

Then and now: Famous My Lai photographs displayed at USD while war in Ukraine rages



Students view Vietnam My Lai photos taken by Ron Haeberle at the University of San Diego on Wednesday. (Bill Wechter / For The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Pictures documented massacre and altered public's perception of Vietnam War

BY **JOHN WILKENS**

MARCH 19, 2022 5 AM PT

A half-century later, the photographs retain their power to shock.

Ron Haeberle understands that better than most. He took the pictures, which documented the Vietnam War massacre of civilians in My Lai by U.S. soldiers.

"War is war," he said. "A lot of bad things happen in war. They're happening now, in Ukraine."

The juxtaposition of then and now is playing out at the University of San Diego, where a [new exhibit](#) of Haeberle's photos is sparking reflection among students, faculty and staff whose online news sites and social media feeds are awash these days in sometimes gruesome photos from Kyiv and other bombarded cities.

Haeberle, now 80, came to San Diego from his home near Cleveland for the opening of the exhibit on Wednesday and to answer questions from the university community about what he refers to as "my silent protest against war." (Because of COVID-19 restrictions, the exhibit, which runs through March 28, is not yet open to the public.)



Student Nicole Chapuy views Vietnam My Lai photos taken by Ron Haeberle at the University of San Diego on Wednesday. "These pictures are tough to see," she said. (Bill Wechter / For The San Diego Union-Tribune)

"How people react to the photos, I'm always curious to see that," Haeberle said in a phone interview with the Union-Tribune a few days before his arrival.

Curiosity is what put him in Vietnam in the first place. After he was drafted into the Army in 1966, he was sent to a public information office in Hawaii, where he worked as a photographer. With his tour of duty nearing its end, he asked for a transfer to Vietnam.

"I wanted to see what was happening," he said.

On March 16, 1968, he arrived at [My Lai](#) by helicopter with Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment. He'd been assigned to the 100-person unit that morning, so he didn't know the soldiers — didn't know they were bristling with revenge from earlier firefights that had killed some of their colleagues.

They'd been told Viet Cong troops were hiding in the village — not true, as it turned out — and that any civilians there were enemy sympathizers. Within minutes, the firing started.



Ron Haeberle shows the opening panel for his showing of Vietnam My Lai photos at University of San Diego on Wednesday. (Bill Wechter / For The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Over the course of several hours, the soldiers killed hundreds of men, women and children. They raped some of the women, according to a later [investigation](#), and mutilated some of the bodies. They set the village on fire.

For Haeberle, stunned by what he was seeing, a kind of reflex kicked in. He raised his camera and started clicking the shutter.

He had two cameras with him that day. One was a Leica issued by the Army that he used to take black-and-white photos of individual soldiers in action. Those pictures were reviewed by military censors before they got released to the soldiers' hometown newspapers for publication.

The other camera was his own, a Nikon that had color film in it. He'd been taking pictures of the sights around Vietnam for his personal photo albums. Now he used it to document the carnage. Villagers dead in the road. A body thrown into a well. Terrified women and children huddled together moments before they got shot.

"I was there to take pictures, so that's what I did," he said. "I knew what I was seeing wasn't right."

His tour of duty ended just days later, and then he was out of the Army. He took the Nikon home with him to Cleveland. Weeks went by before he could look at what was on the film.

Silence, then disbelief

Haeberle had no plans to publish the photos. He figured the higher-ups knew what had happened at My Lai; officers were flying overhead as it unfolded. Surely the chips would fall.

Nothing happened. Haeberle put together a slide show for civic organizations interested in Vietnam. He included a couple of the My Lai pictures at the end. The reaction, he said, was always the same.

Silence.

"People could not believe that American soldiers would do something like this," he said.



Photographer Ron Haeberle tells students of his experience at My Lai in Vietnam at the University of San Diego. (Bill Wechter / For The San Diego Union-Tribune)

By the summer of 1969, word of the massacre was bubbling up in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere. An Army investigator interviewed Haeberle and told him his camera had captured only some of the atrocities. Haeberle decided maybe it was time to inform the public.

He went to his hometown newspaper, the Cleveland Plain Dealer, and [showed the editors](#) the photos. Seymour Hersh, an in-

vestigative reporter, had [written an account](#) of My Lai that was beginning to run in newspapers around the country. The Plain Dealer packaged Hersh's story with eight of Haerberle's pictures (printed in black and white) and published them on Nov. 20, 1969.

A month later, Life magazine printed the photos, this time in color.

"That's where most Americans first encountered them," said Kathryn Statler, a history professor at USD who teaches courses about the Vietnam War, "and they created a tremendous wave of public reaction."

The first response, she said, was "the photos can't be real." The second: "What are we doing over there?" Anti-war protesters had been active for a while, but now mainstream Americans began to question the validity of U.S. military involvement.

Haerberle was lauded by some for his courage and criticized by others for not coming forward sooner. After the furor faded, he got on with his life. He had considered pursuing photography as a career but settled instead into manufacturing, where he worked as a supervisor.

He thought interest in the photos would disappear over time. Instead, almost every new war eventually invites a comparison with My Lai. "The sad truth is, atrocities happen," he said. "And civilians are the ones who suffer."

He's been back to Vietnam several times and met survivors of the massacre. One of them was the son of a woman slain that day. Haerberle took a picture of her body on the ground.

The son had a family shrine in his home. It expanded to include something Haerberle gave him: the Nikon used to document what happened in My Lai all those years ago.

Waging peace

The exhibit at USD was organized by longtime social-justice and labor activist Ron Carver through a project he started that's called [Waging Peace in Vietnam](#). It highlights the actions of U.S. service members and veterans who openly questioned the war.

Carver first contacted Haerberle for a book published in 2019. It includes first-hand accounts, historic posters, clippings from underground newspapers, essays by scholars, and poems by veterans.



In this March 15, 2018, photo, former U.S. Army photographer Ron Haerberle, left, speaks to Do Thi Chi, a survivor of the My Lai Massacre in My Lai, Vietnam. More than a thousand people marked the 50th anniversary of the massacre, using the event to talk of peace and cooperation instead of hatred. (Hau Dinh / Associated Press)

Then Carver proposed the current exhibit, "My Lai: A Massacre That Took 504 Souls, And Shook the World."

It includes, for the first time anywhere, all 19 of the photos Haerberle took. It also has one panel about his decision to show the pictures to the Plain Dealer. Another panel features an Army helicopter crew — Hugh Thompson, Glenn Andreotta and Larry Colburn — who landed several times during the massacre and shepherded groups of civilians to safety.

"I think it's important to show both sides," Carver said. "Not just the horrors of war, but also the people who, at great personal risk, stood up and spoke out about what they had seen."

A [companion exhibit](#), also called "Waging Peace in Vietnam," is on display through March 28 at San Diego State University, in Donor Hall at the library. The exhibit is open to the public with proof of COVID-19 vaccination or a negative test.