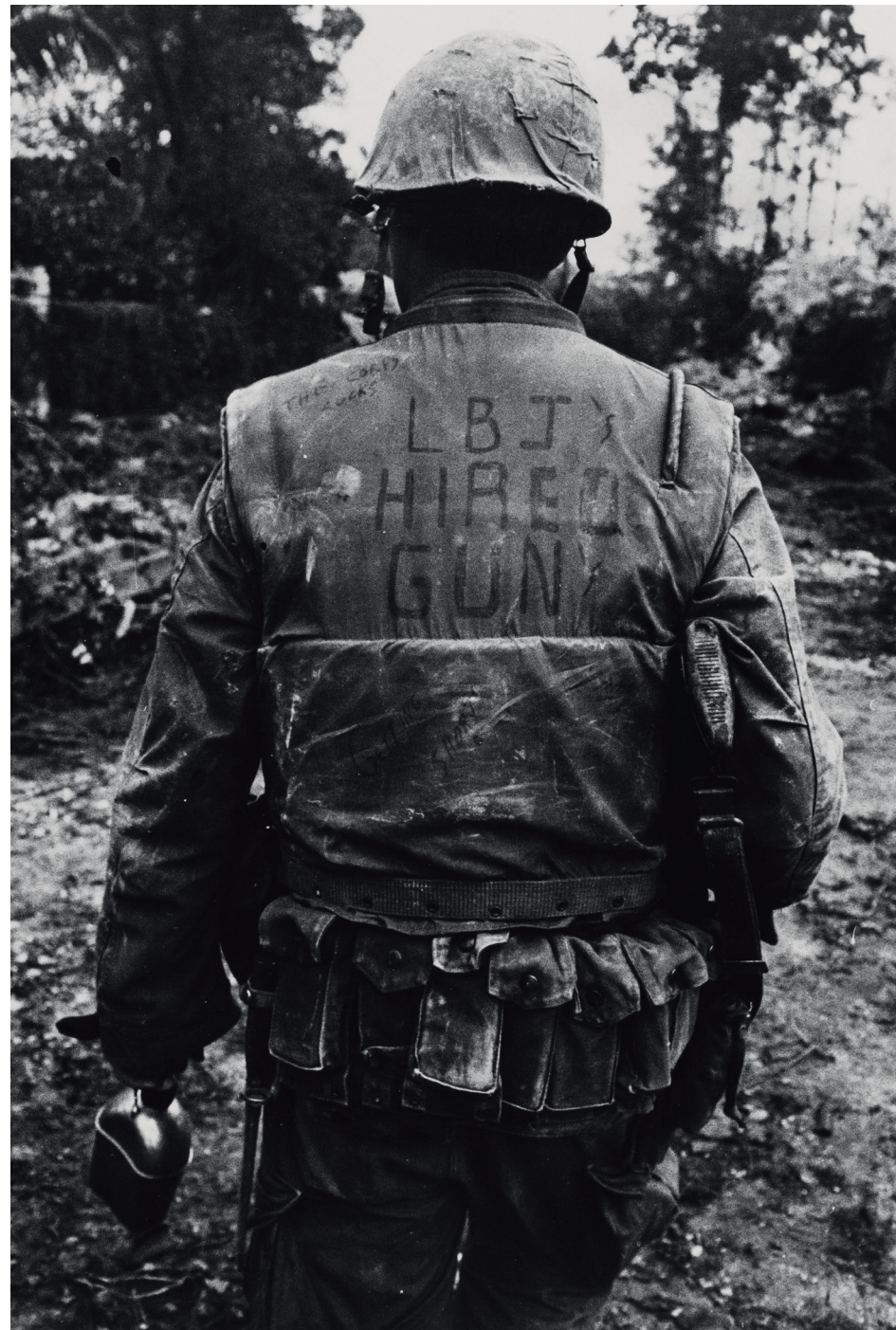


D O N
M C C U L L I N



Photographer Don McCullin
talks to Michael Holden about
a lifetime's pursuit of
the truth.

words **Michael Holden**

(Above) Search and Destroy Patrol, Hue, 1968
(Right) Shell-shocked US Marine, Hue, 1968





US Marines, *The Citadel*, Hue, 1968



Civilian Tormented by US Troops, Hue, 1968

On a clear day in Somerset, Don McCullin is talking about Syria, and how he'd like to go back there. "Trouble is," he says, "I can't run so well anymore, and you need to be able to run in these places." At the age of 77, the photographer's enthusiasm for "these places" – the frontlines and fault lines upon which he has captured some of the most abiding and defining images of modern history – comes as a surprise. Not because of his age which, considering his experience, he wears quite lightly, but because if anyone has earned the right to turn their back on the world, it's McCullin. "It has not been," he will say later, "a free ride."

Whatever those costs, the impact of his work is undeniable. In an era of peak newspaper circulation McCullin, his editors and their designers translated the realities of overseas conflict and domestic inequality straight into the mainstream with a degree of candour that seems unthinkable even in our allegedly more "accessible" era.

From the early 60s until the mid 80s McCullin and his cameras covered almost as many crises as the world managed to create. Fifteen trips to Vietnam, Cambodia (where he was seriously wounded), Biafra, The Congo (where he reached the interior disguised as a mercenary), Uganda (where he was jailed and beaten), The Middle East, Bangladesh, Cyprus, Northern Ireland, Central America and Afghanistan are just some of his overseas assignments; and his domestic work (collected in the book *In England*) is no less notable.

In that prolific period McCullin and his peers reflected the true nature of a world that might otherwise have sped through its Sunday papers

untroubled by the human costs beyond the headlines. Not surprisingly, the world responded.

It could be said that, if you are ever looking for a measure of your effect you might find it in the size of the steps taken against you – and by the time McCullin and his colleagues returned from the end of the Vietnam War no government that could help it would allow the media equivalent access to combat again.

In the 80s (following what had recently emerged as a covert alliance between the owners of The Times Newspapers and the government) the supplements' pictorial agenda lurched from "real life" towards "lifestyle" and McCullin, whose work had flourished in British newspapers since the early 60s, was denied permission to cover the Falklands War.

He kept working. Though never a "war photographer" per se (his landscapes and the calibre of his peacetime portfolio are a vivid testament to that), it is his images of combat and its consequences that have shaped people's perception of him. There, you might argue, his three most remarkable assets – courage, compassion and great photography – are most obviously combined. But here too is where "the cost" comes in.

In David and Jacqui Morris's recent (double BAFTA-nominated) documentary *McCullin* he recalls how in 1982 he was taking photographs on the children's psychiatric ward in a bombed hospital in Beirut. "I don't think I was ever more ashamed of humanity," he remembers. "It was a day of reckoning for me. You couldn't have found more tragedy under one roof. Those days come back to me on a regular



The Bogside, Londonderry, 1971

basis, as fresh as if it were happening today." By that point he admits, "I was suffering from what you become: a war junkie really." And war is where Don McCullin's story really began.

"I came from a really bad background," he says of his childhood in wartime Finsbury Park. "I had no education; I couldn't read; I had dyslexia, which was unknown in those days, and you took some terrible hidings from teachers and disrespect from people who thought you were a total prat. So you were kind of a clown. I felt I was dragging a whole load of ship's chains behind me just trying to move forward. Really, it wasn't right to start off with so many crippling disadvantages. But I got through it, didn't I? I got through it by working bloody, bloody hard, taking risks that most normal people wouldn't take."

A dose of good fortune (he learned developing pictures in the army) multiplied by considerable natural talent (a photograph of gang members he knew locally, who had been implicated in a murder, was published in the *Observer*) and character (in 1961 he made a visit to the Berlin Wall without an assignment, and the pictures he took there won him an award and a contract from the paper) got him started. "Then I was upright, you know, I was on my feet. I was ambitious, and hungry for a challenge."

Nowadays, every phone has its own camera. Back then McCullin made his name with a Rolleicord 2x2, and had to get a phone installed at his mother's so he could take calls. He owns a digital camera today but, "I don't really trust them," he says, "they're full of connivance."

He remains faithful to print and film, and reveals that the previous day's developing had been ruined by an incursion from one of his wife's cats. It bears mentioning that, in contrast to what you might expect from someone who has an understandable reputation as something of a sombre sort, he is excellent company and a warm host. His production of tea and sandwiches is matched with a stream of tales, even the darkest of which are leavened at times by a mischievous wit and the kind of joyful indiscretions that a less venerable soul might hesitate to share.

When we meet he's fresh from the darkroom, a place where he feels his hours are numbered. "The chemistry is destroying my stomach and my lungs," he says. "Also I can't stand for seven hours anymore; I can only do three or four. So I can only produce less. But I have 5,000 prints in my collection here, and 60,000 negatives and 20,000 colour transparencies."

There must be a lot of his images in circulation? "Well, is there any need for me to prove myself anymore? I do lots of landscapes now." Was that what it was about for him at one stage, proving and improving?

"Yeah, I suppose it was in a way. I thought, 'You can do better.' You know there's never any limit to how far you can stretch your imagination or your ability to try and learn more. It's not about photography; it's about you as a human being, what you can get from your time on this earth. It's about, you know, starting off in North London in the stinking two rooms we lived in below the ground. And now, the other day I was sleeping in a suite at the Dorchester Hotel. It's because I can play Jekyll and

Hyde any time I want, because I think that's what my life's been all about. One minute I can stay at the Dorchester, or I can still go and rough it in some stinking tenement kind of place in Bradford. I used to live in Bradford at the weekends. I'd go to Vietnam, I'd come back home to England and see my family, and then piss off and spend the weekends in Bradford, sleeping in dirty old rooms, you know, smelly old rooms – no lino on the floor, nothing. Because I believed that that was where my destiny was leading me, and that was where I should be. And then after all that... I have to come back in the darkroom for hours inhaling all that shit, you know?"

Talk of Bradford brings up McCullin's studies of the extremes of English life. Parts of East London, home chiefly to the destitute when he photographed there extensively throughout the 60s and 70s, are now among some of the capital's most self-consciously aspirational quarters.

"It's been ponced up really," he sighs, "and, you know, the poncing up of places is the death of them. Around 1970 I used to come into Liverpool Street, and when I'd get out the station, I'd see these desperate looking people, twitching and jerking around; they looked like lost ghosts that were somehow trying to come back to the society where they probably once felt they belonged to. And they were still part of it, despite their condition, and I thought, I'm going to go into the office, and I'm going to speak to the art director and say, 'We should do something about these people.'"

“So I went down to Spitalfields. I went for a few mornings, and saw these men standing around a bonfire deep in the heart of the market, and then I kept going. I used to wear Dr Martens boots and an old overcoat or an army jacket. I nudged in amongst them; they were giving me funny looks. I got to talking to one of them, and he said, ‘Whatever happens, never turn away when they look at you, because they’ll put the dead-eye on you.’ And I didn’t, I stared them out. Then, a couple of weeks later, I went back. This time I had my Nikon under my overcoat. I stood round the fire, and I thought to myself, ‘Okay, now is the time,’ and I brought it out... boy, there were a lot of serious threatening looks. And I did it in a way as if I was a magician, as if it wasn’t there. I brought it up very slowly in a very dignified way, and took a picture; there was a lot of jerking going on, and some of them were holding themselves back; you could see they were effing and blinding, and saying, ‘What the fuck’s going on here?’”

What does he remember feeling at that point? “Well once you’ve pressed the shutter, you feel as if you’ve really put the first foot on the thin ice. Then you press

it again, and then you put it away, and you smile at people. There was a lot of tension, and there was a lot of smell too. You see, these guys don’t wash. And they smell of alcohol, of methylated spirits, which is like cat’s piss. But, for me, that smell was like champagne. I knew I was in the right place, because you know when you’re among poverty. There’s no misidentification. You can smell poverty”.

McCullin’s descriptions of his work are seldom confined purely to the visual, it’s as though there’s a full and even extra sensory network of signals that factors back into what he sees and hence his pictures. “Absolutely. I already knew that’s where I should be working; I knew that before I took my camera out. My eyes were my everything; they were my voice as well. They were my integrity. I wouldn’t do something if I thought it wasn’t right, and my eye said, ‘No, don’t do it,’ but my eyes were the green light, you know? So, I was always very sensitive behind all that. I mean, I knew that there’s a certain point where you mustn’t cross over, because you are taking liberties, and it will bring danger to you. Even standing with those men, their favourite game



(Above) Gang Member, London, 1958
(Below) Homeless Irishman, Spitalfields, 1969

was – they wouldn’t have caught me out really – they wanted to damage you; there was a lot of evilness there. They would wait until you were asleep at night, and then they’d lay a bottle into your face, or they would come up behind you, and do you from behind. So, I was constantly on full alert radar waiting for this attack. Strangely enough, it never came.”

“There were many best sellers standing there in those dirty old overcoats, if they could only tell you their story. It would be riveting. It would all very much be part of the same journey in life that these eventually losing people would have come up against. There would have probably been marriage, break-ups, alcohol, business failures, all kinds. They weren’t just a whole load of shit-heads who were totally useless human beings. There’s no such thing as a useless human being. I can say this, because I came from a really bad background; people thought we came from the “die is cast” kind of losers. So I had a certain empathy for these people. I knew that somehow there should be some redeeming factors in their situations.”

“I wasn’t trying to prove how tough or daring I was. My only interest in the whole thing was coming away with an amazing body of work, so that whoever looked at my pictures would be in no doubt about what they were looking at. There would be a strong message to say, you know, ‘Should we allow this to be going on in our society?’”

Though many of us might nurture good intentions, fewer have the instinct or the nerve to place ourselves where others are facing danger. What does he think pulled him into some of the most volatile situations on earth?

“I think there’s a voice in me that says, ‘You must try to do this.’ It’s subconscious, but I am being encouraged. I’ve done all kinds of things in my life; you might, on the face of it, say, ‘Well, you’re a silly bastard really,’ because I could have been killed, and I got away with it. I would run on the Golan Heights to try and rescue a friend (who, in fact, was dead when I got to him). But this voice said, ‘You’ve got to try,’ and I was actually terrified when I went and jumped on the plane to the Congo with the mercenaries. They said, ‘You can’t go to Stanleyville!’ and I thought, ‘You’ve got to try. You’ve got to think.’”

YOU KNEW THE
SOUND OF THE
AK-47; YOU KNEW
THE SOUND OF THE
M16 AND THE SOUND
OF INCOMING AND
OUTGOING SHELLS.

“My dad was a gambler, and it used to cause such mayhem in my house. He only earned five quid a week, if he was ever working, because he was a chronic invalid. But he’d go up Haringey and do that on the dogs. And the trouble it brought to the house... The old lady had a temper like a wild wolf; she’d tear the place to pieces if he’d come back a loser with no money. So, I always said to people proudly, ‘I don’t gamble.’ But, what a silly thing to say, I gamble with the highest stakes you can gamble with. It wasn’t a set of cards; it was my life. I’d gamble with my bloody life.”

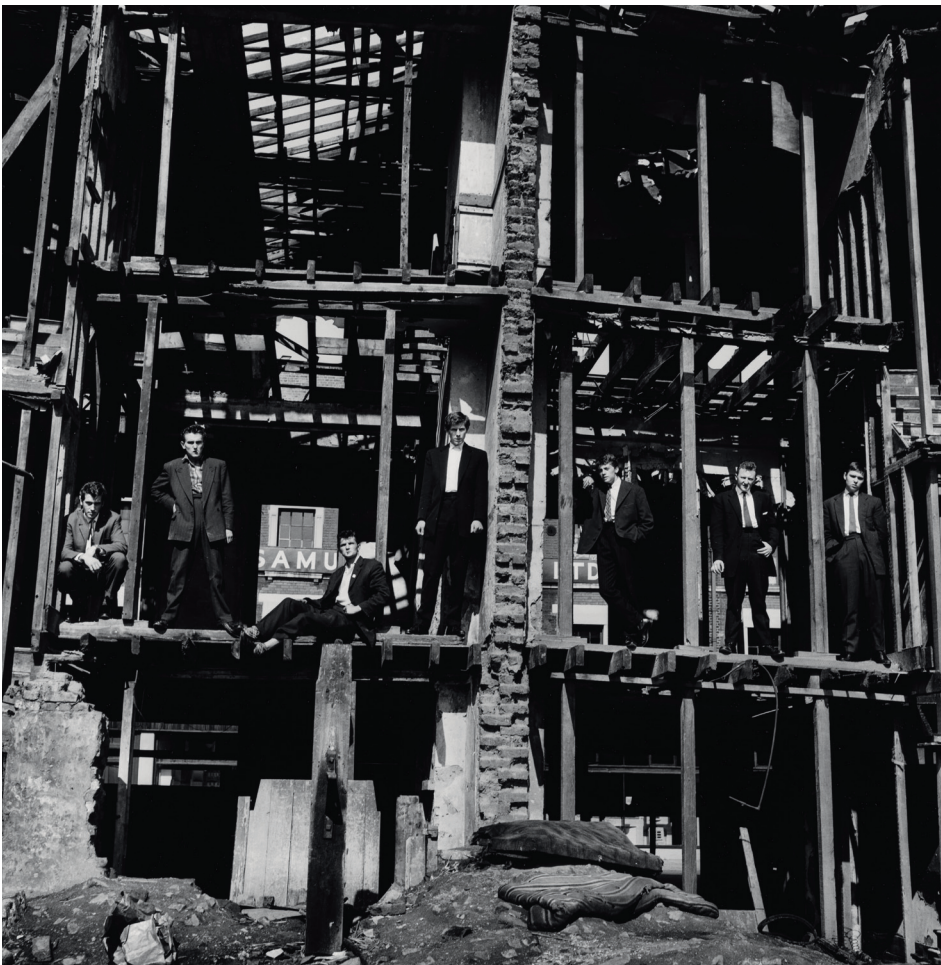
As readily as he reflects he’s also quick to contextualise – as if to say, there’s nothing heroic in this. “If you go to war you mustn’t expect any preferential treatment. I never have and never would, but, you know, when you saw what a bullet could do to a piece of human flesh...” He trails off, knowing perhaps that his pictures have contributed already to this area of our imagination.

“So, when the shit starts happening, and it’s cracking over your head – breaking the sound barrier, snapping, hundreds and thousands of rounds and shells coming at you – it goes without saying that my stress level is as high as you can get on the Richter scale. So, all those years of stress and beatings in the prison in Uganda and wounds from falling off of roofs in gun battles, that’s why I know that Daniel Craig, half of the things he does [as Bond], it’s just not possible. You know I fell off a roof backwards?”

Indeed. The incident happened in El Salvador in 1983. “It was like a classic Hollywood scene,” he continues, laughing. “There was the Spanish bell tower, and there were rebel snipers firing at the government troops I was with; the roof caved in, and I went off backwards – all I did was I shattered my elbow and broke all the ribs on my back, but I crawled away.”

He wasn’t treated quickly, though. “No, no. I lay in that room for 13 hours, and I thought, ‘Any minute someone will kick the door in, and throw in a grenade.’ I’m not saying these things because it needs to be said, I’m giving a sketch of what one does in the average day in a war situation – you know, the unexpected when you actually get hurt. You have to overcome that, and say, ‘I am going to make it,’ and don’t feel sorry for yourself. If you don’t [feel sorry for yourself], you abide by your own set of rules, which is: believe in yourself, and don’t show that you can’t hack it. [Otherwise] you shouldn’t really be there, and you shouldn’t accept the air ticket that gets you there from the office.”

While the statistical risks increase inevitably with exposure to combat, there are, McCullin says, skills you pick up within it. “You knew the sound of the AK-47; you knew the sound of the M16 and the sound of incoming and outgoing shells. There was a definite kind of knowledge you had to take on.



The one thing you could never ever compete with – which worries me today because of my son, who’s [a marine commando] in Afghanistan – is the mine. If I’d have thought about it really as a younger man, it may have actually arrested my kind of daring. The mine is the most fearful, hidden weapon; you don’t know where it is.”

How did he feel about his son joining the Army? “My brother [who served in the French Foreign Legion for 30 years] said, ‘Look, you did it, I did it. You can’t really deny him the right to make up his own mind.’ But I tell you, every time I hear the radio, and I hear the word ‘Afghanistan’, I start to twitch a bit. And it’s not an honourable war that you would feel right about losing one of your sons to, so I’m going through a very mixed bag of feelings right now.”

McCullin’s risks were his own, though. He says at one stage, “I don’t like working with people; I like being on my own. I make my own decisions. I don’t have to get other people’s approval. I also don’t need other people standing over me when I’m trying to do a one-man-band act. I want to be myself. I don’t want to be controlled. I certainly don’t need anyone’s approval other than the victims in my pictures; they’re the only people who have the rights over me.”

Rights that made the risks he ran worthwhile? He gestures at a tower of newspapers in the corner of the room. “Well, wouldn’t it have been a shame to get killed working for newspapers that only go on about David Beckham and Posh Beckham and Gwyneth Paltrow? And the Olivers and the Ramsays and the Nigellas? Is this the world that I’ve inherited? Is this the best we can hope for? You know, nobody talks about science; nobody talks about the suffering of cancer...”

“We should move our attention away from the privileged and those who were born with the looks. There’s one thing about people who are terribly good looking is that they’re the least interesting people you come up against. They wait for things to come to them – which inevitably it does, so they don’t give anything. They’re constantly being rewarded. It’s amazing how we’ve all looked upon Hollywood now as the utopia of the world, but the real kind of utopia, as far as I’m concerned, is out that window. I’ve been looking out there. I’ll go out there now and do some really beautiful landscape shots. I don’t have to go to the other side of the world.”

And with that he squints across the kitchen table and out into the countryside, still admiring and reckoning with the light, by no means fading into it. Seven weeks later he heads into Syria, and starts shooting again.

David and Jacqui Morris’s documentary *McCullin* is available now on DVD.

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(Above) The Guv’nors, Finsbury Park, London, 1958

