyers. Buyer's regret is present to some degree with almost anything we purchase. 20% of the advertising is to convince the people who have already purchased the item that it was a great decision, because those people will either let their friends and co-workers know how wise they were or at least not bad-mouth the product to other prospective buyers.

While heading in to St. Louis, I think a lot of us were, while clearly looking forward to seeing old friends, also telling ourselves to temper our expectations lest we be disappointed. There was some cognitive dissonance occupying our brains.

First, I don't know how Paul and Bob and a host of others did it. I kept thinking, what the heck are we going to do for three days? My job hacked the first evening off but still, the time was filled and I was never bored.

Meanwhile, the question burning within many of us: Was what we did in recording the Vietnam War of true importance or are we a bunch of 60-somethings deluding ourselves?

Don Fedynak did not know how prophetic, nay prescient, his patch would prove to be: "Equus Mille Verbe" — equal to a thousand words, meaning our pictures and films. Except, if anything, he underestimated: those pictures are worth far more than thousands of words, which can and frequently are used to lie. Army files are replete with prevarications, half-truths, coverups, and excuses.<sup>1</sup> It is hard to lie with a picture

and damn near impossible in our "primitive" pre-Photoshop days (I never saw an airbrush in action at the 221st). How do you say, picture equals truth in Latin? *Equus vide verde?*

Our images and clips have a truth-factor not capable of comparison to words. We know in hindsight that Vietnam was a horrible mistake. Johnson thought the South Vietnamese were as dedicated to their country as the South Koreans. That mistake cost incalculable numbers of lives of many racial heritages. Perhaps because of that, these pictures have *more* value than pictures of other conflicts.

In a fascinating book called *Wartime* by Paul Fussell, a WWII second lieutenant wounded in action and now a Professor at U. of Pennsylvania, a controversy arose regarding an "urban legend" (before that word existed) about our soldiers sending home the skulls of dead Japanese. The powers that be indicated that the stories were absolutely false and that no such barbaric acts were being committed. Until a newspaper ran the story with a photograph of a fresh-faced young coed poised at her desk with pencil-eraser to her lips thinking deep thoughts, WITH THE SKULL HER BOYFRIEND SENT HER FROM THE PACIFIC PROPPED ON THE CORNER OF HER DESK. A thousand denials couldn't stand up to that photograph. Truth.

That footage WOLZIEN shot of the dust up of the wounded GI is incapable of being described in words. It would take too many words and each person watching that footage picks up little things that others have missed. Look at all the elements shown in that footage: courage, teamwork, loyalty to one's fellow troops, suffering of the victim and, by extension, his squad, platoon and company, the medics performing professionally in hazardous, life-threatening conditions, the tension of each passing second knowing a rocket or even an unfortunate AK-47 round could cause the mission to end in disaster.

I think STEVE WALPERT shot a good deal with the medivac pilots but I never got to see the finished product. This would have been late 1971 or early 1972. Before the actually brilliant Vietnam Wall was erected, there was a great deal of speculation as to a proper statue. My thought then was a statue of a medivac Huey discharging a medic to a wounded soldier on the ground was one that all of us could be satisfied with.

Photojournalists were searching for a story, so the mundane details of the everyday life of the soldier were generally not of interest to them. Ours was a record of what happened there: the routine and the horrific, the boredom and the inconceivable, and that broad spectrum in between. As interesting as other GI's pictures of Vietnam are, they are snapshots, mostly taken in off-time.

Our pictures are not a polemic: not an endorsement or an indictment of the war but a record of those who fought it: by and large young men drafted into the military and sent off to a land a lot weirder than Oz. (At least in Oz, one could recognize the flying monkeys were evil).

It could be argued that the thing of most lasting import in assembling the history of the Vietnam War is the legacy of photographs and footage because they told the unassailable truth. Who was the ex-general who proclaimed not long ago that he didn't believe a single word that came out of the mouth of Robert McNamara, including the word, "the"?

How did the 221<sup>st</sup> Signal Company gain this mandate? At least part of it is due to the Army actually taking the bold step of granting an unprecedented amount of freedom to a group of soldiers not yet identified, of every stripe and persuasion, whose single common passion was a commitment to photography and its power to convey objective truth. With guys like Alan Rockoff, Evan Mower, Ray Linn, Tom Wolzien, Steve Walpert and the ones you earlier guys knew, the Army *lucked out!* It would never have occurred to any of us to "stage" a scene. There was already more than enough REAL to satisfy any photographer worth his salt.

Did any of us realize the extraordinary freedom that we had been given when we were issued that yellow OFFICIAL U.S. ARMY PHOTOGRAPHER identification card? None of the armed forces will likely never make, what they would characterize, as that "mistake" ever again.

On the front: **"The above-named individual WILL NOT be interfered with in the performance of his official photographic duties."** (emphasis present, not added)

Even more strongly, on the rear it states:

#### **TO ALL UNIT COMMANDERS**

***You are directed to extend all necessary cooperation to the authorized bearer of this card to enable him to carry out his duties as an official U. S. Army Photographer. Requests for photographic service will be made only through established channels, as this photographer has been assigned specific missions. Since all photographs made by him will be reviewed in accordance with regulations, the photographing by him of military activities and facilities is not a violation of security.***

How many petty fogging nabobs (the law has a great name for them: "officious intermeddlers") muttered dark oaths under their breath, and even to our faces, when they found that they could not command us to do their photographic wants nor divert us from our mission? In thinking back, I seldom looked at the back of my ID. If I had, I think I would have given a lot shorter shrift to the underlings who harangued me about Rockoff's appearance while their bosses wanted copies of his photos.

The Armed Forces will never grant such latitude again. Did we ever hear the word "vet" used as a verb, as in background check? If there was an open spot on a chopper, including the cargo hold, we were authorized to jump on and get where we needed to go without getting an authorization. That more of us were not seriously hurt or killed should be ascribed to a divine force or dumb luck based upon one's belief system. Like most soldiers, had we known what we were getting ourselves into with some of our forays, we "woulda stood in bed." Courage is at least partly ignorance.<sup>2</sup>

Further, this short window from 1965-72 may be the zenith of the time period when a photograph stands as a record. The lenses and emulsions reached levels of sharpness, resolution and contrast never hoped for before. A 400 ASA film could actually deliver sharp results. High Speed Ektachrome could even be pushed to 400 ASA with acceptable results making handheld night color shots possible and an action-stopping, depth filled, 1/1000th at f11 possible in the day.<sup>3</sup>

Now we see what used to be "photographic" magazines and journals transformed into forums for graphic artists who transmute photographs into things they think will show us how clever they are, but whose products are generally ugly and depressing. Photography's strength is its realism, unrivaled by any other medium.

Worth a thousand words? More than that, Don, because of the truth value.

And I think the word that defines the feeling we had leaving the get-together was "AFFIRMATION". At least my personal "cognitive dissonance" about whether what we had done was important or of lasting value was laid to rest. My own contributions were meagre in relation to the herculean efforts of many of you, and the efforts of those who were not there, but I was proud to have been a part of the 221<sup>st</sup>.

On 7-9 May, 2012, many of us vanquished any small, lingering doubts about our time in service and what was accomplished. As I told Lumiere, "for most us, this is only two or three years out of the sixty-some which we have now lived but none of us will ever forget it. If one's time in service did not kill you or maim you physically or mentally, then you came out of it a better person."

Endnotes:

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1. I told this one to Kit Kramer and he got a kick out of it. Twice during my tour, I was assigned as the lead investigating officer into certain matters that had been raised with the IG. The first was documenting that an MOS test booklet with answers had been accidentally thrown away.

The second was more interesting: the IG wanted to know why GI's were not getting their medals prior to leaving the country.

First, I spoke with the people who set the ground rules. Medals based on overall service rather than a specific act, either ARCOM or Bronze Star, should not be applied for until the soldier being nominated was under 90-days left to serve. Makes sense. Had to do something well for at least nine months before you get a medal for it.

Second, I interviewed the people who process the paperwork. They insisted that they required at least 120 days to process such applications. Catch 22. These two policies ensured that soldiers were likely in a barracks in Ft. Riley or Ft. Bragg when their medal was forwarded to them. There was also a discrepancy where it appeared that many applications were not acted upon, especially if the soldier had already mustered out.

I asked for the reasons why it took 120 days to process and they insisted that they had to conduct an investigation and didn't really have the personnel or resources. I just noticed piles and piles of paper being shuffled without being acted upon. Duly noted in my report. Don't know what the IG did. I recommended a mandate from a MACV or USARV head to the processing unit that all applications be acted upon within sixty days of submission. Bet that report was buried and burned, recycling being in its infancy. I was out of the Army before I ever got a reply.

So now Kit and the rest of you know why you never got your air medals, ar coms or even the bronze.

2. Eisenhower insisted that on D-Day the troops must be superbly trained and drilled but completely without combat experience. He knew that an experienced infantryman would, when confronted on the beaches with what amounted to an ambush years in the making, lacking only the element of surprise, would dig in and await reinforcement... or

something!

3. I was drawn to large format photography because I had a fascination for the detail in life. When photographers attempt to ape painters, it cannot be good because the foremost strength of photography is its depiction of the actual. No painting can reproduce detail like a photograph can.

Matthew Brady did great work but shooting multiple second exposures precluded any type of action. By WWI, the motion picture was there if shaky, and the early Graphics and Kodaks could record images at action-slowness, if not -stopping, speeds at least in sunlight.

By WWII, the technology improved but our military was not one to embrace change. The Luftwaffe used Leicas, Victor Hasselblad was building medium format aerial cameras for the Swedish air force, even the Brits knew that the Leicas and Rolleis could get images that the Speed Graphic guy would miss while juggling plateholders. My father used a Speed Graphic in the Aleutians during WWII on board the USS Concorde. Found a bunch of his old negatives of bleak landscapes with a sign implanted: "38 (or choose a number) dead Japanese buried here." The Japanese invaded Alaska but that didn't count as a stateside attack.

During WWII, and even before in Spain, Robert Capa and others recognized the portability of 35mm cameras with interchangeable lenses and the superiority of the German 35mm's. While in Korea, these same photographers outfitted their thread-mount Leicas and Contaxes with these new fast Japanese lenses from Nippon Kogaku: the 35mm f1.8 Nikkor, the 50mm f1.4 Nikkor, the 85mm f1.5 and 105mm f2.5. Not only fast, allowing better pictures in lower light, but sharp. When Leica countered with a new camera, the M3 with a bayonet mount that they couldn't copy, Nikon and Canon began building their own rangefinders. The problem is rangefinders are, in practical use, limited to 135mm focal length.

The problem was SLR's of that era were still primitive: the Exakta plant now fell in East Germany and they built clunky, fragile, slow, poorly designed products, cf, James Stewart (decorated bomber pilot by the way) in *REAR WINDOW* peering through his Exakta with a 400mm Tele-Megor to spy on his neighbors.

The beginning of our era came with the introduction of the Nikon F in 1959. An early Nikon brochure refers to it as the "Fully Automatic Reflex". Really? Autofocus? No, of course not. Auto exposure? Not even a built-in exposure meter until 1967. What they meant was that the mirror returned automatically, rather than having mirror black-out until the film was wound; also, the diaphragm would automatically reopen to maximum aperture without having to be clicked or wound. Still, it was a revolution that we would embrace.

The Air Force went Nikon. The Army, being ostrich-like in its outlook, said buy-American so Charlie Beseler of New Jersey slapped his name on the camera designed and built by Tokyo Kogaku and the Beseler Topcon was born. The same with Singer and the Graflex XL. We should have had Nikons and Hasselblads or baby Linhofs (like the French did in Vietnam in the 1950's, *cf* the original film of *THE QUIET AMERICAN*, with Michael Caine.) The Topcon had a fundamental design flaw in that its lens mount opening was modeled after the Exakta — which was too small, making lens design more difficult (i.e. not as good, no super-wides) and more glass meant heavier and more flare problems.

Further, the legendary Nikon F toughness just wasn't in the Topcons. Many of us brought our own: Nikon, if you could afford \$306, Nikkormat FS (\$139.50 with a 50mm f2 lens at Altman's Camera in Chicago in 1968), Pentax (Spotmatic was the first with behind the lens metering and cost almost as much as a Nikon without any meter) H3v, H1a; a few Minoltas and Canons. Most of us had a pretty good sense of what would hold up to Vietnam. (Leather watch bands were not one of those things)

Although the Graflex XL was a turd of a camera:(reset the rangefinder every time you change lenses, be sure the lens is focused at infinity before removing or fitting), the lenses were superb: 58mm f5.6 Rodenstock Grandagon, 80mm and 100mm Zeiss Planars, 150mm Rodenstock Ysarex (a Tessar design with rare-earth lanthanum glass in the third element — radioactive, so what?) and 180mm Zeiss Sonnar. Unfortunately, we couldn't seem to get our photographers to keep lens shades and clear filters on and most of the lenses I saw by 1971-72 sprouted glorious gouges and abrasions of the front element, leading to a starlight filter effect that gave the photos an ethereal but unuseable effect. At one point, all but four of the 37 XL's were deadlined in repair.

For the mopic guys, there really wasn't much choice but what the Army dealt out. No wonder Caily Brown was so impressed. She pops a button and goes from 35mm still camera to High-Definition Video. What could we have done with equipment like that? No photo-lab needed to process. Confirm your shot instantly.

I am starting to feel a bit of a fossil.

Best regards and a salute to you all,

Dave Blocher