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WHEN ITS CUL-  
TURE IS ALIVE.  
HOPE NEVER  
DIES IN THE  
INDOMITABLE  
VIETNAMESE  
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## SAIGON ARTS, CULTURE & EDUCATION INSTITUTE



To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese-American Culture

NEWSLETTER # 125

MARCH 2019



## The True Story Behind an Iconic Vietnam War Photo Was Nearly Erased—Until Now

FEB. 19, 2019 MICHAEL SHAW

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/02/19/magazine/vietnam-war-photo-wounded-marine.html>

The fighting in Hue City, Vietnam, was as intense and confusing as anything the Marines there had ever seen. It was mid-February 1968, and American and South Vietnamese forces were desperately trying to counter a surprise onslaught that became known as the Tet offensive. First Battalion, Fifth Marines had breached the city's historic Citadel. Radio communications were out. From front-line positions, Marines ran back a block or two to give updates to commanding officers and to receive orders. Many of them had already been wounded or killed. As more casualties accumulated, Marines in Charlie Company's Third Platoon helped lift a gravely wounded and unconscious infantryman onto the front of a tank; the man was sprawled on a wooden door that served as a stretcher. No more than a few blocks away, through streets littered with rubble and alive with gunfire, the tank stopped to pick up three Marines who had been injured by a mortar blast. One man's face was swathed in bandages. He was helped aboard and situated near the tank's back end.



John Olson's famous photo of wounded Marines being evacuated during the Battle of Hue in February 1968. John Olson/The LIFE Images Collection, via Getty Images

a raw artifact of a hellish 26-day battle that contributed to turning the American public against the war. Fifty years later, with the approach of the anniversary of the battle, that photo gained renewed exposure — by way of a best-selling book, a major exhibition at the Newseum in Washington and numerous articles and videos in the media.

A photographer, John Olson, approached and began to document the moment. His photo of the unconscious Marine lying on the tank surrounded by his wounded brothers-in-arms now stands among the iconic images of the Vietnam War. Some of Olson's photos from the battle were included in a photo essay in Life magazine on March 8, 1968. The picture of the wounded Marine was the largest photo in the feature, published as a two-page spread. Both painterly and heart-wrenching, it was

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## True Story Behind Iconic VN War Photo...

With this new exposure came uncertainty, then controversy. Who was the unconscious man on the tank? In the past three years, two different story lines have emerged. The confusion raises questions of accuracy and identity. It weighs the duties of journalism against the lure of uplifting war narratives. And it brings into question how much the instinct to memorialize truly respects the dead.

The most prominent current depiction of this scene is in a book, "Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam," by Mark Bowden, an American journalist and author of "Black Hawk Down," as well as books about D-Day, the mission against Osama bin Laden and the killing of the Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar. Bowden's account of the fight for Hue was published in 2017, ahead of the anniversary of the Tet offensive. Vivid writing captures the perspectives of Marine infantry platoons as they fought their way to a Pyrrhic victory. The book's final chapter focuses on the experience of a Marine whom Bowden identified as the unconscious man seen in Olson's picture, lying on the makeshift stretcher on the tank's front end: Pfc. Alvin Grantham.

This account of Grantham's wounding recalls a firefight in which he was shot through the chest, a wound that his fellow Marines tried to seal with cellophane from cigarette packs. It describes his evacuation on the tank and his escape from an even grimmer fate after being mistaken for dead and put in a body bag. Grantham's survival — in the spirit of "Saving Private Ryan" — becomes something to celebrate. He is a living example of resilience and good luck, and of young Marines saving their own.

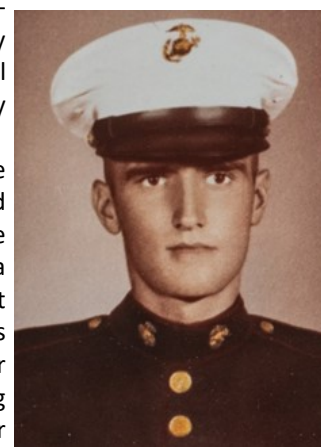
The memorialization of this version of events did not end with Bowden's chapter. In January 2018, the Newseum opened an exhibit, "The Marines and Tet: The Battle That Changed the Vietnam War," based largely on Bowden's book and Olson's photos and research. The exhibit, which has been extended to run through March 17, presents audio interviews with veterans of Hue, including an interview with Grantham that accompanies a large reproduction of Olson's image. Grantham's story, Olson's photo and Bowden's book were prominently featured in public events and other coverage marking the 50th anniversary, including in Vanity Fair, The Washington Post, on "CBS Sunday Morning" and in many local news outlets.

In early 2017, while Bowden was finishing his book, Anthony Loyd, a British author and long-serving war correspondent for The Times of London, was doing his own research into Marines from Hue. And his reporting began pointing to a different story behind the photo and an entirely different identity for the wounded Marine lying atop the tank — that of Pfc. James Blaine, a young rifleman who died in the battle, leaving no tale of resilience to tell. As Loyd put it, "It's like his soul got carelessly mislaid."

**Blaine was born in Moscow, Idaho**, on March 22, 1949, to Jim and Ann Blaine. His family was Catholic, and his father was a veterinary doctor working in meat inspection for the United States Department of Agriculture. His mother had trained as a nurse. Blaine was the second of nine children; his family was from Spokane, Wash., where James — his family called him Jimmy — played high school basketball and pole-vaulted on the track team before enlisting in the Marine Corps in May 1967.

His brother Rob, now living in Boise, Idaho, tells of a young man's journey from an active childhood to premonitions of his own death. "Jimmy was a hard worker," Rob says. "He used to get up and move water pipes at a local fruit farm before going to school. He used to ride bareback broncos in small weekend rodeos in north Idaho and western Montana. He was a tough kid, but kind as well. At the rodeo, an old cowpoke tried to sell Jimmy his coat to get some drinks. Jimmy gave him the \$5 he asked for but wouldn't take the coat." Jimmy was quiet, but he had a sense of adventure. His parents tried to talk him into joining the Navy or Air Force instead of the Marine Corps, but he wanted to go where the action was. According to Rob, when James was at the airport heading to Vietnam after boot camp, he told their brother Tommy that "he probably wouldn't see him again. He knew he was going to be in the fray pretty deep."

When the issue of Life came out, two of his sisters, Kebbie and Theresa, were sure it was



James Blaine upon graduating from Marine Corps boot camp in 1967. Via Rob Blaine

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Jimmy in the photo. The rest of the family was not quite as certain — until a letter published in People magazine 17 years later confirmed it for them. This felt like it brought the seeds of closure. Rob was 10 years old when Jimmy died, and he was always curious what happened. In 1985, he visited a scale model of the Vietnam Memorial when it came to town, to see his brother's name. He was fascinated by the photo, and in 1997 sent letters to the Marines identified in the People article. One of them wrote back, but Rob never followed up.

Then came the claim, which Rob and his siblings first saw in Bowden's book, that the wounded Marine was someone else. "It made me a bit ill," Rob says, "thinking that someone had tried to steal this 'moment' from my brother, a dead war hero. In my research, I came to believe that Alvin Grantham is an honorable man who had a similar experience as my brother, but his experience was not caught on film by John Olson on that February day in 1968."

**John Olson** was drafted in 1966 when he was 19 and managed to get himself assigned as a photographer to Stars and Stripes, the official newspaper of the United States military. Two years later, he was dispatched to Hue from Saigon to cover the Tet offensive. He carried five cameras, shooting black-and-white film for Stars and Stripes and color to capture images that he might sell elsewhere. The Hue photos were almost immediately published in Life and soon earned him a job as the magazine's youngest-ever staff photographer. In 1968, he was also awarded the Robert Capa Gold Medal for his work in Hue, where he spent days photographing the battle. But his encounter with the Marines on the tank was most likely glancing. The battle was so intense that he has no recollection of the individual men, or even of taking the picture.

Olson's photograph was published a handful of times over the following decades, most prominently on April 1, 1985, when People magazine published it with an appeal for help identifying the Marines on the tank. Through reader replies, People found everyone in the frame except the unconscious Marine. Four weeks later, on April 29, it ran a follow-up story with interviews and new portraits of the men. From left to right, People identified the five Marines as Jim Beals (holding IV bottle), Richard Schlagel, James Richard Rice (bandaged face), Dennis Ommert (bloody leg) and Clifford Dyes. The unconscious man on the door remained unknown, though not for long. After People published the second article, one of their reporters managed to track down Octaive Glass, who identified the wounded Marine as James Blaine. As the Navy corpsman attached to the unit, Glass had treated Blaine immediately after Blaine was shot. Blaine was a member of Third Platoon, Charlie Company, the same rifle platoon as two other Marines on the tank, Schlagel and Beals, as well as Glass — although Schlagel and Beals didn't know or couldn't remember Blaine's name when they were each interviewed for the story in People. On June 3, 1985, the magazine published Glass's identification in its readers' letters column with an editor's note relating that Blaine died on Feb. 15, 1968, "the day the photograph was taken." The question of the unconscious Marine's identity, it appeared, was settled.

Olson knew of the first People article in 1985. He had actually been commissioned to photograph Ommert. Three decades later, the approach of the 50th anniversary of the Tet offensive had a powerful effect on the photographer. He started revisiting his old work. "After decades as a journalist, and therefore, as a historian, I began to wonder about these 18-year-old men," he says. "I wanted to know how the rest of their lives had been affected." His interest was in part a reckoning with his own experience. In the course of his research, he read a 1968 interview with a soldier in Stars and Stripes. The interview recounted graphic details of Tet. Olson says he was shocked to discover that the soldier in that interview was him.

Olson tracked down nine Marines he had photographed in Hue, including at least three of those identified in 1985 by People as being on the tank. He became aware of Glass's letter in People, but he had doubts about the reliability of the accounts provided by Blaine's fellow Marines. In one instance, a disagreement over whether the tank was in the Citadel or not when Olson snapped the photo furthered his skepticism. "A lot of people have contacted me over the years," he says. "But I would ask a series of questions, and the stories would fall apart." Tanks ferried many wounded service members away from the chaos and danger in the streets of Hue, so it wasn't surprising that many people believed they were one of the men in Olson's photo.

Olson came to feel that Grantham was different. In 2016, a local ABC news reporter in Fresno, Calif., reached out to Olson seeking a comment for a story about a reunion between two former Marines who claimed to be on the tank. One, Richard Hill, said he was the man at the far right of the photo. The other was Grantham. Olson spoke to Grantham and, after two exact retellings, he was convinced Grantham had been the unconscious Marine. Around the same time, Bowden was talking

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present.

In interviews for this article, Bowden said he had no knowledge of Glass's identification of Blaine in *People*. The information pointing to Grantham, he said, came from Olson's research and Grantham's own account. That, combined with a photo of Grantham and other Marine Corps records, made him confident of his narrative.

But this version of events soon faced a challenge. In June 2017, shortly after Bowden's book came out, he was contacted by Loyd, who was on a quest of his own. Loyd had worked with another well-known photographer of the Vietnam War, Don McCullin, and taken an interest in McCullin's work. He assigned himself the task of uncovering the identity of McCullin's "shellshocked Marine," the subject of another famous photograph from Hue. That effort proved futile. But in the process, Loyd's attention shifted to the wounded Marines on the tank — a scene that McCullin had photographed just minutes before Olson. Whereas Olson had photographed the unconscious Marine almost in passing, McCullin had been present with Third Platoon when the Marine was shot, and had photographed his initial treatment by Glass and other members of his platoon. McCullin had witnessed and documented almost the entire sequence of events, and still retains vivid memories of it. In 30 images on two rolls of film, he followed the unconscious Marine and members of Third Platoon from the moments just after he was shot until he was lifted onto the tank. This sequence, including images that show the wounded man from different angles, combined with other information he gathered, convinced Loyd that the wounded Marine was Blaine.

To Loyd, it was all there: clear views of Blaine's face and the bandages indicating the location of his wounds, the telltale white door that was used as a stretcher. The presence of Schlager in several of the frames was also a decisive clue. He wore a distinctive rubber octopus tucked into his helmet band, which was visible in several of McCullin's photographs and also in the one shot by Olson. These signature elements clearly tied McCullin's sequence of images and the Olson photo to the same event, and to the same wounded man. And Loyd knew that the man in Olson's photo had been credibly identified more than 30 years previously in *People* magazine as James Blaine.

When Loyd presented his findings to Bowden, Bowden pushed back. He had established that Grantham was shot on Feb. 17, 1968, and he informed Loyd that he had information from a second man, Richard Hill, who also said he was in the photo and "says he was wounded on the 16th and picked up by the tank on the 17th." With Grantham and Hill as his corroborating witnesses, Bowden was confident that Olson took his photo on Feb. 17, not on Feb. 15, the day that Blaine was shot. It was, as Bowden presented it, a matter of record. Loyd conceded that he must have been mistaken. "I took Bowden and Olson on their word for this," he says. "They are serious and respected figures." In September, Loyd favorably reviewed Bowden's book in *The Times* of London. But the question hung there, nagging at Loyd, who kept analyzing the records and studying McCullin's photographs. "As I continued further with my own research on Hue, the more Blaine began to haunt my thoughts."

Then there was the matter of Bowden's published account of Grantham's wounding. There was no reason to doubt that Grantham believed he was the stricken Marine. His story had evocative roots: Grantham has said he had first been shown Olson's photograph by his sister's ex-husband as he was recovering in a hospital almost a year after being shot. But Grantham's experience, as is described in Bowden's book and as Grantham related it in later interviews, did not match what befell the man in Olson's and McCullin's images. Grantham described a scene that was different, a treatment that was different and an injury pattern that was different from what was suffered by the man in the photos. And yet Olson and Bowden had superimposed his story over Blaine's.



Alvin Grantham at his parents' house after being wounded in Vietnam and returning home in 1968. Via Alvin Grantham

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## True Story Behind Iconic VN War Photo...

That story was spreading. Olson approached the Newseum about a Tet offensive anniversary exhibition based on his photographs. Again, Blaine was left out. Carrie Christoffersen, executive director and curator of the Newseum, says that Olson's research, along with Bowden's book, served as the museum's primary sources as they made their exhibit. When the Newseum went through its own fact-checking process, she says, she had not been made aware of any alternate explanation of the identity of the wounded Marine, was not familiar with Loyd and had never heard of Blaine. In January 2018, the Newseum opened its exhibit and hosted a panel discussion including Bowden, Olson and Grantham.

A month later, Loyd published an article in The Times of London about the Marines at Hue, asserting that the unconscious Marine was Blaine. Loyd's research raised enough concern in Bowden's mind that he included a postscript to the paperback edition of "Hue 1968," which was published in April 2018, citing Loyd's research and the possibility that the wounded Marine was Blaine. In the postscript, Bowden lays out Loyd's case and his own reasoning and concludes by writing, "I have left my version the same."

**The Unpublished Photos** A set of previously unpublished images, made by Don McCullin, a British photographer who covered the fighting at Hue, follows Blaine and his unit from the moment after he was wounded until he was lifted onto the tank. With the exception of two or three images, McCullin's photographs of Blaine have never been published. Viewed in sequence, they reveal the scene where the Marine was hit, the location of his wounds and steps in his medical care, including the use of a white wooden door as a stretcher. Below is a selection of those photos, with analysis informed by interviews with Alejandro Villalva, a forensic expert with the Department of Defense, and Octave Glass, the platoon trauma medic who attended to Blaine.



In Olson's photo, even when we zoom in on the injured Marine, it is hard to get a detailed view of his wounds, because his lower chest is covered. Yet the location of their wounds is crucial information distinguishing Blaine from Grantham. Blaine was shot in the midchest, center right, just below the diaphragm. The bullet exited his lower left back below the belt line. Blaine was bending forward from the waist when struck, which accounted for the bullet's path. The bullet that struck Grantham entered his midchest and came out under his shoulder blade. John Olson/The LIFE Images Collection, via Getty Images



McCullin's photo of the same scene, in a detail here, shows part of the wounded man's lower torso, with bandages consistent with Blaine's lower-back exit wound. To treat it, Glass had to undo and lower Blaine's trousers to just above the groin, so he could tie bandages around his waist and back. We can clearly see the tails of those bandages tied off, just above the unconscious Marine's right hip. Blaine's military death certificate reports that he was also wounded in the right arm. Grantham was not shot in the arm. Don McCullin/Contact Press Images

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## True Story Behind

### Iconic VN War Photo...

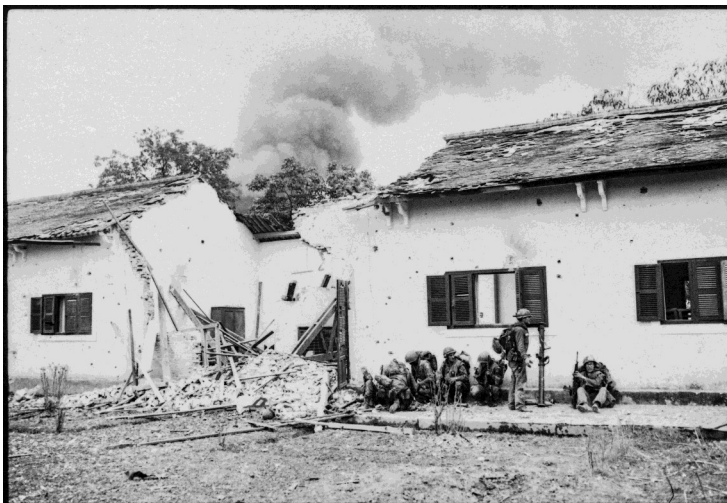
Here we see the wounded Marine being treated by members of his platoon shortly after he was shot. Grantham was inside a house when he was shot and was treated on the floor where he had fallen. This image establishes that the wounded Marine in McCullin's photos and Olson's was treated outside a building, on a concrete walkway. Don McCullin/Contact Press Images



As McCullin's images draw in closer, they show two corpsmen, with Glass holding an IV. As soon as he saw Blaine drop, Glass ran to him and bandaged him with standard-issue field dressings, inserted a drip and spoke to Blaine before he faded out. By contrast, Grantham said his initial first aid was improvised and minimal, with nearby Marines using cellophane from cigarette packets to try to seal his wounds. McCullin's photo shows a more organized first-aid effort by a pair of corpsmen who had medical equipment on hand. Don McCullin/Contact Press Images



Here, we see the Marines carrying the injured man to the tank on the white wooden door. From this angle, we can see that the wounded Marine's trousers have been loosened and pulled down to give access to the lower-back exit wound. Don McCullin/Contact Press Images



As the Marines placed the wounded man on a door, we can see white gauze tied around his chest to cover the entry wound and a wider wrapping farther down the torso to deal with the exit wound. Grantham's injuries did not extend that low on the body. Don McCullin/Contact Press Images



This is McCullin's photo of the wounded Marine being evacuated on the tank. The IV is being held by Lance Cpl. Richard Schlagel, identifiable by the rubber octopus tucked into his helmet band. Olson would arrive soon after to take a photo of the same scene, when other wounded men had

also been placed aboard the tank. Schlagel and his octopus establish that we see the same scene, and the same wounded Marine, in McCullin's photos and in Olson's — and the statements from Glass and several other Marines who fought alongside Blaine and Schlagel confirm that the wounded man they placed on the tank with Schlagel was James Blaine. Don McCullin/Contact Press Images

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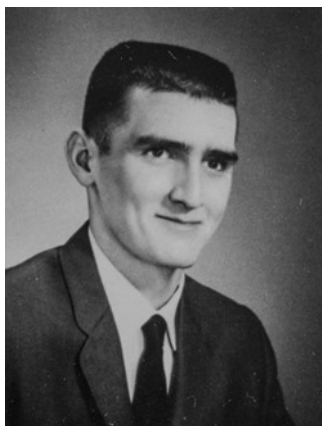


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In terms of written records, the evidence contains contradictions: There are, in fact, some documents that can be taken together to support the notion that Grantham was the wounded man on the tank that Olson photographed. Grantham was wounded on Feb. 17. Military records for Richard Schlagel, the Marine most clearly identifiable in the Olson photo, indicate that he was lightly wounded on Feb. 17. An Associated Press photo that is nearly identical to Olson's famous shot was dated Feb. 17, 1968, and wired from The Associated Press's Saigon bureau to the United States the next morning. For Bowden, Olson and the Newseum, this date has been the central pillar of their continued assertion that the Marine shown lying on the tank in the photo is Grantham, not Blaine.

But two of those Feb. 17 dates are faulty or misleading, and Loyd gathered an impressive body of research to tie Blaine to the photo and persuasively argue that the photo was taken on Feb. 15, the date of Blaine's death. Among Loyd's pieces of evidence are Blaine's death certificate and wounded-in-action reports from the National Archives showing that Rice, Ommert and Dyes, who were identified in the People article as three of the men on the tank, were all wounded on Feb. 15. Olson and Bowden point to the reports indicating that Schlagel was wounded on Feb. 17 not Feb. 15. Schlagel believes that the records are in error — but more to the point, they are simply irrelevant. They show that Schlagel only incurred "multiple barbed wire scratches over body" and was not evacuated. The record of that injury isn't evidence that Schlagel rode a tank out of Hue on Feb. 17, when Grantham did.

Furthermore, another firmly dated set of photographs by McCullin show that the photographer was in a different location on Feb. 17, with a platoon from Delta Company. Finally, there is good reason to question the Feb. 17 date assigned to The Associated Press photo. The Associated Press has confirmed that it was taken by Olson, and there's no doubt that it shows the same scene. But the logistics of physically moving the film out of a war zone with 1968 technology makes it highly unlikely that it could have been taken on the 17th, moved through the shattered city, transported 600 miles to Saigon, developed, taken to the wire station and transmitted to New York within 24 hours. It's more likely that the photo was taken on the 15th and processed and captioned in Saigon on the 17th, a theory backed by Hal Buell, who was coordinating Vietnam photos from The Associated Press headquarters in New York at the time and was the head of The Associated Press Photography Service for 25 years.



James Blaine in a high school graduation photo. Via Rob

The other factor cited in support of the assertion that Olson's photo shows Grantham's evacuation is Richard Hill, who strongly believes he is the man perched at the back of the tank in the photograph. He says he was contacted and interviewed by People in 1985, but they chose not to include him in the story — perhaps because his account didn't align with what they learned from the five other Marines who were identified. Bowden's acceptance that Grantham is in the photo relies in part on Hill as a corroborating witness, but Bowden never interviewed him for the book. Hill and Grantham did not know each other when they were wounded in Hue; they concluded much later that they were on that same tank in Olson's photo, but they don't claim to have spoken to or recognized each other at the time. In fact, Grantham did not recognize anyone from the tank or anybody who attended to him after he was shot. Grantham and Hill feel strongly that they recognize themselves in the famous photo — but there aren't any other witnesses or testimony to back up that feeling.

In stark contrast, there are several former Marines and a corpsman who witnessed the shooting of Blaine and remember lifting him aboard the tank. I interviewed five of them: Walt Markowski, John Erskine, Joe López, Octaive Glass and Schlagel (who still has the rubber octopus). All except Schlagel knew Blaine before that day and confirmed that the unconscious Marine in Olson's photo was him.

Markowski and Blaine fought side by side for weeks in the same rifle squad. Erskine, the sergeant who led the platoon after their lieutenant was wounded, was close with Blaine too. He says he could tell the difference between Blaine and Grantham in a photo because he was familiar with both men. "Grantham was in Weapons and, given my job, I had to know the Weapons guys," he says. López says he was standing right beside Blaine when he got hit; Blaine had just volunteered to run back a block to update command because their communications were out. Glass knew Blaine and treated him after he was shot. All these men claim to have witnessed, or actually participated, as Blaine was placed on a door, carried away from where he had been hit and set atop the tank. They all confirm that Blaine and Schlagel rode that tank out of the combat zone together. Erskine adds that it made sense to send Schlagel with Blaine because he was showing serious signs of combat fatigue.

The most definitive body of evidence is the series of 30 photographs taken by McCullin. With the context they provide

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and their view of the injured man's wounds, they leave no doubt that Olson and McCullin photographed the same Marines on the same tank and on the same day — and that the unconscious Marine was Blaine.

Not everyone agrees. Olson and Bowden have both had a chance to review the evidence, including McCullin's unpublished photos, but they stand by their version. Olson says he would consider the findings of the Marine Corps or The Associated Press if they opened their own inquiries. Bowden points out that "the documentation is not dead certain," but added that he was inclined to accept written records (the Feb. 17 caption date on The Associated Press photo and the Feb. 17 wounded-in-action date for Schlagel) over the memories of the Marines from Blaine's platoon: "Between memory and contemporary records, I lean toward the records," he wrote in an email. Yet he did not address the problems with the records that seem to point to Feb. 17 nor the crucial fact that written records relating to three other wounded Marines in the image indicate they were wounded on Feb. 15. He declines to accept the recollections of Glass and Blaine's other platoon mates as conclusive, but bases his acceptance of Grantham mostly on the recollections of Grantham and Hill.

I also contacted Grantham and presented him with the evidence and the conclusion that Loyd and I both reached. Grantham is a legitimate wounded veteran of this battle, and it would be wrong to denigrate in any way his service, sacrifice and his own memories. He didn't set out looking for any recognition from the photo. In an interview, Grantham said he had no idea whether or how his story was going to be used in Bowden's book, much less that it would become an entire chapter and the book's grand finale. In fact, he said the chapter's depth and scope, especially details of his earlier life, left him shocked. He also said that he was not interested in convincing anyone that he is the wounded Marine in the photo. "It can be any Marine on the tank, and it doesn't matter if it's me or Blaine. The story is what happened to those Marines in that battle. If some mother thought that was her son on that tank, I did not want to be part of interfering or destroying her feelings. What does it hurt? It doesn't matter to me."

In a later email, Grantham took a harder position and insisted that he is the unconscious Marine in Olson's photo. "You and your people seem to already have your minds made up on this, so I don't think I can help you with that," he wrote.

**The story of these Marines** at Hue and after is largely about trauma, both physical and psychic. Grantham's service in Vietnam, and his wounding at Hue during the Tet offensive, was like a voyage to hell that didn't really end. Between his time recovering in Japan and then in Pensacola, Fla., he spent a year in hospitals. He still suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and has said he doesn't go anywhere without his service dog. López, who fought beside Blaine and was there when he died, understands Grantham's suffering. "God bless him," he says. "If Grantham was wounded, if Grantham was in Hue, if Grantham was in Nam, he's a hero. Period."

That loyalty has roots. These men sacrificed much and were sacrificed — not just on the battlefield but after they got home. In our time of stadium flyovers, flag displays and thank-you-for-your-service gestures, it can be hard to understand the extreme hostility and condemnation that was heaped on service members returning from Vietnam as living symbols of the war, or the ways they were ignored. Glass says one of the first things he experienced on American soil after his combat tour was being spat on by a protester. López describes interviewing for a job and having his potential new boss ask him how many babies he had killed. Erskine, who was wounded after Blaine died, came off a transport near Boston on a stretcher and saw women with gift bags and balloons — for Vietnamese orphans they'd come to greet. "We were invisible," he says.

The misidentification of the unconscious Marine was a research and fact-checking failure with multiple causes. Grantham and Hill served valiantly in Hue,



James Blaine's military trunk, which includes a photo collage made by his brother Rob. The collage shows photos of James next to John Olson's photo from when it was published in People magazine. Ian Bates for The New York Times

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were wounded, were evacuated by tank and feel sincerely and deeply that they recognize themselves in Olson's famous photo; it is not surprising that they are reluctant to let go of their long-held belief in the face of evidence shown to them 50 years later. By accepting the self-identification from Grantham and Hill rather than the recollections of Blaine's platoon mates and Glass's 1985 identification of Blaine in *People*, Olson amplified a private error into a public one. In Bowden's book, the mis-identification found an even larger stage, because it left a complex historical puzzle to a single witness and a photographer who were both directly invested in the outcome, even if they had the best of intentions. Later, when the photograph became a prominent feature in a museum exhibit, the error took on a second life, abetted by the fact that the exhibit was prepared in just four months, in order to open in time for the anniversary of the Tet offensive. In haste, an act of commemoration itself helped warp the record.

At a deeper level, something else may be at work: an effect of cultural trauma. Long after the fog of war, perhaps the political and emotional miasma of Vietnam has extended to a fog of facts. It feels informative that the finale of a major work by a noted American nonfiction writer, an iconic image by a prizewinning American war photographer and an exhibition by an American museum devoted to journalism would all share and perpetuate a mistake that gave us a Marine who survived and came home in place of one who lost his life. And it is hard not to contrast their choices with the cleareyed conclusions of a British journalist and a British photographer who don't have any patriotic skin in the game.

The confusion seems connected to the dissonance and denial that extends in an American through line from Hue to the ravaged Iraqi city of Falluja. There are Americans who celebrate battles in such foreign cities as crucibles of our character. Perhaps a hard look at this country's wars is intolerable without a script offering a hopeful ending and enduring characters. It's from that longing and the cultural pressures behind it that we want the unconscious Marine to survive. Bowden told me that Grantham's story "is meaningful, whether he was the person in the photograph or not." That's certainly true but it's not a good reason to take only reluctant half-measures toward correcting a case of mistaken identity. The notion that a good story is more important than actual truth is a troubling thought in these fact-challenged times.

The idea that one person's identity might not matter is also belied by the Blaine family's experience. According to Rob Blaine, his parents were humble people who never envisioned that their son might appear in *Life* magazine, then a staple of American popular culture. And it was hard for them to contemplate a photograph of their son near death. They weren't certain that the unconscious Marine was their son. But Rob and his siblings came to feel that it was Jimmy in that photo, and in 1985 Glass's letter in *People* confirmed it. Finally they *knew* it was him. And it mattered to them; it shaped their understanding of the war and their own family's role in it. "My brother and I were history teachers, and we would use it in class," he says. "Our children took it to their U.S. history teachers when they did their Vietnam War units."

Perhaps the saddest part of all is that the mistake, and the pain it caused the Blaine family, could have been avoided. If someone was absolutely dedicated to finding out what happened that day in Hue, the visual record and the living veterans who had participated in the events were there to be discovered. As Erskine says: "If somebody really wanted to know the story, we've been easy to find. The battalion has been having an annual reunion for the past 20 years."

## True Story Behind Iconic VN War Photo...

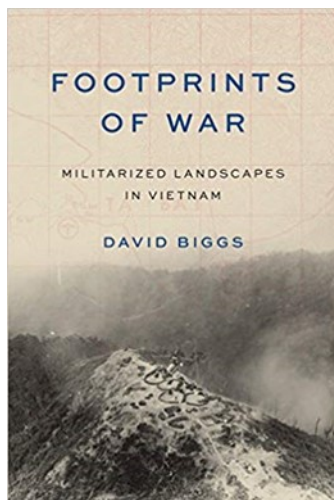
### Daniel K. Winn, Artist



Born in Vietnam, Daniel Winn came to the U.S. with his family at the age of 9. At a young age, he was interested in painting and artistry and spent his spare time doing odd work to raise money to buy paints and brushes. After graduating in 1992 from UC Irvine's School of Medicine to satisfy his refugee parents' wishes, he made a one-hundred eighty degree-turn to pursue his passion and dream as an artist.

In 1997, he created Masterpiece Inc. to help other artists. He held exhibitions in New York, Los Angeles, Toronto, Montreal, Hong Kong, etc... In 2017, he created Winn Slavin Fine Arts of Beverly Hills, CA. He was awarded the 2018 Philanthropic Artist of the Year. In Dec 2018, the German Prince Mario-Max Schaumburg-Lippe bestowed him the title of Chevalier of the Arts.

## Footprints of War: David Briggs



When American forces arrived in Vietnam, they found themselves embedded in historic village and frontier spaces already shaped by many past conflicts. American bases and bombing targets followed spatial and political logics influenced by the footprints of past wars in central Vietnam. The militarized landscapes here, like many in the world's historic conflict zones, continue to shape post-war land-use politics.

*Footprints of War* traces the long history of conflict-produced spaces in Vietnam, beginning with early modern wars and the French colonial invasion in 1885 and continuing through the collapse of the Saigon government in 1975. The result is a richly textured history of militarized landscapes that reveals the spatial logic of key battles such as the Tet Offensive.

Drawing on extensive archival work and years of interviews and fieldwork in the hills and villages around the city of Hue to illuminate war's footprints, David Briggs also integrates historical Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data, using aerial, high-altitude, and satellite imagery to render otherwise placeless sites into living, multidimensional spaces. This personal and multi-layered approach yields an innovative history of the lasting traces of war in Vietnam and a

model for understanding other militarized landscapes.

Available on Amazon:

<https://www.amazon.com/Footprints-War-Militarized-Weyerhaeuser-Environmental/dp/0295743867/>

## A Day of Rice Cakes for the Lunar New Year

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/28/dining/lunar-new-year-vietnamese.html>

Tejal Rao



On a farm in West Compton, Calif., over 100 people gathered to make banh chung — rich, sticky rice cakes — to celebrate and prepare for Vietnamese New Year.

chung for years, beginning at home with a small group of Vietnamese-American friends. “Tet can be such a heteronormative space, and it’s usually very conservative,” Ms. Tran said. “I wanted to share it with progressive women, and more people of color.”

This year, the party grew so big that Ms. Tran sold tickets and set up a half-dozen pressure cookers to boil the rice cakes in a field at Alma Backyard Farms, a nonprofit farm in West Compton where formerly incarcerated people are trained to enter the workforce.

Traditional banh chung can be the size of a birthday cake and simmer all night. They are often beautifully wrapped and tied with ribbons, to be shared as gifts for the New Year. Ms. Tran’s versions were dainty parcels — they fit on the palm of your hand — and cooked through in about 45 minutes.

After watching Ms. Tran’s tutorial, the group made their own. They passed scissors back and forth, and helped each other with tricky steps, like reinforcing the parcels so that rice wouldn’t spill from the seams.

WEST COMPTON, Calif. — In a sunny field here in Los Angeles County, the chef Diep Tran folded a banana leaf like wrapping paper, running her fingers along the crease. As she spooned some pork jowl and rice on top, a dozen women leaned over to observe her technique.

“Not too much!” Ms. Tran said. “Don’t forget, rice expands as it cooks.” Tet, or Vietnamese New Year, falls on Feb. 5 this year. To celebrate and prepare for the holiday, Ms. Tran gathered about 100 women to make banh chung, the rich, sticky rice cakes filled with pork, shallots and mung beans, wrapped in banana leaves and boiled until tender. The women would take home their finished banh chung to share with family and friends.

“Usually people buy it at the store because, unless you’ve made it before, it’s an unwieldy beast,” Ms. Tran said.

Ms. Tran has hosted Lunar New Year parties centered on making banh

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"It's just like a tamalada," said Hong Pham, one of a few men who attended, referring to the communal spirit and collaborative work of making tamales.

## *A Day of Rice Cakes...*



The chef Diep Tran, center, who organized the event, demonstrating how to shape banh chung using strips of banana leaf and a square metal mold.



Evan Kleiman, the host of Good Food on KCRW, timed the banh chung in pressure cookers set up on a portable stove.



The group set up tables in Alma Backyard Farms, where peas, chard and buddha's hand fruit were all growing in late January. CreditCoral Von Zumwalt for The New York Times



Over the course of the day, the women had prepared well over 400 banh chung. CreditCoral Von Zumwalt for The New York Times

Mr. Pham, who writes a [Vietnamese food blog](#) with Kim Pham, his wife, brought a big batch of pickled vegetables. He encouraged everyone to take some home, and stepped in to help late arrivals with the process.

Many attendees had roots in Vietnam, others in Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and China. Few had experience making banh chung. They chatted as they wrapped alongside their children, sisters and mothers, introducing one another and sharing their stories.

Ta-Cuc Nguyen came to the United States as a refugee in the 1970s. She remembered making banh chung in preparation for Tet in Lancaster, Pa., where it was impossible to find the leaves of an arrowroot plant used as a wrapper, or even banana leaves, a common substitute. Ms. Nguyen made do with plastic wrap brushed with a little green food coloring.

After the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, thousands of Vietnamese refugees arrived in the United States, fleeing persecution. Although government programs placed new arrivals throughout the country in small groups, to encourage assimilation, Vietnamese families moved to be near one another and built strongly rooted communities, particularly in California.

Ms. Tran came to the United States in 1978, as a child, and settled in Los Angeles. Her family owns the restaurant [Pho 79](#), in

*Continue on next page*

## A Day of Rice Cakes...

Garden Grove, which was at one point a chain with locations in Los Angeles County and Orange County. She is known for her own restaurant, [Good Girl Dinette](#) in Highland Park, which closed in October.

"It's going to be chaos," said Ms. Tran, a few weeks before the event, as she pictured a large group working side by side. But friends helped with preparation. Na Young Ma, the owner of Proof bakery, offered her kitchen after hours as a prep space, and her walk-in for storage.

Ms. Tran bought a whole pig from Kong Thao, a farmer in Fresno, and after work on a weeknight, she and her friends got together to butcher it.

"Let's each take a quarter and get it off the bone," Ms. Tran said. Felicia Friesema and Cecilia Leung took the shoulders and butt, while Ms. Tran butchered the head. The meat was deeply scored and cured in fish sauce for three days.

As people filed in on Saturday, ready to wrap, tables were set up with metal molds to shape the rice cakes, banana leaves and quart containers with ingredients. Evan Kleiman, the host of the radio show Good Food on KCRW, stirred rice porridge for lunch; the social justice advocate Alice Y. Hom carried paper bags full of freshly cut kumquat branches; and Monique Truong, a novelist who had traveled for the event from New York, snipped the branches to decorate the tables.

The rice cakes are often beautifully wrapped and tied, to be shared as gifts for the New Year.



The group was an intergenerational mix of women, and many arrived with their children, sisters and mothers, including Sandy Har Hom, left, and Jane Tom. Credit Coral Von Zumwalt for The New York Times



The rice cakes are often beautifully wrapped and tied, to be shared as gifts for the New Year.

When the banh chung were cooked, Ms. Tran handed them out and addressed the crowd, thanking all the women. She emphasized that the purpose of the Banh Chung Collective, as she calls the annual party, was to create a Lunar New Year space that built connections among women and people of color, and affirmed queer identities. Over the course of the day, they had prepared well over 400 banh chung.

Like most in the group, Ms. Truong had never made the rice cakes before, in part because it was such a project. She said she planned to eat one that day, and carry the rest to her family in Houston. For Tet, she would slip the rice cakes out of the wrappers and fry them with a smashed garlic clove, until both sides were golden and crisp.

"The way Diep thinks of the work is beautiful," said Ms. Truong, gesturing toward the dispersing crowd. "You come together, you make something and then, you go out and share it."