

APC/DASPO Films Walter's Tractors

I remember doing the story, but many details have been lost to history. I can't remember if I filmed this story of the Walter's Tractors in the fall of 1965, while (TDY) Temporary duty to Vietnam from the Army Pictorial Center, N.Y.C. or if the story was filmed some 15 months later while in Saigon with DASPO. Even the location eludes my memory. I know it wasn't done in Saigon. That would leave Da Nang, which was Air Force and Navy/Marine Corps territory and Cam Ranh Bay with port and dock facilities. I remember flying to Cam Ranh Bay twice to film the De Long Pier Story, at the huge sand box. Slides of that trip at TTU. I remember a two man photo team, that was ideal for APC and DASPO teams.

I've worked my brain for nearly a year before penning this story for more details on the Walter's Tractors. I'm absolutely certain the port had a pier, that's because the ship involved was an LSD (Landing Ship Dock) that backed up to the pier and off-loaded its cargo from the fan-tail (Rear of Ship.)

The Army Transportation people we were working with took us onto the Navy LSD and down into the ship's storage hole. There packed worse than sardines in a can, I saw 40 foot trailers laden with war materials, PX Goods, uniforms, cokes and a mercantile of other products and goods needed by the troops. No where was there even a two inch gap between trailers, mostly they were touching each other or less than an inch between the massive rigs.

I shook my head in total disbelief. There was no way to off load this ship. I remember the hole we were in was mostly if not entirely below the water line. There was a ramp the trailers had to go up to exit the ship off the fan-tail. The transportation people assured us, they would have the entire ship unloaded in something like 36 hours. My thoughts were impossible! Absolutely no way!.

Then the first Walter's Tractors arrived down the ramp into the LSD's hole. I didn't know what it was. It was so revolutionary in style and compactness. It wasn't any larger than a jeep. The traditional tractor you had to climb up into the cab. The Walter's Tractor you had to squat down to get behind the controls. The total height was only about three feet high.

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The traditional 18 wheel rig, only the rear wheels of the tractor are actually under the trailer. With the Walter's Tractor, the driver drove the entire tractor under the trailer. The normal tractor backs up with the 5th wheel plate and trailer pin making positive contact. Then the driver gets out and hand cranks up the trailer's front wheels, before driving off. The Walter's Tractor had a hydraulic jack attached to the plate of the 5th Wheel. Making 5th Wheel positive contact much easier. More hydraulic jacking and the trailer's front wheels were off the ship's deck, enabling the Walter's Tractor driver to head up the ramp in only a few seconds.

If I remember correctly each wheel of the Walter's Tractor had its own motor. We were told it could turn around in its own space. The rear wheels as well as front wheels turned for better steering and control in tight spaces. It had ZERO TURNING RADIUS. That far exceeded anything I had heard of. Today many lawn mowers and sport utility vehicles feature ZTR capability. In the Mid-60's this was cutting edge technology.

Shortly a second and then third Walter's Tractors were on the scene. By the time we finished filming trailers were being lifted out of the ship's hole at the rate of one every minute or two. The bottleneck was the ramp, where only one vehicle could travel. I don't remember anyone attaching the cables for trailer lights and air breaks, between the Walter's Tractor and trailers.

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