

DASPO Covers War Zone "C"

Between 26 Dec. 1966 and 29 March, 1967, while a photographer with DASPO, I covered three combat operations. They were Cedar Falls, Gadsden and Junction City. None of these combat operations were a single unit mission. Rather they were a conglomerate of various units and organizations that were attached or detached, tailoring the fighting force to fit the purpose. All three operations were centered in War Zone "C", home territory to the 25th Infantry Division. However many operations overlapped each other, reducing the 25th Division's troop strength for new combat commitments, necessitating the need to attach units from near by combat units for combat operations on-going or about to begin. Generally 5,000 men brigade size units, but trained and operational battalion sized South Vietnamese forces also were employed, on two of the three operations.

During the massive troop build up, units were assigned where ever there was room. Some units seemed like chess pieces. A case in point, the 4th Inf Div. The last I knew, they were hundreds of miles away, headquartered in the central highlands. However when they first arrived in Vietnam, they were attached to the 25th Inf Div, near Saigon. Some units had the manpower, but lacked specific equipment to conduct their own combat operations, and therefore expected to augment other commands. These would include the paratroopers of the 173rd and the 196th Light Inf BDE. Both commands possessed mortars, but lacked artillery. Both units had insufficient helo or trucks to move themselves into combat positions.

In guerilla warfare, it would be fool hardy to commit a units full resources to a battle. The enemy could pop-up where least expected; including a undefended or lightly defended base camp. While your in the jungle chasing "Charlie", he might be at your base camp blowing it apart. The VC had spies every where, constantly looking for weakness in our defenses. A classic story comes to mind. I forgot whether it was 1st or 25th Inf Div; but the unit hired VC surveyors to plot the entire headquarters buildings complex. Of course the VC had the exact grid coordinates for the commanding general's office and his staff. The VC waited until the command group moved into their new building to unleash a rocket and mortar attack.

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Operation Cedar Falls lasted less than three weeks, during Jan and Feb. 1967. The object of this combat operation was a blocking action and search and destroy mission along the head-waters of the Saigon River in War Zone "C". Besides the 25th Inf Div, the campaign used the 196th Lt Inf BDE, elements of the 1st Inf Div., the 7th ARVN Regiment, the 173rd Airborne BDE and the 11th Armored Cav. Regiment. The results for the 18 day operation 331 VC KIA, 39 POW's and 147 Hoi Chanh (defectors.)

Operation Gadsden lasted from 2-21 Feb, 1967 and took place in Tay Ninh Province Designed to expose VC and NVA infiltration routes from Cambodia into War Zone "C". The 25th Inf Div yearbook states elements of the II Field Force and the 25th Inf Div. conducted this operation. Documents I submitted to TTU Vietnam Archives state War Zone "C" is clearly in the III Field Force area. Results 161 VC killed.

Junction City, 22 Feb-16 May 1967 was a major search and destroy operation from the Cambodian border to the Iron Triangle of War Zone "C". The operation used the 2nd BDE 25th Inf Div, 11th ACR 3rd BDE, 4th Inf Div, the 196th Lt Inf BDE, 9th Inf Div, 11th ACR along with two Bn's of Vietnamese Marine BDE. Resulting in 947 VC KIAs, 18 POWs and 183 Hoi Chanh (defectors).

During Operation Cedar Falls, in the jungle with an infantry company, I got my first wisp of napalm. That first stink came to my nose a good $\frac{1}{2}$ mile from the actual burnt area. The closer we marched toward the stench, the worse it became, until it nearly gagged me. The burnt area wasn't fresh. the ambers were totally extinguished The horrendous stink might have been caused by the morning dew. What ever caused the odor it sure was nauseating to be associated with.

During Operation Junction City, the two man DASPO Team went with a unit, we both said, we never wanted to be with again. Discipline was extremely lax. Troops had boom boxes blaring away. The VC could hear this unit coming two miles off. I felt these troops would run away from a fire fight. They acted like they were taking a stroll in the woods, not kill or be killed situation. We terminated our stay with this unit quickly.

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While on Operation Gadsden, the two man DASPO Photo Team was covering a infantry company. A small group of VC, I guess no more than a half dozen set up an ambush and run tactic. The DASPO Team was mid-column in the vicinity of the unit commander and radio operator. The VC attempted killing the commander. Allowing the unit's point man and first third of the column to pass the VC position, before opening fire with small arms. Bullets were flying all around me. I ducked to the ground by an infantryman.

My intent was to film this guy firing his M-16, but I think he like me, this was his first time in a true fire fight, and to scared to do anything. For the first time, I realized someone was trying to write my obituary. I remember the bullets were coming from the right side of me. Instead of a bang sound you hear from behind a gun being fired, the noise of incoming rounds was a snap. The snap was just like someone snapping their fingers. I layed flat on my belly, by the close proximity, I can't believe that the bullets were wizzing more than four inches over my head. The G.I. I was next to never lifted his M-16 to fire. So I filmed nothing. Out of the corner of my eye, I spied a dark shadowy figure running parallel to the way our column had entered the ambush. The person running was about 100 feet away from my position. One DASPO member told me you can't hear the snap if the bullets are more than eight inches away. How true that is, is questionable?

DASPO seemed to have a fixation with the Tropic Lighting Troops of the 25th Inf Div. This association could be, because we were both from Hawaii. Partly, I figure because they were close to Saigon, but so were the 1st and 9th Inf. Div's. Partly because War Zone "C" was the most active area, with the 25th Div. involved with every operation happening. It wasn't uncommon for us DASPO people at Ft. Shafter to travel to Schofield Barracks for certain supplies from the few 25th Div. troops remaining. Somehow most of the combat patrols, I was on was with the 1st and 2nd Bn, 27th Inf, the Wolfhounds of the 25th Inf. Div. I did go out with the 1st Inf. Div and mechanized units also.

DASPO Films War Zone ".C"

The III Field Force area, including Saigon Tay Ninh and War Zone "C" was dominated by two contrasting climate extremes. The hot and wet and the hot and dry season. Around Saigon, you could set your watch by the time the thunderstorms began. They were that predictable. From April to Oct. was the rainy season, the time to plant crops. It was the time when a seemingly insignificant mud puddle could swallow an entire truck tire, causing delays, stuck, stranded or just simply out of action until help arrived.

During the dry season any zephyr was welcome. The air was still. The dirt roads turned to dust storms, reducing visibility to near zero. Without a breeze the dust lingered in the air from road traffic, causing choking and breathing problems for the convoy drivers and resident Vietnamese people living along convoy routes. Clothing turned brown, foliage was darkened and merchants exposed retail goods all received a coating of dust in the dry season.

Combat operations took intense planning and coordination. Insuring the combat troops were properly prepared and equipped. It meant utilizing internal (DS) Direct Support assets to the fullest extent. It required emptying maintenance shops of helos, vehicles and other equipment. It required the unit to request supplies and support from external sources. These included echelons of (GS) General Support and depot level reinforcements to insure there was enough fuel for trucks, tanks and helos, plenty of C-Rations, water, ammo and artillery shells, down to the smallest detail of having significant quantities of maps of the combat area for helo pilots, artillery fire support bases and ground troop commanders. Everything had to be ready before the operation kicked off.

Additionally coordination with sister services as the Air Force requiring them to restock their fuel and ordinance supplies and hurry up aircraft maintenance. The medical community might require additional supplies of bandages and medicines to care for the casualties. (GS) aviation support needed to be on alert to support the combat troops or retrieve downed helos or aerial transport artillery pieces, with Chinook or flying cranes.

William Foulke
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DASPO Member
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