

“Vietnam was the first and last war with no censorship”

Veteran photojournalist Tim Page discusses his “21” exhibition

Richard Phillips
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Acclaimed war photographer Tim Page recently held an exhibition at the Leica Galleries in Melbourne and Sydney. Entitled “21,” it refers to the number of colour photographs on show, and the fact that they were all taken with a 21mm lens. The images were selected from the tens of thousands he took in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Israel, Sri Lanka, Cuba, Croatia and other countries, between 1965 and 2012.

In 1965, the 20-year-old Page began working as a stringer for United Press International in Laos, before transferring to the news agency’s Saigon office in Vietnam, where he also worked on assignment for *Time-Life*, *Paris Match* and the Associated Press. His images, along with those by other courageous photographers, were crucial in exposing the criminality and horror of the US-led war in Vietnam.

The UK-born veteran photojournalist, who now lives in Australia, has received numerous honours for his work—the Robert Capa Award, the American Society of Media Photographers Award, the National Press Photographers Association Award and others. His books include, *Tim Page’s Nam* (1983), *Ten Years After: Vietnam Today* (1987), *Sri Lanka* (1987), *Mid Term Report* (1995) and *Requiem* (1997). The *Requiem* photographs are on permanent display at the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). In 2002, he edited *Another Vietnam* (2002), an extraordinary collection of never-before-published images by Vietnamese war photographers, supporting the National Liberation Front and recording daily life for millions of ordinary people in northern Vietnam.

Page, who is one of the last surviving documentary photographers of the Vietnam War, was wounded four times, narrowly escaping death in 1966 and 1969. On the last occasion, he was seriously injured by shrapnel from an exploding land mine while attempting to help wounded soldiers onto a helicopter. He was evacuated to the US, where he underwent extensive neuro-surgery and other treatment, during much of the early 1970s.

Following the disappearance, presumed death, of fellow photographer and close friend Sean Flynn (son of film star, Errol) in Cambodia during April 1970, Page decided to establish the Indochina Media Memorial Foundation. The organisation honours the more than 320 photographers and journalists killed from all sides of the conflicts in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia between 1945 and 1975.

While most of the photographs in Page’s “21” exhibition are from war-torn countries, they are not combat images, but mainly contemplative and quiet works. There are portraits of children—a remarkable shot of a small Bedouin girl in a desert refugee camp, and another of a young Cambodian girl delivering an AK47 by bike to her father. The children are world-weary far beyond their age.

One of the few battle-front photographs is of US troops near a medevac helicopter in dense forest northwest of Saigon. The chopper is preparing to evacuate casualties, following a Vietcong attack on US forces. Taken in

1965, not long after Page began working in Vietnam, the backlit shot has an eerie quality.

The largest photograph in the collection is an almost panoramic shot of about 50 people on a Cambodian football field. Some are looking towards the camera, others have turned their backs. All are shielding their faces from the dust storm created by a low overhead helicopter. The helicopter is carrying Prince Norodom Sihanouk, during the so-called UNTAC peace process elections in 1992.

Another image from Cambodia is of a former soldier—an amputee, one of thousands who lost limbs from US landmines—washing himself in the yard behind a restaurant and alongside a pig.

The exhibition also includes photographs of Buddhist monks in Laos, Sri Lanka and Vietnam; sleepy early morning, or perhaps late afternoon, street scenes in Cuba; a shot of a young couple kissing at London’s Notting Hill Carnival in 1998; and a ghostly portrait of Page’s close friend and publisher Thomas Neurath. The “21” exhibition is just a tiny sample of the broad sweep of Page’s work and his humane approach.

Tim Page spoke to the WSWs about his exhibition and some of the issues confronting documentary photographers today.

Richard Phillips: Can you explain your fondness for the 21mm lens?

Tim Page: Way back in 1965, when I had some ready cash after my first big photographic spread in *Life* magazine, I decided to go with Leica. All my mentors and guiding lights—people like [English photojournalist] Larry Burrows and others—used Leicas. I also decided to go with a 21mm lens, which provides a 90-degree angle of vision. It became my prime lens. I had a 35mm on one Leica and the 21 on the other, and then a Nikon F with a 105 and a 200.

This was my basic rig. And in the monsoon season, I had an old-fashioned Nikon underwater camera—a Nikonos—which meant that I was okay in the heaviest downpour or if I fell into a canal.

RP: With a 21mm you have to get close to the action.

TP: Yes, but it also allows you to take incredible landscape shots. The 21mm gives you a reason to be there—to be intrusive, intimate and, in a sense, to interrogate and somehow have an ability to justify your presence. But you must have the curiosity to investigate things and push yourself into situations that are somehow dodgy or dangerous.

RP: Selecting just 21 pictures from a life-time of work is a big undertaking. How did you do it?

TP: About five or six years ago, I decided to go through all 600,000 of my pictures and select all those shot with the 21mm. I ended up with five or six thousand, which was narrowed down to 1,000, 300, and then about 110, which I sent to my photographer mates at [Australian photographic collective] Degree South, and asked them to pick the ones they thought should be exhibited. It took me about six months to reduce that number to

35, with the final selection determined on the basis of emotion—in other words, what I liked.

RP: The exhibition is small but certainly diverse, and many of the images have little to do with your documentary work in war zones—the couple kissing at the Notting Hill carnival, for example. Why did you include that one?

TP: The collection needs a kind of leitmotif, to offset the tense photojournalistic moments. In some ways I'm a frustrated painter. Obviously, you're not taking a palette and an easel out into the field, but great artistic work that you've seen in galleries over the years lodges in your brain. When you've carefully studied and absorbed a painting, its imagery comes back through you and is expressed, in some way, photographically.

The first picture in the box set of exhibition images is of my friend and publisher Thomas Neurath, with a cloud of smoke in front of his face. I call it my [René] Magritte picture.

When the photograph of the UN helicopter over the crowd in Cambodia was published in the *Guardian*, seven different people compared it to a [Diego] Velázquez painting and asked if we could do a poster of it.

RP: Did you see the Ken Burns' *Vietnam* documentary?

TP: Yes, I did. In fact, there were five of my photographs in the first episode, and the next but last image on the screen, in the last episode of the series, was mine.

RP: I hadn't realised that. What did you think of the series?

TP: I thought it was excellent, because it was the first US documentary on the Vietnam War that wasn't entirely American-centric. You get a bit sick of all the "We lost the war," or "We should have won the war," but rarely, if ever, told about the impact of the war on the Vietnamese people.

Burns' series was different. It had many different Vietnamese people speaking—a real cross-section, including bourgeois types from ex-Saigon—and put the war into a historical perspective, which a lot of folk don't really grasp. Most people only know it through *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon* or whatever, and don't understand the entire backdrop to it.

RP: You're involved in exposing the ongoing devastation from unexploded bombs and the impact of Agent Orange in Indochina. Could you speak about that?

TP: As a freelance, now aged photojournalist, there are few assignments that come my way, and so I've returned to the core of my original NGO-type reportage, and documenting the UXO [unexploded ordnance] and UXB [unexploded bomb] issues in Indochina. This is done for MAG [Mine Advisory Group] and HALO [Hazardous Area Life-support Organization], both UK-based concerns and charities.

Having been blown up by a mine in '69, it seems fair payback to document the whole demise. And the same goes for the disastrous Agent Orange, from which I was drenched and afflicted. This insidious shit has a half-life of about 50,000 years—like nuclear waste. There are now fourth generation birth defects and no sign of this letting up.

The Australian government is reluctant to 'fess up to this issue, but the New Zealand government has, and compensates its Vietnam veterans. In fact, Australia is still using Agent Orange to "clean" our railway tracks, etc.

RP: Can you speak about photojournalism and how it's changed since the mid-1960s and early 1970s?

TP: I'm not sure we can even use that word anymore. In the news world today, photographs are now referred to as "captured images on a device." The *Chicago Sun -Times* has got rid of all its photographers and given all of its correspondents a device.

In the early 1970s, we saw the closure of serious news magazines, and over the past couple of decades, the shutdown of countless newspapers. I suppose there's little demand for newspapers because people read them online.

During the Vietnam War, journalists carried a camera, but only in case

there was no photographer around. The average correspondent, though, is not really equipped, or trained, to take a good photograph. Like cinematography and audio, photography is a separate skill. But what newspaper is going to pay a photographer to go into somewhere like Syria—pay for their insurance and the day rates—when they can get images for next nothing?

Maybe this sounds a bit Jurassic Park, but it doesn't seem to be an age to be a journalist, or to aspire to be one, much less a photojournalist.

RP: The other change is "embedded journalism," where everything is vetted by the military and therefore the government.

TP: Yes, that's right. Vietnam was the first and last war with no censorship. Of course, there was some self-imposed censorship. The wire services would not publish a picture of wounded or dead GI, until the next-of-kin had been notified, which was perfectly reasonable. But there was no way the military could try and censor things. In fact, the wire services held back a lot of controversial pictures—of torture, desecration of bodies—as a pressure point to stop the military imposing restrictions on us.

War now, however, is so concentric that the only way you're able to get to the frontlines is with the military. In Vietnam, though, you could go out with a military unit—American, Australian or Korean—and often leave any time you wanted. In some cases, you were able to take a local bus or something like that to get back. We weren't embedded, in the sense of virtually signing away our lives, like you have to now.

RP: What should serious combat photographers be doing today?

TP: Our job is to make people aware—to shock them—because this is the only way you're going to change people's attitudes towards war. We have to present the brutal truth. Unfortunately, the brutal truth doesn't sell newspapers anymore. Newspapers are not interested anymore in strong images; their concern is local promotional stuff or material on tourism. They don't want to upset the reader and stop them looking at the advertising and buying products.

Serious photographers have to ignore all that and present the reality of the situation. You may not win prizes for your work, but you have to try and consistently produce images that resonate and capture something about the period.

That's what I tried to do with my Vietnam work. It didn't make the front page all the time, but now some of these pictures—and I suppose that's got something to do with the fact that I'm one of the few photographers from the Vietnam period still alive—are regarded as iconic.

RP: Those images had a real impact and contributed to the movement against the war.

TP: Yes. And when I was in New York in 1967, and covered the first big antiwar demonstrations, people were carrying photos that we had shot in Vietnam. There were also people denouncing us for taking the photos. It was a bit bizarre, but the images we were producing on a daily basis were pounding the American psyche and did help change public opinion—and also on a global level—in Japan, France and the UK. It definitely impacted on how people voted at that time and caused [Lyndon] Johnson to not run for the presidency.

We need this sort of thing today. And although images can be digitally manipulated, the straight photograph, in its own right, is the truth. We need more, not less of this reality.

RP: But that's why there's such a concerted campaign, by governments everywhere, to persecute individuals such as Julian Assange and the WikiLeaks organisation, and intimidate and silence other journalists. What do you think about his imprisonment and his ongoing persecution?

TP: Without a free and open media we are doomed culturally and politically. In this despotic time, it's necessary that we have whistleblowers, and folk who can open up the Pandora's Box of corruption and deceit.

The fashion in which the Australian government has abandoned its own citizen and whistleblower, Julian Assange, is revealing of its own demise

and dysfunction as a democratic system of government. The greed mongers and the people that run this country appear to me to be a bunch of corrupt businessmen. They don't want to defend Assange, because it will upset their arrangements with the US.



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