

Tearless Until Gassed

The U.S. Army's attempt to modernize its camera equipment for the newly formed 221st Signal Company (Pictorial) who's mission was to visually document the Army's role in the Vietnam War, was stymied by the White House. The Johnson Administration fears the deficit spending would deplete Fort Knox gold reserves, or "Gold Drain and Gold Flow," declared a moratorium on all federal agencies from making overseas purchases. The Army had to settle for American made amateur quality Topcon still cameras and partially developed light weight Beckman & Whitley sound on film movie cameras. None of the 16 B&W cameras never produced one foot of useable motion picture. The Topcon unfit for combat constantly broke down. Frustrated, dismayed the entire 200 man photo company, except for the MACV Photo Teams, was ordered by U.S. Army Vietnam to work the Saigon docks as stevedores and longshoreman, until the back log of ships at dock, in the Saigon River and the South China Sea abated.

Three field grade officer designed an empire building scheme. The trio decided if they controlled all U.S. Army photo assets in Thailand and Vietnam would be high prestige, ego and beneficial toward promotion. They tried controlling the Department Of The Army Special Photo Office in Saigon (DASPO), but told to mind their own business. Hoping to take over the MACV Photo Teams, the trio forbid the MACV teams from ever setting foot in the MACV Headquarters. It was a case of majors up against a general, and the empire builders lost, but didn't give up. Coincidentally when DASPO lent the two MACV Photo Teams Arriflex BL cameras, the Army Pictorial Center had a team in country headed by SFC James Downey, filming a scripted movie. The empire builders decided the Ex-DASPO men needed a class on the equipment. When Jim Downey saw me, he told the trio I was more qualified to give the class. Jim told the majors, he hardly knew the equipment. Class cancelled. The trio did manage to control the 221st as the Southeast Asia Pictorial Agency (SEAPA).

One evening I was sitting on my 221st bunk contemplating how the MACV Army "A" Photo Team would get off Long Binh Post the next morning, before curfew lifted and travel the 10 miles to Bear Cat, The 9th Infantry Division HQS for the scheduled 6 A.M. filming of the introduction of the M-79 grenade launcher into Vietnam. Within the Tropic of Cancer dawn and twilight or dusk is non-existence, The sun rises and sets with little ambient light between darkness and sun up. I heard loud talking some 20 feet from my bunk, but didn't ascertain the topic, I assumed it was some sports figure disagreement. I went back to my own ideas. The Public Information Office (PIO) normally didn't open until 7:30 A.M. Maybe we had to fly the 100 miles to Can Tho for filming.

Tearless Until Gassed

A few minutes later my attention was again turned toward the continuing commotion. My merely being distracted, I saw one white soldier and five or six Afro-American troops in the heated agitation. By now there was some yelling, but no malicious behavior. The white soldier seemed to hold his own ground against the superior numbers. I went back to my own thoughts, still not comprehending the subject of the debate.

I questioned how I got assigned with the 221st Photo Company? I was happy at DASPO, the Army's premiere all military photo unit, and DASPO filming the Army's MACV commitment. However with the creation of the 221st Photo Company a high level pow-wow was held, where DASPO transferred ten enlisted men to the 221st for the continuation of the Army's MACV obligation. I was one of the ten transferred. The Ex-DASPO men arrived in Vietnam during May 1967, the 221st cameras arrived in August, only to learn the 221st movie cameras would never work. Lucky for the two Army MACV Photo Teams, MACV HQS by hook or crook, beg, loan or borrow managed to supply the two Army photo teams with movie equipment to film their photo stories.

The nearby ruckus was getting louder. Redirecting my ears the quarrel wasn't about sports figures or any other topic. The single white troop was actually bullying and tormenting the handful of Afro-American soldiers and getting away with his vindictive racial slurs and rancor towards the Afro-American troops. It seemed the Afro-American troops were defenseless against the verbal transgressions.. Out numbered five or six to one, the Afro-American soldiers could have easily ganged up on the sole white troop and beaten the crap out of him, but instead remained docile with great restraint trying to express their view with greater voice volume, but to no accord.

At least one Afro-American soldiers was on a still photo team heading out for their first combat mission. Everyone entering war for the first time is filled with anxiety, apprehensive and nervousness, and very melancholy of the unknown. I heard the white arrogant trouble maker saying nearly verbatim, I hope you die out there or at least get captured. Either way we won't miss you or have you around anymore to deal with, in a heckling fashion. He added when a general dies in war, they often name a base gate or an entire fort to the dead warrior. In a sarcastic tone he said maybe after you're dead, we might name an outhouse after you. On and on the scurrilous verbal assault continued. The Afro-American soldiers not only attempted consoling and comfort their beleaguered friend(s) from the torment of racial hatefulness, but retorted some reply.

Tearless Until Gassed

The barrack was like 20 photographers under one roof. I personally didn't know any of the arguing troops. They certainly didn't know my prowess filming classified projects, however they were shortly to glimpse the dominion and resources I possessed. Before heading to the enlisted club for beers, the white trash said something stupid. I guess he envisioned walking back from the club drunk in the dark, that he might be attacked by these Afro-American troops having the hell beaten out of him. He exclaimed " I was raised in a Utah Reform School and nobody can make me cry."

The trouble maker was barely out of the barrack door, when I reached into my foot locker, extracting a bottle of (CN) coughing/nausea tear gas tablets wrapped in cellophane. I never had the harsher riot control (CS) form of tear gas. Having this elicit agent two years, until that night I never had any inclination to use the stuff. When he ranted that nobody could make him cry, I bet I had the stuff to banish that statement. The other soldiers probably only used their gas masks once in their Army career. I had far more knowledge on each pills power and potency. It was still only a good guess. Under ideal conditions a single pill hardly larger than an aspirin could put tears in peoples eyes 50 feet away, but these weren't ideal conditions. I figured a single pill broken up and placed in his pillow would make him miserable all night. When I eased his pillow from his bunk and added the broken CN pill, every Afro-American soldier wanted to know what I was doing. When I said "tear Gas" every Afro-American soldier grabbed at the bottle. Each soldier grabbed one or two pills to saturate the braggart's bed. When one pill should have done the trick. These Afro-American soldiers not seeking a court marshal for throwing a punch, though I was some sort of god, instantly levitating their spirits from debilitated defeatist attitude to formable adversity, allowing them non-voilent, non-lethal revenge they so wanted against this white trash.

Our dasterly deed accomplished, the entire barrack retired early. Some hours later, I was awoken with a screaming drunken slur "I got an intoxicating pillow." Looking toward the scream, seeing him sitting straight up in his bunk. Seconds later he tore his entire bed apart. I honestly don't know if he passed out on the floor, slept on the mattress on the floor or slept on the metal bunk springs passed out.

Tearless Until Gassed

The next morning I was the first up to awaken the rest of the MACV Photo Team for our 6 A.M. photo mission. Passing the torn up bunk, I mashed a (CN) pill with my boot. Two steps later I smelled that familiar pungent odor, and knew it wasn't going to be a good day. At the Long Binh gate the MP only asked where we were headed and let us pass.

Getting to Bear Cat as suspected nothing was ready, even though the 9th Infantry Division Public Information Office (PIO) themselves set the time. We had missed breakfast. At the (PIO) a charge of quarters, just someone to man the office all night. It was nearly 8 A.M. the sun had been up an hour before any NCOs and officers appeared. Another two hours passed before an arament NCO showed up with this sawed-off 4 gauge shotgun looking weapon and a bandoleer of ammo. The diameter of the gun barrel was about $1\frac{1}{4}$ inch with only an 18 to 20 inch length. The M-79 round, of course, was $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches in diameter and 3 inches long. A massive ammo round this size would have ear shattering explosion and the recoil knocking the gunner off his feet. I wondered what rifle range we'd have to drive to for a live demonstration of this gun.

Leaving the PIO Office with the arament NCO, no rifle range was needed. We filmed the entire story right in the division headquarters area. Sighting a wooded area in the distance we walked toward the tree line. Less than a 100 yards from the trees, the NCO says see the dead limb sticking up against the fallen branch. The NCO opens the weapon, chambering a round, taking aim he fires. Firing the M-79 was no louder than compressed gas. Recoil wise, his shoulder barely moved. The velocity of a few hundred feet per second allowed us to watch the grenade fly to target. With a contact fuse, the M-79 grenade exploded upon impact, rather than the four second delay fuse of regular hand grenades. The limb broke in half, with shrapnel flying only about 20 feet. The grenade exploding wasn't much louder than 4th of July fireworks.

During basic training every recruit threw one fragmentation hand grenade. The entire ordeal was 100 percent choreographed. It started with one recruit and one instructor. The instructor checked the feet position or stance. He checked the elbows, then the pulling of the safety pin on the grenade. The old adage close only counts in horseshoes and grenades meant something. The M-79 on the other hand, we weren't tossing, we aimed the gun. With less explosive power the shrapnel didn't fly as far. Hell the M-79 became a fun gun. I think all three of us on the photo team fired at least one round.

Tearless Until Gassed

Filming completed by noon, we had lunch at Bear Cat getting back to Long Binh before 2 P.M. Stopping at the supply room to stow the camera gear, we saw two MPS jeeps at the adjacent orderly room. As aforementioned this wasn't going to be a good day, having the MPs still here 8 hours after reveillie meant this was a horrible day.

The troops getting up at 6 A.M. and walking around crushing the CN tear gas pills activating the pills power. I can only guess by 6:30 the stench was so bad that some barracks troops couldn't finish getting dressed or stand the tears to get their shaving kits. The 18th MP Brigade Headquarters was the 221st Photo Company's closest neighbor. As such MP patrols were constantly coming by the 221st area, on routine patrols. Maybe one of the patrols jeep got teary eyes, just passing the barrack and decided to investigate.

At the barrack every door and window was wide open and all the fans blowing on high speed. Just walking past the barrack windows brought tears to ones eyes. The 221st Photo Company like other units on post had no running water. I could only guess the MPs called the Long Binh Fire Department to hose down the gassed barrack. The floors were wet with water puddles in spots. The only water the 221st Photo and other units on post had was a potable water truck coming around twice a day for filling 30 gallon canvas lister bags for filling canteens. A non-potable tanker truck brought water daily for showers, filling our elevated rubber bladder tank and numerous jet plane external fuel tank that provided gravity fed showers. Filming complete, I still had paper work in the form of motion picture and sound captions to do that would accompany the film. Leaning against a sandbagged bunker, I tried doing the caption, awaiting to be called to the orderly room to give my statement on what occurred last night, but never called.

Tearless Until Gassed

The house girls of the gassed barrack were in pandemonium. They couldn't do their routine chores. They did a valiant job trying, but just couldn't work under such adverse conditions. They couldn't make the beds without crying after a few seconds. The tears started just walking into the barrack to gather the boots to shine. The trash can were left full, as was the dirty laundry. They couldn't enter the building to perform these tasks. Sweeping and mopping the floors was out of the question. Quitting time of 4:30, the house girls just had to give up and go home. They did what little they could. One house girl left a few shined boots outside for the troops to pick up our selves. By 5 P.M. I was able to enter the barrack.

One by one the troops returned to the messy aftermath of the incident. The night was solemn, a total mum, an eerie silence took hold with no one speaking. There was no blame, maybe just a hint of we over did it. Maybe everyone was saying I couldn't stand the bastard, but did I also have to suffer too? I never asked any troops what they told the MPs. One soldier told me the guy we gassed, had recently been given an Article #15 by Captain Sayler. An Article #15 is the lightest or least severe judicial punishment under the military justice system. Usually extra duty and sometimes a fine involved. In the short time the two MACV Photo Teams remained at Long Binh, before moving to Saigon, there was no more belittling or badgering of any other soldier.

Cpt Sayler and I were no strangers. Reporting in at the Army Pictorial Center in March 64, Cpt Sayler was the company commander. The NCOs there told me that CPT Sayler had been a Marine Corp gunny sergeant, that converted to the Army and attended OCS to become an audio/visual officer. Three years later coming to the 221st Signal Company, here was CPT Sayler again as Unit commander. The Marine Corp was known to let enlisted take care of enlisted problems, without officer involvement. However as an officer, he had Army directives and protocol to follow. I almost think he was smiling to himself as he called the MPs to investigate the barrack gassing. About five years later, I saw Major Sayler sitting my himself at the Fort Shafter, HI snack bar. Going over to his table, I confessed that it had been my tear gas used that night in Vietnam. In his wisdom and professionalism, he stunned me by giving an unconvincing answer, " I have no recollection of the event."

Tearless Until Gassed

In retrospect it might be that CPT Sayler was only two threads of evidence away from a conviction to order a court marshal, putting the trouble maker in the stockade. But without the few bits of critical information force CPT Sayler to settle for the lesser punishment of Article # 15.

John Glunt of DASPO and the 221st as a motion picture cameraman, arrived in Vietnam in July 1967, told me during his year at Long Binh, the unit had no movie cameras. Roger Hawkins also of DASPO and 221st Sig. Co. (Pictorial) recently told me during his tenture with the 221st, the U.S. Army had purchased the venerable, veteran of three wars, the American made Bell & Howell Filmo movie cameras for the unit to use. The Filmo lacking sound on film capability, was used by all service branches during World War II, Korean War and the Vietnam War.

William Foulke
William Foulke
DASPO/ MACV Photo Team
Written Oct-Nov 2009