Can an ace combat photographer ever find peace away from the zing and sting of the rat-a-tat-tat? Not very likely, especially if her name is

Catherine Ler

By Carol Squiers

When photographer Catherine Leroy showed up at ABC's New York newsroom for her 10 A.M. appointment with Peter Jennings last March, the celebrated anchor was already overwhelmed with the day's breaking story concerning the Iran-*contra* affair. "Indictments against Oliver North, John Poindexter, and Richard Secord will probably be handed down today," Jennings forewarns to explain his unavailability. Leroy merely looks up at him and nods gravely. A disarmingly tiny woman—barely five feet tall and 85 pounds—Leroy is dressed in an elegant black sweater, short black skirt, black tights, and flat-soled shoes. Her blond hair falls straight from a center part, and bangs end just above a pair of enormous, melancholy blue eyes, all of which give her more the appearance of a French fashion designer than a veteran combat photographer. Yet that is what she is. Fiercely determined, Leroy has waited several months for this day, and the announcement of a few government indictments by a network studio is no major obstacle. After all, she has survived the battlegrounds of Vietnam, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Syria, Gaza.

Jennings and Leroy first met in Vietnam over 20 years ago, when he was a rising correspondent and she a freelance photographer getting her first tantalizing taste of a foreign war zone. Now, two decades later, as Jennings scuttles around the ABC newsroom trying to unravel the complicated indictment, he shows obvious second thoughts about having accepted his old colleague's request for a working portrait, part of a self-assigned essay she is doing on American media celebrities. But Leroy hangs close. She follows Jennings into his office and begins shooting rapidly while he intently works his

Right: Photographer Catherine Leroy. Overleaf left: This shot of a U.S. soldier beating a suspected Viet Cong sniper caused outrage when it was printed in 1968. Overleaf right: With a searing immediacy, Leroy captured the war's physical and psychic pain in this shot of a GI.

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computer and his telephone and tries to make polite small talk. "How have you been doing?" he finally asks distractedly. "Been in Beirut lately? This is a story for what?"

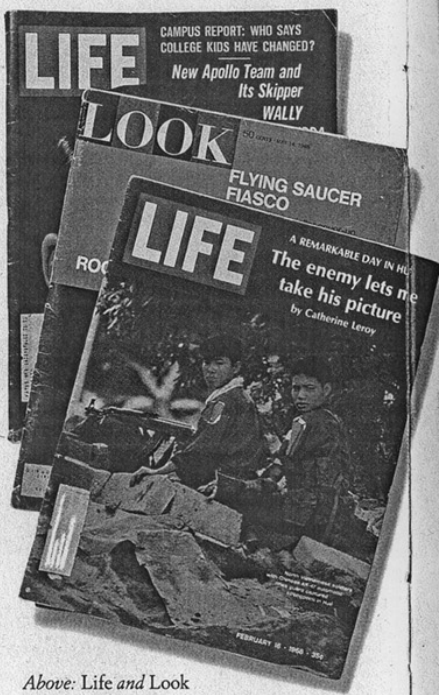
Barely are the outlines of the North and Secord indictments clear when another story comes rushing in: unconfirmed reports that Panamanian leader General Manuel Antonio Noriega has been overthrown. Leroy keeps Jennings in her sight. The newsroom is buzzing with the frenetic activity of a real-life *Broadcast News,* and within minutes Jennings walks up one flight to the broadcast studio to begin airing a special midmorning report. The slight figure of Leroy follows right behind him. Amid the confusion, she periodically makes special requests for pictures, most of which are rejected. Suddenly, one of the producers recognizes her and says with a big smile, "Catherine, not since Vietnam!" and she leans over to kiss him and ask what he's been doing these 20 years. As she changes film, another man recognizes her and calls out, "Catherine! I haven't seen you—since Beirut!" More kisses and pleasantries, though as soon as Jennings is off the air, Leroy is back stalking her subject like a diminutive big-game hunter pursuing the most prized and fearsome kill.

In midafternoon things quiet down sufficiently so that Jennings agrees to sit for a short interview. Now the photographer's reporting zeal takes over. Leroy asks how much power he has at the network, how the U.S. media is being affected by takeovers. The "short" interview lengthens to 45 minutes, giving Jennings only minutes to get back to the studio for another special broadcast. Before he leaves he turns to a visitor and nods at Leroy. "She's a very famous woman—a legend," he says decisively. He pauses, then adds: "You couldn't have a war without her."

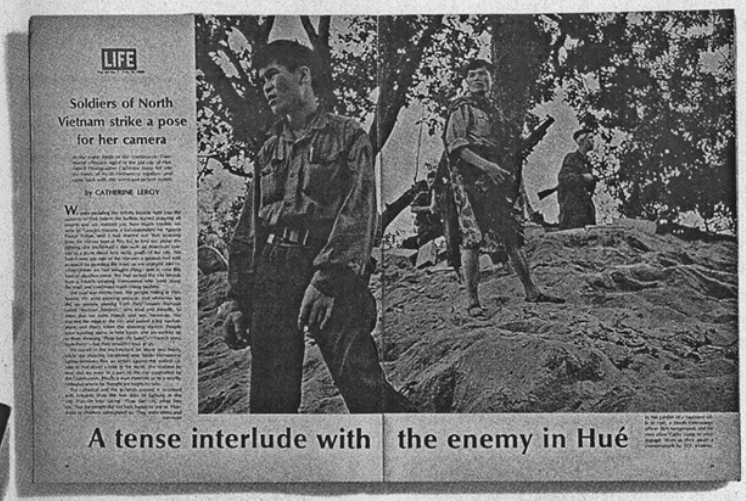
That assertion aside, belligerent nations everywhere will, for now, have to wage war without Catherine Leroy. One of the hardest-hitting and hardest-hit women photojournalists to have worked in the brief history of the genre (whose awards—a number from the Overseas Press Club, including the coveted Robert Capa Gold Medal; the Picture of the Year competition; and the New York Art Director's Club, to name a few—are outnumbered only by her brushes with death in some of the world's angriest places), Leroy says she is sick of war and the job of photographing it. Perhaps that is why she appears so adamant about explaining her presence in an environment as relatively tame and nonviolent as a television studio. "Nothing should be fixed," she announces sternly, as if to reject her glowing reputation as a chronicler of global conflict. "I have other dreams, other projects I want to undertake, other lives I want to live." Perhaps. But considering the facts of her life and career to date, which have already interested a number of Hollywood producers, Leroy is unlikely to stay away from trouble even without a war to cover.

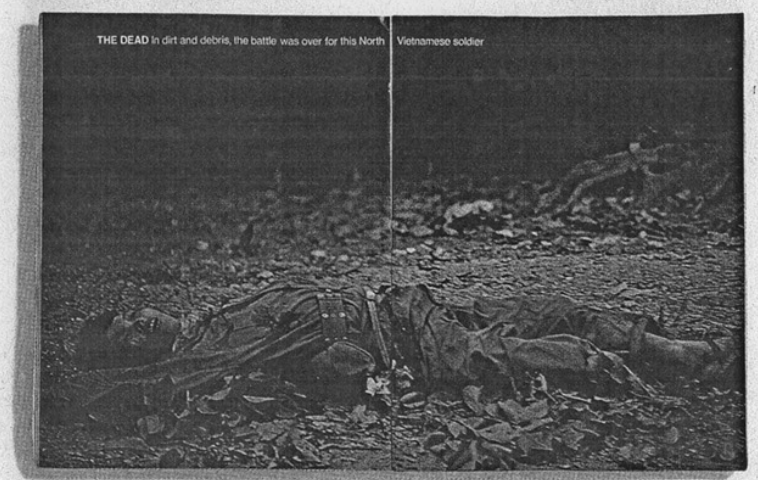
Catherine Leroy arrived in Saigon in February of 1966 with a Leica M2, $100, and the used stub of a one-way ticket. She was 21 years old and had never been more than a few hundred miles from Paris. She had no formal photographic training and had been inspired to take pictures by a photographer she met during two years of skydiving instruction she received as a teenager. She can't remember exactly why she wanted to be a photojournalist. On the one hand she'll say, "I wanted to live a life of adventure." On the other she'll cite her grandfather, who as an engineer on the Trans-Siberian Railway went to China early in this century and took photographs of such exotica as women with bound feet, the first Paris-to-Peking car race, and a public beheading of Chinese bandits. Whatever her reason for striking out into photojournalism, Vietnam was *the* place to begin.

Though Vietnam is usually thought of as America's first televised war, it was also the first time a war was really regarded as a career builder by many still photographers. "It was just overrun by petty jealousies," recalls renowned combat photographer David Douglas Duncan, who is also a veteran of World War II and Korea. According to Duncan, Leroy was not a part of the newer bang-bang opportunism: "Cathy was more like the earlier generation of combat photographers," he observes. "There was never any backbiting. She was great." Arnold Drapkin, now the consulting picture editor to *Time* magazine, says, "I think she's had a terrific effect on photography and on women



Above: Life *and* Look *featured stories by—and about—Leroy. Top right: In 1968 Leroy scored a coup by photographing North Vietnamese regulars. Middle right: Her first published story, about a Marine assault, brought international attention in 1967. Below right:* Look*'s anti-war editorial in 1968 featured graphic pictures by Leroy.*





in photography. There had been women combat photographers before her, but this was at the beginning of a time when women felt they could get out and do it. Cathy came along and made quite a name for herself."

Most people in Leroy's birthplace of Enghien, a Paris suburb, would not approve of a girl from a bourgeois family photographing death and mayhem in Southeast Asia. But then, Leroy had trouble conforming all along. The only child of a factory manager and a housewife, she was a gifted student of the classical piano but spent many hours listening to American jazz and blues singers. By the age of 16, after being booted out of a number of schools, she had dropped out completely and run away from home several times. After moving in and out of part-time office work, she took up the pastime that would eventually lead her to photography. A boastful boyfriend, who had been the youngest skydiver in France, inspired her to learn the sport in a fit of competitive pique. "To me it was an enormous challenge," she says. "I had to prove to myself that I wasn't a coward." Her tenacity paid off. When the U.S. 173rd Airborne Brigade made its first combat jumps in Vietnam in February 1967, going in behind Viet Cong positions 70 miles northwest of Saigon, Leroy went with them, cameras in tow.

So Leroy was a proficient skydiver with a budding appetite for danger when she got to Vietnam. The only problem was that her photojournalistic experience was absolutely nil. Until then her subjects had been mainly her friends and her cat; she had never even had a picture published. Once in Saigon, she immediately went to the offices of the Associated Press. After passing walls hung with photographs of AP photographers who had been killed in the war, she confronted the formidable figure of picture editor Horst Faas. Undaunted by the pictorial evidence of the dangers of the job, she told Faas she wanted to work for him. "You have experience?" he asked. "Yes," she lied. Faas opened a drawer and showed her a pile of wire photos—grisly images of wounded soldiers, burning villages, and decomposing corpses. The wire service paid $15 for every picture it used, and it retained

Previous pages: In Lebanon in 1982, Leroy made this stark portrayal of fear—a child cowering from a French U.N. peace-keeping soldier. Above: Leroy's previous experience in Lebanon was covering the brutal street fighting of the 1975–76 civil war. She confronted that conflict after recovering from her experience in Vietnam.

the negatives. "My visual education came very quickly—I learned what I had to produce to sell pictures," she says ironically. Slightly more than a year after her arrival in Vietnam, Faas would be quoted in *Time* magazine stating that Leroy was "one of the best four or five freelancers here."

Knowing what was going on in the field was actually quite difficult for her then, because her English was so limited. "I learned my American with the GIs," she laughs. "Of course, it was extremely salty language. I knew more insults and obscenities than anything else." The GIs were apparently tolerant and accepting of her—particularly as, she recalls, "I became as miserable as they were."

The miserable conditions of course included inescapable danger. On May 19, 1967, Leroy went out on patrol with a group of Marines, on a sweep through dry, wide-open rice paddies near the DMZ. "We were being mortared again and again, and there was nowhere to hide," she recounts. "I remember lifting my camera up to take a picture when there was a huge bang and I went down in the grass. I was conscious but I couldn't move, and I was completely covered with blood—and terrified that nobody would see me because I was covered by grass." Some corpsmen did

find her, pumped her with morphine, and loaded her onto a tank, itself loaded with body bags.

Her air passages clogged with blood, her jaw broken, and her body torn by 20-odd mortar fragments, Leroy was convoyed to a Marine hospital on board the USS *Sanctuary.* In 1985, the physician who treated her, Dr. Donald R. Goffinet, wrote to Leroy with the details of that day:

"I was on the helicopter deck supervising the transfer of the wounded from helicopters to the triage area, and I well

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remember an H-34 Marine helicopter coming in with several casualties. One was slender, dirty, with badly torn Marine 'utilities' and in great distress from pain, shock, and blood in the airway. As I opened the utility jacket it became obvious that you were a woman; and someone in the background said, 'That's Cathy Leroy, the combat photographer.' The sight I will never forget is your Nikon FTN camera, which is one that most of us were using at that time in Vietnam. I believe that it had a 50mm f/1.4 lens. I was appalled by the immense hole through the center of the lens made by a large fragment which penetrated the lens face and had driven backward through the prism and stopped after bulging the camera back."

Ironically, one of Leroy's best-known series of pictures, detailing a Marine assault of "Hill 881" overlooking the Khe Sanh Valley, appeared as a six-page story in *Life* magazine in the issue dated May 19, 1967—the day she was wounded. Shot in black and white for AP about two weeks earlier, the pictures show the infantrymen's bloody and ultimately futile progression up the battle-scarred hillside. Dodging machine gun and rifle fire, Leroy recorded a poignant series of images: a corpsman bends over a wounded Marine, presses his ear to the man's chest, jerks up in the stunned realization that his fellow soldier is dead, and then leaps away, continuing his own urgent climb up the scorched hillside. So stirring were the pictures that anxious mothers called news agencies to inquire about the dead man's identity. *Time* magazine did a story on Leroy, and the pictures won a number of awards. Leroy, still a novice wire-service shooter whose credit wouldn't usually even run with her pictures, had made it to the big time.

Despite the trauma from her mortar hit, her injuries proved not to be life-threatening, and after a month's recovery she was back in the field, pursuing stories as boldly as before. In January 1968 she and fellow French journalist François Mazure were captured by the North Vietnamese, held for a day, and then released. Leroy photographed her captors and their armaments and got a bylined cover story in *Life:* "The Enemy Lets Me Take His Picture." In retrospect she admits that her actions that day may have been dangerously naive.

After wandering into what they soon realized was Communist-held territory near the walled citadel of Hué, they met a villager who offered to lead them through the Viet Cong lines to a military compound where Americans were holding out. Soon, however, they were apprehended by North Vietnamese soldiers. When a cocky young officer appeared and ordered them untied, Leroy asked if they could take pictures. To her and Mazure's surprise, he agreed, and the two roamed freely about the camp photographing while the soldiers struck triumphant poses.

"Normally you would never see the enemy," Leroy says. "The war wasn't usually very photogenic. Nine times out of ten the light was wrong or it was raining or it was at night or you couldn't see anything because you were lying in the grass and you couldn't stand up. It's absolutely the opposite of the way it is in the movies." As they photographed, they realized that the fighting was getting closer. Astoundingly, Mazure was able to talk the officer into releasing them. Their pictures went around the world and brought Leroy more extraordinary press attention.

Only a few months later, in the May 14, 1968, issue of *Look,* Leroy's photographs were used in powerful double-page spreads, driving home an editorial in which the magazine came out against the war. Perhaps that was the beginning of the end for Leroy, too. "It was obvious after the Tet offensive that the Americans could not win in Vietnam," she says, echoing a commonly held belief. Nevertheless, she stayed on until March of 1969 and then left the country. Though still in her early 20s, Leroy had intently turned herself into an ace war photographer.

After leaving Vietnam she went to

New York where, with a guarantee from *Look,* she was promptly assigned to cover the great countercultural, anti-war celebration of the decade: Woodstock. "I blew it!" she laughs. "I dropped my camera and enjoyed myself!" She stayed in New York for a year, living off the money she'd saved and not taking pictures. "I needed to recover," she says sadly. She then returned to Paris.

Feeling lost and adrift after the intensity of Vietnam, Leroy experienced a crisis of sorts regarding her future. Between 1969 and 1974 she didn't do any news photography and instead directed two documentary films. One of these, *The Last Patrol,* about a group of Vietnam veterans crossing the United States to protest Richard Nixon's renomination at the 1972 Republican National Convention in Miami, won an award at the Leipzig Film Festival. Yet today, Leroy admits she was not really cut out for filmmaking. "I realized you need lots of money and people to work successfully on film projects," she says. "The greatest thing about being a photographer is this extraordinary sense of freedom. And being alone. I'd rather do things on my own."

Her resolve returned. In 1974 she called Goksin Sipahioglu, the owner of the Paris-based Sipa Press, and asked him to send her to Cyprus, the scene of a recent military coup. Her timing proved as shrewd as ever—she arrived one day before the Turkish invasion of that country. In a hurry, Leroy was back in the news business. Then in April 1975 she went to Vietnam and covered the fall of Saigon. A month later, on the eve of the outbreak of Lebanon's civil war, she traveled with a journalist she had met in Cyprus to Beirut, where she would remain for well over two years, thoroughly caught up in documenting the strife around her.

Trying to break through the heated political tensions, Leroy befriended members of the feuding groups and for a while even tried to photograph the various factions at work. That proved to be too dangerous, especially after she took pictures of a Muslim hostage that displeased the Phalangists, a right-wing paramilitary group.

Departing Lebanon in 1977, apparently more exhilarated than exhausted, Leroy moved back to Paris. By this time she was doing extensive freelance work for *Time.* Arnold Drapkin, then *Time*'s picture editor, who later extended contract status to Leroy guaranteeing her a certain amount of work—and money—each month, observes of Leroy: "She has a great news sense and an abiding desire to get where she wants to go. She's relentless when she wants something, and that's exactly what you want from a great news person." Almost as an afterthought he says, "And, of course, she always comes up with a marvelous image."

Given *Time*'s insatiable desire for colorful, up-to-the-week imagery documenting the world's problems in its international news section, it is not surprising that Leroy was in nearly constant motion during her contract years through the mid-1980s. She returned to Vietnam and Lebanon, and worked her

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way around China, Japan, Iran, and Afghanistan, as well as all over the Middle East. After the brutal massacres at the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps near Beirut in 1982, she and Australian writer Tony Clifton put together a sympathetic book on the Palestinians, *God Cried,* which was published in London the following year.

Considering all the misery and violence that she has seen, it is fitting that a trip to peaceful, prosperous Japan signaled a turning point in her work and her life. Yet, just as appropriately, it took a potentially lethal sport to mark her change. In 1983, while scouting backdrops for a shoot on Japanese fashion, Leroy visited a Kudo Dojo, where masters practice and teach the ancient art of archery. "The vision of those masters, who were perhaps in their 70s, practicing archery was one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life," she recounts. "Because suddenly I found an explanation for what I was doing in my own work. In photography, like archery, you hit and are being hit at the same time." Her target, she thought, appeared to be something external—a soldier, a wounded child—but in truth it was herself, or that part of herself that had been affected by the image she was shooting. As a result, she says, she came to realize that she could not go on photographing war, violence, and social upheaval.

For the most part she has kept to that commitment—although she did take an award-winning cover photo for *Time* of the American bombing of Libya in 1986. Her plan has been to do editorial magazine work on more placid, less life-threatening topics. Accordingly, she took an extensive series of portraits of the artists who live in New York's Chelsea Hotel and shot stories in Miami on a cat trainer and on would-be astronauts at a space camp for kids. Her taste for the underside of life, however, has not entirely disappeared. For instance, she worked for weeks documenting runaway teenagers in Manhattan's dangerous Times Square area. Since 1987 Leroy has lived in a penthouse apartment in Cairo, where she admits to feeling "extremely secure."

For all of her philosophizing about Zen and the art of target shooting, it is clear in talking to Leroy that she hasn't entirely lost her taste for hard-news photography. The instincts are still there, and so is the urgent sense of working on the deadline of a late-closing story. "In photography, you are able to live anywhere in the world with a camera: You open your eyes and you shoot! But I'm not sure that this is still possible. Because the world is closing down." What with the control and power variously exercised by such forces as foreign governments, terrorist organizations, and the media itself, access has become extremely limited.

Leroy claims she is not a war photographer, never has been, but simply a photojournalist who has willingly exposed herself to tremendous risks. That those risks have lost much of their appeal is something she maintains. "I have had the benefit of what the Arabs call *baraka*—meaning the stroke of luck," she explains. "You have *baraka* or you don't have it. If you don't have it you're dead." But, she implies, it might not last indefinitely. Clearly, Leroy feels that she is ahead of the game and is searching for a way to at least maintain her position. "Over the years I've learned why I've chosen to live a life that leads to incredible physical involvement, to putting myself in dangerous situations," she says. "I've always found that it was very exhilarating to be shot at without result. It's the biggest high of all, a massive rush of adrenaline. The high you experience in times of great danger is a high that you cannot experience anywhere else."

She stops, as if she's suddenly lined up the bull's eye in her inner sights. To the photographer who's scored so many direct hits in the heat of battle, is the memory alone sufficient to satisfy? Can there really be contentment in following television anchormen around a hermetic broadcast studio? Leroy's answer might be yes. But one wonders if the firing lines of the world have seen the last of her yet. ■

Above left: Turning from war, Leroy made a trip to photograph fashion in Japan in 1983—yet ended up with some militaristically inspired styling. Right: A Libyan child warrior shows Leroy his impish side, 1986.