

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

Recruiting 22 Vietnamese Language Teachers In Vietnam

By retired FSI Associate Dean:
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A SURPRISE TELEPHONE CALL

I was shaving early one morning in our house in Yokohama and the telephone rang. I was getting ready to go to the FSI Japanese language school nearby, where I was Assistant Director. It was early 1966 and the Vietnam War was raging. The telephone call was from Dr. James R. Frith, Dean of the Foreign Service Institute School of Languages, and Dr. Eleanor Harz Jorden, Chair of the Asian Language Department.

The essence of the call was that enrollment in Vietnamese language training for multiple government agencies and the US military had exhausted the supply of Vietnamese language instructors in the US, and they wanted me to go to Vietnam immediately to recruit 22 Vietnamese language instructors as soon as possible. Of course, I agreed, as surprised as I was by the call and the request.

Why me? I had received six months intensive Vietnamese language training at an intelligence agency in the Washington, DC area while enrolled in Georgetown University for a BA in Japanese.

I was hired by FSI in September 1962 for the vacant position of Assistant Director of the FSI Japanese language school in Tokyo. My career at FSI started off in a sort of training capacity. They had a category at the time called Junior Linguist, which was more in principle than practice. We had a professor of linguistics at the time, sort of emulating a university structure. Junior linguists came in and were tutored to a degree on the reality of language training and were given certain assignments to carry out. I would say in principle rather than in practice because the needs of the service and the workload put that on the back burner quickly.

A few months after I joined FSI in September 1962, with my first overseas assignment to be as Assistant Director of the FSI Tokyo Japanese Language and Area Center, the war in Vietnam caused the FSI Vietnamese enrollment to go from six students to sixty! Although I was not actively involved in overseeing the increased training, because of my knowledge of Vietnamese, I was fearful that my Japan assignment would be canceled,

and I would be held back at FSI to work with the expanded Vietnamese program. Fortunately, my assignment to Japan held firm.

The sixty new students were Air Force medical personnel. A question came up from the Air Force training officer about whether the students should be taught Northern or Southern Vietnamese dialect. His point was that many of the government officials had come from the north and spoke northern dialect. Dr. Jorden responded that the Air Force personnel would be stationed in the provinces where everyone spoke southern dialect. The training officer was reluctant to accept this decision and called Dr. Jorden again. This time he said that he had heard that there were only 30 medical terms that were different between Northern and Southern dialects. Dr. Jorden, with her unique sense of humor, responded: "Well, that depends on whether you consider bedpan one word or two!" And so, the medical personnel were taught southern dialect.

My other contact with FSI Vietnamese language training was when I had my home leave curtailed so that I could assist in the Vietnamese language program at FSI for the summer of 1965, working under Dr. Jorden. The supervisor for Vietnamese training had been sent on special assignment to Vietnam for the summer and so my services were needed.

Considering all these factors, I was the logical one to send to Vietnam to recruit teachers.

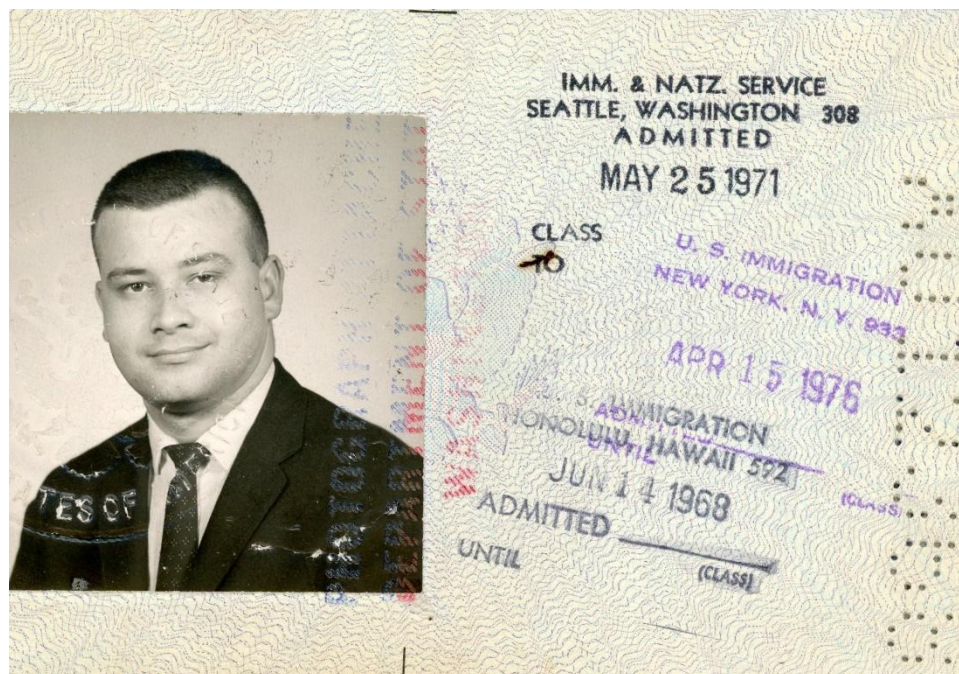
FSI had a Regional Language Supervisor for Southeast Asia assigned to Bangkok, but they were unable to contact him. Later, they found he was out in the provinces in Thailand, recording the language of a Montagnard tribe. That would have been interesting work for a scientific linguist no doubt but bore no relation to his assignment as FSI Regional Language Officer. So, with no way to contact the person who would have been the logical one to go to Saigon for the instructor recruiting assignment, they turned to me.

TRAVELING WITH A DIPLOMATIC PASSPORT

As a Foreign Service Reserve Officer, I was issued a diplomatic passport when we were sent to FSI Tokyo in 1963. The passport below contained all the visas from my travel to Japan and Korea, and then Vietnam and other countries in SE Asia, and elsewhere, with twenty-four added pages because of my extensive travel.



Left: My diplomatic passport Right: My Vietnam visa



Inside page of passport

ARRIVAL IN SAIGON

I left almost immediately for Saigon. Checking in at the US Embassy, they were expecting me and assigned someone in the Personnel Office to assist me in the recruiting effort.

One of our first steps was to place advertisements in the Vietnamese newspapers. Responses began to come in. As the calls would come in, interviews would be scheduled at the Embassy. I recall one case where I was informed that the interviewee was at the bottom of the stairs outside the Personnel Office and was unable to climb the stairs. He turned out to be permanently in a wheelchair. I interviewed him at the bottom of the stairs but concluded that he was not a strong candidate.

I don't recall any candidates with experience in teaching Vietnamese. We had to rely on education, sufficient English, personality, and a prediction of how each would perform as a Vietnamese teacher.

One male candidate was older and had served in the Vietnamese army. He had good English and appeared to be a good candidate for the job.

Female candidates outnumbered male candidates, but we wanted as many male instructors as we could find, with mostly female instructors at FSI Arlington at the time.

As the days went on, I was able to choose more and more candidates. Once a decision was made, I sent each candidate to the visa section for an interview. Before long, the visa officer called me into his office. As I recall, the candidates were being considered for initial two-year visas. But when he asked one candidate how long he planned to be in the US, he said, "As long as they want me." The visa officer explained to me that such an answer would disqualify a candidate for a visa, and I should coach each candidate to answer the question with: "Yes, only two years".

I had made my twenty-two selections, but the bureaucracy was bogged down. No one could estimate when the selected candidates would be cleared to travel to the US. No one would travel to the US anytime soon. To save FSI the cost of another commercial air fare, I took a space available flight on a US Air Force plane back to Japan to await the time when my return to Saigon could be productive.

The pilot viewed me with great suspicion saying, "I don't like to have civilians on my flight. In case of emergency, with all military personnel, I can confidently know that everyone will obey my orders without question." I assured him that I was ex-military and would obey his orders also. He allowed me on the flight. As it turned out, my fellow passengers were dead US soldiers in caskets.

After some weeks back in Yokohama waiting for the bureaucracy to do its job, I got a FLASH cable from FSI! "Proceed to Saigon at once!"

Well, a FLASH telegram is the most urgent category within the Department of State. The Department's definition is as follows:

“ FLASH—The highest precedence designation, reserved for the most urgent telegrams containing information vitally affecting the conduct of foreign relations and requiring instant attention by the addressee, regardless of the time of day or night. Hostile action is imminent.

I got the earliest commercial flight to Saigon possible. In hindsight, I regretted not saving the FLASH telegram.

As we were preparing to land in Saigon, suddenly the plane began rocking and there were flashes outside the window that I feared were gunfire or rockets. It turned out to be only my anxiety and a severe thunderstorm. We landed safely.

As the first four instructor candidates were cleared for travel, I ended up taking them with me on my return flight to Tokyo, with the instructors to stay overnight, spend one day in Tokyo, then take a flight to Washington DC. Below are photos as we prepared to depart Saigon.



At the Saigon Airport
John Ratliff is to the far right of the four Vietnamese instructors



Boarding the plane for Tokyo
Flight attendant is second from the right
John Ratliff is in front of stairs on left

Once in Tokyo, I escorted the instructors to their hotel. They spent their day shopping and being awestruck by bustling Tokyo. Accustomed to smaller streets in a SE Asian city, their walking pace was not fast enough to cross both sides of traffic at a traffic light, having to stop on the island between the lanes to avoid being run over.

“The captain”, as I will call him, the older gentleman with service in the Vietnamese military and travel outside of Vietnam, led the way on their day in Tokyo. He wanted to buy electronic equipment, so they ALL bought electronic equipment.

With another group, when they arrived in Tokyo, my wife Diane and I showed them around downtown Tokyo and took them out to eat at our favorite restaurant near the Mantetsu Building, the US Embassy annex.

The other recollection I have is when my wife Diane and I were seeing a movie in a Yokohama theater and, at the intermission, a call came on the public address system for John Ratliff-san to come to the office. Well, we learned a Vietnamese instructor had landed at the Tokyo airport with no money and no ticket to the US. Someone called the US Embassy for him, and someone from the Embassy called our house. Our maid answered and told them we were at the movies. After the call, we went to the airport and “bailed him out” and had him on his way to Washington the next day.

Eventually, all 22 Vietnamese instructors arrived in Washington to begin teaching. One instructor was a surprise. When interviewed in Saigon, she kept silent about her US military boyfriend in California. As soon as she arrived in Washington, she called her boyfriend and left immediately to join him. She did not teach a single day.

TRANSFER FROM YOKOHAMA TO BANGKOK

While recruiting Vietnamese language instructors in Saigon, I made a weekend trip to Bangkok and in fact met the Regional Language Supervisor who couldn't be found when he was needed. Upon my return to Yokohama, I wrote to Dean Frith and Department Chair Jorden and volunteered to transfer to Vietnam to a position that did not exist at the time, with the knowledge that families were not permitted in Vietnam and had to be safe havens in places like Thailand or the Philippines. The FSI response to my volunteering for assignment to Vietnam was to immediately recall the incumbent Regional Language Supervisor to FSI Arlington to run the Vietnamese program and assign me to his Bangkok position, effective January 1967. Thus, my family would be with me at my home post in SE Asia.

Not only that, but Dean Frith also wrote that after the completion of my two-year Regional Language Supervisor assignment in Bangkok, I would return to FSI Yokohama as Director. I could not have been happier.

AN EARLIER OPPORTUNITY TO WORK IN SAIGON

When I was in graduate school at Georgetown University on a National Defense Education Act Fellowship (all tuition paid, plus a stipend to cover the cost of living and other expenses), I received a call from an official at another intelligence agency. I was invited to lunch at a nice restaurant and the purpose of the lunch became clear soon.

The intelligence agency where I had studied Vietnamese full time had given my name to the other intelligence agency. Over a nice lunch, the representative asked if I would consider joining their agency, with immediate assignment to Saigon. He offered a specific starting salary.

I explained that I was in graduate school on a fellowship but if my country needed me, I would seriously consider the offer. His answer stunned me: "Don't do it for loyalty to country. Do it for the money!" I said the money wasn't enough, and I returned to my graduate classes. No more than a year later, I was hired by the Foreign Service Institute School of Language Studies, to go to Japan as Assistant Director of the FSI Japanese language school, still in Tokyo at that time.

TRANSFER TO BANGKOK TO THE RLS POSITION

In January 1967, my wife, our four sons, and I boarded a plane for Bangkok. We were fortunate to find a luxury hotel with a large suite that the US Embassy would pay for, while we searched for housing. We were quite comfortable there. However, after about two weeks, we were informed that we would have to leave because movie actress Jayne Mansfield was coming to Bangkok and had a reservation for our very suite! We moved to a cheaper hotel with less space for a couple of weeks. Sadly, a few months after visiting Bangkok, Jayne Mansfield was killed in an automobile accident in the US.

FINDING A HOUSE

We finally found a house that was not so far from the US Embassy and would be large enough and comfortable enough for our family of six. We hired two housekeepers and a yard man, all of whom lived in servants quarters behind the house.



STUDYING THAI

Near the US Embassy was a language school called The AUA Language Center—American University Association. It was funded by the US Embassy and the Thai government and offered language classes for Thai and English. Since I had no knowledge of the Thai language, I felt I should receive some short-term intensive Thai training before my regular travels to Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries. Working with the Embassy personnel office, we were able to build a class of six: One army sergeant, one secretary from USIS (United States Information Service), two officers from AID (Agency for International Development), and my wife and I. The classes were overseen by Dr. Marvin Brown, who not only spoke fluent Thai but had a knack for explaining the Thai language in a way that students gained confidence in learning, even before classes began.

I remember an orientation session by Dr. Brown, who helped relax the fears of students to conquer a language like Thai. He told the story of a woman who told him, “Dr. Brown, I understand Thai is a tonal language. I can’t learn Thai because I am TONE deaf (with the accent on TONE)”. Dr. Brown responded, “I could understand your concern if you had said in an even sentence, “I am tone deaf”. But you said you are TONE deaf, which PROVES you are not tone deaf and CAN learn Thai.

I was in the class for six weeks but others in the class continued for an additional three weeks. By then, with my formal linguistic training and knowledge already of Japanese,

Korean, and Vietnamese. I felt confident enough to get around the city, including taking taxis, etc. and overseeing the Embassy Post Language program, consisting of part-time classes for Embassy employees.

PREPARING FOR MY FIRST TRIP TO VIETNAM AS RLS

The time had come for me to make my first trip to Saigon. Knowing of the dangers in Vietnam at the time, I purchased war zone life insurance so my family would be taken care of if I was killed. I also felt I needed a pistol to protect myself. Fortunately, a classmate from my intensive Vietnamese training in 1960, who was also stationed in Bangkok, loaned me one of his pistols, a Walther PPK, which was quite popular. He loaned me ammunition as well.



Walther PPK

I contacted the Embassy in Saigon, planned the time and activities of my first trip as RLS, and departed from Suvarnabhumi Airport outside Bangkok for a flight to Saigon. I had my Walther PPK and ammunition in my briefcase.

We made a stop at the airport outside Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Although some passengers debarked and others joined the flight, as a US official with a diplomatic passport, I could not debark because there were no diplomatic relations between the US and Cambodia.

We landed at Tan Son Nhat Airport outside Saigon. An Embassy car was there to meet me. After getting in the car and beginning the drive to Saigon, I loaded the pistol in my briefcase. I don't recall taking the pistol into the American Embassy, but I did have it with me on most other occasions.

I was shown to an office where a senior officer from The Agency for International Development (AID) was in charge. This was to be the office I worked from. There was an American administrative assistant who would assist me during visits. Because of the incentive pay that had been established for Vietnamese language proficiency of US government employees, my priority was testing the Vietnamese proficiency of those employees requesting tests in Saigon and at US Consulates.

After interviewing several Vietnamese candidates to assist me in administering Vietnamese language tests, all of whom were women, I selected the most promising one, and began training her for testing. She came from a very strict family and when we traveled to consulates that required overnight stays, while I stayed in a hotel, her family contacted a relative in that city with whom she could stay.

And so, the testing began. As far as I can recall, I would have scheduled a trip to only one consulate each time I flew to Saigon unless there were two along the same route. We would test all personnel who requested it and after evaluation, send the results to FSI.

A TRIP TO FSI

After a few such trips, I was asked to travel to FSI for consultation. Officials there wanted to make sure that my testing and scoring were consistent with those at FSI. Apparently, they were satisfied. In returning me to post, they asked me to travel to the Island of Hawaii – The Big Island - to administer Vietnamese tests to about forty USAID (United States Agency for International Development), who were in intensive Vietnamese language training there.

A VISIT TO MY HOMETOWN OF HAMMOND, LOUISIANA

On my way from Washington to Hawaii and then back to Bangkok, I stopped by my hometown of Hammond, Louisiana to visit with my parents. I told my mother that I needed to buy a pistol to protect myself on trips to Vietnam. She told me that she had my grandfather's Smith and Wesson pistol, and I could have it if I wanted it. My uncle told me that my grandfather had carried it on the front seat of his car. He would have had the gun between about 1910 and 1942, so it was quite old.



Smith and Wesson Safety Hammerless 38 caliber
(Called the Lemon Squeezer because you had to squeeze the grip for it to fire)

Having no ammunition for it, I went to the department store in my wife Diane's hometown of Amite, 16 miles away, and bought ammunition there. I then went to the Tangipahoa River nearby with the pistol and ammunition and practiced shooting into the riverbank. I had hunted with my father as a teenager – deer and birds – but had never fired a pistol before. I became comfortable with it, packed it in my luggage and proceeded to Hawaii to administer Vietnamese language tests to about 40 AID students at their training center on the big island of Hawaii, requiring a flight from Honolulu to Hilo. I was met by an AID official and taken to the training center, which as I recall, was located near fields and fields of pineapple.

The testing went smoothly, and I was invited out to a nightclub one night by training center personnel where I found wild boar on the dinner menu. I ordered some and liked it!

BACK TO HONOLULU

I stayed one day in Honolulu and was able to have lunch with a Georgetown University Japanese language classmate, Harry Takane, and dinner with Dr. John Young, the former head of my Japanese language training at Georgetown University, who had moved to the University of Hawaii.

BACK IN BANGKOK

The day after arriving back in Bangkok, I sought guidance at the Embassy where I was assigned and went to a Thai government office to register for a permit for the Smith and Wesson pistol. For an American with diplomatic status, it was quite simple. I returned the Walther PPK I had borrowed to my former Vietnamese language classmate.

I then flew to Saigon, with the pistol and ammunition in my briefcase. The next day, with the guidance of US Embassy personnel, I also registered the pistol in Vietnam.

VISITS TO OTHER COUNTRIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

As Regional Language Supervisor for Southeast Asia, in addition to Thailand and Vietnam, my territory covered Laos, Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and the Philippines. I made only one trip to the Philippines in two years, finding little language training going on there. Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia were usually covered in one trip.

Burma was usually a trip by itself, as was Laos.

Burma was not open to tourists in the late 1960's so very few foreigners were seen in Rangoon. There were two Burmese language instructors teaching in the Embassy Post Language Program.

Travel to Laos was typically by train from Bangkok to Nong Kai, on the Mekong River, with Laos on the other side. A ferry would take me over to the Laos side, where a US Embassy car would take me to Vientiane. These days, a train and a bridge can take you to Vientiane.

The Administrative Counselor told me when I arrived that an embassy car was always available for me, even if it was not job related. It was a nice welcome to Vientiane.

I GET THROWN OFF THE TRAIN IN UDORN

On one return trip from Vientiane, I experienced an unexpected problem in Nong Khai, where I was to board the train to Bangkok. When I arrived at the station, the gates were not yet open to passengers for the Bangkok bound train. I had a reserved seat on the train. I walked across the street to the bar and had a beer. When I returned to the gate at the train station, I was told they had sold my ticket because I did not arrive at the gate in time. This was still long before the train was to depart.

Well, I did not have enough money to pay another fare on the train and they would not give me credit for the canceled ticket. So, I bought a ticket to Udorn, where I knew there was a US Air Force base. When I got off the train in Udorn, I counted my money and saw that I had enough money to take a cab to a hotel and a cab to the Air Force base, where

there was a Bank of America, but not enough for the hotel stay. I had my Bank of America checkbook with me. The next morning, I took a taxi to the Air Force base, cashed a check at the Bank of America, took a cab back to my hotel, where I now had enough money to pay the bill, then went to the train station and bought a fresh ticket to Bangkok. It was a weird experience that I vowed to never repeat for the rest of my life.

LATE JANUARY 1968 – THE TET OFFENSIVE

I had planned to make another trip to Vietnam in late January 1968, but the US Embassy in Rangoon, Burma requested my presence. So, I flew to Rangoon, vowing to visit Vietnam shortly after my return from Rangoon. While I was in Burma, the North Vietnamese army and the VietCong launched attacks all over South Vietnam, including Saigon. An attack was made on the US Embassy compound in Saigon. Four US MP's and one US Marine were killed. The attackers were killed but were able to get into the embassy and an apartment complex, where a Viet Cong invader was killed by a resident while protecting his apartment.

There were no flights into Saigon for some time until the situation was brought under full control. Once that happened, I traveled to Saigon again, heading for the US Embassy. The first thing I noticed was a car that had been driven by Viet Cong soldiers but were repelled by Embassy guards. I personally took the photos below.



US EMBASSY IN SAIGON



Viet Cong car outside US Embassy



Another view of Viet Cong car

After the Tet Offensive, my trips to Vietnam and other SE Asian nations continued until our return to Yokohama in the summer of 1969. I was Director from 1969 to 1974.

RETURN TO FSI

In the summer of 1974, my family and I left Yokohama for the United States and FSI. I had served a total of nine years at the FSI Japanese School for Language and Area studies, first as Assistant Director and then as Director

FSI IN 1974

Upon reporting for duty at FSI in late summer 1974, I found myself in charge of Vietnamese language training. With the Vietnam Peace Talks and reduction in US military personnel, the number of students had dropped dramatically from a peak enrollment of close to 600 students. There were no more than one or two classes.

SAIGON FALLS

Saigon fell to the Viet Minh on April 30, 1975. Vietnamese refugees began streaming into the US. With no immediate prospects for service in Vietnam, and a humanitarian crisis of refugees, all Foreign Service Officers in Vietnamese language training under my supervision were sent to Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania to use their Vietnamese language skills to assist the refugees.

That was the end of my connection with Vietnam and Vietnamese, which started with my Vietnamese language training in 1950, twenty-five years earlier.

I was assigned to supervise German language training for a period of about one year and named Assistant Dean for overseas Programs In 1976. I became Associate Dean around 1982, served as Acting Dean once or twice, and retired on immediate annuity at age 50 in 1985. Of my twenty-three years of service with FSI, my assignments involving Vietnam and Vietnamese consumed a total of about four years over a period of almost twenty years. I think back on those years with pride and hope that I was able to make a small contribution to the needs of the Foreign Service.

End