

Shot in the heat of war

Images from the Indochina conflicts are made more harrowing by the knowledge that some of them are the photographers' final frames, writes Louise Martin-Chew



AUSTRALIA'S recent engagement with the war in Iraq resulted in the loss of one Australian life — not a soldier, but ABC cameraman Paul Moran.

This adds special poignancy to *Requiem*, an exhibition of photographs that commemorates the lives of photographers who died covering the wars in Indochina between 1945 and 1975 — including iconic names such as Robert Capa, Larry Burrows, Everette Dixie Reese, Sean Flynn and Dana Stone.

The role of the media in wars is much debated. Tim Page, who was almost killed in the Vietnam conflict and has since covered many others as a combat photographer — and who has published his own work and that of his colleagues and, latterly, been helping victims of war — co-organised this exhibition with another well-known international photographer, Horst Paas. It has been seen in Vietnam, Tokyo, England, France, Switzerland, Germany and the US, following the publication of the images in a book by Page and Paas in 1997. The Queensland College of Art Gallery in Brisbane is the only Australian venue.

Walking into this exhibition is a sobering experience. Low lights, dark-painted walls and the cogency of the images on the walls are dramatic enough. Paced by headings — *A Distant War*, *Faces of Humanity*, *Escalation*, *Quagmire*, *Last Flight* — and book-ended by a *Wall of Remembrance* with images of all those who died, it is rather like a Wagnerian lament: sombre, poignant and emotional. What gives the experience an added edge is the knowledge that many of these images were last frames — photographs died in pursuit of these pictures.

Page, whose war experience is reflected in the war photographer played by Dennis Hopper in *Apocalypse Now*, suggests that these final frames in some way release the spirit of the person.

"These images were all shot with a traditional camera, with nothing more fancy than a wide-angle lens. And there are images



from both sides of the conflict. It describes a commitment still carried on, although not on the front page anymore. You're getting many fragments, shards, stuck in you. After spending some time with the exhibition and the book, their spirit becomes pervasive. And that means that they didn't die in vain."

As a result of his experience in Vietnam, which was the first and last war to be freely covered by the media, Page is scathing about the choreographed nature of the images that emerged from Iraq. Certainly, few images have emerged in recent years with the drama, staying power and poignancy of those featured in *Requiem*.

Female combat photographer Dickey Chapelle is seen hollow-eyed in a pool of blood on the ground, receiving last rites, in a photograph by Henri Huet taken at Black Ferret, about 100km south of Da Nang. Huet was later killed in a helicopter crash in Laos in 1971. The same crash claimed the lives of photographers Burrows, Kent Potter and Keizaburo Shtimamoto.

While the high moral ground of truth is claimed for these photographs, for me it is the multiplicity of voices, the many individual truths and the universality of experience visible from both sides of the conflict that make *Requiem* such compelling viewing.

Requiem: By the Photographers Who Died in Indochina and Vietnam, Queensland College of Art Gallery, South Bank, Brisbane, until July 20.



Poignant moments: A paratrooper's body lifted by helicopter, captured by Huet in Vietnam in 1966; main picture; helicopter crew chief with a jammed gun, snapped by Burrows near Danang in 1963; above left: *Nearly All Homeless*, an image of Cambodia from 1975 by Son Vitthith, left; and far left, the camera of war photographer Taizo Ichinose, which is part of a family shrine, by Rikio Imago

Tim Page is scathing about the images that emerged from Iraq