

Remembering John Knoop

by Elizabeth Farnsworth, March 2017

The seemingly contradictory words, “fierce stillness,” come to mind when I remember John.

In the years between 1990 and 1995, John, Jaime Kibben and I produced a film about Vietnam, *Thanh’s War*, and more than 35 stories twelve to eighteen minutes long for *The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*. Besides Vietnam, we reported from Cambodia, Korea, Japan, Peru, Panama, Nicaragua, among other countries.

John’s fierceness – his ferocity -- came to the fore when governing thugs in Haiti placed us under house arrest. This happened in 1994. Anger at our arrest and the imprisonment of our fixer and driver made John doubly courageous. He was never afraid, not even when police came to our hotel armed with .45 caliber pistols and Uzis to deport us. Standing with Jaime by my side as I give a statement to the press, John’s furious face revealed an important element of his being. He was proud. He had a sense of himself as worthy. It wasn’t conceit, but rather a clear sense of who he was. Because of that, one didn’t lightly mess with him.

After almost a week of house arrest, we were delivered in the back of a pick-up truck to the border of the Dominican Republic, and our fixer and driver were released unharmed. I will always be grateful for John’s and Jaime’s steadfastness during the ordeal.

And the stillness? That quality of quiet watchfulness – John’s deep knowing?

In 1990, John, Jaime and I traveled to a small Vietnamese village -- Binh Phu, just south of DaNang -- to report for the *NewsHour* and to make the film *Thanh’s War*. Binh Phu, had been destroyed and many of its people killed during what people there call “the American War.”

Binh Phu was a long walk in those days off Highway 1, which runs the length of Vietnam. In the midst of seemingly endless paddies, the village had no roads, electricity or running water. Some people there were still angry at Americans,

and our government-appointed minder made us spend nights in a hotel some distance away. On the first day of filming, as we began the 1 ½ hour walk into where Thanh, the subject of the film, was staying in the village, I said to John and Jaime,

“We can’t do this! We can’t get the footage we need if we have to walk in and out of the village on this trail every day of our shoot.”

I was a very new filmmaker. John had made a lot of films. He said nothing. He looked at me and then turned slowly in a circle, a wry smile on his face. I watched and saw what he was seeing. The path itself was a magic lantern of images, a natural way into the tragedies – and occasional joys -- of the place and its people. Children were already running towards us, among them a woman missing fingers from her hand. She shouted, “Come – look what your people did to me!”

Walking that path each day allowed us to tell the story of Binh Phu dynamically. John hadn’t said a word. He was, as usual, fiercely still. And, also as usual, he was kind, intuitive, and sympathetic when confronted with the weakness of someone with whom he worked.