

Charles W. “Chuck” Abbott

September 23, 2015

Interviewed by with Thomas Webb

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Webb: We do have water. I guess I didn't ask if you wanted another pop.

Abbott: No, I'm good. Yeah, pop.

[Laughter]

Abbott: Keep forgetting about it.

Webb: Okay. To begin, I always like to say: My name is Thomas Webb and I'm here at the Pritzker Military Museum & Library with Mr. Charles Abbott. Today is September 23, 2015, and we're here to talk a little bit about your experiences in conjunction with the DASPO exhibit that the Museum & Library is fortunate enough to be putting on. Welcome.

Abbott: Thank you.

Webb: The first question that I will ask is, when and where you born?

Abbott: I was born in Hammond, Indiana in 1941.

Webb: Okay.

Abbott: And family moved to Lansing, Illinois in about... when I was about three years old.

Webb: Okay, so a local guy.

Abbott: Yes I am, yup.

Webb: [laughter] Very good. And kind of the questions that I am asking to maneuver us into the military experience is whether or not growing up you had any interests or hobbies that involved photos, film, making art, anything like that?

Abbott: I guess most of the interest came from motion pictures. My grandfather and my father—his father-- were projectionists in local theater houses. So when I was ten my mom used to drop me off at Dad's theater and I would be there playing

around with my brother while my sister and mom went shopping. And I always was curious of machines, so I guess I bugged my dad and grandfather enough that they finally started teaching me how to thread a projector and how to address the carbons. 'Cause at that time, the light that they used to produce the image on the screen was carbon arc. So what fascinated me was the film ran... runs through the projector upside-down and it's the lens that reverses it. And of course all these images that come to life on the screen just fascinate me so I just kept asking questions and they just kept teaching me just to keep me quiet, I guess. So eventually I started taking lessons and got books... whatever I could to learn how motion pictures are really are made. So that's kind of where it started, I believe.

Webb: Okay, and did that continue then into college? Did you go to college, or--?

Abbott: Yeah, I was taking some courses after high school that related to photography... mainly still photographer lighting, your key light, your hair light your-- forget the lighting. But I really wanted to get more understanding of the motion picture, but lighting was very similar. If you're lighting a scene for motion picture or if you're doing a portrait shot or something... it's just that you're in the movies. The image moves so you gotta be... you gotta adjust lighting for that or you gotta make sure the scene is set so that if there is any movement that you try to minimize shadow and stuff like that.... So I was trying to find a community college or something where I could go to a motion picture course in that. And that was difficult, so I did attend some courses at the Columbia College here in Chicago for a little bit and then I just wanted more. It just didn't seem like I was going anywhere with that, so... about twenty-five at that time and my dad suggested that the military might be a place to go because they have pretty good schools and stuff like that. He didn't know if they had any motion picture school, so I went around checking the Air Force and the Marines that... and the Army recruiter was the most helpful and I'm sure at that time as the Vietnam was beginning to go full swing-- this was in sixty about sixty-five, sixty-six era-- and so it was just something that... I'm sure the Army recruiter wanted numbers. But he was very helpful, I must admit that 'cause when you signed up there was a program at that time for what they call a hundred and twenty days. If you signed up for a hundred and twenty days, if you didn't get your school, then no problem. But as I told the recruiter,

"Well, I'm not going to sign all these papers and then they're gonna let me walk away", you know, so he said, "All right, we got to fill out the paperwork."

And I put down motion picture school first which was at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. And then I had to put down two more and I said,

"No," I said, "You know, I'm twenty-five. I know what I want pretty well sure, you know what?"

He said, "Well, they'll send it back, you know, they'll want two more."

I said, "Yeah, but my problem is that they'll probably won't find motion picture school available at the time they want to put me in there into service, so they'll give me one of the other two choices."

You know? And he kind of thought a minute.

He said, "Yeah, you're... you got a point there." He said, "Well let's try it."

So, he sent it in and sure enough a week later he called me.

He said, "Well they sent it back, but I wrote on the form that, you know, the recruit wants the school of motion picture. He knows what he wants, he's got background and he fudged it a little bit, you know, he's being doing this and all that stuff."

So it came back okay, got the school. But I had to be... in order to get the November school enrollment at Fort Monmouth I had to be in the Army by August 1st to complete my basic training so, lucked out there. So on August 1st at the Chicago Grand Station there... about sixteen hundred of us that went to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri so.... And that was interesting because they had overcrowded Fort Leonard Wood at the time. So we were there with our uniforms ready for training with the fatigues and all that. But they couldn't put us in any program because they were all filled, so they put us on a bus-- at least most of us from the Chicago, I guess a good twelve fifteen hundred of us-- they bussed us to Fort Campbell Kentucky. And that's where we had our training basic training there

Webb: Now was your dad a veteran or did he just kind of understand how the Army worked to make that kind of connection that, hey, maybe this would be a good place to look into for your kinds of interests?

Abbott: My dad had a health issue that disqualified him for the service which he was quite, quite hurt about that. But he was okay with it, I guess, after a while. But he did not serve in the service.

Webb: Okay, so you are down in Kentucky. You complete your basic training.

Abbott: And then I had a few days leave and so I went home. And then a few days later I grabbed my first jet plane flight to Newark, New Jersey and then took a bus-- commuter bus-- down to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, which is about an hour or two-hour drive from Newark. And it was unbelievable because when I arrived I was so used to the Army training that you couldn't do anything without permission or anything, and I thought I was in pretty good shape until I went in the Army. But after I came out of the basic I, you know, I felt pretty good. But then I was a little reluctant.... My God, is the whole next two and a half years going to be like this or what? So I get to Fort Monmouth and the MP says, "What are you here for?"

And I say, "I'm here to report for photo school."

"Okay, go over there and sit in a bench. I'll have a car for you."

"Okay."

So car whips in the OD olive drab [laughs] Chevy-- if I remember-- Impala pulls in. Guy jumps out of the car grabs my bag he says,

"I got it," throws it in the trunk. I go to sit in the back, you know, he says, "Sit up front" he says, "I'll take you on a tour around the fort."

And I'm like, I can't believe this, you know? So we get a little... where everything he says,

"You can't go over there. That's electronics command. That's all-top secret stuff. You gotta stay away from there, that's why the fence. There's the headquarters, here's the commissary."

You know, all that kind of stuff. Then we dropped off at the photo school and when I checked in it was like a few minutes before I was supposed to get there and they, ya know, right away they,

"Abbott, wow we were about ready to call a no show here."

You know, so it was kind of funny, but it was all jest, you know, it was a lot of fun so...

Webb: Yeah.

Abbott: It was a great, great experience.

Webb: Okay.

Abbott: Just arriving at the fort it's like a country club.

Webb: Yeah.

Abbott: You know, I... holy moly.

[Laughter]

Webb: Okay, and so you are going through a new kind of training. Was it... did you find that it was building on the stuff that you already knew, or was it exposing yourself to new kind of cameras, film--?

Abbott: A little of both, Thom. I think what blew my mind was, the first few months, I learned more than I did from reading some of the books that I read about motion picture. And some of the courses I took and that... they had such a unique program that they taught us lecture type and then they gave us cameras. They gave us a hundred foot of film 16 mm black and white, of course, and we were to go out and shoot a make a story. We learned about captions-- how important they are-- so that when your footage came to somebody, and they cut it up and make a story out of it they could use your captions as a guide and find long shots and medium shots. So you learned a tremendous amount and I guess that's where the journalism kind of got interested in the.... 'Cause you had to learn how to write right, 'cause you had to take captions, you had to know what the story you're doing and that. 'Cause when we did a story later on with the DASPO group we actually had to fill out a camera sheet that had all the shots on each roll. Plus, we had to give kind of a synopsis of the operation in the beginning, then follow that up with on roll one. It was a long shot of this a medium shot of this a close up of a soldier. And then if we did close ups we had to actually write down who the soldier is, his rank, where he was from in the United States, and what unit he was.... Well, that was in the synopsis but... so we had to really kind of think quickly and move quickly because you only shot maybe six seconds of film each time you pulled the trigger of the camera unless you were following action and stuff.

Webb: Yeah.

Abbott: So you had sometimes... you would shoot three or four shots and then you'd have to remember back in your caption book, well, let's see, that last few shots was this or that and that, so.... It really put you on a course to really kind of sharp your skill. And the training was all about that. That was it. Was incredible what they taught us.

Webb: Do you remember.... I've heard others talk about going, and for that initial training and Fort Monmouth filming a circus as an assignment. Do you remember what kinds of assignments they had you work on?

Abbott: Yeah, I don't remember a circus, and that probably might've been at certain times of the year they had...

Webb: Sure.

Abbott: ...different thing, 'cause I was there like from November. So I was kind of, like, in the winter months. But one of the assignments they sent us was to Fort Dix, which was part of the McGuire Air Force Base there in the central right near Fort Monmouth and, 'course, that was a training center, so we had to go there with a couple hundred feet of film, and we had to shoot like we were actually in a combat situation, 'cause these guys were going through training like we just completed. And we had to follow them through their training and the shooting overhead and all of that stuff, so it was kind of, kind of interesting because, I mean, we were kind of on our own and we didn't have to really answer to anybody. But we had come up with a story, so it was a lot of fun doing that. And then another shot we did was job... they had us do aerial shots. So they took us nearby which was the where the Hindenburg was burnt. U.S. Naval, it's a naval station. I'll think of it in a minute.

Webb: [laughter]

Abbott: Hurst, Hurst... anyway they took us there and they took us up in a helicopter and we flew around, and we had to try different speeds on the camera because the helicopter and the jarring-- you could control some of the movement by adjusting the camera speed stuff like that. So that... we learned a little bit about that, we learned about aerals and shooting this and that. And the helicopter pilots were always good 'cause we would tell the crew chief what we wanted. Well we want to get a shot over there, and he'd tell the pilot and they'd swing back. So it was really kind of unique that we had sort of control of that. So those were kind of neat things that we did.

Webb: Did you have a sense at that point what your orders were going to be?

Abbott: No.

Webb: Okay.

Abbott: I had no idea I... well, I shouldn't say... I figured we were going to be shipped to Vietnam 'cause everybody seemed to be going to Vietnam. Even the guys that we meet at the commissary or the place we hung around after hours. Some of

the guys we meet that were going through the electronics command. They were saying a lot of guys got orders for Vietnam and stuff like that 'cause they were in radio communication. Fort Monmouth was the Signal Corps, 'cause we were part of signal electronics radio communication photographic that was part of signaling and stuff, so we had a kind of a good camaraderie about a lot of different people and different.... There was camera repair, there was projection repair, and still photography. So we... there was motion picture, so there was a lot of different guys from different parts of the country, different cultures, so yeah. It's really kind of unique how you got together but everybody really, kind of down deep thought, well, when we're done here we're headed for Vietnam.

Webb: Might be a good place to kind of step back maybe for a second and just ask— twenty-five years old, Midwest. How aware of what was going on overseas were you?

Abbott: Yeah, I knew there was a war going on. I mean, I'm quite... I wasn't quite familiar with Vietnam and like everybody else says, "Where's Vietnam?" But I knew there was troops being sent there was I was aware that there was originally... there was people that were sent in there that were advisors and stuff and then the troops... they sent some troops in, so.... But it wasn't something on my mind or I think most that you were going over to fight in the war and that it was just... you were going to someplace, Vietnam where you're helping a country fight communism. So I don't think at that time, that it was starting to escalate though in sixty-six, but it wasn't... I don't think it was too much on peoples' mind as it did when it became around nineteen seventy when it was just chaos.

Webb: Yeah, I was going to say, and I've asked others that, you know, were at the university, you know, Columbia...

Abbott: Yep.

Webb: ... it probably wasn't till sixty-seven, sixty-eight...

Abbott: Right.

Webb: ...maybe that....

Abbott: That's right, and we were already in it and doing it and all we were reading from the *Stars and Stripes* was a military publication that some unrest on campus and, stuff like that, 'cause they were pretty well telling us what's going on in the States. A lot of people said that, well, they would cover it up. But they... none of the stars and stripes that I had read covered up what was going on in the States.

We were pretty well informed what was going on well for those of us that would read it and stuff, but....

Webb: Sure.

Abbott: But a lot of us read it because it was a lot about what's going on in Vietnam too, so. And I'm sure the communists read it too because...

[Both laugh]

Abbott: ...we were easy to tell people what we were doing. [Laughs] Could never understand that, but we did.

Webb: So where and when did you first hear about DASPO?

Abbott: When I... I never got orders after motion picture school.

Webb: Oh.

Abbott: I was sitting idle, and I couldn't understand why, 'cause most everybody-- not everybody went to Vietnam-- but some went to Vietnam from my class. There were some Air Force guys in the class, 'cause it was a mixture of Air Force, Navy, people in the class. It was a mixture of services and couple of Marines went back to their units, Air Force went back to theirs, some... a few went to Vietnam, a couple went to Germany. So there was a mix up... why I never got orders I have no idea. Maybe it was my age, I don't know. So I wound up with a permanent detail in the motion picture office editing-- not editing but splicing film together that the other students were shooting for the instructors. Usually the instructors had to do that, so it took them a lot of time to piece the footage together of whose... this group these rolls of film was from this class and this.... So I would splice them all together so they'd have one reel that they could critique in the class as a group. So... I was doing that. Out of that experience there was a sergeant which was a teacher... would be coming in and out of the office there when I'm running my doing my job and he said, you know, like,

"Abbott, you haven't got any orders yet." "No." He says, "Well why don't you try for a DASPO team, you know." [Laughter]

"What's a DASPO team?"

And he gave me a little bit... well... it's like an elite photo group that they have in Panama and Hawaii and CONUS continental US, Fort Bragg, I believe and he said,

"As a matter of fact the new CO of the photo school Major Ballinger is just taking over the photo school, but he was just in charge of a DASPO Panama team. He might be able to show you how to get on the team, you know?"

So I thought, well gee I, you know, protocol-- a private talking to a major. So I got to thinking, you know, being I guess older I just thought all he can do is throw me out of his office, you know? So I went in saluted and said,

"Request a few minutes of your time, sir." You know, and he said,

"Yeah sit down," just blew my mind, "What can I do for you?"

So, I sat and told him that I understand that he was in charge of a DASPO team and is there a way to get on it, you know, and he says,

"Ah jeez," says, "DASPO Panama, I just left there a couple months ago and they were over staffed. They'll never put anybody on there." But he said, "Wait a minute."

So he called somebody which, I didn't know at the time, but he called somebody in the Pentagon that was in charge of some personnel, I think was the First Sergeant, and ran by what's going on.

"Yeah, General so and so just walked through here, he's retiring." So you know, like they're old friends, you know I'm thinking hmm. He said, "Hey listen, I got a guy that just graduated from motion picture school, and he's got a couple years-- two and a half years-- left as service and interested in DASPO. Anything going on? You know anything open? Ah really, okay, well here is his service number, his rank and all that stuff."

And a week later I get these orders, and I can't read acronyms yet for the military, as you know working with [laughter] they love acronyms.

Webb: Yep.

Abbott: DASPO.

[Both laughing]

Webb: A lot of them.

Abbott: DASPO. And so I took it over to the sergeant that who encouraged me to talk to Ballinger, and he looks at it and he said,

"You son of a gun." He says, "You're going to Hawaii DASPO Pacific" [laughter] and I thought he was joking me I said,

"Come on." He said,

"Yeah, it says right here DASPO Pacific."

You know, so I thought, oh my God, this is unbelievable. So I when I talked to the major, I noticed on his desk-- he had this big box of house of Windsor cigars and one of my uncles used to smoke and always talked about how great they are. So I thought, well, this major's got the smoke it. So I went to the PX ,and it cost me a lot of money but I bought him a box, came back to his office and did the same thing.

"Request a moment of your time."

"Yeah, sit down." So I handed him the cigars and said,

"Thank you."

"Oh what's this all about?" Then I gave him my orders. "Oh my God," he says, "You're going to Hawaii." And I says,

"Thank you, Sir. Thank you much." And then he says,

"Well when you get there you tell the First sergeant that the only reason he knows about photography is because of me."

And I thought, oh boy, this a.... So one thing lead to another and when I got to Hawaii and I had the time to, the First Sergeant called me in his office to give me the run down. I wasn't sure if I should say anything but I just felt, well, I'll say it 'cause the guy... he seemed to be a pretty good guy, but I said,

"By the way, this one guy told me that the reason you know so much about photography is because of him." And he looked at me and he said,

"How do you know Major Ballinger?" You know? [Laughter]

So I had a good in with First Sergeant, but everybody did. He was... First Sergeant Bridgeham was one of the finest men the... he was an NCO, but sort of in charge of the lower troops, you know, the personnel. But he was a marvelous guy. Wanted you to know that rank has its purpose. Respect rank and always follow military protocol, because where you're going, and you have the credentials to

go places, always respect that so if you're getting yelled at or chewed out or something you stand your ground and just take it and we don't want no back about DASPO. So in a very fair man and very insightful about giving us the right information. Great guy.

Webb: What were your kind of initial feelings, perceptions of the groups that you've found yourself into? I've heard various things of, you know, going in and seeing them in the work room that you knew right away that, oh, these are my kind of people because they're interested in what I'm interested in?

Abbott: Yeah, I think at first being older, 'cause most of them are a few years younger than me or they were just out of college. I kind of was a little intimidated because I've really found a lot of them that were very talented guys and in still photography. We even had sound technicians that recording sound, and some of the MoPic guys and I, you know, I just finished an incredible school, I had some background in photo and I thought I was, you know, I was... well I was pretty good but just meeting some of these guys and their personalities and laughs and funs and that I just thought I fell into heaven, you know. I just... unbelievable the fun and love for everybody of what we all loved to do together; you know. It's just... it was incredible.

Webb: Yeah. Was there any additional training at that point, or testing something to... that you had to do to prove to that group that you belonged there?

Abbott: Not to sort of prove... there was some training there, was a call for us to qualify for the forty-five weapon. 'Cause most of the... most of the Vietnam crew carried a forty-five when.... And the joke was that if you ever had to pull it and use it you might as well throw it because it probably do more harm. But it was more probably for a feeling... if you got separated or something it's more of a sort of a psychologically that you had some sort of protection. And that so we had to qualify for the forty-five because, when we got to Vietnam, we had to go to the armory and check out a forty-five, and you couldn't get one unless you were qualified. So that was one of the side training things. We got another thing... was that when you go over there you had an option... who ever wanted to, is, you had to have a projectionist's license because most feature films that we went into the theaters to see in civilian life were thirty-five-millimeter prints. So the Army, the military always got sixteen-millimeter prints of these feature films and they were usually two or three reels instead of, you know, big reels. So in order to operate the projectors or the dual projectors sometimes you had to have a license to go to the film vault library to check out the films. So some of the

things... like in Vietnam we had lived in the villa and some of our off-duty time in the evening or what... we would check out a film at the library and, you know, sit around drinking beer and watching movies. So in order to get that film you had to have a license. So I more so volunteered but they said,

"Abbott's got a background in projection so we know he's going to get one, right Abbott?" You know,

"Yeah, I guess."

So, I had to go get a license to operate the sixteen millimeter and it was like a... maybe a two-day course on just threading a sixteen millimeter projector and handling it and maintaining it.

Webb: A lot different than what you--

Abbott: The thirty-five. Yeah it, you know. [Laughter] But again, working with sixteen-millimeter film, it was, you know, it wasn't that, bad because it was the same format that I was shooting with, so. But threading it in the projector was a little bit more complicated, I don't want to say complicated, but it was a little bit more... sprockets that I had to wrap around and... 'cause it was a sound track on a film so you had to run it through a sound system and all that. So it was kind of interesting. But other than that I... oh yeah, the one training was kind of unique was we had a Tyler mount, a camera. A Tyler camera mount is something that is mounted in a helicopter and a camera's mounted on it, whether it's a still camera or a motion picture camera, and you're able to adjust the mount so that it... it's so balanced in the weights you're able to balance so that when you put it up here it stays there. If you move it over here, it stays there. So, when you it had like a butterfly handles and the control, you'd plug the camera cords into the... looked like a boomerang handle. And you had controls here for zoom or focus or whatever cause the camera was usually a separate camera that you used for the... well, you'd put this in a helicopter, and you could do all kinds of... in order to train a little bit for that if they were interested. If anybody wanted... interested, which they usually had a few, have a few people in the team to know how to operate one of these so we would mount it in a pickup truck. And it'd be usually three or four of us that would go out in the streets in Honolulu and drive around the highways just shooting. And we'd loaded a four-hundred-foot magazine with film. We'd just go around just shooting film and focus and all that stuff and then, you know, next guy would take a turn at it and then the driver would get out and he'd take a turn someone else would drive so it was like four

of us just having a ball just traveling around and getting a hang of using it while you're in movement. So, it was kind of unique, 'cause I did get to use it in Vietnam once when they did a... they did some aerals. They thought Westmoreland was going to be assassinated so the MI military intelligence people got ahold of the Pentagon saying they wanted a camera crew to do some aerial footage of tracking where... Westmoreland home from home to back via military airlift, military assistance command in Vietnam that the control military in Vietnam... the US military. And so they said, "Well we have a team, we have a team in Saigon." So they contacted the COE, CO of our group and we put together what... the MI people spent maybe a couple of hours just flying back and forth the route that Westmoreland took back and forth to his compound just...

Webb: So you could see...

Abbott: ... see...

Webb: ...what else--

Abbott: ... everything. And we got to film... we had to turn it... we never sent it to Pentagon or caption the MI people that we were working with 'cause they were... there was one in the helicopter with us and there was some on the ground and they were communicating, I was communicating with the pilot so that,

"You're going too fast," or,

"Slow down," or,

"Give me an oblique shot," or....

So, that was kind of unique. And then when I would... when I said,

"Camera rolling," then the MI guy would tell a guy on the ground,

"Start rolling."

You know, so they would start. So that was kind of, kind of interesting. But the Tyler mount was... I loved that. When I got out of the service, I exited at, discharged at Oakland and I really was so tempted to go down to LA and see if I could get a job with the Tyler people, 'cause they did a lot of... they did a lot of aerial stuff. For the Hollywood... as a matter of fact, when we were... one of the times I had come back from one of the trips they were shooting for a movie

"Tora! Tora! Tora!" on Ford Island there and Charles Wheelers, as a matter of fact, Bill San Hamel was the officer in charge of the group at the time in Hawaii. He knew somebody from the studio we... the PR department and they got us permission to go on Ford Island to watch Wheeler and his camera crew shoot. They had a ship in the bay that was an old... it was gonna be towed out and sunk for a, what do they call it, when they sink 'em for, now I can't think of what they call them but a riff.... Anyway, they were going to sink it but in the meantime Hollywood cleaned it up a little bit and made it look like it was a moving ship, or it was being attacked. And there from a distance you could see the helicopter diving and a guy hanging out of the helicopter on a Tyler mount. It was unbelievable. And of course he would take a strafe down and they would set off air caps on the deck and it looked like they were strafing the ship and that, but I really did. [Laughter]

Webb: Yeah, that sounds--

Abbott: But anyhow, not to digress there, but....

Webb: [Laughter]

Abbott: But looking at training... additional training that some of the things and that.... But as far as photo and stuff like that you kind of learned from the film that started coming back, 'cause whatever we shot-- when it's processed it would be critiqued in the Pentagon and the copy of it was sent back to the team whether you're in Korea or Bangkok or Vietnam. And you'd get to actually see your photo gage developed and a critique to come along with it: This shot was good, that shot was bad, great job - and all that. So it was kind of nice to look at other guys work and kind of learn from that. So that's some of the training that you could call....

Webb: I've asked other people this, I'll ask you. Was there friendly competition as to who could get the best shots? I mean you're talking about critiques... were you critiquing each other as well?

Abbott: Oh, yeah. Sometimes you'd see somebody do a kite, a nice camera angling... wish I could have done that, I should have thought of that or something. Or the next time you're out you try that if it's caught on the next critique,

"Oh, copying my work, huh?"

You know.

Webb: [Laughter]

Abbott: So yeah, there was a little camaraderie amongst each other that--

Webb: Yeah.

Abbott: Most of the MoPic guys, 'cause the still guys had their own little thing going to the...

Webb: So what was your first assignment then?

Abbott: Well I got to DASPO in the Pacific in May of '67 and I believe late May or early June I was headed for the Vietnam team. The first assignment, I really don't recall what it was. It probably have to be a search and destroy or a combat, 'cause we had a lot of orders. But I think just to get our feet wet they usually kind of put us in a situation like that, just to kind of get our self... just kind of energized. That--

Webb: But you did go to Vietnam straight away, you didn't go to like Korea--?

Abbott: Yeah, my first trip was Vietnam, yeah.

Webb: Okay.

Abbott: Then, they brought me back and then there was a unique trip that came up which Bill San Hamel—Bill, again-- they took us to about a forty-day trip, forty-four through Taiwan Taipei, Okinawa, and just southern Japan. And that was kind of unique because it was... they were looking at-- they meaning the Pentagon-- was looking at a group of trucks that was stored that were being kept in ship shape, but they were stored in an area in Taiwan as well as Okinawa so that if they ever need them, there's like couple hundred trucks at each location. If they needed them in a moment's notice, they would be shipped to wherever they needed them. So, we had to photograph that, which wasn't much. Some high shots and low shots and stuff like that. And then when we got to Southern Japan we were to photograph some underground caves where the Naval, Navy captain kept torpedoes... stocked torpedoes and artillery rounds and stuff like that. So that was kind of a difficult shoot because we were sort of in a cave, out of a cave and we had to use lights in the cave and that was like... [Laughter] Those lights were never explosion proof and there was some real concerns about doing that, but I guess... somebody OK'd it and said it would be okay. But I thought,

"Are you sure?"

You know, 'cause.... [Laughter] BOOM.

Webb: Okay.

Abbott: But anyhow, that was an interesting shot. Plus, while we were there, the... I believe it was a Forrestal aircraft carrier came in to refuel, 'cause that Sasebo, Japan was a refueling point for the US Navy as well as I guess whoever it was we were selling fuel to. But I believe the US Forrestal, USS The Forrestal aircraft carrier, and that was my first experience, we were photographing the POL --the Petroleum Oil Lubricant department-- groups that supply the lubricants and stuff for the military. So we were doing a story on them at the same time, and we were showing them... hooking up to the ship and all of that. Then, we got on the ship and showed the reverse shots and all that stuff. So it was the first chance that I had a chance to be ever on an aircraft carrier. So some extra time was spent visiting... what goes on in an aircraft carrier. And it's amazing what's under that deck, the way they live. And then they took us up on the deck and course everybody-- the Navy guys, were a lot of them-- were working because they... even though they were fueling up they didn't sit around doing nothing. But they were up either cleaning off the deck where the aircraft landed, and stuff like that. But I was just... boggled my mind to look across this carrier where they land and take off I said,

"Holy moly, what a huge aircraft."

And of course here's that little steeple, it's on the side of it. That's all the control and course, then when you go down underneath and see the operation of the kitchen and where they keep aircraft and it just blows your mind what's underneath that sucker, you know.

Webb: Yeah, what was the-- I'm going to ask it this way. Was there a-- no I'm not going to ask it that way, how do I want to ask this? Indiana... going from Indiana to Vietnam. What was the culture shock like or was there one? Did the DASPO guys that had already gone on assignment do anything to prepare you? How prepared were you?

Abbott: I think had some idea from others' comments. I think as a personal thing that I guess I remember is that growing up in a village like Lansing and in America and having the opportunities that we have at my age-- then twenty-five, twenty-six-- and then to see that the country is like it was probably in 1700. I mean, yeah.

They had the French in there helping them grow and stuff. But it just seemed like their... the culture was so different... that it was like behind the times for what we as America, what we did for our forefathers that came and build what we have at that time. And here we are still... we're in a country that is still on bicycles and motor cars that burn oil and smoke and I mean; it was like a going back in history. Not that I was that old to go back into the twenties and that but... or horse and buggy. But a lot of ox carts used, you know, just a way of life and nobody ever seemed to be happy. Nobody. Even when we back, even when we went back as a reunion group in two thousand, you know. I stood on the corner and I actually kind of cried a little bit because all this death on both sides, and nothing. They haven't moved forward. I mean it's still... [Laughter] it was still like it was when I left. In sixty-nine or sixty-eight-- the last time I was there. It's just unbelievable of course now when you read what's going on there. They want some of our help. We buy a lot of their fish from them, they want our commerce and, you know, we're willing to help. But you know I'm somewhat reluctant of that because the people that really want the help... make their lives better are not going to get that in a communist country. It's the people that run the country that are going to grab all of that stuff.

Webb: Yeah.

Abbott: And the wealth.

Webb: Yeah.

Abbott: So sad, you know?

Webb: Well speaking of culture shock, you have mentioned a couple of times as you went through your initial boot camp training, you know, saluting the rank. DASPO to my understanding was a little bit different than that... that maybe as you moved around from assignment to assignment that you were a little bit freer than other Army units.

Abbott: Yeah.

Webb: What was that like? Did you ever run into people that resented you for your ability to hop on a helicopter or go here or go there without, you know, that same kind of--?

Abbott: Yeah. I think the guys that I ran into most of the time-- and I can't say they were either drafted or volunteered. Most of them... I found out that they volunteered

for what they did. A lot of them resented us as photographers because we really didn't carry a weapon, they didn't consider the 45.... Some guys did carry a rifle, but a rifle for a photographer is cumbersome, 'cause you usually have fifteen rolls of film in your pockets, the caption, you got the.... We usually wore a shoulder holster and kind of kept the 45 under our jacket so we really didn't look like we're there for a fight and a war. So, a lot of guys kind of resented that because we didn't carry it. And we were out with them on a search and destroy and if anything happens they'd be protecting us as well as themselves. So, you'd get into some skirmishes when you'd take a break or you're camping at night.... what are you going to do when they start, when Charlie comes over the hill comes after us? What are you going to shoot with, you know? So, you'd get into some of those debates, and I always thought that talking helps, because a lot of the guys that were doing this really loved what they were doing. A lot of resentment, we've heard. But there's a lot of guys that believed in what we were doing for the Vietnamese people. We knew that there was some questionable... the South Vietnamese army really performing like they should... the politicians we know... that was some problems there. At least some of the guys felt that. But when you get into a situation like that, I've always found that when I ask them, how did they get their job, I mean, did they volunteer or did they get drafted or.... What a lot of them said, well, they were... they volunteered, you know. I wanted to be with this unit, you know. So well I did too and this is what I did, this is what I like to do, you like to do, what you do and I do, so. If it comes to the point where the Charlies are going to come over the hill for us then you guys aren't doing your job and I guess I'm gonna have to pull a weapon somewhere and start helping you, you know. And then they all start laughing. A lot of times the arguments could be broken up just with some humor or laughter but the... yeah there was negatives about us having... and a lot of, I mean, we did get carter blanche on a lot of things. A lot of officers thought we were civilian press and I gotta blame some of the DASPO guys, they took advantage of that a couple of times, and they got caught and really brought some hell down on the Hawaii... the big boss in Hawaii. And they'd get a call from the Pentagon saying "I just got a call from so and so [laughter] and your guys did this and that."

So, they would really be ticked. So yeah, we had some problems there but most of the time we were kind of welcomed, even the news media, nobody talks about this, but maybe some of the guys did. Even the news media had an urge to make a name for themselves. But some of them suckers were cheating too. They would approach us and want us to,

"Hey, what were you?" You know,

"I was just in a battle with so and so, I was just in a firefight with so and so, we just covered this."

"Hey, you want to sell your footage?"

You know, so they were trying to sell, buy, sell. And I don't think anybody in DASPO would ever sell the footage because each reel... each role of still film was slated.

Webb: Yeah.

Abbott: It had our name on it. The camera DASPO [laughter], cut your own throat, you know?

Webb: Yeah.

Abbott: So I'm sure none of us.... But I can remember one place we went, and I guess a few other guys had the same story too, that we went into a place to do a special job and it was a still guy and two MoPic guys-- myself and this other guy-- and we had an extra MoPic guy 'cause usually it was just a MoPic guy and a still photographer on assignment doing a story, but the extra MoPic guy was needed 'cause of the job was a little bit split. So when the still guy worked with one MoPic guy he could go with the other guy so they could switch around so they could get a pretty good coverage for the.... So anyway we go into the... we always reported into the PIO-- Public Information Office-- find out where the unit was at and who was in charge. We had some idea from our record or from Pentagon or from the MACV whoever picked up something. Well we were trying to confirm that through the PIO office 'cause they were like the news media of the military, okay. And every unit had a PIO officer. Matter of fact, that's where a lot of us... we stayed cause they had they had a tent or what we called a hooch, was a wooded frame floor building with a canvas covered over it with a netting around it that the billets.... And they would have that set up for news press, the civilian press.

Webb: Okay.

Abbott: So, if you came into a camp and you needed a place to sleep then the PIO office would charge you a buck or two bucks a night or something. So anyway, when we found out who was in charge and local we would go to that tent or that place and asked to speak to the officer in charge, and then we would sit down with

him and explain to him that we're from DASPO, we represent the Pentagon. And they ask us to come in and photograph such and such operation.

"How the heck do you know about this operation?" You know, so then you'd have to say,

"Well we're under the joint chief of staff. They got... they heard, you know, that you're gonna do the... they would like to have some coverage of it."

And then we'd pull out card that would say that we have the... we have top secret, secret clearances to photograph anything the military does including crypto and, you know, whatever. And I remember one officer was looking at it and he was just shaking his head and he called his first sergeant into the office he says

"Hey, you got to read this." And he handed it to him. Guy says, "These guys got a license to steel for cripes' sake." [Laughter]

So that... those were the kind of stories. But we don't know if we should laugh, if the guy was trying to be humorous.

Webb: Yeah.

Abbott: We're trying to keep military protocol here 'cause if we laugh maybe the guy would be insulted. So when we'd get out of that meeting and that we'd crack up 'cause we were all thinking of the same thing-- should we laugh or should we not. But it was kind of neat and people... some resented it but I think overall they really appreciated us there because we were telling their story. And I know the helicopter crew... a number of them that we did stories on loved to see us come by. When the DASPO unit come in they would just give us open arms, you know.

"Hey, what do you guys need?" And all that. So it was nice, it was good.

Webb: You were solely a film camera operator?

Abbott: Motion picture.

Webb: Motion picture.

Abbott: Yeah.

Webb: So I feel like with a still camera that you can blend in a little bit better, maybe. Did you notice when you were on these search and destroy [missions] or any

kind of assignment that didn't necessarily have, you know, to do with filming refueling or something-- but were you were filming people... that your camera changed their behavior at all?

Abbott: Yes, oh yeah. Yeah. Whenever you picked the camera up and started pointing it, whether it was a soldier on patrol and most of the guys on patrol in that. Or if you were new too they'd make fun.

"Hey, come on, Hollywood. I'm..."

You know, so they kind of welcomed it. They didn't have... but some of the civilians that you might have in the shot that... they would sort of like, duck and cover type things and that. So either they were shy, or I learned later when I had gone to Hong Kong on a leave of one of my... I took leave of one time to Hong Kong to buy some camera gear and I was up in the ol'... what they call the new territories up near the China border. And I was photographing some area of... near the China border and that... and I noticed this in the corner of my view finder a... noticed this woman kept inching in and then she laid her... was got her hand out and stuff like that. So, evidently an older guy that was nearby me recognized that and he said,

"She... you photographed her, and you took some of her life from her and she wants to be paid." And I thought what a game this is, you know, so I just said

"Oh, no. She wasn't in a picture at all."

But, you know, so it's interesting what people... when you point the camera at people what it does. And I even carried a still camera, I bought a thirty-five-millimeter Nikonos. It was made by Nikon and it's an underwater camera, but it was... had fantastic lens. They had an underwater lens, and they had a regular, above water. And the one I was carrying was ideal because it was an incredible wide-angle lens, something like a two-five or something like that, and was really sharp. It had beautiful face on it for f-stop and shutter speed. It was so unique that it was ideal to carry with you in Vietnam because if it started raining you could care less about that camera. You, know, had to worry about the motion picture camera, 'cause that wasn't as waterproof as the camera. So even when I would plank that one people would be a little reluctant to want their picture taken, but yeah. We ran into that.

Webb: Is it the training that you went through that allows you to be able to focus in on what you're trying to shoot as opposed to any kind of danger that might be

around you? Or are you focused on the danger as well, like... how was the balance of the... that in maybe some situations where you feel a little unprotected? I don't know....

Abbott: Yeah, I think mostly in my experience my mind was more on the story and that I would keep the footage that I'm covering... the images would be continuing a story, so I wasn't so much concerned with what's around me or the background, I think, mainly because I felt comfortable. I was with the troops.

Webb: Okay.

Abbott: And if anything went on, it would either be in front of us or in back of us, or I usually tried to stay near the Officer in Charge of the team because he was near the radio and you could pretty well pick up on where we're going, and how far we're going and that, so. And then sometimes you'd drift back to pick up some shots from the tail end of the stuff and stuff like that. Sometimes you'd want to go up forward to the lead, but they usually wouldn't let you go with because they were really good at finding booby traps. Or if I was up shooting or I may be moved off to pick up a shot of angle, I might trip a booby trap so they weren't too keen for me to move up there. And after explaining to me what... why they wouldn't let me go up there I thought to myself [laughter], OK, that's good.

Webb: Yeah.

[Both laugh]

Webb: Well what then was your feeling as your time in the military ran out? We've heard lots of different...

Abbott: Oh, I was sad. I really wanted to re-up, Thom. I figured I could go another three years with DASPO Pacific. I could then transfer to Panama and then maybe to CONUS or maybe to the Pentagon or maybe to the Army Pictorial Center in New York and make twenty years. But I had never taken leave home and I really wanted to see my parents. I wanted to go back. I never really talk much about Vietnam and what I was doing. I had a brother in Vietnam at the same time and I was able to look him up on one of my assignments, so we spent, like, a day together, which I got permission from.... Matter of fact, Bill was in charge of the team again and he said,

"Well make sure you do it after your job, but make sure you get back in time to get this stuff off to the Pentagon, you know. This is critical stuff."

So he allowed me a day to spend, or like a day and a half or something. So I spent some time with him. He was with the First Cav at An Khê so it was kinda, 'cause I hadn't seen him for about a year and a half so that was nice. And then we were to get on a MARS call that we were able to talk to the folks back home and... a MARS call is one of these where they make a call to the States and then that person picks up the phone and relays a message to your family or something and it's like, "over," and then they speak, they say, "over." And then you say... you know, it's one of those... I don't know if you're familiar with that or not, but it was kinda interesting but--

Webb: Yeah, but not personal [laughter].

Abbott: No, it's not a personal call so that was... 'cause we talked my five minutes or that but I had never been home and I was kind of... I don't want to say homesick, but I was just... I wanted to see the family. And all the deaths and all the stuff we photographed, I guess I was just kind of-- not washed out-- but I was just, I guess, sad because my three were up and I had a great time in the Army, and I was anxious to see if I could do something in civilian life. And I just wanted to get home, so it was... it was good, it was bad, you know.

Webb: Okay, the library... the Museum and Library is incredibly honored to be hosting this exhibit. This is a question that I am asking all of the interviews that we do, you know, we are... we think of ourselves as kind of a neat junction between military life and civilian life. We get all kinds of tourists that come in here from the streets, so they're going to be seeing this exhibit and they're going to be learning about DASPO probably in the same way that I did which is, I had never heard of it [laughter] before any of this started.

Abbott: Yeah.

Webb: So my question is, what do you hope that the community learns and what do you hope that they take away from this exhibit?

Abbott: Well I certainly hope that they have a better understanding, that military photographers, not just Army but Air Force, Navy, Marines have an incredible documentation of what the civilian press doesn't cover. And I think they cover-- not think, I know-- they cover more inside stuff of military life. Whether it's good or bad, than civilian stuff. Civilian stuff is... only highlights the bad stuff and every once in a while we hear somebody did something great, oh gee, let's cover him. But very seldom... even today I just hope the public will see that there's a value

to the military photographer and from what Pritzker is-- how's it pronounced, Pritzker?

Webb: Pritzker.

Abbott: Pritzker, for them to put on a show like this I just hope people realize that it's great to have such a great museum to be able to have the opportunity to display military photographs because everything that you-- not everything, but most everything that you see laying around or in the shelves or pictures on the wall had to do with a military, if it's military based, had something to do with a military photographer. Portraits and stuff like that, yeah. Officers usually would go outside to have somebody do a great portrait of them and stuff like that, but the real coverage of the war or the military life is done by military photographers. And, like I said, whether in the Air Force, the Army, or the Marine Corps, or Navy or even Coast Guard they... we all show the public-- which don't get a chance to see a lot of it what really our life is and it's not always war you know there's a lot of people that support those boys and gals that fight the war... the combat troops. And we saw both in DASPO. And now I think that was one of the greatest things that we learned as DASPO people too because we were either in the fight with the guys and... or we were in the background photographing and covering the stories of the people that are supporting them. So you got a chance to really see some different sides of how it all comes together.

Webb: The other thing that I have noticed from this experience is that the DASPO guys seem to be closer knit than any other group that I've been around as far as military you guys. Just fourteen, fifteenth reunion... the looks on your faces when you see each other the way that you talk about each other in these interviews ... it just seems like you're very close-knit. And I wonder if you have anything to talk about the actual DASPO.

Abbott: Yeah. I think we were able to come together at a time that just was a sharing of an occupation or a love that we all had together. And of course serving in the military, whether we had our laughs or kicks, or giggles was all part of it. And to be able to look back over the wonderful things we've gotten accomplished and in that short period of time and be part of a short-lived unit was just amazing. And just when I talk to other people, as you probably have, I'm amazed how many guys and even women that have been in the service wished that their unit could come together as a reunion. Says,

"Oh I would love our unit to get together, but nobody would." You know, "How do you do it?" You know... and this and that,

"Well start, you know you can"

"Well gee, I wouldn't know where to."

So they have that interest to come together, so I'm sure there's a lot of love and camaraderie that they would like to share again with those that they served. I find that a lot when I talk with the Navy guys that do their reunions on ships. You know the reunion is this year... is in.... I have a fellow that I... I'm retired now but I do work part time and a Naval guy that goes to Naval reunions whenever they... there's a ship but I forgot what name of the ship is, but whenever it's in port and they happen to have their reunion at that port, it's amazing, he says, how many people come to that reunion. Just to be... because the Navy will make that ship available for that reunion to go on and meet the present staff. I mean it's just unbelievable what the Navy guys do with the.... 'Cause you got to admit that the ship could be fifty years old and you imagine... fifty years times how many people are on that ship-- you got three, four thousand people...

Webb: Yeah.

Abbott: ...that are coming may... well maybe not.... You got thousands of people coming to that reunion so I'm sure it would be the same with the Army. And DASPO-- we were limited and when we started this reunion we just didn't want a DASPO Pacific, we wanted to make sure everybody was aware that if anybody knew anybody from the Panama team, which some did, to let them know that they're welcome. CONUS, all DASPO members are welcome to this reunion. And we did. We did have quite a few come from different locations to join some of the reunions and stuff like that.

Webb: Yeah.

Abbott: And it was good because we got to hear what they did in South America-- the Panama team. They traveled around South America during Cold War and some of the stuff they got involved with CONUS and the Pentagon.... The APC group was kind of interesting too because they did a lot of the production films. APC was originally the Kaufman studios, which... it's now back to the Kaufman studios, but it was after the Army got rid of it or gave it to the City of New York. ...pretty well it was ideal for years and there was a group of theater people, movie people that put it back together, got it from New York remodeled. There's

a big museum across the street and, anyway. APC was ideal for the Army because it was New York City, and it had a lot of writers that were looking for work.

Webb: Yeah.

Abbott: Actors that were always looking for extra jobs, so it was ideal to make films there in the studio. And one of the unique jobs that we had-- an overnight at Fort Monmouth-- we had an overnight trip to APC cause Fort Monmouth's only about a two-hour drive from to New York City and they put us up at one of the forts or fort right near the Verrazano Bridge in Brooklyn [Fort Hamilton] but, anyway. Long Island City. And we while... we were there we got to visit the studios. And I believe King Kong was made there or something. But the studio cameras-- the big cameras that we would never use in combat-- we got to be able to work with them and thread them up and kind of play around with them and get a feel for what it's like to shoot a studio camera and stuff like that. So it was a real experience just to go there and see what they do. And of course, if you've seen some of the old films through your work here at the museum there is a film they used to... produced called "The Big Picture." And that was done at the APC studios. So they did a lot of stuff-- even our films when they would be shipped to the Pentagon they would go to the APC for processing and then they would be reviewed. And if a story go back to the Pent they'd go back to the Pentagon if there was a story line that they wanted to put together. The footage would be sent to the APC and then they would cut it, put a story... a writer would do... write together a script or something like that and then they would cut and edit the film and add sound to it and stuff like that. And sometimes we would include sound like background sound or what they called presence track where it's just voices and artillery going off or machine gun fire or stuff like that, so it was quite unique.

Webb: Well to end this, I'm going to circle all the way back to the very beginning and just ask that, as a small boy hanging out in a movie theater, did you have a favorite kind of film that was being played?

Abbott: I think that detective stories... to this day I love a good detective story. I don't know anything off hand. I got into a lot of the Colombo's and the Castles and the... just I'm now following the Foyle's, Foyle's. I don't know if they show that out here on PBS but, "Foyle's War," very interesting about World War II, or--

Webb: Yeah.

Abbott: There, England fighting and Foyle trying to solve mysteries that sometimes connected to the military. I mean they're very interesting.

Webb: Yeah.

Abbott: And then there's a few other mysteries out there that...

Webb: Did you ever imagine as a little kid watching those that you would be making films...

Abbott: No.

Webb: ...that...

Abbott: No. I think what probably kicked it off, what really kicked it off and, I suppose gave me the adrenaline, was, before I went into the Army I had bought a sixteen-millimeter Bolex. And I was, you know, going around shooting a railroad trains and stuff. And a friend of mine called me and said

"Are you aware they just had a plane crash?" This is in Lansing now. "They just had a plane crash out at the Lansing sportsmen club." I said,

"No," and I said, "Yeah I'll go out and take some footage." He said,

"Well you better because they think the rumor is that it's Tony Lema," [the golf pro].

"You're kidding."

So I go out there. My dad went with me, my younger brother. And of course I'm trying to keep direction here now, I'm photographer, and I said,

"Okay, you two: when I go I'm gonna start the camera. You guys kinda walk toward the aircraft 'cause it's burning in the back still smoking."

So I shot the film... so I shot my dad and brother walking around and looking and I'm shooting a photograph. Can't go near the aircraft, 'cause they had security people out there, so I was put it on telephoto and adjust the camera and get some shots. So the more I'm talking to some of the people around they believe it's Tony Lema-- Champagne Tony they called him at that time, very wealthy golfer. So I called NBC and said,

"I got a hundred foot of kodachrome that I just shot on a golf course that they believe plane crash's Tony Lema was in it." And the guy got kind of quiet, and he said,

"You got a hundred-foot Kodachrome?" I said, "Yeah."

"Well how good are you?" And I said,

"Well, I don't know, I think I did okay with it." He said,

"Can you get it to us, we're interested, we believe it's Tony Lema also we're getting."

So I drove up to NBC from Lansing, dropped it off, gave me a receipt said,

"You'll be hearing from us."

So that night, yeah, this had to be about eight o'clock I guess, I dropped it off. So that night I'm watching NBC and there's my footage. 'Cause there goes my dad, my brother [laughter] holy moly, this is it! So I think when I finally made the decision for the motion picture that probably really clinched it for the Army just... I want that school you know?

Webb: Yeah.

Abbott: I gotta... this is notoriety, this is...

[Both laugh]

Abbott: ...fifteen minutes of fame. Mine was two minutes.

[Both laugh]

Abbott: But it was... it was good. I think was, you know, we all look for some recognition I guess, but it's good, it's a lot of fun, I'd... you know, some people say, well, they'll do it over again. I'd say,

"Well I might think about it but yeah, I could probably do it again if I had the same people with me and stuff."

It's good.

Webb: Well, I think that wraps it up for today. I want to thank you for sitting with us.

Abbott: Thank you, Thom.

Webb: Hopefully it wasn't too painful.

Abbott: Nope. It was a pleasure. I really appreciate the Pritzker and everybody here.

Webb: Alright, alright, Sir.

END OF INTERVIEW [1:13:10.5]