THE UNQUIET AMERICAN:
Malcolm Browne in Saigon, 1961–65
When AP General Manager Frank Starzel decided to send a permanent correspondent to Saigon, he chose the 31-year-old Browne, a chemist by training, then working in the Baltimore bureau. He read and spoke French, had served in the Army as a public information officer in Korea and written for the Pacific Stars and Stripes before joining AP. In 1961, he asked for the Saigon assignment and got it. "It is a beautiful and sometimes noble little country, which I have come to love," he explained, "and I want to have a part in reporting it."

When Browne arrived in Saigon on Nov. 7, 1961, joining Vietnamese colleague Ha Van Tran. The bureau soon acquired two formidable additions, correspondent Peter Arnett and photographer Horst Faas. From the start, Browne began filing stories that got him noticed by U.S. military officials and the "goons" of the Diem regime. Among these early stories are the arrival of the USNS Core in Saigon harbor with its secret helicopter cargo and crews (December 1961); the difficulties of reporting from Vietnam (March 1962), a story held up by the censors; and a brilliant evocation of the "war behind the war" (October 1962), which got Browne into hot water with the CIA.

The exhibit also touches on the Buddhist crisis, which Browne later referred to as his "personal beat." Throughout the summer and fall of 1963, Buddhist clergy, supported by Vietnamese civilians, began daily protests against the repressive pro-Catholic Diem regime. Finally, the regime transferred directly into reporting, as he was always observing at close range. What piqued his curiosity remained with him. Of Vietnam, he wrote, "it is a beautiful and sometimes noble little country, which I have come to love."

In 1995, Browne published Muddy Boots and Red Socks (Times Books), a memoir which deftly combines a fast-moving narrative with astute historical analysis and personal insight. He shows us the kind of journalism he practiced and why. Curiosity propelled him, and his early training in chemistry transferred directly into reporting, as he was always observing at close range. What piqued his curiosity remained with him. Of Vietnam, he wrote, "it is a beautiful and sometimes noble little country, which I have come to love."

Valerie S. Komor
Director, AP Corporate Archives
Aug. 6, 2013

Browne’s photograph of the self-immolation of Thich Quan Duc, taken on June 11, 1963, led President John F. Kennedy to reappraise U.S. support of Diem. After Diem’s murder on Nov. 1, 1963, in a coup that most probably had the administration’s tacit approval, Browne provided an unmatched account of Diem’s final hours that received tremendous play. For his breaking news stories and his astute analysis of a war in the making, Browne won the Pulitzer Prize for international reporting in 1964.


In 1993, Browne published Muddy Boots and Red Socks (Times Books), a memoir which deftly combines a fast-moving narrative with astute historical analysis and personal insight. He shows us the kind of journalism he practiced and why. Curiosity propelled him, and his early training in chemistry transferred directly into reporting, as he was always observing at close range. What piqued his curiosity remained with him. Of Vietnam, he wrote, "it is a beautiful and sometimes noble little country, which I have come to love."

Valerie S. Komor
Director, AP Corporate Archives
Aug. 6, 2013

The Unquiet American: Malcolm Browne in Saigon, 1961–65, an exhibit drawn from The Associated Press Corporate Archives, honors the courageous journalism of Malcolm Browne (1931–2012) during the early years of the Vietnam War. While Browne was reporting a war being run largely covertly by the White House, the CIA and the Pentagon, he was waging his own battles in another: the war against journalists. Meanwhile, he accompanied U.S. advisers by helicopter into the countryside seeking the latest intelligence on Viet Cong and North Vietnamese offensives.

Browne's letters to AP General Manager Wes Gallagher and Foreign Editor Ben Bassett, and theirs to him, allow us to hear the Saigon/New York dialogue as the biggest story of the decade began to unfold.

In 1961, he asked for the Saigon assignment and got it. "It is a beautiful and sometimes noble little country, which I have come to love," he explained, "and I want to have a part in reporting it."

When AP General Manager Frank Starzel decided to send a permanent correspondent to Saigon, he chose the 31-year-old Browne, a chemist by training, then working in the Baltimore bureau. He read and spoke French, had served in the Army as a public information officer in Korea and written for the Pacific Stars and Stripes before joining AP. In 1961, he asked for the Saigon assignment and got it. "It is my belief that Asia is the fulcrum of contemporary history," he explained, "and I want to have a part in reporting it."

It was a pivotal moment. The 1954 Geneva Accords had divided Vietnam provisionally, leaving Communist leader Ho Chi Minh in charge north of the 17th parallel, while Ngo Dinh Diem rose to power in the south and received substantial United States aid. Intent on preserving that aid, Diem employed censorship, physical intimidation and other invidious means to impede reporting he perceived as critical of his government. Meanwhile, the White House and Pentagon provided little information to reporters and pressured them for favorable coverage of both the political and military situations.

Browne arrived in Saigon on Nov. 7, 1961, joining Vietnamese colleague Ha Van Tran. The bureau soon acquired two formidable additions, correspondent Peter Arnett and photographer Horst Faas. From the start, Browne began filing stories that got him noticed by U.S. military officials and the "goons" of the Diem regime. Among these early stories are the arrival of the USNS Core in Saigon harbor with its secret helicopter cargo and crews (December 1961); the difficulties of reporting from Vietnam (March 1962), a story held up by the censors; and a brilliant evocation of the "war behind the war" (October 1962), which got Browne into hot water with the CIA.

The exhibition also touches on the Buddhist crisis, which Browne later referred to as his "personal beat." Throughout the summer and fall of 1963, Buddhist clergy, supported by Vietnamese civilians, began daily protests against the repressive pro-Catholic Diem regime. Finally, the regime transferred directly into reporting, as he was always observing at close range. What piqued his curiosity remained with him. Of Vietnam, he wrote, "it is a beautiful and sometimes noble little country, which I have come to love."

In 1995, Browne published Muddy Boots and Red Socks (Times Books), a memoir which deftly combines a fast-moving narrative with astute historical analysis and personal insight. He shows us the kind of journalism he practiced and why. Curiosity propelled him, and his early training in chemistry transferred directly into reporting, as he was always observing at close range. What piqued his curiosity remained with him. Of Vietnam, he wrote, "it is a beautiful and sometimes noble little country, which I have come to love."

Valerie S. Komor
Director, AP Corporate Archives
Aug. 6, 2013

From left: Malcolm Browne at work in New York as a chemist for the Foster D. Snell Co. in 1953, before his induction into the military and subsequent career in journalism.

PHOTO COURTESY LE LIEU BROWNE

Associated Press General Manager Wes Gallagher, left, walks with AP correspondent Malcolm Browne in Saigon upon Gallagher’s arrival, March 20, 1964, for an inspection tour of news operations in the Far East.

AP PHOTO


AP PHOTO

Browne, on home leave in New York, reads about his Pulitzer Prize for international reporting, May 4, 1964. His colleague in Saigon, David Halberstam of The New York Times, also won the Pulitzer in the same category that year.

AP PHOTO

Le Lieu and Malcolm Browne pose on their wedding day outside their apartment at 158 Rue Pasteur in Saigon, July 18, 1966.

PHOTO COURTESY LE LIEU BROWNE

From right, Browne, his wife Le Lieu Browne and AP veterans Edie Lederer and Nick Ut examine a photo at an Aug. 11, 2012, tribute to two AP colleagues from the Vietnam era, George Esper and Horst Faas.

AP PHOTO / VALERIE KOMOR
FOREIGN BUREAU
CORRESPONDENCE, AP CORPORATE ARCHIVES, NEW YORK.