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Interview with Dennis Grace

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Dennis Grace

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Serving at the time of the interview as Special Assistant to the President for Administrative Reforms in the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, Mr. Dennis Grace has a long and distinguished career in refugee affairs. After serving in the Air Force from 1965 to 1969, Grace spent four years working in Vientiane, Laos as an English teacher and translator. He later completed his BA at the University of Colorado and an MA in East Asian Regional Affairs at Harvard University. Returning to Bangkok, he spent 15 years in Bangkok as the representative of the International Rescue Committee's Joint Voluntary Agency, part of a network of private organizations that helped bring half a million Vietnamese, Khmer, Hmong, and Lao refugees to the United States. He has subsequently served as Vice President of Refugees International, Executive Director of the US-Thailand Business Council. In 1971, he founded an English language school in Vientiane, Laos.

Mr. Grace spoke to us as a private citizen, not as a member of the Bush Administration. Our discussion focused on his past experiences, especially those related to his work with the Hmong.

(0:03) Well, the obvious question first: your name, sir?

It's Dennis Grace.

And where were you educated and how did you begin the process of getting the education, experience, and credentials that led you down the career path you're currently in—or at least were in.

I had a break in midstream in college and, at the two-year point towards a B.A., went into the US Air Force in the mid-60s. So, from '65 to '69, I was in the Air Force. And then, after getting out of the Air Force, in December of '69, I got back into school briefly before I went off to Laos for four years. It was after that that I went back to school and got a B.A. and M.A. at the University of Colorado and Harvard, respectively. I then joined the refugee program.

(1:03) Could you talk a bit about what you did in Laos for those four years?

Yes, mainly English language teaching, translation. I'd say it's those two. From the beginning, Lao-American Association, Vientiane, many people know. Started a language school—English language—and did translation. So, that was—and as a private citizen always.

Sure. So you were in the city of Vientiane pretty much during that entire period?

That is correct. That's correct.

What were your observations just about the city as it was running at that time?

A marvelously atmospheric city, [Interviewer chuckles] redolent of things French and other European strains—an absolutely beautiful, peaceful, cosmopolitan mix. [Pauses] Heaven.

Really. Very interesting. I don't know—do you know J. Vinton Lawrence at all—
No.

—at least by reputation?

No, I don't.

He was—he was the man who worked with Vang Pao for four years in the very early period of the Secret War. And he remembered it in almost an opposite way, I guess, although he was there for a brief period of time, as sort of a dusty, dirty place.

I suppose it depends what year. It certainly was not dusty, dirty in the early '70s and I'd say—I showed in October of '70 through October '74. I dare say a few people would describe it as dusty, dirty. [Interviewer chuckles] It became so in the early 90s when they cut down many trees and were widening roads—very dusty and dirty, but understandable—the sweep of progress, or something like that. But in my day, in that day—not my day—in that day of the early '70s, [it was] a jewel.

(3:15) Wonderful. Were there any events that took place during those four years that you think had an influence on the work that you did later in Thailand?

[Pauses] Apart from the fact, just being close to the—living there for four years, where the population in those days, [Pauses] probably it swelled a bit because of the ongoing conflict out in the provinces, the population was roughly about a third Lao—ethnic Lao, a third Vietnamese, and maybe a third Chinese. If the other two were slightly less than a third, there were some other groups mixed in, but it was a—quite a balanced mix of Vietnamese, Chinese and Lao—lowland Lao—

Right.

—in the city. And I found that interesting. I'm interested in languages. One could not be there for that long and not be moved by what happened later. So, when I was back in school in the later '70s, of course, the boat people, the exodus from Vietnam and Lao coming out from—later in '75, it was a very compelling situation, and those who had lived their before, especially if they were interested, must have felt a pull to want to go back and do something.

(5:00) Could you talk then about how, once you graduated with your master's, you got involved in refugee work in Thailand?

Near the end of my time in Harvard, which ended in the spring of '79, the boat people crisis was already at high tide. So I wrote to a dozen or so organizations working with refugees and I ended up with the International Rescue Committee.

Did you work with Jim Anderson at all?

I did indeed.

I know Jim reasonably well.

Jim was one of the great team leaders of the Joint Voluntary Agency team, mainly on the Khmer side, with Khmer refugees, but was one of the handful of individuals that really put his stamp on the program out of hundreds that—Americans that were—that participated in the program. Maybe there were 500 Americans, more perhaps. Jim, I'd say, put in the half dozen that made the biggest impact.

(6:14) Could you talk a bit about why that's so?

Yes. The Khmer, the Cambodian refugee program was not only as compelling for those who live there, but—as the Lao and Vietnamese, but it also was turned into a very popular award-winning film so that many Americans understood what the Killing Fields meant. And so when the refugees came out of Cambodia in, really, '79, the big push of over a million swept across the border, it kind

of dominated the policy scene and there hundreds of thousands of refugees in those camps along the Thai-Cambodian border. Jim Anderson was the team leader at—well, this series of places, probably starting in Mairut. He was getting ready to step into a leadership role, but after that, Kamput Camp and then Khao-I-Dang. Jim was the team leader, the head of a large American and Thai team with interpreters. His team was in the many dozens and probably swelled to as much as a hundred. Khao-I-Dang, in those days, held tens of thousands of people. At Site 2, there were 100,000. So, there were hundreds of thousands of people there. Jim was the key lead, and when it became a big issue with regard to the Refugee Act of 1980 and how the American—this new law would impact on refugee processing, Jim was right in the middle of all that because he was the team leader there. So when policymakers and others came to look at what was going there, Jim was the first contact on the American side, even though he was in the private sector with a non-profit organization. International Rescue Committee, the American processing organization was often described as a three-legged stool. One leg was the Department of Justice, INS [Immigration and Naturalizations Services], which, of course, by law, does the refugee determinations on a case-by-case basis. The Department of State, had the management role, policy role. And then the private sector was represented by the International Rescue Committee, which had a cooperative agreement with the Department of State to help in the process on behalf of those American agencies involved in refugee resettlement processing. So again, in the midst of all that, Jim was the team leader at that time at the biggest site in the world for refugee processing. So, not only was it a controversial issue, he was just—he was there during that key three, four year period. So [he played a] big role.

(9:40) Looking back on your own experience, how prepared do you think you were when you first jumped into this experience in terms of understanding what the refugee situation really was and just being able to cope with the situation as you found it when you arrived?

I don't know that anyone can be sufficiently prepared because, even if one were fluent in the language, had lived in a country for decades, you are still not living under the circumstances of a refugee outflux where—I mean, it's a unique situation, and like many emergencies, people behave differently. So some people behave at the best, and there are those at the other end of the scale. And I'm not sure—I mean, one always thinks that some knowledge of the people and of languages would stand one in good stead. [Pauses] I think that common sense is as important, because later when I became the director of the Joint Voluntary Agency there, it was less important to me that people had my kind of background, let's say, that had lived there for years, spoke the language, wrote a language, one of the refugee languages, less important than good sense, hard working. Because as far as language goes, there are interpreters, very solid interpreters, on tap, and it comes back to management and good sense and understanding that there are many people that need to be served and, if individuals who are working in this system are too... [Pauses] let's say interested in their own experiences in that country, that can take precedence and slow down everything, and the people who need help are sitting there waiting while someone is satisfying their curiosity. So we had to be very clear on the team that we needed to move, move things along and serve people rather than serve ourselves by finding out this and that about certain people or backgrounds. Ours was not to invest our time in a certain family or in a certain group because, from the Joint Voluntary Agency side, one could as well be in a Cambodian camp this week, Lao camp next week, Vietnamese camp the week after that. So again, my strength, the day I showed up in Thailand in September of—for this job—in September of '79, was strongest, I suppose, in Lao language, but I went to Songkhla camp, which was for Vietnamese in the south. My Vietnamese was minimal, but that was the job. So, it didn't—it neither surprised me nor disappointed me. I found it fascinating and it was every bit as compelling as I thought it would be. It—to focus on 'Oh, I'd rather be in a Lao camp than?'—it's not about the individual. So all that is a long-winded way of saying that I was very open-minded on

the qualifications for a good case worker. I would be happy enough to take someone off the streets in America with no experience in Southeast Asia, as long as they had good sense, maturity, and again, understanding teamwork and respect for the law, because they had to work with US government officials and Thai officials and international officials—UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees], IOM [International Organization for Migration], Red Cross—International Red Cross—you had all that mix. And I don't think there's any academic training or field training that would prepare one so that—or such that that individual would be a much better resource than another. There are a few jobs that require some background, but in the main, for the caseworker on the nonprofit, in this case, the International Rescue Committee side, the Joint Voluntary Agency, good sense was more than enough. Maybe there's never enough, but that was the best, the most important.

(15:01) I would imagine another important attribute would be compassion, at least on some level, but probably not so much that you become overwhelmed by the circumstances of the people you're serving.

Very important. One needs to—you know, one hopes that there's a general compassionate nature of the people involved, but that could be just as true of the INS officer. The last thing that serves a refugee well is an ideologue or a bleeding heart that wears his or her heart on his sleeve. You're dealing with your own issues instead of helping the family across the table, or preparing—the best way is—I'm not even saying helping—preparing the family across the table for their interview with the INS officer. So compassion... [Pauses] not so, I would say, nor would I ever ask anybody in interviewing—some are quick to say that—that they care a great deal. Well, that's a given if you want to do this, but it's not required.

(16:16) Could you talk just a bit about the IRC itself? I think most people have some vague idea of what it's about, but perhaps not as much as they should.

The International Rescue Committee is an extraordinary organization, founded at the... [Pauses] say behest, urging of Albert Einstein in the '30s, 1930s, and its first great work was assisting Jewish intellectuals and others who were under the boot of the Nazis. So throughout the Second World War, into the second and throughout the Second World War and then afterwards, the International Rescue Committee was a great team of strong, very resourceful individuals who not only saw the work that needed to take place over there, but the—but understanding that you had to work at building—you know, a constituency, a basis in an ongoing way, because it wasn't clear during the Second World War that America would be welcoming to refugees. Ultimately, they were, but in the beginning there were issues. And the International Rescue Committee was known by another name then, but very similar—carried on, again, a great tradition of, I would say, fairness and, while being strong advocates for refugees and, of course, then and not just Jewish refugees, but all refugees, a strong advocate and yet always rock-solid, fair and understood early the need for lawyers who would understand the immigration, the regular channel of immigration, immigrant law. And IRC remained closest, perhaps, to its constituents. The director, the great Caryl Chessman, for many years the executive director of IRC, one might walk past his office, even when he was in his 70s, and see a refugee family there being interviewed by the director. Always the rifleman, you know, [Interviewer chuckles] everybody on the line was the same, no matter whether you, again, were executive director. No one—if once one became interview refugees, you didn't belong in the work. So it had a passion, but ahead—what came across equally was the, again, good sense, intelligence, willingness to be part of a team that included public partnership, working with the government. So IRC was very interesting in that the—kind of the irony was as—after the boat crisis, I think it was Shep Lowman, a former State Department giant, came up with the idea of a joint voluntary agency so instead of

having 10 different voluntary agencies competing for cases to prepare, you would have—there would be one lead in each country and IRC got the lead for Thailand. So IRC, which was the smallest of the organizations that ultimately got these... [Pauses] these grants to work with the Department of State (cooperative agreements)—it had the largest refugee program. So one could not have foreseen that in the late '70s—'78, '77, I believe, when it started—'77 and '78—that Thailand would be the biggest. Everybody was thinking, you know, boat people, so it must be Malaysia or Indonesia. But then, of course, the Lao came over, Cambodians came in. Quickly, Thailand was the biggest and out of our little office came—500,000 people were processed through that office. A big number.

(20:56) What were your initial responsibilities when you first arrived?

I was the second in a two-person team, interviewing in Songkhla camp in the south of Thailand on the Gulf of Thailand, preparing boat refugees, the arrivals at Songkhla camp. There were two boat camps in those days—Songkhla and Laem Sing. Laem Sing was on the other side of the Gulf of Siam, the eastern shore there, and—Songkhla on the south, by Pattani, in the south. So [I was] preparing cases. That means getting the story, understanding what their claim to refugee status was, and getting those cases ready to see INS for their final interviews.

(21:47) And for how much of the time that you spent in Thailand did you have that work—or did you have a relatively consistent experience there? Were you sort of promoted up and have different responsibilities during your...

I was at Songkhla for a couple of months, and then—so I started in September of '79. In December, I became the head of the—then it was called the boat sections of the two camps—Songkhla and Laem Sing. A few months later, it became the Vietnamese section because we were also getting Vietnamese coming by land across Cambodia. So we became the Vietnamese section. I was the coordinator of that. And then, by October or so of '80, I became the deputy of JVA, and then the following June the director. So once I became the deputy, then we were looking at—we had a dozen camps all around Thailand, so I was just kind of roaming the country, all borders.

(22:47) Could you describe the process of helping someone make application?

Yes, in those days, individuals arrived and generally the first official that would be interested in taking their story down would be the high commissioner for refugees, the UNHCR. So the UNHCR had its representatives around in the camps and teams of people that would fill out forms. So in the beginning, the UNHCR would—the UNHCR was already administering the camps. So they would have this registration team and get people registered—so to get a food card. And they would then initially take down the story. OK, you come in, you are a member of a family, wife, children, you get together as a group, maybe take a picture of the group, and all the facts of the family composition. And then your background briefly. Let's say you were a teacher—OK, teacher—where, when. And basically, you might get the story, what happened. You fled such-and-such village after something happened to another teacher, something like that. Then the UNHCR would take the registration forms and try to get other countries, to get countries that had representation there to come forth and interview some of these refugees. So if someone said, 'I have a brother in Paris.' Well, OK, they would take that registration form and notify the French Embassy, wait until the French representative comes down and say, 'Here, we've sorted this group out and here are the ones that have relatives in France.' And for those—and, at the same time, they were trying to (it's an awful word, but let's use it) internationalize the resettlement, so they would—they got the Scandinavian countries involved and others. Let's say Belgium. Australia was always a big, big help. Australia and Canada, I think, per capita were at the top. So it would try to again sort all that out—schedule

when these embassy teams would visit the camps and that kind of thing. So the person is always UNHCR. We were part of the US team, so we would, once that registration was done, if we were going to that camp with a view of ultimately interviewing, we would ask for the registration forms from UNHCR and we would begin our own registration process. Because the US asked for different things, in some cases a more, a fuller—and also more control for—quite often, the UNHCR's registration was not terribly rigorous. They would farm it out to someone to do it under the, say, loose supervision of their representatives. So they might have one—they'd have, let's say, one or two representatives for the camp. And they would hire people to do the registration, but they didn't have the tight supervision that we had in some of the other embassies and also, it wasn't in their interest. They didn't know exactly what they would want later, as if they were an embassy team interviewing. So we started from scratch. We would take that and say, 'OK, this family, this family of five come forward. All right. I'm looking at your UNHCR form. And you are?' And we'd start from the beginning. And it would be somewhat helpful. For example, if you said, when you came through that you're a 30-year-old man with a 22-year-old wife. And in the interview with us, you're a 35-year-old man with a 34-year-old wife, three children instead of one. Then we might ask, we would ask, 'Why?' You know, 'What happened here?' The individual might say, 'Well, I'm actually not that fellow. It was my brother. He left to go to Canada and I'm ...' all this kind of thing. So, you know, you just—so, and also, it was a chance to clean things up, because if you stay with the same thing, it's easy to become ensnared. Someone makes a mistake, whether willfully or not, and getting out of it is sticky and you get further stuck. So we would start from scratch and say, 'Look. It begins now. Here's what we have from the UNHCR, but we just want to be sure we've got all the information. And so it made very good sense and we never, nor did the INS officer ever say, 'But you said to UNHCR...' We just took that as—it's not practice, but that was in the heat of the moment. When they first came out, they may have been told certain things, you know, we felt, in all fairness, you're starting the US refugee resettlement process. We'll begin fresh. So, what was said before was said before. Let's just be clear now because this is the paper that the INS officer will look at going forward. So it was fair and I think it avoided a lot of trouble for people that came in and were told certainly things or, in the heat of the moment said, 'Well, OK, this is my brother's wife. She's going to be my wife's sister for this interview because we're going out now.' And then, 'Oops, we didn't go out now and a year later, now the husband gets ...' It's complicated. It gets very messy. So we just—no one ever knew how long they'd be waiting to be interviewed. You could not know these things. So again, we felt, in all fairness, you start from scratch. And so, then US—and every embassy was different. Some were very detailed like we were, others were not. They'd say, 'Who wants to go? Step forward.' And—but we didn't care—it wasn't our responsibility to critique other programs. Ours was ours, and that was it.

(29:17) Jim gave the impression—well, I think he actually stated outright that there were times, at least, when IRC people felt that they were not on the same page as people with state or INS, that they were there to help these people get citizenship or, at least to migrate. And INS's responsibility was more to serve as gatekeeper, and that sometimes that created tension or at least difficulty between the two sides of this equation. Did you experience anything like that?

Well, I think everyone would. It's human nature. And I'd go further than that. One might say most of the people that, as Jim described, most of the people on the JVA side would probably come down on the side of a real interest in seeing these people get out of the camps and get—for INS, you're trained, some of them came out of the enforcement side, some are on the visa, kind of the processing side. But still, they're there. They're bound to follow the law. But they're part of a structure and it's a career structure. So, of course they're going to look at it with a longer view, less

open to emotion and—but again, just human nature, especially when we were there with a new law—Refugee Act of 1980—that was just starting to be implemented. It was kind of false start in the summer of ‘81 and then it started in earnest in the summer of ‘82 with, excuse me, the beginning fiscal year ‘82—so the fall of ‘81. It became kind of a testing ground for the Refugee Act of 1980. And again, people will differ on what they thought. But at times, I could see when one would feel like that. And what we can say on the Joint Volunteer Agency side—Jim and I and others—we never denied that advocacy role that the private sector must take. Someone has got to speak up for refugees, go the extra whatever it is—yard or sometimes mile—to see that they get a chance. Where you draw the line ultimately is that the final decision rests with INS under law. So we can certainly—those advocates who were caseworkers, [Pauses] you may feel a certain way. Hopefully it doesn’t affect the casework because the casework is an individual telling a story. If you affect that, you’re—if you allow, let’s say, your feelings to change the story, then you’ve got a problem. However, in the first part of fiscal year ‘82, when there were problems in processing, there was a great, wide difference of opinion. And, you know, Jim and I were on the same side of much discussion. But at the end of the day, when things were sorted out in the main by, say, August—certainly, August of ‘83, when the INS issued worldwide guidelines—the thrust from that came from INS. So INS was a big part of making it possible for all the processing from those Cambodian camps that the—that happened later, that Jim did. So it certainly didn’t shake out where the good guys were JVA and the bad guys were INS. It just—it wasn’t that way. But at the same time, there were some basic attitudes, such as Jim has described. One might feel it’s a gatekeeper on one side, an advocate on the other. At times, it felt like that, but over the long run, it was truly a cooperative effort. But that’s true in everything, in universities, [Interviewer chuckles] in, you know, academic life, you always have controversies, push and pull of politics. It’s in everything. So one could hardly imagine that, you know, you have the white hats and the black hats. It just isn’t that way.

(34:12) As you say, job responsibilities have—I’m sorry to say I don’t know that much about the Refugee Act of 1980. How did that change the work that you did?

The thrust of it was this individual determination, on a case-by-case basis, based on fear of having suffered persecution or having fear of persecution along certain lines. And this comes out of refugee protocols done, starting from the early ‘50s—kind of the definition of a refugee. But it became really ingrained with the Refugee Act of 1980. INS had worked under the presumption of refugee status, which is the way the program had operated in the ‘70s—if you got there and you walked up to the table and you had gotten off that boat or you had come across from Laos, you were a refugee. You speak Lao, you must—you’re a refugee. That ended with the Refugee Act of 1980 because it then incumbent on the INS officers to say, ‘OK, you’re from Laos.’ But for the purposes of the US resettlement program, you need to be here and be determined to be a refugee, based on having suffered persecution or fear of persecution. So, if you are a Hmong and you’ve been in a reeducation camp, let’s say, of course, you’ve suffered persecution. Your brother was in it and there’s a good chance if they’d grab you, you’d be in it too. You have a fear—a well-founded fear of persecution—or men from your same village. A well-founded fear. And it’s easy enough to establish that. But as the years went on, there was less, you know, where it was so clear as it was in the beginning. So—and again, that’s human nature. If those who had suffered in a certain village come out in the first year and then later people hear about it and they come out, and later people hear that those who heard about it are off now in America in Minnesota or Santa Ana, maybe we should go, too. And it starts to get more complicated. But the Refugee Act of 1980 really had INS focus on the responsibilities that the law had given it, had asked of it. And that stopped everything in its tracks as far as the presumption of refugee status. So you no longer had this presumption. That was a sea change, a very important change.

(37:15) You mentioned that there were numerous organizations that all had different, sometimes, perhaps slightly redundant, but I'd like to think probably not too often competing—[Pauses] I don't want to use the word agendas, but things that needed to be done. How well do you think these organizations worked side by side? Were there problems, at least, on occasion, in terms of providing the services that were necessary, or was it, for the most part, considering the number of different organizations present, a reasonably well-oiled machine?

You mean the nonprofit side.

Right.

Yes. Well, I'd say there's a big difference in the camps, and certainly as the years wore on. We were on the resettlement side. Many—a large number were on the assistance side. So, they'd be in camp, doing everything from providing clean water to education to medical and that number was vast. So, you could get a place like Khao-I-Dang in—towards the Cambodian border where you might have 75 organizations working there. We never got into that assistance. We were simply there to help in the process for resettlement. So it was another—I wouldn't say it's another world, but a completely different responsibility. And our organization totally stayed out of the assistance side, and all those meetings of how—because in some camps, there was competition and there were things that were—one wishes weren't going on at the time. And IRC had its own office in Thailand. But we had nothing to do with that office, because even though IRC had the cooperative agreement for the Joint Voluntary Agency, those who had hired—been hired by IRC, like me—the responsibility to represent all the 13 or 14 agencies that were resettling refugees, but only that. So, it wasn't like we are the IRC team. No, we were the JVA team that happened to be IRC employees, but we had nothing to do with the IRC office in Bangkok, which did have a number of assistance programs in the camps. We had nothing to do with that. We never set foot in that office, never had any communication of any substantive nature with the IRC people in Bangkok, in the same town. So we didn't get into all that other stuff, whatever camp—this is group is trying to do that, this group is maybe doing the same thing or some are accused of proselytizing or all—didn't get into any of that stuff. Nothing to do with it. Because that was all assistance. They dealt with the UNHCR, the Thai government and, depending on where they were, ICRC—International Committee of the Red Cross—we didn't—we were completely separate from that. And we'd have a collegial relationship to the extent that there was any relationship. But that was it.

(40:40) Despite that, I'm sure, to some degree, you got into the camps and saw the conditions there. For a person who may simply think of a refugee camp as a place where people sit and wait to be moved on, what do they need to know about—and I realize that there were a wide variety of camps—but what do people need to know about what a refugee camp is really like?

Well, you said it pretty well yourself, that there's a wide variety and it also depends on the ethnic group. For example, the Burmese refugees in Thailand to the ethnic minorities, many of them have been in those camps 20 years. That is a very different situation than, let's say, the boat people coming from Vietnam in the late '70s. Their fondest desire was to be out of Thailand in days, if they could. Well, usually, it was months. But they moved relatively quickly and what services there were in camp might be for medical, more in the emergency kind. There was very little thought to teaching, those kinds of things, because they're going to move on, get out of there. And that was so. Whereas when you went to the Cambodian border, the numbers were enormous, and it was understood pretty well from the beginning that we could be here 10 or 15 years and a lot of those people are going home at the end, once the conflict ends. Some may never be able to go home. But

they were going to—some were going to be there a very long time, so they needed more long-term assistance, and they got it. So, you can see all this kind of schooling, training, vocational training. So in the Cambodian camps and, I would say... [Pauses] Well, let's say the Cambodian camps had the most sophisticated, biggest number of international agencies by far. You compare Ban Vinai camp with Hmong in Loei Province in Thailand—a fraction of the services, a fraction of the participation—I won't say interest, but I'll say participation by international organizations—by foreigners. They were a fraction. Ban Vinai looked very rough compared to some of the other camps, less orderly, just not as well-kept or provided for, let's say—a bit bedraggled at its best, where some of these Cambodian camps were as organized as any place there'd ever been, extremely organized with committees of team that did—the clean water, the teaching, the—all the various—just like a city council. And there's probably no such place in Cambodia, you know, that had such an arrangement and the streets were kind of orderly even though it wasn't—they weren't paved at all, but still there was an order in the camp and—by and large, depending where the camp was. So it was very different, depending on the ethnic group, and it was a different feel, a different purpose. The Hmong, I would say, were very different from the ethnic Lao camps in Nong Khai and Ban Na Pho and Ubon in that the Hmong wanted to go home. And I don't mean to criticize the ethnic Lao, but it wasn't—it wasn't the same thing because the Hmong had come from conflict, an area of intense conflict, and were waiting to go back to that area. Ethnic Lao, by and large, were coming from areas—the city areas of little or no conflict and were hoping to move on. A lot of things had come undone, let's say, in those cities and there were, in some cases, good reason for moving on, but a very different motivation, so that it was utterly different in those two camps. So you would never look at them and say 'Lao.' No, the only—one of the main thing—in common was they had crossed the river. That's pretty much it, as far as what was in common. Very little Lao [was] spoken in the Hmong camp. Almost nothing. Just different in every way in those camps. And Ban Vinai stayed the same, pretty much, until it closed in whatever it was, '92 or so, '91, '92, in the early '90s. So, from—[Pauses] by the time it got started, I don't know, '76 when it got going. But pretty much the same. Pretty much the same feel, and they never lost the heightened interest in returning to where they'd come from. At the other end, would be not ethnic Lao, but, say, Vietnamese. There was zero interest in a camp in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, any of the countries of first asylum for boat people where there was even a hint, where there was one voice out of hundreds of thousands that wanted to go home at that time. Many have since gone home, as we know, from California or elsewhere. But in those days it was a very, very different situation. There was zero interest in repatriation. It was never snuffed out in the Hmong camps. And so, very, very different.

(47:08) OK. I'm just going to check my little recorder briefly, make sure all is well. It certainly seems to be.

You need an extra tape for the longwinded correspondent.

No, I appreciate thorough answers very much. Well, before we turn our attention to the Hmong, I'd like you to comment, if you could, on the rather awkward position that the Thai government found itself in with all of these different refugees coming in and probably some anger, resentment, confusion on the part of the Thai people who saw these trucks coming in, providing food and supplies for refugees when, perhaps, their life was not so easy.

Let me start with the last part of that first, so my feeble mind can hold onto that thought [Interviewer laughs] of what later became known as the Affected Thai Villagers Program—the Affected Villagers Program. That really was only true along the Cambodian border and only in certain stretches of real poverty along the Thai-Cambodian border—Sisaket Province, for example—where people had been impoverished for a long, long time. And suddenly, you'd see cars

flashing by and relatively well-dressed people moving by and a lot of money being spent and restaurants mushrooming to feed the foreigners and all others and press. That had an effect, but on a relatively small amount. Thailand, you know, now has a population of around 70 million. But even in those days, if it were on the low side, the low 60s, Thailand had gone through an enormous growth period during the Vietnam War, where Thailand was a key ally of the U.S., where I first set foot in Southeast Asia in the '60s. So, Thailand had already seen a tremendous development spurt in the—starting in the mid-'60s, cutting roads through areas where there had never been roads, radio and then TV having an impact, a huge impact, on the sweep of northeast Thailand, which would take in the Cambodian border and the Lao border. And suddenly, hospitals all over the place where there maybe had been clinics before, and they were quite good. Schools. So already, by the time of the big outflux of the mid-'70s, Thailand was no poor developing country. Thailand had, on its own, really held its footing and taken great strides in public health and all these things, so that what they saw in the refugee outflow—as in any society, there are some people who might prey on people coming across. I mean, it's just true anywhere. But in the main, they were less affected. The average Thai was little affected by that, financially or otherwise. It didn't bring war to his doorstep, it didn't bring great wealth. It may have brought it to a few, but a relatively thin slice of the population, so that there weren't a lot of Thais saying, 'Wow, look at all these people.' There were some—the small—what is great about Thailand and Thailand was a great friend to the US in this period—was most Thais were happy to stay in Thailand. The bigger flow that came to America started in the early '70s. The first—many group of Thais that met, married, in some cases came over to school—we see so many that would say, in the beginning, they'd say, 'Wow, this—how would this ever happen?' The Thais were happy to stay in Thailand, but there were many that, again, marriage—Tiger Woods, we saw the other day, and his mother [a] Thai. You know, good schooling. I think she went to nursing schooling, marries an officer and that story was told many times over. Where in the very beginning, it was looked down on. Thais would actually marry GIs. But they passed through that. But something bigger happening in Thailand—development, more were coming to work in restaurants, go to school, so that already, by the '70s, you went from zero Thai restaurants to a smattering to now we've reached critical mass. You can go down a street in a big city and see a couple on one street. There were none in the '60s. And all that played out over 10 or 15 years, but it preceded the refugee outflow in—the Indochinese refugee outflow. So Thailand was not aided, necessarily. I think it was affected, economically, very little. It was an annoyance for them, more than a great, great burden. And it's important that people understand that it was not because of refugee outflow that Thailand got on its feet and—no. It all happened before the refugee outflow and Thais were already disposed through 400 years of very effective diplomacy and enlightened monarchs to, if not embracing the outside world, to get along in a way that benefited Thailand as much as the other side. So it really, truly played out during the Indochinese period, where there were many, many difficult issues—border, fighting, all this kind of stuff. Thailand never lost its footing. Very clever, and intentionally so because it's got to protect, first and foremost, its own sovereignty. But never, I would say, at the expense, certainly, in the long haul, of refugees or any other country. Again, a longwinded way of answering that question.

(53:38) No, no. Please don't apologize at all. It's very important. Did you have any exposure to the Hmong people when you were in Laos for those four years?

Almost none. Almost none. I'll really leave it there, since I was mostly in Vientiane. There were very few Hmong seen on the streets of Vientiane from '70 to '74, and up in Long Cheng and environs was not my beat at the time. So what I knew about Hmong, I read in or talked to people that went up there. But I would consider that I knew almost nothing.

(54:29) And I would assume that what you hadn't heard, perhaps that Meo was used instead of the word Hmong?

Yes. I don't know that I ever heard the word Hmong when I was living in Laos.

Did you in Thailand? Was it by then more appropriate to call those people Hmong or was Meo still the sort of ...

I think very few people would say Hmong—Thai or Lao. They would have to have been—spent time around foreigners or refugee camps to be saying Hmong. It was not—again, I never heard the word.

No, understandable. I think this is one of those things that people are still trying to understand—this, when that transformation exactly took place.

Well, it certainly goes way, way back. You know, the Chinese, you know, and all that. So, it's—it didn't—on the Meo side. But, I never heard Hmong in my time up there in four years.

(55:34) So was it when you became deputy that you finally started dealing with refugees from a wide variety of experiences?

Yes. That's exactly right.

How did—should say what experiences do you have initially, where Hmong camps were concerned?

I'd say almost the first day as deputy I flew up to the north and visited the camps up there, where I'd never been before, even when I—before I'd gone to Laos. And it contrasted, of course, very greatly with the Vietnamese camps. As I see, here's a different dynamic. I'd never been in a Hmong community before I went up there and I visited the key camps, you know, after flying up to Chiang Rai and going through the Chiang Khong camp—Chiang Khong, Chiang Kham. And then, to Nan, drove down, just drove through all the camps. I could certainly see that something very, very different was going on, and that there was a, again, other interests there than passing through to a third country. Very little there.

(57:06) Were there any distinct cultural or other aspects of these Hmong camps and the people in them that struck you as you visited them?

Yeah, I would say the biggest difference would be the inclination to preserve traditions rather than to discard them. So in the other camps, people were already thinking 'West' and thinking to go to places like California that they heard of and whatever, and wanting to vacuum up language or clothing, you know, style of places that they would ultimately go to, where you'd go to the Hmong camps and they may as well have been in a location inside Laos. People dressed the same. I mean, it looked like, to someone who is albeit ignorant of, say of their history and their way of life, but it looked very different. It looked like every attempt was to preserve, to remain the same as where they'd come from and to also—by the way of leaders. The only leaders in the other camps were temporary figures that were not really leaders in any sense. Very different in the Hmong camps. When those leaders spoke, everyone listened and acted accordingly. Very different.

(58:36) So, if a large number, if not practically most of these Hmong people are waiting to return, what action, if any, are you taking in these camps because I would assume you're not processing requests for...

In the beginning, trying to ascertain the level of interest in resettlement and what was happening up there, to get a feel for things. Our—I'd say our own teams were less organized in those camps. It almost mirrored the camp itself. [Interviewer chuckles] In the one sense, as I said it was organized in that in the Hmong camps you'd have a leader, but that was kind of the extent of it. It looked, again, always impoverished, bedraggled, like people were just waiting to be told what to do next.

But alas, our teams were about the same, and they were just so disorganized, it was driving me crazy. So, as a—my first job as a deputy was to get on a plane and go up there and go look at what was happening and try to improve on the organization of what we were doing up there without trying to entice anybody to resettle. You never wanted to do that, but we want to help those who are interested in resettling.

(1:00:03) Were there any opportunities for your organization or other organizations to not persuade, but perhaps clarify the situation in Laos, that people might have a better understanding of their prospects on returning?

At the beginning, no, zero, none, nor would we want to get into it, [Pauses] because it gets murky immediately. So, our job was to, again, to find out the level of interest and try to help those people who wanted to go, and if people were having problems, what were the problems? In some cases, substance addiction, some cases other issues—polygamy—that would create issues with the US immigration law. So we'd help try to sort out those things and help those that could be helped and wanted to be helped. But we wouldn't get into explaining how things were or, you know, never got into that kind of stuff.

(1:01:16) What—I guess I hadn't really thought about—I mean, I knew obviously, the problem existed, but was there some kind of advice that you could offer a man with more than one wife on what his choices were if he were trying to resettle in the United States in terms of dealing with having more than one spouse, and then, whether he could bring more than one in or ...

Yes. [Both laugh] There was and it was kind of the way through this thicket was worked out, you know, with INS, that you wanted to be sure that it wasn't just a charade for the purposes of an interview where they'd say, 'No, this is my sister, this is my wife, or my wife's sister,' this kind of thing. There would have to be—we'd call it a separation and you'd say, 'OK, look. For those who want to go to the U.S., you must understand US law does not permit one man to enter the country with two wives or for a man to live in the US with two wives. So, if you are still interested, you would need to go to the US with one—no more than one wife.' [Interviewers laugh] And the others would need to hear this, too, because it's not just man to man talking, because the women would have to be helped, too. Now, so, if you're sitting there now with two wives, there would have to be an understanding that you're going to have to have one wife on your family tree and stand a certain test of time. So it might be six months or 12 months or something like that. If you still come 12 months later and say, 'OK. Yes, I understand this. This is the way I'm going'—because our problem is if we do this charade and you go off to wherever—California, Montana, wherever—you get into problems there and you can end up in jail. You can end up being arrested for this. So, people have to understand that it's not just play-acting. So, you would have—you would explain to the family that they would need to be such a grouping that would pass muster. So you'd have one woman. You need to see that she's not just alone and abandoned. So, they have to work that out by themselves and then they'll be interviewed separately and they could be seen, and many were. So the point was that it would be such that if you've ever been a polygamist, you are forever barred—no, from the United States. It was if you could sort this thing out, what's past is past. Now, from this forward as you come—now you must follow the laws of the United States if you're going to go to the United States. You have to sort this out. If you don't want to sort it out, stay here, go to some other country, this kind of thing. So no forcing anybody.

(1:04:30) OK. Now I understand that also any Hmong man who served under General Vang Pao sort of—under the auspices of the United States government, was given some kind of test. He had to identify various weapons and things like that. And I assume that the United States government performed that test. But did—do you remember receiving any sort of certification of a person having successfully passed such a test so that they were seen as a person who could qualify and go to the United States ...

No, I would say, in fact, there was very little of any formal testing. And as—certainly, as the years went on in my time, zero. One might—a particular interviewer might ask, ‘Well, OK, you were a military man. What weapon did you use?’ But no one put out an AK-47 and said, ‘OK, now break this down’ or [Interviewer laughs]—no, it never happened. Well, it certainly was not a part of our processing, so certainly, from ‘79, ‘80 on forward, there was nothing like that. In the beginning when they were trying to sort things out, there may have been more detailed questions. But once the program got to—got quite large—and, you know, maybe 150,000 Hmong came through our process in my time. That’s a lot of people. If you had tests like that, they’d still be there waiting for—to come over. So, there was little like that and it pretty much was, ‘OK. You are Hmong. You are from such-and-such a village, [Pauses] you—and state such-and-such.’ The benefit of the doubt weighed heavily in your favor. Something else would have to come up. And frankly, it’d be very difficult for someone—not all the Hmong were on the American side, of course, as we know. But it would be very difficult for someone who was not to be sitting in that camp and claiming to be something he was not. It wouldn’t last very long, I suspect. So very hard. It wouldn’t be—you couldn’t imagine the circumstances where that could work out. And then to come up and say, ‘Well, I was in the military.’ It would take two seconds to be unmasked by all the other people in the camp. So benefit of the doubt—it was more than that. It certainly was benefit of the doubt, but there was good reason to believe it. So, there was no need for that and Hmong had, I would say, the highest approval rate of the various groups, ethnic groups—the highest. When you had a Hmong family sitting in front of you, especially one that did not have addiction problems—very, very high probability that they’re going to fly through that interview.

(1:07:20) Were there special problems in the Hmong camps because of the widespread desire to stay and to return to Laos someday?

It created a tension. Certainly—a tension—that—I don’t mean attention.

Yes.

Tension between those wanting to stay and those who wanted to go. The ‘go’ part of it would be those who had relatives in America, hearing from Minnesota, Missoula, Montana, Santa Ana, California—‘it’s time to come. We need such-and-such. Father needs this or that.’ For those people, I mean, their responsibility then is to follow. But if the head person is saying, ‘Don’t follow. Our—we owe it to all those who came before us to go back to Laos and reclaim our land.’ That was a real undeniable tension and hard for the average villager who may have been a military man as well, to say, ‘No, I’m doing what I want and going where ...’ It was not easy. So, there was always a tension.

(1:08:33) Now, Wat Tham Krabok, which I would like to ask you about in just a moment, was obviously a unique situation. But were there distinguishing features other than just visual ones between the other Hmong camps that you visited as well, or were they largely similar?

There was a difference. Chiang Kham, Chiang Khong and the two camps at Nan were in upland situations. So the environment was hills or mountains nearby, uneven ground and high terrain. Loei is flat. It’s northeast Thailand, not a place where Hmong would have gone otherwise. It wasn’t

chosen by Hmong. So when the people came out and were in Nam Phong camp near [Khon Kaen], when they flew out of Laos, many of them, it was decided by others that Loei province would be the place for a lot of Hmong that came out that way versus the ones who came out the other way from Sayaboury that way. So, it was very un-Hmong-like. It was nothing like Laos—pretty flat, and so very, very different. So, by the look of it, entirely different.

(1:09:58) Did it pose specific challenges for the refugees who were there because it was so unlike the environment in which they'd lived prior to that time—that made your work with them especially ...

I must say they were both pretty shabby compared to other—perhaps all these comparisons are invidious, but the Hmong camps to me seemed, I think as I said earlier, quite bedraggled compared to the other camps. There was just less of everything, less—even less visitors, as well. But I don't think there was much difference between the two, beside the look of being on a hill situation. They had the same assistance given to them, the same lack, let's say, compared to others, the same pressures, peer pressures. Just physically, it looked different.

(1:11:00) Were there roughly the same opportunities or lack of opportunities to work or engage in other activities outside of the camp from place to place? I realize, too, that over time those things started to clamp down a little more.

Well, work was never approved. And they were never supposed to be officially working in any refugee—at any of the camps in Thailand. That said, some were out of camp doing various things and I don't think it made too much difference—one camp—one Hmong camp versus the other. So, to four, then five camps, Chiang Kham, Chiang Khong, the two at Nan. It was really together, so say Nan as one and then Ban Vinai. Roughly the same. But the others were closing already in the '80s, Chiang Khong, Chiang Kham. So, it was all consolidating in Ban Vinai camp.

(1:12:02) Well, let's talk about Wat Tham Krabok.

All right. Very simply, we were never at Tham Krabok.

Oh! OK.

There was never any—during my time. There was never any refugee resettlement at Tham Krabok. That came about a few years ago. But those people, again, by that time, had been there a dozen years or so. Tham Krabok was started earlier before the end of the war, during the war. I mean, it had a reputation as kind of de-tox temple compound. So some Hmong were already going there at an earlier time. And the number built up, but it really didn't reach critical mass until the closing of those other camps. And then finally, it really picked up speed when Ban Vinai was slated for closure, because many then went to Tham Krabok because it was the holding station. But we were never there. There was never any processing in my day and until a few years ago—three years ago, there was—the US position was we will never process out of Tham Krabok.

I think I misunderstood because Jim ended up going back there under the auspices of the State of Minnesota, not as part of his responsibilities.

Yeah, we were never—I mean, I've been there, but JVA was never there processing. It never happened there.

(1:13:40) So were you there in a capacity as a private citizen that we can discuss or ...

I was there when I was with the JVA just to have a look.

OK. Well, just—if you don't mind, just share what you remember.

It looked like a better organized Ban Vinai. And that was probably because there was more outside work available to people there, and more of an understanding that people would be there for a

while. It's further, way down towards Bangkok. I mean, really, it was not all that far from Bangkok—a two-and-a-half hour drive or something like that. So you are really down there in central Thailand where there are no hill tribes of any sort, certainly not in those days. And the Hmong population there became a real part of the local economy in two ways. One is they did work, the men, outside. And two, a lot of money coming in from the United States, remittances from the US. So there was money there. And it became—I mean, it had its own problems, but I mean, it was—there was a certain stability there—a promise of—that it would be longstanding. So you could see more durable habitations there than you'd see up country. TVs—it looked for all the world like this group was going to stay.

(1:15:26) Could you talk about the process by which some of these earlier camps closed and some of the processes by which people were moved to other camps? And I assume that, maybe in a few rare cases, maybe because of camp closures or for other reasons, they decided to go—actually go back to Laos and take their chances.

By the early '80s, I mean, there were—the number of camps of Thailand was, you know, at least a dozen. And it became, from the Thai perspective, [Pauses] while not unmanageable, it became, [Pauses] you could say, from their perspective, a magnet that created a problem, an ongoing problem. And to the extent that people would use it to do things illegal or to get involved in any kind of political stuff, it created a burgeoning problem for Thailand. So they wanted to cooperative to the US and other—and other countries that were still interested in resettling people, but that meant to consolidate to populations, to make it easier and to understand that those who were in a refugee camp are there because they want to resettle elsewhere. From the UNHCR, there are three durable solutions. You know, first, there's repatriation, going home. Second is local integration. And then the third is resettlement. So we were working on resettlement. A lot of those people actually wanted what was not available, and that was local integration. So for Thailand, that was a difficult issue. So Thais wanted them to either go home or resettle. You're not going to stay here. And [that was] understandable, because Thailand was going through a growth boom, including in the northeast. Land prices were going up dramatically. So, you couldn't have squatters all over the place. That would be true in any country. And so there was a great interest in consolidating the population. So for the hill tribe camps—and they were in kind of in too many locations to effectively manage. So it started with closing Chiang Khong, Chiang Kham, Nan, consolidate inside Ban Vinai. And that lasted five or six years or so inside Ban Vinai. And then, 'OK, we've got to close Ban Vinai. The Hmong would either have to go back,' and in those days, there were very few going back. But there was a real—it remained, and I think it's a credit to the Hmong, an interest in going home, with help or with no help. That was pretty good. I would say the Hmong, more than any other group, had this, again, passion, as I said before, to go back, and weren't waiting for a handout to go back. They wanted to go back—whether or not they'd be embraced by the government where they were going back to was another question. But I did, early '90, go up to Laos and met with officials in all the northern provinces, trying to see if there was a possibility for a fair, effective voluntary repatriation program. So that became kind of my second interest there. And I went up a couple of times. And there was, again, this divide in camp—those who wanted to go back—a lot of it depended where the family was. Many of them were still up there. And things were getting marginally better economically at Kilometer 52 and other places where Hmong were. It was quite good. You know, Kilometer 52 looked a lot better than Ban Vinai or some of these other camps. And again, on the—these remittances that came from abroad were very important, the amount of money that could be cashed. Checks come in, they go to the post office (there was a post office there at Kilometer 52), you get your money. And that's a lot of money, in those days, for—you know, 50 bucks, 100 bucks could be a lot. So—and that was close to Vientiane—you

know, one hour and you're up there. Even in bad roads. You know, the roads were getting a lot better by '90. The country was just starting to open up. So, by '91, '92, it was really opening up to outsiders and the Hmong could come back without fear, pretty much, from the US, who had gone as refugees. Already, that was going by '92 or so—'91, '92. I just felt it was important that there be a real viable opportunity to go home.

(1:20:50) Could you talk about how that process was initiated? It sounds like an interesting story in and of itself.

Well, the UNHCR was in charge of voluntary repatriation. [Pauses] It just never took hold. Very few people took hold. A handful went back each month. And even in those cases, there were strong reasons. Maybe the wife and family—you know, someone was still there that they could go back to. Otherwise, they wouldn't. And my view is the people that had stayed, the hard-core that stayed in Ban Vinai against all pressures to go to America when you've got pictures of people standing next to the automobile or, you know, I mean, it's pretty compelling. People that have nothing, suddenly, 'Wow! There's so-and-so. He went there—his kid is sitting in the front seat of a car. Amazing!' Or 'his daughter is standing there and she's all dressed up and she's going to college somewhere. We're here in the dust.' Still, for many of the people, that was OK. Now, for other populations, you could see all kinds of 'Ah, they have it great. We have it—we lost everything.' It wasn't like that, which, again, is a tribute, I think, to the Hmong people there. There was no... [Pauses] you didn't have the envy that one would expect, and maybe with good reason. But it never really took hold, and I felt that I had been starting to get involved in the Cambodian side as well before the Hmong side on voluntary repatriation. So we felt the people needed—they could use some assistance. They could use a more practical plan than just a vague 'it's time to go home,' because the people had no money, had no jobs, there was no economy to sustain them. The medical situation was terrible. It was worse in the Hmong areas than for Cambodia. Mosquitoes, malaria are killers—killers. So for kids going back, you look at 10, five-year-olds and under, half will be dead in two years. Or at least 40, 50% will be dead. That's asking a lot. That wasn't the case in Cambodia or certainly would be in Vietnam or elsewhere or certainly anybody going back to Vientiane. You're not going to face that. You would face it upcountry in Laos—UNICEF and other organizations, they didn't get up to those areas. So there wasn't great inoculation programs, what you'd have in the lower-level areas. It was a big—to me, so you need to address all those things. You need a critical mass. You need some development programs, and the government would have to agree. So when I went up with a colleague, it was under the auspices of the Ford Foundation. So the Ford sponsored these kinds of mini-studies that we did and also this conference. We went up to Luang Prabang, to the old capital and met with all the officials of the north. And, you know, there was a lot of—here I was an American—I'm sure a lot of people looked askance. 'Why are we up there? Why do they want the Hmong to come back?' It was not easy. But I felt that if we could talk—and there's where language helped. So my terrible Lao, [Interviewer chuckles] which is mixed with Thai—that was it. So when I spoke at the conference for an hour, there was no English. So you've got all these officials and some of them were Hmong and Lu and other groups. So the lingua franca was Lao, such as it was. And I thought that was very important to kind of break down the walls and people would say, 'Here's a human being who actually lived here for a few years and cares, has nothing to gain.' I had nothing to gain by wanting these people to go back, but felt that they're good people. They wanted to live there peacefully. They would be an asset. They would be good for Laos to accept them and to let them develop the area. No Lao were going up there to develop that area. They weren't taking anything away from the Lao. So, they could only be a plus. And if they were going back through the voluntary repatriation program, these are not people who were going to be picking up guns or what have you. It's all so—

but it takes talking, and it takes programs and I felt that the UNHCR needed a lot of help in that. And there were setbacks. There were a lot of setbacks. So we put energy—a few of us—into that, on the one side, to go up and try to help that out.

(1:26:08) How would you characterize those discussions and what were some of the setbacks that you just alluded to?

I would characterize the discussions as a—what could have been the beginning of a very fruitful relationship, had it been allowed to take hold. Human nature comes into play, alas, and ...

I'm sorry to interrupt, but what year was this when these discussions were taking place?

I went up for the first time in 1990.

OK.

And then back in '91. So, I went a couple of times in that area. '90, especially, was the time when you couldn't go to the provinces without a special permission. No one could. Forget about Hmong going back. But already, by '91, it was starting to open and by '92 and now, it's for 10, 15 years—10 years, easily or more, Hmong can go pretty much where they want in Laos. In those days, it did not happen. So it was really closed off. But not everybody kind of embraced the idea of Hmong coming back and there were some bureaucratic turf battles and that kind of stuff. So I would say my position was not entirely welcome at that time. And I just felt that those people needed help and that they were best served by going back. I really felt they would be happier. I mean, who can know, looking into somebody's heart and say what will make them happier? That said, my guess is, if they could go back to the hills of Laos, it would be better than sitting in Ban Vinai camp, at that time, which was the option—or Santa Ana, California. For those that were there, the chance of retaining their way of life—it was an option that they should have been offered. It wasn't for me or for anyone else to decide what's best for them. Not my job—incapable of it. However, they needed an advocate for choice. And that's what I had hoped to offer and to try to facilitate. And it never really played out as well as I had hoped and, again, too many other interests that blocked progress. But again, that's life and [Pauses] so, you know, it's difficult for—it was difficult for many of those folks. So, when Ban Vinai closed then, the people had to choose—do they go back? And very few went back. Do they go to Phanat Nikhom camp for onward processing to America or Tham Krabok? Did they go to—they had to leave the camp and make their way down to Tham Krabok. So the two larger flows—in fact, there was a third—there was—it was not directly—usually to Phanat Nikhom to Ban Napho, which I thought was a bad idea because then they wanted to consolidate this came—Ban Vinai camp, the last Hmong camp, they wanted to mix it in with Ban Napho, which is lowland Lao, and way off to northeast Thailand where you weren't even close to another Hmong. Absolutely flat. Nothing for those people to do and it was really, I would think, kind of warehousing them in a way that would frustrate them to the extent that they have to do something, go back on their own. So instead of getting on the bus, those who had already been approved or about to be approved, were told to get on the bus for Phanat Nikhom. Those who had not yet been interviewed were told to get on the bus for Ban Napho. And those who were interested in going back were supposed to raise their hand and be helped back to Laos. So a small flow back to Laos, very confusing, terrible, terrible implementation. It was confusing. People got all the wrong signals. That's why I always argue that anybody who said the Tham Krabok people were there of their—by choice—yes and no. It was so confused at what the people were told at the close of Ban Napho camp, and I had someone faxing me every day. I had a—I sent someone up to monitor what was going on, talk to the people and every single day fax me what was happening. And it was just a mess. Some people were told this, but that happened. They were told that and this happened. They were not told anything and they got in the wrong bus. So it was just a mess. It was a dumb idea, and it was very poorly implemented. So it was a mess at the close of Ban Vinai camp.

(1:31:52) Were you trying to mitigate these circumstances through the—and—or the daily updates that you were receiving or what were you hoping to accomplish?

Knowing, as close as we could, the truth of how it was working, because our advice was don't do it. Our advice was 'don't consolidate into Ban Napho. Bad idea.' But once that decision was made at the UNHCR and the Royal Thai government, then it's not for us to say, 'Stop. Don't do it.' We—no. But we wanted to see—because the UNHCR would say, 'OK. The people are all going to go to Ban Napho. They'll be told, they're going to be interviewed separately. They're going to get assigned and all this.' We didn't believe it and as it turned out, it wasn't really true. So it was a total mess and HCR just wanted to close the camp. Again, I'm not laying this at the doorstep of any particular individual, but it's just human nature and bureaucracies. They wanted to say, 'OK. It's cleanly done and we did it perfectly.' It was terrible. It was a mess. It was unfair to the people who were there. So what it wrought was, at the end of the day, some people were in Ban Napho, a lot of people were at Tham Krabok, some were in Phanat Nikhom and some were in Loei province, kind of waiting around, figuring out what they should do and a few were—went back to Laos. But it was a terrible, messy situation. And it just meant that someday down the line, something would happen that happened at Ban Napho. So, when I left—I left in September of '95—I just felt before I left that it should never be forgotten that those people still deserve a chance at Tham Krabok—Wat Tham Krabok. And everybody, at that time, would say, 'Oh, that will never happen. It will never happen.' Well it did happen. It just happened eight years later. But it did happen and I felt, even then, when we were talking about—the administration was talking about opening up—that it was not what people thought. That people thought, 'Oh, those people all left camp and they snuck down there and they were this, that.' No. I was there. It wasn't like that. Many were not there of their own choosing. They were poorly served. They deserved, over a long—long before—a chance. They never got it. So we were not breaking our rules and doing a favor for people that didn't deserve it. They did deserve it. So that's kind of the long and short of Tham Krabok.

(1:34:32) You mentioned that for those who chose to go back to Laos, you would try to assist them. What kinds of assistance could you offer them?

Well, as far as—I was not Joint Voluntary Agency in those discussions and I was recommending things to parties that would listen or had some responsibility there. I never thought that JVA—it had nothing to do with JVA. JVA was only resettlement processing. But my view was that there should be nonprofit agency NGOs, non-governmental organizations, that would be doing development projects. And that at the end of the day, for a fraction of the money that it took to resettle people in America, you could have really vibrant development programs in Laos. So my view was if anyone looked at it from a budgetary standpoint, it was maybe a fraction, a twentieth of the money that you'd spend on resettlement. And we had numbers. We worked out the numbers. You'd have to project at a certain point, but it was a huge amount of money to—you're talking, of course, not just the airplane and as people come through the ports of entry, the per capita, the refugee, the organizations here in America. Everything is more expensive. You just compare having to assist somebody in America versus assisting somebody in Laos. It's got to be 100 times more, 200 times—and you enter an entitlement society here. So people are getting to school or getting on welfare or—and need medical care. And each year that they live there, this financial responsibility just grows and grows and grows. Where you invert that, people go back to Laos. You help them at the beginning and you help them get on their feet and it goes like this instead of turned over and like this. So it was—but still, [Pauses] bureaucracy. One would think that's a compelling argument. Not too many people embraced it. And people would spend their time thinking of ways to balk it. So for various reasons...

(1:37:04) [Hillmer to Tzianeng Vang] Now when did Jerry Daniels die?

TV - '82.

May of '82.

Did you know Jerry Daniels at all?

Very well. Saw him the day before he died.

Oh, my goodness.

I saw—yeah. We worked together.

How would you describe him, the work that he did and your relationship with him?

[Pauses] A long pause.

Take your time, by all means.

I didn't know Jerry when he was in Laos. We worked on the same floor of the same office in Bangkok. I can't—Jerry was one of the ethic affairs officers in the refugee processing program. And he wasn't the only one. So it's not like there was some secret agenda there. He was one of the people who had worked in that country and could give information to INS officers who would say, 'Hey, does this sound right? This person says such and such.' Jerry said yeah or no or whatever. The same thing on the Cambodian side, Lao side, ethic affairs officers—EAOs. Jerry was one of the EAOs for the Hmong population. So he was a helpful resource to INS. Jerry was an extraordinary guy. He was a very interesting guy.

Can you elaborate on that for the benefit of posterity?

Again, I did not know him when he was in Laos, and he was 40 when he died. So I knew him for parts of three years and it was really just the last year in '82 and '81 that we worked closer together when I became the director of the program. So, June '81 is the day Jerry walked in the door and said, 'OK, now you're the director. Now, we need to work closer.' And so that lasted 15 months—well, let's say, June '81 and he was gone—not even a year. He was gone in May of '82. And I saw him, I'd say two days—two days before he passed away, because he was in Bangkok. Jerry was just, oh, kind of the—if someone imagined the Marlboro man or the Westerner. This—just a very rugged, handsome, charismatic, bedrock decent guy. And again, it almost proves the—what I was saying earlier—or it bolsters the argument later that you don't need to be great in languages. Jerry was terrible at languages. [Interviewers laugh] He had almost no Hmong, no Lao, he was just terrible, just absolutely terrible. But people loved him. And there was an empathy, there was a relationship that went very deep with Hmong and, you know, some Thai that Jerry worked with and some Americans. But rugged individualist, honest and yet humble, great sense of humor. A very attractive figure as a man. If you said a man's man, that was Jerry. [Pauses] You would not see his heart on his sleeve or talking about his feelings and this kind of thing. [Interviewer chuckles] That was not Jerry. Very wonderful guy.

(1:41:06) So what took you out of your position in '95? Where did you go next?

I came back and was working with Lionel Rosenblatt. I was the vice president of Refugees International. So I did that for four years.

And obviously, we hope to speak directly to Lionel sometime very soon, but how would you describe him and his role in the issue of the refugee resettlement?

Lionel was the prime mover in the refugee resettlement... [Pauses] the whole process. Lionel was the—he built the program, advocated for it from within the State Department, kept it alive, indefatigable advocate for all Southeast Asians. So, you know, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Lao, hill tribe—a real hero of the program. So Jerry worked for Lionel on the embassy team and all of them shared the same building. Lionel was there until '81—so in that critical period when it was halting starts, when it wasn't fully funded in the '70s, Lionel plays his biggest role. So, certainly from '75 to

'77. By '77, then, you had this JVA concept and you had numbers for bringing people. And then it took off in '79. So then you had 14,000 a month being processed out of there. That was—that was big. It was all Lionel. Lionel was the prime mover. Now, at that time, Lionel had very little experience in Laos and almost none with Hmong at the beginning, before '75, because his experience was in Vietnam. But he became extremely knowledgeable and very involved, [Pauses] and the key player in all this was Lionel. He was the refugee coordinator, so—and very articulate. The refugees could not have had a better advocate for them. And this was within the State Department, so it made a big difference. He was policy man and he was very effective with congressional figures. So Lionel was the most important in all of this, without a doubt. So, I mean, enough said there. He was the president of Refugees International and still is. He's president emeritus there. He still works for Refugees International.

(1:44:23) Hillmer to Tzianeng Vang: Well, sir, is there anything you want to ask our...

TV: Well, let's go back to the Wat Tham Krabok. You say you left in '95 and—with the feeling that they still could be processed, did somebody else initiate that process or were you part of it?

My feeling was that for those who said they will never be processed, I thought that was flat wrong. Because at some point, the Thai would want them out of there. It's too close to Bangkok. It's too down in central Thailand there where there are no other Hmong and there are no—so, temporarily, for a couple of years and 10 years the people could live there, but at some point, they would have to move. And then where would they go? The Lao government would not be there with open arms saying, 'Please come back.' So the Thai wouldn't want them to stay there. My view was that at some point, the Americans would have to step in and be one of the opportunities, one of the options, whether they go back—because otherwise, you would have to believe that the Thai would say, 'OK. They can live here forever.' The day that Thailand would say that, you could open the gate and still a lot of people coming from Laos would say, 'Oh, yes. Good. We can operate better, make more money.' It isn't that they love Thailand more than where they're coming from, but the ability to make money, have jobs, live, you have in Tham Krabok more than in Laos. So that's why I felt that no matter what people would say, it will never happen. I felt it would be thrust on us and it proved true to—you know, in '03, that the Thais had their own reasons. They didn't want this to go on forever. And they'd look at the relationship with the Lao government and all that that they have to sort out that situation. So it seemed to be an inevitability. I don't know if it was borne out. It just took a long time.

(1:46:44) Hillmer: Were there other issues related to the Hmong when you worked for Refugees International that you observed or helped work with or was this now a new and broader job that took you into different areas?

Pretty much different, more of a focus in Africa. There were still Hmong in Ban Napho in the '90s, the mid-'90s. So we helped get some people to go back and talk to them and try to sort things out. The problem was everybody thought that they knew what was best for the Hmong and they were not Hmong. Very hard. Very hard for them to put themselves in the shoes of those people and especially when they didn't know any of the history of how they got there in the first place. So they had false assumptions and the impossibility of putting themselves in the shoes of the Hmong. It's a pretty bad combination for folks who would make a decision on these people's lives. So we tried to help a few Hmong go back and help. So when there was interviewing, we said, 'You've got to have some of these Hmong from America who can be fair and not make things worse.' And so we helped that happen in the late '90s, where some went back. And it was helpful. But ...

T. Vang: So, if you could follow back to the single source, who would you say initiated this new way—I mean, resettle the what?

I'd say that it happened because of Thailand. Thailand really had to grapple with what they were going to do there is the usual thing people say. 'Oh, we're going to send them to Ban Napho.' This is in like 2002 or three. Come on— '03, '04—'04. I said, 'There's no way. I can tell you from here. I haven't been there in eight, nine years. I'll tell you here it will never happen. It's just an impossibility. You can send them up and sit on the border of Laos and do nothing? I don't think so.' So, that played out for months and months, that didn't happen. And then, various things. Because, 'Oh, we're going to give them ID cards.' Well, that will never happen. At least not with a group the size of what it was then. So all these things—but it took time for people to see that what they were saying was preposterous. And eventually, people said, 'Oh, well, maybe we'll interview them.' Yeah, it's about time. [Interviewer laughs] It just took 12 years for people to see what we were saying back then, that what's fair—a fair option—is to give them the chance to come to America if they want to. And at least you could get down to a smaller number that later maybe could be part of a voluntary repatriation or something even—some kind of integration. But you can't integrate when it's too big a number like that. It's too easy. It sends too big a signal, you just quietly forget about the rest if you've got it down to a small enough number. So you know, again, I always felt that I am almost entirely ignorant of the ways of Hmong, [Pauses] even after all the years there. I spent almost 25 years in Southeast Asia. I don't know that anybody can ever know, except another Hmong, a Hmong.

(1:50:31) Hillmer: Now, one of the great challenges with the recent arrivals from Tham Krabok is that many of the programs that existed back in the '70s and '80s to help get them settled and provide them housing and things of that nature no longer exist.

I think it's balanced to an extent by the development of Hmong who have been here. Because when they first came to Missoula, Montana, there was nothing. There were no Hmong anywhere. Well, that's changed. Now, there are young ladies who are PhDs and doctors. They didn't exist in those days. There was one PhD and that was it and there was nothing. So all that's changed, so I think that is a strong, strong counterbalance so that the folks come over and it's a different day or it's not the '70s or even the clunky '80s in those first resettlement programs for Hmong, but vibrant communities with many young Hmong Americans who don't know anything about Laos. I'd say the overwhelming majority don't know the first thing about Laos, know nothing, have never been in Laos. Don't know the language—well, don't know Lao. Of course, they can speak Hmong. But there are no texts for them to go back to and read about their history. And so—or certainly not in a written language—their own language. So it's different, but that's how America is: made up of people coming and getting assimilated, hopefully retain some things. But it's just what people don't see is it's a bigger stretch for a Hmong than for an Irishman, let's say, like my grandfather was, to come over and get on the boat and get a job and—big difference. But there are some analogies from Africa now, you know, the people come and it's a big, big change. And then, they have different burdens once they're here. And the Hmong, by and large, are here in America—very few elsewhere. You know, some in Australia and Canada, a few in Central America. But that's it. The overwhelming majority are here. Unlike Lao, Vietnamese are everywhere. This group is here.

(1:53:22) Hillmer: It will be interesting to see if there are divides within the Hmong community in terms of those who have been here now for 15, 20 years or more and those who have just recently arrived. Just as we saw in previous immigrant groups where the better established Irish or the better established Scandinavians or other groups sort of felt

like they had an image to uphold and a reputation to protect and the newer arrivals at least a random possibility of besmirching their reputation because they hadn't fit in as well yet.

I think it's true, but in the long run, it will all become one, I think, where it will play out, it's already now 25 years for some who have been here—more than 25 years for the first ones. Well, gosh, 30 years for the first group. They came out of—on the plane out of Laos in '75. They've been here 30 years. And then a big group that have got 20 years under their belt—big group. So, you look at all those kids. Whenever you went out to Ban Vinai, what you saw were kids. Half the camp was under 10. So all those kids didn't know anything about Laos. I never worried about them. Kids at that age, they can assimilate. But it's the older ones that had a tougher time. And certainly the older ones who were addicted with opium or whatever, you hoped that they could go back so they're not living in some little public housing somewhere in the central valley of California, but they could be up in a village in Laos or something like that where they could have a life that's respectful. And people look at them with respect, versus here when some seven-year-old kid is the interpreter with somebody else. It's tough. It's not easy. And again, my contribution is very small and my knowledge is very small. But in some regards, hopefully, can set the record straight, certainly on the processing side and the consolidation side. If only to ensure, I hope, a certain fairness in the view of what they went through. And they were helped the least and deserve help the most. That's pretty much it in one sentence, I think—and never asked for help. Asked for it the least. The only—I always used to think the only—the most deserving refugee population in the world from our perspective and the one that wanted to come the least. A great irony. Most people are dying to come to America, do whatever they can to come to America. The Hmong did whatever they could to not come to America. And that says a lot. So, they come from a great tradition.

(1:56:39) T. Vang: What was your recollection—do you recall anybody going to South America other than Argentina?

Well, yeah. To ...

T. Vang: We heard that there might be some group in Bolivia, but we couldn't confirm.

No, no, no. What's the group that went to one of the Guineas.

Hillmer: French, wasn't it?

Vang: French Guiana.

French Guiana.

Vang: Right.

Yeah, they did so well they were a problem. [Interviewer laughs]

Vang: They just snuck them in.

Hillmer: Well ...

Vang: And they snuck them in because—so they don't want to offend their native there.

But from our point of view, I mean, that was a failed attempt at internationalization. They wanted to be sure that all countries were doing their share. So here was a chance to send Hmong to another area. So there went completely officially, and there was no sneaking almost immediately because they were hard-working and they completely dominated the vegetable market, the produce market. They dominated it to the point that there was great resentment. So the government then had to deal with it. The Hmong were doing too well. They expected these Hmong to go just sit there somewhere and be quiet. [Interviewer laughs] And they were, in a very short period of time, seized—they were the preeminent produce sellers and growers. So that was the end of that. That totally ended all Hmong resettlement to Central America because they were too successful.

(1:58:18) Hillmer: In Minnesota it's very much the same. All the farmers markets are, I'd say, 80% to 90% Hmong.

Except that there's another economy in Minnesota.

Hillmer: Well, yes. [Laughs]

And they can just disappear in Minnesota.

Vang: It's seasonal.

It doesn't disappear in a country where produce is all they've got and people are sitting there kind of watching the sunset and suddenly this hard-working group comes in and takes over. That was a big, big—so, that ended it. And then, the problem was they couldn't get the people out of there then. [Chuckles] So, they're—and it's such a small population that you have issues of marriage. It wasn't big enough to—you're going to have everybody marrying each other. You know, and that's—it's an issue.

Vang: A lot of them come to the States now to get married

They have to. They didn't have a big enough population there. So, for years it was a problem, a big problem for those people. It's just too small. And you have all these issues that some Lao—well, the Lao have if the population is too small. All these birth issues.

Vang: So, as far as your work goes, you do not know how scattered Hmong were distributed, in terms of this group in South America.

I can tell you very few went to South America—very, very few. I would say, totally, to Central America and South America, [Pauses] certainly, I would say not more than 5,000 totally and probably closer to 2,000. Because some of the numbers, people got there and then left somehow, as well as they could, to get out of there. So it was never a number. Whereas here, again, we brought 150,000 here and the birth rate was the highest of any refugee group that we were bringing by far, so that you've got some real numbers in, initially, in Missoula, but then quickly Wausau and Minneapolis and Santa Ana, central valley of California. Those are the big places, and it went from there. No one really stayed in Missoula. That was just because of Jerry that they went to Missoula. So ...

(2:00:56) Vang: For study purposes, where do you think would be the best place for us to start? Maybe, acquiring some of these old records of how, you know, even from the interview process to how people were distributed? [Pauses] Or if any of the record are kept.

They certainly are kept. I think it could be done with not too much digging. On the resettlement and what countries they went to and all that? Pretty easy through the UNHCR records, through the US records. The US Committee for Refugees puts out its annual report—the refugee report. It would show where folks are resettling, what countries. Not difficult at all to tell you where people went, of the people that went anywhere. Not difficult.

Vang: We could do this without going through Thailand, then, right? [Hillmer laughs]

Oh, yeah.

Vang: OK.

Yeah, yeah. There's nothing to get from Thailand. Nothing over there. So, it's all in the hands of—you know, passed through the State Department. The State Department Bureau of Refugee programs, now Population of Refugees and Migration—PRM. You could pretty easily get that. Very, very easily get that. So, you know, there's nothing in Thailand that would get you anything because Thais or the UNHCR, there would be no interest there in keeping that kind of record, but the US has it and it's readily available. Nothing is perfect, as you know, no—but very good. They tell you year by year, country by country from '75.

(2:02:51) Hillmer: I don't think we could ask for more than that.

Yeah. That's very easy. That's the easiest of all the stuff to get. Another name you may—Jim Chamberlin—has that name been mentioned?

Hillmer: Let me see.

Vang: [inaudible] No?

Hillmer: No.

Vang: I think—yeah, I think Paul [Herr] may talk about it because he said not related to Ambassador Wendy, but yeah, he's a much older guy now, right?

He's my—well, [Hillmer laughs] he's my age. I'd say he's maybe a year older than I am. He's still there in Vientiane. The last time I saw him was when we split. I knew Jim from Laos in the '70s, in the early '70s.

Vang: So, you don't happen to have his contact information?

Easy to find.

Vang: Well, you know. So, you have our contact.

I have not been in touch since I left in '95. But I know he's—Vientiane is a small place. If you know anybody there, they know Jim. He has a PhD—a PhD in linguistics from Michigan. No American knows more about Laos than Jim Chamberlin. None.

(2:04:03) Hillmer: Even Bill Young?

I know Bill—sure. I know who Bill Young is. The difference is—and Young has a longer [Pauses] slightly longer history there. Jim was there since the mid-'60s, and except for the time when he was in Thailand—but Jim was a working stiff earlier and Young was in a different position. Jim traveled around the country extensively and he studied it. He made it his passion to study. So, as far as Lao—the Lao language, Jim is absolutely number one. But culture—I'd also say he's number one. But then now to talk about Hmong, Jim knows a lot. He's—and he's very close to people who were closer—not all Americans. Jim was never—never really knew Jerry. Jim was doing linguistics work when he came on to work with—as an EAO after Jerry passed. But there's nobody more active, involved, no American who's got more extensive knowledge, person to-person, academic to academic, businessman than Jim Chamberlin. I don't know if he ever comes back here.

Hillmer: We're willing to go there.

Vang: Yes.

It's again Chamberlin without an A at the end. So, it's l-i-n. I think it's—wait a second, or is it Wendy? One of them. Is it Wendy that's just l-i-n?

Vang: Wendy Chamberlin. Yes.

Yeah, but the Chamberlin, one is with an i-n and one is a-i-n. I think Jim is i-n—Chamberlin. Many people it's 'a-i-n'. Chamberlain. But you'd probably find him if you just Googled him, you know, Dr. James—against, linguistics. Michigan. And Jim knows anybody who's ever written anything about Laos—anybody.

(2:06:18) Vang: Has he published any book—Jim?

He has published. He's also published Hmong stuff—Hmong primers. He started a for-profit deal in linguistics after he got his PhD in the mid-'70s.

Vang: Maybe Dr. Yang Dao would know Jim.

Late '70s. Dr. who?

Vang: Dr. Yang Dao. The first PhD.

Very close to Yang Dao. I've seen—I first met Yang Dao at Jim's house in the early '70s. Yang Dao knows Jim very—they go back to probably the '60s. And other folks—Reinhardt. Do you know that name: Reinhardt Strunz—German?

Hillmer: No.

Vang: No.

Yang Dao was close to a couple of people—Jim and Reinhardt, I would say.

Vang: Is Reinhardt German or ...

Yes, he is.

Vang: OK.

He speaks beautiful Hmong, but also about 30 languages. Worked with Hmong. Reinhardt is truly an extraordinary guy who is not of this earth, but very hard to track down. But Chamberlin would know where he's at. And Yang Dao would be the person who could tell you about Jim's background. But again, Jim stayed on when Yang Dao came. I think I last saw Yang Dao—I want to say, like '74 at Jim's house. Maybe I saw him once since. But Jim stayed until after—Jim stayed to about December of '74—after Vang Pao and others had left, Jim was still there. And then, Jim had to leave quickly. You know, a gun to his son's head and that kind of stuff. So Jim left and then he went back in '95. So Jim, like many, was out in that period of '75 through '90. I went back first and then Jim went back with me in, I think, '91 for the first time in 16 years, and then went back in '95 and is doing very well because Jim is connected to everybody, including Hmong. I'm just trying to think of who this fellow is—it's a very well known Hmong in Vientiane, who's got an Australian connection. He went to school in Australia. What's his name?

Hillmer: He was in Vientiane.

Yeah. Back and forth. The whole—but he's very well connected, super-connected Hmong. Jim is very close to him. Very, very close.

Hillmer: Not Gary Yia Lee.

No, no.

Hillmer: He doesn't live in Vientiane, but I know he goes there.

So Jim has stayed very close to Hmong connections all these years, and he's been there since '95. And so Jim is really '65 to '75 and '95 to today and every single day focused on Laos. He's an extraordinary guy.

Hillmer: We'll find him.

Extraordinary. And a real, again, with kind of academics, a very rigorous knowledge, not just anecdotal. Good guy. All these know much more, you know, than I do. So ...

Hillmer: Nonetheless, you've been very helpful.

Well, these guys will be truly helpful. [Interviewer laughs]

(2:09:40) Vang: Well, I know it's been long time already, but I do still have one more and this is regarding to Vue Mai, if you recall the gentleman. I don't recall when he visited the States, but I understood that you were—you played a big part in getting him over here and see if you would care to elaborate on his coming to America and his disappearing.

[Eight-second pause. Mr. Grace seems to be recalling a painful memory. He speaks in a hushed tone] I was here when he was here, and he was in that group that wanted to go back. [Pauses] There were all kinds of interests at that time and I want to say when he came here it must have been '91 when he came here. And I would see him regularly in Bangkok, right up until the time he went back. I didn't think he should go back. I don't think he should have gone back at that time. And, you know, nothing that I could—no light that I could shed on what happened—that could usefully be shed. And I talked to his wife and his son and [Pauses] so—nothing—I quite liked Vue Mai. He was a decent guy. [Pauses] It's one of those mysteries being—a quite enduring mystery. I think...[Pauses] Well...so, nothing beyond that.

Vang: All right. But you met him during the—his tenure in Vinai?

Ban Vinai. Yeah. I didn't know him before Ban Vinai, but I knew him then, and then he lived in Bangkok for the last years of his life until he went back up there, assuming he's gone, of course, which I'm sure is true. So, he lived, after he came here, I want to say it was May of '91. Maybe it was May or June '91. And then, after that, he never was—well, he was back briefly for a while until

he couldn't stay there. So then he came to live in Bangkok. But I'm sure you talked to other people—Moua Sou, Moua Sou Yang and people like that.

Vang: No, I haven't. Just the information that I gathered with family members and, of course, I am friend with his kids. We played soccer together and grew up together. So other than that—but from more of an official standpoint, we really never knew why he came and how he got access to coming to America and then what happened afterward. Yeah, we really didn't know anything more.

Well, I mean, he—it was the first time they were talking about voluntary repatriation in that day was in some parts not a welcome subject. [Pauses] And you know, that's what he was speaking about and trying to explain, and it's really hard to know. There aren't many scenarios that would explain what happened, but, you know, it's a dangerous time and I just—he was confident that he'd be OK. I was not so confident.

Vang: Did he come here on his own or ...

Well, he wanted to come.

Vang: OK, I mean, to America. He came ...

Oh, yeah.

Vang: ... on his own, then, right? Not under any official capacity?

Oh, no official capacity. No. He had a family here, so ...

Vang: Right. That was already in Milwaukee.

And—yeah. Sure.

Vang: So, he just came as a regular tourist guy.

Not a tourist. There was a meeting—there was a gathering of Hmong in—on the Virginia side of the river here. So, we were at that. I walked in the door with him at that meeting, and it lasted a day or two. And a lot of people that didn't really know him, especially some of the younger people, or didn't know he went through a real change to talk about voluntary—voluntarily going back to Laos. That was not—that was not the message at the time for Ban Vinai. So you can see where some people were unhappy with him.

Vang: Right. So, then he actually already volunteered to go back before he...

He was talking about it and he wanted it to be a possibility and he was also, as I was, looking for ways that could facilitate some kind of international presence, that kind of thing. But he decided to go back when there was none.

Vang: OK. Thank you.

(2:15:49) Hillmer: I just have one last sort of fluffy junior high question to ask that I hope you don't mind. What do you think, from these many experiences that you've had, you bring to your current job that you've found particularly helpful—or that you think influences what you do in some way?

Well, [Pauses] there are still working groups in the administration on refugee work, so I was fortunate enough to be involved in that as part of this office. So, that background certainly helps because it's been a long time since that level of—heavy level of processing. So that brings—provides a resource that otherwise would not be here. And of course, to this office, this initiative is all about the—facilitating a level playing field for faith-based community groups, grassroots groups in the provision of social services. It's not about religion or pushing, you know, it's about social services and a fair playing field so that you wipe away all the cobwebs and the misunderstandings and kind of the goofy regulations that have grown up over time, and you make it possible to help out and that's kind of the background where I came from. I came from nonprofit, NGO background. Most didn't. So it's helpful to have that kind of mix in a discussion. I'm the only one who comes from a refugee affairs background in this, so it's, you know, it's useful both in—on

occasions where refugees actually are a part of the discussion. And this president was very helpful in getting the refugee program—the admissions program back on track two years ago when he met with refugees and—at our first national conference. He again met with the refugees, came out and talked about the importance of refugees to America. That's the first president that's ever done that ever. This was a great day and many refugee groups were there, including Hmong, at the hotel when the President spoke and that was an important day for refugees. It's not often that the President is out there meeting with refugees. And we tried, believe me, in the past. We had some great help from President Reagan, but not personally. And here he was personally sitting down and talking to refugees and coming out on the stage in front of a thousand people and talking about the importance of the refugee program to America. That was a great day for anybody who cares about refugees or who is a refugee. He met with a woman from Liberia. It was a very emotional scene, and a kid from the Sudan, and their stories were powerful. And you've got the President hearing this stuff and it's very compelling and it's at a time, of course, when immigration issues are big here. There's a lot of misunderstanding. I think it's very important to hear about refugees. And if you don't sort that out, you could have people stopping everybody and then refugees who are truly in harm's way can't be helped or at least can't be helped by us. And America remains a leader in the help to refugees. So it's been a great opportunity in this job to occasionally be there in meetings where we can talk about how important the refugee is. As my colleague and director, Jim Towey, who left a few months ago to head up St. Vincent College as president, he had a big heart for refugees. He used to come and visit refugee programs in Southeast Asia in the '80s and followed it in the '90s. Very helpful in kind of getting that program back on track. Because the more years we are away from the Southeast Asian experience, the less knowledge there is, the less awareness amongst Americans of refugee programs, refugees. There are fewer and fewer coming in. Fewer next door that you would talk to and say, 'Wow, great, I'm glad you were able to come here.' Very few. But—so it's been a great opportunity in this job to be able to do that and also, from someone who is in nonprofits all my life, to be able to work with the grassroots groups. Today our office team, as I told you, is in Austin, Texas, meeting with a thousand reps of grass-roots groups who provide social services to Americans. So it's been a great experience for this office to be involved in that. And this President—you know, try to—has looked after results, groups that can do a good job, that they have a fair shake and have a relationship where they can actually get assistance to do that. So, anyway, that's been a great opportunity for me in this job. So, I'll leave you with that.

I appreciate that.

It's a pleasure having a chance to talk to you.

Oh, likewise. Thank you very much.

Sure.

Would you mind if we posed for just a couple of photographs before you leave?

Not at all, sure.

[Recorder is turned off, interview is over.]