

*FORTY-TWO YEARS AND THE FREQUENT WIND:
VIETNAMESE REFUGEES IN AMERICA*

Photography by Nick Ut

Exhibition Curator: Randy Miller

Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography
August 28 through October 13, 2017

A reception for Mr. Ut will take place in the Irene
Carlson Gallery of Photography, 5:00 – 6:00 p.m.
Thursday, September 21, 2017

About Nick Ut...

The second youngest of 11 siblings, Huỳnh Công (Nick) Út, was born March 29, 1951, in the village of Long An in Vietnam's Mekong Delta. He admired his older brother, Huynh Thanh My, who was a photographer for Associated Press, and who was reportedly obsessed with taking a picture that would stop the war. Huynh was hired by the AP and was on assignment in 1965 when he and a group of soldiers he was with were overrun by Viet Cong rebels who killed everyone.

Three months after his brother's funeral, Ut asked his brother's editor, Horst Faas, for a job. Faas was reluctant to hire the 15-year-old, suggesting he go to school, go home. "AP is my home now," Ut replied. Faas ultimately relented, hiring him to process film, make prints, and keep the facility clean. But Ut wanted to do more, and soon began photographing around the streets of Saigon.

"Then, all of a sudden, in 1968, [the Tet Offensive] breaks out," recalls Hal Buell, former AP photography director. "Nick had a scooter by then. He scooted around making these pictures of battle scenes. He showed the adeptness and smarts you have to have to be a good combat photographer."

The quest to take a picture that would stop the war became Ut's, and many claim he made that picture on June 8, 1972, when he photographed Phan Thi Kim Phuc running toward his camera, fleeing a South Vietnamese napalm attack on Tran Bang village, about 25 miles northwest of Saigon. As soon as she reached him, he put his camera down and poured water from his canteen on her burns. He then rushed her to a nearby hospital, where doctors initially refused to treat her, saying she was burned so badly she wouldn't survive. Ut flashed his press credentials, saying they'd better treat her because her picture would be in all the papers the next day. They did, but Ut later had her transferred to an American hospital, which likely saved her life.

Ut's photograph of Kim Phuc was published around the world the next day. Many claim that it did, indeed, contribute to ending the war. Ut was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for spot news photography in 1973.

Ut continued working as a photographer for AP until the war's end, in April 1975, when he left Vietnam with other journalists. He stayed briefly in a refugee camp set up at California's Camp Pendleton, then AP moved him to its Tokyo bureau. It was there that he met his wife, with whom he moved to Los Angeles in 1977.

In addition to the Pulitzer Prize, Ut's photograph of Kim Phuc also earned him the World Press Photo Award, the George Polk Memorial Award, and the Overseas Press Club Award. In 2012, on the 40th anniversary of his Pulitzer Prize-winning photo, Ut became the third person inducted by the Leica Hall of Fame for his contributions to photojournalism.

Working for AP in Los Angeles, Ut photographed celebrities and major events in the area. Much of his career involved capturing celebrities in their most difficult moments—from a photograph of O.J. Simpson and his lawyer sitting in court, to Michael Jackson standing on a limo waving to fans after his arraignment on charges of child molestation. He has become a U.S. citizen, and retired this year on March 29. Although retired, he is never seen without a camera, and seems to be even busier now than ever.

Ut and Kim Phuc remain close friends to this day. She is married and a mother of two, and lives with her husband near Toronto. Ut has two grown children and two grandchildren, and lives with his wife in a suburb of Los Angeles.

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About my photography ...

Thank you for inviting me back to the University of La Verne to show my photographs. I am honored to be here, and hope people will enjoy seeing my pictures for a second time.

Although I retired from my work as a photographer for the Associated Press in March, it seems I have been busier than ever since then, traveling to Oregon to photograph the solar eclipse, Manzanar to photograph the site of the World War II internment camp for Japanese-Americans, and places such as Philadelphia and Switzerland for exhibits and awards shows.

Everywhere I go, even though I am retired, I bring my cameras. They have become a part of my life and I cannot put them down, even though my professional career has ended. I told the interviewer for an article AP wrote about me in March, "I'll take pictures until I die. My camera is like my doctor, my medicine."

For me, making photographs is about recording important moments, but it is also about self-expression. Sometimes both at once. And today, it doesn't matter if you use professional equipment or just a smartphone. The technology in smartphones today has made them very good. You can get great images from them, and nearly everybody has one these days.

I encourage everyone—students, teachers ... anyone—to take pictures. It allows you to see the world in a special way. The pictures may not win awards, but that's not what's important. Pictures help us express who we are, and they help us communicate with one another, and that's really what's most important.

Thanks again for inviting me back to the university. I hope you enjoy my pictures.

-Nick Ut
August 28, 2017

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42 Years and the Frequent Wind: Vietnamese Refugees in America

The image of a helicopter perched precariously atop an apartment building in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) as dozens of people climb a ladder to it in hopes of catching a ride out epitomizes the chaotic final days of American's military involvement in Vietnam. It exemplifies the effort by American forces at the end of April 1975 to evacuate Vietnamese who had been loyal to the South. For weeks, thousands already had been transported out of the country on fixed-wing aircraft when it had become apparent that Northern forces were poised to overtake the country. By April 29, the military instituted its final push: rushing, via helicopter, as many people as possible to aircraft carriers offshore. It was dubbed Operation Frequent Wind.

Although that final evacuation effort lasted but two days—April 29 and 30—its name was fitting, both then and in the years that followed. Presumably, the “frequent wind” referred to helicopter blades, to distinguish that mission from the fixed-wing operation that preceded it. But it is an appropriate description not only for that mission, which rescued some 6,000 Vietnamese, but for all who were uprooted from their homeland and carried on the wind, as it were, from one country to another before alighting, finally, in places where they could begin anew.

Thousands of Vietnamese eventually ended up in California. Westminster, in Orange County, became home to “Little Saigon,” the largest settlement of its kind outside of Vietnam, where some 190,000 currently reside.

One who did not have to clamber aboard a helicopter in the final days of the war was Huỳnh Công (Nick) Út, who had been working as a photographer for Associated Press since being hired in January 1966, at age 15, and who left the country in April 1975 with other journalists. Still, technically, he too is a refugee from his homeland.

In June 1972, while working in Tran Bang, about 25 miles northwest of Saigon, Ut made what would become one of Time magazine's 100 most influential photographs of all time—one for which he would be awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1973. South Vietnamese forces had dropped napalm on the village of Tran Bang, where they suspected Viet Cong soldiers were hiding out. That was not the case. Instead, civilians were doused with the jelly-like substance and began fleeing their village. Nick Ut and other journalists on a nearby road noticed them and began making pictures as the terrified individuals ran toward them. Immediately after he had made his images, Ut put down his cameras and began pouring water over 9-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phuc, who had been badly burned. He took her to a nearby hospital for treatment, and later arranged for her to be cared for at an American hospital, which likely saved her life.

That image had a powerful impact on me when it was published, as had other photographs from that war: Malcolm Browne's shot of the monk who lit himself on fire in downtown Saigon; Eddie Adams' photo of the street execution of a suspected Vietcong operative; Ronald Haeberle's images from the My Lai Massacre. American involvement began in the early 1960s and lasted until 1975, although American ground troops were no longer involved after 1973. I was a senior in high school in 1972, and turned 18 in June, just days after Nick Ut made his photograph of Kim Phuc. The draft was still in effect, so our involvement in Vietnam hit home. Registration for Selective Service was required by law. As it happened, my number was not drawn in the lottery, and I was not called to serve. The draft was phased out in 1973.

Although soldiers were the ones who felt the impact of the war directly and acutely, it had a profound grip on our entire country then and in the years to come. Without Vietnam, there would have been no Pentagon Papers, no Watergate. President Nixon likely would have been in office for his entire second term. The war had a dramatic effect on the way subsequent wars were covered. Many in the administration and the military were convinced that the media's extensive and virtually unrestrained coverage of the war was a major factor in the failure of the U.S.

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mission in Vietnam. As a result, a pool system was put in place, used first in Grenada and then Panama, and also during the Gulf War.

Interest in the war and its effects has lasted years. Hundreds, if not thousands, of books have been written about it. Universities—even the University of La Verne—have carried courses focusing on the Vietnam War and its impact on society. For my master’s thesis, I did a qualitative study focusing on the nature of the relationship between the media and the military from the Vietnam War through the Persian Gulf War, and the impact on democracy in America. Later, I organized a January Interterm study trip to Vietnam for ULV students and others. We wanted to learn about what Vietnam was like today, but also visit sites that had been pivotal during the war, itself, including Hanoi, Da Nang, My Lai and Saigon.

It was while planning that trip that I met Nick Ut through a mutual friend. Our acquaintance would lead to the first showing of his work in the Irene Carlson Gallery in 2008. Somewhere around that time he told me that he had switched to digital photography, and was no longer using film. Digital photography was not in wide use at that time, and I was surprised to learn that a professional photographer had already made the leap into that new world. I knew there was no turning back, and it set me thinking about the implications for the future of photography.

The shift from film to digital raised eyebrows—and questions—at first, especially about image quality, which was not nearly as good then as it has become today. But the change was inevitable, and those with the foresight to jump on have fared well; those who viewed it as a passing fad, or who were not quick enough to see where things were heading, did not. Kodak comes to mind. Once a dominant player in the world of photography, it was slow to transfer to digital, and things began to go downhill. The company filed for bankruptcy in January 2012.

It didn’t start with Kodak, of course—this business of us documenting ourselves and our activities. We humans have been recording our activities with visual images since we began painting and scratching images on cave walls some 17,000 years ago. Just like Kilroy, who’s cartoon image and famous phrase “Kilroy was here!” was ubiquitous in World War II, we have a need to let people know that we existed, that we made a difference. Increasingly, we even want others to know what we had for dinner. (Maybe that’s what the cave painters were doing when they made their pictures of animals.)

Some decry the increased use of smartphones in recent years, claiming they have led to a decline in the quality of our interactions. Some in the photography industry say smartphone cameras are contributing to the diminishment of professional photography. If everyone can photograph, the reasoning goes—and with increasingly higher quality camera phones—where is the need for professional photographers?

In a February 28, 2012 article by Tom de Castella in BBC News Magazine, Andrew Keen, author of “The Cult of the Amateur: How Today’s Internet is Killing Our Culture,” claims the digital camera has destroyed the craft of photography. “Everyone now is a photographer. Everyone now likes to record everything endlessly.” There is a huge contrast, he suggests, between that and the distinguished female photographer he’s friends with who takes very few photographs but with huge care. “Photography has become so easy meaning that people don’t really think a photo has any intrinsic value. And what concerns me most is that photographers as a profession are being decimated by online theft.”

Today, surprisingly, an increasing number of professional photographers are embracing even smartphones as technological advances offer new options and improve image quality. As American photographer Chase Jarvis puts it, “The best camera is the one that’s with you.” Nick Ut would agree.

Nearly all of the color images in this gallery were made with an iPhone 7, specifically for this exhibit. The black-and-white images provide historical context, and a reminder of the unique challenges faced by Vietnamese who

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fled their homeland in the years following the war's end. Most of the color images—which Ut made on July 23, in Orange County's Little Saigon—offer a tiny glimpse into what life is like for Vietnamese refugees in the United States today, and are intended to tie in with the visit by fellow Pulitzer Prize-winner Viet Thanh Nguyen, the author who will speak about his book, "The Refugees," on campus October 4.

Ut still uses high-end Nikons and Leicas, as the subject may demand. He traveled to Oregon in August to record the solar eclipse and pointed 500mm lenses toward the sun and moon. But, as we see in this exhibit, an iPhone 7 is perfectly adequate for many situations—even for professionals.

What are the implications of this shift in technology in recent years—not just for professional photographers, but for society? If Nick Ut had been using an iPhone instead of a 35mm Nikon loaded with Tri-X film, would he have captured the powerful image for which he won the Pulitzer? Who's to say? Some could argue he might have made an even more gripping photograph.

Ultimately, it's a moot point. The genie is out of the bottle—smartphones are here, and even professionals like Nick Ut have embraced them. There are pitfalls, of course. Psychologists warn of the downsides of our spending too much time communicating via smartphone and less time face-to-face. Is that reason enough to turn our backs on them (as if we could)? Sears and Kodak—giants in their day—failed to adapt as Amazon and Apple ushered in new ways of doing business and creating images.

As with anything, advances in technology are something of a double-edge sword, bringing advantages and disadvantages. Purists may assert that photography reached its apex decades ago, when photographers like Ansel Adams and Edward Weston made stark, black-and-white prints from large-format film negatives. Similarly, audiophiles claim that sound quality in recorded music reached its peak in the days of vinyl records, and began its decline in the digital age, when compact discs were introduced.

Fair points. But consider this. In a recent interview with journalist Patt Morrison, the singer Linda Ronstadt, who much prefers the richness of vinyl recordings over today's digital sound, says she listens to music today mostly on YouTube—not known for high quality sound—simply because it's much easier to hear virtually any artist anytime you wish.

Again, here, in our own Carlson Gallery, we have photographs made exclusively for this exhibit by a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer on a smartphone. Why? Because the quality is good, and because such images could be made quickly and easily.

Before he was caught cheating at bicycle racing, Lance Armstrong wrote a book called "It's Not About the Bike." (Maybe it was about the performance-enhancing substances.) Armstrong's checkered past aside, the point he made in his book was that it's the rider, not the equipment, that makes the difference.

The same argument can be applied to photography. It's not about the camera. Sure, great equipment is helpful, but, following this logic, the images captured have more to do with what the photographer brings to the game.

Nick Ut shot with manual film cameras during the Vietnam War. Today, his equipment is digital. But in addition to his high-end digital cameras, he also shoots with a smartphone.

Do changes in technology and in our tools affect the way we encounter our world? Do the kind of cameras we use make a difference in the kind of pictures we take? Using Lance Armstrong's argument, the answer would be no. It's not the equipment, it's the photographer.

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Still...

Things change. We modify our tools as needs arise and new technology comes along. It's even true of our language. A few sentences back, I used the word "smartphone." If I'd written that word even a few years ago, my computer would have alerted me to my error, telling me it should be two words.

Language changes, tools change, and we adapt. If we don't, we stand the risk joining Kodak and Sears, adrift on the winds of history.

-Randy Miller
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Associated Press photographer Nick Ut received the Pulitzer Prize in 1973 for this image, made on June 8, 1972, depicting the impact the Vietnam War was having on civilians. A napalm bomb dropped by the South Vietnamese Air Force on Tran Bang, some 25 miles northwest of Saigon, hit 9-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phuc and members of her family, killing two of them. The picture almost never saw the light of day. An editor at Saigon's AP bureau initially refused to send it, claiming no paper would run it because it showed frontal nudity. Thanks to the urgings of AP picture editor Horst Faas, the image was sent and subsequently published around the world. The picture is cited as one of the most influential images of the 20th century, and credited by many as helping to end the war.



Nick Ut rushes to help badly burned Kim Phuc, who suffered third degree burns over 30 percent of her body. He took her to a nearby hospital for treatment, and later had her transferred to an American hospital for further care that likely saved her life. Photograph by Hoàng Van Danh, AP/UPI.



A Vietnamese family flees An Loc on Highway 13 in the spring of 1975 as the war draws to a close.



Desperation is etched on the faces of families displaced during the final days of the war. Those who worked for or were associated in some way with the Americans or with South Vietnamese forces knew their days of freedom were numbered, and did anything they could to escape the country before the North took over.



Most Vietnamese who fled their homeland after the war in 1975 were housed for weeks or months in holding centers in places such as Malaysia and the Philippines. In a few cases, the wait was much longer. These Vietnamese refugees were among 229 who, after 16 years, left Manila on a chartered flight for California. Here, they are greeted by grateful relatives upon arriving at Los Angeles International Airport on Sept. 26, 2005.



Ha Huyen, Thanh, 82, served in the Vietnam Air Force, and proudly wears a cap that bears testimony to his years in uniform. He was captured before he could flee his homeland, and was imprisoned for 10 years by the victors because of his allegiance to the South—a fate not uncommon among former members of the Southern forces. Today, he and his family are in California, where he spends much of his time in Westminster, California's Little Saigon, where thousands of Vietnamese began new lives after 1975. Here, he enjoys a morning out with Ha Huynh Than and his wife, Nguyen Kiew Loan.



Former South Vietnam Army soldier Nguyen Thuan was one of the lucky ones who was able to escape Vietnam in 1975 and began life anew in Orange County's Little Saigon.



They may no longer be brothers in arms, but South Vietnamese Army veterans enjoy a special camaraderie, spending much of their time together at coffee shops and restaurants in Orange County’s Little Saigon. Having access to newspapers in their mother tongue helps them remain abreast of current events.



“Often, their children, many of them born in America, aren’t interested in knowing their stories of a lost cause in a distant land,” wrote H. G. Reza and Thao Hua, staff writers for the Los Angeles Times, in a story marking the 20th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War, and bringing to light the quiet, often lonely lives led by the South Vietnamese veterans, like these in Little Saigon. “Seldom do they even share their common experiences with the American veterans who were once their allies and sometimes their friends. The aging Vietnamese veterans are mostly forgotten, except by one another, as they struggle with bitterness and a gnawing need to understand what went so tragically wrong 20 years ago.”



Nick Ut is a familiar face in Orange County’s Little Saigon. Even when making photos with just a smartphone—as on this occasion in July when he was there for lunch with journalist and long-time friend Peter Arnett—he is quickly recognized. Here, he shares a laugh with South Vietnamese Air Force veteran Truong Giang.



Thousands of people turned out for a parade to celebrate the Vietnamese New Year—also known as Tet—in January in Orange County’s Little Saigon. Here, girls in traditional Vietnamese ao dais carry the flag of the former South Vietnam.



A woman uses a smartphone to check her makeup in preparation for Vietnam New Year festivities this January in Orange County’s Little Saigon.



They may have been high-ranking officers or business leaders in their homeland, but when they arrived in the United States, many refugees found themselves struggling just to survive. If it meant taking jobs as janitors, restaurant workers and house cleaners to keep their families afloat and educate their children, they were not averse to doing so. Despite such humble beginnings, many went on to become successful business owners and community leaders.



Just above a corner booth in this Little Saigon restaurant hangs a black-and-white photograph of a winsome young woman gazing into the distance. The woman is Than Mai—seen here, years later, adjusting a sign in the restaurant that bears her name. When the portrait on the wall was taken, she was a teenager in Vietnam, where she enjoyed enormous fame for her singing and acting talents. She and her husband Sim Yersin left Vietnam for Paris in 1978, where she worked for six years as a singer. The couple finally settled in Orange County, California. In 1987, they opened Than Mai Restaurant in Orange County's Little Saigon, which they have maintained ever since. They have two grown daughters, one of whom is following in her mother's footsteps as a singer.



They may be hard to come by at Vons or Trader Joe's, but at grocery stores in Little Saigon, durian, jackfruit and other produce common in Vietnam can easily be found.



Hairdressing salon in Westminster's Little Saigon



Van Thanh Nguyen (left), mother of San Bernardino mass shooting victim Tin Nguyen, and grandmother Nghi Van Nguyen (right) weep over Tin's coffin at her wake at the Peek Funeral Home in Westminster, Calif., December 11, 2015.



Nick Ut has remained in close contact with Kim Phuc since the day he made his famous photograph of her in 1972. In 2009, the two met for a visit at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. Today, Kim Phuc, 54, is married to Bui Huy Toan, whom she wed in 1992. The couple now live near Toronto, Canada, and have two children.



Some 800,000 “boat people” are estimated to have fled Vietnam following the war, especially during 1978 and 1979, although the exodus by ship continued into the early 1990s. While that number applies only to those who left Vietnam and arrived safely in another country, around 2 million people are thought to have left the country by one means or another between 1975 and 1995. The trips, especially at sea, were fraught with danger. It was not uncommon for ships to be attacked, and refugees robbed and even killed for whatever treasure they may have brought with them. Overcrowding, as this photograph illustrates, also was a common occurrence.



A refugee clutches her baby as a government helicopter gunship carries them away near Tuy Hoa, Vietnam.



Lightly wounded civilians and troops attempt to push their way onto a South Vietnamese evacuation helicopter hovering over a stretch of Highway 13 near An Loc, Vietnam, on June 25, 1972.



As the war drew to a close in the spring of 1975, Vietnamese families loyal to the South used any means possible to escape what they feared would be a draconian life under the soon-to-be victors. While likely unintentional, the way this image is framed—through the rear window of a Jeep—calls to mind one of the main formats via which most Americans saw the war: their TV screens. Because of this, the Vietnam War became known as America’s first “TV war,” as viewers huddled around their sets to witness the news as conveyed each evening by CBS, NBC or ABC. While some argue to this day that it was combat scenes on television that contributed in large part to America’s downfall in Vietnam, there’s no denying the impact that a single, still image can have, as Nick Ut’s Pulitzer Prize-winning of Kim Phuc has shown.