This paper is the script for a slide presentation about photographer David Douglas Duncan and his view of war. It is intended to be used with slides made from pictures Duncan took during World War II, the Korean War, and the war in Vietnam and published in various books and periodicals. It discusses a shift in emphasis to be seen both in the pictures and in the text written by Duncan in which he increasingly portrayed the suffering and death of war. It concludes by saying that Duncan in his pictures did not oppose war in general but opposed the sentimentalizing or glorifying of war.

(TJ)
DAVID DOUGLAS DUNCAN'S CHANGING VIEWS ON WAR

an audio-visual presentation

by

Richard Politowski
Michigan State University

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'The dead are dead. It's the wounded that wreck us. Ike Fenton's bloodshot, angry eyes swept the four empty foxholes where the stretcher bearers had just been at work, then stopped on me. 'Okay, get your pictures. But for Christ's sake don't get wounded.' He tore open his K-rations. 'How about killed?' Ike Fenton almost smiled. We were old friends.'

Over a 25-year span, David Douglas Duncan, American photographer and correspondent, photographed and wrote about three major wars in our time -- World War II, the Korean War, and the war in Vietnam. Although Duncan has many accomplishments besides his war photography, this presentation portrays and analyzes the development of Duncan's personal attitude towards war. Conclusions are drawn chiefly from his photographs, but also from his writings for magazines and the texts which accompany the photographs in his books.

Duncan was born in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1916. From the beginning, Duncan was strong-willed and independent. In his pictorial autobiography Yankee Nomad, he claims to have been "expelled from school so often that his presence
in class for a full unbroken month was considered rather unusual."  

Of his boyhood in Kansas City Duncan wrote, "In all the land, the whole isolated land, there was perhaps no place more remote from reality, or happier, than Kansas City, Missouri, my hometown."  

In 1933 Duncan entered the University of Arizona intending to major in archaeology. There he took his first photographs with a Bakelite, thirty-nine-cent camera, a birthday gift from his younger sister Jean. The pictures were of a fire at the Congress Hotel in Tucson. They included one of a middle-aged man who was attempting to re-enter the burning hotel to recover a suitcase. The following day Duncan read in the paper that John Dillinger and his gang had been flushed out of the hotel by the fire and realized his camera contained still undeveloped pictures of the attempted escape. In Yankee Nomad he wrote, "Later I was to improve on hitting newsbreaks with pictures."  

A love of wildlife stemming from boyhood compelled Duncan to transfer to the University of Miami the following year to major in zoology. In 1936 he won second prize in a Kodak snapshot contest for a picture of a Mexican fisherman casting his net. With the money from this prize he purchased better photo equipment and began to fill his spare time with picture-taking. In a letter dated March 7, 1938, he wrote to his parents, "Today, I graduated. Bachelor of Arts, University of Miami,"
mid-term, no formalities. Zoology and Spanish. They'll send the diploma later. That's it . . . except I intend to be a photographer."6

After graduation, Duncan took part in several nature photography expeditions which included giant turtle fishing and a broadbill swordfish study. Several of his photo stories from these expeditions were subsequently published in National Geographic.

Duncan's draft board gave him permission to leave the country in 1940 to do advertising photography in Latin America for Pan American Airways.7 While working in Latin American, he made several unsuccessful attempts to obtain a draft deferment because, as he stated in a letter to President Roosevelt, he thought he "could best serve his country as a representative in Latin America."8 On February 17, 1943, David Douglas Duncan was sworn in as a Second Lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps Reserve.

The religious tone of Duncan's letter home announcing his enlistment was not out-of-keeping with letters he received from his parents. His mother, less than a month before this, wrote, "The Bible says 'the fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.' I'm no man, am not too sure I'm righteous, but I'm praying fervently every day that you may find your right place and be satisfied in it."9 Similarly, his father wrote him less than six months after his enlistment, "May David's songs bring you comfort and peace and an understanding heart."10
After basic training, Duncan was put in command of a photo unit. His longing for more active duty was satisfied when he was given a special commission to photograph the entire operations of the South-Pacific Combat Air Transport Command (known as SCAT) on January 20, 1944. To his parents he wrote, "I shall now photograph Marine Corps aviation throughout the South Pacific. Perhaps the finest compliment of all is that I've been turned loose on the assignment with no strings attached. Much like those jobs I did for Pan American Airways ..." With a boyhood sense of adventure and independence which photography gave him and an almost religious sense of mission which being a Marine inspired in him, Duncan began his career as a war photographer.

Most of Duncan's World War II photographs were never published and are not readily available for examination. This is because they were taken under government assignment. However, three articles by Duncan illustrated with his own photographs from the war were published in 1945. The first of these was "Fiji Patrol on Bougainville," appearing in the January edition of National Geographic. Duncan wrote in the article, "I was a United States Marine, being flown by an Army pilot, going to join a campaign with Fiji islanders." The text of the article gives a firsthand account of the Ibu campaign on Bougainville. Among the photographs are portraits of some of the jungle fighters. The one on the left was captioned, "Scowl and gun lurk in ambush -- he killed 50 Japanese."
11. Parachute

Under a subtitle "Food Floats Down from the Heavens," Duncan describes the parachute drops of food and military supplies to this Solomon Islands outpost against the Japanese. Planning military strategy is also reported on and illustrated in the article. But surprisingly, although the text of the article covers some of the intensity of the Ibu campaign, in which Duncan himself participated both as photographer and fighter, none of the accompanying photos portray combat or violence.

The military, almost patriotic emphasis of the article is most dramatically represented by its concluding paragraph: "For sixty days the colonel had guided his men across the largest of the Solomon Islands, through the heart of enemy country. With the loss of only one man he had fulfilled his mission. He had proved that the thousands of Japs on Bougainville, neutralized by our troops at Empress August Bay, can be left to 'die on the vine.'"15

14. Man with gun

Similar pictures from Bougainville were published in Yankee Nomad, Duncan's pictorial autobiography. Bougainville and the Fiji warriors was also the topic of a second article, this one published in The Saturday Evening Post in March, 1945. Entitled "The Greatest Jungle Fighters of All," the article opens with a description of the death of Nichi Nishino. A private in the Japanese army, Nishino was caught off guard while reading a dirty book somewhere deep in the Bougainville jungle. Coldly and without compassion Duncan describes the quick death
of the unfortunate Japanese private. Mostly head-and-shoulders portraits of the Fiji fighters accompany the text.

By April, 1944, Duncan had completed the first phase of his special photographic assignment with SCAT, the South-Pacific Combat Air Transport Command. A year later he was assigned to special aviation duty to photograph combat aviation from the air. This took him to Okinawa and resulted in an article for the October 1945, National Geographic. The short two pages of text gives an almost tourist's view of Okinawa, especially in light of the first subtitle which says, "Island Reminds Americans of Home." But the pictures -- at least some of them -- show American military interaction with the islanders. In addition, there is movement of refugees and some purely military but non-combat photographs. The only photograph in the entire article to portray any of the real violence of war is a picture of wrecked Japanese plane. According to the caption published with the photograph, the Marine is looking for Japanese name plates and scavenging for scrap metal to make bracelets.

From the Yontan Airfield in Okinawa, Duncan completed at least 19 separate photographic missions. Some of them were done from a special plastic-nosed tank tied under the left wing of a single-seat P-38 fighter piloted by Major Ed Taylor. According to Yankee Nomad, Duncan was thrilled with these aerial expeditions. He wrote to his parents, "Now it's the only way I want to fly."
And pictures! Ed nuzzled right up to each attacking Corsair as the boys blasted enemy artillery positions with broadsides of rockets and firebombs, so close I could look right over the fighter pilots' gunsights. Then Ed poured on full throttle and flew us straight through the exploding targets -- at 400 miles per hour. 18

Duncan's only published photo of World War II showing dead or wounded soldiers shows the cliffs on a beach in southern Okinawa after the last day of official fighting in the Pacific. Because Duncan was photographing them from the air, the bodies are at a great distance, both physically and psychologically, from the photographer and the viewer. In later wars, death and suffering would be portrayed more directly.

Just before the close of the war, Duncan photographed what he termed the "naked act of treason." 19 In a series of pictures published 20 years later in Yankee Nomad, Duncan showed a Japanese officer voluntarily leading a bombing mission against his own headquarters. The Japanese officer had walked into the American lines at Mindanao.

The surrender of Japan in August of 1945 marked the end of World War II. Duncan was among the first to land on the Japanese shore. Because of his connections with some of the top military brass, he managed to be aboard the U.S.S. Missouri for Japan's official surrender. 20

By the end of World War II, Duncan's war coverage was characterized by a strong emphasis on military operations with an apparently indifferent attitude towards the suffering
and death engendered by war. Although this could have been due to the editing by the popular magazines, Duncan's own book *Yankee Nomad* shows approximately the same kinds of pictures for this period. And, when this is considered in light of the postscript to *Yankee Nomad* in which Duncan claims to have obtained from the Marines "every wartime shot" taken for the Marines, it is not difficult to conclude that Duncan probably did not photograph suffering and death to any great extent in World War II.

After the war, Duncan joined *Life* magazine as a photographer. In 1950, he was sent to cover the war in Korea. His first report to the United States appeared in the July 10, 1950, issue of *Life*. The dominant picture on the opening spread shows Lieutenant Robert T. Wayne telling Sergeant Jim Brothers how he shot down two Russian-made Yak fighters near Seoul. In contrast, the small lead picture shows a dazed Lieutenant Charles P. Moran who, Duncan reported, shot down the first invading plane of the Korean War. Duncan wrote, "Something in his face made me grab a quick shot."  

Although the headline and the dominant pictures of this article are directly concerned with military operations, the main focus of the text is evacuation of the foreign civilians and the displacement of Korean citizens.

At one point Duncan remarks, "When I came upon an ancient couple serenely sitting while their eldest son strained to pull them to safety, I felt nothing but shame at being bigger than all three and yet helplessly tied to
the tiny camera in my hands. These were not poverty-stricken peasants headed from an uncertain past to a less certain future but the entire people of that section of Korea where life had been casual and full-stomached.23 The following week, Duncan had a second article in Life, entitled "Thunderbolts Along My Spine." It is a personal account of a jet fighter strike which Duncan photographed from a combat plane at 600 miles per hour. Duncan wrote, "It gave me the most acute feeling of being lashed to a rocket of godawful strength. It was one helluva sensation and wonderful."24

This experience and Duncan's reaction to it are reminiscent of his earlier aviation missions from Okinawa. The physical strain of traveling at such a high rate of speed was apparently too much for Duncan. He concludes the article: "I knew that for a short time I had actually been living in another world, a world which now lay beyond me and into which I would never again set foot once the jet rolled to a stop in its place by the squadron shack. And I was glad."25

Under the heading "Is Formosa Next?" in early August, 1950, Duncan wrote an analysis of the job which was facing the Seventh Fleet in the Pacific. He describes how the inexperienced Annapolis graduates were being formed by veteran World War II officers into a "warlike and purposeful" force.26 Aloft in a divebomber, Duncan witnessed the bombing of an enemy freight train almost hidden in a tunnel. In the article, Duncan refers to the
train's engineer as a "poor miserable ostrich." One of the few photographs which accompanies the article shows a Grumman Panther fighter landing on the carrier Valley Forge.

Again reflecting his military background in a *Life* article entitled "Where 27th Held the Marines Launch Attack," Duncan wrote: "To the Marines, that morning of August 7 was important. It marked the eighth anniversary of their historic landing on Guadalcanal, the first American ground offensive of World War II. And it had been chosen as the kickoff day for the first large-scale infantry offensive by the United Nations' forces in this Korean War."28

Although the lead picture shows Marines sleeping on a train headed for the front, the remainder of the article is highly militaristic in approach. Duncan, along with an AP correspondent, is sharing a hole which they both dug near the battlefront. Just when the fighting seemed hopeless for the Americans, Marine Corsair fighters joined the fray. And Duncan concludes: "Rockets whoomed down into the crags, wing cannons ripped off burst upon burst, and the enemy began getting his first taste of Marine medicine."29

Duncan's first photographs of human casualties in the Korean War appeared in *Life* on Sept. 11, 1950, in an article about the South Korean army entitled "The Durable ROKs." The unit which Duncan accompanied unsuccessfully attacked Hill 626. The brief text discusses
the attack as well as some of the casualties. Some of the photographs portray routine operations of the fighting unit. The closing photograph of a wounded Korean woman nursing her infant son is made even more powerful by Duncan's concluding sentence: "She had been told that her other son had just died of wounds suffered in the same shellburst."30

Duncan's first personal photographic statement on war appeared on September 18, 1950, and was later expanded into a book with the same title. Duncan was following up on an idea he had earlier wired to the Life editors. The story opens with a nearly full-page picture of Corporal Leonard Hayworth in tears because his Captain Ike Fenton had no more ammunition. Several weeks after taking the picture, Duncan brought a copy of the magazine back to the Baker Company where the photo had been taken. He said one of the older Marines, upon seeing it, remarked, "'Hell! We all cry sometime.'"31

Using very few words in the seven-page article, 21 photographs tell the story of the war as these Marines experienced it. An American soldier encounters a dead enemy soldier, pausing, drawing back, and then continuing his mission. The article closes with a full-page picture of a wounded Marine being taken off in a jeep.

The book, This is War!, appeared approximately a year later. In the introduction to the book, Duncan explains: "There is neither climax nor rousing conclusion to this book. It is simply an effort to show something of what a
man endures when his country decides to go to war, with or without his personal agreement on the righteousness of the cause.\textsuperscript{32} And he concludes this section, headed "In Explanation," by stating: "I wanted to show the way men live, and die, when they know Death is among them, and yet they still find the strength to crawl forward armed only with bayonets to stop the advance of men they have never seen, with whom they have no immediate quarrel, men who will kill them on sight if given first chance."\textsuperscript{33}

The book then begins with a reprinting of the text of Duncan's articles from \textit{Life} magazine, with relatively minor revisions and additions. Then Duncan divides his Korean War photographs into three sets and presents them under three headings. "The Hill" covers what has come to be called "The Battle of No-Name Ridge," one of the bloodiest fights in Korea.\textsuperscript{34} Photographs in "The City" were made during the battle to recapture Seoul from the Communists. The closing section, "Retreat, Hell!," covers the First Division Marines' devastating march to the sea in the vicious North Korean winter, after being attacked by the Chinese Communists near the Changjin Reservoir.

Reminiscent of Duncan's earlier war photography are the pictures of the machinery and military maneuvers. Also prevalent are pictures of smaller groups of men engaged in obviously military work. And there are the close-ups of individual Marines. Many of these express strong emotional qualities which were not as evident in similar portraits from World War II.
Portrayal of death and the Marines' encounter with death are factors which differ most significantly from Duncan's earlier war coverage. Each photograph of a wounded or dying soldier is a powerful statement about the experiences of these fighting men. Also different from Duncan's previous war coverage is the inclusion of emotional reactions from native people the war affected most.

Over 16 years passed before Duncan would photograph his final major war, this time in Vietnam.

In 1953 Duncan visited Indochina on assignment for *Life*. In six two-page picture stories under the title "The Year of the Snake," Duncan reported on the indifference of the French staff officers, the suffering and death of local troops, social corruption, French dependence on American supplies, the failure of United States civilian aid, and the Vietnamese dream of independence.35

On assignment for ABC television and *Life* magazine, Duncan returned to Vietnam in 1967 to photograph the war.

His first report, published in late October, covers the intensification of the war around Con Thien. The 18-page articles opens with this photo, and after several pages of artillery fighting begins to show the wounded and the dead.

The closing text provides a contrast to the empathy and intensity of the photographs. Wrote Duncan: "In a way. I look on this story as a letter to the families and friends of the men of the Third Battalion, 9th Regiment,
3rd Marine Division. There are some pictures which are not easy to bear -- of men wounded and killed. But they are professionals, practicing a trade for which they volunteered. In 10 days at Con Thien -- though this seems hard to believe -- I never heard any griping at being there. The men view Con Thien in the same light as Tarawa and Iwo Jima and are proud and happy to have held this hillock in a remote land. It is a place every one of them seemed to believe important. Perhaps my pictures will add meaning to the letters the men themselves write home."36

In February the following year, Duncan was at Khe Sanh. The report in *Life* was similar in approach to the Con Thien story, opening with military action. But there are no pictures of wounded or dying soldiers. Instead, the closing picture, full-page, is of an American soldier singing to himself, as Duncan put it, "spirituals loved since childhood."37

The text, however, deals with death in a straightforward manner. Like this: "As commonplace as the thud of incoming shells and the gut-ripping roar of an attacking jet loosing rockets just over the hill is the idea of being killed at Khe Sanh. To learn of the death of a friend at the air loading ramp, at the trash dump, in his foxhole, at the battalion aid station or anywhere, including standing next to you, is a normal part of daily life."38
That same year, Duncan's Khe Sanh photographs were published in a little book entitled *I Protest!*. After an emphatically political introduction which closes with an open letter to the president concerning the United States' role in Vietnam, the book contains an expanded version of Duncan's Khe Sanh photographic war coverage, without text, captions, or headlines.

The culmination of Duncan's Vietnam experiences was his third book on war, *War Without Heroes*. The book's dedication is a reference to an event from Duncan's Korean assignments. In *Yankee Nomad*, he tells of the "Marine, who when asked what he wanted most for Christmas, reached for words through his frozen lips, then answered, 'Give me tomorrow.'" By way of introduction, Duncan repeats part of the introduction to *This is War* from 20 years earlier. In addition, he includes a statement of his political views on the Vietnam War, briefer, but in a large measure similar to the point of view expressed in *I Protest!*.

The book is divided into four sections. The first is quite short and is basically the same material covered in the 1953 Indochina article from *Life*. The second section covers a small campaign of the war not previously published. The last two are already familiar.

The pictures themselves are reminiscent of much of the Korean photography, although they are displayed with text in most cases. There are the familiar pictures
of war machinery and the movement of troops. And there are the closer pictures of smaller numbers of military men in action. The tight, emotional portraits typical of Duncan are also prevalent. Pictures of wounded and dying are also given significant play.

Beyond all of these, there is a type of photograph new to this war. These are pictures which are on the lighter, almost humorous, side. And in a few places Duncan combines the tragic with the comic, so to speak. As Duncan puts it for these pictures, "Apparently the happiest Marine at Con Thien was dying, too." Absent from the Vietnam coverage are photographs which depict native Vietnamese suffering the tragic effects of war.

But humor is far from the conclusions Duncan would have us draw. As War Without Heroes nears its closing, the pictures become more symbolic and more despairing. The final pictures in the book are at a Khe Sanh airfield as rubber sacks containing bodies of Marines killed in action await helicopter transportation. And then, echoing the religious influences of his childhood, Duncan closes his final book on war with a passage from the Book of Psalms, perhaps suggesting one man's powerlessness in the face of the power of war.

Over his 25 years of war photography, Duncan's pictures show a development which moves away from the purely military photos, the type he was assigned to do while a Marine in World War II, to photographs which attempt to move the viewer with compassion for the
suffering human beings portrayed. To achieve this, Duncan concentrates more heavily on individuals and small groups of people rather than overviews (and aerial views) of military situations. Nevertheless, there is a consistent thread of military emphasis in both Duncan's photos and his writing which gives his more emotional photographs a substantiation which only knowledge of a situation can give.

Speculation about the causes for the shift in Duncan's emphasis could lead to some misleading conclusions. For example, one may say that the changes in camera, lens, and film technology allowed Duncan to shoot better, more varied pictures in later wars. While it is true that faster film and faster lenses, beginning with the Korean War, were available, the older Leica equipment in use during World War II could still have been used to photograph wounded or dead soldiers.

One cannot merely attribute the increased portrayal of war suffering and death to editorial staffs which kept abreast of changing public acceptance of such things. To do this is to forget that Duncan himself does not show any of such pictures in his own books until "This is War" appeared in Life.

What appears to be an emotional viewpoint in Duncan's later war photographs is clarified by what he says in the texts which accompany his pictures. In This is War! he states a general purpose: "This book is an effort to completely divorce the word 'war' as flung dramatically
down off the highest benches of every land, from the
look in the man's eyes who is taking his last puff on
perhaps his last cigarette, perhaps forever, before he
grabs his rifle, his guts and his dreams -- and attacks
an enemy position above him."

And Duncan has a specific political message in
his Vietnam work. He states this quite clearly in

"I am no peacenik, Vietnik, pinkie, Commie,
liberal, conservative, kook, hippie, hawk or dove. I'm
just a veteran combat photographer and foreign correspondent
who cares intensely about my country and the role we are
playing -- and assigning to ourselves -- in the world of
today. And I want to shout loud and clear protest at
what has happened at Khe Sanh, and in all of Vietnam."

Most of Duncan's Korean and Vietnam photographs
speak to his general purpose. On the other hand, most of
his writing reveals a military bias or a political stance.
Together they do not make up a humanitarian viewpoint
opposing war in general. Rather, they seem to be opposing
the sentimentalizing or glorifying of war and its
unnecessary or careless implementation.
NOTES


2. Ibid., p. 29, (orig.: . . . that my presence . . .).


4. Ibid., p. 9, (orig.: . . . from my younger sister . . .).

5. Ibid.


7. Ibid., p. 77.

8. Ibid., p. 106, (orig.: . . . best serve my country . . .).

9. Ibid., p. 108.

10. Ibid., p. 114.

11. Ibid., p. 118.

12. Ibid., p. 119.


15. Ibid., p. 96.


17. *Nomad*, pp. 174-175.

18. Ibid., p. 171.

19. Ibid., p. 178.

20. Ibid., p. 195.

21. Ibid., p. 447.
23. Ibid., p. 74.
27. Ibid., p. 85.
29. Ibid., p. 17.
33. Ibid, second page of text.
34. Ibid., first page of "The Hill."
38. Ibid.
40. Ibid., p. 118.
41. *This is War!*, first page.
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"This is War!," *Life*, September 18, 1950, pp. 41-47.


"Inside the Cone of Fire -- Con Thien," *Life*, October 27, 1967, pp. 28D-42C.


**Picture Sources**

Most of the photographs for World War II were taken from *Yankee Nomad* with some also from the two *National Geographic* articles.

For the Korean War, the bulk of the photographs appeared in *This is War!*. Pictures from the *Life* articles were selected only when they did not appear in the former source.

All of the photographs from the Vietnam War were selected from *War Without Heroes*, although most of them also appeared in *Life*.