

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

PHILIP R. COOK JR.

*Interviewed by: Monteagle Stearns
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[Note: This interview was not edited by Mr. Cook.]

Q: On behalf of the Foreign Service Oral History Program and the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Phil, tell me, how did you get interested in foreign affairs, and how did you happen to get into the Foreign Service?

COOK: Well, I'd lived abroad for about a year during World War II, in France and Italy, and I enjoyed it very much. I liked living there, I liked the people, it was an experience that I had never had before, and after the war I came back and finished up college at Amherst College in Massachusetts, and when I finished I didn't really have any clear idea of what I wanted to do, but I thought whatever it is I wanted to do, I hoped to do it out of the United States. And I saw an advertisement for a school teaching job in Turkey, so I became a teacher.

Q: When was this?

COOK: That was when I finished Amherst College, graduated in 1948, and I immediately went to Turkey. And I taught school in basically a little high school, junior high school, actually, a school run by missionaries originally for Armenian kids, but most of our kids at that time were all Turkish, in a little town of Tulass, the Tulass American School. I came back to go to graduate school. Again, still being very interested in the cultures other than my own, I went to the University of Chicago and studied Anthropology, to be a Social Anthropologist. But having finished my masters at University of Chicago, and I got that in 1952 and being an anthropologist my advisor at the time pointed out that since I had been in Turkey and spoke some Turkish and had experience there, he had heard that there was a new grant to give aid to Turkey to modernize their agriculture. So I go down to Washington and we had a \$10 million gift to Turkey, and I think our five-man team was to go out to do anthropological research. However, while I was there in Washington, talking about this job, I also came to the attention of the Turkish Desk Officer, who was also a teacher in Turkey; his parents were missionaries. He thought there might be other things for me if the AID thing didn't work out. And a little while later it was determined that it wasn't going to work out. The team never was formed and never actually went. But he got in touch with me again, and suggested I might talk with people there. I wanted to go into the Foreign Service, I wanted to go abroad, but I was unable to take the Foreign Service exam at that time because my wife was an English woman; she didn't have her American citizenship.

So instead, in November, 1952, I joined the State Department as an intelligence research specialist. And (my first overseas posting) was Nairobi.

Q: That was about what time?

COOK: My recollection was it was 1956. On our way out there, we flew out; those were the days when you could sleep on an airplane. We were then stopped because the (Israelis invaded Suez). We were on the last plane to get through to Cairo. And I was assigned out there as the Junior Economic Officer in the Economic Section.

Q: After Nairobi, where did you go?

COOK: Well, after home leave, I went to Pretoria.

Q: I'm interviewing Philip Cook for the Foreign Affairs Training Program Oral History Program. Phil, we finished the first part of this interview with the beginning of your career, and I think we've gotten up as far as your assignment to the NATO Defense College in Rome, but then your next assignment was to Vietnam. Could you tell us something about that, and how you got the assignment, and so forth?

COOK: Yes, Monty, sure. I had gone to the NATO Defense College out of OECD in Paris, and had gone there basically with the idea of being there for the six month's course as a member of the college, and then moving on to another job, which I had been given to understand would be the Pol-Mil counselor in Rome. But while I was at the college, the ambassadors in Rome changed, and Graham Martin, who became my boss much later on, became ambassador to Rome and had his own choice to be Pol-Mil counselor to Rome, and it wasn't me. He didn't know me from Adam, it wasn't anything against me, but he did have somebody else who was very, very good, and he insisted upon getting him and he got him. And anyway, so I stayed on at the NATO Defense College much longer than I had intended to, first as a student and later on as the faculty for a couple of years, and realized I had to do something else, and I didn't want to go back to Washington, so I got in touch with Charlie Whitehouse, who was an old friend, and Charlie was in Vietnam at that time. I hadn't realized it when I got in touch with him, but he was the Deputy Ambassador. And I wrote to him and said I'd like to come to Vietnam, and was there anything he could do, and the next thing I knew, I had orders to Vietnam to report at once. This was in early 1972. This correspondence took place in January and February, and I got word to go, I guess, in March, and I arrived there in April. And arrived, of course, in Saigon, and didn't know exactly what I was supposed to do, but I figured that they would tell me, and they soon did. I think I stayed perhaps three or four days in Saigon while they processed me in and decided as to where I was supposed to go. And it was determined that I should go to the province of Binh Thuan, at the capitol of Phan Thiet, and I was to be the Province Senior Advisor, which was the head of the team in that province. And I was the advisor to the province Chief, and my staff were advisors to his staff.

Q: Now, was this under the CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support) program?

COOK: Yes, I forgot to mention that, as I should have. Yes, this was under the CORDS program, which was...I guess I was technically seconded to AID, although I suppose I was; I wasn't aware of it, but I suppose I was. And as they were the ones that ran the CORDS program. And so, in any event, the initial getting acquainted there, I was told that I should go to my assignment, but not directly to Phan Thiet, I was to go up to Nha Trang, where I would be briefed on what I was supposed to do when I got to Phan Thiet.

Q: In other words, Nha Trang was sort of the headquarters for II CORPS, and came under it, or....

COOK: It was where the deputy for CORDS was; it was Tom Barnes at the time, he was the deputy for CORDS, and John Vann was the head of the--I forget what his title was, but he was the--it was normally held by a general, but he was a civilian doing the military, he was the top man in II CORPS for us. And so I went up to Nha Trang, and someone met me at the airport, and I had arrived with bag and baggage, such as it was. And I was met at the airport and they said my stuff would be taken to a temporary billet there, but could I be ready to go up to Pleiku in 15 minutes! So I said, "Certainly I can, but why, what do you want me to do at Pleiku?" And they said, "Well, anybody that's going to take over one of the top spots in the province has to get the blessing of John Vann, and so you have to go up and interview with John Vann and see if you meet his requirements." And so I took a little overnight bag with just a couple of things in it, and I went up to Pleiku, and this was right in the middle of a very big offensive in that area. Actually most of it was taking place in the Kon Tum area, just to the north of Pleiku. And I saw Vann at his headquarters in Pleiku, and we chatted for a little while, and only just a few minutes, and he said, "Well, I'm going up to Kon Tum, come on, you come with me." And I guess Tom Barnes was also along, I remember, at that stage. And so Barnes and Vann and I went up in his little helicopter, it was a four-place helicopter.

We went up to the Kon Tum area, and in fact, got ourselves right into the middle of a kind of a battle, and as he wanted to go out to one of the firebases that was taking fire at the time, and the place where we would have landed was surrounded by concertina wire and barbed wire, and the helicopter pilot dropped us down to about three or four feet off the ground, and said he couldn't land because there were incoming mortars coming in, so we were to jump out of the aircraft. Vann jumped out first, followed by Barnes, followed by me, and Vann took off and jumped over the concertina wire into a bunker, and Barnes followed and did the same thing. I followed and tried to do the same thing but caught my pants in the top of the concertina wire and went flat on my face; fortunately, not on top of it, but on the other side, hung up in the wire for a little bit. And I thought maybe this was going to be my first and last day in Vietnam! But there was some stuff coming in, but fortunately, it didn't hit right next to us at that time. So we got into the bunker and all was well, and this was my first taste of Vietnam, the war aspect of it, and we got a briefing in the little firebase headquarters there, what was going on.

Q: Now, was this by Americans, or by South Vietnamese?

COOK: This was South Vietnamese; you know, I'm not really very clear in my memory on it; I think it was a combination. I think they were largely South Vietnamese, but with some American advisors in support, but I'm not clear as to exactly...it was mostly South Vietnamese.

Q: Yeah, I think by that '72 offensive, most of the American ground forces were gone.

COOK: Yes, most of the main forces were gone, but they still had advisors, and I think that was what it was. And as I say, this was not the headquarters, this was just a forward firebase. And then things cooled off a little bit after about half an hour and the helicopter came back and picked us up, and we went back to the headquarters, which I again remember even more vividly, and this one was most unpleasant, because we landed in their headquarters, and there were 30 or 40 body bags full right on the place where we landed, and it was hot, and the bodies had been there for quite awhile, and there was a very, very strong odor of bodies, which gets in your clothes and all that. I could taste it in my mouth and smell it in my clothes for days afterwards. But these body bags were there, and they were South Vietnamese. And we went into the headquarters there and were briefed again, and finally left and went back to Kon Tum, and apparently, I passed the test. And Vann said, "Well, fine, you have to take up your duties in a week or so, and let me know when you're ready in Phan Thiet". And then he was gone off on some other thing; Vann was a very dynamic person; people either liked him very much or they disliked him very much; I did like him very much, and he apparently liked me, too.

Q: How long after that was he killed? I know it was not long.

COOK: I'll come to that; I was almost with him, actually. But it was perhaps two or three months after that that he was killed. At that particular point, I received his blessing and had to go, and I assumed that Barnes was going to take me back to Nha Trang, but we went outside and Barnes, who was a very interesting fellow and had his own way of doing things...

Q: Well, I knew him when we were both in the Embassy in Bangkok before that.

COOK: Well you know, he's different. And I liked Tom very much, but as I say, he had his own way of doing things, and he kind of alarmed me. I guess it was a good thing, because what he did was, when we went out of the headquarters, he said his best suggestion for me to learn what I was supposed to do would be to go around and see what other Province Senior Advisors did, and so he was just going to leave me there, and he said, "You just work your way around the whole of II CORPS, as much of it as you want, go to two or three places and see how they do things, and when you're ready come back and see me, and I'll take you down to Phan Thiet."

Well, I didn't know the first thing about--I'd been in country for three or four days, I didn't even know where the provinces were, or even their names, but I wasn't about to tell

him that, so I said, "Fine, you take off, I'll take care of myself." I realized, of course, that Pleiku, where I was at, was a province, and they had a Province Advisor, too. I can't think of his name offhand, but he was a Foreign Service Officer as well, and in many of the provinces the Senior Advisor was a military person, but there were three or four of us that were civilian Foreign Service, and Pleiku was under the control of one of these. And so I thought I'd go and see him, he was right there, and I did. And I stayed overnight there and went to his briefing the next morning and talked to him, a very nice guy, and met an old friend who was an anthropologist when I went through University of Chicago in Anthropology Graduate School, and he was there, too, and he was an expert on the Montagnard. We just ran into each other after a good many years, at the bar that evening, and it was fun and pleasant but, and I learned something from this trip, and particularly from running into this guy. He said he was going to go down to Buon Ma Thuot the next day, and perhaps I'd like to come along with him. And so we did, and we thought we were going to ride the trucks down with some Montagnard refugees that were going down to Buon Ma Thuot from the Kon Tum-Pleiku area, because that's why he was going down, to sort of look after the refugees. But we didn't actually ride down in the truck because there was a helicopter going down, and that was quicker and easier, and we went that way. And so then my second place to stop was Buon Ma Thuot, and I stayed there a couple of days and checked in with the Province Senior Advisor there, and his staff and saw what they did, went to another morning briefing and so forth, and then we went out.

The night before, they had an attack at one of their outlying districts led by some... apparently a Vietnamese lady--woman--who was riding an elephant. And this elephant drew up and attacked this village with a group and this lady; I guess she was the Dragon Lady type of person. And so we heard all about that and we went out in a helicopter to where this village had been attacked the night before, and they were all in a state of panic. And in fact, were very anxious to get on the helicopter with us to go back, and we had to be a little vigorous seeing that they didn't. Fortunately, no harm was done, but it looked as if somebody was going to get his fingers mashed a little bit, because you couldn't take them, even though you might want to. Anyway, this was my introduction. And from there, I caught another helicopter and went back to Nha Trang, with only just in time to pick up still another helicopter to go up to Qui Nhon, where I had a friend up there I'd known before.

Q: Which, as I recall, is one of the coastal provinces just north of Nha Trang.

COOK: Yes, it was, it was just south of Binh Dinh, as I remember, and it later became a place which was quite active, because that's where they all evacuated or tried to evacuate to when they came down to their final attempt to escape.

Q: That's right, I remember when we were together there.

COOK: So anyway, I went up there and saw how they did things up there, which each person did things a little differently than other places; a lot of it was attuned to your own Province Chief. Some Province Chiefs were very, very good, some were very, very bad, and others did things the way they wanted, and the Province Senior Advisor had to adjust

his own style to the Province Chief's style, because there was no question who was the boss, it was the Province Chief, but you could advise, but that was about it. And so anyway, then I checked in after this back down to Nha Trang, and then went on down to pick up my regular duties in Phan Thiet. My predecessor was also a Foreign Service Officer, and he was still there, and he was just anxiously awaiting my arrival, and he was kind enough to stay on for two or three days after I got there to introduce me to the Province Chief and bring his people around before he left. What was his name? Falstadt. I think he retired soon after he left there, but I forget, he came from New Orleans. I never knew him before or after, but a very nice person.

Q: Can you give a little description of how many agencies there were in the CORDS program and what the different functions were?

COOK: Yeah, it may not be complete. There was, of course, the regular CORDS program, which was largely staffed by the Foreign Service people, AID people who were career AID people, there were police advisors who were temporarily AID people because they were under a sort of contract to the thing, and of course, there was the CIA, which were known in the provinces as "the Embassy", although the CIA place was separate from mine, and we were the MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) headquarters people.

Q: Now, did you have military advisors as well?

COOK: They were all my staff, well, no, I take that back, not all, but most of my staff were military. But I had, oh, I don't remember now, how many at this stage, but there were, I had four or five, perhaps, civilian people working for me, Police Advisor was the most senior of the civilians, I had another Foreign Service Officer, John Finney, who worked for me, a very good man. And I guess that was the only other Foreign Service Officer there, aside from myself. And then we had a couple AID people, and that was in the headquarters in Phan Thiet, but then each district, and these all came under us, too, each district had...Perhaps I should go back. In our headquarters staff, then I had a number of military people, my deputy was a lieutenant colonel in the Army, a great guy, Glen Leisling, who lives around this area still, I see him from time to time, and a number of other advisors who were all military that had their counterparts as the various functions of the Province Chief staff, who were all military, too. The Province Chief was a colonel, in fact, Giai was one of the best of the Province Chiefs. I was very lucky to have a good person to work with like that, he was great, and we got along perfectly.

Q: Now, the Province Chief largely commanded the province and Provincial Forces and what was the one underneath that, RFP?

COOK: Well, the Province Chief was the military governor; it was sort of like our states, and each state has its governor. Well, each province had its governor, but at least at this stage of the game, each of these governors was a military person, usually a colonel. And I think almost always a colonel. And then, of course, he had his staff, with all of the G-1, G-2, G-3, G-4, G-5, whatever they go up to, functions under that, and their staffs and so

forth, so the headquarters was a fairly sizeable group of people. And so he had both the civilian administration of the province, but he also had in many cases command of all of the military forces in that area.

Q: But these military forces were, if you will, kind of National Guard type, in other words, the regular Army divisions did not come under the...

COOK: That is correct. We had, there was no regular Army division in Binh Thuan province. We had the headquarters of one; I forget now which one it was. And the headquarters was there, but the regular forces were not; they were up in Pleiku, or Buon Ma Thuot. Yes, they were in Buon Ma Thuot, is where they were, but we did have a headquarters in there. But no, our military forces were all RF and PF, and the RF, I'm a little shaky at this point as to what the difference was. The RF were a higher level military force, and I think we had something like five or six battalions; we had quite a few. And they were very well trained, did a good job. But they could go anywhere, but they were largely used in the province, but they could, if needed, they could go other places. But anywhere within the province, or even within II CORPS, but largely they didn't, largely they stayed in the province. The PF were much less trained, and they were not sort of full time. The RF, I believe, were full time, and the PF were sort of nighttime soldiers and daytime farmers and so forth.

Q: Home guard kind of...

COOK: Home guard type of thing, and they were not particularly well trained and not particularly well armed, and also, as I say, they had a full time job in the daytime, and then they were supposed to guard bridges and stuff like that at night.

Q: How much of a military threat was there in Phan Thiet during the '72 offensive?

COOK: Well, not as bad as some places. Certainly it didn't compare to places like Kon Tum and Pleiku, Bien Dinh, where there were, however, Regular Army forces. They had regular divisions of the South Vietnamese ARVN forces there under the command of one of their generals, so that didn't come under the province directly, although there was coordination. But, and then they had the Rangers, and they had various other units, so they had more forces, because there was a bigger threat of that nature. But ours was one of the more active; we had quite a lot of trouble from time to time, and in fact, we'll come to that in due course. The Phan Thiet, as it turned out in the end, and I'll come back to this later, was the place which the VC, when the ceasefire went into effect, or just before it, had selected to be their headquarters, so they tried to take Phan Thiet at the very, very end. The last day before the ceasefire we had a big battle, the biggest in Vietnam at that time. And the lost amongst them were among the last of the American casualties. But I'm skipping ahead here. But no, we didn't have a big threat as Kon Tum did, or Pleiku, but we had quite a substantial threat, but we kept it contained because we had a very good Province Chief, and we had pretty strong RF; we had, as I remember, it was either four or six battalions. I think it was six.

Q: Did you have any American air support at that time?

COOK: We didn't have any in province, we had air support that we could get if we wanted it. We had this in two forms, we had air support, it was still AIRCAV, U.S. AIRCAV, and we did use the AIRCAV at the very end; we had to call them in. We also had Navy support, too, at the very end, because that's when we had our biggest battle. But then we also had B-52s, which we'd call in for Arc Light bombings if needed. We didn't need them very often, I think there was only one or two that we called in, and as far as I could tell, they didn't do any damage, except on the ground. But in any event, we did have that, and there was some U.S. air in the form of jet aircraft. The nearest airfield was in the next province up, in Ninh Thuan, and Phan Rang. Phan Rang had an airbase, and I think not only South Vietnamese armies, but I think we had Americans there, too, at that time. But we never had any cause for using them; our war was not one in which we had a lot of people massed against a lot of other people, until the very end; we did then. But up until then, it was mostly sort of night time guerrilla stuff, and a lot of, at night time, the VC would come into a village and try and kill the village chief and the leading people. The police station was what they'd target, and of course, very often times the place was mined around there, and sometimes they'd run into the mines, and oftentimes, these attacks were successful, oftentimes they weren't, and most of the time when they weren't, their bodies were found in the morning, and they were all young kids.

Q: Did you have the artillery fire bases around?

COOK: Yes, we had...

Q: Were they effective?

COOK: No, I don't think so. Again, most of what we were using them for for the main part of the time was, what do you call it, H&I fire.

Q: Harassment and Interjection, meaning just firing off in the air.

COOK: Yes, they just fired, because just outside of town, not very far, was what they call a free fire zone; anybody who was out there was in danger of getting killed, and it was OK to do it. Otherwise, you had to be careful about where you were shooting.

Q: I would like to ask you next, because we've covered kind of the military side, what about the civilian program, what were they up to?

COOK: Well, the civilian program was a big one in its way, but it took a back seat to the military, because really, there wasn't an awful lot of point in building up bridges that got knocked down, and things like that, unless you could guard the bridge and make sure it didn't get knocked down again. But we did have, and a lot of this was sort of organized on a CORPS area. We had refugee problems. We had refugee advisors, they took care of that, but we handled our aspect of it there, but often times the refugees might go to a refugee camp someplace else. And we did have a lot of civic projects. Schools--we tried

to build up schools that had been blown up and so forth, and then repair and supply them with materials and desks, and books, and writing materials, and so on. Health--we did what we could in the health area; it wasn't as much as it should have been, although there were other countries that were involved in that. We had some Taipei Chinese doctors there, and some other provinces had German hospitals; there were various other countries that were involved in the medical sense. Engineering--a lot of engineering things that were contracted out to contractors; roads and bridges and stuff of that nature. There was a big Chieu Hoi program, too.

Q: Oh, they surrender?

COOK: Yes, this was when people were, this was the Phung Hoang program, which also was known as the Phung Hoang, it means Phoenix. And that has a dirty name, and there was a lot of nasty things about it, but there were some other aspects which I think were much bigger than the facts you hear more about, but there was a concentrated effort to try and turn people around. And when prisoners were taken, they were encouraged to change sides, and some of them did, and they were known as the Chieu Hois. And they had turned around, and that was a big program. The police advisor I had, and he worked very closely with the police administration in all aspects of the police, which were semi-military, too, they had field police as well as the sort of town police.

Q: What about the agriculture, of course.

COOK: There was quite a lot being done in some things of agriculture, but again, a lot of these things were projects which could get kind of discouraging, because you'd make a certain amount of progress down some line of endeavor, only to find it was all burned down or blown up the next day, or next month, or something or other, and so the security problem definitely took precedence over everything else.

Q: Well, I remember we had that problem even after, by the time I got there in '73-'75. What about the '72 offensive, you said, when you really finally had a pitched battle there in Phan Thiet?

COOK: Well, of course, the offensives were all...we had a big offensive which is one that I think they talk about when they're talking about the '72 offensive. I think they talk more in terms of the somewhat earlier one, which was going on about the time I got there, and continued for awhile, which was largely concentrated in its heaviest part up in the Kon Tum-Pleiku area.

Q: Up in the highlands, yeah.

COOK: Up in the highlands. And actually, this was a pretty big concentrated battle. John Vann was killed in that area, possibly. I think the reports finally have it that he was not shot down, he just crashed. But anyway, that was where the bulk of it was. But largely, the battles were fought with some stiffening and some air support from the United States and intelligence work from the United States, but the fighting was done, with those two

exceptions, almost exclusively by the South Vietnamese, who did a fine job, and succeeded in defeating the North Vietnamese, at least at that period of time. They held them off; there were heavy losses taken on both sides, and if you count losses, it's hard to know who won and who lost, but they kept the territory, and it worked out pretty well.

Q: Then you said, just before the ceasefire, this was getting on into what, '73?

COOK: Yes, there was a lot of negotiation going on in Paris about which we knew relatively little. We were not in great contact with Saigon.

Q: Let me ask you this: You in effect reported through Nha Trang, to the CORD headquarters, and they reported to Saigon.

COOK: Right. I was the boss in Binh Thuan province, and there was somebody like me in each of the 12 provinces in II CORPS, and we each had a similar...I had perhaps a somewhat bigger, because the drawdown had already started to take place, and I had six or seven different districts, and each district had villages, and each village had hamlets. So originally they had had advisors in each of these units, several, and the further down you got the lower the rank got, and the smaller number of people in that particular little sub-team, but we had a lot of people. And by the time, or shortly after I got there, we had withdrawn everybody from the hamlets directly, and everybody from the villages directly, but we did have district teams. So each one of our districts had two or three Americans plus usually some Filipino staff as well as some Vietnamese worked with them, too. And we had the overall control of it there.

Q: Going back to the sort of final offensive, there...

COOK: As I say, that was really the second offensive. In Paris, the ceasefire negotiations were going on, but we were pretty far removed from all this, and we really didn't know much what was going on. We knew there were talks going on, but it wasn't at all clear as to who was doing what to whom, and I remember that it earlier had looked, sometime I think in November or something or other or '72, it looked like something might be coming to an agreement right then, but then it all seemed to fall through.

Q: Oh, yes, the famous Christmas bombing and so forth.

COOK: Well, that was before then. I think this was something that we had come to some agreement, as I wasn't aware of it at the time exactly, but since then I read about it, and I've frankly forgotten precisely what the details were, but I think some time in November or December or October, perhaps, we came to some sort of understanding with the North Vietnamese about a ceasefire, but the South Vietnamese weren't having any. And they thought we were selling them out, and they wouldn't buy it. So we went back to the war. And then the Christmas bombing and all that, but the final agreement that was made allowed, it set a date, as I remember it was the 28th of January, I think, in '73, that was to be the ceasefire, midnight on the 28th of January; I could be corrected, maybe it was the 27th, but I think it was the 28th. Anyway, and the rule was that this was the flag planting,

and whatever area that you were in control of would be yours. And the VC wanted to make Phan Thiet their headquarters, and they tried to take Phan Thiet, but we did get word that that was what they were trying to do, and we called in some help and we got a small element of AIRCAV down there, and we got all of our RF and PF out in the field, and we had two destroyers off the coast. I don't think they did a lot of good, but they were there in case they were needed. They did fire, but I don't know what they hit. And I think we brought in some Arc Light things, too. But we had quite an active time there right in the last 24 hours; there were a lot of people killed, a whole lot, and I think much more on the other side, on the VC side, than on ours, although we had a few killed too, including some Americans.

Q: I was going to say, was there any casualties among your staff?

COOK: Yes, I had two or three casualties during the time I was there. We were instructed pretty much not to get killed; we weren't supposed to get killed, but everybody there was involved, and you wanted to take your place, and we had a couple of people wounded, and a lot of us were very close to being wounded, but several were wounded and we had one or two people killed. But during the course of those last few days, it was by accident, it was not really militarily related. But at the end, we did have an AIRCAV down there, and they had put in some Montagnard Long Range Patrol people, and one of these guys stepped on a punji stick or something or other, and they went in to pick him up and they did pick him up, and he got into the harness and they hoisted him up, but he didn't have the harness on right, and he fell out, and that was kind of tragic. And then either that same day; I guess it must have been the same day or the next day, we lost the Loach (Hughes OH-6 Cayuse). You know, the AIRCAV, what they had was a little four-place plane, or three-place plane, that would go in very low. It's what looks like a dragonfly, it goes in about 15 feet off the, right over the treetops, and the whole idea is that they're trying to get somebody to shoot at them from underneath. And if somebody is foolish enough to do that, there's the pilot and there's a guy sitting in the back with an M-16 and hand grenades, and as soon as anybody shoots at him, he cuts loose with the hand grenades and the M-16. Well, up above him is a command Huey and some gunships, these Cobra gunships, and they go in and they really saturate the place, and of course, the other side soon gets to know that, so they don't shoot at you, but anyway, that was how it was supposed to work. And on one of these occasions, the Loach went down and immediately caught fire, and the guy in the back was burned up. And the pilot got out, but the guy in the back didn't. And so he was, I guess, one of the last of the American casualties in the shooting war. Of course at the end there were a couple of Marines that were killed, but this, I think, may have been the very last person, either the last or the next to last; they had other problems in other provinces, too, but this was...anyway, we had one of the last ones. But there were a lot of Vietnamese that were killed, a whole lot. But then it stopped, and at midnight or very soon thereabout, it stopped, and they didn't get Phan Thiet, so we ended up in control of what we had, and it worked out fine. And at that point, I stayed on there; of course, at that point, once the ceasefire went into effect, again, all the details I've kind of forgotten, but as I remember, the American troops had 90 days to get out of Vietnam. We were supposed to have all of our military forces with the exception of some defense attachés...

Q: Well, I guess it all became part of that big defense attaché office.

COOK: There were a few people, but they weren't involved directly in the fighting; they weren't supposed to be, and they weren't.

Q: Yeah, they were all logistics types and so forth.

COOK: Right. And so we had 90 days to get out, and of course the ICCS (International Commission of Control and Supervision) then came in...

Q: That being the International Control. And that was the Indonesians and the Iranians and the....

COOK: Not initially. The first ones were the Canadians. The Canadians initially, and who else was the...there were two, well, there was sort of more on our side, and two that were more on the other side.

Q: Yeah, there were Hungarians and Poles, or something like that.

COOK: Yes, there were; Poles were there. Indonesians came in, too, and the Iranians replaced the Canadians. I remember I sent a telegram from Hue saying that now we have "Kurds in Hue" when they arrived, which I thought was funny.

Q: Now, how and when did you get up to Hue?

COOK: Well, after the ceasefire, in January, I had already gotten word that I was to go on up to Hue and to take over the function up there for the very northernmost part of Vietnam, which included Quang Tri.

Q: So this was up into I-CORPS.

COOK: Yeah, the very northern part of I-CORPS. So I said goodbye to the folks in Phan Thiet and went on up there. I don't remember exactly when, it was somewhere around the first of February. And I was initially supposed to actually take over the new Consulate General in Nha Trang. But it later was decided, and I think rightly so, that it should be, because as you know, there was an AID people had the primacy in the CORD program, in a sense, it was under their control, and it was felt that we should have sort of a clean slate, and that their objectives and their way of thinking wasn't quite the same as the State Department's would have been, and it was felt that this should be effectively replaced by a new organization, which would be the Consulate General, which would not be the same as the old CORDS program, although it had some similarities; it should be different people and different things, and yet some of the old people were still there. And some of them were fairly high ranking people, and at that time under the old system I was a Class Three, and it was felt that in order to effectively do this, the people that took over these Consulates General should be Class Two. And so I was asked to go up to Hue

instead, which was a sub-headquarters under the Da Nang Consulate General. So I went up there.

So I left Phan Thiet and went on up to Hue, and my territory in Hue included not only the city of Hue, but also all of that province, which was called Thua Thien. And more interesting that that was the province to the north, which was Quang Tri, and that was our northernmost border, and beyond that was the North Vietnamese forces.

Q: Yeah, the whole DMZ, the demilitarized zone.

COOK: Well, but the rule was, there wasn't any demilitarized zone anymore, as there had been. But the river at Quang Tri was the line, and we had our flag on the south side, "we" being the South Vietnamese, because the American forces were not active there anymore, they were in the process of getting out, and on the north side of the river, this was Quang Tri city, right there, were the North Vietnamese. We could look across and see each other, wave at each other, and so forth, there they were. And then of course, there was the question of repatriation of prisoners, and this was the point to do it, and we'd send over truckloads and boats across of their prisoners to them and they would send back prisoners to us.

Q: Was this a very extensive prisoner exchange?

COOK: Well, yes, it was, because I wasn't present for all of it, but I was present for a lot of it, and it did seem to me that there far more people moving to the North than what we were getting back from the North. But the interesting sidelight on this, the prisoners that the South Vietnamese had had were very well disciplined, and apparently very well instructed as to what to do by their own people before getting...they came up there in trucks from whatever prison camp they'd been in. I don't know where they had come from originally, but they ended up...there were various points for transfer of prisoners and ours was only one. But they had come from someplace off somewhere, and with whatever prison uniform they were given. But as they approached the area to get on the little boats that took them across, perhaps a dozen in a boat with a little outboard motor to go across, they all lined up, or squatted down on the ground, all perfectly disciplined, all quiet, and all almost naked, because they took off all of their prison clothes. This was a question of honor; they were not going to go back to North Vietnam wearing anything from the South. And they stripped down to their underwear and went across wearing nothing but their underwear, without saying anything, without any kind of demonstration, perfectly quiet, perfectly well disciplined, and obviously still very much North Vietnamese, and not at all ...I was going to say repentant, that's a silly word, but they were not cowed in any way. And I don't remember an awful lot coming back the other way; there must have been some. But Quang Tri, of course, as you know, I don't know whether you, I can't remember, you never did get up there, did you?

Q: No, I got up to Da Nang and Hue, but that's all.

COOK: But Quang Tri, the whole province of Quang Tri was sort of like Hiroshima. In the offensives that had taken place, Quang Tri was literally flattened; there wasn't anything left of any town, and Quang Tri was the biggest town in Quang Tri Province, it was the capital of Quang Tri Province, Quang Tri City. And Quang Tri City didn't have a house that was standing. The entire place, every single building, it was just like Hiroshima. Obviously there was no atomic bomb, but there was a lot of ordnance still around; you had to be very careful where you stepped. You'd see these little yellow balls of little stuff that had come out of these bombs that were dropped from the air, as well as grenade launchers and stuff like that; stuff was all over the place. In fact, I was sitting on the bank watching the exchange of prisoners along with some other people, and I felt this thing sticking into my backside and I reached around to see what it was, and it was something sharp there, and I pulled it out, and it was a human leg bone. And the whole city sort of smelled; there were a lot of people killed there. But the whole province, it wasn't just Quang Tri City, the whole province was this way.

So we had a massive reconstruction job to do; Quang Tri City was not reconstructed, it was going to be kept as it was as kind of a memorial, at least that was the thought at that time; I have no idea what's happened to it now. But other cities, however, we were trying to get people to go back, because all of the people had left, frankly, there wasn't anybody there. And when I was there we did bring a lot back and they started farming and so forth, so they had to be very careful about mines, because the whole place was crawling with mines. But we did try and bring people back and get things reestablished, but not in Quang Tri City at all. It was a very...the city, I remember when we went back in, at the very edge of the town, on the south side coming into the town, there was what had once been obviously a very nice house, western-style house. It must have been a two or three story house, but all that was left of it was one wall, and that was much more than any other...there wasn't any wall even standing in the rest of the town, but this was the one wall. It was way on the south side, a little bit on...it was almost a suburb of the town just as you come into it you saw it. And somebody told me this had been where the press had had their headquarters at one point, and just the wall was standing. And as you approached the town, painted on the wall in big black letters, was "Jane Fonda sucks".

Q: Tell me about, in effect what the differences were then between the end of the CORDS program and your relationship with the Consulate General in Da Nang when you were in Hue.

COOK: Well, there were; the differences, I think, were in a couple of different ways. For one thing, the United States was no longer after the ceasefire was no longer actively engaged in the military effort. Technically, there wasn't supposed to be any military effort, it was a ceasefire. However, that didn't stop the North Vietnamese from violating the ceasefire, or the South Vietnamese, as far as that goes; I think both sides were guilty of some violations; from what I could see it was mostly on the North side, but I'm sure there were examples of the South doing it, too. But of course, the Americans were not involved in any of this, and most of the American forces were busily getting themselves out, because they had 90 days to get out, and there were still quite a few people there, and they were all drawn down so that at the end of 90 days, there were not supposed to be any

military Americans out in the interior on a regular basis. And there were very few American military, in uniform anyway, or in anything else, as far as I know, that were in Vietnam. There were perhaps a couple hundred of them, if that many, in the Defense Attaché's office out of Saigon, but that was it. The military aspect, when I was in Phan Thiet, I was not only the...I was the counterpart of the province chief, which meant I was not only the civilian leader of our side, I was also the military leader, too. And so I had command of the forces, such as they were, and our advisory team. But we didn't have any forces any more; this was a different effort. This wasn't CORDS, this was a different thing. This was a time when a lot of people that had formerly been, a lot of Foreign Service Officers that had formerly been in Vietnam in earlier years, and spoke Vietnamese, were brought back to monitor the ceasefire. This was our job, to follow the ceasefire and report how well it was being observed, where it wasn't being observed, and who was doing what to whom.

Q: Well, I remember that was the mission when I went out there in September of 1973.

COOK: Exactly. And that was the big difference. I mean, before, it wasn't a question of...we didn't have any ceasefire there, it was getting along with the war and helping our Vietnamese counterparts to prosecute the war as best they could. After the ceasefire, we were supposed to watch them. So there was a slightly different relationship between us and the Vietnamese than there had been before; before, we had been a direct ally, now we were still to some extent, because there were still some supplies and things like that coming in, but as far as technical military advice and anybody being right there to say, you know, this is what you ought to be doing, and let's get on with it, to the extent that that was necessary, and it was, in some places, we didn't do any of that any more. We weren't supposed to do that, and we didn't. But we were supposed to get more involved in the aspects of monitoring the ceasefire and seeing to it that prisoners were repatriated; of course, this whole question of missing persons was always there, too, and we were beginning to try and get a handle on that, and we did to some extent. We had people out there that went looking for Americans missing, and prisoners, and so forth. And all the agricultural programs were getting started, engineering programs, a lot of contractors were getting involved in trying to build things back again, and of course, but the relationship with the military which we had enjoyed quite closely became a little bit more suspect, a little bit more at arm's length. It was a little harder to find out what was going on because we weren't directly involved. And what's more, if they were up to something that they shouldn't have been up to, they didn't want you to know about it, and so...and I know that my relationship with the Province Chief in Phan Thiet was extremely close, and it couldn't have been better. When I went up to Hue I had a much more senior person. He was a three-star general, and he was my counterpart up there. This was General Thi. He was a very nice person, but not warm, and clearly initially he was very suspicious of me, and I think he overcame that, but initially, he wasn't sure that he wanted me to attend his briefings and so forth. I rather insisted upon it, and I finally got my way, but I'm not sure it that did me a lot of good; our relationship was pleasant, reasonably cordial and correct, but I don't think I learned an awful lot from him, in the sense that what I did was at a lower level. And the Province Chiefs of both Thua Thien --he was sick, and I didn't get too much from the Thua Thien man, but there wasn't an awful lot going on in Thua

Thien anyway, but the Quang Tri man was very good, Colonel Viet, and he was a young fellow, a tank commander, and very, very nice guy. I don't know whatever happened to him.

Q: Let me ask you this; I'm trying to clarify something, and that is: were you covering three provinces then out of Hue, or more?

COOK: I think only two; Hue counts as something separate. Hue is sort of a separate entity, but it's located within the province of Thua Thien, so I had not only Hue, but also Thua Thien, but you could count that as one.

Q: But what about Quang Tri?

COOK: Quang Tri is a separate province, and I had that, too.

Q: But all this reported back then to the Consul General in Da Nang.

COOK: Yes. And I went down to Da Nang to meet with them down there every two weeks or something or other, and from time to time, anyway whenever they wanted to. And we had pretty good communication.

Q: Well, now did you begin to see the breakdown of the ceasefire and this pushing back and forth on both sides?

COOK: Oh, yes. We did, because the main thing we observed was the roads being built in. There were roads coming in from the Ho Chi Minh Trail over in Laos and Cambodia. I guess it was Laos up there, and it was across, it was out of Vietnam, but then roads were being built from that in towards...

Q: Into the coast....

COOK: Because it was Indian country once you got more than just a few miles outside of Hue.

Q: That's right, because those provinces were all squeezed between the mountains and the sea.

COOK: That's right, and the VC were very much, well, it wasn't just the VC in there, it was NVA, that was the regular North Vietnamese forces. They were all in there, and you didn't want to go out into there very far. You'd go up the Perfume River, which takes a sharp bend; when you got up around that bend, you didn't go any further. I mean, I took a boat up there a couple of times; you didn't want to go much further.

Q: Could you get up to the tombs?

COOK: Yes, some of them, not all of them. Yes, I did, I went up to Khai Dinh and I don't even remember their names now, but three or four other tombs, beautiful places.

Q: Yeah, I got there, too, with Al Francis, yeah.

COOK: But there were some that were not safe to go to at all, and I didn't. But it's a nice city, Hue, but I liked going up also to Quang Tri. I spent most of my time up in Quang Tri, because that's where there was most of what to do, up there. The Thua Thien didn't seem like I had an awful lot to do.

One of the things that happened up there, actually, because we were in the process of trying to put the ICCS stations up, we had one in Quang Tri, which came in after I had been up there about a month, with the ICCS picked up the station right on the border. This was one of their places, they were the ones that were supposed to handle the...I guess I'm not right on that, I was going to say they were supposed to monitor, at least, the exchange of prisoners, as I was. But they were the international group, I was just looking on.

Q: You were observing.

COOK: Right. But we were also supposed to have some ICCS stations in NVA territory, in North Vietnamese territory. And I don't think we ever succeeded in doing it, because while I was there, they had a survey mission of two helicopters went up to Dong Ha or something or other up in that area which is north of the demilitarized zone, in NVA territory, and they were shot down. And all of the people were killed in one helicopter, and in the other helicopter none of them were killed, I think, as I remember. But the helicopter was destroyed, and they all got back, including the North Vietnamese person who was with them. I don't know what went wrong, but apparently the word didn't get to some field unit, NVA out in the field, and they shot him down. So that was quite exciting.

Q: What was your relationship with the people in the ICCS?

COOK: Pretty good, pretty good. The Canadians, mostly, and it was easier to talk to the Canadians than it was to anyone else. I think it was the Indonesians and the Canadians that were on our side, so to speak. I used to see quite a lot of some of the Canadians. We tried to, they did and I did, tried to maintain a certain separation; you didn't want to get too buddy-buddy with them, because it kind of didn't look right. On the other hand, we both spoke the same language, so I helped them whenever they needed it and asked for it, and once in awhile I'd ask them for things, too, and then they'd usually provide it.

Q: Then I gather that as the situation deteriorated and the scale of fighting escalated and so forth, the Canadians got disgusted with the whole thing and pulled out.

COOK: They lasted six months. In fact, that was their agreement. You see, the Canadians had already been in the ICS, an earlier thing, and they had had ten years of it or something or other, maybe more, I don't know, a good many years that they'd been at it.

Q: Oh, yeah, that's the one that was set up under the Geneva Accords.

COOK: Right, exactly, and I think since '54 the Canadians had been in this thing, and it had been a rather discouraging type of experience for them, and I don't think they understood the Vietnamese probably a bit better than we did in some respects, and they said they would do this for six months, but if things didn't seem to be going the way they thought it should be going, they didn't want any more to do with it, they'd have to be replaced. And they did make the decision after six months that things were not going well, that apparently both sides were violating the ceasefire, and all of their efforts to try and stop it or monitoring it didn't seem to be working. And in the end, they had gotten killed, when that helicopter went down, there were some Canadians in that, or at least one, anyway. I don't remember what all the spread was, but there were several people in the helicopter, and they were all killed. And so, yeah, they got discouraged and they left, and the Iranians took their place, and it didn't...it was necessary to have them, but I don't know that they accomplished a great deal. But I was only there a little more than six months, too, because I went up there for this period of time, but then everything seemed to be shaking down, and I went home on home leave and then came back, and there seemed to be a question as to whether I would be going to Da Nang or to Nha Trang, and I went, as you know, to Nha Trang instead, and I was always glad of that, too; it was a good call, better than I perhaps realized at the time, but I was glad to do it.

Q: Tell me, what was your view of the relationship between the Consulate General and the Embassy?

COOK: Oh, yeah, OK, now I'm getting on something I can talk about a little bit more. You ask about the Consulate General and the Embassy in those general terms, as an office and an office. I think largely due to you, that it was pretty good. Because you knew Graham Martin personally, and were friends. And I think you could get his ear much better than anybody else could. If it hadn't been for that, I'm not sure the relationships would have been half as good. But you were able to convey things to him, and him to you, and through you to the rest of us, what needed to be done, and what they wanted, and etc., etc. So I think that was the beneficial side. Also, you got him out of Saigon, the only time he ever got out Saigon, as far as I know, was out on the beach, which was very, very good.

Q: I was wondering how did it look from a staff level?

COOK: Well, I think from the staff level, it was not so good. I think from the staff level, I think particularly as time went on, as things were getting more and more toward the end, it became.... There was a great deal of feeling at all levels, and not only in our consulate, but in others, too, that the reporting was interfered with, and that people were unable to get their reports in to Washington on things as they saw them, because there was a strong feeling that the Ambassador wanted to paint the best possible picture for the South Vietnamese and the worst possible picture for the North Vietnamese, and so he was loath

to let anything get to Washington that said anything good about the North Vietnamese, or said anything bad about the South Vietnamese, which was more likely to be the case.

And I think the fact of the matter was that violations of the ceasefire, and so forth, took place on both sides. And it's my own personal view that the North Vietnamese violations were a lot worse, and a lot more blatant. But the fact is that it happened on both sides, whatever the motive may have been. And I don't know, frankly, what did get to Washington. I mean, we didn't see much; there wasn't an awful lot of feedback.

And in fact, in furtherance of some of your earlier part of the question, I think one of the things that we perhaps suffered from in Nha Trang was not really having a handle on the big picture. We had some of it, but we didn't have very much of it. We saw things from our little narrow standpoint, and we were very much influenced by what the Ambassador wanted.

I mean, just in the last days, as things were all going to Hell, I don't think many of us really believed it. You know, we thought it was all going to work out all right, pretty much. Some of us thought a little bit more negatively than others, but on the whole, nobody could have envisioned that this thing was going to collapse the way it did.

And even after it did collapse, I still thought, because the Ambassador was such a powerful, dominant figure, we thought, in retrospect, you ask yourself how could you have been so stupid! But it wasn't a question of stupidity, we just didn't know. And I'm not sure he did, either.

But anyway, I was always very glad, personally, to be out of Saigon. I didn't like Saigon, I didn't like the Embassy thing, because I preferred to be out amongst where things were going on, and there were less people looking over your shoulder. I mean, we could operate on our own, pretty much, with the necessary general guidance, without normally...once in awhile there were things, but most of the time, we got on with what we had to do and did it, and I liked that.

Q: It seemed to me the Vietnamese forces were doing a pretty good job of holding their own there; we had some offensives in Bien Dinh, but the 22nd Division did quite a good job there, and General Tuan seemed to beat back some of the forces down along the Cambodian border. What was your sense about the situation.

COOK: Well, that's what it seemed like, at the time. But it also was pretty evident that the North Vietnamese, and this was not only from the Nha Trang standpoint, but also from my earlier standpoint up in Hue, that it started right off immediately at the ceasefire. The Ho Chi Minh trail was going on down, and roads were coming in, and we could see them being built in directly towards, and everybody knew what this was for. And so that even though, yes, there were certain victories, certain offensives that were taken here and there that seemed to be quite effective the North Vietnamese really hadn't launched anything. And when they did, everything collapsed; amazingly fast. But again, we were,

as you say, so used to thinking that things were going pretty well, that it was hard to believe that they could collapse so quickly.

Q: Well, this kind of brings us up to the final offensive. I was wondering, what were your thoughts about that?

COOK: Well, surprise. I think it might be of some interest, perhaps, to go back to the beginning of when we knew there was an offensive coming. My own personal experience, which is probably similar to yours, but I'm thinking in terms of Paul Struharik, the Buon Ma Thuot, because I was in the office. I don't remember why, or for what reason, or perhaps I was called in; I think I was called in. I think I went home, and I got a call saying Paul Struharik was on the phone and wanted to get me, and I came in to talk to him on the radio. And yes, that's right, it was, I remember now; I was called in and I came, and it was about...

Q: Let me see, Paul was up in Buon Ma Thuot.

COOK: He was in Buon Ma Thuot, and he had been...he was married to a Montagnard lady, and she was in Thailand, he was living in Thailand. Every month or so, he would go home for a long weekend to visit his wife and children. And he'd been off on one of these long weekends, it was three or four days or something or other, and he'd just gotten back. I think it was a Sunday night, but I wouldn't swear to that. And I got this call, oh, it was nine or 10 o'clock at night. And I went into the office, and there was Paul, and he said, "There's something funny happening out to the west of Buon Ma Thuot here." The Province Chief had been to see him, and said there was something strange, some sort of activity out there, they didn't know what it was. And he was going out to have a look with the Province Chief to see what it was all about. And he wasn't alarmed, he had just gotten back, he'd just arrived back in Buon Ma Thuot from Thailand. And so I talked to him, and I said, "Well, go find out what it is, and let us know."

Well, he let us know, all right; by eight or nine o'clock the next morning, we were on the telephone to him again, or radio with him again, and Buon Ma Thuot had been completely surrounded, and the North Vietnamese were in the town, and the tank was right out in front of his office.

Q: Yeah. I remember I thought the Vietnamese intelligence on that was quite good. They captured various North Vietnamese plans, and so forth, as to which routes they were going to cut off and so forth. But of course, when the defensives came, they just weren't there.

COOK: Well, I don't know about that. I mean, I think the actual attack on Buon Ma Thuot was not...no one knew that, and that's what...

Q: No, that was a surprise. I mean, I knew they were going to try and cut off Pleiku and Kon Tum from the coast, and that they were going to cut off Nha Trang from Buon Ma

Thuot, and so forth. I think they'd actually captured some enemy plans about that. But then when they tried to keep the roads open they just weren't able to.

COOK: Yeah. I'm a little fuzzy on the tactics of that one. I think they surrounded Buon Ma Thuot, the town itself, and took it. Incidentally, Paul and nine or 10 other people, I think a couple members of his own staff and some missionaries, as well, were all.... They were there for three or four days and we talked to them, and flew a plane over them and talked to them from the plane for three or four days, and finally, he went off the air, and that meant he had been captured.

Q: They were captured, and finally repatriated.

COOK: Exactly, about nine or 10 months later, they got out. And I remember I also had to fend off some hotheads from Saigon that were on the phone. They wanted to send up a rescue mission, and they were going to go in and machine gun everything with helicopters, at least so they said. I think they were all full of baloney. Anyway, I said, "Don't you dare do it, you'll kill everybody if you do that, including yourselves." It seemed to me that unhappy as it might be that you get captured, it's a lot better to get captured than to get killed.

Q: That's right.

COOK: And as it turned out, it was. It could have been different, but it wasn't.

Q: Well, it seemed to me we had a busy month there, when we were trying to evacuate all sorts of refugees and bring staff in from the Cambodia border area, and so forth.

COOK: Oh, yeah. That was an extremely busy month, and confusing all around. The campaign, as far as the North Vietnamese were concerned, as I say, they took Buon Ma Thuot, and then I think there was a feeling that they might move on down towards Nha Trang. But first of all, what they did was cut off the road, and the headquarters for the big Army unit was in Buon Ma Thuot, and they cut that off from Pleiku, and they kind of isolated Pleiku and Kon Tum, or threatened to isolate it, which put a panic into the people up there, and they had the Rangers up there and they had some other forces up there, and then...I've never gotten it exactly straight what happened. But you remember, the President came up, President Thieu came up to Cam Ranh Bay. In fact, we were there, I think.

Q: That's right.

COOK: And made an announcement or something or other that he was going to evacuate these troops from up in that area.

Q: Yeah, they came down that old Route Seven, which had been abandoned.

COOK: Yeah, well, that was the way they chose to do it. But he just said, "Everybody has to get out, we're going to evacuate that area." I'm not sure whether that was before or after, but I think...I'm a little confused as to the timing of that, but anyway, I think that was what caused--yes, I'm sure it was. It caused the evacuation of Pleiku and Kon Tum. He made that announcement and then more or less let them go to it, and they didn't do it very well. And they picked up the wrong road, and any kind of retreat like that is extremely difficult. It's a military maneuver, and one of the most difficult, I'm told.

Q: And of course, it just turned into a rout.

COOK: A complete rout. And I don't think they realized how many VC forces there were up in that area, who all sort of immediately rallied around, like Concord and Lexington and the Minute Men behind the trees, the Redcoats, they raised Hell all the way down.

And so then the next thing we were faced with in Nha Trang, after we'd done what we could... you know, we refused to fly up to try and see if there was anything you could do; there wasn't much of anything to do except watch.

Q: Well, it seems to me, I recall distinctly, you and I used to get together sort of every evening at the end of the day, and kind of go over what had happened during the day and then try to anticipate what would happen the next day.

COOK: Right.

Q: And I remember I found that enormously valuable.

COOK: Well, it was a very fast-moving situation.

Q: It was so fast-breaking.

COOK: Exactly. It moved. And again, I don't think that you and I were really in the picture, half of it.

Q: That's right.

COOK: Because I remember it seemed perfectly clear to me, and I guess also to you, that if we really wanted to stop this, we could do so. I mean, we had a couple of carriers off there, and somebody--I didn't, whether it was you or Saigon, but I think it was you, wasn't it--that sent a message saying, "Why don't we use the carriers?"

Q: Well, I remember very distinctly about 10 days before we evacuated from Nha Trang, I cabled the Embassy, and said, "You know, you'd better start getting ready to execute the contingency plan", which provided for evacuation across the beaches from Nha Trang. And of course, by that time, we had brought down all sorts of both Americans and Vietnamese out of our provincial offices, because after all, we had staffs in each of the 12 provinces, and we were pulling them back into Nha Trang. But the problem was that all

of the Naval forces were busy evacuating Phnom Penh at the time, so when push came to shove, we really had to depend on Air America and the flights we were able to get out. Except for a few Naval charter transports that were able to come down from I-CORPS and stopped off and picked up people there.

COOK: Right. I wasn't thinking of that aspect of it, I was thinking from the military aspect of it. I mean, had the desire been there, I think U.S. Navy forces were available, air, to put a stop to what was happening. But obviously, the will and the orders weren't there.

Q: By that time, of course, Congress had passed the Church Amendment and so forth, that forbade the use of U.S. Air and Naval forces in Southeast Asia.

COOK: Except under certain contingencies, or...?

Q: Well, except for evacuating American citizens and so forth, yeah.

COOK: I'm not sure how much of that we knew until the very end.

Q: Yeah, uh-huh.

COOK: I mean, by the time we knew it, it was already too late. And obviously, the will wasn't there. I mean, I think that's what we didn't know. I say "we", I shouldn't say "we", I should say "me". I didn't understand. I had no idea, really, sitting in Nha Trang, of the anti-Vietnam feeling in the States.

Q: Well, I didn't either.

COOK: I mean, I knew that it wasn't a popular war, but I didn't realize how far things had gone.

Q: Well, I didn't realize, you know, that we'd sort of be left out there on the rails.

COOK: I never dreamed that this would be possible, to happen, but it did.

Yeah, getting into the actual evacuation, I think we handled that one luckily and very successfully. I think we had a lot of luck, and I think it worked out pretty well, because we didn't lose anybody.

Q: That's right.

Q: But I remember the way things got completely out of control in town.

COOK: Well, that's on the last day.

Q: On the last day.

COOK: Oh, the last day was miserable. Oh, yeah, that was terrible. Do you want me to talk about that a little bit?

Q: Yeah, go ahead.

COOK: Well, my recollection...I had been down a couple of days before then in Cam Ranh Bay because the people were coming down from I-CORPS, and we were sending people off down there and seeing what we could get them on moving south, there was a whole bunch of Vietnamese and a few Americans, too, that came down through. But the day before the last day, the last day we were there, it became evident that things were getting pretty short. And I remember talking to some of our staff there the night before, and saying, "You know, tomorrow's going to be a big day, and better get ready to leave." But I didn't really think we would be leaving the next day, but I thought that was a possibility, and we should be ready for it. But I didn't anticipate that that would be the last day that we were there.

And then bright and early in the morning--it's been a long time now, I may get things mixed up, but I--yeah, I came in to, I guess I came down, as I remember, to the headquarters to the military briefing. And I went to the military briefing, I think that was it. And everything was more or less normal, people were there, and all the rest of it. And I attended that and then came down to the office, and when I got to the office, everything had gone to Hell. I couldn't get into the office, because the office was...whole crowd of our employees and so forth, were being kept out by the gate. The gate was locked, and I couldn't get in because they hadn't been paid.

Q: The civilian guards hadn't been paid, that's right.

COOK: Right. And they were keeping everybody out. And so when I showed up, they let me in, and I got in and we got that one straightened out, more or less, but there wasn't a great deal of happiness. But things were beginning to panic. And I came into the office, and it was obvious that the evacuation was already starting; we were trying to reduce our numbers way down. And I could see that we were running into problems, because we weren't being able to get through to the gate to the airport. We couldn't get the bus. We had a bus and cars, and so forth, that were taking people out there, but they couldn't get through the gate because the Vietnamese airport guards wouldn't let them on the base. And it was at that point that I went out again, and with a guy from CIA, and I got two radios out of CIA, walkie-talkies, one for him and one to give to a guy, a Vietnamese at the airport, and I went out to see the general, with this guy in the car. And we had a Hell of a time getting onto the base, but I got onto the base finally, and got to see the general; his name's gone from me now. And to arrange, this guy would stay behind at the gate and be liaison with us, and that the general would assign one of his officers, it was some captain or major, and he was to go there and be with this guy, and together, the Vietnamese and the American would coordinate and keep that gate open when there any American buses, and so forth, to go. And that worked fine, for about an hour, I guess; it didn't last long.

But anyway, we thought we'd made a little progress, and I guess we did, some. But then the prison got opened up and all the convicts were out in the streets, and things deteriorated pretty fast, and it was getting worse and worse and worse.

Q: There was shooting all through the town.

COOK: There was shooting all through the town and all around our compound. Every time the damned helicopter would take off, there was a "pop-pop-pop-pop-pop". I don't know what they were shooting at, but they didn't hit it, but...actually, I think they did hit it once. But anyway, whatever it was. But it was getting worse and worse and worse. But we were reducing our Americans down to pretty low, and Saigon was on the phone all the time yelling at us to get everybody out of there and "get out, get out, get out", and we kept saying, "You know, if we reduce our numbers down below a certain point, we can't control things anymore." And so we got to keep a few, in order to get everybody out. And we kept fighting back and forth, and eventually it became clear that they said, "Get out, never mind what you leave behind, get the Americans out, and that's that."

Q: That's right.

COOK: And we did.

Q: Well, then I remember after we got down to Saigon, where for a few days we were monitoring what was going on up there, flights that went on back up.

COOK: Well, I went back up in the WOPAR; there were four or five of us that went up. I don't remember who all was on the plane; Mack McDaniel was on it. I was there, Mack was there, I think Bill Erdahl was there, too. Oh, there were two or three others, and we flew up to see...that was the next day, either the next day or the day after, it was very soon after. And we flew up there to see if anybody could possibly be working the radio out of the airport. And we flew up there and we took a look at the Province Chief's house. And we flew over the Province Chief's house in Nha Trang, and got three or four bursts of flak right on our tail, that damned near...well, it wasn't, I'd say, damned near hit us, but it was too close for comfort, and it has been 34 years since I'd seen flak that close. But it certainly sobered things up. But then I think we flew around inland, because it was just one gun in the back yard; you could see the gun, we were so low, you could see it was just...I don't know what it was, but it was a small anti-aircraft gun right in the back yard of the Province Chief's lawn, his back lawn. And then we flew over the airport, and we didn't raise anybody on the phone at all; we couldn't get anybody, and the place was deserted.

Q: Well then, I guess, you stayed on in Saigon long enough to have been part of the evacuation there, too.

COOK: Yeah, we did what we could, up until the time came when there was no further role for me to play, and then I was ordered out. And I had Gupe and the kids there, and I

wanted to stay on to make sure that they got out, and so finally when we got all the permission that everybody could go out together, we all went out together. But we were ordered to, and then...I forget what day...I wasn't one of the very last ones, it was about three or four or five days before...I didn't go off the roof or anything like that. But it was fairly hairy; in a C-130, we went off from Tan Son Nhut.

Q: Where did you go, then to Guam, or to Manila, or Clark?

COOK: We went to Clark Air Force Base. And I didn't identify, I didn't know what the problems would be, given the personal circumstances that I had, and I didn't know what the problems would be for Gupe and the kids. And so I made myself a refuge, and I was one of the few Americans on the plane, mostly Vietnamese on the plane. But I went with Gupe to make sure bad things didn't happen to them.

Q: Now, let me see. After that, you had an assignment in South Africa; was that our last assignment?

COOK: Yeah. Well, I was back here in the States for about four years.

Q: That's right, working in INR, as I recall?

COOK: I worked in INR, and then I was in the Inspector's office as an inspector; in fact, I ran the inspections for about a year.

Q: Now, what did you work on in INR?

COOK: It was economic...it was whatever that...I can't remember what they called it in those days; they probably call it the same thing now. But it was the Economic Analysis Branch of INR, and there was an office which was divided into three divisions. And I was a Division Chief for one of these, the biggest one, I think, which had to do with all resources. We had to do with oil. The oil crisis was on, and we did an analysis of the oil crises, which was quite different from what CIA did, and much better, and various things of that nature. We had an oil specialist, we had agricultural specialists, we had all the economic, but not the finance; finance was done in another office. I forget what the third office was, but ours was the biggest.

Q: Then what about your South Africa assignment?

COOK: Well, as I say, I had a year as an Inspector...

Q: Oh, yes.

COOK: ...And before then, and I didn't like that.

Q: Abroad, or in Washington?

COOK: No. Well, I was in charge of the inspections. It was a kind of...I had to assign the inspectors and process the reports and get everything organized. I didn't like the job. Quite frankly--I don't know whether I should say this--I didn't like the Inspector General at all; he and I didn't get along very well. However, maybe that can be edited!

But I didn't want to stay there, and so I was there about a year, and then I determined I wanted to get out, and I asked to go overseas. And because of the special family needs that I had because of Thau being deaf, I wanted to go someplace where they had schools for the deaf in English. And there were only about four or five places in the world where that would be, and they didn't have any assignment for me. I mean, I was fairly senior at that point, and there wasn't any job for me in London, and there wasn't any job in Australia, but there was one in South Africa. I had already been in South Africa before, and I didn't particularly want to go there, but that seemed to be the only place there was, so I went. And it was a good choice.

So I went to South Africa, and it was a good job, and it worked out well for the family, too, very well.

Q: Now, there was some special arrangement, wasn't there, by which the Ambassador would ship from one post to another?

COOK: Yes, well, this is peculiar to South Africa, I think. It's kind of a strange thing, but that's why it was a good job for me, because my title there was Economic Counselor, Economic and Commercial Counselor, although the commercial side was virtually all handled in Johannesburg. But the Economic Counselor, I didn't do all that much economic work. I had staff people that did most of the substantive work; I did some, but they did more, a lot more.

But my real job was to be what they call the "Officer in Charge" of the Embassy in Pretoria when the Ambassador wasn't there. And because of the peculiar arrangements of the peace treaty of 1910 or something or other, between the Boers and the British, the new government of the former Union of South Africa, there were three different capitols in South Africa. There was Pretoria, which was the administrative capitol; that was where the administration sat, in Pretoria. And the Parliament, or the legislature, met for six months in Cape Town, so that was a capitol for legislative purposes, and the Judicial one was in the Orange Free State. But basically, it was Pretoria or Cape Town. So the government actually moved every year. Normally they spent six months in Pretoria, then six months in Cape Town. And when they moved to Cape Town, the Ambassador and the Political Counselor and the DCM, usually--well, always, when I was there, anyway--and maybe one or two others, would go down, but leaving the bulk of the staff--we had a big embassy--leaving the bulk of the staff in Pretoria. And I was in charge of Pretoria.

Of course, you know, being in charge had its limits, very decidedly, because the Ambassador was in the country. But you had to know what to do and what you couldn't do, so that was very nice. And in fact, for me, when I was there, it was more than six

months, because of the problems in South Africa, they had special extra Parliamentary sessions, so that one year, I was in charge for a whole year at Pretoria, without stop.

Q: Were there any special issues that came up in our relations or our developments in South Africa at that particular time?

COOK: Oh, yeah, sure. I think one of the major issues was the changeover from President Carter, the policies under President Carter, to President Reagan and the policies under President Reagan, which nobody in Washington bothered to tell us anything about! We just had to sort of see this happening, but there were never any instructions saying, such and such a thing has changed. Never received any word for that, you just had to see it happen, and then you do it. And it did.

It was very dramatic changes, because our policy toward South Africa under the Carter Administration had been very much standoffish, and we had not been cooperative, we wouldn't cooperate with South Africans at all. And there were more and more things that we did that made them mad. And any earlier arrangements that we had with them were being either buried or pushed to the back. And we had some military cooperation, and that didn't take place. We'd had, just before I got there, they'd kicked out our Air Attaché and half the Military Attaché's staff, because we discovered they were building the bomb. And so they kicked the Air Attaché out, and raised Hell, and we raised Hell back and kicked their people out. And so, it was a problem there.

But the whole relationship had deteriorated; it was at an all-time low. The cooperation on economic matters was nil, on nuclear matters, it was non-existent. I mean, we'd supplied them with a reactor earlier, which they still had, and we were under obligation to feed it, and that sort of thing, but within limits. But we thought they were cheating on us; they knew where they were going, and they didn't want us interfering.

But under the Reagan Administration, all this turned around. They thought that they could get on with whatever they wanted to do much easier under Reagan, and they were right, they could. They did! And so under the Reagan Administration, and fairly quickly, the new Ambassador came out, and I held a reception at my house for the new Ambassador when he arrived, and coordinated this with Washington beforehand, and invited all the high-ranking people including all the high-ranking military and intelligence people and all, who I never dreamed would come, because they never would come. You always invited them, but they never would come, and you never expected them to come--they wouldn't. They did! And right away, we got the message. They came--they all came, and it was the first time any of us had ever seen them, most of us! And so it was entirely new. And nuclear stuff; I knew the Director from the time I had been there 20 years before. I knew the Director of their nuclear development place. I knew him, but I had never been able to get near him before. I called him up, "Do you remember me from the old days?" He said, "Come on over." And I was able to do a report on what they were doing there. But that wasn't because they were being careless; they wanted us to know. And they knew perfectly well what I was supposed to do, and what they were supposed to do, but up until then, they hadn't been willing to share any of

this. Now, they thought they could share it, and thereby get policy inroads, which in fact, they did. Their people started coming to the United States again, getting assets that they couldn't get before. They had things clamped down again later on; we began to see that this wasn't advancing the policies that we wanted to advance in South Africa. Things were getting worse and not better, and I think that at that point....And of course, the Congress was acting, which was pushing the Reagan Administration faster than they wanted to go, but they pushed him.

Q: Well, Phil, thank you very much. I think you've done a bang-up job there, and appreciate all your help on this.

End of interview