Interview with Edwin T. "Win" McKeithen

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Edwin T. “Win” McKeithen

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Edwin “Win” McKeithen was born in Old Greenwich Connecticut. After attending Williams College for two years he quit school and joined International Voluntary Services in the Fall of 1962. Instead of being sent to Vietnam, as he expected, he went to Laos just as the Geneva Accords were going into effect. After working in the north for two years, he was reassigned to the Bolovens Plateau where he worked for another year before returning to the US to finish college. He returned to Laos to work for the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in the fall of 1966, stationed at Sam Thong. He remained there until 1971, when Sam Thong was overrun and his father died, sending him back to Connecticut. In his absence the Sam Thong operation moved to Ban Xon, where McKeithen returned later that year. There he remained until the Vientiane Accords were signed in 1973. Next he worked in Vientiane in USAID’s program offices where his responsibilities included the refugee and public health programs, where he worked closely with Dr. Charles Weldon. He witnessed the evacuation of American personnel from Vientiane in May 1975 and remained behind for a few weeks to ascertain the Communist Party’s negotiating strategy before he was sent back to Washington, DC. After writing his reports he followed Dr. Weldon to Haiti in 1975 before receiving an assignment to Bangkok in 1979 to help with the postwar refugee crisis and later USAID Thailand public health programs. He returned to Washington for four years before returning to Bangkok for another five years working once again in public health. He returned to Laos in 1991, 1997, and finally in 2002. Mr. McKeithen spoke extensively about his remembrances of his service in Laos and Thailand and the individuals with which he worked, including General Vang Pao, Pop Buell and Dr. Charles Weldon.

This interview was conducted in an outdoor courtyard at a hotel in Chiang Rai, Thailand.

(2:40) …Well, if you don't mind, let's just start with sort of your personal background, where you were born and raised and went to school and anything that you think might help explain how you ended up taking the career path that you chose.

I was—I grew up in Connecticut, Old Greenwich, Connecticut, went to high school there. Went to Williams College and I quit after two-and-a-half years. I was sort of lost. It was actually the best grades I’d ever gotten, but I quit midway through junior year and went to Laos with IVS, and—International Voluntary Services.

(3:20) What year was that?

'62. Fall of 1962.

So you were in pretty early in the game.

Yes. Although IVS had started there in the late 50s, '58, and—I think '58. So I thought I was going to go to Vietnam, but they sent me to Laos instead. And I got there just as the Geneva Accords of July of 1962 were coming into force, which called for the withdrawal of White Star and everybody else. And so I watched the last Special Forces troops leave the airport, leave Vientiane.

(4:09) Now technically was White Star just a designation for the Special Forces who had been assigned to Laos?

Yes. Yes.

OK.

It was an acronym. So I served a little over two years there. Then I went back and finished up at Williams and then joined the Foreign Service and, to my surprise, got reassigned back to Laos,
which was fine and went to work for Pop Buell. Went to work for the refugee program and spent—lived in Sam Thong for five years. And when I was working for IVS from '62 to '64, I had thought that—I had thought that I was going to, in my second year, be assigned to Sam Thong because IVS also had a couple guys in Sam Thong. And thinking that I was going to be assigned there, I studied Hmong for several months. I learned the phonetic system. I learned the reading and writing. I never got very far in terms of substance. But it's really fascinating because it's a very interesting alphabet. I mean, a very interesting language. Eight tones and so forth. Anyway, I never—instead, I got assigned to southern Laos to the Bolovens Plateau—other—also some interesting languages. And then—so I finished college—from—I went back to college in spring of '65, graduated in '66, and came back to Vientiane to Laos in fall, I guess of '66. Went up to Sam Thong and lived there for five years until '71, until it fell. My father died in '71, I went back to the U.S. and coincidentally, Sam Thong fell in the spring of '71. He died in February. Sam Thong fell sometime thereafter and I sort of watched it or heard about it on TV, sitting back in Connecticut. And then came back out.

(6:48) So the fall of Sam Thong was announced on television?

Well, it was covered—it was covered on TV. I mean, those—naturally, I was interested in following the news and I made a point to try to find out as much as I could. It was—so, I went back in '71 and the refugee operation in Sam Thong had moved to Ban Xon, south of Xieng Khouang Province. And we operated out of there until '73. And that was when the neutrality accords, I think they were called, the Vientiane Accords were signed. And then I got a different job working in the program office in Vientiane, but doing program—the program offices, the budgeting and planning office that puts together programs for AID, puts together the Congressional presentation, monitors, the—we helped the officers deal with all of the paperwork, the massive paperwork that AID requires. And I did—my portfolios included the refugee program, the public health program, where I got to know Dr. Weldon and Pat [McCreedy] Weldon very well and several other programs. So '75, when Laos fell, the then-director, the acting director, Gordon Ramsey, asked a few Lao-speakers to stay behind to help negotiate—to help deal with the new government, which wasn't a government. It was a strange situation because there was no invasion of Vientiane in 1975, in the spring of '75. Rather there were spontaneous demonstrations before each ministry, and each minister and his staff bugged out one by one and the government just sort of fell apart in pieces. And the problem that the AID bureaucracy faced, the embassy faced and that USAID/Laos faced was abandoning millions of dollars of AID assets in the face of what? No overt hostilities like the fall of Saigon. So we had to stay there—although the USAID families had been put under house arrest at the housing compound north of Vientiane, Kilometer 6—nobody could leave, nobody could get in. So our group of 20-odd Lao-speakers helped to negotiate the release of the families during April, May of '75. They were all flown out to Bangkok in late May—not only the families, but their personal property. Marxist theology holds that state property is one thing. Personal property is something else. So people packed out their personal belongings and everybody got flown out to Bangkok. Our small group of Lao speakers stayed behind and negotiated the termination of the AID program. We had to demonstrate to Washington that there was a real threat, that we weren't just walking off and abandoning a program because of a few demonstrations. So it was a very unusual situation. I was not a witness to the Hmong evacuation from Long Tieng. I had been involved in a lot of other refugee evacuations in northern Laos and northeastern Laos. I worked around the southeastern edge of the Plain of Jars and then later on the Plain of Jars proper. But the whole debacle at Long Tieng, I wasn't a witness to that. But—so after Laos fell, we all got reassigned back to Washington and then I followed Jiggs Weldon to Haiti. He had been reassigned to Haiti, and he wanted me as his program officer. So in 1975, I went to Haiti and was there for four years, '75 to '79. And then in '79 got an assignment back to Bangkok working in the Indochina refugee program,
the Lao section of the Indochina refugee program and worked in that for two years, where several
AID officers, like myself, were seconded to help process refugees, Lao refugees. And Lao—by Lao,
I mean Lao, Hmong, all the different ethnolinguistic groups coming out of Laos and Cambodia and
Vietnam. We had Cambodian language officers and Vietnamese language officers. And they
prepared refugee families for INS interviews for the U.S. refugee program. And so we visited the
camps, we dealt with the Thai authorities in terms of repatriation and treatment of new arrivals on
the Thai side, and so forth. So I—the two years of experience with the refugee program, I learned
more—I learned a little about what was going on in Laos post-'75. And then in '82, two years—'79,
'80, '81—in the refugee program and then one year—one further year in USAID Bangkok, working
in the public health programs of USAID Thailand. Nothing to do with the Lao refugee program,
strictly the public health, because I had a degree in public health. Then four years in Washington
and then a return to Bangkok [Chuckles] with AID for five years, working in public health, running
the public health office and a science and technology project that we ran. So I got back to Laos
once in ’91 on an OFDA short-term assignment, Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance. A bunch of
ex-Lao hands went back to help do an assessment of a drought and flood in southern Laos and then
I went back in two other consulting jobs. One was in 1997 doing the socioeconomic impact
assessment of an Asian development bank-sponsored road project from the Thai border at Ban
Huai Sai, northeast to—through Vieng Phu Ka, through Luang Nam Tha to Boten, the Chinese
border town, Route 3 or 3A. And five years later in 2002, that same team went back and redid that
whole feasibility study on the same road project. So I spent another—an update of that study. So
another couple months on that road, which I'm happy to say is now paved and open. Not officially
opened, but a friend of mine, the head of the Lao service of RFA just drove it, and she said it's great.
Three hours to the border. That's a very good resource, by the way. I don't know if you know the
Radio Free Asia, RFA, in Washington.
No.
They had a Lao service and they're very, very well informed. They're very knowledgeable about—
they have—they have sources in Laos, sources in the U.S., of course. They run a top-notch news
program. They broadcast twice daily Lao. And very well informed.
I will look into them.
Yeah, it's rfa.org—Radio Free Asia—rfa.org. And the Lao section is run by a brilliant woman—
Vieng Say Luong Khot—[spells it] it's Vieng Say Luong Khot.
L-u-o-n-g K-h-o-o-t.
Yeah, Vieng Say Luong Khot. She was, at a very young age, the—what the rank? It's called—she
was not minister, but she was like secretary general of the ministry of education of the Lao
government. They were in Haiti when we were in Haiti by coincidence and we used her for all our
French translations because her French was better than the Haitians. [Interviewer laughs] Brilliant
girl—woman. Anyway, Vieng Say is phenomenal source for things Lao and Hmong. And they
have—RFA is on the web, so you can …
(17:36) When we're done I'll go find an Internet cafe and go check it out.
Yeah, anyway, so how did we get on Vieng Say? Oh, the road. So the road's finished. So I haven't
been back since 2002. I'll probably go back around—we have some friends coming. I'll probably go
back December. But Laos still has a special place in my heart. I mean, it's gorgeous, as you know.
It's spectacular. It's really beautiful.
I'd been there for all of one day before this trip, passing through, talked to people like Jim
Chamberlain and Mike Carroll. I went back this time to try to sort of unofficially conduct
some interviews with people and realized that would only go so far. And so now Jim's trying
to see if I can wrangle either some sort of official permission or an invitation from the
university to come and do it the right way. But yeah, I mean, I didn't travel too far—
Vientiane and parts outside. I went up to Xieng Khouang for two days, but it's gorgeous.
Yeah, Jim is the man. He's really brilliant. He's unreal. Fine.
Yeah, a great bonus is he's personable as well. I mean, a lot of brilliant people I know won't
give you the time of day and Jim really did.
I hope he's given you files—the files of his studies that he's done because they just—they're …
I'll have to ask.
They're amazing. They're amazing. I mean, I have them. If you want them, I'd be happy to copy
them for you. I mean, they're just—I wish he would lose some weight because we can't afford to
lose him. That guy's a walking encyclopedia.
Absolutely. He was unfortunately a lot busier than he planned to be …
He's always—yeah. Well, yeah. I mean, if you really want definitive answers to things, he's your
man.
Well, whenever you finish your tea, I think we might almost be better off back by the desk
where we were, just because of all the road noise here, but we can carry on for as long as we
need to here.
OK. I can—we can take this.
Oh, well maybe that's not such a bad idea.
Let me try to pay.
Yeah, and I'll just turn this off for—well, we can wait until they show up. You never know
when that will be.
They're around the corner.
OK. I'll just turn …

[New track begins]

(0:00) … Well, if you don't mind, let's go back to your first tour of—with IVS in '62.
Sure.
How much of an orientation were you given about what you were going to be encountering
in Laos before you actually went?
None.
None. So you literally hit the ground and knew nothing about the country, its history, its
people, pretty much nothing.
Only except what I read myself.
[Re microphone:] Sorry, it's drooping on me.
Yeah, OK. There was no—there was no—there was no even interview. Just—they wanted warm
bodies.
So what …
The paperwork had a big stamp on it that said, 'Vietnam Special.' [Interviewer guffaws]
That sounds good.
Yeah, OK.
So what was your learning process then, as you arrived and what kinds of things were you
doing?
Well, we decided—well, I went there with a Martin Klish, who ended up killed in a plane crash. The
few of us that arrived at roughly that same time. There were two teams—education team which
taught at Dong Dok University at Kilometer 9 and then the rural development team, which I was
part of. And there was not a big organization. Maybe 40 or 50 people, I guess. Don't—I'm not
sure of that number, but—and so the first thing was to learn Lao. And we discovered there were no
materials except a course written by a missionary in Luang Prabang, but it taught the unusual dialect
of Luang Prabang. And so we wrote our own course and learned it at the same time. So we wrote
lesson by lesson with several Lao colleagues, one of whom ended up as the head of the Lao section
for the Foreign Service Institute. I had a career in teaching Lao to foreigners for the State
Department. So that took several months. And then the first sort of real work was—I was a
musician and I wrote arrangements for the marching band of the depart—you asked about what sort
of training or orientation were we given. We were sort of left to do whatever you want to do. So I
wrote some charts for this band, which couldn't play a thing—and—except for a couple ringers who
were Vietnamese. And this was the secret police marching band. This was Phoumi Nosavan's
department of national coordination band. And so that's national development, right?

(3:45) Works for me. I played in the band from grade school all the way through college.
OK. So then I went up to Luang Prabang and taught at a teacher training school. I taught hygiene,
I taught geology. And another IVS guy, a friend of mine, we wrote a book of Lao songs with a
Catholic priest who was an organizer and got it published. Transcribed—I did the transcriptions
and my—other people did the lyrics and the transcriptions for the lyrics and so forth and taught
school for a few months. And [Pauses] did that shoot the year? That year went by pretty fast. At
one—at a certain point, I came back to Vientiane and I can't—oh, we worked in a vegetable
program on the Vientiane Plain to try to grow vegetables so that all the morning market produce
didn't have to be imported from Sisieng May from Vietnamese—refugees from Dien Bien Phu who
lived across the Mekong river in Sisieng May, Thailand. Crop substitution—or not a crop
substitution, but an import substitution program, working with the Department of Agriculture. But
it was just sort of a little bit of this, a little bit of that. And then I started—then I heard that I was
going to be assigned to Sam Thong and I went up for a visit for a day or two, started studying
Hmong in the evenings, went on home leave—or leave and then came back and then was assigned
to southern Laos. So I was in southern Laos for a full year on the Bolovens Plateau. And there we
built a bunch of dispensaries and set up a re-supply program for some rural dispensaries with—all
part of Dr. Weldon's public health operation. And got some ag guys and put in some demonstration
gardens and sort of muddled around, did surveys—a lot of surveys, which amounted to
ethnographic stuff.

(6:35) So you were finding out who was living where and what they needed or …
Yeah. Yeah. And there were 44 villages down there, two different linguistic groups. And that was
really interesting. I mean, they were very interesting people. They were Mon Khmer people. And
so …

(7:08) How much did the war sort of intrude on what you were trying to do in these first few
years?
In—the war—the first year in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, very little. In southern Laos, we—
there—we knew how far—where we could go and where we could not go—that is the eastern part
of the Plateau was where we were—it was safe. The central part, there were some places that one
was not sure about. And the area under that administrative jurisdiction, these 44 villages, they were
on—they were on the government side, if you will. And—but then off the edge of the Plateau to
the east, that was part of the—what developed into the Ho Chi Minh Trail. And there were CIA
case officers working in those areas, developing home guard and ADC units—this Auto Defense de
Choc, the early home guard. But never saw any action during my time in IVS. Heard about people
getting shot up and there were plane crashes and so forth. And a good friend of mine that was a
case officer got killed in a silly chopper crash. But the war—really didn't have any real close
exposure to the war until I came back in '66 and went up to Sam Thong and …

(9:01) Did they give you any information about the war, though, just for your own benefit or
your own…
We worked very closely with the CIA across the valley—there were two valleys, one at Long Tieng
where they ran the war, and our valley of Sam Thong, we picked up the pieces. The CIA folks at
Long Tieng and we were close personally and socially and went back and forth and saw each other
all the time and made it a point to find out what the hell was going on, and where to go or not to go,
and what we could expect and so forth. And so—and we were all sort of part of the effort. So we
learned perforce what was happening. We had to know what was going on.

(9:47) How—I think it's very easy for kids who grew up post-Vietnam, post-Laos war to
sort of look back and see IVS and USAID as just sort of another phase of the American war
movement. Well, maybe not war movement, but war effort in this era.
You can interpret it that way. Certainly one of the great attractions from USAID’s budgetary
standpoint was that here, for 80 bucks a month, were extra people that could help implement AID
programs like the Village Cluster Program. Houei Khong was an administrative region on the
eastern edge of the Bolovens Plateau where I worked for a year—’63 to '64. Our community
development work in Houei Khong became designated a village cluster program. Here were 44
villages and the idea was to do a bunch of basic community development activities - agriculture and
public health and roads. We had an IVS engineer and some Thai contractors building roads to
develop the area and try to increase affinity for the government side by producing tangible
development results. Put in schools and so forth. We never saw much, if any, of the documentation
that described this glorious effort, the Village Cluster Program, the an official AID designation. And
of course, the public health program that Jiggs Weldon set up was an official U.S. government
program. And we IVS volunteers helped to carry it out. So we were part of the effort. And we got
cought up in the feeling that we were on the right side and that this was all a noble effort and that we
were doing the right thing. And it was easy in Laos to feel that way because a higher percentage of
the Lao population was killed and wounded than the Vietnamese population. Moreover,
there were at any one time about 800,000 refugees internally displaced in Laos. That's a huge percentage. And
Vang Pao's forces took 10% casualties annually. We calculated from hospital records and from death
benefit payments that his military and paramilitary forces lost 10% per year. That's totally
unsustainable. It's a catastrophe. So from our perspective, the Vietnamese were bad guys. They ate
dogs. *Suay tog*, the Hmong word for enemy literally means Chinese soldier. And of course, we had
really no idea of what damage the U.S. Air Force was doing. That didn't come out until much later.
And sitting in a place like Sam Thong—I had a ham radio station, but more importantly, we had
good short wave receivers and listened to the news and listened to what was going on in Vietnam.
The news was very, very disillusioning. Very discouraging. [Pauses] So poor old Laos got caught
up in this mess.

(14:03) When you went to Sam Thong for the first time because you thought you were being
assigned up, but ended up not, how long were you there and what kind of initial
impressions of the place did you get?
I was there for just a night—a night, even—I don't even remember—I can't frankly remember
whether I spent the night or not. It may have been just part of a day. And it was just this sort of a
casual trip. I mean, somebody was going—let's go. It was a Dornier we took. And the hospital was
a big tent—or no, it was a thatched—bamboo thatched hut, large hut. The quonset hut was not
there. The refugee supplies were also just under thatch. And it was a dusty strip and it was never paved. And it was gorgeous, I mean, really beautiful, this little setting in the bowl of the Sam Thong valley there. As it turns out, there are other places that are a lot more beautiful, but—and the Hmong were fascinating. I mean, very, very different dress and you can always tell Hmong by the way they walk. They walk flatfooted because that's the best way to grab mud with your bare feet and toes. I mean, even in the market the Hmong walk with flat feet because that's the way they've always walked. Otherwise it's easy to slip down the hill. At least the generation of Hmong we knew walked flatfooted did. So …

I'll pay attention. [Chuckles]

Well, some of the older folks probably not anyway.

So I—impression—I had a very vague impression, so it was a very quick trip.

Who taught you Hmong back when you were …

Oh, one of Touby Lyfoung's sons—I can't remember his name, who—I hired him privately to—I wanted to learn this—I wanted to learn the phonetic system, which is really a bear.

(16:27) I've taken all of two lessons and then my teacher got too busy, but I hear you.

Fifty-eight consonant phonemes or fifty-three.

Fifty-seven, if I—but anyway, yeah.

Yeah. And eight tones, one of which is a pre-glottalization, the [kag, kawg]. It's gorgeous.

And the D.

Oh, it's—oh, well, it's very, very subtle. It's very subtle. It's—there are similarities in some Indian is—that's why the dharma—d-h—it's that same narrow distinction. Very tough. So that was very, very interesting, but when we got—when I then was assigned to Sam Thong in 1966, Vang Pao said explicitly, 'Don't speak Hmong. This is Laos. We want all of you guys to speak Lao. Lao is going to be the medium of discourse. And it's what we're going to teach in the schools and that's it.' And so that was the end of my attempt to really get any fluency in Hmong. Partly I was lazy, but it was also his insistence that was, 'You guys, you speak Lao.'

(18:04) Was this something—I mean, did you hear from him directly?

Directly.

So how often did you see him and what were your impressions of him when you were assigned there?

I saw him more—fairly often because I tended to meddle in [Interviewer laughs]—‘This is not right, General. You've got to do something about it.’ I mean, when we saw—when the Plain of Jars—when he took the PDJ in 1968, some of the old Chao Muongs, the traditional Hmong leadership, went out and stole all the cattle from the Lao on the PDJ. There was a huge cattle rustle, a buffalo rustle, which we got all indignant about and documented and photographed and reported in great detail. And I spent hours with VP describing exactly what was going on. And there was that episode and we'd run into him, of course, at Long Tieng, at events, at parties and so forth and—but, and we'd—I'd point out to him problems with people stealing signals. That is where you have a rice drop which depends on the aircraft getting the proper signal on the ground before they can drop. And sometimes adjacent resettlement villages will learn what the other site's letter is.

They'll put it out and if the sites are close enough and the pilot isn't sure, the rice drop can be, in effect, stolen. It's petty stuff compared to the larger problems we had to deal with, but it can make one very indignant.
Vang Pao was a natural leader. I mean, he had a charisma and an ability to endear himself to people and to make himself feared, if necessary. People knew about the hole in Long Tieng. If an offense was serious enough, you got put, and sometimes left, in the hole. It was like in a dungeon in Medieval Europe. You could die there. And he had people blown away, including this brilliant linguist that I'm sure you're familiar with. [Shong Lue Yang, described in “Mother of Writing,” by William Smalley et. al., Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990]

I'm not sure I am.

The guy that wrote the …

Oh, [Smalley]? Not Smalley, but the guy that wrote the book about it.

Yeah. VP had him killed.

Shong Lue Yang?

I don't know.

Something like that.

I have the book and he was killed. He was—some of the CIA officers thought that his languages included Cytillie characters, which was not the case. And because he was off by himself—he was therefore a prima facie suspect as not being part of the team. And VP had him killed.

They still refer to that script as Communist script. Vang Pao's men do.

That's interesting. That was the rationale. And I visited that—his little—I don't know what to call it—his hut or his …

Almost a shrine, I suppose.

Shrine or—yeah, it was perfectly round like a beach gazebo that one sees thatched and had these banners hanging from it and so forth. And I never met him, but—so VP could instill great confidence in people. And he had a terrible problem. The Hmong are an extremely fragmented society. The typical village is six households in size. It's tiny, which is why you get so much albinism, so much inbreeding, because when the daughter marries, she loses her clan affiliation. And so her daughter can marry her sister's son. So you get a lot of first cousin marriages given the typically small village size. And a lot of stillbirth besides albinism.

It is hard to get the Hmong to agree on anything. So to bring them together for a common purpose is really hard. Somehow VP managed to do it. VP’s original forces were based on the model, really, that Bill Lair established of the home guard concept, and it worked in the concept of traditional Hmong society. Now when Ted Shackley got involved, he just destroyed everything, trying to turn the Hmong resistance fighters into main force battalions.

(23:51) Do you think—I realize you probably don't have first-hand information about this, but do you think this was his own personal initiative or do you think he was trying to carry out something that was ordered from above him?

Don't know. I don't know. I don't know. I do know that I heard—I heard one case officer complaining once about a cable from Washington, from Langley, telling them how to set up a mortar tube. He said—it's the classic problem of the headquarters not allowing the field to—like when the British general during the Revolutionary War, got an order by London by ship to sail up the Bronx River and capture White Plains. The Bronx River is this creek about a foot wide that runs alongside the Hutchison River Turnpike. But it was on map, you see, in London. So it's an age—it's a timeless problem. So I don't know if Shackley was acting on his own, but—and he was trying to make a name for himself. I don't know. I don't know. But certain local officers did have tremendous influence. For example, [Ambassador G. McMurtrie] Godley bought the Air Force's line, hook, line and sinker. Sullivan had kept them out. Sullivan had—basically knew that they were—they did more harm than good. And Godley loved these stereoscopic presentations that the
Air Force would give with the trucks being blown up and so forth. So yes, local officers could make a huge difference. And Vang Pao himself was not averse to getting out on a limb and hoping that the U.S. government, the CIA, would back him up on—the retaking of Phou Pha Ti was just insane, trying to retake Phou Pha Ti was just madness, for example. And he—we're talking about leadership now. He—the CIA used to complain a lot that VP would talk in the clear on the radio, that he would virtually announce that he was going to attack such-and-such a site tomorrow morning. Well, with VP it was partly a game of bravado and bluff and, as it turned out, the CIA had cracked the Pathet Lao codes, which were pretty rudimentary. They could read all the PL radio traffic. They knew exactly what they were going to do, but the Pathet Lao were always late. I mean, you could have all this intelligence, but it was worthless because they never showed up on time.

PL's follow-through was pretty bad.

It was—yes. So military intelligence is always—it never changes. It's a contradiction in terms. But Vang Pao was an amazing leader. He had—every year he had an open meeting at Long Tieng where anybody and everybody could come and raise questions. It was like Question Time in the House of Commons. He was like Solomon deciding. I'd never forget one episode. Late afternoon, people were kind of groggy after a long lunch. Some guy got up and said, 'Our ducks are dying. What are you going to do about all the ducks dying?' And VP's immediate response was 'The goddamn Chinese and their nuclear testing—the fallout from the Chinese nuclear testing is responsible for this…' and he just went on and on for about a half hour about—he was brilliant. He could improvise and maintain the aura of wisdom and knowledge.

(28:25) Do you know who Mike Lynch is?
Not well. I've met him. I don't know him … Mike said that VP liked to act like he knew everything. If they were showing a movie and the projector broke down and he knew nothing about projectors, he still went over and tried to fix it and just sort of jumped into everything.

Sure. I saw him once. They were—some refugees had come off the Plain of Jars and we met them at an artillery position right off the edge up in the hill. And VP showed up and he went over to the 105 and he didn't—he didn't adjust it using the chronometer wheels the way you'd very carefully make all these azimuth and elevation adjustments on an artillery piece. He kicked the support stand over a little bit and said, 'Fire again.' And it was absolutely dead on. [Interviewer guffaws] And the case officers with him just blanched—because this is not the example that you set for the troops, but that was the way he was. He, indeed, yeah, he knew everything about everything. So he was unique, an amazing guy. Have you seen, by the way, the court filing that John Keker did in his—John Keker is a world class defense lawyer who successfully prosecuted Oliver North, who was working pro bono in VP's defense. And he filed the brief that got VP out of jail, under house arrest. And he's going to—his—I'll have to send you the—the briefs because my brother is a buddy of—my brother is a lawyer and he's a good buddy of this…

OK.
These are public court documents now. And it makes—have you ever—did you ever see the actual charges?
Yes.
I mean, that's a joke.
Oh, and I saw this—what was it called? ‘Operation Popcorn.’
Oh, it was a joke.
I know you already have my e-mail, but there it is officially anyway, so you've got it all in one place.
So, I mean, the brief is—absolutely destroys. This is some idiot prosecutor dealing with an idiot undercover ATF agent. And they're going to—this case, I mean, I—the prosecutor is insane if he's actually going to try to bring it to trial. It will just get destroyed.

Well, given the environment in the country right now, it's probably going to be more of problem than it should be, but I think you're right. I mean, it just so clearly seems like a case of overwrought—

Oh, it's insane. Part of the defense case is a statement from Bill Lair.

Yes, that I did read. I think maybe we're on the same e-mail list of Roger Warner because Roger sent it out.

It could—yeah, I think it could be. Yeah. Yeah. [Laughs]

(31:46) One of the other big things that just seems to get blown all out of proportion is the whole drug thing.

Yeah.

And obviously, opium was a part of Hmong culture. It was part of Hmong commerce. And Vint Lawrence, I think, early—I forget exactly when this remark was made, but he was basically saying to VP, we are going to leave someday, which he said was kind of Bill Lair’s mantra to his staff. He said it's a matter of time before the States will leave. We need to train the Hmong people and get them ready to take care of themselves. And Vint Lawrence said on one occasion that, when he said this to Vang Pao, he said, ‘Yeah, I know. That’s why I have all this opium under my house.’ That to him it wasn't, of course, the means by which he was going to start a regional drug business and make money, but it was a way to make sure that he could pay his troops once American resources dried up. But just based on your experience with the Hmong, how would you describe to an uninitiated American the role that opium played in Hmong society and perhaps within the Hmong military as well?

We permitted Hmong patients to smoke opium in the Sam Thong hospital. It's a safe analgesic, it's a traditional medicine. The Hmong, in general, frown on the use of opium because people can't work as hard or long. I mean, they start—an opium user starts taking it to relieve pain typically associated with hard work. And so they can indeed work harder for a while. But, as you know, when it wears off, the synaptic connections are—the fluid is—the body overcompensates. And so things hurt more, sounds are louder, colors are brighter. Everything is more—the nervous system is enhanced, which requires a larger dose the next time. So it's chemically, biologically addictive. And an addict can take 100 pipes a day. It can consume a huge amount of time. Each pipe takes quite a while to prepare. So we saw users—and one of the things that—one of the items that was first to be liberated when the Plain of Jars was taken were these large copper woks, which were used for cooking down raw opium into some sort of paste, which are valuable for any kind of cooking, really, but that had been their main use. In terms of commerce, my understanding was that we did—we—Dr. Weldon and a remote sensing expert that was part of the USAID mission, a guy named Heng Thung. He had a doctorate from Cornell. He still works in Bangkok. We wanted to get a handle on opium production in Laos. And so Heng did an aerial survey, which is the most accurate methodology—the opium fields have a very distinct photographic signature. We hired airplanes and did photography and did sample surveys on the ground and so forth. It turned out that Laos didn't produce much at all. Laos was a transit point. And most of what was produced in Laos was consumed locally. There was very little export-oriented production. The great majority of opium that went through Laos came out of Burma, through northwestern Lao, through Ban Huai Sai, through Thailand—with its good road network—or from Ban Huai Sai in Lao air force aircraft dumped into the harbor at Hong Kong. And the Lao connections tended to be a middle-man
connection, the Yaothe and then Lao army. But the Hmong—the opium growing areas of Sam
Neua Province, first of all, were enemy territory since, what—'58, I guess. Those areas were not
accessible. So the few fields that were in Vang Pao's control, basically, were consumed at home or
traded in local commerce. There wasn't any big trade. And Alfred McCoy did the world a great
disservice by totally misrepresenting—he created this myth, which is complete B.S., but it's now
received wisdom about which movies have been made and therefore it must be true. And it's just—it's a complete
crock that the Hmong financed or that that CIA financed their operations with
opium. They didn't need to. They had appropriated funds. They had U.S. taxpayer money. And
the story really falls apart as soon as you look at any kind of objective appraisal. Heng Thung is still
in Bangkok, I think, at ESCAP. You can probably look him up if you want to.

Well, if he's—I mean, I'm going to be there a relatively short time, but if I can get ahold of
him in advance, maybe I could at least have a phone conversation with him.

Yeah, I might even have his—because he might remember the precise… Let me see if I have his—
try this number for him. It's a—this is, I think, the ESCAP number—02—in Bangkok—[Mr.
McKeithen gives the interviewer the phone number.]

Heng Thung.

Heng Thung. He is a Chinese-Indonesian with a doctorate from Cornell in remote sensing. And he
did this opium survey. A fascinating guy. But the conclusion was—in fact, the chapter in Jiggs'
book about buying the opium crop, I think he gives some data in there on the size.

OK.

And it was …

But it's been awhile.

It was a small amount and it was eminently doable to buy the whole thing because it was a small
harvest. You can get about a kilo, if you're really lucky, out of a hectare. That's all. And Burma,
3,000 tons in a good year? I mean, that's where it all came from.

And, I mean, by the time of the war, it had really lost its place as sort of a medium through
which to pay taxes.

U.S. government—yeah, if it ever was. The French—I don't know that situation. I mean, the extent
to which the French actually—I don't know what they were doing with the trade, but …

Well, there are elders I've interviewed and people in their 70s and 80s who say that back in
the day the French would collect taxes in the form of opium. But that's not to say I
shouldn't …

It's sort of like gold. It's a, I mean, it had a known value. It was easily transportable—iron bars, salt,
gold, opium, silver.

What do you think—this is sort of a question that takes us from beginning to end
and I'll go to go back to the beginning again, but what, as an observer of the Hmong people
do you think you've picked up about them that, say, folks in Minnesota who still may only
know them as the people who live over there somewhere might need or at least should
desire to know about them?

Well, I have to say, first of all, that a lot of what I know about the Hmong culture and belief system
comes from Anne Fadiman's book. I have to say honestly I learned more from reading her book
than I did living in Sam Thong for five years. It is a brilliant piece of work. I mean, the belief
system. I was a witness to a lot of the na neeg ceremonies and—but I really didn't know below the
surface of what really was going on. I mean, I understood the symbolism of the rider and taking the
trip and so forth, but—our electrician was a shaman and he worked on live 220-volt lines all the
time. [Interviewer laughs] Yeah, he was a powerful guy. A little guy—young—a young shaman.
And they, as vessels for traditional knowledge about their world, that is what is in danger of being
lost. I mean, here are people that, using this Jew’s harp thing can—you can dictate prose and
somebody can perform it and some other guy can write it down. It’s astounding to me to have that
aspect of language. And their language, after all, is song. But their knowledge of things in the
woods is just amazing. I think also their hospitality—well, hospitality is such a universal trait, but I
would be the last person to try to identify some particular trait that I thought was unique.
Well, that’s all right. I just always like to ask to see what …
Yeah. Yeah.

(43:31) Well, let's talk about the operation you stepped into in 1966. What was going on and
who were some of the major players in that operation?
Well, the refugee program in Sam Thong—Pop Buell was the boss and there were how many
officers? Let me see. Don Sjostrom was still alive, Ernie Kuhn, Paul White, Bob Dakan was Luang
Prabang, Mac was in Huai Sai. There were, what, four—Blaine Jensen, four, five of us in Sam
Thong, I guess. And we would, when new refugees came out, we would meet them, interview them,
prepare lists of families and get a population count, a quick census and then distribute basic
necessities—blankets, pots, cooking equipment, rice—and establish rice drops. The rice that we
dropped was never enough nutritionally. It was about half the daily caloric requirement—500 grams
per person per day of milled rice. The military got 800 grams per person per day. But you really
need about 1,000 if rice is your only source of carbohydrate. But we also dropped canned meat and
protein supplement and other stuff. And so we provided support—food support and medical
support to existing resettlement villages, setting up, starting new villages, keeping track of people
that moved. Preparing for moves if an area was untenable. Do you evacuate now? Do you wait?
Wait until people have to walk out? Do you move the children and the elderly and can you get the
aircraft to do it and so forth? And it's unusual for—I mean, several times I went down to the
director, the USAID director and said, ‘We need 10 choppers for several days to move these people
off of a ridgeline. They're going to get overrun.’ And he said, ‘Yes.’ And so there was always
something happening, but we were dealing with refugee movements of not just Hmong, of course,
but all of the Lao, the Hmong, the other groups up there that were being displaced by the
Vietnamese.

(46:32) Well, Mac and Ernie are probably the two people who have said this most loudly,
but I mean I think it's an important theme in this whole discussion. And that is, as you just
said, it's not just the Hmong. The Hmong seemed to have received the lion's share of
attention from scholars and from people writing about the Secret War, but what would you
like to share about other groups of people that you worked with, just regarding your
observations of what they went through and how they contributed to this effort?
Oh, the leadership on the Lao side was great. I mean, both the military—the captain & major rank,
light colonel rank, the Chao Muongs, Chao Kuangs, the people we worked with. There were some
good, some bad. But because the civilian leadership maintained the traditional structure of the
province and the district and so forth, and because this leadership tended to be Lao or Phuan, we
dealt with them more than we did with the Hmong. And so we had more substantive interaction
with non-Hmong than we did with Hmong in terms of where should the village be relocated and—
unless it were purely a Hmong village, of course, then—and what's happening on the other side and
when might somebody be coming out and so forth. And in fact, on the military side, as you
probably heard, the Lao became some of the crack, some of the very best military units. Some very
good CIA case officers were able to train some Lao battalions that took on amazing odds.

(48:38) I don't think you hear that often enough.
I think it's quite often the case that people say, 'Well, the Hmong were the only good soldiers and the Lao were terrible.'

No, no. Yeah. No, it was all a function of training and leadership and support. There was a black Special Forces retiree named Will Green, called Black Lion, who trained a bunch of troops out of Savannakhet and brought them up. And then held on half a North Vietnamese division. They were incredible. And Duang Tha and other people that Jiggs Weldon writes about in his book were very good, very good military leaders. And VP relied on them heavily. So then they were fighting for local territory and protecting their local areas. The Lao military at the higher levels was hopelessly corrupt, except for some, like Colonel Chansom, who was our regional deputy. He was Vang Pao's deputy. He was very good. So, no, it's very important to keep in mind that the Hmong were just one of many groups that were doing a good job.

(50:10) Did you work with Chao Saykham at all?

Oh, a lot. Oh, yeah.

I think he's another underrepresented individual in all of this. What can you tell me about him?

He was widely respected. He knew the limits of the Lao government's ability, both national and local to do anything. He often said, 'If you're going to give aid, if you're going to build a bridge, build it yourselves. For God sake don't give the Lao the money.' He was a very savvy leader and very helpful in addressing our concerns when we thought something was wrong. And he would let us know what was really going on or do something about it. And he was good.

Now, I think I got this from Jane Hamilton-Merritt's book, so I can't—that may not be right. But was he also one of the people who sort of supported the effort to educate young women?

I can't say for sure. I think—it certainly - it certainly would be consistent with his—the sort of a man he was. He was an enlightened fellow. He—but I can't point to any—but I wouldn't be surprised at all. And—because his—let's see, his niece, that Ernie married, she was a teacher.

Phaythune.

Yeah. And then, his wife—was she involved in the ministry of education? I can't recall, but …

(52:13) Did you have many dealings with Touby Lyfoung?

I met him a couple times. No, his son was the one that tutored me in Hmong. And I studied at their house in Vientiane. And so occasionally I saw him, but it was pretty rare. So I didn't know him.

When you read Doc Weldon's book, you certainly get this sense of adventure or crisis or whatever you might want to call it that, as you described, you have to sort of meet these refugees as they're fleeing—the village is no longer safe—provide them with healthcare, provide them with rice drops. There must have been a wide variety of ways in which you had to encounter these people. Can you talk a little more specifically about the operation as it may have played out in any of a number of different circumstances?

Yeah, we'd hear about—someone would come into the office or call on the radio and say, 'Forty-eight new families have shown up at X.' And so Pop would assign one of us and one of our counterparts. We always had a—we had four or five—they were all Hmong, young—or elders. These were traditional—they call them naikongs. We'd always travel with one of these guys and go and find out what was going on. In some cases, they were young, like Her Tou or—and …

I think this [the microphone] is about ready to slip off.

Sorry.
Oh, don't—it's gravity at work. What can you do?
So they would—they did all the work. They would go out and ask all the questions and have—whatever leadership was there, they would show them how to prepare population lists and identify what was needed. And then we'd call back or go back and prepare the material that was needed. And so you'd find out—you'd find out various ways, when new groups showed up or people thought they had to leave and it was—it was a very fluid situation.

(54:47) Were these normally relocations that lasted only a short time, or were there at least some cases where individuals could actually at least for, say, two, three years, put some roots and grow some of their own food?
That was rare. That was rare. That was the ideal, but that, in fact, turned out to be pretty tough. That was always the objective to try to get in a crop. But it—I'm trying to think of—there were some, in the Muong Cha Valley, Site 191 and 192, in that area, there were some Lao from north, from Sam Neua, who had been there several years, a couple years, who had been able to grow paddy. But that was not the norm. And it was hard finding places where, particularly for swidden, where it was cultivable and the timing was right. And people wanted to be near a strip or a place where they could build a strip or a road, but those were almost non-existent. So we found out different ways—we tried not to be surprised, but I remember one surprise east of the Plain of Jars, Site 232, I think, the CIA started getting some—noticing some radio traffic that they just couldn't figure out. And it turned out it was a bunch of Khmu that were running their own operations against the Vietnamese, on their own. And they had come up with some radios somehow. And eventually Vang Pao and his guys went out and talked to them and they joined the fold. But that was a surprising development.

(57:30) Well, there have been a lot of stories told about Pop Buell. How did you see him and how well do you think he fit the operation that he was in charge of?
He was—he got along well with the Lao and the Hmong. He drank a lot and he could chat—he was a good B.S. artist. And he really loved those people—he internalized their cause. And he was the antithesis of a bureaucrat. His prose was legendary. Charlie Mann, on more than one occasion, ordered our secretary to not correct Pop’s spelling or punctuation. He wanted to see the raw product. He didn’t want to miss any nuance. And Pop could be frustrating and full of beans. But he was not a linear thinker. He was an intuitive guy and was usually right. And he was a good judge of people. You never quite knew how much to believe of what he said, but that's true of a lot of traditional leaders in Asian societies -- they don't want to be transparent. A good traditional Asian leader maintains an aura of wisdom and knowing things that those below him can't be expected to possibly understand. And so therefore you take it as an article of faith. Paul White, on his first visit to Sam Thong, was told by Pop, if I'm not misquoting Paul. He said, ‘Walk right behind me. You've got to be careful of the mines.’ And they were walking down to the market in Sam Thong. So …

(1:00:24) Paul didn't tell [me] that story. He told a few other—he said Pop's favorite phrase was there's no fool like an educated fool.
Yeah. Yeah.
I also heard it said that he didn't really mind if people thought that he worked for the CIA. Maybe he even cultivated that image, at least to some people.
Well, his knowledge of the CIA was a very local Long Tieng knowledge and those were good, generally, good guys. Vint Lawrence was a peach, whom I didn't—I met years later, but I didn't know him. You know his wife, Anne Garrels.
Yes. I listen to her regularly.

Yeah. Yeah.

In fact, that's how I found him.

Oh, through her.

Yes. Oh, Zalin Grant's book called *Facing the Phoenix*, where I first saw Vint Lawrence's name and did the usual web search to see what I could find. About the only thing that's on the web about him was that he served in the CIA and he's married to Anne Garrels.

Interesting. [Laughs]

So I literally, as a faithful Public Radio listener, I thought, 'Well, what the heck?' I'll—so I sent a request to the Public Radio relations office and just said, 'Here's who I'm looking for.' I understand he's married to your correspondent Anne Garrels. If you wouldn't mind, could you pass on a message to her to see if maybe her husband would be willing to speak to me. And that person did and she did and I was amazed it all worked out.

Yeah, that's good. Yeah. That's good.

(1:02:11) Did you see much of Bill Lair when he'd come up to …

Almost none. I barely—I may have met him. I know I was in the same room with him. But I didn't know him.

But officially, of course, he was never there anyway.

I guess. I guess. I had met—I had met Pat Landry up there. I had met some of the Udorn people. But generally, we only knew the local folks and really didn't know beans about that level of the operation. Didn't know—it wasn't until late in the game that I learned what the road-watch teams were about, because pilots never talked about this stuff. And in fact, most—the pilots who flew those radio relay ships, they were never up country. They never spent the night up country. So on occasion, a helicopter pilot that had run one of these infils or exfils would talk about it, but that was rare. They usually didn't talk about it. They'd talk about it in the sense of pilots telling flying stories. And I listened to a lot of those, because I learned to fly there and I got a lot—I spent a lot of time with the pilots. I ended up with a commercial license from all this time I got in Laos. Because I flew everything and just to be able to get something back on the ground if the pilot got shot, because that had happened. And so eventually I started logging the time and the guys who were current instructors signed off on it. And I took it all back to the FAA and they said, 'This is perfectly valid time.' All I had to do was take the written and flight checks and I got a free commercial ticket with an instrument rating. Pretty good deal. I could have gotten a rotary wing rating, but I couldn't afford to rent the thing—the chopper for a check run. And what are you going to do with it anyway, right, unless you have it rich uncle. But I did buy a Maule. I did own an airplane for a while and took the family around Haiti in it. It was great fun. But I learned with the best.

That's what it sounds like. I mean, it sounds like this was kind of rare breed operating.

They're survivors and everybody taught you something different. So part—a lot of my recollection of working in Laos was the enjoyment that I got out of learning to fly, both the choppers and the Porter and the Helio, the fixed-wing aircraft, the light aircraft. And it was a—it was a lifelong experience. I mean, I don't fly anymore here. It's too expensive and too complicated. But it was a great skill and they were absolutely the best—Al Rich always made me do wheel landings. He said, 'Sometime you're going to need it.' And sure enough, I sold my airplane in Haiti to some medical missionaries. They had to fly frozen vaccine around. And I made the mistake of trying to teach them how to fly the airplane. And I'm not an instructor. And I let one guy get away too soon and he bust a tail wheel. So we had to go back to Port-au-Prince with no tail wheel. But Al Rich had
told me how to make wheel landings. That's all you need. So everybody taught you some other trick. Very, very useful. Valuable.

(1:06:20) Now is Al Rich still living?
I don't think so.
OK. I met Les Strouse. I've corresponded with Dave Kouba. I think those are probably the only sort of regular—I've talked to Heine Aderholt and mostly he just flew missions if he flew at all in the region. Dave Kouba, as you may know, made an audiotape of May 12-14 of '75 when the evacuations had taken place. I'll send you the transcript I made. He gave me a copy and said, 'I've always wanted this transcribed.' I said, 'Shoot, you gave me the tape, I'll be happy to do it for you.' So I'll send you a copy.
Oh, thank you.
My pleasure. My pleasure.
Oh, yeah. Because I was not there.
Well, it was very helpful because if you read all the different accounts of the evacuation, it just doesn't add up. There are some inconsistencies and you wonder, 'OK. How many trips did the C-130 really make?' And I think there's still questions about how many people you can really fit on a C-130. But the tape really helped bring a lot of those pieces in focus. So it was very helpful and quite interesting.

How many roughly were evacuated from Long Tieng? Do you know?
You hear everything from 2,000 to— I know the upper number is impossible, but there are actually some people that say 10,000. I'm guessing it's more like 2,500, maybe 3,000 tops. But I can't imagine it was much more than that. And I know Les Strouse said they came back a third day, but things—it was just mayhem. They tried to throw the kicker off the plane, so he finally just basically blew the engines, scared people off and they took off with an empty plane.
Wow.

(1:08:18) Well, let's turn our attention to Doc Weldon himself. He seems, in many ways, an embodiment of a lot of what USAID really accomplished in the country and sort of was an inspiration to a lot of the staffers in USAID about what they could do sort of for the people they were working with. How would you describe him and sort of his leadership style?
He was a real innovator. When he was assigned to—he invented a model of—a method of healthcare delivery that the University of Hawaii later picked up and called the Medex—M-e-d-e-x—program without giving him any credit. Basically, this was during his time in Samoa, when they had to deal with intestinal parasites and some other problems that were manageable. But to do it you needed good community organization and you needed auxiliary personnel like women's groups to help to organize the clinics and vaccinations and the taking of anti-worm medicine and so forth. And then he quickly figured out in Laos what was needed in two completely different settings. One, the urban hospital environment for which he brought this operation or used—expanded the Operation Brotherhood Filipino medical system or staff in the urban areas. And in the rural areas, he created this rural dispensary system which was really brilliant. It provided the basic health interventions for both civilian and military. Simple—a simple list of essential things like soap and anti-malarials and disinfectants and bandages and so forth. I mean—and the training programs and the retraining programs and the—you asked about his management style. The brighter medics then became supervisors and they became regional supervisors. It was a merit and performance-based system that he put in place. And he tended to be a hands-off administrator. He was not a control freak. And he let his—he hired several ex-Special Forces medics like Steve Schofield and Don
Dougan, and some Thai medics as well, ex-military medics, and ran a good program. And the
nursing program in Sam Thong was a great program. So he—his management style was pretty laid
back. His foil was his wife, Pat, who was a terror, who—but she did—ended up doing a lot of the
budgeting and so forth. And when I was working, doing their program, their program documents
for them and one year she walked in the office and said, ‘Here’s my annual budget.’ And it was this
sort of massive confetti that was—she had a printing—a little old Canon calculator and it would
print out a little strip at the top. And I got this ball of paper strips from her. ‘Here.’ That was
previous lives. And there was one other ex-Vietnam. I mean
great guy, which is really important. And so
And maybe it was a more rewarding position to be in than trying to stay alive. But he was just a
speculating now that here, he’s no longer a warrior, but he’s involved in devel
opment and relief.

They knew
-SF
They were relieved by

—

Sure. Well, that makes as much sense as anything.

… but Jiggs was the original Da Vinci universal man. He was a—his unit, when they hit Guam, had
something like 180% casualties. They were all killed. And they were pinned down. They had lousy
intelligence. They were pinned down on a beach that was supposed to be a gentle drive. Instead it
was 100-foot limestone bluff with automatic weapons. They never got up. They were relieved by
another unit. From there, to start out with that and he worked on oil rigs in Texas and studied
petroleum engineering, then medical school. But he was a mathematician, he was a linguist, he was a
pilot, he was an electronics technician. He knew radios. He was—he wrote computer programs.
He was a master carpenter, master cabinetmaker, made gorgeous furniture and stuff. He had—he
did his own well drilling up here because the locals couldn't drill wells fast and he built his own rig.
He could do anything. Any question about anything you could ask him and if he didn't know, he'd
figure it out. He was unreal. He was a scuba—he scuba dived for two years in the Philippines until
he just got sick of it. But he did—amazing guy. It's amazing.

What was it, do you think, that people like Steve Schofield, who came in with this
SF experience brought to the medical mission?

They knew—he had worked with several different ethnolinguistic groups in Vietnam and across the
border in Laos. So he had that experience of working already—having worked with that—with this
type of people. So he was comfortable from that sense. And he was tireless. And he—I'm
speculating now that here, he's no longer a warrior, but he's involved in development and relief.
And maybe it was a more rewarding position to be in than trying to stay alive. But he was just a
great guy, which is really important. And so—and I don't know much about what he did in
Vietnam. I mean—and neither he nor Don talked much about their previous—Don Dougan—their
previous lives. And there was one other ex-Special Forces medic. [Tries to remember his name]
That's terrible.

Well, Steve may have mentioned him. I'll have to look.
Have you seen Steve and Don in the course of this?

Not Don. I don't even know where he lives.

Florida, I think.

Oh, really? OK. Well, I'm going to be vacationing on the Florida Panhandle in December. Maybe I'll have to see if I can track him down

Let me see if I have a number.

Steve lives in Sheboygan, Wisconsin and was part of the driving force behind the war memorial that was built on the lake. They had a big dedication ceremony with Bill Lair and Father Bouchard attending. I think Aderholt would have been there, but his health wasn't very good. He's—I think he's 87 years old now.

Don, probably.

No, Aderholt.

Aderholt. Yeah.

So I met Steve in part because he's a friend of a newspaper reporter in St. Paul who wrote a week-long series about the 30th anniversary of the fall of Long Tieng.

Oh, really, Don Dougan. You can try this. This is—area code -----------

OK.

I think Steve said he and Don were the only two people who were stuck in the USAID compound when the students sort of surrounded it who kept their firearms. He said they were ordered to give them up and he said, 'No way.' So he and Don sort of patrolled the perimeter. He also said unfortunately, as a result of that, they were given the responsibility for killing all of the pets in the compound before they left, so that couldn't have been fun.

In the USAID compound. OK. Kilometer 6.

Oh, it must have been.

Yeah. OK. Yeah. Oh, that's interesting.

Well, I'll e-mail and tell him you said hello and ask him if he minds if I share his interview with you. And I'm sure he won't, but I'll ask him nonetheless and then I'll pass it on to you.

Yeah, sure.

There's a colorful character Steve mentioned and I wonder if you know. If I remember correctly, his name is Albert Foure.

Al Foure. Yes, he was a French mechanic. He had been—I think he had been in the foreign legion.

At least he—I think he was—had some sort of military position in Laos or Dien Bien Phu. And here I'm vague, but it—he ended up at Phonsavan, some at Phonsavan and he had a restaurant—combination restaurant-garage-brothel—is the rumor. And he became—he was in and out of Vientiane and we hired him to run our—to be our mechanic at Sam Thong and take care of generators and vehicles. And he was an irreverent Breton who loved to tell anti-clerical jokes, especially in Father B's presence.

Of course.

Because he was a great cook and Father B would always invite himself over for dinner. So Father—and so …

That was the price of admission, as it were.

Yeah. So one day—so new refugees had come off the Plain of Jars and Paul White brought back a Vietnamese woman carrying this passport that said Mrs. Albert Foure in a plastic bag, a bunch of documents. And he—we took it to Mr. Foure and said, 'Is this for real?' And he said, 'God, I thought she was dead. Bring her out.' So that was wife number three or something, who had been
through China, through Russia, to France looking for him and came back and came out as a refugee. And after meeting her at the airport, she was doing the lunch dishes. And she stayed there in Sam Thong. She was a Sam Thong wife for awhile, but then he said, ‘She's a Communist.’ And so he got rid of her. And when he—in ’75, Mr. Foure applied to go to Australia, but they wouldn't accept three wives on his application for—his immigration application. And Steve knows the details of that and other episodes. He was a great mechanic, though.

(1:23:21) Another name I remember him bringing up is Lee Chai. Lee Chai? Lee Chai was his Hmong counterpart, the chief medic on the Hmong side with whom he worked hand in glove to supervise, resupply the dispensaries—not just the Hmong dispensaries, all the dispensaries that Steve was working on. Yeah, he was his counterpart. They were real close. Yeah.

(1:23:53) So how often would you take off from Sam Thong and go to Long Tieng and have some sort of social occasion? If—it was always something. I mean, I don't know how to—if something—if something had been organized or planned, we wouldn't go over sort of spontaneously looking to hang around with the guys because we lived at Sam Thong. And if we were going over for a party, we'd have to spend the night there, which, I mean, it was OK. But it was more often on business. In other words, stopping there—if an airplane were going back to Long Tieng, OK, we'll go to Long Tieng and maybe have some lunch and maybe talk to the boys and see what's going on in the area where I'm working, what's planned and to tell them what I found out or what I thought about what's happening, what I saw and try to maintain an exchange of information. They keep each other informed. And because there was so much traffic from Site X or Y back to Long Tieng, not necessarily back to Sam Thong, you'd go along and then get a ride over to Sam Thong. So it was a very—it was really, to a great extent, I mean we saw the need to stay informed and inform them about what we thought was happening. So we were there more often on business than socially. So …

(1:25:53) Whenever the words Sam Thong are uttered, of course, people always think hospital, school, sort of the utilitarian aspect of Sam Thong. But how was it just as a community, on its own? There was an old village north of the strip, which was—had been there for a long time. I don't know how long. But it was sort of an artificial place. I mean, the Xieng Khouang government relocated there. Chao Saykham and so forth were there. The Military Region 2, the Senatikan, the general staff headquarters was there. The official MR-2 military headquarters was there. And most of the people there were refugees. So it was an artificial settlement, like Long Tieng was an artificial settlement. And both kept growing during the—because people, particularly military dependents, wanted to live in Long Tieng or Sam Thong to be close to there, naturally, the headquarters. So there was a policy of trying to discourage people from moving to Long Tieng and Sam Thong.

(1:27:40) Did you ever spend any time with a Hmong nurse named Choua Thao? Choua. Yeah. She's larger than life. I mean, she's a tiny woman, but oh, my goodness. Boundless energy and very expressive. She lives in the Twin Cities now. So I'm just wondering if you had any remembrances of her from back then. Nothing substantive. She was just one of Pop's nurses, one of the girls, one of Dee Dick's nurses. But I—nothing substantive, really.
So you came in '66, had a home leave in '71 before the fall of Sam Thong?

My father died. I came back for that.

That's right, I'm sorry.

And I'd been back a couple times before then. Home leave was every two years. Yeah. And then went back in, I'm going to speculate March or April of '71, back to Ban Xon then. We set up in Ban Xon.

Could you tell, say, from the number of dispensaries that were still operating or not, the number of refugees you had to deal with, the number of rice drops that were coming, those sorts of things, kind of what was happening with the war in those five years from '66 to '71?

That's a good question. I can't really speak with—I can't confirm that there was a big increase in the program. I think so, but I just can't cite numbers.

Steve talked about sort of the fortification of Sam Thong. Was that already happening before your father died and you left or was that something …

Yes.

OK. So there was—

Fortification in the sense of there weren't any, really, there weren't any defensive trenches or perimeters, but every evening for several months an airplane would fly to the sites around there and around there and just look to see if everything looked OK. And then we would—we held—we stood guard among ourselves. We had guard shifts just around where we lived at night. So we were—because we were concerned about being attacked. But there weren't any real fortifications that were, that I am aware of, that were put up.

I thought Steve said something about digging a bunker, but I could very well be mistaken. But we talked about him and Albert sort of guarding the place.

There …

Marching around here and there.

Yeah, they—I'm—there were—because, on that side of the valley where the airstrip was, I don't recall any bunkers per se. I don't remember any.

You talked before about Ted Shackley and how his approach to the war was disastrous in many ways. How did you see that playing out in the ways that you could observe—like, for example, maybe casualties coming into Sam Thong, things like that?

Yeah, the creation of these Special Guerilla Units took the Hmong away from their traditional home guard role, where they're protecting turf, and put them into main force units and it just killed a lot of people. I can't cite statistics, but [Pauses] it was—and it was not limited to Military Region 2, but the same thing happened all over Laos. Bob Dakin in the Luang Prabang area also talked about what a disaster it was. Because these units were supposed to be moved by chopper and go fight the Vietnamese here, go fight them there. Just—it's inevitable, the more exposure that one has in that kind of set piece battle, the greater the casualties are going to be. So …

It almost seems—and again, perhaps I'm mistaken. I've talked to so many people and you get so many opinions, sometimes it's hard to zero in on things. But it almost seemed like VP liked having American air support, liked having this large chessboard, if you will, to play on, was excited about the potential of perhaps using these SGU units to really sort of push through, at least in the rainy season, when they were more suited to fighting against the Vietnamese in that way. Do you think, perhaps, there was—I don't know if
dependency is the right word, but was this sort of a build-up that may have encouraged VP to be more bold in the way that he used his men?

I don't know. I think with respect to air power, I think one can say yes. That, I mean, he saw that our air—to him, Lee Lue was the air power, because it was very effective—and some of the A-1s. The jets were worthless. They couldn't hit anything. The F-100 series had to drop their first stick of bombs no less than 10,000 feet AGL or they couldn't pull out if anything hung up. You can't hit anything from 10,000 feet. You can't see—anyway, so, yeah, for air power, VP liked air power. I don't know how he felt about the SGU concept. I don't—I'm not sure.

(1:34:36) So how did the situation in Ban Xon differ from that in Sam Thong?

First of all, it was hot, it was low. It was—it had no charm. The living was—we worked in air conditioned trailers. And I had to fly back to Vientiane every night. We commuted by air. It was drudgery. So we'd try to spend as much time in the field as possible. I mean, but, yeah. And the situation was not good. I mean, we were losing. So it was not like the heady days of '68 when the Plain of Jars was taken. And that's when I started studying for the graduate record exam [GRE]. I was just determined I was going to go—try to get into this—USAID had an MPH program and they financed my degree at Chapel Hill.

Masters of Public Health?

Which is really nice. Master of Science in Public Heath. MPH per se is reserved for MDs. But non-MDs can get the Master of Science in Public Health. Same course.

(1:36:12) How much did you know about—well, you mentioned Don Sjostrom and obviously he was killed at …

Na Khang. Na Khang. Was he there as a result of sort of a new assignment or was he still working out of Sam Thong and just happened to be in that place when he was killed?

That was his area of responsibility, the Sam Neua theater or—nobody called it a theater, but Site 36 and the areas before that, which was really before my time, Hong Non and I think Site 86 and that—he had been working in Sam Neua with the Sam Neua refugees for a long time. And Na Khang was where he spent a lot of time because that was where everything ran—was run out of there at that time. But he was foolhardy. I mean, he saved Vang Pao from being killed, probably—Vang Pao got shot up once on a strip and as I understand it, Don grabbed an AK and blew away whoever was shooting. And Vang Pao got hit in the arm. And that's when he ended up back in the States for recuperation. But—and so he did indeed save VP's life once. But he liked to get shot charging up a hill. Not smart. Standing up, charging up a hill. I don't understand what could motivate somebody to do that. But he dragged—there was another story Jerry Daniels told me. He indeed dragged some wounded guy back on his back under fire. And he exposed himself. Jerry said, luckily, he just got hit between the eyes. He never felt a thing. So he didn't suffer.

(1:38:36) How—I'm a little unclear about this. Maybe you don't know either, but I never mind asking people to answer questions they may not know—how far back in this operation did Jerry Daniels go?

[Yawns] I think, I don't know, I think of Jerry Daniels as someone that I always knew from day one at Long Tieng. So he'd been there, I don't—it's a very good question, but I think it was a long time. It sounds like at least 10 years by the time Long Tieng fell. He probably had been there at least nine years if not 10 or more. Conceivably. And then we—and then I really got to know him in the refugee program. That's when we really—I really got to know him well. Because we would see these guys in passing in Long
I'll ask you more about him when we get to that then. You seem to compare two of the ambassadors—Mac Godley and Bill Sullivan—in such a way that it sounds like you thought Sullivan did a pretty good job of running things and keeping the Air Force in a limited role and that Godley sort of unleashed things.

That's a comment attributed to Sullivan. He said—who was talking to him that he said, ‘At least I kept the Air Force out.’ This is hearsay that Sullivan is alleged to have said that. But it's a very—it stuck with me. I have no doubt that he said such a thing. But I don’t—what happened at the ambassadorial level, that's really a tough one. I knew [Leonard] Unger socially pretty well. I didn't know Sullivan that well socially. And Godley was—struck me as a bombast. A really, really important book has never seen the light of day. His niece, Jinny St. Goar.

St. Goar?

J-i-n-n-y. J-i-n-n-y. Last name St.—S-t. G-o-a-r.

Godley's niece?

Yeah, this is—Mac Godley's sister married—who was a doctor—married a Dr. St. Goar and worked out of Harvard or Cambridge or Boston. And Jinny St. Goar is a journalist who spent—who got secret clearance and spent a couple years going through state cable traffic, CIA cable traffic, writing the authorized biography of her—of Mac Godley's tour in Laos. And she's a really careful histo—I—she interviewed me. She interviewed Gordon Ramsey. She interviewed everybody in the world. She came out to Air America Association meetings. She hung out at Lucy's Tiger Den in Bangkok and she's very smart. And I still have a letter of introduction that Mac wrote to the ambassador in Malaysia, introducing her, saying something to the effect that Jinny's going to write the real story of the great job that our Air Force was doing in Laos. And I think what happened was that Jinny found out the real story of what our Air Force is doing in Laos and Mac wouldn't let her publish it.

I really think that. That's pure speculation on my part. But she spent several years of her life on this project. And it's just—and it's in a black hole someplace. I have one article, there's one article I know of that she did in a compendium with Mac Brown and Joe Zasloff and some other people about the Chinese road. Why were they building the road? This is the road from the China border to Pak Beng, south from Muong Sai, which is now called Udom Yax. And there was great speculation in Washington. This is an invasion route aimed at the heart of Thailand. Why are they building at such high standards? Why does it have all these underwater bridges on it and so forth? And when I worked for three months in Yunnan on a road project in southern Yunnan and our counterparts were the same guys who built the Chinese road in Laos—the Yunnan provincial highway department. And so after we got to know each other I said, ‘Why—what was going on?’ He said, ‘Well, it was a foreign aid project. It was a high-priority, high publicity foreign aid project that Chou En-Lai and Souvanna Phouma signed up in 1958. And the deal was we were ordered by Beijing to build this road to higher than national standards as a prestige project. And so we had 40,000 laborers and 40,000 security personnel and we had 20,000 logistics people and, by god, we built this to higher than Chinese standards because—1,000 kilometers of road in northern Laos.

That was the agreement. So all these—Muang Sing and Nam Tha and all those roads up there were part of the same deal. These guys were bureaucrats like USAID bureaucrats, building—following orders, building the road. These were the specs, do it. There was no great geopolitical machination involved.
Do you know a guy named Frank Manley?

Oh, yeah.

I met Frank in Vientiane and he was telling me a story about, I think, LBJ who apparently had made a promise to some Laotian official that USAID was not too pleased about. I think it was something like maybe 100 tractors they were going to bring in or something like that. And Frank was hired to do the analysis because, of course, he sold tractors at that time amongst, it sounds like, hundreds of other things. He said, ‘We came back and we recommended one kind of tractor throughout the country. That way you've got no problem with parts and interchangeability and all these things.’ He said, ‘Well, USAID decided they'd bring in half the number of trucks, five different kinds from five different companies.’ He said it was a total disaster. He said that's the way, from his perspective, some of the higher-ups in USAID were.

Oh, the AID procurement system was a catastrophe. It was really—yeah. So—let's see, what were we talking about?

The road.
The road—the road in China. So anyway, the great Chinese road, the great—the threat of the great—hell, in '62, that's when Kennedy sent the Marines—or was it '61? We got involved in this mess because General Phoumi Nosavan lied about Vietnamese troops poised on the border with Thailand, at Ban Huai Sai, ready to jump into Thailand. In fact, they were no more than 50 kilometers and they weren't Vietnamese. They were PL. They had taken Sam Neua and Bien Phou Kha and they were up in the mountains, way up northeast of Ban Huai Sai. Anyway, but Phoumi said, 'They're on the border. They're going to invade Thailand.' And that's when JFK dispatched a whole bunch of Marines and choppers to Udorn. That was in the beginning. That was '61. This was after the Kong Le coup.

Hugh Tovar said something about Souvanna Phouma visiting JFK and asking for aid as well.

Could, maybe. It may well have been. Hugh was an interesting guy. Hugh—the impression that Hugh made on us in the field, Hugh would—Hugh, on more than one occasion, came up country by himself, landed—I was at Phou Kum, Site 50, which is north of the PDJ. It's in the middle of nowhere. And he just flew up and just hung around and just wanted—and talked for a couple hours. Just wanted to find—just talk. Here's the station chief talking to slugs in the field. That made a powerful impression.

So he was the first …

He was a listener.

So he was the first station chief to do anything even remotely resembling that.

As far as I know. Now I don't know about the guy—a really good friend of Jiggs’—Blaufarb.

Douglas Blaufarb. Yeah.

Yeah. He had a good reputation, but I never knew him.

Yeah, I spent two nights talking over the phone with Hugh Tovar and I think—well, I think it's six hours altogether and you ask him a question and he just goes. And his hearing may be going a little bit, but his mind is still just unbelievably sharp.

OK. So let's see. Oh, we were talking about Ban Xon. So this period from the time when you have to work further south in hotter and less enchanting conditions and the time of the Vientiane Accords, what were those two years like? And in the wake of what sounds like a pretty apparent sign that you were going to be losing the war and this was not going to end well, was it a tougher thing to work in an environment like that?
It was not physically harder, but [Long pause]—oh, it's hard to characterize. I mean, I still spent a lot of time visiting outlying sites and doing sort of normal refugee work. People came in, they had to be taken care of. There was a monthly rice quota meeting, site by site. How much did they need this month? And you had to have up-to-date statistics and data on needs and so forth. And so keeping up with the ongoing supply operation took a lot of time. Now when we got into the time of the Accords, we started—some of us were naïve enough to think that there really was going to be a functioning government of national union. And that coincided with the departure of Air America and the question then, what happens to the Hmong up there and the other groups up there? How can they fend for themselves? What kind of development aid can they be provided? And that's when—when I worked in Vientiane from '73 to '75 and was involved in some of those, some of that planning aid for—post-war aid, in effect. And skills training center in Muang Cha, which we built. But there were still refugees that needed to be fed. So—then I pretty much—then '73 to '75 I working mainly in the program office, very little time spent up country, pushing papers for the public health program, this—I became the de facto population officer. We started a national—a little family planning program, Maternal Child Health Family Planning Program. And doing paperwork, doing the AID documentation is very time-consuming. It was just—it's a real bureaucratic thing. So Vientiane politics were more interesting at that point. And I really, to a great extent, lost touch with what was going on up country.

(1:53:11) Now I should remember this, but Pop Buell had his heart attack …
His final heart attack.
I was going to say …
He had a lot, which—and Jiggs did his medicals to allow him to continue in the foreign service. Otherwise he would have been bounced out. He was visiting Lyle Brown in the Philippines when he died. And he died in the Philippines. And I don't know, I don't know what year that was.
(1:53:39) Was it, do you think, kind of a blow to him, physically and emotionally, to have to abandon Sam Thong? Was this …
Yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. That was a big blow.
And you said he really came to identify with the people. So I assume also seeing their potential fortunes grow dimmer and dimmer had to have been pretty hard on him as well.
Yeah. Yeah.
(1:54:12) Well, when you said the politics in Vientiane got more interesting, what kinds of things …
Well …
… you were observing?
… because at USAID, part of our job was trying to plan this post-war period, that was a whole new world, dealing at the national level with national programs to be run through ministries, not handing out pots and pans directly to people. That's very different.
(1:54:48) Was there any sense of optimism that these ministries would not be so corrupt that these programs could be run effectively and efficiently or was that …
The problem was the more you looked at them, the less confident one became about their abilities. And see, we had not really ever been exposed, working up country, to what went on in Vientiane, to what went on in the ministries. And it was not a nice awakening to finally look at some of those ministries. There's nothing there.
(1:55:37) Did you have a chance to read about or hear about the sort of political intrigue or the sort of development of this tension that was going on between the representatives of the old Royal Lao government and the Pathet Lao and the so-called neutralists and how this was all taking shape?

We heard… [Chuckles] We were part of the rumor mill in Vientiane. Each—as I recall, each ministry had a mixed—a mixed leadership. And so since our contacts tended to be from the old government side, we would get impressions of the other side through them, so it was filtered through them. But Lao politics is all family. It's all who's connected to whom. All of it. Ideology is really insignificant. One very savvy political officer back in Unger's tenure did a massive family tree of the five leading families of Laos and put it on his wall. And you could figure out immediately the policy implications of anything by looking at the family connections. That's all that counted. That's all that mattered in Lao politics. Who you're connected to, really. And it's so easy to crack that code. You just needed genealogy. You don't need any deep political analysis of interests and—abstract interests or so forth. Just look at the family ties. It's all there.

(1:57:47) Did you hear much of what was going on prior to the evacuation of Long Tieng?

For example, the assault on Sala Phou Khoun or any of the military developments that preceded the evacuation of Long Tieng or was it more of a surprise to you when it unfolded?

May.

Yeah. I think I was still in the States. The—let me see—yeah. Yeah. Because I was—Pop said, ‘Stay as long as you want.’ I was helping my mom get squared away after my father died. I remember when Muong Soui fell and a Thai artillery unit was overrun and captured. That probably preceded the Sala Phou Khoun thing. But I have very vague memories of the Sala Phou Khoun operation.

(1:59:10) So Long Tieng, too, you were in the States.

I'm pretty—yeah, I should know, but I'm pretty sure I was still in the States. I'd have to dig up some old travel records.

OK. But you said that you were…

I certainly wasn't involved in it.

Yeah. Yeah. You said you were asked to come back as a Lao speaker to sort of help see …

Oh, I was already in Vientiane. In other words, when this bloodless coup, ministry by ministry, took place, Gordon Ramsey, the deputy director, the acting director, chose a bunch of people to stay behind to first negotiate the release of the families, and then to continue talking to try to find out—to try to build a case that, first of all, to satisfy ourselves that, indeed, we had to leave and then to try to convince Washington that we had to leave. Because we knew that the embassy was going to remain. So how can USAID mission abandon all of its infrastructure and its assets and so forth?

There has to be a good reason. No invasion. No street fighting. No blood in the streets. No. So we had to make that case if indeed that case was going to be made and it turned out that was it. We found out from people in the ministry of public health that that negotiating track of the Pathet Lao was to physically assemble all of the jeeps and the bottles of aspirin and the tin roofing sheets and every single commodity, every radio, every tire that had ever been brought into the country and compare the physical inventory with the paper inventory and then see how much we had “stolen”, and then to put us on trial for having stolen the people's property. And then to begin negotiations on war reparations. And so we found out, explicitly, what their negotiating strategy was, this was the script that they were to follow. That's when we were able to convince Washington that there was no
future dealing with that government. That they were not interested in development. That it was
about a Marxist—filtered through Vietnamese, old octogenarian Vietnamese party bosses because
the Lao Dong party ran the LPP—Lao People's Party. And we could abandon. So we did. We
were there for only about three weeks or so after the families got out, when we all left.

(2:03:23) Now Mac tells this story about going around in a truck with some Lao students
and lawyers and a Lao captain, going through houses, trying to determine what property
was personal property of Americans and what property was the property of the person who
owned the house and what property should be turned over to the people and this got to be a
rather demoralizing process, but by the same token he said that they were sitting around
one day drinking Cokes and …

Mac doesn’t drink Coke. Ever.

OK. He was having a Singha. They were having Cokes. He said Cokes. But I think some
of the students finally said, ‘So how much do you figure the United States is leaving behind?
How many millions of dollars?’ He said, ‘Well, we just had a meeting on this and it was
something like $160 million.’ I forget what the number was exactly. Maybe $130 million,
$140 million. They said, ‘Well, you must feel pretty bad about that.’ He said, ‘Well, I look at
it this way. Do you know what the USAID budget for Laos was just for next year?’ ‘No.’
‘$65 million.’ ‘Oh, that sounds good. $65 million.’ He said, ‘Well, how much of that do you
think you're going to get now?’ So to him it was about a short-term victory to them, but sort
of a long-term loss not just for the United States in terms of its position in Southeast Asia,
but in terms of the development and the aid that was provided to the Lao people. Did you
see it at least somewhat in that way, or how did you view this departure from the region?

Well, I mean, we all had very strong emotional ties to Laos, the better part of, at that point, our lives,
our adult lives that we had spent there. And so that was disappointing. I mean, going off to some
gods know where are we going to go, what are we going to do at this point? But when you look
back on it, I mean, the policy was a catastrophe. I mean, the U.S. policy toward Southeast Asia was
stupid. Eisenhower told Kennedy, in the limousine going to the inauguration, whatever you do,
don't get involved in a land war in Asia. Whatever you do. I leave you with one message. Kennedy
ignored these warnings from the old general. He sent the Marines to Udorn in response to General
Phoumi Nosavan's lies about a threat to Thailand. And we haven't learned at all. I mean, it's just—
it was just idiotic. And Laos got caught up in it all of the Vietnam mess, unfortunately. I can't cite
sources for this, but I understand that many of the soldiers in the 314th and 316th NVA divisions
who were the bulk of the troops in Laos where, in fact, Hmong and other ethnolinguistic minority
groups that had brethren on the Lao side. They weren't the dreaded lowland Vietnamese, the [Nya
La] or the …

The same in Thailand as well. I mean, a lot of Hmong fought on the side of the
Communists in Thailand.

Yeah. But, I mean, the whole—there is a soldier patch on which you can—which I have seen—big,
colored, it's lovely. It says Participant, Southeast Asian War Games, 1965-1975, Second Place—
which is great.

Yeah. No small amount of …

Great. Because you look at this part of the world now and you say, ‘What in the world were we
doing?’ What hubris. It's just—and CBUs are still going off all over Laos, blowing people apart.

(2:08:28) Walking through Phonsavan and then seeing all these old shell casings in every
hotel and every restaurant and everywhere. And those are the ones that are safe to have
around. And knowing that you could see a lot more of the Plain of Jars except you might
blow up. All of these things. I mean, it is a painful reminder of what has yet to be done to
make that country whole and safe.
Oh, God. Yeah. It's terrible.
(2:09:02) So how long did you remain in Laos? You said about three weeks after the—after
the USAID …
Roughly. Maybe a month, but somewhere between two weeks and a month after the dependents
were all flown out. Until we were able to determine that—what we—what sort of negotiations—I
mean, were the negotiations serious or what was going on? And when we found out they were
leading to war reparations, first of all, they were leading toward a trial of missing assets.
[Desk attendant brings the two some water. McKeithen thanks him in Thai. Interviewer asks for a
receipt for his room]
Yeah, I'd say two weeks to a month. Then Gordon assembled—Gordon Ramsey assembled most
of us in Washington, those of us that had to be reassigned, waiting for new assignments in
Washington to write up, from memory, as best we could, whatever documents we could lay our
hands on, the recent history of the programs that we'd been working on. In my case, Maternal Child
Health Family Planning Program, which I started in the last couple years I was there, fresh from the
MPH from Chapel Hills. OK. That was a new program we got going with help from Meechai in
Thailand. So he was good. Gordon helped to document the experience in Laos.
(2:10:51) Was that at least a slightly cathartic experience, writing out this history of a
program that …
It was good discipline and good to get it on the record. I don't know if—I'm sure it was compiled
in some sort of historic—some document, but who knows where it is.
(2:11:13) What—we didn't really talk specifically about that program. What did you seek to
accomplish and how well did you think it went?
The Lao were beginning to experience the problems of unwanted children, excessive fertility as
defined by—the important question is you ask the woman, ‘Do you want to be pregnant now?’ I
mean, all of this talk about demographic impact and dependency ratios and the national burden and
the education and so forth and so on, that's sort of beside the point. I mean, the basic question is,
‘Do you want to be pregnant now?’ And a lot of people said no to that. It's very simple. And so it's
a very simple idea is—I mean, if you can—if you can protect a woman from unwanted pregnancies,
that is the most cost effective public health intervention in the world. There's no comparison in
terms of cost-effectiveness, about the health benefits. So …
I'm just warning you, I'm just a pessimist and I don't think that battery is going to run out,
but if it does midstream, I'm going to kill myself. So that's [a second recorder] my backup.
Thank you.
Are you interested in lunch?
Yeah. We could take a break and have some lunch. That would be fine. Do we want to just
finish up this program and then we'll go from there?
OK. The MCH program?
Yeah.
Yeah. So basically there were several tracks to it. One was working with the ministry of public
health on starting to make services available, contraceptive services and tied with Maternal Child
Health Services. And the other was a policy thing. We hired—Jiggs Weldon hired a guy who had
done work in this before to try to put together program, information programs to convince the
national leadership that it made sense that a national demographic policy along the lines that Thailand had adopted and other countries. At that time, the island nations, Hong Kong and Singapore and Taiwan, they—very good population, national demographic policies that talked about limiting family size as a national goal so long that the rate of increased population growth and so forth. So it was a two-track approach: services and policy. And it was going along pretty nicely because, I mean, when you're dealing with unmet demand, that is the easiest thing in the world to try to address. I mean, the demand was phenomenal, of course. Thailand is a good example. Thailand in between 1965, if I'm not—I think it was 1965 to 1980, a 15-year period, the average number of children born to a Thai mother, the total fertility rate, declined from six-and-a-half to two, just in 15 years of purely voluntary methods, all provided through normal government channels. That's a classic example of responding to a need. If you get—if you can sort of—a very good example and one that's been repeated worldwide since then. But back in those days there were these great policy debates about did something have to precede something else and da-da-da-da-da. But programs like the Thai program and working in the Thai mission, Thailand soon became a place where you would bring people to see how it's done properly in a lot of fields—malaria, family planning and child nutrition and so forth.

Let's have some lunch.

Yeah.

Where would you like to go? I don't really know that much about …

[New track begins]

(0:09) So we finished talking about the—I forget the actual name, but the women and children's health program.

Oh, Maternal Child Health.

There you go. OK. So you had been writing a sort of …

We had—to put together a new project in USAID, it takes about two years from the time you start preparing the documentation until you get money from Congress. [Phone rings, McKeithen answers it, talks briefly.] So, yeah, it takes—the bureaucracy is deadly. The documentation that AID is required by Congress but then AID has imposed on itself over the years is—it's a miracle that anything ever gets done. It's really something else. I mean, these international bureaucracies—AID, Asian Development Bank, my own experience so far has been with those two, but they are—they're really something else.

(2:07) Were there any times, maybe there were a number of times in which you had to do things in the field when you were still at Sam Thong or Ban Xon that might have, at least in spirit if not directly been in contravention of USAID policy or was this not really something that you had to worry about too much in the field?

Gosh, I can't think of anything offhand. I mean, we were [Pauses] I can't—nothing comes to mind. The only thing that does to come mind is when my wife visited me. The families had all been evacuated from Vientiane in April or May of '75—April, I think. And—but my wife snuck back across to visit me when I was still with this negotiating group. And somehow ran—later ran into and mentioned her trip to John Gunther Dean who was, I think at that time, an ambassador or DCO. I think he was an ambassador to Thailand and he said, 'I don't want to hear about it.' That was against the—that was—that's not an answer to your question. That was her, not me doing something against the rules. But …
So most of the problems with USAID didn't affect what was happening sort of down at the ground level. It was more just … No, I mean, the—working in the refugee program in the trenches, so to speak, was—we didn't get involved in anything—any of that stuff. Doing things against USAID regulations can involve, say, instead of going through the proper procurement channels, you go downtown and buy a bottle of aspirin or something. But none of that ever—we never were put in that position. Yeah.

So you've left, you've written this essay that Gordon Ramsey has asked you to write about the program that you administered. He compiles all of this. It's sitting somewhere. Perhaps you'll find it someday. And so, then you go where? Haiti.

Then I got assigned to Haiti where Doctor Weldon had already—he had left in, I think, '73 to do—he and Pat both did an MPH at Harvard. And then he was reassigned and he ended up in Haiti. The Haitian mission had resumed the AID program after a 10-year hiatus. Papa Doc had died, Baby Doc come in, new government, new program and that was a good time bureaucratically to be there. You didn't have to inherit other people's problems. You could create your own. And so I was his program officer and then the deputy in the public health office down there. And then he did finally retire from AID at the post in Haiti. Pat went onto USAID Cairo, Jiggs came out to—then he moved to the Philippines, retired in the Philippines. And I was in Haiti for four years. And then in Washington for three or four—three. No, wait a minute. No, no, after Haiti, back to Bangkok, I'm sorry. Haiti, Bangkok for two years in the refugee program and then one year in the public health office. So three years—'79 to '81 in Bangkok.

Well, let's talk about the years in Bangkok and the work with the refugee program there.

We visited—yeah, the refugee program—our job was to, basically, to certify the bona fides of the refugees as indeed refugees from Laos—in the case of the Lao camps, refugees from Laos. This is still under the auspices of USAID.

No. We were seconded from AID to the State Department to their Office of Refugee Affairs. And we were ethnic affairs officers, we were called. And our job was to prepare families for interviews with INS who would make the determination that they did have a well-founded fear of persecution and therefore qualified under the current refugee acts and quotas at that time. And so we wanted to screen out the non-refugees and Lao speakers from Isan [NE Thailand] who were claiming to be refugees from Laos. We had people from Taiwan who claimed to be refugees from Laos. And …

Through Vientiane. That's an amazing family. So we learned a lot about the current regime in Laos as part of our screening process. For example, we would show samples of Lao currency to people whom we thought might not be real refugees without showing the denomination—without showing the number. ‘Identify that bill.’ And we would ask people to complete certain slogans that were part of the liturgy of the Lao government. Every government document has a certain slogan that appears across the top of it. And we would ask people to name movie theaters in Vientiane. And we would ask—and we would use these terms that only people who had been in Laos since '75 and had been exposed to the terminology of the revolution would understand. For example, “What's a boun meeting” and other examples of the lexicon of 'new speak' that had come into force. And so we devised all these different screening mechanisms. Jerry Daniels' role was to validate the claims of military service, because that was a separate category for refugee admissions. ‘…In which unit,
where were you stationed?'. He had photographs of people and places and so forth. 'Name this person,' etc. Part of our job also was the care and feeding of the refugees and keeping track of how refugees were treated by the Thai authorities, both at the border and in the camps, in order to get an accurate picture of what was going on that the embassy could then intercede with the Ministry of Interior for better treatment. And so that was very interesting because it allowed us to keep up, keep abreast with what was happening in Laos. And the interviews of the refugees then painted a picture of life in Laos, which was part of the rationale for the basis of the program: that this was a nasty, brutish place where people were treated badly. We also tried to find out about the “seminars,” what was going on there and so forth. So a lot of the interviews with refugees contributed to reporting cables on life in the LPDR. We saw that the Vietnamese were trying to impose their interpretation of Marxism and Leninism through their Lao counterparts. And it just didn't fit. I mean, like so much of the ideology, it didn't work with the Lao culture at all. The whole guilt trip. I mean, self confession and self criticism sessions. You stand up in front of your peers and describe your sins and why you should be flogged and drawn and quartered. The Vietnamese were trying to introduce the concept of guilt to a society that knows shame, but not guilt. I'm sorry. And that—and the Vietnamese maybe. I don't know enough about Vietnamese. I had the impression that they actually have a concept of guilt. These people don't. And it just doesn't work at that fundamental level. And of course, it originated with Europeans who understand guilt very well. Out here it doesn't fly. And the Vietnamese and Pathet Lao tried to impose this whole collectivization concept and this very onerous top-down system of quotas and taxes on your production. In the old days in Laos, government really was very ineffective, which was a great benefit from the standpoint of the village. The village, if it existed, would almost by definition be prospering. People survived. And government stayed out of the way. But the Pathet Lao, using the Vietnamese model, didn't operate that way. They wanted to be involved in everything and so you got this heavy hand of government getting involved in their lives. Not very pleasant. People spying on each other and so forth. And then, of course, then the graphic accounts emerged of people getting shot trying to get across the river and punished when they get caught and so forth and so on. And to this day, the Vietnamese are running a policy of genocide against the Hmong in Laos. It's a grudge. I think—I can't explain it any other way than it's just a grudge against the Hmong and VP in particular, but all these innocent people are getting caught up.

Well, I think, too, from what little I know, also sort of a grudge against these so-called Chao Fa who lasted for so long after the Americans left and continued to live off the ideology that remained after VP left.

Yeah. But it's really criminal. And that's something that Vieng Say and the people at RFA could help you out on. They really keep up with that sort of thing. [Food comes] Go ahead. While it's hot.

(15:30) I guess so. I see now. This looks like syrup. So we mentioned Jerry Daniels before and that you got to know him pretty well during this period. How would you describe him?

Jerry was [speaking in Thai to waiter]—Jerry was—he, [Pauses as he listens to waiter speak to manager] I don't know. (I'm just—I'm trying to get the fan turned off for the sound, the noise.) Very knowledgeable about the history of the Hmong insurgency because he—to the best of my knowledge, he didn't have a specific area of responsibility, geographically, with Vang Pao. He was sort of all over the place. And he'd been there a long time, so he knew the leadership. He knew the history.

(17:04) He spent a decent amount of time in Na Khang, didn't he?

Na Khang, yeah. He was in the Sam Neua operation.
Well, with all the traveling he did, did he learn to fly or was he…?

No, but Frank Odom did. Frank Odom is another case officer who got interested in flying and ended up as a CIA pilot, actually, and got shot down and killed in the Congo, I think it was. He got blown apart on final approach by some friendlies. But Frank—no, Jerry didn't fly, but Frank did and actually made a new career out of it.

Anyway, I was interrupting your train of thought. You were talking about Jerry.

I—yeah, Jerry's just a great guy, even-tempered and held very few prejudices. I mean, sharp, savvy guy. He understood, to a certain extent, the folly of the whole exercise, but wanted to help the real bona fide refugees and try to protect the program from the fakes. And [Pauses] yeah—he—his death was really stupid, really a tragedy. [Food arrives] Wow. [Speaking in Thai] Anyway, I won't get into his death because it's irrelevant.

But it was asphyxiation from a faulty heater, right?

Yeah. A pilot light went out. The room was sealed so the gas continued to flow out through the pilot light and it was asphyxiation. It was an airtight, air conditioned room. [More food arrives] Wow. My God.

Holy moley. [Laughs]

We can share the salad. I'll put it right here. So feel free to dig into that.

(19:58) All right. Well, I'll clean my plate over here first. Now VP went to Montana, I assume, largely because of his friendship with Jerry.

I believe so. I believe so. First, I think, as part of the recuperation. He got shot in the arm and I think he ended up buying some property there or acquiring some property there somehow. That's a rumor. I don't know that for a fact.

I think that's right, though. I think he lived there for maybe two, three years and tried farming and raising cattle and all that. And I've got to go back and study that story again, but I don't think he was particularly welcomed in the community and things didn't pan out and maybe the farming didn't go as well as he had hoped and so he ended up in the Sacramento area.

OK.

(20:53) So I would imagine you heard more than your share of harrowing stories about what is happening to people across the border.

Yeah. [Pauses] But what we really couldn't find out much about was the seminar, what was going on in the seminars because not that many people were released, particularly in the early days. And it was very hard to get a picture of what—how bad it was.

Now technically speaking, is seminar distinct from a reeducation camp?

I don't think there's any distinction. I think the seminars were broken down by type of inmate. They had the one—they had an island for Done Xao and Done Ying or Done Xai and Done Ying and some island or islands in the Nam Ngum Reservoir were low-security seminars. And then officers—I don't know what—if there was a cutoff of rank or not where—at a different seminar.

And probably local politicians as opposed to military and…

I have the impression that they were segregated by rank and position and perceived, perhaps, perceived threat.

(22:44) So what was the relationship like between the case officers who were taking these stories down and getting refugees ready for application, first of all, I suppose, just to be classified as a refugee and secondly for possible relocation elsewhere and the INS officers?
It could—it was—it could be testy. In other words, every time INS rejected a family, we would leap to their defense. And we naturally thought that a lot of the INS decisions were arbitrary—but they could be appealed. The head of INS was Jack Fortner—a very capable guy. Very smart. He had some cowboys under him. And so we were often able to take a case to Jack and get it reversed or get another hearing. And so the onus was on us and JVA. We had this group called the Joint Voluntary Agency…

In Thailand, the International Rescue Commission.

Yes. Who hired people to do the real scutwork, the detailed interviewing and development of the families and they had a—they had a hard time. We all had a hard time because the INS definitions of brother and sister are narrow. The Lao definitions of brother and sister are quite broad. And you get into cousin and that's another world. So family structure was always a big issue and who's real family and who's not real family and so forth. And there was a natural tension in the relationship between INS and the Ethnic Affairs Officers.

(25:07) For the average American who's never spent time in a refugee camp and even for young Hmong who may not really understand what their parents and grandparents had to go through, what is life in—and I realize there are differences from camp to camp, but what would life be like for a person who crossed the border and found themselves in Ban Vinai or Chiang Khong or …

Well, first they'd be put in a Thai jail and they might be sent back to Laos. They'd probably have all their money taken and be stuck in this jail for awhile. If they made it to the camp, they would be protected. The Volags [voluntary agencies], who had the contracts to provide relief to the camps, did a pretty good job. So people had medical care, they had food. From the refugee standpoint, the most frustrating aspect was not knowing what was going to happen. Were they going to be turned down by the U.S.? Should they apply to France? Should they start out by applying to Australia? Who really made the decision? Could they pay somebody off? I mean, the social norms—the mechanisms that they were used to dealing with just didn't apply.

(27:24) Were there—here again, I suppose there was a pretty wide variety of possibilities, but was there really much opportunity for any kind of meaningful work—

No.

—or was it mostly just kind of sitting around waiting for your number to come up or waiting to make a decision?

A lot of sitting around. Now maintenance of the camp and your own structure and whatever community projects people could organize were important, of course. But I mean, nobody had any real commitment to those because they were not going to be there, they hoped. So…

(28:09) Now did you work with Jim Anderson at all from the IRC?

Jim Anderson. Probably.

He's in St. Paul, so …

Was he a Cambodian language speaker, do you know?

I don't think so, but, well, I think he—then again, we worked with Cambodians, so maybe he was.

OK.

He married one of Fred Walker's daughters.

Oh, yeah. The doctor or …

No, the Air America chief pilot.

Oh, no. But I mean, one of Fred's daughter is a …
Oh, no. It's her older sister. Patricia is the doctor. Elizabeth is the girl he married.

Did she work for this French VOLAG?

Oh, yeah. I think she did. And then she came to work for JVA. In fact, she worked for Jim.

That's how they met.

OK.

And then there's another sister still—Susan, maybe?

Susan Walker is the one I'm thinking of who …

OK.

She's the one who worked for [Speaks with waiter]. Yeah, she worked with the French VOLAG.

I'm trying to get all three sisters to sit down and chat with me, but it's a bit of undertaking given how busy they all are, especially Pat. I would imagine this had to have been a rather delicate situation for the Thai government to have refugees from three or four countries streaming across their borders, their own citizens quite upset that here are these people taking up land and maybe resources, at least from their perspective, even though most of them are coming from the outside. And then having to deal with the governments from which these people are from.

Yeah. Land wasn't so much of a problem, but the perception of the communities near the refugee camps could become jaded, that the refugees were simply a bunch of people hanging around getting fed, sometimes with better medical attention than the people outside the fence got. Then of course, the perception on the part of the Volags was sometimes that the people on the outside of the fence were exploiting people on the inside by charging them abnormally high prices for staple commodities and so forth and so on. And it was a situation sort of designed for exploitation of one sort or another.

(31:11) Thai guards perhaps assaulting women in the camps. Things of that nature.

That was—I don't—I can't think of an episode of that. I mean, I …

That may have been more rumor in the camps than a reality?

There were some examples of Pathet Lao trying—a Pathet Lao tried to kill the abbot of the Nong Khai camp. I don't know if he was called the abbot of the Nong Khai camp, but he was certainly the senior monk. He ended up running the Wat in Virginia outside of Washington and west of Washington. He's a very—he still has a hatchet mark on his forehead.

(32:06) My goodness. So did you see any evidence or hear any rumors of Hmong refugees slipping back over the border trying to participate in the ongoing rebellion against this new government or was that …

Oh, I think so. I think that—I think that happened, indeed. I think that whatever resistance groups were operating on Thai soil had ties with the Hmong at Ban Vinai. They probably asked for donations, I'm speculating, but I'm sure that there was some communication. That was always the very vocal claim on the Lao government's part that Ban Vinai was nothing but a staging area for the Hmong resistance. But it really wasn't. I mean, it wasn't overt.

(33:18) It was (**), as it were. Did you see many cases in which Hmong families, say, applied to go to the United States or elsewhere, asked everything and had their shots, had the orientation and then just couldn't bring themselves to leave? Maybe they thought the situation in Laos would change to make it go back or they were waiting for family to come over or whatever the case might be?

I can't think of anything. Not to say that it didn't happen, but nothing comes to mind.
So you worked out of Vientiane and visited numerous camps or were you designated to certain …

Bangkok.

Yeah, at Bangkok. Yes. [Chuckles]

—mainly Nong Khai—the big Lao camp in Nong Khai, Ban Vinai, the Hmong camp, and later Nakhon Phanom. There was a camp there—Hmong camp in Nakhon Phanom. And occasionally Phanat Nikhom, which was a processing center. And a couple gigs in the Khmer camps just because they were short of people. But—and then, one trip to Chiang Kham. There was a Mien, predominantly Mien camp, Mien camp at Chiang Kham. And Ubon. There used to be a fairly large Lao camp at Ubon. Yeah. Quite large, in fact. And after most of them got processed then the residual Lao went to Nong Khai and eventually everybody ended up near NKP. But the Ubon camp did indeed have fairly close ties with the Lao resistance in southern Laos. That was—I remember interviewing guys from the— in the resistance in the Ubon refugee camp.

Do you remember any particular details they shared about what they were up to?

No. I was trying to find out what life was like on the other side, obviously, and the taxation and the—how much of their rice harvest had to be handed over and how it was enforced and so forth and so on. And in that same camp, [name removed] was given yellow rain. The fact that he handed it over to the CIA and they threw it away and never did anything with it. It got lost and unbelievable.

He said that the fellow that he went with to get it decided not buy it,

Yeah

that they saw it, but that they didn't actually get it.

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, they threw away the chance to—you got the proof.

So it wasn't bee shit, as it were.

I mean—which reminds me of another case officer, Bremer is his name up at Pha Khao, Site 14, who got ahold of a senior captain, North Vietnamese captain, who was a walking encyclopedia on EOB—enemy order of battle statistics, the structure and force levels of all of those units up there. And a gold mine. Bremer had made his career, his next promotion—because he was not contract. He was from Langley. He was a career intelligence officer. And after a month of all day, all night sessions with this guy, they finally decided to box him, and—the guy was lying through his teeth. I mean, everything he said was a complete fabrication and Bremer almost killed himself. He almost killed the guy. And it was fascinating to watch, to watch him just crumble. The guy literally fell apart and slinked away and left MR-2 never to return. He left Site 14 and we heard that he left Vientiane. That he was—that he had a breakdown, a mental breakdown.

That story sounds remotely familiar. I can't remember—I can't remember. Did …

Well, one guy—his boss, Jack Shirley, was at Site 14 at the time and I met Bremer several times because I was talking to the same guy because I was interested in the North Vietnamese occupation, the civil administration of Xieng Khouang Province. Why the North Vietnamese were so involved—what were they doing. We gradually developed the thesis that they needed the land because Nghe An Province is dirt poor next door. And the Plain of Jars is called the Tranninh. Tranninh Plateau in Vietnamese. It's had a Vietnamese name for a long time. And right after the Second World War, according to [Xieng Khouang provincial governor] Chao Saykham, some 10,000 Vietnamese from Nghe An province settled on the Plain of Jars, just came in and squatted and started growing stuff. And he was able to organize enough army trucks to expel them and get them out. So here's this irredentist claim against the Tranninh Plateau, known in Lao as Thong Hai Hin—the Plain of Jars. And at the provincial level of the Xieng Khouang Pathet Lao administration the
Vietnamese have advisors in agriculture, education, public health and, you name it, civil works, etc. which is a normal advisory structure at each line office in the bureaucracy. But then they also had the “959” group. What the hell was the 959 group? The 959 group had the same kind of bureaucratic line ministry organization, but not as advisors to the Pathet Lao government in Xieng Khouang Province. It was independent. It turned out the 959 group was the shadow government, the advance government of the Vietnamese community that would move and live in Tran Yin. So this was part of … Occupation. This was the part of the plan. That's right.

(41:34) Do you know roughly when this was that these 10,000—maybe you said and I just didn't … Right at the end of the Second World War. OK. This is right—this is in ’45 when the French pulled out, the Brits pulled out. There was this power vacuum. The Japanese were gone. So probably right about the time that Ho Chi Minh was pronouncing his Republic of Vietnam or maybe shortly before.

I don't know the timing. But, yeah. But this Tranninh business—these are interviews that I did in the late ’60s. That's what they were doing. They were preparing for—and Saykham talked a lot about, well, if you'd ask him, he'd talk a lot about the problem of keeping the Vietnamese out of Laos. In fact, when we were—during the PGNU era, ’73 to ’75, there was a hot rumor in Vientiane that Souphanouvong had successfully resisted Vietnamese attempts to bring in 100,000 Vietnamese settlers to live in Laos. Because apparently Nghe An is really dirt poor. And so there is this irredentist lebensraum aspect to the Vietnamese role and national interest in Laos.

(43:16) When we look back at the number of times that Burma and Vietnam and, I think China as well, invaded Laos over the centuries before all of this, it's not surprising in a way. I mean, it's sort of a consistent theme that Laos is the poor cousin stuck in the middle and landlocked between all of these more dominant powers. But back then they did it for really important reasons, like great elephant shit war where the—Chao Saykham told me this story where the Mandarin of Hue was used to collecting tribute from the principalities in the area, including the principality of Luang Prabang. And ‘what can you send me this year?’ ‘I can send you a white elephant from Luang Prabang to express my deep respect’ for the Mandarin at Hue. He said, ‘How am I going to take care of a white elephant? It’s—but to show you're—that you mean business, cut off his foot. Send me his foot and I will accept that. It's a lot easier to deal with.’ Unless you're the elephant.

Until you're the elephant. So the prince of Luang Prabang cut off the white elephant's foot, put it in an ornate silver box, shipped it through the good offices of Xieng Khouang, Chao Saykham's father and grandfather, en route to Hue. Well, Saykham's father or grandfather didn't like either one of these guys very much, took out the elephant's foot and replaced it with elephant shit, which arrived at Hue—and so the Vietnamese invaded, they dispatched an army to rape and pillage Luang Prabang and went through Xieng Khouang en route and raised havoc in Xieng Khouang. This was when wars were fought over important foreign policy. Like insulting, yeah, foreign potentates.

Yeah. So you're right. I mean, this part of the world, the Emerald Buddha here was hidden in a stupa here in town for 43 years because, if you have the Emerald Buddha, it's like the king in a game of chess. You win. The war is over. And they hid it from a potential Burmese invasion. And it was
so well hidden it was lost until that stupa downtown here got hit by lightening. And when they
repaired it, they found it inside. I mean, yeah, this part of the world has been torn apart by war for a
long time.

(46:25) So as you were gathering these stories, what accounts did you hear about yellow rain
and what opinion have you developed over the years regarding what it was or was not?
The U.S. army sent out their chemical warfare experts from, I think, Fort Detrick, Texas, I think, or
Maryland. Anyway, four or five of these guys came out here and I was assigned to take them to Ban
Vinai to interview Hmong who had been exposed to yellow rain. And I spent about a week with
these guys. And they came out here totally [speaks in Thai to waiter], very skeptical. But they went
away true believers. And these were guys who, independently—I sat in on these interviews where
they took people apart, different guys interviewed them. They all came up with—and they were
asking for—they were doing medical histories and gathering symptoms. And they said there were
two chemical agents involved. One was a blistering agent and one was a nerve agent. And they
came away absolutely convinced that the victims were telling the truth. No question. And then
there's Bill Garrett's story in the Geographic, slightly less scientific. (Have some salad—if you want it.)
Oh, I'm pretty well stuffed.

Well, and then this episode with [name removed]. It sounds like—it sounds like it was for real. It
sounds like maybe some Russians wanted to experiment with a delivery system—and this was a
convenient theater to do the experiments in. But those two things—the [name removed] story and
my experience with the U.S. Army bacteriological warfare experts. And that's me, anyway.

(48:59) I forget the fellow's name. I should remember. He runs a program called
MINORS. He's a photographer. Too many names in the last three weeks. But he said he
was on a hillside when—the Lao plane went over an area where he was pretty sure there
were Hmong people and he saw a little burst of yellow.
No kidding.
And he was convinced at first that it was his imagination and so he didn't say anything even
though he was standing there next to someone else. But apparently not that many weeks
later his friend brought it up and so they realized, no, they really both had seen the same
thing.
This was a Hmong fighter?
No, this was an American photographer who was just out shooting photos and they saw
this.
He was up near Phu Bia someplace?
Yeah, I forget exactly where he said he was. This was literally just a casual conversation we
were having.
God Almighty. Christ, they still have this stuff?
Oh, no. This was years ago that he was there. No, I'm sorry, this wasn't recently.
OK. Wow. So I think there was no question about it. There was something there. It's like the
MIA thing. The odds are that some of these guys survived. Jiggs used to say 600 guys had—are
missing in Laos out of roughly 2,500. About 600 in Laos. A certain percentage had to survive their
parachute. A certain percentage had to have survived whatever reception they got, particularly if
they fell into regular NVA units, they're going to be taken care of. How come zero have—but the
politics of it in the U.S. The head of the League of Families, a woman, was sleeping with Richard
Childress who was the U.S. State Department—was he State or Pentagon, head of MIA. So talk
about lobbying. [Interviewer laughs] And Charlie Salmon, who was DCM in Vientiane several years
back, a couple decades back, tells a story of one—a farang-looking guy came out of—a photograph
appeared. A photograph shows up. A guy looks like he's Western. 'Anybody know this guy?' And so this photograph circulated among the MIA families of the U.S. 'There's Dad.' So they come out to Vientiane. The embassy finally locates this guy. He's up near Ban Ban someplace. They get him down to Vientiane. 'That's Dad.' Dad could speak no English, but he's been brainwashed. They've brainwashed him so that he's totally lost his ability to speak English. They do DNA tests. It's not Dad. This is the product of some union. He's a half French, half something guy living— that's been living as a farmer from Ban Ban. This family could not believe otherwise. 'I'm sorry. That's him. He's just been—they've messed with his head.' Genetically altered.

People just won't face reality. Astounding.

(53:02) So what finally took you out of your position of helping refugees?

Well, let's see. Oh, I got a chance to—that was a two-year—there was a word for it. PASA— participating agency service agreement, under which we're seconded from AID to the State Department. So I got a chance to get back into my field, which is public health, as the deputy of the public health office in USAID Thailand. That lasted one year. I was supposed to come back, but the new director needed an extra slot to bring out his girlfriend to be his executive assistant. So that didn't work. So back to Washington. And then later I finagled an assignment back out and I ran that office, public health office for five years. And also several other the projects. We had—this is irrelevant to your subject,

That's all right.

but it's interesting that we had—well, first something that is relevant. Thailand beat malaria. They did a very nice job and Thailand did a very nice job in their family planning efforts and so forth. And all of these programs would be so easily replicated by the Lao. In fact, by Lao-speaking Isan former health workers. But—and in fact, the Thai government is trying to do that—they have a foreign aid program of their own and they're trying to do that, but I don't know how successful it is. Anyway, one of the interesting things about the Thai program was the science and technology grant program that we had to set up for the bilateral mission because the worldwide grants were all being won by Thai scientists and they were beating out scientists from virtually every other country in the world. So we set up a parallel but bilateral program just for Thailand. These are grants in material sciences, applied electronics and biotech. They have to be commercially—have commercial implications. At the higher echelon of education, Thailand is in very good shape. The problem is, at the high school level, only about 50% of high school aged kids finish high school in Thailand. There aren't enough slots. There aren't enough schools. It's a scandal. It's really terrible. So after—so my involvement in Laos really ended pretty much until '97 and I went to a part of Laos I'd never worked in, which was northeast of Ban Huai Sai, up in Nam Tha on the China border, doing—looking at the social impact of this road project. And this was part of the Asian Development Bank's loan requirements. They have to have an environmental impact statement and so forth. And so I got a chance to work with Jim Chamberlain and look at—and the people up there. And that is a really fascinating part of the world. Very, very large number of different languages spoken up there and it's really interesting. And you get up into China at Yunnan and you can—I can speak Lao and can get along quite well, in southern Yunnan. What they call Sip Song Pan Na, which is the old—they call it Xi Xuong Pan Na or something like that. But it's Sip Song Pan Na. And the name of the Mekong River in China is Lane Xang.

Interesting.

Lane Xang.

(57:27) So what was it like to be back in Laos again, sort of …
It was a very different experience because we were dealing—our counterparts were all Lao government officials and they're trying to do a job. Bureaucrats like every place else. But—and I met some Hmong. One of the senior officials in the Nam Tha transportation department was an Hmong engineer. And we talked a little bit about Sam Thong, Long Tieng in the old days. He wasn't involved, so—he'd been—he was Hmong from way up there. But they wrestled with—the bureaucrats wrestle with the imposition of the party. The party is a pain. The mandatory education sessions that you have to go to, to listen to policy is a pain. And at every structure of government, you see, you have the regular bureaucratic structure and then you have the party. And so they have to clear on everything. And they're hacks. They may not really understand what's going on with road design or anything else. So it's a pain. And that part of Laos is being sold out to China and the Chinese built the TV station in Udom Sai. They now call it Udom Sai. It's the big town north of Pak Beng. And part of the deal is the 10-year exclusive right to do the programming. So they're going to Sinocize that—and they're—as late as, I mean, as recently as 2002, I went back again to Luang Nam Tha and a number of Chinese speakers who spoke no Lao, and the market was enormous. These people are just flooding in and getting papers. Plus investment by a lot of Chinese in rubber plantations, which contributed the last couple of years to a tremendous amount of smoke all over this part of the world, big clearing operations to grow rubber up there. So it's China. China agreed to fund half of the cost of the bridge between Chiang Khong and Ban Huai Sai. This is a bridge between Laos and Thailand. But because they view that road as such a high priority road, they're paying half the cost of the bridge, which is going to be around $30 million, $40 million. And it's so important because it will put a container at the Port of Bangkok in two day from Kunming instead of one week to Shenzhen or Zhuhai. It's faster. They can be at the border in a day and they can be in Bangkok in another day with a container. So fortunately, it's not going to come right through here. It will—it goes—the route goes slightly east of here. But people around here, the new Mae Fah Luang University north of town here has a Chinese language center—beautiful place. They have native teachers. A bunch of kids from Beijing teaching Chinese. People in town here are learning Chinese, getting ready for the flood, the SUVs, the heavy smokers coming down. It's—this is the Chinese century, the 21st century.

(1:01:57) Oh, no doubt about it. No doubt about it. It's—I've heard people say this. Do you think it's fair to characterize sort of the end of the war period as Vietnam trying to clamp onto Laos and China trying to clamp onto Thailand?

No, I think that—no, I don’t—I don’t buy the latter part of that because the Thai negotiated with the Chinese and ended the Chinese support for the Communist part of Thailand and peripherally, ended support for the Communist party of Burma, and on the basis of commercial interests. So the Thai and the Chinese came to an understanding that stuck. But the Vietnamese indeed want to hand onto Laos for whatever reason. Part of it is irredentist, I believe. Part of it may be paranoia. Part of it may be the knowledge that the way the Vietnamese populated South Vietnam was through Laos, through Thakhek and straight down the river. But for whatever reason they want to maintain their influence in Laos.

(1:03:28) Were there—do you think there were hopes by Vietnam that they might have more influence in Bangkok or in Thailand that they ended up having?

Yeah.

I wonder—I don't know how much influence in Thailand. They're probably smart enough to realize that the Thais would never—I mean, what does Vietnam have to offer Thailand? China, yeah, but, I don't know. The Vietnamese influence in Thailand [Pauses] Now there is—there are a lot of
Vietnamese around Sakon Nakhon. There are a lot of Vietnamese from Dien Bien Phu across from Vientiane. But politically, I mean, in the absence of the Communist movement, which is pretty dead, I don't think…. [Pauses] Vietnam is interested in getting investment from everywhere, including Thailand. That's really—that's what people want now. But politically, the real question is when or how will the Vietnamese ever loosen their hold over the Lao government? That's the real question. What do you hear from the Hmong about their—the Hmong diaspora about their relations with the Hmong in China, in Kuang Shu?

Well, I think it's starting to develop as a generation of Hmong scholars begin to emerge. If you look at—I think there's more than 180 Hmong PhDs in the United States now. A lot of them are interested in studying their own history, their own culture, developing sort of an anthropological paradigm for the Hmong people, all these kinds of things. So a lot of them are looking to China. And a lot of them are sort of searching for their roots in China. After all, the Hmong were relative newcomers to Southeast Asia. So I think most of them sort of look to China more as their home, particularly, I think, in the wake of some of the scandals and some of the difficulties that have come about with General Vang Pao and Neo Hom and some of the rhetoric that's accompanied that. That's safer political ground, if you will.

[McKeithen & Interviewer talk about issues related to the Hmong in Minnesota]

(1:17:24) So you said you came back here to visit Doc Weldon and that's when you sort of decided this might be a place to …

I was—I was—he had—he was working for Bechtel in Korea and he had married—well, he had worked in the refugee camps, actually. He had—he was the medical doctor working for Catholic Relief Services in charge of Nong Khai, in Nong Khai camp. After he left Laos he went to the Philippines and then he did emergency room work in New Orleans for three years, as he put it, to get his hand back in clinical medicine. And then he went to work in Saudi Arabia with Bechtel.

And at a certain point, and I've got these—I don't have the sequence right, but at a certain point he ended up, while I was in the refugee section—'79 to '81—working for CRS in Nong Khai, living in Nong Khai. My wife introduced me to his wife, who just passed away. And he then went to—and Becky, his daughter moved to Thailand, did some work in the camps, did a lot with a lot of the French speakers doing histories with the elite people in the camps. Becky still lives here. So he then—I don't know how he ended up in Chiang Rai, but ask Becky—oh, Becky married the owner who just died—former owner of the Golden Triangle Inn, whose brother now runs it. And she built, on her father's instructions, she built him a house—she's a good builder—on a piece of property that he bought here south of town. He was working in Korea and came back from time to time. And the house was finished. We were still in Bangkok [Pauses] and when—and whenever—I can't remember exactly when that house was finished, but I think it may have been mid-80s when we came back to Thailand—yes, in '84, '85—and visited him, he was fully retired at that point. And liked Chiang Rai and then bought some land and built on it. So that's how he ended up here. But he had done work in the Lao refugee camps in Nong Khai, specifically. I think—I don't know if he ever went to Ban Vinai or not. I'm not sure. But he was the—and then, CRS made him—put him in charge of their country-wide medical program for all camps, which he hated because it was very bureaucratic. He preferred the clinical stuff. So he worked with CRS for a couple years in Thailand.

(1:20:53) Vint Lawrence said that he visited Doc Weldon not that long before he died, if I remember correctly.

Yeah, I wasn't here. I was—I can't remember where I was, but probably in the States. But I know Vint came out and—yeah.
(1:21:10) He said Doc Weldon literally refused—he just did not want to go back to Laos. He was kind of embittered about the experience he had there. Do you recall him...

I don't know—I'm not sure. I'll take Vint's word for it, but he—toward the last five, 10 years, just didn't want to travel at all. He never went back to the States. Never went anywhere. Made furniture and hung out here. Traveling was not his thing.

I'm sure he'd done enough in a way.

He had an endless stream of visitors coming to talk to him, which he enjoyed. And he stayed active and busy. But he didn't treat himself. He finally admitted that he ignored the advice that he routinely gave his patients about routine checkups and this and that. He had a stubborn streak, particularly with regards to his own health. And he just let it go much too long.

(1:22:20) So when you get together with people who shared some or most or all of these experiences with you, when you kind of get beyond the funny stories about people who did silly things or things of that nature and maybe you've had a few drinks or whatever, and you start reflecting on the broader experience—if indeed that happens.

It happens, yeah.

What kinds of themes come out of ...

What a waste, particularly in the context of the national interest, what a waste. Because it really was. It was—the whole—I don't know. We just—we don't seem to learn.

Is there—I'm sorry. Please go ahead.

Part of our job was—in those days the press was the enemy. Reporters were—Sam Thong existed to deflect attention from the existence of Long Tieng. So anytime reporters came even to Sam Thong, it was something to be viewed with great apprehension. And we had a secretary named Ann Bradley, who went on to become an administrative officer in AID. A very good career. She was sitting by the desk in Sam Thong and Vientiane called on the radio and said that a planeload of reporters was en route to Sam Thong. And she said, 'Hey, there's a planeload of reporters en route to Sam Thong. What do we do?' And somebody said, 'Fuck 'em.' And she said, 'But that's not in my job description.' [Interviewer guffaws] Which was perfect. Perfect response. But there were reporters and there were reporters. Henry Kamm worked for the New York Times—K-a-m-m. Really smart. He was a reporter who knew the answer to the question before he ever asked it. He did his homework. He was really savvy. And he wrote a lot about the—-you'll see his stuff in the New York Times archives, his articles from Laos. They are spot on. Very sharp. Good French speaker. Very sharp guy. Robert Shaplen, not bad. I mean, so—but Laos did tend to attract the Tammy Arbuckles and the people that—the real amateurs. They were just looking for sensation and so forth. And we were not in a very good position to give, really, an accurate picture of what was going on because we were sort of at a very low level of things. We knew nothing, virtually nothing about the air war except the sequellae, which we saw enough of to realize that it was pretty bad. I mean ...

Sequellae?

Well, the consequences—I mean, I saw the result of an air strike where the pilot misread the coordinates. He was in the wrong map quadrant -- instead of TG it was TF. He was off by 100 kilometers. Blew apart a village. He was 100 kilometers off. And the Air Force couldn't hit anything because they were going so fast and it was all instrument work. They all relied on this TACAN—Tactical Air Navigation navigation aids. And when Phu Pha Thi, site 85 fell, two days later Johnson announced an end to the bombing of North Vietnam. The Vietnamese, for whatever reason, whether it was coincidental or not, naturally assumed that it was because of a technical reason. The radar operators at Pha Thi could tell the pilots where to go. They could vector them
through weather to bomb targets in North Vietnam. And so under those circumstances would one ever think that the Vietnamese would ever give up that site? No. Yet we supported VP's attempts to try to retake Phou Pha Thi. It was crazy.

(1:27:32) Have you kept track of VP’s career and what he's been up to in the United States or is that something you…?

No. Only recently because my brother is a lawyer that knows this attorney that's taken on his case pro bono, John Keker. And so he sent me the briefs. And Paul White told me, disclosed about a year or two ago what he said in his speech at a, I think, a Hmong Air—I don't know if I'm getting this right, but a Hmong Air Force reunion.

That had to be a very small gathering.

Anyway, it was a gathering of Hmong. It was in—somewhere around Minnesota or Michigan. Paul was there. There were a lot of photographs of him and VP. And he gave a little—VP asked him to say a few words and he disclosed that he had turned down an ambassadorial appointment to Laos. That Madeleine Albright—he was USAID director in Mexico. Madeleine Albright had asked him to be ambassador to Laos and he said, 'I can't do it because I can't work with the PL.' And he never told anybody about it. And this was amazing. Here's a guy, not independently wealthy. USAID career officer. The chance to be an ambassador. That's a big deal. And he turned it down on principle. It's huge. That is really, really, I mean…

They didn't say—

Well, I think he made a horrible mistake. I think he would have done a fantastic job. But in his soul—we roomed at Sam Thong for a couple years. Yeah. In his soul, he said, ‘I can't work with these people. They've done too many bad things to my friends.' That is really—you don't find many people make a decision like that. And Wendy Chamberlain got the gig instead. That was the timing.

(1:29:55) Interesting. I sat down with Paul and Tom Ward and Carol Mills all at the same time.

Oh, wow.

And then Paul got up and left kind of in the middle, so I'm sure there are other tales he could have told, but Tom says he has a way of getting up and leaving in the middle of things.

Did you—Paul also has a great set of photographs.

Yes. In fact, I think I've downloaded all of them or at least most of them. He donated them to the Hmong Cultural Center in St. Paul and I made a tiny little documentary about the Hmong resettlement to the Twin Cities.

[Small redaction to conversation here.]

Well, I'm looking at the watch also.

Oh, OK. So it's about that time.

Yeah.

Well, I think we've covered pretty much everything.

Yeah. I wish I had a better memory. That would be nice if I could remember this stuff.
I can't thank you enough. This has been great. I really appreciate it a lot. And let me turn all this junk off first.