
Maggie Jaffe

"The Camera is a Shield"

John Hoagland, Combat Photographer

I don't believe in objectivity. Everyone has a point of view. But I won't be a propagandist for anyone. If you do something right, I'm going to take your picture. If you do something wrong, I'm going to take your picture also.

—John Hoagland

During the Vietnam War, John Hoagland filed for and received conscientious objector status. Paradoxically, nine years after that war's end, he died in El Salvador by a bullet from a US-made M-60 machine gun. His parents first heard of his death on the radio—they later received condolences from the State Department.

Hoagland's death was not unexpected since his name was on the death squads' lengthy "hit list." To the embarrassment of officials, his photographs recorded the brutal Salvadoran civil war, which was largely financed by the United States. According to *Frontline: Our Forgotten War* (WNET, New York, 1985), military and economic aid to El Salvador was 3 billion dollars since 1980. Some two-thirds of the 750,000 citizens who fled El Salvador ended up in the US: many were deported back to join the imprisoned or the disappeared. Archbishop Oscar Romero was gunned down in 1980 while conducting mass, and many church workers, mostly Jesuits, were assassi-

nated. Three nuns and one layworker from the US were also raped and murdered, their bodies found in a collective grave at a dumpsite. By the time of Hoagland's death in 1984, 65,000 civilians had been murdered by the National Guard and right-wing paramilitary forces.¹

Despite this contradicting evidence, President Reagan's *National Bipartisan Commission on Central America* (Macmillan, 1984) justified massive military support to El Salvador because of their promise for "democratic reform." Critics of Reagan's policy, however, claimed that the main objective was to use El Salvador as a wedge between the "Marxist" Sandinistas and the Cubans.

Whatever the ideological truth, Hoagland's camera caught the brutal consequences. His portraits of war are sharply focused, stark.

Judging from the last six prints found in his camera (not included here), Hoagland photographed his own demise. In one frame, two Salvadoran soldiers emerge onto a highway. One of them turns toward the camera and spots Hoagland "shooting" him. The next-to-last frame contains the tip of Hoagland's shoe, snapped as he fell. The last photo is of the Salvadoran soil, his adoptive country.

Hoagland's life in outline:

June 15, 1947—Born in San Diego, California, the oldest child of Helen and Al Hoagland, a career officer in the Navy and a combat air veteran of WWII.

1965—Enters the University of California, San Diego, where he studies with Herbert Marcuse, the renowned scholar and author of *Eros and Civilization* and *One-Dimensional Man*. Marcuse, a refugee from Nazi Germany, is highly critical of the Vietnam War. Angela Davis is one of Hoagland's classmate.

1970—Hoagland and friends check out video equipment from UCSD to record the Chicano Morato-

rium, a massive antiwar, anti-poverty movement in Los Angeles. Los Angeles police shoot and kill journalist Ruben Salazar. A riot follows. Hoagland is arrested with the video equipment. "The war had come home." Soon after, he divorces and lives with his son, Eros, in San Francisco.

1979—Leaves for Nicaragua to photograph the Sandinista Revolution. The following year, he moves to El Salvador where he lives for nearly five years under contract to Gamma-Liaison photo agency and *Newsweek Magazine*. In El Salvador, his traveling companion, the Mexican reporter Ignacio Rodriguez, is shot and killed by a government sniper.

1981—On assignment with other photographers, Hoagland's car runs over a land mine. He and Susan Meiselas, author of *Nicaragua*, are wounded; journalist Ian Mates is killed. Altogether, 15 journalists die in El Salvador from 1979 to 1983.

1983-84—Assigned to Beirut, Lebanon, where a single driver loads a Mercedes Benz with two thousand pounds of explosives and crashes into the Marine base. Two hundred and forty-one soldiers and sailors are killed, one hundred are wounded. After returning to the States, he leaves for El Salvador within 24 hours. Marries Laura Hurtado, a Salvadoran.

March 16, 1984—John Hoagland dies at the age of 36 on a day reported as "light combat." He was 50 yards ahead of other journalists.

Awards and publications—Special Citation, Maria Cabot Award. Presidential Citation, Overseas Press Club. Publications in *El Salvador*, edited by Harry Mattison and Susan Meiselas (1983); *War Torn*, edited by Susan Vermazen (1984); *Witness to War*, by Charles Clements (1984), and five cover photographs for *Newsweek Magazine*.²

Notes

1. Charles Clements, *Witness To War: An American Doctor in El Salvador*. NY: Bantam, 1984. (Clements was a graduate of the Air Force Academy who later flew 50 missions during the Vietnam War. After leaving the military, he became a Quaker and a physician, treating Salvadoran torture victims in California. He later went to El Salvador as physician for the Revolutionary Democratic Front). See also Cynthia Brown, ed. *With Friends Like These: The America's Report on Human Rights & US Policy in Latin America*. NY: Pantheon Books, 1985.
2. For information about Hoagland's life, I am indebted to David Helvarg, curator and publisher of TWO FACES OF WAR, an exhibition at the Eye Gallery, San Francisco, CA, November 14-December 15, 1985. I also wish to thank Al and Helen Hoagland for their generosity.





















