

**Excerpts from Chapter 2 of
BREAKING THE SILENCE
THE FILMS OF JOHN PILGER**

Anthony Hayward

2. VIETNAM

FROM his first documentary, in 1970, John Pilger made waves by reporting the unpalatable – unpalatable to authority, that is. In *The Quiet Mutiny*, a film for *World in Action*, he broke the story of the disintegration of morale among American servicemen in Vietnam, particularly those conscripts of the anti-war generation. These revelations were, according to Phillip Knightley in his definitive study of war reporting, *The First Casualty*, among the most important ever reported from the Vietnam War. They also brought producer Granada Television into a conflict with the Independent Television Authority greater than any it had previously experienced in its run-ins with the ITV regulator over the question of balance in the current affairs series.

It seemed natural that Pilger should start his screen career with a programme on the Vietnam War. He had first visited the country in 1965, the year when US Marines landed on the beaches of Danang and America's bombing of the North began. He went then to write a feature in his *Daily Mirror* series 'Youth in Action', highlighting the positive contribution of young Britons around the world working for Voluntary Service Overseas. He returned the following year to report the war and his first dispatch for the *Mirror*, headlined 'How Can Britain Support a War Like This?', signalled the paper's opposition to the war and warned Harold Wilson's Labour government of the political pitfalls ahead if it supported American government policy.

Pilger was given as his brief a six-part series of articles by the veteran American war correspondent Martha Gellhorn about Vietnamese victims of the war.¹ Following its publication in *The Guardian*, Gellhorn had been refused a visa to re-enter South Vietnam. The only American newspaper that would agree to publish the series was the *St Louis Post-Despatch*, although it rejected the feature most critical of the United States's involvement in Vietnam. Gellhorn later wrote that she had 'toned down' the *Guardian* reports because 'even liberal readers in Britain were not prepared for the full true story'.² Her theme was that this was 'a new kind of war', one against civilians. She also wrote about child victims of the war for the American magazine *Ladies' Home*

Journal, with ‘sugar coating on the pill’, persuading the publishers that the feature’s motives were humanitarian, not political.³

Pilger’s newspaper reports from Vietnam also concentrated on the victims. At that time, television viewers in Britain and the United States had seen very little critical reporting of the American war in South-east Asia, although coverage had reached saturation point. Vietnam was the first television war. Lightweight film cameras developed in the 1950s enabled crews to cover the fighting from the front line. At times, reporters appeared to be taking part in a *Boy’s Own* adventure. The images were rarely used to explain the issues, such as why the United States had set up a government in Saigon to crush the National Liberation Front in the South and the communist government of Ho Chi Minh in the North.

...When Pilger reported from Vietnam in *The Quiet Mutiny*, directed by Charles Denton, the *World in Action* film was announced on screen as ‘a personal report by the *Daily Mirror*’s special correspondent, John Pilger, Vietnam, 1970, the front line’. It was a rare occasion when *World in Action* was presented by a reporter in vision. ‘This was a time when the Vietnam War still resonated with everybody and the Americans were in the thick of it, with clearly no success on the horizon,’ recalled Denton. ‘John had a very clear view, which I shared, that the Americans not only couldn’t win, but had lost, which wasn’t then a view that was openly spoken. It was almost heresy to say that the most powerful military system in the world had lost a war against a South East Asian Third World outfit.

‘John’s view, further to that, was that there were all sorts of components as to why the war was being lost and, as far as he was concerned, had *been* lost. Quite important was that the people who were fighting it, the draftees, weren’t interested in it, didn’t want to fight it and did most things to avoid it. It wasn’t a professional military machine as you see now and many of those draftees were poorly educated and black, and had many things they’d rather do. I’d never been to Vietnam before and it was an eye-opener to me. Also, the American co-operation was just gobsmacking compared with what our military offered. Their PR machine was dedicated to getting you where you wanted to go. If you wanted a helicopter to get somewhere, you got a helicopter.’

Speaking directly to the camera in *The Quiet Mutiny*, Pilger explained that he was returning to Vietnam for the first time in three years. ‘I’ve come back for the final act,’ he said. ‘No blood, no atrocities, just the rejection of the war by those sent here to fight it, just the quiet mutiny of the greatest army in history.’ This prediction of an end to the war was, perhaps, a little premature but understandable after the start of peace talks in Paris and the troop revolts that Pilger uncovered. Thousands of American servicemen among the 400,000 in Vietnam were refusing to follow orders. ‘Grunts’ – conscripts – complained that they were given most of the frontline action, unlike ‘lifers’, enlisted men. ‘Lifer’ officers were being killed by their own men.

Pilger's disclosures were sensational and supported by reports that began to appear in the press the following year. In his book *The First Casualty*, Phillip Knightley wrote, 'The year 1971 saw a series of stories revealing the massive heroin problem among United States troops (about one in ten was addicted), the "fragging," or blowing up by grenades, of unpopular officers (forty-five killed, 318 wounded in 1971), the staggering desertion rate, the number of combat refusals, and the growing tendency to regard an order simply as a basis for discussion.'⁶

World in Action editor Jeremy Wallington, who had commissioned *The Quiet Mutiny*, was enthusiastic about the result, regarding the combination of Pilger and director Denton as 'terrific' and the content as 'quite shocking in terms of its important revelations'. However, an item in *The Sunday Times* almost two weeks after transmission claimed that the United States's ambassador to Britain, Walter Annenberg, had complained to Granada Television's joint chairman, Lord (Sidney) Bernstein, and 'thunderclouds of disapproval are piling up on his lordship's brow'.⁷

A week later, the paper published a letter from Lord Bernstein denying that he had received any complaints about the programme. 'Whatever the nature of the reported "thunderclouds of disapproval... piling up on my brow",' he wrote, 'they were not caused by *World in Action* and anyway my brow is perfectly normal. Granada has not received any complaint from the United States Embassy about the programme and I was not approached by the Ambassador, Mr Annenberg, or anybody else. What is more I saw the programme and commended it.'⁸

Pilger, who has enjoyed the backing of his television bosses for most of his career, said, 'Granada had a tradition of drama and documentaries, and Sidney Bernstein was of that Jewish-liberal generation who took pride in safeguarding Granada's independence. For the company chairman to write a letter defending a programme would probably be unheard of today, but that's how personally Sidney Bernstein felt about Granada's right to put out a dissenting view.'

However, Lord Bernstein's support masked the fact that the Independent Television Authority's chairman, Sir Robert Fraser, a former civil servant, had already given a dressing-down to Jeremy Wallington and Manchester-based Granada Television's other joint chairman, Denis Forman. This came despite approval of *The Quiet Mutiny* by the ITA, which was then demanding to see all episodes of *World in Action* before transmission, believing that the venerable series carried a left-wing bias.

'In reality, they saw programmes in part and we used to manipulate the system,' recalled Wallington. 'We would say: "If you can get up to Manchester at 4am on Sunday, we can show you the film then – it won't be the final version, but it will be a rough cut." Not surprisingly, they often declined. They saw part of *The Quiet Mutiny* and approved its transmission. After it was broadcast, we got the full ferociousness of Sir Robert Fraser's temper. He had

already accused us of being strongly left-wing and only the previous week told Denis Forman that this bias within *World in Action* was simply not good enough and we had to do something about it.

‘After *The Quiet Mutiny* went out, Sir Robert went absolutely ape shit and we were hauled down to the ITA’s Brompton Road headquarters two days later. I’ve never known anyone go for us quite so ferociously. He said: “This is absolutely outrageous. Do you realise what you fucking people are doing? You’re exploiting the generosity of the Americans, their commitment to broadcasting and publishing. You use their helicopters and their press officers, then you go in and totally abuse the American way of life and way of war.” He then said: “What about Russia? What about China? Why don’t you do something about them?” I made the point that we could not get access to those countries. Denis then told Sir Robert: “I’ve heard what you have to say and taken note of it.” That was the end of the meeting, but we knew we’d lost a lot of brownie points and were in dead trouble.’

Pilger was reliably told by ‘a friendly US embassy official’ that Sir Robert (a fellow Australian) had received a complaint from Walter Annenberg, the American ambassador and a close friend of Richard Nixon who had funded the American President while in opposition. Leslie Woodhead, who had been joint editor of *World in Action* until the previous year and still worked in Granada’s documentaries department, recalled, ‘We were quite astonished by the very strong, hostile reaction from the Independent Broadcasting [*sic*] Authority – this was a report by “a man of the hard left”... he had failed to do his homework... it couldn’t conceivably be true that American soldiers were shooting their own officers and... this shouldn’t be seen. Of course, the strange thing is that, within months rather than years, John Pilger’s view became the common currency.’⁹



Bob Muller, a former US Marine who lost the use of his legs in the Vietnam War and eloquently described the agony of wounded veterans in 'Heroes' (1981), returned to that country with John Pilger twenty years after the war ended for 'Vietnam – The Last Battle' (1995). (Photograph: Ken Regan)

...In 1995, Bob Muller travelled with Pilger and Munro when they returned to Vietnam to reflect on the changes in that country twenty years after the end of the war. Pilger had been back again in 1989, when he discovered a more open society. South Vietnam was then producing enough rice to feed the whole country. Now, in this new documentary, he was able to tell the story of a country facing its 'last battle' – against the pressures of 'globalisation' and 'the market'. 'It was about the terrible ironies that were besetting Vietnam, how it was being drawn into the great, globalised economy and the loss of many of the gains it had fought for against invading powers,' explained Pilger. 'Another form of imperial control had exerted itself through the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the other global institutions. This had produced a very visible consumer class in the south and Saigon was beginning to look the way it did before 1975, with all the old divisions of rich and poor. I found that disconcerting.'

The opening of *Vietnam – The Last Battle* combined film of the American bombing and Vietnamese victims with the voices of American presidents extolling the virtues of the war, including Ronald Reagan insisting, 'It's time that we recognised that ours was, in truth, a noble cause,' and Richard Nixon talking of 'peace with honour' in 1973 and adding, 'Let us be proud of the young Americans who served with honour and distinction.' This was followed

by film of the 1975 American evacuation. From the embassy rooftop, Pilger said:

Twenty years ago this week, I reported the end of the Vietnam War from here, the American embassy in Saigon, where the last American troops fled from this helicopter pad on the roof. Vietnam had marked the last stage of the longest war this century, a war in which the greatest tonnage of bombs in history was dropped, in which more than two million Vietnamese were killed and a bountiful land devastated. This film is not just about an anniversary, but will try to rescue something of Vietnam's past and present, from Hollywood images that have pitied the invader while overshadowing one of the epic national struggles of the twentieth century. Above all, it's about a remarkable people who've paid a high price for their victory over a superpower. Indeed, the terms of their long-awaited peace are still being negotiated.

On China Beach, near Danang, Bob Muller sat in his wheelchair recalling that his original belief that he had gone to Vietnam 'to repel this massive communist invasion from the North on the freedom-loving people of the South' was a myth that was soon exploded by the experience of fighting there. This was the reality that the three million American servicemen who went there had to confront.

...The international embargo [against Vietnam in the post-war years] was broken only after the Vietnamese government's announcement, in the late 1980s, that it was embracing the free market and foreigners would be welcome. On the streets of Hanoi, the traditional bicycle was joined by the motor car as foreign investors arrived. 'America effectively runs the currency, Japan dominates the money lending, Singapore the property market and Taiwan and Korea the sweatshops,' said Pilger. 'The French and Australians are doing nicely, too, with the British not far behind. And, as the roads fill up and the air pollutes, the Vietnamese sink deep into debt to those who once profited from their suffering.'

...Pilger returned to the network of tunnels at Cu Chi and found that they were now a tourist attraction and had been widened to make them more visitor-friendly. 'How was Vietnam perceived by the rest of the world?' he asked. Recalling that the 1968 My Lai massacre was not reported in the United States for more than a year, and then represented as an American tragedy, Pilger tackled the way in which Hollywood consistently depicted the war. Film producer David Puttnam said that the biased images of movies such as *The Deer Hunter* would take 'generations and generations to eradicate' but blamed the United States, not Hollywood – 'This is a nation that can't deal with complexity,' he explained.

...Pilger noted that Vietnam had finally been granted a place in the New World Order, at the price of a society based on exploited labour and divisions between rich and poor. 'Perhaps the most difficult battle of all has only just begun,' he said, 'and, this being Vietnam, it is far from lost.'

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