

Technology gives viral edge to soldiers' frontline snapshots

WASHINGTON, US: Soldiers posing with slain or captive foes for trophy pictures is nothing new. What is new, experts said last week, is how technology is enabling such images to go viral. Digital photography makes snapshots like those of US soldiers alongside the mangled remains of Taliban suicide bombers reveal a brutal side of conflict that's disturbing to civilians, but all too familiar to combatants.

"There have been snapshots since the Boer War," said curator Anne Wilkes Tucker, who is overseeing an upcoming major exhibition on war and photography at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas.

"I've seen German snapshot albums from World War One and Two that have execution pictures," Tucker told AFP in a telephone interview. "I mean, these are soldiers' photographs that I guess you brought home to Mom."

But such images, shot on film that needed time to be developed and printed, were typically shared within tight inner circles. Others might not see them for many years, if at all.

Compare that to how today's warrior can knock off some shots with a cellphone or pocket-size digital camera, email them to comrades and family, and potentially, if unwittingly, see them wind up in the public domain.

"The distribution is what has changed," Tucker said.

"Most soldiers have access somewhere to the Internet," enabling them to download their unique view of the battlefield instantly, added Matthew Seelinger, chief historian at the independent Army Historical Foundation.

Use of images condemned

The White House and NATO on Wednesday condemned snapshots, obtained by *The Los Angeles Times* of US paratroopers posing with the severed hand and disembodied legs of Afghan suicide bombers that they had gone out to inspect.

NATO secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen dismissed the images as "an isolated event," but they recalled the release in January of online video clips showing US marines urinating on the bodies of Afghan fighters.

They also harked back to photos of US soldiers abusing Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad 2004, and those of a US army "kill team" that came to light in March 2011 in the German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel*.

As it happens, 2004 was the same year that a group of Israeli soldiers triggered an uproar with an exhibit of their own, often unsettling snapshots from the Second Intifada on the occupied West Bank.

'Don't expect me not to take a souvenir'

"Just like you take photographs of your life, we took photographs of our life," said one of the soldiers, Yehuda Shaul, a co-founder of Breaking the Silence, a group that raises public awareness of what Israeli troops face on the front lines.

"If you were a mountain climber and you reached the top of Everest, you would take a photo," he told AFP by telephone from Israel.

"When you are trained as a combat soldier, you are trained to kill your enemy, and when you do that, don't expect me not to take a souvenir."

Shaul did not condone such conduct, but he said it was "hypocrisy" for society to send soldiers into conflict then blame them individually if their personal depictions of reality turn out to be so troubling.

"It is their life at the moment," concurred Tucker, who has spent eight years sifting through 165 years' worth of war images for the "War/Photography: Images of Armed Conflict and Its Aftermath" show that opens in November.

"With pictures like this, we have to remind ourselves that we sent them there to do this."

Source: *AFP* via I-Net Bridge

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