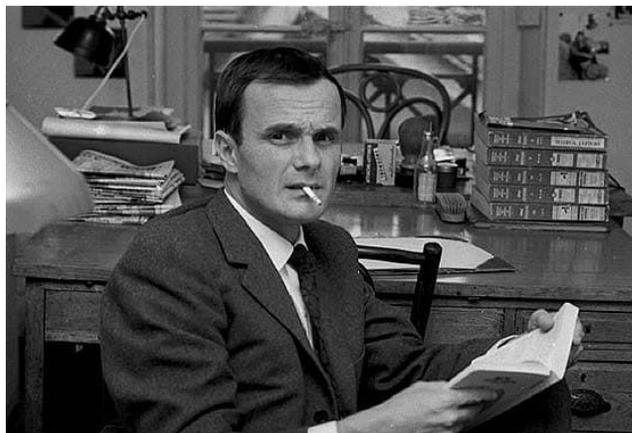


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Pierre Schoendoerffer

Pierre Schoendoerffer, the writer and director, who has died aged 83, captured the torment of Western soldiers in the sodden jungles of south-east Asia, influencing Apocalypse Now and shaping modern audience expectations of what war films should look like.



Concentrating on the confusion, fear, loneliness and moral compromises made by, as often as not, young men barely out of school, Schoendoerffer recorded the fall of the French at Dien Bien Phu and won an Oscar for a documentary about an American platoon in Vietnam. Though fighting, killing and dying inevitably shaped his dramas, it was the details of each man's life that fascinated him. "What's interesting is how they behave, not just in battle, but how they live, how they eat, how they sleep, how they relax and have fun, how they establish an extraordinary solidarity with the threat of death all around," he said.

As well as his documentaries, Schoendoerffer wrote books and made feature films about war which were highly influential. His novel *L'Adieu au Roi* (1969) was adapted for the screen as *Farewell to the King* by John Milius, who also wrote the screenplay for Francis Ford Coppola's Vietnam epic *Apocalypse Now* (1979). One scene from the extended version of *Apocalypse Now* features French rubber planters discussing the pressures on colonial families in Indo-China. Suddenly one of them seizes an egg and crushes it in his fist. "This is the truth," he says, as the egg white seeps through his fingers, leaving the yolk in his palm. "The white left, but the yellow stays."

The scene was an exact replica of a confrontation in *La 317ème Section* (1965), the film which rescued Schoendoerffer's career and reputation after several initial flops. As with *Apocalypse*

Now, the filming was gruelling and beset by difficulties. Similarly, once finished, the movie was garlanded with honours, including the best screenplay award at Cannes.

La 317ème Section tells the story of a unit during the war in Indo-China which is ordered to cross 100 miles of jungle as the French front collapses. Formed of local soldiers, and led by a young French officer and his more experienced adjutant, the fictional platoon's long march is shot in unrelentingly realistic fashion. "I imposed military life on everyone," Schoendoerffer said afterwards. "A war film should not be made in comfort. Every morning we got up at 5am and headed off into the jungle. We were resupplied once a week by a plane, on which we sent the footage back to Paris."

It was hardly surprising that Schoendoerffer's take on war was so demanding and unvarnished: he had started his career in film as a cameraman with the Service Cinématographique des Armées; dispatched to Indo-China, he parachuted into Dien Bien Phu, where he recorded the desperate 57-day siege. When French forces were finally overrun he was taken prisoner and briefly escaped before being held for four months. It was an experience that he later described as "the depths of human misery".

Pierre Schoendoerffer was born on May 5 1928 at Chamalières in France's Massif Central. His family was of Alsatian heritage and in previous generations had chosen French over German citizenship. His father was a doctor and ran a hospital in Annecy, where Pierre went to school.

Though not a brilliant student, he devoured the books of Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad, and resolved on a life of adventure on the high seas. With the war over he joined a small fishing trawler near Brittany, returning the following year to crew on a Swedish cargo ship – experiences which would provide him with material for several films.

After three years he completed his National Service with a battalion in the Alps, during which he decided that, rather than return to sea, he wanted to get into the film business. He tried his luck, only to find it a closed shop to someone without experience or qualifications. Then he read an article in a newspaper about the number of official photographers and film makers who were being killed covering the war which France was waging to retain its colonies in Indo-China. He thought the Army might have a vacancy.

In 1951 he joined up and went on a training course before being sent in 1952 to Indo-China, first to Cambodia, where he met Jean Péraud, a stills photographer who would become his mentor and closest friend during the fighting. Working together, they captured every aspect of the war in progress. "Nothing was off limits," Schoendoerffer said. "We were never told 'No you can't do that.'"

It was Péraud who wired Schoendoerffer from Dien Bien Phu in 1954, telling him to join him there and cover the battle. They recorded the fighting from close quarters but, as French positions were overrun and soldiers were ordered to spike their guns, Schoendoerffer destroyed his footage, keeping only six canisters of film which he hoped to hide and retrieve later.

In the event, the reels were discovered and fell into the hands of the Soviet cameraman Roman Karmen, who was covering the war with the victorious Viet Minh. The footage is still thought to remain somewhere in Russia.

After being captured, Schoendoerffer and Péraud decided to escape and bailed out of the lorry taking them overnight to their “re-education” camp. Péraud made it into the bush, but the guards heard Schoendoerffer jump and quickly recaptured him. He was stripped and beaten, and his wounds became infected, but after four months a deal was struck to secure his release. Péraud, however, was never heard of again.

After recuperating, Schoendoerffer spent the next five years as a reporter, covering South Asia for Time and Paris Match, before heading to North Africa, where the seeds of France’s next colonial war were beginning to take root. His film career began in 1955 in an opium den in Hong Kong, where he met the French writer and adventurer Joseph Kessel, photographing him for Life magazine. The two men stayed in touch, and Kessel later suggested that Schoendoerffer direct a film he was working on in Afghanistan, which eventually saw daylight as *La Passe du Diable* (The Devil’s Pass, 1958).

The film, produced by George de Beauregard, won second prize at the Berlin Film Festival, and de Beauregard commissioned Schoendoerffer to direct two more features, the second entitled *Pêcheur d’Islande* (Iceland Fisherman, 1959). They flopped, but when Schoendoerffer appealed to de Beauregard to let him film a script about the war in Indo-China, the producer gave him one more chance. The result was *La 317ème Section*.

After a forgettable thriller, *Objectif: 500 Millions* (1966), Schoendoerffer decided to head back to the jungle, this time to film American soldiers in Vietnam. The subsequent documentary, *La Section Anderson* (The Anderson Platoon, 1967), again focused on the moment-by-moment experiences of a small group of men, and was awarded the Oscar for Best Documentary.

Over the next 10 years Schoendoerffer turned to writing, winning awards for *L’Adieu au Roi* and, in 1976, *Le Crabe Tambour* (The Drummer Crab, 1976), the story of a naval captain haunted by his betrayal of a young man in the war in Indo-China. Schoendoerffer himself adapted it into a film, starring Jean Rochefort, which was a triumph in France.

Schoendoerffer was never able to put Indo-China behind him. His subsequent films, including *Dien Bien Phu* (1994), all tackled the conflict in some way. For some it amounted to a body of work dominated by melancholia. But in interviews Schoendoerffer said he felt a duty to capture the “effort, sweat, the exhaustion, the tears, the wounds and the death. Our mission was, through images, to bear witness to those events.”

Pierre Schoendoerffer married, in 1958, Patricia Chauvel, with whom he had a daughter and two sons.

Pierre Schoendoerffer, born May 5 1928, died March 14 2012