

MACV Army "A" Photo Team's First Release (Candy Distribution)

The MACV Army "A" Photo Team was jinked, mainly by my own doing. The nature of the stories, handed the team, under my auspicious, were mostly new equipment type stories. Sadly to admit, it was my flaw in thinking, the stories were all filmed from the wrong prospective. That is to say, "Equipent Being Operated By People" not the opposite. Not the opposite, "People Operating Equipment". In effect, under my leadership, the team was making mini-training films of the new equipment in Vietnam. The stories, the team submitted were too much "Nuts and Bolts", not technicians using the tools of their trade. The content of the stories forwarded to Washington, by the team just weren't pleasing for the stateside nightly news audience.

Then came a human story, the Special Forces were distributing candy. Without any first hand knowledge of the events, plus being half a world away, it was hard to certify what took place. However from bits and pieces from various informants, an extrapolated version was formed.. It was understood the good citizenery of Central California, banded together for a massive undertaking. Church and civic action clubs of Vacaville, Fairfield and surrounding communities, adjacent to Travis Air Force Base, conducted fund raising activities, not the least included; bake sales and car washes, to procure boxes of candy for the troops in Vietnam. It was also purported, that some of the volunteers, were wives of air base officials, securing the pallets of candy, a trip to Saigon, on a less than filled cargo plane.

Contacting the 5th Special Forces Headquarters in Saigon, the photo team was told, the Special Forces camps around Tay Ninh, still had supplies of the candy. It was inconclusive, whether the Green Berets had most, or all of the donated candy. It was decided to hop the Saigon/Tay Ninh convoy the next day. The Special Forces people said, they would alert the Tay Ninh camps, that the three man photo team would arrive with tomorrow's convoy.

The convoy had limited time in Tay Ninh. Only enough to have a complete turn around. Arriving truck would disband to all points in the city. The refrigerated truck would head to cold storage. The fuel truck would break away for the POL Center. At both sites, the loaded trailers, would be unhitched and an empty trailer re-connected. Other trucks went elsewhere to be off loaded. What ever the circumstance, within two hours of arriving, the convoy was reformed and heading back to Saigon. Many of our news stories could be completed in less time, but not all, thus it was preplanned for the photo team to spend the night.

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At the Special Forces camp, the photo team was given a tour of the tiny, roughly 200 X 200 feet fortress. Passing an inner perimeter armed bunker, where defenders could fall back to if the outer perimeter was breached. The photo team was told to walk in our guides footsteps, because of exposed claymore and other buried land mines, inside the complex. Theseven Special Forces sergeants were augmented by a cadre of South Vietnamese Regional and Popular Forces, manning the actual perimeter. The RUFF/PUFF's lived behind the four to five feet high rampart. The married RUFF/PUFF's had dug out living and cooking facilities, for the families, with thatched roof huts. The tallest item in the outpost was the radio antenna, providing the Green Berets the only link to the outside world for help.

Inside the main building, the photo team was taken into their storage room, to see the candy. There sat four maybe five cases. Each case containing probably 50 twelve ounce to one pound boxes of chocolates. The Green Berets, told the photo team, that they had distributed about half the quantity they received. They knew only, that other teams and detachments were issued the candy, but didn't know how many teams, or where the other teams might be located in South Vietnam. Nor if every team in country was given an equal amount of the candy. They knew, that a lot of the teams, that were issued the candy, had fully distributed the candy, antecedent to MACV's knowledge of the project.

The overnight stay with the Special Forces was uneasy at best, and downright humiliating in certain instances, at the imposition we caused on another small team sized operation. Based in Saigon, for lodging, each of us had a bed in a BEQ (bachelor Enlisted Quarters) and meal preparation was the cooks responsibility. Everything was provided for us. Out here in the boonies, the small Green Beret Team had to fend for themselves. Nothing was provided, that was a radically altered approached to the situation. They had seven beds, not ten. I recolect sleeping on the sofa. I believe one slept on a spare fold-up cot, and the third man just layed his head on the kitchen table to sleep. In troop concentration, trucks daily bring cases and cases of raw ingredients for the cooks, to concoct three meals for the day. Mess sergeants routinely called out "Anyone For Seconds", to chow down the excesses.

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The Green Berets went several times a week, to Tay Ninh's ration break down point, to obtain multiple days provisions, the team needed. That meant not a case of roasts, but a single roast, not a case of bacon, but a few pounds, two 30 count egg flats, and proportional amounts of bread, potatoes, coffee, sugar milk and other canned, boxed, dried and refrigerated food items. They had groceries for just seven men, not ten. There was no convenience store, nor supermarket to buy any supplementary items. To feed a nearly 50 percent increase in people, meant taking food from the mouths of ill-affordable Special Forces team's meager food supply. They had cases of C-Rations, and I recall at least one case was opened to feed everyone, but under no circumstances was there a call for second helpings. Experiencing the food shortage, made everyone on the photo team uneasy.

There were other reasons for the uncomfortable feeling. Hanoi had a \$10,000 bounty on each Special Forces person. This handful of Green Berets, represented decades of Vietnamese wages. To collect the bounty, any rouge VC company, could probably overrun our position in a heart beat. The problem was at what cost? The defenders would annihilate many attackers. I had no knowledge of locally based helicopter or Air Force gunships. They might have to fly the 50 to 70 miles from Bien Hoa or Saigon, to rouse any attack. Tay Ninh Province was also a prime infiltration route to get men and materials into the Iron Triangle area. Nuy Ba Dinh (Black Virgin) Mountain, sat a few miles from our position. Everyone knew the mountain was crawling with Viet Cong. Cambodia was close by, which the VC and NVA used the border region as a sanctuary and major staging area, for raids into Vietnam.

Exasperating matter, as twilight took over the Special Forces camp, gunfire was sporadically heard. The Green Berets, described the noise, as the RUFF/PUFF's probably shooting at a monkey or other wild animal. Several times during the evening, a symphony of gunfire played out along two walls of the fortress. A NCO headed outdoors, to research the cause of the disturbance, since little or no in-coming gunfire was detected. However the rifle fire added tension to an already bad situation.

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The Special Forces were very accomadating. The team was simply following instruction, given them by higher command. We likewise, were told to film the candy story. Both teams were just following orders, and trying to make the best of a bad situation. However, eyeballing the havoc, disruptiveness our encroachment had on another small team sized unit, I wished we had far better coordination. A good 80 percent of the news stories we filmed, were completed in less than two hours. Thus we had a four out of five chances of doing the story, and re-joining the convoy, had the Green Berets brought the candy, when they met us in Tay Ninh.

The next morning, the Special Forces took out about half a case of confectionary. The candy, three Special Forces NCOs and interinterpreter rode in their jeep. The photo team followed in our 3/4 ton truck. Candy for these villagers, would be an all new experience. The only sweetness the villagers got, was from the natural charms of citrus fruit, such as oranges and bananas, or extracting the nectar of sugar cane, by sucking and biting on the cane stalk. Departing the compound, with the sun at our backs, I knew we were headed towards Cambodia. A few turns on side roads, and in less than 15 minutes we were at the intended village. Stopping so we could get an establishing shot of the entire hamlet, as the jeep entered. Parking our truck, near the jeep, the photo team took a medium shot as residences of the village, especially the kids approached the jeep.

Kids with ewek old dirt and grimed faces, in their extrovert curiosity, were the first to sample the open boxes of chocolates. The western concoction was a strange sensation to their palate. The mixture of raisens, nuts, berries, fudge, caramels and maraschino cherries, creme filling were all new to the kids sweet tooth, and very desirable. With the kids ardent approval, the elders, parents and grandparents partook in the candy give-away. Grandpa's sporting a pair of four inch long whiskers for a beard, munched on the strange pleasing textures, that came from a box.

Within minutes the 40 or so assembled villagers was eating the conglomerations of sugar, cocoa butter, lactose, milk fat, soya lecithin, whey, cocoa power, nuogat, vanillin, glycerin, egg whites, dextrose, PGPR as an emulsifer and more. The team filmed close-ups of kids eating, spilling and dropping candy on the ground, only to pop the dropped goodie back in their mouth, dirt and all. The kids were now two toned brown, not only from filth, but chocolate smeared about their faces.

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Beatle nut stained black mouth mamasan's soon had their own box of candy. The biggest challenge was which of the tempting morsels to try next, a square, round, domed, triangle or rectangular shaped confectionary. Like the children, the adults became gluttons, indulging heavily, until the box was empty. Within minutes empty candy boxes littered the ground around the jeep. With everyone in a tight confined area, there was little room to move back to film any medium or long shots of the entire village gathered around the jeep, enjoying the eating frenzy. All we could film were close ups, from chin to eyes, as the villagers devoured candy. We could see the eyes light up as a different wonderful taste reached the person's tongue. We could see the chocolate stained teeth. The camera showed the tongue and saliva colored brown from the chocolate. Within a half hour the candy was gone. Some villagers, undoubtedly, hoarded entire boxes, under their clothing, to save for later, but no one cared. The candy was a disguise for intelligences gathering.

One of the primary goals of any army field commander, is to have reconnaissance, to find out about as much as possible, about the adversary. This included the opposing leaders, the unit or units designation, its strength, weaknesses and vulnerabilities. They wanted to know the unit(s) size and armaments the unit possesses. They wanted to identify, tired beat up units in retreat to regroup, as compared with heavily armed fresh troops, coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The criteria of intelligence gathering mission was relegated to the interpreter. During the candy consumption, the interpreter, was busy in verbal intercourse, with the local villagers, to ascertain if they saw, heard, or knew of any Viet Cong or NVA troop movements around the village, in the past week. If so, he questioned the direction of travel, unit size and other pertinent data

As the visit to the village ended, the photo team rushed to get a medium long shot of the jeep exiting the site. Back at camp the jeep was emptied of trash. The photo team was given each a box of C-rations, and driven into Tay Ninh, to meet the convoy. The entire trip back to Saigon, the team was unusually solemn. We all knew, our invasion of the Green Berets, adversely affected their ability to function, and created undue hardships for them. Several weeks later, MACV announced that we had our first release. We shot nearly 400 feet of film, but the networks only got 64 feet., about 1 3/4 minutes. Gone were the entry and exit shots. All we saw were close-ups of discolored mud and chocolate covered kids faces and smiling happy adult eating candy. We were told, it was a local release. That Sacramento and San Francisco TV stations used the story.

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