

SEA POWER

For photographer *An-My Lê*, who grew up in Saigon during the Vietnam war, these images of US navy activities in seas around the world are part of a personal quest to understand how war affects our lives. But as US planes fly over Iraq once again, they take on an eerie resonance. By *Liz Jobey*





SENEGAL Damage control training, USS Nashville, Dakar, 2009



JAVA SEA Manning the rail, USS Tortuga, 2010



CALIFORNIA Offload, landing craft air cushions (LCACs) and tank, 2006



ARCTIC Ship divers, USS New Hampshire, 2011



CUBA Treatment clinic and temporary migrant shelters, US naval station, Guantánamo Bay, 2010

It is impossible, now, to look at An-My Lê's photographs of the US navy, made between 2005 and 2014, without being conscious of the air strikes currently being launched from US ships against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isis). The USS Arleigh Burke, which Lê visited in the Indian Ocean in 2009, is one of the two warships from which Tomahawk missiles were launched against Isis in Syria on September 23. But these were never intended as frontline photographs.

They are part of a personal examination of the US military machine at sea, its tiny human operatives often dwarfed by the might of its technological apparatus, set within a wider landscape that only underlines America's global reach – an aircraft carrier in the North Arabian Gulf, a deserted training beach on the Californian coast, a concrete naval base in Thailand, a jungle training area in Indonesia, the wide expanses of satellite-occupied ocean.

For all its ambition, the project began casually, in 2004, when Lê asked one of the marines involved in her last book, *Small Wars* (2005), where he and his men were going next. "We're training on this flat-bottomed battleship," he'd said. "That's how we get on to Iraq... You should come with us!" And once the protocols were organised, she did.

That book, too, had been about how war affects our lives, not least her own. Born in Vietnam, Lê was evacuated from Saigon by the Americans in 1975, at the age of 15, when the country fell to the communists. Twenty years later, she returned for the first time to photograph a nation in recovery but even her more lyrical pictures provoke a background consciousness of the devastation war had left behind. They are part of what became a trilogy of pictures; for the second part she followed a band of Vietnam war re-enactors in the woods of Virginia and, for the third, a group of US marines training in California before going off to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Given her background, war might have been a subject she would steer clear of. "My point of view is in a way completely ►



COMOROS Tutoring for an English exam, US navy civil affairs team, 2009



THAILAND Demonstrating the Puma AE unmanned aircraft system, HTMS Naresuan, Sattahip naval training centre, 2010



CUBA Housing for visiting human rights observers, lawyers and media, US naval station, Guantánamo Bay, 2010

◀ messed up,” she says. “It’s very conflicted. Even though I was an adolescent and a lot of the news was censored, we were all aware of the devastation and the problems with the American forces and, in spite of what they were trying to do, the terrible things that happened in Vietnam. But at the same time we were evacuated, we were saved. So I feel at the same time very grateful. There is some kind of weird syndrome there. I’m fascinated by the power, by the ability to save people, to shake up the world, but I am completely aware of the mistakes.”

I wondered if the navy had asked to vet her pictures. “The only place where they actually looked at the pictures [was] Guantánamo Bay. They looked through my ground glass [of her view camera] every single time. There were certain sites I could not photograph, especially where some of the court proceedings were going to unfold. I do love the picture of the housing area. It’s called Camp Justice, I mean the irony is absolutely...”

Despite the distancing effects that scale imparts to her pictures, the ironies are there for the taking. US planes are back over Iraq. Guantánamo Bay is still open. The war, as Lê says, “is unfolding in real time. It’s not a rehearsal. It’s not a re-enactment.” But she is not a photojournalist. “I am always interested in bringing something back through my own personal experience. I always look for the more complicated, the more ambiguous and strangest aspects. My goal is to make a picture that is somehow clarifying, even within its ambiguity. I want to provide some physical visual experience that is rich. And the pictures provide cues as to what it’s about and what the issues are.” **FT**

An exhibition of An-My Lê’s photographs is at the MK Gallery, Milton Keynes, until November 23; mkgallery.org. Her work is included in “Conflict, Time, Photography”, at Tate Modern from November 26. “Events Ashore” is published by Aperture; a limited edition photograph by An-My Lê will be available via aperture.org in November. To see a slideshow go to ft.com/eventsashore. To comment email magazineletters@ft.com



MAURITIUS Visit, board, search and seizure operations, USS Arleigh Burke, Port Louis, 2009



THAILAND US marines and sailors, Gulf of Thailand, 2010

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