

Rather a Hawk? The Photography of Larry Burrows

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Larry Burrows, LIFE © Time Inc.

Larry Burrows is best known for his photographs of the Vietnam War, and rightly so, since his vision of the conflict was aesthetically accomplished, empirically astute and emotionally compelling. He covered the war as a feature photographer for *Life* magazine in circumstances that photojournalists today can only dream of. In its prime, *Life* lavished support on photographers, which it made into minor celebrities, giving them the time, resources and freedom to develop new visual responses to unprecedented events. Burrows' first major piece on the war for *Life*, published in 1963, was a large, ground-breaking story laid out over a dozen pages, including the cover, that was the result of the photographer accompanying over fifty combat missions.¹ As a double-page spread, the story included *Field of Death*, *Mekong Delta – Viet*

¹ 'Stark Color of the Vicious Struggle in Vietnam: We Wade Deeper into Jungle War', *Life*, vol. 54, no. 4, 25 January 1963, pp. 22-32; see also Horst Faas/ Tim Page, eds., *Requiem: By the Photographers Who Died in Vietnam and Indochina*, Jonathan Cape, London 1997, pp. 92, 96.

Cong Dead Beside their Flag. This may be read as an early, critical and prescient comment on the conduct of the war: the shadowy but dominant presence of US military ‘advisors’, the small haul of weaponry and the larger haul of corpses (gathered here for the infamous accounting of progress by ‘body count’), the peasants taken prisoner, seated and bound. The story established much of our continuing imagery of the war. *Life* was conscious of bringing Burrows to Vietnam to do just that, saying that he showed ‘as only color can, the blood, mud and savagery of this war’.²

Photographic reportage in colour was still a challenge in the early 1960s. The film was unforgiving of error, and the aesthetics of colour photojournalism was largely unexplored. Into this barely emergent field stepped Burrows as a fully formed talent. The arbitrary contingencies of colour could easily wreck a piece of photojournalism: in Vietnam, the limited palette of the war—of flesh, foliage, mud, camouflage, fire and blood—doubtless helped. In any case, Burrows had entered the war as a mature talent, with a long career behind him as a technician and photographer, especially in taking pictures of works of art for *Life*: a practical training in the technical and aesthetic aspects of photography, and also in art history.

A Londoner, Burrows grew up (as Don McCullin did, a decade later) in Finsbury Park, a working-class area of the city. He lived through the Blitz, and later said that the experience gave an edge to his urge to communicate about war.³ It was arguably in his coverage of bombing and aerial combat—the most distinctive aspect of the Vietnam War—that the heart of Burrows’ work lies. It is a well-known but, even so, scarcely believable statistic that by the time of the cease-fire in 1973, the US had dropped on Vietnam triple the tonnage of the bombs used against Europe, Asia and Africa in WWII.⁴ Never had such unimaginable force been applied against a guerrilla army, and the people amid whom they lived. Yet most photojournalists only chose to tramp the rice fields and the jungles with the soldiers, so the air war was little covered. Burrows did work on it extensively, to the delight of the air force, which enthusiastically cooperated.⁵

Burrows rarely said much about his politics, but like most of the journalists and photographers in Vietnam, he worked within an unquestioned Cold War frame, and was—even late in the war—as he put it, ‘rather a hawk’.⁶ He was clearly enamoured with the spectacle of this technological war, and took extraordinary steps to capture it. So on Burrows’ colour film we see traces of that apparatus of mass killing in all of its garish glory: the orange of the napalm burst, the grey tracks of rocket trails, the stark clouds of white phosphorus. It was left to the photographers of the National Liberation Front and the North Vietnamese Army to take pictures of what those bombs did on the ground, and they remained unpublished in the West for a full generation.

² Editors’ Note: ‘He Went Off to War with Film in His Socks’, *Life*, vol. 54, no. 4, 25 January 1963, p. 5.

³ Hugh Moffatt, ‘Life Photographers’, *Life*, vol. 61, no. 26, 23 December 1966, p. 132.

⁴ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, Pimlico, London 1991, pp. 430-1.

⁵ Burrows covered the air war in many stories but see especially, Larry Burrows, ‘The Air War’, *Life*, 9 September 1966, pp. 44-57.

⁶ Richard Pyle/ Horst Faas, *Lost Over Laos: A True Story of Tragedy, Mystery and Friendship*, Da Capo Press, Cambridge, MA 2003, p. 28.



Yet at the same time, Burrows photographed the war's victims with great sympathy —primarily US troops (who were also, of course, perpetrators) but also Vietnamese civilians, especially children, who had been maimed by the intensive bombardment of their country. He made moving stories looking at the circumstances of a few of those wounded innocents, and in the

case of Nguyen Tri Tron, a twelve-year-old girl who had lost a leg, it became a personal link too. He returned to see her, recording her rehabilitation, up until his death.

This personalisation of the war, a conventional photojournalistic concern, was both Burrows' strength and weakness. Few could rival his skill at making narrative through a focus on facial expression—fear on the face of an NLF suspect interrogated at bayonet point, the grief of a helicopter gunner who has lost a comrade, a wounded Marine's battle exhaustion. Yet to pick one child from the millions of mutilated civilians, and to tell her story in such affecting detail, triggering charitable donations from *Life* readers, tended to mask the scale of the systematic killing, the concerted attempt to stall the guerrilla war by exterminating the Vietnamese peasantry: to kill the fish by draining the pond.



So, while Burrows was deeply committed to showing the experience and the suffering of war, the purpose of this display was not necessarily to recommend peace. From a Cold War perspective, such suffering was 'regrettable' and 'inevitable' and so 'tragic', the sacrifice that had to be made for a virtuous and necessary war. This is how Burrows' examination of the bombing war was presented in *Life*, which reported without comment the US military line that all precautions were being taken to avoid civilian casualties.⁷ In general, the magazine's coverage was patriotic, optimistic about the prospects for the US in the war, and did nothing to question the idea that the US state had the right to impose its will on the mass of the Vietnamese people, even at the cost of their destruction. This was the textual frame in which Burrows' image originally sat. The *Field of Death* originally appeared in *Life* as a gung-ho celebration of the counter-insurgency effort,

⁷ Tom Flaherty, 'Unprecedented Tactics, Maligned but Effective', *Life*, 9 September 1966, pp. 58A-59.

in which the corpses are seen as a register of military success. Vietnam was a war to which the media were invited, so that the enemy would be defeated, and would be seen to be defeated.

It did not work out like that, of course, and US power was publicly humiliated in Vietnam, though at stupendous cost to the people of that country, and its very land, poisoned by chemical warfare. In retrospect, Burrows' images have assumed a more critical hue. There were many 'hawkish' photographers working in Vietnam of which the same cannot be said: that Burrows' pictures can be tipped this way and that, according to the political beliefs of the viewer, feeding patriotic commitment, humanist sentiment, or anti-war and even anti-imperial animus, is due to his intelligent, perceptive and sceptical eye, guided but not blinded by ideology.