

Accredited Verses Non-Accredited Press Corp.

The MAC-V Public Affairs Office had many functions. It oversaw the Armed Forces Radio and Television Network. It operated five press camps in Vietnam. It commanded five film teams from the four service branches. The office prepared press releases of events on-going within Vietnam, and accredited the international press corp covering the Vietnam War, as part of its duties.

The press corp comprised of reporters from world renowned newspapers, independent news gathering agencies such as Reuters, Associated Press and United Press International among some. The press corp included network news as the BBC, NBC, CBS, ABC and other nations television news crews, along with some free lance journalist. There were press corp excluded from being accredited. No military journalist or photographers were given accreditation passes. Press from nations without diplomatic relations between South Vietnam and the United States were declined accreditation status. A few countries on this list included; Cuba, China, North Vietnam and North Korea.

The five MAC-V Photo Teams were created to supplement the American television networks with stories they rarely covered. The networks concentrated their assets on combat stories. Mean while the Pentagon was spending millions of dollars on Nation Building and Pacification Projects seldom covered by the American television networks. The MAC-V photo teams honed their talents towards this sector not covered by the networks. The difference was combat operation rarely lasted more than a few weeks. The Nation Building aspect was year after year , thus classified as feature stories, not hard news.

In Jan. 1967 a DASPO senior NCO told me that every passenger C-130 aircraft MAC-V and the Air Force reserved 30 seats for the accredited press corp. He added, something like 15 seats on smaller C-123 and Caribou planes were reserved for the press. What this meant was the accredited press could show up at the passenger terminal during boarding time, show their press passes and immediately board the plane.

For us non-accredited military press corp we would have to book a flight usually several days ahead, or show up at flight time hoping to fly out as stand-by status. Having been in Vietnam three years and utilizing scores of passenger flights, I remember only a single flight where two television film crews took the same flight we the MAC-V Army "A" Photo Team wished to fly on. The priority boarding of the accredited film teams still left two dozen reserved seats for stand-bys. The Army "A" Team was called to board that aircraft.

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There were other reasons to reserve seats on passenger flights besides just the accredited press corp. On another flight I took two MP's were escorting a captured Viet Cong to a detention facility within Vietnam. It would be unconscionable to believe that official police work were held to routine procedures, rather than expedite the proceeding by utilizing the reserve seats on passenger flights.

Vietnam's one year tour of duty plus KIA/MIA's meant the personnel turn-over exceeded 100 percent yearly. Maintaining leadership continuity made it imperative in facilitating senior officers getting to their destinations. Worldwide the Air Force boarded senior officers and families first on flights, working lastly toward lower enlisted. It's argumentatively be within the purview using the reserve seats on passenger flight to hasten the movement of field grade officers around the country. Rarely did I take a passenger flight in Vietnam without majors to colonels aboard the plane.

There was another compelling reason for reserving flight seats. For the over half million military serving in Vietnam, there were family members back stateside. The parents, the mother and father sisters and brothers. In some cases the service member were raised by relatives. This denotes a formidable military community consisting of many million of citizens back stateside. It's notwithstanding that sirens from first response teams, the police, ambulance and fire trucks would affect some overseas, including Vietnam's military personnel with family tragedy.

Once the Red Cross certified and declared a family crisis existed back home, the military issued Emergency Leave papers. From that point nothing was routine. Everything had utmost urgent nature. First to notify the service member, get their bags packed, get them on the first available flight to a embarkation airport, such as Da Nang, Cam Ranh Bay or Saigon, for the 16 plus hour flight to the West Coast. It's inconceivable that the 30 reserve seats weren't for persons on emergency leave, as well as the already stated reasons. With the volume of troops in Vietnam it wouldn't be out of context to assume 100 troops were on emergency leave every week.

Frequently the Tan Son Nhut passenger terminal bused the passengers along the flight line to the plane. Looking out the bus windows one could see three squadrons of C-130's were based at Saigon, having tail letters of "DE", "DH", and "DL". Two squadrons of C-123's were also housed at Tan Son Nhut Air Base. I long ago forgotten the tail letters of the C-123 squadrons from Saigon.

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Vietnam's nationwide 10P.M. to 6 A.M. curfew affected both the accredited and non-accredited press alike. The motor pool would not allow military vehicles to depart until the curfew expired. MP's at installation gates wouldn't allow traffic to enter or exit during the curfew. On base, military operations could continue unhindered by the curfew.

In major cities the accredited press lived and worked out of rented civilian hotel rooms. For the non-accredited military we lived in government leased officer and enlisted hotels scattered all over the city, or in a villa. If the accredited press took civilian taxis to Tan Son Nhut Air Base, the taxis weren't allowed on base. The accredited press would have to hail down a military vehicle or wait for the base bus to get to the passenger terminal. By the time a military vehicle left the motor pool and travelled across town to our base of operation in the Brinks BOQ, the sun was high in the sky. What this meant was neither group of press had an edge getting to a story source, due to the curfew.

Large combat units had immunity to the curfew restriction, allowing them to begin search and destroy or other combat operations at will. By the time either type of press corp arrived at the PIO, the second element troops were being flown in, or the units were in re-supply operations, with such commodities as command post tents, ammo, water or C-rations on board the copters. It took special coordination between the PIO and aviation unit reducing weight on one or two helos enabling any press corp excess to the combat troops.

Filming the 25th Infantry Division's Scout Dog story, a single 160 man infantry company had seven press members attached to the unit. They were two DASPO non-accredited press and five accredited press corp members. I remember two network film crews, at least one wire service or newspaper reporter and a female free lance journalist. All the press covering the Scout Dog story were on someone's payroll, except for the free lance reporter. If she couldn't sell her story to a newspaper, magazine or other publication, she had no paycheck to pay the rent, meals or other necessities. She told the DASPO Team that the Paris Match Magazine sometimes bought her stories.

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By mid-morning the unit was ambushed with two soldiers wounded. Air Force F-100's were called in to drop their bombs on the enemy position. Half the accredited press had their story. They had troops in the jungle, a fire-fight, the wounded being extracted to the rear, bombs being dropped, loud explosions with huge dust clouds and the Med-Evac chopper picking up the casualties. A lot of the accredited press flew out aboard the medical evacuation helicopter, with their 90 second to two minutes of broadcast film in the camera. The rest of the accredited press remained with the unit until the evening hot meal resupply choppers arrived. The non-accredited DASPO Team still had plenty of film left remaining with the Scout Dog unit several more days.

If the PIO couldn't provide air or ground transportation for the accredited press they were stranded, with no unit having a guest house. They couldn't hop a ride on any helo the way the non accredited military could. I recall being at Cam Ranh Bay. There were no scheduled passenger flights for hours. I talked to a Chinook helicopter crew and was able to secure the MAC-V photo Team a ride to Saigon aboard that helo. Cargo aircraft were also off limits to the civilian press. At Can Tho, the MAC-V Army "A" Photo Team was told we were stranded for the night. Spotting a Saigon based C-123 cargo plane, I talked with the cargo master obtaining the photo team a ride to Saigon. In Chu Lai a simular situation occurred. This time a Saigon based C-130 sat on the tarmac. In the middle of the night activity took place at the plane. Again talking with the plane's crew, the photo team was accepted for a ride back home. These are only three of countless travel experiences about the country on the spur of the moment.

True the accredited press corp could board a passenger plane on demand, but the ability to catch rides on helos or cargo air craft provided the non-accredited military a huge advantage and flexibility over the accredited press in movement around the country. So what if the seat was a pallet or wooden crate, rather than a web seat with a seatbelt, getting to the destination was what counted. Here we were total strangers approaching a flight crew asking for rides. We could have been AWOL troops stealing government equipment for sale. I can't recall a single instance where pilots or load masters wanted us to produce travel authority documents. Only the passenger terminal people demanded travel orders.

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I have no idea how many accredited press were in Vietnam. I heard a few numbers tossed around, they ranged from 1,500 to less than 5,000. These totals would surpass the non-accredited military photographers and journalist combined. With no guest house available some stranded press members spent the night at the PIO office or passenger terminal. I've spent part of a evening in a passenger terminal as aforementioned at Chi Lai. For the non-accredited press we could locate a signal unit and spent the night in a vacant cot. The accredited press didn't have this option.

To alleviate the situation MAC-V Headquarters Information Office established five press camps at major military concentrations around Vietnam. The press camps were not on military bases. At Nha Trang, the press camp was a villa in town. At Plei Ku the press camp was a building in a secure area, not with any military unit. Their primary mission was to aid the accredited press in performing their goals, but they also accepted the non-accredited press too. I've spent time at Plei Ku and Nha Trang press camps. The press camps were a dynamic operation, with ever evolving clientele. You could wake up one morning with two or three other press members at the camp. By noon the place was over-incumbent with a dozen or more press members present. By evening the transit population subsided to less than six press spending the night

The press camp's officer and handful of staff doubled up doing tasks. At Plei Ku, I never saw any Vietnamese house maid. The cook frequently doubled as dishwasher and bartender. Besides manning the reception desk, the troops had to clean the eight to 10 bedrooms available to the press, hallways, every inch of the showers, toilets, sinks in the community bathroom needed cleaning. They cleaned the tables in the snack bar/TV lounge area, and tidy up a solace area where reporters could transcribe short hand notes into a comprehensive news story that was readable. It was an area for benediction or for photo teams to have strategy meetings or prepare still photo, sound and motion picture captions. The troops also had to dispose of the trash and garbage as well as clean up the outside of the press camp.

The driver was most in demand. He hussled the press to and from the air terminal. He transported press members to various units so the press could do stories and other press members to the area PIO for an education on events for potential stories. within the area of the press camp. The driver had many non-press obligations he had to preform. He went on mail call run. Went to ration break down or commissary for food and cleaning supplies and other office needs, plus the laundry to exchange dirty bath towels, sheets etc for clean ones.

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The press camps weren't free of charges, even though the cost were quite reasonable. It's beyond my grasp remembering the exact fees for each item. However I vividly recall it averaged near \$7.00 a day to stay at a press camp. My mind is blank if there was a cost differential between the accredited press and non-accredited press groups, even tho the accredited press covering the war averaged \$600.00 a week. That was over four times the median wage of a trooper. A bedroom was about \$2.00 a night. Breakfast, with eggs, bacon or sausage and toast was close to \$1.25. Outside of breakfast the snack bar was just that, a snack bar, with about a six item menu. A hamburger with chips or fries cost less than a dollar. A beer was roughly half a dollar and sodas were a quarter.

While these fees were modest, a prolong stay at the press camps would put a real crunch on any wallet. The 21 day stay at the Plei Ku press camp was the worst. The MAC-V Army "A" photo team was in Plei Ku for a dental story. Upon arriving the dental unit was awaiting parts from the states. The photo team waited and waited. However the military had a solution to this dilemma. Leaving on a protracted trip, the soldier could go to their finance office getting a Dept. Of Defense voucher, allowing the service member to visit any military finance office world wide, obtaining a draw on their accrued wages.

The accredited press had a colossal advantage over the non-accredited military press getting their stories from the combat zone to publication or T.V. airing. The newspapers and wire service reporters needed only a teletype machine, where their stories were transmitted worldwide within minutes. I once visited the ABC News staff in Saigon's Caravelle Hotel. A hotel room was converted into an office. In the back were at least two teletype machines printing out news stories from far flung locales. Newspapers all over America had and still use any entire battery of teletype machines, providing the editor a surplus of news to edit or condense for publication. Large radio stations also utilize the teletype machines as an instrument of news collection.

During the Vietnam Era United Press International (UPI) and the Associated Press (AP) competed against each other for business. Years ago the two merged into (AP). I have no knowledge of the ability to transmit photos on teletype equipment of the day. I can only say a story without accompanying photos is only half a story

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The teletype is still a viable source of news for many media outlets. Across the country hundreds of newspapers not only print stories by staff writers for local news, but rely heavily on incoming news from around the world. Even the global resources of CNN credit (AP) with much of the news headlines scrawled across the bottom of the screen.

For the network film crews, in the early days of the war as soon as they landed in Saigon, the network film team drove to the civilian air terminal to air freight the exposed, undeveloped film to Honolulu or the west coast for processing. This method took 36 hours until the Vietnam film was seen on national T.V. As the war evolved the networks established film processing locations only one to four hours from Vietnam. These sites included Manila, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Bangkok. From these cities the film was processed and the entire story transmitted by satellite to world wide news headquarters in New York City. This shortened by an entire day getting the story on TV.

US military non-accredited press had to type captions for the story matching the film, along with a summary containing the who, what, where, when, how and why of the footage being submitted. While some had typing classes, just typing the triplicate copies was a nightmare, lasting long into the night or the next day. Neither DASPO nor the MAC-V photo teams used air freight to forward the film and sound tapes. The military used the U.S. mail service. DASPO shipped their film to East Coast at Army Pictorial Center in New York City until its closure in mid-69. The MAC-V teams likewise shipped their film to the East Coast. Their film went to Washington, D.C. for processing and editing. In the two cases where MAC-V Army "A" Photo Team was pitted against the civilian news crews; that of the Americal Division getting it's color and Rockets in Reverse, In both cases the Army film was still in Saigon while the accredited press stories were seen by the American public

The civilian press were in competition among themselves. They needed the "SCOOP", be the first, be the fastest and the best. DASPO's primary client was the Pentagon brass, more specifically the Army top chieftains. They weren't competing against the network news. The film DASPO shot was not intended for civilian consumption. In the case of the MAC-V five photo teams, already stated our basic stories were feature stories, not hard news. Since the event continued year after year, who cared if the story was aired this week, or even this month. The story was timeless.

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Exactly who was the non-accredited military press corp? Every Army division had a PIO with reporters and photographers at the units photo lab. These internal assets rarely ventured outside their own domain. Seldom could these press travel from Chu Chi to Bear Cat. Both the 25th and 9th Div were headquartered in III Corps and less than 30 miles apart. These press would not travel to Da Nang in I Corp, thus not true non-accredited military press.

It's not beyond probability that at least one other service branch had an elite photo group as the Dept. Of The Army Special Photo Office (DASPO), that could travel from Saigon in III Corp to Hue in I Corp, or to Qui Nhon in II Corp, To Cam Ranh Bay in III Corp or to Can Tho in IV Corp at any time to film Army activities, making them true non-accredited press corp.

The five MAC-V photo teams had the same authority as DASPO to travel anywhere, anytime within Vietnam. However the MAC-V photo teams had an extra advantage, we could cross service branch boundaries. As NCOIC of Army "A" photo team, we filmed Navy Seabee's and hovercraft. We did an Air Force fighter/bomber story. The Mac-V teams were true non-accredited press.

The Army on paper had a photo company called the 221st Signal Company (Pictorial). Technically the two MAC_V Army teams belonged to the 221st, but under operational control of MAC-V, thus allowing the two teams to move from Long Binh to Saigon. The less time I spent at Long Binh the better I like it. The unit had far too many equipment problems.

The 221st had 40 still photographers and 40 motion cameramen. The Army bought amateur Topcon still camera that weren't suited for combat. The cameras broke down constantly, besides getting mold between the lenses, causing fuzzy and out of focus film. The Army bought drawing board prototype motion picture cameras that were never field tested. Company Tech-reps couldn't get the camera to operate in Vietnam.. John Glunt spent a year with the 221s he said the camera was never used.. With no cameras seldom did the 221st field a photo team. If and when they did, they could be considered non-accredited press also.

Basically that left the 12 man DASPO Team in Vietnam and less than 25 members of the five MAC-V photo teams as the real non-accredited military press in Vietnam. In rough terms this was about 40 non-accredited military press compared with at least 1,500 or more accredited press members.

William Foulke

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DASPO/MAC-V Army "A"
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