

Warehouse of Death
The Saigon Mortuary and
Personal Property Depot.
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Located at the end of the main runway of Tan Son Nhut Airbase was the one place in South Vietnam that no American soldier ever wanted to end up. It was where you went if you had "bought the farm." ...a popular GI euphemism for death in-country. Bush grunts could appear pretty callous at times. It was a way to help keep death at arms length. They had other expressions for different ways of getting killed. For instance, "crispy critter" for being burned alive, or shake and bake for getting killed in an exploding tank or armored personnel carrier.

In the old days soldiers killed in the field were buried close to where they fell. The spot was marked and people from graves registration would come along later to dig them up, identify the remains as best they could, and send them back to the states for burial. By the time of the Vietnam War however, technology had evolved to the point that the bodies of soldiers killed in the field could be sent via helicopter to mortuary facilities in the rear, often before the process of decomposition had started. These bodies were bagged and tagged as the saying goes. Once at the mortuary, professional morticians would clean the body up, and then begin the process of identification and preservation for shipment back home. A few weeks later the personal belongings of the casualty would arrive at the Personal Property Depot where "technicians" would inventory and process the materials. This process included cleaning the soldier's clothes, shining his shoes, and yes, reading and censoring his mail. Material deemed improper for return to the man's family was removed and destroyed.

During the summer of 1969 DASPO was tasked with shooting a documentary film about this process. For several months different members of the team were assigned to film a complete narrative that included a staged battlefield scene as per a script titled "Memorial Activities." We shot the battlefield scene using combat medics and a willing volunteer who played "the body." All of this was done on what we jokingly referred to as the "back lot" at Tan Son Nhut Airbase. I remember that while we were shooting this scripted part of the story, the DASPO officer in charge of our shooting team became overcome with thirst and had to be driven back to a nearby office building to get a drink of water. The enlisted members of the team thought this was pretty funny. This was about the closest that young officer ever got to the "real war" and it was almost too much for him to physically handle.

Once this part of the story was completed we moved on to indoor shooting at the mortuary and the personal property depot. I remember one inventory section officer who proudly told me that most of the guys who passed through their facility probably got a better quality coffin from the army than they would have gotten in civilian life. At the time that remark struck me as being a bit ironic, considering that most of these young

soldiers would have rather lived another fifty years and not cared about the quality of their coffin.

The mortuary and property depot were located in a large, prefab metal building. Outside there was a long stack of shiny shipping containers that were used to carry the bodies back to The States. I remember seeing Vietnamese workers with high- pressure hoses wash out the used body bags, with brackish looking water spilling out into the drain below. Eventually these bags would be returned to the field for reuse.

The Personal Property Depot consisted of a large, airy hanger sized room with long tables piled with personal belongings. At each table a military inventory specialist carefully went through all the ordinary, mundane articles that people tend to clutter our lives with. It was a nice quiet environment, and it seemed light years from the reality that was taking place in the rice paddies and jungles outside of Saigon. While photographing in the personal property room I noticed a small notebook in the bottom of a trashcan. Curious, I picked it up and began to read what appeared to be a diary. Nobody noticed as I pocketed the diary. I couldn't believe that a man's private thoughts about this experience were going to be kept from his family. I thought I would be able to figure out who the guy was and send the diary to his family. It was not to be. The necessary information was not there. Years later I finally gave the little notebook to the Vietnam Collection at La Salle University in Philadelphia. I felt that I was at least giving his experience and thoughts some kind of historical continuation.

What has remained in my memory over the years is a few vignettes from inside the mortuary facility, and in particular the embalming room. Years later, while covering the dedication of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. those memories would come back to haunt me. Most of the names on "The Wall" had passed through that facility, and some while I was working on that documentary film.

I remember a hallway with two doors that faced each other. One had a sign that read, "In Processing." The other had a sign that read, "Out Processing." On this particular day the out processing room contained the corpse of a Crispy Critter, a body that had been burned beyond recognition. What I saw could have passed for a side of barbequed beef that had been cooked by President Lyndon B Johnson at his ranch in Texas. The "body" lay in a shipping casket, cushioned by a layer of thick, clear plastic wrap that was obviously intended to cover the body later on. Next to the body was a neatly folded green army dress uniform. All seemed ready for inspection. I wondered by whom?

Across the hall was the embalming room, the "in-processing" side of the process. At first there was a tidy reception area dominated by a large gray, steel desk. Behind it sat an army sergeant with the usual piles of paper surrounding him. Behind him was a tall white freestanding bulletin board that acted as a divider between the desk and the rows of embalming tables beyond. The first thing I noticed was the overwhelming smell of formaldehyde...a necessary ingredient for preserving human bodies, especially in a tropical climate.

Two rows of embalming tables faced each other down both sides of the room. Some of the tables were occupied, while others were not. Fortunately it was not a busy day, but there was business enough to last me a lifetime. One technician was casually massaging the arm of a corpse that extended stiffly halfway around his body. The idea was to be able to relax the muscles so the arm could be lowered next to the corpse. At the end of the room I watched in fascination as another technician removed several feet of bloody intestines from a body and dumped them into a large plastic bag. I then noticed that the top of the man's head had been sawed off, the skin flaps neatly folded inside the now empty skull. His expression was as calm as if he were asleep. Another technician zip-opened a body bag that was lying on a nearby embalming table. When I saw that the head and the feet of the person inside the bag were both showing at the same time I averted my eyes. I walked out into the hallway to escape the horror, only to be confronted by a long medical gurney on wheels that contained the skeleton of a helicopter pilot. Bits and pieces of uniform and blackened flesh clung to some of the bones. A dark liquid substance lay at the bottom of the tray. The technician who had been pushing the gurney had stopped for a moment, resting his elbows on the bottom lip of the tray, his face only inches from the skeletal feet of the pilot. As I stood watching, he nonchalantly began to discuss with a colleague his up coming R and R in Hawaii.

Later that day, after we had returned from filming, our team NCOIC decided to treat the team and cook steaks out on the grill. When I looked down at my blackened steak and the dark juice that surrounded it on the plate, I decided to drink beer for dinner instead.

As a result of that experience, The Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. has a special meaning to me and the other members of the DASPO team who photographed in that place.