

## 'Napalm girl' in famous Vietnam War photo begins healing in South Florida



Dr. Jill Waibel examines Kim Phuc before the first of several laser treatments to reduce pain and the appearance of burn scars in her back and left arm in Miami. Phuc was injured by a napalm bomb in Vietnam 40 years ago. Nick Ut AP

The photo of a naked young girl howling as napalm scorched her skin is seared into America's consciousness. She is the indelible symbol of the horrors of Vietnam, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning photo that made the front page the next day sparked serious discussions about the validity and morality of war.

Kim Phuc was only 9 when Associated Press photographer Nick Ut snapped a picture of her and her cousins fleeing after a South Vietnamese plane accidentally doused them, and their own troops, in napalm. Two of her cousins and two villagers died in the bombings.

More than 40 years later, she and the man she affectionately calls “Uncle Ut” are still close. He attended her son’s wedding, and together they flew to Miami late last month for the next stage of their saga. He came from his home in Los Angeles, she from her home near Toronto.

Now 52, Phuc received her first in a series of seven laser skin treatments to rid her body of the painful burn scars that stretch from her hairline, down her back and up her left arm. The occasional treatments, being done pro bono at the Miami Dermatology and Laser Institute in Southwest Miami-Dade, will take six to nine months for the skin to heal.

“So many years I thought that I have no more scars, no more pain when I’m in heaven. But now — heaven on earth for me!” Phuc told the AP when she got to Miami.

## **The Patient**

As the napalm ravaged her skin, Phuc tore off her clothes and screamed, “Too hot, too hot,” Ut remembered Tuesday in an interview with the Miami Herald.

“I saw her skin come off,” he said. “I put the water I had on her body. I tried to help her.”

Ut and the other press photographers poured water on the injured children as Phuc’s uncle begged the reporters to take her to the hospital. Ut loaded her into the AP van and drove her to a hospital in Cu Chi.

Phuc wailed for the almost 40-minute car ride to the hospital, Ut said.

Doctors told him she probably wouldn’t survive the third-degree burns that covered her body, and Ut said doctors didn’t want to treat the children. They had too many other wounded on their hands, and they were running out of medicine.

Doctors wanted Ut to take the badly burned girl to a hospital across town. He was scared; he thought she was going to die.

“I didn’t know what to do,” Ut said.

He warned doctors that they must care for the girl or else. They did, and Ut left to develop his film.

After more than a year in the hospital and in physical therapy, she went home.

Phuc declined to be interviewed for this story, but the website for the foundation she started to aid children of war — the Kim Phuc Foundation — said she went on to study medicine.

But before she completed her education, the Vietnamese government called her back to her province to use her for propaganda. There she served as a “national symbol of war.”

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She met her husband, Bui Huy Thuan, while studying in Cuba in the 1980s. There, she reconnected with Ut again.

“We continued to talk for many years. I’m always thinking about her a lot.”

The pair are intertwined by their scars, physical and mental, and the effect her photo had on the world.

“He’s the beginning and the end,” Phuc told the AP. “He took my picture and now he’ll be here with me with this new journey, new chapter.”

## **The Doctor**

From the moment she saw a laser remove a birthmark from a 2-year-old, Dr. Jill Waibel knew she wanted to be a laser dermatologist.

When she was still a year off from completing her residency, Waibel experimented with lasers to heal the burn scars of a woman.

"In retrospect, I shouldn't have done that," she admitted in an interview on Tuesday.

At this point in medical technology, lasers were thought to harm, not help, scar tissue. But when Waibel aimed the beams, the scars melted away.

Now Waibel has 45 lasers to her name, and her own practice at 7800 SW 87th Ave.

The one she used on Phuc boiled the tough, leathery scar tissue to 100 degrees centigrade. The lasers boil the skin, vaporizing the old tissue and making room for new, healthy collagen to grow.

Waibel pioneered this technique, which she has used on burn victims with even more severe burns than Phuc, who reached out to the doctor after seeing a report about the treatments on TV.

Before the treatments, Phuc had lots of pain and itching, as well as restricted mobility in her arm and neck. After the first treatment, her skin glowed red, like a sunburn. But after a week or so the swelling diminished, as did the pain.

“That’s one of the first symptoms that gets better — pain and itching,” Waibel said.

After the long months of repeated treatment and recovery, Waibel said she hopes Phuc will see improvement in the color, texture and mobility of her scarring.

Waibel said she’s glad to help the woman she only knew from a famous photo.

“It’s an honor to treat her and be part of this journey in history,” Waibel said.

## **The Photographer**

Nick Ut still has nightmares.

War movies set him off. So do planes flying over his L.A. home. It doesn’t take much to remind him of the atrocities he saw in Vietnam as a young AP photographer. The war that took the life of his brother, also an AP photographer.

He was only 21 when he took the photo that changed his life. It made the front page of the New York Times and in 1973, it won the Pulitzer.

The award enshrined Ut, but it didn’t change the danger he faced every day.

Three months later, he returned to Trang Bang for a follow-up on Phuc, where he was hit by a mortar.

“I almost died right outside her house,” he said. “My leg still hurts today.”

The scars he bears — a mark on his stomach from where he was shot in Cambodia, a shrapnel wound, again from Cambodia, and the mortar leg wound — pale in comparison to the nightmares. Ut even saw his doctor for medication to halt the bad dreams.

Ut said he has talked to many people, villagers, soldiers and journalists alike, who endured the Vietnam War.

“Everybody has nightmares,” he said.

But seeing the “Napalm girl” blossom into a compassionate, forgiving woman has given him some peace. When he flew down to Miami and heard the doctor would help Phuc with her scars, Ut called the news wonderful.

“Oh my God, I’m so happy,” he said. “I hope the doctor will help her get back to normal.”