

War a Photojournalist, Dies at 72.



Philip Jones Griffiths, a crusading photojournalist whose pictures of civilian casualties and suffering were among the defining images of the war in Vietnam, died Wednesday morning at his home in London. He was 72.

The cause was cancer, said Richard Hughes, an actor and activist who befriended Mr. Griffiths in Vietnam.

The book that grew out of Mr. Griffiths' reporting there, "*Vietnam, Inc.*," is considered a classic, and its publication in 1971 helped turn public opinion against the war. Its harrowing pictures — of a blackened burn victim, a thin woman's body splattered with blood, a South Vietnamese boy in soldier's fatigues, his head tiny beneath a huge helmet — were the kind not often shown in newspapers. And Mr. Griffiths, a pacifist and passionate opponent of the war, never considered himself a traditional war photographer.

"I saw myself as producing a historical document," he said in 2002 interview on the Web site Musarium.com, adding: "Journalists should be by their very nature anarchists, people who want to point out things that are not generally approved of."

"It's by criticizing that society that humanity has made progress," he said.

While critical of the way the United States was conducting the Vietnam war, Mr. Griffiths also included in his book many humanizing images of American soldiers at a time when they were often being demonized back home. One of the most stark showed an American offering a canteen of water to a Vietcong fighter who had survived a stomach wound for three days, holding in his intestines with a cooking bowl. A similar scenario is played out in Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film "Apocalypse Now."

"There were some bad G.I.'s who did terrible, terrible things," Mr. Griffiths said in a lecture at the Frontline Club in London in January "But for the most part they were kids who were confused. They were not the enemy, to me." The enemy was usually governments and bureaucracies, he often said, and he saw photography as one of the best means to bear witness against their failings.

"Virtually the whole of society believes in what they believe not by direct experience but by what they've been told," he said. "We photographers are in this exalted, privileged position of actually going out to find out for ourselves, and that's why we're so dangerous. Because we were there. We saw what happened."

Mr. Griffiths was born in the small village of Rhuddlan in Wales, and came to photography only after an aborted career as a pharmacist. While working at a drugstore in London, he asked to be put on the night shift so he could take pictures during the day to try to sell to newspapers.

"Never underestimate the power of boredom," he said in an interview in January with the British newspaper The Independent.

He told a Welsh interviewer in 2004 that "coming from a country being swallowed up by its neighbor gave me a natural sympathy for the Davids over the Goliaths of this world."

Mr. Griffiths was deeply influenced by the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson, a founder of the photo agency Magnum, where Mr. Griffiths became a longtime member and served as president from

Philip Jones Griffiths. (1936-2008)

Written by Randy Kennedy

1980 to 1985. Besides Vietnam, Mr. Griffiths reported from dozens of other countries. He covered the Yom Kippur War in 1973 and worked in Cambodia from 1973 to 1975.

In 1996, a retrospective of his work, "Dark Odyssey" was published, and in 2001, "Vietnam, Inc." was reprinted by Phaidon Press, with a new introduction by Noam Chomsky. In 2004, Mr. Griffiths published a photographic examination of the death, deformities and suffering caused by the use of the defoliant Agent Orange in Vietnam.

Mr. Griffiths is survived by two daughters, Katherine Holden of London and Fenella Ferrato of Manhattan and Damascus. He never married, telling one interviewer that he refused to sign papers that would allow "bourgeois society to dictate my emotions."

The kinds of pictures that became "Vietnam, Inc." were often difficult for Magnum to sell to publications, and at times Mr. Griffiths was so low on money that he considered leaving Vietnam. But in 1967 he managed to take pictures of Jacqueline Kennedy in Cambodia in the company of a British aristocrat rumored to be her romantic interest at the time; the proceeds from that paparazzi coup allowed him to continue his war photography.

In interviews, he said that he realized early on where his journalistic priorities lay. A London newspaper editor once told him to remember to answer the five basic questions in every photo caption — who, what, why, where and when. Mr. Griffiths said the first two and last two struck him as merely perfunctory.

"It's the one in the middle that counts," he said. "To me that's our task, to say 'Why?'"

by Randy Kennedy
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