

DASPO Films Drug Addict Detox Facility

Arriving in Vietnam between Christmas and New Year 1966, the first few days were relegated to administrative procedures, not the least, changing GREEN BACKS for MPC (Military Payment Certificates) and/or Piaster, the Vietnamese currency, along with insuring our immunization cards were current with the lastest MACV policy. Some of this was done in the airport terminal. Getting ration cards and statements of Non-availability, allowing the DASPO team to live at the DASPO Villa, instead of government housing.

With the holidays behind us, the 12 man detachment was split unto two man teams, heading to all corners of the country for filming assignments, mostly combat operations and patrols. SSG Frank Salas and myself were assigned the job of filming the drug addict holding facility at Long Binh. The Saigon/Bien Hoa Highway in early 1967, was considered safe and secure enough to traverse in daylight, without being in a convoy. Thus the Vietnamese driver, the DASPO Team had, drove us the 15 miles to Long Binh Post.

In this time frame, the only aerial ports serving charter flights for in-coming and departing troops were Saigon, Da Nang and Cam Ranh Bay. The Bien Hoa Air Base was a tactical air base, with a passenger terminal under construction, but not yet completed. The drug holding facility supported the 1st, 9th and 25th Infantry Divisions, the 11th Armored Cav, other regiments and brigades, including the 173rd Airborne and 196th Light Infantry, and the thousands of combat support and combat service support units in the Saigon/ Long Binh area. The holding site in reality was the only location in the lower third of Vietnam for this purpose.

Having been assigned to the Army Pictorial Center in New York City, and now at Ft. Shafter in Honolulu; the news broadcast frequently pertained to custom agents, the Coast Guard and police making drug busts. Occassionally, they dealt with drug deals going bad, culminating in shoot outs and murder. This would be my first encounter with known dope addicts, and I was apprehensive as what to expect, with a speck or two of curiosity prevailed surrounding this assignment.

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The place was a stockade of sorts, complete with 15 feet high fence, barbed and constina wiring, flood lights around the perimeter and MP sentries around the clock. If I recall correctly, there were three maybe four buildings in the complex. In the office area, we were told the interned were collected from units random drug sampling, but mostly from mandatory drug testing of personnel completing their one year tour of duty in Vietnam, and about to depart for the United States. There were urine collecting, lab processing and here at the detox holding area. To do the story, we would have to film all three segments not just the drug holding site.

It was stressed that this place was a detox holding area, and in no way a drug addiction curing facility. Adding they said, our primary mission is war related. There was not a facility, trained personnel and other resources in-country to fight this battle on drugs too. It was stated the interned people were here, only long enough, until their body could expell enough drugs to pass the urine test. That was usually 10 to 14 days. Then they would be put on a plane back to the states for proper medical treatment, at their next duty station.

The people in the office claimed, most of the drugs in Vietnam originated in the Golden Triangle. The region where Burma, Laos and Thailand's borders meet. They also asserted, that nearly all the detainees were herion addicts. Saying that some were using 15 to 20 vials a day. My mind raced to calculate, that was a shot every 90 minutes or sooner. They said, some were \$200.00 a day habit. Parlaying that to my pay check, that was slightly over one day's supply. How did these lower paid troops do it? That question was answered by the counselor and office staff, when they said; one addict stole from another. They begged and borrowed. Eventually they became barrack thieves. Stealing anything that wasn't locked up including, alarm clocks, wallets, watches, cameras, stereos and anything they could get their hands on, to sell on the black market, to support their habit. In addition, Army tools, supplies and equipment were fair game in their quest for illicit funds. It was questionable, that some may face courts-marshal for their actions. The detox center staff, asserted, that some troops couldn't even get high anymore with 15 to 20 vials a day. They stressed the local Vietnam herion was 85 to 90 percent pure, as compared with the stateside purity of only 5-10 percent pure. They said they troops interned were in all stages of "COLD TURKEY" and that their reaction to being filmed would cross the gamut of emotions.

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I remember taking a tour of the site, before filming began. I can't recall being physically searched at any time, but we members of the DASPO Photo Team, had a constant escort, either MP or staff member, the entire time we spent at the drug addict Detox location. The first room the trio, the two DASPO members and escort, entered the guy was sitting on the floor, huddled in a corner of the room, with a heavy Army wool blanket over him. Who ever the escort was, said herion dilates the eyes, so that any light hurts the eyes. The person was totally despondent to any questions. The blanket was moving in relation to the twitching and shaking. It was as though, the guy had gotten bit by a half a snout full of nerve agent. The escort made an attempt to pull the blanket away. The most we saw was a young guy wearing sunglasses, hiding under the blanket. I remember my thoughts were how pathetic. The Army paid for basic training and individual job training. And the reward was a derelict that had desecrated himself into uselessness. Somebody that hides under a blanket in defeatism.

The second darkened cubicle we entered, the guy was laying on the Army cot, wearing sunglasses. He had the Army blanket tacked up over the window to exclude light from entering. The overhead lights were also turned off in this room, as was the case in the former room. This kid was barely old enough to shave. He was less than lethargic, when asked to sit up. He was at least cognizance that he had visitors, with some babbling imbecility incongruous phases, but mostly on parity with the initial incognito troop.

As the tour progressed, the soldiers were coherently more alert. We heard a sanctimonious revalling rhetoric, that they were innocent victims of a covert government plot to frame lower enlisted troops. Throughout the tour, there were two other puzzling issues. While these drug addicts were cornered, and headed back to the states, mostly likely never to return to Vietnam, they sted-fastly refused to divulge their pusher's identity. It was unknown if the supplier was other troops, Vietnamese or an American contractor working in country. The other point of contention, was they all felt unwanted and started on drugs to have a feeling of belonging to a group.

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What a mis-guided foray that turned out to be. One addict ended up stealing from another, inducing mistrust and rancor. They became barrack theives, that everyone hated. Their co-workers and barrack members loathed, the addict and his activities. They terminated this venture, with only their pusher as their friend, and then only when the addict had cash to purchase more herion. This concept of taking drugs to have friends and a feeling of belonging, stalled at alienating everyone around them.

Many stated they started out using herion, with only a few saying they graduated up to smack. When asked how they took the drug the overwhelming response was snorting or injection. Universally, they agreed, they wanted the instantious high of getting the drug into the blood stream fast. Other methods of inducing the drug were slower acting. I vaguely remember something concerning bloody noses from snorting the herion, into the nasal passageway.

I don't recall hearing the capasity of the Detox Center in Long Binh. What we saw were 20 to 25, maybe more interned troops. None seemed over 21 years old. We witnessed no females or officers. Following the tour, I believe we had a Sun-Gun portable light source, that was useful for 10 to 15 minutes of illumination, if lucky. We had barely enough light to film 400 feet of film. I'm thinking for this project we used an "Arri "S" camera, with a 400 foot magazine. I recall, while filming a few felt disgraced enough to ask, if their parents, wives or girl friends back home would see the movie? We assured them with some certainty that it was highly unlikely.

With our light source drained, we had to end filming for the day. The Detox staff said, they would inform the replacement unit that we would film the urine testing and lab procedures operation the following day. Both Salas and myself inticipated, the detained addicts to be outside playing vollyball or basketball, definitely not finding dysfunctional people hiding under blankets in darkened rooms.

DASPO Films Drug Detox Center at Long Binh

Driving back to Saigon, I started pondering what we had seen and filmed. Many of the contained addicts had a pretentious attitude about them. A few were naive. Some showed their vanity, others had an air of arrogance about them. Most felt they had done nothing wrong. One or two of the detainees, I felt like taking my belt off and giving them a good spanking, but I was only 22 years old at the time myself, making me feel more like an older brother. They all seemed weak minded, They were followers of the pack. None of these dope addicts resembled being the leader of the group. Some seemed introverts, intombed within themselves. Others hated the unit, because of mal-assignment (working outside their job training.) Several hated the unit for turning in the addict, ridding themselves of the thievery, felony, burglary and larceny committed by the addict to support their habit. One or two even claimed, they tried drugs, as a relief from exhaustion of over work, and little relaxation time. (See BG Kinderdine's Visit at this web-site.)

The next day at the 90th or 91st Replacement Unit, where all incoming and departing troops went for final processing and awaited flights back to the states, we knew we would be filming indoors and compensated with regular Color-Tran light sets. In the out-processing area, SSG Frank Salas and myself, were told of the known tricks addicts used to out smart the urine test. They stated some of the less innovative addicts would get containers or orange and/or apple juice from the mess hall. They would blend the juices to resemble urine. Using a balloon with a rubber hose taped to their penis, they would have the balloon taped to their armpit filled with juice. When time to piss, they squeezed their arm, releasing the substance into the test vial. More astute addicts, frequently bought a specimen of urine from a clean soldier, and employed the same hose and balloon routine, to try and beat the system.

We by-passed the preliminary paperwork and entered the bathroom itself. Again, we watched the procedure before filming the activity. What we saw was about 15 urinals with a bright yellow line painted about three feet in front of the urinals. The soldier were instructed to proceed no further than the yellow line. Elevated about six feet high, a senior NCO sat on a bench observing the entire line filling the test vial. I don't remember if he had binoculars or not, but from his vantage point he was checking for bandades or rubber band on the person's penis. It was never mentioned, nor filmed how females soldiers were tested, or if they were tested at all. Once the troop filled the vial, he could advance to the urinal itself, to finish the task.

DASPO Films Drug Detox Facility At Long Binh

In early 1967, the charter flight planes mostly used by the airlines were Boeing 707's and 720's, along with Douglas DC-8's, carrying between 120 and 150 passengers. The Army was allocated about half the seats on each plane. Service members granted emergency leave, the other services, VIP's and civilian contractors sharing the remaining available seats on planes flying out of Saigon's Tan Son Nhut's airport. With a half dozen flights a day, the urine testing was an on-going procedure. Every 15 minutes or so a new group would provide a urine specimen. We set up our lights and filmed one line of troops. But, our main objective was to get the observer. I have some recollection, of moving the bench he sat on forward from the wall, allowing us to put a step ladder behind, and film over the NCO's shoulder of the sergeant watching the proceedings, to insure no irregularities prevailed, or bogus samples were gotten.

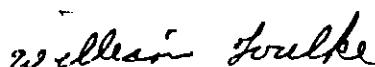
We followed a truck carrying trays of urine samples to the lab a few blocks away. Inside the building, there were two or three long tables, with marble or slate black tops. On the tables were dozens of trays, containing the specimen samples. The two of us DASPO members, were told, they got between two and five percent positive readings. However, that was a misnomer. Explaining some of the troops testing positive, had been on sick call, to dispensaries or hospitalized, having doctor's prescribed pharmaceutical medications, containing the drugs they were testing for. those soldiers using doctor's prescribed medicines, had a readily traceable paper trail. Each soldier at the Replacement Unit had their medical, financial and personnel records with them. It would take a scant amount of time to verify the doctor's perscription, against the positive test. Those soldier with proof of medication were excused from the detox containment.

As I pen this essay, it's roughly 18 months shy of 40 years, since we filmed this activity. We only spent about two hours at each the urine testing and lab work facility, so many long years ago. I'm absolutely certain the boss of the lab, told us they only tested for three drugs. The primary one was opiate derivatives, from which herion originated. The other two, I hope I'm right were coca plant extracts, such as cocaine and the other was marijuana. These were the prevalent drugs used in Vietnam.

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I definitely recall the officer in charge of the lab, telling us they used a special litmus paper, that was sensitive to the drugs they were checking for. I remember setting up the camera and lights, as we watched the lab technicians insert the litmus strips into the uncapped urine samples. The first set of trials, all proved negative. Seeing the action, the lights were turned on to film the second batch to be tested. With several hundred samples in trays, we filmed the lab people testing the second batch. This batch also were all negative. I started to wonder, how they figured a two to five percent positive reading? However the third set of tests was a winner. There were at least three positive reading in a small cluster, with several others positive reading test vials scattered along the table. The problem was all the positive readings were on the far table. We had the camera focused on the closest table. It was simpler to move the trays with positive readings, closer to the camera, than move lights and camera to the trays with positive readings. We then had the lab technicians take out the used litmus papers, and insert new strips for the camera to record the strips turning a red color, from the initial blue tint.

We Department of the Army Special Photo Office (DASPO) personnel, circumvented the drug testing program, because we were on loan to Vietnam from Hawaii. As such, we booked our own flight reservations in and out of country, directly with the Air Force. It should be stated, that at filming of the drug detox treatment in Jan. 1967, the age for testing was 27 years old and younger. Later, by 1969 the age for testing was reduced to age 25. Of the half dozen round trips to Vietnam, that I made between 1965 and 1971, I was never drug tested, either because I was on temporary loan or temporary duty status, or over the drug testing age.



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