

A burst of joy

by BRIAN LOCKHART

There is a well-known Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph titled 'Burst of Joy' that shows a family running to meet their husband and father on the tarmac of an air force base in California.

The man was a Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Air Force and had been shot down over Vietnam and spent five years as a P.O.W. He had been released in 1973, and this was his first time back on American soil.

The photograph itself is spectacular. It shows the Lieutenant Colonel from behind as his wife and four children run to meet him. In the lead is his 15-year-old daughter, her arms outstretched, both feet off the ground as she runs to meet him, and a look of pure joy on her face after seeing the father she hasn't spoken to in five years.

The photograph, in many ways, was a milestone in American history as it marked a turning point in a long and expensive war that had become a national nightmare. Now the troops were returning home.

However, that split second in time is deceiving. The Lieutenant Colonel received a copy of the photograph, but instead of hanging it proudly on a wall in his home, he put it in a place where he would never see it.

For him, the photograph is just a bad memory. While I'm sure his children were happy to see him, he had learned his wife had multiple affairs with several men while he was away. She had sent him a letter on the day he was released from captivity, announcing her intent to divorce him. That is what he had to think about on the long flight across the Pacific to freedom.

There's a saying that a picture is worth 1,000 words. In many cases, that is true, but at the same time, those 1,000 words may not be the truth.

A photograph represents maybe 1/1000th of a second in time. It stops a whirling propeller in flight and freezes a basketball player in the air, making a dunk.

It can also turn the tide of public opinion based on a split second.

When Rob Ford was the Mayor of Toronto, one national newspaper continually ran the same photo of him whenever they did a story on the mayor's office. The newspaper was obviously not a fan of the mayor. The photo they ran was a horrible photo, and any photo editor with self-respect would have rejected the photo as unacceptable. However, they continued to use the photo in an attempt to make the mayor look bad.

The same was true about a federal politician who had found herself in some, later to be proved unfounded, trouble. The politician was an attractive woman, and yet newspapers kept running the same photo of her that caught her with her mouth hanging open and half-closed eyes. It was just another cheap attempt to discredit her.

A well-timed photo can make a person look like an intellectual or a half-wit in the blink of an eye.

You can take a photo of a person in thought just before making a speech to the United Nations and make them look good, or you can wait and snap a photo at the start of a sneeze a few seconds later and run a caption implying the person with this goofy face is in no way qualified to speak to such an assembly.

Several years ago, I was doing a team photo of a Bantam football team. As always, there were four or five guys making faces, or turning their heads, or some other movement to stand out. Finally, I yelled out, 'okay guys, you're a football team, let's look like

skilled athletes.?

Most of them got it, squared their shoulders, and looked into the camera. All except one guy who kept up the act.

When I was going over the final proofs, there was one photo where everyone was looking at the camera, and all had their eyes open at the same time ? except for this one kid. I could have gone to the extra work and photoshopped his face from another photo, but I decided to give this kid what he wanted.

Out there somewhere, stuck to a fridge, or hanging on the wall in some guy's trophy room, is a photo of a Bantam football team with the kid right in the middle of the picture ? doing a duck face.

A photo may be worth 1,000 words, but those words don't always speak the truth.