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**THE ORANGE STRUGGLE**

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## **Abstract**

This report looks into the process of materializing a photojournalism project that hopes to illustrate the lives of Agent Orange victims, family members and caregivers. The beginnings of the Vietnam War discussed in the report provide clues to why Agent Orange was used as part of the US military strategy. In addition, it aims to share the difficulties, lessons learnt and insights of photographing in Vietnam. The photographic style used in the 18 photos that were published into a book, *The Orange Struggle* will be discussed in relation to works of well-known photographers.

## 1.1 Introduction

“When rain blackens the sky in the east, when rain blackens the sky in the west,  
When rain blackens the sky in the south, the north, I see a stork white as alabaster  
take wing and usher in the rain . . . Rice in the paddy ripples like a broad flag,  
potato plants send up their dark green leaves, the palm tree opens its fronds to  
catch the drops. The toads and frogs sing all day and all night, and fish flicker  
away dancing to that tune. But no one sees in the branches the stork shivering in  
the cold . . . When rain blackens again in the east, when rain blackens again in the  
west, when rain blackens again in the south, the north, I see that stork white as  
alabaster take wing to proclaim the rain again.”

-Trang Dang Khoa

It is a Vietnamese legend that in times of suffering, the country will be blessed with the appearance of a child poet. During the Vietnam War, a young poet Trang Dang Khoa became the voice of the Vietnamese. Written by Khoa, *The Alabaster Stork*, on first impression seems like it is celebrating the endurance of agricultural life. However at a closer look, the idea of War is palpably present when Khoa talks about the ‘stork’, which refers to the silvery plane bombers. What this poem illuminates, is the Vietnamese way of life that will not be halted by war.

*The Orange Struggle* is an intimate visual story of the Vietnamese bearing the legacy of Agent Orange 34 years after the Vietnam War. Agent Orange was perhaps indiscriminate in its deadly effects but the worst-affected were innocent children born deformed during the war itself and generations after. The objective of the photos is to show different facets of their lives, including the families and the caregivers. They will tell the story of how Agent Orange has affected them and how they have struggled to improve their lives. Like how the poet Khoa describes the Vietnamese culture in his poem, *The Orange Struggle* hopes to portray the perseverance of the Vietnamese and how they look towards the future with optimism.

## 1.2 Why Agent Orange

The Vietnam War has introduced into the military lexicon the new word “ecocide”. This war is unique in modern history as it is known as the war, in which anti-environmental actions was a major component of the strategy.

Interestingly, the legacy of the Agent Orange is still present in Vietnam today. The dioxin has long-term effects on the ecosystem and most importantly, human health. It is a result of a war that has affected 5 million Vietnamese and more to come in generations.

I was first exposed to the topic of Agent Orange last year when I was talking to a history student from the National University of Singapore. The idea of innocent Vietnamese suffering from complex diseases due to the U.S. military strategy of defoliating the forests shocked me. Therefore, it sparked the interest in me and I decided to read up more on Agent Orange.

The other reason I chose this topic is because people are not aware of the effects of Agent Orange. I found out that many people have not heard of Agent Orange and their only knowledge about the Vietnam War was U.S. losing its foothold in Vietnam.

After researching on photo essays that have been done relating to Agent Orange, I realized that most of them concentrate on the dire consequences of the dioxin. In 2003, Philip Jones Griffiths, a Welsh-born photojournalist known for his coverage of the Vietnam War published the book, *Agent Orange: Collateral Damage in Vietnam*. His

book covers many aspects of Agent Orange such as the science of survival, the poisoning of the land and the lives of the villagers from Cam Nghia.. However, there are very few photos portraying the positive side to the topic. Hence, I decided to choose a different angle of capturing the sufferings by infusing optimism into the photos that is true to the Vietnamese way of life.

Ultimately, it was not just horrific injuries or a war-torn Vietnam that demanded our attention. It was the struggle of everyday life, that little-by-little, step-by-step bravery and resilience of the human spirit that called for our attention. When the violence has faded and the guns withdrawn, what was left was a nation struggling with the after-effects of not only war, but of a tragic and deadly contamination that would plague their lives for generations to come.

### **1.3 Presentation of the Project**

The eighteen photos chosen were put together into a 56-page pictorial book that was printed on 190gsm art cards. Basically the book can be easily distributed to humanitarian organizations, corporate organizations, tertiary institutions and local libraries in order to get donations or to simply gain awareness.

### **1.4 Proposed Audience**

*The Orange Struggle* is targeted to the general public, however it is more geared towards the professionals, managers, executives and businessmen (PMEBs). These are



the people who have the ability to help the Agent Orange Victims through donations. Furthermore the PMEBS may have the power to influence policies that may benefit the victims.

In addition, this book hopes to appeal to the students from tertiary institutions. The youths are an important group to target as they will form an integral part of society in the future and will be able to use their knowledge to help the victims. Moreover, many tertiary institutions have Red Cross Societies and these clubs often organize overseas trips to help the needy. Therefore, these altruistic clubs and societies can be targeted to encourage them to conduct programmes that will involve the students and the Agent Orange victims.

Most importantly, humanitarian organizations are an essential audience for the book. By distributing the books to the organizations that will be interested in helping Agent Orange victims, I hope that they will be able to plan large scale funding campaigns. The organizations have the legal platform and the framework to collect donations from the public. Consequently, this will be a more efficient manner to reach the general public. Humanitarian organizations include the Singapore Red Cross, which provide assistance in relief operations in times of disaster and in auxiliary health and welfare services.

## Chapter 2: Pre-Production

### 2.1 Researching the project

I started my research since July 2007 and looked through various sources to enhance my knowledge on the topic before my trip to Vietnam. First, I visited the Lee Kong Chiang Reference library to look through reference materials and journals on the Vietnam War and Agent Orange. The library offers in-depth information and statistics on Agent Orange and how it was used as a military strategy in the war. The detailed information helped me to build up sufficient knowledge on the beginnings of the Vietnam War and how Agent Orange came into the picture.

In addition, I looked through past works done by photographers on the topic of Agent Orange and other similar incidents such as the gas leak in Bhopal, India in 1984, which was photographed by Raghu Rai. Eugene W. Smith's essay *Minamata vs. the Chisso Corporation* was also examined because it illustrates the lives of the Japanese after the Atomic bomb in World War II. The most influential work was *Agent Orange: Collateral Damage in Vietnam* by Philip Jones Griffiths. He is a well-known photographer covering Agent Orange in Vietnam and his work served as a great inspiration. Exposing myself to his work also helped me to decide on a different angle that had not been done. Hence, I was able to photograph my photos during the trip with a new perspective in mind. Studying the works of similar human tragedies also helped me to picture how my photos on Agent Orange will be shot. I learnt the different angles in capturing the human emotions, composition and lighting especially used in Smith's photos to reflect grief. Moreover, it was through the study of past works by Smith,

Griffiths and Raj in the last 40 years that influenced me to present my photos in black and white.

Moreover, websites such as the Lexis Nexus helped me to search through major newswires such as *Associated Press* and *New York Times*, providing valuable information on the recent lawsuit against manufacturers of the defoliant Agent Orange.

In addition, email exchanges with Merle Ratner, the co-coordinator for the Vietnam Agent Orange Relief & Responsibility Campaign, enabled me to get the contacts of people who can help me with my project. Consequently, this led me to the head of international relations, Mr. Nguyen Minh Y from the Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange/dioxin (VAVA) organization, who provided me more details on traveling to Vietnam. Furthermore, through emails I was able to communicate with Doan Duc Minh, an experienced photographer in Vietnam, who helped me understand the human effects of Agent Orange and the current situation from his personal experiences with the families.

## **2.2 The Vietnam War**

### **2.2.1 The origins of the Vietnam War**

America's involvement in Vietnam began from as early as 1950 with its acceptance of the Bao Dai solution. Since then, American interest in Vietnam has never waned, especially in light of the escalating Cold War. In the Geneva Conference of 1954, the United States made clear that it would not support a partition of the country into two,

with one half under the control of the victorious Viet Minh in the aftermath of the French debacle at Dien Bien Phu, a valley in Northern Tonkin. The United States seemed determined to deny any recognition of victory to the Communists in Vietnam.

### **2.2.2 Ngo Din Diem and the failure of the regime in the South**

In the next ten years, the United States tried vainly to keep a strong regime in Southern Vietnam, one that was led by the nationalist Ngo Din Diem. Diem's autocratic regime received American financial and military aid as the United States was preserving a regime that would assert geopolitical influence. The situation in the South however, worsened against American hopes, and Diem proved both unable to stop the Communist-led insurgency in the South and to keep his own position. Diem's regime was increasingly unpopular. The ruthless dictator's religious persecution of the Buddhist community alienated a large part of the population and he was simultaneously accused of nepotism.

### **2.2.3 Triple Assassination**

Finally, in 1963, Diem and his brother Ngo Din Nhu were both murdered, leaving the South in chaos and political instability. Before the year ended, then-United States President John F. Kennedy was also assassinated, bringing the situation in both Vietnam and America to a crisis. By now, American involvement in Vietnam had increased significantly and Kennedy had further increased the American presence in South Vietnam by sending in more military and political advisors.

#### **2.2.4 Lyndon Johnson and America's official involvement in Vietnam**

When President Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in as President of the United States. Johnson faced an increasingly volatile situation in Vietnam. Despite his inclination to focus on his domestic "Great Society" reforms, he found himself having to deal with the boiling situation in Vietnam. The Americans were not willing to let Vietnam go as it represented a struggle the United States were determined to fight, and win. The loss of Vietnam would not only be symbolic, it would gravely endanger its neighboring Indochinese neighbours—Laos and Cambodia. Furthermore, the Cold War had perpetuated conviction in the Domino Theory in the Far East and United States strategists believed losing Vietnam would start a chain reaction in the rest of Southeast Asia that would only further embolden the Soviets and the Chinese.

#### **2.3 Agent Orange**

When President Johnson finally announced the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1965, it came as hardly a surprise. Vietnam was to represent America's biggest commitment then in an overseas war—the United States military sent in half a million troops into Vietnam.

Agent Orange was but another of the tools of war the Americans employed in a bid to help them win a speedy and decisive war. That was not to be. Agent Orange caused immense damage to not only Vietnam but also Laos and Cambodia as well, leaving literally a path of destruction in its wake.

The massive herbicidal programme named 'Operation Ranch Hand' was aimed for the most part at the forests of South Vietnam and to a lesser extent at its crops (Westing, 1972). Using a variety of agents, the USA eventually expended a volume of more than 72 x 1000 cubic metres containing almost 55 million kilograms of active herbicidal ingredients. The three major anti-plant agents employed by the US army were colour-coded "Orange", "White", and "Blue". Agent Orange was the mostly widely used and represented 61 percent of the total volume expended over the years. Moreover, it is estimated that 14 percent of the total extent of South Vietnam's woody vegetation has been sprayed one or more times. A recent U.S. study provided statistics on the correlation of spraying data to village census reports (Stellman, 2003). The study finds that in 69% of the villages sprayed, 2.1 to 4.8 million people were exposed to the spray. Moreover, according to data from VAVA, it is estimated that one to two million Vietnamese are affected and 300,000 are children.

Concerns over the effect of the dioxin on human health arose in the 1960s when a Catholic Newspaper in Saigon, *Tin Sang*, published reports on an unusual increase in deformed fetuses, stillbirths and children with birth defects in villages that were sprayed with the dioxin. However, there were minimal research on the dioxin's harmful effects in the 1970s and majority of the villagers were unaware that their illnesses were related to the dioxin that was sprayed over their lands.

The lawsuit brought up by the Vietnam veterans in 1979 against the manufacturers of Agent Orange resulted in an out-of-court settlement of \$180 million in

1984. It was then that the Department of Veteran Affairs recognized a stark connection between Agent Orange exposure and at least 11 categories of illness, including diabetes and neurological disorders. However, in February 2005, the U.S. Second Circuit Court of Appeals in Manhattan upheld a 2005 verdict, dismissing the Vietnamese plaintiffs who had failed to establish that their illnesses to be directly related to Agent Orange. Consequently, this controversial decision created an uproar in Vietnam.

Most importantly, the Agent Orange victims are not receiving sufficient help from the government to sustain their lives. The capacity of homes and hospitals are inadequate to receive every Agent Orange patient and the cost of medication is high.

## **Chapter 3: In Vietnam**

### **3.1 Logistics**

The head of international relations Mr. Nguyen Minh Y from VAVA was resourceful in helping me find an accommodation in Ho Chi Minh City for my one-week stay from 22<sup>nd</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> September 2007.

During the first few days in Vietnam, gaining access to hospitals and homes was difficult due to the bureaucracy and the children's unstable medical conditions. However, Doan Duc Minh, a fellow photographer, was able to get permission granted from the Head of the Tu Du Hospital for a visit to photograph the children. In addition, Minh had contacts with the Thien Phouc Home in Cu Chi district, which is a non-governmental charitable organization that receives, nurses, treats, rehabilitates and educates disabled

and cerebral palsy children affected by Agent Orange. As a result, this provided a great opportunity for me to get up close with the children.

Furthermore, I contacted the Red Cross Society in Vietnam to get contacts of families affected by Agent Orange. With these contacts, I was able to travel around in Ho Chi Minh for the interviews.

In the second week from 29<sup>th</sup> September to 3<sup>rd</sup> October, I traveled to Hue with Minh and stayed with three families. Moreover, we would often take day trips to visit more families with Le Minh a journalist with *Hue Times*.

### **3.2 Photography**

On the whole, I took 4,000 photos throughout the two weeks in Vietnam. They were shot with the digital single lens reflect camera Nikon D-70 which I was familiarized during the basic photojournalism class with Assistant Professor Shyam Tekwani from the division of Journalism. Working with the D-70 was comfortable and although some of the photos turned out under exposed. However the quality of the majority was acceptable due to the nature of the topic. Some of the under exposed photos brought out the grief that I wanted to illustrate.

I brought a laptop computer along for transferring the photos, which allowed me to examine and evaluate how I could improve on the experimentation of different angles.



While photographing I looked at how I could adjust the space or perspective to create new twist.

Most of the time, I shot without a flash because it was a disturbance to the sick children and it was impolite to intrude into their comfort zone. Furthermore, in the hospitals and homes, most of them did not allow flash photography because it might agitate the patients. As a result, some of the photos turned out grainy because they were shot with ISO 1600 to accommodate the dark lighting in the village huts and hospitals. However, I felt that the graininess conveyed the tension and the idea of the struggle in the photos.

### **3.3 Interviews**

The interview questions were basically categorized into four sections; i) family situation; ii) forms of help received from the government or organizations; iii) requests for assistance and iv) their personal thoughts about the future.

Although there was a structure in my interviews, the conversations became very informal after establishing a connection with the interviewees. Consequently, the informality enabled me to delve deeper and encouraged them to share intimate details of their daily lives. Doan Duc Minh translated the all the interviews on the spot and I would transcribe them manually onto my notebook.

## Chapter 4: Analysis of Photographic Style

### 4.1 Influence

While developing my own personal style, I also tried to integrate the styles of well-known photographers who have mastered the use of the photographic language as a tool of visual communication and whose works were carefully dramatized for the greatest impact.

I was very influenced by Eugene W. Smith's works while shooting in Vietnam. Before I left for Vietnam I studied his works and various photographers'. Smith's photographic styles have close links with classical paintings due to his familiarity with Dutch and Flemish masters. In his two essays *Spanish Village* and *Minamata vs. Chisso Corporation*, the photos have been frequently compared with the *Pietas*, which abound in traditional religious painting. Smith also imitated Rembrandt's use of *chiaroscuro* and different light sources.

Therefore, the *Spanish Village* and *Minamata vs. Chisso Corporation* were two vital works that influenced my photos. Smith utilizes the shadow or deliberately darkens his photos to create tension and add the metaphorical connotation of death like his famous photo of Tomoku Uemura in her bath taken in 1972. Moreover, I experimented the use of different light sources such as natural light, directional lighting, front lighting and back light.

Most importantly, Smith's essay-making technique was one that should be closely examined. His narrative structured essays were moving and communicated a powerful visual story. In an interview for Editor and Publisher in 1954; "Country Doctor", he said that a photojournalist is like a playwright.

"... who must know what went on before the curtain went up, and have some idea of what will happen when the curtain goes down. And along the way, as he blocks in his characters, he must find and examine those missing relationships that give the validity of interpretation to the play."

-Eugene W. Smith

I followed Smith's mantra on creating a narrative visual story with my photos. The photos taken during the trip in Vietnam looked at the different characters that bring out the struggle of the Vietnamese. I wanted to show the lives of the Agent Orange victims in a dramatic manner that brings out the essence of how they survive through the atrocities of the chemical warfare. In the process of taking the photos, I always went back to the main objective of the essay, which was to portray the resilience of the Vietnamese through their sufferings and optimism for the future. As a result, I was able to mentally prepare myself for the photos that I should be taking to fill in the blanks of the visual story I wanted to communicate.

Moreover, in his essay in Magnum stories, Smith did not see the need to package a story so that it will have an ending. He always leaves room for the future, the unpredictable and the unforeseeable.

Hence, I was aiming to end my essay in a manner that will inspire and provoke the readers to think about the struggles of the victims and how the future will be like for them. *The Orange Struggle* does not provide an answer but it serves more as a reflection avenue for the readers on the lives of the underprivileged.

Another inspiration was Bruce Gilden whose confrontational style in his photo essay *Facing New York* captures the emotions and thoughts of his subjects. Therefore, I tried to emulate his style through the tight shots of the victims so as to convey their thoughts through their facial expressions and body language. I wanted to emphasize the subjects of my photo essays and the portraiture shots were aimed at bringing out their true characters that would eventually connect to the viewers.

## **Chapter 5: Production of Book**

### **5.1 Selection of photos**

It was a tedious task to choose 18 photos out of the 4,000 shots taken during the Vietnam trip. Therefore, I had to categorize the photos into the different groups. The categories were i) the effects of Agent Orange; ii) caregivers and rehabilitation homes; iii) the lives of the Agent Orange victims and families; iv) and the inspirational photos that portray optimism and hope for the future. There were approximately a thousand photos in each category.

From the categorized photos, I was able to form a visual story and I started writing the captions. Moreover, the categorization helped me on the layout and the arrangement of the photos in the book.

## **5.2 Layout**

Due to the serious tone of *The Orange Struggle*, I adopted a minimalist style in my book design. The pages are in black and the captions in white with words highlighted in orange that express the main gist of the photos. The layout is very simple with the captions on one page and the photo on the other. However, for some photos, they were spread across two pages to create a striking effect. The design is very basic because the readers' attention should focus on the photos and the aesthetical consideration in the design of the book is to enhance instead of distract from the essence of the photos.

## **5.3 Printing of the book**

Due to my schoolmate's recommendation based on the reasonable prices offered by KHL Printing, I contacted them to get a price quote for the book. However, logistical problems made me look into other printing companies.

I found a small printing shop, Unity Print, which was able to get the book printed within two weeks before the deadline 26<sup>th</sup> of March 2008. Although the charges were \$550 for 7 books, they were willing to print in small quantities and the quality of the book was not compromised.

## **Chapter 6: Difficulties, Insights and Conclusion**

### **6.1 Difficulties**

Being a student specializing in Public and Promotional Communication (PPC), it might seem inconsistent to carry out a photojournalism project. However, I knew since 2007 that I wanted my final year project to be on the topic of Agent Orange. This was the topic I felt so much for and I had to take a risk to take on a project that was atypical for a PPC student. Furthermore, this was the last major project as an undergraduate and I wanted to choose something I felt passionate for.

Along the way, there were many setbacks and at times I questioned myself if I was able complete this project. The first setback was when the preferred photojournalism advisor could not take me on as his Final Year student. Within a short period of time, I had to find a supervisor who was willing to help me materialize this seemingly impossible project. Hence, I searched through the list of available supervisors and found Assistant Professor Dr Yeoh Kok Cheow whose expertise in graphic design and printed collaterals would be helpful since I was designing a book. Therefore, I am very grateful that Dr Yeoh Kok Cheow was keen to take on this project and he has been very supportive throughout the entire process.

In addition, a solo project meant more responsibilities. Traveling to Vietnam alone was a huge obstacle at first. I had to settle the logistics in a foreign land and get help from friends when I did not understand the language. It was very frightening at the

beginning because it was my first visit to Vietnam and I had no friends to support me when I was there.

However, the frightening thoughts made me more determined to overcome the obstacles. I was very aware of my surroundings and made sure I did not put myself into danger. I learnt to be more independent and took many precautions. Most importantly, being there alone made me more observant and that helped me a lot when I was photographing the victims. On the contrary, photographing in Singapore is more comfortable, as I can be less aware of dangers and my surroundings due to the familiarity. In Singapore, I can depend on friends to be there to watch out for me and in any case of danger, it is convenient to contact the authorities.

Although there were language barriers, I felt that it did not affect my photos. In fact, I communicated with my subjects through body language. At times, actions speak louder than words. Hence, I felt that photographing them was easier when little words were spoken and their bodies communicated visually.

## **6.2 Insights**

The experience I had in Vietnam was amazing and I learnt so much from the people I met. I am glad that I was able to complete this project and travel to Vietnam to witness the atrocities of the Vietnam War. Moreover, this trip enabled me to brush up my photographic skills and put what I learnt during photojournalism classes into practice.

During a few interviews, I tried to hold back my tears because of what I saw and heard. Meeting the victims was very emotional for me because I was never exposed to such sufferings in Singapore. There were moments when we shared laughter and the tenderness for the disabled children. On the other hand, there were moments when I was rendered mute and there would be a heavy silence. Asking the interviewees the questions that bring out the sad past was not the easiest task. Nevertheless I learnt how to ask my questions emphatically and with respect.

### **6.3 Conclusion**

It is saddening to witness so much suffering the victims have to go through, however it was also very inspirational that they still managed to remain determined and positive. Although we could not understand one another through a common spoken language, we felt a special connection. When I had to leave, I knew I was going to visit them again after I graduate because I have learnt so much from my new friends who have showered me with warmth and generosity.

*The Orange Struggle* has been the most meaningful project I have embarked on and I hope that people will look at the photos and realize that there is always hope in our lives, but hope only comes when one takes the setbacks within one's stride and persevere on.



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