

conference at the Joint US Public Affairs Office, known as the Five O'Clock Follies.

When it came time to go home, the Colonel in charge made a typical military security knee-jerk decision telling Lon to destroy all his negatives, even though they had nothing to do with sensitive military matters. Lon went back to the barracks and begged and borrowed as many *Playboy* magazines as he could find. His negatives were stored in protective plastic sheets. So, he slipped the sheets between the pages of the magazines, bundled them up and sent them home. "I got two 40-pound stacks, 80 pounds of *Playboys* air-shipped from Saigon to Chicago," he chortles. And that's how, Lon Holmberg got between 6,000 and 8,000 images out of Vietnam.

But Vietnam did not get out of him. "I had some scary experiences," he says, lips pursed. "I had slight post-traumatic stress disorder for a period of time. I had a few flashbacks. It was not a major thing, but it was awhile getting readjusted." Lon had a job in a photo studio waiting for him when he returned home to Chicago. But he says, "It was kinda boring; photographs of Kellogg's Special K to make recipes for muffins and stuff like that." He missed the adrenaline rush. "Life was really dull. It was just gray. I almost went back in the Army."

He learned of an opportunity to become a TV cameraman for NBC in Beirut. Lon Holmberg walks his fingers over an imaginary precipice, describing the plunge into the dangerous life of a combat photographer. "I did get a taste of the adrenaline rush of that kind of photography, which is incredibly exciting and I got just to the edge of you want to do that and not anything else." It's like a drug, he confirms, "because it is so exciting."

Wisely, however, he became a teacher's assistant while earning his Ph.D. in English from the University of New Mexico. Next stop Gunnison, Colorado where he helped establish photography as a part of the English department at Western State College. From there, Lon Holmberg moved to Florida to teach professional photography at Daytona

Beach Community College. And then he went to Annapolis to shoot a film about a Vietnam War of the human body, the battle against AIDS. "I still had some of that adrenaline thing. I thought here's a project about life and death that appealed to me. And I realized it was so much more than that. And I lost all the excitement about looking at death, and ended up looking at life."

Funded from his own pocket, "Mending Hearts" aired on PBS in 1992. "I talked to junkies and male prostitutes and people who had hard hard lives; that had the most spiritual understanding and were immediately aware that life was not about quantity but about quality...And they understood that relationships and love were what's important."

Relationships. Love. It was in Annapolis that Lon and Sandy signed up for the same tai chi class, although they made an unlikely couple. She came from a starched Naval background. He was long-haired, dressed in black, riding a motorcycle. But, Sandy's friend had a dream, and in it she saw Lon, "and she said to Sandy, 'You're going to meet the man you're going to marry in this tai chi class.'" One thing led to another, and that's exactly what happened. "We gradually became friends and we became closer and closer," smiles Lon. "And we realized that we were perfect for each other, but we never would have picked each other if we hadn't had this angel come and say 'that's your husband.'"

About 20 years ago, the two of them decided to go to an Indian powwow in western Maryland. During the ceremony, all veterans, whether they were Indians or not, were invited to dance. "I joined that. It was very moving. The pulse of the drum beat is very powerful." Lon's voice becomes husky again. "I felt a sense of coming home that I never had before. When I came

home in 1971, it was awkward. It was very uncomfortable and it was not supportive. And here to be among these people who had been through tough experiences with the military, to honor people who made sacrifices for their country, just blew me away." It marked the beginning of a

rich and personal relationship with Native Americans, in particular the Monacan people, that lasts to this day.

Lon and Sandy have lived in our area for the past 10 years in a house that she designed herself. Floor to ceiling books gaze through passive solar windows to a magnificent view of the Blue Ridge. The strains of Vietnamese music whisper from a stereo. "We have just loved being here," says Lon contentedly. "It feels like home to me. I've lived in a lot of different places and this feels like coming back and sinking my roots down and being home."

This past October, however, Lon was not home. He was back in Vietnam teaching English at the University of Hue to advanced physics students "who needed to pass an English exam to go to graduate school in the United States." UVA Physics Professor, P.Q. Hung, "just wanted me to help with their writing and as a retired English professor, that's something I know I can do."

Lon secured leave from his regular gig, teaching the GED exam at the Central Virginia Regional Jail, and came back to his old stomping ground. The last time Lon Holmberg was in Hue was in 1971. He remembers crossing the river on a railroad bridge in a commandeered Jeep. The city was in ruins. Now, 40 years later, he could recognize the Citadel, still pockmarked from the pitched 1968 battle, but little else. The building where they held the Five O'clock Follies daily press conferences is now a Louis Vuitton store.

A secretary from the advanced physics program at the university took him around. "The first day getting on the back of that motorbike, I was so terrified, I just looked at the back of her helmet because people go both ways," shudders Lon. "It was a tough trip, 12 hours a day." They crammed a whole semester into a month.

His students were college kids, mostly young ladies. "They look like kids but they are experts in nuclear particle physics and advanced theoretical physics...Initially it was difficult for them to understand me, and it was hard for me to understand them. But over the month, we made a lot of progress." With classes to teach morning and afternoon, followed by an evening conversation class at a local café, Lon did little else but eat, sleep, walk and teach.

And then one day, he experienced that rare rewarding moment when it comes together. "We finally were able to have a conversation around a table, and this guy was talking and he turned to me and said, 'Wow, I'm speaking English!' And I thought, 'Aw that's cool.'"

Back home, Lon shuffles through a pile of tidy thank you notes all penned in careful cursive handwriting on specialty colored paper. "Hi Sir Lonand," reads one, the student mistakenly thinking that part of Lon's e-mail address spells his entire name. "My writing has been improved a lot because of your teaching. I can get more confident in learning English. An approximate month was not long time..."

No it wasn't, but Lon Holmberg did manage to find a free moment to take a photograph or two; that and call home every Sunday, where Sandy was holding down the fort. "I was glad to see this fellow back," she says grateful and relieved that Lon returned safely from his second journey to Vietnam.



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
Lon Holmberg teaches inmates at the Central Virginia Regional Jail. "I'm just working with the students and encouraging them to see getting the GED as a way of leveraging a change in your life. This is something you can do so you don't end up in here again."



Taken by Katherine Lambert of Newsweek magazine in 1990, this portrait of Lon Holmberg was shot while he was producing a documentary film about AIDS.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
Lon Holmberg of Orange spent the month of October teaching English to advanced physics students at the University of Hue in Vietnam.

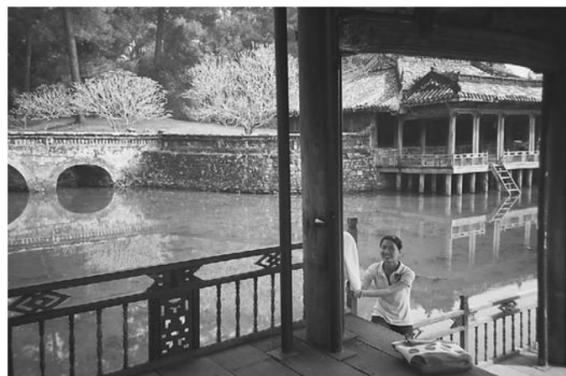


PHOTO TAKEN THIS PAST OCTOBER BY LON HOLMBERG
Emperor Tu Duc's (1847-83) tomb, built during his lifetime as a retreat and as a mausoleum after his death.



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
Lon and Sandy Holmberg met in a tai chi class in Annapolis but have made their home here for the past 10 years.

It was sometime in the late 1960s. Vietnam was hot. At the time, Lon Holmberg was teaching English at a prep school in Brooklyn, NY. Sometimes the kids would fly the American flag upside down in protest, much to the headmaster's consternation. But Lon says despite his longer-than-average hair at the time, "I was not protesting against the war. I really had very little idea about the war because I had just completed my masters in English. I had been in 17th century English poetry in the New York Public Library."

Anyway, for a writing project, he had his students, many of whom were Jewish, watch a movie about the holocaust, discuss it with their grandparents, and then write about it. "The kids came back, and it was the most powerful teaching experience that I ever had." His eyes well up; his voice husky. "I mean one guy's grandmother walked 1,000 miles across Russia with her feet wrapped in cloths; no shoes, through tremendous cold."

Later at a parent-faculty dinner some of these same holocaust survivors came up to him to tell him he was doing a good job teaching their grandkids.

He noticed tattooed numbers on their forearms. The headmaster launched into a tirade. "He started talking about how our country is going to hell in a hand basket, and he said, 'there are even members of our faculty that support this outrageous behavior.'" Lon pauses a beat. "I was the only possibility that he could have been talking about."

Something inside the young English teacher snapped. He stood up, threw down his napkin, spat out an epithet that we cannot repeat because we are family newspaper, and stomped out of the room, never to come back. "You can only afford to do that a few times in your life," he smiles from his comfy living room here in Central Virginia. "It felt great."

Two weeks later, he received his draft notice.

It was the first step in Lon's journey to Vietnam. He became an Army photographer and volunteered to go to Southeast Asia, which is ironic because the reason he was drafted in the first place is that he quit his job after being

falsely accused as a Vietnam war protester.

His assignment: to be General Creighton Abrams' personal photographer, chronicling meetings and photos and the like, in and around the huge military base at Saigon. But Lon says, "after doing the grip-and-grin thing, I wanted to get out into the field." Armed with cameras—both movie and still—he must have cut an interesting figure with 70 pounds of military equipment on his back, machine gun bandoliers criss-crossed over his chest, and a sawed-off M-79 grenade launcher strapped to his leg. "I was supposed to hook up with units that were doing something interesting, going in contact or where something was happening."

He remembers getting lost with a 200-man outfit, spending the night in a defensive perimeter after pulling themselves out of a muddy ravine. Because he wanted to pull his own weight, he vol-

Lon's journey to Vietnam

unteered for a guard duty shift. "It was so dark that your eyes are constantly playing tricks with you...You hear a little something. Is there somebody moving over there? It was maddening."

On another occasion he went out with six guys on recon; their mission: to plant electronic sensing devices along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. "These guys were really good in the jungle. They were experts. I was not so much, but I tried." When they reached their destination, they discovered that the batteries were missing in the listening devices they were to install. "What had happened, someone, most likely back at the base, took the batteries and put them in his cassette recorder," he smirks in disgust.

All the while, Lon Holmberg was taking mostly black and white photographs of a wide variety of subjects other than the war itself: street scenes in Saigon, life at a remote mountaintop firebase, Montagnard tribesmen, the daily press

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Clockwise, from top left: Montagnard tribesmen somewhere near the Cambodian border. Harassment-and-interdiction fire, an attempt to catch North Vietnamese troops bringing supplies down the nearby Ho Chi Minh Trail. Toronto, Canada. New York City, 1960. Loading a C-147 at Can Tho. Shenandoah National Park.

PHOTOS BY LON HOLMBERG



Lon Holmberg has always loved photography. His dad gave him a Brownie when he was eight. A year later, he had learned how to develop his own film. "When I was 11 or 12, I got my first job in photography working in a dark-room for an older guy who was 16." He would chase ambulances and literally throw film from a passing car for Lon to develop. "It was all very very exciting." He winks.

The photographer

He kept up with the photography while attending the Gunnery School in Washington, CT. During the summers he worked for a Chicago advertising company under the watchful eye of "one of those old-time photography guys who mixed all their own chemicals." He kept at it when he was a frat boy at UVA, even illustrated a children's book. And later he became a

studio assistant.

Back home, he caught the eye of Hugh Edwards, who was curator of prints and drawing at the Art Institute of Chicago. "He was a major figure in photography in the 1960s," explains Lon. "The Art Institute was one of the first museums to collect photographs." Wearing white gloves, Edwards would go through prints with Lon. "He didn't talk much, but I could tell which ones were important by the amount of time that he'd make me look at them. Then he would send me into the gallery, if there was a show, and have me pick one image and look at it for half an hour, which is tough to do, to examine every centimeter. And that was very, very productive, because doing that is incredible discipline. But you really see into pictures that way and you see a lot of stuff that you wouldn't see otherwise."

Lon Holmberg lists Henri Cartier-

Bresson, the ground-breaking French documentary photographer, as a major influence. He bought Bresson's book "The Decisive Moment" in 1958 when he was barely in high school. Today, it is just one in a large collection of art photography books in the Holmberg library.

Over the past several years, Lon has taught photography classes and chaired the Orange Photo Club at The Arts Center In Orange. He is currently in the process of publishing a book of his photographs taken in Vietnam and smuggled out in *Playboy* magazines in 1971. It is called "So Long, Vietnam: A Photo-Memoir."

Asked what makes a good photograph, Lon Holmberg thinks carefully before answering. "It's a sense of reality that there is something that is real or alive in some way. It's not a mechanical thing; it's not composition; it's 'do I feel a sense of real experience here? Do we have the people in a moment that is revealing, that is not trivial?' And that's what I try to go for."

