



*Children of the hooch girl, 1968.*

# Another Kind of Truth:

## HERB LOTZ'S VIETNAM WAR PHOTOGRAPHY

BY RICHARD CURREY

Herbert Lotz's evocative photographs from his 1968 Vietnam tour depart from combat imagery to record life behind the lines—the tired faces of GIs in a chow line, men crowded shoulder to shoulder for a USO show, reading *Life* magazine, listening to music in a rare private moment, or the haunted mix of vigilance and fear in a soldier's eyes before he heads back out to his unit. Artfully captured by the then-23 year old, these images tell the stories that live below the face of war and in so doing record another kind of truth in the wartime experience.

Lotz's meditative photos might suggest the war was happening a thousand miles away, but in fact they documented daily life at Cu Chi, where Lotz was stationed with the 25th Infantry Division as a radio teletype operator and where mortar and rocket attacks were routine events.

"The nights came and all hell broke loose," he said. "The VC would do what they did—blow stuff up. We lost vehicles, planes, and helicopters on a regular basis. The days were calmer, and that's when



*Herb Lotz, self portrait, Vietnam, 1968.*

we could relax. For many of us it was time to catch up on our sleep."

Five decades later, when his unique Vietnam War photography was exhibited in a much-lauded one-man show at the New Mexico History Museum in 2017, Lotz called the exhibit *Sleeping During the Day: Vietnam 1968*.

### Working Class Roots

Lotz hails from Illinois farm country. "I grew up there in a very loving family," he said. "It was a wonderful childhood."

He recognized from an early age that he was gay. "My parents knew it, too" he said. "There was no big discussion, they just seemed to see it in me. They were very accepting. I was never pressured to deny the truth about myself. My parents understood that being gay is like having blue eyes or brown hair—it's simply who you are, and my parents loved me without qualification."

Lotz's father operated an excavating company. "I come from working class roots. My dad ran bulldozers, drove tractors and trucks. He worked

outside in all kinds of weather. He was a tough guy.”

Although blue collar and work-hardened, his father did not abide aggressive behavior or unnecessary violence. “My parents disdained what we might now call machismo,” said Lotz. “My father never owned a gun. He never went hunting. He hated swagger and bullying. He taught patience and kindness. Those were the values I was raised with.”

Following high school Lotz enrolled in a joint degree program at the University of Chicago and the Art Institute of Chicago, at first as a fine arts major but later concentrating on photography. Coming from a family of modest means, he had to work his way through college.



“One job I had was creating window displays for stores,” he said. His artistic gifts showed in the work, and his employer sent him to other cities to design displays.

“Between school and work I got busy and let my credit hours slip to eleven.” Twelve academic credit hours was the minimum required to maintain a student deferment. “The draft got me right away,” he said. “I had never given any thought to that possibility. I had no clue what to do.”

### A Sense of Duty

Lotz’s decision was complicated by a difficult fact: his older brother had died from measles ten years earlier. “My parents had lost one son and now their second son was drafted in wartime.”

He consulted his father, but while the elder Lotz’s worry and apprehension were evident, he did not try to influence his son’s decision. “My father wanted me to decide on my own terms, with no pressure from anybody, not even from him. Aside from the risk to me, his personal beliefs did not align with war and I’m sure he wanted to beg me not to go. He showed great courage in not trying to push me one way or the other, despite the anguish he was surely feeling.”



Above: *The Bros*, Vietnam, 1968; Left: *Portrait of a hooch girl*, 1968.

While Lotz dismissed ideas offered by friends, including going to Canada or applying for conscientious objector status, he also knew he could simply inform the draft board that he was gay. “That would’ve ended things quickly,” he said, but he found the notion of using sexual orientation to avoid service offensive.

“Being gay should never be a disqualifying factor for military service. It certainly didn’t mean I couldn’t be a good soldier. In the end, despite my parents’ fears—and my own—I had a sense of duty about being called to serve.”

After boot camp, AIT, and training as a radio teletype operator, Lotz arrived in Vietnam in March 1968. Assigned to the 53rd Signal Battalion, he was detached to the 25th Division at its headquarters in

Cu Chi. It was there that he began taking his striking photos with a Nikon Nikkormat camera, ultimately scores of images documenting daily life at the large base camp.

“But then came the nights,” said Lotz. “You never knew when that direct hit was coming that would take you out.” One night, near the end of his tour, etched a deep-seated fear into Lotz’s psyche.

“We got hit hard,” he said. “The sky turned red. Explosions everywhere. The ground shaking. I thought we were being overrun. I got my rifle, locked and loaded, and waited in my hooch. I figured it was only a matter of time before the VC hit my doorway. I might get off a shot but then it would be all over. That didn’t happen, obviously, but it’s those moments that will scar a man’s soul.”

After getting out of the Army, Lotz went back to Chicago, thinking he could pick up where he’d left off. He soon realized he was a deeply changed man who would need another landscape to kick start his life.

“I wanted dry air and sunlight and open space,” he said. A friend suggested that New Mexico would fit the bill. Lotz moved to Santa Fe, launched a photography business—and in short order began to experience what he called an “almost constant state” of dread.

“I didn’t understand at the time, at least not consciously, the source of my fear,” Lotz said. “I didn’t grasp that I was wrestling with and suppressing those hard Vietnam memories, especially that night sitting in my hooch waiting to die.”

Alcohol eased his discomfort, leading him to drink more. And then still more. He built an eight-foot wall around his small house not far from Santa Fe’s central plaza.

“It helped me feel protected,” he said. “But it didn’t solve the problem. Somewhere in me I was still terrified, as if I was under some imminent threat. I was in a state of daily torment. This went on for many painful years until a point came when I decided I couldn’t take it anymore. I planned to kill myself.”

Lotz took to putting his rifle and ammunition in hard-to-reach places around the house. “I thought



*Soldiers at base camp enjoying a Bob Hope USO show, 1968.*



# Herb Lotz

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

at least I wouldn't make suicide any easier," he said. One night in 1981 found him watching *The Deer Hunter* on television. He had seen the movie before and knew it could be a triggering experience, but thought the commercial breaks would blunt the film's intensity.

"Not so much," he said, "but at one break a message appeared on the screen. It said if you are a Vietnam veteran and are experiencing difficulties in your life, call this number. I jotted down the number and called the next day."

That phone call not only helped Lotz turn his life around, it very likely saved it.

## Managing PTSD

Two counselors from the newly launched Albuquerque Vet Center came to visit the next day. They returned a week later, and again the next week. "We spoke the same language," Lotz said. "I learned about PTSD, how it works and why it comes disguised as some nameless fear. I confronted the fact that I was an alcoholic who was using booze to control that fear."

Between Vet Center sessions and visits with a psychiatrist at the Albuquerque VA Medical Center, Lotz slowly improved. "I stopped drinking," he said. "I



learned to better manage my anxiety. And I saw that part of my distress was grief at having lost the connection and sense of purpose I felt in my old unit at Cu Chi. Losing that was like losing a piece of myself. My recovery had to include learning how to survive that loss and navigate society."

And what of being a gay man serving in a military with a troubled history of anti-gay bias? In fact, Lotz encountered no such issues during his time in uniform.

"I didn't walk around with 'I'm Gay' stenciled on my forehead," he said, "but at the same time I didn't creep around, either. Nobody cared. What mattered is that you did your job well and supported your fellow soldiers."

The story of gays in the military is one of systematic bias, but "it's bias based on nothing," Lotz said. "Why should willing and patriotic Americans be denied an opportunity to serve? Maybe things are better today, with at least some level of acceptance, but I can't understand why it's been so hard for so long. Anti-gay bias in the military is utterly self-defeating and I hope it will finally go away forever."

In his fifty years in Santa Fe, Lotz has built a life, establishing himself as a commercial photographer as well as a distinguished creative artist. Now retired from commercial photography, he continues his creative work, with plans for exhibitions and books.

"Looking back over my life," he said, "I've learned acceptance for what I went through and gratitude for the gifts I've been given."

Herb Lotz's distinctive photographs documenting his year in Vietnam—and the lives of the men he served with—are now part of the permanent collection of the New Mexico History Museum. They will be preserved there as part of the larger record of the Vietnam War and continue to bear powerful witness, in Lotz's words, "to the loss of innocence that so many of us experienced in Vietnam." ■



Top: A fellow soldier listens to music, Cu Chi, 1968; Above: Lotz's parents at the dining room table the night he left for Vietnam, 1968.