



Source: Michael Gawenda, 'Reporter puts into print Bush's lies', *The Age online*, 30/09/06.
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The photograph had been folded in half, twice, and two of its corners cut. I can't be sure why the corners were cut like this. It may have been part of an internal classification system that was never written down, if only because the system for processing official photographs involved as few as four people at any one time, who each shared the same darkroom and office. These systems are, for a broad range of reasons, often not written down.

There are pinholes in two of the photograph's corners. The top left-hand corner has five holes. At some point in its history it was displayed somewhere; perhaps in the office of the four-or-so men who printed and classified it.

The photograph is beautifully composed. It shows two men kneeling on a muddy, steeply-rising landscape in New Guinea. One is holding a piece of card, as if reading it; his downcast face is hidden by the rim of his hat. The other stares directly at the photographer. He is young, although his face is worn and his eyes seem dull; his hands are covered in mud. At his knee is the body of a dead Japanese man. His shirt is open, the line of its buttons creating an arc that ends at his slightly opened mouth and black nostrils. Strong light hits his body, and he radiates against the muted tones of the khaki uniforms of the two men behind and the muddy landscape. There's mud on his face, possibly left from the hands of the man kneeling over him, when he pulled the body out of a pillbox and into clear view.

It's a strange image. Two men kneel over a trophy. One of them looks at the body and the other looks at the photographer, such that the image states very simply the predicament of the photograph as a series of transactions. And on the surface, it's a benign photograph; it looks like a snapshot, taken to record a scene that, in the scheme of its broader context, was no doubt unremarkable. All the same; the body has been dragged from one place to another, and literally pressed into the service of a photographic opportunity.

The print itself is, with its traces of use and handling, certainly curious. The back of it carries a number of hand-written and stamped inscriptions. One of these ('JUNCTION') is completely enigmatic. Two of the marks seem to have been made by a censor, one of those four men who handled the print in its first hours and whose job was to identify any embarrassing or contentious image, stamp it secret or not for publication and hide it from public view.

But this image didn't hide so easily. Across its lower half is a scribbled message:
doN't get a friGHt when you look at this pHoTo

I'm just worN out you caN tell by the way my eyes are stickiNg
out darliNg, but my old mate the Jap has worN riGHt out
he's pulling aN awful face doNt you thiNk darliNg, doN't
lose
the pHoTo will you sweetHeart put it in a little frame just
for me

One of the crease marks made when the print was folded makes reading the first line difficult. The phrase 'when you look' is particularly hard to read.

My father must have acquired this photograph from the field censor's office, where I guess it hung on a reasonably public wall—perhaps alongside other secret images. There's no way of knowing how my mother reacted when she received it some time in late 1944 or early 1945. I found it after she died, in a box that contained a number of letters sent to her by my father during the early to mid-1940s. I have not read these letters, which seem deeply personal and to have been written only for my mother. But I saw enough to recognise the clumsy handwriting. There was one other photograph in this box, a snapshot of a man in white braces riding a horse that has leapt into the air. I can't tell for sure who the man is, as he is shot from behind and he and the horse are blurred; but it is probably my father. It's strange to see a photograph like this, one that escapes you even though you are intimate with everything that surrounds it: its owner; its probable subject; its function.

It goes without saying that I find the other photograph, of 'my father' kneeling over a dead Japanese man, stranger still. It's part of my mother's 'secret' biography, an ambivalent object that was physically and psychologically tied to sexy letters, between which love, desire, horror and shame flickered.

But this is not in itself the source of its strangeness. Its strangeness stems from its earlier history, and the function of the secret within this history. Its physical character—its stamped and hand-written inscriptions, its pinholes, its creases—testify to a short history within which the image was brought into, then hidden from, view, at least twice in its lifetime. The body in the photograph encodes this. How did this body shift from trophy to secret as it travelled from the field to the darkroom? At what point, and for whom, did the shame of this secret come into view? And why didn't my father recognise this shame?

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Shaune Lakin.