A Way of Seeing: The Transformation of American Soldiers' Snapshot Photography During the Vietnam War

Sara Hagerty

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A WAY OF SEEING: THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN SOLDIERS’ SNAPSHOT PHOTOGRAPHY DURING THE VIETNAM WAR

BY

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THESIS

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DEDICATION

For my family--without you this task would have been insurmountable. Your support, love, and incredible patience are truly commendable.

For all veterans--the courage and dedication that you exhibit has taught me about selflessness and what sacrifice can entail. Most importantly, this paper and research is due to the support of the incredible volunteers at the National Veterans Art Museum in Chicago. Your commitment to telling the stories of veterans is inspiring and honorable.

For every trunk or shoebox of war snapshots hidden away in a closet or underneath a bed. These types of images have always spoken to me and perhaps I can do them a small justice with the following paper.

Lastly, I dedicate this paper in memory of Dr. David Craven. His support and constant expression of a belief in his students and their work kept me going this entire time. From the very beginning he encouraged me to pursue this topic and propel myself into this research.
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I must also thank my committee members, Dr. Ray Hernández-Durán and Dr. Michele Penhall, for their professional guidance throughout my time at UNM and their academic recommendations pertaining to my research on this topic.

My interest in this topic is due to the work of my uncle Louis Kevin Hagerty, a veteran of the 101st airborne and the Vietnam War. Photographs play an integral role in understanding where you come from and the intricate histories of family members. I thank my family for their devotion to keeping his memory alive and sharing with me his incredible work and passion for photography.

And finally, to my husband. I am so lucky to be the recipient of your love and immense patience.
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ABSTRACT

Cultural conventions of appropriateness, social standards of artistic practice, and contemporary vernacular traditions of how to visually commemorate ones’ life impact snapshot photography. An analysis of American soldiers’ snapshots taken during the Vietnam War from the National Veterans Art Museum’s archive in Chicago reveals a unique set of images due to their origins as snapshots and their stylistic references to other visual frameworks that are historically used to represent war. Through an examination of the culture of snapshot making, the historic presence of cameras on the battlefield, the conditions faced by American soldiers during the Vietnam War, and the popular documentary styling of war photography, I determine that soldier-photographers in Vietnam reinterpret the conventional meaning of snapshot photography to express intimate photographic representations of the people they encountered and their traumatic war experiences. While a portion of the archive consists of photographs that represent idealized versions of the photographic subjects’ personal traits or morals, such as honor, heroism, or masculine strength, amongst such representation are images that disrupt or are devoid of any positive moral or culturally appropriate qualities. Soldier-photographers snapshot style allows them to both confirm and conform their post-war
reflections to meet the cultural expectations of their peers. The snapshots function as a self-constructed repository for memory, representing a soldier-photographer’s eyewitness, historic authority, and successful participation in the Vietnam War. These snapshots are evidence that this approach to snapshot making is not an anomaly but rather a shared method of domesticating and representing one’s personal experiences and witnessing of a critical event in American history.
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INTRODUCTION:

The personal camera functions as a device for traditionally memorializing major events in one’s life, affirming relationships and emotional connections between subject and photographer, and producing visual documents of the photographer’s personal history. Marketing and strategic advertising by companies such as Kodak promote snapping as an integral part of social interactions that imply family values and sentimentality.¹ By documenting familial connections and the events, people, and places that fill the course of one’s life, the autobiographical ritual of snapping also connotes a snapper’s social and cultural normalcy.² In contrast to this regulating function of the snapshot, Catherine Zuromskis notes that the aesthetic of snapshot photographs is simultaneously understood to be an “. . . unstudied and instinctual mode of photographic production,” thereby inferring a distinction of spontaneity and personal photographic representation.³

For American soldiers during the Vietnam War, the context and experiences that serve as content for their personal snapshots contrasts with the regulating conventions and aesthetics of snapshot photography. The tradition of snapping produces visual autobiographies. Snapshooting appears as any subjective medium, one that can yield free form and independently composed photographs, however it is actually commanded by cultural conventions that define a hegemonic snapshot style. The motivation to chronicle life experiences in the form of snapshots is due to the cultural and social embeddedness.

of snapshotting; it comes so naturally that the act of producing snapshots has become ingrained. The frameworks through which soldier-photographers represent their subjects differ from the hegemonic cultural and social standards that define snapshots’ appropriate subject matter, function, and style. During the Vietnam War, the historical conventions of war representation challenge the conventions of snapshot photography and encourage soldier-photographers to photograph both their subjective war experiences and to objectively document the war as a historical event. Soldier-photographers employ the aesthetic of snapshot photography for particular purposes. For example, snapshots that reflect the collective fraternity shared by soldier-photographers with their wartime associates echo images representing traditional family bonds and togetherness. As seen in Figure 1 (see page 3), soldier-photographers perpetuate the snapshot tradition of posing in a contrived manner. The subjects situate themselves in this popular method of arrangement alongside one another to represent shared acquaintance, imply familiarity, or simply to exhibit compliance with the popular cultural and social conventions of the time.

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4 I will refer to soldiers in Vietnam who produced personal snapshots as soldier-photographers. Personal cameras were so prevalent and embedded within soldiers’ pre-war cultural practices that I strongly believe that their titles as both active soldiers and photographers must be acknowledged. This also differentiates soldier-photographers from media journalists, war photographers, and military photographers employed specifically as photographers in Vietnam.
The intimate act of photographically representing one’s personal history via the camera, the meaning and function of personal war-time snapshots, and the alterations in the style of snapshot photography in the particular context of war must be examined in relation to one another. In response to tenuous and foreign circumstances in Vietnam, soldier-photographers alter their snapshot style according to cultural and historic representations of war when photographing intense subject matter, such as death, atrocity, and military activity. *On Point* (Fig. 2, page 4), taken by John Hosier, illustrates a snapshot he took amidst a live operation in the field. His photographic documentation of the scene captures the two soldiers poised with full gear, ammunition, and weapons.
Soldiers, such as Hosier, continue producing snapshots due to the compelling status of snapshotting as a hegemonic cultural and social activity. As soldier-photographers witness inappropriate and sometimes banal subject matter, they continue to create a visual autobiography in the form of snapshots regardless of a subject’s unconventionality. The cultural and visual prominence of documentary photography, as an emblematic and objective genre, informs the way in which soldier-photographers operate. The pervasive presence of documentary representations of war and violence impact the soldier-photographers’ snapshot aesthetics to convey an alternative visual impression of particular subjects and events during the politically turbulent and violent Vietnam War.

In this thesis, I analyze an archive of photographs at the National Veterans Art Museum (NVAM) in Chicago, which contains the personal snapshots of American soldiers taken during the Vietnam War. I highlight in my discussion particular snapshots
that depict traumatic events, death, and the soldiers’ daily experiences. These snapshots show an alternative style of representing subject matter in contrast to other snapshots from the archive that replicate the prevailing content and implied intimacy of snapshot photography. The rhetoric of snapshot photography, which defines style and subject matter, applies to at least half of the photographs from soldiers’ cameras. Images of base camp and commemorative photographs with fellow soldiers embody qualities of the accepted style and content of snapshots. In contrast, images of death, destruction, live military fire, and soldiers’ day-to-day experiences and encounters while on patrol offer a differing style of snapshot photography. The style presents the soldier-photographer as a witness documenting the violence and trauma of war. For the purpose of my study, I examine the NVAM collection as representative of Vietnam soldiers’ snapshot collections. In their depiction of military subject matter in a removed, documentary style, the soldier-photographers create images of power and connote their separation from the cultural normalcy of the snapshot aesthetic. In their effort to photograph the traumatic and often graphic subject matter of their war experience, soldiers appropriate the stylistic qualities of another photographic genre, most prominently documentary photography. The soldier-photographers popular documentary forms of framing and composition convey physical dominance and agency over their photographic subjects, a voyeuristic or more objective distance from the emotions and situations of their subjects, and illustrate a direct visual link to the military actions and events they witness or participate in. For example, in snapshots of war trauma or death, these compositional choices in representing the body of an injured American or the corpses of Vietnamese casualties communicate numbness to death and authenticate the looming threat of death for soldiers.
The soldier-photographers’ physical contexts, awareness of historic representations of war, and the greater social and political conditions of the Vietnam War directly effect their photographic style. The war in Vietnam was a foreign, controversial, and at times terrifying experience for American soldiers in contrast to their former lifestyles in the United States and outside the military. This contrast, in part, compels American soldiers to alter their photographic style. Soldier-photographers operate outside the conventions of snapshot photography when showing violent subject matter in eyewitness accounts of their military experience. Based on my examination of snapshot photographs from the archive of the NVAM, I argue that a reinterpretation of the style and function of snapshot photography occurs as the soldier-photographers’ negotiate their foreign experiences as members of a new community, the U.S. military, as well as the innate cultural practice to produce images reliant on popular representations of war. This reinterpretation of the cultural and social standards of snapshot photography yields a form of snapshotting that conflates the popular objective styling of documentary photography and the socially distant position of the observant documentary war photographer with the intimate, autobiographical nature of the snapshot collection. The photographs from the personal collections of American soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War illustrate my thesis and serve as examples indicative of a reinterpretation of the meaning of snapshot photography. More broadly, the soldier-photographers’ works exhibit the flexible, independent creative choices of the photographic medium as a mechanism of reflecting individuality and private response. Soldier-photographers rely upon the activity of snapshotting in an attempt to narrate their unique war experiences but with innate
awareness to the historic, mediated, and cultural representations of war that impact their photographic style and function.

Chapter 1 will begin with a discussion regarding the social and cultural practice that is snapshot photography. Understanding the evolution of personal camera use and the practice of snapshooting by soldiers is crucial to establish a foundation of knowledge regarding not only the cultural habit of making snapshots but also the investment of individuals in a traditionally, nostalgic activity during one of the most traumatic life experiences, war. The military expectations of prestige and success glorified in post-World War II American culture encouraged disillusioned youth to fight as their fathers had. The ability of American soldiers to create personal snapshot photographs during their time in Vietnam would yield a reinterpretation of the snapshot with reference to the popular and historic presence of documentary photography as a framework for representing war.

Chapter 2 discusses the political details of the Vietnam War, the traumatic experience of American soldiers while in Vietnam, and the history of the camera as a tool for narrating time and documenting wartime realities. I specifically discuss documentary photography’s investment in the indexical power of the photographic medium and ability to communicate a particular argument through emblematic cultural representations of subjects. Four documentary Vietnam War photographers’ works serve as illustrations for the aesthetics and traditionally communicated representations of documentary war photographs. Soldier-photographers’ replication of documentary aesthetics in their personal war snapshots is evidence not only of their innate awareness to the historic communicative powers of documentary photography but also of documentary
photographs’ evidentiary functions and contextual relationships when seen alongside intimate, snapshot-style photographs.

In Chapter 3, I analyze photographs taken by American soldiers in Vietnam that exemplify both a practice of snapshot aesthetics and the alteration of style when photographing traumatic or violent events and military activity. Soldier-photographers continue the established conventions of snapshot photography, including the representation of the familial and personal achievements. However, on the same rolls of film and throughout their personal collections, soldier-photographers alter their snapshot style with influence from other visual cultural representations of war and particularly utilize documentary aesthetics to express their historic witnessing of the war.

Through my research and analysis of snapshots at the NVAM, I believe the historic, social, and cultural conditions for American soldier-photographers in Vietnam and the hegemonic conventions of both snapshot and documentary representations produce these photographs as unique visual artifacts. The culture of snapshot photography, its intimate and captivating ability to preserve a particular image of one’s self, is perpetuated by soldiers due to a cultural desire to visually narrate their experiences. By creating snapshots, soldiers unite their pre-war lives with their current positions in the U.S. military. However, it is the power of photography to project a version of the “truth” and its fluidity as a subjective medium that allows soldiers to alter the way they operate their camera and the style in which they photograph particular subject matter for future reflection. I believe that soldier-photographers work to understand their unconventional situations in Vietnam by partaking in the familiar cultural activity of snapshot making. Soldiers’ arrivals and duties in Vietnam uprooted
them from their everyday lives and compelled them to participate in a violent war. All the while, political and social tensions back home in the United States yielded a hostile environment for them both while in the military and when returning stateside. When soldier-photographers alter their personal snapshot aesthetic to photograph subject matter, such as military activity and traumatic events during the war, they rely on forms of representation that convey a seemingly objective document of particular moments in their war experiences. The documentary objectivity conveyed in such representations suggests the soldiers’ attempt to neutralize the traumatic events and unconventional situations that would be considered inappropriate or outside the hegemonic conventions of snapshotting. Through these representations, soldier-photographers express their authority over their photographic subject matter and convey their power to project a new representation of their ideal self, one that is influenced by a masculine and historically conceived desire to defeat an enemy regardless of what it takes and a fulfillment of cultural expectations to prove themselves as successful members of both society and the U.S. military.
CHAPTER ONE: SNAPSHOTING AND WAR

For the purpose of examining the personal photography of American soldiers taken during the Vietnam War, one must initially look to snapshot photography’s prevailing social and cultural behaviors in regards to the historic use of personal cameras carried from home by soldiers. The earliest forms of photographic production educated the American public about the personal uses of the camera. In 1839 Louis Daguerre announced the invention of the daguerreotype process. The public delighted in the ability to see a detailed, confirmed representation of the real world. Early on only a small minority could afford the expensive cost of a daguerreotype, however the advancements in technology that introduced the carte-de-visite in 1854 led to an increase in photography studios and eventually portrait photography would be available to most economic classes. In the 1870s, the first hand cameras placed amateur photographers in charge of their photographic subject matter. By the 1890s, photographs were a part of daily life. The manufacturing of smaller lightweight cameras, followed by the replacement of glass negatives with the invention of flexible film rolls, moved photography away from its former status as “...an individualized craft...[to] an industrialized operation.” Personal camera ownership was encouraged due to the invention of better camera lenses, the creation of a service industry based on the more technical tasks of photographic development and printing, and the rising middle class that

was becoming more prosperous with industrialization. The faster pace of society and an emphasis placed on the cultural nostalgia of the things one held dearest led to photographers’ attempts at conveying their confidence and happiness.\textsuperscript{8} Entering the “domain of the ordinary and the domestic,” the camera soon came to serve as an instrument utilized by all ages.\textsuperscript{9} With the camera’s development as a user-friendly device and its growing accessibility over the years due to increases in manufacturing and better pricing, photography came to serve as the familial and personal mechanism for recording important social events, relationships, and memories.\textsuperscript{10}

In \textit{Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia}, Nancy Martha West discusses marketing strategies and the technological advancements made by the Eastman Kodak Co. in 1888 that led to the exponential rise in the popularity of personal camera use. With Kodak’s famous advertising slogan that appeared in 1889, “You press the button, we do the rest,” the company began appealing to the public early on regarding the simplicity and technical ease of operating a camera. A photographer could create a personal visual object without the knowledge or skill to process film and print the final product. This strategic advertisement by Kodak highlights the subjective authority of a photographer as they construct a nostalgic view of \textit{their} world.\textsuperscript{11} Kodak’s initiation of later campaigns, such as “Let Kodak Keep the Story,” promoted the power of the personal camera as a means of organizing photographers’ life experiences into visual narratives. This campaign in particular occurred during World War I, a time when individual photographers’ emphasis on the memories of a national event and the history that could

\textsuperscript{8} Nancy Martha West, \textit{Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia}, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 139.
\textsuperscript{9} Hirsch, \textit{Family Frames}, 6.
\textsuperscript{10} Waggoner, “Photographic Amusements,” 20-7.
\textsuperscript{11} West, \textit{Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia}, 2-3.
be recorded via the camera countered the memories of familial happiness and the leisurely pastimes. It is at this critical time that Kodak advertising began to underscore the mnemonic activity of snapshot making rather than its status as a sentimental, leisurely craft.\textsuperscript{12} As an individual ritual, snapshot making served as a cultural and social tool to document and construct a self-authored representation of ones’ life experiences as well as their witness to history.\textsuperscript{13} West remarks on Kodak’s campaign and the camera’s popularity as fuel for a modern culture that came “. . . to regard the isolated moments represented by photographs as producing collective truth when in fact they represent at best only relative truths . . .”\textsuperscript{14} Kodak’s invention of a snapshot culture promoted the ownership and use of cameras by everyday people for creating nostalgic visual traces of our world and conditioned the public with the compelling desire to see truth and to collect photographs that represent their impressions of reality.

The conventions of snapshot photography, encouraged by Kodak culture and their marketing of a “home-mode” style of photographing, produced a set of appropriate activities and subjects for personal photographs.\textsuperscript{15} Snapshot making coincides with particular social activities such as birthdays, achievements, and vacations; it also is associated with broader cultural achievements and values, such as college graduation, marriage, or buying a home. Richard Chalfen notes that picture taking established itself within behaviors that are deemed socially and culturally appropriate for its use. Snapshot

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 16-7.
\textsuperscript{14} West, \textit{Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia}, 3.
\textsuperscript{15} Richard Chalfen, \textit{Snapshot Versions of Life} (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), 121.
photography, for this reason, often is discussed in tandem with other vernacular photographies, including domestic photography and family portraiture. Authors such as Geoffrey Batchen define snapshot photography as a part of the larger category of vernacular photographies and as photographic objects that resist art history’s formalist narrative. Vernacular photography is understood to be a genre of household or personal photographic objects that function in intimate and personal ways. The cultural necessity of such photographic tokens is motivated by owners’ emotions and intimate connections to the photographic content. The intensely personal nature of snapshots overlaps with imagery of everyday life at home, school portraits and individual family members personal snapshot collections. The nostalgic ties to family and to an individual’s upbringing represented in these types of photographs serve as “. . . symbolic support for [the photographer’s] existence and lives.” At an early age, individuals are taught that a primary function of photography is the use of a personal camera to memorialize and affirm the successes, achievements, and positive events of family members. From the first snapshots taken of a newborn at a hospital to events such as first communions or first days of schools, these early life events justify the functions of snapshooting within the family unit and serves as an initial introduction to the greater culture of snapshot photography. The use of the personal camera becomes a mechanism for validating ourselves and those we photograph into a “normal,” or popularly accepted, representation of the family. The popular use of the camera for documenting the family evolves into the ownership of cameras by multiple individuals within the family. This

16 Ibid., 10-1.
18 Ibid., 15.
19 Hirsch, Family Frames, 7.
produces multiple visions of a single family or community from several individuals’ photographic perspectives. Snapshots become extremely important and cherished heirlooms due to their historic and personal connections. The course of life events documented by snapshots allow an individual to not only construct objects memorializing life events, but also the course of time and the historic witnessing of the snapshotter to events of national or international importance. The cultural and social activities deemed appropriate for snapshot making enforce a particular aesthetic that is demonstrated in Kodak advertisements, as seen in Figure 3 (see below). In the sample images of the collage, the Kodak advertisements show the removed positioning of the snapshot photographers from the events that they document. The photographic subjects compose themselves or are directed to pose in a manner so that the event, landscape, or celebration is represented clearly and comprehensively.

Figure 3: A collage of Kodak advertisements that displays popular manners of composing culturally appropriate subject matter for snapshot making.

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Snapshot photography adheres to an intimate and subjective style, where subject matter often is framed or composed to convey a culturally or socially idealized representation of the subjects as well as to clearly preserve the visual trace of an event or relationship. Photographers tend to direct their subjects to pose frontally and often in a manner that physically expresses their social connections to one another. For example, subjects place arms around one another or close acquaintances sit side by side to connote their emotional familiarity. Companies such as Polaroid and Kodak encourage a particular snapshot aesthetic through advertisements and photographic manuals that present their version of the best representation of photographic subjects. This includes a photographer’s directions for subjects’ facial expressions, their eyes to look toward the camera, centering or physically placing themselves so that all subjects desired by the photographer to be represented are within the margins of the photographer’s view, and to physically convey themselves or their actions in a still and seemingly natural “in the moment” manner. As seen in Figure 3 (see page 14), the photographic subjects as well as the aesthetic criteria put forth by ads serve as examples for snapshot photographers. The subjects gather in front of the photographers; the family at the beach and the two individuals adjacent to the barbeque pose with smiles and in postures that simultaneously convey their natural presence in the scene as well as their desire to project happy and culturally pleasing representations. The family at the table all pose around the centered motherly figure who presents a birthday cake to the group and to the photographer. The snapshot photographer positions herself at the other end of the table so as to capture the joyful

21 This popular method of representation, identified as a culturally determined good snapshot, is by no means enforced. The snapshot aesthetic is culturally ingrained due to the representations put forth by advertisements showing such standards for snapshot photographers. While replicating this aesthetic is an option for a photographer, the frequent replication of this style is a sign of the hegemony of snapshot conventions.
expressions of the children, the beautifully constructed cake, and more broadly the
group’s fulfillment of the culturally appropriate way to celebrate a birthday. Catherine
Zuromskis explains that advertisements often present exemplary photographs that frame
their subjects close up and at eye level; these stylistic qualities show “. . . a carefully
constructed visual ideal, designed to direct and normalize our individual notions of what
can and should be considered a ‘good snapshot’.” This model of a good snapshot
encourages photographers to similarly position their photographic subjects’ bodies and/or
faces frontally, smiling, and placing their arms in a visually pleasing and relaxed manner
at their sides or casually behind their backs. These types of directions are to achieve the
image of an ideal unprompted moment in everyday life, rather than a photograph that
might reveal distracted subjects, frowns, erratic movements, or conflict among subjects.

Equally ingrained in the definition of snapshot photography is the social convention to
preserve a connection between the photographer and their subject in a style “. . . of image
making that is constructed precisely to seem unconstructed, [and] manufactured to be
read as spontaneous.” Zuromskis argues that the snapshot photographer’s desire to
insert himself or herself into the discourse of cultural and social normativity invested in
the meaning of snapshot photography is not an action the photographer is necessarily
aware of. A final defining element of the snapshot genre is that the act of taking
snapshots conceals the intentions of a snapshot photographer “. . . within the notion of a
naïve, unstudied, and instinctual” style of photography. Richard Chalfen stresses that
the “representational task” of snapshot making constructs a type of image making that

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23 Pierre Bourdieu, Photography, a Middle-Brow Art, trans. by Shaun Whiteside (Stanford, CA: Stanford
University Press, 1990), 7.
25 Ibid.
viewers are willing to interpret the photographs as completely accurate or true representations.  

Personal snapshots, as described by Marita Sturken, produce a physical talisman that holds personal value as an artifact “. . . in which the past is perceived to reside so that it can be re-experienced.” As a tool of memory, the camera also is tied to sentimentality and the ability to reminisce on experiences, persons, relationships, and achievements. Personal photographs have the ability to provide individuals with access to “. . . memory, nostalgia, and contemplation.” Images serve as containers for memories and preserve traces of the past, which can be accessed through the materiality of the photograph as an object. While memory is limited and unreliable, nostalgia is an affection or desire that often is relied upon to achieve a preservation of the past. Hence, nostalgia is invested with circumstantial emotions related to the photographic act. In Stuart Tannock’s definition, “nostalgia as ‘a structure of feeling’ invokes a positively evaluated past world in response to a deficient present world.” An object invested with nostalgia is a preventative measure for the eventual loss of detailed memories. Snapshot photographers desire to sustain a vision of a particular moment, experience, or relationship from their personal history so they may revisit the emotions associated with the photographic subjects. These emotions that are tied to a photographic subject maybe unresolved or fantasized. A photographic representation of a subject allows for the photographer to manufacture past emotions as well as to invest desired emotions toward

26 Chalfen, Snapshot Versions of Life, 121.
29 West, Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia, 10.
an individual, an unrealized relationship, or an imagined exchange. For example, a photographer may instruct multiple individuals at an event to gather for a snapshot, but the photographer may be acquainted with only one of the subjects. By making a photograph of that individual with the group, the photographer implies a close connection with all of the subjects. Nostalgia motivates the creation of photographs as physical memory devices.

The exchange that occurs between a photographer and their subjects enforces the hegemonic function of the snapshot as a dialog that implicitly connects both parties. The choice to make a photograph implies real-life intimacies between both photographer and subject. This is exemplified by the photographer’s ability to command the pose or attention of the subjects, the subjects’ acknowledgement of the camera with eye contact, and smiling that often is prompted by a popular request of subjects to say “cheese.” However, as Zuromskis notes, while this allows a photographer to demonstrate a possible inclination toward conformity to social and cultural conventions, as a private creative medium it also provides an opportunity in which individuals may challenge the established norm by representing their identity through photographic acts. Christmas Party, LZ Center (Fig., 4, page 19) shows a group of servicemen gathered together, appearing celebratory (some with beers and cigars) while posing for a snapshot alongside holiday decorations.

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32 Ibid.
What is most provocative about this snapshot is that none of the subjects are clearly conveying the popular joyful expressions habitually expressed in a typical snapshot of a Christmas party. They have gathered close together, lining up, and even lighting their faces with a candle so that everyone is seen. The subjects appear complacent in posing for the photograph; they oblige the photographer’s request and pose, but they challenge the hegemonic conventions of the snapshot. They are not celebrating Christmas in conditions that perpetuate the cultural ideals of happiness, shared goodwill and the joy of a holiday celebration. This particular snapshot takes place in Vietnam close to the one year anniversary of the Tet Offensive, which destabilized southern Vietnam in January 1968. The group’s celebration occurs during a period of morale filled with anxiety and stress due to the increasing disapproval of the American public towards the war and the
fear of another large attack by the North Vietnamese Army. Individuals’ unique intentions for the purposes of a photograph cultivate a reinterpretation of standard photographic practices. This includes the interpretation of snapshot photography’s functions and meanings. For the individuals in Christmas Party, LZ Center (Fig, 4, page 19), they go through the motions to recreate the aesthetics of a typical snapshot. Soldiers’ participation implies a desire for happiness by sharing in the familiar and comforting activity of taking a holiday photograph. Simultaneously, the historical context and lack of obvious celebration reveals a tinge of apathy and absent holiday cheer. While snapshot photography is in part motivated by hegemonic illustrations of relationships, such as the family unit, Lázló Kondor and other soldier-photographers’ ground their wartime photo narratives in nostalgic representations and snapshot conventions. The cultural and social imperative to possess a visual representation of one’s past is a potent value of snapshot photography repeated by individual snapshot makers and soldier-photographers alike.

In On Photography, Susan Sontag argues that snapshot photographers often possess a sentimental desire to acquire knowledge of their past. A convention that accompanies snapshot photography suggests that the photographer has intimate knowledge of his subjects, how they function, and that the photographer can be considered an authority on subject matter. The photographer’s authority, however, is only implied. The way one attempts to understand an interaction or experience, Sontag stresses, is through observation and a visual chronicling of major events. In the culturally ingrained habit to observe personal histories, snapshoters attempt to better understand

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34 Bourdieu, Photography, a Middle-Brow Art, 8-9.
those events, relationships, and experiences through photographs. The nostalgic act of making photographs that presents our pasts serves as an act of continuity. A snapshot photographer’s choice to photograph particular subject matter affirms authority over the evidence of a subject’s presence. What motivates the multitudes of snapshots that often are taken sequentially over the course of an event is the ability of photographs to add to a photographer’s “. . . sense of self, of identity.” This authority allows photographers to repress and reveal particular narrative details from their pasts. Snapshot photographers, through their choice of a photographic subject, are able to selectively remember or forget particular details of an event, person, or relationship. This quality of self-definition and nostalgic reflection of one’s life experiences was invented by Kodak and served as a major selling point.

Snapshot photography expands its social and cultural role due to the appeal of individual cameras for visual autobiography and identity construction. The social and cultural conditions that motivate snapshotters to visually project family togetherness, achievements, and positive imagery are up for reinterpretation by individual snapshotters. A social group of snapshot producers who exemplify a reinterpretation of snapshooting conventions is men serving in the military during the Vietnam War. With the cultural convention to create a visual narrative of their experience, U.S. soldiers use their personal cameras as private devices to connect their past and present and not only their witnessing of war but also their ability to survive and contribute to the success of a foreign campaign. Soldiers embraced historic “Kodak” culture and the authoritative act

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38 West, Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia, 11.
of snapshooting to chronicle their time at abroad with snapshot photography. In the new social context of the military community, soldiers’ snapshots exemplify reinterpretations of the conventional ideologies traditionally represented in popular snapshot culture.

The camera has a historic presence on the battlefield. Some of the earliest technical forms of photography brought the battlefront to the eyes of the public. Beginning with engravings produced from the glass collodian negatives of photographers such as Alexander Gardner and Matthew Brady, who depicted the body-laden fields of the American Civil War, to the landscapes of battlefields during the Crimean War taken by Roger Fenton in 1855.39 With the camera’s ability to remove time and distance, photography presented a danger-free level of involvement for nonparticipants that brought a representation of war to the spectator of a photograph.40 The public’s ability to see war from the perspectives of war photographers had a social and historical impact upon the future presence of the personal camera as a popular supply item to be carried by soldiers.

While companies such as Kodak continued developing the technology and durability of cameras, the camera was still a relatively expensive personal item during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the effort to appeal to the masses, companies advertised cameras as universal items, but in reality they were not sold in mass quantities just yet. At the end of the 19th century, Kodak began advertising the camera as a tool to

be used in all aspects of everyday life and not simply as a creative hobby.\textsuperscript{41} In this effort to gain a more constant use of cameras by a greater number of people, Kodak also encouraged personal photography within every social group, including the military. As the public confronted imagery of the battlefield in publications, they yearned to see family members’ own military achievements. This visibility encouraged the carrying of personal cameras to the battlefront in World War I. A conscious decision to carry a nonessential item on one’s person during battle exemplifies the embedded social convention of snapshot photography. Soldiers began to more readily self-author a photographic portfolio of their war experiences due to the increasing affordability and mass production of personal cameras such as the $1 Kodak Brownie and the production of portable film in 1900.\textsuperscript{42} Sandy Callister regards the important early presence of the vest pocket Kodak in particular and notes that that not only was the camera small and easily portable, Kodak marketed it specifically for use by soldiers during WWI. An ad from 1917 showcases an example from that marketing campaign (See Fig., 5, page 24).

\textsuperscript{41} West, \textit{Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia}, 24-5.
The ad features a soldier reaching from a train window to accept a camera from a young woman. As a parting gift, the woman gives the soldier the camera as a connective device that will withstand their physical separation and bring representations of the soldier back to her. The advertisement’s language, in its desire to appeal to families and loved ones who are sending men off to war, stresses the duty and intensity of what war will be like for soldiers. The ad states “Tens of thousands of brave lads in the camps and trenches of France are keeping their own Kodak story of the war—a story that will always be intense to them because it is history from their view-point.” Such language appeals to soldiers’ families and loved ones’ fears by emphasizing that snapshots will bring not only the home back to the soldier’s camp and his camp back home, but history as well. The ad further urges the family to give the gift of a vest pocket Kodak, so that when the men return home as “glorious veterans” they may carry the vivid photographs.
from their camera to communicate and make the stories of their war more real.\textsuperscript{43} Such advertisements achieved Kodak’s goal to emphasize camera ownership across a growing market of soldiers who left home to fight abroad.\textsuperscript{44} In the case of soldiers actively photographing their war experiences, the cultural and social conventions associated with snapshotting were a familiar and comforting connection back to a home life that was far away from the realities of war. Soldiers, hopeful that their photographs would communicate their experience, attempted to show both their newly forming relationships with fellow soldiers and a documentation of what they did during the war—including their power to defeat the enemy and survive. Soldiers’ reality, however, of confronting death, trauma, and their fears of not returning home alive would encourage them to reinterpret snapshot conventions in the unconventional situations they faced during war.

Earlier forms of the camera, which needed glass plate negatives and large tripods, required an observatory task force of military and journalistic photographers to memorialize the battlefront on film. The developments of the Kodak Co. democratized the technology of the camera. The portability and advancements in camera equipment, such as 35 mm film in 1925, allowed individuals to photograph without the threat of delaying their other duties with slow mechanics or setup.\textsuperscript{45} The automatic camera and disposable film allowed soldier-photographers to photograph an entire roll of film and then mail the film back to Kodak for the prints to be produced and then returned via postal courier.\textsuperscript{46} Local merchants eventually capitalized on the popular need for photograph printing, allowing soldiers to develop and receive their prints while in-
country.\textsuperscript{47} The advancement of the camera as an easily portable item and the ability to have prints processed abroad produced greater freedom to photograph during war.

As civilians transition into the occupation of soldier they are given new responsibilities and confronted with cultural expectations of defending their nation and defeating evil. The new social and cultural experiences in the military provide a variety of foreign experiences and new relationships to photograph. American soldiers during WWII evaluated the conditions of their war experiences by photographing their involvement. This would relate their personal histories to the greater magnitude of the war, its global purpose, and the success of America as a dominant and powerful nation.\textsuperscript{48}

In WWII’s aftermath, the American public glorified soldiers for their honorable positions as military veterans. Returning soldiers’ collections of photographs serve as artifacts that represent not only what the soldier-photographers witnessed but also symbolize what they participated in for the benefit of the nation and the world. When in-country, snapshooting serves as an everyday act that connects the soldier-photographer to the familial rite of snapshot making. The soldier’s snapshooting alludes to the hegemonic convention of representing connectedness. The soldiers supplement the vanishing presence of their nuclear families with their new military community. For example, the creation of photographic albums of war snapshots parodies the traditionally composed albums that would contain snapshots of extended family and memorialize achievements and events that made up the symbolic tokens of family presence. Pierre Bourdieu points out in his book, \textit{Middlebrow Photography}, that the photographic practice of using a


\textsuperscript{48} Roeder, \textit{The Censored War}, 4-5.
camera to immortalize the high points in family life exists for its ritual as a family function. Therefore, snapshot photography is a conventional activity of domesticity that reasserts the unity and integration of the family by visually preserving the positive moments of family life.\textsuperscript{49} Snapshooters participate in the hegemonic social and cultural standards of society by ritually enacting this established custom. Following these conventions, snapshooters naturally seek to highlight the familial connections, positive accomplishments, and successful relationships that fill the course of our lives. In \textit{Family Frames}, Marianne Hirsch asserts that a prominent social quality of snapshots is their projection of familial togetherness.\textsuperscript{50} This familial cohesion can be understood as a representation of the intimate relationships beyond the connections of the biological family, extending to close friends or associates with shared life experiences. By replicating the familial gathering and social intimacies signified by snapshot representations of community, a snapshot preserves an experience that the photographer may later privately invest with imagined associations or fictional relationships.\textsuperscript{51}

Photography, due to its mechanical and chemical nature, serves as a medium of proof or scientific evidence.\textsuperscript{52} The camera as an automated, objective, mechanical device preserves representations of the past in compact photographic prints. Producers and spectators of snapshots also embrace the subjectivity of the medium, as they are able to selectively choose what they want to photograph as well as design any post-memory representations of an individual’s war snapshots as they see fit. For veterans, their

\textsuperscript{49} Bourdieu, \textit{Photography, a Middle-Brow Art}, 19.
\textsuperscript{50} Hirsch, \textit{Family Frames}, 7.
\textsuperscript{51} Zuromskis, “On Snapshot Photography,” 60.
\textsuperscript{52} The camera’s origins and conjunction with science and social scientific activity ground its representation of photographic “truth” in the mechanics and chemical science that allow the transformation of a body into a two-dimensional document. See Jonathan M. Finn, \textit{Capturing the Criminal Image} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xvii-xviii.
photographs provide an immutable source of information regarding their participation in the war. For spectators, private snapshots indicate the soldier-photographers’ worthiness of honor and esteem from their fellow countrymen. Welcome-home celebrations and the status of the WWII veterans as “unquestioned heroes” established national admiration for military members that would form cultural expectations for future American veterans, including those soldiers who served during the Vietnam War.\textsuperscript{53} American soldiers in Vietnam would further perpetuate the cultural and social function of soldiers’ personal snapshots as totems of their military accomplishments and experiences. The soldier-photographers’ inclusion and aesthetic approach toward photographing, death, and atrocity represent their reliance on other forms of visual representation and thus convey a new meaning for snapshot photography.

CHAPTER TWO: THE VIETNAM WAR AND THE CAMERA

In *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America’s Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War*, Henry Kissinger argues that America’s involvement in Vietnam developed from the position of the United States at the time as the leader “. . . in building a new international order out of the fragments of a shattered world.”

Kissinger’s statement projects a state of mind and cultural attitude prevalent in American motivations for participating in the war in Vietnam. The desire for America to remain triumphant after its previous success in WWII placed the United States in a dominating position over its international adversaries and fascism. The U.S. government felt the need to validate its engagement in the politics of other nations due to the country’s new position as a global power and protector.

Prior to the initiation of U.S. military presence in Indochina (consisting of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), America had positioned itself as supportive of “. . . national self-determination, *but* actual commitments [were] in support of colonialism.” William L. Green and John Marciano remark that these qualities characterized American policy and functioned specifically in reaction to the threat of communism in Southeast Asia. Historian Andrew Wiest adds that in the wake of the second World War, the Soviet Union bloc and the United States faced off ideologically and diplomatically. The United States sought an approach of

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limited war, attempting containment of communism rather than open warfare. U.S.
involvement abroad eventually led to questioning from the American public regarding the
compromises that would arise from extending aid to foreign countries. America opposed
European colonialism, but the need to support France as its North Atlantic Treaty
Organization (NATO) ally was of paramount importance in regards to the Cold War.\textsuperscript{58}
America’s role as an international power and the extent of its involvement in Vietnam
forced a coming to terms with the limitations of the United States as a superpower. It
was clear that during the Cold War, the United States could not continue to support Ho
Chi Minh, who organized an anti-Japanese force and received American aid during
WWII.\textsuperscript{59} Therefore, the United States viewed the colonial intentions of the French War
in Indochina as a “stand against communist expansionism.”\textsuperscript{60}

In January 1951, Dean Rusk, the assistant secretary of State, declared that by
neglecting the communist rise in Indochina the rest of Southeast Asia would follow suit
and become a greater collective threat. Kissinger, concerned with projecting America’s
position as a global leader, agreed and promoted Rusk’s claim. It was further publicized
that the looming threat of a communist takeover in Southeast Asia would prevent any
coalition of nations as an adequate adversary to communism’s global domination.\textsuperscript{61} The
security of Indochina was a responsibility passed down by each subsequent U.S.
presidential cabinet. The first two presidents to serve after WWII, Harry S. Truman and
Dwight D. Eisenhower, established policy and funding in an effort to stave off mass

\textsuperscript{58} Andrew Wiest, \textit{The Vietnam War} (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2009), 11.
\textsuperscript{59} Green and Marciano, \textit{Teaching the Vietnam War}, 57-8.
\textsuperscript{60} George McTurnan Kahin and John W. Lewis, \textit{The Unites States in Vietnam} (New York: Dell, 1967), 29.
\textsuperscript{61} Kissinger, \textit{Ending the Vietnam War}, 16.
deployment of American troops. Finally, the deployment of a U.S. military presence occurred after both presidential cabinets’ offerings of aid and France’s withdrawal.

In 1956, the United States officially entered Vietnam upon the promise of President John F. Kennedy to aid the Republic of Vietnam in its defense against a communist takeover of South Vietnam by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), more popularly referred to as the Vietcong.\(^{62}\) During France’s occupation of Vietnam their military fought an intense guerilla war. Guerilla warfare is unlike the conventional warfare strategies of World Wars I and II. Conventional tactics depend upon geographic lines of containment and firepower from above carries out the majority of the work. Bernard Fall discusses that one of the greatest contrasts between conventional war and guerilla war is that guerilla fighters seek to secure the civilian population rather than to take and occupy territory.\(^ {63}\) The conditions of a guerilla war did not favor the French military’s knowledge of warfare and combat strategy. The Americans also found the methods of guerilla tactics confounding. In the conditions of a guerilla war, territory is vague and can be transferred easily between opponents. Instead, civilian support is valued and relied upon for success. The United States sought to make up for its lack of local support in the form of mass artillery. As a result, the strategy of the Vietcong would focus on casualties to eliminate their enemies.\(^ {64}\) The Vietcong’s reliance on their Robin Hood-like status and domestic supporters finally exhausted foreign armies.\(^ {65}\) As American soldiers attempted to distinguish their enemy from the larger population,

\(^{62}\) Wiest, *The Vietnam War*, 16.


\(^{64}\) Green and Marciano, *Teaching the Vietnam War*, 84-7.

suspicious and innocent casualties further hindered American success.\(^{66}\) The mounting military and civilian deaths in conjunction with the slow development of the war underscored the U.S. government’s need to define its progress in Vietnam.

The U.S. government’s establishment of a military draft to support the growing need for troops physically impacted the American population. In Vietnam, mounting casualties and a low number of enlistments strained American efforts to gain headway against the NVA. From 1961-1963, President Kennedy increased the number of troops from a few hundred to 16,000.\(^ {67}\) In the summer of 1964, North Vietnamese PT boats in the Gulf of Tonkin attacked U.S. naval destroyers. At this time, President Lyndon B. Johnson urged the approval of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. This resolution increased attacks on enemy bases in North Vietnam and sent an additional 23,000 U.S. military members to aid the South Vietnamese Army. At the end of 1965, 184,300 troops were stationed in Vietnam, and over the next year this number tripled and the death toll increased to more than 16,000.\(^ {68}\) The requirement of civilian support, beyond the extent of military enlistees and career soldiers, required any male at the age of 18 to register for the military draft. The draft, however, took into account demographic factors including, age, gender, social class, and race. This method of choosing eligible citizens favored conscripting the majority of draftees from working-class families and requiring anyone without a medical disability or proof of college enrollment to report for duty when their assigned draft number was called up.

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\(^{68}\) Ibid., 53-4.
Many of the men who served in Vietnam were the sons of veterans that fought in World War II. For members of the Vietnam generation without direct connections to WWII veterans, the culture of post-war America stressed the military prowess of the United States and the strength of the American man to defeat evil in all its forms.\(^{69}\) Robert Jay Lifton, in *Home from the War*, refers to the “John Wayne” image of manhood, nurtured by American visual culture, to project a masculine attitude of a man “ruthlessly competitive, physically powerful . . . and unquestioningly loyal to one’s immediate group or one’s nation to the point of being ever willing and ready to kill or die for it.”\(^{70}\) Popular media developed story lines around the heroic and romantic feats of young soldiers working to destroy the enemy and return to their sweethearts. Television programs, such as *The Lone Ranger*, focused on good-looking cowboys that projected a masculine image of the average Joe who could summon super hero qualities to save the day. As WWII veterans came home to a country that celebrated their return with parades, parents’ gave children a sanitized version of their military duties during the war. Marita Sturken asserts in *Tangled Memories* that the mediated version of WWII, through Hollywood film and popular media, subsequently influenced the war experiences of the generation fighting in Vietnam.\(^{71}\) Many of the soldiers in Vietnam anticipated that the war would provide an opportunity for them to fight as their fathers had in WWII and to live the war experiences that had been sensationaly depicted in the media.\(^{72}\) However, the failures of the American war in Vietnam were often disillusioning and detrimental to the morale of


\(^{70}\) Lifton, *Home from the War*, 238.

\(^{71}\) Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 65.

soldiers. Upon arrival, soldiers encountered obstacles when distinguishing the hard-to-identify communist enemy from the larger Vietnamese population.\(^{73}\) The military draft, which conscripted unmarried men and individuals not enrolled full-time in college before other men, magnified tensions between races and social groups.\(^{74}\) Furthermore, the government’s lack of official updates as well as no formal declaration of war made soldiers unsure of their progress in Vietnam.\(^{75}\) As American soldiers arrived in Vietnam, accompanied by “the powerful narrative of patriotism, good versus evil, and masculine prowess,” their personal cameras played an integral role in documenting the war from their perspectives.\(^{76}\) I argue that soldiers, with the use of their personal cameras, reinterpreted the conventional meaning of snapshot photography to express intimate representations of the people and relationships they formed within the unconventional context of their foreign environment and new military occupations. These snapshots suggest that while operating within the hegemonic conventions of snapshot photography and the autobiographical nature of snapshot making, U.S. soldiers in Vietnam attempted to maintain a connection to the normality of premilitary life. The traumatic situations that soldiers’ confronted and perhaps perpetrated during the war produced snapshots that attempt to express such experiences in alternative forms of representation. For example, documentary objectivity and the evidentiary quality of photography connect it to trophy or souvenir making. The naturalized practice of snapshot making in conjunction with the new and at times incomprehensible emotional and physical impacts of the war produces

\(^{73}\) Lifton, \textit{Home from the War}, 189.  
\(^{75}\) Edmonds, \textit{The War in Vietnam}, 15.  
\(^{76}\) Sturken, \textit{Tangled Memories}, 94.
snapshots that follow a documentary code, embracing the indexicality of the camera to convey the traumatic realities of soldiers’ experiences in Vietnam.

During military basic training, soldiers encountered former Vietnam veterans in the capacity of drill sergeants and other noncommissioned officers. Other than the media’s broadcasting of imagery and news updates, it is from these veterans that soldiers often received their first impressions of what it would be like once they arrived in country.⁷⁷ In Lifton’s interview with a Vietnam veteran regarding military training, the veteran discusses hearing descriptions of indiscriminate killings of Vietnamese civilians and tales of brutal treatment of the Vietnamese during patrols or combat sweeps. In addition to the influential tales from veterans’ wartime encounters, Vietnam vets shared photographs of mutilated Vietnamese corpses like playing cards, totems to the kills and the survival instincts of the soldier who owned them.⁷⁸ Veterans of Vietnam would accompany their war stories with such photographs as narrative objects and photographic evidence. When sharing photographs, the imagery illustrated a version of the reality that was awaiting new soldiers and what the military community informally expected of novice soldiers.⁷⁹ Drafted soldiers arrived in Vietnam with only short-term formal training. The process of basic training stripped a soldier of their former civilian self and gave them a new social and cultural persona. A draft notification via mail initiated a soldier’s transformation from civilian to soldier. The government then required draftees to report on a certain date to a military pickup location. Upon arrival at their base young soldiers received physical exams, matching short haircuts, and their military uniforms.

⁷⁷ ‘In country’ is a popular term of reference to a soldier’s period of service abroad.
⁷⁹ Lifton, Home from the War, 42.
After soldiers endured the denuding process of training, including physical and psychological drilling, the U.S. military welcomed them into their new community. This social and cultural reinscription for a soldier meant they were not only “. . . ‘accultured to the military system’ but also accultured, in the anticipatory sense, to the atrocity-producing situation awaiting him in Vietnam.”

Upon soldiers’ arrival, a war confronted them that defied their cultural and social understanding of war and how and why it occurs. Miles Orvell specifically remarks that “images of dead soldiers, the seriously wounded and of psychiatric causalities, of the casual atrocities committed by American soldiers in WWII--such images of the brutality of war were censored by the U.S. government and so did not seriously impair a sense of reality based on Hollywood war movies.” Soldiers traumatic witnessing and/or participation in violent and terrorizing acts in Vietnam disrupted their expectations. George H. Roeder Jr., relays that the censoring of imagery from WWII “encouraged excessive confidence” in soldiers during the “early phases of the Vietnam War.” The war’s lack of order and structure, a general confusion regarding a genuine purpose of the war, and the guerilla war tactics that clouded clear indicators of success shook the expectations of soldiers. The thrust of American soldiers into the wartime realities of Vietnam offered them little to no opportunity to demonstrate their worth in comparison to masculine, heroic, and media-perpetuated myths of military operations. War experiences did vary across individual soldiers due to assignments, duties, and military

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80 Ibid., 43-4.
83 Lifton, Home from the War, 38.
divisions. The drudgery of solders’ foreign context and the political and social conditions within the military did unify their experiences to a degree. In the later years of the war, soldiers’ eagerness and naiveté diminished after the devastating effect of the Tet Offensive and the upset of the American morale back in the states. The detrimental effects of Vietnam on soldiers was life altering and continuous.

As soldiers realized the lack of order and clear political purpose in Vietnam, they experienced physical and psychological trauma triggered by atrocity, death, injury, and violence. Whether witness or active participant, the diverse effects of such experiences change individuals’ psyches and behaviors. In *From History in Transit: Experience, Identity and Critical Theory*, Dominick LaCapra describes trauma as “. . . a shock to the system and may be acted out or compulsively repeated in so-called trauma memory.”84 The immediate, shattering ability of trauma to one’s sense of experience unsettles the understanding of context and further results in a disassociation between cognition (more specifically, representation) and affect.85 The structure of trauma is a disruption of the normal flow of time into fragmented pieces of isolated events. The fragmentation of time traps a witness within the memory of an experience and they are unable to leave behind the pain of the event. Jonathan Shay, who writes specifically on the topic of trauma related to Vietnam veterans, proceeds on the premise that while such effects come from one’s exposure to carnage, ultimately the deeper cause to trauma’s effect upon the psyche is a sense of betrayal.86 Shay argues that Vietnam veterans experience disillusionment

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85 Ibid.
due to their witness of violations to their individual morals or beliefs in “what’s right.”

For American soldiers entering the war in Vietnam, the disorder of their environment, along with the novelty of their position in a new community of an equally young and inexperienced military body, produced an insecure experience of wartime realities. Life or death situations and a duty to think not for themselves but of the military’s greater purpose in Vietnam compromised soldiers’ moral and ethical standards. This loss of personal authority and the implied intimacy of a new community further urged a dismissal of soldier’s former beliefs in favor of cultural conventions gathered during their hasty initiation into the U.S. military. As a result, the soldiers missed out on learning how to cope with and understand traumatic events during their service.

In addition to the social and political dilemmas of the war and the debates regarding the United State’s involvement in Vietnam, the traumatic, violent, and dangerous circumstances that confronted soldiers impacted their conventional pastime of making snapshots. Sontag discusses a photographer’s conventional desire to narrate time through a series of photographs with the intention to understand past events, rather than to merely obtain evidence that it occurred. This parallels a discussion by Shay regarding the war veteran’s processing of traumatic events. Shay points out that it is the ability to provide a context for the traumatic moment within the larger scope of one’s life, that allows a veteran’s emotions (related to the knowledge of that event) a place within the timeline of the experience. Through narration, the fragmented and frozen state of trauma is left behind, and a soldier is able to seemingly reassert authority over their

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87 Ibid., 20.
88 It is here that Shay and Capra’s differing definitions of trauma coincide. Capra’s belief in the unsettling of an individual’s control over their experience and how they understand their environment is in agreement with Shay’s belief that trauma for veterans initiates a loss of authority and compromises their sense of experience.
memory. The comforting and familiar activity of snapshooting back home in the states motivates soldiers in part to make wartime snapshots. As soldier-photographers continue snapshooting their images display an altering of the conventional snapshot subject matter to peculiar, and at times disturbing, subjects. Among soldier-photographers’ snapshot collections are conventional representations of relationships, the course of events, poignant moments, and an environment in which they are an experiential witness. When photographing unconventional subjects, we see soldier-photographers frame their content through differing forms of representation that most noticeably echo the aesthetics of documentary war photography.

In the history of representation no medium quite achieved photography’s successful collapse of time between an event’s representation and its actual occurrence. In the 19th century, militaries throughout the world employed artists who often yielded distorting impressions of war. The earliest mass representations of war came in the form of wood engravings and lithographs produced by artists who synthesized representations of events into a single vision. The artists’ synthesis of sketches and slow reproduction processes led to an image’s circulation a good time after the actual occurrence of the depicted battle or event. In 1841, the Natterer brother’s two daguerreotypes of a procession in Vienna not only made details of an event visible, but also for the first time it was proclaimed that photographs could capture movement. This surpassed the earlier achievement of the calotype, another early method of photographic production, which required a prolonged exposure to even suggest movement. With the advent of the

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90 La Capra, History in Transit, 190-93.
camera, militaries throughout the world exchanged artists for the newfound sense of authenticity provided by war photographers who could be at hand to document camp conditions, take portraits of soldiers, and photograph the aftermath of battle. In 1855, Roger Fenton arrived in Balaklava to serve as the first commercial photographer to document a war. The Crimean War took place on vast plains, which in Fenton’s photographs greatly mislead the severity of his position under direct threat of shellfire. Fenton operated his wet-collodian process out of a wagon that he moved around the battlefront. As he struggled in the hot conditions of his wagon, Fenton labored carefully over the fragility of the glass plates. Fenton’s images document the instantaneity of the photo process, the blurred representations of bogged ports and empty battlefields of canon fodder give a distilled impression of the state of affairs. Soldiers, excited by a possible photographic opportunity, hounded Fenton for portraits; this only frustrated him and disengaged him from furthering the traditional condensed lithographic impressions of war to an informative and “truthful” vision of current events. The photography of George N. Barnard, who served as official photographer for General W.T. Sherman during the American Civil War, displays a similar mixture of portraiture and landscape scenes. Barnard’s imagery depicts romanticized impressions of battlefields, showcasing expansive compositions of the broad vistas after battle. Additionally, from the Civil War, powerful photographs of corpses conveyed the immediate presence of war photographers during brief battlefield truces meant for hastily burying the dead. Works such as

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94 Ibid., 91.
Alexander Gardner’s *The Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter* (Fig. 6, page 41), display the strewn body of a soldier still seemingly at his post even after death.

Figure 6: Alexander Gardner, *The Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter*, from “Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War, published, 1865-66.

Images, such as Gardner’s, as well as the observant landscapes of pre and post battlefield conditions, express war photographers aesthetic choices to represent imagery that connotes the narrative unfolding of events, the environment for the men fighting, and emblematic representations of the presence of death during war. This highlights photographers’ awareness of the political and cultural conventions to witness drama and the popularity of imagery that could summon emotion and fervent reactions from viewers. *The Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter* is one such image that is often speculated about in regards to Gardner’s intentions of conveying an accurate scene. The image has often been criticized for the composition’s convenience, the corpse’s position with eyes peacefully closed and body seemingly free from obvious wounds, as well as the propped position of the rifle left at the ready and not fallen with its owner. War photographers perpetuate this historic tradition of war representation and attempt to manipulate or
synthesize details into a singular moment for a more striking effect on spectators. While some photos are debated, I must emphasize that such manipulations are not a blanketing suspicion across all war photographers. Rather, such motivations to express wartime in photographic forms that garner acclaim and convey a seemingly controlled unified representation is a historical trait that can be tied back to the earliest examples of war photography.

The wet-collodian process, with its glass plates and tedious development, still delayed an immediate dissemination of war photographs to the waiting public or the photographers’ employers. Until the early 20th century, lithographs still served as the main method of dispensing eyewitness accounts of war. In 1911 Ernst Leitz developed the “U.R.,” which took flexible film, had a retractable lens and a rotating screen that protected the lens during operation.95 Advancements in portable cameras contributed to the frequency with which more and more photographers came to serve as employed photographic journalists or independent documentary photographers. Photographers utilized such advancements to capture “history in the making” at more rapid speed than ever before.96

Beginning with the Spanish Civil War from 1936-1939, international media and news outlets sent the first hired photojournalists to cover the war alongside troops.97 Advancements in camera technology brought photographers closer to war, leaving behind the heavy tripods and delicate glass of the collodian process for the portability and speed of pocket cameras. War lent itself to being photographed; the drama of life and death, the

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possibility of tragedy or atrocity, and visually stimulating subject matter are qualities that yield dynamic and at times, beautiful photographic documents. Historically impacting the conventions of war photography is the nature of photography to yield visual objects that convey an individual’s eye witness account, and the cultural standards that deem what is suitable or appropriate subject matter for war photograph making at the time.\footnote{Barbie Zelizer, \textit{Reporting War: Journalism in War Time}, eds. Stuart Allan and Barbie Zelizer (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), 117.}

The photographer’s instantaneous ability to create visual representations for the universal understanding of historic events encouraged the development of a documentary aesthetic.

War places individuals in a vulnerable need for reassurance and clarity. The instability and threats to a “way of life” that occur during wartime often elicit news publications to focus on representing war in a manner so as to quiet such fears and to inform the effected public on the course of events. It is precisely the social need for reassurance that calls to attention the qualities of photographs that make them natural tools for depicting war. Equally impacting the creation of war photography is the culture of the particular era and the moral and editorial standards for what is deemed appropriate to photograph. Throughout history, war photographs’ subject matter has a correlation to society’s cultural notions at the time on how war should be waged, patriotism, humanity, and the nation state.\footnote{Ibid.} War photographers’ imagery universally conveys a historic moment at hand, the photographer’s recognition of the power behind photographic style to promote ideas, visions, and politics, and illustrates the operation of documentary aesthetic. Clear compositions and framing positions a viewer at an advantage to understanding more than simple detail but the symbolic representations and complexities
of a photographic scene are examples of such aesthetics that are culturally established by
the function and meaning of war photography for spectators.

War photography during the Crimean War (1853-1856) continued the historic
tendencies of war artists, conveying the beautiful battlefield landscapes and controlled
visions of triumphant and at times antiseptic, orderly representations of the front. Today,
such representations continue to be perpetuated along with idealistic imagery that
conveys sacrifices for the benefit of the greater good.\(^{100}\) A trend of war photography that
is particularly illuminating to the category’s aesthetic tendencies is the reliance of war
photographers on historic tropes even though the cultural standards and social
expectations of what is appropriate subject matter evolve. For individuals creating war
photographs, historic representations provide visual cues or templates that are
subconsciously and at times purposefully recalled in the creation of contemporary war
imagery. For example, current war photographs from Afghanistan echo the quiet
landscape of battlefield photographs from the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s. *The
Bombing of Algeciras* (Fig. 7, page 45) and *Untitled* (Fig. 8, page 45) capture poignant
moments of the quiet battle landscapes after destruction. The billowing smoke, while
evidence of violence between two opposing sides, appears amidst two very different
geographic landscapes of natural and urban beauty.

\(^{100}\) Ibid., 115.
The memorable, vivid, and dramatic qualities of popular or historic war imagery have produced a set of aesthetic expectations for war photography as a genre.¹⁰¹ Cues from certain subject matter, which incite the desired aesthetic qualities sought by a photographer, come to outweigh the comprehensiveness or the represented information provided by a war photograph.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 122-24.
War photographs are not immune to the ambitions of the photographer to create the “best” photograph. While historically censorship may evolve--for example the sanitized representations of WWII to the graphic and grotesque war photographs from Vietnam--the journalistic attempt to portray an objective representation of events is outshone by war’s overwhelming and dynamic photographic content. Under the stressful circumstances of war, photographers--regardless of their personal desire to remember certain moments and forget others--rely on cues from what they witness, themes of war that they are historically familiar with, and what they determine to be comprehensive imagery of wartime subject matter or narrative that they deem noteworthy of photographic commemoration. It is these elements that contribute to the aesthetic culture of war photographers.

From the battlefield and into the home, war photography continues in the tradition of quelling the threats of war with familiar aesthetics and memorable subjects. In World War I imagery was excessive as the conflict became sensationalized and war representations became increasingly dramatic and propagandistic. In an effort to bring the realities of the war to the masses, publications began issuing photo essays that would attempt to communicate narrative as well as highlight details around a battle, or themes such as soldiers’ lives at the front. The freedom of war photographers and the lack of political censorship contributed to an overwhelming amount of photographs from WWI to combine the action and destruction of war with aesthetics such as close ups and dramatic compositions of the historic vision of war torn landscapes. Also, the clarity of new lens and camera technology produced clear visual details of the horror and trauma of

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war. The lack of censors during WWI had a backlash for the subjective freedom of war photographers who put themselves out in battle and at risk during WWII and later the Korean War. As governments realized that they had the greatest impact on the public’s impression of war by withholding imagery, published images from these later wars reflected a sanitized account of what occurred.\textsuperscript{104} Beginning with WWII, Americans perceived themselves and the world through the mass publication of magazines such as \textit{Time} and \textit{LIFE}, which forced a confrontation with war imagery.\textsuperscript{105} Along with the technology to print photography directly in publications, documentary aesthetics developed to depict movement and action with the evolution of shutter speeds. With this ability to capture movement, war photography established two realms: the journalistic, depicting beautiful compositions of “decisive moments” from battle; and the “concerned,” which show action-packed courageous moments from war.\textsuperscript{106} Even though photographs may function as seemingly accurate documentary evidence, John Taylor reminds us that the creation of a photograph “. . . always involves some subjective choice through selection, framing, and personalization.” Social and aesthetic practices still fuel the creative choices of the photographer. Therefore, while the mechanics and objectivity of photography often is stressed (especially in war photography), the viewers must remind themselves of the cultural and social conventions that determine a subject’s appropriateness, as well as the photographers, editors, and the viewers’ own emphasis on certain controversies.\textsuperscript{107}

\textsuperscript{104} Roeder, \textit{The Censored War}, 3.
\textsuperscript{106} Fred Ritchin, “Photo Redux.” \textit{Print} 56, no. 3 (2002): 40-7, 42.
As a result of government censorship the aesthetics of war photography became increasingly thematic. In order to have photographs published in photo essays under such censors, war photographers returned to the increasingly symbolic and universal images of political ideas, positive expressions of military bravery, and sensational depictions of war that appealed to the consumer culture of the 1940s. Such images include the following portrait of U.S. soldiers taken by W. Eugene Smith while embedded with the U.S. military in Asia during WWII.

Figure 9: W. Eugene Smith, Saipan, 1944.

Smith’s use of tight framing and focus on the details of the soldier in the foreground connote the exhaustion and intensity of war for soldiers. This moment of respite while the soldier in the foreground drinks water is tightly cropped to frame the other soldier who stands at the ready directly behind him. The portrait unifies the two different individuals representation into a holistic image that singularly connotes exhaustion, duty, and camaraderie of American soldiers during WWII. The framing also allows only a fraction of the soldiers to be seen and no context is discernible. The symbolism of the
dramatic close up may communicate a concise representation but simultaneously it limits and projects a very small scope of conditions for soldiers.

The censors of WWII and Korea did not completely erase documentary images of wartime atrocities. While graphic imagery was not shown to the public, military photographers documented the horrors and violence of the war. The graphic images from photographers, who accompanied allied troops through the liberation of concentration camps, function as utilitarian evidence. Photography is a tool of evidence for the indexical and historic witnessing of war, however the representations of WWII and the events of the Korean War became heavily limited by government terms of what could be publicly shared. The media depictions of the Vietnam War backlashed against previous institutional censors and instead exposed and constantly publicized casualties, suffering, and violence.\textsuperscript{108}

A discussion of war photography would not be complete without mentioning the variety of visual images that make up this category of photography. It is important to note that war photography is not exclusive to the official images taken by professional photographers and photojournalists. War photography can include portraits, private snapshots, family albums, medical images, and military reconnaissance or aerial photography. All of these images have very different connections to war as well as to varieties of purposes, methods of presentation, and historical authority. I believe the indexical qualities of photography and the technical ease of the camera are to credit for the popularity of the medium’s use in depicting war. The impact and effect that war has

on individuals and entire nations further encourages the incredible diversity of war photography.

Documentary war photographers utilize particular aesthetic qualities to compose a concise and accurate representation of their subject matter. As an established style, documentary photography has several sub categories, including social documentary and photojournalism, whose photographic intentions and social applications often are conflated or misinterpreted to represent documentary photography as a whole. This is due to the complicated issue raised by Douglas Crimp when examining photographs for their aesthetic qualities, while not accounting for the photographs’ simple ability to convey certain information or evidence about a subject.¹⁰⁹ According to the Center of Photography’s Encyclopedia of Photography, “When, for cultural or imitative reasons, many individuals adopt the same approach, a style of a given period or genre can be identified. . . Style is the aspect of expression that links a group of pictures.”¹¹⁰ Spectators often are unaware of their constructed style of documentary photographs. Photographers replicate particular aesthetic choices in focus, lighting, depth of field, or composition that are representative of documentary style. It is such choices that frame the particular meanings that are communicated about a photographic subject. In Allan Sekula’s essay “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” he describes “photographic discourse” as “an arena of information exchange.” However, he notes that while


photography may be self-evident and direct, the very realism represented by the photograph is constructed to provide a message or “an embodiment of an argument.” Sekula concludes that such photographs must be interrogated because regardless of how natural the photographic subject may appear, the photographer’s style and the later contextualization of the photograph as an object spins a particular reading by spectators. As mentioned above, the seemingly objective style of social documentary photographers is influenced by particular personal and commercial motives. Similarly, photojournalists’ photographic styles are under the influences of third parties, including the editorial control of publications, media outlets, as well as government-enforced censorship. Photographic intention implies particular functions for documentary photographs. However, it is the examination of both style and the presented evidence of a photographic subject that must be analyzed to understand a photograph’s meaning. For example, in photographs that replicate qualities of a documentary aesthetic, the subjects are preserved as photographic souvenirs. Photographers rely on a photograph’s physicality as an object to convey their accomplishment as witnesses to or participants in the represented subject.

As a genre, documentary photography presents a multitude of images that construct the public’s mediated perception of the world and historic events. The ability

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112 Ibid., 470-73.
to witness the world and environments through photography influences individuals’ personal tastes and ethics, or other’s impressions of them. While it is not generally accepted any longer that photographs provide transparent representations of reality, the most prevalent perspective is that the camera is understood to be an objective recording instrument. Sontag points out that the public’s obsession to photograph the world is a form of aesthetic consumerism.\textsuperscript{115} It is through the framework of documentary-styled representations that snapshot photographers attempt to enhance reality and confirm experience. Photographers function as voyeurs of their own experiences, documenting the passing of time and the events and relationships that fill their lives. As photographic prints, the immediacy of reality is exchanged for a form of representation that can outlast a photographer’s own physicality.\textsuperscript{116} The photograph is also a mnemonic aid, a tool to help individuals reflect upon the past. The range of a camera’s lenses allows documentary photographers to compose wide shots, framing the large scope of a scene. The freedom of the documentary photographer to be alongside troops or embedded within the military creates opportunities for photographic compositions and strategic angles that can convey a scene from the perspective of individual or an entire group. Documentary styling is often reliant on content and the culturally ingrained practice to create a utilitarian visual object. The photographers aim to represent a swath of information or convey a particular impression of a scene that occurs before their eyes. Stylistic qualities such as angle, composition, and framing aid documentary photographers in creating imagery that connotes a breadth of detail, or strategically execute particular culturally defined motives on part of the photographer or whom they

\textsuperscript{115} Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave,” 8-12.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 11.
are employed by. However, most critical is the selection of content and the ability of a documentary photographer to recognize the potency of their subject matter, what it can be seen to represent beyond the literal evidence and how the photographer’s stylistic approach can aid a particular emotion or remembering of the moment. Documentary photography specifically, given its stylistic tendencies to convey narrative and intense realism, becomes a defining representation of “historical awareness.”¹¹⁷ It is the photograph’s representation of the past that allows viewers to invest emotion and nostalgia upon the photograph as an object. Therefore, photographs become the “principal devices in experiencing something,” because as an indexical medium, photography precisely lends itself to documenting.¹¹⁸

The “empirical validity” and the simultaneous “metonymic representation” conveyed through the aesthetics of documentary war photographs are exemplified in the following works by Nick Ut, Larry Burrows, and Philip Jones Griffith.¹¹⁹ Over the course of their time in Vietnam, these photographers worked either on assignment for press agencies such as Magnum or The Associated Press, independently, or embedded within American troops documenting the war for publications such as Time or LIFE magazines.¹²⁰ When documenting the war in Vietnam, photographers worked on thematic features for publications, such as Burrows’ popular story “One Ride with Yankee Papa 13” printed in the April 1965 issue of LIFE magazine, or on more general assignments photographing the everyday duties of American soldiers. Across these examples of documentary works, the photographers implement distinct aesthetic choices

that are common to documentary war photography including shooting from strategic angles, compositions that frame a vision of scene from the unique perspective of a participant and not an observer, and the constant capturing of imagery throughout the course of an event for images that can holistically represent a breadth of information and often a strategic impression of that event. Photographers’ preoccupations with conveying drama, realism, symbolism, and narrative incite their use of distinct formal approaches when photographing. These documentary representations of realism, symbolism, drama, and narrative are not always independent of one another; often they are presented in tandem to create a more dynamic and expressive photographic image.\textsuperscript{121} Certain techniques such as wide-angle lenses or the photographer’s physical distance from subject matter, the use of flash or strategic lighting to clearly present details, dramatic close ups, bold compositions, and juxtapositions of opposing elements are aesthetic qualities that can be used to communicate these documentary representations of war.

Photographs that present trauma, violence, or atrocity function as narrative analogs to the unphotographed course of military action in Vietnam. As seen in \textit{Napalm Attack on Trang Bang Village} (Fig. 10, page 55), a young naked girl who has been burned by napalm dramatically flees, along with other children and soldiers, from the devastated village in the distance.

Figure 10: Nick Ut, *Napalm Attack on Trang Bang Village*. 1969. AP photograph.

Today the photograph is regarded as a photographic icon, symbolic of the horrors of the Vietnam War and an influential image on the American public’s perception of the war. The photograph silently conveys the chaos and the blind destruction of innocent lives. In the distance, the dark clouds of smoke explode over the barely visible remains of a village. Soldiers and other children escape stunned and terrified in the general direction of the photographer and away from the explosion behind them. Of note are the calm, ambiguous expressions of the soldiers in comparison to the silent screams emitted from the young boy and naked girl. The photograph implies that Ut turns around to capture the image as he too flees the fiery napalm alongside the group. The impulsive documentation of their flight preserves the juxtaposition of the soldiers’ vacant

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expressions to the napalm attack and the emotional and painful wails of the confused and frightened children. The children’s expressions of shock and fear contrasted to the soldiers’ lack of emotion convey an image of the victimhood of innocent children during war. Ut successfully upholds his duties as documentary observer and as an eyewitness to what goes on around him. He turns around possibly to judge the groups distance from the napalm, the conditions of the children, or even simply just to photograph the bombing. Regardless of his unknown motivations, the documentary photograph that Ut captures at this moment successfully frames a vast scene of destruction including the symbolic innocence of the fleeing children and a representation of how uncontrolled and non-discriminating the effects of war truly are.

The symbolic power of documentary photography exemplifies the ethics of a particular subject or it can communicate the subject’s perceived immorality or a photographer’s personal disdain for a photographic subject or broader topics related to it. Some examples of symbolism frequently exhibited in documentary photography are tied to nationalism and a belief in the dignity of humanity. Such representations are constructed by photographers or instructed by editors to appeal to particular emotional, social, and cultural expectations of spectators, or more broadly, photographically communicates “mnemonic materials for democratic identity, thought, and action.”123 In *ARVN Soldier threatening Vietcong Suspect with Bayonet* (Fig. 11, page 57), Larry Burrows presents an image of the humanity of a soldier’s enemy and sacrifice.

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123 Hariman and Lucaites, “Photographing the Vietnam War,” 201.
Figure 11: Larry Burrows, *ARVN Soldier threatening Vietcong Suspect with Bayonet*. 1963. *LIFE* magazine photograph.

Burrows’ positions himself and his camera at an angle above the begging prisoner and directly to the side of the threatening ARVN soldier. This angle and focus on the literal threat to the suspect bring a viewer’s attention to the captive’s seemingly small stature, his emotional pleading, and his victimization. Burrows conveys a moment of sacrifice and suspense as he photographs the intense exchange in which the Vietnamese suspect’s life is subjected to the violent intentions of the ARVN soldier. The camera’s documentation of the confrontation, at what could be the exact moment before the soldier strikes, along with the parted lips of the suspect as he looks upward and attempts to speak, dramatizes for spectators the violence occurring in Vietnam. The photograph’s timely composition places a viewer of the image directly alongside the threatening soldier. It is precisely the intense realism and drama communicated by these aesthetic choices in composition and camera angle, which produce a documentary representation of the threat and more literally, confirms the reality of wartime violence.

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103 ARVN stands for the “Army of the Republic of Viet Nam.”
In Chapter 3, I discuss specific examples from the NVAM archive that exhibit such qualities of form and composition. Soldier-photographers rely on these formal qualities to display a similar enhancing of reality and documenting of wartime experiences. While hired war photographers have the freedom to produce photographs that are not premeditated, they are often appealing to their, or to their editor’s, desired vision of the war. These outside influence seek to conform the war photographer’s imagery for appropriately communicating particular political or cultural impressions of the war to the public back home in the United States. Soldier-photographers are appealing to their private motivations and culturally raised instincts on how to represent their vision of war. Soldier-photographers’ personal snapshots rely on the details of their experience in Vietnam and seek to communicate their own way of seeing. This way of seeing can involve an embrace of cultural representations or a denial of them. Most critical, however, is the soldier-photographers’ duty to their own expectations of war and to creating photographic representations that display their identity, thoughts, and actions during their time in Vietnam.

Untitled (Fig., 12, page 59), taken in 1968 by Magnum photographer Philip Jones Griffith, depicts the body of a young Vietnamese boy killed by U.S. helicopter gunfire while on his way to church.¹²⁴

Surrounding the body in an arc are several other children and a few adults who are witnesses to the corpse. The public that surrounds the perimeter of the scene are emotionless, standing calmly looking at the boy’s corpse in the foreground. Sunlight illuminates the boy’s face and highlights the contrast of the blood with the sandy dirt and the spattering of blood across his body. By composing the scene with the body in the foreground and the physical distance of the surrounding audience staring at it, the body is presented to a viewer and situates him in a similar position to the depicted audience, removed and silently staring down at the corpse.

The overwhelming presence of an observant public, the exposure of the slain child, and the missing presence of someone to visibly mourn the boy’s death convey the randomness and the unjustified slaughtering of an innocent. As a death scene, the body of the child and the silence of the public around him are photographically preserved as journalistic subject matter to inform people of the shocking effect of random killings and
the victimization of children during the war. The stunned silence of the surrounding public metonymically represents the public’s inability to properly react to the dead boy as well as a spectator’s subsequent lack of any opportunity to provide aid. The photograph conveys a mood of stunned detachment and evidence of the public’s lack of emotional response to violence. The depiction of the corpse provides a documentary object that has the potential to transform the loss of the boy into a symbol for political and spiritual community. Griffith’s framing of the scene, capturing the stares of the surrounding crowds and the vacant expressions of the onlookers, presents a particular impression of war violence. As a document the image relies on the reality of current environments, events, and happenings that the photographer is witness to.

Soldier-photographers’ works replicate the spontaneity and evidentiary qualities of photographs such as Figure 12 (see page 59). The desire to visually preserve the intensity of a moment or the shock of an experience for the soldier-photographer parallels the documentary war photographer’s reaction to photographing poignant moments to evoke the emotions of the photographed moment in post-memory reflections. Photographs provide a physical object that allows the unpredictable nature of reality to determine documentary photographic content. However, as documentary photographers are employed as witnesses to the realities of war they arrive at the creation of their photographs with full knowledge that their images will function beyond just basic evidence. The utilitarian purpose of war photographs in this regard gives way to the powerful symbolism and metonymic function that such photographs hold for the public’s understanding of war. While documentary photographers appeal to the emotions of a

universal audience, soldier-photographers’ works are unique in that even the most banal or boring photographs from their personal snapshot collections can summon intense emotions and appeal to even their most intimate memories of Vietnam. The phenomenon of banal private snapshots have little importance for secondary spectators, however it is the function of such images amongst a collection of snapshots produce symbolic meaning or metonymic value for the snapshooters.

The final image I will discuss as an exemplary documentary photograph is from the *LIFE* magazine photo essay, “One Ride with Yankee Papa 13,” by photographer Larry Burrows. Arriving in Vietnam in 1962, Burrows spent time embedded with U.S. troops photographing day-to-day goings on and military action. In March 1965, Burrows accompanied the men assigned to helicopter YP13, known as Yankee Papa 13. This particular photograph is taken from the interior of the helicopter.\footnote{Time LIFE website, accessed on 7 July 2012, http://life.time.com/history/vietnam-war-one-ride-with-yankee-papa-13/#1.}  

![Figure 13: Larry Burrows, *The view from inside Marine helicopter Yankee Papa 13*. Vietnam, March 1965. *LIFE* magazine photograph.](image-url)
Focusing his camera’s lens across a field of heavy grass, Burrows documents the soldiers as they disperse from the helicopter to join other teams in the distance. The composition of the photograph provokes spectator participation, as it places a viewer in the position of one of the soldiers embarking from the helicopter. The soldier in the immediate center departs from the open door, loaded with supplies. The men in the distance, who have made their way further from the helicopter, wear flak jackets while carrying guns and heavy rucksacks. The narrative of the soldier’s experience is conveyed by the photograph’s comprehensive documentation of the course of action taken by the soldiers: landing, preparation at the helicopter door, exiting the door, and proceeding toward other soldiers on the ground. For a viewer of this photograph, the dynamic composition brings to life the soldiers’ departure and conveys the anticipation of the departing soldier in this very moment. The anonymous shadows of the soldiers and the centered presence of the soldier mid-exit symbolize the potential departures of several soldiers from helicopters in Vietnam. The narrative element, along with the photographer’s framing of the image from the perspective of a disembarking soldier portrays intense realism and lends itself to the documentary aesthetic achieved in Burrows’ *The view from inside Marine helicopter Yankee Papa 13*.

Documentary photographs, as the past four examples illustrate, have the power to serve as evidentiary representations that transform the individuality of a photographic subject into iconic imagery. Photographs enhance reality, illustrating the specific environment, experiences, people, and events that are contextually important to the photographer. In the private collections of soldier-photographers, documentary snapshots represent a crucial circumstantial context for the private memories of the photographer-
witness. The conveyance of intense realism, narrative, and drama through the photographer’s aesthetic choices materialize memory and serve as a locus for an individual’s return to the past. These particular codes of documentary photography and their cultural prevalence inform the way soldier-photographers style their snapshots. As seen in the previous discussion of exemplary documentary photographs from the Vietnam War, it is culturally established that by implementing documentary aesthetics, photographers are able to communicate with a larger spectatorship evidence of a seemingly objective witnessing to moments of historical, cultural, or social importance.

Ingrained with cultural expectations regarding war and arriving to hostile conditions in Vietnam, American soldiers negotiated their service in Vietnam (including traumatic situations and foreign experiences) through the creations of personal snapshot collections. While in Vietnam, a soldier’s desire to create wartime snaps was reliant upon the same pre-war cultural and social motivations, including the naturalized habit of snapshotting and the popularity of snapshot cameras as autobiographical devices. Snapshooting allowed soldiers to document their unique experiences while fulfilling their new duties amidst the violence of the war. Franny Nudelman discusses the recent amount of scholarship on the topic of “Violence Studies” has established an understanding that violence is a cultural action that produces “a profound sense of belonging,” that brings an individual into a deeper experience and relation to a community. She asserts that aggression “...is the condition of national belonging” and that through ones’ experience of violence one also endures a personal narrative,

127 Barbie Zelizer states that memory “depends for its existence on the social codes that prevail in a group, a time, or a place.” Through a common cultural form, memory is able to gain meaning. Documentary photographs as a vehicle for memory allow a photographer to represent their witness of time. See Barbie Zelizer, Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera’s Eye (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 4.

which includes “. . . the devastating consequences of combat--the ruin of the body, mind, and spirit.” In the course of a soldier’s snapshot autobiography, they produce photographs of traumatic and violent experiences that pepper the larger tableau of their personal war narratives. In Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites’ analysis of iconic media photographs taken during the Vietnam War, they assert that trauma is “a moment of fragmentation, confusion and terror, [which] elicits narratives of restoration” to illustrate a subject’s desire to return to normalcy or safety.\textsuperscript{129} Through the use of personal cameras to document not only the positive imagery of one’s military relationships and achievements, echoing back to the culturally and socially accepted conventions of snapshot photography, the photographs taken with the same cameras and often on the same rolls of film depict a vivid documentary narrative of soldiers’ experiences, including the traumatic moments and the banal everyday tasks of their new environment. Soldier-photographers rely on a practice of historic representations that resembles the qualities of the vernacular and documentary to create instinctive, experimental photographic narratives to engage the limits of their traumatic experiences within the larger scope of their personal accounts. LaCapra explains that narration constructs a concise representation and conveys a knowledge of events that plays against the cultural desire to rewrite the past.\textsuperscript{130} Soldier-photographers reference alternative forms of representation when depicting photographic subject matter outside the popular conventions of snapshotting. This allows soldier-photographers to show evidence of their wartime reality without attention to the appropriateness or contrivance of their subject matter to be shown in the best possible light. With photographs from traumatic

\textsuperscript{129} Hariman and Lucaites, “Photographing the Vietnam War,” 205.
\textsuperscript{130} LaCapra, History in Transit, 205-6.
contexts or subject matter emblematic of violent moments, the photographer’s certified witness to the subject and evidence of an experience is doubled. This allows a soldier-photographer to register the experience emotionally and cognitively. The use of a personal camera to actively narrate one’s individual war experiences suggests that soldiers’ snapshots display both the intimate connections suggested by snapshot photography and the objective representation of their lived experiences during war through a documentary rhetoric. The foreign context and the desire to communicate achievement compel the soldier-photographers’ focus on particular subject matter emblematic of the affective impact and physical routine of war upon them. The Vietnam War’s overwhelming sense of a lack of order and the accompanying emotional tone of “absurdity and moral inversion” constructed an environment in which soldiers negotiated their comprehension and sentiments toward the war within the greater collective military responsibility in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{131} The camera as a personal commodity would provide soldiers with a tool to authenticate their experiences through a natural photographic reinterpretation of the events, relationships, and landscapes that construct their distinct Vietnam War histories.\textsuperscript{132}

\textsuperscript{131} Lifton, \textit{Home from the War}, 37-8.
\textsuperscript{132} Callister, \textit{The Face of War}, 3-5.
CHAPTER THREE: AMERICAN SOLDIERS’ SNAPSHOTS FROM THE VIETNAM WAR

I began my research of soldiers’ personal snapshots in the collection of the NVAM in December 2009. The museum, established in 1988, has become a repository for veterans to donate their collections of personal photographs. During the course of my research I pored through files and the occasional boxes of miscellaneous snapshots and photographed 100 of them with my personal digital camera. While examining the imagery, I recognized a trend in content and photographic style occurring across the sampling. Through my close observation of these photographs, I selected the following works as representative of the most predominant subject matter depicted in the collections’ snapshots taken by soldier-photographers. These photographs present imagery that exemplifies soldier-photographers’ reinterpretation of the cultural and social act of snapshot photography during the Vietnam War as exhibited by the alternative forms of representation employed when photographing particular subject matter.  

The photographs include a large amount of conventional snapshot subjects that characterize the activity’s grounding in the social motivation to identify oneself as part of a community. Their new military community and collective deployment to Vietnam serves as a new culture or social group for the soldiers to identify with. Soldiers exchange snapshots documenting pastimes or life achievements, such as family gatherings or graduations, for images of military accomplishments or moments of downtime and respite with fellow military members instead of with childhood friends and family. Soldiers arrived in Vietnam accustomed to the intimate and subjective style of

133 This is not to say that irregularities from my determinations of general content do not exist, but from my thorough research and time examining the NVAM archive I determined that the content of the following snapshots accurately represent the most common types of subject matter.
snapshot photography, where the subject matter often is framed or composed to convey an idealized form as well as to preserve the memory of an event or relationship. An exchange of agency and direction between photographers’ and their subjects aims to construct seemingly natural snapshots that connote themes such as friendships, military associations, or impressions of events or achievements that express success. These qualities of snapshooting are so familiar that even in a foreign context and new community, soldiers continue to emulate the typical compositions of snapshot photography when photographing military associates (see Fig., 14, below, Fig., 15, page 68 as well as Christmas Party, LZ Center, Fig., 4, page 19).

Figure 14: Unknown photographer, *Untitled*, National Veterans Art Museum Archive.
However, there are also personal photographs in the NVAM archive that emphasize a more distanced, impersonal documentary style to depict military activity, emotional trauma, and the violence one witnessed or carried out while fighting in the war. As seen in *Untitled* (Fig., 16, page 69), the soldier-photographer frames the unsuspecting subjects without their engagement and from a physically removed position. This communicates documentary objectivity and the myth that the soldier-photographer operates as a detached voyeur of his own reality.
The photographer does not alert the soldiers to his snapshot making in order to eliminate interactions and to better convey a realistic depiction of the natural moments of downtime while on patrol. The photograph, as a result of this unengaging exchange, yields an image of an emotionally vacant moment experienced by the soldier-photographer. The soldier-photographers’ reliance on certain forms of representation (the engaging interactions of snapshooting and the voyeuristic observing of a documentary photo) implies their cultural awareness of the interpretations associated with such frameworks.

The soldiers’ snapshot photographs convey their individual military experiences serving in Vietnam into a concise, visual format that reinterprets the cultural and social conventions of snapshooting. The integration and connection among family members that provokes photographers to make snapshots at home in the United States parallels the connection and assimilation of American soldiers into their military family. The soldier-
photographers, who serve side by side forming friendships and familiarities within their military community, supplant the familial function of photography with their desire to locate themselves within their new collective of military peers. The ritual of documenting familial cohesion can express intimate connections beyond the biological connections of a family. For soldiers in Vietnam, the military associates with whom they formed close bonds through their new sense of military community supplanted the family function and the social value of projecting familial togetherness.\textsuperscript{134}

As a material object, the snapshot photograph provides a way to express one’s desire to return to a particular experience or person.\textsuperscript{135} Therefore, the people or events documented in snapshot photographs are generally positive and represent an ideal rather than a reality. The “ideal” photographic memorialization of a subject in a culturally acceptable fashion depicts them with signs of success, achievement, or power so that when the photographs are later reflected upon as visual artifacts they evoke positive memories. Photographic albums, such as the one seen in Figure 17 (see page 71), are an example of a popular and socially accepted form to display one’s achievements.

\textsuperscript{134} Hirsch, \textit{Family Frames}, 7.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 9.
Figure 17: An example of a commemorative war album, National Veterans Art Museum Archive.

The cultural tradition of organizing a set of snapshots into a concise narrative set, such as an album, allows photographers to share a controlled and personalized set of photographic works to convey visual narrative and a unified expression of an experience or time period. The soldier-photographers’ replication of the “ideal” form in which to represent photographic subjects expresses their own cultural and social conformity to the dominant ideology. As seen previously in Untitled (Fig., 14, page 67), a specific etiquette for posing by positioning the body and/or face frontally, smiling, and placing one’s arms in a certain way help achieve the “ideal” presentation of a subject.136 A soldier, possibly the owner of the camera or a soldier associated with the soldier-photographer, poses atop a military vehicle with one of his arms placed on the gun in front of him. This placement of his arms identifies the soldier as either in charge of the weapon or familiar with the use of a machine gun of such magnitude. The smiling

136 Bourdieu, Photography, a Middle-Brow Art, 2.
acknowledgement of the soldier atop the vehicle, his physical positioning, and direct awareness of the photographer and the camera’s presence constructs an aura of performativity. The subject performs confident knowledge of the gun by placing his hand on the trigger and conveys his masculine heroics by bearing his arms and wearing no protective gear. The soldier-photographer’s exchange of agency with his subject intends to preserve not only his relationship between the soldier and himself but also his connection to the weapon, which includes the associated power to defend oneself and the special access to such artillery. The casual dress of the subject in a tank top with his arms exposed and the relaxed posture of his body imply that he is not at risk or in action. The washed-out background behind the military vehicle and the focus of the camera on the lone soldier and weapon provides no information regarding the environment of the photographer and subject, simply just the visual evidence of the subject and the inferred connections with the gun. These elements provide little to no information regarding the purpose and capabilities of the weapon, or the soldier’s literal knowledge of how to use the weapon. Instead, the soldier poses with the weapon as a spectacle of association, exhibiting soldierly confidence and heroic masculinity for his desired photographic representation of himself. This projection of a military “ideal” and a dialogic relationship between the performing subject of the snapshot and the soldier-photographer exemplifies shared agency between both parties and a desire for both photographer and subject to be associated with the socially and culturally valued qualities attributed to soldiers. The exchange of directions between a photographer and subject, as well as the subject’s knowledge of photographic etiquette, and the physical posturing achieved in snapshots
communicates a common code of cultural representation and understanding between both parties.

The exchange of agency during a snapshot’s creation allows only the photographer and subject to intimately return to the event of the photograph’s creation and engage nostalgic details related to the photograph’s contents. This exchange also yields a possibility for spectators to fantasize and impress their own assumptions regarding the photographic subjects and the relationship to the snapshooter. Therefore, as soldier-photographers compose their photographs inline with popular standards of snapshotting they express positive memory that often represents an ideal rather than a reality. This action, carried out unconsciously at times, brings out circumstances and details of events that culturally inform interpretations. As seen in Christmas Party, LZ Center (Fig., 4, page 19) and Captured VC Flag Bravo co. (Fig., 15, page 68), the photographic subjects also follow an etiquette for posing by positioning the body and/or face frontally and placing one’s arms casually at one’s sides or in a relaxed fashion in one’s pockets, all of which help to achieve an image of the cultural ideal in the snapshot photograph. 137 This controlled composition, directed at the bequest of the photographer or initiated independently by the subject, can be interpreted as an organized spectacle of the event. 138 The soldier-photographers, ingrained with the practice of posing, replicate a controlled impression of their experience, relationships, and achievements during the war. The snapshotting soldiers’ reproduction of cultural standards and mediated signs conveys success and power by composing themselves and the subjects of their photographs according to this prevailing ideology. The subtle and unconscious ways in

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137 Ibid.
which snapshots from soldiers replicate particular symbolic representations of their lives become interwoven to construct a certain pattern or view of what has been established as appropriate, right, or normal. The NVAM’s snapshots express the redundancy of snapshot imagery and the patterned use of certain participants, settings, or topics that align with cultural values of the time.\textsuperscript{139}

\textit{Christmas Party, LZ Center} (Fig., 4, page 19) displays the intimate and subjective style of snapshot photography where the subject matter often is framed or composed to convey an idealized form and to preserve the memory of an event or relationship. The photograph depicts a closely cropped snapshot of a group of soldiers in which the back row of soldiers crowd together to make it into the frame. Ingrained within such representations of soldiers are again both the photographer and subjects’ hopeful fulfillments of the familial gaze. The familial gaze has a determining influence that can be interpreted as the trace of a social integration, upholding of social protocol, or the accepted model of behavior. By recreating such qualities in personal snapshots, it reveals both the photographer’s and the photographic subjects’ emulation, or, alternatively, their refusal of the culturally established ideal if the subjects choose to pose in a manner opposite the typically positive and ideal standards of snapshots (i.e., frowns, closed eyes, turning the face away from the camera). This “gaze” imposes an ideology of the family and defines the family in both literal representation and interpretation.\textsuperscript{140} While our individuality is contrived in snapshooting’s autobiographical tendencies, the camera and

\textsuperscript{139} Chalfen, \textit{Snapshot Versions of Life}, 98.
\textsuperscript{140} Hirsch, \textit{Family Frames}, 7.
the production of photograph collections or albums are the instruments of the gaze that precisely integrate and reassert individuals within an ideology.141

The desire to construct a vision of one’s history has been established by the nostalgic trope of photography’s detailed representations of the past. Albums, made up from the same roll of film or multiple rolls, inscribe photographs into secondary narratives. No clear sequencing, besides the numerical ordering of photographic negatives, controls the heterogeneity of subject matter and the types of images that could be produced by soldier-photographers. Soldier-photographers’ imagery could show documentary scenes of smiling camaraderie or a war torn landscape while the next photograph to be made could be show a wounded soldier or an enemy corpse. Album creators construct a unified narrative based on subjective organization of snapshots based on time, subjects, or groupings of photographs based on the intimate designs of the album creator.142

Soldier-photographers’ snapshots exhibit their creative “... responsiveness to the ideological pressures” of a secure, powerful, and successful version of the American soldier, which was formed through the military archetype of heroic American veterans of WWI and WWII.143 The quantity of photographs depicting relationships and positive representations of soldiers, exuding the model of military strength and pride, represent soldier-photographers’ assimilation into their new military role and their position within their new familial establishment.

141 Ibid., 11.
143 Ibid., 10.
For veterans returning from war, snapshots occupied a variety of material functions. Often, the photographs would be placed in albums, not only for organization but also for illustrating a creative representation of the passage of a soldier’s time spent in Vietnam. American soldiers could purchase cameras and albums from U.S. military supply catalogs or in Vietnamese cities where they spent down time (Fig., 17, page 71). The album, titled “Memory of South Viet-Nam,” depicts a picture of a riverboat and a rough outline of Vietnam with particular cities noted. The popular act of organizing photographs outside of their manufactured, sequential film ordering allows a subjective reordering of events by the photographer or the recipient of the snapshots. Marianne Hirsch argues that photographers have a self-reflexive desire to be both subject and object. Soldiers’ production of snapshots to illustrate their war experience and the occasional assembly of personal albums exemplifies their position as independent and creative authors. Without numerically ordered photographs or negatives, one cannot determine whether a photographer chose to possibly conceal or reveal particular details about themselves and their experience in Vietnam. As an archive, the NVAM snapshots illustrate a diverse narrative of war experience dominated by a contrast in conventional snapshot representation of friends and associates with the documenting imagery of the everyday goings-on and most vividly, the horrific atrocities experienced by soldiers.

Examples of the contents in an American soldier’s personal album are seen in

*Album Pages from Anonymous Veteran* (Fig., 18, page 77) and *Album Pages from*

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144 Photographs within the context of an album are testimony in a narrative form that can be relayed to a spectator by an individual connected to the photographic content (Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 40).
146 Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 47.
Anonymous Veteran (Fig., 19, page 78). In Figure 18, two pages show a set of photographs organized by subject. The multiple photographs of a Vietnamese woman posing on the left page and a soldier on the right page show the photographer’s desire to achieve what he believes to be a good, or aesthetically pleasing, photograph.

![Image of photographs from Anonymous Veteran album]

Figure 18: Unknown Photographer, Album Pages from Anonymous Veteran, National Veterans Art Museum Archive.

Each photograph frames the same subject in a different manner, illustrating the photographer’s intention to take a variety of shots so that they can pick one that they prefer more or deem to be a more pleasing representation. It is clear that through soldier-photographers’ subjective choices in framing and composing multiple photographs of the same subject, they attempt to replicate particular social and cultural conventions in a way to best make snapshots.

In the albums archived in the NVAM collection, some organize imagery that presents a positive vision of soldier-photographers’ surroundings, comrades, and environments in the field or on base. The photographs in Figure 19 (page 78) depict a
soldier-photographer posed similarly with three different individuals. In each of the three images, the pairs pose facing the camera and smiling. The fourth image, in the upper left of the figure, depicts two military vehicles and a group of soldiers walking away from the photographer.

Figure 19: Unknown Photographer, *Album Pages from Anonymous Veteran*, National Veterans Art Museum Archive.

This documentary image provides a visual record of the implied association of the soldier-photographer with the activity of the men and military vehicles. Additionally, the context provided by the documentary photograph of military vehicles with a rural background promotes a reinterpretation of the experience of the men in the surrounding snapshots. The presence of this nondescript photograph of military activity in the context of snapshot-style photographs allows for a cross association and narrative to occur among the photos. A post memory is the ability to reinterpret one’s experience of the past by recontextualizing the subjects of photographs with the evidence represented and in the
surrounding album pages. The conventions of snapshooting often enforce this function, but also snapshotters tend to avoid representation of subject matter that holds painful memories for the photographer. Therefore, through the use of photographs one can reconstruct their individual histories into narratives “. . . of ‘timeless,’ pleasure and affection, thus striving to secure a future that will remain untouched by pain as it looks back on what seem to be moments that somehow escaped sorrow and loss.” The snapshot, which displays a banal landscape of military vehicles, functions as context for the portraits of the soldiers’ implied friendships or common bonds. Hypothetical narratives can be implied from this association. The individuals depicted may have worked in a shared space or office, and the vehicles may be a relevant feature of their location, environment, military duties, or simply a common method of transportation in Vietnam. The unremarkable qualities of the landscape simply associate a detail of the soldier-photographer’s environment with the represented individuals. Sontag notes that while photographs compound reality by making it manageable, they also open up the invitation to speculate and question reality. Patricia Holland argues that a social and culturally established function of snapshot photography is for the photographer’s personal insurance that they “. . . will project the appropriate emotions into the future.” The photographic image also plays an intimate role in recalling history, and it is through re-enactment or narrative that memory takes place so as to promote closure and healing.

A spectator of soldier-photographers’ snapshots from Vietnam would typically be close

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148 West, Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia, 143.
151 Sturken, Tangled Memories, 24.
associates, friends, or family chosen by the photographer to see the images. As a result, such spectators observe both history and memory due to the intimate narrative exemplified in the combination of conventional snapshots with documentary-styled snapshots. In the case of the photographs archived at the NVAM, the public, museum employees, and researchers observe a revealing, voyeuristic opportunity to see the personal photographic collections without any association with the photographers. The aesthetics of snapshooting provide spectators with a false sense of intimacy with soldier-photographers themselves. This access to such private histories and intimate visual memories, not originally intended for public viewing, allows new contextual meanings to develop.

Hegemonic representations of war perpetuated by the documentary aesthetic identified across historic examples of war photography, as seen in chapter 2, inform the style of soldier-photographers’ snapshots. Photographers’ employment of particular aesthetic choices in framing, composition, and subject matter contribute to representations of war that universally appeal to public’s desires while attempting to achieve an unbiased impression of events. The struggle of wartime photographers lies in the subjectivity of the photographic act and that complete documentary objectivity cannot be achieved. The cultural and social conventions insure the hegemonic representations of expansive battlefield landscapes, iconic imagery of innocent victims, as well as symbolic imagery of military heroism. John Westwall remarks: “War stories of death or loss are depicted in a redemptive narrative arc,” which the media interprets in the form of a revisionist discourse and describes war from the perspectives of love, forgiveness, and
Representations of war, including personal snapshots, revise and “. . . can be adapted to the grain of hegemonic views of the historical event under description.” Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, notes that this type of reproduction creates “. . . substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts, feelings.” In her book, Sontag further examines the manner in which such prevailing ideologies influence images of trauma and violence and that photographs’ contexts control their meanings. For the news industry, images of trauma and violence satiate a desire for sensational imagery. As a result of the public’s familiarity with graphic images of war and atrocity, the desire for sensational imagery expands beyond the media, and thus soldiers’ own snapshots begin to replicate the popular types of war representations they have seen in the media. Among the broader compilation of American soldiers’ intimate snapshots are documentary-style photographs of their narrative progress that include graphic or violent subject matter. As a result, the documentary works establish an experiential context for the soldiers’ more intimate and personal snapshots. Soldier-photographers, raised with the activity of snapshooting, represent their unique experiences of war and the shocking realities they witness by continuing to photograph everything from typical moments at camp to military activity and traumatic experiences. During this process they alter their forms of photographic representation based on the subject matter’s inability to fit the conventions and styling of traditional snapshots. These photographs and the inappropriateness of their creation convey the chaos, confusion, and disruption of traditional snapshooting culture.

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153 Ibid., 419.

For soldier-photographers, however, snapshooting is such a naturalized part of experiencing reality that to not take photographs seems unnatural.¹⁵⁵

*Untitled* (Fig., 16, page 69) is a photograph that presents common documentary subject matter portrayed throughout the photographic archive of the NVAM. We see a group of seven soldiers seated upon grass in a rural setting with no buildings or structures indicating they might be on a military base or in a village. The soldiers, wearing fatigues and flak jackets, are seemingly relaxed and casually seated. None appear to be at the ready with their weapons or alert to activity surrounding them. In the foreground of the image, we see the back of a soldier’s helmet as he casually rests with his arm stretching behind to support his head. Contrary to other snapshots, such as *Christmas Party, LZ Center* (Fig., 4, page 19), *Captured VC Flag Bravo co.* (Fig., 15, page 68), or the depiction of the soldier posed with a machine gun in *Untitled* (Fig., 14, page 67), the soldiers in Figure 16 do not face the camera, nor do they acknowledge it in their looks or display a hint of a smile directed at the photographer. The choice of the photographer to not request the attention of the photographic subjects denies the idealistic poses of traditional snapshot imagery. Instead, the photographer operates as a voyeur to capture this moment as a natural, realistic depiction of the group at rest. The photograph represents the soldier-photographers access to the group or his connections with them. This photograph of the surroundings and the military comrades may appear as boring and not particularly informative, but it differs greatly from other imagery that represents performative and ideally behaving subject matter appropriate with the conventional subjects and stylistic representations of snapshot photography. Soldier-photographers readily document even the most banal aspects of their own wartime experiences due to

their presence in a foreign environment and new situations. The soldier-photographer’s making of an image in this moment of downtime represents the hegemonic representations of pre and post battle imagery that make up the culturally ingrained understanding of comprehensive wartime narratives.

Snapshots that replicate the framing and compositional qualities of documentary photography punctuate the collection’s mass of traditionally intimate and composed snapshot portraits with a poignant communication of new experience and context. As evidenced in the album pages of Figure 18 (page 77), the desire to represent a successful or “good” snapshot is a task often requiring multiple images of the same subject. The documentary, more removed aesthetics of snapshots representing corpses, military downtime, or activity are similarly created. Photographs taken while in the field or of violent and traumatic moments exhibit the soldier-photographers naturalized production of images that do not necessarily capture the best impression but rather an immediate impression of reality, in quick souvenir-like form. When producing such instantaneous photographs, the subjects of such works are objectified and engaged with less than typical snapshot subjects. The photographic subjects become visual representations of a specific moment, a memento of a person, place, or thing that the soldier can then physically possess for the rest of time.156

156 This discussion of documentary photographs often overlaps with other discourses, including colonial and post-colonial representations of the exotic and the Other. Documentary photographs project a utilitarian image of detail and surveillance, emphasizing function rather than expressive qualities of photography. Photographers respond to their initiation and witness to environments and people outside their typical world by perpetuating the ingrained cultural desire to expose foreign, strange, and new experiences via documentation. For further readings that discuss these topics see: Linda Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient,” The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader, eds. Vanessa Schwartz and Jeannene Prybyski (New York: Routledge, 2004), 289-298; Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Simpson, eds. Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place, (New York: Routledge, 2002); and Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture, (New York: Routledge, 1994).
Cultural conventions determine that photographers comprehend and find meaning in immediate lived experiences by the visual narrative exemplified in documentary-stylized photographs. By instinctively replicating qualities of documentary representation, including realism, symbolism, narrative, and drama, the soldier-photographers convey a degree of objective distance from their lived experience. As discussed by Bourdieu, “. . . the description of objectified subjectivity refers to the description of the internalization of objectivity.” In relation to soldier-photographers, the snapshots of their experiences are composed in a documentary style to visually preserve particular subjects around them as a seemingly objective context for their more intimate snapshots. Therefore, the lived experience of a soldier-photographer is comprehended through his documentary photographic acts. In the grand scale of war, soldiers attempt to relocate themselves within the collective military narrative. Soldiers continue to carry out the familiar activity of personal snapshot making, under the guise that they are creating photographs in accordance with traditional snapshot conventions. However, in the context of Vietnam, the shocking and traumatic elements of their wartime reality compel soldier-photographers to operate in alternative forms of representation when attempting to include their impressions of new experiences and disturbing photographic subject matter.

The documentary approach of conveying a photographer’s witness of or relationship to an event often is stylized in a manner that limits the visual distractions surrounding the event through compositions that accentuate subjects’ emblematic qualities. By photographically limiting the visual field so that only particular qualities of the subject are visible, a photographer is able to communicate a breadth of information or

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convey a particular affective response, such as compassion or fear, from a spectator. Composition highlights particular qualities of a subject and raises spectators’ attention to the iconic and universally communicative details of photographic content. In *Sentry* the close composition and focus on the raw details of the skull and helmet convey the photographic subject as symbolic.

![Image of Sentry](image)

Figure 20: Jim McJunkin, *Sentry*, 22 x 28 in., Silver gelatin print, National Veterans Art Museum Archive.

*Sentry* (Fig., 20, above) depicts a human skull perched atop a thin tree stump, wearing a U.S. helmet that implies that the skull belongs to a military serviceman. There is no indication whether the skull belongs to a Vietnamese soldier or an American, but one would assume it could not be the latter given the well-known U.S. protocol of bagging the bodies and remains of U.S. soldiers for burial in the states. Regardless of the skull’s origins, the image clearly lacks the intimate and personal subject matter as previously discussed in the snapshot-style photographs of the archive. The skull is
framed at the image’s center, dark clouds loom behind it, and a ragged landscape of trees and foxholes symbolize ominous danger, ruthlessness, and the death that awaits those who cross this sentry of sorts. Directly behind the skull-sentry is a mass covered with a dark plastic tarp, visually reminiscent of body bags that transport American soldiers’ remains. As a personal record of a place and time in which the soldier-photographer witnessed or possibly constructed this sentry, the documentary style emulated by the photographer symbolically communicates the looming threat of death and the drama of war experienced by American soldiers in Vietnam.

The symbolic power of *Sentry* (Fig., 20, page 85) echoes the emblematic qualities of *Napalm Attack on Trang Bang Village* by Nick Ut (Fig., 10, page 55), *ARVN Soldier threatening Vietcong Suspect with Bayonet* by Larry Burrows (Fig., 11, page 57), and the crowd surrounding a deceased boy in Philip Jones Griffith’s *Untitled* (Fig., 12, page 59). These photographs, as discussed in Chapter 2, replicate similar use of aperture, angle, and compositional qualities to visually communicate information beyond the basic evidence provided by the photographs’ indexical traces of their subjects. These photographers frame dramatic and shocking subject matter in sobering, concise form. Soldier-photographers react to their photographic content due to their exposure to such cultural representations of war. As a result they, too, visually eliminate particular qualities of their subjects through framing, composition, and focus. The photographers’ choices in angle as well as selecting aperture in their photographic set up or choosing to manually focus on a selective detail allows them to manipulate representations. This dramatic and symbolic form represents a distinct vision of the subject matter or brings spectators’ attention to a subject’s particular emotion, reaction, or physical state. Larry Burrows’
composition of *ARVN Soldier threatening Vietcong Suspect with Bayonet* (Fig., 11, page 57) with attention to the small form of the pleading Vietnamese suspect conveys the victimization of and the brutality toward Vietnamese citizens. Burrows positions himself directly aside the begging suspect, framing the scene from an angle above but close enough to see the soldier’s threat with the bayonet. Similarly, *Napalm Attack on Trang Bang Village* (Fig., 10, page 55) shows the naked body of a young girl scorched by napalm that became an international symbol of Vietnam itself and the violence inflicted not only on the Vietnamese but also on their country. The instantaneity of Ut’s capturing of the scene and the sensational moment that he is able to frame amid his own flight from the napalm attack is a testament to his readiness and purpose as a war photographer in Vietnam. Even more broadly reflecting on the iconicity of this image, Hariman and Lucaites note that her nakedness represents a “[. . .] performative embodiment of the modern conception of universal humanity.” Philip Jones Griffith’s isolating composition of the young boy’s corpse captures a symbolic representation of the corpse as an isolated injury but also an object that connotes the public’s shock to such violence (See Fig., 12, page 59). The image represents the innocence and victimization of not just the dead boy but the threat of death to all the young children who gaze upon his body and the reality that for many Vietnamese children there is the possibility of death. When composing a documentary photograph, a photographer instinctively frames a scene that has the potential to express a much larger topic and emblematic knowledge beyond basic evidence. Such photographs can communicate the martyrdom that scathes the seemingly untouchable innocence embodied by children. *Sentry* (Fig., 20, page 85) and other documentary-style images within the NVAM archive convey information beyond the

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158 Hariman and Lucaites, “Photographing the Vietnam War,” 203.
evidence presented by the photographs’ indexical values. By replicating the style of documentary photography to frame and compose images around a central subject or action, these photographs among the collection at the NVAM, contain representative evidence of events and their mnemonic representation related to an individual’s experience of the Vietnam War.

Another quality of documentary form among the soldier-photographers’ works is violent, traumatic subject matter depicted in a concise and intense realistic representation. In particular, images where the faces or identities of individuals depicted are not visible, the photographer’s framing of actions and the event’s details speak loudly for their documentation of their subjects, regardless of their identities. The physical situations or traumatic environment during tense situations of military activity is a critical part of the soldier’s personal narrative. *Untitled* (Fig., 21, page 89) by Dean Sharp depicts a wounded soldier amid a live firefight.
Figure 21: Dean Sharp, *Untitled*, National Veterans Art Museum Archive.

The anonymous soldier is depicted in the foreground, while off to the right the smoke and attention of the other soldiers in the image imply the firing of smoke grenades and gunfire into the surrounding thick blur of jungle foliage. The injured soldier is naked from the waist down; his head and genitals are not visible due to the angle and arrangement of his legs as he lies on his left side across a tarp. The contrast of the downed soldier’s white legs and buttocks with the surroundings confront a viewer’s eyes immediately, guiding attention to his vulnerable injured state. The photographer’s composition places the injured man at center, alluding that the soldier-photographer is possibly the only individual attending to the exposed soldier. The photograph functions as evidence of the injured soldier as the overwhelming attention of the other soldiers is to the military activity on the perimeter. The soldier-photographer, in a tenuous, traumatic situation, snaps his photograph amid the chaos of the firefight that is possibly deterring
aid from arriving to the wounded man. The drama and intense realism depicted by the soldier-photographer’s documentary-style juxtaposition of the injured man’s naked vulnerability and the surrounding dark border of smoke constructs a photograph representative of the disarray and shocking moments of a live firefight.

The intensity of the moment and capturing the vulnerable soldier depicted in Untitled (Fig., 21, page 89) reference the emotion of the dramatic narrative in Napalm Attack on Trang Bang Village (Fig., 10, page 55). The harrowing image frames the moment of the photograph’s creation and clearly presents for a viewer the explosions of napalm and the silent screams of the fleeing children. Dean Sharp’s representation of the injured soldier’s vulnerability and the chaos around him echoes the documentary juxtaposition, referenced in ARVN Soldier threatening Vietcong Suspect with Bayonet (Fig., 11, page 57) of threatening violence versus the begging position of the NVA soldier. As soldier-photographers respond to the shocking events and the disorder of their present reality, the act of snapshot making duplicates their experiences in a manner that grounds the instability of their current predicament, or more abstractly, domesticates the traumatic scenes they witness. While the act of snapshot making is familiar and grounded in cultural and social activities that dominate the soldier-photographers’ pre-war lives, they are compelled to continue snapshotting to maintain or regain the activity’s positive cultural associations. The motivation for snapshotting such violent events or subjects is reliant in part upon the autobiographical conventions of snapshotting and the capture of an individual’s life experiences. The peculiar response of photographing traumatic or graphic subject matter is considered a part of the natural context and environment of soldier-photographers. The soldier-photographers realize
that their subjects do not fit traditionally accepted snapshot content and therefore rely on other cultural representations of war as most popularly conveyed by the aesthetics of documentary photography.

A large number of snapshots in the NVAM archives feature the landscape of Vietnam and the military routine of soldiers as they searched out their enemy, the NVA. This activity is a popular subject of personal photographs since ground troops constantly trekked through the rural countryside, slowly securing villages and seeking out a hard-to-identify enemy. In another image, Dean Sharp uses his camera to frame the course of fellow soldiers as they traverse a thick marsh with little foliage to conceal them from enemy fire.

Figure 22: Dean Sharp, *Wet Patrol*, 16 x 20 in., National Veterans Art Museum Archive.

The water level of the marsh is up to the soldiers’ shins as they carry their loaded weapons and supplies. The reflective surface of the water serves as a pathway illuminating the group’s course through the grass. From his position ahead of the group,
Sharp turns around to photograph his fellow soldiers. Taken mid-journey, the photograph captures the course of the soldiers behind Sharp without their acknowledgement of the camera, lending to them an air of anonymity and emblematic presence. The photograph conveys a narrative image that expresses a collective experience and a depiction of banal, daily military activity. Similar to Sharp’s documentary presentation of soldier’s military routine, *Destruction of War, American Division* (Fig., 23, below) by Lázló Kondor depicts the military destruction of the Vietnamese landscape as a result of the symbolic presence represented by the singular soldier walking across the landscape.

![Image](image_url)

Figure 23: Lázló Kondor, *Destruction of War, American Division*, 1970, printed in 1995, silver gelatin print, 20 x 24 in., National Veterans Art Museum Archive.

The inclusion of a desecrated Christian church in the background aids in the symbolic communication of the disrespectful acts that occur during war. The universal knowledge of the Christian cross and the iconic presence of the singular soldier place them in moral
opposition to one another. While representing the destroyed landscape of Vietnam, Kondor also symbolizes the undiscriminating effect of violence and disregard for even the holiest of places.

While images of military routine and landscape can be easily interpreted as documentary context for soldiers’ experiences in Vietnam, such imagery also presents soldier-photographers’ experiences of fatigue, violence, and destruction. In *Wet Patrol* (Fig., 22, page 91) the trail of the soldiers through the water as they carry their personal supplies, ammunition, and weapons exemplifies the witnessing of a single individual, but the photographic content is emblematic of several soldiers’ experiences. This echoes the narrative qualities represented in images such as Burrows’ photograph of the soldiers departing from a helicopter in Figure 9 (See page 61). Soldier-photographers express foreign experience or unfamiliarity with photographic subjects by replicating the observant, emblematic qualities conveyed in documentary photography’s use of composition, angle, and framing. Images such as *Destruction of War, American Division* (Fig., 23, page 92), illustrating the landscape crossed by American soldiers, represent the physical effect of war and the violent scars left on the country of Vietnam. The clarity and simplicity of the image of the soldier mid-journey across the nondescript landscape represent the long days on foot, searching for an enemy, and the determinism of the U.S. military. The choices made by Lázló Kondor in composing *Destruction of War, American Division* illustrate his attempt to objectively capture the military presence of the soldier crossing in the foreground, while also framing the destroyed remains of the church in the background. The scene eliminates any distracting visual presence of other individuals or physical features of the landscape around the subject. The soldier-
photographers’ framing in Figure 22 and Figure 23 (See pages 91 and 92), conveys their objective witnessing to the subjects and provides documentary context for more intimate and subject-engaging snapshots, such as Figure 14 (see page 67) that depicts the brazen young man posed with his gun.

The contrasts of subject matter and style, from one’s attempted fulfillment of cultural expectations to content that it is photographed in a documentary manner that attributes drama, intense realism, or symbolism, exemplifies the innate motivations of soldier-photographers to present a complete representation of their experiences in Vietnam. The soldier-photographers include their impulses to photograph the traumatic and foreign subject matter that is unconventional to the snapshot genre in order to express a comprehensive narrative of their historical witnessing. They construct evidentiary imagery of their victims and the horrific violence they witness or participate in. Soldiers re-affirm their subjective impressions of reality and witnessing of traumatic events by visually preserving and objectifying their war experience with their personal cameras. This allows the soldier-photographers to depend on their photographs as visual objects that appear to objectively present their visual evidence of the past for post-war reflection. Such graphic imagery is very conventional within the photographic archive at the NVAM. The commonality of this peculiar response to such content, in photographs such as Untitled (Fig., 21, page 89) that are taken in the middle of firefights where the photographic subject is in a life-threatening state, is an indication that this collective response is a normal and practiced reaction by American soldiers in Vietnam. The choices to create snapshots when faced with horrific devastation, death, or one’s own

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morally abject behaviors are contrary to the cultural and social conventions of
snapshooting. It is the following examples of such snapshots from the NVAM collection
that express my argument. The practice of snapshot making relies on individual
motivations and a cultural desire to present a complete visual autobiography of life
experiences. The conventions of snapshooting inform a compulsive, ritual practice of
photograph making. Aside from the personal expression of an experience or relationship,
soldier-photographers also rely on other methods of representation. The alternative
framework is used in the soldier-photographers’ snapshots of traumatic subject matter,
foreign environments, and violent behaviors. The soldier-photographers’ diverse sets of
snapshots combine typical snapshot imagery with photographs of death, wartime
destruction, and military activity that echo documentary objectivity and intense realism.
This variation conveys the intensity and chaos of soldier-photographers’ situations in
Vietnam. In soldiers’ efforts to convey their autobiographies and fulfillments of military
expectations (including bravery and survival), they employ visual frameworks that
communicate their personal narrative but it also comments upon their cultural awareness
of historic representations of war.

The following image is one of many photographs in the archive that depicts the
body of a Vietnamese man.
The collapsed body extends horizontally across the length of the photograph; his clothing appears tattered and blown away, exposing wounds on his back and left leg. He is frontally positioned toward the camera, eyes closed and mouth parted with no expression of pain or life. Photographed in a clearing of grass, the image is cropped tightly, bringing a viewer’s immediate attention to the lifeless state of the man and not to a more expansive view of the scene. The photograph implies a connection between the soldier-photographer of this image and the death of the Vietnamese man. It further serves as a figurative image of the success and power of American soldiers to collectively destroy and defeat their enemies. The position of the photographer over the body and the exclusion of surroundings or other individuals present within the image indicate his metaphorical authority over the body and possibly his credit for this death. The composition of this image and the soldier-photographer’s attention to framing the body
suggests a desire to preserve evidence of this man’s death as an object, which the photographer can return to—to recall the event around the death and perhaps the soldier-photographer’s status as a living witness to it.

These personal photographs, which depict isolated and vivid photographic documentation of suffering and death, contain extremely powerful ties to documentary photography’s exhibition of power relations.160 As noted by Sontag, “The camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque.”161 The camera gives photographers a sense of physical authority over reality; they are able to control evidence of the content in a physical form that can be returned to or even discarded. The photographer’s historic witnessing to an event or person allots them the power to synthesize, focus, and determine a particular impression, fascination, or expression of visual taste in regards to photographic subjects. This private investment in a photograph’s design allows the subject matter to be examined as an object of fascination. This allows creators and observers of such photographs to privately fantasize about the multiple connections and deductions that can arise from the ability to possess the photographs’ contents as objects and evidence. In the case of the soldier-photographers who created the snapshots of dead Vietnamese soldiers seen in the album page (Fig., 25, page 99), they are possibly motivated by the historic and perverse cultural practice of ridiculing one’s enemy. By photographing an enemy’s physical debasement or torture their visual objectification emphasizes their inferior status in comparison to the individual committing the act of

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debasement. In the case of photographing such activity, the photographer or a subsequent individual who possesses the photograph also stands to represent omnipotent authority over the dead. Soldier-photographers repeat a historic act of objectification and dehumanization by continuing this trophy-making behavior of photographing and graphically depicting dead enemies. Soldiers ritually created these photographs as a perverse reactions to moments of stress, anxiety, or fear while also attempting to represent their connection with their photographic subjects, such as deceased enemy soldiers, traumatic firefights, or documentary impressions of military activity. Sontag further describes the camera’s likeness to a gun, and that “. . . to photograph someone is a sublimated murder--a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time.”

By photographing peculiar moments, such as a wounded comrade, the corpses of enemy combatants, and the course of a soldier’s trek through the Vietnamese jungle, soldier-photographers possess these moments as physical objects. The photographs are utilitarian however they reroute the post-memory nostalgia of the photographic subjects from evidence to totems of an emotional and traumatic historical witnessing.

The soldier-photographers’ popular activity of taking snapshots of corpses suggests a performance of authority. Cultural rituals, such as posthumous photography developed in our spiritual attempt to sustain life, function for soldiers as social structures that exemplify authority and moral values. However, soldier-photographers’ photographing of the dead reflects perverse and moral values opposite of the culturally accepted motivations for visually memorializing the dead. Elaine Scarry argues that peoples’ beliefs wane when something lacks substantiation or appears fictitious; therefore, the physical trace of the body or “. . . the sheer material factualness of the

162 Ibid., 14-5.
human body is borrowed to lend…an aura of ‘realness’ and ‘certainty’.” When photographing a corpse, the soldier-photographer takes the authority to document the subject’s loss of life for the perverse ability to visually objectify the material form of the dead. The soldiers’ ability to create a photograph that materializes anonymous individuals’ deaths precisely lends an “aura of ‘realness’ and ‘certainty’” as Scarry points out. Ingrained in this cultural ritual of documenting a loss of life is the unique position of the soldier-photographers who wield the power to replace memory and subsequently life itself. In the act of photographing the corpses of Vietnamese men, the camera and the creation of such photographs are evidence of a desire to objectify ones’ enemies as well as of the naturalized habit of snapshot making (see the multiple photographs in Fig., 25, below).

Figure 25: Unknown photographer, Random set of pages from a personal album, National Veterans Art Museum Archive.

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The photographers use their cameras to instantaneously document their subject’s vulnerability and their authoritative perception of photographic events. As a type of photographic subject replicated across the archive, it is clear that the photographing of dead Vietnamese was not provoked by simple confirmation and self-realization. Rather, soldier-photographers intend to show the dead as objectified, dehumanized remnants of their former military foes. In representing their dead enemies, the soldier-photographers conversely represent their survival.

As a medium, the camera is capable of minimizing the space of the experience between the photographer and the corpse. The soldier-photographers’ culturally ingrained reliance upon documentary rhetoric communicates their control over both the camera and the evidence of the deceased’s existence that has been extinguished with brutal force. The documentary style, framing the corpse at the center of the photograph’s composition with minimal inclusion of environment or narrative context, emphasizes the physicality of the corpse and the blatant loss of life. This tendency of soldier-photographers’ to rely on the familiarity of documentary form and compositions focuses a spectator on the physicality of the body and the fetishizing attention given to the graphic state of the corpse. The brutality and lack of memorializing qualities in the bare bones, evidentiary depiction of Vietnamese dead emphasizes an air of perverse exhibitionism to the voyeurism innate in the photographic act.\(^{164}\) Additionally, multiple photographs of one of the corpses in Figure 25 (page 99) convey the soldier-photographer’s ritual practice of the snapshot tradition to compose a view of a photographic subject that is most pleasing and in line with particular visual tastes and

cultural expectations. The soldier-photographer makes multiple photographs of the same corpses, similar to the repetition seen in snapshots on the album page of Figure 18 (page 77). While documentary subject matter elicits immediate snapshots in the heat of a moment, the perverse intentions of soldier-photographers in taking multiple photographs of corpses conveys a degree of pleasure. As they repeat the perverse act of making photographs of corpse after corpse, this repetition illustrates the fetishizing obsession over the state of the bodies. The isolating compositions of the corpses removes distracting or contextual details aids in communicating a symbolic achievement of the photographer’s success at survival and fulfilling their military duties.

Spectators who view a photograph’s exhibition of a body, as it lies seemingly untouched after the moment that ended the subject’s life, experience a voyeuristic act and a degree of identification with the photographer. Similar to Annette Kuhn’s discussion of the range of pornography and her identification of the limitations of sexual fantasy established in hard-core porn, the graphic photographs of corpses in their clearly dead state similarly extinguish the ability of the spectator to fantasize about the course of action required to achieve the kill. Hard-core porn eliminates a need fantasizing and the cultural associations of sex with emotions such as love and of wholesome social values such as fidelity. Hard-core porn, in brief, visually focuses on the fulfillment of a sexual act that directly elicits sensations associated with immediate physical pleasure. In the case of hard-core porn, visual attention is completely given to the pleasure-causing sexual act, which allows a spectator to gain the pleasure of the act through looking and without the need to emotionally engage, as with soft-core porn. Therefore, spectators of hard-
core pornographic images gain immediate pleasure. I recognize a parallel with Kuhn’s discussion in the similar way that the graphic photographs of corpses taken by soldiers in Vietnam also produce imagery that, too, extinguishes a spectator’s pleasure from step by step narrative explanation. The graphic subjects and evidentiary style of these photographs (see Fig., 24 on page 96 and Fig., 25 on page 99) preserve the dead as an object, highlighting the lifeless state. This form of representation allows spectators of the photograph to identify with the protagonist or in this case the soldier-photographer and their scopophilia, as well as their seemingly guilt-free responsibility for the graphic state of the individual pictured. The combination of the voyeuristic and authenticating qualities of photograph making with the sensational qualities of the soldier-photographers’ works, seen in the attention given to the centered framing of the body and elimination of contextual detail, encourages a spectator or photographer to feel excluded from the action or in this case the responsibility for the pictured individual’s death.

Stephen Eisenman in the *Abu Ghraib Effect* declares that images of brutality in the history of representation are expressions of a vision where:

“... military victors are not just powerful, but omnipotent and the conquered are not just subordinate, but abject and even inhuman. The presence of the latter, according to this brutal perspective, gives justification to the former; the supposed bestiality of the victim justifies the crushing violence of the oppressor.”

Similar to the photographs of torture from Abu Ghraib, the American soldiers’ snapshots (that picture Vietnamese corpses) intend to be private and for personal use. The graphic depictions of the brutally deceased in an evidentiary manner in Figures 20 and 21 elicit criticism similar to the Abu Ghraib photographs. Several authors have discussed the

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165 Ibid., 46.
similarity of the Abu Ghraib images to lynching postcards and the souvenir quality that such images reference in their stylizing qualities. The soldier-photographers’ snapshot depictions of corpses are comparable to the relishing of achievement or celebratory qualities of snapshotting for the purpose of souvenir or trophy making. Photographs, as visual repositories, can function as trophies and souvenirs in the same way we buy trinkets from places we have visited. As souvenirs, photographs can be understood to culturally and socially signify achievement or evidence of one’s witness to and pride in a particular documented action. Souvenirs and trophies also can represent for an individual a symbol that can be carried as a totem, holding the emotions and associations to the place, person, or event the object references. Photographs serve as a vessel for memory due to the position of the photographer as a controller to what is remembered, or more literally, visually preserved, in photographic form. The creation of snapshots and the choices of multiple photographers are a dynamic and interactive activity that is a performance, or as Kuhn puts it, “a purposeful staging of memory.” Through sets of images, soldiers perform a staging of their memories of Vietnam but also indicate the social and political imperative of the time. The corpse snapshots as a set represent a political allowance that was ingrained throughout the soldier-photographers initiation to combat and the authoritative perspective of Vietnam veterans during training. The social acceptance and lack of political control preventing snapshots of corpses are responsible

170 Ibid.
for allowing the behavior to become a collective method of expressing heroic pride and military success. By controlling the photographic form, as paralleled in the Abu Ghraib images, soldier-photographers’ snapshots convey a set of private memories that celebrate their conquered enemy as lifeless objects and former threats to the soldier-photographers’ own existence. Kuhn comments on Martha Langford’s discussion of the performance of photographic album making as “a repository for memory” and “. . . an instrument for social performance,” noting that if albums and photographs are instruments of a performance, then their meaning or function is contingent and flexible based on their “contextual variability” and “potential interactivity.”

Graphic representations that display soldier-photographers as the surviving, powerful victor as opposed to the conquered, debased enemy further expose a degree of perverse pleasure in the photographic act. This pleasure in the death of another conveys qualities for the creators of such images that otherwise may not have been implied or conveyed to spectators.

The photographs in Figures 24 and 25 (pages 96 and 99) show the ultimate physical consequence of war on the bodies of these NVA soldiers, but yet the photographs do not even begin to convey “the existential or metaphysical reality” of the soldiers leading up to their deaths or their deaths themselves. The documentary aesthetic presents sensational imagery of the victims’ bodies as they have fallen after the lethal impact from grenades, machine gun fire, or artillery shells. The historic debasement of enemy bodies in the aftermath of battle is evident in the soldier’s decision to create such photographs. These images of the NVA dead serve as documentary evidence of the violence, desecration, and disrespect by the American soldiers toward

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171 Ibid., 304.
their enemy. Throughout history, soldiers have photographed their dead enemies. Historic representations showing a physically conquered or defeated individual as subordinate, abject, and inhuman justify the actions of a victor. Photographs of the dead, in debased or traumatic states, service as evidence to the qualities of one’s oppressor that are justifiable for violent retaliation. While creating such emblematic photographs may yield criticism of the perverse or disgusting intention required to motivate such image making, Eisenman points out that such behavior is grounded in traditions of war representation. The soldier-photographers are culturally compelled to create such dark images by the historical routine of such behavior and the photographic documentation of one’s power over an enemy.

Soldier-photographers mimic the media’s editorializing of war dead but with a very different intention— for the pleasure of personal keepsake making. The continuation of this practice by soldier-photographers in Vietnam is a signal to the cultural awareness and familiarity with such photographs across generations. In her discussion of documentary photographs taken by American photographers accompanying the U.S. military while liberating the victims of Nazi death camps, Barbie Zelizer notes that after the photographs release to the public, they transformed “... from indices of certain actions to symbolic markers of the atrocity story ... [compelled by] a general and urgent need to make sense of what had happened.” While the photographs of dead NVA soldiers present the finality of the war for these particular individuals, the brutality and violent evidence of their deaths without connection or knowledge of who they are or how

175 Barbie Zelizer, Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera’s Eye (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 139.
they died erases their former selves and sustains only their deaths as symbolic visual artifacts. For the soldier-photographers, the photographing of dead enemy soldiers could have multiple meanings, relating to both the indexical trace of the body as evidence of a kill or to a greater symbolic meaning, possibly to the U.S. soldier’s unique desire to convey fulfillment of cultural military expectations. It is the cultural impression of documentary-style photographs, as presented in the popular media of the time, which perpetuate a particular way of seeing war. The cultural hegemony of alternative frameworks for representing subject matter disrupt the conventions of snapshooting and effect the function of snapshots as visual artifacts.

Soldier-photographers’ private image making in this manner is invoked by the cultural importance placed on individuals’ experiences of history, a desire to reveal truth, and the belief that visual narrative can explain historic events. Soldiers arrived in Vietnam saddled with particularly potent expectations from previous generations’ military duties in WWII and an American cultural expectation to serve as the uniting force against communism. As soldiers fought in Vietnam, they relied on a familiar social and cultural activity, snapshooting, to express their historic experience, in a seemingly truthful and complete visual narrative form. Compared to the media’s presentations of previous wars the conditions of Vietnam decentered the soldier’s psyche and emotionally traumatized them. Once a part of the military scene in Vietnam U.S. soldiers photographed their new world, responsibilities, and witnessing to the course of events that made up their war experiences. The conditions of the war and military environment, as previously discussed, proved to be a disrupting event in the course of many American soldiers’ lives. Snapshooting served as a contiguous and familiar ritual carried from
home to the front for soldiers. The cultural expectations that accompany the act of
snapshooting, conveying one’s witness of history, revealing truth, and explaining the
narrative course of historic events compel and enforce soldier-photographers’ reliance on
snapshot making in the uprooting and foreign conditions of Vietnam. In reality, the
shocking and violent moments that soldiers experienced during the war did not fit their
cultural impressions of military grandeur and heroic pride. Soldier-photographers relied
not on the intimacy and nostalgia of snapshot making but rather on its instantaneous
commemoration of lived experiences. For representing content that did not fit snapshot
conventions, soldier-photographers came to rely on their cultural awareness of popular
documentary representations of war. An evidentiary and emblematic style would convey
a photographic document of their witness to the average day-to-day live firefight or to an
enemy kill.

The frequency of these images and the fact that such violent imagery is culturally
sanctioned reveals the political responsibility for photographs of such a perverse nature.
The degrading quality and clear lack of sound morals and judgments by individuals who
take such action in making photographs of corpses or of the disgusting treatment of other
humans is of concern for the international acceptance and constant repetition of such
behaviors. Susan Crane regards that each time such photographs are subsequently
viewed or reviewed, an acknowledgement of these actions occurs in a new historical
context that “. . . links this shameful past with an ashamed present.” Two results occur:
the harm to the victim depicted is reiterated, and the viewer suffers only from an
acknowledgement of the damage and an inability to “. . . intervene, correct, or atone” for
Eisenman notes, that in the rush to highlight “. . .national character and political responsibility--the specific subjects and purpose of the prison [Abu Ghraib] photographs themselves, and their deep historical roots are obscured.”\textsuperscript{177} In examining the

conventionality of soldiers’ snapshots from the Vietnam War, the soldier-photographers works express a culturally ingrained framework for representing war that disrupts the

conventional rhetoric of snapshotting. Part of understanding the function of photographs and the meaning of their subjects is examining them as a set and how they interact within that set. The NVAM snapshots display an impulsive and at times accidental reliance on documentary-style photography instead of obeying the social and culturally established conventions of snapshot photography. Across the collection of soldiers’ personal photographs, the images convey a responsive and at times shocking account of soldiers’ witness or participation in traumatic events and their impressions of the war. American soldiers in Vietnam utilize the performance of snapshot making not only as a social behavior but also as a natural tool for restoring a sense of order and wholeness during a traumatic, life-altering experience. The collective transition in style exhibited in soldier-photographers’ works reveals an approach to photographic subject and purpose as a hopeful attempt at documenting a personal narrative during a period of warfare that was fragmented, confusing, and traumatic for troops as a whole. The recognition of

documentary aesthetics and the historical frameworks of war representation are evidence to a broader culture of war image making that is often ignored in our urge to identify the personal function and subjectivity of photography.

\textsuperscript{176} Susan Crane, “Choosing not to Look: Representation, Repatriation, and Holocaust Atrocity Photography.” \textit{History and Theory} 47, no. 3 (October 2008): 321.

\textsuperscript{177} Eisenman, \textit{The Abu Ghraib Effect}, 29.
CONCLUSION:

Visual representations from popular culture, including cinema and television, inform the snapshot making of soldier-photographers in Vietnam. These mediums convey cultural expectations when portraying particular subject matter, such as heroic representations of soldiers and the justified debasement of political enemies. Snapshot photographers, in particular, are not always aware of the pervasive effect of visual culture upon their own photographic representations. Photographers’ subjectivity in representations of subjects challenges the evidentiary quality of photography and its seemingly truthful, indexical recording of events.\(^{178}\) Personal snapshots conventionally function as autobiographical visual objects that create narrative mementos, or totems to times gone by, people, and experiences from the course of a snapshot photographer’s existence. The snapshots taken by American soldier-photographers during the Vietnam War disrupt the culture of snapshooting; they are an indicator of soldier-photographers’ cultural awareness to different frameworks of war representation. The popular aesthetics of documentary photographic representations of war and the historic practice of representing one’s enemies as debased and inhuman objects influence the snapshooter’s composition and framing of their wartime experiences.\(^ {179}\) While soldier-photographers continue to perpetuate the hegemonic ritual of snapshooting, they reinterpret the meaning and function of snapshooting and instinctually alter their aesthetic based on the subjects and environment they encounter and the photographic content’s inability to meet the conventions of snapshooting.


Sontag remarks on the ability of photographs to “anesthetize” reality or deaden photographers’ reactions to their photographs contents. She expresses the prevalence of shocking, sensational imagery and “... the vast photographic catalogue of misery and injustice throughout the world, which has given everyone a certain familiarity with atrocity, making the horrible seem ordinary.”\textsuperscript{180} The snapshots of atrocity belonging to soldier-photographers present documentary aesthetic choices, such as framing and compositional choices that convey intense realism or narrative details, which communicate a seemingly “less manipulative” style and thus representations are culturally interpreted as more authentic or objective.\textsuperscript{181} By relying on compositional and framing choices that are recognizably documentary in style, soldier-photographs of violence, death, and traumas in Vietnam appeal to the same emotional, social, and cultural conventions of documentary photography and its ability to communicate emblematic and utilitarian representations grounded in photographic authority and evidence. The soldier-photographers “invest their personal emotions and feelings” in the camera’s function as a personal visual tool for conveying their eyewitness account of the war.\textsuperscript{182} The photographs locations in the NVAM archives and the existential trace of photograph making ground the unique historical authority of soldier-photographers’ snapshots from the Vietnam War. The snapshots also reveal perverse motivations or actions of American soldiers in Vietnam as they seek to fulfill military cultural expectations and replicate representations of the foreign. The snapshots as a collective set reveal the frameworks of war representation that are historically perpetuated in visual representation.

\textsuperscript{180} Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave,” 20-1.
\textsuperscript{181} Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others, 26-7.
\textsuperscript{182} Thuc-Doan T. Nguyen and Russell W. Belk, “This We Remember: Consuming Representation via the Web Positing of War Photographs.” Consumption, Markets and Culture 10, no. 3 (September 2007): 262.
culture. The evidence of a documentary visual language in this set of soldier-photographers’ snapshots disrupts the conventional belief that snapshots obey the cultural and social standards of their genre.

Soldiers, culturally raised to replicate the intimate and idealized photographic depictions of family, friends, achievements, and popular values, realize that while photographing from the subjective vantage point of their personal camera they experience photographic content outside the cultural norm of what is considered appropriate. Americans who made the transition from civilian to soldier lived in an unstable environment due to the disrupting and chaotic qualities of the war, the lack of a clear enemy, a deficient education on the culture and language of Vietnam, as well as the larger monumental tensions between races and social groups. In the course of adapting to life in a war zone, American soldiers engage with their photographic subject matter and instead of relying on established conventions, they self-author photographic representations that echo documentary aesthetic tendencies. The violence, traumatic experiences, as well as their banal day-to-day activities become new photographic material that does not necessarily meet the established practices of snapshotting. The snapshots at the NVAM exemplify a collective reinterpretation by soldier-photographers of snapshot photography’s conventional representation of the ideal and instead, invoke the ability of the personal camera as a tool to convey power and authority over representation.

The goal of this thesis was to examine the visual frameworks that impact American soldiers’ personal photographic representations in the unique, historical conditions of the Vietnam War. First examining the social and cultural uses of the
personal camera and its functions for soldiers during war, I later expand to discuss the personal camera’s use specifically during the historical and political conditions faced by American soldiers in Vietnam. I focus on the soldier-photographers’ replication of compositional and framing qualities that can be most prominently recognized in documentary representations of war. The innate and natural evolution of the soldier-photographers’ reliance on other frameworks to present photographic subject matter outside the conventions of snapshooting illustrates my belief that soldier-photographers have a unique “way of seeing.” This way of seeing war exemplifies the conventional impression of photography as indexical, the potent visual culture representations that infiltrate even the most personal of photographic creations, and the disruption of soldiers’ expectations of what fighting in Vietnam would be like based on the majority of their upbringings in post-WWII American culture. This thesis illustrates that soldiers’ personal war photographs gather influence from popular forms of representations as well as from the intimate, ritual practice of snapshooting. The intricacies of this unique and expressive set of snapshots would be lost without understanding the process of snapshot photography, the cultural and social impacts of sensational images of atrocity upon photographic memory making, and most importantly, the conditions of war for soldier-photographers in Vietnam.

This thesis sought to interrogate the mnemonic qualities of snapshot photography and particularly the influence of other methods of representation upon it. While a portion of the archive consists of photographs that represent idealized versions of the photographic subjects’ personal traits or morals, such as honor, heroism, or masculine strength, amongst such representation are images that disrupt or are devoid of such
qualities. Some snapshots convey mute, everyday military environments that seemingly express an observant impression that could be collectively applied across a set of soldiers, rather than being tied intimately to a specific soldier-photographer’s autobiography (For examples, see *Untitled* (Fig., 16, page 69) of the men at rest, *Wet Patrol* (Fig., 22, page 91), or *Destruction of War, American Division* (Fig., 23, page 92)). Similarly, certain photographic subjects are framed tightly, eliminating visual distractions so as to not provide more information beyond basic evidence of a subject as an emblematic visual object for later reflection. Examples of such photographs include *Sentry* (Fig., 20 page 85) or images of corpses in Figures 24 and 25 (pages 96 and 99). Soldier-photographers’ visual rhetorics resemble qualities of both snapshot and documentary photography.

These methods of representation complement each other, due to the fact that both aim to represent their subject matter in a natural and seemingly uncomposed state. However, the soldier-photographers’ representations of authority or objectivity toward specific subject matter exhibit a contrast that is provoked by a familiarity with other styles of representation and their opportunity to control representation. Subject matter such as military activity during the war, violent actions and traumatic experiences do not fit into the conventional mode of snapshotting. The historic and political importance of the war and cultural pressures upon them to fulfill certain military expectations prompt soldiers to make snapshots. As a result, a negotiation occurs as soldier-photographers construct their visual records of unique war experiences and physical proof of their ability to meet or exceed those cultural expectations.

Pervasive and alternative visual rhetorics inform the culture of snapshotting. This is exemplified by the instinctive choices of soldier-photographers to create
snapshots of traumatic moments or bodies in framed close-ups, dramatic angles, or tight visual cropping of the subject matter (see Fig., 21, page 89 of the wounded man mid firefight and Fig., 24, page 96 of the corpse). Visual rhetorics promote a particular way of seeing that is hegemonic and based most noticeably on the photographer’s culturally ingrained reaction to their photographic content. The cultural practice of victimizing ones’ enemy combined with the instantaneous representations of the documentary style yield a transformation in soldiers’ snapshot making. During this extremely uprooting and foreign experience, soldiers practice the familiar art of snapshooting along with the ritualized and culturally ingrained visual frameworks of war representation. The snapshots at the NVAM are evidence that this behavior is not an anomaly but rather a shared method of domesticating and uniquely representing one’s personal experience of history and the witnessing of a critical event in American history. A culturally established need to construct archives of evidence, compel soldier-photographers to illustrate their abilities to adapt, conform, and work successfully in their new environment and community. As both a repository for memory and a performance of memory, soldier-photographers seek out a manner of expressive self-representation that allows them to both confirm and conform their post-war reflections. Snapshots, as a result, embody Vietnam soldier-photographers’ fulfillment of cultural expectations and military achievements.

By raising attention to the aesthetic transitions in soldier-photographers’ personal photographs, I hope to argue a case for the importance of the everyday, the fluidity of visual culture in response to the conventions of visual frameworks, and the influence of historic visual representation on forms of self-representation and affirmation. Snapshot
photography, as an autobiographical medium of expression, can be seen to reproduce and enforce particular ideologies. While we might assume our personal photographic creations to be unique, they always will contain evidence of popular visual and cultural representations. I was drawn in particular to the isolation of the Vietnam War as a historic and political event that is often downcast in American history, as well as to the elusive presence of Vietnam veterans’ works in current discussions regarding the history of photography. It is for these specific reasons that I focused my examination on soldier-photographers’ aesthetic transitions as represented in the photo collection of the NVAM.


Green, William L. and John Marciano. *Teaching the Vietnam War: A Critical Examination of School Texts and an Interpretive Comparative History Utilizing the*


