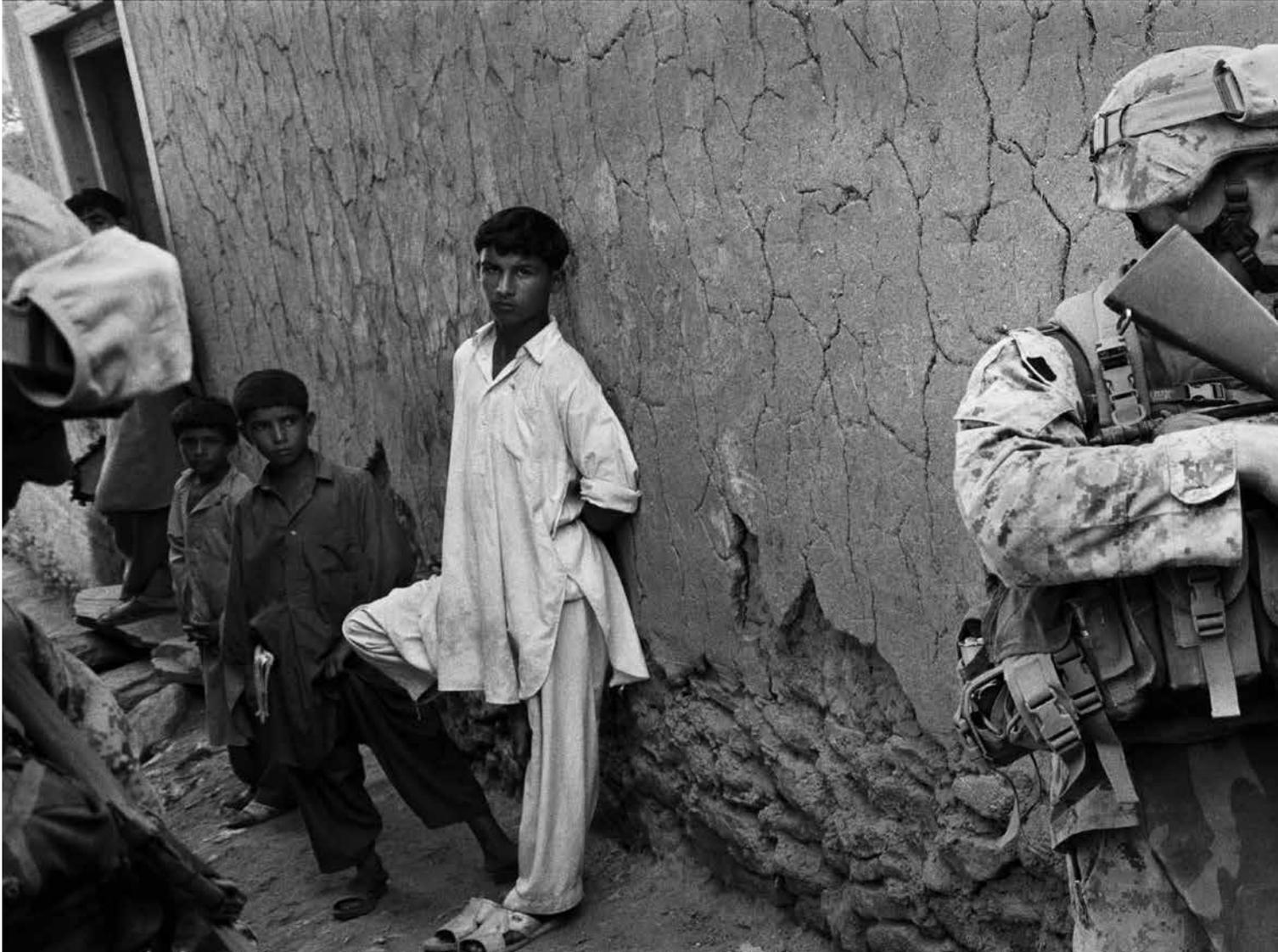# Photojournalism as a Line of Defence in War

Brigit Morris

Stephen Dupont, *US Marines, 2nd Battalion, Echo CO., on patrol in Asadabad, Kunar Province, Afghanistan, 2005*. Courtesy of the artist.

On the left is a grainy black and white still of a solider in uniform. He squats with a cigarette in hand. While he makes direct eye contact with the camera, his is a vacant, expressionless gaze. The soldier looks through the viewer, generating feelings of isolation and disconnection. On the right-hand side of the picture is a reproduction of a loose page from a diary. It is a torn sheet from a Moleskine. The writing is child-like and the page is littered with grammatical errors. The first line reads, 'I've been doing this for long enough that I'm not sure I remember anymore'.

This composition, entitled simply 'US Marine, Afghanistan', is a snapshot of life in war. It offers a bleak reminder of the realities of conflict, yet it is restrained. It shows hardship, fatigue and depression without the violence and death of many candid battle photographs. In this way, the composition balances propriety with the sensational, provoking viewer reactions in a more subtle manner. The photograph was taken by Australian photographer Stephen Dupont while he was embedded with US troops in Afghanistan in 2009. It was part of Dupont's latest showcase held at Sydney's Australian Centre for Photography (ACP) in late 2010 entitled 'Afghanistan: The Perils of Freedom 1993-2009'. Dupont is well known for war photography which depicts the horrors of conflict with a very human sensibility.

Photojournalism is a particularly challenging medium, offering viewers a direct insight into unspeakable horrors. Photographs bring events
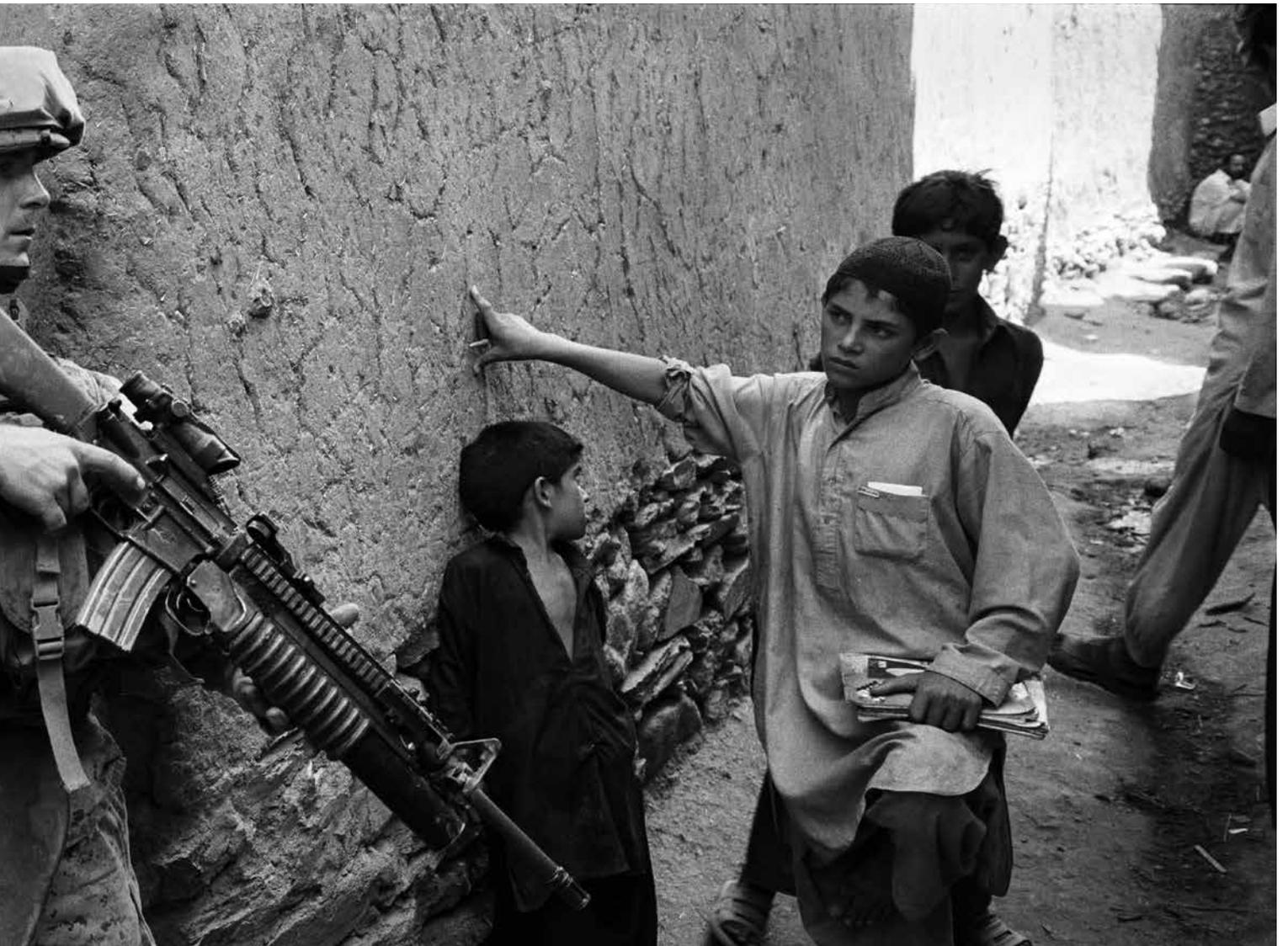
into the public realm; seemingly private or covert acts can become instantly known to a broad, even global public. The landscape of the twenty-first century is littered with infamous and chilling images: the lone student in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square, a naked child running from a Napalm bomb in Vietnam. Visual representation of violence can generate several effects: it can shape and protect collective memory of crimes committed; it can heighten awareness of current cruelties; canvass debate about the justification of violence; and it can also be used as a tool of propaganda, creating fallacies that often come to be seen as 'new truths'.

Images as tools of truth
Images are invaluable tools in the process of truth-telling. Photographs can act as concrete, forensic evidence to bring perpetrators of violence to justice. Paradoxically, it has often been the perpetrators

themselves who have recorded the images which would later come to condemn them. This was evident in the efforts of the Wehrmacht (German Army) during World War Two (WWII) to gather meticulous photographic and documentary records of the execution of Jews, Gypsies, political prisoners and prisoners of war. These images would later be used to prosecute Nazi leaders at the Nuremberg Trials. The abuses committed by US marines at the Iraqi prison Abu Ghraib, were similarly documented by the accused, captured like trophies of war on mobile phones.

A photographic exhibition of the Wehrmacht's atrocities was held in Germany from 2001 to 2004.[1] Whilst the crimes committed during WWII are broadly understood in German society, the reaction of the 1.2 million visitors and the German media to the exhibit was one of shock, as powerful and as yet unseen images, were brought to the fore. Those images contributed to a re-awakening of public and private debate

Stephen Dupont, *Brothers Reza and Hussein shooting up heroin behind Maiwan Avenue, Old City, Kabul, Afghanistan 2006.* Courtesy of the artist.

Like all mediums, photographs can be manipulated and even misused for a variety of agendas.

around responsibility, historical truths, and the value of collective memory-making. The photos confront our assumptions about the ability of ordinary people to commit unspeakable acts. Many of the images portray execution pits where soldiers are posed in elevated positions at the edge of killing sites. According to critic Bernd Huppauf, this distance offered the kind of 'spatial separation'[2] which buffers ordinary men from the realities of their actions.

Humanising suffering
Cultural signifiers like film, art and music often act as catalysts for change. They inspire and inform their audiences. In times of war, viewer reactions are often shaped by clinical reports and statistics-laden articles. Photographs can make conflicts more tangible to those at a distance, and thus humanise the suffering of others. Without them, carnage and destruction can be un-imaginable. The absence of images makes it difficult to share experiences with others. In this way, photographers have multiple roles – historians, dramatists, artists and even humanitarians.

Australian-born photographer, Stephen Dupont, is a striking example

of this multi-faceted role. Throughout his career, Dupont has produced a hauntingly beautiful body of work, focusing on the fragile existence of humanity in times of conflict. Dupont has documented conflict and the human condition in Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka, East Timor, Iraq, and more recently, Afghanistan. Born in 1967, Dupont has had a notable career receiving international acclaim for his work and in the process winning several notable prizes. These have included a Robert Capa Gold Medal citation from the Overseas Press Club of America; a Bayeux War Correspondent's Prize; and first places in the World Press Photo. Pictures of the Year International, an Australian Walkley Award, and Leica/CCP Documentary Award. In 2007 he was the recipient of the W. Eugene Smith Grant for Humanistic Photography for his work on Afghanistan. In 2010, he received the Gardner Fellowship at Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology.

Controversially, in 2005 Dupont released photographs of US troops burning the bodies of Taliban fighters, who had died in the course of conflict in Afghanistan. The photos were taken while Dupont was embedded with a platton of U.S. marines, the 173rd Airborne Division, in Southern Afghanistan. 'Taliban Burning' is an eerily beautiful reminder

Stephen Dupont, *an Afghan special forces soldier leaving a house after a weapons and enemy search, Gonbaz Village, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan 2005.* Courtesy of the artist.

of the sadness of war. Smoke billows over the heads of several heavily armoured U.S. soldiers.

This series of images generated worldwide outrage, both in the Islamic press and in the U.S. The troops' actions were condemned by many, as contrary to the rules of war, as specified in the Geneva conventions. While U.S. Army Central Command released a statement at the time reinforcing the Army's policy against desecrating the bodies of dead enemy combatants, the commander of the resposible battalion claimed the actions were taken for reasons of hygiene. It was alleged by U.S. command that the bodies had been unclaimed and were decomposing close to a village.[3] Irrespective of the truth of the situation, the stark images provoke questions about decency and loss in war-time as well as the conduct of the military.
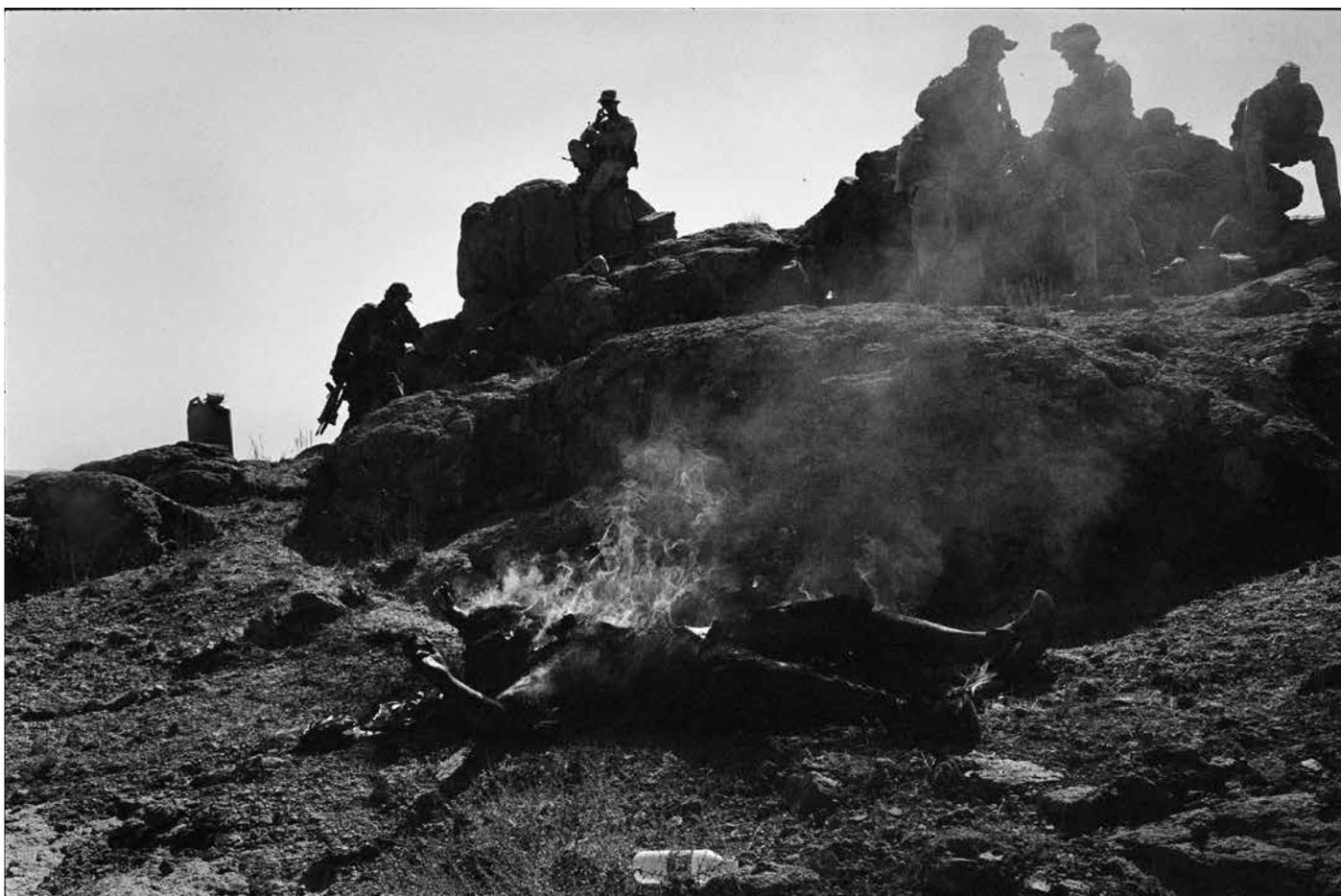
Photojournalism as a tool of change
More than acting as cultural signifiers, photos often hold the power to create immediate, direct change. Policy shifts from governments and military are often consequences of illuminating photography which in turn, forces accountability and transparency from the actions of such institutions. In a 2006 interview with the ABC's Radio National, Dupont stated that; 'my photographs and the repercussions of the story, changed US military policy. Psychological operations were changed. It had some direct effects on world history. So for me, that was incredible.

It's something that I've always dreamed about'. [4] This statement acknowledges the political nature of photojournalism.

On the one hand, the speculation aroused over the circumstances behind these images has been terrifyingly sensational. We may never know whether the Taliban were given a chance to reclaim the bodies of the dead, or whether hygiene was a legitimate reason to burn the bodies. We may never know whether allegations that the U.S. soldiers deliberately faced the bodies towards Mecca – an insult for Muslims – is true. For all the insight provided by such images into the nature of conflict, they also generate numerous questions. Questions which have the power to exacerbate tensions between Afghani civilians and US soldiers, as well as tarnish the already fractious relations between the Islamic world and the West.

Photographs are contextual, live documents; their meaning is fluid and unstable. Like all mediums, photographs can be manipulated and even misused for a variety of agendas. In this way, photographers encounter a special dilemma in approaching subject matter which is different from that experienced by print journalists. A famous example of this is Eddie Adam's 1968 picture of General Loan summarily executing a member of the Vietcong in Saigon. The image captures the split-second before death. General Loan holds a gun to the temple of the condemned man's head. The man's face is grimaced in fear. For many, this image is a symbol of the terror of the Vietnam War. In

Stephen Dupont, *U.S soldiers from the 173rd Airborne burn the bodies of two dead Taliban fighter in Gonbaz, Kandahar Province, Afganistan, 2005.* Courtesy of the artist.

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the U.S., this photograph which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1969, contributed to anti-war sentiment. Decades later however, it was used by President Ronald Reagan as an example of a 'noble cause': the necessary death of a Vietcong soldier, who may later have killed U.S. soldiers and Southern Vietnamese.

Photojournalism and voyeurism
Some critics argue that war photography feeds into a television-fed culture of voyeurism; one obsessed with fear and destruction. These include John Taylor, the author of 'Body Horror; photojournalism, catastrophe and war', which documents the impact of censorship and selection within the press.[5]

The disturbing title of John Taylor's work, 'Body Horror', speaks to his belief in the fascination of the news cycle with 'bad news stories'. In contrast, celebrated journalist and social critic, John Pilger, separates photographic images from television footage. In a 2003 interview with

UNSW academic, Claudia Tazreiter, Pilger argued that the impact of photography in newspapers can have a singular impact on the public which defies the rapidity of television footage:

I think the impact of the still photograph is incomparable. Before September 11, 2001, there was a view in some newspapers around the world that the photograph was simply an adornment – a graphic exercise – that it didn't really matter that much anymore. Along came September 11, and newspapers sold out. They couldn't print enough. The reason, research now shows [is] that people didn't just [want to] read about what [had] happened, but they wanted the photograph behind the words. In order to make sense of what had happened . . . they wanted the photograph in order to examine [it].[6]

The important function of the media as the fourth estate in any robust

Stephen Dupont, *an Afghan policeman taking cover from incoming fire outside Khogyani Police barracks following the suicide bombing by a young boy on a narcotics Police convoy, Afghanistan, 2007.* Courtesy of the artist.

democracy, is to follow and shape public debate.[7] Given this role, censoring or governing the publication of news publications has serious implications for the strength of democracies. Rather than creating gruesome, voyeuristic images of death and destruction, the responsible and ethical use of the camera allows viewers to face horrific scenes that depict lived reality. The lens is at once both a shield and an educator. Unlike news reel or live footage, reproduced images provide safety for viewers from gruesome realities – it provides a more reflective space.

While this article has briefly reviewed the important role of photojournalism, it is also a fact that this form of public documentation is in decline.[8] A rise in web-based news outlets and social media sites, hand-held camera phones empowering 'citizen journalism' and a focus on lifestyle and fashion photography, are all factors in this decline. Yet photography, and war reportage in particular, is crucial in bearing witness to world events. Eye-witness testimony captured in visual archives, cultivates collective memories. Memories can glorify war; bring an end to war; or seek truth about events which occurred during war. Whatever use it may be put to by future generations, documentary photography is pivotal in the process of documenting the present and of remembering the past; two factors that are significant in both respecting and understanding human rights.

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Endnotes

1   The travelling exhibition of photographs was held in Germany from 2001 to 2004. It was produced by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research and named 'Vernichtungskrieg.: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944' which translates to 'War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941-1944'. An outline of the exhibition, published by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, can be accessed at: http://www.verbrechen-der-wehrmacht.de/pdf/vdw_en.pdf

2   Bernd Hupauff in Heer, H & Naumann, K (EDS) (2004) *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II 1941-1944*, Berghahn Books, New York, p. 358.

3   Eric Schmitt, 'US investigating report that soldiers abused two Taliban corpses', International Herald Tribune, 21 October 2005, p.10.

4   ABC, Radio National transcript, 26 October 2006, http://abc.com.au/rn/mediareport/stories/2006/1774908.htm#

5   John Taylor, Body Horror: photojournalism, catastrophe and war, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1998, p.19.

6   Interview with John Pilger conducted by Claudia Tazreiter, Senior Lecturer, School of Social Sciences and International Studies, Faculty of Arts, UNSW; April 2003.

7   John Taylor.

8   Andrew Wasley, 'Doctoring the Image', British Journalism Review, Vol.11, No. 57, 2000, pp. 57-62.

Stephen Dupont, *an Afghan refugee inside Shamsatoo refugee camp near Peshawar, Pakistan.* Courtesy of the artist.