The Army Phone System In Vietnam

It's paradoxical, that even though all Army photographers wore the Signal Corp insignia, we seldom filmed asignments of our sister/brother communication jobs. Many photographers, including myself sent some portion of their Army career in signal battalion photo labs. Much of this dilemma relates to the fact the photo section was housed within the Headquarters Company, not the line companies having telephonic equipment. Another factor was our terminology and jargon were completely unharmonious. While the photo section talked in terms of whether to "SOUP" film in DK-50 or D-76, and how long to "HYPO" it, or the virtues of TRI-X over PLUS-X film; the communicators had their own argot and lingo for their work related tools, parts and equipment, that were totally alien to the cameraman. My stay in the NCO hut at Chu Lai, with the 36th Sig. Bn., while awaiting the Americal Division Colors (story and slides at this web-site.) I was a total stranger to the other NCO's vocabulary, their ACRONYM's in reference to work related communications, parts and equipment. It was an embarrassment for me wearing dignal Corp brass, to be associated with these other signal sergeants, our work related language had nothing in common.

This discord created isolation between the photo section and the communicators. The situation was sort of a quarantine from the Bn HQs and the photo staff. It's believed the "HEAD SHED" considered telephone operators a lack luster, non glamorous, rather mundane occupation. Another element in the equation is that the signal battalion, also operates the message center. A portion of the message center's traffic is classified, with higher headquarters sending down mission directives or operational changes to subordinate units. These messages were received and transferred to the appropriate unit(s), within the signal battalion jurisdiction. Having photos of these classified segments would add burden and delay in completing the yearly Inspector General's visit.

I well remember my first trip to Vietnam in 1965, when 14 camreaman from the Army Pictorial Center were sent to augment the 39th Sig. Bn, on Tan Son Nhut, until the 69th Sig. Bn arrived from Germany. The entire battalion was huddled onto a few acres of the air base. We had ample opportunity to film the telephone operators at work. I doubt that any of us 14 cameramen ventured to the signal vans out of curiosity. Daily the word from the superiors was nothing happening, or certain people hang loose, we're trying to contact some far flung location to send a photo team. It was this lack of emphasis from the brass and command center on down, that deprived the signal battalion operations from being filmed during the Vietnam era. In my 13 years behind a camera, I never filmed the switch board operation of a Sig. Bn.

The Army Phone System In Vietnam

From my first venture to Vietnam, until I departed the MACV Photo Team in 1969, plus two subsequence trips in 69 and 71, a goodly amount of time was wasted trying to communicate. The phone system had definately improved over the years, but was still primative, by any standards. Much of the telephonic equipment was probably Korean War vintage. Under this criteria, the signal Bn would have land lines between Corp HQS, to each division HQS, the seperate regiments and brigades, independent avaition, medical and supply and service units. The TV series M.A.S.H. graphically depicts the situation. The entire 4077th Hospital had a single phone, controlled by Radar in the Orderly Room. At best the Korean War phone service reached down to battalion level, and probably not to company level. One phone served 800 to 1200 troops. In Vietnam the phone service had escaladed to one phone for every 150 to 200 troops or there about. Besides telephonic communications with Army units, the phone system had to interface with the Air Force, Navy and Marine units.

It must be emphasised that all calls were processed by rank. There were, and probably still is five catagories of calls. I hope I remember the catagories and ranks using each catagory correctly.

FLASH: For generals, admirals & GS-13 or above civilians

PRESIDENTS: For colonels, Lt. Col, Naval Captain and commander

IMMEDIATE: For Major and possibily captains, Lt. CDRS

PRIORITY: Lieutenants and top three sergeant ranks

ROUTINE: For junior sergeants and lower enlisted

Rank had it privileges as far as phone service went. The second the operator came on line, the first question was what catagory of call are you making? When all circuits were busy, and someone with a higher rank wanted to place a call, any underling was unceremoniously disconnected. There was no fanfare. No operator came on the line saying you have 10 seconds to end the call--nothing. In the middle of a sentence or a word, the line just went dead. Untold countless times this has happened to all, but the generals.

The Army Phone System In Vietnam

This was decades before the cell phone craze. Satellite communications was in its infancy. The phone system had no direct dial service. All calls were operator assisted. The phone system had no private lines, they were all party lines. Meaning four or five units shared one phone line. Frequently when lifting the receiver, you would hear an on-going conversation. All you could do was hang up and try later, which added to the frustration. In the early years, there were few, if any microwave relay antennas. The phone system was virtually as if each zip code was its own area code. For example: If the TTU Archives wanted to call Chicago, picking up the receiver, you would get the Lubbock operator. This operator would contact Amarillo or Dallas operator The Dallas or Amarillo operator would extend the call to Oklahoma City operator. The Oklahoma City operator would plug your call into St. Louis phone center. In turn, the St. Louis operator would transfer the phone line to Chicago operator, where finally the Chicago operator would connect the TTU Archives with the proper number in the Windy City. To call Cu Chi from Tan Son Nhut only 25 miles away, it quite probably you were transferred to Saigon, then Deer, to Rabbit and Foxtrot, before getting to Charlie Charlie.

If the above scenario sounds like a nightmare; it was. Tan Son Nhut Air Base, at the edge of Saigon had one phone exchange, while the military off base had a seperate phone operation. If the 5th Special Forces wanted to book some people on a flight, they had to have the Saigon operator connect them with the Tan Son Nhut operator, which in turn would connect the call to the passenger reservations. Under the best of circumstances, a simple phone call became a laborious task.

I've only seen the switchboard equipment of the era in technical manuals and on historical episodes, such as the History Channel's "Mail Call." I remember there were two rows for phone connections. Each row having eight to 10 outlets. One of the most common phrases heard from operators was, try later all circuits are busy. When you tried a few minutes later, a different voice came on the line, thus there were several switch board operators on duty at all times.

The Army Phone System In Vietnam

A G.I. needing to update his immunization record might try placing a "Routine" call to the dispensary, checking if the vaccine he needed was available. Between all circuits are busy, the party line already in use, higher caliber calls disconnecting the completion of the call to the dispensary, or the dispensary line busy with other incoming and out going calls, it could take half a day to perform this simple chore.

The voluminous amount of calls taxed the American Forces phone system to the point many troops considered the telephone a necessary evil. In most cases it was virtually easier and quicker to take a military vehicle, hitch-hike, use the military bus or even take a Vietnamese taxi, to conduct business; than to try and perform these tasks over the phone. Conducting business in person had several drawbacks. First it escalated the volume of traffic on the Saigon and other Vietnamese city streets. This congestion slowed traffic to a crawl. Causing it to take longer getting from point (A) to point (B). Second with the added vehicles on the streets greatly increased smog and other pollution, causing an unhealthy air to breathe. Lastly it adversely affected the productivity a person could accomplish in a work day.

The phone system expedited wasted manpower, cost and reduced effeciency. I recall in 1965, a captain spent two days trying to contact an engineer battalion in Qui Nhon, to inform them that he was sending a two man photo team to cover their activities. In to total exasperation, the captain booked us on a flight to that city. Arriving in monsoon rain, we were informed the unit hadn't worked in a week, because of the rain and mud. Hoping the weather would clear, we spent a week with the unit. Not having a change of clothes, nor a bath in a week, the two of us stunk to high heaven. We booked ourselves a flight back to Saigon totally empty handed. This was only one costly incident because of communications were lacking.

The De Long Piers (story and slides at this web-site) was another communication fiasco. I with a still photographer were sent to Cam Ranh Bay to film the installation of floating docks. Arriving on site, the piers were somewhere on the Pacific Ocean or South China Sea, but no one knew where.

The Armed Forces Phone System In Vietnam

While the desk clerks and pencil pushers of the combat service support units had more phone. The combat divisions were closely alined to the Korean War era. I was at the Public Affair Office of the 25th Infantry Division. The entire 15,000 man division had a four page mimeograph phone book. Other combat units had phone books of simuliar size; That meant each of the division's brigade had some phones. Each battalion within the brigade had fewer than 10 phones for 1200 to 1500 troops. The battalion headquarters had a few phones. Each 160 man company had a phone in the orderly room. The mess hall probably had one. The motor pool and battalion supply (S-4) had a phone. That was about all the phone service for a battalion sized unit.

Line drop was another hardship everyone had to endure. Every one got a cauliflower ear and sore throats yelling into the phone It was as if two kids had a pair of tin cans attached by a string a half mile apart and trying to talk. I remember calling Bam Me Thout for two hours, one evening, to inform them a MACV Photo Team was coming to film a specific topic. I was cut-off numerous times by higher class call. When I finally was able to make contact with the staff duty NCO, the line drop was terrible. We were both screaming at the tops of our lungs and getting cauliflower ear from pressing the ear piece into our ears. Still both of us screamed "SPEAK LOUDER", I CAN"T HEAR YOU!!. In the end, I think I was able to convey that "The Big HQS" was coming. The people in Bam Me Thout had no idea if the team was to relieve the commander If some inspection team was coming, or something as innocent as a photo team was coming.

Because of the dense telephonic traffic, the operators were constantly monitoring the calls. Any brief silence in talking was justificable reason to assume the call was completed. The operator would disconnct the line. Many calls required that one person lay down the receiver, to ask someone else a question, or extract a document from the file cabinet. To insure you weren't disconnected, during the silent moments, one person had to constantly say "WORKING."

By Mid to late 1967, there were some marketly improvements in the telephone system. However it must be remembered that this time frame also saw the maximum troop strength in Vietnam, straining an already precarious communication links to the limit.

Armed Forces Phone System In Vietnam

I recall MACV handing the Army "A" Photo Team an assignment in Da Nang. I dreaded even attempting to place a call to the unit four hundred miles away. I questioned how many switch boards I'd be transferred through to complete the call. I procrastinated if I would be able to hear the Da Nang operator, because of the line drop. I pondered how many higher class calls would cut me off, before ever getting to Da Nang. When I finally got up the fortitude to lift the receiver and tell the Saigon operator, that I wanted Da Nang, the next person I heard was the Da Nang operator. The line drop was unnoticeable on this call. I can only deduce that the Pentagon donated to the Military Assistance Command some frequencies on a Dept. Of Defense communications satellite to alleviate some high congestion phone routes.

Another time I needed to call Tay Ninh, concerning a photo assignment. I well remembered going through four or five switch boards just to reach Cu Chi. To tranfer the call another 40 miles from Cu Chi to Tay Ninh was a daunting problem. Yet by 1968, when the Saigon operator asked where the call was to, I was immediately connected with Tay Ninh. I have no conformation, but I infer the introduction of microwave relay stations, from Saigon directly to Cu Chi and another relay antenna in Tay Ninh put the call straight through with minimum of line drop and delay.

William Foulke

William Foulke
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Written Feb 2006

DASPO Films USARV Data Processing Unit

Throughout the history of warfare, the lack of intelligence has led to many outrageous blunders on both sides of the conflict Indecision has led to miss opportunities or advantage during battle. During the Vietnam troop build up some hasty ill thought out stupid decisions were made, that had profound implications to one critical Army unit in the Long Binh area. The case in point, was the positioning of the U.S. Army Vietnam (USARV) Data Processing Unit or DPU.

SSG Frank Salas and I were assigned to film the DPU activities upon completion of shooting the "Long Binh Detox Facility (Story available at this web-site.) By Jan. 1967, the Long Binh Post was growing by leaps and bounds, with new units arriving daily. Back then the installation was only a fraction of its eventual size, affording abundant room for the DPU operation directly on Long Binh Post itself, but for some obscured reason the DPU folks were nestled on a acre or two at the most inopportune location. Because of their dumb site, the data processing people told us, they had two or three computer runs ruined every day.

The location selected for the DPU folks was the intersection of two major highways; the Bear Cat to Bien Hoa and the Saigon to Bien Hoa road. Both highways sustained heavy convoy and tactical vehicle traffic. The DPU was housed outside the fence of the 3rd Ordnance Battalion. The DPU was operating on pins and needles all the time, and persistantly behind schedule, working under the adversities. They never knew how many computer runs would be desecrated that day. Every computer run they made was iffy, because of the lousy working location.

The myraid of problems began with the fact the IBM-360 computer the data processing people had, was very delicate sensitive item of equipment, designed for a very stable enviornment inside a permanent structure. The Army however adapted the state of the art main frame computer for mobile trailer vans configuration, with punch card functions in one van and computer operation in an other. Both trailers were connected by an interlocking causeway.

DASPO Films USARV Data Processing Unit

The DPU people told SSG Salas and I, to operate normally, the computer had to be perfectly level. Yet upon arriving on the site the land the computer unit was sitting on had never been excavated. No bulldozer or grader ever levelled the terrain. Weeds knee high were all around the site. Under the rear wheels and the front landing gear of both vans were railroad ties to level the machinery. The landing gear are retractable skids at the front of the trailer, allowing the tractor to be disconnected from the trailer/van. January was the dry season, however afternoon thun derstorms were common, that created water puddles around the rail road ties, causing the computer vans to be off balance, as the ties sank into the mud. We were told this situation was a constant problem. The DPU had to relevel the vans nearly every day before operations could begin.

The computer people informed us, the IBM-360 was prone to malfunction if strict hygienic and humidly conditions weren't within strict adherence. Dust and dirt were arch enemies for proper computer operations. Any of these factors would jinx a computer run. Arriving we DASPO (Dept. Of The Army Special Photo Office) Photo Team walked on pallets, avoiding getting wet feet. Inside the door of the computer vans were rags or towels to wipe our feet, reducting the contamination. The computer vans were as sterile as any hospital operating room. The computer vans were the only air conditioning, I felt during the three months DASPO stay in Vietnam. Yet outside, it wasn't uncommon to step in a water puddle and have dust blowing in your face at the same time. When a computer run was bad, they had to start all over, that forced the DPU people behind schedule. All these natural forces could and did ruin computer runs.

Other unnatural forces added trauma and devastated some computer runs, we were told. They said, being situated at the crossroad of the two highways, greatly added burden to the already precarious operations. Adding they said, heavily loaded five or 10 ton convoy trucks sometimes destroyed a computer run from the vibrations, these trucks created. Moreover, they said the armored personnel carriers (APC), M-48 or the massive 102,000 pound M-60 tanks rumbled by their site caused intolerable vibrations for the computer, that messed up computer program runs.

The DPU people had another major problem to contend with, but stated, they had learned to work around that tribulation. The DPU unit was buttressed up against the 3rd Ord. Bn. fence, meant the most sensitive computer sustained more impact from the 3rd Ord's nightly explosions, than any other unit. Among the Army's most costliest, most fragile equipment was located closest to harms way.

I later worked with the 3rd Ord Bn's bomb disposal team (EOD) while shooting Army Photog flys the A-37 (story and slides at this web-site). I learned the EOD team had five pads, but usually only used two or three for destroying unuseable artillery shells, explosives and other ordnance. On each pad, they stacked from 5 to 15 tons of bad explosives. The EOD team lit the det-cord for a 5P.M. detonation of the pads. The blast from each pad could be seen and heard for miles. The blast created diastrophism, magnitude two or three earthquakes and sent out shock waves that shook the computer vans. The DPU people knew to complete a computer run by 4:45 or totally shut down operations, until after the nightly blasts.

Electricity for the computer vans was supplied by several mobile generators. The generators were behind the vans and mostly out of sight. They were probably 15 or 30KW generators. Anyway, this was one time popping circuit breakers wasn't foremost in the camera teams mind. We set up the lights and camera at the punch card operation. We filmed as DPU personnel prepared tray fulls of blank punch cards. We shot film as the person sat at the key board typing in new input data. Seconds later the punch card was extracted from the machine with numerous holes strategically located with computer code. It took between a half hour and 45 minutes, to convert all the new input from common English to computer terminology. They had several trays of punch cards of new data, that was taken to the other trailer van housing the IBM-360 computer itself.

One person showed us the tape disk storage containers. My mind is vague, but I think they had five storage containers with six tape disks per container. Each disk represented a different computer program, that the DPU people ran for USARV. We were informed most programs were daily runs. A few were twice a week and the rest were a weekly program. We were told, because of the volume of work, the DPU operated around the clock, in three shifts.

DASPO Films USARV Data Processing Unit

We were informed that most programs were dedicated to logistical operation; including procurement, supplys on hand and maintenance activities. The comptroller and finance had several programs, involving the daily ratio of committed to obligated funds. Other finance and accounting programs were also included. Personnel needed daily up dates of troop strengths, unit overages and under strength by job description, among with other personnel computer programs.

We filmed as the person selected the proper computer program disk for this computer run, and installed the disk into the computer. We filmed the trays of punch cards being attached to the computer, and watched as blank computer paper was stacked into the paper feed bin and the paper threaded into the computer. When all was set, we filmed the DPU chief push the run or start button. Seconds later page after page of printed computer issued forth from the computer. Scanning the documents it appeared to be a good computer run, that went off without any glitches. Dust, dirt, water vavor etc, etc hadn't affected this computer run.

After filming the DPU unit, I mostly lost track of their activities, until Mid-1968. The nearly completed USARV Headquarters deep inside the Long Binh Post itself, when I saw in what should have been parking spaces, there sat on level concrete pads the computer vans, far from vibrations or blast effects.

William Foulke

William Foulke
DASPO Member
Written Mar 2006

MACV Army "A" Photo Team's Dec 1968 Trip To Thailand

509th Radio Research Unit
Ubon (UDon) AFB Radar Site
World Airway Flight Crew Interview

During my three years in Vietnam, and elsewhere in the orient, I saw and was associated with a wide assortment of Air Force conventional iron bombs. The bombs ranged in size from 500 pounders up to one ton, with 750 and 1000 pounders as intermediate sizes. It mattered little that I was at Da Nang, Chu Lai, Cam Ranh Bay, Anderson AFB on Guam, Tan Son Nhut, Bien Hoa or Pleiku, it was inevitable seeing sorties of fighter/bombers, with bomb racks loaded taxiing or taking-off. Elsewhere on base, tractors pulled dolly loads of bombs from storage bunkers to parked flight line planes, was nearly a daily routine. Napalm was the only exception to the high explosive ordnance the aircraft carried into war.

The delivery platform was just as immaterial. I saw Navy A-6 Intruders, Corsair II's and Skyhawks with varing arsenals. I eyeballed Skyraiders, F-5's, F-100's F-4 Phantoms and A-37's (as described at this web-site). I also saw B-52's taking off from Guam with multiple bomb racks on each wing, plus internal loads, so laden with an assortment of munitions, the planes took-off with nearly empty fuel tanks, to be refueled once airborne.

The Stars & Stripes Newspaper carried stories of the Air Force using exotic ordnance, such as Smart and Cluster bombs, but I never saw these weapons in Vietnam. By the time the MACV Army "A" Photo Team's second trip to Thailand, in Dec. 1968, I felt that I was beyond a novice in Air Force ordnance. However on bases home to the 355th and 555th Tactical Fighter Squadrons or wings, flying F-105's Thunderchiefs, sent me back to kindergarden on the subject of Air Force Bombs.

I saw ordnance hanging from bomb racks, on these planes, that looked more suitable for a sheet metal shop. I saw what resembled a triple or quadruple sized oxygen tank on some planes. Absent were chemical bands, signifing these oversized oxygen tanks weren't toxic agent cannisters. For all I knew they may have been oxygen tanks, providing the "THUDS" extra thrust for eluding MIGs or SAM missiles, while over North Vietnam and enemy territory

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Other F-105's had rectangular sheet metal boxes, 10 to 15 feet long hanging from bomb racks. These rectangular shaped boxes could just as well served as heating/air conditioning ducts for a office complex. These exotic contraptions were in addition to the conventional bombs, extra wing tanks and Sparrow or sidewinder missiles, as part of the payload the planes carried. What these unconventional bombs were was a mystery.

The primary stories that, MAC-Thai handed the visiting photo unit, on the second trip to Thailand, had the propensity for disaster. Both jobs were under a high defination of veiled wraps. Both were on Air Force bases. The stealthiness of the jobs, using an Army photo team, when the base photo lab had competent personnel raised a lot of questions. Why; as with the spring excursion to Thailand (stories and slides available at this website), the team spent incessant of two weeks in country. Why the Army photo team was selected to film classified equipment and missions, when we had no safeguards for the sensitive material, specifically the exposed film. The base Information Office and photo Lab had safes for securing privilaged material, however we were scheduled to film at night, when these offices were closed. Our only asylum as a safe substitute was stuffing the film under the pillow or mattress while we slept in the base guest house.

This was not the first rouse the team or I fabricated to disguise holding classified material. I have vivid memories of flying, by myself from Honolulu to New York, aboard a United Airlines, all night journey, with classified film. I had to stay awake, until I could turn over the film to proper authorities at the Army Pictorial Center, the next morning.

I sat in seat R-5, my favorite location on United flights in the mid-60's. United Boeing 707's and 720's had a five seat tourist class lounge. This lounge was adjacent to the galley, lavatories and rear boarding door. Oddly enough, the rear lounge was rarely occupied, though one could spread their legs up to four feet, instead of the cramped 28 inch seating allotment in the standard tourist class seats.. On this particular flight, I told the stewardess, that I had a medical condition, I was traveling to New York to be cured. Explaining, that if I fell asleep, I could go into mass hysteria. The flight attendants did a superb job of keeping me awake, the entire flight.

MACV Army "A" Photo Team's Dec 1968 Trip To Thailand

509th Radio Reserch Unit
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One story on Ubon Air Base, was in part classified, because the base didn't want to advertise the filmsy, antiquated inadaqute air defense system the base had. This information would have been restricted anyway. The MACV Army "A" Photo Team filmed in the base radar station. I had apprehension and consternation, when we were told the effective distance of the base radar unit. Stateside radar units had well over double or triple the range that this base radar unit had. I had serious reservations, that a F-105 could reach cruising altitude, before dropping off the radar scope at 30 miles. The radar station personnel had no idea what country the departing planes were headed to. The destination was a mystery. They had no knowledge what direction of travel, nor target once the planes were out of radar range.

It was scary to think, the scant time frame the radar people had, to determine if returning in-bound planes were friendly or foe. If North Vietnam had mounted a sortie of MIG-17's to Thailand, the alert planes would barely have time to scramble and clear the runway, before bombs could have fallen onto the base. It's quite probably the air base had a battery of ground to air defense missiles, either of the Nike family or Hawk missiles.

The other story that MAC-Thai handed the photo team was at Takhli AFB, and was far more technical in nature. It dealt with an obscure unit, that I never knew exsisted, the 509th Radio Research Unit. The photo team stood outside their building for over one and one half hours, while the 509th personnel sanitized the work area down to a secret classification, so we could film with our photo team's security clearance.

At the end of WWII, this toddler was as the cliche expresses "In The Terrible Two's". The family had an Emerson Radio capable of receiving the standard AM band, plus several short of long wave bands. In my early days, when it became annoying to listen to the vocalizations of the characters and sound affects of such shows as "The Green Hornet", Lux Threatre, Amos & Andy or the Lone Ranger, desiring something pleasingly melodic, I recall switching to the other radio bands, to hear something more soothing to a youngster's listening pleasure.

509th Radio Research Unit
Ubon (Udon) AFB Radar Site
World Airway Flight Crew Interview

To this youngster's dismay the noise on the other bands were alarmingly unintelligible and incomprehensible to a pre-schooler's ears. Nearly every frequency that was transmitting was a series of dots and dashes code. Whether it was common Morse Code or any of numerous other known codes wasn't ascertainable. I couldn't decipher if I was hearing high frequency, Very High Frequency (VHF) or Ultra High Frequency (UHF) or some other wave length the Emerson Radio received. I was disoriented if the dots and dashes were war time friendly or adversary. Whether official or amatuer radio operators chit-chatting around the globe. I may have actually heard Hilter's orders in cryptic code to his U-Boat commanders, requiring an Enigma Machine to decode and translate into the German language. I probably heard Western Union conducting business sending messages. I might have heard hourly meteorological data, being sent by weather stations all across America to Washington, to formulate weather maps and atmospheric predictions for all locales. The few random human voices, I heard was just as disconerning too. I couldn't differentiate if the babbling, I was listening to, was Radio Cairo, speaking in Arabic, or the Vatican Radio transmitting in Latin? From a child's standpoint and knowledge there was nothing unstandable, sympatheic nor alluring for a person to hear on the short or long wave bands of the radio.

As with all classified information, the need to know is of paramount importance. Entering the building, the most ominous thing were rows of radios. All capable of receiving many radio bands. The MACV Photo Team were outsiders to the 509th innersanctum. Our security clearance was lower than the radio research personells; therefore our need to know was diminished. An officer a sergeant and several enlisted were all we worked with, while filming the story. They were reclusive and obscurant to any questions. It seemed the entire film shooting sequence was staged from both prospectives. We weren't going to film the people as they actually worked. It was all staged theatrics. I bet from the 509th standpoint, they selected a wave band and frequency of inconsequential value. We filmed a member of the 509th as he sat in front of a radio set, wearing earphones and taking some sort of shorthand notes on a notebook pad. Even the notes were a mystery, since none of us knew shorthand.

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509th Radio Research Unit
Ubon (Udon) AFB Radar Site
World Airway Flight Crew Interview

Departing the building, the mission of the 509th Radio Research Unit was ambiguous. The national orgin of the transmission we filmed was innominate. The frequency, whether in kilohertz, megahertz or gigahertz was anomymous. The tongue and vernacular of transmission was unknown. All this was a riddle as we departed the building.

This was a dichogamy comprising a myraid of delusion,illusory erroneous things that were set up. Nothing on film was real or true. Diligently the team filmed something, not knowing what or why we did the project, was a disingenuious feeling. It was tribulation enough to hand carry legitimate classified stuff, but now to hand carry doctored-up phoney classified material, was a loathing event, but the photo team's integerity was at stake/.

What we did, or how we handled the classified film once back in Bangkok, stresses my memory beyond limits. The MACV film contract with Hearst Metrotone News Agency excluded classified material. I probably furnished the MAC-Thai Information Officer, the address for the Army Pictorial Center; and just handed over the film from both projects, and let MAC-Thai get the film processed as best they could somewhere in the orient or stateside.

One morning while in the Bangkok hotel cafe, hours before daylight, there was a World Airways flight crew having breakfast. I wasn't cognizance that any flight crews were staying at the hotel. Talking to the flight crew, they stated they were not the passenger charter flight crew, but rather the newspaper plane crew. It was widely known that World Airways flew the military newspapers; however the contract terms were unknown. The flight crew told me the newspaper (The Stars & Stripes) were printed at the Tokyo press office and brought to the plane shortly after midnight. They would first fly to Okinawa, then onto Guam, onto the Philippines, then to Da Nang and Saigon and finally into Bangkok. This crew was flying the plane back to Tokyo.

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508th Radio Research Unit
Ubon (Udon) Radar Site
World Airways Flight Crew Interview

Further the crew said, immediately upon landing, maintenance crews began working on the plane. World Airways had only one aircraft for flying the newspapers, and it had to fly every day of the year. To keep this single plane flying required the maintenance crews to perform routine tasks as changing tires and worn brakes, replace burnt out landing and navigation lights, or swap out engines. Extract and have fixed or replaced avionics equipment, navigational systems, radios etc, within the prescribed ground time limitations.

Jet planes are combed with miles of electrical wiring and plumbing with pumps, boosters and valves of all sizes for fuel and hydraulic lines. All commerical aircraft have redundant systems for critical flight maneuvering components. These are all hydraulic operated. Not just the retractable landing gear and aircraft brakes, but of all the control surfaces. The primary systems on the wings are the flaps and ailerons, and in the tail section are the elevators and rudder, with duplicate hydraulic systems for each component. The multiple hydraulic systems for each control surface required a quantum replication of effort during the performance of inspections or repairs. In some cases a portion of the wing or fuselage would have to be disassembled to work on the system and reassembled, before flight time. Much of the work had to be accomplished piece-meal, with only a small portion of the entire system being worked on each day. In any case, without a back up plane, it was an arduous task to keep this Boeing 727 flying.

The flight crew stated with World Airways having a 9 million dollar a year contract flying "THE STARS & STRIPES" newspaper the 27 million dollar plane, in essence would be paid off in three years. That would be a staggering feat, virtually unheard of in aviation annals.

William Foulke
MACV Army "A" Photo Team
Wriiten Feb-Mar 2006