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Interview with Steve Schofield

Paul Hillmer

Concordia University, Saint Paul, hillmer@csp.edu

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Steve Schofield

31 March, 2006

Interviewer/Transcriber/Editor – Paul Hillmer



Born and raised in Chicago, Steve Schofield majored in physical education and wrestled on scholarship at MacMurray College in Jacksonville, Illinois. On the basis of his college study in zoology, when he joined US Special Forces in 1966 he was assigned to train as a medic. He served in the 1st Special Forces Group in Okinawa, then in Vietnam with the Studies and Observations Group (SOG). In 1968, as a sergeant with SOG, Schofield was one of 14 US Special Forces personnel transported 13 miles into Laos with a company of ethnic Chinese and Cambodian soldiers. Two SF and several Chinese and Cambodians were killed; dozens were wounded. In 1969, Schofield was recruited by USAID to work in Northern Laos as a public health advisor, supplying village dispensaries and supporting local medics and field nurses. He also served a secret role training Hmong military medics and performing search and rescue operations for downed air crews. (Hmong forces usually got to pilots first, he says.) Stationed at Sam Thong (Lima Site 20), Schofield participated in its evacuation in March 1970. He worked closely with Edgar "Pop" Buell and enjoyed a friendship with Father Luc Bouchard. Arriving in Laos in October 1969, Schofield was among the last 26 Americans evacuated in May 1975. He has also played a significant role in helping Hmong veterans form their own honor and color guards and in erecting a monument to Hmong soldiers in Sheboygan, Wisconsin which will be dedicated in July 2006. Schofield has produced a DVD, "A Brief History of the Hmong and the Secret War," and speaks extensively about his experiences to help educate the general public and the American-born generation of Hmong.

My thanks to Mr. Schofield for thoroughly editing this transcript.

[Schofield and Hillmer were discussing how remarkable it was that a people who were, by Western standards, so "primitive," had accomplished so much and adapted so well to life in the US. Schofield was providing some examples of the Hmong view of the world when Hillmer turned the recorder on]

(0:00) Go right ahead. We'll catch up—we'll go back to the beginning when you're done.

—This is kind of a funny story; I had been walking with Father Bouchard, the Catholic missionary. He was saying mass in a little hut in the mountain top village. I'm not Catholic, nor was LyChay, my interpreter and chief medic. So, we were outside the hut lying on a hillside. LyChay, was relatively well-educated (with three or four years of school). So, we are waiting for Father B to finish and laying on the hillside looking at the stars and the moon—it was a full moon—I was telling LyChay how the moon circled the earth and how the earth and the moon circled the sun, and he just wouldn't have any of it. And when I told him the earth was a round globe like a ball [he replied], 'No, it's flat.' I mean, that was it, you couldn't convince him or the Hmong that it was any different. Then to see the Hmong in the US today, it's just amazing. A few years ago—I went out with two Hmong couples, and my Japanese wife. We went out in Manitowoc to a pizza place, and we're

sitting there having pizza. And I just had this thought. I said, ‘Thirty years ago when I first arrived in Laos and I had first met the Hmong, if somebody would tell me that 30 years from now that I’m going to be having pizza in Manitowoc with two Hmong couples, [Chuckles] I would have said, ‘You’re crazy!’ It’s just—to me it’s just unbelievable. I get excited every time I talk to a bright young Hmong professional, and I think about all the devastation and all the terror and what a tremendous waste that war was for the Hmong. But then I think, ‘Well look, here they are, 300,000 in this country with all the best this country has to offer. They never would have had this chance. They’d still be up stuck in those mountains, doing the same thing...if they’d survived.

(1:57) I think the point you made earlier, too about the fact that these things [information about Hmong history and the Hmong participation in the Secret War] have to be for the non-Hmong in our community as well, because we are woefully ignorant about the Hmong contribution and why they are here. And obviously the Chai [Soua] Vang incident just brought it all to a head—that we’re still at the point where the acts of one Hmong person are a reflection on all Hmong people. So we still have a long way to go in educating the community about that history.

Yes. [Pauses] I’ve been thinking about that, and we had a lot of questions last night (at the UW presentation)—that subject came up also, and talked about why I do what I do, and I said, ‘Well, people need to be educated, and if I can tell a few people and they can tell a few more people, and we can get the word out. The DVD has sold all over the world now, but the memorial in Sheboygan will be that one place where it will all be written. The story is on the monument. I had the draft of the twelve panels—gave them to [*St. Paul Pioneer Press* reporter] Jim [Ragsdale, who is helping Schofield with his biography] this morning. I’d like you to see those at some point, because—I helped write the panels that tell the story of the Hmong and how they got here. And it’s kind of difficult to get it all into a thousand, fifteen hundred words. But I think we did a pretty good job with it.

I look forward to seeing it.

And one of the things we consciously did not do is write a lot about Vang Pao. This is about the soldiers. And—one panel is dedicated to Ly Lue; the T-28 pilot who flew 10 missions a day and was finally shot down by anti-aircraft fire. His picture will be etched onto the granite. The woman, Sherri Byrand, who wrote the Ly Lue story, did it in five short paragraphs, and it’s just perfect. It gives the essence. And it’s the kind of thing—, you want people to read all the panels, so you want to get to the point and tell the story, and I think this memorial’s going to do that pretty well. And it’ll be the only one of its kind. There is a memorial that was just finished in Fresno, and it was done by Vang Pao and his group of Lao Veterans of America. It’s a statue of an American pilot and two Hmong soldiers helping him. This was actually our first design, and when we met with the mayor of Sheboygan four to five years ago, this was the sort of story we put forward. This is what we wanted to do—a small statue in a park somewhere, like most statues, Washington on his horse, stuff like that. So Vang Pao’s group was at the meeting with the mayor, and they said, ‘No, Vang Pao doesn’t support this, and we don’t want to be involved in it. So, of course, they built a memorial in Fresno,—but it doesn’t really tell the story of the Hmong and the secret war. I have seen photos of the Fresno Memorial, and it briefly describes the role of the Hmong in the secret war, but it lists all the colonels and all the state representatives of the Lao Veterans of America. But at any rate, at least it’s something. So the Sheboygan Lao, Hmong and American Veterans Memorial will be one of a kind, maybe there’ll be something in the future that will be better, but this is a real start. And a lot of people, even last night, asked me, ‘Well, why Sheboygan? Why not St. Paul? Why not at the high ground?’ I said, ‘I guess it really happened in Sheboygan because we had a group of Hmong that were tuned into the community, were able to get the rest of the community to support it, and they

were active. I find too many times, in too many towns across Wisconsin the Hmong are ghettoized, and they don't really try to interact with the rest of the community. In Sheboygan the Hmong are really tuned into the community. So they were able to get the support of the community. When we first approached the City Council with this idea of the memorial, there was some controversy. There were a lot of newspaper articles pro and con—a lot of crap was put out in letters to the editor—things such as, 'the Hmong don't pay taxes, the Hmong all got an SUV when they got to the US, they all got free airplane tickets,' all this stuff. We just had to combat those things, address them one at a time. The City Council then had a vote, and they voted our proposal down. All we wanted was twenty square feet in a little park to put up the (original design) statue. So the Hmong got organized—the Hmong in Sheboygan are only 10% of the population. So at the next city council election? Six of the nine that voted against it weren't re-elected. The next time our proposal was brought up it passed. And not only was it passed, instead of the little place in the center city park, where most of the other war memorials are located, they gave us a beautiful piece of ground on the lakefront between the Yacht Club and the beach—a large grassy area surrounding it where the Hmong can have get-togethers. So it really worked out for the best. But it's been a long, hard fight. Last week we just realized after counting checks and pledges, that we now have everything paid for. We started construction last fall, even though—we only had 75% of the funds required. Now we're going to raise money for the dedication celebration and for a fund set up for perpetual care. So that's what we're doing now. Last night we were able to raise \$800. It was a worthwhile trip.

(7:28) Absolutely. Well, shall we go ahead and get underway?

Yep. OK.

Well, let's just start with some of the vital statistics, as it were. Where and when were you born?

Chicago, March 1945.

And did you spend most of your young life in Chicago?

Yes, until I went away to college I'd lived in Chicago.

(7:53) You went to college where?

MacMurray College in Downstate Illinois.

And studied what?

I studied physical education. I was on a wrestling scholarship. And in order to minor in physical education one had to major in another field. I chose psychology. Because I took zoology for two years I ended up as a Special Forces medic. When the Special Forces saw my college transcript they said, 'Oh, you've got to be a medic.' [Interviewer laughs] I only took zoology because I was a physical education minor. I wanted to be a coach.

(8:53) So how did you end up in the military?

Well, I didn't do so well in college. [Both laugh] I used to fight, drink, [More laughter] I liked to party, I didn't study a lot, and I wrestled. It got to the point where the Dean of Men asked me to leave. [Chuckles] And so I left, and as I was leaving he called my draft board and gave them my name and number.

Of course.

In those times that's how it all happened, so I was out of school for a few months, and then the draft board wrote and said, 'You're going to be inducted.' So before I was inducted I enlisted. I figured at least I had some choice in the matter.

(9:40) So, if you don't mind, just give a sort of overview of your service in Special Forces in 1966.

In '66 I went into Basic Training. I didn't volunteer for Special Forces when I enlisted; I enlisted for heavy equipment operator. I thought that everybody likes to run bulldozers. I'd learn how to do it in the military, and then have a job when I come out. While I was in Basic Training, I was a couple years older than the average kid, had a couple more years education than the average, and I was in a lot better shape, because of wrestling. I was just appalled at these guys in my basic training unit. I thought, I'm supposed to go to Vietnam with these guys? [Both laugh] And so after about five or six weeks of the eight-week Basic Training, the Special Forces recruiters came to the base—this was Fort Polk. All day the “Ballad of the Green Beret” was played on the loudspeakers, and the word was if you go listen to the pitch you don't have to attend training that day—it was a Saturday and it was something like drill and ceremonies so I thought, ‘Sure, I'll go just to get out doing drill and ceremonies.’ It turned out to be a pretty good pitch. There were several of these guys looking sharp—spit-shined jump boots, ribbons and silver jump wings ‘Well; I thought these are real soldiers’ [gives expression like ‘Yeah, right. Interviewer laughs]. During that time everyone knew we were going to Vietnam. If you were in the army, you went to Vietnam. So I was scheduled to become a heavy equipment operator and after I listened to the pitch and I volunteered for Special Forces, I had to sign away my initial enlistment contract. I took the battery of tests that started after lunch on Saturday and then went all day Sunday. And it was quite a battery of tests. There was a general aptitude test where you had to score—I think it was 120 at that time to be accepted into Special Forces. You only needed 110 to go to OCS [Officer Candidate School] or become a pilot. So there was the general aptitude, and then a series of psychological tests—where aggressiveness, all that sort of stuff was measured and whether you're a whacko. The Special Forces did not want Rambos. [Chuckles] So I went through all the tests, and of the probably 250 guys that went through the testing; only two of us were accepted [Interviewer whistles]. When I was asked, ‘Do you want to volunteer?’ I said, ‘Yes sir.’ And the interviewer said, ‘Well, you can be sure you're not going to make it through training, but you volunteered so now you're in our hands.’ And so I went back and finished Basic Training and then waited to see what would be my orders. After graduation an officer said, ‘You're going to Fort Sam Houston and you are going to be a medic.’ I thought, ‘A medic?!’ [Both laugh] ‘No!’ I said, ‘Why?’ ‘You had two years of zoology.’ Then I thought ‘Medics!’ They're not real soldiers. I wanted to be a weapons guy. In Special Forces at that time we had five specialties, and junior enlisted could be a radio operator, a weapons man, or a demolitions man—or a medic. The other two positions were for senior sergeant's intelligence or team sergeants. I had thought for sure that I was going to be a weapons specialist as I loved weapons. I had weapons ever since I was 15 years old—even in Chicago. [Chuckles] So anyway, I was really disappointed. But they said, ‘You want to be in Special Forces you're going to be a medic.’ So I went to Fort Sam, went through the basic Aid Man course, then I went to Fort Benning for Jump School—always on Special Forces orders. Then I finally went to Fort Bragg for the start of Special Forces training. There were three or four phases of Special Forces training. The first phase was the basic stuff, survival, patrolling methods of instruction, all Special Forces soldiers are teachers, theory of guerrilla warfare, etc. I then went into my medical specialty, and was back to Fort Sam for the Special Forces Medic's course—and it was a really good course taught by nurses, doctors, veterinarians and dentists. We learned the basics of dentistry, surgery, veterinary medicine, the nursing care, the whole thing—much more than the average medic would learn. Then I went back to Fort Bragg, and from there we did an OJT

(14:04) OJT?

On-the-job training. To a hospital—one of the military hospitals, and I ended up at Fort Dix for five weeks with three or four other guys. We went through a rotation with five or six specialties—I think: surgery, gastroenterology, dermatology, internal medicine, working with GPs [General Practitioners] on the history and physical exam and then in the emergency room. In our spare time we always went to the emergency room to work. In fact, we'd sleep in the emergency room and have them wake us if anything good came in—anybody with gun shot or knife wounds or anything like that. We would get up in the morning, and go back to the barracks, shower, and go to class all day. The other thing we liked to do is ride the ambulances, because that could sometimes be exciting. So it was good training, really good training, with good docs. Then back to Fort Bragg, and did what was at that time called the dog lab, which was another five or six weeks. At the dog lab they had a bunch of dogs procured from the local pounds, many of them were sick. So we'd start by nursing them back to good health. Of course, we had classes all day, and in between you'd get 15 minutes every couple of hours to check on your dog. After the dogs were healthy, they'd take them in, anesthetize them, and then shoot them in the upper part of their hind leg. Our job would be then to take the dogs/patients into surgery, debride their wound, put drains in, whatever was needed, while one of us would be administering the anesthesia and the other guy would be doing the surgery on his own dog/patient. Then you had to take your dog back out and nurse it back to health with this big, gaping wound. The wound was from the removal of all the dead tissue caused by a high velocity gun shot. Dead tissue had to be removed in order to prevent infection, and the wound left open to prevent gas gangrene. Once the patient could walk on that hind leg without a limp they were deemed ready for the next phase. By the way we could not give them any antibiotics.

Oh boy...

Yes, this was to ensure the patient received good nursing care. Plus you had class all day, as usual with weekly tests. Guys were washing out on the tests every week. Then after the dog was walking, you'd take the dog in and amputate a foreleg with a good surgical amputation, the foreleg of a dog was similar to a man's arm. After the amputation you'd put it to sleep. After that training you were considered a Special Forces medic, but then you went through the last phase of Special Warfare Training, which was field exercise and more of the Special Forces operations and intelligence theory. Then—it was about a year and a half total; we graduated, and were sent to an active duty group. I was sent to Okinawa, to the First Group, which had responsibility for all of Asia, including Vietnam. Before I was assigned to the First Group, the Fifth Special Forces Group was put in place in Vietnam, so they had their own group in Vietnam, and a lot of people just moved from all the other groups into the Fifth Group. But the First Special Forces had responsibility for all the other countries in Asia, and while I was there, I went to the Philippines, and Taiwan, of course we also worked on the smaller islands of the Ryukus, (the off-islands, little islands that didn't have electricity). We did civic action, medical work. And then I went to Vietnam with Studies and [Observations Group—SOG] I had been on another team, training to go to Northern Japan for ski training. One day the Sergeant-Major called me in and said, 'One of the medics on a team in Vietnam was wounded, and he's being evacuated. Do you want to replace him?' I said, 'Sure. But doing what?' 'Well, it's top secret.' [Both laugh] 'Can't tell you much about it. So, will you volunteer?' I said, 'OK, yes, I volunteer.' So I was a four-time volunteer: Army, Airborne, Special Forces, and now for SOG. I only found out once I got there, what SOG did. SOG sent small reconnaissance teams into Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam, and the medics that were assigned to SOG were also on a roster to do air crew recovery in North Vietnam. The other element of SOG was called the Hatchet Force. That is usually where the guys from the first group were assigned. The usual mission was to take a company or platoon size group into Laos. The troops were usually ethnic Chinese or Cambodians, who were not in the South Vietnamese army but mercenaries. A typical mission would be to take the hatchet force into Laos or Cambodia after one of the recon

teams got in trouble, or found an area that needed exploitation. So, the Hatchet Force was almost always sent into a “hot operation” into Laos on or near the Ho Chi Minh Trail. I went in on one operation, with 140 men, 14 Americans. We lost 20 or so Cambodians and Chinese killed, two Americans killed, and another 20 or so Chinese and Cambodians wounded.

(19:59) So you were way too busy.

Yeah. I was wounded, when the first shots were fired. So I had a lot of people to take care of, one American Master Sergeant, , was killed when he went down to help some Cambodian troops that had been hit. I helped drag his body out. It turned out he was married to an Okinawan and had several kids. [Interviewer gasps]. I recently have been in touch with his son, who is now in his 40s, ...So we got him out. We were surrounded on a mountain top ridge line for three days. We called in air strikes day and night on both sides of our half mile long ridge line position. The NVA troops were firing up and we were firing down. Finally we got choppers in to get us out. The Air Force flying over reported counting bodies—in the open—there were 900 bodies around our position and this was triple canopy jungle, so there might have been many more.

(21:06) That’s an eye-opening experience.

Yes. Most of the body count was from the air strikes. The air strikes were coming in low and fast. I’d get in my hole and just look over the edge of the hole, and I could see the pilots’ head as they came by in F-105s—“Thuds,” they called them—carrying about 15,000 pounds of bombs, CBU’s, and napalm. I also went on another couple of operations in South Vietnam. Our camp was right on the South China Sea, down the beach from the hospital unit that was [depicted in] the TV series, “China Beach.”. When we were not on operations we trained our troops.

Oh!

Yes, half mile down the beach from us.

[Interviewer adjusts the recorder]

So we were right there on the beach, we’d go swimming out in the ocean, but we were restricted to our camp, because it was top secret. Our camp was at Marble Mountain. There were five peaks that made up Marble Mountain and a village just south of our camp. Every ten days or so I ended up on top of the peak over looking our camp. I went with four or five of our local troops. We took a radio and sometimes another American, usually a radio operator. In case the camp was attacked we could at least see where the fire was coming from and could direct counter fire. We were alone up there, and the last 30 yards or so was accessible only by climbing a rope. Once while I was climbing up the rope I had a sniper shooting at me! [Laughs] Talk about climbing a rope fast! One night just before dark, we were up there and watching a movie shown at the Marine Amphibious Base, which was separated by the peak I was on from our camp. So we’re watching the movie with our binoculars, and we saw a Marine patrol come out of their gate and start walking through the village. They got hit—somebody fired ‘em up. And another group of Marines about a thousand yards away started firing into the area. We were about 250 yards away from the fire fight and could not see well enough to fire, but the Marines up there on another peak had a 50-caliber machine gun. They opened up onto the ambush and every Marine that was killed had a 50-caliber slug in him. You couldn’t see who was where and what and...I wouldn’t let my guys shoot ‘em up, but we saw the whole thing happen. It seemed that things like that happened too often. Turned out after we left Marble Mountain we learned that there was a complex, a weapons factory, a hospital, everything in the mountain. It had been a marble mine and was honey combed with tunnels and caves. The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were right next to our camp the whole time we were there. But it was one of those things—there was a temple in the middle of the peaks, so we couldn’t go in there. Just

one of the many, many ways that our hands were tied. So—anyway, that was Vietnam. After Vietnam I went back to Okinawa and re-joined my team. We went to the Philippines, and did operation there looking for New People’s Army communists, insurgents in northern Luzon.

We parachuted into northern Luzon and spent two months in the mountains. Didn’t find any—saw a couple, but never shot ‘em up. One convoy of Filipino troops was ambushed while we were there, and about 20 were killed. So they were there. We were working with a tribe that was formerly head-hunters way up in the mountains of northern Luzon. It was interesting to deal with them, I did medical civic action, but I was always armed, of course, and I always had a Filipino with me. The two of us, would go out to various villages, and do med caps, treat the villagers.

(25:03) When you say “med caps” what do you mean?

Do a dispensary call. Just treat anyone who came in, it was mostly kids with infections, and once in a while a broken bone or something—a lot of eye infections and the usual dysentery, coughs and colds with sore throats. I had been in Taiwan before Vietnam and while there I lived with the Aborigine people up in the mountains of Taiwan for a couple of months.

(25:37) You had extensive experience dealing with peoples in a number of Asian countries who were, I think it’s fair to say, marginalized and outside the bounds of what—

Yes and the people in the mountains of Taiwan were as similar to the Hmong as I’ve ever seen any people. They were certainly an ethnic minority, and scorned by the mainland Chinese who came in when Chiang Kai-Shek fled China [December 1949]. The Hmong were isolated in the mountains; they were denied access to education. But the Hmong were so much more primitive than any people I’d ever run across. They had no written language and no concept of science at all. I think back to ancient peoples, the Egyptians and the Aztecs they all had calendars and knowledge of astronomy and math. The Hmong were basic and simple. They measured distances in how many days’ walk it was. And counting—you get past ten and it’s difficult. [Both chuckle]

(26:51) So how did you make the transition from being in SOG to being recruited by USAID?

Well, a friend of mine, Doug Hardy—my senior medic was an older guy who was near 40—we thought of him as ‘Gramps’. He was my senior medic on the team in Vietnam—with me on the operation when I was wounded and we had so many other wounded. I must have impressed him, [Chuckles]. He was going to go work for USAID in Laos; it was right at the time he was going to retire. So he was going to retire and then go over to USAID. But his mother and brother both came down with brain tumors—same time—so he decided he had to go back to the States and take care of his family. The guy in Laos who had recruited him was another Special Forces medic, Don Dougan, who was already working for USAID in Laos. Doug wrote to Don, ‘I can’t go, but I can recommend Steve,’ and so Don wrote to me and said, ‘Well, if you’re good enough for Doug, you’re good enough for me.’ So he gave me all the forms to fill out, and said, ‘You’ve got to get out of the army. Put your paperwork in, and we’ll make sure you’re hired.’ I wasn’t really sure, about getting out of the army, I had found a home in Special Forces, so I took a four-month extension—that’s when I went to the Philippines. And in that four-month extension I got two Article 15s—commander’s punishment. I was in trouble all the time [Chuckling] fighting, drinking and accidents. So I did the four-month extension and then decided, ‘I’ll get out.’ I was leaving Okinawa, going back to the States as a civilian, and at the airport, I met the Group Commander Colonel Rheault, who was the guy who gave me the two Article 15s (we just laughed about ‘em—he punished me, but he was laughing because of some of the things I did. I picked a fight with MPs downtown, and he

loved the story because—well, I did something I shouldn't have to an MP who was in civilian clothes. I really got him ticked off. [Both chuckle] And he called all his buddies a brawl ensued and we ended up in the post jail. Anyway, when the Group Commander heard the whole story he just laughed and said, 'Well, your punishment is to clean my office for two weeks.' And I ended up cleaning it only two days and then he said, 'Aw, that's enough.' But anyway, that's how I knew the Group Commander, on that basis. [Interviewer laughs]) He was leaving to go over to Vietnam to take over as the Fifth Group commander, and he was only there two weeks before he ended up in jail. He was the guy who took the heat for the Vietnamese double agent that was killed in Nha Trang. I don't know if you've ever heard that story—

No!

A Vietnamese double agent was murdered. (The CIA had said was a double agent) A few intelligence types attached to Special Forces took him out in a boat, wrapped him up in chains, shot him in the head, and dropped him in the bay. Some how the story got out, the CIA clammed up, The commander of US forces in Vietnam, Creighton Abrams, hated Special Forces, so he made an example of Bob Rheault. He was put in jail, and then basically ushered out of the army. And he'd only been there two weeks, didn't know anything about it. But he took the heat for it, and later he ended up running Outward Bound—in Maine. He's still around, and a great guy, and all SF guys, will, always love him. He was a great commander. He did what he did, and he took the heat for the guys, and he said, 'That's all my responsibility. Hang me if you will.' And while he was in Long Bin jail for those two weeks, there was a group of SF guys in Okinawa getting together to go break him out of jail! [Chuckles] That's how wild and crazy we were! But at any rate, I met Colonel Rheault at the airport, and here he had his entourage with him, and he came over to talk with me, and said, 'Sergeant Schofield, how you doing? Enjoy civilian life! It's been great,' and all that stuff. I really was impressed with the guy, because he had spent the time to talk to me; he was a soldier's soldier. At any rate, I got out of Special Forces, went back to Chicago, waited and waited, finally I got the paperwork. It said, 'Report to Washington, D.C. for training in ten days.' So I was waiting for six months and now I've got to hurry up and go. Typical. It took six months for my new top secret security clearance to come through. I had had one in the army, which was sort of a funny story. Everyone in Special Forces had a secret security clearance, but in order to go to SOG I had to have a top secret security clearance. So they started the paperwork, after the fact and they found out, and I found out at the same time, that my mother was an illegal alien—never got citizenship! Just came across from Canada as a young girl, when her family emigrated.[Laughs]

Oh, man...

She had been living her whole life in Chicago as an illegal alien! [Both laugh] So they gave me the top secret clearance anyway, and sent me. So I go to Washington, D.C. for the State Department training, and find out everybody else is there for four or five months training, they're getting language training and things, like what fork to use when dining with the ambassador. But the State Department told me, 'You're needed quickly in Laos, so you're only getting two weeks.' The six months they fooled around with the security clearance I could have been doing something productive. Anyway, so I went through a couple of weeks of training such as how to fill out paperwork to apply for insurance, and get my red diplomatic passport and how not to be an, "ugly American". Then one day, I got the real briefing, which described my top secret duties. The other AID/State Department trainees, didn't have any idea what was going on, and that my top secret duties would be to train, equip, and monitor Special Guerilla Unit medics in the field in Military Region II, and to do search and rescue of downed American air crews. My cover was USAID public health advisor to Military Region II. So I had my two weeks training, went over to Laos, was in Vientiane, the capital city, and was met at the airport by Don Dougan. Funny story about him, too. He was at the airport to meet me. It's a little airport,

Vientiane International Airport. And I was looking around for this Special Forces guy, and finally I see this guy. He's got on a Hawaiian shirt, open down to his navel, tan, gold chains all over with Buddhas on 'em, and I finally thought—"That couldn't be him." [Laughs] So I went over and said, 'Are you Don Dugan?' He said, 'Are you Steve?' I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'Well, I was expecting somebody a lot bigger.' [Both laugh] I said, 'Well, you weren't what I was expecting, either!' He looked like a Miami Beach pimp. Anyway, so we hit it off and became good friends. He's an older guy and at the time was nearly 40. He was my mentor over there. Bright guy—no college, but a really good, self-taught guy. A big reader with a tremendous vocabulary—he knew history and politics...so he sort of filled me in on what was going on and how this whole thing fit in the big picture. And then I went up country and started working.

Holy cow.

And that was it. Five and a half years later, I left.

(35:00) So what were your first impressions of the areas that you were visiting in Laos right off the bat?

Well, I went up to Sam Thong, and that was the USAID base, and there were several other Americans there, working there—quite a few young guys who had never been in the military. So they're working in the mountains of Laos, walking around carrying M-16s and grenades and playing the role, but they did good work, they were good guys, but I was sort of a fish out of water with this group. And my boss on the AID side up there, the guy that ran the Military Region II in Xiengkhoang Province was a guy by the name of Edgar Buell, 'Pop' Buell.

Sure.

And I just hit it off with him right away, and his first words to me were, 'What are you doing here, Steve? Why did you come here?' And I said, 'I came here for the money.' [Chuckles] He said, 'No, you've got to understand these people, and you've got to understand what we're trying to do here, and you've got to believe that we're doing the right thing for the Hmong.' And he was right. He was a good guy, a solid American, he believed in what he was doing. And gradually, over time, I came around to his way of thinking. [Both chuckle]

(36:33) He's kind of an icon for anybody who's studied the Hmong and especially America's involvement in the Secret War. How do you think he should be remembered, based on your experiences with him?

Ah, Pop. What a guy. He was a tremendously good friend [Long pause] My wife loved him, everybody loved him. He was a good man. He was—I mean he wasn't just a simple farmer; he had a lot of common sense. I mean, he just had a gift. He could convince ambassadors and congressmen that he really knew the score—and he'd always tell 'em, when they'd ask him, 'Where did you graduate?' he'd say 'Metz'—that was Metz High School. [Both laugh] He'd go brief Congress and speak in his old homespun way, but he just had a tremendously big heart. He was a great guy. One of my favorite stories about Pop was when I first got there, he told me, 'The main rule here is you never mess with the local Hmong women'. If you do, you're gone; you're out of here, if they don't kill you first. I said, 'I understand that, Pop. Special Forces works that way also. You don't do that.'

So I'd go out into the villages with him, and then pretty soon, because I was the only medic there, I became Pop's medic, Pop had a heart condition, and he had other problems, so I'd carry his nitroglycerin, and when he'd go out to villages I'd always watch him, make sure he didn't drink too much. [Chuckles] Usually—

A challenge.

Yeah. So I sort of took care of Pop and Pop took care of me. And one day—oh, this was years later, maybe right before he left Laos. It was in the time he was running the blind school in Vientiane, which he started with all his own money. I helped find blind kids all over the mountains of northern Laos and bring them down there to Vientiane. And sometimes I had to buy ‘em from their parents, because they didn’t want to give them up. So I’d give them \$30 and take their kids and bring them down to the blind school. And they got an education and they learned Braille,—it was really was a nice place. Pop did a tremendous job with that, because at that time, with his heart condition, he couldn’t work up country anymore. So the embassy sort of gave him a job—or AID gave him a job in Vientiane, which wasn’t really much of a job, just to keep him there so he could run the blind school. And so one day Pop comes over to our house. Our son was just—less than a year old, maybe a newborn at the time. Pop comes over at about five in the morning, he had been out drinking all night, and wakes us up and orders—‘Yasuko, fix me breakfast.’ So she goes in the kitchen, starts fixing him breakfast. And I was sort of grouching around—I had a long beard at the time, a lot longer than yours. [Interviewer chuckles] Pop says, ‘Steve, you look like Grumpy from the Seven Dwarves.’ [Both laugh] I shaved the beard off that day! [More laughter] So that was Pop. ‘You look like Grumpy from the Seven Dwarves.’

(39:57) How would you—to people who have only read about it, how would you describe Sam Thong?

Ah, Sam Thong. It was surrounded by hills that pretty much—had all the trees cut down for fire wood. A few pine trees up there—one of the things that was unique to the area were the pine trees. A dusty, dry red clay air strip, and in the dry season the dust would be everywhere. All the planes had reverse props and although it was along airstrip, the pilots often put the prop in reverse, so the dust would be blowing everywhere. And then in the rainy season, they’d be sliding all over in the mud. You know, it was like snot, and it was slick. And so everything would be covered in mud or dust and flies and—, just a non-stop operation. When I first got up there, I was introduced to my medics, we had a little sort of dark, dirty Quonset hut, actually only part of a Quonset hut. We had the medical supplies stored there, in the packed mud floor building. Every morning we would load up enough supplies for five or six dispensaries on a Porter usually, which is a single-engine fixed wing STOL [Short Take-off and Landing] aircraft, and then the chief, medic, Ly Chay and I would get on the plane at first light, as soon as we could get flying, and we’d go out and visit, five, or six dispensaries. We’d off-load the medicine for that dispensary, go check the medic, make sure he knew what he was doing, and make sure he had supplies. I’d look at his in-patients to see if they were being treated properly, look at what he was treating them with, and I’d ask questions—‘What do you give them if somebody comes in with?’—just basic on-the-job training again. That was how I trained the medics on the job. Then if they had a patient who was too sick for him to continue to care for, I’d put the patient on the airplane. So, as we offloaded medicine at each place, we’d take on more patients, and we’d end up back to Sam Thong with an airplane full of patients and no medicine. We would drop the patients off at the hospital, taxi back over to the warehouse where the medics/warehousemen had the next load set up. I’d usually average 15 take-off and landings on these mountain strips a day, and do this every day, and then come back at night, just as it’s getting dark, drink a few beers, [Chuckles], go to bed, get up and start all over again. All the Americans would stay two-three weeks up there and then two or three days down in Vientiane.

(42:25) Now the hospital at Sam Thong—what was that like?

A tin roof with thatched walls, wood floors, and all these little local girls, mountain girls, Hmong and Lao Theung, upland Lao Working in US type white nurses uniforms

Pop had helped train [really meant ‘recruit’] them?

No, we had American nurses that would train nurses, and a couple of Thai and Lao medics that also helped in the training. We always had an American nurse there. While I was there, the first nurse in Sam Thong was a male nurse, Jack Thiel, who had been to Vietnam with USAID—also from Chicago, it turned out. We had a surgeon, an American general surgeon, and then we had two Lao, one doctor and one medicine chef, as they called it, which is like a super-medic. They worked in that hospital—with 140 patients a day not unusual—and when the war was really heating up, we had casualties all over the place, there was a covered veranda, like a porch around the front, and they'd have 'em out there. They'd be everywhere. And it was non-stop.

(43:38) How many beds did you have?

About a hundred beds. But it was not unusual to have 140 patients in there. The surgeon would do the operations—mostly war-wounded operations. One day he called me in—they were just swamped. He had a guy—well, actually a couple of Hmong soldiers, had been up on a mountain outpost somewhere, and they'd filled up a five-gallon GI can with water, and they were heating it on a fire, but they had the top locked down. That thing exploded while they were sitting around the fire, and mangled one guy's feet and hands. He'd apparently been sitting with one leg out and both hands out [toward the fire to warm himself]. So the surgeon asked me to help him amputate. He worked on one side and I did the other side. And that really is the only time I did anything in the hospital. I'd bring patients in all the time. I remember one time I was out in a village and a girl, who'd been out with her father who was cutting down trees—big teak trees, hundreds of years old. This teak tree fell on her, broke both her femurs. [Interviewer groans in sympathy] Luckily, it was soft ground, so she wasn't crushed; and it was only a branch, it wasn't the whole tree. But anyway, she had two fractured femurs, and I brought her in. And I remember we ended up taking her down to the hospital in Vientiane, and it was months before she was able to come back up. I mean, her femurs were just smashed. And there were things like that that I remember, that little girl—she had such a nice smile...

(45:17) You were saying earlier that you've been so impressed with how far the Hmong have come. What do you remember about what the Hmong were like and your first impressions of them as you were meeting them in these villages?

Oh, well, let me think about that... Well, one thing, the Hmong didn't bathe much. Not that they were dirty, it's just that it wasn't part of their customs. So that was one thing. And the women—wore these baggy pants. And whenever they needed to pee they would just lift a leg and pee down their leg and that was one of the things that got my attention right away. [Both laugh] The food was pretty basic stuff. It was boiled vegetables and water, basically, or roasted meat—chicken or pork. And sticky rice. They ate with their hands, which a lot of South East Asians did—Filipinos did also—but they had no concept of germs or sanitation. That was one of the things we had to teach them—of course, we had to teach the nurses this right away. We had to explain to them that there were little things on their hands that would cause other people to die, and you had to wash your hands to kill these little things you can't see. They didn't believe that at all. But they'd do what we told 'em. [Both laugh] And telling time—a nurse for example, has to be able to take pulse, and so we had to teach them—the whole concept of time. They were all given a wrist watch when they graduated. It was just, just totally out of their sphere. They just didn't understand it. So they all learned to tell time. [Chuckles] The Hmong, though, were stern, stoic people. They didn't laugh a lot, unlike the Lao who were happy-go-lucky, drink, sing and dance. The Hmong were serious, and you could tell that right away, that they were serious people. And they were husky and stockier than the Lao or the Vietnamese or any other Asians I've ever been around. And they were fierce-looking, and you could see why they might be good soldiers even before you found out that they were good

soldiers. I'll never forget my first impressions; I went to Long Tieng maybe the first week I was up in Sam Thong. Stan Monie, the guy that was showing me around, was an ex-Air Commando medic who also worked for USAID. He took me over to Long Tieng for my first visit. We didn't drive over there. It was just up over the mountain ridge—and it was, I don't know, a two-hour drive, but nobody ever drove—we flew. So he takes me over there and we land on this long asphalt air strip, with a karst right at the end of the runway, so if you didn't stop, the karst would stop you—and there were karsts on either side of the runway.. The karsts just come straight up out of the ground—limestone karsts. There was a road that went up a small hill at the end of the runway which was where the CIA headquarters was located. It was built in the midst of another karst. There were barracks for sleeping, an office, and a bar, and under the bar—there was a trap door in the floor of the bar, and under the bar there was a cage, and in that cage was an Asian black bear. They would feed it through the trap door, and the Asian black bear liked beer, so the guys would be in there drinking at night, and they'd be getting the bear liquored up with beer! Every once in a while—there was an iron gate on the entrance to the cage down below, and every once in a while a Hmong would get too close and a bear would tear his arm off. It was a wild bear, and a big one. So that bear was there most of the time I was there. It was just sort of surreal. There was no sanitation system in Long Tieng. Long Tieng was the second largest city in Laos, and there was no sewer system, so everything sort of ran or lay alongside the roads. The sewage didn't really run until the rainy season—there was no place for it to run to, and so there were open sewers everywhere. There was a constant stench. The Hmong just built houses everywhere—bamboo, whatever they could find, tin roofs, flattened 55 gallon gasoline drums—I mean, I never saw so many gasoline drum houses in my life! Fifty-five gallon drums split open, hammered out, put together to make houses. There were also quite a few house made from wood ammo cases or from the pallets on which rice was air dropped. Whatever was available they used it. At Long Tieng guys were walking around in every combination of uniforms you can imagine—everything from French camouflage to...

[Recorder turned off, new track begins]

(0:00) You were walking through Long Tieng and there were guys with all kinds of uniforms—

So we were walking around Long Tieng, and there's a little restaurant on the corner, at the end of the air strip where the road goes up to the CIA headquarters. So Stan said, 'Let's go have a bowl of noodles or something, and have a beer.' By the way, we used to drink beer instead of water when we were up country, because it was hot, and you did not drink the water. So sometimes by the end of the day you were a little bit looped, but it didn't matter. [Chuckles] No drinking when I was flying, though. We drank when we were in Sam Thong and there wasn't much going on. So we are sitting there in this little cafe and watching this parade of guys go by: Air Force guys in Levis and cowboy hats and M-16s—the Ravens; the CIA guys in full combat gear, but not in uniform; the Hmong walking by, some with a camouflage jacket and Hmong black, billowy pants. Others wore fitted uniforms. They were carrying every weapon you can imagine. The Hmong officers all had side arms. The women in traditional Hmong costume, most of them up there wore a simpler version of the full dress Hmong costume. When I was sitting there, I remember thinking, 'Gee, this is like Terry and the Pirates! This is just unbelievable! Nobody would ever believe this. How could you describe this to people?' I mean, the smells, the heat, the humidity, with all these characters walking by. It was like when I first saw the 'Star Wars' movie where Han Solo and Luke were in the bar with all the creatures, as soon as I saw that scene, I thought of Long Tieng. [Both laugh] Then there were the CIA guys—they were mostly aloof. They didn't talk to anybody unless they knew them, and I was a new guy, but Stan introduced me around. I got to know a lot of the Air America pilots and the Continental [Air Transport] pilots, because I flew with them every day. They liked to

teach the basics of how to fly the airplanes, so you'd sit in the right seat, and they'd teach you how to fly, just in case something happened to them. It was good insurance, so you learned to fly. You'd spend all day with a pilot and so you got to know them. Another group of characters. Most of them were ex-military guys; a lot of them were ex-World War II fighter pilots—just great individuals—hard-drinking, hard-partying, hard-charging, expert pilots.

(2:34) [Did] you know Fred Walker at all?

Yes, I knew Fred.

What do you remember about him?

Not a whole lot. I don't remember much about many of the guys. I remember the guys whose bodies I recovered—killed in crashes. Two particularly—one was a young guy, ex-Special Forces guy who was flying for Continental. I picked him up. He crashed—apparently his Porter engine went into reverse when he was dropping rice, and he went right in. And every bone in his body was broken; his head was almost torn off. I put him in a rice bag. He had a young Vietnamese wife and two kids, and I brought him back to Vientiane. Another was Jack Weber, who by this time was flying for Royal Air Lao. They hit the highest mountain in Laos. They were just about a hundred feet too low, hit the tip of the mountain in bad weather, and I brought what was left of his body back—which was his lower leg. But I recognized his boot. And so I certified to the embassy that this was the body of Jack Weber. And to this day his daughter will not accept that he's dead. You don't live with your leg sheared off at the knee. And I found his leg up at the top of a tree. So I remember those guys and—a lot of the guys who are dead now—Al Adolph had a great big handlebar moustache, a great big guy. Another guy, who's still alive, is 85 years old, ex-World War II fighter pilot, Jack Knotts. I saw him in Tampa two or three years ago. He's the current president of the Air America Association. I'll never forget the time, Jack was bringing in a load of dead Hmong bodies all wrapped up in ponchos, he was driving a Huey—an Air America Huey. And apparently, just as he was coming in for the landing, one of these poncho-wrapped bodies' starts moaning and moving around, and Jack was spooked, and landed too close to my office. His rotor tips hit the tin roof and as my medics ran out the shrapnel was flying everywhere hitting my medics! But anyway, we got this guy off and took care of him. And so I'll never forget that Jack Knotts story.

[Laughing] I guess not!

Another guy got doused by jet fuel when he was re-fueling a Porter. Somehow it came out of the fill tank, and he got sprayed with jet fuel. So he ran over and jumped in the river that ran alongside the air strip. [Laughs] So he came in to my office on the Ban Xon air strip and I had to get him cleaned up. The pilots, like the rest of us often got diarrhea, but they wouldn't want to stop flying. But there they were flying all day, and what are you going to do? So every village they'd stop and just drop their drawers under the wing of the airplane or the more modest off to the side of the runway... So I tried to make up concoctions that they could still fly, but would stop their diarrhea. You learn to treat dysentery over there, and I came up with a lot of combination remedies, and some of them worked pretty well.

(5:53) So was your USAID role one that took up most of your time, and you were essentially 'on call' as far as rescuing downed pilots and—

Well, that was the whole thing. I mean, the USAID job required me to be flying all the time, so as soon as I got a call there was a plane down, I would immediately divert. A Porter couldn't land in most places where aircraft went down, so when we got helicopters (we had jet rangers); I started flying mostly in the jet rangers. It couldn't carry as much, but at least you could get into difficult

strips easier, and the weather wasn't such a factor, either. They could hover down through the clouds. I was always ready for a search and rescue in the choppers.

(6:37) Well let's go back just a little bit and talk just a little more about your medical work in the villages. I assume there were some things you expected to find, but there might have been a few surprises as well, in terms of the kinds of diseases or problems that you were encountering.

Well, there were the basic diseases that you would find anywhere and the mountains in the colder season you'd get a lot of coughs and colds. We had outbreaks of measles, and it was terrible; it would just decimate the kids in Hmong villages, 'because they had no natural immunity. Then when the Hmong moved as refugees down to the lower elevation areas around Ban Xon, they came down with a lot more malaria—for example when they moved out of Sam Thong in 1970. Sam Thong was, I think, in the range of about 2500 feet, and it was right at that 2500 foot level and above where malaria wasn't much of a problem. There was some malaria in Sam Thong, but not a lot. But when you went down in the lower elevation river valleys, malaria was everywhere. The Hmong weren't as used to malaria as the lowland Lao were, so they suffered tremendously from malaria. When I would go out to a village there was always some war-wounded, there were the coughs and colds, dysentery, vitamin deficiency, malaria, and then every once in a while something more unusual—fractures or things like that, or like the little girl that the tree fell on. Sometimes on the rice drops there were accidents. The rice bags were tied to a pallet, and they were pushed out of a C-46, or dropped from a Porter. Some times the Hmong would stand on the drop zone waiting for the rice, and they'd get hit with a rice sack or a pallet, which usually killed them, but if it didn't, they were in pretty bad shape. Another thing that Hmong did—and they didn't usually survive this—was they'd walk into the aircraft props all the time.

Oh, God...

Because you can't see 'em when they're spinning, and the pilots wouldn't usually shut the engine down. So I really had to be careful. When I'd land, the first thing I did was jump out of the airplane and make sure they didn't run into the prop or if in a helicopter, rear rotor. When we would land the villagers would all charge up to the airplane trying to be the first in line to get a ride somewhere. So I would try to keep 'em out of the prop of the front of the airplane, and the back rotor on the helicopter. Some times they'd walk around the back of a helicopter and be decapitated, [Interviewer sighs] so there were a lot of those kinds of accidents. But the war wounded were the worst, and we had the Hmong medics out with troops in the field and the outposts. During the '72 and '73 dry-season offensives the casualties were the worst. The Hmong had really already been decimated, and the Thai volunteer battalions were brought in. I talked about it in my DVD, but I don't think I can adequately describe how bad that was. The first choppers would start coming into Ban Xon with the guys that had survived the night attacks—, the ones that didn't have head wounds or gut wounds but extremity wounds—There would be chopper after chopper, mostly all Thai at this point, and some Hmong. We'd send the Hmong right up to the hospital. I had my office, which was on the air strip, converted to a sort of a MASH triage station/dispensary, and so my better medics and I would treat the Thai wounded until about two in the afternoon, when the last ones would usually come in. We'd get 'em stabilized, IVs, get their wounds packed, and amputate limbs that were just hanging, get 'em ready to go. They were then loaded onto the C-130s and -123s, and shipped back to Thailand. By two o'clock I'd be covered in blood and gore, I had a crude shower put in behind my office and then after showering we would hose down the office. Then I might start drinking beer until the planes were ready to leave and go back home to Vientiane. That lasted for the five months dry season—for five months at a time, that's all I did—putting in IVs, doing amputations, stabilizing them and then getting them t back to Thailand. So it was a pretty gruesome

time. I got pretty good at it, though—a lot of experience, a lot of practice getting an IV into a collapsed vein—many docs have a hard time doing that, I would often do a cut-down.. Some times you'd find these guys, treated by the medics in the field who would just bandage them and put them on a chopper. We had just started to get these blow-up splints for arms and legs. So the splints would put some pressure on the wound. When we would get these casualties we would always start an IV, and all of a sudden the opaque blow-up splint would turn red, because there was nothing but mush under there. So, then we'd have to take the leg or arm off. Then in '73, I think later in the '73 offensive, we got a Thai team of docs and medics up in Ban Xon. These guys were docs, but they just didn't have the experience taking care of casualties, so... we ended up doing most of it, anyway, working with them.

Another good story about a US Air Force crew that got shot down in the Plaines des Jarres, in the spring of '70,—right before Sam Thong fell—maybe February 1970. I got the call that an A-1E went down in the Plaines des Jarres. I was in a Porter, and at least the Plain was flat, so I was heading out there for the pick-up. Just ahead of me, an Air America Huey landed and, got them on board. So we followed the Huey back to Sam Thong, I was right behind them when they landed. Air America at the time has a blue and gray helicopter with tiny letters about this big [puts hands about 3-5 inches apart] on the tail that said, 'Air America.' Those were the only markings on the airplane. Now the pilots sometimes had beards, they wore cowboy hats, they wore whatever—or they wore the gray “sort of” uniform. I get there, in time to off load the pilot and co-pilot. The pilot had a fractured femur and the other guy was just shaken up. They both had their combat vests on with pistols and everything. At that time I had the full beard. I was carrying an AK-47, dressed in Levis maybe jungle boots and a bush shirt. I grabbed the guy that wasn't hurt, and said to him, 'Are you all right? Are you OK?' And I just took him and sat him down on the bench on the hospital porch. We had landed right in front of the hospital. He just sat there docilely, and I got the other guy off, the Huey. The American doc, Jim Borden said, 'The hospital's full. We can't put him in there.' So we will take care of him on the porch. So the porch had benches for patients waiting to be treated, and it had a railing around it. Jim told me too pull traction on the pilot's leg after he had given him morphine. I sat on the railing and locked my legs around it, so that I could pull traction on the pilot's femur, while the surgeon put a plaster cast on the leg. So I had to hold the traction 'til the cast dried. So I'm sweatin' it,—it's a hundred degrees—

That wrestling training came in handy!

—I've got traction on the guy. And so I'm pretty well running on adrenaline after going out on the PDJ and flying back, I'm pretty well hyped up, anyway, so...after Jim says I can let up I walk over to the other guy's who is still sitting on the bench, and I grabbed his arm and say, 'Come with me!' [Laughs] So I took him over to Pop's house, and I opened the fridge. And all that was in there was—what was it? Oh, shit, now I can't—

(14:31) Don't tell me it was White Horse [whiskey].

No—Pabst Blue Ribbon. [Both laugh] So I get a couple of Pabsts, I hand him one and I take one, and he looks at it and he looks at me, and he says, 'My God! You're an American!' [Both laugh] He thought he'd been captured or something!

Oh really?

[Still laughing] It was the Pabst Blue Ribbon! He says, 'You're an American!' And then he just opens up—'Where am I? What' is this place?' I am sure he was confused because of all the little Hmong girls, in their white uniforms, white nurses' caps on, in the middle of the mountains, and civilian clothes and chopper. Apparently—they were never briefed on[the fact that] we were there. It was too secret for the Air Force to know we were there to help them. The North Vietnamese knew we were there! Why were we keeping secrets from the Air Force? It was crazy! But anyway,

this guy now just—just couldn't stop talking. Then he took off his vest and gave it to me. In his vest he had the gold chit—you know, the one that says, 'The bearer of this can receive—'

(15:31) The blood chit.

Yeah, the blood chit. ['The bearer of this can] receive \$10,000 in gold.' And get that, and I get his pistol and most importantly, the survival radio which I could [use to] talk to the fast movers!

Now when you say the fast movers...

Jets. You could always talk to our planes with—we had HD-2s, battery-operated things, but with this radio, you could talk to the jets. So if you're really in deep kim-chi you could call in a jet! So I had the vest with .38 caliber pistol, and of course I kept it. He said, 'I won't be needing this anymore.' I never did find out what happened to those two guys. But that was my first pick up assist...

(16:07) That's the first rescue you ever did?

Yeah. And I didn't really do the rescue—I mean, I was there, but... Yeah, at least the first American pilots.

(16:17) How many would you estimate you helped rescue or at least help treat?

Oh, let's see. [Pauses] Unfortunately, most of the ones that I picked up were dead, were bodies, and they weren't rescues. In fact, soon after I got to Sam Thong, a Lao Air Force C-47 took off from Long Cheng with the blocks still on that rudder. So as you come out of Long Cheng, there's a hill that you have to get over. Well, he started banking and it didn't bank, and it just plowed into this hill and burned. It was full of fuel, and so I think there were nine bodies that I pulled out of that one, all charred.

(17:03) You know, I think—the Director of the Center for Hmong Studies, Lee Pao Xiong, grew up in Long Cheng. He was talking about that, too.

Yeah. But that was just a pure screw-up on their part. They left the blocks on the rudders and the elevators. So he had no chance, and it was loaded with cargo and people going back to Vientiane.

(17:24) Now what interaction did you have with the Hmong troops who were also trying to rescue these pilots?

Well, you know, there wasn't a lot of direct communication with anybody. Everybody sort of did everything on their own, and the radios we had were these HD-2s, and they took eight D-cell batteries, and they had a range of about a half a mile—under good conditions. And this was all the communication we had. You could talk to pilots if they were overhead, and then they could relay messages. And that's what we did—a lot of relaying. So you might have a Hmong talking to an American, and if lucky, you'd get a, Hmong, T-28 pilot who could speak English. I always traveled with a Hmong so he could translate. And I could communicate that way. I was never involved with the Hmong on the ground helping pilots. I know they did bring in a couple of pilots. In fact, one Pathet Lao soldier brought in an American pilot from the Plaines des Jarres. He then became a USAID employee afterwards. We put him to work, gave him a job—he was a Lao Theung. He worked for Monsieur Four, the Frenchman who was the mechanic, and ex-Foreign Legionnaire who ended up in Laos and then got hired by USAID as a third-country national employee. So he went to work with Monsieur Four, who became my good friend. So there were just characters everywhere in Laos. Albert Four was just an unbelievable character.

(18:57) I don't know much about him.

OK, Albert Four. I'll tell you the Albert Four story. Albert Four, at 16 years old, was fighting with the French Army against the Nazis, and he was a loader for a bazooka. And so his loader was a guy who had already lost, I think, part of his leg, and had a stump, and couldn't move around very well. This guy would wait until the Panzers were right on him, and then fire. And so Four said he was just terrified the whole time during the war. So, after the war, guess things aren't so good and he joined the French Foreign Legion and gets sent to Vietnam. He was at Dienbienphu, when it was surrendered and is captured. [Laughs] After awhile they were sent south, and he decided to stay in Vietnam. He married a Vietnamese woman, and he said he had various jobs. He was a hunter for a while, he was a truck driver, a mechanic, and then eventually he ended up on the Plaines des Jarres. And he had, as he described it, a combination trucking business, restaurant, and whore house.

[Laughs]

OK...[Laughs]

And again he's captured by the North Vietnamese.

(20:11) Where—do you know roughly where on the PDJ he was located?

In Xiengkhoang, near Xiengkhoang—or was it Lat Sen? Xiengkhoang, I think. But anyway, so he's captured, and this is now, around 1965, somewhere around there. His wife's Vietnamese, and so eventually he convinces the North Vietnamese that he's "one with them" and his wife is one with them, and we're both communists at heart, and we're for the cause. Why don't you let me start driving the truck and I'll move supplies for you? So the NVA agree, and as soon as he gets his chance, he loads up his truck, leaves his wife, and high-tails it to Vientiane, where he then goes to work for USAID. So in 1968—or '69, right before I get there, Don Dugan, who had hired me is working up on the PDJ. This is just after Colonel Cher Pao Moua had taken the PDJ, routed the Vietnamese and captured all the NVA tanks and artillery pieces. Don was working a dispensary that was set up with ex-Pathet Lao nurses, and this old wizened, wrinkled Vietnamese woman comes up to Don, unwraps this plastic passport which reads: 'Madame Four.' [Chuckles] So in the meantime Four is already re-married to another Vietnamese woman in Vientiane. And so Don Dougan brought her back, they are reunited. So she ends up living together with the second wife in Vientiane, while Four is working up-country—also in the house is the second wife's sister—three women. Four was [sleeping with] all three of them! [Laughs] Plus he had a Lao girl friend—when we moved to Ban Xon who had his child. He was a character—short and round. I mean, he was stocky like a bull, but as big around as he was tall. And he didn't really speak good French but a patois, and he didn't speak very good English, and he didn't speak Lao very well—a little bit of everything—that patois/pidgin... So he and I ended up—I was put in the same house with him and Blaine Jensen, the three of us in one house in Sam Thong. Four would do the cooking, and we'd get food from the commissary, and he'd get wine, Algerian red wine from the French commissary, so we always had plenty of food. But everything he made had big hunks of garlic in it, and he put red wine in everything—Four was a character. We were good pals, and I could communicate with him pretty well. Another story about Four: it was about the time when we learned Sam Thong was surrounded by North Vietnamese, and it was looking bad. Most of the military were on or near the PDJ, so I trained some of the medics, put them out in defensive positions. We built bunkers and trenches connecting the bunkers, and we had a mortar pit for illumination if we needed it. I trained the medics, and the only weapons we could get from the CIA were M-1 rifles—those great big old things. Brand new M-1 rifles, still in cosmoline. So I got them all trained up on the M-1s, and we also had A-6 machine guns. The medics were just kids, no military training, so I trained them and got them all set up in defensive positions. Every night I'd go out and check the guards two or three times. Our house was on the edge of the runway so Four and I put a trap door in our house, which was on stilts, and we had, a wall of gasoline drums filled with sand, on the open runway side and

another big wall of drums on the high point as it came across the runway. The idea was that if the NVA, were crossing the runway and they were shooting at our house, maybe they'd hit the drums. [Interviewer laughs]. Anyway, we would go down through the trap door and into a trench, and then Four and I would go out and make sure that the guards were awake and alert. As I said, we would do this a couple, three times a night. Usually I'd wake up Four, but one night he was snoring away, and—there he is on his bunk, and he's got an AK-47 on his belly and his pockets stuffed with magazines, fully dressed. I saw the AK going up and down [on Four's belly as he breathes in and out]; sound asleep, so I just went out by myself. I checked the guards, and I returned up through the hatch, as I am climbing in Four's got his AK in my face! He says, [feigning a French accent] 'Oh, Monsieur Steve! It is no possible you do the same again! Next time you must always take me!' [Both laugh] Oh, he was a character.

(25:01) Well, somebody else we haven't talked about yet is Father Luc Bouchard.

Ah, Luc. I saw Luc, and had lunch with him two weeks ago.

Oh really? Where is he?

Miami.

I'd love to talk to him.

You will if you come to the dedication on the 15th because he's staying at my house. I sent him an airline ticket from Miami—he's already got the ticket. I told him, 'You've got to come up for this, you've got to speak—in Hmong'—and he said he'd do it.

Well, I'll even come a couple of days early if there are people coming that I can talk to—that would be great.

Yeah, there'll be a bunch there. So [Pauses, getting back to the story] Father Luc—OK, I'm a young kid when I get over there, I'm 24, and I'm into taking this whole thing with the government seriously—and I see this Catholic priest—you know, a missionary. The pilots are always picking him up, and taking him places. And I had two airplanes working for me and said, 'None of my planes—are going to pick up this guy. I'm state, he's church—you don't mix state and church. It's a no-no. That was my policy. Finally I got to know Father Luc, and I realized, he was just a good guy trying to help, to do what he could'—we're all on the same country team. He did his thing with the lepers primarily, and the Lao Theung—and the Lao Theung were even lower than the Hmong. The Hmong looked down on the Lao Theung. So he worked with the Lao Theung and the Hmong and the lepers, and he was the only one who would work with the lepers. Finally I got to know Luc, and really got to be good friends with him, and so not only would I send my airplanes to pick him up, but I'd get his schedule to make sure the pilots would take him where he wanted to go. I'd always send two cold beers out for him, because unlike the Baptist missionaries, Father Luc would have a beer or two. [Both laugh] And we had Baptist missionaries, too. They were all uptight and had their own airplane, so they didn't need my airplanes. But at any rate, we seldom discussed religion, but I really liked Father B and we were good friends. My wife's a devout Buddhist, and he and she had no problem with that. So about '74, somewhere about there, maybe '75—it was after the coalition was formed, and the Pathet Lao were in the police force in Vientiane, and that evening Father Luc had gotten down to Vientiane before me and when I landed he was waiting for me. He said, 'Steve, my driver came to get me, as usual, to take me back to the

(27:46) Oh, a rectory?

Something like that. His driver told him the communists were going to kill him that night. He said, "They're going to kill me tonight, so can I come home with you?" I said, 'Sure, Father B.' So we got in my car, and I drove him out to my place—I lived in this American compound, six kilometers out of the city called KM-6—Kilometer Six. And it was, a relatively secure area, with only Americans living there. When I got home I just strapped on my nine millimeter, and Yasuko

cooked a nice dinner for Father B, later we sat in—I had a great place—I had a big screened-in porch with a pond with a fountain in it. So we sat in the screened porch, put our feet up on the fountain, and drank Irish coffee all night to stay awake! [Both laugh] At first light I, drove him to the river, put him on a boat to Thailand, and he just left with whatever he had in his rucksack after 18 years in Laos—didn't say goodbye to anybody. But I felt good, because he had trusted his life with me, and so we stayed in touch over the years—not as much as we should have, but he visited me in Chicago twice on home leave.

(29:10) Did you have any sense at the time why, of all the people the communists could have tried to kill, Father Bouchard was such an important figure?

Boy...why? I really don't know why—other than that he worked with the Hmong, worked with the lepers [Pauses] and everybody loved him, but he was an outspoken guy. It also could have been that the driver could have had something against Father B? The thing about the Hmong—and they haven't changed. They love to send anonymous letters and death threats. They call them 'bullet letters.' Have you ever heard of bullet letters?

[Interviewer says he has]

I used to get them all the time.

You got them?

Oh, yeah. When my medics—weren't happy about something—for example when one medic was a Vang, and the other was a Yang, and the Yang got 50 kip—two cents more a month than the other one, the Vang would say something like, 'Why should he get more than me...' [Makes whining sound] Some times they were like little kids. The clan stuff would drive you crazy. So it was always something. They didn't like the way I was running things, or I was showing favoritism to one clan over another clan, whatever it was. So [Pauses] at the end, during the month before the fall of Laos I got a bullet letter, and this one was different from the others, because it said, I am going to kill you—Yasuko, and Tommy, my son. 'Im going to kill you, Yasuko, and Tommy.' He spelled their names correctly and everything. I didn't pay much attention to it, but I showed it to my boss, who then gave it to the ambassador, and the ambassador pulled me out. So the last month, when I could have really done more to help the Hmong, I wasn't there to help. I'll just never forget that, because some asshole Hmong did that. So...at any rate, I was in Vientiane, and as the Lao and Hmong filtered down, at least I could give them some money and get them across the river, I could do things like that, but I could have been more help up country. At least I could have told them to get to Thailand, because most were sitting there waiting for VP to tell them to do something.

(31:21) Well, let's talk about the fall of Sam Thong.

OK.

You were, as you said, of a pretty good idea that it was going to happen, and you'd fortified the place, you'd trained medics, you'd equipped people and built all kinds of stuff...

Great story: right before the fall, Senators Walter Mondale and Inouye came to visit Sam Thong—with a couple of others. I don't remember who the other guys were, but Mondale I knew was from Minnesota. I'm over there supervising building the trenches and the bunkers and so they come up to me and asked. 'So, what are you doing?' I said, 'Oh, I'm just a medic here, I'm just watching what these guys are doing.' I lied right to their faces! they also asked, 'Who are you.' And I said, 'Oh, I'm just a medic working for USAID.' I lied right to Inouye and Mondale, and they replied 'Oh, yeah, OK,' and off they went. So anyway, we knew the NVA were coming. We had intelligence that sappers were spotted near Sam Thong. Four and I were pretty well armed, and we were two of the only—maybe there were one or two other ex-military guys there. So we decided we were going to stay and fight. We got everything ready to go, and finally Pat McCree, Doc

Weldon's wife who was head of the village health program (he was head of all public health. But anyway, she came up to Sam Thong and said the ambassador doesn't want anybody staying, everybody has to get out. We had been loading planes with the hospital patients and women and children all day long. And again, I had been threatened many times that day— 'You put my family on now or I'll kill you'—these were armed policemen and military guys making threats. So after awhile I put my 9mm on. (I did not usually carry a gun in Sam Thong.) Finally, this policeman— really started getting on my nerves. Every time a plane would come in he would say, 'My wife goes on this plane or I will kill you.' So I grabbed him by the neck and dragged him in to Pop and I said, 'If you don't get this guy away from me, I'm going to break his back.' [Interviewer laughs] We got them all out and then we were the last to leave. I packed a duffel bag with what ever I could stuff in the bag, I took my weapons, and we flew to Vientiane, and that was it—left everything in the house. We didn't have that much, anyway, but all that I had that I brought to Laos was in that house. Two weeks later I came back. There was a dead body on a metal gurney in front of the burned out warehouse. It never made the evacuation and had turned to soup in the hot sun. And as soon as I opened the door of the airplane I could smell that one. I mean, that is a smell you never forget. The T-28s were still bombing between Sam Thong and Long Cheng (that's in the DVD) and we looked around, went in to my house. The electricity was off, so everything in the refrigerator had turned to rot and black goop, so that was pretty bad, and there were quite a few holes through my house, but of the four houses in a row, it was the only one still standing. The others were all burned to the ground. I was able to grab some of the stuff that I'd left—still there—, letters and things like that, stuff that was in the desk drawer.. We had evacuated Sam Thong, got all of the patients out, lot of the wives and kids of the employees. Everybody else had to fend for themselves in the jungle, and they just headed south through the jungle, for days we were picking them up with helicopters and Porters as they moved into various strips along the way. Finally we got them all to Ban Xon. Ban Xon was a road camp for the USAID public works people building a road to Long Cheng from Vientiane. They had some facilities there; to include a big maintenance facility which we converted into a hospital. After a while we built a new hospital. Blaine and Pop were working out of a Sears Roebuck tent, it was rainy season,—right there on the runway. Blaine had a generator shipped up with a refrigerator full of beer. [Chuckles] And the Sears tent couldn't have been 12 by 12 [Interviewer laughs]. He had his radio in there and the antennas, his refrigerator with the beer, and the generator. That was the new USAID operations center, and we just kept everything going. It started rough, and pretty soon we had a warehouse built for rice and other foodstuffs, and the other materials distributed by USAID, such as plastic sheeting and tin roofing, and pot and pans and the other stuff that the refugee people sent out to the refugees. I also had my medical warehouse built, and worked right off the runway. We thought it was going to be temporary, and we would go back to Sam Thong. We never did, and it ended up being the USAID base for the last five years we were there.

(36:46) Did you have any interaction with Vang Pao or his officers during this period, or did that not happen until later?

Did I tell you about my first meeting with Vang Pao?

No, you haven't yet. Here we go! [Chuckles]

Here I am; I've been in country maybe a month, 24 years old—hot shot, right? We landed the Porter on the PDJ—it was Lima 22—and LyChay and I to check on the military medic. The pilot wouldn't stay on the ground and circled overhead, because they were still getting shelled every once in a while—120mm rockets and artillery. So we look for the dispensary and have to ask for directions—now it was a real flat area, and the dispensary is a GP medium military tent—I mean, it was—shredded from shrapnel.—There, the wounded were laying on cots with IVs running, and no

medic around. This tent was full of holes. The patients were just not protected at all! So I said, 'Who the hell is in charge here?' So a soldier points me down to an underground bunker. I went down to the bunker, and there is VP with three or four CIA guys eating lunch. I said, 'Who the fuck's in charge here, and why the fuck would you guys be sitting here stuffing your fucking faces, while you've got wounded lying out there in the open?' VP looked at me and said, 'They're of no use to me.' So I chew out General Vang Pao the first time I meet him—I didn't know who he was. [Both laugh] So we were—not on really the best terms for the first two or three years after that. The CIA guys were not too fond of me either after that—I mean, they must have thought, who is this kid and what the hell is he doing here? [Interviewer laughs]

(38:31) I assume even if you hadn't met him that you knew him by reputation at least to some degree—or was it too early for that.

[Well], I'd heard of him, but I didn't know this was VP. If I did, maybe I was too mad to even care, I don't know.

What reputation did he have amongst USAID staff and other folks during—

He was the leader? He was the guy that was in charge; he was the guy that was supported by the US government, doing what we wanted done. But again, I was probably too young and dumb to understand the significance of—my actions at the time, but I was hot-headed....

(39:13) Well, you had a legitimate concern for goodness sake...

Yeah, but... [Both laugh] One of the CIA guys, a guy named Burr Smith was down there, he had a shaved head

[Interviewer clarifies that it's "Burr" Smith]

Burr Smith, yeah—so his codename was Mr. Clean. So he was one of the CIA guys that really didn't like me shooting off my mouth to VP. It turns out that he was ex-Special Forces, a reservist—that's all no active duty, big deal, ends up a CIA case officer. So he thought he was hot shit—and, of course, I thought I was hot shit, too, 'because I'd been at SOG, I'd been in First Group, and I'd been around, done a few things. Most of these guys that worked for the CIA did not have much experience—there were some that were ex-military, but many of 'em were not. Many were smoke-jumpers—that was their entire claim to fame. So they were smoke-jumpers ended up working in the mountains of Laos. Why? Because, there were mountains in Laos? I had no idea! Jerry Daniels—was an ex-smoke-jumper, who was very good. Many with no or little military background would get six months of training at CIA headquarters and off they would go. Some of them were military. or guys that were Marines or Special Forces just sort of on a 'leave of absence'—they called 'em 'dipped' guys.

Yes, 'sheep-dipped.'

Sheep-dipped. But—Jerry was a good guy. I don't mean to imply anything negative about him or the others, but to me they just weren't in the caliber of guys that I had been associated with as a young SF trooper. Some of these old SF guys were World War II vets, and DP'S who had come out from behind the Iron Curtain and joined Special Forces, great guys, hard-charging. Then I'd see these CIA case officers, most didn't impress me much.

(41:12) Were there times when, in your opinion, perhaps, the different American agencies made it more difficult for the Hmong to do their work, or to benefit from the services and supplies and other kinds of things that the United States was providing?

No, I think we all worked together pretty well. Whatever the personal feelings were, we all worked together—we all knew what the goal was, and the goal was—It was the CIA's job to recruit as many Hmong to fight the North Vietnamese as possible, it was USAID and Pop's job to make sure that

families were taken care of, so that the soldiers would continue to fight. Even in '69 they were recruiting these ten- and 12-year-old boys, it wasn't USAID recruiting them, but we allowed it to happen. The CIA allowed VP to recruit these kids—it was the idea that some of the older guys didn't want to be on the front lines. So they had some influence in the right clan or were in the right place, did their time and they didn't want to be on the front lines anymore. All these kids were conscripted out of the villages, and they were sent out with very little training out on the front lines, to fight hardened North Vietnamese regulars. And it was a slaughter. And when the Hmong were used up, the older Hmong—they were hunters and farmers from the mountains—when they were used as guerillas to go out and attack in small groups and then run, they did a great job. But when they were put out on the mountain top to fight defensive action against well-trained North Vietnamese regulars, it was no contest, especially when the NVA went up against these ten-year-old kids with two weeks of training. There was no place to run, so they just stayed and died. [Pauses] So yeah, it was sad.

(43:03) Can you talk about that sort of change—not just in the way the Hmong were asked to fight by the United States, but obviously the impact it had on the Hmong community during your very long stay there, in which you were practically there until the very end?

Yes, to the end—two weeks after VP left. [Sighs] You saw it, first of all, when you would go into villages and find only old men, women, and little kids—and that's all you'd see in the villages out on the mountain tops. VP's recruiters had already been there and scarfed up all of the boys—everybody that was big enough to hold a rifle. They were all in the military. [Pauses] Of course, a lot of them had already been killed, so there a lot of widows around. The Hmong have the custom of taking several wives—and one of the ways this happened, was a family with four or five brothers, and the brothers are married and get killed, even if it is the youngest brother, a boy of 15 years old, he takes his brothers widows as his wives. So he would be responsible for his brothers' wives. He was the responsible guy, and that was the custom so there were a lot more females than males, eligible females around than males. [Pauses] But to see how young these kids were who served in Vang Pao's army—In the DVD there is a great shot of Nhia Thong Lor, and—it was just such a stroke of luck that I ran into him again—

It's a great story...

—I was showing my slides to a group of Hmong and showed him that picture and he said, 'Oh yeah, that's me, that's my cousin.' So he has that photo blown up, [Chuckling], hanging in his living room, and he carries a copy in his wallet. It's the only picture he has that proves he was in the military.

(45:00) Where does he live?

Madison now. He was in Milwaukee, but recently moved to Madison where he has a grocery store. He is a good guy—very solid guy.

(45:14) Well, in these presentations that you give, what is it that you hope to inform young Hmong people and American-born citizens about what the Hmong did for us, and what it cost them?

Well, I think that's the first issue: you want to explain to people that—first of all, you've got to remember that when the Hmong got here, they came in the same wave with the Vietnamese boat people, and everybody knew about the Vietnamese boat people, but nobody had ever heard of the Hmong, and no one was told about the Hmong, because it was all secret. The Hmong got here and they were just considered Vietnamese. And everybody knew that the Vietnamese—half of 'em were communists. So the Hmong are lumped in with the Vietnamese. Many of the Vietnamese were also

economic refugees—they were fleeing because they had some money—The Hmong sort of got lumped into that thing, and there was nobody around to say, ‘No, the Hmong are different,’ that they weren’t like the Vietnamese, and they were on our side. The Hmong who are here were all on our side, because they were vetted in the camps of Thailand. No Hmong got here on a boat or anything like that. They all came the official way through the US Government, with the State Department vetting each one. When we first proposed the memorial, there were veterans’ groups saying, ‘Oh, the Hmong fought on the side of the communists.’ Well sure, there were Hmong that fought on the side of the communists, but they’re not in America! They’re still over there! [Chuckles] And if any of those communist Hmong ever showed up in a refugee camp in Thailand, the other Hmong would have killed them in no time—There is no chance they would have gotten over here! So that’s a ridiculous thing to say, that the Hmong in this country fought for, on the side of the communists. It just makes no sense for anybody who knows anything ... So it was all secret, and the US Government would not tell anybody what the Hmong had done or, who the Hmong were. The US Government just...probably thought the war is over, it was a State Department responsibility now, and the CIA sort of washed their hands of the whole thing. The Hmong were just poorly served. The whole story of how the first immigrants arrived and how the subsequent migrations and the secondary migrations occurred is interesting. Most of the Hmong that ended up in this part of the world came because of the churches—good-hearted church people in the upper Midwest said, ‘Sure, we’ll take in some refugee families.’ So they came here, they were treated well, treated nicely by the good people in Wisconsin and Minnesota, and so then you had the secondary migration of people. In some places, the State Department in their wisdom said, ‘We will put all the Vang in one city’—say, Hutchinson, Kansas, out in the middle of nowhere—and they didn’t realize that there’s no opportunity for the kids, because they can’t marry within their clan, so when they get to that age, they have to go somewhere else to find a mate. So, it was things like that, the splitting up families with second wives. So then you had the secondary migration, and it didn’t hurt that not only were the people in Wisconsin and Minnesota good people, who took care of the Hmong, got them established, but these were two states with the best welfare programs. So you have the secondary migration to three places: California, Wisconsin, and Minnesota—the three with the best social services and welfare programs. So that’s a no-brainer. So, there was that secondary migration, and now you’ve got another migration: Hmong moving to warmer climates—Florida, Arkansas, North Carolina—a lot of Hmong are moving to North Carolina because they know there are a lot of ex-Special Forces guys in North Carolina—and a lot of military in general, who have taken very good care of the Montagnards. In the hills of NC there is a large tract of land that Special Forces have bought for the Montagnards. They put them all together there, and the Yards are farming, putting together villages, where they can preserve their culture. The Montagnards benefit by having somebody to accept and take care of them and get them started. The Hmong didn’t have that. The last wave of Hmong, are those who have spent their entire lives in the refugee camps in Thailand. Now these people are totally different from the Hmong, who came here in the mid seventies. They don’t have any work ethic; they’ve been used to living on a hand-out—totally different situation. I go back to one of the things that happened, maybe ’78, ’79. I used to get calls from the CDC (Center for Disease Control) in Atlanta all the time. The investigator would say, ‘We have all these reports of Hmong men dying in their sleep’—Night-Time Sudden Death Syndrome. And they wanted to know what it was—could I give any insight into what was going on, and I could only tell them that they had to be under tremendous stress. I don’t know whether that was a cause, but I told the CDC that in Laos these guys were leaders, not only in—the military but, they were leaders of other men, they also led their large families and some times entire Clans. They were in control, and here they can’t speak English and they can’t get a job. Their kids are doing the interaction with the social welfare services, the kids are running the household, and the guy’s sitting there with,

nothing. I imagine that was a terribly depressing thing for these Hmong men. So a lot of them just up and died in their sleep. The other thing was that there was a poison that a lot of the women would take when their husbands would take a second wife. So suicide was a very common practice. So I'm not so sure that some of these guys didn't just kill themselves. I think they would get that poison—from Thailand and other places. I don't even remember what it was, but it was pretty potent stuff. What I found—just among friends and acquaintances, was that a lot of Hmong have died at early ages from common cancers, and at early ages from uncommon cancers. Brain tumors in infants, things like that—unusual. My chief medic, Ly Chay, couldn't have been more than 43, 44 when he died of cancer in Appleton. Her Tou and his wife Youa Lo, from the Twin Cities, had twins, and the twins were taken in by Dr. Joe Westermeyer when they died young.—if you haven't talked to him, you should talk to Joe Westermeyer. He's a Ph.D., maybe a psychiatrist, psychologist. But anyway, he took in Her Tou and Youa Lo's kids. Her Tou was just a real hard-charging Hmong who worked very closely with Pop and all of us in Sam Thong—good guy, who spoke English very well. And Youa was a chief nurse. In Laos Youa Lo came down with Falciparum malaria, and was in the hospital. She was wasting away, jaundiced, the whole thing... dying. The Doc was asking around, did anybody have A-positive blood to give to Youa Lo a transfusion. So I was A+ and we put Youa Lo on a stretcher on the floor and I got up on the gurney and we just did a direct, line right into her, and she not only recovered, but she got fat, and then she had the twins. And that was really unusual for a Hmong, so she always blamed the twins on me! [Chuckles, interviewer guffaws] You know, in her mind it was my blood that did it. [Chuckles] Who knows? But she believed it, and so did Her Tou.

Interesting.

So now they both died in the Twin Cities. She died of a fungal lung infection, and I forget what Her Tou died of, but unusual sort of stuff. And they died young, also, and left those twins, and a couple of other kids.

(53:13) When you went from Sam Thong down to Ban Xon did your job change at all, or were you simply operating out of a different location?

Well, just a different place, and more hectic, obviously, because now... everything was in disarray, dispensaries were moving, populations were moving, I had to put in new dispensaries, move medics around, and find out where the people were setting up villages, so I would be flying around, going to one dispensary, and I would see a few huts on a mountain top—so I'd land and find out who they were, where they came from, if they were going to stay, and my criteria were, maybe 20 or more families then I'd put in a temporary dispensary—put a medic there and he would live in one of the houses with the villagers until they decided where they were going to move. Of course, it was a lot more unsettled, because you never knew where the communists were either. So we really had to be more careful—watch for ground fire and check to see that there were kids and animals around. Before Sam Thong fell, you pretty much knew where the enemy was, and you would avoid the areas, you flew around hot areas, and we got into Bouam Loung, which was surrounded by North Vietnamese—by flying high above 12,000 feet and spiraling in. The porters had no oxygen and at twelve thousand feet you got pretty cold, with thin air. But after the fall of Sam Thong, we never knew where the NVA were. And because we were down in the area that was traditional Pathet Lao, we had the Pathet Lao that had been in the area for a long time moving around through the area. The Ban Xon area had been a home base for them. So we had Pathet Lao, and North Vietnamese. We had an attack at Ban Xon once. They fired a rocket-propelled grenade (the same as used in Iraq now), which hit my warehouse.—it has a large warhead. Luckily, it went through the bamboo siding of the warehouse, right into where we had ceiling to floor stacked cases of Similac infant formula. The stack was about ten cases deep and all the way to the ceiling. The RPG hit that, and

expended most of the shrapnel into the milk, we had milk all over the place—a hundred degrees, and now we had sour milk all over everything. There was not enough water to wash it out. So we had medics run with buckets from the river all day long for days, flushing the place out. Finally we got a water truck in with a hose and hosed the whole place down. I had a couple of good hunks of shrapnel come through my office walls.

One time I was up near the North Vietnamese border, it was probably in early '70-some time. I was with a Chinese American CIA case officer—brand new—first week in country. I don't remember how he ended up in the same plane with me. We were going to deliver medicine and cases of milk to a dispensary that was pretty well isolated. So we land, and because it was close to North Vietnam, it was dangerous and often attacked, and the Porter pilot just kept the prop turning. This was a Porter that had cafe doors that swung out, the back door would stay open, because of the prop wash, but the front door, had to be pushed until it would hook on a little latch in the wing strut. So it locked open. As usual I'm getting the people back and unloading the supplies. All of a sudden I see all the people are running like crazy, and I turned around just in time to see this 82mm mortar round land right in front of the airplane. How we didn't get hit, I don't know—big puff of smoke and dirt. Unlike the movies, it's not fire and flash, its dirt and dust and noise and shock, but because of the prop, you couldn't hear or feel the shock, either. I saw they're walking mortars right down the runway towards us. I ran and jumped, into a hole along side the runway. The hole was surrounded by 55 gallon drums filled with dirt, a common practice. Ly Chay the chief medic, always carried my M-16—and he was already a hundred yards away! [Interviewer laughs] The plane is taxing back and forth and, I'm in the hole forty yards away, the mortar rounds are walking down the runway. I yelled, "Ly Chay, get over here with that M-16!" So he ran back, gave me the M-16, and took off again. [Interviewer laughs] then I saw two guys running through the exploding rounds right toward me. At first I thought they were NVA and took aim at them. As they got closer I saw they were very young Hmong soldiers and they were both crying as they ran by me. I am glad I did not shoot them! Meantime the pilot's waving at me to 'get on board!' and I'm waving at him to get the hell out of there, because they're shooting at him, not me! So he tries to take off, but the door's latched on the wing, so somebody has to get out. Finally the Chinese case officer who had stayed on the airplane got out and unlatched it, The pilot then started taxiing away—He's still waving at me, and getting ready to go, and so I ran out and opened the door and jumped in—sure enough, the door latches on the strut! So the pilot stops again, I get out and unlatch it. Then the pilot turns, and he's starting to take off—into the wind, which is the same way the rounds are coming from! I said, 'Hey, turn around! Take off the other way! Who gives a shit about the wind?' [Both laugh] So he then began to take off the other way and all of a sudden I see Ly Chay running along side the airplane [Interviewer laughs] Lychay is out there, and we're still moving, so I open the door, grab Ly Chay by the hair, and throw him on the airplane. Guess what? The door catches on the strut again! So by this time the NVA must have been laughing so hard they could not hit us. So I got out again and unlatched the door and we take off. I got on the Porter's radio and I said, 'We need some fast movers, I know exactly where the mortar team is; they were behind the hill on the far side of the runway, exactly at the 82 MM maximum range, 2500 meters. I get on the radio and say, 'Looking for fast movers in the area. Any fast movers?' No fast movers, but two T-28s pilots came on. They were right nearby, and they get there within minutes. So I then put Ly Chay on the radio, and I tell him, 'You direct them to put their bombs on the far slope of that hill These two T-28s just come in low and slow, and dropped all their bombs on that hillside. No more mortar rounds. [Chuckles]. Yeah, that was good. That was a good one. The Chinese case officer was still white. He sat in the plane and never says a word all the way back to Long Tieng. When he got back he apparently writes some report—about this USAID guy doing all this shit. [Both laugh] I never saw him again. [Interviewer laughs]

(1:00:21) So as you saw the sort of slow decline of American influence and American military commitment in this part of the world—

It was abrupt. After '73, Air America pulled out, CIA pulled out—they left Jerry and a couple guys, but—they all of a sudden became USAID guys. [Chuckles] Yeah. And Jerry became a USAID refugee relief worker in Long Tieng, and George Cosgrove became Blaine's assistant area coordinator for MRII, in Ban Xon, but he was CIA. Good guy—I think he's dead now. One afternoon, George and I went out to search for a missing truck driver who had been ambushed on the road from Vientiane to Ban Xon. We got word of the ambush just before we were getting ready to go back to Vientiane. We got a call that a convoy of public works trucks had been ambushed on the way up to Ban Xon—about 15 miles down the road. George, Ly Chay and I loaded up a jet ranger with— M-16s, and ammo, and other gear, and we flew down the road to see if we can find this ambushed convoy. When we found the truck we planned to leave Ly Chay in the helicopter to circle above us to see if there's anything going on, 'cause the Hmong had great eyes—they could see things in the jungle that we could never see. Ly Chay stayed in the chopper and, of course, Lee Chai liked that idea, too. [Both laugh] George and I landed in a river bed, and the pilot immediately took off. George and I had to move uphill to the road where this truck is. The truck's engine was still running, there were bullet holes through the truck, doors which were open and the driver's nowhere to be found. So we look around, we're yelling a little bit, but not yelling too much, 'because it's getting dark. We don't know if the bad guys that ambushed the truck are still around. We looked around as best we could, decided 'hell with it,' and called the chopper down and took off, went back to Ban Xon and then on to Vientiane. First thing next morning we got up there, and saw a Royal Lao Government Patrol coming up the road, so we landed the chopper on the road. Then we noticed that there was some scuff marks down from the truck to the river bank. Apparently the truck driver had slid down the bank and when he got to the bottom near the river had covered himself with leaves. We found him, barely conscious, with a bullet through his femur fracturing it. He was weak, in bad shape, and had lost a lot of blood. We had to get him up to the road and then into the chopper. We dragged him up the hillside, got him in the chopper back seat with his leg broken, I decided not to splint him, but get him into the hospital as quickly as possible. The nearest hospital was in Vang Vieng. Jim Borden, the surgeon from Sam Thong had moved down there, so we landed, next to the hospital, and Jim immediately began working on him. He died during the night of a fat embolism probably from bone marrow, into his lungs. The chopper got hit on the way to Vang Vieng—one round through the tail so the bad guys were still in the area. I went back to the ambush site and I put some booby traps up in the area above the road. After that ambush every time there was a convoy leaving the last Lao government control, checkpoint I'd have 'em call me. A bus had also been ambushed and all the passengers taken off and executed. Soon the buses and the civilian trucks would all wait for the convoy, and all travel to Ban Xon together. Ly Chay and I would stop what we were doing get in the jet ranger and fly in front of the convoy shooting up both sides of the road all the way up through bad guy territory. I wasn't supposed to be doing stuff like that, but we'd just load the whole back of the chopper with M-16 magazines, and M-79 rounds, and we would just spray the area on either side of the road. We never had an ambush while we were flying convoy cover. [Interviewer laughs] We did it for months.

(1:04:25) And you never had anybody fire back at you?

No—well, not that I know of. You can't hear anything in the chopper while shooting an M-16— Oh! Another funny story! We we're flying low and fast, right down the road. The M-16 spent casings were flying inside the chopper and one went down the pilot's collar—hot. I thought for sure we were going in the way the pilot reacted to that hot shell casing... 'OK, we' had to develop a new

plan. So after that we got to get the M-16 out the window, far enough so that casings would remain outside. So...there were interesting times. Another time I dropped rocks on the NVA, using the drop doors on the Porter, load up the Porter drop doors with rocks fly over and drop rocks on 'em. [Both laugh] It's all we had!

Sure. Quiet.

Another time I was in the—same village where we had been mortared, right after I had arrived in Laos. Stan Monie was showing me around said, 'You know, there's something funny about this village. They've got all kinds of weapons stored here, and I bet this commander is selling weapons to the bad guys. It was close to North Vietnam, and there was a river that ran into North Vietnam near there. Al Rich, another World War II fighter pilot was flying and he agreed to go look for the bad guys.' We opened the Porter drop doors, before we took off, and I sat spread eagle on the Porter deck, with an AK between my legs, ready to go. As soon as we got up we saw a boat going down the river loaded with something, so we decided—'We'll shoot it up.' Al gets up some altitude, and then when he is in line with the boat—puts it into a dive. This produces the affect where everything loose in the Porter starts flying around and out the drop door between my legs.

[Interviewer laughs] Pretty soon my butt's going out—he's still in a dive! And I'm yelling, 'Pull up, Al! Pull up! Pull up!' [Laughing] And then he finally pulls up, I never got a shot off; we never went back for the boat. [Both laugh] I have many more such stories.

Oh, I'll bet! I'll bet.

(1:07:18) So did you have other encounters with Vang Pao, or members of the 'higher-ups' in the [Hmong] military that gave you a sense of what the leadership was like?

Oh, yes. Colonel Cher Pao Moua and I were good buddies—another hard-drinking little guy. We became good buddies, he was in Bouam Loung, so I'd always stop in to see Choua Pao and talk for awhile. Also—Colonel Douang Tha who was a Lao, and was based at Ban Xon, so we became very good friends. We spent a lot of time together. In fact, Douang Thao came to my wedding. I don't think Cher Pao was there, but a lot of the other officials did come down to Vientiane. I got to know some of the military leaders, and it's like anything: some you like, some you don't, but some of the *naikongs* like Nhia Her Lo were great guys—I don't know if you know anything about—Nhia Her Lo he just died a few months ago here in the Twin Cities.

Boy, the name sure rings a bell...

Nhia Her Lo was a *naikong* in the area just outside of Long Cheng. He had a model farm there. His sons and daughters are now MDs and lawyers. Song Lo Fawcett—is with a major law firm in St. Paul—a University of Minnesota graduate]. Of Nhia Her's the six kids, one is a teacher, a nurse, two lawyers and two doctors. They all came here as little kids—as refugees. A great family and I knew Nhia Her very well in Laos.

(1:08:44) And her [Song Lo Fawcett's] picture is on your DVD...

I liked him, and I used to spend a lot of nights in his village. His wife was a good cook, and he made the best corn whiskey. Pop and I would often drink whiskey all night, while talking with Nhia Her. I put a medic's training facility in his village also, because it was a good secure place, and I knew the trainees would be well taken care of. So I spent a lot of time with Nhia Her, and Pop liked him also.—and Cher Pao and Douang Thao were the two colonels that I really liked and got along well with—I never really got close with VP, although over the years he would always invite me and everybody up to his house when he had parties. He gave me one of his MR II diamond rings. Of course, his last wife, was one of our nurses, that helped things a little bit, I guess.

(1:10:00) Were you ever in a village—I assume this would have happened in Sam Thong—when there were festivals such as the New Year that you observed or participated in?

Yeah.

What do you remember about those kinds of things?

You really got me thinking about my first New Year in Sam Thong—1969 (because it was only a couple months after I got to Laos)—I remember everybody lined up in their best traditional dress, it was the first time I saw them all dressed up with all the silver necklaces. Everybody in Sam Thong lined up along the runway, and Souvanna Phouma came, and he trooped the entire line. It was a good celebration, just absorbing as much as I could. I—actually had a suit and tie on.

Wow!

There's a picture of me somewhere with a beer in my hand. I have been to quite a few New Year's celebrations since, but last year, I came to the St. Paul New Year. I just couldn't help but think of that first New Year, and compare it to this New Year. 'Thirty thousand Hmong in one place!' I never saw more than a few hundred Hmong in one place before in my life—in one building or one room—And there were 30,000 all in one place, and all sharp-looking kids—they're all a lot bigger now than they were then. That's one of the things that really amazed me—how much they've grown in just one generation. Big kids and a lot of fat kids, too. But big kids—healthy, husky kids. Some kids looked like they were weight-lifting; I was just amazed—just amazed at the experience—I met so many professional Hmong men and women. I had a good time. —I just kept thinking, 'How can this be? How can so many Hmong be in St. Paul, of all places?'

(1:12:06) Yeah, I think a lot of people kind of throw up their hands on that one, but as you say, there are some good reasons why they're here.

Yeah, maybe it is why the Somalis come here also? That's another one that just baffles me!
[Chuckles] Anyway...

(1:12:18) So here you are, you've been essentially sent out of Laos by the Ambassador two weeks after Vang Pao left—

Sent out of Ban Xon—I was still in Vientiane.

Oh, OK.

Yes, I was still in Vientiane. Maybe it was a month before the end, we went on vacation with our friends from the embassy—the doctor Dave Hungerford and his wife Betty, who was Chinese American. We all went to Phuket and Penang on the train from Chiang Rai, which was across the river from Vientiane. We took the narrow-gauge train all the way to Bangkok, spent a day or two in Bangkok and then all the way down to Penang, Malaysia. We spent a week on the beach, and then came back, and, while we were gone, Vietnam fell. Then we got back and Cambodia went, and so I knew it wasn't long before Laos fell. We had a party at my place, oh, probably three weeks before everything went to hell. We invited a lot of people from the embassy—one guest was the embassy political officer and he got up and made a little speech and said, 'We're going to be here for the foreseeable future. This doesn't mean anything,' and 'Don't worry about it. We're going to be here.' Well, you know how quick it happened—the party was catered by the American Community Association—Club. I never got the bill for it! [Chuckles] So it went down the tubes quick. It started with street demonstrations, student demonstrations put up by the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. It was getting pretty bad. We knew it was coming. The Hmong had fought near Sala Phu Koum and they got wiped out—so they were still fighting even though the Prime Minister had told VP to stand down. I was at home early one morning, maybe four in the morning, in KM Six—and Lyle Brown, who was a CIA case officer—now USAID refugee relief officer, called me and said, 'Steve, don't tell anybody I told you, but today's the day. It's all going down. So do what

you've got to do.' Now there wasn't much I could do, anyway, but that was the day, and the NVA took over. There were still a lot of American families—wives and kids in Vientiane. The Pathet Lao allowed us to evacuate the women and children with one small suitcase each. We left everything behind. At the airport the Pathet Lao wouldn't let the Lao airline employees load the baggage, luckily I had gone with them on the bus to the airport, so me and a couple of others loaded the airplane. Finally, we got everybody on the airplane, and they took off and went to Bangkok. The families waited in Bangkok to see what was going to happen. There were 26 of us left then, and we were all put in the KM-6 compound (where I happened to live). My friend Don who had been living in town moved into my house. We had nothing to do for a couple of weeks. We went to all the abandoned houses taking all of the best steaks so we were eating steaks three times a day, and, drinking. Our boss, who was an MD, in charge of public health, (Doc Weldon had already gone) decides that all these pets in KM Six had to be humanely killed. 'The Pathet Lao will eat 'em, or they'll abuse them. So he gave Don and me the job of killing all these pets. [Interviewer lets out a sigh]

Oh, it was terrible—killing beautiful dogs... I had a .22 pistol with a silencer, and we'd go to the houses where the dogs were, dig a hole in the back yard, take the dog out, shoot it in the head, put in the hole and bury it. That's what we did all day for a few days, 'til we took care of all the pets. We stayed half drunk the whole time.

(1:16:31) That's got to depress the hell out of you.

One of the worst things I've ever done. Don and I were the only two ex-military guys out of these 26 USAID types. Many of these guys liked to play the role—they had all kinds of guns and stuff, so when the Pathet Lao surrounded the compound and wouldn't let us out they all threw their weapons down the well. Don and I said, 'We're not throwing our weapons down the well'—Our boss, Dr. Kennedy said, 'I order you to—' [and we still refused. I think he thought if the communists found weapons they would treat us like combatants instead of civilians. Each evening Don and I would arm ourselves—I had an M-16 and he had a .38 pistol, and we'd walk around the inside of the fenced compound, just to show the Pathet Lao that we had weapons. We figured that if the Marines were going to come and get us, they would land in the soccer field in the compound. We believed they would want somebody on the ground with a weapon, for security! So that probably didn't help my career with AID. When I got back to Washington I received a pink slip. Later Don and I worked for a company together in Pennsylvania, which had a large contract with USAID public health. We worked for a company that manufactured laparoscopy sterilization equipment that USAID distributed all over the world for family planning programs. One day we went in to see the boss of USAID public health, and our former boss, Dr. Kennedy, was in the same office, and we walked in to his boss' office ignoring him. We just thought that was the best thing ever! [Both laugh] But at any rate, when I got back to the States, after Laos—and again, I was among the last 26 to leave—Cambodia had fallen and there had been 500 USAID people there. There were 3000 in Vietnam, and all back in Washington already. There were too many employees and not enough jobs.

Oh! Very nice!

Yes. Here I am, nothing, my one suitcase, a wife and a baby, and [Pauses] no prospects, no job, no nothing. And I said, 'Well, can't you find something for me?' They said, 'No. You didn't work for us anyway, you worked for the CIA.' 'OK,' so I go over to the CIA. [Chuckling] I told them, 'Look, they're telling me over at USAID I didn't work for them, that I worked for you.' The CIA says, 'No, you didn't work for us, you worked for them'— So I finally just gave up and went back to Chicago, but it was a tough time. It took me, I'd say 15 years to get over that experience: what we did to the Hmong, how we left them, and for me, 10 years of government service—out of work and no prospects, and then trying to get a job! It was just unbelievable! I applied everywhere:

customs, post office, FBI, CIA—I put in applications everywhere. I couldn't get another federal job. So the best thing I ever did was to go back to school, and get my degree. Within two weeks of getting my degree I went to work for this medical company with Don—again, he got me another job, [Interviewer laughs] and I ended working with that company for six years in a 20-year career in pharmaceuticals and medical devices. Now I have my own pharmaceutical company. So [Pauses] things happen—all because of those two years of zoology! [Laughs]

(1:20:17) Who knew? What is it that you think you learned about and grew to appreciate about and came to understand in ways that I'm sure that few Americans did, why the Hmong people were so important, why Americans used them but also owe a debt to them, and why you spend so much of your time talking about them, supporting them, building a memorial for them...

The Hmong are in many ways like any people, they can be frustrating, and there are some real assholes. There really are—some of them drive me crazy. But what I saw in Laos was a group of hard-working, loyal, and honest people. What more can you ask for? They would work hard all day long, and they were loyal. You could trust them. You asked them to do something, and they'd do it. I have many Hmong friends, not close friends, like the guys I grew up with, but friends—guys that you could depend on and trust. I like the Hmong, I liked what they did. I certainly felt bad for what we did to them, and...and if we'd won the war, maybe things would have been a lot different—really different. But we didn't. We could have won it, but we didn't. We just left. Ted Kennedy and his ilk again. We couldn't supply them with weapons or arms, so how are they going to fight? And that was all the doing of the American Left. After the '73 peace accord, Air America was out, CIA was out. No more weapons, no more ammunition, so more air support. So how are they going to win? They can't win—especially after they'd become dependent on the American system of supply and air support! We left them, bugged out, cut and ran. You asked, why am I doing what I'm doing? If I don't do it, who's gonna do it? I have had a couple of bad experiences with the Hmong. I see things that still bother me about the Hmong: their loyalty to the clan above everything else. I think some of the aspects of the clan, such as not inter-marrying within the clan—it's a good idea—but this loyalty to the clan above everything else, to me, just drives me crazy sometimes. I don't think they're ever going to really assimilate until this clan system goes by the board, because it really does hurt the Hmong—and it keeps them in a sort of socialist state. I don't know if you're familiar with what happens with the Hmong. If somebody dies, everybody chips in. Somebody gets sick, everybody chips in. You know, somebody graduates from high school, they all go. Their whole life is spent in this sort of reciprocating obligations. So, if anybody ever gets ahead, the wealth gets distributed to the others that aren't getting ahead. To me there's something basically un-American about it. Many of the Hmong have already figured this out—opted out, and more and more will. But I think the clan system in America results in a lack of Hmong unity. Non Hmong often say, 'Well, they're homogenous, they're just one group of Hmong. They're very together.' But they are not! There are 17, 18 clans in the US, and some of those clan hatreds go back hundreds of years, or at least to the time in Laos. The Yangs and the Vangs will never get along! It won't happen. Then, of course, there are the Vangs, and their devotion to VP—I mean, to me the devotion borders on sickness at this stage. Many of them are wising up to that, too. They're not a homogenous group; the stuff between the clans still goes on all the time. And nepotism is a virtue. The various organizations hire only their clan members, and nobody else has a chance. Somebody gets power somewhere, and they maintain it by bringing in their loyal clan members. That sort of aggravates me—it still does.

(1:24:54) So what do—I mean, I think most Americans don’t even know who Vang Pao is, but the ones who do just think of him as ‘the general’ or the sort of transcendental or powerful leader of the Hmong people. What is it that has led to so many problems with him in this country, in your opinion?

Well, first of all, you’ve got to remember how it all happened. The CIA used Vang Pao to fight the war primarily. The CIA flew in a C-130 full of Lao kip every month for the payroll. So VP controlled the money. He controlled life or death. He meted out favors—he held court. People would come and plead their case with VP, and VP would—Solomon-like make a decision. VP’s law that was it. So he made the decisions. He then—and again, he probably would say that, at the behest of the CIA, just bugged out and left his people with no direction. He just left, bugged out, took his family and his close associates to Thailand, and then came to the US. He was set up in Missoula, Montana, by the CIA. He has a pension, and he has VA benefits—the only Hmong who does. He’s been well taken care of. When I saw him in Chicago, in ’77, he was surrounded by American State Department or CIA bodyguards.—Caucasian guys. who, surrounded him when I approached, like I might do him harm.

Reaching for their guns!

Yes! I just don’t understand how he has been able to maintain his position, his leadership over the years, after the way he abandoned his people. Of course, he surrounded himself by a group of people who have been ripping off the Hmong for years, by collecting a tithe and selling military officer commissions.

Yeah.

Yes, I understand there are now several Hmong major generals... Hmong major generals that have bought their commissions, and many lieutenants and captains and majors who never even served in the military, who are now officers in the Lao Veterans of America Organization. VP’s story has been all these years that, “we’re going back to take our country, and when we do, you’re going to be an officer”. This is just a fantasy. First of all, Laos is not a Hmong country, and never will be a Hmong country. They are far outnumbered by the Lao. If they went back to the mountains, who’s going to support them, and who are they going to fight?

(1:28:05) There, of course, have been lots of rumors—and I’m not saying that you can confirm, deny, or have any knowledge of these, but one of the stories is that he participated in the drug trade or benefited from that.

Well, the story was—a book by a UW guy, claimed that not only was Vang Pao was in the drug trade, but the CIA aided and abetted—financed the war with the drug trade. First of all, I don’t think that the CIA actively—or Air America actively moved drugs for Vang Pao. Were drugs moved on Air America airplanes? Hell, yes! I mean, it happened all the time. But it wasn’t an organized operation to move those drugs for VP. Did VP use the drugs to make money on the side? Sure. No doubt about it. He got a cut of everything. But he wasn’t a drug lord. Opium was grown there, it was a cash crop, and he was the guy in charge, so he got his share. He was getting all the money he could handle from the CIA—I mean, a C-130 full of kip—Lao currency—every month. He did not need drug money!

(1:29:24) I remember reading in Jim [Ragsdale]’s piece for the [St. Paul Pioneer Press] series, that you took a pretty significant role in helping Hmong veterans understand what it means to be a veteran in the United States. Could you talk about that?

Yes. When I first came back from Laos, my uncles were World War II veterans, and they convinced me to join the VFW. So there was a local VFW Post—mostly a drinking place—a bar. They brought me in and signed me up at the VFW. The first thing I find out is they have these secret

handshakes, this stuff [Interviewer laughs], and then, they all were World War II guys, and some Korea guys, but they really looked down on Vietnam vets. They considered us killers, rapists, druggies, losers whatever...

Failures.

Yes, failures, 'because we lost; they didn't. Vietnam vets weren't accepted by these guys. Of course, my uncles accepted me, but the rest of them didn't, so I said, 'The hell with that,' and I never got involved in any veterans group. I'd been an American Legion member ever since I joined in Laos, but I'm not active—thirty-some years now. After I moved to Manitowoc, and I was becoming involved with the Hmong, I learned that the local chapter of the VVA had been supporting the Hmong. So I joined the VVA, and was put on the board of directors. I helped the VVA become more active in working together with the Hmong. We recruited several Hmong members into the chapter. Hmong vets that I knew, even guys from Milwaukee would come up to the VVA meetings in Manitowoc. We had 15 or 20 Hmong members, at the VVA, and put a couple of Hmong members on the color guard. When there was a veteran's funeral or civic function the color guard carried the flags and the Hmong were right there with them. I had been a member of the Special Forces Association for years, so I also recruited some of the Hmong into the Special Forces Association. Then we decided that we were going to train the Hmong to march in Memorial and Veterans' Day parades. I have a big place on Lake Michigan, a lot of flat area, so we had the Hmong buy their own uniforms and the SFA Chapter 73 members and I spent 2-3 weekends training them. We marched them up and down, right face, left face, salute, rifle salute, and how to carry the rifle properly. They were looking pretty sharp. For several years now—it's been at least ten years we have marched in the Manitowoc Memorial Day parade, and now in the Sheboygan Memorial Day parade. At the last Memorial Day parade in Sheboygan, the Hmong were the only military unit in the whole parade. The rest were Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and high school marching bands. They do a pretty good job and we have turned the training and practice sessions over to their NCOs and officers. One of their sergeants calls the cadence and we march with them in the back of the formation. We usually have 10 SF guys who always march with the Hmong at the parades. Then, with some help from a couple of the SF guys, we trained a Hmong color guard to fold the flag and fire the gun salute at Hmong funerals—and they do that all over Wisconsin now. They wear copies of the Lao military dress uniforms that they had made up. The color guard fires the gun salute and folds the flag over the casket which is then presented to the widow at Hmong funerals. The Hmong funeral ceremonies are very important, and I think that's a good thing, and I think they're doing well with that. They don't practice as much as they should, they're a little bit sloppy—they're all older, obviously, but...they do a decent job.

We've got the dedication of the memorial on July 15th, and the VVA from Manitowoc—a pretty good color guard—will fire the gun salute. They probably have a dozen M-16s and they'll fire the rifle volley, post the colors, and play taps and they're going to include the Hmong color guard with them at the memorial dedication.

(1:33:51) What has it meant to you and to be this close to seeing it come to fruition and to know that it's going to be there for centuries to come?

Well, I think it's long overdue. I think it's really important that the Hmong have a place that they can come; they can call their own and honor the surviving veterans. I believe it's going to be a gathering place for Hmong—I don't know what day it'll be, whether it's Memorial Day or Veterans Day or Fourth of July, but it'll be a gathering place for Hmong every year now, I'm sure of it. It will be an educational experience for everybody. They'll learn about the Hmong. Not that Sheboygan's a big tourist destination, although it's a little bit better now with the new Whistling Straits golf course and Blue Harbor Resort—The Blue Harbor Hotel Resort now, draws a lot of people from out of state, and from outside of the immediate locality. The Memorial is located in a beautiful area

along the lake, so I think it's going to be an important place in the future, and the best thing about it was a grass roots success. The hard work of the Hmong community and the Anglo community in Sheboygan, who are good people. I'm really impressed with them. A story about Sheboygan—my uncle was a Baptist evangelist preacher, and after the war he used to travel up to Sheboygan. He said it was the only place where he'd ever been, where a black man was not allowed to spend the night. A black man had to leave town before dark in Sheboygan. He said that he always remembered that. And Sheboygan's come a very long way. [Chuckles]

(1:35:32) Well, I look forward to being there!

Yeah, I hope so...