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## Interview with Vint Lawrence

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# J. Vinton Lawrence

17 July, 2006, Norfolk, CN

Interviewers – Paul Hillmer, Anne Garrels

Transcriber/Editor - Paul Hillmer



Paul Hillmer and Vint Lawrence outside the home in Norfolk, CT Lawrence shares with wife Anne Garrels

*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 17<sup>th</sup> of June—

July, actually.

**July.** (That’s how quickly the summer’s going for me.) I am the very happy guest of Mr. J. Vinton Lawrence. We’re here today to talk about a wide variety of things, but mostly those related to his time in Laos.

[Interviewer puts recorder in front of Mr. Lawrence]

**(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?

35 I was born in New York City, spent my childhood either in New York or out in New Jersey when  
36 the apartment got too small for six kids. This place in Norfolk, Connecticut has been my spiritual  
37 home, and now my physical home for a number of years. We always used to come up here in the  
38 summer. And my wife and I moved up here, more or less full time, about ten years ago. And I've  
39 been delighted to be here. Childhood was... [Pauses] I think in every possible way it was a very  
40 privileged childhood. I had good parents, I went to very good schools, and I [Pauses] really never  
41 worried the way most kids have to worry about certain things. So in that sense I was extraordinarily  
42 lucky. I went to a good boarding school in New England, Phillips Exeter Academy, and I went to  
43 Princeton University, where I majored in Art History, and did a lot of sports and theatrical stuff.  
44 And when it came time to graduate, just shortly before that, I had been in ROTC—this was in late  
45 1960—'59 or '60. So I had a three-year military ob—I had a two-year military obligation, I guess, as  
46 an active junior officer. And the Dean of Students called me into his office and [asked if I might  
47 want to] serve my country in a different way, and I—my father had been in OSS during World War  
48 II, so I knew something about the Agency, and—

49

50 **(2:42) He had told you stories?**

51 No. My father, by and large, told very few stories. But it was nonetheless a romantic image that I  
52 probably supplied mostly by myself. But I thought it was sort of a feather in my cap to be, in effect,  
53 tapped by the Dean of Students, who was, I think, probably nothing more than an agency spotter,  
54 basically. I mean, I think he got ahold of 15 or 20 in his graduating class who he thought would  
55 make good officers, and I was one of them.

56

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

58

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

66

67 **(4:34) They didn't make any explanation for why—**

68 No, it was just—well, I think it was because the stuff going on in Laos had all of a sudden become  
69 more... [Pauses] Kennedy was very interested in Laos, he was very interested in counter-insurgency  
70 or insurgency warfare, the Agency saw this as an opportunity—the connection with Vang Pao had  
71 been recently made, and they needed bodies, and I was a body. So I arrive in Vientiane, slightly  
72 little—my 22<sup>nd</sup> year—21<sup>st</sup> year, actually—22<sup>nd</sup>, I guess I was 22. And I spoke some French, I was  
73 not married, I didn't have any dependents, and so I was the guy who was sent up-country to talk to  
74 the French-speaking Hmong. I did not speak, obviously had absolutely no language training, no  
75 nothing. I knew nothing about Laos.

76

77 **(5:40) I'm curious...Did you ever hear the word 'Hmong'—**

78 No.

79 **—when you were in Laos?**

80 No. This is a culturally-imposed re-naming of the Meo tribesman.

81 **Dr. Gary Yia Lee is the fellow in Australia who helped me put my trip together, and he was a**  
82 **student of William Geddes—**

83 Yes.  
84 —who was one of the first people to write about [the Hmong]—*Migrants of the Mountains*,  
85 I think—

86 Something like that, yes.

87 **And he told [Geddes when he read a draft of his book], ‘We hate to be called Meo.’ But**  
88 **[there was] absolutely no evidence of that from your experience when you were in Laos?**

89 Well, you know that’s interesting. Certainly... [Pauses] I assumed that they hated to be called Meo  
90 largely because it was the Lao, the lowland Lao, who used that term, [Pauses] who used the term  
91 derisively. If you use the term with obvious respect, I never—I was never physically corrected by  
92 Vang Pao or anyone else who said, ‘You know, we really don’t like that. It was only—

93

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

95

96 (0:07) And I cannot remember whether I changed my use before I left or not.

97

98 **(0:19) If you don’t mind me backing up (as I said, I’m a stickler for silly little questions...)**

99 **If you think of yourself as a young man going through high school and college, how much,**  
100 **if at all, do you see yourself as a product of the Cold War and this idea that America must**  
101 **protect itself against all enemies foreign and domestic?**

102 [Pauses] That’s a good question. I certainly think I was a product of the Cold, War, and I certainly  
103 think the language and the discussions that I tended to hear around—

104

105 [Mr. Lawrence asks if the noise of the coffee brewing is too loud. Interviewer says no.]

106

107 The conversations usually, [Pauses] when they were being held by people who wanted to pretend  
108 they were extremely educated, [Interviewer laughs] those conversations tended to focus more on  
109 sort of global arrangements and global conflicts, and so I grew up with the language of an affluent,  
110 intellectual family to which those kinds of arguments came rather easily. So in that sense I was  
111 [Pauses] I think I was probably imbued with that, and it was the four years in Laos that just  
112 disabused me of it rather substantially.

113

114 **(2:07) Could you talk a bit about reporting to duty to wherever CIA headquarters was at the**  
115 **time, and...about some of the training that you received during that period before you went**  
116 **to Laos?**

117 The CIA headquarters when I first get there in the early 1960s, I guess in the fall of 1960, were in  
118 the temporary buildings down by the reflecting pool. They were old World War II naval buildings  
119 that were built in a temporary—and then just kept on. It was a very ramshackle affair, and then, of  
120 course, during the four years I was overseas, when I came back, we’re in Langley, that new complex  
121 is built. [Pauses] Yes, my training was pretty much standard. I was a junior officer trainee, which is  
122 known as a JOT, and we spent a great deal of time at the agency installation near Williamsburg,  
123 Virginia, which is known as the farm.

124 **Fort Peary, was it?**

125 What? Camp Peary, Camp Peary. We did all our foreign intel—we went through our foreign  
126 intelligence course there, which was fascinating work. I mean, it was fascinating. It was a...

127 [Pauses] somebody with made-up countries and made-up political situations, and you would do your  
128 trade craft with the instructors. And we all thought, as a JO class, we were pretty smart.

129 [Interviewer laughs] And so there was this certain—there was a huge amount of intellectual

130 arrogance involved. I don’t know how many of the 45 or 50 guys who were in my class ever stuck it

131 out. Not very—I would say under—probably less than 10%. Maybe more than that, 20%. Not  
132 very many. Many of them just did it for a while and then left the Agency. That course, as I  
133 remember, sort of started (I don't know)—the better part of a year, I think. And then after that,  
134 there was a requirement, because of the Bay of Pigs, that all physically capable officers had to go  
135 through paramilitary training. So that took me through the better part of 1961.

136  
137 **(4:52) So—I'm sorry, I have no military experience—so paramilitary training involves, I**  
138 **assume, jump school...**

139 Jump school, and it involved—it wasn't like Special Forces training; you weren't being taught  
140 specifically to fight. We weren't being taught to fight the way a Special Forces unit is taught. It  
141 was—the idea was familiarization with the terminologies and the tactics and some of the processes  
142 so that if you got into a situation you could be an advisor to or at least a window on other local  
143 people who are actually doing the fighting. And certainly, during the whole period I was in Laos, I  
144 was often admonished that I was not there to actually pull triggers and become a hero. I was there  
145 basically to help them—help the people that were doing the fighting do what they were supposed to  
146 be doing. So that's—so in that sense it was a broad exposure to various things of, various forms of  
147 military procedure.

148  
149 **(6:16) Before you left and arrived—first in Bangkok, right, and then in Vientiane after**  
150 **that—how much time did you have to sort of bone up on Laos in general and the Hmong**  
151 **specifically?**

152 [Laughs] A week?

153 **Oh my. And this was—**

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

161  
162 **(7:34) And this wasn't an era (maybe it still isn't an era, for all I know) in which the CIA**  
163 **thought, 'Well, of course, in order to work effectively this person needs to know something**  
164 **about this culture, these people'...**

165 Yeah, well this is... [Both laugh] I'm sure they're better. [Interviewer laughs] How could they be  
166 worse?—let's put it that way. I mean, it was just a forgotten country then, and I would suspect that,  
167 to some degree, it still is. But no, there was no—I remember the Agency had almost—at least what  
168 I could read and I could get was very marginal at best

169  
170 **(8:18) So, if you don't mind, talk about Vientiane as you remember it when you arrived.**

171 Well, [Pauses] the interesting thing about Vientiane and what happened when I left four years later  
172 was the—and that's what made our visit back there in 1999 so bizarrely interesting was that on the  
173 short list of an incompetent socialist/communist regime is that nothing gets done. And so  
174 Vientiane, [Pauses] always susceptible of being a time warp to begin with, in the last 30 years is  
175 virtually unchanged from what it was when I first went there—streets unpaved, the promenade by  
176 the Mekong River which was started in 1958 remained [Interviewer gasps]—you know, nothing ever  
177 happened. So it was—I enjoyed it. I didn't spend much time in Vientiane, because I very quickly—  
178 I mean, I guess I got there in [Pauses to remember] mid-summer, maybe, late summer—no even

179 earlier than that. Oh, I got there in February 1962. And I started going up country a lot by  
180 summertime. And of course part—then I became rather infamous because I was the long-time  
181 record-holder for the longest tapeworm that had ever been on display at the embassy dispensary. It  
182 was over—stretched out it was over 22 feet long. And I reeled it out of my rear end one night and I  
183 thought I was dying. So I was a very sick puppy for a while. But anyway, I got upcountry... [Both  
184 laugh]

185  
186 **(10:26) More on that later! [Laughs]**

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

198  
199 **(12:11) Was there much in the way of electricity or running water or...**

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

207  
208 **(13:07) So you had to come in with some kind of cover, since you were CIA.**

209 I came in as a military officer, because I was a military officer. I was assigned to a military  
210 assistance—a MAAG group—Military Assistance Advisory Group, and then, when September '62  
211 coincided with the two years of my active duty. So I then went home. You couldn't resign your  
212 commission out of country; you had to be in country to do that. So I came—literally I was flown  
213 home for a weekend, where I signed papers saying I resigned my commission. And then I was  
214 flown back, and then I became an employee of Bird and Son, and had that useful piece of paper in  
215 my pocket if anything should happen, and I went back up country—

216 **Oh, the blood chit?**

217 No, no, I just had a little piece of laminated plastic and a picture saying I was an employee of Bird  
218 and Son. So, to the extent one had a cover it was very light; to the extent that it meant anything it  
219 was inconsequential. Everyone knew who I was, everyone knew what I was doing, and they may  
220 not have gotten all the fine points, but basically I was—what did they call us? They called us Sky—a  
221 Sky Team. And so it was loose enough so that a lot of USAID guys sort of snuck in underneath it,  
222 and Pop Buell, who was quite a famous name, loved to pretend to people that he was actually a CIA  
223 operative. [Interviewer laughs] So I guess—you know, you had to do something for humor out  
224 there.

225

226 (15:27) Sure. I'm probably getting ahead of myself a little bit, because this is obviously  
227 something that persisted during your tour of duty and well beyond, but there were so many  
228 layers in this chain of command, for lack of a better descriptor. I mean, you had the  
229 embassy, you had the President and the State Department, you had the CIA... During your  
230 years there, how did you see those different facets of the entities that represented the United  
231 States and American interests interact with each other or come into conflict with each other?

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

265

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

267

268 (0:03) Chiefs of station, who would come in and try to add a layer, layers upon layers  
269 between... [Pauses] I'm thinking particularly of Douglas Blaufarb, who turned out to be one of our  
270 strongest supporters, I think, toward the end, but he started out being one of our most severe critics,  
271 and I think generally speaking, the project turned out to be larger than any one individual's effort to  
272 impose a certain kind of structure to it—other than what it had.

273

274 **(0:52) Was there discussion, during your tenure already—I seem to recall reading**  
275 **somewhere that someone back in the States had run some kind of simulation—but was**  
276 **there talk about moving the Hmong people to Sayaboury province...in your sphere?**  
277 [Pauses] I'm sure there was. I don't have a specific memory of sitting down with anybody in the  
278 four years—because basically, in the four years, anybody who came out from Washington was  
279 simply—usually pretty impressed by what he or she saw. I am sure someone said, 'Well now what  
280 happens if it all goes south? Where do they go? What do they do?'—yadda yadda yadda. The  
281 problem of Sayaboury as a province is it tends to be lower than the existing—where they lived for  
282 the most part. It tended, it would be further away from the Hmong homeland of Nong Het, up  
283 very close to the Vietnamese border. A lot of these folks fought largely in order to return one day  
284 going east. If you went to Sayaboury you were getting further west. You also had to cross the  
285 Mekong River plain. You also had the issue of—which, of course, subsequently killed so many of  
286 them, of malaria when they went across the river. These guys just didn't have that kind of immunity  
287 in their system. So I'm sure there was talk. Of course, western Sayaboury province starts to climb  
288 toward the borders of Thailand, which is where there were Hmong. But I don't recall a serious talk.  
289 I mean, I was always being asked all kinds of things by Washington, such as having—they were  
290 much more concerned about opium trade than they were ultimate escape routes and things like that.

291  
292 **(3:14) Well, this may not be an apt title—perhaps you can tell me if this is a good**  
293 **appellation to use or not, but I think of them as the two founding fathers of this operation.**  
294 **One is obviously Bill Lair—**

295 Yes.

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

297 [Yes.]

298 **What do you remember about your first encounter with Bill Lair, and how soon and to what**  
299 **degree were you told about the various intricacies of Operation Momentum?**

300 What's Operation Momentum?

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

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

303 **To you it was just your job.**

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

318  
319 **(5:52) How so?**

320 You take a man or woman, you let—you put him into—the Brits would put him into deep cover  
321 and send him over to a country where he spends the next five to 10 years establishing his



322 credentials. But you leave that person in country. You don't rotate them out for bureaucratic  
323 promotional reasons. And Bill found in the Thai, a country and a people that he truly loved, and I  
324 think he turned down any efforts to move him on to go to this training or that training. He wanted  
325 to stay in Thailand. And to somebody's great credit, they let him stay. And as far as I know, he's  
326 the only one who I think ever did that. (I'm sure there are other instances that I just don't know of.)  
327 But it seemed to me that if you wanted a model of how you gain the trust of a host country, this is a  
328 pretty good model. And I think there is no question that Bill, to this day, is honored by Thais of  
329 every stripe. And it's sort of ridiculous that you—that here you have a model of how to do it, and  
330 yet it's never been done again, as far as I know. [Pauses] Bill taught me a great deal about Thais and  
331 about life and about growing up, and he was very much an older brother to me. And I was  
332 enormously fond of him—still am, and enormously respectful. I was also fortunate in that, for  
333 about a year and for almost the entire time I was there, I did all of Pop Buell's work. [Interviewer  
334 guffaws]  
335

336 **(8:15) Well, talk some more about that. [Chuckling]**

337 Pop I loved. He was a real character. But Pop—I ran Pop's—all his air drops, I ran all his logistical  
338 support units. He was in Sam Thong, I was 12 miles away in Long Cheng, and Pop and I spent a  
339 whole lot of time together. Again, I liked him, he liked me. I worked my ass off for Pop. And I let  
340 Pop be Pop, in effect.  
341

342 **(8:56) What do you mean by that?**

343 Well, Pop was a great—Pop was a bullshitter. But he was a good bullshitter. I mean, I'm not—he  
344 was a great 'press the flesh' guy, and he was a wonderful motivator of civic behavior. He was hardly  
345 a detail man. And in effect—and I wasn't either, although I became a detail man, because that—in a  
346 way, curiously, my job for four years was to do the details. So I did the details for him as I did for  
347 Bill. And I think—I ran interference with him. Charlie Mann, or somebody who was in charge of  
348 the AID mission would come up, and they would sit together and Charlie would talk to me, because  
349 basically I knew where everything was going and I knew what was going on. And Pop would rant  
350 and rave about this. [Pauses] He also had some cute nurses, [Interviewer laughs] which I didn't  
351 [Laughs]—so I went to visit his nurses a couple of times—sort of. But anyway, we got along very  
352 well. And if Pop needed money or needed funding, because AID was very difficult for him to work,  
353 I would make sure—I would get him what he needed, by and large.  
354

355 **(10:34) I've got two or three different questions I need to...[Pauses] I'd like to go back to  
356 Bill Lair for a second. If I've heard the story correctly—you talked about how you were  
357 replaced by 500 men. In a way, did, at least initially, Bill Lair see you as someone that he  
358 hadn't asked for, that he wasn't really sure he knew what to do with, and—**

359 Absolutely. He didn't know what the fuck I was. You know, I was some little Eastern twit—you  
360 know, majored in art history and spoke with an accent. I'm sure...[Chuckles] Both Bill and Pat  
361 [Landry] were Texas A & M guys. I'm sure—it took quite a while for them to understand maybe  
362 that I wasn't such a—I wasn't maybe as bad as I appeared. [Interviewer chuckles] Yeah, I think  
363 Bill—I'm sure Bill asked for help, 'cause I'm sure he said, "This thing is growing, we need"—and I  
364 suspect Bill wanted junior people because he felt that he could mold junior minds better than he  
365 could old paramilitary minds who had their own ways of doing things. An example, a little bit is  
366 Tony Poe. I mean, if you talk about a warrior who had seen it all, Poe had done it all from being a  
367 Marine sapper in World War II, where he joins up—he lies about his age, he goes into the Marine  
368 Corps at the age of 16, into a unit where your casualty rates were up in the high 80s. He then fights  
369 in Korea, he fights in Malaya, he fights in Indonesia and the Philippines—you know, Tony had—

370 and Tony was exceptional in that regard. But I think the paramilitary bureaucracy of the Agency  
371 wanted to send out some of their old war horses who, probably Bill Lair—I would guess that Bill  
372 Lair didn't want. And I don't know that for a fact. But in my dim memory, I think I remember him  
373 saying he liked to have people he could teach. So he taught and I listened and I learned.  
374

375 **(13:12) I'm sure there are all sorts of things you could say, but if you were forced to come up**  
376 **with a 'top however many you want to choose' of big ideas or really helpful guiding**  
377 **principles that he passed on to you, what would those be?**

378 I think probably the best idea was that you don't bring the last war into the current one. And I think  
379 this is one of the things why he and I got along so well. If you had to write one rule for why we  
380 were successful for as long as we were, it was that we followed no *a priori* guidelines, no *a priori*  
381 manual. He was of the impression, I believe, that if you got smart people who would work hard,  
382 and loved what they were—the people they were working with, the answers would occur organically,  
383 if you will, and you would build a structure that was organic to the people you were working with,  
384 rather than imposing it hierarchically, from the top down. And I think that was the one guiding  
385 principle that we worked on—that there was no manual, and the one person you didn't want,  
386 however famous he was, was General Lansdale coming out and telling you how you ought to run an  
387 insurgency or counter-insurgency or guerilla operation, because the one thing that we both felt—and  
388 I don't know if it came from me or it came from [Bill Lair or] it was symbiotic between us. We  
389 understood that the process of getting someone to move from fighting to protect his family on one  
390 village on one hilltop was that you had to somehow take that initial desire, expand it so that person  
391 would be willing to fight for the village on the other, the opposing hilltop, with whom his village  
392 probably had a long-running feud. So going back to what you were saying earlier about clans, you  
393 had to figure out how to expand someone's consciousness so that they could indeed fight for a clan,  
394 perhaps that they had been feuding with for generations.  
395

396 **(16:01) And to build it on something other than the almost more Western idea of 'the enemy**  
397 **of my enemy is my friend,' to bind them together in some more meaningful way, I suppose.**

398 Yup, in that way, absolutely. So you would try—you started very simply. And that's sort of in the  
399 film I made. I tried to make that point. I did a film for the Agency.

400 **Oh, OK, I was not aware of that.**

401 Well then tonight you get to look at it. [Interviewer sounds very pleased at the prospect]. You get to  
402 look at the film. I have a purloined copy of that, too. [Interviewer laughs] But now a lot of  
403 people—it's out there. But that was my point—  
404

405 **(16:42) This isn't 'Journey from Pha Dong'?**

406 Yeah.

407 **Oh, OK, I have seen that.**

408 You've seen it.

409 **I had no idea you were involved with that.**

410 I made it.

411 **I've used that in my classes.**

412 I wrote the script and I put the film together.

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

415 I'm not in it. The credit lines are not extensive, as you noticed. No, but if you notice in the film, I  
416 try to get to the point where you talk about people coming in from various places to meet with Vang  
417 Pao, and how the genius of Vang Pao was that he would arm them and then he would [Pauses] give

418 them a reason for fighting and also a reason for protecting their neighbors and their zone or their  
419 community—their larger community.

420  
421 **(17:43) Well this makes perfect sense now, because I saw this and I thought, ‘This is pretty**  
422 **perceptive culturally. This is about telling people more than just, ‘These are good fighters.’**  
423 **I mean, there’s footage of a funeral, there’s footage of ball tossing, there’s all sorts of stuff in**  
424 **there.**

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

427 **Oh, sure! Of course!**

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

430 **What’s her name?**

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

434  
435 **(18:48) Well, this was for a very different audience.**

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

453  
454 **(21:21) Just one last question about ‘Journey from Pha Dong.’ Who would you say was the**  
455 **intended audience for that film? I always imagined select members of the Senate Foreign**  
456 **Arms Committee or—**

457 Exactly.

458 **OK.**

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

463  
464 **(22:01) So you think in the long run it was a very, very wise thing to get you out of there.**

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

486 **Unbelievable.**

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

490

491 **(25:15) I think for a period piece it holds up pretty well.**

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

501 **Field Service Officers?**

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

512 and I thought that was too good a chance to see what it was like to work at the very top. And that  
513 was very disappointing, so then I decided, ‘Well, why don’t I become an artist?’

514

515 **(27:51) Now what was your job with Paul Nitze?**

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

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

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

537

538 **(29:56) OK. Well, I’m going to haul us back to Laos now.**

539 Yup.

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

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

550 **Exactly. I—**

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

553

554 **(31:33) Yeah. [Perhaps I should have said] ‘indirectly influential.’**

555 Indirectly influential. You got it.

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

558 Did I?

559 **That’s what Roger [Warner] wrote, so I’m trusting Roger—that sort of before you were—**

560 I'm sure. I mean, he would have been a fool not to. [Interviewer laughs] Yeah, I don't think it was  
561 ever stated clearly that 'you guys'—I think I was there with three or four—and I can't remember.  
562 There was a guy named [Pauses] Oh! It'll come to me tonight. [Interviewer chuckles] I think we  
563 went out with a guy named Terry Ward, who stayed in the Agency. He came out with me. Joe  
564 somebody, and then there was a red-headed guy, and it was clear that we were all sort of in the pool  
565 to begin with, right? [Pauses] Well, they clearly made a judgment on the red-headed guy. He was  
566 totally incompetent to work with third country nationals. So I remember he ended up being sent to  
567 the training base at Hua Hin, where he was in charge of manuals. So clearly they made that  
568 [decision]. Joe went down ('cause Joe was married and his wife worked for the Agency as a  
569 secretary)—he went down to Takhet—Takhet, I think. And I think he did a very good job down  
570 there. But he couldn't go in country because he had responsibilities. And Terry...[Pauses] Terry  
571 was more like me, but I think he went to the south, not because he was farmed—they just, they  
572 needed—I think Terry was as good as I was, if not better. And I was—and so I'm sure there was a  
573 vetting process that went on.  
574

575 **(33:52) OK. I think the one unfortunately-worded question that I asked Bill Lair when I**  
576 **saw him was, 'I read through your Texas Tech oral history interview, and you mention Pat**  
577 **Landry, but not much, and I was just curious to know more about your working**  
578 **relationship.' And I think he inferred that I was suggesting there was some kind of conflict**  
579 **in the relationship, and I wasn't at all, because from what little I've heard, the two worked**  
580 **almost miraculously together. How would you describe the two of them, and even just Pat**  
581 **Landry alone, about whom I know very little?**

582 They were very different. Pat—I mean, they started out in the same place if not indeed in the same  
583 class. But Pat was never long—Pat's long suit was not subtle indirection. There was much more of  
584 a Texas A&M guy in Pat at the end than there ever was in Bill. Pat was a profane, hard-driving,  
585 hard-working, hard-drinking, really good man, who probably—and I don't know this—probably had  
586 been given an opportunity to rise in the Agency and blew it somehow, 'cause he had a temper, and  
587 he didn't—he had no problem calling somebody an asshole—none. And I think why Pat and Bill  
588 worked together so well was that Bill was far more diplomatic. He needed somebody behind him to  
589 sometimes give him some backbone in a bad situation, and Pat was willing to do a lot of the shit  
590 work that Bill was either incompetent or just didn't want to do—a lot of the personnel crap. So I  
591 think they did work well together. [Pauses] I don't know what happened after '66. There was  
592 another nine years... I think Pat gets ill, and I think he deteriorates physically. And I think this  
593 bothered Bill a lot. Because they used to fight—I mean, they would fight pretty well together, at  
594 least when I was there. And I know Pat died sadly, because I think he had very bad Alzheimer's  
595 toward the end. [Pauses] I'm not sure that the—as far as I knew, I think their relationship, at least  
596 in the years I was there, was a very good 'I'll do this, you do that' kind of thing. And Bill relied on  
597 Pat very, very [much], because Pat was extremely good at sorting out and cracking the whip over  
598 American—particularly the Americans. Pat did not spend a lot of time, I think, with the Thais, and  
599 certainly never with the Hmong. He never came up country. That's about... He was a back-office  
600 guy. He was indispensable in that role, because Bill was not about to do it, and Bill trusted Pat  
601 implicitly, and as far as I know, they never had a—Bill never had a reason not to trust [Pat]. But I  
602 don't know what happened at the end.  
603

604 **(37:55) Now [as I understand it], you, in one of your early responsibilities, worked with Pat**  
605 **training some of the early SGU units in Hua Hin. Is that right?**

606 Yes, actually, I did. I was responsible for getting together, with Vang Pao's help, the early units that  
607 were to mimic the Thai [PARU] teams. The SGU thing, the battalions came later. So initially what

608 we wanted to do was to get the young leaders, the young kids who were flexible and could learn  
609 languages, and the sons of important Hmong leaders, and give them training similar to that which  
610 the PARU had gotten. I cannot remember what they were called, but it was something like...I don't  
611 know. [Later he remembers they were the SOT, Special Operations Teams.] So we were training  
612 radio operators, medics, sort of a smattering of military technology, and the PARU trained them in  
613 Hua Hin, and I went down, the only time I was ever in Hua Hin was when I brought—I either  
614 brought or came to visit the first of my class that were going through training. Other than that, I  
615 never went back. [Pauses] And then subsequently Hua Hin was used for larger units, but initially it  
616 was just the small [ones]. The actual battalions we ended up—we did most of that training in Laos,  
617 in country, although some of their leaders, I suspect, went, were taken out of country, but I don't  
618 know where. Takhli? I don't know where.

619

620 **(40:13) So you said radio training...**

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

625 **One-time pads?**

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

636

637 **(42:00) So what was your first encounter with Vang Pao, and how did that relationship  
638 begin? I'm sure we'll be bringing him up repeatedly during the rest of this interview, but  
639 what about the early time...**

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

650

651 **(44:08) So you're training troops, you're conducting—well, I don't know if you should call  
652 them negotiations, but certainly you're building a relationship with Vang Pao,**

653 Yup.

654 **you're doing all of these things at the tender age of 22.**

655 Yup.

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

660 No. Bill Lair was the only person—I never went behind Bill’s back. His relationship with the  
661 ambassadors—Charlie Whitehurst and various others—I can’t remember all of them—was always  
662 tenuous enough so that I—Bill said, ‘I don’t want them fucking around up here,’ and I said, ‘Great,  
663 ‘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—  
664 they were always, by and large their learning curve was a whole lot steeper than mine, because they  
665 had to forget a whole bunch of shit in order to get on the curve. So I—there was never any time  
666 that I felt at all tempted in any way, shape, or form of going behind Bill’s back, because I didn’t  
667 think—first of all, I could always talk to Bill, and we might not always agree on things, but Bill sort  
668 of respected—toward the end I think he respected my judgment pretty well, and if I felt very  
669 strongly about that we don’t do this or we don’t do that or something else, he never was dictatorial  
670 in any way, shape, or form. I’m sorry, what was the first part of your question?  
671

672 **(46:09) Well, whether there were—any maybe it’s not so much about policy as getting to**  
673 **know the lay of the land a little better or getting to know about the Hmong people or about**  
674 **how things had worked prior to your arrival.**

675 Well, you see, the interesting thing was that Bill actually didn’t know the Hmong people. I did, in  
676 that sense, and in September of ‘62, during that first six-month period when we are really under  
677 wraps, in order to not become an alcoholic like old Tony, I actually spend my time interviewing  
678 every Hmong leader I can, and I start putting clans together, I start talking to witch doctors and  
679 medicine people about what plants they use, I start talking to people about—you know, ‘How old  
680 are you when you start fucking?’ I mean, I’m a junior field anthropologist, because there’s really not  
681 much else for me to do, and I don’t do well just sitting around doing nothing. So that part of it was,  
682 in effect, extremely valuable toward the end, because I know what the clans are, I know what the  
683 feuds are, I know who’s done what to whom 30 years ago, I know who you trust or don’t trust, and  
684 for what reason. So it was like an incubator into the [Pauses] into the sociology and anthropology of  
685 the Hmong. And that’s sadly, what none of my successors and those guys who had a whole bunch  
686 of Americans to pal around with at night never had.  
687

688 **(48:31) Can you remember, as someone who came in knowing very little about the Hmong,**  
689 **specific ‘aha’ moments or specific things that struck you about their clan organization or**  
690 **their sense of spirituality or their herbal or ritual healing practices, or really anything at all**  
691 **that stands out in your mind?**

692 Well, I spent a great deal of time talking to them about animism and what was—I think once I sort  
693 of got a grip on how their world is populated, in terms of the spirit world, that was something of an  
694 ‘aha’ moment, because I realized that if I could get myself out of my agnostic Protestant  
695 background, structured with all the problems of how I grew up and how I ended up thinking, then it  
696 really became—you can sort—that gave me a real insight into how they thought and how they  
697 operated, because if you see, or if you make the assumption that everything has an animus of some  
698 kind, then they, I can see where it’s not so difficult to get from there to how they would fight,  
699 because they didn’t want to kill anything, basically, and they didn’t even want to kill their enemies.  
700 You would fight to such a degree where your enemy would have to leave, but you would always  
701 leave your enemy a way out. And once I sort of got to that, I sort of came to realize how, why Laos  
702 was the way it was, because that general perception of how you fight—and there were fascinating  
703 books on ancient Thai warfare which I found, which I did get my hands on when I would go out.



704 And so I would try to make that transposition to the Hmong, with certain qualifications, obviously,  
705 and what that also gave me was— [Pauses] that was an ‘aha’ moment. The second sort of ‘aha’  
706 moment was the idea—when we started fooling—this idea of using the King as an overarching  
707 symbol, and when I discovered—again, this is not, I don’t think this is written down, but in the  
708 1880s or 1890s, the Vietnamese invaded northern Laos, and the Hmong, who were then in the  
709 Plaines de Jarres—more or less where they were—banded together and resisted, and in effect saved  
710 the kingdom, or the King, the Luang Prabang King, and that was why—the King then gave to the  
711 Hmong of Xieng Khouang a greater degree of self-governance than they had, than any other  
712 minority group had. And then, what struck me as interesting was when we talked about—we had  
713 these zones, you know, surrounding the Plaines de Jarres, and I realized as I was talking with some  
714 old *naikong* from some place, that the zones they had used almost 60 years earlier were precisely the  
715 same zones with the same families running them that were used when we were there. So I began to  
716 get a sense of historical continuity, which in a language that is an unwritten language is sort of  
717 fascinating. So there were a lot of those kinds of connections that I made during the six months  
718 when I was just talking to people.

719  
720 **(53:16) Were there, in general, responses of surprise that you were interested, or did they**  
721 **simply sort of take you in when you asked and tell you what you wanted to know, or...**

722 The latter.

723 **OK.**

724 The latter.

725 **Interesting.**

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

730

731 **(54:06) So did you learn the intricacies of both Green and White Hmong?**

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

739

740 **(55:11) A remark that Bill Lair made to me that surprised me was that at the time [already**  
741 **early 1960s] he was telling people, ‘We need to do as much for the Hmong as we can before**  
742 **we abandon them’—that he already had a sense very early in this process that there would**  
743 **come a day when the United States would just pull up stakes and go. Is that something you**  
744 **clearly remember?**

745 Absolutely. And that was the reason—that was the reason why I got so unhappy when [distracted  
746 by a pesky deer fly] No, my whole pattern—I mean, there were several things going on. One, that  
747 was why I felt so badly for him later on, because it was counter to everything he [Lair] believed in  
748 and what I had come to believe that the only way we could possibly work our way out of this place  
749 was to keep such a low profile that you almost—unlike what we’re doing in Iraq, you almost had to  
750 rely on the local people right from the get-go. And if you weren’t going to get something done you  
751 weren’t going to get something done, but it was them who weren’t going to get something done.

752 Right? So from the very, very start the whole thrust of what we tried to do was not to push them  
753 out on the limb any further than they—so that when we did leave they could get back off the limb.  
754 And of course this is what the militarization of Northern Laos prevented them from doing, because  
755 they became such a target and such a pain in the ass to the North Vietnamese that that was it. And  
756 that was the whole purpose, or one of the purposes behind the political attachment to the King, so  
757 that we were not involved in any way, shape, or form to where their allegiances were. It was also—  
758 we were parsimonious, I would say, as far as aid was concerned, and Pop agreed with that. I mean,  
759 he never wanted to give them so much help that they wouldn't want to go back home. So I think  
760 there was a general consensus among Pop Buell, Bill Lair, myself, and a guy named Doc Weldon,  
761 who was truly an amazing man.

762  
763 **(57:59) Charles Weldon, I think?**

764 Yes.

765 **Did you work closely with him?**

766 Yeah.

767 **Well, anyway, finish that thought [Chuckles]**

768 Yeah. And he's the one person I did get to see when I went back in '99, just before he died. And  
769 we had a wonderful talk.

770

771 **(58:22) But you all agreed in terms of keeping spending low and...**

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

779 **Yeah, we'll get to that, too!**

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

785

786 **(1:00:07) And I imagine the CIA wasn't really crazy about his dealings with opium of any  
787 kind, either.**

788 No. No. And so I used to have to—I mean, they would send me out a message every month, every  
789 couple of months and say—'cause I admitted freely that the stuff was there. I said, 'There's no  
790 sense pretending it's not there—it is there.' And I said, 'But it's there for a specific reason. And  
791 here's the reason. And as long as it doesn't become a hoard, then I don't think you worry about  
792 this. This is providential planning.' And it—Vang Pao did not smoke opium. He had to pay off his  
793 corrupt co-leaders, if you will. I think when he—when I knew him well, I thought he was quite an  
794 extraordinary human being. I don't think he stayed that way, but that's something we can talk about  
795 later.

796

797 **(1:01:08) Oh, indeed. Well since you brought up Doc Weldon, and I assume you had at  
798 least some dealing with Pat McCreehy as well—**

799 Not really. Pat was very prickly, and I really liked Jiggs a great deal. He was in the same boat, as far  
800 as I was concerned, as Pop and Bill. And I used Jiggs as my eyes and ears wherever he went and I  
801 didn't go. He would often stop by and say, 'You know, you'd better go look at Tal Anoi 'cause  
802 there's some real trouble going on there,' or whatever. So I had less to do with him in the sense that  
803 he had organized his own supplies and his own operation far more effectively than Pop had his, so  
804 Jiggs didn't need me like Pop needed me. And Pat I knew, but she, I think, spent more of her time  
805 in the south than in the north.

806  
807 **(1:02:18) OK. I need to double back for just a moment. We were talking about Hmong**  
808 **culture and such. Did you ever attend a Hmong New Year or a Hmong wedding or a**  
809 **Hmong funeral or—**

810 All the time.

811 **All the time?**

812 Well sure.

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

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

817 **Yeah.**

818 They dress the body, and they would then use the paper—Chinese paper money, and the idea was  
819 that there was a group of keeners, who were hysterical to watch doing it, and curiously enough, I  
820 thought of them when I was standing on a platform of East Glacier, Montana waiting for my  
821 brother to come in with his kids on a train, and there were some Blackfoot Indian ladies waiting for  
822 a body to be returned to them from wherever—some place back east. And the body came off the  
823 train, and these women started keening and wailing in a pattern, in a manner that was so spookily  
824 similar to what I had witnessed 20 years earlier in Laos that it was one of those sort of 'Oh, shit!'  
825 moments! [Interviewer laughs] But there was that whole process. And then the women would  
826 leave the hut and go out and smoke a cigarette. I mean, they didn't smoke, but they would start  
827 laughing and talk about something else. And then they would go back in and immediately start—  
828 No, I watched, I went to a number of funerals. The funerals themselves were really sort of—were  
829 day-long if not week-long events where it was a personal, a personal goodbye said by all the relatives.  
830 I mean that was why the body was left on the table, was that everyone who was related to that  
831 person had to basically come and touch the body one more time. And one of the issues that  
832 bothered the Hmong greatly was that the body theoretically in the spirit world goes back to the place  
833 that it was born, where it started out. And the problem was that it had a lot of rivers to cross, and  
834 spirits don't swim. So there was a lot of concern over whether—how they were going to get home.  
835 So [Chuckles] that I recall being an issue. And I'm not sure how it was ever resolved, frankly. I  
836 mean, I—

837

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

840

841 **(0:00) Well, when we left off I think we were finishing off talking about funeral rituals, and**  
842 **while we were walking you mentioned that you observed a woman engaging in embroidery**  
843 **in a way that you found quite amazing.**

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

846 **Could you describe what you described earlier?**

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

857  
858 **(1:54) Now I would imagine you used some of your art training to—I think you said you**  
859 **sketched some of the leaves or some of the plants that they used for herbal medicine?**

860 I tried to. I tried to. I found, actually, when I went back—first of all, I never had any art training—  
861 **Oh! Silly me.**

862 [Chuckles]

863 **You studied art but didn't practice it.**

864 I studied art history. That was my degree. But [Pauses] when I went back and looked at those later  
865 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  
866 a medical anthropologist. [Interviewer chuckles] I just—and my description of the plants were  
867 not—I wasn't sufficiently trained in what I should be looking for and how to describe the leaf  
868 structure. So I just—it wasn't, I don't think, very helpful.

869

870 **(3:01) And you were also saying that the reason, when I ask Hmong about what a wedding**  
871 **ceremony is like that I don't get any answers is that there isn't much of a ceremony to speak**  
872 **of.**

873 Not that I observed. It's more like just a reception. I suspect that the actual work goes on behind  
874 closed doors in whatever kind of dowry and financial arrangements are to be made. And there's—  
875 but the wooing ritual is elaborate, with the ball tossing and that sort of business.

876

877 **(3:38) Oh yes, New Year! We haven't talked about New Year.**

878 Well, that is nothing more—that is sort of a gang wooing ritual. [Interviewer laughs] **(I didn't want**  
879 **to go for it.)** Yeah, they toss the ball back and forth, and then I—there's a lot of banter, a lot of  
880 sexual banter that goes on with the—

881 **Oh really?**

882 Oh, yes! Oh, no, the—I didn't really—I didn't understand enough Hmong to really [understand it  
883 all], but I was told by people who were there. I mean, I spoke enough Lao to understand it, but they  
884 were going back and forth in Hmong, and basically it's one sexual joke after another with the young  
885 girl. So it's—there's a lot of stuff that goes on.

886

887 **(4:28) OK. And did you observe any shamans performing healing rituals, sort of looking**  
888 **into the spirit world?**

889 Yes, I did. I watched him ride off in a—on his bench, and I watched him try to find the missing  
890 spirit that had—which was causing the person to be ill, and—yeah, I did see that on a number of  
891 occasions.

892

893 **(4:59) Well let's talk about your work to create the—I hope I have the name right here—the**  
894 **Union of Lao Races Radio. Does that sound about right?**

895 That sounds about right.

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

898 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  
899 one has to be careful of as you get older is you think you are both indispensable and sort of the  
900 founder of all modern knowledge. Right? I don't know where the idea comes from, so let's be clear  
901 about that. I'm enthusiastic about the idea, because it is clear to me with an illiterate—with a group  
902 of people who are fundamentally illiterate, and who all have access to little Japanese radios. When I  
903 —an interesting sidebar to give you an idea about this. When, on November whatever-it-was, the  
904 day Kennedy was shot, I was in a tiny village, right—I was as close to being in North Vietnam as I  
905 ever really wanted to be, and I was with a group of young men who I was sending out into North  
906 Vietnam to monitor the roads as they come into Laos and let us know—so like a road watch intel  
907 team. And we'd trained these guys. They had flash cards of different kinds of trucks and military  
908 vehicles. And I was in a little hut and all the Hmong were sleeping around me, and at about nine  
909 o'clock three of them came racing up, all with their radios, saying, 'Your president has been killed.'  
910 So here you are. I was about as far from civilization as you're going to get out there, and they all  
911 were in radio contact of some station, some—maybe it was a North Vietnamese station. That would  
912 have been closer, actually, than Laos, Vientiane. So the idea of connecting these people via radio  
913 made sense, both given the language problem—they all understood Lao. Whether or not they  
914 could—for the most part they could understand the language, whether they could read or write it,  
915 but certainly they could—and there was a war, of course, which I guess you know, between Father  
916 Bouchard and the Baptists about—

917

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

919

920 **(0:00) So a war between Father Bouchard and the Baptists. Like I said, I spoke to him, but**  
921 **he's a very plain-spoken person, very modest, doesn't really like to self-promote—**

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

925

926 **(0:32) [Chuckles] Just by giving you the right supplies, or...**

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

931

932 **(1:01) That had to be one of the creepiest experiences of your life, I would think.**

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

937 **Right.**

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

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

941 The Catholics and the Baptists, at least in my—in this instance. I can't speak for anyplace else. But  
942 they had competing alphabets, and they came to me for a judgment of Solomon, and I had to draw a

943 line on the map and say, ‘South of this line shall be Baptist territory; north of this line shall be  
944 Catholic.

945

946 **(2:22) Oh my goodness. Where roughly was that line?**

947 I have no idea.

948 **[Laughs] OK!**

949 I have no idea.

950 **Fair enough! [Laughs]**

951 We were getting on to something else, I’m sorry.

952

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

954

955 **(2:49) Oh! The radio station!**

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

968

969 **(4:55) So this was, as I understand it, more to do with uniting the different ethnic groups in  
970 Laos rather than dealing, for example, with clan divisions within the Hmong culture or...**

971 Absolutely. Much more the former than the latter.

972

973 [Interviewer scans his notes]

974

975 **(5:24) What do recall about the movement from—Pha Dong was the first main base, as I  
976 understand it, and it was kind of foggy and unreliable. And Pha Khao was near there,  
977 wasn’t it?**

978 Yeah, Pha Dong—Pha Dong was a rather small place, a rather—not very [substantial], but it was the  
979 place where the Hmong resistance began. And I don’t think it was particularly defensible. I never  
980 actually went to Pha Dong, as far as—I may be mistaken, but I can’t remember. Pha Khao, which  
981 sat behind it, and was sort of the—was an extraordinary place. It was like the interior of an old  
982 volcano, and the landing strip in the village sat up at about eight or nine thousand feet—no, 7,000—  
983 in the middle of this sort of lost, this lost volcano—I mean, if you want a romantic spot—and then  
984 with great big karst ridges going up on either side, and you’re on the shoulder of Phou Bia, which  
985 was the tallest mountain in Laos, and that was just under 10,000 feet. So you’re up pretty high, and  
986 because of the geological formation, it was susceptible to having—I mean, clouds would just come  
987 in and sit on top of it. So its weather was pretty iffy. So when we decided that when we needed to  
988 move, it was done largely because it would be more meteorologically reliable.

989

990 **(7:11) And so who was in the heli—I assume it was a helicopter, not a plane, that went**  
991 **searching for this site that became Long Cheng?**

992 [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  
993 lot of people claim to be the person who found Long Cheng, and I really don't know who can  
994 actually claim that, whether it's worthy of claim, anyway. I mean, it seems to me that everybody—  
995 the valleys were pretty well known by the people, and from Long Cheng you could see Pha Khao, so  
996 you weren't—you know, you were maybe five miles away. So I'm not sure it was much of a genius  
997 to decide that Long Cheng was a better place. It was lower; you were 3,000 feet, I think, and it was  
998 much more open in its configuration. So I'm not sure, but I'm sure somebody was in a plane at  
999 some point. And it may well have been Vang Pao and Bill Lair, for all I know. I just don't know  
1000 that.

1001  
1002 **(8:29) OK. Now there's one date I should have been a little more careful to look for. When**  
1003 **was—when did Pha Dong finally fall? When was it abandoned?**

1004 I have absolutely no idea.

1005 **OK. For some reason that was one date that I just didn't nail down.**

1006 My guess is it falls some time in 1961. When? I don't know.

1007 **Maybe it's just me looking back years later, but Vang Pao was, it seems, very upset at losing**  
1008 **it, and yet everyone seemed to say, 'This is'—in the long run anyway, 'an impractical site—**

1009 Yup.

1010 **—and we need to move.'**

1011 All of the above.

1012 **So I suppose it was more the emotional or the dishonorable aspect of having to abandon a**  
1013 **site to the enemy?**

1014 That's right. I would think that was probably 90% of it.

1015  
1016 **(9:17) Two things: one referred to by Roger and another by—is it Zalin Grant?**

1017 Zalin Grant.

1018 **Roger refers to a party that you attended at Pha Khao as an envoy of Pat Landry. You were**  
1019 **bidding farewell to some Special Forces people. They had replaced another group...that**  
1020 **had defended Pha Dong. They were leaving, to be replaced by others, and you saw it as a**  
1021 **moment when you were there, speaking with Vang Pao in French, and they saw you as this**  
1022 **sort of 'other guy' who obviously—**

1023  
1024 [Interviewer and Lawrence work to clarify the event that Hillmer is describing to him, which comes  
1025 from Roger Warner's use of items Lawrence wrote more than 30 years prior.]

1026  
1027 (10:18) There was a time, there was an evening, yes, I certainly do remember that, it was—and they  
1028 were called White Star at the time.

1029 **And maybe that's where I confused you; I said Special Forces.**

1030 Well, they were all the same difference. [Interviewer chuckles] And there was a White Star team  
1031 that did leave, and there was another White Star team that came in. In fact, when I go to Long  
1032 Cheng, I am with a White Star team who are very good. [Pauses] I'm a little worried now...I don't  
1033 know what—it's one of those guesswork things. I am sure that—the White Star guys were pissed  
1034 off at having to leave the country. They were pissed off. They did not like the idea that the Agency  
1035 would come in with a sort of Ivy League 22-year-old asshole. [Interviewer chuckles] I think there  
1036 was a lot of that. What do these guys think they're doing?

1037

1038 **(11:32) You hadn't paid your dues, so to speak.**  
1039 Yeah. And I wasn't career military, and all that kind of business. So there was certainly that aspect  
1040 to it. Did I seize upon the hiatus between one team and another? I'm sure I did! It sounds like I  
1041 was pretty clever. [Interviewer chuckles] But I don't—  
1042

1043 **(11:52) Well, I don't think he [Warner] was implying that you did that.**

1044 What?

1045 **I don't think he was implying that you did that.**

1046 Oh, he didn't?

1047 **He was simply saying that you were there as Pat Landry's representative. You were**  
1048 **speaking to Vang Pao, you were both speaking in French, and these guys sort of**  
1049 **understand, 'OK, this guy must be CIA, he must be somebody a cut above,' and they**  
1050 **seemed rather impressed by you. So who knows, maybe this is a story someone else told**  
1051 **about you. But the way Roger wrote about it I got the impression—**

1052 I don't think I could—I don't think I would have said that to Roger. The trouble is, I don't know  
1053 who else he would have gotten it from.

1054 **Well, I think he also remarked that you felt that respect was undeserved.**

1055 Yes, absolutely! [Interviewer chuckles] I think—well, let's set the record straight. Four years later I  
1056 would have said the respect was deserved. But certainly—when I first go up there as Pat's—I fly up,  
1057 I remember going up into Pha Khao, and I remember—I think I saw some photographs of some  
1058 White Star guys. And I certainly would—I deserved no respect at that point whatsoever. Later on, I  
1059 think I did.

1060 **Fair enough.**

1061 Yeah.

1062

1063 **(13:07) Well, the Zalin Grant reference I wanted to ask you about—he mentions a fellow**  
1064 **who's not in any of the other books that I've seen, and that's Stuart Methven.**

1065 Stu Methven.

1066 **And so if you could just help me understand his role in all of this, I'd be most grateful.**

1067 I'll try. Stu Methven is a paramilitary officer who is in Laos, I would guess, from 1960 through the  
1068 end of '61. I meet Stu later on in life, and I would hazard a guess that Stu Methven knew Vang Pao,  
1069 and in effect made—I think he was, you might call a catalyst for the whole thing. I think he's one of  
1070 the—and I suspect he never got much credit for it. 'Cause I remember him coming here and—he  
1071 visited me here one summer, and he was very embittered. And I suspect he had a reason to be. I  
1072 think he [Coughs]—Stu Methven and a guy named Tom Fosmire...

1073 **Hmm...I've heard the name.**

1074 ...were early paramilitary types working in Laos and/or Thailand, looking for assets, looking for—I  
1075 guess the word had gotten out, probably, that there was interest in the government—the US  
1076 government—about doing something in Laos. Was there anything worth working with? And I  
1077 think Methven and/or Fosmire, or both, sent the word to Lair, 'cause Lair was, at that point, really  
1078 not involved, and sent the word to Lair, 'You'd better meet this guy [Vang Pao], 'cause he's  
1079 impressive. He's got his people together, he's trying to form a resistance group and they're using old  
1080 flintlock rifles' and whatever. So I would think that that—I think the first meeting between Vang  
1081 Pao and Lair is probably set up by Methven, although that is not—I have no real knowledge of that.  
1082

1083 **(15:44) Grant seems to suggest that in the way he writes about it.**

1084 Yeah.



1085 **And it's interesting, too—I had a student who spoke with Vang Pao. And the way he**  
1086 **described his initial meeting with ‘the United States,’ as he put it, was the same kind of**  
1087 **language that Grant used to talk about Methven [contacting Vang Pao]: ‘Oh, what do you**  
1088 **need? What can we drop off for you?’—just little things that sort of help forge that**  
1089 **relationship.**

1090 I think that's probably right, because I—this is all long before Pha Dong (or is it just about the same  
1091 time as...?) but this is before I certainly get involved. And there's very little history that I read or can  
1092 read about it before I get there.

1093

1094 **(16:34) One of the understandings, whether implied or imagined or real, is that the United**  
1095 **States did or did not make promises to Vang Pao about what would happen if the whole**  
1096 **operation went south. And Bill Lair, who ought to know, of course, says, ‘No, no promises**  
1097 **were made’—**

1098 I would agree. I don't—you know, we certainly talked a lot about it, but it was usually in the terms  
1099 of how that kind of perception would guide you towards a particular present policy. In other words,  
1100 the idea that this thing might go south, the idea that the Americans might not be here in six months,  
1101 informed and made a difference as to what kinds of programs, what kinds of projects you were  
1102 going to get involved in now, right?

1103 **Sure.**

1104 So I don't think—and Vang Pao himself was of such a kind of leadership where he wasn't going to  
1105 entertain that as something that he ought to spend a lot of time worrying about. I don't—but there  
1106 was not, if I understand—I don't think there—there certainly wasn't [that kind of understanding]  
1107 when I was there.

1108

1109 **(18:05) If you wouldn't mind going to post-Geneva Accords 1962,**

1110 [Yes]

1111 **The agreement's made and—I've read this, I don't know if you were aware if this or not,**  
1112 **that Averill Harriman was literally negotiating with the Soviets, and [the Soviets] said, ‘OK,**  
1113 **you can leave two CIA people behind’ in one way or another. Anyway, the call is made, two**  
1114 **are left, and you're one of those two.**

1115 [Yes]

1116 **Do you remember that conversation with Bill Lair, or at least anything about that phase in**  
1117 **which you were suddenly told, ‘You're one of two people who are staying,’ and you were told**  
1118 **you were going to be Tony Poe's—I don't know if ‘boss’ is the right word, but it sounds like**  
1119 **in a way, at least—**

1120 No, I wasn't his boss.

1121 **OK.**

1122 No, no, it was quite the opposite.

1123 **OK, well see, Bill Lair said the opposite. He said you were. [Laughs]**

1124 No, in effect that's how it happened, but when we start, Tony's 20 years my senior. Tony is—and at  
1125 least four or five grades ahead of me. The conversation—this all just didn't happen overnight.

1126 From almost the first—well, I'd say from the spring of '62 'til it actually—the signing occurred in  
1127 the fall, we were—this was a topic of discussion. What was the Agency going to do, what were the  
1128 ground rules? And I think by the time it's actually signed, we've already figured out what the impact  
1129 is going to be, and who the people are who are going to implement it. Bill was—I mean, I think  
1130 whether that was—whether they got it 100% right, I don't know, but I think they must have gotten  
1131 it pretty close, because I certainly go into Long Cheng three or four months before the signing of  
1132 the agreement, and my role, my job is to find a suitable open space to building a landing field, and a

1133 place where it is easy to get aircraft in and out, and where we can do some camouflaging of what  
1134 we—of any building that goes on there, because we expect the International [Pauses] whatever  
1135 commission, it's called—the white helicopters—  
1136

1137 **(20:42) Oh, the ICC.**

1138 ICC—International Control Commission, something like that—is going to—they'd have a little  
1139 trouble finding us. So this is not something that's just dropped like a bomb. And when we go—and  
1140 I—see, I think I'm ready for it, 'cause I think Bill has already told me or briefed me about it long  
1141 before it happens. And he puts Tony in there because of Tony's experience, more than anything  
1142 else. And I think he [Coughs] was perfectly prepared to have Tony run the thing, except Tony had a  
1143 real alcohol problem. And Tony didn't want to write [Interviewer laughs]—Tony didn't really want  
1144 to do anything except go out and shoot people. And [Pauses] Bill and Pat were no fools, and I think  
1145 they knew pretty much whatever it said on paper, what was going to happen. And so we sort of  
1146 survived together, Tony and I, and we [Pauses]—it wasn't—you know, Tony and I got along  
1147 perfectly well, except he—because he didn't get in my way and I didn't get in his. And the only time  
1148 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  
1149 dry season it gets well below freezing up there. It's cold! And his bunk was on the other side of the  
1150 stove, and we'd get that stove running so that it was pretty red hot. And my job, on many a night,  
1151 was to take Tony in a fireman's carry—which is not easy, 'cause Tony was very strong and very  
1152 big—and get him over the red hot stove and into his bunk, in sort of generally the right direction.  
1153 But it really was a fact—all I had to really do was get him up and over the stove and just hope for  
1154 the best, and then he—and let him take care of himself. He... [Pauses] because I didn't mind  
1155 writing, and because I didn't mind kind of doing what I was doing, I think the whole thing slightly  
1156 changed fairly rapidly over time, and then Tony, I think, got really—I think Tony's nose got out of  
1157 joint, so that later on, when the fighting started again, and by that time, people had gotten into the  
1158 practice of coming to see me and not him, and I'm sure that's what made him—made his life  
1159 unhappy.  
1160

1161 **(24:14) And the fact that you could speak French,**

1162 Yes.

1163 **and therefore were close to Vang Pao,**

1164 Yes.

1165 **And the two of them seemed to have a rather stormy relationship.**

1166 Yeah, I think that's right. I think that's safe to say. [Interviewer chuckles] I mean, I think he  
1167 respected Tony. But Vang Pao was very shrewd, and he couldn't use Tony very well, and he could  
1168 use me. He knew he could get to Bill Lair through me, and I could get—you know, we both used  
1169 each other, and I don't think there was anything wrong in that.  
1170

1171 **(24:52) So this is a friendly relationship, [Interviewer is describing VP but is unclear, and**  
1172 **Lawrence thinks he's describing Poe] but one in which both of you choose, essentially, not**  
1173 **to fire your guns at each other. He's not doing anything too radical; he's passing things by**  
1174 **you, and you control the purse strings in a way, and—**

1175 Sort of.

1176 **At least you can contact Bill and say, 'Here's what's going on,' and if it's not good...**

1177 Yeah, Bill would ask me, and I would be—because I liked Tony. I respected him for what he had  
1178 done. He was tough to handle. He was not a team player. He was a loner, he was a recon, he  
1179 was—you know, he was one of these guys you want to send out in the jungle with nothing,  
1180 [Interviewer chuckles] and he'll live off the land, and he'll get you 500 ears from the enemy. I mean,

1181 he did a lot of that sort of stuff. So there was a lot of bravado associated with him. And the pilots  
1182 loved him because he—god, could he talk. [Interviewer chuckles] But the point was that 90%,  
1183 most of what he said was actually true! I mean, he actually—if you wanted a story of an  
1184 extraordinarily...[Pauses] There's a figure in [Pauses to think] I think his name is Moon. [Pauses]  
1185 Peter? I'll think of it. He's a novelist. [Pauses] Matheson, Peter Matheson. And he wrote a book  
1186 about an insurgency in South America, and there's a character named Moon in that, and I've got to  
1187 go find that and re-read it. But it struck me—I remember reading it out there, and it struck me as a  
1188 beautiful parallel description of Tony Poe. Tony was an interesting guy. I'm glad—I think Bill did a  
1189 very good job in getting him out of there, because I think we probably—we would not have—we  
1190 left on very amicable terms as far as I recall.

1191  
1192 **(27:14) Well he had—I suppose you could say it was out of necessity, but he had, at least on**  
1193 **one occasion, literally gotten into the middle of a gunfight, hadn't he?...I thought there was**  
1194 **a case in which he was wounded because he was—**

1195 Yes, I think that came later. I think that comes later when the attack on Sam Neua occurs. I think it  
1196 was at Sam Neua province. And he did, he did get wounded, but I—and I'm not quite sure what—  
1197 but I think he is brought back.. He has been up in the north in the Yao people, and then when this  
1198 big offensive starts in Sam Neua, I think he comes back to help out.

1199  
1200 **(28:16) OK. [Pauses] Actually, the comment I made about you not firing your guns at each**  
1201 **other, I actually meant with Vang Pao—that in a way he was, he was the leader of the**  
1202 **Hmong who maybe could have, on his own, run off and initiated some offensive, but he was**  
1203 **running it by you and making sure that it was going to be given some kind of approval by**  
1204 **his friends. And your control over him, whether it was—**

1205 Oh, I see what you mean.

1206 **Whether it was his opium trade or whatever, was that you were Bill Lair's emissary and you**  
1207 **had some control over what he was going to be given.**

1208 Yes. Yes, yes, all of the above. But the question is to what extent did he conceive of these as—the  
1209 situation as limitations and to what extent did he—that was just what he thought should be done at  
1210 that particular time? I think later on—I think his sense of grandiosity got the better of him, and  
1211 unfortunately I wasn't around at that point to say, 'We can't do it.'

1212  
1213 **(29:33) Well, this is another question I asked Bill Lair. I said, 'When Vint Lawrence left, it**  
1214 **seems to me that while you had other people who came in, that there was really no one like**  
1215 **Vint who had that kind of relationship, and who could sort of dissuade him or bring him**  
1216 **back down to earth in the same way. I'm not sure he agreed with me, but it seemed that**  
1217 **way from the reading I've done. It seems like you at least in part concur with that.**

1218 [Pauses] I would say—I would think that yes, that was true to a considerable extent. However,  
1219 Vang Pao was smart enough—I had a guy who took over for me, a guy named Jonathan Randall.  
1220 And Jon didn't have the language skills or he didn't have other skills. And my sense is that Vang  
1221 Pao, when he needed to, would just go over—would say, 'I want to see Bill.' And Randall was not  
1222 about to say, 'Well, you can't see Bill, you have to see me.' Or if he did, maybe that happened once.  
1223 And then when Vang Pao and Bill did get together, Vang Pao made it clear—so I [Pauses] again, I'm  
1224 unclear in my own mind the extent of what my power actually was. I think I wielded it wisely, I  
1225 think it was there. I don't—I would be uneasy sort of standing up and saying, 'I could tell Vang Pao  
1226 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  
1227 much more subtle than that. He would propose. We would discuss. I would check with Bill or Pat.  
1228 I would come back with suggestions. We would discuss again, and he would propose—you know, I

1229 mean, I would leave the final—the final implementation of how he wanted to do a particular thing  
1230 up to him. But we did talk a lot. In those discussions was I able to shape what his plan was? I  
1231 suspect I might have, on the margins. But I would be loath to say that I was the brains behind this  
1232 stuff.

1233

1234 **(32:17) Fair enough. [Pauses] So did Lair sneak into Laos often, or was your**  
1235 **communication almost entirely by radio and through impersonal channels?**

1236 He would come maybe once a month or something like that—or when things started to kind of  
1237 loosen up a little bit, I often would go down to Udorn for the night, and Bill and Pat and I would go  
1238 out for dinner, and we'd just go through a raft of problems and things that I needed—that they  
1239 needed to know. And he would come up—I mean, it wasn't that he didn't but I think that I  
1240 probably went down to Udorn more frequently, because, you see, at that point, Bill was running  
1241 stuff in the northwest with the Yao, and the Hmong, he was also—he and Pat were also responsible  
1242 for trying to get road watch teams from central Laos and southern Laos into the Ho Chi Minh Trail.  
1243 He had a pretty full plate. So my sense is that he figured between Vang Pao and myself, we had it  
1244 sort of under control, and he didn't need to watch this. I know he was very worried about how  
1245 Americans and Lao—in the south the teams were American and Lao, albeit a better, by and large a  
1246 better class of Lao soldier than you found generally in the north. But it was still...[Pauses] It was  
1247 awfully hard for them to get those programs up and running in an effective way. And I suspect that  
1248 that absorbed a great deal of their time. So as long as we were seen to be puttering along fairly well,  
1249 and he could—and I think Bill relied on me never to lie to him, and never—and to let him know  
1250 everything that was going on, and I think I did. I mean, I probably...[Laughs] Many years later there  
1251 was a CIA reunion on the Flathead Lake in Montana. And I said to Annie, 'We'll go to one of these  
1252 things.' They happen every year. It's a tedious and sad event, because it's these old, by and large, air  
1253 operations guys, none of whom I really knew. But the air operations teams were substantial. There  
1254 was a lot more people in—doing these air operations than there ever was of those of us on the  
1255 ground. I mean, there were, what, maybe four or five people on the ground. And it was a big  
1256 party—it was about 400 people. I knew five. I knew Bill Lair, one of my classmates who is in the  
1257 South, a couple of other people. I just didn't know very many people. I mean, everybody knew who  
1258 I was, but I didn't know them. And this young woman came up—or not so young—this woman  
1259 came up to me and she said, 'I just want to look you in the eye.' I said, 'OK. Why do you need to  
1260 do that?' She said, 'You wrote the longest, most'— she said, 'My vocabulary today consists of the  
1261 language that you kept using in your messages.' [Interviewer chuckles] She said, 'It was in English,  
1262 but I had to use a dictionary... [Both laugh] Ask Annie—I mean, she was there! Annie came to this  
1263 thing, [Laughing] and she remembers this look of absolute astonishment in this woman's face as she  
1264 said, [With anguish:] 'I had to type out every single message you wrote! And Jesus, you never  
1265 stopped!' [Laughs]

1266

1267 **(36:29) Now this is something I'm—I really don't—were the reports that you sent—**

1268 There were two kinds. Initially, when we were in there black in the first six months to a year, it's all  
1269 by radio transmission, because there's very little air traffic landing at Long Cheng and then taking off  
1270 and going to Udorn.

1271 **And this is largely intelligence that you've received from PARU teams in the—**

1272 No, I—well I had two sources. I had [Pauses] oh, I remember! Those people we trained at Hua  
1273 Hin were called SOT teams—Special Operation Teams. So they were modeled on PARU. And we  
1274 had those radios spread out all over the north. We had about 35 of them or something like that.  
1275 The number—don't hold me to the number, but there were a lot. There were maybe six PARU  
1276 teams that were not (\*\*\*)—maybe even fewer than that. But every night every one of these Special

1277 Operation Teams would send in their message of what the activity during the day was. It would be  
1278 decoded, then it would be given—it would be in Lao. It would be given to a translator, who would  
1279 translate it into English. I would take all those messages and do a wrap-up summary of the day's  
1280 activities and send it to Lair, where—by encryption, every night. So I kept the operating team up  
1281 half the night encoding my messages. Later on, we would have pouches, and that was better for me,  
1282 because I found—I kept getting gigged for writing messages that were too long and I was keeping  
1283 people up too late at night. [Interviewer chuckles] So in the end, I would write these long memos,  
1284 which were then typed up and sent on in a pouch to Washington, in which I tried to give a fairly  
1285 accurate read on the politics, on what was happening, not necessarily in terms of which enemy  
1286 battalion was facing us here, but in the momentum of what I thought—the critical momentum of  
1287 where the project was going politically within the Lao system, where there's a coup—I mean, there  
1288 were coup rumors all the time—opium, allegiance to the King, philosophy of how you go into a  
1289 village and how you connect it to the larger entity. And I wrote a lot! And this poor lady was  
1290 responsible for typing up all of these and sending them on. [Interviewer chuckles] And she was—  
1291 she said she learned a great deal of... [Pauses] She said it was quite an education.

1292

1293 **(40:01) She improved her grammar tremendously.**

1294 Not her grammar, no.

1295 **Her vocabulary, pardon me. [Laughs]**

1296 No, no, vocabulary. I'm a terrible grammarian. No, I don't do that. I don't spell well and I don't  
1297 punctuate well. [Interviewer chuckles] But I can spin out the words.

1298

1299 **(40:21) So until the time that you had the pouch, these messages were going straight to**  
1300 **Lair.**

1301 No, they all went straight to Lair, even at the end. They always went to Lair. Lair read them in  
1302 whatever way he wanted to. He could either read them in a typed-up manuscript, pouch, or he  
1303 probably read them in my longhand. But I would write them in longhand and send them on down,  
1304 and they were then typed and cleaned up, and I suppose vetted for—you know, everyone had a code  
1305 name, and Lawrence was Mark—my name was a wonderful name. It was 'another dispatch from—  
1306 unforgettable dispatch from Mark W. Cechotd. [Interviewer tries to repeat the last name] C-E-C-H-  
1307 O-T-D was my name. [Interviewer chuckles] And [Laughing]—and then they were read with great  
1308 anticipation at the Friday briefings or something like that.

1309

1310 **(41:23) So...from beginning to end these things were also read by Colby, or only once the**  
1311 **pouches started?**

1312 Well, I don't know. I don't know what—certainly I was told later on that Colby found my—he  
1313 thought my—because I not only put in hard, what I thought was hard information, but I thought it  
1314 important to put in the color or the atmosphere of what the situation was like, because they needed  
1315 to understand the conditions under which we were operating, and what were the nuances of what  
1316 was happening. Because I felt we had a huge investment in this, and I think later on Colby said  
1317 those were probably the best things I did.

1318 **So perhaps that's what got you the gig writing 'Journey from Pha Dong'?**

1319 Maybe. He knew I could write.

1320

1321 **(42:24) For many of us, we can't even imagine what it would be like—**

1322 [It is announced that dinner will be ready in five minutes]

1323 **—what it would be like to live out in the jungles of Laos pretty much alone, or just with**  
1324 **Tony, other than your Hmong companions, for what, almost two years?**

1325 Pretty much, yeah—a good part. I would say it was two years.

1326 **What was that like? I'm sure you could address that from a variety of perspectives, but for**  
1327 **those of us who have no idea, or perhaps the wrong idea—**

1328 Well, [Pauses] I had graduated from University with a severe—a tremendous appreciation of the  
1329 education I did not get. I mean, I said to you earlier, I felt I was a privileged—I had a privileged  
1330 upbringing. And one of the things that Laos did for me on a personal basis, for which I am forever  
1331 grateful, is make me understand just how dumb I was. And to the extent that I have an education, it  
1332 was the nights I spent reading Toynbee, [Chuckles]—I had a deal with a book store in Washington  
1333 that they would send out books that I wanted, and I had worked out this rig—there was no  
1334 electricity, so I worked out this rig where I had candles, and I had taken the inside of tins, and  
1335 beaten them out so I had little reflector mirrors behind the candles. And I would sit there for four  
1336 or five hours every night reading. And I read by candle—you know, this is sort of a very Abraham  
1337 Lincoln idea. [Interviewer chuckles] And the books you see on our shelves in there that are  
1338 wrapped in brown paper are the ones that I brought back. But I read a lot. And I figured this was  
1339 an extraordinary experience that wasn't going to happen to very many people, or to me ever again,  
1340 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,  
1341 and I had a lot of friends. I really had good friends in the Thai group that was with me. And I really  
1342 had a lot of good friends in the Hmong. So was I lonely? Sure! I [Pauses] I didn't get laid every  
1343 day, I had no 'honey,' which is probably a really good idea given what I did afterwards. [Interviewer  
1344 chuckles] You know, I just realized I was in a cocoon, and it was a cocoon that was very exciting,  
1345 and there were just hundreds of people who would have given their eye teeth to be where I was.  
1346 And I just lived, ate, slept, that whole experience. I just thought, 'You're not going to get this one  
1347 again.' I mean, I sort of knew in my senses, 'This is not something you're going to find [again].' So  
1348 I [Pauses] I can't really say that I was lonely at all. The Hmong kept trying to give me women,  
1349 [Interviewer chuckles] and Jiggs Weldon was very clever, and he said, 'Don't go there.' [Laughs]  
1350 'Don't go there' And he said, 'Medically, don't go there.' I saw a lot of guys with some various  
1351 forms of syphilis which weren't very pleasant. And politically, it really made no sense whatsoever.  
1352 Vang Pao would always say—he had five wives, and I said, 'VP, if you give me one, I'm going to  
1353 have to take four others just to make everyone happy,' and I said, 'I can't do that.' So they called me  
1354 'the Prince.' That was Vang Pao's word; he said, 'You're the Prince.' I said, 'What do you mean by  
1355 that?' He said, 'Well you don't need what the rest of us need.' [Interviewer laughs] I said, 'Well,  
1356 that's not actually, strictly true!' [Both laugh] So there was a lot of sexual banter back and forth, but  
1357 I was pretty good. I never touched a Hmong girl. I saved all my lust for various houses in Udorn,  
1358 and luckily survived those. But I really—I really found the whole—you know, you'd wake up—it  
1359 was an extraordinary place! You wake up at four o'clock in the morning and you—the sun would  
1360 just be coming up, and you'd watch the women going up in the fields to work, and you'd hear the  
1361 sounds of the village, and you realized you had to go to this place, this place, this place, and you had  
1362 to check on that. You just had a list of 50 things to do and you were only going to get through ten  
1363 of them. And every day was like that, seven days a week. So you didn't have much time to be  
1364 lonely.

1365  
1366 **(47:59) You certainly weren't bored.**

1367 You certainly weren't bored, no.

1368  
1369 **(48:03) Well you mentioned the 22-foot tapeworm, and I think you said it was also close to**  
1370 **six months before you had any regular contact or maybe supplies dropped to you from**  
1371 **outside—**

1372 I think that's right. I mean—but that was where Father Bouchard came in. See, I had the tapeworm  
1373 when I was still living in Vientiane. And the reason I got the tapeworm was the very first night...

1374 **Oh, the steak tartar...**

1375 [Yes]. The Kobe beef from the back yard, which is a dumb-ass thing to do. [Interviewer laughs]  
1376 And then it didn't—they got—and when it all came out, it came out all except the head. I mean,  
1377 that's what tapeworms do. If you get sick enough, it will just drop off what it doesn't need. And  
1378 then it starts to grow again. And then I went through an American medically-approved method,  
1379 which was high doses of Atabrin, which turns you jaundiced—I mean, you turn yellow, your shit  
1380 turns white and your pee is dark. And that didn't work. And then I go up country, and about  
1381 [Pauses] some time in the fall, I know it's back in there. And Father comes—stops in, 'cause we  
1382 have this talk about—

1383  
1384 [Dinner is ready. The recorder is turned off, new track begins]

1385  
1386 **(0:00) Well, we had left off with the story of Father Bouchard coming to your rescue, as I**  
1387 **recall.** [Anne Garrels laughs]

1388 Yes. Well, the good Father heard my case, and said he knew how to take care of it, but he had to go  
1389 visit some colleagues down south and he would return in a number of weeks, which he did, and he  
1390 gave me a little aluminum vial, tube, and at the bottom were eight tiny little black pills. And he said,  
1391 'Take one a day for the next week or so,' and he said, 'You'll be cured.' I did, and I was. And I  
1392 don't know this for a fact, but when Annie and I were walking around Angkor Wat a number of  
1393 years later, in '99, we had a wonderful guide who was telling about the various trees and things like  
1394 that, and he was explaining about the use of strychnine, and the nut of the strychnine tree, and how,  
1395 if you want to kill someone, you basically give him the whole nut. But its use in homeopathic  
1396 medicine was extensive. And there was an entire science of how much you should be given for  
1397 whatever ails you. And I suspect I was given a very small dose of strychnine. And whatever it was,  
1398 it—that's all supposition. But he described what it looked like (because I got rather interested), and  
1399 it reminded me of what the pills were like that Father Bouchard gave me. So that's my little story of  
1400 Father Bouchard.

1401  
1402 **(1:59) Now we'll get to the big event where you have to leave the country because you're**  
1403 **sick a little down the road. But just in general, were there other hazards of living out in the**  
1404 **jungle like that?**

1405 No, actually it was remarkably benign. I mean, everyone thought my life was extremely hazardous in  
1406 general, and of course I never moved without a number of very fierce little tigers who went with me.  
1407 I remember—when I was explaining to you when I heard about Kennedy's death, I was surrounded  
1408 by the toughest group of people I—no one was going to get to me. And they liked—we got along  
1409 very well, and they were—obviously Vang Pao had given the word out that 'This guy needs to be—  
1410 you'd better—nothing should happen to him.' And so I always had at least one or two with me no  
1411 matter where I went, and they just said, 'We're here to make sure that everything's all right.' The  
1412 food was really quite edible, was perfectly adequate. Clearly if you ate with Vang Pao you got the  
1413 best of what was offered. It was very simple. You ate soup, sticky rice, more soup, and more sticky  
1414 rice, and [Pauses] that was about it. And it got you through. But you got greens, and they were  
1415 awfully good, they were well-prepared. And often—not always, but often, there were little bits of  
1416 some kind of meat floating around. And so I lost a lot of weight. I was, what with the—I am 200  
1417 pounds now; I was 40 pounds lighter [Interviewer whistles]—no, 35. I came back at about 165, 170.

1418  
1419 **(4:02) On a 6' 3" frame.**

1420 Yeah.  
1421 **That's pretty light.**  
1422 Yeah. Yeah. But I think a lot of that had to do with the very—I got the hepatitis and other things.  
1423 But by and large it was adequate. And I got pretty used to it, and the only thing I never got used to  
1424 was hot Thai sauce, so I never...[Interviewer laughs]  
1425  
1426 **(4:33) Just rounding back for one second. We were talking about these reports you wrote**  
1427 **that both Lair and Colby saw. Did you ever get any feedback from Colby other than when**  
1428 **you saw him—**  
1429 I got nothing—later on I got feedback that they had indeed been appreciated. Annie, what was the  
1430 story—Sweetie? When we were at the CIA reunion and that secretary comes up—  
1431  
1432 AG: [Laughs] And she says, 'Oh, you're Vint Lawrence.' She said, 'I was the one who had to  
1433 transcribe all—I mean, 'and decode all of your messages.' She said, 'They were the longest anybody  
1434 in the Agency ever wrote!' [Lawrence and interviewer laugh] I mean, the word was out: 'If you're  
1435 on, don't get assigned to Vint Lawrence, because it will be pages upon pages upon pages!'  
1436  
1437 VL: She was funny  
1438  
1439 AG: He was writing his doctoral dissertation without knowing it.  
1440  
1441 VL: Yeah.  
1442  
1443 **(5:37) If only someone could have handed it all over to you. Well, I suppose—you said you**  
1444 **kept copies of most of this, right?**  
1445 VL: Yes, I do. Yeah. By and large they're very dated.  
1446  
1447 AG: Well, they're very detailed.  
1448  
1449 **That makes them important historical artifacts, though.**  
1450 VL: Yeah. They're dated, and some day, if you have—if the Hmong Center—when I end up trying  
1451 to figure out where my remains and papers should go,—  
1452  
1453 AG: So to speak.  
1454  
1455 VL: I'll send them out to you.  
1456  
1457 **(6:13) Yeah, we'll hope the 'remains' issue is a long, long, long-from-now question.**  
1458 [Garrels laughs]  
1459  
1460 VL: No, but I mean, it's been something—I don't want to send them to the Agency, for god's sake.  
1461  
1462 **(6:21) No, I'm—I know they would be thrilled to have them. In fact, I'll leave you one of**  
1463 **my cards, and—**  
1464 Sure.  
1465 **No, they would, I'm sure—**  
1466 When I'm *in extremis*, be sure to come back and get here before everyone else gets here.  
1467 **All right. Well, I'm sure—**



1468 I mean, I think that—I mean, it would be—  
1469 **I have it on record now. [Chuckling]**  
1470 VL: It would be—  
1471  
1472 AG: It would be a great place.  
1473  
1474 VL: No, it would be a great place to have it. It would make sense.  
1475  
1476 **(6:43) I was talking to you earlier about this ‘Evening with Bill Lair’ thing. I think it would**  
1477 **be great if you came and conducted the conversation with him, if you’d be available. I**  
1478 **mean, we haven’t—this is just an idea I have, it’s not gone any further than that.**  
1479 AG: I think it would be great.  
1480 **But I think it’d be a brilliant evening.**  
1481 VL: Well, when are you doing the evening?  
1482 **Like I said, it’s literally just an idea I had, and I talked to Bill Lair about it three days ago.**  
1483 VL: Uh-huh.  
1484 **So I’ll take it home, and I’ll—I mean, Lee Pao would be insane not to—**  
1485 VL: Now what’s Lee Pao’s middle name?  
1486 **Lee Pao Xiong.**  
1487 VL: He’s Lee Pao Xiong. ‘Cause I knew a guy called Lee Vang Pao.  
1488 **OK.**  
1489 (\*\*\*) I don’t—you know, I—when we were in Bangkok, we met some of the Hmong who were  
1490 there. I, with very, very, very few exceptions, those names and those faces have slipped, to be  
1491 honest with you.  
1492  
1493 **(7:46) That’s quite all right. [Pauses] Well, I’d like to ask you about the event that’s**  
1494 **repeated more than once in Roger Warner’s book, and that you witnessed at least once, and**  
1495 **that’s the shooting of the moon.**  
1496 Oh!  
1497 **What was the story behind that, what cultural significance, if any, did you derive from it**  
1498 **once you talked to people about it? And I seem to recall Tony Poe complained once that**  
1499 **you were wasting ammunition by giving the [Hmong bullets to engage in this ritual].**  
1500 Oh, I’m sure he did. I’m sure. But I suspect—it is perfectly conceivable that Tony was too hung  
1501 over, [Interviewer laughs] and this was an ex post facto criticism. The irony for me was that  
1502 [Pauses] I had gotten—I had drunk—the night before, I had had—I had been at a *baci* [Hmong  
1503 string-tying ceremony] for somebody, I don’t remember who, and I had drunk very bad hard  
1504 liquor—rice wine. And my face that morning—I could hardly see out of my eyes because I was  
1505 so—there’s a photograph of me somewhere, and I am just a horror, because my whole face is  
1506 puffed up like a balloon, and so I’m not seeing very well. And about 11 o’clock, I notice it all getting  
1507 darker, and I think I’m losing my fucking mind, because everything else that day had gone pretty  
1508 badly. And so it was with some relief that I—I had heard that this—that was the first eclipse I had  
1509 experienced out there. And so it did get dark, and—it wasn’t a full eclipse, but it was three-quarters  
1510 partial. So it got pretty dark. And then the firing started. But by that time, I knew what was  
1511 happening, and I knew what was going to happen, so the shooting at the moon or shooting at the  
1512 eclipse or the sun was—it was just a great cultural event. And so the sun came back and we all  
1513 plodded on our day, as I recall.  
1514  
1515 AG: And your eyesight returned.

1516  
1517 VL: And my eyesight returned, but not that quickly, as I recall. [Interviewer chuckles] But, of  
1518 course, the moon or the sun had spirits, and if you scared the spirits away—I think it was  
1519 theoretically a frog, or something like that [that was consuming the moon/sun and needed to be  
1520 scared off with gunfire]  
1521  
1522 **(10:26) Yeah, that's what I recall., yeah.**  
1523 A huge frog eats it and you scare it away, and then everything's all right.  
1524  
1525 AG: I want to ask a question that I think would make—  
1526  
1527 [Interviewer more than happily cedes the questioning to Anne Garrels]  
1528  
1529 —to get at his perceptions, because a lot of the questions that he's been asked a million times, and  
1530 he's—you know...But when you first get up there and live with the Hmong, what are your first  
1531 impressions?  
1532  
1533 VL: My first impressions...Well, it's a—you know, I'm enormously chuffed. I mean, here I am, this  
1534 young kid. I passed the Bill Lair, Tony Poe, Vang Pao, Pat Landry tests. I've been given an  
1535 enormous, incredible sort of—  
1536  
1537 AG: But why have you passed the Vang Pao test?  
1538  
1539 VL: Well, 'cause he let me come. He—  
1540  
1541 AG: But why did he let you come? Go back earlier, then.  
1542  
1543 VL: Well, I think he lets me come because I'm the best of a bad lot, to be honest with you.  
1544 [Hillmer chuckles] I mean, I speak French, I was relatively personable, I think. We get along, and  
1545 he thought, 'Well, I can work with this kid.' But I'm a kid—you know, I'm 22 years old.  
1546  
1547 AG: But when you first meet the Hmong—I mean, whatever that means.  
1548  
1549 VL: When I first meet the Hmong.  
1550  
1551 AG: What's your first encounter with—not just—I mean, Vang Pao is one thing, and the Hmong,  
1552 as—  
1553  
1554 VL: OK, the Hmong strike me as a truly [Pauses] esoteric, wild, marvelous group of people. I  
1555 mean, the men are extraordinarily handsome, but in a very carved, Oriental manner. They obviously  
1556 have incredible endurance, they're incredibly strong, they're very slight—I mean, they're not big  
1557 people by a long shot, but they're large—but you would see occasionally six-foot—there were  
1558 Hmong who were six feet, and just extraordinarily beautiful people, and unbelievably stoic. And  
1559 they'd gone through all kinds of stuff, and I thought, 'Gosh, maybe I can be of help here,' so... I  
1560 was going to be there for two years, and—  
1561  
1562 AG: Where was—what was your first meeting with them?  
1563

1564 VL: My first meeting? [Pauses] Well, my first meeting of seeing Hmong in village was probably in  
1565 Pha Khao, where it was the first headquarters. And then we moved over to Long Cheng, and I ran  
1566 into my first group of truly—well, you might say ‘wild Hmong.’  
1567

1568 AG: What do you mean by that?  
1569

1570 VL: Well, these were people, these were farmers who lived in this isolated valley, this Shangri-La of  
1571 a valley, isolated from the war, isolated from other tribes and other Hmong, leading a very quiet  
1572 agricultural life. They had a—everyone had animals and they had, they were growing crops. It just  
1573 struck me as being [Pause] close—very idyllic in many ways. I mean, this—it met, if you will, a  
1574 Westerner’s preconception of what mountain people in Southeast Asia should look like and what  
1575 they should be doing. Now that all changed very quickly. Those families, those 14 families or 14  
1576 people who lived in that valley were quickly subsumed by all the rest of us who moved in *en masse*.  
1577 So I don’t—you know, I’m not sure I ever—four years later I recognized any of the original  
1578 inhabitants, ‘cause it was 45,000 people.  
1579

1580 AG: My last question, at least that I’ve got is—I mean, I know when you would walk through Long  
1581 Cheng,—

1582 VL: Yes.

1583 AG: —when it grew up—

1584 VL: Yes.

1585 AG: How do you think the people in Long Cheng looked at you? Who did they think you were?  
1586

1587 VL: I think they saw me as Vang Pao’s special friend, and I was accorded extraordinary—I was  
1588 greeted... [Pauses] And I knew a lot of them by name. It’s sort of like walking around Norfolk.  
1589 [Hillmer chuckles, having followed Lawrence and his dogs on a walk around the neighborhood that  
1590 afternoon.]  
1591

1592 AG: How many people were in there—but in Long Cheng, at the end?  
1593

1594 VL: [There] were forty [-five thousand]—but the 45,000, there was an enormous refugee  
1595 community to the east of the town, that I rarely went to, and they were mostly not Hmong, they  
1596 were Lao Theung. So when I would go through the Hmong village, I would recognize faces, and I  
1597 would recognize a few of them, but they would all come up and we’d have—they were always asking  
1598 me, they were always trying to push—you know, free meals, free women, free anything. They were  
1599 always—they always wanted to give me gifts. I could have lived in the village and never paid for a  
1600 thing. ‘Cause I think they felt that I had—I was somewhat responsible for the fact that they were all  
1601 relatively safe.  
1602

1603 AG: You didn’t get a sense that there were people in that—of course, I’m coming out of  
1604 Baghdad—that there were people in that village who wanted to stab you in the back?  
1605

1606 VL: No. Absolutely not. I never, never once had that suspicion. Never. Never. Never. I never  
1607 watched my back. I never had to watch my back. Didn’t have that worry at all. Now, I don’t know  
1608 what would have happened if I’d been—stayed another two years. I don’t know. I’m not sure.  
1609

1610 AG: Excuse me.  
1611

1612 **Oh, thank you very much! Stop by again any time! [Chuckles]**

1613 [Anne Garrels leaves the room]

1614

1615 **(17:07) Now, there are stories going back to the days of the French that the Hmong also**  
1616 **moved remarkably quickly through the jungle, especially for people of their size. Did you**  
1617 **ever observe—?**

1618 Yes. The Hmong could walk through the jungle faster than anybody I knew. They had—at least  
1619 the actual, the real local, local people who never wore shoes, their little toes, genetically, had moved  
1620 from a point of being parallel to the other toes to being almost at a right angle. So they—when they  
1621 went up a trail, their toes were virtually prehensile, and they would grab---they would grab—and  
1622 then, of course the trails were slick and muddy and all that, and they could move up a trail with a  
1623 speed that was truly frightening, whereas the rest of us were wearing boots that got clogged and wet  
1624 and soggy. It was amazing how they could walk. And they would walk for days. And they would  
1625 chew on opium leaves or chew on opium seeds, if they didn't smoke it. And that gave them a very  
1626 nice—I mean, to eat, to chew opium seeds at the end of a long day's march really acted like a—  
1627 better than Advil. It just kind of calmed you down, and you slept very well.

1628

1629 **(18:39) There's been a lot written about the role of the opium economy,**

1630 [Yes]

1631 **from a social, from a cultural, from a political, from an economic perspective. From your**  
1632 **experience with the Hmong, how do you think students of the subject—anyone interested**  
1633 **in opium's role in that society should best understand it?**

1634 Cultivation of opium is both labor-intensive and space-expansive. To get a good crop of opium,  
1635 you need a really nice, good field that has been—that has been cultivated and prepared. Those  
1636 fields—and they prefer if I'm not—I think I'm right—they prefer a gentle hillside. They don't like  
1637 to be down on the flat [land], and they don't—they don't really grow well high up in the mountains  
1638 where it is precipitous. That land was the land that existed between the Hmong, in their traditional  
1639 locations around the Plaines de Jarres, and the Plaines de Jarres itself. It was that land which was the  
1640 best opium-growing land. That land was lost to the war. That was sort of the first thing that the  
1641 Vietnamese took over, so that much of the really prime opium-growing land was lost. There was  
1642 opium—of course there was opium grown. There was opium grown right behind my house, in fact,  
1643 in Long Cheng. But the guy and the family who worked it, who I presume were one of the first—  
1644 the old settlers of Long Cheng—they worked that field extremely hard to prepare it and get it seeded  
1645 and all that sort of thing. So, of course, the Hmong traded opium, but the Plaines de Jarres was  
1646 thought to be the best opium land in Laos. The best opium land in Laos, if I understand it correctly,  
1647 was up in the Yao country in the northwest corner. Why it's the best, I don't know, but that's what  
1648 I was told. So you had a society and a group of people who made a lot—they were superb  
1649 herdsmen. They made a lot of money running cattle. They also had access to silver mines, and they  
1650 also had access to opium. When the Plain falls and everyone comes our way, you lose the opium  
1651 fields, you lose a lot of the cattle, and certainly you lose the access to the silver, which is in the Nong  
1652 Het plateau, which is where most—where we—I never found out where those silver mines were.  
1653 No one would ever tell me. All I was told—they were in Nong Het. Well, of course I didn't get to  
1654 Nong Het, because it was under Vietnamese control. So where those were, I don't know if I'd had  
1655 access to Nong Het if I would have been shown them. It was very closely guarded. I don't believe  
1656 there was any silver mined in the areas that we controlled for the four years I was there. Opium—if  
1657 you recall the film, Vang Pao was quite adamant about opium—that his people should not and could  
1658 not—he couldn't trust soldiers who smoked opium. And I won't say that he threw a soldier out  
1659 who smoked opium, but there were clear examples of what happened to you if you did use excessive

1660 amounts of opium. He himself never touched the stuff. He didn't smoke. He would drink  
1661 occasionally—yeah, he drank. Sure, he drank. But—so the issue of opium trading, I'm sure did  
1662 exist, and I'm sure Touby Lyfoung and the Ly [Lee] family were the recipients of largely Vang Pao's  
1663 private deal that, in effect, if Touby Lyfoung wouldn't make political or military trouble for him,  
1664 he'd let Touby trade in anything he wanted. What Touby traded in—I would just make the  
1665 assumption that it was opium, among other things. But you're still not talking on a huge scale.  
1666 You're talking on quite a reduced scale, and you're also talking... [Pauses] You're also talking that  
1667 this was simply raw opium and not processed opium, 'cause it went out of the north country and  
1668 was processed in the labs near Vientiane.

1669

1670 **(24:35) Would it be fair to say that there's been a lot of hay made without much**  
1671 **justification, necessarily, about alleged links between Air America flying Hmong people**  
1672 **around the country and representatives of Air America supposedly participating in the**  
1673 **opium trade?**

1674 I heard a lot of that stuff. Do I have any direct knowledge? Would I have likely had knowledge of  
1675 it? Probably not. By the time I think that occurs...

1676

1677 [Pours some wine, offers some to Interviewer, who accepts, and Lawrence goes to retrieve a wine  
1678 glass. Recorder turned off, new track begins.]

1679

1680 (0:03) You know, when Long Cheng gets bigger, there are Americans and Thais running the airport.  
1681 I basically had nothing—very little to do with that. Planes come in, people get on them, planes take  
1682 off. Was it Air America, was it Bird and Son, was it Vang Pao's airline? Did I stand at the door and  
1683 check everyone's baggage? No. Do I suspect that certain people—a number of people were carrying  
1684 opium in small bundles? Absolutely. Do I think that perhaps there were certain Air America pilots  
1685 or American pilots flying for whatever airline that were knowingly carrying opium from Nam Tha  
1686 up in the north to Vientiane? Wouldn't surprise me at all. Did I know of any of it actually  
1687 happening? Did I see it? No. Did I look for it? Probably not as hard as I should have. Especially  
1688 the Nam Tha stuff, I wouldn't have known about, anyway, 'cause that wouldn't have come through  
1689 Long Cheng. Did I go through the business as I mentioned earlier, of checking with Vang Pao as to  
1690 the amount of raw opium he had under his house at any given time? Yes. I think a lot is made of it,  
1691 and I'm not going to—I have no way of denying it or corroborating it, because most of it simply  
1692 bypasses me. And frankly, [Pauses] you know, maybe I should have been more concerned that the  
1693 ultimate user end of this thing was some kid in Baltimore who was killing a cop to get this stuff. I  
1694 was maybe not as aware of where it all ended up as I might have been.

1695 **Sure. Well, it was very early in that period.**

1696 It was early, but I certainly was—it wasn't on my radar screen, except in an operational sense of  
1697 what it meant for Vang Pao.

1698

1699 **(2:33) Did you know many of the Air America pilots well—especially the people who tend to**  
1700 **end up being mentioned in books a lot like Ron Sutphin, or Fred Walker?**

1701 Rarely. I knew a lot of the helio pilots, the small engine pilots. They were not the big guys. I knew  
1702 none—I remember one night in Udorn I went out with Bill, and there was a—I can't remember  
1703 what his name was, but he was a famous Air America C-46 pilot. Now C-46s would never land,  
1704 couldn't land where we were, and so the whole mystique of Air America and the pilots largely went  
1705 literally over my head. Bill Andresevic, who was the chief helio courier pilot was a friend, and is a  
1706 friend to this day. Ed Dearborn, whom I knew quite well, was a—flew Caribous. But the pilots  
1707 were not—you know, they weren't my main concern. I didn't—I'm not a guy who likes to sit in

1708 bars and talk war stories. [Interviewer chuckles] So I didn't do it—you know, I didn't do it in  
1709 Vientiane for the first few months; I never did it in Udorn. And when I go to this Sky reunion in  
1710 Montana a couple of years ago, guys would come up to me and say, 'You know, I was so-and-so,  
1711 and I would—I did all the rice drops' or 'I did all that.' And they're all good people, but I didn't  
1712 know who they were. And they said, 'Well, we know who you are.' And I said, 'Well yeah, but my  
1713 concern was not with you dropping the rice. My concern was the people on the ground.' So there  
1714 was a real disconnect. There were some—and Tony was better at this than I was. Tony's  
1715 personality appealed to these guys who left Alaska 'cause—the Alaska bush pilots who had come  
1716 and who left Alaska 'cause it got too populated. They were quite a breed of cat, these guys. And I  
1717 respected them and liked some of them, and brought the body home of one of them who was a very  
1718 good friend, but I can't say that, with the exception of Bill Andresevic, who—we talk every six  
1719 months or so—I've kept in touch with any of them. They have a different—and I don't think Jerry  
1720 Daniels was actually a pilot. I think he was actually—started out as a kicker and then he morphed  
1721 into an Agency person, and became quite beloved—not that I'm—I'm not trying to take anything  
1722 away from Jerry. And Stu Methven, I don't think—I don't think he was a pilot, either. Methven, I  
1723 think, was an old Agency employee, and Daniels became one. So, just to correct the record...

1724  
1725 **(6:37) OK. I appreciate that. Before we move on, we were discussing over supper that it's**  
1726 **difficult for an American audience to get a sense of Vang Pao's role, and particularly to**  
1727 **judge how 'corrupt' he was in an appropriate context. Would you offer any advice to those**  
1728 **who may want to use their moral compass or their moral measuring stick to judge Vang Pao**  
1729 **as a leader in Laos during this period?**

1730 I think [Phone rings] I personally feel what happened to Vang Pao is pretty tragic. I look with great  
1731 sorrow at a man who I felt was pretty close to everything America was looking for in a region and in  
1732 Vietnam all the way through Cambodia and Thailand, was crying out for energetic and far-sighted  
1733 leadership and he—and charismatic leadership. This guy was truly charismatic. [Pauses] Age hits  
1734 these people early. Vang Pao was about 35 when I knew him—35, early 30s. And by 50, that life  
1735 takes a terrible toll on people. [Pauses] And I watched Touby Lyfoung, for example, who had been  
1736 a hero in the French resistance to the Japanese, and here was a hugely corpulent, hugely  
1737 untrustworthy human being, who clearly had sold every principle he had. What happened to Vang  
1738 Pao in this country, I just think is a tragedy more of the event than the man, but I think the ultimate  
1739 result is that the man has been wounded irreparably. And my sense is that it will take a long time  
1740 before—within the Hmong community—he'll be seen in his proper light, because as you said, you  
1741 go to St. Paul you either love him or you hate him, and a lot of it depends on how old you are.  
1742 And—yeah, I'm sure he made mistakes, and I'm sure that after I left, he became enamored of the  
1743 toys of war. And I think he made a mistake, but I think the Americans made that mistake real easy  
1744 to make. And my only real argument with Bill has ever been—was the part that we played in  
1745 fostering that. And it's not much of an argument, 'cause he said it was—you know, I think he saw it  
1746 one way—he saw the training of the Hmong to be pilots as a gesture of their status within the  
1747 world. And I don't argue that point. My worry was whether that emboldened Vang Pao to think in  
1748 terms that he had not heretofore thought in. And I don't—and to this day, I wonder whether, had I  
1749 stayed for another tour, and I saw the militarization and the conventionalization of the Hmong,  
1750 whether I would have had the balls to resign. I should—'cause I should have. And I don't know,  
1751 'cause I never had to face that question. And I know it caused a great deal of anguish among some  
1752 of the older hands who thought this was a road to disaster, and it turned out to be just that.

1753  
1754 **(11:16) Do you have a sense at all—and I realize this is probably not more than a guess,**  
1755 **but—that Touby Lyfoung was jealous of this boy who had been his emissary to the**

1756 **Japanese in years gone past, who was rising up the ranks and becoming this charismatic**  
1757 **leader who was getting all the press and—**

1758 All of the above and then some.

1759 **How so?**

1760 Well, [Pauses] Touby was—Touby played his games with the French very nicely, and he was picked  
1761 over Faydang Lo [to receive the title of *tasseng*], right? So he was the golden boy for the French. My  
1762 guess is that Touby never was much—he was never the fighter that Vang Pao was. He never had  
1763 Vang Pao's reputation as a superb tactician, and somebody who lived and quite preferred a simple  
1764 life. My guess is that Touby saw an opening and grabbed it and took it, and then thought he had the  
1765 Hmong under his control only to discover that unless he was out there in the field leading the  
1766 troops, old VP was going to come by and usurp him. So I think Vang Pao, in his brilliant, tactical  
1767 way, as he was early on, went to him and they made a deal, where Touby would back off, Touby  
1768 would let Vang Pao have the military establishment. Touby would get the commercial  
1769 establishment, and the political establishment they would talk about. But basically, I think Vang Pao  
1770 had the last word.

1771

1772 **(13:16) Now I think Jane Hamilton-Merritt suggests that there was a plot to kill Vang Pao**  
1773 **that was at least supposedly initiated by Touby Lyfoung.**

1774 I heard that. But I would put that in the realm of 'which side did you get it from, and did you talk to  
1775 the—did you look at the countervailing arguments?' I would be [Pauses] I have no way of knowing  
1776 yes or know. All I know is after four years out there, I knew enough that if I heard something, I  
1777 would need to go to somebody who was going to tell me the—180 degrees the opposite, and then  
1778 weigh the two of them and try to figure out which one was playing games with the other. So I—and  
1779 even Vang Pao was not above using—spreading the rumor that Touby was out to assassinate him.  
1780 So where the truth is, I don't have any idea.

1781

1782 **(14:23) A name that comes up, but not a whole lot is said about him is [Prince] Sai Kham.**  
1783 **Did you have any dealings with him at all?**

1784 No, I'm afraid he's one of the names that has receded into the mists of history. I'm sure that I knew  
1785 him or knew about him when I was there, but to be honest with you, if I said anything about him  
1786 now, it would just be bullshit.

1787 **[Laughing] Fair enough.**

1788

1789 **(14:54) Do you think the King's visit in December of '63 to Long Cheng was a significant or**  
1790 **perhaps more ceremonial step in the attempt to integrate the Hmong into the broader**  
1791 **Laotian society and national identity?**

1792 Good question. I personally think it was a huge success. It would be hard not—for even such a  
1793 phlegmatic individual as the King, who seemed never to know—I mean, he was absolutely  
1794 expressionless the entire time—this huge, rumbling old fart. But to see him get off the royal aircraft,  
1795 and to have—I don't know, was it a 5,000-foot runway? A thousand-foot runway—whatever it was,  
1796 it was a long runway. And every single—the entire runway lined with kids waving Laotian flags—on  
1797 their knees.

1798

1799 **(16:06) Oh my! I hadn't heard that detail.**

1800 Oh. You know, maybe that didn't mean much to the old guy, but I believe that it did. Now what  
1801 that meant for him when he goes back to LP [Luang Prabang], and what that meant within the  
1802 politics of Laos, I don't know, because I don't—I'm not privy to that. But I think that had a huge  
1803 effect on him alone, because I don't think he—if I understood what other people said, what other

1804 celebrations for the King amounted to, they were rather patchy, shall we say. And this was an  
1805 impressive deal. So can I point to tangible results as a result of the visit? No. Can I say that all of a  
1806 sudden—the generals in Vientiane all of a sudden thought Vang Pao was a great guy and they  
1807 promoted him? I'd have to work on that. [Interviewer chuckles] Do I think it had an effect? Yes.  
1808 Precisely what that effect was, I'm not sure.

1809  
1810 **(17:33) Now was it Bill Lair or—do you have any idea of who it was who was placing**  
1811 **pressure on the King to promote Vang Pao up the ranks?**

1812 It wouldn't have been the King.

1813 **Oh, OK.**

1814 It wouldn't have been the King, because the King, I think, had very little temporal power. This  
1815 would have been whichever generals were running—either the neutralist government, or then, after  
1816 the coup, a right-wing government out of Vientiane. So I—and that [Pauses] I don't know who was  
1817 putting the pressure on. I suspect it wasn't Lair. If it was anybody, it would have been the  
1818 Ambassador and the Chief of Station in Vientiane, because Bill—remember, Bill does not go to  
1819 Vientiane.

1820 **True enough.**

1821 He's pretty much an Udorn guy. And he's a back room player. He doesn't go, and I don't think  
1822 he—I don't think he's on an easy, one-to-one relationship with the guys who are running the  
1823 government at all. So...

1824  
1825 **(19:04) I think I misunderstood, because I think the King did pin his stars on his uniform,**  
1826 **or whatever, after he was promoted to general.**

1827 He may well have done that, and I suspect that was a staged event. Maybe he got the promotion,  
1828 and maybe—and it is perfectly possible—because I really can't tell you whether when you got to  
1829 become a general whether that was symbolically done by the King. That may well have been. You  
1830 see, I don't know. I don't know what the Lao military ritual was.

1831  
1832 **(19:36) Fair enough. Like I said, I ask lots of questions that probably aren't fair to ask.**

1833 Yeah.

1834 **Again, if I remember correctly, once there was this withdrawal of Americans after the**  
1835 **Geneva Accords were enforced, there was a period in which the enemy made some relatively**  
1836 **significant gains, was it not, at least for a time?—but that it was also a time in which Vang**  
1837 **Pao was starting to become more effective in recruiting more Hmong, and people were**  
1838 **coming in, and he having to sort of figure out who was just in it for the pots and pans and**  
1839 **food, and who was in it because they really wanted to fight for him and for the Hmong**  
1840 **people.**

1841 Yeah.

1842 **Did you see a significant change in the way—I think you said earlier in his career, people**  
1843 **just walked up and berated him and treated him with no deference whatsoever, and that**  
1844 **people had no compunction about just dressing him down if they thought he'd done**  
1845 **something wrong. Was his standing in the community changing? Was his—**

1846 Well, I think he always had that—like any really good leader, he always invited—

1847  
1848 [A friend drops by to see Anne Garrels and passes through]

1849  
1850 Vang Pao and the Hmong always, no matter how high you were, had a very democratic way of  
1851 dealing with each other. There was nobody, no matter how high you were, that you were above



1852 being berated by some farmer who just was pissed off at you. [Interviewer chuckles] I mean, that  
1853 was one of the really, really nice things about the Hmong. They didn't mind who you were. You  
1854 put your pants on one leg at a time like everybody else, and if they had a gripe, they'd come after  
1855 you. So that quality—that quality never failed Vang Pao, as long as I was with him. [Pauses] What  
1856 was the other part [of the question]?

1857  
1858 **(21:51) Was there [Pauses] was there a challenge that came along with all of these potential**  
1859 **Hmong recruits coming in terms of arming them,—**

1860 No.  
1861 **—figuring out what their motives were—?**

1862 No, this was—that's a good question. What we got during the hiatus period—oh, you were asking  
1863 about the activity—because it was quite complicated. You have the Geneva Convention, you have a  
1864 titular, neutral—Souvanna Phouma comes in, and he installs Kong Le, who is a titularly neutral  
1865 army—what is left of the neutral army—on a position in the Plaines de Jarres. [Pauses] And  
1866 therefore you have three groups sort of milling around in the PDJ. I don't recall [Pauses] any really  
1867 significant gains made by the Pathet Lao-slash-Vietnamese or the Neutralists other than the  
1868 exchange of some towns on the eastern edge of the Plaines de Jarres. It was the attack by the—of  
1869 the Pathet Lao-slash-Vietnamese on the Neutralist forces maybe a year or 14 months into this that  
1870 sort of caused the whole thing to blow up again. And I don't know—Vang Pao was always very  
1871 leery of dealing with Kong Le because he feels he can't trust him. We get a lot of people coming  
1872 and wishing to join Vang Pao during this period, all of whom—most of whom we have a very hard  
1873 time getting any weapons for, because, if I remember correctly, we are in the business of replacing  
1874 weapons, but not adding to our overall force structure. So there were a lot of folks who came in to  
1875 talk to Vang Pao that we just basically had to say, 'Go home. Let us know where you are.' And I  
1876 can't—I'm sure VP slipped them a rifle or two, but in the sense of any substantial increase of our  
1877 group, of our little outfit, there was very little. That only started to occur after the fall of the  
1878 neutralists leaving the Plaines de Jarres in 1963 sometime—spring of '63, or something like that—  
1879 fall of '63.

1880  
1881 **(25:16) When I talked to Dick Secord, which I was only able to do through the graces of**  
1882 **Heine Aderholt—he just happened to be passing through—he, I'm sure in hyperbolic**  
1883 **fashion, said, 'There was no such thing as the Pathet Lao. We would have given our eye**  
1884 **teeth to actually capture a Pathet Lao. It was all the North Vietnamese.**

1885 That's not true.

1886 **Is there a grain of truth in there, or do you think the Pathet Lao or the sort of Lao portion of**  
1887 **the communist infiltration of the country...**

1888 Well, I think it is absolutely true that behind any Pathet Lao unit—there was probably a Vietnamese  
1889 unit behind them. So it was a little bit—they were between a rock and a hard place, usually. But  
1890 certainly [Pauses] the numbers—and I don't know how many companies Faydang Lo brought to the  
1891 table, but those guys fought just like VP's people. They were not patsies at all. I think increasingly  
1892 [Pauses] the Pathet Lao was a kind of ineffectual force, because the Vietnamese didn't trust them,  
1893 and the people didn't like them, and they were used sort of as occupation groups that would come in  
1894 after the Vietnamese took some place. So, you know [Pauses] what numbers am I talking about?

1895 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  
1896 form or another who were all Lao fighting for a communist takeover.

1897  
1898 **(27:27) Sure. So the day comes—you get hepatitis, you're deathly ill, you get flown to**  
1899 **Udorn and then on to Bangkok, and you're out for—was it two months, something like that?**

1900 Well, I'm actually better in days [Pauses] and my friend Mike Lynch, who was in the next bed  
1901 [Pauses]

1902 **Wounded, or...?**

1903 No, he has hepatitis, too.

1904 **Oh, my goodness.**

1905 Terrible, dry—it's just simply fecal hepatitis, whatever that number is—Hepatitis A. And you get  
1906 terrible dust storms. At that point our hut was sitting right at the end of the runway, so whatever  
1907 plane was going to take off would just coat everything in dust. Initially my numbers were worse  
1908 than Mike's, but I—my numbers improve rapidly and Mike's do not, because I have two years of  
1909 immunity built up to it and he had months, he didn't have the years. So my problem is that I'm fine  
1910 to go back, but medically they won't let me. And in fact what they do medically is they say, 'you've  
1911 got to go home and be checked out by a doctor at home and then you can come back.' So I don't  
1912 know if it's two—I don't remember if it was two months or a month and a half or whatever. I go  
1913 home and I—a bunch of doctors at Langley look at me and I say I'm fine and they take my tests and  
1914 they say, 'Jesus, you're clean as a whistle.' [Interviewer chuckles] 'Can I go back?' And they say,  
1915 'Well, you'd better stay around, because we don't know what'—I mean, they don't know what  
1916 they're looking at. And this is very early on in tropical medicine, and so I think I'm—what do I do?  
1917 It's 1964, it's the convention, I'm with my family when Johnson gets re-nominated...

1918

1919 **(29:47) Or just nominated...**

1920 Or nominated. [Pauses] Nominated for the first time, yeah. So I'm there for the summer, I'm here  
1921 for the summer. I think I go back in August. I don't know what—I can't—I'm not here for very  
1922 long.

1923

1924 **(30:06) Do you remember taking any opportunities to sort of reflect on your experience and  
1925 think about what you wanted to do when you got back or what situations you might face, or  
1926 was it more that you were just glad to be out of there and glad to feel all right and happy to  
1927 visit your family...?**

1928 Pretty much that. I didn't have any—I knew I had to go back, I knew I wanted to go back. You  
1929 know, a year earlier my parents had come out to Bangkok to see me, and I was way, way—way up in  
1930 northern Plaines de Jarres with (\*\*\*) operation, and they were cooling their heels in Bangkok. And  
1931 it was a tough time. I think we got hit a couple of times. And so I got out of the jungle and so flew  
1932 directly to Bangkok, and it turned out that my father, during World War II, had been a great  
1933 friend—was a classmate and an OSS mate of a guy named Jim Thompson, who was the one who  
1934 resurrected the silk industry of Thailand. And he lived in this palatial, wonderful house, right on a  
1935 beautiful (\*\*\*) in Bangkok. And I walked in virtually in my jungle clothes, and there were my  
1936 parents, and they were seated at the end of a long, beautifully polished hall of a remodeled Thai  
1937 temple. And there was Mr. Thompson dressed in silken whites, and my mother looking very cool,  
1938 and they were—and so I was introduced, and I sat down. I will never forget the sight—it must have  
1939 been 35 feet down the other end—of the servants coming to the door, then dropping to their knees,  
1940 and coming across the floor on their knees to ask me if I'd like a gin and tonic.

1941 **Oh my goodness!**

1942 [Both laugh] So that was sort of fun. Quite a juxtaposition of... So anyway, [Pauses] I thought I was  
1943 important, and I thought that I really wanted to go back and so I did.

1944

1945 **(32:42) I know it was a relatively brief time, but had there been any changes or  
1946 developments that you recall noticing in that brief time when you returned?**

1947 Not that I know of—not that I can remember. I think everybody was happy to see me, but I  
1948 can't—you know, they didn't—the runway wasn't lined with little kids holding flags, let's put it that  
1949 way. [Interviewer laughs]

1950  
1951 **(33:03) Another name that I just recently picked up and I think this was Roger's book too,**  
1952 **and I'd never come across his name—was Vongrasamy Thong—if that name sounds**  
1953 **familiar at all—if it doesn't we'll just move on, that's—**

1954 Yeah, I have no idea who he's talking about.

1955 **OK. I think he was one of Vang Pao's lieutenants, did a lot of traveling with him, wore an**  
1956 **amulet. He wasn't Hmong.**

1957 I don't know. The name is not familiar, and I may have known him, and I probably did, but I  
1958 don't—'cause I knew all of Vang Pao's lieutenants, but I can't remember that one.

1959  
1960 **(33:45) By '64 going into '65, was there a growing American presence in terms of more CIA,**  
1961 **more undercover people who were trying to exert and influence and provide air support and**  
1962 **do all these other things?**

1963 Well, I think [Pauses] through much of '65 Bill Sullivan was still the ambassador. And as long as  
1964 Sullivan was the ambassador, he was going to keep a pretty tight lid on that, and as far as I know.  
1965 [Pauses] Yes, there was, there was—let's see. We got... [Pauses to remember] There was myself,  
1966 there was my assistant, John Randall, there was this god-forsaken person who—who was briefly  
1967 advisor to the radio station until I could get rid of him. [Pauses] There was a retired army colonel  
1968 who would come named Floyd something or other, who was a sweet man, and he would come and  
1969 try to help with the training, but he was sort of ineffectual. There were a lot of ineffectual—because  
1970 in part the operation attracted—was both a dumping ground for failed operatives in other  
1971 endeavors, and also became a place where, because it was successful, various bureaucratic,  
1972 competing components of the Agency vied to get their own people into. So I often was given  
1973 people that I didn't need or didn't want. I felt I was perfectly capable of running this thing pretty  
1974 much on my own—a trait I've continued on 'til this day. [Interviewer chuckles] And I got angry  
1975 that I ended up doing so much babysitting, because a lot of the guys who came had troubles and  
1976 problems, and it was basically theoretically my job to spend time and find out what was wrong.  
1977 Then we got—Mike Lynch went up country. He was out of Sam Neua. Mike did a very good job.  
1978 He was a fine officer.

1979  
1980 **(36:31) I think about the only thing that's been written, at least for public consumption,**  
1981 **about him was his presence at Na Khang and his heroism there.**

1982 Yeah, and of course the big thing is that Mike—I think a lot of why nothing has been written is  
1983 because he stayed in the Agency for a long time afterwards.

1984  
1985 **(36:51) Well, if I am fortunate enough...**

1986 If you get to see him, please give him my best. I saw him briefly at some function—one of the few  
1987 that I go to—and I am...

1988 **What should I know about him?**

1989 He was a good officer. I think of Mike as being...[Pauses] He and I were very similar. I mean, we  
1990 kind of—we took risks, we liked the people. He didn't have—he hadn't had the years, the time that  
1991 I had there. And he didn't have the quiet, that kind of incubating, quiet time to begin with, where  
1992 you really kind of got—you had the time to get to know who your people were. I mean, so often,  
1993 like any other military person, you get dropped into a situation and you've got to work fast and  
1994 you've got take what's handed to you, and then you go. But Mike was a good officer.

1995  
1996 **(38:00) I don't think I knew a thing about him, and Secord mentioned him and—I don't**  
1997 **know the man particularly well, but he strikes me as the kind of person who isn't given to**  
1998 **easy praise.**  
1999 Secord?  
2000 **Yeah.**  
2001 I don't know him at all, and I'm sure you're right. [Interviewer chuckles]  
2002 **But he just said, 'And Mike Lynch was a helluva soldier,' and there was this tone of**  
2003 **reverence in his voice that made me think—**  
2004 Well, Mike was! I think he probably was a better soldier than I was. I mean, I think he was—and he  
2005 was in a much hotter situation.  
2006  
2007 **(38:31) Well, we've already talked about Colby's visit and his announcement to you that you**  
2008 **weren't going to re-up for a third tour in Laos.**  
2009 That took place in Washington.  
2010 **Oh!**  
2011 Yeah, Colby came, and I—at the—when he came, I was scheduled to come back, as I recall. It  
2012 wasn't until I get back to Washington, I guess when he then talks to [Richard] Helms, and they  
2013 both—or they decided that it was not such a good idea.  
2014  
2015 **(39:07) Do you recall putting up any resistance to this idea that you should go, or were you**  
2016 **pretty well resigned to it by the time the case was made?**  
2017 They phrased it in such terms that it wasn't—there wasn't going to be an argument from me. It was  
2018 phrased in such a way that they—I was going to be relieved—period, and that the embassy request  
2019 for my return would be denied, and in fact I think it was a *fait accompli* by the time I get home.  
2020  
2021 **(39:46) What do you remember about your last days in Laos?**  
2022 Oh, very poignant.  
2023 **How so?**  
2024 Well, [Pauses] these were good people. This is my graduate education—this was my education. To  
2025 the extent that I know anything about how to deal with people, how to run things, how to [Pauses]  
2026 run myself, it was what those four years taught me. [Long pause] The ceremony, my closing  
2027 ceremony, they gave me a tailor-made Hmong suit that I still have, and can still get in. And Bill Lair  
2028 was there, and Vang Pao, and I was able to stand up and give a speech in Lao. And there were a lot  
2029 of tears. Vang Pao held my hand and cried, called me his younger brother.  
2030  
2031 **(41:05) I assume you made it clear to him that it was not your decision that you were**  
2032 **leaving.**  
2033 Well, at that point I was just going home on home leave.  
2034 **Oh, OK, that's right.**  
2035 But I think—I have a sense there must have been something in the wind. But I was leaving, I  
2036 thought, for home leave, and I then I would come back. And I think that's basically what I said, that  
2037 'I will return.'  
2038 **And yet you didn't have a ceremony like this...**  
2039 The first time around?  
2040 **Yeah.**  
2041 I didn't even leave.  
2042 **[Laughs] Well, I guess there was no reason to have one, then.**

2043 No, I mean, this was... [Pauses] This was a very intense four years, and this was—you know, it was  
2044 every day, 24-seven. And if you survived, there was no way this wasn't going to leave a pretty  
2045 sizeable mark on you, and it does to this day. And I don't—it's something I do not talk about. I  
2046 mean, unless you come and have a specific reason, I—this is—this is very—in many ways very  
2047 private to me. And also, of course, my life took a rather radical turn shortly thereafter, so in some  
2048 ways, when I leave the Agency and decide to go off and do what I really—I think is in my heart, that  
2049 I want to do, to a considerable extent I need to put as much as I can of the specifics of about Laos  
2050 behind me, if not the things that taught me as a human being.

2051  
2052 **(43:20) Now did Tony Poe even come back for this farewell and sort of pay his respects in**  
2053 **his own way?**

2054 I don't think so. [Interviewer laughs] I don't think so. I'll have to look. There are photographs. I  
2055 don't remember Tony being there, but—you know, Tony, I think, and I, we sort of patched things  
2056 up toward the end. I mean, I bore no grudge at all. I think he was the one whose nose was properly  
2057 out of joint by my—by this upstart who just came in and kind of took things over from him.

2058  
2059 **(43:59) Do you remember any specific misgivings you might have had about how the**  
2060 **situation in Laos might evolve—not necessarily just because you were leaving, but because**  
2061 **of the way things seemed to be going?**

2062 [Pauses] I had long talks when I came—Bill Colby was, I think both a very good friend and a very  
2063 good mentor, and I think, a man whose concern for the well-being of his officers under him was  
2064 probably his undoing as a director. He cared too much about the people who he liked. We had  
2065 long—his office was always open, and we would have long and really quite interesting talks about  
2066 my future life, and about the failure of the Brits and the Americans and anybody else to fully care for  
2067 and acknowledge the debt they owed to the people they hung out to dry. And he—you know, he  
2068 had parachuted into Norway into World War II he was a very brave and honorable soldier. But it  
2069 didn't—that didn't hide the fact that he thought the Brits had hung the Kachin and Karen tribes in  
2070 Burma—they basically handed them over to the Burmese at the end. And he was very worried that  
2071 history was not a good guide as to what would happen to the Hmong. [Long pause] I'm not—I  
2072 remember just before—just when I arrived home, I briefed the new Station Chief, a guy named  
2073 Shackley...

2074  
2075 **(46:28) Ah, the infamous Ted Shackley.**

2076 Yeah. And I had a very creepy suspicion about the man. I hate—I disliked him from the moment I  
2077 met him, and nothing has ever changed my opinion since. I think he was a dishonorable and venal  
2078 human being.

2079 **So plenty of reasons to worry very soon after your departure.**

2080 Yeah. Bill always had the belief that the program as a whole was bigger than any one man's  
2081 component in it, and that Shackley could not single-handedly destroy what four and a half years, five  
2082 years had done. He may have been wrong, and I think he probably was wrong. And Bill—I think  
2083 Ted Shackley and a change in ambassador—Mac Godley came in, and Godley wanted to get in bed  
2084 with the military, or was susceptible to their blandishments, if you will.

2085  
2086 **(48:00) You think Sullivan overall did a good job as ambassador?**

2087 Yes, Sullivan—personally, I think, did a wonderful job as ambassador. He would come up country,  
2088 he and I would sit and talk. I told him what I was doing, what I was hoping to do politically,  
2089 strategically, if you will. He was—he liked to think of himself as a strategic thinker, and I think he  
2090 was. And he and I got along very well. In fact, when my brother published his memoirs...[Laughs]

2091 He became somewhat of a parody of himself toward the end, 'cause I think he kind of believed all of  
2092 his press clippings. But he said some nice things about me. And we—I had—I thought he was on  
2093 the right track, and I thought there was a—it may have all ended up in the same veil of tears. You  
2094 know, I'm not about to say that if they hadn't done this and hadn't done that, it all would have been  
2095 a success. I think at the end, the Vietnamese were a whole lot stronger and a whole lot more  
2096 dedicated to doing what they were going to do than we were to stopping them. So I'm not sure it  
2097 would have ended up ultimately any better. I do think we could have left with a little more honor  
2098 than we did. And if you listen to the Jiggs Weldon piece [Anne Garrels' interview with Dr. Charles  
2099 Weldon on NPR], it's the question of honor which really gets to **some of the** people who really care  
2100 about the place.

2101  
2102 **(49:42) Do you think the external fiction of—obviously there were plenty of people who**  
2103 **knew it was fiction—but do you think the external fiction of neutrality in any way tied the**  
2104 **hands of those who were trying to prosecute this Secret War? Or do you think, given the**  
2105 **way you saw operating this war ideally, that it really wasn't an impediment of any kind?**  
2106 I think if you... [Pauses] You do yourself a tremendous danger if you disregard a historical context  
2107 of a people. And if you looked at the history of Laos as a people—whether it was three kingdoms,  
2108 one kingdom, you name it—it doesn't make any difference. Historically this is a group of people  
2109 who sit between two stronger neighbors, the Thai and the Vietnamese. And their lot in life has been  
2110 historically to play a buffer between those two stronger entities. Sometimes it's the Vietnamese  
2111 coming in, now it's the economic power of Thailand coming the other way. I think the fiction of  
2112 the neutrality had some real value, [Pauses] because it allowed at least a continuity, if you will, of a  
2113 semblance of a country which, as we know, has never really existed. But nothing else existed in  
2114 Laos, so why should the government be anything less? It has never been a cohesive group of  
2115 people, and it probably—may never be. And I think what we did—as a country, we did wrong was  
2116 this sort of belief that if we just got the correct right-wing general in there, he could make the  
2117 difference.

2118  
2119 **(52:08) Just like in Vietnam, right?**  
2120 Just like in Vietnam. Phoumi Nosavan was just as corrupt, or Lon Nol in Cambodia, and I think all  
2121 of this was done, perhaps with good will and perhaps with good intentions, but the end result was...  
2122 [Pauses] you simply invited somebody else to go to the trough and steal as much as they possibly  
2123 could. Phoumi Nosavan, I'm sure, was just simply an impossible human being to deal with. He was  
2124 a French intellectual. I mean, anyone dealing with a French intellectual is—you know, this is—you  
2125 don't want to go there, particularly if the guy is head of a country! But in some way, he was truer to  
2126 the historical role that Laotians played than almost anybody else. It's never going to be a strong left-  
2127 wing country, it'll never be a strong right-wing country—not in our era of time. Maybe one day, but  
2128 not now.

2129  
2130 **(53:22) So do I understand you correctly from what you were saying earlier? You left in '66,**  
2131 **and then you spent '66 to '67 as Colby's assistant—**  
2132 Roughly, yes.

2133 **And it was during that period that you made 'Journey from Pha Dong.'**

2134 Yes.

2135 **So you were in Laos making the film?**

2136 No, I had made the—what I had done—I had started taking 16mm footage almost right from the  
2137 beginning. I was kind of a photography bug, and then they sent John Willheim out—gosh, I don't

2138 know what years. I would say '64, '65. He was with us for almost a year. And John was a bizarre  
2139 but wonderful human being.

2140

2141 **(54:11) His photo collection is at the Center for Hmong Studies.**

2142 It is?

2143 **Yes.**

2144 You mean slides?

2145 **I don't know that it's all there, and it may not be the originals, but they have numerous—  
2146 probably most if not all of his photographs.**

2147 Well that's where I'll send mine. 'Cause I have a huge collection of photographs. So in effect, much  
2148 of the film, virtually all of the film was shot by the time I come home.

2149 **So when you said earlier that you worked for Bill Lair in the morning and then—**

2150 Bill Colby.

2151 **Oh, Bill Colby. My mistake.**

2152 I worked—

2153 **I'm sure you just said Bill and I [Laughs]**

2154 No, I worked for Colby. I was Colby's special assistant in the morning, and then in the afternoon  
2155 and evenings, John Willheim and I fashioned the film together.

2156 **OK. My mistake.**

2157

2158 **(55:10) Did you have any inclination or opportunity to sort of monitor what was going on in  
2159 Laos during the ensuing years?**

2160 Not really. I was somewhat out of the loop, and I would sit in on the staff meetings and  
2161 read...[Pauses] because you see, of course, it isn't clear...Let's see, I come home in '66, I work for  
2162 Colby from roughly July, then I get—oh gosh, do I get married? Yeah, I meet an Austrian girl on  
2163 my way home, virtually. [Pauses] I'm married in '67, in Austria, and I think that fall of '67 I've  
2164 completed, in a year and a bit, I've completed the film, and I've taken Colby's advice and I've  
2165 applied to go to the fall semester at Princeton to get the necessary undergraduate courses in  
2166 anthropology to apply. I go to the Woodrow Wilson Center, and I spend the winter of '67 at  
2167 Princeton, and I'm accepted by Chicago in the spring, and we're ready to go to Chicago when I get  
2168 the call from Nitze, so I go back to Washington in '67, and I worked for Nitze '67, '68. The fall of  
2169 '68 Johnson chooses not to run, Nixon is elected, Nitze is out, so I am faced with going—I've had  
2170 an extended leave without pay from the Agency, and I'm faced with the idea—do I go back to the  
2171 Agency or do I go off and do what my heart has sort of been telling me for some time? So I choose  
2172 to leave.

2173

2174 **(57:55) Were you—it sounded like you wanted, as you said, to put your experiences in Laos  
2175 behind you for a time for, I'm sure, a number of reasons. Were you aware of the fall of Long  
2176 Cheng in '75—**

2177 Oh, sure.

2178 **OK.**

2179 But I'm not aware, in the sense—because once you're out, you're out. Things dry up real fast. And  
2180 I don't have the connections in the Agency any longer. I don't have the guy—my old friend that I  
2181 can call up at the desk and say, 'What's going on?' I mean, my old friend is Lair, and I can't reach  
2182 him anywhere. So in '75—you see, and I don't think it's clear—it's not clear what the impact of the  
2183 militarization of Laos is until after I leave, really. I mean, the first year, everybody dislikes Shackley,  
2184 but it's not clear that this man is in the process of dismantling everything in his quest to become...  
2185 [Pauses] So I'm—maybe it is clear, maybe if you went back you could see the signs, but I don't see

2186 them. So by the time I leave I'm so focused on the sense that I've got to go find something that I  
2187 want to do for the rest of my life, so when I leave [Pauses] the Pentagon in the—oh, September,  
2188 December—or I guess after the elections in November [Pauses] I don't think it's absolutely clear  
2189 what's happening.

2190  
2191 **(59:59) Did you ever see VP in the US?**

2192 [Yes]. When I worked for Colby, in the year and a half I worked for Colby, VP was wounded in the  
2193 arm, and he spent some time in the Tripler Army Hospital in Honolulu, and I went out and spent  
2194 time with him. I saw him several times thereafter when the war was going on. And when he came  
2195 out and went to Missoula, [Pauses] I and my father went out to visit him south of Helena. And at  
2196 that point he was still full of the bravado of going back and the irredentist dreams of all that (\*\*\*)  
2197 stuff. I think I see—and I remember seeing him once in my house in Washington. So I would say  
2198 three times, maybe four. Not very often. I'm not useful any longer, you see?

2199  
2200 **(1:01:22) But these were at least cordial visits—**

2201 Oh, very...

2202 **—in which you were happy to see each other, and...**

2203 Yeah, I was—very happy to see him.

2204

2205 **(1:01:31) Well, I think you said you'd prefer not to answer this question, so I'll just ask it and**  
2206 **you can say, 'No comment.' And that is, how do you feel your experiences in Laos have**  
2207 **affected you?**

2208 [Half-minute pause] It taught me to try to be fair. It taught me to try to be consistent. It taught me  
2209 not to rely on anybody else, and do it yourself. [Pauses] And it taught me if you fuck up, you'd  
2210 better admit it. [Interviewer laughs]

2211 **Always good advice.**

2212 Yeah. [Later, as Lawrence is walking the interviewer to his art studio, he adds another lesson to the  
2213 list: 'Keep your head down.']

2214 **More people should follow it.**

2215

2216 **(1:02:58) You mentioned that you went back to Laos in 1999.**

2217 [Yes]

2218 **What was the purpose of that trip, and what, if anything, came out of it that made you**  
2219 **reflect on that war and your experiences there?**

2220 The purpose of the trip was—came out of NPR [National Public Radio], who thought it would be  
2221 interesting if Anne Garrels took her old husband back to the scene of his earlier triumphs, and to  
2222 look at what had happened in the intervening 30 years. It was in many ways remarkable. Annie had  
2223 done some really good stuff out of Cambodia, where she had talked to a lot of the Khmer Rouge  
2224 people, and she was, as she is now, really, a superb reporter, and a great believer in oral history. I  
2225 think, actually—and there's a book I'll give you—you should have, called *Rules for Old Men Waiting*.  
2226 Have you heard of that?

2227 **No, I don't think I have.**

2228 It's a marvelous book about—I liked it very much. It has a lot to do with oral history. [Pauses] I  
2229 don't think it turned out the way NPR or Annie thought it would, largely because there was no  
2230 way—it turned out there was no way for us to go back to Long Cheng and I could walk around  
2231 nostalgically like a grad student, saying, 'Here's where I did this, and this was old Hillier Hall, where  
2232 we used to snoggle down in the basement'—you know, all that kind of bullshit. [Interviewer  
2233 chuckles] So I mean, that whole kind of nostalgic thing, which is never something I really needed to



2234 do or wanted to do anyway, was largely left off the table, off the plate. What it did do—I think our  
2235 three days with Doc Weldon was very touching, largely because this was a man who had given far  
2236 more years of his life to the Hmong and to the people of Laos than I had, and this was a man who  
2237 was so deeply wounded and scarred, although, as I said, he lived an hour and a half away from Laos  
2238 itself, could never bring himself to go back. He thought the behavior of America toward these  
2239 people bordered on the criminal. And he said it with great compassion and great pain. And it was  
2240 far better for Annie to get this on tape than it was for anything I could say. As I think I mentioned,  
2241 the visit with Doc was very useful in the sense that it put us in touch with people in Vientiane who  
2242 were delighted to see us and spent many hours—as I had remembered Vientiane being. You could  
2243 sit out on a patio overlooking the Mekong after a hot day and talk and drink wine, and pretty much  
2244 blow the whole evening away. But there were some fascinating remnants of people who were doing  
2245 interesting things—I think I mentioned to you on the walk: young lawyers from—half-Lao, half-  
2246 American lawyers whose father had been in Laos, who were doing really important things for—in  
2247 their own way. And the usual collection of people for whom Laos was a particular magnet that they  
2248 could never free themselves from—and there’s a lot. Probably per capita there’s a lot.—I mean  
2249 there’s not very many in terms of actual numbers, but there is an entire community of people who  
2250 somehow got hooked on Laos at an early age, and then found the rest of the world was as  
2251 meaningless as anything else, and they decided, ‘Well, if I’m going to do a meaningless life, I might  
2252 as well go back and do it where it’s really—life is pretty nice and easy. We had a—I look back on  
2253 that—we had a wonderful time. Annie was gone quite a bit, doing pieces on—as I suggested: one  
2254 looking for body parts on the Ho Chi Minh Trail with American teams, and also a really compelling  
2255 piece on the issue of unexploded ordinance, which is absolutely staggering. Laos has the greatest  
2256 amount of unexploded ordinance of any country in the world, and it’s just—every plane coming  
2257 back from Vietnam who couldn’t drop their stuff in Vietnam dropped it in Laos. So there’s a huge  
2258 amount of that. And I was left somewhat to my own devices. I went up to Luang Prabang, spent a  
2259 couple of days walking around painting and drawing, and then having long evenings with good folks  
2260 in Vientiane. So in the long run, I found it a rather wistful and rather strange experience. It wasn’t  
2261 the fact that I knew Vientiane very well, ‘cause I didn’t, but it had always stuck in my mind.

2262  
2263 [Interviewer checks recorder quickly to make sure it’s not running out of memory. Final track  
2264 begins.]

2265  
2266 **(0:00) Well, I’ll try not to keep you forever. I know you’ve been very indulgent. Could you**  
2267 **recount, because we didn’t get this on the recording, when Bill Lair came here, and his stay**  
2268 **with you? That was a particularly interesting story, I thought.**

2269 Well, I think I mentioned that when I left [Laos], I had boxes and boxes and boxes of material.  
2270 Mostly they were carbon copies of every message I had sent in four years. And there was—as Annie  
2271 suggested, once you get me going, I [Interviewer laughs] I can talk or I can write. And I thought,  
2272 actually, I had a lot to say. We’ll let somebody else be the judge of that. But I was extremely  
2273 worried about security and about my commitment to the Agency’s—maintain **secrecy**, so I basically  
2274 wrapped all the boxes up in very strong tape, sent them home, and in effect said, ‘I will not look at  
2275 this stuff for 25 years.’ And as it turned out, my life took several interesting and different turns, and  
2276 I really had forgotten pretty much all about them, and they were down in the stable, high on a shelf.  
2277 And when I turned 50, Annie thought it would be great if I got—if she brought Bill Lair up here for  
2278 a visit. And it just so happened that that roughly coincided with my 25-year self-imposed  
2279 moratorium. And I said to Bill, ‘Let’s—I think it’s time to open the boxes.’ And he said, ‘What  
2280 boxes?’ [Interviewer chuckles] And I said, ‘Copies of every single message I ever sent to you.’ He  
2281 said— [Laughs] He blanched, and [Interviewer laughs] I don’t know if he really—you know, be

2282 careful of what you wish for. So I brought them out, and he sat at this table, which at that point was  
2283 going perpendicular to where it is now, and he sat at this end, right down at that corner, and for—  
2284 I'm not sure he slept for four nights. He read everything—virtually everything that was in those  
2285 boxes. And, of course, one morning I came down and he was particularly intent. And I said, 'What  
2286 are you reading, Bill?' And he said, 'I'm reading the diary of your—the night when I told you that  
2287 the CIA had chosen a wife for me. [Interviewer chuckles] And he said, 'You were a little harsh on  
2288 me.' [Both laugh] But he said—I said, 'Well Bill, I was a young man. I was sort of brought up on  
2289 romantic love and here you are telling me that you have a 25-year marriage with a girl who was  
2290 picked out of a CIA dossier for you.' And he said, 'Yeah, well of course, if you look at it that way, I  
2291 could understand that.' But he said it had been a great—it had been a good marriage. And I  
2292 think—as far as I know it was. And it was at that point we thought—we had talked a lot about  
2293 trying to get the story out, and it was at that point—well, I'm not sure if Roger Warner was in the  
2294 picture at that point, or whether he came shortly thereafter. I think actually Roger was. [Pauses]  
2295 And Bill and I discussed it, and we thought that Roger was—we were very—we both believed that if  
2296 we couldn't get the right person, it was better to let the stuff lay buried until the right person came  
2297 along—that we did not want—we didn't want an exposé, we didn't want—we wanted something  
2298 fair, we wanted something cohesive, and we wanted something that, at least to the best of that  
2299 writer's ability, reflected what in fact had happened. And Roger was pretty impressive. We both  
2300 liked him. If didn't like him [right away], soon thereafter we both liked him. [Pauses] And so I said,  
2301 'Bill, I think it's time to let Roger have the boxes.' And that's what I did, with Bill's blessing. And I  
2302 think Roger's—I think *Shooting at the Moon*, or *Backfire*, or whatever, I think has been [Pauses] a  
2303 worthwhile exercise.

2304  
2305 **(5:15) Very much so. Absolutely.**

2306 I don't think any of this... [Pauses] You know, I don't think any understanding of the Hmong  
2307 would be possible without his book. So [Pauses] I'm glad I broke the law, [Interviewer laughs] so to  
2308 speak.

2309 **As it were.**

2310 Yeah.

2311  
2312 **(5:42) What—obviously, I'm not trying to be too nosy, but considering that most of the stuff**  
2313 **that's out there on the internet about you is 'Laos, CIA, blah, blah, blah, and oh, by the way,**  
2314 **he's an artist and married to Anne Garrels.'**

2315 Yeah.

2316 **What would you like people to know about this later and probably more rewarding period of**  
2317 **your life?**

2318 [Pauses] Oh, not much. [Interviewer laughs] Well, you know, I—I'll give you an example. Annie's  
2319 been on a huge problem with Wikipedia, because someone keeps posting on Wikipedia an utterly  
2320 fallacious story that she turned her armed guard unit, which follows her everywhere, firing at a  
2321 crowd of civilians in Baghdad. [Interviewers gasps] I never look—I have never looked, I have  
2322 never Googled myself, I have never looked at this. I figure—I spent 30 years, roughly publishing  
2323 two drawings a week for 30 years. If anyone wants to look at that, I'll show them the result. It ain't  
2324 bad. I taught myself how to draw, I taught myself how to do... I never went to art school and it's all  
2325 mine. And at the age of 60 I thought I had enough balls to go off the cliff one more time. I didn't  
2326 like what was happening at the *New Republic*. I didn't like the internal politics of the magazine. I  
2327 didn't like George Bush, but I didn't like the *New Republic's* incessant Israel-centric view of the  
2328 world. And I thought—the one thing I worried about mostly was—people who are commentators  
2329 of one type or another end up at the end of their lives repeating themselves, and become parodies of

2330 themselves. And I thought the crucial thing in life was knowing when to quit. And I thought, ‘Time  
2331 to quit, kid. Go do something else.’ And so I started painting, and have been very happy doing it.

2332

2333 **(8:34) Do you have a particular medium or a particular subject matter—**

2334 Well, I’ll show you.

2335 **Oh, I’d love to see some.**

2336 Yeah, I’ll show you. We’ll go out in the studio, I’ll show you—well, I’ll give you a little tour.

2337

2338 **(8:45) Well, with that, goodness know you’ve been more than generous with your time, and**  
2339 **more than indulgent with my silly questions, and I can’t thank you enough for inviting me**  
2340 **into your home—**

2341 It’s no trouble.

2342 **—and letting me hang out, and go walking with you and your dogs—**

2343 Anybody who wants—who I think—the crucial thing, what I judge is how serious the person is  
2344 who’s asking the questions. And I’m not bad at spotting phonies. And you’re not a phony. I mean,  
2345 I don’t mind—you know, it’s a subject I like to talk about if somebody has done their homework,  
2346 which obviously you have, and somebody who’s truly interested, which clearly you are. In that case,  
2347 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  
2348 that’s really sort of—that’s sort of where it is. And so I don’t—very few people know about all of  
2349 this, and largely because they don’t want to spend the time to listen to it all. It’s a complex—and  
2350 clearly, there’s a lot of gray in it, and there’s a lot of nuance in it.

2351

2352 **(10:17) Yeah, I still feel like a beginner.**

2353 Well, you’ll get there. But the point is—I still go back to that same idea that it took me two years of  
2354 living it to know what the questions were. It took me another two years to know conceivably what  
2355 the answers were. I don’t—it has always been slightly interesting to me, is what I might have done  
2356 in the next two years. But I didn’t get that chance. So I don’t know.

2357

2358 **(10:59) Well again, thank you very, very much.**

2359 You’re welcome.

2360

2361 [Recorder is turned off, interview is concluded.]

2362

2363

2364

2365

2366

2367

2368