

# **Role of the Combat Cameraman**



**Presented by Ted Acheson**

-ELISON-



## Role of the Combat Cameraman



## Slide 2:

My name is Ted Acheson I roamed Vietnam with a 16mm camera. While I was in Vietnam the 17th was the group I always worked with. When I went through my slides I would come across a caption sheet with your name on it. I don't know what happened to the rest of the slides that day and I am pleased to tell you a little about the roll of the combat cameraman. I have a couple of the cameras we used sitting up here that you're welcome to hold and look at after my presentation. Now I'm going to show you a film of what combat Cameramen did.

HERE IS AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT  
WE DID TET 68, MIN TET ANY 68 DAK TO  
AND OTHER AREA'S  
PLAY MOVIE  
CLOSE VIDEO  
START PRESENTATION  
NEXT SLIDES



Slide **1** 2

Even after all these years, the sound of a helicopter will stop many of us in mid-thought. Helicopters were the music of the Vietnam War. This shot by **Harry Breedlove** was used as a postage stamp commemorating the 60's.



Slide 6: 3

I worked for a unit called the **Department of the Army Special Photo Office** or **DASPO** for short



Slide ~~6~~ 4

Between 1962 and 1974 we served in this unique military unit...



**“I am fed up with looking at Le May’s documentary films showing how great the Air Force is!”**

Slide 7: 5

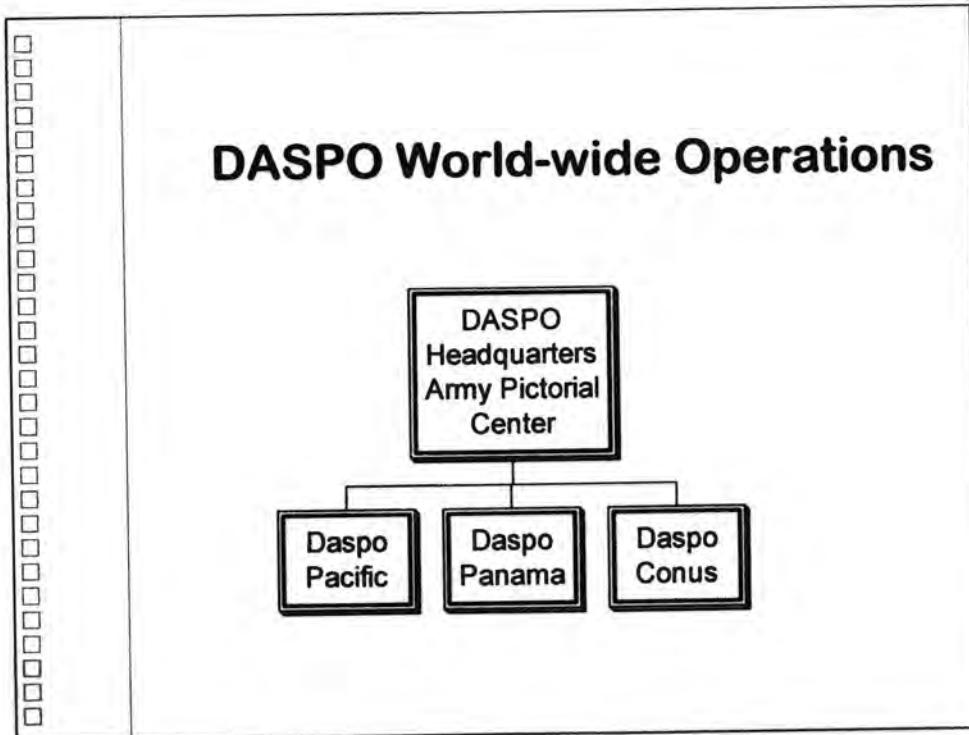
This quote is attributed to **Gen. George Decker**, Chief Staff of the Army as he left a White House briefing with **President John Kennedy**. Gen. Decker then initiated a directive to enable the Army to produce documentary films showing the Army's operations world-wide.



**DASPO Headquarters Army Pictorial Agency  
Long Island, New York**

Slide 1: ✓

This studio is now being used by **Kaufman Studios** and has the largest sound stage ~~East~~ of Hollywood. Originally built by Paramount Pictures in 1920, it was taken over by the army in 1942 to help produce documentaries.



Slide 9: 1

When DASPO was established, we had a very short chain of command -- all of the operations reported to DASPO HQ's. HQ then reported to the chief of staff for **Gen Decker**.

## **The unit covered assignments in and around the Pacific Rim.**



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Slide ~~8~~ 9

By 1968 there were three "permanent" foreign operations teams:

**Alpha (Seoul), Bravo (Bangkok), and Charlie (Saigon)**



Slide #2: 10

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.



Slide 12: //

While negotiations were underway for the release of the crew, **Team Alpha** was kept busy documenting the activities of **US Army** and **Republic of South Korea** forces.



Slide ~~11~~ 12

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. Their film was then shipped to Japan for processing and transmission via satellite to the United States.

That Skinny guy was me.



Slide 15: 13

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.

## DASPO CONUS

- The CONUS detachment was headed by SFC Jack Yamaguchi.

Slide 16: 17

*Conus*  
DASPO covered the U.S. and the rest of the world.



Slide 19: 15

During its existence, the **Panama group** covered riots, military coups, and natural disasters.



Slide 20: 16

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.



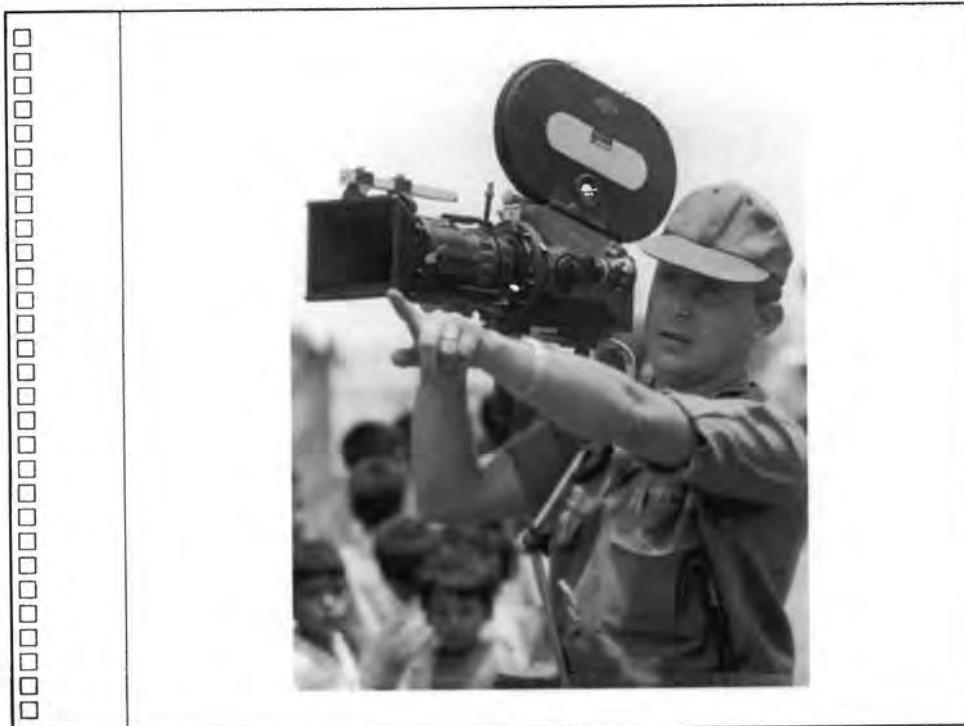
Slide 21: 17

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 the Cuban revolutionary, **Che Guevara**. Not long after, Guevara was killed.



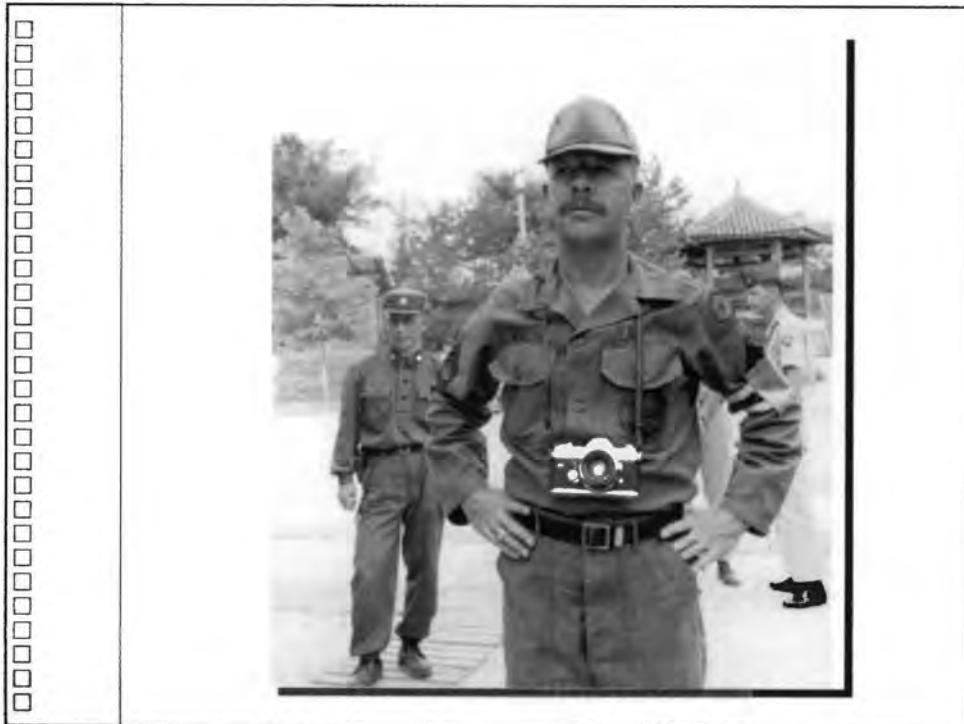
Slide 22: 18

All three units were tasked to produce motion picture and still photo reports of US Army activities engaged in the Cold War. 1962 was when this picture was shot of **Jerry Cornelius** when only advisors were in Vietnam. Jerry was DASPO's first causality of the war.



Slide 20: 19

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 Army use.



Slide 24: 20

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 II and Korea**.



Slide 26: 21

The younger enlisted men and officers came mostly from the signal school at  
**Fort Monmouth, New Jersey.**

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Slide 25:  
72

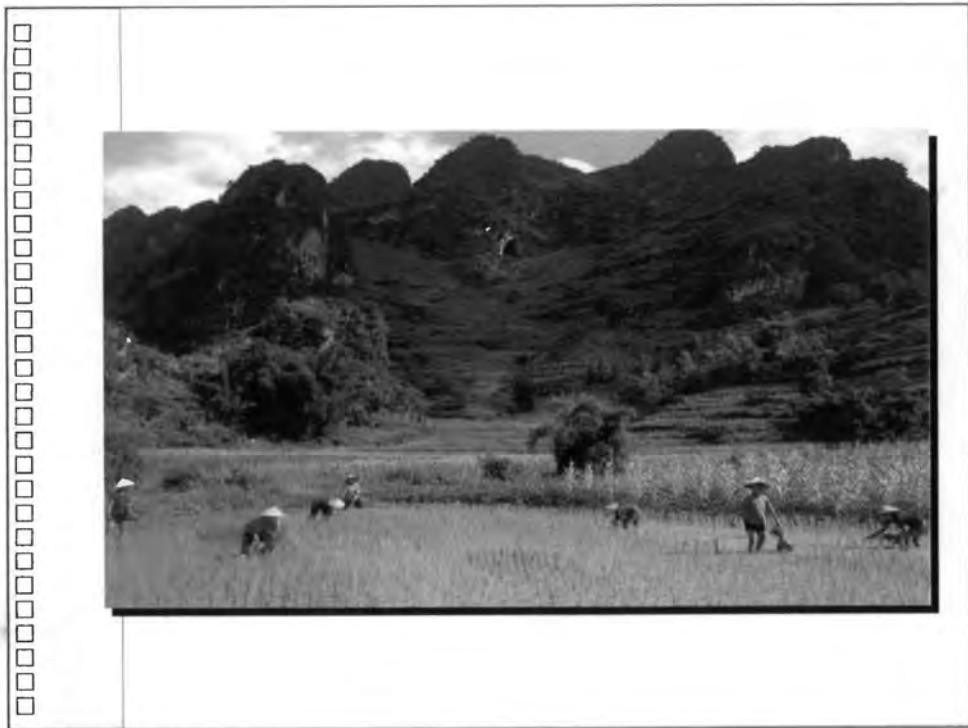
For the professionals, they had to contend with a large group of sometimes-unruly, non-professional soldiers, with civilian life and attitudes still on their minds.



Slide ~~28~~ 23

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.



Slide 29:

29

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.*



Slide ~~20~~: 25

Stepping out of that same plane and onto the tarmac of **Tan Son Nhut Airbase**, the reality of Vietnam swiftly became evident...



Slide 31: 26

...You were immediately hit by a blast of searing hot air, accompanied by a symphony of intense noise consisting of the whine of combat jet aircraft and the roar of large, lumbering cargo airplanes – all competing for the limited runway space of the world's busiest airport.



**Welcome to South Vietnam!**

Slide ~~12~~: 21

The smothering heat would cause your sunglasses to fog up and the withering humidity would make the shirt of your Jungle fatigues stick to your body.



Slide 38: 28

DASPO roamed and photographed across the face of **South Vietnam**.



Slide 34: 29

Part of why DASPO worked so well was because it had been created and organized to work *outside* the control of local US Army command in the host countries in which we operated. We were designed to work only for the Department of Defense in the Pentagon. We didn't take *grip and grins* or *cocktail party shots*. We were accredited just like the civilian press but we did not answer to MACV. *OUR PASSPORT WERE GOV ISSUED*



Slide 35: 30

We had military vehicles in which to get around. But, these were not "legal" in a military sense - somewhere there was a motor pool sergeant with a fresh bottle of scotch in his locker, or an unlimited supply of 35mm film. ~~Chad Lewis~~ that Randy Smith is ~~here~~ ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~US~~ ~~Army~~ ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~US~~ ~~Army~~ vehicles both were Navy. One was a jeep and the other a ~~jeep~~ Chevy suburban type truck.



Slide 36: 31

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.



Slide 37-32

When on assignment around the country, our teams would operate much the same as civilian journalists covering the war.



Slide 38: 33

Most projects were set by our team OIC, who would contact the host unit we were planning on photographing.



Slide 39: 37

If the Pentagon didn't have anything for us to do, the team was expected to come up with story ideas of their own.



Slide 40: 35

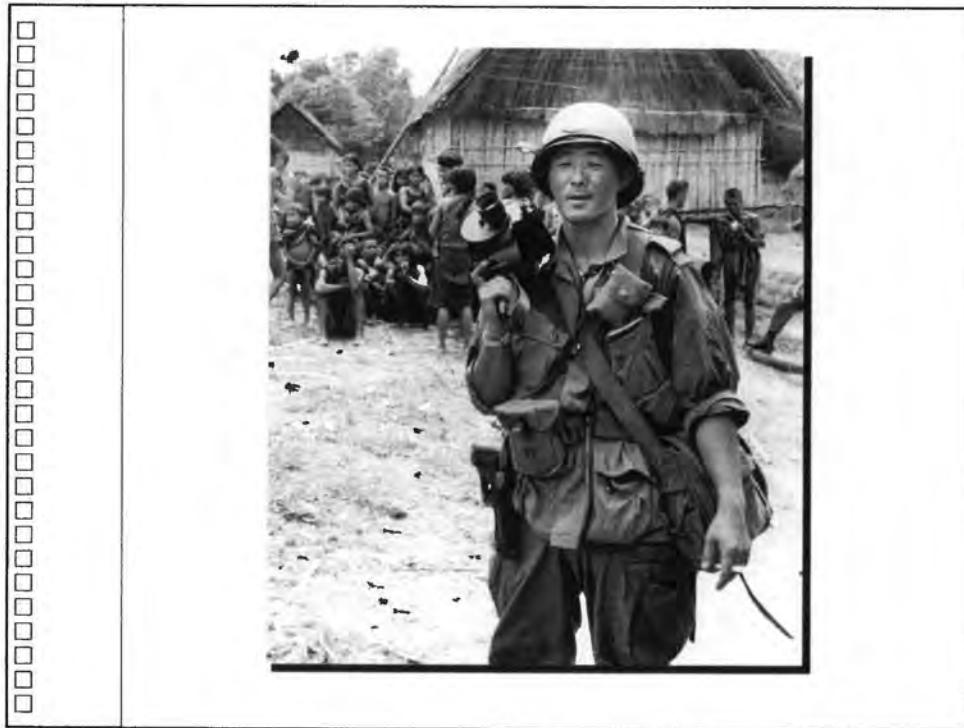
Usually, our teams were expected to cover combat.



Slide 41: 34

As members of **DASPO Team Charlie**, we often bore witness to some of the best of times there, as well as some of the worst.

We often moved between two worlds of the grunts, who sweated in the bush, and the rear-echelon clerks, who worked in air conditioned offices.



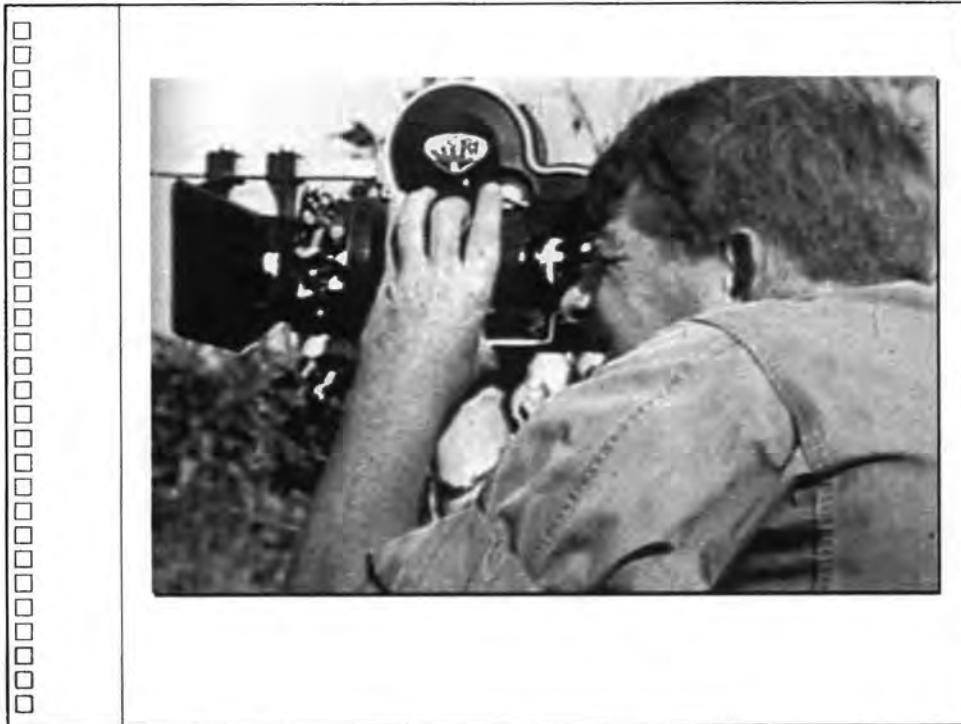
Slide ~~42~~: 37

As relatively independent military photographers in a war zone, we were often free to choose our possible fate.



Slide 43: 36

Like World War II photographer **Robert Capa**, who, when writing about his participation in the news coverage of the invasion of Normandy in June 1944, wrote, "The war correspondent has his stake – his life – in his own hands, he can put it on this horse or that horse, or he can put it back in his pocket at the very last minute."



Slide 44: 79

One of our own, **Rick Rein**, chose to ride on one of two helicopters being used to shoot a story on a device literally to "sniff" out enemy soldiers. They were testing this device in the DMZ



Slide 45: 40

Somebody on that three-man DASPO team had to photograph this device in action, and **Rick** volunteered. His was the one flying closest to the ground. Midway into the operation the other two DASPO photographers watched in horror as Rick's helicopter was hit and destroyed by enemy ground fire.



Slide 48: 21

However, choice isn't always protection from death in combat.

DASPO photographer **Kermit Yoho** was killed by a misdirected US artillery round - so called *friendly fire* - while walking in a secure area with a civilian photographer who was also killed.



Slide ~~47~~: 42

Over the years many more DASPO members were wounded.



Slide 48: 43

During the Communist Post-Tet Offensive of May 1968, three Team Charlie <sup>1/4</sup> ~~of our unit~~ photographers were wounded in one week. The guy bandaging the other guy got hit the very next day



Slide 50. 44

As military photographers we were not expected or allowed for that matter, to judge what we saw.



Slide ~~51~~: 45

However, images often speak for themselves without forced editorial comment.



Slide 51: 46

As photographers, we were taught to somehow detach ourselves from these very human emotions and just record what was happening.



Slide 53 47

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...



Slide 54. 48

"The Elephant" .....those moments of real combat that demand that you  
overcome the most debilitating fear, whether you are carrying a rifle or camera.



Slide 58: 49

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.



Slide 50: 50

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.



Slide 58 51

Unlike civilian photographers and reporters who make a reputation for themselves and further their careers by covering combat, military photographers are merely doing their jobs.

*Just merely doing our jobs is an understatement*

... like the day I hooked up to cover the **101st Airborne**.

# 43 Years

May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1968



## Operation Carantan II

45 years ago

101st Airborne was tasked to keep the enemy from moving back into the city of Hue. It was called Operation Carantan II. The 101st Airborne were responsible for making sure that roads to Hue were safe and that the NVA was not moving into the area. An estimated 78,000 enemy troops operated in I Corps. My still photographer Ken Powell and I were filming B troop 2nd BN, 17th Cavalry 101st Airborne as they did a sweep of an uninhabited and bombed village of La Chu. This platoon was ordered to sweep out what they were told was a small force of Vietcong. However, what we found there instead was a battalion-sized force of North Vietnamese Army regulars – and we were suddenly outnumbered by more than three to one.



Slide 60. 53

The village was a warren of tunnels and I was filming guys clearing the tunnels.

~~There were several men from B troop taking a break and sitting on the steps of a Buddhist temple as I filmed them.~~



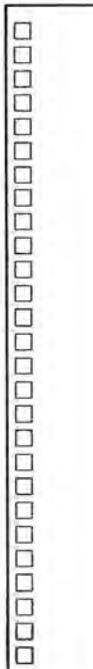
Slide 61: 54

I had just stopped filming when we heard AK47's and Machine gun fire happen; the NVA/VC were almost right on top of Ken ~~Burns~~ and me. ~~There were bomb~~ craters around the area and I told Ken don't pull the John Wayne and try to get to the crater for better shots. I know he couldn't hold up his camera without it being shot.



Slide 62: 55

I ran into the temple with an ABC Vietnamese motion picture stringer. The reporter for ABC didn't want to go out with us. <sup>which was usually two cars</sup> I was in the corner of the temple with my lens sticking out of a shell hole getting some incredible shots, I was standing and only using a camera. We were trained to get a shot that was at least eight to ten seconds long to be able to build a sequence, otherwise the cuts are too short for the editor also if the shot wasn't steady it was of no use as well. Eight to ten seconds standing exposing your body is an eternity under fire. A deafening explosion hit near me, and I was blown out of the temple with the ABC cameraman.



Slide 03: 54

We both landed along a wall that protected us from incoming fire. I remember not hearing too clearly and looking at the ABC guy who was bleeding from his ears and mouth. He had teeth knocked out. *We were 20 feet from where we had been filming. ~~How damn lucky to be here today~~*

The temple became the attention of the machine gunners in the bunker spraying it with fire even though at the time I thought there was no one in it firing at them. The rounds were hitting all around where I had once been and were moving closer to my new position along the wall. I couldn't hold my camera up and shoot, the building was just being riddled with automatic weapons and I certainly didn't want any more RPG's shot at me. ~~There's only enough room for one bullet hole~~ I screamed at Ken ~~that~~ that I was going to move and get a better and safer angle to film from. I am not sure he heard me because the noise of the firefight was so intense and deafening.



Slide 64:

It's amazing to me under the most arduous of conditions you still would frame the scene and were worried about composition. It was instinctive in photographers from framing a shot to exposure to what focal length you were using, the length of the shot and how you imagined using the next the scene. Even under combat conditions I was doing all of this instinctively as we were being hit with enemy fire.



Slide 85: 58

As I moved to another position, I came across several wounded men from B troop; one was a crusty old sergeant who was hit in the stomach. I was filming him talking to another GI and he flicked his cigarette away and I followed it with the camera down to a dead NVA.

There were more wounded and dead NVA/VC to film along with some of our GI's who were hit, that part of the fire fight was over in less than ten minutes.



Slide 66:

We continued to move forward as I kept looking for Ken ██████████ whom I was responsible for. We continued to get hit from what was left of buildings that were cleared moments before and the NVA/VC still kept popping out of them shooting at us. I stopped to rest with several other men when we got hit again by a sniper from rubble that had been cleared a moment earlier.



Slide 07: 60

I was told that what happened next was that a new NFG (and I don't have to translate that for you) threw a grenade into the bunker and it came out as fast as it went in detonating among a number of us who were hit by shrapnel. They screamed fire in hole and I dove from one end of the bunker to the ground. I thought I had gotten hit by the debris when I heard the explosion almost on top of me.



Slide 88: 4 /

It was starting to get dark; there was hardly any light left when I heard helicopters coming in our direction, they were low, firing tracers and rockets barely over our heads. ~~Y~~ ~~Y~~ ~~see these shots in the footage that I took~~

I was still trying to find Powell when I made my last shots before the sun set. From the time I left Ken to when the battle subsided, I was filming. There were snipers everywhere and it was hot and I didn't have any water. I was wearing a very heavy battery belt and didn't have a place to put my canteen so Ken carried it with him. When we were separated that was the end of my water!

Slide 69: 62

Here is the caption of the action filmed. You will see the familiar names in it.

SPL ACHESON

NEWSFILM CRITIQUE SHEET

File Project No. 1. AF-100-1000 Team: ARMY (ARMED) Subject/Title: Operation Centurion ST

Date Shot: May 5, 1968 Length: 300 Color: X Black & White      Silent: X Sound     

**KINSHIP EVALUATION:**

Subject selection/development: Good

Newsfilm value: News: Very Good

Feature: OK

Technical Quality: Film: Very Good

Sound: S/A

Caption Informationality Good

**DISPOSITION:** X Cleared/released to: Telepress Date: 5/16/68 156-68 Release No. 108 Length: X Silent      U.S. ARMY UNITS  
CONDUCT OPERATIONS  
Release Title: CENTURION II IN  
VICTORY OF HUE,  
NORTH VIETNAM

Origin: MEC, VTFQ, ANC

Not released. Reason:

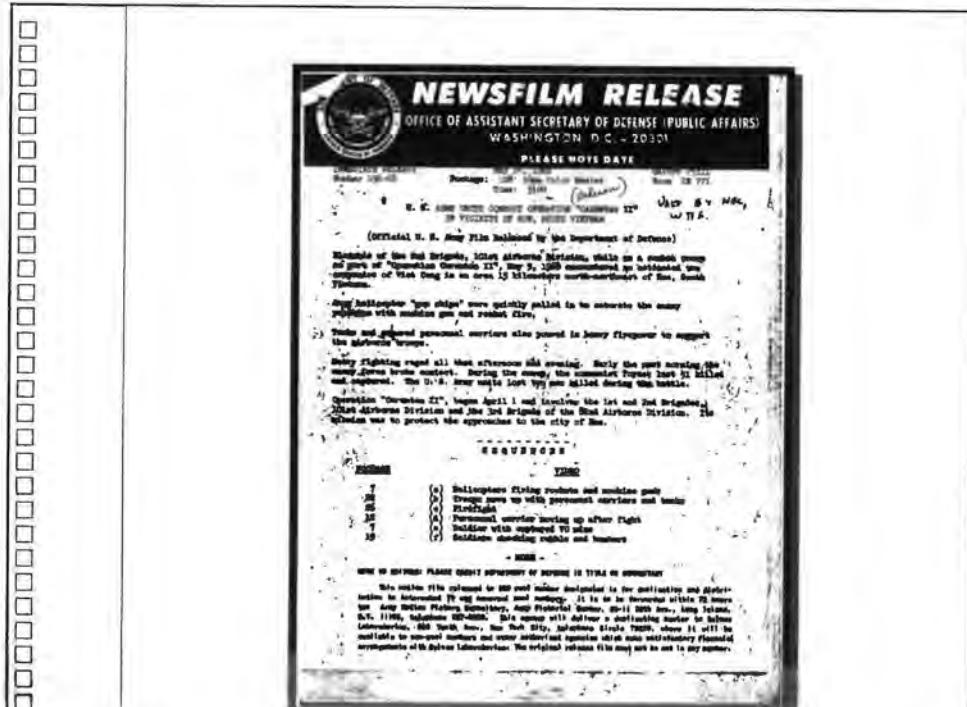
**OVERALL COMMENT:** Centurion had all the elements of a good story here and used them effectively. Air sorties by planes and capture were covered by ground cameras. Also the brief firefight was well enough photographed, some of scopes moving up under fire are very good visually. Despite the late release date, film was well received by the media.

*Joseph F. Powers*

Editor, Media-IV Newsfilm Section  
Radio Visual Division  
Directorate of Defense Information

Slide 70: 43

After the film was received, it was critiqued by editors in Washington DC.



Slide 71: 621

The Pictorial Center would send you a copy of a release if it was picked up by the networks. You can see they really edit film down for TV.

I now show you a film of the end of the 17<sup>th</sup>

I was ~~screamed a Purple Heart~~ the footage was used by ABC and NBC's Huntley and Brinkley. I didn't know it then, but this was the start of the second TET offensive of 1968. (See film Critique)

We had a Captain (Rick Griffith) back in Saigon who was very strange and did everything by the book. If I had ever mentioned the story about how Ken Powell didn't stick with the troops that night and went back to base camp he would have court martialed him.

Here is what I shot and I will repeat it for you after my presentation if you would like.



Slide 72/ 65

That night we walked across rice patties where we were being fired at; we walked through woods where we were being fired at. I think it was fate on whether you were hit or not. Flares were being fired and the silhouettes of the trees and the men blended into one. *ANVIC would run over AND THIS SNIPED AT* Dehydration was setting in I hadn't had a drink of water since before the firefight started back at the Buddhist temple.

It was the only time in Vietnam where I picked up an M-16 from a wounded GI and was ready to use it – he certainly wasn't going to use it. The medics threw his flack vest to the side, which I took and wore. It was very dark with just some light from the flares; I avoided looking at the ~~young~~ man's face as they put him in an APC. I had seen enough for the day. Not long after I picked up the M-16 the NVA broke contact.



Slide 73: 66

At about 2:00 AM in the morning, we stopped at a rice paddy where a water buffalo was not happy at seeing us. I finally was able to get my first drink of water in almost ten hours. I carried Iodine pills and another guy let me use his canteen. I filled it up with the nasty looking water and threw in about ten pills, shook it and drank it through my teeth, using them as a filtering device for the sludge. It probably was the best drink of water I had ever had. I kept looking for Ken ~~Waggoner~~ but no one noticed him or knew where he was. I was scared that something happened to him, and I was scared something was going to happen to me.



I kept looking for Powell all night until we walked out into sunlight the next morning, exhausted from the adrenalin rushes and dehydration. A medic said it looked like I was hit; my pant leg was soaked in blood. About that time I saw Powell and I didn't know if was happy or mad when I saw him. I found out later he got on the last vehicle back to LZ Pinky that afternoon which carried some of the wounded on it. ~~I never told the OIC what happened and why Powell was still with me. You would have gotten court martialed by him.~~

*IF OUR OIC FOUND OUT Powell HAD HIGH TAILED BACK*  
I wanted my wound attended to, but there were a lot of wounded in worse shape than me so we took a chopper that was heading to Phobia. I got cleaned up and sewn up by a doctor there.

You can't conceive how lonely I was that night walking with strangers that didn't even know who I was. I was TDY to Vietnam and here I am in the middle of a firefight and no one even would know if I disappeared. It was a scary feeling knowing that you could have fallen into pongee pit and wouldn't be missed.

8/10/67

To The  
FIRE  
BASE  
HQ  
WOUN  
COURT  
MR



68

## Robert Martin Patterson

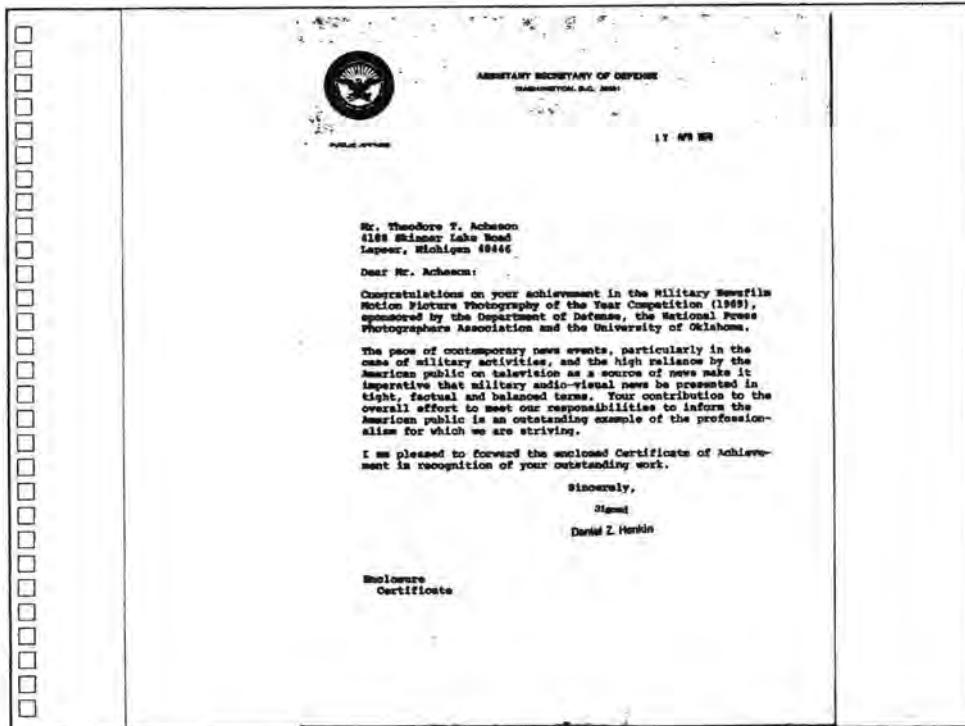
Another squad of the 2nd of the 17th was pinned down near me that afternoon and not only was B troop in this fire fight but it had a Medal of Honor awarded to Robert Paterson. Patterson's squad part of the 2nd of the 17th B troop ~~and~~ was probably a hundred yards away from where I was filming and I didn't know about it. Patterson's squad was cut off from the rest of the platoon.

~~Climbing to the second floor of a pagoda~~, Patterson was able to destroy two of the bunkers, but several more remained. With flanking maneuvers stalled and his squad taking casualties, Patterson made the fateful decision to charge into the hail of enemy fire – and that was when his memory went out. Though he would remember none of it, his fellow soldiers saw him single-handedly destroy five bunkers, kill eight enemy soldiers, and capture a cache of weapons. With that opening, his squad was able to rejoin the platoon and continue the attack until the next morning when we all walked out.



Slide 49: 69

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.



Slide 76: 70

After my Vietnam tour, I went back to college. While in school, my parents called and said: "You have something here from the DOD". I told them to hang onto it and will get it the next time I came home. My parents kept calling about the package from the DOD I told them it was just more junk. I came home and finally opened it - to my amazement I had been selected The DOD Photographer of the Year by the National Press Club.



Slide ~~71~~: 71

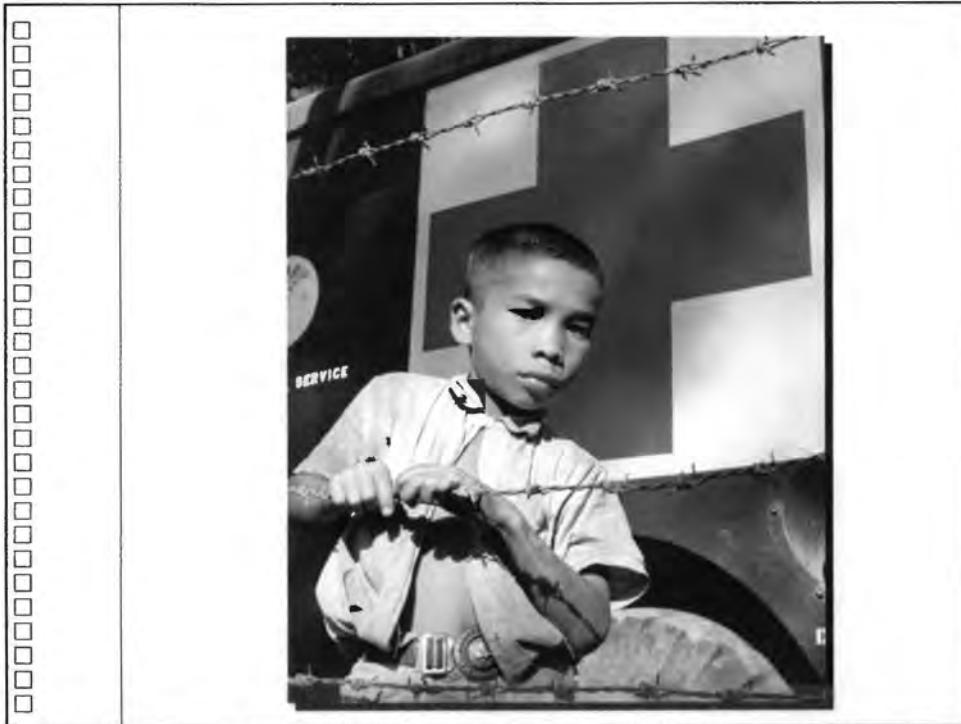
After the final US military pullout of South Vietnam in 1973, DASPO experienced the same post-war downsizing that was going on in the rest of the army. The last big story DASPO documented was **Operation Home Coming** - the release of our POW's.

On December 6th, 1974 DASPO Pacific ceased to exist. Born **under General Decker**, who was then **Chief of Staff of the Army**, we were closed down by another Chief of Staff, **General Abrahams**.



Slide ~~70~~ 72

None of us who worked and lived through our experiences in Vietnam can say we were not affected in some way. Most of us have forgotten the worst parts of it and gotten on with our lives.



Slide 79 ~~79~~ 73

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.



Slide 80:

74

Most of us think back to that time more often than we probably want to admit. Veterans of wars and former soldiers, have a common bond between them that is difficult for those who have never lived that experience to understand.



16  
Slide 52:

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.



Slide 81: 74

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.



Slide 82: 77

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 ~~veterans~~ together today...even after all these years.

Veterans



Slide 83:

Thank you for your time ~~to answering~~. If you would like, I have some still pictures of the 2nd of the 17th that I found in the National Archives. I have made a CD for Dave so that he can get these to you.