

Peter Arnett: Saving the AP Saigon bureau archives

Dodging the Memory Hole 2016 | Oct. 14, 2016 | Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA

PETER ARNETT: [\[00:04\]](#) When, a few months ago, Ed invited me to join this conference, I immediately accepted because information gathering in the field and access to research materials, particularly historical data, had been an integral part of my 50-year journalism career. But I must confess that the name “Dodging the Merry Memory Hole” initially threw me. The reading of Ed’s fine essay, “McCain Speakright” — I like your titles — cleared it up. What he was referencing, of course, was George Orwell’s masterwork “1984.” Big Brother’s world with bureaucrat Winston Smith was required to routinely consign writings both significant and insignificant to the oblivion of the “memory holes.”

Now, on reflection, I remember that at one point in my career, near the conclusion of a bloody controversial war that had torn America apart, a war that I had covered since the beginning, I faced my own memory hole. In this case it was a fiery furnace into which I was ordered to consign the complete raw file of the Associated Press’ field coverage of the Vietnam War for the years 1962 to 1972. We’re talking here of millions of words — the product of labors by the dozens of professional reporters, mainly Americans, sent to the war theater over those years. I didn’t do it. By concealment, deception; yes, lying, I saved the files for history. Methods I’m sure George Orwell would have approved.

[\[01:59\]](#) But now for some background, a quick background on the war. Important policies of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon involving Vietnam were carefully concealed from the American public. To maintain this deception, the media policies of all three presidents attempted heavy-handed news manipulation and intimidation of reporters in the field and their superiors back home. The objective was to proceed with actions in Vietnam which, if publicly debated, would meet resistance at home and concern abroad.

[\[02:35\]](#) These leaders endeavored to compel powerful news industry leaders, with its long tradition of war reporting, to bend to the winds of policy makers making questionable judgments on issues important to the American public — judgments often made far from the battlefields. In earlier significant American wars, the government, with official censorship, took upon itself the burden of deciding what news was fit to print, what information gathered by reporters in the field might harm the security of military operations and also to keep on message in terms of achieving the overall objectives and keeping the support of the public at large.

But that was in previous wars; not for the war in Vietnam, an enterprise deemed politically sensitive by far-too politically sensitive individuals to justify censorship. So from the beginning, as early as June 1962, when I arrived, I was assigned to the Saigon bureau; a young man with a full head of hair and a lot of enthusiasm.

[\[03:53\]](#) So from the beginning — when I arrived in June 1962 there were the beginnings of a credibility gap that only worsened as the years went by and it’s still being argued what that war was all about.

[04:11] Now I soon learned what war was, what covering war was, all from my colleague and bureau chief Malcolm Browne; a New York City native and a graduate from an Ivy League college who handed me a pamphlet he had hand-written — a short guide to news coverage in Vietnam.

I followed his instructions and as you can see here, me standing in the balcony of my Saigon apartment with the clothing and equipment for my war reporting assignment —all purchased, by the way, on the Saigon black market, as we got no cooperation from the military. Now, what do we have here? Two dozen items, all to be carried in the field: a camouflage mosquito net; canteen with case; a rubber air mattress and groundsheet; a light blanket; jack knife and assorted canned goods; several changes of underwear and socks; toilet paper; small flashlight; first-aid kit; water purification tablets; aspirin; a suitable plastic map; money and identification papers; condoms and a pocket pistol optional.

[05:27] All to be put into an infantryman's field pack. Now condoms, what? On the battlefield, Malcolm Browne told me, they were the best thing to carry exposed film in, in the paddy fields and jungle, because they're waterproof. Of course, those were the days before digital photography. I and most of the young reporters in Vietnam had benefited from military training during our draft years, but that was between wars. Vietnam was the real thing. And I soon felt ready to head out into the field.

This is me with all my gear on. Mel Brown's instruction guide had some good pointers for combat coverage. He wrote, quote, "The whole idea of covering a military action is to get the news and pictures back and not to play soldier yourself." He said you should know how to swim. Canals and ditches are often above your head. Lie prone under fire and move only on your belly; and here am I doing that: prone under fire and moving on my belly with an American unit. Look for cover and move toward it. Which is exactly what I'm doing here.

Other advice: when moving with troops, do not stay close to the head of a column or the point man in a formation — that's right up front. There are a lot of others ahead of me in this picture. Professional soldiers are paid to do that, to go up front. Do not stand or march close to a radioman or medic because they are prime targets of the enemy. Here's some more advice from Mel: try to keep in good physical condition so you can march or run for a reasonable distance. You may save your life by doing this at some point.

He said if you hear a shot and think it's not from your own side, don't get up to look around to see where it came from. The second shot might get you. When possible, step in exactly the same spot as the soldier ahead of you. If he wasn't blown up, you probably won't be.

And do not pick up Viet Cong flags or other souvenirs from haystacks. They may be booby-trapped by grenades. One other point: beware of water buffalo. When they get excited, they stampede, charge and kill. Don't be misled by seeing children playing on their backs; children and buffaloes are friends. And finally, his advice was: stick close to the commander, who was generally in the safest position available. And you'll learn from him and most of the others, anyway. So that's what I'm doing in this picture. But a sad note — the lieutenant colonel I'm walking beside here in August of 1965, William Leftwich — he was the assistant American advisor to a Vietnamese Marine battalion and was a good friend. He died five years later in a helicopter crash in Vietnam when he returned for his second tour.

Now we wrote our stories on personal Opal office typewriters, and this is what pages looked like from the war zone era. Now they're pretty flimsy.

[08:57] But this is a story I wrote in 1968. And I'll explain later how we find. But here it is. Journalism circa the sixties. Not like that anymore.

[09:11] Very flimsy very fragile, distinctive type, too. I used the Lettera 22 Olivetti portable. These

pages are from the bottom carbon copy of a book of four we always used to type out our stories in the Saigon bureau. After editing, one copy would be sent to the Telex room for punching on tape to our New York headquarters. A second would stay on the bureau news desk for immediate reference and a third to the bureau chief's office. All would eventually be discarded. This one that I showed you — these ones — they would be filed in a binder along with the rest of the day's stories and message traffic.

[10:03] By the end of the war there were scores of these thick binders. And you will see a couple of them, maybe on the desk of the office at one point, on our crowded news desk.

[10:16] Now at the beginning, Vietnam was a patriotic war — or that is how the military high command saw it. And they suggested that the press be on the team. A story I wrote on July 24, 1962 angered U.S. officials because I reported that American armed helicopters firing machine guns and rockets had come to the aid of a trapped South Vietnamese Ranger unit under attack by the Viet Cong. At that time, American soldiers were supposed to be just advisors to the Vietnamese, not directly involved. Our story revealed how that role was changing into a combat one.

How did I get the story? Some of the pilots were my friends such as this crew chief on this plane. Now, the U.S. embassy complained that this story and others like it were damaging to secret policies aimed at winning the war. President John F. Kennedy even tried to get David Halberstam of the New York Times, then a young reporter I worked with, reassigned out of Vietnam because of his critical stories. American editors were getting from us a unique look at a nation at war in the jungles and on the streets through uncensored stories and photos.

[11:38] And even though they generally supported America's policies there in the early years, reporters and editors strenuously defended press freedoms. And the example of that is a letter to President Kennedy on 18 July 1963 from the president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Edward Drucker, editor of the Hartford Courant, who spelled out the support. He said, "There have been complaints over a long period that American reporters are hampered by the South Vietnamese government in going about their duties and sometimes even American officials do not support their efforts to report events as they are. It is not yet certain that all possible efforts are being made to prevent further deliberate obstacles to press freedom. He continued, "Whatever the difficulties, we urge you to bear in mind the need of the American people to have the fullest possible factual information from South Vietnam, no matter what anyone may think is right or wrong about the situation.

[12:59] Good Letter. For us. For the reporters, though, the pressures on the streets of Saigon continued as a developing protest by Vietnamese leaders threatens the stability of the Catholic-led government of Ngo Dinh Diem, supported by the US. This picture by Malcolm Brown — taken at a mid-1963 protest and which shows the self-immolation of an aged monk, Thích Quang Duc, on the streets of Saigon — brought Vietnam to the attention of the world and police attention to the correspondents. The Buddhists were protesting the policies of the government.

In this photo, I'm arrested along with an Australian cameraman, Peter Herford, and held for several hours after attending a Buddhist rally. A few weeks later, I was attacked by plain-clothes police at another rally, thrown to the ground and kicked. You can see me on the left of the picture with my bloodied face.

[13:56] I was fortunately rescued by the brawny David Halberstam, who challenged the police to continue attacking me — and that's David standing in front. Those first years of the war set the course for news coverage of the whole Vietnam conflict. The U.S. government continued to reveal as little as possible of the policies behind the war, emphasizing the positive, but reporters and photographers at least were free to travel with the troops and tell the story as they saw it.

There were some discordant moments — here an American military policeman in 1966 in Saigon is holding a gun on me and some other reporters including young Bob Schieffer, then of the Dallas

Morning News and later a famous CBS anchorman. We were just trying to cover a Buddhist protest and the soldier was trying to stop us, and which he had no authority to do. The picture was published in The Washington Post the following morning, resulting in a directive from Secretary of State Dean Rusk to the Saigon embassy not to let it happen again.

[12:20] Under President Lyndon Johnson the war began widening to the dimensions of a major conflict in 1965. But even as hundreds of thousands of Americans entered the battlefields, there was no censorship of the press. This did not mean that pressure on journalists was not powerful. President Johnson wanted the media to affect what he himself was unwilling to do. He wanted an unofficial censorship that would shape news dispatches to conform with his view of how the war should be proceeding. And the president did not hesitate to arm twist reluctant editors at home for them to get on the team. We were told by friendly U.S. officials in Saigon that President Johnson was our most avid antagonist — brooding over the media's depiction of the war in front of a row of television sets in the White House, tuned to the network news casts and checking up on the three telex machines clicking out the product of the AP, UPI and Reuters from Vietnam and elsewhere. My favorite story about the AP's relationship with Lyndon Johnson comes from Wes Gallagher, who was the president of the organization.

[16:42] One day, the president had complained to two visiting managing editors from AP member newspapers about my coverage specifically in Vietnam, complaints that they passed on to the AP. Now this was early in 1966 and it happened that Gallagher, our president, and Johnson were going to meet for lunch the following day. Now they were both formidable men; both were tall and tough-minded and with the luncheon nearing an end with no mention of the war, Gallagher said, "Mr. President, I understand you have been critical of some of the AP stories from Vietnam." "Oh no," the president replied, "I think the AP is doing a great job." Not willing to challenge the president on what had been reported the day before by the managing editors, Gallagher said, "Well, I just want you to know, Mr. President, that the AP is not against you or for you." And Johnson replied, "That's just; that's just not quite the way I like it." He didn't like it.

[17:50] Now, in a visit to Saigon well into the war, at a time when our reporting was often challenged, and there was pressure from the White House to send me home; Gallagher told me that he supported what I was doing, but he said, "Peter, don't make any mistakes. If you do, you're out." No mistakes! Journalists unintentionally make them all the time.

My solution was to continue covering the war by reporting only what I personally witnessed; and wrote analysis based on my own investigations, and in interviews with those I saw had the most perspective and experienced view of the war. That meant I covered almost every major military action in the country and the consequential battle of Ap Bac — the first of the war in January of 1962 — to the fall of Saigon in April 1975.

[18:50] To cover the war, I needed contacts. I made the personal acquaintanceship of this man, Daniel Ellsberg, first when he was a hawkish whiz kid working for Secretary of Defense McNamara as seen in this picture, and later as the dovish author of the famous Pentagon Papers. I spent several days with major Norman Schwarzkopf when he was a Ranger advisor at the besieged Duc Co Camp in the central highlands in 1965. This is a picture I took of him helping a wounded Vietnamese Ranger at the Duc Co Camp, and he kept a copy of this on his desk for years. Another source important to me: John Paul Vann, famous from Neil Sheehan's Pulitzer prize-winning biography of him, "A Bright Shining Lie." Vann was smart, fearless, challenged authority — my kind of guy. He also wanted South Vietnam to survive as an independent country, as he had helped South Korea in the previous decade. He was my most enlightened source from the time I met him in the Mekong Delta in 1962 right up to a week before his death in a helicopter crash near Kontum in 1972.

Let me just mention General Frederick Weyand — he arrived in command of the 25th Infantry Division operating in the Cu Chi region west of Saigon. He turned out to be a very reasonable, pleasant

man. I won his trust and friendship during his latest tours of duty as the last commander, and finally as the last chief of American forces in Vietnam.

[20:48] Now for some action.

AP photographer Horst Faas; a wonderful Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer. We were often out in the field together, including Operation Crimp in January 1966 when we joined up with an infantry battalion from the U.S. Army's 1st Division, commanded by our friend Lieutenant Colonel George Eyster. Now, this was a West Point picture of Eyster and then in a story I later wrote, I described him as a lean, laconic man who reminded me of the actor Gary Cooper. The mission we were on that day was to rout out Viet Cong snipers from a tunnel system known to exist under the village of Trung Lap, west of Saigon; an area of tangled scrub and low forest. I was walking with Colonel Eyster when we were joined by one of his company commanders, and we stopped to look at a combat map Eyster was holding at the place. As he peered at the details I heard four loud shots as bullets tore through the map and into his chest a few inches from my face. Horst ran up to take this picture as medics gave the officer his first medical aid. Eyster saw Horst and gasped at him, "Horst take cover; the V.C. are everywhere."

[22:13] Anyway, Horst took his pictures, including this one, as Eyster's men carried the wounded leader to a Medivac helicopter. Then we found an opening in the brush where the murderous shots had been fired from a tunnel entrance. The Viet Cong shooter had long escaped down the tunnel system. We visited our colonel friend in hospital at the military base the next day, and saw that he was gravely ill. We were notified several hours later that he had died.

[22:49] I began his obituary for a AP this way: "He was the son of a general, a West Pointer and a battalion commander, but Lieutenant Colonel George Eyster was to die like a rifleman. It may have been the colonel's leaves of rank on his shoulder or the map he held in his hand, or just a wayward chance that the Viet Cong sniper chose Eyster from the three of us standing in that dusty jungle path. The Orlando Evening Star from Eyster's hometown published the full story. And the AP photograph interviews his wife and family, as this picture showed, and they talked about the loss of their husband. A few weeks later I received a letter from Harriet who wrote about my story: "You gave the children a legacy that no one else could have. For writing in such a manner that his courage and heroism will live for them and be an inspiration for them forever."

[23:52] Now the 1968 communist Tet Offensive, launched in late January that year, had a decisive impact on the war.

Media Historians note that the AP, through its reporting at that time, contributed two of the most damning indictments against America's war policies. One of these was a photograph; the other a quote from an American officer. The photo shows the two journalists involved. Third from the left, Eddie Adams, our photographer, and I'm next to him. An hour or so after this picture was taken on February 1 in Saigon, Eddie Adams took this photograph. The picture of the execution of a Vietcong prisoner, a suspect, at a Saigon street by the chief of police General Nguyen Ngoc. Unlike today, when horrific pictures routinely appear on the internet and in our news, media in the 1960's was more traditional and reticent. Adam's photo was a shocking revelation to America's newspaper readers of the growing brutality of the Vietnam War. And this was only the third day of the Tet Offensive, when American troops were taking overwhelming casualties.

[25:19] The picture itself was unique. Forensic analysis later determined that during the fraction of a second in Adam's photo, the bullet was still passing through the person's head. I won notoriety for popularizing the phrase, "Destroying the town to save it." That came from a reporting trip to the Mekong Delta city of Ben Tre several days into the Tet Offensive. I saw on my visit that most of the city was in ruins after constant bombing and shelling by American forces trying to dislodge a force of Vietcong soldiers who had occupied most of the town. Hundreds of civilians had been killed. In my story I quoted an American major saying, "It became necessary to destroy the town in order to save

it." That was his explanation for the extraordinary physical and human damage inflicted on Ben Tre as the attacking forces — communist forces — threatened to overrun the few remaining defenders.

[26:29] Now some may argue that it was a justifiable tactic. My thought was that they could have easily escaped by the river. They could have pulled out the Americans, but they didn't. The graphic descriptive, "We had to destroy the town to save it," coming at that point in the Vietnam conflict, sent critics into frenzies. I notice that phrase comes up often, even today, referring to other crises.

[26:58] Now at that point — to use a biblical phrase — the Johnson administration had sown the seeds of its own destruction by its unwillingness, for political reasons, to publicly restrain the press in Vietnam. It was now reaping the whirlwind. Many American newspapers turned against the war editorially after the Tet Offensive. I notice that my critical analyses were used more frequently by once-conservative newspapers. The Richmond Times Dispatch, for example, was one paper that not only headlined an analysis I wrote that summer, but talked about the growing strength of the communist side. Editor Johnny Laird wrote to AP a congratulatory letter indicating that in the battle of credibility with the government, the press had won over the American heartland. He said, "Pete Arnett's Sunday piece was an excellent appraisal of the situation in Vietnam. It was the type of story I am sure that meant much more to many of our readers than the day-to-day body counts." The editor wrote, "Congratulations to Arnett on a fine appraisal and to you and your news editors for giving him the opportunity to put the war in perspective."

[28:25] Well what about those AP files that I came here to talk about? Now we knew —this is a picture of the AP team in Saigon in 1972, it's a big team — but we knew at that time that our news organization had plans to substantially reduce the Saigon staff once the peace agreement with the North Vietnamese was signed, and that happened in 1973 early. As that day approached, Wes Gallagher, our president — who had personally, relentlessly, wholeheartedly staffed, funded and supported our sometimes controversial war coverage from his headquarters in New York — began making plans for the future. Those plans included what he said was better management and preservation of the millions of pages of words and photographic images produced by The Associated Press domestically and in its dozens of bureaus around the world.

[29:38] Wes Gallagher, at right, advised all bureaus, domestic and internationally, to destroy all the original copies of stories and pictures in their possession. He said only stories and pictures that had been edited in New York and used on the AP's domestic and international news wires would be seen as suitable for the news organization's archives. I was personally shocked. I'd been in and out of New York a lot over the years at the headquarters and I was aware that our files were in disarray. At the time, this is how our material, all the AP material, was filed in headquarters: strips of telex stories from the news wires were pasted on both sides of sheets of light cardboard and numbered with a seven-digit code on one side. They were then stored in shelves in tall steel cupboards. Boxes of index cards were in separate cupboards for the use of researchers seeking access to the main files. I had attempted to use the system in my visits to New York, but was rarely successful in locating material. The company librarians admitted to me the system was failing and they expressed their concern.

[31:04] I was also aware that the AP was limited technically to sending subscribers a finite number of words each day. In those days, news was sent by Telex to all the subscribers. So if a major political story was breaking in America — the death of President Kennedy in '63, the American elections, Martin Luther King's death — many of these stories that took over media for months.

[31:38] Elsewhere, where the AP People were working, we were still producing. In Saigon we never stopped working every day — when a major crisis was taking over our news wires, we kept doing our stories — and sometimes 20 stories a day came out of the bureau. We were geared to produce these stories irrespective of what was happening anywhere else. If these stories were not used the day we sent them, it was most unlikely they would ever see the light of day. And that was the case; they'd just be thrown in the trash in AP headquarters. We kept them.

So I mentioned this in a meeting I had with Wes Gallagher, a supportive, friendly man who heard me out and said, "Peter, we have the best of the Vietnam stuff here. Go back and make sure yours is destroyed." Now I was a loyal AP man, but I also treasured everything in our files. My own sweat had dripped on to some of these pages — pages to stories that I'm sure hadn't made the wire. These were not amateur bloggings or airy Twitter-like expressions of opinion. They were finely crafted stories from some of the best-trained young reporters in the United States, who risked their lives to write them. That the AP had not the space nor the inclination to save them all, I thought it was unfortunate, but not unusual considering the volume of material that fought for attention on the AP news wires.

[33:15] So I told the bureau in the summer '72 that I would undertake the responsibility of destroying the files by taking possession of the scores of binders and removing them from the bureau. I loaded them into several dozen large tin trunks and quietly shipped them to the port of New Jersey, final destination, and the storerooms of my apartment building on the Upper East Side of New York where I had moved to.

[33:48] Now the war ended in 1975 and I covered the end and then I moved on. The AP files moved around with me — finally to McLean, Virginia, where I lived after the first Gulf War for quite a few years and I wrote my autobiography, "Live from the battlefield," using as my primary sources the old AP files. I would still have them — rotting in my garage, probably — if the AP had not employed a distinguished archivist, Valerie Komor, to straighten out its news production history. She was a very persuasive person. And the tin trunks and their historical contents were returned to the AP headquarters several years ago. No questions asked. And that's where they should have been in the first place. Thank you.