

DASPO/MACV Army "A" Photo Team Meets Odd Events and Execration Jobs.

Linguist
Morgue Photographer
Urine Collection Inspector
Under Age Drinking
Vehicle Guard
Out-House Attendant

LINGUIST

One of the most bazaar and intrinsic events happened while staying at the Nha Trang MACV Press Camp, during coordinating a film project. I headed to the beach, known either as the Rivera of the Orient or Pearl of the Orient, I've forgotten which for a beer and hopefully see some bathers. The beach was deserted this mid-week work day and I had to walk a long distance to find a drink stand that was open.

While sipping a beer, a caucasian man wearing civilian clothing approached sitting down close by. He asked me in clear English, why I wasn't wearing swimming trunks. I didn't know if he was CIA, CID agent, a USO entertainer or an RMK/BRJ employee on vacation, or who this stranger was. I replied with a six word sentence; "I DIDN'T BRING THEM WITH ME." He retorted your from Pennsylvania!!!. That blew my dandruff, the worst part, I was wearing the uniform baseball cap.

As I sipped the beer, my mind wondered and drifted across a wide spectrum, trying to ascertain how with a six word sentence this guy could determine I was from Pennsylvania. Foremost I deemed I left my colloquialism a long time ago, having been in the army six years, having lived in New York City four years, travelled to Alaska, Hawaii and taken basic training with Puerto Ricans, at Ft. Jackson, S.C. plus a year in Korea mixing with troops from all walks of life and every town in the country at every base and installation. I was certain any accent I might have had was long gone, yet here I sat half-way around the world from home and this total stanger nails me to my home state with a simple six word sentence. It must have been something in the pronunciation I made to give him the right answer.

LINGUIST

After finishing the beer, I walked over to the man asking him how he knew I was from Penna. His answer was just as mind boggling. He said he used to have a radio show, I think from Chicago, and his sponsor would pay him a dollar, if he could guess within 50 miles of where the person lived, when they called into the radio station.

In high school geography class I frequently flip-flopped Alabama and Mississippi, New Hampshire and Vermont, Colorado with Wyoming. I also knew most of the state capitols, but never had to accurately place the capitol within the state's borders. However this guy had to be a genius, knowing exactly where every town and city was situated within every state. Then I pondered the Western States, with sparse populations and over 100 miles between towns. He also had to know topographical features as lakes, mountains, rivers and valleys within each state, that far exceeded my knowledge or experience.

Further he knew every drawl, enunciation, twang, jargon, slang or dialect and other exstripulations of English used around the country. I figured he would say Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, maybe Altoona or Harrisburg, when I asked where I hailed from? If he had stated Phila. he would have been within the 50 mile radius; instead he cited Chester, an obscure town South of Phila on the Delaware River, who's claim to fame is oil refineries and chemical plants just outside the 50 mile range. In the end I was so dumbfounded and nincompooped in awe-struck by this man's talents to even ask what he was doing in Vietnam????????

MORGUE PHOTOGRAPHER

One of the most loathing, despicable jobs imageable for an Army photographer in Vietnam, I learned about when I met a senior sergeant, that I knew from the Army Pictorial Center in New York City, when we met on the streets of Saigon. He was two sheets to the wind drunk when we met. I asked him where he was working? He stammered at the mortuary. Questioning what he did at the morgue; he replied taking pictures of every wound and injury on every dead American serviceman, that came into the Saigon Mortuary

Morgue Photographer Cont.

No wonder the (SFC) Sergeant First Class wanted to get drunk and forget his work at the end of the day. I thought what a morbid job. I'd probably get drunker than him if I had his job. Taking pictures of dead bodies and their imparments that took the serviceman's life all day, day in and day out, week in and week out, month after month. Several weeks later I again bumped into this particular SFC staggering along the streets of Saigon, totally polluted. I can't remember if I got him a taxi cab ride to him bachelor Enlisted Quarters (BEQ) hotel or not.

While his job was seedy and grotesque, it had positive overtones. The government using his photos and other taken from morgue photographers around Vietnam looked for patterns and trends in the causes of death from which the government could redesign, figure out improvements and in other ways reduce casualties on the battlefield, and learn from mistakes and oversights during developments of the product.

One aspect happened in the jungle boot. At the begining of the Vietnam War many troops suffered foot wounds from Punji Stakes. The U.S. solution was to insert a steel plate between the vulcanized soles and heels of the jungle boot preventing punji state penetration, thus dramatically reducing punji stake mishaps. This took place in 1965, just as the massive build-up occured.

The government was scrutinizing many aspects of combat gear, that I heard about using these photos of dead servicemen. Among them were improved armor plating around helicopter pilots seats. Improved helmets and flak vests to name a few. However most of these futuristic developments were obtained after the Vietnam War, when new materials similiar to bullet proof vest were introduced.

The last time I saw this particular NCO, he was totally drunk, barely able to stagger home. At that time he told me he had about two months left in Vietnam. I hoped back in the states he could kick the bottle.

Urine Test Collection Inspectors

Another detrimental position for senior NCO's in Vietnam was urine specimen collection inspectors. I witnessed this ugly job, when DASPO filmed the three sectors of the drug screening procedures at Long Binh. They were urine sample collection, lab testing, and detox center. For young army personnel under the age of 25, it was mandatory to be drug tested before leaving Vietnam on R & R or completion of the tour of duty in country.

The NCO sat on a stool overlooking a series of urnials as the troops entered the bathroom and stood about two feet in front of the urnial and peed into the test vial. The age cut off was important, because very few soldiers over the age of 25 ever came up positive when tested, so why test them.

The NCO's job was to detect cheaters. Drug addicts would do anything to cheat the system for a flight out of Vietnam, including switch samples and a few innovative drug addicts used a balloon and hose attached to their penis. The addict might buy a clean soldiers urine, by having the clean soldier pee into the balloon or use apple or orange juice. The balloon was placed under the armpit with the hose running under the uniform and the hose taped to the addicts penis. At the urine sample the addict squeezed his armpit, emptying the balloon's contents into the vial for testing.

In the lab,, the cycle the DASPO Team filmed, about one in every 20 to 25 tests came up positive, but that wasn't unusual for the lab personnel. They told us some of soldiers would be excused, because they were on doctor's prescribed medications, that could be readily verified. Undoubtedly the NCO's used as inspectors were awaiting their own flight out of the country, thus the urine specimen collection inspector job lasted only a day or two. Still a senior NCO watching guys piss all day long had to be gross.

Under Age Drinking

Another strange incident occurred in the Hue/Phu Bui area shortly after TET, during a transitional period as the Army was taking responsibility for the region from the ~~Marine~~ Corp. The MACV Army "A" Photo Team was staying with a battalion of Navy Seabee's, while filming in the Northern part of Vietnam. I had just exited the tent that served as the (PX/BX) Post or Base Exchange; I don't remember which branch of service operated the facility, after buying some cigarettes. I was folding my ration card to insert back into my wallet, when I heard a squeaky voice calling, "Serge oh serge could you do my a favor." The person calling to me saw that the Class VI (liquor) portion of my ration card was hardly used at all.

Looking down to face the person calling me, I saw a pint size kid wearing gold bars on his lapel, with peach fuzz for a beard, wearing grubby filthy uniform in full combat gear looking up at me. He must have been an (OCS) Officer Candidate School graduate, also known as 90 day wonder, or he lied about his age to get into service. I question if the height requirement had been relaxed, because this man stood barely 5 feet tall. I didn't even check to see if he was Army, Navy or Marine Corp. His face was just as muddy and dirty as the rest of his uniform, but he was a Gentlemen by Act Of Congress. But most certainly looked more like he should be back in high school, not a war zone.

The most compelling feature were his eyes. They clearly told a story of horror and fright. Here stood one scared kid that survived more than he bargained for. A young Lt. that wanted to drown his sorrow by getting drunk and forget what he witnessed and events that took place in combat. Part of his dilemma and perplexing difficulties was military ration cards for service members under the age of 21 didn't include Class VI ration allocations. He asked if I would buy him a bottle of booze. Seeing this young officers predicament, scary look, down trodden, mentally, physically and emotionally drained adolescence standing before me; I asked what's your pleasure? He passed me a (MPC) Military Payment Certificate note and I went to an adjacent tent to procure the booze. It was obvious he needed it worse than I did. Over the years I sometimes question if this over-incumbered kid survived the tour of duty in Vietnam.

Vehicle Guard

Another slowly evolving story with a strange twist began as both MACV Army Photo Teams "A" and "B" left the 221st Signal Company in Long Binh and set up offices in rooms 100 and 200 at the Brinks BOQ in Saigon. Parking for military vehicles was provided across the street from the Brinks. From the time we moved in, around Labor Day, 1967, there was a disabled Vietnamese Vet would sit outside the Brinks. Like thousands of other street beggars, both Army Photo Teams ignored this street beggar. However he never had his hands out begging. He would sit there all day long from about 9A.M. to 6P.M. day after day without failure sitting in the hot tropic sun.

It was as if this was his territory, for no one else ever was there, just this one disabled Viet Vet. I sometimes wondered what he did for a latrine. I remember at times if the team had cold sodas, we'd pass him one as we left to do chores around Saigon.

I guess it was about 10 months of seeing this beggar, who never begged true idenity became known. One morning while leaving the Brinks on business, this beggar pointed at our truck making grunting noises. We immediately understood, that all these months this street beggar was guarding all the military vehicles for us. The team crawled under the 3/4 ton truck looking for a bomb, lifted the hood checking for explosives connected to the ignition system. All the equipment was intact, but someone had messed around the truck, and this beggar let us know it.

From that day on this street beggar, became a paid employee of MACV Army Photo Team "A". The MACV photo teams also said they paid this street beggar. With 15 to 18 vehicles parked in this one parking lot, this disabled Vet could earn a living guarding American military vehicles, using his assets, his eyes.

In Feb. 1969 upon my departure from Vietnam, I decided to give this guardian angel a treat. I was going to buy him dinner next door at The exclusive Continental Palace Hotel. It would be something he could brag about to his family and friends the rest of his life. The one meal he had at this swank hotel.

Vehicle Guard Cont

Outside the BOQ, I pointed to our vehicle guard and motioned for him to follow me, He collected his crutch and got up.. Slowly we hobbled the less than 200 feet to the Continental Palace. When I motioned for him to enter, he shook his head NO. I shook my head YES. As he got on the first step, the bar room staff came running in our direction waving him out. I pointed to the begger then myself and crossed my fingers in what is usually a good luck gesture, indicating this begger was with me. The bar staff immediately understood that this otherwise Persona Non Grata individual, who could never enter this establishment was with an American and quickly began ushering him in as a welcome guest. Crossing the bar area and entering the dining area, a repeat incident occurred. Giving the restaurant waiters the same symbols, they changed from chasing my guest away, to pulling out a chair for him to sit. All the waiters. spoke enough English to translate to my guess, that I was leaving Vietnam and would never see him again and this treat I wanted to give him something he could never have on his own.

Out-House Attendant

Of the nasty, crappy, despicable jobs aforementioned, nothing could compare with the loathing, mungy and discussing duty of being the units latrine attendant, and that's a polite terminology for shit burner. No G.I. or any rank or position volunteered for the duty of being the unit's glorified septic tank disposal person. While at the 221st Signal Company at Long Binh, the still photographers took turns burning the human waste the first few weeks that the unit was in Vietnam, but quickly took up a collection to hire a Vietnamese to administer that task.

Out House Attendant Cont

From artillery fire support bases, that dotted the Vietnamese landscape to medium sized bases such as Pleiku, Kontum, Chu Lai, Bear Cat, Di An and Dong Tam to the massive army posts at Cam Ranh Bay and Long Binh, very few army posts had plumbing either indoor or outdoor, except mess halls. Thus thousands and thousands of out-house latrines were scattered around the various encampments all over the country to take care of the troops defecation. The latrines were not one or two holes, except for officers latrines. Many were huge with a dozen holes in one large out-house. The tropical sun and humidity made a stinky, smelly mess around the latrines, to say nothing of drawing flies and other bugs and insects to the damp, moist human manure providing prime breeding conditions for these creatures.

I remember leaving Saigon heading to Long Binh, crossing the Saigon River's New Port Bridge, it looked like a major brush fire on the horizon with black smoke rising over thousands of acres. Instinctively knowing the out-house attendants were at work. The normal way to dispose of the excrement was to cut 30 and 50 gallon drums in half and putting a half drum beneath each hole.. Daily the latrine attendant would get a 5 gallon can of diesel fuel and using a shovel, hoe or a wooden or metal pole pull out the filled drums and add some diesel fuel setting the whole mess aflame.

After taking up the collection, the 221st Sig. Co. went to the civilian personnel gate where besides permanent work staff as translators and house girl entered Long Binh Post, there were hundreds of day workers, who would perform a days toil for a honest day's wages. From this catagory of employable people, the unit hired an out-house attendant. I was taken back, when I eye-witnessed this papasan wearing a plastic bag over his head, to keep out the stench. Flicking his thumb and forefinger indicating he needed a match or lighter to burn the excreties.

From this pool of day labors, the 221st Sig. Co. hired girls to fill sand bags. These jobs could last from several hours to several months, or even become a full time position for some Vietnamese.

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