

THE DASPO VILLA HOME AWAY FROM HOME

By Bryan Grigsby

It wasn't much to look at, but sometimes, if you had a few too many beers and you were sitting across the street drinking yet another brew at the Vietnamese street vender who sold black market American beer and Pho, the popular fish soup that seemed to fuel much of the energy that made Saigon run...well, you could almost get misty eyed looking at the old gal.

We did a lot of drinking in the villa in those days. We also worked, ate and sometimes even slept in the joint. There were the late night poker games in what passed as the dining room. Up on the second floor, in a large room that looked out over Trung Ming Ky street, we watched stateside movies on a 16mm sound projector we had for the purpose. Besides that army issue projector we had all kinds of other stuff that I never knew where they came from. You see, we weren't "officially" there. Don't get me wrong. We had heavy weight credentials mind you. Hell, we worked for The Pentagon. But the Army runs on it's own curious fuel, and the military likes everyone to "belong" to somebody else...which we didn't. So, DASPO Photo Team "Charlie" operated pretty much like a band of gypsies. We operated through the wit and creativity of the individual officers and nco's who set up the place.

From the street our villa looked pretty much like any other residence in the neighborhood. I don't think we were the only gypsies on the block. There were other Americans, civilian and military around us. Quietly doing their thing, whatever that was. We didn't exactly chat over the fence you see.

Speaking of fences. We had one that surrounded our "estate." On top of it were several strands of barbed wire that was supposed to keep people out, and didn't. We had more of the stuff around the roof of the villa as well. Inside our walled compound we kept the illegal vehicles we used to get around town, and more importantly a basketball net which we used for impromptu games. We also kept a couple of dogs known as Cry Baby and Dip Shit roaming the grounds to keep strangers out...which they didn't. I guess they got even with us for giving them such crappy names. It always amused me that our Vietnamese born dogs were so completely Americanized. Happy, outgoing, tail wagging, hand licking little guys. On the other side of the fence, the local Vietnamese dogs were miserable looking curs that gave you a wide berth if you got too near them and looked at you with sullen eyes. I suspect the reason for that difference in personality was because the local dogs knew that at anytime on any day they could be part of the menu in any of the other homes in our neighborhood.

The ground floor was devoted to "business." The NCOIC's (Non Commissioned Officer In Charge) desk faced the front door, which was a flimsy glass and latticed metal affair that folded accordion style across the front of the room. If the enemy had ever decided to make a frontal attack on us, there was no way that door was going to stop anything,

especially a determined little guy with a AK-47 assault rifle. No doubt about it, we would have been fucked. During the day the doors stayed open, letting in what breezes there was and the outside light. A large ceiling fan circulated air around the room and it was usually quite comfortable there. The OIC's (Officer in Charge) quarters were located on that floor as well, with his door facing out into the dining room, which was dominated by a long table with chairs and a small black and white television we sometimes watched state-side re-runs on. One good thing about that setup however. If we ever did suffer that frontal enemy attack, the OIC would be the first to go! Also located on the ground floor, but behind the dining room was the kitchen. In it were two large size refrigerators, one of which was used exclusively for keeping our beer cold.

The beer cooler was a completely democratic institution. Beer was rationed and we all donated our beer ration for the mutual good. However, there was one member of our team who once decided not to use his ration to buy the team's usual favorite American brands...you know, like Bush or Budweiser. There was the one time when Craig Fairall bolted from the team and used his ration on several cases of a particularly nasty tasting Korean brand known as "OB" beer. To give you some context here, it would be like bringing a case of MD20-20 wine to a country club event. Anyway, Craig had those cases of beer all to himself, while the rest of us cursed him for the duration. Bad is it was, however, Craig's lapse in judgment wasn't as bad as that exhibited by yet another member of our team, Carl Sandri, who decided to put nuc mon sauce on his food. Now don't get me wrong. To the Vietnamese, nuc mon sauce is like catsup is to us. The difference is, catsup ain't made out of ground up rotted fish heads. Consequently Carl had to enjoy his nuc mon covered food away from the rest of us while we ate. At least with Craig, you could sit next to him while he drank his Korean beer.

Besides the movie viewing room, which we also used to work on equipment and pack exposed film for shipment to The Pentagon, there were also three more sleeping spaces. One was a multi-bunk affair located behind the viewing room. In the corner of the second floor was a bathroom with shower, then next to that another smaller two-man room, and next to that a three man room. All of these rooms were cooled by individual window sized airconditioners. Going up yet another stairway brought you to an outdoor deck. Here was located another large multi-bunk room, a bathroom, and a smaller, free standing private room for the NCOIC. All of these rooms were also air conditioned. Along the outside wall of the large sleeping quarters was a metal ladder that led to the top of the top of the DASPO villa. Here was the greatest place in the world to enjoy the sights and sounds of metropolitan Saigon, a view usually enhanced by drinking and sometimes a little weed.

The Villa was not free space however. We rented it from a South Vietnamese general who once a month sent his wife to collect the rent. Mrs. General Whatever would ride up to the front gate in her chauffeur driven black Citron limousine. Her driver would get out and ring the outside doorbell so he could drive his mistress into our compound. Then once inside, Mrs. General Whatever would get out, dressed up like a mandarin princess to collect the rent from the NCOIC. We always paid in Vietnamese currency and the wad of money he would hand her looked like a small fortune. She would very slowly count all

the bills, and then once satisfied that we had not short changed her, she would get back in her car and have her driver take her home. It was a fascinating routine to watch, especially the Citron limo, which looked like a gangster car from the 1930's.

There was a kind of routine to living in the villa. Most days, if not working in the field, or typing captions, we kept busy doing chores to keep the place running smoothly. Usually one of us went grocery shopping with the NCOIC to the Cholon Post Exchange. Most of the American community that lived on the economy in Saigon shopped there. We also had to keep our military vehicles serviced and gassed up. This also required keeping our fake documentation on those vehicles up to date. Other chores included driving to Tan Son Nhut to refill our drinking water bottles, or chauffeuring our team OIC to MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) headquarters for the daily briefings about what was going on in the different war zones. When we didn't have any chores to do, time could stretch out very slowly on those hot Saigon days.

The cooking, cleaning and laundry chores for the team, were done by a trio of Vietnamese maids. None of us ever learned their real names. We called them Sam, Gus, and Momma-san. Who ever originally hired them must have put an ad in the paper that said, "Wanted. Three unattractive females to do housework in a villa full of horny young American photographers. Patience and a sense of humor helpful." And oh how patient they were. English was never their second language, but somehow we always managed to communicate. Momma-san was the oldest and she took care of much of the laundry. Most days you would find her in the film room ironing and folding our clothes. The railings along the roof served as her clothes dryer. The afternoon heat made short work of drying things. Sam and Gus cooked our meals and cleaned. Horse play was never part of what any of those three women signed on for when they came to work for us, but good natured "tom foolery" was never off the list of distractions and entertainment for some of the younger team members. Sam and Gus might be quietly dusting the floor and then suddenly find themselves lifted off the ground and carried around the room. This would elicit an outburst of rapid Vietnamese. The culprit would then run off laughing. However, Momma-san had little tolerance for such antics, and if you fooled with her, you later might just find yourself wearing a t-shirt that was several sizes too small, or pants that were too short. I learned to leave well enough alone. One of our officers who was constantly nasty and disrespectful to them, never seemed to get his correct uniforms back. And he never seemed to pick up on the cause and effect, either.

Life in the villa was seldom boring. Sometimes it could get downright exciting...like the night before my 26th birthday, when a mysterious American "civilian" who identified himself as an embassy security official came storming into the villa in the middle of the nightly poker game. A short, heavy-set man, he announced that intelligence sources had learned that a Viet Cong sapper team was planning to attack our villa that very night. Surveying this room full of very un-soldierly looking photographers, his gaze landed on our Philippine-Hawaiian NCOIC Al Batungbacal. Without missing a beat he began shouting orders to Sergeant Batungbacal in a dialect that only he and Al seemed to understand. Later Al explained that the guy had served in the Philippines during World War Two. Anyway, this unknown civilian decided that we needed a plan to defend

ourselves. The problem with his getting any enthusiasm out of our motley crew was that we had noticed a large of Vietnamese civilian and military police setting up a roadblock in the street in front of our villa. All this activity didn't leave much room for a "surprise" attack from an enemy force. All in all it was beginning to shape up as a great show and we did not intend to miss any of it. The American official left, satisfied I suppose, that he had gotten us organized to defend ourselves. Left to our own devices, we did come up with a plan. It wasn't quite the same as his.

Sergeant Batungbacal suggested we take our party up to the roof where we could "defend" ourselves better. In short order a large supply of beer and food was lugged up to the roof where we soon settled down to our feast and the free entertainment that was on the street below us. Everyone had agreed to this plan. At least we thought we had all agreed. On my first trip downstairs I discovered that, SP4 Carl Sandri had set up a defensive position on the floor of the film room below us. Decked out in full battle dress, steel pot, flack-jacket and M-16 rifle, Carl had decided that the villa still needed protecting. Personally, I had no problem with him doing that. That left more food and beer to go around for those of us. My only fear was that he might accidentally shoot somebody, and so every time one us trooped up or down the stairs that night, we announced in a loud voice that we were approaching his "position." I guess eating all that nuc mon sauce had affected his brain. Eventually we all did pull guard duty that night, but we never did learn why we got that "official" warning visit. The attack never came and the next morning our Vietnamese defenders were gone.

According to Sergeant Paul Moulton, the cocktail hour at the villa started officially at 6pm. If Paul had a drink in his hand before that hour, he always answered that it was 6pm by HIS watch. Now I'm not suggesting that we were a bunch of drunks in DASPO, but truth be known, the best way to deal with the reality of the place was to drink. And drink we did. Besides the water was pure poison.

SP4 Rick Rein liked to hang out by the wall that surrounded the front yard. All kinds of people would walk down the ally that was located by the south side of the compound. Rick liked to chat up any pretty girls that might walk by. Often as not, these girls were members of the world's oldest profession. Located just down the street from the villa was a barbershop. Now in the same building as that barbershop was a brothel. During the days right after the Tet Offensive, the younger enlisted men had to get permission to leave the villa on their own. Going to get a haircut was a good excuse to get out of the villa. It became something of an in-house joke. Go get a haircut and get laid. At one point Rick was getting pretty "enthusiastic" with his chatting up of the girls. Observing this one afternoon Sergeant Moulton suggested he go get a haircut. Rick didn't pick up on the true nature of Paul's suggestion and replied that he had just gotten one. Paul gave Rick an incredulous look, and then laughingly, ordered Rick to "go get another haircut damn it!"

Sitting up on the roof was always a pleasant diversion. In the late afternoon, after the worst heat and humidity of the day had dissolved, we would often pull folding lawn chairs up to the front railing of the roof, sit back with a cold brew, put our feet up on the railing and watch our neighbors across the street. There was this one particular civilian,

an older guy, who maintained this amazing lifestyle that we loved to watch. You could almost set your watch by him. Dressed in a t-shirt and boxer shorts, he would wander out on his balcony every evening with a newspaper. A few minutes later a young Vietnamese girl would bring him what appeared to be a cocktail. When he had finished reading his paper, an older Vietnamese woman would bring out a small portable television set, and judging from the time, we figured he was watching the armed forces broadcast of the evening news. After a couple more cocktails, and once the news was over, he would go back inside his house. We wouldn't see him again until the same time the next day. It was a routine we grew fond of. Like followers of the Rocky Horror Picture Show, we knew the script so well we knew what was going to happen before it happened. I guess we were all so charged up on a constant adrenaline high, chain smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol to push the demons back into our subconscious, that we loved that little show for its mom and pop normalcy.