

William San Hamel

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Interviewed by Kenneth Clarke

Transcribed by Thomas Webb?

Edited by Thomas Webb?

Clarke: I am Kenneth Clarke, and I am the President and CEO of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Who are you?

San Hamel: I am Bill San Hamel, formerly with DASPO, Department of the Army Special Photo Office. I was in the Pacific Detachment, Hawaii, Fort Shafter, spent a lot of time in Vietnam and other countries over there, and I came out of the army as a captain. And I was a motion picture director. A misnomer of some people who are familiar with what we did in Vietnam-- we were not allowed to shoot. We were officers. And so people said, "Where are your photographs?" Well, I don't really have that many because we could not-- we were not supposed to shoot. Periodically, if something was right in front of us it was hard to resist. But, yeah, so we directed.

Clarke: Will you, real quick, spell your full name for me?

San Hamel: Capital S-A-N, and then there's a space like San Diego, capital H-A-M-E-L. San Hamel. Austrian-Dervish.

Clarke: And it's William?

San Hamel: William.

Clarke: And it's William officially? Bill, by what everybody knows you as. Wonderful. Wonderful. Well those are some nuts and bolts things of what we are gonna take care of. And for the recorded record, we're conducting William San Hamel's oral history, and we have another reason for wanting to do this is that this is gonna tie into a DASPO exhibit that Bill has been working with us very closely to help mount this on our walls for September 2015, which will also be a reunion if I'm not mistaken?

San Hamel: It will be a reunion starting on Monday of that week-- the twenty-first, and that will go through Saturday morning. So we're gonna have about-- I'm gonna say

forty four. Thirty three up through Wednesday and then there's an additional eight or ten people-- twelve people coming after that...

Clarke: Wonderful.

San Hamel: ... two days. And coming for the grand opening.

Clarke: Grand opening, the event and all the festivities with getting that done. Well it's been some work so far, and the work is just beginning in some ways.

San Hamel: Oh, yes.

Clarke: I am gonna lead you through a series of questions and I'd like to say there's not right or wrong answer. The thing I'd like to challenge you with is to kind of go somewhere-- you don't have to get super personal if you don't want to, but kind of go somewhere where you might not have or be thinking of it almost from a third-person. Like you're giving somebody a tour of your city, and they've never seen it before. The tour of the city is you and your experience.

San Hamel: It's an exciting city.

Clarke: Yeah, exactly. I find when I do a tour of Chicago; I always try to put myself in their mind. They've never seen this particular skyscraper or this avenue or this... you know, they've never seen it before. They're witnessing it for the first time, and to them it means something totally different from me whose passed it a thousand times.

San Hamel: I do the same thing. I've got a tour set up for all the DASPO people coming in for the reunion that have never been here before and they're all excited about going to the museums, etcetera.

Clarke: Oh, good. So you are the cityscape today.

San Hamel: The cityscape, okay.

Clarke: Your-- what you're willing to share about your life and your time in the army and with DASPO is what we're looking out for and we're hoping that this will be something for you and your family, obviously. The transcript and then the

eventual podcast. But also something that will go into that primary source category of people in the future accessing your oral history and using it to understand what happened. So, that's kind of the goals today. Do you agree with all those goals?

San Hamel: I do. Do you want me to start with my entrance into the military?

Clarke: No, let's start with just real cursory. Where were you born? Where did you grow up? Just some really basic, capture the early part of your life, and then we'll get to where you went to college and some of those kind of things.

San Hamel: Alright.

Clarke: So why don't we just start off with some of the real basics. It doesn't have to go into the long time...

San Hamel: Sure. Born in Chicago and raised in Chicago on the northwest side. I went to grammar school at St. Benedict's on Irving Park and Leavitt and moved over to-- in Chicago we always go by parishes as you may know, so I moved over to the St. Andrew's parish which was near Wrigleyville or part of Wrigleyville, Addison and Lincoln, and I did my seventh and eighth grade days at that address, but I continued to go to St. Benedict's. Went to Loyola Academy in-- at that time, on the Lakeshore campus, which was Devon and Sheridan, and then in our senior year, which was 1958, I-- the school moved to Wilmette, and we were the first class out of Wilmette at a campus that was not quite done yet. It had a mud parking lot, and we used to track in a lot of mud into that school when we were seniors. Went on to John Carroll University in Cleveland, Ohio. And I didn't have a real distinguished academic career at John Carroll. I was in the ROTC program at John Carroll in the transportation corps. And we did our boot camp in 1961 at Fort Lee, Virginia with the quartermaster corps, the Riggers. Jumped out of towers and all those things, which we thought was fun. And never jumped out of a plane, thank god. And then in my senior year, my grades weren't as good as they could have been, and the university asked if I would take a break and perhaps come back a semester later. And that put me in a funny situation because I couldn't get hired anywhere. People knew I was going back to school. And we had a friend of the family who was a film producer. And he was doing some very interesting film strips-- the old 35 millimeter film strips that you would use a Dukane projector for to look at on a screen, and so he hired me, and

he said, you know, "You're gonna go back to school. When do you go back? Fine." So I hooked up with him. I think he paid me fifty dollars a week or something just to be kind of a gopher. Well, I got into the photo end of it very quickly and liked it and had an ability for it, and he recognized that. And we made some interesting, like, biblical things with Max Factor wigs from Hollywood and that type thing, and that's how I really got into the photo business. And he would shoot his-- all his production was done at Wilding Studios up on Argyle in the uptown area of Chicago. And so, because I was filming there quite a bit, the head Magoos of the studio kind of took notice of my activities and the films I was producing, and they hired me. And so I became a director at a very young age at Wilding. They always told me, "Don't ever tell anybody how old you are." So I used to walk around the studio, and we had sound stages. It's the old S and A Studios, which was the home of Charlie Chaplin and, who else was there-- one of his protégés, Ben-- Ben whatever his name, anyway. Gloria Swanson, Wallace Beery, all that crowd. Now, I was not there when they were there. They were a little bit older than I am, but that's the studio where I really learned the business. And I did the-- it was, at that time, the world's largest commercial studio, and they had studios in Detroit on Leroy street. They did all of the Ford production TV commercials. Product introduction and that type thing. And I did some work for Ford. I did Amoco, American Oil Company. Firestone tire, Goodyear tire. American motors that was right before they collapsed. I don't know if I was the reason they did because of my productions. But anyway, it was a great experience, and we even did live shows where they would do the product introduction. The new Ford would be coming out, and they'd do-- in those days they did live stage shows with original music and actors and dancing, it was big productions. So it was quite an experience. I learned a lot there. And because I had left John Carroll University, I had a little more than a semester worth of grades to get-- to go through to get my degree, so I enrolled in Loyola University in Chicago going to night school. And my thought was I could go to night school at Loyola, work at the studio, and the chances of getting into that business at the age that I got into it was just not very common and very difficult to do, and I didn't want to give up that position. So I took one course a semester at night school at Loyola. My intention was to keep doing this and keep working at the studio because I had a commission coming through ROTC, which, once I completed all my academics, I would get from Loyola University. So there was a Colonel Murphy up there who was the commandant of Loyola's ROTC program, and he was a very nice guy, and I told him basically what I was doing which he didn't like much. He said, "Well you've got to get your commission." And I said,

"Well, I'm working on it, and I'm going to night school, and I'm making these movies and ba ba ba ba." So he was pretty understanding. He protected me for about two years and then one day he came to me and said, "I can't protect you any longer. You are gonna get drafted if you don't get your commission. There's a war going on in Vietnam and that wouldn't be too cool. So do you want to go as an officer or as an enlisted man?" And I said, "Well, I want to get my commission. I worked a long time to get it." So, it took three years with this strategy to get my commission. And Colonel Murphy said, "Alright, this is it, when are you gonna graduate?" And it was a September date I believe, and he said, "Good, get your grades, come into my office, and show me your grades that you've — you're gonna graduate." And he said, "Get your mom and dad, tell them to come up to my office, 'cause I'm commissioning you and you're gonna go in the army." And that's how it happened. So at that time because I was transportation corps from John Carroll University, and they had all that-- the classes in transportation, which I really wasn't too thrilled with, but, you know, somebody's got to be a-- have a truck company or something, but I didn't want it to be me. So I had all this experience in the film business, and I said, "The army must run their program-- their personnel office like a company, I would think. I'm gonna send them ten letters of recommendation," from my studio and other people that I had worked with. Probably the most prominent name from whom I got a recommendation was Alex Dryer, which maybe is before your time. He was a big network news guy. Good guy, I knew him in Chicago. And so, I sent the letters.

Clarke: What year is this?

San Hamel: This is 1965. September of '65. I went on active duty in October of '65. And lo and behold, they came back and said, "These letters of recommendation stating that you have a, you know, broad photo experience and background, we're gonna put you in the signal corps." I couldn't believe it. It had worked. My letters worked. So now I'm in the signal corps. And they said you are gonna go to Fort Gordon, Georgia and take the basic signal officers course which is radio, wires, satellites, you know, that type of thing. Once again not my bag but I figured, well, I gotta do that. So I went down to Fort Gordon, Georgia and went through eight weeks of intensive communications courses, to be honest, none of which I enjoyed. To be honest, didn't score real well but I was just doing it to get out of there so I could, you know, go into photo. So they sent me orders to go to Tobyhanna, Pennsylvania, a mobile TV operation at the Tobyhanna depot, and it's--well it's better than a truck company, so I was happy about that. And I was

into the program at Fort Gordon, Georgia for about, I'm gonna say, about six weeks, and they put a notice up on the-- in the day room on the bulletin board that there was a colonel from the Pentagon from the United States Army Photographic Agency who was going to come down to Fort Gordon, Georgia, Colonel Walter Halloran, and so he was gonna come down and interview any of these lieutenants, second lieutenants, who had a background in photo or pictorial. Well, wow, this looked like a great opportunity. So three of us ended up interviewing. And he came down and he was just, a just a real gentlemen, probably ends up one of the finest officers that I ever served with. And so he came down, he interviewed me, and he said, "I think you've got the job." He said, "I want you in the Pentagon." Whoa. Second lieutenant going to the Pentagon. This is big time. So that's what happened. I got orders to go to the Pentagon. And so this was-- my orders-- I think I arrived in the Pentagon, I believe it was December of '65, yeah, and they made me the acting director of administration for the United States Army Photographic Agency. And there was a shortage of officers because of Vietnam. It was a major slot, but he felt that I had the experience where I could fill it so I did. And as a second lieutenant in the Pentagon- there must have been five of us in the whole building- I had a sergeant major as my sergeant, which I thought was pretty unusual as a second lieutenant, and it was a great experience. So I dealt with the folks in DASPO while I was at the army photographic agency. And because of the director of administration I met a lot of the guys that were coming-- that came into the Pentagon for whatever reasons and became familiar with DASPO. And while I was there, which had to be in '65, '66, they decided-- the Department of Defense decided that they were going to issue new building passes to all their employees. So-- they call it rebadging. So, I get appointed by Colonel Jones, who was my commanding officer in the Pentagon, the head of USAPA and DASPO, he wore two hats, and he wanted me to put a team together where we could issue building passes. They had a contract with Polaroid. Polaroid had a prototype camera and system that would issue a plastic card that had Polaroid stripes on it, have your photograph on there and ID information that would allow you to get into the Pentagon or some of the surrounding buildings, of which there were many. So, and not only did the Pentagon rebadge the Pentagon, all the employees, military and civilian, but I went out to other buildings and issued passes there, too. And I put a team together, sat down, and figured out if I have two cameras, how many guys do I need, and I worked with Polaroid and put the team together. I think we had a total of, oh, maybe sixteen enlisted people that took the photos and processed, etcetera. So, in six weeks we did forty thousand

building passes. It was amazing. We were moving them in, moving them out, and I had this thing-- it was a well-oiled machine. And people knew when they were supposed to be there, they came down, got the photo, and this of course was the prototype for Polaroid's basically controlling that whole type of ID system where it went out after we did what we did. We proved that it worked. And that's how people got their driver's licenses nationwide and that type thing, so that was the beginning of the Polaroid ID pass.

Clarke: Once again, the military innovating that then goes into the civilian sector.

San Hamel: Yeah.

Clarke: Can we do a quick pause? Can I get you to take your watch off?

San Hamel: Oh, I'm sorry. What's it doing?

Clarke: It's clicking.

San Hamel: Oh, is it?

Clarke: And I don't want that to be a part of you're...

San Hamel: Oh, I'm sorry.

Clarke: No, no. Don't be sorry. And then you can be...

San Hamel: I'll take a cup of coffee, or a drink of coffee, too.

Clarke: Yeah. But then if you are emoting, then it doesn't rattle as you talk. Because I know that Brad will be like, "What's that rattling? Why is it rattling?"

San Hamel: Been there, been there. So, there's a funny story that goes with that, I don't know if you want to hear it, you just want me to talk...

Clarke: Yeah. No, no, funny stories are good.
(26:55)

San Hamel: My-- the liaison for Polaroid was Admiral Robert Quackenbush. Retired.

Clarke: And that's the joke?

San Hamel: Nah, he wasn't a joke.

Clarke: He's got a good name.

San Hamel: There's a long line of Admirals in the Navy named Quackenbush. He was one of them. Nice guy, real tough guy, big man. He and I had a good rapport, and he was just thrilled that we were pumping this thing out and it was working. So he had tickets to the White House Press Photographers Association dinner, which today is called something else. It's called the White House Press Corps or whatever, but it was really photo in those days, which would have been '66. And so he said, "I've got tickets. Do you want to go?" And I said, "Well, sure." So we went to the dinner, and, you know, it was a great big formal, Sammy Davis performing, and it was really a big deal. So I was sitting at the table with Admiral Quackenbush, and in those days President Lyndon Johnson didn't like to go to those things too much, and he'd always tell people he was coming, and then at the last minute he'd send Hubert Humphrey. So on this occasion, it was Vice President Hubert Humphrey, and he was sitting up at the dais. My mother loved Hubert Humphrey. She thought he was the greatest thing since sliced bread. So I said to the admiral-- and they had a book. Everybody got a book of photos that were award-winning photos that were taken during that year at the White House. There was a photo in there which was really unusual, and it was Hubert Humphrey in the back seat of a limousine. And his profile was a shadow cast behind him, of course, and it was a silhouette of FDR, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It was an amazing shot. I can't tell you who took it, but it was in the book. And I said, "Wow, is this unusual." I said, "You think it's fake?" He said, "Well, I don't either, you know." I said, "I'm gonna go ask the vice president to autograph it for me." And he said, "You're not going up there." I said, "Well, yes I am. I want to get the thing autographed." He said, "You're not gonna go see the vice president and talk to him." I said, "Well, why not?" So, and I'm in my dress blues, looking pretty spiffy. And so I walk up to the dais, and I walked up to the vice president and said, "Mr. Vice President, I'm Lieutenant San Hamel, and I work in the Pentagon, and I was wondering if you'd autograph this photo." And he said, "Well sure, who's it to?" And I said "My mom." And he said, "Come on, it's for you, right?" I said, "No, it's for my mother." He said, "You sure it's not for you?" I said, "No, sir." He said, "What's her name?" You know, to Mary and Hubert Humphrey. He said, "So what do you do in the Pentagon?" And I said, "Well, I'm

with the Army Photographic Agency." He said, "Well, you're the guy that supplies me with my head-and-shoulder color photographs that I send all over the place." "Yes sir, we do, and we also do the president." "Well, I've got to thank you. You guys do a great job. Every time-- if I'm low, man, and we order, they're there and thank you very much. You guys do a great job." I said, "You're very welcome Mr. Vice President." He said, "What are you doing after the dinner?" I said, "Well, I'm gonna go to the Time Life hospitality suite, and I'm here with Admiral Quackenbush from Polaroid, and we've been invited to go in there. You know, have a drink or something." He said, "I'll meet you in there." And I said, "Okay, fine. Nice talking to you. Thank you so much." Go back to the table. Admiral Quackenbush is going crazy. "You got so-- you've got balls. How could you go up and do that?" I said, "Nothing to it. I just went up and talked to him." So he says, "Oh, boy," he says, "you're something." I said, "Well, he wants to meet us at the Time Life suite, the hospitality suite. And he said, "You're kidding." I said, "Well, no. That's what he said, I'll meet you in the..." "Alright." So, after the dinner, we're walking down the hall, and Frank Reynolds from ABC comes walking along, newscaster. And Frank sees me, and I'm in my dress blues. I knew him from Chicago. And he says, "What are you doing here? What are you doing in that uniform?" And I said, "Well, I'm not an impostor." I said, "I'm in the army, you know. I got commissioned, and I'm over in the Pentagon." He said, "My god," he said, "what about the studio and Chicago?" I said, "Well, I had to give it all up. Here I am." Said, "But I'm in photo." He said, "Well, great. Good luck," and, like, shaking his head like, here's this guy from the studio, now he's in the army. But anyway, so we went to the Time Life suite, and we walked in and Admiral Quackenbush-- he was like a nervous Nellie. He was so excited he was gonna meet the vice president, right. So we grab a cocktail and Humphrey walks in. So he's working the room, and he's shaking hands, and so he comes around to us, and he says, "Well, Lieutenant, it was some dinner." And I said, "Oh yes sir, it was really wonderful, and this is Admiral Quackenbush, Vice President Humphrey." Quackenbush was shaking, and this guy is-- he was, you know, a retired-- he's probably in his, I don't know, seventies or whatever he was. He was so excited. My god, he was gonna meet the vice president. So we had a nice chitchat and he said, "Okay, see you guys. Alright." So that's what happened at that particular dinner. I don't know if I should jump a few years or let me just finish that story.

Clarke: I think, finish the time in the Pentagon, yeah.

San Hamel: I can finish that story.

Clarke: Oh, there's more to that story?

San Hamel: Yes.

Clarke: Oh, yeah. By all means.

San Hamel: In 1967-- I'm not quite sure the date, I'm in Vietnam, DASPO, and the time difference was crazy. Vietnam was seventeen hours ahead of Hawaii. So my commanding officer is in Hawaii. So if he's calling me at two in the morning, it's nine o'clock in the morning his time or whatever. So it was very difficult being the team officer in Saigon 'cause they'd be calling at all hours, and you're trying to get some sleep. So anyway, I get the call, and they tell me orders are coming, but Vice President Humphrey is going to be in Vietnam. And it was around Christmas time as a matter of fact. And so he's gonna be staying at Ambassador Bunker's house, so we want you to go over and get a Christmas message from him to the troops. Okay. So, you know, typically the way we operated in DASPO, then I'd get follow up, okay here's my contact, blah blah blah. So, I did, and I put it all together. Colonel Jones, who was my commanding officer in the Pentagon, hope I'm not confusing you, had been transferred out of the Pentagon, and he was sent to Saigon to be in charge of the Armed Forces Vietnam Network in Saigon, or just outside of Saigon. And he found out that I was in Vietnam, and we got together. And so, I'd have dinner with him or something periodically and-- great guy. And so, he found out that I'm doing the vice president on the ambassador's front lawn of the house. He said, "Can I send my TV crew over?" I said, "Of course." He said, "Will you set it up?" I said, "Of course, Colonel. Whatever you want." He was the best. I owed him. So I make all the arrangement. And so, I've got a mobile TV crew, got a dish up on the roof of the house, which has to be readjusted, and nobody can go in there but me, so I'm up in there. And here's the vice president's bedroom, he's got his suitcase, he's got these silk ties out on his suitcase. I'm going, "Wow, those must be hundred dollar ties," you know. I go out, and I get on the thing, the roof, and I adjust the dish, and everything's cool. So I go back down. So I'm out in front of the ambassador's house and a colonel comes out. And he said, "Okay, what do you want to do now?" And I said, "Well, you've got General Westmoreland in there. I would like to have him say a few words to the troops. Christmas greeting. You've got Ambassador Bunker. I want him also. And then my assignment is to get Vice President Humphrey." And so Colonel says, "Fine. I see you're all set up out

there." "Yes, sir, everything's cool, ready to go." He said, "Well, they'll be out in about fifteen minutes." So, fine. So General Westmoreland comes out first, and-- I was a captain at the time, we exchange salutes. He said, "Captain, what do you want me to do?" I said, "Well if we can have Ambassador Bunker introduce you, and then if you would do like two minutes to the troops, Christmas greetings, and 'someday you're gonna be home soon,' and that type thing." He said, "Okay, I got it." And very striking guy by the way. I don't know if you've ever seen photographs of him, but he looked like a general. And he had four stars up there of course. And so then the vice president came out and he goes, "Hey San, what do you want me to do?" I go, "Uhh, well Mr. Vice President, I've got ten minutes in my magazine, and if General Westmoreland does two, and the ambassador does two, you know, that's gonna give you the balance, so that's six minutes that you can speak, and if you go over that I've got to change the magazine and then, you know, we're gonna have a lapse in your statement." "Oh, that's fine," he said, "six minutes, okay, good." And I said "When you're all done, gentlemen, if you would join me, I'd like to introduce you to all my troops. My photographers. And to the TV crew, and we just walked on the lawn, and we'll grab some photographs." And they said, "Well, great. Fine." So, Bunker introduces Westmoreland. Westmoreland does a great job. Two minutes, camera's rolling, you know. And Leroy-- was it Leroy Massey? No, it wasn't Leroy; it was another guy-- McBride, Billy McBride. And so now, Vice President Humphrey. And he starts in, and he's talking, and he's talking, and he's talking, and six minutes go by, and we change the magazine, and he's talking and talking. He did another ten minutes in the magazine. And I always heard stories of him-- if you open up the refrigerator door and the light went on, he was good for a half hour. This guy could talk. And so he finishes up. And so he walks over to me, and Westmoreland comes over and said, "Let's go meet the troops." So we're walking along, and Bob Lafoon, who's coming to the reunion, I told Bob in advance-- he was a still man. I said, "Get some shots as I introduce these gentlemen to our photographers." "Okay, good." So, go down the line. I'm introducing everybody and going along. And so, get all done, and I turn around and say, "Where the hell's Lafoon?" He froze. He never met the vice president before in his life or Westmoreland. Totally froze. Bob, if you're listening, I'll never forgive you. [laughs] So anyway, so we get done with the introductions, and we're walking back up the lawn. And I'm walking with Vice President Humphrey, and I said, "You know, Mr. Vice President, I'm really impressed." And he said, "Well, why is that San?" I said, "I met you at the White House Press Photographers dinner two years ago, and, you know, it was very nice, you autographed a photo, and we

had a drink in the Time Life building, and blah blah blah. That's a long time ago, and you're a busy guy. How in the world did you remember my name?" And he looked at me, and he looked at my nametag, and he said, "I knew your name because of your nametag." My ego was so deflated. I thought he remembered me. He didn't. But that's my Hubert Humphrey story. As a matter of fact, right before that, I have a photo of that floating around someplace where he's doing his sixteen minutes or whatever with the camera crew.

Clarke: Is any of that footage available anymore or is that out there anymore?

San Hamel: Oh, I'm sure it is. I'm sure it is.

Clarke: Might be kind of fun to find the Westmoreland/Hubert Humphrey Christmas greeting.

San Hamel: Yeah, yeah. I'm sure it's there 'cause it probably went in the archives.

Clarke: Look for that. Let's make a note here, guys. Look for that. Alright, so you're at the Pentagon, and you've just finished up this big job with Admiral Quackenbush.

San Hamel: Correct.

Clarke: So why don't we start—we'll go back in time again and start off from basically how you got from that moment, and what lead you basically ending up in DASPO and then deployed in Vietnam. And then before we get into some of the stories of Vietnam, I want to hear a little bit about--

San Hamel: The transition or whatever?

Clarke: Yeah. I want to hear a little bit about your thoughts about DASPO, and what it was, and how it fit into things and things like that. So let's, let's take that tact, if you will.

San Hamel: Ken, you are a glutton for punishment 'cause I'm gonna tell you two more stories.

Clarke: Good. Great, I like the stories.

San Hamel: I was in the Pentagon, really enjoying it. By the way, when I-- I should have mentioned this-- when I issued the building passes, I had created the greatest black book of female employees in the Pentagon ever assembled. I had them all, and they had to be number tens to get in my black book. I had their phone number, their office number, I had it all. So, I put this thing together and-- which is a funny story because I-- the colonel in charge of the Pentagon, the commandant, great guy. Oh, that's another story. I said "Colonel, you want me to be here every day and bright and early, and I'm issuing these building passes, and I gotta walk ten miles in the parking lot to get into the Pentagon," 'cause it's a huge-- it's surrounded by parking lot, and I said, "could you get me a parking spot, you know, so I wouldn't have to..." "Absolutely." He gave me a parking spot right at the front door. I could pull in in the morning-- it was reserved for me. And that was the best thing that ever happened when I was in the Pentagon. Anyway, so we put the black book together, and I said to the colonel-- I forget his name off-hand. I said, "We have to really promote this thing. Let's get one of these really beautiful ladies that works in the Pentagon, and we'll make her the forty-thousandth one that we issue." "Great idea." He loved it. So we put that all together. And so she posed, and we blew up, you know an ID card and all that. And it was, it was in all the papers, you know, the local papers. And we, later on, started dating, but that's another story. But that was that part of it. So I'm in the Pentagon, and I'm really enjoying it. And the war is on, and now they're going to form the 221st Signal Company, Photo Company, at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. Now, you and I had a conversation in the past about what preceded DASPO-- what was going on. And Colonel Halloran informed me, which I believe I sent to you, that there-- in World War II, they had photo companies, and it was maybe a captain in charge of it, maybe a major, and there'd be twenty something lieutenants and two hundred enlisted men. And they covered the war, and they were attached to the major divisions. And so they didn't do that in Korea, which, he informed me, was a disaster in Korea. The photo experience was bad. So now Vietnam is on. DASPO was the only organization covering the war in Vietnam. So they're gonna form the 221st, and they do. And they pull me, 'cause I got the photo background, and send me to the 221st with twenty some-odd lieutenant and a captain who was going to be a major, it was a major slot, to command the unit, and there was two hundred men. Well, they were mimicking the World War II company structure. T O & E. And so I get yanked out of the Pentagon, which really broke my heart. I loved that job. I went to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, and it happened that the, at that time, captain who became a major, Tom DeYoung-- I knew him through my job at the Pentagon. So

it was nice going into a unit where I knew the commanding officer from the Pentagon. And I knew a couple other people in the unit also. So we have-- we're starting from scratch. There's no photo equipment. There are no vehicles. There are no nothings except a bunch of bodies and the enlisted men living in the barracks at Fort Monmouth. So the commanding officer says to me, "You've got experience, you know, with photo. You take the TO&E and rewrite it. It's a World War II TO&E. It's obsolete, and we've got to update this thing." I was a little bit flabbergasted 'cause I figure, well that's a heck of a big job, you know. But struggled through it, and that's basically what I did other than I was a newsreel officer, and I would have a team of five people to go out and do newsreel. So long and short of it is I was there about six months, still no cameras. Now this is the honest to god truth, we used to go around with our teams, and we were going to Vietnam, so we're doing PT every morning, we were running miles every morning. It was like infantry. We were gonna go to war. And-- but we would-- for the technical aspect, we'd take our team and we'd say, "Alright, now simulate a camera. Now pretend you've got a camera, and now you've got to get your f-stop right and, and..." It was nonsense. It was total craziness. You know, it was maybe like one of those books they write, a catch 22 or something, you know. So, I am getting more frustrated by the day 'cause I want to be productive. I want to be doing something, you know, not wasting my time. My parents, ironically, came to visit me when I was in Fort Monmouth, and they said, "What do you do everyday?" I said, "You don't want to know, okay. We're not doing anything. We run in the morning. We're out simulating." So I called Colonel Halloran in the Pentagon. He was now the commanding officer of USAPA and DASPO. And I called him in the Pentagon. I said, "Colonel, I am going crazy. I gotta get out of here." He said, "What's wrong," and I told him. He said, "Oh my god," he said, "that's terrible." He said, "How long have you been...?" "Well, six months." I said, "I rewrote the TO&E, and I'm running out of things to do here, you know, and I want to be productive." He said, "Well, what do you want to do here?" I said, "Just get me out of here. Send me someplace. I don't care. I want to go." So he says, "Oh, you want to go to DASPO Hawaii?" I said, "Absolutely." He said, "You know you're gonna go to Vietnam?" I said, "Great. Let's do it."

Clarke: And you knew what DASPO was?

San Hamel: Oh, yeah. 'Cause I knew it from the Pentagon. So then he says, "You're probably gonna have to add-- re-up and add some years to your-- not enlistment, but to your contract to stay in the army." I said, "Fine, whatever you want to do with me." He said, "Okay, I'm gonna get some orders cut for you." And he said, "You

can bring one guy with you." And I said, "Really?" And he said, "Whoever you want, and I trust you, you'll pick a good one." And he said, "I want to see you guys in Washington after you get the orders. Come up to the Pentagon, and I want you to stay up here for five days for briefings." "Yes sir." I was gone. I was out of the 221st. Thank god. They had more guys killed in that unit in Vietnam-- it was just crazy. I think nineteen enlisted, and I don't know all the exact numbers. They have a website of officers-- I don't know, five, six whatever it was. They were getting shot up like crazy. But anyway, thank god I got out of there. And then I-- we went up to Washington. I picked Rick Griffith, who joined us in DASPO, and we did our thing and-- with the Pentagon briefing, and then we went off to Hawaii. And so that was the transition into DASPO, which was very smooth because, you know, DASPO-- it's an operation. I mean they were established. They were in Vietnam; they were in Thailand, Korea.

Clarke: When did DASPO become?

San Hamel: '62

Clarke: So '62.

San Hamel: 1962. And that was-- it started because a general chief of staff of the army, and I always forget his name-- he used to do briefings with the air force and navy at the White House with President John F. Kennedy, and he came out of a briefing for the president one day, and he said, "You know what?" to his aid, who I believe was also a general, maybe a two or three star who, you know, was with him at that briefing, and not-- a four star normally wouldn't have a lieutenant general as an aid, but he was one of the briefing team with the president. He said, "I'm sick and tired of the air force. Every time we go into these briefings"-- and they were briefings about Vietnam, you know. "That Curtis Lemay drives me insane." And he says, "That guy, he goes in there with motion pictures and still photography. He wows everybody. The president thinks he's the greatest thing since applesauce." And he says, "I'm tired of it. Let's put a unit together that can supply us with the same thing. And I don't want it next year, I want it now. And you go get it done." And that's how it started. They, in very rapid order, put it together. And Colonel Jones was the one who was assigned to put it together. And at the time, he was a major I believe when he formed the TO&E, Table of Operations and Equipment, for DASPO.

Clarke: And that's the guy who you reported to at the Pentagon?

San Hamel: Yes. He later, you know, he was the first CO, actually, of the unit. And there's a whole story of how they end up in the Pentagon. They used to be at the pictorial center in New York. And that's another whole story about how they bought-- the army bought that studio from Paramount Pictures in New York, and that's where everything was going on. And Hollywood directors were either in the Army or they were volunteering for the army to do productions. Frank Zappa and a bunch of guys in New York. And they were doing training films and that type thing, you know. So it was-- that was the origin and then, in short order, they ended up in the Pentagon on the fifth floor. Five-- fifth floor, A-ring, room four seven zero, where I walked many a, many a morning.

Clarke: So just for the whole lineage sake, you have what Halloran described happening during World War II.

San Hamel: Yes.

Clarke: Korea, they didn't do anywhere near as good of a job. Or they didn't just-- they just didn't do the job.

San Hamel: They just didn't do the job. If you talk to him-- now I'm just quoting what he was saying.

Clarke: Yeah. In his opinion, it was not the same operation.

San Hamel: And he was there.

Clarke: He was there.

San Hamel: He was a photo officer in Korea.

Clarke: You get into the Vietnam Era. You have the signal quarry. You have the forming of the 221st. Before that, DASPO had been kind of created probably out of the same kind of spirit of it, but it's kind of its own thing.

San Hamel: Yeah, it was a-- like a delta force kind of a photo unit. Quick reaction, get there, top-secret clearances, no encumbrances. Orders to steal. I brought a copy, by the way, 'cause I had talked to you about our orders.

Clarke: Yeah, I want to hear the story as part of this. So, this is the first time the army has put a special-forces team together that is devoted to capturing the story on film and video and audio.

San Hamel: Exactly.

Clarke: So this is a first in the army's-- 1962, this is the first time anything like this has ever happened.

San Hamel: And the, the genesis of the thing was, okay we want this stuff worldwide so let's put a detachment in the Pacific, let's put one in Europe, and let's do one in Panama. So they did. So, you know, it took a lot of the military with the orders and setting all this stuff up. They had to go to USARPAC and say, "We want to send in a team of photographers, DASPO, into Hawaii. USARPAC, do you mind, you know-- they don't belong to you. You have no control over them. We control them from the Pentagon. They do what we tell them. You have nothing to say about them." "Fine." "Panama, same deal. You have no control over this team." "Fine." "Europe. You have no control over this team," and they said, "Forget it." "What?" "We don't want them. If we don't control them, you're not sending some foreign detachment that's controlled by the Pentagon into Europe. We won't tolerate it." And they said, "Fine, you're not getting the team." So they didn't get one. So it went to CONUS. It went to the United States. And they weren't that busy in CONUS. And all the action, the activity, was in the Pacific because of the war. Panama got some activity. They did Dominican Republic thing and that type of thing. But, so it was supposed to be worldwide photo enterprise feeding the Pentagon. So that's how it started. It only lasted, what, ten years. It was '62 to '72. And then they broke it down after Vietnam, and then they, you know, reorganized and-- typical army, they had re-- new titles and all kinds of things and new locations. They ended up in Fort Bragg, I believe, the whole DASPO operation. And from what I understand, they didn't really have a lot of assignments. They weren't that busy. But I'm not really familiar with that. Some of the guys in later years could tell you more about that.

Clarke: It's a ten-year experiment basically-- a special-forces experiment in a way.

San Hamel: I don't think it was an experiment, it was-- let's do it. And when our mission was over, especially for Vietnam, they said, "Let's break it down. Let's reorganize."

Clarke: Yeah, yeah.

San Hamel: Yeah. So they pulled out of Korea, they pulled out of Thailand, pulled out of Vietnam.

Clarke: That is very-- I mean, that is very interesting, and some of the stuff that you've captured, you know, speaks for itself and--

San Hamel: Yeah.

Clarke: And we won't go into all of that stuff, but-- so, let me understand this. You're going from one thing to the other. The training that you got to do what you did, really, you got from the studio in Chicago.

San Hamel: Oh, absolutely.

Clarke: And you were-- ended up more in kind of a teaching role and a put-it-together role than you did like, "Hey, you teach me," and now I understand in the professional world, people exchange tips and tricks and this, that, and the other.

San Hamel: Yeah.

Clarke: That's kind of the level that you were at once you go into the Pentagon and once you got into DASPO. You kind of knew what you were doing and how you were doing it.

San Hamel: Well, the Pentagon was more administrative. A lot of, you know, paperwork with DASPO and, you know, with Panama and with Vietnam, what was going on. At the 221st, that was instructional, and I happened to review, I don't know, several months ago, some of my efficiency reports, and they talked about my experience and how I helped the unit and in training and that type thing. But in DASPO as a commander, pictorial commander, a team-- the team officer in Saigon, my major responsibility was not instructional. We used to do that back in Hawaii. We would critique captions from still photographers, and we would critique the motion picture footage. The raw footage unedited. And that's what we did in Hawaii. And-- understand, I'm the only bachelor officer in the unit. So, Thanksgiving, Christmas, I got them all, which was fine. But sometimes they had me on the road for, like, six, seven months at a time. TDY, three months in

Vietnam, and then off to Korea for four months and filming the DMZ or something, you know. But when you come back, you're a little beat up because when you-- especially in Vietnam, when you are going twenty four hours a day, seven days a week-- a lot of activity out there. You're, you're kind of beat up, especially these guys that were out in combat. They go home, they just want to, hey, crash. So, when we get back, we'd -- paperwork for a couple of days. And then the commanding officer would say, "Okay, go get lost for a couple of days. Go to the beach or something, 'cause you guys are burned out." And they were. They had some guys with some mental things going on too. But anyway, my job in Saigon was, number one, I went to MACV headquarters every other day at Tan Son Nhut to get a briefing from a briefing officer, usually a major, and they had these briefing rooms set up, I Corps, II Corps, III Corps, IV Corps, and I'd go in there, and I'd get briefed, and my role was-- where's the action? So I would say to the major who was the briefing officer, "Where can I find some real combat action?" And then he would say, "Well, you know, over here in Pleiku, or whatever, they're gonna be engaging the enemy, the DD, on Wednesday and could be a big fire fight going on. There's two thousand NVA." And so I would get all that information, I'd go back to the villa-- our famous villa where we lived, 'cause we lived on the economy, which is what our orders said we had to do-- I'd go back to the-- to my office in the villa, and I'd say, "Okay, I need to get a team there to Pleiku by Wednesday, and I'm gonna have to send three guys- still man, motion man, sound man." And so then I'd say, "Who do I have available?" Pick three guys, and I'd tell them, "Okay, you're going to Pleiku, and head out to Tan Son Nhut, hitch a ride." And that's what they would do. And when you get there, they knew where to go, they'd go to the operations officer, and they'd identify themselves, and if someone ever heard of DASPO they'd say "welcome" or they'd say, "DASPO. Never heard of it." "Well, sir, here's our orders." "Okay, great," you know. "You're right, there's gonna be some combat going on," and, "Well, can you get us in there?" "Yeah, sure. We'll get a chopper for you. We'll get you in." And that's basically how it went. So, I'd get my briefings at MACV. And then my other responsibility was if a film had to be-- a script written or an outline written or a film to be directed, that was my job. So you were a director, you were a producer; you were assigning teams to go around the country. And then, you know, as the officer in charge, you had men, personnel, to look after, and that was part of my job also. I always had good sergeants, thank god, who would help, you know, keep things in order. So those were the three major functions. I never shot. We were not allowed to. Now, 221st, which rubs my craw the wrong way-- their officers were out shooting motion pictures, and, I

mean, I couldn't believe it. I mean, I'd seen photographs of these lieutenants out there actually shooting film. Motion pictures. I mean, if you did that in DASPO, you weren't doing your job. You weren't allowed to do that. And you'd hear about it real quick, you know. You have other responsibilities. Don't be out there shooting. And, you know, I'd go out with the team and, you know, do three days in the countryside and enjoy the scenery and do some search-and-destroy things and all that. And the reason I was doing that; I was directing and producing the 1st Air Calves story. Lieutenant General Kinnard asked me to produce it for him. And I went to the Pentagon, and he briefed me as to what he wanted, gave me a lieutenant colonel to be my liaison, and we went off and did the 1st Air Calves story. So, as part of doing that film, I went out on these missions-- operations with my film crew to get the footage. Harry Breedlove and I did that-- did some of that 1st Air Calve footage out in the villages and that type thing. He was a good guy to be out in the field with. He was great. He'd stop, take a break, and, you know, he'd reach into his fatigues, and he'd pull out a sandwich. He was always prepared. He was the all-season veteran. And then he'd get the sandwich out, and then he'd reach into this pocket here, and he'd bring out hot sauce, and he'd put the hot sauce on the sandwich. He was always prepared. But he was a good guy to be out there with, you know. A guy you could depend on and rely on and he'd have your back for sure.

Clarke: And what was that Air CAV story you did?

San Hamel: The 1st Air CAV story, yeah, it's, it's-- General Kinnard was anxious to fill in the gap of the 1st Air CAV story that was already on film. He didn't have the Vietnam portion of it. And he was in the Pentagon, and he had, you know, moved on from being the father of helicopter warfare. He was still very much involved in it. And they flew me to the Pentagon to visit with him, and he briefed me. Very cool general by the way. And, another guy who looked like a general, talked like a general. A real gentleman too. Great guy. And he told me what he wanted. And he wanted to do this whole Vietnam thing. So I did, you know. I forget how long it took us to shoot that thing, six weeks or more.

Clarke: And there's probably plenty of footage on that, too, as far as, so that's that's--

San Hamel: Oh, yeah. Well, I know you can just-- if you just wanted to view it without having quality, it's on the 1st Air CAV website. It's the first-- you know, they have the films embedded in there.

Clarke: Right, right.

San Hamel: Yeah? It's the first one on there I think.

Clarke: Is that '67?

San Hamel: Seven.

Clarke: '67.

San Hamel: Yeah, '67.

Clarke: We had some Air CAV guys associated with us here.

San Hamel: Oh yeah. That are here now you mean?

Clarke: One guy's on the board.

San Hamel: Oh yeah?

Clarke: And Al Lynch's stuff is out. His citation from President Nixon for when he got the Medal of Honor is in the cases out here, so--

San Hamel: Oh, cool.

Clarke: So they'd be, they'd be glad to hear that story. They're very proud of--

San Hamel: Well, and I enjoyed working with the 1st Air Calve. They were so efficient. And you know, and that's—you know what, well, you're gonna ask me a question later on which is related to this-- when you're in DASPO, and you've got Lieutenant General Kinnard in the Pentagon wanting something, and I got to the ops officer out in the boon docks, and I say, "I need fifteen helicopters in the air tomorrow. You got anything going with the VC? He said, "Yeah, we know where they're sitting, we're gonna go-- you want them tomorrow?" And it's like, "What do you want to do in the war today? Tell me what should we do in the war today." General Kinnard wants it, it's done. And that's how it worked. I'd go out there-- man; I had more helicopters than you could shake a stick at. And we had a Tyler mount-- I don't know if you know what a Tyler mount is. It's a gyro head

on a, a piece of equipment where you put your motion picture camera, and you control it—and there's arms-- the camera sits in here, and then there's arms on the Tyler mount and buttons to zoom in and to shoot, and because of the gyro head on it, it doesn't-- you know, when you're shooting, the film doesn't go like this from the helicopter, it's steady Freddie all the way. And it was very expensive piece of equipment, and we used it quite a bit with the 1st Air Calve, and it came in so handy because it was such a great piece of equipment to have for motion picture work. Tyler mount.

Clarke: I think that as a-- you know, as we're piecing this whole story that you're telling right now together, having all these little bits and pieces to-- like the Westmoreland Christmas interview and the 1st Air CAV stuff that you directed, we were doing-- obviously we're doing some research on you, getting ready for this interview and also for the exhibit, and the army, or the military I should say, is very different about how a director is treated versus out there in the world of, you know, film studios and this, that, and the other. And there's not a lot out there on you as far as, like, exactly what you did.

San Hamel: Oh, really?

Clarke: It's just general consumption.

San Hamel: Yeah, yeah.

Clarke: And they would have, you know-- because of the way the military is, your name's not necessarily gonna be all over this stuff. It's gonna be, it's gonna be- this belongs to the army, and there were people who worked on it, and that was their job because they had orders to do it. And so it's kind of interesting to... Have you ever done a list of the things you've worked on?

San Hamel: I did at one time. I think I came up with seventeen, maybe, full motion pictures. Footage, lengthy footage, that I did that was on national TV. A lot of our footage- - I don't know if you're aware of that or not. I never did mention it either-- it would go-- our film would go back to the Redstone Arsenal, it would be processed, and then it would go to the Pentagon where-- I was gonna say New York, and I don't know why I'm thinking that. Maybe initially it was New York -- but the networks would come in and bid on our footage. They'd then buy it, they'd put it on TV, not that they lied or anything, but a lot of times they would

insinuate that it was their footage. Sometimes we got credit, sometimes we didn't. But, no, my attitude, and I would think my fellow officers and enlisted men-- none of us were out for glory.

Clarke: No.

San Hamel: And we didn't expect our names to be on things, and there were some awards that were given by the Department of Defense. Ted Acheson got Cinematographer of the Year one year. George Stevenson, who's a Hollywood cameraman today-- he got it one year, I think '70, '71, or something like that. And he never even saw it. He doesn't-- he was surprised he got it. I was talking to him on the phone. But anyway, no, we were not glory hounds. It's, you know, it's the army.

Clarke: Yeah, for the historical purpose, it's not about the glory hound. It's the making sure what happened is documented.

San Hamel: Yeah. Exactly.

Clarke: That's what we're after now, so, kind of the--

San Hamel: Yeah, that was our mission.

Clarke: --the hindsight, twenty-twenty, if you had that list and can provide it to us that would be wonderful.

San Hamel: Well, I--

Clarke: If you have it on a piece of paper, or a...

San Hamel: I did have it on a piece of paper. I don't know that I ever put it in my computer. And then films that you can find on the archives, I don't know if they'd ever release them. I did a great film on medical evacuation. It would be in the archives. And I got the idea-- I was home on leave. I was in Chicago, and I was watching the news. One of the networks, it might have been CBS, did an excellent documentary on medical evacuation in Vietnam. And I said, "Wow, how come we haven't done that?" I went back and, to Hawaii, and I said, "We got to do a medical evacuation..." "Go ahead." So my-- it was my baby. So we're

in Vietnam and I said, "How would I really want to do this film so it was totally different from anything that I perhaps saw on CBS or whatever?" And I said-- I would start, like my usual thing, "where's the action gonna be? Where will the combat be? I'm gonna put a team there. And then I'm gonna put a team with a medical evac chopper. And then I'm gonna put a team back at the hospital." Field, not the field hospital, but the-- what do they call them? You know, where they first, someone gets hit, where they first go out in the field and then they get...

Clarke: Triage?

San Hamel: Yeah, a triage. Triage. That's the term I couldn't think of. But in the triages, they actually had surgery rooms and things. So, that's what I did. So it took three teams. And sure enough, a guy was riding on an APC. A young guy from Texas, a black boy, really nice kid. He was riding on a PC. It got blown up, and our camera crew was there. And so now they're shooting they're getting their footage. I mean, it couldn't have happened-- sounds maybe a little gory or something, but it couldn't have happened more perfectly. They caught it when he got hit. Now he comes into a chopper, my team's in the chopper, and I'm back with my team at the hospital-thing. And in they bring this guy. Now, in those days, we didn't have communication like we have now, I mean, no cell phones or whatever. I didn't know my guys on the APC captured him being hit, and I didn't know the chopper at the time had brought him in. And so we-- this guy comes in. And what they used to do in those emergency rooms, for lack of a better term, was they would bring in the guy. He's wounded and-- put him in the emergency room on a, whatever you call it, a table or whatever, and they would just start cutting their uniforms off with a scissors, rip. No medication, no painkiller or whatever, 'cause they wanted to find out where the pain was. And so we saw some very interesting things. But this one kid came in, and we-- when they were really busy at a time like that-- I think they brought in three guys in at the same time, we used to take our camera gear and step aside so they could take care of the guys. And, you know, we'd do a handheld maybe over in the corner and get out of the way so that the victims could be taken care of. And, and that was, what's the proper word? If you're not used to seeing surgical stuff and everything, it could make your knees bend. That's a good way to say it. And I remember in particular, they brought in one guy, and he had his hand blown off and they had a wrapper. A band aid, bandage. Not a band aid, bandage, on his wrist. And so we were shooting, and I was standing there, and I'm directing, and they start taking this

thing off. And I'm going, "Oh my god, that guy lost his hand, I'm standing here watching this?" So I'm watching, now they're taking it off. And I'm going-- the knees are starting to go. 'Cause you see guys bloody or whatever, but to see that particular activity going on. And I thought, "I gotta get out of here for a minute guys." 'Cause I started to go. And it just bothered me, affected me, where as other stuff didn't. 'Cause later on I'm in the operating room, and the subject of the guy who got whacked on the APC, and-- came in, he went into the operating room right there which was an experience itself. And he had lost half of his buttocks on the left side, and they were working him right down to the bone. The doctor later told me that it would grow back, not to worry. I thought that was interesting. But there were, I would say, probably six tables going in that surgical room all at one time because of these guys that were coming in, and it was, it was something. I didn't-- my knees didn't buckle in there. But it was just-- if you've never been in an operating room where six people are going getting taken care of at the same time, it was a lot of activity and people, you know, doctors...

Clarke: I think that the only thing anyone has in their mind is *M*A*S*H*.

San Hamel: Well, probably, yeah.

Clarke: That's what I-- for, you know, the general public.

San Hamel: Yeah, I mean, there's a...

Clarke: I can't imagine that that was too real 'cause it was TV. This is a different thing, yeah.

San Hamel: Oh yeah, this was real. They had to hose-- hosing down the floor for the blood. They get pretty gory and did see somebody over at one table to my right with the hack saw out doing whatever he was doing. I didn't want to see that. But we made a great medical evacuation film, and we stayed with that kid 'til he went home. And we had him at the hospital in Saigon or whatever--

Clarke: Wonderful.

San Hamel: --and the doctor told me they were gonna send him to Japan. This is back in Saigon. And I said, "Well, why are you gonna send him to Japan?" "Well, there's a

hospital that, you know, he can be treated." I said, "He's from Texas. Why don't you send him to one of the army hospitals in Texas, and his family can come see him?" He said, "Is that what you want?" And I said, "Well, yes I do." And he said, "Alright, he's going to Texas." But why wouldn't they think of that? Why do I have to tell them, you know, to send the guy to Texas? But anyway, he went to Texas. And then we had a team pick him up in Texas, too.

Clarke: Oh, so you followed him even once he got home?

San Hamel: Yeah, yeah.

Clarke: This is a total aside, but there's a guy named Joe Cockrell and he was a photographer, and he was in the helicopters when the guys who jumped out of the helicopters, para-rescue guys, would jump out and he documented a lot of that stuff, the photography, and I don't know who he was with ultimately, what unit he would have been with but...

San Hamel: Probably a real special unit to do something like that, where they were jumping out.

Clarke: Yeah, he was directly with the para-rescue guys and documenting those. We have-- he donated his collection. He's got three silver stars as a result of his work.

San Hamel: Wow.

Clarke: Yeah, that he was awarded. So, interesting group.

San Hamel: That's terrific. Yeah.

Clarke: I didn't know if you had heard of him or not.

San Hamel: No, no.

Clarke: Let's, let's-- let me go into the, let's do a two-fold thing here. First of all, do you need a break or anything, by the way?

San Hamel: I'm alright.

Clarke: Alright. Let's do a two-fold thing here. Let's talk a little bit about what exactly it meant to be a special-forces team that's relatively new. You know, you're not the rangers, you're not the this, you're not the that, you know, so you're this new-ish kind of special forces team doing something atypical for special forces but you're using all the same tactics to get to where you need to go to do what you need to do, so let's talk a little bit about that. And let's talk a little bit about the fact that you're with DASPO '67 to '69, you were there at the absolute height of the war.

San Hamel: Yes, uh-huh.

Clarke: Cause after that, things started dropping off and there's a lot of famous stuff that happened after that obviously, but that was the-- the pinnacle of the American war effort in Vietnam. So let's contextualize it, that special-forces team at the apex of the American war effort in Vietnam. So, kind of first question is how did you do what you did? You've already mentioned some helicopters and this, that, and the other, and what was the reaction to you doing what you did? We've had conversations where one guy accused you of stealing and things like that.

San Hamel: Stealing, what's that?

Clarke: These guys are licensed to steal.

San Hamel: Oh, licensed to steal. That was in Okinawa, yeah.

Clarke: Yeah so there's-- tell me a little bit about that.

San Hamel: Well, were we well known? No. I mean, in Okinawa or Taiwan or wherever we'd go. In Vietnam, some guys knew us; some operations officers would know us because our cameramen had been there before, months ago, year ago, whatever. When they first went in in '62, I'm not privy to everything that went on, but it was a little difficult to get set up. The first team in was Lieutenant Carl Caan. And he went in, and he was the first team in there, '62 probably to '63, something like that. I'm not totally familiar with his history. He is available if you want to talk to him. How difficult was it when they were there, I don't know. It had to be-- they had to live on the economy. And initially, I think, when they went in they were supposed to live in the officers' quarters, and we're gonna live in the enlisted quarters. You can't function that way.

Clarke: Tell me why.

San Hamel: You need the flexibility to be able to move quickly. You can't have some sergeant in a enlisted quarters telling the guy, "You got KP, you're not going out to shoot today. What are you talking? You're going to KP." Or, in a BOQ that is cumbersome with security getting in and out, now you got to travel from there to join up with the enlisted men. It just doesn't work, 'cause we-- we're rapidly, rapid-reacting unit. And I hate to call us special-forces because we did a lot of work with the Special Forces. They'd be offended probably if we called ourselves special-forces. We were a special operations team. And we answered only to the Pentagon. And the chief of staff of the army was telling us what to do through a Colonel Jones or Halloran in the USAPA and DASPO office. So that's who we responded to. Now, my experience, I mean, I can only tell you about my experience, when I went in the first time was '67, into Vietnam, and well, you know, going into Vietnam itself the first time is a shock. It's like surreal. Its like-- what is going on here? It's just bodies everywhere. Heat, humidity, stinky air, sewer problems, airplanes all over. It's kind of like the painting on the wall you got. It was crazy. And I remember, because of our close bond, officers and enlisted men in DASPO, I mean, we took care of each other. We always picked each other up. We make sure that they had food; we made sure that everything was accommodated for. We took care of each other. So any, any country we'd go in, there'd be a DASPO vehicle there picking you up and taking care of you, that type thing. So it was very-- there was a real bond. The first time I went in, I forgot who picked me up, we had a-- I think we used to have an old Volkswagen bus or something that we had in Saigon. I don't know, we used to scrounge transportation because there was no TO& E for Saigon. And I was coming from Tan Son Nhut; they picked me up in Tan Son Nhut, and the streets of Saigon, or the suburbs of Saigon, up near Tan Son Nhut-- they're just jam-packed with bodies. Bodies are everywhere. Everybody's on a scooter. Everybody's got a car. Everybody's got a taxi. Everybody's got one of those basket things that you sit in, and the guy's driving you with a motorcycle thing behind you, you know. They're everywhere. And we hit somebody on the way from the airport, my first day in Saigon. And, didn't run him over, they bumped into the, into the vehicle. And I thought, "Well, you know, we gotta stop." "Oh, no, it's common, sir. Relax." I said, "No, we bumped into somebody. I mean, they're walking and everything." "Don't worry. If we stop, we'll have a riot on our hands." So we kept going. That was my introduction to Vietnam. But we went to the villa and, of course, got all

squared away. Functioning had already been established when I got there. I knew, when I would go into Vietnam I'd relieve another officer. That officer and I would overlap for three/four days. And in Saigon he'd take me to MACV headquarters, introduce me to the briefing officers, and so they'd know when I came in who I was. And so we always overlapped and took care of each other. And so functioning as far as that goes was fine at MACV headquarters. We were established in our residence and there was nothing-- everything just went kind of smoothly. We had some-- a mama-san and three of her daughters or whatever that cooked for us and cleaned-- you know, we didn't have time to be cooking and cleaning the place and that type thing. Do our laundry. And we all chipped in 'cause we lived on the economy. We got our per diem to pay for those things. Back to your original question, there's no way in Vietnam we could have functioned if we were separated. We lived together, we did our captions together, we cleaned our equipment together. We were together. We ate our meals together, and there was just-- the camaraderie was unreal. Never would have been that way if we were separated. Never.

Clarke: Well, I know you don't want to call it a special forces unit as in, you know, what a special forces unit does, but if you called it a special-forces photography and film unit, you're-- from everything I've ever read about special forces, you do have that close link between officers and enlisted.

San Hamel: Oh yeah.

Clarke: For example, the Navy SEALs are-- yeah, there's rank. Yeah, there's enlisted.

San Hamel: They're together.

Clarke: And officers, but they're together. So, it does sound like your experience was quote unquote special forces-ish. The way that you behaved and operated.

San Hamel: Yeah. I always refer to it as special operations but, you know, I only say that because we did a lot of stuff with the Special Forces and the Montagnards and that type thing up in the highlands. And...

Clarke: I definitely want to hear about that a little bit. That's a question...

San Hamel: Well, you'll have to talk to some of our enlisted guys, they're-- Breedlove. That's one for Breedlove. He was up with the Montagnards, and they-- you know, the

Montagnards, when you go into their village, you become part of their culture. And, you know, they'll give you a wife, they'll give you food, whatever you want, you know. And a lot of those people never saw white skin or, you know. I was in Thailand, a special mission or something out in the jungle or whatever, and I had to stay in this little village overnight, and I was alone, I think. And the kids in that village, they could not-- they had never seen a white man before. They used to come up and pull the hair off my arms, you know, and look at me. It was a strange feeling. I had one kid stood guard in my hotel room, which was a joke. I mean, it was a screen door, and that was my hotel room. Secured by a screen door. You want to take a shower, you had to go up on the roof and pull the chain and there's a bucket of water. That was your shower. I was really in the boon docks. But the Montagnards just made you part of your culture. And we have photographs of Breedlove drinking their whacky bowl of whatever the heck it was. And I'm sure it was loaded with alcohol, it'd probably knock you right on your butt, you know? But yeah, there's a picture here, he has a big long straw and he's drinking this thing. But if you didn't become part of their culture, they wouldn't accept you. And as Special Forces, we're used to that because they, you know, they lived with them, and they trained them pretty good. They were pretty good fighting people, the Montagnards. Even used bow and arrows, did you know that? Up there, oh yeah.

Clarke: That's a lot of stories there. So, how long are you in Vietnam? You're in the Saigon office. You're the officer in charge.

San Hamel: Yeah I was in there definitely fourteen months. Not steady, you know, I'd go in there for three, and then I'd come out and maybe go to Thailand or maybe go back to Hawaii. Depended upon the mood of our commanding officer. My 201 file is not complete. And, which is not unusual for any of the guys in DASPO because we were TDY all the time. We were not assigned to a division or whatever. So the records are not well kept. So when you go in there, I know I was in Vietnam longer than fourteen months, but that's what it says. You know, who's gonna argue? I was down in Malaysia with the CIA, there's nothing in my file about that. Zero. Why? I suppose they didn't want to put it in, I don't know. That's another story in itself. But anyway, so that's how long I was in there. And things were smooth. The guys knew how to get transportation. They'd go out to Tan Son Nhut and, you know, they'd be-- maybe one, we'd have one of the guys drive them out, we had a truck or something, drive them out and they'd hang around until they got a flight. And, but they knew how to maneuver. They were

survivors. At Tan Son Nhut, they knew how to catch a plane, get a flight, chopper, C-130, whatever it might be. Once they got into the headquarters of the operation they were going to, they knew how to get to the ops officer. They knew-- they knew how to function. And they were all very well seasoned. And if a new guy came in, he got trained. They made sure that everybody-- the guys, the new guys knew how to do it. And so it was-- it went smoothly. I never really had any dysfunctions when I was in Saigon. See, the biggest problem was the phone call at two in the morning from Hawaii. "Good morning!" "Good morning. How are you? Nice of you to call." And we had our own phone, which was nice. That was another thing. How would we have communicated with Hawaii or with Washington, which sometimes we got calls directly from Washington, if I'm in a BOQ and they're gonna come find me? And say, "Oh, you've got a phone call." We, you know-- the signal corps hooked us up. We had our direct line, and it was great, so...

Clarke: What was your-- you're an observer. Kind of what you did is you observe a lot and you record what you see. What is your impression of the war during that period of time-- that '67, '69 time period that you were...

San Hamel: To begin with, my impression-- the reason I was there was because our government, the army, sent me there, and I'm-- I don't know if I was old school or whatever, but you tell me to go, I go. I was trained that way. So that's why I was there. I knew, perhaps, that it wasn't so popular that we were there, but it didn't bother me. I didn't think twice about it because I was told to be there and we were-- I once made a comment to somebody that all the guys in DASPO had the personalities of assassins. They would go and go into combat or go do whatever they had to do film wise, and they'd do it. They'd walk away and forget about it. It was onto the next project, you know? And they were all that way. And sometimes you hear a few little war stories around the village, when a couple guys would come back and it was pretty bloody or whatever. But they, they never complained, you know, they just went and did their job and when the job was done, bump, that one's over and that one's the next one. And they relished going out. You know, sometimes they'd go, "Oh, sir, are you going to send me?" "Yeah, I'm gonna send you." "Well, okay." You know, it was very minimal. There was no, no real bitching. And they had to take care of their equipment. That was the other thing. If it malfunctioned while they were out there, shame on them. What did I think of the war?

Clarke: Well, maybe the war or just your observations of what other people thought of the war. What did you, kind of, what did you-- you're a sponge. You're seeing a lot, you're hearing a lot, you're getting all this film in, you're...

San Hamel: Westmoreland's attitude-- you know, he's my commanding officer of sorts, although I had no-- he couldn't command me, only the Pentagon could. So in essence he's the boss of Vietnam. He had this "we're winning" attitude which I didn't really totally go along with. I didn't think we were winning so much as we were fighting. Body counts, you know, didn't bother me, but everything was a body count. Oh the NVA, we got two thousand and we only lost eight hundred guys. Oh, great. So, you know that kind of-- the body count attitude bothered me. Matter of fact, I got in a fight with a French correspondent in the PIO office, up country someplace, where he was calling in on the phone lying about the body count. I knew what the body count was, and he was saying that the Americans had more killed than actually were killed. And I really got into it with him, I actually got kind of into a fistfight and then they broke us up. But it was the media lying to the public about what was really going on and what was really happening. So, his we're winning the war attitude kind of bothered me, 'cause I knew we weren't really doing all that well, and when I-- in '68, '68 January, I was the officer in charge in Saigon, and I went over to MACV, like I always do-- I'd go like every other morning. So I'm in there and I'm, I don't know, two weeks, and I'm looking at 3 corps, and I'm going, "What is this big build up of North Vietnamese here?" "Oh yeah, there's this unit and that unit." They knew who they were, identified what units they were. And, well, okay. So I'm watching it, and I'm watching it. It's getting bigger, and it's getting bigger. And so I said to the briefing officer, I said, "Are they-- are we in for some big time action here in Saigon?" "Well, no, we figure it's a normal buildup." And he's going on, and, oh, he was just lying to me because he knew the truth or whatever. And so my tour, my TDY trip is up, and Rick Griffith comes in. Captain Rick Griffith. So he-- we overlapped for three days, wherever it was. So, Rick, let's go over to the war room. Okay, so we go over. And go to the briefing officer, and we're getting our briefings, and now we're at III Corps in Saigon and get big buildup going on in the northeast sector, and more but it was really heavy up there. It's up by what they call the racetrack. The racetrack was up in that area. And I said, "Rick, something's gonna happen. Something big. And this buildup here, it portends of something about to happen, I can't tell you what, but be careful, be smart, and watch it." "Okay." So he takes over. I leave, and I swear I went to Thailand right from there. And [pause] Tet hits, January 1968. Whatever the date is that they

kicked it off. And that's what was happening, it was Tet forming up. The big offensive. And I said, "Holy mackerel, why I didn't figure that out?" I knew something was gonna happen, but I just never figured Tet. What do I know about Tet? So, Rick got shot. Breedlove got shot. And I'm in Bangkok, and I get a phone call from Hawaii. "Officers down and sergeant down and you've got to go in and replace Griffith." And so, I said, "Fine. I'll get there as soon as I can." "Alright. Well, get your-- we'll get you some orders and blah blah blah." We lived in a hotel in Bangkok. And-- Su Khum Vit and Soi Ha. And-- those were the streets. And my sergeant in Bangkok was Jack Yamaguchi. And Jack says, "You can't go." I said, "I know I'm sick but..." He said, "Sick?" He says, "You've got a fever that won't stop." He says, "I'm not allowing you to get on a plane." He said, "You're a wreck." And I was actually shaking from this fever. And we went to the field hospital, and they said, "You've got a fever from an unknown cause." "Well, thanks a lot guys. In the meantime, what do I do?" "Tough it out. Take some aspirin or whatever." So, go back to the hotel, and he says, "You're not going." And Jack and I were pretty close. So I said, "Well, maybe if we wait a day or something." So he calls Hawaii, he said, "This guy's sick as a dog." He says, "If he goes, he's gonna look like there's something wrong with him or something." So they said, "Well, let him-- just wait a day." So, next day comes, I've got a flight out of the airport in Thailand, I forget the name of it, in Bangkok. And so, I'm at the-- I'm in my uniform, and we used to wear summer tan uniforms, tailor made, and I put my hat on, and I'm walking down the hall, and Yamaguchi's walking behind me, and I'm flippity flopping along and my hat won't stay on my head 'cause I've still got the shakes. He said, "That's it, you're not going." I said, "Jack, I got to go. There's no officer over there." He said, "You're not going. I'm calling Hawaii." So he called Hawaii and said, "He can't go. He's gonna look like a drunk. They're gonna think the guy's drunk. He can't even walk." And I said, "Alright, you win." So they said, "Alright, we'll send somebody else." So they got a guy out of Hawaii to go in there. But I was the closest, I could have been there in hours, you know. You know flight time from Hawaii to Saigon? You know how long that one is? What is it? See, seventeen hour time difference, flight time was six thousand miles, was twelve-- fourteen hours, I think it was. Yeah, fourteen. Six thousand some-odd miles. So I was in Bangkok, boom, I could have been there in no time. Anyway, I didn't go. But that was Tet. And we have a lot of footage from that '68 Offensive. Picture of Breedlove. He got shot in the leg. And then Griffith got shot in the hand.

Clarke: I need to take a quick break. [1:41:10] [return at 1:46] Alright, so, I've got more questions for you, kind of, about Vietnam to get a little bit more into the-- kind

of the nitty gritty of, like, your physical day to day experience. So let me just collect my thoughts here 'cause we kind of have done-- we've done a lot already. We've done an awful lot, which is really good. And then let's make sure that we get anything in there that you want to get in there as well.

San Hamel: No, I'm just looking at some notes that I made yesterday. Korea, I did-- oh, that's another big film I did on-- I don't know what they ever did with it though-- on the DMZ in Korea. I was there for-- there for two trips. One for four months, one for three months.

Clarke: Let's talk about, since we're kind of-- you're sick in Malaysia, you can't go and re-take over the Saigon office of DASPO. So let's talk about Malaysia, let's get into the Korea stuff, and then let's go into some of the-- we'll kind of go back into Vietnam.

San Hamel: You know what, I just thought of something.

Clarke: What's that?

San Hamel: I was talking about the buildup before Tet.

Clarke: Yeah.

San Hamel: And I remember reading that Westmoreland didn't admit or denied that there was a buildup happening.

Clarke: Yeah.

San Hamel: And it was only at the last minute that he-- oh yeah, he was gonna have a truce, where you don't shoot each other for a few days or whatever, because of Tet, the Chinese New Year. And he called it off at the last minute because he didn't realize that that buildup around Saigon was really the beginning of the Tet Offensive. And that explains-- it just dawned on me now. That would explain to me why that briefing officer couldn't tell me what was going on there because he was the same guy who would brief Westmoreland. They wouldn't recognize the oncoming disaster. A lot of people got whacked in that one.

Clarke: Alright, so let's go back into where-- let's pick up where we left off. You're sick in Malaysia. What are you doing in Malaysia?

San Hamel: I'm in Thailand.

Clarke: Or in Thailand. Sorry. You're sick in Thailand? What are you doing in Thailand?

San Hamel: In Thailand, we were predominantly documenting the Thai army, which was in support of the Vietnam effort. They sent troops in there. One of the, was it a battalion, the Queen's Cobra, was one that went in. And there was another one, and I can't recall the name. Of course, they have a lot of cobras in Thailand, so the Queen's Cobra... No offense to the Thais, they weren't great soldiers even though we trained them extensively. You know, they were so-so. They were nothing to write home about. And, but, you know, they tried. So we were documenting their training and their preparation for going into Vietnam. And that was probably our biggest mission was to work with the Thai army. So other happenings in Thailand were-- there was not that much going on there, you know. All the action was in Vietnam.

Clarke: So, from there you went to Korea? Or from there you went...

San Hamel: Well, it depends, you know, they would send me wherever they...

Clarke: So you were kind of in and out, in and out.

San Hamel: Well, yeah, yeah. I went to Korea to do a film on the DMZ. They had never filmed the-- no one had ever filmed the DMZ from the west coast to the east coast. And so that was my job. Big job, you know. You're going across the country. Tyler mount, once again, you know. And when you use a Tyler mount, your feet hang out of the helicopter. So the cameraman, he's hanging out and he's shooting. It's really a great piece of equipment. It gets a little cold in Korea, though, you know, like forty below in the chopper when we were going up to the DMZ one winter day. And we're all wearing Mickey Mouse, big boots and fur parkas and the whole thing. And, but it was an interesting experience shooting the DMZ because the marines were on the west coast and somewhere along the way there-- was that the Fourth Division? The Apache with the Indian headstone, ah, head-- Indian, yeah. Maybe that's the Fourth Division or whatever. And so we had our issues when we were there. We landed in the DMZ one day. I had a helicopter

assigned to me the whole time and we lived in a house in-- outside of Seoul. And then there was a LZ someplace where they'd come pick us up in the morning. And it was, you know, like a regular job. Everyday, chopper come, we'd go to work. We'd go in the DMZ and they would keep our equipment in the chopper, the Tyler mount. And so one day I had a young warrant officer flying and he had never flown the DMZ before. And my team was his guinea pig crew or passenger list. So he landed inside the DMZ, which is not a good thing to do. There's a series of fences on the DMZ, and sometimes they have an old fence that hasn't been torn down yet. And so it's understandable that a young pilot might get a little confused. So, he set down and shut the engines down. Now a chopper, heli, when you want to start it up, it doesn't start like a car, vroom. You know, it's got to get going. So we set down and we get out of the chopper and I'm looking around, and I'm going, something's wrong here? I wasn't paying attention to where he landed. We were supposed to land in a different location and set up our cameras. So, I'm looking around and going, there's something wrong here. And the North Koreans decided that we weren't too welcome there, so they took a shot at us. Boom. Small weapon, you know, small rifle. And they're shooting at us. We're in the DMZ. You stupid head. I started going crazy. I said, "Alright, everybody back in the chopper. Let's get out of here." [sound effect] Well, they're getting it going. And, oh my god, are we ever gonna get off the ground here or what? He finally gets it going. In the meantime, the US Army said-- and of course they've got all kinds of equipment out there knowing that we're inside the DMZ. And then some Korean colonel-- he decided that he was gonna come and rescue us. And he's in a jeep and some communication in the helicopter-- somebody on the ground said, "You assholes are in the DMZ." And he's gonna come rescue us. Well, we could see him coming up on this mountain thing, you know. He's going around and around. Figure it'd probably take him two hours to get to us. But at the time I didn't know that he was coming to rescue us. And I'm not about to stand around and wait for him to get there 'cause they were shooting. And now the army is shooting back at them, so they're going back with a little grenade. Now they're responding with something a little bit bigger, and we have basically started the whole Korean War all over again as we're, put-put-put-put, we're getting out of there. The ironic part of that story is my father, who was with the Chicago Daily News for many years-- he was a staff artist, and he saw the newspaper and he clipped it out and sent it to me and he says, "Is this you?" And it was a story about how the firefight started on the DMZ between the troops. It said nothing about a helicopter. It just said, you know, small fire back and forth. Yeah, it was me, you know. Thanks a lot, Dad. You're reading

about us back in Chicago. But anyway, we had a few incidents there, and discovered that flying in snowstorms is not a good idea when you're in a helicopter. We were on the east coast and a storm just came out of nowhere and the problem with helicopters was some pilots-- they don't believe their instruments when they get into a snowstorm. So your instrument would be going like this, you know, to make sure you're level, as opposed to having your chopper cockeyed. And that particular pilot-- he didn't trust his instruments. And we came real close to going down, but we survived. And I went back to army headquarters in, what was it, Yan Sang, I think is where it was, and the colonel, aviation colonel, told me that the-- the aviation colonel says, "You better get out of the air." He says, "You're overdue for a big time accident." And we have a law of averages or some such thing, call us superstitious, but you're bond to get in trouble.

Clarke: How many hours do you think you were in a helicopter?

San Hamel: Oh, god. In Korea?

Clarke: Everywhere.

San Hamel: Everywhere? Oh, tons. Never got an air medal for...

Clarke: Hundreds?

San Hamel: Hours? Oh, sure.

Clarke: Thousands?

San Hamel: Probably hundreds. I never stopped to figure it out. In Korea we were up every day, five days a week. Probably five/six hours a day for ninety days. What does that come out to? I don't know. I don't know. Lot of hours. I never stopped to figure it out. That's one thing that irritated me. We never got our air medals for doing the Air Calve story. And they said we couldn't have them 'cause we weren't-- we didn't get aviation pay. Flight pay. So someday I'll go back and try to get them.

Clarke: Well, it's four hundred and fifty hours alone in Korea.

San Hamel: Just in Korea, and I was there seven months. Three months and then four months. Lot of hours. All our guys. We were all in choppers all the time. Airplanes, running around.

Clarke: Living in a chopper is a different life.

San Hamel: I didn't mind the choppers that much. I kind of, you know-- when I was doing the Air CAV story-- and we're not supposed to shoot, and I used to carry a Leica camera, thirty five millimeter. Just in case, 'cause I'm not supposed to shoot. But sometimes, you gotta take a shot. So we're in the command chopper doing the 1st Air CAV story, and Leroy Massey, Sergeant Massey was next to me. He was a MoPic guy. And we had these choppers-- here's the command chopper, you've got fifteen, twenty choppers below you going through maneuvers that they're trained and taught to do when they're in an assault going after Charlie and those types of situations. It was very interesting. And so I'm looking down, and all this is going on, you know, I said, "Wow this is really cool." And it's not by accident, I mean, these are maneuvers that these guys are taught. And then outside of my chopper, there was a chopper over shooting rockets and it was-- so I wanted to get the shot, and so I took it. And then I wanted to get these guys below. But how am I gonna get it? I gotta hang out of the chopper, and I'm not on a Tyler mount, so I told Leroy, I said, "Hang onto me, and I'm gonna hang out and get this shot." He says, "Ohhhhh." Leroy, great guy. Big black guy. Super, super guy, He said, "Ohhh," and I said, "Just hold my belt buckle," you know. And you're yelling. You're in a chopper. "Hold my belt buckle!" So I go. Now I'm hanging over the edge. And I get the shot. All these choppers going and smoke from the weaponry and da deet da deet. And he's holding me, and so I got the shot, and I get back in. And in hindsight, that was probably the dumbest thing I ever did in my life, 'cause that chopper, all we had to do was make a turn and I was adios. How stupid? Anyway, Leroy knew it but he held me anyway. But, I forgot about that little incident.

Clarke: You still have that photo?

San Hamel: The army has it, and, actually, it was an award photo, which I never received an award but they did-- it was some kind of an army award.

Clarke: For that photo?

San Hamel: For that photo.

Clarke: Really?

San Hamel: Yeah. And I've never seen it since really. I saw it years ago.

Clarke: Let's try to find that photo.

San Hamel: Yeah. It'd be in the archives I'm sure.

Clarke: So that's-- where is that? Tell me again. What year?

San Hamel: That was in '67, 1st Air CAV story.

Clarke: 1967 1st Air CAV story. So this is-- information, I'll try to find that. So you're living in a chopper an awful lot. Anything that the world should know about or the people who listen to this down the road should know about living in a chopper during the Vietnam Era and...

San Hamel: Great helicopter pilots have a super touch. When they-- what do they call that? Joystick. When they get the joystick, which is a little army, or a little military-- little air pun. When they get the joystick, you know, they fly with that thing like this. And I learned that anybody who's got a real tight grip would not be a great helicopter pilot. You've got to hold that thing gently so you can move it around. So you need a real loose grip. That's the only thing I know about helicopters. Except when you run out of gas, it's not good fuel. You don't want to do that. We did that in Korea, too. And we got lost. We were lost and we had no fuel. And I was-- pilot, the co-pilot and I'm-- and these warrant officers, they love to put you in dangerous situations. So I'm back there and they hand me a map. You know, aerial, and I'm supposed to find out where we are. In Korea, they have these valleys and they have these cables going across the valley. Electrical cables and phone cables, whatever. And they all have a big, like, a red ball on them or something. And when you're in a chopper, if you see it-- if you see one coming, it's your responsibility to yell Cable. And either the chopper pilot will go down underneath them or he'll go up over them. But if you ever hit them, it's adios. You're toast. And so we're flying along, no fuel, lost, and we're trying to-- you know, is there a church steeple down there? It was crazy. And we made it back on fumes. Finally got there. You were asking me the question which I was going

to lead up to, and that was-- oh, the aviation officer, he was a colonel, he said, you know, "You're gonna get in trouble." The last day of our filming on the DMZ, our chopper dropped us off, they went back to—oh, I forget the name of that airport thing where they used to park that thing-- and they crashed into the hanger, and one of the pilots got killed. So that colonel's intuition was right on. He said, "Get out of the air." Well, we got out. Fine for my team, but for the poor co-pilot. But, crazy.

Clarke: So, four hundred fifty hours in Korea, and that's not even talking about all the stuff you did during, you know, the 1st Air CAV story, or the this, or the that. I mean, you're talking about spending thousands of hours in a helicopter, literally.

San Hamel: I suppose. I've never stopped to figure it out but I guess, yes.

Clarke: Well, four fifty for Viet-- or Korea and, that was comparable if not a little less than what you did in Vietnam, so...

San Hamel: Yeah, but Korea was everyday, you know, me personally and my crew. In Vietnam, I was not in a helicopter that often other than that 1st Air Calve story.

Clarke: Alright, so you, you mentioned your dad. And I have a question here that-- you must have told somebody a story somewhere about his request for a photograph.

San Hamel: His request for a photograph.

Clarke: I mean we don't need to go down there if there's not a story here, but did your father request specific photographs to be printed in the Daily News. Is that something that--

San Hamel: Oh, no.

Clarke: Is that a different story? I don't know why that's here but it's not something I...

San Hamel: Did somebody do a little research there?

Clarke: Apparently. Yeah. You don't have to tell it if you don't want to.

San Hamel: I'm a captain. I'm a captain, and I live-- I'm not in the BOQ, I live in the punchbowl area of Hawaii in an apartment building. And I'm on the third floor or something. Third or fourth floor, whatever it was. It was a very nice apartment. Two-bedroom. Modern. And Lanai, you know fresh air all the time. Never close windows, its Hawaii. And, get in the elevator one morning, and this knockout chick gets in there. , yeah she gets in the elevator--she gets in there, or she was on there, whatever. This absolute knockout gets in the elevator with me. So I go, "Holy mackerel. Good morning." "Oh, hi, how are you?" "Good." "You live in the building?" "Yeah." "Where you at? Oh." "Oh. What do you do?" "Oh, I'm in the army." And, "Oh. Well, nice to see you." "What's your name?" "I'm Alexandra." "Oh, okay." Couple days go by, get in the elevator. "Oh, good morning." "Oh, hi. Alexandra, right?" "Yes." "Wait a minute. Are you Alexandra the Great 48?" She says, "Yeah that's me." I said, "Oh my god, you live in my building?" She was the biggest stripper in Hawaii. So, I said, "Well my goodness. It's really nice to meet you. I've never seen your show." "Well, come on down." "Oh, okay." She used to perform at Forbidden City and then, what was the other one; it was out by Pearl Harbor? I forgot the name of it. And, "Oh yeah, come see it sometime." So, one day, one day the guys- "Hey, let's go have lunch at that burlesque place." "Hey, you really wanna go have lunch there?" "Yeah, yeah. Get a hamburger." "Okay." So we go, and here's Alexandra. So I wave at her. Oh, you came to see me. She does her thing, you know. Guys, just thousands of guys in there going crazy, you know. Navy guys. So I met Alexandra. I said, "Alexandra, why don't you go to Vietnam and perform for the troops?" She said, "I'd go." I said, "You know, maybe when I get out of the army, I'll take you over there." She says, "It's a deal." So now Alexandra and I become an item. Is that what you say in Hollywood? We're an item. And so, we kind of, like, start dating, kind of. She's in the building. And now there's a story in the newspaper that I-- that she was-- I was seen with her or something stupid. Okay? Is it a real romance? I don't think so. It's kind of a convenient thing. And so I'd take her to the Officer's Club. And, oh man. San Hamel's dating Alexandra the Great 48. And, 48 of course, meant that she had forty-eight inch boobs. So, she says, you know what. I got an idea. I had a Dodson 1600 two-seater sports car. Gray. When I went to Hawaii, they shipped my T-Bird, my 1958 T-Bird, over on the deck and never put it in a container. Ruined, totally ruined. It was full of rust and salt, and they cracked my windshield. I had three flat tires. So I-- when I got to Hawaii, I go get my car. It's all screwed up. And I'm looking at it-- I was sick. I loved that car. So, I had to go trade it in real quick so I could have wheels on the island, so I got this Dodson. So, "I have a great idea," she says. "Why don't I tell the"-- and she was the

biggest thing in Waikiki. I mean, everybody knew who Alexandra was. "I'll tell the media that you are taking me to Vietnam to perform for the troops." I said, "Okay, fine." So she calls me up one day, she said-- and I was at the office, I was in uniform, and-- which was not mandatory when you were in Hawaii, but she says, "Could you meet me over at Jack whatever-his-name's house over on the ocean, say around four o'clock?" I said, "Yeah, I could, what's up?" She said, "I just want you to come over. Jack's gonna be there," and Jack's the guy who owned the strip joints. Very wealthy guy. "Sure." So I go over there. In uniform-- I keep adding in-uniform because, little do I know, there's a photographer there who takes a picture of me with Alexandra. Like, how about ten poses looking into each other's eyes and all this. And she proceeds to tell this reporter that she's going to Vietnam, I'm taking her there, and we're getting married. Well, I about fell over. Getting married? And now what do I do? There's a reporter, photographer. Do I make her look like an idiot? So I figured, well, I'll get out of this later on. "Oh yeah, we're really looking forward to it," and all this stuff. She goes out and buys a yellow Dodson identical to mine so we can have his-and-her cars. I can't believe this is really going on. I said, "Alexandra, we got a problem here, you know. I'm trying to get out of the army, but I don't want to get out this way. I don't want to get boarded out of the army by being all over the newspapers, saying I'm marrying a stripper. Get it? Stop it." She goes, "Oh, don't worry about it. It's just publicity. It's good for my career." "Oh, okay." There was a guy on the beach, Waikiki, from the Chicago Daily News, vacation. He picks up the local Honolulu paper while on vacation and sees me on the front page of the newspaper with Alexandra. He says, "What a great story." Oh and here was the hook. She told them that her boobs were so big; she was gonna have a mastectomy or whatever they call it. And that was-- 'cause she gets back pains, and she was going on with this medical thing. Well, they just thought this was the greatest story in the world, right? He wires the story back to the Chicago Daily News. This is where my father gets involved, and my mother. My father looks at the paper and-- my god. That's my son on the front page with a stripper. And he goes, "Oh my god, what the heck's going on?" My mother gets the afternoon paper, Chicago Daily News, delivered to the house. She picks it up. Holy mackerel, here's my son with this stripper. Well, I'm in the Officer's Club. I think it was sometimes in the afternoon. Five o'clock after work or some such thing, and I get a phone call in the Officer's Club at Fort Shafter. It's my brother. He's an attorney, Chicago. He says, "Do you know what's going on?" And I said, "No, about what?" He says, "Your mother called me, and you are really in hot water." "Why, what'd I do?" "Your picture's all over the front page of the

Chicago Daily News, and she's so upset she was crying." And I said, "Why, what's she crying about? He says, "Well, you're marrying some woman that's forty eight years old." And I said, "No, no, no, Quentin, she has forty-eight inch boobs. Would you please tell your mother that? And then she'll calm down." And that's a true story. So she calmed down after she found it was forty-eight inch boobs, but that's the story-- what you're referring...

Clarke: So which newspaper is that? There's got to be an archive somewhere.

San Hamel: Chicago Daily News.

Clarke: What's the date on that?

San Hamel: Oh god. 1967 I suppose. Something like that. Yeah, it was on the front page. It was big time. My five minutes of fame.

Clarke: So that leads up to my next question. I've been kind of meaning to ask you this for a little while, but lived in Chicago, grew up in Chicago, went to Catholic schools, University. Then suddenly you're all over the world, you're flying in helicopters thousands of hours, you're doing all this stuff. Did you ever, like, kind of pinch yourself and go, what the heck is going on? I mean...

San Hamel: That's an interesting question because...

Clarke: You're on the front page with Alexandra the Great 48.

San Hamel: Well, yeah, I didn't need that one.

Clarke: Yeah, but, I mean like, seriously though. There's a life story here that's interesting to kind of look back and you go, what have I done in my life, and this is a story.

San Hamel: Yeah. Well, I am writing a book, and I'm not getting very far 'cause I have no time.

Clarke: Maybe this'll help.

San Hamel: Doing reunions and things. I never-- I never felt like I was making history when I was in Vietnam. Thought never occurred to me, ever. I don't know if there's a word that describes my personality, but I go ahead and I do things not for fame, glory, whatever. I'm doing it 'cause I'm supposed to do it. And everything in DASPO was so, for the lack of a better word, natural. Everything just flowed, you know, when you're in Vietnam or whatever. And everyday is a challenge. You're solving problems all the time. You're reacting on your feet and executing on your feet. And that's my personality I guess. And so I don't think about what I'm doing other than the fact that I'm doing in and I want to do it right and I want to do it the best I can. I've had that experience in life also with political campaigns that I've run. I never think that I'm making history, I never think-- all I know is I've got to get this guy elected. And don't talk to me, talk to the candidate. I don't want to talk to you. You know. That's my attitude, and I went through Vietnam that way. So, did I pinch myself? Not really. Maybe in hindsight when I start putting a DASPO reunion together or something, I might come close to a pinch, but I've never really pinched yet, you know. I just don't have that-- I just don't have that mentality or feeling. And I know we did a lot of great things, there's no doubt about that. But, you know-- being with Humphrey on the lawn and-- you know, you just roll-- go with the flow, you know.

Clarke: It's the place where you were and what you had to do.

San Hamel: I don't know if there's a description for that...

Clarke: It's still a cool story.

San Hamel: Well, yeah, but there must be a description of my kind of personality, and I don't know what that is.

Clarke: I think you did it. You're operationally focused. You want to do the best job you can, its nuts and bolts, get it done, and then, you know, on to the next thing. You already said the assassin's mentality.

San Hamel: Oh, yeah. That's right, it's the same thing.

Clarke: Okay, that's done. Next.

San Hamel: And I've done films, well, for the army or civilian life, where I have got to get this thing done in two weeks and I've got to cram all that knowledge into my head so we can shoot this thing and it makes sense, and da deet da deet, and the progression and angles and everything. And two weeks is over, and two weeks later if you ask me one question about the con-- the subject matter and any of the technicalities of it, I couldn't tell you. Because I forget it and I go on to the next thing. And there's a lot of guys in the film business that have told me the same thing. They just forget it and they go on to the next thing.

Clarke: What's next?

San Hamel: Yeah.

Clarke: So you-- let's kind of go into, I guess, for an oral history, the natural progression, you've already helped me with that part of it. But you got out of the army when?

San Hamel: December 31st, 1969 at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii.

Clarke: So, and what did you do after that? Did you marry Alexandra? [laughs]

San Hamel: No. No, I did not. I-- when I was-- I had mixed emotions when I got out. Really mixed because I loved what I was doing. I mean, it was the plum assignment of the world. I mean, of the army. I mean, I had the greatest job. Periodically dangerous, not as bad as my cameramen had, you know. I really loved it and I wanted to stay. And I asked the army if they would let me get a master's degree at UCLA or Southern Cal in cinematography. And, of course, they have these educational programs where, you know, they say sure. I was gonna be a major, draw full salary, go to school, they'd pay my tuition, I'd owe them four years or something, and I'd have a master's in cinematography. Done. But-- I always have a but, right? You have to go to the career signal officer's course at Fort Gordon, Georgia. And it's like eight-- its like, what is it, twelve months or fourteen, fourteen months. Whatever it is. And I said, "Oh, gee, you know, I'm really not into communications, guys, you know, I'm into the photo thing." Nope, adamant. Had to do it. So they soured me on staying in. And I really wanted to stay. I really did. To go to Hawaii, I had to re-up two years or more because it's an overseas tour. It's a three-year tour. So when Colonel Halloran says, "When you're going, you're gonna have to re-up." "Fine, I'll do whatever." So I had-- I really had mixed emotions. So I said, "Alright, that's it. Just bite the bullet and—they're not gonna

do it, and go onto the next thing,” which was Jack Yamaguchi. The sergeant that I was in Bangkok with who said I had the heebie-jeebies. He and I were good friends, and he was a very interesting person. He grew orchids as a hobby. And I think he named one of the orchids that he generated, hybridized, whatever--

Clarke: Hybrid, yeah.

San Hamel: -- after one of our guys that got killed. And that was Yoho. Kermit Yoho. I think there's an orchid called Yoho, but I wouldn't swear to that. But anyway, Jack was a Japanese Hawaiian. Lived there. His wife was an advertising executive in Honolulu. And then, through the years Jack and I became good friends. And he was always-- he was the entrepreneur. He was always gonna make money doing this and that, and he had some ventures going that he was successful at doing. He's the original officer in charge as a sergeant of-- at the PIC center. I think the first CONUS team of DASPO that they put together Jack was the OIC. How do you make a sergeant OIC? They did. You'd say NCOIC, they list him as OIC. Pretty interesting. But Jack's a pretty sharp guy. He was quite a character. So he and I decided, you know what, we go to Vietnam and you see all these clubs. I, II, III clubs and Sergeant's clubs and Officer's clubs and Special-Forces clubs and Air Force clubs and-- all over the country. And they have live entertainment in the clubs. And I said, I checked around. They're paying pretty good money for these groups. And a lot of them are coming from the Philippines and maybe Taiwan or whatever. You don't see too many American entertainers at these clubs. So, I'm gonna check into it. So, I did. Colonel Jones, God love him. He was in charge of the Armed Forces Vietnam Network. He had a radio personality that had a regular program every morning on his radio station called Chris Noel. That was her name. Her stage name. She was a disk jockey. She was kind of like *Good Morning Vietnam*, except she was not as crazy. I never really listened to her, but she was real sugary, you know, and- “Oh, I'm in love with you guys,” and all this crazy stuff, you know. Entertaining the troops on the radio, trying to get them all aroused listening to some chick back in LA. So, Colonel Jones calls me up. My buddy Colonel Jones. He said, “Would you escort Chris Noel around Saigon for like two days?” I said, “I'm kind of busy,” you know, and he says, “Well, I don't have anybody else. I really want you to do it.” I said, “Colonel, you know I'd do anything for you.” I said, “Let me ask Hawaii if it's okay.” So, I think Major O' Connor was the CO or something, he said, “Yeah, fine.” You know. So, alright. So, I go to the-- what did they call it, special services was the entertainment that came in? Not USO, but-- yeah, it was USO. Yeah, it was USO. And other types of

entertainers that would come in through various reasons, like the radio station. So, I meet Chris Noel at this facility, and they had--it was like a dorm. And they had, like, a round office area, and off of the office area were bedrooms, like this. Like a circle thing. And then there was a desk and office kind of a thing up front. So anyway, long story short, I meet Chris Noel. Hi Chris, you know. "You're taking me over to the hospital, right?" I said, "I am." "Oh yeah, you have to-- I have to get a shot everyday 'cause I'm allergic to Vietnamese or something." And so, "Oh." So I go up to the desk, there's a major sitting up there or something, and I said, "She's supposed to get shots or something?" He said, "Yeah, you got to take her to Third Army Hospital, and she's got to get a shot in the ass." "Oh, okay." So I had a jeep. Take her over, she gets shot, and off we go. Chris-- I don't know if I should tell this story with-- she'll never see this, will she? So, I take her to the hospital where she's gonna visit the troops. That was the objective. And so, we walk in a room and there's a guy in bed, you know, obviously had been wounded, I don't remember what particular wound he had or whatever. So she walks in, and she says, "Well, how you doing? Not so good, eh?" And I said, "Oh my god, I don't believe this woman." So she talks to the guy, and I get her out in the hallway and said, "You don't say that to a guy in Vietnam who got whacked and he's recovering. And who knows if he's got a leg or a foot or you know. 'Not feeling so good.' Don't ever say that again." "Oh, I'm sorry, were you offended?" I said, "I'm not as offended as the poor guy in bed. You know? Come on." Oh, boy. She didn't like me from that point on. And so I tolerated her for a day or two, and then I shipped her on off 'cause she was going up-country someplace. But, how do I get off on that? You're talking -- oh, so the major who was in charge of this facility-- I went up to him, and I was talking to him, and I said, "How do you get a license to do shows in these clubs?" He says, "Well I issue them." I said, "You're the guy?" I said, "What if I came into Vietnam, and I brought an American rock group? Can I do that?" He said, "Not without a license, but I'll-- you know, if there's a license available I'll give you one. I said, "Well, how do..." He said, "There's nothing available." But he said, "Keep in touch. I'll let you know." So I did. You know, so, back to Yamaguchi. They might have a license opening up where we can bring shows in here. Not while we're in the military. We've got to be civilians. Very interesting. Oh, you know, we can make a lot of money. So long story, December 31st, 1969, I get out. Schofield. And I really had to pull some maneuvers through some ingenious warrant officers in personnel to get discharged in Hawaii 'cause I was supposed to get discharged in California. But anyway, that's another whole story. And so, I don't know, a couple weeks later--oh, no, I went to California, auditioned some rock groups, and-- and to LA,

and we walked into this-- I walked into this studio that I had prearranged with a guy in California, in LA, and I think it was, I don't know, ten o'clock in the morning or something, and I was gonna audition some rock groups. What do I know about rock groups, but I'm gonna audition them. And so there's a bunch of guys in the studio. Oh, man, tired, all beat up, smoke, you know. Oh geez. And the guy says to me, "Do you want to meet Three Dog Night?" And I said, "Sure. Whose Three Dog Night?" "That group there, they're the most famous group in the world." "Oh, next to the Beatles or what?" Yeah. So I met Three Dog Night, and I was unimpressed by meeting them. But that was the group of the day, I guess. And so, I auditioned some groups, I hired some bands, and-- to take them, and they were kind of excited about going. One group turned me down. They didn't want to go. But we put a thing in the paper at a-- out in California, a little notice, and so anyway. It worked. So Jack and I get the license, and we-- I don't know, probably, must have been probably around February. I go off to Vietnam and make arrangements to bring in these entertainers. Got a old house to put them in and have them stay, and Jack and I were in the entertainment business in Vietnam. And I didn't bring Alexandra but I brought one of her other ones. I forget her name. So she came in and-- and that's an interesting story, just an aside. That major that gave me the license, I said, "Can I bring a US stripper in here?" He said, "Ooh, it's got to be something classy. No, we can't have, you know, something bad." I said, "No, I'm talking classy." These outfits these chicks wear, you know, they're like two thousand dollars apiece. There's buckskin on the inside and sequins, and it's all tailor-made. He said, "Well, if you think so," he said, "bring one over and-- and we'll take a look." So I brought Jennifer. Jennifer whatever her name is. Brought her over, and they had a room-- I don't know, there's like five or six guys in there. And she had a little tape-thingy that she sets up her strip music to, and she auditioned for these guys. Slam-dunk. Classy, good-looking, great outfit. "No problem. You can bring in-- bring as many in as you can." I said, "Okay." So anyway, that's how Jack and I got into the entertainment business. And I stayed there 'til seventy-- well, things were getting kind of touch-and-go there, I guess I left in seventy-- probably '71 and headed over to Bangkok. And I think I closed-- I forget what year it was, I closed up shop in '72 maybe. And then the clubs were shutting down too, 'cause the war was winding down, so there weren't that many venues to operate in. And then, did some shows in Thailand. And it was '72, '71. And then I hooked up with Muhammad Ali, but you don't want to hear that story. Oh you do? [laughs] I-- what did I have? Oh, I had *Roller Games*. Roller derby? Oh, you'd say, "roller derby?" This was the most popular show, TV show, in Thailand and Hong Kong.

Oh, big, big stuff. So I hook up-- contract roller derby, and I'm gonna go Jakarta, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and work the circuit up. Thailand, Bangkok, end up in Hong Kong. So, had to build a track and all this stuff, you know, that they skate on. So I go to Jakarta. I wanna start way south and get my first booking done. And I needed a real good legal-smegal contract with the promoters in the various countries. So I went to Baker McKenzie, I don't know if you've ever heard of them, big Chicago law firm. They had a branch in Jakarta. So I walked in. Nice building, you know, downtown Jakarta. And walked up to the counter and I said, "I need to see an attorney about putting a contract together." And so, okay, and have a seat. Andrew McCarten comes walking out. From London, you know. And looks just like David Niven with a bit of a little mustache, you know, guy about, I'll give him about thirty years old maybe. Shake hands, puts a contract together for me. He said, "How many other cities you going to?" I told him. He says, "You know, I would love to quit my job here. Maybe you would consider hiring me, and then I could help you book all these things through the contracts." So, "I'll let you know." So, I let him know. Open an office in Singapore in the Hyatt Hotel, and it's like a-- it was really a cool thing. It was like a, like a suite. But it was like, the bedroom was upstairs on a, on a balcony kind of a thing, and then there was, down, was a big, you know, conference table, so it worked out great. That was the office. He moved in there and stayed there. I paid him. Hey, you know, it was really great. So while I'm in Singapore, I hooked up with some government officials there. Really nice people. And a guy said, "Would you like to promote Muhammad Ali?" And I said, "Well, sure." Who wouldn't, you know. He said, "Well, maybe you could do exhibition fights. Three rounds, you know." Good idea. Long and short of that story, I hook up with Bob Arum in New York, I go to New York, and he's the promoter of boxing. At that time, big big big. Still is. You know, and so, I can't think of the name of it. He's on TV every once in a while when they have a big fight. He does all those top rank-- top rank; he does all the big boxing matches. I meet Angelo Dundee, I meet Muhammad Ali, ba bee, ba boom, and we're gonna go. And every country's gonna do exhibitions. I mean, slam-dunk. He's the most popular man in the world. So I take the south end, and Andrew McCarten takes the north end, and he's gonna work booking the show in all these other countries. And we're midway through, I don't know, a week or two into it, and he said, "You know, I just noticed there's something wrong with this contract with top rank." And Muhammad, I said, "What's wrong?" He said, "This one paragraph should be changed." He said, "I would like to get this done but they might not go for it. It might be an argument here. I'd better go to New York and see Bob Arum." I said, "Okay, fine. If you think it's right." He goes to

New York. I never saw Andrew McCarten again. He took the funds out of the bank in Singapore. He was missing in action. I'm not hearing from him. I know he's staying at the Drake Hotel in New York. Now I put the search on for him. I call Bob Arum; I call everybody, the hotel. "Yes sir, his clothes are in the room." "Oh, okay." Now I think he got mugged in New York. I'm calling my brother. "You got any connections?" Yeah, I got a law firm in New York," da deet da dee. They're trying to track him down in New York and nothing. He's not in the morgue. He's nowhere. And then they found out that he caught a flight and went to London and absconded with the funds and left me holding the bag. I was in Hong Kong at the time. And so, "Geez, what am I gonna do? He took all the money. I owe Muhammad Ali fifty thousand dollars. I gotta pay him in a couple of weeks. I don't have fifty thousand dollars." Muhammad Ali was fighting Joe Bugner in Las Vegas. 1973 maybe, something like that. I flew to Las Vegas and met with Muhammad and Bob Arum, a coffee shop. We're sitting there, I said, "This guy ran with the funds." He said, "I know, it's so strange," Bob Arum says, "It's so strange, this guy's supposed to meet me. He wants to talk contract. We can't find him. He disappears." I said, "Yeah, he took the money, he went to London." Oh my, he's, you know-- they were both really disappointed. They both really wanted to do this deal, you know. I said, "I don't have fifty thousand to give you guys. And I don't know where I'm gonna get it. I'm in Las Vegas. I gotta go back there, ba bing ba bung." So, Bob, really a nice guy, real gentleman, he says, "Well," he says, "let me give you a couple weeks, you know. Go ahead; see if you can arrange it." And he said, "Keep in touch. In the mean time, we'll do this championship fight we're doing." I said, "Okay, great." So, needless to say, I'm going, "Hmm, where am I gonna-- 1973, where am I gonna find fifty thousand dollars?" So, it might have been '72, whatever it was. So I said, you know-- I called Bob, I said, "We're just gonna have to abort. Keep the money that I gave you. Sorry." You know, 'cause where am I gonna get fifty grand? So that was the end of the Muhammad Ali tour and it would have been gangbusters. But Jack Yamaguchi and I were out there. Boy, we were in show biz. And that's what we did.

Clarke: How long did that last?

San Hamel: Three years, I left. '73 I guess.

Clarke: Okay.

San Hamel: Yeah. Came back in '73. Are these duddy stories or what?

Clarke: They're good stories. I like them. We're trying to get, I guess, the last-- well, we've been going about--we're going on three hours here.

San Hamel: Oh, you're kidding. Really?

Clarke: Nope, two hours and forty three minutes.

San Hamel: Wow.

Clarke: Well, that's, you know, not-- we took a little break and we've been-- hemmed and hawed a little bit here, but this is normal. So, summary. Kind of, you leave Vietnam in '73. Least your dealings with it. So you're there from sixty...

San Hamel: Early '70 to, it might have been, '72.

Clarke: No, but I'm just trying to get a-- you're, kind of...

San Hamel: Probably '72. You know, or late '72. The war was winding down. The clubs were closing.

Clarke: So from '65 to '73, this is your, your engagement with that whole thing.

San Hamel: Yeah. Yeah.

Clarke: And then you come home. And you mentioned that you've run political campaigns. Did you-- just a quick summary of what you did after that for--

San Hamel: I went to work...

Clarke: I'm trying to capture the whole you as well, 'cause you're not just Vietnam, and you're not just, you know.

San Hamel: I went to work for Ed Russell, who was a executive VP with the Meyerhof Advertising Agency in Chicago. They had the Wrigley account and that type thing. And Ed went on his own, I guess, shortly before I went to Vietnam, or before I went into the army I should say. And so I figured when I come back, I'm probably gonna go right back and same business that I was in. I called Ed and he said he

was in St. Joe, Michigan. He had decided he had had it with the Madison Avenue advertising world. And so he was in St. Joe, Michigan, started his own agency, and he said, "You know what? Timing is perfect. I need somebody bad." You know, "Do you wanna come here and work here?" So I said, "Well, I'll give it a whirl. So I went to St. Joe, Michigan and made an arrangement with him where I'd buy out his agency over time. And-- 'cause he just wanted to quit the whole thing. He was a very brilliant guy. Good, good ad man. And, so I-- I'm working with him and living in a nice little house I found that I rented over on-- by Lake Michigan. Sawyer was in Sawyer Michigan. And I had a life-- not a life-long, I met him in college, Tom Tully, at John Carroll University, I met Tom there. He was my senior advisor. And Tom was gonna run for Cook County Assessor. And he and I had been in touch, you know, through the years. And so he said, "Why don't you do my advertising campaign and do it through your outfit in St. Joe, Michigan?" "Fine." Ed was a big time professional. He had a big career. Big accounts. He wrote up a media plan for Tom and presented it to Tom's campaign manager. And Tom, you know, he was fine with it. Campaign manager says, "Well, I wanna make some changes. And then, you know, I'll approve it and you guys were hired." Well, Ed said, "No, no changes. I don't do changes. When I put up thing, it's thought through and no changes." "So that means we can't hire you." And he said, "I guess not 'cause I don't operate that way." "Okay, but good luck to you guys." So he goes back to Michigan, and I go back to Michigan, and communication with Tom, and he says, "Well, why don't you come and do the campaign?" I said, "I just went to work for this guy in St. Joe." "Oh, come on." So I said, "Alright." So I went and talked to him. "Alright, I'll shoot your commercials. Blah blah blah. Direct them, you know. And long story, I end up being his campaign manager, and we get him elected. Did his TV commercials and that type thing. And did a lot of work in his campaign and got him elected. He had some tough opposition. Eddie Vrydolyak, I don't know if you ever heard of Eddie. And anyway, so I did that campaign and that was in '74 I believe. '74. And then I did-- from that campaign, Mike Bakalis asked me to run his campaign for governor, so-- on the democratic ticket, so I went to work with Mike. He was in trouble, and I came in mid-- mid-campaign. And he had gone through the primary, and I came in for the general. And he was up against big Jim Thompson, Governor Thompson, who was-- I don't know how many times around he went. What did he have, five terms or four terms? Whatever. So anyway, so I did his campaign. He lost, and then I did Ted Kennedy after that. He ran for the Draft Kennedy movement in Illinois. I was in charge of Illinois and I was his executive director for Illinois. And then I did a ton of judges and union elections and

probably forgetting somebody, I apologize. But anyway, so that's what I did on the campaign thing. I did go to work in the assessor's office when Tom got elected. And I didn't really want to, I wanted to go off and do my own thing, but he asked me to go in for a year, and I stayed for like two years I think. I was his director of administration and special assistant to the assessor, and that was a good trip. Great guy, wonderful friend, so...

Clarke: That's kind of like how you pivoted coming out of Vietnam is you went into the advertising business and shot commercials basically, more or less.

San Hamel: More or less, yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Clarke: So no movie business after that or did you...

San Hamel: No. I'm trying to think.

Clarke: No big studios or like you-- you didn't pick up where you were before you left to go to war.

San Hamel: No. Wilding had shut down. They were closed. They were no longer operational. I think they had a minor operation in Detroit. I went to Twentieth Century Fox in 1968. In October of '68 and I did an interview with them and thought perhaps I could go the Hollywood route. And Colonel Jones, my good buddy, he had shot the bow and gotten me all hooked up with Bobbie the Weathergirl in Vietnam. Are you familiar with Bobbie the Weathergirl? Oh, you missed a big thing about the war. I'll have to send you all that stuff. They-- the TV station had a weather girl that came on every night at five o'clock or something. And if anybody was fortunate enough to have a TV in Vietnam, they could see Bobbie. And they had a series of them. And he had one who was working when he was there, and then she was a Red Cross donut dolly. And then her tour would be over with the Red Cross, and then they'd bring some other - they'd create a new Bobbie. It was always a feature that the troops loved. I mean, the most popular person in Vietnam was not Westmoreland. It was Bobbie. I'll have to get you all of that. I thought you might know about that. Well, Colonel Jones calls me up one day and he says-- in Saigon, and he says, "I want you to come over and I want to introduce you to this real nice lady, young lady. Oh, she's really terrific," you know. And I said, "Oh, Colonel that's really nice of you but, you know." "No, no no." And I figured, you know, maybe he's gonna introduce me to some

Vietnamese girl or something, you know. "No, no," he said, "I want you to come over." So, alright. So I go over. He was a great guy. Go in. "Oh," he says-- he always had a cigar. "I'm so glad you came." He says, "Now, you know, I just want you to meet her and there's no obligations or anything. You don't have to go out with her." "Okay." So in walks this gorgeous, platinum blonde chick named Bobbie. It's the Weathergirl, okay. And great personality, great figure, the whole thing. So we became an item. Anyway, we dated in Saigon, and she was engaged at the time to some doctor in Saigon. Barry somebody-or-other. I forget his name. And he was in the army, captain, so there was a little competition going on there. She wasn't really engaged. He wanted to get engaged. So anyway, so the reason I just thought of that is when I went to Twentieth Century Fox, Bobbie had left Vietnam and gone to, outside of LA, Long Beach, California and she went to work for, I think, the Queen Mary. Is that the ship they have there that's a tourist attraction or something? And they sell real estate or whatever they did. She went to work for them. She tried to get-- she was a weather girl there. No, she tried to get a job as a weather girl, didn't succeed. In Long Beach. So, I called Bobbie, and I said, "I have an interview at Twentieth Century Fox." Now, I'm back in Hawaii. She's in California. And '68, October I think. And so she said, "Well I'll pick you up at the airport and-- you coming in Friday?" "Yup, yup." "Stay at my place." "Okay, fine." And my interview's on Thursday, she picked me up, whatever. My interview was on Friday. And so I go to Twentieth Century Fox and did a nice interview there. They were very cordial. Told me what I had to do which I found to be really burdensome. Had to join the Director's Guild and could not work on a film until I was chosen by someone to work on a film. In the mean time you waited on tables and try to survive. Well, that was not what I was used to doing in my capacity with the army, etcetera. And so I walked away on that and decided not to do it. And it was very interesting; I saw the set of *Hello, Dolly!* and-- while I was at the studio, and some other sets. And so, I came back on Sunday. My girlfriend was acting a little funny when I was leaving and some other side stories that I probably shouldn't relate. But I was in the airport, and I was calling Hawaii to say, "Okay, I'm on flight so-and-so," so somebody could pick me up. I was in uniform 'cause we could travel half-fare in those days. And she started stepping on my spit-shined shoes. I was very proud of my uniform, it was always spit and polished, and I had my buckle all polished. She started putting her thumb on my buckle. I said you know, "What are you doing? What's wrong? She said, "I don't want you to go." I said, "Oh, I don't want to go either, but unfortunately I gotta-- you know, the army calls, and I gotta get back to Hawaii." And she was acting a little bit strange, and you say, "Well, okay, she

doesn't want me to go." So I go back to Hawaii and I get back to Fort Shafter and I believe it was a Thursday morning, October something. And one of my fellow captains around the corner, Ed McQuiston, is in his office and he yells out a expletive. "Holy F." And I said, "What's wrong with you," yelling around the corner. He said, "Did you see this Stars and Stripes?" I said, "No." He said, "Bobbie the Weathergirl committed suicide." I said, "Oh, no." And that was on a Tuesday and he had seen the-- he had the Thursday Stars and Stripes or something. I couldn't believe it. And then he says-- he was he was a character. He says, "Weren't you just there." And I said, "Yeah, yeah I was." You know. What a shock. And it was just, like, unbelievable. This girl had everything going for her in the world. And I had my suspicions as to whether it was suicide or not, but that's another story, But Colonel Jones, Colonel Jones played a big role in my life, as did Colonel Halloran. Those two guys. Big influence on things that I did.

Clarke: Oh, wow. Well, let's, just for the sake of running out of tape here, 'cause we don't have tape anymore, but there's a memory unit in there that is gonna get full, let's try to do some stuff to kind of close this out as far as like-- 'cause we could go on for a while.

San Hamel: Oh, we could go forever.

Clarke: And if you wanna do more...

San Hamel: No, no. I mean...

Clarke: No, seriously, we've had-- we've had things last...

San Hamel: Yeah.

Clarke: Nine hours.

San Hamel: Oh really?

Clarke: Ten hours. Yeah, so if there's-- if, after you get a hold of this, and you want to do more. After you think about what we talked about, and you want to do more--

San Hamel: Yeah, we're cruising in anyway.

Clarke: I invite you to do more, is my point.

San Hamel: Oh, okay.

Clarke: You know, we've done enough for today, but I invite you to do more if you want to do more, 'cause this is your story and this is what we do here at the Museum and Library.

San Hamel: Yeah.

Clarke: That's kind of our job.

San Hamel: Which is cool.

Clarke: Yeah. We might forget about it the next day that we did it, but this is our job while we're doing it, and we want to do it to the best of our abilities.

San Hamel: That's good.

Clarke: So that's kind of what we're doing. I want to ask you a couple of questions about DASPO in hindsight. You've been one of the key members to keeping, kind of, DASPO together over the years, and you've been one of the organizers. From everything you've told me about yourself today, I can really see why. You know, it seems to be in your DNA to do these kinds of things.

San Hamel: I guess, yeah.

Clarke: And even if you don't remember it the next day. Why do feel it's important to keep this legacy together and going forward for the-- I'm imagining it's for just to stay in touch with the people you served with? But there's got to be a bit of story in there too. I don't want to put words in your mouth.

San Hamel: Oh, no, no. This is our fifteenth reunion. I have only attended one other, which was-- well, I'll take that back, two others. And one was in Washington, D.C., or Arlington in 2011. And I had never been to one before, and I didn't want to go to reunions. I just figured it would be hoakie and-- no interest. They even went back to Vietnam, this crowd, and toured around there. A reunion. But I just want to do it, don't ask me why. I just didn't want to do it. I didn't think it would be fun and da deet da dee. So I finally decided, "Alright I'll go to the one in Arlington." I

did. I had a great time. I enjoyed it totally. And, which was great seeing all the guys again. And so they-- at the end of their reunion they say, "Well, where is the next reunion, and who's gonna do it?" And I said, "I'll tell you what. I'll step up to the plate. Let's do one in Chicago 2012." So I did one in Chicago, and it was great. I enjoyed it thoroughly. And so now we're doing this one too, in conjunction with the exhibit. Perhaps in going to the reunion in 2011, and doing one in '12, I had a rebirth, you know, I-- wow. How come I haven't paid attention to DASPO in all these years? And I hadn't. You know, I get a newsletter every once in a while. And I talked to one of the other officers, who shall be nameless, and he said, "No, I don't wanna go. It's one of those things," he said, "You're gonna have an officer, enlisted man, or situation, it's not good, not healthy." Well, it's just the opposite. Everybody calls everybody by their first name. Rank, no rank, it's not important. And it's good. It's cool. And so I figured I owed it to DASPO. My whole-- not my whole, but much of my career-- much of my life, I owe to that time in DASPO. That's why I'm so indebted to Colonel Halloran and Colonel Jones. They were the absolute best. And I've run into other officers along the way-- not in DASPO necessarily but in other capacities in the military, and I did not, you know-- I never met anybody like these two guys. They were exceptional. And I would throw in General Kinnard, but I didn't know him that well. I just met with him. But anyway, I felt I owed it to DASPO to help keep the legacy alive, and perhaps, you know, in encountering the Pritzker Museum, that really set me off to do what we're doing. I think I told you I went to another museum in Chicago, and I was devastated at the vulgarity and the art thing. It was terrible, and I told them so after I toured their facility. And I told them we were thinking about doing an exhibit, but I would never bring it to you folks, and I told them point blank. Didn't care for their attitude towards veterans and drugs and things of that nature, and that I found the supreme, cream-of-the-crop in the Pritzker Museum. And that's why I contacted you folks to have you do it.

Clarke: Glad you did.

San Hamel: 'cause you guys are a class act.

Clarke: We aim for that. Yes, we do.

San Hamel: You do. You do well.

Clarke: I guess my question to follow up on what you just said about getting, you know, back involved with DASPO after saying, "Eh, you know, I'm not this reunion kind of guy. Leave me alone." And--

San Hamel: Mhm.

Clarke: Now you did it. Now you're kind of, you know, up to your armpits in it. That twenty-twenty hindsight-- this is a twofold question. What does it feel like to have been involved with DASPO to the extent that you were? And that's a summary statement, and then here's the follow up.

San Hamel: Yeah.

Clarke: What would you want somebody who encounters-- like for in the exhibit coming out; they encounter these DASPO photographs, they-- one they're just taken with or the whole thing or whatever. What would you want them to take away-- you know, how does your feeling of what you did and then what you want the public to understand about that feeling? What is-- what is that?

San Hamel: My experience in DASPO, you asked, how do I look-- feel about it or whatever?

Clarke: How do you feel about it all these years later? What is your...

San Hamel: I was totally honored, personally, to be in DASPO. It was a tremendous experience. Could I trade it for anything? Would I? No. People have asked, you know, "Would you do it all over again?" I said, "You bet your ass I would." Absolutely. It was tremendous.

Clarke: What would you want somebody who's a civilian who's encountering-- you know, they might know about the Breedlove stamp if they pay attention to stamps if they're paying attention to stamps in 1999, but they're-- you know, a lot of people are going to encounter these photographs for the first time. They're gonna find them familiar but they're not gonna understand. What do you want them to know?

San Hamel: Well, in putting this thing together, that's been one of my concerns. What will they take away? What will they see? And I just hope that they can look at a photograph and really look at the content of the photo and see if they get the

real feeling of what's there and appreciate what's there. You know, it's easy to look at a photograph and just, you know, "that's nice," and go to the next one. But I think, you know, many of these photographs, if you really look at them, there's a story in that one photograph. And that's what I hope that they take away. You know the real feeling that war's not so pretty. It's not fun. You can make it entertaining or fun if you're in DASPO and being creative. You know, we were fortunate that we were put in that kind of a position where we could move around. And we saw the whole country, we saw the whole war, we saw all the units that were there. We worked with every unit. I hope they take away the feeling that this war thing is not the greatest thing in the world, but look at that photo that guy took. That is really a great shot 'cause it tells me how the faces of war maybe sometimes aren't so pretty. You know.

Clarke: So you want people to get the real story?

San Hamel: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. And I hope they do. I've been-- I have a concern about that. That they will-- please, walk away with the real feeling of what's really in these photographs. You had asked about a favorite photo on the questionnaire or something.

Clarke: Yeah.

San Hamel: And my favorite photo is not gonna be exhibited. And...

Clarke: Why not?

San Hamel: Cause it exists, but it got lost. And it's one of the photos that I took, and I was telling Kat about this. I was with the 1st Air CAV and we were on a search-and-destroy mission. We had surrounded this village at four in the morning or something. And when you walk into these villages, there are no men, teenage boys. It's just women and little kids, 'cause they all know you're coming and they get out of Dodge. And this particular village we went in, there were no males at all in the village. And there was a woman; she had to be seventy or eighty. Some of these women over there, they're really fifty but they look like they're eighty or ninety. They've been through a lot. And she was standing out in front of her hooch-- her hut. Straw. And she was basically dressed in rags. And she was holding a young child who was probably maybe twelve months old, something like that. And the child had, what I assume was, rickets. A bloated belly that was really huge. And next to her, to her right, was a stick in the ground where she had taken the rags that she would clean her home with. And they were old and full of holes, and she had them hanging on the stick. And if you looked at that

stick, it just reminded you of death and the grim reaper. It was just unbelievable. And I see the kid being held with the rickets maybe, probably not gonna survive out in the no-man's land and this death thing next to her, and I couldn't resist taking the picture. And I took it. And unfortunately the negative was lost in Hawaii at Jack Yamaguchi's house, 'cause I had left some things there with Jack. And his wife maybe threw some of my stuff out 'cause she didn't like me leaving a box of goodies there. So it was lost. And that is my favorite photograph from the war. I remember it vividly. And it's one of the rare times that I actually was shooting. And if I could find that photo today-- my kingdom. I would give you my kingdom if I could find it. But I never turned it in to the army, I just-- it was, like, a personal shot. I should have. It was a great shot. Geez. So that's my favorite photograph. The other one's with the little dog on the-- on the APC, you know, where's he's sit...

Clarke: Oh, yeah.

San Hamel: I like that one.

Clarke: That's a good one too. And we're showing that one.

San Hamel: Yeah, that's a good one.

Clarke: Well, is there anything else you'd like to add to what we've talked about?

San Hamel: No, I think I've talked your ear off.

Clarke: Well, no, you've-- that was your job, so you did a good job.