DASPO Introduction
Bryan Grigsby and Susan Van Dongen

Even after all these years, the sound of a helicopter will stop many of us in mid-thought, opening circuits to a very private part of our minds. For like most veterans of the war in South Vietnam, helicopters provided an almost omnipresent background score for that experience. Helicopters were part of the music of the Vietnam War.

Between 1962 and 1973 we served in a very special military unit -- the Department of the Army Special Photo Office, more commonly known as DASPO. This unit was born almost at the very beginning of America's involvement in that war. In the Spring of 1962, General George Decker, then Army Chief of Staff, attended a screening in the Pentagon of a US Air Force-produced film showing their activities in Vietnam. At the end of the screening, General Decker turned to his staff and asked, " Why can't we do that?" From that moment the concept of DASPO was born.
Major Arthur Jones was the Pentagon project officer charged with organizing DASPO and later became the first Chief of DASPO. That office was first located at the Army Pictorial Center on Long Island, New York and later moved to the US Army Photographic Agency at the Pentagon, where Major Jones was promoted to Lt. Colonel and given command. Eventually there were three photo detachments operating under this command, the largest being the USA Special Photographic Detachment, Pacific, based at Fort Shafter, Hawaii. Operating out of the Hawaii detachment were three smaller teams: Team Alpha in South Korea, Team Bravo in Thailand, and Team Charlie in South Vietnam. Other detachments included the USA Special Photographic Detachment, Panama based at Fort Amador, Panama and later a third, CONUS (Continental United States) detachment located at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. All three units were tasked to produce motion picture and still photo reports of US Army activities engaged in the Cold War. And produce they did. During the first three years of DASPO, starting in August of 1962, the Hawaii detachment produced 750,000 feet of color motion picture footage and several thousand still images for Department of the Army use.

Deployed at the same time as the Pacific Detachment, the Panama Detachment consisted of one officer and six enlisted men. Based at Fort Amador, Panama, their mission was to document cold war activities in Central and South America. Because their job required them to work with the host governments of foreign countries, the men of the Panama Detachment often worked in civilian clothes rather than military uniforms. Single members of the team were usually housed at the Tivoli Guest House, a grand old hotel built to house visiting dignitaries during the construction of the canal. Among its more famous visitors was President Teddy Roosevelt. During its existence the Panama group covered riots, military coups, and natural disasters. And while their mission was not necessarily to cover combat operations, in 1965 the detachment had a team on the ground with the 101st Airborne when it invaded the Dominican Republic. Two years later, while filming US Special Forces training government forces in Bolivia, a Panama team found

themselves unexpectedly under fire during an engagement with insurgent forces under the command of Cuban revolutionary Che Guevarra. Not long after, Guevarra was killed.

DASPO Pacific bore the brunt of the Vietnam War coverage responsibility. Our base at Fort Shafter was located in the suburbs outside the city of Honolulu. Duty in this tropical paradise could be both sweet and frustrating. For a lower enlisted man making less than a hundred dollars a month, much of the "good life" there was way out of reach. Even for officers and NCOs, the cost of living made life outside the perimeters of military existence difficult. The chain of command was largely made up of professional soldiers, with the senior officers and NCOs having photographic experience dating back to World War Two and Korea. The younger enlisted men and officers came mostly from the Signal School at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. We all had a lot to learn about each other. The older professionals were there not only to lead but to train us as well. For the professionals, they had to contend with a large group of sometimes-unruly non-professional soldiers, with civilian life and attitudes still on their minds.

Although the primary mission of the Pacific Detachment was documentation of US Army activities in South Vietnam, the unit also covered other assignments in and around the Pacific Rim. By 1968 there were three "permanent" foreign operations. Team Alpha, stationed in Seoul, South Korea, Team Bravo, stationed in Bangkok, Thailand, and Team Charlie, stationed in Saigon, South Vietnam. The Korea team was the newest, inserted in South Korea after the capture of the USS Pueblo by North Korean forces on January 23rd, 1968.
While negotiations were underway for the release of the crew, Team Alpha kept busy documenting the activities of US Army and Republic of South Korea forces. These missions took them from as far north as the demilitarized zone located along the 38th parallel to the port of Pusan, located at the southern tip of the country.
The Korea Team lived for a while in a hotel at Walker Hill, a large resort located outside of Seoul. Later they rented a house in Seoul. On hot summer nights members of the team would often sit up on the roof, drinking beer and taking in the exotic sights and smells of their Korean neighborhood. When the crew of the Pueblo was finally released at the border village of Panmunjom on December 23rd, 1968, Team Alpha was there, filming the former POW's as they walked to freedom across the infamous "Bridge of no Return." Their film was then shipped to Japan for processing and transmission via satellite to the United States. While the Pueblo crew was not allowed to talk to the press because they had not been debriefed, they did ask the DASPO team questions like, who won the World Series. One guy even wanted to know what had happened in his favorite comic strip.

The Thailand Team had as long a history in DASPO as the Saigon team. Assignments in Thailand consisted of documenting Thai and US military training and support activities across the country. Early on, the team was based in the Bangkok home of a Chinese national with the unlikely name of Johnny Siam. Johnny owned a rambling two-story house located in the heart of the city. He rented rooms to Americans and also ran an antique shop where you could buy, according to one former lodger, jewelry, trinkets, and artifacts stolen from remote ancient Thai temples. At his weekend patio cookouts, Johnny

would personally grill water buffalo steaks for a group of assorted types such as Air Force pilots, Red Cross workers, DASPO photographers and a journalist or two. Later the team moved into a Bangkok hotel.

Flying at 32,000 feet in the air-conditioned comfort of a commercial airliner, the landscape of South Vietnam appeared as a cloud-swept Impressionist swirl of pastel greens and browns. This vista was punctuated by the staccato-dipped points of small, perfectly round blue holes, which reflected the glare of the sunlight coming from above. These swirls of blue were actually water-filled bomb craters -- visual evidence that this beautiful landscape was really a country at war. A popular GI cliché of the time was that if it weren't for this freaking war, Vietnam would be a great place to visit.
Stepping out of that same plane and on to the tarmac of Tan Son Nhut Airbase, the reality of Vietnam swiftly became evident. You were immediately hit by a blast of searing hot air, accompanied by a symphony of intense noise consisting of the shrill whine of combat jet aircraft and the roar of large, lumbering cargo airplanes competing for the limited runway space of the world's busiest airport. The smothering heat would cause your sunglasses to fog up and the withering humidity would make the shirt of your khaki uniform stick to your body. Welcome to the Republic of South Vietnam!

Those of us in the DASPO Pacific detachment generally traveled to South Vietnam on three month-long Temporary Duty (TDY) orders. The DASPO "Team Charlie" team worked out of a rented, privately owned home located in Gia Dinh, a suburb of Saigon. We called it The Villa. A three story-tall building of non-descript design, The Villa served as our office and home away from home. The Vietnam team usually consisted of an (OIC) Officer in Charge, a (NCOIC) Non Commissioned Officer in Charge and anywhere from 10 to 18 enlisted sound specialists, motion picture men and still photographers. From here we roamed and photographed across the face of South Vietnam.

Part of why DASPO worked so well is because it had been created and organized to work outside the control of local US Army command in the host countries we operated in. We were designed to work only for the Army Pictorial Agency at the Department of Defense in the Pentagon. This very special military pedigree prevented DASPO from ever working in Europe because the chain of command there would not accept a military unit operating outside their control. Early on, this independence was tested by the staff of General William C. Westmoreland, then commanding general of US military operations in The Republic of South Vietnam.
Staff Sergeant Ray Goddard, who due to a temporary shortage of officers was the acting team leader, was "collared" by one of the general's aides and ordered to have his team cover an upcoming cocktail party the general was throwing. While DASPO was supposedly immune from covering local military publicity events, Sergeant Goddard could not shout down a general staff officer, so a photographer was sent to shoot at the party. Later, an extra set of prints were sent up the chain of command at the Pentagon, eventually reaching the Army Chief of Staff, who reprimanded General Westmoreland and told him to keep his hands off DASPO photographers. Later, Goddard, while on

assignment out in the boondocks, had to hitch a last minute ride on a departing helicopter. After scrambling aboard the slowly rising chopper, he landed at the feet of an officer sitting in the rear. Looking up, Goddard saw the four stars on the officer's uniform and recognized General Westmoreland. The general peered down at Goddard, noticed the camera and read his nametag. His only remark was, "So you're Goddard."

Because DASPO operated slightly outside the official chain of command in South Vietnam, our officers and NCOs often had to resort to non-military style ingenuity to accomplish our mission. For instance, we usually had at our disposal a couple of military vehicles to get around the Saigon area. Neither of these vehicles was "legal" in a military sense, but somewhere there was a motor pool sergeant with a fresh bottle of scotch in his wall locker or an unlimited amount of 35mm-color film at his disposal.
A general in the South Vietnamese army owned our villa. When the rent came due, his wife would arrive in an old, chauffeur-driven, Citroen limousine. We always paid in cash.
When on assignment around the country, our teams would operate much the same as civilian journalists covering the war. We flew out of nearby Tan Son Nhut Airbase, either from Hotel Three, a helicopter departure area, or via the 834th Tactical Airlift Command, a fixed-wing aircraft unit that had regular, scheduled passenger flights around South Vietnam. Most projects were set up by our team OIC, who would contact the host unit we were planning on photographing via an erratic and generally flaky, long-distance telephone system. If the Pentagon didn't have anything for us to do, the team was expected to come up with story ideas of their own. If we didn't have anything else scheduled to do, our teams were expected to cover combat. And sometimes events unfolding on the battlefields of the various war zones dictated what our teams were tasked to cover.

As members of DASPO Team Charlie we often bore witness to some of the best of times there as well as the worst. We often moved between the worlds of the grunts who sweated in the bush and the rear-echelon clerks who worked in air-conditioned offices. As relatively independent military photographers in a war zone, we were often free to choose our possible fate. Like World War Two photographer Robert Capa, who, when writing about his participation in the news coverage of the invasion of Europe at Normandy in June of 1944 wrote, "The war correspondent has his stake - his life - in his own hands, and he can put it on this horse or that horse, or he can put it back in his pocket at the very last minute."
One of our own, Rick Rein, chose to ride on one of two helicopters being used to shoot a story on a device utilized to literally "sniff" out enemy soldiers. His was the one flying closest to the ground. Somebody on that three-man DASPO team had to photograph the device in action and Rick volunteered. Midway into the operation the other two DASPO photographers watched in horror as Rick's helicopter was hit and destroyed by enemy ground fire. However, choice isn't always protection from death in combat. DASPO photographer Kermit Yoho was killed by misdirected US artillery round -- so-called friendly fire -- while walking in a secure area with a civilian photographer who was also killed. Over the years many more members of DASPO were wounded. During the

Communist Post-Tet Offensive of May 1968, three Team Charlie photographers were wounded in one week.

Looking back, it is not difficult to be proud of what we accomplished. Much of what DASPO produced has become part of the visual history of that conflict. As military photographers we were not expected, or allowed for that matter, to judge what we saw. However, I think that the images often speak for themselves without forced editorial comment. As General William T. Sherman said during the Civil War, "War is Hell." It is indeed ironic that something as cruel and demeaning as warfare can also serve as a platform for the most noble of human interaction. By the late 1960s much of the work done by Team Charlie revolved around documenting how military equipment worked in the field. While photographing in field locations was not as secure as being in Saigon, it was while photographing combat operations in the bush that each of us had to confront "The Elephant"...those moments of real combat that demand that you overcome the most debilitating kind of mortal fear, whether you carry a rifle or a camera. Your body begins to betray you. Hands want to shake. Your sense of time becomes distorted. Your sense of space is compressed into a very small area immediately around you. Unlike commercial motion picture depiction of combat, a soldiers eye view of what is going on around them is generally focused within they're own personal perimeter of fear. As photographers we were talked to somehow detach ourselves from these very human emotions and record what was happening around us. A standing joke among the younger enlisted men in DASPO was, we had to "shoot or be jailed." Unlike civilian photographers and reporters who could make a reputation for themselves and further their careers by covering combat, military photographers were merely doing their jobs.

After the final US military pullout of South Vietnam in 1973, DASPO experienced the same post-war downsizing that was going on in the rest of the Army. On December 6th, 1974 DASPO Pacific ceased to exist. The last commanding officer of DASPO Pacific, Louis Poirier remembered packing up the last of the Hawaii equipment and shipping it to DASPO CONUS at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Then, as he wryly recalled, he shipped himself up to the 25th division at Schofield Barracks. The three DASPO detachments were then consolidated into one unit stationed at Fort Bragg, and the name was changed to Army Special Operations Pictorial.
Today the 55th Combat Camera Company stationed at Fort Meade, Maryland carries on the visual documentary mission that was started by DASPO in 1962, traveling to hot spots around the world.

I do not think that any of us who worked and lived through that experience were not affected in some way by it. Most of us have forgotten the worst parts of it and gotten on with our lives. A few were nearly crippled by the emotional and psychological impact of that war. Some of us found our "vision" and craft as photographers while there. However, no matter what eventual impact that war had on our lives, I suspect most of us think back on that time more often than we would like to admit. Veterans of war, former soldiers, have a common bond between them that is difficult for those who have never lived that experience to understand. Looking at newsreel footage from the early decades of the 20th

century -- footage showing Civil War veterans, bent and crippled by time, marching slowly together down small-town streets, veterans of any war since then would understand why those old men would subject themselves to such physical pain. It was pride in a shared experience, and most importantly, a sense of love for their fellow veterans. It is this common thread of experience that holds the veterans of DASPO together today...even after all these years.