



### World in Action: The Quiet Mutiny

Director/Producer: Charles Denton  
Production Company: Granada Television  
Executive Producer: Jeremy Wallington  
Camera: George Jesse Turner  
Film Editor: Gerry Dow  
Sound: Alan Bale  
Dubbing Mixer: Frank Griffiths  
Reporter: John Pilger  
ITV tx 28.9.1970  
26 mins  
Digital

Please note, this film contains racially offensive language

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## HIDDEN TRUTHS: JOHN PILGER AND THE POWER OF DOCUMENTARY

# The Quiet Mutiny

+ intro and Q&A with author Anthony Hayward

When John Pilger reported from Vietnam for his first television documentary, *The Quiet Mutiny*, directed by Charles Denton, the *World in Action* film was announced on screen as 'a personal report by the *Daily Mirror's* special correspondent, John Pilger, Vietnam, 1970, the front line'. It was a rare occasion when *World in Action* was presented by a reporter in vision. 'This was a time when the Vietnam War still resonated with everybody and the Americans were in the thick of it, with clearly no success on the horizon,' recalled Denton. 'John had a very clear view, which I shared, that the Americans not only couldn't win, but had lost, which wasn't then a view that was openly spoken. It was almost heresy to say that the most powerful military system in the world had lost a war against a South East Asian Third World outfit.'

'John's view, further to that, was that there were all sorts of components as to why the war was being lost and, as far as he was concerned, had *been* lost. Quite important was that the people who were fighting it, the draftees, weren't interested in it, didn't want to fight it, and did most things to avoid it. It wasn't a professional military machine as you see now and many of those draftees were poorly educated and Black, and had many things they'd rather do. I'd never been to Vietnam before and it was an eye-opener to me. Also, the American co-operation was just gobsmacking compared with what our military offered. Their PR machine was dedicated to getting you where you wanted to go. If you wanted a helicopter to get somewhere, you got a helicopter.'

Speaking directly to the camera in *The Quiet Mutiny*, Pilger explained that he was returning to Vietnam for the first time in three years. 'I've come back for the final act,' he said. 'No blood, no atrocities, just the rejection of the war by those sent here to fight it, just the quiet mutiny of the greatest army in history.' This prediction of an end to the war was, perhaps, a little premature but understandable after the start of peace talks in Paris and the troop revolts that Pilger uncovered. Thousands of American servicemen among the 400,000 in Vietnam were refusing to follow orders. 'Grunts' – conscripts – complained that they were given most of the frontline action, unlike 'lifers', enlisted men. 'Lifer' officers were being killed by their own men.

Pilger's disclosures were sensational and supported by reports that began to appear in the press the following year. In his book *The First Casualty*, Phillip Knightley wrote, 'The year 1971 saw a series of stories revealing the massive heroin problem among United States troops (about one in ten was addicted), the "fragging," or blowing up by grenades, of unpopular officers (45 killed, 318 wounded in 1971), the staggering desertion rate, the number of combat refusals, and the growing tendency to regard an order simply as a basis for discussion.'

One of the strengths of *The Quiet Mutiny* was its irony and black humour, which were to become Pilger's trademarks. His interviews with American officers, who might have stepped out of the pages of *Catch-22*, could make viewers laugh in the middle of a film about a deadly serious issue. There was the bored Psyops (psychological operations) officer who played a 'Wandering Soul' tape from a helicopter ('the ghosts of the ancestors of the Vietcong exhorting them to surrender') while throwing out whole boxes of leaflets. 'Maybe one will score by hitting some guy on the head,' he said. Then there

## **HIDDEN TRUTHS: JOHN PILGER AND THE POWER OF DOCUMENTARY**

### **I Am Not Your Negro**

Sat 26 Oct 20:35; Sat 9 Nov 15:30;

Thu 21 Nov 18:30

### **Seniors' Free Talk: The Quiet Mutiny + intro and Q&A with author Anthony Hayward**

Mon 28 Oct 11:45

### **Seniors' Free Matinee: The Last Day + intro with author Anthony Hayward**

Mon 28 Oct 14:00

### **The Pilger Effect**

Mon 28 Oct 18:15

### **The War You Don't See**

Mon 28 Oct 20:35; Sat 16 Nov 18:10

### **Death of a Nation: The Timor Conspiracy + Palestine Is Still the Issue**

Sat 2 Nov 15:00

### **The Golden Dream La Jaula De Oro**

Tue 5 Nov 20:45; Thu 14 Nov 18:10;

Sun 24 Nov 15:30

### **Lousy Little Sixpence + Utopia**

Sun 10 Nov 14:50

### **Year Zero: The Silent Death of Cambodia +**

### **Breaking the Silence: Truth and Lies in the War on Terror**

Mon 18 Nov 18:10

### **Burp! Pepsi v Coke in the Ice Cold War**

### **+ Flying the Flag: Arming the World**

Sat 23 Nov 17:45

### **The Coming War on China**

Sat 23 Nov 20:10; Fri 29 Nov 18:15

### **The Ballymurphy Precedent**

Tue 26 Nov 18:10 (+ intro by director Callum

Macrae); Sat 30 Nov 12:20

**The documentaries in this season contain distressing scenes of both violence and racism related to the events they cover**

### **With thanks to**

John Pilger, Jane Hill, Sam Pilger, Christopher Hird, Matt Hird, David Boardman, Marcus Prince

Programme texts compiled by John Pilger, Jane Hill, Sam Pilger, Christopher Hird, Matt Hird, David Boardman, Maggi Hurt and David Somerset

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was the Vietcong chicken. 'On this patrol,' reported Pilger, 'we hear a chicken and the captain says it may be a Vietcong chicken... Only the grunts can kill that chicken.'

Back in Britain to edit the film, the chicken incident became celebrated. Pilger came face to face with television's guardians of 'impartiality' and 'balance'. In his original commentary, he wrote that the patrol had encountered a Vietcong chicken. Jeremy Wallington, *World in Action's* editor, asked Pilger for the source of the statement. 'He asked what proof I had that the chicken was Vietcong,' said Pilger. 'This discussion went on for a couple of days. I don't think I've laughed as much in my life, although at times it was in despair. My informant about the chicken was a US captain, so I was obliged to rewrite it to say that and everyone was happy.'

\* \* \*

Pilger called the daily press briefings for Western correspondents in Saigon, known as the 'five o'clock follies', a West End farce. In trying to answer his questions, the briefing officer stumbled when asked how many American troops had been wounded by mistake or accident and what the desertion rate was. 'I've never been asked anything like that,' he later told Pilger. In fact, more than half the US Army deaths were caused by 'friendly fire'. Beneath the circus-like exterior, there was great anger as Donut Dollies, brought in to entertain the troops, became, along with unpopular officers, targets of GI disaffection. 'The other day,' said Pilger, 'a Donut Dolly was blown up by a grenade and another was stabbed to death – by grunts.'

\* \* \*

Charles Denton was pleased with how Pilger acclimatised to television and he did much to help the newspaper journalist in a new environment. 'I was nervous,' said Denton, 'because I knew he could write the opinions and the commentary, but the issue was to what extent he could deliver pieces to camera that were as relaxed as they could be. It was a question of him writing, as if for print, the core of the opinion and then me saying: "Let's sweat this down a bit into something you can say and deliver. Let's try to simplify it – I just want 50 seconds of this delivered straight to camera."

'We had a lot of rehearsing of pieces to camera. John was not immediately wonderful at it, but I think it's a terribly difficult technique to learn. Most people who got to do a half-hour opinion-piece movie had done two- or three- or four-minute films in regional television news or *Tonight*, where you got to make your mistakes privately. In *The Quiet Mutiny*, John picked it up fairly quickly, but we did quite a few takes.' The camera pieces, with his viewpoints – as he would see them, rather than opinions – became a critical element of Pilger's documentaries over the following decades and marked the journalist out as a filmmaker with a voice that should be heard.

Anthony Hayward, *Breaking the Silence: The Films of John Pilger* (Profiles International Media, 2013)

**Anthony Hayward** is a journalist and author specialising in television and film. A regular contributor to *The Guardian*, he has written the books *Phantom: Michael Crawford Unmasked*, *Julie Christie* and *Which Side Are You On?: Ken Loach and His Films*. In 2013, he updated *In the Name of Justice: The Television Reporting of John Pilger*, originally published by Bloomsbury, as the e-book *Breaking the Silence: The Films of John Pilger*, available through Amazon.