

Foreign Correspondents in Vietnam

Laura Palmer & Jurate Kazickas

Some were sent as foreign correspondents by news organizations back in the States, others arrived on a one-way ticket purchased with winnings from being a game-show contestant. Some had impressive journalism credentials and long track records, others got their first press pass in Vietnam. The one thing every woman had who covered the war in Vietnam was the determination to do her damndest.

Risks, we took. Fear, we hid. Courage we mustered up. Fatigue we ignored. Strength we found, often more than we ever thought we had. Laughter helped heal and what wasn't written down in our notebooks or recorded on tape is still there, in our heart-of-hearts.

Ability, determination and humor became a strategy for making them accept us. They were the generals who felt women belonged somewhere other than wherever the war was. They were the bureau chiefs who didn't think we could cut it until we proved them wrong. They were the friends and family who couldn't understand why there weren't enough stories back home. Why do you have to go to Vietnam?

Why not?

It was a hell of a story. It was easy to get there. All you needed was a visa. Commercial flights flew in and out of Saigon and with a letter from some newspapers back home it was easy to get accredited.

Women reporters in Vietnam did just what men did. We were killed, wounded, shot at and captured by the enemy. We jumped out of planes, slept in foxholes, went on patrol, humped through the boonies, choppered into hot LZs, looked out for landmines, and wondered how we would ever try to put it all in words. Could we really make them see, feel, and understand?

No one knows exactly how many women journalists went to Vietnam as civilians. Our

numbers were small. The first arrived in 1961, the last left in 1975. Eighty is a conservative estimate. The actual number could be twice that when stringers, freelancers and photo journalists are included. We won every major award, including the Pulitzer Prize.

We did not agree politically. There were women who supported the war and women who violently opposed it. We were not unanimous in anything except perhaps our passionate pride for the jobs we did. Sure, there were legends like Frances Fitzgerald, Gloria Emerson, Marguerite Higgins, Georgie Ann Geyer, Kate Webb, Elizabeth Pond, Beverly Deepe, Liz Trotta and Ann | Bryan Mariano.

And Dickey Chapelle, who was killed on November 4, 1965 while out on patrol with the Marines near Chu Lai. She was forty-seven and on assignment for the National Observer when she died wearing a pink flower in her bush hat and the paratrooper's emblem she had won jumping with the 101st Airborne. Chapelle believed in the war and once told a friend, "I suppose my luck will run out someday. But if you're scared, really scared, you don't belong over here."

We were living full tilt and we knew it. Vietnam was fair, if not generous. For all it took from us in despair, anguish, and heartbreak, Vietnam gave back even more in achievement, love and wisdom. It was intense, emotional and unforgettable and the women we are now are inextricably linked to the reporters we were then.

Jurate Kazickas was a freelance photojournalist in Vietnam from 1967-68 and was wounded there while covering the siege of Khe Sanh. Kazickas was a consultant to ABC's "China Beach" and appeared in both episodes which integrated the true stories of women veterans with footage from past "China Beach" shows.

Laura Palmer was in Vietnam from 1972-74, working for ABC and NBC News as a radio reporter while freelancing for Time and Rolling Stone. She went back to Vietnam in April 1975 and left by helicopter on the last day, covering the U.S. evacuation of Saigon. In 1986, she wrote *Shrapnel in the Heart* which traced people who left letters to the dead at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. From 1988-90, she wrote a nationally syndicated newspaper column called "Welcome Home" about coming to terms with the Vietnam war.