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**DAVID J. GARMS**

*Interviewed by: David Reuther  
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**INTERVIEW**

*Q: Today is the fifth of March. We're starting our conversation with David Garms. David has had a fascinating history on the AID [United States Agency for International Development] side of foreign affairs, but Dave let's start out—when and where were you born?*

GARMS: I was born in 1942 in southwest Minnesota. My parents were farmers. They specialized in dairy, swine production, and poultry. And my dad also was growing soybeans, which was a major cash crop.

*Q: Now, how did they come to be in southwest Minnesota?*

GARMS: My ancestors came from Germany in the 1870s. They eventually wound up in Minnesota and became farmers. My grandfather owned the farm before my dad and my mom. I am a fourth generation American.

*Q: Now, you were born in 1942. So, the war had already started. Were your parents or relatives drafted into the war?*

GARMS: No, my dad, his father was ill and so they gave him an exemption. He didn't go into the military. Also, the government decided that farmers were important for the war effort.

*Q: And you were telling me that while you were still very young, you remember the announcement of the end of World War II?*

GARMS: Yes, I do. I was about three years old, and I remember I was playing outside, and my dad was out in the field cultivating corn, and he had a radio installed on the tractor. So, he heard when the war in the Pacific was over, he came rushing home, and I remember that very vividly.

*Q: Now, it sounds like that part of Minnesota is not very densely populated. Where did*

*you go to school then when you started school?*

GARMS: Well, I started in a one room schoolhouse with no indoor plumbing. I remember the teacher's name was Fern Cunningham and they had all eight grades in one room. I went there only one year. After that school was closed, I went to Sioux Valley high school. It was five miles away from the farm. And that school closed over six years ago. There just wasn't enough—there just weren't any kids anymore. They weren't going into farming. And so, you had a lot of kids who just left the area to go to college and they went somewhere else because the jobs weren't available in southern Minnesota.

*Q: So, but at the time that you were going, there were enough kids to keep the school going up through high school?*

GARMS: Oh, yes. I was in a class of eleven and generally the classes would be no more than about fifteen per class.

*Q: And what was the high school called?*

GARMS: It was called Sioux Valley High School.

*Q: Sioux Valley High School. Okay. Yeah. So, you would have entered high school about 1956.*

GARMS: Yes, that's correct.

*Q: What—let's see if there were eleven of you per class, I presume some were males and some were females, not much of a football team I suspect.*

GARMS: That was in fact a big problem there. It was difficult to get enough players for a football and basketball team.

*Q: Now in those kinds of agricultural environments there isn't much industry available to learn skills and whatnot. But you had an opportunity to pick up some welding skills you were saying.*

GARMS: That's correct. When I was thirteen years old, a guy by the name of Bill Ruser had a welding shop that was not too far away from my parents' farm. And he said he wanted some help with his farming and in the welding shop. So, he trained me, he treated me like he was my father. He trained me in both electric and acetylene welding. I don't weld very much anymore, but I consider myself an expert welder. Ruser was a great guy. He had a kind heart. He repaired farm machinery and earth moving machinery. And for poor farmers, he charged them less, and if you happened to have a lot of money, he would really charge like the dickens. I remember this one time there was this guy who was the owner of the Sather cookie company, which was a big company in Round Lake, a town about five miles away. And he came up one day to Ruser's welding shop and asked Bill if

he could make a trap to catch wild animals on his property. He charged him seventy-five dollars per trap and the guy didn't bat an eye. Sather asked us to make fifty traps. The cost for materials and labor per trap was only about twenty dollars. So, I spent a lot of days making traps.

*Q: Now in high school, were there any teachers or subjects that you quite enjoyed?*

GARMS: Well, I enjoyed both history and geography and the teacher I remember was Mrs. Watson when I was in the sixth grade. I considered her a very stern, but very fair teacher. And so, I remember her quite vividly.

*Q: Now this wasn't—you went into the Peace Corps and AID afterwards, but at that time, about the time you were a sophomore in high school, Lederer and Burdick wrote a book called The Ugly American.*

GARMS: Oh yes.

*Q: Are you familiar with that?*

GARMS: Yes, I am. Absolutely.

*Q: Anyway, you graduated in 1960.*

GARMS: That's correct.

*Q: Went on to a local junior college.*

GARMS: Right. I went on to Worthington Junior College. I went there because it was only fifteen miles away from the farm. And so, I could save money by staying at home. And I drove to the college every day, even in the middle of winter storms. And then when I graduated from Worthington Junior College, I went to Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota, which has been there since the mid-1800s. The college has a strong connection to Sweden. There are various academic years that are spent in Sweden and some Swedish students come to Gustavus to spend a year there.

*Q: Now, when you started junior college in the 1960s the president—that was the presidential election year. Nixon-Kennedy year, did it sort of cross your attention?*

GARMS: Oh, absolutely. I was very interested in the election. Of course, I was not old enough to vote, but I was very interested in the Kennedy administration and what they were talking about in terms of foreign relations and domestic policy. And I was very impressed with the president. And one of the things that he created was the Peace Corps. And so, while I was still in college at Gustavus Adolphus, I started reading news articles about the Peace Corps, and I decided that was something I wanted to do. And so, I applied. I was accepted to go to India, and we had a three-month training program at

Oregon State University in Corvallis, Oregon. We studied the language, Hindi, six hours a day. We also had cultural and history studies regarding India.

*Q: Let's go back to Gustavus Adolphus for a moment. You spent your last two years of education there. What was your major and did you have any favorite teachers?*

GARMS: Yes. I majored in sociology and social work and the head of the department of sociology and social work was Dr. Floyd Martinson. And he was my advisor, and he was an excellent guy. And one of the things I should mention is Gustavus is a private school and it's one of the more expensive schools. And silly me, I didn't have enough money. And I decided I wanted to go to this college. And after about six months, I didn't have money to pay the bills and the registrar, a guy by the name of Ross Bloomquist called me into his office. And he asked why I wasn't paying the bills. And I said, "That's because I don't have any money." And he said, "Okay you just go back, and study and you pay it back when you can, and if you get any notices about bills ignore them and you just continue in school." Later, I found out that he did this for several students that had trouble paying their bills and he had even gotten loans for students from local banks. He was one of the kindest men I've ever met.

*Q: Well, that must've been a load off your back to—*

GARMS: Oh absolutely.

*Q: —be able to pay attention to your studies. I presume you were doing well.*

GARMS: Yeah, I was doing okay.

*Q: But let's go to the Peace Corps. So how did you apply to the Peace Corps? Was that something you noticed on the campus?*

GARMS: Yes, I did. I got an application. I applied and was accepted and went to India. And that was a big challenge because there's nothing in Minnesota that can prepare you or train you to go to India. Totally different culture, diversified country, some very poor people, about two hundred million people are still in the poor category, but also some unbelievably rich people. So, there was a great difference in income earning abilities there.

*Q: Can you give us a sense of how the Peace Corps took you in and how it trained you in preparation for this assignment?*

GARMS: Yes. They had language teachers who were all Indian and I took quite a strong interest in studying Hindi, the language that's spoken in northern India. And I was assigned to Bihar state, which is one of the poorest states in India. And we had some field training also. We went to Walla Walla, Washington, and for one week we did projects with native Americans there. That was a productive experience where I was the head of a

team that was assigned to shore up a well and put a cement cover on it. So that worked out well.

We finished the project in a short period of time. And so, we were talking about what we should do. Should we go and get another activity since we finished this one. The Indian driver, a guy by the name of Henry Bush said, “Well, you could do that. Or you could just go over the hill over there and go to the tavern. Then you can find out more about the community than you would by getting another activity.” And so, we did that, and we had a wonderful time. We got back that night and some guys were complaining about their leadership. They said they were dissatisfied with their leaders. And there were some arguments about that. And they asked my guys about our experience, and they said it was great. They said this guy “Garms knows what he’s doing.”

*Q: Now, let me get this straight. You’ve applied for Peace Corps. You get accepted. How, where, and how do they train you and how did they get you there from Minnesota?*

GARMS: Okay. I took a flight from Minnesota to Corvallis, Oregon. We had a three-month training program at Oregon State University. We studied the Hindi language, had cultural and history studies and training in animal husbandry, primarily in swine and poultry production. We also had some orientation after arrival in India. And after that, my friend, Ken Goodmiller, and I were assigned to a place called Pusa Road in Bihar state and we met with our local advisors.

*Q: Right. Let’s go back to Corvallis for a moment. Was that the center of all training for India, or just a particular program that you were involved in?*

GARMS: Just this program. Oregon State University has good agriculture programs, primarily in poultry and swine production. I was trained in swine production, but one of the things that happened was that I was more of a trainer than a trainee because of my experience on the farm. But swine production was a little touchy in terms of our village, because there were a lot of Muslims. Muslims can’t eat pork. So, we focused on poultry instead, and that was very difficult. The Indian bureaucracy was overwhelming and there wasn’t exactly an outpouring of enthusiasm from the farmers.

*Q: Well, now let me get the timeline straight. You went to Corvallis for your initial agricultural training at that time. Did you already know you were going to India or—*

GARMS: Yes.

*Q: Okay, did you sign up for India or they said, you look like—*

GARMS: No, I didn’t sign up for India. When they asked for a preference I said, you know, “Anywhere in the world.” And so, India at that time had hundreds of volunteers. Our group was number nine. Group number one arrived in 1961. I arrived in 1964.

*Q: So, the Indian program was solid and working forward. Now, how many people were at Corvallis with you? How big was the number nine class?*

GARMS: Okay. It was seventy-two people, all men. And at that time, they had what they called the deselection process where volunteers were interviewed by psychologists and psychiatrists. They evaluated our emotional stability and commitment to India. It was quite traumatic to see friends deselected, both midterm and final term. And I think that was unfair. In later years they stopped doing this. Instead, the volunteers were allowed to deselect themselves, when they didn't think that they were up to it. And then another thing that happened later was they started training volunteers in country. My daughter went to Peace Corps in Haiti, and she had her training in Port-au-Prince. She stayed with a Haitian family, studied Creole, the language, and she was assigned to a mountainous region in the Southern part of the country. Fortunately, my wife and I had a chance to visit her while she was in the village. And we stayed two nights. My wife, who is Sri Lankan, said that after two nights she had had her Peace Corps experience!

*Q: So, group number nine is in Corvallis, and you're being taught these various agricultural programs.*

GARMS: Right.

*Q: And then after Corvallis, what happens?*

GARMS: Well after Corvallis, we flew to New York and got a Boeing 707 flight to New Delhi, stopping in different places along the way like London, Munich, and Tehran.

*Q: Did you get some language training there?*

GARMS: No, not in New York. No, we just got together there to catch the flight to India. We were all on this one flight, all thirty-two of us.

*Q: Okay. Well, you did get some language training though before you left. Was that a Corvallis?*

GARMS: Yeah, that was at Corvallis. All the training was at Corvallis.

*Q: And they were training you in Hindi. So, there must have been enough Indian Hindi speakers in the Oregon area to supply the program.*

GARMS: That's correct. There were even some Indian professors at Oregon State University. They also recruited teachers from California, Oregon, Washington. Surprisingly, there were a lot of Indians on the west coast who were professors at different colleges and universities. The language training was intensive. The only thing that they did not do was teach us the Devanagari script [Hindi writing system]. After I got to India and found out that there wasn't too much that we could do, I started studying the

language more and I started studying the Devanagari script, which I still remember. There was a pundit [Hindu priest] who lived near us by the name of Shastri. He showed up one day and he said, "I'm your teacher." I had never seen the guy before.

He says, "Your Hindi is not very good, but I'm going to teach you. And you're also going to learn the Devanagari script." I did that for a few months, and he really kept on me. A couple of different times, I tried to hide after I was getting tired of his lectures about my Hindi. And so, I remember one day I went into the village and was in a tea shop having a cup of tea. And my teacher sent boys out looking for me, and a bunch of them went into the village bazaar. They found me and as I went back to my quarters. These young boys were teasing me about missing my language lesson.

*Q: After Corvallis you went to India through New York.*

GARMS: Yes.

*Q: You must have gone east.*

GARMS: Yes. Right, that's correct.

*Q: Since I'm from Seattle, I always think you go to Asia over the Pacific.*

GARMS: That's true. You can go either way.

*Q: So, at what point did you realize what part of India you were being sent to?*

GARMS: We didn't find out about that until we arrived in New Delhi. We were assigned to two states in particular, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Bihar is one of the poorest states in the country. It's just grueling poverty. Just enormous suffering. And even though the caste system was outlawed after independence, there still was very much a caste system in place. And people just had to know their place and follow it. Of course, with the Brahmans owning all the businesses and so on, and the untouchables were the ones who did laundry, cleaned bathrooms, and cleaned homes. And so, it was quite an experience. My friend and I got sick several different times, mostly intestinal diseases. My friend, Ken Goodmiller, eventually became very ill. We took him to Calcutta, put him in the hospital and he had a ruptured appendix. So, he was in bad shape, and he spent several weeks there in the hospital in Calcutta. He was later flown to New York and was in a hospital there for a month.

*Q: Let's go back to New Delhi for a minute. You were saying there was a large Peace Corps program. So, there must've been a large Peace Corps staff in New Delhi.*

GARMS: That's correct.

*Q: Orientation, what was that interaction like?*

GARMS: Yes, there was a large staff in New Delhi and in regional offices. Our regional office was in Calcutta. Also, there were officials from the government, officials from the Peace Corps, and officials from the government who were briefing us about India and its economy and history and types of development programs that were being implemented by the government. And that was a time when I also found out that I was assigned to Bihar. And so, I spent eighteen months in this one village.

*Q: Now I got the impression you were sent as teams, you and a colleague.*

GARMS: Yes.

*Q: Was that true for everybody? They were sent out as teams?*

GARMS: That's right. In our group, we were sent out in teams of two, and that's not always the case with Peace Corps. For example, my daughter, she was the only one in southern Haiti that was from the Peace Corps. And so, they don't do the team approach very much anymore. I don't know why.

*Q: Because for your own, you know, adjustment and sanity—*

GARMS: Right. This is true.

*Q: —good idea. Now explain where Bihar is and why it needs your help.*

GARMS: Well, Bihar has Nepal on the north side. Uttar Pradesh is to the west and West Bengal is to the east. The capital city of Bihar is Patna.

*Q: Now, when you went up there, were you assigned to an Indian counterpart or you were just supposed to show up in this village one day?*

GARMS: Well, that's kind of what happened because there wasn't really anybody who we were supposed to have as a counterpart, but we did, eventually have one counterpart. That person was a veterinarian, Dr. Prasad. We took a liking to him, and I kept in touch with him for several years. Unfortunately, he passed away about five years ago. He was a great guy. We learned a lot from him about the village and about the culture. He was also a good teacher.

*Q: Now you were saying that back in Corvallis, you were trained in swine production and whatnot. How did that translate once you got in place in India?*

GARMS: That experience was not used, and other volunteers found the same thing because about 25 percent of Bihar state is Muslim. So, when you have a lot of Muslims around, you don't want to be raising pigs. Muslims can't eat pork. It was taboo. So, we focused on poultry the whole time. We did some experiments with hybrid corn



production. And then we finally got one farmer to agree to establish a poultry unit. And we got hybrid chicks from Bombay. And then the unfortunate thing was there was a cold spell in northern Bihar and all the chickens died. So that's what happened to that project. Believe it or not Bihar is very cold in the winter months.

And the thing is that if it's raining and it's cold outside and the wind's blowing, you need extra clothing on, and of course it's not as bad as southern Minnesota, but it's somewhat surprisingly cold. And then in the summer it's very hot and just at the beginning of the summer, there are these hot winds they call the "loo" and that's just overwhelming to be out in that kind of a situation, but we continued to work, whatever the weather was. We continued to go out into the villages to talk to farmers and they joked about us being—there's an old saying about only the English and mad dogs would go out into the sun in the middle of the day. They started saying the same thing about us, that we were mad because we'd go out with the mad dogs in the village.

*Q: So, it was up to you to find a cooperative farmer.*

GARMS: Oh, yes. That was very interesting to see how they were managing their assets. And still what happened is the people who were well off owned the land. The poor people did the planting and the harvesting of the rice and other crops. Also, there were several vegetable farmers. And so, we were able to get food during the whole year, even though the food was scarce in the area, particularly in the summer. So, we couldn't have any eggs for breakfast. That was just out of the question.

And so, it became quite difficult. And we had a cook who was a Muslim, and he did something that was kind of surprising as he brought us beef. Of course, the Hindu Indians are not supposed to be eating beef because they believe cows are sacred. And so, he would bring that in, and he would cook it for us. And then one day he was cooking and then a guy who was living next door said, "Kya mangte hai," which is "What is that smell?" And so, he didn't say anything. He was a devout Hindu, but that was all we heard from him. But it was rather risky to do that. Not a good idea because the Indians could become violent if they find out that you're eating beef.

*Q: Really, it's that strong a taboo?*

GARMS: Oh yes, absolutely. And it's been a source of friction between the Muslims and Hindus. Sometimes there would be riots between the Muslims and the Hindus because of this.

*Q: In the area that you were in.*

GARMS: Yes, about 25 percent of our village was Muslim. And we had a lot of Muslim friends and there was a Muslim, Maulana [Muslim holy man], who had a tea shop next to the train station. And when we were waiting for our train, we would have our tea there

and the station was close enough to the train station so we could run up to the platform and get on the train.

And one of the things I remember that happened one day. My pundit teacher was with us. Something very unusual happened that day. One of the things that the Hindus don't do is they don't go into Muslim shops. They go into their own Hindu-owned shops. We asked the pundit to join us for tea at this Muslim proprietor's shop. And he did take the tea, but he stood outside. That was something remarkable that happened. He stayed there and had his tea, but he wouldn't go inside the shop.

*Q: But you were saying that you didn't think you made much of a difference?*

GARMS: No, unfortunately, clearly, we got more out of it than what we gave. We tried many different things, and it was hard to get anything done. And the government was corrupt and Bihar state is one of the most corrupt states in the country.

*Q: So, in fact, you were trying to nudge the government into doing things as well as—*

GARMS: That's right.

*Q: —creating—on the part of the farmers.*

GARMS: Right. We tried to work with established government programs and there was one poultry facility about ten miles away from where we were living. And we went out to see the manager one day to see if he could help us get some poultry on the farm to farmers. And what wound up in a short period of time was, he told us if we come back at night, we can have some of the chickens. And so, what he was doing was he was selling the chickens to people who wanted to buy them. He wasn't in the extension business.

*Q: That must've been hard on your morale.*

GARMS: Oh, well, that was, and it was not unusual. Many volunteers faced the same difficulties. And the most encouraging guy was Dr. Prasad, the veterinarian. And he was just a wonderful guy, and we would go to the villages with him to check on the health of livestock. He was a real morale booster.

*Q: Now in the eighteen months you were there, did you have a break, an R&R [rest and relaxation] or go back down to New Delhi or Calcutta or something else?*

GARMS: There was no R&R. We wanted to see the country as much as we could. And when there was a bit of a lull, we would go to Calcutta. We'd save up as much money as we could, and then blow it one night in a restaurant. It was beer and nicely made steaks, which was kept as a secret. If the Hindus ever found out that would have been a problem. And we went down to Bombay a couple of times, went to Goa, went back into New Delhi, tried to get up to Kashmir, but the road was blocked off at that time. I didn't get to

Kashmir until several years later when I was in Bangladesh.

*Q: So, you finished your assignment. I mean, was it always eighteen months?*

GARMS: Yes, at that time it was eighteen months with three months of training in the U.S. So, they ended that program of training at a university or another potential organization.

*Q: At the end of your tour, were you asked to do an end of tour report or some writeup?*

GARMS: Yeah, we did. We all went to New Delhi to share our experiences with the Peace Corps staff. And by the time our tour ended, we were disappointed. So, the get together with the Peace Corps staff in New Delhi was not an exciting experience. It wasn't positive because we'd all been beaten down by the poverty and the corrupt government. It was very difficult.

*Q: Was that a response of other members of the group of nine?*

GARMS: No. There was one pair who established a poultry cooperative in Patna, the capital city of Bihar. And the last I heard it is still in operation today. So that was the most significant success with our group.

*Q: Now did group nine all go to Bihar or were they spread around India?*

GARMS: Just two states, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

*Q: Okay, and how supportive was a Peace Corps staff down in New Delhi?*

GARMS: They were excellent. I remember the director at the time was Brent Ashabranner. He was a wonderful guy. And we also had our regional set up in Calcutta. The head of the regional office was Bill Donovan. He came to see us once and brought his sleeping bag along and slept on the floor along with his assistant Gary Harms.

*Q: Well, so they shared your experience.*

GARMS: Yeah, they were obviously impressed because they wrote a letter to Brent Ashabranner saying that we were doing good work under the circumstances. We subsequently got a letter from Ashabranner expressing his appreciation for our doing an excellent job. But I think they were kind of surprised to see how we were living there in that very limited house, it was very small and of course, no air conditioning, but we had fans. And in the summer, it really got to be hot.

*Q: Now you had a Peace Corps salary.*

GARMS: Yes, that's right. Subsistence.

*Q: But you got your own accommodations and whatnot.*

GARMS: That's right. When we arrived in the village, we had this house assigned to us, but when we traveled, we would try to stay with other Peace Corps volunteers or stay in a hostel that was not expensive. So when in Calcutta we stayed at the Salvation Army hostel. That's where all the volunteers stayed because it was very inexpensive.

*Q: Now this was a time when the Peace Corps and the diplomatic facilities tried to stay apart.*

GARMS: That's correct. Peace Corps was not supposed to be involved in any political issues. We avoided discussing politics in the U.S. and in India as well. Also, at one point we were advised that the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] could not get information from us. And there was one situation where Brent Ashabranner was asked by the CIA station chief in New Delhi if he could contact some volunteers. And he said, no, because it was not something that we could do. And they were very strict about it. They didn't want any complications with the Indian government.

*Q: Now in this kind of environment you're not getting a daily copy of the Herald International Tribune.*

GARMS: That's right.

*Q: Do you have any sense of what's going on in the U.S.?*

GARMS: We had a radio and we used to listen to BBC [British Broadcasting Company]. That was really the only source of news. And we would turn it on every night and listen to BBC. At the time BBC had a station in Colombo, Sri Lanka. And that was the only source of news. There were no papers in English, only papers in Hindi, which at one point I started to read. I did occasionally buy a Hindi newspaper to try to find out what's going on in the country. Of course, one of the things in India is rumors spread very fast in the village. So, every day there would be somebody coming to us to tell us about something that happened in this village or that village, such as who got in trouble with the government and who was identified as a corrupt government officer. And so, we got that information every day.

*Q: Now when did your tour in India finish?*

GARMS: I finished in 1966, later in 1966, I then stopped in Thailand, Hong Kong, and Japan on the way home. After arrival in the U.S. I found myself without a job. And a friend had joined a Peace Corps training program at the University of Missouri in Columbia and had advised me that a position was available. And we were like advisors to this training program. And when the trainees wanted to find out some information about India, they would come to us to ask questions. We attended all the sessions and

sometimes the instructor would ask us for our opinion about something. So that's what we would do.

*Q: So, when you came back to the States, you didn't go back to Minnesota. You went to this other program as a trainer.*

GARMS: I went first to Minnesota. I got a phone call from my friend advising that an advisor position at the University of Missouri was open. And so, I was in Minnesota only a few weeks, I would say three or four weeks.

*Q: And that was for another training group going out. You were the ninth, what was their number?*

GARMS: Oh, I don't know. It was already a higher number. It could be in the sixties or seventies.

*Q: Already?*

GARMS: Yeah. And it was a very difficult group because that was when there was a lot of turmoil in the U.S. There were demonstrations about the Vietnam War in Washington and across the U.S. The group was not very interested in the program, and I don't know why some of them even wanted to go to India because they didn't seem to be overly interested. And it was disappointing to see that. And I think it was because of the political turmoil in the United States at the time.

*Q: So, after that training gig was over, what were your options?*

GARMS: Well, while I was in this training program in Columbia, Missouri, I got a reply from USAID. They had invited me to come to Washington for an interview. So, I flew to Washington and was interviewed by three people. I went back to Columbia and a few weeks later someone from Washington called my mom. And I only called her like once a week. She said that someone from USAID in Washington was trying to contact me. They asked if I would go to Vietnam. And I said, yes. And then I went to the University of Hawaii for a six-month training program. We studied the Vietnamese language about six hours a day and had sessions on Vietnamese history, geography, and customs. Also, people who had been working in Vietnam would stop in Honolulu to give a presentation about their experiences. I really enjoyed this training program.

*Q: After studying Hindi how did Vietnamese feel to you?*

GARMS: It was difficult because Vietnamese is a tonal language. And if you say something with the wrong tone, it could mean something totally different, there are six tones in the Vietnamese language. And a word could be spelled the same way but would have a different marking for the tone. Whether it's a rising tone or a falling tone, or a short stopping tone, you could get it totally wrong. And so, for me, that was a challenge,

but I did learn the language. And when I arrived in Vietnam, at first, I didn't know where I was going to be assigned. And then I heard that I'd be assigned to the Amnesty program, the Chieu Hoi [open arms] program for Vietcong who would return to the South Vietnamese government. They would get paid for their return and if they brought any weapons with them, they would get paid for that too.

One of the things I found in Gò Công province where I was stationed, they had this interpreter. I went to one district one day with him. And while he was trying to translate, I decided that I could do better than him. So, from that point on, I didn't have him come along. I couldn't believe that the whole advisory team was relying on him for translating what was going on and probably got many things wrong in different meetings that my colleagues would have with the government.

*Q: Now tell me again when the training in Hawaii started, just get my dates right.*

GARMS: Okay it started in late '66 and then I went to Vietnam in '67, like about June or July in 1967.

*Q: Okay. And when you finished up in Hawaii did you know at that time, what your assignment was going to be or what they were training you for?*

GARMS: No, I didn't know. None of us found out until we got to Saigon.

*Q: How does one get to Saigon in 1967?*

GARMS: We went across the Pacific, and I think we changed planes in Japan and then flew into Saigon. Yeah, there was somebody there to pick us up at the airport. I was with another colleague at the time who was in my training program at the University of Hawaii, and we were just surprised to see the enormous U.S. presence in Saigon. Americans were everywhere. And I once joked with somebody that the only institution in the country that didn't have an advisor was the zoo and it was run well. They had a good zoo in Saigon.

*Q: So okay, you arrive in Saigon, go to the AID office and they say, "Garms who?"*

GARMS: It was almost like that. It was the CORDS office that we went to because CORDS had recently been established. It was called Civil Operations Revolutionary Development Support. And so, both military and civilians were under this umbrella. An ambassador was the head of CORDS. His name was Bill [Colby] [William E. Colby]. At that time, he was the deputy CIA director and then after he came back from Vietnam, he became the director of the CIA. The organizational setup was good. It's just that the Vietcong were very committed. They were very dedicated. And the South Vietnamese government was quite corrupt and not interested in trying to improve government programs. They were just looking to see how they could rip off the Americans.

*Q: Give me an administrative sense of what this CORDS looked like, because I understand that about 10 percent of the foreign service was stationed in CORDS during that time. And I presume AID is either part of that or a larger part of that. Very mixed structure.*

GARMS: Yeah. Both employees from State [Department] and USAID were assigned to CORDS, and we had a national office in Saigon. Then there were four regions called corps I, II, III, and IV. And Gò Công province, the province I was assigned to was in region IV with the capital also called Go Cong. And I did get a chance to visit several different provinces and was given the opportunity to select which province I wanted. And I selected Gò Công because it just seemed like it was much more exciting than what I had seen in other provinces. And that was a wonderful experience.

*Q: Now Gò Công is close to Saigon.*

GARMS: That's right. It's the first province south of Saigon.

*Q: Why did it strike you as more exciting at that point?*

GARMS: Well, I liked the people who I saw there on the CORDS advisory team. I was impressed with the provincial advisor and the deputy provincial advisor. The provincial advisor was a civilian. The deputy provincial advisor was a military person, Lieutenant Colonel Yasiru Komoto, a Japanese American. And I worked directly for him, and he took a great deal of interest in the Chieu Hoi program and was interested in what I was doing. And in one of my evaluations, he said that I was well suited for this job because of my experience in the Peace Corps, which I was kind of pleasantly surprised to see because the military guys didn't always have a good opinion of Peace Corps.

*Q: Now at the province level, how many, how big is CORDS in your province?*

GARMS: Gò Công had four districts and the people assigned to the districts were all military. In the capital of Gò Công we probably had about twenty-five Americans in different programs, such as public safety, agriculture, and rural development. USIS [United States Information Service] also had an office there. CORDS had rented this huge mansion in Gò Công. All the offices were there except for me. I worked at the Chieu Hoi center. And there were some military officials who were a liaison with the ninth infantry division, which was the division that was operating in a corps IV. And they would sometimes sweep through Gò Công.

*Q: Now the CORDS program itself, you're in the Chieu Hoi program. You said there's agriculture, public safety, rural development, and other individual divisions.*

GARMS: Yes, there was also something called the hamlet rehabilitation program. And most of the programs had advisors and we also had a team of Navy Seabees doing road construction, and it was kind of interesting to see these guys at work. I became their

interpreter sometimes. We also had a Spanish medical team.

*Q: But again, almost like in the Peace Corps, you don't have any authority—save your excellent Vietnamese to get your Vietnamese counterpart to do something.*

GARMS: Oh, absolutely. No authority whatsoever. And I was only twenty-four years old, and my counterpart was a Vietnamese captain, much older than myself. He was in his late thirties, and he was decent when he met me. I once told him that I didn't presume to have all the experience needed to be an advisor to him and that I was sure that he was doing a pretty good job without an advisor, but I said, "This is my job." And so, yeah. And so, he said, "Let's go drink some beer." So, we went to a nearby shop, and we had several bottles of beer after which he said, "I think it'll work out pretty well." So, I was quite pleased, and he wasn't upset that I was twenty-four years old. He liked the fact that I spoke Vietnamese, he was not an English speaker. So, by the time I finished my job in Vietnam, I was a pretty good Vietnamese speaker. And I had to use it every day because there just weren't many Vietnamese around who spoke English, unlike in India, where you have lots of Indians who have English as their second language and are taught English in schools. In Vietnam there were a lot of people who spoke French, a leftover from the colonial days when they got French language training in school. But I'm not a very good French speaker. So I didn't try that route, I took French in college, but did not have enough to carry out a meaningful conversation.

*Q: Now give us some sense of what the Chieu Hoi program was supposed to do and how it was executed in your position.*

GARMS: Well what we tried to do is when the different military units of the province would go on an operation to try to sweep the Vietcong out of an area, we would send some of our employees along with this unit to see if they couldn't talk some of the Vietcong into returning to the south Vietnamese government. That worked out well. And one of the things that happened is when the military units were successful in clearing out an area after that, you would find people returning on their own. And at one point we had, like in one year we had about a thousand Vietcong returned to the government. Then they would have orientation. And they would also have handicrafts and other skills training. We would help these returnees find a job. We worked closely with a Buddhist monk who was very good at trying to find jobs for them. And he took a great interest in the Vietcong returnees, and he sometimes came to talk to them. He was a wonderful man. And my counterpart was also a Buddhist, and he had a deep interest in the people and was very concerned about their welfare.

*Q: What was your office like or the facilities for the returnees?*

GARMS: The center was made from corrugated steel. And there was one brick and mortar structure where we had most of the administrative staff and my office consisted of a desk and a chair in the same room as my counterpart.



*Q: You have written about this experience in a book entitled *With the Dragon's Children* and it gives an excellent portrayal of your circumstances there. But one of the things that strikes me is I take it you had some success when you had Mr. Cat come along and improve the facilities and whatnot that must've made you—I mean, that was an improvement over the Indian situation.*

GARMS: Oh yes, absolutely. I didn't get along with Mr. Cat so well in the beginning, he was a much older man in his fifties and French was his second language. So, we communicated mostly in Vietnamese. And I remember one evening I met him in the market, and he said, "Let's go get a drink." And so, we sat down and had a couple of beers and I told him the same thing that I was, you know, twenty-four years old and I didn't presume to know more than he did about the Chieu Hoi program and about Vietnamese history and culture. And only when I said that, he said, "I think we can work together." He was quite positive about our relationship at that point.

The province got a new program called assistance-in-kind funding. And if there were projects that made sense, we could get this funding. We used it to improve the Chieu Hoi facility, we put up a structure that was over a pond and that became the library. And we had also recruited trainers for automotive repair. And we did that training program. There was another program that taught guys how to be a barber. We also had people come to talk with the returnees on how to start a business. And so that worked out well.

*Q: Now you arrived in July of '67 and January '68 is Tet [Offensive]. How did that go? What happened to your province?*

GARMS: Our province was attacked during Tet. I asked my supervisor if I could stay at the Chieu Hoi center during Tet to give the Vietnamese staff some encouragement. And he agreed. I think if I was him at the time, I wouldn't have agreed, but I did give the Vietnamese much needed encouragement. Our Chieu Hoi center was attacked, it was a ferocious attack, and they were lobbing in mortar, and they were already firing AK-47s into the facility. And my counterpart was very close with the people who had howitzer cannons. And what he did is—[since the Vietcong were right at the fence], he called the first artillery in right on top of the center with what's called VT timing, variable timing, where the shell explodes like fifty feet above the ground.

Well, we were in bunkers and so we were safe. And so, my counterpart walked the artillery out and he first started with 155-millimeter howitzer [artillery gun], and then further out, he went with 105-millimeter howitzer, and he walked them back as they were retreating. He kept launching artillery attacks as they retreated into the mangrove forest. One of the things that the VC [Vietcong] tried to do after a battle was to remove all their casualties. This was so that the Americans and the South Vietnamese wouldn't know what kind of damage they had done. Well, we did find there was one body on the perimeter, somehow, they didn't find this guy. And there was also a machine gun that had been left behind, a Browning machine gun.

*Q: But it wasn't as bad as Huế, down where you were?*

GARMS: No, it wasn't. Yeah, the whole city of Huế was taken over for like about twenty days. After Gò Công, I was assigned to Huế. The Chieu Hoi program was in terrible shape and a lot of the people who were with the Chieu Hoi program were killed. The Vietcong also took over the emperor's palace, and they surrounded the citadel that housed one of the south Vietnamese divisions. And it was a scary scene, and it went on for many days.

*Q: I'm sorry. When were you transferred to Huế?*

GARMS: I went to Huế in '68 and left in '69.

*Q: Then the program you took over in Huế must have been in bad physical shape.*

GARMS: It was, yes. And they were very demoralized. One of the things that I did do with the former Vietcong was collect intelligence regarding the different Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army [NVA] units. Like the U.S. 101st Airborne Division was nearby. And so, when we had information about the Vietcong or the NVA, I would pass that on to the intelligence people at 101st Airborne Division. The South Vietnamese intelligence units also received this information. Each returnee that came in, they did a dossier on him/her. Where had they served with the Vietcong and what battles they had been in.

*Q: What shape was the Chieu Hoi program at that time?*

GARMS: It was disorganized. Basically, what I found was that they weren't doing anything. They were just coming to work and sitting at their desks, and they weren't trying to go out into the villages to spread the word about the Chieu Hoi program. They weren't doing anything. I'm surprised that any Vietcong returned at all.

*Q: So how long were you in Huế then?*

GARMS: I was in Huế for about eight months.

*Q: And was that your last tour then?*

GARMS: While I was still in Vietnam, I was selected for the international development intern program [IDI]. I came back to Washington for six months of training. And then what happened was, since I was single—they were giving the married guys such posts as the Philippines, Thailand, Turkey, and South Korea—I was advised that I was going to go back to Vietnam. I thought this was unfair. And so, I spent the last eighteen months in Vietnam in different offices in Saigon. I met a lot of new people and I started to think about writing a book. I started keeping notes and every night I'd try to write something down, you know, and I didn't get into finishing the book until I got back to the U.S., It was finally published in 1973.

*Q: And it's very good. And I've only just started it. I think we've finished your time in Vietnam. And the next chapter is Bangladesh.*

*This is the tenth of March and we're returning to our conversation with David Garms now. Dave, when we left your province the Chieu Hoi program had been attacked during the Tet Offensive and while the damage was modest, you did get through it. But your book says that you were shortly thereafter transferred up to Huế. I would assume the situation there was much different. Could you tell us what you found?*

GARMS: Okay, basically what I found was there wasn't any Chieu Hoi program at all, and we had to organize it. And my counterpart was not as friendly as my colleagues in Gò Công and it took a while to work with him. And I could see throughout the city a lot of damage, and unfortunately the very beautiful emperor's palace was partially destroyed. A few years ago, my wife and I traveled to Vietnam and were able to travel to Huế. The restoration of the emperor's palace was excellent. One thing I should mention is there's a huge difference between the people of Gò Công and Huế. As far as attitudes, the people in Gò Công are easy going and friendly. But in Huế the agriculture sector is not as productive as in the Mekong delta. And as a result, life is harder in Hue, and it is difficult to establish productive relationships. So, I found my time in Hue to be difficult.

*Q: My impression was one of the targets of the Tet Offensive was the Chieu Hoi programs in each of the provinces.*

GARMS: That's true.

*Q: So, to attack them and perhaps dispatch anybody who had turned themselves in. So how long were you in Huế?*

GARMS: I was there about eight months and then I left in '69. I was selected for the IDI program and went back to Washington for a six-month training program. I rotated among various offices. And in late 1970 I went back to Vietnam where I also had rotational assignments. That was generally a good experience. Everybody I worked with was quite supportive. One thing I should mention is while I was in Washington, I studied French because I already knew Vietnamese.

*Q: So as the intern in Washington, you sorted through the various AID offices there, which one struck you as most interesting?*

GARMS: Well, I would say that the Development Planning Office in the Asia Bureau [Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs] was the most productive. The other assignments were not as useful.

*Q: Well, as you know, in the Foreign Service, they often took first tour junior officers, assigned them to the embassy, and then shifted them around to the different positions:*

*counselor, administration, political, economic. So that sounds like that's what this task performed for you. So, at what point did you go back to Vietnam and what were you assigned to do there?*

GARMS: I went back to Vietnam in late 1970, and again, I rotated among various offices. There was one job I had with the land reform program and working with the chief of that division I produced a Gantt chart detailing the steps needed to implement a land reform program. Then another time I was in the Program Office, which was mostly reviewing requests from the field and taking appropriate action. And near the end of my time in Saigon, I was responsible for a group of Vietnamese students who had come back from the U.S. to get reacquainted with Vietnam. I organized a plane to take them up to Huế. I also organized other meetings. I think that they had lost some of their culture and positive outlook while in the U.S. I thought that they were, in some cases, a little arrogant.

*Q: Along those lines when you were back in Saigon, were there many congressional delegations coming through town?*

GARMS: Oh yeah, there were always some senior officials coming to Vietnam. I was never directly involved in backstopping the congressional delegations. They even had one office just to handle visits of senior officials. I felt that the focus of these visits largely involved meeting with Americans. And Americans were everywhere. Every government department, every agency, every province, every region had American advisors. There were thousands of Americans. At one point we had five hundred thousand troops in Vietnam, and unfortunately, we had a lot of casualties—fifty-eight thousand killed and a hundred and fifty thousand wounded.

*Q: Did you ever come across any of the non-American NGOs [non-governmental organizations]?*

GARMS: I once ran into a guy who was with International Voluntary Services [IVS]. That's the only contact I had with someone with a non-governmental organization.

*Q: And how would you judge the morale of the Americans after Tet?*

GARMS: Well, I think a lot of people were shocked. For the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese Army to organize a countrywide attack during Tet was remarkable. And our intelligence didn't really pick up on this. The fact that the Vietcong were able to launch an attack countrywide on the same day at the same time stunned the Americans. And that's when some of my colleagues started talking about how this conflict was not going to end easily. I think this Tet attack was the beginning of the end of our time in Vietnam.

*Q: Now you departed Vietnam for good in June of '71 and came back to AID. How did you get this assignment?*

GARMS: Well through contacts I was able to get an assignment. It was in the Africa Bureau [Bureau of African Affairs] in the Development Planning Office. I was responsible for overseeing programs in Central and West Africa. I met with the different desk officers for the countries, and I also met with the mission directors and other mission staff when they came into Washington. And I didn't do that for very long. I was there no more than three or four months. I then heard about a new relief and rehabilitation program in Bangladesh. I thought here's a new country and it could be exciting. And so, I went to the director of the South Asia Office, Herb Reese. Herb said he was looking for guys who were in their twenties. And at one point they called it the kiddy corps. We did get some wisecracks from Washington. But we did have good support from TDYs [temporary duty assignments]. The enthusiasm in the mission was incredible. We had great camaraderie. The government was easy to work with. The government was very positive, and we got a lot done and I was responsible for a major education project. We restocked universities with books and science equipment. And we also got into secondary school reconstruction where schools had been damaged during the war. I also studied the Bengali language while I was there. This was useful when I went on field trips.

*Q: So, well because not only were they looking for young activists, but Bangladesh itself was young. It only gained its independence in December of '71. And you arrived there at what '72?*

GARMS: Yes in '72.

*Q: So, everything is new and exciting.*

GARMS: Yes.

*Q: And so, you probably had a great deal of independence to design policies and get things done. How was your budget?*

GARMS: We had two hundred million dollars for relief and rehabilitation projects. We were left with the responsibility to design projects. We had family planning, agricultural production, agricultural research, and education projects. It was a very exciting time to be involved in the design and implementation of new projects. We did occasionally have someone come from Washington to check what we were doing. We had a really committed group. We would often work seven days a week.

*Q: Now, how closely did you work with the embassy?*

GARMS: Very close. I remember in one document you sent, you included something about Frank Wisner. Frank was the econ officer. I went on a few field trips with Frank and since I was a decent Bengali speaker this was helpful for Frank. And he said in that document that you had passed to me that family planning and agriculture production were priorities. It had the full support of the embassy. Wisner made this like a major policy statement with his colleagues in Washington. And so, we had a very cooperative

embassy, our economic counselor came to our weekly USAID staff meetings. Frank also went on field trips with different USAID officers. So, he was fully aware of what types of projects we had and how they were being implemented.

*Q: Can you give us a sense of the AID staffing and command structure? Who is the head of the AID program?*

GARMS: Tony Schwartzwalder was the AID representative. We had a direct hire staff of about fifteen and about another twenty local hire staff. And we had the full range of talents. We had an auditor, we had a program officer, we had a capital development officer, and an agriculture officer. We even had an evaluation officer. So, we had the technical skills to implement the program.

*Q: Now, the State Department was still working with this new situation too. So, there wasn't an ambassador there, but Dan Newberry was the chargé [d'affaires].*

GARMS: That's correct.

*Q: Did you have a chance to interact with him much?*

GARMS: Oh yeah. We saw him a lot. There was a cafeteria in the USAID building and the embassy people would often come across the street for breakfast or lunch. The USAID office and the embassy were close to each other. So, I got to see almost everybody in the embassy daily.

*Q: Now you were saying that the two structures were across the street from each other, the embassy was the old consulate general.*

GARMS: That's correct. But they turned it into an embassy.

*Q: Was the AID building previously there as an AID structure?*

GARMS: No, we were in a hotel, Purbani hotel. We had like two floors in the hotel. It was really a rundown hotel. But that didn't matter to us. At least we had a desk and a phone and something to write on.

*Q: How about your guidance from Washington? Were they closely on top of you or giving you some freedom to adjust to the local situation?*

GARMS: Yeah, they gave us freedom to adjust to the local situation. And the people in Washington had a high regard for Tony Schwartzwalder. He was an excellent AID representative. And I think everybody who was recruited for Bangladesh was very competent and knew their technical area. So that was a very positive thing with USAID.

*Q: Now you're coming out of the Vietnam background. What's the background of the*

*other—of your colleagues?*

GARMS: None of my other colleagues had been in Vietnam. The others had been in different countries like Pakistan, India, and Nepal. One officer had been in Bolivia. The two auditors had been in a regional office in New Delhi before coming to Bangladesh. They did, however, continue to have regional responsibilities.

*Q: Excellent, now what was the assumption of the greatest need in terms of development assistance?*

GARMS: The greatest need was for family planning. At the time we arrived they had a population of a hundred million. You just saw people everywhere. In the cities, in the countryside. They clearly had a population problem. So, we put a lot of emphasis on family planning and fortunately the government was receptive. A very successful family planning program was started. And we had two guys who were family planning officers. And so, we put the technical skills and the budget behind it. And the other area where we made good progress was with agricultural production. Distributing high yielding rice varieties was an important component of the agriculture program.

*Q: In these early days were we also bringing in food?*

GARMS: Yes. While we were there the country faced food shortages and the U.S. did provide PL 480 [Public Law 480] Title I and II food aid. Title II was a grant and Title I was a low interest loan.

*Q: Bangladesh is this new country. It's not even a year old. What would you say about the quality of the Bangladeshi officials that you interacted with?*

GARMS: They were excellent. What had happened is before independence, there were a lot of West Pakistanis in senior positions, and then after India invaded Bangladesh and ended the war, these guys eventually went back to West Pakistan, now Pakistan and what was left was a group of young Bengalis, so our young status in the USAID mission was also in the government. So, for example, the deputy secretary of the Ministry of Education was like in his twenties. So, a lot of these guys were young guys and had been in mid-level positions before, but then were moved up after independence. Very committed.

*Q: You were saying that you and Frank Wisner got around the country a bit. What did the country look like? They must have had infrastructure problems and that sort of—*

GARMS: Yeah, they did—the road system was terrible. An interesting thing was that they didn't have gravel for road construction. So, what they did was use bricks made of clay and they would bust up the bricks and use that for the road surface. Bangladesh is very flat—only a few feet above sea level. The Meghna River flows almost due south into the Bangladesh delta.

*Q: Now do I get the impression your office was in a hotel, so does that mean that your rooms were upstairs, and your office was downstairs in this hotel? Where did you live?*

GARMS: We were on the second and third floors of the hotel and most of us lived in an area of Dhaka called Gulshan.

*Q: You were there for a considerable length of time. Wasn't the normal tour two years?*

GARMS: Yeah. A normal tour was two years, and I came back for a second tour. During my second tour I was recruited for a job in the Program Office in the Philippines. I was assistant program officer responsible for backstopping the agriculture projects. And, while I was in the Philippines, I decided to go to the college of public administration of the University of the Philippines to get a master's degree. And the college of public administration was just a short walking distance from the USAID office. They held the classes in the evening so Philippine government officials could attend. I was able to take my USAID experience and relate it to these people. They were interested in our projects and how they were implemented. They also looked at different Philippine government projects and discussed how to improve the management. Development administration was the major focus for the college.

*Q: Now, before we get over to the Philippines, in August of '75, you had a military coup in Bangladesh. Did that kind of civil unrest create problems for your program?*

GARMS: No, not really. No. I can't say that it did.

*Q: Now, 1976 with the American centennial, big programs everywhere. Did any of that kind of stuff filter down to Bangladesh?*

GARMS: No.

*Q: So, let's go back over this. How did you get the assignment to the Philippines?*

GARMS: I had a friend who was the Philippine desk officer and he got me the job. After three years in Bangladesh, I thought, Well, that's about time to leave for another country. So, I went to the Philippines and had a chance to travel a lot in the Philippines along with the agriculture officers in the mission. And I was impressed with what was being done in the Philippines, particularly hybrid high yielding rice varieties. And IRRI [International Rice Research Institute] is based in the Philippines. They produced some excellent rice varieties, and they were distributing it to different countries. And I understand that in India, this new variety of rice had a lot to do with India reaching self-sufficiency in food production. It was a secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Dr. Swaminathan, who launched the rice distribution system nationwide. He became a legend because he organized the program to get hybrid rice seeds out to the states for the local agriculture extension people to distribute to farmers. India, still to this day, is food self-sufficient.



*Q: It's interesting. You're coming from a new country Bangladesh to the Philippines, which got its independence after the war, and it has a much more stable program. Did you think the program in the Philippines was as professional as it could be?*

GARMS: Yeah, I think so. They had qualified people in the mission and our Agriculture Office was staffed with some excellent people. And there was another office, it was called Rural Development. And these guys also were very well qualified. I think we had the technical skills needed to implement projects and our relationships with the government officials were also very good.

*Q: Now in the Philippines, give me a sense of what the AID mission looked like. Was it as large as Bangladesh or—*

GARMS: Larger, it was a big mission. We had office space in the Magsaysay building, and we were on like four floors. So, there must have been fifty Americans in the mission. And then we had another, probably seventy local hires. And the local hires were very competent.

*Q: How was the interaction with the embassy as compared with Bangladesh?*

GARMS: We didn't really have much interaction with the embassy. The USAID mission director went to the weekly country team meetings at the embassy and kept the ambassador briefed on the program. But the rest of us, no, we didn't have contact with the embassy unless we had something specific that we needed from the consular section.

*Q: Who was the head of AID at that time?*

GARMS: Peter Cody was the mission director.

*Q: Pretty senior guy.*

GARMS: Yeah, he was very senior. He'd been with USAID for probably twenty-five years. The first mission director was Garnet Zimmerly, and he was unfortunately killed in a plane crash. Peter Cody came in after Zimmerly and he had—he was very discerning regarding the program. He had a lot of questions about what was being done and he challenged the different offices to come up with answers on how to improve the program. And when he saw something that didn't look right, he brought it up and he went after it. I considered him to be a very good mission director. He listened to the younger people in the mission. He had an interest in getting feedback from the younger people. And so, we sometimes got together with him to talk about what we thought about the program and how we could improve it.

*Q: And you think he listened and acted on some of those suggestions?*

GARMS: Yes, he did, a very committed officer.

*Q: Now, you weren't in the Philippines very long.*

GARMS: No, I was in the Philippines for about a year and a half.

*Q: That's a little bit unusual. That's not a full tour.*

GARMS: That's right. Well, I transferred mid-tour from Bangladesh, so I had like six months left on my second tour in Bangladesh and then went to the Philippines. I left the Philippines early to take up the India desk officer position in Washington. The USAID program had just restarted under a new government. Morarji Desai was the prime minister. We had a two hundred million dollar program in India and India is so vast that you've got to be selective in terms of what you want to get into. You had to be focused otherwise you could get sidetracked.

*Q: Well, now it's Peace Corps in India. You must have had some strong observations.*

GARMS: Oh yes, absolutely. I did.

*Q: Give me a sense of when you came back to Washington to work on the India desk.*

GARMS: It was a period when there were a lot of new projects being implemented in India. It was a new program. Indira Gandhi had shut it down. And then when the new Desai government came in, they wanted to restart the program. Also, President Jimmy Carter was very interested in the program. We tried to look for high impact opportunities. And we had—there was a dairy development program in Gujarat, and agricultural research in all the states. There was also a family planning project.

*Q: Now as the India desk officer what's your typical day look like? What are the tasks, the portfolios, that you're paying attention to?*

GARMS: Okay, well everything that had to do with USAID Washington would come to the desk officer and it's everything from a program input to handling somebody's transfer to Washington or transfer to India. If there's some issue that needs to be ironed out, I would do that. During my time as a desk officer, there was a pressure to hire one guy who had been with the Ford Foundation but lost his job. I was tasked with getting him on board and that was not easy. It was a political decision, came from our assistant administrator and my office director said, "Get this guy on board anyway you can." So, I did that. And I got some flak from the Personnel Office. I told the guy later what had happened. And he said he knew about it. He later became the mission director in Sri Lanka.

*Q: This is John Sullivan?*

GARMS: No, this was Brown, Dick Brown. John Sullivan was the assistant administrator for the Asia Bureau.

*Q: Now, how is the desk you are sitting on organized, who is the director, office director?*

GARMS: Well, the office director was Priscilla Boughton, a very experienced officer. She was a real taskmaster. She was after us every day of the week. She didn't let anything slide. And if you were delayed with something you were reminded of the delay. On the positive side, if there was an issue that I couldn't resolve, she got involved. It was also very convenient to have an office director who was well-connected politically. She knew senior people and was able to get things straightened out quickly. I accompanied her on several visits to the White House.

*Q: Now this bureau I think is Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka, who were the other desk officers then?*

GARMS: Okay, the Bangladesh desk officer was Joan Dudik-Gayoso. The Sri Lanka desk officer was Jack Miller.

*Q: Now in the Washington area, would you be associating with the FSO [Foreign Service officer] side of the India desk and whatnot?*

GARMS: Oh yeah, we did. We also got involved in outside organizations like the Asia Foundation and the Asia Society. We went to their meetings when they'd have some speaker coming in to talk about India or any other country in South Asia.

*Q: Now in late '79 the Russians move into Afghanistan.*

GARMS: Right.

*Q: Does that send waves through the policy toward India?*

GARMS: Well, if anything, the India program took on a greater priority because of Afghanistan. And of course, Pakistan became very important in the cross-border program. The Afghanistan mission staff were based in Pakistan and some of them would cross the border.

*Q: No clever smuggling there?*

GARMS: Yeah.

*Q: Now again you have also in late '79 in Iran, the Iranians seize the American embassy—*

GARMS: That's right.

*Q: —and I suspect that was quite distracting.*

GARMS: Yeah, it was distracting. It was a very shocking thing. And then when President Carter tried to undertake a military intervention that turned out to be a disaster that added more to our disappointment regarding the handling of the Iran crisis.

*Q: Now, you were on the desk through the 1980s and yet late 1980s there was an American election and a shift in administration.*

GARMS: Right.

*Q: What does that mean for you as the desk officer? What is it looking like with a new administration coming in?*

GARMS: The political appointees were generally at the assistant administrator level, the head of each bureau. The rest of the organization was not involved with any other political appointees. There were a few who were assigned at office level, but not many. The administrator and deputy administrator were of course political. And when we shifted from the Carter administration to the Reagan administration, we didn't really miss a beat because our programs weren't challenged. Our office director was able to present an excellent face for the India program. And she had all the details at her fingertips. She had contacts in the White House and in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building. I went with her to these meetings.

*Q: And those are basically information sharing meetings, policy meetings?*

GARMS: Yeah, that's correct.

*Q: Just to sort of summarize things, you moved from Peace Corps, India through Vietnam, to the Philippines. Now you're on a desk in Washington, does being in Washington look attractive or being in the field look attractive?*

GARMS: Being in the field is more attractive. So, when I arrived in Washington for the assignment, I tried to keep it as short as possible. The first thing I did was look for another job overseas. And that's how I got from the India desk to Malawi. Someone had tipped me off that there was a position open in Malawi and so I went after it.

*Q: Okay. And now are these sort of—you went after this job sort of informally or—*

GARMS: Informally.

*Q: —by corridor reputation, you just mention the personnel guys and say, “Hey.”*

GARMS: Right, exactly. I had a friend who was connected with the people in the Africa

Bureau. And so, he had recommended me. I went for an interview, and it worked out okay. In early 1981, I left for Malawi.

*Q: Now let me ask this, back in Washington, do the different bureaus have different corridor reputations?*

GARMS: I think that the corridor talk among the bureaus was the same. The corridor talk focused on individuals who had a solid reputation. Information regarding the problem makers got around very fast—hallway communication was very robust. And so that's how a lot of things happen. That's how decisions are made. That's how you found out about new positions overseas. So that's what I did. I tried to stay connected with a lot of people, so I could get an insight on when there were new jobs opening up overseas.

*Q: Now, the Malawi job started in 1981. What time did you arrive? And let me ask you this. How does one get from Washington to Malawi?*

GARMS: I arrived in early 1981. The flight to Lilongwe usually went through London and then took a direct flight out of London to Lilongwe the capital city. But when I was there, Lilongwe, the capital city airport was just being constructed. So, we initially went through Blantyre, which is a large commercial city in the south. We then flew in a smaller plane going up to Lilongwe.

*Q: Now, when did you arrive in Malawi?*

GARMS: We arrived in January 1981. We came to Malawi halfway through the school year and so my children had quite an adjustment to make. But they did okay, they adjusted quite quickly to Malawi.

*Q: It must suck because you were there for several years, five, six years?*

GARMS: Yes, five years.

*Q: That's wonderful. Now, give me a sense, you're arriving, is AID in its own building or is it in the embassy? What's the physical setup?*

GARMS: USAID had its own building. And the first building we were in was rather shabby. After about six months we moved to another building that was just recently constructed. And we occupied one floor of the building. It was a beautiful building. The comparison between the two buildings was rather stark.

*Q: How about your housing arrangements?*

GARMS: In Malawi almost all the houses were owned by the U.S. government. And when the new capital of Lilongwe was being built, we had someone in the embassy with foresight. Funding was acquired to purchase these homes at reasonable rates. And so very

few homes were rented.

*Q: Were these compounds or individual houses spread around town?*

GARMS: There were no compounds, only individual houses. There was a fence around each property. And the yards were huge. We needed a gardener to take care of the yard and mow the grass every week.

*Q: Or play a football game.*

GARMS: Yeah.

*Q: So, who was the head of AID at that time?*

GARMS: A lady by the name of Vivian Anderson. The ambassador had some problems with her performance. He asked Washington to have her removed, I then became the acting AID representative. And I held that position for about two and a half years before they got another person in there by the name of Sheldon Cole.

*Q: Okay. So how big was the AID office at the time that you were acting?*

GARMS: We had a program of about fifteen million dollars annually, which was mostly focused on agriculture and education and the development of cooperatives. We had three American direct hires and five local-hire Malawians. We had a University of Florida technical team in support of our agriculture project. We also had a person there from the Cooperative League of USA, John Bilderbeck. He was an excellent officer and we really made progress in organizing farmers' cooperatives.

*Q: How was your relationship with the local government?*

GARMS: Our relationship with the local government was very good. They were all very competent. So, we didn't have any problems working with the government. So long as we were straightforward and we were able to articulate whatever the issue might be, they were responsive. They would return the telephone calls! In some countries that doesn't happen, such as in India.

*Q: At what level in the Malawi government were you working?*

GARMS: I was working primarily at the deputy secretary level. Sometimes I would meet with the secretary, the deputy minister, but most of the time it was a deputy secretary and the secretary of that government ministry. And they were responsive. They liked our program. They were quite satisfied with it. They had no complaints.

*Q: Were there many of their officials that had been educated in the UK or the United States?*

GARMS: Yes, there were some people who had been educated in the U.S. and some in the UK. But also, a lot of them were graduates of the University of Malawi in Zomba. And one of the other things I should have mentioned about education in Malawi is that it's difficult to find qualified local staff. And so, what we had to do was get someone who had graduated from high school and train them. They were called secondary school leavers. And so, we trained one lady in administration. We had another lady who oversaw the participant training program. We found that when I was there, we had problems with some of the male employees. We had to let them go due to drinking problems. So, I made the decision to only hire women.

*Q: That would be your FSNs right?*

GARMS: That's right.

*Q: Now was the American AID program the biggest one in the country, or were there others working in the country?*

GARMS: No, our program wasn't the biggest. The biggest program was the British aid program. One of their activities was called the supplementation scheme where the British would double encumber a position where they didn't think a Malawian was sufficiently trained.

*Q: Did the World Bank have a major program there?*

GARMS: Yes. The World Bank did. We didn't have a resident World Bank representative, but they came out from Washington frequently. We communicated with them every time they came out. We would have meetings to discuss what they were working on.

*Q: Did these different aid organizations—programs all do education, you do farming, or each was focused on its own mix?*

GARMS: Well, there was quite a bit of coordination and then there were monthly meetings with donors. And so, we tried to find out what they were going to—what projects they were going to start. And so, we wouldn't start a program in the same area. And sometimes we would cooperate on a particular project like the agricultural college. We had technical consultants in the agricultural college, and the British also had consultants there. The college was called the Banda Agricultural College. It was named after President Hastings Banda.

*Q: How close did you work with the embassy itself?*

GARMS: I was very close with the embassy. I was very friendly with the DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission]. I was also very friendly with the ambassador. I was his contact person

for tennis. And sometimes he'd call me late in the day and say, "Can we play some tennis?" And usually, we would play doubles. So, I would get on the phone and line up some players. And if they were hesitant, I said, "The ambassador wants to do this. Let's go." So, I never had a problem. All I had to say was, "The ambassador wants this to happen, we're going to do it." So, we'd show up and play several games of tennis. After we finished the ambassador would bring out a container with beer. And we sat there and drank beer for a while and got up to date on scuttlebutt.

*Q: Did you get much of a chance to travel around the country?*

GARMS: I did. I traveled quite extensively throughout the country. However, I did not get to the farthest point in the north.

*Q: Now currently other areas, African neighbors were having a lot of political problems, Mozambique particularly, was there a refugee problem?*

GARMS: Actually, this is an interesting question. There actually was not a refugee problem. The only thing that happened was a couple of Portuguese farmers came to Malawi and tried to start farming there. They brought their equipment across the border. And so, they must've had some backup reserves because it's not easy to start from scratch in farming in Malawi. Most of them decided to get into tobacco farming. Tobacco is a big cash crop in Malawi.

*Q: Also, Malawi has—encompasses—has on its border a lake, Lake Malawi. That's almost the entire length of the country. So, there must have been quite a bit of fishery programs.*

GARMS: Yes, there was a big fisheries program in the country, but it was not USAID supported. The lake was about an hour's drive from Lilongwe. And the embassy had a house there on the lake shore. And so, whenever you wanted to go there to stay for a while and go boating or swimming, you could use that facility. So, it was on a first come first serve basis.

*Q: Now, looking back on your own experience, was there a Peace Corps presence in Malawi?*

GARMS: Yes, there was, and I should have mentioned this. We worked closely with the Peace Corps, and I became friendly with the Peace Corps director and deputy director. They had several volunteers involved in the agriculture sector. They also had volunteers in the health sector. We coordinated closely with the Peace Corps. They complemented our program.

*Q: So, it sounds like a little more cooperation than in the larger—well, India was such a large country you probably already saw a heavier Peace Corps presence.*



GARMS: Yeah, that's correct. There were at one point something like a thousand volunteers in India, a huge program.

*Q: Now, you were there so long you had the opportunity to work with two different ambassadors, John Burroughs and Weston Adams.*

GARMS: That's right.

*Q: How would you compare their approach to running the embassy and interest in your programs?*

GARMS: It was like the difference between night and day. The first ambassador, an African American by the name of John Burroughs, was a career person. And he was a very sharp guy. He really, he knew how we should coordinate with donors and how to keep in touch with donors, how to work with the government. He was interested in the USAID program. We had weekly country team meetings. We'd get together in the embassy and give the ambassador an update on what we're doing, and he would also share information that he might've gotten from Washington. The next guy, Weston Adams, was a political appointee. He knew nothing about Malawi and didn't seem to want to learn. Genta Hawkins Holmes, the DCM at the time, tried to train him, but he had his own firm ideas about what was supposed to be done. And I would say we were not well-represented by this guy, unfortunately.

*Q: Any problems come up?*

GARMS: Well, he was not really interested in finding out what our USAID projects were about. And he was not interested in traveling to see any of our projects. He didn't have a particularly close relationship with the government. And our earlier ambassador really had excellent connections in the government, and he kept on good terms with senior government ministers and secretaries.

*Q: Genta Holmes then—*

GARMS: Right.

*Q: —You know the business about where your DCM comes from, generally ambassadors are given the opportunity to select their own. How Genta got to post you understand?*

GARMS: Bob Kott was the earlier DCM, and I had a very good relationship with him. Genta Hawkins Holmes came to post before the political appointee ambassador came in. Genta had quite a job to try to enlighten him, try to get him to understand the culture, understand conditions in Malawi, and how to deal with government officials. He was not popular with the mission staff or with the government, unfortunately.

*Q: Now, his assignment comes at the start of the second Reagan administration.*

GARMS: That's right.

*Q: As a political appointee. Now you were saying that the government had moved its center from Blantyre to Lilongwe. But we left one officer there to take care of consular issues or—*

GARMS: That's correct.

*Q: That was the major business center of the country.*

GARMS: That's correct. It was the largest commercial area in the country.

*Q: Did you get a chance to get down there?*

GARMS: Oh, yeah, I went down there several times. It's a long drive, however. It takes five hours to travel from Lilongwe to Blantyre.

*Q: What was the quality of the roads?*

GARMS: Roads? Pretty good, actually. Certainly, a lot better than India. The Philippines was comparable as far as having good infrastructure. But the roads were fine.

*Q: When Adams departs post, Dennis Jett is then DCM chargé [d'affaires], what was he like to work with?*

GARMS: I left before he was assigned.

*Q: And when did you leave Malawi?*

GARMS: It was in the summer of 1986. I went back to Washington and became the Mozambique desk officer. I didn't really like that job. So, I went to Pricilla Boughton who was again the director of the Office of South Asian Affairs. And the Sri Lanka/Nepal/Maldives desk was going to be open, the person who had the job was leaving. So, I went to her and asked if I could get that job. And she agreed. And then the Africa Bureau didn't want to let me go. So, I started out working a half day in the Africa Bureau and a half day in the Asia Bureau. It was unworkable. Pricilla called the director of the Office of South African Affairs and said, "This is not acceptable. You need to find somebody to take over David Garms' position in your office."

*Q: That was the Mozambique desk.*

GARMS: Yes, the Mozambique desk. I did get a trip out to Mozambique once and got around in the country. I went down there in late '86 while the war was still on. The only way you could get the different district headquarters was to fly in. So, I went to several

different districts to see what was going on with the USAID program. The USAID representative was Alan Silva.

*Q: Now Mozambique was almost 50 percent of the border with Malawi.*

GARMS: That's right.

*Q: So, you're going to the neighboring country, but it's in great civil turmoil.*

GARMS: Yes. Mozambique was a mess.

*Q: What was the focus of our programs in Mozambique then?*

GARMS: It was largely education and health. And in health, we had some NGOs that were involved in the health sector.

*Q: So how long were you on the Mozambique desk from summer of '86?*

GARMS: I was only on the Mozambique desk for about six months. I wanted to get out of there. I didn't care for the office. My supervisor was a good guy, but the office director was rather slow. You'd finish a memo and put it on his desk for clearance and then you don't get it back. I usually had to follow up with him to get him to focus on it. In the meantime, people were calling me about the action, not the director.

*Q: Because you'd been in all these hard charging, new environments, like Bangladesh and whatnot. So, when did you get on the Sri Lanka desk?*

GARMS: I started at the Sri Lanka desk in August of 1986. I also covered Nepal and the Maldives.

*Q: Okay cause if you started Mozambique in the summer of '86 and were there for six months that almost put you in '87 for the—*

GARMS: I don't remember the timing here, but I think I arrived on the desk late in '86.

*Q: Okay. That's close. Okay. Well, Sri Lanka is a major program. I'd like to stop here and pick that up at the next go round. How about that?*

GARMS: That sounds fine.

*Q: It is March 18. We're returning to our conversation with David Garms. David, we had you at the—back in Washington after long field trips. And if you're like me, you just want to be out in the field—*

GARMS: Oh yeah.

*Q: —not where it is. But you managed to get yourself a job as the Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Maldives desk officer in Washington. Moving to this new office, can you give us a sense of how it was organized and what your responsibilities were?*

GARMS: Okay. Well, our director was Priscilla Boughton and I had worked for her before when I was the India desk officer. There were desk officers for Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan. And after Priscilla, John Pielemeier became the office director. Both Priscilla and John wrote some good things about me in the evaluations. And I got promoted into the Senior Foreign Service, which was very nice. During my time on the Sri Lankan desk the most significant thing was the Indo-Sri Lanka peace accord, where Rajiv Gandhi and J.R. Jayewardene signed this accord to bring peace in the northeast with the Tamil Tigers [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam]. And thousands of Indian troops were sent to the northeast and reportedly, many Indian troops were killed.

After this heavy loss, and no peace in sight, Sri Lanka's President Ranasinghe Premadasa requested the Indians to leave. Then an interesting thing happened, I asked some Sinhalese about this. They viewed it as our guys beating up on the Indians. There's not a lot of love lost between the Indians and the Sri Lankans. In response to the accord, the World Bank organized a pledging conference in Paris. I led the effort to come up with the U.S. pledge amount. I coordinated with State [Department], AID, OMB [United States Office of Management and Budget], the embassy in Sri Lanka, USAID in Sri Lanka, and the Sri Lankan embassy in Washington. I was able to come up with a total of seventy-five million dollars for our pledge in less than three weeks. Fifty million was for grant funding and twenty-five million was for PL 480 Title I funding. I went to Paris for the pledging conference and the Minister of Finance Ronnie de Mel thanked me personally. I learned later that this was at the request of the Sri Lankan ambassador with whom I had a very good working relationship. Three months after that, I went to Sri Lanka to discuss the implementation of the accord with the Ministry of Finance, the embassy, and the USAID mission. While in Sri Lanka the Ministry of Finance organized a luncheon for me. Again, this was at the request of the Sri Lankan ambassador.

In 1986, after the United National Party won the election President J.R. Jayewardene pushed for a market-based economy and major reforms. Our focus was on the private sector. We created a stock market and provided technical assistance for privatization of government parastatals. We also provided funds for the Mahaweli region. Our emphasis there was on rice production with hybrid, high-yielding seeds developed at IRRI in the Philippines.

*Q: Let me ask, at this point when you were in this pledge situation, was the framework for how this assistance would be used already set or was there flexibility at that point?*

GARMS: No, everything was not fixed. We looked at new projects and a big emphasis was on the private sector. Assistance didn't go to the northeast due to the war and because

the government's focus was on the Mahaweli region. Probably more should've gone for the northeast, but it was too dangerous. So, government officials couldn't get out in the field to talk to the Tamils about implementing projects.

*Q: In '88, you yourself then were assigned to Sri Lanka to implement.*

GARMS: That's right. After about three months and while I was there, the Tamil Tigers increased their activity. [Velupillai] Prabhakaran was the head of the Tigers. Another terrorist group was the JVP [Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna], which translates into English as the people's liberation front. It was a marxist terrorist group that focused largely on increasing attacks in the south. Now the JVP received weapons from the tigers, which was an effort to start a second front. President Premadasa asked his Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Defense to take on the JVP because he said he couldn't handle two insurgencies at the same time. And the government organized, well, it was apparently government policy, but it was very under the radar. And that was a program of sponsored death squads that went out and targeted JVP.

It was reported that in the middle of the night, white vans would come out and capture these JVP officers. And after that, no one would ever hear from them again. And my wife, Barbara, told me of one case where she knew for sure that there was a guy who talked critically about the Sri Lankan government. The white van picked him up and he was never seen again. During my time in Sri Lanka the Tamil Tigers and the JVP assassinated several government officials. They assassinated the minister of defense, the minister for the Mahaweli and the commander of the navy. The general in charge of the northeast was also killed. What happened was a vehicle with a bomb went to the headquarters for the northeast and detonated the bomb. Parts from the vehicle landed in our yard. And a friend of mine who lived nearby, found himself picking up body parts and undertaking the gruesome task of burying these. So, it was a very shocking situation.

*Q: So, this is a bomb attack in the capital?*

GARMS: It was in the capital. Yes, that's right.

*Q: The embassy and AID must've been very security conscious.*

GARMS: Oh, absolutely. We've met almost every day to talk about security. And we were particularly concerned because we had a technical assistance team in the Mahaweli. And the Mahaweli borders the northeast province. We kept talking every day to get updates on the security situation. At one point the ambassador was almost ready to bring all technical consultants back to Colombo, but he didn't do that. I kept in touch with the consultants every day.

While I was in Sri Lanka, I was also responsible for the Maldives. The Maldives had a serious windstorm, and a lot of houses were damaged. I went down there to do an assessment and I met with the president and the president asked me if I was getting the

help I needed. And I said, “Yes.” He had assigned a man to work with me on the assessment and as a result it became a joint assessment. Upon return from the Maldives, I gave a briefing on the situation. We received three hundred thousand dollars from the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance in AID/Washington. It was approved in less than forty-eight hours. And so, we really came across looking pretty good there.

*Q: Now. Tell me about the structure of AID in Colombo, who was chief and deputy, I mean, where were you in the organization?*

GARMS: I was the chief of the Program Office, and we had an Agriculture Office, a Project Development Office, a Management Office, and a Controller’s Office. The director at the time was Peter Bloom. The deputy director was George Jones. Peter Bloom was later replaced by Dick Brown, who unfortunately passed away recently. Then just before I left for Rome, Italy, which was my next assignment, the office had organized a farewell for me. But on the day of the farewell, the president was assassinated by someone who had been in his company for many years. He had a suicide vest on. Needless to say, the party was canceled. My new assignment in Rome was to serve as the U.S. representative to the United Nations World Food Program.

*Q: Let me stick with Sri Lanka for the moment, who was the ambassador?*

GARMS: Marion Creekmore was the ambassador and later Teresita Schaffer became the ambassador. The DCM was Don Westmore. They were excellent people. I had good working relationships with all of them. At different times I was the acting USAID director or acting deputy director. So, I attended several country team meetings, and everybody was there, the military, USIS, and the economic and political officers.

*Q: Well, now you started in Colombo in '88, but that year was an American presidential election year, and the Bush administration came in. Was there any policy change by virtue of the presidential change?*

GARMS: Well, the only thing I would say is that there was a greater emphasis on private sector development. And since the country had been a socialist country for a long time, there was a lot of work to be done in the private sector. And so that was a major portion of our program. There was no change in personnel. Marion Creekmore remained the ambassador and Donald Westmore remained the DCM.

*Q: Now let me ask this, sometimes external events cause waves in other countries—’Cause I’m just noticing that the Desert Storm campaign to kick Iraq out of Kuwait was in '91. Were there any reverberations in Sri Lanka from that event?*

GARMS: Not really. The only thing that happened was that the Iraq Tea Board closed its office. The Iraqis like Sri Lankan tea. But I must mention one funny thing that happened on April 1, April Fools’ Day. The newspapers, even the government newspapers, had many totally unrealistic stories. It was all just a big joke. The front page of a newspaper

had a picture of Saddam Hussein with the title, “Saddam Hussein seeks a residence in Sri Lanka.” And we had one guy in the embassy who thought it was true.

*Q: Apropos to a question I just made, you were in Sri Lanka from '88 to '93.*

GARMS: Yes.

*Q: In '92, there was again, another American election and the Clinton administration came in in '93. Did that seem to make any policy change at your end of the highway?*

GARMS: No, there wasn't. There wasn't any policy change that I noted. Again, I would say that there was strong support for the portfolio because of the strong emphasis on the private sector and on the Mahaweli. I should mention one thing about the Mahaweli. Under the USAID-funded Mahaweli project high-value fruit, such as papaya and pineapples, was produced. Much of these fruits were exported to Singapore and to the Middle East. So anyway, that's just another example of an emphasis on the private sector.

*Q: Did you, because of the insecurity, were you able to travel around Sri Lanka any?*

GARMS: No. For several months we were required to stay in Colombo. After the JVP was largely defeated the country was opened again, except for the northeast. It was still very dangerous there. The farthest I ever got to the northeast was to Trincomalee, which is a port city just south of the northeast province.

My next assignment was Rome, Italy as the U.S. representative to WFP [United Nations World Food Programme]. I was responsible for the oversight of about five hundred million dollars in assistance that came from State, USAID, USDA [United States Department of Agriculture], and even the Department of Defense [DOD], which provided a grant to WFP to distribute food to the Kurds in northern Iraq. Our chief of mission was Bill Marsh. The deputy chief of mission was Frank Burnholtz and later John Egan McCateer. The USDA person was Frank Vacca. The other USAID person was Hugh Smith. He was responsible for overseeing the International Fund for Agriculture Development [IFAD].

During my time in Rome, we faced five major food aid emergencies. The first involved assistance to Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The second major food aid assistance project was for Bosnia. I helped organize a military food airlift and airdrop. During a meeting with the prime minister of Bosnia I accompanied the executive director of WFP, Catherine Bertini. The prime minister advised that the airlift and airdrop were crucial in Bosnia's survival. The third major event was for assisting refugees in the Democratic Republic of the Congo [DRC]. After the Rwanda genocide about one million Hutus fled to the eastern DRC. We also had an interesting request from North Korea for food aid via WFP. J. Brian Atwood, the administrator at the time, didn't want to see this approved. So, then we took the position that this is a UN [United Nations] organization delivering the food. We should be helping any country that is facing a humanitarian crisis. In this case,

there was a severe drought in North Korea. Then a strange thing happened. The boat carrying the U.S.-funded food sank on its way to Pyongyang. And then J. Brian Atwood wanted to cancel the food aid grant. We then had to advise him that we can't do that because WFP is self-insured, and they've already replaced that shipment.

I should mention one other thing about being in Rome and that is people like to visit Rome. Anybody who has anything to do with Italy wanted to visit. On average I had about 150 visitors per year, and many of them were senior officials. So, this required meeting them at the airport, getting through customs and immigration and getting their luggage. We also had to schedule meetings with senior United Nations officials. All this was very time consuming. During these visits we had to set aside our other work.

*Q: Actually, now you made the interesting point that WFP was a UN organization. You're a U.S. government official assigned to work with a UN organization because we're a major donor.*

GARMS: Yes. We're the largest donor to WFP.

*Q: Well, as you were saying, there's—you're under UN direction, but U.S. people can fuss a little bit about the program.*

GARMS: Yeah, we did have a group of people who were very anti-UN. The UN organizations were criticized all the time. And we also got our share of complaints about WFP, which was under tremendous strain because of all the disasters in Rwanda, Burundi, the DRC, Sudan, Bosnia, Armenia, and other countries as well.

*Q: Let me ask, is the U.S. support for WFP consistent year after year, or it can vary?*

GARMS: It's pretty much been consistent. It's been running out about five hundred million dollars per year.

And then after Italy, I returned to Washington and worked for the Office of Food for Peace for two years. My responsibilities included Haiti and Central and West Africa. Subsequently, I worked for a private company called Keys and Associates. The president was Art Keys. I also helped him create a new voluntary organization called the International Relief and Development. And I became the director of program development. We had a portfolio that went from zero to sixty-five million dollars in nine months. Most of it was for medical assistance to Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. After that, I became the Washington representative for the International Fertilizer Development Center, which is based in Muscle Shoals, Alabama. One of my major assignments was to evaluate a fertilizer marketing program in Afghanistan. While I was there, we were in the middle of a firefight. We locked our office and asked that everybody stay away from the windows. The fighting eventually stopped. It had gone on for about three hours. We never did find out who was fighting whom. Anyway, that was a little unnerving.



*Q: Now, wait a minute. Where was this happening?*

GARMS: Afghanistan, in Kabul.

*Q: Oh, in Kabul, okay, because let's see, how long were you in Rome? When did you leave Rome?*

GARMS: I left Rome in 1997.

*Q: Okay. And did you retire at that time or—?*

GARMS: No. I continued to work for USAID in a contract position for two years in the Office of Food for Peace.

*Q: Because you'd already retired.*

GARMS: Yes, I was no longer a direct-hire USAID officer. Then for a short period of time, I worked for Refugees International, and my most significant assignment was to carry out a food aid assessment for Eritrean refugees in Yemen, and for displaced persons in Eritrea. At that point, I retired completely, and my wife and I bought a 223-acre farm in the Shenandoah Valley. It was a farm that was in a great state of disrepair. And I spent many years putting in fences and restoring a 200-year-old house and a 130-year-old barn. It was hard work, very time consuming and expensive. The farm is listed as a historic site in the National Park Service registry and on the Virginia registry of historic places. We sold the farm on June 1, 2021.

*Q: Oh, and what are you raising or growing on this farm?*

GARMS: It was primarily grass-fed livestock.

*Q: Interesting. Now let me ask you this, looking back over your career in AID from Vietnam to Rome, AID has changed over the years.*

GARMS: Yes.

*Q: How would you describe those changes and why would they—where were the changes originating?*

GARMS: Well Congress is still raising questions about our programs. This was often because a constituent would write a letter complaining about some country or some project. So, this hasn't changed. The usual changing of the guard between administrations still takes place. Well, one major change was the reduction of direct-hire AID officer positions and the hiring of contractors. This became very expensive, but I don't see this changing anytime soon.

*Q: Well, I'm asking that in part because when I was in Thailand in the 1970s the AID guys that I interacted with were water specialists installing pumps and whatnot. But later AID seemed to be moving—having less people in its roles and going to contractors.*

GARMS: That's correct. The hiring of contractors to do work previously done by direct-hire employees. This policy change started about ten years ago and by the time I arrived in Sri Lanka this conversion to contractors was well underway. This policy change is not very cost effective. Direct-hire employees would do a better job and at less cost.

*Q: And at one point would you say it was abandoned or significantly changed? Wasn't it Jesse Helms or am I thinking at USIA?*

GARMS: The USIA was under attack by Jesse Helms. He was also after USAID. He had staff who would comb all the documentation that was related to USAID, and they'd come up with even as minutiae, like say, a single project in a country that he didn't think was appropriate. Also, the policy that USAID missions must buy American vehicles and not vehicles from other countries, mostly in Japan. If this wasn't feasible, we would have to do a justification explaining why we couldn't buy American vehicles. This of course begs the question as to what an American-made vehicle is these days. Toyota, BMW, and Volvo now assemble cars in the U.S.

*Q: Because you have the issue there of maintaining the vehicles.*

GARMS: Oh absolutely.

*Q: In Thailand, all the automobile mechanics were familiar with Japanese equipment, not American equipment.*

GARMS: That's correct. The only country where I saw U.S. vehicles being used was in Botswana.

*Q: That's the one. Interesting.*

GARMS: Yeah. I went down to Botswana. I didn't mention that earlier. I went down to Botswana to help create a strategy for southern Africa. The USAID office in Botswana is a regional office. So, backup support was provided to the different missions in southern Africa.

*Q: And are you still working on your farm?*

GARMS: Well, we actually sold it on June 1, 2021 to a family that wants to get into grass-fed livestock. One of our considerations was that we were no longer able to work long hours on the farm, which we bought about twenty years ago.

*Q: What kind of people are coming into AID these days? New hires or—*

GARMS: The new hires, there is a heavy emphasis on having a master's degree or a PhD degree in a technical field. And there's much greater emphasis on diversity. The last few years there's been a strong emphasis on recruiting minority persons, such as African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans. As far as I can see that effort has been successful. One of the things that I've continued is mentoring new hire USAID employees who are in the field.

*Q: Helpful and interesting program.*

GARMS: Yes, it is.

*Q: I think we have gone from India to Vietnam to Rome. This has been very interesting and very helpful.*

GARMS: Okay. Well, thank you. I've enjoyed this.

*End of interview*