



Touching the world with a snap

By Mike Howard

Stripes Korea Correspondent

SEOUL — While working for The Associated Press in 1969, Eddie Adams photographed a Vietnamese colonel executing a man suspected of being the leader of a Viet Cong commando unit.

The photograph had more impact on the American public than Adams ever intended. The photo won him a Pulitzer Prize but spurred anti-war demonstrations.

Adams is back in South Korea where he spent his early days as a photographer — taking panoramic photographs of the Demilitarized Zone in 1953 as a U.S. Marine Corps combat photographer.

Adams is attending the Asian Games, preparing for Time magazine's coverage of the 1988 Olympics.

Reflecting back on his Pulitzer-winning photo, Adams said he later regretted taking the shot.

"The photograph was misinterpreted. People didn't look any further than cold-blooded murder."

It was later revealed that the colonel's family was murdered by the Viet Cong leader.

In 1977, many people expected Adams to win the Pulitzer Prize again with his photographs of the boat people escaping Vietnam. He didn't win, but he says he didn't care.

THE PHOTOS STIRRED private citizens and members of Congress to open America's doors to Vietnamese refugees.

"It was such a great feeling just to have helped all those people," he said. "There are thousands of Vietnamese making a new life for themselves in the United States now because of those photos. That means more than a prize."

Despite all the talk about his emotion-moving photographs, Adams points out he is only doing his job.

"A photo has a lot more power than a lot of people think," he said. "I'm not a do-gooder out to save the world. I'm just doing what I'm paid to do. But if a picture moves the world, then that's power."

One of his motivations for photographing the Vietnam War was the way American people treated soldiers returning from the war, Adams said.

"I went over on a two-week assignment in 1965. There was heavy fighting. I was so scared I wanted to get out and did," he said.

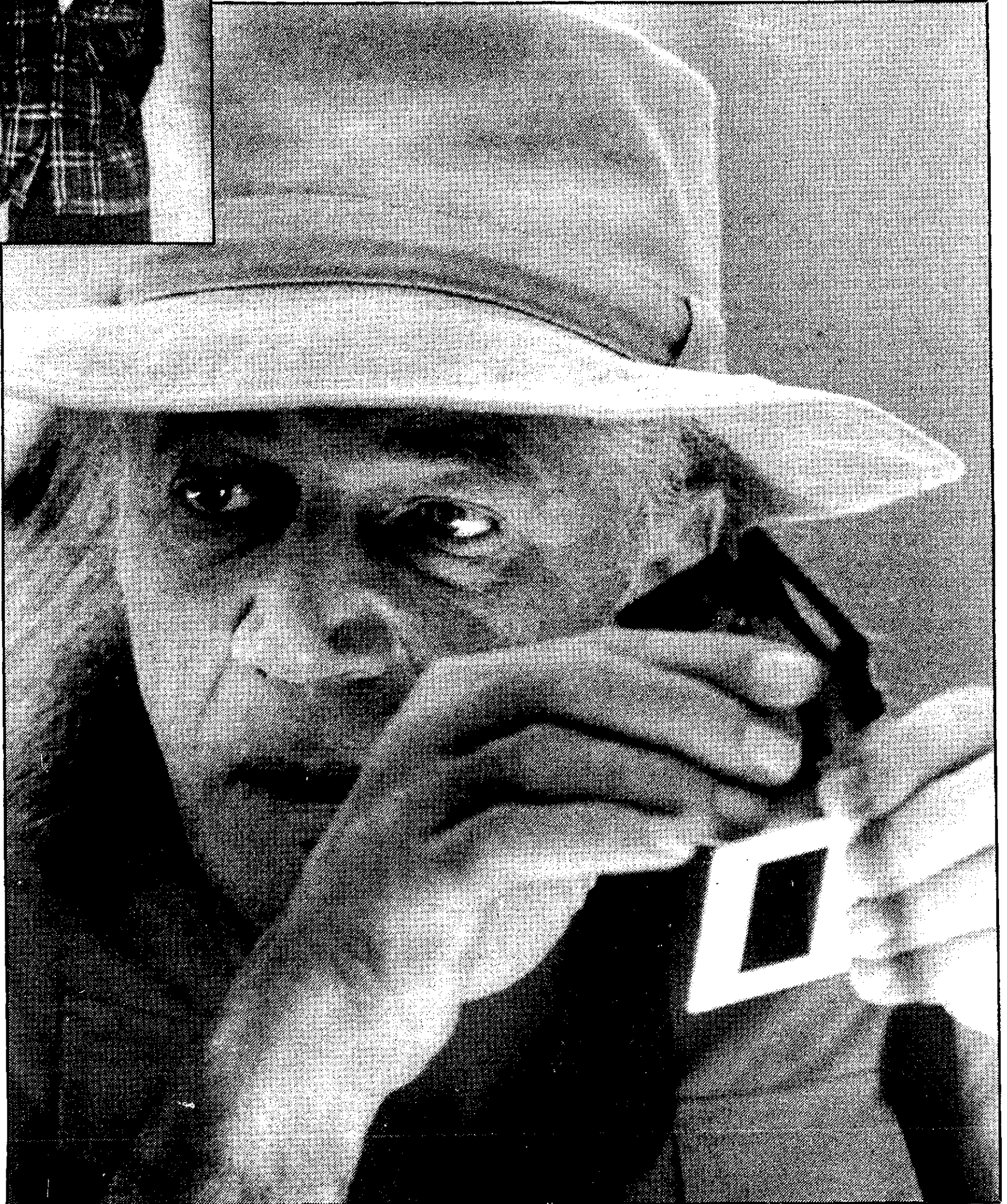
"THEN WHEN I GOT back to the States, I hated how the American people treated the veterans — a taxi driver trying to run over a soldier on crutches, fat people sitting behind typewriters in their own little world. The only ones who cared were the mothers, fathers and other family members of GIs over there.

"I volunteered to go back to Vietnam. I didn't care if I got blown away."

In retrospect, Adams is not happy with the story his photos told of the war.

"They (photos) left the impression that we were the only ones fighting over there.

"I could have done more, like photographed more of the other (allied) countries fighting. The photos didn't tell a balanced story."



Stripes, Howard

Adams, in Seoul to photograph the Asian Games, says he regrets his Pulitzer Prize-winning Vietnam photo (top) that sparked anti-war feelings among the U.S. public.

Adams has covered so many wars that he considers himself a GI in civilian clothes.

"I joined the Marine Corps because I wanted to cover the Korean War. I wanted to prove something to myself," he said. "The training you get as a Marine never leaves you."

"I've been out covering a war and have seen what commanders are doing wrong. I've advised them what to do. Sometimes they listened, sometimes they didn't."

After more than 30 years as a photographer, Adams said two stories stand out in his mind.

One is when he talked AP into allowing him to do a follow-up story on Brig. Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan — then a colonel — who executed the Viet Cong commando leader on a back street in Saigon.

"For two weeks straight I went knocking on his door," he said. "He wouldn't see me. Finally, I was let in. I went into his office and sat down. I hadn't said anything to him about the photo."

"He came from behind his desk and put his

face right up to mine and said, 'I know the Vietnamese who took my picture.' It scared me but he was telling me he did not blame me for the photo."

"I really gained a lot of respect for him. We are good friends now."

Adams said that Loan now owns a restaurant in Washington, D.C.

The other story involved the boat people when he went to Thailand in 1977.

After many years of covering tragic scenes, Adams had grown accustomed to local children coming up to the camera and smiling.

"There'd be dead bodies lying around and these kids would come up to mug for the camera," he said.

Adams went to sea and found a 30-foot boat with 50 people aboard. He spent several days at sea on the boat.

"This was the only time I've not had kids smiling for me," he said.

The photo story was called the "Boat of No Smiles."