

Breaking Ground Dickey Chapelle

By: Justin Mott



Dickey Chapelle was an excellent war photographer going so far as to die for the cause. In her career that lasted almost 30 years, she traveled the world reporting on wars from World War II to Vietnam. She broke new ground for women who came after her by becoming well respected in a previously almost exclusively male profession. Chapelle goes down in history as the first American female reporter to be killed on the battlefield.

Starting life in 1919 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin her parents named her Georgette Louise Meyer. As a child she was captivated by the thought of air travel. This obsession for adventure is what probably inspired her to take up the name of a famous explorer Admiral Richard

‘Dickey’ Byrd. Even at a young age she had ambition to make something of herself. At the age of sixteen years old, she graduated early from Shorewood High School. Chapelle started attending aeronautical design classes at MIT. After a few months in school she returned home knowing in her heart that she wanted to fly a plane not design one. Upon returning home she took a job working for a local airfield. While working at the airfield she began an affair with one of the pilots. Once her family got wind of this she was forced to pull up stakes and move. Chapelle was sent to live with her grandparents in Florida. She had several jobs, including a job as a publicist for an airshow, before landing a job with Trans World Airlines in New York. She obtained sponsorship from the company to pursue her new chosen profession photography. During the course of her studies she attended a photography class taught by TWA’s publicity photographer Tony Chapelle, whom she would later marry.

Divorce would follow 15 years into their marriage and after the couple parted ways, the now Georgette Chapelle officially changed her name to Dickey Chapelle. Even with her apparent lack of credible photography and journalism skills ‘Dickey’ managed to somehow get hired as a war correspondent for National Geographic. While on duty in World War II she was posted with the Marines. In war it would seem her tenacity and adventurous nature towards life would pay off. Chapelle became known for her never quit attitude and willingness to go to any length to get a story. This bulldog nature of hers and a mountain of luck allowed her to document the battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa. This was an impressive feat on her part given women were not officially allowed to be combat reporters at the time. During the battle of Iwo Jima she was assigned to the USS Samaritan a hospital ship stationed in the South Pacific. She was given strict orders to stay on board and to report the work done by the nurses. This did not set well with her and being determined to photograph the frontlines she managed to make it to the shore of Iwo Jima. While taking photographs she was constantly pestered by what she thought were

wasps. Chapelle later discovered after making it to a military encampment that Iwo Jima is a volcanic island with no sizeable insect population. Those wasps were bullets being fired at her by Japanese snipers. After her time serving in the second great war, WWII, she would go on to be accepted in to a host of different militia forces including: rebel forces in Cuba, Hungary, Algeria, and South Vietnam.

Middle age did not seem to slow her down as it does to most, at the age of 40 she learned how to parachute jump out of perfectly good aircraft. In the process she became the first female reporter to receive approval from the Pentagon to Para-jump with the American soldiers in Vietnam. Chapelle would always follow the brave military men into the heart of the fray, possessed as it would seem by capturing the moment. Chapelle rode on planes, helicopters, and marched with the American troops through the tortious jungles of the orient, all the while wearing her fatigues, harlequin glasses and pearl earrings. Chapelle captured many stories which were judged to be too sensitive for publication. She took a photo of a soldier engaged in combat in Vietnam. Despite a request from the Pentagon, National Geographic ran the photo in their magazine anyway. The photo won Photograph of the Year in 1963.



Marine crew chief Nelson West and South Vietnamese soldiers patrol an area near Vinh Quoi. This photograph originally appeared in 'National Geographic' in 1962 and was awarded the 1963 Photograph of the Year Award by the National Press Photographers Association.

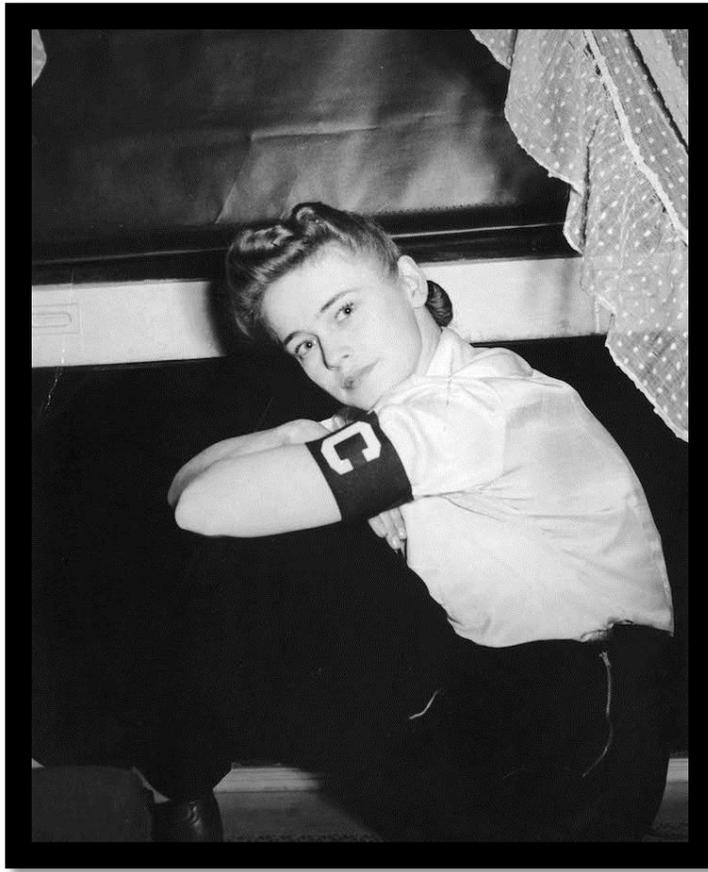
Perhaps, one of her driving forces to catalog the war in Vietnam was her out right anti-communist views. Chapelle was verbally pro-American in all her political views and would not mind letting you know. Chapelle's passion would sadly lead to her demise. In 1965 she managed to convince her editors to allow her to return to Vietnam. Early on November 4, 1965 she met her end. While on operation Black Ferret with US Marines station near Chu Lai Air Base she went with the men on patrol. During the patrol the lieutenant walking in front of her engaged a tripwire boobytrap composed of a mortar shell with a hand grenade on top of it. In the explosion her neck was eviscerated with shrapnel cutting her carotid artery. Chapelle passed away soon after at the age of 47. She was given last rights by U.S. Marine Corps chaplain John Monamara of Boston. The service was photographed by photojournalist Henri Huet.



U.S. Marine Corps chaplain John Monamara of Boston administers the last rites to war correspondent Dickey Chapelle. (Note the pearl earring) Copyright Henri Huet/AP

In death she became the first American female journalist to be killed while covering a war. Her body was buried at the road side where she died. She was buried with a full military honor, which is out of the ordinary for a civilian journalist. Her body was later exhumed, cremated and returned to the United States. The ashes were buried in Wisconsin. The United States Marine Corp still honor her to this day by giving out the annual Dickey Chapelle award. It honors the women of the Corp who contribute the most to wellbeing and morale of the Corp.

Dickey Chapelle was a much loved award winning photojournalist that served as groundbreaker for all female journalists to come after her, and her legacy still lives on today.



Self-portrait, wearing a war correspondent armband, 1942 (Caption from "Dickey Chapelle Under Fire," photo courtesy Wisconsin Historical Society Historic Images Collection)

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