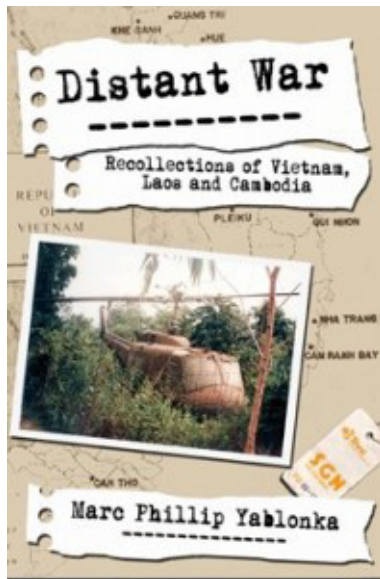


# otherpeoplesbooks

Reviews, Observations & An Occasional Rant

## Talking Vietnam

By Jonathan Webb



Marc Yablonka talks to people who were there about the Vietnam War.

He'll talk to just about anybody. He has interviewed doctors who worked among the Montagnards in the Central Highlands. He has interviewed pilots who flew secret missions for the CIA. He has interviewed the helicopter jockeys who gave Nixon his last ride from the White House to San Clemente. He has interviewed Pat Sajak, the “Wheel of Fortune” MC, who turns out to have been a real-life counterpart of the Robin Williams character in the film, *Good Morning, Vietnam!* He has interviewed Vietnamese veterans who fought for the communists. He has even interviewed some of the Canadians – by his conservative estimate there were ten thousand of them – who fought in the war for Uncle Sam.

Yablonka also has sought the company of the reporters and photographers who covered the war. Perhaps he feels a bond with them because he's a journalist and photographer himself. In his conversations with Nick Ut and Catherine Leroy, for example, the reader senses affection as well as respect.

Nick Ut's story is a dramatic one. His brother was on assignment for the Saigon bureau of the Associated Press when he was killed in a firefight in the Mekong Delta. His sister-in-law urged Horst Faas, the AP photo chief, to hire Nick in her husband's place: the family desperately needed the income. Faas balked at the idea. Nick was in his mid-teens, too young to be exposed to the risks assumed by reporters. Faas did, however, agree to employ the boy in the darkroom – where he thrived.

“I had never been a photographer before,” Ut told Yablonka, “but the darkroom was so easy. Nothing to learn but loading the film and developing. I learned everything in three minutes ... and loved it.” He was taught by a master: Faas, too, had started his career in the darkroom, not with AP, but with the Keystone agency in Berlin. Faas always claimed that he learned what made a good picture from the professionals whose film he processed. He saw the many shots that came in and he saw the few that were sent out over the wires. He noticed what made them different. Ut, like Faas, was an apt student. Before long, he, too, had a camera in his hands.

He is known now as the photographer who took what may have been the most powerful image of the war – the picture of the nine-year-old Vietnamese girl, her body seared by napalm, running

naked from her just-bombed village. What's less well known is that the photographer saved the girl's life. It was he who gathered her up in a blanket and drove her to a hospital where he insisted to indifferent medical staff that her injuries be taken care of. The two of them still keep in touch.

Catherine Leroy's story, too, is poignant in its way. She was a tiny, fearless French photographer who somehow wrangled permission to jump with the 173<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Brigade in Operation



Marc Yablonka. Photo by Camille Tran-Yablonka

Junction City in February 1967. The wings they pinned to her battledress commanded respect from troops who, often enough, had been impressed already by her fierce command of colorful language. She took remarkable photographs, including the first pictures taken behind enemy lines of North Vietnamese troops fighting in the South. One of these made the cover of *Life* magazine.

War has a way of staying with the people who are marked by it. Years after the war, Leroy told Yablonka, she was visiting the Pentagon when she was accosted by an American secret service agent. "Excuse me, Catherine," he said. "I'm sure you don't remember me, but I'll never forget you." It turned out he had been wounded and was stepping off a helicopter just as Leroy was boarding it at a firebase somewhere in Vietnam. As they passed, she tossed him a can of Coke, and the casual kindness of the gesture touched him. That's war," she told Yablonka. "You meet someone for a few seconds and you remember it for all your life."

Leroy later asked Yablonka for advice on selling her war photographs, and those of some of her colleagues. The market for them had died.

[Yablonka's book](#), *Distant War: Recollections of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia*, (San Diego, CA: Navigator Books) brings together an astonishing array of voices from the conflict. The terrible rancor the war engendered can be heard in the occasional comment, but, for the most part, his subjects are either philosophical or filled only with sadness. "We all left a bit of our souls in Southeast Asia," Tim Page, another veteran photographer, told the writer. "We don't want to lose that."