7-17-2006

Interview with Vint Lawrence

Paul Hillmer
Concordia University, St. Paul, hillmer@csp.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/lawrence-interviews

Part of the Military History Commons, Oral History Commons, and the Political History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.csp.edu/lawrence-interviews/1

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the J. Vinton Lawrence Collection at DigitalCommons@csp. It has been accepted for inclusion in Interviews by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@csp. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csp.edu.
Born in New York City to what he describes as “a very privileged childhood...in every possible way,” J. Vinton (“Vint”) Lawrence attended Phillips Exeter Academy and Princeton University. Recruited by the CIA, he was sent to Laos in the very early days of “Operation Momentum,” the campaign to train and arm the Hmong to fight against Communist forces. Arriving in Laos in February 1962, Lawrence was sized up by Bill Lair, worked under Lair’s lieutenant Pat Landry to train some of the first groups of Hmong soldiers, and ultimately became one of only two CIA operatives (along with the infamous Anthony Poshepny, a.k.a. Tony Poe) to remain behind in Laos once the 1962 Geneva Accords were put in force. He lived with General Vang Pao, serving as a constant companion and sounding board. (As Roger Warner has written, Vang Pao considered Bill Lair an older brother and Vint Lawrence a younger one.) Living in a jungle in isolation from the outside world for nearly two years, Lawrence in many ways served as the conduit between the Hmong and the US. Given the amount of time he spent with them, Lawrence became an amateur anthropologist and folklorist, asking numerous Hmong leaders and villagers to help him understand their culture. After two tours in Laos, Lawrence was told he would not be allowed to return for a third (to save him from being killed or “going native”—that is, so sympathizing with the Hmong that he might never return). After a short period working first for William Colby and then Paul Nitze, Lawrence opted for a civilian life and has never looked back, unless to assist authors like Roger Warner, Keith Quincy, or Zalin Grant.

(0:00) Well, it’s the 17th of June—
(0:21) Let’s just start with some basic information. Where were you born, and what do you remember about your childhood, your family life, that may be of interest?
I was born in New York City, spent my childhood either in New York or out in New Jersey when
the apartment got too small for six kids. This place in Norfolk, Connecticut has been my spiritual
home, and now my physical home for a number of years. We always used to come up here in the
summer. And my wife and I moved up here, more or less full time, about ten years ago. And I’ve
been delighted to be here. Childhood was… [Pauses] I think in every possible way it was a very
privileged childhood. I had good parents, I went to very good schools, and I [Pauses] really never
worried the way most kids have to worry about certain things. So in that sense I was extraordinarily
lucky. I went to a good boarding school in New England, Phillips Exeter Academy, and I went to
Princeton University, where I majored in Art History, and did a lot of sports and theatrical stuff.
And when it came time to graduate, just shortly before that, I had been in ROTC—this was in late
1960—’59 or ’60. So I had a three-year military ob—I had a two-year military obligation, I guess, as
an active junior officer. And the Dean of Students called me into his office and [asked if I might
want to] serve my country in a different way, and I—my father had been in OSS during World War
II, so I knew something about the Agency, and—

(2:42) He had told you stories?
No. My father, by and large, told very few stories. But it was nonetheless a romantic image that I
probably supplied mostly by myself. But I thought it was sort of a feather in my cap to be, in effect,
tapped by the Dean of Students, who was, I think, probably nothing more than an agency spotter,
basically. I mean, I think he got aboard of 15 or 20 in his graduating class who he thought would
make good officers, and I was one of them.

[Interview double-checks to make sure recorder is on]

So I went through all the training and all that sort of business, and came out the other side. And it
was all kind of, for the most part, great fun, and interesting work. And I was very interested in
China. And at the end of our training we had to go through paramilitary training, because, of
course, the Bay of Pigs had just happened. [Pauses, takes a sip of a drink] I was set probably to go
to North India to help what was left of the Tibetan resistance. And I bought all my high-
weather gear, [Interviewer laughs] and then all of a sudden there was a meeting—I was called into a meeting,
and they said, ‘Well, no, you’re going to go to Laos.’

(4:34) They didn’t make any explanation for why—
No, it was just—well, I think it was because the stuff going on in Laos had all of a sudden become
more… [Pauses] Kennedy was very interested in Laos, he was very interested in counter-insurgency
or insurgency warfare, the Agency saw this as an opportunity—the connection with Vang Pao had
been recently made, and they needed bodies, and I was a body. So I arrive in Vientiane, slightly
little—my 22nd year—21st year, actually—22nd, I guess I was 22. And I spoke some French, I was
not married, I didn’t have any dependents, and so I was the guy who was sent up-country to talk to
the French-speaking Hmong. I did not speak, obviously had absolutely no language training, no
nothing. I knew nothing about Laos.

(5:40) I’m curious…Did you ever hear the word ‘Hmong’—
No.
—when you were in Laos?
No. This is a culturally-imposed re-naming of the Meo tribesman.
Dr. Gary Yia Lee is the fellow in Australia who helped me put my trip together, and he was a
student of William Geddes—
Yes.
—who was one of the first people to write about [the Hmong]—Migrants of the Mountains,
-I think—
Something like that, yes.

And he told [Geddes when he read a draft of his book], ‘We hate to be called Meo.’ But
[there was] absolutely no evidence of that from your experience when you were in Laos?
Well, you know that’s interesting. Certainly… [Pauses] I assumed that they hated to be called Meo
largely because it was the Lao, the lowland Lao, who used that term, [Pauses] who used the term
derisively. If you use the term with obvious respect, I never—I was never physically corrected by
Vang Pao or anyone else who said, ‘You know, we really don’t like that. It was only—

[Mr. Lawrence’s coffee brewer needs attention. Recorder stops, new track begins]

(0:07) And I cannot remember whether I changed my use before I left or not.

(0:19) If you don’t mind me backing up (as I said, I’m a stickler for silly little questions…) If you think of yourself as a young man going through high school and college, how much,
if at all, do you see yourself as a product of the Cold War and this idea that America must
protect itself against all enemies foreign and domestic?
[Pauses] That’s a good question. I certainly think I was a product of the Cold, War, and I certainly
think the language and the discussions that I tended to hear around—

[Mr. Lawrence asks if the noise of the coffee brewing is too loud. Interviewer says no.]
The conversations usually, [Pauses] when they were being held by people who wanted to pretend
they were extremely educated, [Interviewer laughs] those conversations tended to focus more on
sort of global arrangements and global conflicts, and so I grew up with the language of an affluent,
intellectual family to which those kinds of arguments came rather easily. So in that sense I was
[Pauses] I think I was probably imbued with that, and it was the four years in Laos that just
disabused me of it rather substantially.

(2:07) Could you talk a bit about reporting to duty to wherever CIA headquarters was at the
time, and…about some of the training that you received during that period before you went
to Laos?
The CIA headquarters when I first get there in the early 1960s, I guess in the fall of 1960, were in
the temporary buildings down by the reflecting pool. They were old World War II naval buildings
that were built in a temporary—and then just kept on. It was a very ramshackle affair, and then, of
course, during the four years I was overseas, when I came back, we’re in Langley, that new complex
is built. [Pauses] Yes, my training was pretty much standard. I was a junior officer trainee, which is
known as a JOT, and we spent a great deal of time at the agency installation near Williamsburg,
Virginia, which is known as the farm.

Fort Peary, was it?
What? Camp Peary, Camp Peary. We did all our foreign intel—we went through our foreign
intelligence course there, which was fascinating work. I mean, it was fascinating. It was a…
[Pauses] somebody with made-up countries and made-up political situations, and you would do your
trade craft with the instructors. And we all thought, as a JO class, we were pretty smart.
[Interviewer laughs] And so there was this certain—there was a huge amount of intellectual
arrogance involved. I don’t know how many of the 45 or 50 guys who were in my class ever stuck it
out. Not very—I would say under—probably less than 10%. Maybe more than that, 20%. Not very many. Many of them just did it for a while and then left the Agency. That course, as I remember, sort of started (I don’t know)—the better part of a year, I think. And then after that, there was a requirement, because of the Bay of Pigs, that all physically capable officers had to go through paramilitary training. So that took me through the better part of 1961.

(4:52) So—I’m sorry, I have no military experience—so paramilitary training involves, I assume, jump school… Jump school, and it involved—it wasn’t like Special Forces training; you weren’t being taught specifically to fight. We weren’t being taught to fight the way a Special Forces unit is taught. It was—the idea was familiarization with the terminologies and the tactics and some of the processes so that if you got into a situation you could be an advisor to or at least a window on other local people who are actually doing the fighting. And certainly, during the whole period I was in Laos, I was often admonished that I was not there to actually pull triggers and become a hero. I was there basically to help them—help the people that were doing the fighting do what they were supposed to be doing. So that’s—so in that sense it was a broad exposure to various things of, various forms of military procedure.

(6:16) Before you left and arrived—first in Bangkok, right, and then in Vientiane after that—how much time did you have to sort of bone up on Laos in general and the Hmong specifically?

[Laughs] A week?

Oh my. And this was—First of all, you have to—you know, 1960, if you went to any kind of archive and looked up Laos, you got two books, if you were lucky. And you got no—there were some, it turned out later that there were some Ph.D. dissertations on the Hmong, largely from one fellow (I'll see if I can find…) who I think did it mostly in Thailand. But there really was absolutely no—there was no archival material whatsoever, to speak of, and there were some very—you really had to read it in French if you were going to spend any time to—and I assume that there was good French archival material, but I just couldn’t get my hands on it, and I didn’t have the time.

(7:34) And this wasn’t an era (maybe it still isn’t an era, for all I know) in which the CIA thought, ‘Well, of course, in order to work effectively this person needs to know something about this culture, these people’… Yeah, well this is… [Both laugh] I’m sure they’re better. [Interviewer laughs] How could they be worse?—let’s put it that way. I mean, it was just a forgotten country then, and I would suspect that, to some degree, it still is. But no, there was no—I remember the Agency had almost—at least what I could read and I could get was very marginal at best

(8:18) So, if you don’t mind, talk about Vientiane as you remember it when you arrived.

Well, [Pauses] the interesting thing about Vientiane and what happened when I left four years later was the—and that’s what made our visit back there in 1999 so bizarrely interesting was that on the short list of an incompetent socialist/communist regime is that nothing gets done. And so Vientiane, [Pauses] always susceptible of being a time warp to begin with, in the last 30 years is virtually unchanged from what it was when I first went there—streets unpaved, the promenade by the Mekong River which was started in 1958 remained [Interviewer gasps]—you know, nothing ever happened. So it was—I enjoyed it. I didn’t spend much time in Vientiane, because I very quickly—I mean, I guess I got there in [Pauses to remember] mid-summer, maybe, late summer—no even
earlier than that. Oh, I got there in February 1962. And I started going up country a lot by summertime. And of course part—then I became rather infamous because I was the long-time record-holder for the longest tapeworm that had ever been on display at the embassy dispensary. It was over—stretched out it was over 22 feet long. And I reeled it out of my rear end one night and I thought I was dying. So I was a very sick puppy for a while. But anyway, I got upcountry… [Both laugh]

(10:26) More on that later! [Laughs] I got up country almost full-time by the late summer, and then by the fall we were [Pauses] looking around for a permanent base, and that’s when I got to Long Cheng. And when I get to Long Cheng some time in September, there are 14 people in the valley. It’s gorgeous. But then I—once the Geneva Conventions were signed, I believe in September of ’62, I was in there black [under cover]. I mean, I wasn’t supposed to be there, and I was theoretically working for an airline, and they just left us up there for about six months before they even tried to get us out for some R & R, which consisted of a night in Udorn. So I never went—see, my sense of Vientiane is—I really, by the time I leave four years later, I had seen New York more recently than I had seen Vientiane, because I was theoretically not in the country. And then when I go—so I get to go back one night four years later, and then come back to Vientiane 30 years later, and as far as I can see, it’s just this wonderful, sleepy little colonial city on the Mekong River, and it’s really quite unchanged.

(12:11) Was there much in the way of electricity or running water or… There was running water—the French had done that—and there was a power grid of some form. I can’t remember [Pauses]—gee, I just assumed that it worked pretty much all day long but I never—and I’m sure there were districts on the outskirts of Vientiane that got spotty coverage, but I—the Agency had a house that I lived in, and then it had a complex out near the airport, and I lived in a house for about two or three months with a pilot named Bill Andresevic, and Bill Lair across the street, so there was sort of a Hmong, there a was road that was known as Meo Alley, or something like that.

(13:07) So you had to come in with some kind of cover, since you were CIA. I came in as a military officer, because I was a military officer. I was assigned to a military assistance—a MAAG group—Military Assistance Advisory Group, and then, when September ’62 coincided with the two years of my active duty. So I then went home. You couldn’t resign your commission out of country; you had to be in country to do that. So I came—literally I was flown home for a weekend, where I signed papers saying I resigned my commission. And then I was flown back, and then I became an employee of Bird and Son, and had that useful piece of paper in my pocket if anything should happen, and I went back up country—Oh, the blood chit?

No, no, I just had a little piece of laminated plastic and a picture saying I was an employee of Bird and Son. So, to the extent one had a cover it was very light; to the extent that it meant anything it was inconsequential. Everyone knew who I was, everyone knew what I was doing, and they may not have gotten all the fine points, but basically I was—what did they call us? They called us Sky—a Sky Team. And so it was loose enough so that a lot of USAID guys sort of snuck in underneath it, and Pop Buell, who was quite a famous name, loved to pretend to people that he was actually a CIA operative. [Interviewer laughs] So I guess—you know, you had to do something for humor out there.
(15:27) Sure. I’m probably getting ahead of myself a little bit, because this is obviously something that persisted during your tour of duty and well beyond, but there were so many layers in this chain of command, for lack of a better descriptor. I mean, you had the embassy, you had the President and the State Department, you had the CIA... During your years there, how did you see those different facets of the entities that represented the United States and American interests interact with each other or come into conflict with each other?

Well, it’s an interesting question, because I think... [Pauses] I have a certain bias, and you might as well know the bias right up [front]. I believe that the project was viable as a project, as long as we didn’t push the Hmong out on a limb to fight a war they were unprepared to fight, even though they wanted, they wanted the bells and whistles that were involved in getting made a more conventional force. I spent four years very hard trying to connect the Hmong and Vang Pao in particular, to an overarching symbol of Lao—‘Laotion-ness,’ if you will, which, at that point, the King was the only institution—the royalty was the only institution that could serve that purpose. So I saw my job as: one, to keep any aspirations of Hmong autonomy at bay; two, to do all that I could to bypass the Laotian political—the venal political system as it existed in Vientiane; and to connect Vang Pao to the King, because I felt that was the only way that they would survive in a long term, and that we Americans should do nothing to make that, their connection to the King more tenuous, and that we should keep a lid on the more adventurous or heroic Hmong officers who wanted Air Forces and conventional weapons and—there was a huge force [push] to make them a conventional force. My departure four years later coincided—so going back, this whole thing worked, and the layers that you asked me about worked as long as the Agency and the State Department agreed that this was the proper role. And for a good part of the time I was there, there was an ambassador named William Sullivan, and Sullivan and I saw absolutely eye to eye on this. This is what he wanted. He didn’t want to see northern Laos become an adjunct of Saigon and the military in Saigon. He thought that there was a role for the State Department and the Agency to play, and indeed I thought there was. When I left, as I have said on some occasions, I was—things had been going badly in Vietnam, and the push by the southern, by the military in Vietnam finally won, and they flooded the place with American soldiers and officers and training teams and this. And I like to think—I said I was replaced by 500 Americans, and in fact I pretty much was. And I think that was a disaster. Because that did was—I ate, slept, and worked for four years with Vang Pao. I went with him everywhere, he talked to me every day. I knew the man and I knew the people. I didn’t have any American friends. The only person I had up there was a guy named Tony Poe. Tony and I didn’t see eye to eye. Tony didn’t like me particularly. I was a young upstart, I did all the writing, I was not a warrior, Tony was. Tony subsequently—Bill Lair, in a very good, judicious move, got Tony his own little bailiwick up in the northwest. I think Tony was delighted to see the end of me. [Interviewer chuckles] How long it could have lasted in this sort of earlier form I don’t know, but I think the end of the Hmong was absolutely written in stone the day they decided to take back the Plaines de Jarres, they got air cover, they got—you know, they just got excited about what they could do, and I think that was probably the worst thing we could have done.

[Mr. Lawrence gets some coffee, recorder is turned off, new track begins]

(0:03) Chiefs of station, who would come in and try to add a layer, layers upon layers between...[Pauses] I’m thinking particularly of Douglas Blaufarb, who turned out to be one of our strongest supporters, I think, toward the end, but he started out being one of our most severe critics, and I think generally speaking, the project turned out to be larger than any one individual’s effort to impose a certain kind of structure to it—other than what it had.
(0:52) Was there discussion, during your tenure already—I seem to recall reading somewhere that someone back in the States had run some kind of simulation—but was there talk about moving the Hmong people to Sayaboury province…in your sphere?

[Pauses] I’m sure there was. I don’t have a specific memory of sitting down with anybody in the four years—because basically, in the four years, anybody who came out from Washington was simply—usually pretty impressed by what he or she saw. I am sure someone said, ‘Well now what happens if it all goes south? Where do they go? What do they do?’—yadda yadda yadda. The problem of Sayaboury as a province is it tends to be lower than the existing—where they lived for the most part. It tended, it would be further away from the Hmong homeland of Nong Het, up very close to the Vietnamese border. A lot of these folks fought largely in order to return one day going east. If you went to Sayaboury you were getting further west. You also had to cross the Mekong River plain. You also had the issue of—which, of course, subsequently killed so many of them, of malaria when they went across the river. These guys just didn’t have that kind of immunity in their system. So I’m sure there was talk. Of course, western Sayaboury province starts to climb toward the borders of Thailand, which is where there were Hmong. But I don’t recall a serious talk. I mean, I was always being asked all kinds of things by Washington, such as having—they were much more concerned about opium trade than they were ultimate escape routes and things like that.

(3:14) Well, this may not be an apt title—perhaps you can tell me if this is a good appellation to use or not, but I think of them as the two founding fathers of this operation. One is obviously Bill Lair—

— and the other is Pop Buell, at least in terms of the USAID side of things.

[Yes.] What do you remember about your first encounter with Bill Lair, and how soon and to what degree were you told about the various intricacies of Operation Momentum?

What’s Operation Momentum?

Oh! It's basically the plan to arm and use the Hmong—sorry.

[Both laugh] See, I don’t even know what the...

To you it was just your job.

It was just my job. [Interviewer chuckles] I met Bill Lair right off the bat, in February 1962. He and his deputy Pat Landry became very—I think very good friends of mine. Somehow I think they liked me. I don’t know—I mean, they certainly gave me the job that everyone else envied. As I said, I think it had largely to do with the fact that I was not married, I had no children, I had no dependents, I was—and I spoke French, to a certain degree. So I would—I spent a lot of time with Lair in the early months where he—and we talked about that earlier where he talked about his early formation of the PARU [in Thailand], which was—which all of this could not have happened without that asset in place. I mean, it is something which—I just don’t think any of this would have occurred if the PARU had not been able to go in and quietly become our surrogates with the local population. They spoke the language to a great degree. And it was that whole group of the Police Aerial Rescue [Re-supply] Unit, or whatever it was called, that made this whole thing fly. So Bill was very proud of it, as I think he should have been, because I think it was a—and Bill very quickly, to me, became a paragon of how a secret service should operate.

(5:52) How so?

You take a man or woman, you let—you put him into—the Brits would put him into deep cover and send him over to a country where he spends the next five to 10 years establishing his
credentials. But you leave that person in country. You don’t rotate them out for bureaucratic promotional reasons. And Bill found in the Thai, a country and a people that he truly loved, and I think he turned down any efforts to move him on to go to this training or that training. He wanted to stay in Thailand. And to somebody’s great credit, they let him stay. And as far as I know, he’s the only one who I think ever did that. (I’m sure there are other instances that I just don’t know of.) But it seemed to me that if you wanted a model of how you gain the trust of a host country, this is a pretty good model. And I think there is no question that Bill, to this day, is honored by Thais of every stripe. And it’s sort of ridiculous that you—that here you have a model of how to do it, and yet it’s never been done again, as far as I know. [Pauses] Bill taught me a great deal about Thais and about life and about growing up, and he was very much an older brother to me. And I was enormously fond of him—still am, and enormously respectful. I was also fortunate in that, for about a year and for almost the entire time I was there, I did all of Pop Buell’s work. [Interviewer guffaws]

(8:15) Well, talk some more about that. [Chuckling]
Pop loved. He was a real character. But Pop—I ran Pop’s—all his air drops, I ran all his logistical support units. He was in Sam Thong, I was 12 miles away in Long Cheng, and Pop and I spent a whole lot of time together. Again, I liked him, he liked me. I worked my ass off for Pop. And I let Pop be Pop, in effect.

(8:56) What do you mean by that?
Well, Pop was a great—Pop was a bullshitter. But he was a good bullshitter. I mean, I’m not—he was a great ‘press the flesh’ guy, and he was a wonderful motivator of civic behavior. He was hardly a detail man. And in effect—and I wasn’t either, although I became a detail man, because that—in a way, curiously, my job for four years was to do the details. So I did the details for him as I did for Bill. And I think—I ran interference with him. Charlie Mann, or somebody who was in charge of the AID mission would come up, and they would sit together and Charlie would talk to me, because basically I knew where everything was going and I knew what was going on. And Pop would rant and rave about this. [Pauses] He also had some cute nurses, [Interviewer laughs] which I didn’t [Laughs]—so I went to visit his nurses a couple of times—sort of. But anyway, we got along very well. And if Pop needed money or needed funding, because AID was very difficult for him to work, I would make sure—I would get him what he needed, by and large.

(10:34) I’ve got two or three different questions I need to…[Pauses] I’d like to go back to Bill Lair for a second. If I’ve heard the story correctly—you talked about how you were replaced by 500 men. In a way, did, at least initially, Bill Lair see you as someone that he hadn’t asked for, that he wasn’t really sure he knew what to do with, and—
Absolutely. He didn’t know what the fuck I was. You know, I was some little Eastern twit—you know, majored in art history and spoke with an accent. I’m sure…[Chuckles] Both Bill and Pat [Landry] were Texas A & M guys. I’m sure—it took quite a while for them to understand maybe that I wasn’t such a—I wasn’t maybe as bad as I appeared. [Interviewer chuckles] Yeah, I think Bill—I’m sure Bill asked for help, ‘cause I’m sure he said, ‘This thing is growing, we need’—and I suspect Bill wanted junior people because he felt that he could mold junior minds better than he could old paramilitary minds who had their own ways of doing things. An example, a little bit is Tony Poe. I mean, if you talk about a warrior who had seen it all, Poe had done it all from being a Marine sapper in World War II, where he joins up—he lies about his age, he goes into the Marine Corps at the age of 16, into a unit where your casualty rates were up in the high 80s. He then fights in Korea, he fights in Malaya, he fights in Indonesia and the Philippines—you know, Tony had—
and Tony was exceptional in that regard. But I think the paramilitary bureaucracy of the Agency wanted to send out some of their old war horses who, probably Bill Lair—I would guess that Bill Lair didn’t want. And I don’t know that for a fact. But in my dim memory, I think I remember him saying he liked to have people he could teach. So he taught and I listened and I learned.

(13:12) I’m sure there are all sorts of things you could say, but if you were forced to come up with a ‘top however many you want to choose’ of big ideas or really helpful guiding principles that he passed on to you, what would those be?

I think probably the best idea was that you don’t bring the last war into the current one. And I think this is one of the things why he and I got along so well. If you had to write one rule for why we were successful for as long as we were, it was that we followed no a priori guidelines, no a priori manual. He was of the impression, I believe, that if you got smart people who would work hard, and loved what they were—the people they were working with, the answers would occur organically, if you will, and you would build a structure that was organic to the people you were working with, rather than imposing it hierarchically, from the top down. And I think that was the one guiding principle that we worked on—that there was no manual, and the one person you didn’t want, however famous he was, was General Lansdale coming out and telling you how you ought to run an insurgency or counter-insurgency or guerilla operation, because the one thing that we both felt—and I don’t know if it came from me or it came from [Bill Lair or] it was symbiotic between us. We understood that the process of getting someone to move from fighting to protect his family on one village on one hilltop was that you had to somehow take that initial desire, expand it so that person would be willing to fight for the village on the other, the opposing hilltop, with whom his village probably had a long-running feud. So going back to what you were saying earlier about clans, you had to figure out how to expand someone’s consciousness so that they could indeed fight for a clan, perhaps that they had been feuding with for generations.

(16:01) And to build it on something other than the almost more Western idea of ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend,’ to bind them together in some more meaningful way, I suppose. Yup, in that way, absolutely. So you would try—you started very simply. And that’s sort of in the film I made. I tried to make that point. I did a film for the Agency.

Oh, OK, I was not aware of that.

Well then tonight you get to look at it. [Interviewer sounds very pleased at the prospect]. You get to look at the film. I have a purloined copy of that, too. [Interviewer laughs] But now a lot of people—it’s out there. But that was my point—

(16:42) This isn’t ‘Journey from Pha Dong’?

Yeah.

Oh, OK, I have seen that.

You’ve seen it.

I had no idea you were involved with that.

I made it.

I’ve used that in my classes.

I wrote the script and I put the film together.

Oh, my goodness! Very—no, I had no idea. Maybe that information isn’t out there to be found somewhere.

I’m not in it. The credit lines are not extensive, as you noticed. No, but if you notice in the film, I try to get to the point where you talk about people coming in from various places to meet with Vang Pao, and how the genius of Vang Pao was that he would arm them and then he would [Pauses] give
them a reason for fighting and also a reason for protecting their neighbors and their zone or their community—their larger community.

Well this makes perfect sense now, because I saw this and I thought, ‘This is pretty perceptive culturally. This is about telling people more than just, ‘These are good fighters.’

I mean, there’s footage of a funeral, there’s footage of ball tossing, there’s all sorts of stuff in there.

Yeah. It’s a little purple. [Interviewer laughs] I have a great friend. He’s a historian at Princeton named Sean Wilentz.

Oh, sure! Of course!

Sean’s a very good friend of mine, and actually his wife is a historian of the Progressive [Era], particularly of women.

What’s her name?

Christine Stansel. Chris Stansel. She’s also a professor at Princeton, and they come up here and spend time when they can, and I watched it with them last year or the year before. And I was acutely embarrassed by my prose, which never would have flown by Sean, and is… Anyway…

Well, this was for a very different audience.

Yeah, it was. It was, and it served its purpose. But what the point, though, is, is that—going back to that initial idea that you don’t have a manual. It is very difficult to transpose the animating principle from Country X to Country Y—that you’re better off not even trying to do that. I was better off, in effect, being untrained than if I had had in my mind a military concept, which is sort of what Special Forces or White Star or whatever you want to call them—how they operated, ‘cause they came in with a doctrine. We had no doctrine; we made our doctrine up. And I would be very loath to transpose that doctrine to, say, Iraq. [Interviewer chuckles] We sat—Annie [his wife Anne Garrels] and I sat here last summer with her driver [during her visits as an NPR correspondent to Iraq], who is in the book [Naked in Baghdad]. They call him ‘Amer.’ His real name is XXXX but XXXX is a Sunni Muslim, who lives—his family come from near XXXX. And on his wall he can trace his family back roughly 800 years. And to teach, to talk to XXXX about how they fight and what their customs are, is to listen to what would have been an articulate Hmong talking about how they fought, another words…[Pauses] And I realize how XXXX and his family are going to survive this thing, if in fact they do, is going to be based on their animating principles, and nothing we can bring in to them. So that was—I would say Bill Lair—and I don’t even know if Bill Lair said this to me, it’s just that [Pauses] we would talk. We spent a lot of time talking and drinking together, and [Pauses] I would believe that—I’m sure he mentioned this, and I just expanded on it.

(21:21) Just one last question about ‘Journey from Pha Dong.’ Who would you say was the intended audience for that film? I always imagined select members of the Senate Foreign Arms Committee or—

Exactly.

OK.

Yeah. It was made—it was made as a puff piece for the Agency, basically. I mean, I came back from Laos, and I was supposed to go back for a third tour. Bill Colby and Dick Helms got together, and each one claimed later on that they were responsible for not letting me go back. So I’m going to give credit to both of them, thank their souls.

(22:01) So you think in the long run it was a very, very wise thing to get you out of there.
Well, I think Colby said it very wisely. He said, ‘My worry about you going back is that you’ll never come home. You’ll either go native’—such as many [Pauses] there was a family by the name of Bill Young—sons of missionaries who—and maybe he was worried that I would become another Lair. I don’t know; he never said that, but—that I would go native, and I would become so invested in this program that nothing else would make any difference [or] sense to me—or that I’d get killed. And getting killed was—you know, you were flying every day—not killed in terms of a fire fight, but these little planes went down all the time, and you were flying in and out of landing strips that were truly hairy, and you did that on a daily basis, so at some point your string was going to run out. So on that basis I think it was—and then I’m not sure he envisioned the career that I subsequently took, but…let’s just cover this. So what he did, he said, ‘I want you to be my special assistant for a year, and I would like you to take all that footage that you and John Willheim produced, and make a film for us.’ And so I would work for Bill Lair [meant Colby] from eight to 12 in the mornings, and then John Willheim and I would go into some secure film lab down somewhere near the capital, and we would work on the film until all hours of the night. John—we got along very well, and John was a superb photographer, and I wrote the story board and had it all out. I’d never done this before, so here again, I’m just kind of winging it. And then we presented it to the Director and the various heads. And John had a marvelous wrinkle. He said, ‘What we’re going to do is we’re going to misspell one word in the title when we show it to all of these cats, because they are all going to feel like they have to criticize something, so let’s give them the fuck-up right up front.’ [Interviewer guffaws] And it worked like a charm. They all said, ‘Oh, boys, you kind of mis—and the only thing they said was, ‘You misspelled the title.’ [And we replied,] ‘Oh! I’m sorry!’ Unbelievable.

And then I think it was subsequently shown—I don’t know where. Defense Department, Pentagon, National Security Council, all that sort of stuff. Yeah, as a film of that nature, some of it’s pretty good. Some of it’s pretty tacky.

(25:15) I think for a period piece it holds up pretty well.

Period piece—let’s call it that. Period piece indeed. So that was the story. Oh, and then, just so you know [Pauses] I was walking down the hall one day, and an old, grizzled veteran threw his beefy arm over my shoulder and said, ‘Kid, do you want some advice?’ And I thought, ‘Oh god, sure, let’s go for it. I could use all the advice I can get.’ And he said, ‘Quit.’ I said, ‘Joe, what are you talking about?’ He said, ‘If you think about it, it makes a lot of sense. You’ve had the best four years and the best tour of duty that anyone has ever had in this outfit. You’ve got medals, you’ve got promotions, you’ve got this, you’ve got that. You’re going to spend the next 30 years looking for the same thing and you aren’t going to find it.’ And he said, ‘Besides, there are about 2,000 young FSOs out there—

Field Service Officers?

Foreign Service Officers—you know, whatever—‘your contemporaries [Hushed] who are just waiting to prove to you that you’re not nearly as good as you think you are.’ [Interviewer laughs] I thought about that, and I said, ‘I’ll get out.’ And Colby, to his credit, also said to me that if you were going to stay in the government you needed a second job. You needed to be a lawyer or an academic, or get something else rather than selling used cars. He said what happens to old CIA officers is not very pretty, because no one wants to hire them. What do they do? No one—you know. So that was when I decided to go—I figured I’d done my doctoral field work on a degree, and so I went back to Princeton, did some undergraduate work, went to [the University of] Chicago where Clifford Geertz was teaching, and a lot of good people were teaching. Good anthropology department. So I was just about to move to Chicago when Paul Nitze tried—got me to go back,
and I thought that was too good a chance to see what it was like to work at the very top. And that was very disappointing, so then I decided, ‘Well, why don’t I become an artist?’

(27:51) Now what was your job with Paul Nitze?

I was his special assistant, basically, to do what he wanted me to do—I mean, that’s when he asked me to cull his speeches for... [Before the recording started Mr. Lawrence said that Mr. Nitze asked him to pull together all of Nitze’s speeches on Southeast Asia and critique them. Lawrence did so and Nitze paid the advice little mind. Years later, says Lawrence, Nitze essentially told him, ‘You were right.’]

That’s right. You had said this before we got the recorder. So just so I remember, he was in what position at that time?

He was the—he had just come on. Clark Clifford had just been named Secretary of Defense, taking McNamara’s place. Clifford’s job was to persuade Johnson to get out of Vietnam. Nitze, his deputy—his job was basically to run the department. I was not suited, really, for doing what I was doing, because I was a field person. I didn’t know defense policy, I didn’t know the department. And Paul did it because he knew what I did in Laos and, I think, was admiring of what I had done. And he wanted to keep—Paul was always trying to collect bright young guys around him, to form something of a nucleus. And I suspect I was part of the nucleus. The problem was that also part of the nucleus were guys who really knew how to play the Washington game well, and I’m thinking of the fact that a guy named Dick Holbrook was a special assistant to a guy in the White House, and a guy named Tony Lake was a special assistant to a guy in the State Department, and we would have special assistant lunches, and I very quickly realized that these guys played the game a whole lot better, and liked it a whole lot better than I did. So that’s when I decided to take a sharp left-hand turn and head for something I’d always wanted to do, which was to paint and draw. So that’s sort of the very quick genesis of it all.

(29:56) OK. Well, I’m going to haul us back to Laos now.

Yup.

If I remember you being quoted in Roger Warner’s book, you talked about Bill Lair and that he was a good mentor but he was also good at—this may not be the right word, but I’ll use it anyway—manipulating people subtly, maybe even helpfully, but that he was...

Oh yeah. Oh yes. He had become a very—Bill had become Thai. Bill—I mean, there was very little of the Texas A & M guy left, except when he wanted to pull it out of the back closet. And he became very...[Pauses] to the extent that you can use that term to describe how the Thai mind or the Oriental mind works through indirection as opposed to in your face—‘this is what the fuck I want.’ He had really made that transition, and he was very adept, and very careful at keeping at least the face of the person he was going after clean—and his own—and yet getting what he needed. So I don’t think Bill would be—I use that term almost as a term of admiration,—

Exactly. I—

—not in sort of the Western term. Because if you’re going to survive in Thailand or in any of those cultures, you do become manipulative in the sense that—you’ve got several different agendas going.

(31:33) Yeah. [Perhaps I should have said] ‘indirectly influential.’

Indirectly influential. You got it.

Now—again, if I remember this correctly, you served something like a two-month probationary period under Pat Landry when you got started?

Did I?

That’s what Roger [Warner] wrote, so I’m trusting Roger—that sort of before you were—
I'm sure. I mean, he would have been a fool not to. [Interviewer laughs] Yeah, I don't think it was ever stated clearly that 'you guys'—I think I was there with three or four—and I can't remember. There was a guy named [Pauses] Oh! It'll come to me tonight. [Interviewer chuckles] I think we went out with a guy named Terry Ward, who stayed in the Agency. He came out with me. Joe somebody, and then there was a red-headed guy, and it was clear that we were all sort of in the pool to begin with, right? [Pauses] Well, they clearly made a judgment on the red-headed guy. He was totally incompetent to work with third country nationals. So I remember he ended up being sent to the training base at Hua Hin, where he was in charge of manuals. So clearly they made that [decision]. Joe went down ('cause Joe was married and his wife worked for the Agency as a secretary)—he went down to Takhet—Takhet, I think. And I think he did a very good job down there. But he couldn't go in country because he had responsibilities. And Terry…[Pauses] Terry was more like me, but I think he went to the south, not because he was farmed—they just, they needed—I think Terry was as good as I was, if not better. And I was—and so I'm sure there was a vetting process that went on.

(33:52) OK. I think the one unfortunately-worded question that I asked Bill Lair when I saw him was, 'I read through your Texas Tech oral history interview, and you mention Pat Landry, but not much, and I was just curious to know more about your working relationship.' And I think he inferred that I was suggesting there was some kind of conflict in the relationship, and I wasn't at all, because from what little I've heard, the two worked almost miraculously together. How would you describe the two of them, and even just Pat Landry alone, about whom I know very little?

They were very different. Pat—I mean, they started out in the same place if not indeed in the same class. But Pat was never long—Pat's long suit was not subtle indirection. There was much more of a Texas A&M guy in Pat at the end than there ever was in Bill. Pat was a profane, hard-driving, hard-working, hard-drinking, really good man, who probably—and I don't know this—probably had been given an opportunity to rise in the Agency and blew it somehow, 'cause he had a temper, and he didn't—he had no problem calling somebody an asshole—none. And I think why Pat and Bill worked together so well was that Bill was far more diplomatic. He needed somebody behind him to sometimes give him some backbone in a bad situation, and Pat was willing to do a lot of the shit work that Bill was either incompetent or just didn't want to do—a lot of the personnel crap. So I think they did work well together. [Pauses] I don't know what happened after '66. There was another nine years… I think Pat gets ill, and I think he deteriorates physically. And I think this bothered Bill a lot. Because they used to fight—I mean, they would fight pretty well together, at least when I was there. And I know Pat died sadly, because I think he had very bad Alzheimer's toward the end. [Pauses] I'm not sure that the—as far as I knew, I think their relationship, at least in the years I was there, was a very good 'I'll do this, you do that' kind of thing. And Bill relied on Pat very, very [much], because Pat was extremely good at sorting out and cracking the whip over American—particularly the Americans. Pat did not spend a lot of time, I think, with the Thais, and certainly never with the Hmong. He never came up country. That's about… He was a back-office guy. He was indispensable in that role, because Bill was not about to do it, and Bill trusted Pat implicitly, and as far as I know, they never had a—Bill never had a reason not to trust [Pat]. But I don't know what happened at the end.

(37:55) Now [as I understand it], you, in one of your early responsibilities, worked with Pat training some of the early SGU units in Hua Hin. Is that right?

Yes, actually, I did. I was responsible for getting together, with Vang Pao's help, the early units that were to mimic the Thai [PARU] teams. The SGU thing, the battalions came later. So initially what
we wanted to do was to get the young leaders, the young kids who were flexible and could learn languages, and the sons of important Hmong leaders, and give them training similar to that which the PARU had gotten. I cannot remember what they were called, but it was something like…I don’t know. [Later he remembers they were the SOT, Special Operations Teams.] So we were training radio operators, medics, sort of a smattering of military technology, and the PARU trained them in Hua Hin, and I went down, the only time I was ever in Hua Hin was when I brought—I either brought or came to visit the first of my class that were going through training. Other than that, I never went back. [Pauses] And then subsequently Hua Hin was used for larger units, but initially it was just the small [ones]. The actual battalions we ended up—we did most of that training in Laos, in country, although some of their leaders, I suspect, went, were taken out of country, but I don’t know where. Takhli? I don’t know where.

(40:13) So you said radio training…

Well, if you had a PARU team of four guys, one of them was your team leader. He was collecting intelligence, he was talking with the local people. Maybe you had two people doing that. One was certainly a radio communications person who had to know one-time pads and all that kind of bullshit.

One-time pads?

One-time pads—you know, CIA jargon. It’s the way you encode a message. I’ve got a pad with a series of absolute random numbers, and my friend—you’ve got the other pad. And it’s all done by computer, so the numbers— theoretically you can’t, there’s no pattern to the randomness of the numbers. And you just start with the given letter and then you write your message and then transpose it into text that way. That was what—and every night I would write one of my messages, and I used to drive those kids crazy, ‘cause I never knew when to shut up. [Interviewer laughs] But that—you have that, you clearly have that capacity, ‘cause what we were trying to—the thought was to take those teams when they came back, and send them into places, ‘cause—I think we only had about five or six PARU teams, and so it was to sort of have a junior PARU effort elsewhere in the country. And they were good kids.

(42:00) So what was your first encounter with Vang Pao, and how did that relationship begin? I’m sure we’ll be bringing him up repeatedly during the rest of this interview, but what about the early time...

Well, he—we met in a little hut in [Pauses], which is where their headquarters were. We got along pretty well right from the start…We got along very well, and as I said, I spoke some French, and he spoke some French, and later on we—once I learned Lao, he would speak to me in Lao, and then he would use—Lao is a very simple language, but not a very extensive vocabulary—you’d just use French for the words you didn’t know. We got along extremely well. I think he—I think he was impressed by my willingness to hunker down and live his life. And I think he knew—and I’m sure Bill Lair told him that I was—for many, for a long time I think Vang Pao would have preferred to talk to Bill Lair, but Bill Lair had other things to do, so poor old Vang Pao got me. So—but it took time, and I think over time trust was developed, and trust was—I wasn’t going to fuck him up, so we became very close.

(44:08) So you’re training troops, you’re conducting—well, I don’t know if you should call them negotiations, but certainly you’re building a relationship with Vang Pao,

Yup.

you’re doing all of these things at the tender age of 22.

Yup.
Was there at least a wee bit of insecurity about—‘Oh my goodness, what am I doing here?’
and ‘Do I have the right stuff?’ and ‘Am I making the right decisions?’ and if there ever was,
were there people other than Bill Lair that maybe you could turn to, to bounce ideas off of
or—

No. Bill Lair was the only person—I never went behind Bill’s back. His relationship with the
ambassadors—Charlie Whitehurst and various others—I can’t remember all of them—was always
tenuous enough so that I—Bill said, ‘I don’t want them fucking around up here,’ and I said, ‘Great,
‘cause I don’t want them here, either, so if I don’t get it out of you, we won’t get it.’ And I always—
they were always, by and large their learning curve was a whole lot steeper than mine, because they
had to forget a whole bunch of shit in order to get on the curve. So I—there was never any time
that I felt at all tempted in any way, shape, or form of going behind Bill’s back, because I didn’t
think—first of all, I could always talk to Bill, and we might not always agree on things, but Bill sort
of respected—toward the end I think he respected my judgment pretty well, and if I felt very
strongly about that we don’t do this or we don’t do that or something else, he never was dictatorial
in any way, shape, or form. I’m sorry, what was the first part of your question?

(46:09) Well, whether there were—any maybe it’s not so much about policy as getting to
know the lay of the land a little better or getting to know about the Hmong people or about
how things had worked prior to your arrival.

Well, you see, the interesting thing was that Bill actually didn’t know the Hmong people. I did, in
that sense, and in September of ’62, during that first six-month period when we are really under
wraps, in order to not become an alcoholic like old Tony, I actually spend my time interviewing
every Hmong leader I can, and I start putting clans together, I start talking to witch doctors and
medicine people about what plants they use, I start talking to people about—you know, ‘How old
are you when you start fucking?’ I mean, I’m a junior field anthropologist, because there’s really not
much else for me to do, and I don’t do well just sitting around doing nothing. So that part of it was,
in effect, extremely valuable toward the end, because I know what the clans are, I know what the
feuds are, I know who’s done what to whom 30 years ago, I know who you trust or don’t trust, and
for what reason. So it was like an incubator into the [Pauses] into the sociology and anthropology of
the Hmong. And that’s sadly, what none of my successors and those guys who had a whole bunch
of Americans to pal around with at night never had.

(48:31) Can you remember, as someone who came in knowing very little about the Hmong,
specific ‘aha’ moments or specific things that struck you about their clan organization or
their sense of spirituality or their herbal or ritual healing practices, or really anything at all
that stands out in your mind?

Well, I spent a great deal of time talking to them about animism and what was—I think once I sort
of got a grip on how their world is populated, in terms of the spirit world, that was something of an
‘aha’ moment, because I realized that if I could get myself out of my agnostic Protestant
background, structured with all the problems of how I grew up and how I ended up thinking, then it
really became—you can sort—that gave me a real insight into how they thought and how they
operated, because if you see, or if you make the assumption that everything has an animus of some
kind, then they, I can see where it’s not so difficult to get from there to how they would fight,
because they didn’t want to kill anything, basically, and they didn’t even want to kill their enemies.
You would fight to such a degree where your enemy would have to leave, but you would always
leave your enemy a way out. And once I sort of got to that, I sort of came to realize how, why Laos
was the way it was, because that general perception of how you fight—and there were fascinating
books on ancient Thai warfare which I found, which I did get my hands on when I would go out.
And so I would try to make that transposition to the Hmong, with certain qualifications, obviously, and what that also gave me was— [Pauses] that was an ‘aha’ moment. The second sort of ‘aha’ moment was the idea—when we started fooling—this idea of using the King as an overarching symbol, and when I discovered—again, this is not, I don’t think this is written down, but in the 1880s or 1890s, the Vietnamese invaded northern Laos, and the Hmong, who were then in the Plaines de Jarres—more or less where they were—banded together and resisted, and in effect saved the kingdom, or the King, the Luang Prabang King, and that was why—the King then gave to the Hmong of Xieng Khouang a greater degree of self-governance than they had, than any other minority group had. And then, what struck me as interesting was when we talked about—we had these zones, you know, surrounding the Plaines de Jarres, and I realized as I was talking with some old naikong from some place, that the zones they had used almost 60 years earlier were precisely the same zones with the same families running them that were used when we were there. So I began to get a sense of historical continuity, which in a language that is an unwritten language is sort of fascinating. So there were a lot of those kinds of connections that I made during the six months when I was just talking to people.

(53:16) Were there, in general, responses of surprise that you were interested, or did they simply sort of take you in when you asked and tell you what you wanted to know, or…

The latter.

OK.

The latter.

Interesting.

Yeah. We got along very well. I suppose they were surprised. They didn’t say to me, ‘Oh, I’m surprised,’ [Interviewer chuckles] but if you asked them the right questions, they would say, ‘Oh yeah, well this is why this happened and this is why we don’t like these people and this is why’—I mean, they would rattle on—I mean, to varying degrees, not all of them.

(54:06) So did you learn the intricacies of both Green and White Hmong?

Not really. I was dealing mostly with White and some Striped. The Green, if I’m not mistaken, was a clan more concentrated in the area of Dien Bien Phu in Northern—I don’t think I ever consciously ran across a Green Hmong that I know—and I couldn’t really tell the difference between the Striped and the White—I mean in terms of behavior. I’m sure—there was a woman in Missoula who I knew pretty well who did her dissertation on the various intricacies of the woven patterns, and she said she could see—I have that somewhere, but I never could figure that out particularly.

(55:11) A remark that Bill Lair made to me that surprised me was that at the time [already early 1960s] he was telling people, ‘We need to do as much for the Hmong as we can before we abandon them’—that he already had a sense very early in this process that there would come a day when the United States would just pull up stakes and go. Is that something you clearly remember?

Absolutely. And that was the reason—that was the reason why I got so unhappy when [distracted by a pesky deer fly] No, my whole pattern—I mean, there were several things going on. One, that was why I felt so badly for him later on, because it was counter to everything he [Lair] believed in and what I had come to believe that the only way we could possibly work our way out of this place was to keep such a low profile that you almost—unlike what we’re doing in Iraq, you almost had to rely on the local people right from the get-go. And if you weren’t going to get something done you weren’t going to get something done, but it was them who weren’t going to get something done.
Right? So from the very, very start the whole thrust of what we tried to do was not to push them out on the limb any further than they—so that when we did leave they could get back off the limb. And of course this is what the militarization of Northern Laos prevented them from doing, because they became such a target and such a pain in the ass to the North Vietnamese that that was it. And that was the whole purpose, or one of the purposes behind the political attachment to the King, so that we were not involved in any way, shape, or form to where their allegiances were. It was also—we were parsimonious, I would say, as far as aid was concerned, and Pop agreed with that. I mean, he never wanted to give them so much help that they wouldn't want to go back home. So I think there was a general consensus among Pop Buell, Bill Lair, myself, and a guy named Doc Weldon, who was truly an amazing man.

(57:59) Charles Weldon, I think?
Yes.
Did you work closely with him?
Yeah.
Well, anyway, finish that thought [Chuckles]
Yeah. And he's the one person I did get to see when I went back in '99, just before he died. And we had a wonderful talk.

(58:22) But you all agreed in terms of keeping spending low and…
Yes, yes, because otherwise you would destroy something that was very important, and you would give them a false sense of—you know, Big Mother America. And their perceptions—I remember having these long, turgid discussions about politics with Vang Pao where he would discuss the values of capitalism, and I thought, as I was listening to him go on about this, that, and the other thing, ‘You know, [Laughs] it isn’t as simple as you seem to think.’ And he had a very simplistic view of the world. And he thought—and I kept saying, ‘VP, we're going to leave one day.’ And he said yes, he knew that. And he said, ‘That’s why I have the opium under my house.’ [Both laugh]

Yeah, we'll get to that, too!
But in effect it made perfectly good sense! He said, ‘You know, you are going to leave, or something is going to go wrong, and I need to be able to pay my men for a year until I can find somebody else to help me. So that was—and I said, ‘I think that makes a lot of sense to me. Just don’t get too much. If you get too much you’re going to be able to—you’re going to be a target.’ And he understood that—at least he said he understood that.

(1:00:07) And I imagine the CIA wasn’t really crazy about his dealings with opium of any kind, either.
No. No. And so I used to have to—I mean, they would send me out a message every month, every couple of months and say—’cause I admitted freely that the stuff was there. I said, ‘There’s no sense pretending it’s not there—it is there.’ And I said, ‘But it’s there for a specific reason. And here’s the reason. And as long as it doesn’t become a hoard, then I don’t think you worry about this. This is providential planning.’ And it—Vang Pao did not smoke opium. He had to pay off his corrupt co-leaders, if you will. I think when he—when I knew him well, I thought he was quite an extraordinary human being. I don’t think he stayed that way, but that’s something we can talk about later.

(1:01:08) Oh, indeed. Well since you brought up Doc Weldon, and I assume you had at least some dealing with Pat McCreedy as well—
Not really. Pat was very prickly, and I really liked Jiggs a great deal. He was in the same boat, as far as I was concerned, as Pop and Bill. And I used Jiggs as my eyes and ears wherever he went and I didn’t go. He would often stop by and say, ‘You know, you’d better go look at Tal Anoi ‘cause there’s some real trouble going on there,’ or whatever. So I had less to do with him in the sense that he had organized his own supplies and his own operation far more effectively than Pop had his, so Jiggs didn’t need me like Pop needed me. And Pat I knew, but she, I think, spent more of her time in the south than in the north.

(1:02:18) OK. I need to double back for just a moment. We were talking about Hmong culture and such. Did you ever attend a Hmong New Year or a Hmong wedding or a Hmong funeral or—
All the time.

Well sure.

What do you remember about—I don’t know, maybe we shouldn’t focus on all three—let’s start with the Hmong funeral. What do you remember about that particular ritual and how it was practiced in the villages in Laos?

Well they—you know, it’s in the film, actually.

Yeah.

They dress the body, and they would then use the paper—Chinese paper money, and the idea was that there was a group of keeners, who were hysterical to watch doing it, and curiously enough, I thought of them when I was standing on a platform of East Glacier, Montana waiting for my brother to come in with his kids on a train, and there were some Blackfoot Indian ladies waiting for a body to be returned to them from wherever—some place back east. And the body came off the train, and these women started keening and wailing in a pattern, in a manner that was so spookily similar to what I had witnessed 20 years earlier in Laos that it was one of those sort of ‘Oh, shit!’ moments! [Interviewer laughs] But there was that whole process. And then the women would leave the hut and go out and smoke a cigarette. I mean, they didn’t smoke, but they would start laughing and talk about something else. And then they would go back in and immediately start—

No, I watched, I went to a number of funerals. The funerals themselves were really sort of—were day-long if not week-long events where it was a personal, a personal goodbye said by all the relatives. I mean that was why the body was left on the table, was that everyone who was related to that person had to basically come and touch the body one more time. And one of the issues that bothered the Hmong greatly was that the body theoretically in the spirit world goes back to the place that it was born, where it started out. And the problem was that it had a lot of rivers to cross, and spirits don’t swim. So there was a lot of concern over whether—how they were going to get home. So [Chuckles] that I recall being an issue. And I’m not sure how it was ever resolved, frankly. I mean, I—

[Anne Garrels comes home, recorder turned off. New track begins. In the interim the two have taken the couple’s three Labradors for a walk.]

(0:00) Well, when we left off I think we were finishing off talking about funeral rituals, and while we were walking you mentioned that you observed a woman engaging in embroidery in a way that you found quite amazing.

Yeah, and it was one of those things when you realize that the people you’re with have a different matrix of intelligence.

Could you describe what you described earlier?
Well, they would—we’re looking at a panel, and I watched—this is a panel of embroidering that is perfectly, perfectly geometric. And it looks absolutely symmetrical. And I watched a woman embroidering one of these enormous Hmong skirts that are heavily pleated so that they are just enormous in their—you put them on the ground and they just flatten out to a donut-type of thing. And they would start literally in one corner and they would start to embroider and embroider and the patterns would get more and more elaborate, and then they would get all the way around the circle and come back to the original point in about a year’s time, and it would end up perfectly symmetrical. And how they did that without patterns, without any kind of, as far as I could see, no aforethought whatsoever, I found absolutely remarkable. And I gather that’s what they—and each family has its own pattern which they repeat over and over and over again.

(1:54) Now I would imagine you used some of your art training to—I think you said you sketched some of the leaves or some of the plants that they used for herbal medicine?
I tried to. I tried to. I found, actually, when I went back—first of all, I never had any art training—Oh! Silly me.

[Chuckles]
You studied art but didn’t practice it.
I studied art history. That was my degree. But [Pauses] when I went back and looked at those later on I was chagrined to find that they really weren’t going to tell me a lot. So I’m afraid I’m a bust as a medical anthropologist. [Interviewer chuckles] I just—and my description of the plants were not—I wasn’t sufficiently trained in what I should be looking for and how to describe the leaf structure. So I just—it wasn’t, I don’t think, very helpful.

(3:01) And you were also saying that the reason, when I ask Hmong about what a wedding ceremony is like that I don’t get any answers is that there isn’t much of a ceremony to speak of.
Not that I observed. It’s more like just a reception. I suspect that the actual work goes on behind closed doors in whatever kind of dowry and financial arrangements are to be made. And there’s—but the wooing ritual is elaborate, with the ball tossing and that sort of business.

(3:38) Oh yes, New Year! We haven’t talked about New Year.
Well, that is nothing more—that is sort of a gang wooing ritual. [Interviewer laughs] I didn’t want to go for it.) Yeah, they toss the ball back and forth, and then I—there’s a lot of banter, a lot of sexual banter that goes on with the—
Oh really?
Oh, yes! Oh, no, the—I didn’t really—I didn’t understand enough Hmong to really understand it all, but I was told by people who were there. I mean, I spoke enough Lao to understand it, but they were going back and forth in Hmong, and basically it’s one sexual joke after another with the young girl. So it’s—there’s a lot of stuff that goes on.

(4:28) OK. And did you observe any shamans performing healing rituals, sort of looking into the spirit world?
Yes, I did. I watched him ride off in a—on his bench, and I watched him try to find the missing spirit that had—which was causing the person to be ill, and—yeah, I did see that on a number of occasions.

(4:59) Well let’s talk about your work to create the—I hope I have the name right here—the Union of Lao Races Radio. Does that sound about right?
That sounds about right.

**How did that idea come to you, or was it given to you? And how did you go about organizing it? Who did you recruit and what were its aims, the programming…**

Well, I would hate to take credit for it. I’m not sure. I believe I was part of it, but I think one thing one has to be careful of as you get older is you think you are both indispensable and sort of the founder of all modern knowledge. Right? I don’t know where the idea comes from, so let’s be clear about that. I’m enthusiastic about the idea, because it is clear to me with an illiterate— with a group of people who are fundamentally illiterate, and who all have access to little Japanese radios. When I—an interesting sidebar to give you an idea about this. When, on November whatever-it-was, the day Kennedy was shot, I was in a tiny village, right—I was as close to being in North Vietnam as I ever really wanted to be, and I was with a group of young men who I was sending out into North Vietnam to monitor the roads as they come into Laos and let us know—so like a road watch intel team. And we’d trained these guys. They had flash cards of different kinds of trucks and military vehicles. And I was in a little hut and all the Hmong were sleeping around me, and at about nine o’clock three of them came racing up, all with their radios, saying, ‘Your president has been killed.’ So here you are. I was about as far from civilization as you’re going to get out there, and they all were in radio contact of some station, some—maybe it was a North Vietnamese station. That would have been closer, actually, than Laos, Vientiane. So the idea of connecting these people via radio made sense, both given the language problem—they all understood Lao. Whether or not they could—for the most part they could understand the language, whether they could read or write it, but certainly they could—and there was a war, of course, which I guess you know, between Father Bouchard and the Baptists about—

[A friend stops by to say hello. Recorder turned off, new track begins.]

**0:00** So a war between Father Bouchard and the Baptists. Like I said, I spoke to him, but he’s a very plain-spoken person, very modest, doesn’t really like to self-promote—

No, and it really wasn’t Father Bouchard. Father Bouchard was extremely—exactly as you described. He had the best interests of the people at heart, and he was a very decent man. And he actually saved me from my reincarnation of my tapeworm, which we don’t have to go into.

**0:32** [Chuckles] Just by giving you the right supplies, or…

Yeah, he went down and—what he got were little bits and pieces of strychnine, from the south, where the strychnine tree grows. You’ve got to be awfully careful how much strychnine you take; obviously if you take the whole nut, you’re done. But if it was taken in slivers, it was very—it’s extremely good for intestinal parasites, and of course, a tapeworm is—that’s what a tapeworm is.

**1:01** That had to be one of the creepiest experiences of your life, I would think.

You’re… [Pauses, interviewer laughs] Yes. Anyway, I like Father Bouchard a lot. He was a very, very good man. The Baptist missionary was a little bit more Messianic and a little bit more driven to account for souls saved than Bouchard. And he—they had competing alphabets they were trying to teach the Hmong.

**Right.**

So we had—they came to me, and I had to render a judgment of Solomon—

Now was this Father Bouchard or—I thought Father Bertrais was the one who came up with the other writing system.

The Catholics and the Baptists, at least in my—in this instance. I can’t speak for anyplace else. But they had competing alphabets, and they came to me for a judgment of Solomon, and I had to draw a
line on the map and say, ‘South of this line shall be Baptist territory; north of this line shall be Catholic.

(2:22) Oh my goodness. Where roughly was that line?
I have no idea.
[Laughs] OK!
I have no idea.
Fair enough! [Laughs]
We were getting on to something else, I’m sorry.

[The two try to remember what they had been discussing previously]

(2:49) Oh! The radio station!
Right. So the radio station made sense. It was a good idea both to give the people in the north a sense that they belonged to a larger entity, [Lawrence pauses to move one of his Labradors out from under the table] and it also made it possible for Vang Pao to make it clear he wasn’t just doing stuff [only] for the Hmong. In other words, there were programs in Lao Theung, there were programs in Lao, and there were a couple of Thais. One worked for USAID and Pop Buell, and another one, I think, was a PARU, who were awfully good at this. And it was one of those things that—it was up on top of a hill overlooking Long Cheng, and once it got established, I really had so much on my plate I just didn’t worry about it. But I think it did a good job. There was also an American—the Agency sent out an American to oversee it, who I had known in training, and he was an utter disaster as a human being, and sub—you know, he really—it was not a good job. So I guess that was another reason I didn’t want to spend a whole lot of time with the radio station, because I didn’t like Colin very much. But I think it did a fairly good job. I don’t know.

(4:55) So this was, as I understand it, more to do with uniting the different ethnic groups in Laos rather than dealing, for example, with clan divisions within the Hmong culture or…
Absolutely. Much more the former than the latter.

[Interviewer scans his notes]

(5:24) What do recall about the movement from—Pha Dong was the first main base, as I understand it, and it was kind of foggy and unreliable. And Pha Khao was near there, wasn’t it?
Yeah, Pha Dong—Pha Dong was a rather small place, a rather—not very [substantial], but it was the place where the Hmong resistance began. And I don’t think it was particularly defensible. I never actually went to Pha Dong, as far as—I may be mistaken, but I can’t remember. Pha Khao, which sat behind it, and was sort of the—was an extraordinary place. It was like the interior of an old volcano, and the landing strip in the village sat up at about eight or nine thousand feet—no, 7,000—in the middle of this sort of lost, this lost volcano—I mean, if you want a romantic spot—and then with great big karst ridges going up on either side, and you’re on the shoulder of Phou Bia, which was the tallest mountain in Laos, and that was just under 10,000 feet. So you’re up pretty high, and because of the geological formation, it was susceptible to having—I mean, clouds would just come in and sit on top of it. So its weather was pretty iffy. So when we decided that when we needed to move, it was done largely because it would be more meteorologically reliable.
(7:11) And so who was in the heli—I assume it was a helicopter, not a plane, that went searching for this site that became Long Cheng?

(Pauses) That’s a good question. I think I was in one of them, but I don’t if I—I think there’s—a lot of people claim to be the person who found Long Cheng, and I really don’t know who can actually claim that, whether it’s worthy of claim, anyway. I mean, it seems to me that everybody—the valleys were pretty well known by the people, and from Long Cheng you could see Pha Khao, so you weren’t—you know, you were maybe five miles away. So I’m not sure it was much of a genius to decide that Long Cheng was a better place. It was lower; you were 3,000 feet, I think, and it was much more open in its configuration. So I’m not sure, but I’m sure somebody was in a plane at some point. And it may well have been Vang Pao and Bill Lair, for all I know. I just don’t know that.

(8:29) OK. Now there’s one date I should have been a little more careful to look for. When was—when did Pha Dong finally fall? When was it abandoned?

I have absolutely no idea.

OK. For some reason that was one date that I just didn’t nail down.

My guess is it falls some time in 1961. When? I don’t know.

Maybe it’s just me looking back years later, but Vang Pao was, it seems, very upset at losing it, and yet everyone seemed to say, ‘This is’—in the long run anyway, ‘an impractical site—Yup.

—and we need to move.’

All of the above.

So I suppose it was more the emotional or the dishonorable aspect of having to abandon a site to the enemy?

That’s right. I would think that was probably 90% of it.

(9:17) Two things: one referred to by Roger and another by—is it Zalin Grant?

Zalin Grant.

Roger refers to a party that you attended at Pha Khao as an envoy of Pat Landry. You were bidding farewell to some Special Forces people. They had replaced another group—that had defended Pha Dong. They were leaving, to be replaced by others, and you saw it as a moment when you were there, speaking with Vang Pao in French, and they saw you as this sort of ‘other guy’ who obviously—

[Interviewer and Lawrence work to clarify the event that Hillmer is describing to him, which comes from Roger Warner’s use of items Lawrence wrote more than 30 years prior.]

(10:18) There was a time, there was an evening, yes, I certainly do remember that, it was—and they were called White Star at the time.

And maybe that’s where I confused you; I said Special Forces.

Well, they were all the same difference. [Interviewer chuckles] And there was a White Star team that did leave, and there was another White Star team that came in. In fact, when I go to Long Cheng, I am with a White Star team who are very good. [Pauses] I’m a little worried now…I don’t know what—it’s one of those guesswork things. I am sure that—the White Star guys were pissed off at having to leave the country. They were pissed off. They did not like the idea that the Agency would come in with a sort of Ivy League 22-year-old asshole. [Interviewer chuckles] I think there was a lot of that. What do these guys think they’re doing?
(11:32) You hadn’t paid your dues, so to speak.

Yeah. And I wasn’t career military, and all that kind of business. So there was certainly that aspect to it. Did I seize upon the hiatus between one team and another? I’m sure I did! It sounds like I was pretty clever. [Interviewer chuckles] But I don’t—

(11:52) Well, I don’t think [Warner] was implying that you did that.

What?

I don’t think he was implying that you did that.

Oh, he didn’t?

He was simply saying that you were there as Pat Landry’s representative. You were speaking to Vang Pao, you were both speaking in French, and these guys sort of understand, ‘OK, this guy must be CIA, he must be somebody a cut above,’ and they seemed rather impressed by you. So who knows, maybe this is a story someone else told about you. But the way Roger wrote about it I got the impression—

I don’t think I could—I don’t think I would have said that to Roger. The trouble is, I don’t know who else he would have gotten it from.

Well, I think he also remarked that you felt that respect was undeserved.

Yes, absolutely! [Interviewer chuckles] I think—well, let’s set the record straight. Four years later I would have said the respect was deserved. But certainly—when I first go up there as Pat’s—I fly up, I remember going up into Pha Khao, and I remember—I think I saw some photographs of some White Star guys. And I certainly would—I deserved no respect at that point whatsoever. Later on, I think I did.

Fair enough.

(13:07) Well, the Zalin Grant reference I wanted to ask you about—he mentions a fellow who’s not in any of the other books that I’ve seen, and that’s Stuart Methven.

Stu Methven.

And so if you could just help me understand his role in all of this, I’d be most grateful.

I’ll try. Stu Methven is a paramilitary officer who is in Laos, I would guess, from 1960 through the end of ’61. I meet Stu later on in life, and I would hazard a guess that Stu Methven knew Vang Pao, and in effect made—I think he was, you might call a catalyst for the whole thing. I think he’s one of the—and I suspect he never got much credit for it. ‘Cause I remember him coming here and—he visited me here one summer, and he was very embittered. And I suspect he had a reason to be. I think he [Coughs]—Stu Methven and a guy named Tom Fosmire…

Hmm…I’ve heard the name.

…were early paramilitary types working in Laos and/or Thailand, looking for assets, looking for—I guess the word had gotten out, probably, that there was interest in the government—the US government—about doing something in Laos. Was there anything worth working with? And I think Methven and/or Fosmire, or both, sent the word to Lair, ‘cause Lair was, at that point, really not involved, and sent the word to Lair, ‘You’d better meet this guy [Vang Pao], ‘cause he’s impressive. He’s got his people together, he’s trying to form a resistance group and they’re using old flintlock rifles’ and whatever. So I would think that that—I think the first meeting between Vang Pao and Lair is probably set up by Methven, although that is not—I have no real knowledge of that.

(15:44) Grant seems to suggest that in the way he writes about it.

Yeah.
And it's interesting, too—I had a student who spoke with Vang Pao. And the way he described his initial meeting with 'the United States,' as he put it, was the same kind of language that Grant used to talk about Methven [contacting Vang Pao]: ‘Oh, what do you need? What can we drop off for you?’—just little things that sort of help forge that relationship.

I think that's probably right, because I—this is all long before Pha Dong (or is it just about the same time as…?) but this is before I certainly get involved. And there's very little history that I read or can read about it before I get there.

(16:34) One of the understandings, whether implied or imagined or real, is that the United States did or did not make promises to Vang Pao about what would happen if the whole operation went south. And Bill Lair, who ought to know, of course, says, ‘No, no promises were made’—

I would agree. I don’t—you know, we certainly talked a lot about it, but it was usually in the terms of how that kind of perception would guide you towards a particular present policy. In other words, the idea that this thing might go south, the idea that the Americans might not be here in six months, informed and made a difference as to what kinds of programs, what kinds of projects you were going to get involved in now, right?

Sure.

So I don’t think—and Vang Pao himself was of such a kind of leadership where he wasn’t going to entertain that as something that he ought to spend a lot of time worrying about. I don’t—but there was not, if I understand—I don’t think there—there certainly wasn’t [that kind of understanding] when I was there.

(18:05) If you wouldn’t mind going to post-Geneva Accords 1962,

[Yes]

The agreement’s made and—I’ve read this, I don’t know if you were aware if this or not, that Averill Harriman was literally negotiating with the Soviets, and [the Soviets] said, ‘OK, you can leave two CIA people behind’ in one way or another. Anyway, the call is made, two are left, and you’re one of those two.

[Yes]

Do you remember that conversation with Bill Lair, or at least anything about that phase in which you were suddenly told, ‘You’re one of two people who are staying,’ and you were told you were going to be Tony Poe’s—I don’t know if ‘boss’ is the right word, but it sounds like in a way, at least—

No, I wasn’t his boss.

OK.

No, no, it was quite the opposite.

OK, well see, Bill Lair said the opposite. He said you were. [Laughs]

No, in effect that’s how it happened, but when we start, Tony’s 20 years my senior. Tony is—and at least four or five grades ahead of me. The conversation—this all just didn’t happen overnight.

From almost the first—well, I’d say from the spring of ’62 ‘til it actually—the signing occurred in the fall, we were—this was a topic of discussion. What was the Agency going to do, what were the ground rules? And I think by the time it’s actually signed, we’ve already figured out what the impact is going to be, and who the people are who are going to implement it. Bill was—I mean, I think whether that was—whether they got it 100% right, I don’t know, but I think they must have gotten it pretty close, because I certainly go into Long Cheng three or four months before the signing of the agreement, and my role, my job is to find a suitable open space to building a landing field, and a
place where it is easy to get aircraft in and out, and where we can do some camouflaging of what
we—of any building that goes on there, because we expect the International [Pauses] whatever
commission, it’s called—the white helicopters—

(20:42) Oh, the ICC.
ICC—International Control Commission, something like that—is going to—they’d have a little
trouble finding us. So this is not something that’s just dropped like a bomb. And when we go—and
I—see, I think I’m ready for it, ’cause I think Bill has already told me or briefed me about it long
before it happens. And he puts Tony in there because of Tony’s experience, more than anything
else. And I think he [Coughs] was perfectly prepared to have Tony run the thing, except Tony had a
real alcohol problem. And Tony didn’t want to write [Interviewer laughs]—Tony didn’t really want
to do anything except go out and shoot people. And [Pauses] Bill and Pat were no fools, and I think
they knew pretty much whatever it said on paper, what was going to happen. And so we sort of
survived together, Tony and I, and we [Pauses]—it wasn’t—you know, Tony and I got along
perfectly well, except he—because he didn’t get in my way and I didn’t get in his. And the only time
he got in my way was when I had to—I rigged up this oil can as a stove, ‘cause in the middle of the
dry season it gets well below freezing up there. It’s cold! And his bunk was on the other side of the
stove, and we’d get that stove running so that it was pretty red hot. And my job, on many a night,
was to take Tony in a fireman’s carry—which is not easy, ‘cause Tony was very strong and very
big—and get him over the red hot stove and into his bunk, in sort of generally the right direction.
But it really was a fact—all I had to really do was get him up and over the stove and just hope for
the best, and then he—and let him take care of himself. He… [Pauses] because I didn’t mind
writing, and because I didn’t mind kind of doing what I was doing, I think the whole thing slightly
changed fairly rapidly over time, and then Tony, I think, got really—I think Tony’s nose got out of
joint, so that later on, when the fighting started again, and by that time, people had gotten into the
practice of coming to see me and not him, and I’m sure that’s what made him—made his life
unhappy.

(24:14) And the fact that you could speak French,
Yes.

and therefore were close to Vang Pao,
Yes.

And the two of them seemed to have a rather stormy relationship.
Yeah, I think that’s right. I think that’s safe to say. [Interviewer chuckles] I mean, I think he
respected Tony. But Vang Pao was very shrewd, and he couldn’t use Tony very well, and he could
use me. He knew he could get to Bill Lair through me, and I could get—you know, we both used
each other, and I don’t think there was anything wrong in that.

(24:52) So this is a friendly relationship, [Interviewer is describing VP but is unclear, and
Lawrence thinks he’s describing Poe] but one in which both of you choose, essentially, not
to fire your guns at each other. He’s not doing anything too radical; he’s passing things by
you, and you control the purse strings in a way, and—
Sort of.
At least you can contact Bill and say, ‘Here’s what’s going on,’ and if it’s not good…
Yeah, Bill would ask me, and I would be—because I liked Tony. I respected him for what he had
done. He was tough to handle. He was not a team player. He was a loner, he was a recon, he
was—you know, he was one of these guys you want to send out in the jungle with nothing.
[Interviewer chuckles] and he’ll live off the land, and he’ll get you 500 ears from the enemy. I mean,
he did a lot of that sort of stuff. So there was a lot of bravado associated with him. And the pilots loved him because he—god, could he talk. [Interviewer chuckles] But the point was that 90%, most of what he said was actually true! I mean, he actually—if you wanted a story of an extraordinarily…[Pauses] There’s a figure in [Pauses to think] I think his name is Moon. [Pauses] Peter? I’ll think of it. He’s a novelist. [Pauses] Matheson, Peter Matheson. And he wrote a book about an insurgency in South America, and there’s a character named Moon in that, and I’ve got to go find that and re-read it. But it struck me—I remember reading it out there, and it struck me as a beautiful parallel description of Tony Poe. Tony was an interesting guy. I’m glad—I think Bill did a very good job in getting him out of there, because I think we probably—we would not have—we left on very amicable terms as far as I recall.

(27:14) Well he had—I suppose you could say it was out of necessity, but he had, at least on one occasion, literally gotten into the middle of a gunfight, hadn’t he?...I thought there was a case in which he was wounded because he was—

Yes, I think that came later. I think that comes later when the attack on Sam Neua occurs. I think it was at Sam Neua province. And he did, he did get wounded, but I—and I’m not quite sure what—but I think he is brought back.. He has been up in the north in the Yao people, and then when this big offensive starts in Sam Neua, I think he comes back to help out.

(28:16) OK. [Pauses] Actually, the comment I made about you not firing your guns at each other, I actually meant with Vang Pao—that in a way he was, he was the leader of the Hmong who maybe could have, on his own, run off and initiated some offensive, but he was running it by you and making sure that it was going to be given some kind of approval by his friends. And your control over him, whether it was—

Oh, I see what you mean. Whether it was his opium trade or whatever, was that you were Bill Lair’s emissary and you had some control over what he was going to be given.

Yes. Yes, yes, all of the above. But the question is to what extent did he conceive of these as—the situation as limitations and to what extent did he—that was just what he thought should be done at that particular time? I think later on—I think his sense of grandiosity got the better of him, and unfortunately I wasn’t around at that point to say, ‘We can’t do it.’

(29:33) Well, this is another question I asked Bill Lair. I said, ‘When Vint Lawrence left, it seems to me that while you had other people who came in, that there was really no one like Vint who had that kind of relationship, and who could sort of dissuade him or bring him back down to earth in the same way. I’m not sure he agreed with me, but it seemed that way from the reading I’ve done. It seems like you at least in part concur with that.

[Pauses] I would say—I would think that yes, that was true to a considerable extent. However, Vang Pao was smart enough—I had a guy who took over for me, a guy named Jonathan Randall. And Jon didn’t have the language skills or he didn’t have other skills. And my sense is that Vang Pao, when he needed to, would just go over—would say, ‘I want to see Bill.’ And Randall was not about to say, ‘Well, you can’t see Bill, you have to see me.’ Or if he did, maybe that happened once. And then when Vang Pao and Bill did get together, Vang Pao made it clear—so I [Pauses] again, I’m unclear in my own mind the extent of what my power actually was. I think I wielded it wisely, I think it was there. I don’t— I would be uneasy sort of standing up and saying, ‘I could tell Vang Pao to do this, this, and this, and he’d do it.’ I don’t think that was our relationship at all. I think it was much more subtle than that. He would propose. We would discuss. I would check with Bill or Pat. I would come back with suggestions. We would discuss again, and he would propose—you know, I
mean, I would leave the final—the final implementation of how he wanted to do a particular thing up to him. But we did talk a lot. In those discussions was I able to shape what his plan was? I suspect I might have, on the margins. But I would be loath to say that I was the brains behind this stuff.

(32:17) *Fair enough. [Pauses]* So did Lair sneak into Laos often, or was your communication almost entirely by radio and through impersonal channels?

He would come maybe once a month or something like that—or when things started to kind of loosen up a little bit, I often would go down to Udorn for the night, and Bill and Pat and I would go out for dinner, and we’d just go through a raft of problems and things that I needed—that they needed to know. And he would come up—I mean, it wasn’t that he didn’t but I think that I probably went down to Udorn more frequently, because you see, at that point, Bill was running stuff in the northwest with the Yao, and the Hmong, he was also—he and Pat were also responsible for trying to get road watch teams from central Laos and southern Laos into the Ho Chi Minh Trail. He had a pretty full plate. So my sense is that he figured between Vang Pao and myself, we had it sort of under control, and he didn’t need to watch this. I know he was very worried about how Americans and Lao—in the south the teams were American and Lao, albeit a better, by and large a better class of Lao soldier than you found generally in the north. But it was still…[Pauses] It was awfully hard for them to get those programs up and running in an effective way. And I suspect that that absorbed a great deal of their time. So as long as we were seen to be puttering along fairly well, and he could—and I think Bill relied on me never to lie to him, and never—and to let him know everything that was going on, and I think I did. I mean, I probably…[Laughs] Many years later there was a CIA reunion on the Flathead Lake in Montana. And I said to Annie, ‘We’ll go to one of these things.’ They happen every year. It’s a tedious and sad event, because it’s these old, by and large, air operations guys, none of whom I really knew. But the air operations teams were substantial. There was a lot more people in—doing these air operations than there ever was of those of us on the ground. I mean, there were, what, maybe four or five people on the ground. And it was a big party—it was about 400 people. I knew five. I knew Bill Lair, one of my classmates who is in the South, a couple of other people. I just didn’t know very many people. I mean, everybody knew who I was, but I didn’t know them. And this young woman came up—or not so young—this woman came up to me and she said, ‘I just want to look you in the eye.’ I said, ‘OK. Why do you need to do that?’ She said, ‘You wrote the longest, most’—she said, ‘My vocabulary today consists of the language that you kept using in your messages.’ [Interviewer chuckles] She said, ‘It was in English, but I had to use a dictionary…’ [Both laugh] Ask Annie—I mean, she was there! Annie came to this thing, [Laughing] and she remembers this look of absolute astonishment in this woman’s face as she said, [With anguish:] ‘I had to type out every single message you wrote! And Jesus, you never stopped!’ [Laughs]

(36:29) *Now this is something I’m—I really don’t—were the reports that you sent—*

There were two kinds. Initially, when we were in there black in the first six months to a year, it’s all by radio transmission, because there’s very little air traffic landing at Long Cheng and then taking off and going to Udorn.

*And this is largely intelligence that you’ve received from PARU teams in the—*

No, I—well I had two sources. I had [Pauses] oh, I remember! Those people we trained at Hua Hin were called SOT teams—Special Operation Teams. So they were modeled on PARU. And we had those radios spread out all over the north. We had about 35 of them or something like that. The number—don’t hold me to the number, but there were a lot. There were maybe six PARU teams that were not——maybe even fewer than that. But every night every one of these Special
Operation Teams would send in their message of what the activity during the day was. It would be decoded, then it would be given—it would be in Lao. It would be given to a translator, who would translate it into English. I would take all those messages and do a wrap-up summary of the day’s activities and send it to Lair, where—by encryption, every night. So I kept the operating team up half the night encoding my messages. Later on, we would have pouches, and that was better for me, because I found—I kept getting ganged for writing messages that were too long and I was keeping people up too late at night. [Interviewer chuckles] So in the end, I would write these long memos, which were then typed up and sent on in a pouch to Washington, in which I tried to give a fairly accurate read on the politics, on what was happening, not necessarily in terms of which enemy battalion was facing us here, but in the momentum of what I thought—the critical momentum of where the project was going politically within the Lao system, where there’s a coup—I mean, there were coup rumors all the time—opium, allegiance to the King, philosophy of how you go into a village and how you connect it to the larger entity. And I wrote a lot! And this poor lady was responsible for typing up all of these and sending them on. [Interviewer chuckles] And she was—she said she learned a great deal of… [Pauses] She said it was quite an education.

She improved her grammar tremendously.
Not her grammar, no.
Her vocabulary, pardon me. [Laughs]
No, no, vocabulary. I’m a terrible grammarian. No, I don’t do that. I don’t spell well and I don’t punctuate well. [Interviewer chuckles] But I can spin out the words.

So until the time that you had the pouch, these messages were going straight to Lair.
No, they all went straight to Lair, even at the end. They always went to Lair. Lair read them in whatever way he wanted to. He could either read them in a typed-up manuscript, pouch, or he probably read them in my longhand. But I would write them in longhand and send them on down, and they were then typed and cleaned up, and I suppose vetted for—you know, everyone had a code name, and Lawrence was Mark—my name was a wonderful name. It was ‘another dispatch from Mark W. Cechotd. [Interviewer tries to repeat the last name] C-E-C-H-O-T-D was my name. [Interviewer chuckles] And [Laughing]—and then they were read with great anticipation at the Friday briefings or something like that.

So…from beginning to end these things were also read by Colby, or only once the pouches started?
Well, I don’t know. I don’t know what—certainly I was told later on that Colby found my—he thought my—because I not only put in hard, what I thought was hard information, but I thought it important to put in the color or the atmosphere of what the situation was like, because they needed to understand the conditions under which we were operating, and what were the nuances of what was happening. Because I felt we had a huge investment in this, and I think later on Colby said those were probably the best things I did.

So perhaps that’s what got you the gig writing ‘Journey from Pha Dong’?
Maybe. He knew I could write.

For many of us, we can’t even imagine what it would be like—
[It is announced that dinner will be ready in five minutes]—what it would be like to live out in the jungles of Laos pretty much alone, or just with Tony, other than your Hmong companions, for what, almost two years?
Pretty much, yeah—a good part. I would say it was two years.

**What was that like?** I’m sure you could address that from a variety of perspectives, but for those of us who have no idea, or perhaps the wrong idea—

Well, [pauses] I had graduated from University with a severe—a tremendous appreciation of the education I did not get. I mean, I said to you earlier, I felt I was a privileged—I had a privileged upbringing. And one of the things that Laos did for me on a personal basis, for which I am forever grateful, is make me understand just how dumb I was. And to the extent that I have an education, it was the nights I spent reading Toynbee, [chuckles]—I had a deal with a book store in Washington that they would send out books that I wanted, and I had worked out this rig—there was no electricity, so I worked out this rig where I had candles, and I had taken the inside of tins, and beaten them out so I had little reflector mirrors behind the candles. And I would sit there for four or five hours every night reading. And I read by candle—you know, this is sort of a very Abraham Lincoln idea. [Interviewer chuckles] And the books you see on our shelves in there are wrapped in brown paper are the ones that I brought back. But I read a lot. And I figured this was an extraordinary experience that wasn’t going to happen to very many people, or to me ever again, so I was going to make the best of it. Yeah, it was lonely, but I had a dog, which I was very fond of, and I had a lot of friends. I really had good friends in the Hmong. So was I lonely? Sure! I [pauses] I didn’t get laid every day, I had no ‘honey,’ which is probably a really good idea given what I did afterwards. [Interviewer chuckles] You know, I just realized I was in a cocoon, and it was a cocoon that was very exciting, and there were just hundreds of people who would have given their eye teeth to be where I was. And I just lived, ate, slept, that whole experience. I just thought, ‘You’re not going to get this one again.’ I mean, I sort of knew in my senses, ‘This is not something you’re going to find [again].’ So I [pauses] I can’t really say that I was lonely at all. The Hmong kept trying to give me women, [Interviewer chuckles] and Jiggs Weldon was very clever, and he said, ‘Don’t go there.’ [Laughs] ‘Don’t go there’ And he said, ‘Medically, don’t go there.’ I saw a lot of guys with some various forms of syphilis which weren’t very pleasant. And politically, it really made no sense whatsoever. Vang Pao would always say—he had five wives, and I said, ‘VP, if you give me one, I’m going to have to take four others just to make everyone happy,’ and I said, ‘I can’t do that.’ So they called me ‘the Prince.’ That was Vang Pao’s word; he said, ‘You’re the Prince.’ I said, ‘What do you mean by that?’ He said, ‘Well you don’t need what the rest of us need.’ [Interviewer laughs] I said, ‘Well, that’s not actually, strictly true!’ [Both laugh] So there was a lot of sexual banter back and forth, but I was pretty good. I never touched a Hmong girl. I saved all my lust for various houses in Udorn, and luckily survived those. But I really—I really found the whole—you know, you’d wake up—it was an extraordinary place! You wake up at four o’clock in the morning and you—the sun would just be coming up, and you’d watch the women going up in the fields to work, and you’d hear the sounds of the village, and you realized you had to go to this place, this place, this place, and you had to check on that. You just had a list of 50 things to do and you were only going to get through ten of them. And every day was like that, seven days a week. So you didn’t have much time to be lonely.

(47:59) **You certainly weren’t bored.**

You certainly weren’t bored, no.

(48:03) **Well you mentioned the 22-foot tapeworm, and I think you said it was also close to six months before you had any regular contact or maybe supplies dropped to you from outside—**
I think that's right. I mean—but that was where Father Bouchard came in. See, I had the tapeworm when I was still living in Vientiane. And the reason I got the tapeworm was the very first night...

Oh, the steak tartar...

[Yes]. The Kobe beef from the back yard, which is a dumb-ass thing to do. [Interviewer laughs]

And then it didn't—they got—and when it all came out, it came out all except the head. I mean, that's what tapeworms do. If you get sick enough, it will just drop off what it doesn't need. And then it starts to grow again. And then I went through an American medically-approved method, which was high doses of Atabrin, which turns you jaundiced—I mean, you turn yellow, your shit turns white and your pee is dark. And that didn't work. And then I go up country, and about [Pauses] some time in the fall, I know it's back in there. And Father comes—stops in, 'cause we have this talk about—

[Dinner is ready. The recorder is turned off, new track begins]

(0:00) Well, we had left off with the story of Father Bouchard coming to your rescue, as I recall. [Anne Garrels laughs]

Yes. Well, the good Father heard my case, and said he knew how to take care of it, but he had to go visit some colleagues down south and he would return in a number of weeks, which he did, and he gave me some aluminum vial, tube, and at the bottom were eight tiny little black pills. And he said, 'Take one a day for the next week or so,' and he said, 'You'll be cured.' I did, and I was. And I don't know this for a fact, but when Annie and I were walking around Angkor Wat a number of years later, in '99, we had a wonderful guide who was telling about the various trees and things like that, and he was explaining about the use of strychnine, and the nut of the strychnine tree, and how, if you want to kill someone, you basically give him the whole nut. But its use in homeopathic medicine was extensive. And there was an entire science of how much you should be given for whatever ails you. And I suspect I was given a very small dose of strychnine. And whatever it was, that's all supposition. But he described what it looked like (because I got rather interested), and it reminded me of what the pills were like that Father Bouchard gave me. So that's my little story of Father Bouchard.

(1:59) Now we'll get to the big event where you have to leave the country because you're sick a little down the road. But just in general, were there other hazards of living out in the jungle like that?

No, actually it was remarkably benign. I mean, everyone thought my life was extremely hazardous in general, and of course I never moved without a number of very fierce little tigers who went with me. I remember—when I was explaining to you when I heard about Kennedy's death, I was surrounded by the toughest group of people—I—no one was going to get to me. And they liked—we got along very well, and they were—obviously Vang Pao had given the word out that 'This guy needs to be—you'd better—nothing should happen to him.' And so I always had at least one or two with me no matter where I went, and they just said, 'We're here to make sure that everything's all right.' The food was really quite edible, was perfectly adequate. Clearly if you ate with Vang Pao you got the best of what was offered. It was very simple. You ate soup, sticky rice, more soup, and more sticky rice, and [Pauses] that was about it. And it got you through. But you got greens, and they were awfully good, they were well-prepared. And often—not always, but often, there were little bits of some kind of meat floating around. And so I lost a lot of weight. I was, what with the—I am 200 pounds now; I was 40 pounds lighter [Interviewer whistles]—no, 35. I came back at about 165, 170.

(4:02) On a 6' 3" frame.
Yeah.

That's pretty light.

Yeah. Yeah. But I think a lot of that had to do with the very—I got the hepatitis and other things. But by and large it was adequate. And I got pretty used to it, and the only thing I never got used to was hot Thai sauce, so I never…[Interviewer laughs]

(4:33) Just rounding back for one second. We were talking about these reports you wrote that both Lair and Colby saw. Did you ever get any feedback from Colby other than when you saw him—

I got nothing—later on I got feedback that they had indeed been appreciated. Annie, what was the story—Sweetie? When we were at the CIA reunion and that secretary comes up—

AG: [Laughs] And she says, ‘Oh, you’re Vint Lawrence.’ She said, ‘I was the one who had to transcribe all’—I mean, ‘and decode all of your messages.’ She said, ‘They were the longest anybody in the Agency ever wrote!’ [Lawrence and interviewer laugh] I mean, the word was out: ‘If you’re on, don’t get assigned to Vint Lawrence, because it will be pages upon pages upon pages!’

VL: She was funny

AG: He was writing his doctoral dissertation without knowing it.

VL: Yeah.

(5:37) If only someone could have handed it all over to you. Well, I suppose—you said you kept copies of most of this, right?

VL: Yes, I do. Yeah. By and large they’re very dated.

AG: Well, they’re very detailed.

That makes them important historical artifacts, though.

VL: Yeah. They’re dated, and some day, if you have—if the Hmong Center—when I end up trying to figure out where my remains and papers should go,—

AG: So to speak.

VL: I’ll send them out to you.

(6:13) Yeah, we’ll hope the ‘remains’ issue is a long, long, long-from-now question.

[Garrels laughs]

VL: No, but I mean, it’s been something—I don’t want to send them to the Agency, for god’s sake.

(6:21) No, I’m—I know they would be thrilled to have them. In fact, I’ll leave you one of my cards, and—

Sure.

No, they would, I’m sure—

When I’m in extremis, be sure to come back and get here before everyone else gets here.

All right. Well, I’m sure—
I mean, I think that—I mean, it would be—

I have it on record now. [Chuckling]

VI: It would be—

AG: It would be a great place.

VI: No, it would be a great place to have it. It would make sense.

(6:43) I was talking to you earlier about this ‘Evening with Bill Lair’ thing. I think it would be great if you came and conducted the conversation with him, if you’d be available. I mean, we haven’t—this is just an idea I have, it’s not gone any further than that.

AG: I think it would be great.

But I think it’d be a brilliant evening.

VI: Well, when are you doing the evening?

Like I said, it’s literally just an idea I had, and I talked to Bill Lair about it three days ago.

VI: Uh-huh.

So I’ll take it home, and I’ll—I mean, Lee Pao would be insane not to—

VL: No, it would be a great place to have it. It would make sense.

VL: I was talking to you earlier about this ‘Evening with Bill Lair’ thing. I think it would be great if you came and conducted the conversation with him, if you’d be available. I mean, we haven’t—this is just an idea I have, it’s not gone any further than that.

AG: I think it would be great.

But I think it’d be a brilliant evening.

VI: Well, when are you doing the evening?

Like I said, it’s literally just an idea I had, and I talked to Bill Lair about it three days ago.

VI: Uh-huh.

So I’ll take it home, and I’ll—I mean, Lee Pao would be insane not to—

VL: No, it would be a great place to have it. It would make sense.

(7:46) That’s quite all right. [Pauses] Well, I’d like to ask you about the event that’s repeated more than once in Roger Warner’s book, and that you witnessed at least once, and that’s the shooting of the moon.

Oh!

What was the story behind that, what cultural significance, if any, did you derive from it once you talked to people about it? And I seem to recall Tony Poe complained once that you were wasting ammunition by giving the [Hmong bullets to engage in this ritual].

Oh, I’m sure he did. I’m sure. But I suspect—it is perfectly conceivable that Tony was too hung over, [Interviewer laughs] and this was an ex post facto criticism. The irony for me was that [Pauses] I had gotten—I had drunk—the night before, I had had—I had been at a baci [Hmong string-tying ceremony] for somebody, I don’t remember who, and I had drunk very bad hard liquor—rice wine. And my face that morning—I could hardly see out of my eyes because I was so—there’s a photograph of me somewhere, and I am just a horror, because my whole face is puffed up like a balloon, and so I’m not seeing very well. And about 11 o’clock, I notice it all getting darker, and I think I’m losing my fucking mind, because everything else that day had gone pretty badly. And so it was with some relief that I—I had heard that this—that was the first eclipse I had experienced out there. And so it did get dark, and—it wasn’t a full eclipse, but it was three-quarters partial. So it got pretty dark. And then the firing started. But by that time, I knew what was happening, and I knew what was going to happen, so the shooting at the moon or shooting at the eclipse or the sun was—it was just a great cultural event. And so the sun came back and we all plodded on our day, as I recall.

AG: And your eyesight returned.
VL: And my eyesight returned, but not that quickly, as I recall. [Interviewer chuckles] But, of course, the moon or the sun had spirits, and if you scared the spirits away—I think it was theoretically a frog, or something like that [that was consuming the moon/sun and needed to be scared off with gunfire]

(10:26) Yeah, that's what I recall., yeah.
A huge frog eats it and you scare it away, and then everything's all right.

AG: I want to ask a question that I think would make—

[Interviewer more than happily cedes the questioning to Anne Garrels]

—to get at his perceptions, because a lot of the questions that he's been asked a million times, and he's—you know...But when you first get up there and live with the Hmong, what are your first impressions?

VL: My first impressions...Well, it's a—you know, I'm enormously chuffed. I mean, here I am, this young kid. I passed the Bill Lair, Tony Poe, Vang Pao, Pat Landry tests. I've been given an enormous, incredible sort of—

AG: But why have you passed the Vang Pao test?

VL: Well, 'cause he let me come. He—

AG: But why did he let you come? Go back earlier, then.

VL: Well, I think he lets me come because I'm the best of a bad lot, to be honest with you.

[Hillmer chuckles] I mean, I speak French, I was relatively personable, I think. We get along, and he thought, 'Well, I can work with this kid.' But I'm a kid—you know, I'm 22 years old.

AG: But when you first meet the Hmong—I mean, whatever that means.

VL: When I first meet the Hmong.

AG: What's your first encounter with—not just—I mean, Vang Pao is one thing, and the Hmong, as—

VL: OK, the Hmong strike me as a truly [Pauses] esoteric, wild, marvelous group of people. I mean, the men are extraordinarily handsome, but in a very carved, Oriental manner. They obviously have incredible endurance, they're incredibly strong, they're very slight—I mean, they're not big people by a long shot, but they're large—but you would see occasionally six-foot—there were Hmong who were six feet, and just extraordinarily beautiful people, and unbelievably stoic. And they'd gone through all kinds of stuff, and I thought, 'Gosh, maybe I can be of help here,' so... I was going to be there for two years, and—

AG: Where was—what was your first meeting with them?
VL: My first meeting? [Pauses] Well, my first meeting of seeing Hmong in village was probably in Pha Khao, where it was the first headquarters. And then we moved over to Long Cheng, and I ran into my first group of truly—well, you might say ‘wild Hmong.’

AG: What do you mean by that?

VL: Well, these were people, these were farmers who lived in this isolated valley, this Shangri-La of a valley, isolated from the war, isolated form other tribes and other Hmong, leading a very quiet agricultural life. They had a—everyone had animals and they had, they were growing crops. It just struck me as being [Pause] close—very idyllic in many ways. I mean, this—it met, if you will, a Westerner’s preconception of what mountain people in Southeast Asia should look like and what they should be doing. Now that all changed very quickly. Those families, those 14 families or 14 people who lived in that valley were quickly subsumed by all the rest of us who moved in en masse. So I don’t—you know, I’m not sure I ever—four years later I recognized any of the original inhabitants, ‘cause it was 45,000 people.

AG: My last question, at least that I’ve got is—when it grew up—

VL: Yes.

AG: How do you think the people in Long Cheng looked at you? Who did they think you were?

VL: I think they saw me as Vang Pao’s special friend, and I was accorded extraordinary—I was greeted… [Pauses] And I knew a lot of them by name. It’s sort of like walking around Norfolk. [Hillmer chuckles, having followed Lawrence and his dogs on a walk around the neighborhood that afternoon.]

AG: How many people were in there—but in Long Cheng, at the end?

VL: [There] were forty [-five thousand]—but the 45,000, there was an enormous refugee community to the east of the town, that I rarely went to, and they were mostly not Hmong, they were Lao Theung. So when I would go through the Hmong village, I would recognize faces, and I would recognize a few of them, but they would all come up and we’d have—they were always asking me, they were always trying to push—you know, free meals, free women, free anything. They were always—they always wanted to give me gifts. I could have lived in the village and never paid for a thing. ‘Cause I think they felt that I had—I was somewhat responsible for the fact that they were all relatively safe.

AG: You didn’t get a sense that there were people in that—of course, I’m coming out of Baghdad—that there were people in that village who wanted to stab you in the back?

VL: No. Absolutely not. I never, never once had that suspicion. Never. Never. Never. I never watched my back. I never had to watch my back. Didn’t have that worry at all. Now, I don’t know what would have happened if I’d been—stayed another two years. I don’t know. I’m not sure.

AG: Excuse me.
Oh, thank you very much! Stop by again any time! [Chuckles]

[Anne Garrels leaves the room]

(17:07) Now, there are stories going back to the days of the French that the Hmong also moved remarkably quickly through the jungle, especially for people of their size. Did you ever observe—?

Yes. The Hmong could walk through the jungle faster than anybody I knew. They had—at least the actual, the real local, local people who never wore shoes, their little toes, genetically, had moved from a point of being parallel to the other toes to being almost at a right angle. So they—when they went up a trail, their toes were virtually prehensile, and they would grab—they would grab—and then, of course the trails were slick and muddy and all that, and they could move up a trail with a speed that was truly frightening, whereas the rest of us were wearing boots that got clogged and wet and soggy. It was amazing how they could walk. And they would walk for days. And they would chew on opium leaves or chew on opium seeds, if they didn’t smoke it. And that gave them a very nice—I mean, to eat, to chew opium seeds at the end of a long day’s march really acted like a—better than Advil. It just kind of calmed you down, and you slept very well.

(18:39) There’s been a lot written about the role of the opium economy, [Yes]

from a social, from a cultural, from a political, from an economic perspective. From your experience with the Hmong, how do you think students of the subject—anyone interested in opium’s role in that society should best understand it?

Cultivation of opium is both labor-intensive and space-expansive. To get a good crop of opium, you need a really nice, good field that has been—that has been cultivated and prepared. Those fields—and they prefer if I’m not—I think I’m right—they prefer a gentle hillside. They don’t like to be down on the flat [land], and they don’t—they don’t really grow well high up in the mountains where it is precipitous. That land was the land that existed between the Hmong, in their traditional locations around the Plaines de Jarres, and the Plaines de Jarres itself. It was that land which was the best opium-growing land. That land was lost to the war. That was sort of the first thing that the Vietnamese took over, so that much of the really prime opium-growing land was lost. There was opium—of course there was opium grown. There was opium grown right behind my house, in fact, in Long Cheng. But the guy and the family who worked it, who I presume were one of the first—the old settlers of Long Cheng—they worked that field extremely hard to prepare it and get it seeded and all that sort of thing. So, of course, the Hmong traded opium, but the Plaines de Jarres was thought to be the best opium land in Laos. The best opium land in Laos, if I understand it correctly, was up in the Yao country in the northwest corner. Why it’s the best, I don’t know, but that’s what I was told. So you had a society and a group of people who made a lot—they were superb herdsmen. They made a lot of money running cattle. They also had access to silver mines, and they also had access to opium. When the Plain falls and everyone comes our way, you lose the opium fields, you lose a lot of the cattle, and certainly you lose the access to the silver, which is in the Nong Het plateau, which is where most—where we—I never found out where those silver mines were.

No one would ever tell me. All I was told—they were in Nong Het. Well, of course I didn’t get to Nong Het, because it was under Vietnamese control. So where those were, I don’t know if I’d had access to Nong Het if I would have been shown them. It was very closely guarded. I don’t believe there was any silver mined in the areas that we controlled for the four years I was there. Opium—if you recall the film, Vang Pao was quite adamant about opium—that his people should not and could not—he couldn’t trust soldiers who smoked opium. And I won’t say that he threw a soldier out who smoked opium, but there were clear examples of what happened to you if you did use excessive
amounts of opium. He himself never touched the stuff. He didn’t smoke. He would drink occasionally—yeah, he drank. Sure, he drank. But—so the issue of opium trading, I’m sure did exist, and I’m sure Touby Lyfoung and the Ly [Lee] family were the recipients of largely Vang Pao’s private deal that, in effect, if Touby Lyfoung wouldn’t make political or military trouble for him, he’d let Touby trade in anything he wanted. What Touby traded in—I would just make the assumption that it was opium, among other things. But you’re still not talking on a huge scale.

You’re talking on quite a reduced scale, and you’re also talking… [Pauses] You’re also talking that this was simply raw opium and not processed opium, ’cause it went out of the north country and was processed in the labs near Vientiane.

(24:35) Would it be fair to say that there’s been a lot of hay made without much justification, necessarily, about alleged links between Air America flying Hmong people around the country and representatives of Air America supposedly participating in the opium trade?

I heard a lot of that stuff. Do I have any direct knowledge? Would I have likely had knowledge of it? Probably not. By the time I think that occurs…

[Pours some wine, offers some to Interviewer, who accepts, and Lawrence goes to retrieve a wine glass. Recorder turned off, new track begins.]

(0:03) You know, when Long Cheng gets bigger, there are Americans and Thais running the airport. I basically had nothing—very little to do with that. Planes come in, people get on them, planes take off. Was it Air America, was it Bird and Son, was it Vang Pao’s airline? Did I stand at the door and check everyone’s baggage? No. Do I suspect that certain people—a number of people were carrying opium in small bundles? Absolutely. Do I think that perhaps there were certain Air America pilots or American pilots flying for whatever airline that were knowingly carrying opium from Nam Tha up in the north to Vientiane? Wouldn’t surprise me at all. Did I know of any of it actually happening? Did I see it? No. Did I look for it? Probably not as hard as I should have. Especially the Nam Tha stuff, I wouldn’t have known about, anyway, ’cause that wouldn’t have come through Long Cheng. Did I go through the business as I mentioned earlier, of checking with Vang Pao as to the amount of raw opium he had under his house at any given time? Yes. I think a lot is made of it, and I’m not going to—I have no way of denying it or corroborating it, because most of it simply bypasses me. And frankly, [Pauses] you know, maybe I should have been more concerned that the ultimate user end of this thing was some kid in Baltimore who was killing a cop to get this stuff. I was maybe not as aware of where it all ended up as I might have been.

Sure. Well, it was very early in that period. It was early, but I certainly was—it wasn’t on my radar screen, except in an operational sense of what it meant for Vang Pao.

(2:33) Did you know many of the Air America pilots well—especially the people who tend to end up being mentioned in books a lot like Ron Sutphin, or Fred Walker?

Rarely. I knew a lot of the helio pilots, the small engine pilots. They were not the big guys. I knew none—I remember one night in Udorn I went out with Bill, and there was a—I can’t remember what his name was, but he was a famous Air America C-46 pilot. Now C-46s would never land, couldn’t land where we were, and so the whole mystique of Air America and the pilots largely went literally over my head. Bill Andresevic, who was the chief helio courier pilot was a friend, and is a friend to this day. Ed Dearborn, whom I knew quite well, was a—flew Caribous. But the pilots were not—you know, they weren’t my main concern. I didn’t—I’m not a guy who likes to sit in
bars and talk war stories. [Interviewer chuckles] So I didn’t do it—you know, I didn’t do it in Vientiane for the first few months; I never did it in Udorn. And when I go to this Sky reunion in Montana a couple of years ago, guys would come up to me and say, ‘You know, I was so-and-so, and I would—I did all the rice drops’ or ‘I did all that.’ And they’re all good people, but I didn’t know who they were. And they said, ‘Well, we know who you are.’ And I said, ‘Well yeah, but my concern was not with you dropping the rice. My concern was the people on the ground.’ So there was a real disconnect. There were some—and Tony was better at this than I was. Tony’s personality appealed to these guys who left Alaska ‘cause—the Alaska bush pilots who had come and who left Alaska ‘cause it got too populated. They were quite a breed of cat, these guys. And I respected them and liked some of them, and brought the body home of one of them who was a very good friend, but I can’t say that, with the exception of Bill Andresevic, who—we talk every six months or so—I’ve kept in touch with any of them. They have a different—and I don’t think Jerry Daniels was actually a pilot. I think he was actually—started out as a kicker and then he morphed into an Agency person, and became quite beloved—not that I’m—I’m not trying to take anything away from Jerry. And Stu Methven, I don’t think—I don’t think he was a pilot, either. Methven, I think, was an old Agency employee, and Daniels became one. So, just to correct the record...

(6:37) OK. I appreciate that. Before we move on, we were discussing over supper that it’s difficult for an American audience to get a sense of Vang Pao’s role, and particularly to judge how ‘corrupt’ he was in an appropriate context. Would you offer any advice to those who may want to use their moral compass or their moral measuring stick to judge Vang Pao as a leader in Laos during this period? I think [Phone rings] I personally feel what happened to Vang Pao is pretty tragic. I look with great sorrow at a man who I felt was pretty close to everything America was looking for in a region and in Vietnam all the way through Cambodia and Thailand, was crying out for energetic and far-sighted leadership and he—and charismatic leadership. This guy was truly charismatic. [Pauses] Age hits these people early. Vang Pao was about 35 when I knew him—35, early 30s. And by 50, that life takes a terrible toll on people. [Pauses] And I watched Touby Lyfoung, for example, who had been a hero in the French resistance to the Japanese, and here was a hugely corpulent, hugely untrustworthy human being, who clearly had sold every principle he had. What happened to Vang Pao in this country, I just think is a tragedy more of the event than the man, but I think the ultimate result is that the man has been wounded irreparably. And my sense is that it will take a long time before—within the Hmong community—he’ll be seen in his proper light, because as you said, you go to St. Paul you either love him or you hate him, and a lot of it depends on how old you are. And—yeah, I’m sure he made mistakes, and I’m sure that after I left, he became enamored of the toys of war. And I think he made a mistake, but I think the Americans made that mistake real easy to make. And my only real argument with Bill has ever been—was the part that we played in fostering that. And it’s not much of an argument, ‘cause he said it was—you know, I think he saw it one way—he saw the training of the Hmong to be pilots as a gesture of their status within the world. And I don’t argue that point. My worry was whether that emboldened Vang Pao to think in terms that he had not heretofore thought in. And I don’t—and to this day, I wonder whether, had I stayed for another tour, and I saw the militarization and the conventionalization of the Hmong, whether I would have had the balls to resign. I should—’cause I should have. And I don’t know, ‘cause I never had to face that question. And I know it caused a great deal of anguish among some of the older hands who thought this was a road to disaster, and it turned out to be just that.

(11:16) Do you have a sense at all—and I realize this is probably not more than a guess, but—that Touby Lyfoung was jealous of this boy who had been his emissary to the
Japanese in years gone past, who was rising up the ranks and becoming this charismatic leader who was getting all the press and—

All of the above and then some.

How so?

Well, [Pauses] Touby was—Touby played his games with the French very nicely, and he was picked over Faydang Lo [to receive the title of tasseng], right? So he was the golden boy for the French. My guess is that Touby never was much—he was never the fighter that Vang Pao was. He never had Vang Pao’s reputation as a superb tactician, and somebody who lived and quite preferred a simple life. My guess is that Touby saw an opening and grabbed it and took it, and then thought he had the Hmong under his control only to discover that unless he was out there in the field leading the troops, old VP was going to come by and usurp him. So I think Vang Pao, in his brilliant, tactical way, as he was early on, went to him and they made a deal, where Touby would back off, Touby would let Vang Pao have the military establishment. Touby would get the commercial establishment, and the political establishment they would talk about. But basically, I think Vang Pao had the last word.

(13:16) Now I think Jane Hamilton-Merritt suggests that there was a plot to kill Vang Pao that was at least supposedly initiated by Touby Lyfoung.

I heard that. But I would put that in the realm of “which side did you get it from, and did you talk to the—did you look at the countervailing arguments?” I would be [Pauses] I have no way of knowing yes or know. All I know is after four years out there, I knew enough that if I heard something, I would need to go to somebody who was going to tell me the—180 degrees the opposite, and then weigh the two of them and try to figure out which one was playing games with the other. So I—and even Vang Pao was not above using—spreading the rumor that Touby was out to assassinate him.

So where the truth is, I don’t have any idea.

(14:23) A name that comes up, but not a whole lot is said about him is [Prince] Sai Kham. Did you have any dealings with him at all?

No, I’m afraid he’s one of the names that has receded into the mists of history. I’m sure that I knew him or knew about him when I was there, but to be honest with you, if I said anything about him now, it would just be bullshit.

[Laughing] Fair enough.

(14:54) Do you think the King’s visit in December of ’63 to Long Cheng was a significant or perhaps more ceremonial step in the attempt to integrate the Hmong into the broader Laotian society and national identity?

Good question. I personally think it was a huge success. It would be hard not—for even such a phlegmatic individual as the King, who seemed never to know—I mean, he was absolutely expressionless the entire time—this huge, rumbling old fart. But to see him get off the royal aircraft, and to have—I don’t know, was it a 5,000-foot runway? A thousand-foot runway—whatever it was, it was a long runway. And every single—the entire runway lined with kids waving Laotian flags—on their knees.

(16:06) Oh my! I hadn’t heard that detail.

Oh. You know, maybe that didn’t mean much to the old guy, but I believe that it did. Now what that meant for him when he goes back to LP [Luang Prabang], and what that meant within the politics of Laos, I don’t know, because I don’t—I’m not privy to that. But I think that had a huge effect on him alone, because I don’t think he—if I understood what other people said, what other
celebrations for the King amounted to, they were rather patchy, shall we say. And this was an impressive deal. So can I point to tangible results as a result of the visit? No. Can I say that all of a sudden—the generals in Vientiane all of a sudden thought Vang Pao was a great guy and they promoted him? I’d have to work on that. [Interviewer chuckles] Do I think it had an effect? Yes. Precisely what that effect was, I’m not sure.

(17:33) Now was it Bill Lair or—do you have any idea of who it was who was placing pressure on the King to promote Vang Pao up the ranks?
It wouldn’t have been the King.

Oh, OK.
It wouldn’t have been the King, because the King, I think, had very little temporal power. This would have been whichever generals were running—either the neutralist government, or then, after the coup, a right-wing government out of Vientiane. So I—and that I don’t know who was putting the pressure on. I suspect it wasn’t Lair. If it was anybody, it would have been the Ambassador and the Chief of Station in Vientiane, because Bill—remember, Bill does not go to Vientiane.

True enough.
He’s pretty much an Udorn guy. And he’s a back room player. He doesn’t go, and I don’t think he—I don’t think he’s on an easy, one-to-one relationship with the guys who are running the government at all. So…

(19:04) I think I misunderstood, because I think the King did pin his stars on his uniform, or whatever, after he was promoted to general.
He may well have done that, and I suspect that was a staged event. Maybe he got the promotion, and maybe—and it is perfectly possible—because I really can’t tell you whether when you got to become a general whether that was symbolically done by the King. That may well have been. You see, I don’t know. I don’t know what the Lao military ritual was.

(19:36) Fair enough. Like I said, I ask lots of questions that probably aren’t fair to ask.

Yeah.
Again, if I remember correctly, once there was this withdrawal of Americans after the Geneva Accords were enforced, there was a period in which the enemy made some relatively significant gains, was it not, at least for a time?—but that it was also a time in which Vang Pao was starting to become more effective in recruiting more Hmong, and people were coming in, and he having to sort of figure out who was just in it for the pots and pans and food, and who was in it because they really wanted to fight for him and for the Hmong people.

Yeah.
Did you see a significant change in the way—I think you said earlier in his career, people just walked up and berated him and treated him with no deference whatsoever, and that people had no compunction about just dressing him down if they thought he’d done something wrong. Was his standing in the community changing? Was his—Well, I think he always had that—like any really good leader, he always invited—

[A friend drops by to see Anne Garrels and passes through]

Vang Pao and the Hmong always, no matter how high you were, had a very democratic way of dealing with each other. There was nobody, no matter how high you were, that you were above
being berated by some farmer who just was pissed off at you. [Interviewer chuckles] I mean, that was one of the really, really nice things about the Hmong. They didn’t mind who you were. You put your pants on one leg at a time like everybody else, and if they had a gripe, they’d come after you. So that quality—that quality never failed Vang Pao, as long as I was with him. [Pauses] What was the other part [of the question]?  

(21:51) Was there [Pauses] was there a challenge that came along with all of these potential Hmong recruits coming in terms of arming them,—

No.

—figuring out what their motives were—?

No, this was—that’s a good question. What we got during the hiatus period—oh, you were asking about the activity—because it was quite complicated. You have the Geneva Convention, you have a titular, neutral—Souvanna Phouma comes in, and he installs Kong Le, who is a titularly neutral army—what is left of the neutral army—on a position in the Plaines de Jarres. [Pauses] And therefore you have three groups sort of milling around in the PDJ. I don’t recall [Pauses] any really significant gains made by the Pathet Lao-slash-Vietnamese or the Neutralists other than the exchange of some towns on the eastern edge of the Plaines de Jarres. It was the attack by the—of the Pathet Lao-slash-Vietnamese on the Neutralist forces maybe a year or 14 months into this that sort of caused the whole thing to blow up again. And I don’t know—Vang Pao was always very leery of dealing with Kong Le because he feels he can’t trust him. We get a lot of people coming and wishing to join Vang Pao during this period, all of whom—most of whom we have a very hard time getting any weapons for, because, if I remember correctly, we are in the business of replacing weapons, but not adding to our overall force structure. So there were a lot of folks who came in to talk to Vang Pao that we just basically had to say, ‘Go home. Let us know where you are.’ And I can’t—I’m sure VP slipped them a rifle or two, but in the sense of any substantial increase of our group, of our little outfit, there was very little. That only started to occur after the fall of the neutralists leaving the Plaines de Jarres in 1963 sometime—spring of ’63, or something like that—fall of ’63.

(25:16) When I talked to Dick Secord, which I was only able to do through the graces of Heine Aderholt—he just happened to be passing through—he, I’m sure in hyperbolic fashion, said, ‘There was no such thing as the Pathet Lao. We would have given our eye teeth to actually capture a Pathet Lao. It was all the North Vietnamese.

That’s not true.

Is there a grain of truth in there, or do you think the Pathet Lao or the sort of Lao portion of the communist infiltration of the country…

Well, I think it is absolutely true that behind any Pathet Lao unit—there was probably a Vietnamese unit behind them. So it was a little bit—they were between a rock and a hard place, usually. But certainly [Pauses] the numbers—and I don’t know how many companies Faydang Lo brought to the table, but those guys fought just like VP’s people. They were not patsies at all. I think increasingly [Pauses] the Pathet Lao was a kind of ineffectual force, because the Vietnamese didn’t trust them, and the people didn’t like them, and they were used sort of as occupation groups that would come in after the Vietnamese took some place. So, you know [Pauses] what numbers am I talking about?

No idea. But I don’t think it’s fair—I don’t think it’s accurate to say there were not units of one form or another who were all Lao fighting for a communist takeover.

(27:27) Sure. So the day comes—you get hepatitis, you’re deathly ill, you get flown to Udorn and then on to Bangkok, and you’re out for—was it two months, something like that?
Well, I’m actually better in days and my friend Mike Lynch, who was in the next bed, was wounded, or…?

Oh, my goodness.

Terrible, dry—it’s just simply fecal hepatitis, whatever that number is—Hepatitis A. And you get terrible dust storms. At that point our hut was sitting right at the end of the runway, so whatever plane was taking off would just coat everything in dust. Initially my numbers were worse than Mike’s, but I—my numbers improve rapidly and Mike’s do not, because I have two years of immunity built up to it and he had months, he didn’t have the years. So my problem is that I’m fine to go back, but medically they won’t let me. And in fact what they do medically is they say, ‘you’ve got to go home and be checked out by a doctor at home and then you can come back.’ So I don’t know if it’s two—I don’t remember if it was two months or a month and a half or whatever. I go home and I—a bunch of doctors at Langley look at me and I say I’m fine and they take my tests and they say, ‘Jesus, you’re clean as a whistle.’ [Interviewer chuckles] ‘Can I go back?’ And they say, ‘Well, you’d better stay around, because we don’t know what’—I mean, they don’t know what they’re looking at. And this is very early on in tropical medicine, and so I think I’m—what do I do? It’s 1964, it’s the convention, I’m with my family when Johnson gets re-nominated…

(29:47) Or just nominated…

Or nominated. [Pauses] Nominated for the first time, yeah. So I’m there for the summer, I’m here for the summer. I think I go back in August. I don’t know what— I didn’t have any— I knew I had to go back, I knew I wanted to go back. You know, a year earlier my parents had come out to Bangkok to see me, and I was way, way—way up in northern Plaines de Jarres with (***), and they were cooling their heels in Bangkok. And it was a tough time. I think we got hit a couple of times. And so I go out of the jungle and so flew directly to Bangkok, and it turned out that my father, during World War II, had been a great friend—was a classmate and an OSS mate of a guy named Jim Thompson, who was the one who resurrected the silk industry of Thailand. And he lived in this palatial, wonderful house, right on a beautiful (***), in Bangkok. And I walked in virtually in my jungle clothes, and there were my parents, and they were seated at the end of a long, beautifully polished hall of a remodeled Thai temple. And there was Mr. Thompson dressed in silken whites, and my mother looking very cool, and they were—and so I was introduced, and I sat down. I will never forget the sight—it must have been 35 feet down the other end—of the servants coming to the door, then dropping to their knees, and coming across the floor on their knees to ask me if I’d like a gin and tonic. Oh my goodness!

[Both laugh] So that was sort of fun. Quite a juxtaposition of…So anyway, [Pauses] I thought I was important, and I thought that I really wanted to go back and so I did.

(32:42) I know it was a relatively brief time, but had there been any changes or developments that you recall noticing in that brief time when you returned?
Not that I know of—not that I can remember. I think everybody was happy to see me, but I can’t—you know, they didn’t—the runway wasn’t lined with little kids holding flags, let’s put it that way. [Interviewer laughs]

(33:03) Another name that I just recently picked up and I think this was Roger’s book too, and I’d never come across his name—was Vongrasamy Thong—if that name sounds familiar at all—if it doesn’t we’ll just move on, that’s—Yeah, I have no idea who he’s talking about.

(33:45) By ’64 going into ’65, was there a growing American presence in terms of more CIA, more undercover people who were trying to exert and influence and provide air support and do all these other things?

Well, I think [Pauses] through much of ’65 Bill Sullivan was still the ambassador. And as long as Sullivan was the ambassador, he was going to keep a pretty tight lid on that, and as far as I know. [Pauses] Yes, there was, there was—let’s see. We got… [Pauses to remember] There was myself, there was my assistant, John Randall, there was this god-forsaken person who—who was briefly advisor to the radio station until I could get rid of him. [Pauses] There was a retired army colonel who would come named Floyd something or other, who was a sweet man, and he would come and try to help with the training, but he was sort of ineffectual. There were a lot of ineffectual—because in part the operation attracted—was both a dumping ground for failed operatives in other endeavors, and also became a place where, because it was successful, various bureaucratic, competing components of the Agency vied to get their own people into. So I often was given people that I didn’t need or didn’t want. I felt I was perfectly capable of running this thing pretty much on my own—a trait I’ve continued on ‘til this day. [Interviewer chuckles] And I got angry that I ended up doing so much babysitting, because a lot of the guys who came had troubles and problems, and it was basically theoretically my job to spend time and find out what was wrong. Then we got—Mike Lynch went up country. He was out of Sam Neua. Mike did a very good job. He was a fine officer.

(36:31) I think about the only thing that’s been written, at least for public consumption, about him was his presence at Na Khang and his heroism there.

Yeah, and of course the big thing is that Mike—I think a lot of why nothing has been written is because he stayed in the Agency for a long time afterwards.

(36:51) Well, if I am fortunate enough…

If you get to see him, please give him my best. I saw him briefly at some function—one of the few that I go to—and I am… What should I know about him?

He was a good officer. I think of Mike as being…[Pauses] He and I were very similar. I mean, we kind of—we took risks, we liked the people. He didn’t have—he hadn’t had the years, the time that I had there. And he didn’t have the quiet, that kind of incubating, quiet time to begin with, where you really kind of got—you had the time to get to know who your people were. I mean, so often, like any other military person, you get dropped into a situation and you’ve got to work fast and you’ve got take what’s handed to you, and then you go. But Mike was a good officer.
I don't think I knew a thing about him, and Secord mentioned him and—I don't know the man particularly well, but he strikes me as the kind of person who isn’t given to easy praise.

Yeah.

I don’t know him at all, and I’m sure you’re right. [Interviewer chuckles]

But he just said, ‘And Mike Lynch was a helluva soldier,’ and there was this tone of reverence in his voice that made me think— Well, Mike was! I think he probably was a better soldier than I was. I mean, I think he was—and he was in a much hotter situation.

(38:31) Well, we’ve already talked about Colby’s visit and his announcement to you that you weren’t going to re-up for a third tour in Laos.

That took place in Washington.

Oh!

Yeah, Colby came, and I—at the—when he came, I was scheduled to come back, as I recall. It wasn’t until I get back to Washington, I guess when he then talks to [Richard] Helms, and they both—or they decided that it was not such a good idea.

(39:07) Do you recall putting up any resistance to this idea that you should go, or were you pretty well resigned to it by the time the case was made?

They phrased it in such terms that it wasn’t—there wasn’t going to be an argument from me. It was phrased in such a way that they—I was going to be relieved—period, and that the embassy request for my return would be denied, and in fact I think it was a fait accompli by the time I get home.

(39:46) What do you remember about your last days in Laos?

Oh, very poignant.

How so?

Well, [Pauses] these were good people. This is my graduate education—this was my education. To the extent that I know anything about how to deal with people, how to run things, how to run myself, it was what those four years taught me. [Long pause] The ceremony, my closing ceremony, they gave me a tailor-made Hmong suit that I still have, and can still get in. And Bill Lair was there, and Vang Pao, and I was able to stand up and give a speech in Lao. And there were a lot of tears. Vang Pao held my hand and cried, called me his younger brother.

(41:05) I assume you made it clear to him that it was not your decision that you were leaving.

Well, at that point I was just going home on home leave.

Oh, OK, that’s right.

But I think—I have a sense there must have been something in the wind. But I was leaving, I thought, for home leave, and I then I would come back. And I think that’s basically what I said, that ‘I will return.’

And yet you didn’t have a ceremony like this…

The first time around?

Yeah.

I didn’t even leave.

[Laughs] Well, I guess there was no reason to have one, then.
No, I mean, this was… [Pauses] This was a very intense four years, and this was—you know, it was every day, 24-seven. And if you survived, there was no way this wasn’t going to leave a pretty sizeable mark on you, and it does to this day. And I don’t—it’s something I do not talk about. I mean, unless you come and have a specific reason, I—this is—this is very—in many ways very private to me. And also, of course, my life took a rather radical turn shortly thereafter, so in some ways, when I leave the Agency and decide to go off and do what I really—I think is in my heart, that I want to do, to a considerable extent I need to put as much as I can of the specifics of about Laos behind me, if not the things that taught me as a human being.

(43:20) Now did Tony Poe even come back for this farewell and sort of pay his respects in his own way? I don’t think so. [Interviewer laughs] I don’t think so. I’ll have to look. There are photographs. I don’t remember Tony being there, but—you know, Tony, I think, and I, we sort of patched things up toward the end. I mean, I bore no grudge at all. I think he was the one whose nose was properly out of joint by my—by this upstart who just came in and kind of took things over from him.

(43:59) Do you remember any specific misgivings you might have had about how the situation in Laos might evolve—not necessarily just because you were leaving, but because of the way things seemed to be going? [Pauses] I had long talks when I came—Bill Colby was, I think both a very good friend and a very good mentor, and I think, a man whose concern for the well-being of his officers under him was probably his undoing as a director. He cared too much about the people who he liked. We had long—his office was always open, and we would have long and really quite interesting talks about my future life, and about the failure of the Brits and the Americans and anybody else to fully care for and acknowledge the debt they owed to the people they hung out to dry. And he—you know, he had parachuted into Norway into World War II he was a very brave and honorable soldier. But it didn’t—that didn’t hide the fact that he thought the Brits had hung the Kachin and Karen tribes in Burma—they basically handed them over to the Burmese at the end. And he was very worried that history was not a good guide as to what would happen to the Hmong. [Long pause] I’m not—I remember just before—just when I arrived home, I briefed the new Station Chief, a guy named Shackley…

(46:28) Ah, the infamous Ted Shackley. Yeah. And I had a very creepy suspicion about the man. I hate—I disliked him from the moment I met him, and nothing has ever changed my opinion since. I think he was a dishonorable and venal human being. So plenty of reasons to worry very soon after your departure.

(48:00) You think Sullivan overall did a good job as ambassador? Yes, Sullivan—personally, I think, did a wonderful job as ambassador. He would come up country, he and I would sit and talk. I told him what I was doing, what I was hoping to do politically, strategically, if you will. He was—he liked to think of himself as a strategic thinker, and I think he was. And he and I got along very well. In fact, when my brother published his memoirs…[Laughs]
He became somewhat of a parody of himself toward the end, 'cause I think he kind of believed all of his press clippings. But he said some nice things about me. And we—I had—I thought he was on the right track, and I thought there was a—it may have all ended up in the same veil of tears. You know, I'm not about to say that if they hadn't done this and hadn't done that, it all would have been a success. I think at the end, the Vietnamese were a whole lot stronger and a whole lot more dedicated to doing what they were going to do than we were to stopping them. So I'm not sure it would have ended up ultimately any better. I do think we could have left with a little more honor than we did. And if you listen to the Jiggs Weldon piece [Anne Garrels’ interview with Dr. Charles Weldon on NPR], it’s the question of honor which really gets to some of the people who really care about the place.

(49:42) Do you think the external fiction of—obviously there were plenty of people who knew it was fiction—but do you think the external fiction of neutrality in any way tied the hands of those who were trying to prosecute this Secret War? Or do you think, given the way you saw operating this war ideally, that it really wasn’t an impediment of any kind? I think if you… [Pauses] You do yourself a tremendous danger if you disregard a historical context of a people. And if you looked at the history of Laos as a people—whether it was three kingdoms, one kingdom, you name it—it doesn’t make any difference. Historically this is a group of people who sit between two stronger neighbors, the Thai and the Vietnamese. And their lot in life has been historically to play a buffer between those two stronger entities. Sometimes it’s the Vietnamese coming in, now it’s the economic power of Thailand coming the other way. I think the fiction of the neutrality had some real value, [Pauses] because it allowed at least a continuity, if you will, of a semblance of a country which, as we know, has never really existed. But nothing else existed in Laos, so why should the government be anything less? It has never been a cohesive group of people, and it probably—may never be. And I think what we did—as a country, we did wrong was this sort of belief that if we just got the correct right-wing general in there, he could make the difference.

(52:08) Just like in Vietnam, right? Just like in Vietnam. Phoumi Nosavan was just as corrupt, or Lon Nol in Cambodia, and I think all of this was done, perhaps with good will and perhaps with good intentions, but the end result was… [Pauses] you simply invited somebody else to go to the trough and steal as much as they possibly could. Phoumi Nosavan, I’m sure, was just simply an impossible human being to deal with. He was a French intellectual. I mean, anyone dealing with a French intellectual is—you know, this is—you don’t want to go there, particularly if the guy is head of a country! But in some way, he was truer to the historical role that Laotians played than almost anybody else. It’s never going to be a strong left-wing country, it’ll never be a strong right-wing country—not in our era of time. Maybe one day, but not now.

(53:22) So do I understand you correctly from what you were saying earlier? You left in ’66, and then you spent ’66 to ’67 as Colby’s assistant—Roughly, yes. And it was during that period that you made ‘Journey from Pha Dong.’ Yes. So you were in Laos making the film?

No, I had made the—what I had done—I had started taking 16mm footage almost right from the beginning. I was kind of a photography bug, and then they sent John Willheim out—gosh, I don’t
know what years. I would say '64, '65. He was with us for almost a year. And John was a bizarre but wonderful human being.

(54:11) His photo collection is at the Center for Hmong Studies.

It is?

Yes.

You mean slides?

I don't know that it's all there, and it may not be the originals, but they have numerous—probably most if not all of his photographs.

Well that's where I'll send mine. 'Cause I have a huge collection of photographs. So in effect, much of the film, virtually all of the film was shot by the time I come home.

So when you said earlier that you worked for Bill Lair in the morning and then—

Bill Colby.

Oh, Bill Colby. My mistake.

I worked—

I'm sure you just said Bill and I [Laughs]

No, I worked for Colby. I was Colby's special assistant in the morning, and then in the afternoon and evenings, John Willheim and I fashioned the film together.

OK. My mistake.

(55:10) Did you have any inclination or opportunity to sort of monitor what was going on in Laos during the ensuing years?

Not really. I was somewhat out of the loop, and I would sit in on the staff meetings and read...[Pauses] because you see, of course, it isn't clear...Let's see, I come home in '66, I work for Colby from roughly July, then I get—oh gosh, do I get married? Yeah, I meet an Austrian girl on my way home, virtually. [Pauses] I'm married in '67, in Austria, and I think that fall of '67 I've completed, in a year and a bit, I've completed the film, and I've taken Colby's advice and I've applied to go to the fall semester at Princeton to get the necessary undergraduate courses in anthropology to apply. I go to the Woodrow Wilson Center, and I spend the winter of '67 at Princeton, and I'm accepted by Chicago in the spring, and we're ready to go to Chicago when I get the call from Nitze, so I go back to Washington in '67, and I worked for Nitze '67, '68. The fall of '68 Johnson chooses not to run, Nixon is elected, Nitze is out, so I am faced with going—I've had an extended leave without pay from the Agency, and I'm faced with the idea—do I go back to the Agency or do I go off and do what my heart has sort of been telling me for some time? So I choose to leave.

(57:55) Were you—it sounded like you wanted, as you said, to put your experiences in Laos behind you for a time for, I'm sure, a number of reasons. Were you aware of the fall of Long Cheng in '75—

Oh, sure.

OK.

But I'm not aware, in the sense—because once you're out, you're out. Things dry up real fast. And I don't have the connections in the Agency any longer. I don't have the guy—my old friend that I can call up at the desk and say, 'What's going on?' I mean, my old friend is Lair, and I can't reach him anywhere. So in '75—you see, and I don't think it's clear—it's not clear what the impact of the militarization of Laos is until after I leave, really. I mean, the first year, everybody dislikes Shackley, but it's not clear that this man is in the process of dismantling everything in his quest to become... [Pauses] So I'm—maybe it is clear, maybe if you went back you could see the signs, but I don't see
them. So by the time I leave I’m so focused on the sense that I’ve got to go find something that I want to do for the rest of my life, so when I leave [Pauses] the Pentagon in the—oh, September, December—or I guess after the elections in November [Pauses] I don’t think it’s absolutely clear what’s happening.

(59:59) Did you ever see VP in the US?

[Yes]. When I worked for Colby, in the year and a half I worked for Colby, VP was wounded in the arm, and he spent some time in the Tripler Army Hospital in Honolulu, and I went out and spent time with him. I saw him several times thereafter when the war was going on. And when he came out and went to Missoula, [Pauses] I and my father went out to visit him south of Helena. And at that point he was still full of the bravado of going back and the irredentist dreams of all that stuff. I think I see—and I remember seeing him once in my house in Washington. So I would say three times, maybe four. Not very often. I’m not useful any longer, you see?

(1:01:22) But these were at least cordial visits—

Oh, very…—in which you were happy to see each other, and…

Yeah, I was—very happy to see him.

(1:01:31) Well, I think you said you’d prefer not to answer this question, so I’ll just ask it and you can say, ‘No comment.’ And that is, how do you feel your experiences in Laos have affected you?

[Half-minute pause] It taught me to try to be fair. It taught me to try to be consistent. It taught me not to rely on anybody else, and do it yourself. [Pauses] And it taught me if you fuck up, you’d better admit it. [Interviewer laughs]

Always good advice.

Yeah. [Later, as Lawrence is walking the interviewer to his art studio, he adds another lesson to the list: ‘Keep your head down.”]

More people should follow it.

(1:02:58) You mentioned that you went back to Laos in 1999.

[Yes]

What was the purpose of that trip, and what, if anything, came out of it that made you reflect on that war and your experiences there?

The purpose of the trip was—came out of NPR [National Public Radio], who thought it would be interesting if Anne Garrels took her old husband back to the scene of his earlier triumphs, and to look at what had happened in the intervening 30 years. It was in many ways remarkable. Annie had done some really good stuff out of Cambodia, where she had talked to a lot of the Khmer Rouge people, and she was, as she is now, really, a superb reporter, and a great believer in oral history. I think, actually—and there’s a book I’ll give you—you should have, called Rules for Old Men Waiting.

Have you heard of that?

No, I don’t think I have.

It’s a marvelous book about—I liked it very much. It has a lot to do with oral history. [Pauses] I don’t think it turned out the way NPR or Annie thought it would, largely because there was no way—it turned out there was no way for us to go back to Long Cheng and I could walk around nostalgically like a grad student, saying, ‘Here’s where I did this, and this was old Hillier Hall, where we used to snuggle down in the basement”—you know, all that kind of bullshit. [Interviewer chuckles] So I mean, that whole kind of nostalgic thing, which is never something I really needed to
do or wanted to do anyway, was largely left off the table, off the plate. What it did do—I think our
three days with Doc Weldon was very touching, largely because this was a man who had given far
more years of his life to the Hmong and to the people of Laos than I had, and this was a man who
was so deeply wounded and scarred, although, as I said, he lived an hour and a half away from Laos
itself, could never bring himself to go back. He thought the behavior of America toward these
people bordered on the criminal. And he said it with great compassion and great pain. And it was
far better for Annie to get this on tape than it was for anything I could say. As I think I mentioned, the
visit with Doc was very useful in the sense that it put us in touch with people in Vientiane who
were delighted to see us and spent many hours—as I had remembered Vientiane being. You could
sit out on a patio overlooking the Mekong after a hot day and talk and drink wine, and pretty much
blow the whole evening away. But there were some fascinating remnants of people who were doing
interesting things—I think I mentioned to you on the walk: young lawyers from—half-Lao, half-
American lawyers whose father had been in Laos, who were doing really important things for—in
their own way. And the usual collection of people for whom Laos was a particular magnet that they
could never free themselves from—and there’s a lot. Probably per capita there’s a lot.—I mean
there’s not very many in terms of actual numbers, but there is an entire community of people who
somehow got hooked on Laos at an early age, and then found the rest of the world was as
meaningless as anything else, and they decided, ‘Well, if I’m going to do a meaningless life, I might
as well go back and do it where it’s really—life is pretty nice and easy. We had a—I look back on
that—we had a wonderful time. Annie was gone quite a bit, doing pi
s suggested, once you get me going,
Mostly they were carbon copies of every messag
(0:00)  W
[Interviewer checks recorder quickly to make sure it’s not running out of memory. Final track
begins.]

Well, I’ll try not to keep you forever. I know you’ve been very indulgent. Could you
recount, because we didn’t get this on the recording, when Bill Lair came here, and his stay
with you? That was a particularly interesting story, I thought.

Well, I think I mentioned that when I left [Laos], I had boxes and boxes and boxes of material.
Mostly they were carbon copies of every message I had sent in four years. And there was—as Annie
suggested, once you get me going, I [Interviewer laughs] I can talk or I can write. And I thought,
actually, I had a lot to say. We’ll let somebody else be the judge of that. But I was extremely
worried about security and about my commitment to the Agency’s— maintain secrecy, so I basically
wrapped all the boxes up in very strong tape, sent them home, and in effect said, ‘I will not look at
this stuff for 25 years.’ And as it turned out, my life took several interesting and different turns, and
I really had forgotten pretty much all about them, and they were down in the stable, high on a shelf.
And when I turned 50, Annie thought it would be great if I got—if she brought Bill Lair up here for
a visit. And it just so happened that that roughly coincided with my 25-year self-imposed
moratorium. And I said to Bill, ‘Let’s—I think it’s time to open the boxes.’ And he said, ‘What
boxes?’ [Interviewer chuckles] And I said, ‘Copies of every single message I ever sent to you.’ He
said— [Laughs] He blanched, and [Interviewer laughs] I don’t know if he really—you know, be
careful of what you wish for. So I brought them out, and he sat at this table, which at that point was going perpendicular to where it is now, and he sat at this end, right down at that corner, and for—I'm not sure he slept for four nights. He read everything—virtually everything that was in those boxes. And, of course, one morning I came down and he was particularly intent. And I said, 'What are you reading, Bill?' And he said, 'I'm reading the diary of your—the night when I told you that the CIA had chosen a wife for me.' [Interviewer chuckles] And he said, 'You were a little harsh on me.' [Both laugh] But he said—I said, 'Well Bill, I was a young man. I was sort of brought up on romantic love and here you are telling me that you have a 25-year marriage with a girl who was picked out of a CIA dossier for you.' And he said, 'Yeah, well of course, if you look at it that way, I could understand that.' But he said it had been a great—it had been a good marriage. And I think—as far as I know it was. And it was at that point we thought—we had talked a lot about trying to get the story out, and it was at that point—well, I'm not sure if Roger Warner was in the picture at that point, or whether he came shortly thereafter. I think actually Roger was [Pauses] And Bill and I discussed it, and we thought that Roger was—we were very—we both believed that if we couldn't get the right person, it was better to let the stuff lay buried until the right person came along—that we did not want—we didn't want an exposé, we didn't want—we wanted something fair, we wanted something cohesive, and we wanted something that, at least to the best of that writer's ability, reflected what in fact had happened. And Roger was pretty impressive. We both liked him. If didn't like him [right away], soon thereafter we both liked him. [Pauses] And so I said, 'Bill, I think it's time to let Roger have the boxes.' And that's what I did, with Bill's blessing. And I think Roger's—I think Shooting at the Moon, or Backfire, or whatever, I think has been a worthwhile exercise.

(5:15) Very much so. Absolutely. I don't think any of this… [Pauses] You know, I don't think any understanding of the Hmong would be possible without his book. So [Pauses] I'm glad I broke the law, [Interviewer laughs] so to speak.

As it were.

Yeah.

(5:42) What—obviously, I'm not trying to be too nosy, but considering that most of the stuff that's out there on the internet about you is 'Laos, CIA, blah, blah, blah, and oh, by the way, he's an artist and married to Anne Garrels.'

Yeah.

What would you like people to know about this later and probably more rewarding period of your life?

[Pauses] Oh, not much. [Interviewer laughs] Well, you know, I—I'll give you an example. Annie's been on a huge problem with Wikipedia, because someone keeps posting on Wikipedia an utterly fallacious story that she turned her armed guard unit, which follows her everywhere, firing at a crowd of civilians in Baghdad. [Interviewers gasps] I never look—I have never looked, I have never Googled myself, I have never looked at this. I figure—I spent 30 years, roughly publishing two drawings a week for 30 years. If anyone wants to look at that, I'll show them the result. It ain't bad. I taught myself how to draw, I taught myself how to do…I never went to art school and it's all mine. And at the age of 60 I thought I had enough balls to go off the cliff one more time. I didn't like what was happening at the New Republic. I didn't like the internal politics of the magazine. I didn't like George Bush, but I didn't like the New Republic's incessant Israel-centric view of the world. And I thought—the one thing I worried about mostly was—people who are commentators of one type or another end up at the end of their lives repeating themselves, and become parodies of
themselves. And I thought the crucial thing in life was knowing when to quit. And I thought, ‘Time to quit, kid. Go do something else.’ And so I started painting, and have been very happy doing it.

(8:34) Do you have a particular medium or a particular subject matter—
Well, I'll show you.
Oh, I'd love to see some.
Yeah, I'll show you. We'll go out in the studio, I'll show you—well, I'll give you a little tour.

(8:45) Well, with that, goodness know you've been more than generous with your time, and more than indulgent with my silly questions, and I can't thank you enough for inviting me into your home—
It's no trouble.
—and letting me hang out, and go walking with you and your dogs—
Anybody who wants—who I think—the crucial thing, what I judge is how serious the person is who's asking the questions. And I'm not bad at spotting phonies. And you're not a phony. I mean, I don't mind—you know, it's a subject I like to talk about if somebody has done their homework, which obviously you have, and somebody who's truly interested, which clearly you are. In that case, I'm delighted to talk about it. It's just that I don't need to talk about it to define who I am. And that's really sort of—that's sort of where it is. And so I don't—very few people know about all of this, and largely because they don't want to spend the time to listen to it all. It's a complex—and clearly, there's a lot of gray in it, and there's a lot of nuance in it.

(10:17) Yeah, I still feel like a beginner.
Well, you'll get there. But the point is—I still go back to that same idea that it took me two years of living it to know what the questions were. It took me another two years to know conceivably what the answers were. I don't—it has always been slightly interesting to me, is what I might have done in the next two years. But I didn't get that chance. So I don't know.

(10:59) Well again, thank you very, very much.
You're welcome.

[Recorder is turned off, interview is concluded.]