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'80s TV director's career had a dark side:  
Combat photographer

By Thom Patterson    October 27, 2015



(CNN)John Florea directed some of the most famous American TV shows of the 1960s, '70s and '80s, like "Mission: Impossible," "The Dukes of Hazzard," "CHiPs" and "MacGyver," but he spent his early years as a photographer on the bloody battlefields of World War II.

Some of Florea's most powerful images — including an executed German spy and emaciated American POW — are part of a photography exhibit marking the 70th anniversary of the war's end.

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"What I like about John Florea is that he wasn't a war photographer when he started," exhibit curator Anais Feyeux said. "He was a celebrity photographer in Hollywood." Florea shot photos for Life magazine, perhaps the most prestigious publication of the time.

Like America itself, Florea's images changed radically from the beginning of the war to the end. One of his earliest shows a 1942 photo of an actress with Army trainees. "He photographed them like entertainers — almost like he would have done for the movies," said Feyeux. "For me it was like he was still in Hollywood."

That image stands in stark contrast to Florea's 1945 picture showing thousands of bodies laid out on the ground after the liberation of a German concentration camp.

Changes in Florea's style happened slowly, said Feyeux, who holds a Ph.D. in photography history from the Sorbonne. His first combat assignments were aboard ships in the Pacific. The themes were less dramatic, and even included a bit of humor, she said. When Florea took his camera to cover the fighting on the ground in Europe, a darker side emerged.



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"We gradually see faces of the dead," she said. "It's a kind of crescendo in his coverage of the war."

"I busted a lot of lenses," Florea once said of his wartime experience — quoted in the Los Angeles Times after his death in 2000 at age 84. "It's hard to run with cameras, and you have to hit the deck when the bombs whistle by."

In a way, Florea's photos followed the wartime experience of many civilians back home, said Feyeux. At first they knew little about what was happening on the front lines. But as the war progressed, month after month, photographs helped people on the home front become more aware of the war's

atrocities. As Americans learned more about the horrors of the war, Florea's photos turned darker and more disturbing.

Feyeux calls Florea's war photos a kind of "personal diary" by a man with access to some of the most horrific scenes of history's deadliest war.

What sets Florea apart from many other war photographers is that "these images show us his own experience of war as a civilian," Feyeux said. "It wasn't his real job. Unlike the iconic photojournalists of the time, like Robert Capa or Margaret Bourke-White, Florea did not continue."

Instead, after the war Florea returned to Hollywood to photograph celebrities like Marilyn Monroe — eventually rebooting his career in a new medium called television.

By the time he retired, Florea had become a producer, director and writer for U.S. TV favorites such as "Bonanza," "Daniel Boone," "Mission: Impossible," "CHiPs," "The Dukes of Hazzard" and "MacGyver."