

SAIGON, SOUTH VIETNAM

Dickey Chappelle had visited Vietnam three times to cover the war from the soggy rice paddies in the south to the jungled "green hell" in the north near Laos.

She was a favorite of the Vietnamese Airborne Brigade; she thrilled the lowliest Vietnamese privates and the highest ranking generals in the country by becoming the first correspondent to jump on combat operations with them.

"She wasn't very pretty," one of the generals commented this week. "But she was very courageous. I saw her jump with the paratroopers in Tay Ninh province (near the Cambodia border) where there were alot of Viet Cong. She was really courageous."

As the first war correspondent to make the necessary seven combat jumps, she added her Vietnamese airborne symbols to those she had won years earlier with the paratroopers of America and France. She was an adopted member of the famed 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions of the U.S. Army and she not only jumped with them but continued the battles or training exercises on the ground in the most rumble-tumble airborne fashion.

It seemed fitting that on November 4 the briefing officer was a paratrooper who told the Saigon Press Corps, "We are saddened tonight to report..."

"But Dickey's first love was always the Marines," one of her admirers and old-time friends reported. "It wasn't that she was a Marine Corps mascot or anything like that. She was a Marine. ~~Should~~ She'd go out on the biggest operations or the little patrols with them; she had more combat experience than the littliest privates and always sought to protect them. She dug her own foxhole and built her own fire to heat the instant coffee in the most traditional Marine Corps fashion. She even carried her pack of cigarettes in the top of her socks, like they did. She adopted their descriptive four-letter language and she could out-cuss any of them--but she usually saved these words for the generals--some of the highest ones in the American military establishment came under fire of her tongue. Before her last trip to Vietnam, she interviewed General ~~Greene~~ Greene (U.S. Marine Corps commandant) in Washington. He presented her an honorary globe and anchor of the U.S. Marine Corps.



In mid-1962, Dickey became the first correspondent to photograph in color the Vietnamese war, which was exquisitely published in the National Geographic. The article and photographs featured the first U.S. Marine helicopter squadron in Vietnam, which at that time had just moved to the Mekong Delta town of Soc Trang. During the dry season Soc Trang was a pleasant sleepy town; during the rainy season it was miserable; and that's when Dickey was there. The Marines, who had transferred their "self-contained" squadron from the North were submerged in water; even when tent-to-tent boardwalks were constructed they too became inundated. Breakfast was usually in the rain, about three in the morning, long before the dawn flight briefings and then take-offs for combat missions.

"We could never find Dickey anywhere," one of the Marines then reminisced. "She would eat meals with the 'old man' (the commander), but then she would walk all over this camp; usually she was talking with the enlisted men. She always carried six cameras around her neck and she photographed everything in sight.

"It was very embarrassing when she first came here," the young Marine recalled. "We had never had a woman down here before; we didn't know how we would manage things for her. Dickey said 'Don't worry about it, sonny. I'll take of things myself. / But then we devised a new system; we flew a little red flag on the outdoor latrine, which meant 'Female Inside!'"

So, three years later, on November , it was hardly a surprise that her last patrol should be with the Marines or that the lead on her last piece read, "I was today again out wity with my Marines..."

When the news reached Danang, the U. S. Marine Corps commanding general, Maj. Gen. Lewis Walt immediately telephoned the Marine Corps commandant in Washington; Saigon information officers immediately telephoned their superiors in Washg Washington; the colonels and generals who had known her in Korea, in World War Two talked about the news over dinners--and ordered an extra round of drinks.

This week, she was accompanied to the United States by six Marines--an honor guard. She went home, as the GI's have a way of explaining, "under a fifty-star flag."