

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.

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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 thunderstorms were common, that created water puddles around the railroad 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, reducing 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.

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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.

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We were informed that most programs were dedicated to logistical operation; including procurement, supplies 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 vapor 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.

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