

DASPO Film 1st Infantry Division

The DASPO Team, that I went to Vietnam with left Honolulu on a Continental Airlines military charter jet, the day after Christmas 1966. The plane had stops at Anderson AFB, Guam and Clark AFB, The Philippines, before arriving at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut Airport's civilian terminal.

The Saigon airport had one runway serving everyone. The civilian operated Air Vietnam was headquartered on the grounds along with maintenance hangers, and definitely used the South Vietnamese operated civilian terminal along with Cathay Pacific, Pan Am and Thai International, and I deem Singapore and Philippin Airlines had flights to Saigon as well. Military contract flight used the civilian terminal as transshipment facilities for all branches of services.

The VNAF or South Vietnamese Air Force used Tan Son Nhut as its headquarters with squadrons flying propeller driven Skyraiders and later F-5 Freedom Fighters. The U.S. Air Force was based there along with many squadrons. A reconnaissance squadron flew B-57s, F-101s, F-102s, F-104s and F-106s. Tactical squadrons included Skyraiders and F-100s. (MAC) Military Airlift Command had squadrons of C-130s and C-123 aircraft, flying passengers and cargo around the country. (At this point in time) a squadron of Army operated Caribou's were based at Tan Son Nhut, plus a major helicopter port HOTEL THREE, serving all branches of service. Jan 1st, 1967 the Army Caribou fleet was transferred to the Air Force and the fleet moved to Vung Tau. The army had the 39/69th Signal Battalion to which I was TDY to this unit in 1965 from the Army Pictorial Center New York City.

The DASPO driver picked us up and drove us to the DASPO villa close to the U.S. Air Force Main Gate of the airport complex. With our team having Christmas with our families and friends; the out-going team would have New Year's with their relatives, back in Hawaii.

At the DASPO villa we had several days down time allowing our circadian rhythm or jet lag to wear off. We would make the DASPO villa our home for the next 90 days. Before going out on missions, we had to get an orientation, ration cards and any shot if needed. Having left Saigon barely a year earlier I knew my way around Saigon, but we went as a team, for these required functions.

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The orientation was an abbreviated version of the one I received 15 months earlier. With four or five flights a day arriving in country, it wouldn't take long for troops to be in Saigon a week before getting the orientation, if MACV hadn't shorten the briefing time. Also deleted was the gammaglobulin shot requirement. The orientation I had gotten back in Oct. 1965 took most of the day, with heavy emphasis on black market activity and ruining the Vietnamese economy with over tipping. In 1965 a taxi ride from Tan Son Nhut to the downtown U.S.O. cost 81 to 85 Piasters, depending on traffic, with every taxi driver using the meter. Now no cab driver wanted to use the meter and you negotiated the fare before getting into the cab. That was 200 and even 300 (P) the driver wanted. Most cab driver refused to carry Vietnamese civilians, opting for the more profitable American troops.

It was hard not to tip, things were so cheap in Vietnam. The 1965 trip we had flown directly from New York City to Saigon. An equal cab ride to the U.S.O. in New York would cost \$4.00 to \$5.00 here it was about 75¢. With an exchange rate of 119 Piasters to the dollar, why worry about a few dong change from a 100(P) note.

We arrived in country wearing the standard army combat boots and fatigue uniform. Vietnam had its own dress code of jungle boots and fatigues, which I didn't have, nor any combat equipment including; pistol belt, canteen, mess kit, steel pot and helmet liner, holster and weapon. When it was announced that SSG Frank Salas and I were to go out on a mission, and he had his gear, I asked where he obtained his gear. His reply wasn't the least bit funny, saying the morgue!!! Those people didn't need their equipment anymore. Morbid as it sounded we had to mooch and freeload on all the equipment we had or would receive in the future. Our supply was back at Ft. Shafter, where this equipment was useless. The traditional requisition were equally invalid. In many cases barter a roll or two of color slide film with some receptive supply sergeant, usually produced immediate results.

The out-going team left their combat gear behind for us to use. This being my first combat patrol, the main concern was finding a pair of size 11 jungle boots for me to wear. Before we left for the field, someone scrounged up a pair of old jungle boots, I had never seen before. They had laces and two straps at the top. They preceded having a metal plate in soles preventing foot injuries from punji stake penetration.

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Getting a map case and stripping out the partitions was perfect for holding 10 rolls of 35mm, 100 foot spools of film, plus it had incorporated in the stitching places for incidentals such as film slate, grease pencils or felt tip pens and masking tape. Cutting a slice of a 3 inch square 85 gelatin filter and taping it behind the lens converted the tungsten film to daylight.

SSG Salas had a rucksack, that was the latest innovation of the day. Today virtually all hikers and backpackers use the rucksack type of backpack. I was given the traditional army backpack, that dated back eons. The pack was small holding a towel, soap and spare socks comfortable. Anything more in the pack and it would be crammed. The backpack was attached to suspenders and the suspenders afixed to the pistol belt in front and back. I was to learn that the troops of the 1st Infantry Division were about equally divided between the two types of packs.

The next morning the DASPO Driver took us two to the 1st Inf Div. HQS at Di An (pronounced Zee Ann), located North of Saigon. We were dropped off at the Division Public Information Office (PIO), that would be our liaison for this and all future operations. The IO briefed the two of us on the operation's mission and objectives. (Probably Cedar Falls started on 8th of Jan, 67, as a joint 1st Inf Div, 25th Inf Div, 173rd Airborne BDE, 11th Armored Cav Regt, 7th ARVN Regt and 196th Inf BDE in the area of the Filhol Rubber Plantation as a search and destroy mission, including the Thi Than River and Saigon/Thi Ninh River. I remember Cedar Falls and Filhol Rubber Plantation when slating film rolls and typing caption documentation. The date, unit involved and location are according to the 25th Inf Div. year book.

We were then driven to a battalion sized unit ready to move out. A truck load of C-ration arrived and everyone got their share. What was left Salas and I got a box or two each. We sat around till mid-morning when trucks arrived and everybody climbed aboard. Several miles out of the post we passed a rubber plantation. Shortly thereafter the ride ended.

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In a single file the unit entered the grass and jungle leaving the gravel road behind. We walked and walked, took breaks and walked some more. My backpack wasn't adjusted correctly and the suspenders were cutting into and hurting my shoulders. At each break, I'd unbuckle the pistol belt and toy with the pack and suspenders or move the attaching points on the pistol belt. Adding to the discomfort was the heat and humidity of the jungle that was getting us all sweaty.

We were situated close to the HQs Co. Commander, about midway in the column. We were close enough to hear radio chatter between the battalion's companies, but at a distance to far to delineate and clearly understand the conversations. At breaks most of the troops surrounding Salas and myself opened cans of C-Rats, we did likewise. As the break finished the troop movement continued at 10 to 15 feet intervals. We not only needed this distance for tactical reasons, but the heat and humidity caused jungle sweat, we'd gone beyond (BO), all the way to (GAPO) Gorilla Arm Pit Odor. As the day past the only real movement I saw was the troop in front and rear, begrudgingly move one foot in front of the other. Step by step we moved deeper and deeper into VC territory.

At one point SSG Salas came over asking, how much footage had I shot? Looking at the footage counter, I replied about 30 feet. He said shoot more.

Somewhere around 3:30 to 4 P.M. the rumor mill was whispering that a unit had found a cache. What unit was a mystery to me. Was it our unit,? The battalion? Was it even the 1st Inf. Div.? An hour later we broke out of the jungle into a huge clearing close to three football fields long and two football fields wide. The battalion took up defensive positions along the tree line of the vast open area, with grass only ankle high. SSG Salas and I followed the C.O. and 1st sergeant to an area on the Northwest side of the clearing, where weapons were being stacked. Salas took still shots and I took motion picture of the event.

Soon helicopters were landing delivering hot food and a CP (Command Post) tent, water and extra ammo for the night. As the CP tent was being erected near a tree, Salas borrowed an entrenching tool to dig his foxhole. When he was finished, I asked to use it. Like the FIRST NIGHTER I was, who'd taken A DOUBLE DOSE OF DUMMY PILLS TO STAY STUPID, I dug an asinine foxhole only three inches deep under the tree. Hell an aerial burst into the tree would have killed us out right. We dug the damn thing so shallow because we both hit tree roots, so we dug to lay in the depression, not crouch down in a hole.

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At chow time SSG Salas told me, we're the outsiders and to hang loose until the cooks called for seconds, or at least until there was no line at all. As darkness set in we both settled into our tree root bumpy mini excavation, looking up at the stars.

The tranquillity and serenity of the evening was shattered shortly after dark, when explosions rang out mostly to our West and Northwest part of the clearing, as the VC opened up with a rocket and mortar attack on the battalion's position. No one was hit, but both Salas and me scrambled, scratched and clawed to dig our way in depression a hell of a lot deeper. We were lucky no incoming rounds hit the tree over us. Then there was an explosion on the Southeastern perimeter area and we heard yelling MEDIC, and light from several flashlights heading in the direction of the yelling.

Later it was determined that the explosion wounded two soldiers was a SHORT ROUND. It was one of our artillery rounds fired on the VC rocket and mortar position, that fell short of its intended mark, or friendly fire casualty. I don't remember a night time MED-EVAC or DUST-OFF chopper, so I can only deduce the injuries weren't that serious.

The next morning it was announced that the (C.G.) Commanding General was coming out to inspect the weapons cache the battalion had uncovered. With that, word spread that everyone was to be clean shaven. I wondered who we were to impress? The birds or VC? Thinking back, I remembered my days with the navy, as soon as a ship left port, they had beard growing contests. I assure you, after 45 and 65 days at sea, winner included the longest, fullest and funniest beards etc. Now here we were one day out in the middle of the jungle and its mandatory to shave.

However, we would have to photograph the general inspecting the weapons cache, therefore close proximity to the C.G., also we were guest of the 1st Inf. Div., to avoid friction and hard feeling moreover to be invited back our actions were as the old adage says, "When in Rome, do like the Romans."

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Pouring luke-warm water from the canteen into the brain bucket, as the G.I.'s referred to the steel pot, using a bar of soap, without a mirror, I started shaving; hoping I wouldn't nick myself so severely that my face looked like a bloody mess. When it was all said and done, rubbing my hand over my face, the shave felt as good as with a mirror, hot water and shaving cream. Checking my fingers, I found little or no traces of blood. From that day on, I had absolutely no use for shaving cream.

With the shave completed, HQ's Company troops around the two DASPO Photographers were preparing breakfast. On a key ring, I dug out my trusty (P-38) can opener and went routing around in the backpack for something that sounded appetizing. A few yards away several G.I.'s had canteen cups over a very small intense fire making instant coffee. At first I thought they had a sterno can they were using, but the fuel cell was the size of a cigarette filter. Perplexed and bewildered, I walked over to the pair, puzzled by the small intense white/blue flame, with very little redness and without smoke? I was dumbfounded? As the flame died out, one G.I. dug into his rucksack producing a block of C-4 EXPLOSIVE. If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't have believed it, because C-4 detonates at 27,000 feet a second. Using a thumb nail he scooped out one then another thumb nail full of C-4 and lit it. The other troop pinched off a small quantity with his thumb and forefinger rolling it into a thin cigarette shaped and lit it for his canteen cup. He handed me the block and a knife saying help yourself, take plenty for later. The two thumb nails would burn for about two minutes and it was smokeless. With roughly 1/10th of the block Salas and I had enough for the rest of our time with the 1st Infantry Division.

With a shave and now coffee, I saw numerous troops coming toward the CP Tent, without shirts and towels over their shoulders. Some were wiping themselves off. With the CP tent still erect and no word on the general's arrival, we weren't leaving immediately. Asking one of the returning soldiers what's going on? He informed me there was a clear running stream about a hundred yards pointing behind him. I grabbed my towel from the backpack and soap and headed toward the other soldiers coming back from the bath.

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The guy I talked to was right, the creek was perfectly clear, fast running looking like a spring fed stream running out here in the middle of the jungle. Several men bathing warned me to watch out for leeches. Splashing around washing myself down, I spied a black looking worm going between my legs. As I washed more, I saw several more. Walking back to our equipment, I sat down to dry off. Lifting a pant leg there was a leech on my calf. Pulling that one off, it left a perfect (Y) shaped incision about $\frac{1}{4}$ of an inch in size. I bled for probably five minutes. Another one was found on the other leg and a third on my thigh, that bled non-stop for 45 minutes.

In the tropics daylight breaks around 6A.M., within an hour and a half, I had shaved, had breakfast and a bath. By then it seemed like mid-morning, but hardly even 8 A.M. The two wounded soldier with bandages were now at the CP tent area. The general finally flew into our location with a fleet of choppers. The general looked over the captured machine guns as Salas and I filmed the activity. One ancient, maybe Japanese WWII anti-aircraft gun on wheels was checked over. The general observed other individual and crew served weapons that the advocacy was using against us, as we shot MOPIC and stills.

The general seemed to be a real gun enthusiast. It also appeared as tho he wouldn't ask a question, if he didn't already know the answer. His own officer and enlisted weapons experts were constantly stumped, stammered and frequently stated they didn't know, to many of the general's tenacious questions, that were extremely technical in nature. I don't remember any specific question the general may have asked. He may have asked, do the Bulgarian AK-47 use sheet-metal or brass screws or the tensile strength of the metal used for springs is it the same quality between Russian and Chinese Communist versions of the AK-47. I truly felt sorry for the weapons experts.

While the general indulged very attentively at the weapons cache, men of the battalion had struck the tent, loaded empty water cans, the extra ammo brought in the preceding evening and the two wounded soldier were loaded onto awaiting helos. More C-Ration were distributed for the forthcoming day's meals. I finished off the 1st roll and completely used up another full roll of film, possibly even $\frac{1}{3}$ of the 10 rolls of film I had brought on the operation. Upon the general's departure the weapons cache was loaded onto helo and flown back to Di An Base Camp.