



# DON'T

MARVIN WOLF



# AWAY

RECOGNIZING THE WORK  
OF VIETNAM WAR  
COMBAT PHOTOGRAPHERS  
50 YEARS LATER

BY ERIC MINTON



**J**im Wilson, Cr.Photog., was in fire-fights when he served in the Vietnam War, but the Army photographer never used his firearm. “If I had to pull the rifle out and fire back, I’d have to put the camera down, and the camera was the priority,” Wilson says.

Marvin Wolf, also an Army photographer, used his rifle as a tripod. “I would turn a rifle upside down—I put a patch in the barrel so dirt wouldn’t get in there—rest my camera on the butt of the rifle, and squeeze the shutter—one thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four thousand, go as much as eight thousand.” In this way he used tracers and explosions as light painting to capture a firefight at night.

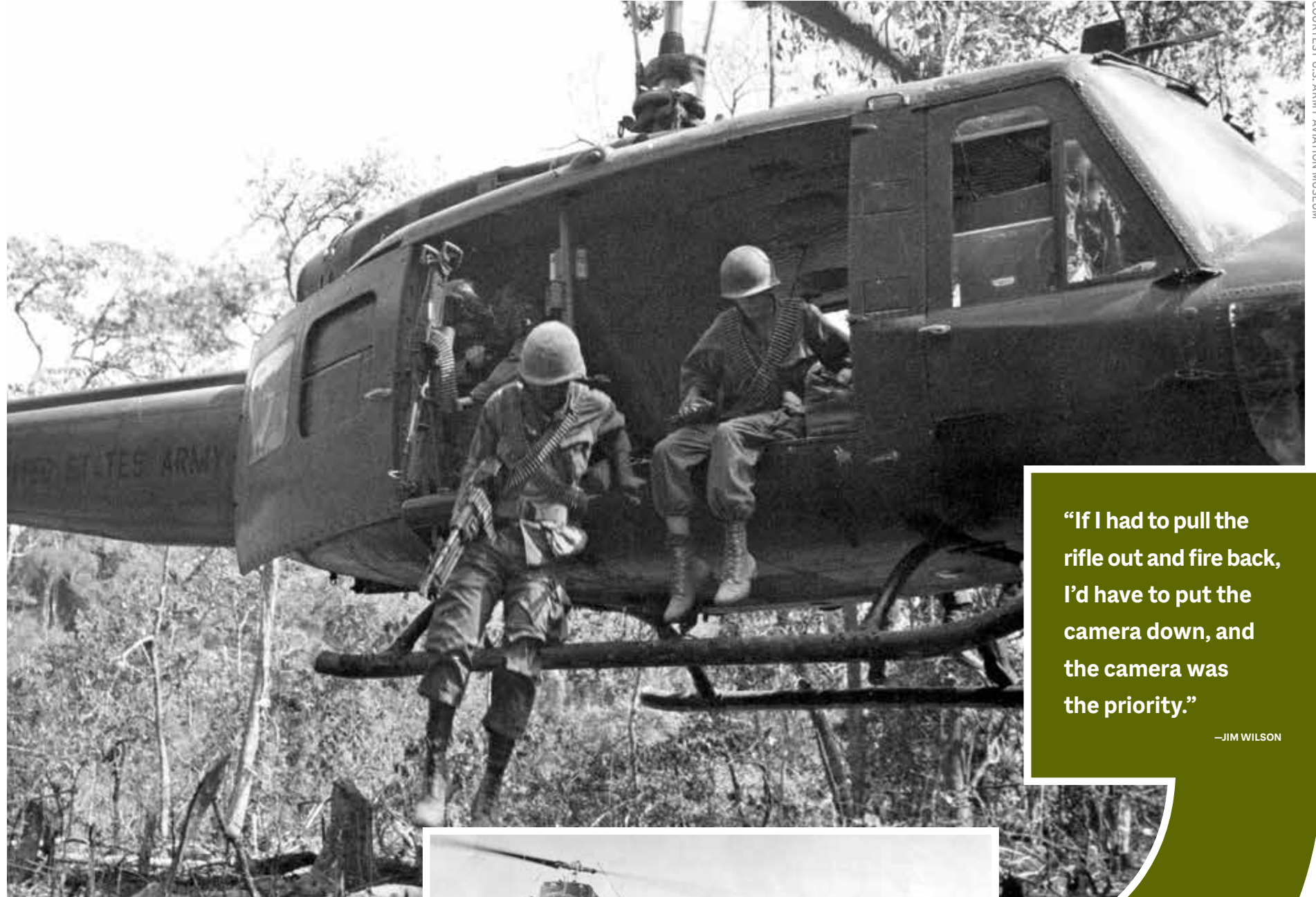
A four-man advisory team that included Navy photographer Dennis McCloskey was sailing on a South Vietnamese Navy junk when they came under fire from a house on the shore. McCloskey started taking pictures, but the commander ordered him to man a 50-caliber machine gun at the front of the boat, its barrel pointing through a two-by-two-foot metal shield. “And it struck me, this is an incredible photograph,” he says. “I pick up my camera and I’m shooting down the barrel aiming at this Vietnamese house,” until the unit’s commander issued an obscenity-

filled command to shoot the gun instead.

Joe Dupuis was an Army photographer and supervisor of a public affairs unit when he deployed to Vietnam in May 1967 for “One year and a day because ‘68 was a leap year,” he says. On the morning of Jan. 29, the base alarm went off, sending Dupuis and his team to their bunker. “Nothing happened,” he says. The next morning the alarm sounded again. “Nothing happened.” The next day, another alarm. “It happened,” Dupuis says: the Tet Offensive. “My photographers and I were moving all over the compound, shooting pictures of our guys shooting the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army.”

Three of these Vietnam War veterans went on to professional photography careers, one did not: The war partially forged each one’s career fates. All are alive today to see this month’s 50th anniversary of the official end of hostilities and the U.S. government marking the occasion with a long-due commemoration for all veterans and their families who served during the years of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam.

The Vietnam War produced extraordinary images of the full spectrum of war: soldiers caring for refugees, Marines fending off a determined ambush, children fleeing an attack, a South Vietnam general’s impromptu execution-



“If I had to pull the rifle out and fire back, I’d have to put the camera down, and the camera was the priority.”

—JIM WILSON





MARVIN WOLF

of a Viet Cong prisoner on a Saigon street. “One of my guys was standing three feet away,” Dupuis says of that last image, which earned photojournalist Edward Adams a Pulitzer Prize. Military photographers contributed indelible images chronicling the war, too; Dupuis and Wolf even provided images and footage for TV news networks and commercial enterprises while serving in Vietnam.

It was risky business. Between Nov. 24, 1945, and April 30, 1975, 135 combat photographers died in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, including 20-year-old Marine corporal William T. Perkins Jr., who received the Medal of Honor after he threw himself on a live grenade to protect the riflemen he was photographing.

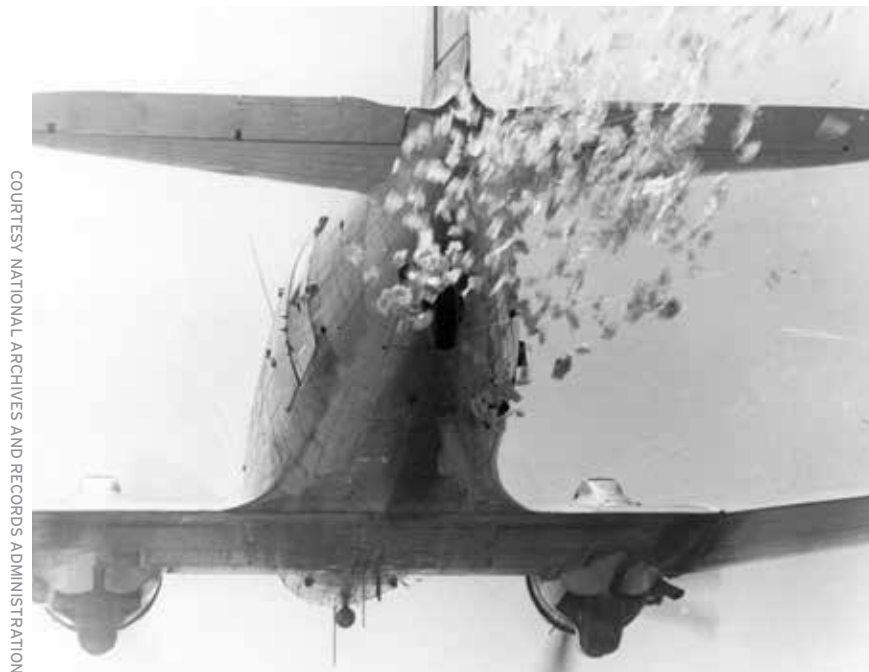
#### LIFELONG ENTREPRENEUR

Jim Wilson was a professional portrait photographer before he enlisted in the Army. After graduating from high school in 1962, the Youngstown, Ohio, native attended the Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara, California, where he became and remains a PPA member. Back home, he got a job in a portrait studio, and when the owner died a few months later, Wilson managed the studio for his boss's widow while taking college classes at night. This was typical of Wilson's lifelong entrepreneurial attitude. As a kid he mowed two lawns a day during the summer and turned school-closing winter days into paydays shoveling driveways.

With the draft looming, Wilson talked to recruiters for every service. The Army offered him a deferred enlistment so he could finish his college classes and gave him a choice of still or motion picture photography for his military occupational specialty. He chose the latter to broaden his skill sets. However, assigned to the 19th Psychological Operations Company in Can Tho in October 1966, his primary job was capturing images for propaganda leaflets, so he usually used a Polaroid for its instant-picture-producing capability.

“Within a couple hours you had a couple thousand leaflets ready to go. Polaroid was instrumental for a quick turnaround,” he says. Many images portrayed U.S. forces as the good guys, such as medics providing dental care to Vietnamese peasants. Others documented Viet Cong atrocities, such as an abandoned prisoner of war camp where prisoners were staked to the ground and subjected to exploding hand grenades.

Wilson describes his Vietnam experiences



COURTESY NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

The U.S. military drops propaganda leaflets over Vietnam.



MARVIN WOLF

with a touch of wry humor, whether recalling the processing lab in Can Tho or his flight in a helicopter among the body bags of Vietnamese soldiers after a nighttime battle. His visit to the POW camp is more a tale of travel challenges than atrocities. Upon arrival, “I jumped out of the chopper and went down into elephant grass taller than me, and I’m 6-foot-1. I held my camera up high because I didn’t know where I was going. All of a sudden, this hand comes out of the elephant grass, grabs me, and someone says, ‘Come with me, boy.’ It was a Marine corporal.” Upon departure, “We happened to be in the last chopper. We’re just starting to clear the trees when the enemy starts shooting at us. A guy taps me on the shoulder and says, ‘We’re going back; we’re going after them.’ We banked just above tree level and blasted the area. I don’t know if it was successful, but the shooting stopped.”

He once hitched a ride on a two-seat Cessna. “I got in, the pilot says, ‘Pay attention: If something happens to me, this is how you control the plane,’ and I’m like, what the hell?” Jim had climbed aboard a Bird Dog, flying along treetops to vector jet fighter targeting while drawing enemy fire. “Just relax,” he told Wilson as they made a Viet Cong-flushing run on their way back to base.

Wilson also took part in missions scattering the propaganda pamphlets across the countryside from aircraft and swift boats. Even these missions drew enemy fire, but Wilson regards them simply as a job that needed doing, and he was available. “The more I did, the less I had to think about anything. The busier I was, the closer I got to ending the day, the closer I was to going home.”

After Wilson's Vietnam tour, the Army assigned him to the White Sands Missile Range, where he photographed and filmed tests and took official portraits of newly promoted officers.

#### HEAD IN THE CLOUDS

Joe Dupuis, the son of a sharecropper in Ville Platte, Louisiana, spent much of his childhood hunting and fishing or lying in clover fields staring at the sky, wondering what was beyond the clouds. His lone aspiration was inspired by the 1954 film “The Bridges at Toko-Ri” about a U.S. Navy mission in the Korean War. He was 9. “When I saw those jets flying in formation through the



COURTESY JIM WILSON

Jim Wilson



COURTESY JOE DUPUIS

Joe Dupuis



clouds, I thought how beautiful that is. I want to do that, fly in those jets and make movies with guys like that.” His interest in school didn’t soar so high, and he dropped out after the 10th grade. His angry father wasn’t the only one lecturing Dupuis. “I had a long talk with myself,” Dupuis says, “and promised myself I would never fail at anything ever again.”

Though just 16 years old, he joined the Louisiana National Guard, graduating basic training at the top of his class and going on to special warfare training. He became a communications specialist operating telephones and radio. Then, on an exercise, he saw a soldier operating “a strange looking machine. I asked, what is that? He said it’s a motion picture camera. I said, that’s what you do in the Army? He said yes. I said, how the hell do I do that? He said, you just go to school. I went to the counselor the next day, and he said all I have to do is reenlist.”

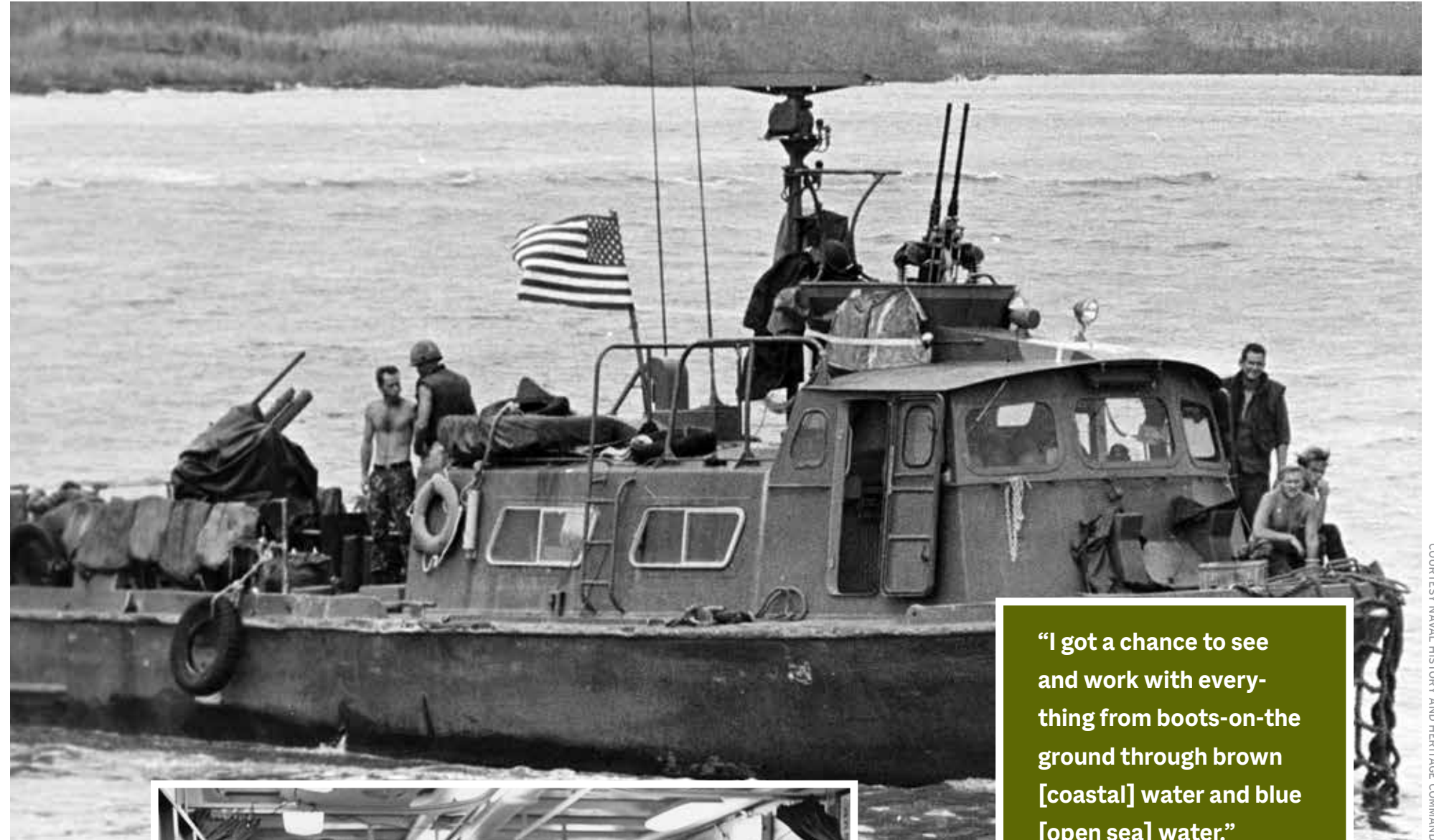
Dupuis did, and after assignments in Germany he landed in Vietnam in May 1967 as the noncommissioned officer in charge of the 199th Infantry Brigade’s 40th Information Detachment at Long Binh, the Army’s largest base in Vietnam 20 miles north of Saigon.

Dupuis’s detachment produced photographs and stories about the brigade for military and commercial media outlets. Most of his work was still photography, but he did motion picture photography for ABC and CBS. “They didn’t pay me anything, but they did provide the 16mm film,” he says. He went on missions often, but his biggest test was when the war

came to Long Binh with the Tet Offensive. “We had helicopters in the air, gunships all over the place, shooting like crazy. That went on all day.” It went on for 72 hours, but the enemy never breached the compound’s perimeter.

Though initially saying Tet was his worst day in Vietnam, Dupuis goes back eight weeks earlier to another date etched in his mind, Dec. 6, 1967, and Army chaplain Charles Liteky. A great counselor for the frightened young troops but also “very much a GI guy,” Dupuis says. “Every evening he’d ask if he could go out on an operation, and the general always said no, it’s too dangerous and your job is here.” The general finally relented for a mission considered benign and ordered Dupuis to accompany the chaplain. The mission wasn’t benign. The helicopters were ambushed as they landed.

Dupuis and Liteky jumped out to keep from getting hit, but that was jumping from the chopper into the fire. “That was probably the worst day I ever had in Vietnam: being fired on from every direction, difficult to fire back, and soldiers were getting wounded three or four every time,” Dupuis says. As soldiers fell, Liteky crawled to them. He gave last rites to some and carried or dragged 20 others to safety, even after being wounded himself. The commander ordered Dupuis to grab the chaplain and evacuate with him. Dupuis tended to Liteky’s wounds as they flew to a field hospital before the chaplain was sent on to Japan. Chaplain Liteky received the Medal of Honor for his actions that day.



“I got a chance to see and work with everything from boots-on-the-ground through brown [coastal] water and blue [open sea] water.”

—DENNIS McCLOSKEY



U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (left) visiting Vietnam

## OVERDUE APPRECIATION

“They never got their parade” is a common refrain referring to veterans who served during the Vietnam War. That’s putting it mildly: Hostility greeted many veterans in the wake of their service.

Aligned with the 50th anniversary of the war, the U.S. government is undertaking an earnest effort to give Vietnam veterans and their families a long-due expression of appreciation for their service and sacrifice.

The keystone event is “Welcome Home!” May 11-13 on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Its centerpiece will be Camp Legacy, featuring historical displays—including a Vietnam War photography exhibit—a hub of Veterans services organizations, an outdoor stage for daily performances, and rally stations for Vietnam veterans, families, and others to gather and commune. Ceremonies are planned at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and a musical and multimedia concert will cap the festivities on May 13.

Staging “Welcome Home!” is The U.S. Vietnam War Commemoration, authorized by Congress in 2008, established by the secretary of defense, and launched by President Barack Obama in 2012. In addition to Vietnam veterans and their families, the Commemoration recognizes the contributions of American citizens, federal agencies, other organizations, and allies, as well as technological, science, and medical advances related to military research during the war.

This year includes the war’s most significant anniversary, the official end of hostilities and return of the U.S. prisoners of war March 29, now recognized as National Vietnam War Veterans Day. However, the Commemoration’s



COURTESY U.S. VIETNAM WAR COMMEMORATION

historical scope runs from Nov. 1, 1955, when the first designated military mission began in Vietnam, to May 15, 1975, with the Mayaguez incident, the last casualties listed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The Commemoration’s charter runs through 2025.

Since 2012, more than 3.5 million veterans who served during that period and their families have been individually thanked in more than 23,000 ceremonies hosted by some 12,000 Commemorative partners. That’s still less than half of U.S. Vietnam veterans the Department of Veterans Affairs estimates are living today. May’s “Welcome Home!” is a national-scale effort to reach as many Vietnam veterans and families as possible. [vietnamwar50th.com](http://vietnamwar50th.com)



U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO

September 1966

## YEARNING FOR ADVENTURE

Except for manning the machine gun on the gunboat, Dennis McCloskey experienced little combat in his time assigned to the Navy 7th Fleet’s public affairs detachment in Saigon. Nevertheless, vigilance was ever essential. “You learned to pay real close attention to Vietnam civilians around you, and if they disappeared, by gosh grab your weapon and prepare,” he says. The Missoula, Montana, native was an avid reader by the time he was in the fourth grade and yearned for adventure. His father served in the Navy in World War II, so McCloskey enlisted in the Navy rather than await the draft.

He was set on being a photographer. “The classification counselor laughed and said that’s what everyone wants, you haven’t got a prayer. Boot camp instructor says you haven’t got a prayer,” McCloskey recalls. Yet, the Navy assigned him to its advanced training center for photographers in Pensacola, Florida. Finishing near the top of his class, McCloskey got orders for Saigon, then considered a dream assignment. How much a dream McCloskey measured in



U.S. ARMY PHOTO BY PFC ROBERT A. HILLERBY

69th Signal Battalion, June 15, 1967



MARVIN WOLF



U.S. NAVY

June 1968



COURTESY NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

years. He arrived for his 12-month tour in September 1968 but kept volunteering to extend until the operation shuttered in June 1971.

The lab's senior noncommissioned officers were all University of Syracuse graduates, McCloskey says. "They didn't see themselves as running the photo lab; they saw themselves as photojournalists" and saw everybody else as second class—in skill sets, not Navy rank. Soon, though, they saw the Missoula boy as one of their own, and his work started being published in magazines and newspapers around the world.

"I got a chance to see and work with everything from boots-on-the-ground through brown [coastal] water and blue [open sea] water." He flew on AC-47 gunships, he worked with Navy Seals. "I'm interviewing people to learn about it all so I could write stories," he says. "I desperately wanted to stay in the unit because the last thing I wanted was to go back to the states and take pictures of the admiral's wife's garden party."

#### A COCKAMAMIE PLAN

Marvin Wolf saw the Army as key to his "cockamamie plan to become a photojournalist." He had spent almost three years in the Army, got out and, after discovering an aptitude for photography, reenlisted "to find a unit to teach me photography and send me to Vietnam to build my portfolio." He accomplished that goal "one lucky break after another," reaching Vietnam in 1965 with the First Cavalry Division (Airmobile).

His professional photography career began in Vietnam, providing action images to helicopter manufacturers. He left Vietnam with \$4,000 in freelance income. He also received a commission of another kind while in Vietnam, that of an officer promoted from the noncommissioned ranks. Accounting himself "an average officer," he left the Army in 1974, and his cockamamie plan came to fruition. He was a photojournalist for 10 years before segueing into a third career as an author, with 24 books published.

He credits his training in the infantry for the foundation of his photography skills. "I held every job in the infantry except platoon leader. But my first job was the platoon leader's radio operator, so as the guy with the radio you went with him everywhere. That's graduate training in being a platoon leader."

On missions he'd ask the company commander to put him with the best squad leader in the unit, guaranteeing the best perspective of operations. "I not only learned anticipation



U.S. AIR FORCE, 1352ND PHOTO GROUP

April 14, 1966

but positioning myself," he says. "I learned to get close but not too close. If you're not close enough, you don't get anything. If you get too close, you get killed." He learned to frame widely, "so they can crop it without ruining it." He learned the value of bracketing a half stop or full stop on either side of the purposed exposure. "I didn't have a light meter, and cameras didn't have light meters in them. I used the rule of 16 and intuition. Light in the jungle can change frequently, so bracket, bracket, bracket."

#### RETURNING HOME

Joe Dupuis's military-learned skills also led to a long photography career. Upon leaving the Army he worked for Whirlpool, photographing appliances and their parts for training manuals. "I discovered I wasn't a good civilian," he says, frustrated at the lack of discipline around him. He tried to reenlist in the Army but was stymied by the post-war drawdown. The Navy, however, made an offer. "They wanted me to fly jets and make movies in the air," Dupuis says, fulfilling the dream of his 9-year-old self. He retired in 1985 as a chief petty officer after 13 years in the Navy and settled in Roanoke, Virginia, producing promotional videos and commercials until retiring permanently in 2003.

Of Vietnam's impact on his photography career, Dupuis says, "If anything, it made me more



Marvin Wolf

COURTESY MARVIN WOLF

**“I learned to get close but not too close. If you’re not close enough, you don’t get anything. If you get too close, you get killed.”**

—MARVIN WOLF



MARVIN WOLF

aware. There’s all kinds of things going on around me all the time, and I’m keenly aware of all those things happening. It made me a much better observer of my environment and what’s going on and made me a better photographer because of that.”

Dennis McCloskey, despite his success as a Navy photographer, returned from Vietnam with a lingering sense of failure. “We were trying to let Americans know what we were doing and why we were doing it and why it was important, and for a wide variety of reasons we failed in our mission. That was enormously depressing, especially after I got back.” He enrolled in the University of Montana intent on continuing in photojournalism, but the ostracism he encountered from fellow students and professors exacerbated his haunted perspective. After much self-reflection, he turned away from his adventure-junkie lifestyle and embarked on a fulfilling career as an accountant in his hometown.

He admits that Vietnam was a highlight of his professional life, but that experience ultimately taught him something more profound than photography and writing. “The most valuable thing was who I am and who other people are,” he says. “It taught me more about life than I could have learned under any other circumstances and freed me to go in any direction I decided to go.”

Having an established profession to return to kept Jim Wilson focused throughout his three-year enlistment. “When I left the Army, I had a wife and a 6-week-old baby. I knew I would get a job, and if I didn’t get a job, I would have opened my own studio.” Back in Youngstown, he managed department store studios before becoming an instructor for Environmental Projection Systems, now known as Virtual Backgrounds, in San Marcos, Texas. Retired and still living in San Marcos, Wilson struggles to credit his Vietnam experience with any impact on his photography career. “I really wasn’t doing portraiture except a buddy in Vietnam, and missiles don’t have anything to do with a studio,” he says. “What it did do was keep me up to date with equipment and built confidence in what I was doing with equipment. If you know your equipment, that’s half the battle.”

After saying this, Wilson wonders aloud, “I don’t know if I can give you an answer you are looking for.” Given his entrepreneurial history, perhaps Vietnam didn’t fashion his outlook, but his outlook fashioned his Vietnam? He agrees, but then reveals the lasting impact of serving as a combat cameraman in the Vietnam War.

“When you see something bad, and you see it with your naked eye, it’s easy to close your eyes or look away or look beyond it, and you can forget it,” he says. “When you see something bad, and you focus on that with the camera through your viewfinder, that’s imbedded in your mind forever.” •

*Eric Minton is the senior advisor for veteran and partner outreach with the U.S. Vietnam War Commemoration.*

See more images with this story  
[ppa.com/vietnam](http://ppa.com/vietnam)

Or hover your phone camera  
over the code

