

INTRODUCTION BY **TED KOPPEL**



ON THE FRONTLINES OF THE TELEVISION WAR

A Legendary War Cameraman in Vietnam

YASUTSUNE "TONY" HIRASHIKI • EDITED BY TERRY IRVING

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FOREWORD BY TED KOPPEL

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This book is a translated and revised edition of the original Japanese title: *Once I Dreamed of Being Robert Capa* (Kodansha, two volumes, 2008)

“I like to tell people about the bravest man I ever met. He’s a Japanese cameraman who didn’t even come up to my shoulder but I never saw him back away or even flinch when the shooting started. He could walk through the bush all day long, carrying a load of equipment that would buckle a mule’s knees and never complain. He also took all the crap the war, the country, and the climate handed out and shrugged it off with a smile.”

Roger Peterson, former ABC News correspondent

“Tony Hirashiki is an essential piece of the foundation on which ABC was built. From the day he approached the bureau chief in Saigon with a note pinned to his shirt saying he could shoot pictures to the anxious afternoon of 9/11 when we lost him in the collapse of the Twin Towers (and he emerged covered in dust clutching his precious beta tapes), Tony reported the news with his camera and in doing so, he brought the truth about the important events of our day to millions of Americans.”

David Westin, former President of ABC News

“The cameramen were the real heroes of the Vietnam War coverage ... and Tony Hirashiki’s story proves it!”

Sam Donaldson, former ABC News White House reporter

“Tony realized his dream. He became the Robert Capa of TV news cameramen. Everyone at ABC News loved working with Tony but I was so fortunate to have him as my ‘sensei.’ He selflessly taught me the craft. He was always patient and gracious. Tony has such a unique sense of humor. He is as loyal a friend as you can have. A truly outstanding human being.”

J. W. Lower, documentarian and photographer

“Beautifully composed pictures, even in the most chaotic of circumstances, came naturally to him. Some of that, I’ve learned over the years, is a matter of instinct, but more of it comes from having the soul of a poet.”

Ned Potter, former ABC News correspondent

“Tony Hirashiki is among the greatest video journalists, and legendary among us. His deep intelligence, stunning eye, compassionate personality, and warm wit saved our lives at roadblocks real and conceptual in many wars, sometimes literally.”

Bill Blakemore, ABC News correspondent

“In his book *Dispatches*, Mike Herr wrote ‘...Vietnam is what we had instead of happy childhoods.’ This book is an honest, sensitive and entertaining account of that family written by one of its most respected members. This translation retains the humor and gentleness in Tony’s story.”

Keith Kay, award-winning CBS cameraman

“Tony Hirashiki was perfect for the times. Young, with no thought for his own safety, he just wanted to show the Vietnam war as it was. He did that, filming for ABC News and the various correspondents he worked with. It’s his filmic brilliance that turned the reporting then into what was called, The Living Room War.”

Drew Pearson, former ABC NEWS correspondent

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FOREWORD

I did not witness the event, but the arrival of Yasutsune Hirashiki at ABC's Saigon bureau in 1966 has, over the years, taken on some of the resonance of the baby Moses' discovery in the bullrushes by the Pharaoh's daughter. The legendary account does not differ all that drastically from Mr. Hirashiki's own recollection; but in the version I heard on my initial tour in South Vietnam in January of 1967, Hirashiki had an envelope addressed to the ABC Bureau Chief safety-pinned to his jacket. If that image evokes a child's first day at summer camp, it is apt. To put matters into perspective, none of Hirashiki's legion of American friends and colleagues has ever called him Mr. Hirashiki, or Yasutsune. It has always been "Tony." It is a testimony to Tony's innate modesty and courtesy that he has seemed genuinely content with this arrangement, while continuing to apply the Japanese honorific to each of our names—*Ted-san*, for example.

But back to the letter: It was from ABC News' Director of Film, a man by the name of Jack Bush. It introduced Tony to the Saigon bureau chief and, in essence, recommended giving Tony a tryout. This, as you will later learn, did not precisely reflect Tony's understanding. He thought he was coming to a job and a regular salary. At the time, Tony spoke very little English. There are some harsh critics who will argue that, despite many years living here in the United States, fluency in English still eludes my old friend. The reader must understand that

loving Tony is not dependent on sharing a common language; indeed, it might even have proved to be an obstacle.

I have seen this book in three iterations: the Japanese version, which was honored with one of that nation's top literary prizes but not a page of which I could read, Tony's helpful translation of the chapter relating most directly to me, and Terry Irving's splendid effort to bridge the gap between the two. To give a flavor of Tony's English, I am providing part of an email Tony sent informing me of the good news that his original book was being honored in Japan:

June 19, at imperial hotel Tokyo, the organizer will held award ceremony. They invited me to attend. I also getting 10 thousand award cash!

So if you are coming down NY area and have time, I'll buy good Sushi Dinner (not lunch special). The book had great reviews by big news papers and magazines in Japan, but sale was slow due to economic situation, good book but too expensive and two volumes. well at least people know how we had covered the Vietnam war.

I wish you are attending at ceremony..., meanwhile please share with me this honor...it's yours too. Please don't forget wash hands, gargle, no shake hand, no hug, and no kissing air or cheek and keep away from Japanese cameraman who write funny story.

One article said [71 YEARS FRESH WRITER WAS BORN, PROBABLY WITHOUT SECOND BOOK]

So I have to challenge!

Best regard to all your family.

Love and respect

Tony HIRASHIKI

Tony would have been the perfect intelligence agent. He conveys the impression of a complete innocent, a man without guile. Tony makes people smile. His own smile is beatific and infectious, but it is his generosity of spirit, his deep sense of humanity that transcend language and culture. Tony Hirashiki was simply one of the best television cameramen to cover the Vietnam War. His soaring video, often acquired only at great personal risk, gave wings to even the most mundane narration. For those of us who worked with him he was also a source of gentleness and joy in a place where both were in terribly short supply.

But those were just surface impressions. I am more than a little embarrassed to discover that Tony's impressions of Vietnam, the ~~war~~ and the people he worked with were infinitely more sophisticated than my own. Tony Hirashiki, it turns out, has also been a canny, if gentle, observer of a generation of American television journalists. While cataloguing and gently tweaking our failings and exaggerating our virtues, Tony has produced a memoir of Vietnam unlike anything previously written.

I have only recently re-read Michael Herr's brilliant memoir of the Vietnam War, *Dispatches*. It is, by far, the best book of its genre. It makes the horror and madness of anticipating, experiencing, and dealing with the consequences of intense combat palpable. Tony Hirashiki's book is "shot" through a softer lens, but none the less true. If I had only spoken Japanese, I would have known for fifty years what a truly eloquent man he is. I kept a diary for a couple of weeks during my several tours in Vietnam. Tony was a constant diarist and a keen observer.

This is a particularly important book for Americans to read. We have a national inclination toward solipsism—the notion that only those things we personally experience exist. That's how too many of us covered the Vietnam War; the Vietnamese becoming almost incidental to the battles being waged by our troops, the demonstrations on our college campuses, the expediencies of our diplomats and politicians. Tony was an Asian observer of the war and its victims, capable of viewing both with an objectivity and compassion that gave equal weight to the Vietnamese experience. There were, among the camera crews and photographers in Vietnam many Japanese, Koreans, Singaporeans, ethnic Chinese from Hong Kong and Taiwan and, of course, Vietnamese. There was a tendency among American television correspondents to view them largely, if not exclusively, through the prism of their technical abilities.

They, meanwhile, were casting a far more observant eye on us; on the frequent triviality of our coverage. Like the military and government spokespersons who parceled out meaningless body counts as a way of "keeping score," our reports provided little depth or analysis: "New York" was obsessed with combat footage involving American troops and we obliged. Vietnam was a dateline. We rarely engaged with its people

or paid much attention to the impact that our massive presence had on their communities.

I doubt that my friend, Tony, has an acquaintance with the Scottish poet, Robert Burns, but he provides an answer to the poet's plea:

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us,
To see oursels as ithers see us!

Read on.

Ted Koppel

EDITOR'S NOTE

I want to make it clear to the reader that this is a memoir and not a history. It is what one young photojournalist saw and remembered and is not meant to be a definitive record of the people, places, and battles he witnessed. In my experience as a producer, camera operators put the facts into their lenses and often aren't paying all that much attention to the details of what's going on around them. If anyone who was in Vietnam during that period feels that we've made an error—for instance, which unit was in which particular town at what date—please let me know, we do want to get it right. But no one should assume that any error is intentional, or any oversight is meant as a slight because to do that would be to misunderstand the care and attention that Mr. Hirashiki has given to this project.

Tony's English is, as his children say, about "grade school level" so, as editor, I needed to move around some clauses, fix a verb or two, and find different words for the ones he found in his Japanese–English dictionary. However, the more I worked on this extraordinary book, the more I realized that what I was doing was very much what a jeweler does when he polishes a diamond. All I had to do was to make Tony's observations and comments clear and, occasionally, figure out what he wanted to say. I hope that the result matches the original as a warm, intelligent, and extraordinarily observant man's record of a very complicated period and the men and women who tried to present it honestly and truthfully.

Terry Irving

PREFACE

Not long ago, I had the opportunity to visit the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C. and pay my respects to those who paid the ultimate sacrifice. As I looked at name after name carved on the black marble wall, I found myself searching fruitlessly for the names of those friends, colleagues, and mentors who had died doing their jobs during the nine years I spent in Vietnam.

I searched for their names although I knew I wouldn't find them.

Their names aren't chiseled into the Vietnam Memorial because that honor is reserved for soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen. The names of my comrades have a place in my heart instead: Terence Khoo, Sam Kai Faye, Howard Tuckner, Craig Spence, Kyoichi Sawada, Larry Burrows, Henri Huet, Kent Potter, Keizaburo Shimamoto, "Moon Face," and many others. They were my comrades and our war was on the battlefields next to the soldiers, encountering many of the same dangers, and making many of the same sacrifices.

They were journalists: television correspondents, cameramen, soundmen, photographers, and many others. They didn't carry weapons; they carried pens, typewriters, film cameras, and microphones. They used these tools of their trade, powered by intelligence, empathy, wit, and creativity, to stand side by side with the troops and witness and record the war as it actually happened and to document the courage of the young men who fought it.

In 1966, I came from Japan with a 16-millimeter film camera, a dream of becoming a legendary war photographer like Robert Capa, and no job. I was hired by ABC News and worked with the brave men and women who came to cover the war until the last helicopters lifted off from Saigon in 1975. I was hardly alone. Hundreds of journalists from dozens of countries would come to cover this war. Some were experienced journalists, well-known writers, respected historians, and legendary photographers, but most were inexperienced and unknown young men and women like me who were driven by youthful enthusiasm and a determination to report the biggest story of their generation.

None of us had been taught how to cover a war before we arrived; we had to learn the hard way. War took the place of journalism school, and battles were our classrooms. We were armored by the conviction of invincibility that is the hallmark of all young people, and we worked together, learned together, competed against each other, and built friendships that have endured for the rest of our lives. There was a wealth of stories to cover and the veteran journalists, well-known experts, and experienced troops who stood by our side became our professors. Although tuition was free and doing a tour in a war zone was, and still is, one of the fastest ways to succeed in our profession, a failure in these classes far too often meant terror, pain, and death. All of our bravery and courage was no shield against the cruel and random nature of war, and we all had to master the harsh truth that fear and sorrow would always be a constant companion.

Vietnam was the first time that all of the television networks covered all of a war, and ABC's entire news division was only a few years old. Consequently, I had the opportunity to learn in the wide-open atmosphere of a young company, and I took full advantage. I tried to collect and keep everything: reporter's scripts, the caption sheets that told the producers and editors back in New York who the people were in the stories, the "dope sheets" that accompanied every reel of film—filled with details of when and where it was shot, the names of the correspondents and crew, the events we were covering, and even how many feet of film we'd used. In addition to collecting many of the telexes, memos,

and letters from the time, I have spoken and written to my co-workers many times since the war to make sure that my memories are accurate.

Thousands of personal accounts have been written about the Vietnam War but very few about those who brought it home to America. These are the memoirs of my war and a testament to my wartime comrades. We shared moments of joy, bouts of bitterness, and hours of fear. In the end, we survived Vietnam together, and together we mourned those who did not. Some might see these pages as sentimental but I'm proud of the ABC News correspondents, editorial staff, and crews that I worked with, and I want to present them to the world.

Yasutsune "Tony" Hirashiki

“The television cameraman is rather a new breed. There is no exact profile of the man. First of all, he is an artist, a craftsman, not just a picture-taker. The camera is an extension of the man himself. His knack for composition is built in. He is not only the eyes for the viewer but, often, the creator of the most dramatic part of the story.”

Elmer Lower, President ABC News, London 1973¹

PART I

GOOD LUCK OMIKUJI



For a cameraman covering a war, good luck meant getting good pictures, which meant risk and danger. Good luck lived side by side with bad luck. Growing up in Japan, I sometimes went to Shinto shrines to find out my fortune. Written on tiny pieces of paper called *omikujji*, there were four types of luck that you could end up with: “ordinary bad fortune,” “very bad fortune,” “good fortune,” and “extra good fortune.” If you drew one with “bad fortune” or “very bad fortune” written on it, you would fold it and hang it on a tree branch at the shrine and pray that it would change into “good fortune.”

I have divided this book into two parts because, for me, there are two stories: one of very good fortune and one of very bad fortune.

In fact, they were side by side the whole time.

Previous page: Tony smiling with an Auricon camera in c. 1966. The camera weighed about 30 pounds and had to be supported by a brace that went down to a belt around the cameraman's waist. However, since the system that drove the film was inside a metal case, it was quieter than any other portable camera that recorded both sound and video. (Courtesy of Yasutsune Hirashiki)

CHAPTER I

HAPPY VALLEY

The early morning sun made the plain below us shine like a golden carpet. We had a bird's-eye view from our "Huey," the UH-1 helicopter that had picked us up an hour before sunrise.

Now, as the sun rose, we were somewhere over Central Vietnam. A Huey heading into a combat zone has to have both of the big sliding doors open, and this means that the cold morning air blows through the cabin along with all the power, and noise, of the 1,000 horsepower main engine.

The public information officer, who was our escort, shouted into my ear as he pointed at our destination, a mountainous area far to the southwest. He had to shout twice before I understood that he was saying, "That's Happy Valley."

The helicopter dropped us off on a low hill. Beautiful rice fields reached to the horizon in all directions, each filled with golden rice, ready for harvest. I could tell that it would be a bountiful crop because the weight of the rice was making all the plants gently bow in the breeze. These fields were the "golden carpet" I'd seen from the air.

By and large, Central Vietnam is a tough place for farmers. It's squeezed in between the South China Sea and the Central Highlands and, compared with the Mekong Delta where farmers can grow two crops of rice a year, in Central Vietnam it's a struggle to raise a single crop.

There are exceptions where the land is fertile and well watered. Often these areas were given names such as "Happy Valley." We were actually

in the Song Ve Valley in Quang Ngai province, a region where good harvests brought devastating conflict.

Every harvest season, the North Vietnamese Army regulars and the Viet Cong guerrillas of the National Liberation Front would come down from the safety of their mountain bases for rice to feed their troops. The Army of South Vietnam, and now their American allies, would fight to stop them.

It was war as regular as the seasons.

On May 12–14, 1967, the First Battalion of the 327th Airborne, 101st Airborne Brigade was sent in. Ken Gale was the ABC correspondent on this story, a slim and handsome guy from Texas, who was only 29 years old—a year older than I was. Unlike most of the reporters, correspondents, and camera crews in the Saigon press corps, who tended to be energetic and talkative show-offs, Ken was quiet, gentle, and serious—much closer to my image of a college professor or a doctor than a television correspondent.

I later learned that Ken had planned to cover China but was blocked by the emergence of the Red Guard and the rise of Chinese xenophobia. He worked in Taiwan, went back to New York for some graduate study, and when correspondent Ron Nessen was wounded, NBC hired Ken to replace him.

Ken said that he had never done a television report before Vietnam, so his time at NBC was on-the-job training. He lasted six months before being let go and then freelanced for ABC. Ken was an excellent writer when he had time but he was not fast, and that's a problem in the deadline-driven world of TV news.

By nature, Ken always challenged himself to try new things and cover tough stories. The determination to overcome fear is an essential part of combat journalism, but Ken had a reputation among the camera crews as going too far too often.

In other words, a dangerous partner.

Once Ken asked me to join him on a report about a small 12-man long-range reconnaissance team, but a friend of mine had told me that this particular team not only searched an area but acted as a decoy to draw out enemy soldiers. I had no desire to be a decoy.



ABC News correspondent Ken Gale works on a script in the field. On May 12, 1967, Gale, Hirashiki, and soundman Nguyen Thanh Long went on a search and destroy mission with the 1st Battalion, 327 Airborne, 101st Airborne Brigade. On the second day, they were hit by a large force of North Vietnamese, a battle unofficially named “Mother’s Day Hill” by the troops. (Courtesy Ken Gale)

I seldom refused assignments but that time I turned him down. Looking back at this period from the viewpoint of decades later, Ken wrote of his dangerous reputation:

It wasn’t bravery; it was idiocy. I remember that I was very afraid the first several months in Viet nam. As time went on, I gained more confidence, but mostly I think I got wholly caught up in what was then the biggest story of the times in America. The more I learned, the more I wanted to know.¹

Our soundman, Nguyen Thanh Long, was a native of South Vietnam who loved to drink, play, and enjoy life. Most Vietnamese men are thin, but Long was really skinny despite the fact that he loved to drink *Ba Muoi Ba* beer. Ken Gale wondered if this frail-looking guy could

handle the soundman's job—which involves carrying a lot of heavy gear—but Long always kept up and did his job well.

Long was planning to go to college, and I remember him as very smart, an avid reader, and a man who enjoyed arguing about any subject; including the war. He was an outspoken guy and, like many Vietnamese, just wanted the Americans to go away and let the Vietnamese people work out their own future.

Long and I became good friends even though for a long time I would unwittingly embarrass him every time we worked together. I knew that the word “long” in Vietnamese meant “dragon,” so I didn't see any problem with loudly calling “Long! Long!” in the rush of changing reels or catching natural sound.



ABC News correspondent Ken Gale doing a stand-up report in South Vietnam. He was attending university and studying China Policy when a chance to cover the war in Vietnam came and he, like so many others, leapt at the chance. (Courtesy Ken Gale)

He finally begged me to call him by his family name, “Nguyen.” He said the problem was my accent. When I said his name, it sounded like the Vietnamese word for female genitalia. Long knew how hard it was for a Japanese to speak his language but he just couldn’t stand being so embarrassed every time we worked together.

This morning, the Airborne soldiers were gathering in the middle of the rice paddies. From here, they would be climbing west into the mountains—a long, tough march. Ken said that this was going to be a battalion-size operation and would involve hundreds of soldiers so he decided that we should stick with the command group so that we could get a better idea of what was happening when things got scattered and confused.

When the operation kicked off, the soldiers moved single file at a slow and steady pace and tried to step in the footprints of the man ahead to avoid booby traps and mines. When we reached the thick jungle on the first mountain, I looked back at “Happy Valley” with its golden fields stretched out in the sun.

It was dark and cool under the trees that made up the thick jungle canopy. The trail was narrow, less than 10 feet wide. The first soldiers in line, a job called “walking point,” used minesweepers to clear the trail. Along with the machines, a trained German shepherd scout dog ran back and forth sniffing trails and bushes for any signs of the enemy. I worried that the dog would think Long and I were enemies because we were Asians but he was smart enough to realize we were on his side.

Ken came up and asked me to film the dog, and when I told him that I had already done it, he was pleased. Good communications and a shared vision are crucial to creating a good television story.

Today, you can see your video instantly, but it wasn’t like that in 1967. The film had to be raced to an airplane and shipped back to the States or to one of the big Asian cities like Hong Kong, Tokyo, or Manila where it was developed and edited. The final story was transmitted over one of the few satellite links to New York.

If a correspondent expected to have certain pictures to write to and the cameraman had missed it, the result was frustration and anger.

Mistakes like this could create friction and flare up into angry words, but when the whole team was in sync, it was pure pleasure. After we'd worked a number of stories together, Ken knew when I would shoot and when I would turn off the camera to save film, so he seldom gave me specific directions.

For my part, I learned Ken's style of reporting and made sure that I got the right pictures and sequences. The truth is, a combat cameraman had to be a journalist, not just a technician. If I didn't understand what the reporter wanted to talk about or missed the unexpected moments that make a good story great, we would all fail.

The fact is that genuine combat rarely happens within the range of your camera and if you waited for what the New York producers cynically called "bang bang," you could well end up with nothing at all.

So I filmed images that could illustrate story concepts. If it was raining, I took close-up shots of boots slogging through thick, clinging mud that would show how physically exhausting it was for soldiers on the frontlines and sunsets and sunrises that were like postcards but also an excellent way to begin or end a piece. I was fascinated by everything I saw, and I tried to capture that on film.

There was no school for Vietnam. Like all the other young photographers and cameramen, I learned as I went along. My work had to address the essentials: who, where, when, what, why, and how. I couldn't write those answers, so I tried to be sure they were in my camera and to get them, I had to be on the scene, and ready to shoot at any second.

These days, many people think the press was against the war and distorted the coverage—that simply wasn't true out in the field. Nevertheless, our bosses in New York wanted to be sure our coverage was fact-based, and so they sent out what became Rule Number One: "Do Not Stage Any Scenes."

We were told in no uncertain terms that our coverage of the war was not to be scripted, dramatized, sensationalized, exaggerated, or biased in any way. Our job was to record what was happening "as it is" and then be sure we reported it "as it was."

After two hours of walking, we took a short break. When we started moving again, we heard the flat *crack* of a shot from an M16 up ahead. The captain jogged forward, and we followed.

When we arrived at the scene, a young North Vietnamese soldier was lying on the ground, and blood was softly bubbling from a wound in his chest. Except for the blood, he could have been taking an afternoon nap.

What had happened was that the sergeant walking point had rounded a hairpin turn in the trail and almost bumped into the Vietnamese soldier, who had been walking down the trail. The man wasn't in a uniform; he was wearing the black shirt and pants that were the everyday clothes of Vietnamese farmers—American soldiers called them “black pajamas”—but he was armed, and there was no question he was an enemy.

Both men reacted quickly. The Vietnamese soldier tried to throw a grenade, and the sergeant snapped off a rifle shot. The sergeant was faster. He was very lucky, his first bullet struck the other man in the heart and killed him instantly.

A soldier standing next to us pulled a card from a strap around his helmet and put it on the chest of the dead soldier. It was the Ace of Spades. Ken interviewed the man, and he showed us an entire deck made up of the same card and told us that his family back home had sent it to him. According to the soldier, both Americans and Vietnamese believed that the Ace of Spades was bad luck, and they hated the idea that it would be placed on them after they were killed.

Then we did an interview with the sergeant, whose name was Gerard Simpson, but who was usually called “Bernie.” We could see that he was still in shock—his face was pale, and he was shaking. This was the first time that he had ever killed another human being. His comrades were treating him as a hero, but he was very honest when he spoke to us, “I spun around to fire at him and he started reaching for something. I fired in the general direction of his chest. I wanted to get the round out there before anything else.... If I hadn't killed him, I and my fellow soldiers would have been killed by the grenade. I had no choice.”

His relief at being the one left standing was clear. He told us that “In three more days I'm going to Hawaii, and my fiancée will be flying out



Many GIs carried packs of cards—all the Ace of Spades—to place on the bodies of enemy dead. Both Americans and Vietnamese saw the card as unlucky and it was thought to increase fear among the enemy. (Film shot by Yasutsune Hirashiki; courtesy ABC News)

there, and I'll meet her there." They were going to get married and for the first time, he showed us a slightly shy but happy and smiling face. His fellow soldiers teased him by chanting "Honeymoon! Honeymoon!"

The plan was to reach the top of the mountain by evening, but we ended up camped by the side of the trail not far from the summit. Ken, Long, and I got ready to spend the night under a good-sized tree where the roots were good and thick—at least a foot high where they stretched across the ground. We had just finished our C-rations when a soldier came up with a message from the commanding officer. Apparently, he wanted Long to act as translator, but we all decided to tag along.

They had laid out the meager belongings of the young soldier on the ground; his rifle was old and worn, he had a few hand grenades, a canteen, a cooker, and a toiletry kit in a worn canvas bag. In his pockets,

there had been a picture of a young Vietnamese woman and a diary, which the officer wanted Long to translate.

Long began to translate the soldier's diary. It began in 1963 when the soldier had left his small village near Hanoi. He wrote about his mother, saying that she cried when he was chosen to go south. The rest of his neighbors celebrated with a farewell party for him, but he was miserable because he had to leave his girlfriend.

In the diary, he wrote about her as his "sister," but Long explained that this was a poetic way of speaking; she was the woman he loved and he said that being separated from her was the worst part of going to war. The young soldier wrote about how he had to remember that he was a patriot and that it was his duty to go and help the people in South Vietnam suffering under the American occupation.

Long soon began to skip pages because they were filled with what he said was "a beautiful poem" about the soldier's love and how much he wanted to be with her. Long claimed that his English wasn't good enough to translate it, but I think that he was trying to protect the young man's privacy.

As the years passed, the diary began to have gaps, and the sentences were shorter—no more beautiful poetry. Long read about how life in the mountains had become more and more difficult for the young soldier as American ground troops began to take over combat duties. In the early days, he had been relatively safe because it would take the South Vietnamese troops days to get close to the secret bases in the mountains. The GIs, on the other hand, were using helicopters, which could get them into combat range very quickly. He feared the American artillery and described what it was like to hug the ground as the big shells came in.

As the Americans steadily tightened their grip on the roads and trails, he wrote about how it became more and more difficult to get medicine and supplies. By the end of the book, he wrote that he was hungry all day every day. Finally, Long translated the last page, dated only a week ago:

The other day I cut trees and turned them into charcoal. Today, after dusk, I put a sack of charcoal on my shoulder and went down to the village to sell it. The villagers were not interested in buying my charcoal. I asked the villagers if they wanted to barter my charcoal for a little rice and salt but nobody wanted to deal

with me. It has been quite a long time since I left my home village. Everyone must have forgotten about me except my mother. I'm sad and very hungry. I want to go home. This moment, if I could get a bowl of rice and a spoonful of salt in my hand, I would never complain about food for the rest of my life.

After translating the last page, Long took a deep breath and fell silent. No one said anything for a while. When Long handed the diary back, the commander thanked him and said, almost as if he was thinking aloud, "This young man was a good soldier, too."

Long was quiet as we left the command area but once we'd settled down under our tree, he began to talk. "I hate both the VC and the NVA soldiers, but after reading this diary, I'm unable to hate this guy even though he's my enemy. He's just a Vietnamese guy like me. He believed that he had a duty to his country, and so he came down here and was killed. His life was simply wasted; any possible achievements lost forever. How stupid he was but..."

Long fell silent after the word "but."

I think that Long was genuinely shocked by this young soldier's story. It was one thing to see someone as an "enemy," a shadowy and unknown image, but the diary had made this man real.

Long had always spoken very frankly and openly with me, never hesitating to be honest about his thoughts, emotions, and opinions. He once told me about his plans to avoid being drafted into the army. He thought he could make it across the border to Laos—at the time, it was safer there. Or he could get enough money together to bribe an officer who would just mark his name down as "present." If these plans didn't work, he said he would cut the first two fingers off his right hand. He would keep the thumb and the other two fingers, but he was sure that the Army wouldn't draft a man who couldn't pull the trigger on his weapon.

For a long time, we lay quiet on our sleeping bags. I didn't fall asleep for a quite a long time. I kept thinking about the last glimpse I'd had of the young soldier laying on the ground. He'd looked like he was sleeping except for the ace of spades on his chest.

I wasn't sure if I'd be able to fall asleep at all.

Ken Gale remembers that for most of that night, heavy artillery shells aimed just yards away were whistling so close over our heads that some

of the shells brushed the tree tops and showered us with leaves and twigs and the explosions were deafening. I have to take his word for this because I was sound asleep.

The commander had apparently called in a “danger close” fire command to keep enemy troops away in the darkness. “Danger close” means the shells needed to be precisely aimed because the attackers being targeted were extremely close to friendly forces.

In the early morning, we had to wait until a thick fog cleared, so we had breakfast with the soldiers. I can still remember the delicious taste of the coffee that they shared with us. The fact is that we had all gone through some stressful events the day before, and we had bonded with the men.

The fog cleared in the late morning, and we went back on the march. I called to Sergeant Simpson as he walked past and he greeted us with a big smile. The other soldiers were still teasing him with shouts of “Two more days to the honeymoon!”

After about half an hour of careful travel, the trail widened, and we started going up another mountain ridge. Suddenly—in war everything happens either suddenly or very slowly—we heard heavy machine-gun fire and grenades exploding not far ahead of us. The firing was so close that I could hear bullets whiz past my ears, making a noise that I remember as *pyunn, pyunn*.

My camera was rolling as soon as I heard the first shot.

This wasn’t a single quick incident like yesterday; we were under heavy attack. The soldiers immediately moved off the open trail and into cover, and we followed, scrambling to the left and into the shelter of thick trees and bushes.

On the now-deserted trail, we saw the first casualty heading to the rear. It was the German shepherd scout dog that had led us so bravely the day before. Severely wounded and covered with blood, it was crying like a puppy as it ran down the trail.

Very soon, wounded troops appeared, supported by their comrades. I was surprised by how many were injured. The unit was ordered to fall back and form a defensive position right where we were crouching. From that position, the Airborne soldiers fought back, kneeling behind

tree trunks and lying behind the big roots. The undergrowth was so dense that we couldn't see more than a few yards. One of the soldiers told us that we'd made a mistake when we jumped off the main trail. We'd moved to the left, and that's where the attack was coming from. Sadly, no place was safer at the moment, so we huddled in what cover we could find and filmed the troops from only inches away.

After a time, Long and I began to move to where other soldiers were fighting—crawling or crouching low all the way. At one point, you can hear on the film a soldier saying, "You better get down, cameraman, or you're gonna catch a bullet." So I stayed down behind the massive tree roots and would just raise my camera high enough to film. Since we couldn't move, I kept changing angles and using different lenses to get as many different images as possible.

A lot of my shots were very tight close-ups: a tense young soldier's face, frightened eyes flicking in search of a target, an unlit cigarette hanging forgotten from the side of lips pulled tight with fear and concentration.

Long was right next to me, pointing his microphone to record the sound of explosions, commands, and the cries of the wounded. Medics had set up an aid station near us because it was the safest location they could find and were tending to the wounded as a steady stream of injured soldiers kept arriving.

Ken had already put away his notepad and still camera and was doing his best to help the wounded. In a letter, he recalled how difficult it was:

At one point a wounded soldier asked me to re-insert the needle of the serum drip bag he'd had hooked up. I crawled up to him and made several attempts to insert the needle into a vein, but I think I may have been a bit nervous, probably from idea of jabbing a needle into someone's skin as much as from all the shooting going on around us. After several failed attempts, the soldier hollered, "Goddamit. Just stick the fucking needle in the vein!" or words like that. I concentrated and got it in right.

Later, after I had crawled back to my place and chattering into my tape recorder for radio story, but mostly to keep my wits about me, I felt a bump on my back. It was the same soldier, passing me his rifle and pointing out towards the perimeter. I think that's when I got scared and stopped chattering into the microphone. He meant for me to watch our flank and use the M16 when needed. It was never needed.²

About fifty feet to our right, I could see the command group with the captain alternating between calling commands to his troops and yelling into a radio. Long and I crawled over and filmed, but we didn't hang around. We'd been told by soldiers on earlier assignments that it was a bad idea to remain near a commanding officer and his radioman because they were always a target for snipers.

Within minutes, shells began to come over our heads and slam deep into the jungle. They made a loud whizzing sound followed by an enormous *BANG* that shook the ground like an earthquake.

With only a small number of men, many of them wounded, the captain was calling in artillery fire as close as possible to drive back the enemy. It's a dangerous tactic because it depends on everything going precisely as planned.

There was an enormous noise, and I thought I'd been struck by lightning and my eardrums had burst because, at first, I couldn't hear anything. Slowly my hearing came back, and I could hear voices screaming and moaning. I was covered by branches, leaves, and everything around me was lost in a cloud of dust. Later, we were told that a shell had come in short, hit a tree, and impacted right where the captain had been talking on his radio. He was killed instantly, and most of the soldiers around him were badly injured in a crazy confusion of blood and screams.

"Medic! Medic!"

"Oh, my leg! My leg!"

I was crazily filming everything—just operating on unthinking reflex. After a few minutes, Long tapped on my shoulder and yelled, "Tony! Stop filming! Let's stop and help!"

I looked over at Ken, and he nodded in agreement. I put my camera on the ground, and we moved to do what we could for the wounded soldiers. We helped to move the injured to where the ground was lower, and there were ditches where we could get them out of the line of fire. I remember Ken, Long, and I all struggling to move one big soldier. The number of wounded kept growing until about twenty soldiers were lying in the ditches next to the trail.

"Give me water!"

“Give me a cigarette!”

We weren't doctors or even medics, but I realized that wounded soldiers were like kids. They just wanted someone to stay beside them, talk to them, care about them. We could do that.

One soldier tried to talk to me but he'd been shot in the jaw, and his head was covered with bloody bandages so I couldn't understand anything he said. He pointed to the small backup camera that hung on a strap at my waist. I finally worked out that his father back in Chicago worked at the Bell & Howell Company where the camera was made. I showed it to him, let him touch it, and with words and gestures demonstrated how well it worked. This made him happy, and he smiled with his blood-red jaw.

I collected canteens from all over and gave them to soldiers whenever they requested a drink. A medic came by and advised me not to let them drink too much water because it would make them weak. His last words to me were, “Don't let them die.”

I was shocked when I moved to one severely wounded soldier and realized that it was Sergeant Simpson. He had been standing very close to the captain, and the explosion had blown one of his legs off at the knee. I realized that the agonized cry of “Oh my leg! My leg” that I had captured on film had been his voice.

This was one of the first times when what I did in my job as a cameraman became extremely personal and horribly real. It would be far from the last.

Now, Simpson was much calmer—probably because of the morphine—he even gave me a faint smile. He asked me for water and a cigarette.

While I lit the cigarette, he asked, “Have you seen my leg?”

I shook my head.

“No more honeymoon in Hawaii.” He said softly, “It's stupid.”

I pretended that I couldn't speak any English, but the truth was I didn't know what I could say. I just sat beside him for a while and wiped the sweat from his face.

Eventually, he repeated, “Stupid!” and closed his eyes.

Sitting beside him, I thought about what he kept saying. What did “stupid” mean to this man? Was he talking about his lost leg? Or about his honeymoon? Was the war itself “stupid”?



May 13, 1967. The pain of his lost leg shows on Sergeant Bernie Simpson's face. He was intending to take a leave to Hawaii and marry his fiancée only two days later. In 1968, he was the first amputee to become a New York City policeman. (Film shot by Yasutsune Hirashiki; courtesy ABC News)

I remembered that yesterday, Long had said “stupid” after he’d read the diary of the young soldier.

There was a lull in the fighting and soldiers moved quickly to prepare for a new attack. There weren’t all that many left who could still fight, at least two-thirds of this small unit were either injured or dead. I wondered if they could hold off another attack?

A soldier came by and asked, “You guys know how to use machine guns?”

Long and I both said “No.”

Another soldier came by and asked if we knew how to throw grenades.

“No way,” was my answer. I couldn’t even throw a baseball from the pitcher’s mound to the catcher correctly. I was so clumsy that I was sure the grenade would never even leave my hand and I would end up killing myself.

The soldiers were disappointed by what terrible soldiers we were. We said that we would continue to take care of the wounded.

There was no second attack.

This battle was over.

Helicopters came in with reinforcements and medics to treat the wounded so I picked up my camera and began to film again. There wasn’t enough clear space for the choppers to land so the initial load of GIs slid down on ropes. One of the first down was the company chaplain who moved about encouraging the wounded and saying prayers over the dead. I filmed the scene and then we said goodbye to Sergeant Simpson and the other wounded soldiers we had come to know. Along with about a dozen unwounded Airborne soldiers, we walked another thirty minutes to the top of the mountain and were airlifted out.

This small battle happened between May 13 and 14, 1967 and I found out much later that it was part of Operation *Malheur I*. Officially, there were eight Americans killed and 36 wounded in what the men came to call The Battle of Mother’s Day Hill.

It might have been a small battle compared to the massive military operations happening elsewhere in Vietnam at the time, but it was an unforgettable experience for Ken, Long, and me. I wondered if the black Ace of Spades on the dead soldier’s body might have had something to do with it. Were the North Vietnamese who were attacking so fiercely seeking revenge or was it some sort of bad luck?

I had no answers.

When we left, we flew over Happy Valley again but it was far away, the weather was cloudy, and we couldn’t see it clearly. I felt the contrast between the beauty of the dawn of the first day and the exhaustion and sadness we felt at the end of the second. Ken Gale remembers it a bit differently:

I had never been so thirsty in my life. It was agonizing and like manna from heaven when someone in the helicopter handed me a canteen. Back in camp, a beer had never tasted so good.³

Ken had time to write a great script and ABC decided to run a five-minute story on the Evening News. To put that in perspective, almost all stories on television run less than a minute and a half. Devoting that much time was a real indication of the impact that our story and my pictures had when they were shown to the decision-makers in New York (see plate section for film footage.)

However, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) decided to pull Ken's press card for a month and ban him from going out on missions. Again, Ken's side of the story:

The official reason I was given was that Sergeant Simpson's family had not been notified of his injuries before the story aired. It was a cardinal rule that pictures and names of American dead or wounded would not be aired until their families had been notified. In Simpson's case, I was told that Simpson's parents were divorced and that only one parent had been notified, but not the other.

Unofficially, I think what the army was most concerned with was our reporting that the captain and others had been killed and wounded by their own artillery—"Friendly Fire." But that may not have been a legitimate "official" reason for suspending my press card. In hindsight, I wonder if the letter from the major who saw us helping out might have softened reaction. I believe they could have banned me from the military coverage permanently if they'd tried harder.⁴

The shocking pictures, the many wounded, and the sound of Sergeant Simpson's cry of "Oh, my leg!" made for a report that did not help to support the war. In fact, it could hardly have been anything but negative, and that's almost certainly why the military press officials punished us. We defended ourselves by showing that we had covered the war "as is." There had been no staging, no exaggeration, and no sensationalizing. The ABC executives supported us all the way to the Pentagon and a week later I recorded in my diary:

Ken's suspension was lifted. I heard New York made a great effort. I believe in journalism in the USA!⁵

The troops sent ABC News a special letter of thanks for the help that Ken, Long, and I had given to the wounded. I felt that Ken and Long deserved praise for their actions because Ken's example and Long's words were what woke me up and got me to stop being just an "eye in a lens."

As it turned out, Long didn't run away, bribe an officer, or cut off his fingers. A couple of years later, he joined the South Vietnamese Air Force and served until the end of the war. When Saigon fell, he wasn't able to join the ABC staffers who were flown out on the last day, but he managed to get to Malaysia in the exodus of "boat people," and later immigrated to Canada.

Gerard "Bernie" Simpson went home to Staten Island and in 1968 was the first amputee to be made a member of the New York City Police.