

MACV Army "A" Photo Team Films MUST Hospital

The most grotesque and disturbing story I filmed with MACV to this day, some 35 years later, I still hate aspects of what transpired so long ago, and seldom think about those events, but when I do think of them bad vibes haunts me and I feel very melancholy. The story centered on a quick moveable MUST Hospital or (Medical Unit Surgical Transportable.) (*) The hospital consisted of a series of huge intertube type structures that could be inflated or deflated as needed. With about eight such buildings that served as wards, operating room, recovery room, billets for hospital staff, mess hall, orderly room and chapel. Each inflatable building measured about 20 feet wide by 30-35 feet long and the entire complex was climate controlled. Between building were interlocking cause-ways.

We drove to the hospital site. I can't remember where the location was, but the army wouldn't deliberately put a hospital in Harms Way., even tho the hospital site was isolated out in the jungle and at a desolated area..We saw very little civilization while driving to the hospital location.

The Hospital's First Sergeant stated that they arrived yesterday and expected us to accompany them to this location. That was news to me, since I hadn't contacted them telling we were coming! The 1st SGT said the MUST Hospital could be trucked to a location and set up ready and operational within eight hours of their arrival. He continued by saying each building took 45 minutes to and hour to unpack from the truck and have it fully inflated. For us to film this procedure, the hospital crew collapsed the chapel, so we could film the building being inflated.

The medical doctors talked to the photo team about filming in surgery and it was decided under the circumstances, it would be better to cover a minor operation, lasting from 20 to 45 minutes, rather than a major surgery that could consume hours. I was notified that the surgery room was cramped and only one photo team member would be allowed in. It was also said, I would have to wear hospital scrubs, cloth booties over the jungle boots and face mask in order to enter the operating room. They also asked about our time schedule? We were in no great rush, but I didn't want to stay there for a week either. So I told the doctor's we could stay until tomorrow afternoon, if need be.

(*) May stand for Self-Contained

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What we had so far was a unique style of hospital, but no patients on hand. Since the hospital moved here yesterday, it had no patients on hand. Any patients it had were transferred to the 3rd Field Hospital in Saigon, before moving. The MUST Hospital was an intermediary medical facility, between the front line combat medic and full service hospitals, just like in the T.V. Series MASH, the hospital's prime objective was to stabilize the casualties condition and then forward the patient to a more advance, fuller service medical facility, such as the 3rd Field Hospital. Many wounded were further transported outside Vietnam for full recovery of their injuries. What we needed to finish the story were casualties. What a remorseful thing to want. Intentionally hoping and wishing for allied wounded. I well remembering hoping the injured were Korean, New Zealand, Aussie, or South Vietnamese troops entered my mind, but chances were nine to one, they would be American G.I. injured troops coming in. How morbid? How insensitive, like a vulture, hoping and wanting American Troops to get ambushed, maul, maim, injured, crippled, blown away, messed up for life, amputees, death, etc, etc, and why this rancor and malice, just so I can finish my story on the MUST Hospital. How damn low can I precipitate to? I felt like the albino aborigine in the xylem that should attend the Weiss-Chert Gutenberg Phase-transition.

Then I pondered the difference between my feelings and the medical staff of the hospital. The pharmacist has no work without patiences, the X-ray technicians can't perform their jobs without patiences, nor none of the other dozens of medical jobs. How much different was I from them??? Then it hit me, the difference was simple. Their jobs were to try and save lives; I just wanted messed-up soldiers to finish the story.

It was late into the lunch hour when the alarm went off and a voice over the intercom said, all emergency room personnel report to your duty stations. Dust-off helicopters were bringing in wounded. The first stretcher off the helo took only a glance to know he was beyond mortal help. The second soldier crawled off the helo with head bandages. The third stretcher, the soldier had no visible signs of injury, except his head was deformed, but no sign of blood anywhere and rigor mortis was setting in. The forth casualty was carried off on a stretcher more dead than alive, but breathing on his own accord.

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A second MED_EVAC chopper landed. I let the assistance cameraman film this group of wounded being off loaded, while I prepped myself to enter the operating room. When I was finally admitted, I saw three tables. The middle one had a cluster of robed people working around the table. The far table was fairly well concealed from view. I wasn't sure if it was for X-Ray, but it didn't have a lead wall around it, a prep table or exactly what. I was taken to the closest table. There was a soldier that had been shot in the head. The hair had been shaved off and I could only surmise that this troop had been the one with head bandages, from the first chopper load. The bullet had entered his head at the hair line and travelled along his skull and exited at the back of his head, taking along all the flesh it encountered, leaving a groove along the top of his head where the bullet traversed. The bleeding had been stopped.

I started filming immediately. The flesh on the forehead, top of the skull and back of the head is thin, and I guessed the doctors were only going to stitch up the skin along the groove. One of the doctors took a long slender probe and ran it along the entire length of the groove. That did it, I lost it, I got dizzy and weak and had to be ushered out of the operating room expeditiously. What I had on film, when linked with the chapel being inflated and wounded arriving was enough for a 90-120 second stateside T.V. news release.

Before leaving the MUST Hospital, I talked with the stretcher crew, asking them about the body with the deformed head? They told me it wasn't common, but usually he died of a concussion from an explosion real close, that crushed his skull, killing him instantly. I also learned the wounded were members of the 173rd Airborne Brigade. They stated the unit had sent a 160 man company into the Iron Triangle where the americans encountered a 600 man VC battalion. In simple terms the 173rd was out gunned 4 to 1.

Leaving the hospital, the photo team saw that one tire on the 3/4 ton truck was low, we hoped to get back to Saigon before the tire went flat. Along the way the team spotted some kind of maintenance unit. The sign out front had "DS MAINTENANCE." We didn't know nor care what DS meant if they could fix a flat tire. Between the sign and maintenance tent lay several 175mm artillery barrels.

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I was surprised to see a Warrant Officer (WO) as head of the operation, and he seemed happy that we stopped. I really think he was hoping we would do a story on his maintenance facility out here in the boon-docks. I had all sorts of problems with that concept. The team had done several "NUT & BOLTS" stories and few ever got released. Second the WO was talking in Greek as far as I was concerned. I couldn't grasp what he was talking about using "MAINTENANCE JARGON." He said his unit was one echelon above user unit level. I had to digest that and I vaguely remembered hearing the term years earlier, but translating what the (WO) said into useable terminology stateside civilians could understand seemed a formidable task. Third "NUTS & BOLTS" stories require the focus be on "PEOPLE OPERATING MACHINERY" not machinery being operated by people. To better understand this, most game shows have contestants solving a puzzle. In Wheel Of Fortune its the puzzle being solved by contestants. Seldom in Wheel Of Fortune do you see the contestants.

When I mentioned the 175mm barrels, the (WO) quickly corrected my wording. He stated they are tubes not barrels. He then explains the difference between cannons and howitzers. I once wrote the list down, but promptly lost the note. I remember him saying breach pressure, tube life and I sort of remember him saying rifling of the tube for the spin of the projectile were the differences between cannon and howitzers. He said the 175mm was a cannon, where as the 155mm and 8 inch artillery were true howitzers. By now the tire was repaired and we departed.

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Written June 2004