

War photos that changed history

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Wars have a way of reducing themselves to moments, single memories, tiny episodes. Here, pictures have a thousand-to-one advantage over words. The 10-year Vietnam War was summed up in four photographs:



Nick Ut/1972 AP file photo

SOUTH VIETNAM — Phan Thi Kim Phuc was 9 in June 1972 when a South Vietnamese plane mistakenly dropped its flaming napalm on South Vietnamese troops and civilians. The photo, by Nick Ut of AP, 'made America conscious of the full horror of the Vietnam War,' Life magazine editors said.



AP / The Washington Post

BAGHDAD — A photo obtained by the Washington Post and released Thursday, May 6, 2004, shows a soldier identified as U.S. Army Spc. Lynndie England, 21, of the 372nd Military Police Company with a naked detainee at the Abu Ghraib prison.

Associated Press photographer Eddie Adams captured the instant in 1968 when South Vietnamese Brig. Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan executed a Viet Cong prisoner on a Saigon street. Nick Ut snapped a picture of Kim Phuc, a Vietnamese girl, fleeing naked down a highway in Vietnam after a napalm attack in 1972.



Ronald L. Haeberle/1968 AP file photo
MY LAI, South Vietnam — This photo of the bodies of women and children after the massacre of civilians in March 1968 shocked Americans when it was published by Life several months later.

Ron Haeberle took a picture of the limp bodies of the My Lai massacre victims after they were shot in 1968. John Filo caught Mary Ann Vecchio screaming over the body of a fellow student slain by National Guardsmen during a war protest at Kent State University in Ohio in 1970.



John Filo/AP file photo

KENT STATE UNIVERSITY — Protests over the Vietnam War led to death in the streets of America as well as Vietnam. Mary Ann Vecchio (left) screams as she kneels by the body of a student demonstrator, one of four killed by Ohio National Guardsmen on May 4, 1970.



Eddie Adams/1968 AP file photo

SAIGON, South Vietnam — South Vietnamese National Police Chief Brig. Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan executes a Viet Cong officer with a shot to the head, one of the most chilling images of the Vietnam War. Photographer Eddie Adams, who won a Pulitzer Prize for this photograph, said the execution was justified, because the Viet Cong officer had killed eight South Vietnamese. The furor created by this 1968 image destroyed Loan's life. He fled South Vietnam in 1975, the year the communists overran the country, and moved to Virginia, where he opened a restaurant. He died in 1998 at age 67. Loan 'was a hero,' Adams said when he died. 'America should be crying. I just hate to see him go this way, without people knowing anything about him.'

These photographs, it could be argued, tilted the whole balance of public opinion against the war. What occurred on the battlefield was rendered largely irrelevant by what occurred when certain photons massed themselves into images and rushed into the retinas and minds of the American public.



Matthew Brady/AP file photo

ANTIETAM, Maryland — On Sept. 17, 1862, at least 3,650 Confederate and Union soldiers died at the Battle of Antietam. Matthew Brady did not actually take all of the photographs attributed to him. He spent most of his time supervising his corps of photographers, including his assistant, Alexander Gardner, who was an expert in the wet-plate photo process that was rapidly displacing the daguerreotype. Soon after the Battle of Antietam, Brady shocked America by displaying his staff photographs of battlefield corpses. This marked the first time most people had ever witnessed the carnage of war.

In the same way, the photos of Iraqi prisoners being tortured and humiliated at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad have delivered a grievous blow to American power and prestige worldwide. The tiny, glass eyes of digital cameras and what they witnessed have proved more shocking and awesome than all the shock-and-awe Cruise missiles and bunker-buster bombs launched and dropped at the start of the war.

It is impossible to escape the gloomy presentiment, that with this single series of pornographic eye-blinks, these cheap shots of cheap behavior, the entire war in Iraq has been summed up and may be irrevocably lost, or immeasurably lengthened, or both. The suspicions of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims toward the U.S. have surely been confirmed, sharpened, renewed and validated photographically.

A few nights of vulgar, cruel hijinks on the part of a handful of American soldiers in uniform have nearly set the sacrifices of thousands of U.S. servicemen and women at naught, imperiled the job of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and placed the Bush administration on the defensive. In some ways, we will have to start the war all over again now, from scratch.

Photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson used to call such pictures "the decisive moment."

"Susan Sontag once opined that photographs were useless without words accompanying them," said Neal Ulevich, a retired AP photographer who won a Pulitzer Prize himself in 1977 for a picture of leftist students being lynched in Bangkok, Thailand.

"She was wrong. These photographs bury words. Shocking as they are, they left me with a feeling akin to vindication. They are astonishing proof of the power of the image to inform and clarify.

"To me, it is interesting that the really breathtaking images of war are usually the product of time. They come out of wars that last for years," said Ulevich, who lives near Denver.

"Conflicts that are over in a week do not tend to produce the images of agelong value. There is not enough time. The first Gulf War did not produce 'eternal' images. The current Iraq war has been percolating for more than a year now, and images of consequence are beginning to appear.



AP / Toronto Star

The body of a U.S. serviceman is dragged with ropes through the dusty streets of war-torn Mogadishu, Somalia, on Oct. 4, 1993. The dead soldier was one of five Americans killed during the first day of a major U.N. assault on warlord Mohamed Farah Aidid's military command.

"While there is often an element of randomness or luck in the strongest of images, the photographer must be there at the right time. Even randomness and luck seem to need some time to germinate."

'The terrible reality of war'

Photography has marched arm-in-arm with war since its invention.

Hippolyte Bayard made a daguerrotype of the barricades of Paris after the 1848 revolution, but daguerrotypes required several minutes to make and were useless for action shots.

A technological improvement came with the invention of the wet collodion process, which spread light-sensitive silver iodide crystals on glass plates. Images could be easily multiplied, even though they still took a long time to make.

Using the wet collodion process, Felice Beato shot pictures of the Crimean War in the mid-1850s, and Matthew Brady and his staff photographed the battlefields of the Civil War, often within a few hours of the actual battle. Photographs of the dead at Antietam in 1862 shocked Americans when they were displayed at his New York studio.

"Mr. Brady has done something to bring us the terrible reality and earnestness of the war," wrote a reporter for *The New York Times*. "If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our door-yards and along (our) streets, he has done something very like it."

Wet plates were replaced by gelatin-coated dry plates around 1880 and the invention of halftone printing enabled photographs to be reprinted in newspapers in the 1890s. Hand-held cameras with spooled film arrived by the turn of the last century, enabling photographs of the Spanish-American War, the Mexican Revolution and the second Anglo-Boer War.

The motion-picture camera was invented in 1891 by Thomas Edison, making war films possible. One of the first combat scenes to be filmed was World War I's Battle of the Somme in 1915.

This movie, only seconds long, which is run on a continuous loop at the Imperial War Museum in London today, shows British soldiers going "over the top" of a trench to attack well-entrenched Germans across no man's land. One man doesn't even make it to the top. He is killed as soon as his head emerges, and he slides back down, limp, against the trench parapet. This film was screened in British theaters, but it proved so shocking that the government quickly suppressed it and clamped down hard on war photography during World War I. As a result, the conflict is remembered more in paintings than in photographs.

By 1913, smaller, lighter cameras such as the 35mm Leica, the 120mm Rolleiflex and the single-lens-reflex Contax enabled photographs to be taken at eye level, without exposing

the photographer to prolonged enemy fire. They also opened photography to amateurs, even to soldiers themselves. German soldiers took their Leicas with them when they marched into Russia in World War II and took thousands of shocking photographs of massacres and murdered Jews.

"If your pictures aren't good enough, you aren't close enough," war photographer Robert Capa used to say. In 1954, Capa got too close. He stepped on a land mine in Indochina and died in the explosion, aged 40.

The digitalized moment

Still photography still trumps movies of war. Motion pictures are diffuse, streaming by their very nature. The single image captures the decisive moment with absolute unified clarity. There is nothing beyond its borders. It is all there is: Take it or leave it.

Digital photography, pioneered in the 1980s, has resulted in cameras so tiny they fit in a shirt pocket and seldom err in exposure or focus. No film is necessary, so the image is completely unmediated. No one can halt it or thwart it. No film processor at a one-hour-photo lab can call the police, alert the Pentagon or notify the FBI. There is no time, no opportunity to destroy a negative, because

there is no negative.

The tap of a finger, the push of a button, completes the picture completely. Digital photography thus offers an uncensored look at the world, which can then be flashed over the Internet instantly.

This is what happened in the Abu Ghraib prison. Behavior got out of hand, and digital cameras got into the hands of people who doubtless now wish they'd never heard of such instruments.

The camera literally broke the chain of command. Wishes became deeds. Deeds became pictures. These pictures have wrought immense mischief. The acts were terrible, but the pictures are themselves innocent, because pictures seldom lie, no matter how often they are accused of lying.

Rather, they expose lies. The camera never apologizes. That is left to us to do