



**Dickey Chapelle,  
Pioneering  
Photojournalist and  
Correspondent**

**by Kathy Warnes**

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## Chapter One

### Dickey Chapelle Begins Her Career as Georgette Meyer from Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Dickey Chapelle earned the title of one of the first female war correspondents through firsthand experience. She took combat pictures on a ridge at Iwo Jima with bullets whizzing around her. She crashed in a Jeep under mortar fire in Cuba. She survived torture and threats of hanging in a Communist prison in Hungary. She parachuted into Viet Cong territory and returned with stories and pictures. She jumped with paratroopers, traveled with troops, and lived the life of a soldier to get the best possible stories and photographs from the front lines. At a time when pioneering women journalists were not socially or politically accepted, she took pictures and wrote dispatches that brought the people back home to the front lines of war and its heavy price.

She was known for her tenacity and willingness to do anything to get the story, and many nations accepted her into their military units, including rebel groups in Algeria, Cuba, Hungary and South Vietnam. Chapelle even took up parachuting at the age of 40 to cover guerilla conflicts in inhospitable terrain. She became the first female reporter to win Pentagon approval to jump with American troops in Vietnam.

Dickey Chapelle covered wars and rebellions for publications including *Look Magazine*, *Life Magazine*, *Reader's Digest* and the *National Geographic*. In all of her service she never demanded special treatment because of her gender. Men sometimes did their best to keep her out of danger, but

she managed to find it. While covering the rebels in Algeria, she learned to survive on a diet of half a dozen dates a day, to sleep on a rock, and to urinate only once a day to prevent dehydration. She could do 50 pushups. An admiring Marine Corps commander in Vietnam said, “In fatigues and helmet you couldn’t tell her from one of the troops, and she could keep up front with the best of them.”

By all accounts, Chapelle could also endure punishment as well or better than men. During the Hungarian Revolution, she slipped over the Hungarian border without a visa and the Communists caught her and threw her into a cold, grimy jail for seven weeks. By starving and brainwashing her, the Communists tried to force her to admit that she was guilty of espionage. She never broke. Later, Dickey wrote that “the old rules still held good in this as in any other conflict between human beings. If you fought hard enough, whatever was left of you afterward would not be found stripped of honor.”

Some of the most popular magazines of the time including *Reader’s Digest*, *National Geographic*, *Look*, and *the Saturday Evening Post* commissioned Chapelle for assignments and featured her work. She won the George Polk Award in 1962 for her coverage of the Vietnam War. She also received the United States Marine Corps Combat Correspondents Association’s Distinguished Service Award. The Women’s Press Club said that Dickey Chapelle was: “The kind of reporter all women in journalism openly or secretly aspire to be. She was always where the action was.”

### **Georgette Louise Meyer Becomes Dickey Meyer and Goes to MIT**

Dickey Chapelle’s story began in the upscale Milwaukee suburb of Shorewood, Wisconsin, expanded to cover the world, and then ended back in Milwaukee at her grave in Forest Home Cemetery. She was born Georgette Louis Meyer in 1919, into an accepting and encouraging family. According to her biographer, Roberta Ostroff, Georgette’s family continued to be supportive and good naturedly perplexed by her intelligence, imagination and fierce individuality. Dickey talks about her father in her autobiography published in 1962, called *What’s a Woman Doing Here?* “He

often had taken me along on his calls at building construction projects. He would tell me to follow him as he walked across the high boards and roof beams. I was always frightened, but I never could bring myself to admit it so I did as he told me. I thought he'd never notice but one day he said kindly, "You won't fall. I promise, if you don't look down. Look ahead." I've since applied his advice to logs over rivers, ropes over chasms, cargo nets down ship sides, parachutes, front line, and assorted abstractions and it hasn't let me down yet. "

Throughout her childhood in Milwaukee, Georgette Meyer's appearance- she grew to be only about five feet tall and extremely nearsighted- lagged behind her spirit. Airplanes, machinery, and adventure fascinated her and she quickly became a tomboy. According to her autobiography, she didn't rebel against her family, but she did wear unfashionable enough clothes and had boyish enough manners to be the object of her high school classmate's jokes.

As she explained in her autobiography "I may have contributed somewhat to my difficulties. At fifteen, I was not much over five feet tall, weighed 153 pounds, was shaped like a straight-sided box and usually wore corduroy skirts, boys' shirts and snow boots to school. But tomboys were no novelty in suburban Milwaukee. When I was a high school freshmen, we must have had at least eleven of them in my class because I remember the soccer team on which I naturally played fullback trounced the sophomore girls and then challenged the boys. The dean of women, in a seizure of uttered sanity, banned the game. But we knew we could have won it..."

Despite the ridicule, precocious and industrious Georgette Meyer graduated as valedictorian of her high school class at age 16 with the highest grade point average ever earned at her high school. She won an aeronautical engineering scholarship to Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

Georgette spent three semesters at MIT, but she didn't attend too many classes. Instead, she visited the Boston Airport, the Boston Navy Yard, and the nearby Coast Guard base. By her second semester, she realized that she wanted something more than the life of an engineer. She had discovered two

new passions – flying and sex. Thirty years later searchers found an unpublished article entitled *In Defense of Necking, by a Coed who has done It, Aged 16*. This probably was Dickey Chapelle's first story written as all of them to come would be written, only after firsthand experience and a thoroughly researched knowledge of the subject. She also changed her name to Dickey after she met Admiral Richard E. Byrd, her favorite Antarctic explorer.

Moving off campus, Dickey met more boys and sold an article about the Coast Guard to the *Boston Traveler* newspaper. She didn't make it past the first semester of her sophomore year at MIT, because she lost her scholarship and the Depression made it difficult to find a job and finance her college education. She decided that she'd rather fly airplanes than build them and she dropped out of school.

Back in Milwaukee, Dickey traded secretarial work for flying lessons at a Milwaukee airfield. She had the opportunity to get to know the rough and tumble barnstormers of the time. Air shows provided welcome and affordable entertainment during the Depression all across the American heartland. Dickey also worked for the *Milwaukee Journal* and wrote articles and books about aviation.

By the summer of 1938, Dickey's mother had become concerned enough about her personal relationship with a pilot to send her to live with her own mother and father in Coral Gables, Florida.

### **Dickey Meyer Moves to New York and Marries Tony Chapelle**

Dickey hung around the airfields in Florida and wrote stories about air shows and planes. One of her stories produced an offer from Transcontinental and Western Airlines (TWA) to work in its publicity department. In 1938, Dickey moved to New York to write press releases for TWA.

In 1940, at age 21 she enrolled in the photography class of TWA's publicity photographer, Tony Chapelle. Tony Chapelle had been a pioneering aerial photographer of World War I, and he lived and breathed airplanes and



cameras.

He was also charming, twice Dickey's age, and married. The fact that he was married and had a son didn't stop Tony Chapelle from proposing to Dickey Meyer and she and Tony were married in Milwaukee. Chapelle remained married to his first wife six full years after he married Dickey.

Dickey loved airplanes- she earned her pilot's license at age 21- and cameras as well and she quickly learned as much about them as she could from Tony. Later, she credited her husband with planting the essential seeds of her career in photojournalism.

Tony Chapelle believed that, "If you were a real photographer you were on the spot where things happened before they happened."

His wife and student learned her lessons well. A good photographer was out front, the first person to arrive no matter the price. This idea shaped the rest of Dickey Chapelle's illustrious career.

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## **Chapter Two**

## Dickey Chapelle Begins Her Photography Career in World War II

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 brought America into World War II, Tony Chapelle volunteered for the military and orders came through for him to teach photography in Panama. Dickey set her heart on accompanying her husband to Panama, so she coaxed an assignment from *Look Magazine* to cover U.S. Army Jungle Training there. She arrived in Panama with camera and notebook intact after a rough voyage and with her reporting and photography skills honed to new levels.

Dickey flew from Pearl Harbor to U.S. Navy Headquarters on Guam. Colonel H.B. Miller, a public relations officer there, had insisted that female reporters could go no farther than Guam after their stories. Dickey for all practical purposes camped out in Colonel Miller's office, politely insisting that she would go "as far forward as you will let me."

Giving in to Dickey's contagious enthusiasm, Colonel Miller finally assigned her to a hospital ship, the *Samaritan*, bound for Iwo Jima. Dickey Chapelle was the first woman correspondent to report on the bloody battle for Iwo Jima and she was the first and youngest female combat photographer in the Pacific Theater. She made friends with countless Marines, listened to their stories, and photographed their pain and their hope. One Marine gave her his eight inch K-Bar fighting knife, a souvenir that she carried to every "bayonet border of the world."

Then came Okinawa, even bloodier than Iwo Jima. As the Japanese launched waves of kamikaze attacks, Dickey evaded restrictions and reached the combat zone, at one point advancing hundreds of yards in front of the line. Military authorities decided to chase her down. Weeks later when they found the tiny figure in a helmet and filthy fatigues, she shouldered a heavy pack and looked like just any other Marine. Over her career, she formed deep bonds with the soldiers fighting on the front lines.

Learning from a few early disasters, the brilliant, self confident Dickey Chapelle began to make a name for herself. She wasn't a great photographer, but she compensated for her artistic shortcomings with determination and undeniable courage. She took thousands of gripping war pictures—many of wounded and dying men. It was as if she had a compulsion to make the home front aware of the miseries and the sacrifice of war, of the "eternal, incredible, appalling, macabre, irreverent, joyous gestures of love for life, made by the wounded."

Bill Garrett, her editor at *National Geographic* after the war said, "She wasn't that good, and she had to hustle to keep the work coming, but she would stick with a story two or three months while another reporter would stay two days. And she would bring back the facts, no matter how long it would take."

Chapelle also wrote two books for the U.S. government, titled *Needed: Women in Government Service* and *Needed: Women in Aviation*. The books stressed that the government needed women for the war effort and issues surrounding gender bias.

### **Dickey Visits the Old Warsaw Ghetto**

After World War II, Dickey and her husband Tony Chapelle spent five years documenting the devastation caused by World War II. In her autobiography, *What's A Woman Doing Here?* Dickey Chapelle recalled a scene in the old Warsaw ghetto in Poland. She came upon a sturdy Jesuit priest surrounded by ragged orphans. These orphans had been traumatized while watching their parents and neighbors die while fighting against some of Hitler's crack troops.

Dickey had just come into the children's mess hall to photograph them drinking American powdered milk from tin cups. She had expected them to answer the pathetic question that Polish children asked, "How far down may I drink?" Warsaw youngsters knew there would never be enough to eat in the world again.

These children didn't ask the question. Some groaned, and a few grimaced but they didn't smile and they didn't speak. They didn't react until Dickey used her first flash bulb and then a dozen of them screamed and cried. A flashing light meant gunfire and someone close to them dying. Dickey said that she almost sobbed to the priest. "I'm so sorry, Father. I didn't think. I'll go at once."

The priest straightened himself, ignoring the noises from the tiny strained throats and said to Dickey with the accent and attitude of an infantry sergeant, "You will go nowhere. Take another picture."

Dickey took another picture and again terror struck the children, but there were fewer noises this time.

The priest ordered Dickey to keep taking pictures until he told her to stop and she did so. After ten of what Dickey described as "the most sickening moments of my life," the room remained quiet, even when a bulb flashed. The priest relaxed and smiled at Dickey. "I am sorry if I have been using you, daughter, but you are the first stranger these children have seen since the fighting ended. I thought it was time they learned that strangers and lights do not always mean bloodshed. I could never teach them about flash-bulbs because I have none for my own little camera."

Dickey ended her story by reporting that the set of photographs she made that day under the priest's orders were given by the Quakers to the United Nations and they became part of the photographic files of many relief agencies, because the naked faces so plainly told of fear and want. The last time she heard of them being used was in 1959 during the observance of World Refugee Year, when larger-than-life enlargements were exhibited in London.

### **Dickey Goes to Hungary, Algeria, Lebanon, India, Turkey and Cuba**

The Chapelle's work as a photographic team ended early in 1953. Soon after that, as Dickey put it, "We came to what I guess is called the parting of the

ways both personally and professionally. We were separated in 1955 and our marriage dissolved the following summer. We had been married fifteen years.”

Dickey Chapelle appeared in the front lines of every armed conflict that erupted after World War II from the Hungarian Revolution, Algeria, Lebanon, India, Turkey, and Cuba. In Algeria, she learned to live like a soldier. In 1956-1957 while photographing Hungarian refugees, she was imprisoned and tortured for seven weeks in a Communist prison in Hungary. Her captors tried to torture her into confessing to espionage, but she didn't break. At the age of 40 she learned to parachute so that she could remain in front of the competition. If there was no war to cover, Dickey went to places in the world where people were hurting, hungry, oppressed, hopeless. She later learned to jump with paratroopers, and usually travelled with troops. This led to frequent awards, and earned the respect of both the military and journalistic community

In 1958, the Research Institute of America assigned Dickey to cover the Communist Revolution in Cuba as an anti-communist photojournalist. She interviewed Fidel Castro, and found herself being quite sympathetic to him despite his Communist ideology.

### **Beirut, Lebanon, 1958**

In 1958, Dickey Chapelle went to Lebanon with the Marines.

There has been political and religious unrest in Lebanon for most of its history, stemming from the long standing Israeli-Arab-Christian-Moslem disagreements. After World War II, Lebanon became an independent state and the various political and religious factions co-existing within its small borders tried to achieve a balance of power. In the mid 1950s, Lebanon attempted to mediate between the Arab and Christian world. This attempted failed and in May 1958, unknown perpetrators assassinated the editor of the Beirut newspaper *Al Telegraf*. The assassination sparked riots that eventually led to the burning of the United States Information Agency in reaction of

Lebanese President Chamoun's sympathy with the Western powers. By late May 1958, Chamoun had requested the United States to stand by to aid them if necessary.

On July 14, 1958, young King Faisal of Iraq was murdered and the Iraqi Premier Nuri Said was killed while attempting to get away. The revolt that followed ignited the fires in the Middle East. Chamoun appealed to the United States and Britain to intervene. United States President Dwight Eisenhower gave the order to send in the Marines. Dickey Chapelle landed with the third wave of the assault force. In 1958, Marines were supposed to have 24 hours warning before they had to land so they could position themselves. President Eisenhower gave them half that time.

They got the landing order because they were the only force close enough to land within 24 hours. They were ordered to land on Red Beach near the Beirut International Airport and seize and control it. The Marines didn't know whether or not they would face opposition. Their landing situation wasn't exactly what they had anticipated.

Red Beach was four miles from the heart of Beirut. Bikini-wearing sunbathers, Khalde villagers and the beach workmen who dropped their tools and ran to the site to watch the landing witnessed the Marine assault on Red Beach.

Dickey Chapelle was in the third wave of the assault force as it landed. She later wrote, "The real thing here didn't look much different from a rehearsal except for the hazard offered by Arab families sun-bathing on the sand." She recalled the final sentence of the operations order to Marines, "You will make every effort in this assault not to disturb the swimmers on the beach..." a juxtaposition of ideas that surely had not occurred in Marine history."

She noted in her autobiography, *What's A Woman Doing Here?* that the next night she spent flat on her stomach in a hole in the ground near the top of a

hill they called Irene. The hill overlooked the main runway of the Beirut International Airport which was the prize piece of real estate in the Middle East at the moment, since the Russians couldn't send "volunteers" to Lebanon unopposed as long as the field was defended by United States Marines.

Dickey Chapelle noted that "crisscrosses of blue and amber runway lights stabbed up impertinently from the field through the tense quiet of the Marines' outer line, a row of holes thirty steps apart extending in a giant arc which embraced the Lebanese capital city, airport and all." She reported that there were four people in the hole on the line, each resting flat with their boots pointed inward. Each of the people were assigned to watch in a different direction since they knew and hoped that not too many other people did that the line didn't have much depth and there was no direction that was safe from infiltration.

The hole belonged to Lieutenant Tom Akers, the leader of the second platoon of Indian Company, 3rd Battalion 6<sup>th</sup> Marines. He was 23 years old and from San Francisco. Lieutenant Akers was so lanky that almost every man in his command outweighed him, but he could outreach most of them. In a stage whisper, he repeated the order of the day from Brigadier General Sidney S. Wade, the Commander of Marines in Lebanon.

Chapelle had combat experience in WWII and Korea so she was astounded at the order that had been given to Brigadier General Sidney S. Wade, commander of Marines in Lebanon.

"All of us had considered it the most extraordinary order to a moving assault force we could imagine, and historically I later learned we were right to be astounded," she recalled. "It was, 'You will not shoot unless you are being shot at and then only at a clear target.'"

After the Marine invasion, retiring President Chamoun said, "Your Marines...they acted like angels," which Chapelle jokingly said dealt a heavy blow to Marines' reputation. The Marines suffered no casualties during the



four month 1958 operation.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Dickey Chapelle Goes to Vietnam**

Vietnam turned out to be the final chapter in Dickey Chapelle's career. She had covered wars, the aftermath of wars, rebellions and invasions. She had already won the prestigious George Polk Award from the Overseas Press Club and worked for the big magazines and relief agencies. She had proven herself to be a fighter and a patriot, but her outspoken manner and venturesome temperament made it difficult for her to maintain a steady paycheck position.

Drawing on her Cuban experiences and despite her sympathy for Castro, she entered the lecture circuit as a strident and vociferous critic of communism. Dickey decried American complacency and expressed her uncompromising views and these factors often made her unwelcome in both military and

civilian circles. In 1961, Dickey Chapelle left the United States for Vietnam. She left alone, as the first American female journalist searching for the biggest story of her already stellar career.

Vietnam had a tumultuous history. France colonized Vietnam in the middle to late 19<sup>th</sup> century and during World War II, Imperial Japan expelled the French and occupied Vietnam although they retained French administrators during the occupation. After World War II, France attempted to reestablish its colonial rule, but lost the First Indochina War. The Geneva Accords partitioned Vietnam, with a promise of a democratic election that would reunite the country.

Instead of peacefully reuniting Vietnam, the partition provoked the Vietnam War. The People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union supported North Vietnam and the United States supported South Vietnam. American involvement on the side of the South gradually escalated and the war dragged on for twenty years. After millions of Vietnamese deaths, the war ended with the fall of Saigon to North Vietnam in April 1975

Dickey Chapelle was one of the many reporters and photographers who covered the Vietnam war and one of the few who observed first hand and understood the situation in Vietnam. In the early 1960s, she traveled to Laos and observed clandestine American CIA operatives in combat there. She believed that Americans back home didn't have any idea what was about to happen in Southeast Asia and she couldn't get anyone to buy her dispatches and photographs.

An outspoken anti-Communist, Dickey boldly expressed her anti-Communist views at the beginning for the war. Her stories from the early 1960s praised the American military advisors who were already fighting and dying in South Vietnam and Father Nguyen Lac Hoa and the Sea Swallows, an anticommunist militia. Over 7,500 American women served in the military in Vietnam. Thousands more women experienced Vietnam first hand as civilian Service Club personnel, Red Cross workers and journalists.

Sixty two women died. Dickey insisted upon being with the troops at the front collecting stories first hand. Her work showed the stark realities of war. Many of her photographs and articles were marked “lost,” or censored by the United States Defense and State Departments to keep up American morale and hide the full and brutal involvement of the United States in the War in Vietnam.

Dickey Chapelle was a different breed of reporter from the official, credentialed press corps in Vietnam in the early 1960s. She was used to digging for the story until she uncovered it and she ate and slept in the mud with the soldiers. When officials told her that a story didn't exist, she proved that it did. That's exactly what she did in Vietnam.

While on assignment for *National Geographic Magazine* in 1962, Dickey photographed a United States Marine , uniformed and combat ready in the door of a helicopter, surrounded by South Vietnamese soldiers. It was the first published photograph of an American in combat in Vietnam. She received an award from the Overseas Press Club in 1962 for her article and photographs that appeared in *National Geographic*. Chapelle's article was the first one published in the United States that showed American soldiers fighting in Southeast Asia. The photograph of the combat Marine won the 1963 Press Photographer's Association “Photograph of the Year.”

One of her photographs, a 1960 shot of a Vietnamese Airborne officer executing a “suspected” Communist prisoner, anticipated the Eddie Adam's photo of “Guerrilla Dies” by six years. Adams won the Pulitzer Prize for the famous photograph of the police chief pulling the trigger of his pistol against his bound North Vietnamese captive's head in 1968.

During the last few years of her life, many of Dickey Chapelle's photographs and stories were considered too sensitive to publish because of their realistic portrayal of the deception and death in Vietnam. In 1965, she convinced her editors to send her back to Vietnam. Dickey had to be in the front lines. Her spirit and intellect demanded it.

## **Dickey Chapelle's Pearls and Pink Flowers**

On November 4, 1965, photo journalist Dickey Chapelle, who was embedded with the American Marines reporting for the *National Observer* and WOR-RKO radio, was on jungle patrol with a Marine unit near the Song Tra Bong River near Chu Lai, in South Vietnam. Suddenly, the lieutenant in front of Chapelle tripped a booby trap consisting of a nylon fishing line attached to an M-26 hand grenade wedged beneath an 81-mm mortar round. The soldier who tripped the wire, walking point, was not seriously injured. The explosion threw Dickey who walked right behind him at the front of the squad, twenty-one feet into the air. Shrapnel slit her carotid artery, mortally wounding her.

Associated Press photographer Henri Huet photographed Chapelle as she lay dying. Marine Corps Chaplain John Monamara of Boston administered the last rites to Chapelle as an American Marine and a South Vietnamese soldier carrying M-14 rifles watched. The famous photograph showed blood pooling in the dirt near her head and a small pearl earring gleaming in her left earlobe. Her pearl earrings as well as her Australian bush hat were a signature part of Chapelle's uniform. The Australian bush hat lay nearby. The tiny bouquet of pink flowers that she had tucked into it earlier contrasted with the red blood and the white pearl earrings.

Henri Huet's photograph of Chapelle's death became famous. He himself would die in a February 1971 with fellow photographers Larry Burrows, Kent Potter and Keisaburo Shimamoto, when North Vietnamese shot down their helicopter over Laos.

In the rescue helicopter on the way to the base hospital, Dickey Chapelle looked into the face of a corpsman. "I guess it was bound to happen," she said.

Those were the last words she spoke.

Chapelle was the first female war correspondent to be killed in Vietnam and the first American female reporter to be killed in action. The Marines admired her so much that when her body was repatriated to her hometown of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, she had an honor guard of six Marines and she was

given a full Marine burial.

### **Dickey Chapelle Is Buried in Forest Home Cemetery in Milwaukee, Wisconsin**

A story in the Milwaukee Journal dated Saturday, November 13, 1965, records her burial on Friday, November 12, 1965, in her family plot at Forest Home Cemetery. Journal reporter David G. Meissner put it, "Flanked in full dress, the ashes of the former Shorewood correspondent-photographer were buried in a family plot at Forest Home Cemetery." Dickey Chapelle's body had been cremated in San Francisco earlier in the week.

Reverend John W. Cyrus, pastor of the First Unitarian Church gave her funeral oration at the church and conducted the graveside service. Reverend Cyrus said that Dickey Chapelle's life had swung between two poles. Her family where there were strong pacifistic tendencies and on whom she deeply depended was one pole. The other pole was the far distant place where danger was. He said her life "was action, doing, working, talking, traveling." Of her reporting in Vietnam, he said, "She was interested in the victims of war, the men who fought it...She believed in her side...This was her war."

During the church and graveside services, cameras clicked and reporters wrote in their notebooks. Delmar Lipp, a senior editor at the *National Observer*, the paper that Dickey Chapelle was on assignment for when she died, was there. She had worked for *The National Geographic Magazine* and a representative from the magazine was there. SSgt. Albert P. Miville, leader of the Marine platoon that Chapelle had been covering when she died, attended the ceremonies. Major Robert Morrisey, special assistant to the Marine Corps commandant, came from Washington. Sgt. J.M. Folk, of the Marine barracks at the Great Lakes Illinois Naval Training Station, blew taps at the windswept gravesite. Members of the Marine Corps recruiting office in Milwaukee acted as ushers and honor guard during the service.

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