

DASPO/MACV Army "A" Films Bubonic Plague Hunters & Lepers

I remember doing a job on rats, however it's been so long ago, and with only about 45 days transitional period between doing film projects for DASPO Dept. Of The Army Special Photo Office and MACV, with both units in Vietnam, I honestly can't remember under which command the rat project was filmed. Also I vaguely remember the U.S. Embassy was connected with the project, as was the 3rd Field Hospital in Saigon.

During the days the French controlled Vietnam, they only provided services to the cities, leaving the towns and villages to support themselves the way they had for eons. Since World War II, the country had been in a virtual state of conflict. First fighting the Japanese, the Viet Minh, The French and now the Viet Cong, leaving the masses of the country's population with nothing for an infrastructure or in total disarray. Still Vietnam reported among the world's highest number of cases of Bubonic Plague, in the mid 1960's, on a yearly basis.

In the country side people got sick and died, without any one knowing why. Lacking electric power and phone service to much of the country, its definitely predictable to say that the unreported cases of Bubonic Plague that actually happened was several hundred percent higher, than the distorted lower number of Bubonic Plague reported cases from the cities.

The data coming out of Vietnam sent up red flags. The personnel I filmed working on the rat project stated, the World Health Organization and U.N. HQS, were worried about the situation here in Vietnam. The U.S. Military couldn't afford having over flowing hospital wards with Bubonic victims, reducing troop strength to fight the Viet Cong.

I had filmed two members, a petty officer and a four stripper, a full Naval Captain, from the Navy's 6th Entomology Unit based at Pearl Harbor. Contrastingly, the army posts had MPs, and Dept. of the Army Civilians (DACs), to catch loose dogs, stray cats, wild skunks and other vermins, seen in the installations living and working areas. It would be a rarity if any one responded to a call concerning scorpions, tarantulas, bats or bee hives. Nobody in the army was looking for smaller creatures, like bugs and insects the way the navy was.

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Granted the Navy's 6th Entomology Unit searched for bugs and insects and spiders, but I have no knowledge of their activities into microscopic spectrum of virus and bacteria. Bubonic Plague is caused by bacteria that frequently finds a host on fleas. The fleas attach themselves to rats. The disease thus is transmitted from fleas, to rats to humans, when Bubonic Bacteria infected fleas or rats bite a victim.

Here my mind goes foggy, but based on the aforementioned, I deduce that since the military had nobody trained to perform the task, the U.S. Embassy hired and brought to Saigon civilian Entomologist to fill the void. The Embassy also did coordination with the Vietnamese authorities for these people to trap rats along Saigon's back streets and ally ways in the slums and refuge concentrations of the city. It was important for the Vietnamese people to understand not to tamper with trapped rats, because they ate rats. I've seen rats in the meat section of the Saigon Central Market; and as the attached slide shows in the Long Xuyen Market.

I located the Entomologist's villa on a side street near the VNAF (Vietnamese Air Force) gate to Tan Son Nhut Airbase. The people I filmed weren't wearing uniforms, but in civilian clothing, with hospital lab coats. For the work I was going to film, the personnel wore latex gloves. Using white butcher block paper. They layed a large sheet on a stainless steel table. Reaching into a chest type freezer, one person lifted out a sealed plastic bag containing a frozen rat.

The person I was filming meticulously opened the sealed bag, extracting the dead rat on the paper. He then very carefully tapped the plastic bag. Asking why this technique was used? I was instructed, this was the only safe way. Nothing could escape from the sealed bag. They told me, if they killed the rat, the fleas would escape, to the entomologist and all over the villa searching for a warm host. The person I was filming pointed out some dark specks on the white paper, from his tapping the plastic bag. He stated the specks were dead fleas. The fleas were so small, you couldn't tell fly shit from black pepper.

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Methodically the person combed the rat inch by inch, insuring he combed out each and every flea the rat contained. He checked the ears, the tail, the legs, around the mouth and most certainly he checked the comb itself for dead fleas. When he was finished, he probably had about 100 black specks on the white paper. He scrupulously emptied the fleas from the paper into a vial and sealed it. He then took a label off the plastic bag affixing it to the vial, identifying where in Saigon area the rat was captured.

While he combed the rat, the entomologist was looking for symptoms and indications that the rat had Bubonic Plague. I asked what percentage of the rats test positive? I was told about one in four they collected. I can't recall if the one in four ratio was rats or fleas. The fleas collected would have to be studied under high power microscopes, capable of looking at bacteria and virus samples. This equipment was only available at the 3rd Field Hospital.

While some entomologist would be at the hospital examining the collected fleas for Bubonic Bacteria, the rest of the team would be out checking the traps around Saigon, and preparing those rats caught for the overnight freezing. I had absolutely no attachment to connect the camera I was using to a microscope to film the actual bacteria. The entomologist didn't have a poster, print nor sketch of the bacteria either, thus there was little reason going to the hospital.

Because the U.S. Military had better sanitation procedures than the Saigon slums and rat bait was prevalent around all military encampments, the deadly effects of Bubonic Plague never took place, while the U.S. was in Vietnam. While racking my brain for details on this story, I remembered doing a story on a Leper Colony, I think in Kontum, that I hadn't thought about in 35 years.

The Leper Colony story more or less came out of the clear blue to the MACV Photo Team. It probably came about during a chance meeting at the Kontum Officers Club, between the photo team's lieutenant and a doctor with the local civil affairs team, that also worked at the Leprosy Sanitarium in the Kontum area.

I remember the entire photo team disliking the job. We all heard of lepers, but nobody knew anything about the disease. We all feared we might contract leprosy from being exposed to the lepers. The dictionary states its caused by an organism that causes ulcerations, fingers and toes to fall off, makes the skin scaly and affects certain nerve regions.

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The Lt informed the photo team a day or two prior to the event. The leper colony was an added story to our primary story we flew to Kontum to do. Perhaps The Montagnard Boarding School (see this web-site) was the primary story. The photo team was told to be ready on a moments notice. The story came together so quick, I almost bet, the doctor was waiting for a shipment of leprosy medicine to arrive. When it got to Kontum, he took his lunch hour to run the medicine out to the sanitarium and film the job.

I remember we spent about the same amount of time driving to and from the leper colony, as we spent there. Arriving the doctor took some sort of small package inside to the sanitarium administrators. Since the film team had no lights, we couldn't film indoors. Our story was for network news and they would not except any story over two minutes in length, therefore we didn't need much film.

The sanitarium, as I recall had a large porch and a gazebo in front. The gazebo was adequate lighting for our needs. The doctor and leper colony staff brought out something like three patients. The doctor opened his medical bag at the gazebo. With two cameras running and tape recorder going, we started filming. The doctor used tongue depressers, checked ears, felt the skin and checked reflects of the patients. The doctor spent only a minute or so per patient.

The patients looked normal to us. Perhaps one had a finger or toe missing, we truely didn't know what to expect. These were the first lepers we on the photo team ever layed eyes on. Even if the doctor cheated on the exams, what percentage of American back home ever seen a leper, much less how to treat the disease. So what ever the doctor did, would be O.K. In all it took about 10 minutes to film the leper colony story. Maybe that's why I hadn't thought about the leprosy story in 35 years. The doctor told the photo team, with proper treatment, these leper would lead a normal life and most would leave here in a few months.

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