

LAOS

COUNTRY READER TABLE OF CONTENTS

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| Franklin E. Huffman | 1956-1958 | IVS French Interpreter, Vientiane |
| Elden B. Erickson | 1956-1958 | Economic Officer, Vientiane |
| Leonard L. Bacon | 1957-1959 | Deputy Chief of Mission, Vientiane |
| Rufus C. Phillips, III | 1957-1959 | Operations Officer, USAID, Vientiane |
| Gilbert H. Sheinbaum | 1957-1959 | Disbursing Officer, Vientiane |
| Christian A. Chapman | 1958-1959 1959-1962 | Political Officer, Vientiane Desk Officer for Laos, Washington, DC |
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| William W. Thomas, Jr. | 1962-1964 | Economic Development, USAID, Vientiane |
| Leonard Unger | 1962-1964 | Chief of Mission, Vientiane |
| George M. Barbis | 1963-1966 | Analyst for Laos, INR, Washington, DC |
| Thomas L. Hughes | 1963-1969 | Director, Intelligence and Research, Washington, DC |
| Mark S. Pratt | 1963-1968 | Political Officer, Vientiane |
| Charles William Maynes | 1965-1967 | Economic Officer, Vientiane |
| James R. Lilley | 1965-1968 | Deputy Chief of Station, Vientiane |
| Ernest C. Kuhn | 1965-1975 | Operations Officer, USAID, Vientiane |
| Joseph A. Mendenhall | 1965-1968 | Director, USAID, Vientiane |
| Nicholas A. Veliotis | 1966-1969 | Chief of Political Section, Vientiane |
| Paul E. White | 1966-1970 | Colunteer, International Volunteer Services, Vientiane |
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| S. Douglas Martin | 1967-1970 | Chief of Economic Stabilization, Vientiane |
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| Charles E. Rushing | 1969-1971 | Political Counselor, Vientiane |
| John M. Reid | 1971-1974 | Director, Binational Center, USIS, Vientiane |
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| Richard W. Teare | 1974-1976 | Political Counselor, Vientiane |
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| Theresa A. Tull | 1983-1986 | Chargé d'Affaires, Vientiane |
| Marie Therese Huhtala | 1990-1992 | Office Director, Vietnam, Laos & Cambodia, Washington, DC |
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Marie Therese Huhtala

1996-1998

Director, Office of Burma, Cambodia, Laos,
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DC

THOMAS J. CORCORAN
Chargé d’Affaires
Vientiane (1950)

Thomas J. Corcoran was born in New York in 1920. He entered the Foreign Service in 1950. His career included positions in Spain, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Washington, DC, and an ambassadorship to Burundi. Ambassador Corcoran was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1988.

Q: I want to come back now to what you were doing. This gives an idea that it was a complex situation. You were sent to Saigon as what?

CORCORAN: Initially, there had been a consulate in Hanoi and a consulate general in Saigon. As I understand it in the old days, during the hot season, the government moved to the north, and consular representatives would follow them there. But when the war ended, we maintained a consulate in Hanoi and a consulate general in Saigon, two consular posts. Then in 1950, when the French union concept was being established, the other two countries, Laos and Cambodia, had their own problems. Laos had also been divided into three parts, Luang Prabang, the kingdom in the north, Champassak, the kingdom in the south, and Vientiane, a sort of expired kingdom, in the middle, which was under direct French administration. The French union concept was that these three separate countries, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, would be members of the French union, each with its own monarchical form of government, a king in Laos, a king in Cambodia, and the ex-emperor of Annam, who was supposed to be accepted as the ruler of Vietnam.

As part of supporting this, in 1950 we agreed to diplomatic recognition of each of these countries, and we sent one minister, Donald Heath, who resided in Saigon. He kept a small branch office with a junior officer in Vientiane and one in Phnom Penh. So I first went to Saigon when it was a legation, and I was a political officer. I was, at that time, a third secretary. But after a few months there, I was sent up to relieve the man who was in Vientiane. I became the chargé d’affaires of legation at Vientiane, with the proviso I didn’t get any extra pay, because the Department realized this was a special situation. I spent about eight months there.

Q: What sort of work were you doing there?

CORCORAN: The whole general work of the embassy on a small scale. The minister would come up there from time to time to call on the king and prime minister. In the meantime, I, as the chargé d’affaires, kept in touch with the government and with the French commissioner, who was also there, and occasionally saw the king on ceremonial occasions. I also coded the

telegrams and typed the letters.

Q: So you had an exalted title, but you actually were doing everything.

CORCORAN: A one-man post. I had one Thai National, who was sort of a general messenger and office clerk. After a while, I got a couple of USIA people there. But all the rest were local employees of a custodial nature, except the clerk. Vientiane then was a pretty quiet place. My telegrams went to the post office. They would be written up, put on blue forms and sent through the post office to Saigon, and I got telegrams back the same way. We had a courier every two weeks who would come in and take mail out. We had a generator for electricity, which meant importing gasoline, an old U.S. Army generator of World War II. We eventually were able to buy some copper wire, and the electric company strung it on to the main generator for us, so we'd get sort of a low-powered general current. There was a strange mixture of sort of very primitive working conditions plus sort of exalted contacts with the government and the royalty within the administration from time to time.

Q: What was our interest in the area at that point? we're talking about 1951.

CORCORAN: Actually, it started out with the end of World War II, when the policy, as I recall it, was that the former French and British colonies should be put on the way to independence. As part of that, we arranged for the three countries in Indochina to sign the Japanese peace treaty in San Francisco. That tied in with us sending diplomatic representatives to each of them. But this was complicated by the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950.

Q: June 25, 1950.

CORCORAN: This, of course, meant that there was really a major U.S. involvement in Asia, and the Chinese were involved. The Chinese, in those days, were the main suppliers of the Vietnamese Communists. So the French, of course, had a rather large army on the scene that they sent in at the end of World War II. They sent in an army which was largely composed of what they called the Army of Africa, which was the Foreign Legion, plus North and West African troops. As I recall, they never had any French draftees there; they had French gendarmes and career officers and the French Navy and Air Force. But the Korean problem tied in pretty closely with this because of the French commitment in Indochina, so they sent a small token force to Korea, but they also kept this rather large force holding on in Indochina.

Our main effort, as I understand it, was to persuade the French to go along with various agreements they had with the Indochina states toward more and more independence, which the French were inching along at. They, of course, never forgot they had this big army there and a question of security of their own forces. So we were giving them military assistance in France with the Russian threat, the beginnings of NATO, and also for the use of their armed forces in Indochina, a separate military defense assistance program for Indochina.

As I said, the idea was to progress towards independence for the three countries, which was easier said than done, because Laos had a tradition of not only the three monarchies but of being in between Burma and China and Vietnam and Thailand and Cambodia. It was an

underpopulated country, rather long and strewn out, and really sort of at the mercy of just about anybody.

Q: During the time you were there, did the Lao government there, the king or his ministers, try to use the United States as sort of a surrogate protector against these other forces, including the French?

CORCORAN: Initially, of course, the Lao got along with the French better than either the Cambodians or the Vietnamese, because they were the weakest. The French went in there in 1893 when the Thai were getting ready to devour the country, and the French stopped that. At the end of World War II, of course, the Thai had taken a big chunk of Cambodia, and the French made them give that up. But the Cambodian problem was a little more complicated. The Lao having a very small population, having been traditionally vassals of both Thailand and China, were sort of resigned to getting along as best they could, but they had an independence movement which had fled into Thailand, headed initially by Souvanna Phouma's eldest brother Prince Phetsarath.

Q: How were they using you? Were they coming to you, or were you sort of a bystander?

CORCORAN: We dealt with the Lao government in those days as an independent government, but within the French union, recognizing that the French were responsible for their defense. The French had very small military forces in Laos at this time, but they had military and gendarmery training missions, and they had a small civil service, teachers and doctors. But the Lao, both in the south, under Prince Boun Oum, and in the north under the king and Souvanna Phouma's family, had aspirations of their own. A lot of these people, of course, were French educated and some of them had gone into the maquis against the Japanese with the French. So they had sort of a mixed feeling there, but they all agreed with the king of Luang Prabang being the king of Laos, and accepted that, under French tutelage.

In those days, while I was there, Souvanna Phouma became prime minister for the first time. That was the result of a long parliamentary struggle, where all sorts of explanations were given about what was going on.

Q: Were you reporting this in some detail?

CORCORAN: Oh, yes, in as much detail as you can when you have to write something out, type it, code it, and send it.

Q: Were you able to talk to some of the participants in the maneuvering and all, to get an idea?

CORCORAN: To talk to them, the participants, to get the inside details directly, would take a long time. You'd have to get them over a period of time, and you would get some views from participants, some from people outside what was going on. You'd occasionally get a French position, so you'd have to sort of cut and paste it, but you could usually find out what was going on in a general way there.

Souvanna Phouma became the prime minister for the first time, and then on and off for the next 25 years, he was in and out of office. He was originally considered as sort of the French choice, but as time went on, of course, circumstances changed, and he, like everybody else, had this nationalist persona which came out, despite the French education and all that.

He had a half-brother, of course, who is today the Communist chief of the state of Laos. His elder brother, Prince Phetsarath, was sort of a super royalist and a super leader of the independence movement against the French in the old days, who went into Thailand and lived under Thai protection for a while, as did Souvanna Phouma. But the younger brother was a half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong. He was the son of the same father as Phetsarath and Souvanna Phouma, but his mother was not a member of royalty. He also was trained as an engineer and he acquired a Vietnamese wife, an early association with the Communist Party of North Vietnam. As I say, he's still there.

Q: I'm trying to get down to how does a young, junior officer, given quite a bit of responsibility, albeit in a small place, operate.

CORCORAN: The diplomatic corps there consisted of just the American chargé d'affaires and the Thai consul. The French added on the apostolic delegate -- actually "apostolic prefect," senior missionary there.

Q: From the Vatican.

CORCORAN: In my day, he was a Canadian missionary. I don't think he was part of the Vatican diplomatic service. He might have been. Others were in Vietnam. But normally, these three people came out on parades and other social events of the diplomatic corps. But they had a foreign ministry with protocol, political and international organization sections, in it. We were in touch with the foreign minister, and a *chef de cabinet* and a *director de cabinet*, and we handed in notes and spoke to them. We saw all the cabinet quite frequently on social occasions. But most of the business we did was with the foreign ministry. The prime minister, when I first arrived there, was a man named Phoui Sananikone, from a Vientiane family. We could see him at any time.

When I first went there, I called on all the members of the cabinet and talked to them, so I could talk to any of them at any time. I would see them when anyone gave a huge party there. Just about everybody was there in the foreign community. The French community was very small. There were a couple of American missionaries there. That was the American colony. There was one American charge and one or two USIA people by that time. Then we had the British American Tobacco Company and the Air France group. The rest of the foreign people there were French teachers and doctors.

Q: At that time we had, I take it, no real economic interest in the place.

CORCORAN: We were beginning an economic aid program. In addition to the establishment of diplomatic relations, we established an aid program with each of the three countries, and a military assistance program. I was present there when the first military assistance was delivered

to Laos. It was the Garand rifle.

Q: Ah, yes.

CORCORAN: There was a symbolic delivery and then the rifles were put back into stock, taken back to Saigon and put into stock, because there weren't enough Lao trained to use them.

Q: They're pretty big rifles to be carrying for rather small people.

CORCORAN: Some of the French thought that the carbine was better for people their size. But eventually, we also had people coming up from Saigon to discuss the aid programs. Initially, we were largely thinking in terms of public health, food production. Later on, we got involved in currency support.

Q: But on the economic side, one of the controversies is what was our interest in the area. Economics, in other words, were our commercial interests driving this? Was there anything of that nature there?

CORCORAN: No. We had no commercial interests in Laos. We really had none in Cambodia. I think that in Vietnam maybe to some extent in Cambodia, we had oil companies marketing gasoline products and that sort of thing. But that was on a small scale. Most of the exports from Indochina in those days were rice and rubber. Rubber was controlled by the French rubber plantations. Rice, initially, was exported through traditional markets, although Vietnam usually didn't have much of an export. Traditionally, they had an exportable surplus. Cambodia did have.

Q: After you left Vientiane, you went to Phnom Penh.

L. MICHAEL RIVES
Political Officer
Vientiane (1953-1955)

L. Michael Rives was born in New York, New York in 1921 and raised in New Jersey. He attended Princeton University in 1940. After one year, Mr. Rives joined the U.S. Marines, serving until 1945. He joined the Foreign Service in 1950. His career included positions in Frankfurt, Bonn, Hanoi, Guatemala City, Paris, Brazzaville, Bujumbura, Phnom Penh, Djakarta, and Montreal. This interview was conducted by Charles Stuart Kennedy on July 25, 1995.

Q: After you left Hanoi, you went to Vientiane in Laos. You were there from '53 to '55? That must have seemed like the end of the world, didn't it?

RIVES: Yes, but it was fascinating, because it was a one-man post when I was there. I was the only American in Laos. So I dealt with the prime minister and the king, and everybody else. It was a lot of fun. Ambassador Heath, of course, was still the nominal [U.S. Government

representative]. It was a legation in those days. Ambassador Heath came up once a year or so, or when we had important visitors.

Q: Can we talk about Laos at this time?

RIVES: Yes. It was a fascinating country. Completely undeveloped. It was involved in the Vietnam War, of course. I was there during the Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam, in 1954, I guess it was. The French considered trying to send a relief column from Laos to Dien Bien Phu. But they just didn't have enough men and couldn't get it organized.

It was fascinating because, as I say, I dealt with everything by myself, the one-time pads and everything else.

Q: "One-time pads," for the record, being a primitive coding device.

RIVES: The most secure in the world...

Then I would have visits, occasionally. Senator Mansfield came twice and stayed with me. That was always one of his real interests, Southeast Asia. Then we had regular visits from the CINCPAC. He used to come out very regularly. The French Commander was a colonel by the name of de Crevecoeur, who later became a General. I considered him absolutely brilliant, and he was very nice... he and the General used to have a wonderful time together. I was the interpreter because one couldn't speak French and the other one couldn't speak English. The only thing that came out of their visits was agreement to disagree. Of course, the American wanted to "sweep up" the Indochina peninsula, shoulder to shoulder, towards China, and the French believed in small-scale operations.

Q: What was your impression of the royal family in Laos at that time?

RIVES: The king was very old. I didn't see him often. The crown prince was very impressive. He was very well educated, in France, of course, and was a very commanding, very handsome person. I remember one of my British colleagues took him to London, I think it was perhaps for the coronation of the queen... could it have been? Or some other important occasion. As he told me, the crown prince just floored them all, he was so outstanding. He was big, not at all like most Laotians, tall, and very handsome. Then there was Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, whom I admired very much, in spite of the CIA. The Laotians themselves couldn't have been nicer, but completely feckless.

What they did in the military, Colonel de Crevecoeur explained to me, they would volunteer for the army or the navy (they had little patrol boats), and they thought that was great because they had free uniforms, free food. But then they'd get bored and desert. Or they'd go back and pick up the rice crop. And then, maybe six months later, they'd volunteer for the Air Force or something like that. The Colonel said they never knew how many men they had, because they could be [counting the] same men twice. They didn't fight very well at all. When they had to fight, the Colonel explained to me, they'd put the Legion behind them, the Moroccans on the left and the Algerians on the right, and if they hesitated, they'd just shoot them down, so they fought.

Q: This, of course, was very much a colonial period...

What was the situation in Laos? Was the Pathet Lao or were the Vietnamese... what was happening there?

RIVES: You had the Viet Minh on the borders, and you had the local communist party, headed by the prime minister's half brother. Again, it was not a country you could travel around in very freely. You could go out in the country up to a point, but you had to be careful.

Q: How "communist" did we consider the prime minister's brother?

RIVES: Oh, I think he was a pretty devoted communist. He was a Laotian, but he was a communist.

Q: Were there any American interests in Laos at that time?

RIVES: As such, I don't think so. There was the British-American Tobacco Company; I'm not quite sure if that's considered British or American. They had a plantation there, and a lot of the tobacco was shipped to the U.S.

Q: How did the fall of Dien Bien Phu play in Laos? Did you see a change?

RIVES: No. Not outwardly. Obviously, the French were crushed by it, you know. It disappointed the military. But other than that there was not much...

Q: What did you do as a one-man post there?

RIVES: I kept in touch with the French particularly, and the Laotians, did political reporting, and did military reporting. I knew all the attachés in Saigon, because I would give them what de Crevecoeur would tell me. He was quite honest, I must say, with me. The military in Saigon didn't always agree with the French view of things, so it was amusing that way.

Q: When you left there, did you see Laos ever becoming the center of attention it did a few years later?

RIVES: No. Well, while I was there, [Washington] finally sent people from the CIA, and I had two public affairs officers. Then Charles Yost took my place, as resident minister, and with him came a secretary. After that it got out of control.

Q: Later the CIA practically took over the American mission...

RIVES: Well, this is my own opinion, not being there at the time... I'm sorry to say I think they pulled the wool over Ambassador Yost's eyes. They had gotten rid of Souvanna Phouma, threw him out, and got this awful Captain Phoumi in there instead, who was a disaster of the first order.

Q: I'm trying to get a feeling for how things operated at that time. Did our military attachés or

CIA people come in from time to time to sort of "sound the waters?"

RIVES: Well, I didn't have any military when I was there. They'd come from Saigon once in a while. I did have a permanent CIA man there, whom I had removed because I found he was spying on me.

Q: What was the problem?

RIVES: Well, we shared a filing cabinet at one time, when he first got there, before his own things came. One day I went down there... his drawer was open, and I did something which I shouldn't have done, but the yellow pad was sitting there, and I read it. It was a report about me, which they weren't allowed to do, were not supposed to do, and swore they never did. So I said to the Ambassador in Saigon, "Either he goes or I go." So he went. Mr. Yost wouldn't believe that when I told him.

YALE RICHMOND
Public Affairs Officer
Laos (1954-1956)

Yale Richmond was born in Massachusetts in 1923. He received a bachelor's degree in 1943 from Boston College, thereafter he joined the Army from 1943-1946. He then receives a master's degree from Syracuse. His career included positions in Germany, Austria, Russia, Poland, and Laos. Mr. Richmond was interviewed in June 2003 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

RICHMOND: In '54, I was assigned to Laos. I had had 5 years of high school and college French, I was single, and healthy. I was assigned to Laos and arrived there a couple of months after the battle of Dien Bien Phu when the French agreed to withdraw, and the Geneva Conferences which set up and divided Vietnam and an independent Laos and Cambodia and Republic of Vietnam. I was there for 2 years of what later came to be called "nation building." We didn't know the term then, but that's what we did in Laos. We were involved in nation building.

Q: So you were there from '54 to '56?

RICHMOND: Yes.

Q: Tell me about Laos when you arrived. What was it like?

RICHMOND: Laos was a buffer between Thailand and Vietnam and for the French in French Indochina. It was a very quiet place. There had been a war. There had been some battles there and some destroyed bridges and roads but the French were still there but steadily withdrawing and there were still French troops up in the north in the mountains around Luang Prabang. There was a French lycée. There was a Lao government and a Lao army which hadn't been paid for

months. One of the first things Charlie Yost did – he was our first minister when he came in – was to get a check for two million dollars which we presented to the prime minister to pay the army so they wouldn't rebel. When I arrived, it was a 5 man mission for the whole country. I was number 5.

Q: Who were the others?

RICHMOND: The chargé d'affaires was Lloyd Michael Rives, who is now long retired. We called him Mike Rives. He's up in Boston. I bumped into him once by chance in San Francisco on the street. Mike Rives was there because he was practically bilingual in French. He had been raised in Paris or gone to a French school. He was bilingual. But he was an FSO-6, which in those days was the lowest rank, which shows you how important Laos had been to the United States government. Then we had what later became AID. We had a woman named Nan McKay, who was the USOM representative. She was in charge of our economic assistance program as small as it was. Then we had Ted Tanen, the public affairs officer. I was his deputy. Then we had a vice consul, Ted Kobrin. He's living out in Bethesda. That was it. I was number 5.

My introduction to Laos was very interesting. I wrote about this in the Foreign Service Journal years ago. The first weekend I was there, I received 2 invitations to dinner on a Saturday night. One was from the minister of foreign affairs, who wanted to invite this new American in town to see who he was, dinner at his home. The other was an invitation to dinner from a French anthropologist who was one of the French experts on Laos. His wife was a Shan princess who spoke Lao. The Shan are related to the Lao people. Of course, I accepted the Frenchman's invitation because that was more interesting for me. Lucky I did because at the minister's home after the dinner when the guests were sitting in the living room, someone threw a hand grenade into the room – they didn't have screens there – and killed the minister and several of his guests. Had I accepted that invitation, I would not be here today.

Q: What was the political situation?

RICHMOND: Laos was nation building. Here was a country with about 2 million people. There was a royal capital up in the mountains of Luang Prabang, a beautiful little town, where the king lived when he was not in France taking the waters. And you had the administrative capital down in the Mekong River Valley where the French had set up an administrative center. That's where the government offices were. But the people were all very inexperienced. The minister of defense had been a sergeant in the French army and here he was minister of defense commanding an army. There was only one European trained doctor in the whole country, a Lao doctor, and he was the minister of public health but his specialty was gynecology because that was fashionable when he studied in France. And the rest of the officials, some of them had secondary school education, some did not.

Q: What were you doing?

RICHMOND: There was a Lao information service which was supposed to be putting out information about the government, the country, the communist insurgency in the north, and we were supposed to be helping them. But in effect we were doing it for them. They just didn't have

the wherewithal, the means, the know-how, to do it. We did 2 things which we were very proud of. First, we established a monthly photo magazine for Laos in the Lao language. USIA in Southeast Asia had a magazine called Free World published in Manila and distributed in language editions in Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai, Indonesian, Filipino, and so forth. We said we wanted to start a Lao language edition. Everybody said, "You can't do it. It's going to be too difficult," but we did. We would get the dummy edition every month and pull out the articles we didn't want and put in articles that we liked. I was the photographer with my Leica camera. I knew quite a bit about photography. I would take the photos and then we would write stories about what was happening in Laos, how the country had come into existence, it had a king, it had an army, it had a parliament. We were the news service in that monthly magazine. I kept a number of copies and donated them to Cornell University which has a big center on Southeast Asian studies, and they were delighted to have it.

The second thing we did was a monthly newsreel, which sounds even more fantastic. This was a country that had never had a publication in the Lao language and we were going to do a newsreel in the Lao language. They gave me a Bolex camera, a 16 millimeter, and I went around the country filming events and we would have them developed in Saigon, which had a big USIA photo lab, and we would put it together and write a narration. This became a monthly newsreel. I want to donate that. I have 30 minutes of that. I'm going to donate that to Cornell also. And how we did the narration was very interesting. I did not speak Lao. I learned enough to get along with people. I could talk about people in any person-to-person situation but I couldn't talk politics. So I would write the narration in English. Then we had a Thai employee who spoke English and he would put it from English into Thai. Then we had a Lao employee who knew Thai and Lao and he would put it into Lao. Then we had another Lao employee who would read it back to me in French. That was our way of ensuring that what we were saying was okay. And how would we show the films in villages which had no electricity? We gave each province chief a small generator, gasoline run. We gave them a Bell and Howell projector with speakers and a screen. And the local chief, called the Chao Kueng, would go around his province showing these movies at night in villages where they had never seen an electric light bulb.

Q: It must have been quite successful.

RICHMOND: It was. It was a very exciting thing.

Q: Were the Pathet Lao doing their thing at that point?

RICHMOND: They were, but it was safe. I had traveled around the country all by myself. In fact, I enjoyed getting out along. I did a lot of traveling in the country. In Vientiane, we were trying to live like westerners in a place where there was almost no electricity, usually no running water. It was difficult. But out in the villages, I could put on my sarong and live like a Lao. I did a lot and wrote a lot of reports that Ambassador Yost came to appreciate.

Q: What was going on in the villages?

RICHMOND: Not much. People were living just as they had always lived. Laos was a very fertile land. When there was enough rain, there was plenty of rice, there was fruit, there was fish,

there was game. They only suffered when there was a drought. In the years I was there, there were never any droughts. So the people were living as they had for generations.

Q: Within 3 or 4 years of the time when all of a sudden you had the President of the United States explaining what Laos was and why it was important, special missions and everything else... None of that was in the offing at this point.

RICHMOND: No, but we did have a visit from John Foster Dulles with Douglas MacArthur II and Robert Bowie of the State Department.

Q: These were Dulles' top guns.

RICHMOND: Yes, they had come to Saigon. They also had a trip to Laos. They were with us for a couple of days. I have some wonderful photographs of that. Laos was becoming important. The U.S. army recognized its importance. The army had several military survey teams that came in that were mapping and checking on roads and geographic features.

Q: Wasn't there something afoot about building a base in the middle of Laos?

RICHMOND: That came after me. There was talk about it. When I first arrived in Laos, there were 5 Americans in the U.S. mission. When I left, there were 1,000 and it was going up.

Q: Who were these people who were coming in and what were they doing?

RICHMOND: We beefed up the economic aid mission, which became a big program of economic aid, largely foodstuffs and food oils. How many of those were really USAID types and how many were military and how many were CIA, I don't know. But it was a big mission. They had built a little community on the edge of town which they called Silver City because they were all aluminum-free prefabs. And that's where they lived.

Q: Was this having any impact from your observations on Laos, the corruption of too much money and too many foreigners arriving with too many demands?

RICHMOND: No, I didn't notice that at all. This all happened during the closing months of my stay. After me, that may have happened after I left.

Q: How did you find the Lao reacted to the Vietnamese both North and South?

RICHMOND: The Lao people had never liked the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese were the entrepreneur class. All of the stores and little shops that you see in these side-by-side shops in these typical French-built towns were either owned by Vietnamese or Indians. The Lao people were not entrepreneurs. When the French came up the Mekong River in the mid-1800s, they brought with them Vietnamese as their technicians and administrators and when the Indochina War broke out all the Vietnamese left and the administrative and technical services collapsed until they could be rebuilt with American aid. We had electricity - I don't know how many volts it was. It wasn't very bright - a few hours of the evening. In all our American homes where we

lived, the army brought in generators and we generated our own electricity. Water came in a truck, if it came at all, and was dumped into a tank in the back of the house and we had to pump it up on the roof into 55 gallon drums so we had a toilet and a shower.

FRANKLIN E. HUFFMAN
International Voluntary Services
Laos (1956-1958)

Franklin E. Huffman was born in Harrisonburg, Virginia in 1934. In 1955 he graduated from Bridgewater College and immediately joined IVS. From 1967 to 1985 he was a Professor of Southeast Asian languages and linguistics at Yale and Cornell. His second career was as a Foreign Service Officer with USIA where he was posted to London, Rangoon, Marrakech, Paris, Washington, Phnom Penh, and Wellington, with subsequent WAE tours to N'Djamena (Chad) and Phnom Penh. Mr. Huffman was interviewed in January 2006 by Charles Stuart Kennedy

HUFFMAN: We're jumping ahead of the story a bit, but I served in Laos from 1956 to 1958 as a volunteer French interpreter for International Voluntary Services, Inc. In Laos I came in contact with USIS (United States Information Service) in Vientiane, and I was very favorably impressed by the work they were doing. I mean, they were creating dictionaries and they were translating books into Lao and publishing them; they had mobile movie units that would travel about the country and show documentaries and health cartoons and that sort of thing and I thought, "Gee, you know, this would be fun." I'd also of course met some of the embassy people whom I considered not quite as colorful and more desk-bound than the USIS people were. I resolved to apply to the U.S. Information Agency when I got back.

Q: So you got out there in February of '56 and you were there for how long?

HUFFMAN: Two years.

Q: Two years. Well. Can you give me a sketch of Laos when you got there in '56, what it was like, who was running things, what was going on?

HUFFMAN: Okay. In 1956 the Prime Minister was Prince Souvanna Phouma, a pipe-smoking gentleman whom I met several times when he came up to visit our project and I served as interpreter. I admired him enormously, but as a neutralist, he was not quite as anti-communist as his U.S. backers would have liked. Of course, there was a communist insurgency going on in Laos similar to the on-going war next door in Vietnam. Prince Souphanouvong, half-brother of the Prime Minister, disillusioned with the failure of the fight for Lao independence from France after World War II, had fled to Hanoi and founded a communist government in exile called the Pathet Lao (literally "Lao State"). With the aid of the Viet Minh, the Pathet Lao had occupied the two northern provinces of Houaphan and Phongsalai which bordered North Vietnam, and were fighting the Royal Lao army. It was in the context of Vietnam and the Cold War that USAID was financing our relatively small-scale IVS project as part of the objective of "winning hearts and

minds” and preventing Laos from falling into the hands of the communists. By the end of my tour in 1958 the Pathet Lao and the royal government had come to an agreement that their forces would be integrated, but that agreement fell apart and then of course in ’75 the Pathet Lao achieved what they had been working toward the entire time, and that same communist regime is still in power today.

Q: Well, that whole area was considered important after the fall of the French at Dien Bien...

HUFFMAN: Dien Bien Phu, exactly. And as a matter of fact the town where we located, called - Phon Savanh (which means “Heavenly Hill”), was a recently founded market village primarily made up of Vietnamese refugees who had come across from Dien Bien Phu. Our village was at about the latitude of Dien Bien Phu, and we were only about 50 miles from the Vietnamese border. And so the village had Vietnamese and Chinese; of course the mayor and all the officials were Lao -- had to be -- but there were also many minority groups such as the Hmong, who you know came to the U.S. in large numbers as refugees after the war. Most went to Minnesota, for some reason, as well as many other places. So there were many ethnic groups there in this little town which was basically two rows of shop houses and a muddy street and that was it. This was in Xieng Khouang Province. The reason we located there in Phon Savanh rather than in Xieng Khouang town itself was that they had an airstrip there on the Plain of Jars. They had just built a new post office – PTT (Poste, Téléphone et Télégraphe) – which was the nicest building in town, but since they weren’t getting a whole lot of mail, they figured they’d let us live in it. So that was another factor in deciding to stay in Phon Savanh.

Q: Well what was your team like? What did it consist of?

HUFFMAN: Well, the chief of party was a retired Iowa farmer who had been quite prominent in Iowa. And his wife, who didn’t have an official portfolio other than a kind of den mother. I was considered the interpreter and education specialist, although my skills as an interpreter were only needed when an official such as the governor came to visit, since the peasant villagers we worked with didn’t speak French. My friend Carl was the animal husbandry guy from Texas A&M; the idea was that we were going to bring in improved breeds of livestock and poultry to upgrade the local stock. It was to be both an agricultural research station and a community development project. The team was augmented by the arrival about six months later of a public health nurse named Martha Rupel, along with Clyde Searl, an entomologist from the University of Redlands in California. An industrial arts specialist named Wally Brown joined the team a bit later, about six months after I got there. As you can imagine, with six people living in pretty close proximity there were some tensions, personality conflicts and so on, but basically we got on alright, played a lot of canasta on Sunday nights. And while IVS was interdenominational it just happened that all of the team members belonged to the Church of the Brethren except this one guy from California who was, to put it charitably, non-religious. So it annoyed him no end when people in the embassy would say, “Oh yeah, you’re up there with that missionary group,” since, with all of us being from the Church of the Brethren they assumed we were some kind of missionary group. That really infuriated him. But we carried on.

Q: What were some of your own duties day to day?

HUFFMAN: Well, I served as interpreter, jeep driver, and general assistant for our public health nurse in her child care clinics in a dozen surrounding villages. Our patients were typically Hmong women with their babies. While most Hmong men speak also Lao, most of the women speak only Hmong, so I had to learn a certain amount of Hmong medical vocabulary to be effective. Since I would interview the patients about their symptoms and relay this to the nurse, who would then administer the required treatment, the villagers naturally assumed I was the doctor. I remember once we were invited for lunch in the house of the village chief. Now Hmong food is generally pretty good, consisting of fried meat and potatoes, but that day they had discovered a tree of yellow jacket larvae, and insisted that we, as the guests of honor, take the first bite of the deep-fried larvae. It wouldn't have been too bad if I had swallowed the thing whole, but I made the mistake of biting it in two, and it oozed a bit.

Q. Could you describe your other projects?

HUFFMAN: Well, as the "education specialist," I opened a library with materials primarily from USIS, I established a library with materials in six languages: Lao, Thai, Vietnamese, Chinese, French and English. Most of these materials were supplied by USIS Vientiane. And we taught English at night to various of the ethnic groups. It was clear early on that we had to segregate the English classes because the Lao were happy-go-lucky and laid back and never did any homework; the Vietnamese were bright and quick and worked hard and learned much faster than the Lao. This ties in of course with the whole history of Indochina, I'm afraid, with regard to the superiority complex of the Vietnamese vis-à-vis their Lao and Cambodian neighbors. The Chinese had their own reasons, which were commercial, for learning English. We had some Lao schoolteachers and some local government officials, but it didn't work out because the young people would put them to shame and of course that's a no-no in an Asian society. So they sort of fell away and we ended up with classes of Vietnamese, Lao and Hmong. The Hmong were bright and could learn quite quickly but they were also illiterate.

Q: I was going to say, they didn't have an alphabet.

HUFFMAN: They couldn't write any language at all. So we just taught them the spoken language and tried to teach them to read a little bit.

Xieng Khouang Province is the primary locus of the Hmong people in Laos. The French called them the Meo, which is a Chinese word meaning "cat." They wanted to be called Hmong. They are closely related to the Yao tribespeople, who are now called Mien. We used to call that language family Miao-Yao, but Hmong-Mien is considered more politically correct. There were also other ethnic minorities. Laos at that time had a population of only about two million, of whom a million were ethnic minorities. The Lao themselves typically lived in the plains and small valleys where they could farm wet rice. Government officials and administrators were drawn exclusively from the Lao so they were the elite of society, but then you had the Miao-Yao, Tibeto-Burman, and Mon-Khmer minorities scattered all around. This was where I got my first interest in Southeast Asian languages and linguistics as well as in ethno-linguistics, that is the ethnic groups and the languages they speak and the affiliations between them.

Q: Well, if you're teaching English and you've got these people speaking a language that you

don't speak, at least at the time, were you playing catch up or learning the language while you were teaching another language?

HUFFMAN: Yes. But of course we didn't learn Lao fast enough to really serve as a medium of communication so we were starting at zero level and using, you know, gestures and mime and all the rest, just as I'm doing right now as a volunteer teaching English to Hispanic immigrants, many of whom are illiterate as well.

Q: Well, how did these various groups get along with each other?

HUFFMAN: Well, by and large the ethnic minorities lived separately and did not co-mingle. For example, the Hmong liked to live at elevations of 4,000 to 5,000 feet in the mountains where they raised pigs and grew potatoes and raised opium, which was the major crop of the Hmong. And of course the embassy was always talking about substituting other crops for the opium but that didn't work in Laos because there's no other crop where small amounts bring as high a return as opium. For example, they proposed corn. But how can you get the corn to market? There're no roads, there're no trucks. We had the only truck in the province. So, you know, corn was not going to make it as a substitute. A lot of the Hmong themselves were addicts because they took opium as a painkiller and then they would become addicted. The sale of opium was legal in that Xieng Khouang, and, sometimes when we were out on the road in the jeep we'd stop and pick up tribespeople carrying their opium to market. But they didn't get the major profit. The major profit went to the middlemen, Chinese merchants who would buy the opium from the Hmong farmers and then sell it to the French, who would fly it out to Saigon and Bangkok and so on. They'd get caught once in awhile but if they could get just one shipment through they were made for life, you see. There was an inn called "the bungalow" there in Phon Savanh run by the French. We were supposed to believe that they could operate a twin engine Beechcraft on the revenue from their inn and restaurant. The problem with that was that there weren't any tourists. Every morning about 5:00 o'clock you would hear their plane take off. We joked about going down there some morning and snapping a flash shot of them loading opium into the nose of the plane but they would have shot us without hesitation. These were international criminal types – Corsicans, most of them.

Q: Oh, you don't mess with that group.

HUFFMAN: No.

Q: Well, were the Vietnamese communists working on the area? I mean, you know, beginning to develop the Pathet Lao and all that? I mean, what was happening?

HUFFMAN: No. The Vietnamese who were there in the town and even those down in Vientiane were basically anti-communist refugees. At that time the Pathet Lao controlled only two provinces in the extreme north. The Pathet Lao were part of the Indochina Communist Party and many of them had been trained in Vietnam but I don't think there were a lot of Vietnamese on the ground in Laos.

Q: Well did you feel the reach of the Pathet Lao particularly where you were or not?

HUFFMAN: Yes, more so where we were than in the capital. There was a military air strip right next to us on the Plain of Jars where they would bring the wounded troops back from the front. We would see them lying there in the hot sun with just a little bit of canvas as shelter until a military ambulance would come and take them over the 30 kilometers of bumpy road to the provincial hospital in Xieng Khouang. We didn't have much hope for them because that hospital was an incredibly dirty and ill-equipped place. I really pitied those soldiers. And all of the death and suffering, like most wars, was in the end all in vain.

Q: Was Kong Le at all a figure at that point?

HUFFMAN: Not at that point. He didn't stage his coup until 1960. All of this was in fact before the U.S. began to get involved in Vietnam in a big way.

Q: What about Vientiane and our embassy? Did you have much contact with them at all?

HUFFMAN: No, very little. We had most of our contact with USAID, which was our parent agency and which dwarfed the embassy in size, as was true in many third world countries at that time. Embassy officers would frequently come up to our project from Vientiane because it was at 3,600 feet elevation and much cooler than in Vientiane, so officials from USAID and the embassy would seize any occasion to come up there and make a pretext of touring our project.

Q: Did you run across, I mean, was the, did the ambassador ever make an appearance?

HUFFMAN: Yes. Yost, Ambassador Yost.

Q: Charlie Yost.

HUFFMAN: Yes, he and his wife came up to the project quite soon after our arrival. The U.S. was giving Laos about 40 million at that time in aid, there were approximately 150 American personnel in the U.S. mission. We were the only six who were out in the field, They were all beaver away there in Vientiane and so whenever any CODEL or any person who had anything to do with the appropriations would come over they'd shuttle them right up to us, saying "Look what these guys are doing up here -- this is a USAID project up here." I remember one such visitor was Senator Allen Ellender

Q: Ellender from Louisiana.

HUFFMAN: Louisiana.

Q: Of course he made a point of going everywhere and writing voluminous reports which he put into the Congressional Record, which were absolutely unreadable but anyway.

HUFFMAN: It was clear that he was looking for evidence to use against foreign aid. The word came up from Vientiane that Senator Ellender was on his way, and that we should put our best foot forward, show him the wonderful things we were accomplishing. Our little project up there,

with a budget of a couple of hundred thousand dollars was a pittance compared to the 40 million in aid to Vientiane. I don't know what Ellender reported about it, but it certainly didn't make a good impression on me.

Q: How about the animal husbandry project? Was that going anywhere?

HUFFMAN: No. Well, it would have, but of course, you know, in the '60s and '70s Xieng Khouang became a total battleground.

Q: Oh yes. The Plain of Jars was the hot spot.

HUFFMAN: Yes. And our project was quite early on discontinued and the city of Xieng Khouang was totally blasted off the map by our bombers. It was rather humorous if it hadn't been so sad -- we were going to get some Brahma bulls from Texas. They had been brought to Texas from India originally, and they had been upgraded, upbred in Texas. We spent a year building miles and miles of three-strand barbed wire to keep them in. Finally, after almost two years, when our animal husbandry guy was almost due to leave, they finally arrived. When the boat arrived in the Bangkok harbor these Brahma bulls must have realized they were coming back home to Asia because they jumped off the boat and swam ashore and they had to round them up in the streets of Bangkok. When we finally got them up there to the project it turned out that they could easily leap over our miles and miles of three-strand barbed wire fence. But I'm sure that, you know, they made what contribution they could to upgrading the local stock.

Q: How well did you feel the writ of the government in Vientiane ran up in the Plain of Jars? Was there much government up there or were things pretty loose?

HUFFMAN: Well, the Lao government had a pretty well articulated administrative framework up there. Governors were appointed by the central government and the governor of the province was royalty, you know, had a royal connection. The province was divided into "muong," or districts, and the Chao Muong, or chief of the Muong, was appointed by the governor and he was always a Lao, so the Lao certainly from a superficial point of view pretty much controlled the administration. There were some French "coopérants" still up there advising the Lao military.

Q: They were a little bit like the Peace Corps, the "coopérants."

HUFFMAN: Yes, a little bit higher level than that, I suppose. But there was a kind of parallel administration up there. The king of the Meo lived between us and Xieng Khouang and he was given a certain amount of latitude to govern his own people. But he certainly had to be subservient to the Lao government. His brother was the only Hmong deputy in the Chamber of Deputies in the capital. In other words it was considered that they were a significant enough part of the population of that province that they deserved to have a deputy in the chamber of deputies.

ELDEN B. ERICKSON
Economic Officer

Vientiane (1956-1958)

Elden B. Erickson was born in Kansas in 1917. He entered the Foreign Service in 1946 and served in China, Algeria, France, Laos, Japan, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Canada, and Germany. Mr. Erickson was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1992.

Q: Then you left and staying in the sphere of French influence went to a hot spot again, Laos, where you stayed from 1956-58. How did you feel about this?

ERICKSON: I really did plan to quit then. I tried to get out of the assignment actually. Unbeknownst to me, my future wife was in Washington with Jeff Parsons sending telegrams saying I couldn't get out of it.

Q: Your future wife was...?

ERICKSON: She was Parsons' secretary in Tokyo and he had asked her to go with him to Laos. She was here while he was on consultation and then went to Laos. I hadn't met her at that time.

Q: What were you going to do in Laos?

ERICKSON: I was *the* economic section in Laos. No secretary, no typewriter, no window in my office, I was it. My only claim to fame there was that I decided what the GNP of Laos was and it stuck for at least a number of years. I invented that.

Q: That is one of those figures that all of us learn that if they want a figure, we will give them a figure.

ERICKSON: That is right. We had no figures from Laos before I went, so I tried to give them a right figure.

Q: You couldn't even look out the window and do it.

ERICKSON: I didn't have a window and I carried my in-box around with me.

Q: What was the situation in Laos in 1956-58?

ERICKSON: One thing was that Souvanna Phouma was Prime Minister throughout the whole period. So in that sense it was stable. But he brought the Communists into the government during that period also, Prince Souphanouvong, who was head of the Pathet Lao.

Again our position was that you have to keep the Pathet Lao out, etc. Souvanna Phouma was always saying that we have to work together, etc. We did not appreciate Souvanna Phouma entirely. I didn't at the time, but I think in retrospect we probably should have been more helpful to him.

Q: Your Ambassador was J. Graham Parsons. How did he operate?

ERICKSON: He operated as a real pro. He could have conversations, meetings and at the end he would always say "Now to sum up in review...." It was absolute synthesis and clarity and he reduced everything to simple elements in beautiful language. I have never met anybody like him, who could gather in all the information and hand it to you in perfect language without leaving any of the essence out.

Q: What was the economic situation in Laos at the time?

ERICKSON: Chaotic. They had no money for the military or for their civilian operations. They had really no institutions that were of any use either. I was involved 80 percent of the time with the AID program. I was the Ambassador's liaison with the AID mission there.

Q: What were we doing aid-wise?

ERICKSON: We were supporting their military totally and in the economic program, the police, the administration, the central bank. In every phase of their economy we were helping them on the aid side.

Again you must remember that this was the period when Walter Robertson was in the Department and everything is black or white as far as communism was concerned.

Q: Walter Robertson being the Assistant Secretary for the Far East.

ERICKSON: Everything in his eyes was related to China and communism. Laos wasn't pro-West enough for us and their officials weren't pro-West enough for us so therefore we were always kind of at loggerheads with them.

Q: Well, what about the French?

ERICKSON: The French felt we were totally undercutting them and our relations officially with the French were not at all good in Laos. We saw each other all the time and were polite, but the relationship was not good. We really didn't cooperate on any programs. But then I think that was true in all these Southeast Asian countries. We did replace them and they resented it.

Q: Looking at it at the time, did you feel that the Laotians were either bemused by the American presence or using it to get what they could out of it?

ERICKSON: No, I don't think so. There weren't the types who really tried to get everything out of it. They weren't playing both sides like Indonesia and some other countries did. They really wanted and needed the aid. They certainly had nothing. I think they were appreciative of it. Not, perhaps, everybody, but by and large they were. Both officials and Laotians who thought about it at all.

Q: What was your impression of our AID people? Did they know what they were doing?

ERICKSON: We had so many problems with the AID people, beginning with their personalities. I came back to the Lao Desk and used to go down to the Hill and listen to all the hearings on the AID program in Laos. We really had many people who were the dregs there. Practically everybody was a volunteer and I think they all volunteered to get out of something or to make something. The head of our public works was finally tried here for corruption and sent to jail. The head of the mission had his car cut up and put down a well. It was simply a bad situation. There were a few competent and dedicated people, but by and large our AID program was terrible and badly run.

Q: Obviously as the Ambassador's liaison you must have been giving some feel of this to him. How was he dealing with this?

ERICKSON: Well, I think he did what he could. I think he thought more highly of people and their honesty than I did. I used to report things to him that I thought they were doing and he would call them in and they would somehow manage to convince him that they weren't all that bad. He was such a good ambassador and so supportive. I think he was great, but he thought people were more honorable than they really are.

The AID program was really a disaster from beginning to end. The roads they built were washed out, the money disappeared. All we were doing was buying time.

Q: What was your impressions of the Laotians?

ERICKSON: All the ones that we dealt with were French trained and not really all that competent because the French had used Vietnamese almost entirely to run the country. So the Laotians were totally inexperienced. I found them willing and dedicated, but there were so few who had knowledge and authority that you could deal with that we all had to deal with practically the same people.

Q: Could you travel around or did you feel a threat from the Pathet Lao?

ERICKSON: We traveled around all the time except in the Communist held areas. They were really at that time mostly in the two northern provinces. We traveled in southern Laos. Again there were so few people that personally we knew everybody in the government from Souvanna Phouma to all the ministers, and saw them at lunch, dinners, etc. They were really friends. Even with Prince Souphanouvong the Communist, I sat down with him like this when there had been only five or six people and talked about fishing and his ideas.

Q: How would a royal prince get in bed with a communist?

ERICKSON: I think most people thought he was being bought by them, but I think he was brainwashed and believed in what he was doing.

Q: He sort of came out of the French intellectual left?

ERICKSON: Yes. I had an occasion under to review Souvanna Phouma's diaries which were made available through the Freedom of Information Act. They were given to the Library of Congress. The whole thing was handwritten in French covering ten years. I read every single page of all that. That was interesting as far as his opinion of us was concerned. I remember one comment, he said, "Strange as it may seem, the Embassy is saying the same thing as its intelligence agents."

Q: Well, what about the Agency, the CIA? This was one of their happy hunting grounds in a way. They were running airlines, air forces, etc.

ERICKSON: They had their own airline. All of their cars were marked specially. They had separate nice housing. They stood out, not like a sore thumb but like a sore hand.

Q: Did they have their own guards, Hmongs, who looked quite different from everybody else?

ERICKSON: I don't remember that.

Q: When I was in Vietnam later on they had their own guards who came from a separate racial group.

ERICKSON: They were helping the Hmong.

Q: These guys were big and you could tell a CIA place because it had a big guard in front of it.

ERICKSON: In the Embassy there were no doorknobs on their offices. You always had to telephone. But as far as the public was concerned, everybody knew who they were and what they were doing. It was the most blatant operation I had ever seen.

Q: Was the feeling that they knew what they were doing or a bunch of freeloaders?

ERICKSON: For the Lao, I think they knew that is where you went if you wanted something.

Q: You were following the economic things. Did you find that they were intrusive in the economic field too?

ERICKSON: Not on the economic side. They were really political/military.

Q: What was your impression of the staff? You mentioned AID had these people, who were running away from something. I might add that that was my impression in 1969-70 when I was in Vietnam.

ERICKSON: It was true of the Embassy staff. More than half were volunteers who had done so just to get out or to do something. I remember we had a person who had lived in a tree for 12 years, and various strange types. It made for interest, but not for a very efficient operation.

Q: You were sitting there looking at reports from Saigon and from Phnom Penh. What was your

impressions of the reporting and all you were getting from these other two parts of Indochina?

ERICKSON: I think we felt it was always overly optimistic from the American point of view of what we were accomplishing. If we would have done half of what was reported as being accomplished, we would have really done well.

Q: This was, I think, one of the great errors that we made -- thinking things were done when they weren't done.

ERICKSON: And it was always convincingly done. You didn't really have anybody say that this wasn't really true.

Saigon at this time was rather peaceful. We went on R&R from Laos at that time to Saigon to have good meals and enjoy life.

LEONARD L. BACON
Deputy Chief of Mission
Vientiane (1957-1959)

Leonard L. Bacon was born in New York in 1907. He joined the Foreign Service in 1945 and served in Switzerland, China, Germany, Laos, and Washington, DC. Mr. Bacon was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1990.

Q: You were in Vientiane from 1957 to '59. What was the situation there at that time.

BACON: It was very quiet. Vientiane is a country which -- well, it really should have been in Micronesia or some place like that beyond the reach of land based forces. It has almost no economic importance. It has a little bit of everything, but not enough to make it commercially viable, either of ore, or silver, or whatever. Living is very easy for the Lao. They can sit under a tree and pick the bananas as they fall and that's all they need to do. The gross national product per person was said to be \$50.00, which may have been high. The only thing required was a little bit of home made clothing, and you could build your own house as long as you kept it about four or five feet off the ground. Consequently, Laos was not attractive to anybody, but part of it was occupied by local communists in the north, and that part of the country nobody ever visited, naturally. But it was only a sort of a jungle area in the extreme north near China, and North Vietnam. So nobody was much concerned about Laos, knowing that the country was indefensible; if Vietnam went communist so would Laos. Knowing also that its other big neighbor, Thailand, would probably not take any steps to help the Lao at all. In fact, they were decidedly unhelpful. The only railroad access to Laos was on the Thai railway and Thailand imposed enormous tariffs for goods destined for Laos -- two or three times what it would charge for goods which would stop on the Thai side of the Mekong River. So that even foreign aid paid the price for that.

Q: But since this is a tape you have to tell it -- we're looking at a map now of Laos and Thailand.

BACON: The railway comes up to here about 20 miles southeast of Vientiane. There is no bridge so everything would have to be unloaded and put on boats to cross the river, and there isn't one yard of railway in Laos -- never has been.

Q: Politically...you got there...I mean it began to heat up considerably at the time you were there. Here was this basically rather sleepy place, and all of a sudden this became a focus of the Soviet Union, the United States. Did that happen while you were there?

BACON: Oh, yes. There already was there in the government a faction sympathetic to the communist. The wife of Souvanna Phouma, who is a metisse -- that is a half breed -- was quite a smart woman and she apparently could tell which way the wind was really blowing, and didn't make much of a secret of her sympathies.

Q: Towards the communists.

BACON: Toward the communists inside the government, that is. Really a distinction was drawn -- you see, those would be Lao communists, and not Chinese communists. So it wasn't considered such a devilish thing to favor the kind of reform which the Lao communists claimed to be in favor of. Our aid program there was very slight because, first of all there was virtually no such thing as Lao army. They had a training cadre and that was about it. And the possibility of commercial aid almost didn't exist because there was almost no commerce in Laos to begin with. So there wasn't even much of any room for us to deploy skills and our equipment. Laos didn't even have a newspaper.

Q: What was the attitude of the Embassy towards the...first it was Graham Parsons, and then it was Horace Smith as Ambassadors, both career men. What was the attitude of the Embassy towards the communist side of the Laotian movement and also the North Vietnamese?

BACON: We were quite concerned about the communist elements because they had been successful anyhow all over East Asia. I think there must have been some feeling among the Lao that they couldn't possibly get very far in Laos because the thought of working your head off for the government, or anybody, never occurred to anyone. We were somewhat more concerned, I guess, with the plantation of opium poppies, not because that trade was so tremendous, but the locals in the woods and on the hills would burn off the tops of the mountains as a favorable place to plant seeds, but there was only a few inches of soil, and directly underneath was laterite which is a very hard stone, I suppose probably volcanic. Once the tops of the mountains were burned off the soil would be washed out by the rain, and more and more of the country would be denuded for the sake of the opium which was shipped out through Burma and Thailand. That was more of a concern, and the local government, of course, was opposed to it too, except that it was a source of revenue.

Q: Had the Laotian crisis...that came a little after you left.

BACON: It was building up all the time. Horace Smith was very determined to prevent a crisis from really happening, but it did, nevertheless. It depended a lot upon the military reports from

Vietnam. If the south Vietnamese had been clearly successful with our help, we could have expected an echo of that in Laos. But things went the other way.

Q: You were the Deputy Chief of Mission then. What sort of guidance were you getting from Washington? Or was this very definitely a back burner operation?

BACON: It was pretty much a back burner, because it was, I believe, seen that what happened in Laos would reflect faintly what was happening elsewhere in Saigon, and Bangkok, and Rangoon.

Q: What were the major problems you had to deal with?

BACON: It certainly wasn't trade because there wasn't any, not even the usual consular problems of visas, because the Lao who had the money and could travel usually went directly to France without stopping anywhere on the way. So all they needed to do was apply to the French embassy. The big event was the conversion of currency with U.S. support. The kip, the local currency, had gradually deteriorated, not so fast as, certainly in China, and probably not so fast as in Vietnam either, but it was in effect inconvertible. You couldn't buy anything outside of Laos with kip, not even in Bangkok. So an effort was made, as had been previously elsewhere, to issue a new currency backed up by hard money, namely the U.S. dollar. That was very well received but it didn't last very long either, because once again the government found its expenses greatly exceeded its income, and the only way out is to print more money.

Q: Of course, this is an unclassified interview, but what was your impression of the role of the CIA at that time?

BACON: The role of the CIA seemed to be largely a matter of strengthening the hand of both the government and the military, such as it was. There was almost nothing to be discovered in the way of the usual targets of the CIA, and it was primarily a political operation.

Q: But they didn't have the huge apparatus that later developed there, the private armies, and almost private territories, and all that at the time that you were aware of?

BACON: No. Without doubt some of the local military had their coteries and cliques.

Q: We have but it's more trouble than it's worth. You left Vientiane when?

BACON: In '59 -- I think it was the spring.

RUFUS C. PHILLIPS, III
Operations Officer, USAID
Vientiane (1957-1959)

Rufus C. Phillips, III was born in Ohio in 1929. He graduated from Yale University in 1951 and served overseas in the U.S. Army from 1954-1955. He

served as Assistant Director of the CORDS program in Vietnam. Mr. Phillips was interviewed July 19, 1995 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

PHILLIPS: I came back to Washington and was asked to go by Fitzgerald up to Laos to start Civic Action there. Everybody was very concerned about Laos and the fact that Souvanna Phouma had come as Prime Minister. There was a truce with the Pathet Lao and an agreement that the Pathet Lao were going to come in to the government and stand in the next National Assembly elections. The Army was supposed to be integrated. In the meantime, of course, if South Vietnam was governmentally something of a vacuum out in the countryside the Laotian government didn't exist. The CIA Station Chief was a guy named Milt Clark. He had gotten some ideas -- these were really Lao ideas -- in talking with the then Laotian chief of staff who was almost illiterate, named Quan. He had been in the Lao Issara, which was the Lao resistance movement against the French, and had left because of increasing communist influence. His ideas amounted to taking some of the Laotian army, training them to go out to be medical workers and other workers in villages. It was something like what the Pathet Lao were already doing. Because I had been so involved in working with the Vietnamese army and so involved in helping Vietnamese Civic Action, I guess I became the US expert on Civic Action. So they asked me to go up to Laos to start a Civic Action program there, which I did. It was headed by a colonel in the Lao army named Oudone Sananikone, who was detached from the Lao Army and served under the prime minister (then Souvanna Phouma).

Q: How long were you in Laos?

PHILLIPS: I was in Laos off and on from 1957-59.

Q: Did we have an embassy?

PHILLIPS: Yes, we did have an embassy.

Q: Did it play much of a role?

PHILLIPS: The embassy was pretty active, in fact it became even more active in 1958 at the time of the National Assembly elections. There was something called Booster Shot which the Embassy was very much involved in. Horace Smith was the ambassador. It was an attempt to provide some support for non-communist Lao politicians in the elections. It worked simultaneously on various fronts. The ambassador and the head of the CIA Station were actively involved trying to encourage all the non-communist Lao politicians, most of whom were heads of families and traditional rivals, to get together and put up a common list of candidates. Well, that turned out to be a fiasco because a lot of them couldn't agree with each other. The Pathet Lao ran a single slate while there were multiple slates on the other side with the results you would imagine, the Pathet Lao won. These were not all the seats in the assembly, by the way, but a supplementary set of seats.

We had a nascent economic aid program in Laos, but it was pretty much confined to Vientiane. Not much was happening outside the city limits. There were a couple of road building programs but they hadn't gotten off the ground. The idea was how could we come up with an almost instant

village aid program. We did have by that time some Civic Action teams out in the countryside working in various areas. I was asked to help conceptualize what could be done. What would the villagers think was effective economic assistance on behalf of the government. The idea was that these were basically government candidates and therefore if the government could do something out there this would have some effect on how the voting Lao public might view the government and government candidates.

It didn't quite work out that way but I will tell you about the program itself. The kinds of requests we were getting from villages were mainly to put tin roofing on schools and Wats (Buddhist temples) and in some provide material for dams. There were basically two elements involved in the school and Wats requests, some cement and some roofing, and then the villagers would do the work themselves. The way the plan evolved we were to distribute to the villages cement and tin roofing which would be distributed through the Civic Action teams. Then, supposedly the government candidates would be on hand to try to take advantage of this.

Well, the program actually achieved something. I don't know how many Wats were roofed (they were all called schools by the way in case there was any congressional criticism of our supporting a religion), but there were hundreds. A lot of cement was distributed and used. Things did actually happen. A lot of supplies were bought in Thailand and brought in and distributed. We distributed them by truck whenever possible and by C-130s, without US Air Force marking, to villages without roads. Sheet metal and cement were airdropped with parachutes all over the place. There were actually two bulldozers dropped up in Phong Saly Province to build an airfield which actually got built.

This didn't have much impact on the elections for two reasons. One was that the nationalist candidates were divided and there were too many of them. Secondly, they couldn't get the notion in their mind to go out and campaign while all this was happening to connect with it. There is a story I will tell about this one candidate who was very well known and ran in Vientiane Province against Souphanouvong who was Souvanna Phouma's half brother but who was the leader of the Pathet Lao. Souphanouvong won the election handily. This particular candidate, Oun Sananikone was his name, was really enraged because he had particularly campaigned in a village which had been helped but the village voted against him. So he went up there and apparently convened the village head man and this entire village, where the Wat had been roofed and lots of things had been done. He berated them and said, "Look what I did for you. This Wat over there has been roofed and this bridge was built and this school was repaired with cement and I was responsible for that and you didn't vote for me." The people looked at him and said, "But you didn't ask us to vote for you."

So, it didn't have much of an effect on the elections. It did have one effect though which was sort of unintended and that is that before Operation Booster Shot I don't think the Lao ever took the Americans very seriously, because although there was a lot of activity in Vientiane and inside the economic aid mission with talk about grants, nobody ever saw much of anything happening. For the first time they saw lots of things happening. It was a tangible demonstration that the US could really produce something. The result was that I think they became over convinced about what the US could do, and of course to help them. They were terribly disappointed in the 1959-60 period when we did nothing after the North Vietnamese invaded Laos.

My role in Operation Booster Shot was that I became the on-the-ground organizer of all this development effort as part of the election campaign. Then I went on working with Civic Action thereafter.

Q: Did you find as you got involved in this that there was a dichotomy in the way AID and the CIA did things in this kind of activity?

PHILLIPS: Yes, there was a dichotomy in the sense that the traditional AID programs were so cumbersome and took so long to implement that they hardly ever responded to real problems. In other words, you might start something, crank it into the AID mill and maybe something might happen 18 months or two years later. If you wanted to distribute medical chests out to the provinces you might get them two years after your teams had already been out there. This was a real problem. I remember seeing the Vietnamese Commissioner of Civic Action -- when I went through Saigon in 1957 -- going up to Laos. He had gotten American aid in the beginning of 1956 to agree to buy some limited supplies that would go into villages, some tools and stuff like that. When I saw him, he said, "Congratulations." I said, "Why?" He said, "The first shipment of aid supplies for my village teams have arrived." I said, "A year later?" He said, "Yes." I said, "What were they?" He said, "vingt mille siseaux" (20,000 scissors).

The difference was this, with what were called unvouchered funds, even though the accounting system inside the Agency was very strict, you were able, once the program was approved, to go into the market in Hong Kong and buy 20,000 scissors and get them to wherever you wanted them in less than a month. There was no way that AID, following all its conventional procedures, seemed to be able to move in less than a year or a year and a half. The problem was that a lot of these needs, as they developed, were not ones that you could wholly foresee. This was a very fluid situation, if not revolutionary, in which the local teams needed something to work with soon, not in a year and a half. I think at that point, that the Agency was involved in a lot of overt programs using basically covert funds to be able to purchase things and get them to wherever they were needed. This was viewed as a stop-gap operation and was never liked by the more conventional Agency (CIA) people.

For example, a lot of the support for Operation Booster Shot...all the stuff that we could buy locally and a lot of the sheet roofing was purchased in Hong Kong and flown to Laos and dropped. The funds were taken from the US defense budget, transferred to the Agency and then Agency procurement methods were used to buy this stuff, including purchases on the local market in Thailand. The kip (Lao currency), I remember was about 100 to 1 and they only produced it in bills of 500s. We were buying thousands of dollars of cement which could be bought across the border in Thailand but paid for in Lao currency. So, I would go and get, literally, huge cartons of kip and go down to see Oudone Sananikone at his house. He would have drawn up lists and gotten prices and I would count out the kip. He would send out his procurement people and they would come out with the receipts and the goods. I would check the goods, then take all the receipts and staple them together, bring them back and make a report. That was how most of the cement and sheet roofing was bought.

The only other time I saw something like this done was in Vietnam in 1962 where USAID

created a local 10 million dollar piaster fund which was then used to support the strategic hamlet program. It was in local currency but USAID controlled it. We had a tripartite committee out at the province level, and jointly with the province chief the committee controlled all of these expenditures. But generally, the way things were programmed on the AID side, and I don't blame them, it was just inherent and basic in the way the thing was being run. It was so clumsy, so cumbersome and so time consuming that it was almost impossible to respond very quickly or even in a very sensitive fashion to a particular requirement. And lots of things happened to the road program, for example. By the time you got a road approved it was no longer a priority but another road was for different reasons.

Q: I am an old bureaucrat myself and this must have enraged the AID people. Here, the CIA if they needed something could go out and buy it, but they had to go through all their procedures. I would think this would have caused all sorts of friction.

PHILLIPS: It created quite a bit of friction. It varied with the individual. There was a Deputy Director of AID in Laos named Mike Adler. Mike had been in Greece during the early Point Four program when we were helping the Greeks to defeat the communists there. Things were a lot more informal then. He was very action oriented. His attitude was that if there were things which needed doing and we can't do them and you guys can, be my guest. Attitudes varied widely. I got a lot of cooperation from two guys in the program office. Initially they thought I was some kind of a spook, a creepy kind of a guy. But we got to know each other and realized I wasn't hiding anything about what we were doing, so they began to like me and trust me. They could see that things were happening. After all that was the rationale for our being there in the first place. So they became quite supportive. On the other hand I had a real run in with a community development guy who came out and whose approach to the whole notion of trying to help in village development or help the villages help themselves, was: first this is really an anthropological problem and we have to get a group of anthropologists here to study Laos culture and how the villages are configured in order to decide what the most effective way of helping them is. Here you are going off half cocked because you don't have an anthropological background and I do and I can appreciate different cultures and want to preserve elements of Lao culture, etc.

The outcome was that the Lao got so mad at him as he went over to try to tell them that he was the guy who really knew what was going on and I didn't know anything and therefore he should take over the whole Civic Action effort that they just cut him off. It was sad. I wouldn't say he was typical. We had some problems which I encountered when I went back out as Assistant Director in the USAID Mission in 1962 in Saigon. Similar problems that we had with some of the AID people. Part of the problem was that each AID division had its job, its assigned responsibility. If you somehow cut across those lines that had to do with something they were responsible for, then there was a tendency to guard that jealously and to try to wall it off. It didn't make any difference whether they were doing anything or not, they just didn't want you doing something in their field. This was one of the things that I think prevented AID from ever having a very successful approach to community development and, secondly, killed any spread of the JCRR concept from Taiwan. This was the old Joint Commission for Rural Reconstruction. It was very successful in developing the rural areas of Taiwan. That idea never went anywhere inside of AID because it ran across objections from the agricultural division, the public works division,

etc. What the JCRR did was to cut across all of those divisions. It was doing something in all of those fields, but doing it on a decentralized basis out in the rural areas. I suppose in terms of the philosophy of the approach that followed when I went back out with AID to Saigon in 1962, it was very much shaped by my earlier experience in Vietnam and subsequently in Laos. This was that the problems you were trying to help the locals solve had nothing to do with divisions between agricultural, social work, education, etc. They were all in fact bound together and had to do with how do you improve life at the village level, and with education, health, agriculture, etc. at that level. You couldn't separate them into discreet programs coming down from the central government.

Q: Why don't we pick this up next time with how you saw the North Vietnamese excursion into Laos and then move on to what happened to you subsequently. How is that?

PHILLIPS: Okay.

Q: Today is August 15, 1995. Was it an invasion by the North Vietnamese?

PHILLIPS: What happened was this. There was an accord in 1957 by which there were general assembly elections and Pathet Lao divisions were to be incorporated into the Lao army. This was very difficult to do and took a lot of negotiation. Finally two units came in. But they had been so indoctrinated that it was apparent from talking to defectors that the North Vietnamese had a number of North Vietnamese Lao speakers as well as Laotians they had trained and indoctrinated who really were the cadre that formed the basis of the Pathet Lao movement. These units had been so indoctrinated in a picture of what the Royal Lao army and government was like that they couldn't believe that the Americans weren't running everything as they had been led to believe. They couldn't believe, for example, that the Lao army had tanks and was actually running them themselves. There were some very curious incidents. They had been told that if you see tanks they are not real tanks but made out of papier-mache or phony materials. So they actually came up and hit the tanks with rifle butts and were surprised that the tanks were actually made of steel. Then they would question the Lao who were actually driving the tanks who were showing how the tanks could move. They said, "But, you are not Lao, you are American." The Lao guy who was probably just a sergeant would say, "What do you mean I am not Lao, I am talking to you in Lao." It was as if these guys had been sequestered, like Rip Van Winkle, and had just woken up, that this was some world they didn't recognize at all. So, there was very tight and very close ideological control over these units. They didn't really want to let the Royal Lao Army officers have anything to do with these units and insisted that they be allowed to have their own barracks apart from the rest of the army. This went on for a while. At one point, and I have forgotten exactly what provoked this, one of these units took off into the brush. The Lao army tried to get them back dropping leaflets but they didn't return. The unit headed up toward the North Vietnamese border. The North Vietnamese used this as a pretext to send in some units in which they had some Lao speakers and began occupying part of Sam Neua Province and on down into the rest of Laos along the North Vietnamese border which extends down to the South Vietnamese border. And, of course, this coincided with the development of their own guerrilla campaign in South Vietnam. It wasn't completely clear at the time, but it should have been obvious to those who were looking at it from a more detached point of view, that what they were trying to do was simply take over this area, occupy it, and then construct their own trails which

became the Ho Chi Minh trail into South Vietnam. I left about the time that this occurred. It was very frustrating to me. It was at the time that the Eisenhower administration was ending and Kennedy was coming in.

GILBERT H. SHEINBAUM
Disbursing Officer
Vientiane (1957-1959)

Gilbert H. Sheinbaum was born and raised in New York. He received a bachelor's degree in history and political science from New York University. He entered the Foreign Service in 1957. Mr. Sheinbaum's career included positions in Laos, France, Vietnam, Denmark, Madagascar, Malawi, The Philippines, and Switzerland. He was interviewed by Tom Dunnigan on September 5, 1995.

Q: And your first assignment was to Laos which in those days, as I remember, was very much in the headlines.

SHEINBAUM: Well, not when I went there but after about a year or so. When I returned to the States in mid-1959 I was asked to talk to a lot of young kids in different groups about Laos, which they were just finding on the map since it was getting more and more coverage owing to new communist participation in the government coalition while the U.S. was supporting anti-communist elements.

Q: Right. Now you had two chiefs out there, I gather, Jeff Parsons and Horace Smith, is that right?

SHEINBAUM: That's correct.

Q: Both career officers?

SHEINBAUM: That's right.

Q: Well, tell me a little about them. How were they as chiefs and did they pay attention to the most junior officer there?

SHEINBAUM: Well, not only was I the most junior officer, I held the position of disbursing officer, so I didn't have any influence on policy. I had not been happy about going into that job. I was very happy about going to Laos, but disbursing was the type of thing I was trying to get away from in New York. Nonetheless, it turned out to be very interesting because through finance I learned a lot about the U.S. Government as I was disbursing for six agencies there including USIA, AID, a pseudo-military, the Agency, and one other, I can't remember which, maybe it was VOA. But I did have enough interface with both Jeff Parsons and Horace Smith and got to know them rather well. Jeff Parsons I had a great deal of respect for; he died, of course, a few years ago, and he and I had maintained a correspondence during his last ten or

fifteen years. He was the first ambassador I ever knew on the job, and he was a pro. He, unfortunately, did not get along with Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, perhaps because of policy from Washington, which is what, I believe, led to his early departure and reassignment as Deputy Assistant Secretary in the East Asia Bureau. It was surprising because both of those men were rather thoughtful men, had good education and were intellectually strong, and you would have thought would have gotten along well. I don't know the background; I don't remember having read about why they split. Horace Smith was a different type of person. Horace was a jolly, not very substantive person, a good guy. He was always supportive of his troops (as was Jeff Parsons), but, of course, that was the old Foreign Service.

The Agency (CIA, to be more specific) had a great deal of control over operations in Laos during that time as events were evolving in Indochina. Perhaps some of that was due to Ambassador Smith's own concept of how to deal with Laos, but I think most of it was due to the influence of CIA Director Allen Dulles, the military, and so on. They were aided and abetted by John Foster Dulles, who was still Secretary of State but in rapidly declining health (I believe he died in 1959). I saw Horace again during my following posting in Paris: he loved to ride around in my Austin Healey and eat in my favorite bistros. He was a very likable person, but I think events took control of his time in Laos.

Q: Was your entire tour in Laos spent as disbursing officer?

SHEINBAUM: That's correct.

Q: So you got no rotation and no training in other phases of the Foreign Service.

SHEINBAUM: That's correct, except that there were three very fine officers who were very helpful to me in teaching me about substantive work. One was the chief of the political section, Chris Chapman. The second was John Gunther Dean who was the junior political officer, and he actually led me through a lot of what he was doing there which gave me great insight into policy and developments. There was also Elden Erickson, our economic officer, who had been repatriated in (I think) 1951 after being interned in Mukden with Angus Ward.

Q: Well, all those were good officers who had fine careers ahead of them. Who was the DCM at that time?

SHEINBAUM: Lee Bacon was my first DCM. Now, I didn't have that much contact with him. He was succeeded by John Holt. I didn't have that much to do with him either, except at the time that my superior, the B&F officer, died suddenly from too much alcohol and pills.

Q: Was our advice influential with the Lao at that time?

SHEINBAUM: I think so, although Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma tried to resist our advice to a great extent, which led to conflict within his own government. His successor, Phoui Sananikone, was much more amenable to dealing with us. But of course, things got a bit out of control as time went on.

Q: Yes, and we were unhappy with the coalition government that was set up there later which included the Pathet Lao and so forth.

SHEINBAUM: That's right. That took place just before I left. Pathet Lao leader Souphanouvong (a half-brother to Souvanna Phouma) came in out of the cold, was seen around town and even went to receptions. Much to my surprise, I was at a reception and this man approached me from my side and started speaking in good French: it was Souphanouvong, "the ogre" as we thought of him in those days, but he wasn't an ogre like Pol Pot, quite a distinct difference.

Q: Was it the general belief at the embassy at that time that Laos was slipping into communism?

SHEINBAUM: There was great fear of the domino theory.

Q: Yes. Was our aid well used? We were giving quite a bit of aid, I think.

SHEINBAUM: We were. We had a pretty good aid program there. Some of it was emergency aid for people who were suffering in one way or another. I think some of our projects were pretty good, such as infrastructure and agricultural development. We had some really good people in the aid program, but we also had too many losers: has-beens and others who were clearly not suited for working in that type of environment but enjoyed the perks of overseas living, government paychecks, and (in a couple of cases) eager to avoid previous charges of malfeasance on the job. One of the latter actually continued his malfeasance while working for AID.

Q: Well, did we have any proof of interference by the North Vietnamese in Laos at that time?

SHEINBAUM: Some. They had, of course, control over the Lao communists who had control of the two northern provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua which border on Vietnam. Therefore, the North Vietnamese ran all over those places at the time.

Q: Were you able to travel around the country at all or were you pretty well stuck in Vientiane?

SHEINBAUM: I was able to travel a lot because I did some volunteer things to help out the USIS and AID programs. We were dropping supplies on occasion, foodstuffs and aluminum roofing, to needy villagers. I went to almost all parts of the country -- never got to the Plaine des Jarres nor Phong Saly nor Sam Neua, but I did get up to Muong Sing which is five miles from the Chinese border. I flew up with the army attaché and spent the long weekend with Dr. Tom Dooley and his gang, whom I knew from Vientiane. Tom and I had become pretty good friends, and when I returned to New York on home leave in August-September 1959 he was already in the hospital with cancer of the chest. I was with him almost every day at the hospital, opening mail and doing other chores for him, including accompanying his mother on occasion. Visiting with Tom in Muong Sing gave me a good insight on Laos, mingling among folks living in remote areas, not just in the rural areas around Vientiane, and that was rather revealing for a new officer in the Foreign Service. And I did odd jobs for USIA. I used to take one of their mobile units out to the countryside and show films on my own time. I was also a disk jockey for six months on a new radio station VOA set up for the Lao Government.

Q: A disk jockey!

SHEINBAUM: The VOA had brought in a new radio station for the Lao and had an unwritten agreement that we would have one hour daily on the station from one to two every afternoon, on which we would play popular music. One of the VOA guys was the disk jockey but when he left he invited me to take over. So I was a disk jockey for six months in addition to my regular duties. Fortunately, that was during the lunch hour -- we had an hour and a half for lunch so I was doing an hour of disk jockeying and eating my lunch at the same time, and it did not interfere with my regular work.

Q: You ate your lunch to music, in other words.

SHEINBAUM: That's right.

Q: Well, when you left, Gil, did you have any hope for Laos? That it could remain independent or neutral or were you pessimistic about its chances?

SHEINBAUM: I was ambivalent, I would say. I literally cried on the plane when I left. I went down to Bangkok on a CAT flight (CAT was the predecessor of Air America), and I was the only passenger on the flight. The pilot was Bruce Blevens, and I was sitting in the back and just thinking about the magnificent two years there, thinking about what the hell was going to become of Laos. So I was hopeful but not unrealistic. I guess I'd put it that way.

Q: Have you ever had a chance to go back to Laos?

SHEINBAUM: I took my wife back there back in 1988. I had to go back on business when I was Director of the Colombo Plan, and Laos is a member of the Colombo Plan. We spent three days in Vientiane and three days in Luang Prabang, the old royal capital, and had a very nice trip.

Q: You were next assigned to Paris. That was a reward for your service in Laos or normal?

SHEINBAUM: Well, of course, when I was leaving for Laos in 1957, it seemed like everyone in Personnel, probably not including Pat Byrne (the desk officer, later Ambassador to Mali and Burma), felt sorry that I was being assigned to Laos. I wasn't at all unhappy about being assigned to Laos, as I mentioned before. I was simply unhappy about going into disbursing, but in the end that turned out to be a good thing as a start in the Foreign Service. When I left for Laos, they said, "Oh, don't worry, we'll take care of you the next time." But who would believe that? So when my orders came in for Paris, it took the code room twenty-four hours to convince me that they were legitimate orders because I had seen them play around in the code room dummyping up orders for other people, and I could not believe that I was really going to Paris.

CHRISTIAN A. CHAPMAN
Political Officer

Vientiane (1958-1959)

**Laotian Desk Officer
Washington, DC (1959-1962)**

Christian A. Chapman was born in France in 1921 to American parents. He joined the Foreign Service in 1951 and served in Morocco, Lebanon, Iran, Vietnam, Laos, Luxembourg, France, and Washington, DC. Mr. Chapman was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1990.

Q: Then you were only there ten months. Then where did you go?

CHAPMAN: I was transferred directly to Vientiane in Laos as chief of the two-man political section. I found it a very interesting, but puzzling, situation, with an ambassador I respected very much, Jim Parsons, and his wife, Peggy, a charming Canadian, and a Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma for whom I developed considerable respect. Unfortunately, there was a personal antagonism between the two men. And they reflected two fundamentally different views on how to save Laos. Jeff Parsons very much espoused the view of Washington that given a Communist China and the then apparently firm Sino-Soviet Block, it was essential for us to draw the line in Southeast Asia. There could be no compromise with the communists. Souvanna Phouma dealt with the Lao reality, which favors compromise. His half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong was a leader of the Pathet Lao, which was the Lao communist party and held two provinces in the Northeast, resulting from the 1954 Geneva Agreement. Souvanna felt that the way to maintain peace and the integrity of Laos was to work it out with the Pathet Lao, among Lao of all tendencies. For the Americans, this was unthinkable. At the time, Americans perceived the communist threat as world-wide, determined and coordinated. We put little trust in men of good will such as Souvanna being able to hold out against the communists. It was a fear of the camel's nose under the tent.

The tension between the two men existed right through this time. There very unfortunately developed an active dislike between them. It was a clash of policy but it became personal. Jeff went back to become Assistant Secretary for Far East and this tension remained a problem.

When I came back later to Washington to become desk officer, the junior officers felt much more in sympathy with Souvanna than Jeff and the senior officers throughout the government.

Q: How were you able to report, to operate.

CHAPMAN: When I arrived, the other political officer was John Gunther Dean, whom I did not know but who already had the reputation of being a very able young officer, and who had established a personal relationship with Souvanna. John's wife, Martine, is French and a very intelligent and able person. They worked very well together.

There was the same problem in Laos that there had been in Vietnam: of Americans coming in and trying to push the French out. All of us at the Embassy understood that it was much better to work with the French community, and we made great efforts that way, including with Souvanna

Phouma, who remained close to the French.

When I arrived, rather than take over all these contacts that were senior to John, I told him, "You carry on with Souvanna and the others, and when you leave, I shall take over all your contacts. We are only two men in this section. It's no big deal." That's the way we operated.

In any event, in a village like Vientiane, you get to know everybody pretty quickly. It was a dusty village of less than 100,000 people, and marvelously cheerful. The Lao are very welcoming and relaxed. Unpretentious, non-competitive, friendly, warm people. For any occasion, there would be a boon, which is a Buddhist feast celebrated on all important - and not so important-occasions, marriage, birth, holiday and departure, etc. And they included foreigners. The Lao have no side to them. They remain an extraordinarily attractive people. They are not very vigorous, and they don't work too hard. But it is a very attractive, small society. They're very humble and say, "Oh, we're just 3 million people in the middle of Southeast Asia and there's only so much we can do. " They recognized that the Vietnamese were the power in the area and that they were caught between Vietnam and Thailand.

So it was very easy to get to know the full leadership, all of the ministers, all the senior generals. In parenthesis, to show the stability of that society, I left in 1959 and when I came back in 1974, Ambassador Whitehouse gave a dinner in my honor with all the senior generals. They were exactly the same gang I had known 16 years earlier! The same was true for the political leadership. I could not believe it. It is a small society with stable ruling families.

Q: Laos didn't get the attention that flared up later.

CHAPMAN: More papers, hours, energy, money must have been spent by more people in the USG on Laos per square mile, per head of population than on any other country. When I came back to Washington in 1959 as desk officer for Laos, the country was in continuing crisis.

Q: Did you feel the crisis there?

CHAPMAN: Yes, but it was in no small measure generated by Americans. The least thing caused us to get terribly excited.

In 1975, on April 15, Phnom Penh fell, and Saigon fell to the communists on April 31. On May 1, one day later there were demonstrations in Vientiane. Within a month the Pathet Lao had taken over. I think the case can be made that it was the activism, firmness, deep involvement, however you might want to call it, of the United States in these countries that kept the communists at bay, at least until 1975.

Q: What were the tools at hand for trying to do this. You had an ambassador who couldn't talk to the leader very well. What were the other tools?

CHAPMAN: In 1958-59 when I was first there, we had a large aid mission and what was called the Program Evaluation Office, which was responsible for keeping tabs on the military assistance we were providing. It is a measure of the artificiality of the situation that the PEO was manned

by US military officers who had been civilianized. They were not in uniform but all wore white shorts and white short sleeve shirts. Everyone knew who they were in reality and called its leader, John Heintges, "General", even though he always scrupulously introduced himself as "Mr." We had gone to extraordinary lengths to maintain the fiction of the country's neutrality.

The economy, such as it was, such as it had developed, was totally dependent upon foreign assistance, particularly the US and France. In terms of Laos, it was very large. And one of the problems that we never resolved though we recognized its negative impact was that of the counter-part funds. Because we were providing a lot of military assistance, and economic aid, and generating kips, which was the local currency, it was necessary to find a mechanism to absorb these kips so as to avoid causing a wild inflation. And to do that we helped them import consumer goods to sop up these kips..

Goods could be imported with a license. Any Lao who had a license, had money in the bank, because licenses could be sold and that led to widespread corruption. A lot of people became very rich through the system. This was something that we never resolved.

Q: On the field there, how did you view the Pathet Lao at that time.

CHAPMAN: I think we viewed the Pathet Lao more seriously than they were in fact. They were hidden, living away to the Northeast in the hills bordering on Vietnam. The danger was the Vietnamese. The Secretary General of the Pathet Lao was half-Vietnamese and Prince Souphanouvong, who was one of the principal leaders of the Pathet Lao, had a wife who was Vietnamese, a dedicated communist and a very strong influence on him. That was the danger, of course.

Q: The whole thing had a racial overtone, didn't it?

CHAPMAN: The Lao were the valley dwellers. Then you had the Hmung Muongs, the mountain tribes in the northeast. The reason they became involved in the so-called secret war was that they were situated between the Lao in the Mekong Delta Valley and the Pathet Lao and the Vietnamese in the northwest.

Q: Were the Vietnamese being perceived as a threat, that they were trying to take over Laos?

CHAPMAN: The Lao always felt threatened by the Vietnamese and by the Thais. Both are historical enemies. The former now had in addition an expansive political system and ideology. The Lao genuinely feared them. There was a feeling among the Lao that if the French had not taken over the country in the last century, there would have been no Laos today. The Cambodians had very much the same feeling. The Thais and the Vietnamese would have taken over these countries.

Q: How did you feel towards the Thais?

CHAPMAN: We treated them as respected allies. And important. We tried very strongly to encourage them to be generous and supportive of the Lao. By and large I think we did help

mediate between the Thais and the Lao.

Q: So in many ways, our efforts and the French efforts helped gel these borders.

CHAPMAN: That's right. Historically, the Vietnamese push into Cambodia a few years ago is in line with the history of the Vietnamese. They originally came from China 1200 years ago.

Q: By Vietnamese you mean South Viets.

CHAPMAN: I don't know the etymology.

Q: Their word for "south" actually means south China.

CHAPMAN: They came down from China along the South China Sea, a strip of land between the Annamite chain and the sea and then gnawed their way over a thousand years right down into the south, eliminating all the peoples who had lived there, establishing soldier-farmer villages and gradually working their way forward. The thrust into Cambodia a few years ago was in line with the general thrust of their entire history. The withdrawal from Cambodia last year is historically the first time they pulled back.

Q: The question is whether they have really pulled back.

CHAPMAN: So there was this sense that you had a dynamic, energetic, determined people, the Vietnamese, who were kept within their boundaries by the French and then by us. Any chance they would have, they would press west against the Lao and the Cambodians, and eventually the Thais.

Q: Were you thinking communist threat or Vietnamese threat?

CHAPMAN: Communist threat. What is now forgotten about this situation is that at that time, there was a Sino-Soviet bloc that was truly threatening. It was threatening by its size, by its ideology, by its determination, by its global weight. Supporting communist rebellions in all three Indochina states, in Thailand, in Malaysia and in the Philippines. There was a great deal of uncertainty as to where the whole area would be going. All these countries were still very vulnerable and weak throughout the 40's, 50's, 60's and even 70's.

Q: When we talk about the domino theory, which is now snickered at.

CHAPMAN: I believe it.

Q: I believe it too. People forget these things. You were operating under this impression, that there was a communist threat and you had to toe the line.

CHAPMAN: I believed absolutely in Washington's overall view. On the ground, however, the junior officers saw the reality and felt a little uneasy as to the amount of resources we were devoting to these countries. They were such weak societies and we were pouring in these

millions and corrupting them in very large measure. But to hold the line is not easy when you deal with societies that are vulnerable in so many ways.

Q: Was it possible to talk to the Pathet Lao?

CHAPMAN: No, they were up in the northeast in the other province, and there was no contact. To the best of my knowledge, not even the CIA had any direct contact. However, there was one moment in 1958 after Souvanna returned to power when his half brother Prince Souphanouvong and his wife came to Vientiane to test the waters. The new American Ambassador, Horace Smith, even had them to a swim lunch at his pool. The conversation was very guarded and neutral. Finally, tensions in the city developed which forced the Pathet Lao Prince to leave.

Q: This was the kind of area that became CIA country.

CHAPMAN: That's right.

Q: How did the CIA operate and interface with the rest of the policy. Were they a loose cannon?

CHAPMAN: I was in Laos twice. Once in '57-59 and again in 1974-75. There was a large presence. Already in 1958-59 their operation was larger than the Foreign Service. And they were in touch with all of the players. By 1974-75, they had wired the whole place. As a Foreign Service officer, you looked at an event and weren't quite sure whether it was generated by the society or somehow generated by the agency. They had half of the ministers on their payrolls- or so it seemed. It was, I think, a very unhealthy situation.

I felt then and I feel today that we work in but one embassy and therefore must work cooperatively with the CIA. I had good relations with the agency people. They probably considered me a bit naive and didn't tell me what I didn't need to know, and in truth I did not seek it out.

Q: You left in 1959. Was it stabilized?

CHAPMAN: Yes it was stabilized. After untold happenings, a new government under Phoui Sananikone, the leader of the major family from Vientiane, was established, courtesy, I suspect in part, of the CIA. Souvanna was ousted. Phoui was a genial, roly-poly, easy going man, but shrewd and intelligent. It was a government that had essentially accepted our point of view- i.e., the communists were a threat and to be opposed without compromise. The government was genuinely friendly and eager to work with us. We were comfortable together. We felt that after years of spending time and energy making tactical moves, finally we had a situation that would permit the Lao, with our active support, to build their country. Here I think some credit is due the new Ambassador who replaced Jeff Parsons, Horace Smith. He was a big man who exuded energy and optimism, and who by his very cheerfulness and gung-ho attitude reassured the Lao, and certainly his relations with Phoui were excellent.

And so I left feeling good. And then I came back and ...

Q: I have you at the Laotian desk between 1959 and 1962.

CHAPMAN: Yes. In June 1960, we sent out a new ambassador, Winthrop Brown, a marvelous man. Very steady and open-minded. Within two weeks of his arrival, there was a coup in Vientiane led by a young captain, Kong Le, against the government. He declared: "I am for Laos, and the Lao people, for honesty, purity and against corruption," and he completely upset the apple cart. He asked Souvanna to take back the prime ministership. Phoui and his Ministers were out of the capital when the coup happened. It was a time of extreme tension. No one knew exactly which way things would go and there was always the fear that the Pathet Lao would take advantage of the situation and come in. Vientiane became isolated and Souvanna Phouma became Prime Minister again. Fortunately, Win Brown remained calm and managed to establish a good relationship with him. Win being very level headed, argued that we should work with Souvanna, because he represented the Lao reality.

Well, you have never seen a town so emotional as Washington. The Pentagon considered Win Brown virtually a traitor, gone-soft kind of thing. The senior levels of the State Department gave him very little support, although his old friend, Jeff Parsons, stuck by him. But the working folks in the Department and even in Defense, thought he was right.

Q: Why did this happen? Laos is not a place people know much about.

CHAPMAN: Laos was the front line. It extended from Korea, through Indochina, to Iran, Turkey and NATO. Indochina is where the issue was now joined. This was the weak link and it was perceived that way and believe me, at that time, there was a lot of emotion. There was a lot of fear regarding the drift of events. We had demobilized after World War II and then there was the Korean War, and now we were involved in this very messy situation in Indochina with an aggressive Soviet Union and China.

Q: We're still talking about the latter days of the Eisenhower Administration. What did you do as a desk officer?

CHAPMAN: Well, I worked very closely with Jeff Parsons, whom I very much admired and liked even though I thought better of Souvanna than he did. But there was an emotional factor there. Bill Sullivan was assistant to Jeff and because the Laos desk was the most agitated right then in Southeast Asia, I had direct access. Daniel Anderson, the Director of the office and Dick Usher, his deputy, worked a good deal on Laos affairs but left me considerable freedom. In fact, most of the officers in the Office of Southeast Asia worked in one way or another on the problems generated by Laos. It was quite a boiler room that office.

Q: What did you do?

CHAPMAN: It's difficult to convey years later but it was a very charged atmosphere. When a country is in crisis, formidable pressures and demands gather on the desk: continuing requests for briefings and speeches from the top levels of the administration; continuing inquiries from Congress; unending questions from the media; inquiries from many Embassies; requests for speeches, for discussion panels, etc. All this on top of a flood of materials coming from all over

the world. These were twelve hour days, seven day weeks.

As an indicator of the priority Laos had assumed by the end of 1960, one of the first trips Kennedy took in January of 1961, was to meet Prime Minister of Great Britain MacMillan in Key West in Florida. There were a couple of issues but the first big issue was Laos. (Skybolt was the other.)

Q: Before Kennedy came in, did you get this pessimistic impression of Laos from the Pentagon? Where was it coming from?

CHAPMAN: It was coming from the general atmosphere. We were so deeply involved with our military and AID missions that every happening in Southeast Asia echoed in Washington. You felt you had to react to every word Souvanna said. A climate develops in Washington that requires you to act at every step, otherwise, you are preempted by other players, and the more serious the crisis, the more players you have- which provides another element of tension. (Just as an example. In order to maintain the leadership of the Department in the conduct of affairs on Laos, I gathered every once in a while all the officers who dealt with it on a daily, operational basis. We were some thirty, and I am not talking of the dozen of others, inferiors and superiors who numbered in the hundreds, but just the immediate operational guys.)

Q: This is an example of how things get completely overplayed. I suppose those who had been there could say that this was no big deal but obviously nobody is going to listen to a relatively junior officer.

CHAPMAN: That's exactly right. Anybody who had said at that time, "Well, maybe we should talk to the communists" would have been crucified within the executive branch, in the legislative branch, and in the press. There was a degree of unanimity in this country that created a lot of pressure, and made it virtually impossible to propose alternatives. Now everybody says that Vietnam was a mistake, but at that time we marched down that road as a single man.

Q: Were there others that thought like you?

CHAPMAN: I think the junior officers felt on this specific issue of Laos that Souvanna was probably right and that we should help him find a Lao solution.

Q: And that would be?

CHAPMAN: Compromise with the Pathet Lao. But this coup was important. The one by Captain Kong Le in June of 1960. He ousted the Sannanikone government which he considered corrupt and asked Souvanna to become Prime Minister. So this made everybody uncomfortable - a young captain revolting and choosing Souvanna. Souvanna was again talking peace among the Lao, bringing all the factions together. Win Brown said that he was right and that he was the only one who could put the show together again. And in Washington, people were saying Win Brown is a traitor and Souvanna is dangerous, he wants to compromise with Communists. He is going to lead us down the road and the Pathet Lao are going to take over. Emotions ran very high here.

One of the great regrets I have in my career was that unbeknownst to me, and I was then the Laos desk officer, a high-level DOD mission was sent to northeast Thailand. They went there to see Colonel Phoumi Nosavan who was in south Laos in dissidence against Souvanna Phouma. They promised Phoumi gold and US support.

Q: Good God.

CHAPMAN: Contrary to everything we had told Souvanna. To this day I believe it was one of the more shameful acts of this government.

Q: This was not a Pentagon operation.

CHAPMAN: It was approved by the President.

Q: This was the Eisenhower...

CHAPMAN: It reflected the reality of the views in this town much more than I did.

Q: What happened in the operation?

CHAPMAN: Phoumi took Vientiane by force, bombed it including our embassy, among other places and took over the government.

Q: When did this happen?

CHAPMAN: August 1960.

Q: How did we react to that?

CHAPMAN: He was our boy but he was a disaster. He was corrupt and a rather limited man. It took some months before he could be eased out of position and sent as military attaché to Bangkok. He was part Thai and had some family there.

Q: We organized a coup against Souvanna?

CHAPMAN: We supported Phoumi, who attacked Vientiane.

Q: What were we getting out of our embassy?

CHAPMAN: From the embassy we had Win Brown who was saying Souvanna is right and Phoumi is wrong.

Q: How come Win Brown lasted. Why wasn't he just yanked out?

CHAPMAN: Because he was proved right in the long run.

Q: But at the time?

CHAPMAN: He was a very disciplined officer and he and Jeff Parsons were very close friends. It was a very painful moment.

Q: What happened then?

CHAPMAN: What happened was that there was a great deal of uncertainty for some months. Finally Kennedy came in and Harriman was made Assistant Secretary for the Far East. Harriman met Souvanna in India and took a good measure of the man and helped bring him back.

Q: Let's talk about Kennedy. One of the first sights I had of him was sitting with a map of Laos on television explaining where this country of three million people was.

CHAPMAN: This was the front line between the Free World and the communist world. There was instability in the country and therefore the fear that the Pathet Lao would take advantage of the situation, and break the front.

Q: You were an experienced desk officer. Were you able to get across to the Kennedy administration how you felt?

CHAPMAN: It was done beyond me. I don't know how the Kennedy Administration was briefed on Laos, frankly. I know I wrote some long papers.

Q: Kennedy became renowned later for talking with desk officers.

CHAPMAN: Not this one, but he did take me to Key West. With MacMillan.

Q: And Averell Harriman?

CHAPMAN: Harriman was the one who turned this around.

Q: Did you have much to do with him?

CHAPMAN: Not very much because I left the desk not too many weeks after he took over and I was on the Vietnam Task Force that was being organized at that time. I had gotten married in April 1960, and working twelve hour days was not ideal under the circumstance. So I left the desk in 1961 and joined the Vietnam Task Force. There was a growing problem there; the north Vietnamese had launched an offensive against the south the previous winter and the situation was deteriorating.

Q: Can you describe your trip to Key West with Kennedy. What did you do?

CHAPMAN: I was a note taker. I had a hard time hearing MacMillan who spoke through his heavy mustache and dropped his words on the table. Essentially there was an agreement to work towards the reconciliation of the anti-communist Lao factions, and support Souvanna as leader.

The Europeans were always more favorably disposed towards Souvanna.

Q: The British have never been much of a player there, so why the meeting?

CHAPMAN: They weren't. But the British have always known how to work this town, how to work with Americans. In embassies abroad they have always been close to the American embassies because they speak the same language, they understand the American perspective and they add their own intelligent views to our own. They are very professional and for us Americans, friends like that are always very useful. It extends the range of our reporting and the knowledge of a society, and they are very professional colleagues. Canadians are very good also. But world wide, the British are certainly the best diplomats that I have dealt with.

Q: What about this task force? What were you doing?

CHAPMAN: I was one of a growing number of officers on the Vietnam Task Force because there was a growing problem in that country. This was the winter of 1961. Hanoi had reopened the war in the south. There was a growing number of incidents. So we got more involved in Vietnam.

Q: You were there from 1961-62. How did the officers feel about Vietnam.

CHAPMAN: There was no real dissent, no real dissent. This is the great tragedy of Vietnam, that at no point did anyone suggest alternative policies nor could we easily disengage ourselves from Vietnam. I don't know when we could have disengaged without shaking our alliances throughout the world. When a situation becomes worse and the United States pulls back, this seeming backing-off a commitment causes great anxiety for Koreans, Europeans, Iranians. I think all of us recognized that. We tend to the overkill, and we made an enormous effort in Vietnam, committed enormous resources, and rather than take a more distant view and build up the Vietnamese forces and say, "We'll do the best we can. We'll deliver the guns and the money, but if you can't hack it, that's it; we have done our best." I tried one initiative which to this day I think had some merits. To launch a proposal to neutralize Laos and Cambodia (I didn't dare say South Vietnam) under international supervision with rather large international forces in those two countries. With the thought of creating a neutral barrier between Communist China and Vietnam on one side, and Thailand and the Free World on the other.

I should have persevered more and pushed it to a higher level. But it got shot down right away.

Q: Was neutral still a bad word?

CHAPMAN: Yes, yes it was. Dulles had said it. To be neutral in the world is to be immoral. It was the one initiative that I took that to this day I think had some merits. I don't think it had a chance in hell. If it had been accepted in the State Department, it would have been killed by the Pentagon, the Congress, and the press.

HARVEY E. GUTMAN
US AID Representative
Laos (1958-1960)

Harvey E. Gutman was born in Switzerland in 1921. From 1942-1946 he served in the American Army overseas. Upon returning in 1949 he received his bachelor's degree from University of Portland and later received his master's degree from American University in 1958. During his career with AID he held positions in Laos, Paris, Thailand, Morocco, Liberia, and Nigeria. Mr. Gutman was interviewed by Stuart Van Dyke in August 1997.

GUTMAN: You may enjoy the anecdotal background of the assignment. The Far Eastern edition of the Wall Street Journal was having a field day with an article series entitled "Chaos in Laos". Indulging in a great deal of journalistic license, the correspondent alleged horrific incidents of corruption, bloopers and waste in the American assistance program. In view of my Commerce background in trade and commodity licensing, I was rushed to Vientiane to replace the USAID representative on the US/RLG (Royal Lao Government) Import Licensing Board. My predecessor was a somewhat crotchety retired army officer. He did not speak French and, according to the WSJ account, had signed off on a large import license for rails.

Unfortunately, Laos had no railroads and the license apparently authorized the acquisition of dollars for tile procurement of miles of toy rails at the official exchange rate (three times higher than the open market rate). Happily, within days of my arrival, the Lao currency was floated and the Board abolished. I was transferred to the vast Program Office and by the end of my tour had served as both Program Planning and Program Operations Officer.

USAID/L was huge; I would estimate around 100 direct hire Americans plus a large number of American and third-country contract teams. (Actually, the official appellation was U.S. Operations Mission (USOM). I mention this as this acronym was a source of hilarity for the Lao and the Thai. Depending on the tone used, "U.S.OM" translates into "useless" in Lao/Thai).

Possibly, even bigger was the Program Requirements Office (PRO), nominally a part of the USAID. An important difference was that their staff, though wearing civilian dress, addressed one another by military rank. These fellows were concerned with advising, training and equipping the Lao Army. They were either active military officers who had been discharged for the duration of their Laos assignment or bona fide retired officers. This scheme was designed to comply with the letter — if not spirit — of the Geneva Accords under which Laos was to be demilitarized. Since USAID was responsible for the generation of PRO's large local currency requirements through commodity import programs, the Program Office was extensively involved in this part of the U.S. effort.

It's a bit difficult to recall program details 40 years later. Basically the Mission had two themes: classic technical assistance, i.e. the transfer of skills by demonstration projects and training and much larger category of activities that was funded under "defense support". Later incarnations of this appropriation were called supporting assistance, economic support, etc. Its purposes ranged from budget support to financing road and airport construction, i.e. turn-key operations, far

beyond mere technical demonstrations. These projects aimed at strengthening the RLG against the internal communist threat (Pathet Lao) and North Vietnamese incursions and propaganda.

In contrast to later years, mission directors, at least in the Far East Bureau, enjoyed a large measure of discretion in project initiations. The D/Laos could approve projects up to \$5 million within the Mission appropriation ceiling without AID/W approval. Around 1959 AID/W imposed a more detailed programming style with a form, called E-1. It consisted of a summary sheet with life-of-project data, including annual obligations and estimated expenditures by component, local currency requirements, host country contributions and 3-4 pages of descriptive text.

The technical assistance activities, e.g. animal husbandry, upgrading statistics and customs services, mother-and-child clinics, handicraft, etc., etc., were very much the same as those that I observed in the early 1990s during consulting assignments. Though the activities were virtually identical, their documentation now include the weighty annexes discussing social/economic/financial/environmental effects, the impact on the role of women, etc. This requires relays of experts, months and years of preparation and hundreds of thousands of dollars to achieve often no more than what we did already 40 years ago, but relatively simply and fast. At a regional USAID seminar in the early 1970s, I suggested once that AID might have overdeveloped the art of helping the underdeveloped. This observation went over with the AID/W notables like the proverbial lead-balloon.

Lao officials were modestly involved in the formulation of our TA program but found it difficult to absorb our procedures. The Mission had very few Lao employees (who, if qualified, could find better paid positions) and was largely staffed by third-country nationals, mainly Thai, Vietnamese and Filipinos.

When it came to defense support activities, there was little conceptual consultation with the host country. We considered these activities a part of U.S. geo-political objectives, i.e. as much in our own interest as in the GOL's. Basically, we decided what was needed; cooperation was a matter of implementing our projects. For instance, our Public Safety people pushed measures that, in their opinion, made the police more effective. In contrast, the RLG's primary concern was the balance of power between various armed factions rather than increased efficiency.

I liked Laos, especially the relatively unspoiled countryside and tried to get out in the field as much as possible. In particular, I recall a rather arduous trip to Kampachak in the South to investigate the state of some abandoned tin mines. When we entered the village where the retreating Japanese supposedly had slaughtered the French mining staff in 1945, we were surprised to encounter white people. The neat houses flew a strange flag and the people spoke a language that was foreign to all of us.

However, most of the locals also spoke French. They explained that they had been members of the "Free Brittany Movement" [la Bretagne Libre] who had collaborated with the Germans in the hope of becoming an independent, Celtic-speaking state within the "New Order." Many of the men had served in SS units. Their leaders had been tried and executed by the DeGaulle government but they had escaped and made their way to Laos. To judge from the number of

kiddies we encountered, one of their main efforts must have been the augmentation of the group.

PETER M. CODY
Desk Officer for Laos, USAID
Washington, DC (1959-1961)

Deputy Director, USAID
Vientianne (1965-1967)

Peter M. Cody was born in France in 1925. He received his bachelor's degree in 1947 from Yale University and received his master's from Yale in 1948. From 1943-1946 he served in the US Navy. His career with AID included positions in Mexico, El Salvador, Washington, Laos, Paraguay, Ecuador, Philippines, and Lebanon. Mr. Cody was interviewed in November 1991 by Melbourne Spector

CODY: So when I arrived in Washington, I objected, and they put me on the Laos desk, which I enjoyed. Laos was very much in the news in those days. Porter Hardy was holding hearings every day and into the evening about Laos. They had a lot of problems that had come out of the import program that had led to a lot of abuse, not so much abuse on the part of Americans, but abuse on the part of the people who handled the goods, who were a variety of different nationalities. There was an American contractor who was obviously stealing from the US government. He never came home. I assume by now he's dead, but he declined to come back to the U.S. So a lot was going on, and it was the sort of job where you didn't come home for dinner, you stayed downtown and went back to work after dinner.

Again, I came back to work for interesting people. My immediate boss was a man named Victor Morgan, who was a person with a lot of intellectual capacity, for whom I enjoyed working. His boss was another fellow who was intellectually stimulating, Sherwood Fine. Various people at the top changed, but one of the ones I remember most was Bill Sheppard, who, again, was both an interesting person, and enjoyable to be around, and exceptionally well organized. He ran the Far East Bureau in those days. Different people came through the Bureau. Bill Ellis was the program officer for awhile, Warren Wiggins the Deputy Bureau Chief. Jim Fowler eventually wound up in that office. I ran into him later in Latin America as the head of Latin American Bureau. Rudd Poats was head of the Bureau awhile after Sheppard. We just had a lot of people with whom it was a pleasure to be working. Don McDonald was head of the Korea office. We had a woman, whom you may recall, Helene Granby, who could be difficult, but she was hard working. She once stayed in the office five days without going home. We called her "Old Stinky." She probably weighed about ninety pounds soaking wet. She was intellectually stimulating, too. It was a nice place to work. I enjoyed it.

Q: What years are we talking about now?

CODY: 1959 to 1961. I went out to Laos twice during that period. At the other end of the line, the mission director, John Tobler, I thought was very poor in his job. The mission was in rather a

mess. The mission director not immediately before him, but there were a couple of interim people before that, Carter DePaul had a number of problems with the Hardy committee and he had been thrown out. It was a time of ferment and, therefore, it was stimulating. When Chester Bowles became the deputy secretary and he took an interest in Laos as well.

Q: Was there a lot of pressure on Laos from the White House?

CODY: I guess there was, but I think that came a little later. Working for AID abroad prior to coming on the Laos Desk, I really had very little to do with the embassy people, whereas in Washington, working in AID, I met regularly with my State Department contacts at the desk level and occasionally higher up the line. As I say, at one point Chester Bowles took an interest in what we were doing.

There were battles between State and AID. One of the things we did, one of the ways in which we supported Laos with State's encouragement was to give them cash grants, which was very much against AID's normal policy, particularly as expressed by Dennis Fitzgerald, who was technically the number three in AID, but in many ways the number-one. He just hated that idea of handing people cash money.

Q: What kind of strings were on that money when you granted it?

CODY: I guess we allocated it to different things, but it was budget support and was fungible. It was a continuing process. After giving each grant we knew they were going to renew the request. It came up every three or four months. Every time I'd have to run over to State and say, "I need a statement from the under secretary that says 'For overriding political reasons, we want to give another cash grant to Laos,'" and Fitzgerald wouldn't budge unless he received that piece of paper. He always acted like it was something new and unusual, and it kept happening every time they ran out of money, which we knew they were going to do.

This was an era where we were saving if not the whole world, portions of the world from communism. One of the things that made Laos look good to AID and the State Department was that for a short period of time we had a coalition government between the "bad guys" and the "good guys". The "bad guys", Prince Souphanouvong ("the red prince") and his followers, were brought into the government. He was a half-brother of Souvanna Phouma, who was the neutralist Prime Minister. There were a variety of different people--General Phoumi and others, who represented the right wing. When they brought the Red Prince into the government so we could say, "We have recaptured two provinces from the reds." Laos received a lot of attention. As I say, I enjoyed being in a job where I was in the eye of the storm.

Victor Morgan, after I was there a year, moved on and went to SAIS, the Johns Hopkins' economics program, and I became the Laos desk officer. Then I had more contacts with people like Sheppard and others up the line. At the end of my normal two years' tour plus a couple of months, I was asked for by Charles Mann, who was the mission director in Cambodia, to come out and be his program officer. On my last trip to Laos, I had stopped by Cambodia and he had made this offer.

So I went. Cambodia was, again, a fascinating place to be, because this was during the days of Prince Norodom Sihanouk when he was walking a tightrope between East and West. We had diplomatic representation and aid programs from all sides, in addition to the International Control Commission which had been set up by the Paris Accords of '54 which divided Vietnam in half and oversaw "peace" throughout Indochina. The Commission had a neutralist Indian chairman, as well as Canadians, and Poles, a tripartite commission to oversee the divisions established in '55. But then we had a Russian aid program, a Chinese aid program, a Czech aid program, other Eastern bloc countries, plus the heavy French influence that was still there. We provided military assistance in the sense of materials, but the French provided military assistance in the sense of saying how to fight. So you had both the military missions, and you'd come in contact and see all these people. Lots of little anecdotes about those kinds of things. It was an fascinating place to be.

Sihanouk was at that time quite adept at walking this tightrope. He eventually threw us out. Whether he jumped the gun or whether he had no alternative, I'm not sure. I think he jumped the gun, but I obviously was not privy to all the influences that were on him particularly the Chinese.

Q: What do you mean, jumped the gun?

CODY: He threw us out using the excuse of incursions of U.S. forces in Vietnam. By that time we had military advisors. I don't think we were formally engaged in combat at that time. We had military advisors with Vietnamese units and they would occasionally, in hot pursuit, chase Viet Cong across into Cambodia, particularly in that area called the Parrot's Beak, where that piece of Cambodia sticks into Vietnam. Sihanouk would object violently to this. So eventually he asked the two AID missions, military and economic, to leave. Subsequently he threw out the embassy as well. So he abandoned this policy of walking the tightrope. I think he probably did it sooner than he had to and it wasn't a good idea, but I wasn't privy to all the inside information as to what pressures he was under from the Chinese and the Russians and the North Vietnamese and others to do this.

Station from 1965-1967

Q: You were how long in Laos then?

CODY: Over two years. Then I was offered a job from the Latin American Bureau to go as director in Paraguay. One thing about Laos, it was one of the countries where I had a good ambassador, had good relations with the mission director, and got along extremely well with the Lao. The Lao are generally easy to deal with. I can't even remember whether Rudd Poats was still the AID Regional Director--but Sullivan was such a person that if you had Sullivan on your side, you weren't going to get any real problems from Washington.

One of the international figures who I have met, who I really admired was Souvanna Phouma. Souvanna Phouma, off and on for thirty years, was the chief of state. He was thrown out, brought back in various times, but he was a person who had received a lot of support and adulation. He

was one of the few people, maybe the only in that level, where it didn't seem to go to his head. He didn't think he was god. In addition, he actually was royalty. We referred to him as Altesse, "your highness." The Lao royal system is kind of messed up, because there wasn't just one king. The French took one of the three kingdoms and made one of them the dominant one, Luang Prabang. That's why the flag had a three-headed elephant. Luang Prabang was established as the royal capital of Laos. Vientiane was the administrative capital. There is no royal capital now. In any event, Souvanna Phouma was a serious, sober-minded person. His relaxation was playing bridge. He took his job very seriously, but he didn't seem to take himself as seriously, in spite of the fact he had a lot of dignity. When I was in Cambodia, there was an article in the government paper referring to Sihanouk as "égale à Dieu," equal to god. I think Sihanouk was tending to believe it. In subsequent countries, as with Stroessner or Marcos, they were beginning to believe--maybe not equal to god, but that they were infallible. Whereas with Souvanna Phouma, I admired him for the fact that he was able to keep his sense of balance that he was still a human being.

PERRY J. STIEGLITZ
Teacher/Information Officer, USIS
Vientiane (1959-1963)

Cultural Attaché
Vientiane (1967-1968)

Perry J. Stieglitz was born and raised in New York. He entered the USIA in 1961 and served in Laos, Paris, Marseille, Thailand, and Brussels. Mr. Stieglitz was interviewed by G. Lewis Schmidt in 1992.

STIEGLITZ: After my years in Switzerland, I returned to New York and was given a teaching appointment at Hunter College. As soon as I received tenure from Hunter, I applied for and received a Fulbright grant. I had requested one to take me back to Europe for a year but was told via a telephone call from Washington that they needed a French-speaking teacher in Laos. I was a bachelor and didn't hesitate to accept, even though I may not have been certain where and what Laos was.

Consequently in September of that year I flew to Asia and up to Vientiane. The program there was under the sponsorship of the U.S. Information Service. Charles Searles, the American cultural attaché in Vientiane, was in charge of the program. He was a fine fellow and did a great deal to make my life pleasant, although my living conditions were somewhat on the primitive side -- transportation was a bicycle, and my lodgings were so meager they lacked cooking facilities.

I was the first American to be accepted as a teacher in the French lycee of Vientiane. The French in charge of the school were deeply suspicious of having an American on their staff. I had been told I would be teaching the senior classes of English but instead was given the beginner classes -- and lots of them. Nevertheless, Laos itself was unique and seductive. The classical dance and

music were enchanting, and bicycle excursions around the countryside -- generally with colleagues from the Lycee -- were delightful. My list of friends and acquaintances became long among the Lao, members of the French faculty and the French embassy, and Americans from the American embassy.

Near the end of the school year, a USIS inspection party headed by Dan Oleksiw came to Vientiane. After they had been there for several weeks, Dan called me in to tell me they had been observing my activities and asked if I would be interested in joining USIA.

I liked the idea and agreed to be a candidate. When I returned to Washington, I went through a series of examinations including a three-hour oral session during which I was subjected to a barrage of questions by six State Department officials. Then because in those days they decided that before sending people overseas they should see a psychiatrist, I was sent to a psychiatrist in New York who happened to be a Frenchman. He and I got on the topic of French literature and most of our time together was spent on that. So much for my psychiatric exam.

Before I was scheduled to report into the Information Agency, I was asked by the Department of Education if I would undertake a project in Finland. I was given leave from Hunter College once more to go to Finland for four months. While in that handsome northern country, I traveled about for four months to set up four posts at which American teachers would teach English. The project worked well and had a duration of some years.

1961: Branch Public Affairs In Souvannakhet, Laos

Back in Washington, I was informed that my first USIS post was in Laos, but not in Vientiane. Rather, I was to be branch post officer in Souvannakhet, a city on the Mekong that was later to have an unfortunate political significance. It was a small city, and my principal activities included setting up a library, used largely by the high school students, and taking excursions into the neighboring villages to speak to the village chiefs and find out what they most needed. I would be accompanied by health medics who would examine the sick, and by motion picture technicians who would show USIS-made films to the people in the evenings.

While in Souvannakhet I got to know a good many Lao, including the General of the southern armies -- my friendship with him remained through the years. Becoming part of that community -- participating in their rituals -- being asked to be one of the judges at their annual boat races -- was exotic and exhilarating.

After numerous complications, I found a house in the city, and brought down an excellent Vietnamese cook and butler to take care of it. It permitted me to entertain my Lao friends, which I took pleasure in doing.

Q: Did you find that the Lao retained any of the French suspicion and perhaps prejudice against Americans or were they pretty much free of prejudice by then? And how did you find your ability to mix with them on a personal basis?

STIEGLITZ: I found no anti-American prejudice among the Lao in Savannakhet. My personal relationships with them were generally excellent, as were my relationships with the French who were in the city. To cite an example, there was a French commissary at the nearby airport of Seno. I had a problem getting food items and such from Vientiane, and the French granted me full use of their commissary -- a most generous gesture. The Lao have always been a gentle, loving, caring people.

Q: Did you ever, at any time after your return to Vientiane or elsewhere in Laos, feel that the people themselves had any suspicion of Americans that they might have obtained from the French or was it always pretty much an open sesame as far as you were concerned?

STIEGLITZ: The latter. Let me cite another example. Before I left Savannakhet, the General of the Southern Lao armies invited me to go with his wife and himself down to his town of Champassak in southern Laos and spend a few days there as his guest. It was unforgettable, especially doing the Lao dance, the lam-vong, at an open-air pavilion on the banks of the Mekong.

One problem in Savannakhet was the lack of support I received from the USIS people in Vientiane. The field officer was extremely unpleasant. He was infinitely more suspicious of me than were the Lao and French put together. He did not like my being a New Yorker and a teacher of literature. He liked to give the impression that he was a gung-ho type, and kept a gun on this hip -- although it was against the rules -- pretending that there were enemies around each corner. He obviously wanted people to believe that he was with the CIA rather than USIA, but I trust no CIA officer would have been so obvious and obnoxious. He was so dreadful and unhelpful that at one point I wondered whether I really wanted to continue in this situation. But I was too proud to give in to him and stayed on.

Eventually a new USIS team arrived in Vientiane, and the situation changed at once entirely for the better. The new PAO came down to visit Savannakhet, and asked me to come up to Vientiane to be his information officer.

Q: Who was that?

STIEGLITZ: Gerry Gert, a splendid PAO. It was a pleasure working for him. Being an information officer was not at all what I had had in mind when I had joined the Agency. I had expected to remain in cultural affairs, but it was the information slot that was open, and I did the best I could with it for the year.

While in Vientiane, because I was a decent bridge player and because the Prime Minister of Laos, Prince Souvanna Phouma, was a great bridge player and always on the lookout for fresh blood at the bridge table, I had the good fortune one evening to have one of the Prime Minister's French friends bring me to the residence for an evening of bridge. Even more fortunately, I played fairly well that night and consequently was invited back a number of times. That was how I got to know the Prince.

When it was time for me to leave Laos, to my great joy my next assignment was as Assistant

Cultural Affairs Officer in Paris. I went to call on the Prime Minister to say goodbye. He graciously received me. I asked, "Altesse, is there anything I can do for you in Paris?" He replied, "Oh, no." And then he added, "Yes. Once in a while, look after my children."

Q: You left when?

STIEGLITZ: In 1967. But I have to mention this. While in Paris, I knew the Lao Ambassador, and one day at the Lao Embassy, at a reception, I saw this young woman enter the room. I was literally smitten at first sight, and asked who she was. She was the daughter of Prince Souvanna Phouma.

Q: She had not been in Laos when you were there?

STIEGLITZ: No, she hadn't. She was working at UNESCO in Paris, and when I met her, she had just separated from her husband, a French count. Her mother was friendly and invited me to a party. From then on, I lost no time in trying to advance my friendship with Moune Souvanna Phouma. Near the end of my stay in France, Moune left to return to Laos to be Chef de Cabinet in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She had been educated at the Institute of Political Science in Paris, and was therefore well qualified to be in the government.

Then someone from USIA Washington came to Paris to speak to us about our assignments. In those days everyone was supposed to be going to Vietnam. He assured me that my position would be in Saigon. I said that I would prefer to go back to Laos -- that I had learned some of the language and could be more immediately effective there. I did not mention my personal reasons for wishing to go to Vientiane, but by great good fortune, the cultural attaché position in Vientiane fell open just at that moment. So I went from Paris back to Laos to be the Cultural Attaché at the Embassy.

Q: And by some coincidence, Moune was there?

STIEGLITZ: Yes, indeed -- at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. And the very first evening I was there, she and her father cordially received me at his residence.

I was able to do quite a few things for our program in Laos. We were putting up a new cultural center, and some of my ideas were incorporated into that building. When a group of American musicians came, I was able to persuade the Prime Minister to be the guest of honor at their concert.

Q: Was Dave Sheppard the PAO at that time?

STIEGLITZ: Dave Sheppard, the best of all PAOs, was there at that time.

Q: Unfortunately his wife became ill. . .

STIEGLITZ: While we were there. Moune and I had become close to Dave and Peggy. He seemed to be everything a PAO should be, including terribly smart. I had disliked the previous USIS programs for Laos. They tried to stir the people up and tell them how rotten the enemy was. With Dave, it was constructive. He saw things in another way and tried to help build these people, to make them strong, pleased with themselves. This allowed them to realize what the enemy was trying to do to them. I was happy to work with Dave.

Peggy became ill and had to be evacuated. Then Dave left. He didn't want to come back under the circumstances.

Before the year was up, Moune and I were married. We were married in her father's home in a Buddhist ceremony.

Q: This was one case where the prominent father was in favor of the groom, I gather.

DANIEL OLIVER NEWBERRY
Political Officer
Laos (1960-1961)

Daniel Oliver Newberry was born in Georgia in 1922. He received his bachelor's degree from Emory University in 1944. He then served overseas in the US Army from 1943- 1946. His career included positions in Jerusalem, Turkey, New York, Laos, Iran, Turkey, and Morocco. Mr. Newberry was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in December 1997

Q: You were in Laos from 1960 until when?

NEWBERRY: From December, 1959, until December, 1961. For reasons which we can review, I got out of Vientiane precisely on the second anniversary of my arrival there. I was plenty ready to leave.

Q: Who was ambassador when you went to Vientiane?

NEWBERRY: The ambassador who had been there for some time and who was so insistent about getting another French-speaking officer out there was Horace Harrison Smith. He was a "Far East hand" and was fairly well known in the Foreign Service in those days. About six months after I arrived in Vientiane, Ambassador Smith was replaced by Ambassador Winthrop Brown, who arrived in Laos in early summer, 1960. He was still ambassador when I left Laos in 1961. Then Ambassador Brown went on to be ambassador to the Republic of Korea and, I think, Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs.

I don't want to distract the reader or the transcriber of this memoir with too many personal reminiscences.

Q: Well, let's see what you have to say.

NEWBERRY: It will become evident, if it is not already so, that I admired Ambassador Winthrop Brown and that I did not admire Ambassador Horace Smith.

Q: Let's talk about the situation in Laos when you arrived there in December, 1959. This was a time when the situation in Laos was beginning to "heat up," and Laos became a significant center of public attention.

NEWBERRY: Well, not quite. The whole of the former Indochina was receiving attention, but Laos was still a little known corner of Indochina. In fact, many people at our wedding had to ask me where Laos was on the map and what was this place called "Vientiane." They would ask: "Don't you mean 'Vietnam?'" This was a fairly sophisticated community in Asheville, North Carolina. However, a lot of the people we met didn't even know where Vientiane, Laos, was!

Anyway, what I intended to say was that, when I arrived in Vientiane, after all of those "NIACT" telegrams the ambassador had sent to the Department about filling my position, I found that the ambassador was going to put me to work doing something other than what he had been screaming about in those telegrams. In fact, the embassy initially didn't even have a desk for me! Anyhow, I figured that I "lucked out," because these telegrams precipitated the lady's decision to marry me and to go with me to Indochina. I was happy, no matter what the job was.

As far as the political situation was and the place of Laos in the world, these were still a puzzle to me and to most of the Americans in our embassy there, who were not "in the know." There was a "huge" CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] component there. They far outnumbered the State Department people, and I was about to say the AID [Agency for International Development] mission. It was the most blatantly open, "clandestine" operation I have ever seen. Everybody in Laos knew who many of the CIA operatives were, and the CIA people didn't make any attempt to disguise their affiliation.

As a matter of fact, there was a very colorful, picturesque CIA man in Vientiane whose name was Campbell James. He was famous among CIA veterans of those days. The way the newly arrived CIA people identified themselves to the Lao was by asking the question: "Do you know my friend, Campbell James?" That was a way of announcing that they worked for the CIA and that the Lao could deal with them accordingly.

Then we had a "disguised," military aid mission. Under the terms of the 1954 Geneva Accords, there was not supposed to be anything like a military aid mission in Laos. We had something called the "PEO," or the "Program Evaluation Organization." Every one of the men assigned to the PEO dressed alike in sort of British-looking, white tropical shirts, shorts, knee length stockings, and white shoes. They all stood to attention when they talked to one another. There was a Major General, Johnny Heintges (John Arnold Heintges), who was in charge of this group. Instead of calling him "General," everybody called him "Chief." Again,

this was a very thinly disguised MAAG [Military Assistance and Advisory Group] mission in Laos. It was a very bizarre situation that my wife and I moved into when we arrived in Vientiane at the end of 1959.

Q: Well, what was happening in Laos? Why was all of this there?

NEWBERRY: There was a communist-inspired insurgency, called the "Pathet Lao," which controlled a good bit of the country. They were very aggressive. As far as we understood it, the Chinese Communists and the Soviet Union were giving the Pathet Lao aid and comfort. Meanwhile, the country was still ostensibly governed by the King of Laos, whose residence was in Luang Prabang [some 120 miles North of Vientiane] and who was a remote figure. However, the real leaders were other Princes from the royal family.

Prince Souvanna Phouma was the Prime Minister. His half brother, another member of the royal family, was Prince Souphannouvong, who had associated himself with the communists years before. He was a communist protégé. Prince Souvanna Phouma and Prince Souphannouvong were openly contesting with each other for power, supported by their sponsors: the French and the Americans, in the case of Souvanna Phouma, and the North Vietnamese, the Chinese Communists, and the Soviet Union, in the case of Souphannouvong.

I'm not sure that anybody understood what we were trying to do in Laos. It was certainly never conveyed to us by the ambassador and the "Country Team" [ambassador's senior advisers]. In addition, there were hundreds and even thousands of American officials, milling around and "doing their own thing," without very much coordination.

Q: What was your job in the embassy in Vientiane?

NEWBERRY: I was assigned there to be a liaison officer between the embassy and the thinly-disguised MAAG mission, but the ambassador realized that it was a waste of effort to have a French-speaking officer dealing with Americans. The embassy replaced me with a Thai-speaking officer, who did liaison work with the American military! I became the second-ranking officer in the Political Section. My assigned duty was to cover the Lao National Assembly, which passed for a Parliament. However, I found that there were three or four CIA officers who were doing the same thing I was doing, and with more resources at their disposal than I had. So it was an uphill struggle.

Q: When you say this, in the first place, was the Lao National Assembly an effective, political organ, or was this just a sort of "show piece"?

NEWBERRY: It was more of a "show piece" than otherwise. Just to give you an example of how well-equipped the members of the National Assembly, the deputies, were, all of the legislation introduced into the Lao National Assembly was drafted in French by French bureaucrats seconded to the Lao government and ultimately translated into Lao. The debates in the National Assembly were in French, and then they were translated into Lao before they were published. This gives you a pretty good idea of who was doing the "technical work" of the National Assembly.

I hesitate to say that French advisers were "calling the shots," because there were real shots being fired before long. However, French officials were still very much in control of the situation and also in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We in the American embassy dealt openly with French bureaucrats, who were telling Lao officials how to conduct the foreign affairs of Laos.

Q: Then, in a way, your most effective work involved dealing with French officials who were working for the Lao?

NEWBERRY: Yes. That was certainly the most satisfying aspect of my work to me because I had very intelligent conversations with these French officials.

I would like to get back to this other point, about the competition with CIA officers. A very vivid episode comes to mind. When the situation was much "tenser," later on, I had a conversation with Chao Somsanith, who was the President of the Lao National Assembly. In other words, he was the Speaker of the National Assembly. This was at a time when it looked as if the Pathet Lao were going to take over the coalition government, or some such thing. I thought that Somsanith, the President of the National Assembly, expressed some very interesting views, contrary to what his own colleagues had been telling our ambassador. So I reported all of this, and the ambassador sent this report to the Department of State. He said that he had no idea that Prince Somsanith was an "independent thinker."

The next day one of these CIA officers went around and had another talk with the same man, Chao Somsanith, and sent out a completely contradictory telegram through his own channels to Washington. I didn't find out about this, and neither did the ambassador, until several days later. What the people in Washington made out of the President of the National Assembly talking out of both sides of his mouth to different American officials and why he did so, I leave it to you and to our readers to conjecture.

Q: Were you sort of "tripping over" the CIA people? Laos is a small country, and if the CIA had three people covering the same ground that you were covering, I would have thought that there would have been a "traffic control problem."

NEWBERRY: Well, they had their own communications system.

Q: I was thinking of "traffic" in the sense of going in and out of these offices.

NEWBERRY: Or the embassy parking lot. Sometimes this was a problem in itself. To say that we had problems is another way of saying that we were just trying to make our way through the congestion. There were several conspicuous and, shall I say, ubiquitous figures involved. I sometimes had this figure of speech in my mind. We in the State Department, Foreign Service officers, were like the "gigolos" at a tremendous house party. We were keeping the guests entertained, while the "second story men" were upstairs doing our work. That is the feeling I had as an embassy officer in the midst of all of this so-called "clandestine activity," which was so much more extensive than our own, official activity.

Q: What was your impression of the communist threat where you were in Laos?

NEWBERRY: The communist-supported "threat" was very evident. For example, when I made one of my fairly rare trips to Luang Prabang, the "Royal Capital" [as distinguished from the "National Capital" in Vientiane], we flew on small airplanes which were just able to fly above the anti-aircraft fire of the Pathet Lao stationed between Vientiane and Luang Prabang. The Pathet Lao had "infested" a great deal of Laos, practically to the outskirts of Vientiane. That was the situation in northern Laos. When the Lao government forces moved a little farther South toward Savannakhet [in central Laos, on the Mekong River], the Pathet Lao anti-aircraft did not reach that far, of course.

A metaphor which often came to my mind when I traveled in the countryside, and every Foreign Service officer wants to get out and see the countryside, was that so much of the country was "infested" by the Pathet Lao, Vientiane was sort of an island. Other places, like Luang Prabang, and Sam Neua, in northern Laos, were other islands. All around us and between these "islands" were shark-infested seas, and the sharks were called "Pathet Lao." The situation was that bad.

This was the situation in northern Laos. Southern Laos was where the anti-communists retreated to when the civil war broke out in August, 1960.

Q: What was happening before August, 1960? It sounds as if a war was going on, anyway.

NEWBERRY: Yes. There was a guerrilla war going on in the countryside. The royal government controlled all of the major towns in the country. However, as I just indicated, it could not reach many of these towns by road. That was the beginning of the operation in support of the "Montagnard" [mountain people], whom we called the "Meo" or "Hmong." Supporting the Meo was a particular responsibility of the CIA people. There was a particularly "heroic" CIA officer who, every couple of weeks, would go up to Sam Neua, which was way up in northern Laos. He was the source of many stories about the "beleaguered" Meo contingent up there, surrounded by Pathet Lao and eventually overwhelmed by them. So traveling around and working in the provinces in Laos in 1960 and 1961 was a dangerous and sometimes fatal business. We lost a few of our colleagues there, some of them in air accidents.

Q: What was your impression of the Lao politicians and the other Lao people you were dealing with?

NEWBERRY: It's hard to answer that. The Lao, as people, are very lovable and charming. However, their culture and their whole way of thinking is so different from ours. I began to look on them as people who were just trying to survive and to provide as best they could for their families and other people close to them. They were just trying to figure out, day by day, which way to jump. That was the theory that I had.

The Lao were not terribly sophisticated. When my wife and I arrived in Laos and, for all I know, this may still be true, there was only one high school in Laos. One "lycée" in the

whole country! The lycée, of course, was a school with a French curriculum, located in Vientiane. You can imagine the level of sophistication of the people below the high-ranking government officials. Even in Vientiane, below a certain level, you couldn't find people who could speak even "pigeon French" [or "Français Negrillon" or "Français Petit Nègre," as the French used to call it].

Q: You had come from the Turkish desk in the State Department. You were concerned about having "too many Americans" with NATO and so forth, with the subsequent impact on Turkish culture. Did this type of concern carry over to Laos, when you talk about the number of CIA and U.S. military people?

NEWBERRY: It was a very different kind of concern. My dismay at what my wife and I found in Laos brought me very close to giving up my career as a Foreign Service officer. I had the feeling that "we Americans," that is, United States government officials, had no idea of what we were doing. We were just floundering around in Laos, misleading these poor, simple, unsophisticated people and expecting more than we were going to get. I felt that in that particular, little corner of the world that we were in, we didn't know what we were doing, we didn't know where we were going, and we had no "vision" of the future.

Then it became evident from Washington that President John Kennedy had decided to make a "stand" in Vietnam and to cut our losses and whatever strings we had in Laos. I don't know that anybody said it this way, so many words, but we in the embassy in Vientiane said this to each other. Governor Averill Harriman was appointed to negotiate some kind of "arrangement" in Laos. By the way, later on, when our efforts in Vietnam turned sour, many people referred to the "Ho Chi Minh Trail" [supply line from North Vietnam to South Vietnam, through Laos] as the "Averill Harriman Memorial Highway." However, I later worked closely with Averill Harriman. I want to make the point that he was a very loyal member of the Kennedy administration. If he made a bargain that way, at the Conference on Laos in Geneva in 1962, it's because President Kennedy told him to do so. So if you want to call the "Ho Chi Minh Trail" something else, you could call it the "John F. Kennedy Memorial Highway." Why? Because it was Kennedy's policy that Harriman was carrying out during the Laos negotiations in 1961-1962.

Q: How did you follow these negotiations at Geneva? In the first place, they started under the Eisenhower administration and then moved to the Kennedy administration.

NEWBERRY: Right.

Q: What was the feeling on how the negotiations started and how they ended?

NEWBERRY: In retrospect, we all sort of cheered over the whole history of our involvement in Indochina. I can't really put myself back, after all that's happened, into what I thought in 1958 about Indochina. I thought that we had sort of come to a general agreement. Being a Foreign Service officer working somewhere else in the world, I tried to keep up with these things. However, I'm just trying to project myself back in time. My view was that Indochina was an area that we had sort of agreed to neutralize. After all, we had the Accords from the Conference in Geneva in 1954 and we thought that this had all been settled. However, then

other things happened. I had the feeling that Washington had "changed its mind" and that we had decided to be more aggressive in Indochina but had not really thought the matter through. I still have many questions in my own mind. We were in Vietnam but we didn't know where we were going. I certainly had that feeling about Laos.

Q: At some point wasn't there a military plan to insert a lot of American troops into Laos? Were you aware of this?

NEWBERRY: I just heard talk of this. It was all on a "need to know" basis, and since I didn't need to know, I wasn't told very much about it.

Q: In the long run our common sense came back, and since there was no airport in Laos, what were we going to do with these troops?

NEWBERRY: The infrastructure of Laos was all wrong. Our military people there, the men in the white shorts and stockings, knew this, too. However, they were disciplined people, and if somebody gave them an order, they would say, "Yes, sir," salute, and go off to do what they were ordered to do.

Q: You mentioned that you were not on the best of terms or didn't care for Ambassador Horace Smith. Could you talk about him as an ambassador and so forth?

NEWBERRY: Ambassador Horace Smith was a remote figure to almost everybody at the embassy in Vientiane. He chose to conduct much of his telegraphic traffic with Washington on what we later called a "NODIS," or "No Distribution" basis. So most of his reports on his conversations and his instructions from Washington were simply not distributed to anybody else in the embassy. If the DCM [deputy chief of mission], who was John Holt, ever saw any of this cable traffic, he never told any of us about it. I was on very congenial terms with John Holt, who was a very nice person.

The way that Ambassador Horace Smith managed the embassy, he had a French-American FSO, a lady who had joined the Foreign Service as a "Wristonee" ["lateralized" into the Foreign Service under a program set up in the mid-1950s by Henry Wriston, a former Dean of Brown College]. She had been a teacher of French, I believe, at one of the colleges near Baltimore. I believe that it was Hood or Goucher College. She was bilingual in French and English. Ambassador Smith took her everywhere, and she was in on everything. However, she never told any of us anything. So the conduct of our official relations with Laos was being carried on by Ambassador Horace Smith and this very brilliant but "close-mouthed" lady, named Francoise Queneau. She has long since retired from the Foreign Service.

All of this was going on, and the rest of the embassy and the mission were only told, selectively, of what was going on between the Lao Prime Minister and Ambassador Smith, and the ambassador and Washington. So we were all, literally, "floundering."

However, when Winthrop Brown arrived as ambassador to Laos, the whole situation changed. We had "Country Team" meetings [staff meetings]. I was assigned to do what old-

time Foreign Service officers remember as the "WEEKA" [originally the acronym for the "Weekly Airgram" but later meant a weekly summary sent in by cable]. Things changed, almost from "night to day," in the sense that we knew what Ambassador Brown was thinking about doing.

Q: What happened to Ambassador Horace Smith?

NEWBERRY: I think that he retired soon after leaving Laos. He was assigned for a while as a "Diplomat in Residence" at Sarah Lawrence College. Then he retired and stayed on at Sarah Lawrence as a member of the faculty. I think that's where he was serving when he died, several years after he retired.

Q: Did you get any "feel" about how Ambassador Winthrop Brown was assigned to Laos? He was an "East Asian hand." What was his impression in Laos when he came and took a look at the situation there? What were you and other officers in the embassy getting from him about the situation in Laos?

NEWBERRY: Unfortunately for Ambassador Brown, he didn't have much time because, I think that in a matter of two weeks after he arrived, we had the so-called "coup d'état" when a young, Pathet Lao Captain ["Commandant" in French], named Kong Le, under really bizarre circumstances and not knowing really how far he would be able to continue with this effort, in effect, "took over the Lao government." I later had a conversation with him. His French was about as good as my French. He told me that he had planned this whole "coup" on the basis of a training course that the French military had given him on how to defend against this kind of coup. He decided to turn it around. So the French taught him how to carry out a coup d'état.

Q: What was Kong Le after?

NEWBERRY: Of course, all of the Pathet Lao military people wanted to win control of the country. However, the strange thing about it is that he was such a low-ranking officer, only a "Commandant." Then, of course, his superior officers quickly reacted to what he had done, and Prince Souphannouvong, the head of the Pathet Lao, in addition to his supporters, quickly made use of the coup. However, for a long time we were dealing in Vientiane with Captain Kong Le.

Meanwhile, Vientiane had been occupied by Pathet Lao troops, and we couldn't do anything, even function, without checking with Kong Le and the group of uneducated people around him. Then the "educated" cadre of the Pathet Lao came into Vientiane and set up an improvised "coalition government." This didn't last long, by the way.

Q: These Pathet Lao had been shooting at you previously. All of a sudden, they were in Vientiane.

NEWBERRY: I should say that this was a "bloodless coup d'etat." The Royal Lao Army didn't put up any fight against the coup. The big fight came later on. In retrospect, although I

was not privy to the planning, it soon became evident that Washington, including the Pentagon and the royal Thai government in Bangkok, were organizing to "roll back" the Pathet Lao. The first thing we knew, there was an all-out civil war.

General Phoumi Nosavan, the chief of staff of the Royal Lao Army, was our "chosen instrument" in the campaign to re-take Vientiane. That's where we got into the highest drama of all, with the "Battle of Vientiane," which took place, I believe, in December, 1960.

Q: Well, before we get to the "Battle of Vientiane," how did you operate? What had been the "enemy" was now inside the gates and controlling Vientiane. How did you work during this particular time?

NEWBERRY: In fairly short order the "Princes," namely Prince Souphannouvong and Prince Souvanna Phouma, cobbled together a sort of "coalition" in which there were Pathet Lao ministers as well as ministers who supported Souvanna Phouma in the government. Souvanna Phouma was the Prime Minister, but, as I say, there were Pathet Lao ministers in the government, too.

I must say that we weren't accomplishing very much at this time. My role was just trying to figure out who the "players" were every day. That is, who was in which post. My job, from day to day, was sort of to identify who the "personalities" were.

Q: Were you "constrained" or could you go out and "knock on doors?"

NEWBERRY: We could travel around the city. We were not "constrained," except that we learned to be cautious because there were so many Americans at large. We learned to be careful to make sure that we did not find ourselves in the same office, at the same time, and on the same errand as another American. There might be representatives of two or three different agencies doing the same thing I was doing. We had a large AID [Agency for International Development] mission in Vientiane, too.

A lot of our time and effort was spent in trying to coordinate with other American officials and agencies, rather than with the Lao government. That's my recollection of this period.

Q: What about the CIA? They'd been running a sort of "active campaign" in other places. I would have thought that the Pathet Lao would want to expel the CIA people, or something like that.

NEWBERRY: The Pathet Lao were there, but they had a pretty tenuous hold on Vientiane. They knew that the Royal Lao Army and the royal Thai government were organizing to push the Pathet Lao out of power. So the Pathet Lao was not in a position to do an awful lot of detailed targeting of people. My impression was that Captain Kong Le did not expect to take over Vientiane. The Pathet Lao were sort of surprised at their success. They really didn't have a "scheme," in the sense of a classical, communist scheme, to go in and get rid of the intellectuals. There was none of that. Everything was very improvised.

Q: How did this all play out?

NEWBERRY: With massive support, both financial and material, from the United States government, and working through the royal Lao government, General Phoumi Nosavan, the chief of staff of the Royal Lao Army, organized a military "push" against the Pathet Lao occupation of Vientiane. He was operating from his headquarters in Savannakhet [central Laos, on the Mekong River]. Toward the end of November, 1960, he was getting close to Vientiane. I'm sorry, but we'll have to check all of these dates. In December, 1960, there was a pitched battle for the city of Vientiane, insofar as the Pathet Lao Army and the Royal Lao Army could undertake a pitched battle.

The battle of Vientiane went on for four or five days. We had the odd circumstance that, at one point, General Phoumi, who was our "chosen instrument," was lobbing shells into downtown Vientiane, and they were hitting the American embassy chancery. The Vientiane "Fire Brigade" was trying to put out the fire at one end of the chancery. We knew that we were going to have to get out of there. Therefore, at the other end of the chancery in the code room we were trying to burn all of the classified documents. So at the same moment we were putting out a fire at one end of the building and setting a fire at the other end! I mention that to epitomize the absurdity of the situation. Eventually, we closed the chancery for a day or two.

Q: What about you and your wife at this time?

NEWBERRY: Very early on in the process the powers that be in the embassy knew about this military assault against the Pathet Lao in Vientiane. They ordered the evacuation of all of the wives and children, the so-called "dependents." They were all evacuated to Thailand. My wife, who was several months pregnant, was evacuated to Bangkok and lived in virtual "exile" there for the next year and a half. Our first child was born in Bangkok. This evacuation situation continued for the rest of my tour in Laos. The families had not been allowed to return by the time I left Laos. I went to Bangkok and got my wife and child in December, 1961, prior to going on to my next post.

Q: So you had the "Battle of Vientiane." Then what happened?

NEWBERRY: Then General Phoumi's forces, the Royal Lao Army, retook control of Vientiane. The Pathet Lao left the capital, and the situation returned to the "status quo ante." The Pathet Lao was still the net gainer in all of this. On a parallel track Averill Harriman and the Pathet Lao side were negotiating in Geneva about setting up a so-called "Conference on Laos." They tried to work out a "modus vivendi" between the communists and "our side" in Laos.

Q: What was the attitude toward these negotiations in Geneva? Was there a feeling that "our side" was going to be "sold out" or not?

NEWBERRY: That was the general feeling. We thought that we would make the best deal that we could. We had the perception that we were going to make our stand in Vietnam and

cut our losses in Laos. That was the general view. Because we didn't have the same level of virtually "instantaneous communications" that we have now, we didn't get daily summaries of what was going on at the Conference on Laos. From time to time we would hear what was going on.

Q: Once you got to the "status quo ante bellum," did you go back to knocking on doors and doing what you'd been doing previously?

NEWBERRY: Yes, pretty much the same thing. However, we did this with a good deal more sophistication and a much better sense of direction. We had Ambassador Brown, and the man who succeeded John Holt as DCM was much more in the Foreign Service tradition. He made it a point to...

Q: Who was the new DCM?

NEWBERRY: His name was Bob Keel, who has died since then. We had a much better sense of a traditional, Foreign Service "team," working together, than we had under Ambassador Horace Smith. Of course, since our wives and children were still "living in exile" in Bangkok, we had a great deal more time to spend together. We had lots more poker and "Scrabble" games in the evenings, because there was little or no social life.

Q: Did you ever feel, at times, that perhaps you and the other members of the embassy staff were learning far too much about this rather "improvised" Lao government, or not?

NEWBERRY: I did. I wouldn't want to put words in the mouths of other members of the staff, when we were all living in Vientiane as "unwilling bachelors." We had an awful lot of time to talk to one another. I think that my own, personal reaction to all of this went deeper. I was very troubled about our sense of national purpose. We seemed able to spend so much of our national treasure and effort on such an inconsequential corner of the world. I had some serious doubts about whether I wanted to stay in the diplomatic service. However, my own vision of it was very much complicated by the fact that I'd persuaded this lady to marry me and come out to Laos and live. And then look what I got her into! So I said to myself that it would not be fair for me to leave the Foreign Service without letting her have a "normal" Foreign Service experience. So I stayed in the Foreign Service and had a different experience later on.

In my view it was a very personal matter for me to spend, what, six or seven months with my bride in Vientiane and then have her sent off, well advanced in pregnancy. She used to say that, apart from the one weekend a month I was given to go and visit her and the baby in Bangkok, she used to feel like Madame Butterfly, pacing up and down with the baby, wondering whether the father of her child would come back! That's a joke, of course. However, that was the kind of life in exile that SHE was leading.

My own recollection of the situation in Laos and my personal involvement in it are all tied up with what happened to my bride and my first born child.

Q: Absolutely! What about Ambassador Winthrop Brown? He got "hit" with this whole situation, rather early in his time in Vientiane. Did he express any concerns about what we were doing in Laos or was he just being a "good soldier?"

NEWBERRY: I think that he was being a "good soldier," a very earnest and reflective one. Since the embassy Marine guards were in on this situation, too, I would say that I did the same thing for Ambassador Brown for years before he ever came to Vientiane. I kept a daily, UNCLASSIFIED journal. When I was embassy duty officer and was checking around the office, I read some of his journal from the time he was DCM [deputy chief of mission] in New Delhi, India. The Marine guards told me that they had found some of his journals since he had come to Vientiane. This was all UNCLASSIFIED. I said: "Well, that's indecent! What were you doing?" But some of these journals were later published. His UNCLASSIFIED account of the "Battle of Vientiane" appears in "The Foreign Service Reader," which was published by the American Foreign Service Association [AFSA].

I mention this because Ambassador Brown was a very thoughtful man who had a sense of history and the place of things. However, as far as his view of Laos was concerned, I would say that he was very much like Secretary of State Dean Rusk. You know, during the Vietnam crisis Dean Rusk was often one of the "true believers," God rest his soul. That was the impression that I had of Winthrop Brown. He was a very disciplined, competent, capable Foreign Service officer, and he believed in what we were doing. How, I don't know, but I give him credit for it, and I admire him for having been a man of such integrity. I have to believe that he really believed.

Q: Dan, we've talked about Ambassador Winthrop Brown being a "true believer" in what we were doing in Laos. Do you feel that some of the other embassy officers in Vientiane held the same view? You said that you were sitting around, talking to each other in the evenings. You had plenty of time to spend in "bull sessions." Was there much concern about "what the hell are we doing here in Laos" and all that?

NEWBERRY: Oh, very much so. Some of my contemporaries and some others who were younger than I was had lots of questions about what we were doing. However, instead of making a really, extensive analysis, I must recall that we were in a really remote corner of the world. We didn't get the "Herald Tribune." If we got a copy of the USIA [United States Information Agency] "Wireless File" three or four days later, we were lucky. We were pretty isolated from the world out there in Laos.

Q: Did you meet with any journalists?

NEWBERRY: Yes, some very competent reporters were assigned to Vientiane. They especially began to come to Vientiane after the Kong Le "coup d'etat," in 1960. Some of them regularly made the rounds. Stanley Karnow of "Time" used to come down from Hong Kong, Takashi Oka from the "Christian Science Monitor" came there about once every three months, as well as other reporters who went on to be very distinguished foreign correspondents. They were on that "Southeast Asian beat." They were checking us out. Some of us had, what shall I call them, "no holds barred conversations" with them. I must say, in

my candid conversations with journalists that none of them ever "betrayed" me. I was very careful, of course, which ones I chose to be candid with. I went to Vientiane very early on in my career. My wife had some experience as a press officer. I found that some of the most interesting and enlightening conversations about the involvement of the United States in Indochina came from talking to visiting newspapermen, and not from my own colleagues.

Q: When did you leave Vientiane?

NEWBERRY: I left there in December, 1961.

Q: What was your feeling about where Laos was going?

NEWBERRY: I thought that there was going to be more fighting. I couldn't say what kind of fighting but I just had a feeling that this was just a pause and that there was going to be more fighting. We could see what our own people were doing in Vietnam. We were just building up for something bigger, but I couldn't make it more specific than that.

Q: Did you have the feeling that the North Vietnamese, Chinese Communists, and Soviets were involved in what was happening in Laos?

NEWBERRY: I had to rely on our intelligence reports. We didn't have any direct evidence on the ground in Vientiane, except that, when the Pathet Lao was included in the coalition government, they were following a very obvious pro-Chinese or pro-Soviet line. However, we didn't have any direct evidence of that. Of course, the Soviet Union opened an embassy in Vientiane after the coalition government was established. We, at the second secretary or first secretary level, whatever I was at the time, didn't have any contact with these communist representatives.

FRANCIS J. TATU
Political Officer
Laos (1960-1961)

Francis J. Tatu was born in New York in 1929. He served in the US Navy from 1946-1952. Afterwards, he received his bachelor's degree from University of California in 1955. His career includes positions in Hong Kong, Laos, Taiwan, Philippines, Thailand, Washington D.C., Nepal, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and Australia. Mr. Tatu was interviewed by Susan Klingaman in October 2000.

TATU: Yes, to get out of the consular "cone" - we didn't use the term "cone" in those days. But it was interesting. Apparently nobody in the consulate general, even the big shots, knew anything about Indochina. Laos: among other things they were pronouncing 'La-os. (so, much later, was President Kennedy – on TV!)' I had to go up to Hong Kong University to get background information.

Q: You mean nobody in the consulate general in Hong Kong knew anything about their next door neighbors?

TATU: Not quite “next door,” but very little. That was kind of shocking.

Q: So you went there directly with no home leave?

TATU: Yes. Throughout my career, I may insert, I missed so much home leave it’s staggering, and annual leave also, years on the books when I retired. So there I was in the middle of this upheaval in Laos.

Q: What was going on in Laos? This was 1960.

TATU: As one of her artifacts from Laos, my wife Marian has a hand-written note from the supervisor of the Embassy motor pool, dated August 9, 1960: “we’re sorry we can’t send you a car this morning; the government has just been overthrown.” There had been a coup in December 1959. There were a continuation of coups. You had to really be deep into it to be able to figure out what the line-up was, who was with whom, of what persuasion. You didn’t know the players without a scorecard. We had a three-man political section. The chief was Julian Fromer, the deputy the late Dan Newberry and then myself. There was a large CIA contingent.

Q: How large was the embassy?

TATU: I’ve got to guess. When I got there, incidentally, the ambassador was Horace Smith, another old China hand survivor. He was shortly replaced by Winthrop Brown. But I would guess in the embassy properly so-called, State had only about 15 people. Francois Qienou, she was aide to the ambassador, but she functioned more like a political officer. So I guess in the embassy properly so-called there weren’t more than 15.

Q: What was your particular area of responsibility?

TATU: We sort of split the pie up as it fell; we were not that specialized. We’d just go off, and whatever happened, happened, but it was fascinating stuff.

Q: Such as...?

TATU: How about this? This is probably one of these little sensitive things. At that time Laos had dual capitals, the administrative capital at Vientiane and Luang Prabang, the royal capital. When Winthrop Brown came as Ambassador, he had me accompany him on many of his official visits. He decided to go up to Luang Prabang, the royal capital, to make a call on the king. So the air attaché flew us up there, and we were met by the CIA guy and the USIS representative. The ambassador then decided, on the advice of the local boys, he would see the king alone, so he left me there with these fellows. No sooner had the ambassador walked out the door than they literally jumped me physically and pinned me up against the wall.

They had been arranging for their own coup, you see, and they felt that the embassy had put them down. “Goddamn you guys. What did you think you were doing? I’m just a junior officer here.” I really felt threatened. They weren’t kidding. That was reflective of the tensions in that little country.

Q: Well, I can imagine. Did you ever mention that to the ambassador?

TATU: Yes, I did.

Q: What was his reaction?

TATU: You know, Win Brown, a taciturn New-Englander of the old school, really played his cards very close. He didn’t say very much. I was there also for the “Kong Le” coup, and I remember very vividly the coup occurred at three o’clock in the morning. So I got up ready to go to work, not knowing. We were driving along and there were roadblocks, something new. When they saw the diplomatic plates, they passed us through, and I said, “Gee, they’re playing war games again.” We had a staff meeting, and it was revealed that there had been a coup on the part of a captain of the Second Paratroop Battalion (Kong Le). At this point a fellow poked his head in and whispered to the station chief, and the chief said, “Our man from the Second Paratroop Battalion is here.” Win Brown, who was always very dignified said, loudly, “Where the hell has he been?” Everyone looked shocked.

So we lived under the siege for some time, and Washington decided we should evacuate dependents. By that time we had two little kids. My wife went off to Bangkok with them. Then it was decided they’d better evacuate all people who were unstable.

Q: Unstable?

TATU: Unstable, who makes that decision? So they sent off a bunch of people from certain agencies. One of the funny things was the only way you could get across the Mekong River into Thailand then was by commercial barge at a location about 10 miles from the city. The barge could only take four cars at a time. Well, we had such an enormous AID mission there that, I was told, there were over 600 cars piled up waiting to get across on the barge. Finally the ambassador decreed, “They’ve just got to leave their damn cars here and take off.” So I, in fact, had a car, which I had brought from Hong Kong. It was not much of a car, an old British staff car. I sold it at a very nominal fee to one of the local employees who was a good guy and deserved something. The next thing I knew he was in a knife fight with another local employee who thought he should have gotten the car. Well, anyway, Laos was interesting for all of these reasons.

Q: But what were we supposedly trying to do in Laos at that time?

TATU: Well, we were supposedly trying to make peace and to shore-up the non-communist resistance. One of the curious things was that the leader of the right-wing group, if you will, was one Phoumi Nosavan, General Phoumi, and he was the Agency’s man. Then on the other side we had the neutralists who were being led by Kong Le, and the Prime Minister, Souvanna Phouma. So curiously we were in a position where we were offering support to

Souvanna Phouma with arms and what have you, in effect, we, the USG in a larger sense, was offering support to both competitive sides.

While all of this was going on, along came Skip Pernell, a visitor from the EA Bureau in Washington. Have you ever heard of Skip? He was a famous FSO. His dictum was that I'd better get out of there and go to the Chinese language school, which I had applied for, or I would miss out because they were going to close the language school down. (The rumor had been going on since time immemorial, that the Chinese language school would be closed down.) So he said that with my concurrence he would arrange to find somebody to replace me and get me out of there to go to Tai Chung. This was a major, I think, career mistake.

Q: To go to language training?

TATU: No that I agreed to this. That meant I was in Laos less than a year. I think that when promotion panels look at somebody's record and they see that he's experienced a truncated tour, that raises a flag, and it's happened to me on a number of occasions, all in the interests of the Service, their very good grace. So that's what I did.

THOMAS L. HUGHES
Administrative Asst. to the Under Secretary
Washington, DC (1961)

Mr. Hughes was born and raised in Minnesota and was educated at Carleton College, Oxford University and Yale University. After service with the US Air Force he worked on Capitol Hill and became active in Democratic Party politics. He later joined the Department of State, first as Assistant to Under Secretary Chester Bowles and subsequently as Deputy Director, then as Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, where he served during the event filled period 1961 to 1969. His assignments brought him in close contact with the major political figures of that era. His final government assignment was to Embassy London as Deputy Chief of Mission. Mr. Hughes was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1999.

Q: While you were helping put the administration together did Vietnam come up on your radar?

HUGHES: Not really in 1961. In the mid-to-late 50's, however, in a curious way Vietnam had already become a kind of liberal-Catholic alliance. The American Friends of Vietnam had been organized then in support of Diem, and it contained a roster of prominent American Catholics on its board including Jack Kennedy and various generals. Cardinal Spellman was the self-appointed "Vicar of Vietnam". Mike Mansfield was a champion of Diem in the 50's before he jumped ship in the 60's. But in the '50's. land reform and economic development in Vietnam were issues that appealed to liberals. This was a tie to people like Bowles. He realized that this wasn't exactly his crowd. On the other hand there were hopeful things to say about Diem in the early years.

When Kennedy entered the White House, Laos was the big issue in southeast Asia. Eisenhower had warned about dominoes there. Ultimately under Kennedy there was a trade off between Laos and Vietnam. He went for neutrality in Laos, giving it to Averell Harriman to see what he could work out, while he authorized 16,000 military advisers to bolster Vietnam.

Q: Was this balance between Laos and South Vietnam - fortify one-neutralize the other - was that made explicit? Was this coming from Kennedy?

HUGHES: No, but it was implicit. No one knew what the outcome in either place would be. Kennedy was going to be doing both at the same time-- satisfying the hawks on Vietnam and satisfying the doves on Laos. The two policies were meant to be mutually reinforcing.

JOSEPH P.O'NEILL
Communications Officer
Laos (1961-1963)

Joseph P. O'Neill was born in New York in 1935. From 1953-1956 he served in the US Army. After joining the Foreign service in 1961 he served positions in Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, India, Portugal, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Sudan, and Eritrea. Mr. O'Neill was interviewed by Thomas Dunnigan in May 1998.

O'NEILL: That was my great interest. So, I went there in '61. We had Winthrop (Win) Brown, a great ambassador, stiff and upright, pure as the driven snow, a man who was not very happy with this new young President from not a terribly good family out of Massachusetts. Went back to see the President and came back and was his devoted servant from that moment forward. Could not believe what a fantastic gentleman Mr. Kennedy was. It was a great time. At that time, we had the former Governor of New York, Averell Harriman, coming through Laos to do all the negotiations for the Geneva Accords. He came out to see to the Geneva Accords implementation.

Q: Laos was a principal point of interest to the Kennedy administration, much more than Vietnam at that time.

O'NEILL: Well, it was the battleground. When Kennedy came in, he had a problem. The Lao communists, for want of a better term, were primarily nationalists, but the whole complication of people, plus pressure from the Vietnamese, who always considered Laos and Cambodia within their sphere, kept the pot boiling. In fact, if the French had not come in in the late 1800s, all of that area would have been Vietnamese. People forget that Laos asked the French to become their protectors. The French had defeated the Cambodians and the Thais balanced the French and the British off against each other. But at that time, Laos was the focus. Being in the "back room" in the communications, I recall at one time either reading or hearing a senior officer at that time saying that Kennedy was absolutely mortified that he

couldn't find a couple of divisions to put in Thailand to threaten the Lao and the Vietnamese about coming in and taking over that country.

Q: Were the Lao themselves afraid of the Vietnamese?

O'NEILL: Always. They always considered their neighbors as adversaries or as predatory animals.

Q: Did that include the Chinese, too?

O'NEILL: Chinese, Thais, the Vietnamese, everybody. Somebody described Laos as a zoo for, people, mostly foreign, who were different. Vientiane was a really sophisticated culture city, not for operas, but for the people who were there. There were Corsicans, of course, involved in the narcotic trade. There were Legionnaires who did not want to go home. There were Italians, Americans, French priests and "ladies" from all over the world - Korean, Italian, Burmese, and many others engaged in the oldest profession. Chinese engaged in normal trade along with Thais and Vietnamese in a certain amount of harmony. So, you had all these people living close together, many educated by the French. Even the senior communists were educated by the French. Many had gone to the Sorbonne.

Q: How was your French? Did you have to use it?

O'NEILL: At that time, the Department did not train any of its [clerical] staff in French. But knowing I was going, I had gone over to Berlitz and invested the magnificent sum of \$300 and learned French. So, when I went out there, I was the only clerk who could speak French. Because I was a clerk, I could go to all those disreputable places where officers could not go and where you could be drinking beer and Colonel Kong Lee would be sitting next to you or Premier Nastaban and his ministers at the Vien La Tre or to The White Rose to pick up the enjoyment for the night. So, I saw these people. I was in my most unsophisticated way, as Bill Hamilton and Phil Cadman (Bill Hamilton was chief of the Political Section. Cadman was the DCM.), [you might say, "useful"] because I could tell people who was in town and who was doing what at a very low, corrupt level.

Q: Did your communicator assignment involve code work or mainly pouch work?

O'NEILL: I was responsible for all the pouches, moving all the classified materials throughout town. Plus, I did some of what we called at that time "poke and tape" because all the communications were done by one-time tape.

Q: So, you were it in many ways.

O'NEILL: It was a fairly big code section. Arlene Monette was in charge and we had four of us on the State side of the communications office. The CIA had its side, so there were another four. We put out a lot of telegraphic traffic. Everything that happened in Laos, as you said a few moments ago, was important. Laos was considered by Kennedy at that time a place where he was going to put a line down. He just did not know how weak we were

militarily. All he was able to bring in was, I believe, about two battalions of Marines, which he then sent up into the northeast of Thailand and they remained in Udorn. I can't remember the other place, but it was along the border. He moved the Marines because the Thais were very, very upset. When the Marines came in, they were put in trucks and rolled through Bangkok.

Q: So people could see.

O'NEILL: Yes, they were put in trains and shipped up north. I went over to visit them because I knew one or two of the Marines who were from my old neighborhood. They were well-trained, able to do what they were going to do. But as one of the sergeants said to me, "If we have to go across the river, we'll inflict casualties because we're not coming back across." A sober assessment of the situation probably, very sober and very accurate. All they had at that time were M-16s. No, they didn't. They had M-1s.

Q: Still those World War II M-1s is all they had?

O'NEILL: They were carrying M-1s. They had 50 calibers [machine guns]. All the wreckage of the Korean War.

Q: I remember them well. Were you able to travel about Laos at all or were you confined in Vientiane?

O'NEILL: I got around a bit. One, because I was a bachelor and, two, I don't like to use the word "expendable," but I was useful. So, I got up to the "boondocks." I got up to the Plain de Jars and Luang Prabang. But I didn't get to any of the CIA bases. They were still "secret, off limits." They were being supplied out of northeastern Thailand.

Q: What were living conditions like in Vientiane at the time?

O'NEILL: Great. I know people will say, "Oh, they were terrible." But at some time (I can't remember when), all the dependents were moved out of Vientiane. It was sometime in '61 and they came back in '62. The wives stayed primarily in Bangkok, most of them. A few of them went back to the States. So, a two family household evolved. The gentlemen had their families in Vientiane and they had their families in Bangkok. There was plenty of food. There was plenty of booze. There were nightclubs, whorehouses, and of course, very, very interesting work because everybody came through there.

Q: What was the morale like?

O'NEILL: Winthrop Brown kept morale very, very high. He knew what was going on and, except in one case where one of the officers tried to have a relationship with one of the Marines, he had a laissez faire attitude. He himself was straight as an arrow and he knew that some of his officer weren't. One of his officers who later went on to be Consul General in Marseille was notorious for his liking for the ladies. There was nothing vicious about it. He just loved them, all colors, all sizes, all shapes. He enjoyed Marseille for years afterwards.

Q: Given the situation at that time in Laos, Joe, was there fear among the staff as to their own personal security? Where there any terrorist incidents?

O'NEILL: Once the ladies and the children had left, I think, the question of fear sort of evaporated. Of course, during one of the coups, they had blown the whole front part of the embassy away. There were shootings in town, occasionally. But most of the fighting was upcountry. Of course, officers who went upcountry understood that the danger was there. But there was no terrorism factor like there had been in other posts where I would serve in the future.

Q: Was there an anti-American feeling? How did the Lao feel about our staff?

O'NEILL: The Laotians were great. They really didn't care one way or another as long as they were left alone. They were sort of bystanders in a fight in their own country. So, they really didn't care. Nothing seemed to bother them at all.

BERTHA POTTS
Cultural Attaché, USIS
Vientiane (1961-1963)

Bertha Potts was born in California in 1915. After receiving her degree from San Jose State College, she became a member of the WACS. Her career has included positions in Bangkok, Saigon, Lyon, Algiers, Vientiane, and Rabat. Ms. Potts was interviewed by Howell S. Teeple on February 19, 1999.

Q: Relationships often depended on the attitude of the person in charge.

POTTS: Yes. So, bombs went off and there were bodies in the street, which was not a pleasant situation. I finished my tour and then begged to go home saying I was ready for a stateside tour. However, I was told that USIA was not ready to send me home yet. I was on home leave, and on a trip with my sister when her housemate in Bakersfield, California called our hotel in Las Vegas and said, "I have a telegram." "Well, read it." She said, "Well, I hate to open it, it is addressed to Bert." My sister said, "Open it. She has to know what it says." She opened it up and it said, "Welcome back to Southeast Asia."

Q: Did it mention any particular post?

POTTS: No, I found out when I made the call the next morning. I have forgotten the name of the chap doing assignments at that time. I said, "All right, is it Cambodia or Laos?" He said, "Why do you ask me that question?" I said, "Because I have already done Vietnam and you are not going to waste my French at this point." He said, "You are right, it's Laos."

Q: What year was this?

POTTS: This was 1961. I said, “What if I don’t want to go to Laos?” He said, “Well, you better go to Laos. We have to have single, French-speaking officers. You are going to have a nice job. You are going to be cultural attaché.” So, I went to Laos and had two PAOs there, Dan Moore and Gerry Gert. Jim Stoddard was the deputy, I believe.

Q: Do you remember who the ambassador was?

POTTS: I don’t remember but he spoke terrible French. [transcriber’s note: Winthrop Brown was ambassador 7/60-6/62 and Leonard Unger from 7/62-12/64.]

Q: You were the cultural attaché?

POTTS: I was the cultural attaché there, yes.

Q: In which city were you stationed? There were two posts there.

POTTS: There were four posts – Vientiane, the administrative capital; Louang Prabang, the royal capital; Savannakhet in the middle of the country; and Pakse in southern Laos.

Q: Did we have USIA offices in all four places?

POTTS: We did.

Q: Where were you stationed?

POTTS: I was in Vientiane where the embassy was located. Louang Prabang, Savannakhet and Pakse were branches.

Q: This was 1961?

POTTS: This was 1961 to 1963. I spent two full years to the day.

Q: What kind of work did you do in Laos?

POTTS: I was the cultural attaché.

Q: Yes, but that can cover a lot of different tasks.

POTTS: We ran the libraries, did all of whatever exchange programs existed, gave lectures and that kind of thing. I was not too happy there and was ready to shake the dust of Laos from my feet and leave on October 1, 1963 when I finished my tour.

Robert S. Zigler

**IVS Administrative Head
Laos (1961-1964)**

**US AID Employee
Laos (1964-1968)**

Robert S. Zigler was born in Illinois in 1920. He received his bachelor's degree from Manchester College in 1942. During his career with US AID he served in Laos, Vietnam, Philippines, Washington D.C., Ghana, and Upper Volta (Burkina Faso). Mr. Zigler was interviewed by W. Haven North in November 1998.

ZIGLER: That would have been 1961. This was the time of the Kennedy election. I was in the IVS/Washington office in the spring of '61. I went to Laos with IVS about April of '61. By this time then the Peace Corps bill had been passed. Then IVS began to receive delegations from the new Peace Corps, organizational teams. They would come out and see Dr. Noffsinger and ask, "What do you do about insurance?" That was the insurance group. Then another group would come out about recruitment and another about travel. Of course he would give it to them. For the Peace Corps, it was important useful information based on experience.

Q: What was your job in the IVS?

ZIGLER: Well, in Laos I was the head of a group of about 26 Americans who in this time would be easily described as a Peace Corps type assignment. They were scattered all over the country and I was administrative head.

Q: What were they doing?

ZIGLER: They worked out in the countryside. They worked on agricultural construction, health, and educational projects. It was part of the rural development program that had to do with trying to stimulate activities in the rural regions by the rural people using resources provided by AID. That is a philosophical concept that AID had developed. I'll talk more about that when I get into AID. Nevertheless, they were action type persons who could use the resources AID provided.

Q: IVS was funded by AID.

ZIGLER: It was at that time. We were working under AID. In a sense we cooperated; we accepted cooperation where the Peace Corps tended to go their separate way. We were part of the country team. Another interesting thing about that, there were two IVS teams out there, another in the area of education. I counted about 17 people from that IVS Lao group that went on to work in AID. It was quite a supplier. I admit it was easier to get employed in AID in the 60's than it is now. You were there. AID knew who you were; saw how you functioned. It was easy for me then to kind of transfer over to AID once completing my IVS tour.

Q: What did you think of the impact of this work on rural development? Were there some political overtones to what they were trying to do there?

ZIGLER: Well, the American objective was to create, I believe, a neutralist country. It was supposed to be a tripartite kind of government, left and right and neutral. That was one of the reasons I wanted to go. From the point of view of historical involvement, there has never been a neutral government that was created. Switzerland kind of existed that way, but to create one had a lot of appeal to me.

So, what we tried to do then was to get the village people to make group democratic decisions, because of the stimulus that came from offering outside resources. That's what AID provided, opportunity for something different and practice then in democratic action in their community. That was the rural development side of things.

Q: The core of the program was rural development?

ZIGLER: Yes, and education. IVS has a team right now in Bangladesh. It has been there for a long time. IVS was there before the recent big flood, and is working right now on this.

Q: How were the volunteers received by the communities?

ZIGLER: Generally speaking, we are talking about the communities in the rural areas of the 40's and 50's and maybe the 60's, accepted a foreigner in a way that they may not do it in the 90's, because if you are from a foreign country and you are living there, that means that by implication you are of value. Your ideas are of value. You have to maintain and perform in a way that you don't lose your reputation, I admit. There was an acceptance, no question about it.

Q: What do you think were some of the longer term impact of what you were doing? I'm sure they had a very significant impact while they were going on.

ZIGLER: Now we are talking about people. Today there are a number of people alive from these different countries that I can cite like Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos that are either important in the World scene or important in their host country that got their start as a result of their association with IVS.

Q: Were they IVS employees too...?

ZIGLER: Like for instance with me, I'll give you an example. I was head of the IVS team in Laos. There was no local competency for the office people. I trained two or three office people, women, how to type, take shorthand, and office procedures. One of them came to this country and is still working in Montgomery County. Then we had a bunch of young Laotian men who were what we called field assistants. They were a combination of interpreters and aides to the American IVS person. They were colleagues you might say. They knew something about the culture and all that. But here once again, there was association with foreigners. A number of them I know of have either emigrated or stayed in their host country.

Joined the USAID Rural Development Program in Laos - 1964

ZIGLER: Well, then you see, I was right across the street from the AID rural development office

in Laos. I had a six month contract in the RD office as a program officer cleaning up documents and doing things like that. By that time I had also applied to AID as a regular employee. That was approved, so come March 1964 I was back out there as a regular AID employee.

Q: What was the situation in Laos at that time?

ZIGLER: Well, you still had this tripartite plan, but you also had fighting in the interior. That was a bad situation. That affected project performance in several ways. One is when it came to people particularly of the Montagnard types, they would get their upland, dryland rice, started and ready for harvest. Then they were frequently attacked by the enemy, which was composed of a variety of groups, and driven off. They had no rice crop for the coming year for survival. That was one impact. Another impact had to do with the limitations on travel because of security, and there were a number of people that got killed in different ways. Some IVS people got killed, for example. We had the Air America pilots that were killed. They were pilots flying in uncertain areas. Believe it or not, at that time, there were certain routes that you could fly safely. If you would cut the corner, and a number of them would cut the corner to get home for a cocktail party or something, they'd get shot down. So, that was a kind of limitation on travel. Then, occupation of territory by the so-called enemy could be one that would prevent you from access to the people. So, those were limitations caused by the internal war in Laos which had limitations in involvement, of course, on the part of everybody.

Q: What was the general economic condition of the country?

ZIGLER: Well, at that time it was essentially self sufficient agriculture with the exception of some people that lived in the city. In the Mekong River valley area, that was paddy rice. You had one crop a year and that was about it. They would also fish and hunt for survival. As I remember the income was about \$100 + a year in dollars at that time. Once again that doesn't mean you had a poor life, but you just had a limit in life. Something like we had during our Depression. We had what you might say was a limited life, but we didn't think it was a poor one; everybody was that way in the depression years, so that was the way it was there too. Some people called it a twelfth century civilization. We were trying to get Laos to the fifteenth.

Q: What was your position?

ZIGLER: I worked in the rural development division. I was a jack of all trades. I was originally brought out there with the title of "village leader development and also rural development staff personnel." It ended up most of the time I worked on the rural staff side. I didn't do much in the leadership. The rural staff was kind of a continuation of my IVS experience in terms of interpreting, translating, automobile driving. We had to teach the Laotians how to drive, for example. That was important because if both men couldn't drive on the team, well, you had a problem, particularly in a crisis. Basic automobile maintenance was taught. I also substituted as a field representative. I went to two or three locations and spent two or three months out in the field because the Americans assigned to these different locations would go on annual leave. There was a man named Phil Gullion, who was head of the refugee department. That included the rice supply program which I'll describe in a minute and also food, clothing, medicine, and dispensaries and that kind of thing, personnel. I did that for a couple of months.

Q: What was the scale of this rural development program you were working on?

ZIGLER: Well, it covered the nation pretty much. As I remember, we must have had about 12 or 15 Americans out in the field. This had to do with the nature of the country and the general approach of the U.S. Government for aid worldwide. We had the second highest number of personnel in country. We were about 20th as far as budget was concerned. How can this be?

Well, in rural development when you go out to a village and ask the people, "What do you want to do? Do you want to build a bridge? Do you want to build a school? Do you want gardens? Those are three options." Then they have to decide what they want. I've described this before. We could provide the material, personnel, and supplies. You don't spend much money for 40 bags of cement, some nails, and roofing sheets for example; and your budget would be disproportionally smaller than as far as your personnel was concerned. Of course, we had an agricultural team, an educational group, public health, public works.

We also had a social scientist out there, I believe he was an anthropologist. The idea was good, no question about that, but unfortunately, his demeanor was such that he didn't get accepted. He acted like a social scientist. Here you had a bunch of hard nosed we-can-do-it type guys, and they didn't react too positive to him. Unfortunately, he even had a kind of an explorers uniform he wore. Short pants, sox, hats like he was exploring Africa, that kind of thing. I really believe he would have been quite useful, but here you have the problem of human relations, which is what AID is all about, and he didn't come across too well.

Q: Was there any particular approach: we talk about human involvement and participation in things as though they were something new? What was your approach then?

ZIGLER: Well, to review, what would happen is an American AID man with his Lao counterpart would go to a village meeting and say we can supply to you materials of different kinds, technicians. If you want to build a bridge, if you want to build a school; if you want to build a dam; if you want to start gardens or something like that, we can help you do it. Now, you decide what you want. Then, you send your requests to the provincial governor. This has to do with nation building and government participation. So, they send it to the provincial governor. He reviewed it, and he sent it to the government in Vientiane, Laos, the rural development division. They review it and approve it. Then, there are warehouses supplied by AID under the administration of the Laotian government. The commodities were delivered by trucks, airplanes, boats. Here is a government that never did anything like that before, so you are trying to build a government at the same time you are trying to help the people in a remote village do something. Now, there were some interesting implications on that related to success. That had to do with the proper selection of projects.

I'll give you an interesting one in which there were Montagnard people up in the north who were moved out of a crisis situation down to what you might call a peaceful, secure province. So then they reestablished themselves in a new place. What are they supposed to do for a living? Now you see, you have a new entity in a society, in a community there of some size. One of the things I remember we did, we thought they could raise cabbages. All right, that was a great idea, have a garden to raise cabbages and sell to market. Well, two things, number one, that market as it was,

was already functioning at a reasonable maximal level. That's where it was; it met the needs of the community as of that time. Number two is here you have people growing cabbages who are taking them down to the market, and there is already enough cabbage in the market. Then you have the issue of conflict and competition and price. Another interesting thing, and that is the cabbages they grew were too big. At that time as you know, people buy in the morning, and they cook it in the day, and they eat it the same day and start over the next day. There is no refrigeration, no carryover. These cabbages at that time were just too big. Eventually we tried to get them involved in making some cole slaw or something like sauerkraut. Then you had to have the jars! Interesting aspects about the problems of success.

In 1964, there was a big flood in the Mekong River Valley which you may remember is one of the major rivers of the world. There was an AID man up north about 4-500 miles. At that point we had radio communications. He would radio down the Mekong is rising. He was able to notify Vientiane that this flood was on the way, so actually they began to plan in advance. A number of people were assigned to be part of the American team, as well as anybody else who could volunteer to prepare for this flood that was going to arrive in a week. Nobody knew where the low spots were in the city of Vientiane at that time because at that time it had never been flooded. All kinds of plans were made, meetings and so on. I was the responsible man for my particular neighborhood. I was supposed to get a radio call and then I would go around and pick other Americans and haul them into the USAID compound. Well, I got a phone call one morning about two o'clock, and they said, "Get your people out there; the flood is on its way." I said, "Why don't you use the radio?" For some reason or other, the radio didn't work, but the telephone system did! There you go. So, anyway, I went out and I picked up the Americans. The Laotians had to fend for themselves. I think it was about a 30,000 population town at that time. There were trucks that had exhaust pipes that stuck way up in the air so they could drive through high water, things like that. We vaccinated the Laotians. I can remember people lining up in long lines. In those days, you just stuck a needle into some alcohol and wiped it off and jammed it into another arm for disease prevention related to flood water. The worst was cholera.

Q: A big threat?

ZIGLER: Yes, sure. The house I lived in was flooded up to about five or six feet. This, you see, was a real difficult problem for a lot of people because nobody knew who was going to get flooded and who wasn't. Another physical event that affects the performance of a development team. You have floods, earthquakes, fires, fallen bridges, etc.

Q: That's remarkable that you had an early warning system, unplanned I guess.

ZIGLER: Yes, but it worked. There are some other interesting things too about the business of achievement. even in those days, '64,'65,'66, Washington whatever that was, Washington represents AID headquarters as well as Congress, as well as the news media. Washington needed evidence of success. Here you go, how can you know what is successful? Also it had to be quantifiable; the big word. So, you could say you dropped so many of this and did this and did that, but that is not really a proof of success. Is Harvard University a success? Well, how do you prove it is? Anyway that was a problem we always had, trying to create projects that had some kind of an identifiable achievement that could be reported to justify the continuation of the

program.

Related to that, the director of the rural development team at that time was Howard Thomas. He was a Ph.D. sociologist and had been a missionary in Thailand before W.W.II. He had met some Catholic missionaries who told him that their Bishop said when he sent them out, "I don't expect a conversion from you for 20 years." Now that was a realistic approach from the point of view of real change. You have different kinds of conversion I accept, but nevertheless, that was his admonition to them. Thomas was a faculty member out of Cornell.

Q: How did you see success in the work you were doing?

ZIGLER: Well, I suppose when you have taught somebody how to write shorthand or how to fix a car, is that success? I have always had this opinion and it started then is you have "got to try." You have to make the effort; you've got to be a believer. It's like some ways a soldier in combat; he believes in the effort, but he doesn't know whether or not he is going to be successful. Then, as you know, peace is a questionable term too. So what are you really doing? But, you're trying.

That to me was somewhat of an acceptable situation. You remember, part of my objective was to try to make the world better. Part of my philosophy too had been it related to when you have a career opportunity to make a change. If it is still in your philosophy, take it, a new one, automatically. It is like going out in the Mississippi River starting in Minneapolis. As long as you are in the river, you are getting to New Orleans. You might go to this side or that side, but go with the flow. That was a kind of a quality that I accepted myself.

Q: Did you have to do a lot of reporting? What kind of statistics did you gather on measuring success or accomplishments or so on?

ZIGLER: Usually it had to do with "numbers" of events or items. For instance, we went to Ban Hui Sai and talked to the leaders there, and decided they would build a school etc. So, they built a school, so that is an achievement. Or 2,000 bags of rice were dropped. This doesn't show what the value was of the learning or the nutritional impact of the rice.

Q: So it was nothing but the impact?

ZIGLER: I would like to mention a little bit about the support of the Montagnards in northern Laos. Now, as you know, Laos was essentially divided into two groups of people, the Laotians and the mountain people minorities. There was one minority that was composed of 17 people. They were called the yellow banana leaf people. They would build their houses out of banana leaves. It was a primordial concept. When the leaves turned yellow, they would move to another place for protection.

There were other people in northern Laos that what we call now the Hmong. A number of them as you may know have come to the United States as refugees. They fought on what you might call the free world side. I mentioned their rice fields being attacked before harvesting, so here they were moved to a new site which was hopefully militarily protected, but they needed food. So there were air drops of rice. These Air America planes flew over the sites and pushed out the

bags. The bags of rice were double bagged. Air drops started out with one bag and when they would hit, they would break all over the place so they doubled or tripled the bags. The general idea as I remember, the planes came in at 200 feet at 100 miles an hour. That was the right combination of height and speed. It would keep the plane in the air, and then you would push the bags out the door at the site. The people would see them come down. Of course, they didn't want to get hit by one. Then they would go out and pick up the bags.

To show you how loose things were in those days, a number of times on a Sunday afternoon I'd go out to the airport and find a plane that was getting ready to go and ask about going along. I would go on board and ride along. This is incredible you might say, but nevertheless that was done.

Then there was the other aspect to it, of course. These minority people were militarily involved and the paradox was they were defending Laos, but as far as the Laotian people were concerned, there was antipathy toward these people, the Montagnards. That is a French name, of course. There are other names for them. You have an interesting paradox because we would use black Thai, and the white Thai, which was an English terminology. Be that as it may, they were important people in the resistance and with the fall of Laos in '75, a lot of these people were refugees and came to the United States. Some of them are in Minnesota, California, North Carolina, and Wisconsin.

Q: We had been supporting them militarily?

ZIGLER: Sure. And there was a famous man named Buell. They called him Pop, his first name was Edgar. He started out, believe it or not, as an IVS man. He was a retired farmer; he might have been in his 50's. He was one of those hardy guys, a common sense guy and an effective public speaker. He would come back here to Washington and testify to Congress on behalf of the American involvement in Laos. He'd look those Congressmen right in the eye. To him, that congressman was just another guy from someplace. He was quite effective. He made quite a name for himself; he got a lot of publicity, a "Saturday Evening Post" story.

Q: He was a rural development person?

ZIGLER: He started out in IVS rural development. Then he became a U.S. government employee and was more or less king of the northern territory. He was involved in rice drops and military supplies and medical stuff, the whole shebang with support of different kinds.

Q: The regional coordinator type of person. How did you find working with the Lao people?

ZIGLER: Well with the Lao people the first thing is you have got to remember that you have two cultures, so you have the problem of language. I tried to learn Laotian because originally I was working out in the villages. Those people were not formally educated. Laos was part of the French colonial presence and French was the common language of the educated person. One of the interesting things is I would go out there and try to talk Laotian and they would look at me and all of a sudden they would realize I was talking Laotian. When they realized I was talking bad Laotian, then they could understand me. An intriguing communications problem.

Another aspect that they had and I think this is a generalization for most of the Asiatic people is they will listen to the foreigner. They won't argue with him. Then they will go back and think it all over and decide what they are going to do about it. A meeting then is appealing and not contentious.

Then, there is another interesting aspect too, and that is the influence of religion which you cannot disregard. I remember one time considering a ceremony in which AID was going to deliver to the Lao government about four or five jeeps which could be used for the rural development agency. I was talking to the two men who were Laotian heads of the rural development agency, educated in France, advanced degrees, world travelers. We were talking about what we were going to do and who was going to talk, etc. Just out of some kind of subconscious inspiration, I said, "Do you think we should have a monk to bless these Jeeps?" There was almost an obvious sigh of relief. They said yes we should. They were not going to propose it themselves because of their sensitivity to my culture, but when we got it out, it was great and grand. So here you have the impact of religion on two people, for example, that are just as sophisticated as you and I. You just can't avoid it.

NATALE H. BELLOCCHI
Administrative Officer
Silver City (1961-1963)

Ambassador Natale H. Bellocchi was born in Little Falls, New York in 1926. He received a degree in industrial management from Georgia Tech in 1944 and was soon drafted into the U.S. Army to serve in a rifle platoon during the Korean War. His Foreign Service career included positions in Hong Kong, Laos, Vietnam, Taiwan, Japan, India, and an ambassadorship to Botswana. Ambassador Bellocchi was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on March 21, 1995.

Q: You were in Laos from when to when?

BELLOCCHI: '61 to '63.

Q: What was the situation in Laos at that time?

BELLOCCHI: It was delightful. We had no running water so we had a water tank truck that went around and delivered water to the houses that you lived in. There was no electricity; everyone had their own little generator. It was a place called Silver City where most of the staff people lived. It was built by USAID. When I got there our military was still there, like MAAG-type of military. AID had been bounced out because the talks were going on with Harriman in Geneva.

Q: Laos was right on center stage at this point.

BELLOCCHI: That's right. As a matter of fact when Kennedy was president he always said

"Lay-os". When Unger became ambassador, then he would come back to Washington, he said it was delightful to come to Washington. The president usually called him in, and he said he didn't have to give him any background about where Laos was, or what was going on. He was very familiar with it. So he said it was really quite an experience. We were in the center of everything. It was fascinating.

Q: What was the impression at your level, and your perspective, of the importance of the country and why it was on the President's front burner?

BELLOCCHI: Oh no, I mean it was strictly the Cold War thing. We always used to say Laos was not really a country, it was a figure of speech. It was not really the kind of thing that you'd say; well, here's a clear territory, clear borders, people that are under the control of the. . .none of that existed. It was very much just an area.

Q: I'm talking about when you were there, were you all feeling that you might be swallowed up by the communists at any point?

BELLOCCHI: Oh, sure. Up in the Plain de Jars, Kong Le and his troops were not communists, but they were allies of those that were. Sure, they thought they would be coming down and then moving into Thailand. It was the old domino theory that they were still thinking of already in those days. So I think that the idea was our JUSMAAG people were supporting those that were resisting the communist move to the south.

Q: Your ambassador was Leonard Unger.

BELLOCCHI: Yes.

Q: How did he operate the embassy?

BELLOCCHI: Well, you're in a place like that, it's quite unusual, you do everything for yourself. We built an addition on to the embassy all by ourselves, all this kind of business. When it rained very hard you just rolled up your pants and walked through the flood, and the secretaries kept right on typing away with the water swirling all around them. It was a happy mission, a very happy mission. Eventually the AID people started to come back as the military left. For a while we were all alone, only about 30 of us in all Laos when the military left. Then the AID came in. They came in faster than the military left. They really poured in. But it was a family thing. I remember we'd have parties and Unger would come, taking a beer and downing the whole mug of beer at one time. We'd have contests, and he'd join right in. It was a fun post.

Q: Did you have any dealings with the Laotians?

BELLOCCHI: Only when we got to things like receptions. I was in the administration section, and in fact didn't have to deal. We had third country nationals dealing with them.

Q: What would you have? Filipinos?

BELLOCCHI: Oh, yes, had Japanese, Filipinos, Thai, Chinese.

Q: I take it Laotians weren't up to, or interested...

BELLOCCHI: I think peddling the pedicab was about the level of technology that they had reached at that time. They may have improved after more and more, but at that time, no. So we did everything ourselves, with our own people. It was fascinating, I enjoyed it. If you take an interest in any post it doesn't matter where you go, it can be a test.

Q: That's the kind of place that's fun.

BELLOCCHI: We enjoyed it very much.

Q: You were married by this time?

BELLOCCHI: No, still a bachelor. You'd go down to Bangkok, for example, that was the big trip for us. It was at a time remember during the Kennedy years where there really was an attitude back here in Washington, administratively, give the post the money and let them do it and have them report back. If they do their job, we'll fund them and that kind of flexibility made it actually a lot of fun to be an administrator of those things. It was challenging. We were able to accomplish an enormous amount.

Q: Then you left there and what happened?

BELLOCCHI: We got inspected while I was in Laos and only two of them dared to come up from Bangkok, and they inspected us and it was a time when it very fortuitously rained very heavily so flood waters were all over the place, and our secretaries were sitting at their desks typing away with water and lizards floating around the water, and right within the building. I'm not talking about outside, and they were very impressed with the way we kept everything going even in such a bad time. So I at that time had just become an officer -- I'd passed my Foreign Service exam, I actually got sworn Laos by the DCM at that time, and they said, "Well, you don't have any language on your paper. What are you going to do about that?" So I said I would like to go to Chinese language; I'd been studying it privately on my own even there in Laos. He asked me, "With a name like yours, why not Italian? That would be the easiest way for you to get off the language problem." I said, "Yes, but if I studied Italian, I would only be able to be assigned to one place and I'm interested in Asia." So he said, "That's reasonable." And he recommended that I go to Taichung, and I did eventually get the orders to go to Taichung.

FRANK N. BURNET
Staff Assistant, Bureau of East Asian Affairs
Washington, DC (1961-1963)

Political Officer
Vientiane (1963-1966)

Frank N. Burnet was born in New York in 1921. He joined the Foreign Service in 1951 and served in the Philippines, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Taiwan, and Washington, DC. Mr. Burnet was interviewed in 1990 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: Did you have any feeling when Harriman came on board, replaced McConaughy, that he was coming in to sort of sweep things clean or to really take charge? How did you feel about this?

BURNET: I think there was a feeling that at last we had somebody who had some political clout, particularly vis-à-vis the White House. So there was this feeling that at last we'll be able to get something accomplished and we will get things done, because Governor Harriman could really see that these things were done. Laos was a bone of contention with the USSR and it was thought that the Governor, knowing the Russians, could work out a compromise.

Although it's funny, this is in the period when we were worried about dominoes falling in Southeast Asia, and the Geneva Conference on Laos (1961-62) was ongoing. Harriman was trying to compromise with the USSR in Geneva and McConaughy was Assistant Secretary with responsibility for the ongoing negotiations. Bill Sullivan, who later on became our Ambassador to Laos, used to joke around the Bureau that we had two choices at this point in our history: We could either "falter with Walter or cave with Ave!"

Q: "Walter" being Walter McConaughy.

BURNET: So there was the changeover, you see, between the two. That crack was just for our own amusement. There was a good feeling about Harriman's coming in. Of course he was much too senior a gentleman and, really, to take that job. He had once been Governor of New York and was Secretary of Commerce in Roosevelt's cabinet after all.

Harriman, I think, really thought that here we were in a struggle with the Soviet Union over a little corner of Asia and that he, Harriman, knew the Russians and knew how to deal with them. And he knew how to strike a bargain. So that was his job.

Q: Of course he had been Ambassador during most of World War II.

BURNET: Yes, he said, "The President [Kennedy] has given me this job, because we can get along with the Soviet Union and we need to buy some time in Southeast Asia." This is what he set out to do. He succeeded, eventually, in achieving modus vivendi with the Soviets on Laos at the Geneva Conference of '62.

Q: There was a tremendous concentration on affairs in Laos in that period, wasn't there?.

BURNET: Yes, because this same view of Laos was seen from Moscow. Moscow was putting in a lot of effort, a lot of material, and a lot of people into that scene too. They had a supply line going into Laos, just as we did. They were flying things in: ammunition, equipment, and God knows what. Prestige was engaged on both sides.

Q: At that time why did we think of Laos as being so critical?

BURNET: Well here you had a situation on the periphery of China. This is where the free world sort of rubbed up against the Communist world. And we thought that if we showed any sign of weakness we were going to lose out and bring the domino theory into play. And if we didn't show some strength, stand up to the Russians some way, we were going to lose the whole area.

Q: So it wasn't Laos per se.

BURNET: It was not so much Laos per se. Laos, you might say, was sort of the point man in the group of countries out there.

Q: You were around when people were thinking about things there. How did we see the Soviet Union and China? This would be '62, '63. Did we see them walking in lockstep?

BURNET: I'm afraid we saw them pretty much as a Sino-Soviet Axis. That they were working in lockstep, as you say. That they didn't make many moves without consulting the other, and that there was such a thing as a monolithic view of Communism. So I don't think that we really understood the long adversarial history behind these two great powers.

Q: In a way, after all, we'd gone through the process of Tito, back in '48 or so when Tito broke off. Here was the equivalent to Mao Zedong and a world leader. Obviously a much smaller country, but still. We have a good example of the forces of nationalism coupled with Communism. America has a long history in China, and studies and all. Were people talking? If not in the State Department with the China experts, were we talking about this, or had we sort of been fixated or something?

BURNET: I think we were fixated. I mean here's Governor Harriman, who had an intimate knowledge of the Soviet Union. He loved to talk about his wartime relationship with Stalin. He also knew something about the Chinese, although academically speaking he wasn't an expert on China.

But he had, after all, been there, I think before World War I, maybe, with his father. His father was in the railroad business. So that he was just a young man in that period.

But I don't remember Harriman's making a pitch that there are good reasons why China and the Soviet Union should not get along together. You know, Stu, they're ancient enemies, they occupy parts of the same huge land space, and so they're natural adversaries. I think that the idea of a Sino-Soviet Axis was very deeply imbedded in our world outlook. It was a convenient way of looking at the problem and it also reflected our fears.

Q: Well this continued, despite all evidence to the contrary, in our whole involvement in Vietnam. Inability to realize the enmity between the Chinese and the Vietnamese, which was the same...

BURNET: That's right. The same phenomenon there. Absolutely the same phenomenon. Despite

lots of evidence to the contrary, which had been accumulating since about 1960 when the Soviets pulled their aid, lock, stock, and barrel, out of China. There were beginning signs of friction, but that didn't seem to make any difference. We kept to our view. Once you've made an investment in the opposite view, it's very difficult to change your mind in the middle of this process.

Q: Again, you had taken Chinese studies. Were any of these ideas perking within the Chinese group?

BURNET: They were. And the seeds were certainly planted early on in my Chinese training in the Foreign Service Institute. We were in touch with academics there who said, "Now look, you don't hear much about it now, but there are great sources of friction between China and the Soviet Union."

And they went back into some of the problems in history in the areas along the Manchurian border, where there are great unresolved border issues. The fact that they share the same land mass creates a natural kind of enmity between these two people.

So we were exposed to these ideas from the very beginning in my Chinese studies. But I'm not so sure that it made a very strong impression on many of us.

Q: What was Harriman's operating style, from your vantage point within the department and elsewhere?

BURNET: He's not a man of words. I think he's pretty much a man of action, in the sense of getting hold of the person who was vital to a particular problem or job that you had to do. Getting the right word to the right person at the right time. He's very good at that. He, of course, is extremely well connected all over Washington.

As part of the job, he made it very plain to me that I was going to be asked to do certain things. He didn't say so in so many words, but when he wanted something done, it was to be done.

And if it meant sneaking a piece of paper outside of the normal chain in the State Department directly to the White House, he'd say, "Frank, I want you to get this over to so and so in the White House right away." And he said, "Don't mention this to anybody in 'S/S'."

Q: "S/S" being the secretariat which normally covers the distribution of papers.

BURNET: The paper chain would go from the Assistant Secretary level on up to the Secretary in S/S, where it would be properly recorded and reproduced, and then sent in proper fashion, in their own sweet time, to the White House.

Well, lots of times in a fast-breaking situation there wasn't enough time for that, so he would ask me to take this over to Brom Smith, or whoever, in the White House right away, and I'd do that.

But he was frequently on the telephone to the White House, or telephone to God-knows-where. He was quite a doer. Lots of meetings held in his office. We'd have people coming in almost

every day from CIA, certainly from AID. In those day, Laos took up an inordinate amount of time. That was the hot spot and involved all of us quite a bit.

Q: Well then, you went to the hot spot, didn't you?

BURNET: Following that, that's right. It was '63. I was coming up for an assignment again. Governor Harriman was moving up to Under Secretary for Political Affairs, and it came clear to me that whoever came in to succeed him would bring in his own staff. So it was a natural time for me to go. I was interested in going back to Asia. I kind of thought that Harriman had the right idea in what he was trying to do. And I thought I'd like to go to Laos. I had the French language background, so that it seemed to me a good assignment.

Q: So you went to Vientiane from '63 to '66. What did you do out there?

BURNET: I went out there to replace Patricia Byrne, who had what we call the ICC slot in the political section. This referred to the International Control Commission, which was established first by the Geneva Accords of 1954, and they were reconstituted following the Geneva Conference of 1961-62 on Laos. That conference attempted to set up a coalition, a tri-partied government in Laos, with the Pathet Lao, the neutralists and the right wing. On the ICC you had the military groups or delegations from three countries: Canada, Poland, and India, representing roughly western, eastern and neutral viewpoints.

So Laos, then, was a little piece of territory that was in contention between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the ICC was there to attempt to keep the peace, to be kind of a benign police force. And it was my job to report back to Washington what was going on in the ICC.

We had a very close relationship with the Canadians. They were sort of "our man" in the triumvirate of the ICC. There was a lot of contact between our Ambassador and the Canadian Commissioner, who was the chief of the Canadian delegation in the ICC.

But I had a lot to do also with the Russians and the Poles. As in 1954, the Russians and the British still had responsibilities and roles as co-chairmen of the Geneva Conference. The British Ambassador in Laos was the representative of the British co-chairman and in the same way the Soviet Ambassador was the representative of the Soviet co-chairman.

So all of these people talked to each other; we saw each other almost every night. Vientiane is a very small place, and you got very familiar with all of the characters. The Beijing Chinese were there too but we were not allowed to have any intercourse with them.

Q: What was your impression of the various delegations, what they were doing and their effectiveness?

BURNET: Oh, sort of a combination of bemusement and interest. It was at times almost funny, because here we all were in this very small town on the muddy banks of the Mekong River, and yet none of us was really as interested in the Lao as we were in each other and what each other was up to and doing.

And so there was a lot of spooking, and trying to keep from being spooked, going on. It had its funny side. It was the grist in all of our mills, and the subject of all of our conversations at cocktail parties and in the post-mortem the following day and so on.

The Poles had a large delegation and worked hard at gaining intelligence from western Embassies. Some of its members appeared to be targeted on some of us. For a long time it was common knowledge in that small town that one of the handsomer Poles had befriended and was perhaps sleeping with the Canadian Commissioner's secretary. One day she was sent back to Ottawa very suddenly. Thereafter we irreverently referred to this episode as the Polish "penetration" of the Canadian Delegation.

So it was an interesting time. I enjoyed it. And everybody, I think, more or less felt the same way about it. We all had a job to do, so why not enjoy while we're about it?

Q: You were saying you considered the Canadians sort of our representative. What were they trying to do on this?

BURNET: The Canadians were trying to be a counterweight to the Poles and a sort of a gadfly to the Indians. In their role as the neutral Chair the Indians were fence-sitters, and the less they did the happier they were. Their idea was to keep the warring factions separate, I suppose, and to bring the wisdom of the Indians to bear on this situation which they hoped would allow them, in effect, to prevail over the Lao and the other participants in this international effort. And as long as no one did anything very rash then the ICC could keep the peace out there. But the less the Indians did to stir the pot meant that they could be friendly with all sides. This was the role of the Indians and they played it very well.

The ICC was supposed to investigate and to report to the two Co-chairmen, the UK and the USSR. And of course there were all kinds of reasons why you couldn't investigate anything in Laos. First of all, you had transportation difficulties, and then you had to take care of the people who were going to do the investigation, and then you had to get approval by all sides. But whoever wants to be investigated? So there were endless opportunities for spinning wheels and not doing anything.

We were pushing the Canadians, and the Canadians were pushing the Indians and tugging a tug-of-war with the Poles to try to get something reported. The Canadians worked very hard at this task.

We knew, for instance, that there were North Vietnamese in Laos. They were not supposed to be there. As you know, by the terms of the Geneva Accords of 1962, the American and all foreign troops were to get out of Laos, and it was to be neutral and hopefully peaceful so that the three factions with neutralist Premier Prince Souvanna Phouma could run the show.

But the Vietnamese, as we all know, didn't entirely leave Laos. They were certainly in the northern part and the eastern half of Laos. So there were occasions when a Vietnamese soldier would be killed or might even be taken prisoner in the sort of low-level, low-scale kind of

warfare that was going on in those days.

We would say, "Aha, here is our chance. Let's get the ICC cranked up and out there to investigate, and we'll prove to the world that the Vietnamese never left Laos." And this would be good for our side. So this was our objective, and the Canadians' too, to try to get the ICC to really investigate something and put the blame where we thought it belonged -- on the other side.

Q: You know, in retrospect, it sounds like a pretty futile exercise, because nobody really cared in a way, did they, as long as this rather peculiar monster that had been created had at least stopped tensions at that particular time from boiling up between the two super powers.

BURNET: That was the main thing. And if the ICC just did that, that was enough, as no one really wanted or expected us to be cited in the press.

But of course this did not mean that full and replete reports of: Who shot John (and I mean everything) didn't have to go back to Washington. Certainly Ambassador Unger took this responsibility very seriously. He reported everything, in extenso, so that if he would have a half hour conversation with the Canadian Commissioner on ICC matters, this would have to be reported back to Washington.

Q: There must have been an awful lot of repetition after awhile.

BURNET: Oh, there was an awful lot. A lot of talk and very little action. Some of it could be rather amusing. I remember when we got a new Indian Commissioner. Of course the character of the Indian Commissioner was very important, because he was the chairman. Whatever he decided pretty much went.

Well, we got a new Indian: his predecessor we had done very well with, because there was a period when China and India were having a little war on their common border. During that period, we just sailed along. We got good investigations out of the ICC because the Indian Commissioner wanted to strike a blow against the Chinese who were helping the Pathet Lao and the Viet Minh. There were a few good reports that were sent back to the Co-chairmen. Of course after these reports went back to the Co-chairmen, they were just really lost. But there was a certain amount of publicity which came out of them, and they made a few good news stories occasionally.

But I was talking about the new Indian Commissioner, Ashoke Badkhamkar. Quite a name, the British Military Attaché used to refer to him good-naturedly as "Bad Jam Jar" all the time.

Anyway, poor Mr. Badkhamkar. Either he was sick when he arrived, or as soon as he saw Vientiane he immediately became ill. And pretty soon he just didn't venture out at all. He became a real bed patient and yet he wasn't sick enough to be sent home. Or at least he didn't want to go home and anyway I think he began to enjoy having the moral edge on us this way.

He would receive official visitors in his bedroom in the one hotel in Vientiane. So that Ambassador Unger, when he had to go see the Indian Commissioner, had to call on him in his

bedroom in this hotel. And I went along as the note-taker. Oh, it was really something. He stayed there for about four or five months, a patient, in effect, in his own bedroom.

Of course as far as the ICC was concerned, it didn't make a hell of a lot of difference. There wasn't an awful lot for him to do, but he made a big thing out of it. Actually, at the end of his assignment (I was still there when he left) he finally let his hair down in one great fling.

It was a party given at the palace in Vientiane, and it was a very stately occasion. He proceeded to get royally drunk. And who rescued him? The Canadians and the Australians came to his rescue and said, "Now, now, now, that's all right, I think we'd better go home now." I mean, here was this very social setting in the royal palace in Vientiane, with the whole diplomatic corps there and all kinds of official and royal Lao and the Indian Commissioner, one of the dignified leaders of the diplomatic community, getting royally plastered. That was funny. Particularly for those of us who in line of duty had been subjected to his hypochondria.

That was the setting as far as the ICC was concerned. A lot of ado about nothing much, but yet a lot of work. It all had to be reported back to Washington.

A related but separate job I had was to look after the interests of one of the first American POW's in Southeast Asia. Charles Debruin was a "kicker" for Air America (he literally kicked sacks of rice or other cargo out of the rear door of a C-47 on air drops to Meo in remote areas) whose plane had been shot down by the Pathet Lao in early 1963. Every month or so I called on our only contact with the "other side," the head of a small unit of Communist Pathet Lao guards encamped in the middle of Vientiane, Sot Phetrasi, to inquire into the well-being of our one American prisoner. Occasionally I handed over food packages which his family in Wisconsin had sent. I always received bland assurances from Sot that Debruin was well but we know now that the prisoners of the Pathet Lao were held under much worse conditions than those of the North Vietnamese. I kept up a regular correspondence with the distraught family for nearly three fruitless years. Later, I learned that Debruin had attempted to escape with a fellow prisoner, a Navy pilot, but unfortunately was caught and shot while the pilot, probably being in better physical condition, got away.

Q: You mentioned about Unger reporting things in great detail. How about Sullivan, what was his operating style? This is William H. Sullivan.

BURNET: Well they couldn't be more different in personality and in operating style. Sullivan was sort of a hip-pocket kind of Ambassador, who was never at a loss for words -- and I mean the right word at the right time. He was a good man with a bon mot, like Marshall Green.

Sullivan (this was his first post as Ambassador) well knew his own strong points, and he wrote a very good telegram. His telegrams became notorious. Later on in other assignments, I had people tell me how they loved to read Bill's telegrams. Well, Bill wrote the best of them there in Vientiane. And he would write them all out on yellow foolscap -- very little editing, very little fretting and fussing over his wording.

Ambassador Unger, on the other hand, carefully crafted each word. Yet he was never at a loss for

words, either, because his telegrams went on and on much to the vexation of the Desk Officer who had to read them and respond to them.

But Bill was very succinct. He cut right through to the heart of the matter very quickly, and also had very little difficulty making up his mind which way he wanted to go on a particular issue. He was a lot easier person to work for.

With Ambassador Unger we were often in the office until 6 and 7 o'clock. Whereas under Bill Sullivan, we got out of there at five or earlier and he let it be known that there was no need for us to stick around as long as we had done our work.

Q: Did you get much of a feeling about what we were doing in Vietnam and the connection with Laos?

BURNET: Of course we shared a lot of the cable traffic with Saigon. We were aware as we moved into '64 and '65 that tension was rising as the American commitment in Vietnam increased; and as we stood up to North Vietnam, we raised our profile in Laos.

Laos was very much a part of the struggle in Vietnam, because I think our strategists thought of it as: This is the other side of Vietnam, this is the country through which most of the Ho Chi Minh Trail passes. And so, if we were going to tighten the noose around North Vietnam, we had to be just as tight in Laos as we were in Vietnam.

It was very interesting from my point of view, because here I was working with the ICC, which was there to keep the peace, but things were changing, things were moving far faster than the ICC had ever imagined. And pretty soon, the ICC became irrelevant.

And my job changed as the ICC became irrelevant. I became Bill Sullivan's first bombing officer, which as we started the air campaign... Actually it started in Laos, I think, a little bit before it started in Vietnam. Bill saw that I was having less and less to do as the war heated up, so that he needed somebody to keep an eye on the military. And we had all kinds of military running around, though they were in mufti.

Q: You're talking about American military.

BURNET: American military, oh yes, just American. We had a huge Air Attaché office, a huge Army Attaché office, and there were a lot of programs and a lot of opportunities for somebody with his own agenda to go off on a tangent. And Bill was mighty good about keeping everybody's nose clean, and keeping them from getting into some of these things. Although there were a lot of things going on that we didn't learn about until they had gone too far.

Q: Can you think of any examples?

BURNET: Well, you know this was a period when we had a program of building up the Lao Air Force, and we had provided them with the T-28 propeller aircraft. In the beginning the Lao didn't have enough pilots, so we had a program where we used "sheep-dipped" Thai pilots who had

previous training in this particular aircraft. And the Thai and the Lao, of course, look much alike. I think the planes were based in Thailand and flown into Vientiane where they loaded bombs and took off on a mission, supposedly as part of a Lao Air Force strike against the insurgents somewhere in Laos. But many of those planes were flown by Thai pilots.

Well, I learned that some of our over-eager American pilots serving with the Air Attaché's office would slip themselves into the cockpit of some of these planes, or maybe a different plane, but fly along with the mission.

I told the Ambassador that I thought there was some hanky-panky going on, and he said if he could get the evidence, "I'll get that guy's ass out of here, but quick!"

Because we were still in the period when we were ostensibly observing the rules as far as the Geneva Accords were concerned, we wanted to keep our nose as clean as possible, even though many of the things we were doing were contrary to the Geneva Accords. We were also anxious lest any word of this should get into the press. But I suppose that some of the Air Force Personnel felt they were striking a blow for freedom by such acts of derring-do, no matter what the consequences were for our public posture.

Q: As a bombing officer...you know this became a fancy term in the Foreign Service to have a diplomat actually sort of plotting out missions and all. What did you do?

BURNET: One of the Air Attaché's jobs was to develop what they called targets. And this involved taking a lot of aerial photography. These photographs would be read out, and people who knew what they were looking at could pick out certain buildings, maybe, or certain areas where they felt they could see Vietnamese military activity and so on. They would spot these targets all over Laos. And then these would be developed and numbered and catalogued, and kept in reserve for use when strike missions came up, and would be used for briefing the pilots.

Our job, as the Ambassador saw it, was to make sure that U.S. planes did not hit civilian targets, hit civilian populations or anywhere near them. So he wanted somebody on his own staff to check on the targets that the Air Attaché's office produced. I would look at these photographs with targets marked on them that the Air Attaché's personnel had developed and try to make sure that there were no habitations anywhere near them, or any civilian aspect that we wanted to protect, and thus to make sure it was strictly a military target. And as you can imagine, there were many cases where I felt there were signs of civilian activity somewhere nearby.

But the Air Force's job was to try to convince me that no, they had looked at this very carefully and this was purely a military target and could be approved. So I had basically to approve or disapprove the targets as the military developed them in Laos in the name of the Ambassador.

Q: How did you feel, was it that the military, particularly the Air Force, wanted just to go...Did they understand what you were trying to do, and were they trying to put something over on you? Or were you working in conjunction?

BURNET: I felt that it was a game, that they were trying, as much as they could, to get as much

by me as they could. Because they were looking for hotter and hotter targets. The Air Force had a way, I felt, of wanting to level everything that was vertical.

I knew there were certain areas that they simply could not get into. And I made it plain to them, I thought, time and again, where the Communists in Laos had their headquarters in Sam Neua, also in a place on the *Plaine des Jarres* called Khang Khay, and a few other areas, which were sort of sacred to the Communist chieftains and their organization. Also, the ICC would officially visit these areas from time to time. The Ambassador felt strongly that we should not get into that, otherwise it might erupt into a much wider war in Laos.

Q: It wasn't just because these were civilian places; these were political centers.

BURNET: Yes, centers of Communist political activity, Pathet Lao activity in Laos. But yet intermixed with them would be a civilian population. So the idea was we simply couldn't get anywhere near them. It would have immediately resulted in heated complaints to the Co-chairmen of the Geneva Accords which we still ostensibly observed, and attendant bad publicity.

Q: Did you feel that sometimes missions were slipped over that you never knew about?

BURNET: Yes, I think there were. I think there probably was a lot going on that I didn't know about.

Q: Because you had to depend on the Air Force to supply you with the data in order to...

BURNET: Well, I had to depend on their good word. It was a kind of a gentleman's agreement, because I had no independent means of checking on these things. So I had to make up my mind based on what these guys were telling me -- did I think this guy was telling me the truth? in effect.

Q: This is an interesting study. I hope some day we can do a greater one, and that's the interfacing, or whatever you want to call it, of the military and the State Department at various levels. Did you have the feeling that they were laughing at you? You were the guy who was trying to stop something, whereas yet they had the answer, which was air power, and you were kind of, in a modern term that's used today, a wimp. Not you, personally, but as a State Department person, that you didn't really understand, and you were trying to be too good about something that could only be answered by force.

BURNET: Yes, I think there was a lot of that present. Yet I felt that because I represented the Ambassador I got a lot of respect. So they were not too brazen about it. I felt more put upon by the working staff, not the Air Attaché himself, who was a great guy.

I'm sure that I could have gone to him and said, "Look, you know, I hear Captain so-and-so flew on a combat mission." And he probably would have stepped on the guy or shipped him out. But it was hard to be sure of your information. And let's not forget the Attaché was under pressure from his headquarters to get results.

The Air Force was wanting to strike a blow to make it look good. The Air Attaché was interested in getting as much accomplished as he could, but yet he had to be very careful not to overstep the mark and incur the wrath of the Ambassador, which would happen occasionally.

Q: A little bit about how things worked. Were you getting any instructions, or at least the Air Force, and were you monitoring them from our military headquarters in Saigon at MACV? Did MACV play much of a role in this bombing business?

BURNET: Well, I think that was quite true as MACV regarded it as all one war. There was also great rivalry between (it seems incredible now) Ambassador Sullivan and General Westmoreland which was reflected mostly in the back and forth of message traffic.

Maybe you've heard of this before, but Bill regarded Laos as sort of his territory. And Westmoreland was wanting to do more and Bill to do more. Bill was very, very watchful and very careful to see that he stayed in control of whatever happened in Laos.

Bill's fallback, of course, was: Well look, you can't do this, because of the Geneva Accords, for one thing, if this thing become public. For another, I can't do anything in Laos, or give my approval to anything, unless I get Souvanna Phouma, the Prime Minister's, permission. And he's got to know about it before this thing happens. So Bill could sort of slow things down with Westmoreland, and Westmoreland would get very frustrated with this treatment.

Q: Was the checking with the Lao authorities a sort of a card that was used more in terms with dealing with the rest of the American military establishment?

BURNET: It was a card.

Q: Did he really do this very much, or was this just something he said?

BURNET: No, Bill actually did it. He would have real conversations with Souvanna, and I think he told the Prime Minister exactly what was up. But at the same time, it was a card that Bill played, and he played it to the hilt, I think. He was very effective. And there was a lot of rivalry, as I said, and joshing going back and forth between General Westmoreland and Ambassador Sullivan.

Q: Wasn't Sullivan called "The American Field Marshal," or something like that?

BURNET: Yes, Westmoreland called him "Field Marshal Sullivan" in cables.

Q: But you were picking up these vibrations then of this rivalry?

BURNET: Oh yes. As a matter of fact, we would have meetings periodically, usually across the river in Thailand, in Udorn. Westmoreland would come up from Saigon, and Sullivan would go across the river, and I would usually go along with him, and Ambassador Graham Martin would come up from Bangkok. And the three heads would get together, and there was lots of joshing and putdowns and carrying on at these sessions.

And I can see Westmoreland shaking his head: We can't win the war this way, or we can't if we don't get some of our troops across the border into the Ho Chi Minh Trail area, etc.

Q: So he wasn't just interested in the bombing, he was interested in putting troops in.

BURNET: Yes, I think he was also interested in doing more and more on the ground. Of course, my impression was that, slowly, Sullivan had to give way, and so did Souvanna.

I'm sure that Souvanna probably would have said yes to almost anything that Sullivan asked for. But I'm sure there were occasions when he said no, sort of put a hold on whatever the operation was.

So there were two things that we had to consult with the Lao about: there was the air war and then there was the border war, with lots of teams of special forces who were slipping across the border from Vietnam into Laos, and having a very rough time of it. There were heavy in these cross-border operations. Of course all this time the CIA-directed guerilla war against the PL and the North Vietnamese in north Laos was going non-stop.

Q: Why weren't the cross-border operations doing well? Were these American troops?

BURNET: These were usually American-led native forces, tribes people from the mountainous areas in Vietnam and Laos.

Q: Montagnards, I guess.

BURNET: Montagnards, that's right. One tended to lump them all together as one but they were: Meo, Nungs, and a number of other groups.

Q: Well, why didn't they do well? I mean they would be in their environment and all.

BURNET: It was very rough terrain for whomever was involved. And they were far from any base of supply. They were off on their own for weeks on end. They couldn't use radios and things would go wrong. Resupply missions by air often went awry. And, I don't know, I think that they had some very rough adversaries in the Vietnamese, who had after all been fighting in this area since God-knows-when. They were some of the world's best guerrilla fighters. They had learned well. So it was a very difficult kind of operation going on. Really rough. U.S. forces invading Cambodia and GVN forces invading Laos later on found this out.

Q: What about Washington? Were you getting many instructions from Washington on the bombing and all, or were they allowing Sullivan and Westmoreland to pretty well call the shots?

BURNET: Except for major operations, they arranged things between themselves. When Westmoreland really wanted to get something new accomplished in Laos, his route was through CINCPAC to the JCS, and then SecDef to the Secretary, and the Secretary on back down the line to Sullivan. That's the way it came, or sometimes through Bill Bundy, who was sort of running

the show as Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs. So that's the way it came. Westmoreland eventually got what he wanted.

Just to fast forward on the machine a little bit. After my assignment in Vietnam, I went back to Laos, briefly, in 1970, I checked in with the Ambassador there, who was Mac Godley, [G. McMurtrie Godley] and with our Air Attaché, and I looked at the current photos of some of these old targets. I looked at the towns of Sam Neua and Khang Khay, which were sacrosanct in my day in '66, and '65. I simply didn't recognize them. Absolutely leveled.

So you see the nature of the war had changed and had gradually escalated, until the Air Force was allowed, presumably, to bomb most anything as long as it was in enemy territory.

Q: You left Vientiane then in 1966. How did you feel about what we were doing? Did you think we were ahead, behind, holding our own, or what?

BURNET: I think, holding our own. But in those days I still thought that we were going to come out of it all right. Yet I could see a bit of the hugger-mugger involved, this nasty war going on, in which the Meo and other minority groups were doing most of the dying. In Laos the war was just the reverse of what it was in Vietnam: the guerrillas were on our side and the North Vietnamese held the LOC's and deployed conventional forces against our friends.

Q: Meo being one of the hill tribes.

BURNET: Tribesmen in Laos. That was the part of the war that the CIA was running. The Meo were getting kind of chewed up. And that war flowed back and forth across the Plain of Jars and surroundings. There was certainly a very frustrating element about it all. But yet I thought eventually we were going to clean it up.

Q: We've talked about relations with the military, how about with the CIA? Did you have much to do with them, and how did you find them operating?

BURNET: In Laos, of course, this was a big operation for CIA, and so we got along very well. I think that they sent some of their best people out there. We never had any real problem. Very little friction.

Upcountry Laos was pretty much the preserve of the CIA, and AID would sort of try to get in there a little bit. But there were certain areas that even people like myself couldn't go in Northern Laos, secret areas where training or whatever was going on.

Even some Congressmen weren't shown a few places there. Although I, in the course of events, saw quite a bit of Northern Laos in the areas where we were operating, escorting Congressmen and so forth. So I felt fairly good over our prospects; yet I had this nagging feeling that it was carrying on too long, bleeding our friends white.

Q: And there didn't seem to be an end.

BURNET: There didn't seem to be an end, a little bit of that feeling.

Q: You came to a really rather unusual assignment, but very pertinent to what you were doing. You were transferred to CINCPAC in Honolulu from 1966 to '67, where you were the Deputy Political Advisor. Could you explain what this meant and who were some of the personalities you were dealing with at the time?

BURNET: CINCPAC had a vast military staff. There must have been thousands. I've never been in such a place before. It was kind of a mini-Pentagon. All of the G-numbered staff, the G-1, G-2, G-3, all the way up to G-7, -8 and so on. All presided over by the Commander in Chief Pacific, whose name, at the time I was there, was Ulysses S. Grant Sharp.

I arrived there in 1966, and the air war in Vietnam was in progress. And one of Admiral Sharp's roles was to run the air war for the various staffs back in Washington. He took it very, very seriously.

Of course, I was kind of on the periphery of it, because, after all, I was the Deputy POLAD. But yet I regularly attended the briefing sessions that were held in the big briefing room daily for Admiral Sharp, so that I could see what was on his mind, what he was trying to accomplish, and perhaps finding out what we had accomplished.

You're right. It was more exposure to the counter insurgency type of conflict which I had seen on a smaller scale in Laos. But here is where it was being planned and especially the intensive air campaign in North Vietnam. And the interface, I think, between the diplomatic and the military was something to be observed here.

These briefings always included reports on the bombing of North Vietnam. U.S. planes inevitably flew up toward the China border. We had a really good Foreign Service officer, an old-timer, in Hong Kong, whose name escapes me at the moment. I'll think of it in a minute. He was Consul General.

Q: Was it Ed Rice?

BURNET: Yes, Ed Rice, an old China hand.

Q: He's a real old China hand.

BURNET: He's written a book about Mao Zedong. As a matter of fact, I saw in the recent months he's come out with another one.

In any event, he knew China. And of course he knew the whole history of Korea and what had happened there when U.S. forces wandered too close to the border. So he was, naturally and understandably, concerned that we were getting a little bit too close, too often, to the China border in our air operations over North Vietnam.

And so he would weigh-in, in his messages back to Washington, which always were tagged

"CINCPAC for POLAD" or "CINCPAC," so that Admiral Sharp read a good deal of the messages coming out of that part of the world.

And one day, after several of these messages in which Consul General Rice had warned about flying too close, what might happen if there were an incident on the border involving our aircraft, and I suppose Admiral Sharp was under a good deal of pressure from Washington, he said, "God damn it, I hear about all I want to hear from Mr. Rice. You guys who are doing this briefing, now I don't want to hear any more of this stuff. Just keep it out of your briefing." He just laid down the law that he did not appreciate having to take advice from a diplomat at his own briefing. That made quite an impression on me and on members of his staff, too.

I would get a good idea from the back-and-forth between him and his staff at the briefing sessions what his role was, how he saw his role, and what he was trying to do and so on. It was a fascinating assignment.

Q: Who was the Political Advisor at that time?

BURNET: Bob Fearey.

Q: And how well did he work within this context?

BURNET: He worked very well indeed. I think Fearey enjoyed this. He saw his role as being very close to the Admiral and told me when I first arrived there that an awful lot of the work was going to be shoved off on me, because he, Bob, had to devote himself almost exclusively to the needs of the Admiral. And whenever the Admiral took these long trips through East Asia, he had to go with him, and that I would have to run the office by myself then.

There is an awful lot of staff work that goes on in a place like that. Every operation had to be planned as a staff paper, each one having at least two officers to bird-dog it. They had to get a chop from all the offices concerned. One of the chops was almost always the POLAD chop, particularly if the operation or project impinged upon an Asian country.

So many papers, and these included some of the intelligence missions that we were running in Korea, came across my desk. I would have two guys from the staff sit down in my office with their piece of paper, and their one job was to push that piece of paper through each office concerned. They had to tell me what the paper was about, what the operation was about, what it was trying to accomplish and so on. As I think about it I remember putting my chop, my OK, on the ill-fated mission of the USS Pueblo.

And I was supposed to see how it would fit as far as our foreign relations were concerned in that part of the world, whether there would be any problems with countries that we had good relations with and so on. That kept me pretty busy. There was a lot of this paperwork, beside, I was running around to meetings and attending briefings.

Q: You say Sharp was focusing on the air war. Talking about a worm's eye view, I was the equivalent to a Corporal in the Air Force in Korea during the war there. And actually my job

was to listen to Soviet Air Force radio transmissions during the Korean War. But I was a college graduate, I looked at this appendage, which is Korea, with high mountains, not much forest, the American Air Force had complete dominance over the thing and yet was unable to stop some very massive Chinese armies from being resupplied. And, as a Corporal, I said, "Gee, this Air Force really doesn't work very well as an instrument." And having known about the strategic bombing survey in Germany, which showed that the Air Force with all the impression of destruction, German production went up rather than down during this period.

BURNET: And it didn't destroy morale as they hoped it would.

Q: And you saw what we were doing in Laos, and you flew over and you saw this jungle and all. Wasn't everybody saying: "You know, this isn't working."?

BURNET: You just couldn't put that down. The problem came up again and again and again as to how effective we were with our air power. These things made some very deep impressions on me.

I remember how, to go back a moment, in Laos in the early years of the air war, we heard from our Air Attaché and from people who came up from Saigon, again and again, in messages coming out of MACV in Saigon, that what we had to do was to cut a particular LOC as they called it.

Q: Line of communication.

BURNET: Line of communication, Route Number Seven, which comes right straight in from North Vietnam into Northern Laos by the Plaine of Jars. We had a beautiful choke point, they told us, by a little village called on the map, Ban Ken. If we could get permission from Souvanna to bomb that bridge, we would create a choke point. Then the Vietnamese would not be able to bring their supplies and men into Laos, as we would cut their line of supply. It sounded reasonable.

By 1964 or so the relations between the U.S. and North Vietnam had gotten to the point where we were steadily increasing the pressure. Finally, MACV got an approval to bomb this bridge in the little village of Ban Ken in neutral Laos, which was going to cut the main route from North Vietnam and got permission from Souvanna. So the mission came along.... And Yankee team, or what was it called?

Q: Yankee Station.

BURNET: No, Yankee Station was where the Navy was in the Gulf. But we had another name, this code name misses me at the moment.

Q: Something about Tiger?

BURNET: No, this was before "Tiger Hound," which was a free bombing zone along the Ho Chi Minh trail in the Laos corridor. So they bombed it. They did a pretty good job of bombing this

bridge. But do you know that within 12 hours the North Vietnamese trucks were successfully going around it, and within 24 hours they had started to rebuild the bridge. And very soon that LOC was right back in commission again.

That made an indelible impression on me, that air power ain't gonna do it in this part of the world.

Q: It really doesn't do it most places.

BURNET: It didn't do it in Germany. But of course that happened again and again.

Q: But you're really talking to true believers, aren't you, when you're talking about proponents of air power.

BURNET: Absolutely. You haven't convinced them even to this day.

Q: Well then in POLAD, in the time you were there, were there any incidents that made Admiral Sharp pay more attention to the diplomatic warnings, or were there no responses from China?

BURNET: Fortunately nothing more than an endless series of "serious warnings." I think that Admiral Sharp probably got most of it when he went back to Washington. I'm afraid he didn't get much from us, from the two members of the State Department. Fearey was very, very. . . As a matter of fact, there was the story going around the staff at CINCPAC that the biggest hawk in the whole staff was Bob Fearey, who was a diplomat who should not have been a hawk but was. Some very responsible members of Admiral Sharp's staff told me they were greatly bothered by this.

Q: This often is the case. We had one interview with somebody who I think served under Sullivan and Godley and was quite unhappy about these... I can't think of his name, he was on the National Security Council at one time, I think.

BURNET: Not Holdridge? But Holdridge had a lot to do with the war in Laos under Kissinger on the NSC.

Q: But anyway who was really unhappy serving under these two men because he felt that they...I just looked it up and I think it was Lindsey Grant, but I'm not sure.

BURNET: He wasn't in Laos.

Q: Well, maybe it wasn't, it was somebody else in our interviews, but who really felt uncomfortable because he felt that diplomats became, and this had been noted other times, often become accessories, almost infatuated as by war, which is true often in Washington, by William Bundy and...

BURNET: You have those who are and those who are not. Those who are seem to forget they are diplomats and often defer to the military. My impression is that a good example of those who

are would be somebody like U. Alexis Johnson. And somebody who is not -- Marshall Green. Marshall Green was very much his own man anyway. I remember attending Foreign Service Day several years ago which featured an address by the new chief of the NSC, Colonel Bud McFarlane. He made a strong pitch for continuing covert operations. A large part of the audience applauded. I noticed Ambassadors Green and Johnson sitting together as they are old friends. Only Ambassador Johnson applauded. But I think a strong case can be made that over the years since WW II, the State Department has not served the country well by its policy of working so closely with the military. In most cases, we would be far better off if the Department had stuck to its own diplomatic, peaceful, proposals for consideration by the White House instead of serving as the handmaiden of the military as we have done so much of the time.

Q: Is there anything else about the relations within CINCPAC? Did you find that there was a difference dealing with the Air Force and the Navy on matters you were concerned with, particularly on the war?

BURNET: Let me go back to Laos. There was a great deal of difference. Most of our difficulties were with the Navy. I don't know what the problems was. Was it training? Was it inadequate briefing? Whatever it was, we had constant problems with Navy aircraft bombing the wrong targets in Laos, and bombing, in particular, one village.

You could almost spit from this village to the Mekong River. And anybody who knows *anything* about Laos knows that any population living within sight of the Mekong River, certainly, and even beyond that, is in friendly territory. But the Navy planes were forever bombing this friendly town.

And we had to go down there several times to give some compensation to poor villagers who had been bombed by U.S. aircraft. The Navy, as we would say in those days, "screwed up" more often than the Air Force did. So it was a problem with the Navy. I recall that in one of his famed cables, Ambassador Sullivan wrote, "Tecumseh weeps..!" referring to several of these Navy screw-ups.

Q: How about in CINCPAC, did you see this?

BURNET: We saw an awful lot of the Navy, but I didn't have that impression. You were asking to what extent Sharp was impressed by or listened to the diplomats. I think that the visitors who came through there, and there were many, I think he gave them a good hearing, and I think he was impressed by them. And of course he read most of the diplomatic cable traffic.

He was always very friendly toward me and didn't show any impatience which he exhibited with his own staff in that one instance that we talked about. My impression is that he wasn't totally out of control as far as civilian control of the military was concerned.

Q: Well, for a Chinese language officer, your specialty... I'm talking about your next assignment. You went to Bien Hoa from 1967 to '69. Didn't you feel you'd had enough of this? Or did you have any choice in the matter?

BURNET: Well, I didn't really like the assignment, for one thing, in CINCPAC. I was there for a year, and it had its difficulties, mostly personal. And, I guess I thought that there was a contribution I could make in Vietnam. They were putting pressure on us, as you know, to go to Vietnam, and there were inducements. So the totality of it convinced me that I should go out there and have that experience. So I went and got to Saigon just a week before Tet.

PAUL F. GARDNER
Consular/Political Officer
Vientiane (1961-1963)

Ambassador Paul F. Gardner was born in Texas in 1930. He entered the Foreign Service in 1956. His career included positions in Madagascar, Laos, Indonesia, Cambodia, Turkey, Washington, DC, and an ambassadorship to Papua New Guinea. Ambassador Gardner was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1991.

Q: You left there in 1961 and went to Laos where you served for two years. What were you doing when you got to Laos?

GARDNER: I started off as a consular officer but moved to the political section after two or three months. I asked for the political section and they said I could have it. This had something to do with my desire to go to Laos. I actually had asked to go to Paris or Scandinavia, which sounded very good after Madagascar. But the Department felt that I should go to Laos and they promised me a good job as political officer. So I was the junior political officer at the Embassy there.

Q: You got there just about the time Laos was probably at its peak of interest.

GARDNER: With the US government, I think so, yes. This was right after the Kong Le coup. There was a security problem there. The Pathet Lao, the local Communist organization, had control of a great deal of the countryside, with the help of the Vietnamese, of course. The Vietnamese were always there in the background.

Q: These were the North Vietnamese.

GARDNER: North Vietnamese, yes. So the only thing in the hands of the royal Lao government were the towns, you might say. After the Kong Le coup took place...this was a coup of non-Communists against other non-Communists ...life in the cities itself became a bit dangerous so we had to go without our families at that time. I was separated from my wife, who had to stay in Bangkok, although within a period of a few months she was able to join me because things had straightened out a bit.

But it was a time when the US role in Laos was quite large and US interest at the White House, in particular, was quite large. What has struck me and what I have retained from Laos I guess

after all of these years...there are some graphic events that I have implanted in my mind which quite frankly show that I think I came out of Laos feeling that we were doing the wrong thing and didn't really know what we were doing there on the whole.

Q: What were these events?

GARDNER: First, at that time they talked about reviving Laos at the grass roots. Winning the hearts and minds of the people and this sort of thing. All of the officers were supposed to help out on this program. So I went on one trip to a rural area in a province near the Mekong Valley. We went by helicopter to a small town, capital of a county or region. We were to present performances. I was given to show a film on Alaska, the United States newest state. That was my program to the grass roots along with some Mohlam singers. These are traditional Lao singers, a woman and a man, who sing to each other with great humor. They also had an anti-Communist message.

Well, my film was not a hit to say the least since there was no comprehension of snow, seals or anything else that goes with Alaska. The Mohlam team was a hit principally because they were risqué and off color and made a lot of good jokes. I am not sure the Communist message went so well, but they loved the jokes.

Then we went by foot to another small village nearby and we are having dinner...we had to go after dark, of course, because I was going to show my movie on Alaska...we were having dinner on the porch, I think it was chicken heads, when a very, very frightened Lao soldier came up. They didn't tell me what he told them, but I could see that he was shaking all over. I thought, "My gosh he must have had some kind of experience to be shaking all over."

After a while it came out that the Pathet Lao had moved into the vicinity of our area and they were all frightened that they were coming after me. They decided that they would have to cancel the program and I would have to go back at night through this jungle trail to this other village. I had a strong feeling there that I hadn't brought anything to the villagers except fear for themselves because I was there. I don't think that soldier's teeth were chattering because he feared about my safety. But the fact was that he feared that they would come here because of me and his safety was in danger.

So we walked back over a bamboo bridge, which consisted of four or five bamboo poles over a very deep chasm, and I had great difficulty with it because each pole had a different diameter and would give with my weight a little bit differently. Because the Lao weighed almost half what I did, they got across it very easily but I caused a great deal of consternation at first and then later humor. They laughed out loud at me struggling to get across that bridge.

I had the feeling that the only thing I brought to them during this whole trip was a little bit of humor, a great deal of fear. I am not sure I should have been out there at all, so to speak.

That night the military shot off mortars continually throughout the night. I knew they couldn't see anything and I knew they didn't have a target. They were simply using shells to make noise to scare the enemy off as traditional Asian armies used to do. It kept me awake all night and used

a lot of very expensive mortar shells. So I came back feeling that we were not really getting to the hearts and minds at the grass roots.

Another feeling I recall is an intense interest at the White House and the lackadaisical attitude of the Lao. So it was terribly difficult to get the Lao to do things that the White House, itself, the President himself, wanted. We think of Lyndon Johnson as having hands on control over what went on in Vietnam, but Kennedy was doing the same thing really through Averell Harriman in particular. I remember Harriman came out one time to see one of the local leaders Phoumi Nosavan. It was my job to go to his house and try to get an appointment because Harriman gave us 24 hours notice that she was coming. I told them that Harriman wanted to see Phoumi and was told that he was off on a picnic and there was no chance of getting hold of him. I told this to Harriman who simply sends a one liner back...I will see Phoumi. So I went back and said everything had to be done to get this man back to the city. He did show up for the meeting, but I had a feeling...he wasn't even in the government...that we were really pushing people who didn't like being pushed, and that the urgency all seemed to be on our side.

I can also recall during Christmas of 1962, when we were trying to bring the three parties together for a peace agreement...the Communists, the Phoumi government that we were supporting and the neutralists under Souvanna Phouma, who at that time was in Paris. They were holding negotiations and I was on duty all day on Christmas because Washington couldn't wait. There had to be a cable out that night as to what they had accomplished in the negotiations that day.

I had a heck of a time finding the negotiators. They didn't show up at the meeting place. I finally found them in a restaurant, drinking and telling dirty jokes. They had simply decided they didn't want to negotiate that day. They wanted to party instead. This was very difficult, however, to explain to Washington.

It seemed to me in retrospect that it was so silly for this huge world power to try to be pushing a country of less than 3 million people forward when they didn't really know where they were going. We were sort of outlining it for them. I just don't think we played it right in the long run. I think we wasted our resources in an area where we wouldn't have been.

Q: We did get involved. This wasn't the only place. We felt that whatever we wanted we should get. I have heard almost the same story about Averell Harriman in a major capital in Europe where he wanted to see the Foreign Minister when he was just an Assistant Secretary. He would not brook being fobbed off onto anyone else.

GARDNER: Yes, we became very involved in local politics to a large degree by supporting Phoumi. When we found it was wrong, we tried to put it all together with Souvanna Phoumi, but I think by that time it was a bit late. I am not saying that we came out in a bad position, but I do feel that we were very, very naive about what you can do with another country just because you are a big power.

Q: You had two ambassadors while you were there, Winthrop G. Brown and Leonard Unger. How did they feel about what they were doing there?

GARDNER: Well, I guess you are going to have to ask them. Certainly I didn't speak the way I do now then because I followed my orders and tried to believe in everything I was doing. It was only as I grew older and looked back on it and realized what was sticking in my mind were these images and not the images of any successes at all so to speak. I do know that they were very conscious of what Washington wanted and they wouldn't have been ambassadors there if they hadn't tried to obtain it. I think they both did a good job.

Q: Did you feel that whatever you were doing there that basically this was a CIA run country insofar as political action, etc.?

GARDNER: Of course, the CIA was very big there especially among the Meo mountaineers. Their man was our contact with Phoumi. Virtually everything we got from Phoumi was through him. To the sense that they were the channel to Phoumi, and he was the leader of the country they were very important, but I had a feeling that they were following the Ambassador's and Washington's lead. I didn't see them as doing their own thing which was against policy. I saw them following policy.

Now, when our government decided that the Phoumi outfit wouldn't make it and they were going to have to rely on a coalition of the three parties, then, I think, some CIA people were put in a very bad position because they were so personally attached to the person they were dealing with such as Phoumi and others, that they, themselves, felt betrayed because Phoumi was being betrayed when we started fooling around with Souvanna Phouma and others with which they did not have contact. So I think there were some CIA agents, if you like, who didn't like the way the policy was going because they had become very, very tied personally to their contacts.

PHILIP R. MAYHEW
Consular/Economic Officer
Vientiane (1961-1963)

Philip R. Mayhew was born in California in 1934. He graduated from Princeton University in 1956 and served in the U.S. Marine Corps from 1957-1959. He entered the Foreign Service in 1961 and served in Laos, Congo, Vietnam, Thailand, Jordan, and Washington, DC. Mr. Mayhew was interviewed on May 26, 1995 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: Laos was in center stage, although a very small country, at that particular time, wasn't it?

MAYHEW: Yes, it was. Personally, I wanted to go to a French-speaking post and had an interest in Asia but almost none in Africa, the obvious alternative. When I got to Laos, it was beginning, I think, to be a real focus of attention. President Kennedy in 1960 had sent U.S. troops to Northeast Thailand as a warning for Laos.

Q: What was the political situation in Laos when you got there in '61?

MAYHEW: Confused. In 1960, neutralist military leader Kong Le had taken Vientiane from rightist General Phoumi Nosavan. In 1961, by the time I got there, the political situation was somewhat peculiar. Phoumi had retaken the capital, and we were supporting him, but there was a neutralist faction, and a communist faction. Each had foreign supporters.

When I got there, wives and other dependents, who had been evacuated in 1960, still had not returned, so we were bunked together in various houses. It was sort of like being back in college again, in a sense. For cost, and security reasons, people were sharing houses.

Q: What type of work did you have?

MAYHEW: I started out as a junior officer doing the consular work, which was minimal. A little bit of economic kinds of things. Sort of trying to scare-up something to do because being a vice consul in Laos was not a very demanding job.

Q: What about getting around there? Were you pretty well confined to Vientiane?

MAYHEW: You were largely confined to Vientiane and its immediate surroundings. You could fly to Savannakhet or to Pakse. The roads, quite apart from the security problem, were pretty awful. The air transport was not much, so you were pretty well restricted to Vientiane. Though later I was one of the first diplomatic travelers, with my boss Bill Thomas, to go up to the famous Plain of Jars, so-called because of neolithic burial jars on the plain. He had wrangled an invitation from Phoumi Vongvichit, who was one of the communist faction figures. We spent a day in the Plain of Jars. I did get to Luang Prabang, because I went up as Ambassador Unger's staff aide for his credential presentation to the Lao king. But travel was very difficult.

Q: You served under two ambassadors while you were there? Went through Brown and Unger?

MAYHEW: That's right.

Q: What was your impression? I mean, here you were a junior officer, of how these two men operated.

MAYHEW: One thing that needs to be outlined, I think, is the setting. We were carrying on some of the functions of a normal embassy in a very abnormal kind of place. The Embassy really was a special purpose post, trying to maintain a modicum of stability in Laos and avoid a communist takeover for the larger stakes of Thailand and Vietnam. This meant trying to fuse a coalition government out of the three political factions -- communist, rightist and neutralist. It also involved supporting a large CIA effort of the so-called Secret War in Laos. There was an enormous CIA establishment across the river in Udorn, Thailand working for US ends in Laos. In many ways those of us in the embassy were merely ancillary to this huge project.

So to get back to the two ambassadors. The most important thing that Winthrop Brown and Washington special envoys were trying to do was to pull together the three factions of Laos into a unified government. They finally did get agreement from all three factions very close to

Winthrop Brown's date of departure. I can remember him getting the news at some sort of embassy function where we all were; that the government had finally been formed. He departed and could count himself, I guess, as having completed his mission successfully, although he was under no illusions as to how stable the coalition might be. Then Unger came in.

Since he had these immense responsibilities dealing with the Secret War, Unger was somewhat in the position, I would say, of a Chief Executive of a large corporation, perhaps a defense company doing classified work, in that he had a lot of different kinds of American bureaucratic interests to keep his hands on. And he had to try to keep the various Lao factions in order; he had to try to prevent Phoumi Nosavan from doing things that would upset the government. Of course, all the factions had inner problems and foreign sponsors pulling them in various directions.

It was a rather difficult time because you had in Vientiane the 3 factions each having their own armed troops. You'd see the Pathet Lao troops in the markets in the mornings, walking around town with submachine guns. It probably couldn't have lasted, and didn't last.

These 3 incompatible factions could not really agree on government leaders. The government was created as a result of internal and international pressures, as well as the U.S. concluding that Phoumi Nosavan and his faction could probably not establish control over all of Laos. It would thus be better to accept a neutral Laos if that could somehow be obtained.

Q: You were a junior officer and obviously didn't have your hands on the levels of power. What was the view of the officers about the CIA operations and relations with the CIA?

MAYHEW: The agency was so important there that, in a way, they took precedence over everything else. In more normal countries you would have a whole host of other interests. The interest in Laos, of course, was really not so much an interest in Laos as an interest in Vietnam and Thailand. Laos merely happened to be a stage on which related events were happening. To the misfortune of the Lao, of course.

So you'd have to say that, really, the whole US interest was bound-up with the security situation. There really were no other interests at all. The agency had a good deal of military success initially with its irregular forces, but these forces could not in the longer run resist the Vietnamese when they became serious about Laos. The Lao, at great cost, fulfilled the function of buffer state, protecting Thailand for a long period from having a communist government on its border.

Q: Was there much of a government to deal with, at your level?

MAYHEW: Not an awful lot. There were a few Lao at the top who were competent, but not very honest. The immense amounts of money that we were introducing brought forth the kind of corruption that you normally have. At one point, I think we were handing them a check for \$80 million a month to support the government. This cash-grant policy was an effort to finance the Royal Laotian Army. A great deal of that was raked off by the Laotian figures involved.

In terms of relations, everything, of course, went to the security effort. The rest of us were just

sort of there, I think, doing our normal functions. The Lao, certainly on the other side, must have felt much the same way. Everything depended upon the security situation. They were more or less amenable to what we wanted to do, considering that we were funding them. I think the Lao understood that agents had them by the throat, and that the story was likely to end badly.

Q: Did you have much contact with the Lao there?

MAYHEW: Not very much.

Q: You served for a while as ambassador's aide, how did Unger feel about this hodge podge of government?

MAYHEW: First of all, I didn't serve as aide too long. I didn't do a terribly good job at that. In any case, Ambassadors don't confide very much in junior officers normally.

I think that he believed very much in what he was doing; worked very hard to make the whole thing go. One of the unforgettable images that people who worked with him had took place during one of the attempted coups. He had to reassure Souvanna Phouma of U.S. support. He went over to Souvanna's house. He was not let in, but Souvanna was up on the balcony and Unger was outside of a fence talking at some 60 feet or so, sort of a Romeo and Juliet balcony scene, holding what in other cases would have been a confidential conversation.

I did go with Unger a couple of times when he talked with General Phoumi. Phoumi had one of the softest and least audible voices I have ever heard, or tried to take notes on. Ambassador Unger spent an awful lot of his time trying to keep Phoumi in line. Phoumi had hard liners on his side who thought they could take care of the situation militarily. It was some time before it was demonstrated that the Royal Lao Army was virtually worthless, and not much could be done with it.

Q: Did the events of the overthrow of Diem and all in October of '63 have any ripple effects?

MAYHEW: I don't recall. I think the two situations were going along in parallel, but not really connected with each other. I left in November of '63, shortly after President Kennedy was shot. In fact, farewell parties that had been arranged for me were canceled because of the assassination. I think it was about a week after the funeral that I left Laos. I've been back to Laos, but only for very brief periods since.

Q: How about the role of the North Vietnamese at that time, how did we perceive it?

MAYHEW: I think we certainly perceived the North Vietnamese as being the counterpart to ourselves in support of their faction, that is the Pathet Lao. But also the Chinese had an important role. That was the time we were much concerned about a Chinese road that was being built from China. It went on for years and years. Partly, it seemed that the construction schedule depended upon the political events because it took so long to be built.

In those days we felt that the Chinese and the Vietnamese definitely had designs on Southeast

Asia. This is the time of the "Domino" theory, which, of course, was really the reason that we were in Laos at all. We were fearful that all of Southeast Asia was going to become communist. This was a time when we had more respect, I think, for the possibilities of guerrilla warfare than we do now. Laos certainly was inherently unstable. It's almost born to be a buffer state. The North Vietnamese from their point of view needed it for what became later called the Ho Chi Minh trail. Also, they saw themselves as the natural inheritors of the French in Indochina, if not of all Southeast Asia, certainly Indochina -- to recall that era now is to underline the immense differences.

Q: Any love between the Lao and the North Vietnamese?

MAYHEW: Culturally, and in other ways, they're very different. But the Lao don't seem to have animus for the Vietnamese. The Cambodians and the Thais do. Lao, I think, basically like to be left alone and that's always been very difficult because they're always a tempting target for someone.

GERARD M. GERT
Public Affairs Officer, USIS
Vientiane (1962-1965)

Gerard M. Gert was born in Danzig, Germany in 1920. He joined the State Department in 1949 and served in Germany, Yugoslavia, Laos, Vietnam, and Washington, DC. Mr. Gert was interviewed by G. Lewis Schmidt in 1988.

GERT: From Yugoslavia, I got a direct transfer to Laos. After two years in Yugoslavia, this was 1962. Walter [Roberts] wasn't very happy because he didn't think I should leave. I'd spent a lot of time in language study. I said, "It's all right with me. I have a chance to be a Public Affairs Officer (PAO) there. I'll go to Laos."

So direct transfer to Laos, 1962. It was a little strange for a guy who had a European background and knew nothing about the Far East. I got on a Pan American plane and wound up in Bangkok, where it was hot as hell. As I got off the plane and walked down the gangplank, there was a guy at the bottom who said, "You're Gerry Gert!"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Remember me?"

I said, "For God's sakes, of course. Phil Damon. I remember you from Germany." I knew him in 1946 or '47, when we'd both been in Public Safety. I'd been in De-Nazification, and he had been in criminal investigation in Wiesbaden. It turned out that when the PAO in Bangkok heard that Gerry Gert was coming, he was going to send somebody out to the airport, and the only guy who ever heard of Gerry Gert was Phil Damon.

Q: Who was the PAO? Was that Howard Garnish?

GERT: Howard Garnish. Very nice guy. Phil picked me up at the airport, first familiar face. Everything was unfamiliar. I spent two days in Bangkok and got myself some white suits and tried to get used to that heat.

Then I flew off to that strange place, Laos. Well, that was quite an experience. I really knew nothing about the place, language, or anything. A fairly large staff. I forget what we were, 20 some-odd people with more than a half million dollar budget. I didn't do too well. I wasn't satisfied with my own performance. I think this was the low point of my whole career, because I didn't know what was going on, frankly. This was a very complicated place. The war was on. There was fighting between the royalist troops and the Pathet Lao, the communist forces. The CIA was deeply involved in arming and directing the famous MEO, the mountain people. We were also, later on, bombing places in northern Laos, and ambassadors got involved in targeting. By now this is all out in the open; then it was a big deep secret.

My relations with the ambassador were not good.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

GERT: Leonard Unger, a very decent man.

Q: He was my ambassador later in Thailand.

GERT: The same guy, of course. Leonard was okay, nothing wrong. He was partially right, but he was also being egged on by a very nasty DCM. A DCM, as you know, can make the life of a PAO pretty miserable. This guy didn't feel that I gave him enough obedience or whatever. Phil Chadbourn was his name. Phil didn't like my performance, and he would whisper to the ambassador that Gerry Gert was no good. So the ambassador must have written a confidential letter to Ed Murrow.

I went on home leave in 1963 and went to see Ed Murrow and Don Wilson. Don, as we know, had a bad reputation, but I must say Don was very nice to me, had never seen me before, and Ed Murrow was just wonderful. We had a great talk, the three of us, in Ed's office. Ed said, "The ambassador's not satisfied with you, but you have a good record. You don't have to go back to Laos if you don't want to. We'll get you another job some- where. But if you want to, you can go back. I'll support you."

I said, "That's a challenge. I'll go back." I had a heart-to-heart with the ambassador. And things worked out fine. From then on, things were okay.

Shortly thereafter, Unger left and Bill Sullivan became ambassador. Much more important, the DCM left, and a wonderful guy named Coby Swank became DCM. With him it was just one big love affair, life became pleasant, and everything changed. My relations with Sullivan, the ambassador, and Coby Swank were perfect, and I enjoyed my tour.

I got very high recommendations from these guys, and I was picked by the Agency in 1965 to attend one of the service schools. I was picked for the Army War College, which I really didn't want; I wanted to go to the National. Bill Sullivan wrote a letter to the Secretary, and somehow or other they managed to get me into the National War College.

Q: Let me ask a couple of questions before you leave Laos. What do you think you were able to do in Laos? What kind of a program were you attempting to put out in that country, which wasn't very high in literacy and otherwise had a lot of difficulties?

GERT: You're absolutely right. I think there was a lot of commitment on the part of USIS. We wanted to show the State Department, we wanted to show the Defense Department we were in there. Actually, we couldn't accomplish much at all. Let me give you an example. My first trip was to Luang Prabang, the royal capital, where we had a branch post. A nice guy, Jim Decou, was branch PAO. I looked at the PAO office and the building, and downstairs there was a small library. I walked in to see what kind of books were being read. Very few of the books had ever been taken out. But what struck me as I looked at the shelf was that they had red and green dots on these books. I had heard of the Dewey decimal system, or the Library of Congress system of organizing books. What's with these red and green dots? The librarian said, "The red dots are for French books, and the green dots are for English books." And that was our library. They had a few books in Thai and a very few in Lao.

What else? One thing that was good was the Lao-American Association where people could study English. That was quite good, a good effort, and I'd like to come back and talk about a wonderful person in that outfit. We had a cultural program, we sent some people to the States, but the cultures were so far removed from each other that there was danger that if they got too Westernized, too Americanized, they would find no place in Lao society.

Information? We were busy. We showed films, we had mobile film units going into the boonies, putting up generators and projectors and screens. I remember going to one of those, a place we had never been before, and I went along with the mobile unit. There were people who kept coming behind the screen because they wanted to know what was going on there. They thought these were shadow plays and there were people actually performing.

Q: What was the subject matter of the films?

GERT: We showed them the regular USIS catalog. It was hard to find something that really had any relation.

Q: You didn't have any film production capacity in Laos?

GERT: By now we did, yes. That was good. Thank you for bringing that up. That's one of the best things we did. We ought to give credit for this. This happened within the period of Hank Miller, my predecessor, "Big Hank." Whoever came up with the thought, we used the Lao technique of telling stories in sing-song. It was almost like Chinese opera. There's a moral, and the moral, of course, that we worked in was that the communists are no good. Straightforward. We would dress this up in Lao historical costumes with sing-songs and plays, and this was

performed not as a one-time performance, but we did this on film, so we could then ship the films around the country. These were sort of morality plays. That, I think, was one of the most effective things we did in the country. There was even a special name for that: Mohlam.

We had a fine film unit, with a wonderful Danish American, Bonnesen was his name.

Q: Niels Bonnesen.

GERT: Niels Bonnesen! Right.

Q: He's dead now. A wonderful guy.

GERT: Yes, long dead.

Q: The great Dane. (Laughs)

GERT: Right. A big man. Poor guy died of emphysema. He smoked too much. He ran this unit. As a matter of fact, because Bonnesen was a Dane, focused on Hans Christian Anderson tales. Bonnesen took some old fairy tales, and we transferred these into local stories. All the Danish characters became Lao. The action took place in Laos and we put these on film and used them in the countryside. We had a whole troupe on the payroll of singers and dancers, maybe a dozen people, with instruments, traditional local instruments. I think that was the best thing we did in the country. It cost money, but money at that time seemed to be no object. Talking about money being no object, is not quite true, because USIA never has any money.

In this struggle, in the war, USIS came up with the idea at a country team meeting that we should drop safe-conduct passes on the Pathet Lao suggesting that they give themselves up. I must say by word of explanation that I had been a reserve officer in psychological warfare, and this is one reason why I volunteered for Vietnam, but that's a later story. As a reserve officer, I had to do correspondence courses while I was in USIS, even in Vietnam. Somewhere in my textbooks, I found a safe-conduct pass signed by Eisenhower in World War II, which gave me the format. I prepared the same thing for the Lao situation in Lao, Vietnamese, French, and English, which in effect said, "If you surrender, you are going to be treated well." This was to be signed by the Royal Lao Army Command.

I brought this to a country team meeting and showed this pass and told everybody around the table, "Wouldn't this be a nice idea if we could drop these in areas?"

The ambassador said, "Great idea! Let's do it."

Q: Was this Sullivan?

GERT: This was Sullivan, yes. Sullivan said, "This is a great idea, Gerry, why don't you do it?"

I said, "I have no money. The only person around this table who's got money is Charlie Mann, Director AID." Charlie, by the way, later on became Director of AID in Vietnam, where I saw

him again. Charlie is now living in Florida and has had a bad stroke.

So these were some of the projects we did in Laos. The ambassador then encouraged Charlie to pay for it, and AID then printed these. We had the Lao Air Force drop these leaflets over the Pathet Lao contested areas.

Q: Did you get much response from these?

GERT: I don't really know. As you know, in Vietnam we had the famous Chieu Hoi program, where we claimed 85,000 people came in. With or without the leaflet, I don't know. But in Laos, I can't really come up with any figures if anybody showed up. The fighting there, of course, was far away, and on a much smaller scale.

What else can I tell you about Laos? What else did we do? We put out daily bulletins, too, in Lao, very short because we didn't have much of a capability. It's interesting that among the local staff in Laos, I believe we only had two Lao working for us, and the highest ranking Lao was the man in charge of the motor pool. The others were all third country nationals, Filipinos, many Thais. The majority were Thais.

Q: The language is very similar, of course.

GERT: Right, particularly northeast. But the Lao just never had the level where they could come in and get these jobs. As we once said at a PAO meeting that we had in that area, when my colleague from Cambodia said the Cambodians suffer from an inferiority complex as compared to the Vietnamese and Thai, I got up and said, "Well my people in Laos, we don't have an inferiority complex. We are inferior to the rest of you guys," which is not nice to say to the Lao, but that's the way I often felt about that place. There was just so little to work with.

In my time there, we had a couple of *coups d'etats*, and the right faction throwing out the middle-of-the-road faction. During one *coup d'etat*, I was going to the office, driving the PAO car; I got stopped by a man with a gun, a little Lao soldier with a big gun. He made me get out of the car. I saw such a look of hatred in his eyes, I've never seen that anywhere else. To me that was very surprising, because the Lao had been so gentle and charming and loving and full of dance, and here was this guy with this look, that if I'd made the wrong move, he would have killed me. He would have just shot. It shocked me a little bit to see how these people can, at the drop of a hat, change. That's where you get your "Killing Fields" in Cambodia, another very gentle, lovely people. It's so strange to me that the peoples of Southeast Asia can be so cruel, as we know from [the movie] "Killing Fields."

I wanted to come back to something I said before about our Lao-American Association. They taught English, which I thought was an important project. I attended classes, and the Lao learned little in a relatively long time. There were people who studied semester after semester, and they still couldn't carry on a conversation in English because it was just slow.

When I was on home leave, I was told by Elizabeth Hopkins, who handled the Binational Centers, that she had a candidate for director of the Lao-American Association, but she was not

sure that the person, a woman over 60, could do the job. Would I, as PAO, look her over, and if I would say she was acceptable, they would hire her.

I went to New York to look up this "old" lady. She turned out to be a perfectly delightful, wonderful woman. She had been dean of students at the roughest school in America, New York City College, and she had just the right background. I said, "She is fine. She is right." Her name was Mrs. Wright. Ruth Wright then became our director. She did a wonderful job. Ruth Wright is still alive, although very, very old, and is now in Sun City.

Bert Potts, who did a fine job, was our Cultural Affairs Officer(CAO) for quite some time. We had Bob Krill as press attaché, who did a fair job. We had Harry Mannville succeed Bert Potts. Isabelle Thomas, who lives in Grass Valley in California, was assistant CAO. Ivan Klecka was field operations. And Perry Stieglitz was CAO for a long time. Perry, of course, married Princess Moun, the daughter of Souvanna Phouma, the neutralist premier.

Q: I see Perry very frequently.

GERT: A very colorful guy.

Q: Perry is one of the homeliest, but one of the nicest men I have ever known.

GERT: He's homely, but he has such a good voice and he's got such wonderful energy, great energy.

So that was Laos. Of course, we always had to acknowledge that our lifeline went right to Bangkok, and we have to thank our PAOs in Bangkok for many things, because we couldn't get paper or pencils if we didn't have the lifeline into Bangkok and the executive officer, and we had a fine relationship with Jack Zeller and Otto Strohmenger before that.

Q: I don't know who preceded Jack.

GERT: Howard Garnish was fine, and Jack O'Brien, of course, was a wonderful guy, a good friend of mine.

I don't know what else I can tell you about Laos. Do you have any questions?

Q: I've asked the questions I wanted to ask about Laos, so let's go on to the next assignment.

PAUL D. HARKINS
Military Assistance Command
Vietnam (1962-1964)

General Paul D. Harkins was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1904. He graduated from West Point in 1929 and served in World War II, the Korean War

and Vietnam where he held the Military Assistance command. General Harkins was interviewed by Ted Gittinger in 1981.

Q: Oh, Hilsman. Well, we'll come to him I hope. How did you regard that settlement in Laos at the time?

HARKINS: I sort of felt that they were making it more difficult for us, because here was a communist country on the border of one we didn't want to be communist.

Q: Of course, they were not saying it was communist. They said it was -

HARKINS: No but it was run by two communists, one who didn't have much to say. He was sort of a figurehead. I think there were two brothers. I think they were cousins, but they were related, yes.

Q: Let me ask you to talk about the relations within the American country team in Saigon. How were your relations with Ambassador [Frederick] Nolting, for example?

HARKINS: Absolutely perfect. He was one of the best I've ever seen and ever dealt with.

Q: Tell me about him.

HARKINS: Well, he's just my type of man. He is a very fine ambassador. He went out with me on most of my trips. He got around the country. He was entirely different from [Henry Cabot] Lodge. Nolting would get out and see what was going on throughout the country, and when Lodge came over, he said everything that happens in Vietnam happens in Saigon, so he never left. When we'd go on trips, Nolting and I and Diem would probably go together in a helicopter or a plane, and when Lodge got there, I was always with Diem and he was in the second plane, and he didn't like that at all. And he didn't like going around one bit. He was a loner. Well, I can't say all I want to say about him.

Q: That's another thing I want to come back to. How did Ambassador Nolting get along with Diem?

HARKINS: Fine.

Q: Would you [say] more or less like you?

HARKINS: Yes. Every time he went he asked me to go with him, and every time I went I'd ask him to go with me. But sometimes we could get together and go or sometimes we'd just go alone. But we always reported to each other what the conversation was and what we were going to talk about with Diem.

Q: When did Diem's problems begin in your opinion?

HARKINS: In the Laos -

Q: *In the spring of 1962?*

HARKINS: Yes. When they put the communist government into Laos.

Q: *Could you be more specific? How did this begin Diem's long, slow decline?*

HARKINS: Well, that's when Harriman told him he couldn't pull the ambassador out of Vientiane, but he did. And then the State Department just didn't like that.

Q: *I see.*

HARKINS: From then on they weren't very favored toward Diem.

Q: *Some people who have written on this subject could make a good deal of State Department versus Defense Department attitude. Is that a good way to put it?*

HARKINS: Yes. I think that's true. We were trying to save Diem and build up their army, and they were trying to get rid of Diem and that's what caused the attempted coup in August.

Q: *I see. Of course, the problem as it was reported begins with the troubles between Diem and the Buddhists, as they were called, although of course they weren't all Buddhists. What were the sources of discontent in the country with Diem?*

HARKINS: Well, it's hard to say, because actually in the five-year plan, not only in building canals and roads and airfields, Diem, who was a Catholic of course - there were seventeen people in his cabinet and there were only three Catholics in the cabinet; Vice President [Nguyen Ngoc] Tho was a Buddhist and all the others were Buddhists -

Q: *Did the cabinet have much power, however?*

HARKINS: -and he built as many pagodas as he did churches, but they were also infiltrated from the North. I mean, at least they were brainwashed, and they started these things about raiding pagodas and things like that. Then the press got on it, particularly led by this guy [David] Halberstam from the New York Times. If you ever look up the press reports in those days, you'll find Halberstam would write them and then hand out the circulars to all the other press guys and they'd actually put in the same thing, change a few words here and there. But Halberstam was a Jew, and he didn't like Diem. He was on the side to get rid of Diem and they wrote about "Thirty bonzes killed in a raid on a pagoda." Well, there were no bonzes killed in any raid on any pagoda all the time I was there.

Q: *Is that a fact?*

HARKINS: And they talked about Buddhist battalions fighting Catholic battalions. Well, there weren't any Buddhist battalions, as such, to fight Catholic battalions as such. And those are the reports you get back here.

Q: Still, there seems to have been a lot of popular unrest in Hue, for example, in that summer, led by people like Thich Tri Quang, I believe.

HARKINS: He was a Buddhist, and his brother was a communist up in North Vietnam. I think he was a press man, as a matter of fact. And again, it's a matter of brainwashing and causing this upset and another plot to get rid of Diem. And the Buddhists - they just blow everything way out of importance, as far as I'm concerned. As a matter of fact, I guess when I talked with General [Le Van] Ty who was there - he died as a matter of fact while I was there; he was the head guy of the Vietnamese Army, T-Y-I asked him about the Buddhist things. He said, "Well, when the French took a census when they first came over there, they'd go into the religious [question] and ask the people what they were. Well, actually, they were ancestor worshipers. They worshiped their ancestors. They lived and died in the same place their ancestors did. Well, that wasn't a religion to the French, so they said, 'Okay, you're a Buddhist.'" So they named 90 percent of the people Buddhists, and they weren't really, truly Buddhists.

Q: How many practicing Buddhists do you think there were, perhaps, in the country? Is there any way to tell?

HARKINS: Ty said there's probably about - I forget the population, but it was I think seventeen million in the whole country. And he said probably about 30 per cent.

Q: And how many Catholics?

HARKINS: About 10 per cent.

Q: About 10 per cent. Now, in the summer of 1963, things began to come apart, it seems. Can you tell me what was your view of how that happened, what the progression of events was?

HARKINS: Well, this is the Harriman-Hilsman thing. They sent a telegram. The CIA had been working with the generals, led by Big Minh, for the overthrow of Diem.

Q: Was that Richardson's boys?

HARKINS: I think he had gone with Nolting.

Q: Well, Richardson left about October, I think, early October of 1963.

HARKINS: Well, I guess it was still him then. But his people had been working with the State Department and the CIA to get the generals, telling them that if they overthrew Diem, we'd back them.

Q: I thought Richardson was pro-Diem. Or is that a mistake?

HARKINS: He was.

Q: *He was?*

HARKINS: But he went along with the new regime of Harriman-Hilsman to get rid of Diem. So they sent a telegram to have somebody contact the generals and tell them what they would do if they overthrew Diem.

Q: *Was this the famous August 24 [1963] telegram?*

HARKINS: Yes. Twenty-third or -fourth. So they nominated this guy named [Lucien] Conein - CIA man - and Conein went up to see Big Minh, and through [Tran Thien] Khiem, K-H-I-E-M, who I think was chief of staff at that time, Big Minh said, "No, I don't want to see him. I want to see somebody in authority." So Mr. Lodge, who found out that Big Minh wouldn't see Conein, immediately sent back word to the State Department and in a flash message, I think. So the message came back and said, "Well, have General Harkins see him." So I was dragged into it and told what was going on. I got hold of Khiem and asked him to come down to my office. I didn't want to go out to see him at his place, because he had been G3 and we had worked on different things before. So he came down to the office and I just saw him all by myself and told him what I was going to propose. And he said, "Well, I'll let you know." I said, "If Big Minh is ready, let me know." Well, he got the word back from Big Minh, he said, "They're not ready. The generals weren't ready." So when I had to report that to Lodge, that ended that right there. Big Minh said the generals weren't ready. Well, as a matter of fact, they weren't.

Q: *What was holding them up?*

HARKINS: Well, they didn't have everything organized. There were about twelve of them that would go along with the generals, and the others were on the fence, particularly [General Nguyen] Khanh, who headed the First Corps up in the north. He was not in on it at all. Then when they finally took over in November when they killed Diem, there were thirteen generals on the committee, and you just can't run a country by a committee. It doesn't work. And it didn't work. I mean, the strategic hamlet program collapsed, the officers in the field, the corps commanders, didn't know whether they were going to stay on, whether they were going to hold their jobs or whether the generals would change them. Some of them came running in to me to see what should they do. Like [General Van Thanh] Cao down in My Tho came up to see me. He was not put in house arrest or anything, he wasn't in on the thing. He was one of the generals, but he didn't go along with it. He said, "What'll I do?" I said, "You better hold your job as long as you can." And Khanh didn't come in at all until the twenty-eighth of January when he sent word to me that he was growing a beard and he wasn't going to shave it off until he took over.

Q: *That's another thing I want to come back to. To back up for just a second, as I recall there were of course many fact-finding visits by various people in Washington. I had two hundred and fifty a month. One of the things I was going to ask was how you ever got any work done, but -*

HARKINS: I'd just go out.

Q: *One in particular that sticks in my mind was made by General [Victor] Krulak and Mr. [Joseph A.] Mendenhall. Do you remember that one specifically?*

HARKINS: Yes, very well. Krulak went all over the country. I gave him a plane and he went every place. He talked to advisers. Mendenhall stayed in Saigon.

Q: *Who did he talk to?*

HARKINS: He talked to the Ambassador, the staff there in the embassy. That's when they went back and reportedly the President asked if they had visited the same country.

Q: *That's a famous story. I suppose General Krulak talked to you?*

HARKINS: Oh, yes, very much so.

Q: *Now, later, just a few weeks after that visit, General Taylor and Secretary McNamara visited. This may have been the third time they came in tandem, I lose count. This was the visit, as I recall, that resulted in a selective suspension of aid to Diem.*

HARKINS: That's right. Unless he did certain things.

Q: *Right. Certain reforms were carried out and so on. Hadn't we told the generals earlier that a suspension of aid should be regarded as a signal?*

HARKINS: Not that I know of.

Q: *I'd read that, I think, in the Pentagon Papers, that we had told the generals that this was our signal that we were ready.*

HARKINS: It could have fit in very well, because soon after they made that announcement General Don came to see me and said; "We'll have a¹ new president - " This is on the twenty-eighth of October, I think. He said, "We'll have a new president by Saturday."

Q: *Did you believe him?*

HARKINS: I sent the message back to Washington, and I said, "This is what Don says." And they had the coup. Admiral [Harry D.] Felt was there - was it the first or the second?

Q: *He had just left, I think, when the coup took place.*

HARKINS: No, because the coup was on when he was there.

Q: *Oh, it was? I see.*

HARKINS: And they kept the airfield open until his plane took off.

Q: *Oh, my.*

HARKINS: And I got a message to him in the air. I said, "The airfield's closed. Don't try to come

back because they're having a coup." That was a Saturday and I was home for lunch, and all hell broke out because I lived near the palace. The soldiers had gone through my place, the people on the roof of the palace were shooting down at the soldiers in the streets and several of the bullets coming into my house, in the front yard, particularly.

Q: Was Mrs. Nolting still there?

HARKINS: No, Nolting wasn't there. Lodge was there, though. I came home to see if Mrs. Harkins was all right. I called her first, and we had big concrete archways downstairs, and I said, "Just get under one of those archways and stay there until I get there." And I had a hard time getting home, because the troops were going to attack the palace, which is right close to where I lived. I got back and then I went to the office and found out that Diem had escaped. He and his brother Nhu had gone out through, I don't know, some tunnel and ended up in Cholon.

Q: I've heard that that tunnel story was not true, that they simply walked out. Do you know for sure?

HARKINS: I think they had a secret passage.

Q: You think so?

HARKINS: Yes. To get away. Now, where it came out, I don't know. But when Khanh had taken over and I went through the palace with him and he took me to a stairway that led down, he said, "This is how Diem and Nhu got out." And it was so far down, I didn't want to go down to walk up the thing. It really went down to the depths.

Q: Were you able to keep track very well of what was going on during the coup?

HARKINS: At that time, yes. Well, yes, I saw Big Minh all the time, and I saw Don. I saw Khiem, and when we went out to visit the country, I mean, I always rode with Big Minh. And there was Khiem and Don usually in the same helicopter with me. It was a French helicopter, one of their own. So I kept right alongside them all the time. But the Buddhists rose up again and the VC took advantage. They'd been trying to get rid of Diem ever since 1954, and it took about one day to do what the Viet Cong had been trying to do for six years.

Q: I've heard it speculated by some fairly knowledgeable people that the-coup caught the VC by surprise -

HARKINS: By surprise, Absolutely.

Q: -and stole a lot of their thunder for a time. They weren't quite sure how to handle that.

HARKINS: That's right. But then when they realized what had happened, they rose up in the villages and said, "Tear these hamlets down and pull down the fences," because we had put barbed wire around most of the strategic hamlets. They cut all the wire up, filled in the ditches and everything else.

Q: *Do you know why Richardson was sent home?*

HARKINS: No, I don't.

Q: *I've heard it speculated that this was supposed to be a signal.*

HARKINS: I imagine he wasn't getting along with Lodge. They didn't see eye-to-eye. He was a very close friend of Nhu's, Richardson. I didn't know Nhu too well. I had met with him once or twice. I met with him with General Taylor one day. I had a French interpreter, a young colonel, with me and we went along together. Nhu was talking French and General Taylor was an expert in French, you know, and in order to get out he turned to the interpreter and said, "What is he talking about?"

Q: *Really?*

HARKINS: And he said, "That French is something I haven't heard before." And the interpreter said, "Well, I didn't understand part of it either." And I don't know what it could have been, because I couldn't understand it.

Q: *You don't know the explanation for that?*

HARKINS: No.

Q: *At one time the State Department was pushing the line, I think, that if Diem would get rid of Nhu, that they would settle for that.*

HARKINS: I think so. I think that was the beginning. When Madame Nhu left the country, they probably - blood is thicker than water, you know, and Nhu and Diem were brothers and Diem wouldn't get rid of him. Now, what they could have done easily, and I think for probably all intents and purposes was to put Diem in house confinement with his brother in Dalat. But it didn't work out that way, because this young captain who finally captured them out at Cholon shot them.

Q: *I was going to ask you if you knew who pulled the trigger and who gave the order.*

HARKINS: I don't think anybody gave the order. I don't think he was supposed to, but he had them and had their hands tied behind their back in this half-track and just put a bullet right through their heads.

Q: *I've heard a lot of speculation - have you read Tran Van Don's book? It's not very old, I think.*

HARKINS: No.

Q: *He says Xuan gave the order, Mai Huu Xuan was the hatchet man on that job. Mai Huu Xuan. He was, I think, chief of security for Minh. But he thinks Minh gave the order and Xuan had them*

executed.

HARKINS: I don't know. I hadn't heard about Xuan.

Q: Well, it's just one of many versions, because I think -

HARKINS: I don't think that Minh would have them shot. I really feel in my own heart that I don't think he would.

Q: What was the reaction of Americans in Saigon to the coup? I guess it was mixed.

HARKINS: Mixed. I think the embassy and the CIA now - that's another thing. When everything settled after the twenty-third of August attempt, they took off military law and things were going along pretty well again for a while. Then in Lodge's book, now, I was supposed to be very close working with the Ambassador, and I did with Nolting. But he said that he worked with CIA, and this guy Conein again contacted the generals without informing me. That's true, because I didn't know it, but he'd been working with CIA and this man Conein, other generals had, until the twenty-eighth of October when Don came in and told me that they were going to change the government. Later on I found out that they had been working behind my back, which is not a very good way to run the country team.

Q: I've seen you quoted - I don't know whether it was accurately or not - on October 30 making a very optimistic prognosis for the war and the general situation in Vietnam, or maybe it was October 31. It was very close to the coup, a day or two before. Were you quoted accurately?

HARKINS: I don't think so. I don't remember the quote.

Q: Well, I have a copy of it here.

HARKINS: I felt that way, and I so reported to Taylor and McNamara and as a matter of fact, Mr. McNamara said, "Well, get ready to bring a thousand American troops home." And we started working on that right away.

Q: Well, what I would like you to comment on is if you knew that there was a coup in the offing, didn't that affect your optimism in any way?

HARKINS: No, not particularly, because I think things in the country, all over the country, were going in our favor at that time. The army was taking over and we had built up the CIDG, the Civil Defense [Civilian Irregular Defense Group], and the province troops, and they had things pretty well under control as a matter of fact at that time.

Q: Now Lodge, I think, reported a couple of months after the coup when things began to slide downhill, when it became obvious that the military situation was turning around, that in fact the security situation had been deteriorating since the previous spring or some such.

HARKINS: He didn't know anything about it. He never left Saigon.

Q: And he wasn't taking your advice on this kind of thing?

HARKINS: No, no. We didn't see eye-to-eye at all. I think if Nolting had stayed there, things would have been much different. But every time Lodge would stab me in the back he'd tell Mrs. Harkins how pretty she was.

Q: How much time did Ambassador Lodge spend at the Cercle Sportif?

HARKINS: Do you mean playing tennis?

Q: -And swimming. I've heard that he spent a lot of time there.

HARKINS: Oh, I think he probably went over in the afternoon every day. I don't know. I never went there, as a matter of fact. I wasn't a tennis player at the time. I didn't have time to, in the first place.

Q: Now, Diem's other brother, [Ngo Dinh Can], who was up in Hue, I think, that made quite a story, how he was handled. He was arrested and executed, I think, well after the coup, sometime after the coup. Did this case pose some special problems for you?

HARKINS: No. No, I don't remember the Can incident too well.

Q: Well, it was mainly a political thing.

HARKINS: There were so many people being done away with.

Q: Can you describe how all of this affected the military situation?

HARKINS: Well, as I say, the commanders didn't know who to turn to, and they didn't know whether they were going to keep their own jobs or whether they'd be colonels tomorrow, or the generals didn't know if they would be reduced in rank or if they'd be the next ones to go. And they were looking back towards Saigon for guidance, and guidance wasn't coming out of Saigon, because as I say, you can't get guidance from twelve guys who don't see eye-to-eye all the time. So that really they were looking for their own jobs and staying close to home and not getting out with the troops and seeing that the war was carried to the VC.

Q: Why didn't Minh assert himself and give direction to all of this?

HARKINS: I don't think he was that strong. I think he was a popular man, but I don't think his decisions were very good, and as a matter of fact, that's when General Khanh said, "We're not getting any guidance from Saigon and I'm just going to take over."

Q: Were you able to establish a good relationship with the new regime, the Minh regime?

HARKINS: Yes. I got along fine with them, because I knew them all, except one named Thien, I

think. He had been out of the country, and I didn't know him at all. But he was a pretty important guy.

Q: Can you give me some assessments of character of some of these guys? What was your assessment of Big Minh? That he was popular?

HARKINS: That he was popular, but as I say, he was not a decision-maker as far as knowing what to do in the country. Khiem was probably the strongest of them all. He was sort of the one that held them together as chief of staff.

WILLIAM W. THOMAS, JR.
Economic Development, USAID
Vientiane (1962-1964)

William W. Thomas, Jr. was born in 1925 and raised in North Carolina. He attended the University of North Carolina, where he majored in political science and international studies, but his attendance was interrupted by his enlistment in the U.S. Army in 1944. Mr. Thomas later returned to continue his studies as a graduate student. He entered the Foreign Service in 1952 and served in Thailand, Hong Kong, Cambodia, Laos, Taiwan, and China.

Q: After Ann Arbor in 1962, where did you go?

THOMAS: I went to Laos, to the AID mission.

Q: How did this come about?

THOMAS: Because I got assigned to Mali and didn't want to go. I thought Bamako was a terrible place and I was assigned there because they were short a French language economic officer. I wangled my way out of it. They were just reopening the AID mission in Laos and this was going to be a Kennedy-Khrushchev show place of how co-existence could work. It didn't happen that way.

Q: You were in Vientiane until...?

THOMAS: From 1962 to 1964.

Q: What was the political situation when you arrived?

THOMAS: Very uncertain. Within the first two or three weeks I was there, I went up to the Plain of Jars, the ruins up in the mountains, and met the number two man in the politburo. No one had met any of the Communists before. He was coming down to Vientiane for his first visit since co-existence had started. The Chinese Chargé came for his first visit to Vientiane. Things were very uncertain and they put a company of Lao troops outside our embassy, which we considered an

intrusion, but one we would put up with. It stayed that way until the Communists took over Vientiane. It was a very odd situation and had a lot of elements of instability. For example, we woke up one morning and there was machine gun fire in the back yard. I called the embassy and said, "There is machine gun fire in my back yard?" "Go and see what they are shooting at." Like a fool I went. I said, "Who are you shooting at?" They said, "General Lamka [ph]." I said, "Okay," and went back and called the embassy to tell them. They said, "Oh, we knew that." That made me rather irritated as I had risked my life for my country and they knew it already.

Q: What was this?

THOMAS: This was a coup d'etat attempt, one that you may have read about. Ambassador Unger went to the coup d'etat people and told them that something was wrong, there was no coup d'etat so forget it and come to a cocktail party. And they called it off. It was amazing to be successful in something like that. I was very pleased with him.

Q: What was AID doing at that time?

THOMAS: My job was financial adviser and stabilizing the kip, the local currency. It was a successful operation. Looking back on it, it was outrageously expensive and whether we got our money's worth or not is still a little difficult to see. But compared with Vietnam it was small potatoes.

Q: One has the feeling that Laos was always a crisis but things never seemed to collapse, at least from reading the papers.

THOMAS: If you are in total disarray already, you can't collapse. Things just kept on going. I got back years later and it wasn't as different as I had been led to believe. As you say, if there was always a crisis going on, maybe this was for our benefit.

Q: There were all these offensives on the Plain of Jars, etc. How seriously did we take these various troop operations?

THOMAS: Oh, for those involved they were quite serious. We were a hundred miles away. When things got closer to home...for example, they had a peculiar rite of shooting at the moon when there was an eclipse and the first time you hear this with howitzers going off in the middle of the night or at the end of the night, you take it seriously. And there were always things of this sort going on, even if it wasn't an eclipse of the moon, which you could predict at least.

Q: What was your impression of what we were doing with our aid there?

THOMAS: It was a very complex operation and I didn't know all of it even though I was in the AID mission. I was in the Center because the boss liked to keep his fingers on the money end of it. A lot of it had to do with supplying people in the mountains and trying to build up roads that didn't stay built very long. And building airstrips all over the country. That was very active but I had nothing to do with it.

Q: Were the Soviets involved?

THOMAS: The Soviets were there, but not very active. I am sure they watched us very carefully, but we didn't see much of them.

Q: In your dealing with the financial work, were you involved with allocating funds or help to one segment of the political spectrum as opposed to another?

THOMAS: It was fairly clear who were our friends and who were not. We did it through the Lao budget and people who were the friendly Lao anyway. Actually it was run by an old Corsican. He did it for the Laos government and saw that the right people got the money.

Q: It was known in government circles that CIA had very large operations, comparatively, going in Laos. Were you familiar with any of those?

THOMAS: I am not familiar with them although I knew they were there. I had other things to do.

Q: Did they sort of intrude? Did you find yourself saying, "Don't worry about that, we'll take care of that?"

THOMAS: No, it was a cooperative group. The people I dealt with were very helpful. I didn't feel I was in competition with them or anything like that. The ambassador had things under control.

Q: Could you talk a little about Leonard Unger as ambassador?

THOMAS: He was very active, very smooth, a great language man. By the time he got to Laos he was fluent in Thai and learned Lao very quickly, which is an extraordinary accomplishment I think. I have told you about his calling the Lao coup off, saying "You can't do this," and they saying, "Yes sir." I thought he ran a pretty good ship there.

Q: Was there any Chinese influence there? Were you able to use your Chinese at all?

THOMAS: I read the Chinese business people's newspaper from Thailand, but that was the only thing that was there. The Communist Chinese had a bookshop on the Plain of Jars which I visited once. They were there but generally kept out of sight.

Q: What was your impression of the Lao government?

THOMAS: Corrupt. They did what was necessary. We thought they ought to have a budget office but they wouldn't enlarge their budget office. What we thought was necessary and what they thought was necessary were quite different.

Q: You left there when?

THOMAS: In 1964.

Q: This was just when our real buildup was starting in Vietnam. Did what was happening in Vietnam intrude at all upon what you were about?

THOMAS: We watched it with great interest and it helped us to get funds. We had no funding trouble for our program which was about \$30 million a year.

Q: What about North Vietnamese? Were you aware of their presence?

THOMAS: There was a small North Vietnamese population, many of them Catholics, who had lived there for some time. Some of them came out after Dien Bien Phu with the French and just settled in Vientiane, the most convenient place they could get to. The North Vietnamese were there. They had a large embassy. When I first got there in 1962, the South Vietnamese still had an office there but they left at some point.

Q: When you left there in 1964, where did you think Laos was going at that time?

THOMAS: I thought more or less the same. It didn't look too much worse than it had before and actually didn't collapse until Vietnam did.

Q: It was always on the brink of collapsing and never really did, it seemed.

THOMAS: The same is true of Cambodia to a certain extent, except the Lao were actually shooting and the Cambodians weren't until somewhat later.

Q: Why don't we stop at this point and put on the tape where we should pick it up next time. Where did you go after Laos?

THOMAS: I went to the Taiwan desk in the State Department.

LEONARD UNGER
Chief of Mission
Vientiane (1962-1964)

Ambassador Leonard Unger received a bachelor's degree from Harvard University in 1939. He began his career as a geographer for the National Resources Planning Board, but was recruited in 1945 to assist with settling the post-war boundary issues in Europe. Ambassador Unger served as deputy chief of mission in Thailand, ambassador to Laos, Thailand, and Taiwan, and in Washington, DC as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1989.

UNGER: Yes. Vietnam was kind of on and off; the South was holding its own at that time, but the pressures from the North were beginning to be felt more and more. A grave defeat had

already been suffered at Dien Bien Phu.

In 1962, there was a new accord on Laos. There was an apprehension that Laos also was about to be swallowed up by the Communists. So there was a conference called with the British, the Russians, the Chinese, the French and ourselves. A new accord was worked out in 1962. Once that was worked out, the new neutral, tripartite Regime was set up, in which you had representation from the Far Left, the Far Right, and Souvanna Phouma in the center. At that point it was deemed important to start over with a "clean slate". I was sent from Bangkok, where I was DCM, directly to Laos, having been sworn in Bangkok, as Ambassador to Laos. (Almost always a new Ambassador is sworn in Washington where he gets his instructions before taking up a new assignment).

Q: In the first place, when you were in Thailand when the Kennedy Administration came in 1961, did you feel, just from your position as a Foreign Service officer there, a change in mood toward the area or not?

UNGER: Yes, I think so. There was less of a disposition to accept some of the attitudes that had been established and running by then for a fairly long period. The sort of black and white attitude of John Foster Dulles about how you can't have anything to do with the Communists; their intentions are invariably evil and aggressive. The only thing to do is to build up secure defenses and military arrangements, and work with the countries that are friendly to gear them to share the same anti-Communist attitude. (Some people referred to this as "pactitis.") In that particular area, the SEATO pact and ANZUS, and perhaps several others, were already in force.

This situation I think, in a way, was what led to the Laos settlement of 1962, which was intended to substitute a neutral solution for the dangerous East-West hostility which otherwise prevailed. Presumably, some of the initial discussions on this were between Khrushchev and Kennedy. When the new arrangement was worked out to provide for a neutral Laos, the idea was to wipe the slate clean, send in a new ambassador who was going to be there to work with not only his British and French, but also his Russian colleagues. (We Americans couldn't work with the Chinese because they wouldn't talk with us!) But we meant to try to make a success of this neutral solution, with the idea that Laos might lie as a buffer between western-oriented Thailand and Communist-oriented North Vietnam. It was also intended that a neutral Laos would not be used by North Vietnam to infiltrate troops into South Vietnam.

In Cambodia, you had kind of a neutral position of Sihanouk. If you could have a similar neutral position in Laos, perhaps you could isolate and insulate the Communists who were in charge in North Vietnam, and also the Chinese, particularly from Thailand. And Thailand could continue its existing western orientation.

Q: Did the nomination come as a surprise to you? Had anybody talked to you before about it or prepared you for it?

UNGER: I knew it might be in prospect because I knew about the Geneva Conference; I knew it was going to be necessary to appoint somebody to Laos. And several of the people who had come through Bangkok, had been working in Geneva with Harriman, who was our principle

negotiator there.

Q: He was then Assistant Secretary for the Far East.

UNGER: Yes, which was an interesting job for him to accept because with his standing he could have aspired to be Secretary of State.

Q: Or President.

UNGER: Or President. He was so interested, and so determined, to work something out on Southeast Asia. He was very much opposed to the Dulles policies. He totally disapproved of them and felt that we had made a lot of mistakes. And I suppose he was sure he could work out a better solution, partly because of his experience in the Soviet Union, his contacts with the Russians, and his considerable exposure to the European point of view, the British, but others as well. For example, he was our first Marshall Plan administrator. He had a feeling that Dulles had made a botch of our whole East Asian policy, including Laos. He was not very sympathetic to the Thai but he knew that they were Allies and he had to work with them. But he was especially intent on making this compromise on Laos work.

I don't know who it was that had mentioned my name to him -- it may have been Bill Sullivan who was working very closely with him at the time. (I had known Bill when he was my assistant in Naples.) It may have been Bill, knowing that I knew the story out there reasonably well, from the experience I already had in Bangkok. There were two people -- we used to call them the "Gold Dust Twins" -- Bill Sullivan and Michael Forrestal, James Forrestal's son -- both of whom were working to find solutions for the critical problems in this part of the world. Both of them were very much trusted lieutenants of Harriman, and I'm sure that they gave him advice about ambassadorial appointments and all kinds of other things as well. It may have been that they had something to do with that appointment.

Q: Did you get any instructions before going? Did Harriman take you to one side and tell you what he wanted?

UNGER: Oh, absolutely. He couldn't do it in Washington until several months had gone by. I didn't get back to Washington initially, and as I said, I was sworn in out there in Bangkok which was quite unusual. But the idea was to get me on the ground right away. The idea was also for me to get acquainted with my Russian opposite number and establish an effective working relationship with him. There was no pretense that we would agree on everything, by any means, but at least we should talk and look for a way to live together. Everything I did should be very loyally in support of this compromise solution for Laos, with a government that was made up of representatives from Far Right, Far Left and Center, with Souvanna Phouma in charge and coming from the Center.

My job was to do everything that I could to make Souvanna Phouma's Administration a success and constructive, also from a U.S. point of view.

Q: Who was the Russian ambassador at that time?

UNGER: Oh, boy. [Laughter]

Q: Well, how did you get along with him?

UNGER: Quite well. We saw a fair amount of each other and we talked pretty frankly. Actually, I was introduced to him in Geneva when all of these arrangements were still being worked out. (You know, there was the Conference in Geneva, the Second Geneva Conference, in '62). While I was still stationed in Bangkok I returned for a consultation in Washington; at that time I was DCM to Kenneth Young, who had taken over as Ambassador from Alex Johnson.

Harriman asked me to come to Geneva where the Second Geneva Accords were still being negotiated. He introduced me at that time to Souvanna Phouma and various other people from Laos. And one day, when we were there in Geneva, he and his Russian counterpart (Pushkin, I believe) got together; Pushkin pulled an individual over, who up to that point was unknown to me, and Harriman pulled me over and put the two of us together to shake hands. He was going to be my Russian colleague in Vientiane when I took over as ambassador.

The idea was that, however we had to do it, we were going to make the accords that were then being worked on in Geneva -- and were almost ready to be signed -- function successfully; those were the accords that were going to neutralize Laos. They were going to provide for the withdrawal of all foreign forces. They would (I think, in the accords themselves) develop this idea of installing a coalition government which would represent all shades of Lao opinion, all the way from the Far Right to the Far Left. They would establish an ICC, International Control Commission, with an Indian chairman and a Canadian and a Polish associate. The ICC would be there to be sure that the Geneva Accords were properly carried out. That neither we, nor the Russians, nor the Thai, nor the Vietnamese nor anybody else, would trespass on the provisions of the Accord.

Q: What control did the Soviet man have over the Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese, for example?

UNGER: Considerable control. I'm not sure my memory will tell me exactly to what extent the North Vietnamese, at that point, were dependent on Soviet aid, but probably to a considerable degree. I'm sure the Chinese were involved in it as well, but the Chinese didn't have a great deal of resources to spare at that point. In other words, roughly speaking, the Soviet role in North Vietnam was like the American role in South Vietnam.

When I got to Laos, and when I was able to assess the situation and learn more directly what was going on, I discovered what the whole world has known about ever since, that the North Vietnamese, who were not able to penetrate South Vietnam directly, were using Laos as a route of passage for men and material. The idea was to try to prevent that from taking place. In other words, there were caravans moving across into Laos, from North Vietnam, traveling down the eastern edge of Laos, and then moving back into areas in South Vietnam that the Communists controlled. This, of course, was the central issue. It meant that the neutralization of Laos -- which Western countries including the United States, and Thailand also, had all favored in the

expectation that it would cut the North Vietnamese supply route off from supplying their forces attacking South Vietnam -- obviously was not being achieved.

Q: We'll come back to that. How did you deal with the government of Laos? Was it really you and the Soviets talking things over with the three Princes? How did this work?

UNGER: We dealt almost always directly and officially with Souvanna Phouma. The Soviets were in very close touch, as were the North Vietnamese, with the left wing of the coalition government, Prince Souphanouvong, a half brother of Prince Souvanna Phouma, was the leader of that wing. Actually Souphanouvong was the front man for the left wing; the real figures were just the same people that we keep hearing about who are now heading the government in Laos, Nouhak and Kaysone. But at that time, they were in Hanoi or Sam Neua province of Laos (on the Vietnam border) most of the time and were not visible in Vientiane.

Their instruments were available in the government in various roles. For example, Phoumi Vongvichit and various other people, who were associated with Prince Souphanouvong and the left wing, were in ministerial and other positions.

The right-wing certainly had definite ties with the Thais and with us; Phoumi Nosavan was the most active figure there, but the nominal head of the right-wing was Prince Boun Oum.

So you had three princes: Boun Oum on the right, Prince Souphanouvong on the left and Prince Souvanna Phouma in the middle.

Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong were half brothers; I believe they both had the same father.

Q: With Souvanna Phouma, did you have much to do with him?

UNGER: Oh, sure; he was my principal contact.

Q: How was he to deal with?

UNGER: He was, by and large satisfactory, but he had a very tough row to hoe. There were all kinds of things that were happening in Laos that were not pleasing to Western powers, to the Thai, to the U.S. Government, et cetera. But I had to recognize what a difficult task he had, and I had to recognize that, above all, we wanted to preserve this tripartite, neutral government. This was our policy and we believed this was our best hope of getting Laos through a very difficult situation and preserve it as a neutral country. So there were many things, including many things that Washington wanted me to do, that I didn't feel I could do or that Souvanna Phouma would say, "No, I can't" or "you shouldn't." I was on the telephone with Bill Bundy, sometimes almost everyday (usually in the middle of the night in Laos), just trying to work out all kinds of critical issues.

The Thai were very impatient with Souvanna Phouma -- their man was Boun Oum -- because they felt that Souvanna Phouma was playing into the hands of the Communists and not doing the

things that they considered important, or right.

Q: Were you directing or being involved with American Military or CIA operations? Again, this is an unclassified interview. But a lot of time has gone and a lot has been published.

UNGER: Basically, I was in a role which relatively few ambassadors are put in, and most of them don't want. But we couldn't have any military people in Laos under the neutral solution, so whatever happened there I had to, in effect, supervise.

One of the kinds of things we felt we had to do was to continue to keep alive and protect various highland tribal groups. You've undoubtedly heard about the Meo, more recently referred to as the Hmong (but they're the same people). Those were people who were strongly anti-Communist and anti-Vietnamese and who had been very much committed to the United States and to the Thai and to the earlier governments in Laos, governments that were very friendly to us. The Meo had, you might say, stuck their neck out very far and they were well known enemies as far as the Communists were concerned.

Souvanna Phouma tried to handle it in a very fair and dispassionate way. But as far as the Communists were concerned, these (i.e., the highlanders such as the Meo) were people to be eliminated. Of course, the Vietnamese, in particular the North Vietnamese, hated their guts; they would do anything they could to cut these people off from supplies and take any action just to get rid of them.

We had a supply route which, of course, couldn't go through Vientiane. It was pretty much an air supply route that fed essential food stuffs and ammunition, and so on, up into that highland area. On a few occasions, I went up there to talk to General Vong Pao, who was the leader of the Meo, about what our position was, what we were prepared to do, etc. We definitely told him that we would not put up with any activity, on his part, that was prejudicial or hostile to Souvanna Phouma. We insisted that the neutral solution was our solution, too, that Souvanna Phouma was the man in charge and that he was to do nothing to undercut Souvanna Phouma's position or anything that was hostile to Souvanna Phouma. That wasn't always easy to enforce.

Q: What did he want to do? Did he want to put a more Rightist government in?

UNGER: The Rightist government that had been in office up until the time of the second Geneva accords, had been friendly to Vang Pao and supported him. He was very, strongly anti-Communist and he felt that the center in Laos, the neutralists, were really playing into the hands of the Communists. He said, "No, I understand they're not Communists but the Communists are just going to use them and our whole country will go Communist as a result. Therefore, it is I, Vang Pao and my people, who certainly have to keep the Vietnamese from moving into and taking over our country."

He acknowledged that he had to support the neutral, Geneva solution, but he was obviously dubious about various aspects of it.

Q: This is an area where the CIA was very active. How much did you work with them or were

they working with you but not with you? What sort of control did you have?

UNGER: Well, I insisted (and, in this case, Harriman was, of course, my supporter) on knowing essentially everything that was going on, and having a veto power, at least. I think that for the time that I was there that was pretty effective. I had a very different kind of CIA Station Chief from the people who had been there before. The ones who had been there before were great activists who had practically picked up their rifles and joined in on the fray.

My CIA man was very circumspect and moderate. He knew the situation very well but understood that he had to work with me. My own opinion -- I've never had any evidence to the contrary -- was that he did work very loyally with me. Although things changed as time went on, for the time I was there that was pretty much the situation.

Q: You were there from '62 to '65.

UNGER: To the very end of '64.

Q: Was this a time when we were doing much to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos?

UNGER: More and more as time went on. Initially, we were not doing a great deal. Souvanna Phouma was very, shall we say "allergic", to any action we might be taking in that regard. He felt that this was going to immediately undermine the neutral solution and Laos would be right back in the same old mess.

But we were quite convinced and, little by little, the evidence became quite concrete, that the North Vietnamese were doing exactly what we thought they were doing. On occasion I would take photographs and show Souvanna Phouma a truck convoy moving by road, out of North Vietnam into Laos, to go down whatever kind of routes they could find to feed eventually back into South Vietnam. Of course, the roads were atrocious, but there were routes that could be used. To be sure, sometimes things had to be carried by porters down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. But it was my task to demonstrate to Souvanna that the Ho Chi Minh Trail was not interdicted, was in active use, and that it obviously was a means by which the North Vietnamese were putting military pressure on the South.

Q: Were we doing anything? During your watch in Laos, were we doing anything regarding interdiction?

UNGER: Yes, as time went on.

Q: The reason I ask is someone I know, who is a historian at the Army Historical Center here, is working on MACV. That's the Military Assistance Group Vietnam. He asked me to ask you what were your relations with MACV. He mentioned two things. I'm not sure whether these were during your time or not. One was an operation called Barrel Roll. Then there was Steel Tiger.

UNGER: Yes. I remember both of those.

Q: I wonder if you could comment on that.

UNGER: Well, needless to say, the U.S. military who had the responsibility they had in South Vietnam, believed they were aware of what was taking place. And I think they were undoubtedly right; the task of protecting South Vietnam against the pressures, actual military pressures, from the North was very considerably complicated by the moving of supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to North Vietnamese forces, whether on the Laos side, or as you got farther south on the Cambodian side, and eventually back over into South Vietnamese territory. (Whichever place I can show you on the map here).

Q: We're pointing to a map of Vietnam down toward the bottom of Laos.

UNGER: Anyway, the route the Ho Chi Minh Trail took, through Laos, was fed by convoys that came over the mountains out of North Vietnam, by a number of different routes. Then it turned south in Lao territory, just to the west of Vietnam, and then moved back into South Vietnam from Laos. Sometimes it stayed in Lao territory all the way down to the northern boundary of Cambodia, and then moved into Vietnam from there. But there was a whole string of routes and feeders into Vietnam.

Q: What were we doing about it? Let's take the Barrel Roll business. What did that consist of?

UNGER: We wanted very much, as I've said several times, to keep alive the neutral solution in Laos. On the other hand, the U.S. Military were very insistent, and the South Vietnamese were very insistent. It was, of course, quite understandable, that they insisted that Laos not be used as a route of passage to support the Communist pressures against Vietnam.

As time went on, I found myself in the position of informing Souvanna Phouma and asking him, in effect, to acquiesce in our bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, in those areas where we knew the Vietnamese were crossing over into Laos, where we knew that there was a supply line functioning, in order to inhibit the movement of those supplies to the South.

Q: What was his reaction?

UNGER: Well, at first, of course, he hoped very much that somehow Laos could be kept pure and pristine and out of this conflict, and that the Geneva accords would continue to prevail. As time went on, evidence was presented to him by me. And, of course, it wasn't only what I showed him in the way of aerial photographs, and so on, but he also had reports that came from some of his own people up in the Plain of Jars and elsewhere (some of this came via General Vang Pao and his people). Although Souvanna didn't always trust those reports, some came from people he knew he had to believe.

As time went on, he, of course, became more and more outspoken in opposition to this abuse. He would call together his top council and send Prince Souphanouvong over to Hanoi to tell those people to stop doing what they were doing. Whatever Prince Souphanouvong told them, I don't know, but it certainly never worked. [Laughter] Nobody really expected it was going to.

Q: Would you call up MACV and say, "All right, bomb such and such." Or would they say, "We're going to bomb." Or would they say, "Can we bomb?" How did that work?

UNGER: As long as I was there, there was no bombing carried out, unless they had explained to me what they intended to do. Certainly, initially, it was a case by case review. I had to be satisfied that it was not, in a serious way, going to interfere with things in Laos, with Lao population, even though it was Lao territory. In any case it was Laos territory not under the government's jurisdiction, but under Communist administration.

Basically, the idea was to be sure that things didn't go to the point where the Geneva Accords were going to be seriously jeopardized. Even though we knew this Vietnamese infiltration was taking place, the idea was to try to keep Laos as a country, and most of its territory, out of this Vietnam situation. On these matters I used to be in regular communication, mostly with Bill Bundy in Washington; he was then Assistant Secretary for East Asia and the Pacific.

Q: But there was MACV headquarters. Would they send somebody over or were these bombing things called out of CINCPAC in Honolulu? Where would this come from and whom would you talk to?

UNGER: A lot of it came directly out of Washington. My communication was often with Washington. Now and then, I would go down to Saigon when there was a pertinent meeting taking place there; I remember one time, for example, when I went down because Dean Rusk was there. This is just one of those anecdotes but it's interesting as it relates to what was taking place: I flew down there because there was a meeting down there and there because there were so many things to talk over with Rusk as to how far to go and what could be condoned and what should be reported, what should be my position with Souvanna Phouma, with Souphanouvong, with Boun Oum, et cetera. I mean there were just all kinds of outstanding issues and I really needed to talk with the Secretary.

So I flew down and I had some time to talk with him; then I had to get back promptly. I got into a plane and they flew me up to Vientiane. When I got to Vientiane, I couldn't land. General Kouprasith, who was one of the right-wing generals, was pulling a coup! He was going to take over and throw out the Tripartite Government and put in a right-wing government and go on from there.

My deputy, Phil Chadbourn, was well aware of this and telegraphed, or telephoned me, in Saigon just as I was about to leave. Of course, there had to be clearance for my plane to land in Vientiane. They wouldn't give clearance because they were afraid of what I was going to do to undo Kouprasith's actions, if I got on the ground! Chadbourn fought them to a standstill and eventually got permission for the plane to land. At that point, Kouprasith had called together the National Assembly and was about to announce the fact that the Geneva Accords were a dead letter and that the right-wing was taking over the government. At the airport Phil told me what was taking place.

So I went immediately to the Assembly. First I got together with my fellow ambassadors in our little balcony seating area to get their assessment of the situation. The most pertinent of my

colleagues, were the Thai, British, French and Indian ambassadors. (The Indians, with the Poles and the Canadians, were on the International Control Commission). All of these people were there, as well as a few others and they overheard. At the same time I asked somebody to send a message to Kouprasith saying that I must see him. When he came out of the Assembly session I met him in the corridor and told him that if he carried through his plans, that there was going to be no U.S. support for Laos and he was going to be in deep trouble.

In due course Kouprasith backed down and didn't declare an end to the Geneva accords or dissolve the coalition government. So we went on for a while, continuing to try to make them work.

Kouprasith, incidentally, also had arrested Souvanna Phouma and on that occasion had put him under house arrest. It was essential that Souvanna Phouma know what had taken place because there were good indications that this was kind of a last straw, as far as he was concerned; if Kouprasith were successful in pulling this coup and installing a right-wing government, Souvanna Phouma was going to get on a plane and get the Hell out of Laos!

So I had to get to Souvanna Phouma to tell him what had happened. As I say, he was under house arrest, so I drove over to his house and I tried to drive up his driveway, but Kouprasith's soldiers wouldn't let me. Souvanna's house was set well back from the road and I noticed that the next-door driveway, immediately parallel to Souvanna's, with only a fence in between, was not guarded. So I had my driver just move over one and drive up that driveway. I got up more or less abreast of Souvanna Phouma's house, and by that time, he began to know what was going on. He came out on his balcony and I stood there at the fence and shouted to him, you know, "don't give up, don't resign." [Laughter] "We're with you and stay with it." So he did.

Of course, by that time, my diplomatic colleagues were all there, and a large press contingent as well. And the French ambassador provided the "bon mot," saying, "Mmhmm-ala, la diplomatie, à la Romeo et Juliette." [Laughter]

So the Souvanna Phouma government survived and went on for sometime. But, of course, it ultimately folded.

Q: I'd like to go back and talk about your relations with the American Military in Vietnam. MACV, the Military Assistance Command Headquarters. You were there during the period when the big build up began. You were in Laos in about '64, when we started to really insert troops in and play a more active role. Did you find yourself under any pressure from the American Military in MACV to call for more air strikes, to do more. Did you find yourself trying to find other solutions while they were pressing for bigger and better strikes of the Ho Chi Minh Trail?

UNGER: Yes. Our objective was to preserve the 1962 solution for Laos and to keep Laos out of the struggle. Of course, we had to acknowledge that Lao territory was being used to move men and material from North Vietnam South, but we were initially very hesitant to have any bombing. But, as I say, at one time, I showed Souvanna Phouma this photograph of a Vietnamese truck convoy moving into northern Laos. Souvanna made it perfectly clear; he didn't say yes or no and I didn't expect him to, but I felt that he undoubtedly understood what the issues

were and why we were doing what we were doing. Given the situation in Vietnam, there didn't seem to be much escape from trying to interdict the supply route. Nevertheless it never was effectively interdicted in spite of the large numbers of men and the carpet bombing used in the effort.

There were all kinds of other solutions that people put forward. For example, there were those who felt that the United States should move militarily from Thailand, right across the waist of Laos to Tchepone near the Vietnamese border. Then push right on in and seal off South Vietnam from the North. My task was to do what I could to preserve a neutral Laos and keep it from becoming embroiled in the struggle. But, of course, that became, as time went on, more and more difficult.

Q: How would it play out if the American Air Force wanted to put in a series of strikes on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and you felt it would be too much. This would be upsetting as very precarious neutrality. The Air Force insists, you say no, would this go up to the Joint Chiefs of Staff or to The White House?

UNGER: Well, sometimes to The White House. Kennedy was President at the time and he was committed to the neutral solution in Laos. Of course, Harriman was his principle instrument in that regard.

I remember, when I would come back to Washington, I would not only check in and talk to the Secretary and, on a few occasions also to the President, but also the Chiefs (Joint Chiefs of Staff) would ask me to come and sit down in their room to talk about the situation as I saw it in Laos. I got into some pretty good arguments with Curtis LeMay who wanted to bomb the hell out of everybody. [Laughter]

Q: He's still the man that talked about "bombing the enemy back to the Stone Age". Were you also saying, look this isn't working very well, the bombing. Were you getting reports?

UNGER: It was very hard to get a reading. In other words, the bombing would take place, but we had very limited possibilities of seeing to what extent it was inhibiting the use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. As you know, that debate went on for years, long after I left Laos.

Clearly, there was no highway and exactly how things were moving was kind of a mystery. We had different sorts of intelligence reports and there were innumerable solutions proposed as to how we might interdict the Trail.

Q: There was something called SOGS, Study and Operations Groups or something? We would put down teams to put down sensors. Were they doing that at your time, too?

UNGER: Yes. That was beginning at that time, yes. To try to get a much more precise feel for what kind of traffic there was and how much there was and where it was going, and so on. We did drop a lot of sensors in the zone of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Q: You mentioned Kennedy. But Johnson came in late '63 obviously. Was there any change in

attitude or your point of view of a neutral Laos or the situation there with Johnson in instead of Kennedy? Or was it about the same?

UNGER: I'd say, as far as that area goes, it was more of the same. The people around Johnson, of course, were very different from the people around Kennedy. You didn't have any people like Arthur Schlesinger, for example. Or if they were there, Johnson wasn't listening to them. Johnson was, as time went on, certainly more intent in taking a strong stand.

I'm trying to remember. Let's see. I was there from July of '62 to spring of '64.

Q: Excuse me, '65.

UNGER: '65? Maybe so. I don't know why I find this very hard to reconstruct. [Laughter]

Q: I'm looking it up in my handy-dandy little book here. It has you presenting your credentials in July 1962. You left the post in December 1964.

UNGER: That's right. I had to report, in Washington, in January '65, as one of Bill Bundy's deputies.

Q: During the time you were in Laos, did you have any direct dealings with Johnson or Kennedy?

UNGER: Oh, yes. For example, at one point, after I went to Laos in July of '62, a delegation of Lao leaders -- Souvanna, Ngon Sannanikone, Qunim Pholsena, *et. al.* -- and I were received by President Kennedy in the White House. Then in the mid-winter of '63 -- Kennedy had already been assassinated -- Souvanna Phouma with a group of his ministers, including some of the Communist ministers, came back to Washington. I accompanied them and I remember that we were in the White House calling on President Johnson. The obvious objective of all of this was to strengthen Souvanna Phouma's hand, to make him feel that the United States was still behind him and the neutral solution for Laos.

I did see Kennedy but I guess that must have been earlier, but after I had been appointed to Laos. I was in Washington at some point and, in effect, the President and Bobby, who was always around, told me what they expected was going to be achieved; Harriman, of course, was there too; the objective was to remove Laos from the list of U.S.-Soviet differences.

When I brought Souvanna Phouma to call on Kennedy, that may have been when I was already appointed but hadn't yet gone to Laos and Souvanna Phouma was in Washington before he went over to the Geneva meeting that I referred to earlier. Then he went back to Laos and when he went back to Laos, I went up to Laos directly from Bangkok. It was on the earlier occasion that there had been a meeting in The White House with Souvanna Phouma and Jack Kennedy and Bobby and Harriman were there as well.

Q: Kennedy was quite conversive with the problems of Laos. I remember his giving a television talk. He got himself much farther into an obscure area.

UNGER: Yes, February of '63 I think that was. Nobody in the United States had given two thoughts to Laos; they mostly didn't know where it was or if it was. [Laughter]

Q: Were you told that he was going to give a speech?

UNGER: Yes.

Q: Did this have any repercussions on what you were doing?

UNGER: Not specifically and directly. But it meant that Americans were alerted to the fact that the President considered this an important issue. They were made familiar with what our approach to the problem was. I think I was still in Thailand when that took place.

Q: That might have been just before the Geneva Accords. How about in Vientiane? How did you find your staff? Was it an active staff, knowledgeable, not so knowledgeable? Or was it some of the back water type staff?

UNGER: It was a pretty good staff. It was essentially a clean sweep from the staff that had been there before. As I say, Winthrop Brown had been my predecessor; he was a very fine, very competent ambassador. But it was thought that with the whole new situation, the new Geneva Accords, etc., that there ought to be a change in ambassadors.

My DCM was Philip Chadbourn. I think Phil had been there with Win Brown for at least a while, and then stayed on with me. He went through much of my time, and was succeeded by Coby Swank. My political counselor most of the time in Laos was a fellow who is living in Arlington now, Bill Hamilton.

Q: You thought you had a good solid team there?

UNGER: Very good, yes. Phil was a very realistic fellow, an activist, who was prepared to do essentially whatever he had to do in implementing U.S. policy. For example, I mentioned the fact that I had had that airport landing problem after meeting with Rusk in Saigon. When I flew back to Vientiane, the authorities didn't want me to land. But Phil went out to the airport and made it very clear in no uncertain terms that they were to let that plane land! [Laughter]

Q: What was your impression, as far as Laos was concerned, of Dean Rusk's interest in that area?

UNGER: He was very much interested. His associations, before he became Secretary, had been with that part of the world -- with East Asia. I think he felt that the United States had a great deal at stake in this whole Southeast Asian situation, including the idea of setting up a neutral Laos and taking Laos out of the East-West struggle, if it could be done. Of course, he had been very much in support of the program in Vietnam. As I said, he was in Saigon to chair a meeting of the U.S. Chiefs of Mission of the region. At this point, the situation in Vietnam was becoming more and more difficult. He was discussing and supporting with the U.S. Chiefs of Mission and other

American officials the various measures that were being formulated and initiated in Washington.

On the other hand, he was very strong for the kind of solution we were trying to make work in Laos, which was very different from our approach in Vietnam. We were trying to take Laos out of the East-West struggle. I don't think he and Harriman were particularly congenial; they obviously had to work together a fair amount but I don't think that they were soulmates. But to the extent that they had to work together, they did.

Harriman probably aspired to be, and thought he should be Secretary of State; it was his conviction that this Southeast Asian problem was a serious one and needed to be worked out but in a peaceful fashion, removing it from the list of U.S.-Soviet issues. He was prepared to take the job under Rusk as Assistant Secretary to do just that, to work on that problem.

Q: At the time you were leaving in December of '64 from Laos, how did you think the situation in that country would work out? Were you optimistic, pessimistic? How did you feel about that?

UNGER: I thought that it coming to depend more and more on what took place in Vietnam. If we could stabilize the situation in Vietnam, so that the North Vietnamese realized that using the Ho Chi Minh Trail was a losing game for them, then they would probably be prepared to leave Laos alone. They would have their influence there, but we were never opposing that. In other words, there was agreement on a Tripartite Government with a left-wing component, which obviously was very responsive to Vietnam. That was okay, but we felt that only if they gave up in South Vietnam, and stopped trying to use Lao and Cambodian territory to take over South Vietnam, only then could the Laos solution work. If it did, that would be to everybody's benefit, not only to the Lao, but the Thai would have an insulation from an aggressive North Vietnam, and also from an aggressive China (as we saw it then). And we believed that then the situation in Southeast Asia would have a much better chance of being stabilized. But, of course, the Vietnamese didn't see it that way. So the situation became more and more acute as time went on.

I went from Vientiane back to Washington where I became, as I said earlier, Bill Bundy's deputy for Southeast Asia. Then I went back to Thailand in August of 1967.

GEORGE M. BARBIS
Analyst for Laos, INR
Washington, DC (1963-1966)

Mr. Barbis was born in California and raised there and in Greece. He graduated from the University of California and served in the US Army in WWII. In 1954 he entered the Foreign Service and was posted to Teheran, Iran as Economic Officer. His other overseas assignments included postings in Thailand, Korea, France, Belgium and Greece, primarily in the Political and Economic fields. Mr. Barbis served on the US Delegation to the United Nations (1973-1975). His Washington assignments involved him in Southeast Asia matters and the US military. Mr. Barbis is a graduate of the National War College. Mr. Barbis was

interviewed by Mr. Raymond C. Ewing in 1996.

Q: This was the period of the Kennedy Administration and there was tremendous interest in Laos, as well, of course, in Vietnam.

BARBIS: Exactly. Laos, as you recall, was the one issue that President Eisenhower alerted President Kennedy as being at the top of his plate when he took office in 1961. I found out through my CIA counterpart and colleague that Governor Averell Harriman, then Assistant Secretary for Far East was looking for some one to be in charge of Lao affairs. The incumbent, Chuck Cross, was moving on to the War College. Harriman said it had to be somebody who really knew Laos and that they had picked me, even though I had never served there. Meanwhile, though, Mr. Harriman had moved on to become Under Secretary for Political Affairs, and Roger Hilsman, who had been my boss in INR, had become Assistant Secretary for Far East. In any event, I moved down and replaced Chuck Cross at the time when Laos was the issue before the new administration.

Q: So you were officer in charge in the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs. Responsible only for Laos?

BARBIS: [Yes, officer in charge of the Lao Desk], responsible only for Laos. I had two officers under me, one who had been there for some time. One was a Foreign Service officer, a senior political officer, and very knowledgeable about Laos and Southeast Asia generally and a young Civil Servant officer who followed mostly the economic side of things. So, we made a pretty good team. And then Miss Kanold moved on and somebody else replaced her. So, there were three of us on the desk.

Q: The desk was part of what office?

BARBIS: The Office of Southeast Asian Affairs which encompassed everything from Burma to the Philippines. What we define still as Southeast Asia.

Q: Did you travel several times to Vientiane?

BARBIS: Surprisingly it was such an active desk that I didn't, until one day Marshall Green who was deputy assistant secretary, was defending the budget at one of the Foreign Affairs Committee meetings or subcommittee meetings and was questioned on the point of officers in charge not knowing their countries or not having served in their countries for which they were responsible. Two cases came up, one, Laos and another one the Philippines.

Q: Where the officer in charge had not been there.

BARBIS: Like me he had not served there or been there yet. I guess I had been on the job for some months or maybe a year at that time. Well, as soon as Marshall got back to the Department he set in motion trips for both the OIC Philippines and OIC Laos to go. I did go for a month which was very valuable because although I knew Ambassador Unger very well, it was good to see him on his own turf and charged with a wonderful team. His political counselor was Bill

Hamilton and we used to refer to Ambassador Unger as Mr. Inside and Bill Hamilton as Mr. Outside. The ambassador doing all the sensitive, internal high level negotiating, etc. with the prime minister and ministers, and Bill out circulating a lot and having excellent contacts. Anyhow it was a wonderful experience working with those two people.

I went out with my successor in INR and we traveled all over the place including spending a night on the Plain of Jars with some of the troops confronting the Pathet Lao, who were trying to extend Vietnamese influence, Communist influence.

Q: We didn't have any contact directly with the Pathet Lao ourselves, of course.

BARBIS: Well, we did. Because of the Geneva Agreements of 1961, which created a "neutral" Laos, you had this strange situation where Souvanna Phouma, the prime minister, was sort of the compromise, a coalition government in which the Pathet Lao participated, although there continued to be fighting around the country which then spread and the whole thing was overturned and then you have civil war going in which we tried to support and assist the royal Lao government.

My trip was after the breakup of the coalition government. We traveled down in the southern region, the Ho Chi Minh trail, the Fifth Military region, and spent some time there and there was fighting down there quite extensively.

Q: The Bureau for Far East Affairs was very active in those days. You were part of the office that was also dealing with Vietnam and Cambodia and Thailand.

BARBIS: The Office for Southeast Asian affairs had responsibility for Vietnam, South and North, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Burma. It was a very active office and the bureau, itself, was very active and very deeply involved. Roger Hilsman by that time had been replaced by Bill Bundy, who was a very capable, activist type and was the older brother of the national security advisor, McGeorge Bundy. So, as things heated up in Laos, I did get involved at higher levels, always as the working level guy, the expert, if you will. I can remember one time, in fact, when U. Alexis Johnson, who was then the Under Secretary for Political Affairs, took me to a White House meeting, which was co-chaired by the Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense. We sat around the cabinet table. I remember I was sitting in the seat of the Secretary of Agriculture, next to U. Alexis, and at some point I was called upon by Secretary Johnson to give a report or to comment on the situation on the ground. But, it was interesting, at one point the President who had not joined us, did come in accompanied by Adlai Stevenson, who was our Ambassador to the United Nations at the time. I had never seen the President up close that way, a very imposing tall person.

Q: This was President Johnson by then?

BARBIS: Yes. I jumped ahead because I should say that during the Kennedy years, before the President's assassination, he was personally deeply involved in Laos and the Laos desk had daily contact with Mike Forrestal who was on the NSC staff along with his colleague, Cliff Alexander, covering the Far East. In fact I guess I spoke with Cliff or Mike almost every day, and frequently

Cliff would come over to the desk to consult with us.

I did not have the experience that one of my predecessors had, who was the officer in charge at the time President Kennedy came into office and that was to have a call from the President. As I understand it one of my predecessors did get a call and didn't believe the President was calling and hung up. The President called back and said, "This IS the President." That may be an exaggeration but something like that did happen.

Q: Certainly at the time you were there, you were very aware from your contacts with Mike Forrestal and Cliff Alexander that the government was very interested in what was going on?

BARBIS: Yes. And, this was before Vietnam had become the issue in Southeast Asia and Laos was the focus of all our attention. But, as things were changing in Vietnam, Vietnam started becoming the main issue, and our involvement started to become openly greater than it was in Laos, Laos became peripheral. But, in that initial period I remember we used to say, "Thank God Kennedy is President," because those of us who were working on Lao affairs at the time were deeply committed to the Geneva Accords, which were quite controversial domestically on the political scene. After all, here we were at the height of the Cold War, etc. and the Geneva Accords on Laos provided for a neutralization of the conflict and confrontation there which was indirect, but nonetheless was taking place. We tried, or so I believed at the time, to honestly try to make those agreements work. In the end they fell apart largely because of things the communist side did. The Pathet Lao, supported and directed by Hanoi, did things to which we had to respond and as a result the solution some years later fell apart and Laos is now communist.

Q: Some Foreign Service officers who worked on Vietnam in a little later period did a lot of soul searching and there was a degree of controversy and of not being comfortable at times with US policy. You did not feel any of that in the time you were working on Laos?

BARBIS: No, because I think we were driven by our commitment to try to make the Geneva Accords work and we thought we were doing the right thing. The right thing being as I recall seeing it, isolating Laos from any kind of conflict or power struggle in Southeast Asia. It was a peaceful, innocent country that didn't deserve to be torn apart by a civil war of great brutality. So, we were doing things that later became known as the secret war that some people would be critical of, and dealing with reporters was a problem for me frequently...I remember I had a pretty good relationship with Friedreich Smith, who later became quite an outstanding journalist and still is.

Q: He was with the New York Times?

BARBIS: Yes and still is. He was young, brand new, my age so we could communicate easily and comfortably. Although he would press, he respected my need to protect classified information so I don't think I ever gave any secrets away. It was a little tricky because we were doing things that we didn't want the press to publicize. All of that came out later, but at the time I was doing it without any moral questions or disagreement with what we were doing because I believed my role as OIC Laos was to make sure that I followed our policy which was to try to

make the Geneva Accords work.

Later, as we became more and more involved in Vietnam, and as Vietnam began to drive our policy not only with respect to Laos but also with respect to Cambodia, I can remember sitting around with my Cambodian colleague and sort of bemoaning things that were happening that were Vietnam driven that we didn't feel comfortable with. A feeling that what we were doing in Vietnam was not based on an overall strategic plan or vision of what we were trying to do but was more getting dragged into situations because of what happened on the ground to which we had to respond which committed us and got us more and more involved and then before we knew it, we had half a million troops there.

The need to react and the domestic pressures were great. That was the time of the doves and the hawks, with the hawks pressing for more aggressive action to counter the Vietcong. Our feeling was that we had enough to do dealing with Laos in my case and Cambodia in my colleague's case. We didn't know all the ins and outs of Vietnam, although we participated in meetings and in other ways kept up--saw the traffic, etc. But, our impression was that it was sort of an incremental involvement rather than a planned, deliberate, strategic approach.

Q: Going back to Laos again. Did we see the support for the Pathet Lao coming primarily from China or from the Soviet Union or did we not make really a distinction, that it was the communist bloc?

BARBIS: As I can best recall we saw Vietnam... Hanoi... as being the main agent of the communist movement, if you will, in directing things in Laos but with support both from the Chinese and the Soviets. The Soviets certainly were providing a lot of material support, the Chinese also were playing a role, especially up in the northwest. We had a lot of exaggerated rumors and stories about the Chinese building airfields right up there in that corner where Laos has a common border. Nothing ever came of that, although I guess some people would argue that they did build a road, although I don't know for what purpose. They were able to get supplies and reinforcements and whatever they needed through quite easily without modern transportation.

Q: When you were in Chiang Mai you traveled to the Laotian border, of course, [did you enter Laos]?

BARBIS: Only [viewed it] from across the Mekong [River]. We would go by road to Chiang Rai, which is just north of Chiang Mai, and then by land rover up to the Mekong where there was a little village, [Ban Houei Sai], and looked across into Laos. That was an area of Laos that was fairly sparsely populated. There was not much Pathet Lao activity there during the time I was in Chiang Mai. Most of the Pathet Lao being along the North Vietnamese border in northeastern Laos and, in fact, one province was pretty much under their control for most of the time that I was involved.

Q: Laos certainly has a long frontier with Vietnam. When you traveled in Laos did you go up into the north at that time?

BARBIS: Well, the closest I got to the north was this little overnight visit to the borders of the Plain of Jars. This might be interesting. We did have a covert role with what we called the Meo at the time and who later became known as Hmong. The leader of the Meo was a man called Vang Pao, who now lives in Montana, I believe. I happened to visit an outpost of his forces on a mountain near the Plain of Jars where there was a small, simple clinic and they had brought in a young Meo boy who had stepped on a mine. They had their first operation since this clinic had been opened and they amputated the kid's leg, I guess. Bernie Kalb, of CBS news at the time, was there with a camera crew. I wish my memory was a little clearer to tell you more about it, but it was an experience that I will never forget. In the middle of nowhere there was this wooden structure with surgical and other equipment and this poor teenager. It was one of the grimmer and gorier parts of my trip through Laos. It is also a reminder that already in the early 1960s, American television was already in places like Laos bringing the story home to American living rooms. I never found out what Kalb did with the footage. I saw him at an Asia Society event some months ago and went up to him and recalled this. He didn't remember that particular event.

Q: Let me come back to the Geneva Accords again. They were signed in 1961?

BARBIS: They were signed in 1961.

Q: Was Averell Harriman ...?

BARBIS: He was the head of our delegation. That was when Bill Sullivan came into great prominence because Bill had been officer in charge in Burma and Harriman identified him as a bright young expert on Southeast Asia. He jumped Bill over all kinds of more senior officers and made him in effect his deputy. Whenever the Governor would come back to Washington for consultations he would leave the mission in Bill's charge, which caused a lot of heartburn. I had a friend in the delegation who was an FSO-1 and Bill was an FSO-4. So that created some problems, but ability sometimes prevails. And, with patronage by someone like Harriman, it overcomes all obstacles.

Q: I was really getting at his role, not so much then, because you weren't directly involved in those negotiations, but the time you were in the intelligence bureau and then the Far East bureau, he was always kind of around?

BARBIS: I met Bill Sullivan before going to Chiang Mai because when I was preparing to go to Chiang Mai and was being briefed, etc., I had a desk in the same office where Bill's Burma desk was. I can remember his going off to...

Q: George, we were just talking about Bill Sullivan and your relationship with him. Why don't you just finish up on that. This is post Geneva Accords on Laos.

BARBIS: That is right. Because of the centrality of Laos in the Far East bureau, certainly, at that time the desk officer worked very closely with the director of the office of Southeast Asian affairs, but also with the front office. I had almost daily contact with the deputy assistant secretary who was overseeing this. For most of my time that was Marshall Green. Then it was Bill Sullivan and then for a brief time before moving on to my next assignment, Len Unger. That

was when I developed a very close working relationship with Bill Sullivan, even when he moved up to the seventh floor with Governor Harriman, because he continued to be interested in things in Laos. He then was named ambassador to Laos and invited me to join him as his political counselor. By that time I had more than two pretty intense years on Laos affairs and I felt that maybe I didn't really want to continue that pace by going to Vientiane. This may have been a mistake but other personal things that happened proved that it was probably a good thing I didn't go.

Q: Let me talk a little bit more about Laos, itself, and the work of the desk besides trying to uphold the neutral status under the Geneva Accords. There obviously were political/military things going on. You did the normal backstopping of the embassy, I suppose, and were the main contact for the Laotian embassy in Washington. What about the economic side? Were we giving a lot of economic aid?

BARBIS: Laos was and is a very poor country with limited resources and people lived a very bucolic, in a way, peaceful life there until they got involved with these ideologies and these military activities. There was no way that the country could survive economically were it not for our assistance. We kept Laos afloat. One of the mechanisms was a large AID mission there. A lot of it was on the agricultural side helping them to develop and improve their agricultural production, etc. But, an important effort on the economic side was dealing with the country's foreign exchange problems. That was a constant struggle for the desk, to which I am indebted to my economic officer, Gene Bruns, who subsequently left the Civil Service in the State Department and I think is still teaching at FSI as an expert on Southeast Asia.

Q: He was a Foreign Service officer and entered the Foreign Service with me. But, he didn't stay with the Foreign Service very long and, as you say, moved to the civil service.

BARBIS: I had forgotten that. When I got to know Gene he was a civil servant and then went on to get his PhD and is still teaching Southeast Asian affairs at FSI. But almost exclusively he spent an awful lot of time on this foreign exchange operation that we created with allies and friends. It involved a lot of negotiating, pressuring and trying to raise money to keep the country afloat.

Q: You say with allies and friends, who were some of the other countries?

BARBIS: Well, the French always had an interest, not always in agreement with us, although basically our policies coincided in that we, initially certainly in the 1960s, were trying to make the Geneva Accords run. But, we also had help from the British and the Australians and I guess the Germans.

Q: Was Japan actively involved?

BARBIS: Ray, I can't remember. I presume they were.

Q: It may have happened later because certainly Japan is very involved later on in Southeast Asia.

BARBIS: Yes, very much so.

Q: You say the desk, the bureau and the State Department were very much involved in the foreign exchange fund, etc. There was the Agency for International Development, did they tend to opt out of that?

BARBIS: Oh, no. This was working in close cooperation and coordination with AID. We were not, as in ARA [Bureau of Interamerican Affairs] where I believe Brazil was the pilot country where AID and the State Department were joined in one staff, but we did work very closely with AID. In my case, the officer in AID who was sort of the counterpart of our director of SEA was a very close personal friend from my Korea days, Tom Niblock, and we had a car pool together so we talked Laos all the time during office hours and not. So, that also contributed to a very close working relationship between the two agencies.

Q: And was the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, quite involved or not so much?

BARBIS: Not so much in my period. It was pretty much the US underwriting politically, militarily, if you will, economically, financially, the whole thing.

Q: Wasn't there a Mekong Basin development project of some sort?

BARBIS: That was towards the end of my association with Laos and involved my friend Tom Niblock from AID, who became Eugene Black's right hand man on the Mekong Basin development project which was a World Bank project. Tom spent many years after I moved on to War College and my European assignments involved with Mr. Black in that. But, in my days it was the beginnings of Black's vision and his trying to develop this magnificent concept, and I am ashamed to say I don't know what has become of it.

Q: That was involving Laos, Thailand and...?

BARBIS: And Cambodia, too.

Q: You were on the desk close to three years. Is there anything else you would like to reflect on that particular period?

BARBIS: Well, two things that might be of interest, one dealing with the bureau, itself, and one with being in Washington at the time of President Kennedy's assassination.

Because of my role of being responsible for Laos, I got to work, as I mentioned, very closely with the assistant secretaries, especially Bill Bundy when he was assistant secretary. We had weekly meeting with our counterparts from CIA, for example. The OIC Laos and the head of the Vietnam Task Force always sat in on those because the subjects usually were Vietnam and Laos. At one point Bundy turned to me and my colleague, Larry Pickering, who was OIC Thailand, to do something outside our immediate areas of responsibility and look at the region and what we needed. I guess it was more Vietnam oriented. In any event, we did the first draft of the Tonkin

Gulf Resolution. I am not sure what we wrote was in the final resolution, but it was a contingency thing that Mr. Bundy had us do.

Q: This was after the incident?

BARBIS: No, this was months before the incident. It was sort of anticipating something like that, so that we would be ready to react if we had to.

I was also involved, with others in the bureau, in changing the name of the bureau from the Far East Bureau, which it had been for many, many years, to East Asia and Pacific Affairs. This was sort of a belated recognition of where Asia is in the world.

Q: The Southeast Asian Treaty Organization. Was that something that you devoted much attention or thought to?

BARBIS: Only peripherally when I was in Chiang Mai, because Bangkok, of course, was the center of that [issue] and we had a SEATO office in the embassy and I knew the guys who were there. Other than frequently working SEATO language into papers and things like that, [the desk was] not deeply involved with SEATO.

Q: You mentioned being in Washington on November 22, 1963 when President Kennedy was assassinated.

BARBIS: I remember vividly, as many Americans do, where I was and how I heard. Gene Bruns and I had gone to Fort McNair to have lunch with my predecessor, Chuck Cross, and the former OIC Thailand, Ed Masters. I don't know if we took a taxi back or Chuck drove us back, but I remember as we drove up to the diplomatic entrance and left the car, people were gathered and talking about it, that Cronkite had just announced that the President was dead. We rushed back up to FE where we had a TV in the visitors lounge and everybody from the staff was collected there. I remember Mr. Bundy spent more time in that room watching the news, etc. than he did in his office. It was a traumatic thing for all of us as it was for most Americans. People still remember and think about it because there was an awful lot of enthusiasm and admiration and affection for President Kennedy as a leader who knew what he was doing. Especially in the State Department, he sort of inspired young people, especially, but everybody [in general]. In my case, I had not had direct contact with the President but with his office at least. I had sort of a personal feeling that he was on the right track in Laos and we had to do what we could to make it work.

Q: He was on the right track in terms of his policy and attitude and perception and you could feel that there was interest.

BARBIS: Exactly. As I said before, I think we used to say, Gene Bruns and I, we can sleep easier tonight because we know the President is worrying about it, too.

That pretty much wraps up Laos.

THOMAS L.HUGHES
Director, Intelligence and Research
Washington, DC (1963-1969)

Mr. Hughes was born and raised in Minnesota and was educated at Carleton College, Oxford University and Yale University. After service with the US Air Force he worked on Capitol Hill and became active in Democratic Party politics. He later joined the Department of State, first as Assistant to Under Secretary Chester Bowles and subsequently as Deputy Director, then as Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, where he served during the event filled period 1961 to 1969. His assignments brought him in close contact with the major political figures of that era. His final government assignment was to Embassy London as Deputy Chief of Mission. Mr. Hughes was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1999.

HUGHES: When Kennedy entered the White House, Laos was the big issue in southeast Asia. Eisenhower had warned about dominoes there. Ultimately under Kennedy there was a trade off between Laos and Vietnam. He went for neutrality in Laos, giving it to Averell Harriman to see what he could work out, while he authorized 16,000 military advisers to bolster Vietnam.

Q: Was this balance between Laos and South Vietnam - fortify one-neutralize the other - was that made explicit? Was this coming from Kennedy?

HUGHES: No, but it was implicit. No one knew what the outcome in either place would be. Kennedy was going to be doing both at the same time-- satisfying the hawks on Vietnam and satisfying the doves on Laos. The two policies were meant to be mutually reinforcing.

Q: I heard from somebody that Eisenhower had told Kennedy that he was going to support him in foreign policy but he shouldn't try to change our confrontation with communist China.

HUGHES: My impression of Eisenhower throughout the Kennedy administration was that he was unremittingly unhelpful on Asia policy. Kennedy in part appointed John McCone as CIA director because he was a Republican with good ties to Ike. He was often sent up to Gettysburg, and invariably came back from the general with hawkish responses on Vietnam and China. Eisenhower always proposed reinvesting in our military effort up to, and including, the use of nuclear weapons. Later Johnson dispatched General Goodpaster to Gettysburg, and the response was the same. I thought Eisenhower's advice to Kennedy and Johnson in the 1960's was deplorable. It contrasted sharply with his own non-intervention in Indochina in the 50's after the French debacle there.

Q: Still talking about the period when you are putting things together, what about the role of Averell Harriman at that time? And G. Mennen Williams, who was the first State Department appointee named by the Kennedy administration as Assistant Secretary for African Affairs. How about those two?

HUGHES: To take the second one first, "Soapy" Williams wanted a cabinet post (HEW, I think), but JFK convinced him that foreign policy was going to be more important and that he needed him at State. He was, as you say, Kennedy's first appointee there. Bowles had known Soapy well as governor of Michigan, and was pleased over the timing, the importance of Africa that it signaled, and the personal priority JFK seemed to attach to the newly independent African countries.

On the other hand, this was clearly a political payoff. Was Kennedy putting Williams out there as an early liberal hostage? Did he expect Acheson and Joe Alsop to start undermining G. Mennen Williams from day one, until bigger targets like Bowles himself came into view? Ultimately Bowles was forced out as Undersecretary in late 1961, with Williams still in office. . At that time a smiling Acheson actually accosted Soapy's deputy, Wayne Fredericks, in a State Department corridor. Pointing triumphantly to his belt, he said "See this scalp here? That's Bowles. Soapy is next."

Then there was Harriman. Instead of the image others held of him as a grand old man, he thought of himself as eternally young. He was also a wild card, and he was always available. At first Jack Kennedy had doubts about Harriman's loyalty, because Averell had been so disdainful of Joe Kennedy, his father. But you couldn't have had a more devoted Kennedy supporter than Averell the morning after the election. I think Kennedy thought he would give him an impossible assignment like Laos to see what he could do with it.

Harriman was quite willing to humble himself to do this, but he was not called "the crocodile" for nothing. He would cut people off with his sharp, quick tongue. He was irascible, rather unpredictable, and not necessarily always coherent. He would snap at this and snap at that. He turned off his hearing aid when people got boring. Kennedy was amused at that. I got to know Averell quite well during the Kennedy-Johnson years, and our friendship continued for years afterwards until his death. Jean and I often saw the Harrimans socially, both with his first wife Marie and later with Pamela. Occasionally we were guests for dinner at their house in Georgetown, or on weekends at their estate in Middleburg.

In April, 1963, Kennedy appointed the three of us to new positions at State--Harriman, Hilsman, and Hughes, "the three H's" Rusk called us, when swearing us in at the same ceremony on the seventh floor at State. On that occasion Harriman was elevated to an Undersecretary position, having just served as assistant secretary for East Asia. Hilsman succeeded him in East Asia, and I succeeded Hilsman in INR. By that time Laos was more or less behind us, and Vietnam was about to become a high priority problem.

During my eight years at INR, Vietnam was, of course, THE major issue. It constituted also a prime exhibit of the uneasy relationship between policy and intelligence. The saga began slowly with Laos and Vietnam in a kind of tradeoff early in the Kennedy administration. It was almost as though Kennedy consciously gave Laos, which happened to be militarily indefensible, to the doves in general-- and to Harriman in particular--- to produce some kind of modus vivendi. Vietnam by contrast was entrusted to the hawks to build up and fortify as our chosen

protectorate. JFK compartmentalized the South East Asian crisis, letting the negotiators work on the Laos part of it and pointing to Laos when his policy was criticized for being too militarized. At the same time he gambled on a hoped-for success in Vietnam. Kennedy was rather pleasantly surprised that Harriman pulled off his Laos negotiation and came up with some compromises that at least might allow US policy to muddle through.

Q: This is actually where the Soviets were very much involved.

HUGHES: Not only the Soviets, but the international community as well in the form, for example, of the ICC (International Control Commission). In addition there were some storied individuals involved, like the Polish Ambassador in Washington in the late '60's-- a fascinating character named Jerzy Michalowski. Poland was a member of the ICC, and he had early on been deeply involved behind the scenes as Director General of the Polish Foreign Ministry. I remember going more than once to Mikalowski's embassy residence in Washington, and being impressed with his ambidextrous approach. Previously he had been ambassador to the Court of St. James and also ambassador to Hanoi. On his desk he had autographed pictures of both King George VI and Ho Chi Minh.

I said earlier that Kennedy decided to negotiate his way out of Laos and, if necessary, militarize his way out of Vietnam by sending US military advisers for starters. I think it is futile to speculate over what Kennedy would have done about Vietnam if he had lived and won reelection in 1964. Some of his champions are sure that he would have withdrawn. Roger Hilsman thinks so. Others are convinced that the same predicaments that confronted Johnson would ultimately have forced Kennedy to escalate as well.

MARK S. PRATT
Political Officer
Vientiane (1963-1968)

Mr. Pratt was born and raised in Massachusetts and educated at Harvard, Brown, Sorbonne and Georgetown Universities. Entering the Foreign Service in 1956, he studied Chinese and was posted to Hong Kong. Throughout his career Mr. Pratt dealt with Far East and Southeast Asian affairs, serving in Taichung, Hong Kong, Vientiane, Paris, Taipei and Guangzhou (Canto), where he was Consul General. His Washington assignments also concerned Southeast Asian matters. Mr. Pratt was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1999.

Q: Bowles, Chester Bowles. Well, now, should we go on to Laos?

PRATT: Well, I want to add one more thing. As I mentioned, the Geneva agreement on Laos had been signed in 1962, and following their signature there was an effort to determine how much we could expect from Hanoi, whether they would really live up to the letter of the agreement or how they would really get around it, in what areas, and all the rest of it. So Harriman had been responsible for this, and you may be aware, one of Harriman's protégés was Michael Forrestal.

Well, Mike Forrestal had been in my mathematics class at Philips Exeter Academy, and I knew him. He was one of the more prestigious figures in our class, and his father, as the first secretary of defense, came up for our commencement address in 1945. So I somewhat followed the career of Mike Forrestal, and he was sent out on a trip by Harriman to look at Laos and to see what was happening because already things were breaking down. I don't think Quinim Pholsema had been killed yet, but obviously the Hanoi side was trying to turn the screws and to push Souvanna Phouma to granting them the predominant role in much of the eastern part of Laos. And that, of course, would have been something which later became the famous Trail, but at that time it was basically access to the Plain of Jars and control, really, in Laos itself.

But Mike was sent out to inspect all this and determine to what extent we would try to persuade Souvanna Phouma to accept greater deliveries of American military equipment in order to build up the defensive capabilities of the neutralists, to begin with, but then also perhaps to get him to agree also to getting stuff to the former [inaudible]'s troops. And so he was coming back through Hong Kong, and I sent a cable to him in Laos suggesting that he stay with me and we could chat about the situation. So I picked him up at the Star Ferry, and we went back and had dinner, and he said, "Oh, this is all very well and good, and it's nice to talk to you about China, and China is very interesting, and so on, but really, where you ought to be is Laos." And we were seated up behind my house, which is the highest private house in Hong Kong, looking down over the harbor and the and the hills beyond. And I said, after having a marvelous dinner from my wonderful cook and seeing this beautiful view and drinking brandy where you were overlooking these magnificent sights, "You think I ought to go to Laos? You know, I think I had better send you off on the next plane."

Well, he went back, and what role he played he never would confess to, but within a few months of that, I got orders transferring me to Laos. Of course, I was a bachelor, therefore no family encumbrance. Two, I spoke French. Three, I was already in the area. I was being transferred from a post where there were quite a few officers who could presumably pick up the slack until they could get somebody else out there. In any case, I was sent off to Laos to be the Pol-Mil officer there, to be working on the political aspects of the efforts to crank up the air force and get further arms in and so forth. This was not the CIA side, the other irregular forces, but really the regular forces particularly efforts to try to crank up the poor neutralists.

Q: You were there from when to when?

PRATT: I was there from April of 1963 - that's when I got the assignment change, anyway - to January of 1968.

Q: All right, what was the situation? You arrived in the spring of 1963 in Vientiane. Could you describe both the embassy and job, the situation on the ground?

PRATT: Well, the Embassy was still a rather crumbling old building with rather cramped quarters. I had to share an office with someone, with a nice young chap in the CIA, and it was very clearly a . . . We worked very closely with the station in Hong Kong as well, because we knew so many of the same people. We knew the people in British intelligence, and we had a great deal of back and forth. But this was clearly a big CIA function as well. And we also, of

course, had an even more testy relationship in a way with the American military, which of course was no longer permitted to be in *as* military, and so they had to have a very discreet-type operation, and they had really first rate officers in all of these areas because Harriman had sort of hand picked these. And the ambassador was Unger. I guess you've interviewed him, too, haven't you?

Q: Leonard Unger, yes. Well, what was the situation in Laos?

PRATT: Well, the situation in Laos was that you had a very testy relationship because you had a time rift in effect, has is not always, in effect, a very stable form of government. Souvanna Phouma had to fight people on his right and on his left. He had also to try to hold together his own neutralists, because this was not a - shall we say - political movement which was very understandable to most of the Lao.

Q: What was the sort of situation on the ground, military, going on at that time?

PRATT: Well, there had been nibbling away in the Plain of Jars, as they started at that time to try to clean out people, including pushing back some of the neutralists. The neutralists, for example, were in posts farther in towards the center of the country and even towards the east of the country than the Vietnamese wished them to be. And so what they were trying to do, however, was to do it politically, in other words, to take over the neutralists. You see, the neutralists were themselves divided into several factions, and even at the top political level, the foreign minister, Quinim, had really been under Vietnamese discipline, whereas Souvanna Phouma, of course, obviously was not. And Kong Le was, of course, basically his own man; whereas some of the lower neutralist military leaders were basically sympathetic to and basically had been coming under the discipline of the North Vietnamese and the Lao who were controlled by the North Vietnamese. In other words, the Neo Lao Hak Sat was an organization which was basically controlled by what we called the Pathet Lao, the Lao Communist Party. But it in turn was influenced by the Vietnamese because most of these persons were also members of the politburo or at least of the Hanoi Communist Party. So it was very complicated politically speaking, and before I got there they had already had the assassination of the foreign minister, Quinim, apparently by somebody whom Kong Le sent in to do it.

Q: Kong Le being?

PRATT: A neutralist. He was the captain who had sparked off the 1960 uprising.

Q: On the ground, in the first place you were politico-military. What was the military situation, one, with the Lao military - I suppose the royal army or something - then the sort of neutralists Kong Le, and then what was the CIA cadre doing? And then what were the North Vietnamese doing?

PRATT: Well, the North Vietnamese, as I say, were trying first politically to grab a hold of all of the neutralist forces and the neutralist areas, thereby trying to twist the screws on Souvanna Phouma to get him to basically give in and come over to their side. Souvanna Phouma was trying to hold on to a kind of what his concept of neutrality was, and his concept of neutrality, of

course, had brought in the Chinese Communists with their embassy and the North Vietnamese with their embassy. And he was trying very hard to do this above this kind of fray, whereas the Vietnamese, of course, were trying to do it all through their direct cadre approach. And one of the key things they thought that would be the vulnerability of true neutralists, and therefore they could get these neutralists to split off from Souvanna Phouma and to go over to their side, and then that would undermine the whole role that Souvanna Phouma was playing. Now very early on, Souvanna Phouma had been convinced that the Vietnamese were trying this, and he did not like to be treated that way. After all, he was from his point of view the descendant of the "Kings of the Front." He was a *Mahuparak* of old Lao society, as his older brother had been, and therefore they should let him do this, and he would restrain the Thai, he would restrain the Americans, he would let the French do military training and so forth, but he would keep it, from his point of view, neutral in favor of everyone. Well, the Retsi [Ed: ?] insisted on having Hanoi's ambassador in Vientiane and Peking's ambassador in Vientiane and keeping this as a somewhere where everybody was supposed to be welcome and just leave Laos alone, whereas, of course, Hanoi was not prepared to leave Laos alone.

Q: Were there North Vietnamese troops in Laos itself at this point, when you arrived in 1963?

PRATT: Oh, yes, oh, yes, oh, the whole eastern area was occupied by the Vietnamese. In addition to that, there were cadres in all of the areas in which the normal Lao Communists were functioning. There was a Lao Communist contingent right around the corner from our embassy when I got there.

Q: As a politico-military officer, what were you u to? What were you doing?

PRATT: Well, one of the things we were trying to do was to strengthen the Lao Air Force. They had old P-6s.

Q: It's a trainer, actually.

PRATT: Which were old training planes which had been fitted to carry machine guns and things of that sort. We had to work this out. It was good training for what I had to do later with Taiwan, but we had to try to say, "Listen, we can't repair these P-6s; therefore, we can introduce P-28s, which is the next step up because that's the only thing we've got parts for. So therefore this will not be a violation of the introduction of new and sophisticated military equipment." These aircraft could therefore be of assistance to both neutralists and what they called the Royal Lao Army, which was in trouble particularly in Suvannakhet Province, and so forth. And then, of course, later on they could be used to assist the neutralists in the Plain of Jars and the other areas in the north. So this was one of the key things we had been trying to work out, to get some framework within which we could introduce improved aircraft.

Now Souvanna had to be brought along at every step of the way because we had strict instructions from Governor Harriman and therefore from President Kennedy that we were to respect the framework that Souvanna had established and try to make it work because they thought that it would be helpful in making any future framework work for Vietnam itself. So this was very much the desire to maintain a kind of framework. I think, as you know, later on one of

the key finds was always the overt but the secret war and all the rest of that. Well, this was, I think, one of the key things which bothered us with, shall we say, naïve journalists - not with the more sophisticated ones. They realized in the first place that this wasn't secret and there was no real attempt to keep it secret; the only thing we were trying to do was to match Hanoi in having it "not avowed," because that's what Souvanna asked: "I don't mind your providing this assistance, but I want to be able not to have it something we put out in the press as something which says, 'Yes, we are indeed violating the Geneva agreements of 1962,' because that's not what Hanoi says in all of its attacks." And therefore this was one of the key things that we had to try to do in our pol-mil approach, to make sure that we at every point tried to respect Souvanna's desire to keep the framework of the Geneva agreement as best one could, and that meant making sure that we did not criticize his having the Soviet ambassador or the Chinese ambassador or even the Vietnamese ambassador around and so on, and at the same time that we were not trying to upset the Geneva agreement's military matters. I don't remember them in detail now, but the French were the only ones permitted to do formal training. That was under the Geneva agreement, and they did have a French military mission there, which was training and primarily trying to train the neutralists, because, of course, the French, with their usual ideological and geometric approach, were very much tied to supporting neutralism in the middle against the two extremes, as they might as the Chamber of Deputies was the range from left to right. So they considered themselves the vague supporters of Souvanna Phouma and the middle. But of course they weren't prepared to do very much, and they weren't really capable of doing very much, but they were there, and Souvanna always gave them due recognition (as we did as well) as people who were providing a very important service, namely, a French military mission which tried to crank up the military capabilities of this ragtag neutralist force.

Q: You mentioned the royalists, the regular army. Did that amount to anything?

PRATT: Oh, yes, that was the biggest army in Laos.

Q: How could you work with that, then?

PRATT: Well, we didn't have any problems in dealing with them except on the political level, but there again, at the political level the deputy prime minister was Phoumi Nosavan. And of course Souphanouvong was the deputy prime minister, but he hadn't been around town for quite a while because the government itself was composed of all three factions. Boun Oum was not in a formal position, but he was the nominal leader of this group, and he was also in town, and he, of course, had basic authority in the southern part of Laos because that's where his Champassak kingdom had been, because he was basically one of the three kings of Laos in the good old days, before the French just picked on the king of Luang Prabang and made him the king of all Laos.

So we had direct connection with Phoumi Nosavan. One of my tasks was to deal directly with Phoumi's staff, particularly his *chef de cabinet*, who was Bounleut Saykosi, who had a very distinguished career. I think he's now living in California. But we dealt with all these military commanders. Some of them we liked better than others. One we always had a bit of trouble with was Kupersit Abai [Ed: ?], who commanded the legion there in Vientiane itself. His father was from the Island of Kong. His mother was a Senanikom. The Senanikoms were the big family of Vientiane, one of the Sino-Lao families. So we had no problem in meeting with all factions

because they all had things to gain from us. We were supporting their currency, and that of course was a very key thing. At some point you might want to talk to somebody who worked on the economic side, because that was a very interesting one. We were trying to use economics to bolster the society, and of course with the usual lack of great results.

Q: Supposedly, the French were in charge of training the army, but they were concentrating on the neutral side. Were we furnishing equipment to the regular Lao army?

PRATT: Oh, we were providing most of the equipment, yes.

Q: Well, who trained them in how to use a howitzer and that sort of thing?

PRATT: Well, we had a bit of a military group there. Some of them were very capable indeed. Colonel Law was a chap who had been in the American Army in World War II and had been sent out as an advisor to the Lao Issara movement, which was trying to fight first the Japanese and then decided it could also fight against the French coming back in. It was the movement in which Souvanna Phouma had been involved and many of the other members of the Lao elite. But he was a very sensitive chap who knew the geography, knew the history, knew the psychology of the area. And he got together some very, very good people, including a young colonel who was unfortunately forced out too soon. But they had big parties. One of the things the Lao liked are what they called *Boums*, or parties, and they would bring together the neutralists and the rightists and the American and the French. And we occasionally were able to get the Russians and the Poles involved. The Poles were members of the International Control Commission. That was, again, a very important part of the overall façade. And we therefore, in addition to myself as a Pol-Mil officer, we always had an ICC officer, and officer who was charged with trying to make sure that the International Control Commission, which reported to the co-chairman of the Geneva conference, could function in such a way as to deter violations by any side.

Q: Was the ICC the usual Poland, India, and Canada?

PRATT: That's right.

Q: What I gather, the Canadians were the only ones who wanted to do something. The Indians were trying to duck everything.

PRATT: Well, the Indians, of course, were under pressure from Moscow, and of course, that's one of those things which, while I don't think that they ever did too much what Moscow wanted inside India, nonetheless they were prepared to pay by doing abroad whatever Moscow wanted. And of course the Poles were just total emissary of Moscow, and Moscow, indeed, was very supportive of Hanoi. That did make for problems until the Chinese attacked again, and this is something which some of the Indians got sufficiently annoyed at all Communists so that they did get a few investigations going, too. But we were trying, in any case, to keep this functioning as best as possible as part of this façade.

Q: Was this sort of basically a façade? I mean, as we see this as being anything other than giving lip-service and let's get on with what we have to do using the CIA and whatever we had to

do?

PRATT: No, it was a much more two-track approach. Let's keep this going as best we can. Souvanna wants to keep this framework, and remember, we were able to keep that framework through all the open war until we, of course, bugged out of Vietnam. And then, of course, Souvanna was able to use the remaining shreds of this façade to be able to arrange a rather peaceful turnover to his brother. So it was a good deal more than just a façade which we treated with contempt. It was a façade which we considered to be very much part of the way of managing things in Asia.

Q: What about the CIA? What were they doing? It almost seems like they were running their own war while the diplomats were going around trying to do something but rather ineffectively.

PRATT: No, I think that we were all being pretty effective. The fact that we were able to maintain that façade and to keep certain military - and this particularly became difficult later on when the MAC-V [Military Assistance Command-Vietnam], of course, began to be viewing itself as the command structure for the entire area and then required a great deal of effort on the part of Bill Sullivan . [Ed: Ambassador William H. Sullivan (non-career appointment) presented his credentials on Dec 23, 1964 and left post, Mar 18, 1969] to restrain MAC-V, and he had to use his contacts both in the Pentagon and in CINCPAC to try to rein in those who were trying to destroy that framework. So no, I would say that we were doing several tasks at once, one of the political tasks for the international community, which of course, these are what the people wanted, and I think it's something that really should be better studied by people who think we can do these things in Kosovo and all the rest of it purely by this international façade. The façade could be of some help, but you have to look at the other aspects of it. So the CIA, indeed... In the first place, its role changed considerably through the year.

Q: We're talking about 1963-68 here.

PRATT: Yes, in 1963 to 1968, even during that period there were enormous changes. When I came back in 1968, I handled Laos again and then added Cambodia until 1973, so I have perspective there of basically 15 years, because that's what I was also doing in Paris, of handling this. Now, of course, that means I sometimes get the date when something happened a little bit off, but what I wanted to say is that from 1962-63, the CIA had a double role. One was to have liaison with Souvanna Phouma and Souvanna Phouma's people, to be supportive to the neutralists, and that meant supportive in various ways. For example, they provided money to run a neutralist newspaper. They supported a neutralist youth movement. They tried to assist in getting some of the neutralists trained in Thailand or something of the sort. But at the same time, they were handed the task of trying to assist the Hmong/Miao, as we then called them, Meo, to withstand attacks by the North Vietnamese and by the Neo Lao Hak Sat and what were called then by the Communist side, the "patriotic neutralists." So this was, of course, General Vang Pao's who led the Region II (MR2) defenses from his headquarters in Long Cheng, operation in the Plain of Jars area, where the Miao were. And then also, the CIA assisted down in the Bolavens area, where the Communists tried to get in. There were two provinces to the west, Champasak and Saravane, and they tried to defend the two capital cities. They couldn't do much in the countryside, and then they tried to get some patrol-type operation in the Bolovens area to

try to keep protection in depth for the river valley, and also the same way in Suvannakhet, and then they made an operation up in the north, which was designed to try to keep the area of Kweisai [Ed: ?] somewhat safe. And this meant being involved with the Ha or other Chinese type forces up there. So, Vang Pao, of course, was the most important figure, and he could be used even in dealing with some of the top people there on the Vietnam border area.

But this meant money, of course, medicine. It meant food. We set up the operation of air drops of food in these mountain areas, where it was very difficult to have a good landing strip, but we also built two landing strips not too far from the Plain of Jars to support the Vang Pao operation. So this was obviously starting out small. It was starting out in its support for guerilla-type operations - it was not so much the whole territory, but it was to have forces which could try to make sure that the others could not hold territory - but later on became more positional, and by the time I left, they were beginning to chew up Vang Pao as they tried to hold on to areas where they could not really withstand a full onslaught by the Vietnamese, even with the assistance of not only the Lao Air Force but then the American Air Force by that time.

But it was slow. It was progressive, and it was designed in its defensive way to spare also as much of our population as possible, because everybody knew that the Vietnamese population was so much larger. They could afford to lose a lot of people. The Lao couldn't, and least of all the Meo and the other highlands people because their slash-and-burn agriculture and the other problems of living at high altitudes mean that you had rather low birth rate and you had a fairly high death rate. People died fairly young, and therefore, you just did not have a big population base you could work with. Vang Pao finally got to the point of having 13 or 14 year olds being some of his most important troops. That's something which, of course, when we go back and revisit it, we will not be quite so proud of. But we certainly can be proud of what a lot of the Meo and the Khman did do, and they were doing, of course, a lot of this, in the end, for us as well because they were there to rescue American pilots shot down in the bombing raids over North Vietnam. They would help establish and protect navigating device in the northern part of Laos to try to assist in the actual bombing of Hanoi, things of that sort.

Q: Talking about triangulation.

PRATT: That's right. It's just one of those Air Force operations which they would basically be supportive of. We knew a key aspect of what they were doing, and they had really very, I think, high quality people. I think whether you did work with this, then of course you've got the book that was written by Doug Brauthar, who was one of the station chiefs.

Q: No, I'm not familiar with the book.

PRATT: Okay, well, he was one of the station chiefs, and he wrote a book about the guerilla warfare. And it was after his time that they went more into positional warfare, which of course chewed up the Meo and did not really . . . well, it was designed basically to be supportive of the mentality of MAC-V, which never really, I think, understood the war which was going on, and I don't think that, for example, Kissinger did, either. And I think that, of course, the big problem was the way in which we handled Cambodia. That was something I worked on when I was back here in Washington that happened later. But again, the unwillingness to listen to most of the

people whom they sent out and paid fairly good salaries to learn about what about what was going on was a key aspect of the this fortune, as I say. Bill Sullivan, I think, emerges as a considerable hero, as somebody who was able to parlay his previous experience working with Harriman, at the Geneva Conference, and through the contacts that he had made with the military, to be able to keep at least the Lao situation from getting too much out of whack. I think that this is something which John Gunther Dean understood from his time in Laos and his time also in Paris and would have liked to be able to do better in Cambodia, but already MAC-V [Military Assistance Command-Vietnam] and General Vessey had already taken over and militarized the thinking there, which I think was part of the standing problem, why we were still having some of these difficulties in Cambodia. Laos was coming along not terribly smoothly and not terribly well, but since it is more of a backwater than any other place, it probably means that the passion in Bangkok and the passion in Hanoi don't get quite so riled up, and certainly not in Peking so that people are much more prepared to let it go its own way than if it's not what they would like. It's less offensive to others. And this is basically what we were trying to do at that time as well, to commit Souvanna Phouma to make Laos as inoffensive as possible, to be used as little as possible by anybody else so that the opponents of these other people would have less of a pretext.

Now we did eventually get the Thai involved, and we got them in with their own troops and their artillery in certain areas. They were very much in support of Vang Pao and so on. This, of course, provoked in turn even greater efforts on the part of Hanoi. We got the Chinese involved in what I later on - when I was back in Washington - tried to downplay so that we would avoid reaching in such a way as to anger the Chinese and to get them to be more involved than they otherwise would be. But we had people at that time who were saying, Ah, the Chinese are trying to build a road straight down to the Mekong and then cross into north Thailand. They intend to move in and take over Thailand. When you get these wars and you see people looking only at their maps and not looking at who else is looking at what map and what their map tells them, then you really can get involved in trying to prevent something which you don't need to prevent.

Q: Did you find during this 1963-68 period that the people from MAC-V or from our embassy up in Saigon or CINCPAC or what-have-you would come in and start looking at maps with flags and say, well, we've got to move in here and mover this - you know, this type of thing. Was this the mentality?

PRATT: This was what constantly . . . It was not so much of a problem in, of course, 1963-64. It was not until things began to go rather badly in Vietnam itself that the military began to say, "The reason things are not going well in Vietnam is not because we aren't doing things in Vietnam well; it's because of what's going on in Laos or [later on] in Cambodia, and therefore we only widen the war, we can reduce the war." And this, of course, is not the mentality of Bill Sullivan, who felt that if you are going to really get something accomplished in Vietnam, you've got to do it in Vietnam. And it was later on when we had our incursion into Cambodia-

Q: In the spring of 1970.

PRATT: -in the spring of 1970, then we on the Desk at that point said, "Well, you know the Vietnamese are fighting so well in Cambodia, and the CIA has gotten the Cambodians to go up

and fight in southern Laos. Now the thing to do is to have the Lao attack Hanoi, because it looks as if they can't fight very well in their own countries but they can fight pretty well when they go abroad." So, you know, it was just crazy. Well, we felt that having a balanced view was very, very hard. Now we had great advantage in having Governor Harriman still around, even though Lyndon Johnson didn't much like him. And after all, Kennedy did not live that long. And so it was important that some of the framework which he had been astute enough to let Harriman try to handle rather than letting Dean Rusk do it, this was something which Harriman, being on the scene, could continue to sort of play a key role in. Now I'm sorry that Harriman did not really get into the Vietnam equation earlier. I think we might have avoided some of what we did in Vietnam if he had been able to do this because he was able to, for all of the contempt that some people have for Averell Harriman . . . One of my friends said, "Well, you expect a person who has \$21 million on his 18th birthday to be able to do something with his life."

Q: I think his life stands as quite a monument to public service.

PRATT: I think it does. And strange public service, too, and not always what he would have thought, but nonetheless, a person always interested in public service and having certain talents for it. I think that one of the key things was his ability to appraise people. He wasn't always right, but he was far more right than most of the others, and he was able to see that they could build on Souvanna Phouma as they could not build on Phoumi Nosavan. Now if he'd been able to get to Saigon, he might have been able to find somebody there whom one could build on rather than a parade after . . .

Q: The 1963 assassination of Diem.

PRATT: Yes, after the assassination of Diem, the parade of sorry figures that followed. That's something I think that he would have been able to try to arrest.

Q: Well, now, Unger was ambassador about to when?

PRATT: He arrived I think in 1962, so I think he was there until 1964 or '65. [Ed: Ambassador Leonard Unger (career foreign service) presented his Credentials on Jul 25, 1962 and left post, Dec 1, 1964]

Q: And then Sullivan.

PRATT: Then Sullivan, yes.

Q: Can you describe from your perspective at the time the differences - operating style, effectiveness, point of view and all - between Unger and Sullivan?

PRATT: Well, I'd say one of the key things is that under Bill Sullivan one immediately had a vast increase in the excitement level. He was very much sort of in the Kennedy mode, somebody who was very quick, not ponderous, very open. He convened a kind of dinner meeting at his house very shortly after his arrival at which one of the questions raised was a discussion of China. I didn't think he did a terribly good job on that, and I told him so. It didn't bother him one

bit, whereas I found that Leonard Unger was rather secretive. He did not really convey easily to the members of the staff what it is that he thought we should be doing. He did not always clue people in who were in the embassy. He's a shy man, and Bill Sullivan is not very shy. And so one had a greater sense of involvement when Bill Sullivan was there because everybody was brought into what it was that he was trying to do, and he had no problem in trying to explain to others what it is we should be doing, and I think this made for - shall we say - a much happier team. If you look at the people who have been in Laos, you'll find that it's one of the few places where almost everybody considers it either his most important, most interesting tour or one of them. And I think in part this was even more true under Bill Sullivan than under Leonard Unger, although under Leonard Unger as well one had to admit that the Lao, in the first place, were very open to foreigners. In the first place, most of them had been trained in a foreign language; therefore, they did not expect people who came to their country to know their language - because they all themselves had had to learn French, and they also, when they were speaking, even to each other, when they got into an economic or military discussion, they would switch or at least introduce a lot of French because they didn't have the word in their own language. They discussed Buddhism, of course - they had all the words they needed. But when it came to other subjects - medicine or something of that sort - they had learned it in a foreign language, which meant they were very open, and this was very, very pleasing because they are also very ingratiating people. They can be awfully tough to each other, but the point is that even, for example, persons whom they did not particularly like, or should I say, whose country they did not like or the policy of their country they didn't like, they would nonetheless be very, very pleasant with the individuals themselves. And it made for very sharp contrasts to some countries where you're really feeling left out and you're working on the periphery and you are nothing to do with what really is going on in that country.

Q: Was there that visceral reaction to the Vietnamese? You know, in Cambodia the Vietnamese are seen as very aggressive people, sort of like the Japanese certainly before World War II. What were you getting in Laos?

PRATT: Well, in Laos, remember that almost all the elite had been trained in Hanoi or somewhere in Vietnam.

Q: We're talking about French Hanoi at that time.

PRATT: Yes, what I'm saying, though, is that they had all very good Vietnamese friends, and many of them spoke some Vietnamese. The Vietnamese had been used quite considerably in Laos as well as Cambodia by the French as intermediaries, so from their point of view, there were good Vietnamese and there were bad Vietnamese. They did not like, of course, what Hanoi was doing because, in addition to that, Hanoi was suborning their fellow Lao. Now admittedly the top man, Kaysone, was half Vietnamese and half Lao, and there were stories that his Lao mother still lived in the Suvannakhet area and she cursed her son as a turncoat from his Lao roots. So indeed they did consider this to be a Vietnamese movement. They considered it to be having all the ferocity and the un-Lao aspects of ideology and class hatred and xenophobia, which they knew to be bad qualities of the Vietnamese and which they themselves, as good Lao, did not think would be good for them to copy.

So yes, they disliked the Vietnamese and what the Vietnamese temperament was, but so many of them went to marry the Vietnamese; therefore, there were good Vietnamese too. And that's one of the great things about the Lao - they were so, shall we say, not *unconscious* of these various differences, but very conscious of them but assimilated them easily, so that the Chinese they saw not just as the money-grubbing people who benefit from the opium trade or something of that sort, but there are also some Chinese whom they dealt with, who were their bankers and whom they liked and could talk about things with. So that's why Souvanna Phouma was so able to have his own type of neutrality, which was neutrality open to everybody. And I think this was something, a spirit that made us feel that the Lao would be one people who probably could try to make that kind of framework work at the same time that they were able, around the edges, to try to defend their own territory and within their own interests and so on. So it was a strange little operation, and in the end not so much of a success as we would like, but certainly, when you look at what happened to South Vietnam and what happened to Cambodia, Laos came through it a good deal better than any of the other places; therefore, I think it's a vindication of the efforts that people put in to try to manage this framework, because it meant when that whole thing collapsed you had the framework for a transition, to recognize the changed realities.

Q: When Sullivan came in, as you were saying, he's very much the activist and all. Was that a certain amount of concern? In other words, it sounds like situation where more activism might cause more activism on the other side and stir up the pot rather than keep it calm.

PRATT: No, because his activism was to keep the pot calm, because that was his framework. And therefore he was not one of the persons driven by a military mentality at all. And so, yes, he was activist, but activist in trying to manage all of these various problems without any of the military desire to solve something.

Q: Were you, as the politico-military officer feeling very much under the pressure of the American military: get out and do more and all that, I mean from MAC-V [Ed: Military Advisory Command-Vietnam] and other places?

PRATT: No, because we were able the whole time I was there to keep that restrained. In other words, we had our good military and not the bad military. Well, I can take that back - we did have one "bad" military, General Vernon Baldwin, a very nice man, but one who was also duplicitous, the way the military can be. I think some of the greatest liars within our foreign affairs area are the American military, who believe that civilians shouldn't be told some of these things because they will come to the wrong opinions and stop giving them money. So this is something which we were able, for the most part, to restrain because the CIA was, of course, even substantially more secretive, and as you are, I'm sure, well aware, Ted Shackley came in after we'd had out succession of Charlie Whitehouse. [Ed: Ambassador Whitehouse was appointed Jul 24, 1973; presented his credentials on Sep 20, 1973; and left post on Apr 12, 1975]

Q: Whitehouse?

PRATT: Yes, Charlie Whitehouse. He's the FSO who now lives in Virginia in the horse country. No, he was also involved in all of these things a little later, but this was a CIA figure who was a very smooth operator, very good. And a very good deputy, George Kolaris. And then we had Jim

Lilley and then we had Shackley coming in with Lilley also still there.

Q: How was Jim Lilley? I've interviewed him, and what was your impression of how Jim Lilley operated?

PRATT: Well, of course, as I told you, I knew him back in Philips Exeter, so...

Then he had been involved in the China side of things, too. Very intelligent. I know he would make jokes about his being a jock, but he was very intelligent, and very smooth. Well, we had one delightful little contretemps which I'll cover now. One of the jobs I said was to have liaison with the neutrals to funnel money and other support, and on one occasion my house was cattycornered from that of Sukhan Bilaison, who was a secretary of state of sports and youth and was a neutralist official whom Souvanna had designated to be the intermediary for much of this. And so I went home for lunch one day and was called over by Sukhan, who said that he had learned from the front, the neutralists up in the Plain of Jars, that there was going to be a real problem and therefore I should let Bill Sullivan know about this because there was going to be funds or else Colonel Sing would have some difficulties with the patriotic neutralists, mainly the ones who had been taken over by the Communists.

So I went in and told Bill Sullivan about it, and he said, "Go down and tell Jim about this." So I went down and told Jim, and Jim blew up. He said, "I see Sukhan once a week. Why did he raise this with you?" I said, "I don't know. You'd better ask him." Jim did ask him, and he called me in afterwards and said, "I asked Sukhan why he called you in, and so Sukhan said, 'Ah, but I thought you were supposed to be handling support for newspapers and things of that sort and when it comes to intelligence matters I should raise it with Mr. Pratt.'" You have to find that funny. Here we are in this country like Laos, you know, where they are so subtle about so many human relations, but they really can get something so wrong.

But at one point, well, I'll just say why it is that this sort of thing went on. I was considered to be, if not the station chief, a top intelligence operative there, and this came from the fact that one of the persons who had previously, in the 1959-62 period, who had been there with Campbell James, who is a legend in the CIA (and not one that they're always terribly happy about, although I think they should be). He was a very colorful chap, and he was the one who had all these contacts with Souvanna Phouma during the time when he was in the outs and so on. But they finally, when he went away, they then tried to figure out who would be coming to take his place. And then they got an announcement that Campbell James had married Ruth Pratt, and so immediately the penny dropped, and they said, "Ah, then it's Pratt who'll be sent here to take his place." So they considered me to be a top intelligence official.

Q: Offhand, was Ruth Pratt any relation?

PRATT: Only very, very distant, because her family was the family that left New England after the Civil War and became Standard Oil Pratts, and say that my family remained back with whale oil. So in any case, it was still quite enough for them. But again, on one occasion, at a wedding, one of the Sumanikong's *Oulm* called me over to introduce me to a brother whom they had recently elected to the National Assembly from Attopeu, I think it was, because Jim Thompson

had died and he was no longer working with Jim Thompson in his silk business.

Q: Jim Thompson had disappeared.

PRATT: Disappeared, yes. But we considered that he died. In any case, he introduced me and said, "Oh, this is Pratt. He's the head of American intelligence in Laos." So the secretary general of the prime minister's office, Peng Nourin, a very pedantic chap who had been a schoolteacher, of course, very bright chap, too, said, "Oh, but I thought that Shackley was the station chief of the CIA." And Boone turned on him in his rather imperious way, because he, Peng, had married a Souvanikong who was his niece and therefore was one of these young whippersnappers who hadn't really learned the real things in life, and said, "Oh, but Pratt is from the intelligence organization of which the CIA is the front."

Q: How wonderful!

PRATT: Well, it did mean, of course, that I had a role there which sometimes annoyed the CIA. In fact, at one point Shackley tried to get me sent out of Laos, but Sullivan said no. They also sometimes found it useful because it did deflect some what from them, although Shackley, I think, tried with his colorful car and the fact that he made no secret - in fact he made it clear that everybody knew that he had one of the few acoustical rooms - the only one, I guess - in Laos, and one that the ambassador didn't have either.

Q: An acoustical room being...

PRATT: A safe place for conversations.

Q: You couldn't bug it.

PRATT: Yes. And so I think that he was always very fond of his appearing so very overt. It still made things a little bit confusing to some people because they couldn't be quite sure . . . they knew I was very close to Sullivan and therefore questioned the roles. They could get to Sullivan directly and easily through me, but they weren't quite sure just how this worked.

Q: What was Shackley? I mean he was colorful and all that, and later he went down to Saigon.

PRATT: That's right.

Q: But what does it mean to be "colorful," as far as operations go? Was there a feeling, at least on your part, maybe some of your colleagues, that Shackley and his operations were getting off base or sort of going too far, or not?

PRATT: Yes, very much so, because, you see, we'd had the contrast with Blaufarb, his predecessor, and we began to feel that both under Shackley and then later under Devlin the pressure to make a contribution to the Vietnam War effort there in Laos was such that we were destroying people and we were not making a framework where we could keep Laos, as much extracted from it. Of course, we would be considered to be narrowly interested in Laos, and I

suppose, to a certain extent, in part, that was true; however, I do think that Sullivan's view, that Laos could not make a great positive contribution and therefore the thing to do was to maintain things in such a way that it was the least negative contribution . . . and we were very much considering the problem of Thailand on the other side of Laos and Laos as a buffer and not bringing the Thai and the Vietnamese nose to nose. So our view was that in Vietnam, try to solve Vietnam's problems in Vietnam.

Q: Yes.

PRATT: Now we had a number of trips back and forth, because of course we knew that they were not totally separate and they couldn't be. But the point is just in order to be able better to argue how to manage some of the Lao stuff, we would have periodic meetings in Saigon discussing problems of the whole area. And, of course, Bill Sullivan would go down a lot more frequently than anybody else, and he also, of course, had his own back channel to the State Department and so forth. So indeed, this was indeed, again, a problem which we thought should be looked at in its own right, and all the details of it understood rather than just seeing and being seen as an unpleasant little difficulty impinging upon the one thing that they were really interested in, which was Vietnam. And there again, you know that we felt that we had to consider China, we had to consider Thailand, and all the rest of it. And therefore it was a whole *Gestalt* which you had to look at from the Lao point of view as well as from the Vietnam point of view.

Q: Well, certainly when you get into a military operation, thoughts get to be . . . Here people are taking military equipment down through Laos, and we've got to stop that, and that's it, as far as they're concerned.

PRATT: But they should have considered, do we stop it at Hanoi? Do we stop it at Haiphong, etc.? Because, you know, finally when Nixon did do that, blockaded Haiphong and also had the Christmas bombing and also Peking had been sufficiently massaged so that it was holding up shipments across China, you know it was much more effective than what they were doing on the Trail. So you know, the point was that they just were not looking at it either from a broad enough perspective or a narrow enough one.

Q: When did the bombing of the U.S. Air Force start coming in?

PRATT: That must have been in 1965 or 1966.

Q: What was the feeling about the effectiveness of that?

PRATT: Well, we felt that it was something where we had to have a good handle on it, which is why Bill Sullivan grabbed a hold of it and said, "We will validate all targets."

Q: He became known as the "bombing officer."

PRATT: Yes. That was right. Mort Dworkin you probably have heard of, anyway.

Q: Yes.

PRATT: He was one of them. And I've forgotten. There were two other people who had been there. I think Mary Rosenberg for a time, and he died. Anyway, Mort's a good man. In any case, and he always took it in stride, and of course as you know an FSO does not really like the thought that he's the one who's deciding who's going to get hit and who isn't going to get hit by bombs and so forth. But since the principal job was to try to make sure that one avoided hits on inhabited villages and things of that sort - that's why we insisted on having control over it - and therefore we would look at absolutely everything to make sure that if there were any chance of there being a bad hit on civilians that we would say no. And so that's what Sullivan considered his job to be, and of course he was considered to be part - particularly Lavelle was the one who, of course as you know, was most annoyed by any of these civilian controls, including by the President of the United States.

Q: Yes.

PRATT: And I had a problem with that when I was back in Washington later, when we found that Lavelle had been able to find a little area on the map where he could hit the Chinese.

Q: Who's Lavelle?

PRATT: General John D. Lavelle was the commander of the 7th Air Force in Thailand from July 29, 1971 to April 7, 1972. He was the one who was eventually reprimanded and removed for directly disobeying orders.

Q: During this bombing, what was the reaction when it started with Souvanna Phouma and company?

PRATT: Well, the first . . . I remember once, and I've forgotten which operation it was. I think it was something with Long Vong Ping and so forth. I was sent by an aircraft up to Luang Prabang, where Souvanna was at that time, to let him know that we were doing something of this sort, and Sullivan considered that when he had discussed it with him earlier and raised this, that and the other, that he had said yes, provided you don't hit at such and such. And Souvanna still felt that he wanted . . . more than he wanted to . . . So he was a bit unhappy because, of course, this was one of the . . . a point of exclamation which he had to consider might produce a Hanoi or Soviet or Chinese or even a French escalation against him politically, or attacking him in the press in Paris or something of the sort for going over to the Americans et cetera. Because he wanted to make sure, certainly to begin with, that all these U.S. air operations were designed in support of the Lao question, not designed to support what Saigon wanted done against Hanoi. And therefore, not (Ed: Ho Chi-minh) Trail oriented and not purely Vietnam, but something where he could justify it. Listen, the Vietnam were attacking my Lao positions such and such, and this is trying to defend my Lao positions. And so this was something he had to be very careful about, and he did, as I say, get very unhappy when it first occurred because it was at that point of escalation. But when we explained and when we put on our various safeguards and we said it would be supervised . . . he talked to Sullivan, you see, but he had learned to trust Harriman, Unger, Sullivan, but he never really had much trust in most of the American military.

Q: Did the bombing while you were there - and again, we're trying to stick to the 1963-68 period - get to be one of these things where first we made due representation and then begin to get out of hand and become pro forma, and were our people beginning to go after things without due consultation?

PRATT: Not at that time, not until after 1968.

Q: Okay. What was the feeling about Kong Le?

PRATT: Well, Kong Le, of course, was a rather romantic figure. He was a person who was half-Lao - really Lao Tung - and therefore not very much held in respect by the Lao elite, which is all Lao Leung and not Lao Tung. And he had gotten up with a bit of support at the French to be a captain of the paratroopers, and he's the one who staged the coup in 1960. So he was somebody who we knew, to a certain extent, had been responsible for some of the problems. But then, of course, we felt that he was initially not really very supportive of any political figure. It was only later that he became tied in with Souvanna Phouma. And so we realized that he was a not-very-well-educated military chap. We didn't know to what extent what he did was prompted by some of the French, who were anti- Phoumi [Nosavan]. So we had to be supportive of him and what he was doing because he was Souvanna's man and he was therefore someone whom Souvanna had asked us to assist. And since we were pinning our policies on Souvanna [end of tape].

Q: You were saying it was Souvanna Phouma who asked you to support him. He wouldn't have been your candidate.

PRATT: That's right. We knew he also was very, very close to the French, and particularly to those French who were rather anti-American. However, of course, he had to be more open to us because he was being attacked by the Communist side. The Communists had already taken one of his principal deputies; Colonel Duen had gone over to the Communist side. They had killed one of his chief friends and lieutenants in the Plain of Jars, and in retaliation for this - that was Colonel Ketsen, I guess - Kong Le was supposed to arrange the assassination of Quinim, the Chinese (or half-Chinese, half-Lao) foreign minister. And so all of this happened before I got there, but it was very much a fight within the neutralist movement. I knew particularly well some of the ones from Luang Prabang who were better educated than Kong Le, and they all were trying very hard to have Kong Le become more prestigious military leader. He had been, of course, promoted to general by a captain. He of course was totally despised by the regular Lao military because they considered him badly educated, not of the right social class, and all the rest of it. But Kong Le had quite a bit of charm. I don't know whether you ever heard of Pamela Sanders, but she was a journalist out there who was one who wrote a lot of stories which made him very appealing to the American public at the time. And she subsequently married Marshall Brement, who was somebody who at some point you ought to talk to.

Q: We've interviewed Marshall Brement.

PRATT: I see. Well, okay. Pamela, of course, is now Mrs. Brement, and so Marshall's career went from China to Moscow and other -

Q: He ended up in Iceland, I think.

PRATT: That's right, Iceland, although he's continued to be very much involved in Russian affairs, the gulag issue and so forth. In any case, Kong Le was a colorful and charming chap, but not somebody on whom one felt one could build a great deal.

Q: Well, you have this peculiar thing - at least this is just my observer's thing - of this war over the Plain of Jars in the rainy season, one side would take it over, the rainy season would go, and I guess the Vietnamese would take it. Was this considered a real war, or how did we feel about this Plain of Jars dos-à-dos-ing?

PRATT: Well, I think we felt at least one should hold the western rim of the Plain of Jars because that's what then could protect against incursions against the Lao to the Mekong River Valley at Luang Prabang, to a hit into the Meo country, and so forth. So indeed, we did support a Neutralist position there on the western rim. They had already lost the central part and the eastern part by the time I got to Laos, and there was very little thought of retaking it. There had just been stories of how . . . One could never get out of the DIA the reports that Bill Wall would have sent in at one point. He was explaining why the Neutralists were not taking the hills from which the artillery of the North Vietnamese in support of the so-called Patriotic Neutralist forces were bombarding the Neutralist positions in the Plain of Jars. And that's because the spirit's there, and Kong Le, before the attack, went into a monastery and abstained from sleeping around, as he usually did most of his days, in order to build up merit, to be able to get strong enough numenistic [Ed: animistic?] powers to be able to oppose the superior spirits of the Vietnamese. When it failed he went right to his womanizing because he realized that it still wasn't enough to take care of the stronger *phi*. *Phi* is the term used for spirits in Laos, very, very important. But the *phi* of those mountains favored the Vietnamese and not them. So he wrote a communication back explaining why this attack had not succeeded, and of course immediately it was ridiculed by people who just didn't understand the *kabang*. That's what really happened - in the minds of the Lao, anyway.

Q: Before we finish this up, were there any major crises when you were there? I'm thinking of personally affecting you.

PRATT: There was a kind of *coup d'état* almost every month almost every year, and in a couple of these I was very, very much up to my eyebrows, including being nearly . . . Well, mortar shells were landing all around us, but fortunately they hit a tree instead of getting to the ground where they would have spread out and taken care of us. Several of these, I say, I was very, very much involved in, trying to show support for Souvanna Phouma and to . . . Well, for example, in one of them I spent several days with Colonel Bounleut Saykosi, who was involved on the wrong side in one of these coups, and finally got him to surrender and to sort of withdraw his support from the coup, and that permitted Souvanna to get back into power openly. And at that time, for example, I had forty-some people who were camped out in my house because I was considered to have, the Lao said, a big spirit, and therefore, my spirit would be there in the house and help protect them. In addition to that, this Buddha in the next room - it's a Thai Buddha, but I had that in the house - and that was considered also to be a great protective element. So people involved with the coup - on both sides, really - who felt they might be endangered all came and were

camped out in my house, people including all the children.

Q: What were the coup people trying to do? Were these just discontented military, or were they coming from the right, the left, or what?

PRATT: They were coming from the right. They were coming from people who were either supportive of Phoumi Nosavan - and occasionally Phoumi Nosavan was himself personally involved in some of these, and eventually of course Phoumi had to hide out to Thailand, and when he went down to Songkla and continued to make problems from down there. But these were persons who objected to Souvanna Phouma. They felt that these policies were not really resulting in the defeat of the Vietnamese. And he, of course, kept trying to explain to them, "Listen, nobody thinks you can defeat the Vietnamese from here. If anyone defeats the Vietnamese anywhere it's going to be in South Vietnam." But these were persons who just had enough military capabilities so that they felt they might at least try to turn their military capabilities in to greater political clout.

CHARLES WILLIAM MAYNES
Economic Officer
Vientiane (1965-1967)

Ambassador Maynes was born in South Dakota and raised there and in Utah. He was educated at Harvard University and Oxford. Entering the Foreign Service in 1962, he was first assigned to the State Department in Washington, then to Vientiane as Economic Officer. Following Russian language studies, he was posted to Moscow as Economic-Commercial Officer. Resigning the Department in 1970, he served a two-year assignment in the office of Senator Morse, after which he joined the Carnegie Endowment and later served on President Carter's Transition Team. From 1977 to 1989, he held the position of Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations with the rank of Ambassador. Ambassador Maynes was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1998.

Q: Well, then, you went out in '64 to Laos?

MAYNES: Let's see, '64, that's right.

Q: You were there from when to when?

MAYNES: I came in the Foreign Service November, '62. I took four months of French, so April of '63 to probably April of '65 I was in the Department of State in IO, and then I went up to Laos for the next two years, and then I took a year of Russian.

Q: Then we're talking about '65-67, approximately.

MAYNES: Yes.

Q: What was the situation? Laos early on in the Kennedy Administration had been front and center, and one always thinks of Kennedy on TV explaining Laos. The only time that Laos has ever been there.

MAYNES: And it didn't belong there then.

Q: Where did Laos-

MAYNES: I arrived, I guess, when Laos was in the eye of the storm. There had been Kong Li. He had been decently written up in the Washington Post as a little major. I think he was only about four-feet-nine or something like that. He basically pulled a *coup d'état* and established a neutralist government under Souvanna Phouma, which we initially were violently opposed to but then realized, of course, that he's the best thing that we had going because it basically calmed the region for a while. So I arrived just after that had happened, and Laos was the eye of the storm. In fact, the AID director and I took the first car trip down the spine of the country from Vientiane to Paksay to try to prove to merchants that you could take that road and not get shot. But I think if we'd taken it six times, we would have been shot. I don't know. But the point was that it was calm enough in the heart of the country that actually to begin to see life restored, and we were then to convert our AID program in that period from simply supporting the currency to trying to do some development and trying to encourage some cross-border commercial activity, etc. The Cold War was there. Of course, I realized subsequently that we were doing some extremely rough things beyond the point that I could see, a lot of covert activity, a lot of bombing out of Thailand, the "Secret War." The Secret War was going on.

Q: They even had Thai troops.

MAYNES: Everything.

Q: But here you are, Vientiane, you must have been aware of the CIA presence.

MAYNES: Oh, God, I was the only non-Agency. . . . I mean, everybody assumes I was in the Agency, because I was in AID, and everybody around me was CIA, and the director there was the "White Ghost" - what's his name? He's an infamous character in CIA. Stockwell.

Q: Later he was a major figure down towards the end in Saigon.

MAYNES: That's right, and also connected with the Bay of Pigs and Jim Lilly, who went on to become ambassador in Taiwan and South Korea and China. That was a long, long CIA background, including his wife's father was a major figure in the Agency. So I know all those people.

Q: Did they sort of do their thing and you do your thing?

MAYNES: Yes, I mean, first of all, if you crossed the line, it was quickly made clear. For instance, I once did a report on opium smuggling. Of course, it's now known that the Agency

was allowing some of these shipments to come out on their planes, and I began to poke around a little, and immediately, you know, it was made clear to me that I should not do any more reporting in that field.

Q: Who made it clear?

MAYNES: Somebody who came from the embassy. He was the "administrative officer," but I think he was in the chain.

Q: Well, it was a period when if it seems to work you can do anything you want.

MAYNES: That's right. Which, I think, ultimately led to things like the secret bombing of Cambodia that brought us down. I mean, they were breaking the rules; we have to break the rules. It looked gentler where I was sitting, but I realize now that. . . . I had friends who worked in the head office, and they would talk about "the killers," you know, in the mission, because we had people who . . . that was their job.

Q: Just to capture the spirit of the time, was this something that in a way one said, I guess I'd better not know about that and go about my own business?

MAYNES: Well, it wasn't that easy to find out. It was very compartmentalized. Every once in a while, the veil would be broken. For example, there was once when it was clear that the embassy in Vientiane was helping pick targets, but somehow the codes got broken or the messages got rerouted some way and this got out. You weren't supposed to know, and "What's this?" and people very upset higher up that these messages had gotten out. It was all over our heads and beyond the horizon with people at the top in the agency and the embassy helping direct it, but it was over our heads, and as I said, over the horizon. The center part of the country was an island of relative stability, and it was the best moment. Then it began to deteriorate.

Q: Did you, sort of collectively, feel concerned about what the North Vietnamese military might do there?

MAYNES: Oh, sure. We had people killed. I had friends killed because they'd be flying out to these remote areas and their planes would be shot down and that sort of thing. You know, we didn't have a sense of the true dimension of the terror that lay ahead, both the terror that we were inflicting by the bombing and the terror that was on the ground. In part, this was because Souvanna Phouma had miraculously - because of his unique role in Lao history - achieved a situation where all the contesting parties accepted him as prime minister. It was a period of relative calm there for a while. But no, we're talking about the period before we had introduced 250,000 troops into South Vietnam. This was '64, and we introduced them in '65, as I recall. Is that right?

Q: Yes.

MAYNES: Anyway, we hadn't done it yet, and so there was still a kind of calm. You certainly got a sense of the vulnerability of Lao society because Laos is basically a country that should not

exist. It would not exist but for the protection of outside powers. The Thai and the Vietnamese were in the process of dividing the country when a French postal official, Pavie, took a canoe up the Mekong and arrived at the royal court about the time that the division was about to be consummated, and without any authority from Paris, he proclaimed a French Protectorate. I mean, this was totally self-initiated - no authority from Paris - and the Lao were saved as a kingdom as a result and a ward of France. And while I was there, they became a ward of the United States. And then they tried to become the ward of Russia and then the ward of China - anybody from the outside who can protect them against the Thai and the Vietnamese, who otherwise would simply divide the country according to the balance of power or ethnic lines or whatever. So when I was there, Souvanna Phouma was accepted by everyone, even though everyone also took advantage of the situation, but not excessively at that point. And the Lao were very grateful to us and dependent on us because we'd replaced the French as their protector against these immediate outside forces.

Q: How did you find dealing with the Lao government?

MAYNES: Fascinating and frustrating. Fascinating because your Lao counterparts were often as well educated as you were and very smart and, of course, knew the culture better and yet couldn't get anything done. And it was only after I'd been there a year that I realized the difference between a country like the United States and Laos was not just their size and wealth, but in the United States, if somebody at the top says get something done, there are 20 people below who are capable of actually turning out the order. In Laos, these people were like the Wizard of Oz. I mean, they'd issue these orders. . . . I mean, one day I was sitting in AID and into my office came our director of highways, somebody who certainly didn't go past high school, but he'd been building roads in the United States for 25 years. He knew how to build roads. If you called Tom in and said, "Build a road," he could do it. And I looked at him and I thought to my self and said to him, "You know, the difference between Laos and the United States is we have Tom. We have people who aren't at the top who actually can *do* these things, and they don't have any of that." Of course, they have other things, but they don't have that. So it was very frustrating, because we had an action-oriented agenda. You know, Washington wanted progress on all of these things. And we'd go see the Lao, and they'd promise, and then nothing would happen - because they couldn't.

Q: I was consul general in Saigon '69-70, and I found that you were up against the bureaucracy, where in our bureaucracy you say do something, and somebody will do it. But in the Vietnamese bureaucracy, a person on top might give the order, but they might not just do it. Like you'd usually find some way, but there wasn't a feeling of either urgency or really did they want to do it.

MAYNES: Exactly. And then we had this colonial relationship, which was a real problem. I sat in on a meeting once where we had a VIP from Washington and we had our minister-advisor right next to the minister, and the minister gave what the advisor thought was an inadequate answer to this VIP from Washington, so the advisor reached over and grabbed the minister by his necktie and said, "What kind of chickenshit answer is that to give to an important person from Washington, huh?" And we got him out of there the next day, but I thought about that for weeks afterwards - you know, what that really said about the American presence there and the colonial

nature of it, which was not as raw in virtually every other aspect, but the reality was the same. The guy with the clout was the little guy from America, not the big guy from Laos. And that's a very . . . It's a corrupting relationship. A friend of mine who was in the Japan and is the Department's foremost Japanologist said he had not realized this until he took his first tour in Okinawa, and he saw for the first time, for the first time realized what this was doing to us as well as to the Japanese.

Q: No, it does. How about Bill Sullivan? How did he operate and your impression of his influence there?

MAYNES: Well, he totally dominated the mission. I thought he was a brilliant ambassador. Of course, the young people in the mission loved him because he had no sense of hierarchy. I turned out my first airgram, and a note came over to my boss saying, "The man seems to show some analytical talent. I think you ought to give him xyz to do." So already, the doors open with one little note from the ambassador. And he did that all the time with others, so there was a real sense of ferment, and everybody admired him. He wrote better than anybody else in the mission, had ties to Washington, was feared in Washington because of his sharp tongue and sharp pen and the fact that he had Harriman's support.

Q: Harriman was assistant secretary.

MAYNES: Yes.

Q: And really much more - I mean, Harriman was sort of the sub-secretary of state.

MAYNES: Exactly, for Asia, and so he was exciting to work for, and I'm very high on him. I guess the only thing I would say in retrospect is that none of us, including him, saw far enough ahead. We were so absorbed in doing the job that we, I don't think, saw just how futile this exercise was. It was only at the end of my tour that I began to realize that we were fighting nationalism more than we were fighting Communism and we were going to lose for that reason. But the Communists had captured the nationalist flag. That is the way I would put it. We were continually trying to convince ourselves that the majority were really with us if we could only prevent them from being intimidated. And in fact, and this was a debatable assertion, but in fact I think in retrospect it's clear, that once Ho Chi Minh captured the nationalist flag, that to resist it took such overwhelming force that it would be almost unconscionable to apply - and that they were going to win, maybe disastrously for their own future. It's kind of like the Israelis trying to deny the relevance of Arafat.

Q: You're talking about the Palestinian cause?

MAYNES: Yes. He had captured the nationalist flag, and to defeat him when he's got that flag, maybe to help somebody else get it - but, of course, the people there who would get it would be Hamas. But it was the same kind of situation, and I don't think Sullivan saw that. I certainly didn't see it until it was too late, and I think in that sense, I suppose, he failed and we all failed.

Q: But it seems, too-

MAYNES: But he was an excellent, excellent ambassador who stood up for his people, who wasn't afraid of Washington. I find if I have a criticism of people in the State Department it is that too many of them are almost like military officers in the sense that they don't challenge a bad order. They just "Yes, Sir," and "Can do," and that's good in some cases, but I'm not sure in diplomacy that that's always the best approach.

Q: But it seems as though some of the thrust of what we were doing - we put such emphasis on these small countries that we were putting people like Sullivan and others in, who were great activists, and they were the wrong people for the countries.

MAYNES: They were larger than life.

Q: And this is exactly what you shouldn't, because the Lao are a pretty passive people, and they sort of brush them aside. I mean, you have a feeling that-

MAYNES: I agree with that too. I remember going in as the notetaker for one VIP from Washington, and I accompanied him in every place we went. He would make Washington's spiel, he would advance Washington's demands, and the Lao would say, "I understand, I understand you," and so he goes back, and I see a cable that goes from the plane to the White House saying, "All objectives achieved." And of course, I knew that not one of them had been achieved. Not one time did the Lao say they would actually *do* what he said. They said they understood him, you know, that they understood it and they weren't going to do it.

Q: Well, this is one of the great stories of the clash of cultures.

MAYNES: Of course, in Laos you also have a culture that regards any show of excessive emotion or anger as totally unacceptable socially. And it's almost in the American character that a good manager or something - well, maybe the word *anger* isn't quite right - but energy, edge - but it doesn't work in that culture. They find it almost an example of barbarism.

Q: Well, on the economic side, how were things going as far as the AID program is concerned?

MAYNES: Well, we had a relative success. When I was there the Lao currency was declared the strongest currency in the world by a survey out of Wall Street. We supported it at 5500 to 1. We had a little organization called FEOF (Foreign Exchange Operations Fund, or something like that), and we had five countries run it. America dominated it because we put the most money in, and we stabilized the currency. This was in reaction to an earlier AID program where we'd subsidized the import of commodities, and then it had been grossly abused and had led to many congressional investigations and condemnations of the Department for its poor management. This was the alternative, which was to stabilize the currency and basically create a free market. And it worked. The trouble was it was expensive. We were spending - not the United States alone, but with FEOF - something like \$60 million a year to subsidize the Lao economy, and when you do something like that, of course, the reason we got so involved in the budget was that the higher their budget, the higher FEOF had to be. So if you only had \$60 million or only had \$50 million, you had to go in there and tell them which they had to cut in order to make it. Every

year I had to do the mathematical analysis of what the imports were and what the outputs and what the FEOF amount was going to be. And then we would present it to the IMF, and they would ratify it and they would go and raise the money. But it was considered a great success at the time and was the reason that the DCM in Laos, who was slotted to be DCM in Moscow, took me along, because he wanted to get some new blood in the economic field in Soviet studies. So I had a very successful tour there. It ultimately began to collapse because we began to have gold outflow problems in the United States, and the treasury began getting upset that Laos in particular became the center, in Indochina, for the gold trade. Massive amounts of gold - because we were a free market - were moving through Vientiane to Saigon, where every housewife in Saigon was wearing a gold bracelet that was hammered out in Vientiane as an inflation protection device.

Q: Yes, like they even buy little bars of gold. They're for sale along the-

MAYNES: Yes. I was providing the financial underpinning to make this, because you could buy and sell money. So we had some very serious visits from the Treasury while I was there. I spent time with senior officials of the Treasury, and they wanted us to stop this gold trade. We couldn't stop the gold trade without stopping the free market in the currency, so while I was there it lasted, but I think in the end they had to take some steps because it was true we were headed off the gold standard. We were not going to make people pull more and more tons of gold out of Fort Knox.

Q: What was the impression that people had of Souvanna Phouma, from the embassy, that you were getting?

MAYNES: I think high because of Sullivan. I mean, Sullivan dominated the embassy, and if he was high on him, then others were. There were some Cold Warriors who were close to some of the right-wingers in the military and thought that we should get a government with a harder edge, and some were there to work up *coups*, one of which is an interesting story in itself. But whenever that happened, we came down foursquare for Souvanna Phouma because anybody who did his numbers back in Washington knew that this was the best situation for us.

But Souvanna was a transitional figure. I realized that while I was there. I followed him out in the countryside once. I used to watch him all the time in Vientiane, but there was a period after decolonialization where there was a window for a certain kind of leader, and that was someone who was comfortable in both worlds. Souvanna Phouma could show up at a diplomatic dinner party and be a charming Frenchman, and a Westerner, if you will.

Souvanna Phouma was a transition figure because after decolonialization there was a window where people were absolutely needed by their country in order to reassure the domestic population that an authentic figure was in charge of the country and reassure the outside donors that someone like them was in charge of the country, and so Souvanna Phouma was an ideal transition figure. He was a French member of the *haute bourgeoisie* in Vientiane, charming the wives of ambassadors, and out in the countryside he was a Lao prince. But even while I was there, you began to see the transition to the new order. A bill went through the Lao parliament which required all documents in Laos to be in Lao, and that was passed by a parliament which

was dominated by military people who'd been elected to the parliament. Many of them were sergeants and majors, and they took over the parliament, and they represented the future of Laos, which was more indigenous, with no or very light French patina. And they were demanding that Laos be Laos, and so the more that they succeeded in passing regulations like that, the less relevant people like Souvanna Phouma became, because basically the parliament was saying, "We don't want a transitional doubt. We don't want a translator between the two cultures. We want one culture. We want Laos." And so he had to pass from the scene at some point. But for a while I think he was, even in the Lao context, a great man. I mean I think he spared his country. . . . He tried to play the role that Sihanouk has also tried to play, and I think maybe in some ways with more success, because Sihanouk finally got overwhelmed. That may not be Sihanouk's fault, but they both were trying in their way to keep the Communists at bay and keep us at bay and save their country, and I think they, in their own ways, bought a lot of time for their countries. In the end they were overwhelmed.

Q: Did you have any feel, while you were there - I'm talking about you as one of the members of the embassy - for the Communist movement there, because we're looking down at Cambodia, where you had the Khmer Rouge, which was-

MAYNES: Of course, Khmer Rouge we hadn't even heard of.

Q: I know, but I'm still saying, in that country there developed probably the most vicious and virulent form. Were you seeing anything of that nature?

MAYNES: Nothing. As a matter of fact, the Communists were in Vientiane. They had a little compound there - at least that's my memory of it. One didn't know. First of all, Souvanna Phouma's brother was the head of the Communist movement.

Q: Half brother.

MAYNES: Half brother - so one didn't know what kind of movement it was or what would happen if they ever took over. I mean, we saw them more as agents of the Vietnamese than as any serious domestic movement. Maybe we were wrong, but I'm saying that's the way we saw it. And no one really knew what a Lao Communist was, other than an ally of the Vietnamese, who were trying to take over South Vietnam. The politics in the period that I was there, the neutralist mantra was dominant, and the right-wingers and the Communists were pushed to the side because there was an international agreement and you had Souvanna Phouma as a unique legitimator in charge of the government. So we didn't have debates like that. The Communist problem was over there, and it was being contained by the fighting in the mountains, on the one hand, and the agreement of '62 on the other.

JAMES R. LILLEY
Deputy Chief of Station
Laos (1965-1968)

James R. Lilley was born in China in 1928. After serving in the US Army from 1946-1947 he received his bachelor's degree from Yale University in 1951. From 1951-1958 he worked as an analyst for the US Army. His career includes positions in China, Japan, Thailand, Cambodia, Philippines, Laos, and ambassadorships to South Korea and China. Ambassador Lilley was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in May 1998.

LILLEY: I was still considering whether I should stay in the agency. I talked to some people in the Foreign Service about what was called "lateral entry" into the Department of State. However, the agency personnel people came to me and said that I had a "big break" coming up and that I was scheduled to go to Laos as Deputy Chief of Station. This was one of our biggest projects at the time, involving an operation of some 40,000 Montagnards. It sounded attractive to me and much more interesting than anything I would have to do in the Department of State. So I went to Laos.

Q: You were in Laos from when to when?

LILLEY: From 1965 to 1968 and it was truly a big operation.

Q: Oh, yes.

LILLEY: It wasn't very "covert." However, in the initial stages some of the things that we did were quite successful. We had small teams "upcountry" in Laos. We had people like Vint Lawrence, Tony Po, and Tom Fushman, who were really first rate, paramilitary officers.

Then Ted Shackley was assigned as the Chief of Station in July, 1966. He brought in a lot of his old Cuban and German crowd. That changed the complexion of the Laos operation because Ted was a real activist and had been directed to increase efforts to support military operations in Vietnam.

Q: I was just going to say that Shackley also became quite a figure in South Vietnam. He was assigned to Saigon in December, 1968, and served there until January, 1972.

LILLEY: He became known as the "Blond Ghost."

Q: Were you there in Saigon with him?

LILLEY: No. I was in Vientiane, Laos for about a year with Doug Blaufarb and then, maybe, two years, with Shackley.

Q: How did Shackley operate?

LILLEY: Shackley was a good, personal friend, and our wives are good friends, and that sort of thing. Shackley is a "driven" person. He's a "driver," ambitious, tough-minded, and ruthless. However, there is a very appealing aspect of Ted as a human being, which I always

liked. What he was determined to do was to build up the Station in Laos and play a critical role in the Vietnam War by hitting the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. He brought the paramilitary assets that he had to bear on this key target. He didn't just sit around. He wanted to win wars. His inclination was to drive ahead.

He had never served previously in East Asia. He was very new to the area. He caught on very quickly and he mastered facts quickly. He made persuasive presentations. He was a "match" for the U.S. military in Saigon. He was in ways smarter and tougher than they were. He ran these operations against the Ho Chi Minh trail, including sending "trail watchers," paramilitary "strike forces," and Forward Air Controllers to bring in the F-4 fighters, T-28s, B-52 bombers to bomb the trail. He would have his people out there, calling in the air strikes against the trail. I think, again, that he was engaged in building up an empire and developing staff communications facilities to support people assigned up country in Laos. He was appointing Chiefs of Bases, assigning administrative officers, putting in communications, and all of these things. In fact, this was the beginning of the end as the war in Vietnam became increasingly unpopular and support for our operation in Laos was cut back and eventually withdrawn.

Q: I also take it, and I've never been in Laos, that it is difficult to impose all of this system on the Lao. Not so much the Montagnards, but the lowland Lao are a rather gentle people.

LILLEY: Yes, they are. They are "sweet people" in many ways. They love to make love. They love to drink and play. They don't like to work too hard. They think in terms of the "Pi" or the "spirits." Everything is pervaded with a sense of another world. The lowland Lao are Buddhists. They will do much of what you want.

Prince Souvanna Phouma was then the Lao Prime Minister. He was a sophisticated, French educated man, an intellectual. He was a politician, but he was a French style politician. He went along with all of this. He was considered a "neutralist," but then he moved more and more toward the West as he saw his rival, Prince Souphanouvong, the leader of the Pathet Lao, being "turned" by the Vietnamese communists and eventually taken over by them.

The U.S. aid program in Laos was gigantic. It was keeping the whole situation afloat. Laos did produce a little. U.S. aid was pouring into the country.

We had a huge Mission in Laos. In effect, the CIA Station was fighting the war for Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, much to the frustration of the U.S. Army representatives, who always wanted to get in and run the war and couldn't stand to see this clandestine war going on and succeeding. I think that what happened was that we were caught in the "Vietnam Syndrome" of building a large, administrative structure and perhaps exaggerating our successes.

Q: I've talked to some of our people who served there. We talked about the bombing of strategic points along the Ho Chi Minh trail. They noticed that if we cut a given point on the trail, everything would just go around it.

LILLEY: We did what we could with B-52 strikes against points in Laos and near the trail. We prepared "after action" reports and picked out areas which had been bombed. If you read the reports prepared by North Vietnamese prisoners, you'll see how "devastated" they were by the bombing of the trail. However, you'll also see how relentless the North Vietnamese were in carrying out their mission. There is a book by a North Vietnamese soldier, I think, who served in a battalion with a nominal strength of 500 men. I think that about 490 of them were killed. They suffered horrendous casualties, but the remaining 10 North Vietnamese from this battalion kept on fighting.

I think that, in many ways, we were often rather successful with our practice of taking these illiterate "Kha," or southern Laotian tribesmen, and equipping them with a little hand device with a picture of a truck, tank, or artillery piece. These devices had the capability of relaying up to an aircraft overhead how many of these items of equipment they had recorded as having seen. The tribesman just punched a button for each item he saw. The location of this tribesman was reported automatically to an aircraft flying overhead. The tribesman would be sitting on a mountain, looking down on the Ho Chi Minh trail. Then they would call in the air strikes. Sometimes we had quite a bit of success. The North Vietnamese had trail watchers, too. They would sense that our planes were coming, and then they would get off the road and take cover. Instead of using jets, we brought in B-25 bombers [World War II, twin-engined aircraft]. They would hover over the Ho Chi Minh trail till the North Vietnamese equipment items came out of hiding. We also used T-28s [single engine, originally advanced training aircraft, which were equipped with machineguns and bombs]. We used them because they could hover over a given area for a long time.

We tried all sorts of things to get at this target. We had advance scouting parties which would pick out a North Vietnamese munitions dump located on a hill. These parties would call in air strikes by planes with missiles which would try to hit the tunnels going into the munitions dump. Once in a while, we would get a "hit," and the whole hill would blow up. More often, we didn't get a "hit."

One of the things that we did in the Nam Bac area in Laos was to try to persuade the Hmong, the Montagnards, to take over a given valley. This didn't work very well. The Hmong couldn't fight well in the lowlands of Laos. Just as they wouldn't fight on the Plaine des Jarres, a plateau area of northern Laos.

We took a "beating" there. Then, when Ambassador Mac Godley and Larry Devlin came in and replaced us, they did try to take over the Plaine des Jarres. Ambassador Bill Sullivan would never let us try to do that. He was sure that this effort would fail. However, Ambassador Godley was more gung ho [aggressive] than anybody I've ever seen. He loved doing this paramilitary type action.

Q: This was the problem. Obviously, some of you felt that this was fun. Perhaps fun is the wrong term, but when you try to do something, through third parties and using various types of equipment, you get terribly involved in this.

LILLEY: You were in Vietnam.

Q: I was in Vietnam. I remember that we were always looking, not so much for a "gimmick," but to find a way of making a small investment and so end the war.

LILLEY: We accepted the line that this was an honorable war which was worth fighting. We believed we were fighting against a vicious, cruel, communist enemy.

Q: Right.

LILLEY: This situation drove us to do these things, without taking any really long range view of them. So the whole "Meo" or "Hmong" operation became controversial. Then, when we pulled out of Laos, the Hmong were left on their own. Some of the people in U.S. agencies were very disturbed about this. Dr. Jiggs Weldon, a medical doctor who worked for USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development] in Laos, also used to work with us. He was really "tortured" about this whole situation. He would say: "The Laotians can't win. They could have beaten the Pathet Lao, but the North Vietnamese have 70,000 troops in Laos. These Laotians can't fight them." For a while we equalized the situation by bringing air power to bear. Then, I think, the "Fulbright Committee" [Senate Foreign Relations Committee] began to reduce appropriations for Laotian operations, when the war in Laos and Vietnam became unpopular. The North Vietnamese saw that the end was coming for us. The antiwar movement in the U.S. began to get very strong.

We had coups d'etat, floods, and all kinds of things in Laos to deal with. We saw some of our people "crack up" who could no longer "take it." We saw some of our young guys killed in helicopter crashes.

Q: What about Kong Le [dissident Royal Laotian Army officer]? Was he there in Laos when you were there?

LILLEY: Yeah, he was there.

Q: What was he like?

LILLEY: Kong Le was a short, little ex-paratrooper who, I think, pulled off a coup d'etat against the Lao Government in 1960. He claimed to be a "neutralist," working against the then right-wing Government of Laos under then Prime Minister Phoumi Nosavan. He was a very strange little man with great ideas of what he was. Briefly, he became a "celebrity." People looked to Kong Le, including the Russians and everybody else. I remember that Ambassador Sullivan used to say: "The Russians were trying to play the Laotian game. They started out, trying to pick their people. The first one that they picked was Kong Le." They picked him as a "neutralist" who was supposed to be against the U.S. Sullivan said: "Then they found out that he was a 'nut.' The second guy that the Russians tried was Prince Souvanna Phouma. They found out that he was a bourgeois Frenchman with a Lao face. The third one that they tried was Phoumi Vonvichit, who turned out to be in the Chinese camp." Sullivan said: "The Russians were not formidable. They made mistake after mistake."

The Americans made mistakes, too. Ambassador Sullivan was in Laos during the whole time

I was there. I must say that Sullivan had a pretty good grasp of the limitations on what could be done in Laos. He was determined to keep the U.S. military out of Laos, unless they were conducting air strikes for him. He wanted the CIA to stay in Laos because he thought he could control it and he was pretty good at doing this. For example, every rifle provided to the Lao had to be issued under a memo submitted to him. He was a "take charge" person and very clever in terms of detail. I know that he made a lot of enemies on the way but I always had the greatest admiration for Bill Sullivan.

Q: How did he work with Shackley?

LILLEY: It was a good working relationship. Sullivan respected Shackley's drive, his command of facts, and his ability to lead men. However, he also distrusted Shackley's ambition and what Sullivan thought was his practice of "shading" certain facts. I think that Sullivan liked Doug Blaufarb, who was Shackley's predecessor. Blaufarb had gone to Harvard University and was much more "restrained" than Shackley was.

Shackley was assigned to Laos by Des Fitzgerald [former Assistant Director of CIA for East Asian Affairs] and was told, in effect, "Take that thing over and run it! You're the man who did the Berlin operation. You're the man who handled the Cuban missile crisis and got us out of the 'Bay of Pigs' fiasco. I want you in Laos and I want you to get on top of that situation. You're in charge." I think that Shackley took those instructions seriously. He was Fitzgerald's "fair-haired man."

Q: Were there debates over reporting and evaluations?

LILLEY: Yes, there were. I raised that subject a couple of times. It was very hard to "dent" the trend of the reporting. I thought that our figures on enemy casualties were too high.

Q: I think that this was one of the major problems that everyone felt. This was during the administration of President Johnson. From Johnson on down, including Secretary of Defense McNamara, did you feel pressure to turn out reports showing real progress? Was this part of the situation?

LILLEY: I think that there was another dimension to this which said, in effect, "If you guys can't do it, we're sending in the American Army."

Q: I never thought of that. You mean that you really had the feeling that...

LILLEY: Well, Major Gen Dick Stilwell was a big hero during World War II. And then, I believe, he was in the military group which tried to take over the CIA in the early 1950s. He then got into the MAAG [Military Assistance and Advisory Group]. It was called "MACV" in Vietnam [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam]. In Thailand he called the MAAG "MACTHAI" [Military Assistance Command, Thailand]. He was going to turn the campaign against the communists in Laos into a military operation by questioning the CIA effort. Ambassador Sullivan worked with us to keep the Army out of taking over the military campaign against the communists in Laos. The U.S. military had already had the "White

Star" Special Forces teams on the Bolovens Plateau in southern Laos. They had been in there in the early 1960s. The U.S. military had developed a taste for this "exotic" area. The Bolovens Plateau was a beautiful and strategic area at a relatively high altitude, and down to the southeast of it was the "Sihanouk Trail" which traversed Laos south of Pakse.

Then the Special Forces teams were all pulled out when the agreement on Laos was signed with the Pathet Lao [in, I believe, 1962], providing for the neutralization of Laos. As you know, Governor Averill Harriman was the negotiator of this agreement to neutralize Laos that was reached in Geneva. Bill Sullivan was Harriman's principal assistant at this negotiation, and Harriman arranged to have him promoted over others and to become Ambassador. Harriman was Sullivan's "guru" [sponsor]. Sullivan is a terrific "staff man" and a master of detail, which he learned very quickly. I think that Governor Harriman was Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs at that time.

Q: Yes, but he was more than that. He was THE "powerhouse" in East Asia.

LILLEY: He was former Governor of New York State. He was a "big man" and he "mattered." He was always very nervous about the huge CIA contingent coming into Laos and, in effect, violating the terms of the agreement to neutralize Laos. At that time U.S. military officers weren't in Laos, but CIA was there, carrying out a paramilitary operation. We arranged for our teams to be resupplied by planes from Air America, and Bird and Sons' resupply missions. Of course, the Defense Attache Office in the Embassy in Vientiane had about 30 people in it, engaged in running the Forward Air Controller system. We were sort of "hiding an elephant under a handkerchief."

However, for a while it was like Afghanistan in the future. It was THE big, successful, paramilitary operation, which kept the North Vietnamese "in line." What we couldn't do was to do the things that the Mission in Saigon was calling for, and that was to cut the Ho Chi Minh trail and prevent communist reinforcements from going through Laos into South Vietnam. I think that that is where the distortions took place in the reporting. The Ho Chi Minh trail just wasn't being cut, and we said that it was being severely constrained.

Then the U.S. Air Force brought in B-52 bombers under the "ARC LIGHT" operation. They brought in the bombers because movement along the Ho Chi Minh trail wasn't being stopped. Before they bombed an area under the "ARC LIGHT" operation, we had to send in people to certify that the area had nobody in it. They were bombing wasteland, in effect.

ERNEST C. KUHN
Operations Officer, USAID
Vientiane (1965-1975)

Ernest C. Kuhn was born in Ohio in 1940. A graduate of Ohio State University, he served in the Peace Corps in Thailand from 1963-1965. He became an AID officer and served in a variety of positions in Laos from 1965-1975. Mr. Kuhn

was interviewed in 1995 by Arthur J. Dommen.

Q: Would you like to tell us some basic facts about how you got to Laos? First of all your name and what you were doing when you were sent to Laos.

KUHN: Okay. My name is Ernest C. Kuhn, Ernie Kuhn. I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand from 1963 through mid-1965 working in a...I'm going to use the politically incorrect term of Meo rather than Hmong because at the time we are talking about no one referred to anyone as Hmong...I was living in a Meo village up near the Thai/Lao border in Loei province. While I was in the Peace Corps two of our directors in Bangkok had been AID employees in Laos and were familiar with the program and basically recruited me or suggested that I might be interested in working up in Laos. They set up a trip for myself and four other Peace Corps volunteers the summer of 1965. We went up to Laos, were interviewed and I was offered a job immediately on contract at first and later on became a full Foreign Service officer.

I arrived in Laos to work in September 1965. I was assigned to the Rural Development Division (RDD). Under the RDD there were mainly three different sections or subdivisions within that division. One was the cluster program. A cluster program was straight community development work. Working with groups of villages, hence the name clusters, anywhere from three to five villages. The AID employees, or in many cases they were IVS (International Voluntary Services) people, lived in one of the villages and worked in the cluster.

The second major office in RDD was the Forward Area Program. These again were either AID or IVS people who lived in one village which was in an area of general intermittent fighting or least civic or military tension. Hence the term, forward area, they were a little bit forward of the mainstream Lao village security.

Q: What province was this?

KUHN: Well, these were all over. There were cluster and forward area people in Sayaboury, in Savannakhet, outside of Saravane, the Pakse area, Muong Soui, generally all over.

Q: Did you move around from one to the other?

KUHN: I wasn't in the Forward Area Program, but they didn't really move around. They would be in one village basically conducting political, social and agricultural programs and things like that. Those people were in a more exposed area than people who were working in the clusters which was just general rural development work.

The third section, the one that got all the raised eyebrows in Vientiane, and we were all suspected of not being AID employees. In fact, people would say to our face, "You people are all CIA agents and not AID people." That section was the refugee relief program. This was the program that by 1966 was almost driving the AID program there. The refugee relief program was broad and included the whole school system, the medical system and, of course, the relief part. After the cease fire of 1973, the attention turned from relief to more resettlement. So by the early seventies we were sort of half relief and half resettlement and by 1973-74-75, we were strictly

trying to resettle people. But the refugee relief work was the most dangerous, the most exposed. We had at Sam Thong at various times, where I was assigned, anywhere from three to five people; Luang Prabang usually had one or two people and Ban Houei Sai had either one or two. Later on, people were assigned to Savannakhet and Pakse in refugee relief. When I got there the primary emphasis was in the north. The program had been started by a man by the name of Edgar "Pop" Buell. Pop, along with whatever support he could get from the CIA, whatever support he could get from any source available, really started the refugee relief program and, of course, later on AID picked it up and it became a huge operation.

Q: Was he still in the country when you arrived?

KUHN: Oh, yes. I was interviewed by Pop and hired by Pop. He was the one who had the final say as to who was sent to Sam Thong. He was there until Sam Thong fell in March 1970. Later on, he retired but still stayed in Vientiane until 1975 when he went down to Bangkok. He died in Manila visiting a mutual friend there. So, Pop was quite the character.

There were two people who were widely instrumental in promoting the refugee relief program and really making it a success, at least we considered it a success at the time. The other man was Dr. Charles Welton, "Jiggs" Welton, and his wife, Dr. Pat McCreary, the Field Marshal. These two people along with Pop were able to put together an integrated program with medical relief, educational facilities, agricultural programs that was really quite remarkable for its breadth and scope, the number of people that we served given the conditions that we served under.

Q: Do you have any general number of people you were serving?

KUHN: Well, there were times when we were feeding well over 300,000 people. Now, of course, that included people in the south, too. I suppose in the north at any given time we probably had upward to 200,000 or more people. Those people were mostly served by air. We had an extraordinary system using both *Air America* and *Continental Air Services*. People don't really give much credit to Continental because the popular perception is that Air America was the CIA airline and did all the work. But, in fact, a major part of the work was done by Continental Air Services. Bob Six who was the owner of Continental Airlines had started up this subsidiary to get a piece of the pie. Bob Six and his wife, Audrey Meadows who played the wife of Jackie Gleason on the *Honeymooners*, took a personal interest in the program. In fact, they would themselves come over to Sam Thong and even donated a jeep to Pop back in the days when AID was not giving him any support. So Continental was a major player.

Later on, there were other smaller airlines, helicopter airlines. I can't think of names right now but there was a series of little airlines who got contracts with AID. The way these contracts worked both with Continental and Air America was on a cost sharing basis. Even though Air America was a proprietary airline somebody had to pay the bills. So, once or twice a year there were these huge meetings where the AID contracting people and the Air America contracting people, the Requirements Office, which supported the government troops, and the CIA representatives all sat down and tried to figure out who was going to pay what portion of the bills. It got sort of arcane and bizarre because at any given air drop, at any given location we might have Special Guerilla Unit (SGU) troops which would get support from the CIA, we might

have refugees who got support from AID, we might have dependents of Forces Armee's Royale troops who would get support through the RO (Requirements Office). So these things became rather bizarre in trying to split up the costs of the aircraft.

Q: This raises an interesting question. How much of these costs were actually secret? Presumably the AID budget was all public.

KUHN: Many of these things were simply lumped under the category of refugee relief, AID. I honestly don't know what was published in the way of air costs, if anything. That was something I wasn't ever involved in, and as long as the planes kept flying and the rice kept dropping, I was happy.

Q: Who was the AID director at the time you arrived in Laos?

KUHN: When I arrived there, it was Joe Mendenhall. Ambassador [William H.] Sullivan had just arrived not too long before I had gotten there. I guess Doug Blaufarb was the station chief.

Q: He later produced a voluminous document on counterinsurgency in Laos.

KUHN: I have seen it so many times referenced, but have never gotten a copy of it yet.

Q: It is practically unreadable. It is so technical. Not the sort of thing you would read at bedtime.

KUHN: Okay, I didn't know anything in Laos was all that technical.

Q: Well, organizational rather than technical. A whole series of acronyms, etc.

KUHN: Oh.

Q: So Sam Thong was your first assignment in Laos?

KUHN: Yes, I was there until medevaced out in January 1970 with a suspected ulcer.

Q: Can you say a little bit about what was there at the time you arrived?

KUHN: Before I answer that, let me go back to one other point in terms of the refugee relief program and being hired. I was instructed by Pop...and this is how relatively secret the program was supposed to be...I was told by Pop that there were only four people whom I was ever to talk to about refugees or military operations.

Q: These did not include journalists, I presume.

KUHN: These did not include journalists, no. One was Joe Mendenhall, the director; another was, of course, Ambassador Sullivan; one was Alex Mavro, who was AID executive officer; and the fourth person was whoever the station chief was in the embassy. Everything we did

upcountry was to be considered classified because no one was allowed to come upcountry and this is why whenever we came down to Vientiane and would sit in the ACA (American Community Association) and have breakfast or lunch or beer in the bar, etc., if there were more than one of us we would talk shop... “Oh, I was up at Lima Site 215 last week” or Lima this or Lima site that [Airfields in Laos were designated on air navigation charts by numbers with the prefix Lima. Thus, Vientiane was Lima 08, Pakse was Lima 11, Savannakhet was Lima 39, Séno was Lima 46, Luang Prabang was Lima 54, and so on. Smaller landing fields, basically Short Take Off and Landing (STOL) strips, were designated by numbers with the prefix Lima Site. Thus, Khang Khai was Lima Site 08, which was shortened to LS 08] and the FAR, the SGU, so that anyone else listening to our conversation full of acronyms would assume that we were talking in this gobbledygook for some secret reason. In fact, we weren't, it was just a convenient, shorthand way of talking.

But Sam Thong, when I got there was still relatively primitive. There was no housing for the Americans, with the exception of one small house for the public works man who had been in charge of putting in the airstrip and building the buildings. We had one Quonset hut which on the ground floor housed the office, which consisted of a big Mark 4 single sideband radio and a backup sideband, a desk and some other junk. There was a little kitchen area in the back where we could cook. There was a big fireplace and upstairs there were three or four rooms that some of us used when we came back to Sam Thong. Often someone slept in a sleeping bag on the floor in front of the radios. We tried to monitor the single sideband 24 hours a day. Anybody who was back at Sam Thong -- somebody usually took turns sleeping on the concrete floor. We would sleep on the floor with the radio on in case somebody upcountry might need assistance.

In fact I had brought all my clothes from Thailand and my mother had sent me some things. I had them just in cardboard boxes in the second floor of the Quonset Hut. I came back one time and found that the room was empty. I didn't know it, but Pop Buell used to solicit used clothing from any source and he stuffed everything in the same room where all my belongings were. While I was gone somebody came in and distributed everything out to the refugees. So I came back and all I had were the clothes that were in my knapsack. I was pretty well ticked off as you could imagine.

When I got there in September, 1965, the hospital had just been built so we had a fully functioning hospital with operating room, the nurses' quarters for the Lao nurses had just been completed and they were graduating their first or second class of nurses. This was a tremendous social upheaval in northern Laos to take 15-, 16-, 17-year-old Lao, Meo (Hmong) and Lao Theung girls out of their villages and bring them down to Sam Thong and try to teach them some sort of rudimentary skills to become nurses.

Q: Who were the teachers?

KUHN: Well, one of the first persons up there was a woman by the name of Diana Dick. She, along with personnel that the public health people, Dr. Weldon and Dr. McCready, sent up did the training. We had a Lao doctor, Dr. Kameung, who was an outstanding doctor, who did a lot of the work. And we had air commando doctors and medics. They were not involved in teaching, but certainly as full fledged doctors; the nurses were there and could watch and observe what

was going on. Many of the things that local nurses did were just the basic things of looking after a patient, but in fact many a patient died in the middle of the night because the nurse had forgotten to adjust the flow of medicine or saline solution, or the person developed complications during the night and the nurse on duty may have gone out with her boyfriend for the evening. It was pretty primitive, but the first time something like this had ever been developed. So it was a showcase. Every time someone came up to Sam Thong, all the nurses were paraded out in their little white uniforms and it was quite a sight.

In order to give some continuity to the Lao government in Sam Thong, there was a house built for the governor and there were *khoang* offices built so we had a fully functioning *khoang*. All the different *muongs* had offices there.

Q: The khoang being the province and the muong being the district?

KUHN: Yes. So we had a fully functioning government, as such. Also at Sam Thong we had an ENI, a teacher training college, where village men and women who had some education were trained to eventually go back and teach in their own villages. In fact, that is where my wife was teaching, in the ENI, when I met her.

General Vang Pao was the commander for Military Region II, but his deputy commander, Colonel Chansom Pakdimonivong actually lived at Sam Thong. While Long Chieng was considered more the headquarters for the Armée Clandestine or the SGU special forces units cum CIA, Sam Thong was considered more as the administrative headquarters for the FAR troops. Colonel Chansom had his office there and all his G-1, G-2, G-3, whatever, were all located there.

Q: Military Region II covered Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua provinces.

KUHN: Officially, MR II was Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua, but authority and operations, in the early days, bled over into Luang Prabang, Sayaboury, Phong Saly, and Borikhane if it involved the Meo. When you get up in the border areas it was a little bit fluid depending on who the ethnic groups were. Based out of Sam Thong I covered a lot of activities in Luang Prabang and Phong Saly. Even though they were under command of Chao Sayavong, who was the commander for that region, when it came to the tribal movements, they looked to Vang Pao as much as anybody.

Xieng Khouang province, itself, was predominantly an ethnic group called the Phuan, and Chao (Prince) Saykham Southakakoumal himself was the son or grandson of the last ruling prince of Xieng Khouang. He was also the appointed governor of Xieng Khouang. In addition to the Phuan in the lowlands and the valleys, there were also the Meo who were predominant around the Plaine des Jarres towards the Vietnamese border and on the northern part of the Plaine. And then there were several different Lao Theung groups, and quite frankly I don't know the specific designations which were simply lumped together as Lao Theung. I visited different areas and can't tell you all the names. There were also lots of so-called tribal T'ai -- T'ai Dam (Black T'ai), T'ai Daeng (Red T'ai), and some T'ai Khaw (White T'ai) up north. Most of the tribal T'ai tended to be under communist control, not that they were necessarily communists. For instance, Sam Teu (LS 02) was a T'ai Daeng village and made numerous overtures for arms from Vang Pao,

but he never trusted them.

The one misconception. . .this really bothers me...most of the literature that is written about the special guerrilla units in northern Laos emphasize the Meo and implies that the Meo were the only people who were doing any fighting. I would like right up front here to say that I disagree with that completely. There were entire SGU battalions comprising solely various Lao Theung ethnic groups. There were T'ai Daeng groups amongst them. The officers were almost uniformly Meo, but of the first four SGU units, and each one had approximately 300 men, at least two were predominantly if not fully Lao Theung. Later on, SG 9 was a completely Lao battalion recruited from Savannakhet and brought up to the north. So the Meo were not the only people fighting. And also the Lao get very short shrift when it comes to being fighters and I have very strong feelings about that because Lao troops, when properly led, were as good fighters as anyone else, and probably could fight just as well as the Meo if not better. When they had commanders such as Colonel Khongsavan, who was commander of BV 24 [The French acronym for Volunteer Battalion] in Xieng Khouang and Colonel Douangtha Norasing, commander of BV 27 in the north, these were outstanding local commanders. Of course, one of the most tragic things for both Laos and the United States was when Colonel Thong Vongrasamy died from wounds trying to rescue an American pilot. Colonel Thong was a charismatic leader who got the best out of his men. Unfortunately, the stereotypical Lao officer was venal, he was corrupt, he was more interested in getting money by padding payrolls, etc. But when you did get a good commander...I remember Colonel Douangtha telling me when I was sitting down talking to him one day, that in the previous two years he had gone through three complete battalions of people through casualties, either dead or wounded. So, the Lao put up one hell of a fight and don't get much credit for it.

Q: And they made a lot of sacrifices.

KUHN: They made an awful lot of sacrifices and get very little credit for anything that they did.

When I first arrived at Sam Thong, I came up from Vientiane in a little small single engine aircraft. The night before I had been at the American Club having dinner and drinking, there was a little fat guy who got totally stoned and was throwing beer bottles up against the wall and generally making a great ass of himself. He was finally carried out about 11:15 and disappeared. The next morning I walked out to the airport at 5:15 in the morning to come back to Sam Thong and here was the same guy sitting out there checking the fuel and the hydraulic pump, etc. He was the pilot who was taking me up to Sam Thong that day. That pilot had a tremendous capacity for staying up half the night drinking, getting stoned drunk, and at five or six o' clock in the morning being in the cockpit and ready to go. You would never know that he had so much as a ginger ale the night before.

When I got to Sam Thong, things were relatively quiet. There was an area down south of the Plaine des Jarres where there had been some heavy fighting at a site called Ban Peung (LS 95). It had been overrun and several officers had either been killed or captured and missing. One of the missing was one of the original Thai PARU, Captain Daychar. A word about the PARU. The PARU (Police Aerial Resupply Units) were a group of 90-some Thai who had come to Laos a few years before, recruited by the CIA, to work with the ethnic tribes and meld them into some

kind of fighting force. Captain Daychar was a Muslim from south Thailand and was an outstanding officer. Three months later he turned up alive. He had been hiding in the jungles for three months before he made it back to friendly lines. Unfortunately, a few months later he was in a Helio that was overloaded and crashed near Muong Hiem (LS 48A). Captain Daychar died attempting to rescue other crash victims.

But things were relatively quiet. Pop sent me immediately to Hua Muong (LS 58) in Sam Neua and I had no idea what I was getting myself into. It turned out that Hua Muong had just been captured two days before. I was in the first airplane to land on the strip since it had been recaptured. The T-28s were bombing off the ridge line south of the airstrip. I thought to myself, "What am I getting myself into here? This is not where I thought I was going to be." But I had a load of used clothing and a couple of other planes had loads of clothing, and I waited there the entire day and Pop never came. So I organized the refugees that were coming in and distributed the clothing. Just before dark Pop came in and appeared to be highly agitated with the fact that I had already passed out the clothing. We sat around the early part of the evening eating cucumbers and then Pop decided that I had better go back to Site 36 (Na Khang), which I did. So I flew back to Na Khang and spent the night. I found out later that this was one of the things that Pop does to people who are new. He puts them into exposed areas or into situations where they have to sort of sink or swim on their own and if you don't handle it right then he knows you are not the person for that area. So I guess everything worked out all right and I survived that little test. Pop got an acute case of food poisoning or stomach disorder of some kind which he blamed on the cucumbers and that put him down for several days.

Na Khang was an old French base from the French Indochina war. There were two or three big Phuan villages in the area. Basically a rice paddy area, flat rolling hills, very little vegetation in terms of trees. The Lao commander was having a big party that night, so we proceeded to get totally smashed. That was my first introduction to some of the more clandestine operations in Laos. One of the people at Na Khang was an air commando named Jack Tighe. Jack Tighe's father was a congressman, I believe from Texas or Louisiana. Anyway, Jack was an air commando sent up to help coordinate air strikes. This was now September 1965. Mike Lynch was a CIA case officer. Mike's father was the lieutenant governor of California. Mike had a brother who had a rock band, and he used to tell the story that if anybody would ever ask his mother how many children she had, she would always say, "I don't have any children," because one was working for the CIA and she couldn't tell people what he was doing, and the other son was the head of a rock band and was too embarrassed to admit that he was her son. The third person up there was Jerry Daniels who became a legend in his own right through years of working with the Meo and years later died in Bangkok of gas poisoning. So there was a pretty good crew working at Na Khang when I first arrived there.

Another American who eventually was really covering that area, was a young American named Don Sjostrom. Don had also been in the Peace Corps in Thailand and came to Laos about the same time that I did and we became very good friends. We worked together a little bit in Sam Neua in the beginning and then later on he covered Sam Neua and I went over and covered parts of Luang Prabang and southern Phong Saly until January 1967 when Don was killed during an attack on Na Khang, but that is still somewhere in the future and we will get to that later.

The people at Na Khang, their function was basically to supply the airstrips and the outposts in Sam Neua province and anything north of the Plaine des Jarres. So what happened was airplanes...C-123s and Caribous, two short takeoff and landing planes could land at Na Khang. They would bring in ammunition and supplies which would be offloaded to helicopters or small Helio Couriers or Pilatus Porters. These smaller aircraft would then take the supplies out to a smaller strip someplace and drop it to the troops. So Na Khang was really a resupply point. Also, too, by the time I got there in 1965, the Air Force was beginning to use Na Khang as a daytime deployment for their rescue helicopters for planes that might get shot down over north Laos or North Vietnam. The Jolly Green Giant rescue choppers were on station there, which meant there was also these World War II planes called AD-1s or Sandys that were constantly flying cap all the time so in case a plane had to scramble for a search and rescue, the AD-1s then could provide ground cover if the chopper came under attack.

Q: This was a major operation.

KUHN: It was a major operation. It was embarrassing, though, because most of the rescues were made by Air America helicopters. Air America choppers would just come in. They didn't give a damn...the pilot was down, they had him spotted, he had a radio they got a signal. Nine times out of ten, unless there was really heavy ground fire, they would just go in. Whereas the Air Force had all these rules of engagement that they had to abide by.

When I arrived they had just gotten their first Bell Huey, it was the short version of the Huey which only took four or five people and a small amount of cargo. A year or so later they were using much larger Hueys. However, most of the USAID work was done with the old Marine H-34 helicopters. These Air America pilots were really good and knew what they were doing and were willing to put their necks on the line and try to pick up people.

Q: Regardless of whether the downed flyer was Air America, or Air Force or any other service, they would go in?

KUHN: I would say almost a hundred percent were Air Force or Navy. I can't recall any Air America planes that would have gone down in the early years. If an Air America Helio or Continental Porter went down, the pilot went down with the plane. The planes were too small for the pilots to wear parachutes. An Air Force jet was equipped to eject the pilot. The crews in the Caribous, C-123s and C-130s did carry parachutes.

Q: They would have more of a chance of surviving.

KUHN: If there was a C-46 or C-123, yes, they could parachute out. But I don't recall at the time any of those aircraft being shot down. It was all Air Force planes being shot down.

I am kind of jumping around but I am trying to put my thoughts in order as to what happened. I think it is important to know that what I am going to be talking about are the operational nuts and bolts of what happened. I am not somebody who was sitting in Geneva. We are not talking about high policy...

Q: Or even Vientiane.

KUHN: Or even Vientiane...

Q: On the cocktail party circuit.

KUHN: No, the circuit that I was part of was more like the saloons. I think the operational end of Laos is not well known. The books and the things that are written are the major histories that give the broad scope and, of course, there were daily incidences going on that are unrecorded and are soon going to be lost. So, I want to make it quite clear, if I bore anybody that is too bad, but these are the nuts and bolts, what the program was. [W. Averell] Harriman could talk about cease-fires, etc., but we had to do some implementation on the ground, and that is where I came in.

In the early days it was not an easy job. I had a deferment from the draft board. The USAID director would write yearly to the draft boards of all of us who were of draftable age and explain what we were doing over there and we got deferments. It wasn't that I was trying to get out of any kind of danger, in fact, within weeks after I arrived in Laos I was sent over to a little village inside of a bowl shaped valley to check on some refugees, over near Site 95, south of the Plaine des Jarres, and while we were there during the day the chopper was supposed to come back and pick us up in the afternoon but it never came back. We spent the night there. While we were there that night the outpost perimeters around the area were attacked. Several people came in who were wounded and the enemy was pressing clearly in an attempt to take this bowl. The next day, still no helicopters came in and it was not until late in the afternoon, when again it was evident that the fighting was getting close to where we were that a helicopter came in at extremely high altitude and dropped something. It was a cloth wrapped with a small stone. There was a message inside that said, "Ernie, if you are still down there...in those days we didn't have any radios for communication...wave your t-shirt or make some signs so we know you are there because the place is under attack all around you and we have orders not to get low unless we know you are there." So I made some signals which apparently satisfied the pilot and he came in and picked me up. It turned out that the helicopter that tried to pick us up before never even got to us because he was hit by ground fire coming in and the crew chief had been wounded and evacuated back down to Udorn. I got back to Sam Thong and Pop said that they were lining up T-28s and AD-1s at that time because if the chopper couldn't get in to pick me up the second day, they were going to have flare ships and propeller driven T-28s and AD-1s in the area all night because they didn't think the place would last. As a matter of fact, the next day the whole area did fall.

So, I have been in several villages where I have been under attack and had to walk out. So it was dangerous work, but highly exciting because here were Don Sjoström, myself, two or three other people, 24, 25, 26 years old, doing work that was not only dangerous, but it required a lot of on-site decision making. I played God more times than I would like to think about. I would go into an area and there would be refugees coming in. I had to make a decision...do we keep the refugees here, do I try to move them, what do I do with them, who gets fed who doesn't get fed...and a lot of people died, quite bluntly, on decisions that I made, or Don Sjoström made, or Bob Daken made or any number of the other refugee officers who were out there made. We had

to make quick decisions. We had to send pilots into areas where we knew it was dangerous. We, ourselves, had to go into areas where we knew it was dangerous. I tried to develop quite early on a trust and rapport with the pilots of Air America and Continental, because I knew I had to depend on them to get my job done and perhaps to save my life. I would never send them into an area unless I was along with them on the first trip, and they appreciated that because other Ops officers and CIA people did not do that, and a lot of planes would get shot up and the pilots would get very upset because they thought they were being sacrificed. But if you worked with the pilots yourself, you could get an awful lot of work out of them. So, it was a very heady period of time. We were fast moving and making lots of decisions.

Looking at some of my letters recently, I found a note saying that Pop Buell finally sent me down to Vientiane for two days rest, I hadn't had a day off in six weeks. This was a common occurrence when you were working in the refugee program, especially during the time of the year when the enemy was attacking or we were on the offense. You were working 16, 17, 18 hours a day, day and night sometimes. So, it was a very fast moving operation which required a lot of quick decisions.

There were other times when we were able as so-called refugee relief operations officers to expand our own roles, and I think it maybe would have gotten us thrown out of the country if the ambassador found out about it. I was lucky because Ambassador Sullivan had given Pop Buell carte blanche to let me go wherever I wanted to. The understanding was that if anything happened to me, it was Pop's responsibility. It was going to be carried out one step removed from the ambassador. The ambassador didn't want to know anything about it except the good things that happened. If anything bad happened to me, I was on my own and it was Pop's neck and not Ambassador Sullivan's. This was kind of funny because the CIA people were not allowed to RON (remain over night) anyplace outside of Luang Prabang or Na Khang. So, I was free to go wherever I wanted to and could spend the nights, etc.

I am going to relate something that is not important really in the sense of the war effort, but again the kind of things when you are young and foolish you do. Just south of the Plaine des Jarres the Vietnamese and PL [Pathet Lao] had built a road up near a BV 24 position. I had become good friends with a Lao officer, Major Khongsavan. He had a 75 recoilless rifle and some other little assorted things. We got together on Thanksgiving night 1966...to digress a second...this man was outstanding and later wounded in an attack with an American attaché on the Plaine des Jarres. Anyway, at that time he was a photographer and in his bunker he developed film and printed pictures...in a bunker with candle light. In fact, somewhere around here I have a couple of pictures of myself that he took of me. Anyway, we moved the 75 recoilless rifle and rockets over three mountain tops after dark and set everything up. At night, when the Pathet Lao brought their trucks in to the edge of the Plaine there...

Q: Because they would move at night.

KUHN: Yes, they didn't do anything during the daytime. We shelled these trucks with this little 75 recoilless rifle. At the time it was exciting and fun. It didn't make a rat's ass difference in terms of the war. But, it also showed the Lao battalion that the night was not all that frightening, that they could go out and attack the enemy at night just as well as the enemy attacked them. It

was interesting that the Lao could do that if someone was with them and pushed them a little bit.

In those early days we didn't have much support. When we went out on a field trip for one night or any number of nights, we had no radio, no communications, if we got out someplace where we got into trouble we just had to hang in there until somebody would come in the next day or a couple of days later to pick us up. By 1966 we were beginning to be equipped with more efficient communications systems. All operations officers were given small little radios called HT2s. They had two fixed frequencies. One usually was 119.1, which was what Air America and Continental Airlines used as their standard operating frequency, and the other frequency was usually 123.7 or 118.1, which were alternate frequencies. The unfortunate thing was that although all the radios had 119.1, not all of them had the same alternative frequency. But, at least you had something if you got into trouble and could hopefully flag down a passing aircraft to relay a message. At night it was much more difficult to find aircraft monitoring 119.1.

And then, one of the most outstanding pieces of equipment we had was a single side band radio which was about the size of two Britannica Encyclopedia books stacked on top of each other. It was a single side band with multiple frequencies. It came with a kind of bizarre antenna which was modified basically to two wires that went out about 30 feet on each side. We just tied them on tree limbs. That little Stoner weighed about 9 pounds, was portable, could be put into your knapsack and carried on your back. It literally saved my life on more than one occasion. It had a tremendous range. You could talk all over northern Laos, even down as far as Udorn and occasionally pick up places in Thailand.

The story goes that Stoner had developed this radio and asked the CIA if they were interested in using it. He wanted them to buy some to test. They said, "Well, if you want to give us some to test, we will test it. We are not going to buy anything for testing." So, Stoner didn't do any business with the CIA, but AID came in and bought a lot of these radios. The ironic thing was that the CIA portable radios that their guys carried when they went out took a truck battery...a great big 12 volt truck or car battery...which they had to lug along with them, and make sure there was water and everything. I had been out with General Vang Pao at various places at night when he needed to get some communications and he couldn't get his radio to work at all. Whereas I would get my Stoner and called Sam Thong, catch whoever was the night duty officer and say that we need to talk to Long Chieng. They would call Long Chieng on the telephone and they would come up and use the USAID radio because CIA portable radios were nothing but a piece of garbage.

Q: Quite a piece of equipment.

KUHN: Yes, these little radios were quite a life saver. Sort of chronologically, a few things that were happening at this time. The general perception was that Sam Neua was communist. During the last election it had voted communist and it was a communist area.

Q: Of course, in the wake of the Viet Minh invasion of Laos in 1953 the Pathet Lao established their base area in Sam Neua where they were in close touch with the relevant Viet Minh command, training and logistical headquarters just over the border. Sam Neua province was one of two regrouping areas for the Pathet Lao specified in the Agreement on the Cessation of

Hostilities in Laos signed in Geneva in July 1954. Thereafter, there was sporadic skirmishing between the royal army and the Pathet Lao for control of small outposts along the border of North Vietnam. But the Pathet Lao walked back into Sam Neua town itself in 1960 as an aftermath of the Kong Le coup when Phoumi's [General Phoumi Nosavan] troops abandoned it. When the war escalated and bombing began, the Pathet Lao operated out of fortified positions in the Sam Neua countryside, some of them in deep caves. That is why Sam Neua became known as being communist.

KUHN: I am glad you said that because that is all true. It is also true that on the ground huge areas of Sam Neua were not controlled by the Pathet Lao at all, were in fact controlled by either FAR or by the guerrilla units of Vang Pao.

Q: Despite the fact that it was right on the border with North Vietnam? It was kind of an enclave sticking right into North Vietnam.

KUHN: Yes, it was.

Q: Which shows the tremendous importance of geography in such a situation.

KUHN: It may have just been a question of priorities or something that the Vietnamese had higher priorities in the earlier years, etc.

Q: Well, they couldn't control every mountain top or position.

KUHN: That is true. Well, the only point I was going to make was that it would not have been impossible, really, to have by ground...walking or by truck...to have gone from Vientiane all the way up to Nong Khang, Lima 52, way up north of Sam Neua city. It would have been possible to have gone on the ground that entire way.

Q: And not be detected by the communists.

KUHN: That's right. And not even be in an area where you were in any great danger because there were enough contiguous areas. This didn't last very long because by 1966-67 many of those little enclaves had been overrun. But, even when Vang Pao in later years... whenever we would lose, Sam Neua would go back and try to take it, many of these areas had become friendly again for a short period of time and then they would be overrun again and try to knock us off again. So there were rather strange little pockets of support for the Lao government.

Q: So villages would change hands quite frequently?

KUHN: Villages would change hands. In some cases villagers would stay there in the village and in other cases once Vang Pao's troops were there if they were going to be overrun the villagers would pull out.

Again, there has been a lot written about villagers coming over to the Lao side because they were afraid of bombing. That I think is true to some extent, but also many of the areas we are talking

about were not areas that were under extensive US bombing. Again, there were certain areas in Laos that were over bombed, there is no question about that. But, there were also vast areas that never saw a U.S. plane and never saw a bomb. As a matter of fact, I think the people in many cases were voting with their feet. They did not like the communist system, did not like the harsh rule that they were subjected to and genuinely were disposed favorably towards the government and wanted to be under government control. I am really quite confident in that.

There were a lot of defectors too. A lot of people who were Lao schoolteachers, minor officials, who were simply tired of the whole system, didn't like the way the system was run. I think in your book you quote Win [Edwin T.] McKeithen in your references...

Q: Yes.

KUHN: ...he interviewed several people. I interviewed people that did not get published like Win's did, but basically they were the same thing. They were conscripted as coolies, they were doing things they didn't want to do.

Q: Yes, and these were civilians who had actually experienced life under communism. So they knew what they were talking about. It wasn't a theoretical thing for them.

KUHN: That is right. I don't think this is mentioned often and I think it is an important aspect of the political situation at that time, in 1965-66.

Also, little known are the operations that were being conducted up in Phong Saly province, another area that was basically assumed to be under Pathet Lao control or Chinese control, depending on whom you talked to. We didn't have the extensive operations in Phong Saly that we had in Sam Neua. But when I got there, there was a contiguous band of sites from the southern portion of Phong Saly, across from Dien Bien Phu down towards Luang Prabang that were friendly. So the first area I was assigned to was in fact that nebulous area of southern Phong Saly and northern Luang Prabang. We had sites up there like Lao Ta, Lima Site 121, very close to the Chinese border and right down from that was Chuk Chung, Lima Site 138. These were two very, very important bases.

In January, February, early March 1966, the "enemy," whoever they were, the Chinese, Vietnamese, Pathet Lao, whoever, began to take a more serious interest in the area and one by one these sites were overrun. We began to get large numbers of refugees accumulated, particularly at Site 138. I was at Site 138 for several days when the weather turned bad and we had about five thousand refugees there at the time. We went several days with no rice drops. There was a Thai PARU team there who had been training some of the villagers as militiamen. I had said that if the refugees didn't have anything to eat, I wouldn't have anything to eat either, which sounded good at the time but after the second day and the beginning of the third, I was getting pretty hungry and the weather was just absolutely down on the deck. So the Thai PARU late in the afternoon came over and said, "Ernie come down to our bunker, we have something for you." So I went down and they had a few little handfuls of rice that they had saved and I decided I was suppose to be the one who was getting their food through rice drops and I had to be alert enough to do some work, so it wouldn't hurt if I had a little bit of rice. Well, also on the

plate was a bunch of other little things that I couldn't tell by candlelight what they were. Finally I realized they were grubs and worms and various things. So, I thought, "Gee, it is either that or nothing." I didn't watch everybody else eating very carefully and I picked up one of these little beetles and looked at it and closed my eyes and popped that little sucker into my mouth like a kernel of popcorn. I crunched down on it and these beetles must have legs that have ten thousand sawtooth jagged things on its legs and its shell was like eating an egg shell. Well, to make a long story short I then began to watch the Thai eat these things and they very carefully peeled off the hard shell and with their finger scooped out the soft underbelly and threw away the shell and the legs. Well, it must have taken me 15 minutes to chew that beetle and swallow the shell, legs and everything. I felt so utterly foolish. But those were situations that were not uncommon where refugees would not get fed, the weather would get bad, we would try to get help and you couldn't.

Another little aside. Going up into these areas where we were again exposed to possible enemy action, I always carried a weapon. I carried a 38 Colt in a shoulder holster. And I also carried an AK47 because Ambassador Sullivan would not allow us to have any American weapons. I did it for one reason. Before I got there, there was an American who was working up in Laos and he did not believe in carrying guns, he was there to help people and everybody loved him and Pop loved him. He was absolutely well known and a great young man. He was in a village one night that was overrun. He said he suddenly realized what a burden he was to the villagers he was staying with because the last thing they wanted to have was an American in their village get killed or captured and he had absolutely no way to protect himself. He had to rely upon them to protect him. He said at that time he realized that you are putting a burden on the villagers. So, for that reason I always carried a weapon. I never had to use it, thank heavens, but I always carried one with me so that if I ever did need it I could protect myself, I didn't have to have someone else worrying about me very much.

In late 1965-66, northern Luang Prabang and southern Phong Saly sites were falling and pressure was building. Pressure always built around Na Khang, Lima Site 36 above the Plaine des Jarres, the big supply base for Sam Neua. The perimeters around Na Khang were probed nightly. They had flare ships up there at night to try to give some protection at night. Finally, Na Khang did fall, was overrun. General Vang Pao went up there to see what was going on. I don't know whether this story is exactly correct or not, but Don Sjostrom, who worked with me in AID, was up there. He said they went out to a chopper pad with General Vang Pao and they saw a Vietnamese who was still alive and coming up the backside of the pad. They flipped a hand grenade down over the side, hit the guy and it blew his head off and his head came flying past Vang Pao. General Vang Pao saw the head and when it came to a stop he walked over to examine the head, supposedly, and a sniper fired a round at him. He was hit in the elbow and his neck was grazed.

Q: I remember that, it was a famous incident.

KUHN: A very famous incident. In fact, General Vang Pao was somewhat concerned that one of his own men might have tried to hit him. This was January 1966. He was evacuated. In fact, a year or two later he had to go back to Hawaii for an operation on his arm.

During this attack on Na Khang, I have in my notes at the time that this was the first time that the Air Force used napalm in Laos in trying to blunt the attack on Site 36. Allegedly there were over five or six hundred Vietnamese killed during this attack. We can't verify that, but the refugees, at least the people who lived in the villages around Na Khang who became refugees, reported that for over six hours the Vietnamese on stretchers and litters carried out wounded and dead Vietnamese troops. So whether it was true or not I don't know, but even though they captured Na Khang I think it was a big cost to the Vietnamese. The troops and refugees had retreated back towards Muong Hiem, Lima Site 48 Alpha. Muong Hiem was a Neutralist strong point. Souvanna Phouma's nephew was commander at Muong Hiem.

Q: Maybe we should point out here what some people may not know. The Neutralist army was separate from the Rightist army up to fairly late in the war and regarded themselves to be basically loyal to Prince Souvanna Phouma, who was the prime minister, rather than to General Phoumi Nosavan and his followers.

KUHN: At both Muong Hiem and Muong Soui, there was pretty bad blood between the Neutralists and the Rightist troops. This was quite surprising when Souvanna Phouma's nephew actually offered to help. In fact they actually brought up two hundred Neutralist troops from around Saravane to bolster the Muong Hiem troops in case the Vietnamese decided to push on up the Muong Hiem Valley. But jets came in and totally destroyed the little base there at Na Khang. Everything was burned, the fuel dump was blown up, the headquarters was destroyed. I went in there the second day of the attack and a bunch of Thai T-28s came up with...Thai pilots used to fly planes in Lao, as you know, with Lao markings. A group of Thai T-28s came up and there were no Thai or Lao speakers in the area, so I took a Porter up and marked the targets for the T-28s. This was one of those little things that were not in your job description, but one of those things you had to do in the course of a day's work. The unfortunate thing about the attack on Na Khang, I think, is there were three old villages..Na Khang, Nakut, and I forget the name of the third. They had been there for several hundred years and had these beautiful big old Phuan houses.

Q: Made out of what?

KUHN: Made out of wood. I have some cross pieces from the ends of a house. Later on after the village was burned down, a year or two later, when Don Sjostrom and I joined Daniels one day, I cut off the end pieces, they were elephant heads, I have them in the room, of these beautiful old houses. A week or two before the attack, Don Sjostrom and I had been walking down through one of these villages and the people were so friendly and invited us to spend the night in the village. So, we decided to spend the night there since we didn't have to return to base. They had a little party and everything. About 9:00 at night we were getting ready to go to bed and there was a commotion out on the back porch of the house. One of the old village elders came in and said they had several village girls lined up for us so that we could choose whichever one we wanted. We thought this was not exactly building the hearts and minds of the people there, so we explained to them that we appreciated the fact...we didn't want to embarrass the girls because we found out that the Phuan were pretty loose in this area, and in fact the villages were a source of amusement for all the Lao troops at Na Khang during the night. We didn't want to embarrass any of the girls by refusing them nor the village leaders, so we told them we appreciated it all, etc.

And they said, "Well look, it is okay because back in the days when the French had a base here they used to come out here and they always wanted a few girls, a few pigs, a few chickens and we always let them have what they wanted. When the Vietnamese went through after the French left they wanted mostly pigs, but if they wanted a girl or two, we gave them a girl. Why don't you accept our hospitality?"

In early 1966 I spent more of my time up around the Phong Saly area. Over the next month the various sites up there one by one fell and there was never any real attempt after that to try to take back anything. At this time, the contracts that Don Sjoström and I were on were due to expire in March. So Pop Buell in the meantime had sent word back to Washington that he wanted both of us to come back to work as direct hires. Word came back from Washington that we were going to be hired and that we should take a vacation for a couple of months and report to Washington the last part of May, which we both did. Unfortunately, I contracted some sort of unknown disease and spent most of the summer in and out of the hospital, although ultimately I was diagnosed as having schistosomiasis, which was treatable to the point where the medication became worse than the disease and I would begin to fall down and bump into things. The doctors finally realized what was happening and took me off the medication and observed me for a while and said I was okay and shipped me back to Laos. By the time I got back to Laos it was the end of summer of 1966 and I was all set to go, to get back to work. Unfortunately, things were a little bit slow during the end of the summer there and I was a little bit disappointed in the way things were going. I was all charged up and the program wasn't charged up.

Q: Were you out in the field or were you in Vientiane?

KUHN: I was always stationed all the time at Sam Thong, right up until it fell in 1970. Pop was in and out and Jack Williamson was pretty much in charge for a while. Sam Neua was relatively quiet. It was decided to put another person in Luang Prabang. Tom Ward had been there and it was decided to put someone else there permanently, so that sort of took the Phong Saly program away from Sam Thong. So during the fall of 1966 and late 1966, I was hopping around in different places. There really wasn't much continuity in what I was doing, I thought.

During this time, though, several things happened. A Helio crashed near Sam Thong with one of our chief Nai Khong, [The term comes from the French, who appointed Meo to quasi-official positions with the title "Nai Khong." See below. (ECK)] Nhia Ying, aboard. He died of burns suffered in the crash. As I mentioned earlier, another Helio crashed at Muong Hiem, resulting in the death of Captain Daychar, the Thai PARU whom everybody really respected and liked. Another Porter was shot at while it was coming right over Sam Thong and a bullet hit the pilot in the foot. We have no idea who that was or why. There were a lot of little strange things going on at the end of the summer. Somebody had picked up some broadcasts in the Sam Thong area in a combination of Lao and Vietnamese and first someone thought they were being broadcast to Vietnam. The CIA sent in some of their radio experts and they did all kinds of triangulation exercises. Guys were running around with little radios disguised as cigarette packets to try to triangulate the radio transmitter. They spent weeks there trying to track this transmitter down, and finally realized it was coming from the FAR headquarters because the sister of Colonel Douangtha had been trained in Hanoi back when there were relationships between the Lao and the Vietnamese. Her "fist" and everything had some sort of Vietnamese pattern to it, etc. That

was a big fiasco with a lot of people running around Sam Thong trying to locate this alleged clandestine transmitter. It was a waste of time.

In terms of the AID operation, we were at this time still pretty much doing what we had always been doing. We were still running the refugee relief program with the rice drops. I really haven't explained what the rice drops were.

Q: No, please explain what they were.

KUHN: Refugees, at least in the early days, were primarily in the north and were virtually 100 percent in areas that had no road access. The only way you could get into them was by air. So the Air America and Continental contracts that we had were for rice drops. We used the plane called the C-46, which was a plane that had been developed during World War II to fly over the Hump, over the Himalayas, from India to China. These planes, interestingly enough, were not certified to fly in the United States because they used the short electrical propellers. They were tremendous aircraft, easy to handle, easy to get on and off the ground and tremendous drop planes. I think, if I recall, a C-46 would usually carry 4.8 tons of rice at a time. The rice would be put into jute bags at first and at the very end we used polypropylene. Into jute bags would go 40 kilos of rice. And then there were two other bags sewn over that bag. The rice was stacked up on big wooden pallets, eight bags on top of one another, side by side, so there were 16 bags to a pallet. Inside the C-46 there were tracks onto which the pallets fit. They had kickers in back of the aircraft who would push the pallets right up to the door of the aircraft and then tip the pallets outside and the rice would then fall down. An optimum altitude for a rice drop was 800 feet. On the ground the villages would...each village or military position had a signal, which might be a T for tango, and A for alpha, whatever, and on the daily drop sheet for that day that the pilot got when he left Vientiane, it would list the location he was to go to with the coordinates and the signal. If he got up to that location and circled and did not get that signal he was not to drop because he would know there was something wrong down below, presumably enemy activity, etc. So they only dropped when they got the proper signal. There would be a field somewhere next to the village where the signal would be put out and the plane would come in at 800 feet and make the drop, circle around again and drop more rice, repeating this until all the rice had been dropped.

We used two methods. Originally the rice on the pallets was rolled out to the edge of the plane and then the pilot would ring the bell to drop and the kicker would kick the whole thing out, pallets and all. The pallets were highly prized because they were thick plywood and people used to build their houses out of them. Whole villages would be built out of pallets. But they were also tremendously expensive, so later on, towards the end of the program in the early 1970s, there were ways devised so that the pallet was simply tipped over on the plane and the rice slid off, but the pallet was brought back into the aircraft. All the rice for the big sites was airdropped like that. Then, of course, if we had smaller sites with just a few hundred people or even less, we would sometimes then take a Porter (could take about 12 hundred pounds) or Helio (could take about 6 hundred pounds) of rice and re-drop rice to isolated areas. If it was some place where we really had trouble getting into, we might take out a helicopter of rice.

The commodities that we gave to the refugees were primarily taken from Vientiane up to Sam

Thong by Caribou or C-123 cargo plane and stored in warehouses and from there we would shuttle them out either by Porter or by helicopter. We did make a few commodity drops, things like blankets, pots and pans, which were mildly successful. It was better to land the commodities themselves. We also gave out PL 480 [U.S. Public Law 480, no relation to the Pathet Lao] cooking oil. We actually had classes for people to learn how to cook bulgur wheat. These were disastrous. People were used to eating rice all their life and you try to feed them hard wheat, they have a lot of stomach problems. Cooking oil, vegetable oil, was highly prized.

Q: That is how they cooked their food, mainly frying.

KUHN: If they didn't have enough of their food they could always fry up some greens of some kinds and vegetables that you could find out in the woods.

Q: Being a kicker on a C-46 must have been a dangerous occupation. Wasn't there a kicker who fell out and was captured by the Pathet Lao?

KUHN: Yes. There were occasionally crew members who fell out of aircraft. I vaguely remember what you are talking about...

Q: They must have worn parachutes

KUHN: Well, they did not at first. Even then, later on, they didn't wear parachutes, but they did wear harnesses. They were strapped in and could go only to a certain point in the plane and couldn't physically go any further.

The rice drops probably killed more people. The rice drops that were done with the Porters and Helio. It was a small plane, the pilot would go into the village and there would always be some young soldier there who would either want to or was designated as the local kicker. So this guy would get into the plane not really having the understanding of the G forces, and if the plane tips and you are at the door, and all kinds of things. There were a lot of young men, and even old men, who went out as kickers from individual sites and would fall out. In fact, there was one story that went around that there was a commander from one area who was going back up to where he was from and the pilot got instructions a little bit screwed up. This guy was lying in the back of the plane...in the back of the Porter there was a normal floor, but you then lifted out a square in the floor and there was a set of drop doors under that, so when the pilot got ready to drop he would pull a lever and those doors would open like a little bomb bay in an airplane. Well, they had loaded this plane for drop rice and this local commander got into the back of the plane and fell asleep lying on top of the rice sacks. The pilot forgot the guy was back there. They get to this outpost and see the signal and come in, pull the switch and down went the rice including the commander. That night there was a message sent back to Na Khang to the effect that rice drop and one commander received this afternoon. I don't know if that story is true or not but occasionally people did get dropped out of aircraft. There were no safety precautions of any kind to save anybody.

Probably the biggest crisis that occurred in late 1966 happened right about the end of November, the first part of December. It was about 2:00 in the morning...I had said previously that we had

no quarters at Sam Thong except the Quonset hut. Sometime in the middle of 1966 two or three sort of communal bunkhouses were put up at Sam Thong, and Jack Williamson and I were sleeping down at one of them near the hospital. At about 2:00 in the morning, I was vaguely aware of somebody shouting but wasn't really fully awake. Then I realized somebody was pounding on my door. It was Jack Williamson, who was the acting AID coordinator because Pop wasn't there. Jack shouted, "Ernie, Ernie, get up, get up, the Quonset hut is on fire." So we got dressed real quick, grabbed our guns, because we didn't know what was happening, and jumped into the jeep and drove down to the Quonset hut real quick. We had some little Lao Theung orphan kids living in the warehouse in the Quonset. So Jack kept on in the jeep and went up to Air America because Air America planes were parked adjacent to the Quonset hut and all the way back up to the Air America mess, a distance of maybe 50 meters. So Jack took the jeep up to Air America to try to get some of the pilots to move the planes real quick. I ran into the Quonset hut to see if the orphan kids were okay. They were coming downstairs and were all right. The smoke was getting pretty bad but I managed to get out two of our single side band radios that were in the back, and carry out some of our rice drop records that we needed badly. By that time smoke was just too bad and I couldn't get back in again. The Quonset hut held the office, all refugee relief supplies, all the rice we dropped, all the medical supplies for all of north Laos and a small office of USIS, United States Information Service. The whole nine yards. We figured we lost over a million dollars worth of medicine alone in the warehouse. The next day, flying over it from the air, it looked like a huge dirigible had collapsed. The whole Quonset hut just fell in on itself. For the hospital we had just gotten that day several hundred tins of kerosene and several propane and butane tanks to run things in the hospital. As these things exploded they would shoot up two or three hundred feet in the air. It was like a rocket going off, these big tanks of gas and tins of kerosene were exploding all over. We never found out what happened. We all pretty much assumed it was bad wiring because the wiring in the place was terrible, it was all ad hoc and that sort of thing. The conspiracy kinds of people said it was a plot from the Le family that is trying to overthrow Vang Pao and burned down the Quonset hut to make him look bad and the Americans look bad. There were all kinds of rumors going around, but we never really found out what happened.

Also, right about that same time was a day that I call "Black Tuesday", where in one single day we had a Caribou come in and land and break a nose wheel. I took a Porter to a small strip to the east of us, and on taking off the strip was a very steep angle with a lot of stumps along the side, the pilot hit a stump on takeoff and we ripped off the whole tail wheel and part of the aileron in the back of the plane. We got back to Long Chieng safely. I got back to Sam Thong and heard on the radio that an AD-1 Skyraider had been shot up and the pilot was trying to land at Sam Thong. I got on the radio and got the pilot, I thought, lined up with the runway and he came in and overshot the runway. He tried to make a go around again and came back and missed the runway and crashed. We went over to get him and he was pretty much shot up, he was dead. Then a Jolly Green Giant helicopter lost its hydraulic system at Sam Thong and almost crashed on top of a Caribou. And then that evening at Long Chieng another Jolly Green Giant was carrying lumber up to the King's house and lost its power and crashed. So in one day we had about six aircraft crash in one sort or another. It was an unheard of set of calamities. People were superstitious anyway, and when this happened, it was really bad.

Then, about the same time in late November, John Perry, the area AID coordinator, had his two

sons home from college in France, and they were ready to go back to France the next day. John decided he wanted to give them a ride someplace and put them in a helicopter that was going up to Nam Bac, a valley north of Luang Prabang that had been heavily contested for some time. The helicopter came in and sat down and the chopper pad had been overrun. The pilot either hadn't seen the signal and landed anyway, or the communist put the signal out to lure the chopper in. When the chopper landed they took over a hundred rounds and John Perry's older son was hit, dying instantly on the spot. So, it was again one of these really stupid things.

Backtrack about a month or so, during the summer of 1966, the commander of the Lao air force, General Ma, had been relieved of his command. General Ma was from an ethnic minority from the southern panhandle of Laos. He was sort of from the same mold as General Vang Pao. Ma, as commander-in-chief of the air force, liked to lead his bombing raids. The stories are that in his early days some of the new pilots went out on missions with him and planes came back to base. One of them was just shot full of holes. The pilot was fairly new and he thought he was going to get reamed out by General Ma for getting the plane shot up. The plane right behind him came in without a hole in it, in perfect shape, and the pilot was real confident having come back without a scratch. General Ma landed his plane, came over, took the pilot who had gotten his plane shot up and put his arm around him and said, "What a great job you did. If you are going to bomb the enemy you have to get right down on the deck. If you don't get down on the deck you are not going to kill any enemy and you are not going to get shot at. You did a great job." He went back to the plane that came back without a hole in it and really chewed out the pilot. He said, "Obviously you were too high. If the enemy can't hit you from the ground then you are too high, you have to get down where the enemy is and hit him." This was the kind of man he was.

General Ma had been hospitalized for general fatigue in the fall of 1966. It was the 20th of October when this incident occurred. I happened to be the only American at Sam Thong at the time. We had an air commando doctor who was stationed at Sam Thong, and once every two weeks he went down to Udorn and Korat to bring back supplies of fresh plasma. That morning the doctor had gone down to Udorn and Korat to bring up blood and wouldn't be back until the next day. I was in the office at Sam Thong when I looked up and the door opened, and there was General Ma coming into the office. I had met him several times before...as an aside...one time myself, Don Sjostrom and John McLean, who was a USIA officer at Luang Prabang, accidentally all met at the lobby of one of the hotels in Luang Prabang one day and started talking. The ironic thing is that of General Ma, Don Sjostrom and John McLean, I am the only one that is still alive. Don was killed, General Ma was killed and John McLean was killed in a plane crash.

Anyway, General Ma was at the door and he looked very agitated. He asked me if the American doctor was there and I said, "No, but Dr. Kameung, the Lao doctor was there, if he had any problems." He said, "No, no, no, he had to see the American doctor." I said, "Well, I'm sorry. Why don't you spend the night here and he will be back tomorrow morning." He said, "I haven't got time, if he is not here now, I can't wait one minute." He left, got into his jeep and drove back to Long Chieng. Well, of course, the ironic thing is the next day he led a group of six or seven pilots out of Savannakhet, up to Vientiane in an attempt to bomb the headquarters of General Kouprasith [Abhay]. Of course he did bomb Kouprasith's headquarters, but Kouprasith wasn't there. There were 30 or 40 people killed. The planes went back to Savannakhet where word came

out from the embassy that they were not to be rearmed, reloaded or refueled. As a result six of the pilots fled into Thailand in exile.

A little footnote to history...If the American doctor had been at Sam Thong and had a chance to get his hands on General Ma, would he have said, "General, I am going to put you in the hospital right now. You are showing all the signs of fatigue that you were hospitalized just two weeks ago for." Would this have prevented the attack? Because the loss of General Ma in effect meant the loss of an effective air force. The Lao air force lost much of its effectiveness.

I guess, to backtrack even further, what brought everything to a head with General Ma and Kouprasith and, of course, with General Ouane Ratthikoun, was the use of Lao air force transport planes, C-47s, which Ma wanted to use to supply troops with equipment, supplies and ammunition in the Nam Bac and other forward areas, Ouane wanted to use those same planes to run opium in and out of Ban Houei Sai and oranges out of Nam Bac. They wanted to use the planes for commercial purposes for their own gain and Ma said, "Look, this is not right. These are air force planes and we should be supporting our troops with them." That is one of the reasons that led to his confrontation with Ouane and with Kouprasith and then later his attempt to bomb Kouprasith's headquarters.

Q: That is very interesting. Why did General Ma want to see the American doctor? Was he a particular friend or did he realize he needed some medical attention?

KUHN: I think it was because he realized he needed some medical attention and he just probably...I don't know if he knew Dr. Kameung, the Lao doctor, or not. Whether he felt he couldn't trust Dr. Kameung in what he might do or say, but did feel he could trust the American doctors. It was probably the American doctor or another American doctor who had probably insisted on his hospitalization earlier for battle fatigue. So it was a tragic thing and, of course, General Ma was killed two or three years later.

Q: There was another coup.

KUHN: Yes, I think it was in 1973. He crashed on the runway at Watthay and I saw photographs of his body. I think it was probably true that he was injured and wounded and General Kouprasith, the man he had tried to kill in the previous coup, stood there and simply bayoneted him to death. The wounds in his chest and stomach were big gash wounds like a bayonet might make. Whether or not it was really Kouprasith, I don't know, but General Ma came to a very sad ending. I thought he was a very outstanding man.

In December, 1966 something else happened that was a tragedy in terms of the war effort in southern Laos. The CIA had developed a series of road watch teams which were small groups of men who went over along routes 6 and 7, and observed truck traffic and reported back the number of trucks that were involved. Later this escalated into calling in air strikes on trucks that were passing up and down the road. The program was developed around a young man by the name of Moua Chung. His call sign was "The Tall Man" because he was exceedingly tall for a Meo. He established a base on a mountain called Phou Pha Lang, which was just south of Sam Neua city. In fact, from the top of Phou Pha Lang on a clear day you could actually see the little

Sam Neua city valley. He established a base there from where he ran his road watch teams and was sending back a tremendous amount of intelligence. He was also becoming quite a popular individual, both locally and back at Long Chieng and Sam Thong. We had a minor problem between CIA and AID in the field in that the road watch team on Phou Pha Lang was known to all the local villagers. The villagers wanted to get away from the communists and saw that their way of escaping communism was to come to Phou Pha Lang. Well, that was soon going to destroy the secretiveness of the base, not that the enemy didn't know there was anybody up here because we used to land helicopters up there, but it was going to become an unwieldy situation. So there was a new CIA case officer assigned to Na Khang who told me that I was no longer going to be allowed to go into Phou Pha Lang to do any work. Fortunately, another case officer I had worked with for a long time was this person's boss and overruled him and I was able to freely go in and out of there. We tried to get the civilians out as people came in so they would not be a burden to Moua Chung's operation.

Well, one night, about the first week of December 1966, Moua Chung was coming back up the mountain to the peak where they had their headquarters. It was a foggy, rainy day and as they were coming up the trail, they were ambushed, assassinated, whatever, and attacked and Moua Chung was killed. Now, the people on top of the mountain claimed that they didn't know it was Moua Chung, they thought it was the enemy coming up the trail. So, without trying to find out who it was, opened up and Moua Chung was killed. Two or three Meo who sort of admitted responsibility for it were brought back to Sam Thong and as they were hauled off the aircraft, mobs of people descended on them and just beat these guys senseless until finally, the military police came in and rescued them and hauled them off. I think they were in prison for several months and eventually released. There was no way to prove that it was a deliberate assassination. But, there again, Sam Thong and Long Chieng, all the time I was there, were rife with rumors. Somebody was after somebody else constantly. There was this clan against that clan, and somebody trying to dethrone Touby Lyfong; the Les trying to dethrone the Vangs; somebody else trying to do something to someone else, so there was constant turmoil. This sort of fit right in with all these theories that were going around about coups, etc. It was about this time also that the areas around the southern rim of the Plaine des Jarres, some of the big Lao villages like Tha Thom, a big area, were lost. These places were later recaptured but the government was never able to control them.

One of the main personalities, of course, in the running of the USAID operation was Joe Mendenhall, the USAID director. Not only was he the director, but he also was the economic counselor of the embassy, which gave him considerable influence. Mendenhall was a rather unusual individual. I don't think this has been publicly acknowledged and I have no proof of this in terms of anything written ...when he went on home leave in late 1967 or early 1968, the Lao government quietly asked he not be returned. They just felt that he was not someone who was financially able to support the kinds of things that they felt they should be getting. They were very anxious to have a person come back -- Charlie Mann -- who in fact did come back and we will get to that a little later. Mendenhall did not come back. His tenure as USAID director was somewhat stormy in the sense that he began to really watch the pennies. It reached the point where money was a greater concern than the program. In the summer of 1966 there were tremendous floods in Vientiane and around the Mekong area. USAID and the refugee relief were gearing up to try to provide food support and relief to flood victims, and Mendenhall decided,

much like the debate we are having today in Congress, that giving food to someone was a bad idea, but we should sell them rice. So he wanted to charge people for rice. Well, this wasn't so bad for those people who had money and could afford to buy rice. But thousands of people in the Vientiane area that were affected by the floods were day laborers. These are people who worked every day and got paid on the basis of what they did or on a weekly basis, and had no income or savings. Therefore, they really had no money to buy rice. So it was a strange proposition that we start selling rice to people who had lost their homes because of flooding.

This is jumping ahead a little bit, but later on the Lao troops in Ban Houei Sai for some reason, and depending on whose articles or books you read what the reasons were, the FAR troops in Ban Houei Sai decided they were going to go up and attack Nam Tha, Lima 100. These FAR troops had relatives in Nam Tha families who were still living there, so they decided they were going to go in and liberate Nam Tha. So the FAR went up and captured Nam Tha and held it for a few days, evacuated out several thousands of civilians and brought them back down into government-held territory. Word went out from the Lao governor's office in Houei Sai that they wanted to have support.

Well, Joe Flipse was working up at Houei Sai at the time. He put down a fairly routine request that they needed additional rice to feed these refugees. Well, we had a rice meeting about that same time. Mendenhall got very upset about feeding these new people because he felt this was an operation that no one had approved of in advance. It raised all kinds of problems with delicate negotiations going on between the U.S. and the Chinese in Warsaw. We had promised the Chinese that there would be no Lao operations within a certain number of kilometers from the border and here the Lao army on their own walked right up to the Chinese border, could almost spit over the border, and occupy a town that the Chinese considered as under their influence. So there was a lot of ill feeling in the embassy about this operation. Well, Mendenhall told the people up at Houei Sai, after a lot of arguing, that they had to cut the support by 30 percent. Joe Flipse sent back a message to Mendenhall asking what that meant. "Do I take all my refugees and cut their rations by one-third, or take all my refugees and cut off one-third of them and give them no support? You make the decision Mr. Director. You are the boss in this operation. Mendenhall backed down and said, "Everybody gets fed a hundred percent."

There were lots of these little kinds of things that were going on. He seemed to be at odds a lot with the Lao. After he left Laos he became assistant secretary or under secretary of state for Vietnam and Laos, and he made a very, very strong pitch for myself and three or four of my colleagues in Laos to be transferred to Vietnam, which we resisted strenuously and managed to overcome. But Mendenhall...I personally had several dealings with him and never had any problems with him. But he did have some run-ins with the Lao, and he was a difficult person in terms of support, unlike his successor, Charlie Mann. Now Mann had been in Laos several years before. He had been in Cambodia as USAID director as a young man and then most recently had been in the Congo. Now, I am really getting ahead of the story, but in 1968 the Congo Mafia came over. Larry Devlin was the station chief, he came from the Congo; McMurtrie Godley was the ambassador and came from the Congo; and Charlie Mann had been in the Congo. So, you had the three most powerful people in any country all coming from the Congo. I think there is a book by Madeleine Kalb about that...something like "The Congo Cables."

Anyway, Charlie Mann was a totally different type of individual. He had very little sense of humor, basically a self-made individual. He was also economic counselor to the embassy. But, when he decided he wanted to do something, he didn't want someone to tell him, "You can't do it because of regulation such-and-such." He would say, "If regulation such-and-such says we can't do it, you find me some way to go around regulation such-and-such so we can do it." Charlie Mann would never fit into today's operations in AID because people just don't operate that way.

Q: But in the Laos of the sixties this was a tremendous advantage to be able to work with such flexibility.

KUHN: Once you knew that Charlie Mann was in agreement with something, you were in good shape. At the same time, though, he was in some cases kind of nitpicky. I remember...this is now up in the seventies when I was stationed in Vientiane...every morning at 7:00 I had to present to Charlie Mann a report where every single bag of rice had been distributed the previous day...

Q: It all had to be accounted for.

KUHN: It all had to be accounted for. Absolutely every bag. I used to come into work about 5:00 and compile this list. We didn't have any computers in those days, it was all done by hand using a calculator. This went on for several months and we were having our semi-annual program reviews. Normally, what everyone had done in the past was to make up very complicated charts to show what we had done the previous years and all the projected refugee moves the coming year and how much rice we were going to need. It was very difficult to understand. I said, "Let's cut out all of this crap. Mann likes to see the bottom line pretty much. Let's just simplify these charts and make the projections in one chart and we will present them to him." Well, it was the kiss of death. I went in the next day and it came to be my turn for the presentation. I got up and put one big piece of paper on the flip chart. At that he said, "Where are the rest of your projections?" I said, "Mr. Mann, these are the projections right here. This is the projection for this month, here are the projections for the next quarter, the next quarter, the next quarter. All these have been calculated based upon all our analysis of refugee moves and perceived enemy moves, etc. Here is the bottom line, here is what we need." He said, "I can't understand that. I have to have everything laid out in front of me." So I went back to the office and spent almost the entire night making about a 20-foot-long chart of some kind showing all this stuff. I went in the next day and he looked at it for about ten seconds and it was fine. He didn't have a question. It was all right there.

Also, he had no sense of humor. We had a guy, Hugh Brady, who was running our resettlement program. There was a big program in Pakse at Kilometer 13. During this same meeting, Hugh got up to give a briefing on resettlement of refugees and he talked and talked about 20 minutes on Kilometer 13. Finally Mann looked up and waved his hand and said, "Hugh, where is Kilometer 13?" Well, Hugh Brady was not one of our smartest guys around, he was an old retired military officer and didn't know beans about resettlement. He looked at Charlie Mann and said, "Mr. Mann, Kilometer 13 is halfway between Kilometer 12 and Kilometer 14," and kept right on talking. Mann just sat there not knowing what to do. His mouth kind of fell open, you know. I think it was a month after that Hugh Brady was transferred somewhere. We never saw

him again, he was gone. It just totally floored Charlie Mann that anyone would ever give him an answer like that.

On other agency people. In general, one of the station chiefs before Devlin, Ted Shackley, used to have really stormy verbal battles with Joe Mendenhall over refugee programs. We used to hold quarterly meetings at Long Chieng where the chief of station from Vientiane, the USAID director and all the mucky-mucks that were involved in political politics of refugees. These meetings would plan out what we needed for the next quarter, discuss funding levels, rice levels, etc.

Q: Would this be only among Americans?

KUHN: Yes, although some of our locals, who went out into the field with us, often would be there. They were held on General Vang Pao's front porch so they were open to the world. Anybody could practically walk by and listen to what was going on. It was not an unusual occurrence for Mendenhall and Shackley to get into very violent arguments. At the time, I think everybody perceived Mendenhall to be an extremely intelligent individual. He may not have used it the right way, but he was a very intelligent individual. There was no question that Shackley was a very intelligent individual. Why these two men couldn't have seen that it would have been to one of their advantages to use the other person instead of always having to knock heads about something, I don't know. Shackley could have used Mendenhall to his own objectives simply by backing off on some of these things like whether or not this thousand person group over here were really refugees or really dependents of SGU groups. It didn't make a bit of difference in the course of events. They would argue over things like this.

Q: Both men were career officers. Shackley was a career CIA officer and Mendenhall was a career Foreign Service officer.

KUHN: Yes, he was not an AID person, he later became ambassador to Turkey, I believe, or something. But for some reason there was just this clash of personality somehow that neither wanted to feel that they were giving into the other. I don't know.

Q: A terrific bureaucratic struggle.

KUHN: Yes.

Q: It didn't make your life any easier, I imagine.

KUHN: Well, once those meetings and everything were over, then we got down to the people who worked together and that was at a different level. When I first got to Sam Thong, Vint Lawrence was head of the operations at Long Chieng. It was a very small operation. Tony Poe had been there before that and had just recently gone up to Nam Yu up on the Thai/Burmese border, at the other end of the country. Relationships with Vint? I never knew him well and never had much dealings with him but certainly those I did have were very, very cordial while he was there. Later on John Randall came in, and as Long Chieng began to build up, Howie Freeman came over from Luang Prabang. There were several people who were there for only a

year or two. But the relationship at the working level was very cordial. At Site 36 at Na Khang there were Jerry Daniels and Mike Lynch. Later on Terry Quill came up there. Terry and I had a lot of run-ins. We did not get along at all, but he was probably the only person. Dick Santos as did Frank Odom worked at Site 36. We all worked together very well. If one of them was out at a refugee site and somebody needed refugee rice and material, they would either let me know or do what they could to get it. Likewise, if I were out at a site and needed some ammunition, or to move some troops or a Medevac or something, I did. We had to work together at the lower levels. The embassy people could argue among themselves, but we couldn't do that at the field level.

On the local side, I think Pop tried but didn't get very far and gave up. No one at the embassy appreciated the power and wisdom of Chao Saykham, who was the governor of Xieng Khouang. He was the grandson of the hereditary ruling prince. He had been decorated by the French for his work against the Japanese in World War II as a young man. As a young man, as he told me, he was the person who picked Vang Pao as a little school kid running around and put him into a school recognizing his potential. I think Vang Pao has also said that Chao Saykham really got him started. Vang Pao would often call Chao Saykham and come along to Sam Thong to see him. We are talking about a man who was in his forties at the time. We are not talking about an old duck who was senile.

Q: Was he older than Vang Pao?

KUHN: Yes, he was older, but not that much. Chao Saykham was in his late teens, early twenties, at the end of World War II.

Q: Was he already governor then?

KUHN: No. In fact, I think he was some official in Savannakhet where he met his future wife. So, it wasn't until the fifties that he was sent back up to Xieng Khouang. Chao Saykham had been a guerrilla fighter against the Japanese, a guerrilla fighter against the Vietnamese. He knew what he was talking about. The Americans, I think, at the embassy, when you mentioned Chao Saykham's name they would say, "There is no use talking to him, he is with the French." The reason why I...I don't want to be, say pro-prejudice for Chao Saykham...but my wife is Chao Saykham's stepdaughter. Not her biological father, but Chao Saykham's wife and my wife were first cousins and she was brought up to live with Chao Saykham when she was a young child. So, I have had a chance to talk to him before he died several years ago.

But even during the days during the war, I remember at Sam Thong some little outpost would call in and say they were out of rice, or meat, or need something send a helicopter over. And Chao Saykham would say, "You know, you people are ruining the ability of the Meo and the Lao Theung and the Lao to be mobile guerrilla fighters. You are putting them in positions and having them stay there, or at least they want to stay there and when they want something, rather than getting off their ass and walking two days back to Sam Thong or Na Khang during which time they could be observing whether there is any enemy activity around, anything happening. What do you do? You let them sit on a mountain top, send over a helicopter, give them their food, ammunition, etc. and they never leave their outpost from week to week. They haven't the

slightest idea what is happening around them. The enemy could be slowly up, choking them off, and they will never even know it because they never have to leave their foxholes. You have got to get away from the use of helicopters. Make the troops walk.”

Q: That was very wise insight.

KUHN: But we never did.

Q: What were the circumstances in which he said this? Was it written up somewhere?

KUHN: No. This is something he said to me. In this case it happened to be Site 15, Ban Na which was northeast of Sam Thong, between us and the Plaine des Jarres. It turned out that about this time some villagers who were out hunting on the very trail the troops would have been walking had they been going back and forth, noticed something that looked like the leaves and dirt had been disturbed. They brushed everything aside and dug up several small cases of Chinese canned pork and canned vegetables. Well, of course, right away the rumor began flying around that the enemy was going to attack Sam Thong and was caching supplies along the trails. Chao Saykham said, “See? If you make these people get out there and walk they would know whether or not there might be any enemy troops coming into that area.” He was a person who spoke very slowly -- didn’t speak any English that I recall -- but was fluent in French and Lao. The people in the embassy just were not interested in him. I know Pop talked to people down there. I made suggestions that we ought to see more of Chao Saykham and every time the response was that he was with the French. I believe this was a big mistake.

Q: When you go back and read the accounts of the French working with the Meo, right after the Second World War, and against the Japanese, their scouting ability was absolutely fantastic. They would walk for days, knew all the trails and where the Japanese were exactly. All of this was just muscle power basically and brain power. They were fantastic scouts. It is unfortunate they were put into the role of having to defend fixed positions in a much bigger war. Of course, in those days, in the forties and fifties, there weren’t the same heavy weapons and certainly no air strikes and things like that to worry about.

KUHN: But, the enemy in Laos didn’t have all those things either.

Q: I suppose not, but the mobility of the Meo was probably their greatest strategic asset, wouldn’t you say?”

KUHN: Yes. I was looking through some of my letters and notes here, and I see I had written to myself and my parents years ago that when Shackley left, his tour in Laos ruined the program because it was basically during his period of time when the idea of mobility gave way to fixed positions and massive buildups. But, I personally have agonized and mulled this whole thing over in my head probably hundreds of times since we left Laos and even when I was in Laos. I am still not exactly sure where I come down on this business of mobility versus fixed positions. The concept of a guerrilla fighter, to my mind anyway, implies operating basically in an unfriendly area. I think the classic case of guerrilla fighting is in Burma during World War II. The Americans and the British -- of course they had the ethnic fighters with them, the Shan,

Karens, etc -- but basically guerrilla fighters need to be mobile. You take Sam Neua, for instance, and you had lots of villages, some friendly and some unfriendly, but they were all mixed up. There were no clear lines, no clear borders. Now if you took villagers from the friendly areas and made them into small guerrilla groups and sent them out, where were they going to be fighting? And who was eventually going to be protecting their villages when they were out being guerrillas and keep the other side's guerrillas from coming in? See, there really was no ocean for the guerrilla to fight in just for his own survival to harass the enemy. Everything was all mixed up. If you didn't protect your own village, what was the purpose of going over and harassing somebody else's village if your own village was going to get burned down while you were gone?

Q: It's a dilemma. It must be the same dilemma that faced the opposing sides in the French and Indian wars on this continent. Particularly, burning the other side's villages was the most common form of retribution. It is a dilemma.

KUHN: So, I am constantly going around and around about this idea, "What if we didn't have nine SG units. What if there had been only 3 SG units or even no SG groups, but just small village groups. How would that have made a difference? I don't know. These small groups in and among themselves would not have been able to march up to Sam Neua city and capture it or up to Phong Saly and capture it. What would they have done? They probably would never be strong enough to harass the enemy enough to draw troops off from Vietnam. So, what would anybody have gained by having a bunch of small guerrilla groups operating around Laos? I really am not sure.

Q: I suppose the answer to that is that they would have been able to prevent the North Vietnamese from installing their administration in what they called the liberated area. This is what was foremost in their minds, that they wanted to clear as much area as possible of the royal government forces and the Meo so they could install their administration. That is the way they measured the progress of the so-called revolution. So, I suppose to the extent that the guerrilla forces could prevent that, they would be winning.

KUHN: Yes, but I would argue also that from an outsider's viewpoint, people assumed that that control was already there anyway. There were very few people in the world that knew that Nong Khang, Lima 52, was friendly for a few years or that Lima Site 87 [Pia Khan] was friendly for some time, and all these little villages around Sam Neua city where we had a presence. For example, this operation in December 1965 that went up and took Muong Het, near the border, many of the troops came from small villages and while they were up there attacking Muong Het, the Vietnamese came around behind them and cleaned out the villages.

Q: Of course the Vietnamese were masters at guerrilla warfare themselves, so they knew what to do.

KUHN: Well, the Pathet Lao were not really a force to be reckoned with in most cases up there.

Q: I think it is unfortunate that in later years of the war, the test of the effectiveness of the Meo and Vang Pao came to be how many North Vietnamese divisions these forces could tie down because that after all was not the object of the war, although it might make sense to the

commander of MACV sitting in Saigon who had the 312th Division tied down defending the Plaine des Jarres. But it certainly wasn't going to determine who won the struggle in Laos.

KUHN: This is another two or three days' discussion. But Arthur, I was again going through some of my papers and for the sake of anyone listening here, I have boxes and boxes and boxes of records from Laos that I'm trying to sort out. So, going through things I came across a little something I had written here which must have been written around 1967 or 1968. Some of the sentences don't make any sense but I just want to read a paragraph of it, I think, and give a comment on exactly what you said about Laos. Maybe I will make the comment first. It seems to me there are a lot of things again written or coming out about how...and of course Pop Buell was one of the biggest perpetrators of this and Jiggs Weldon is to a certain extent too...we used the Meo, we used hill tribes, we used people and then dropped them. Well, maybe we did, but I don't think we should be so cynical and sit back and say, "Gee, that was terrible," because that was already drilled into me when I first went to Laos. I was basically told that...and I believe in the domino theory. I truly believe the domino theory was correct. If Laos had been taken over by the communists in 1964, 1965 or even earlier, Thailand was in no condition to defend itself against a massive move across the Mekong. One of the things when I came back between the end of my contract and being hired as a direct hire, was to play some hypothetical "peace games" or "aid games". The names they gave two or three of these countries...we were all people who had spent two or three years in Southeast Asia already...After the first day we said, "Let's cut out the crap here. This is Thailand, this is Laos, this is Vietnam." They said, "Okay, we will call them all by their correct names." The information we were supplied, which was supposed to be accurate, was that the condition of the Thai government was in no condition to have slowed down or stopped any kind of major incursion.

From my own personal standpoint, when I was in the Peace Corps, I was in a Meo village in what was called the tri-state area, where the provinces of Loei, Pitsanaloke, and Petchaboun come together up in the mountains, about 20 miles south of the Thai/Lao border. There were about 9,000 hill tribes in that area. I made a survey. Several times we would walk the area taking four or five days making the circuit. Anyway, in late 1964 and early 1965, there began to be some communist activity in that area. Tribal village leaders would find hex signs on the door of their houses in blood. Many of these Meo spoke Chinese and there were Chinese broadcasts coming out of China both in Chinese and in Meo directed towards the Thai border areas. These people were really concerned. They were afraid, they weren't communists. The Thai border police had several outposts up in the area. They had dispensaries, hospitals, schools. They were working very hard with the Meo. But remember back in the fifties there was a schism between the police and the military in Thailand. The United States gave significant support to the Border Police. Because there was a major training ground, Pits Camp, near Pitsanaloke, there were American advisors and their families living in Pitsanaloke. On American holidays any Peace Corps volunteers in the area were invited over for dinner.

They were aware of what was going on. When I left and went up to Laos, within 18 months after I left, all the border police had been pulled out of these border areas and replaced with Thai military. The Thai military came in and, unfortunately, the father of a friend of mine was a Thai commanding general for this whole operation. They came in and just wiped out Meo villages -- air bombardments, shellings, everything. Of the several people in the area where I had lived --

another friend of mine who worked for the narcotics bureau, told me that only 400 people out of several thousand came down to the refugee camps in Petchaboun. The rest were killed or went with the Pathet Lao. The whole mountainous region, inhabited mostly by hill tribes, from the Thai/Lao border down to Nakhon Thai and over to Dan Sai and over to Lom Kao was up for grabs. You probably remember. In the sixties it was a very volatile area.

At the same time, down on the Mekong side, the Mukdahan area, that whole area along the border was all populated by Vietnamese, and you would walk into stores and see Ho Chi Minh's picture on the walls, etc. Nakhae was the communists' and CT headquarters for all of northeast Thailand. They were very strongly entrenched in the sixties. They controlled all along that border area.

At the same time you had Malaysia just coming off their big insurgency campaign. I really don't think the Indonesian military would have hung on like they did, and done the things after the Gestapu affair in 1965 had they not felt that the communists at some point were being slowed down.

So I remember distinctly being told that this was a stopgap measure. Laos is to give the rest of Southeast Asia time to regroup and...My recollection is that we had a pretty clear understanding that Laos was really the buffer that we had to hold. No one ever really said to me, "We are really concerned about what happens to these people later on." It was just assumed that there would be some miraculous ending and everybody would come out on top, which I think realistically we all knew was not going to happen.

Q: You didn't feel that you were just expending these people?

KUHN: I guess sometimes people think I don't have much feeling. I sort of made myself look at this whole situation. If I got concerned about every single person or thing that I saw or did, I was going to be a physical and mental wreck. If every time I saw a wounded person, a dead person, a refugee being run out of their house, I felt I had to look at this thing objectively. So in my mind I said that my job is to work with refugees. If it is to evacuate wounded, I evacuate wounded. I have carried people off of airplanes and as they came off the body would sort of tilt a bit and the entire insides would fall off onto the ground. I have seen people get their heads cut open by helicopter rotor blades. All kinds of things that I told myself I was not going to worry about it, not go home and dwell on it. So, when it came to the overall picture, I tended to look at myself and say, "Gee, you know these people, whether Lao, Meo, or whatever, if they are sitting up on top of that mountain and the enemy attacks, they are all going to run away. If they would sit up there they might lose one or two killed or a couple of wounded, but they probably would hold the mountain. So, what do they do? They run away and wait two weeks and then run back up and try to retake the hilltop and they lose ten people. How can I feel sorry for people who somehow have got to sit down and say 'This is it, we are going to stand here and fight.' So the Lao, and the Meo leaders who did that were successful. The only reason that they eventually became unsuccessful was because everything else was falling around them and eventually they were caught up in this whole fiasco. Colonel Chansom; Colonel Khongsavan, that is his picture there; Colonel Douangtha up in Sam Neua; Vang Pao himself. There were so many things that the Lao could have done correctly, or the Meo could have done correctly, but they didn't.

Well, at some point you have to accept your own consequences. Vang Pao, I don't want to jump ahead of the story on Phou Pha Thi because that is a major point up there. Pha Thi is the perfect example, on both the American and on the Meo side, where we should have stood pat and not abandoned the site...but by not standing up, but by giving up, and then ignoring Pha Thi for months...we just really got our ass whipped in the attempt to retake it. I used to get up into some villages...Arthur, I would do this many times, be in a really remote village some place and get everybody all whipped up and big parties going on and taking my shirt off and pounding my chest. Stupid as it sounds I used to do these kinds of things and yet I never came back and said, "Gee, what have I done? What am I getting these people into?" I just felt that people don't get into things blindly no matter how we may think they do. They knew the situation better than any of us ever could possibly know it on the ground. They didn't do the things and make the necessary moves that they had to do to prevent certain things from happening.

I came back from Laos and had many a night I didn't sleep, but it really wasn't because of those things, there were other reasons. I wrote back some 30 years ago U.S. objectives in Laos. I am not going to read this whole thing, but one sentence here..."The importance of Laos to overall U.S. objectives in Southeast Asia is not intrinsically related to Laos per se, but to the fact that Laos is a supply route to South Vietnam...an access to northeast Thailand, etc." We need to have access to certain parts of Laos to do certain things and I wrote them down. I go on and say, "However, to do those things there are five or six other things that need to take place at the same time. There has to be economic stability in the country. There has to be programs related to both the war effort and to the effort of maintaining a social fabric, a social life. There has to be a program to help maintain a certain level of government services. There has to be a program to maintain social infrastructure. And not only economic stability, but economic development of the country." So, it seemed to me that if we do all those things, and this may be sticking my head in the sand, somehow things are really going to come out all right in the end. There is not going to be a total disaster. I suppose most of us never ever really thought we would leave Laos in the way we did.

Q: Okay, not to jump ahead but just to take up one point here. I think those points you made are certainly very good, and certainly it comes down to the whole question of preserving the national identity of Laos and preventing it from falling apart or being taken over and made into something else. That raises a question which is often discussed these days in various fora. To what extent was all this effort we were doing with the Meo sort of autonomous from the rest of Laos, and to what extent were we consciously trying to integrate the Meo into the Lao nation as such? How strong were the links? Was our presence weakening or strengthening these links? You mention that Vang Pao was making a house for the king at Long Chieng and things like that. To what extent did that sort of thing work?

KUHN: I think the King had a tremendous following among the Meo. Now I don't know when that started. I think the King's first visit to Long Chieng could even be before I arrived in 1965. I think while I was at Sam Thong the King made two visits. Vang Pao was really the first non-ethnic Lao general, certainly the first Meo general to ever be integrated into the Lao forces. With U.S. government help, he established the radio station Lao Hom Pao, which broadcast in several different Lao languages and dialects. Now, some people get a little more cynical about this next

thing, but there was also the Xieng Khouang Panich, or something like that, and there were a couple of old DC-3 cargo planes available. Now, the cynics say this was a ploy to give Vang Pao and his cronies a way to make money by running goods up and back from Long Chieng to Vientiane; the way to run his opium in and out of the country. That may or may not have happened, I don't know. But, the fact is that there was an association, a cooperative as such, established at Long Chieng with advisers trying to help them get the whole thing started, which gave access to markets in Vientiane. When it became feasible, a road was actually built from route 13 over to Long Chieng. So there was an attempt to incorporate Long Chieng into the fabric of everything on the road system. I think the fact that AID, again this happened before my arrival, at Sam Thong there was a complete physical structure of government built. There was a school there. The major part of the population were Meo. There was a government structure for Sam Neua although the khuang offices were at Sam Thong, or even at Vientiane. There was always a governor appointed for Sam Neua. There were schools.

It seemed to me that what we were doing, on the surface anyway, was an attempt to create a wholeness. One of the things that I started when I was at Sam Thong, and Jack Williamson and I worked on this a lot, was to bring not official village leaders, but acknowledged village leaders, male and female, back to Vientiane and to other cities. We would take people on tours. People from Sam Neua would be taken to Savannakhet to let them see what the rest of the country looked like. There was this constant effort to try to tell them that they were part of one country. Whether they believed it or not or understood it, I make no pretense of even guessing. But I think there was an effort made to try to do this. By the end of the war...before 1973 there were massive shifts of troops. There were troops from the south coming up to the north, and north people going to the south, which may have been more harmful than helpful.

Q: Did you ever see any effort on the part of any American at all to encourage the Meo to think that what they were fighting for was some kind of autonomous entity of their own?

KUHN: No.

Q: Sometimes that charge is made.

KUHN: Unless someone would just assume that by giving Vang Pao so much authority, but certainly I never heard any ...

Q: Because he did have a lot of power. There is no doubt about it. He exercised a lot of power over his people, and they would do what he told them to do.

KUHN: Pretty much so.

Q: He was not of a mind to create an autonomous Meo state?

KUHN: I think he realized that probably would have never flown. In fact, you say that he was a powerful person. He was and he wasn't. Let's remember there are several clans. Touby Lyfong was still very important and very influential. There was also his relationship with Chao Saykham. I think that was an influence that was a strong influence on what Vang Pao did. Again,

it is not acknowledged and it is hard to pinpoint, but I think it was there. You know these things about Vang Pao walking down the street and seeing a prisoner and shooting him in back of the head, I personally never saw anything like that or any indication of any activity like that. I am not saying it never happened, I don't know. But a lot of the things that serious writings attribute to him I just wonder sometimes...it may have happened once or twice, but to think that is the way he acted all the time, I think is erroneous. This idea in terms of money, whether or not there were padded payrolls, whether he was getting kickbacks...I am not saying it didn't happen, but let's look at it from a different standpoint. Anybody could go over there to Vang Pao's front porch and sit on it from about 4 in the afternoon until about midnight, and see the parade of children, widows, wounded, sick come walking up on his front porch. There would be ten dollars here, 100 dollars there, fifty dollars over there. Every night there would be somebody coming up wanting something. That took money.

Where was Vang Pao going to get that money? Even if he were running opium. I doubt that Vang Pao was a wealthy man when he came to the U.S. I never went to his place when he went to Missoula nor to his place in California. I do know though, that there was a lot of skimming off of money collected for the re-invasion of Laos, but whether or not Vang Pao benefitted personally, I don't know. But he was constantly giving things away. He had to, that was his role. If he was going to be the traditional leader, he had to be in a position to help people, and he had to get the money some place. If it was phony troops or straight cash from the CIA, so what? If he was going to be in that position he had to play that role. If he didn't play the role then the whole system was going to collapse because nobody was going to give him any homage. If you are the boss and I need something and come to you and you say, "Look, I am sorry, I can't give you 20 bucks today. Just tell your mother who is starving to wait until tomorrow to get some rice." It wouldn't take me long to figure out that this guy wasn't the person I thought he was. So, there is this tremendous image that had to be maintained. Not just an image but an actual persona that had to be maintained.

Q: Yes.

KUHN: Vang Pao was a mercurial personality. He was not somebody who was predictable. He, I would guess, like many Meo, may have been superstitious enough to have many whims. I remember at the attempt to retake Phou Pha Thi in December 1968, I spent three weeks with Vang Pao, with him constantly day and night. Sleeping at the same outpost and everything with him. I remember one particular time the friendly troops were making pretty good advances up the side of Pha Thi. One of the CIA people came in and said, "General we have good news. Tomorrow the air force is going to give us a max effort, we have a code name. When the air force gives a code name to something it means they are really taking it seriously. So tomorrow the sky is going to be dark with jets over Pha Thi. All you have to do is pull back down about a quarter of a mile and they will level the top of Pha Thi. It will be five inches shorter by tomorrow afternoon when they get finished with this." And Vang Pao said, "Don't need it." I said, "What?" He said, "I know that tonight I am going to give the order to advance and I know that by tomorrow morning my men are going to be on top of Phou Pha Thi."

I am a great believer in individuals affecting history. I think when Colonel Thong Vongrasamy got killed it affected history. When Don Sjostrom got killed, that affected Lao history. When

Jerry Daniels for the first time retired...he retired a couple of times from Laos...and the new guy who was General Vang Pao's case officer just didn't know how to handle Vang Pao. Vang Pao said he wanted everything canceled for the next day and no air strikes. I think Jerry would have been able to sit down with Vang Pao and say, "Let's just think this over a little bit." But, as it was, the guy who was working with Vang Pao said, "Well, okay, I will cancel it." That night, I think it was Colonel Douangtha, got their ass kicked. They were hauling off the dead and wounded from that attack all the next day. It was a massacre. Vang Pao came in and said, "Well, we didn't take the top so now I want the airplanes for tomorrow." This guy said, "General Vang Pao, I am not even going to call down to Udorn. After what we just canceled today, if I call down tonight and tell them we want something for tomorrow, you will never see another airplane up here for the next ten years. You have used up your creditability in terms of this operation. We are not going to see any more aircraft up here on Pha Thi." And basically that was the end. Shortly after that the whole thing was called off. Vang Pao was so cocksure of himself. He did the same thing earlier in 1968.

I was looking at my notes here today and I see where I have written, "Just talked to Vang Pao and he said he is stopping the Hua Muong operation and in two more days he is going to attack Pha Thi again." The same thing happened on the Plaine des Jarres. All of a sudden, to try to protect Long Chieng he captures Xieng Khouang, holds it for a short period of time, and then gets pushed out. He would do these things. You could never tell what he was going to do next. That was probably okay when he was dealing with small groups of guerrilla people, but he tried to translate that same thing into moving three or four hundred men in operations and it didn't work at all.

I think one of his faults, although perhaps he was just being more realistic than the rest of us, I don't know, he did not trust anybody except the Meo. When he came out to remote villages...I know at least three different...one T'ai Khaw (White T'ai), and two Lao villages, that begged for weapons and arms for training, sent people in asking for assistance. He said, "No, I don't trust those people. They are Lao." So from that standpoint, just the opposite of what I was arguing before, where he was trying to get this integration, if he didn't like a group or felt they were a group that was from an area that had been patrolled by the communists for a long period of time, he wouldn't trust them, wouldn't bring them in, wouldn't go with them. So, he did have some kinds of limitations.

Again back to the old warlord kind of concept, too, in the summer of 1969, when I had just returned from home leave and went straight out to the Plaine des Jarres area where Vang Pao had just captured Lat Sen and parts of the southern part of the Plaine. I have movies of the first group of refugees coming across the grasslands over to where the friendly troops were. You can see the planes bombing in the back and everything. They are carrying sewing machines, have all their livestock and getting over to where the friendly forces were and it looked pretty obvious to me that there was an awful lot of cattle coming out, hundreds of heads of cattle and water buffalo. We were spending thousands and thousands of dollars in buying beef from Singapore Chinese merchants. Buying the canned beef, flying or trucking it up to Vientiane and then flying it up to Long Chieng or someplace to give to the troops. I thought, "Gee, this is the perfect opportunity. We have meat on the hoof. Before tomorrow night is over I am going to evacuate almost all of these civilians on airplanes to Sam Thong. But I am not going to take the cows and water

buffalo. Here is a chance if I can buy their buffalo, we can give them some money so that when they get to Sam Thong they will have money to buy other things that they need.” So I got my trusty little Stoner sideband out and called Jack Williamson down in Vientiane and said, “Here is my scheme.” Jack said, “Hey, that sounds fantastic. Give me a half an hour. I have to get with the embassy, with the AID procurement people, etc.” About 35 to 45 minutes later, Jack came back on the radio and said, “It’s a go. I don’t care how you do it. We can’t get you any suitcases of money tonight, but if you can somehow talk these people into accepting some kind of IOU that we will buy so many cattle for so much kip, okay.”

Vang Pao was out with me most of this day and it was hot. Looking back on it I attribute it to the ice water. Some of the guys at Long Chieng had sent over these great big metal water cans full of ice and water. It was so hot out there in August that I was just drinking this water glass after glass, and I think it really went to my brain. I went over to Vang Pao and say, “General, I have what I think is good news,” and explained to him the whole situation. He took off his hat, he used to wear one of these floppy bush hats, and threw it down on the ground and said, “What? That is impossible. These are enemy. These people are all enemy and my troops deserve those water buffaloes and cows. They get to keep those things.” So, I started arguing and this is one of those times that maybe one of those stories about Vang Pao pulling out a gun and shooting somebody could have been true because he was armed and I was armed. He had on a pistol of some kind and I had on my 38. I think he was actually thinking about that.

Q: I suppose from his point of view these people had been living in the Pathet Lao zone for so long with their animals that all the animals were considered to be booty.

KUHN: Yes, and I wouldn't have argued the fact that they all may have been or were enemy too.

Q: Was he opposed to sending them to Sam Thong?

KUHN: The people?

Q: Yes.

KUHN: Oh, he wanted to get them out, to get rid of them.

Q: Even if they were Pathet Lao agents?

KUHN: He didn't care. He wanted to get them out of the Plaine des Jarres. But, I think he wanted to get them out so that whatever they left behind...and in fact over the next three or four days it looked like something out of the wild west. There were huge cattle drives from the Plaine over to Long Chieng. I don't know if individual soldiers ever got their share of the cows, whether Vang Pao and other mucky mucks planned on keeping them all.

Q: But they were simply taken and not a penny paid?

KUHN: Not a penny paid. I tried. I said, “Just think of the savings. The U.S. government is spending millions of dollars trying to support this and we can save a lot of money.” In 1969 there

was still some congressional activity about how much money was being spent.

Q: Well, the scrutiny of expenses was growing in 1969.

KUHN: Yes. A couple of Americans who were working over there came in to talk to me and, of course, at that time Phaythoune and I were married, and with Chao Saykham having family connections to the government there made everything even a little more sticky. So, there were several Americans who went over to talk to Vang Pao when he was threatening to have me physically removed from Sam Thong and never work up there again. They talked to him and calmed him down a little bit. But, after that, the relationship between Vang Pao and me was correct, but nothing supergrade. Having said that, about three or four months later, January, I came down with what was thought to be a bleeding ulcer and was medevaced out and never came back to Sam Thong again. I was sent some place else. So I never had much opportunity to work with Vang Pao again. But, I always laugh because I was one of the very few people never to have gotten what they call a Vang Pao ring. He used to have these big rings made and give them to the people who were working closely with him, particularly some of the pilots, the Ravens and AD-1 pilots and people like that. Maybe one or two AID people had them. One of Vang Pao's aides had told me just before that Vang Pao was getting ready to give me one of the rings which was a very coveted things at the time, but he never did.

There are a couple of other people whose names I want to mention, not only because they are really important, but for their memory's sake. The operation that we had at Sam Thong, in addition to the Americans we had four or five people we called nai khongs. *Nai khong* is a term carried over from, I guess, the French occupation days. Our nai khongs were officially paid by AID. They were people who had respect in the area. A couple of the younger fellows spoke some English, which made it nice to work with them. Either they would go with us or go on their own to investigate refugee moves and gather intelligence as to what was happening to civilians and refugees.

One of the nai khongs we were working with was a combination of Lao Theung and Meo, his name was Nhia Ying and just a tremendous, tremendous individual. In September 1966 Nhia Ying was coming back in a Helio Courier to Sam Thong in the afternoon and for some reason the plane crashed about a quarter of a mile from Tha Tham Bleung, Lima Site 72, near Sam Thong. The pilot of a Helio Courier sits on the left-hand side and the door to get in is on the left-hand side. So the passenger has to get in and crawl past the yoke to get over to the passenger side and likewise to get out. Well, when the plane crashed the pilot crawled out and started to run away from the airplane. He turned around and realized that Nhia Ying was still in the front seat. He ran back into the aircraft and started to pull Nhia Ying out from the seat harness and the plane caught on fire. As he was dragging Nhia Ying out it basically exploded. The pilot was partially burned on the face and hands but Nhia Ying had third degree burns over 89 percent of his body. He got him back to the hospital in Sam Thong and he was still alive. He was rushed down to Korat and was down there. He had two wives and several children. Pop arranged for one of his wives to fly down to be with him. In the meantime, Pat McCready said that she was working on a space which was normally only reserved for Americans on what was called the Red Ball Express back to Brook Burn Hospital back in Texas. Everything was getting set up to send Nhia Ying back to the States for treatment when he died in the hospital. That was a tremendous loss because he was

somebody who was very well respected, and the fact that he was part Lao Theung as well as Meo sort of gave him an entrée to both worlds, so to speak. We were lucky, I guess, that of all the people who worked for us in those years we didn't lose more people. Later on towards the very end we lost another nai khong, Nou Tou, when a pilot ran into a mountain. But those were the only two of our people that were ever killed during our operations, but pretty important people.

There were a few strange and unusual things that happened in late 1966. In the late summer of 1966 there was an American lab technician working at the hospital who was one of the air commandos, and he was shot one night. Nobody was ever apprehended, we could never figure out any motive for the shooting although there were several theories. One of them was this man was a lab technician at the hospital and the nurses quarter was right next to the hospital. The soldiers used to come down after the nurses were off duty. This guy used to go out late at night to chase the soldiers away from the girls. The theory is that he irritated somebody one night and somebody shot him. This probably makes about as much sense as anything. Another theory was that two black American White Star soldiers had allegedly raped a Meo in 1961 and that there was some resentment among some of the Meo against the black Americans, so he was shot. But that doesn't hold water because we had other black Americans who worked at both Long Chieng and Sam Thong and got along fine with everybody and there was never any kind of racial animosity. So, I think probably it had to do with the girls and the nurses more than anything else.

At the end of 1966 and the beginning of 1967, it was obvious that the air head at Site 36, Na Khang, was probably going to be hit and indications were that the Vietnamese were making a buildup to attack 36. I went up there...Don Sjostrom was another AID operations officer I worked with and probably my closest friend in Laos at that time, was staying at 36 along with Jerry Daniels and Mike Lynch. I went up there and spent four or five days with them. The weather was very bad. Fog was right on the deck and no planes were coming in or out for four or five days. Jerry, Don and I spent a lot of time walking around. We walked two, three, four miles out from the airstrip, all around the area...just in retrospect, rather foolishly walking around by ourselves. We went through some of the old Phuan villages that had been burnt out in a previous attack. There was no sign of any enemy at that time. So, when the weather broke I went back to Sam Thong for a couple of days because nothing was going on at 36.

It was the morning of January 6, 1967 that we got a call a little after 6:00 in the morning from Long Chieng saying that site 36, Na Khang, was under attack and they had just gotten word that Don Sjostrom had gotten killed in the attack. At Na Khang there was a airstrip with kind of a kidney shaped hill just to the north and the friendly positions and the CIA bunkers and radios were located on the slopes of that little kidney shaped hill ridge line. On top of the ridge line there was a 75 pack howitzer and a 50 caliber machine gun. The 50 caliber machine gun was facing away from the airstrip. Well, when the Vietnamese attacked they came in and got up on top of the ridge line where the 50 caliber machine gun was located and apparently were trying to get it turned around so they had a field of fire to sweep the airstrip and basically sweep the areas where the troops were located and where the CIA radios and bunkers were. In order to prevent that, the forces there...I should at this time say there was a mixed element at Na Khang. There were elements of SGUs but many of the main forces were FAR troops. Colonel Phan Syharat was the governor of Sam Neua and his battalion, I believe, was BV 26. At any rate, there were mixed Meo/Lao and other tribal troops defending Na Khang.

Apparently in order to try to keep the Vietnamese from getting the 50 caliber machine gun turned around on the runway, they were going to try to hit the position where the gun was. There were three groups of troops involved. One group would come in from the left, one from the right and one right up the center. For some reason, Don, instead of staying in the bunker where he would have been perfectly safe, but also totally keeping in character with him, was in the center group, and the reports say he was actually leading the center group up the hill to where the machine gun was when he took one round right between the eyes. All accounts were that he was dead instantly. But that did not deter the friendly groups from coming up. They overran the 50 caliber machine gun position and prevented the Vietnamese from staying on the ridge line. They pulled back down to the side.

They were still coming in across the runway. The weather broke, this was about 6:00, 6:30 in the morning, a little later on an aircraft did come in and there was heavy tactical support for Site 36. In the meantime, then, I left Sam Thong as soon as I could and went up to a location called Site 50, Phou Cum, which was near 36 to see if things were going to break, if any aircraft were going to get in. My intent was to try to get in on the first aircraft so that I could pick up Don's body and bring him back to Vientiane. I felt very strongly that I had to do this and no one argued with me. After I got to Phou Cum, Lima Site 50, and was there for a few hours, it was obvious that aircraft were still not able to get into Site 36 because of weather and ground fire. I got word on the radio that Vang Pao was quite concerned as word got around the rest of Sam Neua, that Na Khang, Lima Site 36, had been hit and that Don was dead, that this would cause some panic and unrest and unease. He wanted to make sure that other sites up in Sam Neua got the word firsthand from somebody to cool it, things were under control, don't get excited. So I left Phou Cum late morning and spent most of the rest of the day visiting all the various airstrips up in Sam Neua talking to the leaders and explaining to them what happened and that everything was okay and calm.

In the meantime, late in the afternoon a Caribou got into 36 and picked up Don's body and took it back to Vientiane. I was heading in to 36 to spend the night there when again it was suggested that I go over to Site 50 at Phou Cum and coordinate activities from there because if 36 got hit again it might cut off communications. So I went back to Site 50. The next morning early, 36 was still in friendly hands and a pilot coming up out of Vientiane...as an aside, Air America and Continental pilots were great individuals but often times they got things screwed up...in this particular incident the pilot said he had observed an ICC (International Control Commission) C-47 headed north and supposedly someone had heard on the radio that the ICC, which was composed of Indian, Polish and Canadian diplomats and military officers, were in fact coming up to Na Khang to investigate the attack because the Lao government had protested the Vietnamese attack on a Lao outpost.

Q: That would have been rather surprising because the ICC had to debate many days if not weeks before deciding to investigate any cease-fire violation.

KUHN: You probably know better, but I don't think there was ever any case where the Vietnamese were sanctioned for any kind of act.

In fact there was panic in Udorn a little bit. During the attack, of course, Mike Lynch had been there, Jerry Daniels was the other person who had been waiting, waiting and waiting for the attack and had given it up like I did and had gone to Bangkok for a couple of days on vacation. Jerry came back the day after the attack, so there was Jerry and Mike up there. The last thing the embassy or anyone wanted was the ICC to land at Na Khang and find two CIA case officers and a whole bunker full of radios. But in one of these little quirks in diplomacy, Jerry and Mike were ordered back to Udorn, and I was asked if I wanted to go into Site 36 as an AID employee and if the ICC came in I would be the cover for the radios and everything, which was pretty flimsy.

Q: But you were legitimate anyway.

KUHN: Yes..

Q: The presence of the other two might be construed as a violation of the provision of the 1962 Geneva Agreement forbidding foreign military personnel from being in Laos. This was rather nonsensical considering the thousands of so-called North Vietnamese "volunteers" roaming over the entire country.

KUHN: I said, "Yes, of course." I came in and Mike and Jerry were both still there. The problem was that the CIA radio network used upper and lower single sidebands and they had multiple frequency radios. The AID radios were fixed frequency and although we used upper sometime, we primarily used lower. Also, the CIA at night switched from upper to lower and then changed frequencies and you had to know how to calibrate the radios which I did not know how to do. So they gave me a five-minute lesson on how to recalibrate the radios for day and night time. Well, it turned out we just left them on the daytime frequency the whole time because it was too much trouble to try to recalibrate.

Anyway, the upshot was that for three days and two nights I spent at Na Khang with a Thai road watch team leader whose code name was Blue Boy. For two nights I never went to bed. I coordinated virtually all of the road watch air strikes that were going on during the night as well as coordinating U.S. flare ships. All night long for two consecutive nights we had C-130s who did nothing but drop flares over Site 36 to illuminate it in case there would be another attack; you could spot the Vietnamese. There were a couple of probes in the perimeter, but no attack either night. Then during the day I not only had to continue to coordinate the refugee activities, but also coordinate the air activities and sending out ammunition supplies to all the other outposts. So for three days and two nights it was absolute hell because I was the only American there and I was doing the work of the CIA and AID. The ICC never did show up, it was a false alarm. It was not an ICC C-47, it was a Continental C-47 which was kind of a whitish color.

The upshot was that Na Khang, Lima Site 36, held, although we lost our best, and most respected, operations officer in Don Sjostrom, but I think it gave the Lao and the Meo a great morale booster. For here 36 had been hit and hit and all indications were that the Vietnamese had lost a lot of men. We went out the first day I was there around some of the perimeter areas and the Vietnamese had picked up all their bodies but there was a lot of material left around. There were hats, belts, mail pouches, personal effects and things down around the airstrip and fueling dumps. So, I think the Vietnamese got hit pretty hard.

Q: We might just put in a footnote here about the weather. The foggy conditions that you were describing were quite common were they in the mountains even in the middle of the dry season?

KUHN: Fairly common depending on where you were. If you were really high up on a mountain top, say 3,400 or 3,500 feet above sea level, often times at 5 or 6 or 7 in the morning the strip would be open because the clouds and the fog would be down below you. Then, as the sun came out and it got warmer, the clouds would rise and so where you may be open at 7:00, by 8:00 or 8:30 you may be engulfed in clouds until that burned away around 9, 10 or 11 o'clock you may be closed in again. Conversely, if you were down in the valley areas, early in the morning you were apt to get a lot of ground fog and haze and as that burned off or rose, then the planes could come in under that and get into the valleys. So Na Khang was one of those places that was not all that high and often in the morning it was...but that particular time of the year for some reason, late December, we had days and days of fog. Not just haze but absolute fog where you couldn't see more than 40 meters ahead of you. And, of course, the airstrip at Site 36 was laid out in the only way you could possibly lay it out in terms of the terrain. For some reason, there was almost constant three-quarter tail winds which made it very dangerous for takeoffs. It was tricky enough on landings, but particularly dangerous on takeoffs. The Air Force had seen the utility of these little Helio Couriers, so I guess in late 1966 they decided to switch their planes they used as spotters or FAC (Forward Air Controller) planes to the Helio Courier thinking it would be a better aircraft. Well, the Helio was a good aircraft, but tricky on takeoffs and landings if you don't know how to do it. I think they crashed three or four of these Helios in a matter of a week because the pilots were not used to them, and tried to land and takeoff from Site 36 with these tail winds and just flipped. It was a very long strip but very dangerous. The C-123s that came in, came in only if they had the extra jet pods on the wings to give them an extra boost. You had to get up pretty quickly.

With the death of Don, I was assigned full time the responsibility of covering Sam Neua and all the area north and east of the Plaine des Jarres. In the meantime, right after the incident at 36, someone came up with an idea to have something that was called Operation Linkup. Operation Linkup was supposedly to try to relieve some of the pressure, I think, on Nam Bac, north of Luang Prabang, and at the same time give a land bridge between western Sam Neua province and eastern Luang Prabang province. So some of the sites in that area, Houei Tong Kho (Lima Site 184), Houei Thong (Lima Site 196) and Phou Saly (Lima Site 178), were supposed to be furnishing their ADC, their home militia people, in conjunction with a SGU battalion, to start moving to the west and try to link up with troops coming out of the Luang Prabang region.

This was kind of a fun thing. Again, it was one of these things that probably turned out tragic for everybody, but when you are young and your adrenaline is going it was a fun kind of operation, if I can use that word in this kind of situation. The local leader of the area was very anxious to get in and resume operations, so to speak, in this area. USAID had a huge printing operation in Vientiane. Ken Ross was the head of the printing office there and he used to print things for USAID, CIA, USIA. We printed leaflets, school books, etc. So, we had a whole lot of leaflets printed up with the chao muong's [district officer's] picture and little safe conduct passes saying "anybody having these passes would be given safe conduct and that the Lao government wanted to come in and work with the civilians again." This was primarily up and down a little river

called the Nam Xang. So, I took the leader up one day in a Helio and took in several big boxes of these leaflets and just flew at tree top level up and down the river. Every time we would see people on the river or working in fields we would fly over and drop these leaflets. We only got shot at one time. There was one farmer in his field who had an old single shot rifle of some sort and he took a shot at us. Other than that, we didn't see any troops and it looked like a pretty wide open area.

The troops began to move into the area in late January or early February, and on February 2 it occupied a fairly large former trading town called Ban Xe. Jack Williamson and I had been over at Luang Prabang doing something and were coming back in a chopper, when we heard a chopper pilot say the troops were going into Ban Xe. So we took the chopper and swung over and landed at Ban Xe. It is a big Lao village. People were very enthusiastic. They were all excited and they had all of these leaflets so I said, "Well, maybe I will just spend the night here. The people looked like they were friendly." I think that was the coldest night I ever spent in my entire life. I nearly froze to death. But the people were very excited and the next day a chopper came in to pick me up and we started working with these people. I started bringing in school supplies, brought in a medic right away. They weren't really refugees, so there really wasn't refugee supplies, but they needed some food and some things that they hadn't had for some years. It was really a beautiful village. They went along the river and cut down a series of teak trees they had planted and we put in an airstrip. Vang Pao was going to put more troops in the area and there was going to be an expansion of the whole program. Some of the men volunteered to be militia and some of them were armed. I mention this because it was one of these things where you get caught up in the excitement of it all and think, "Wow, we are going in. This village is now friendly and we are going to help them." But it was obvious that the Pathet Lao was not going to allow this to happen in their territory for very long. Things went well up until May. I was up there and things were deteriorating and I was going to spend the night there again. The villagers came up and said they needed weapons, would I please go back to Long Chieng and plead with Vang Pao to send up more guns.

Q: Because they were still relying on their old flint locks?

KUHN: They didn't even have those. These were Lao who didn't really have any guns at all. Some of them said that they had been with the French years ago, but these guys were quite elderly by this time. Ban Xe had been a large trading town and the French had been in and out. They were anxious to do something for themselves. Well, I went back to Long Chieng that night and was on Vang Pao's front porch to get an audience with him. He absolutely refused. He said that he was not giving any weapons to these Lao.

Q: Why, because he mistrusted them?

KUHN: He mistrusted them because they had been with the PL too long and he wasn't going to trust them to give weapons. So, the next morning I took off at 6:00 from Long Chieng and it was about an hour's flight up to Ban Xe. As we were approaching the village I could see smoke coming up from along the river. When we circled the place the entire beautiful, beautiful village was all in flames. The Pathet Lao had attacked about 5:30 in the morning and immediately as they came in they set fire to the village, rounded up all the people they could. We flew around

the area and spotted groups here and there but there wasn't much we could do. We went over to Site 196 and told the commander there what had happened and he promised that he would send some Meo and Lao troops there to at least try to locate the civilians. Over the next month or so several hundred civilians did straggle into the east.

I remember we located two or three hundred of them in a wooded area about half way between where Ban Xe was and Site 196. I took up one of the U.S. attachés with me. The attachés were not allowed to carry guns, but the attaché at Sam Thong always had a Colt 45 and there was a tradition that when a new attaché arrived the old attaché would pass his weapon to the new one. So this army captain had his Colt 45. That happened to be the night of a partial eclipse of the moon. Here we were out in the middle of the woods trying to be as inconspicuous as possible with not knowing where any of the enemy was and all hell broke loose. Anything that these people had to make a noise with, they were out and they persuaded the attaché to empty off one clip of his gun. It must have worked because the tradition being there is a frog eating the moon during the eclipse. This frog ate about one-third, maybe a half of the moon and disgorged it. So, I guess the whole process worked because the moon was saved and the next day we got some choppers in and started moving the civilians out. Later on this entire group relocated down at the north end of the Nam Ngum Reservoir in Vientiane province and did quite well. They were a very, very prosperous group. So, at least we got most of the people out, but their whole village was unfortunately totally destroyed.

One other incident occurred there. The night that I went back to Long Chieng we had a Lao Theung medic there. He was 20 years old and had a wife and two kids back at Sam Thong. He begged me to bring him back to Sam Thong. I asked him why and he said, "I just don't want to stay here. I want to go home. I want to get out." I said, "No, you can't, you got to stay here." Well, a villager told me later that when the Pathet Lao attacked during the morning, this kid, why, I don't know....

[change of tape] Maybe he panicked, maybe afraid of being captured by the Pathet Lao...again, I do not know, but the villagers said that when the attack started the medic put a grenade to his stomach and pulled the pin...committed suicide.

This is again one of these things when you are up country working, occasionally you get involved in something that is a little more significant than you think at the time. It was in late July, early August when we got word at Sam Thong that an Air Force helicopter was bringing in a very badly injured U.S. Air Force pilot and the Air Force doctor at Sam Thong was alerted. I happened to be back at Sam Thong at the time so I went down to the hospital...

Q: This was a pilot who had bailed out and had been rescued?

KUHN: Well, presumably, but we didn't know. I went down to the hospital and the Jolly Green landed in front of the hospital and one of the crew chiefs got out and came over and talked to the doctor and said, "I think we are too late. This pilot died on route to the hospital." He said, "It is really too bad because you can tell he was not shot. His parachute collapsed and he smashed into the side of a karst. We picked him up semi-hanging there. But, we don't think he was shot, but died a few minutes ago." The doctor looked at him and very quickly confirmed the fact that the pilot was dead, and they took off. A few days later in the *Bangkok Post*, I think it was August 8,

there was a big article that said something to the effect that a modern American hero dies in North Vietnam. The story was that this man, Carl Rickter, was apparently an outstanding squadron leader and Air Force officer. After his first 100 combat missions he volunteered to come back for a second hundred. He had cut down the rate of losses in his squadron over the year he had been there drastically. He had several kills to his credit and apparently was a rising star in terms of being a pilot. The Air Force was planning on bringing him back to the United States using him sort of as a recruiter around the country. He was on his 198th mission, had two more to go, was in an area that was classified as very low risk in terms of picking up any ground fire and he was breaking in a new pilot, showing him the area, when he came in to hit a bridge and the plane got hit. Apparently he maneuvered, got altitude, ejected and the chute came down and brushed against the side of this karst and the chute collapsed and swung him up against the side of the rocks and smashed him up pretty badly. The Jolly Greens got in and picked him up and brought him in. Now, I can't confirm that that was the same person, but the sequence, the events and everything all came out about the same.

During 1967 there were skirmishes all up and down Sam Neua, areas which were lost and we would retake them and then were lost again. Suffice it to say, there was a lot of activity, a lot of action going on in Sam Neua at this time.

In January, 1968 we had an unusual visitor, Senator Young from Ohio. I was from Ohio so I had a little personal interest in him. The man at that time was so old and so decrepit he literally could not walk off the back of the Caribou. He had to be carried in and out. He came up and said some asinine and inane things about what a beautiful country Laos was and how lucky all the children and people were to be living in such a beautiful country, when you could hear the jets flying overhead and 155s firing at Muong Soui (Lima 108) to the north of us, and he was talking about how lucky people were to be living in Laos. But he did make a short speech...we gave a party for him and Vang Pao came over and gave him the traditional things that Vang Pao gives to visiting dignitaries. In his speech he said that he was in the middle of his trip to Southeast Asia, was a firm supporter of continued U.S. aid to Laos and Southeast Asia and continued effort to support the war. There was a Pentagon escort with him. After this little speech the escort came over to me and said, "Three weeks ago, Senator Young would never have made comments like that. I can't believe the 180 degree turn around that this man is publicly professing in terms of his support for what is happening in Southeast Asia." I have never gone back to look up what the record was. Apparently, this Pentagon escort was quite surprised because this did not sound like the Senator Young that he had known before.

Another bizarre thing happened in January 1968. I was over at a place called Houei Tong Kho (Lima Site 184) when I heard on the radio that Phou Pha Thi, Site 85, was under attack by at least two and possibly more, aircraft. The pilot I was with decided somebody must be playing a joke on us because Phou Pha Thi couldn't be under an air attack. In fact, it was. The story is, and there are several variations but the one I have is, I think, pretty much the standard one, is that early in the morning at site 205, Pha Hang, the local troops and the people living there spotted four biplanes passing overhead heading west and north of 205. There seems to be full agreement that there were originally four aircraft, but in the actual attack on Phou Pha Thi there were only two planes spotted. These were old Colt biplanes. They came in and dropped some kind of ordinance on Pha Thi that killed one or two Lao and Meo civilians that were on top of the hill.

They didn't really do any damage, but one of the planes apparently sustained heavy ground fire and Jerry Daniels has always claimed that he was the one who shot one of them down. There was at least one Air America helicopter on the ground at the time and they took off. Dick Elder was the pilot of one of the helicopters and Dick later told me that his crew chief had an AK-47 on board and these old Colts were so lumbering and so slow that Dick maneuvered his Huey up alongside the Colt, and his crew chief blasted it and it crashed. Whatever happened both of them did crash. One of the planes was found and recovered. A Thai team went in to try to bring out the aircraft and salvage whatever was possible. It was a strange thing. They came back and said that the pilot and co-pilot were very light skinned and very tall and very big. They looked more Chinese than Vietnamese, but no one was really sure. Well, I never understood why they just didn't bring the bodies out and have somebody take a look at them. They claim in order to get the bodies out and to move the aircraft itself they had to take axes and chop the legs off the pilot and co-pilot because they were jammed in the cockpit. Again, if that were true why didn't they just leave the bodies in and bring them out? I examined the cockpit and aircraft pretty carefully and didn't see any signs of blood or anything that looked like somebody had their legs chopped off.

Q: So the bodies were never recovered.

KUHN: The bodies were never recovered, [A recently published book states that the bodies were displayed at Long Chieng, but I do not recall this] but one whole plane was brought out. It was taken back to Na Khang and I photographed it almost inch by inch. The so-called bombs, they had taken what looked like old fashioned milk racks you put the cans of milk in and just take mortars and inserted them in these racks. They had a bomb bay like thing at the bottom of the plane and were just dropping these mortars out. They had some kind of rocket pods mounted on the wings which they had fired off. But a very bizarre incident. The embassy, of course, was very nervous because nothing had been said in the press about Pha Thi and what was up there. Pha Thi was a radar base. So, the embassy was a bit nervous about the question of why would the North Vietnamese come all the way over and attack Pha Thi. So, the embassy put out the word that the attack occurred at Nam Bac, which lead to even more raised eyebrows because why would they come all the way over...I mean, if they could come down from Dien Bien Phu, about a 15-minute flight, why would they come all the way from eastern Vietnam to bomb Nam Bac?

Q: But it is rather strange, this Phou Pha Thi was such a strategic site. It is strange that the North Vietnamese never tried to knock it out with some of their MiGs. Wouldn't you have thought they would try to do that?

KUHN: Well, I would assume that they probably could have. I don't know in January, February, March, 1968, whether by that time we had decimated their air force or not.

Q: They certainly would have been far more effective than these Colt things.

KUHN: Oh, no question about that. Again, maybe their pilots had not been trained for bombing. They were fighter pilots and were pretty effective in terms of counteracting American fighters. Whether or not they were bombers and were capable of bombing, whether their planes were rigged for bombing, I don't know. Anyway, it didn't work, but it almost worked. In the first week of March, I got a call one morning very, very early that a plane was coming up to pick me

up, I was at Site 111, Houei Kha Moun, and I was to return to Sam Thong immediately, no questions asked. So the plane landed getting in before the clouds started to lift. At Sam Thong I was told immediately to get a suit on and be over at Long Chieng by 9:30. Now, I can't imagine why anyone thought I would have a suit at Sam Thong. For some quirky reason, I did have a grungy old greenish color Sears and Roebuck suit and a white shirt. So I got dressed and went to Long Chieng and found out I was one of eleven Americans to be awarded the Order of the Million Elephants and the White Parasol by the King of Laos, which totally surprised me. There were myself, Dr. Weldon from AID and one Army attaché and seven CIA officers including Ted Shackley, who was station chief, and Bill Lair and Pat Landry coming out of Udorn, and Jerry Daniels and Howard Freedman and I think Kirk Dimmit and John Randall were the other ones, I am not sure. We went through the ceremony where we were introduced to the King, and he gave each one of us a large certificate stating that we had been given the Order [this certificate was actually dated August and sent to each of us several months after the ceremony. Recent writings have used the date of the certificate as the date of the award. This is incorrect.] and a medallion with a cloisonné three-headed elephant on it, which was quite nice. When I think of all the things I have ever gotten in the way of awards, that one certainly meant the most to me because the story came out that the Prime Minister had gone to Ambassador Sullivan and said that the Lao government wanted to recognize the work of several Americans in the north at Long Chieng and wanted to give us this award. Sullivan said, "No, I refuse to allow any American to accept decorations from the government." Apparently Souvanna Phouma went to the King and they decided that this is our country and if we want to give out awards we will give out awards and not tell the ambassador. So these were kind of given under the table, so to speak, and were never publicly acknowledged. Although the Army attaché who got the award later on did request permission to wear his decoration on dress uniform. The Army did approve that.

Q: But there was no public announcement?

KUHN: No public announcement. On my records in AID there is no indication of my having received the Order.

Q: Not even on your personnel records?

KUHN: No.

Q: I wonder what the rules are about Foreign Service people accepting awards?

KUHN: It is country by country. In Vietnam people were getting awards from the Vietnamese government. I think Sullivan was worried that if you get an award from the country you are working in you are somehow compromised, tainted. You know, "If you give me an award than I owe you something over and above what might be normal." I think that is a lot of B.S. Anyway, we were not allowed to publicly acknowledge the fact that we got this award.

That was the first week of March and it was just a few days later when the event which was almost the major event of the war, so to speak, occurred in north Laos and that was the Vietnamese attack on Phou Pha Thi. A quick word on Pha Thi. Pha Thi was not a mountain in the traditional sense. I have seen writing about Pha Thi talking about the peak of Pha Thi, the

summit of Pha Thi and the slopes of Pha Thi. Pha Thi was not a Mount Fuji where you could walk up the sides to get to the top. It was a karst and a karst is a limestone outcropping. It was almost as if someone had taken a huge child's oblong building block -- in this case a mile long and half a mile wide -- and just stuck it out in the middle of northern Laos. Three sides rose up straight, and on the east and southeast, partway up the sheer side, it starts to slope down in more traditional kind of sloping area until it got down to the river. But it was not a traditional mountain. It was a block, a karst, a limestone outcrop.

Q: Did it have some spiritual significance for the Meo?

KUHN: I have heard people say it was a spiritual symbol, but I am not sure spiritual so much as just a dominating feature. Traditionally anybody who controlled Pha Thi controlled Sam Neua. This was something that the Vietnamese recognized. Whether or not there had ever been a radar station put on top of Pha Thi or not, in my mind it was something the Vietnamese and Pathet Lao would have had to capture anyway to legitimately claim control over Sam Neua. You mentioned yesterday about the Pathet Lao concept of controlling territorial territory. So, without having this major piece of terrain they were lacking something. It was a karst that had been fought over during the French Indochina war. I knew a Catholic priest in Laos, a tremendous old man, at least he seemed old at the time, who had been with the Meo and a small French group on top of Pha Thi, back in the late forties and fifties when the Viet Minh were attacking it at that time. Hearing stories about this Catholic priest teaching villagers how to fire 60 mm mortars and run reconnaissance, etc.

Q: It had a lot of other history.

KUHN: Yes. When I first got to northern Laos in late 1965, I was going up to Na Khang in 1966, I noticed occasionally there were these people in civilian clothes coming through Na Khang who I was told were technicians going up to Site 85 to install a TACAN. A TACAN is a navigational beacon system. In 1966-67, the decision was made to put a full scale radar station up on the top of Pha Thi, although there was a lot of discussion as to whether it should be done or not. It was manned originally by civilian technicians and then later by Air Force technicians who were ostensibly no longer in the Air Force, were civilians and sent back up there again. The equipment was quite complex and required months and months of construction. Bringing up big heavy pieces by helicopter and inserting them from on top of Pha Thi. This is important because of some other things that happened after the attack.

Q: It was quite an elaborate installation.

KUHN: Yes, it was.

Q: It wasn't just like a satellite dish that you put on top of a mountain.

KUHN: No. This was the kind of thing when it was operational -- and it didn't really become operational until late October, November, 1967. It was a year or so in the making. But this was the kind of operation, and I don't pretend to be an expert on this and I honestly can't recall ever actually being inside the console unit itself. But it was the kind of operation where you had your

bombers coming in to North Vietnam and the controller is sitting there and has everything before him on a screen. He is vectoring the plane to the target and he is telling the pilot at a certain point, "You are no longer in charge of your aircraft, I am in charge of your aircraft." He guides the plane in and hits the target, the bombs are dropped and the pilot then takes over and flies back home. Pilots apparently didn't like this because they didn't like not being in control of their own bombing runs. So I think that if you read the Project CHECO Southeast Asia Report, and if it is anywhere near as accurate as some others that have been written, the percentage of sorties flown over North Vietnam in November, December, a relatively small percentage were actually under the control of the radar station. It was not, I think, until the beginning of 1968 that the number of sorties controlled by the station increased.

At any rate, this was a key installation regardless the percentage of sorties it controlled. It was the key installation for the bombing of North Vietnam.

Q: Well, I suppose it was key in the sense that it provided the capability to run these bombing runs even in bad weather.

KUHN: Bad weather, yes. You didn't have to see where you were, you were electronically guided right in and you dropped your bombs and came back out again.

About three miles or so to the north and slightly east of Pha Thi was an airstrip and a village called Houei Kha Moun, Site 111. It was a village that I had made my USAID command post for Sam Neua. It was only 16 or 17 kilometers from the North Vietnamese border. It was a long strip, we could take Caribou. It had a good local Meo leader by the name of Lao Thai, who was the civilian leader for that part of northern Laos. His brother, Captain Gia Tou, was a captain not in Vang Pao's militia army, but captain in the FAR. He commanded a company of FAR ADCs who lived around Pha Thi. So I had made Site 111 my headquarters right after Don Sjostrom had been killed. I had a little office, made out of rice pallets and smashed fuel drums, and a Stoner single sideband radio and a small generator there. In addition to the big permanent Mark IV single sideband, I also had my portable Stoner radio.

At any rate, things were deteriorating in the area and in early 1968, January, February, the Vietnamese started the construction of a road from Sam Neua coming west towards Phou Pha Thi and literally every day the road got closer and closer. There are so many loose ends in this whole story that it is hard to give it in a continuous flow. But the assumption had always been that if anything ever happened to Pha Thi, an attack or under a threat, the U.S. Air Force would come in with massive bombing and massive bombing support to drag off the immediate attack, or even to try to slow down the road and everything. This was always the assumption. Along with the radar station...as I recall there were as many as 21 people up there at a time. I guess normally there were around 16 or 17. In addition to the Air Force "civilian" technicians, there was also a small CIA station there. There were two Americans there full time. These two Americans, I won't mention their names, but they were not the best and the brightest as far as I was concerned and things had not been going very well there. I think Udorn recognized this and they ordered Howard Freeman, who was working out of Site 36 at the time, to periodically go up to Pha Thi and stay there and sort of monitor activities to make sure things were going well. Howard and I had worked together for a long time. When I first came to Laos I was working

over at Phong Saly and northern Luang Prabang and he had been over there. We got along very well. Physically we looked somewhat alike and pilots used to get us confused at times and we tried to make a joke out of that.

We were coordinating our activities very closely because I had 15 to 20 thousand civilians in the whole area up there that were getting some kind of support from us or who were friendly villages and who were certainly people we wanted to look after if there was an attack.

Howie had been giving me information as he received it and, of course, I was passing along whatever I heard to him. Again, I have to take a sidestep here. The defense of Pha Thi was a real mixed bag. There were in addition to Captain Gia Tou's BV 26 ADC militia, an SGU battalion had been sent up and General Vang Pao had sent up Yu Va Ly, one of his Meo majors, to coordinate the entire activity up there. Well, this got him at odds with Captain Gia Tou because Gia Tou considered this was his territory. In addition to that there was a contingent of a hundred or so Thai troops. The Thai troops, interestingly enough, were under the command of a young lieutenant or captain at the time, who later became a general and was governor of Bangkok and ran for prime minister, Chamlong Srimuang. [Chamlong has written in Thai a rather vivid account of the Thai troops during the attack on Pha Thi. He is still active in Thai national politics today.] So he was just an unknown officer in those days. Anyway, there was a Thai contingent up there.

So, there were these three or four different groups with no one having overall control of the defense of Pha Thi. As I said, Pha Thi was this mile long karst. On the west side of Pha Thi down at the bottom of the cliffs there was a little spur and we had an airstrip there called Lima Site 198. It was a big refugee area. We put them over on the west side.

I was in there one day about a week or so before the attack and we had a meeting of the civilian leaders. They said, "You know we don't quite understand what is going on at Pha Thi. We know if the Vietnamese attack there will probably be a lot of bombing, etc. We want to make sure that we can get out. But, a strange thing happened. A week or so ago, one of the Americans up there came down and said they wanted to arm us as part of the civilian militia defense and they were going to give us guns and wanted us to go out full time and patrol all around the area to the west." They said, "If we are on patrol, we are not going to be out hunting, or tending our gardens or raising any rice, etc., so we want to know if you are going to support us with rice and any kind of supplies?" Well, this was the first I had ever heard of this kind of an operation. It turned out that one of the CIA guys up there was going around to the civilian villages and refugee villages around Pha Thi, at the base, and trying to organize another set of local militia with no coordination, no training, no radios, no means of support, and it was just total chaos. It was absolutely the most idiotic thing I ever heard.

Well, Howard and I had been talking and he said, "Look, I think we got at least 48 hours before there may be any attack on Pha Thi and....I want to say something here. I have several things that I have written about Pha Thi and some of the exact details vary slightly. I wrote a long paper for USAID right after the attack which varies slightly from the letter I wrote back to my parents. It also varies slightly with my own memory. In general the scenario was like this:

It was March 10. I spent most of the day traveling around the various sites and airstrips within a 30- or 40-mile radius of Pha Thi visiting each of the strips, talking to civilian and military leaders, seeing what was happening. We came into several locations where we got no signal. If they had been under attack they put out no signal for us to land. We tried to land at one airstrip as they came under attack and we got waved off. The whole area around Pha Thi was being probed. Almost every location was getting an attack of some sort. Howard Freeman was with me on part of this trip but not the entire trip. I came back and rendezvoused with Howard again at the lower edge of Pha Thi. I should say something else about Pha Thi, too. On top of the karst was where this radar base was. Then on the east side of Pha Thi, way down off the face of the karst there is a small spur where there is an airstrip that had been closed, but there is a helicopter pad there. To get to the top you had to actually climb up bamboo ladders. Then off the southeast portion, on top of the karst towards the northwest end, and the little CIA headquarters and the chopper pad on top was more in the center of the karst. Also, an aside to this, this was an excellent opium growing area because opium likes alkaline soils and, of course, they try to plant around these limestone karsts. So, interspersed among the Air Force, the CIA, etc., there were lots of poppies growing up among the rock outcroppings.

I rendezvoused with Howard down on the lower pad of 85. Captain Gia Tou was there with a pair of binoculars. He was highly agitated. This was about three or four in the afternoon. He said that the enemy had gotten up on the upper reaches of the face of the cliff and were essentially on the top of Pha Thi. He said he could see Vietnamese moving around up there and requested air strikes on the face of Pha Thi itself. Well, Howard said that was impossible because that is basically where the Thai troops are and if there was any kind of enemy intrusion up there the Thais would be calling for help or shooting. Gia Tou said, "No, I have been told by my people that the Thais have pulled back." So, there was some confusion there, but the upshot was that Howard said that he would not call in any air strikes. Gia Tou was highly agitated and highly upset and stomped off towards the lower pad. But, he claimed there were 200 enemy up on top but it turned out there couldn't be 200 enemy because there wasn't 200 enemy in the whole attack. They might have gotten up there before dark, although again probably not.

Q: Did it turn out to be true that the Thai troops had pulled back?

KUHN: Essentially yes, but I will get to that in a second. Howard asked me if I wanted to spend the night with him at Pha Thi and I said that normally I would but I had arranged, at their request, a meeting with all the civilian leaders over at Site 111, where I lived. I felt I had to get back there because they wanted to know what to do if Pha Thi did come under attack or did fall, where would the civilians go and where could we pick them up. So, I said I had better go back. He said, "Okay."

So, I went back to Site 111, it was just a few minutes chopper ride, and Gia Tou's brother Lao Thai and his wife arranged an early dinner. We ate very quickly and the village leaders began coming down to my little house. My house was made out of rice pallets and fuel drums and had a little front porch which overlooked Pha Thi. There was the valley down below where the Nam Het (River Het) was and then there was Pha Thi. Again, an aside, I always had 24 hour bodyguards whenever I was up there, so right outside my door was my little chair and there was my armed bodyguard standing there. The village leaders all came down to have a meeting. It was

close to 6:00 and as we were sitting their talking, we heard rockets and mortars from a distance. We looked up and we could see muzzle flashes from our position east of Pha Thi. There were just hundreds of these things going off, a barrage of rockets and mortars...

Q: You had a front row seat so to speak.

KUHN: We had a front row seat. Of course, Lao Thai immediately ran down to get his radio to try to talk to his brother. He came back and said, "I can't raise anybody. I can't get anyone to answer the radio." So, again, the quirkiness of the communications up there, I didn't have any real ground to ground radio. The only way I could have talked to Pha Thi on my single sideband was if they changed their frequency from the CIA frequency over to the AID frequency, which they would never have done. So I couldn't get anybody at Pha Thi. But I did have my little HT2 which I described earlier as being these little portable radios, walkie-talkie type things, that did have 119.1 air-ground-air and 127.1 ground-to-ground frequencies. So I flipped on my radio and started calling in the blind and I got a response. One of the civilian people over there was in fact a real Air Force guy and he was what was called a FAG, a forward area guide, as opposed to a forward area controller which is up in the air. The FAG are ground based. This kid was 19 years old and he had a little perch on the cliff east of Pha Thi and every night he would go out there and sit on this little perch and try to coordinate any of the aircraft that might come up. So, he was sitting out there, totally exposed to everything when this barrage started. He had tried to call back to the main Air Force and CIA base but couldn't raise anybody. So he felt he was isolated out there. He was very happy when he got me on the radio. He said, "I can't talk to anybody." So I got on the radio and called down to my people in Vientiane, Dr. Weldon and his wife Dr. McCready, who you call when you are in trouble. I think it was Jiggs who answered the telephone. I explained to him that the Boiling Pig Fat Area was under attack. Now Jerry Daniels, Don Sjostrom and I used to give little nicknames to things/people. Because the Meo were big pig eaters and the Pha Thi area always seemed to be "boiling" over some incident or other, we called the Phou Pha Thi area the "Boiling Pig Fat Area."

So, Jiggs started called major people in the embassy, the CIA and the Air Force and the Army attaché's office and no one believed him, that this was going on. Finally the Air attaché said that this was impossible. If it was under attack we would have heard about it by now. Jiggs said, "Look, Ernie is up there he is on the ground at 111 and is watching this whole thing take place and talking to somebody over there. Believe me, you had better get some help up there."

Well, in the meantime then, still none of the massive air support that was supposed to be triggered if anything ever happened at Pha Thi. I am not sure if I have explained this or not, but there was a program for night bombing of the Trail and for night bombing of the roads in Sam Neua and the planes that were used were converted World War II B-26s and they later called A-26s. Their code names were "Nimrods." Every night just about dusk these Nimrods, usually in pairs, would come up and strafe the road, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, or if they didn't see anything would come up to Sam Neua and hook into one of the road watch teams.

So a Nimrod came up and I managed to get him on the radio. He was monitoring 119.1 so I got him on the radio and said, "85 is under attack and I can see the muzzle flashes and everything from where I am. The best I can do is give you some general areas. I think if you get over there

in the general area where I can give you the coordinates and if you drop some flares you should be able to see something." He said, "Roger, I'll give it a try." So I gave him some coordinates and he got over there and in a few minutes the guy came back on the radio and said, "I have some bad news, somebody forgot to put the flares on board. We have a full load of ordinance but no flares." I said, "Well, okay. The coordinates that I gave you, the best thing I can say is that if you are in the area now where I told you, unload your bombs some place and maybe by sheer luck you might hit something." So, he did, and he said, "Sorry, that is about it." You know, kind of unconcerned. I didn't hear him say anything like, "Don't worry, I am going to call down to Udorn right away," "Or I will call NKP [Nakhon Phanom] or will call somewhere else and make sure we get something up here."

About 7 or 7:15, the shelling slowed and basically stopped. Then about 9:00 we could hear from where I was what sounded like an assault on the lower chopper pad 85. In fact Lao Thai had communication with his Gia Tou by this time and there was ground probe up on the lower pad. We could hear the grenades and automatic rifle and machine gun fire. But the lower pad held, the probe was not successful. In the meantime, I really didn't know what was going on at Pha Thi. It appeared as if communications had been established with somebody but the ground FAG did not come back on or talk to me again. So, we really weren't sure exactly what was going on. From what we were getting from Gia Tou, he didn't have any communication with anybody up on top of the hill either.

As I said, the shelling stopped after 7:00 and from where we were sitting we could actually see trucks coming up the road and we presumed they were bringing up more ammunition. I am assuming too, and this is a terrible assumption on my part though, that they had expected a lot more response and air power and probably didn't want to bring everything up at one time and have it possibly destroyed. That they had an hour's worth or so of ammunition and then since nothing happened brought up the next load.

Q: The only response up to now had been the one Nimrod?

KUHN: Yes, that is all. It was a very tepid response from the Air Force. There was not much that I could do at 111. The only danger that we were concerned about was that if there was a shelling attack on Pha Thi, was there also going to be an attack on 111 too. Certainly the Vietnamese could have hit 111 with a lot less intensity and a lot fewer troops than they would have had to expend against 85. So, we thought there might be a possibility and Lao Thai got the local ADC militia out doing some patrolling. During the night apparently nothing that we were aware of happened. About 11:00, I guess, we all decided just to go to bed. I went in and slept with my clothes on and had the radios on all night but didn't hear anything. So, it wasn't really until later on the next morning that I began to get more information in terms of what happened. By 8 or 9:00 the first aircraft started coming in to where I was. I flew down to Site 36, I had heard that Vang Pao was coming there, to try to figure out what was going on and see where we were going to start coordinating and what we were going to do with the civilians and what was actually happening at Phou Pha Thi.

Q: You must have flown pretty close to Phou Pha Thi, that flight down to Site 36, did you see anything?

KUHN: Well, we flew around it, we couldn't see anything particularly one way or another. We got down to 36 and that was when I found out that according to sources at 36 that about 6:00 there had been ground fighting up on top of Pha Thi. And, in fact, the Vietnamese came through where the Thai army contingent was supposed to have been. They were supposed to have been the ones guarding the Air Force. By mid morning, the 11th, Air America helicopters were still landing on the chopper pad and still landing at the 105 pad and were carrying out wounded SGUs, wounded Meo and Lao. There still were SGUs up on top of the karst, so we still controlled the top of the karst. I should say, also, that before I left Site 111, the helicopters began to evacuate the Thai troops -- now these were the indomitable warriors that were going to defend, and they were the first troops evacuated out of Pha Thi. They were evacuated to Site 111 where they were picked up by Caribou and flown back to Thailand. When I went down to the strip and talked to the Thai, I could not determine that there were any dead or wounded Thai troops. They seemed to be totally intact with all their gear and marched up into the planes and flew out. So, they were totally worthless in defending Site 85. Just recently, Chamlong Srimuang wrote a little biography when he was running for office in Bangkok saying what a furious fight occurred on top of Pha Thi, the Thai troops killed many, many Vietnamese and his troops really suffered. As far as anyone can tell, I don't think they fired their weapons at all.

So, the Thai troops were evacuated out. I went down to Na Khang to see Vang Pao. He by that time had already started bringing troops up out of Long Chieng to Site 36 and he was going to try to reinsert more troops into Pha Thi. That was also when I found out that of all the Americans that were on top of Pha Thi, only the ground FAG, the guy I had talked to on the radio, had gotten out. Also the two CIA people had gotten out and three, four or five of the Air Force technicians, one of whom died after being evacuated having been hit as he was getting into the chopper. I also learned at that time that Howard Freeman had been wounded in the leg. When they heard the shooting up on top of Pha Thi around 6:00 in the morning or so, Howard went out with a couple of Meo to try to see what was going on and came around the side of the karst and came face to face with the Vietnamese. Howard carried a sawed off shotgun and most of the CAS guys up there carried short barrel shotguns, and tried to fire off a round of his shotgun and it jammed. The Vietnamese took a shot at Howard and wounded him in the leg, not a serious wound. Howard managed to pump his gun a second time and apparently blew the guy away with a second round. But, he never got up to where the radar station was, never confirmed what happened to any of the Americans.

At this time it looked like there was still going to be an effort to keep Pha Thi, we were not going to abandon it. About 11:00 or so, when I was at Na Khang, Vang Pao came over to me and said, "Let's start to get the civilians out of 111 [Houei Kha Moun, Lima Site 111]. So I went right back up to 111 and by talking on the radio while flying up, by noon I had nine helicopters that were already en route to Site 111 and we began to shuttle civilians over to Site 215, Houei Hin Sa. Subsequently I heard, this was some time later, bits and pieces on the radio that everybody was pulling off of Pha Thi and they were going to abandon it.

It was not until some weeks later, in talking with one of the principal people who was up on Pha Thi, that I learned that even though Vang Pao wanted to reinforce Pha Thi and not give it up, the CIA said, "Forget it. You are wasting your time, we are not going to support it. The Air Force

has shown no interest at all in taking the top of Pha Thi.” This is something that I think should be looked at in detail by someone because this was obviously a key piece of territory. Ten or fifteen Americans were dead or missing in action. A top secret radar installation was being handed over to the enemy without any attempt to take it back or contest it. In this case, I think, there were a lot of wrong decisions made and Vang Pao was basically told to forget it, he would not get any support, so get your guys off the karst as fast as you can. I didn’t find this out until later. I always wondered at the time what happened up there. Of course, it really wasn’t until years later that I found out that a relatively small number of North Vietnamese were in the attack and that a disgruntled villager in the area had led them up a hitherto unknown trail, or at least a trail that was so obscure that the defenders on Pha Thi thought that no one knew about it, and brought them up the backside and came in virtually unopposed to the top of the mountain before anyone knew it. But a lot of things that are being written now and have been written still leave a lot of gaps as to what transpired between the initial shelling at 6:00 in the evening and the ground assault at 6:00 in the morning. Did the North Vietnamese come up at night or were they already up on top and just stayed there all night waiting for daylight to attack? Why did the Air Force not provide more support? Why did no one want to try to hold Pha Thi after the top had been hit when clearly there were still helicopters landing up there and it was safe enough for people to get in or out? There are so many unanswered questions that I still don’t understand.

Anyway, in terms of my responsibilities, I spent that night at Site 215, Houei Hin Sa. During that night...Phou Tia (Lima Site 185) was a key mountain area over to the east. We heard the fighting and shelling at Phou Tia and it fell during the evening which meant that Site 215 was going to be vulnerable. At Lima Site 215 the weather was bad all morning, and I didn’t get up to Lima Site 111 until very late in the morning. When I landed there, the entire runway was just jammed with people. I had helicopters stacked up in the air waiting to try to do something. I got on the ground and was told by Lao Thai that to the north of us and to the west, there were enemy up on the ridge lines already and that it was getting dangerous and we had to start getting people out as quickly as possible. Well, I looked around and word came in about that same time that off the southeast of the runway, four people had just been shot and that the Pathet Lao had been seen putting up a 60mm mortar of some kind of a mortar placement there. Well, I knew right away that if they were on the southeast side of the runway, it was not safe for any aircraft to come in. So, I got on my HT2 radio and told all of the aircraft in the area to clear the area, go back to 36 and wait further instructions. There was one Pilatus Porter pilot that said, “I am going to stick around up here.” I said, “You can’t land because it is not safe.” He said, “That’s okay, I am going to stick around to see if you need anything.” So he circled fairly high up above. In the meantime I got on my radio and called down to Sam Thong and explained that I was sending all the helicopters back and that there was enough enemy activity around the airstrip I didn’t feel it was safe to have any planes land. We were going to try to get the refugees assembled and they were going to have to start walking out. That was acknowledged.

In the meantime we start hearing the recoilless rifle fire down over the edge of the village which was south and east of the airstrip. Lao Thai came in and thought we’d better keep out of the village, it was not safe. On my radios in my little house I had thermite grenades, so supposedly, in theory, if anything happened I would pull a pin and it would melt the radios, etc. Well, at the first mortar round, when it hit the village, I didn’t waste any time on pulling the pin on the thermite grenade. I ran out and had my little radio with me. The pilot called me and said, “I just

saw a round hit the village, are you okay?" I said that I was. He said, "I am coming in to pick you up." I said, "No, you can't." He said, "That's okay, I am coming in." A little aside about the Pilatus Porters. The Pilatus Porter is a turbine engine Swiss-made aircraft that has something called Beta Mode. Don't ask me to explain it, but Beta Mode is something that you put your plane almost in complete vertical dive and you just come straight down. It gives you the ability when you are almost on the ground to flare out and land in just a very few feet.

So, the pilot said he was coming in to pick me up and he was coming right down. Just about that time a second mortar round hit the village and the pilot came in and landed. Mind you, from the end of my house this little pathway came down and right at the end of the strip was this huge ammunition dump, huge fuel dump, because all the fuel that was used over on Pha Thi was air dropped here and shuttled over by helicopter. So we had the potential if a round hit that dump that we were going to have fireworks for hours and hours. So the plane landed and I jumped on. I am not exaggerating, but when I jumped on the plane I thought I was moving pretty fast. I looked up and all the civilian and military leaders were already on the airplane ahead of me. I was furious. We didn't have time to argue because we didn't know where the next round was going to hit. I slammed the door and we took off. Unfortunately I slammed the door on the Meo representative to the National Assembly who had been up there and left him on the runway. But I had all the civilian and military leaders with me on the plane. I said, "Who is going to coordinate all this?" "Oh, it's more important for us to get out to safety." I was so disappointed with all the people I had been working with up there that they had bugged out.

Anyway, we just cleared the runway when the third...I don't know why the Pathet Lao were taking such a long time to fire these mortars, I mean like 30 seconds between each one or so...mortar round was a direct hit on my house. So, that took care of my radios. And maybe they knew where I was living and were trying to vector in their mortar on the house, I don't know, but I was lucky.

We got airborne and the pilot right away...we could see down off the runway half a dozen guys with a couple of little mortars sitting there. The pilot got on the radio and used every frequency that he knew the Air Force operated on and finally got a couple of Sandys. Sandys were these World War II AD-1 Skyraiders. The Sandy designation meant that they were to fly cap for the rescue helicopters and they couldn't be diverted for anything else. Even if there was no fighting going on they had to standby. We got a couple of Sandys and they said "We would like to come over and help you, but unless we can get released from our cap job, we can't do it." So, we stood there and watched these guys pump in a few more mortar rounds, totally helpless. Then out of the woods behind where the mortars were, there were 50 or 60 Pathet Lao troops that came up and moved up the runway and we could actually see them starting to roundup the civilians on the runway. We stayed up in the 111 area trying to get some kind of air support but there wasn't a plane in the sky. When someone told Vang Pao that the Air Force was not interested in this area, they must have been correct, because there was nothing up there.

We got low on fuel and eventually had to fly back down to Site 36. Now the interesting thing was that about 3 or 4:00 in the afternoon, one of the CIA guys who had a helicopter had gone up in the area and managed to land up north of 111 and there were several thousand refugees up there. For some reason the PL or the North Vietnamese got to the runway at 111 and didn't go

any further. They didn't pursue the civilians although they rounded them up at first. So, about 8 or 9 thousand people then started walking out of 111 and eventually made their way down to various points to safety to the west. In the meantime, then, we were not really sure what was going to happen. Between 111 and a site called 184 [Houei Tong Kho, Lima Site 184], there was the long Muong Son Valley and southwest of that was a high ridge line, Phou Loi. Now Phou Loi was an interesting area because back in the French occupation, French archeologists had found several prehistoric sites up on top of this long ridge line. The general plan was for the people to start walking to the west, hope to get passed the Muong Son Valley which was semi-friendly and semi-not friendly, and eventually end up over in the Phou Loi area, a walk of well over 60 kilometers as the crow flies, to a place we called Point Alpha.

I came back to Sam Thong to talk to Pop and we flew down to Vientiane because we weren't in total agreement with the embassy, CIA and USAID as to what we wanted to do with these people. There was talk about trying to use airlifts, and talk about trying to walk the people out. I think we were pretty much in favor of letting the people walk to the extent they could, and we would air drop them rice along the way. So eventually over the next five or six days we got almost 10,000 people over to Phou Loi, Point Alpha.

This is one of those personal things when somebody gets killed who could have had a positive influence on the way the war was going at that time. At Point Alpha, I was spending a lot of my time there, Captain Gia Tou and Lao Thai were both staying over there also. We rigged up some parachutes as tents...

After having been there for several days, it was one morning about 3 or 4:00 in the morning I woke up to a lot of noise, people talking loudly and a lot of voices. I got up out of my sleeping bag and turned on my flashlight. Gia Tou was there and there were four or five men, one or two of who were wounded, and I said, "What is going on?" Gia Tou said, "Well, these men have just walked in. They were two or three hours walk from here with a large group of refugees and a few ADCs and were ambushed by enemy and some people were killed, a few wounded. But the enemy is obviously moving up here towards Phou Loi. I said, "How many enemy were there?" No one seemed to know, but still it was enough to concern us. Then about 4:30 or 4:45, a couple of more men came in, also wounded, and said they had been ambushed. Well, in the meantime I had already been on the single sideband to Sam Thong and had relayed to them that there was some trouble around the area and I needed at least one if not two helicopters up here on site at daybreak. They said, "Okay, we will get something up there."

The two choppers must have taken off before daybreak, must have taken off in the dark, because just after daylight they both landed. I had a habit which I think the pilots were sort of proud of, but also didn't like it. I had pilots that I liked and knew were going to do the job and then I had pilots I knew were marginal. If I wanted to have a nice safe trip I would take one of the marginal pilots, if I wanted to get the job done, I would take the other guys. One of the captains of one of the planes I knew was very good and I went over to him and said, "Look, we have a problem. Somewhere south of here there are some enemy, and some civilians and a few military. They have been ambushed. We want to take the chopper up with Captain Gia Tou with his radio and try to locate these people. The pilot said, "Fine." So he had a copilot which meant I had to sit down below in the belly of the aircraft. We took off and went down south a short distance and

started circling around trying to locate these people and couldn't locate anyone. Finally, Gia Tou thought he could hear someone talking but it was broken up, a lot of static and everything. So, we said, well get a little lower if you can and try to hit this valley, we think we have people there. Well, the pilot came down through the clouds, we got under the clouds a little bit, and headed down through the valley. All of a sudden all hell broke loose. We had shooting not only from below us but from above us. We were actually below the ridge line of this valley and there were enemy up on this line and they were shooting down into the helicopter. We took multiple hits. One just missed the pilot went through the plexiglass canopy...it was an old H-34, the old Marine Corps choppers...We started taking rounds in the body of the aircraft. The flight mechanic was a great big Filipino and he got his great big huge toolbox and sat on it thinking if anything came up through the plane it would be stopped by the box.

In the meantime, Gia Tou and I had been sitting across from the open door in the belly and we were trying to shoot out the door, but it was kind of a useless gesture. Gia Tou took his radio to the edge of the door and tried to find someone on the ground to talk to. A round came in and hit Gia Tou right through the cheek on one side and out behind his ear on the other side. I will never forget this, Gia Tou didn't crumple or anything, he was just like a tree falling, he just went backward right into the arms of his brother, Lao Thai. Of course, Lao Thai started screaming and the helicopter captain was trying to control the aircraft. The fuel tanks had been hit, the whole body was filling up with fumes so one tracer round, one spark, and we would have been one great big firecracker. So it was a very, very dicey situation. The pilot gained enough altitude to get over the ridge line to the other side and we managed to just barely get back to Phou Loi, Point Alpha, and sort of crash landed. Gia Tou was still breathing, but he got off the helicopter and the helicopters were mobbed by people and he died right there on the helicopter pad. Well, everybody started screaming and there was just total chaos. Word got down to where the refugees were staying that Gia Tou had died, and somebody shot off a M 79 round and it landed right near the choppers. Well, the pilots, of course, panicked. I didn't know what was going on. They said, "Come on, let's get the hell out of here." So, I jumped on, thinking that the pad was under attack. The helicopter that had been hit, we found out that only one tank had been hit and they are self-sealing so that when one tank is hit the other one is still there, so there was enough fuel. We took off, circled the area for a while, couldn't really talk to anybody and finally went back to Site 36. It wasn't until later on during the day when another chopper went up with one of the other CIA people that they landed and got a signal. That is when we heard that it was not an enemy attack, but a friendly round going off in mourning for Gia Tou. Anyway, that was the situation at Point Alpha and it was obviously a very tenuous area and we would not be able to sustain the position for a long period of time.

Most of the civilians there were eventually evacuated by air, mostly over to Site 184, Houei Tong Kho. Over the next few days we started by helicopter airlifting all of the civilians over to Site 184, which was a little safer than Phou Loi. Also Phou Loi didn't have enough water. We had 10,000 people with only one small stream, and there was no way to resettle anybody there.

In the meantime, spring and early summer, 1968, Vang Pao decided that he was going to try to retake Sam Neua again. Again, the initial plan was to go in and try to take the Hua Muong, Lima Site 58, area back again. So there were some major efforts in the Hua Muong area which really didn't amount to much. We started getting many more refugees in. I put a big refugee area up at

a place called 221, Houei Moun. We started getting refugees into 215, Houei Hin Sa. So we were getting a lot of civilians coming out, but militarily it was not all that successful.

In the meantime, Vang Pao decided that he was going to switch tactics and concentrate back up on Pha Thi again. In the meantime, then, Ambassador Sullivan had called a meeting in Vientiane of the USAID operations officers, myself, Jack Williamson, the guys from Pakse and Houei Sai, seven or eight American operations officers. I think Jiggs Weldon was there along with five or six political officers from the embassy and the DCM. We met at one of the political officer's houses. It was a good opportunity to sit down and everyone could sort of get drunk together with Sullivan and have him talk to us about his perspective and what the plans were from the embassy side. One of my great concerns was that with the announced bombing halts in North Vietnam, or at least projected bombing halts anyway, with the holidays coming up...this was around October, 1968...that we would get less support in the north. Sullivan said, "On the contrary, whatever had been normally going to North Vietnam in the past, once the bombing halt in Vietnam was in effect, would be increased air support for the Laos." Now, I should say that after Pha Thi, when there was this non-interest by the Air Force, this did not last very long. The air support did resume shortly after that.

Q: Let me just interject briefly as a footnote. Sullivan had consulted Souvanna Phouma about this policy of increased bombing and obtained Souvanna Phouma's complete agreement to it. This is found in the State Department's archives.

KUHN: A couple of little side notes to this meeting. A week or two before this meeting occurred, the BBC had been allowed to bring a crew of people up to the Sam Thong area to do a documentary. We had been told by the embassy to cooperate with them. So, I was asked to go out with one of the camera crew to a refugee area and to interview some of the refugees on camera for the BBC. I went out with them and we got some refugees and we interviewed them. Then the interviewer from the BBC also interviewed me. So, I used the term "I" and "we" quite liberally. "We" were pushed off mountain top X; or "I" did this; or "We" did that. It was just natural. I was involved in all of these things and was up there with these people and would have felt kind of silly saying, "They" lost this position and "they" did this and that. It was "we," I was there.

So, when the embassy saw the first cuts of this whole thing, they were absolutely aghast that I had been using the terms "I" and "we" instead of "they." Well, not only that, but the BBC man in the program had identified myself and Win McKeithen as the "silent men" of the CIA.

Q: Which was totally erroneous.

KUHN: Yes, but it was kind of humorous in a way. So, it happened that this meeting with Sullivan was being held at one of the political officers' homes, down along the Mekong River. You had to go back a couple of narrow lanes to get to it. Win McKeithen and I got lost and were a few minutes late getting there. We walked in the door and there was Sullivan sitting in the middle of everybody and he looked up and said, "Oh, I see the silent men of the CIA have arrived." So, he did take it in good stride. But not only the ambassador, but other people cautioned me about it after that, if I was going to be interviewed use the word "they" and not "I"

and “we”. Interestingly enough, I got married a few months later, and the next year, a good friend of mine, Henry Ginsberg, who at that time was studying at the School of Oriental Studies in London and is now the curator of the rare book section at the London Museum...anyway, my wife and I stopped off to see Henry in 1969 and he had seen this program on the BBC so I know the program was aired.

Also, another little side note on this thing. This meeting ended about 12 or 12:30, I guess, maybe 1:00 and everybody was pretty well smashed.

Q: Referring to this BBC documentary, do you think the media were paying more attention to the war in Laos, because they hadn't been paying much attention to it up until now?

KUHN: Well, let's see, this would have been 1968. Well, not really. Perhaps I shouldn't say not really. You see, Arthur, I was so far removed, working in areas where hardly anybody ever got permission to come up and do anything. So, what the press may have been wanting to do in Vientiane or Udorn or someplace, I don't really know. I do know that later on we had a *National Geographic* crew come in, Bill Garrett, the end of 1968. He had free rein to go to any place he wanted to. In fact, there were a couple of photographs in the article of planes dropping rice. I took the photographer up in a plane and was with him when he took those pictures. Also a couple of pictures up at 184 of some of the Hmong refugees were pictures taken by the photographer while I was up with him. So some people were getting access. *Life* magazine also sent a crew up. And in fact, my picture is in that *Time-Life* series of the war in Vietnam which is about a 15-volume set. Also, *Foreign Affairs* had an article about north Laos, the Plaine des Jarres area, somewhere around 1968-69, too, by a fairly well known individual, but I can't remember now who it was. He was given access to go around up there. It was a hit and miss kind of thing.

I know later on, this must have been late 1968, I guess, Keyes Beech of the *Chicago Tribune*, Bob Shaplen from the *New Yorker* and Arnaud de Borchgrave with *Newsweek*. They were given permission by the embassy to come up to Sam Thong and interview Pop and do a story. Well, nobody had told Pop this. These three guys pulled in on a Caribou about 8:00 in the morning and jumped off. Of course, if anybody knows Pop Buell, he would know that every other word is profanity, and he just promptly read them their pedigree very quickly and put them back on the plane and sent them back to Vientiane. Well, in two hours they showed up on the next flight again at which time he promptly put them back on the plane. Of course, by this time too he probably had had five or six beers in between. It got to be noon time and they came back again and he threw them out again. They got really ticked off and went back to the embassy and complained. Pop got word that he was to treat these people nicely, that they had permission, authorization to come up and to make sure they got a story. Well, I had been up north some place and had refugees just milling all around. Everything was going to pot. I had in my own mind all kinds of stories. Not that I was looking for any reporters, but if they were looking for something all they had to do was ask me. Pop got on the radio to call me back. He said, “I need help back here. I have three blank, blank, blanks back here. Can you come back tonight and go back up tomorrow morning?” I said, “Okay.” I came back just before dark to Sam Thong. I got off the plane and here I was in my version of combat gear as a refugee officer carrying an AK, a 35 on my hip, knapsack dusty and dirty with all kinds of maps and guns hanging all over me, and these

guys standing there along the airstrip ignoring me. They were so mad at this time they had only one thought in mind and that was to nail Pop Buell. So, Pop said, "Would you take these guys down to my house, I will be along in a few minutes?" While Pop had been on home leave the previous year USAID or someone had built him a very nice house in Sam Thong with a fireplace and everything. So I said, "Okay." I drove them down to Pop's house. They didn't want to talk to me, they were belligerent, just total jackasses, all three of them. So we got to the house and they had some Scotch and opened it up and started drinking. Jiggs Weldon came in and they jumped all over him and he got, of course, very defensive. Then Pop came in and the fireworks really started. These guys sat around for three or four hours just basically calling each other names...the three reporters and Pop and Jiggs calling each other names...and I was just sitting there as an interested bystander in this whole thing. But, again, they were not really interested in my opinion, in really getting a story. Pop was ranting and raving about Averell Harriman and how he had given away all of Laos to the communists. I guess it was Shaplen who said that he had been an aide to Harriman, one of the three had been an aide to Harriman years before, and was saying what a great man Harriman was. And Pop was saying what an idiot Harriman was.

Q: Unreal discussions.

KUHN: Yes, unreal discussions. The stories came out eventually. One was a story that supposedly had happened four or five years before that Jiggs Weldon related and Shaplen couldn't even spell Sam Thong right, misspelling it all through the article. This meeting left a bad taste in my mouth. They wanted to see Vang Pao, but he didn't want to see them. I had to drive them over to VP's house later on, and we had curfew at Sam Thong and we had to pass these little checkpoints. No one had ever told these militiamen what to do except to stop anyone who came down the road, so they didn't know what to do with us. Vang Pao was not there, he never talked to them.

Q: Illustrative of a totally adversarial relationship between the officials present and the media.

KUHN: Of course, at the same time, though, perhaps the embassy or USAID was a little at fault here. We are talking about 1968 sometime. Up until this time there had been very little written about anything that had happened in Laos. Probably the most that had been written was Don Schanche's article in the *Saturday Evening Post* about Pop Buell. And, of course, either ABC or CBS did that documentary on Pop, which I have a 35mm copy of that I managed to abscond with when Laos fell. And then there was the documentary called "The Secret War" where a lot of pilots were interviewed. That came out about the same time. So, there were a few things coming out, but basically there was very little. But the mood had been, you don't talk to anybody, you don't talk to reporters, reporters are not allowed to come up to Sam Thong and Na Khang, so we never really had any guidance on handling people. I think if the embassy had said, "Look, we are going to have to start making overtures to the press a little bit. People want to come up to see what is going on. They have to see Sam Thong, see a refugee move, etc." They could have explained that to us a little bit better. We were still operating under the old rules. Nobody goes any place. You don't tell anybody anything unless it is specific. When Garrett came up we had very specific orders that National Geographic is very sympathetic to us, they are not going to write anything that is going to be harmful to the program, take them around and give them what they want to see. We never got that with people like Shaplen or Beech, etc. So it was a very, very

unfortunate situation and I think these three people could have gotten much better stories out of their stay had it been handled a little bit better.

Anyway, when it comes to Pop, he could be very abusive, especially when he was drinking. He could be very antagonistic. Another little story about Pop and his language. Charlie Mann came back to Laos and he had a new secretary. Pop used to write these handwritten notes and Pop I think had a third or fourth grade education. I loved Pop Buell, but he was a character. His grammar was unusual to say the least, his spelling was unique and he wrote like he talked, using the same language. Anyway, he used to handwrite his reports back to the director. Well, Mann got a new secretary and she got one of these handwritten reports and I guess her eyeballs just about popped out. She spent the rest of the day cleaning it up, taking out all of the bad language, correcting the spelling and grammar, and gave it to Charlie Mann. He picked up this piece of paper and said, "What the hell is this?" She said, "Well, it is Pop Buell's weekly report." He said, "This isn't Pop Buell's report. Pop Buell could never write a memo like this. I can't understand a word of it. What is he trying to say? Where is his original piece of paper?" So she had to go out to her files and pick out this crummy piece of paper and gave it to Mann. He said, "Now I understand what he says, when I read it."

Q: That's good.

KUHN: We go back to the fall of 1968. As I say, Vang Pao had suddenly decided that Hua Muong was not going to be the focus of his attack. He was going to start concentrating back up on Pha Thi again. So troops began to be moved into place and begin to take back some of the airstrips to the south, east and southeast of Phou Pha Thi until the point came where we were right up at one point to the base of Pha Thi and the river around Pha Thi were the Nam Yut to the east and the Nam Het to the north. These areas were basically in friendly hands.

Another aside. I haven't mentioned yet a little place on the east face of Pha Thi, down on the Nam Yut was a little Lao village called Muong Yut. Muong Yut was two hundred yards of interconnected rice paddies, a beautiful Lao village. But above the village were huge caves and in the river that ran through the village were hot springs. You could take a bath in the river and there were fresh water shrimp in the river. I (and before me Pop and Jiggs in the "old days") used to go down there and spend some time with the villagers and catch these little shrimp. They were just a fantastic group of people. When the government troops reoccupied the area, I went in because it had been reported that the caves were full of supplies. Well, it turned out that this whole cave area had been a big North Vietnamese camp at the base of Pha Thi. There were bamboo fences around which the Lao told us no Lao was ever allowed to go inside the fences. They had their bamboo chairs, tables and benches, a whole camp there. In the caves they had all their supplies. They had military supplies, of course, but the interesting thing was they had huge amounts of civilian supplies. Apparently they had put together a kind of cooperative there, or at least a store where people could come in and buy things. Up around the northern part of Pha Thi and on the Nam Het River the area was noted for its sugar cane. The Vietnamese had brought in these huge iron vats to boil sugar cane with. They had sewing machines. They had clothes, cooking pots, knives, axes, anything you could possibly buy as a villager. So I called back and said if someone could get me up there with a helicopter, I would bring back all these things out and give them to refugees. So, sort of like Vang Pao felt about the water buffalo, here we had

with some of the supplies, because things like sewing machines and some of the more major items, the troops felt were theirs by right of booty. So, I didn't contest it, but most of the things we were able to bring out. We carried the things down to the rice paddies and choppers came in and carried the things up to Site 107 and put it on the airstrip. Something else that was in there was a whole room of Lao school books, textbooks. So, I managed to send down to Vientiane about six boxes of Pathet Lao textbooks. Some of them were in Meo language written in Lao script and others were Lao. They had the normal stuff, reading and writing and math. There was only one book, which must have been for older school children because it was a different kind of book and the writing was different, where it was blatantly propaganda. It had big foldout colored pages of Meo, of Lao Theung, of Lao, old people, young people, children with bayonets and pitchforks pushing along an emaciated old man that looked like Uncle Sam, it said U.S. on it. There were other foldout pictures of villagers shooting at an airplane. It was really kind of a neat little book, very well done. The embassy was very much interested in this because they wanted to determine...they could send back to laboratories and see where the paper came from and whether or not they were printing these things in Laos or China, whatever. But later on, USIS wrote up a big report about how they had gotten all these school books and what a great job they were doing sending them back to the States for analysis. If it hadn't been for me they never would have known these things ever existed.

One other thing about this same time was that the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, a magazine which I still read avidly, in my opinion anyway, during the sixties really never got some of their stories straight when it came to Laos and what the U.S. was doing. I have the issue downstairs so this is not something I have made up. They ran a story once saying that there was a secret U.S. Air Force jet base located at the town of Muong Yut in Sam Neua and that the U.S. was violating Laos neutrality by basing these jets at Muong Yut and flying out from there bombing everything. Well, the point being, I just described Muong Yut before. It was Thanksgiving Day and we always had a big open-air lunch for all the Meo and Lao officials at Sam Thong, and just about anyone else who wandered by. People from Vientiane were also invited. I came back and got off the chopper and was walking towards where all the people were and Jiggs Weldon and Pop came running up to me. Both of them just irate and waving their arms and Pop was yelling all kinds of obscenities at me. I said, "What is going on?" They said, "You never told us what is going on up there. We are supposed to be sharing information and you are running this secret program up there." I said, "What in the devil are you talking about?" They pulled out this *Far Eastern Economic Review* and were waving it and saying, "Why didn't you tell us you had a secret jet Air Force base up there at Sam Neua?" Well, by this time Jiggs couldn't keep from laughing. They opened up the magazine and showed me this article that this guy had written that there was this so-called secret base up there in the rice paddies of Sam Neua.

When you talk about the interest in the press, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and *Asia Week* after it was established, did run a lot of articles on Laos, more political stuff, I guess, out of Vientiane. But often times the kind of stories that were written about up country...and, I suppose, it was inevitable if no one is allowed access to anything and you can't talk to anybody who has firsthand knowledge about what is going on, and you have a good imagination...stories just get written that don't have any relationship to what was going on. So I guess you can't blame these guys. But, they did used to make us pretty upset sometimes with some of their stories.

About this same time in October/November, 1968, Joe Mendenhall, USAID director left and did not come back. Rumors were that Charlie Mann was going to be the new USAID director. I think by this time Larry Devlin had already come in as station chief in Vientiane. I believe by this time Godley was at least in country or it had been announced that he was coming because I know it was a Congo mafia. All these three people had been together in the Congo previously and had worked together. So, we weren't sure if that was good or bad. Everybody was happy to see Charlie Mann come back, particularly the Lao government.

About this same time in November, 1968 something else happened that indirectly affected the war. The embassy and other US agencies ran what was called the milk runs. The milk runs were C-46s that came out of Vientiane twice a week making the route Paksane, Savannakhet, Pakse and return taking people and supplies. A C-46 came out of Pakse, landed at Savannakhet, took on passengers for Vientiane, took off and went about a half a mile and crashed into the rice fields killing everyone on board, 30 some people. The tragedy was on board the craft was the wife of Chao Saykham, the governor of Xieng Khouang province, his sister and niece. All three were killed. To back track slightly, you may say why does this have any effect on the war. A lot of Americans were killed and other people were killed. Chao Saykham had been in France for personal reasons and while he was there he got word that his younger brother, who was a doctor in Savannakhet had unexpectedly died. So Chao Saykham came back just in time for the cremation of his brother. His wife had come down from Sam Thong, she was the head of ENI which I think I mentioned previously. They spent a day or so together, and she said she had been gone from the school for so long that she had to get back up to Sam Thong and back to the school. Pop got permission for her, and the governor's sister and niece to get on the milk run to go back to Vientiane and on to Sam Thong. She was killed. So in a short space of a week or two Chao Saykham lost his brother, his wife, his sister and a niece, and I really truly think that that took the wind out of his sails. I don't think from that time on he ever really exerted himself and was the effective civilian leader that he was prior to that. I think you asked me earlier his role and his relationship in what was happening as a civilian. I think that airplane crash when his wife was killed really affected him mentally and he just never was the same again.

One other thing that was interesting, to get back up to Sam Neua, Phou Pha Thi and General Vang Pao's attempt to recapture Pha Thi at the end of 1968 was the fact that it gave many of us a chance to walk on the road that the Vietnamese had built. By the time Vang Pao's troops had reoccupied the area around Pha Thi, the road had gone all the way to Lima Site 107, Houei Ma. It was interesting because it is a rolling hilly area and all the road had a bank on one side and a sloping side on the other. On the bank side, about every five or six meters there were little bunkers, little indentations, for people to hide in, so if you were on the road and a plane came over or there was some attack on the road, with a few steps you were able to duck into one of these little hollowed out holes in the side of the bank and be protected.

But there was no attempt to blow up the road. We captured part of it and that was it. But then Vang Pao decided that he was going to actually take Pha Thi itself. There was a considerable amount of bombing. The Air Force did come in intermittently, nothing sustained. Interestingly enough, and I have never seen anything that could verify this, but from prisoners and people who were there, we were told that in the caves on Pha Thi, the North Vietnamese mounted these 12.7 mm anti-aircraft guns and put them on some kind of tracks with rollers. They would roll them

out when attacking aircraft was coming in and making their dives and shoot these 12.7s on these tracks to the point where they could see a puff of smoke or something where a rocket or whatever was released, then would pull the guns back inside the caves so even if the rocket or shell hit the mouth of the cave, the guns themselves were pulled way back inside. I have never known anybody who actually saw this, but the Vietnamese defectors and some prisoners that were captured claimed that they had the 12.7s located on tracks.

Another prisoner who was taken later on said during the period from the time that Pha Thi fell in March 1968 until whenever this man was captured, sometime in mid to late 1968, sometimes the bombing had been so intense on top of the karst that people lost all control. They started bleeding from the ears and some people actually fell off the top of the karst because they were so disoriented from the constant shelling and bombing. I don't know whether that is true or not.

Anyway, there were periods of time when the bombing of Pha Thi was quite heavy. And interestingly enough...the question always came up within a few days after Pha Thi fell were there any Russians who came up to examine or do anything with the radar. My gut reaction is very little could have been carried off the top and unless the North Vietnamese brought in helicopters at night that no one was aware of. But sometime in 1969 I ran across some refugees who had come out of that area and one old man came up to me and talked very friendly to me as if he knew me and I couldn't place him from Adam. Finally he said, "Don't you remember me?" I said, "No, I really don't." He said, "Well, I am the one who took you to the top of Pha Thi and helped you get up there in December of last year." Well, it turned out that supposedly he had mistaken me for one of the Russian technicians or a Russian technician that had allegedly been up there. Now, this old guy was an old duffer and whether he was hallucinating, I don't know, but he claimed he remembered me because after Pha Thi had fallen he remembers seeing me and talking to me up on the top. I don't think anyone has ever confirmed that anything had ever been taken off the karst.

Q: It is possible that some Russians just went up there to look around?

KUHN: That's possible. Certainly plausible, anyway.

Q: There was a very large Russian embassy in Hanoi and they were certainly interested in technical matters.

KUHN: There is one other little incident that I want to relate; I think it is indicative of what can happen when you get the right people at a location at the right time. Somewhere during 1967 or early 1968, and I don't have the exact date, there was a site way to the east in Xieng Khouang called Site 201, Sam Song Hong. And 201 was commanded by a young kid who looked about 19 or 20 years old, who was General Vang Pao's nephew. His name was Vang Fong. This kid was a clone of Vang Pao. He looked like Vang Pao, his face was like Vang Pao, his gestures, his whole personality was Vang Pao only in miniature. I should say there was this long airstrip that only held Porters and Helio Couriers. Then there was a kind of little moat and then a little village. You go on past the village and there was a trail that took you way up to a mountain peak about three quarters of a mile away. That was where everybody thought Vang Fong had his little command post. In fact, Vang Fong actually lived at this little airstrip down in the village. Well,

one night the Vietnamese attacked 201 and there was one stormy fight. The next day when the Vietnamese finally pulled back, Vang Fong's people recovered I think 67 weapons which were left behind on the airstrip. He recovered 40 some bodies the Vietnamese hadn't dragged away. The Vietnamese as they attacked up the airstrip they uncoiled telephone wire almost up to where the moat was. The only thing anybody could figure out was they hadn't realized that Vang Fong was down there. And, of course, being on the spot he rallied all the troops and they just cleaned these guys' clocks. An example of when you had a good effective leader who was willing to stay in there and lead his people. These guys were as good as the Vietnamese ever were. They took out a whole load of booty from that operation.

Another incident occurred earlier than that up at this big airstrip at Nong Khang, Lima 52, which was way up north and east of Sam Neua city. There again the Vietnamese attacked one night, came in around the airstrip and tried to attack the positions there. Nong Khang was defended by a FAR battalion, BV 26, as I recall. I went up there the next morning after the attack and I personally photographed over 20 dead bodies of Vietnamese. There were no air strikes, this was strictly a ground fight. It was hand-to-hand weapons. I still have belts, stamps and all kinds of things. This was a Lao company, but the commander was good and stayed right in there with his troops and they held him off.

The biggest problem in terms of loss of manpower was when they retreated quickly and tried to retake someplace. Just like Pha Thi. In trying to retake Pha Thi they lost a hundred times more men than they would have lost if they had tried to stay up there and just hold it. This, unfortunately, happened time and time and time again. One of the times in late 1968 when Vang Pao was trying to retake back Hua Muong, before the attempt on Pha Thi, he and I were together one night up at Lima Site 215 and got a frantic call on the radio from Colonel Douangtha, who was over at a place called Phou Daeng. It was about 2:00 in the morning and Douangtha called in and said, "I am under attack." Phou Daeng had a long ridge line on top of it and Douangtha had his command post and trenches dug all the way around the top of the outpost. He said, "I am under attack and the Vietnamese are threatening one end of my command post. I don't know if we can hold them off or not. If they come over the top we are basically finished." Douangtha had just taken his second or third wife and had just gotten back up there. If he had been gone the whole place would probably have been blown away. He said, "I desperately need help."

Well, over the next hour or two the North Vietnamese were able to get up over the top of the ridge and they were at the west end of Douangtha's trenches and he was at the east end of it and he said "We are throwing hand grenades back and forth. In fact, they are throwing our hand grenades back at us and we are throwing theirs back at them. We can't hold out much longer." By this time it was about 4:00 in the morning and Vang Pao couldn't get his CIA-issued radio powered by a car battery to work. I got on my radio and called Sam Thong and Pop Buell was there. He got a hold of Long Chieng and there was a FAC there. This Raven took off while it was still dark with nothing but rockets which were basically to mark positions rather than kill enemy with. He flew up to Phou Daeng and the weather was bad. The pilot repeatedly came down in through the clouds and fired off all his rockets at the Vietnamese. By this time they were almost literally in hand-to-hand combat, and this guy came right in on the deck and blasted the Vietnamese with his rockets. They eventually pulled back and Douangtha held. Well, I felt really good about it because if I hadn't been there with my little Stoner, word would never have gotten

back to Long Chieng. Interestingly enough, in [Christopher] Robbins' book "The Ravens" this incident is noted and the pilot did get the distinguished flying cross or something and he well deserved it. But again, the communications were so screwed up that when people were out there and needed help, it was happenstance more than anything else that got people the support. But I was very happy I had my little Stoner there. Of course, this was one of the reasons why Pop always wanted to make sure that there was somebody on the radios at all times. Carol Mills was our secretary in those days, and Ann Bradley after her, and Carol actually had a radio installed in her house at one time so she could monitor everything. There was a great sense of esprit de corps in the whole operation, everybody was involved in it. Nobody had any egos about it.

To get back to Pha Thi again, basically the entire month of December, Vang Pao tried to retake Pha Thi. I think I mentioned earlier how the Air Force had laid on a maximum effort one day and Vang Pao said, "No, never mind I am going to capture the mountain, I know I can take it." And the same Colonel Douangtha took his troops up the lower slopes of Pha Thi trying to get to the very top and just got totally creamed. Vang Pao pulled back and basically that was the end of the operation and he never tried to take it back again.

Q: At this time then, the situation had been totally reversed. It was Vang Pao's men who surrounded the base and it was the Pathet Lao who were holding the top, which was completely the reverse of what it had been in March.

KUHN: It was the reverse and in fact you would have thought that we would have held the trump cards in this case because there was no water on the top of Pha Thi.

Q: Hmm. Couldn't you have just isolated the people up there?

KUHN: Yes, just waited them out. Vang Pao didn't really need to have his troops climbing up the face of the cliffs because he could have pulled back and let the Air Force come in. They were willing at that time to come back in because there wasn't much activity in North Vietnam and they wanted to bomb some place. They could have come in at random and hit them day and night if they wanted.

Q: Well, they could have just waited because without the possibility of air supplies they would have run out of supplies and surrendered.

KUHN: Eventually, yes. They couldn't have had that much stockpiled up there. Why Vang Pao didn't try to use the same kind of secret back trails...

Q: And this was in the dry season too, this was in December. So they wouldn't have been able to catch rain or anything and in a few weeks they would have surrendered without water..

KUHN: Well, it was one of those unexplainable things that you wonder what happened.

An incident occurred during this attempt to take back Pha Thi that in itself is probably not significant, but it points out some of the dangers of working up there. I spent without a break over three weeks every night with Vang Pao. If he went up to his command post or somewhere

else I would go with him. At this particular time we were at the command post and I had gone out to check some refugees. I came out of 36 and was in a Huey and was dropped off at Vang Pao's command post. There was a bunch of bags, burlap sacks and cartons of ammunition in the Huey with me. The chopper dropped me off and then proceeded to go on to another pad that was maybe three quarters of a mile away. I had just bought an 8mm movie camera and really wanted to get some good action shots. I thought about photographing this Huey as it was departing but decided to save the little film I had for something more exciting. So, I had just gotten off the Huey and had my camera there and I put it back in my knapsack. I walked over and Colonel Phan Syharat, who was the governor of Sam Neua, who was later killed, Vang Pao and myself were standing there and we watched the chopper take off from this other chopper pad and proceed down to Lima Site 107. We were far enough away that we couldn't tell the details but as the chopper looked like it was on the strip at 107 it blew up. The whole chopper just completely blew up. It was late in the afternoon. I got on the radio and started calling any aircraft in the area, "May Day, May Day, we have a chopper down, unknown casualties." Well, we could start seeing things popping. We knew there was ammunition in the helicopter and it was starting to explode. This went on for hours and finally just before dark, myself and one of the CIA guys, a chopper came in and we came down and landed at the far end of the strip and the stuff was still cooking. The pilot said that it was not safe and he couldn't get any closer, so we got back up to Vang Pao's CP and radioed down and said, "Have people secure the area but don't touch anything or do anything." The next morning at daybreak the chopper came in and we went down. In conflicting stories it depends whose ox is being gored here as to which story was going to be the official story. There were some people who claimed that the chopper had not yet landed on the ground. It was coming in for a landing and the entire rotor assembly flew off. Okay, Air America's fault. Other witnesses said, "No that is not true, the chopper was on the ground and the kicker and the people on the ground had begun to drag off big burlap bags." Well, it turned out the burlap bags were full of hand grenades. Somewhere the cases had gotten destroyed and some of the hand grenades had apparently been taken out of the cardboard canisters and were loose.

Q: Very dangerous.

KUHN: Yes, very dangerous and I had just come up in that helicopter from 36. So, the question was, was it an "accident" for clearly there was no enemy fire that had hit it, or was it an Air America mechanical fault? Anyway, the interesting thing was the pilot was just as if he had been sitting in his plane. His legs were bent like he had been sitting in the plane, his hand looked like it still held the stick, his pants were burned off, his shoes were off but his body was just like he had been quick cooked and was lying like a tipped over chair on the ground. There was nothing left of the two flight mechanics on board. I don't know what the final outcome was. Air America eventually brought up their teams and sifted through all this stuff. But the point being that these were the kinds of things that you never knew when you got on an airplane what was going to happen because you had people loading cargo and offloading cargo and ammunition. There were no safety precautions whatsoever. The Meo, and even the Lao and Lao Theung, gave no thought whatsoever to safety precautions. Their life style was something that was totally different from ours and their philosophy. If you die in this life you are going to come back later on anyway, so what is the big deal? A kind of fatalism. So there was just this lack of caution and it was really a wonder that more accidents like this did not happen.

By the end of December 1968, early 1969, it was obvious there would be no more attempts to retake Phou Pha Thi. Sam Neua was pretty much a backwater. However, we still had at the very, very borderline between Sam Neua and Luang Prabang, Houei Tong Kho, Lima Site 184, eight or nine or ten thousand refugees. It was decided then that all the refugees were going to be left at 184. There was not going to be any attempt to try to move them anywhere else. The same was not true at Site 215. We had about four thousand refugees at Site 215. I remember New Year's Eve of 1968/1969, Frank Becker, who was a public health dentist working with USAID, and I spent the night at 215. It was a pretty bleak night. Other areas around us were being hit and attacked. Seven different places were attacked that particular night. Sam Neua was basically off. We did manage to get most of the civilians evacuated out to other sites so we didn't really lose all that many people.

You asked a minute ago about reporters. On the 19th of October, 1969, 25 newspaper and TV reporters were sent to Sam Thong.

Q: Yes, I think the tide was turning. The media were really beginning to pay attention to the war in Laos. By then the Symington subcommittee had held its hearings in the Senate and Sullivan had testified. The "secret war" was becoming much more public knowledge. What were these reporters going to do?

KUHN: I have no idea because I don't think I was there. They showed up there for whatever reasons.

At the beginning of 1969, as I said a minute ago, that was really the end of any attempts to take back Pha Thi or move back into Sam Neua, other than to just maintain some of the areas we had over to the west near the Luang Prabang/Sam Neua provincial borders. For me, personally, January and February were pretty much of a slowdown because from a personal standpoint I was preparing to marry a member of Chao Saykham's family. The fact that his wife had been killed a couple of months before in a plane crash caused a lot of problems in terms of arranging the marriage ceremony and getting things ready. So, I was pretty much involved in personal obligations. However, there was a major thing that happened at the end of February and beginning of March 1969. My wife and I were married on the 20th of February in Sam Thong and right after that got word that Site 36, Na Khang, was under attack. Thinking I was going to be a big hero I wanted to go back up to Na Khang to see what I could do to help, which obviously would have been nothing, but I thought I could have done something. Cooler heads prevailed and I was told to just stay at home. I had just gotten married a couple of days before and my wife and I were scheduled to go on home leave back to the States on March 3 and it would have done me no good at all to have gone up there. So, I didn't. The next day we got word back that Site 36 had fallen, the Vietnamese had overrun the base. Colonel Phan, who was the governor of Sam Neua, was killed. Blue Boy, who I mentioned previously as being the Thai road watch team leader who spent two or three days with me at Na Khang when Don Sjostrom was killed, was reported to have been captured by the Vietnamese. We had civilians come out of the area who claimed they saw Blue Boy being tortured by the North Vietnamese. He never was reported in any prisoner of war lists so presumably he was killed or died during the attack.

Na Khang, Lima Site 36, was the major air head for any kind of operation for the northeast. That, effectively, was the end of north Laos and Sam Neua. There were still some sites a little bit to the south and west, north of the Plaine des Jarres -- Bouam Loung, Site 32, was still in friendly hands -- but the loss of Site 36 was a major blow. It also, too, was a major loss of civilians in the area between 36, Na Khang, and Muong Hiem, Lima Site 48 Alpha. The Phuan who had lived in the villages around Na Khang had set up big villages between Na Khang and Muong Khout, and I had gone in there and visited them frequently. Fortunately, the enemy did not push much past Na Khang so the Phuan villages remained friendly, at least through all of 1969.

Anyway, my wife and I went to the States in March via Asia and Europe, arriving in the States in April. We spent April and May there and didn't come back to Laos until June. So, during those months I was out of the country, but during that period of time, Vang Pao, as I recall, did go in and capture Xieng Khouang Ville, and I think they lost it again, but when we came back in June there were moves on to capture the Plaine des Jarres. The Plaine des Jarres is kind of tricky because the actual location of the jars most people think about is an area of a couple hundred meters by a couple hundred meters, a relatively small area. But that is not the only place that the jars are found. There are several locations in a greater area where there are large numbers of jars. So, when we talk about the PDJ, technically it is a very, very small piece of property, in a broader sense it is the entire plateau. So it has two meanings and I guess I will use it in the broader sense, the entire plateau and not just where the jars themselves are located.

Now the troops came in mostly from the south at a place called Lat Sen. I was sent out to start working with any civilians that may come out. I was there when the first large group of civilians started coming in. I have movies of many of these moves with refugees coming across the grasslands of the plateau with cattle, pigs, chickens and all their personal belongings, etc. I mentioned earlier when talking about General Vang Pao the incident that occurred where he and I got really sideways over whether or not I was going to be able to buy cows and water buffalo that the refugees brought in so I could feed the troops with. This is the time when this incident occurred. Over the next four or five weeks, there were daily small groups of refugees coming out and as the troops moved up into the greater Plaine des Jarres area and captured some of the towns there -- Lat Houang, for instance, Phong Savan -- people living in the towns came out. Basically in generalization there were no young men, but old men and women, younger girls, small children. No teenagers or men in their twenties or early thirties which was military age. Almost uniformly they all had skin the color of white milk. The old cliché that these people lived in bunkers and caves for two or three years was basically true and not a cliché. A lot of people had big pimples and sores on their faces because they had been living in these damp, dark caves. And, in fact, at Lat Houang I went into some of the caves which were really bunkers under the ground. They were reinforced bunkers with beds, tables, chairs, little kerosene lamps. People spent their entire lives underground in some cases. I brought out a lot of notebooks and written material, some in Vietnamese and some in Lao. The interesting thing was that in these little towns, they had all been trading towns in the past, Lat Houang particularly, there were not just Lao refugees or Phuan refugees, there were Vietnamese, Cambodian, Indians, a whole range of people who just got caught up in the fighting years before and for what ever reasons could not or did not get out. A lot of ethnic Chinese there. The interesting thing was this was the early stages of the evacuation of these people so they were taken out to Sam Thong and because they were Chinese, or Cambodian or Vietnamese or Indian, we didn't try to keep them up country. They

were sent down to Vientiane immediately. Each one of the ethnic groups had associations in Vientiane. So the Chinese association immediately took care of the Chinese. We never gave any of these people any refugee support. The Indian association took care of the Indians, etc.

At Sam Thong we had a mechanic who was a Frenchman. His name was Monsieur Albert Foure. Albert was a character. He was living with two women who were sisters, neither one of whom he had married. He had a daughter by one of them, a teenage girl who was absolutely, stunningly beautiful. Foure spoke a broken English, French, Lao combination. You would have to hear it to try to appreciate it and you could never duplicate the way he talked. But years before Foure had been in the French army and stayed in Southeast Asia. He had been married to a Vietnamese woman. He had applied back in the fifties to immigrate to Australia. Everything had been approved, the Australian Embassy had cleared him, all his papers had been cleared and everything was set to go. He and his wife had some kind of an argument and she took off with all of his documentation and all of his papers. In the meantime, the communists came in 1960, the Neutralists, and they took the Plaine des Jarres. Foure was separated from his wife, had no documents, no papers, nothing. Well, in one of the towns we went into, this rather middle-aged Vietnamese woman came up and asked either Win McKeithen or me if we were French. We said, "No, we are Americans." She said, "Do you happen to know a Monsieur Albert Foure?" It turned out that she was his real wife and had all the papers that he had needed ten years before to go to Australia. Anyway, Foure was a real character. Now he is in New Caledonia or some place like that.

At any rate, during the course of 1969 we started moving people out. Then later on there began to be bigger and bigger refugee moves to the point where we started setting up locations for people around the edge of the Plaine to feed people.

Q: This was a relatively heavily populated area, the Plaine des Jarres.

KUHN: Yes, it was. The Plaine's area, the greater plain's area and the hills around it there were several large towns. Of course, Xieng Khouang Ville itself was not on the plain, it was down in the valley, but still there were large numbers of people there. However, in actual fact, to jump ahead slightly, the major evacuation did not occur until January/February 1970. That is when they brought in the C-130s and literally thousands of people were evacuated to Vientiane. But, when I was up there in the summer/fall/winter of 1969, we were keeping people in the area or moving them over to Sam Thong. But we didn't have these massive numbers that later came out of the woodwork.

In late 1969, December,...the 1969 period was kind of abbreviated because I was in the States for part of the time and things were not just moving. It was not a particularly exciting time for me other than the fact that Vang Pao was trying to take back the Plaine des Jarres. The old French airstrip at Phong Savan and near the Plain was rehabilitated and new PSP (perforated steel planking) was put on the strip. It was called Lima Lima or Lima 22 and became a major air head for the area up there. A fairly substantial base was built at Lima Lima by Vang Pao and his people.

But late 1969 there was some concern about what was going to happen to the eight or nine

thousand refugees that we still had up at Site 184 on the border between Sam Neua and Luang Prabang. Early January it was decided we would evacuate all of these people out and bring them down to south of Sam Thong. So, once again I was faced to go back up to Sam Neua and evacuate the last of the Sam Neua people. We knew that we could never get it accomplished with only Air America aircraft. We needed help. So, we turned to the Air Force and asked for their assistance. They said, "Okay, we will give you ten of these big troop carrier helicopters." [They were called BUFFS by their crews, but please do not ask for a literal translation of that acronym!]

Before I go any further, I would like to digress a moment and relate an event that occurred prior to the Sam Neua move. During the summer and fall of 1969, the situation around Muong Soui was very fluid. In fact, Muong Soui was attacked and the Neutralists that were left up there pretty much bugged out. There was an incident that occurred that I want to relate to you very shortly. Again, whether or not it is significant, it is a footnote in history. One of these unexplained footnotes, I think. All the time that I had been in Laos we had maintained a requirements officer, a RO officer, which was a USAID position at Muong Soui, to help the Neutralists out, the army. We also had had a USAID community development advisor, although by this time he had been pulled out. And the Attaché's Office also maintained two or three Americans there full time in Muong Soui with the Neutralists.

I was up country one night and got a call from Pop saying that Muong Soui had come under attack, this was called Lima 108, and some Americans had been killed and it was not clear what was going on, it was a very strange situation. The airstrip was open and Pop wanted me to go in there immediately and try to find out what the hell was going on and come back and tell him. So I got a plane and we came in and we determined there was a signal out at Muong Soui and it was okay to land. I landed but there was really nobody there. The Neutralist colonel was there and he was cordial to the extent that he showed me around a little bit, but he said really you ought to be talking to Bob. Well, Bob Parshall was the RO at the time there. I got on the radio and got hold of Bob and said, "Bob, I am here at Muong Soui and Pop wants me to look around. Could you come back up here?" He was a little reluctant but agreed he would come back up and show me around. The situation was that there were two stone houses that were built for the Americans and there was a little driveway in between which was used to park the jeeps. Just a few days before the attack occurred, there was a bomb disposal unit that had come up to get rid of unexploded ordinance at Muong Soui and had pitched some tents right in front of where the Americans lived. The attack occurred in the early hours and they were probably Pathet Lao, no one has really claimed that it was a Vietnamese attack. They came right through the Neutralists' lines, right through any patrols they might have had. They came in to the two stone houses and start shooting up the two houses. In one house there was Bob Parshall and an Air Force captain. In the other house there were a couple of enlisted men. Then there were these guys out here in this tent from the bomb disposal unit. Well, they came in and Parshall told me that the enemy actually came to his window and held a AK inside the window and sprayed the area. I am sure it was true because the inside of Bob's bedroom was just littered with AK shells. Bob said he got up against the wall under the bed so they didn't get him. The Air Force captain was in an adjacent room and for some reason came running out the front door and there was a little tiny porch on the house that came around in front of the house and was shot and killed right in front of the house. The other Americans were unharmed and got out okay.

Q: Let me just ask a question about the identity of this captain. Are you sure this wasn't Army Captain Joseph Bush who became famous as a known American casualty on the ground in Laos?

KUHN: I think he may have been Bush. There was another attaché who was killed in a plane crash.

Q: Bush was killed on the ground and that was why he became famous.

KUHN: Yes, it was written up in *Time* and *Newsweek* and all that.

Q: Yes, he became famous in March 1970 when President Nixon made the statement that no American military men had been killed on the ground in Laos.

KUHN: This may have been that man. He was kind of a hamburger in a way because in *Time* or *Newsweek* they published excerpts from his diary and he used to say that he would sit at his house at night and listen to the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Well, he was so far away from the Trail that it was ridiculous. And also too, the pilots who worked up there with him said that he used to -- if you spend a certain number of hours in the air you get air medals -- so he would go up with pilots and just fly around for hours and hours and hours and hours and have the pilot certify in his log that he was so many hours in the air. I don't want to disparage the dead, but he was not somebody I think that anybody was really all that crazy about. But, I think you are right, I think his name was Bush.

Anyway, Parshall said, "Okay, here is where the captain was killed." He was killed right in front of the stone porch and I looked at the stone porch and there was lots of blood still in the dust and dirt.

Q: This was the same morning as the attack?

KUHN: Although the exact timing of my visit is a little hazy, I believe that it was late afternoon of the same day, or the latest the next morning. The reason I think it was the same day was the urgency of Pop's request for first-hand information. There was still blood on the dirt. There were lots of little steel pellets in the dirt. The stone right where he had been killed was pockmarked with lots of teeny tiny holes.

Q: Seems like a shotgun or something.

KUHN: Shotgun. When I checked and asked about the tent, I was told that the bomb disposal people had shotguns for protection. The enemy came in, attacked the two houses but never touched the tent. Later on it came out, I forget whether it was through a prisoner or a villager, but someone reported about eight or ten days before the attack that the Pathet Lao had put out a sandbox model of Muong Soui. The tent wasn't there at that time. The tent had only been there for just a few days before the attack. They probably didn't even know the tent was there. If they had known, it would have been easier for them to go in and kill eight or nine people in a cloth tent than it was to attack somebody in a stone house. What I am suggesting is that it sounds to me that this captain was not killed by the Pathet Lao as he came out the front door. Somebody in

the tent fired off a round either in panic or whatever. I did not imagine this. It was very clear to me that there were shotgun pellets in the ground where the blood was and the holes that were in the stone were not the kind of holes that an AK would have made. So, how this captain actually got killed, I don't know. But it just seemed to me that there were some strange things. Parshall disappeared. He came back to the States a few years later and somebody said he went to Canada, but I don't know where he is now.

Q: What happened to the people in the tents?

KUHN: They were taken out immediately. They were never attacked. By the time I got there they were gone. So it is a very strange occurrence. One of the oddball things that happen.

Also, too, then we were quite concerned that Sam Thong was going to get hit, or we were concerned that, with Muong Soui hit, we didn't have any big airstrips in the area. So we were frantically trying to build a new airstrip at a place called Xieng Dat, Lima Site 26. We actually had a couple of big bulldozers and some heavy equipment trying to make this new airstrip south of Muong Soui. This was also at the time when General Vang Pao's number one air ace, Ly Lue, was shot down in a bombing raid over Muong Soui. Of course, that took the wind out of Vang Pao's sails. Ly Lue was his main person. Anyway, we had equipment on the ground, as I recall, at Xieng Dat. When the enemy got close enough we had to finally call in a C-130 or C-123, and evacuate out our bulldozers and everything because we were in danger of losing the whole nine yards. The whole Muong Soui area then eventually went down the tubes. But, later on, by the end of 1969, Vang Pao had some troops that were sort of monitoring in the area.

The reason I bring this up is that a decision was made to evacuate the people out of Lima Site 184 and we got permission from the Air Force for ten helicopters. Well, it was unfortunate because the weather got bad. We waited around a couple of days but the weather didn't break until late one afternoon and it was too late to do any work. So, finally on the third day we decided we couldn't wait any longer, we had to get started. I got into 184 in a Porter or Helio and got on the ground. I talked to the commander who was in charge of the ten aircraft, which were flying high above the bad weather en route to Lima Site 184, and he said, "Okay, we are going to have nine aircraft on the move and one will fly cap." In other words, if one chopper ever went down they wanted one that was going to be empty to go in and rescue the crew of the downed helicopter. So the commander said he would fly cap and the other nine would haul people. They wanted to put three helicopters on the airstrip at one time and would I make sure that I had three separate groups of people. I said, "Fine." It turned out that these choppers would take 130, 140 people as the Meo were very small. They just packed them on like cattle. He said, "Okay, we are going to approach the strip from the south, the first helicopter (and he was talking to his crew as well as me) will come in and land at the north end of the strip, the second will land in the middle and the third at the south." I had my camera and decided I wanted to get this on film when they came in. So I got up off the runway on a little nob and started filming. The first chopper came and landed where it was supposed to. The second chopper came in. The third chopper instead of landing on the south end he tried to land at the north end and, of course, this was a dirt strip and they were churning up dirt, and this idiot tried to land at the wrong end and was coming down right on top of the other helicopter. I was filming all this and said to myself, "If this happens we will never see another Air Force helicopter in northern Laos if this war lasts a thousand years." I

was just praying that nothing would happen. The guys were on the radio yelling at this guy and at the last minute he stopped his descent and maneuvered around and landed at the other end. In the meantime we started loading people on. It was a pretty orderly affair. They all got loaded up and all went back to Sam Thong to offload their people. They came back again and by this time the weather was getting bad and it was late in the afternoon. They said that they did not think they would be able to make another run up here, it was getting too late. Well, they weren't like the Air America pilots who could fly in any kind of weather. These guys had to have good weather, clear visibility, it was just incredible the restrictions that they placed on themselves. They said they were going to head back. They asked if I wanted to go back with them. They could not drop me off at Sam Thong but could take me back with them to Udorn. I said, "Well, I don't really want to go to Udorn." They said, "Well, we could take you back and bring you back up in the morning." I said, "Okay."

So I got on the chopper and it was late in the afternoon, weather was bad with clouds down, and they didn't want to take any more people out. They said they were going to head straight back to Udorn. But straight back to Udorn for them meant going right over the middle of the Plaine des Jarres and then down. We took off from 184 and as we approached the Plaine, weather was getting worse and worse, they diverted to the west and north a little bit and said, "We can't get through this weather, it is too bad. We are going to set down at Muong Soui." I said, "Well, in Muong Soui you never know one day from the next whether Vang Pao's troops are in there or the Neutralists or the PL." They said, "Well, we have to set down, we can't do anything else." So we landed at Muong Soui and it was almost dark. These guys had these M60 miniguns mounted on all the doors of the helicopters. Each person had a sidearm and ammo and a M16. These guys were scared to death. It was almost like the wild west and they formed a wagon train. They sat around and I honestly couldn't believe that these were the indomitable warriors of the Air Force. They couldn't make a decision -- should they stay, should they go, could they fly through the bad weather, were they going to get hit if they stayed on the ground, what should they do?

For all practical purposes it was dark when we heard the sound of a Porter overhead. I had my HT-2 radio on when I heard the pilot's voice calling "Ernie, Ernie, Ernie, this is (whatever his call sign was)." I said, "Yes." He said, "I have orders to pick you up and get you out of 108, you are not to overnight there with or without the Air Force." I said, "Come on, it's pitch dark, you can't land." And he said, "I am coming in, I am going to land and come get you. Do you have any kind of a flashlight?" I said, "Yeah, I have a flashlight and I will go out and wave it around." He was an incredible pilot. He landed that Porter in the dark with nothing but me and a flashlight on the runway. In the meantime, then, the helicopter crews decided they were in fact going to fly back to Udorn. So they got airborne and headed south. I got on the Porter with the pilot and he said, "I got word from Vientiane that under no condition was I to come back without you." So, we took off. It was absolutely the worst weather, we were up and down, bouncing...

Q: Thunderstorm?

KUHN: No, just rain and fog. It wasn't until we got over Vientiane that we broke out into any kind of clear weather. So I got on the ground and went into Vientiane and spent the night, came out the next morning and got on the radio. Word was that Sam Thong was still open but 184 was still socked in. I got up to Sam Thong and my wife, who was teaching at the time, had already

gone over to the school. I waited and waited around as the weather was still bad. She came back home about 11:00 from school for lunch and by this time I was really nervous. There had been several plane crashes and friends of mine had been killed, and lots of unusual things were happening and I was very superstitious anyway. I was just a bag of nerves. So Phaythoune came home and started to fix lunch and I collapsed on the floor of our house in absolute pain. I felt like my stomach was being ripped apart. She called the hospital right away and the American doctor again was not there, but Dr. Kameung was there and he said to get me in a jeep and get down to the hospital right away. So I got down to the hospital and Kameung said all symptoms pointed to an ulcer. He said that he had no way of treating me there, that I needed immediate medical attention. So, they got on the radio and called down to Pat and Jiggs again. Pat called up and said she had clearance for me to be admitted immediately to the 7/13th Field Hospital at Udorn but the weather was getting bad down there. Well, by late afternoon we were completely socked in, no planes could come in or out. So I was at home that night just absolutely in agony lying on the bed. It was terrible.

The next morning the weather had broken enough so a plane was able to get me out and we flew down to Udorn and landed. A jeep came out and took me over to the CAS office and I called the hospital and they said, "Oh, my God, we thought you had died last night. We got a report that you had a bleeding ulcer and since you didn't arrive last night we assumed you had already died." Anyway, they put me in the hospital and I was there for ten days. It turned out it was not a bleeding ulcer, but it was a peptic ulcer, and the doctor said that under no condition were they going to allow me to go back to Sam Thong. I said, "Well, I have a wife up there and everything else." I went back up to Vientiane and the doctors examined me. They said that they concur that I can go back to Sam Thong long enough to get my belongings out and bring my wife down to Vientiane. Well, this meant that my wife had to leave teaching her class right in the middle of the school year and she felt it was a bad deal for the school. We came down to Vientiane and I was told that I was to spend a few weeks in Vientiane and I would then be reassigned some place, probably Luang Prabang. And in fact Phaythoune and I flew to Luang Prabang and were wined and dined, it was very embarrassing, by the area coordinator up there who actually had a party that we didn't know about, and introduced me to all the Lao officials as the next refugee relief officer coming up there. Well, I hadn't made up my mind yet.

In the meantime, Joe Flipse, who had been over at Ban Houei Sai and on home leave just suddenly called up one day and said, "Suzie (his wife) and I have decided that we don't want to go back to Laos, I'm staying back in the States." That opened up a position in Ban Houei Sai, which was more of an autonomous, one man operation. So when I heard that I immediately opted for Ban Houei Sai which was nominally under the Area Coordinator of Luang Prabang, but in fact had a substantial degree of autonomy in the operation of its refugee program. As Sam Thong had Long Chieng, Lima Site 98 (or 20 Alternate), as its CIA counterpart, Ban Houei Sai had Nam Yu, Lima Site 118 Alternate. Lima Site 118, Nam Thoui, had been the original USAID base of Joe Flipse, who later moved the operation to Ban Houei Sai. Houei Sai was also just a fascinating place to live. In addition to the opium trade, the KMT representatives, and the like, the Shan movement was represented by a FAR officer who, sitting in my house one night in front of my wife and six-month-old daughter, tempted me to accompany him on a trip to the Salween River, guaranteed safe passage to and from. I was truly tempted. He, Colonel Phai Vilypan, later lost a leg and then some years ago, still fighting for the Shan, drowned when a boat or raft

capsized. He was a character straight out of Terry and the Pirates. The leading Chinese merchant in town had been a radio operator at Muong Meung, Lima Site 193, and at Muong Sing during the French period. The primary noodle shop was run by a (self-proclaimed) ex-KMT colonel with the improbable name of Oscar, who claimed that he had once traveled to San Francisco, and whose Yao wife had syphilis. Semi-precious gems were panned in rivers just outside of town. The province was littered with ruins of old towns and the troops often uncovered old stupas and chedis when they dug in positions on hilltops. Of course, Houei Sai was just a short distance from the old kingdom of Chiengsen. I spent many hours during the dry season on the Mekong trying to locate the giant stone Buddhas that tradition says were submerged in the river when it changed course centuries ago. During late 1970 and into 1971 the major spectator sport was watching bodies, single and in bunches, floating down from China...bound and executed during the era of the Red Guards. But I digress...as I was saying, a sidelight to Joe Flipse, Joe's wife is Lao and when he came back to the States he had two or three children and just about a year or so ago his eldest daughter, Mary, returned to Laos with a law degree and has opened up a law office in Vientiane.

I want to backtrack just a few months here, if I may, to something that happened to me personally, but it was something that over the years happened with much more frequency than anybody would like to acknowledge. That is the bombing of friendly villages and areas. In September 1969, I had arranged through USIS to take up a mohlam team. Now a mohlam team is often times translated as a vaudeville group which usually consists of three or four or five people, generally two or three men and two or three women. In the old days, they would go from village to village in Thailand or in Laos giving a combination of songs, jokes, a little political satire, etc. It could be most anything. In this case the people were Lao government and USIS people. They would come in and give a little propaganda talk, tell jokes, but as the evening progresses usually the mohlam team becomes more open, sexual innuendoes and in many cases, if it is a true private mohlam, it degenerates into a really raunchy kind of jokes, etc. It is just a good time. The Lao like to have a good time with these people. So, I had arranged to take this team up from Vientiane to a very, very remote village, Houei Sang, Lima Site 206, which was near the Xieng Khouang/Sam Neua border, east of Route 6 [Usually designated Route 61 on U.S. Air Force maps.] that comes from Sam Neua down to Ban Ban. This particular village was well east of route 6. I had taken the mohlam team with a small generator, and they had some lights that could be rigged up at night so they could put on their show. The mohlam team got set up and the villagers had a little party for us before the program was supposed to start. The mohlam group went out and started their routine and I stayed back in one of the little houses drinking rice wine with some of the villagers and just generally relaxing.

About 9:00 I was beginning to hear a funny little hum, but I wasn't paying much attention, when two villagers came rushing in very quick and saying "Tan Ernie, there is an airplane circling above the village!" So, I went out real quick and sure enough there was one aircraft making big long lazy circles around the village with its running lights on. Immediately I got out my little Stoner single sideband radio and set it up with the idea that if anything happens I would be able immediately to get a hold of Vientiane and the Attachés Office or somebody who could get hold of Udorn and see what was going on.

I got on the radio and called down to the radio operator and said, "Can you get me anybody in

the Air Attaché's Office." The radio operator tried and tried and came back and said, "There is no one answering the phone." I tried the Army Attaché's Office and there was no body there. Just then the plane came in and dropped the first load of bombs. To make a long story short, over the next hour and a half there were two planes that came in. They would usually circle for a long time, finally drop a bomb and then circle back up again and circle, circle and come back again.

In the meantime, I got back on the radio again and got Jiggs Weldon on the phone. I explained to him the circumstances. He said, "I'll get right back to you. Is there anything else?" Just in the middle of the sentence a plane came in, and I don't know whether it was white phosphorous or not, but whatever it was it hit in a bamboo grove that was just down from where I was, and a huge shower of burning something came around me, it didn't get on me. Whether it was real white phosphorous or burning leaves, I really don't know, but it scared the heck out of me because it was getting closer and closer now. I dropped the microphone in the middle of a sentence. When I got back on the phone, Jiggs said that the radio operator had decided that that bomb must have gotten me because I stopped talking right in the middle of a sentence. Anyway, Jiggs finally got hold of somebody at Udorn and they called Saigon, and word came back that there were no U.S. friendly aircraft in the area where I claimed to be, and that the only aircraft in the area were in the process of hitting a truck park.

Well, I was up there with a mohlam team with a generator and one electric light bulb and they had claimed that was a truck park. The villagers wanted to turn the light off when the plane came over, but I said, "No, if we do that it looks like we have something to hide." So we left the light on. Well, that was a mistake. Finally at 11:00 the planes left. It turned out that the only thing that got hit was the school, which was blown up; the Buddhist temple, the wat, was blown up and with all that bombing and strafing they had never managed to hit the generator where the light bulb was. They hadn't even been able to hit any of the houses that were in the radius of about 60 to 70 meters around the light bulb. Now these were the same kinds of guys that would go out in the night and come back and say that on a very narrow 3 meter road they had just killed 50 or 60 trucks on some massive bombing raid. They couldn't even hit an entire village. The only thing that they could hit were the school and the wat on the outside of the village. The Air Force Attaché's Office never officially admitted that they had anything to do with it, but in fact they did pay for the repairs to the school and the wat.

I say that this happened more often than not. Down in the Panhandle, east and south of the Plaine des Jarres, there was a village, Ban Done, Lima Site 28, which was the home of the number two monk in Laos. This village had an airstrip that was at least 1,500 feet long. [My FIC Air Facilities Data Laos (book) describes the strip as dirt/sod 1,600 feet long by 100 feet wide.] It was never used much because it was never a militarily contested area. I had been down there on one occasion and we used to have a Caribou go down there periodically and drop fuel in drums. The villagers would bring them up and line them up on the runway because occasionally if a plane was in that area, it was so far away from everything that you had to refuel to get back up to Sam Thong. It was a peaceful area. It was a village bisected by a river and there was this huge airstrip there. I don't remember the exact date but it must have been somewhere in 1967 or 1968 and one or two American planes came in and wiped out about half of that village. I mean totally destroyed it. Now, the standing order was that no villages were supposed to be bombed. However, in the Panhandle there were areas where fuel pods were released or unexpended

ordinance were dropped by pilots approaching Thai airspace. There were also mountainous areas that were called free bombing zones where planes coming back from Vietnam that had not expended ordinance or still had live ordinance on board, could jettison their load before they went into Thailand and had to land again. Ban Done was nowhere near these places and the fact was it was a village which never should have been hit in the first place. It was a tragic thing and I don't think ever got published. It was one of those incredibly stupid blunders.

Even further on down from there, when I came back to Laos in 1966, there were two or three occasions I had to go down into that area and pay death benefits to villagers whose family members had been killed by bombs from planes that were just jettisoning their bomb loads in the area. Who determined that area to be a free drop zone, I don't know, but there were in fact a lot of civilians living in the area and, in fact, a fairly large number of civilians were killed. After going down there three times, I think, I said I would never go down there again and give out money to anybody who had a family member killed. To give somebody \$50 or \$60 and say this is compensation for your husband or your son or your daughter to me was preposterous. And, I never did. I don't know if anyone else was involved in it, but I simply refused to do it.

Back up to the place where I was staying. It was a very unnerving situation and I thought for sure that was going to be my last night on earth.. If those pilots had had any kind of training at all, that whole village should have been wiped out, so obviously the pilots were very, very poorly trained. This makes one wonder how much you could really believe when pilots would come back and claim they had killed lots of trucks on the road. I know Jerry Daniels and I on a number of occasions would get reports in the morning that a plane had hit so many trucks on route 6 or route 7 at 3, 4 or 5:00 in the morning, and at 11:00 Jerry and I would go out and fly over the exact spot where the pilot claimed he had hit all the trucks and never even see a scorched place on the earth, let alone what might have been craters filled in from bombing.

Q: Did you ever find out how those pilots came to be targeted on that particular village which they may have thought was a truck park?

KUHN: Well, see, many of these airplanes used to use a triangulation process. They would use TACAN that was at Pha Thi and a TACAN that was over near Sam Thong and Long Chieng and then a TACAN that was up at Site 50. And there used to be a TACAN that was further south which was overrun. It was another one of these Pha Thi operations. So, at that time in 1969, they did not have the navigational aids they had before. This pilot just wasn't where he thought he was. He thought he was over the road when in fact he was about 19 kilometers east of the road. The fact that he saw the light down there confirmed to him that it was a truck park, but the stupid thing is...and these were these A-26s, not jets that were coming in at 350 miles an hour, these were those slow lumbering World War II planes and there was plenty of time to take a look at the situation. He could have seen, I would have thought, or used his imagination, and said, "Why is there only one single light if it is a truck part?" Truck lights go out, make beams, and the fact that this light never wavered, never went off, never did anything, should have led him to believe that there is something wrong. Then, when they started to get radio calls from Udorn or from Saigon saying, "Verify where you are there is a friendly person down there" and then say "No, no, that can't be right, we know where we are," was just total arrogance as far as I'm concerned. So, thanks to some very poor bombing techniques I am still here to do this little spiel today.

My wife and I in early April 1970 moved out of Vientiane up to Ban Houei Sai. I was running the refugee relief operations up there. During that time I was also unofficially keeping my eyes and ears open for word about any opium and heroin traffic because the Ban Houei Sai area was right in the middle of the Golden Triangle. A year to two before, I am not going to go into this because it is all covered in other sources, but there was the famous opium war between General Ouane Rathikoune and Khun Sa (also known as Chang Si Fu, the half-Shan, half-Chinese warlord still active until recently) and the KMT that occurred just outside of Ban Houei Sai. There were rumors and unconfirmed reports that the KMT were running heroin factories along the Mekong border on the Lao side. There were extensive reports that the KMT operations were also running heroin factories on the Burmese side of the border between Burma and Thailand. Of course, if you are making heroin you have to have lots of chemicals, especially one which I forget exactly, acidic anhydride or some such thing. For every kilo of heroin you get you have to have hundreds of kilos of chemicals. So, people were on the alert to see whether or not there were any indications of large amounts of chemicals being brought into some of these remote areas that could verify whether or not heroin was being produced from the opium.

We were running the refugee program, but there were a lot of other things that were going on at the same time. The U.S. was in the process of supplying Laos with a large contingent of so-called customs agents to help the Lao bureaucracy set up customs procedures. In fact, these guys were all narcotic agents and we were getting a couple of them at Ban Houei Sai. I had gone down to Bangkok sometime after this to do some business, and was coming back up on the milk run to Vientiane and there was the first group of five or six of these guys on the plane with me. I had bought a stereo in Bangkok and had forgotten to get the customs papers before I left Laos saying that I was going to bring this in customs free. So I got to Vientiane and the customs people said, "Until you get the paperwork from the embassy completed we are going to have to keep your stereo system here at the airport." I said, "Fine, it was no big deal." Well, these narcotic guys were coming up and heard me talking to the customs agents and came over. They were dead drunk having been drinking on the plane all the way from Bangkok. They belligerently barged up to the Lao customs official and said that they were American advisers who were coming up to help the Lao, and that I was an American working in the embassy and Americans in the embassy didn't have to pay customs. Therefore, they should let my equipment go through free. They just really made jackasses of themselves. Well, the Lao customs agent got really ticked off and he said, "I don't care who you are. I have never seen you before and you are not advising me. I want all of you to open up your suitcases." Well, that really caused some consternation. The first guy who opened up his suitcase must have opened it upside down because when he opened it up a full box of 38 ammunition fell out and the box broke on the floor spilling out bullets everywhere. These boys were really cowboys. So this was the kind of person they were sending to Laos to try to curtail what people thought was a huge narcotics problem.

The work at Ban Houei Sai was relatively cut and dried. The legendary CIA agent, Tony Poe, was running the operation up by Nam Yu, and Tony by this time had been for two or three years, pretty much a nonentity in terms of what was going on. He was a total alcoholic. He used to come down to Ban Houei Sai...of course, when running the refugee operation I spent most of my time at the airportTony would come down from up country or come over from Thailand, and would be so drunk that we kept a set of stretchers at the airport, so when he came we could roll

him over on the stretcher and either carry him out to the airplane or carry him off the airplane depending on which direction he was going. Tony, of course, later basically was thrown out of the country by the embassy and CIA for doing things that were not his own fault, but he probably should have gone long before he did.

I had been there just a few months at Ban Houei Sai when it was decided to make Ban Houei Sai a separate area. Laos was divided up into areas with area coordinators. There was one in Pakse, one in Savannakhet, one in Vientiane, one in Luang Prabang, one in Sam Thong. But the people in Ban Houei Sai had sort of operated semi-independently, but under the control of Luang Prabang. The decision was made then that Ban Houei Sai would become an Area Coordinator position. The other American who was up there had been there a little longer than I had, and was actually running the Rural Development Program, and he was named the coordinator. But a few months after I got there his wife became very ill and he was forced to leave. So I was named the Area Coordinator which put me in charge of not only the refugee program, but everything else that we were running there at Ban Houei Sai -- schools, hospitals, public works, well drilling, agriculture as well as the narcotics people when they eventually came up. So my role in Ban Houei Sai had changed slightly which meant I did not get out and do the field work as much as I used to. I had someone else come up to do the relief refugee work. Wayne Johnson came up and became the refugee relief officer. In fact, this period when I was up there was not exactly the most exciting time for me. It was interesting being an Area Coordinator because you were autonomous to the extent you ran your own programs, did your own budget, went down to Vientiane to go to the meetings, but I was a little bit removed from the day-to-day aspect and it was not as much fun for me. However, during this time up there were some things that happened that were again of tragic consequences.

I will speak a little bit about the Thai side of the border because this is very important. The background of that area being that the Thai side of the Mekong river and then further south where there is a land border, a mountain range. Traditionally this area had never been inhabited by Thai, mostly tribal peoples or nobody. During the fifties when the KMT (Kuomintang) was pushed out of China to the south, they occupied parts of Laos at one time until they were pushed out of Laos and occupied large parts of Burma and Thailand. The Thai decided they could use the KMT in the border areas as protection against further communist incursions. So they entrenched the KMT in many of these border areas. The KMT operated semi-autonomously. I know from Ban Houei Sai and some of the big camps on the Thai side, if you went up river at night there were planes that came over at night ostensibly from Taiwan that made night drops. There were a couple of big airstrips up in southern Burma where you could actually see planes coming in at night. So even as late as 1970 they were still a force to be reckoned with. They had their own school system, etc.

One of their sources of income, of course, was trading in opium. This was a concern to the embassy and a concern to everyone. Also, too, there were other areas where the communist terrorists were beginning to move into the mountain ranges and were contesting some of these areas with the KMT. There had been a series of governors in Chiang Rai who had not been able to make much headway in terms of the insurgency problem in the border areas. There was a new governor appointed, who came in and had a totally different approach of dealing with the KMT and the communist insurgencies. As Area Coordinator from Ban Houei Sai, I had periodic

meetings with the military leaders in Chiang Rai over border operations, and to a larger extent the American consulate in Chiang Mai, as well as the embassy in Bangkok. Two or three times a year we had meetings between myself from Houei Say, consulate people from Chiang Mai, Bangkok, as well as Thai officials to coordinate border activities. So, this governor was doing a very good job of trying to clean up the border areas along the Mekong between the KMT and the communist terrorists.

Anyway, to make a long story short, the governor sent out word that communist terrorists would be given amnesty if anybody wanted to surrender. Word came out that a large and very strong group of communist terrorists were willing to surrender if the governor, himself, came up and accepted their surrender. People advised him against this. I think it was November 1970. People advised him not to do this. He said he had to do it. So, he was to take a day or two walk up into the mountains to meet with these people and accept their surrender. Well, the CIA had given him a special cane with a radio transmitter in the handle, and the plan was to have a Porter come up and basically on the Laos side of the river far enough away from where the governor was so the plane would not be conspicuous, to fly up and down the river at a given altitude all night long. If the governor got into any problems or needed any help he was to relay this to the plane.

Well, no one knows what happened. The plane came up and the pilot came in to see me. We arranged everything for him to take off before dark and to go up and down the river. He got orders to cancel the trip, he was not to fly but to stay on the ground, which he did, of course. The governor of Chiang Rai went up into the mountains and the next morning was ambushed and killed. It was a very traumatic thing and I don't know what happened. Of course, it had nothing to do with me or with AID, it was the Thai government and the CIA, but somebody blew it somewhere along the line. Whether the plane should have been up in the area and there was a mistake in the set of instructions; whether the governor didn't follow his instructions, I don't know. But he was killed in the ambush. The whole time that I was in Ban Houei Sai we continued to have major problems to the extent that when I left Houei Sai to go back on home leave around September/October 1971, it was extremely dangerous to drive from Chiang Khong over to Chiang Rai through the mountains. I did it a couple of times by arranging to go in logging trucks because there were certain kinds of vehicles that no one paid any attention to. You did not want to drive that road in an official U.S. vehicle or military vehicle or an official Thai government vehicle. So I used to go in logging trucks, if I had to drive. Normally I would fly, but there were occasions when I had to drive.

Q: Could you tell us who exactly the communist terrorists were? Were they Thai?

KUHN: They were primarily Thai.

Q: They were then an indigenous terrorist movement?

KUHN: They weren't necessarily indigenous to that area, but if you take the border area of Thailand and start about where Chiang Khong is and just go down south...the different provinces are Chiang Rai, Prae, Nan, Pitsanaloke, Uttaradit, etc. On the Lao side there are Luang Prabang and Sayaboury, which includes Xieng Lom, Lima Site 274, where the CIA had personnel stationed. That border area was a major Communist terrorist (CT) area. And remember, just a

little further south on the Thai side was where I lived as a Peace Corps volunteer, near the Thai airstrip Tango 20, and by the time I left in September 1965 Red Chinese-backed propagandists were making major inroads among the Meo in that area. That was much further south than the KMT ever got. The KMT never got much further south than Chiang Khong. The further south you went the more the communist terrorists consolidated their [position along the border].

Q: Were these CTs being supported by China, or North Vietnam, or the Pathet Lao?

KUHN: Probably the Pathet Lao and maybe China. I don't think the Vietnamese were involved in that area, this is just my own guess, although they may have been involved in the northeastern part of Thailand. I know that there were a couple of guys up in Luang Prabang and one guy up in Nam Yu who were absolutely furious. They had spent several months infiltrating agents along the border, down around the Sayaboury area, and had located a couple of big CT camps along the border. They had infiltrated people in there and knew exactly who the leaders were in that particular area and knew virtually everything about them. They were preparing on the Lao side a major operation with a select group of people to go in and hit these camps very quickly and they thought that if not kill, at least they could capture the major communist command structure along the border. Somebody, whether it was the CIA in Thailand, or the Thai government, no one really knows, but the Lao on the Lao side were actually in place and were actually observing the people they were trying to capture taking a bath in the river right near their camp when out of the blue came two or three aircraft and came in and started bombing these communist camps and bombing along the river where these people were. Everybody escaped. The guys at Nam Yu were absolutely furious because they said they didn't know who blew it. Somebody had blown the entire operation either deliberately or whatever. But they felt that they had a chance to capture the entire infrastructure for that area in one fell swoop. As it was, they got nobody.

The border between Burma, Laos and Thailand is the source of the old "Terry and the Pirates" cartoon. It was a real wild area with about 20 or 30 different ethnic groups living in that area, all of whom had allegiances or feuds with other groups. Then you bring in the opium in the middle of all this and the opium trade, it was a pretty complex picture.

Q: Did you ever go into Burma?

KUHN: I went into Burma once and created a kind of minor incident. I hate to say why I did it, but I became an avid collector of these little things that are popularly called opium weights, and I have a collection of over 600.

Q: Elephant figures

KUHN: Elephants, ducks, geese, etc. We were up on the Mekong one day and one of the guys that worked with me said he had located several good opium weights at the Burmese village across the river, and if I wanted them he would go over and buy them for me. Or, if I were interested he could take me over and we would both go in. I said that I would much rather go in myself, let's go. He said, "Well, you know, it might cost you a little bit more." I said, "Well, I want to see what the Burmese side of the river looks like anyway." So we went over and spent about three hours in this village, which was pretty stupid, actually. We came back across the

river and I got back to Houei Sai. The next morning, Colonel Khamphay Sayasith came charging up saying he had just gotten word that there was some unknown American who had been seen in a Burmese village up the river, and the Burmese army had started off to find out who it was and he wanted to know if anybody had gone across the river that I was aware of. I sort of played ignorant as if I didn't know what was going on. That was the only time I ever went into Burma and, as I say, it was a pretty stupid thing.

But there was between the Lao and Burmese government a lot more local cooperation. There was a lot of give and play back and forth, particularly because of the different ethnic groups living on both sides. We also used to get some interesting people coming through. One particular individual was Sterling Seagrave who a few years ago wrote a book called "The Sung Dynasty." Sterling Seagrave's father was Gordon Seagrave, the famous Burma surgeon. Seagrave was convinced that there were large numbers of Americans working up in Burma flying helicopters up and down the Mekong River running opium. So, he was probing the area trying to prove his theory on that. Then he had a theory that there were prisoners of war from Vietnam, Americans, who were running helicopters up and down the river. This guy was a real nut. So, occasionally you get people like this coming through with all kinds of wild theories. But in general Ban Houei Sai was fairly quiet.

During the time I was up there we had what used to be called the BNDD (Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs), and the guy's name was Bill Wamzak. He came up to try to find out whether or not heroin was being produced in Ban Houei Sai. We ran up and down the Mekong River a few times in a boat and pointed out to him the areas where General Ouane had his operations. I am not sure what came of all this. He seemed to be interested in where it was being produced, how much, and where it was going, but there was very little attempt to, that I could see anyway, for anybody to stop it. A couple of times I had reports of major heroin factories that were burned down, had been destroyed, either accidentally or through struggles between various warlords in Burma. The sources that would tell me this would ask me to please be very careful how I handled the material. I found out later that my reports were going down to Vientiane and were being left in the director's office and sometimes passed around and being left carelessly on desks, etc. It got to the point that quite frankly I didn't want to send any thing down to the USAID director's office because it became quite obvious that things were being mishandled.

Q: It is pretty certain that General Ouane, whom you mentioned, was directly involved in this trade?

KUHN: I personally can't say that he was, but everything you heard indicated that he was. In fact, the great opium war of 1967 where Khun Sa, who right today is operating and these operations are under siege by the Burmese right now. Khun Sa's conflict with the KMT, General Ouane seeing an opportunity to take everything. Certainly this is well documented that the T-28's came in and blasted both sides. I don't know the details, but he was involved in some shape or form.

At the same time, not to defend what General Ouane was doing, but in general the use of opium, the control of opium, was a government-run operation, even during the French occupation. Talking to my wife and other people, it was traditional for the rulers of Xieng Khouang to be part

of the trade. We are not talking now about some worldwide conspiracy like we have now. This was just something, opium was moving in and out. There were a lot of people who were very legitimate people and honest and upright in their own right, but because it was condoned and traditional, probably got some benefit out of it. It just grew to global proportions and I guess that is where the real problem came in.

Quite honestly, of my stay at Houei Sai, I can't recall much else that was going on up there at the time that is of significance, other than we were keeping the normal USAID operation going. We had one daughter who was born in Chiang Mai. We left Houei Sai on home leave and when I came back from the States it was decided that I would be reassigned to Vientiane and put in charge of the Division of Refugee Relief countrywide.

So from late November/December 1971 until the time that we left in May 1975, I was operating out of Vientiane. About 75 to 80 percent of that time was in a desk job. There were a few operations. For instance, in late 1971, early 1972, there were some big FAR operations over near the Vietnamese border in Khammouane province and Andy Leonard of the Army Attaché's Office somehow got involved along with General Att. General Att, as a colonel, had been Kouprasith's hachetman down in Paksane, Tha Thom area, and I think he had been involved with General Phoumi and was somewhat responsible for General Amkha being captured in 1960. Certainly, he was a warlord in the Tha Thom area. It was his GM in Tha Thom that looted Tha Thom when friendly troops came back in 1967. Somehow he got involved in this whole operation with the Attachés Office. I was asked if I would go over and look at this operation and see what was happening in terms of refugees. It was one of these sad things because several thousand people came in and had rallied to a FAR initiated operation, asked for weapons...these were all Lao or various kinds of tribal Lao. These people spoke different kinds of dialects. One village over there that struck me as being strange was that the people in the village would speak Lao but use Thai words. They would say "kap" which in Thai is a polite term and they would use "phom" which is a Thai word for "I" instead of "khai." It is interesting because just recently Jiggs Weldon told me that Jim Chamberlain, an ethnolinguist in Thailand, is trying to locate people he has heard about, these people in Laos who have a Thai dialect appended to their Lao language. Anyway, there were a lot of strange Lao groups in this area and they rallied to the government side. There was a village leader who defected, and when he came over he made a big play about it in the Vientiane press and was made a big hero. I often wonder what happened to him after 1973 and then after 1975 when the communists took over. I am sure he was executed, but that is speculation on my part. This area expanded and got a little bit bigger and a little bit bigger, and USAID gave it some support. It really wasn't a refugee program because the people were primarily in place and weren't moving around. I used to go there with Andy quite often. I don't know what happened to the area after 1973. It was just one of those little raindrops here and there that are important at one time and then lost its importance.

Q: What about the main refugee program? It expanded enormously, didn't it, between 1971 and 1973?

KUHN: Yes, the main refugee program did expand. I don't know the details before that because I wasn't really involved in it, but military operations in the south...enemy operations against friendly territory was much greater later on than it was earlier. The Bolovens Plateau was back

and forth. Attapeu had fallen, it was back and forth. Saravane had fallen, and was back and forth. Sedone was pretty much under enemy control. All these activities pushed out more and more refugees. All these incursions from Vietnam into Laos to try to interdict the Vietnamese supply routes, all they did was to help push the Vietnamese further to the west, and as the Vietnamese pushed further to the west, right in front of them, just like the tide coming in with all the flotsam and jetsam of military activity were more refugees.

We had a big refugee program in Pakse. Outside of Savannakhet there was a huge refugee relocation program. In the south the idea was trying to get the refugees into an area, and then we spent tremendous amounts of money to relocate them. Whereas in the north, it was more fluid and we didn't have roads and couldn't move around as much, only by aircraft, so the tendency was to feed people to the extent possible thinking that they would probably have to move and we would feed them somewhere else. It was almost a different philosophy between the north and the south. It wasn't until about 1970 or 1971 when we really began to have the philosophy of relocating and resettling the people from the north. In February 1970, just before Sam Thong fell...because right after I was evacuated from Sam Thong with my ulcer in January, in March Sam Thong fell to the enemy. At that time I think they moved something like 8,000 people off the Plaine des Jarres. Remember earlier I mentioned we were mostly keeping people in the area. By 1970-71 a major focus of our program was resettlement which was becoming more and more important. In the north we had lost most of the areas where we were involved in relief activities, and the idea was that those people we did have, try to resettle them. We still counted them as refugees and they still had to get refugee relief support, but there was an attempt to resettle them. So there was an overlap of functions here.

Q: As division director did you deal with this fact-finding commission that came out from Senator Edward Kennedy's subcommittee in 1971? Or was that before your time?

KUHN: I know we had people coming in and out of there a lot and I can't remember talking to anybody specifically or not. There was one person, Ron Rickenback, who when he left AID, he was in the Peace Corps with me, people were upset with him because when he came back he made a lot of anti-AID, or at least what we called anti-AID statements. He maintained the bombing was done primarily with the purpose of trying to drive civilians out of areas and we just didn't agree with that. But one thing that Rickenback did give us, he inadvertently saved the program probably when he testified before the Senate subcommittee, and made these allegations that got Senator Kennedy so upset that we began to get more money. Rather than Rickenback killing the program, which I think is what he wanted to do, it evoked more appropriations for the program. I say this kind of cynically, but as you recall Kennedy, I think, had some designs on great aspirations and being a Senator he was trying to find things that would put him...

Q: Well, he certainly got a lot of publicity out of this refugee thing.

KUHN: So, it did help us in the long run, although some of the publicity that we got was rather stupid. Things like Metracal, used for dieting at home, but if you took it by itself with nothing else except a minimum amount of food, you could lose weight. However, if you were eating a minimum amount of food and drinking Metracal on top of that it was an added vitamin supplement and calorie supplement. In fact, I was losing weight so badly when I was working at

Sam Neua that Dr. Weldon prescribed that I start drinking Metracal because I was eating one meal a day with the refugees. I was down to 123 pounds at one time. So, Jiggs arranged for me to get shipments of metracal. Well, some reporter somewhere heard that AID was giving Metracal to refugees. Of course this created a firestorm because here we are trying to feed people and we are giving them diet food. No one ever sat down to think about what was going on. Combatants were getting 800 grams of rice grain per day and each refugee and dependent 500 grams per day...about a pound per day for an adult refugee. In addition, each refugee family initially got a can of PL 480 cooking oil, period. Later, we were forced to substitute corn meal and bulgar wheat for a percentage of the rice in order to save dollars and reduce U.S. PL 480 storage costs in the U.S. We bought canned meat for a time, but then we were forced to substitute meat protein with a soya blend concoction that was rich in protein. The fact that the refugees did not know how to eat the stuff made little difference to Washington. We actually trained young women how to cook some of these PL 480 concoctions and sent them out to the refugee areas to teach people how to cook bulgar wheat, corn soya blends and the like. On top of that, we were suggesting that they drink a can of Metracal. It was that much more added supplement to their diet, but that got lost somewhere. Then, of course, we had pharmaceutical companies and food companies that would ship over foodstuffs, things that had expiration dates passed. We had inquiries as to why we were feeding our refugees food that had expired. Of course, the companies that gave us the stuff got in trouble with the IRS because they were writing this off as a tax rebate. We had one product, I can't remember which one it was, but we were told we had to go in and bulldoze a ton or two of this stuff. Jack Williamson was furious but he said he would take care of it. They bulldozed a big pit, shoved all the stuff in it, put a few shovels of dirt on it, reporters took their pictures and went home. The Lao went back out again, dug the stuff up and put it back in the warehouse. These are absurd little anecdotes, but we had to contend with these kinds of things on a daily basis.

Another thing we had to contend with was reporters coming in. We were told to talk to a particular reporter who came in one day. Jack and I were told to give him as much information as we could. This guy said, "When something happens and a place gets overrun, how do you know what to do with the refugees?" We said, "Well, we have contingency plans. The definition of a contingency plan is if such and such happens we might do this. For instance, we had a contingency plan for Pakse if Pakse got hit, and Pakse at that time was getting nightly rocket attacks on the city itself. We had Kilometer 13 with several thousand people out there. If certain things happened we might move them in this direction, if certain other things happened we might move them over here. As part of the contingency if certain things happened we would move them...if you remember in Pakse the Mekong River is not the border there...if they get hit we might move them across the river where there was a small Thai airstrip right across the border." Well, we were just telling this guy these different things. When the story came out the headline basically was "AID officials say that if Pakse gets hit, the refugees will be moved to Thailand." We told him we didn't say that. That he had asked us what we would do and we had told him we had contingencies based on different things. These kinds of things were very frustrating.

Charlie Mann was extremely interested, he wanted to know everything that was going on at all times. You didn't want to give Charlie any runaround because he had no sense of humor. He was 100 percent workaholic and he wanted to get the job done. Having said that, there was another aspect to Charlie Mann that I think did not serve the interests of the U.S. government or the

interests of the Lao government at the time. Mann made it very clear when the ceasefire occurred, February 22, 1973, that there was to be no assistance to any Pathet Lao area. Of course, to some respect you can understand that because the Pathet Lao theory was it is a ceasefire and whatever is yours is partly mine, but whatever is mine is still all mine.

Q: That was the principle on which they operated. After the ceasefire, they never allowed an official on the Royal Lao Government side to go into the Pathet Lao areas on any excuse whatsoever.

KUHN: Right. So Mann said until we have access we are not going to give any support to anything in the Pathet Lao areas. Well, in fact, we did do this because, like I said earlier, by 1971 the resettlement part of our refugee program had overshadowed the relief part. As we phased out the relief portion of the program I assumed the position of office director of all the normal rural development activities in Laos. So the Luang Prabang area was a fertile area to work in because you had a lot of areas that were PL, government areas, and some gray areas. Working with Luang Prabang people we were able to circumvent Mann's edict, and in fact we did build schools and support dispensaries in areas that were basically controlled by the PL. Gary Byer was the community development advisor in Luang Prabang and I went up there one time. Gary and I took a ten-day boat trip up the Mekong and then up the Nam Ou by pirogue stopping off at different villages. I came back with picture after picture of not only Lao officials, but Pathet Lao officials from the Luang Prabang area; Gary and myself sitting down with PL soldiers and officials all up and down the Nam Ou or Mekong Rivers, planning some small-scale local development activities. We met a lot of the PL people. But this was very low key and unofficial, but again we were able to start to provide some small assistance.

The most successful instance of USAID/RLG/PL cooperation occurred in the area of the important town of Pak Ou, where the Nam Ou River comes into the Mekong. The town gained additional importance from the famous caves, Tham T'ing, which contained thousands of statues of Buddha, and are located on the Mekong across from the mouth of the Nam Ou. Pak Ou had a water problem. Frank Bewitz was our public works advisor in Luang Prabang. This was about 1973 or 1974. Bewitz along with some of the local officials up there contacted the Pathet Lao on the communist side of the Nam Ou and said, "Look, you have some big springs up here. You let us come up and tap those springs and we will put a pipe across the Nam Ou to pipe water down to Pak Ou. The PL, for some reason agreed. Frank and his technicians explored the area across the Nam Ou from Pak Ou (in PL-controlled territory) and surveyed the springs. I don't know how he did it, but Frank and his people spanned the Nam Ou, at least 100 meters wide at this point, where the distance down the vertical face of the cliff from the top to water level was probably sixty or seventy meters, with pipe suspended on a cable. The pipe extended into the village and the water came down by gravity flow. He built big water tanks and then distribution tanks which were connected to underground pipes going out to pumps all over the village. This was a major success story...the cooperation between the PL and the RLG [Royal Lao Government] side plus the water system.

Jump ahead, it is now March, 1992. My wife and I have gone back to Laos on vacation for a couple of weeks. We take a boat from Luang Prabang up the river to Pak Ou curious to see if Frank Bewitz's system was still working after almost 20 years. We walked in and the first thing

we came to was this big hand pump. I pumped it a few times, no water. It looked like it had been used. We walked about 30 or 40 meters, another pump, no water. So we walked on up into the center of the village and there was the big water tank. There was a little ladder going up the side and I climbed up the ladder and looked in and there was no water. I thought, "Oh, geez, this is too bad. The whole system has fallen apart." So, just then we looked up and this old man came out and we said hello to him in Lao. He said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, I used to work with USAID in Vientiane and just wanted to see if the water system was still working. It looks like it is not working, what is wrong?" He said, "Oh, it is working. I am the chairman of the water association. Every three or four months they shut off the system, clean all the algae and scum out of the inside of the tank, drain the pipes, clean the pumps and then resume. We just spent all morning cleaning the inside of the tank. Tomorrow morning we will start putting the water back in again." So I started talking to this old guy and it turned out that he had been a carpenter who had worked with Bewitz and had actually helped install the water system. So, almost 20 years later, here is a perfect example of a water system that proves just the opposite of those who say USAID never did anything that lasts.

Q: Were the pipes still obviously across the river?

KUHN: Oh, yes. When we went up the river you could still see the pipes. So I was surprised when we got into the village there was no water. So, everything is still there.

Back to Charlie Mann. Jump ahead to September 1976. At that time I was in the Philippines and the director of the program there was Garnett Zimmerly. He had been formally a program officer in Laos years before, and later had gone back to Washington as deputy assistant administrator for Vietnam and Laos at one period of time. He was in Washington when the ceasefire occurred in 1973. I was accompanying him on a five-day trip to the island of Leyte and he and I had a chance to spend many nights together in little tiny rooms with mosquitoes and no electricity. One night we were lying awake and talking. I said, "Zim, one of the biggest mistakes you people made in Washington was the day after the ceasefire occurred, you should have had Charlie Mann on a plane out of Laos. He was obviously a Cold War warrior. He was obviously someone who the communists did not like and did not trust and he didn't trust the communists." And Zim said, "You are absolutely right. I have thought about this many, many times in the past. It was a mistake to have left him there. But at the same time, Charlie Mann was so powerful and had so much clout in AID that he refused to leave. He said, 'I won't leave Laos unless I have a position commensurate with my status.'" This is all rumor and I don't know if true or not. It is too bad that Charlie Mann is physically not able to give his side of the story because I am sure he would be able to talk days and days about Laos. He apparently was turned down, so the story goes, by several ambassadors in different countries. Ambassadors didn't want him. They had heard he was a very tough individual, very strong and they didn't want him. The position that finally lured him out of Laos, which was not until just a few weeks before Laos fell, was Assistant Administrator for Program and Management Services, a job Charlie Mann was totally unsuitable for. That was not his forte at all and, of course, the bureau chewed him up and he retired a year or two later.

Q: Yes, that was very sad.

KUHN: But, during his time there he was the wrong person.

Q: He stayed, you say, up to the time the AID mission evacuated?

KUHN: No, he had left a month or two before. He and Charlie Whitehouse, who had been named as ambassador to Bangkok, left...I am trying to think...Lao New Year was the middle to the end of April and Gary Byer, the person I mentioned earlier, and his wife had gone on vacation for two weeks. When Gary heard that Phaythoune and I were planning on spending two weeks in Luang Prabang to celebrate Lao New Year, he offered us his house. It was a good deal for both of us as it assured us a place to stay (hotel space being at a premium), and Gary could feel that his house was safe with us staying there. I figured this might be the last New Year's celebration, and it turned out that it was. The Lao New Year in Luang Prabang is a two-week affair. Every day there is something that the King or Crown Prince does for two solid weeks. We wanted to see this so we went up with plenty of cameras and film. I photographed the King so many times and it reached a point where if he saw me he would slow down to make sure I got a good shot of him. It was during that two-week period...of course all the diplomatic corps was invited up and many people drove their cars up and I wanted to. Fortunately, we didn't because if you recall during the Lao New Year celebration the Pathet Lao attacked the Sala Phou Khoun road junction and overran it cutting off the ground route between Luang Prabang and Vientiane. It was also during these celebrations that Phnom Penh fell. It seemed to me that Charlie Mann and Whitehouse had left just the week before. I am not entirely sure about that. But he was gone sometime before we were evacuated.

Since the beginning of the year USAID had been making plans to reduce the size of the Mission...people were being given the opportunity to send their families home early, etc. Phaythoune knew that she and the children would have to leave soon and that I would stay in Laos. Charlie Mann, as USAID director, and the ambassador had both left prior to the USAID compound being occupied, and there was serious trouble in Vientiane.

Q: I think that happened around May 1, the demonstrations.

KUHN: Sometime in early May, yes. I think it was a little bit later than that when we were actually locked out of the compound.

Q: How do you explain those demonstrations against the AID program? It would seem that the cooperation with the PL in Pak Ou was an exception to the rule, and the PL were very much against the AID mission and were determined to see it closed down.

KUHN: No, in fact, to the contrary. The Pathet Lao made it very clear that they wanted to continue U.S. government support, but they wanted it without the Americans. They were very naive saying this for some months..."We are happy to receive U.S. assistance. Give us the program, but close down your mission. We don't need two or three hundred Americans." The embassy in one respect agreed with that, that we don't need 300 Americans, so they began to phase out non important jobs and dependents. But no, the Pathet Lao said very clearly, "We expect assistance, but we don't want all the people around." I think the demonstrations right after Lao new year's...and the reason I think we got shut out of our mission was later than the first of

May because there were massive demonstrations also in Luang Prabang, in Savannakhet. Americans in Savannakhet were under virtual house arrest for a long time. Demonstrations in Pakse. I think, let's face it, Saigon was either gone or was going, Phnom Penh was already gone and look what was happening in Thailand with the students down there. The wave of the future was communism and the Americans had been defeated in Vietnam, in Cambodia, and it was just a matter of time before they were going to be out of Laos, so let's get as much as we can out of them. People who had worked for AID for years and years and were considered loyal employees, suddenly demanded outrageous things from AID.

Q: At the instigation of the Pathet Lao.

KUHN: Yes, but they were receptive to that. Had they thought that the PL was not the wave of the future, these are the guys who are going to be gone in a few months, it would have been a different situation. But if you are standing out there as an ordinary Lao in the middle of the street at the end of April and looking around you in Southeast Asia, there is only one conclusion that you could come up with, and that is it's a one-way street for these guys and it's a one-way street for the others coming in right behind them, there is no future to be with the Americans. And the fact that there were no Americans ever harmed, no one was ever seriously harassed...the Pathet Lao did not want to hurt the Americans, they really seriously expected that they were going to get some kind of support. I think this is one of the reasons why the embassy was never closed down, we maintained an embassy there and a chargé. There was always this feeling that something is going to happen, something is going to change.

Colonel Chansome Pakdimonivong, who had been General Vang Pao's Deputy Commander of MR II when I worked at Sam Thong, frequently stopped by our house in Vientiane for a cognac. Colonel Chansome and I had been very close. He and his wife acted as my "family" and go-between in the engagement and marriage discussions with Chao Saykham and my wife's family. I had tremendous respect for Chansome as a soldier. When we came back from Luang Prabang, Colonel Chansome's visits increased in frequency. I should note that Colonel Chansome's wife was a niece of Pheng Phongsavan, the principal Neutralist negotiator with the Pathet Lao in 1961 and again in 1972-1973. [Pheng Phongsavan was the head of the Neutralist delegation at the tripartite peace talks at Ban Namone in 1961 involving the Neutralists, Rightists, and Pathet Lao.] The fact that Pheng lived three houses down the street from us (and directly behind the Russian embassy) made it easy for Chansome to drop in. Also, Chansome had been appointed governor-in-exile of Sam Neua, so his influence and information went beyond the military. Chansome had been providing me with insights on what was going on in the government. The night before (we did not know it was our last night at the time) we left Laos, Chansome dropped in about 11 p.m. and we drank cognac until the wee hours of the morning. He said, "Ernie, AID and U.S. embassy made a couple of major mistakes. First of all, Mann should have gone a long time ago. Then, when it was time for him to go, he should have stayed. The ambassador should have stayed. Vietnam falls, Cambodia falls, U.S. ambassador leaves, AID director leaves. Who do you have to negotiate with the PL? You have your second string at the embassy. Chris [Christian A.] Chapman, a good man, but he is the number two man. At USAID not only wasn't there a number two man, but there was a number three man in charge. You have nobody of any stature in the embassy or AID to counteract the Pathet Lao. Their leaders are the same leaders that have been going on for 20 to 30 years, and you have nobody of any authority at the embassy

or AID to say we will do this or not do that because they are not high enough up in the pecking order. You have given away all of your bargaining chips.” And he was right. Gordon Ramsey was the acting director. Gordon had essentially nothing in his gun, in fact, he barely even had a gun, it was a gun with no cylinder in it. He had nothing to bargain with or do anything with.

Q: Do you think the ambassador or AID director could have exerted any positive influence?

KUHN: Let’s face it, individual persona is important in Southeast Asia. Who a person is. If I think I am dealing with someone of importance it is one thing, if I think I am dealing with somebody who is just sweeping up after everybody else has gone home, I deal with him in a different way. Chansome, being very well connected and in tune with what was going on and having a direct pipe line into Pheng Phongsavan’s thinking, I think Chansome had a point. I really do. In the long term it may not have made a difference as to what happened. It may still have ended up the same way. But, maybe we wouldn’t have had to leave Laos exactly as we did. Maybe an accommodation of some kind might have been made. Someone in the State Department, although I doubt this because the mood in America was so anti-Southeast Asia by then...Chris Chapman was in a delicate position and I basically have a lot of respect for the way he handled things at the end.

Q: Well, he managed to keep the embassy open.

KUHN: Yes, and he kept the American community at bay. There was a lot of agitation in the American community. People around Kilometer 6, the largest concentration of Americans, where the American School was located, and there was a little "suburban America," who were basically surrounded were pretty upset. We lived out on the economy [In AID-speak, we had a house in a nominal Lao/other foreigner neighborhood, not in an official U.S. Government housing compound.] in another section of town and we came and went freely daily. Chris was getting daily requests...this is true...every day they had to send back to the White House how many American Foreign Service officers, whomever, had left Laos; how many dependents had left Laos; how many were still there; how many were projected for the next days; how many left the next day; how many were still there, etc. This on a daily basis.

Q: It was really a question of getting as many people as possible out.

KUHN: Getting them out, but at the same time though, the point I am making that the embassy had very little leeway to negotiate anything. They were under the guns of the White House to do it. Gerald Ford was saying, “Do it!”

When I say I had a lot of respect for Chapman, I think he looked at it from a very pragmatic standpoint. He kept things under control. The son of an internationally known Foreign Service Officer was a political officer at the embassy. The guy was kind of a jackass I hate to say. He was kind of pompous. I was in the embassy one day in Chapman’s office and he came running in and said, “The Russians are landing Pathet Lao troops at Watthay.” And Chris said, “So?” “Well, you have to go stop it.” Chris said, “What?” “You have to stop this. They can’t do this.” Chris said, “And what am I going to use to stop them. Am I going to go over to [Prince] Souphanouvong and say, ‘Oh, please don’t do this any more?’” I saw Chris a few months ago

and I mentioned this, and he says he doesn't remember it. But, he was looking at it very pragmatically. The U.S. really couldn't do very much. There wasn't much he could really do. Send a note to the Foreign Ministry saying we don't want the communists bringing any more troops in or something? Yet there were a lot of people in the embassy who were running around wild not really thinking things through.

Q: Well, this was the time when the top government people were also leaving including the Defense Minister. What can you do if the Defense Minister flees? Vang Pao got out safely, I wonder if there was any consideration given to evacuating his followers after the situation turned really bad in May 1975? They were more or less left sitting in Long Chieng weren't they?

KUHN: Let me answer it this way. Vang Pao had left. Chao Saykham contacted me and said, "I need help. I need to get out. If the communists catch me at best they will put me in prison, at worst they will kill me, so I have to get out." In fact, that was why I was over at the embassy talking with Chapman. First I talked with the USAID acting director and he gave me no help whatsoever. I went over to see Chapman and he said we are not evacuating any Lao out of the country. What really burned many people up was this fact, as well as the fact that if you were Vietnamese you were evacuated. Congress or somebody had passed something helping Vietnamese. So there were Vietnamese who had been born and raised in Laos who were being assisted out of the country, Lao were not. Fortunately, the consul general in the embassy called me early on and said we have to get your wife out of here. He said, "I have all the papers here and everything for her green card. We want to make sure she gets out of here okay." He was helping me do that. Phaythoune, as my wife, was a legal dependent and was on my travel orders. Our daughters, one born in Chiang Mai and one in Vientiane, had U.S. passports from birth. However, on the assumption that I might one day resign from AID and go into the hotel business in Laos, Phaythoune had never gotten U.S. citizenship. Thus, the Pathet Lao had every legal right to deny her departure from the country. In the end, she had more trouble getting into Thailand than out of Laos! But back to Chao Saykham. In the meantime, when I went over to see Chapman and tell him that Chao Saykham was basically asking for political asylum, Chapman said we had no program to help any Lao out of this country. We are not about to evacuate any Lao. There again, I didn't have any clout, I didn't have any authority. If Charlie Mann had been there or Gordon Ramsey, the acting director, they could have called over and maybe I would have had an argument.

Q: You think this resulted from orders from Washington?

KUHN: Yes. Meantime I was told that I was going to be one of seven Americans who were going to stay behind to close down the Mission. Then I got word at 4:00 on a Saturday afternoon that my wife, both the girls, and I were to be on a plane at 5:30 out to Bangkok. The word was since my wife was still a Lao citizen they were afraid of retribution against me or her family if I stayed behind. So we had to just leave. Everything you see now, my wife's sister and family packed up for us. Anyway, I got down to Bangkok and immediately went to the embassy and said that I wanted to be one of the first people to apply for or whatever to work in any of the programs based in Thailand for the refugee Lao that we bring out. They said that there would be no program. I spent 30 days in Bangkok on TDY doing other kinds of work. I left on July 2, and on that day I was still being told by the embassy that we have no plans to have any kind of

program for any Lao coming across the river. I got back to the States and my mother's and father's wedding anniversary was July 4th, and we were trying to get back for that. We got home on the 4th and mother said I had had a call two or three days earlier from Washington. So, the next day I called and was told I was being assigned to the Philippines and that was it. Then I got to Washington about three weeks later and all of a sudden the big cry was, "Oh, we need people to go to Thailand, Guam, etc. and start working in the refugee program." I don't have any inside information, Arthur, but from the external sources that people I talked to when I was offering my services to the program, I was told consistently that there was no program. I think that was probably true. If you look back at the legislation in Congress and the *Washington Post* for June, July and August, I would suspect somewhere in there you would find an authorization for the U.S. government to start working with Lao and accepting refugees. At first it was all Vietnamese and that was it. So, Chao Saykham ended up going to France. He ended up driving a nitroglycerin truck. He was thoroughly disappointed because he had received several military honors, including the Legion of Honor; he had French in-laws, his sister was married to a French intelligence agent; he had a lot of contacts; and they didn't do anything for him.

Q: He was living in Vientiane at the time of the exodus?

KUHN: Yes.

Q: So, he just went across the river?

KUHN: He went across the river. He arranged a boat with all his children and went across the river one night. We helped him, in fact, they did it somewhat semi-illegally. He had his family's passports in order. About 10 p.m. one night someone from his household came over and asked if I could make passport photos for the family that night. I had a darkroom in my house. I printed a lot of visa-sized photographs for his family. He had made arrangements in advance and Phaythoune's sister was instrumental in getting them across the river. But she and her husband remained in Laos for about six months before leaving. He had been renting a house in Bangkok and so they went down there and stayed two or three months. In fact, my wife and I, after leaving Vientiane, stayed with them for a month. Again, no one was interested in people like Chao Saykham for asylum in the United States. He went to France and they gave him very little help. He was driving a nitroglycerin truck which was a very stressful job. He died of a heart attack in 1977 or 1978, still very young.

Q: What about Vang Pao? Have you seen him again since 1975?

KUHN: I have not seen Vang Pao since late 1974. After the incident on the Plaine des Jarres in 1969, we were not at all close. I know that there has been a lot of controversy over money that was collected ostensibly to go back and retake Laos, and things like that. But I felt, to get back to the embassy business again, that it was another one of these cases where either the embassy was not representing what was happening back to Washington properly or what, but we should have had some programs to help some of the Lao who were coming out. When the decision was made to help the Meo, I really don't know. I don't know who made the decision to bring out Vang Pao's family.

Q: I think it was done on a very last-minute, ad hoc basis. It may have even been done by an

individual like Jerry Daniels, stuffing them into an airplane and taking off. As far as I can see there was no governmental policy at all.

KUHN: Maybe that is what I could have done with Chao Saykham, but I didn't have any aircraft in those days. My wife wouldn't say anything, but I know she always felt bad that we were never able to do anything. Then, of course, her sister stayed behind for a while and then her sister, her husband and their daughter came out. They lived in a refugee camp for a couple of years and we couldn't do anything. We were overseas and we had some Americans who were very much disliked in running the refugee program in terms of who was getting visas and who wasn't. Finally they got very discouraged and accepted an opportunity to go to France where Chao Saykham was. Then this American came over and said, "Oh, I was just getting ready to let you go to the States and now you have accepted to go to France so that disqualifies you for the States." A lot of stuff like that. I was overseas continuously so I wasn't in a position to sponsor any of my wife's family. But the whole American evacuation and the whole thing with the embassy I thought was handled well in the sense that Chris kept the lid on everything, but the overall policy was a mess. Things just happened so fast that people didn't know what was going on. A couple of days we drove to work and there were reported demonstrations, and we had been warned to be careful when coming to the compound. Then there was one day that they locked the gates and that was it. Yet, people who have been back to the USAID compound the last couple of years or so, say that most of the offices that we occupied are just the way they were. People still have their name plates up on the doors!

Q: That's amazing. As if the Lao were waiting for AID to return. Well, there may be an AID mission again in Vientiane one of these days.

KUHN: Well, if people in AID right now have their way there will never be an AID mission there.

Q: No? Why not? Too much emotion?

KUHN: Well, first of all we don't have much money. Even when we might have had some money a couple of years ago, I came back from Indonesia and naively thought that all the time I had worked and lived in Laos and Southeast Asia people kept telling me, "People like you are going to be important later on." When I went back and tried to get back into the Southeast Asia program and offered my expertise, the quotation from Linda Morris, who was the office director, after she gave me an hour of her time, she looked at me and said, "Ernie, you have too much old baggage hanging around your neck." You know the "Don't call me, I'll call you" thing. Four or five of my friends who, like me, had spent much of their career in Southeast Asia doing similar things like I had done all were rebuffed exactly the same way. And then, people who had not spent as much time in Southeast Asia, but whose work experience had been more recent, were also rebuffed. Then we began to realize that for the entire Southeast Asia program they were deliberately bringing in people whose basic background was Africa or South America. It was almost as if there was a conscious decision that anybody who had ever worked in Southeast Asia, even those who like us were at the operational levels and not policy levels, represented a failed program and therefore they didn't want to have anything to do with us.

Q: Well, let's face it Ernie, the only people who are interested in old hands like you in Southeast Asia are historians like me.

KUHN: I am glad there is one person in the world who has sat here for two days listening to all this. You must have a pillow or something you are sitting on over there.

Q: It has been fascinating, absolutely fascinating.

JOSEPH A. MENDENHALL
Director, USAID
Vientiane (1965-1968)

Joseph A. Mendenhall was born in Maryland in 1920. He received a bachelor's degree from the University of Delaware in 1940 and a master's degree from Harvard University in 1941. Mr. Mendenhall served in the U.S. Army from 1941-1946 and joined the Foreign Service in 1946. His career included positions in Turkey, Iceland, Switzerland, Vietnam, Laos, and Madagascar. Mr. Mendenhall was interviewed in February of 1991 by Horace Torbert.

Q: Well, then on to Laos. How did that assignment come about?

MENDENHALL: This brings us to the summer of 1965 when my family decided after three years in the States it wanted to taste something foreign so we decided to take a brief summer vacation in the province of Quebec which is a bit different from the Anglo-Saxon atmosphere. I had fully expected to serve another year in Washington completing a four-year tour, but the day I arrived back from that vacation, Bill Bundy, the Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs called me in and said that Bill Sullivan, our ambassador to Laos, wanted me to come out to Laos to operate the AID Mission for him. I asked Bill for 24 hours to speak to my wife and think it over. Came back the next day and said, "Yes," and within a few weeks we were on our way out to Laos.

That, indeed, proved to be the most interesting and challenging assignment of my entire career. The mission in Laos was the second biggest in the world, after Vietnam. We had about 500 Americans working for me in the AID Mission, 600 third-country nationals and 2,000 Lao employees. We were the largest employer of labor in Laos after the Lao government. In financial terms our program was also extremely large. We had a \$50 million a year economic aid program and because of provisions of the Geneva Accords of 1962, the economic aid mission also operated the military aid program, which amounted to \$150 million dollars a year. Those two programs combined at \$200 million a year would be about a billion dollars a year in terms of dollars today.

We had an extremely sizeable program. I had no idea when I went out there whether I was a manager or not, one doesn't get too many opportunities in the Foreign Service at a lower level to determine whether one has managerial capacity or not. But I found that I did possess it. I ran that

Mission and enjoyed it very much for the three years I was there.

The program which we operated was three-pronged. First we supported the war effort. As you know, Tully, Laos was in many ways an integral part of the conflict in Vietnam and in the AID Mission we functioned very closely with CIA in support of the so-called secret war up in northeastern Laos against the North Vietnamese communists and the Pathet Lao, the Lao communists, operating in that area. We had a very large refugee program always numbering at least 100,000. As soon as we would get some off the rolls by resettling them, additional ones would be generated, so we constantly had about that number of refugees that we were supporting around the provinces.

The second prong of our program was the support of the economic stability of the country of Lao. We did that by subsidizing certain essential imports for the country and by operating a foreign exchange fund at a level which enabled the Lao currency to be completely convertible. That is a pretty remarkable thing in the case of a small underdeveloped country like Laos, but it did mean a very substantial input of foreign assistance in order to keep the Lao currency, the kip, convertible. There were five countries which participated in the foreign exchange fund which supported the kip, but the United States, just as it is today in the war in Iraq, was overwhelmingly the principal architect and contributor to this program.

The third prong of our AID program was economic development. It was one which had not been emphasized very greatly before my arrival. I tried to put as much emphasis on it as I could because I thought we ought to do whatever we could in Laos in order to begin to move this country towards a self-sustaining basis. Laos had imports of about \$50 million and exports of about \$1 million a year so you can see that we had a long way to go if we were ever to achieve that objective. The best one could hope for was to begin to whittle down this immense deficit in the Lao balance of payments.

As I wrote in one of the Congressional presentations in support of AID appropriations in 1967, we really were trying to move Laos from the 12th century to the 19th century, not into the 20th century. Laos was essentially still very much a feudal country; very much underdeveloped. When the French were in control of Indochina they did a certain amount in Vietnam and a lesser amount in Cambodia and did virtually nothing to develop Laos, except for the construction of a few roads, which by the time I was there had almost totally disintegrated. In fact some of them had completely reverted to jungle -- utterly impassible.

As far as roads were concerned in our program and to indicate that we were not trying to move into the 20th century, we never paved roads when we upgraded them. We stabilized them in a way that we hoped would hold up during the torrential monsoon rains, but they were not something on which we spent a lot of money because the amount of traffic in Laos would not have required it at all.

We also in our economic development activities did our best to try to put Laos back on a self-supporting basis as far as rice production was concerned. Rice is the staple food in Laos. The country at one time had been completely self-supporting, at a rather low level, but nonetheless self-supporting. I felt what we should try to do was to increase the production of rice and get

them back up as nearly as we could to sustaining themselves. One of the problems was that so many of the Lao males had been taken off for military operations that there were not very many people left on the farms to operate them except for women. Actually in rice culture women can do everything except to plow with water buffaloes. You usually need a male to do that, but all the rest of the work they could do.

Q: Is this a cultural thing or a physical thing?

MENDENHALL: A physical thing. Even though the water buffalo is a docile animal it is too difficult for a woman to handle along with a plow which they are holding on to.

This was the time when the so-called new miracle rice was being developed in the Philippines at an experimental station. This is something that spread throughout much of Asia subsequently. We introduced it into Laos at that time. We also began to encourage the farmers to use fertilizer and insecticides. We developed small irrigation projects, and I do mean small. These often were little self-help dams built on streams. We would furnish the materials and the peasants would supply the labor to build these little dams. We also encouraged the Lao to go in to some extent for double cropping. During the dry season, traditionally it was impossible to put into the ground a second crop of rice, but with irrigation it was possible to begin to develop a certain amount of second cropping.

This program which I spent a great deal of time on was beginning to show some signs of progress by the time I left -- not great, but we were moving towards our objective. I don't know what happened later. I am sure after the communists took over in 1975 everything went to pot, but we did what we could during the time we were there.

Interesting in operating the AID program in Laos, the AID Mission director there probably had as much if not more power than an AID Mission director anywhere else in the world and in some respects even than in Vietnam at that stage. I worked with all of the Ministers of the Lao government except the Minister of Religious Affairs, which was a bit outside my domain. I found it necessary since the Lao were not particularly energetic even at the ministerial level, to have our mission prepare a proposed program each year in each of the functional fields -- education, health, public works, etc. Then we would take this program and I would sit down with the minister who was the head of that department, discuss it with him and get his concurrence. Sometimes he had a few suggestions, but by and large they left it up to the AID Mission to work out the program. It meant a constant series of negotiations all conducted in French -- so as a result of that my French came out of Laos far better than it had ever been before.

Q: With a Laotian accent?

MENDENHALL: Actually the Lao spoke very good French because a lot of the older ones had been educated in the French educational system. They used to criticize my accent. There was no university in Lao and one had to use French because there was only one Lao who had been to an American university. A young man who was very capable and worked in one of the ministries with us. One absolutely had to speak French, there was no English in Laos.

When I served in Vietnam a few years earlier, the Vietnamese had been predominantly French speakers, but I think by the time I served in Laos, the Americans were so ubiquitous in Vietnam that by that time a lot of Vietnamese were speaking English. But that was not true of Laos at all.

To indicate the extent of the AID Mission's activity in that country, in 1966, when one of the great floods of the Mekong occurred and the capital city of Vientiane was under about a meter of water for almost three weeks, it and the surrounding area, the operations of the Lao government totally fell apart. We in the AID Mission did everything to operate the services of that government. We fed the city. We had rice for our refugee program and were able to use it to feed the people of Vientiane. I decided that on that score since these people were not destitute, we did not need to give away the rice as we did to the refugees, that we would sell it to them. So we set up distribution points around the city and sold rice every day to the people. At the end of the day, because in Lao currency there was no bank note larger than the equivalent of \$2 my staff would come back with many, many burlap bags full of Lao kip, because they had sold many tons of rice during the day at these distribution points. We also brought in water purification systems from the American military because the water was contaminated in the city. We vaccinated about 80,000 people which was about two thirds of the total population of Vientiane. We even set up a boat transportation system because there were some high points in the city that were not under water but to get from one to another one had to have little boats. We even operated the boat system to get people around. So in effect we operated that city completely for about three weeks.

Q: How much of this organization to do all this was existing when you went there or was there nothing?

MENDENHALL: No, no, the organization was in place when I arrived. I did not have to set up the organization.

It was fortunate that I did take the decision on my own to sell the rice to the population of the city, because after the flood was over the Lao government turned to me and said, "Look, to the extent that our streets were paved here in the city they have totally disintegrated as a result of the flood. Will you repave my streets?" Well, I took the \$20,000 which we had gotten for the sale of rice and used that to pave the streets.

Now there is an interesting parallel to that. Oliver North took the money from the sale of arms to Iran to support the Contras in Nicaragua and has been subjected to all kinds of criticism for it. I suppose in a sense I did the same thing because I didn't turn that \$20,000 back into the treasury but used it for a good purpose in Laos. We would have had to come through with the money anyway, we just avoided a lot of bureaucracy by doing this.

This is an example of the kind of power and authority which the AID Mission director in Laos either possessed or took.

Another example of this was that within our mission we possessed a complete construction capability. I don't think even the AID Mission in Vietnam had that item. When they decided on a project they always had to contract with an outside contractor. We had this right within our mission operated by an old American construction man. As a matter of fact the first decision I

ever took with respect to the AID Mission Laos was here in Washington before I even got there. This particular man was without an engineering degree and I found right after I had been nominated as AID Mission director that the public works people in AID Washington wanted to replace him with a man with an engineering degree. I had been told that he had been doing a good job. He was here in Washington worrying about his future and came up to me and laid out his case. I said, "Well, I understand you are doing a good job. If you continue to I am going to support and keep you." I overruled the public works people here in AID and indeed he proved a superbly efficient individual, degree or no degree.

Q: Self taught contractor.

MENDENHALL: He was self taught. In Laos in the AID Mission we possessed the authority to initiate and approve construction projects ourselves. In the Marshall Plan days I know that didn't exist in any aid mission. I am not sure it existed in Vietnam. All I had to do was to pick up a telephone and tell Tom Cole, who headed the public works division, that I wanted him to build a road here or an airport there, and he would do it.

Again an example, in the great flood of 1966, which I mentioned a moment ago, the chief airport up in northwestern Laos at Hotel Sal used for both civilian and military purposes, was swept away by the flood. It was very essential, for military as well as other reasons, to get another airport up there. So as soon as the flood subsided, I got ahold of Cole and said, "You go up there and have your people build an airport." In six weeks we had a new airport ready up there capable of taking jets. It wasn't paved, but the reason it could take jets was because right in the middle of the runway there was a slope down and because of that slope you could get enough runway for a jet to take off. He did this in six weeks.

Another example, we have no road at all to northeastern Laos where so many of our activities together with those of the CIA took place. Everything that went to northeastern Laos had to go in by air which was extremely expensive. So I decided that we ought to try to build a road up there. I had to go to get approval from the Prime Minister because a road into the northeast for us to get things in could enable the communists if they conducted an offensive to come down that road. He agreed. What Tom Cole did was to simply take an airplane, fly over the jungle and try to select his road route from the air. It was all jungle and mountainous terrain all the way -- about 40 or 50 miles. By the time I left he had the project underway and I think it did get completed subsequently.

But here again was a project which we undertook totally on our own in Laos without any reference to Washington for approval or consent. I think this authority that didn't exist anywhere else was one of the things that made the job so fascinating.

Q: Did this keep on as far as you know as long as we were there?

MENDENHALL: I would assume so, I think so.

I mentioned that we had to fly everything up into northeastern Laos. I found when I arrived in Laos in 1965 that one fifth of our total economic aid budget of \$50 million a year was going to pay for air costs simply to move people and things around the country by air. About \$9 million

of \$50 million was going for that purpose. I was appalled by that, to think that we were spending so much of our aid money simply for air transportation. I decided that one of the first things I was going to do was to try to get that down. Well in my three years there we did succeed in cutting those air costs in half. We got them down from nine to about four and a half million by instituting rigid controls over the use of aircraft for the movement of people and things. Prior to that time anybody who had a thought ran out to get a plane or helicopter. We had 20 helicopters and 40 fixed-wing aircraft under contract to the AID Mission.

Q: Was this Air America?

MENDENHALL: This was Air America and Continental Airlines. That's an interesting story. I found when I got there that the AID Mission had contracted with Continental for 2 C-130 transport planes. These are very big planes and I found there were only two airports in Laos capable of accommodating those planes. We were paying \$1000 an hour for operating them and were responsible to Continental for a fixed number of hours per month whether we used them or not. This immediately rang bells in my mind as to whether this was justified. I found after a month that it was not at all justified so we told Continental, we had the option after a month of saying take them back, to take them back. Continental had purchased those planes specifically for the operation of Laos not expecting this outcome. This didn't make me very popular with Continental Airlines. Indeed, I found in subsequent negotiations over reducing air costs that the man Continental sent out to supervise these negotiations wouldn't even talk to me -- that happened to be Pierre Salinger who had been the press spokesman for President Kennedy, subsequently he ran unsuccessfully for the Senate in California and was then a Vice President of Continental. On his first visit he was very cordial, but on his second visit when he saw how we were squeezing down what we were paying to Continental he was so annoyed with me he wouldn't even come around and talk with me at all. I fortunately had an excellent man in my controller who conducted the negotiations with Continental and got our costs very substantially reduced with them.

This, Tully, was actually one of several fights that I had while AID Director in Laos in order to reduce costs that I didn't feel were justified. I had one battle with our CIA station chief over war operations. I was all in favor of what CIA was doing so long as it seemed to me to server a specific purpose. But to conduct an operation for the sake of an operation didn't seem to me to be justified, particularly when it always generated additional refugees for the AID Mission to support.

One operation I remember that I objected to after it took place because I hadn't known about it before hand, was one up in northwestern Laos, up near the Chinese frontier which generated a certain number of refugees for us to support. This annoyed me and I also felt that it was not particularly wise politically to conduct operations so close to the Chinese border because it risked a reaction from the Communist Chinese regime.

But that was a minor thing compared with another battle I had with him with respect to northeastern Laos. In that area every year during the wet season the Meo guerilla forces, the ones supported by CIA and the Aid Mission would conduct operations against the communists and make substantial advances. Then would come the dry season when the communists would mount

their offensive against them and recover a good deal of that territory. The third year I was there, General Vang Pao, the very capable Meo general who was in charge up there told my man up in northeastern Laos that because of the heavy casualties which the Meo had been taking in these campaigns and the fact that it had been simply back and forth that he was not particularly in favor of an offensive the third year. Well, in a country team meeting, the CIA station chief said he was not getting that kind of report from his man up in northeastern Laos. He said that Vang Pao was all gung-ho to carry on as they had done in preceding years. So we had a big go round over that. The Ambassador decided to send us all up with the DCM to talk directly with Vang Pao. Well, this unfortunately put Vang Pao on the spot because he was drawing support from both CIA and AID and he didn't want to alienate either. So all he did was temporize, but the result was that the offensive that was carried on was substantially reduced in size.

Q: Who was the DCM?

MENDENHALL: Bob Hurwitch at that time.

I would like to mention something about the AID representative up in northeastern Laos. He was a very unique individual. He was an old Indiana dirt farmer who had lost his wife and in his early 50s decided that he would leave his farm and join the International Voluntary Service which was a private equivalent of the Peace Corps. He was sent off to Laos to work up in northeastern Laos and learned Meo. He was so successful in his liaison with the Meo that after a year or so with IVS he was taken on by AID as our representative up there. He was a completely uneducated man who had no idea of what English grammar was at all. As a matter of fact one summer my oldest daughter went up to serve as his secretary for a week. I told her to clean up the grammar before she sent his reports down to the Mission. He was one of the most remarkably effective individuals in working with backward peoples that I ever encountered in my life. Truly fantastic. He stayed in Laos quite a number of years. He died shortly after Laos fell to the communists. A very interesting fellow known as Pop Buell. There were a lot of newspaper articles on him at the time he was serving there because he was such a colorful individual.

I also had a big battle with Embassy Bangkok over the cost of transportation through Thailand. Everything that came into Laos had to be transported by land up through Thailand. There was a Thai government organization with participation by several Thai generals which operated the outfit that controlled the transportation and they were gouging us as far as costs were concerned. So I started putting up a big battle about that and generated a terrific reaction against me, not the Thai, on the part of the Embassy in Bangkok. Graham Martin was then the ambassador, but it was his economic minister who came down very virulently against me on this and even started accusing me of shenanigans upon which Bill Sullivan, our ambassador, rose in my defense and cables were flying hot and heavy between Bangkok and Vientiane. The upshot of that was that we did get some reduction in costs, not as much as we should have, but there was at least partial success in that battle.

Then I had another battle, this time with the Philippines. The AID Mission in Laos spent about a \$1 million a year financing a contract with a Filipino organization known as Operation Brotherhood which manned several provincial hospitals we had built in Laos. About \$200,000 of that \$1 million went towards overhead in Manila and that raised a red flag in my mind. The main

justification that was being used was training personnel to come to man these hospitals in Laos. Well, the Filipinos who were delighted to have a job in Laos seldom turned over so there wasn't much continued training involved, so I couldn't see why we needed to continue to send \$200,000 out of our program to Manila. I think it was being used mainly to support the sanctimonious head of Operation Brotherhood who as soon as I started raising questions came over first to talk to me and then to threaten me that he was going to take this matter to the President of the Philippines with whom he was very close politically if I didn't back down. Well I didn't back down. He went back to Manila and the next person who came over was a personal emissary from the President of the Philippines. I talked to him, explained the situation to him and he evidentially accepted it and convinced the President to accept it because my position totally prevailed in that fight.

I did learn, however, that the White House staff who were dealing with the war in Vietnam were getting very concerned over the cables flying back and forth between Vientiane and Manila because they were afraid my effort to cut down on this money going to the Philippines might adversely affect Filipino participation in the war in Vietnam. You never know what repercussions you stir up in a battle of this sort.

Q: It is good to know somebody at the working level in the White House was screening the situation.

MENDENHALL: Another battle I had was an interesting one. In early 1968, the American Mission, that is the embassy, CIA, USIA, AID and Defense, were considering an increase in the salaries of the local Lao employees. I was very strongly opposed to it for this reason. We were by far the biggest employer of Lao labor among the agencies of the US Mission. I felt that if we agreed to an increase in salaries of local employees, it would induce the Lao government to raise salaries of their employees. Since anything they spent in their budget had an immediate impact on the money we had to contribute to the foreign exchange fund, I was opposed. The word got out to the Lao community that Mendenhall was the only American head of an agency who was opposed to the increase. While I was on a mission to southern Laos, an inspection mission, I learned my Lao employees had gone on strike. This was the first labor strike in the history of Laos. I came back and talked with the strike leaders, but they were persistent. Everybody else, including the ambassador, wanted to go ahead with this increase in the salaries, but I held out. There was a procedure in the regulations that if the ambassador and a head of one of the other US missions disagreed, the dispute could be submitted to Washington for decision. So Bill Sullivan and I both sent off our positions by cable to Washington. Bill Gaud who was then the head of AID went over and took it up with the number two man in the State Department, the Deputy Secretary, Katzenbach. Katzenbach listened to him and said, "You tell Mendenhall I admire his guts but we have enough problems in Southeast Asia at this moment and I think we had better give in on this one." This was the moment of the heavy communist TET offensive in Vietnam. So at least I got my case considered at top level here in Washington, but did not prevail in that. And I might say that the fact that I disagreed with Sullivan over this never affected our relations whatsoever. I give credit to Bill for that because some ambassadors would have held this against another head of US mission for insisting that this thing be taken to Washington.

Q: This time you were not really on the Embassy staff. You were an independent mission?

MENDENHALL: Well, I also concurrently held the role of economic counselor, but that amounted to nothing. The AID Mission job in Laos was a big job, the economic counselor was zero.

My final big battle in Laos was with the Lao government itself. In the early spring of 1968 one of the principal taxes collected by the Lao government -- the bottom fell out of it. Laos was an entrepot for the gold trade. It allowed gold to be imported and exported freely, but taxed the exports. At that time the U.S. rigidly controlled gold here and held the price at \$35 an ounce. The U.S. decided in the spring of 1968 to free the price of gold for commercial purposes. Well this cut the ground out from under this Lao entrepot trade and took away one of the principal sources of revenue for the government.

I felt that the Lao government would then come down on us for increased contributions for the foreign exchange fund because the budgetary deficit would be much bigger and would therefore generate more demand for foreign exchange. I insisted that they not only control their budget but reduce their budget eventually in order to prevent this. Well, this resulted in a big conflict between the Lao government and myself.

At one stage a mission from the International Monetary Fund came out to Laos to look over the situation. And though you know that IMF is supposed to be the bad boy in financial situations like this, since there were no IMF funds at stake in Laos, they weren't about to be the bad boy. I was the one. So at a big session in the Prime Minister's office with the IMF team, the ambassadors of all the other countries contributing to the foreign exchange fund and our Chargé Bob Hurwitch, Bill Sullivan was on home leave at that point, and myself were present. I was the only one who spoke up for stern controls. This alienated the Prime Minister, Souvanna Phouma.

I went off on home leave shortly after almost three years in Laos and to my consternation while I was here a cable came through from Hurwitch that the Prime Minister had asked that I not return to Laos. So in effect I was PNGed from Laos after three years there.

Q: It was probably time to go anyway.

MENDENHALL: Had Bill Sullivan been there this would never have gotten into the Washington channels. It would have been resolved in Laos, it wouldn't have been any problem. But our DCM, serving as Chargé, was rather jealous of my position in the US community there and with the Lao and therefore put up no fight at all with Souvanna Phouma when he asked that I not return.

The epilogue to this was that when Sullivan got back he did insist that I return to Laos for a proper farewell reception. He gave the reception for me to which all the Ministers of the Lao government except the Prime Minister came, which gave me a good send off despite the fact that I had been PNGed. Thus ended my three year assignment to Laos which, in spite of what happened in the end, I still regard as the most fascinating and challenging assignment of my career.

NICHOLAS A. VELIOTES
Chief of Political Section
Vientiane (1966-1969)

Ambassador Nicholas A. Veliotes was born in California in 1928. He received a bachelor's degree from the University of California in 1952 and a master's degree in 1954. He joined the State Department in 1955. Ambassador Veliotes' career included positions in Italy, India, Laos, Israel, Washington, DC, and ambassadorships to Jordan, and Egypt. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1990.

Q: You then were assigned to Laos, from '66 to '69, which certainly was at the top of our concern at the time, because this was all part of the Indochina concentration, and Laos was right in the middle of this. I wonder if you could describe the situation when you got there and how you got your job.

VELIOTES: Bill Sullivan was the guy who tried to get me to Vietnam the second time. I told you that I had...

Q: The midnight call.

VELIOTES: Yeah, and I was sure the other shoe was going to drop. And, sure enough, it did, when he was ambassador in Laos, and Coby Swank was his DCM; I used to work with Coby.

We had an embassy softball league in Delhi, and I was having a terrific year; I think I was leading the league in hitting. I prided myself on never having struck out during this season, and it was fast pitch. I'm not that good, I was just having a good season. We were playing the Marines, and it was my turn to get up to bat, and a friend of mine came over from the code room and said, "I have a telegram for you," and informed me I had ten days to get to Laos. I promptly struck out.

I went to Laos in late '66, preceding my family because I had to get there fast. My introduction to Laos was marvelous. I got to Thailand. I'd never been in that part of the world before. I got on a Royal Air Lao C-47, with chickens and bananas and people, and we flew in to Vientiane, Laos. We were told we had to get there fast, to hurry up, because there were no lights. It turned out that every time they put lights out, the tribesmen would come and steal the wire for copper amulets. And if we got there after dark, they'd have to line the field with cars, so get there before dark. So I arrived, and I'm met by Mark Pratt. I'm the chief of the political section in this little embassy. And Mark Pratt walks me over to his car, and the first thing that strikes me, a whole row of parking places labeled CAS. Well, you remember, that used to be CIA. And I stopped and I looked at Mark, and I said, "Mark, I know we have an active CIA program here, but isn't this overdoing it?"

And he laughed, and he said, "No, no, that's not Confidential American Source, that's Continental Air Service. . .the CIA run it."

So that was my introduction to Laos.

The first night there, I was introduced to one of Mark Pratt's Chinese dinners. He's a remarkable human being; he's a French and Chinese gourmet, and he's also a linguist, French and Chinese. And Mark Pratt was very traditional: if you had fifteen people for dinner, you had fifteen courses. And it was the first time I was going to try to speak French professionally since I left French school in Nice, in late '59 or the middle of '59.

What I didn't tell you is that I was sent off to French school, from Rome, against my wishes. And I never understood why they insisted I should go to French school when I had another year to go in Italy. And my Italian was terrific at that time. But, no, I had to go. And I spent three months, and it turned out to be a very good thing, I learned a lot of French. But the hope was we could turn around the desire of Congressman Rooney to get back at the then head of FSI by closing these terrific languages schools in Germany, Mexico City, Rio, and Nice. And that misguided venture never worked.

Q: They had to staff them to make them appear full.

VELIOTES: And to try to say, "See, aren't we doing well?" And then I got sent back to Italy, of course, and my head had been totally drained of Italian, and I had to relearn Italian.

Our embassy there was quite an embassy; it was an honor to be chosen to go to Laos. Bill Sullivan was the ambassador, a bright young man in East Asian Affairs. Coby Swank was the deputy, he was later minister in Moscow, ambassador in Cambodia, and had been Dean Rusk's executive assistant. Joe Mendenhall was the AID director, later an ambassador. The CIA chief there was Ted Shackley.

Q: Later station chief in Saigon.

VELIOTES: Bill Mayes was the young economic officer when I arrived, working with the AID mission. Keith Adamson was one of the PAOs who was in Laos. My political section staff was Mark Pratt and Sam Thompson, who now is our representative out in one of the Trust Territories. Peter Leyden, who was our Laos speaker. Sam spoke Vietnamese. Jim Murphy, terrific guy. We had a great crew. Tom Barnes was there, the only man I ever knew who could study five languages at the same time and stay fluent in all of them: Mandarin, Lao, French, Vietnamese, Thai. Great esprit de corps.

But you've got to understand Laos at that time. It was the flank of the Vietnam War, in two senses. It really was the flank as far as the war; the bombing was being done on the Ho Chi Minh Trail essentially in Laos. We were running a Meo war up in the north, to try to pin down Vietnamese forces.

Q: Meo being Montagnard tribes people.

VELIOTES: A Montagnard tribe that had fought with the French against the Vietnamese when they were Viet Minh. And we replaced the French to help them against their traditional enemy.

That was genocide up there; the Vietnamese had the Meo and were going to try to get rid of them. And they did, pretty much, in the end.

We had an enormous AID mission that did actually do economic development. We had some young heroes -- Peter Leyden was one of them for years -- who went out and worked with the Lao people on health and on agriculture and education; their lives were put in danger.

But most of the AID mission was another cover for helping the Lao militarily. We had a large military mission that funneled arms to the Lao Army proper, and then we did the targeting for the bombing from Udorn and from the Thai bases, to put that into perspective. We did our best to save as many civilian lives as we could. If the Lao had had their way, there would have been a free-fire zone. But Bill Sullivan always had a young political officer who worked with him as staff aide and also with targets, with the photography. You know, there might have been a Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun hidden under that house, but we were not going to take out the house.

So part of it was real war. Not in Vientiane itself, but I'll talk about that.

The other part was that we were also the possibility of being the catalyst for a peace movement, because the Geneva Conference on Laos of 1962 set up Laos as independent and neutral -- violated in the breach by the Vietnamese initially, and then we responded -- but our aim was to try to maintain as much of the fiction of Lao neutrality as possible, the thought being that perhaps a reconvened Geneva Conference on Laos might be a catalyst for a broader conference. It may have been a vain hope, but Bill Sullivan was Averell Harriman's aide at the Lao Conference; he was hand-picked to go to Laos and not let the war extend any further into Laos than it had. Even our aid to the Meo was deniable, if you will. And that's where we were.

Vientiane itself was a very strange experience. It was an island, a few kilometers on either side, that was safe. It wasn't safe because it was defended; it was safe because the other side decided it was in their interest not to blast it. And that included a school and an AID housing complex at Kilometer Five, K-5, I think. If you went to K-10, you might get zapped. In its own way, it was very tense, although most of us have fond memories of Laos and we could go forever on humorous anecdotes. It wasn't much fun there with two young kids, no place to play, particularly after Delhi. That was a terrific family post, just terrific. The school was terrific. I was the head of the school board for a year. The kids were in a multicultural context. There are problems in India, but they weren't the kind there. I knew that the Vietnamese probably had the mortar range of every damned American house there and could zap us anytime they wanted. It didn't bother me for myself, you live with these things, but it did used to periodically bother me with the kids and my wife. All in all, Vientiane was the one part of our Foreign Service career we wished we had done without.

Q: How did Ambassador Sullivan operate?

VELIOTES: Well, Bill Sullivan was a high roller. He had Averell Harriman in his hip pocket, which means he could afford to be a wise ass. And he was very fun. He was hardworking. He was quite arrogant and intolerant of other views, which means that he and I had a lot of trouble.

He also...it was very funny, I never understood this. Bill -- so bright, so successful, so visible -- seemed only comfortable with people around him who were older than he was.

Q: That's a very odd manifestation.

VELIOTES: Yes. And I always got the strange feeling that maybe I was too young. I didn't ask for Laos; I was forced to go to Laos. It was a very strange thing; I never really understood that about him. And perhaps I was wrong.

The second DCM, Bob Hurwitch, who came, we had a fair enough relationship, but, again, that was uncomfortable. And I found that I had to be a den father to my staff. I would go to bat for them and protect them. And I'll tell you what we did that didn't endear us to anyone. But I felt I had no den father; I couldn't trust the DCM after Coby Swank left. And the ambassador and I disagreed on some issues. I thought that what he was trying to do was right, but I thought some of the things he let happen were wrong. And I used to tell him about that, even before some of them happened. And then they happened, and then they were proven wrong, and that doesn't endear you to anyone.

I looked around and I said, "Well, what role does the political section have here? Why have one? Laos isn't a real country."

Q: I was going to ask, just what. . .

VELIOTES: There seemed to be a hundred people back in Washington who sent out obscure instructions on United Nations issues, so we would just sort of make up answers and wave them past the Lao. Fortunately, the daughter of the Prime Minister came back and became director general of the Foreign Service, Moune Souvanna Phouma, who was a brilliant young woman and also had a great sense of humor. So I could always go by and see Moune and we could come up with something.

So I decided the only thing that justified my being there, and this bright staff of young guys, was we were going to try to operate as a control mechanism for the ambassador, whether he liked it or not. We were going to find out what was going on in the country and what Americans were doing. And we were going to try to measure them against our policies, and be a source of information to the ambassador, to help him control this monster that we had there.

Q: I might add that we had responded to the whole Indochina business by just putting tremendous amounts of equipment and personnel in, many of whom were sort of moving on their own.

VELIOTES: Probably less so under Bill Sullivan, but Bill Sullivan didn't know everything. And there were a lot of things that were going on. So I assigned one guy to USIA, another one to AID. I took the Agency.

Q: The Agency being CIA.

VELIOTES: CIA, and the military attachés. These were the most sensitive. We got out and my guys went over and found out a lot of things. We did a hell of a lot of good reporting. We kept track of the Chinese community, the Vietnamese community, the Thai community. I liaised with the French -- the French ambassador, the French generals -- because Sullivan hated the French. We tried to just keep on track of who was doing what. And I realized early on that this was being resented, and I just said, "Well, I don't care. They could always send me home and cut my staff in half, but if they want me here, I'm going to do something."

We learned, for example, that the famous Opium War that the Lao general claimed had happened in the Golden Triangle, and that had been reported by the CIA as having happened, where this man came out a hero; he stood off... drug smugglers, et cetera... I sent Sam Thompson up there. Sam Thompson came back and said, "There was no war. The general's sawmill is still there. This is all bull shit." The first thing that stuck us was maybe the Lao were more engaged in dope than we thought, and we learned a little about that.

But basically our job was to be supportive. I saw our job as to be loyal and supportive. We had a policy, let's see if we're doing it. How are we doing? How can we do it better?

And we had a lot of problems, the worst one being when there was a decision to mount an assault in an area in northern Laos called Nambak. It was supposed to be a secret assault, but everyone in Vientiane knew about it. So if everyone in Vientiane knew about it, so did the enemy. And everyone who did know about it, particularly the Lao, who were more outspoken, were calling it the new Dien Bien Phu. So we got our information together, and I forced a reevaluation in the country team. They tolerated me, and they reevaluated it, and they decided to go ahead. For all the reasons that were very easy to discern, it did turn into a disaster. The Meo not only lost heavily, because they were using Meo guerrillas as regular troops, the Lao Army was pretty much destroyed. As a result of this effort to go up and seal the Chinese border, the Chinese started building roads down into northern Laos. It was an unmitigated disaster.

Okay, it happened. So it happens, you go about... I came in one morning, and the ambassador had approved the station chief's fable of what had happened, the net result of which was that it was a great idea and they should have succeeded, there just were a few little mistakes, but we'll get 'em next time.

I went in to see Sullivan, and I said, "Look, what are you doing?" And he got very defensive. We talked about it, and I said, "Look, I forced through. I don't want to say I told you so, but we did tell them it was so. We told them all it was going to be a disaster. Okay, these things happen. I'm not trying to harp on that. But then all of a sudden I see this thing, and you have concurred and you send it in and it's a lie. What are we going to do? Are we going to encourage the next station chief and the next ambassador and the next political chief to go down the same road?" He got very, very mad. And I said, "What I object to more than anything else is that you would let this go without my seeing it. You're the ambassador, you don't have to let me see it, but knowing how deeply I felt about this and my staff felt about this operation, you would send this in. That really..." Well, he asked me what I wanted to do about it and all that. I said, "You know, I don't want to embarrass you, I don't want to embarrass the station, I just want to make sure this never happens again." Too many young kids were dead. So I said, "I'll think of some way to get it into

the files at home."

That conversation kept me in grade four for years. And those were the days you never saw your efficiency report. And it was only after I'd been passed over again, and I was one of the youngest Class Threes in the Service, and now I was getting pretty close to being selected out time-in-grade. Then you could see your file, and a guy in Personnel said, "Come on down and see your file and you'll understand why." And I went back to see it, and. . .it made indirect reference. . .the ambassador, something very negative about my argumentativeness, or something like that, or not being able to see the forest for the trees.

And I knew immediately what he meant, and I said, "Look at the other reports, they're all very good."

He said, "We don't... the competition. You'd better get something in there."

So I took it down to Sullivan.

Q: Who was back in Washington at that time.

VELIOTES: He was back in Washington. And I said, "Bill, you probably don't even remember this, but did you think I was very weak as a political counselor?"

He said, "Of course not, you were a damn good political counselor."

The fact that I was now special assistant to the deputy secretary may have had something to do with it. But I don't know; I give Sullivan a lot more credit than that.

I said, "Well, you know, I think you and I had a time when you were very piqued at me. I understand that. I even tried to transfer, but the inspector, Mac Godley, wouldn't let me. But if you say you didn't feel that way, would you please say so, because this is holding me up."

Well, he did. He didn't say this is wrong, but he...

There were a lot of things in the Lao thing. I don't regret anything I did along those lines.

Q: Well, now there is much more of a mechanism that was developed before dissent. In the Foreign Service in that era, you might have had something, but the idea of going the dissent route was just not done.

VELIOTES: The ironic thing about it was I wasn't trying to do that, and I wasn't trying to get visible, I really did want to have the record straight, somewhere back in Washington, on this issue.

One of the results of coming out was to get out of East Asia. I refused to have anything more to do with East Asia.

Q: How did you see the situation? You left there in 1969. In the first place, did you feel any repercussion from the advent of the Nixon administration?

VELIOTES: Oh, sure. Look, what happened, I was not a violent opponent of the Vietnam experience. I'm not sure I ever had to think it through in the early days -- not very many people did -- even though I saw some things that happened in the early part of the Kennedy administration which made me worry that other voices were being systematically dealt out. Chester Bowles, for example, was deliberately excluded from the decision-making process of really increasing our troop levels in Vietnam, in the early sixties, when he was still under secretary. I think Roger Hilsman, Abe Chayes, these were people who were dealt out, deliberately, on orders of the White House, I believe.

I had visited Saigon in early '62, on a trip, and had been impressed by what a beautiful city it was still at that time, although the American presence was starting to grow. During the time I was in Laos, I did visit Saigon and was shocked at what it had become -- just an armed camp and a brothel.

In Laos itself, I could live with our policy there because we saw ourselves as a place where you tried to control the violence and tried to keep the door open to something else. And that went a long way to keeping you on board with the policy. I began to wonder and had very serious doubts about whether I could believe what my own government was saying, within six months after I got to Laos.

One of my jobs was to be the liaison officer with the Prime Minister's office. And periodically I would go to the secretary general of the Prime Minister's office to discuss remuneration for the innocents who were killed by mistake by American bombing. Now here are planes coming out of Thailand, there is no antiaircraft, they just make mistakes. Instead of bombing there, they bomb here. Innocents are dead. And it didn't take long to say, "Wait a minute. If that's happening here, without any antiaircraft, how can every day in every way the Johnson administration, including the president, maintain there are no civilian casualties in the bombing of North Vietnam? There are no *deliberate* civilian casualties, but there *have* to be civilian casualties. If they're here in Laos, they've got to be there."

This may sound like a little thing to you, but this bothered me more and more. And I went in to see Sullivan, and I said, "Look, we've got to talk. I've been here long enough now. I haven't been involved in Vietnam, as you have, but this is a lie. And if this is a lie, what in the hell else is the truth? Because this is a lie you don't have to lie about. I mean, why not just say we regret it?" Well, he was quite sympathetic to this and said well, he'd been trying to tell them.

While I was there, Harrison Salisbury came out.

Q: He was New York Times.

VELIOTES: *New York Times*. He'd been invited to Hanoi, and he was going to fly to Hanoi on the International Control Commission plane. The International Control Commission, which I'll mention in a moment, used to have a plane that flew to Saigon and other places. . .into Hanoi.

And I was his control officer. . . great interest in Washington. He said, "I'm going to tell you. . . You can send this telegram if you like. I'm going to come out of Hanoi whenever I do, and you'll be at the airport." And I said, "Yeah." He said, "Then I'm going to come back here. I'm going to tell you everything. I will already have filed. . . so I'm going to tell you what I've seen and what I wrote, because I don't want to surprise anyone. And I do this sadly, because I know what I'm going to see. And if the administration had ever been honest, I wouldn't be here; this would not be a scandal." But, if you'll recall, this was when the credibility gap really. . .

Q: Yes, I remember, it was such a shock, the Salisbury reporting. I wasn't paying that much attention, but it rings in my mind.

VELIOTES: Well, you see, that's what got my attention in Laos, that there's got to be something wrong here.

So, sure enough, Salisbury came back, gave me the briefing. We had every damn...we had the JCS, the White House, secretary of defense, secretary of state, all wanting to know about this. And then he won the Pulitzer Prize for it.

By the time I left Laos, after almost three years, the Nixon administration was on, and Mac Godley had replaced Sullivan. Mac wanted me to stay, and I said, "No way." But you saw a difference right away. Mac was a can-do, let's bomb them, let's shoot 'em... That was his image of himself -- cigar smoking, hard drinking, carrying guns. It worked well for him in the Congo, and I guess he loved it in Beirut; he saw all those guys carrying guns there. That's just the way Mac was. He got to Vientiane, and he immediately went on a trip around the country, with the attachés, the station chief, and some of my people. In fact, my replacement had arrived, and I was going to leave in a few weeks. He came back and he dictated a telegram, and he asked us all to look at it and talk with him the next morning. I saw this telegram...meeting. I said, "Christ, you are saying the war can be won in Laos... I like you. You realize...every bit of credibility...this telegram, because anyone who knows anything about Laos knows you can't win this war. The Vietnamese are too strong, the Lao are too weak. It's too bloody...It can't be done. Don't send the telegram." Well, of course, he then had his meeting... he sent the telegram.

What I didn't know until I got back was that Nixon and Kissinger had devised this sort of Vietnamization policy, and you had to at least pretend, I guess, that the war was going very well on the ground in order to justify the withdrawal of American troops -- as is not unusual in such situations. The political hopes and realities at home serve to distort the perceptions overseas. You wanted to hear what you wanted to hear. And you didn't want Mac Godley, who you sent out because he was a tough-minded guy, to say, hey, we can't do that here.

Q: I might add, in about '69, I had gone to Saigon as consul general there, just running the consular section. But the feeling was, things were going fairly well in Vietnam at the time. The Tet offensive had run its course a year before. The military situation seemed in fairly good control there. At least that was the perception.

VELIOTES: That wasn't the perception in Laos, if you had your eyes open. Just too many people had been. . . Anyway, it had become clear to me, certainly in the last year I was there, that we

weren't going to stay the course. Too many visits by too many people. Another visit to Saigon. As I said, I was just appalled by the place and wondering how long the South Vietnamese population was going to put up with that kind of an occupation. You know, they could have..., and we could have left...

In any event, I came back, after 32 months. Actually, the Lao were a very sweet people. I really enjoyed them. I thought it's too bad they're not in an island in the Caribbean. They really were nice people. They were very gracious. I used to play tennis with them. You could go down to this funny old stadium, and everyone in Laos who had a high school education would be there playing, drinking beer, laughing. Very accessible. Very accessible.

But, in retrospect, particularly from the family point of view, it was the one post both my wife and I agreed we could have done without.

PAUL E. WHITE
Volunteer, International Volunteer Services
Vientiane (1966-1970)

Mr. White was born and raised in Indiana. He received his education at Sacramento State College, Valparaiso University and the East-West Center in Hawaii. He joined USAID in 1970. During his career with that Agency, Mr. White served in Vientiane, Seoul, Phnom Penh, Panama City, Lima, Guatemala City, Tokyo and Mexico City. He also had tours of duty at USAID Headquarters in Washington. Mr. White was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2006.

Q: Whither?

WHITE: I came to Washington and applied for various jobs with anyone I could think of that worked in Southeast Asia. And I was not having very much luck and I ran into, just by accident on the street, someone from the East-West Center that I knew, Jack Parmetier, who had signed on with the International Voluntary Services to go to Laos. He talked to me about pursuing that, I did and I ended up joining IVS and went to Laos as a volunteer.

Q: Tell me about the IVS. What sort of organization was it in the Sixties?

WHITE: When I joined, it was a church-based group, a Quakers group that was essentially used...a lot of the IVSers were conscientious objectors who didn't mind going to Southeast Asia but didn't want to fight. It was, I assume, mostly funded by USAID in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. They also had people in Iran and Iraq, other places around the world but the largest number of people were in Southeast Asia. It was...when I joined it, the IVSers were essentially out on the front lines, in Laos anyway. They were out in the forward areas and were very dedicated to doing whatever it was that they did-- agriculture, health, education. At some point during the Sixties IVS became more of a...started leaning towards being anti-government, anti-our mission in Southeast Asia and eventually rejected all U.S. government funding and

automatically reduced down to a tiny, tiny group of people that continued to work and hung together as IVS but very small, just a shadow of its former self.

Q: Well when you were doing it it was

WHITE: Large, active, directly working under USAID supervision, under the area coordinators in Laos.

Q: What sort of training did you get before you went out?

WHITE: We had an interesting few weeks of training in Washington. The academic training, so to speak, was cross-cultural in nature. They had an anthropologist on staff who did a lot to talk about how you work in foreign cultures. We received intensive Lao language training. It was like ten hours a day at Berlitz or one of the contract schools, for just a week or ten days. It wasn't a long language-training program. They did language training in country. And that was essentially it.

Q: Then you went to Laos...

WHITE: I was in Laos from '66 to '73, more or less.

Q: Where did you go initially?

WHITE: Initially I went to Vientiane, where I was put on the education team for IVS and I worked at Dong Dok, which was the local university, I think teaching English. But my original agreement with IVS was that I would go up country to work with the Hmong and that's what I was looking to do. When I got to Laos they said, "Well, you really don't have much choice. There's an education team and a rural development team and none of them work up in the area that you want to go to" up where the Hmong were. So it took me a number of months to negotiate to get up country to where I wanted to work. In that interim period, while they were working on that, I worked at the local university. I also was assigned for a while to work with the Asia Foundation.

Q: What was the situation in Laos in 1966 when you got there?

WHITE: It was a very confused country. You had neutralists, the rightists, the Pathet Lao and it was hard to tell at any given day what group of warlords were on what side. So there was active fighting in the countryside and very quiet in the cities at that point. The guerilla warfare there, which was associated with the Vietnam war, was essentially warfare out in the areas bordering Vietnam.

Q: Had the battles of, I think of Kong Le, between the generals, had that already happened?

WHITE: The Kong Le thing had already happened. The essential, the struggles for the Plain of Jars, the real struggles with the North Vietnamese, were yet to come. And that's, of course, the area I worked in.

Q: Here you were an American working for a voluntary NGO (non-government organization). What was the official American presence there at that time?

WHITE: As I best understood it, the official American presence was a group called CORDS [Ed: Civil Operations and Revolutionary Support was a counter-insurgency program based in Vietnam, not Laos]. That was a coordinated government body that folded State and AID, CIA, the military attachés all into one group that was called CORDS. So a lot of people lost their designation while they were in Laos. It was a very large mission there, probably the second largest in the world, next to Vietnam would be my guess. There were a lot of Americans there, including groups like IVS that were essentially contractors to the government.

Q: What was your initial, you spent a considerable amount of time, seven years. What was your initial impression of the Laotians that you were making contact with?

WHITE: Before I went up country? Well, before I went up country my impression was that Laos was a very happy place. There was no evidence that I could see in and around Vientiane of the war, except you would see occasionally soldiers on the street. But working out at the university or working with the Asian Foundation, where I essentially worked with Buddhist monks, my impression, and this was with the lowland Lao, that they were extremely easy-going people, very friendly and open to me, which is something I was looking for after having gone to Japan, the place that I loved so much and found that there was a lot of prejudice there. I didn't find any of that in Laos, so I felt very comfortable there.

So, at Dong Dok University I taught English.

Q: How did you find the students, as students?

WHITE: Not very excited as students. They were not burning the house down to learn English. Laos was essentially a French colony and French was the language that was used in academia. So there were a smattering of students interested in English. But also I was there only part-time, knowing that I would soon leave there, soon as I got an assignment. So I never got fully attached or involved with the university. The people on the education team that worked there certainly formed a core of people that were very interested in English and the American way of life and have wonderful memories of that time there.

Q: Well then, you went up country, where'd you go?

WHITE: I went to Sam Thong, which was right at the southern edge of the Plain of Jars. It was the capital, Sam Thong and Muang Xaing are too adjacent towns that were kind of the seat of the secret army of General Vang Pao and where most of the activity in northern Laos took place.

Q: What were you doing there?

WHITE: I originally went there to teach in a teacher training school. The valley of Sam Thong was a seat of Zhou Quang, who was the local governor of that area and it also had a teacher

training school that was for the Hmong people. So originally I taught, I started teaching English but I'm really not a teacher at heart, so I quickly changed my assignment to helping the teachers build school furniture and improve the school infrastructure and things like that. So I spent most of my time working on community projects.

Q: What was your impression at the time of the relationship between the lowland Lao and the Hmong?

WHITE: There were, clearly there were a lot of bad feelings in the lowland Lao about the Hmong. They felt the Hmong were dirty, uneducated. I learned a lot about that because as I learned Lao up country I learned Lao with a Hmong accent, so even when I would go down to Vientiane or other parts of Laos and speak Lao, people right away would detect that I lived with the Hmong and I heard lots of negative comments about the Hmong. There also is not a lot of opportunity for interaction between the Hmong and the Lao, because they really did live in very different places and Laos was a country with no roads. The only way you could really get around is by airplane. So there wasn't the friction because there wasn't the social contact.

Q: Where you were, was this almost strictly Hmong, or were the lowland Lao sort of holding administrative positions?

WHITE: No, it was strictly Hmong. All the administrative positions, from the governor, the governor was a Lao, Chao Xicome, but almost all of the administrative positions were held by Hmong. The person I worked with was the director of the school system for northeast Laos. He was a Hmong. The governor, while he was a Lao, he wasn't a lowland Lao. He was from that area.

Q: I've heard since many Lao and many Hmong ended up in Minnesota and places like that, that there was a real problem because they didn't have an alphabet or whatever. In other words, that they really hadn't received much, their culture just did not prepare them to move easily into the Western world. Is that true?

WHITE: Yeah, the Hmong, certainly, were among the most primitive of the people in Laos. There were probably some hill tribes that were even more primitive but the Hmong basically lived in an area with no transportation, with no cash economy, with no written language other than written language that missionaries had developed for them that were only known by a few people. So that's why when they came here as refugees they were found in Golden Gate Park still hunting for squirrel with crossbows. The people that came here were rural people with no education. But that has changed so much. I went to a function for General Vang Pao a couple of years ago in Wisconsin, a tribute to him paid by the Hmong and you could look out across this large valley and see three kinds of people. You could see the old Lao or the Hmong in their Hmong costumes, the women with their parasols and still with their silver necklaces on. And then you could see the soldiers, 'cause the Hmong army still exists and they were wearing camouflage fatigues and all that. And then you could see these young Hmong who grew up in the United States, who've had a Western education and who were now doctors and lawyers and some local politicians, some airplane pilots. There were three groups out there, it was just incredible to see. And for me, having lived for that long with the Hmong, it was incredible to see

these young kids who speak fluent English and are Americans.

Q: When you were there, in the area you were, what was the military situation and how were the Hmong being used?

WHITE: The military situation was pretty difficult. The U.S. policy was that the Hmong essentially were to hold defensive positions, not to be offensive. So there was a strong desire on the part of General Vang Pao and others, for instance, to take the Plain of Jars. And there were a couple of incursions where local commanders in fact overran North Vietnamese positions or Pathet Lao positions and were asked to retreat back by us because we wouldn't supply them. So that was one aspect to the war, that there were a lot of rules of engagement that made it difficult for the Hmong.

The security in and around where we were was basically difficult as well. There were North Vietnamese troops in northeast Laos, not just Pathet Lao. Northeast Laos, where we worked with refugees, we would overfly enemy positions to work with refugees. So we were constantly being shot at as we flew around that area and a number of the officers, operations officers, in the area where I worked were killed in action. There were no U.S. military people there other than one official military advisor. So it was a bunch of civilians out in a very dicey area. I worked for Pop Buell, who is a quite famous AID (Agency for International Development) type that worked in northeast Laos for many, many years and did, essentially after I left the school I did refugee work. He had a number of Americans, five or six, who worked with refugees or worked in the health system in northeast Laos.

Q: Well, to begin with you were sort of working really in the school in what could be called I suppose the support/admin area. How long did that continue?

WHITE: I worked in the school for, ... Pop Buell was a tough guy and he wanted his ops officers to speak the language and accept the conditions of flying out and working behind enemy lines and all of that. So he had a way of testing people and it was basically to throw them over to the school and not pay any attention to them and to check with the Hmong every once in a while to see how they were doing. So that's where I was and at one point one of the ops officers, Don Shustrom, was killed by the North Vietnamese and Pop came over and said, "Would you like to come up to the airstrip and work on refugee relief and rehabilitation replacing Don Shustrom?" So that took place maybe a year or so after I started working at the school. Around that same time a number of IVSers in these forward areas were killed in fights and IVS decided to withdraw all of its forward area people down to the capital. And at that time Pop Buell came to me and said, "Would you like to work here or would you like to go to the capital?" I said, "I'd like to work here" so Pop got on the singlesideband and called the AID director, Charlie Mann, said, "I've got a fellow here who's about to quit IVS and I want to put him on an AID contract" and that was the negotiation, the extent of it. So I became a contractor to AID and eventually became an AID direct hire while I was there.

Q: During the year you were working with the school you were working in which language, was it Lao or was it Hmong?

WHITE: Well, I chose Lao, because it had broader use and the school system was in Lao. I learned some Hmong but essentially the language that I used was Lao.

Q: Then after a year, that takes us to 1967, 1968, then you moved out to work with refugees?

WHITE: Then I moved out to become one of the refugee officers and our job was essentially to track civilian populations, especially populations that were in areas where they might get caught in crossfire or caught in bombing and all that and to move them to safer areas. So essentially what we would do is fly out with helicopters and depopulate areas by removing the civilians populations, all of which was important because these civilians were, another way of looking at them is that they were the dependents of the military, the Hmong military that were fighting. It's very hard to have someone fighting in an area if their family itself was in danger. So while at the time I didn't look at it that way, as you look back on it a lot of what we were doing is moving military dependents, moving villages where there were large numbers of military dependents, to safer areas. Once we moved them, building schools and clinics and training doctors, not doctors actually, but medics and nurses and school teachers. Providing them with agricultural tools and helping them to get started again.

Q: Well was it hard to get the people to move?

WHITE: No, it was usually easy to get them to move. The longer you stayed the harder it was, because generally what happened is you wanted to keep them in areas, in highland areas. They're highland people. So you would move them and in a year or so the North Vietnamese would have moved that much further south and hit their camps again or hit the area again. Once you'd moved them a couple of times then it became more difficult, not to get them to move but to get them to do everything they needed to do to reestablish their life.

Q: Was this a period of increasing Pathet Lao taking over territory?

WHITE: Yeah, mainly in northeast Laos it was mainly the North Vietnamese regular army rather than Pathet Lao, but, yeah, this was an area where they were continually moving south, putting pressure on the government, in this area (pointing) right along the Ho Chi Minh trail.

Q: Did you get involved in military action?

WHITE: Only on the margins. There were times when I was out sleeping in a village and there were firefights and I had to walk out of the village and get on a trail to save myself. But for the most part, no. For the most part, we had pretty good intelligence about where people were, where the North Vietnamese were, where the Pathet Lao were and other than getting shot at as we flew back and forth to work we were pretty much protected. Other than the guy that I talked about that was killed, Don Shustrom, who worked in an area that was a hotly contested area. So he was in constant, every time he went to the area where he was working, he knew there would be firefights.

Q: Was the Laotian Government involved in these movements or...

WHITE: No, the Laotian government was hardly involved at all. Almost of all of this happened with the local government. Usually we worked with the local level leaders of the village heads, the niban and the next level up, the tasangs and all of them in this Hmong area were Hmong. There were a few lowland Lao villages in that area, but not many. There were more kind of midlevel, because everything was geographic there, you had the lowland Lao and you had the Hmong at the top of the hills. You also had other ethnic minorities called the Lao Tung or the highland Lao. Those people we worked with. There were smatterings of them and they were also working with General Vang Pao and part of the minority army that was up there but they were a very small part of it. But, yeah, there were very few lowland Lao that we were working with, other than at very high levels. Souvanna Phouma clearly dealt with Vang Pao and that level but at the local level where we were working it was Hmong.

Q: I would have thought it would have been a bit disheartening to the Hmong to continually have to move. I assume it's all giving up territory, rather a feeling that we're on the wrong side.

WHITE: It's certainly disheartening in the sense that they were under continual pressure and they were continually moving the wrong way and they were never capturing territory and moving back. So, yeah, the longer that we were there, the more discouraging it got for everyone, including the refugee workers and the refugees.

Q: Well, was there any attempt to bring in some fancier military power, either new equipment or other, professional soldiers, or anything of that nature?

WHITE: There was really not a need for that because the Hmong were tremendous fighters and it's kind of, I was watching boxing last night on TV and the guy was saying in the corner, "You just have to let your hands go. You can beat this guy if you let your hands go." That was the way the Hmong felt: if we could only get air support from the U.S., we could do anything we want. But as long as we're instructed to hold defensive positions on the top of hills and not ever move forward, not ever be on the offense, we can't do anything. When they did conduct an operation, usually on their own, they were successful. But there were several key things that they were doing. Among other things, there was protection of TACAN (Tactical Air Navigation) that was used to guide our bombers to the Ho Chi Minh trail. So we had sophisticated equipment in a few places that needed to be protected.

So their roles were several. One was to hold defensive positions to keep the North Vietnamese from moving south. The other was to protect a few key areas. And there was no plan ever to be offensive or to take back area or to reestablish a Hmong area that was secure. That was not in our game plan.

Q: Do you know what was the reason for this, this game plan?

WHITE: I think the essential reason was as someone called Cambodia, Laos was a sideshow. The action was Vietnam. So what we were doing in Laos was essentially a holding action to, one, bomb the Ho Chi Minh trail and try to contain the North Vietnamese and try to not let them move through Laos to the Thai border. So it was more of us having a policy that did not look at what the needs of the Lao were as much as what our needs were to fight this war in Vietnam.

Q: Did you run across any of these troops Thai who were turned into Laotians for a short period of time?

WHITE: There were some Thai, they were called PARU, I don't know what that stands for anymore [Ed: Thai Police Aerial Resupply Units, essentially special forces units]. There were some of those Thai troops there but they weren't fighters. They were essentially there as reporters, watching the action and informing the Thai what was going on. They weren't Thai fighting units out there. All the fighting units were Hmong.

Q: How long were you doing this?

WHITE: Oh, for quite a while. I was in Sam Thong from 1966 to 1969 or 1970. Then I became a direct hire and in order to become a direct hire I became an international development intern. So I had to come back to Washington for some training and then I went to Korea for my internship in fall 1971. So I was there in Korea for a year and a half or so and I was in training for a year or so.

PHILLIP C. WILCOX, JR.
Press Officer
Laos (1967-1969)

Phillip C. Wilcox, Jr. was born in Colorado in 1937. He received his bachelor's degree from Williams College in 1958 and then immediately after received his law degree from Stanford University in 1961. After graduation he went and taught in Sierra Leone from 1961-1963. During his Foreign Service career he had positions in Laos, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Washington D.C., and Jerusalem. Mr. Wilcox was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in April 1998.

Q: You went to Laos from when to when?

WILCOX: We were in Laos 1967 to '69, in the midst of the Indochina war. I served under Ambassadors Bill Sullivan and G. McMurtrie Godley.

Q: Two of the top people.

WILCOX: And I had the good fortune of having two jobs. I started out as a Field Operations officer in USIS. Then, when the Press Officer, a veteran Foreign Service officer, left unexpectedly, the Ambassador asked me to be the Press Officer. It was an absolutely fascinating job, and I learned a lot.

Q: Your wife went with you.

WILCOX: Yes, Cynda went with me, and our daughter, Elizabeth, was born in Bangkok in 1968.

Q: What was Laos like when you arrived in 1967?

WILCOX: Laos was a beautiful little Asian country. The people were charming; the culture was quaint and exotic. The country was overwhelmed by a massive American presence, since it had become an adjunct of the war in Vietnam.

Q: What were you doing first as a field operations officer for USIA?

WILCOX: My job was to help “win the hearts and minds” of the Lao people in support of victory over the Vietnamese communists and their Lao puppets, the Pathet Lao. I wrote soft propaganda and what were called USINFOs, which were news reports with a policy slant designed for the USIA wireless file, which went around the world, for placement in local newspapers to win support for U.S. policy. Laos was a valuable education. With the benefit of hindsight, the USIS mission there, to make a tiny passive little country into an aggressive ally against the Vietnamese, was unrealistic. The larger U.S. mission in Laos was to use the country to vector bombing by U.S. Air Force planes based in Thailand against the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and to stage ground attacks against the North Vietnamese along the border, using Lao irregulars trained and armed by the CIA. The Ho Chi Minh Trail was a major logistics route and supply line for North Vietnamese forces and the Viet Cong in South Vietnam. In the end, this bombing campaign did not stop the flow of arms to the South. We had hundreds of Americans in Laos. The majority of them were involved in the paramilitary or military efforts, but we also had a significant economic development and currency stabilization program, run by the U.S. Agency for Economic Development [USAID]. We invested vast sums of money without much knowledge of the history and culture of Laos, and I believe, with unrealistic expectations about rescuing Vietnam from the communists or helping stop the war in South Vietnam. For me, being in Laos was a sobering education in the limits of U.S. influence and military power.

Q: Did you get out into the field much?

WILCOX: I did a lot. One of my responsibilities was to provide information to the visiting press and the local press. The Saigon war correspondents would come to Vientiane periodically to write Laos stories and I got to know a lot of them. I found that an exciting, heady experience. My job was to provide them with information but also to steer them away from a lot of clandestine activities, which were going on at the time. In some ways I was an agent of misinformation when I had to use Washington’s boilerplate press guidance. For example, the prescribed line on our military activity in Laos was that we were “conducting armed reconnaissance flights, and U.S. pilots were instructed to fire if fired upon.” In fact, we were bombing the hell out of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. But I tried to be helpful in other ways.

When journalists came to Laos, they always called on the Ambassador. Bill Sullivan liked the press and understood the importance of trying to help them. He always had me with him when briefing journalists. Listening to him was an education because he was a superb diplomat and a very clever man

The major lesson I learned from my work as Press Officer in Laos was that while there are inevitable tensions between the U.S. Government and the press, a policy of secrecy and disinformation ultimately fails. The press was resourceful enough to learn what was really going

on in Laos, and our unwillingness to be candid probably contributed to the great loss of credibility the U.S. Government experienced as a result of our Indochina venture. Our ostensible reason for not discussing our activities in Laos was that we were violating the Geneva Convention, negotiated by Averell Harriman with the Soviets, which agreed that Laos would remain neutral in the Vietnam conflict. Since the Vietnamese had flagrantly violated Laos' neutrality, we probably should have determined that the Geneva Convention was moot, and admitted what we were doing there.

I remember when Charley More of the New York Times told me, after I had recited to him the usual press guidance, that some day the United States would pay a price for its unwillingness to level with the public about what was going on in Laos and elsewhere in Indochina. He was right. Our policy of less than full candor ultimately created a backlash and a loss of credibility that hastened the decline of public support for our involvement in Vietnam and hastened our departure.

Q: What was the feeling among particularly the junior officers of which you were one about that whole business?

WILCOX: I can't speak for officers, but I think we all felt we were part of a cause, and there was a strong sense of commitment. Laos was a victim of North Vietnamese aggression, and we thought it deserved support. Before joining the Foreign Service, I had become skeptical about our involvement in Vietnam, but my views were not fully formed at that time. I did think at the time that the U.S. should be working harder to encourage a political solution in Vietnam, attempt to bring the Viet Cong into the government as a way of separating them from the North Vietnamese, and that we were relying too heavily on military means. In any case, working in Laos and being part of a team was exciting and challenging.

Q: What was your impression about how Sullivan dealt with his staff and then also Godley?

WILCOX: Sullivan was a man of powerful intellect, and strong views. He followed our diplomatic and military efforts very closely in Vietnam, and he was never shy about offering his advice to Washington or to Saigon. He did so regularly in pithy telegrams, and made some enemies among those who felt he was meddling. Nevertheless, he was committed to the broad goals of our struggle in Vietnam, and later when he became a Deputy Assistant Secretary in the East Asia bureau. In any case, he was a very able diplomat, a skilled political analyst, a great raconteur, and a strong leader.

Sullivan was also a thoughtful man. Once he asked me to escort two journalists to Xieng Khouang Province in northern Laos where they wanted to do a refugee story for Life Magazine. He told me to avoid exposing the journalists to any of the clandestine activities we were conducting in that area. I went to the person who was supposed to plan the itinerary for our helicopter flight. We flew up to a top of a mountain where the journalists had a wonderful time photographing colorful Meo refugees streaming up the hillsides and getting into helicopters. To my great shock, suddenly a U.S. Air Force F-4 bomber flew directly overhead and dropped its ordinance seven or eight miles down the valley. Because of faulty directions, we had strayed into a forbidden area. I was terrified that my two journalist charges were going to rush back and report an eye witness exclusive of the "secret war in Laos," bringing to an early close my career in the Foreign Service. To my amazement, they did not. One of them wrote the story about six

months later with a dateline of Hanoi after knowledge of our bombing activity had become much more public. I went to Sullivan and told him what had happened. He was annoyed, but there were no recriminations.

Q: How about Godley?

WILCOX: I didn't know Mac Godley as well. He was in some ways a more traditional Foreign Service officer of the old school. I liked him a lot. When I was getting ready to leave, he offered to help me on my next assignment and through him I was assigned to Sri Lanka, although the Department abolished the position before I got back to Washington. Godley was close to the CIA, and hired his former Station Chief in Kinshasa to join him in Vientiane.

Q: What was your impression of the CIA and its activities and its personnel in Laos?

WILCOX: There was a massive program to train and supply Lao irregular forces. The officers I knew were talented, dedicated people. There was a pronounced division between the overt political side of the embassy and the clandestine side, which I thought was excessive and unhealthy, although both Sullivan and Godley were strong managers who watched everything closely.

Q: What about the royal family of Laos? From your perspective, was that much of a factor?

WILCOX: The Royal family was respected, but the monarchy didn't have the kind of dynamic leadership that for example, the Thai King had. The country was governed more indirectly by a kind of feudal civilian military aristocracy. There was a lot of drug running going on. An acquaintance of ours, Chao Sopsaisana, who was a prince from Xieng Khouang, was appointed ambassador to Paris, but was arrested by the French police on his arrival for attempting to smuggle in drugs in his briefcase! Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma was a Lao prince from an old noble family, and ironically, his half brother, Souphanouvong, who was known as the Red Prince, was the nominal head of the Pathet Lao, the Lao Community Party that was controlled by Hanoi. Souvanna Phouma, was a patriot who was trying to preserve his country's independence from the Vietnamese and maintain at least a veneer of neutrality.

The Lao were not equipped nor prepared for the massive Vietnamese assault nor the large U.S. presence there. They more or less stood aside while the U.S. took over, and their own regular army was corrupt and ineffective.

Q: Were you getting any reflections from people you know about what was happening in Vietnam itself, whither Vietnam?

WILCOX: Yes, we would read the cables and we would read the press, so we had a pretty good sense of what was going on next door. In a way I regretted that I never visited Vietnam to see it myself. We felt we were a part of that conflict.

Q: Well, when you left there, what was your impression in '69?

WILCOX: Well, as I said, I was growing more skeptical about the whole enterprise, but I hadn't

really developed an ultimate view of our involvement. It was not going well, and even then I thought that there ought to be more emphasis on finding political solutions both in Laos and in Vietnam. My impression at that time was that South Vietnam was still a viable entity, and it could emerge in some way without being swallowed up by the North. I was wrong.

SAMUEL B. THOMSEN
Political Officer
Vientiane (1967-1970)

Samuel B. Thomsen was born in Minnesota in 1931. After serving in the US Army from 1952-1954 he received his bachelor's degree at University of California Los Angeles in 1956. During his career he had positions in Vietnam, Laos, Washington D.C., Botswana, Nigeria, and an ambassadorship to the Marshall Islands. Mr. Thomsen was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in August 1996.

Q: What was the situation in Laos when you arrived?

THOMSEN: I arrived just after the worst defeat the Lao army had suffered from the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese in what they called the Plain of Jars. Just before the Tet offensive in '68, just as the Khe Sanh situation was developing in far northwest of Vietnam

Q: This was the siege of American Marines in ...

THOMSEN: Near the Lao border. And we were also escalating our B-52 strikes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail which was in Laos. Things were getting hotter in Laos than they had been before. You may recall that in Laos at that time we had the North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, the PRC, British, Poles, Soviets, Czechs, and French, just an incredible microcosm of the Cold War. Probably the only place in the world where both the South and the North Vietnamese were diplomatically represented. But the International Control Commission was there with the Canadians, Indians and Poles.

What I got into almost immediately after arriving was the first negotiations with the North Vietnamese on various issues. You may recall that in February, just a couple months after I arrived...

Q: February '68.

THOMSEN: February '68 the North Vietnamese released three Americans in Vientiane. As I recall it was Dillinger was in Hanoi and as a sign of their willingness to be accommodating the North Vietnamese allowed them to bring out three Americans, a major lieutenant J.G. David, I believe, and a captain John Black. They came out through Vientiane. I was a part of the team that helped debrief them, and in return then we began a process of releasing some of theirs. From

then through to May we were the venue for the decision that negotiations would take place in Paris. I think on May 3rd the President announced this publicly in Washington, but we had already on May 3rd, a day earlier, been given the note from the North Vietnamese embassy that Paris was agreeable to them. It was quite a fascinating process to get from our first meeting to that agreement in May over a period of about two months.

Q: Do you want to talk about that?

THOMSEN: I'd like to just get it on the record. It's kind of fun, and for a young Vietnamese language officer fresh from the battles of Vietnam, and having been wounded there, it was a real introduction for me into what diplomacy was really all about.

I think going back we recall that on February 16th there was a release. On the 4th of April I went to the North Vietnamese embassy, knocked on the gate, a guard came to the gate, looked at me, recognized me as certainly someone they didn't know before and probably an American, ran back inside. A young Vietnamese diplomat who I later knew to be named Kim, came to the gate, scowled at me, and exchanged a few words in Vietnamese. I told him I was trying to deliver a note and I was told to come back later. I did. I was able to deliver the note, and then was invited to come back the following day for a response. The response was a long note in Vietnamese with coastal maps of North Vietnam in which they were attacking the United States for being war-mongering imperialists. A tremendous diatribe in what was supposed to be a diplomatic note. I could read it well enough to know that I wasn't going to be very happy trying to discuss it. But there was no time to discuss it anyway, so I took it back to the embassy and translated it and showed it to Bob Hurwitch, who was our DCM and a veteran diplomat. Together we drafted a cable to Washington with the substance of the note, which was they were after all willing to talk.

We were given instructions to go back and to say that we wanted to release a number of their prisoners. Bob accompanied me this time. The language was switched from Vietnamese to French. Their chargé came in, another experienced diplomat. Bob and he began to discuss the substance of our concerns. We put aside the note, and the language that was in the note, and just then talked about substance. Over a significant number of exchanges, we talked about Phnom Penh, and Warsaw, we talked about dates, and finally Paris came out. But for me to watch all of this, and Bill Sullivan, our ambassador, who was also a consummate diplomat, a protégée of Harriman, they were the ones who were really doing a significant job of diplomacy, and I was there learning during that process.

Q: Can you go into considerable more detail, if you'd like...let's stick to this talk negotiations, and then we'll come back to other things.

THOMSEN: Okay, I mentioned in October 16th they did release three of our prisoners. On March 29 we released three of theirs, and that was as a result of negotiations which we had conducted. We had informed the North Vietnamese of our intentions to release three fisherman who had been washed ashore in northern South Vietnam after the storm. They were going to fly in by Air America to Vientiane from Saigon. We proposed that they receive them and put them on the ICC flight that flew three times a week to Hanoi.

Their chargé said, "what we do is our responsibility"...this was his formulation, that they did not

explicitly agree to accept the prisoners, but they did make it clear that they would be appreciative if there was no press at the airport when we brought the prisoners in. On the 29th of March the plane arrived. We had something for them to sign which would recognize that they had received their prisoners back. They refused to sign. The three men got off the Air America aircraft; a car drove out from the main terminal. We were parked a little way away from the main terminal, a car drove quickly to the airplane from the terminal. Two North Vietnamese embassy officials jumped out, issued instructions in Vietnamese, which I could barely understand, but essentially told them to strip, so they stripped to their underwear, they were originally in fatigues. They were handed grey North Vietnamese outfits, they put them on, jumped in a cab, which had followed the first car, and drove away.

Q: By that striping of the sort of standard garb that we give people who are incarcerated, that had been done en masse during the Korean War.

Thomsen: That's interesting. So they had a precedent. Well they certainly followed it. It surprised us, but the reality was that having had our negotiation without any confirmation on their part, that they knew in effect do what had to be done to get the job done.

On the 3rd of April they announced in a kind of propaganda way that we had done this. On the 4th of April we tried to deliver a note that suggested that there be a meeting between the two governments on April 8th in Geneva. They signed a receipt for the note, but refused to discuss it. But later in the day COM, the second secretary, arrived at the embassy, and asked to speak to Mr. Hurwitch by name, or the "Secretair Particular," which they intended to refer to me. In any case, I met with them. They reported that the message passed by the embassy had been forwarded, that a response had been received, and they would like to see the ambassador at the North Vietnamese chancellory that afternoon. So at 4:00 I went with Ambassador Sullivan to the North Vietnamese embassy. The chargé was there, translated the note which was in Vietnamese. The note accepted a proposal for discussion and said that we must specify what we meant by a bombing halt, which had been a part of the first note. It confirmed that ambassadorial level would be alright for the meeting. They suggested Phnom Penh and the 12th of April.

On April 10th, Bob Hurwitch and I went to the embassy to arrange an appointment with the ambassador, and agreed we could meet in the American embassy this time at noon. The ambassador and I again went to the North Vietnamese embassy. By the way, during this time we were driving in Bob Hurwitch's yellow Chevrolet Corvair. what was the name of that small Chevrolet? We were in the Covair, partly to dodge the press, because by this time there was a fairly good size press contingent in Vientiane. We got there at noon on the 9th, and the chargé Chun read an aid memoire. He said that Phnom Penh would be convenient for Hanoi, but not final. We could start on the 12th. The ambassador again raised the problems of Phnom Penh, for example, the question of how an ambassador could get back to Vientiane from there.

Q: Was there concern there that if we went too often to the North Vietnamese embassy that this would show that we were deferring to them?

THOMSEN: That's never came up. No, it never came up. Mainly what we were trying to do was avoid the press. There was a gal there, and I can't remember her last name, her first name was

Estelle, who was maybe a stringer for some of the major press. She would just sit outside the embassy waiting for official vehicles to go to certain places. That's one of the reasons we used the little Covair. I had a big Chevy station wagon that I would use once in a while, but the Covair was a lot more convenient. In any case, by the 11th of April they were coming to us as often as we were going to them. Cam, the little second secretary arrived at 4:00, and after a brief conversation said he was just dropping by on another errand to see if anyone would be around if he delivered a document toward 6:00. That was kind of, "if I came by around 6:00, would anyone be here to receive a document." Bob Hurwitch assured him that our bureaucratic requirements would keep us there long past 6:00. At 5:50 Cam arrived again with their attaché, Kim, who claimed to speak some English, but no French. That was a very interesting thing. Cam constantly kept him informed in Vietnamese of what was going on in English. We suspected that obviously Kim was intelligence or had some control or responsibility. Cam passed Bob an envelope for which he required a receipt for "the secretariat," he said. Bob took the letter to the ambassador, returned shortly, Bill Sullivan came back out, he thanked Cam and told him we would transmit it immediately and give the answer as soon as possible.

Q: When you say transmit immediately, you mean back to Washington?

THOMSEN: We were going to send it back to Washington.

Q: I assume during all this that Washington was calling the shots, wasn't it?

THOMSEN: Oh, absolutely. We were simply messengers. That isn't to say that Bill Sullivan, who had been through the earlier Geneva talks, wasn't giving his own views on what the best solutions might be. (I have to say as an aside, that the Vietnamese had been giving us delicious green tea at the Vietnamese embassy, which they bragged about. They even told us which part of North Vietnam it came from. So when they came to our embassy and went back into the little kitchenette that we had, and poured some of the worst tea I've ever tasted. In any case, it was interesting because Tiem, who was supposedly just a low-level functionary, made the first move to go. We'd gotten to know Cam fairly well. But Cam was very stiff in that situation. We had actually gotten to the point where we were giving friendly goodbyes, small talk, and he was very stiff and formal during this time.

So on the 19th of April 1968 was the next event. A telegram came in and was delivered to Cam by Bob and me in the yellow Corvair. We were telling them about a Rusk press conference that was just to be held. Again on the 22nd of April at 11:50 we delivered to Cam an expression of our concern about the press play. April 25 I was absent, but by this time the press had gotten on to it and were following us back and forth to the North Vietnamese embassy. Finally on the 27th of April, at 4:00 in the afternoon Cam and Tiem were waiting in the lobby for Bob Hurwitch who had not been informed of their presence. They invited the ambassador and Bob and me to the embassy where they gave us a note offering Warsaw as the location. On May 3rd the DCM, Bob Hurwitch, passed a note to the North Vietnamese. Nick Veliotis, the political counselor accompanied. I was at home but my phone wasn't working. We agreed on Paris. At that time the President made the announcement that Paris was agreed upon. On the 4th we went to the embassy to invite the North Vietnamese to come to our embassy. They showed up and were

given a 7-up this time, instead of the tea. And at that time we delivered the note formally agreeing to Paris, and that was the end of the exercise. It was a fascinating exercise because, as I say, the beginning with the juniors kind of walking around each other and not knowing quite how to deal with the reality, to see Bob Hurwitch and Bill Sullivan operate, and the North Vietnamese chargé who was an experienced diplomat. And they cut through all of the negative stuff, and went right to substance. A lesson I never forgot.

Q: With Sullivan, was he making any comments that you heard as this process was going on about what he thought was happening, and where it was going?

THOMSEN: I haven't covered it in here in great detail, but when various other venues were being proposed by Washington, he was encouraging us to focus on Paris. It seemed the North Vietnamese were more interested in that location. So he was urging us to keep our eye on the ball, and not to allow locations to divert us from getting some place for the talks, and Paris actually turned out to be quite alright. Phnom Penh of course would not have worked.

Q: If you want to come back at any point to this, but let's talk a bit about developments in Laos, particularly early on. 1968 was not a good year, with the Tet offensive, and the fighting at Kue Sanh.

What were you absorbing from the other people in the embassy about whither Laos at that time?

THOMSEN: Well, actually I had a lot of other responsibilities besides this exercise. In the political section, the primary demand was to keep an eye on the CIA activities, and the military situation. So I did a lot of traveling. The defeat that had been suffered was at Nam Bac in the far northern part of Laos, and it was a major defeat in that major Lao units were badly hurt. But what it did, and the escalation of the war in Vietnam did was to give us more resources. For example, B-52 strikes in northern Laos began. We began bringing in better and more equipment for the Lao army, giving them better training and we were giving them better air support from Thailand. So aside from Nam Bac, and again that occurred before I got there, the situation in Laos was pretty stable through the time I was there, which was until July of 1970. In fact, in some areas the Lao army actually regained some territory.

One of the fascinating results of my study at Cornell was an understanding of the history of the region, I copied a map at Cornell of Thai influence in Laos .in the 19th century Laos was essentially a hinterland of Thailand up to a certain point of elevation in the Annenite chain. At that point the Vietnamese had superiority. For example, the Plain of Jars which was a major battle area, had been under North Vietnamese influence in the 19th century. The local princes would go to Hanoi to show their fealty. Whereas in the lowlands, to the south and west, the local princes would go to Bangkok. The Lao were really kind of a country bumpkin Thai. The point being when I was trying to assess North Vietnamese versus Lao control, I discovered that it was virtually the same line as in the late 19th Century. What we thought of as a war situation in 1970s was almost identical to what had been the political situation in the late 19th century, which gave us better insight into what was going on in those areas. A friend of mine who was a prince

of a royal family, and traced his ancestry back many, many generations, recalled that his great grandfather would go to Hanoi. That was again in that part of Laos. And that they regarded Hanoi as friendly, protecting them from the Thai who they considered to be rapacious, although they were ethnically related to the Thai. They were not Chinese, they were ethnically more like the Thai. But politically in the 19th century they had regarded the Thai as less friendly than the Vietnamese. That was true all up and down the chain, all up and down Laos. And really helped inform us as to what was going on, even at the village level.

Q: How about contacts with the Lao government?

THOMSEN: The Prime Minister, Souvanna Phouma was a very urbane, distinguished political leader. He was from the family that produced the Prime Ministers historically. They were related to the royal family.

So Souvanna Phouma had a kind of a charismatic leadership capability. He loved to play bridge, would play bridge all night, enjoyed the company of Bill Sullivan. Was very practical in his approach to what was going on. We had very open relations with, for example, the Foreign Minister. Nick Veliotis and I would play tennis three times a week with the chief of protocol, and the deputy chief of the political office in the Foreign Ministry, both of whom subsequently became ambassadors. They were from major families. I think we would say they were open with us, and were very pragmatic in how they dealt with common problems. Some of their colleagues, on the other hand, were a lot more circumspect because they were looking to the future for alternative futures where they might have to be able to live. One of my best friends actually was another deputy in the political office, later became chargé in Washington while I was the Lao desk officer. He subsequently went home with his beautiful new '73 Ford, and when Laos finally went communist after the fall of Vietnam, he was imprisoned and we learned in 1995 that he has finally been released from digging up land mines in of north Laos. He's home in Vientiane working at the Ministry of Tourism now. What I'm getting at is that the Laos that we dealt with, who had essentially cast their lots with us, were working with us very closely to try to find diplomatic solutions, and reasonable solutions for themselves. But there were others in the same Laos government who were much more careful to protect the future with a different kind of government, which is in fact did happen.

Q: During this '68 to '70 period, what did the United States government want from Laos?

THOMSEN: I think essentially to allow us to prosecute the war against the North Vietnamese, and have their assistance where possible. We did not regard the Laos army as particularly effective but it did hold several North Vietnamese regiments in Laos, engaged there which might have otherwise gone to South

Vietnam. We were able to interdict the trail without the kind of criticism from the Laos that Sihanouk was giving us from Phnom Penh. They allowed us to organize the Meo. The Meo tribes people were valiant fighters against the North Vietnamese. Again you go back to this 19th century history where the North

Vietnamese...I don't think persecute is exactly the right word, but essentially treated them very much as they treated their own Montagnards, badly mistreated them. So the Meo were willing to be armed and led against them. I think if we could have created a truly neutral Laos protected

from the North Vietnamese, we would have been delighted to do that. But in the absence of that, we simply wanted not to have them be a problem for us as we fought in South Vietnam.

Q: Did you find that many people that you ran across in Laos were either overtly or covertly trying to say, look, this is a big boys' battle, keep us out of this and we want to stay out of the way.

THOMSEN: I didn't get very much of that. I think the Lao have always seen themselves as needing a protector. Again, let's go back to the 19th century. The name of Pavie isn't well known in the world, but

Pavie was the French explorer that boated down the Mekong, and when he stopped in Luang Prabang, which is the royal capital of Laos, the King of Laos asked him for French protection from the Thai and the Vietnamese. I think this is where the word protectorate must have come from. The King of Laos asked for French protection from the Thai and the Vietnamese. And in a sense we were a successor to that legitimate by request protecting relationship. I think the Lao understood where they were. They were a tiny country between two larger countries, and to get another country on their side was to their advantage. I think if they thought they could be put in a situation where they could be left alone, they'd have been delighted. But I don't think they saw that as an alternative.

Q: From your perspective, what was the role of the Thais at this particular time?

THOMSEN: The Thai were very supportive of our efforts to keep the North Vietnamese away from Mekong. The Thais saw the North Vietnamese as a major threat. I think they'd seen them as a threat for 100 years or more. They saw us as the bulwark against the North Vietnamese coming to the Mekong. There were situations in northern Thailand where the Chinese were very active. If the map of Laos, Thailand, China and North Vietnam, there are places where the North Vietnamese could become a danger to the Thai. There were reported some North Vietnamese units that had moved close to the Thai border in the province of Saisbuiy where the Mekong River flows actually through Laos. Saisbuiy is on the Thai side of the Mekong, and there were rumors of North Vietnamese units supporting Thai insurgents from that area. The Lao were not very good at controlling even their own lowland territory, and the under populated areas. So the North Vietnamese could move in some of these places.

Q: I'm not sure it was at this time or not, but I understand that the Thais sent troops who put on Laotian uniforms and fought some battles there. Was this going on when you were there?

THOMSEN: I don't think so. I think the Thai had a very strong liaison team of military officers at Lao headquarters, and I think they were probably in Lao uniforms. And there also, I think, Thai observer liaisons with some of the hill tribes. But as far as Thai fighting in Lao uniforms, I hadn't heard of that.

Q: You said you were reporting on the CIA. People I've interviewed, and also it's well known, Laos was practically a province of the CIA in many ways. I mean it was very much their operation more than most

others. What were we doing? And what were you doing?

THOMSEN: I was simply trying to keep informed would be the best way to say it. I wasn't trying to monitor them, I had no commission to second guess them. The CIA were supporting smaller ethnic Tai minority groups in the mountains all over the north, and there would be an American case officer in some of those villages who would live there and make sure that the support was available to them. And I would visit those places, visit with them, get an appreciation for what was on the ground from them, and just get a sense of what was going on. I would use the CIA contacts in those locations to do that.

Q: You had been very much involved in the war in Vietnam, and you were getting out beyond dealing with the North Vietnamese, and as a diplomat probably you were seeing the case officers. Can you compare and contrast the war in Laos as compared to what you'd seen in Vietnam?

THOMSEN: Much lower intensity. And much more localized. Often the North Vietnamese would be using other Lao, or other minority tribes to gain control of territory. And their main interest was really not to occupy, but simply interdict, or prevent us from using certain territories. So it was a very much lower level kind of activity. And often I'd visit a case officer and there wouldn't have been any sort of violence for weeks or months. The tribal troops were training, and he was making sure they were being fed. Some of them got very much involved in education, and community development, small scale gardening, all sorts of things. It was a fascinating experience to see these Americans, some of them in their 30s and 40s who had been there for a long time, just totally engaged with these tribal communities, and looking after their best interests, and feeling committed to them. That was not unique.

Q: Was there any concern on the part of the embassy that the CIA was running its own program that the embassy did not have control or oversight?

THOMSEN: I don't think so. Both Bill Sullivan and his successor, Mac Godley, were called for different reasons, the Field Marshal. And having served as a political advisor with the Marines in Vietnam, I was familiar with the morning daily briefing which is not a typical event at an embassy. But we would have a regular 7:00 a.m. briefing. One of the things about Laos was that we still had the old military attaché system where we had not just a Defense attaché, but we had an Army attaché, an Air Force attaché, and even a Naval attaché who was a Marine out of Bangkok. They would give us full operational briefings every morning, and then the CIA station chief would give us a full briefing on the events, essentially he was giving us a military briefing on what the CIA supported units were doing in northwest Laos. That's I think probably why I was travel to make sure that something wasn't happening that we might want to be interested in. I must tell you that some of my closest professional friends over the years are case officers I worked with in Laos. My feeling to this day is that they were pretty much playing straight with us.

Q: What about the case officers? Where were they coming from? Do you have any feel for where they were recruited?

THOMSEN: Some were recruited as long ago as the Second World War. They were long term CIA officers. In other cases they were bright young officers out of the eastern schools, as is often said to be the case. They weren't strange kind of off beat folks coming out of strange places.

Q: Because this can often end up by having people looking for adventure and getting away from their families. You can end up with some very good, and very weird people.

THOMSEN: We had a couple of them, but they were not recruited off the street for these jobs. These were men who had served in the agency for a couple of decades. This is just where they were put with all of their color, and idiosyncrasies.

Q: What about AID? What was AID doing there, and what was your impression of how things...

THOMSEN: AID was essentially the infrastructure for the country. Air America and Continental Air Services, the two contract airlines, were the means of communication for the Lao as well as the Americans from north to south. I think it may have been after Vietnam the largest AID mission in the world. It was a huge organization. And there they had some of the brightest young Americans I've ever seen. Kind of Peace Corps types but not from the Peace Corps working in the provinces, and they were essentially the CDOs, the Community Development Officers, were in many cases the backbone for the province chief providing him with the communications, and with the logistics that he needed to keep some vestige of control in his province. Some of these men and their families, and their families were with them, had harrowing experiences later on, when the North Vietnamese became more active than they were while I was there.

Q: With these officers out in the villages, was there the same feeling that there had been in Vietnam?

Where the Viet Cong would come in and take control in the night?

THOMSEN: It was very different. The Pathet Lao were not real insurgents. They had been organized and trained by the North Vietnamese, and they were in units but they didn't have the same kind of local infrastructure they had in Vietnam. There was no fear in the late '60s in provincial Laos that an AID officer might be hurt by somebody.

Q: As you were working on these peace talks, granted it was a peripheral and getting things ready, helping to get the thing going, but obviously there must have been talk among you and Nick Veliotis, Hurwitch, Sullivan and others, was there concern that when the peace talks came about, that the Lao might end up as

being deserted as what we would consider more important to considerations?

THOMSEN: No, our feeling was that peace would be good for Laos. That the Lao could only benefit from a peace treaty for the war next door. That almost any agreement next door would reduce tensions in Laos. That the Ho Chi Minh Trail would cease to be critical. We always felt that the Lao could make an accommodation among themselves if the outside pressures were removed. The head of the Pathet Lao was the half brother of Souvanna Phouma. They did know each other. So the sense was that they could find an accommodation once the outside pressures were removed. And we recognized that we were one of the outside pressures, and if we were able to lower our level of visibility that would be helpful too. But we couldn't at the time as far as we were concerned.

Q: How about the People's Republic of China? Did that play any role there while you were there?

THOMSEN: Not significantly. They were there in a fairly significant presence. One of my other monitoring responsibilities was to keep track of a road the Chinese were building through north Laos. Everyone ignored it officially. The Lao disclaimed any knowledge of it, but I would go up north from time to time to get local reports on the progress of the road. The road would have been a threat to Thailand. But by the time the road got near where it would have been a major threat, things had changed enough so we didn't think it was any more. But it was the kind of thing that was going on in this fascinating part of the world.

Q: What was life like at the embassy? I mean family and all that sort of thing?

THOMSEN: Life for families was comfortable. Vientiane was a tiny French city with the cosmopolitan diplomatic corps I've described. We had a huge commissary, a supermarket of a commissary for the Americans. We had a small community called K-6 with a school. I don't know how many thousands of Americans there must have been there, but it was large enough for there to be a school, and a small hospital. The embassy medical unit had, I think, eight doctors.

Q: What was your impression of Bill Sullivan as ambassador?

THOMSEN: Bill Sullivan, I thought, was one of the most consummate diplomats I've worked with in my career. His style was very interesting. He would use a legal sized yellow pad to do his drafting. He did not go out a lot, he was not a person who was an outside man. His most important visits were with the Prime Minister when there was something to talk about with him. Socially, he and his wife were very gracious and did entertain, and kept themselves in the community that way. But I'm comparing him to Mac Godley who I can talk about in a minute as almost the antithesis of Bill Sullivan's style.

An anecdote: Bill Sullivan would spend a day with his legal tablet preparing a gem of a diplomatic message, and it would be read. Everyone knew...I recall in Saigon the Marines, who I got to know later would say that these they would fight over who would get to read the Sullivan's cables first, because they were so pithy. They were gracious, well written, but that they had

important information in them and important judgments. That's exactly what they were. He was an important player, but he was not an activist in his personal style. He was quiet, somewhat withdrawn, but very, very personable. I'll tell another anecdote. When he left, the American community had a farewell party for him at the American club. It was a part of the commissary, but it had a snack bar, actually a large dining room. The place was absolutely packed, and as a junior officer in the embassy, I got to play..).they had skits about Ambassador Sullivan at various stages). Sullivan as a six month old, and a huge logistics officer (It could have been a nose guard for the Chicago bears) he had me over his shoulder like I was a six month old. But the amount of affection and respect that flowed out of that farewell was just overwhelming. And Ambassador Sullivan, who had the gift of gab of any good Irishman, gave a farewell speech that would have gotten him elected mayor. He was very well liked, he was very low key. He was very polished, he was very affectionate, and a great person to work for as a role model.

Q: How about Mac Godley? When did he come?

THOMSEN: I would guess toward the end of '68. He was a totally different kind of ambassador. Where Bill Sullivan would sit for a day crafting this careful tome. Godley would spend the day in a helicopter with his AID director, his station chief, and his Army attaché , all over Laos. He'd come back at 4:00 or 5:00 in the afternoon. He would call the whole country team together in his office. He would bring in his secretary, who I think is now an admin counselor somewhere. She would sit down and he would start dictating. And as he dictated he would say, "and I visited the AID project in such and such a place, and here's what we found." And he'd look over at the AID mission director. Unless the guy got out of his chair and waved his arms, or stomped up and down, they would just go on. That would be his clearance. And at the end of let's say a 45 minute dictation in which he would give his appraisal of what was going on, he would then give maybe a two or three paragraph summary of action requirements, or recommendations. And at the end of that time, unless someone said, I can't agree with that, his secretary would type that up, it would probably be ten or twelve pages of the loosest prose you can imagine, and he would sign it and then he would go away. That would be Mac Godley's day in Laos, and in it would be buried absolute nuggets of important information, and a page and a half of loquacious sharing of his impressions of a village chief. It was a fascinating variation on the theme. But that's the way he operated. He was always out, always with the people. When visitors came, the Godleys would entertain and half the embassy would be there. But Godley would be in a room with two or three of his senior folks making decisions and getting things done as people were enjoying the party. Another fascinating professional to watch for a younger officer.

Q: Was there a bit of sort of feeling like country cousins to the embassy in Saigon, or anything like that?

THOMSEN: We had very few relations to Saigon. Bangkok was really where we had our ties, and most of our communications were with Washington. Our only real relation to Saigon was the interdiction of the Trail. We had what has been popularly called a "bombing officer." It would be a junior officer who sat in an airless office, one wall of which was covered with a map of the Trail on a ½ inch to a kilometer, incredible detail. And every morning we'd get the requests for air strikes to the Trail.

Q: Those were the B-52s.

THOMSEN: He'd go to his map and he'd mark them out on the map. I say it was his office. Actually he was doing this in the conference room, his office was adjoining the conference room. When we went there to our meetings the first thing we'd look at would be the air strike requests with his recommendations. A young officer telling the President of the United States in Washington.

Q: Lyndon Johnson.

THOMSEN: He had this FSO-6 in Vientiane vetoing it. We had an agreement that if we found that any strikes would be in an area that had populations, it would be called off. So he was the one who was using that map.

Q: This again was something I think I picked up some of this from an interview I did quite a few years ago with Nick Veliotis talking about the problems that the American military was always saying, all right, if we only get this particular point here, this is going to cut off the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It never did. But I mean, it was always this is a junction, or this is a...what do they call it...some kind of a point...

THOMSEN: Concentration

Q: A choke point. And if you bombed that, which always happened to be a village or something like this, this will stop them dead. Of course, if there was anything that experience showed, the Ho Chi Minh Trail just kept expanding, it would by-pass. Could you talk about the embassy's role in this bombing, and any problems that you can remember?

THOMSEN: Well, essentially, if there were complaints from villages that bombs had been dropped near them, we would investigate and try to make restitution and certainly then try to prevent any repetition. What had happened was that a village, or a populated area, might be in existence and not on the map.

Q: You were talking about the role of the embassy. I mean you pay restitution.

THOMSEN: Our intention was to prevent any injury to the Lao to the best of our ability. And we had agreement all the way back to Washington that any concerns that we had would be operative. It was simply a matter of having information to protect the populations. The Trail though had a low civilian population density. The North Vietnamese were not wandering through villages. They were moving in uninhabited areas. So it was not as much of a problem as it might sound. But there was certainly the possibility of a mistake, or of a bomb going into the wrong place, or of a village moving because they were fairly mobile. Some of those tribes stay a while in one place, and move to another place and we might not spot them.

Q: ...enter into the equation of this bombing...the bombers were ordered from, I think, when it came to CINCPAC, didn't they?

THOMSEN: Probably because the bombers were based on Guam so CINCPAC would have been a good relay point. My recollection is that the coordinates for the targets came right out of Washington.

Q: Were you aware of any kind of clashes between the military? So we got to bomb point B, and the embassy saying no, we don't want you...or that type of thing?

THOMSEN: Yes, that kind of thing was going on all the time at a fairly low level. There was never an instance where the military said, this is a choke point of major proportions where thousands of tons of logistic or material are going through every week, and we've got to do it. And we would say, no. Those so-called choke points just weren't in inhabited areas. I'm trying to remember a few instances where we judged that there was a village within a few kilometers of a trail and they simply wouldn't bomb there.

They'd bomb further up or down the trail. It would call for an exchange of messages, it wasn't a simple no and that would be the end of it all the time. Although in many cases there would say seven or eight targets, and we'd erase two targets and they would do the other five and let the two go.

Q: While you were in Vientiane the anti-Vietnam movement in the United States was really sort of hitting us. Were you aware of this? Was this having any impact on the embassy officers, or other people in terms of morale, or people who were sort of agin what you were doing within the ranks of the Foreign Service, or CIA?

THOMSEN: No. In the political section we had one junior officer who was kind of a peacenik. But he regarded what we were doing in Laos as supporting peace. He didn't think about what we were doing in Laos in the same way he thought of what we were doing in Vietnam. I thought of him as a bellwether, a kind of litmus test. If he got upset about something we were doing in Laos...and he wasn't all that happy about bombing in Laos, but he was delighted that we had some control, and that we weren't just being cut out of the picture. So what we were doing with regard to the bombing, was something he regarded as being beneficial. And the fact that he was a fairly thoughtful guy meant that a lot of us who were mostly engaged in the Vietnam situation, although we didn't approve of all of his attitudes, the fact that he was supportive of what we were doing in Laos was helpful to us.

I must say we didn't pay a lot of attention to what was going on in the States. We weren't wrapped up that much. Again, when I'd been at Cornell for a year, I had been involved in giving the State Department views around that part of New York, and into Pennsylvania speaking at colleges and public forums about Vietnam. So I knew that there was a rising consciousness about what was going on, but that faded into the background while we were in Laos. We were pretty much taken up with what we were doing there.

Q: Is there anything else we should cover in Laos?

Thomsen: I don't think so. The embassy was an effective, the political section was certainly unusual. Nick Veliotis and myself and two other officers, three other officers including the bombing officer doing a variety of things that needed to be done. And doing it effectively. I had

tremendous respect for Nick Veliotis as political counselor. I think that's probably a good coverage of...

S. DOUGLAS MARTIN
Chief of Economic Stabilization
Laos (1967-1970)

S. Douglas Martin was born in New York in 1926. During 1945-1945 he served overseas in the US Army, upon returning he received his bachelor's from St John's University in 1949 and later received his law degree from Columbia University in 1952. His career included positions in Germany, Washington D. C., Yugoslavia, Poland, Laos, Austria, Turkey, Nigeria, and Cameroon. Mr. Martin was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in January 1999.

MARTIN: So I turned it down. In turning it down, I said, "Look, send me anywhere you want, but not Stuttgart. Please, let me out of that." The next thing, I got a letter telling me I was going to go to Vientiane, Laos, and I would be the economic officer at the embassy. That was something of a fiction, because in Laos at that time, the second largest employer was the AID mission, with something like 5,000 people working there. They had one Foreign Service officer, State Department, there, and I was it. I was the deputy in the Program Office, in charge of something called the Economic Stabilization Program.

Q: You were there from '67 to -

MARTIN: - to '70.

Q: '70, okay.

MARTIN: The Economic Stabilization Program had been a three-part program some years before I got there. There were direct grants. Really, they would pay the officials in the Vientiane Government to send family members for medical care in Thailand and even to Paris and direct grants to support embassies. Laos was such a poor country, it could not afford to have embassies in countries where they were really needed, such as Thailand, Paris, London, and the UN in New York, and Washington. We were providing the money for that. That was the first part of the three-part program.

The second part was something called the Commodity Import Program, where we subsidized the import of American products, particularly vehicles. They would be sold to the Lao. That didn't work out because there was a lot of corruption in the government, and, though we kept tightening the Commodity Import Program up, somehow they would get around it. For example, they imported luxury vehicles, and we said no more of that, no more automobiles could come in. So they started importing trucks, but the trucks were really being used as household vehicles, and they were the most luxurious pickup trucks you could get.

The third part of the Economic Stabilization Program was the one that occupied me full time. It was something called the Foreign Exchange Operations Fund, which we called FEOF. It

consisted of five contributing countries: the United States, which was by far the major contributor, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, and France. France's contribution was fake because they used it as a means for cashing francs into Lao currency, which is called the *kip*, the Lao kip. But the other countries really made a contribution, and they also generated kip, but it was used to pay down the national debt. So basically, every year there'd be a budget deficit, and FEOF was subsidizing the budget deficit just about completely. There were four local banks which would accept kip in return for dollars at a fixed exchange rate, 500 kip to one dollar. That program was always under the scrutiny of the Treasury Department. They didn't like it. First of all, our share of FEOF was high. It started out at about 50 percent and gradually crept up until when I got there it was about 75 percent. Since the French basically used it as a way of changing their money, they did not make any net contribution at all, but they had a chance then to participate with us in negotiations with the Lao Government to try to control the deficit. Basically, in return for their agreeing to limit the deficit to a certain amount, which was really the amount that the government was costing them, we would agree to put in the equivalent in dollars. We would have meetings monthly to discuss progress to see how they were doing so that the deficit wouldn't get out of hand. It was a successful program. By the time I got there, the US was putting in \$10 million, but it was also seen as a way for a Lao with kip to go and get dollars and send them to an account in the West. So the capital flow outwards was something the Treasury Department was concerned with.

I also did the general economic reporting, and a couple of things were important. The ambassador when I got there was Bill Sullivan. I guess he's my favorite ambassador. He has a great sense of humor and is also tremendously capable and a brilliant writer. He was very interested in keeping the war in Laos as quiet as possible, because we were, including CIA, underwriting the Meo tribes. They were called "the sky people," because they live up on top of the mountains. Today they're known as Hmong in the United States and apparently have not adapted very well in this country. Their leader was General Vang Pao, who had been a sergeant in the French army and was actually a brilliant commander and revered by his people as they would a king. One of my most interesting days in Laos was to go and visit General Vang Pao's headquarters, which was near a refugee camp that USAID was operating up in that northern part of the country. I sat on his tremendous porch as we were waiting to see him, and Meo people were also sitting around waiting to see him. He would come out like a medieval king and mediate disputes, handle questions, advise people, like a wise king who was loved by his people.

That program was generating a lot of refugees, so USAID had a big refugee program. Ambassador Sullivan wanted to control any planes going up there. I used to write an annual aviation report, and I had to get the name of every plane in the country, and the number, and who was running it. There were all kinds of funny airlines there. There were airline companies that had no planes, and there were planes you wondered what airline company was running. A New York Times stringer and a New York Times reporter, Edward David Binder, did get up there to the battlefield and learned quite a lot and wrote a book called The Secret War in Laos. He got some kind of a prize for it. But the secret war in Laos did remain a secret for quite a long time, and I think it was pretty much a secret still when I was there.

That was one part of my economic reporting. Another was gold. There were no restrictions on gold imports into Laos, although all the surrounding countries had restrictions on gold imports. So the gold used to be shipped into Vientiane. A fee had to be paid to the government for that, and then nobody cared where it went. It was obvious it was going to the Chinese communities in the surrounding countries. Those people liked to collect and hold gold.

But the most important was running the FEOF. Every day, the cashier, a British fellow, whom I'm still friends with, would come in and tell me how much kip was turned in that day, and how many dollars we had sent out. We would have negotiations with the government. We were always afraid of a run on the money, and when we got low, I would send a telegram saying we must have a deposit of a quarter of a million dollars by tomorrow morning or the Western World as we know it will collapse. They always came through with it. I really negotiated with the Australians, Japanese, French, and the British; the British were our closest, you might say, friends on that. The Japanese were sometimes difficult to understand, but I think I learned a lot. It was the first time I was in the Far East since I had been in the army of occupation in Japan for a year.

Q: Doug, before we get into that, I'd like to go back to Laos for a bit. In the first place, can you describe what was happening in Laos when you were there, the war, the economy, the political situation?

MARTIN: Okay. Politically there had been a right-wing government, and then there had been a coup, the Kong Lee coup, and when we were there, there was a coalition government headed by Souvanna Phouma, who was the premier. He was a moderate person and was related to the royal family. I think the king was his uncle. He's in the cadet line of the royal family. The minister of Finance, who was the one I dealt with, was named Sesak Na Champassak. Champassak is an area in the southern part of Laos. His uncle was the warlord in southern Laos and the top guy there, but he was kept in line. He was careful. They would have just bounced him out if he had caused trouble. Then in the center, where we were, Chinese merchants were coming in. There were a couple of families that were very powerful within that area. There was not what you would call a central government that extended through the whole country with schools, hospitals, and that sort of thing. People lived in these little villages.

One reason why we could have an economic program that could underwrite the entire budgetary deficit was because they were a small population - no more than three million people - and because most of that three million people did not live in a money economy. They were people who grew their own rice or caught some fish from the many waters all around there, so they had food. Clothing would just be one piece of clothing. A woman had one dress or two. It wasn't a dress; it was traditional - not a sari either. I forget what they call it. It was just a tubular kind of dress that they wore. And shelter - they could build a house themselves. They were straw houses.

It was not much of a money economy except in Vientiane, where there were lots of stores that sold everything. It was strange, in that although it was not a money economy basically, anywhere you went in the country, you could get imported beer and sandals. So there was import-export business going on. They produced very little themselves. Our aid program was designed to try to get them going. I know we had for example a tire recapping plant.

The AID program was engaged mostly in road-building. The theory of economic development that was being followed or approved in Washington and was the idea of the successive AID directors there, was road development. You build a road, the people will come and the area will be developed. There was a lot of truth in that. We had two kinds of road-building programs going. One was trying to work through the local government, giving them assistance in building roads. Then we had one big road going from Vientiane, the capital, to Luang Prabang that was being built by American highway construction people from the state of

Washington. That road was cut soon after I left, because it was under attack.

There was danger there. People were being killed. I had a friend, a guy named Parento, six kids, and he was a navy civilian employee in the Office of Naval Construction or something, basically . . . what do they call those guys?

Q: The Seabees.

MARTIN: The Seabees. He was a civilian employee in the Seabee program: construction of the embassy there and other government buildings.

There was a very, very big CIA operation.

Q: What happened to him? Was he killed?

MARTIN: Parento was killed in an airplane going to look at a school down in the south. He was on the school board, and I was on it with him. The plane crashed. There were lots of plane crashes there. They had all kinds of the so-called "STOL" aircraft, "short take-off and landing." One kind of airplane was called a Porter. People used to travel all over the place by air, because traveling by land was not safe.

There were five Frenchmen killed within a couple of miles of Vientiane while I was there. They were out hunting. Some people suspected they might have been doing something else, some kind of intelligence work, but I don't think so. They were out hunting, and two of them were caught by the Pathet Lao, the Communist insurgent group, and were being held. The others came along and stopped to try to help them. All five were then killed in a shootout. I went to the funeral there.

It was interesting to see the French *colons*, because that's basically what they were. There were lots of bars and places down on the main street. Lots of the Frenchmen had been veterans of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, and found themselves in French colonial places and stayed there afterwards. There were bars there. I used to go to a bar on Saturday afternoon to have a beer. The owner was a Frenchman who had been in the French Foreign Legion, had fought in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and because he had a Lao wife he stayed. There were some Hungarians who had somehow gone from Hungary to Paris, Paris to the French Foreign Legion and the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, and then they stayed. One guy we called János Bácsi, Uncle John. He used to regale me with stories of the French Foreign Legion and the Hungarian army and his opinion of the Lao, Hmong, and others. Anyway, he told me that the French Foreign Legion was "*Kinderspiel*," child's play, compared with the Hungarian army. He said that was a real army, that was a tough army. We used to love to hear him talk. And there were some others there. My wife is Hungarian. I was in with the Hungarian community, such as it was, all expats and refugees who had somehow found their way there. The woman in charge of the hotel cleaning staff was a Hungarian woman. My wife was friendly with her.

There was a war going on, there was a war atmosphere, and it was what people had said in the press. It was a CIA-client country. They had a big trail-watching program going on. Besides what was going on in the north, the war down in the south, was where the Ho Chi Minh trail went through. It went right through Laos, cutting out from North Vietnam down through Laos and back over into South Vietnam itself. The CIA ran something called a trail-watching program. A lot of what they were doing I wouldn't know anything about, but I knew that they

were watching the trail, because it was only a few miles from Savannakhet and Paksay to the other major cities or towns in Laos. They were on the Mekong River or just a few miles away. One thing I would say about the CIA there, they knew what was going on. They couldn't stop it, couldn't do much about it, but they did know what was going on.

Q: Did you find that the CIA was part of the team, or were they off to one side?

MARTIN: They were definitely part of the team, because Ambassador Sullivan was in charge, and they honored him. But they were so big and so rich, they had so much going, that in effect they were something different. They lived in a separate building. They all had the same title, community development advisor, which was kind of a joke. My kids went to the local American school there and most of their friends, it seemed, were people either from the AID mission or from the CIA. The State Department was definitely overwhelmed or outnumbered. The DCM was State.

Q: Who was the DCM, do you remember?

MARTIN: The DCM was . . . I'll think of his name in a minute. He was very good and later got into trouble in the Dominican Republic, where he was the ambassador and he had his general services officer was building. . . . Bob . . .

Q: Hurwitz?

MARTIN: Bob Hurwitz. I liked him a lot. He was very good and very decisive. To show you one incident that showed his character. He was a good DCM in that he was able to go in and talk sense to the ambassador, because Sullivan could get out on a limb, but he also had a great sense of humor and he realized when he had done it. We used to send in a "weeka." I used to send in some economic items for the weeka. They were reviewing the reporting in Washington, and said, "Look, just send in separate reports on anything significant. We don't need the weeka any more." Sullivan blew up. He really got upset at that. He said, "They can't tell me how to report. I'm the ambassador. I'll decide how I'm going to report. If I want to send in a weeka, I will send in a weeka." And that was it. He proclaimed that at a staff meeting. Apparently after the staff meeting, Hurwitz went in to talk to the ambassador. He said, "You know, this might be a break for us. That weeka is getting to be a pain anyway, and I wonder how valuable it is. They might be right. It's better to send in the more important stuff we report separately. We don't have to send in a silly weeka every week with a lot of little items that are more or less insignificant and meaningless." Sullivan said, "Well, I guess you're right. I still can write whatever I want, but okay, let's forget the weeka." That's what I mean by a good DCM. Very few are. Most DCM's are afraid of the ambassador. If you have a strong ambassador, they are supine. They are afraid to say anything because it wouldn't do any good, they think.

I shouldn't say most - I don't know, I haven't had that many, but it seems to me the DCM gets all the bad jobs like running the school board, the housing, and all those things. He takes a load off the ambassador. But the real contribution he can make is to get the ambassador to head in when he's going wrong, and they don't always do that. I think somehow the training program in Washington that trains DCM's tells them that they have to be the alter ego, that is they act as if they're inside the ambassador doing whatever the ambassador would do in those spots. They

should be encouraged to dissent a little bit. When the ambassador needs a talking to, they should be able to talk to him.

Q: What was your impression of the war at the time you were there? How was it going?

MARTIN: Not very well. While I was there, the Tet Offensive took place.

Q: That was in January, '68, in South Vietnam.

MARTIN: Yes, I was in Laos. Tet is a big Vietnamese holiday. Because it was like a very long weekend a number of people came, from the AID mission and from other groups in Vietnam to visit Laos. People wanted to visit other countries while they were there. So we had a number of people who came during the Tet Offensive. While we were there, Khe Sanh was going on.

Q: This was the siege of Khe Sanh?

MARTIN: Yes. Near the Vietnamese-Lao border. And people were afraid it was going to turn into another Dien Bien Phu, and we were getting reports every day, and people had maps of Khe Sanh out on the desk looking at what was happening. It was touch and go there. It was getting to look like the war was going to go on forever and we weren't really gaining much.

General Westmoreland was the commanding general, and I'm pretty sure while I was there he was replaced by General Creighton Abrams. The general feeling was that General Abrams was a much greater man and a greater general than General Westmoreland. As it turned out, General Abrams was the one that really got us out of Vietnam in a way to save the American army. That was what they were trying to do at the end. The military side of it was to get the army out, in a sense to save our military from what could have been a terrible and endless mire, going on and on. I didn't realize that when I went in. I just thought, well, if we did bomb north of the military line, bomb North Vietnam, we could subdue them. I think we could have, but I don't know that it was worth it.

I went there because my record showed that I knew French, and I could read French very well. I really couldn't speak it very well. One of my accomplishments there was I took French lessons and I did qualify in the French language. My wife, who speaks a number of languages very well, was very friendly with some of the French. There were a lot of French military there, and we were friendly with one family. He was a lieutenant colonel in the French army, and he said, "You know, we couldn't do it, and I don't think you can either, but I wish you luck." He was right. I think it was just too much for the United States to think we could defeat a Vietnamese insurgent movement that was popular.

So I would say the war wasn't going very well, but we were holding our own. Ambassador Sullivan used to have meetings on Sunday morning targeting where we would bomb in northern Laos. There was a place in northern Laos where the Meo in a sense were protecting our guys. I think they were employees of Lockheed or something, and they were on top of a mountain, and they were guidance for our bombers coming over Vietnam. Gradually the enemy was closing in on that area, and we were keeping it open, knowing that probably we were going to have to give it up. It was overrun and a number of people were killed but some escaped. I remember Ambassador Sullivan showing me a telegram, and he said, "Well, we stayed at Site 129" - or whatever it was - "a day too long. It was too bad that that happened." But the place was

serving a very important purpose right up until the minute they overran it. Still it would have been better if we could have destroyed the machines that were there.

Q: Was Sullivan the ambassador the whole time you were there?

MARTIN: No, no. He was succeeded by Ambassador Godley.

Q: Mac Godley.

MARTIN: Mac Godley, who was also very good. I liked him a lot. He's still around. So is Sullivan, for that matter. Ambassador Sullivan lives in Mexico. Ambassador Godley, I would say loved the idea of war. I don't think Sullivan did. Sullivan was having a lot of fun, but I don't think he really loved it. He would have preferred if somehow there could have been a peaceful solution to the thing, whereas Godley really reveled in it. He relied almost completely on the military attaché and the CIA station chief, Ted Shackley. He was very good, too. We were friendly with them because his daughter and mine were in the same class together. The war was not going very well when Godley came in either. Shortly after we left, I read in the paper that the road between Vientiane and Luang Prabang had been cut, and that was a very important event, because the northern part of Laos was being cut off.

Another friend, who had a Hungarian wife who was very nice, was a pilot in Air America, and he was killed while we were there. He was flying, probably delivering, as he used to say, "We deliver 'hard vegetables,'" meaning, of course, we had rice drops going on all over the place. There were a lot of technological advances being made there. How can you drop a bag of rice from maybe 600 or 800 feet high and not have it smash all over and the rice get scattered? We used to put it in three bags, a bag inside a bag inside a bag, so that when it was shattering, if you were lucky it might have just shattered inside one of those bags. And they were pretty good at it. They had people employed on these planes (this was Air America and Continental Air) as "kickers," and believe it or not, the plane would drop its tailgate, and the bags of rice would be on it, and the bags would sometimes get stuck, so these guys would be kicking. At the beginning they were just kicking, and a couple of them fell out of the plane and were killed. Pretty dumb, but anyway, it happened. So by the time I got there, they had straps on. They couldn't fall out of the airplane anymore.

So the rice drops were going on. We had projects going on all over the country. As I said, road building was big. The AID director when I first got there was Joe Mendenhall, and eventually the Lao pushed him out. He went on home leave, and they said they didn't want him to come back because he was death on corruption. He used to brag that our AID program, when we built a school, we brought in all the equipment for the school, all the materials, we purchased it, brought it to the site, and we supervised the school going up. In Vietnam, they would give the money to the Vietnamese and say, "Build a school, and we'll give you the material." The schools weren't getting built. Schools were getting built in Laos, but the money wasn't going into Lao hands. He had cut out programs for medicines, for example. The Ministry of Health and the Veterinary Ministry - medicines weren't getting to the people; the money was going into the hands of the health officials. And Mendenhall was death on corruption, and I really admired him for that, but he got the local Lao officials very upset with him.

Next came Charlie Mann, an old-time AID bureaucrat, and he died six months or so ago. He was a road-builder. He liked roads projects. He didn't worry about corruption; he worried

about getting along with the government. When I discussed the two AID directors and my judgment about them as to whether they were good or not, I would always point out that Charlie Mann didn't seem to be concerned about corruption. He'd talk about his program. On the other hand, Joe Mendenhall was always aware of corruption and always on the lookout to prevent it, to reduce it to a minimum, to keep a watch out for it. So I used to tell people that the difference between the two AID directors was that Joe Mendenhall was so good he was bad, because resources weren't coming into the country nearly as much as they should have. Charlie Mann was so bad he was good, because there was a lot of waste under him, but there was a need for resources to come into the country, and they were coming in.

A lot of his favorite projects out in the boondocks got overrun. They would be evaluated as good projects that somehow because of enemy activity got overrun. I would say that Joe Mendenhall was much more aware of political-military stuff and more careful about where the projects got put. Mendenhall's biggest project was to try to get the Lao to grow more rice, because they could easily feed themselves on the rice they were producing. If we could get them to grow two crops of rice a year, which would have been easy if they tried, then they could sell one crop and it would be a good income for the country. The idea was great, but it was very difficult to sell, because the Lao didn't want to grow another crop. They were satisfied with the status quo. It was a very peaceful, wonderful, beautiful country with happy people.

Basically, even though there was a war going on, the Lao - and of course the Meo were suffering badly - the Lao people were very happy. It didn't seem to bother them whatever their political or religious beliefs, if it was up to them, they were happy. The basic term in the language is, *mo pin yan*, which means "It doesn't matter." So whenever anything would happen, they said *mo pin yan*, it doesn't matter. I remember we had a maid working for us, and her father died. And I said to her when she came back from being away for a couple of weeks, "I'm very sorry to hear that your father died." She said, "Oh, *mo pin yan*. It doesn't matter."

The Buddhists - in most religions there are apparently two branches, the strict observers and the loose observers, but of the Buddhists the Lao are definitely the loose observers. We lived just 200 yards from a sacred place for the Buddhists. A holy place is a *wat*, but this was a *that*. It's like the difference between their cathedral and a chapel. And a *that* had to have some relic of Buddha. I've forgotten what it was, but they had a relic of the Buddha, a fingernail or a hair or something, in there. And people used to be streaming by. These monks used to go by our house with these saffron robes and begging bowls, and on feast days the maids would put candles out. They would light the whole house up with candles every couple of yards. It was nice. It was a very nice culture, very nice society, and the people were very nice.

They're coming back now, I guess, but it will always be a backwater. It's a landlocked country, and they were exploited by the Thais while we were there. Anything they shipped through, they were terrible about it. I'm sure, the Vietnamese will also take advantage of them.

They had a feast every year called the Water Feast. At the beginning of the morning the maid would come around and they would bless us with this equivalent of holy water. They would throw a couple of drops on you. Then you would grab the container and throw a couple of drops back, and before it was over, everybody was tossing buckets over everybody else's head. That was done all over. It was the silliest thing. And they had boat races. It was the first country I ever went to that I really did have culture shock. It took a little getting used to. But once we got used to it, we really did like it, and we left with a certain regret. But because of schools, we got out.

KEITH EARL ADAMSON
Public Affairs Officer/Director, USIS
Vientiane (1968-1970)

Keith Earl Adamson was born in Newton, Kansas in 1917. Mr. Adamson received a bachelor's degree in economics from George Washington University. After college, Adamson worked in the Interim International Information Administration of the State Department, which later became the USIS. Mr. Adamson's career included positions in Egypt, Turkey, Colombia, Vietnam, and Thailand. He was interviewed by Earl Wilson on January 12, 1988.

Q: We will pick up in 1968, when you were assigned as Public Affairs Officer to Laos. You want to tell us about that?

ADAMSON: I moved on a direct transfer from Saigon, South Vietnam, to Vientiane, Laos, the administrative capital of the kingdom. At that time, we had a very complete roster of personnel, plus our branch posts in Luang Prabang, the Royal Capital in the North, in Savannakhet and in Pakse. The principal problem, I think everyone will remember, is that we were there primarily because the North Vietnamese were there, both in their efforts to conquer the tribesmen, the Hmong or Meo as they were better known, in the Plaine des Jarres, in that area, and because the Ho Chi Minh Trail almost the entire length of the country, from an area level with Hanoi all the way down to below I Corps (the northernmost region in Vietnam).

The job was twofold: we were trying to help the Lao run an information program and a counterinsurgency-type program. We had been doing most of their printing for them. We produced the motion pictures for them, and we helped with their radio broadcasts. In other words, we had in our radio shop personnel on our payroll, but we also had personnel on their payroll, and we were working together with them in the production of programs. They handled the basic cultural programs and the news programs, and we handled the feature-type programs that were designed to form attitudes, if you will, regarding the conflict with the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese.

We also were, of course, operating a very good library system, both in Vientiane and in the branch posts. It was intensively used primarily by secondary school students, although we had a number of adults who were regulars, but the majority of our users were the school students. Other tasks we had were leaflet drops which, in effect, were an extension of the program in South Vietnam. We didn't do them, but we controlled the content and the drop areas. So every time they'd plan a new series of leaflets, up would come the draft copy for our review or Clyde Slayton -- (he served in Hong Kong for so long) -- would bring them up personally.

Q: How big was your staff in Laos?

ADAMSON: I had a deputy PAO, a motion picture officer, a radio officer, a press officer, a cultural affairs officer, and the American secretary, plus the branch PAOs.

Q: Did you have military assigned to you?

ADAMSON: We had one military assigned to us, a Major who was supposed to be liaison between ourselves and the U.S. military mission there. He was, in effect, full time and had an office in our space. We worked very closely with the PSYOPS command of the Lao armed forces, and had direct contact with the Chief of Staff.

Q: Wasn't there a major military buildup in Thailand across the border from Laos at that time?

ADAMSON: Let's go back to what I was saying the other day, when I was comparing the Vietnam operation with the Lao operation. We were helping the Lao to fight their own war, and so it was the supply chain that was extremely important. So the military buildup was both that which was running air strikes against the North Vietnamese, both in the Plaine des Jarres and in the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but it was also the ordnance and material supply system coming in for the Lao armed forces.

Q: I see.

ADAMSON: The thing I was trying to get back to was just that, that in South Vietnam we had to send in personnel on everything and to do the job, to try to do the job, because we were impatient and didn't think the South Vietnamese forces could handle it, whereas in Laos, we were much more patient, and we did have training programs for the Lao, and we supplied the materials, and they supplied manpower.

Q: I would suppose one thing that might be different in program there, the Lao, defending their own land against what is essentially an outsider, as opposed to Vietnam, where you just fight the north-south; you had the same race.

ADAMSON: Well, it was similar, because in South Vietnam, you had the local Communists, the Viet Cong, as we called them, and in Laos, you had the Pathet Lao. Historically, of course, you had the neutralists, the rightists, and the left-left wing. When they had the mixed government -- what do you call it?

Q: They had the Russian term, Troika, the three.

ADAMSON: A tripartite or coalition government. They all had agreed as to who would hold what jobs. I was not there yet, but I heard there was a security problem, and the Pathet Lao retreated to the northern area past the Plaine des Jarres to Sam Neua with Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's half-brother going in that direction, and his staying on as Prime Minister in Vientiane. But the problem that we tried to face, the same as we did in South was that there were the local Communists as well as the North Vietnamese, and so we were helping the Lao Government, the Lao Ministry of Information, and the Lao armed forces, to produce materials, to prepare pamphlets, leaflets, and so on for both the population, as well as for the local Communists, to try to dissuade them and to gather support.

One thing to remember in Laos and, I believe, to a great extent the same in South Vietnam, the PSYOPS was a concern of the military, yes, but they weren't oriented to try psychological operations against the enemy. They were directing it at their own troops and family. In other words, it was a morale operation. That was their primary objective. When I was in Saigon, they had a mission from Taiwan, and the Chinese, of course, were teaching them how to do it, because that's the Chinese orientation, too, toward their own people, not toward the enemy. So I thought that was quite interesting. We tried to get them to think in terms of both, instead of just having it as a morale operation. But the morale operation, of course, was extremely important. So they went their way on that one.

We had very good relations with the local government; there was no question about that, in all spheres. As a companion effort, the Agency for International Development was really working hard on developing the Lao language school system. Up until that point, Lao language education only went up to the first few grades, and, of course, out in the rural areas, that was as far as anybody ever went anyway. But the higher education was primarily in Chinese language schools and French language schools or in English language schools. So AID was helping to develop text materials and all of that in Lao. We, every year, had a pavilion or display at the that Luang Fair. The king came to our pavilion, and he was a tall, very tall, handsome fellow. His wife was typical Lao, very short and very, very sweet. He came and was looking through, and we had a display of the Lao language school project and the materials that were there. He spent so much time there that the other exhibitors, including the Soviet Union, all thought he was never going to come to them, because he stopped to look at all the textbooks. He was very impressed by it, and he hadn't known about this project before, all of which goes to prove that exhibits at international fairs do pay dividends and are worthwhile.

I can't really say much more about how we did it. I wish I could say more about how effective we were. One thing we were able to do was to respond to very specific situations. The Japanese got the contract to build the Pha Ngum dam, not on the Mekong River, but on the Pha River, coming in across the plains. That was, of course, to help provide electric power, as well as control floods. The Pathet Lao were trying very hard to scare both the Japanese contractors off, as well as all of the villagers around the area. So frequently we would find that all of a sudden, all the villagers had disappeared. The Pathet Lao had scared them sufficiently that they would migrate. So our task was to drop some leaflets on these disappearing villagers to get them to go home, to get them to go back where they were. They were really torn between the two sides, because they'd go home, and they'd be talked into leaving again. So here they were, back and forth, almost in a constant state of anxiety, which was not good for the villagers, but the point I'm making is that at least we had some noticeable degree of success with the materials that we dropped in on them. That was an airplane drop. The Lao had the air capability to drop leaflets.

Q: Incidentally, going back to Vietnam for a moment and relating to this, I understood the Chu Huo program to bring in people who had come across to surrender, that most of those people did have a leaflet. Is that correct?

ADAMSON: That is correct. The leaflets offered them amnesty, offered them an opportunity to become integrated into national life again. And when they came in, they had the leaflet that made the offer in hand.

Q: Was that true in Laos, as well?

ADAMSON: No. We didn't have what you could call a similar program. There was no real amnesty program. What we were trying to do is just get those people who were in contention to stay put.

Q: But the much maligned leaflet drops did have benefits.

ADAMSON: Yes. My feeling is that when they were very specific, they could be successful. When they were just saying, "So and so's a bad guy," you never knew whether it was successful or not. It didn't offer something for people to do. It was merely trying to say something to them without any response either possible or requested. So I've learned from that, that message has to have some response-ability. I'm not talking about responsibility; I'm talking about response-ability. I think that's important in most any information effort, that you really need to present it in such a way that you can get a reaction.

Q: Right. Specific.

ADAMSON: The addressee shouldn't be permitted the luxury of being indifferent.

Q: Going back to Laos, didn't you have a special program for the Meo?

ADAMSON: The only thing that was special about it is that we had Meo employees. We tried Meo language, and so on. But it was no different, really. Obviously, they were bearing the brunt of all of the ground fighting, and their Air Force with their T-28s was doing most of the aerial support for them, but nonetheless, it was not a different program.

Q: How long were you in Laos, Keith?

ADAMSON: I was there two years, almost two years. I was there from the end of May 1968 until early April 1970.

Q: So by the time you left, the program was beginning to change somewhat?

ADAMSON: By the time I left, it was still going pretty much at the same rate, except for one thing. We were beginning to turn over the direction and the responsibility for the non-U.S. information and cultural exchange program to the Lao. We had turned over to them the job of printing the periodicals and more of the radio program production. Of course, I forgot to mention that, through the Colombo Plan, they had some nice new transmitters in Luang Prabang and in Pakse. So they were doing local programming, which we had helped to get people trained to do. One of the reasons, I guess, why I was selected to go to Thailand was because we were in the process of turning over the task to the Thai. We were no longer the surrogate information service for the Lao; we were turning it over to them to do on their own, being available to advise and help if needed. That was what they wanted to do and what Lyndon Johnson and Prime Minister Kittikachorn agreed would happen in Thailand, that we would turn over the job to the Thai

Government, instead of our continuing to do it. So that was when I was transferred to Thailand to do what I'd been doing in Laos.

Q: Who was the effective person in charge of government in Laos when you were there?

ADAMSON: The prime minister was Prince Souvanna Phouma.

Q: Did you meet him?

ADAMSON: Yes, we played tennis, as a matter of fact, almost every week. He was a delightful guy, and his special assistant, La Norindr, who later became the first Lao ambassador to Moscow, became a very good friend of mine. He and I played tennis with our ambassador and the prime minister.

Q: I gather you made a lot of good friends with the Lao.

ADAMSON: Yes. The Lao people were very likable, very delightful. It's hard to understand how they could sustain a war effort for so long, being such a peace-loving people. They were just very pleasant, very nice. Of course, as a result of those friendships there, we've ended up sponsoring a great many Lao, after the government fell to the Communists, who fled to refugee camps in Thailand so that they could come to the United States. So we have a fairly large Lao family now.

Q: You mean here in Honolulu.

ADAMSON: Here in Honolulu.

Q: Lao people must have gone through a lot of changes, because I was in Bangkok in 1954, and the U.S. Government had its first operation in Vientiane at that time, and it was regarded as being extreme hardship. They had everyone living together in one place. I remember a statistic which may have been wrong, that there was one Western-trained doctor for all of the Lao area.

ADAMSON: That wouldn't surprise me. Medical facilities in Laos were limited, but they had improved tremendously by the time I got there. One was a U.S. AID-supported hospital operation. Most of the personnel, nurses and other medical personnel were Filipino. The Embassy had its own clinic, its own doctor, and he was German. So the Lao themselves did not really have much. They had a pre-med training program run by the French.

Q: But what I'm getting at is over a period of 14 years, these people living in a rather primitive area, which even the French, I think, gave only minimal control up there, suddenly, over a period of 14 years, Americans had just come in every direction. It must have made quite an impact.

ADAMSON: It did. By the time I got there -- in other words, I can believe that the conditions that you'd heard existed in '54 existed -- or didn't exist, to put it that way. And that there was during the subsequent years -- particularly since '61, '62, when we really began to get involved in

Laos, in that period of six years, a great deal had been accomplished. Most of that which is in place was imported and put in place; it was not yet evident that the Lao had been trained to do it themselves in the medical field. Of course, one of the problems that many of our Lao refugee friends -- family, we call them -- said was that they had deaths in the family due to lack of medicine, due to medicines from France, through the pouch to the French Embassy, and then the French Embassy in Vientiane would mail them to, say, Pakse, they were confiscated by the new Communist government before they ever got to the patient. So the father, in this one family's case, died. Medical facilities were still -- and are as yet -- not really available to the Lao. Very limited.

CHARLES C. CHRISTIAN
Mission Controller, USAID
Vientiane (1968-1970)

Charles C. Christian was born October 22, 1927 in Missouri. He received a bachelor's degree in economics from Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. Mr. Chapman's 23 years of service with AID included positions in Thailand, Afghanistan, Philippines, and the Ivory Coast. He was interviewed by W. Haven North in April 1995.

CHRISTIAN: I was transferred to Laos to be Controller at a mission that was really in the midst of a hot, secret war that was going on. USAID's contribution was basically for building roads, providing food for the war refugees and keeping up the viability of the Kip by supplying enough foreign exchange that the Kip didn't float too far one way or the other. It was basically when Charlie Mann was the de facto prime minister of Laos. He was the USAID Director, but the local wags gave him the honorary title. He came to Laos for his second stint shortly after I got there.

Q: Was there an ambassador there?

CHRISTIAN: Ambassador Bill Sullivan was there at the time of my arrival. He was one of the best orators I have come across in my day. He was also the ambassador when I got to the Philippines later on.

Q: What was our role in Laos? What were we trying to do? What policy was USAID supposed to be supporting?

CHRISTIAN: We were to furnish the infrastructure and financial support for the Laos government that was friendly to the US in an active war. But you could call it a "civilized" war. They had reasonable hours for the war, and they took off on holidays. They usually shut down at night. The Laotians were the most quiet and low-key of all the Asians I have met. They are the country cousins of most of the other Asians. We had a public works division there that would be the envy of many small towns in the US. The US Bureau of Reclamation was working there. Our public works division built roads into the interior presumably to assist farmers in getting their produce to market, but the roads could also be used by the CIA sponsored Lao troops to get here

and there. We had education and training programs there, as well as a small agriculture staff.

Toward the end of my two year tour, the Controller of AID came out to Laos in January 1970. The agency was making the decision in Washington to split off the auditor from the Controller and to make the Auditor General a separate office with the auditors not reporting through the controller or through the Mission Director. The object of the Controller's visit to Laos and other places was to determine how the staff should be split under the realigned responsibilities; the people who should go with the Auditor General, and the people who should stay with the Controller; in other words, the percentage of time the auditors worked on audit or on financial analysis. Out of the six US direct hire auditors on my staff, I was able to make the case for five of the six to remain with the Controller office to continue to perform financial analysis work. Of course they had to replace many auditors to build up the big audit staff, but we had that much work to do in financial management in Laos.

Q: Was it a big financial management task?

CHRISTIAN: We had a very large airline contract there with the wings of Continental and Air America. We dealt with them as though they were independent contractors. They were, as far as USAID funds were concerned. We had to keep close scrutiny on all of the work they were doing. They were dropping rice from the sky on pallets. They would fly over in small aircraft. There is a whole generation of Laotian that think rice comes from the sky not rice paddies. During the visit of the Controller out there, before the division of the audit function, we took a flight up to an airstrip whose code name was Hotel India. In landing there we flew over the "Plains de Jars" where these huge jars are located; back in ancient time they were used as funeral urns. How they got there (they came from China) is a big mystery to archeologists. We were the last Americans to visit that area and land on that strip. The next day the Viet Cong came back, usually it changed hands whenever the rainy and dry seasons changed. However, this was the last time the American-financed forces held it. This was the beginning of the end of the US presence in Laos. I guess it took five years for that to finally happen.

Q: How big a program was it?

CHRISTIAN: At that stage it was second only to Vietnam. It was a lot smaller than Vietnam, of course. I would have to dig into the archives to get an actual magnitude in numbers.

Q: Anything else on the Laos experience?

CHRISTIAN: We handled, as the liaison part of our official function, funds for bombing mistakes of "friendlies." We would receive the money in a box from our counterpart agency and deliver it to the "friendlies" when we had our payroll runs to the countryside.

Q: What are payroll runs?

CHRISTIAN: USAID/LAOS had casual hires then who we hired to help build roads. We had a few different categories like that which we did not have in other country programs. We had to send out our Laotian cashiers to pay the people working on the roads. They went out weekly. We

had more loss of funds in that program than with anything else. There were reports of robberies, but I don't know how legitimate they were. I remember in making a case with the people back here once, stating that we were handling more currency than the Riggs bank downstairs from the Controllers office in Washington, and so we were bound to lose some money. There were also deaths when planes went down. The first week I was at post I attended a Laotian Controller employee's funeral who was on a "payroll run" when the plane crashed. There was a huge pyre with a fire that the body was being cremated on, surrounded by hundreds of Laotians with the atmosphere of a festival or celebration of life and death.

Q: Were there any other operations or financial processes that you thought were unusual?

CHRISTIAN: I am trying to bring back the acronyms. We had the "invisibles" program and the FEOF Program (Foreign Exchange Operations Fund). The purpose of the FEOF Program was to maintain the viability of the local currency, of the kip. We had to supply enough dollars for that fund so that the Kip would not fluctuate wildly and bring the economy and maybe the government down.

Q: Where did the dollars go?

CHRISTIAN: To the purchase of imports.

Q: Did the dollars go to a central bank?

CHRISTIAN: The office for this program was in the central bank, but it was managed by a FEOF manager that we hired. So was it in the central bank? We had to make certain that it worked.

Q: And you would allocate the dollars for import purposes?

CHRISTIAN: The Lao government did not have enough hard currency to meet all of the dollar requirements for the Lao embassies and training abroad, as well as their imports. We also contributed to the so called "invisibles" program. That had to do with the non-commodity imports like the cost of training people abroad. It wasn't an invisible fund, it was related to invisibles in that the economic transaction did not involve materials or commodities. I do not recall entirely what was the intended purpose other than what I have mentioned. But we did have a chief economist there in the mission with a staff of one or two who was responsible for "riding herd" on this activity. Garnett Zimmerly, Zim, was a program officer in Laos when I first got there who I later crossed paths with in the Philippines. There is quite a story to relate when we get to the Philippines. Gordon Ramsey followed Zim as the program officer. Charlie Mann was Mission Director with Jim Chandler as his deputy, and Harry Carr as the Executive Officer. They all stayed on and on, except for Zim and myself, for ten years or more, rather than the normal two, two-year tours. Things worked there, basically because the Americans were doing things; we were very operational. You didn't wait for the Laotians to do it; it was considered very important to avoid delays.

Q: How was the living situation?

CHRISTIAN: There was a large compound called KM6 where most Americans lived. I was fortunate to get assigned to a place outside of the compound by the MeKong River, two doors back of the Russian complex. I didn't see much of them, however. I did hear them playing volleyball behind their compound wall.

Q: Was the compound arrangement very satisfactory?

CHRISTIAN: The compound arrangement was probably quite satisfactory from the standpoint of reasonable living conditions, with a large swimming pool for the families and an American school there. It was just that as part of my foreign service experience I wanted to mingle with the foreigners that are out there as well as the Americans whom I worked with. I had 30 some years of the KM6 compounds when I lived in this country. My wife and I wanted to broaden our exposure to other cultures if we could.

Q: Did you get to know Laotians?

CHRISTIAN: Yes. But they were not as forthcoming and probably did not have the wherewithal to mix as readily on a social basis as some of the other places I've been. They were certainly receptive to invitations to your home, and a lot of Americans I know have sponsored Laotians when they came to this country. The Americans that had stayed there for extended periods did a lot of sponsoring Laotians that were not particularly treated hospitably by the Pathet Lao when they came into power in government.

Q: Were you working with the government? You said that the US was doing most everything.

CHRISTIAN: The Minister of Finance basically worked with the Mission Director. (I played tennis with the Prime Minister occasionally!) There didn't seem to be as much interchange for my office with the Laotians as in other places, because we were doing so much of it ourselves. There wasn't as much satisfaction in that direction as there had been in other posts. It was a little bit like what it was like with the regional offices in Africa where you were not relating to a host government.

Q: Well, let's go on from there. What happened after Laos?

MARK S. PRATT
Desk Officer for Laos and Cambodia
Washington DC (1968-1973)

Mr. Pratt was born and raised in Massachusetts and educated at Harvard, Brown, Sorbonne and Georgetown Universities. Entering the Foreign Service in 1956, he studied Chinese and was posted to Hong Kong. Throughout his career Mr. Pratt dealt with Far East and Southeast Asian affairs, serving in Taichung, Hong Kong, Vientiane, Paris, Taipei and Guangzhou (Canto), where he was

Consul General. His Washington assignments also concerned Southeast Asian matters. Mr. Pratt was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1999.

Q: Today is the 2nd of December, 1999. Mark, you came back in January 1968, and you were on the Laos-Cambodia Desk-

PRATT: -until 1973. Again, a five-year assignment.

Q: When you came back in 1968, could you give a feel for where Laos and Cambodia were in the Washington complex? Had the Vietnam War sort of almost overwhelmed this area, or was there a substantial group looking at this and figuring out what to do about it?

PRATT: Well, obviously by 1968 the emphasis had been on Vietnam for some time, but Laos and Cambodia, the office of which was located right across the hall from the Vietnam Desk, was obviously very much involved in what was going on in Vietnam. In many cases, as I discussed earlier, there were efforts certainly to try to keep them somewhat separate and to try not to militarize, shall we say, the situation in Laos and Cambodia the way it was being increasingly done in Vietnam.

Q: Could you describe a little bit of the structure in the Department of State, where you fit in, and then we'll talk about the issues?

PRATT: Well, of course, this changed several times during the time that I was there, but there was, of course, under the assistant secretary, a deputy assistant secretary who handled Indochina, and I think that that was only Indochina, French Indochina, that is. And then the other deputy would handle the Southeast Asia or China or Japan. The biggest office was called the Vietnam Working Group, rather than just the Vietnam Desk, because of course it was also working on North Vietnam as well as South Vietnam, and it was seeing this as also an operation which had to include more about what the Defense Department was doing and then of course later on what the negotiations in Paris were all about, or even pre-Paris, the concept of negotiations which at that time was already being urged by Harriman on Johnson.

Q: What were you doing? Start at the beginning. I'm sure it evolved and changed.

PRATT: Well, in the beginning I was the deputy office director on the Laos side. There was an office director, and he had two sections under him, one Laos, one Cambodia. I was sort of the action officer on Lao matters. The head of the office was Tom Corcoran, who had his own experience in Hanoi before in the 1950s and also in Cambodia and Laos, so he was a well-grounded hand for Indochina.

Q: Oh, yes. One of our earliest oral histories was with Tom.

PRATT: I see. Well, Tom was a very good, savvy officer who knew the substance and was concerned about being as effective as we could be, and he was not carried away by any of the particular enthusiasms of the morning.

Q: Well, this is one of the things. Talking about enthusiasms, did you have the feeling where you were that one of the things we had to do was to almost sit on the CIA because, as we've talked about before, Laos had such a major CIA establishment there by that time?

PRATT: No -

Q: Talk about the relationship.

PRATT: Well, the relationship was basically that we felt that there was no chance or very little chance of doing what was best for Laos and Cambodia; we merely had to avoid the worst. And this, I think, is something which many officers in the Foreign Service gradually come around to realizing is the primary function of experts in the foreign affairs side when they look at what the elected representatives of the United States will be doing, and therefore how do you minimize the damage? How do you keep things from getting worse? So that was our approach. And the biggest threat did not come from the CIA. The CIA was already being slapped around by the military in Vietnam. It was already waning. All the operations which they had previously done - and done fairly well - in the Highlands, and I knew some of the people in Saigon who had been involved in those efforts, just as I knew some of the people in Laos, many of whom on the CIA side I thought were very savvy and very effective . . . So no, we did not really consider the CIA to be the major part of the problem. We sometimes considered some of the leaders - I mean, Shackley would have done things, and Devlin also.

Q: Robert Shackley.

PRATT: Shackley and then also Devlin, who went out there at that time. Some of these persons were being too responsive to the pressures put on the CIA by the military, by the Pentagon, to accomplish what we considered to be excessively "adventurist," activities, wasting and damaging the assets which we felt we had in Vang Pao and elsewhere in Laos. So it was really the militarization of the conflict in Vietnam and the lack of understanding of what the military problem in Vietnam really was. I'm sure when you've interviewed a lot of people who had been in Vietnam, many of them will be blaming the political leaders for not permitting this, for not permitting that, handling the military incorrectly, and the whole concept of the Vietnam "complex" within the military is something which I think certainly deserves much more attention and a much better look than it's ever gotten and probably ever will get, because the military is, I think, not very good in examining itself and in understanding its own shortcomings. Obviously, a lot of our political leaders deserve their criticism as well. I do think that Lyndon Johnson was very ineffective in having a good foreign policy, and I think he kept on Dean Rusk, primarily because he liked his Southern accent, far longer than Dean Rusk should have been there. I think in addition to that his handling of the military - because most Southerners, you know, generally have nothing but the greatest of confidence in military people, despite the Robert E. Lee's idea of what they are trying to get in their generals. And so I think that our biggest problem was really trying to have knowledge about the area and knowledge about the people involved, knowledge about how things were set up, and a feel for the people there that was almost totally lacking in the American military. I don't think that's necessarily true for some of the top civilians in the Department of Defense. We had some very, very good people, particularly later on, when President Nixon was in. I think Secretary of Defense Mel Laird was really a very, very good

Secretary of Defense and had in his ISA office a group of very, very competent people. And of course nobody can fault Elliott Richardson as a Secretary of Defense, either.

Q: You came there just as the Tet Offensive was hitting?

PRATT: Yes, I was in Washington when the Tet Offensive hit.

Q: You were in the bureau. How was this perceived when it started and as it developed.

PRATT: Well, of course, it was perceived primarily as an aspect of the political situation within the United States and the relationship between the government and journalists, which were both, of course, we thought, being rather badly handled. And one of the reasons for their being relatively badly handled is that they were being handled as part of an attempt to manipulate rather than as, let's say, getting a good policy which is going to be effective and then letting the chips fall where they may. It was already the beginning of, shall we say, "spin" running programs. And I think this is in part what some of the military complain about, but the point is they played their own role in this, to my mind. And what some of the most dishonest people giving the worst reports back as to what was going on were in the military. That goes from Westmoreland in particular. We all hoped that Abrams would turn this around, but he didn't.

Q: Well, this, of course, is one of the basic problems with the military, in that it's in the culture that they have to give a positive view of what they're doing, rather than say, "We're losing."

PRATT: That's right.

Q: I think I've mentioned before during part of this period, 18 months from 1969 to 1970, I was consul general in Saigon. I would get these military briefings as I would travel around, and these were sort of well-rehearsed, canned briefings which were all supposed to show that I, the officer, and the command that's doing whatever it is, is doing a good job, even if it's not their fault that the job isn't being done well.

PRATT: That's right. I quite agree. Now I, of course, was under the influence, when I was Laos, of the John Paul Vann school as well as the CIA school, because these persons, whom I would see most when I would go to Saigon as well as, of course, seeing my fellows in the embassy, and I visited a former colleague of mine who was with me together in Laos, Tom Barnes, who was in Ben Lam. And I visited him up there and ran into John Paul Vann [Ed: see Neil Sheehan, A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and American in Vietnam], who came in, and so forth. And there was no question but that the persons who knew Vietnam best were persons who could have found much better solutions than those which the military adopted when they came steaming in. For example, their concern about a field of fire going up a road there meant that they would chop down rubber plantations. Okay, well this alienated not only the French planters but it alienated all their workers because it destroyed their livelihood. And there they were trying to fight a war in which they required the support of the people they were dealing with, and they did the very things which destroyed the support of the very people they needed. So we felt that this was one of the biggest problems, and I know that the military thinks that they are merely in an engineering-type approach, dealing with matter and not dealing with human beings, and they

don't think that that's part of their job, just as they don't think that, say, pacification or anything of that sort is part of their job.

Well, you can imagine what would have happened if you had tried to tell Eisenhower that when he had to deal with the French and they were invading France and had to say "To hell with all the French." Come on, you can't do that. Or for example, you've got McCloy and you say, "You don't have anything to do in Germany. The army has defeated Germany; now we turn it over to the Department of the Interior." You know, come on, the American military has been able for centuries to do the task which it's called upon to do. It's only now that they're saying, "Listen, you elected people have no right to tell us to do anything we don't want to do." And I think this was the major mentality, and one sees it still. I mean, everybody is saying how marvelous General Colin Powell was and how he restored everything from the disastrous . . . how marvelously he helped us recover from the Vietnam syndrome. Well, I think not. I think what we're seeing now in Kosovo and elsewhere is the continuation of the military's concept that it is what decides is supposed to be done and it's going to take any war that they're given and try to turn it into the war that they like. And that's why, of course, we continue to have the American military able to fight a big Soviet invasion from Eastern Europe into Western Europe. Richard Pearle yesterday was saying that he thought that it was appalling the way we're now developing all of our equipment basically designed to fight a Soviet invasion. And the procurement timing is many years, and therefore, by the time any of this stuff is produced, even if it might have made sense at the time it was started, does not make any sense. And there's no effort on the part of either the President or the Secretary of Defense to try to shorten procurement time to keep up with the very rapid change of technology. Well, the military, I think, is very much that way. It's very set in its way and believes that it should tell the civilians what war is, who the enemy ought to be, what they are supposed to do about them.

Well this was our major problem about Laos and Cambodia, particularly Laos. Later on, of course, in 1970, the big problem was the invasion of Cambodia. That was, of course, one of the crucial things which called me off from doing time in my Laos work to doing also Cambodian work. And this is a time when-

Q: About the spring of 1970.

PRATT: -the spring of 1970 - and this is when Rogers also asked for the formation of a special working group on Cambodia, to look at various aspects of this. This is just when, of course, Kissinger was grabbing a hold of things from his point of view and changing the whole structure of how the Asian approach was done.

Q: Well, I'd like to go back again. Let's talk about 1968, maybe to the spring of 1970. We're talking about your perspective at that time, and we're talking about the military. Now, by this time, the American military had had thousands of officers of various ranks serving as advisors. Serving in Vietnam you almost had to, even though it was a relatively short tour, get your ticket punched to move on. So I would have thought that you would have had the feeling that there was a pretty solid cadre of people who knew Vietnam in the military - or were they so isolated that it didn't seem to give you that type of expertise?

PRATT: Well, I think that they were also shifted. And of course the ethos was such that those who did know anything about it were generally sidelined. As you know, the whole concept of command was such that people had to go in there with a particular type of command, and then once they punched that ticket, then they were rotated out.

Q: It was six months. There were usually two assignments in a year, which was a disaster.

PRATT: Well the point is that also they were not highly valued for acquiring the knowledge and abilities which were required by the situation. They were highly valued for the way in which they could deal with Tan Son Nhut Air Base. I think if anybody in the future looks to see what the ratio was between - what do they call it? - nose - and tail? - that the tail, of course, was wagging this dog very early on, and the enormous layers, and the enormous bureaucracy of Tan Son Nhut Air Base -

Q: You're talking about the Pentagon -

PRATT: Pentagon-MAC-V headquarters there at the airport.

Q: It was huge.

PRATT: Which was huge, and which, of course, the military ran this for the benefit of themselves. And all the people who were also working on this, in large, large numbers in Washington, viewed this as their way - though some of them would say, in a cynical way, "Good Lord, if we keep this up, maybe we can turn this from a two-promotion war into a three-promotion war." Then again, they would say, "Let's go off and make our inspection tour leaving the 28th of this month and we'll come back on the 3rd and we'll be able to get two months' combat pay." So they were viewing this war as part of their fiefdom, part of their way of getting something for themselves. This was no longer a concept of trying to win the war we had, even trying to understand the war and the enemy that we had. Now, admittedly, I think that certainly President Johnson was no great help. I mean there are some things that . . . Pulling a cheap trick like the Tonkin Gulf incident, if that is indeed what it was, was something which does nobody any good. Saying that he's going to fight this war without raising taxes, without putting any kind of strain on anybody - this also is no way to fight a war.

Q: Including not drafting people in colleges and all of that in order to keep the pressure off the middle class.

PRATT: No, you have to enlist the people rather than viewing them as the enemy. And we created not just the enemy in Hanoi; we created an enemy in the United States - by the way, in which we did not handle what this war really was. Now I think that in many ways it was a much more laudable war in that it was very much concerned to avoid too many casualties, one of the first times we ever considered that as part of what we were doing, but we were avoiding casualties of the enemy as well as for the U.S. for the benefit of the U.S. electorate, not for the benefit of the war that we were involved in. And in addition to that, we were trying to help escape what this war really was by coming up with mythology like that of Dean Rusk saying, "This is part of the world Communist movement, and it's all run out of Moscow, and everything

we do in Vietnam is hurting the leaders in Moscow and the leaders in Peking who are in the chain of command from Moscow down to Hanoi, and from Hanoi down, of course, to Saigon." So I think that the concern to fight this as a creation for public relations and media purposes, rather than seeing it as something that was a factual question and a problem which we had to first understand better ourselves and then to try to explain it better - this is, I think, also the fault of the top leadership. And obviously poor President Johnson was very badly trained to see this, and he did not have, I think, advisors of the caliber of, let's say, General Marshall and other people of the Second World War period who could have given him much better advice. Bunker was not bad, but Lodge was a disaster.

Q: Mark, going back to this time when you were there - in the first place, what was the feeling at that time, by you and your influence group, that you were influencing - you know, I mean your working group that you were dealing with this? I mean, what you said now, was that apparent, and how well did you think that the Department of State, through the Foreign Service and maybe other experts brought in, was serving the cause or not serving the cause? We're talking about 1968 to the spring of 1970.

PRATT: Well, the talks in Paris had started, and Laos was one of the subjects which was occasionally included in that. We were not against holding the talks. In fact, we thought they'd probably be useful, and that, of course, was a small part of the problem which we were playing a more direct role in, and therefore we were encouraged to spend more time working on that than on, for example, what the military were actually doing. There was not much advice from the State Department asked for by the Department of Defense. The American military have never been very terribly fond of political advisors. I mean, they say they want them, and they try to get them to sit in a corner of the room and not interfere in what they would call their military matters. They are not quite as bad, perhaps, as doctors or lawyers, but they do feel they have a profession, and while I'm quite prepared to admit that they do, I think they occasionally misunderstand, as some doctors do, that they have to deal with the whole patient, the whole problem, and not just that part of it which they would like to have it limited to. So we did indeed feel that what we were trying to do was constrain them as best we could, and obviously by the time when President Nixon came in in January of 1969, we felt that there was perhaps a better chance of having an influence go from the political level to the military level and have the military understand better what its real problem was. However, we did not see that this took place that rapidly, because everybody else was sort of deferring to the military and its concept of what their war was. And of course they were chafing at the bit because they kept feeling that they were being kept from doing things which, as a military, they ought to be able to do, at the same time that they felt they couldn't criticize these decisions because they came from the lawful commander-in-chief. So everybody was very unhappy with what was going on: we because we thought the military did not understand what it really ought to be doing - and many of us were very much in favor of having direct pressure applied to Hanoi and doing effective measures such as bombing the rail lines into North Vietnam, blockading the ports, as was done to save the Christmas bombing -

Q: Of Haiphong.

PRATT: But the problem we had there was that at every point Dean Rusk would go in and say,

"Ah, the Chinese are still just acting as agents of Moscow, and they're all together in this, and if we try anything above such-and-such, then the Chinese will invade, as they did in Korea." And we were saying, "Come on, the Vietnamese would never want the Chinese in," because the old saying of Ho Chi Minh, that it's better to be in French shit for a few years than in Chinese shit for centuries. So we did not see the Russian and Chinese connection the way in which some of the political figures at the top were apparently presenting it.

Q: What was the East Asian Bureau called in those days?

PRATT: East Asia. It was before they added the Pacific.

Q: In the view of the professionals - not of Dean Rusk, but in the view of the professionals - you did not see China as ready to move across the Yalu into North Vietnam and come down and attack.

PRATT: Definitely not. We saw even the strains between the Chinese, who were building the roads in Northern Laos, and the Vietnamese, and how the Vietnamese wanted that road construction from the point of view of having supplies come in, but they did not want a large Chinese presence. At that time already, as you know, or later on perhaps, we were trying - and certainly the minute that Nixon came in we were trying - to get the China connection going in a separate way from the way in which it had been viewed by Dean Rusk, as merely a spin-off from the Vietnam one. Fortunately, President Nixon himself had already seen the importance of China. He had written about it in 1967, I believe it was.

Q: A Foreign Affairs article.

PRATT: The Foreign Affairs article, yes. So we realized, although he put India there instead of Japan or whatever it was, nonetheless he had recognized the importance in Asia of China, and we figured at some point we therefore would be able to have a more sensible China policy and not necessarily trying to split China away from Vietnam, because we were sure that China would continue to support the unification of Vietnam, because that, of course, was ideologically connected with their concern about Taiwan. Therefore, that was not something that we could do; however, we could expect Peking not so support Ho Chi Minh's desire for the creation of the greater Indochinese state, in which Vietnam would rule Laos and Cambodia and Thailand.

Q: Well, now, I take it from what you are saying that your view and the view of others was a feeling that the Johnson-Rusk administration was by this time a spent force and maybe had gone down the wrong track and that you looked forward to the Nixon Administration. Of course, Kissinger was an unknown quantity at that time.

PRATT: That's right, and certainly unknown for Asia, and insofar as known at all for Asian matters, shall we say, it was China that he was considered to be not very well informed about. I had friends from Harvard who ridiculed Kissinger's approach to China. He went to them and asked for briefings, and he said "Maybe I will take all afternoon to talk about China." And at the end one of them turned to the other and said, "Well, he does not know much about China, does he?" And he said, "He did not express the right views about China." And the other one said, "He

didn't even ask the right questions about China." So Kissinger has been very good, I think, as his own publicist, but no one had very much knowledge of what he might do, despite the fact that he had made several trips to Vietnam, and some people say that he did ask some of the right questions there.

Q: When it happened, how was the Nixon-Rogers connection, this new administration? Did you have a feeling it was taking hold and beginning to do some of the right things?

PRATT: Well, we learned very early on that it was Kissinger who would be grabbing hold. Of course, we knew that Nixon had his own views and was very much a key element in all of this, and therefore you could not really move without having some idea in your mind as to how his mentality would look at this problem. But nonetheless, it was Kissinger's emergence which startled, I think, Rogers. And very early on, of course, came to the attention of Elliott Richardson. If you can ever interview Elliott, I think you'll find that he'll be a very, very good source on what was going on there. But the minute Nixon came in, the State Department, basing itself on what Nixon had written and a bit of what he'd said about Asia, tried to start work going on China. And there was a speech, I think Rogers gave one in I've forgotten what the sequence was, but there was one by Rogers in Australia and another by Richardson in New York, which we sort of wrote and sort of suggested be given, which sort of tried to point to a maneuver concerning China. And of course, there was an immediate response from Kissinger and a directive from the White House that nobody should talk at all about China and this would be off limits. So then it became very clear that whenever something looked significant and important, that Kissinger would probably want to grab a hold of it. This also turned immediately, of course, to the Indochina situation. Kissinger grabbed a hold of that.

Q: Well, did you all get hit by this flurry that Kissinger did on purpose of wanting position papers on everything of the State Department, which was according to everyone, including I think Kissinger, was basically designed to tie up the State Department while they went ahead with their own policy?

PRATT: Well, yes, and in addition to that, the whole approach to the papers, in that you were expected to give your options, and they were supposed to go from the silly at the top to the silly at the bottom, and everything was always aimed for "option 3b" or something of the sort, which would be neither the high nor the low.

Q: Well, the classic one was "abject surrender, nuclear war, or something in between." The something-in-between was always the one that . . . These could be gussied up, but basically that was how these things were designed.

PRATT: So of course you spend your time spinning this, and these were often long papers, and they had generally very short time fuses. It was a little bit later, this time when I was involved in doing these, because we had to do even more than anybody else because we very quickly became first . . . the Vietnam Working Group was put under Bill Sullivan. Bill was not permitted to tell either the assistant secretary, Marshall Green, or Secretary Rogers what it was he was doing in many areas because he was considered to be working directly for Kissinger. That was when it was a Vietnam Working Group reporting directly to Kissinger. Then it was expanded-

Q: The policy, was this before 1970.

PRATT: Yes, 1969. And then it was expanded to be the Indochina working group, so that Bill Sullivan, instead of being just the deputy assistant secretary-type setup, it was a separate office, and he was then put over the Laos and Cambodia, although Laos and Cambodia continued for a while to be still reporting to Marshall Green on some matters, and Marshall Green was kept in the loop for a while there. Then later on almost everything had to be handled through the Working Group, and as you know, that's a time when Kissinger was also establishing, or refurbishing, the inter-agency committees, and by that time the inter-agency committees were doing most of the work. That was the WSAG - the Washington Special Action Group - the Forty Committee, and the Senior Review Group.

Q: At a certain point during this period we've blocked out, when you were in Laos and Cambodia, was it sort of understood that essentially you were working for Kissinger, and not for the State Department, and was there a Laos-Cambodia man or woman over in the NSC?

PRATT: Yes. In fact, there was one for each. The Laos lost out; that is, the man of Cambodia was General Haig. General Haig sent his man, General Vessey, to Cambodia, and he tried to hold on to that. Of course, Kissinger was himself handling much of the Vietnam thing at that time, and the NSC tried to get into its hands Colonel Kennedy.

Q: Richard Kennedy.

PRATT: Richard Kennedy, yes, who was, of course, a deputy to Haig, and he wanted to be able to get a similar control over the Laos side of things and wished to have the Lao communications and all the rest of that be funneled through him, but the Defense Department said, "We are not involved in war in Laos. We won't touch it." CIA said, "Listen, we are doing the bidding of the U.S. Government, including the Department of State, in Laos, but we are not doing this as a regular CIA operation; therefore, we do not wish to be point man."

Q: This was sort of disingenuous, wasn't it?

PRATT: No, it wasn't. It was part of the internal U.S. Government bureaucratic fight. I remember when Laird went up to testify on Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, he took Bill Sullivan and myself up there and said, "Well, of course, the Defense Department has nothing to do with Laos. If you want to ask questions about Laos, you ask the State Department." Because the fiction and, to a certain extent, the reality was that the American ambassador in Laos was running the operation, and whatever the CIA did, they did it at the behest of the American ambassador. If there was bombing in Laos, they had to go through the ambassador's office. You had your Mort Dworkin and so forth working as bombing officers. So Laird was very meticulous about this and said he would not be held responsible for this, that they did not have the command structure, they had no generals in Laos, and so on. This was part of the basic U.S. policy, which was to support Laos as an entity which should be considered as neutral as it could possibly be and could be returned to the neutral provisions of the Geneva Agreement. And therefore, this was something which got very down to the nitty-gritty of what policy should be. But the NSC

didn't much like that, because it liked the Ollie North type approach.

Q: Being in control of everything right at the center.

PRATT: Well, primadonnaism - in other words, it's *my* country. In other words, it's not that there is a U.S. Government. These are all fiefdoms spinning off from Henry Kissinger, who distributed them as grand duchies to his various minions, and then they would try to use the other structure and play them off one against the other. It was very Byzantine, but as you'd guess from the way in which he had this Washington Special Action Group, Forty Committee, and Senior Review Group, with basically the same participants, and then different people would talk differently. If you got to the Forty Committee, then you'd have Richard Helms and probably Mitchell attending.

Q: Helms was the head of CIA. Mitchell was -

PRATT: Attorney general. So I would attend meetings on Laos, and because of the CIA role there, you'd have Helms. And because Helms was there, you had Mitchell. And then it would turn into the Senior Review Group, and it would be a different representative from the Department of State and so forth, but Hemming would always be in the chair, and he would generally walk in and say, "I've just talked to the President, and he believes we . . ." From there on. So this was a very different type organization. It was not from the President, who as you know was most reluctant to talk to many people, a very shy person, and therefore was delighted to deal with just one person and then feel that he had the real control going out in various areas. And Kissinger, of course, was very good in signaling both that he would do exactly what Nixon wanted and secondly in implying - even when it was not true - that he had just raised his own ideas with the President and the President supported them totally.

Q: You are a Foreign Service officer, and in a way almost by instinct and by training, Foreign Service officers are supposed to figure out where power is in various countries where they serve and what buttons to push. I mean, was it pretty quickly apparent how this was working, and how were you, as a Laos officer, getting your . . . I mean, what were you doing in order to get what you wanted or what to get? Or was it all orders coming down to you?

PRATT: Oh, no, no. So much of the orders, we tried to make sure that we drafted the orders we wanted to get. And it was networking that we did, and we developed, as backup to the inter-agency approach, a network of people - and obviously when Person A was posted elsewhere, then we'd have to make sure that he introduced us well to the next person coming in - and we also had to work out something at our inter-agency level which we would then have to sell to other bosses.

But we had some very bright people. We had, for example, Jerry Britten over in ISA, who could sell things to Laird. I mean he had access to Laird and would tell his immediate superior, and they had some pretty good ones. And we would generally try to I shan't say cook things, but we would try, since we were the ones who had the best knowledge, most detailed knowledge of what was going on, to try to make sure that we came up with, shall we say, the most sensible policies we could. For example, when we discovered that General Lavelle was bombing parts of the

Chinese road - I was the one who detected that from some of the military traffic - we would then get to ISA. ISA got to Laird; Laird got to them, and they had the man fired, because to begin with he was manipulating an oversight in how some of the various lines on the map were drawn, and he was anxious, of course, to avoid any kind of restriction on what he was doing, and from his point of view, if people that said that China was really running this whole thing or Moscow was running it using China, then obviously hit the Chinese. Well, that, of course, was just the time when we were trying to push to get our own dialogue going with the Chinese and say, "Listen, we can eventually agree at least on some things concerning Southeast Asia." So we, indeed, had our own little team, and we'd often get together just before some of the bigger meetings because the bigger meetings would generally include other people on Cambodia, other people on Vietnam, and so on, and therefore the Laos side would be I shan't say a sideshow, the way Willy Shawcross put it [Ed: Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia] ... and yet it was something where we knew that we had to be aware of what the big Vietnam questions were, because they'd be the things finely discussed. Then at the very end there might be a little fillip concerning what was going on in Laos.

Q: Could you explain who Lavelle was?

PRATT: Well, General John D. Lavelle was the general in charge of the Air Force engaging in operations in the Indochina sphere, and he was eventually removed and disciplined for violating his instructions.

Q: He was up in Thailand.

PRATT: He was in Thailand, yes. His was in Udorn, Thailand, which was the 7/13 Air Force headquarters for the Indochina area.

Q: Well, in 1968 and 1970, what were your prime concerns, and how were things going as you saw them in Laos?

PRATT: Our prime concerns were to try to keep the American military from doing things which would complicate unduly Souvanna Phouma's efforts to have Hanoi restrained by his actions with Moscow and Peking. In other words, his effort to convince both Moscow and Peking that he was not being un-neutral for, shall we say, bad reasons, from their point of view - that he would like to be as neutral as he could be and he wanted to Chinese to be involved, he wanted to have good relations between Laos and China. He believed that was important, and he could not do this if he appeared to be an American pawn. And therefore we had to have Laos look like something other than an area in which the American Government was just acting as though it was the colonial power and Souvanna Phouma was our puppet. This permitted him to remain on until he, of course, turned things over to his brother.

But there was no need, we felt, for many of the incursions they wanted to do using American troops into Lao territory. We did not mind what the CIA was doing, which was trying to block certain guerilla operations - in other words, provided it was aimed at the Vietnamese. And similarly in the north, Vang Pao, and also in the far north, the other Thais up there. So that we considered to be far preferable to the way in which the American military operated. We therefore

had to keep the Defense Department happy. As I say, the Defense Department at the upper level, particularly Mel Laird, was very sensitive to all this and for the most part not very well prepared to accept the more outrageous demands from MAC-V, you know, of widening the war just to be able to widen it. So that was the major framework - trying to maintain Souvanna as best we could because we felt that it was valuable in itself, of all else, and we were very concerned, particularly when we had people like Bill Sullivan around, very concerned about the people of the country concerned, in trying to minimize the sufferings. We also, of course, had to do work a great deal on such things as the AID program for Laos. We supported the currency, so we'd go to the World Bank and IMF to work out supports for their exchange program. The second largest AID mission after Vietnam was in Laos. So we had across the board a whole range of things which we were trying to do, but the principal thing was to maintain the viability of Laos and to try to minimize the suffering of the people there, who were not actively involved against the U.S. - quite the contrary. And then to have against the Vietnamese use of Laos the kind of operations which would cause the minimum concern for Souvanna. Souvanna said that if you're hitting against the Vietnamese and it's clearly against the Vietnamese, they say they're not in Laos, well, they can't say they've been hit and they can't blame me for that because they say they're not even there.

So this is of course . . . we then permitted use of American Air Force in Vietnam and then operations in northern Laos in support of that. This is when we put in directional radar in the mountains of northern Laos, and of course we had Vang Pao and his people as our marvelous troops were extracting the airmen. They were operating throughout the western part of North Vietnam as well as in Laos to pick up pilots, and so we had a number of operations which we were trying to control to make sure they served the purposes which had been decided upon. And I must say that the American Air Force and military did a very great job in all of that.

Q: Was there any concern in putting these directional radars - because later one of these ones was old and rotten -

PRATT: That's right.

Q: Was there any concern about the isolation and the protection?

PRATT: Yes, a great deal, which is why, of course, this was something which we had to work out with Vang Pao and I think it was the father-in-law - because he had several wives, and it was the father of one of them who was the chief in the area in which we put in the first one. And so, yes, one had to make sure that we knew the terrain, that we knew what the assets were and making sure also that this would be something for which the Meo would also feel that they wanted to fight.

Q: During this time, 1968-70, who was our ambassador in Laos?

PRATT: Mac Godley up until 1973. [Ed: G. McMurtrie Godley, career Foreign Service officer presented his credentials on Jul 24, 1969 and left post on Apr 23, 1973.] So let's see. I'm trying to think. Bill Sullivan, of course, was for a while, and then he came back.

Q: Did you have the feeling that the so-called "bombing officer," the operation there, was well under control, that they knew what they were about and this was not something where it might get out of hand, although you talked about the Air Force?

PRATT: We knew that there were efforts on the part of the Air Force to push the envelope, and they would be prepared to be far more understanding if bombs got close to an inhabited village than the bombing officer and the ambassador were. But any failure on that score would be something which could be laid at the ambassador's door, and if reports came in about that, then there was a remedy - not that we reprimanded him, but he knew that there were people back in Washington watching over this. And so even Mac Godley, who liked to be very much a generalissimo, was aware that he was sent out there with an organization back here which gave him his orders and that he was expected, if he didn't like them, to come in and request that they be changed. But not to violate them. And as you know, I think most Foreign Service officers are far more respectful of orders and will indeed go in and try to get them changed if they think there's something wrong with them, and will not just disobey them because they think they're crap.

I think that's also for example when, say, they questioned even the loyalty, Foreign Service officers had generally been quite trustworthy from the point of view of loyalty, something that you cannot say for some of the military.

Q: Well, now, in the body politic, this was the period of demonstrations and all. Did you feel any repercussions of the antiwar movement on the Laos operation at this particular time, or were you off to one side?

PRATT: No, we were right in the middle of it. I went up and talked to people. For example, I went up and talked to Reischauer and others at Harvard. When I came to Providence, my current wife was married to somebody else, and she gave a party in which they included the usual academic types, most of them not knowing very much about Asia, not really caring very much about Asia, but they were very passionate about all of Indochina. And of course I would get it in the neck. But yes, the whole question of the reputation of the Vietnam War was very problematic, particularly in intellectual and political circles in the United States. Certainly not very much was being done successfully to handle that, and this was true particularly, in think, under the Johnson Administration, but even under the Nixon Administration, when the effort was indeed made and both Kissinger and Nixon, I think, made some very cogent arguments, nonetheless, the ferment was very much there.

Q: Something we may have touched on before, but let's go to the 1968-70 period again. What was your feeling about the whole of our effort in Vietnam? Was this a worthy cause, or was this in American interests, and all that?

PRATT: Well, I think we basically considered that this was one of the more, shall we say, principled wars that we were involved in. We were not fighting it from any narrow aspect of U.S. interest. We did not have a defense agreement with the Vietnamese people or anything of that sort. It was not part of a treaty organization like NATO. It was not right on our doorstep, and so forth. We were therefore doing it for relatively high-minded reasons, trying to prevent - just as

we would have done, obviously, if East Germany had attacked West Germany. We would have had far more cogent reasons for intervening, but the point is we had the same reasons that we should have had for preventing Stalin from moving as far to the west as he did. And this, I think was something which was in the minds of people, that we had let this take place in Eastern Europe and we shouldn't permit something similar to be done in Asia. I don't know whether that was what the French really felt they were doing; I'm sure some of the French did. Others, of course, really thought that the French had been merely involved in holding on to a colony for commercial and other reasons. But I don't think that that was what was in the minds of many of the French. *La mission civilatrice* is something which very much influenced the French as well. So the fact that the French couldn't do it - well, if the French had not been able to prevent Stalin from moving in to take West Germany, then perhaps the U.S. ought to be involved. Well, I think that this was part of the mentality. Now it's one thing to say you have a laudable goal, but the next question is what are your chances of doing it and what is the means you may have to use to accomplish this. We thought those second two questions were not well addressed. We obviously had felt that the earlier period, immediately following the departure of the French, had been badly managed.

Q: That was 1954-55.

PRATT: 1954-55-56, when for example the earlier Geneva agreements, which we'd been somewhat involved in, they called for elections et cetera and polling for reunification. Now should those have been provisions in that agreement? Well, we weren't determining what was in that agreement. And should we have tried to find some better way of handling this afterwards in order to blunt the obvious intent of the Indochinese Communist Party in Hanoi to replace the French to begin with and maybe even to move on Thailand next, because there was a Thai aspect to the Indochinese Communist Party as it was formed in 1931, and Ho Chi Minh had his first assignment in Thailand, where he was an organizer. So how are we going to see the problem for what it is and then try to determine how we best can handle this? And this is something in which I don't think we did a very good job.

Q: Well, now, let's turn to spring of 1970. In the first place, I can't remember the exact timing because there was this rather infamous attempt by the South Vietnamese to invade Laos - Operation Lam Son 719 executed in February and March of 1971 or something.

PRATT: Something of the sort, yes, and it was up in what was often called the Triangle area.

Q: Did you get involved in that? The idea was that the South Vietnamese were going to go into Laos to block the Ho Chi Minh Trail, wasn't that it?

PRATT: That's right.

Q: And Lam Son 719 or something like that was operating. I mean, you must have been involved.

PRATT: We were, and we, of course, recommended against it, only the decision was made based upon MAC-V, that, one, it would be a great success and it would be something which nobody would really notice. Of course it was noticed, and it was not a great success. So this is precisely

what, say, Bill Sullivan, of course, was, he thought, one of the best persons to give advice on this sort of thing. I believe he was still in Laos at that time, and he argued against it and really challenged MAC-V et cetera - that they had been engaged in this, that, and the other thing along that area and had never been able to do very much, and the losses, not only Vietnamese but in American operations (because Americans were going in with the Vietnamese) - and the American losses would be totally out of whack with what they could expect to accomplish. And indeed, that's the way it turned out. So often when we make our recommendations we knew full well that they might not be accepted. We were, after all, only one factor in this.

Q: This essentially was an invasion of a foreign country, and so sitting on the Laos Desk, as this happened, did this have any repercussions? I mean, was there much consideration or some office talk about this?

PRATT: There wasn't. The fact that it wasn't a success was what the most important repercussion. You notice they didn't try it again in that area of Laos. But there was, you see, a lot of this went down to disputes about borders, and there was a little area where the DMZ came in, which was disputed, and some of the people were saying that this is what is being used by Hanoi to be able to say that it's not using Lao territory because it claims this little area, which goes around the DMZ, and therefore, we have just as much right to move in there as the Vietnamese have to say they're not in Laos because it's an area which had a peculiar background in the French time. I think there are some maps in INR where they worked on this. We tried to say that this is not what the Vietnamese had in mind. This is not something which is part of their mentality. They're going to deny it no matter whose territory they may eventually recognize it to be. But then again, they also considered all of Indochina to be their territory, from the point of view of what the Comintern gave them as their marching orders in the 1930s. So this was something which obviously caused Souvanna some pain, and of course it was in an area which they had absolutely no pretense to control and also an area which the Lao Communist movement could not really claim to control, because it was indeed in the non-Lao-inhabited areas. It was the Lao Tung, the tribal people, who existed on both sides of the border and so on. So this was something which was a problem, but it was primarily a problem because, of course, it was not very successful.

Q: Well, let's turn to the events of the spring of 1970, when there was a joint South Vietnamese-American incursion into what was called the Parrot's Beak. What was the initial reaction you heard about it, and then what were you doing?

PRATT: Well, we were involved very much. As I say, Rogers had established a little group to work on Cambodia, and this was before everything was being handled by Kissinger. And so one of the things that we were working on, and I was, of course, next door to the person who was the principal action officer on Cambodia, but was whipped into it because we had to write so many papers about Cambodia. And one of the key things was that we were trying very hard to convince the White House that Sihanouk, despite his failings, was more of a positive element than a negative element. We didn't think he was quite like Souvanna Phouma - he was not as much of a gentleman. Souvanna Phouma called Sihanouk "*ce prince mal élevé*" - 'this badly raised prince.' We knew that there were problems with him, but still we considered that he had no personal interests and no national interests in permitting his country to be taken over by the

Communists of Hanoi any more than Souvanna did. Therefore, the thing was how to make sure we kept him as much of an ally as possible, because he had prestige, he had international connections, he had support of many of his people. These were assets which nobody else in Cambodia could readily lay claim to. So we were checking on him as he saw the increased operations of the Vietnamese in his own country. On one occasion, when he flew to a province bordering on South Vietnam to the north (I don't remember what it was), and he was asked to leave, and he felt that this was something which was going too far. The Vietnamese were already using Cambodia, from the northern route, as a supply route for parts to the Third Corps.

Q: This was around the Mekong.

PRATT: Well, west of Saigon. It was not up in the upper highlands, Danang and so forth. And so we also knew that he had been permitting the use of the port of Sihanoukville, also using then army trucks to convey some military equipment, again to the more southern parts of Vietnam, which the Communist was using. And we knew that he was not totally aware of this or was not totally aware of the volume. There was a big dispute between CIA and MAC-V over the importance of this, and it was the CIA which was charged with looking at port capabilities, checking on the ships going there, how many of them, checking on what the capacity of the cranes were to offload and so on, and therefore estimating the tonnage. Well, they got the tonnage wrong because they got the Belgian company's specifications for different cranes from those actually being used. However, they were fighting against MAC-V's claims that the tonnage was everything that was being used by the Vietnamese Communists in the southern part of Vietnam. In other words, nothing was trickling down from the North, and therefore, all of this tonnage was what their figures were. So as usual, you had two intelligence organizations arguing about the facts, neither of them right and both of them having their own reasons. Well, I don't know whether the CIA had any ulterior motive, but I think they really wanted to show that they felt that they were capable of making this kind of analysis, with photography and querying Belgian firms and all the rest of it, and come up with a correct figure. But in any case, MAC-V won the game, because by that time, of course, we had Al Haig beginning to grab a hold of the Cambodian side of things. And so of course they then decided on moving in to disrupt. We, of course, were opposed to this with then advising our political bosses to keep in good contact with Sihanouk while this was going on. But at the same time that we were advising that, MAC-V back in here in Washington was dickering with Lon Nol to depose Sihanouk.

Q: Were you aware of this?

PRATT: We were not fully aware of their intrigues in Phnom Penh, by no means, but we knew that there was something going on, and we knew that Lon Nol was making a play. And of course you had a much more distinguished and important figure, in a way: Sirik Matak, who was, I think, a fairly honorable gentleman. And so indeed you had people who were viewing Sihanouk as complaisant and supporting the Communists, whereas the State Department considered that he was doing as best he could to try to hold onto things. And there were certain things he felt he couldn't do and there were things he felt that he could try to do by other means. And his whole departure from the country, his talking in France - which we could not get a kind of good readout which we could then play to our top leaders - and then, of course, his conversations in Moscow - and we lost contact with him there; we didn't even try to see him in Moscow. And of course his

plane was going from Moscow to Peking when MAC-V moved and Lon Nol took over.

Q: Well, now, we talked about mindsets, but it strikes me that the military is always looking for that particular point that if you push a button you either knock out this road or you do this and that will change things dramatically. Do you have the feeling that the military got fixed on the supply side of Sihanoukville and all that?

PRATT: Yes, that was almost their total motivation.

Q: There seems to be a sort of an undercurrent - it's a very American thing, in a way - that there has got to be a gimmick, something that will unravel the puzzle, and if you just push somewhere . . . I mean, this is not just military, but our military respond to this idea that "this is going to be the key." Were we in CIA and State both sort of saying "no"?

PRATT: Well, I think CIA was at that point pulling out of this because they had originally been very, very important in the whole operation in Vietnam and the upper highlands and the organizing of troops there. They had, I think, been relatively supportive of the Green Beret approach, but they had seen the American military move in and destroy the whole concept of irregular-type things in favor of spit and polish and parades and so on. And so I think by that time they had seen that if it worked at all they wouldn't be involved in it and they'd get none of the credit for it, and therefore they were sort of washing their hands. And this is when they began also to do the same, certainly, for much of Laos, although they were still hoping, I guess, in Laos that they could still retain some of this. And in Cambodia, of course, they had not been involved in much other than up near the Lao area, where they had gotten some Cambodian troops, which they had organized through Lon Non, Lon Nol's brother, and they were involved in certain operations in the Bolo Lands and other parts of southern Laos against the Vietnamese, using these Cambodians tied in with Lon Non, who was probably even more unsavory than his older brother.

But the other key thing was, I think the American military has always wanted to have "their" man. In other words, they've not been very relaxed with political figures who themselves are aware of various complexities. They want to have their man whose mind is as simple and direct, military as their own. As you know, the American military picked Phoumi Nosavan in Laos. In the first place, they love military men, and I think that's going to be part of what we're going to have difficulty with in Bosnia and Kosovo. They're probably going to be in favor of the military leaders in Kosovo, just as they apparently almost all the military went out to Bosnia and was impressed by the Serbs there because they felt that the Serb military people were disciplined and behaved like true military men were, whereas the Bosnians were-

Q: Were always committing war crimes.

PRATT: That's alright - they don't mind war crimes. As we can see, there was not much impetus on their part to do anything about Calley and the other people doing war crimes on our side, so they were always very indulgent about that. But they do like the military mind, and this, of course, is exactly what Haig thought that he had found in Lon Nol.

Q: Did you find that there was any sort of residual resentment against Sihanouk on the part of the CIA because he had made a big point, back in the early 1960s, I guess, of kicking all the CIA out and made this not a place that the CIA could maneuver in. Was that around or not, I mean the feeling about Sihanouk?

PRATT: A little bit, a little bit, but I think, because I have known some of the people who had been there in the station in Phnom Penh, and many of them ended up with a considerable amount of respect for Sihanouk, so yes, he was difficult, but you know, the CIA, these are people from Yale and probably even from Harvard, and therefore they understand that people can disagree with them. They hadn't gone to West Point, where everybody agrees with you, and if they don't they're the enemy. So I don't think that they were nearly so . . . As I say, they were already cooperating with Lon Non and using the Cambodians for matters in Laos. And admittedly this was the southern part of Laos, which had originally been part of the same old kingdom of Champassak that, after all, you know the old Lao kingdom of Champassak claims the northern part of Cambodia as having been part of the kingdom of Champassak in the 16th and 17th centuries. So indeed, the CIA has been involved there, and they found- [end of tape]

Q: So you don't think the CIA was a problem.

PRATT: No, I think the CIA people working at Tan Son Nhut Air Base and Saigon might have submitted an analysis of Sihanouk and what was going on which would not be supportive, but we did not feel in Washington that the top figures... because we had some very astute and I think broad-gauge people at CIA who participated in the Indochina working group. And they were always very sensitive to the more sophisticated aspects of international politics and so on. So they were probably pretty divided, just as there were certain persons in the Department of State who were divided as well, and they probably were supportive of this because they resented the fact that, while Sihanouk now had been very unhappy with Ambassador McClintock, who arrived with a dog under his arm and so forth-[Ed: Ambassador Robert McIntock, career Foreign Service officer, presented his credentials on October 2, 1954 and departed post on October 15, 1956.]

Q: That's McClintock. He did that in Beirut, too.

PRATT: Well, anyway, the fact that he had difficulties with Sihanouk . . . Well, almost everybody had difficulties with Sihanouk. Sihanouk was a difficult person. But persons who really looked at what a leader of a country, with all of his failings, if he's able to accomplish something, then use his abilities, because you've got nobody else who's going to have comparable ones. Some people felt that Sirik Matak might be able to do that because, after all, he was related to the royal family. He never was able to take off. He never was able to compare with Lon Nol. Lon Nol, of course, was basically also able to say that he was the man of the Americans. But in any case, to get back to the whole question of Sihanouk, we had, I think, certainly in the East Asian Bureau, a general agreement that he was better than alternatives, and the State Department being what it is, you know, if you can get something which is better than something else, you generally go for it. You don't say, "Let's see if we can get the perfect solution, and if he isn't perfect, we'll make him perfect" - which is what I think the military believed. We also had seen the problems of trying to shape Phoumi Nosavan and having him

with his military backers turn into the perfect leader. It gave us a disaster in Laos. And Souvanna Phouma, who was a prince in the sense of *noblesse oblige*, was able to accomplish things which Phoumi Nosavan never could have. This is something which we felt, you know, there again, the American military went along - in fact were perhaps the principal impetus behind removing Diem - and then of course they were the ones who were always looking for the person to replace him, and one after the other they found disasters. And so we at the Department of State were looking out there and seeing what these appalling figures were that had gone one after the other. Then we saw the other side, the French, saying, "Ah, Big Minh is the one who really can handle this." And then finally at the end, Polgar running in to the ambassador and saying, "Maybe we can get Big Minh to solve the problem for us now."

We did not find that the American military were very good in running foreign countries, particularly when they select a fellow general to do it.

Q: Well, now, let's talk about the incursion, as it was called. How was this seen when you got brought into it - I mean, the accomplishments, and then what were we about?

PRATT: Well, of course, we considered that the major accomplishment was the fact that Sihanouk was brought down and it polarized things. Two, we were just beginning to see what the Cambodian Communist movement - the new one, the one that started in 1966 - what that was beginning to do. We were monitoring, for example, the fact that they had moved west of the Mekong and were having their communications run by the Chinese and most of the communications going outside to Peking and equipment coming in from China. So one was seeing that you were dealing with a change. Now that, of course, was stimulated by the incursion. Secondly, we were looking at the general situation in the United States, and you know, it's very difficult to predict what foreign country the Americans can get an enthusiasm for. Who would have thought that Tibet would be such a great spot for Americans to be picking for a place to fight a kind of battle. Well, Cambodia? Cambodia was far less important than what was going on in Vietnam, but we had enormous demonstrations here, and I went with my colleague, who was the principal action officer on Cambodia, down on the Mall, and we talked with the people there, and of course they were enjoying this as a bit of an outing as well, so my Cambodian colleague turned to me and said, "Well, you know, if they knew as much about what's going on as we do, they'd really be worried!" So our basic concern was that this was not going to be very effective and, secondly, that it would have repercussions which would be ones we could never really handle.

I made a trip out to Cambodia as well as Laos in 1970.

Q: Was this after this?

PRATT: This was after this, yes. Of course, things were by then polarized and things were then also getting into the usual Asian corruption mode. How could they best utilize the American support? Was there any way of trying to restrain, let's say, the exploitation of this war for their own benefit, trying to keep the war from being done for the purposes of war. And so this was what we were concerned about because we didn't think they'd leave the troops there. We thought that it would end up, the bombing and all there rest of it, causing more havoc and sort of putting

Cambodia into the pot, rather than being more like Laos, which was tied in with but could still be handled separately and you could come up with a final solution which probably then would have Sihanouk around and you'd have some areas where the Vietnamese would still be operating but you'd at least not have sacrificed Cambodia in the process. We could not have envisaged what the Khmer Rouge would eventually do. We didn't think that Cambodians would be quite that bloody-minded. We knew they'd be much worse than the Lao because the Lao are basically a rather benevolent Buddhist people. The Cambodians are a more bloody-minded Buddhist people. But the thing is that we did see that this was "Vietnamizing" the Cambodian situation even more than . . . But they even held on to Laos and keep Laos from being so completely Vietnamized, but Cambodia was basically destroyed as a separate *Gestalt*. It was put within the framework of a kind of satellite of the U.S.. Lon Nol could never have the prestige that Souvanna Phouma had, including in, shall we say, Hanoi because Souvanna Phouma still had sufficient prestige in Hanoi. His younger brother would be the person who was still there, and he would go through the procedures of having the younger brother take over from the older brother and, you know, having things move a little bit more humanely. And of course also foreign support.

Q: Did you sense, after the initial incursion, a sense that it didn't quite work on the part of the American military, or was there sort of a positive attitude maintained?

PRATT: Well, we knew that one thing had been accomplished, but we felt that in the first place, Sihanouk was going to Paris, Moscow, and Peking to accomplish the very things that we sent the troops in to do - in other words, to cut down Vietnamese utilization of Cambodia for the southern part of Vietnam. And so we felt that this incursion and of course the seizure and the breaking of the route from Sihanoukville so that indeed that part was no longer used, nonetheless, that did not block the utilization of the northern route, and therefore we felt that Sihanouk could have accomplished everything that was being done by Lon Nol without the disadvantages of having Lon Nol around our necks.

Q: What was the reaction from our embassy in Phnom Penh at this point?

PRATT: Well, it was told to shut up.

Q: What?

PRATT: *It was told to shut up.*

Q: Yes, but I mean, when you went out there, what were you getting?

PRATT: Oh, I was getting the fact that they were finding it very difficult to find somebody to deal with because, of course, you had Lon Nol there. He was really the top figure. You had Sirik Matak. I believe at that point one still had Sami San. You had some fairly prestigious people there, but the political structure had been so much a personal garment tailor-made to fit Sihanouk that you didn't find it easy to change that and have another political structure put into place. Lon Nol thought he could do it somewhat through military means, but he didn't have the prestige among the royal family and with top, very intelligent people like Song San to be able to tell them what to do and to run his own type of government. So you had considerable disorder.

Q: Were we seeing the Khmer Rouge in this first period as being basically a Chinese tool rather than a North Vietnamese operation?

PRATT: Well, first we were seeing it as Sihanouk saw it as a rather disruptive student group. These persons were all students - the top leaders, anyway - who had been paid for by the Cambodian Government and the French Government, who had gone off to Paris and studied there. Some of them even became members of the French Communist Party and came back, of course, and had their own little movement inside Phnom Penh and working in various ministries of Sihanouk's. And so they were indeed considered the left fringe of the returned students, but of course they then left Phnom Penh, went into the woods, and of course they had to fight against the Vietnamese Communist Party, which had organized the Cambodians and which was, indeed, the old Communist Party movement which traced its history back to 1931, to the formation of the Indochinese Communist Party. This is not what Salatsar, Khieu Samphan, Ieng Sary had as their background. They, of course, had not been involved in the early anti-French Indochinese War. They did not have direct connections with Hanoi. They were rather anti-Vietnamese, which is why, of course, they initially went together with the Vietnamese part but then split off and had their communications handled by Chinese and so on. So the Chinese were merely a matter of convenience. None of them were of Chinese origin that we know of. Some of them, I think, were Vietnamese. I think Ieng Sary may have had some Vietnamese blood. But we didn't know too much about that Communist Party, just as we had difficulty in trying to tell people about the Lao Communist Party. Fortunately we'd had a RAND study and another book by Joseph J. Zasloff [Ed: perhaps the 1969 RAND research memorandum "Revolution in Laos: The North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao"] on the Lao Communist Party, which pinpointed the real party as opposed to the Neo Lao Hak Sat, which was the front organization. But we were having our problems because, of course, MAC-V considered them all to be run out of Hanoi, and we found it very difficult to try to convince them that, you know, Sihanouk says these people are different, they aren't tied in with the Vietnamese. They were not giving any significance whatsoever to the movement of their headquarters and the communications center from east of the Mekong to west of the Mekong. They saw no significance to any of Chinese connections; from their point of view it merely showed that China was supporting Hanoi and what Hanoi was doing. Of course, the suborning of Thai and all the rest of that along that border area was not something which they were able to see as it really was. And of course they were totally taken by surprise later on, when the Vietnamese attacked Cambodia. Why would they do that? Of course the Cambodians were trying to get the Vietnamese out of the Parrot's Beak .

Well, in any case, at that time, we did not consider that either the Vietnamese or the Cambodian Communists were a major threat. After all, if the Cambodian Communists required support from Peking, then Sihanouk was perhaps best able to figure out how to get them to give the minimum support, and maybe Sihanouk would not even have permitted support if he had been still sitting in Phnom Penh - but of course he wasn't. So that's another aspect, we felt, of the dangers of getting rid of Sihanouk, because Sihanouk would be able to make sure that this was seen as a Cambodia versus Hanoi type problem rather than a Communist movement inside Cambodia which other Communists, particularly in Peking, might feel they not only could but should support.

Q: During the period after and up through 1973, when did you leave this job in 1973?

PRATT: In 1973 I went first on a quick trip to attend the international conference on Vietnam and the last of the negotiations for that, and then was posted there in April.

Q: Posted where?

PRATT: In Paris. There was one important even of 1970 which I think I ought to fill in, and that was after Sihanouk was in Peking. The Indochinese people's summit conference was convened. Sihanouk attended for Cambodia, of course -

Q: He was out of power by this time.

PRATT: Yes. This was held in what they called the Vietnamese-Lao-Chinese border area. Some say it took place in Canton. Others say it took place in Nan Mei - Guangzhou, of course, now. And I don't know whether it's ever been fully established from the Chinese side just where it did take place. But this was, I think, a significant development which I was never able to convince the Department of State was that significant. In fact, INR wrote it in as "old wine in new bottles." I said, "No, this is China giving its blueprint for what is going to happen if and when Hanoi takes over South Vietnam. This is time when Zhou Enlai" - because Zhou Enlai attended, and I said, "You don't have Zhou Enlai attending this kind of thing unless there's something in it for China and unless it's important." And this is when I believe the Chinese said they were going to be supporting the non-Vietnamese-controlled Communist movement, the Pol Pot movement, and they were going to say that it was nominally under Sihanouk. This is when they insisted on having direct access to the Lao Communist movement, and not just the French organization of the Neo Lao Hak Sat headed by Souphanouvong. And they were therefore laying down their markers. While Hanoi could expect to reunite Vietnam and control all of Vietnam, it was going to have to leave Laos and Cambodia sufficiently independent so that China could maintain its paternal relations with two Communist movements. In other words, the expanding of the real Indochinese Communist Party. Now several years before that they had nominally disbanded the Indochinese Communist Party and referred to it just as the Lao Dong and said it was limited to Vietnam. And in fact they said there were two movements, one in the north and one in the south. Obviously that was not correct, but in addition to that, operationally speaking, they had retained strong movements in both Laos and Cambodia, and therefore they were reporting in to the Central Committee in Hanoi, and some of these persons were members of the Central Committee in Hanoi, and they were therefore under the direct discipline of the Vietnamese Communist Party, or Indochinese Communist Party as it was rechristened.

As I say, I tried to alert people to the fact that China had taken an important step and therefore we should expect to see some rather different developments in both Laos and Cambodia, and that China had already set out its markers for what it expected to happen in the future and may have remembered the fact that when they were moving into Cambodia, and this of course annoyed China considerably, and installed their own government there, the Chinese remonstrated and said that after all at this Indochinese summit congress, Pham Van Dong had come to an agreement

with Zhou Enlai concerning the fact that Hanoi would treat Cambodia as a separate country.

Q: He was the foreign minister?

PRATT: Pham Van Dong was the prime minister of North Vietnam. And Zhou Enlai, of course, was prime minister of China. So this was, of course, at a very high level that this agreement had been reached. And the Vietnamese replied to the Chinese, "Ah, we always considered that to be an unequal treaty, and sure that you have had plenty of experience in deciding how to disregard unequal treaties." So they considered that they had to come to disagreement in 1970 because they were dependent upon transportation of war equipment from the Soviet Union through China on the land route, and also there was certain support coming from China as well. And therefore, because of this, they felt they had to agree to these provisions, which were arrived at during the Indochinese summit conference. Now as I say, I think that this is one of the aspects which, again, was very difficult to explain to people because, of course, they just said, "Well, that is just new wine in old bottles," when of course it was a fundamental change, with China appearing very much on the scene and playing a much more understandable role. Now whether Kissinger ever understood this or not or focused on it, I don't know, but in any case, he certainly was able to see that one of the keys to working to try to handle the Indochina situation as well as the Soviet side warranted an approach to Peking. And I think that Nixon was already phasing in an approach to Peking for a whole slew of other reasons. But this was one of the things which, I think, could have reinforced and perhaps even expedited the movement toward China if it had been more widely studied and discussed.

Q: Well, in 1970 you were dealing with this matter to 1973, how did you see the opening to

Q: Well, now, turning to the peace process, during the 1970-73 period, what were you doing?

PRATT: Well, we were back-up for such aspects of the negotiations in Paris as involved as involved Laos and Cambodia. Originally, of course, it was just Vietnam, and that's all that Henry was running to his special Vietnam Working Group. But then as early as Harriman even, Harriman said that we had to whip up positions on particularly Laos, because of course it was where the road went and there would be aspects of the Vietnam agreement which would include discussions of such things as the utilization of Lao territory by Hanoi and so on. And I think what he said afterwards, one of the major reasons for this is that we are very much at a handicap in negotiating with the Communists because they don't mind coming in every single week and repeating exactly what they said the previous week, but we get bored with that. We constantly want to say something different. We want to say something new, we want to try to get things moving, et cetera, whether they want these things to move or not. And therefore we find that we through boredom, without listening to ourselves speak, undercut the only real method of dealing with the Communists. Now of course, while Averell Harriman was not the most brilliant diplomatist in the world, nonetheless, he certainly was one of those who had the longest experience, particularly of dealing with Communism from, I guess, even from Stalin on. So part of what we had to do was whip up a few little things, of which I think some of them were supposed to be zingers, in that they should annoy the Vietnamese, who were saying we're not

going to discuss this, it has nothing to do with it, we have no Vietnamese in Laos, et cetera et cetera - their usual line on this question. But at least it would mean something different. Each week we had enabled something new. So this, I think, is one of the key things that we kept on doing to have fodder for the people in Paris.

Q: Before the plan of peace accord, all this was going on. Actually the military situation wasn't that awful, was it, in South Vietnam?

PRATT: We considered that basically the political situation was very bad. We considered that they had a rather feckless régime and corrupt and not coming to grips with what the real problems were, and the American military had never wanted to fight that war and certainly didn't want to fight it the way in which the political leaders thought it ought to be fought. And so it was a bad situation. It wasn't even the Tet Offensive in 1968 that let one see just how problematic this was, but even earlier than that. So lo, these many years later, we did not believe that the U.S. had come any closer to having a real idea of what the problem was and how it could be handled. That is, we thought maybe when the Christmas bombing took place that this would be an indication - and all it was just an indication - that they were finally convinced by China and others to take what they had and the good prospects that that gave them for getting more.

Q: Well, as you were sitting on this Indochina task force, was there the feeling that if we wanted to do something we had better start mining the harbors, going after the guts of the thing rather than just nibbling at the edges?

PRATT: Yes, and we, of course, as I said earlier talking about Dean Rusk, we never thought that China would follow through on a major program, say, sending troops in the way they did in Korea. This was not so important to China. Now obviously we wouldn't want to get off on Yunan and Guangxi borders, so it's not a question of our occupying North Vietnam. But there was a lot more that we could do that would not bring necessarily any Chinese movement. But the point was if you're not prepared to do that, we said, you know, what you're trying to do is not the way it can be accomplished - just as, for example, in the case of Laos we felt that trying to fight a frontal war with the North Vietnamese troops in Laos was a no win situation. Laos just did not have the manpower to take this kind of killing battle. You had to do non-positional warfare. You had to be guerillas and just do what you can do with a very much smaller force and don't delude yourself into thinking there's any way of turning it into the major positional warfare along the lines of World War II.

CHARLES E. RUSHING
Political Counselor
Laos (1969-1971)

Charles E. Rushing was born in Illinois in 1929. He received his bachelor's degree from Augustana College in 1951 and his law degree from Duke University in 1954. He served in the US Army from 1954-1955. His career included positions in Italy, Eritrea, Southern Rhodesia, Congo, Laos, Liberia, Denmark, and

Ireland. From 1985-1991 he served as an ambassador to the UN in Geneva. Mr. Rushing was interviewed by Thomas Dunnigan in July 1996.

Q: Instead of that, you went out again and you went far out, to Laos, Vientiane, where Ambassador Godley was in charge. Had you known him when he was in Kinshasa?

RUSHING: I had met him, but I didn't know him very well.

Q: How did this assignment come about? You were an African specialist by this time and now we find you in Southeast Asia.

RUSHING: I don't know. The head of Personnel came to me and said, "Charlie, the job of political counselor in Vientiane is coming open. It's a big operation [for the State Department]. We've got about four or five political officers. I think you'll find it interesting." It sounded good.

Q: And it would be a chance to use your French again.

RUSHING: A chance to use the French, and going to a part of the world that I'd never been to before and was interested in.

Q: How large was the embassy?

RUSHING: I've lost track of the numbers. In the embassy itself, there may have been five political officers. Of course, the Agency had a large contingent there, some in the embassy and some elsewhere. It wasn't nearly the size of operation going on in Saigon, but it was substantial.

Q: How about the military? Advisors, Attachés, what did we have?

RUSHING: We had Attachés. We had an Air Attaché with an airplane. We had an Army Attaché with an airplane. Both of their offices were in Vientiane with their support staff. Agency personnel were numerous all over the parts of Laos not under the control of the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese.

Q: What was the situation in Laos when you arrived, politically and governmentally?

RUSHING: The Prime Minister was Souvanna Phouma, who was a so-called neutral. We were on good terms with him. At first, he was suspected because he wasn't perceived as an out and out anti-Communist. Then, the far Right guy was Prince Boun Oum, whose territorial fiefdom was in southern Laos around Pak Se. Finally, there was Souphanouvong, who was the head of the Pathet Lao - allies of the North Vietnamese.

Q: The latter two were half-brothers, weren't they?

RUSHING: Yes. The King, with no real power, was in Luang Prabang. The Agency had a

big hand in this. Its activities were supposedly clandestine but were widely known and widely reported.

Q: You were there from 1969 to 1971 when the Vietnam War was raging. So, it had a great effect on you. What about the question of U.S. bombing in Laos?

RUSHING: The bombing was basically ineffectual in terms of contributing to the end of the fighting on terms favorable to us. Basically, what the bombing did was produce Lao refugees from the areas of the bombing.

Q: Did the embassy report this?

RUSHING: We tried to, but it wasn't a very popular view. In fact, USIA took a poll of the Lao refugees, asking, "Why did you come here" and they said they'd come to get away from the bombing, not to flee from the Communists. That was published and the USIA guy almost lost his job.

Q: We apparently dropped a lot of them along the trail there.

RUSHING: Yes, and it had little effect on the guerrillas. This is not to say that the Communist forces in both North and South Vietnam did not suffer stunning casualties. They did but it didn't stop them.

Q: How would you describe your relations with Laotian officials? Were you able to talk to them and would they talk to you?

RUSHING: They were quite accessible. The members of the government understood that, if it weren't for the American presence, probably their so-called neutral government would topple and be taken over by the Pathet Lao. They were urbane. All of them spoke French. Some of them spoke very good English.

Here's an anecdote. Ho Chi Minh died when we were in Laos. We got a circular cable from the Department saying, "Send back an immediate message giving the official reaction of your host government to the death of Ho Chi Minh." I tried to call the Foreign Minister or some one in his office and got no answer. (You never knew whether they didn't answer because they weren't there or they didn't answer because the phones weren't working.) So, I went down there and I couldn't find anyone. I went back to the embassy and sent a telegram, something to the effect that the death of Ho Chi Minh was greeted with restraint by the host government officials!

Q: Were you able to travel around the country at all?

RUSHING: Yes. You couldn't go very far by road, only about 20 kilometers by road safely, outside of Vientiane. I flew to Luang Prabang and other places quite a few times, including Pakse in the south, which was Boun Oum's territory. I also went to South Vietnam and Thailand a number of times.

Q: Was Mary with you?

RUSHING: In Laos, yes.

Q: Dependents were allowed to come?

RUSHING: Yes.

Q: The ambassador's relations with Souvanna Phouma were cordial?

RUSHING: Yes.

Q: And I gather that we had to keep denying that we had any combat forces in Laos?

RUSHING: Yes, but "combat forces" may be a little misleading. The CIA had personnel who were training and supporting anti-communist elements such as the Meo.

Q: What role did the Chinese Communists play at this time in Laos? Was there a Chinese embassy?

RUSHING: Oh, yes. We saw them when we went to receptions and so forth, but had little direct to do with them.

Q: It would have been an interesting time because it was just before the Nixon visit to China in 1972.

RUSHING: Preparations for the visit were extremely closely held. I left Laos in 1971, I doubt whether anyone in Laos knew anything about it in advance.

Q: What about the North Vietnamese? Were they represented at all?

RUSHING: Oh, yes. They were very active. There was both a South Vietnam mission and a North Vietnam mission. The latter was only a couple of blocks from our house. We would see each other every day.

Q: Rather crowded for a small town, wasn't it?

RUSHING: It was like a Hollywood movie of intrigue: there were the two Vietnamese embassies, the Russians, the Indians, the Poles and on and on. I can't remember all the missions but the number of diplomatic personnel in Vientiane may have exceeded the Lao themselves.

Q: What was our relationship with these Meo tribesmen?

RUSHING: They were guerillas in the pay and under the tutelage of the CIA. They were

valiant. I understand that we took many to the States when we got out of there.

Q: Did you get any Congressional delegations during this time?

RUSHING: Yes, we had quite a few Congressional delegations. Ambassador Godley's predecessor discouraged visitors based on the secret nature of what was going on. Godley changed that. He welcomed visitors and got a lot, including high ranking military. Among them was Governor Wallace, Bill Buckley, the journalist, and Dick Moose, then working for Senator Fulbright.

Q: Oh, yes, Moose had been out with Lowenstein.

RUSHING: He'd been out with Lowenstein.

Q: I remember that famous mission and the report they sent out on Southeast Asia. They were very critical of what was going on. I think the word was that deeper U.S. involvement in Laos was being admitted. There were speeches made. What was the effect in Laos of our sudden move in May of '70 into Cambodia?

RUSHING: They were distraught.

Q: Did the embassy have any control at all over U.S. bombing in Laos or was that all done out of Saigon?

RUSHING: We had to approve the targets in Laos. In fact, there was a young officer who was called the bombing officer who advised the ambassador on what was okay or not. Among the files was a famous telegram that Godley's predecessor, Bill Sullivan, had sent. The Navy and Air Force were both bombing targets in Laos. Their accuracy was somewhat questionable. In one case the Navy came in and leveled a town that was off-limits. Deploring that incident, Sullivan sent back a cable which ended, "Tecumseh weeps," referring to the famous statue at the Naval Academy in Annapolis.

JOHN M. REID
Director, Binational Center, USIS
Vientiane (1971-1974)

Mr. Reid, a Virginian, was educated at Virginia Tech, Columbia and Harvard Universities. A specialist in East Asian and Pacific Affairs, he served in Saigon, Vientiane, Bangkok and Seoul, primarily as Public Affairs Officer. In his Washington assignments, Mr. Reid also dealt with affairs of that region. He was also assigned as Public Affairs Officer at Beirut during the Lebanon Civil War, and was a casualty in the bombing of the US Embassy in Beirut. Mr. Reid was interviewed by Charles R. Beecham in 2002.

Q: Tell me a little about Laos.

REID: I got to Laos and began working as binational center director in November 1972. The center, the Lao-American Association, was a smaller version of the American University Alumni Association in Bangkok, but it was pretty significant by Lao standards. As LAA director, I reported nominally to a 12-man board. The six Americans on the board included the USIS CAO (Cultural Affairs Officer), some very good people from USAID and Frank Manley, the only American businessman in Laos. The six Lao were prominent people—the prime minister's son who directed the national airline, a prominent doctor at the only real hospital in the country and several senior government people. There was a lot of traffic in and out of the center, and we had about 2,000 language students enrolled—again pretty significant by Lao standards. Our director of courses, hired locally, was Penny Khounta, who had been a Peace Corps Volunteer in Thailand and who was married to a prominent Lao. Penny was very professional and hard-working, and she supervised a staff of about 50 teachers. We had a Lao activities director, Somsanith Khamvongsa, whom I liked very much.

There was a small LAA branch in Savannakhet and another in Luang Prabang, the royal capital. Both of these had absorbed whatever resources were left behind when USIS branch posts closed.

LAA had a very high profile, and we maintained a pretty lively schedule of activities. Of all the things the Americans did in Laos, LAA was probably one of the most highly regarded. It was a good job, although it could be very frustrating sometimes. The local talent pool was pretty shallow, and, when things went wrong, we couldn't call GSO (General Services Officer), and it was sometimes difficult to find the right kind of help.

When I got to Laos, the ambassador was McMurtrie Godley, and I think USIS was pretty peripheral to his interests. The secret bombing was continuing, around the Plain of Jars and in northern Laos. Most of it was done from bases in Thailand. I didn't have that much to do with Godley, but I think the bombing was his principal interest. To the extent that he had any use for USIS, I think it was the degree to which the press attache could help him with the international media and keep them away from the bombing story. He did appear at some LAA functions, however, and he showed some interest in what we were doing.

Q: What did you learn from the experience in Laos?

REID: Running the Lao-American Association was the first time I had ever been fully responsible for a relatively large organization. Unlike U.S. government offices, LAA could receive and bank income, using the money subsequently to pay its expenses. This was a new kind of responsibility for me, and, fortunately, I got a lot of help from Frank Manley, the American businessman on our board, who taught me what I needed to know about budgets, balance sheets and profit-and-loss statements. A large part of our revenue came from USAID teaching contracts, which required detailed negotiation.

Sometimes the board members could be a bit prickly, and, very quickly, I had to learn some diplomatic skills which did not come easily to me. It was important to keep everyone in the loop and to do the necessary lobbying and stroking. Including the teachers, we had a very large staff and I had to learn to deal with salaries and standards of performance. These were skills and

experiences which I found very useful later in my career.

I didn't realize it then, but I also learned something about what happens when the U.S. involves other people in pursuit of its own interests and then abandons them when its interests change. When I left Laos in 1974, there was already a coalition government, and the Soviets and Chinese were airlifting Pathet Lao troops into Luang Prabang and Vientiane. In 1975, it just fell apart, and the communists took over completely. It was very sad.

I made my first trip back to Laos in 1994, and I have been back a few times since. Of all the people I knew there, the only one there now is Penny Khounta, living with her late husband's Lao family and working as a teacher, which is what she loves to do. All the others have left—they're now living in France, Australia and the U.S. The country still grinds along under the one-party communist regime that took over in 1975. The U.N. ranks it as one of the ten poorest countries in the world.

When I went back in 1994, I stayed with Vic Tomseth, a good friend who was, at that time, our ambassador in Vientiane. As I walked around, I had the sense that the whole country had died for 20 years and was just beginning to come back to life. Although it was depressingly seedy, a few little stores were beginning to open, and a few people were beginning to fix up old buildings. A year later, it was better. Most Lao depend on subsistence agriculture, and I didn't see anyone starving. In fact, people were very friendly and gracious. The Lao are very nice people.

When I went up to Luang Prabang, I had a very poignant experience. Luang Prabang is a beautiful city which you can easily cover on foot. I walked around and then found a little restaurant on the riverbank from which I could watch the sun setting behind the mountains. As I was having a beer, a Lao family—father, mother and small son—came and sat at the table next to mine. When the son heard me speaking Lao to the waitress, he became very excited. Finally, the father walked over to my table and asked if he could sit down. We talked, and he wanted to know who I was, why I spoke Lao, when I had been in Laos before, and what I had been doing then. I explained the whole thing to him, that I had been director of the Lao-American Association from 1971 until 1974. He laughed and said, "You know, during those years, I was in the Pathet Lao army and up on the Plain of Jars. I was 16 years old. Every night, the American bombers came over, and I was terrified. I have never been so terrified in my life. When the bombers came over, we would run outside and start shooting at them with our rifles. So far as I know, we never hit anything." It was an amazing conversation, and there was no rancor, no bitterness at all. We were just there, two middle-aged guys drinking beer and exchanging experiences. At that time, he was a major in the Lao army, earning 50 dollars a month.

BROADUS BAILEY, JR.
Army Attaché
Laos (1972-1974)

Broadus Bailey, Jr. was born in South Carolina in 1930. He received his bachelors from Princeton University in 1951 . During his career he held positions

in Fontainebleau, Vietnam, at the Pentagon, and in Laos. Colonel Bailey was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in April 2002.

Q: So you were in Vientiane from when to when?

BAILEY: From May of '72 until May of '74.

Q: What was the situation in Laos when you got there?

BAILEY: They had had a difficult winter dry season campaign, December of '71 and January of '72, and they were sort of licking their wounds.

Q: "They" being...

BAILEY: The Americans and the Lao Royal Lao Army. And they were planning or scheming as to how they could recapture the Plain of Jars, very much obsessed with that, and it proved to be a task that was beyond the competence of the Lao, even with considerable help from us.

Q: Who had taken over, was it North Vietnamese?

BAILEY: Taken over?

Q: The Plain of Jars.

BAILEY: Oh. Well, nominally the Pathet Lao, but the real fighters were the North Vietnamese, and there was a division, I forget its number, that was by and large occupying the Plain almost as far west as Luang Prabang. But if you were engaged in a firefight, the first line probably would be Pathet Lao, but behind them would be professionals from North Vietnam.

Q: Well, it seemed to be a pattern going on for some time about the rainy season things would stop, then there would be fighting over the Plain of Jars, and then the rainy season would come and they'd go back and forth. Principally, what was your job in...

BAILEY: I was the Army attaché, which involved traditional overt intelligence collection, as any attaché office would do anywhere in the world. The additional duty that I had was as the supervisor of JCS Project 404, which was in effect an advisory detachment that had been created after the Americans had withdrawn from Laos in '62. Sometimes later this element was introduced into Laos. There was an Air Force Project 404, the boss was the air attaché; there was an Army element, and I was the boss of that. The additional boss, and it was really a confused military structure, was the Deputy Chief, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Thailand, who was headquartered in Udorn. I wrote the efficiency report on the Project 404 Army officers; the deputy chief, a brigadier general, endorsed those efficiency reports, and that's the easiest way to characterize the organization, which was sort of strange.

Q: Was the Ambassador Mac Godley?

BAILEY: Mac Godley, yes.

Q: What was his role?

BAILEY: Well, he, Mac, was the proconsul of Laos.

Q: Sometimes some people know him as Field Marshall Godley.

BAILEY: Field Marshall Godley, that's absolutely right. Mac Godley had more leadership ability than almost any general I ever served with. I was very devoted to Mac, and I enjoyed working for him tremendously. And he was into everything. He didn't hesitate to dip into squad operations if he chose to, and quite often he did, and he was a very adventuresome, very brave person, and he went all over Laos. I'm right now sending off some pictures of Mac and Charlie Mann, who was the chief of the AID mission, overlooking a river in central Laos with the North Vietnamese on the other side of the river, and we've just gone down to see because Mac wanted to find out who they were and what they were doing there.

Q: I was interviewing Dick Howland, who's telling the story that he had heard about you going in a helicopter, that Mac Godley wanted to go up and see some ruins or something?

BAILEY: Well, that's true. Since Mac is not living, I guess I can tell the story. But the reason we were forbidden to tell the story was because of Betty Godley – Mac didn't want Betty to find out. We had gone to Pak Ou. We were in Luang Prabang.

Q: Which was the royal capital.

BAILEY: Yes, and Mac wanted to see Pak Ou, the mouth of the Ou River, where the Ou flows into the Mekong, and the Lao military region commander, he was a half-brother of the king, said he'd be glad to take us there. My assistant, a major, a resident in Luang Prabang, said "No, I don't think the Ambassador ought to go there, I don't think you ought to go there," and Mac overruled my guy on the scene, as well as Lou Connick, the AID representative, and we piled into one of my helicopters and off we went. And we were descending into what in New England would be called a village green, at the Village of Pak Ou, and as we were coming down, I noticed the school building on one side of the little green, and all of the blinds were raised, were up, and I could see in the schoolroom, and there were desks with papers on them, but there were no students around, and I thought that was very strange, but by this time we were 15-20 feet off the ground. So I put one leg out on the skid of the Huey helicopter to be on the ground and help Mac get out, when a rocket round went underneath the helicopter just before we landed, and fortunately, my pilot, Scooter Burke by name, saw it and heard it, and he got us back in the air quickly. We were taken under fire also by a 50-caliber machine gun, which was undoubtedly North Vietnamese, on the north side of the river, and we were very lucky to get out of there; it was a very competent pilot who got us out of there. And Mac made us swear that we would not tell anybody about this, but of course, the stringer picked it up, and it was in the Washington Star the next day, I think, and somebody sent that to Betty, and Betty let us know that she didn't like it. Mac got a "rocket" the next morning from the Secretary of State.

Q: Well, this 404 – what was it doing?

BAILEY: They were the same as advisors in Vietnam; they would have been called sector advisors there. I had one lieutenant colonel in each of the five military regions. I had sort of a liaison officer at Long Chen, which was the MR2 headquarters. That was CIA turf, and I didn't really get much involved in that, but I did have a liaison officer there. And each of the lieutenant colonels had sometimes a captain, always a couple of sergeants, and they were in charge of advising the military region commander on what it was that we thought ought to be done, and helping them in any way they could to carry out and prosecute the war.

Q: Well, what was your impression, not just yours but your colleagues', of the military effectiveness of the Royal Lao Army?

BAILEY: The military effectiveness was almost zero. They were not disciplined, they were not adequately trained, they were not adequately paid, they were surrounded by their families. The Laos, as so many people have said, were - are and were - a very gentle people, and they prosecuted the war very, very haphazardly. The burden of combat was carried out by the Hmong, under the tutelage of the CIA, and the Thai irregulars; they were really the ones we counted on if something had to be done. If the fire brigade really had to be sent out, you'd look for the Thai irregulars or...

Q: When you're talking about Thai irregulars, were these sort of ersatz Laos, I mean, were they really irregulars, or were they sort of regular type troops with Lao markings?

BAILEY: I'm not sure I can answer that; they were recruited and managed by a Thai general named Pai Tun. Whether they were recruited from regular Thai divisions or not, I don't know, but they were recruited for fighting in Laos.

Q: They were a separate breed, evidently.

BAILEY: Yes, as far as I knew, yes, they were. Paid by the Agency.

Q: Well, how did you find relations with the Agency?

BAILEY: Relations with the Agency under the station chief who was there when I got there were very good – Hugh Tovar. And Hugh is a wonderful person to work with; I would do almost anything Hugh asked me to do. He has a knack, had a knack for making you think you were in on all of his secrets and a part of his operations, which goodness knows, I hope I wasn't, but he made me feel that way, and I enjoyed tremendously working with Hugh, and we traveled together. We inspected units together; that was always a pleasure. His successor was more difficult to get along with, and I really spent more time trying to get along with him than I ever spent trying to get along with the ambassador.

Q: What was the problem? BAILEY: He was, as so many of his agency are, enormously secretive, and not candid or not frank or not forthcoming on subjects that I really thought he should be. For example, I had a wide variety of capabilities of people working for me, and I

found that I had generator operators that had been borrowed temporarily from me that were really running the electrical systems at Long Chen; they were generator mechanics. I had all sorts of skills available among the people who worked for me. And I didn't realize it for quite awhile, I was not very bright, but the agency was in the process of pulling out of Long Chen, and of Laos, and, though I didn't know it, I was taking on a lot of their functions. And it was never said to me, it was just, "Broadus, could I borrow Sergeant So-and-so for a few days?" "Sure." And then Sergeant. So-and-so wouldn't reappear. And finally, we had sort of a showdown on the subject, and I said I was very sorry, but the sergeants had to return to my control in Vientiane or go other places where they were supposed to be assigned, and there would be no more unless I was told to do so by the Joint Chiefs, and I prepared the message to Washington to this effect. I took it to the station chief for his concurrence, and I would routinely ask for concurrence (on things that I thought were in their field though the reverse was not the case). And he realized I was serious about it, and it came to an end. But he was very, very difficult to get along with.

Q: You were there again, let's see, this was...

BAILEY: '72 to '74.

Q: So this is the beginning of the winding down, I mean, our commitment there; how were you feeling this?

BAILEY: How was I?

Q: I mean, your operation in Laos - were you seeing this as the beginning of the end? BAILEY: Not the beginning of the end, because I think we hoped that Souvanna could once more pull off a coalition government that would maintain some semblance of neutrality or interest in the West, and I don't think we viewed it as the beginning of the end, though that was always sort of in the back of your mind, as that could happen. But the peace treaty was, I believe, finalized, I think it was our wedding anniversary, which was February 22; that would have been '73. And it of course established certain deadlines for the formation of the government that never happened. The new government was supposed to be inaugurated in April of '73, and it didn't happen until April of '74, just before we left. But we viewed it as workable, as possible. The Lao did not at all - they viewed it as being abandoned by us, and they were quite frank in saying so; the people that we were close to among the Lao, the generals, the hierarchy, they thought they were being deserted.

Q: Was there a problem of one form or another of corruption involved within the Lao structure?

BAILEY: Oh, sure, I'm sure there was. I didn't have any real first-hand knowledge of it, but supplies would disappear out of warehouses - military supplies, AID supplies. There was a problem paying the troops - there were ghosts on the payroll. There were certainly rumors about the Sananikone family, which was in Lao terms enormously wealthy and had their fingers in any number of commercial pies. The bottling plant was said to be partially owned by the Sananikone family, so there were all sorts of corruption that we thought was going on.

Q: Did you have problems keeping your advisors, young officers, sergeants and all, from getting

involved in firefights? I mean, trying to push, you know. When you've got a rather reluctant military force you're advising, it's hard to keep your own people from going out and doing the job.

BAILEY: It wasn't their job to be involved in firefights, and it certainly was not a problem for me. It was appropriate on limited and rare occasions, and on those occasions we did participate. There was one firefight northwest of Vientiane in December of '72 and January of '73, and it's my lieutenant colonel (I sent him up there, at the ambassador's request. Mac wanted an American on the ground there), the MR (Military Region) advisor's job to be there, and he went, and he supervised the firefight. But I don't think there was a problem with the troops that worked for me getting into firefights that they weren't supposed to. I don't think that was a problem.

Q: How did you find supervision, or oversight, or whatever you want to call it, from both the Vietnam and from CINCPAC or the Joint Chiefs, I mean on the military side - where were your instructions coming from?

BAILEY: In Laos?

Q: Yes.

BAILEY: My instructions were coming from Mac Godley. Very rarely did CINCPAC get involved in anything I was doing. That's not true of the air war, but it was true in my case, and the JCS was not involved at all. But Mac was very much involved in whatever the sergeant and the lieutenant colonel were doing, and what they were seeing, and he had his ideas about what they should be doing. They were very conscious, the people who worked for me, that Mac was the boss.

Q: How about the Lao leadership? Did you have much to do with them?

BAILEY: Oh, yes, I saw them a lot. Not much leadership ability there. They just weren't trained, they didn't have the experience; they viewed the senior rank in the military as being an opportunity to profit one way or another. The profit might simply be a nice house in Vientiane to live in, provided by the military, it might be a BMW car, but they viewed the perquisites of their job as truly justified, and that was what they were interested in. But field leadership of soldiers, no. There were a couple, a few, but not many.

Q: Was Kong Le at all a presence while you were there?

BAILEY: No, he was not in Laos at all. He was in Paris, I believe, and Souvanna sent him a monthly check, I believe. I think the prime minister sent him a stipend quite regularly, is what I've heard, but he was not in Laos, and I don't think really he exercised any influence.

Q: Well, while you were there had the AID and all... You were at the seat of the throne.

BAILEY: Oh, I think so. You mean the AID program or the military? AID, I believe it was still carrying on, but I'm not certain about that. The military program was being phased out, and of course, I was in a sense replaced by the deputy chief. The deputy chief when I got there was General Jack Vessey, later chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. And General Vessey was

replaced by Dick Treffrey, at the time a Brigadier General, now Lieutenant General (retired), and he moved to Vientiane from Udorn, Thailand. That was one of the big things that the U.S. military wanted, was to have the deputy chief resident in Vientiane. General Vessey had made the trip every day from Udorn to Vientiane. And Dick moved to Vientiane, I think, in September of '73, I believe, about the time that Charlie Whitehouse arrived. And so he was more involved in the military assistance program than was I, and the details of the budgetary aspects of the military assistance program. But my knowledge of it, second hand, was that that was phasing down.

Q: Well, you left there in '74. What was your impression of whither Laos?

BAILEY: Well, the hope was that the Lao could pull it off. As I said a moment ago, the Lao didn't think they could pull it off, and that was a self-fulfilling prophecy; in December of that year, many of them fled. I believe the embassy was occupied briefly in the fall of '74, and the Lao, the hierarchy, many of them, left at that time.

PAUL E. WHITE
Deputy Director for Rural Development, USAID
Vientiane (1972-1974)

Mr. White was born and raised in Indiana. He received his education at Sacramento State College, Valparaiso University and the East-West Center in Hawaii. He joined USAID in 1970. During his career with that Agency, Mr. White served in Vientiane, Seoul, Phnom Penh, Panama City, Lima, Guatemala City, Tokyo and Mexico City. He also had tours of duty at USAID Headquarters in Washington. Mr. White was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2006.

Q: Well what were you doing back in Vientiane?

WHITE: I worked in the front office for rural development as a deputy director for rural development and that was a difficult job. After you've been out in the field, working in really exciting work, for me it was hard to sit behind a desk and really not do very much, other than tell other people what to do. And so I was there in the capital city, doing a desk job for a while.

Q: You'd been away for a little while. Was there a change in attitude about how the war was going and what was happening?

WHITE: It was...when I was in Vientiane I had a countrywide view, rather than just the Military Region II view of northeastern Laos and clearly things were continuing to disintegrate everywhere. So it was more, I think, that things were just going, just going in a difficult way and again our policy constrained us from doing anything about it. So the most you could do is sit and watch things deteriorate without having a good solution. Now what we didn't know about was the negotiations that were going on, the peace negotiations. That was something that, on the ground, I wasn't familiar with at all but was going on at the same time. So things were happening

that we didn't know about.

Q: Did you find yourself, having been in the field, did you find it difficult sort of living in Vientiane at all?

WHITE: I did and that's essentially why I moved as quickly as I could to Cambodia. I didn't particularly like living in the capital city and commuting to work and sitting behind a desk with everything that needed to be done there in Laos. There's an interesting period there, as I mentioned, when the IVSers were withdrawn and everything. My closest friend was Fred Branfman, who was an IVSer in Laos who very quickly decided that we were on the wrong side of the issue and that the North Vietnamese and the communists were on the right side of the issue and he became a black pajama person who essentially believed in the North Vietnamese cause. We were really good friends and he was constantly after me because I was working up country in this kind of military operation and we had tremendous arguments. When Fred left Laos, he came back to head up the antiwar movement back here in the States. He was one of the leading people because he had actually been out there and had lived it. I think he probably accompanied Jane Fonda to Hanoi when she went. We were very good friends and we could drink a lot of lao lao together and argue a lot but we really went two different ways.

Q: Did you see the stereotype of corrupt, discredited government versus the modern uncorrupt communists who could come in with a clean broom?

WHITE: Well, I think that certainly that is the kind of thing you heard a lot and there was corruption at all levels in the Lao government. But again I'm not sure how much the people thought about things like that. That's the kind of things that the politicians said or the media people said. It's not the kind of thing that you felt and heard when you were out in villages. I think probably more than anything else for me when I started in Sam Thong, when I started out going out and working in villages, is I learned that there was a political side to all of this. I had not ever looked at it or thought of it that way.

I had been teaching in a school, I had been working with villagers on various projects but when I started going out and sleeping in the villages, there's nothing to do there but sit around a fire and talk to the village headman and to the other elder people in the village. And one day I was in a Lao Tung, a highland Lao village and the guy said to me, "It's interesting that when the North Vietnamese are here talking to us or the Pathet Lao, they talk about what a bright shining future there's going to be when we get rid of the French and the Americans and all of these people, talking about the future. When you're here with us, you're asking us about our customs and our traditions and how we used to live. You're looking back this way and they're looking that way." And I never thought of that before.

So in the airplane going back to Sam Thong I did a lot of thinking and I realized I wasn't just there to teach English or to build a school or whatever. That was like a light that came on. I had never been a political person, never thought about these things before and in that one conversation I learned a lot about the world and grew up, so to speak.

Q: Well it sounds like in Laos that you might have had corruption and all but the whole system

was so decentralized and lack of organization didn't make a lot of difference.

WHITE: Yeah, it was so decentralized, so village based. For instance when I went from village to village people would come up to me and hand me some local decree from the government to say, "Can you read that?" I was the only person that could read. So I would read it and it would say, "We've decided that five weeks ago the school's going to have vacation for two days because of the king's birthday." Of course no one had been able to read it so they hadn't been able to do anything about it, so then they would take that vacation anyway. But, yeah, there was no sense with the people that I worked with that there was a larger country called Laos with a king and all of that. Laos was a country of communities, still. It wasn't a nation.

Q: And also I take it that there really wasn't the resources, infrastructure, to rob it blind by the leaders.

WHITE: Only at the capital city level, where foreign aid is coming in and military aid is coming in. We were supplying everything that could be corrupted and it was happening in a very small circle of people. But once you left that there was none of that. What we were doing is flying in and dropping rice on a village. Everyone knows everyone and the rice would get divided up in whatever ways it needed to get divided. In a small community, how much corruption can there be? The only corruption that could happen out there is the North Vietnamese or Pathet Lao would say, "We need thirty per cent of the rice. If we get it, we won't hit your village." And so unbeknownst to us there was rice siphoning off to people that we didn't want to have it. But it was not the kind of corruption that we talk about in Mexico, where it affects every person in the society.

CHRISTIAN A. CHAPMAN
Chargé d'Affaires
Vientiane (1974-1975)

Christian A. Chapman was born in France in 1921 to American parents. He joined the Foreign Service in 1951 and served in Morocco, Lebanon, Iran, Vietnam, Laos, Luxembourg, France, and Washington, DC. Mr. Chapman was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1990.

Q: Then you went on to Laos.

CHAPMAN: I returned to Laos as DCM in June 1974. My family stayed until June 1975, and I, until August 1975.

Q: What was the situation?

CHAPMAN: The ambassador was Charlie Whitehouse. The situation was that we had a very large AID mission, we had a very large military assistance program although it was not called that. The situation was very, very tense and uncertain. There was a national government which

included the Pathet Lao under Souvanna Phouma. I had been in Laos fifteen years before and Vientiane had grown. It was a much more tense situation. You couldn't travel around the country. You were pretty well confined to Vientiane. We could fly up to the northeast, to the Meo country, the Hmung Muongs, the tribes that lived on top of the mountains between Vientiane and Vietnam, and fought the Vietnamese all those years. We were supplying them and the question of supplies was a very major subject. We had a large AID mission that was very active, road building, providing medical supplies and education, we developed textbooks in Lao and a whole educational system. We built schools. We trained agriculturalists. We sought to help the Lao raise their food supply by improving and diversifying their crops. The effort put into that little country by the United States over thirty years was really enormous.

Q: In Laos did you see any progress from when you were there before, in terms of our effectiveness?

CHAPMAN: The results were a mixed bag. It is a very small fragile society, and not very energetic. There were some very real accomplishments. Schools had been built, hospitals had been built. There was one Western-trained doctor in 1958-59, now there were a hundred by the time I got back. That is real progress. The young people were better educated, coming back from abroad and taking senior positions in the administration, but significantly, at one of the first dinner parties that Ambassador Whitehouse gave for me, attended by military officers, I knew all the guests from about fifteen years before. They hadn't changed, the colonels or the generals. The great families had remained in power. It was the same cast of characters. Things don't change even within the Pathet Lao, some of the great families were represented. It was very clear that an independent Laos was dependent upon the support and active involvement of the United States; that the day we weakened that support the Vietnamese who were in the eastern part of Laos in force, would just take over through the Pathet Lao. Indeed this is what happened.

Charlie Whitehouse left for reassignment at the beginning of April, on April 15 Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge, on April 30, Saigon fell, and on May 1st, the following day, there were large demonstrations in Vientiane against the nationalist ministers and generals in the government, demanding they be thrown out. I immediately got the country team to fan out all over town to try and keep the nationalist leadership steady. We pointed out that we were continuing to support them, we had large AID and other programs that we were maintaining. But fear swept the city and within ten days, the entire nationalist leadership crossed the Mekong and fled into Thailand. Except for Souvanna Phouma who stayed.

Q: While these events of spring of 1975 were taking place, what instructions did you get. How did you view what was going on?

CHAPMAN: Glumly. The problem between the United States and Laos under these circumstances was that we had played such a large role, that any indication of our being concerned, that things were going badly, that maybe we should retrench in some way, would have absolutely panicked the situation and any chance of maintaining this dual government of the Pathet Lao and the nationalists would have been finished. We would have been held responsible for the end of the independence of Laos. So we were caught in this situation.

Particularly after May 1st, when I was trying to encourage the non-communist leadership to stay on, assuring them that we would continue to support them, and told everyone in the American community to stay steady, and calm, and not panic. When the leadership left, the situation turned more and more sour. We started evacuating our people, first the families. There were about 800 Americans there, wives and children included, but I wanted to maintain at least the principal officers who might be able to give a degree of stability to the situation. I thought it would be very, very bad if we just pulled up stakes and left, to be viewed as the abandonment of Southeast Asia. So by the third week of May, we brought in some specially chartered planes and started getting families out, but we were at the same time continuing to have discussions with the Pathet Lao and Souvanna Phouma trying to encourage them to work with us, to continue these programs. The Pathet Lao had just come down from the hills and were, in retrospect just as anxious as we were, not knowing just what would happen. This was their first real meeting with Americans. May, June and July were very tense.

Q: Any dealings with them before this?

CHAPMAN: We had met several of the ministers who were there. But after May, while we continued to deal with Souvanna, we worked mainly with the Pathet Lao who had taken over the government. As a community, we were terribly vulnerable, and I think that one of the things that helped us get out of this terrible situation in which we found ourselves was that we were in constant touch, morning, noon, afternoon, evening and night with the Pathet Lao leadership and most particularly, Phoumi Vongvichit who was Minister of Foreign Affairs. There was sustained, continuing communication. One lesson I brought out of that period, was that in a tense situation, it is essential to keep communications open. What is dangerous is the fear that's built up over time to the point where the least incident can be misunderstood, misinterpreted and create a very serious crisis.

Q: What sort of instructions were you getting from Washington.

CHAPMAN: Very little and I was very grateful. This was an essentially tactical situation and I was very grateful to the State Department for not telling me how to suck eggs on the spot.

Q: In Phnom Pehn and Saigon people were yanked out. Why weren't all of you.

CHAPMAN: I could have sent a telegram to Washington that said, "Situation deteriorating fast, we should evacuate all personnel and close the embassy." And Washington would have said okay.

I felt that it was important to maintain a presence in Laos. I felt that given the role the United States had played in Asia and Southeast Asia, we could not abandon ship and scurry away like a small frightened country. We were too important. I thought it was important to stay there to the extent possible. And if there is an embassy today in Vientiane, it is because we made that decision at that time.

Q: I find it interesting because the view of Southeast Asia was as a whole unit and if two of the capitols fall, very obviously there was nothing to stop anybody from taking over in Vientiane. I

would have thought there was a lot of pressure to get Americans out.

CHAPMAN: We were under a lot of pressure to get Americans out. And I wanted to retreat on an orderly basis. I did not want to appear that we were turning tail and fleeing. We managed to get out...planes came in and we got out many of our people by air and many simply drove their cars out. All on a more or less orderly basis. To me, that was important.

Q: Were you having trouble from your staff?

CHAPMAN: They were pretty steady on the whole. In fact, I was very proud at the way the Americans reacted: there was no hysteria and all remained on the job. There was understandably a lot of bitterness among the AID people who had worked very hard to help the Lao and many felt that we were being treated very poorly. There were some nasty reactions, but by and large the American community stayed very steady and disciplined.

Q: How did they feel that they were being treated poorly?

CHAPMAN: They felt that they had worked very hard to help the Lao and now they were being thrown out of the country, with the Pathet Lao showing no interest in pursuing programs that we had developed over years.

Q: How did you phase out?

CHAPMAN: We were in continuous discussions with the Pathet Lao leadership to see if the aid programs that had been elaborated over the years, at great cost, could not be salvaged for the benefit of Laos. For instance, we had an entire warehouse full of medicine. There was a very large depot of earth moving and road building equipment. There were programs in progress. It was to no avail. The Pathet Lao held to the philosophy that politics primes all and that all these matters were technical and of secondary interest.

In the end, after a dramatic capture of our aid compound by so called students and a fourteen hour confrontation between myself escorted by Stephen Johnson, a young political officer who spoke Lao, and a mob of several hundred "students", and after other varied happenings, we decided that the Pathet Lao were simply not willing to pursue normal relations. Finally, one morning in June I went to the office of the Minister of Economic Affairs with whom we had been negotiating over aid, and just put down on his table a box full of keys - all the keys we had of the aid compound. He had wanted to have a big, symbolic ceremony of turning over all our assets to the government, but given their unwillingness to enter into any meaningful dialogue or to recognize that we had laws prescribing the disposition of assets, we left it all, noting that our laws were being violated.

From the beginning of May I had a country team meeting every morning to make certain there was complete communication and coordination among ourselves.

Q: Who was on the country team?

CHAPMAN: There was General Round who was the senior military officer, head of the MAAG and senior Attaché. All told we were half a dozen.

Q: Basically, AID, CIA.

CHAPMAN: AID, CIA, USIA. We met every morning at 9:00 am, and go over exactly where we were. Everything was going so fast. Then each would carry out the decisions in his own mission. It was mainly a question of phasing down our operations and coordinating our actions.

Q: I find it very interesting that Washington was letting you alone in all of this.

CHAPMAN: Their concern was for the safety of Americans and that's why we accelerated the evacuation by air and by car. Washington put a lot of pressure on me to get my wife and three children out. They were wonderfully steady. We did not feel that as the senior family we could leave before all others had left safely. They finally left, the last family to leave, at the beginning of June, following a particularly nasty rocket from Washington.

At the beginning of June, June 2nd, Phil Habib who was then Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, came to take a look at the situation. I told him that we had to stay calm, withdraw to the extent necessary, try to maintain working relations with the government, and avoid aggravating fears. His response was, "Don't be a cowboy." He came away sensing that we could maintain relations with the Pathet Lao government and that it was useful to keep an embassy there.

Q: You were in charge of quite an operation.

CHAPMAN: I was four years in World War II as a fighter pilot and I have never been so steadily frightened as in those three months, May, June and July. We were absolutely defenseless as a community. With all the arms lying around Southeast Asia, one kook tossing a grenade could have created a very ugly situation. In the event, we got away sort of whole.

Q: Why did the Laotian communist side act different than Vietnam.

CHAPMAN: Because it had been a completely different situation. The Pathet Lao had been in the government with the nationalists; there was not a war situation, as in Cambodia and as in Vietnam. Vietnam was conquered militarily. Phnom Penh was conquered militarily. In Vientiane the Pathet Lao were there already and simply took over completely when the nationalist leadership left. There was no fighting, there was no battle. It was a completely different situation.

Q: What happened as far as our work there?

CHAPMAN: Maintaining a presence. We were down to a dozen people from eight hundred. Then, at the beginning of August, Tom Corcoran came, to relieve me. He arrived one morning and I left the same afternoon.

Nothing illustrates better the tensions of the moment than this change of Charge. We didn't know

what the reaction would be. We thought that they might try to keep me. So we made the relief in the most expeditious and quiet manner possible. But it was a very tense time.

The experience of dismantling the American mission in Vientiane was very illuminating. I must say, one felt that the Pathet Lao had a point when they said that the United States was a state within a state in Laos. We had a police force of about 5 or 600 men, with night sticks to protect the Americans in the compounds. We had a fire department with a couple of fire trucks. We had an infirmary, with a doctor and nurse. We had an independent telephone system connecting all houses and offices. We had an independent power generation capability all over town. We had all the elements of a government for our community. When you take that apart, you measure the extent of the effort.

Q: How big had it been?

CHAPMAN: We had had 800 people.

Q: This is an unclassified interview but how about the CIA efforts.

CHAPMAN: I don't like to speak too much about it because it was very highly classified. Let's say it was a very large effort, to the point that you looked at events and you wondered whether it was authentically generated by the society or whether it was a CIA generated operation.

Q: I spent eighteen months in Vietnam between 1969-70. I came away with the feeling that we don't go in and try and win a country very well. We tend to take over and cause more problems than ... I don't think we are very good at this. Maybe nobody is.

CHAPMAN: To this day I find it difficult to pass a judgement. In 1958-59 most of us felt that the effort being put in was not related to the strength and absorptive capabilities of the society. We were putting much too much weight on these fragile societies. At the same time the reason for this effort was the Sino-Soviet bloc, which was indeed threatening and there were communist insurgencies in Thailand and in Malaysia and in the Philippines. North Vietnam was very vigorous and communist. Adding everything up it was a very threatening situation. If we could have made a lesser effort and if we had let the communists take over earlier, what the impact would have been on Thailand and Malaysia is uncertain. I thought the domino theory was justified. I still think so today. So once we became involved in that kind of effort I don't know a time when we could have reduced it without seeming to abandon these countries with consequences that would have been felt worldwide. When we left Saigon under those dramatic circumstances in 1975, there was a shudder around the world. There was real concern. In fact European attitudes changed after that.

Q: I was in Korea later on, and they too were looking differently at the US. You moved back from a very dangerous situation to one that sounds quite a change.

CHAPMAN: It was a bitter moment, I confess. I came back after three months when I thought that I had accomplished a good deal, maybe in a negative sense, but at least had kept the American flag planted in Southeast Asia, and to a degree had contributed to reassuring the

Asians that we were not abandoning them. As it was, I could have come back from anywhere. Only two people went out of their way to welcome me back to the department. Two lawyers took me to lunch.

Q: I find that astounding.

CHAPMAN: Absolutely. I went around the department just to say thank you for having supported us, for not sending detailed instructions, and giving me a free hand. I called on everyone. No one asked me to see them.

Q: You think they wanted to forget about the whole thing?

CHAPMAN: I think in part it was that. That spring was so traumatic. Abandoning Saigon. The circumstances in which we had to leave Saigon caused such a trauma that people wanted to forget Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, on a personal basis, it was very harsh. If that happened to me who was in charge of the mission, I wondered how would my hundreds of colleagues of lesser rank be treated? Washington did not give them the time of day.

There is a lack of sensitivity. Even with all these intelligent people, the Department is like a machine. It is unthinking, unfeeling, and it lacks imagination in the management of its personnel.

Q: I have to say that I completely agree. It does not respond.

CHAPMAN: You would think that the desk officer, the deputy assistant secretary and the assistant secretary for instance might take a personal interest in people coming back from a dangerous and difficult situation.

Q: I think that at least the secretary should say, "Come on up and a job well done."

CHAPMAN: That's right. Some gesture like that.

Q: The problem really stays at a lower level because they didn't organize this. No one bothered.

CHAPMAN: No one bothered.

Q: There is a problem with the foreign service. It does not think in these terms. For all the nice people, it is a very cold blooded organization.

CHAPMAN: Finally I mentioned this to Arthur Hartman, an old friend. And his response, which I think is the right one: when all is done, only your friends really count.

Q: You came in early.

CHAPMAN: I came in early so I was out of phase with the assignment process. For about three months I sat at a desk and did nothing.

Q: Out of phase.

CHAPMAN: Out of the normal cycle. There seemed to be nothing at all. For personal reasons, with my family, I preferred to stay in Washington, after these difficult months. The children were of an age to go to school, and I therefore felt we should stay here.

There was nothing available and finally I guess Eagleburger, who was then under secretary for management, named me Deputy Assistant Secretary for Cultural Affairs. It turned out to be a very interesting assignment.

STEPHEN T. JOHNSON
Political Officer
Laos (1974-1976)

Stephen T. Johnson was born in Tokyo, Japan in 1936. After serving in the US Army from 1956-1957 he received his bachelor's degree from Occidental College in 1960. He entered his Foreign Service in 1961 and his career included positions in Canada, Paris, Vietnam, Laos, Romania, and Kenya. Mr. Johnson was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in January 1997.

JOHNSON: I served in Laos from June 1974 to July 1976.

Q: What was the situation in Laos in 1974?

JOHNSON: Well, the situation was that there had been a coalition government formed in 1973-I guess it was September. It was called the Provisional Government of National Union. There was still a king, but the ministries and things-they were communist ministers and nationalist or rightist ministers, I guess you can call them, and neutralists ministers. The government, at least formally at the top, was a coalition government, though there still existed areas that were under the complete control of the Laos communists, the Pathet Lao, as they are called. The Pathet Lao in "Lao" just means "country of Lao." So there were kind of no-go areas of the country.

But there wasn't formal fighting going on at the time. The country was still effectively divided. You had a situation at least in Vientiane where you had ministries which had a communist as a minister or a communist as the number two or a rightist in the other position. You had several Lao communist garrisons in town as well. So it was a peculiar situation.

Q: Were there certain people you could talk to and others you couldn't talk to?

JOHNSON: No. We could talk to any of them. Mr. Charles Whitehouse was the ambassador. Chris Chapman was the DCM. Dick Teare, whom I had been with in Nha Trang, was the head of the political section. We didn't have any restrictions about talking to the communists. In fact, we talked to them all the time. The ambassador had one amusing incident when he

arrived at the boat races and found one other group there - Mr. Whitehouse, a very outgoing man, gave them all an embrace, and it turned out the North Korean embassy minister there who I think almost had a heart attack. Whitehouse didn't get bothered by it. But no, we didn't have any problem with that. We, in the normal course of business, certainly dealt with the Lao communists.

Q: Well, Laos had the reputation of being practically a CIA country at one time. Had that passed by the time you got there?

JOHNSON: No. They were still very important. The chief of station was obviously a potentate unto himself. You know that was still going on. There still was a "secret" army. They weren't secret anymore, but they still had a very large operation. The military defense department I think had 45 officers. Under the agreement, they were restricted on how many they could have. The defense attache was a major-general, later on a brigadier general. He also had a rear headquarters right across the river. So it was a pretty big operation still. The USAID [mission] was still there in great numbers and were sprinkled around the country. The figure that kind of sticks in my mind was that we had about 1400 Americans not counting women and children. There were people, particularly in AID that had lived in Laos for 12 or 13 years. It was a very comfortable place for families and the like. There was an American school kind of like, maybe not small town living but at least medium town living in Vientiane.

Q: Were we trying to do anything in Laos?

JOHNSON: We were trying I guess to do what we could to encourage a real coalition government and at the same time encourage the better elements in what you might call the "rightist" side of the government in their endeavors. There were certain generals and certain politicians that we found to be pretty good people and that we were-we wanted this coalition to be a permanent one in a sense and to really bring peace in Laos. I think that the perception was that the difference between all the sides there weren't that great and Laos being such a small country and the elite being even smaller, the communists were very often the cousins of the rightists or even the brothers.

Q: How were you viewing events in South Vietnam particularly as time moved on towards was the spring of 1975?

JOHNSON: Well, we had our own fish to fry. When it collapsed, it collapsed very suddenly. That was a surprise. A lot of people had concluded that the South Vietnamese were not going to be able to make it in the long run. Certainly in Laos we knew that what happened in Laos would largely be dependent upon what happened in Vietnam.

At the same time of course, Cambodia was going on. I remember [that] when the Khmer Rouge succeeded in mining the Mekong River so much you couldn't supply Phnom Penh, everybody concluded that Cambodia was gone. South Vietnam went. I think the result was, Laos would have just rocked along, but when the rightists saw that we weren't really going to come back and rescue these people. Given our record in Southeast Asia and the people that

we backed there, they thought in their heart of hearts until the very end that somehow or other the United States would come back and take care of things and that we really wouldn't let them collapse. That we would not have spent all that blood and treasure for nothing.

I guess it was the 17th of April that Phnom Penh fell and the 30th of April, Saigon fell. As for the smarter rightists in Vientiane across the river, they were gone. They realized that they were on their own. The communists of course realized the same thing, so they started moving some units towards Vientiane and the prime minister, who was a neutralist, ordered the rightist army not to interfere with this movement, and everybody realized then that it was all over. I shouldn't say everybody, but most of the rightist leadership at the time realized that it was all over and left. In Vientiane, unlike Phnom Penh or Saigon, since we already had the communists in town, the takeover was more subtle. I guess there was a demonstration May 1st, and another on May 9th, including a march on the American embassy. The marchers shook the gate of the embassy, and it sprang open. It had been badly made. They all jumped back when that happened, and a little unarmed kind of guard that we had there closed it again. So the demonstrators then shook their fists and threw some stones and the embassy had no windows. I don't know if you have ever seen the building. It is an old house, very unprepossessing place. There had been various coups and fights in Vientiane over the years so it was a little bit of a fort in a sense. But anyway, they threw rocks at the embassy. But they didn't try to...

I was standing out there with them, kind of observing and joking with a few of them. It was a very Lao kind of demonstration.

The Prime Minister was Souvanna Phouma, who was a neutralist and whom we had either been friends with or enemies with over the years. At the time of 1975 we had pretty good relations with Souvanna Phouma and saw a lot of him. In any case, he had a rather realistic view of where power was at the time and decided not to really resist the Lao communists.

In any case, the rightists fled. The Lao communists were so mysterious that we didn't know what the name of the party was. There were arguments in the embassy at the time whether they were the Lao Revolutionary Party or the Lao People's Party. It turned out that they were the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, and we didn't really know who was in the politburo. Our knowledge of the Lao communist structure was much less than it was in Vietnam, even the secret Viet Cong structure. We knew a lot more about them than we did about who was what in the Lao communist structure.

Neither did the Lao people. The people in Vientiane had never heard of most of them and the people in the kind of non-communist zones, had never heard of most of the leadership, and didn't know they were communists. The proclaimed goals of the Lao patriotic front probably would have passed muster at a rotary meeting. A lot of Lao in the towns along the Mekong believed that this was in fact a program. But in any case, they didn't move their soldiers into Vientiane. But the soldiers who were there moved out and demobilized the rightist army. This was May, 1975.

On May 22, 1975, a mob, run by the Lao communists—took over a large compound of ours that contained the military attaché's office, the defense attaché's office, the USAID building and the commissary and the American Club. The CIA, knowing that trouble was coming, had

apparently taken a lot of their technical equipment and centered it in some of the buildings inside this compound. Anyway the compound was taken over, and we weren't able to get in.

There were two Marine guards in the compound, one in the defense attaché building and one in the USAID building. These two buildings didn't have any windows, so they shut themselves up into these buildings. I should say that Mr. Whitehouse, the ambassador, had left in April. He had been transferred to be ambassador to Bangkok. So Christian Chapman was the chargé d'affaires. So we had a problem. All of this was going on, and we were trying to get people out.

Kilometer 6, a housing area six kilometers outside of Vientiane where most of the USAID people had been kind of besieged. It was obvious that the function of a lot of these people no longer existed, and people who were in various provincial studies were having a hard time. We were getting them out, so we had the problem of getting back into this compound and getting the classified stuff out and getting the Marines out.

One problem with the government was that the shell of coalition government continued to exist. The communists hadn't taken over formally. You saw the same fellow that you had seen before in the foreign ministry, but he had no authority. It was very hard to get hold of a communist in the structure, and a little hard to know how much authority they had. So it was a difficult time to try to get anything done.

There was a communist representative in Vientiane all during the war. This was one of the peculiarities of this war in Laos that there was always a representative of the other side. In the coalition government, I think his job was minister of the economy, so we went, Mr. Chapman, myself, and Larry Daks, who was the USIA fellow, since he was kind of the highest communist we could get our hands on, to try to make a deal about getting back in the compound. [His name was Sot Phetrasi]

We found ourselves negotiating with a revolutionary group, a kind of group of students or young fellows. It was the theory of the Lao communists that everything that USAID had brought into the country now belonged to the Lao people, and to them, in other words. They acknowledged, they had diplomatic relations with the United States. They didn't contest our rights under the various diplomatic conventions, but everything that had belonged to the USAID was now theirs. I don't know what the lawyers back in Washington talked about, but the view in Vientiane was "Let them have it!" We weren't going to get it out anyway.

So we basically had to get an agreement [to] get back in the compound, get out the classified stuff that we really needed to get out and then concede the rest of it to them. We had a negotiation about this and just what was the USAID's and what wasn't came up all the time. We wrestled about this in negotiations that started at nine in the morning and went to eleven at night. We negotiated an agreement in French, English, and Lao, three copies. The kind of chief negotiator for the Lao revolutionary group was a fellow who would have made a good right wing American.

But it was a very hard negotiation, and well, the language made it difficult. But particularly

Larry Daks with really great facility with Lao was a help. I noticed he was editing what Chapman was saying because Chapman had the tendency to give kind of cursive answers to some of the things, and he would kind of simplify them down. So we arrived at an agreement which allowed us one week or two weeks of access to the compound. But whatever came out of the compound had to pass under the eye of the "revolution" or whatever you want to call them.

I guess it took a couple more days to get back into the compound, but we were able to get out what we had to get out. One of the things we didn't prepare for... Well, this fellow who was so revolutionary who was in charge, kind of the chief negotiator, turned out to be interested in the personal profit. So we basically bribed him to get out whatever we really needed to get out, including the central papers of USAID and the defense attache's office. I guess the CIA got out whatever it had to get out. We kissed the commissary goodbye.

At the same time, we continued to draw down and by that time we were probably down to about 30 people.

Q: I was going to say, I assume at some point the families had left.

JOHNSON: This was going on all the time. A lot of people lost most of their possessions, and the cars were left behind and distributed by the Lao communists to other more friendly embassies or to various government entities. I am told that out in Kilometer 6 there is a well where all of... Apparently, a lot of the people that lived out there had a lot of weapons in the American way and these were all tossed in the well. I should mention that Kilometer 6, after all this was over, became the housing area as I understand for the central committee of the Lao Communist Party. But at any case, out there someplace is a well full of weapons.

All this was going on. It was chaos. All this stuff going on at the same time. The Lao communists hadn't really asserted themselves in a law and order kind of way, so there was quite a bit of robbery and just general lawlessness going on in Vientiane. It had always been a rather calm place in between the coups, but this made it kind of a dangerous place to live.

Q: What was the spirit in the embassy at that time under Chris Chapman? Were you concerned about your safety?

JOHNSON: As it turned out, no one was badly hurt, but yes, we were concerned about our safety. Our brethren in Saigon and Phnom Penh did all... Our major activity became kind of just to be. In a sense, it wasn't so much reporting or anything else. It was just to kind of preserve ourselves and preserve the embassy. At the same time other bits of property were taken over. There was an area called "Silver City," which was staff housing and also the GSO warehouse and motor pool; that was taken over one night.

I must say they always seemed to do these things on the weekend about three a.m., and since I was one of the few Lao speakers around, and the only one in the political section, I was turned out to confront them. I would get to go there with whatever was going on. There would usually be some kind of Lao communist soldiers who had, as far as I could tell, a "one

size fits all" uniform which seemed to be made for somebody who was about six foot three. They were always in this ludicrous kind of uniform.

I would try to explain about diplomatic rights and the Geneva Convention, and they would just poke their guns at me. So then I would go and wait at the foreign ministry until somebody would appear. But it was hard. We had friends at the foreign ministry, people who had been there before, but they could see that dealing with the Americans was bad for their health. So they didn't want to see you, and they couldn't do much. You had to kind of trap them in order to make your complaint.

There was the kind of special assistant to the minister who has been a deputy foreign minister now for many years, who was a Lao communist, was the fellow to see. He was the one who could connect with what was going on; if you could make a deal with him you could get something done. I should say at the same time all this was going on - people were being shipped off to "seminar." They called it "semina." That became the Lao word. "Seminar" meant anything from maybe a three hour session about the joys of the new system to the rest of your life cutting trees in a malarial jungle.

So non-communist Lao - at least the wiser ones among them - were scared, and for very good reason. Some were fleeing; some tried to flee and didn't make it; and others would try to make a go of the system. But they had every reason to be afraid of dealing with Americans, so great pressure was being put on them. It was very hard to get things done in this situation, but we kept plugging away.

Q: Well, your job was what? You were the political section?

JOHNSON: Yes. I should say that sometime in July, Mr. Chapman was replaced by Tom Corcoran as the chargé d'affaires, Tom Corcoran having served in every post in Indochina.

Q: He had actually been the last man out of Hanoi.

JOHNSON: Yes, the last man out of Hanoi. He had served in Hue, and Phnom Penh and Saigon and Vientiane. He had served there in the 1950s.

Q: Were you sort of asking yourself what were you doing? After all, Cambodia and South Vietnam had gone down the tubes. Here was this little land-locked country. What was the point?

JOHNSON: Yes. We asked ourselves that. Given the difficulties of our situation, I think, I am pretty sure if there had just been a vote of the embassy we would have closed up. But the Department of State decided that we should tough it out, and so we did. I must say, I guess it was July or August, Phil Habib, who was the assistant secretary for East Asia came and kind of looked the situation over. He had a meeting with Prince Souphanouvong and that was the only time in my career, by the way, that I did both memos of conversation, because they had a meeting in which they basically whispered to each other in French, and I was taking notes and everything.

When I got back to the embassy, the Prime Minister's special assistant called up to say she hadn't been able to follow the conversation and could I give them my memo of conversation. So I spruced it up and made our points even more pointedly than they had been otherwise and got to do both sides.

The foreign minister was a communist, and Habib met with him as well. That kind of settled things down, but Habib basically told us to tough it out. And we did.

Q: Were the Pathet Lao very disciplined?

JOHNSON: In retrospect, I guess I'd have to say, "Yes." They didn't shoot any of us. All this was going on and kind of normal life was going on at the same time. There were some people out water skiing on the Mekong - that sounds absurd - kind of a mixed Australian-American group. Some Lao communist soldiers decided this was the feared invasion from Thailand and opened up on them with an AK-47. Somehow or other they managed to sieve the boat, and only one fellow, an Australian as it turned out, was hit in the knee. Since it was the weekend, the Australian ambassador wasn't interested in actually doing anything, so we arranged to get him evacuated. But you had those kinds of incidents.

But for the most part, of course, we didn't know that nothing too bad was going to happen. One American private person who was there was shot and subsequently died. But that was had to do with the degeneration of the situation but didn't have to do with the communists doing it. They were putting pressure on us. They were taking away property. They did shoot at two fellows.

Well, we heard a rumor there was going to be a march on the embassy to attack it. So the air attaché, Captain [Donald E.] Loranger, and our administrative officer, Bob McCallam, came to the embassy early to see what was going on. Nothing was going on, as often happened in Laos. So for some reason or other, they decided to go out to Kilometer Nine where there was a USAID warehouse which several weeks before had been taken over by the communists. When they got out there, they decided that they wanted to take pictures of this, so they started to take pictures of it. The guards tried to arrest them, and they got into their car and zoomed off. But they were followed and shot at by the guards. As I was going to work, I found them in a corner rather near the embassy where they were surrounded by Pathet Lao soldiers pointing guns at them.

I went over and tried to do my thing about diplomatic rights and all that kind of stuff, but they pointed their guns at me, which I thought was not an improvement in the situation. So I went to the foreign ministry and was able to get them freed after awhile. The fellow who was the defense attaché was leaving that day, and so we said, well, he'd leave, and Bob McCallam was just a simple soul who had been led astray. That was not true about Bob, but that took care of that incident. We those kinds of incidents.

Most of the Lao communist soldiers were not lowland Lao. They were hill tribesmen and relatively primitive folks. Even their Lao wasn't very good, which was another problem in

dealing with them. They were kind of antsy about photographs. I got a Polaroid camera, and once I got the Polaroid camera, I could take all the pictures of them I wanted. I just had to give them one for each one that I took. That worked out pretty well. But all this was going on and, as I say, we in the embassy were... The survival of the embassy (not our personal survival, although our personal survival did come into our thoughts sometime) was the problem.

The shell of the coalition government continued, and the king was still there. In September 1975, my wife, Judy and I... I should say that in February 1975 I got married to Judith Rhodes, also a Foreign Service officer, who thus became Judith Rhodes Johnson. She was assigned to the embassy as the commercial officer, the only State officer in USAID. As the draw-down took place, she effectively became economic counselor in the commercial section. In any case, Judy and I and Mr. Corcoran, the chargé d'affaires all went up to the royal capital for what turned out to be the last royal boat races.

But there was still the princes, the palace, the king, etc. You could see, and we obviously didn't know the logic of what the communists meant, that the king had to go. But some people think of Laos as being kind of sui generis, and perhaps he wasn't going to go. But you could see at the September boat races the disrespect he was getting from some elements.

There were some Lao communist boats in the boat races, and there was a very close finish in which the judgement went against the Lao communist boat. There was really a great hue and cry and carrying on which wouldn't have happened in the old days. But it was a peculiar situation there.

Q: Could people get out? Could you get across the river?

JOHNSON: There was not any law anymore in a sense. Some Lao could get out legally. Most of them couldn't. People were fleeing across the river. At the same time, the CIA had organized to get out various of their contacts and [related] people out. We were doing what we could to get out various people who had worked for the American embassy or USAID.

One of the peculiarities of it was that Bob McCallam, our administrative officer - a very talented administrative officer - had been a vice consul or consul in Bien Hoa in Vietnam. He had a whole bunch of calling cards with his name and title in English on one side and then in Vietnamese on the other, and he gave these to people who were fleeing who were for one reason or another - usually because they were embassy employees or were well and favorably known to the embassy. We wanted to get consideration at the consulate in Udorn, which was about 25-30 miles from the river.

It was soon recognized by the Thai border authorities that if you had one of these cards, the Americans would take care of you. So Bob's Vietnamese consular calling cards became international travel documents. People would then be taken to the consulate in Udorn, which became a- they were just going through an incredible amount of work. All of these people were descending on them and there were just Lao sitting on their lawn and they were working 18 hours a day. People were being flown out on C-141s, I think to Guam in the first

instance, and then went back to the States. This exodus was a great burden for consulate at Udorn.

We went over and visited them one time and commiserated with them. Lee Bigelow was the consul there who had served in Laos. But it was a very dicey time. As I say, our basic problem was to kind of continue the embassy. I shouldn't say "we." Washington had decided that we should continue to be there. Laos had been the end of the road for a lot of American hippies over time. Dope and life were cheap there. A lot of these folks were under the impression that the Lao communists had the same liberal attitude towards social situations and dope that they did. Well, it turned out that the Lao communists attitude rather resembled Queen Victoria's - perhaps a little less liberal than Queen Victoria. So they scooped these people up, threw some of them in jail, and otherwise made life difficult for them. My wife and I and the chargé had a hard time about sorting them out and trying to get them out.

For a while, the Lao and the Thai were at cross purposes, so they closed the land border. The only way you could get out was a rather expensive air ticket to Bangkok. People didn't have it, and we had to negotiate a four-hour window in the middle of all this when we could take people down to the Lao kind of ferry port across the Mekong to the Thai town of Nong Khai.

In those days there was no bridge across the Mekong. There is now a bridge which was built in the last several years, but then you had to go down this whole bunch of steps and get into a small boat to go across the Mekong. The boatman always tried to renegotiate the fare about halfway across and that was kind of an adventure. But, with great alarms and excursions, we were able to get these hippies out. I shouldn't say [they were] all hippies, but [they were] in any case young folks. [They were] fetched up there with limited means.

We had other people, too. We had one lady who came and claimed she was a CIA agent. She was mad as a hatter, I think. If she had claimed she was a teapot, she would have been all right. The Lao communists were tremendously indulgent about insanity. But she claimed she was a CIA agent, which was a little bit off-putting. They finally arrested her. The Lao communists took a very strict view of the consular convention and allowed us to see somebody once, but then wouldn't allow us to see them again until they were released. So this lady went in for six months. I think when she finally came out, she was in great form because she basically wanted to tell her story to everybody, and these poor Lao had to take it all down. They had to interrogate her. I have always wondered about being interrogated if somebody wouldn't stop talking. So she survived that very well.

But we had a few other Americans who were in jail. There was no law, and if you were in a Lao jail it was expected that your family would feed you. These people didn't have families, but we had a whole pile of out of date army rations which we would take over. We weren't allowed to see them, but we would take these over. As I understand it, they did have to share them a bit with the guards, but they did nurture them. My wife gave away my underwear and stuff to various men that ended up in jail. Over time we got them out.

There was always a bit of a ceremony in which we would have to apologize in their name for getting them out. The lady that was involved was a particular problem because she had a

little daughter that was living with an American family in Udorn, a retired American sergeant and his Thai wife. They were leaving because the air base at Udorn was being closed. The question was what to do with the daughter. I should say the lady that was in the Lao jail was Rosemary. So the baby was always referred to in telegrams as "Rosemary's baby."

Q: That was the name of a supernatural novel.

JOHNSON: Yes. Well, as you know, the American government doesn't have the right to grab people, even babies, and send them hither and yon without their parents or without their own permission. We were able to convince the Lao to let us send Rosemary a letter kind of laying out the problem and suggesting that her baby be sent to her mother or sister who were living in the United States. But she said, "No," that she wouldn't allow this, that she had been brought up wrong, and she wanted the baby to go into a Thai orphanage.

Well, the Thai orphanages didn't take foreign babies, so we really didn't know what to do. But happily Rosemary was released before we actually had to make the decision as to what was going to be done. So she was able to take over her child. I learned subsequently that she sent the child to live with her mother in spite of it all. All of this was going on in a situation of no law.

Money was skyrocketing. The Lao kip went from about 200 to the dollar to something like 24,000. The official rate was something like 600 to the dollar, I think when it was 24,000. So if you changed your money officially, you got back a pittance. This was the only embassy I have been at in which we didn't change our money officially. That was just so absurd. I mean, the embassy obviously had to do it itself, but privately we dealt on the black market.

Q: Well, how did you get food and things of this nature?

JOHNSON: Well, it was a problem. The commissary disappeared early on after the siege of the compound. Then there was a brief - I guess we could call it - "happy period." One of the many, many, many anomalies of the situation in Laos was that all the time, all during the war, there had been a French military training mission there. A group of officers and enlisted men. There was a compound kind of between town and the airport where they lived, and they had their own commissary. They were pulling out as well, and they had to sell off the stuff they had. So they opened it up even to the Americans. They had really great stuff as compared to our commissary.

So we had this brief period in which we were able to go and buy up a lot of their things. I should say that one of the things that happened to my wife and me in the midst of all this was that we were evacuated for, I guess it was, 10 days when they were trying to figure out how to pull down the embassy - you know, who would stay and who would go. So we were evacuated with a bunch of other people to Udorn for about 10 days. We thought that maybe we were going forever when we left, but when we came back after 10 days, our house had been emptied. So all the kinds of things like pots and pans and sheets and pillowcases and food that we had accumulated before were gone. So we had to kind of start [anew].

We took over one of the military houses in which I guess each military person turned over their booze to whoever had stayed behind. So we had this incredible collection of liquor of one sort or another which I think was 99% still there when we left. Anyway, we just bought whatever was left in the house. So we had sheets and stuff after a while. But we were very happy when the French pulled out because they opened up their commissary.

Then after that disappeared, when the border was open, you could go to the market over in Thailand across on the ferry. But that was difficult. It was a primitive market. There were a few shops that kind of continued to exist in Vientiane and the government set up a diplomatic shop which had some of some of the necessities of life. Otherwise when we went down to Bangkok, which we would do every now and again, we would go to a market there and have them make up a whole box of meat with some dry ice and just have that as our checked baggage going back to Vientiane. But it was always kind of an adventure trying to feed yourself there.

Q: Did you have servants?

JOHNSON: Yes, we did. They had a very hard time of it. There was great pressure on them as to why were they working for the imperialist Americans. One reason they were working for us was there weren't any other jobs, and we paid rather well. Our cook there was a lady who in a better organized world would have run a very large corporation, a very intelligent, very hard working woman. But we had her and a maid and a gardener and a guard, and we got along pretty well. But there was always this pressure, and there would be days in which they would disappear because they had to go to seminar. There was always the possibility that they would be sent off to the mountains and just disappear.

There were various local employees in the embassy who had that happen to them - who were arrested. Some of them died, and some of them reappeared months later.

Q: Well, were you able to do any political reporting?

JOHNSON: You were. You could talk to people. Of course, things were going on. Announcements were being made by the authorities which you could comment on. There were Lao who didn't really understand what the Lao communists were about, who thought that this was kind of a benevolent, agrarian reform, an honest group that was coming in and that they personally could survive in it. They didn't see any reason not to continue to have contact with Americans. It kind of put you in an awkward position because on the one hand as a political reporter I wanted to cultivate the contacts.

On the other hand, I knew that this was terribly dangerous for them. They might not know it. I mean, they didn't know it - even if I told them. It was kind of really hard decisions to make whether to maintain contacts that you had before. It was the more honest thing to do to tell them that, "no," it really wasn't wise for them. It was really difficult that way, because your instincts as a political reporter were going against, I guess, your humanity.

The shell of the coalition government continued until the beginning of December of 1975

when the communists actually proclaimed they had taken over and came out of the closet. The king was forced to abdicate. The Prime Minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma stepped aside, and the communists took over formally, and the Lao People's Democratic Republic was proclaimed. That made it easier, in a sense, because now you knew you were dealing with the real people. You didn't have to worry about a kind of scared neutralist in the ministry.

There were people who survived right on through, people who had never been identified as communists who somehow or other floated through in various ministries and other institutes or institutions. But it made the situation clearer. The king was kind of under house arrest for awhile. Then he was sent off to a house in, I guess, one of the provinces near Vietnam, and, as I understand, died there. As far as I know, the Lao have never acknowledged whether the king's death was also the crown prince's. The queen also died. The king and queen were relatively elderly people.

The crown princess, at least a few years ago, was still alive, as were other royals. The royal family was a relatively unsophisticated family in a sense. It was a large family but a lot of them didn't flee. A lot of them thought somehow or other they had a future there. Of course, one of the leading communists who became president was Prince Souphanouvong, who was a member of the cadet branch of the royal family and a half brother of Souvanna Phouma, who had been the neutralist prime minister. He was at least nominally an advisor to the government. I don't know whether they ever asked for his advice. But at least he lived on in his house and died in his bed full of years and honors. It wasn't as bad as it could have been.

I should say that as compared to what happened in Cambodia and even compared to what happened in Vietnam, the regime that the Lao communists were imposing was kind of a normal communist regime. There were certainly people who died in the work camps and the like, and there were some executions. But generally speaking, they didn't do anything that odd. They set up elaborate bureaucratic structures which, given the amount of literacy in Laos, became sinks of corruption and bureaucratic inertia. Somebody said it took sixteen signatures in order to be able to slaughter your own pig. They set prices so that Vientiane, which historically had always been able to get salt out of salt flats, I guess, down by the river, ceased producing salt because it didn't make sense any more. Salt was being flown in from Poland after a few months.

So it was a feckless and kind of uninspired form of communism, but it wasn't as cruel as certainly wild as the Khmer Rouge or anything like that. There were clever people who were able to survive right on through. Other people who weren't so lucky, were sent off to long term seminar or thought reform camps - some of whom died in the process, while others survived.

Q: Were there any reports of what was happening in Cambodia during the time of what became known as the "Killing Fields?"

JOHNSON: Yes. Well, of course, we had some of the reporting from embassy Bangkok. Tim Carney I think was down there managing that, so there was some of that. Everything that we

got directly was that the Lao, of course, had diplomatic relations with Cambodia, and so there was a Lao embassy in Phnom Penh. I talked to some folks who served in that embassy, and they basically told me that there wasn't anybody in the city. Even being communists as they were, they had a view of what normal life was like, and they had this embassy sitting in a deserted city in which they had no contact with anybody. They were fed by the foreign ministry. I think they came with a bucket of food twice a day or something, so basically they were sort of prisoners in their little embassy. So even for them, even for a good Lao communist. It was shocking!

We weren't getting anything direct about the country or what was going on. We, of course, saw the reports from Bangkok, but we did get the very peculiar impression from the Lao who were down there. The Cambodian embassy in Vientiane we didn't have anything to do with; I don't think they wanted to have anything to do with us. It was there. There was a Khmer Rouge embassy.

Q: Were there any other embassies in Vientiane?

JOHNSON: Yes. There was a pretty good collection of embassies at the time. The British were there. The French obviously. Later on, the French broke relations or the Lao broke relations with the French for awhile. They had a spitting match about something. The Germans were there. There were the Soviets and the North Koreans. The South Koreans were there. After the communists took over, they forced the South Koreans to close and I had to go with them to the airport.

I guess one of my many little jobs was escorting people to the airport. I took the South Korean to the airport to make sure that he got on his plane and didn't have any misadventure when they closed them. I had to do the same for the Israelis. The Israelis there. I got to see them off. I guess the Mongolians opened. But there was a pretty good size - a bigger diplomatic corps than you would have expected really.

Particularly, the Australians always had a policy of important relations with what they call the "near north" [i.e., Laos]. So they had a relatively large establishment there and continue to have a large establishment there.

Q: Were there diplomatic receptions and the like?

JOHNSON: Yes. Life went on. There were diplomatic receptions. There were other parties. There was some journalistic interest in Laos, and people could come up. Laos was very strict about visas. I remember that all the visits for which I was control officer never actually took place, except Mr. Habib. You know, kind of diplomatic life went on. We had the worst of it obviously. We were seen not as the great Satan but as the enemy of the Lao communists with some justice.

One of the peculiarities was that the Lao closed out USAID and ripped it out root and branch all around the country. But after a few weeks, right in the middle of all this trouble, we got a note from the Lao foreign ministry asking to negotiate a new AID agreement. I think we sent

one back saying that maybe the timing was not right. But they never pushed us so hard that we left, and so I guess they didn't want to really break relations. On the other hand, they were very unhappy with us and wanted to push us quite a bit.

Q: This was one of the peculiar manifestations of their own Cold War.

JOHNSON: One part of my job was writing serious notes of protest about the various pieces of property and things that they took away, asking for them back. The only thing we ever got back was a fork lift truck which caused us great difficulty because no one in the embassy knew how to say "fork lift truck" in French. It was "camion grou" as it turned out, but we did get that back. We still have disputes with the Lao government over some of the property. Most of the property was under USAID and reverted to Laos when the USAID agreement ended, so we didn't have any problem with it. But there was one area which was U.S. government, belonged to the State Department; we had bought it and are still claiming it I understand.

Q: What was the Thai attitude from your perspective towards this?

JOHNSON: Of course, the Thai had an embassy there. They had bad relations with the Lao communists. They had backed us during the war; there had been Thai units in Laos and the like. I think the Thai always have a rather condescending attitude toward the Lao like little brothers - and the Lao - whether communist or nationalist - have a real fear of being absorbed by the Thai. Laos is a country in which, if the French hadn't intervened in the 19th century, probably would have disappeared into Thailand as many Lao speaking principalities did. Thailand is such a locomotive of culture and commerce compared to Laos that it is a fear that is well founded, so there was a lot of ambivalence.

As I mentioned before, there was a several month period in which the Lao and the Thai had closed the border. There were a lot of disputes, but one of the disputes that tangled things a lot is the demarcation of the border along the Mekong and other places, but principally along the Mekong. The border treaty, and I'm not really a specialist on the border treaty, had been basically negotiated by the French with the Thai at a time when the French had the whip hand, and so the border favored the Lao. This, of course, didn't reflect the current strength of the two parties involved. There were quite a number of areas which were Lao but when the water was down in the dry season were effectively part of the Thai side of the river. So there were lots of little disputes there and some shooting, and as I say, border closing.

At the same time, you know, Thai business was always important. Certainly, over time, the Thai have established good relations with the new Lao authorities, but it was a difficult time for them.

Q: Vietnam is now united. Did that play much of a role?

JOHNSON: There were Vietnamese in the country. There was always some question as to how many Vietnamese soldiers were in Laos, and I don't really think we knew at the time. It didn't make too much difference. The Ho Chi Minh Trail of course had gone through Laos.

In Vientiane itself, there was no Vietnamese military presence, although there was a Vietnamese embassy. There had of course been a South Vietnamese embassy as well. Yet another group that we had to see across the border.

There was a Vietnamese community. A local Vietnamese community was its own business in various towns along the Mekong including Vientiane but they were obviously important. At the time, when they started out, the Lao communist party was very obviously subservient to the Vietnamese communist party. The Lao communist party-the Lao People's Revolutionary Party to the Vietnamese Worker's Party. The people who were in charge of the Lao communist party were people who had kind of learned their communism at Ho Chi Minh's knee, and had a lot of connections with Vietnam. Some of them had Vietnamese wives. This situation has changed over time, but during those days, 1975-76, they were very much subservient to Hanoi.

Q: China?

JOHNSON: Well, China was their-formally, their friend and ally. But you could see ambivalence about that relationship reflecting the ambivalence and changes in the Chinese-Vietnamese relationship. The Vietnamese had a great fear of China, and a great desire to be independent of China. My impression with Lao was that the Lao were much more concerned about Thailand and Vietnam; they saw the Chinese as objectively their ally against these other powers.

But during that time, given their subservience to Hanoi, they reflected the difficulties in the relationship. At that time at least they were correct. The Chinese didn't have any problems.

Q: Any Soviet presence there?

JOHNSON: Yes. There was a Soviet embassy. That was one of the peculiarities about Vientiane. Everybody was always represented there as opposed to Saigon or Phnom Penh. So there was a large Soviet embassy, and it was always hard to know what they were doing. Later on there was a large Soviet aid program and the like. But they were around.

There was an incident in which somebody threw a couple of grenades into the front yard of their embassy where they had a tennis court. These blew some holes into a couple of Soviet diplomats-not fatal as it turned out, and it was blamed on the Thai. Everything was always blamed on the Thai. But the Soviets were there. We saw them a lot, and they drank a lot was my impression. They weren't too useful as diplomatic contacts.

There was the French library downtown which had been kind of a French cultural library where you could buy books. It was like a bookstore. It became a Soviet bookstore. The Soviets put out some really great picture books, but it was really hard to buy them. Most of them were just there to be seen, but they were there and there were still businessmen there.

I remember Shell was the major supplier of petroleum products to Laos. Although during the time of the closing of the border there wasn't any gasoline for a while that was imported

legally which was awkward for the embassy. Bob McCallam, our administrative officer, basically put out the word that we were willing to pay. I think that basically we got the gasoline that was in the tanks of the armored brigade of the Lao communist army. If they had actually been asked to fire up their vehicles, they would have been in trouble. But you could go down on the main street of Vientiane, which was kind of a very quiet street, and if you announced in a loud carrying voice that you were interested in buying gasoline, gasoline would be produced. The embassy at the end of this three months had more gasoline than when we started out.

But we did have to hire a samlor, one of those three wheeled peddle things, in order to send invitations around town and do other things.

Q: So should we quit at this point. So we will pick it up next time. I don't know if there is anything more to talk about in Laos.

JOHNSON: I think maybe we have plunged the depths of Laos.

RICHARD W. TEARE
Political Counselor
Laos (1974-1976)

Richard W. Teare was born in Ohio in 1937. He received his bachelor's degree from Harvard University in 1948. His career includes positions in Barbados, Philippines, Vietnam, Laos, New Zealand, and Australia. Mr. Teare was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in July 1998.

TEARE: '74 to '76 I was in Laos.

Q: '76...what was the situation when you got there in '74?

TEARE: It was quite interesting because the Communists there had come to town already and had joined in a coalition government with the Right Wing and with the neutralist Prince Souvanna Phouma as Prime Minister. It was a very uneasy coalition but it was nevertheless a coalition and I think some people thought it might even provide a model for Vietnam, which of course it didn't. But there were Pathet Lao in town and they had positions in I think almost every ministry. The guy I dealt with most from that side is still around and is today the Foreign Minister, Mr. Suban Sikkerat who in fact had been a Colonel in the Pathet Lao, the Laos Peoples' Forces or whatever it was called but he would never admit it. He was educated in France, spoke very good French, quite good English too and had been sent down to Vientiane with the establishment of the coalition just a few months earlier to be I think one of the senior political figures in the whole Communist show. He was very, very good and a very worthy adversary for us.

But the Government was limping along. There was not a real spirit of cooperation between the

two sides. Souvanna Phouma did not have a whole lot of power. There was also a sense of watching what was happening next door in Vietnam. I think it was pretty clearly understood that a collapse of the Saigon Government over there would have repercussions for Laos and for Cambodia, as of course it did. The Domino Theory is true to that extent. Not Thailand, not Malaysia, not Indonesia but Cambodia and Laos certainly. So it was again a strange sort of place.

The United States had invested a lot in Laos over the years since the late '50s to the extent we almost had or did have a parallel government in some ways. We had our own electrical power generation and distribution system alongside the Government's. We had our own telephone system with its own lines running alongside the Government line. We had our own school, our own compound, our own commissary, our own little hospital, and our own fire engines. We had just about everything. We were like a state within a state. We had I think about 400 employees and something like a thousand dependents. We were far bigger than all other Missions.

We put a lot of money into the country. Our military assistance went mainly to buy rice and gasoline for the Force Somai Royal, the Rightist troops. I don't know that we had influence to match our contributions but nevertheless we were the best friend of the old Rightist Government and we were trying to be friends to the Coalition Government which was meant to be somewhat neutral, neither all Right nor all Left. We contributed direct budgetary support through something called the Foreign Exchange Operations Fund, FEOF. We had AID people working in education, public health, public safety, all over the country in all kinds of things. We had regional AID operations in Luang Prabang, and Pak Se. The CIA was involved with General Vang Pao and his Hmong guerrilla force up in the Northeast of the country around Long Cheng, that was the Headquarters.

I paid one visit up there and saw. The Vietnamese word for highlanders, Montagnard if you will, who were not much interested in being controlled by the lowland Laos and who hated the Vietnamese, all Vietnamese, but since Vietnamese in those parts were mostly Communist they were happy to fight them. So it was a strange situation in which we were ostensibly working with the Coalition Government in town and also doing a lot of things for the people of Laos. But we were also still involved with a fighting force that was harassing the North Vietnamese in the northeastern part of the country, the whole eastern part of Laos, particularly in the highlands.

But all of this had sort of an unreal aspect. Once again I got involved in a disappearance case because a young American named Dean, and an Australian companion named Sharmon, these were guys just out of university, were going down the Mekong in a canoe and they disappeared. We launched a search operation for them, largely trying to collect intelligence on what might have happened to them. The father of Dean turned out to be a YALE classmate of Ambassador Whitehouse so there was a lot of interest there. It is not known to this day what became of them precisely but the CIA did succeed in tracking pretty far. It seems they went ashore at some point in southern Laos and were captured by a Pathet Lao element and then probably after a couple of days in captivity somehow angered their captors and were shot. But their bodies have never been recovered.

In my last assignment in Honolulu I got a report on the case which I'll dust off for a future session here giving what the military now has on that case. The Joint Task Force for Accounting

that is looking after MIAs also looks peripherally at civilian cases of which this was a prominent one. So, again, I was not in Laos very long however before the roof fell in there. It was in April of 1975 that things started to come apart, well late March over in Vietnam when the North Vietnamese came in just as had been predicted into Dar Lac Province and on down to the central coast. Vietnam started rolling up.

The Government in Cambodia decamped and the Khmer Rouge took over...well, Ambassador Swank left with the flag under his arm on the 12th of April 1975. That was the same day that Ambassador Whitehouse left Laos having completed his tour of duty. He was nominated and confirmed later that year to go to Thailand as Ambassador. I remember the day very well because it was the day that my wife came back from her mother's funeral. She had been gone for three or four weeks. Then by early or mid May all the families had left Laos because the minute Saigon fell it set off a panic among the Rightist side of the Government in Laos.

All the generals and cabinet ministers of the Rightist persuasion, virtually all of them, fled the country in a matter of days. In many cases the Generals were flown over to Thailand by helicopters and their Sergeants drove their Mercedes down to the ferry crossing and the cars were taken over to Thailand and then from there. We were pretty cynical about the whole thing.

We were working for an orderly drawdown of the American community. A lot of people went to the APO, which was still functioning, and mailed out their silverware and their family photographs. Yet at the same time we were trying to preserve calm in the community and say that nothing had happened here yet. Whitehouse had turned over to Christian Chapman who was the DCM. He became Chargé. We had several community meetings, tried to keep calm, but it was clear that people were panicking. Above all, people in Washington were panicking because they had just had the evacuation of Saigon the helicopters off the roof of the Chancery. They were traumatized by it. They could only imagine that it was going to happen again. We had already pulled a lot of people out of Cambodia, I don't know if we intended a total evacuation. And they were afraid it was going to happen in Laos.

We kept saying there wasn't combat here and there probably wasn't going to be, it was going to be far different from Vietnam, it may not be pleasant but would be mostly peaceable. But Washington said no, get them out, get them out, and so we did. We sent out all of the families, mine was among the early ones to go. I think we did them almost all on commercial flights of Thai Airways and Royal Air Laos. I don't think we brought in many or any military or contract aircraft. But virtually all of the dependents were gone by, say, the 20th of May, three weeks after the fall of Saigon. Chapman's family was the last to go. His wife didn't want to leave. She wanted to stay there as a symbol. I think he had to be ordered to get her out.

But we sort of hunkered down and waited to see what would happen. One of the first things that happened was the seizure of a couple of our properties, our in-town compound where we had the swimming pool and the Commissary, and a little compound of tin roof buildings that was known as Silver City was seized. So eventually was Kilometer Six where we had the school and a big U.S. housing area. We still had people living in Silver City, including a temporary duty secretary I remember who had come up from Bangkok because we had thinned out the staff so drastically. I think she was on her first or second night there when ostensible student demonstrators seized

the compound. I remember going over at six in the morning trying to negotiate her way out of there and the other people who were in there.

Eventually we got the people out. The Pathet Lao were not interested in hurting people. In fact they weren't really interested in antagonizing the United States. They seemed to cherish the belief that if they were semi decent to us we would quickly start coming forward with reparations. Well that was not of course what we had in mind. But it took awhile for all of this to settle down.

One of the first things the Pathet Lao did however was freeze our bank accounts. We had an account at the Bank National. They assumed that the money in that account was rightfully theirs, that it was an undisbursed, if they understood that concept at all, contribution by the United States to the Foreign Exchange Operations Fund. Well it wasn't, it was the embassy's own operating funds for local salary and purchases and so forth. But it took us weeks or months to get them to understand that and finally to unfreeze the bank accounts.

Washington did not want to send any additional money. They didn't want to give us a new Treasury check. It would be throwing good money after bad. That is not precise either. New money after perfectly good sequestered old money. They didn't want to do that, understandably, and meanwhile we were running very low on cash. Somewhere along in there, I guess by this time it was later in the year of '75, I sold my car to a Thai diplomat who paid for it in Laotian kip. He got a very good deal because we had to convert our kip at the legal rate, which was totally artificial. But even so I was paid something like five million kip and it took the embassy B&F Officer and a local cashier all of one afternoon to count it! But with that cash in hand we were able to meet the payroll that particular time. I think before the next payroll came due our account had finally been unfrozen.

But it was that sort of thing. We were living from hand to mouth. The Lao shot up a Thai border post across the river so the Thai cut off petroleum supplies. Laos had none of its own. It was all imported from Thailand. So it became a question of how we were going to get gasoline for any purpose, our generator fuel. We had an Admin Officer, Bob MacCallum who saw to it by whatever means that we never ran out of fuel and I didn't ask too many questions about how he did it!

By this time Chapman had pretty well burned his bridges with Souvanna Phouma and the Pathet Laos and Phil Habib, who had visited us in June, had decided that Chapman needed to be replaced. So they brought out Tom Corcoran who from my work in Saigon I knew had closed Hue, first closed Hanoi then closed Hue, had closed Phnom Penh once in the '60s. We didn't tell the Laos that but Corcoran came as Chargé. We had had an Ambassador nominated and even confirmed, Galen Stone, known as Rocky, who was coming from a European post. But Stone was never sworn in because we thought that would be too encouraging to the Laos.

Meanwhile there was a Lao who had been, I think, Ambassador in Beijing come back. He was all ready to go to Washington. He was desperately hoping that Stone would be confirmed and come to post because that was the only way he was going to get to Washington. But it didn't happen. We stayed at the Chargé level from then, 1975, until 1990, I guess it was...no, '93. Let me get

my years right. Charlie Salmon was my predecessor in Honolulu '93 to '96. So he went in '89 as Chargé and became Ambassador in '92. 1975 to 1992, seventeen years, we were at the Chargé level. I was by this time, effectively the DCM. But I couldn't get the title because the Ambassador's slot was vacant, then Corcoran as Chargé was occupying the DCM slot so I stayed political counselor. But for all practical purposes I was the acting DCM.

So we just hunkered down. Now Habib had come out in June and he sat down with the country team. He said, what did we think; should we stay or get out? I knew him. Perhaps I was the only one in the room who knew him, or at least knew him better than the others having served under him in Vietnam, and I said I felt we should stay unless they kicked us out. We had turned tail and pulled out of Phnom Penh and Saigon but this situation was different...let them kick us out. He said, "That's what you say, what do the rest of you say?" So he went around and polled the DAO and the Station Chief and Chapman himself. I think all or all but one or two agreed with me. So Phil said, "Alright, if that's the way you want it, okay. Now, you have an evacuation plan?" And we said yes, sure, but it was premised on an unopposed evacuation, U.S. military helicopters coming in and lifting us out. He said, "That's not going to happen now. Throw away that plan and if you guys get into trouble here is what you do. You go over to the Chargé's residence and you hunker down there. Make sure you have plenty of water and C-rats and I'll negotiate you out. Got that?" We said, "Got it." So he patted us on the back and went on his way.

But in fact that did a lot for our morale and it was not long after that that he replaced Chapman with Corcoran, which was a good move as I said.

Q: This is a very peculiar relationship because most of the time the newly emerging Communist takeovers, starting with China and moving down to Korea, we didn't have anything in North Korea, but certainly in Cambodia and Vietnam....

TEARE: We left Hanoi in '54.

Q: We left Hanoi...so was a lot of this different? Did you feel we could hang on? Would it serve any purpose?

TEARE: We thought it would. First of all we believed, and I think we were exaggerated in this, that Vientiane would be a good listening post on Hanoi. We also thought that we might be able to do something on the POW-MIA front. And at this point too there were still quite a few American civilians who had been captured in the final offensive in '75 and they weren't all accounted for yet. But beyond that I think there was the feeling that I expressed to Habib that we shouldn't be seen as running away, particularly in a country where there was really no violence in connection with the takeover and where our lives were not under threat.

When the Pathet Lao troops came down to some of the river towns in southern Laos school girls came out to meet them and put flowers in the barrels of their guns. They were glad to see them. It was a welcome. It was that relaxed. So we were pretty confident that we were not in any physical danger. In fact the people who quickly became endangered were the Russians and the Cubans because almost immediately a ragtag Laos Rightist guerrilla force began staging minor harassment operations from across the river in Thailand. You know a couple of guys would come

over in a canoe at night and toss a grenade into the Russian Ambassador's front yard and go home again. That was the new terrorism in Laos in late '75 and the first part of '76.

But it was kind of a grim existence particularly for our local employees. Most of them wanted to stay with us. It represented steady employment. They had come to know us and like us over the years and believed in the American way to a certain extent. And precisely because of their loyalty to us they came under suspicion in their own community. The Pathet Laos set off on a process of political organizing and indoctrination and just about everybody had to go for some form of education. This was typically done through what they called seminars, usually a week or two of morning, afternoon, and evening lectures. Lecturing about the evils of the old Royal system in Laos and the old government and the Americans and others who had supported that government and the glories of the new Communist system and the fraternal allies in Vietnam, Russia, China and so forth. It was stultifying stuff but you had to do it. Furthermore you had to appear attentive and interested, otherwise you drew attention to yourself, adverse attention.

Our employees would be taken off for seminars and sometimes wouldn't come back for weeks. We kept their pay going and also realized soon that they were malnourished. Even with their salaries there wasn't a lot to be bought. So we would pay them partly in rice and then vitamin pills along with their cash salaries just to keep them going. They appreciated that. But it was grim for them and it was rather grim for us. Other embassies had drawn down to some degree. There was a small core of Westerners; ourselves, the British, the Australians, some French I think at that time, a couple of Germans, and then friendly Asians such as the Thai and Japanese. It was a pretty small community and we saw a lot of each other and not much of the Laos.

Q: What did you do?

TEARE: Well for example we played volleyball every Wednesday evening and every Sunday afternoon on the tennis court at the British Embassy Sports and Social Club. And there were movies shown a couple of nights a week also there. Later, after my time, the Australians built a much bigger and fancier sports complex down on the Mekong with a swimming pool and all. But it was pretty limited.

We worked long hours.

Q: Doing what though?

TEARE: Well we were sniffing around all the time trying to find out what this new Government was up to. What we could learn about what was going on in Hanoi and in Phnom Penh. I remember one day we got a Diplomatic Note from the local Cambodian embassy, Khmer Rouge controlled. It had been distributed for them by the Laos Ministry of Foreign Affairs that didn't realize we shouldn't have received it so we did. It was the first listing of the Pol Pot Government in Phnom Penh. A lot of the names didn't mean anything to us but Tom Corcoran recognized the value of it instantly. We got an Immediate telegram out to Washington that evening reporting this thing that had fallen into our laps!

A lot more of it was staying alive. Trying to get our bank account unfrozen, trying to get the

Silver City properties back, trying to get permits for outgoing shipments of household effects. In general it turned out that those who were packed last fared best and that included me. Other people had belongings stolen out of their shipments, either on the Laos side or the Thai side, rocks substituted for contents of packing cases, things like that. Ours came home with almost no loss or damage. But it took a couple of months to get things out.

Also getting visas for people coming in TDY or replacement personnel. And Washington having once got us down to a ceiling of 29 staff members said that was it. We'd say there was a budget and fiscal officer over in Thailand and we need him and they would say we would have to send someone else out if we were going to bring him back. This was the way Washington was playing at that and still is. I saw that in Djakarta just a couple of months ago.

They, to my mind, take a wrong-headed view of things. There are times in fact when a post needs more people or at least different people more than what it already had. In fact in troubles in Cambodia recently the Department did allow Ken Quinn to bring in some extra DS, Diplomatic Security people from Bangkok. But in general the Department is so concerned with minimizing exposure and possible loss that it to my mind interferes with the Post's ability to do its job in a crisis situation.

Now what we are doing in Nairobi and Ghana this week seems to be to flood the place with FBI men and Marine Security Guards and so forth and I think that's probably the right approach in the circumstances. Certainly if you are going to do an investigation. We weren't doing that, but the numerical ceiling on personnel strength hamstrung us for quite some time.

Q: You had an awful lot of equipment, a Commissary, everything else there, and the Laos taking it over. I would have thought that part of your problem would have been custodial.

TEARE: Well we tried to get property back. We would write them Notes all the time saying we had the honor to bring to their attention that certain property of the American Employees' Association is still sitting in a compound in Vientiane. But it mostly fell on deaf ears. We got very little back. Most of it had been taken from us so our custodial job in fact was not all that great.

Now on the question of what was going on Hanoi. We did get some information. The pattern seemed to be that the people in Beijing would go to Hanoi for R&R, people in Hanoi would come to Vientiane and people from Vientiane would go to Bangkok, the beaches of Thailand. But the most significant exercise in which I was involved had to do with some of the American civilians who had been captured in the final offensive.

There was a UN High Commission for Refugees representative, a Burmese, named Darryl Grin Han who had arrived in Vientiane I think during my time. He ran the office there and furthermore he was entrusted with opening an office in Hanoi that had not been allowed previously and was a sensitive operation.

So Darryl left his wife, who was German, in Vientiane most of the time. He went to Hanoi periodically and would stay. I guess he took her eventually too. He had an office in the hotel. On

one trip back Darryl sought me out and said he had learned that the North Vietnamese would be ready to release several American civilians who had been captured earlier that year, '75, in the final offensive. He said he thought he could be of help in getting them this far and etc, etc. And so we did that and the Americans got out rather quickly and everything worked very well.

What the Vietnamese and Laos didn't know was that Han was a Resident Alien of the United States. In fact he had met his wife while both were in the Southeast Asia Program at Cornell. They had green cards that were about to expire. You ordinarily can't get a green card renewed while you were overseas, I think you have to come back to the States to do it. At least that was the rule in the mid '70s. So I remember writing to INS through State explaining why these people who were extending themselves to help the United States ought to have their green cards renewed on an exceptional basis while still outside the United States. And of course that worked.

But the larger point was the fact that he was able to learn so quickly of their presence and was able to do something about it. That convinced me that if there were military personnel in North Vietnam, prisoners of war, it would have come to the attention of the outside world. A Scandinavian diplomat would have picked up something of this and the word would have filtered back to us rather promptly and we might have been able to do something about it. Here we are 23 years after that and we are still conducting POW and MIA recovery operations, now with the cooperation of the Vietnamese and Laotian governments. We have pretty well finished up in Cambodia where the Hun Sin Government was giving us good cooperation.

We pay a lot for day laborers and helicopter rides and so forth.

Q: We are really talking not about prisoners, we are talking about the dead.

TEARE: We are talking about bodies not recovered, BNR, yes. There are no more prisoners. I am convinced. There are no MIAs, living MIAs.

Q: This has become sort of...

TEARE: It has become a political football.

Q: It's a Right Wing political thing in the United States.

TEARE: Absolutely.

Q: Nobody who knows anything about the place believes that but it is an article of faith for those who believe in plots.

TEARE: Yes. But anyway I was convinced as early as '75 that if people were there we would have some line into it as we did with these civilians. Once their case was resolved I think that was it. One was an AID employee named Paul Struherik. A couple of others were missionaries. They had been mostly in the highlands.

Q: What were your dealings? I mean did you go to receptions and things like that with the Laos

Government?

TEARE: Yes we were invited to most things to which other members of the Diplomatic Corps were invited. We spent a good deal of our time speculating. It was a rumor mill. One question was what happened to and would happen to the Royal family? Well it was pretty quickly established that they were taken off to re-education in the north of Laos. But it was not until some time quite recently...the late '80s or beginning of the '90s, that the Laos Government finally admitted that the King and the Crown Prince had both died back in the late '70s, I think, or the early '80s. And they only did that in order to win a visit by the Thai Princess because the Thai Government had made it be known that she could not go to Laos, Sirindhorn is the Princess, unless the Thai Government were informed officially what had happened to the Laos Royal Family. So then the Laos revealed through a press conference in Paris that the King was dead. So the Thai Princess could make her visit and so forth.

But it was that sort of thing. Was a Republic going to be declared? Well there was speculation it was going to happen on such and such a day in July and then in September and it didn't happen and didn't happen. Finally it was declared on the 2nd of December 1975 and that became the National Day and Prince Souphanouvong, the half brother of Souvanna Phouma, and the so-called Red Prince, was installed as President of the country. So then chiefs of diplomatic mission were invited to call on him.

First all of the resident Ambassadors were booked in. This was all in the space of ten days or so at the rate of a couple a day. Then it got to Charge de Affaire and I was Charge at that moment because Tom Corcoran had gone to Bangkok for dental work. So we had a couple of days' notice of this. I got a message down to Tom saying don't you want to hurry back so you can make the ceremonial call on Souphanouvong on next Tuesday or whenever it was. Tom came back and said no thanks. Tom didn't like dealing with the Chinese Communists at all and he probably had met Souphanouvong in earlier years and had no interest in a further meeting.

So I went to the call on Souphanouvong which we conducted in French. I had talked to a few others who had already gone to see him so I had some idea. It was meant to be courtesy but anyway I remember that he said that we needed to get countries to heal the scars of the war. I was mighty glad I knew French but my vocabulary wasn't all that good. He wanted an immediate contribution, reparations, etc. I countered by rendering in French as best I could the idea that it was time that heals wounds, that a passage of time would be necessary. So we parted on that. I still have I am sure the issue of the Communist Party's daily newspaper with little photos of my call on Souphanouvong and three or four others on the front page.

So it was distant, rather formal.

Q: The whole Vietnamese Government was claiming reparations.

TEARE: Well they were trying to.

Q: It was absolutely politically out of the question and practically out of the question and it stopped the sort of return to some sort of relations for a couple of decades.

TEARE: But the Vietnamese have always claimed that the United States halfway promised them three billion dollars if this, that and the other.

Q: Which didn't happen anyway.

TEARE: No. They broke the agreement, we say. And they did, there is no question about it. But anyway that is the sort of thinking and I think the Laos generally believed that vast sums of money would somehow begin to flow and of course they didn't.

Bob Hawke as Prime Minister of Australia went to Laos in 1989 I think it was and said they would build them a bridge across the Mekong. He had not checked this out with his staff and nobody knew how much such a bridge would cost but Australia was committed to it. I think they finally did build it and it cost them tens of millions of dollars and I think it is not being used very much. Partly because the Laos are so damned suspicious of anybody trying to come across it. It is a good avenue for trade and would allow one to bypass the ferry, which is a very inefficient way of getting goods across.

But in general we've stuck at that point, as we did with Vietnam too for many years. They want aid and trade, we want accounting for MIA and body count recovered cases. In the case of Laos also we want to see action in the counter-narcotics field and we haven't seen too much of that although we've funded some programs, I think largely through the UN Program there. But I am not expert on what has happened in Laos since I left in '76.

Q: Well was there sort of the feeling while you were there that we were maintaining a presence but that the importance of Laos with the fall of South Vietnam basically disappeared from our radar?

TEARE: Almost. Yes. It was not important to us and it never had the value as a listening post on North Vietnam that some people had predicted.

Q: Was there ever any concern that Laos now being in Communist hands that it might try to do something to Thailand?

TEARE: I don't think so. I don't think the Laos have the capability to run things within Laos much less to do anything on anyone else's territory. No the saying is that the Vietnamese plant rice, the Cambodians watch it grow, and the Laos listen to it grow. That is how energetic they are. The commercial establishment of Vientiane such as it was when I got there was almost entirely foreign. There were Thai, there were Indians, there were Chinese, there were Koreans...lots of Vietnamese of course. But you had to look far and wide to find any sort of business establishment actually run by Laos. Commerce was not their thing. Commercial agriculture is, I dare say, their thing.

It has changed somewhat since then and certainly policies have changed. Laos is now much more open to outside investment. I think it has had an evolution rather like Vietnam's in that respect. They went along for the first ten or fifteen years after the Communist takeover and the old

Socialist Party and then they got poorer and poorer. And then they began to wake up. In the case of Vietnam it was called Doi Moi, new life, program of economic liberalization. Incentives to production and things like that started in the late '80s. Laos got into it a little later.

Now...I was in Hanoi in 1997 and things are not exactly booming but at least they are coming along. There are the rudiments of a tourist industry and a couple of high-rise hotels and things like that. Unfortunately I could not get the Admiral to visit Laos, it never worked on his schedule during the last two years, so I have not seen Vientiane since '76 but I think it is moving in somewhat the same direction, probably much more slowly.

THOMAS J. CORCORAN
Chargé d'Affaires
Vientiane (1975)

Ambassador Thomas J. Corcoran was born in New York in 1920. He joined the Foreign Service in 1950. His career included positions in Spain, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Washington, DC, and an ambassadorship to Burundi. Ambassador Corcoran was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1988.

Q: We're talking about 1975. You were picked to be the DCM (charge) in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. Was this at the time when we had evacuated Saigon, the fall of Saigon?

CORCORAN: Yes.

Q: So you were there to pick up whatever pieces there were to be picked up.

CORCORAN: I think they decided that Saigon was evacuated and Cambodia was, too, but there were indications that although there was a certain amount of harassing of Americans in Vientiane, we were getting the mission way down from the huge size it was. There were indications that they weren't going to kick us out. I suppose it was assumed by Secretary Kissinger that maybe they'd learned something from the other experience or maybe they just realized that despite all the brilliant talk about being able to supply themselves through Hanoi, that railway down to Bangkok was pretty good, and if the Americans left, maybe the Thai and the other people would leave, and they'd be landlocked for sure. That's my own interpretation.

In any event, I was in Quebec -- in fact, I expected to retire from there -- when I was called and told they wanted me to go out to Vientiane again, 25 years after I'd had the same job. I said, "okay, I'll go." And I went. I relieved Christian Chapman, who had been the DCM during the last days of the struggle. Charlie Whitehouse had been the ambassador but had gone to Bangkok. I took over. It was still nominally the kingdom of Laos, although the Communists really had control of it. Souvanna Phouma was the prime minister, as he had been near the end of my earlier stay. But an awful lot of water had gone over the dam in the interim, and we had mushroomed out into this big presence. We'd gone through the Geneva Accords in '53 and also '62, Laos, and we'd gone through the secret war in Laos. The North Vietnamese never accepted the terms of the

'62 agreement. They were continually operating. Each dry season, they'd move into the Plain of Jars and we'd help chase them out. This went on and on, until finally with the collapse in Indochina, they more or less came to stay there.

I got there again in about September or October. The situation there was that the king, the son of the original king, was still king. Souvanna Phouma was the Prime Minister. But most of the other ministers worked for the Communists. There were still one or two holdovers whom I'd known in earlier days who were in the capital, both of whom intended to stay there, because their families were gone -- dead.

So here again, I went around and called on all the members of the Cabinet, including the Communists. The only one I did not see was the Minister of Security, but I saw the head of government who was also the secretary general of the party (Kaysone Phomvihane, the longstanding leader of the Communist Party). I saw his deputy, Nouhak. He was the Minister of the Economy and second to the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister, of course, was Kaysone Phomvihane.

But the initial problem I had was we got down to a rather small group, 30 people, and we had Marine guards, but our funds were frozen, because they seemed to think that an agreement to turn over some aid funds to them, part of the aid program, included all of our funds, including the embassy funds. We were operating by selling automobiles and whatnot, and getting money to operate on.

Q: Were you able to have communications and all that while you were there?

CORCORAN: Oh, yes, we had communications.

Q: So you could talk to the budget and fiscal people who were probably not very understanding.

CORCORAN: Actually, it was out of their hands by that time. But from my own point of view, there's no point in starting a long-term operation if you can't function. Some time went by there, but this happened rather early on. I got a chance to make a call on the Secretary General and the prime minister. I mentioned to him that I'd been there before and I knew the people. Of course, he knew all about me. I'm sure he had a file on me. I told him we were trying our best to get along, but we had a strange problem in which somebody in the government seemed to think that our administrative funds belonged to them, obviously an impossibility. I gave him a little sheet of paper in explanation of this. He said, "Go see Mr. So-and-so at the bank." And I did. Mr. So-and-so at the bank had gotten instructions to resolve it, so it was resolved. We were back in business, and we could get our frozen money out of the bank to operate on.

Q: There were some anti-American riots and takeovers and real problems.

CORCORAN: This was just before I got there in '75, at the American School, at some other buildings and the aid housing project. But all we retained were the embassy and the residence which Ambassador Godley had built on the outskirts of town, which is quite big, with a swimming pool and tennis court. Some people suggested we should all retreat into that, and I

said, "No, from my experience, you can't operate that way. You've got to keep the embassy, too, the embassy and its administrative compound across the street. Otherwise, there's no point in pretending you're functioning." This was not a consulate; this was an embassy. There's a big difference.

There were other strange things. Through the years, our generator in our embassy was generating power for part of the city, and until this could be sorted out, at one point, an agent of the electric company would come in, with our permission, and check the generator. Eventually it got sorted out and they rewired it, and we were out of their network.

I'd see the Foreign Minister quite frequently, and I would see the Secretary General of the Foreign Ministry, the Chef de Cabinet, and the real deputy. The Foreign Minister was a Communist, but he was an old man, sort of old-school enough that you could deal with him. He had a young assistant who would have to do the dirty work, but was quite polite. He later ended up in the U.N. in New York and now is Vice Foreign Minister. The point was that I went around and called on all the ministers except the Minister of the Interior, who was busy and didn't want to see me. Some of them, actually, rather naively asked me to get more economic aid. But in any event, we were on a talking basis. They would come to social events and entertainment and vice versa. I was invited to almost everything they did.

The British had an embassy there, a small embassy. Australia had an embassy, the Thai, and the Filipinos were there. The Burmese were there, and the West Germans and East Germans. The Russians, of course, were there, and the Chinese. The Russians we dealt with, and the Chinese we didn't. This was when Mao Zedong was still alive.

Q: Although we had begun the opening to China at that point.

CORCORAN: Yes, we had.

Q: It was just getting started.

CORCORAN: Yes, we had, but still, it wasn't until I was in Burundi that the Chinese diplomats became friendly with us. We had no contact with them in Vientiane. The Russians, of course, we did see a little of them. The Russian Ambassador, of course, was not somebody whom I would regularly see and talk to and call on, except when on very formal occasions including national holidays, we'd exchange hospitality. We did see some more of the junior people. There again, some of them came up from Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge had given them a rather rough time. But it was obvious to me then that it was the North Vietnamese who occupied Laos, who had troops in the countryside, and that the Head of State and Secretary General and one or two of his leading men were longtime members of the Indochina Communist Party. And so the Russians had the main influence there.

The Chinese were there, and they were there, I expect, until the later split with the Russians.

Our daily work was largely that we had a lot of hostile press criticism, and they wanted me to stop putting out our daily USIS bulletin after a while. We kept that up for quite a long while. But

we actually took part in the Louang annual fair, which I'd first taken part in 25 years earlier. Louang is a big Buddhist monument on the outskirts of town which they used as fairgrounds. We participated in that. We'd go to ceremonies and we went up to the boat races in Luang Prabang shortly after I got there. Some people were surprised, but it seemed normal to me. The king was still there.

Then in December of '75, they started having secret conferences in the old AID housing area, and rumors leaked out that this was the plan; that they were going to dump the monarchy and proclaim the Democratic Republic. We reported that very briefly. We didn't have details on it.

Q: How did you get this sort of information?

CORCORAN: Rumors. Then finally two people told me, two old-regime types who were getting ready for the worst to happen. We sent that in, and it happened. There were other rumors going around. They were making sounds about killing the king, and that sort of shocked everybody, but that wasn't going to happen, though he was sent off to exile in the north, I gather, and did die up there. Those are things that I might have been prone to think when I first went there. But the king gave a sort of party, really a farewell party. A week later, they gave another party to celebrate his overthrow. I think the king knew it was coming and was sort of taking his leave in a very polite way.

Then they inaugurated the Lao People's Democratic Republic(LPDR) and then they began to become a little more difficult. They eventually made us get rid of the Marines. They didn't want them around. I think you'll find the Chinese had done something similar, earlier, claiming that the wearing of T-shirts with a Marine Corps emblem while jogging violated a ban on wearing uniforms. The Lao Communists just said they weren't getting any military aid from us, and they didn't want any military presence. The French in Vientiane, as I recall, handled it by noting that their embassy guards were CRS, civilian policemen, really trained by the Army for this, a national police force. They kept theirs. We replaced ours with security officers. We didn't replace all of them; we replaced the six Marines with several security officers, who also did administrative work.

As time has gone on, I've had five replacements since I left Laos eight years ago.

Q: So we've kept a presence there. What were your instructions from Washington or the guidance from Washington? What did they want from you when you went out and when you were there?

CORCORAN: Pretty much just try to stay in business and play it by ear. Of course, I had good communications, and if I had a problem, I could talk it out with the Department, but they always agreed to whatever I wanted to do. It was just a question of staying in existence there, keeping an eye out, and learning what we could. We could pick up all sorts of things there from various people. But mostly the LPDR wanted us there for the reason that I mentioned earlier -- they didn't want to be cut off. They would have spats with the Thai from time to time, and at times the Thai closed the road and railway, and, actually, it was done more often by Kukrit Pramoj and Seni Pramoj, the Thai civilian prime ministers. It was done by the Thai military later on. But the

Thai just kept it as a reaction when they got too many unreasonable demands made on them, and they would turn off again to the communications. But that's been thrashed out through the years by several crises and agreements.

Q: Did you have problems keeping up morale at the post? Did people like it?

CORCORAN: What we did was to encourage travel. We'd let people go to Bangkok. When we started out, we'd have people carry the mail down to Bangkok and take a little leave, and we'd let them go to Hong Kong on Christmas leave and visit families in the U.S. We encouraged that. Most of the people we had there liked it pretty well. We also had this community of Australians, Americans, British, French, Filipinos, and Germans, which they could mix in. There was very little mixing with the Lao, because most of them were afraid.

Q: Any great crises while you were there?

CORCORAN: We had a number of minor crises. We had, for example, usually roadblock problems. The communicator going to the embassy to answer telegrams would be grabbed by the police for violating a curfew. Or on one occasion, somebody was pursued to his house, and the electric company militia, which was a union-type militia, tried to force their way in. Fortunately, we were able to thrash that out, because the embassy security officer stayed at the scene and just by word of mouth discouraged them from barging into the place. We talked to the Foreign Ministry all day, and I finally told them, "Now, look, you know, two things have happened here. You've got this guy who you say didn't stop at a roadblock and you chased him home, but you have this other guy who did stop, and he was manhandled. We've got to sort both of these problems out. You've got to make up your mind what you want to do. You can't operate this way."

This dragged on all day and then, finally, I was told it was all right. I went out to the house, and the militia were still there, so I went back to the Foreign Ministry and said, "I'm going to tell the Department this thing can't be worked out." They said, "It can be worked out." I went back again, and it worked out. So I guess they decided the electric company militia people might have had a theoretical cause for complaint, but they had so botched it up in the other case at the same time that they decided they'd work it out.

That was probably the last real crisis I had there, although they did sort of tighten up rules about driving down to the river port. We could cross over on the ferry and get on the train to Bangkok. You were supposed to fill out a form each day if you were a diplomat, but there was nobody to collect the forms. We agreed we'd always carry a form, though there was nobody to hand it in to.

Q: Just keep it in the car.

CORCORAN: That faded out after a while.

Q: While you were there, did we get involved in any efforts on stopping drug trafficking, or was that an issue at the time?

CORCORAN: No, that wasn't really an issue at the time. The U.N. had a man there following that. I'm not too sure how successful he was or how important the problem was at that time. There had always been talk about drug (opium) production in western Laos, and some people thought the Chinese were controlling it. They had troops in the area, and I think they still have. But it never became a real issue in my time. We had so many other things to worry about.

WILLIS J. SUTTER
Public Affairs Officer, USIS
Vientiane (1976-1977)

Willis J. Sutter was born in New Jersey in 1936. He joined the Foreign Service in 1966 and served in Thailand, the Soviet Union, Laos, Zaire, and Mauritania. Mr. Sutter was interviewed by Jack O'Brien in 1988.

SUTTER: I just want to recount one incident. It illustrates a point. Very often agency officers ask what is the value of showing various aspects of American culture, films, for example. What freight is it really carrying -- what political freight, and so forth? That is a hard question to answer, because you just cannot tell. But, when I was in Vientiane, the Lao mounted an annual national fair and invited all the embassies to participate. I decided, with the concurrence of our chancery, that we would participate. I mounted a big pavilion and put the bicentennial exhibition in it. Outside, I put up a big movie screen, on which I showed, at nighttime, which is when most of the people came to the fair, old American silent films -- basically, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton films.

The Vietnamese had a "big" movie screen. The biggest movie screen in town mounted in the middle of the field on which this fair took place. They were showing films taken of American air attacks on North Vietnam, including some really, really obnoxious scenes. I can recall one scene very clearly of an American pilot's helmet, which they were kicking along the ground. It clearly had the top half of his head in the helmet.

They were kicking it along the ground like a football. This was the point, I think, of their film show, that the American's were real beasts and so forth and so on. They would have a small crowd watching these rather grisly scenes, while half of Vientiane would be over at my pavilion watching Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, just laughing themselves silly at these films.

It has always been a lesson to me. Yes, okay, these guys are universal -- Chaplin and Keaton are universal. And, you did not have to know English to appreciate those silent films. Maybe it simply illustrates the old adage that you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. The point is -- yes, there is sometimes a point to using these rather attractive aspects of American culture, and it carries a lot more freight sometimes than we may think.

It certainly did for me in Vientiane that week, when we had big crowds watching our films and just the old die-hards watching the Vietnamese films. It got so bad as a matter of fact that the Vietnamese finally pressured the Lao government to stop showing films at the fair.

Q: What other activities were you permitted in Laos? Did you have a library at that time?

SUTTER: No, they had closed our cultural centers down. I did have a kind of library. We brought all the books back to the Embassy compound and had them in a big room that we called the library. But the Laotians could not come onto the compound, so it was useless.

I culled it and took out what I thought were still useful books and donated them to the -- what was being grandly called in those days -- the University of Vientiane. I donated them to the English language faculty. As far as I know they are still there.

Q: Was radio a factor?

SUTTER: They listened to VOA, yes. I also put out an information bulletin every day. Surprisingly, well, not surprisingly I guess, I sent several copies up to what I used to call the Kremlin, the headquarters of the Pathet Lao Government and the communist party. They had occupied the old AID building. I think I sent twelve copies up to the party offices. They were avidly read, avidly read, by those people up there.

As a matter of fact, on days on which for one reason or another we might miss delivery, we often got a call from the party wanting to know where their information bulletin was.

EDMUND McWILLIAMS
Political Officer
Vientiane (1976-1978)

Laos/Cambodia/Vietnam Desk Officer
Washington, DC (1978-1980)

A native of Rhode Island, Mr. Mc Williams was educated at the University of Rhode Island and Ohio University. In the course of his diplomatic career he served in several South East Asia posts including Vientiane, Bangkok and Djakarta. Other assignments took him to Moscow, Managua, Kabul, and Islamabad. In 1992 Mr. McWilliams was engaged in opening US Embassies in the newly independent states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. While his assignments were primarily in the Political and Economic fields, in Washington he dealt with Labor and Human Rights issues. Mr. McWilliams was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2005-2006.

Q: Well you went to Laos when?

MCWILLIAMS: In 1976.

Q: And of course this was a very difficult time there.

MCWILLIAMS: Oh yes, yes.

Q: And you were there from '76 to when?

MCWILLIAMS: '78.

Q: Talk about the situation- before we put you in there but when you went out, what did you know about what we were up to? Well, what was happening in Laos? This was after everything had collapsed.

MCWILLIAMS: Well yes. I mean, this was our last outpost in Indochina. We had had a very large presence in Laos. The CIA, of course, was there but AID (Agency for International Development) had a huge presence there, DAO was there and from a very large presence we were knocked down to 24 people. Shortly after I arrived the Lao government cut us in half again down to 12 people so we were the last 12 American officials in all of Indochina. It was a wonderful assignment.

I should say something about the man I worked for, Tom Cochran. Just a little bit about how he got assigned there. Tom Cochran was an older man, I guess in, certainly in his late 50s, sort of a Buddha-like figure, rather heavyset, white haired, very slow but very intelligent and very ponderous in his movements and his thought patterns and so on but extremely intelligent fellow who'd spent years in Indochina. He had been in Hanoi consulate-

Q: He was the last man out of Hanoi.

MCWILLIAMS: He was. He was in Hanoi, he was in Phnom Penh and Saigon and his last overseas assignment was Vientiane. A little story on his appointment there, I'm told, now this is a little hearsay but everybody told me the same thing, when they realized back in '75 that we still had a position in Vientiane, I mean there was debate as to whether or not to keep to the embassy open, but as a window on Vietnam and so on it was felt that we would probably have to do it, but Phil Habib, who was then the assistant secretary, a brilliant man, wonderful man, was faced with the task of finding someone who'd head up our embassy, our mission in Vientiane and he said I don't want someone who's going to be aggressive, out to make policy, out to make waves, you know, the Lao hate us, we've got to get somebody who's not going to be offensive but nonetheless we want someone who's going to stand up for America. And apparently at the big table up in the SEA conference room he was pondering now who can we get, who can we get and someone at the table said how about old Tom Cochran, who was then the Cambodian desk officer. And I'm told that Phil Habib slapped his hands down on the table and said "inspiration!". Old Tom will go there and he won't do a damn thing, that's exactly what we need. Well, in retrospect I think he was a superb mission chief because he did that, he didn't do a thing except when the Lao, using a Vietnamese encouragement tried to embarrass the U.S., he would stand up and he would go over and speak to them in flawless French, insisting on that, and he was, for young officers like myself and one of my compatriots, he was a tremendous model of what the Foreign Service was all about. A great start.

Q: Well no, I mean, he's, I did an interview with him.

MCWILLIAMS: Oh really?

Q: Unfortunately it was one of my early ones and so shorter than I wish it had been but still. No, he personified the Foreign Service the way it was. Good observers, not running around trying to prove themselves but there.

MCWILLIAMS: I can remember several bits of wisdom that he imparted to myself and to Wendy Chamberlain, who was my, I should say after, it was, a couple of things about him and I think this is important. Soon after he was put there he was told that the CIA would be there too. And fully understanding what the CIA's role had been in Laos and what he figured it would be again. He said you can have me out here or you can have the CIA. So the CIA left because Phil Habib said no, I need Tom Cochran out there. And then after about oh, a couple of months the embassy received word from Lao that we had to cut our 24 people to 12 and he could have kept on the old hands, Jerry Broh-Kahn, who was a good officer, my boss, but he said no, I'm going to get the young people to stay. So he kept myself and Wendy Chamberlain, first tour officers, and gave us the responsibility. We were the only political officers there. And indeed Wendy took over responsibility for econ and consular. And was a great role model for us in terms of standing up to Washington bureaucracy, standing up to intimidation from the Lao and just telling us what the Foreign Service was all about.

Q: Okay. What was the situation beyond, we'll talk about our relations, but what was the situation where we were seen in Laos?

MCWILLIAMS: Well. The Lao, Pathet Lao who basically won, had virtually no knowledge of the United States because there had been no contact between the Pathet Lao and the U.S. Moreover they were very much under the tutelage of the Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese. So we were in a position of having to become acquainted with a leadership that we had no knowledge of in the context where they were very much, we thought at that time, the puppets of the North Vietnamese who of course hated us and didn't really want us there. I can't remember specifically the rationale but the Soviets and the Chinese, particularly the Soviets, who had a fairly significant presence in Laos, did want us there. They wanted us there, I think, to give legitimacy to the new Lao government that the American embassy would be there because if the American embassy was not there the German embassy probably would close, the Australians wouldn't be there, the New Zealanders wouldn't be there, so we were sort of an anchor for a Western presence in Vientiane which I think the Soviets wanted. So notwithstanding the fact the Vietnamese probably would have liked to have seen all of us out we stayed.

And what was interesting, and again this reflects to some extent Tom's, I think understanding, I should say Mr. Cochran's understanding, I never just called him Tom, Mr. Cochran's understanding of Indochina, he said you know, we shouldn't think the Vietnamese and the Lao are the same, they are different. And there are some, probably some antipathy between the Lao and the Vietnamese just as there was between the Cambodians and the Vietnamese. So he sought to get to know the Lao at a very gradual level and Wendy Chamberlain, who was actually junior to me by six months had spoken Lao because, and spoke it very well because she had been part

of the, oh some sort of an NGO that work in Laos, I can't remember the name. And Tom I think very effectively used Wendy, who was a very charming and very vivacious young woman who spoke very good Lao to some extent to ingratiate himself, ingratiate us with the Lao. And I think Wendy as a first tour officer played a significant role in helping us get to know the Lao leadership and I think Mr. Cochran's instincts were right that there were some differences between the Lao and the Vietnamese and I think working that angle he began to create a little bit of space for us that actually constituted a Lao-American relationship. And I think his wisdom in pursuing that and Wendy's tactical ability in charming people was very important.

I can relate on instance.

Q: Yes.

MCWILLIAMS: Tom used to have these grand old receptions in our grand old residence and of course you'd invite the entire diplomatic community. And Phoumi Vongvichit, who was one of the heroes, one of the more progressive, more interesting, philosophical communists in the Pathet Lao structure, I think he was minister of health at that point, I'm not sure what he was minister of but Phoumi Vongvichit I remember quite well; handsome fellow, charming in his own way, very French in his own way and he spoke French beautifully, of course. He had shown up. Usually we didn't get many ministers to our receptions but he was there. And Wendy in her wonderful way went right over to him and started speaking to him in Lao, of course, and Vongvichit loved this, this American speaking Lao and very well and so on. And the Soviet ambassador came up and in a rather pompous way, in perfect French of course, turned to Phoumi Vongvichit and said what language is this woman speaking? And Phoumi with obvious anger said "she is speaking Lao, that is my language!". In French of course. And that was a story that resonated for several weeks through the community that Phoumi Vongvichit obviously appreciated the fact that this American embassy was attempting to speak to him in his language.

Q: What were we doing there? I mean-

MCWILLIAMS: Almost nothing. We, you know, there were old asset problems. You know, we had controlled a lot of property that we simply no longer controlled and there were periodic discussions about how we might get that property back. Not very serious. I think in a Lao-American context we were doing very little. What I was doing and I think to a large extent what Wendy was doing was trying to use Vientiane as a watch post because as it was there was a diplomatic presence in Hanoi. We weren't there, of course, but others were; the Aussies were there, for example, early on the Japanese were there.

Q: Canadians had been there a long time.

MCWILLIAMS: Canadians. But the point was that the transit point between Hanoi and the rest of the world was Bangkok through Vientiane. So quite often we would have people coming out of Hanoi, spending a couple of days in Vientiane at their embassies and then going down to Bangkok, because at that point very limited air support between Bangkok and Vientiane. So we would basically talk to these diplomats as they came in from Hanoi about what's going on in Vietnam and then of course go back to our typewriters and hurry up and write reports. So we

were basically do the intelligence thing on the rest of Indochina using that as a very limited window as to what was going on.

Q: Did you ever have any contact with the Vietnamese leaders who came to Vientiane?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, essentially no although I remember at one point Mr. Corcoran had to go down to Bangkok for medical reasons and I was left as chargé, this is a 27, 28 year old kid as chargé, and that happened to be the weekend that Pham Van Dong and Le Duan the leaders of Vietnam, who had been against us all these years, came to Vientiane sort of for their victory tour. And I sent this- I at the American embassy received an invitation to go to the airport to represent the American embassy. And I remember feverish messages back and forth to Washington, should I go, should I not go? What should I do? And finally the message came back saying that I was correct in saying that we should "not, not go" basically. So I showed up and I remember in the long line of the diplomatic line at the airport receiving Pham Van Dong and Le Duan. I stood at the very tail end of the diplomatic line because I obviously had very low rank and right next to the Cuban, oddly enough. And as they came through, in my rather poor Vietnamese I shook his hand and told him who I was. He got this incredible startled look and then a glare. Right behind him was Pham Van Dong who was smiling from ear to ear, just thinking it was funny that the Americans had showed up. But I was able to shake both of their hands. But other than that contact, no. We had no contact with the Vietnamese at all.

Q: Did, were we concerned with the missing in action?

MCWILLIAMS: Oh yes, yes, I should have mentioned that right away. This was a terribly important issue in Washington, of course, and that was very high on our agenda but frankly we had no, we had virtually, I cannot remember any action on that at all in Vientiane. Subsequently when I was assigned to Bangkok we saw more action but at that time, although it was a very important issue no, I had no action on that.

Q: I've been interviewing Terry Tull and Terry was talking about how she was a- I mean, you know, they began to open up-

MCWILLIAMS: That's right.

Q: And get going. I mean, it's become almost an industry there.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. Well, it was becoming that when I was in Bangkok as well, yes.

Q: What about, had the Laotian government forces pretty much taken over everything or did we have warehouses full of stuff sitting there?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, there was a place called Silver City which was the USAID compound and I guess there was lots of stuff up there. I know that one of the senior officials in the foreign ministry was driving around in an American sports car, a red one, I can't remember what it was, but it was basically stolen. But as I recall we had very little luck getting anything back, obviously.

One other issue that was important and it became very important when I went across to Bangkok was the fate of the Hmong because there was still fighting, of course, going on up there and we would get some inklings of some of the battles and so on at the embassy reported but very little because we weren't really doing anything like that.

Q: Well tell me, how about getting over to Thailand? Were you able to?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, that's part of the story actually. At one point, I guess it was in '77, there was a flash, flare up between Laos and Thailand and the one skimpy little airline, air route between Bangkok and Laos went down. As I recall I think it was the Soviets that were flying it. But in any event there was no longer any air communication so the only communication was across the Mekong and you had to get into these boats and try to cross the Mekong to Nong Kai and then take the train from Nong Kai down to Bangkok. And that was always an adventure because of course Nong Kai was a big town, you could buy things there; there was very little available in Vientiane. But crossing that river, depending upon the season, was always arduous and there are a number of tales where a diplomat's trying to cross, the motor would quit midway across and those boats would just go off, you know, in tremendous current on the Mekong, just go way south of Nong Kai and then have to sort of get that engine started and work their way back up the other coast. But that was always fun, traveling over to Nong Kai because you're never sure you can get over there or get back.

Q: What sort of support were you getting and when you got to Bangkok were you debriefed and all that?

MCWILLIAMS: No, not a great deal of that. We were reporting fairly voluminously out of Vientiane so that there wasn't too much of that. Basically it was sort of like a little R&R you'd get down to Bangkok. But for Wendy and I, we often would just take off on the weekends and go over to Nong Kai, as I say, which is charming little Thai river town and buy what you needed and get back over to Vientiane.

Q: When you say you're reporting voluminously, what were you reporting on?

MCWILLIAMS: Well basically diplomatic chatter. The Canadian or the Aussie diplomat out of Hanoi told me the following. And also, of course, we would be working the diplomatic circuit. It was, for a little, very, very small capital you had a very large diplomatic presence there. And as a consequence there were receptions and parties almost every night and basically Wendy and I were sort of known as, I think there was always a question among our observers as to who was the CIA agent, Wendy or me. But we would be digging for information, of course, at these parties.

Q: Did- who else was, you know, this 12-person embassy?

MCWILLIAMS: Well, that was including the Marine detachment.

Q: Oh, you had a Marine detachment?

MCWILLIAMS: We had five or six people, five or six Marines there. But I remember at one point they were ordered out, reducing us down to six people. And I remember I had a farewell party for them, a dinner party, just Americans, and I remember the toast which Cochran liked. I said this is the last, you are the last military, U.S. military to be in Indochina for the last 30 years. Anyway, he thought that was good, he liked history. But we were down to six. Julie Holmes was our secretary, Wayne Swedenburg was one of several admin officers and then we had a series of communicators and I'm afraid I'm not going to remember all of their names. The communicators tended to be in and out. But we were down to six for awhile.

Q: Did you get any visitors from the State Department or anywhere?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes sure, we had State Department types coming in. I'm trying to remember any congressional delegations. We had staffers in. Offhand I can't remember any CODELs. But Bob Oakley had come out; he was the DAS. Phil Habib I don't think came out, nor did Dick Holbrooke, who succeeded him, that I can recall. Dick Holbrooke came out later after I had left. Oh, Mansfield, Mike Mansfield came out and that was a good visit, I recall that.

Q: He was ambassador to Japan at the time.

MCWILLIAMS: Well no, no, he was senate majority leader.

Q: Senator majority leader.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. I can remember we put him up at the hotel, which sounds strange at the time but we basically didn't have room at the ambassador's residence, and I decided I was going to get over there really early, I was his control officer, make sure everything went well, and I arrived like 6:30 and there he's sitting alone in this huge old lobby waiting for someone to deal with him. But obviously he was an early riser, old Montana guy, but very, very nice man, wonderful man to work with. My first staff del, or CODEL, I guess.

Q: What about the Laos? First the officials. Could you go and talk to them?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. That was the thing that I think struck me most. The Lao themselves, if you've ever had dealings with them, are among the most charitable, generous, warm, lovely people, absolutely gorgeous people. And we found with a few of the Lao officials that you could break through and have a person-to-person communication. Some of them were hard as nails and you just couldn't talk to them but some of them were more Lao than communist, we used to say.

Q: What about the people? Could you sort of get out and mix with the people?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. Yes. And there wasn't a great deal of following. That is to say the Pathet Lao were not particularly interested in chasing us around as was the case in Afghanistan and Moscow where I served subsequently. But as a consequence, Wendy and I would get out on our bikes and go off into the countryside. I should say we were pretty much confined to Vientiane and its environs but its environs, of course, were very rural in those days so it was really a treat

to get out and go orchid hunting or just meeting with the local people.

Q: Did you feel that the equivalent of the Secret Service or something, the intelligence service was particularly interested in your or was this not that sophisticated?

MCWILLIAMS: Well you know, I think it reflects perhaps to some extent my naiveté in those days but I didn't notice that particularly. And I'm sure that they did, I'm sure that they were following us because even some of our Western diplomatic colleagues assumed Wendy or I were CIA and for that reason I'm sure there would have been, perhaps even the Soviets or the Vietnamese might have been interested in what we were doing but I don't remember specifically any obvious tailing in that period.

Q: Was there any sort of intrusion by irregular American-led forces or Thais or anything like that?

MCWILLIAMS: No, not in those days. Now subsequently there was a lot of cross border efforts, particularly in the MIA issue but no. I recall one incident where an old U.S. military fellow from the Vietnam era had gotten onto a plane in Bangkok and somehow managed to get into Hanoi and apparently, as I recall, looking for his wife, a Vietnamese woman. And this was a big mess, of course, and he got turned around, he got on a plane back to Vientiane, in custody, and we were able to get him out of custody and get him safely back to Bangkok. I remember the incident because my friend Wendy Chamberlain did a very good job in negotiating that through and it could have been a mess but she sort of took charge of that as the consular officer, did a very good job on that.

Q: Well then, was Cochran there the whole time you were there?

MCWILLIAMS: No. He left in '77 I believe and George Roberts came in, a very different fellow, very capable, very charming, loquacious, had a wonderful wife named Zara who enlivened our diplomatic community significantly. He was of a mind unlike Tom to try to improve ties and I think subsequent to Tom Cochran most of the chiefs of mission there were aggressive in that sense, trying to build ties, build relationships with the local government, even Wendy subsequently, who did wind up as ambassador, as I recall, not chargé, these were all chargés. There is, I think, in the Foreign Service a tendency to try to improve relationships even with the worst of governments.

Q: Yes.

MCWILLIAMS: That's just sort of instinctually what you do although interestingly then you give these farewell speeches frequently which damn local government. I've seen that happen. But George tried very hard to improve the relationship. I think it was premature but he was careful with what he did.

Q: Was there any concern about people who had been pro American or what have you, I mean, put in concentration camps and that sort of thing?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. We were aware of a number of people and indeed reports would come back about conditions. And we would, obviously- no, I shouldn't say obviously, we would on occasion raise this with the Lao but I think our feeling was at that time and I think appropriately that calling attention to our concern about these individuals probably wouldn't do them any good. When I served in Moscow subsequently we very much made use of the relationship, Moscow to Washington, to try to intervene on behalf of individuals who were not necessarily our friends but who were dissidents and refuseniks and so on. But no, in Laos we didn't do that a lot and I think in fact in retrospect it would have been a mistake to do that.

Q: Well I think there are times to do something and times not to do and sometimes it's hard to distinguish, you know, to make the decision.

MCWILLIAMS: Now, when I was in Laos of course the old king was still alive and there was always interest in what had happened to him and we did get some reporting on him. I can remember my maid, I mean the local Lao community was an excellent source of information, saying something about the king and I immediately perked up, this was probably at home, and she refused to speak to me, wouldn't speak about it because she was afraid, of course, and finally she went like this, putting her wrists together, shook her head and sobbed a little bit.

Q: As though he were handcuffed.

MCWILLIAMS: That he was being held that way. And he subsequently died in captivity.

Q: What about, was there any reflection, looking at the map I can see that you've got a long piece of territory before you get to Cambodia and obviously you couldn't get there. Were you getting any reflection from the Cambodian holocaust?

MCWILLIAMS: No. Not a thing. And indeed that only really became I think apparent when I began service in 1980 in Bangkok. Even at that point it wasn't really clear until the refugees began to come out in great numbers. That's a different period, different era.

Q: Well then, is there anything else you should discuss there?

MCWILLIAMS: On Laos? No. I think in retrospect it was interesting that that leadership that we dealt with remained in power; I mean those very personalities, for nearly 20 years after we'd left. So I think that Mr. Cochran's original insight into trying to develop almost a personal relationship with some of them and his approach on that was probably right because otherwise it would have just been us dealing with Vietnamese puppets.

Q: I have to say I just finished, about two days ago, a series of interviews with Marie Huhtala.

MCWILLIAMS: Oh yes.

Q: And Marie at one point was desk officer to the Southeast Asian hand-

MCWILLIAMS: She was in Chiang Mai when I was in Bangkok.

Q: -for Laos among other places. But just saying, you know, essentially it was and is essentially a stagnant area.

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. I mean, we forget it's still a very much a communist government. I'm afraid still very much beholden to Hanoi. The only thing that's new and I think it's a tragedy for us old Lao hands is that they finally bridged the Mekong and I think what you have now is, as I understand it, a great deal of Thai enterprise now in Laos, taking down trees and so on. And that's unfortunate because there is tremendous natural beauty and natural wealth in Laos. Laos, I've always felt it should have been an island somewhere but sandwiched between two very aggressive neighbors, the Vietnamese and the Thai and of course the Chinese up north, it's a particularly unfortunate place.

Q: Well during the time you were there we were getting closer to China. Did that make any difference?

MCWILLIAMS: No. At that time there wasn't much closeness in the relationship, certainly not reflected in Vientiane. Tremendous interest in what the Chinese might or might not be doing up in the north at that point. They controlled pretty much the northernmost province. But no, I can't remember too much, any interaction with the Chinese.

Q: Did you have any connection with the Hmong?

MCWILLIAMS: Subsequently yes.

Q: But at that point?

MCWILLIAMS: No, at that point not very much. We did a little bit of reporting, as I said earlier, about reports of conflict with the Hmong and some of the problems the Hmong were facing in dealing not so much with the Lao but with the Vietnamese. We also had, I should mention, a number of peace groups, the Mennonites and the Quakers were in Vientiane and as Americans we of course had pretty close relations with them and lots of debates because of course they took a very different perspective. But I'm actually still friendly with the Mennonites who were out there at the time and in retrospect I think they had it right in a lot of ways. They were trying to respond with the humanitarian concerns in Laos.

Q: Well, were they accepted in Laos?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes. I think so. Because they had been there a long time and because their humanitarian focus was so genuine and I think pretty widely accepted they had a pretty secure position in Laos.

Q: Well then, you left there when?

MCWILLIAMS: In 1978.

Q: Whither?

MCWILLIAMS: I came back to be the Lao desk officer and then the Cambodia/Vietnam desk officer in a two year span, '78 to '80.

Q: What was this period like? Was this a period of, I mean, this is the Carter time. Maybe this might be a good place to stop, what do you think?

MCWILLIAMS: Yes, I'll tell you, if we're going to get into that it's a whole different realm, so maybe.

Q: Yes, it's a whole different realm and I was just thinking we'll put at the end of the tape here. We're going to pick this up in 1978 when you're back to Washington.

MCWILLIAMS: Right. Holbrooke was then assistant secretary, was a very interesting, dynamic leader as well.

Q: And what was your position?

MCWILLIAMS: My first job, lasting just about a year, was the desk officer for Laos and Cambodia. And after that one year I moved to the desk officer responsibility for Cambodia and Vietnam.

Q: Well, let's talk about Laos and Cambodia at the time. What was ticking? I mean, this is three years after we bugged out of the whole area except for our tiny foothold in Laos.

MCWILLIAMS: Well, there wasn't very much on our agenda in either country at that point. I had just come out of Laos, of course, and that was a very sterile relationship. There was a brief initiative, essentially from the State Department, to relax some of the restrictions on the relationship, trying to seek support for this in Congress which failed. I was a part of that but very minor effort. And of course with Cambodia at that point the Khmer Rouge were in control and we had virtually no contact at all with the Cambodians although I do recall at one point there was an attempt to begin at least communications, quiet communications with the Cambodians and this was to be accomplished through an initiative that myself and my director took by going up to the UN to meet with the Cambodian delegation and I forget frankly exactly the ruse under which we agreed to meet. But in the course of the conversation it was planned that actually as the junior officer I would say that in addition to the rather specific, and I can't recall what the issue was we were supposed to be discussing, that we would be open to communications on other issues as well.

Q: Did that, I mean, did you find that you were almost having to look for, I mean, where were you, what were you getting-

MCWILLIAMS: There was a hell of a lot of work to do. At that time, of course, there was

tremendous press interest and academic interest in both Vietnam and Cambodia, tremendous interest on the Hill as well, and it was a very busy job and frankly it was only thanks to an extremely good director, Steve Lyne, that I was able to keep my head above water. Certainly under the Laos, when I was Laos/Cambodia desk officer there wasn't a whole lot really to address but that one year working as Vietnam/Cambodia officer was extremely busy because simply so much was going on and I was new to the State Department bureaucracy, I had never actually worked in the State Department and only a second tour officer so I relied very much on leadership of a very good director, Steve Lyne.

LACY A. WRIGHT
Director, Kampuchea Working Group
Washington, DC (1980-1981)

Mr. Wright joined the Foreign Service in 1968 after earning degrees at Mendelien College and Loyola University. His foreign service took him to Vietnam both during and after the War. Other assignments took him to Milan, London and Bangkok as well as to the State Department in Washington, where he worked with International Organizations in matters concerning refugees, and UNESCO affairs. Mr. Wright was born and raised in Springfield, Illinois. Mr. Wright was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1998.

Q: Well then you left the Italian desk in 1980, and then what?

WRIGHT: Then I went to be the director of something which was then called the Kampuchea Working Group. I did that for a year and a half. And this was a kind of task force which was set up to respond to the tragic events in Cambodia and Thailand at the end of 1980, when the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and sent hundreds of thousands of Cambodians fleeing into Thailand.

Q: Well, who headed this and how was it organized, first. You were doing this, by the way, from 1980 to—

WRIGHT: Let's see, end of '81.

Q: Shall we stop?

WRIGHT: Is that all right?

Q: Sure, that's fine. Why don't we stop at this point? And we'll pick this up when you're dealing with this Kampuchea working group, which was starting in 1980, and we haven't gotten into this at all..

Today is the 10th of April, 1998. So you wee assigned to the Kampuchea Working Group.

WRIGHT: that's right.

Q: You were doing it from when to when?

WRIGHT: I did it for a year and a half, from about June of 1980 to the end of 1981.

Q: Okay, what was the Kampuchea Working Group. What was the genesis?

WRIGHT: The genesis was the catastrophe that befell the Cambodians in the wake of the Pol Pot years, when the Vietnamese, at the end of 1979, invaded Cambodia. Now one has to have mixed feelings about that, because they were able to drive the Khmer Rouge out of Phnom Penh, which I think any right-thinking person has to regard as a good thing, but at the same time, they took over the country, which we regarded as a bad thing, and even worse, they created a huge number of Cambodian refugees, whom we didn't want to call refugees—whom we called displaced persons—who were, whatever you called them, pushed to the Thai border, most of them across the border into Thailand.

Q: Well, now, what was the group working on? Was it on the relief of this mass of refugees? Was it trying to do something about the situation in Cambodia? It is now called Kampuchea, I believe?

WRIGHT: That's right. During that period it was called Kampuchea. We were doing relief, and the United States Government put up a great deal of money to feed and house these displaced people, and this was funneled mostly—well there were two main channels of effort going on, I guess. One had to do with the agencies of the UN system, principally the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, assisted, by the way, by the ICRC, the International Committee of the Red Cross, which, by the way, is not part of the UN system but is an international organization, and UNICEF. UNICEF was very much involved.

Q: UNICEF, the United Nations Committee for what?

WRIGHT: Let me see, anyway the C stands for children. And it's based in New York, as you know. The other part of the effort had to do with voluntary organizations, many of them—probably most of them—American, but not totally. There were organizations from other countries there too, mostly based in Bangkok, and a very large number of them—I don't remember the exact number now, but probably upwards of a hundred at the height of this disaster—so our job was to funnel out our own money to the international organizations involved and, in some instances, to the voluntary organizations, like Catholic charities and various other agencies in the United States that are concerned with refugees and relief.

The other thing that we did was to do a lot of reporting on the situation there, not so much the political situation but the relief situation. And there was plenty to report about. I would say that another part of our effort was protection of these refugees. Now protection involved not only feeding and clothing these people but also trying to do what we could to assure their physical safety. These camps were very, very large places. I believe that Khao-I-Dang Camp reached several hundred thousand people at its height. You can imagine that in those kinds of conditions,

with law and order having largely broken down and with so many other social problems coming to the fore at that moment, there was a good deal of lawlessness. There were many incidents in which minor warlords within these camps would take them over or take over parts of them, and so this was a constant problem. Probably, when we looked at it in a cold blooded way, statistically, even though there were murders in the camps, there were other kinds of violence... I remember at one point we compared this to the conditions, as far as we could determine them statistically, in Thailand as a whole, and they weren't as bad. That also means that Thailand was pretty bad—it's murder rate, for example. But it probably also means that despite appeals of alarm from a number of the organizations that worked there who saw these things first hand, they were not an extraordinarily high level, given the fact that in any society, including in a place like Thailand, a certain amount of violence exists anywhere. But at any rate, that was one of our main problems, and it was a subject of a good deal of scrutiny by our own Congress, people like Steve Solarz, Democrat then from New York, and others, as well as by these agencies themselves, whose job in life it was to look after refugees. So we were constantly under pressure to do better, rightly so, with regard to the displaced people.

By the way, the distinction between a refugee and a displaced person is an extremely important one here. A refugee had the opportunity to be resettled in another country. He or she was a person who, according to the UN definition, had suffered persecution in his country of origin, and one of the options for such a person was to be resettled in another country. In part for political reasons, because we had just had these waves mostly of Vietnamese refugees who had kind of saturated the market for refugees in the world, and also because, I think, we genuinely thought that the Cambodians would probably want to go back to Cambodia and one day could go back to Cambodia. They were categorized as displaced persons. This too was a constant source of friction and contention between the US Government and various humanitarian groups.

Q: What were the humanitarian groups pushing for?

WRIGHT: Well, I wouldn't say they were all pushing with one voice, but first of all, they were all pushing for the best possible treatment of the displaced people—that was not in dispute—but some of them were pushing for some of them to be considered as refugees, and indeed, eventually, some of them were. These began to do this and to make pretty contorted distinctions among people, and often kind of arbitrary ones. People who had arrived before a certain date could be considered refugees; people who had arrived the next day were displaced people. And so there was a certain amount of that, and that was seen as unfair, as indeed, if you were one of the people involved, it probably was, and so on and so on.

Another thing that complicated the matter was that there were also camps for Vietnamese boat people who had washed up on the shores of southern Thailand. Some of them were separate camps, all by themselves, but in another instance, in Site II, as it was called, which was another huge camp, maybe 100,000 people, there was an enclave (inside of Site II) of Vietnamese refugees. Now there is a situation which is perfectly capable of exploding at any moment because the Vietnamese and the Cambodians, first of all, don't like one another and, secondly, the people in the Vietnamese enclave could be resettled in the United States, the people in the rest of this sprawling camp could not. So there were all kinds of problems. The efforts that then went on—although I just realized in the describing of this I am skipping ahead probably into one

of my later jobs, so let me stick back with the Kampuchea Group.

During that time, the effort was mostly to keep these people alive. There was, of course, a political aspect to it. It had to do with the Khmer Rouge. The United States was put in the very difficult position because, on the one hand, we were, of course, against the Khmer Rouge because of the atrocities that they had committed; on the other hand, they were the enemy of our enemy, the Vietnamese. They were also in charge of people. That is, they ran some camps along the Thai-Cambodian border on the Cambodian side. So in many instances, at many times, the question was, Do you feed the people in these camps and thereby lend support, aid and comfort, to the Khmer Rouge, or do you let them starve? And there were people passionately on both sides of this question. By and large, we chose to feed them, and then, of course, our adversaries accused us of coddling the Khmer Rouge, which they regarded as a terrible thing to do. So that was a constant *leitmotif* throughout this.

Q: Were there any signs that the Khmer Rouge had begun to accept the responsibilities of power?

WRIGHT: I wouldn't put it that way, but one has to ask, who is they? The Khmer Rouge was always a very shadowy group of people, and it's probably a little too much to think that they had, let us say, a government in exile and ministers and all that kind of apparatus, although I think sometimes they did have people who were called those, but these were people out living in the most primitive conditions in camps that they had set up and that they were defending. So it takes a kind of leap of imagination to think of them as a government. Nonetheless, your question is a good one, and it added to the ambiguity of the situation, because sometimes it did appear as though the people in these camps were being modestly well treated by the Khmer Rouge running the camps, despite their atrocious past. So that, as I say, lent some more ambiguity to the situation.

One of the litmus tests that was often applied to this situation was whether the people living in the camps, ordinary people, wanted to escape and whether they would escape if they could. And sometimes, observing the situation, one came up with one answer and sometimes in another camp with another answer. But that too, if you had a situation where people were not trying to flee and where they did seem to be getting the aid that was being sent there, that lent support to the arguments of the people who said, "We can't let these people starve. We ought to feed them like other people."

Q: What about the parts of Cambodia that had been taken over by the Vietnamese? How were things being done there?

WRIGHT: I'm not sure I can answer that any more with much enlightenment. There were, of course, vast parts of the country that were in the hands of the Vietnamese. One of the constant questions during that two- or three- year period was how much rice and other foods, but mostly rice, can the Cambodians grow for themselves, and therefore, how much has to be provided by the international community? This, by the way, brings up another point of contention: should the international community, with our help or with our acquiescence, be feeding people in the interior of Cambodia, who, after all, were being ruled by the Vietnamese, who were our

adversaries? And there were people in our Congress and elsewhere who said no, we should not be. As I remember it, we certainly acquiesced in the deliveries of rice to the interior of Cambodia and I think we paid for a certain amount of it. But to get back to what I was saying, one of the efforts was to try to cut down on the amount that was needed from the international community by encouraging the growing of rice inside Cambodia. This was in large part in the hands of the FAO, the Food and Agriculture Organization, based in Rome, which had a big role in the interior of Cambodia. So they had to deal, of course, with the Vietnamese, who were running the place, as well as with the Cambodians, and that effort, as I remember it, had a certain amount of success.

Q: What was your role particularly in this?

WRIGHT: Well, I was the director of the Kampuchea Working Group. We probably had, at any given time, maybe eight or ten people attached to us, some of them Foreign Service officers, some of them AID people, and it was a group that was constantly shifting and changing in its composition as people came and went. There was a group in New York of the international agencies and organizations, which was headed for a while by Sir Robert Jackson and of which UNICEF was a lead agency, and it was an effort to coordinate the activities of all the players, particularly the large international organizations. And they had pledging conferences and they had other kinds of meetings in New York, so one of our efforts was to follow these meetings very closely, be in touch with all the people involved, go to the meetings, report on them for the State Department and other agencies of our government—that was one of the things that we did. We also did the same kind of thing with regard to the voluntary agencies, which had their own organization in New York, of which Julia Taft was the head for a while, in fact, recently, I think. So we would sometimes go to their meetings. During the course of this, I made trips to Thailand, trips to Rome, to Geneva—not a large number I don't think—because people or agencies in those places were all involved in this effort.

Q: How did you find dealing with the Thais with this mass of people on their borders?

WRIGHT: Difficult. The Thais, before I went to Thailand, which I did later, I was given a very good piece of advice by one of my teachers of Thai here at FSI, who was not a very good teacher of Thai, but he did leave me this one piece of wisdom. He said, "Don't forget when you get to Thailand that whatever you do to a Thai he will do back twice to you. If you are nice to him, he will be twice as nice to you, and if you are not nice to him..." The Thais can be extremely gracious, normally are extremely gracious. They have the best hotels in the world, I believe, for that reason, because they have this tremendous capacity for service and for making one feel good. At the same time, they have a very dark side, as is attested to by their murder rate, which is very, very high. That by way of introduction. The Thais, of course, did not want Cambodians on their soil, let alone Vietnamese on their soil. They made that extremely well known to us. We, on the other hand, for humanitarian and other reasons, wanted these people taken care of, and the only option that we saw was for them to be taken care of in Thailand. So we had to try to reach an agreement with the Thai Government for this to happen. And it did happen, albeit fairly grudgingly by the Thais. The Thais were very fond of being sanctimonious about all they were doing, and in some cases that may have been justified, but for the most part we were spending, of course, a very large amount of money in Thailand to take care of these people, and the Thai, on

the other hand, were constantly setting up regulations which wreaked hardship on the people involved, not to mention the various kinds of chicanery and corruption that would normally go on in any kind of a situation like that and which did, indeed, go on in Thailand.

So, for example, none of the displaced people was ever allowed to leave the camp, and if such a person did, if he were found wandering around alone in Thailand—which happened from time to time—he was put in jail. And I've been to that jail in Bangkok, and believe me, it's not a nice place to be. And the Thai were pretty unrelenting about this. And we were often involved, for one reason or another, in trying to get somebody out of one of these jails or trying to convince the Thai to treat the people more leniently. Sometimes this was because such a person had a defender in the US Congress who wrote to us about him or her or for some similar reason we got drawn into it. So we were constantly talking to the Thai about better treatment for these displaced people and Vietnamese refugees.

Q: Well, while you were doing this, and particularly dealing with the Thais, there had to be an end plan. In other words, you had the Vietnamese, who were sort of our enemies, suddenly controlling most of the country. You had this amorphous group the Khmer Rouge, which were beyond the pale for any civilized party to deal with. And in a way no particular end in sight. And then you had these refugees and displaced people sitting in Thailand and also straddling the border. This sounds as open-ended as one can get.

WRIGHT: Yes, that's what the Thais thought. And by the way, your question has just reminded me. There was another curiosity ascribed to the Thai treatment of these people, and that was that, on the one hand, the Thai wanted people to be resettled because they wanted them out of there in any ways they could; on the other hand, they knew that if the Cambodians started to be resettled in the United States, this would attract vast new numbers of people into Thailand in hopes of being resettled to the United States. So in the end, when you netted it all out, they were very much against resettlement in the United States for the Cambodians.

But you asked about the end game. I guess the end game in our minds was what, in fact, eventually happened, ten years or so later, which was that we always looked forward to the day when conditions in Cambodia would change sufficiently to allow these people to go back. Actually, I was gone from this by the time that eventually happened, and I think that when it did happen there was not too much controversy. I think people did, in fact, filter back into Cambodia, not only filter back but were taken back and assisted within Cambodia by the international organizations in a fairly peaceful way. Now a lot of other things more violent have happened since then, but I think at the time that that happened it was not so contested.

By the way, I've totally forgotten to mention another huge group of refugees—this time—who were in Thailand, and those were the Lao, up along the Lao border, large, large numbers of them as well who had fled in 1975, when the Vietnamese took over all of Indochina, and were still there. And there was a different wrinkle with them still, and that was that there was a great deal of sympathy for the Lao, particularly for the Hmong, which is a mountain tribe of Lao, who are different ethnically from the so-called lowland Lao, and who worked very closely with our Special Forces and others during the Vietnam War. And we felt that we owed them, as indeed, we did. And so we regarded them as refugees, capable of being resettled in the United States.

The only problem was they didn't want to be refugees. They wanted to go back to Laos, by and large. Now many of them did come to the United States, and that was one of the problems because I guess they tended to write back the truth to the people in the camps, which was that they were having a difficult time. And so for years, people sat in those camps who could easily have been interviewed by the INS and gone to the United States. And this, too, became a subject of contention with the Thai Government: when are these people going to leave?

Q: What was the feeling--again we're talking '80-'81—about the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, that this was a sometime thing, or how did you figure that was going to play out at the time?

WRIGHT: I guess we thought it was a sometime thing, in the sense that the Vietnamese would gradually draw back some of their troops, but I imagine—I'm guessing a little bit now—that we thought that the Vietnamese would do everything they could to maintain a heavy influence over whatever government there was in Cambodia.

Q: Was there any reaching out with the Vietnamese occupiers and their collaborators in Cambodia with us or with any of the refugee groups in our dealings?

WRIGHT: I'm sure they were always trying to put on their best face for the international organizations and the voluntary agencies who worked in Cambodia. I don't think there's any doubt about that. I don't remember any instances where they could have been said to reach out to us. I think we were fairly implacable adversaries at that time and regarded as beyond the pale, although I might be wrong and there might have been instances where some probe was made.

Q: How about our embassy in Bangkok? I imagine that, in a way, they weren't very happy with the situation and you might have caught some of the brunt of the thing, of, you know, "You're screwing up our normal relations with this interesting country."

WRIGHT: This came later, I would say. During the period that I'm talking about now, Mort Abramowitz was our ambassador. Abramowitz was a decided partisan of the displaced people. There was no doubt where Abramowitz stood, and in fact, it was he who sounded the alarm to mobilize the US Government to do something about this human tragedy in the beginning. So it would be interesting to talk to him about this, but he was certainly regarded as a decided defender of the interests of these displaced people and, I presume, must therefore have been looked at with a good deal of suspicion by the Thai Government at the time.

Q: How about in Congress? You mentioned Steve Solarz. Were there others? Steve Solarz, as far as I know—I've been interviewing him and he's been off to Cambodia all the time—he's involved with the Pol Pot matter.

WRIGHT: Even now?

Q: How did you find dealing with Congress? Were you being called upon to testify and that sort of thing.

WRIGHT: I don't think I ever testified, although other people did that I wrote testimony for. And I talked to a lot of staffers. People like Solarz who felt very strongly that the United States had a humanitarian responsibility toward the people in these camps in Thailand, as well as others of them, although I haven't thought about this for a while, but there were a number of congressional delegations, particularly later, when I was in Thailand, who went to Thailand. I'm trying to think of somebody who would have been on the other side of this. It's hard to be against helping refugees, but I would say there were people—this might bear some more thought—who were not involved in this issue, and then there were people, like Solarz, who were very much involved in trying to get the United States to be a part of this humanitarian effort.

Q: Who did you report to and where did you fit in in the State Department apparatus?

WRIGHT: I reported to the refugee bureau, although we had a lot to do also with the East Asia bureau. In fact, specifically I reported to a deputy assistant secretary who was, at least, I think, for most of that time, Shep Lowman.

Q: How did you find it within the Department? You know we've been so involved in Vietnam. This is five or six years after the fall of Vietnam. Was there a tendency to say, "God, I wish this would go away," or did you find an engaged State Department ?

WRIGHT: Well, by that time, of course, although this was a big problem, it was by no means the biggest problem in the State Department . It wasn't the Vietnam War. As I say, the East Asia bureau was very much involved in this, particularly in the person of one of its deputy assistant secretaries at the time, who was John Negroponte, so I would say that within the refugee bureau this was a very large item. Up on the Seventh Floor, I doubt that it loomed nearly that large.

Q: Well, when you left this job in 1981, how did you see the thing standing? Did you see this as an open-ended problem, or did you see that there was a handle on it, did you feel?

WRIGHT: Well, again, to be honest, I don't remember what I thought, but as I look back on it, I think that we did have a lot of success. I was talking a few months ago in New York with one of the UNICEF officials that was very much involved in this. His name is Paul Altesman. And Paul at that time was a young aide to Jim Grant. Jim Grant was the very much beloved and very competent head of UNICEF during these years. And Paul was saying that from his point of view and his institution's point of view this whole effort was a tremendous success. When you think of the enormity of the job involved and even though it often didn't look like it at the time, to have received all these hundreds of thousands of people from three countries eventually into Thailand, taken care of them by and large, and then had them return either to their own countries or to third countries over however many years it was, eight or ten years probably, was really an effort that everybody involved in it could take pride in.

WILLIAM W. THOMAS, JR.
Chargé d'Affaires
Laos (1981-1983)

William W. Thomas was born in North Carolina in 1925. He served in the US Army during 1944 and later received his bachelor's degree from the University of North Carolina in 1947. His career included position in Thailand, Hong Kong, Cambodia, Laos, Washington D.C., Taiwan, New York, and Beijing. Mr. Thomas was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1994.

Q: What were you doing during this 1981-83 period?

THOMAS: We periodically went to the Lao government asking their help in accounting for missing Americans, and we asked for their help in recovering remains of dead Americans. As time passed, more and more the emphasis came to be on recovering remains. Towards the end of my tour we got a group of MIA association families to come to Laos, to fly by helicopter to a remote area and to look in bomb craters, and they actually found some human bones in them. Since I left Laos things have moved much faster. The new generation of Lao government officials is more willing to work with us than their predecessors.

Another very important program is the Vietnamese exchange. I was allowed to go up to the Plaine des Jarres with a Congressman and have a look. We didn't see anything we hadn't seen before, but it was nice to be able to go up and show a member of Congress the bombed out countryside.

Q: How did you find the Laotians? When you arrived there you said they were beginning to change, but was it difficult to deal with them? I am talking about the government.

THOMAS: As people they are extraordinarily pleasant and easy to deal with. They don't stand on ceremony at all. They don't always do things the way you would like them to but you can't be too particular. Personally I found them very much like they had been during my first tour there. However, their cooperation with us was not everything that could be desired. They had some very good people and I imagine they are more important now that the older people like Prince Souphanouvong have died.

Q: You said your job was mainly to hold open the embassy?

THOMAS: Yes, and wait for better days, which have come. It was a fairly obvious policy but a sensible one. Things have gotten much better under my successors.

Q: What was your problem with the Rambo types which I assume could be termed as soldiers of fortune?

THOMAS: Yes. We had problems with one American in particular who claimed to have been in Laos wandering around in the forest. He possibly was, but it was by no means certain that he was. There were others. I think there were more stories than people. Anybody could say that he had been to Laos and get it printed in the press somewhere.

Q: Did you find yourself having to swat down these stories all the time?

THOMAS: I think Bangkok was doing most of the swatting, that is where the stories were coming from. They could go to the bars and find the guys who were pushing the stories, whereas we were in another world.

Q: Well, what kind of a world was it? Were you pretty well restricted? What did you do?

THOMAS: Compare Laos and China, they are two so-called Communist countries. In China if you invite people to dinner they would say, "Sorry, it is inconvenient." In Laos if you invite people to dinner they would say, "I would be delighted," They would be late, but they would be there and behave very politely while they were there. The Lao were easy to get along with but not easy to accomplish anything administratively with. But fortunately we had a large embassy left over from the old days which we were able to keep.

Q: So you were a small staff with a huge embassy?

THOMAS: We had a huge house from the days when there were a couple hundred Americans in Vientiane. One other thing on the MIAs that keeps the story alive. We had one story of a man named Garwood, an American who stayed on his own initiative in Vietnam. We used to get reports that he had been sighted in such and such a place...an American black has been sighted. That kept things alive until he finally got fed up with Vietnam and left. The other thing was the Japanese from the Second World War who stayed in the Malaysian jungle until 1990. These were very real people and from 1945-90 is a long time. But it kept things alive in Laos which otherwise might have died a natural death.

Q: Were the Vietnamese running things at that time?

THOMAS: I had that impression. They had an intelligent and very well informed ambassador who had been in Laos for several years. We felt at that time that the Vietnamese were running things. They had a large embassy there and a military group outside of the city. When I went to the Plain of Jars there were Vietnamese troops everywhere, many of them speaking Lao. So when things changed in Vietnam, it automatically meant things changed in Laos for the better. They have gotten much more comfortable about cooperating with us on the MIAs, people or remains.

THERESA A. TULL
Chargé d’Affaires
Laos (1983-1986)

Theresa A. Tull was born in New Jersey in 1936. She received her bachelor's degree from the University of Maryland in 1972. Her career included positions in Brussels, Vietnam, Washington D.C., Philippines, Laos, and ambassadorships to Guyana and Brunei. Ambassador Tull was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in November 2004.

Q: '86. Okay. What was the situation first we'll talk about relations second, but just the plain situation in Laos when you got there in '83?

TULL: It was very quiet, very economically undeveloped. They were very much under the thumb of the Vietnamese, which they probably still are. Sleepy little town, not much economic development.

Q: The town is?

TULL: Vientiane, the capital, Vientiane. They had not yet moved toward a more open economic system so it was very quiet, very sleepy, but beautiful, nice old style Southeast Asia. I love Southeast Asia. Vientiane was this beautiful little town on the Mekong River with hills in the background, with Thailand across the Mekong. It was quiet. There were relatively few cars creating noise. There was, as I assess the government situation, the hard-liners who had been in the caves and up in the hills in the very difficult provinces during the war, they were at the top of the pecking order and they had the interior ministry and things like that. The more outward looking, common sense type people were in the foreign ministry, but they were not viewed as maybe sufficiently nasty to have a lot of say in running things. The deputy foreign minister, Soubanh, had been in the hills and in the caves and he was a smart communist who also realized you had to be outward looking a little bit. He had a very good person in charge of western affairs, Pheuiphanh Ngosivathanh, was his name. My predecessor, Bill Thomas, told me that when he informed him that the new chargé was going to be Theresa Tull he said in mock dismay, "Oh, a woman. We're going to have to be nice to her." And they were reasonably nice to me. I got to have a very good relationship with Pheuiphanh.

At that point Souvanna Phouma was still alive. He was ill and my hope was that at some point I could meet him. He had been head of the neutralist faction back during the peak of the Vietnam War, the Indochina War, when there were three factions in Laos: the communists, an extreme right wing group, and this Neutralist faction. I believe Souvanna Phouma was the Prime Minister of that tripartite government. He had linkages to the royal family. He had sufficient prestige that when the war was over it is my understanding that it was he who persuaded the communist government to allow a continuation of a U.S. Embassy in Vientiane, on a much, much reduced scale. We'd had a massive presence in Laos and it was kicked down. I think we had about nine Americans when I was there, but it was Souvanna Phouma who had enough sense to want Laos to have this little contact with the West. It gave us a window into Indochina. This was 1983 and the war ended in '75. We had never closed that embassy, just reduced it in size. We had to be very careful. We were very circumscribed. The Western community, particularly the Americans, were confined literally to the city limits of Vientiane. You could not go outside the city limits unless you had a special permit, special permission. The Lao claimed this was for security purposes. Nonsense. There was some rebel activity far outside the city, but it was basically because we want to watch every move you make and we don't like you. You know, you are the Americans and dropped all those bombs and left unexploded ordnance around. You're going to stay in the capital where we can watch you.

Now, one way to get out of town was if you had an aid program, which of course we didn't, but the Swedes could get out because they had an aid program. The British had little bits and pieces of one. The French were pretty successful. They had an excellent ambassador there.

He could get around a little bit and he was very forthcoming with me so to the extent I could do political reporting a lot of it was what he had learned. It was a very interesting and difficult time. It was tough particularly being confined to the city. It was particularly hard on the staff. It just rankled me. I was so busy. At any post I've ever had I've always managed to find more work to do than there were hours in the day to do it in, so I was happy fulfilling work. The staff, when their work day was over, it was pretty tough being confined to a small town.

The Australians were there in pretty good numbers. They had a club with tennis courts, a swimming pool, and a bar and restaurant. A lot of our people belonged and enjoyed it. The residence I had was beautiful. It was the ambassador's residence and it had tennis courts and a swimming pool, which I made available to the staff, anytime they wanted it. There was a lot of tennis going on, not just the staff, but diplomats and aid workers from other embassies used our courts. To help deal with the morale situation, we had a weekly pouch run to Bangkok because we could only get limited classified material at posts. We could get cable traffic, but the other things that you needed to keep your systems functioning you had to go down to Bangkok and bring back. We had a generous policy for that, paying good per diem to get the folks out, get them down for three or four days, go down and pick up a pouch and spend three or four days in Bangkok and then come back. Each American got a pouch run about every two months.

Q: How big was your staff?

TULL: There were about eight or nine of us.

Q: Were they mainly married, unmarried?

TULL: Some of them had families in the States. We generally didn't have dependents there, although my initial secretary's young son, who was about ten years old, was at post when I arrived. Her replacement was single. The bulk of the Americans were unmarried, but there were a couple of married people who went home periodically to see their families in the U.S.

Q: Well, then were there what were you doing?

TULL: Well, the biggest issue we had, which was wonderful to deal with and one of the major accomplishments of my Foreign Service career, was attempting to persuade the Lao government to allow crash site excavations to search for the remains of our missing service personnel in action during the war. The big issue was POW/MIAs. I went there with the view that there probably were no POWs, but you had to keep an open mind on the subject. But definitely we had crash sites. President Reagan made getting a full accounting of POWs/MIAs and remains recovery a priority for his administration. My impression was the President Carter did not push this issue.

Q: They would be the MIAs.

TULL: They would be the MIAs from planes that had gone down and we wanted to recover remains. No recovery effort had been allowed in Indochina up to that point. The National League of Families in the United States was very active on this and I consulted with them. There was an Air Force colonel in the White House at the NSC and he worked with the League of Families and

was very interested and active on this issue. That was the principal thing I did for quite a while: to try to persuade Laos to allow crash site excavations, to let American military personnel in for this purpose.

Our efforts were stymied by the efforts of a retired U.S. air force colonel, Bo Gritz I think his name was, who used to lead groups of rebel Lao across the Mekong River from Thailand. We were making progress toward getting a commitment for the crash site excavations. We had selected the site. We knew what we wanted and they were moving toward accepting the idea. Of course I believed the Vietnamese were using the Lao as stalling forces on this. If it worked with the Lao maybe the Vietnamese would consider excavations in Vietnam. I felt that the Lao could not agree without Vietnamese. Then Bo Gritz and his group crossed the Mekong again. There was no way in the world you could persuade the Lao government that a retired U.S. air force colonel wasn't working with the full consent and cooperation of the U.S. government. That shut that negotiation down, for many months, shut down the progress toward getting the crash site excavation, but we did get agreement eventually. It got the process started and it was very exciting.

Q: Let's talk first about the colonel. Was there anything, I mean I assume our embassy in Bangkok was leaning on them trying to do something about them or getting the Thai government to stop this?

TULL: Well, you know the Mekong River, that's a long, long river and you can't patrol every speck of it. No, I don't think the Thai up in the northern area opposite Laos supported the Gritz efforts. They were not happy with the Lao, of course, and I think they turned a blind eye to Gritz's efforts. I believe some highly placed regret wringers in the U.S. supported and/or condoned Gritz's activities. However.

Q: The Thai could just say as far as the colonel was concerned, you know, you have no reason to stay here, go.

TULL: I believe he was using former remnants of the Vang Pao Hmong group, some of whom were in refugee camps in Thailand. They didn't accomplish a thing except to derail what we were trying to do for several months. It was very frustrating, but eventually we did get all systems go for a joint crash site excavation in Pakse in southern Laos. First the team came in for an exploratory visit, got it all lined up and I flew down with them to the site. They were from the Joint Casualty Resolution Center in Honolulu. I don't know what it's called now; that's what it was called then.

Q: This is tape six, side one with Terry Tull. Yes?

TULL: We got the approval for a team to come in and do an exploratory visit to the crash site to determine what was needed for the actual excavation. I flew down with a young officer from the foreign ministry together with this group of about six I would say, six or seven team members from the Joint Casualty Resolution Center headed by a very capable colonel. We flew down on an old Russian helicopter, tremble, tremble, as you do this, a noisy thing, down from Vientiane to Pakse. It took a couple of hours in the helicopter to get there. I think they even had to stop to refuel. We got to Pakse and we were driven out to this crash site and our people started their

search and literally you could see little unexploded ordnance where we're walking around. Well, don't step there, we don't know if it is still live. You're kind of tip toeing. I had to think of this when last week Senator George Allen of Virginia in his defense of John Bolton thought that Bolton would be a great person to have at the UN because you need somebody tough. You don't need these little striped pants cookie pushers with their little pinkies in the air. I would have liked to have taken Senator Allen tip toeing around with the little pinkie raised through the unexploded ordnance in Pakse. This type of nonsense drives me nuts. Anyway, that's what the Foreign Service people do. They're not there pushing cookies all the time. We were pleased to be on the site and it looked promising. Our men had just begun, no, not just begun. They'd been there maybe a half-hour. The province chief, the senior province official came over and tells the official from the foreign ministry, all right, we have to go now. She comes to me and says, "We have to go." I said, "No. They just got there. These people came all the way from Honolulu." I talked to the colonel and I said to the Foreign Minister, "No, we're not ready to go. We've only been here a half-hour. They have to do a complete survey. It's not worth their while. Why did they come? They might even have to come back tomorrow morning. Remember we made this arrangement? They could come here in the evening or late afternoon and if necessary come back in the morning. It was all arranged." I was arguing very strenuously and she's translating for me. I said, "The deputy foreign minister approved this." This local official, you could see him thinking, hey, Vientiane is a long way away; you could see it on his face. I'm in charge here. He kept pushing that we had to leave. I will say the young officer, she was able to deter him a little. In the meantime I'm telling the colonel, I said, "Look, I think we bought you another hour, but do it as fast as you can because I don't know if I can get you back here in the morning." In the meantime this guy is like this.

Q: You're kind of looking at me with a scowl.

TULL: Very unhappy. Kind of like get out of here, get off our turf. So, our people, they did the best they could, but I was upset and I made it quite clear to the foreign ministry official at that time. I said, look if you can put me through by phone to the deputy foreign minister. We got on and talked with him. I said, "We've brought these people here at great expense, great distance and it's fruitless if they can't do the job they came for." He says, "Give me some time. I will try to sort it out tonight." We got back to the hotel and in the meantime the colonel said to me, "Look if we can't get back in the morning, I think we've got enough information to go on." I said, "Well, don't say anything now. We'll see what happens."

A rather cool dinner in this hotel followed. It was all right, but not a lot of mingling. It's kind of like them at one table and us at another. The Lao at one table and the Americans at another. The next morning, big smiles. Yes, we go back to the site. Oh, that will be very nice won't it? I said colonel, you're going? Oh yes. We went back to the site and he was only there about an hour with his team and everybody is smiling, yes this is fine. We have the information we need. We went back. They then put on a sort of a luncheon of amity you might say. We're all intermingled sitting together with the formerly scowling province official passing lau-lau, which is a very strong Lao drink, up and down and shaking hands and taking pictures and the whole bit. I don't know what happened the night before, but at any rate we got the preliminary inspection under control. It was great. It was funny, too because they wanted me to have lau-lau wine. It's a very small tiny drink made out of rice wine. It's a very clear liquid, but it packs a punch. For my country, I diligently drank one of these lau-lau and then they wanted me to have more. I said,

“No, no, the colonel or his men will do it.” They designated this sergeant and he was going one on one. I said, you’re doing it for me. Anyway, that worked out.

Eventually we did get the crash site excavation and that meant a team of Lao coming to work with a much larger team of Americans. I encouraged the Lao government to allow publicity for this, that this would give them a good image in the United States, that they were allowing this. Of course, the Lao didn’t want newsmen of any kind ever setting foot in their country, but they gradually gave in and they allowed NBC News and National Geographic and I think Time Magazine to come in and meet with them in Vientiane. I think they might have gone down to the crash site briefly. It was a very successful enterprise. I went down for the first day. They were there for two weeks and I designated my deputy to be there on the site. I didn’t want any ruffled feathers; I wanted to have someone from the embassy there so if there were problems they could get to me. I also had great confidence in this colonel. At some point if I go digging back into my own papers I’ll find his name because he was a superb diplomat himself, just the right person for this, because this was the first crash site excavation in Indochina. It was very important to the families of the people who gave their lives in Indochina. If our military had botched it up by being arrogant or stupid there wouldn’t have been any others, and he and his team did a very good job. All of his team, they were very good and the Lao, too. I have to say it almost brought tears to my eyes having been through what I had been through in Vietnam, to be there out on the site and see an American, a Pathet Lao, an American, I mean we’re talking soldiers in uniform, American, Pathet Lao digging in this dirt and searching for the remains of American military personnel. I just thought it was a very moving moment.

We could not because of various bans and law, we couldn’t give aid per se to the Lao, but I worked it out with our military to bring in some medical supplies. They said they would have to bring in a doctor and people for the care of their own people and lots of medicine and they said we will bring in a lot of medicine and anything left over we’ll give to the local officials. They did bring in a lot of medical supplies, basics that they really were desperate for in Laos at that time. It was a very successful undertaking. That was the first, Pakse. We did one later in Savannakhet probably the following year. You had to work it around the rainy season. Not too long after that the Vietnamese agreed to begin crash site excavation with the U.S. That’s an ongoing project now with the Vietnamese and also with the Lao.

Q: Did you get the feeling that the Lao understood our desire to find the remains?

TULL: I don’t know about the Lao. I know that the Vietnamese do because.

Q: They worship family.

TULL: They worship family and take care of graves and things. I don’t really, I don’t know that much, I have to be honest, about the Lao culture to know whether it was important to them, but they certainly were willing to go along with us. As I say the foreign ministry in particular wanted to move out of this self-imposed isolation into a little better relationship with the world. I even was able to get them to agree to receive an American oil company and discuss oil prospects. I had to work on that one for a while. There was some thought that there was some oil possibilities in Laos. I prayed for it. I really wished it would have materialized, but they did agree to have a team from I think it was Hunt Oil in Texas came in and they actually did some exploration I

believe eventually probably after I left, but it was unproductive, but at least it opened up the door.

Q: Were they beginning by the time you left were you still confined to the city, I mean they hadn't opened it up yet?

TULL: We were still confined, but I kept pressing for relief. Laos had major flooding and I looked for opportunities that any diplomat would to push the envelope a little and to get better relations. We wanted them to move away from this total control by Vietnam of everything. They had major flooding and through the World Food Program the United States donated a substantial amount of rice. I made the point that when the rice comes of course we need to be sure that it gets distributed to the correct places which meant we would go out with the rice. I went to one distribution ceremony and then we had some that were sent up, taken out to the plains area. I forget the names of these provinces. It's been a while. I got one of my staffers, the economic officer, a very smart young woman. She was able to go out with them and see that the rice got there and it gives you a look at another part of the picture. Then I pushed the ministry to allow us to have a tourist visit to Luang Prabang, which I knew that other embassies were getting to do.

Q: That was the royal capital.

TULL: The royal capital of Laos. They did agree to that and I'll tell you, one of the joys of being chief of mission. Your staff is complaining the whole time, we never get out of this city, we're just trapped here, it's just awful. Guess what folks? There're going to arrange a weekend trip, three or four days to Luang Prabang. Oh, I don't want to go. Bang head against nearest wall. Half of them didn't want to go. I said, well, I don't want to hear any whining or complaining about how you're stuck in the city. I encouraged them. I said this is the royal capital of Laos. It's probably not touched. You think Vientiane is untouched. That's probably hardly touched at all. No, so half of them didn't want to go. Okay, good enough. Well, we had a great trip. We had a very nice trip. Of course they sent a foreign minister watcher who was with me every step of the way, but that's all right. I didn't speak Lao so they arranged it and it was beautiful. Luang Prabang is a gorgeous, untouched royal capital. We visited the royal palace and I would periodically inquire what is the status of the emperor or the king I used to call him. Well, you'd never get an answer. We know he was taken to a reeducation camp in 1975. Many Lao were still in the so-called re-education camps and the best answer we got much later was that he had died. He had diabetes and I don't think they gave him the medicine he needed, so he was treated pretty badly. Occasionally, somebody would materialize in Vientiane who had been in a camp for many years and they would have been released. That was an interesting time.

Q: Were you able to get any visitors in. I was wondering whether former, we had a lot of American AID people particularly who were married to Lao wives and all that.

TULL: Not while I was there. We did have some high-ranking delegations visit. Congressman Steve Solarz and I want to say Torricelli at that time a representative from New Jersey, later became senator and then was disgraced, but Steve Solarz and Torricelli came on Christmas Day. We appreciated that timing immensely.

Q: Oh, yes, I've interviewed Steve.

TULL: Yes. I had a lot of respect for him, but I didn't appreciate him coming on Christmas Day. Basically the whole embassy couldn't have Christmas. He was only going to be there I guess that day and overnight, but I think he did the policy good work. It was worthwhile in terms of policy, so he came and that was interesting because I tried to get the Department to say could we celebrate and have the holiday for Christmas another day and there was some bureaucratic reason I could not do it the way I wanted to. Could we be closed on a Tuesday or whatever, whatever, we worked something out so that the people got some time off later. That's how Christmas was spent, taking him around.

Q: How did it work, I mean you still remained charge?

TULL: Yes, for three years.

Q: For three years. Was there any talk of raising it to?

TULL: No, not during that time at all. Not at all. We had some ups and downs there. I tell you. We were greatly constrained as I say in our movements and technically for every Westerner in Vientiane there was an 11:00 PM curfew. Everybody is supposed to be tucked in their beds by 11:00 at night, but the other embassies did not do this. They did not require that and I felt it was not fair for my staff to require that either so I didn't do anything about it. I thought this is crazy.

This went on without incident for several months, but then this one night my political officer was coming home from a party where he had been with Swedes and Australians and other Western diplomats who were also out at 1:00 a.m. at night and his home was close to the government guest house. Well, it happened that the government guesthouse that night had some high-ranking visitor from Vietnam. This was pretty early in my stay there, too I have to say. He drove past and went to his home. The next day I was summoned to the foreign ministry and told they are throwing him out of the country as a spy. Well, that's nice. That helps the Lao immensely. I will say that the Lao official representative was very regretful when he was telling me this. I was absolutely stunned. I said, "What are you talking about, a spy? He's my political officer." Of course you're always under that suspicion if you're a political officer. He says, "Well, he was out past curfew." I said, "So is every other young man or woman in this city. Everybody is, the Swedes, the Australians, the Brits, everybody else. I can't have my people treated differently." He said, "No, he was seen going past the guest house and I can't do anything about it. He has to be out of here" what did he say, 72 hours, 24 hours whatever it was. I said, "This is going to bring retribution, I have to tell you. The U.S. is not going to sit quietly by. You're going to lose somebody in Washington. That's going to happen. I really object strenuously. He was not doing anything inappropriate." Anyway, he had to leave and of course we reciprocated and threw out their person and when that message came, the official saw me at the foreign ministry and he said, "But, you're a big power, you didn't have to get rid of one of our people." I said, "You're in the diplomatic big leagues here. You throw out an American diplomat for no reason; we're going to reciprocate. It's definitely tit for tat. It's really regrettable, but that's it. This was totally unjustified." I told my political officer, "This will not hurt your career because I know you were doing the right thing. This was not right. So, if you ever run into difficulty, let me know." I saw him off at the airport. I made quite a thing of being there with him

and everything in case there was any other nonsense that they try to lock him up or something. There were some hostile times. That was nasty and we had to live through that. You have to wait until you get a replacement. We were short-staffed for some time.

I learned a few weeks later that I really had to rein in my staff. That they had to be in at 11:00 p.m., this was a very tense time in our relationship. If we wanted to move forward with the crash site excavation (I think at this point we maybe had had the preliminary site visit, but had not had the actual excavation itself.) I learned that there were very angry people in the Interior Ministry who did not approve of the direction that was being taken. Quite frankly, I learned that one of my staffers was not only staying out late at night, but was having an affair with the wife of a Lao official. Very cute. I had to seriously rein in my staff and get them in at 11:00 because this was all going to blow up. I found this out and I sent this particular staffer to Bangkok on a courier run and I called up the security officer and I said, "I'm going to send you a message, limited channel and I want you to read it before this man comes and I want you to track him down. It's important." He said okay. I got a message down saying I wanted him interviewed about the possible liaison this guy was having and the fellow admitted it. So, he never came back to Vientiane. That was the end of that. I thought the Department would kill him. They didn't. I think they might have given him three days suspended pay or some nonsense. I was furious when I found out that this person, this was the wife of a Lao official and he mucking around with and I think this was a set up job. I think it was a put up job and they figured out who can we get there to latch themselves onto. So, at any rate I told the staff, I said I'm awfully sorry, but you're really going to have to for a while be in at 11:00, I hate to do it, but please, we're working here. We've big odds. You're getting 25% differential. I'll try to get you good onward assignments, but that's the law here and you see what happened to the political officer, and now this. They weren't happy, but they cooperated.

Q: How did you find, did you get good support from the Asian bureau?

TULL: Yes, very good support and also very good support from the embassy in Thailand because that was a break for me, too. The ambassador in Bangkok at that time, John Gunther Dean, who has a reputation in some circles as being kind of arrogant, was really very nice to me.

Q: He can be a very nice man.

TULL: He was wonderful to me. Really wonderful to me. He was really great. He had one of the biggest embassies in the world and I probably had one of the smallest, but when I would go into Bangkok as a courtesy I would call on him and we developed a real friendship. He was just very, very nice. He could talk to me, chief of mission to chief of mission about things that he couldn't talk about there and likewise. I stayed with him and his wife a few times at their home and he arranged for me to do a couple of neat things when I was there. When the Pope came to Bangkok for a visit Dean got in touch with me and he said, the Pope is going to be here. He happened to be Catholic, too. The Pope is going to be here at such and such a time. Make sure you have consultations during that period. Bangkok did a lot of support for us including covering certain traffic that I did not have access to. I'd have to go down and read this material among other things. He took me to a reception I think the prime minister was having for the Pope. He said if you want to come, I might not be able to get you in, but I think I can. You might end up sitting in the car. This is for the Bangkok diplomatic corps. I said, I'll give it a try. We get out of the car at

this beautiful palace that they're having this reception at and somebody opens the door and Dean in all his majesty says, "I've brought our ambassador to Laos with us." I went and I met the Pope and it was very interesting. So, he did nice things for me. They gave good support to us, they really did.

Q: How did you find the?

TULL: And the bureau was good, too.

Q: How about the Vietnamese? Were they, I mean did you have any contact?

TULL: Yes, that was tricky because the Vietnamese ambassador was dean of the diplomatic corps. He had been there for a long time. He was a high-ranking person I think in the Vietnamese government besides and since he was chief of the diplomatic corps I had to deal with him. Go to receptions, I couldn't just stand at the other side of the room. I worked that out with the Department about how I could deal with him, but I had no contact with him otherwise. Could not have one on one. I didn't call on him when I arrived because we didn't have diplomatic relations. As chief of mission you pay courtesy calls on all the ambassadors, but I didn't on him because we didn't have diplomatic relations. He was a very dignified capable diplomat. He was at an arm's distance shall we say, but I knew he was calling the shots. I knew that there was no way that Laos would agree to the crash site excavation unless the Vietnamese had agreed to it first and that they were doing it as kind of a preliminary, let's see if this works here. We wanted to do it in Vietnam, too. In fact we started eventually in Vietnam before we had diplomatic relations.

Q: Oh, yes.

TULL: I think the first one in Laos was in 1985.

Q: Was there anything like an orderly departure program or anything of that nature?

TULL: In Laos?

Q: Yes.

TULL: No. People were still fleeing at night. They were taking boats. No, there was nothing. We had a very limited operation and there was no USIS, nothing, Peace Corps, nothing. Consular, yes, but routine. There was visa issuing for the officials or other foreigners in country, but not the Lao. Beautiful town, Vientiane.

MARIE THERESE HUHTALA
Office Director, Vietnam, Laos & Cambodia
Washington, DC (1990-1992)

Ambassador Huhtala was born and raised in California and graduated from

Santa Clara University. Joining the Foreign Service in 1972, she studied Thai and Chinese languages and became a specialist in East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Her overseas postings include Paris, Quebec, Hong Kong and Chiang Mai (Thailand). In Washington she dealt primarily with East Asia and Pacific Affairs. From 2001 to 2004 she served as US Ambassador to Malaysia and, from 2004 to 2005, as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Ambassador Huhtala is a graduate of the National War College and the State Department's Senior Seminar. Ambassador Huhtala was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2005.

HUHTALA: To 1992.

Q: Let's do a little round up of relations with each of these countries.

HUHTALA: Oh God, what a job that was. The only country of the three that we had a diplomatic relationship with, and that just barely, was Laos. We had our little embassy, which had hung on in Vientiane through the darkest days of the Vietnam war and the Pathet Lao take-over of the government. It was headed by a chargé d'affaires and its staff was severely constrained by the paranoia of the government there. It was a tiny little embassy.

Q: I'm interviewing Terry Tull now.

HUHTALA: Yes, she had the chargé job right before I came into VLC. Her successor was Charlie Salmon, who had just gone out there as chargé. So much for Laos. Cambodia was just emerging from the long nightmare of the Khmer Rouge era. A peace process was in play in Paris, and while I was in that job Secretary James Baker led our delegation to the signing of a peace agreement. This in turn resulted in the introduction of a UN (United Nations) force to go into Cambodia as peacekeepers.

Q: When you got there in 1990 was there the feeling that okay, we're going to have relations, I mean you didn't feel that?

HUHTALA: No, there was more to it than that. There was interest on both sides in having diplomatic relations but I think both sides saw that there were huge obstacles, the largest being the POW/MIA issue, but also just a huge wall of mistrust on both sides. There were several things that happened. Vietnam had an Ambassador in New York accredited to the United Nations, so we had a channel for dialogue. One very important step was a congressional delegation that was put together of Vietnam vets in the congress. Senator John Kerry, Senator John McCain, Congressman John Rhodes, Congressman Tom Carper, and others (I can't remember all the names) -- about eight or ten members of the House and Senate travelled to Vietnam, the first Congressional group to do so since the war, to explore the possibility of having relations. They were well received, not lavishly but seriously. That kind of broke the ice. Then they came back and Senator Patrick Leahy put into law a provision whereby we could offer humanitarian assistance to victims of war, specifically prosthetics, in Vietnam and other countries. There was a huge need in Vietnam for prosthetics and assistance to adults children who were war victims, and Leahy set aside about a million dollars a year for Vietnam. That was

a very positive step on the part of the United States government. Then Kerry and McCain created a Special Select Committee on Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia to investigate the reports of live POWs and withheld remains in Vietnam. It was a very big deal, highly publicized, it went on for half a year or more. The Committee interviewed everybody and anybody who had anything to say on this issue, including the people who believed in the tiger cages and people who believed in the warehouse full of remains. The State Department was tasked to provide boxes and boxes of documents on the issue, including years' worth of telegrams that we had to declassify and send over. We did, we just emptied out our archives. They went through every piece of paper and heard all kinds of testimony. At the end of this period, that Select Committee was able to declare that there was no reasonable evidence for any existing prisoners still being held in Southeast Asia and Vietnam was making (I don't remember the exact terminology) good faith efforts to help us find the remains, including the many, many joint recovery missions in which they had cooperated very well with us.

So because all this was happening, in the spring of 1992, the Administration – State, Defense, the National Security Council – together with the director of the League of Families, hammered out a road map to normalization of relations with Vietnam. By hammered out, I mean they were in the office of EAP/VLC till ten o'clock p.m. the night before the road map was presented to the Vietnamese Ambassador to the UN. It was the craziest document I had ever seen. It was quickly leaked by the Vietnamese so it's out there, it is public knowledge. It had four phases and each phase was very heavily weighted toward action on their part. For instance, in stage one, it said Vietnam shall do the following: open up their archives, conduct a large number of joint recovery activities, persuade the Cambodian government to sign the peace agreement calling for a United Nations peacekeeping force, and persuade Cambodia and Laos to cooperate in tri-lateral talks with us. In other words, these were huge things. If they did all of that then America would allow direct phone links with Vietnam. Then in phase two there was another long list of very difficult things for Vietnam to do in exchange for which we would allow American businesses to set up offices in Vietnam. Finally in phase three, we would stop voting against them in international financial institutions like the World Bank, and finally in phase four we would lift the embargo, establish liaison offices in each other's capitals and begin to normalize. I believe the opponents of moving forward were convinced we would never get past phase one or two. The Vietnamese, I think, swallowed hard and did all the things that was on the list for them to do. (By this time I had moved on to my next assignment. It was in 1994 that we had to lift the embargo, despite the political difficulties that created in Washington. In 1995 we established diplomatic relations with Vietnam.)

Q: Was Laos much of a factor?

HUHTALA: Laos was very much a satellite of Vietnam. It still is in many ways, a very backward country. Oh yeah, I didn't tell you this part. We had managed to keep our tiny mission going since 1975. When I was in Chiang Mai for instance in the late '70s my colleagues in Vientiane were not allowed to travel unless they got permission. They were really harassed by the government. Well by 1990 that harassment had pretty much stopped and we were able to normalize relations. We upgraded Charlie Salmon to the status of Ambassador and received our first ambassador from Laos. The Lao were cooperating very well on the POW/MIA side too so this was warmly endorsed by the League of Families and the other political actors. Nevertheless

it's still very much a communist country, very repressive and we've never been able to make a lot of progress in our relations with Laos.

Q: Did you have any, did they hit your responsibility? You had some of these soldiers of fortune going out and trying to lead bands of, I guess in the hinterlands, who were sort of playing Green Berets after the war is over.

HUHTALA: That happened before I came to the desk. That happened in the '80s, Bo Gritz and his people. That left a lot of echoes in the area. Also there'd been charges of "yellow rain," allegations of chemical warfare which have never been proven, to this day. This brings us to the issue of the Hmong people who had been our allies during the war.

Q: This is the mountain people?

HUHTALA: Yes, Hmong who had worked with the CIA in the resistance and fought very valiantly. Many of them came to our country as refugees settling in --

Q: Minnesota and places like that.

HUHTALA: Minnesota, also North Carolina, and the central valley of California. They have become a political force in terms of our relations with Southeast Asia now. Back in the early '90s that we were just beginning to see the outlines of that. Initially they didn't fit well into the United States. When the big wave of Indochinese refugees came to the U.S., at first there were efforts to settle them very evenly across the whole country. Vietnamese, Cambodians, Lao, Hmong, they were all going to be evenly distributed across the country. The first thing that happened was that they immediately clumped out into areas where they could be with their own people. So now there are Cambodians in Long Beach, Vietnamese in San Jose and Westminster and the Hmong in rural areas where they were able to carry out the kind of agriculture that they were familiar with. Unlike some of the others, the Vietnamese did extremely well economically, including in education as you pointed out. They've become stellar citizens and I think quite a few Cambodians have as well. The Hmong have not had such success in integrating.

Q: They didn't even have a written language as I recall.

HUHTALA: I don't think they had a written language; they practiced kind of an animistic religion and had a very different take on life, basically. The ones who came over as refugees, many of them have never learned our language. However, their kids are American citizens and speak wonderful English and are becoming something of a political force.

Q: Well this is America. We pick them up and we chew them up and out they come Americans. The real tragedy of America is often between the generation that first comes over but never quite get there and the kids have become Americans and the estrangement between the two. I mean it's very difficult because the parents have made the sacrifice and then the kids take off leaving their parents behind.

HUHTALA: I don't think Hmong kids are leaving their parents behind at all, really, that's not

my experience, but they are able to give voice to some of the concerns and resentments that the older folks still have. There have been special bills in Congress to give them citizenship even though they can't pass the language requirement and that kind of thing. Well, who made that happen? Their kids.

VICTOR L. TOMSETH
Ambassador
Laos (1993-1996)

Victor L. Tomseth was born in Oregon in 1941. He received his bachelor's degree from the University of Oregon in 1963 and his master's degree from the University of Michigan in 1966. After joining the Peace Corp and going to Nepal he joined the Foreign Service. During his career he had positions in Thailand, Iran, Sri Lanka, and was ambassador to Laos. Ambassador Tomseth was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1999.

Q: You were in Laos from December 1993 until when?

TOMSETH: Until September 1996, almost three years.

Q: Who was ambassador before you?

TOMSETH: Charlie Samin, who had left in July as he was scheduled to do. Charlie had actually gone out as charge d'affaires in 1975 when the communists took over and did away with the old royal Lao government and abolished the monarchy. We did not close our embassy, although the new regime put a lot of pressure on the embassy and forced AID out, forced the Marine security guards out, forced the military attaches out. In the end, for probably a decade or more, there was a numerical limit on the number of American staff on the embassy and the [number was] seven - not only staff; that was Americans, period. That could be staff, dependents, cats, and dogs, but no more than seven. So, what we had for a long time there was, it was basically a bachelor post. Whether people were married or not, they went unaccompanied. It was only the seven. Charlie had gone out in 1989, I guess, as charge, with the understanding that the then-relatively new Bush administration was going to upgrade the position to the ambassadorial level in fairly short order. As it turned out, it took them almost three years to get around to doing that, at which point (Ordinarily it would have been a three year tour.) they agreed that Charlie would stay on an additional year so that he would actually have a decent period not only as charge, but as ambassador as well. That is how that year gap came about. Originally, when this was all under discussion, my objective was to see if I couldn't go there in 1992 when Charlie Samin was originally scheduled to leave. As it turned out, he was there until 1994.

Q: Here is Laos. At one point, you had the President of the United States, John Kennedy, with a map of Laos and a pointer explaining to the American people about the-

TOMSETH: The good "grints," the bad "grints," and in between.

Q: This whole thing. Laos has disappeared off the radar of anyone. What were American interests? When you went out to Laos, did you have anything in mind to do?

TOMSETH: Yes. It was quite clear what the agenda was. At the top of the list was accountings for people missing in action for the period of the Vietnam War, of which at the end of the war in 1975, there were about 600 in Laos, most of them lost in aircraft incidents. Laos was the corridor for flights out of the air bases that we used in Thailand to Vietnam. Laos was where the Ho Chi Minh Trail ran from North Vietnam into South, so there was a lot of bombing in Laos itself along the trail and then later on, in Laos, in support of the royal Lao government forces fighting the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese in the northern part of Laos. As I said the other day, when Reagan ran in 1980, one of the issues that was on his agenda was the whole matter of Americans missing in Indochina and including the possibility that some of those people were still alive and still being held prisoner. So, even though the vast majority of Americans had long since forgotten where Laos was, even if they had known, despite John Kennedy, there was a very vocal constituency that at first the Reagan and then the Bush and by this time the Clinton administration were quite conscious of. So, it was not a well-known issue, but it was one with a fairly influential constituency in the United States. There were a couple of other things as well that were fairly important again to specific interest groups in the United States. One of those was the final resolution of the Indochinese refugee crisis which had begun in 1975. I mentioned the other day the second Geneva Conference and the program that it adopted whereby there would be a screening process to determine whether or not asylum seekers from Laos and Vietnam actually qualified for refugee status with the presumption that those who didn't would go back from whence they had come. There weren't so many new people coming into the Laos stream, but there were a lot of Laos still in camps in Thailand or the most part, although there were some in China as well, who for whatever reasons had opted not to accept third country resettlement. Neither China nor Thailand were prepared to hold onto those people forever. So, there was a program of repatriating those people to Laos if they didn't want to go to the U.S., Australia, or wherever. At least in the case of the United States, I think in large part because of the feelings of guilt about our having run out on these people in 1973 or 1975, there was a great deal of concern about what their treatment would be like if they were to return to Laos. So, we spent a lot of time and indeed most of the money, the resources, that we had for programs in Laos came because of this concern about returning Lao asylum seekers, for the most part people who did qualify as refugees, but who didn't want third country resettlement.

There was one other thing that was also quite important in terms of the U.S. agenda. That's counternarcotics. Laos was and still is a major opium producer and increasingly was being used as a transit for drugs produced in Burma to move to the international market via a variety of routes.

Q: Could you tell about the government of Laos, their attitude towards us by this time? We're talking about some 20 years after the collapse of America's role in Laos. How did you deal with the government?

TOMSETH: The senior leadership was still very much this group of people who had formed the core of the Pathet Lao all during the 1950s-1970s. I think in the outside world, most people

tended to look at Prince Souphanavong as the head of the Pathet Lao, but he was really not the most influential person in the leadership. He was the person that they tended to put out in front because he had a name that was recognized internationally, but the real power in the Pathet Lao was a fellow from Savanaket in central Laos, who was half Vietnamese and half Lao. His name was... He had died a year or so before I got there, but the rest of the people were very much this core group that had spent 20 years in the caves of northern Vietnam and northeastern Laos. They were still very suspicious of the United States. But one of the things that had happened during the 1980s was that the economy had just gone into the tank under the Marxist economic policy that this Pathet Lao regime had tried to implement after it came into power in 1975 and really was being kept afloat by aid from the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries. But in 1989, that went away, too. So, the government was faced with a very major problem, Laos never could always, forever, from the time the French were there, never could pay its own way. It always cost the French more than they were able to get out of it to run it. During the 1950s and 1960s, the U.S. in effect replaced the French in terms of being the sugar daddy for Laos. Then it was the Russians and their friends during the 1980s. So, by the end of the 1980s, Laos had to find a new source of aid. That meant loosening up their foreign policy and their domestic economic policies as well. So, that process was fairly well entrained by the time I arrived in 1993. In a way, even though we weren't an aid donor of any significance, that opened the door to some other things. In this process of reaching beyond the socialist bloc for help, it opened the door for us to start working with the Laos on our agenda (POW/MIAs, refugees, and counternarcotics), but because of this attitude at the seniormost levels of the government, it was always very slow going. That was probably just reinforced by the nature of Lao society, which is really... They had a saying: "Step by step." Everything is step by step. Sometimes I thought it was one step forward, one step back, and one step sideways. Progress on these things tended to be fairly slow. But if you were patient and plugged away at it, it was possible to make some headway. I think certainly in the last couple of years that Charlie was there, some fairly significant breakthroughs were made and during the nearly two years that I was there, I think, we pushed the peanut down the road a bit, too.

Q: You want to send a team in to look for remains and something or get a UN vote. Would you go to the foreign ministry as standard contacts rather than somebody you played golf with or sat around and drank gin and tonics with?

TOMSETH: Our principle interlocutor in the government was - they had two vice ministers of foreign affairs, deputies in the foreign ministry. The one that we dealt with was in charge of international organization affairs, their North and South American department, counternarcotics issues. That, in effect, took care of our entire agenda one way or another. He was French-educated, one of the very few western-educated people who stayed after 1975 and was in a senior position in the government. One of the things during the time that I was there that we worked very hard on was trying not to go around this person, but to expand the points of contact that we had in the government, particularly with the military, the Ministry of Interior, the prime minister's office. Again, as with everything, that was fairly slow going. But I think we were helped in that...

I should back up a step or two. Before I got to Laos, while I was waiting to get through this confirmation process that seemed to be taking forever, in the fall of 1993, I started coming over

here to the Foreign Service Institute in the morning and sitting in on the Lao classes to convert the Thai that I already spoke to Lao. The two languages are fairly closely related. I had spoken Thai for a long time. So, I spent the fall of 1993, or at least part of it - part of it, I was up in New York - going through a conversion process. When I got to Laos, I made a point in all of my official contacts of trying to speak Lao with the officials that I dealt with, with great or lesser success. These two languages are close enough together and the penetration of Thai radio and television, at least in Vien Chung, had been so pervasive that in Vien Chung, virtually everybody certainly understands Thai. I would have been able to communicate in Thai even if I hadn't tried to make that conversion to Lao. But there was a certain rivalry between Thailand and Laos that in recent decades has also been a political rivalry. I just thought it would be more politic to at least make an attempt to speak Lao. But doing that turned out to be a great advantage in terms of access to some of these hardline communist senior leaders in the regime. The prime minister is a good example. This was a fellow who had been the commander of the army for a long, long time. While I was still in Bangkok, he had become prime minister. I remember seeing cables out of Vien Chung about how anti-western this person was. For a long time, he would not receive any of the heads of the western missions in Laos. Then when he did, they tended to be very perfunctory meetings. So, when I arrived and had presented my credentials and went to call on him, I went alone. He had an interpreter there, but when we sat down and we started this conversation, initially, it was very much diplomatic boiler plate on his side and then I would respond and wouldn't give hi interpreter a chance to convert that into English. I would respond in Lao. After five or six minutes of this, a great big smile lit up his face and he said like a light had come on, "You can speak Lao, can't you?" Then we had a fairly good conversation for the remainder of the time I was there.

A couple of months after that, the Australians had built a bridge across the Mekong between Thailand and Laos near Pien Jun and that was opened up in April of 1994. Everybody - the diplomatic corps, all sorts of people - were invited to this and they had a joint [ceremony] with the Thais and the Laos to do this. While we were standing around waiting to be seated before the ceremony, people were mingling on the bridge. I encountered the prime minister and he immediately grabbed hold of his wife and said, "Talk to this guy! He can speak our language!" So, the ability to do that, even though the Thai antecedents obviously crept in from time to time, made a big difference in terms of the barrier that ordinarily we had to get over to have any kind of contact with some of these senior leaders. I don't suggest that it went away. It did not. But at least it was lowered somewhat in terms of being able to gain access and to have some communications.

Q: Your main priority was missing in action. How did that go while you were there?

TOMSETH: By the time I had gotten there, we had made enough progress in our working relations with the Laos and with the Vietnamese for that matter to have put in place permanent detachments of the Joint Task Force operating out of Hawaii responsible for accounting. So, we had four active duty military people assigned to this detachment in the embassy in Vien Chung, full-time. They were there year-round. They worked principally with the Lao Ministry of Defense in developing plans for trying to search out crash sites for the most part and then mounting archeological digs. A team of 30-40 people would come in to the crash sites which had been identified and dig them up just like an archeological dig looking for remains or any other

evidence of what happened to the individual or individuals involved in these crashes. By the time I left, this had become so much of a routine that the planning went on year-round, but teams were coming in every other month and spending a month at a crash site. Indeed, on several occasions, we had multiple teams in so that they were doing two or three crash sites at a time. Part of that was gathering information. That included archives. Lao are unlike the Vietnamese, who are basically Sinitic in their culture and keep meticulous records. The Lao never were great record keepers. Even if they did write something down and put it somewhere, within a fairly short period of time, they probably forgot what was in it and they also forgot where they put it. So, tracking down records was an arduous task. Again, I mentioned several times before this industry that developed to meet the demand for live American prisoners in Indochina was very much at work. We would get people walking in saying that they knew of people or they knew somebody who knew of people who were being held. All of that had to be tracked down. We endeavored to do that in cooperation with the Lao authorities, although there was a clandestine aspect to it as well of gathering information in various ways and trying to get some fix on how good the information was before we might then take that to the Laos to go into the area where So and So allegedly was sighted.

Q: By this time, we're talking about the early 1990s, some 20 years after the last ordinance. Had there ever been a credible finding of an American alive?

TOMSETH: No. The only American that came out of Indochina after 1973 was a Marine enlisted man named Garwood, who voluntarily stayed behind. That was known in 1973. In the late 1970s, he decided that he wanted to come home after all and is now in the United States. He is the only one. No. Most of this work really has been done since 1981. There was relatively little done in the period from 1973-1981. But in all of that time, there has been no solid evidence produced to suggest that any American who was or may still be alive was or is still being held in Indochina.

Q: Were the American adventurers allowed? Could they get inside? Were they a problem for you?

TOMSETH: Well, two or three times, some of the less well-known ones managed to get a visa into Laos, but those were fairly rare happenings. The Laos knew most of the more notorious ones. For an American to get a visa, certainly during the entire period I was there, you had to apply at a post overseas and then that post had to send the information back to the ministry of foreign affairs for a coordinated approval within the Lao government. That allowed them to pretty much keep the more notorious of these soldiers of fortune out of Laos. But they were much more frequently in Thailand. Thailand is a lot easier to get into and the environment is in some respects more friendly as well. So, the activities of these people in Thailand would sometimes cause a certain amount of angst in Laos.

Q: What about old timers? We had been there a long time. They were devoted friends and wives or consorts, children, the whole thing. Was that a burden on you at all?

TOMSETH: Unlike Vietnam, if children were left behind, they were taken into Lao society and that was the end of it. But the numbers in Laos were never what they were in Vietnam, so the

numbers of children simply weren't anywhere near as great. But certainly by the time I got there, you had a phenomenon of people who had served in Laos - not just the AID people - Air America and servicepeople, too. Maybe they hadn't been in Laos, but they had certainly flown over Laos. They started coming back on nostalgia trips. It became possible while I was there to cross into Laos at Whosi, which is on the Mekong River. You could get on the Mekong and come down the Mekong to Vientiane, stopping at various places along the way, including Rulupuban, the old royal capital. A group of 10-12 of these people made that trip. It was sort of a nostalgia trip for them. We had a fair number of military and Air America people who also came back on nostalgia trips.

Q: What about drugs?

TOMSETH: One of the projects that we had while I was there was to actually get a DEA person assigned to the embassy in Vientiane. That did not happen while I was there. It has now. There is a DEA person there. But DEA had an office in Udorn in northeastern Thailand and we were able to work out an arrangement where that DEA person would come over every couple of weeks or so to do liaison work with his Lao counterparts. We also had a State Department "Bureau of Drugs and Thugs" person in the embassy. The program was basically aimed at two things. One was the Lao opium crop. That was basically the State Department component of it. We had a budget to do a crop substitution program in northeastern Laos in Whoupon Province. Our State Department person basically ran that program. Also some things with Lao customs and a little bit with the police, although that was more a DEA function. DEA worked with the Lao police. During the time I was there, we were actually able to get the Laos to establish a special counternarcotics unit in the police force to focus on this. DEA helped with the training. The State Department put up some money equip an office for them and buy them some vehicles. Their objective was to try to disrupt trafficking operations through Laos and, when we could find evidence of refinery operations in Laos, to track that down and shut down the refineries.

Q: I would have thought that getting evidence and all would be very difficult. Here is a regime which is obviously suspicious of American activities and even though this is not of a military nature, it's still intelligence is intelligence. It means informants and that whole thing.

TOMSETH: Well, the major purpose of the office in Udorn was to collect intelligence on what was happening in Laos. DEA had/has (They still have the office in Udorn.) a string of informants providing them with "information" on what was going on in Laos. One of the big problems was that a lot of these informants were people associated with the old regime and their reliability was always suspect. CIA had stopped collecting intelligence on Laos by the early 1990s, so there really was very little information available on what was happening, most of it via these DEA sources whose reliability was in some doubt. The other major source of intelligence, but it didn't do much good in terms of trafficking, was satellite imagery. That was okay for the opium [crop] and we were quite open about that. We would share the information that we got from that with the Laos as part of our effort in the crop substitution program.

Q: You mentioned missing in action. Refugees... How did that work?

TOMSETH: Not bad. This was really a quadrilateral effort. The main triangle were the

governments of Laos and Thailand and UNHCR, but because the U.S. had a special interest in these Lao islanders in particular, we were very much involved in it. We put some money into projects to assist the reintegration of people who actually came back. The biggest problems really were the asylees themselves. If allowed to have their druthers, they would have just as soon have stayed in these UNHCR-administered camps in Thailand. I remember going to one of these things in the 1980s when I was on the Thai/Burma desk. There was a State Department person along with me. We went to this one at Bangquini, which was in Loui Province west of Vientiane, but on the Thai side of the border. It's a very remote area of Thailand. "Bur" in Thai actually means "beyond." Beyond the beyond.

Do we have time for a funny story?

Q: Yes.

TOMSETH: When I was in Thailand the first time in the late 1960s, Bangkok had a mayor who was notoriously corrupt. The mayor was then appointed, not elected. Finally, things got so bad that the government knew that it had to get Chun Nan Uaboon not only out of that position, but out of the country. So, like Chai Chai Chunawan, whom I spoke of the other day, the government sent Chun Nan out to Argentina as ambassador. In one of the Thai language papers, somebody wrote a letter to the editor - obviously an older person. The letter said, "I find it absolutely scandalous that the government would appoint a notorious crook like Chung Nan Uaboon to a prestigious position such as the Thai ambassador to Argentina. In my day, the government never would have done that. They would have made Chung Nan the governor of Loui Province and really punished him." We went to this camp at Banwinai in Loui Province and this person that was along with me after we toured around said, "My god, how can people possible live in these conditions?" It was sort of like a great Lao island village, but it had 40,000 people in it. But the conditions were pretty primitive. I said, "Well, from their point of view, it's probably no worse than living on a mountaintop in Laos and the good news is that UNHCR delivers the chickens every Thursday." So, there were understandable reasons why many of these people really would have preferred to stay forever in these refugee camps. But in this program to wind down the whole Indochinese refugee problem, the government of Thailand, the government of Laos, and UNHCR were the principal actors in moving people back to Laos if they weren't going to be resettled in a third country. But we involved ourselves in that process very closely and put some resources into helping ease the transition for people coming back. But in addition to the reluctance of people to come back, the problem for the Lao government was to find places where they could go. It wasn't an issue of just taking an individual or even a family or maybe two or three families and saying, "Here is your 10 acres. Do with it what you will." These people wanted to be resettled in villages. They have a very strong clan structure. Finding enough land that was suitable for agriculture to support a whole village was a real challenge for the Lao government.

Q: Did they come from a place and was that place empty before and they just go back to where they came from?

TOMSETH: No. Almost none of them went back to where they had originally come from for a couple of reasons. One was that these were highlanders for the most part. The Lao government

had a policy of encouraging stabilization of agriculture. These highlanders practiced slash and burn agriculture. They cut down the forest, farmed a few years until the soil was a dust, and then move on to someplace else. The Lao government, like a lot of governments in Southeast Asia, was really trying to stabilize that population. So, they wanted to put them somewhere where they would be able to farm the land permanently.

Additionally, the people themselves usually didn't want to go back to where they had been. Those areas, while economically they were marginal, in security terms they might not be safe either. There was and is a resistance movement that operates in remote areas- (end of tape)

These returning asylees were afraid that they would be identified by the resistance as traitors just by virtue of having agreed to come back to Laos and be resettled. So, they wanted to be in areas that were reasonably secure.

Q: How about the Laotian government? What was your feeling about refugees, your dealing with them?

TOMSETH: In the circumstances, I think the Lao government was surprisingly willing to take these people back and to do so in conditions where the people really had as much freedom as anyone else in Laos. They were issued an identity card and they could move about as easily as anyone else. Also, the resources are always a problem for the Lao government. They don't have a lot. But to the extent that there were government resources available for public programs, whether that was in health or education, they made a fair share of that available to people returning. They would set up a school in each of these returnee villages, for example.

Q: By this time, people coming back, what was the attitude of the people, particularly the officials? Did you feel there would be retribution?

TOMSETH: No. That is why I say they were surprisingly open. It would have been fairly easy to... Not necessarily retribution. A lot of these people were just family members of people who might have - and some of them rather distant family members - been involved in the war. But I certainly could have understood the regime being very suspicious of where their loyalties were. I think there is some question about where their loyalties were. But that usually did not manifest itself. Certainly at the local level, the local officials tended to be quite good about doing everything they could to reintegrate these people into local society. I think from the local point of view, there was a reason for that. That was that if you can get a population settled there, that means that you get a little more from the central government in terms of resources that it provides. Also, in a number of areas where these people were resettled, the only land that could be identified that was large enough to resettle a whole village often was forested land. That had to be cut down in order to turn it into farmland. There was revenue to be made from the timber that was harvested on that land. So, that was an incentive for local authorities to want to have these people.

Q: During this time, 1993-1996, what was your impression of the writ of the Lao government? In South Vietnam, it was really a takeover by North Vietnamese communists and there were reeducation camps and everything else. They're still kind of working their way out from under

that. What about in Laos?

TOMSETH: Laos is a country of very rugged terrain with a very underdeveloped transportation infrastructure. There are very few decent roads in Laos. I was able to get all over the place thanks to the Joint Task Force accounting operations and the counternarcotics program that we had. That meant I could travel by helicopter. Other than that, it is very difficult to get about. The theory of administration in Laos was typically communist top-down directives. But the reality on the ground because of the poor transportation infrastructure and poor telecommunications as well as that local authorities tended to have a great deal of authority in many areas, not so great that they could deviate from basic party doctrine and dogma, but certainly in the day-to-day administration of their areas of responsibility, they had a great deal of authority. It's not surprising that provincial governors almost without exception were members of the Central Committee. One of the things that surprised me a bit was that the provincial governors tended to be people from that area and many of them tended to be ex-teachers. So, by and large, the provincial governors I found fairly easy to deal with. They were a little different than the typical Party apparatchiks in Vientiane. They tended to be very pragmatic in terms of they saw fairly clearly what their agenda was. It was really a development/education-focused agenda at the provincial level. They were not doctrinaire at all in terms of finding solutions to the practical problems that they had to deal with in the context of their local agenda.

Q: When the Pathet Lao had taken over, what did they do with their opponents?

TOMSETH: They managed to scare most of them out of the country even before they took power. As soon as they did, most of the rest left the country. You wound up with certainly at least 10% of the population fleeing. Of that 10%, that was the vast majority of the educated elite in Lao society, needless to say. A few did not. They were sent off to reeducation camps. Most of them were told, "Well, you're going to have to go off and go to seminars for a few weeks." Most of them didn't stay that long. Typically, it was a few months, six months maybe. After the first six months, the majority of those people who went to reeducation were allowed to go home. But there were a few. These tended to be people who were officers in the military or mid-level functionaries in the government who wound up staying for years and years. I think the last of the people originally sent to reeducation were not released until about 1989. So, they had been there 14 years. Interestingly, a few of those - there was one fellow in particular in the Ministry of Justice who was released in 1989. In the meantime, his wife and his children had all fled to Thailand and had been resettled in the United States. He was from Savanaket in central Laos. When he was released, he found out that his wife and children were all gone. He was able to get in touch with them through family, but they weren't terribly interested in reestablishing the family. So, he went back down to Savanaket. He was not a young man. He was well into his 50s by that point. He remarried and was sort of prepared to live out the rest of his years in retirement as it were in Savanaket with a new wife, but a few months after he was released, the government got in touch with him and said, "Would you come to Vientiane and serve as an advisor in the Ministry of Justice for a few months anyway? We really need to avail ourselves of your expertise." So, he did that. Then they told him after a few months, "Would you stay a few months more?" Finally, they said, "Would you stay on as the senior civil servant in the Ministry of Justice?" This didn't happen often, but there were enough of these really strange cases that made you wonder. But when he was released, he didn't feel any - I think probably because the

signals from his family in the United States were that his wife really wasn't interested in getting back together - he didn't want to leave Laos. He stayed in Laos and then he was called back by the regime.

A few, of course... The King was the most notable example. When the monarchy was abolished, he, like Prince Souvanna Phouma, was made an advisor to the new regime, but within a year the King and the Queen and the Crown Prince were sent off to reeducation and they never came back.

Q: During this time, were we looking towards doing more than running our show? Were we looking towards assistance and this sort of thing?

TOMSETH: We were providing some assistance, very targeted, through the counternarcotics program, through the refugee return operation, and in the context of the POW/MIA operation... That actually was fairly interesting in that we would take advantage of resources within the military, the need to do training, for example, to have teams come out to Laos and build schoolhouses, for example. Then while I was there, one of the issues that I became particularly interested in was unexploded ordinance, of which Laos was the most heavily bombed country in the history of warfare. Far more tonnage was dropped on Laos than was dropped on all of Europe during World War II. A lot of it didn't go off. There were lots of land battles in Laos between the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese on one side and the Royal Lao government forces on the other supported by the U.S. So, this stuff was all over the place. By the early 1990s, there had been far more people killed and injured by unexploded ordinance since 1973 than had been killed in the period 1962-1973 when the bombing was going on. This was a development issue as well. There were large parts of Laos that basically were off-limits in terms of agriculture because of unexploded ordinance. So, in the context of the POW/MIA operation, we began to look at this issue of unexploded ordinance. The whole basis for cooperation was that there was no explicit quid pro quo, but in exchange for their helping us with an issue that was high on our agenda, we would try to do what we could to help them with priority areas on their agenda. Development was obviously at the top. So, we began to look at this issue of unexploded ordinance and what we might be able to do.

As it turned out, because we had to do this through the U.S. military - essentially, that was the only avenue available to us in terms of finding resources - there was a great deal of reluctance on the Lao side to let us get... It's one thing to bring in an engineering detachment and build a few schools in a month. It's another thing to bring in special forces and Marines to run an unexploded ordinance program on an open-ended basis. But the UN also got involved in this from the development point of view. The senior UN person there was the head of the UN Development Program and an old friend of mine. We had been in Sri Lanka together. So, he felt that unless... What he was trying to do was to organize an international consortium to fund a major unexploded ordinance program in Laos. But he felt that if the United States were not part of that, it would be very difficult to get much enthusiasm from other potential donors. So, he was very anxious to have us in it. My position was, 'We'd like to be in it, but we're not making much progress bilaterally. If we can get under the UN umbrella, that might allow us to do it.' That's exactly what happened. With the UN pushing on the political front, we were able to piggyback on that effort to get a U.S. component in this unexploded ordinance program - actually, the single

largest component in it using U.S. military and resources available through the Department of Defense. That actually got started a few months before I left in 1996 and has gone very well since then. In fact, Jan Matsen, who was then the head of the UNDP in Laos and now is in New York and was visiting a few weeks ago. He said that the UN-administered trust fund actually has more money in it than it can spend, that the real constraint is local resources, principally personnel that the Laos can put into the program. So, that was one of the things we were able to do.

Q: During the time you were there, I think there was a big effort on the part of the UN in Cambodia to have fair elections and all. They did try something. Did what was happening in Cambodia spill over to either the Khmer Rouge or the Vietnamese government? Did that have any effect?

TOMSETH: No, not very much. The elections were in May of 1993 and they formed a government during that summer. By that point, the Khmer Rouge really was not much of a factor in Cambodia anymore. It was breaking up into factions. They operated in a few places along the Cambodian-Thai border, but in the tri-border area where Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand come together, which in the 1980s, there was a lot of fighting that involved Thailand and the various factions in Cambodia and the Vietnamese (not so much the Laos. They just sort of got out of the way.) in that tri-border area. But by the 1990s, that really wasn't happening anymore. In a political sense, there wasn't much apparent impact of what had happened in Cambodia in Laos, although I am sure that it probably caused some anxiety among the leadership. Here, after all, was a country that had been part of the socialist bloc, that had become a monarchy once again. While there was never a Lao equivalent of Prince Sihanouk and the Lao family never was the same kind of political factor in Laos that Sihanouk was in Cambodia, I'm sure that some of these guys must have been a little bit uneasy by what had happened in Cambodia. But the immediate practical effect in Laos was negligible.

Q: What about the writ of Vietnam?

TOMSETH: In the 1970s and 1980s, the Vietnamese presence in Laos was overwhelming. They had 40-60,000 military forces at any given moment and advisors in every ministry. In fact, the fellow who was the Vietnamese ambassador while I was in Vientiane (He is still there, as a matter of fact. He is now dean he's been there so long.) had started out in Laos as a Vietnamese advisor in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and then had gone away briefly and then had come back to their embassy as their deputy chief of mission and then had gone away again and then had come back as their ambassador. He spoke very good Lao.

Another digression, if I may, about the utility of learning a language. Of the diplomatic corps, he and I were the only ones who spoke Lao. They had a party congress while I was there in the spring of 1996. By that time, traveling around the country on POW/MIA and refugee things, I had become fairly well known to what passes for the Lao press corps. In fact, we through a USIA program were trying to help them a bit in improving their professional standards. When this congress was over, the diplomatic corps was invited to attend some of the sessions, including the closing session. At the closing session, the Lao press corps wanted to interview some of the diplomats about the congress. The only two that they could interview because you had to speak

Lao were the Vietnamese ambassador and me. So, here we were, this one-time patron of Laos, the representative thereof, and the representative of what had at one time been the great enemy of their regime standing there side by side commenting on the results of the Lao communist party congress.

In any event, by the 1990s, the Vietnamese influence had diminished very considerably in real terms as far as what was happening in Laos. They had neither resources nor expertise that seemed terribly relevant. They still came and went all the time. The seniors were always running off to Vietnam. There were always senior Vietnamese coming. At the time, it seemed almost farcical in terms of the importance of this to anything meaningful that was actually happening in Laos. The Thai government in many respects had much more influence than the Vietnamese government. Thailand was the single largest foreign investor by far in Laos and it was Thai investors that were really driving the economy at that point. I am told by my successor, Wendy Chamberlin, who just finished up her tour, that with the Asian financial crisis, the Vietnamese have made a bit of a comeback in Laos. The Lao economy was hurt by this, being as dependent as it was on the Thai economy. The Vietnamese have been able to make something of a comeback, in effect, by telling the Laos, "We told you so."

Q: I take it that from what you were saying your embassy was no longer under the seven American restriction.

TOMSETH: No. By the time I got there, I think we were up to 15 or 16 American staff and we added a couple more while I was there. They've added a couple more since then. But it's still not a big embassy. Actually, it was in many respects a very good post. We had work that kept everybody busy and some of these issues had their constituencies in the United States, so people working on them could feel that they were involved in something that was important, at least to those constituencies. But it was not like some places where I've been where the only life that people assigned in the embassy had was their work. People actually had a life. It really had transformed from being a bachelor post to a very nice family post. In fact, when I was in Croatia last year, the consular officer in the embassy in Zagreb told me that in the last bidding cycle go-around, he had tried to get Laos, but there was a lot of competition for it.

Q: What was Vientiane like during this time? I've heard that before it had all the aspects of a "Wild West" town. This was from Dick Howland and others who spent quite a bit of time there during the early 1970s.

TOMSETH: When I was a vice consul in Udorn in 1968 and 1969, I lived with a USIA officer. We were both bachelors at the time. We would go up to Vientiane on the weekend fairly frequently. It wasn't very far away. We would go up there because at that time Udorn had been a little northeastern Thai provincial town and was a lot of unpaved streets and red dust and a great big air base right on the edge of town, but really it was a seedy little backwater. Vientiane was seedy, too, but at least it had an air of cosmopolitan quality that Udorn couldn't begin to match. It also had a nightlife that was about as raunchy as anyplace in Southeast Asia, I suppose. When we were in Bangkok - it must have been about 1991 - my wife and I went up to visit Charlie in Vientiane. It was the first time I had been there in 20 years. Other than the fact that the cars were somewhat newer models, it looked to me like Vientiane hadn't changed a bit in those 20 years.

We were there about three days, I think. Wandering around the market, I was talking to some of the people, I said, "I was here in the late 1960s and early 1970s and it looks to me like nothing has changed." They said, "Oh, a lot has changed. After 1975, it really got bad. In the last few years, we've managed to claw our way back to where we were." But in the meantime, Udorn had become a thriving metropolitan area, sort of the major economic center for the upper part of northeastern Thailand. These days, the big city is Udorn. If you want Kentucky Fried Chicken and the Thai equivalent of the Price Club, that's where you go. Vientiane is just as sleepy as it ever was.

Q: Is there anything else we should talk about about this time?

TOMSETH: I think that probably covers most of the issues in Laos while I was there. It was a good post.

MARIE THERESE HUHTALA
Director, Office of Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand & Vietnam Affairs
Washington, DC (1996-1998)

Ambassador Huhtala was born and raised in California and graduated from Santa Clara University. Joining the Foreign Service in 1972, she studied Thai and Chinese languages and became a specialist in East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Her overseas postings include Paris, Quebec, Hong Kong and Chiang Mai (Thailand). In Washington she dealt primarily with East Asia and Pacific Affairs. From 2001 to 2004 she served as US Ambassador to Malaysia and, from 2004 to 2005, as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Ambassador Huhtala is a graduate of the National War College and the State Department's Senior Seminar. Ambassador Huhtala was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2005.

Q: Then where did you go in 1996?

HUHTALA: In 1996 I went back to the Department, to the East Asia and Pacific, Bureau, EAP. While I had been away, since I left VLC in 1992, they had combined the offices of Thailand and Burma with Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia. So there was a new office called BCLTV – Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam Affairs. It had come together in the winter of 1995. In the summer of 1996 I took over as the second director of that office. Right off the bat there were some organizational and administrative challenges, because the two offices were not yet functioning as one. There was a deputy for each side of the house and there was no real interchange or interplay among them. I came in with a new deputy director and we rearranged the responsibilities so that, for instance, the Thai desk officer would have backup duty on Cambodia and the Laos desk officer would be back up on Burma. In that way the two offices would become better meshed.

We had a lot of challenges in those two years in BCLTV. The first one had to do with Burma, a

country with a horrible human rights record, where Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi had been kept under house arrest for many years. In the summer of '96 the Congress had passed an amendment to one of the appropriations bills called the Cohen- Feinstein amendment, which mandated economic sanctions if its human rights record deteriorated further.

Q: What about Laos?

HUHTALA: In Laos, we had an Ambassador there of course. We had normalized in '91 and Wendy Chamberlin was our Ambassador, greatly beloved by the Lao people because years before she'd been a volunteer teacher there before she joined the Foreign Service. She spoke Lao and she had a very dynamic personality. Wendy tried very hard to move the Lao in the direction of opening up and liberalizing so that we could have stronger relations.

During that period we signed a bilateral trade agreement with Laos. The Lao were very anxious to have most favourite nation (MFN) status which is now called normal trade relations, NTR. They didn't have MFN at the time and they knew that they needed a trade agreement first to get it. The Lao delegation came to Washington and came into the first meeting to negotiate the bilateral trade agreement and the minister who lead the delegation said, "Where do I sign?" They were ready, so it was pretty easy to negotiate an agreement. Of course an agreement like that has to be ratified by the Congress and the Congress has to agree to give most favored nation status. At that time the Lao unfortunately were engaged in stupid human rights abuses. There was a group of Lao villagers who had converted to Christianity and there were American missionaries with them and they were caught reading the Bible in their homes. The Lao authorities clamped down and arrested the American missionaries, eventually expelled them and put the poor Lao in jail. Naturally a huge uproar in Congress ensued, as you can imagine. Wendy was there behind the scenes saying, "This is insanity. Do you or do you not want trade relations with us? Congress takes all of these things into account." The Lao said, "This has nothing to do with trade." Well guess what, it does. She was very frustrated. Also there was a Hmong insurgency, you know the Hmong people who had fought with the CIA during the war. There was an active remnant up in the hills that was still resisting the government. By this time we had sizable populations of Hmong resettled in the United States, many of them with citizenship.

Q: Some up in Minnesota.

HUHTALA: A lot in Minnesota, central valley of California and North Carolina, Senator Jesse Helms' home state. A group of them in their beautiful tribal costumes had paid a visit on him on New Years Day. He was enchanted with them. They were good citizens now and they had grievances about their homeland so he was very interested in their cause. I remember we were up in the Senate for a hearing. The budget committee had taken up the matter of whether or not we should grant MFN to Laos. On that very day -- and I think this is just a coincidence -- on that very day there was a delegation of Hmong in their bright red tribal outfits who had come up to the hill to lobby for support in general. They found out about the budget hearing and the two events sort of collided and it went off the agenda. We have never been able, to this day, to get normal trade relations with Laos because every time we get close the Lao authorities crack down in some way on either religious practice or human rights in general. That was frustrating, I have to say.

Q: Tell me, I mean this whole area you dealt with from Thailand to Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, what was your involvement with POW thing at that time?

HUHTALA: There was an office set up in the Pentagon called DPMO, Defense POW/MIA Office. We provided a lot of support to them, as did the embassy in Hanoi. There was a detachment in Hanoi that was still conducting many different recovery activities every year. We attended and spoke at the annual conferences of the League of Families who were still very resistant to the fact that we had normalized. The issue had taken up a life of its own. The search for remains was primarily a military activity, but it was also, always, the first talking point in any discussion we ever had with the Vietnamese. They understood that this developing, mutually beneficial relationship was founded on continuing cooperation on POW/MIA.

End of reader