

DASPO Covers The Manila Conference PG #1

During the fall of 1966, DASPO Pacific Detachment had an over incumbered agenda, not only a full time 12 to 14 man team in Vietnam on a 90 day rotational basis, but the government, at least the army had aspirations of producing a movie of what was left of WWII around the world, for the silver anniversary to commemorate the end of hostilities in 1970. During WWII the leaders, Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin met several time to discuss war strategy as at Valta and Potsdam. The Vietnam War had only one meeting of the seven allied powers, that was the Manila Conference, held in October, 1966, with the Philippines hosting the meeting.

An an almost unprecedented move, DASPO Pacific Detachment was transferred from the Pentagon and put on loan to the State Department, to augment the various embassy's United States Information Service film units to cover the state visit of LBJ and Lady Bird Johnson, to each of the countries with ground forces in Vietnam. They were Australia, New Zealand, Philippines Malaysia, Thailand, Korea and Vietnam, plus the Manila Conference itself.

The presidential itinerary called for the first family to fly from Washington and spend the night in Hawaii. The next day fly onto Pago Pago, American Samoa, where they would dedicate a satillite dish, enabling the U.S. possession to receive Hawaiian school curriculum. Then fly onto New Zealand, where the first family spent several days, before travelling onto Australia. After Australia, the president would travel to one more country before flying into the Philippines for the Manila Conference. After the conference the Johnson's would travel to two more countries, with the last being Korea. I can't remember if Thailand or Malaysia was visited before the conference.

Fulfilling the requirement, DASPO Pacific Detachment scrapped together three teams. One would fly to New Zealand, another to Australia. There after the teams would leap-frog around the pacific ahead of the president. The third team headed by CPT Penny and SFC Yamaguchi, to which I was assigned headed to the Philippines to cover the conference and remain there to film World War II historøcal sites and events, which were the Bataan Death March and Corregidor.

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Departing Honolulu Saturday, 15th of Oct on a Air Force charter jet, the team flew across the International Dateline arriving at Clark Air Force Base on Sunday, one week ahead of the VIP arrivals. Clark AFB, located some 40 miles from Manila, where at the air base gate, the team contracted a jeepney to transport us and equipment to the capital city. Along the way a constabulary pulled us over. The driver and cop were talking and pointing to a very faint, nearly invisible line on the road. After several minutes of discussion, one sergeant took out some money handing it to the cop, telling everyone to get back in the jeepney and let's go. Cpt Penny nearly died knowing he was part of bribing a cop. The last word said, it's part of his retirement dowry.

Arriving in Manila before dark, we found rooms at the Hotel Manila, close by the American Embassy. Getting two rooms, one for CPT Penny and SFC Yamaguchi, the other room had three beds, but two cots were added and still had plenty of room for the equipment and a pool table or dance floor. The room was huge. The next morning my first disappointment hit, when I plugged in my electric razor into 220 volt outlet, I never finished shaving before the razor burned up.

The president already had a battery of correspondences called The White House Press Corp, that followed LBJ's daily movements. Likewise the other six Heads Of State had similar press relationships that covered their First Family's activities, but with Seven King's, Prime Ministers and Heads of State attending this meeting commanded outside press from all over descending on the Philippines to cover this newsworthy conference. With the Philippines hosting the meeting, even the American Embassy would play a minor role in the activities. Before hand it was declared, that a small press pool would be established of 5 or 6 people to actually cover the Manila Conference. These few would then prepare press statements and film for the rest of the correspondences to distribute worldwide.

The next morning CPT Penny and SFC Yamaguchi went to the embassy, to coordinate our activities and talk with the USIS photo people on the compatibility of their film and equipment and what the DASPO Team brought with us. Some five hours later they returned. Stating the embassy seemed to be in a state of confusion, their main concern was finding or making a bed big enough for LBJ. I heard that tale before, when LBJ became The President, Washington was in turmoil trying also to find a bed large enough.

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Were were told the USIS was virtually all 16mm, while DASPO was heavy 35mm. They told us the embassy had a snack bar and the hours were good and cheap food. Continuing they stated things are so hectic that the embassy had a barge out in Manila Bay to house extra embassy Marine Corps guards. That DASPO's part would be basically relegated to chasing Lady Bird Johnson around. We were told the Philippine Government were expecting about 6000 press from all over to arrive in the coming days.

They said the re-enactment of the Bataan Death March wouldn't take place for some 6-8 weeks, mentioning that we couldn't stay there that long, and another team might have to come film it. They mentioned the embassy's concern, that LBJ might try to sneak into Vietnam, since the war zone was about two hours away. Since none of us five had ate, one of the two escorted the rest to the snack bar, then to meet the USIS counter-parts.

Since we'd be working out of the embassy, it was suggested that we transport our camera equipment there. I dreaded carrying camera cases and tripods throughout the entire embassy or up and down elevators, but USIS was located on the ground floor in the rear of the building, with an overhead door and driveway, making it easy to load and unload equipment. We were assigned an embassy carryall and driver named Geronimo. I was outfitted with a 16mm FILMO Camera. The FILMO is a Bell & Howell, spring driven motor with a 30 second run of film, before re-winding. While somewhat dated the FILMO was still a main stream camera of many location film makers. The camera had a 3 lens turret, wide angle, normal and telephoto lens, which I would need.

The rear of the embassy overlooked Manila Bay, where it seemed at least 100 ships were. One embassy staffer, told us most ships had been at anchor for up to two months, awaiting pier or dock space in Vietnam, and each ship cost the U.S. \$2500.00 a day to sit at anchor.

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Much of the rest of the week was down time until Saturday afternoon. The entire DASPO Team hoped we could stay at the Manila Hotel, but the hotel had reservations for our rooms and we were told to leave. CPT Penny and SFC Yamaguchi went to the embassy to see what arrangements could be made. Returning the options were the Marine Corps Barge in the bay or a low class Chinese hotel several blocks away. The barge had boat service, the schedule probably would conflict with our routine, plus we had to expect the unexpected, thus we opted for the hotel.

Saturday afternoon we all climbed into a vehicle and drove to the airport. Along the way, maintenance workers were sweeping the highway and stacking banana and cocoanut palms leaves to hide the grass shacks and shanty towns that sprang up between the highway and Manila Bay.

At the airport on each side of the tarmac bleachers were set up for the press. I was assigned the one on the Manila side of the airport. We were told there would be press truck to drive us back to Manila and be sure to get on one of them. It was thought that LBJ would be the last to arrive. The rest of the team was located elsewhere around the airport and other set of bleachers.

Sunday turned out being a hot sunny day in Manila, we got to the airport early in the afternoon and took up our assigned locations. With tripod and telephoto lens in place set up in the bleachers I was ready. I was surprised at the fullest, the bleachers were only 1/4 filled, the closest person to me was probably 15 feet away. As each VIP aircraft arrived the press in the bleachers thinned out more. I can't remember who from the Philippine government met the income dignitaries, from my location, even with telephoto lens, they looked like ants crawling around out there.

About mid-afternoon, I saw a man in a suit talking with the press probably 75 feet away. Later I looked behind me and the man was trying to find shade and wiping perspiration from his forehead. Hell the man was Sec. of State Dean Rusk. Wondering where is his staff and why wasn't he in the terminal, rather than wondering around an isolated section of the tarmac by himself?

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Long shadows were forming as Air Force One was the last VIP plane to land. After LBJ and Lady Bird were on the ground, I packed my gear heading toward the press trucks. The sun was setting by the time the presidential motorcade arrived at the hotel. I walked the few blocks to the embassy turning in my film. It was an hour later until everyone was there and the debriefing took place and Monday's schedule announced.

Monday was an early start day, we had to be ready to leave by 7:30 or earlier. I thought Lady Bird Johnson was to visit a blind school, orphanage or something to do with children, but I can't find any slides to verify that idea. What ever we filmed, the footage was handed over to U.S.I.S. for processing and editing.

One day thing seemed all screwed up. Lady Bird was to visit Taal Volcano. We needed to be on the road early. I can't recall if the trouble was with the carryall, Geronimo, bad communication or what, but Geronimo was about a half hour late arriving with the truck. Hurriedly we loaded the carryall and the entire DASPO Team was heading South toward the volcano. In an industrial section of Manila we spotted Lady Bird's lights flashing, sirens going police escorted motorcade. At the next intersection, Geronimo turns toward the motorcade and speeds up. in an effort to catch the motorcade. CPT Penny yells at Geronimo we're going the wrong way on a one way street and to slow down your speeding. Geronimo turns the steering wheel and next thing we're up on the sidewalk racing down the sidewalk faster than before. CPT Penny hung his head in his lap; probably thinking what next. First bribe cops, speeding, wrong way on a street and now driving on the sidewalk. Needless to say we lost the motorcade, but made it to Taal Volcano.

Taal Volcano is not a volcano as such. It's like Crater Lake, OR., where the volcano blew the cone off, leaving a crater which later filled with water.

To my shock upon arriving, there were a half dozen press buses that I never knew about, staff cars for secret service etc., and not just Lady Bird Johnson, but six First Ladies. I don't recall if one First Lady didn't come or if one dignitary was a bachelor, maybe President Ky of Vietnam? As stated before from my position on the bleachers, even with a telephoto lens the people looked like ants on the tarmac. At Taal Volcano, for some reason artist had displays there.

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One evening most of us were in the hotel room, when one DASPO member who had been partying, came in stating there was an anti-war demonstration going on at the American Embassy. For some reason several team members had their equipment in the hotel. They took off to cover the demonstration. An hour passed, until they returned stating it was a peaceful protest, of between 100-200 people chanting and marching with posters and banners with anti-war slogans. The next morning when it was mentioned covering the demonstration, no one at U.S.I.S. heard about the protest or knew about it, and even more surprised that our people were turning in film of the event.

One day President Johnson planned to skip the conference and visit Corregidor. That was one of DASPO's after conference WWII missions in the Philippines, but the USIS people took that assignment for themselves. There was probably a press limitation imposed for the trip. The USIS may have included one DASPO man with them; I can't remember.

There were times it seemed I nor the rest of the DASPO Team could see the trees from the forest, as the old saying goes. If we didn't get a newspaper we knew nothing. Here we were in the middle of a major news making event and all I knew was what I had done that day and seldom knew what was in store for tomorrow. Mostly it was, be ready to leave the embassy by a certain hour. I never found out at what hotels the other six prime ministers and heads of state were staying. I never knew exactly what building nor even what part of Manila the seven dignitaries were actually meeting. Seldom did we hear a radio news broadcast, much less have the opportunity to see a TV for the news.

It wasn't part of the USIS, nor DASPO to hang around LBJ's hotel lobby. However many press did. Rumors surfaced that press were still lingering around the lobby an hour after LBJ was asleep, in a scant hope he would wake up and come down for photos or interview. These same tired, worn out press people would have to get back to their own hotel, file their daily report, grab some sleep and be up, dressed, eat and be back the hotel ahead of LBJ leaving for the next day's activities. This grueling schedule would exhaust anyone and many press had been following the president since he left Washington.

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Rumors persisted that LBJ might sneak off to Vietnam, I believe it was a Thursday, the last day of the conference. In the afternoon, we were told to go set up at some building for a press conference that would take place. Geronimo drove us to the building in Manila. We were the first one there. Setting up lights to cover the stage and podium. Next we set up the Aricon sound of film camera. Taking sound levels, light meter reading, setting the distance and F-Stop on the camera we were ready. We started wondering if we were at the right place since noone else had arrived, when some print media arrived, with notebooks and still cameras. Over the next half hour represenativies of all news media started arriving, some national and a lot of international press. They started talking that LBJ had been to Cam Ragn Bay, Vietnam that day.

Both NBC and CBS were there they were polite and professional, asking if they were blocking other people's view. They helped with re-arranging the lights for the benefit of all photo people. Jumped up on the stage by the podium taking light meter readings and calling off F-Stops for various film speeds the photographers were using. By now the room was filled elbow to elbow with press, camera cases, tripods and sound gear. Tripods legs were situated in between other tripod legs, but everone asked if they could set up by me, before doing so.

A fist fight nearly broke out when ABC arrived. Camera on tripod, they entered the room hitting people in the head, arms and body trying to get in the door. They never said sorry or excuse me. They knocked over camera cases, cameras, tripods trying to step over everyone. They set their camera right in my spot nearly knocking over the camera I was using.. Their attitude was we're ABC and get the hell out of our way.

Shortly after ABC's arrival some man came out on stage and announced the the conference had successfully concluded and that there would be a press banquet at President Marcos's Palace that evening. All of DASPO with Geronimo driving attended the party All seven Prime Ministers and Heads of State with the First Ladies attended.

The next morning there was an urgent message for CPT Penny to call Hawaii. The result of the call was the team scheduled to leap frog into Korea was stranded and couldn't make it, we were ordered to Korea. I remember a quick meeting of us DASPO People, then I and one or two others off to the Korean Embassy in Manila with all our passports to get Korean Visas. The embassy booked us on an evening flight to Tokyo. The rest of the day was pack our gear and personnal clothing and get ready to leave.