Kit Kramer

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Webb: My name is Thomas Webb and we are at the Pritzker Military Museum and Library Downtown Chicago. I'm here with Mr. Kit Kramer and today is September 24th, 2015. And the first question we always ask is when and where were you born, Sir?

Kramer: I was born on September 1st, 1943, in Rockford, Illinois.

Webb: Local guy, great… We—because this is kind of a unique opportunity to explore DASPO [Department of the Army Special Photographic Office] and kind of the surrounding history around DASPO, rather than to go into detail about your childhood, which is something we're interested in, I have been asking each participant whether or not they had any interests, any hobbies with photography or film making or even art growing up.

Kramer: Well, I was probably eleven or twelve years old and I was given my great-uncle's Kodak camera from the turn of the century, something he had used to record family gatherings. And I used that for probably a year, and then I got my uncle's camera that he had in the 1940s, which I don't know what type it was, it shot 127 film, and I used that through high school. And it was, again, photographing family get-togethers. Nothing—I wasn't real interested in photography but it was something I enjoyed.

Webb: Okay. Others have talked about maybe that small time hobby leading to a class in school or even beyond grammar school, did you have any of those kinds of experiences?

Kramer: Nope. Nope.

Webb: No, not at all?

Kramer: Not at all. It was just learn as you went.

Webb: Then how did you find yourself in the military?

Kramer: Well, I'd taken junior ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] in high school and faced with the prospect of what am I going to do? I was really young for my age and college was out of the question at that time. We didn't have student loans or anything of that so even though I had taken the college prep courses in high school I was not gonna—that was not in my future. So I didn't really look forward to going to work in the factory,

which was basically what was available in Rockford at the time. People made good livings there. But that just wasn't what I was interested in so I had decided the Army. So two weeks after I graduated high school I was on a train bound for Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri for basic training.

Webb: Did you have others in your family that also served that might have preempted that decision or was it strictly, you know, “I see this as a route of post-graduation of something that I might be able to do?”

Kramer: It was more something to do. My uncle had served during the Korean War and my mother's cousin fought in the Philippines during World War II, but there was no real family tradition of military service.

Webb: Okay. So what year was this that you went to Fort Leonard Wood?

Kramer: 11 June, 1961.

Webb: Others have mentioned that when they enlisted that there was an option of three slots of things that you could potentially write down as kind of the route you would take in the military, as you were already in ROTC, maybe that wasn't an option for you. But I'm curious as you were going down—downstate, down country whether or not you had envisioned what you were going to do in the military?

Kramer: I had no clue. After we had been in training for about two weeks, they marched us up to one of those old temporary single floor buildings, some sort of a personnel office. And we went in one at a time, sat down at the desk with a clerk and he said, "Well, what do you want to do?" Which came to shock for me. I never assumed the Army would give me an option, you know, [laughs] I thought they were going to tell me what I was going to do. Again, I hadn't given this any thought at all. And for some reason, out of the blue, came Military Police. Well, he looked at this seventeen year old, 5'9", 130 pound kid, glanced at his paper says, "You don't qualify for that. What else?" [Laughter] Well, now I got to come up with something or they will be telling me what I'll be doing. So I had been thinking in the back of my mind I needed to get to the PX [Post Exchange] and pick up a camera so I could record some of these experiences we were having. So I said, "Photography." He looked down and said, "Okay, you're qualified for that." That was it, and I gave no further thought until we graduated and, of course, everyone gathers around the bulletin board to see where they're going to be going next. And I... “Kramer. Motion picture photography at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey." Never even thought about motion picture. [Laughter] That was it.

Webb: Okay… Do you happen to know, you might not, he said that you qualified for that. Have any idea what the--?

Kramer: No idea. It was just a qualification other than MP [Military Police]. I think it was part a result of test scores that we'd taken on when we first enlisted we had to sit down and take batteries of tests. I think a lot of it had to do with my test scores on that.

Webb: Okay. So how did you get to Fort Monmouth?

Kramer: Train. Back in the days when you could actually take trains to take you places. I took the train from Rockford into Chicago for the processing center, and then the next day we boarded the trains headed south to St. Louis, [Missouri], and from there by bus to Fort Leonard Wood.

Webb: Now '61, maybe by this point, almost '62, was a little before Vietnam but certainly Korea was fresh in everybody's mind. I'm curious how your family reacted to you going into the military, to going to New Jersey? What was the reaction back at home?

Kramer: There was no issues with any of that, at all. When we were in basic training, about half way through, maybe not even that, and the whole unit was put on alert because of the crisis in Berlin, [Germany]. That's when the Berlin Wall, [Laughter] when Checkpoint Charlie came up see, and what we would have done if we been sent over there, you know, we didn't know our left foot from our right foot yet. Right from the very beginning one became very aware that -hmm, this could get interesting. [Laughter]

Webb: Yeah and then what are your first impressions of Fort Monmouth?

Kramer: Well, my uncle had been there. He was in radio school at Fort Monmouth, so I was aware of its existence prior to the time that I arrived, but it was a nice place. And again, I had probably a week and a half, two weeks to go before my classes started so we were basically, a detail organization until then. The course was really well taught. Dan Grumio, who had been a World War II combat cameraman in the European Theatre, was my civilian instructor. And there was a corporal—I don't remember his name, who was our military instructor. And it was really, really interesting.

Webb: Would you say that you were as prepared for that kind of instruction as the rest of the people there with you?

Kramer: Yeah. I think it was pretty much…

Webb: Everybody was starting…

Kramer: Yeah, yeah. We had a couple of [US] Air force guys in the class with us and the rest were all Army. And everyone did quite well.

Webb: And what kinds of instruction did you take?

Kramer: Well, the first couple of weeks it was all book work. Theory. Then we finally got into using cameras. We used the Eyemo Bell & Howell thirty-five millimeter, Eyemo camera.

And the sixteen millimeter Auricon, which was a sound on film which we used at McGuire Air Force Base [in New Jersey] to do on camera interviews.

Webb: And that on base interviews, was that one of the assignments?

Kramer: It was. We were supposed to rotate, but I didn't get to work the camera. I was the interviewer and so I had to find someone to interview and then go over with him the questions I'd be asking and then conduct the interview on camera.

Webb: Okay. And that product was critiqued by your instructors?

Kramer: Right. And we would often go into Red Bank and be on our own come up with a story, film something, and then we'd get critiqued on that.

Webb: Do you remember what kind of story...?

Kramer: I have no—this is over fifty years ago. I don't remember. [Laughter]

Webb: Okay. And did, you've talked a little about the camera you, the cameras that you were working on did it become… 'cause you were motion picture, so that was the sole focus of your instruction? You ever have to deal with still photography?

Kramer: Nope.

Webb: Okay. And then, at what point did you start hearing about DASPO? Is that next?

Kramer: Well, no. That came later. I was very fortunate. Three of us in our class were assigned to the Army Pictorial Center in Long Island City, New York. The Army's little Hollywood studio. And it truly was—it was an amazing place. So I was there. I worked in camera branch. I was assistant cameraman on the Mitchell 35 millimeter camera, studio cameras. We used the standards, the NCs and the BNCs [Blimped Noiseless Camera]

Webb: What kind of things did the military have you filming, there?

Kramer: Well, my very first assignment was, believe it or not, in February 1st of 1962, I was on a team that went to Laos… Vientiane, Laos. We were going to film Special Forces activities in country. We were there about two weeks didn't expose a foot of film, and then they decided, "Well, the real story might be in this place called Vietnam." So we got back on the plane, all except two of us, two of us stayed in Laos. The rest of the team flew back to Bangkok and then to Saigon and we were there. I was there for three months the rest of the team was there for six months, and again, we were working with Special Forces training—Montagnards—and helicopters that we each had H-21 helicopters over there at the time that were being used to ferry ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] troops to battle.

Webb: Well, I want to ask you, being from Rockford, what was the… or was there kind of a culture shock?

Kramer: Oh, it was like being in *National Geographic* magazine, which I had grown up reading. It was just wow. And you could throw in a little bit of *Playboy* and a little bit of *Soldier of Fortune*, this was, you know, I was eighteen years old and what an experience.

Webb: But this is still probably before the public, anyway, really understands Vietnam?

Kramer: Most people wouldn't have heard of Vietnam. Yeah.

Webb: So when you're telling your family you're going to Laos and potentially to Vietnam there's no…?

Kramer: Well, Vietnam wasn't even on the schedule at that time. It was strictly Laos. We were going to be there for three months to film or six months whatever it was going to be to film these actives and none of us knew what these actives were going to be until we arrived in country and discovered that it was going to be on Special Forces work… Now on this team, make sure you get a shout out because there's quite a group of guys: Major Ken Elk was the director, Major Elk had been in the fifties had done a photo safari across Africa and he loved his land rover he… well, we were presented a land rover to use as our vehicle, and Ken he was in his glory. But every morning we had to go out and push this thing to get it started so we were not as enthusiastic about the vehicle as the major was. And Spec5 Jim Macintosh was the senior cameraman. I was a PFC [private first class]. I was his assistant cameraman. Sergeant Walt Martin was another motion picture man. Walton and Ken stayed in Laos when the rest of us went to Vietnam. Spec 4 Joe Saunders was another cameraman and Staff Sergeant Tony Martin was our still man. So it was quite a crew of people. Tony introduced me to jazz and scotch I had a long relationship with both.

Webb: Yeah, I'd like to talk to you about the jazz after… So there's different levels of probably experience at this point you're still learning from these men you've given the shout out to. At this point, I think you said you're secondary camera?

Kramer: I was assistant cameraman.

Webb: Assistant Cameraman. What kind of tasks does that?

Kramer: Well, I'd load the film magazine. I was responsible for the camera. Weighed 135 pounds, five pounds more than what I weighed. But when you put it on the tripod, it was perfectly balanced so I was able to carry it through some of these jungle trails and it was not an issue. The fifty pound battery box on the other hand, that was a struggle. [Laughter] But I was responsible to maintain the camera, help with the set ups, we were doing any follow focus I had to do that. It was good. It was a learning position. And Jim Macintosh was my mentor. He taught me a great deal. He had been an assistant

cameraman in the film world for Warner Brothers in the forties and his wife and child were killed in a terrible automobile accident and he just kind of derailed and wound up in the Army but he was a fantastic cameraman.

Webb: Remember maybe some of the advice he may have given you on the best way to get a shot?

Kramer: I just absorbed it as we went along. I never learned by asking questions. I learned by observation and by doing. Sometimes that worked and with other people it didn't work they thought, "What's the matter with this guy? He's not curious about anything." But it worked well with Mac.

Webb: And was there at that time some kind of level of critique of what you guys were shooting?

Kramer: Well, I'm sure there was. Again, part of my job was to box up the exposed film and ship it back to APC [Army Pictorial Center] and I'm sure critiques came in but I was never made privy to any of that. I should say once we got to Saigon we were joined there by Mr. Will Sparks, he was a civilian contract director and our soundman Spec 4 Loren Hallen. So that made our team complete.

Webb: I don't know how to ask this question or if now is the appropriate time, but as we explore DASPO, the carte blanche, is the way it's been put, the ability to move all around to kind of to do your own assignments—however you want to say it—that's probably much different than what you were experiencing at this point in your military career?

Kramer: Right.

Webb: I'm curious how the assignments came to you? Did they just come strictly from APC or were there other means of getting your assignments?

Kramer: I think the total direction came from APC, but what we were actually going to film was pretty much up to the director. He had to make the story. We didn't have a script to go by. This was strictly off the cuff.

Webb: Okay. And that's the civilian...

Kramer: Yes, Will Sparks and later, Ken Elk.

Webb: And how, I mean, you may not be privy to it, how the civilian is, is he making these kinds of decisions of this is what the direction's going to be?

Kramer: Well, he's a film director and he's gonna tell a story. And he would confer with people we're going to work with see what they did and how they went about doing it and from that he would decide how to tell the story. So we had a lot of leeway in that regard. I think we shot two big picture episodes out of that, the work we did there. We also had

an article in TV Guide because when Will got back to that States he wrote up something and sent it in to them. I think there was a three page article in TV Guide on work we did there.

Webb: Did your family see it?

Kramer: Probably. I never asked them about it but I'm sure they must have. They got it every week.

Webb: What was military life like in that area when you weren't on assignment? When you weren't doing these shoots?

Kramer: It was an eight to five job. There was no military about it. When we worked, we worked in civilian clothes. We didn't have any uniforms with us in Southeast Asia. It was all civvies. Yeah, it was a very relaxed atmosphere. It was more like having a civilian job.

Webb: And if I remember correctly, you did that for three months? Six months?

Kramer: I was in Vietnam for three months.

Webb: Okay.

Kramer: Then I went back to APC. I had come down on order to go to Germany, which APC notified us of. I was sent back, I think it was, in May or June, I was sent back. I got there and they said "What are you doing here?" I said "Well I'm orders for Germany." They said, "We sent somebody else!" I go, "Well, they never bothered to tell us." [Laughter] Or I would have still been over there for the rest of the trip. So from there, I just went on working other assignments in the States. Then we went to Panama in October, so we were there for the Cuban Missile Crisis. We were shooting a training film on their jungle warfare, where a big picture episode on jungle warfare training school down there.

Webb: How aware of the Cuban Missile Crisis were you?

Kramer: We were very aware this. This assault occurred while we were down there. They had machine gun posts set up on the Thatcher Ferry Bridge. And it was, yeah, people were preparing for any eventuality because no one had any idea how this was going to play out. Least of all the principals, [Premier Nikita] Khrushchev and [President John F.] Kennedy.

Webb: Beyond the assignment, beyond filming jungle training that kind of thing, are you at any point starting to pick up a camera to do your own personal shooting or are you more strictly...?

Kramer: I had a still camera and I had an eight millimeter. But I didn't really, you know, I didn't really do much with it. It was just recording family activities and I shot photos of where we were, the different places we went to. The summer '63, we went down to White

Sands Missile Range with the President, and Mrs. Kennedy. This was part of watching missile launches I'm sure he did the same thing with the Air Force. He wanted to see all these different kinds of missiles we had and how they worked because he was pushing the space program, of course. And I was in Alaska when he was killed… on another assignment.

Webb: I'm curious because I don't know. I feel that the military is very insulated, but when big events like that happen, I assume news travels very quickly?

Kramer: It affects everyone.

Webb: In the military, however, the Commander in Chief has been removed. Is there a reaction from the group as a whole or is it more of an individual reaction?

Kramer: Well, I think it's probably both, but it's certainly the individual reaction that's the strongest. We were, we were up in Alaska as I said and this was in November, December we were up there. We had four hours of daylight and given the film stock we had at the time they gave us two hours of actual shooting. And you figure, earlier would be too red and I think later would be too blue. So we had two hours. We had an office in an aircraft hangar and we walked in to get started on our day and this guy comes in from an office on the second floor says, "The President's been shot! The President's been shot!" So you just kinda, you just ran{?} and we went into our office and turned on the radio and that's where we spent the rest of the day, just following what was going on. It just, it was just an empty feeling, just horrible. I'll never forget that.

Webb: After Alaska, where did you go to next?

Kramer: Well, I was still at APC. I was there from, I was at APC from December of '61 to October of '65. And then I went to DASPO PAC [Pacific] force at Fort Shafter, Hawaii. Now DASPO had been formed it was in late '63 or early '64 that DASPO was formed. And there was only CONUS branch, Continental United States, and it was based at APC, so I knew the guys Jack Yamaguchi and Tom Schiro. I had worked with Dave Dardzinski, I had worked with, they were three I remember, were three of the earliest member of DASPO. And they were… all three of those were in Ia Drang Valley in November '65 when we were soldiers once and young took place that, the big battle there. Our first major engagement of the war. They were, the three of those were involved with that from DASPO. So I don't know when DASPO PAC [Pacific] was formed but I don't think it was, it was sometime in '65 I believe. It was initially formed. In the Caribbean around the same time. So we were early on with DASPO PAC [Pacific].

Webb: Okay. So… so many of the other have said, "I didn't really know what that was, I just sort of stumbled into it or was assigned to that."]

Kramer: I knew who DASPO was and then what DASPO was…

Webb: You sort of had a kind of a front row seat to it?

Kramer: Yeah. Right, because of my experiences with APC. Had I not been there, I would not have had a clue.

Webb: Did that proximity because you were right there and kind of informed how you got into DASPO?

Kramer: I think it maybe luck of the draw, probably. I don't know what criteria they determined as to who was going to be assigned to DASPO. Certainly, as it turned out it was many of the elite still and motion picture men in the Army. Now whether that was by design or by accident, I couldn't say but certainly, it turned out that way.

Webb: So in '65, you're kind of transitioning over into DASPO?

Kramer: Right. Got there in December.

Webb: Hawaii at that point was where they sent you or...?

Kramer: Yes. Yeah, we were based out of Fort Shafter.

Webb: And then you immediately do kind of the ninth day…?

Kramer: Well, I didn't go over until, my first rotation was either… I think it was either February, March, and April or March, April, May—I think it was March, April, May of ‘66.

Webb: Okay. So there's a little bit of period that maybe you did more?

Kramer: Well, I had to get my family settled and things of that nature.

Webb: How did they feel about being moved to Hawaii?

Kramer: Well, we went from New York City to Honolulu. I mean, come on, I'm thinking, "This Army's pretty good."

Webb: So maybe a little bit of a culture shock for them, as well?

Kramer: It was different. My kids were very young.

Webb: Was there additional training that you were going through?

Kramer: No.

Webb: No?

Kramer: No.

Webb: They just assumed that you....?

Kramer: That we knew what we were supposed to be doing and were capable of doing it.

Webb: Okay. So what was your first assignment with DASPO?

Kramer: I went out with the 25th Infantry Division out of Củ Chi [District, Vietnam]. Rodriquez was the still man, he was a staff sergeant. I guess he was supposed to guide me through the process of where to go and how you got to where you were going to arrive at and that whole thing. We were out with a mechanized unit, which was interesting. It was the first time and my footage was not worth a darn. Again, this was first time I had had this type of coverage and it was kind of, "What do I do?" I did improve from there, I think, but yeah, I was not at all pleased with what I came up with then. I still have copies of that and I look at it now and I say, "Oh my God, that was..." [Laughter] We were going through, sweeping through a rubber plantation and the antennas on these M-113 APCs were sweeping the leaves. Well, residing on these leaves are what you call fire ants. They have a toxin in their mandibles and they land with their mandibles open and they bite as soon as they hit and it's very painful. Of course, a swarm of them can kill a small mammal or insects or whatever, might be disturbing the colonies. But yeah, they were; we spent a good part of that time spraying one another, drowning these ants with bug repellant. We had these ODs, these Army olive green cans of bug spray. It was interesting.

Webb: You said that you weren't at all happy with that footage?

Kramer: No I wasn't. There was no story. There was no coherence to it. It was just a lot of random shots.

Webb: You've also said that DASPO was the best of the best?

Kramer: It was but there's always a learning curve. And this was new type of coverage.

Webb: I wonder, and I've talked to others, if you felt even almost immediately that kind of friendly competition of artists, you know, trying to get this great shot, trying to tell this story, most succinctly and interestingly; whether that was something you experienced or not?

Kramer: I have never competed with anybody but myself. I try to be the best that I can be and I hope that everyone else was the best they could be. I don't get involved in that type of stuff. I knew some of the guys. Paul Moulton I had known at APC and he was there. Became very good friends with George Gentry who went on to a long distinguished career in photography. It was just… and Pete Ruplenas, my God, what a terrific guy he was. He and his wife Hazel and my wife and I were friends. He was more my father's age but we just seemed to click. That was nice. What a great group of guys, they really were.

Webb: And that has been the consensus and something that I'd like to explore in a little bit. My other question is coming from an environment where maybe you were doing your assignment in civilian clothes but maybe still more of the disciplined rank structure; I don't know how to say it.

Kramer: I never felt that at DASPO.

Webb: Right.

Kramer: Everyone was a professional.

Webb: Okay. Was it, I guess the question is, going into DASPO, my understanding is that you can go anywhere as long as you are covering the assignment and getting back was your responsibility?

Kramer: The OIC [officer in charge] and the NCOIC [non-commissioned officer in charge] went to briefings every morning at MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] headquarters, and they decided where it looked like there was going to be something going on. They found out what units were going to be involved in operations and then they would come back and they would assign: "Okay, you're going to go with the 25th, you're going to go with 1st Cav [Cavalry]." Then they'd drive us out to the airport. And if you're going 1st Cav, you're going to Pleiku around case? you've got to get on board a C123, a C130. If you're going to go to Củ Chi you get on board a chopper so you go to the helicopter operations office and you get your name put on a list and as soon as an opening came up they call your name out, you get on the chopper and you'd wind up at Củ Chi. And then you'd go to PIO [public information office], find out what was going on and decide what unit you were going to go out with. When it was time to leave, you came back on a resupply chopper. And then reverse the process to get back to Saigon. And call the Villa and they'd come pick us up. And generally, we'd be gone for a week at a time. And then we'd have two or three days off between assignments and then we'd go out again somewhere else… And on that first rotation, I spent—the bulk of my combat time was with the 25th Infantry Division because of course, we had the Buddhists riots we filmed and a few other, I did a thing with USAID where they were dropping fingerlings into some ponds. They had a French Alouette [aircraft] that they would load up with these baby fish and water and he'd fly all over the pond and drop them in. So there are, were a lot of different types of stories we told.

Webb: The question that I have asked, in following around the 25th, even now with everybody having a camera in their pocket, the moment that a camera comes out, people change their behavior. And I wonder as you're filming these different units, the 25th here, doing what they're supposed to be doing, if you noticed that your presence in any way changed the way that the soldiers reacted...that they did their job?

Kramer: I think they were professionals and they did their job. I didn't notice there was any...there was no showboating or any of that type stuff going on. They were very, concentrating on the job at hand. Yeah… It was with them I got my Purple Heart, the 25th. [Laughter]

Webb: Would you like to talk about that story?

Kramer: Well it's, there's not much to it. We'd been on a sweep and we're getting ready to into a new LZ [landing zone] so we were waiting along the side of river bank, there was an open area, open field, across the river, there was another smaller open field, with forest around it, one dead tree standing out. Evidently, someone thought they saw a Charlie over near that tree, a sniper. So without telling anyone, they called in an Arty [Artillery] strike. Well, I didn't hear the first shell go off, I just knew something hit me in the back and threw me face first in the dirt. So I jumped up ready to fight whoever this idiot was, see, and I realized everyone else is on the ground. And my buddies Charlie Uchima and Jack Yamaguchi are calling, "Kramer, get down! Get down!" So I spun and hit the dirt just as the second one went off. Again, throwing shrapnel just above our heads [imitates sound of flying shrapnel], you know, it goes over. Then the third one hit, this one closer to the tree but, of course, if there was a Charlie there, he was long gone after the first shell went off. But then that was the end of the fire mission. So the medic came over and patched up my wound and then we got back in line to wait. I was on the first ship going into the new LZ. We got there, almost got my second Purple Heart. For some reason when the second wave came in, well, when I landed, went forward to secure the front of the perimeter, others went off to secure the sides and the rear. So the second wave comes in and the troops disembark and as soon as the ships lift off the ground, their M16 machine guns open up and they're firing. And I'm laying there and I'm watching these puffs of dirt coming at my feet and I'm thinking, "Wow, this is just like the movies, they got that right!" You know. I'm thinking, "I'm going to have to do something." I'm going to have to roll out of the way but I've got this tree right here but that puts me under the ship and if I go out away from the ship, the gunner might track my movements and for that I might as well stay where I'm at. So I'm just getting ready to roll up against the tree. I got just enough room to get sideways and be missed when the firing stopped. So it was less than three feet away from me before the firing stopped. But this tree line that we were at wrapped around at the left flank it came in more towards the LZ. And one young man took a ricochet off a tree to his temple and he died on his way to the field hospital. Friendly fire. Interesting day.

Webb: When you're in a situation where there's obviously—not this particular one but maybe others—where you're responsible for getting a shot and not only a shot but probably a close up, wide, long… but there's something happening that is also a risk to you; how do you do that?

Kramer: You do the job. If they weren't just scared... you're out there, everyone around you is armed with weapons and you're out there with a camera "What are you, an idiot?" I said, "Well, I'm around all these guys who have weapons." [Laughter] You know, that's their job. My job is the camera. If things ever get bad enough that I have to set my camera down and pick up a weapon, there's gonna be a lot of unused ones laying around. And the way you combat the fear is just by focusing on doing the job. And that's all we did. We just did the job. There's always risk. You can walk across the street in Honolulu and get hit by a car, there's always risk. It's just; you focus on doing the work. And of course, in those circumstances, you're not going to be doing establishing shot, medium shot, close up; you just shoot what you can. And mostly it's going to be medium shots or close ups. That's the nature of the beast. The issue, the problem we always had: you're out there with a finite amount of film. What do you shoot? Because if you expend all your film, now something happens and you've got nothing. You can't do anything. So often times we missed some great shots, some terrific things that we should have covered but we didn't because we were trying to preserve your film. And a lot of the time, nothing happened. It was just a long hot walk in the sun. You're out there for a week and nothing happens. All you've got shots of guys walking through the bush or the jungle or whatever, sitting down for chow or whatever, it just, dull boring stuff. But then once in a great while, all Hell would break loose. And you tried to save your film for when all Hell was going to break loose but it didn't always work out. [Laughter] I was out with Mike Lamanna… we were out with the 1st Infantry Division. This was on my second rotation. And someone came up with a bright idea that we should send a man out with us, with a sound, with a tape recorder, so we could get sound to go along with the film. So Mike was the cameraman, he had his Eyemo [motion picture film camera] and I had a twenty-two-pound tape recorder. I was going to be the sound man. Why me? We had soundmen but I got selected to go. Okay fine. First time we can experiment. We were out on a sweep. Nothing happened, ever. We—we got footage of... boring. On the last day we were going to be out, we swept through a village and about a klick [kilometer] and half beyond the village we got hit in an ambush. It was an open field, gently sloping hill down to a tree line. And we were drawing fire. So they go into skirmishers and they sweep down the hill and there was a firefight for some time. Mike, the first sergeant, and I are laying about halfway down a hill I guess and I'm lying on my back with my head towards the firing. I'm holding this microphone and I look over at Mike with this big shit-eating grin on my face, you know, this is what it's all about, baby! You know, and he's got no film left because it's all expended. So when the critique prints came back, it was all his footage and then the sound was all the firefight. You know, "Mike, why didn't you get any of this coverage?" [Grumbling] It was a problem every cameraman over there faced. What do I shoot? What do I shoot? See I should have had shots of this chopper shooting at us when we came out, shots of the wave coming in and landing. But I was conserving my footage. My concentrations out there in front, that's where the enemy's going to be. I didn't know that the enemy was behind me, flying over me. [Laughter] So, what do you shoot? You never know. I wish I had shot that. Just the

footage of the bullets coming towards my feet would have been fun. But… what do you do?

Webb: The moments that you've, walking in the hot sun, are those important to document as well?

Kramer: It all is. I'll tell you a little story. This happened on my second rotation. Harry Breedlove and I were out with the 1st Air Cav somewhere out of Pleiku. Evidentially at that time when new troops were getting, going through their indoctrination to get sent Vietnam. They spent who knows how many hours in these hot buildings watching footage coming in from Vietnam. Now I'm presuming this was edited footage. There was evidently a title card. Operation Khamera 25th Infantry Division, 26-28 May, 1966, Camerama. SP5 Kramer. Okay. So Harry and I are out and we had been through the sweep and a group of half a dozen young guys, young guys, I was twenty-three, but I was the old guy, you know. Half a dozen of these young guys come up and their spokesman says, "Sergeant Kramer, we just wanted to meet you and thank you because we saw some of the stuff in your movies that have helped us stay alive over here." Well, as we used to say, I still get chills. That was heavy. None of us had ever considered that. We were shooting for the historical record. We were shooting propaganda film for the folks back home. Maybe something to debrief the SecDef [Secretary of Defense], you know. But maybe, maybe, if it's true that this helps keep a handful alive for a couple of extra days, then everything we went through is worth it just to get the coverage. Just wow. You know what, I never told anybody about that. Well, I told Frederick at the 221st when he did the interview down there. But I've never told anyone that. But I received the compliment, but it was directed to every guy who ever exposed a foot of film in Vietnam or shot a still. It was, maybe it really did matter what we were doing. It was a purpose we had never, never imagined. So that was a heavy moment, you know. [Laughter]

Webb: What… what kind of things did you do to de-stress when you're back—back at the villa?

Kramer: Well, I've always been a reader. And when I was out in my pack I always had a couple of paperbacks when I was out in the field. And I did a lot of reading. And we played nickel-dime-quarter poker at night. You go downtown and have a couple of beers, whatever. We never really thought much about it. It was just things that we did, just life.

Webb: These… that's very much keeping with what everybody has sort of said. I'd like to ask then if the tightknit nature of DASPO, the kinds of guys that you were there with, the almost family quality that I keep picking up on, if that played a role? Or if you can discuss the relationships you guys had.

Kramer: It certainly contributes to a lot of fond memories. But I don't think that was unique to DASPO. I think that was Army photography. Yeah we were—there were a lot of us but it was really a very small part of the Army. And if you were around long enough you'd keep running into the same people. You know, people I worked with at APC I ran into in

DASPO, I run into to ‘em 221st, I ran into 'em in Germany, you'd go on TDY [temporary duty] somewhere and there'd be someone you'd worked with, or perhaps someone you met while you were on TDY you'd work with later. It was a small group—it was a small group. And I think there was always kind of a closeness we were all involved in doing the same kind of work. We all had the same kind of experiences, or similar experiences, most of us did. But yeah, it was very close. When I go to... the 221st Signal Company has a reunion every three years and I tell you it's like no time has passed at all. It's just, it is just such a warm brotherhood. This is my first reunion with DASPO, and I expect that there'll be some of that as well. It's...it's... we all went through the same type of things and I think that draws you together.

Webb: What was your last assignment with DASPO? Do you remember?

Kramer: Christmas Eve. I got a… a still photo. One that Harry took. We were out with the 1st Cav. And it's a photo of me, kneeling over a dead Charlie, filming up at a GI who's coming over to check over the body. That was on my last assignment with DASPO. That was in December of '66. I should have gone back over again in March but I got curtailed, I got sent to the 221st that was one of the guys on the teams that he got sent to the 221st.

Webb: Why? Or was there…?

Kramer: It was politics. It was politics. We had what they considered a SEAPC team, Southeast Asia Photographic Center; they were based out of Tan Son Nhut [Air Base]. And we had two teams that went over there and they photographed these little news bits for them, they chose four minute excerpts that they would send to CBS, NBC, ABC maybe; it was a slow news night they would throw this up on the screen, you know, that was their idea. And I didn't know because I had never worked on those teams but I was selected to go because the fella who was the senior cameraman on the one team had been at DASPO longer than I had, so he had more time in country, so it was only fair they send someone... yayaya, it was all politics. So George Gentry who was the other team leader. He was the team; he was the senior cameraman on the other team. And I and Bob Lohr, Bill Garvey, Jim Macintosh several other guys got sent to the 221st. It was a funding issue. DASPO didn't think they should have to fund SEAPC's work. So, of course, I got there, and the 221st we're busy building hooches, we're pouring cement pads and putting up huts and I'm the first sergeant because I'm the ranking enlisted man, the NCOIC anyway. SEAPC [South East Asia Pictorial Center] calls and they want us to shoot this, a story on a convoy that's going to go to Saigon to Củ Chi. So again, I've never shot one of these before. So I shoot a film. I mean, I shoot a big picture episode; I come back with a roll of film like this, and Major Hall and the other, I knew both of them they were captains at APC, "What the hell is this? What are we supposed to do with that?" The film, probably you want to go in the trashcan, you know, but I didn't know. And that was the only time I worked for SEAPC. [Laughter] I didn't do it right but I didn't know. I had no briefing. I didn't know what they did. I shot a story. That was when we got to Củ

Chi and we're parked off to the side waiting for clearance to the base I guess and all of a sudden, somebody hollers, "Grenade!" Well the vehicle right here, some kid had thrown a grenade under the vehicle a tanker. So everybody exists the truck, and everything, we're laying there waiting for this big explosion that's gonna happen well nothing happens. Well, they caught the kid a little further down. It was his first terrorist act and he forgot to pull the pin. [Laughter] Of course, we wouldn't have any footage of that because we didn't have our camera there. You know. [Laughter]

Webb: So other than… SEAPC, what is your role in your 221st?

Kramer: Well, I was platoon sergeant, 1st Platoon, and I was a motion picture team chief. I didn't get to go out in the field nearly as often as I would have liked. As I started looking back over some films I had and things like that remising with the guys, I did get out in the field a lot more often than I remembered. It just wasn't as often as I liked to have gone. I would have liked to have been like DASPO where you're just out there in the field and you're doing that you're doing work but I spent a lot of time at Long Bình. And George who was the other senior motion man at the SEAPC team he became the operations NCO so he didn't go out either. [Laughter] So there's a little bitterness the fact that we were pulled away from DASPO for political purposes and then we're not able to do the type of work that we wanted to do. But part of life

Webb: What is the difference between the kinds of assignments that DASPO was doing versus the kinds of assignments that you were required of at the 221st?

Kramer: They were very similar. In fact, I've heard not long ago that after the 221st was up and fully operational, DASPO didn't do any combat work after that. They did other types of jobs. I don't know truth to that but that's what I heard. But they left the combat stuff to us.

Webb: Was there different—you've mentioned politics, was there different politics between the two?

Kramer: Well, I think there was respect between the 221st and DASPO. I mean, we didn't interact very much but sometimes you run into people out in the field. Sometimes, we'd stop in the villa when we were in Saigon. It was always good. Now whether that was because we were DASPO and 221st both or not, I don't know but I've heard from other people in the 221st who had never been assigned with DASPO that they would stop in at the Villa when they were in Saigon—that they had a good relationship with the people.

Webb: I was thinking that in DASPO from what I've understood, you guys are observers, you're witnesses, I mean, you have your assignments but there's not necessarily a slant to the story that you're trying to tell just observing. Is that typical of the work that the 221st is doing, as well?

Kramer: Absolutely. Yep. Absolutely. I mean, the camera can lie because it, edits by what you chose to show. But no one intentionally ever tried to give it a slant one way or the other. You just tried to be honest and show what was happening. Again, it was the historical record is what you were producing.

Webb: You've kind of mentioned them a couple of times but I'm curious because as I look at history, I kind of think of relationship that the military has with the media starting to sour around the time of Vietnam?

Kramer: Well, I'll tell you the truth, as I see it. We won the war at Tet '68. We destroyed the Viet Cong. We had so badly mauled the NVA [North Vietnamese Army]; they weren't going to be a force to be reckoned with for a long time. And yet Walter Cronkite goes on television and says he doesn't see any way we can possibly win this war. Now I'm sure that was an honest perspective from his point. But the truth is we had won the war. All we had to do... Charlie was trying to get one little victory so he'd bring something to the negotiating table. We know this now from their records that this is the situation they were in. Now time was on their side. They could stand back for ten years and come back at it again. But once Water went on TV with that, they knew they had the war won, they just had to wait. So there weren't any major engagements or very few after that point, it was just little hit and run things, just enough to let people know they were still there and it drug on and on and on until they won.

Webb: So did you have any interaction with media heads, or, you know the media?

Kramer: Sometimes, you run into Dan Rather or someone else in the bush but they were doing their thing and we were doing our thing. I never tried to ingratiate myself to them or interact with them in any way, just when… I was with DASPO CONUS out of Fort Bragg, we had the big, the big floods, the flood of the century in 1969, the spring of '69, the Mississippi and all the tributary rivers were just overflowing their banks. So we were in Minot, North Dakota and we went up to this bluff we could get a nice overview of the town under water. And there was a network news guy on camera, right over here, and he's giving a report. Oh my God, you'd thought Noah's Ark was going to be coming down here just any moment at all. It was so built up! [Laugher] It had nothing to do with what was going on. I mean, it was tragic and terrible, you know, this flood certainly affected a lot of people's lives, but there were not raging torrents everywhere and I mean, oh my God. It was just...they had to come up with a story. The network spent money to send them out there and you by God better have a story. And more than that, you better have a story that's going to get you some airtime or you're not going to be there, anymore. So they would do what they had to tell their version of the story. So I always think of that when I watch the network news. [Laughter]

Webb: I was going to ask if your work behind a camera, you know that the camera doesn't lie but editing does.

Kramer: People exaggerate and they're covering their job.

Webb: Let's see… How long then were you with the 221st?

Kramer: I was there for thirteen months. I was there from May of '67 through June of '68 and then I went to DASPO CONUS from there.

Webb: Why would DASPO CONUS be sent to North Dakota to cover those floods?

Kramer: The Army Corps of Engineers was responsible for maintaining the dams and that sort of thing.

Webb: And so are those the kinds of stories that you covered?

Kramer: We did—we did a lot of that. We had, there was a Vietnamese WAC [Women's Army Corps] going through training at our WAC school down in Fort McClellen. I shot that story. There was… when they activated the national guard units for Vietnam, we traveled, I had a team, we went to Massachusetts, and Colorado, and Washington filming their activity as they prepared to go… when they were gonna move all the nerve agents out of Rocky Mountain Arsenal and sink them in the ocean I was out at Rocky Mountain Arsenal I covered that. There were just a lot of different types of things that came along. It was classified at the time but it couldn't possibly be anymore but we had purchased through a client country Soviet helicopters. We had those down at an abandoned airfield, World War II airfield down in Louisiana and we were testing those to see what their capabilities were and that so I was down there filming that. There were just any number of different types of stories to shoot.

Webb: It all sounds fascinating.

Kramer: It was. I had the greatest job in the world. I absolutely loved it. For ten years I lived out of a suitcase with a camera in my hand and it was phenomenal. And the last two years I was in, I was running photo labs and I just didn't enjoy that. And the Army was having a lot of serious drug problems and things of that nature, and my career's at risk because these kids who work for me, all they want to do is go out and get high and just... I said, "This is enough," so I got out. I did a year in the active reserves running the photo labs but then that was it. [Laughter]

Webb: When you are in DASPO CONUS you're doing these different stories but that's also a really turbulent time in American history here. I wonder, did you ever do stories on the American people or was it strictly focused on…?

Kramer: We worked in civilian clothes all the time when I was in DASPO CONUS. They gave us a clothing allowance and we went out and bought sport coats and whatever, we'd always work in civilian clothes. I was in Washington, D.C., for the big peace march in November '69. I can't remember his name. He was the founder of the Weatherman faction of the

SDS, the Students for Democratic Society, which was a Communist funded organization and the weathermen were the radicals they were the ones who went out and created all the real physical problems. Well, the FBI was after this fella, so he had escaped down into Cuba but he was smuggled in to the States for this rally… So Albert Quivers had the camera, I had the lights, and we're wandering around trying to find something to shoot, he's this big group of people at Du Pont Circle and somebody's up there hammering them. So I hit the lights and Q hits the camera and this whole crowd of forty to fifty people turns on us, “Get those damn lights off!" So hey, I'm not arguing with fifty people and we head off towards Pennsylvania Avenue. Well, that was him. That's why they didn't want any lights. They didn't want anybody to know he was there in country. But yeah he was getting them all fired up to get out there and cause mayhem. [Laughter] I can't think of his name. I had it just a few days ago, but it just slips away. That was November 15th, 1969.

Webb: What… when you're sent out to cover a story like that, what does the assignment say? Just, cover it?

Kramer: Basically that's it. Yeah. I was there for Ike's [Eisenhower’s] funeral. Also ‘69. And I was assigned a place to be and that's where I was when I filmed the cortège went by on Pennsylvania Avenue. We had, God, we must have had fifteen or twenty camera men out there, and the OIC [officer in charge] for that was from APA, which was our parent organization the Army Photographic Agency in the Pentagon. The OIC had been my OIC in the 221st when I was the NCOIC [non-commissioned officer in charge] . You know, you run into people all the time. It was a small family.

Webb: Well, we're getting a little low on time I don't want to keep you.

Kramer: I'm at your disposal. [Laughter]

Webb: Well in that case, may I ask, once you left the military, did you stay with filmmaking related kinds of occupations or did you get into completely different…?

Kramer: I sent out to resumes to some TV stations, all three of the major networks here in Chicago, and I got one reply and that was from WBBM and it was: “We get all our cameramen from the union hall.” And you know what it’s like trying to get into union, you're somebody's son, or nephew or good buddy or whatever. So I just... “Forget that.” I didn't even own a camera. A still, I’ve never had am motion picture camera in my hands since then. I did get a still camera. Got another yashica ,years later. I just, I didn't do anything with photography. I went into other pursuits. Had I known—[Laughter] my good friend George Gentry was at a TV station down in Atlanta, I would have sent a resume down there because he did hire some DASPO people down there.

Webb: Yeah. I'm trying to think of how I want to ask this question or even if I should. I'll just ask it, if you want to ignore it. You've already mentioned by the time they put you into the

photo lab it became a little bit more boring, less interesting. Are there ways to have that same adrenaline rush as being out there not knowing, in the field, taking those kinds of pictures or is that a one in a kind adrenaline rush?

Kramer: I think it's one of a kind. There may be other circumstances where you'd find yourself in dangerous situation where you would get that. But yeah... I think that's...

Webb: Not even the danger so much as... I can get this shot, I can…

Kramer: Oh, the excitement. Man, I loved the work. I loved it. I was truly blessed. I really was. I mean, the Army had four elite photographic organizations. Army Pictorial Center, DASPO, the 221st, and the 69th Signal company in Kaiserslautern, Germany. I was privileged to serve in three of those four, and I went to the fourth one to get members to round out my team when I was over there shooting three big pictures in Germany. [Laughter] How many guys have that kind of an opportunity? No other path I would have taken in life would have afforded me those opportunities. You know, and I pretty much fell into it. [Laughter] Believe me, it was not by design. It just happened.

Webb: You saw so many, just… pivotal movements in history.

Kramer: I did. I was privileged to be there.

Webb: Are there any that stand out in your mind that, “This is something that I am so glad that I was there for that?”

Kramer: All of them. Honest to God, all of them. I don't know if I was fully conscious at the time of how privileged I was to be in that situation. I certainly appreciated being there but I don't… you know, you live your life and you just assume that everyone lives their life. And everyone experiences what they experience. And everyone probably has all these wonderful experiences. You don't find out until later that you working in the factory for forty years must have been fun. They made a living, but I was fortunate to do a little more than make more than just a living, I just really. And maybe the older you get, of course, the greater the days of your youth were and truer of your friends of your youth were. It's just—it’s natural. But I really think I was truly blessed.

Webb: The museum and library is honored to be putting on this exhibit, and I know from kind of a personal standpoint, I didn't know anything about any of this before we started. It's so silly because these images that you've described, you see them, and as a civilian, I guess, you don't think about how they were taken. The question that I am asking as kind of a wrap up to these interviews, is what do you hope the community learns from this type of exhibit?

Kramer: I had not given that any consideration, at all.

Webb: Take as much time as you...

Kramer: It's very gratifying to receive recognition for the work that we did. And it'd be nice I guess if people realized that there were people behind cameras who recorded these iconic images that they have seen. And this is true not just of Vietnam. It was true of Korea, World War II, the Civil War. I mean, come on. There was somebody out there doing work and who more than likely loved doing the work. Felt privileged to be a part of that. That it's a long tradition that we've had and the 55th now was kind of the DASPO of today's Army is out there and they're doing the same thing again in Iraq and Afghanistan. You know, the tradition goes on and on and on. From Mathew Brady and his people all the way down, and they're all doing good work and they're all professionals and they all just thoroughly love the job.

Webb: Let me see. Is there anything you think I didn't cover? I know we just skimmed the surface.

Kramer: Nothing I can think of offhand. Something might come up later but that's always the case. [Laughter]

Webb: You've talked that this is your first DASPO reunion that you tried to do the reunion with the 221st often.

Kramer: We've only had two.

Webb: Oh, okay.

Kramer: The first was in St. Louis, [Missouri], in 2012 and the last one was back in May of this year in Washington, D.C. The next one will be in '18 out in Las Vegas, that's already planned. I guess DASPO does them every year but I wasn't aware of that. Until Facebook. My daughter finally dragged me, "Come on Dad, you gotta get on there and get with the program." That's when I reconnected with guys from the 221s, 1st, and then DASPO.

Webb: What is the… What is the word that I want to use? Why are these reunions important to you?

Kramer: It's this sense of comradery that comes back that brotherhood, you know. You haven't seen these people in forty years and yet it's like you've never been apart. You've had this shared experience that just keeps you together forever and it's nice. It's nice to feel that.

Webb: Well, I want to thank you for taking the time today.

Kramer: My pleasure.

Webb: It's going to be a, I hope, a very good event tonight. I'm excited to see it. Like I said, if you'd like to do a longer or we'll delve a little more into the details, we can. But thank you for taking the time today.

Kramer: My pleasure.