

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 Dunford¹—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).² 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

¹ 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.

² 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).³ 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

³ 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=RlMEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_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.