

# One Ride: Larry Burrows

and the Contexts of the Vietnam War Photography

Aleksandra Musiał

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Referee  
Paweł Frelik

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## Introduction: Two Stories

In 1951, a book was published in America. It was cumbersome and heavy, as an object to handle lacking the easy convenience of a standard hardback that could be retrieved and enjoyed at any time, during a longish train ride or a solitary afternoon in a café. Its very form was demanding, calling for a comfortable domestic setting in order to be viewed, a slice of time and attention to be found in the day to actually pick it up and read it. Its title was *This is War!*, and its author, as printed on the jacket, was David Douglas Duncan.

But the book's content was not necessarily the standard stuff of coffee table literature, either. Being as it was an album of photography—a “photo-narrative in three parts,” in fact, as the subtitle explained—and war photography at that, it offered its audience something new, a story of a war told entirely through intentionally captionless images, enabling the pictures to speak for themselves and the reader to engage with them personally and unburdened by words. In his introduction to the first edition of the book, Duncan ([1951] 1990) wrote:

*[This is War!]* is simply an effort to show something of what a man endures when his country decides to go to war, with or without his personal agreement on the righteousness of the cause. This book is an effort to completely divorce the word “war” as flung dramatically down off the highest benches of every land, from the look in the man’s eyes who is taking his last puff on perhaps his last cigarette, perhaps forever, before he grabs his rifle, his guts and his dreams—and attacks an enemy position above him.

Believing that the look in that man’s eyes tells more clearly what he felt, I am presenting this book to you without a single caption. [...] [T]o learn their stories, each page of photographs must be read as

carefully as you might read a page of written text in a novel. Asking you to read the story in their faces and hands and bodies, as they were feeling it themselves at the moment of impact, is only fair to them—and is asking more of you than ever before has been asked of the picture-viewing audience. (“In Explanation”)

Duncan’s words constitute something of a motto for the present volume. Even though, as shall be argued later on, war photographs cannot be divorced entirely from the rhetoric of the “highest benches,” Duncan was right in pointing out that at the source of each picture, there are a lived experience and real emotion, captured by a skilled photographer at a moment that lays them bare for the contemplation of the viewer. He is also right in recognizing the potential of telling war stories through images. The photographs in his book, originally taken for *Life* magazine, focus mostly on the men of the U.S. Marine Corps deployed to Korea and offer a photo-by-photo account of an American troop’s life while on active duty. The book’s first part, “The Hill,” details the so-called Battle of No-Name Ridge on the Pusan Perimeter in 1950. In the story, a few men keep reappearing throughout: unsurprisingly, these most memorable faces, which belong to the story’s most easily identifiable protagonists, are captured in portraits and close-ups. In one of these, a young marine—identified by one source (Forney, 2018) as PFC Joe Dunford<sup>1</sup>—is seen in a powerful, almost intimate close-up, smoking a cigarette, palpably uneasy and alert as the preparations for battle take place (see Photo 1).<sup>2</sup> Another hero of the story emerges in the person of Corporal Leonard Hayworth, the central figure of some of the most remarkable photographs in the series: he comes into view in a succession of eight photographs that show him dirty with the battle grime, exhausted, and crying

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<sup>1</sup> According to Forney (2018), Dunford was the father of Joseph Dunford, a four-star general in the U.S. Marine Corps and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff between 2015 and 2019.

<sup>2</sup> All the photographs referenced in this book may be viewed in various sources online. A list of links to the images is provided at the end of the book (see Appendix). For the reader’s convenience, the list of links can also be found at <https://onerideimages.wordpress.com>, from where it will be easy to navigate to the sources.

(Photo 2). Arguably, this is the strongest moment of the narrative: the reader gets a very clear impression of the emotions involved, of the corporal trying to make sense of what has happened and slowly settling down, as he sits for a cigarette and a chat with a fellow marine. (Hayworth is devastated after having learnt that his unit has run-out of ammunition, a circumstance which also occasioned perhaps the best-known photograph of the series: the picture of the company's grave-faced commander, Captain Francis "Ike" Fenton (Photo 3). Hayworth is also one of the two marines to whom *This is War!* is dedicated; from the dedication the reader learns that he was eventually killed in action.)

Fifteen years after Duncan had photographed his marines in Korea, another photojournalist, in another war, set out to document the experiences of a "grunt" (marine) of his own, and the pictures he would take on that occasion embodied perfectly the principles of combat photography expressed in Duncan's words quoted above. Larry Burrows, a Londoner also on assignment from *Life*, found his subject among the U.S. troops, whose numbers had just begun to creep up, in Da Nang on the Vietnamese coast. The man he picked was a 21-year-old James Farley, a Marine lance corporal and crew chief of the eponymous helicopter of what was to become "One Ride with Yankee Papa 13," a photoessay published in *Life* on April 16, 1965, and reprinted almost four decades later, with changes and additions, in a posthumous album of Burrows's work done in Vietnam (Burrows 2002, 100–123).

Each version of the narrative begins differently. The changes are not surprising, of course: the magazine story is situated firmly in the immediate context of its publication, very much close to being news, or at the very least having the objective of informing its audience about the new American war. The book version of "Yankee Papa 13," on the other hand, has become something more akin to an art piece, part of Burrows's oeuvre, and so mediated by an artistic consideration that moreover, due to the passage of time and the organic development of historical memory, has rendered the story part of the American representation, or even cultural narrative (Neilson 1998), of the Vietnam War. The *Life* version began with pictures of a marine squadron

briefing, and then of Farley out and about on liberty in Da Nang (Photo 4).<sup>3</sup> In the book, the story opens with a simple, zoomed-in portrait of Farley grinning. The discrepancy is easily explained: while the purpose of the photoessay in *Life* was at least partly to inform the magazine's readership about the lives of the U.S. troops in Vietnam—hence the snapshots of Farley's antics on the streets of Da Nang—the book's version positions itself more clearly within the “innocence lost” genre of war storytelling, transmitting its central theme through the juxtaposition of the happy, smiling Farley in the first picture, and the devastated Farley in the final picture.

The story that follows is more or less the same in both cases, even though told in a slightly different arrangement of photographs: there is a shot of smiling Farley as he walks through the airfield, a heavy gun in each hand; shots of the eponymous Yankee Papa 13 (YP13) “chopper” being prepared for a mission, then of take-off. As the accompanying text in *Life* explained, Farley’s squadron had been detailed to fly what was supposed to be a “milk-run mission”—trouble was not expected, in other words—to drop a South Vietnamese battalion in a landing zone not far from the base at Da Nang; as it turned out, once fire started coming up from the ground, the area was surrounded by the Viet Cong, equipped with anti-aircraft artillery. In the air, a photograph shows Farley manning the helicopter’s machine gun, calm and seemingly bigger in his flight gear, squinting against wind, and then looking on as the Vietnamese troops disembark.

As Yankee Papa 13 touches down on its second run of the day, the text continues to explain, the crew spot another American helicopter, YP3, shot down and sitting on the ground nearby. Two wounded crewmates manage to make it from YP3, across a field of grass and in a storm of bullets, onto Yankee Papa 13. The succeeding series of photos focuses on Farley’s failed attempt, under the unrelenting Viet Cong fire, to rescue YP3’s wounded pilot still stuck in the cockpit (the bloodied and unresponsive man seemed dead to Farley, but would

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<sup>3</sup> All issues of *Life* magazine are available free of charge in an archive hosted by Google Books. “One Ride with Yankee Papa 13” is available at [https://books.google.pl/books?id=RIMEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gb\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.pl/books?id=RIMEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gb_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false), cover + pp. 24–34C.

in fact be rescued later and survive). The cover photograph of this particular issue of *Life* would come from the very next sequence of dramatic shots: back in his own craft, Farley, now manning YP13's machine gun to cover their takeoff, shouts something in shock as the two injured crewmates lie on the helicopter's floor. Once the craft is out of the enemy's fire range, Farley joins in the efforts to save their lives. Soon, midflight and at some point between Burrows's published shots, one of the men, YP3's copilot Lt. James Magel, dies. The expression of dumbfounded shock is clearly manifested on Farley's face throughout the flight, and then turns into uninhibited anguish. Two pictures—not printed in *Life*—now show Farley looking out the helicopter door, his flight helmet off: he is crying, child-like, his face a stark contrast to the cheerfulness of only a few photos ago (Photo 5). Back in Da Nang, the wounded are taken off the aircraft, and Farley and crewmates relate to other marines what happened. Both stories end with the same powerful image—though cropped differently in the two sources—of Farley back in Da Nang, weeping, slumped over a stack of boxes and shielding his face away from Burrows's camera (Photo 6).

In this book, I will attempt to contextualize Burrows's photoessay, referred to thereafter as "Yankee Papa 13," and to interpret it within the frameworks of the Vietnam War photojournalism. Chapter one traces the milestones in the development of war and combat photography and its public reception, in order to provide some background and to investigate some of the traditions inherited by the cameramen in Indochina. The chapter also introduces some general problems resulting from the nature of photography—its subjection to connotation and change of meaning, its vulnerability to manipulation—and the close, almost seamless linking of images with the "reality of war." This is done to illustrate how the medium aids the arbitrary, and sometimes propagandist, portrayal of a conflict entrenched in the common perception, memory, and popular culture.

Chapter two examines the journalism of the Vietnam War, drawing on some of the works published on the subject, in order to locate it historically and politically, and to tackle some of the myths and misconceptions concerning the reporting of the war, including its supposed

antiwar stance, its impact on public opinion, and the importance of television coverage. The second part of the chapter looks at the photographs of the conflict, specifying some of the prevalent conventions of capturing it on camera and examining how the Vietnam War was defined through visual imagery as seen in photographs.

Chapter three proposes one way of investigating the transformation of the popular view of the war in Vietnam, a view that culminated in the characteristic image of the American soldier in the narratives of the war, thus introducing the final context within which—or against which—Burrows’s “Yankee Papa 13” can be read. The photoessay is then placed within a framework that elucidates the historical and political circumstances of its conception, execution and publication; or, in other words, it is put in the chronological and ideological context of the Vietnam War reporting and the changes that occurred within it over the years. Finally, the photographs are interpreted as a narrative, the analysis drawing on some observations concerning war storytelling in general.

An undercurrent theme in the discussions of war photography throughout this study is the image of the American soldier. On the whole, as it will be seen, the photographers seem to remain sympathetic towards the troops they portray, perhaps because, equipped with cameras rather than rifles, they nonetheless share some of the same misery and danger of the frontline and the battlefield: when James Farley dashed across the distance between his own helicopter and the downed YP3, Larry Burrows was right behind him, and then crouched close to the craft to get some cover as bullets peppered YP3’s fuselage while Farley reached inside to get to the wounded pilot. But the ways of photographing the troops, whether in the attempt to “capture that look in their eyes” or in trying to frame them meaningfully within their surroundings, change. It is by examining these changes that one may consider the practice of photography to better understand the perceptions of conflicts in society and in culture.

If, for reasons explained later on, the press photography of the Vietnam War did not register the massive transformation of the soldier’s image—nowhere as evident as in the disparity between the pop-cultural portrayals of the heroes of the Second World War and the much ma-

ligned Vietnam War veteran—it nevertheless did help instigate a specific sensitivity and imagery that became the setting for the new war stories. Burrows's "Yankee Papa 13" is interesting in this respect as it occupies a spot at a crossroads, capturing a moment when the American soldier, still as an American hero, a once would-be cowboy, was thrust down the jungle road that would eventually take him into the heart of darkness.

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Aleksandra Musiał

## "One Ride": Larry Burrows and the Contexts of the Vietnam War Photography

### Summary

The purpose of this book is to analyze a photoessay from the American war in Vietnam by photojournalist Larry Burrows that appeared in *Life* magazine in April 1965. The photoessay, titled "One Ride with Yankee Papa 13," consists of photographs of American marines in Vietnam and tells the story of a tragedy that occurred when one of the American helicopters was shot down by Viet Cong fighters. In the book, I situate "Yankee Papa 13" within the historical and cultural contexts of photojournalism and American narratives of the Vietnam War in order to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the photoessay. The central thread of the considerations undertaken in the monograph is the question of the image of the American soldier and its transformation against the background of the history of American wars.

After the introduction, where among other things, the story of "One Ride with Yankee Papa 13" is told, the first chapter presents the history of war photojournalism, with particular emphasis on the conflicts in which the United States participated. For example, the chapter discusses the conventions of American-centric photography during World War II and the Korean War in order to chart trends that would affect reporters photographing the Vietnam War in the future. The second part of the chapter is devoted to a consideration of the nature of photography and its relationship to the ways in which photographs, especially documentary photographs, are interpreted and, by extension, the function of photography, including war photography, in culture. The discussion is based on texts by Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, and John Berger, among others. One of the issues discussed in this part of the book is, for example, the iconicity of certain images, that is, their status as symbols of the conflict they depict in relation to their ideological contexts and readings.

The second chapter discusses the specifics of war correspondence from Vietnam, and, in particular, the specifics of photojournalism of that conflict. The first part of the chapter outlines the historical context and circumstances

of the work of journalists sent to Vietnam by U.S. agencies and media, and the ways in which these circumstances influenced the work of reporters and photographers. The second part of the chapter focuses on the conventions and trends of the Vietnam War photography and the place it occupies in the American narrative of the war. The work of reporters such as Philip Jones Griffiths, David Douglas Duncan, and Tim Page is discussed here, with particular attention given to photographs of American soldiers and their interpretations in the context of the overall image of this figure in American culture.

Chapter three deals with several interrelated themes. First, the transformation of the image of the American soldier as a result of the Vietnam War is discussed. To analyze this phenomenon, I use the key metaphor that the figure of John Wayne—symbol of the disillusionment and bitterness of Americans sent to fight in Vietnam—represents in the American narrative about this conflict. Thus, the essential threads of the analysis, that is, the comparison of representations and perceptions of World War II in American culture with those of the Vietnam War, come together in this section of the book. Another key discourse about the latter in U.S. culture, discussed in chapter three, is the “heart of darkness.” As with Wayne, the chapter briefly presents examples of literary and other cultural texts that frame the American experience in Vietnam in such an interpretive framework, designed to reveal some of the meanings of the conflict for Americans and their culture. The chapter also deals with the theme of irony as seen by Paul Fussell, that is, his model of war narratives according to a three-part structure in which the key moment of “death recognition”—seeing the death of a comrade-in-arms by a soldier-witness—is crucial. I will also briefly touch upon the connections between Fussell’s theory and certain currents of representations of the Vietnam War in American literature and cinema, namely, the trend of realism/naturalism growing out of modernist war narratives.

Having thus outlined the major strands in the American narrative of the Vietnam War in various types of cultural texts, the second part of the chapter focuses specifically on Larry Burrows, his work in Vietnam, and “Yankee Papa 13.” The analysis of the photoessay in the light of the contexts outlined in the book allows us to discuss its historical, cultural, and artistic value, and its contribution not only to the broader American narrative about the Vietnam War, but also to the aforementioned transformation of the image of the American soldier.

Most of the photographs discussed in the monograph, authored by Larry Burrows and other photographers, were published in *Life* magazine, the full archive of which is freely available on Google Books. The book thus includes

a list of links to all the *Life* articles discussed and to individual images available in other free online archives.

The book ends with a conclusion that ties together all the threads taken up in the book, a bibliography, a list of links to the discussed photographs, and an index.

Aleksandra Musiał

## “One Ride”: Larry Burrows i konteksty fotografii wojennej z Wietnamu

### Streszczenie

Celem książki jest analiza fotoeseju autorstwa Larry’ego Burrowsa z czasów amerykańskiej interwencji w Wietnamie, który ukazał się w magazynie *Life* w kwietniu 1965 roku. Fotoesej, noszący tytuł „One Ride with Yankee Papa 13”, składa się ze zdjęć amerykańskich *marines* w Wietnamie i opowiada historię tragedii, która rozegrała się, gdy jeden z amerykańskich helikopterów został zestrzelony przez bojowników Wietkongu. W książce wpisuję „Yankee Papa 13” w konteksty historyczne i kulturowe fotoreportażu oraz w amerykańskie naracje o wojnie w Wietnamie, aby móc przeprowadzić kompleksową interpretację wybranego fotoesaju. Centralnym wątkiem rozważań podjętych w monografii jest kwestia wizerunku amerykańskiego żołnierza oraz jego przemiany na tle historii wojen, w które zaangażowały się Stany Zjednoczone.

Po wstępnie, w którym między innymi opowiedziana jest historia „One Ride with Yankee Papa 13”, w rozdziale pierwszym nakreślona jest historia fotoreportażu wojennego, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem konfliktów, w których brały udział Stany Zjednoczone. Rozdział ten omawia na przykład konwencje amerykanocentrycznej fotografii z czasów drugiej wojny światowej oraz wojny w Korei, zaznaczając trendy, które wpłynęły na pracę reporterów fotografujących wojnę w Wietnamie. Druga część rozdziału poświęcona jest rozważaniom o naturze fotografii oraz jej związkom ze sposobami interpretacji zdjęć, zwłaszcza dokumentalnych, a co za tym idzie – funkcji fotografii, w tym wojennej, w kulturze. Podstawę dyskusji stanowią między innymi teksty Susan Sontag, Rolanda Barthesa i Johna Bergera. Jednym z zagadnień omawianych w tej części książki jest na przykład ikoniczność niektórych fotografii, mianowicie ich status symbolu konfliktu, który przedstawiają, wobec ich ideologicznych ukontekstowień i odczytań.

Rozdział drugi omawia specyfikę korespondencji wojennej z Wietnamu, a w szczególności specyfikę fotoreportażu obrazującego konflikt. W pierwszej części rozdziału zarysowany jest kontekst historyczny oraz uwarunkowania

pracy dziennikarzy wysłanych do Wietnamu przez amerykańskie agencje i media oraz jak okoliczności te wpływały na prace reporterów i fotografów. Druga część rozdziału poświęcona jest konwencjom i trendom fotografii z Wietnamu oraz miejscu, jakie zajmuje ona w amerykańskiej narracji o tej wojnie. Omawiane są tutaj prace takich reporterów jak Philip Jones Griffiths, David Douglas Duncan czy Tim Page, a szczególna uwaga poświęcona jest zdjęciom amerykańskich żołnierzy oraz ich interpretacjom w kontekście ogólnego wizerunku tej postaci w amerykańskiej kulturze.

Rozdział trzeci dotyczy kilku powiązanych ze sobą wątków. Po pierwsze, omówiona jest transformacja wizerunku żołnierza amerykańskiego na skutek wojny w Wietnamie. Do analizy tego zjawiska wykorzystuję kluczową metaforę, którą w amerykańskiej narracji o konflikcie wietnamskim jest postać Johna Wayne'a – symbol rozczarowania i rozgoryczenia Amerykanów wysłanych do Wietnamu. W ten sposób w tej części książki łączą się zasadnicze wątki analizy, mianowicie porównanie przedstawień i wyobrażeń o drugiej wojnie światowej w amerykańskiej kulturze z tymi o wojnie w Wietnamie. Kolejnym kluczowym dyskursem dotyczącym tej ostatniej w kulturze USA, omówionym w rozdziale trzecim, jest „jądro ciemności”. Tak jak w przypadku Wayne'a, rozdział omawia pokrótkę przykłady tekstów literackich i innych tekstów kultury, które wpisują amerykańskie doświadczenie w Wietnamie w takie właśnie ramy interpretacyjne, mające objawić pewne znaczenia tego konfliktu dla Amerykanów i ich kultury. W rozdziale podjęty jest również temat ironii w ujęciu Paula Fussella, tj. model narracji wojennych wedle trzyczęściowej struktury, w której kluczowy jest moment „rozpoznania śmierci” (doświadczenia śmierci towarzyszą broni) przez żołnierza-świadka. Pokrótkę poruszone są też związki teorii Fussella z pewnymi nurtami przedstawień wojny w Wietnamie w amerykańskiej literaturze i kinie, czyli z wyrastającym z modernistycznych narracji wojennych nurtem realizmu/naturalizmu.

Zarysowawszy tym samym najważniejsze wątki w amerykańskiej narracji o wojnie w Wietnamie w różnego typu teksthach kultury, druga część rozdziału skupia się na Larrym Burrowsie, jego pracy w Wietnamie oraz na „Yankee Papa 13”. Analiza fotoesaju w świetle zarysowanych w książce kontekstów pozwala omówić jego wartość historyczną, kulturową i artystyczną oraz jego wkład nie tylko w szeroko pojętą amerykańską narrację o konflikcie w Wietnamie, lecz także we wspomnianą wcześniej transformację wizerunku amerykańskiego żołnierza.

Większość omawianych w monografii zdjęć – autorstwa Larry'ego Burrowsa i innych fotografów – została opublikowana w magazynie *Life*, którego pełne archiwum dostępne jest nieodpłatnie w serwisie Google Books. Książka za-

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Przemysław Pieniążek

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