

Gregory Adams

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Interviewed by Edward Sanderson

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Adams: Well, just to give you a head's up, there were two different ends to the DASPO [Department of the Army Special Photographic Office] organization. There was the front end that are here. They view themselves as combat photographers, and they're very active in the reunion group, and they had a pretty unique set of experiences. I was the first person in the company at a point when the company forbid us to be in combat. We were told by the Pentagon that they had spent too much money training us. We were going to be assigned to special ops and special projects, and if we got anywhere near a firefight we could be court martialed. We were told under no uncertain terms, you let the 221st handle the combat. Okay, so my first week in the company, that was the marching order that I got.

Sanderson: And now, what year did you join DAPSO?

Adams: I got into the service in 1969. I ended up in DAPSO the beginning of 1970 and stayed there through April of '73. Almost no one--there's only really one person here from DASPO after me, and that's Ed Lewin, the guy who turned off the lights. But he had military training before DAPSO and viewed himself as a combat photographer. But none of us after that did. But we handled a lot of military projects--napalm, training on napalm bomb treatment. I filmed President Thieu's election. Did a lot of work in Micronesia with issues related to the flak from Vietnam. The Green Beret at one point after leaving Hamburger Hill twice were accused of being traitors, you know, and turning in the face of battle. So, their colors were removed; they weren't permitted to wear their berets or flag or show their colors outside of the United States. And to keep that organization alive they had to find other work to do outside of military zones. And one of them was what we were producing a film of, the Green Beret cleaning up the mess after the Second World War for the Micronesian people, something we promised them and never got around to. What we didn't know and we discovered while we were shooting that film was there was an undercover operation going on that the civic action work was just a cover for, and that was to build military bases in the Pacific theater to replace the ones we were losing in Okinawa, possibly losing in Japan and Korea, and there was a threat of losing them in Thailand. We had already

lost our military bases in Cambodia. So, Congress had decided with the military that we would not let the Pacific go unguarded without a ring of military installations. So, they were building them in violation of UN law in the Marshall Islands. And when the Green Beret realized that we had figured out what they were doing, we were marked for liquidation. And it was an interesting story. We had to get out of that one alive on our own. (Pause) But my guess is the focus of this is Vietnam.

Sanderson: M-hmm.

Adams: Okay.

Sanderson: Right, and then what we can do--we're looking at potentially getting about ten minutes with you. And specifically if we could talk about with Phillip Manhard, on that with him being the highest-ranking on that. Did you take the picture?

Adams: Yeah.

Sanderson: Okay.

Adams: Yeah, I've got a whole series of them. Texas Tech wanted me to turn over the negatives to them, but I sent them a bunch of material that I'd shot in Vietnam--some film and stills-- and waited to see what they did with them. The scanning and storage was abysmal. I was not happy. So I was not willing to turn over my good stuff to them. So I still have my negatives and material.

Sanderson: Okay. Now (pause)--Double-checking if I have an extra release. We'll take care of the release when we get done. Kinda go back, so another guy can edit it, where we start off introducing you and go on from there. Today is September 24, 2015, and we're speaking with Specialist, 5th Class?

Adams: M-hmm.

Sanderson: Gregory Adams. You were with DASPO from 1970 to 1973.

Adams: M-hmm.

Sanderson: And you were there at the Pacific detachment. Thank you for coming out—

Adams: In Honolulu—

Sanderson: --and sitting down and talking to us real quick. I'm Edward Sanderson. We're here at the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in Chicago. And one of the things that you did in while you were there in DAPSO, you took pictures of the guys coming back from Hanoi.

Adams: Yes.

Sanderson: The Hanoi Hilton.

Adams: Our teams--in fact the entire company was pulled into service to do the POW release to cover all of that. I was selected to be one of the two people to get on the flights bringing them back from Hanoi. But it was a rotation basis, and two of my roommates were on the odd weeks, and we were on the even weeks. And we got notified that the POW release was going to happen. And it was during my cycle so I was prepared and everything to get on the plane to go shoot that. And then it was delayed just until an hour after the next cycle. So I missed it. And the advantage for me was I wasn't assigned to do any formal shooting at Hickam Air Force Base in Honolulu when the people were coming--the POWs were coming in. So I just shot second camera, backup, stuff like that, and had some spare time left over. And I had some training material from Ansel Adams on how to--a new processing technique for black and white film. So I put some experimental film and, you know, was going to process that using Ansel Adams' technique in my camera. And the last plane came in, you know, to finish off the POW release. All of the other planes had either gone back to the United States from Guam or had gone from Guam to Hickam Air Force base where they got off there, and the POWs went into debriefing at Hickam. But for some reason this one plane was delayed. And it was delayed about four or five hours longer than it was supposed to. So the sun had already set. The news media had lights out, and we just figured, okay, we don't know what happened. May have been a mechanical error. But they came in late and a lot of the people had left. The POWs came off the gangplank, back of the airplane, one at a time, and they were all wearing brand new military uniforms with their correct insignia based on how long they had been in the service and what their rank had progressed to. But after about two thirds of the men had come off, this guy in a civilian suit got off. And at first I didn't realize he was a POW I thought he as just someone from the crew. But he got off, and he saw all of the people lined up at the fence and the news media, the cameras, and the lights, and he froze, and he didn't know what to do. So he got to the bottom of the steps and then just walked sideways and backed up and stood underneath the tail of the airplane. Two army officers came over, and they just--one stood on either side of him just to kinda keep him company, help him acclimate. And he was panicking. I

later found out that he had been in solitary confinement for almost nine years and was really struggling with all of the people and all of the lights. And so I was taking pictures of all of the other POWs coming out. They're waving, happy, grinning. Everything is great. And finally the last POW gets off and walks up the gangplank. So the two security officers finally nudge this guy and put their hand behind him, and they're kinda pushing him to walk up. And I thought, "That's an interesting shot. I need to get a picture of this." So I took a shot of him getting off the airplane, standing underneath, and as he was coming forward. I wanted it to be a story. I'm a motion picture guy, so I shoot stills in story format. And I was waiting for him to get in front of me at the fence so I could get a good portrait shot of him. Just as he was two steps away, and I've got the camera all set and ready to shoot, a woman crawled up my back who couldn't get to the fence because of the crowd. And it just, you know, shocked the hell out of me, and I had to duck down. My forehead almost hit the fence. And I tried to look up, but I couldn't see who it was. She had her head on top of my head balancing herself, and she's screaming, "Phil, Phil!" And I thought, "What the hell?" So I looked up to see if Phil was the guy, this POW that she was hollering to. And sure enough, and by the time he had stepped in front, they put leis around his neck, he had a flag in each hand, and he's standing there crying, a tear running down his face. I got the shot. It was all I could do to keep it steady enough, but I got the shot. And then I turned around, and I helped her down and quit shooting, and, you know, I walked back to the crowd with her. And I said, "Did you know that guy?" And she said, "I was his secretary in Washington." And I said, "Oh." She said, "Is there any way I can get to him before he's debriefed?" And I said, "I don't know." I said, "I know some of the air men here on security." And I said, "I've got a clearance to get in." I said, "Let me see if I can get you in." So I talked to my buddies, and they said, "Sure, fine." So we got her in, and she was able to meet with him for about fifteen minutes before he went into debriefing. And when she came back out she said, "They told me he would be in there for about two hours, and I'm supposed to wait." So I figured, oh, what the hell, I'll just sit with here. So she and I sat there for about two and a half hours as she told me the story about this guy. He had gone in. He was a captain. No, that was a different story. The first story was he was a businessman working for the CIA under cover, where he was disguised as a businessman. And his cover was blown when he was in Hanoi. He was captured, put into prison, and spent nine years in solitary. And she told me about his wife. She had him pronounced dead because the military didn't know whether he was dead or alive, and they wouldn't tell her anything 'cause he worked for the CIA. After seven years, I was told, she--the wife--went to court, had him classified as dead. She remarried, went on and had two more kids but made it clear she didn't ever want to hear about him or from him should

he ever reappear. And I wrote all the story down, had it in my notes. And the war was over, years had gone by. And I decided--the internet came about, and I thought, "I'm gonna see what I can track down." I made a vacation to Washington, went to the Library of Congress, and sure enough I was able to track down information on this guy, Phillip A. Manhard. Where he grew up, who his parents were, where he went to high school. The whole story. And it all matched everything I had. And I thought, "Oh, so, you know, pretty good story. All wrapped up. Someday I'll do something with this picture and this story." And then every now and then I would tap back into the internet. So in the mid-80s I took another dive into the internet to find this guy, and Phillip A. Manhard was disappearing, being erased from the federal registry. Eventually even his social security number disappeared, back when they had them that you could search. Where he was born stayed the same, but the person was Phillip Q. Manhard, not Phillip A. And this guy in the 1980s, Phillip Q., after he got out of high school went into college, ROTC, became an officer, was in Vietnam, and was captured in Vietnam as a military officer. All right. And no evidence of Phillip A. left. All replaced by Phillip Q. And I thought this is odd. And every now and then I would check, and the story with Phillip Q. would get more robust every time I would do a search. And something's wrong here. This lady told me one story. That one vanishes from the internet between 1973 and around '85 replaced by a Phillip Q. And Phillip Q.'s story starts to alter a little bit. You know, significant pieces here and there got changed over time. And I kept checking back in and couldn't really find anything conclusive until in 2011 DASPO had a reunion in Washington, and we were invited to go to the National Archives Research Group to try to rewrite the captions to photographs we took that had been destroyed. The Pentagon kept the negatives and threw away the captions, and they wanted us to come back in and recreate them. So we did, and I thought, "Okay, here's my opportunity. These guys do all the research. They can help me track down information on Phillip Q. Manhard." End of the day, they give me a post-it that had phone numbers, email addresses, websites. And they said, "You can find all the information you need about this guy through these resources." Went back home to Michigan, started digging into them. Every one of them was phony. The websites, the fax numbers, the phone numbers, the names. All of it was phony. And I began to think, "Wait a minute. This is leftovers from the previous stuff." And I figured I would never have an answer to it. A year later I decided to make one last dive into the internet on Phillip Q. Manhard. And I was surprised to see hits coming up on Phillip Q. and a Phillip W. And it turned out as I read the material, the debriefing notes from the POWs had finally been declassified and released from 1982 through 1989, but it took over a decade for those documents to be scanned and put on the internet, and they were just

starting to pop up in 2012. So I start collecting all of these that I can, trying to piece the story together. The true story is that it was Phillip Q. Manhard. The Phillip W. was a typo. The Phillip A. was created as a diversion so the North Vietnamese could not connect the dots between Philip A. and any of the other POWs that were being held. It turned out that Phillip Q. was the highest-ranking civilian in Vietnam, was captured in Hue when Hue was overrun. But when he was captured, a lot of our allies were captured with him. There were Australians, I believe--I know Australians, Korean, and a number of others, you know, from other nationalities. And our intelligence organizations didn't want anyone in North Vietnam, including Cuban interrogators that interrogated this guy and Chinese interrogators that interrogated this guy, to be able to connect the dots as to who knew what, you know, that they could torture to get information from. So to protect everyone they created the phony Phillip A. Manhard. And particularly to protect his family, his wife had him pronounced dead and went on and married somebody else. In reality his wife never did leave him. Happily married, had, I think, four kids, and they were doing fine. But it was the intelligence organization's way of creating a diversion to protect their people. And they had to keep the story up because when the POW release happened, only the American POWs were released. The other nationalities, our allies, didn't get released until as late as 1982 through 1985. So, they stayed in captivity significantly longer than our men did. You know.

Sanderson: 'Cause I remember looking back at some of this stuff when our guys were released as--it was a huge--I mean it was a huge news event. And then they--and a lot of the pictures and photographs that you guys took--I mean, it's very iconic, especially the one where there's a gentleman that was standing on the plane taking pictures as, you know, as they were--I think, I don't know if it was as they took off or as they landed, but you could see all the POWs like, raised his arms in victory and all that. They knew that they were--

Adams: And I have copies of all of those that I could make available to the museum for research.

Sanderson: Oh, that would be awesome.

Adams: Yeah.

Sanderson: I mean, the picture in itself--

Adams: Yeah, the picture--

Sanderson: Talkin' about snapping it at the right time.

Adams: It was a good picture, and I have--I offered this picture to the National Archives, and they didn't want it. I just--I couldn't understand it. I showed it to a couple other intelligence organizations, and they at first said, "Wow. That's interesting. Yeah, we'd love to have a copy of it." But when I would follow up with that later on, the interest in that would vanish. And I always thought, "This is strange. I don't know what is going on. First they're interested, then they don't want it." And I showed copies of it to Texas Tech. and at first they were excited. "Oh, yeah, yeah. We want the originals." And then later they said, "No. Nope. We're not interested." So there were still remnants and could possibly still be remnants of classified status for anything related to this guy out there. But I brought along copies of the declassified reports, you know, that really show who this guy was, what his position and knowledge was inside Vietnam when he was captured. He was--they never knew how important a person they had in their captivity. And thank God to the CIA, the US Department of Interior, and the Pentagon for putting up a false front that worked for decades.

Sanderson: Definitely, 'cause God only knows probably what--you know, what would potentially have gone down with that.

Adams: He wouldn't have survived. We know that for sure.

Sanderson: Oh, yeah, 'cause they love to--they love to do stuff like that. Well, we appreciate you sharing that story with us. Definitely, I don't want to keep you from the reception, I know, with them getting ready to start it. One of the things that we would like to do--were you gonna come back tomorrow, or-- 'cause I know we originally had you on this--

Adams: I could, and there may be value in trying to do that. It's just--

Sanderson: If not, we can do it over the phone.

Adams: Yeah. See, all of us are getting to the point where health is a little rough around the edges for us anymore, and I'm not a morning person anymore. I don't really function well in the morning, so--

Sanderson: I hear you on that one. My wife's the same way. I won't even talk to her until she's had at least one cup. And the first, yeah--with my family, she's like—

Adams: For me it's two cups.

Sanderson: Yup. I just walk in, I set it down in front of her, and I walk away. And I wait for her to speak. When she says hello, then I'm like, "Hey, how's it going?"

Adams: Yeah, when she's human, she'll let you know.

Sanderson: Right. Until then, stay away. So we can definitely do that, and like I said-- if that's something you'd like to do, or we can do it over the phone, whichever would be more convenient for you. 'Cause I know I think we initially had it at like nine o'clock, but I'm not sure what--I know quite a few of you guys are leaving tomorrow. Some of them are heading out tomorrow--

Adams: Let me see. Tomorrow's Friday. Yes, I'm not leaving until Saturday, so I'm a little more flexible.

Sanderson: Okay. What we can do is we can talk to Thom and see what we can do on that.

Adams: All right. And I know one of the people due next morning is Dawson, and he told me just before I came down here, "I'm not a morning person either." He said if we can do it tonight that would be great. So--

Sanderson: All right. Outstanding. So we can definitely look and see what we can do on that and go from there.

Adams: Okay.

Sanderson: So I greatly appreciate your time. Thank you very much.

Adams: All right. Thank you.