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

# Acclaimed war photographer and steadfast opponent of “embedded” journalism Tim Page (1944–2022)

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The death in late August of photographer Tim Page in Fernmount, New South Wales, after being diagnosed with liver cancer in May, has seen an outpouring of expressions of condolences from fellow photographers, along with journalists, writers and many others from across the globe. Heartfelt tributes have been contributed by Australian photographers Stephen Dupont and Ben Borane, who gave important moral support to Page and his long-time partner Marianne Harris during his last weeks.

Page was one of the last surviving members of the generation of courageous photographers who exposed the bloody reality of the US-led imperialist invasion of Vietnam.

Between 1955 and 1975, the American military killed an estimated three million Vietnamese, most of them civilians, whose towns and villages were destroyed by American bombs, high-powered artillery, napalm and chemical defoliants. Over 58,200 US soldiers died in Vietnam, most of them conscripts.

Photographs taken by Page and his colleagues and published internationally in mass circulation newspapers and magazines, particularly in the last ten years of the war, helped galvanise the mass opposition to this savagery. As he explained in an interview with *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) in 2019, “Vietnam was the first and last war with no censorship.”

Born in England in 1944, Page was adopted by a foster family, a few weeks after his father was killed during World War II. While he described his childhood as a happy one, he left home in search of adventure in 1962, working in various jobs in Europe and planning to reach Australia, via India and southeast Asia.

Page made his way, via various means and occupations, through Turkey, Pakistan, India, Burma and then to Laos, where he began his photographic career. After operating as a stringer for United Press International (UPI) and Agence France-Presse, he was transferred to the UPI’s Saigon office in Vietnam, working on assignment for UPI, *Paris Match*, *Time-Life* and Associated Press.

Largely self-taught, Page favoured shooting with wide-angle lenses and therefore dangerously close to the action. He also learnt from Eddie Adams, Philip Jones Griffith, Larry Burrows and other experienced combat photographers in Vietnam and studied how they worked.

In Saigon, Page, Sean Flynn (the son of actor Errol), Dana Stone and others lived and socialised at a three-storey house, later known as Frankie’s Place. Much has been written, including by Page and others, about their hedonistic lifestyle—a toxic mix of hallucinogenic drugs and a willingness to take on any dangerous photographic assignment.

Michael Herr, Vietnam war correspondent and author of *Dispatches*, said that the drugged-out American photographer played by Dennis Hopper in the last part of Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* was loosely inspired by Page.

Although the movie is a damning indictment of the US occupation and regarded highly by Page, “the American photographer” is an irritating caricature. Apart from his heavy drug use, it bore little relationship to the real-life Page who was deeply impacted by the horror he was witnessing.

As Page wrote in *Another Vietnam* (2002), an extraordinary book that he edited of images taken by National Liberation Front war photographers:

“Everyone caught in this theatre of war became a victim by default. Not least the photographers. They couldn’t just glaze through their experiences, using the lens as a veil for defusing the horror around them. And there was the beauty in those images of horror, an aspect of Goya or Brueghel. A macabre surreal thing, too awesome to be real. The inhumanities these photographers observed seemed even more poignant frozen as pictures than they did at the moment of exposure… [And for the Vietnamese photographers] on the home front, you were exposed to death or mutilation at any second, at any place, most chillingly in your own home.”

Daniel Ellsberg, the former Rand Corporation analyst and state department consultant, met Page and stayed briefly at Frankie’s House in the mid-1960s. A few years later in 1971, he made the dramatic decision to hand over what became known as the *Pentagon Papers* to the American media, exposing the war’s criminality and the mountain of lies told to justify it. Ellsberg gave Page a copy, originally called “Papers on a War,” with the following inscription, “To Tim who may well have changed the course of the war.”

Recalling the response to Ellsberg’s courageous and politically explosive decision, Page wrote in his book *Mid-Term Report*: “An almost audible sound of relief escaped from America when Watergate burst open its collective psyche. The whole rotten-ridden core of the corruption in politics and justice was laid bare. The open wounds of the Vietnam war could be examined.”

Page was wounded four times in Vietnam, narrowly escaping death in 1965, twice in 1966, and again in April 1969, after returning to Vietnam following photographic assignments in the Middle East and covering the first mass anti-war demonstrations in the US.

On the last occasion, Page was hit with a two-inch piece of shrapnel that penetrated his head from an exploding land mine as he was attempting to help injured soldiers onto a helicopter.

Pronounced dead on arrival at the closest hospital, Page was revived and evacuated to the US where he underwent extensive neurosurgery and more than a year of rehabilitation at Walter Reed military hospital. In April 1970 whilst still recovering in the US, he learnt about the

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disappearance in Cambodia of Sean Flynn and Dana Stone.

Page was deeply impacted by this news and resolved to do everything he could to try and find their whereabouts or bodies. Flynn and Stone were captured by the Khmer Rouge and are believed to have been executed about a year later.

Page kept working in the US—freelancing for *Rolling Stone*, *Crawdaddy* and other American publications—while supporting Vietnam Veterans Against the War and assisting military amputees. These were difficult years for Page, still in his thirties and struggling with his injuries and the psychological impact of the war.

"The decade of pain, searing bouts of fear, loathing, confusion and mindlessness, the dead years of the 1970s, had been passed mainly in the United States," which only led to "a vortex of violence and self-destruction and eventual deportation. Those problems reflected mine and the nation's attempt to recover from the trauma of the Vietnam conflict," he explained in *Mid-Term Report*.

In 1991, Page established the Indochina Media Memorial Foundation, in honour of Flynn, Stone and the more than 130 other photographers from all countries killed in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia between 1945 and 1975. This led, in turn, to *Requiem*, an impressive 336-page book jointly edited with Horst Faas, a former Vietnam war photographer, and containing images by the deceased photographers. The *Requiem* collection, which has been shown around the world, is on permanent display at the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon).

Page, who also covered military conflicts in Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, East Timor and the Middle East, received numerous honours for his work. These included Robert Capa, American Society of Media Photographers, National Press Association and other awards.

The veteran photographer authored or edited ten books and also leaves behind a 750,000-image archive. *Nam Contacts* (2021), his last book, which was co-edited with Stephen Dupont, is a 448-page compilation of his Vietnam photographs from 1965 to 1969. Page and Dupont were working on *American Whiplash*, a collection of his US photographic work during the 1970s, when he died.

Page's passing, however, is not just the occasion to celebrate his considerable body of work and his humane and fiercely independent approach to photography. It is crucial to reflect on the fact, as Page often later did, that the relative freedoms enjoyed by photographers and journalists during the Vietnam War no longer exist.

Starting with the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, journalists and photographers must be "embedded" with military units, their work vetted by military authorities and not published in the mainstream media unless it fits the prevailing government propaganda.

Several letters sent in response to recent obituaries of Page appearing in the US media, including from former Vietnam veterans, condemn this censorship and salute his work.

Tim Page "gave the world a truthful and unvarnished firsthand look at the Vietnam War directly from the front lines," one reader wrote, with another stating, "There is a pact between major media corporations and our government to purposely not show the real face of war."

One letter-writer commented, "Sanitizing war is always a sure-fire way to quell protest." Another observed, "The world's eyes have been blinded to the atrocities of wars by the imposed requirements of 'embedded' journalists and photographers."

Page, interviewed twice by the WSWS in the last three years, was hostile to this repressive state-controlled "reality," and offered the following advice to serious photojournalists: "We have to present the brutal truth… and 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."

Interviewing Page was always a stimulating and pleasurable assignment. Compassionate, hostile towards the political establishment and its media flunkeys, deeply immersed in the history of photography, it was like attending a master class on the art form.

Last November he spoke with the WSWS in opposition to MGM's refusal in the US to release *Minamata*, directed by Andrew Levitas and starring Johnny Depp as famed photojournalist W. Eugene Smith. Page denounced the censorship and was fulsome in his praise for the film and Depp's performance.

"It's rare that you get a film made about a photographer that is so meaningful and accurate in dealing with the dichotomies of being a photojournalist," he said. Page offered some valuable insights into the fight against military and industrial pollution, the horrors of war and its impact on photographers, and the significance of Smith's photography.

"Smith's Minamata series are part of that lexicon of images that define photography, that define history and even define our life on this planet," he said.

The *Minamata* movie, he concluded, "goes a long way to explaining why it's necessary to report on issues that are usually hidden. The question is not what people want to see, but what they should see. There's very little of that sort of thing being published in media today."

Never one to pull his punches, Page was hostile to "embedded" journalism, the mainstream media, and the persecution of Julian Assange and others attempting to expose corporate corruption and the bloody reality of imperialist war.

In a powerful interview with the WSWS in November 2019, Page bluntly declared: "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."

Perceptive, accurate and powerful comments such as these are verboten in today's thoroughly corrupted mainstream media.

Tim Page made a priceless contribution to honest photojournalism and reportage during his more than fifty-year career, and, to the very end, still had plenty more to contribute to this fight. He will be sorely missed.

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