

Thomas C. Fox speaks with Vietnamese refugees at the Dong Tac camp in 1967, which offered minimal shelter to several thousand war refugees, situated outside Tuy Hoa, Vietnam. (Courtesy of Thomas C. Fox)



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It's a story that Thomas C. Fox, National Catholic Reporter's editor/publisher emeritus, has hoped for many years would become public. Now it has.

"I do know it's going to bring a sense of justice," Fox told NCR of a [controversial new documentary film](#) that questions the official lore behind one of photojournalism's most iconic news photographs, "The Terror of War."

"The Stringer," which premiered on Jan. 25 at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, asserts that a little-known Vietnamese freelance photographer took the famous 1972 picture that shows a naked 9-year-old Vietnamese girl running down a road, screaming for help, after a napalm attack burned the clothes off her body.

For decades, The Associated Press photographer Nick Ut has been credited with taking the Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph. Based on interviews and other evidence gathered over a two-year period, "The Stringer" suggests Ut was not in a position to take the photo, but was still improperly given credit.

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While not an eyewitness to how the film alleges Ut was given credit for the photo, Fox is interviewed as a friend and colleague who corroborates a former AP photo editor's anguish while he was deciding whether or not to come forward with the story.

AP has rebutted the film's allegations in a 22-page report on Jan. 15. AP said it conducted a six-month investigation into the circumstances behind the photograph and confirmed that Ut took the picture. AP also said that it would review any additional facts that might emerge from the film, which it was not permitted to preview.

NCR was also not permitted to preview the film for this story, but plans to publish a review in the coming days.

James Hornstein, an attorney who is representing Ut, told NCR on Jan. 15 that he had sent a cease-and-desist letter to the documentary's distributor and to the Sundance Film Festival warning that they would "bear the consequences of the defamation to Nick Ut" if the film was presented.

"All the evidence, every bit of the history, is that this picture was taken by Nick Ut, and there is no credible evidence to the contrary," Hornstein said.

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— Attorney James Hornstein

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Among those interviewed for "The Stringer" are Fox, who in the early 1970s was a young journalist in Vietnam filing dispatches for NCR, Time magazine and The New York Times.

"It is an injustice, a deep injustice, for the person who actually took the photograph, who has lived in obscurity and who has had to live with being upset every time someone else is honored for something they did," said Fox, a current member of NCR's board of directors.

More than a decade ago, Fox told NCR in an exclusive interview, his friend, Carl Robinson, who in 1972 was a young photo editor with AP in Saigon, confided in him the story of how he said Ut came to be credited with taking the photograph.

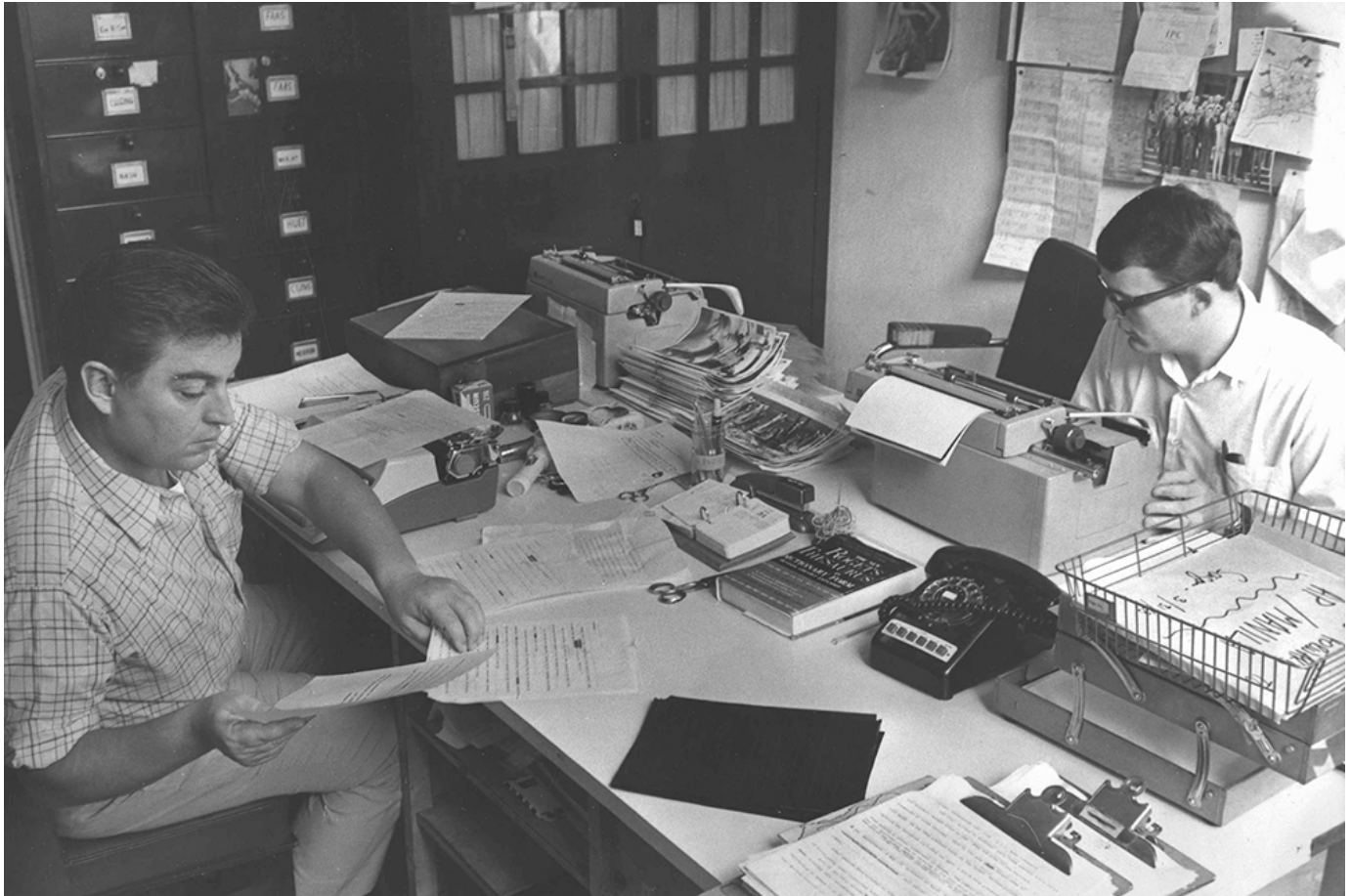
According to Fox, Robinson told him that Horst Faas, then AP photo chief in Saigon, ordered him to credit Ut with taking the photograph even though the freelancer, whose name is Nghe Nguyen, had actually taken it. [Faas died in 2012.](#)

"Nick Ut. Make it Nick Ut," Faas is alleged to have told Robinson in the bustling AP photo office while Robinson was typing the caption with the photo's byline.

Fox said he was shocked and saddened when Robinson, who is also interviewed for the documentary, told him the story several decades later.

"I told him, 'You gotta go public. This is not a small matter,' " said Fox, who added that Robinson was initially hesitant to share his story with the wider world.

"He said, 'No this is too much to take on. It's my word against theirs,' " Fox said. "I said, 'No, you really owe it to history to be truthful.' The war itself was perpetuated on so many lies. I think he at one point said, 'What's one more lie?' No, you can't have one more lie. You got to have the truth."



The Associated Press staffers Horst Faas, left, and Carl Robinson, right, work on the photo desk at AP's Saigon Bureau, preparing radio photos, originals and news/photo packages in April 1968. Exact date is unknown. (AP Photo/AP Corporate Archives)

Fox said he urged Robinson to tell the story in his 2019 autobiography, *The Bite of the Lotus: An Intimate Memoir of the Vietnam War*. Robinson omitted the story in the book, a fact that AP noted in its Jan. 15 report, refuting Robinson's account. AP also portrayed Robinson as a disgruntled employee who for decades never raised any concerns about the photograph's attribution.

However, Fox said he witnessed the internal struggle that Robinson had in deciding whether or not to share his truth.

"I believe Carl," Fox said. "Over a period of several weeks, I would talk to him on the telephone at length, and he would share with me his distress, his deep distress. That is not something you make up. It was both the stress that he had done this but he was deeply agonized over whether or not to come forward, and what the consequences of coming forward would mean to his life."

More than a year ago, Fox said, Robinson told him that he had been in contact with producers of "The Stringer" and that they were working together. Fox said he volunteered to assist with the project. Several weeks later, the producers contacted Fox and arranged to interview him for several hours.

"There are elements of nuance in all this," Fox said. "One can say, why does this have to come out? If the myth has stood for 50 years, what really is gained by sort of an almost self-righteous indignation that there is another truth to be unraveled?"

"But then on the other hand, there is an injustice, a deep injustice here," Fox said. "So finding the person who actually took the picture and contacting him and trying to get a sense of what's been going on in his life in subsequent years became an interesting part of what the producers tried to do and what Carl tried to do."



In this undated photo from May 1973, staff in the Associated Press's Saigon bureau celebrate news of Nick Ut's Pulitzer Prize, won for his picture of young Kim Phúc, severely wounded by a napalm strike. Left to right: Edith Lederer, Charles Harrity, Horst Faas, Dang Van Huan (in rear), Richard Pyle, Carl Robinson, Nick Ut, Toby Pyle, Lynn Newland, Dang Van Phuoc, Hugh Mulligan and George Esper. (AP Photo)

Fox, whose reports from South Vietnam appeared in the earliest issues of NCR, had been in the country for close to five years as a journalist and volunteer with International Voluntary Services when the napalm attack occurred on June 8, 1972.

"Vietnam was quite familiar to me," said Fox, who was 28 at the time and had learned to speak the Vietnamese language.

The day after the attack, Fox said, he met Robinson at the AP photo office in Saigon, and together they rode on a motorcycle to Saigon to search for the wounded girl, whom Ut had taken to a hospital. They found the girl, whose name is Kim Phúc, in a hospital burn unit. Fox said he remembers the smell of burnt flesh in the hospital.

"It was awful," he said.

In a statement provided to NCR by Ut's attorney, Phức, who is now 61, characterized Robinson's claims as "mean and untrue." Phức added that she had no interest in participating in the documentary, adding: "I know it is false."

Said Phức, "I have no doubt in my mind and heart that it was Nick who ran towards me to capture the famous photo. Nick took the image and he deserves the credit he has received. He is a good man who fully deserves to be treated with respect, dignity and kindness."

Fox added that he doesn't have any specific "hopes" for the documentary other than that it will deliver a moment of justice for Nguyen, the stringer whom he believes is the rightful photographer of "The Terror of War."

Said Fox, "He is going to be at Sundance, and he will tell his story, and he will have for the first time in 50 years, some recognition."