

Gloria Emerson

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Among the papers left by the American journalist Gloria Emerson, who has apparently committed suicide, aged 75, to escape the increasing disablement from Parkinson's disease, was her own obituary, recalling how she initially ran away from "an alcoholic, wretched home" to work for a hotel giveaway magazine. She went on to write award-winning accounts of the Vietnam war and other late 20th-century conflicts.

In 1957, Emerson applied for a job with the New York Times, and recalled how "getting a job on the women's page was a gift from heaven". But her memoir also spelled out the frustrating reality of the work. "I hated writing about shoes and clothes, all under the eye of the advertising department, who measured editorial mentions of retailers."

After three years, she moved to Brussels with the man who became her second husband. She rejoined the paper in 1964, and was initially assigned to cover the Paris fashion shows before being transferred to the London bureau in 1968. She reported for a time on the growing crisis in Northern Ireland, but constantly agitated to be sent to Saigon. As she later recalled, "I was allowed to go to Vietnam because the war was supposed to be over, so it didn't matter if a female was sent".

Emerson had previously visited Saigon as a freelance journalist, when it was still under French control, and was shocked by its appearance on her return.

"There were so many little hideous places on what had been the Rue Catinat - Big Boy Hamburgers - and the war had cut down the trees to widen the streets for military traffic. That was so sad and so painful. The city had been deformed in a hundred different ways. It had a kind of sepsis. The war had gone into every corner of every life. The Vietnamese value harmony very much. There was no harmony, there was no

order, there was no calm."

By this stage, of course, the Nixon administration in Washington was rapidly reducing America's involvement in the war, so the military burden fell increasingly on the Vietnamese. Emerson concentrated her reports on the effect this was having on the people.

She cut away from the main press corps, becoming such a maverick that her bureau chief, Alvin Schuster, swore she would give him a heart attack before he was 40. One of her regular unofficial activities was to persuade airline crews to smuggle antibiotics into the country to treat injured children.

Emerson's was never an easy personality. Unusually tall, she had her lighter side and was often extremely witty, but she could equally be overbearing and protective of what she claimed as her own territory - an understandable reaction, perhaps, in a woman working in an excessively macho culture. She had difficulties with photographers, constantly interfering with their work in the apparent belief that their brief images would overshadow her carefully crafted prose.

In part, this insecurity seemed based on her early years, though the details remained shadowy. She came from wealthy parents, who had lost their oil fortune through alcoholism, though she later benefited from a small family trust income. When she first joined the New York Times at 28, she described herself as a widow, giving her married name as Znamiecki, though no more was ever known of the circumstances. Her second marriage to Charles Brofferio, which brought her to Europe, ended within a year. She said later that she had only married these two Europeans "for their history."

By contrast, the reports Emerson filed from the conflicts in Vietnam, Nigeria, Palestine and Algeria were passionately empathetic to the sufferings of those

innocently caught up in the fighting.

In 1972, trying to get the point across to an indifferent readership, she wrote that "Americans cannot perceive - even the most decent among us - the suffering caused by the United States air war in Indochina, and how huge are the graveyards we have created there. To a reporter recently returned from Vietnam, it often seems that much of our fury and fear is reserved for busing, abortion, mugging and liberation of some kind. Our deepest emotions are wired to baseball players."

Emerson's account of a year living through the intifada in Gaza noted that the Palestinians were "made to feel inferior, treated with contempt and cruelty [and] struggled to transcend their own feelings of helplessness". It brought predictable condemnation from pro-Israeli groups, to which she mildly responded that she had simply hoped to provide a primer for those who felt the Middle East situation was too complicated, or too controversial, to understand.

Emerson won a number of awards but later, acknowledging that she had spent a third of her life covering wars, observed ruefully that nothing she had ever learned from it had been of any benefit. "I think that writing about war is a way of raising the dead and hoping you will see them again." She left no surviving relations.

· Gloria Emerson, journalist, born 1929; died August 3 2004