

SEEING THE ELEPHANT  
OPERATION TRAN HUNG DOA II

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Vietnam was our first commuter's war. American and allied forces flew to and from the battlefield via aircraft while the enemy fought mostly in his own backyard. On February 28, 1968 I experienced this fact first hand when I flew to the 25 Infantry Division's combat base near Cu Chi. This was to be my first assignment as a still photographer with DASPO. It would also turn out to be my first experience with "Seeing the Elephant," as Civil War soldiers used to say. A metaphor for seeing combat for the very first time.

Daspo motion picture photographer Chuck Abbott and I began our journey from "Hotel 3", a military heliport located at Tan Son Nhut Airbase. Because of the recent Tet Offensive, the road to Cu Chi was too dangerous to drive, except by convoy, so we hitched a ride on a U.S. Army CH-47 helicopter, a lumbering aircraft designed to carry large numbers of troops and supplies, also known as a "Chinook."

The flight was very short. Cu Chi was located only a few kilometers Northwest of Saigon. However, the noise from the chopper engines was so intense, by the time our trip was over, I found I was almost totally deaf, and would remain so for the next hour or so.

Our assignment was to cover the 25<sup>th</sup> Division's participation in "Tran Hung Doa II", a combat sweep through III Corps. The operation was initiated to eliminate enemy rocket and mortar positions that had been endangering nearby Tan Son Nhut Airbase and the adjacent metropolitan Saigon area as well.

Fifteen minutes after our flight rose off the tarmac at Hotel 3 we were hovering over a sprawling city of sandbagged tents and prefabricated buildings, all covered with a thin layer of gritty red dust. Cu Chi was home base to the 25 Infantry Division, also known as the "Tropic Lightning." The twenty-fifth had deployed to Vietnam several years before from their home base at Schofield Barracks Hawaii. As we made our way to the division public information office we noticed the streets all had Hawaiian names, lending a little bit of "home" in a faraway land. It was late afternoon by the time we finished making arrangements with the division PIO people to go out into the field, so we opted to join the operation early the next morning.

Public information soldiers were generally an eclectic collection of educated, un-soldierly types who managed to live the best of camp life and then go out and experience the worst of field life. While the PIO enlisted men's tent was primitive by Saigon standards, it was a Holiday Inn compared to life in the bush. Because they were located near division headquarters, the PIO guys also were near what turned out to be a very well appointed enlisted men's club that featured air conditioning and more importantly, cold beer. Chuck and I purchased a couple of six packs to go and then settled ourselves on the sandbags that ringed the outside of the PIO enlisted hootch, joining some of our "hosts" who were already relaxing there. The approaching night brought a relative calm and

coolness to our surroundings. I was actually enjoying myself. Nearby a trio of small puppies tussled with each other. Then one guy began to ruminate on how the pups never seemed to get hurt during mortar and rocket attacks. Mortars and rockets? Incoming? My mind slowly took this in. One of the photographers showed me his personal Magnum .357 handgun that his folks had sent him from back home. More protection he allowed. It packed more punch than our standard issue Army .45 automatic. But wait, I thought. It was so pleasant here right now? Look at that beautiful setting sun. Feel that warm breeze! Then our hosts began to talk about the best way to build a bunker. What materials to use and in what order. One guy allowed as how, when he got home "to the world" he was going to sandbag his whole "motherfucking house." My relaxed reverie began to change back to my recently acquired in-country paranoia. Fuck the sunset I thought. Where was the nearest bunker?

Later, when everyone began to settle down and lay on their bunks I noticed that most of the other guys hadn't bothered to get undressed, most did not even remove their boots. Despite the stuffy confines of the tent, I followed their example. I lay on the hard, canvas bunk. Slowly, despite my racing mind, the heat, and my elevated paranoia, fatigue slowly took over and I began to drift off to sleep.

Suddenly I was jolted awake. I had no idea how much time had passed. Minutes? Hours? The hot darkness of the tent was filled with the thump of incoming mortar rounds and the eerie wail of the base air raid siren. Despite the dark I could sense bodies moving past my bunk and out the tent door. As my feet hit the floor, I congratulated myself for not taking off my boots. Moving towards the door, I reached down and picked up the remnants of my six pack. Ahead of me I could make out Chuck, who was also headed for the door and the bunker beyond. We both sped out the door and headed down into the bunker entrance that was just off to our left. Chuck was fast, but I guess I was a little faster, my knees landing in the small of his back as we both flew down into the void below. Fortunately we landed in soft sand. Groping in the dark we found a couple of empty spaces along the wall and like the rest of the men down there, waited in the darkness. Somewhere a portable radio was playing music from the armed forces radio station in nearby Saigon. The disc jockey was reading a public service announcement reminding everyone in Saigon not to hang their military laundry out where it could be seen by the public. Keep Saigon pretty. Cigarettes were lit and my remaining beers began to disappear around the "room." An informal head count revealed that two of our tent mates hadn't bothered to leave the cozy confines of their bunks in the tent above us. A couple of "Old hands" who probably figured that the attack was over as soon as the sirens sang out, so why bother to get up? More time passed and it stayed quiet. I began to think that maybe those guys upstairs were smarter than the rest of us who were huddled in this damp hole in the ground. Then, as suddenly as that thought surfaced in my mind, the sound of more incoming rounds punctuated the quiet outside. The base siren started up once again, and above us we could hear the sound of two sets of feet hit the tent floor. Just as suddenly two dark shapes darted past us into the relative safety of the bunker. Welcome to life in the rear, I thought.

Later, after we returned to our bunks, my fatigue overcame the earlier adrenalin rush of fear, and sleep came again. Several more times during the night we were forced to run for the bunker. Finally, just as I thought sleep was mine for the night, a hand appeared out of the dark. A hand attached to a voice that announced that it was time to go. Good morning, I thought. Our ride to the war was here.

Chuck and I gathered up our cameras and other field gear and headed out the door. I had a hangover-like headache from the recent events of the night. My mouth tasted stale. A beer and cigarettes after taste. There was no time or place to brush. I noticed that despite the early morning chill, my uniform was already beginning to smell ripe, and the material clung wetly to my skin. I put on my web gear, checking my two canteens and the holster of my .45 automatic. Then I put on my helmet and shouldered the world war two surplus canvas bag that held my extra film, towel, extra socks and my yet unused toothbrush.

The hand that had so abruptly awakened Chuck and I also came with a jeep. It was still pitch black as we headed out a side gate of the base and drove out along the perimeter of the base. The headlights of our jeep swept across ominous looking dark space. Here and there the jeep lights would reveal objects and shapes, suddenly coming to a rest on a row of headstones in a small Vietnamese graveyard. Amorphous forms wearing what turned out to be military ponchos and helmets stood around small fires. Everywhere there was combat gear, c ration boxes, and weapons. The men stood quietly, soaking in what warmth they could absorb from the small fires. I wondered if they had spent the night there, so close and yet so far from the relative comforts of camp life. These guys were our next "hosts". Charlie Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 27<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, 25th Infantry Division. They were also known as The Wolfhounds, a nickname their grandfathers picked up when the 27<sup>th</sup> Infantry had fought in Russia at the end of World War One. We said goodbye to our driver, shook a hands with men who's faces we could barely see, and settled down to wait for the helicopters that were due at any time to take us to the war.

The early morning light slowly began to reveal our surroundings as the men of Charlie Company began to organize themselves into squads and platoons. Although the sun was barely above the horizon, the dampness of the night was already giving way to the sweaty heat of day. We were told we would need gas masks on this assault. Gas masks? We didn't bring any with us. No problem there were extras we could use. There was just barely enough light to make a picture. Many of the men around us began to shoulder their equipment. Several were radio operators. We could hear them listening to ground-air control chatter with the approaching helicopters. One small group stood on a light rise. I kneeled down and made a slow shutter exposure picture. My first official photograph in the US Army! I thought it might make an interesting silhouette. Off in the distance a line of Huey helicopters began to approach the assembled groups of soldiers. There is an oft used cliché about approaching Huey's looking and sounding like buzzing gnats. The funny thing is, it's true. They really do. Our group's ride was now hovering a few feet off the ground in front of us. The prop wash from the blades blew sand and grass around the cemetery and in our faces. As the copter skids slowly settled on the ground Chuck and I crawled aboard with a group of medics, a couple of extra radio operators, and a squad leader with the 1<sup>st</sup> platoon. My first photograph shot, I was now about to go on my first

Huey helicopter ride. Once everyone was safely on board our chopper quickly began to rise, heading forward, with it's nose down, and tail up. As we gained altitude our Huey began to level off. Minutes later we were several thousand feet above dried looking Winter rice paddies that made up much of Binh Duong Province.

At three thousand feet the air was chilly. My sweat turned cold. It was like we had entered an air-conditioned room. I noticed the men around me were already putting on their gas masks. I decided to make a picture before I put mine on. . I framed the squad leader as he sat next to the door. Behind him another Huey floated in the background. I made the picture and then pulled my gas mask out of a green canvas bag. Taking off my helmet, I pulled the heavy rubber mask over my head and down over my face. I took a deep breath, the rubber sucking into my face. I choked! No air was passing through the filter. The damn thing didn't work! Inside my head I screamed "Jesus Christ!" I'm heading into a gas attack and this fucking mask doesn't work. I briefly panicked. Fortunately one of the medics noticed me having a problem and handed me a large piece of gauze from a field dressing. "Put that over your nose and mouth", he advised. Okay, okay, I thought, so now I'm going into some kind of gas attack holding a fucking piece of bandage over my face. Great! Our chopper began to drop altitude and the ground was coming up fast. Everyone else began to brace themselves, weapons out, rounds in the chamber, safety off. Here I was. My first combat assault. Suddenly our chopper was hovering just a foot or so above the ground. Crowded among my adrenalin-charged sensations of heat, sound and fear, I carried the distant memory of having watched this scene as a black and white image back home on my parent's television. I could almost hear CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite describing me as I jumped to the ground.

Thoughts of Cronkite were quickly gone from my head as I found myself scuttling across the LZ towards the other men I had flown with. They had begun to set up a defensive perimeter. So far there was no gunfire. A faint trace of white smoke floated over us. I took off my gas mask and took a breath. Instead of instant death I smelled tear gas. Tear gas. They used tear gas! Not nerve gas or some other poison. For the moment I could stop worrying about being poisoned to death by my own country! Now I could worry about other ways to die. My companions were still wearing their masks, so I made a picture. There was still no in-coming fire. Our landing had apparently been unopposed.

Slowly I became aware of my surroundings. For the first time I noticed that we were part of a much larger group of soldiers...larger than Charlie Company in fact. There were guys in green on either side of me, stretching off far into the distance. Around me men were re-adjusting their equipment or smoking cigarettes. The heat began to seep though the layer of cold that had enveloped me during the chopper ride. It was really, really hot. I thought about my canteens. No stop, a tiny voice warned. Wait. Hold off. You've got to make your water last. I felt like a F.N.G worrying about water so soon. Everything around me was dry. The ground appeared cracked and parched. Trees and scrubs were brown. There was no hostile fire yet, but my senses were on overload. Somewhere the order was given to move out.

Time and reality reach an uneasy truce during moments of extreme stress. Moments can become eons and long periods of time can somehow compress. I became painfully aware of Vietnam's reputation for booby traps. I concentrated on the ground in front of me, attempting to walk in the tracks of the guy in front of me. My world was compressed to a very few square feet of ground. God it was hot! Damn I'm thirsty! Where are we going? Where is the enemy? How am I going to make any pictures always looking at the ground in front of me? We stopped again and I saw that we were also in the presence of tanks and armored personnel carriers. That made me feel better. This looked like a pretty imposing force. The troops stopped again. Near me I saw a radio operator having a cigarette. There was a small bible in the band of his helmet. I was here to take picture, I told myself, so I walked over, stooped and shot a picture of the guy. I took down his name, rank, hometown, all the stuff the Army wanted to know about a soldier doing his job. We had to take down that kind of information for all our pictures. My little notebook was getting wet in my shirt pocket, my sweaty uniform was making the pages damp and that was making it difficult to take notes. Worse yet, the heat and humidity was making it tough to smoke. When my sweaty fingers touched a cigarette, the paper would become wet and soggy, causing the thing to fall apart. Later, when I noticed the white circles of salt that were staining the underarms of my shirt, I knew why our sergeants made us take salt tablets every day.

Our forward movement stopped once again just as we began to enter a line of trees and brush. Hostile fire had apparently dropped a soldier a little further down the line. I watched as a tank backed out of the tree line. Up and down the tree line troops took cover and began to fire their weapons. I dropped down near a soldier with a M-60 machine gun. I watched as he would fire a few rounds and then curse when the weapon would jam. Over and over he cleared the weapon, only to have to jam again. I made a picture of him when his weapon was working. The level of noise was deafening. I couldn't hear the shutter on my camera, so I wasn't even sure if it was working or not. My hands trembled and sweat dropped from my head into the back of my camera as I attempted to change film. At that time Daspo still photographers were using the Rolleiflex 2 1/4 camera. They only used 12 exposure rolls, so the end of the roll could come up pretty fast.

Off to my right I could hear a radio operator call to a nearby tank requesting permission to take some sodas from a large cooler that was strapped on top behind the main gun. "Take all you want" came the reply, "but replace the cold ones with hot ones from the cardboard box on back" A solitary grunt sprinted off towards the tank, scrambled on top and began to remove several cans from the cooler. The level of firing was gaining in intensity. After carefully replacing the cold sodas with hot ones, the grunt then slid down off the machine and sprinted back to where the radio operator and a couple of other soldiers squatted in the tree line. I watched this performance in wonder. These had to be what could have been the most expensive sodas a man ever got for his friends. I laid back for a moment and took a swig from my canteen. The water tasted hot, but it felt good as it went down.

After awhile the firing slowed down and just as I thought we might be given the order to move out again, a single jet fighter came swooping down, low over the deck but parallel

and to the front of our position. Looking up as it sped by I saw that it was laying a trail of napalm behind it, the earth thundering as the jellied fire pounded to the ground. It grew very quiet. Smoke and the smell of gasoline drifted over our position. I wondered how anything could survive something like that. Around me men began to shoulder their gear, preparing for the order to move forward once again. But before anyone could move however, the almost surreal calm that had taken over the landscape was now shattered by a loud explosion. An order was given to pull back. Maybe it wasn't an order. I was never sure. Everyone around me just turned around and headed in the other direction. After running a few yards I turned around and stopped. Other men around me had stopped too and were looking at a trail of black smoke that snaked up into the sky behind us. I dropped to one knee and made a picture. Seconds later another loud explosion could be heard and I watched in amazement at what I guessed to be the back door to an armored personnel carrier go sailing up high into the air. This metal door weighed hundreds of pounds, and yet it flew straight up like it was light as a balloon. I found Chuck and we found a shady place to rest. Everyone around us had dropped to the ground. There was no more firing. Another jet came in low over the ground we had just vacated, dropping more napalm long the tree line.

The crew of the APC had survived their ordeal. As he was bin glooked after by a medic, the driver described how he has seen a single enemy soldier pop up out of hiding, and point a rocket propelled grenade launcher at their vehicle. There was no time to do anything but drop down and shut the hatch. The rocket had slammed into the front of the vehicle, causing a minor explosion that injured all of the crew. Battered and burned they had helped each other out of the APC and gotten away from the vehicle before the fire inside set off the ammunition stored inside. That was the explosion that had sent the back door flying up into the air. The crewmen were brought back to where Chuck and I were sitting. A medivac helicopter was coming to carry the wounded men back to the 12<sup>th</sup> Evacuation Hospital at Cu Chi Army Base.

One of the advantages of being a military photographer is that you have a certain amount of control of your fate in a combat situation. The day was getting late and the light was beginning to fade, so we decided to hitch a ride with the wounded men back to the division base camp. As the chopper rose to cruise altitude the air got cool again. I handed my canteen to one of the wounded APC crewmen. Nearby, lay the body of the grunt who had died earlier in the day. The heat and terror of the past few hours began to ebb away and I felt a great surge of relief to be away from that place. Once back at Cu Chi we dropped our gear at the PIO tent and made our way to the enlisted men's club. Soon we were listening to rock and roll, enjoying cold beers, and the club air conditioning. For a while we could forget the war that was still out there, only a few kilometers away.