

DASPO Covers Operation Fire Fly & Escorts Viet Boy Home

On Oct 12th, 1971 I started my last trip to Vietnam while on my second tour of duty with the Pacific Detachment of DASPO (Dept. of The Army Special Photo Office.) The dozen man photo team heading to Saigon had been booked on a C-141 Starlifter, rather than 707s, 720s or DC-8s that charter airlines used. Instead of having the loveliness of Trans International's hostess Tiger Mathews, we'd have the flight suited crew to look at. The traditional fantastic service of Continental Airlines would be replaced with box lunches, but the plane was dependable. This flight wouldn't be the first long distance flight on a C-141. In 1969 while filming the last of the Army's BIG PICTURE T.V. Series in Alaska, an airline strike stranded the motion picture team in Anchorage, When we got a lift on a C-141 it was filled with body bags heading for Dover, DE.

Arriving at the MAC check in gate area of Honolulu International Airport, the place was unusually devoid of activity. A few servicemen and women lingered around the check in area, that normally near flight time was a maze of human bodies. Before we could get the bags and camera gear to the check-in counter, the team's OIC was called to a conference in a room behind the counter area. Re-appearing a few moments later, he had a Vietnamese boy of seven or eight years old in his hand. My first thought was it's past bedtime, why isn't this kid in bed, instead of a back office of the airport check in area?

The Air Force had ambushed the Army, that's for sure. To what extent I never knew! What the team found out was that the Vietnamese boy found and played with a grenade or cluster bomb, when it exploded it blew off the child's leg. Somehow he survived to make it to some medical facility and MED-EVAC back to Honolulu for treatment and recovery. The medical community had done all they could and it was time for the boy to return to Vietnam.

The Air Force must have invented a criteria for just such circumstance. They must have scrutinized hundreds of aircraft bookings, looking for just the perfect suckers. I'm certain the Air Force rejected young servicemen travelling alone, for fear the child might be dumped along the way. Families weren't authorized in Vietnam and flight into Saigon, only those destined there were allowed to deplane. Senior NCO's and officers were also rejected for various reasons, not the least being un-becoming of an officer to had a to have a Vietnamese kid hanging onto you. But a team of men was perfect. If one slept others could watch the boy. If one got bored of the duty other could immediately resume responsibility. Most importantly we would exit in Saigon.

DASPO Covers Operation Fire Fly & Escorts Viet Kid Home

Checking in our baggage, the team with its new travel companion headed to the airport bar. Watching the boy walk you could hardly tell he had prosthetic equipment or artificial leg. Entering the bar, Eileen, the bar waitress was taking orders at a table. Glancing up, she spied an oriental kid sneaking in. Excusing herself she hurried to the entrance to chase the kid out. The team OIC explained to her, the team was his temporary guardian escorting him back home to Vietnam after a hospital stay in Hawaii.

The professional she was, Eileen stated she wasn't going to be fired or the bar lose its liquor license for serving minors. That he could have only non-alcoholic beverages. The entire team assured her cokes were all he would have. With that she returned to finish taking orders at the table she was working. The DASPO Team found tables and enough chairs to seat everyone.

Eileen quietly explained to the bartender and customers why the child was there. When she finally got to our tables, she had our orders in one minute, but spent five more minutes of conversation concerning the boy. She told the team she was sponsoring two children around the world through Christian Children Fund or some such group. Until boarding time Eileen spent every spare moment at the DASPO tables discussing the boy's situation.

She wanted to know all sorts of things. the boy answered in moderately good English as best he could. She asked why he had been hospitalized? Learning the facts, Eileen embraced and cuddled the boy. With tears in her eyes, she excused herself heading to the power room. Returning Eileen asked about mail? He told her some. Oblivious a 2nd grader, if he attended school at all, wasn't fluent enough to read or write a letter. Thus probably a hospital staffer took down ideas, concepts and thoughts and wrote a letter, that was mailed to the embassy Red Cross or welfare agency, where the letter was translated into Vietnamese and forwarded to the kids parents.

While Eileen was busy with other customers, the DASPO Team was ready for another round of drinks. The bartender was idle, so picking up some money from the tables, I went to the bar. Eileen approached, reaching behind the counter she grabbed her purse,. Extracting her billfold she showed me pictures of the two children she was sponsoring. She stated she was thinking of sponsoring a third child, could she sponsor the boy? I had to admit, I didn't think he was in the program. Eileen looked very depressed at my response.

DASPO Films Operation Fire Fly & Escorts Viet Kid Home

With everyone in the bar served, Eileen was soon talking to the boy again. Asking how long he was in the hospital? The boy answered almost nine months. She asked about the care? The tot with a smile said good. Eileen asked if he liked Hawaii? Again he replied yes. Was he happy to be going home? The kid actually had reservations. And why not have mixed emotions. The boy had a glimpse of the good life; if you can call hospital life GOOD? He had 24 hour electricity, air conditioning, T.V., radio. He had three meals a day. Eggs and bacon, toast, milk or juice and fresh fruit for breakfast. Hamburgers, fries and coke for lunch. He was probably going home to no electric and one bowl of rice a day, but he'd have his parents!!!

The conversation turned to play mates in the children's ward. The boy said they came stayed days or weeks and left, but he stayed. He told everyone a few stayed a month or two and he got to be friends with them. He would miss them too. It was time to head to the boarding gate. As we all got up to leave, Eileen visibly was restraining tears.

Boarding the plane I was in for a surprise. I expected to be strapped into uncomfortable combat web seats for the long flight. Instead the air force had reconfigured the plane with one comfort skid/pallet with about 50 regular airline seats and the rest of the plane were cargo pallets. The pallets were covered in plastic and tied down with yellow cargo web netting, so the loads couldn't shift.

Taking off at midnight most of the passengers were soon asleep. Having had a few drinks, I got up as soon as the seat belt sign was turned off to find the john. The enlisted crew members of the C-141, the crew chief and load master were curious about the asian boy with us. I told them the story, plus added that I expected a plane load of passengers, not just 50 people. They informed me this was an embassy flight. Besides Saigon, they were going to Bangkok, then onto India. Further a stop or two at Mid-East countries and another stop along the Mediterranean, before their final destination of Ramstein, Germany.

DASPO Films Operation Fire Fly & Escort Viet Boy Home

For most of the DASPO Team members this wasn't their initial time making this trip. It was at least my sixth journey to Vietnam. With several hours sleep under our belts, the cargo bay lights came up. As the passengers woke up, the enlisted crew members began handing out box lunches. Sleeping in a different row and several seats away, our little travel companion had to be shaken awake. Our body clocks (circadian Rhythm) told us it's breakfast time, but the box lunch contained fried chicken. Neither I nor most passengers' minds, taste buds or anything else wasn't ready for chicken at this hour, thus most box lunches were only nibbled at.

About two hours later between 4:30-5A.M. we landed. Our worst fears were well founded. We were ahead of the newspaper plane bringing the Stars & Stripes. The P.X. Snack Bar truck wasn't due for another hour. The graveyard shift at the terminal snack bar would serve until they ran out of yesterday's food. I wanted coffee and doughnuts, but the pastries were long gone. Our Vietnamese guess wanted breakfast. I saw three or four DASPO Members escort him to a booth. The cook yelled to the waitress, that he only had about 20 eggs. No bacon or ham, just some sausage. Hot cakes became an instant hit, but the place only had a handful of syrup packets. I never asked if they got any food during our 45 minute lay over.

Back in the air the pilot came over the loud speaker welcoming us passengers to come up and look at the cockpit or ask questions about the plane's operation. Most of the 50 passengers took up the invite. At Saigon, the DASPO Team with travelling trooper deplaned. The team OIC found a phone in the Tan Son Nhut Civilian Terminal calling the appropriate agency that our escort was at the airport. The DASPO Driver quickly had a truck load. I left with the truck never to see the boy again.

Since my last time in Vietnam, two years ago, many changes had occurred. The Nixon Administration was now in the White House. The Paris Peace Talks were an on-again/off-again news event. Bombing of North Vietnam was a changeable as the Peace Talks. Egress Recap, the code name for bring the troops home was in full swing.

DASPO Films Operation Fire Fly & Escort Viet Boy Home

The only mission I remember doing on this two month 1971 Vietnam trip was Operation Fire Fly. For this job I was sent out by myself to film. It turned out to be the most lengthly and exhaustive project I ever got involved with. The job centered on an aviation battalion stationed at Marble Mountain, Da Nang. Linking up with an AVN vehicle outside the air base terminal, I was driven to a flatten hill on the East side of the Air Base.

When I told the battalion sergeant major, I was there to film Operation Fire Fly, he said they fly all night from curfew to curfew. He told me to report back after supper, but meanwhile the SGM had me put up in one of the HQS Co. NCO huts (Hootches.)

I immediately began wondering if the slow ECO film speed I was carrying would even register anything, or would I end up with blank film, causing a total waste of time and effort all around? Or should I notify the film lab to push the film two stops in processing? But I still had an ace in the hole. I could do a SLOP TEST.

Its a test my first photo lab NCO showed me. He returned to Korea from a SEATO Exercise in Thailand with lots of color slide rolls. Not sure he used the right exposure, he had me develope one roll in black & White chemicals. If his exposure was off, he'd compensate processing time in the color chemicals. It was a quick simple and cheap method to answer the question.

Four pilots showed up for the meeting. The Staff Duty Officer told the pilots, I'd be flying with them tonight. Outside the BN HQS, they told me to be ready to go at 9:30. That evening there Fire Fly mission was 10-12P.M. and 2-4A.M. The four pilots had a discussion and it was decided for the first flight, I'd fly in the high helo. They explained one chopper flew at 400 feet elevation, the other flew NAP OF THE EARTH. Meaning flying below power lines, cocoanut palms and telephone poles, with an Air Force AC-130 gun ship orbiting at 3500 feet high.

DASPO Films Operation Fire Fly & Escorts Viet Boy Home

For two hours we flew around in the night sky at 400 feet elevation. I think the high helo had a People Sniffer on board. (See People Sniffer Story at this web-site.) In the entire time I only got one or two fleeting glimpses of the low chopper. The two crews were in constant radio communication, so I knew the low helo hadn't crashed. We never had street lights below us, thus I know we never flew over downtown Da Nang, leaving that sector to the MPs/APs and White Mice (Viet Police.) We concentrated our efforts on the outer most suburbs, villages and hamlets surrounding the city of Da Nang. After 120 minutes of aerial fruitlessness, with none of the door gunners on either chopper not firing a single round of ammo, was good cause for myself not to waste a single frame of film. Our replacement pair of helo were already aloft, when we landed for refueling and a hour or so of sleep before relieving the flight crew currently airborne.

Since the high chopper had been mundane, uneventful and unproductive, I decided to try the low helo for the second flight, the 2-4AM mission. The low chopper was a radical different experience. It was more daring than I envisioned. I had good eye sight, but couldn't see much in the pitch black darkness. I had looked through a Star-Light Scope before, but it was the size of a rifle telescopic sight. No pilot could fly a helo and hold a Star-Light Scope. It was common knowledge that the government was working on Night Vision Goggles, but I had no confirmation they were developed nor operational. Yet without such equipment there was no way these pilot's eyes were any better than my own, and I couldn't see anything.

Taking off the helo had no lights turned on, not even navigation lights showing the outline of the helo. I don't comprehend how we got over the Marble Mountain perimeter fence without lights or using night vision goggles. Then it was NAP OF THE EARTH never flying higher than 20 feet above the ground. I can't believe the landing skids didn't snag wire on a fence post. Flying under high tension power lines, rising momentarily to fly over a stream bridge. We were bait, we were guinea pigs hoping to attract enemy gun fire. Without lights they could only shoot in the general direction of the engine noise. Once tracer rounds were seen, the door gunners on both helos and the air force gunship could open fire to surpress the enemy.

DASPO Films Operation Fire Fly & Escorts Viet Boy Home

I had flown NAP OF THE EARTH during daylight hours, with a melting block of sliding ice for a seat. (See 25th Div finds VC Rice Cache this web site.) but flying NAP OF THE EARTH in the middle of the night was ludicrous. The dodging of tree trunks, the swerving to avoid hitting obstacles. The zig zag to miss telephone poles, homes etc? There were moments I felt I was in a huge agitator washing machine, with centrifugal force heaving part of my body to one side, while the rest of my body was still going in the opposite direction. All the time flying at 60 to 80 miles an hour.

At one point on this flight the high helo got a contact. circling around the helo turned on the landing light to spot several water buffalo grazing. Since they posed no threat to us nobody opened fire. I shot a foot or two of film of the spot light shining to the ground, but that was all for the second two hours of hectic flying.

With nearly a week of flying nights alternating between high and low choppers, I had only exposed between 60 and 70 feet of film, less than 3/4 of one roll. I decided it was time to go to a photo lab and see if I had anything or a total waste of time.

It was mid-afternoon until the AVN BN's driver was free to drive me to the air base photo lab. I spent close to a half hour in there. The clerk and photo lab NCO both got involved with the debate. I asked them if they could develop a test roll of film? That was O.K. I told them it was color MOPIC. They explained it would be a week, because they had to send it out of country. I asked if they used DK-50 or D-76, all I wanted was a SLOP TEST. They thought I had shell shock, battle fatigue or just plain nuts coming up with a stupid idea of putting color film in black&white chemicals. They all but called the air police to have me thrown out of the place.

The driver knew of another photo lab in the Da Nang area, operated by a different branch of service. They also thought I was stark raving mad, but finally the petty officer in charge, said it quitting time, I have about a 1/2 hour of work here yet. The dark room is back there, if you know what your doing. But leave me out of it. I don't even know your here. I'm not going to be responsible for anything.

DASPO Films Operation Fire Fly & Escorts Viet Boy Home

With that I dashed to the back. In the dark room I smelled the chemicals to determine the developer, stop bath and hypo. Inserting a thermometer into the DK-50 it read 72 degrees or 4 degrees to hot. The over-development would act as at least one stop push on the film. In other words instead of ASA 25 film I had in effect ASA 50 film I was going to develop. Setting the timer for six minutes, I closed the door and in total darkness quickly fed the spool of film into the 2½ gallon tank of SOUP.

Grabbing handfuls of film like spaghetti I shook the film in the tank for the allotted time. Then a minute or so in the stop bath and finally into the hypo (fixer) for several minutes before opening the door. By now nearly 20 minutes were used up. Looking at the film it was blank. Not one black streak from a tracer round. Not a single black ball from the gun ship dropping flares, absolutely nothing on the film. I was dejected, heart broken. Putting the film in the sink to wash a few minutes and roll the film back on the spool.

In the office I thanked the petty officer for letting me use his lab. He asked how it went. I told him I had to go back to Saigon and get faster film. The driver drove me to the air base terminal, on his way back to Marble Mountain.

At the DASPO Villa, the team OIC asked how things were going? I told him it wasn't. The whole Fire Fly Project was IFFY. We were in essence an aerial night time combat patrol, if the enemy hid in huts, tunnels or wouldn't fire on the helos, plus flying four hours a night, I had only a 50-50 chance of getting the action that took place that night. I told him I came back for faster film. He asked how I knew I needed faster film? I informed him I developed a test roll.

In the next day or so I returned to Marble Mountain with EF Film, the fastest Kodak made. Since leaving the battalion received word they would start using the wire guided TOW missile. One morning, on a clear, full moon night, while flying in the high helo, the pilots came over the intercom announcing an ARC-LIGHT Raid (B-52 Raid) some 10 to 15 miles off. I witnessed the length and duration of each planes bomb run on a ridge in the distance. We could watch each bomb detonate. In tandem the three plane sortie dropped its payload on the ridge. In the past I felt my bed shake, heard the bomb noise, but never actually saw a B-52 Raid, especially a ring side aerial view of the action as I had that night.

DASPO Films Operation Fire Fly & Escorts Viet Boy Home

For roughly the next three weeks, I worked Fire Fly, flip-flopping between low and high choppers, with mixed results. The air force gun ship never fired its vulcan or motorized Gatling Gun. It had no reason to fire the artillery it had aboard. On numerous occasions the AC-130 dropped from one to three flares lighting up the ground below. On the helos from time to time we encountered curfew violaters and swiftly dealt with them. We hadn't engaged the enemy in any unit size only one or two enemy soldiers acting indepentently. I finally called it quits with between 600 and 700 feet of film exposed and spent a month trying to film Operation Fire Fly.

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