

MACV Army "A" Photo Team Films People Sniffer

By the time MACV Army "A" Photo Team received the assignment to cover the People Sniffer, I felt we were given a re-hash of an old story. The People Sniffer had been in Vietnam a good six months, if not longer. It had been months since I had seen any headlines about the contraption. I was certain other MACV Photo Teams had covered the story, while the two Army Photo Teams awaited our equipment to arrive. Definately DASPO (Dept Of The Army Special Photo Office) had covered the story. Stars & Stripes Newspaper carried articles and stories as did T.V. News teams in Vietnam and print media as AP and UPI had all done stories on the mechanical smelling machine. To stir up several months old news and try to hash out a new angle was all we could try to achieve.

The mechanism of the People Sniffer were relatively simple. Every mammal, except the Orangutan emits ammonia with its body odor. By honing the People Sniffer's sensors they detected minute trace quantities of ammonia. The machine would alert combat troops of close proximity to enemy troops, or that enemy troops had passed by this vicinity recently, leaving an ammonia residue in the air, that could be followed.

Originally designed to be hand carried by the troops into the combat zone, the People Sniffer lost its luster quickly and the machine was all but abandoned by the combat troops. The reason was simple weight. Lugging around an 80 pound contraption in the jungle, by one man was just too much. Undoubtly the People Sniffer was battery operated, with much of the weight attributed to battery power. It was highly unlikely that the batteries lasted more than a few hours of continuous operation. Shipping batteries back to base camp for re-charging became over-incumbered. Or maintaining sufficient supply of batteries became a logistical nightmare.

With wanning interest in using the People Sniffer by ground forces, somebody came up with the brilliant idea. If the People Sniffer can detect ammonia 400 feet horizontally, could it perform the same vertically?? They mounted the People Sniffer in a helicopter and as luck had it, the machine worked admirable aloft. By trial and error it was determined the People Sniffer worked best at an attitude of less than 400 feet and an air speed of 60 knots. At this height and speed the People Sniffer detected one or two men on the ground hidden by thick jungle canopy.

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The photo team was told to contact an aviation unit, I deem with the 9th Inf. Div. at Bear Cat. I took no photos for myself of the People Sniffer. What I saw was a machine mounted just behind the pilots seats, in the center of the helo. It stood not quite two feet tall. Probably eight or nine inches deep and nearly a foot across the front. It came with headphones, and on the front of the machine was a gauge. I was told the needle on the gauge would swing if contact was made, along with an audible noise would be heard in the headset. I believe the People Sniffer's sensor was lowered and let dangle below the helo, after take-off, relinquishing false contact reading from the ammonia emitted by the helo crew members.

This aviation unit had the People Sniffer mounted in older model huey helicopters, and other light observation helos. Using the early "B" and "D" models capable of carrying five and seven passengers, freed up the newer models for larger tasks. I remember flying in one that held 13 people. That was probably an "H" or "J" model huey. However the older versions blend well for the People Sniffer's mission, and its small crew effort. Our problem was, there wasn't enough room on the older huey to fly the full camera team. at one time.

Ground troops might travel five miles in a day during combat operations. The airborne People Sniffer could traverse that distance in moments, With a two hour fuel supply, the aerial People Sniffer could effectively cover many square miles of terrain, in that time limit. Plus it would alleviate the problem of low or dead batteries from extended useage.

The pilots told the photo team, unless we're fired upon, they would not believe the first People Sniffer alert. Citing; if we're flying North when contact is made, we'll arc around and cross over the contact point flying East Ward. If the People Sniffer confirms the first alert, they would circle around and fly a West direction over the contact spot. Then we'll go in for the kill. That was great news for us. We wouldn't have to waste valuable film if no contact was made, trying to film the needle move, when the ground below was devoid of mammals.

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With the ground rules of what the flight crew were doing made things easier for us film team to understand. Then it was divide up the photo team, since most couldn't get aboard. Most of the film team stayed on the ground. I flew using the Filmo camera, I also took the Narga Tape recorder. I could get a minute or two of helo flying for sound. Then if we made contact turn on the tape-recorder for sounds of the machines guns firing, while I filmed the needle move and the guns firing.

We took off heading North of Bear Cat and close by Long Binh Post. We probably were flying 10 to 15 miles North of this area of major troop concentrations. It had been declared a "FREE FIRE ZONE" for this day. Free Fire Zone meant that no friendly troops were reported to be in the region. No MED CAPS or LRRP (Long Range Recon Patrols) were known to be operating in this vicinity. Simply put anything that moved could be shot.

We were cruising along in the Free Fire Zone at 400 feet and 60 knots air speed for maybe 30 minutes when contact was made. As the pilots turned to re-confirm, I started the camera rolling on the gauge. A few seconds later it spiked out. With camera and tape recorder going, the pilots descended to about 200 feet. One door gunner opened fire spotting a person on the ground. The pilots veered around and the other door gunner opened fire. Within two or three passes it was all over. Two down VC, with fuel remaining the helo continued the search, but without luck.

A quick trip, but a different twist for an old story and the People Sniffer made new headlines. It needs to be noted that many water buffalo, monkey families, tigers and elephants were shot in Vietnam, because they emitted ammonia in their body odor.

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