

Paging Mr Tim

Back in Vietnam for the 47th time, award winning photo-journalist Tim Page explains his love affair with the country and reflects on his memories of it. Words by Will Peach.



TIM PAGE: FROM HIS COLLECTION DEGREE SOUTH

“When I come here now I hardly see the war, only the archaeological scraps of it,” he laments.

TIM PAGE'S EXHIBITION IS SHOWING tonight, but he sits comfortably in Dong Khoi's Givral Café with coke and camera in hand. Having just spent seven months recovering from operations, he is now buoyant and hungry to work.

Ahead is a New Year's trip to Papua New Guinea to film a documentary on Sean Flynn, close wartime friend and the son of legendary actor Errol. He also has a couple of assignments lined up in Cambodia, but he feels that Vietnam is the perfect place to chart his return.

“It's all about getting back in the saddle,” he explains, “and for me Vietnam is a good starting point.”

◦ A Retrospective on a Man

Tim Page has lived an envious and some would say full life. Hobnobbing with the rich and famous, his character has been immortalised in books (*Dispatches* by Michael Herr) and movies (*Apocalypse Now*). In between he has won numerous awards, does humanitarian work and has seen wars come and go and come again. His work and life has taken him far and wide.

It all started in 1962 when, in his late teens, he drove overland from England to Indochina. Finding himself in South-East Asia at the time of the civil war in Laos, he ended up working as a stringer for United Press International (UPI). From there he moved on to Saigon where he covered the war for the next five years, working largely on assignment for Time-Life, UPI, Paris Match and Associated Press.

Although the war ended here almost 40 years ago, Tim finds it hard to turn his back on the place where he made his name.

“I love coming back to this country,” he says. “Once you've been to Vietnam it's like you've stepped into a vortex. You get the bug, an infection. When you have that in your system it doesn't go away.”

He adds: “If I don't get a fix once or twice a year, I feel like an empty vessel.”

◦ Full Circle

Although a near fatal head injury cut short his time in Vietnam, in the 1970s he continued his photography work, doing cover assignments for the likes of Rolling Stone and Crawdaddy. But while photographing rising

DEGREE SOUTH

War images from a recent collection of photos put together by Tim Page



TIM PAGE

stars seemed a relieving break, Page could simply not escape Indochina.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s he made several trips back to the region to uncover the mystery behind the disappearance of his best friend, Sean Flynn. Also a photojournalist, Flynn went missing in Cambodia in 1970 with compatriot Dana Stone after leaving Phnom Penh for the countryside on hired motorbikes.

In 1990, in the Cambodian village of Bei Met, Page found what forensics thought to be the violently felled body of his former friend.

◉ The Seduction of Vietnam

Just a few weeks before the start of 2009, his exhibition at Cepage is the latest reason for his return. Showcasing some of his most moving images of both the war and the region, the selection process itself was relatively straightforward.

"Last year when I did a couple of shows here it was easy to see what pictures people were taken by," he explains. "Using that piece of information, I tailored the exhibition to include things people will most want to see."

If his new show is not enough, it is easy to see why the name Tim Page is so synonymous with such a brutal subject. His exhibition entitled *Requiem*, a tribute to the photographers that died in the war of Indochina, is on permanent display in the War Remnants Museum in Saigon.

But for a man who can't stay away, do the memories of an aging war offer a good enough reason to keep calling him back?

"Nothing measures up to it," he says. "It's the ultimate adventure, like an addiction."

But while the war is seductive, he also admits it's short lived. "The war becomes too much fun. When you're young, you're invulnerable. You cover it because that adrenalin is peaking in you and keeping you safe. War is such a rush and then it's over, it's madness for a microsecond and then it's over and you go - "What do I do now?"

So what does Vietnam have left for him? "When I come here now I hardly see the war, only the archaeological scraps of it," he laments. "I come back now because of my friends, because of the intrigue and mystery this place continues to espouse."

◉ TV Cannot Kill Photo-Journalism

These days Page has a new quest marking each return. "Every time I come back I try to go back and do something," he says, still feeling a sense of responsibility.

One quest that he started in 1985 was to get the American government to officially accept that the wartime usage of the dioxin Agent Orange has side affects. Due to the pressure of both himself and a number of other "hardcore" journalists, "America has now recognised that it does exist and it does cause things."

Armed with a Canon DSLR 5D, he is also continuing to take photos of Vietnam. While TV has changed the role of the fixed, non-moving image, he still believes that photography can be effective.

"I haven't given up that photo-journalism is dead," he explains. "If you reach one percent of the people, if you can make just one person think about your work, then hey, you're winning."

His return to Vietnam certainly shows that old affinities never die.

To see more of Tim Page's photos, go to our website - www.thewordhcmc.com. 