



JOSEPH M. QUINN AWARD

*for Journalistic Excellence
and Distinction*

The Man Who Took 'THE PICTURE'

NICK UT'S VIETNAM WAR PHOTO CHANGED HISTORY.
IT IS ONLY ONE PART OF HIS STORIED CAREER BY LINDA DEUTSCH

In Los Angeles, where he has spent most of his career, the diminutive photographer with the ready smile is known to his news photo colleagues as "Nick" or "Nicky." They give him special deference when he arrives at the scene of a disaster, at a Hollywood premiere, in a courtroom or at a sports competition on assignment for The Associated Press.

They honor Huyn Cong "Nick" Ut as someone important—the only one among them who changed history with a single picture. If some photographers are too young to remember the Vietnam War, the veteran shooters fill them in on Nick's history and they are awestruck.

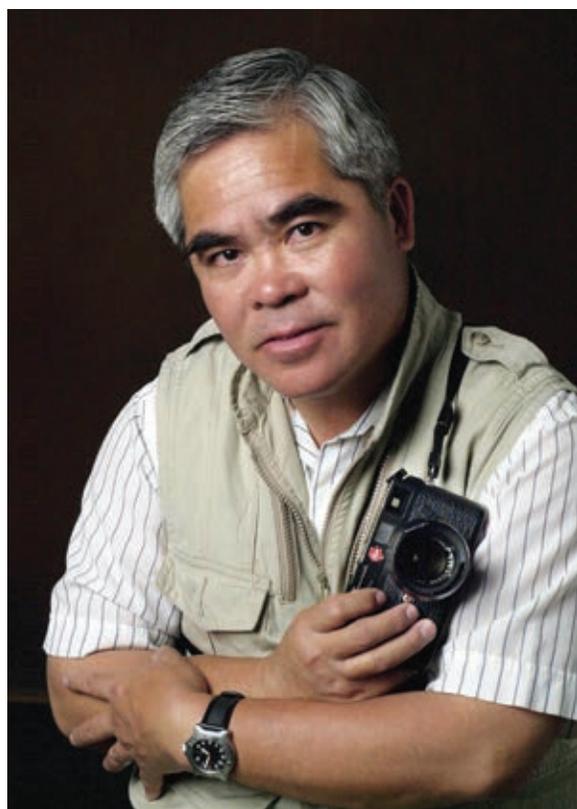
This is the man who took "The Picture" is all they need to know. All of them know about that image. It is part of America's history now, part of our collective memory.

Tonight, Nick Ut receives the Los Angeles Press Club's Joseph M. Quinn Award for Lifetime Achievement.

By the time I met Nick Ut in April of 1975, he was a legend. He had snapped one of the most famous scenes of the Vietnam War, a photo that would be dubbed "Napalm Girl." The picture of a young girl, her clothes burned off her body, running to escape napalm falling from the sky, became an enduring image of the horrors of that war. He was 21 when he clicked his shutter in 1972 and changed the course of his life and the history of the war.

He would become the youngest photographer ever to win the Pulitzer Prize, along with every other major photographic award in 1973.

But when I met him he was a refugee, one of many Associated Press bureau staffers evacuated as Saigon fell to the communists. He was huddled in a tent on Guam with other evacuees. Here he was not a celebrity, just a very young looking man, displaced and uncertain where the future would take him.



Here is what I know about Nick's life: He was born in Vietnam in 1951. His brother, Huyn Than My, a gifted photographer, was covering the war for the American news agency The Associated Press, when in 1966 he was wounded and later shot by the Viet Cong while awaiting evacuation. The grief-stricken younger brother was a mere 15 years old, but had been learning about photography from his brother. "I picked his camera up," he remembered, and volunteered to shoot for the AP.



Huyn Cong “Nick” Ut spent his early life covering the war in Vietnam after his brother was shot by Viet Cong. He captured scenes of terror, the hardship of refugees and the toll that war takes on a country and its people.

“The AP was my family now,” he recalls, and there were times when he slept on a couch in the Saigon bureau waiting for assignments. Another photographer gave him the nickname “Nick” and it stuck. He had many close calls in the field and was wounded three times in 1970 as he covered the U.S. and South Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia.

Then on June 8, 1972, a routine assignment became his story of a lifetime. There was word of fighting on Highway 1 near the Cambodian border. Nick was sent out along with a driver.

“We had a big AP van,” he recalled recently. “We see a lot of black smoke and a lot of fighting. I told my driver to stop. We could not go further because soldiers were blocking the road.”

He hiked with the soldiers over a mile and then considered turning back.

“I said I had enough,” he recalled. “Maybe I go back. Then I saw South Vietnamese planes coming. I picked up my camera and was shooting pictures.”

Suddenly, he said, the smoke turned a brilliant

yellow. “It was beautiful,” he thought, but said to himself, “My God, it’s the napalm.” He had not seen that cruel weapon used before.

People began running toward him, refugees who had been mistakenly targeted as Viet Cong.

“I saw an old lady running,” he remembers. “She carried a baby in her arms. The baby died while I shot my pictures.

“Then I see the girl running and I say to myself, ‘Why she has no clothes?’ Then she came closer and I see her skin coming off.”

After shooting his pictures, he poured water on the girl, wrapped her in a coat and put her in the AP van. He and the driver raced to the nearest field hospital. During the 40-minute ride, the 9-year-old Kim Phuc screamed that she was dying.

At the hospital, which was overwhelmed with wounded soldiers, no one wanted to help until Nick realized what he had to do. He showed his press pass.

“I told them, ‘If she dies, picture will be everywhere tomorrow.’ I told them they do not want the news media.”

Once they agreed to help her, Nick raced to the AP Saigon bureau with his film. Those who were there remember him running in the door, sweat pouring off of him, yelling, “Great pictures! Great pictures!”

When they processed the shocking photos, some wondered if the girl’s nakedness would be a prob-

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After moving to Los Angeles, Ut continued working for Associated Press and covered a different range of subjects, from Hollywood celebrities to court cases, to political figures.

Top: President Obama with older daughter Malia

Top right: actor Robert Blake

Middle: celebrity couple actor James Brolin and singer Barbra Streisand

Bottom, left to right: Kim Phuc stays in touch with Nick Ut, whom she calls "Uncle Ut" and lives with her husband and children in Canada.

Phuc visits a burn victim in England.



lem for publication. But photo editor Horst Faas ordered that the photos be transmitted immediately to New York. Editors soon called and said it was on front pages everywhere in the world. It has since been dubbed "Napalm Girl" and has been reproduced perhaps more than any other photo from the Vietnam War.

Although it is the picture for which he will be remembered, Nick Ut's other images from Vietnam are a searing testament to the horrors of war and the power of news photography. He has taken thousands of pictures since then, proving himself a brilliant interpreter of the American scene.

After the war, Nick was assigned to the Tokyo bureau for two years, then was sent to Los Angeles where he has distinguished himself with dazzling pictures for nearly four decades. But "The Picture" is always present for him.

In the 1990s I was interviewing Daniel Ellsberg, the man who leaked the Pentagon Papers secret history of the Vietnam War. The bureau sent Nick to photograph Ellsberg, who, when he was told who

was coming, was overcome with excitement. As Nick arrived, Ellsberg rose and embraced him.

"You helped to end the war," he said.

As for Kim Phuc, she continues to fight the after-effects of her injuries that required numerous surgeries. She won asylum in Canada where she lives with her husband and two children. And she became a UN Goodwill Ambassador. She travels the world telling her story.

She and Nick have remained close over the years and she calls him "Uncle Ut." For a time she disliked seeing the painful picture. But Nick said she now accepts it as her legacy.

"Her picture tells a story forever, not just for Vietnam but for every war," Nick said. He recalled a recent conversation with Kim about her experiences since the day she ran for her life.

"She said to me, 'Uncle Nick, I'm so busy. I'm not running now. I'm flying.'" 🇺🇸