



John Olson's photograph of wounded Marines being evacuated from the battlefield atop a tank is one of the most iconic images of the Vietnam War. JOHN OLSON

Lives beyond the lens

John Olson took some of Vietnam's defining photos; now his mission is to tell the stories behind them

Matt Alderton Special to USA TODAY

Many of the young men who were drafted to serve in the Vietnam War had spent their adolescence hoping and praying to stay home. Instead of acne, college and courtship, they lay awake at night worried about gunfire, homesickness and death. ■ John Olson was not one of those young men. Instead of anguishing over how to avoid Vietnam, he was obsessed with how to get there. Not because he wanted to fight the war, but because he wanted to photograph it. ■ "As a very young man I identified what I wanted to do as a career, and that was to be ... a world-class war photographer," recalls Olson, now 70 and living in Chatham, N.Y. ■ That's exactly what he became. Drafted into the Army in 1966, the 19-year-old Olson was assigned to the military newspaper *Stars and Stripes*. As



Drafted in 1966, John Olson became the only combat photographer in Vietnam for the military paper *Stars and Stripes*.

its sole combat photographer in Vietnam, he had the autonomy to go virtually anywhere and photograph anything. And in February 1968, he decided to go to Huế (pronounced *hway*).

Part of the Tet Offensive, the Battle of Huế was one of Vietnam's longest and bloodiest engagements. It began Jan. 31, 1968, and ended four weeks later. In between, more than 200 Americans were killed and hundreds more wounded; there were thousands of North and South Vietnamese casualties.

Olson spent three days embedded with U.S. Marines tasked with retaking Huế from the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, who had seized the ancient city in the opening hours of the Tet Offensive. Fifty years later, the photos he took are the subject of "The Marines and Tet: The Battle That Changed the Vietnam War," a special exhibit at the Newseum in Washington. Olson's work is on display there through July 8 along with exclusive audio interviews and artifacts from the men he photographed.

"I don't know of any other historical story ... where you can see the participants and 50 years later hear them analyze the event," Olson says.

The effect does more than describe the Battle of Huế; in a visceral way, it recreates it.

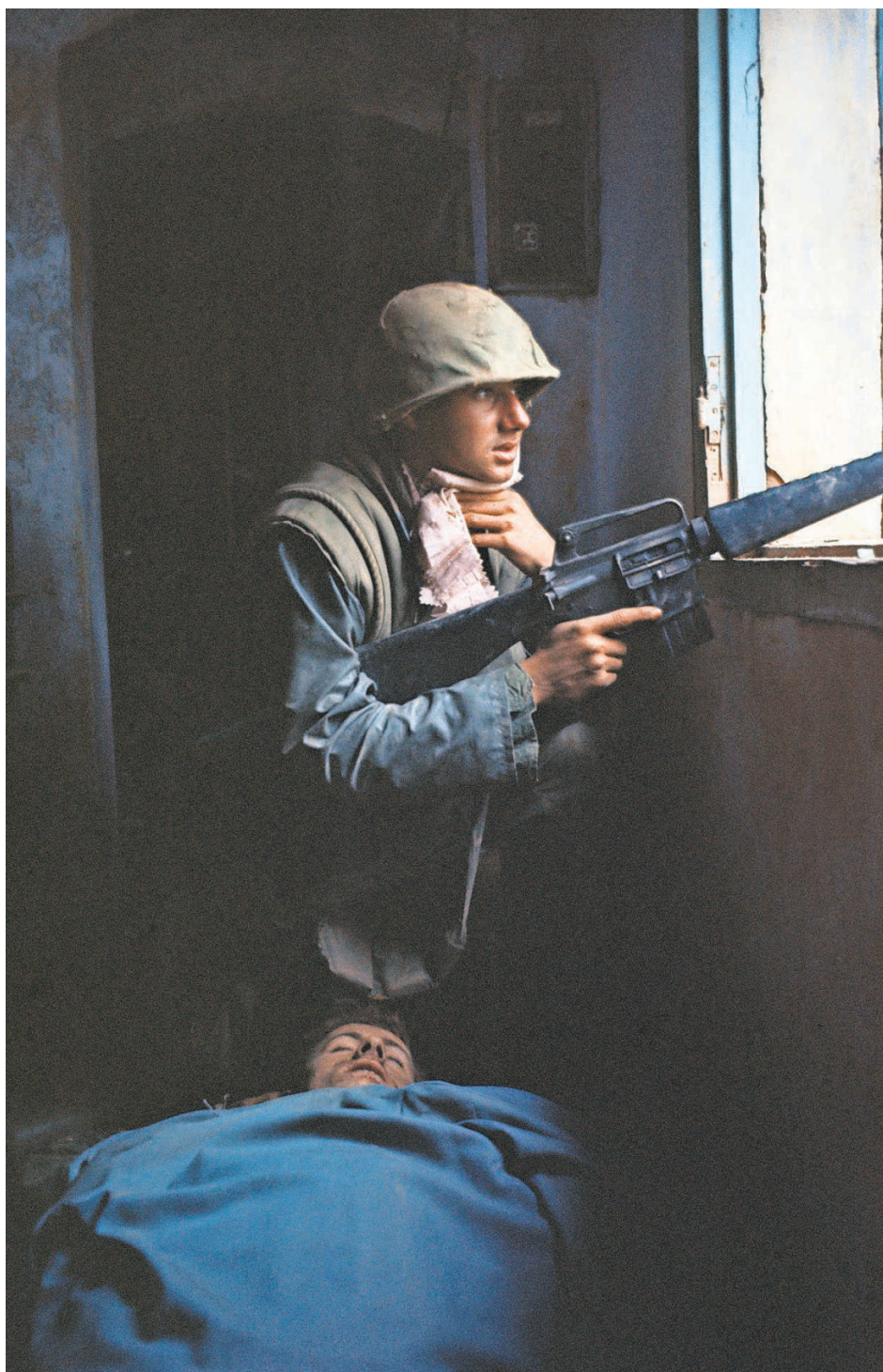
Olson's best-known photo shows wounded Marines atop a mud-crusting tank-turned-ambulance. A bloodied tourniquet hugs one of them above the left knee. Another Marine struggles to sit upright, his face wrapped in bandages. In the foreground, a barechested Marine with a bandage over his heart lies on a door that's been fashioned into a litter; one comrade cradles him, while another holds an IV bottle.

Such images became seared in Americans' collective conscience, yet the man who took the photos remembers almost nothing about them. When he conceived "The Marines and Tet" in 2015, his research led him to a 1968 article in which a bystander recounted the horrific scenes he'd witnessed in Huế. The story was both familiar and foreign. Then Olson realized the bystander was him.

"The article described my three days in Huế to a T, but what it described was far more horrific than anything I'd seen," says Olson, whose photographs appeared in *Life* magazine, which after Vietnam hired him as its youngest-ever staff photographer. "I blocked it all out. Myself and a lot of these men saw such horror that our minds won't let us go a lot of places."

Although his mental block long protected Olson from his memories, decades later they began to percolate.

"As we approached the 50th anniversary



As North Vietnamese soldiers surrounded their position inside a villa in the city of Huế, John Olson captured this photograph: One wounded Marine keeps watch, his rifle at the ready, while another recites the Lord's Prayer. JOHN OLSON

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John Olson
Combat photographer

sary of the Tet Offensive I began to wonder what had happened to the young men I photographed," Olson says. "So, I set out to find them and capture in audio how the Tet Offensive in Huế had affected the rest of their lives."

Although most remain anonymous, Olson has identified and interviewed 10 of the 200 men who appear in his photographs — including A.B. Grantham, the Marine on the door whose chest wound is the emotional center of his famous

Putting names to faces

Some of the Marines in John Olson's photographs have been identified, but others remain nameless. As part of his mission to identify all the men, Olson has set up tet1968.com, a website that allows the public to assist with his research and share their experiences of the Tet Offensive.

Newseum

tank photo.

"A.B. Grantham survived," says Patty Rhule, the Newseum's director of exhibit development, who co-produced "The Marines and Tet" with Olson. "He heard them say, 'This one is not going to make it,' and later realized he was the one they were talking about. Once stories like that go into your brain, you can't forget them."

The stories are just as impactful for their tellers as for listeners.

"Each one of these interviews was highly emotional, and for many men I think it was some sort of closure," Olson says. "Listening to these men talk was really powerful."

Although "The Marines and Tet" is a mostly visual exhibit, its impact even extends to the blind. Olson is founder of 3DPhotoWorks, a company that turns two-dimensional photographs into three-dimensional prints using a proprietary process known as "tactile printing." Of the 20 large-format photographs featured in "The Marines and Tet," 10 also are presented in tactile versions for the benefit of blind and low-vision museumgoers.

"This exhibit is meant to be seen, touched, felt and heard," Rhule says.

She adds that the exhibit also sends an important message about the First Amendment, which is the inspiration for the Newseum and is engraved on its front facade. "We want to remind the American public about the power of a free press," she says, emphasizing how Olson's photographs helped shape public opinion about the Vietnam War in a way that ultimately led to America's withdrawal from it. "Photographers and reporters who cover war are really important, and this story really powerfully shows why."

For Olson, what resonates most about the exhibit isn't political in nature; it's personal.

"We were all kids. It was an act of God that any of us got out alive, and to be able to sit back and analyze it at this age in life is a blessing," he says. "Have I fully processed it yet? No. I don't know if I ever will. But I wouldn't trade that time in my life for anything."