

A Reason for Being

The Life of Pioneering War Photographer Dickey Chapelle

BY RICHARD CURREY

Operation Black Ferret launched on the morning of November 3, 1965, in the I Corps tactical area of South Vietnam. The operation combined U. S. Marine units and ARVN infantry elements. Embedded with the Marines was a photojournalist, a rare instance of a woman photographer working on the ground with American forces.

Her name was Dickey Chapelle. She was on her fourth trip to Vietnam. A deeply experienced conflict photographer and writer, Chapelle had launched her career storming ashore with the Marines at Iwo Jima in 1945. In the following two decades she documented wars, revolts, and uprisings throughout the world, all the while facing and overcoming seemingly never-ending bias against female war correspondents.

On the second day of Black Ferret, a booby trap tripwire went off as the Marines worked along a trail, activating a mortar rigged with a grenade. Shrapnel sprayed into the unit, injuring several Marines. One fragment tore across Dickey Chapelle's neck, severing a carotid artery.

Last rites were given by a chaplain, as Chapelle reportedly whispered, "I guess this was bound to happen."

She died within minutes. She was 47 years old, the first female American war correspondent to be killed in action and one of the most significant war photographers of her generation, male or female. Dickey Chapelle had pioneered the reluctant acceptance of women as war correspondents, and left behind thousands of powerful images that helped us see, without compromise, the face of war.

FROM MIT TO TWA

It is no surprise to learn that Dickey Chapelle — born Georgette Louise Meyer in 1918 in Milwaukee — was an adventurous girl. Valedictorian of her high school graduating class with an aptitude for science and mathematics, she was entranced by airplanes and the technology of flight. She considered explorer-pilot Adm. Richard Byrd a personal hero, and adopted



Lt. Harold Meyerford/Wisconsin Historical Society

On the deck of the South Vietnamese Navy's River Assault Group 23 command ship near Vinh Long in central Vietnam in 1964, then *National Geographic* magazine contributor Dickey Chapelle took photographs for an article she wrote titled, "Water War in Vietnam" that appeared in the magazine's February 1966 issue three months after she was killed in South Vietnam.

his nickname for herself, "Dickey."

In 1934, at the age of 16, she accepted a scholarship to attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to study aeronautical engineering, one of only seven women admitted that year. While at MIT she gravitated to the Boston Coast Guard Station where she made the acquaintance of seaplane pilots, whose (possibly exaggerated) tales of their exploits only furthered her appetite for a life of adventure. Meanwhile, quieter pursuits in classrooms received less of her attention. After a string

of missed classes and poor grades, Dickey Chapelle was asked to leave MIT.

Back home in Shorewood, Wisconsin, she landed a job at a local airfield hoping to learn how to fly. But when she began a love affair with a pilot, her mother decided the best course of action was to get her high-spirited and strong-willed daughter out of town. Chapelle's mother sent her to live with her grandparents in Coral Gables, Florida.

South Florida only offered more airfields and pilots and an even

larger dose of the romance of aviation. By way of staying close to that world, Chapelle found a job writing press releases for air shows. When she submitted a freelance story to *The New York Times*, it garnered notice by TWA (then Transcontinental and Western Air, later Trans World Airlines) and an offer to work in the airline's New York City-based public relations office.

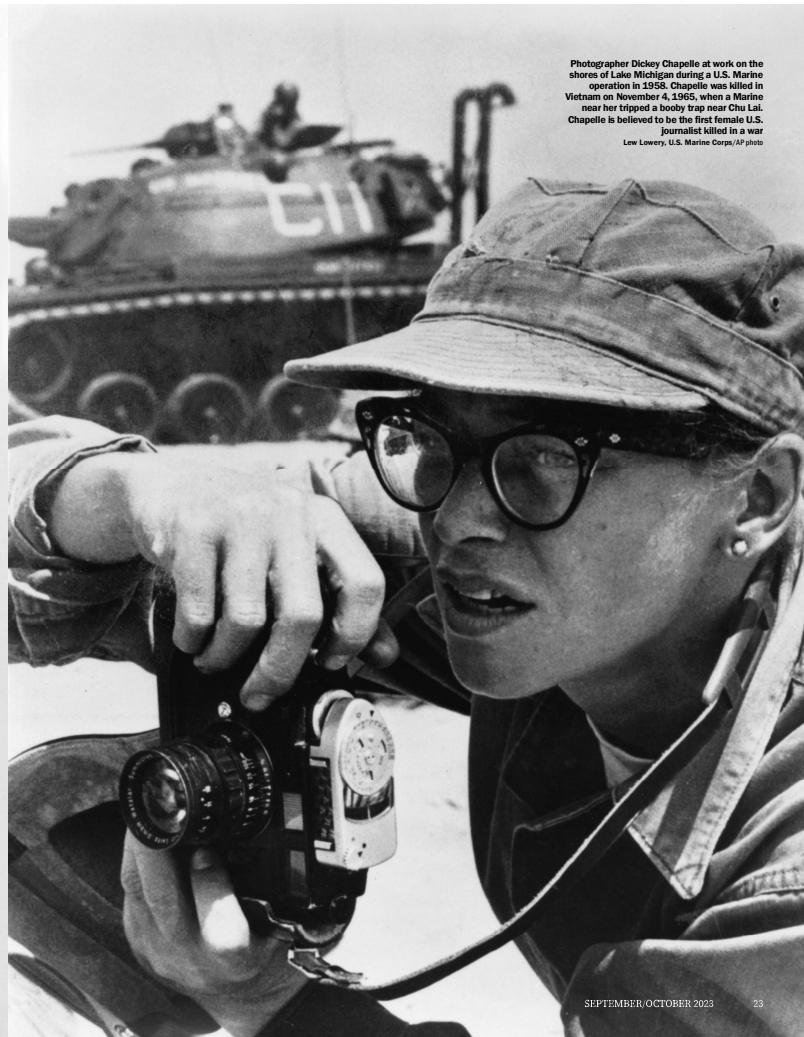
It was at TWA that she met Tony Chapelle, the bureau's staff photographer. Twenty years her senior, he had helped develop aerial photography techniques during his Navy service in World War I. Dickey Meyer found him worldly and charming, and a man who shared her passion for airplanes and aviation. She began to take weekly photography classes with him, and their mutual interest in each other blossomed along with Dickey's photographic skills. They married in October 1940.

Everything changed in the following year. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Tony Chapelle rejoined the Navy. Dickey Chapelle made another leap of the sort that had driven her life, fueled by her thirst for adventure and taste for risk — she applied for war correspondent/photographer credentials. She had no experience in a field of endeavor traditionally owned by men. But her credentials were approved, an event that set the rest of her life in motion. She was 23 years old.

After several behind-the-lines assignments, Chapelle was assigned to a hospital ship in the Pacific to document the medical care that troops evacuated from Iwo Jima and Okinawa received. Although she had orders forbidding her to join Marine forces on the ground, a bit of subterfuge mixed with her characteristic brashness got Chapelle ashore for both island assaults. Her photos from those battles, and from the minutes, hours, and days afterward, remain among the most enduring images from the Pacific theatre of World War II.

In the course of capturing her indelible scenes of combat, Dickey

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Photographer Dickey Chapelle at work on the shores of Lake Michigan during a U.S. Marine operation in 1958. Chapelle was killed in Vietnam on November 4, 1965, when a Marine near her tripped a booby trap near Chu Lai. Chapelle is believed to be the first female U.S. Journalist killed in a war
Low Lowery, U.S. Marine Corps/AP photo



LIFE

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Chapelle was once told that "war was no place for a woman."
 She agreed. "But," she said, "it's no place for a man, either."

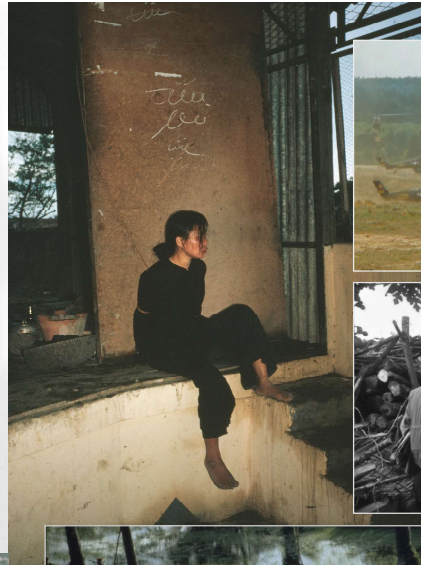
GOING 'WHERE THE PICTURES ARE'

After the war Chapelle embarked on wide-ranging travels with her husband on behalf of several post-war relief agencies, documenting the rebuilding of much of the world after the cataclysm of the Second World War. Their photos and reporting of humanitarian efforts in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East appeared in *National Geographic*. But their marriage was fraying, complicated by the long separations of war and Tony Chapelle's serial infidelities. They divorced in 1955.

Post-divorce, Dickey found herself with the old itch to take her camera "where the pictures are," as she put it, and she renewed her military press credentials.

Over the next 20 years she documented the Algerian revolution, the Cuban revolution (where she was among the first correspondents to photograph Fidel Castro), and the 1956 Hungarian uprising, where she was arrested, interrogated, and

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Opposite page, top: Marine Lt. General Lewis W. Walt, commanding the III Marine Amphibious Force, and Jim Lucas, representing members of the press corps in Vietnam, pause in reverence after unveiling the plaque on the memorial honoring Dickey Chapelle on November 4, 1966.

Bottom: Two soldiers in the Mekong Delta sit on sandbags smoking cigarettes.
 Photographs by O.M. Benson, top; and Dickey Chapelle, bottom/
 Courtesy Wisconsin Historical Society

Pictured, clockwise from top left: A captive, wearing all black, barefoot with her arms bound behind her back, sits on a ledge in a bare concrete room in Vinh Quoi in the aftermath of a 1962 Viet Cong attack on the village.

Several Sikorsky CH-34A helicopters somewhere in South Vietnam. Because these heavy lifting helicopters were not introduced in Vietnam until 1963, this photograph dates somewhere between 1963 and Chapelle's death in 1965. A Marine veteran who was there at the time says the photo was taken shortly before Chapelle died.

American soldiers talk to a man in a village in 1965.

Elevated view of a group of South Vietnamese troops hiking through a forest in Vietnam in 1962. The footpath they are on is bordered on one side by trees and on the other with a marshy expanse of water and plants.

A newly captured prisoner suspected of being Viet Cong, bound with his elbows tied behind his back and blindfolded, is escorted by South Vietnamese Rangers down a gravel road in the vicinity of Bac Lien in 1962.

Photographs by Dickey Chapelle/Courtesy Wisconsin Historical Society

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CHAPELLE

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spent five weeks, much of it in solitary confinement, in a Budapest prison. Her photographs and journalism appeared in *Life*, *National Observer*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Reader's Digest*, *National Geographic*, and many other publications. Chapelle first went to Vietnam in 1961 when the American public was still being reassured that our military involvement was strictly in an advisory capacity. When she captured the image of a Marine with a machine gun at the ready in a helicopter doorway, later published in *National Geographic*, it put the lie to the official version that U.S. forces in Vietnam were non-combatant "advisers."

Chapelle received the Overseas Press Club's George Polk Award in 1962 for her Vietnam War photos and coverage, and the now-historic image of the door gunner was the National Press Photographer's Association Picture of the Year in 1963.

DEFYING THE STATUS QUO

Never famous in her lifetime beyond the world of war correspondents, the last decade has seen growing recognition of Chapelle's importance. The Wisconsin Historical Society maintains an archive with more than 40,000 of her photographs, letters, and books. Her combat photography can be seen in print and online in many books, archives, and collections, going back to her groundbreaking photos from the Pacific Theatre in World War II.

She is the subject of at least two biographies, and the Milwaukee Public Television 2015 documentary, *Behind the Pearl Earrings: The Story*

of Dickey Chapelle, *Combat Photojournalist*. Her life and career were celebrated at the 2017 Marine Corps Combat Correspondents Association banquet where she was named an "Honorary Marine."

When asked to imagine a combat photojournalist, many envision a man looking as weary and sweat-stained as the troops he is embedded with. Few visualize a woman in that role, mainly because women were long locked out of combat photojournalism.

These traditional gender attitudes held sway for many years, at one point reflected in a question put to Dickey Chapelle in the midst of a military operation: "What's a woman doing out here?" A Marine commander on two Jims voiced the same idea when he spotted Chapelle shortly after the landing and shouted, "Get that woman the hell off the beach!"

The prejudice prevailed for years, dictating that a war correspondent was a role no woman could or should involve herself with. It took women like Dickey Chapelle to defy the status quo, both by insisting on being in the heart of the action no matter the danger, as well as by finding and recording the humanity that persists in the midst of war's chaos and confusion.

Dickey Chapelle was intense and dynamic, five feet tall, never without her trademark pearl earrings and cat-eye glasses under an Australian-style bush hat. She reportedly could out-shout a drill sergeant, and was a close friend of several senior commanders in Vietnam, even talking wartime strategy with some of them.

But through it all, under the havoc of war, Chapelle always understood her central mission. It fueled the vitality and mastery in her work and was reflected in her working dictum: "The picture is your reason for being."

ELECTION

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dinner buffet and a spirited performance by Beate-mania USA, an early Beatles tribute band.

Saturday morning's final General Session opened with the announcement of the election results by Elections Committee Chair Scott DeArman. President Jack McManus, Vice President Tom Burke, and Secretary Bill Meeks were re-elected, while Wayne Reynolds was elected as Treasurer. (Complete election results can be found on Page 19.) The newly elected Board conducted its inaugural meeting after the short session concluded.

The Saturday Night Awards Banquet, co-emceed by Meeting Planner Wes Guidry and myself, provided a grand conclusion to the four-day Convention. VVA bestowed several key honors, including the President's Award for Supporting America's Veterans to Evan Williams Bourbon for its American-Made Heroes program, and the 2023 In Service to America Award to U-Haul International for its long-standing support of VVA.

Jan Scruggs, the Vietnam War veteran who spearheaded the effort to construct the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the Nation's Capital, was honored with the VVA Lifetime Achievement Award. Harvey Pratt, an artist, sculptor, and Marine Vietnam veteran renowned for creating the National Native Americans Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., received the VVA Excellence in the Arts Award. Additionally, Laurel Schaefer-Bozoucoff, Miss America 1972, was presented with the President's Award for Entertaining the Troops in Vietnam.

The Convention's final official act was the swearing-in of the new Board and Officers, performed by former VVA President John Rowan. With that, the 21st VVA National Convention was in the record books. ♦

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