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Interview with Edwin T. "Win" McKeithen

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Edwin T. “Win” McKeithen

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Interviewer/Editor – Paul Hillmer

Transcriber – Diane Schuessler

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 I 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,

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

61

62 **(6:48) So the fall of Sam Thong was announced on television?**

63 Well, it was covered—it was covered on TV. I mean, those—naturally, I was interested in following
64 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
65 and the refugee operation in Sam Thong had moved to Ban Xon, south of Xieng Khouang
66 Province. And we operated out of there until '73. And that was when the neutrality accords, I think
67 they were called, the Vientiane Accords were signed. And I then got a different job working in the
68 program office in Vientiane, but doing program—the program offices, the budgeting and planning
69 office that puts together programs for AID, puts together the Congressional presentation, monitors,
70 the—we helped the officers deal with all of the paperwork, the massive paperwork that AID
71 requires. And I did—my portfolios included the refugee program, the public health program, where
72 I got to know Dr. Weldon and Pat [McCreedy] Weldon very well and several other programs. So
73 '75, when Laos fell, the then-director, the acting director, Gordon Ramsey, asked a few Lao-speakers
74 to stay behind to help negotiate—to help deal with the new government, which wasn't a
75 government. It was a strange situation because there was no invasion of Vientiane in 1975, in the
76 spring of '75. Rather there were spontaneous demonstrations before each ministry, and each
77 minister and his staff bugged out one by one and the government just sort of fell apart in pieces.
78 And the problem that the AID bureaucracy faced, the embassy faced and that USAID/Laos faced
79 was abandoning millions of dollars of AID assets in the face of what? No overt hostilities like the
80 fall of Saigon. So we had to stay there—although the USAID families had been put under house
81 arrest at the housing compound north of Vientiane, Kilometer 6—nobody could leave, nobody
82 could get in. So our group of 20-odd Lao speakers helped to negotiate the release of the families
83 during April, May of '75. They were all flown out to Bangkok in late May—not only the families, but
84 their personal property. Marxist theology holds that state property is one thing. Personal property
85 is something else. So people packed out their personal belongings and everybody got flown out to
86 Bangkok. Our small group of Lao speakers stayed behind and negotiated the termination of the AID
87 program. We had to demonstrate to Washington that there was a real threat, that we weren't just
88 walking off and abandoning a program because of a few demonstrations. So it was a very unusual
89 situation. I was not a witness to the Hmong evacuation from Long Tieng. I had been involved in a
90 lot of other refugee evacuations in northern Laos and northeastern Laos. I worked around the
91 southeastern edge of the Plain of Jars and then later on the Plain of Jars proper. But the whole
92 debacle at Long Tieng, I wasn't a witness to that. But—so after Laos fell, we all got reassigned back
93 to Washington and then I followed Jiggs Weldon to Haiti. He had been reassigned to Haiti, and he
94 wanted me as his program officer. So in 1975, I went to Haiti and was there for four years, '75 to
95 '79. And then in '79 got an assignment back to Bangkok working in the Indochina refugee program,

96 the Lao section of the Indochina refugee program and worked in that for two years, where several
97 AID officers, like myself, were seconded to help process refugees, Lao refugees. And Lao—by Lao,
98 I mean Lao, Hmong, all the different ethnolinguistic groups coming out of Laos and Cambodia and
99 Vietnam. We had Cambodian language officers and Vietnamese language officers. And they
100 prepared refugee families for INS interviews for the U.S. refugee program. And so we visited the
101 camps, we dealt with the Thai authorities in terms of repatriation and treatment of new arrivals on
102 the Thai side, and so forth. So I—the two years of experience with the refugee program, I learned
103 more—I learned a little about what was going on in Laos post-'75. And then in '82, two years—'79,
104 '80, '81—in the refugee program and then one year—one further year in USAID Bangkok, working
105 in the public health programs of USAID Thailand. Nothing to do with the Lao refugee program,
106 strictly the public health, because I had a degree in public health. Then four years in Washington
107 and then a return to Bangkok [Chuckles] with AID for five years, working in public health, running
108 the public health office and a science and technology project that we ran. So I got back to Laos
109 once in '91 on an OFDA short-term assignment, Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance. A bunch of
110 ex-Lao hands went back to help do an assessment of a drought and flood in southern Laos and then
111 I went back in two other consulting jobs. One was in 1997 doing the socioeconomic impact
112 assessment of an Asian development bank-sponsored road project from the Thai border at Ban
113 Huai Sai, northeast to—through Vieng Phu Ka, through Luang Nam Tha to Boten, the Chinese
114 border town, Route 3 or 3A. And five years later in 2002, that same team went back and redid that
115 whole feasibility study on the same road project. So I spent another—an update of that study. So
116 another couple months on that road, which I'm happy to say is now paved and open. Not officially
117 opened, but a friend of mine, the head of the Lao service of RFA just drove it, and she said it's great.
118 Three hours to the border. That's a very good resource, by the way. I don't know if you know the
119 Radio Free Asia, RFA, in Washington.

120 **No.**

121 They had a Lao service and they're very, very well informed. They're very knowledgeable about—
122 they have—they have sources in Laos, sources in the U.S., of course. They run a top-notch news
123 program. They broadcast twice daily Lao. And very well informed.

124 **I will look into them.**

125 Yeah, it's rfa.org—Radio Free Asia—rfa.org. And the Lao section is run by a brilliant woman—
126 Vieng Say Luong Khot—[spells it] it's Vieng Say Luong Khot.

127 **L-u-o-n-g K-h-o-t.**

128 Yeah, Vieng Say Luong Khot. She was, at a very young age, the—what the rank? It's called—she
129 was not minister, but she was like secretary general of the ministry of education of the Lao
130 government. They were in Haiti when we were in Haiti by coincidence and we used her for all our
131 French translations because her French was better than the Haitians. [Interviewer laughs] Brilliant
132 girl—woman. Anyway, Vieng Say is phenomenal source for things Lao and Hmong. And they
133 have—RFA is on the web, so you can ...

134

135 **(17:36) When we're done I'll go find an Internet cafe and go check it out.**

136 Yeah, anyway, so how did we get on Vieng Say? Oh, the road. So the road's finished. So I haven't
137 been back since 2002. I'll probably go back around—we have some friends coming. I'll probably go
138 back December. But Laos still has a special place in my heart. I mean, it's gorgeous, as you know.
139 It's spectacular. It's really beautiful.

140 **I'd been there for all of one day before this trip, passing through, talked to people like Jim
141 Chamberlain and Mike Carroll. I went back this time to try to sort of unofficially conduct
142 some interviews with people and realized that would only go so far. And so now Jim's trying
143 to see if I can wrangle either some sort of official permission or an invitation from the**

144 university to come and do it the right way. But yeah, I mean, I didn't travel too far—
145 Vientiane and parts outside. I went up to Xieng Khouang for two days, but it's gorgeous.
146 Yeah, Jim is the man. He's really brilliant. He's unreal. Fine.
147 **Yeah, a great bonus is he's personable as well. I mean, a lot of brilliant people I know won't**
148 **give you the time of day and Jim really did.**
149 I hope he's given you files—the files of his studies that he's done because they just—they're ...
150 **I'll have to ask.**
151 They're amazing. They're amazing. I mean, I have them. If you want them, I'd be happy to copy
152 them for you. I mean, they're just—I wish he would lose some weight because we can't afford to
153 lose him. That guy's a walking encyclopedia.
154 **Absolutely. He was unfortunately a lot busier than he planned to be ...**
155 He's always—yeah. Well, yeah. I mean, if you really want definitive answers to things, he's your
156 man.
157 **Well, whenever you finish your tea, I think we might almost be better off back by the desk**
158 **where we were, just because of all the road noise here, but we can carry on for as long as we**
159 **need to here.**
160 OK. I can—we can take this.
161 **Oh, well maybe that's not such a bad idea.**
162 Let me try to pay.
163 **Yeah, and I'll just turn this off for—well, we can wait until they show up. You never know**
164 **when that will be.**
165 They're around the corner.
166 **OK. I'll just turn ...**
167
168
169 [New track begins]
170
171 **(0:00) ... Well, if you don't mind, let's go back to your first tour of—with IVS in '62.**
172 Sure.
173 **How much of an orientation were you given about what you were going to be encountering**
174 **in Laos before you actually went?**
175 None.
176 **None. So you literally hit the ground and knew nothing about the country, its history, its**
177 **people, pretty much nothing.**
178 Only except what I read myself.
179 **[Re microphone:] Sorry, it's drooping on me.**
180 Yeah, OK. There was no—there was no—there was no even interview. Just—they wanted warm
181 bodies.
182 **So what ...**
183 The paperwork had a big stamp on it that said, 'Vietnam Special.' [Interviewer guffaws]
184 **That sounds good.**
185 Yeah, OK.
186 **So what was your learning process then, as you arrived and what kinds of things were you**
187 **doing?**
188 Well, we decided—well, I went there with a Martin **Klish**, who ended up killed in a plane crash. The
189 few of us that arrived at roughly that same time. There were two teams—education team which
190 taught at Dong Dok University at Kilometer 9 and then the rural development team, which I was
191 part of. And there was not a big organization. Maybe 40 or 50 people, I guess. Don't—I'm not

192 sure of that number, but—and so the first thing was to learn Lao. And we discovered there were no
193 materials except a course written by a missionary in Luang Prabang, but it taught the unusual dialect
194 of Luang Prabang. And so we wrote our own course and learned it at the same time. So we wrote
195 lesson by lesson with several Lao colleagues, one of whom ended up as the head of the Lao section
196 for the Foreign Service Institute. I had a career in teaching Lao to foreigners for the State
197 Department. So that took several months. And then the first sort of real work was—I was a
198 musician and I wrote arrangements for the marching band of the depart—you asked about what sort
199 of training or orientation were we given. We were sort of left to do whatever you want to do. So I
200 wrote some charts for this band, which couldn't play a thing—and—except for a couple ringers who
201 were Vietnamese. And this was the secret police marching band. This was Phoumi Nosavan's
202 department of national coordination band. And so that's national development, right?
203

204 **(3:45) Works for me. I played in the band from grade school all the way through college.**

205 OK. So then I went up to Luang Prabang and taught at a teacher training school. I taught hygiene,
206 I taught geology. And another IVS guy, a friend of mine, we wrote a book of Lao songs with a
207 Catholic priest who was an organizer and got it published. Transcribed—I did the transcriptions
208 and my—other people did the lyrics and the transcriptions for the lyrics and so forth and taught
209 school for a few months. And [Pauses] did that shoot the year? That year went by pretty fast. At
210 one—at a certain point, I came back to Vientiane and I can't—oh, we worked in a vegetable
211 program on the Vientiane Plain to try to grow vegetables so that all the morning market produce
212 didn't have to be imported from Sisieng May from Vietnamese—refugees from Dien Bien Phu who
213 lived across the Mekong river in Sisieng May, Thailand. Crop substitution—or not a crop
214 substitution, but an import substitution program, working with the Department of Agriculture. But
215 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
216 going to be assigned to Sam Thong and I went up for a visit for a day or two, started studying
217 Hmong in the evenings, went on home leave—or leave and then came back and then was assigned
218 to southern Laos. So I was in southern Laos for a full year on the Bolovens Plateau. And there we
219 built a bunch of dispensaries and set up a re-supply program for some rural dispensaries with—all
220 part of Dr. Weldon's public health operation. And got some ag guys and put in some demonstration
221 gardens and sort of muddled around, did surveys—a lot of surveys, which amounted to
222 ethnographic stuff.
223

224 **(6:35) So you were finding out who was living where and what they needed or ...**

225 Yeah. Yeah. And there were 44 villages down there, two different linguistic groups. And that was
226 really interesting. I mean, they were very interesting people. They were Mon Khmer people. And
227 so ...
228

229 **(7:08) How much did the war sort of intrude on what you were trying to do in these first few
230 years?**

231 In—the war—the first year in Vientiane and Luang Prabang, very little. In southern Laos, we—
232 there—we knew how far—where we could go and where we could not go—that is the eastern part
233 of the Plateau was where we were—it was safe. The central part, there were some places that one
234 was not sure about. And the area under that administrative jurisdiction, these 44 villages, they were
235 on—they were on the government side, if you will. And—but then off the edge of the Plateau to
236 the east, that was part of the—what developed into the Ho Chi Minh Trail. And there were CIA
237 case officers working in those areas, developing home guard and ADC units—this Auto Defense de
238 Choc, the early home guard. But never saw any action during my time in IVS. Heard about people
239 getting shot up and there were plane crashes and so forth. And a good friend of mine that was a

240 case officer got killed in a silly chopper crash. But the war—really didn't have any real close
241 exposure to the war until I came back in '66 and went up to Sam Thong and ...

242
243 **(9:01) Did they give you any information about the war, though, just for your own benefit or**
244 **your own...**

245 We worked very closely with the CIA across the valley—there were two valleys, one at Long Tieng
246 where they ran the war, and our valley of Sam Thong, we picked up the pieces. The CIA folks at
247 Long Tieng and we were close personally and socially and went back and forth and saw each other
248 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,
249 and what we could expect and so forth. And so—and we were all sort of part of the effort. So we
250 learned perforce what was happening. We had to know what was going on.

251
252 **(9:47) How—I think it's very easy for kids who grew up post-Vietnam, post-Laos war to**
253 **sort of look back and see IVS and USAID as just sort of another phase of the American war**
254 **movement. Well, maybe not war movement, but war effort in this era.**

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

280
281 **(14:03) When you went to Sam Thong for the first time because you thought you were being**
282 **assigned up, but ended up not, how long were you there and what kind of initial**
283 **impressions of the place did you get?**

284 I was there for just a night—a night, even—I don't even remember—I can't frankly remember
285 whether I spent the night or not. It may have been just part of a day. And it was just this sort of a
286 casual trip. I mean, somebody was going—let's go. It was a Dornier we took. And the hospital was
287 a big tent—or no, it was a thatched—bamboo thatched hut, large hut. The quonset hut was not

288 there. The refugee supplies were also just under thatch. And it was a dusty strip and it was never
289 paved. And it was gorgeous, I mean, really beautiful, this little setting in the bowl of the Sam Thong
290 valley there. As it turns out, there are other places that are a lot more beautiful, but—and the
291 Hmong were fascinating. I mean, very, very different dress and you can always tell Hmong by the
292 way they walk. They walk flatfooted because that's the best way to grab mud with your bare feet and
293 toes. I mean, even in the market the Hmong walk with flat feet because that's the way they've
294 always walked. Otherwise it's easy to slip down the hill. At least the generation of Hmong we knew
295 walked flatfooted did. So ...

296 **I'll pay attention. [Chuckles]**

297 It may have been lost in the intervening years.

298 **Well, some of the older folks probably not anyway.**

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

300 **Who taught you Hmong back when you were ...**

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

303

304 **(16:27) I've taken all of two lessons and then my teacher got too busy, but I hear you.**

305 Fifty-eight consonant phonemes or fifty-three.

306 **Fifty-seven, if I—but anyway, yeah.**

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

308 **And the D.**

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

316

317 **(18:04) Was this something—I mean, did you hear from him directly?**

318 Directly.

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

321 I saw him more—fairly often because I tended to meddle in [Interviewer laughs]— 'This is not
322 right, General. You've got to do something about it.' I mean, when we saw—when the Plain of
323 Jars—when he took the PDJ in 1968, some of the old Chao Muongs, the traditional Hmong
324 leadership, went out and stole all the cattle from the Lao on the PDJ. There was a huge cattle rustle,
325 a buffalo rustle, which we got all indignant about and documented and photographed and reported
326 in great detail. And I spent hours with VP describing exactly what was going on. And there was
327 that episode and we'd run into him, of course, at Long Tieng, at events, at parties and so forth
328 and—but, and we'd—I'd point out to him problems with people stealing signals. That is where you
329 have a rice drop which depends on the aircraft getting the proper signal on the ground before they
330 can drop. And sometimes adjacent resettlement villages will learn what the other site's letter is.
331 They'll put it out and if the sites are close enough and the pilot isn't sure, the rice drop can be, in
332 effect, stolen. It's petty stuff compared to the larger problems we had to deal with, but it can make
333 one very indignant.

334

335 Vang Pao was a natural leader. I mean, he had a charisma and an ability to endear himself to people
336 and to make himself feared, if necessary. People knew about the hole in Long Tieng. If an offense
337 was serious enough, you got put, and sometimes left, in the hole. It was like in a dungeon in
338 Medieval Europe. You could die there. And he had people blown away, including this brilliant
339 linguist that I'm sure you're familiar with. [Shong Lue Yang, described in "Mother of Writing," by
340 William Smalley et. al., Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990]

341 **I'm not sure I am.**

342 The guy that wrote the ...

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

344 Yeah. VP had him killed.

345 **Shong Lue Yang?**

346 I don't know.

347 **Something like that.**

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

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

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

354 **Almost a shrine, I suppose.**

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

362
363 It is hard to get the Hmong to agree on anything. So to bring them together for a common purpose
364 is really hard. Somehow VP managed to do it. VP's original forces were based on the model, really,
365 that Bill Lair established of the home guard concept, and it worked in the concept of traditional
366 Hmong society. Now when Ted Shackley got involved, he just destroyed everything, trying to turn
367 the Hmong resistance fighters into main force battalions.

368

369 **(23:51) Do you think—I realize you probably don't have first-hand information about this,
370 but do you think this was his own personal initiative or do you think he was trying to carry
371 out something that was ordered from above him?**

372 Don't know. I don't know. I don't know. I do know that I heard—I heard one case officer
373 complaining once about a cable from Washington, from Langley, telling them how to set up a
374 mortar tube. He said—it's the classic problem of the headquarters not allowing the field to—like
375 when the British general during the Revolutionary War, got an order by London by ship to sail up
376 the Bronx River and capture White Plains. The Bronx River is this creek about a foot wide that runs
377 alongside the Hutchison River Turnpike. But it was on map, you see, in London. So it's an age—
378 it's a timeless problem. So I don't know if Shackley was acting on his own, but—and he was trying
379 to make a name for himself. I don't know. I don't know. But certain local officers did have
380 tremendous influence. For example, [Ambassador G. McMurtree] Godley bought the Air Force's
381 line, hook, line and sinker. Sullivan had kept them out. Sullivan had—basically knew that they
382 were—they did more harm than good. And Godley loved these stereoscopic presentations that the

383 Air Force would give with the trucks being blown up and so forth. So yes, local officers could make
384 a huge difference. And Vang Pao himself was not averse to getting out on a limb and hoping that
385 the U.S. government, the CIA, would back him up on—the retaking of Phou Pha Ti was just insane,
386 trying to retake Phou Pha Ti was just madness, for example. And he—we're talking about
387 leadership now. He—the CIA used to complain a lot that VP would talk in the clear on the radio,
388 that he would virtually announce that he was going to attack such-and-such a site tomorrow
389 morning. Well, with VP it was partly a game of bravado and bluff and, as it turned out, the CIA had
390 cracked the Pathet Lao codes, which were pretty rudimentary. They could read all the PL radio
391 traffic. They knew exactly what they were going to do, but the Pathet Lao were always late. I mean,
392 you could have all this intelligence, but it was worthless because they never showed up on time.

393 **PL's follow-though was pretty bad.**

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

403

404 **(28:25) Do you know who Mike Lynch is?**

405 Not well. I've met him. I don't know him ...

406 **Mike said that VP liked to act like he knew everything. If they were showing a movie and**
407 **the projector broke down and he knew nothing about projectors, he still went over and tried**
408 **to fix it and just sort of jumped into everything.**

409 Sure. I saw him once. They were—some refugees had come off the Plain of Jars and we met them
410 at an artillery position right off the edge up in the hill. And VP showed up and he went over to the
411 105 and he didn't—he didn't adjust it using the chronometer wheels the way you'd very carefully
412 make all these azimuth and elevation adjustments on an artillery piece. He kicked the support stand
413 over a little bit and said, 'Fire again.' And it was absolutely dead on. [Interviewer guffaws] And the
414 case officers with him just blanched—because this is not the example that you set for the troops,
415 but that was the way he was. He, indeed, yeah, he knew everything about everything. So he was
416 unique, an amazing guy. Have you seen, by the way, the court filing that John Kecker did in his—
417 John Kecker is a world class defense lawyer who successfully prosecuted Oliver North, who was
418 working pro bono in VP's defense. And he filed the brief that got VP out of jail, under house arrest.
419 And he's going to—his—I'll have to send you the—I have the briefs because my brother is a buddy
420 of—my brother is a lawyer and he's a good buddy of this...

421 **OK.**

422 These are public court documents now. And it makes—have you ever—did you ever see the actual
423 charges?

424 **Yes.**

425 I mean, that's a joke.

426 **Oh, and I saw this—what was it called? 'Operation Popcorn.'**

427 Oh, it was a joke.

428 **I know you already have my e-mail, but there it is officially anyway, so you've got it all in**
429 **one place.**

430 So, I mean, the brief is—absolutely destroys. This is some idiot prosecutor dealing with an idiot
431 undercover ATF agent. And they're going to—this case, I mean, I—the prosecutor is insane if he's
432 actually going to try to bring it to trial. It will just get destroyed.

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

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

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

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

440

441 **(31:46) One of the other big things that just seems to get blown all out of proportion is the**
442 **whole drug thing.**

443 Yeah.

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

456 We permitted Hmong patients to smoke opium in the Sam Thong hospital. It's a safe analgesic, it's
457 a traditional medicine. The Hmong, in general, frown on the use of opium because people can't
458 work as hard or long. I mean, they start—an opium user starts taking it to relieve pain typically
459 associated with hard work. And so they can indeed work harder for a while. But, as you know,
460 when it wears off, the synaptic connections are—the fluid is—the body overcompensates. And so
461 things hurt more, sounds are louder, colors are brighter. Everything is more—the nervous system is
462 enhanced, which requires a larger dose the next time. So it's chemically, biologically addictive. And
463 an addict can take 100 pipes a day. It can consume a huge amount of time. Each pipe takes quite a
464 while to prepare. So we saw users—and one of the things that—one of the items that was first to
465 be liberated when the Plain of Jars was taken were these large copper woks, which were used for
466 cooking down raw opium into some sort of paste, which are valuable for any kind of cooking, really,
467 but that had been their main use. In terms of commerce, my understanding was that we did—we—
468 Dr. Weldon and a remote sensing expert that was part of the USAID mission, a guy named Heng
469 Thung. He had a doctorate from Cornell. He still works in Bangkok. We wanted to get a handle on
470 opium production in Laos. And so Heng did an aerial survey, which is the most accurate
471 methodology—the opium fields have a very distinct photographic signature. We hired airplanes and
472 did photography and did sample surveys on the ground and so forth. It turned out that Laos didn't
473 produce much at all. Laos was a transit point. And most of what was produced in Laos was
474 consumed locally. There was very little export-oriented production. The great majority of opium
475 that went through Laos came out of Burma, through northwestern Lao, through Ban Huai Sai,
476 through Thailand—with its good road network—or from Ban Huai Sai in Lao air force aircraft
477 dumped into the harbor at Hong Kong. And the Lao connections tended to be a middle-man

478 connection, the Yaothe and then Lao army. But the Hmong—the opium growing areas of Sam
479 Neua Province, first of all, were enemy territory since, what—'58, I guess. Those areas were not
480 accessible. So the few fields that were in Vang Pao's control, basically, were consumed at home or
481 traded in local commerce. There wasn't any big trade. And Alfred McCoy did the world a great
482 disservice by totally misrepresenting—he created this myth, which is complete B.S., but it's now
483 received wisdom about which movies have been made and therefore it must be true. And it's just—
484 it's a complete crock that the Hmong financed or that that CIA financed their operations with
485 opium. They didn't need to. They had appropriated funds. They had U.S. taxpayer money. And
486 the story really falls apart as soon as you look at any kind of objective appraisal. Heng Thung is still
487 in Bangkok, I think, at ESCAP. You can probably look him up if you want to.

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

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

493 **Heng Thung.**

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

497 **OK.**

498 And it was ...

499 **But it's been awhile.**

500 It was a small amount and it was eminently doable to buy the whole thing because it was a small
501 harvest. You can get about a kilo, if you're really lucky, out of a hectare. That's all. And Burma,
502 3,000 tons in a good year? I mean, that's where it all came from.

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

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

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

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

512
513 **(40:27) What do you think—this is sort of a question that takes us from beginning to end**
514 **and I'll go to go back to the beginning again, but what, as an observer of the Hmong people**
515 **do you think you've picked up about them that, say, folks in Minnesota who still may only**
516 **know them as the people who live over there somewhere might need or at least should**
517 **desire to know about them?**

518 Well, I have to say, first of all, that a lot of what I know about the Hmong culture and belief system
519 comes from Anne Fadiman's book. I have to say honestly I learned more from reading her book
520 than I did living in Sam Thong for five years. It is a brilliant piece of work. I mean, the belief
521 system. I was a witness to a lot of the *ua neeg* ceremonies and—but I really didn't know below the
522 surface of what really was going on. I mean, I understood the symbolism of the rider and taking the
523 trip and so forth, but—our electrician was a shaman and he worked on live 220-volt lines all the
524 time. [Interviewer laughs] Yeah, he was a powerful guy. A little guy—young—a young shaman.
525 And they, as vessels for traditional knowledge about their world, that is what is in danger of being

526 lost. I mean, here are people that, using this Jew's harp thing can—you can dictate prose and
527 somebody can perform it and some other guy can write it down. It's astounding to me to have that
528 aspect of language. And their language, after all, is song. But their knowledge of things in the
529 woods is just amazing. I think also their hospitality—well, hospitality is such a universal trait, but I
530 would be the last person to try to identify some particular trait that I thought was unique.

531 **Well, that's all right. I just always like to ask to see what ...**

532 Yeah. Yeah.

533

534 **(43:31) Well, let's talk about the operation you stepped into in 1966. What was going on and**
535 **who were some of the major players in that operation?**

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

555

556 **(46:32) Well, Mac and Ernie are probably the two people who have said this most loudly,**
557 **but I mean I think it's an important theme in this whole discussion. And that is, as you just**
558 **said, it's not just the Hmong. The Hmong seemed to have received the lion's share of**
559 **attention from scholars and from people writing about the Secret War, but what would you**
560 **like to share about other groups of people that you worked with, just regarding your**
561 **observations of what they went through and how they contributed to this effort?**

562 Oh, the leadership on the Lao side was great. I mean, both the military—the captain & major rank,
563 light colonel rank, the Chao Muongs, Chao Kuangs, the people we worked with. There were some
564 good, some bad. But because the civilian leadership maintained the traditional structure of the
565 province and the district and so forth, and because this leadership tended to be Lao or Phuan, we
566 dealt with them more than we did with the Hmong. And so we had more substantive interaction
567 with non-Hmong than we did with Hmong in terms of where should the village be relocated and—
568 unless it were purely a Hmong village, of course, then—and what's happening on the other side and
569 when might somebody be coming out and so forth. And in fact, on the military side, as you
570 probably heard, the Lao became some of the crack, some of the very best military units. Some very
571 good CIA case officers were able to train some Lao battalions that took on amazing odds.

572

573 **(48:38) I don't think you hear that often enough.**

574 No.

575 **I think it's quite often the case that people say, 'Well, the Hmong were the only good**
576 **soldiers and the Lao were terrible.'**

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

586

587 **(50:10) Did you work with Chao Saykham at all?**

588 Oh, a lot. Oh, yeah.

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

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

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

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

602 **Phaythune.**

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

604

605 **(52:13) Did you have many dealings with Touby Lyfoung?**

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

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

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

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

621 Sorry.

622 **Oh, don't—it's gravity at work. What can you do?**

623 So they would—they did all the work. They would go out and ask all the questions and have—
624 whatever leadership was there, they would show them how to prepare population lists and identify
625 what was needed. And then we'd call back or go back and prepare the material that was needed.
626 And so you'd find out—you'd find out various ways, when new groups showed up or people
627 thought they had to leave and it was—it was a very fluid situation.

628

629 **(54:47) Were these normally relocations that lasted only a short time, or were there at least**
630 **some cases where individuals could actually at least for, say, two, three years, put some**
631 **roots and grow some of their own food?**

632 That was rare. That was rare. That was the ideal, but that, in fact, turned out to be pretty tough.
633 That was always the objective to try to get in a crop. But it—I'm trying to think of—there were
634 some, in the Muong Cha Valley, Site 191 and 192, in that area, there were some Lao from north,
635 from Sam Neua, who had been there several years, a couple years, who had been able to grow
636 paddy. But that was not the norm. And it was hard finding places where, particularly for swidden,
637 where it was cultivable and the timing was right. And people wanted to be near a strip or a place
638 where they could build a strip or a road, but those were almost non-existent. So we found out
639 different ways—we tried not to be surprised, but I remember one surprise east of the Plain of Jars,
640 Site 232, I think, the CIA started getting some—noticing some radio traffic that they just couldn't
641 figure out. And it turned out it was a bunch of Khmu that were running their own operations
642 against the Vietnamese, on their own. And they had come up with some radios somehow. And
643 eventually Vang Pao and his guys went out and talked to them and they joined the fold. But that
644 was a surprising development.

645

646 **(57:30) Well, there have been a lot of stories told about Pop Buell. How did you see him**
647 **and how well do you think he fit the operation that he was in charge of?**

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

661

662 **(1:00:24) Paul didn't tell [me] that story. He told a few other—he said Pop's favorite phrase**
663 **was there's no fool like an educated fool.**

664 Yeah. Yeah.

665 **I also heard it said that he didn't really mind if people thought that he worked for the CIA.**
666 **Maybe he even cultivated that image, at least to some people.**

667 Well, his knowledge of the CIA was a very local Long Tieng knowledge and those were good,
668 generally, good guys. Vint Lawrence was a peach, whom I didn't—I met years later, but I didn't
669 know him. You know his wife, Anne Garrels.

670 **Yes. I listen to her regularly.**

671 Yeah. Yeah.

672 **In fact, that's how I found him.**

673 Oh, through her.

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

677 Interesting. [Laughs]

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

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

684

685 **(1:02:11) Did you see much of Bill Lair when he'd come up to ...**

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

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

689 I guess. I guess. I had met—I had met Pat Landry up there. I had met some of the Udorn people.
690 But generally, we only knew the local folks and really didn't know beans about that level of the
691 operation. Didn't know—it wasn't until late in the game that I learned what the road-watch teams
692 were about, because pilots never talked about this stuff. And in fact, most—the pilots who flew
693 those radio relay ships, they were never up country. They never spent the night up country. So on
694 occasion, a helicopter pilot that had run one of these infils or exfils would talk about it, but that was
695 rare. They usually didn't talk about it. They'd talk about it in the sense of pilots telling flying stories.
696 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
697 with the pilots. I ended up with a commercial license from all this time I got in Laos. Because I
698 flew everything and just to be able to get something back on the ground if the pilot got shot,
699 because that had happened. And so eventually I started logging the time and the guys who were
700 current instructors signed off on it. And I took it all back to the FAA and they said, 'This is
701 perfectly valid time.' All I had to do was take the writtens and flight checks and I got a free
702 commercial ticket with an instrument rating. Pretty good deal. I could have gotten a rotary wing
703 rating, but I couldn't afford to rent the thing—the chopper for a check run. And what are you going
704 to do with it anyway, right, unless you have it rich uncle. But I did buy a Maule. I did own an
705 airplane for a while and took the family around Haiti in it. It was great fun. But I learned with the
706 best.

707

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

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

718 told me how to make wheel landings. That's all you need. So everybody taught you some other
719 trick. Very, very useful. Valuable.

720

721 **(1:06:20) Now is Al Rich still living?**

722 I don't think so.

723 **OK. I met Les Strouse. I've corresponded with Dave Kouba. I think those are probably the**
724 **only sort of regular—I've talked to Heine Aderholt and mostly he just flew missions if he**
725 **flew at all in the region. Dave Kouba, as you may know, made an audiotape of May 12-14 of**
726 **'75 when the evacuations had taken place. I'll send you the transcript I made. He gave me**
727 **a copy and said, 'I've always wanted this transcribed.' I said, 'Shoot, you gave me the tape,**
728 **I'll be happy to do it for you.' So I'll send you a copy.**

729 Oh, thank you.

730 **My pleasure. My pleasure.**

731 Oh, yeah. Because I was not there.

732 **Well, it was very helpful because if you read all the different accounts of the evacuation, it**
733 **just doesn't add up. There are some inconsistencies and you wonder, 'OK. How many trips**
734 **did the C-130 really make?' And I think there's still questions about how many people you**
735 **can really fit on a C-130. But the tape really helped bring a lot of those pieces in focus. So it**
736 **was very helpful and quite interesting.**

737 How many roughly were evacuated from Long Tieng? Do you know?

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

744 Wow.

745

746 **(1:08:18) Well, let's turn our attention to Doc Weldon himself. He seems, in many ways, an**
747 **embodiment of a lot of what USAID really accomplished in the country and sort of was an**
748 **inspiration to a lot of the staffers in USAID about what they could do sort of for the people**
749 **they were working with. How would you describe him and sort of his leadership style?**

750 He was a real innovator. When he was assigned to—he invented a model of—a method of
751 healthcare delivery that the University of Hawaii later picked up and called the Medex—M-e-d-e-x—
752 program without giving him any credit. Basically, this was during his time in Samoa, when they had
753 to deal with intestinal parasites and some other problems that were manageable. But to do it you
754 needed good community organization and you needed auxiliary personnel like women's groups to
755 help to organize the clinics and vaccinations and the taking of anti-worm medicine and so forth.
756 And then he quickly figured out in Laos what was needed in two completely different settings. One,
757 the urban hospital environment for which he brought this operation or used—expanded the
758 Operation Brotherhood Filipino medical system or staff in the urban areas. And in the rural areas,
759 he created this rural dispensary system which was really brilliant. It provided the basic health
760 interventions for both civilian and military. Simple—a simple list of essential things like soap and
761 anti-malarials and disinfectants and bandages and so forth. I mean—and the training programs and
762 the retraining programs and the—you asked about his management style. The brighter medics then
763 became supervisors and they became regional supervisors. It was a merit and performance-based
764 system that he put in place. And he tended to be a hands-off administrator. He was not a control
765 freak. And he let his—he hired several ex-Special Forces medics like Steve Schofield and Don

766 Dougan, and some Thai medics as well, ex-military medics, and ran a good program. And the
767 nursing program in Sam Thong was a great program. So he—his management style was pretty laid
768 back. His foil was his wife, Pat, who was a terror, who—but she did—ended up doing a lot of the
769 budgeting and so forth. And when I was working, doing their program, their program documents
770 for them and one year she walked in the office and said, 'Here's my annual budget.' And it was this
771 sort of massive confetti that was—she had a printing—a little old Canon calculator and it would
772 print out a little strip at the top. And I got this ball of paper strips from her. 'Here.' That was
773 typical. But he, because he—because of his strong military background, he could deal with the
774 military folks on their terms and they trusted him instinctively. He was a pilot, of course, and so the
775 pilots bend over backwards for anything he wanted. But bureaucratically, he was very savvy. And
776 he was very effective.

777
778 **(1:13:45) I've never really understood—maybe it was just a matter of personality, maybe—**
779 **it's hard to say. But it seems to me that just about any Hmong of a certain age knows who**
780 **Pop Buell was. It's not the same for Doc Weldon. And I've always wondered why, because**
781 **it seems to me he was every bit if not more important to their survival, to their well being.**

782 I think it was because he wasn't there as much. Because Pop was there all the time. Now Doc had
783 to spend a lot of time in Vientiane and in other parts of Laos. Pop was in northern Laos the whole
784 time, specifically the Xieng Khouang area. But Jiggs also had to work in Huai Sai, in Luang Prabang
785 and so forth. And he ran—he had to deal with the urban hospital program, had to deal with the
786 ministry a lot. And he ran a big office in Vientiane. And—but Pop was on the ground all the time.
787 So it could be just the amount of time and I'm speculating ...

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

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

801
802 **(1:16:50) What was it, do you think, that people like Steve Schofield, who came in with this**
803 **SF experience brought to the medical mission?**

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

813 **Well, Steve may have mentioned him. I'll have to look.**

814 Have you seen Steve and Don in the course of this?
815 **Not Don. I don't even know where he lives.**
816 Florida, I think.
817 **Oh, really? OK. Well, I'm going to be vacationing on the Florida Panhandle in December.**
818 **Maybe I'll have to see if I can track him down**
819 Let me see if I have a number.
820 **Steve lives in Sheboygan, Wisconsin and was part of the driving force behind the war**
821 **memorial that was built on the lake. They had a big dedication ceremony with Bill Lair and**
822 **Father Bouchard attending. I think Aderholt would have been there, but his health wasn't**
823 **very good. He's—I think he's 87 years old now.**
824 Don, probably.
825 **No, Aderholt.**
826 Aderholt. Yeah.
827 **So I met Steve in part because he's a friend of a newspaper reporter in St. Paul who wrote a**
828 **week-long series about the 30th anniversary of the fall of Long Tieng.**
829 Oh, really, Don Dougan. You can try this. This is—area code -----
830 **OK.**
831
832 **(1:19:43) I think Steve said he and Don were the only two people who were stuck in the**
833 **USAID compound when the students sort of surrounded it who kept their firearms. He said**
834 **they were ordered to give them up and he said, 'No way.' So he and Don sort of patrolled**
835 **the perimeter. He also said unfortunately, as a result of that, they were given the**
836 **responsibility for killing all of the pets in the compound before they left, so that couldn't**
837 **have been fun.**
838 In the USAID compound. OK. Kilometer 6.
839 **Oh, it must have been.**
840 Yeah. OK. Yeah. Oh, that's interesting.
841 **Well, I'll e-mail and tell him you said hello and ask him if he minds if I share his interview**
842 **with you. And I'm sure he won't, but I'll ask him nonetheless and then I'll pass it on to you.**
843 Yeah, sure.
844
845 **(1:20:37) There's a colorful character Steve mentioned and I wonder if you know. If I**
846 **remember correctly, his name is Albert Foure.**
847 Al Foure. Yes, he was a French mechanic. He had been—I think he had been in the foreign legion.
848 At least he—I think he was—had some sort of military position in Laos or Dien Bien Phu. And
849 here I'm vague, but it—he ended up at Phonsavan, some at Phonsavan and he had a restaurant—
850 combination restaurant-garage-brothel—is the rumor. And he became—he was in and out of
851 Vientiane and we hired him to run our—to be our mechanic at Sam Thong and take care of
852 generators and vehicles. And he was an irreverent Breton who loved to tell anti-clerical jokes,
853 especially in Father B's presence.
854 **Of course.**
855 Because he was a great cook and Father B would always invite himself over for dinner. So Father—
856 and so ...
857 **That was the price of admission, as it were.**
858 Yeah. So one day—so new refugees had come off the Plain of Jars and Paul White brought back a
859 Vietnamese woman carrying this passport that said Mrs. Albert Foure in a plastic bag, a bunch of
860 documents. And he—we took it to Mr. Foure and said, 'Is this for real?' And he said, 'God, I
861 thought she was dead. Bring her out.' So that was wife number three or something, who had been

862 through China, through Russia, to France looking for him and come back and came out as a refugee.
863 And after meeting her at the airport, she was doing the lunch dishes. And she stayed, they were
864 there in Sam Thong. She was a Sam Thong wife for awhile, but then he said, 'She's a Communist.'
865 And so he got rid of her. And when he—in '75, Mr. Foure applied to go to Australia, but they
866 wouldn't accept three wives on his application for—his immigration application. And Steve knows
867 the details of that and other episodes. He was a great mechanic, though.

868
869 **(1:23:21) Another name I remember him bringing up is Lee Chai.**

870 Lee Chai? Lee Chai was his Hmong counterpart, the chief medic on the Hmong side with whom he
871 worked hand in glove to supervise, resupply the dispensaries—not just the Hmong dispensaries, all
872 the dispensaries that Steve was working on. Yeah, he was his counterpart. They were real close.
873 Yeah.

874
875 **(1:23:53) So how often would you take off from Sam Thong and go to Long Tieng and have
876 some sort of social occasion?**

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

889
890 **(1:25:53) Whenever the words Sam Thong are uttered, of course, people always think
891 hospital, school, sort of the utilitarian aspect of Sam Thong. But how was it just as a
892 community, on its own?**

893 There was an old village north of the strip, which was—had been there for a long time. I don't
894 know how long. But it was sort of an artificial place. I mean, the Xieng Khouang government
895 relocated there. Chao Saykham and so forth were there. The Military Region 2, the Senatikan, the
896 general staff headquarters was there. The official MR-2 military headquarters was there. And most
897 of the people there were refugees. So it was an artificial settlement, like Long Tieng was an artificial
898 settlement. And both kept growing during the—because people, particularly military dependents,
899 wanted to live in Long Tieng or Sam Thong to be close to there, naturally, the headquarters. So
900 there was a policy of trying to discourage people from moving to Long Tieng and Sam Thong.

901
902 **(1:27:40) Did you ever spend any time with a Hmong nurse named Choua Thao?**

903 Choua. Yeah.

904 **She's larger than life. I mean, she's a tiny woman, but oh, my goodness. Boundless energy
905 and very expressive. She lives in the Twin Cities now. So I'm just wondering if you had any
906 remembrances of her from back then.**

907 Nothing substantive. She was just one of Pop's nurses, one of the girls, one of Dee Dick's nurses.

908 But I—nothing substantive, really.

909

910 **(1:28:18) So you came in '66, had a home leave in '71 before the fall of Sam Thong?**

911 My father died. I came back for that.

912 **That's right, I'm sorry.**

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

916

917 **(1:28:55) Could you tell, say, from the number of dispensaries that were still operating or**
918 **not, the number of refugees you had to deal with, the number of rice drops that were**
919 **coming, those sorts of things, kind of what was happening with the war in those five years**
920 **from '66 to '71?**

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

923

924 **(1:29:38) Steve talked about sort of the fortification of Sam Thong. Was that already**
925 **happening before your father died and you left or was that something ...**

926 Yes.

927 **OK. So there was—**

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

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

936 There ...

937 **Marching around here and there.**

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

940

941 **(1:31:18) You talked before about Ted Shackley and how his approach to the war was**
942 **disastrous in many ways. How did you see that playing out in the ways that you could**
943 **observe—like, for example, maybe casualties coming into Sam Thong, things like that?**

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

951

952 **(1:32:45) It almost seems—and again, perhaps I'm mistaken. I've talked to so many people**
953 **and you get so many opinions, sometimes it's hard to zero in on things. But it almost**
954 **seemed like VP liked having American air support, liked having this large chessboard, if you**
955 **will, to play on, was excited about the potential of perhaps using these SGU units to really**
956 **sort of push through, at least in the rainy season, when they were more suited to fighting**
957 **against the Vietnamese in that way. Do you think, perhaps, there was—I don't know if**

958 **dependency is the right word, but was this sort of a build-up that may have encouraged VP**
959 **to be more bold in the way that he used his men?**

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

966

967 **(1:34:36) So how did the situation in Ban Xon differ from that in Sam Thong?**

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

975 **Masters of Public Health?**

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

978

979 **(1:36:12) How much did you know about—well, you mentioned Don Sjostrom and**
980 **obviously he was killed at ...**

981 Na Khang.

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

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

996

997 **(1:38:36) How—I'm a little unclear about this. Maybe you don't know either, but I never**
998 **mind asking people to answer questions they may not know—how far back in this operation**
999 **did Jerry Daniels go?**

1000 [Yawns] I think, I don't know, I think of Jerry Daniels as someone that I always knew from day one
1001 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.

1002 **It sounds like at least 10 years by the time Long Tieng fell. He probably had been there at**
1003 **least nine years if not 10 or more.**

1004 Conceivably. And then we—and then I really got to know him in the refugee program. That's
1005 when we really—I really got to know him well. Because we would see these guys in passing in Long

1006 Tieng and I got to know well a couple of the guys that worked at [Lin Macs], Site 46 because I spent
1007 some time out there. And the guys at [Long Che] we'd know in passing and chatting and so forth,
1008 but extended periods together, those were rare. But when Jerry worked in the refugee program we
1009 were working all the time screening refugees.

1010
1011 **(1:40:04) I'll ask you more about him when we get to that then. You seem to compare two**
1012 **of the ambassadors—Mac Godley and Bill Sullivan—in such a way that it sounds like you**
1013 **thought Sullivan did a pretty good job of running things and keeping the Air Force in a**
1014 **limited role and that Godley sort of unleashed things.**

1015 That's a comment attributed to Sullivan. He said—who was talking to him that he said, 'At least I
1016 kept the Air Force out.' This is hearsay that Sullivan is alleged to have said that. But it's a very—it
1017 stuck with me. I have no doubt that he said such a thing. But I don't—what happened at the
1018 ambassadorial level, that's really a tough one. I knew [Leonard] Unger socially pretty well. I didn't
1019 know Sullivan that well socially. And Godley was—struck me as a bombast. A really, really
1020 important book has never seen the light of day. His niece, Jinny St. Goar.

1021 **St. Goar?**

1022 J-i-n-n-y. J-i-n-n-y. Last name St.—S-t. G-o-a-r.

1023 **Godley's niece?**

1024 Yeah, this is—Mac Godley's sister married—who was a doctor—married a Dr. St. Goar and worked
1025 out of Harvard or Cambridge or Boston. And Jinny St. Goar is a journalist who spent—who got
1026 secret clearance and spent a couple years going through state cable traffic, CIA cable traffic, writing
1027 the authorized biography of her—of Mac Godley's tour in Laos. And she's a really careful histo—
1028 I—she interviewed me. She interviewed Gordon Ramsey. She interviewed everybody in the world.
1029 She came out to Air America Association meetings. She hung out at Lucy's Tiger Den in Bangkok
1030 and she's very smart. And I still have a letter of introduction that Mac wrote to the ambassador in
1031 Malaysia, introducing her, saying something to the effect that Jinny's going to write the real story of
1032 the great job that our Air Force was doing in Laos. And I think what happened was that Jinny
1033 found out the real story of what our Air Force is doing in Laos and Mac wouldn't let her publish it.
1034 I really think that. That's pure speculation on my part. But she spent several years of her life on this
1035 project. And it's just—and it's in a black hole someplace. I have one article, there's one article I
1036 know of that she did in a compendium with Mac Brown and Joe Zasloff and some other people
1037 about the Chinese road. Why were they building the road? This is the road from the China border
1038 to Pak Beng, south from Muong Sai, which is now called Udom Xay. And there was great
1039 speculation in Washington. This is an invasion route aimed at the heart of Thailand. Why are they
1040 building at such high standards? Why does it have all these underwater bridges on it and so forth?
1041 And when I worked for three months in Yunnan on a road project in southern Yunnan and our
1042 counterparts were the same guys who built the Chinese road in Laos—the Yunnan provincial
1043 highway department. And so after we got to know each other I said, 'Why—what was going on?'
1044 He said, 'Well, it was a foreign aid project. It was a high-priority, high publicity foreign aid project
1045 that Chou En-Lai and Souvanna Phouma signed up in 1958. And the deal was we were ordered by
1046 Beijing to build this road to higher than national standards as a prestige project. And so we had
1047 40,000 laborers and 40,000 security personnel and we had 20,000 logistics people and, by god, we
1048 built this to higher than Chinese standards because—1,000 kilometers of road in northern Laos.
1049 That was the agreement. So all these—Muang Sing and Nam Tha and all those roads up there were
1050 part of the same deal. These guys were bureaucrats like USAID bureaucrats, building—following
1051 orders, building the road. These were the specs, do it. There was no great geopolitical machination
1052 involved.

1053

1054 **(1:45:35) Do you know a guy named Frank Manley?**
1055 Oh, yeah.
1056 **I met Frank in Vientiane and he was telling me a story about, I think, LBJ who apparently**
1057 **had made a promise to some Laotian official that USAID was not too pleased about. I think**
1058 **it was something like maybe 100 tractors they were going to bring in or something like that.**
1059 **And Frank was hired to do the analysis because, of course, he sold tractors at that time**
1060 **amongst, it sounds like, hundreds of other things. He said, 'We came back and we**
1061 **recommended one kind of tractor throughout the country. That way you've got no problem**
1062 **with parts and interchangeability and all these things.'** He said, 'Well, USAID decided
1063 they'd bring in half the number of trucks, five different kinds from five different companies.'
1064 He said it was a total disaster. He said that's the way, from his perspective, some of the
1065 higher-ups in USAID were.
1066 Oh, the AID procurement system was a catastrophe. It was really—yeah. So—let's see, what were
1067 we talking about?
1068 **The road.**
1069 The road—the road in China. So anyway, the great Chinese road, the great—the threat of the
1070 great—hell, in '62, that's when Kennedy sent the Marines—or was it '61? We got involved in this
1071 mess because General Phoumi Nosavan lied about Vietnamese troops poised on the border with
1072 Thailand, at Ban Huai Sai, ready to jump into Thailand. In fact, they were no more than 50
1073 kilometers and they weren't Vietnamese. They were PL. They had taken Sam Neua and Bien Phou
1074 Kha and they were up in the mountains, way up northeast of Ban Huai Sai. Anyway, but Phoumi
1075 said, 'They're on the border. They're going to invade Thailand.' And that's when JFK dispatched a
1076 whole bunch of Marines and choppers to Udorn. That was in the beginning. That was '61. This
1077 was after the Kong Le coup.
1078
1079 **(1:47:57) Hugh Tovar said something about Souvanna Phouma visiting JFK and asking for**
1080 **aid as well.**
1081 Could, maybe. It may well have been. Hugh was an interesting guy. Hugh—the impression that
1082 Hugh made on us in the field, Hugh would—Hugh, on more than one occasion, came up country
1083 by himself, landed—I was at Phou Kum, Site 50, which is north of the PDJ. It's in the middle of
1084 nowhere. And he just flew up and just hung around and just wanted—and talked for a couple
1085 hours. Just wanted to find—just talk. Here's the station chief talking to slugs in the field. That
1086 made a powerful impression.
1087 **So he was the first ...**
1088 He was a listener.
1089 **So he was the first station chief to do anything even remotely resembling that.**
1090 As far as I know. Now I don't know about the guy—a really good friend of Jiggs'—Blaufarb.
1091 **Douglas Blaufarb. Yeah.**
1092 Yeah. He had a good reputation, but I never knew him.
1093
1094 **(1:49:07) Yeah, I spent two nights talking over the phone with Hugh Tovar and I think—**
1095 **well, I think it's six hours altogether and you ask him a question and he just goes. And his**
1096 **hearing may be going a little bit, but his mind is still just unbelievably sharp.**
1097 **OK. So let's see. Oh, we were talking about Ban Xon. So this period from the time when**
1098 **you have to work further south in hotter and less enchanting conditions and the time of the**
1099 **Vientiane Accords, what were those two years like? And in the wake of what sounds like a**
1100 **pretty apparent sign that you were going to be losing the war and this was not going to end**
1101 **well, was it a tougher thing to work in an environment like that?**

1102
1103 It was not physically harder, but [Long pause]—oh, it's hard to characterize. I mean, I still spent a
1104 lot of time visiting outlying sites and doing sort of normal refugee work. People came in, they had
1105 to be taken care of. There was a monthly rice quota meeting, site by site. How much did they need
1106 this month? And you had to have up-to-date statistics and data on needs and so forth. And so
1107 keeping up with the ongoing supply operation took a lot of time. Now when we got into the time of
1108 the Accords, we started—some of us were naïve enough to think that there really was going to be a
1109 functioning government of national union. And that coincided with the departure of Air America
1110 and the question then, what happens to the Hmong up there and the other groups up there? How
1111 can they fend for themselves? What kind of development aid can they be provided? And that's
1112 when—when I worked in Vientiane from '73 to '75 and was involved in some of those, some of that
1113 planning aid for—post-war aid, in effect. And skills training center in Muang Cha, which we built.
1114 But there were still refugees that needed to be fed. So—and then I pretty much—then '73 to '75 I
1115 working mainly in the program office, very little time spent up country, pushing papers for the
1116 public health program, this—I became the de facto population officer. We started a national—a
1117 little family planning program, Maternal Child Health Family Planning Program. And doing
1118 paperwork, doing the AID documentation is very time-consuming. It was just—it's a real
1119 bureaucratic thing. So Vientiane politics were more interesting at that point. And I really, to a great
1120 extent, lost touch with what was going on up country.

1121
1122 **(1:53:11) Now I should remember this, but Pop Buell had his heart attack ...**

1123 His final heart attack.

1124 **I was going to say ...**

1125 He had a lot, which—and Jiggs did his medicals to allow him to continue in the foreign service.
1126 Otherwise he would have been bounced out. He was visiting Lyle Brown in the Philippines when
1127 he died. And he died in the Philippines. And I don't know, I don't know what year that was.

1128
1129 **(1:53:39) Was it, do you think, kind of a blow to him, physically and emotionally, to have to**
1130 **abandon Sam Thong? Was this ...**

1131 Yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. That was a big blow.

1132 **And you said he really came to identify with the people. So I assume also seeing their**
1133 **potential fortunes grow dimmer and dimmer had to have been pretty hard on him as well.**

1134 Yeah. Yeah.

1135
1136 **(1:54:12) Well, when you said the politics in Vientiane got more interesting, what kinds of**
1137 **things ...**

1138 Well ...

1139 **... you were observing?**

1140 ... because at USAID, part of our job was trying to plan this post-war period, that was a whole new
1141 world, dealing at the national level with national programs to be run through ministries, not handing
1142 out pots and pans directly to people. That's very different.

1143
1144 **(1:54:48) Was there any sense of optimism that these ministries would not be so corrupt that**
1145 **these programs could be run effectively and efficiently or was that ...**

1146 The problem was the more you looked at them, the less confident one became about their abilities.
1147 And see, we had not really ever been exposed, working up country, to what went on in Vientiane, to
1148 what went on in the ministries. And it was not a nice awakening to finally look at some of those
1149 ministries. There's nothing there.

1150
1151 **(1:55:37) Did you have a chance to read about or hear about the sort of political intrigue or**
1152 **the sort of development of this tension that was going on between the representatives of the**
1153 **old Royal Lao government and the Pathet Lao and the so-called neutralists and how this**
1154 **was all taking shape?**

1155 We heard... [Chuckles] We were part of the rumor mill in Vientiane. Each—as I recall, each
1156 ministry had a mixed—a mixed leadership. And so since our contacts tended to be from the old
1157 government side, we would get impressions of the other side through them, so it was filtered
1158 through them. But Lao politics is all family. It's all who's connected to whom. All of it. Ideology is
1159 really insignificant. One very savvy political officer back in Unger's tenure did a massive family tree
1160 of the five leading families of Laos and put it on his wall. And you could figure out immediately the
1161 policy implications of anything by looking at the family connections. That's all that counted. That's
1162 all that mattered in Lao politics. Who you're connected to, really. And it's so easy to crack that
1163 code. You just needed genealogy. You don't need any deep political analysis of interests and—
1164 abstract interests or so forth. Just look at the family ties. It's all there.

1165
1166 **(1:57:47) Did you hear much of what was going on prior to the evacuation of Long Tieng?**
1167 **For example, the assault on Sala Phou Khoun or any of the military developments that**
1168 **preceded the evacuation of Long Tieng or was it more of a surprise to you when it unfolded?**

1169 I was in the States when it happened, but the—what month was that, by the way?

1170 **May.**

1171 Yeah. I think I was still in the States. The—let me see—yeah. Yeah. Because I was—Pop said,
1172 'Stay as long as you want.' I was helping my mom get squared away after my father died. I
1173 remember when Muong Soui fell and a Thai artillery unit was overrun and captured. That probably
1174 preceded the Sala Phou Khoun thing. But I have very vague memories of the Sala Phou Khoun
1175 operation.

1176
1177 **(1:59:10) So Long Tieng, too, you were in the States.**

1178 I'm pretty—yeah, I should know, but I'm pretty sure I was still in the States. I'd have to dig up
1179 some old travel records.

1180 **OK. But you said that you were...**

1181 I certainly wasn't involved in it.

1182 **Yeah. Yeah. You said you were asked to come back as a Lao speaker to sort of help see ...**

1183 Oh, I was already in Vientiane. In other words, when this bloodless coup, ministry by ministry, took
1184 place, Gordon Ramsey, the deputy director, the acting director, chose a bunch of people to stay
1185 behind to first negotiate the release of the families, and then to continue talking to try to find out—
1186 to try to build a case that, first of all, to satisfy ourselves that, indeed, we had to leave and then to try
1187 to convince Washington that we had to leave. Because we knew that the embassy was going to
1188 remain. So how can USAID mission abandon all of its infrastructure and its assets and so forth?
1189 There has to be a good reason. No invasion. No street fighting. No blood in the streets. No. So
1190 we had to make that case if indeed that case was going to be made and it turned out that that was it.
1191 We found out from people in the ministry of public health that that negotiating track of the Pathet
1192 Lao was to physically assemble all of the jeeps and the bottles of aspirin and the tin roofing sheets
1193 and every single commodity, every radio, every tire that had ever been brought into the country and
1194 compare the physical inventory with the paper inventory and then see how much we had “stolen”,
1195 and then to put us on trial for having stolen the people's property. And then to begin negotiations
1196 on war reparations. And so we found out, explicitly, what their negotiating strategy was, this was the
1197 script that they were to follow. That's when we were able to convince Washington that there was no

1198 future dealing with that government. That they were not interested in development. That it was
1199 about a Marxist—filtered through Vietnamese, old octogenarian Vietnamese party bosses because
1200 the Lao Dong party ran the LPP—Lao People's Party. And we could abandon. So we did. We
1201 were there for only about three weeks or so after the families got out, when we all left.
1202

1203 **(2:03:23) Now Mac tells this story about going around in a truck with some Lao students**
1204 **and lawyers and a Lao captain, going through houses, trying to determine what property**
1205 **was personal property of Americans and what property was the property of the person who**
1206 **owned the house and what property should be turned over to the people and this got to be a**
1207 **rather demoralizing process, but by the same token he said that they were sitting around**
1208 **one day drinking Cokes and ...**

1209 Mac doesn't drink Coke. Ever.

1210 **OK. He was having a Singha. They were having Cokes. He said Cokes. But I think some**
1211 **of the students finally said, 'So how much do you figure the United States is leaving behind?**
1212 **How many millions of dollars?' He said, 'Well, we just had a meeting on this and it was**
1213 **something like \$160 million.' I forget what the number was exactly. Maybe \$130 million,**
1214 **\$140 million. They said, 'Well, you must feel pretty bad about that.' He said, 'Well, I look at**
1215 **it this way. Do you know what the USAID budget for Laos was just for next year?' 'No.'**
1216 **'\$65 million.' 'Oh, that sounds good. \$65 million.' He said, 'Well, how much of that do you**
1217 **think you're going to get now?' So to him it was about a short-term victory to them, but sort**
1218 **of a long-term loss not just for the United States in terms of its position in Southeast Asia,**
1219 **but in terms of the development and the aid that was provided to the Lao people. Did you**
1220 **see it at least somewhat in that way, or how did you view this departure from the region?**

1221 Well, I mean, we all had very strong emotional ties to Laos, the better part of, at that point, our lives,
1222 our adult lives that we had spent there. And so that was disappointing. I mean, going off to some
1223 god knows where are we going to go, what are we going to do at this point? But when you look
1224 back on it, I mean, the policy was a catastrophe. I mean, the U.S. policy toward Southeast Asia was
1225 stupid. Eisenhower told Kennedy, in the limousine going to the inauguration, whatever you do,
1226 don't get involved in a land war in Asia. Whatever you do. I leave you with one message. Kennedy
1227 ignored these warnings from the old general. He sent the Marines to Udorn in response to General
1228 Phoumi Nosavan's lies about a threat to Thailand. And we haven't learned at all. I mean, it's just—
1229 it was just idiotic. And Laos got caught up in it all of the Vietnam mess, unfortunately. I can't cite
1230 sources for this, but I understand that many of the soldiers in the 314th and 316th NVA divisions
1231 who were the bulk of the troops in Laos where, in fact, Hmong and other ethnolinguistic minority
1232 groups that had brethren on the Lao side. They weren't the dreaded lowland Vietnamese, the [Nya
1233 La] or the ...

1234 **The same in Thailand as well. I mean, a lot of Hmong fought on the side of the**
1235 **Communists in Thailand.**

1236 Yeah. But, I mean, the whole—there is a soldier patch on which you can—which I have seen—big,
1237 colored, it's lovely. It says Participant, Southeast Asian War Games, 1965-1975, Second Place—
1238 which is great.

1239 **Yeah. No small amount of ...**

1240 Great. Because you look at this part of the world now and you say, 'What in the world were we
1241 doing?' What hubris. It's just—and CBUs are still going off all over Laos, blowing people apart.
1242

1243 **(2:08:28) Walking through Phonsavan and then seeing all these old shell casings in every**
1244 **hotel and every restaurant and everywhere. And those are the ones that are safe to have**
1245 **around. And knowing that you could see a lot more of the Plain of Jars except you might**

1246 **blow up. All of these things. I mean, it is a painful reminder of what has yet to be done to**
1247 **make that country whole and safe.**

1248 Oh, God. Yeah. It's terrible.

1249
1250 **(2:09:02) So how long did you remain in Laos? You said about three weeks after the—after**
1251 **the USAID ...**

1252 Roughly. Maybe a month, but somewhere between two weeks and a month after the dependents
1253 were all flown out. Until we were able to determine that—what we—what sort of negotiations—I
1254 mean, were the negotiations serious or what was going on? And when we found out they were
1255 leading to war reparations, first of all, they were leading toward a trial of missing assets.

1256 [Desk attendant brings the two some water. McKeithen thanks him in Thai. Interviewer asks for a
1257 receipt for his room]

1258 Yeah, I'd say two weeks to a month. Then Gordon assembled—Gordon Ramsey assembled most
1259 of us in Washington, those of us that had to be reassigned, waiting for new assignments in
1260 Washington to write up, from memory, as best we could, whatever documents we could lay our
1261 hands on, the recent history of the programs that we'd been working on. In my case, Maternal Child
1262 Health Family Planning Program, which I started in the last couple years I was there, fresh from the
1263 MPH from Chapel Hills. OK. That was a new program we got going with help from Meechai in
1264 Thailand. So he was good. Gordon helped to document the experience in Laos.

1265
1266 **(2:10:51) Was that at least a slightly cathartic experience, writing out this history of a**
1267 **program that ...**

1268 It was good discipline and good to get it on the record. I don't know if—I'm sure it was compiled
1269 in some sort of historic—some document, but who knows where it is.

1270
1271 **(2:11:13) What—we didn't really talk specifically about that program. What did you seek to**
1272 **accomplish and how well did you think it went?**

1273 The Lao were beginning to experience the problems of unwanted children, excessive fertility as
1274 defined by—the important question is you ask the woman, 'Do you want to be pregnant now?' I
1275 mean, all of this talk about demographic impact and dependency ratios and the national burden and
1276 the education and so forth and so on, that's sort of beside the point. I mean, the basic question is,
1277 'Do you want to be pregnant now?' And a lot of people said no to that. It's very simple. And so it's
1278 a very simple idea is—I mean, if you can—if you can protect a woman from unwanted pregnancies,
1279 that is the most cost effective public health intervention in the world. There's no comparison in
1280 terms of cost-effectiveness, about the health benefits. So ...

1281
1282 **I'm just warning you, I'm just a pessimist and I don't think that battery is going to run out,**
1283 **but if it does midstream, I'm going to kill myself. So that's [a second recorder] my backup.**
1284 **Thank you.**

1285 Are you interested in lunch?

1286 **Yeah. We could take a break and have some lunch. That would be fine. Do we want to just**
1287 **finish up this program and then we'll go from there?**

1288 OK. The MCH program?

1289 **Yeah.**

1290 Yeah. So basically there were several tracks to it. One was working with the ministry of public
1291 health on starting to make services available, contraceptive services and tied with Maternal Child
1292 Health Services. And the other was a policy thing. We hired—Jiggs Weldon hired a guy who had
1293 done work in this before to try to put together program, information programs to convince the

1294 national leadership that it made sense that a national demographic policy along the lines that
1295 Thailand had adopted and other countries. At that time, the island nations, Hong Kong and
1296 Singapore and Taiwan, they—very good population, national demographic policies that talked about
1297 limiting family size as a national goal so long that the rate of increased population growth and so
1298 forth. So it was a two-track approach: services and policy. And it was going along pretty nicely
1299 because, I mean, when you're dealing with unmet demand, that is the easiest thing in the world to try
1300 to address. I mean, the demand was phenomenal, of course. Thailand is a good example. Thailand
1301 in between 1965, if I'm not—I think it was 1965 to 1980, a 15-year period, the average number of
1302 children born to a Thai mother, the total fertility rate, declined from six-and-a-half to two, just in 15
1303 years of purely voluntary methods, all provided through normal government channels. That's a
1304 classic example of responding to a need. If you get—if you can sort of—a very good example and
1305 one that's been repeated worldwide since then. But back in those days there were these great policy
1306 debates about did something have to precede something else and da-da-da-da. But programs like
1307 the Thai program and working in the Thai mission, Thailand soon became a place where you would
1308 bring people to see how it's done properly in a lot of fields—malaria, family planning and child
1309 nutrition and so forth.

1310 **Let's have some lunch.**

1311 Yeah.

1312 **Where would you like to go? I don't really know that much about ...**

1313

1314 [New track begins]

1315

1316 **(0:09) So we finished talking about the—I forget the actual name, but the women and
1317 children's health program.**

1318 Oh, Maternal Child Health.

1319 **There you go. OK. So you had been writing a sort of ...**

1320 We had—to put together a new project in USAID, it takes about two years from the time you start
1321 preparing the documentation until you get money from Congress. [Phone rings, McKeithen
1322 answers it, talks briefly.] So, yeah, it takes—the bureaucracy is deadly. The documentation that
1323 AID is required by Congress but then AID has imposed on itself over the years is—it's a miracle
1324 that anything ever gets done. It's really something else. I mean, these international bureaucracies—
1325 AID, Asian Development Bank, my own experience so far has been with those two, but they are—
1326 they're really something else.

1327

1328 **(2:07) Were there any times, maybe there were a number of times in which you had to do
1329 things in the field when you were still at Sam Thong or Ban Xon that might have, at least in
1330 spirit if not directly been in contravention of USAID policy or was this not really something
1331 that you had to worry about too much in the field?**

1332 Gosh, I can't think of anything offhand. I mean, we were [Pauses] I can't—nothing comes to mind.
1333 The only thing that does to come mind is when my wife visited me. The families had all been
1334 evacuated from Vientiane in April or May of '75—April, I think. And—but my wife snuck back
1335 across to visit me when I was still with this negotiating group. And somehow ran—later ran into
1336 and mentioned her trip to John Gunther Dean who was, I think at that time, an ambassador or
1337 DCO. I think he was an ambassador to Thailand and he said, 'I don't want to hear about it.' That
1338 was against the—that was—that's not an answer to your question. That was her, not me doing
1339 something against the rules. But ...

1340

1341 **(3:59) So most of the problems with USAID didn't affect what was happening sort of down**
1342 **at the ground level. It was more just ...**

1343 No, I mean, the—working in the refugee program in the trenches, so to speak, was—we didn't get
1344 involved in anything—any of that stuff. Doing things against USAID regulations can involve, say,
1345 instead of going through the proper procurement channels, you go downtown and buy a bottle of
1346 aspirin or something. But none of that ever—we never were put in that position. Yeah.

1347
1348 **(4:44) So you've left, you've written this essay that Gordon Ramsey has asked you to write**
1349 **about the program that you administered. He compiles all of this. It's sitting somewhere.**
1350 **Perhaps you'll find it someday. And so, then you go where?**

1351 Haiti.

1352 **OK.**

1353 Then I got assigned to Haiti where Doctor Weldon had already—he had left in, I think, '73 to do—
1354 he and Pat both did an MPH at Harvard. And then he was reassigned and he ended up in Haiti.
1355 The Haitian mission had resumed the AID program after a 10-year hiatus. Papa Doc had died, Baby
1356 Doc come in, new government, new program and that was a good time bureaucratically to be there.
1357 You didn't have to inherit other people's problems. You could create your own. And so I was his
1358 program officer and then the deputy in the public health office down there. And then he did finally
1359 retire from AID at the post in Haiti. Pat went onto USAID Cairo, Jiggs came out to—then he
1360 moved to the Philippines, retired in the Philippines. And I was in Haiti for four years. And then in
1361 Washington for three or four—three. No, wait a minute. No, no, after Haiti, back to Bangkok, I'm
1362 sorry. Haiti, Bangkok for two years in the refugee program and then one year in the public health
1363 office. So three years—'79 to '81 in Bangkok.

1364
1365 **(6:34) Well, let's talk about the years in Bangkok and the work with the refugee program**
1366 **there.**

1367 We visited—yeah, the refugee program—our job was to, basically, to certify the bona fides of the
1368 refugees as indeed refugees from Laos—in the case of the Lao camps, refugees from Laos.

1369 **This is still under the auspices of USAID.**

1370 No. We were seconded from AID to the State Department to their Office of Refugee Affairs. And
1371 we were ethnic affairs officers, we were called. And our job was to prepare families for interviews
1372 with INS who would make the determination that they did have a well-founded fear of persecution
1373 and therefore qualified under the current refugee acts and quotas at that time. And so we wanted to
1374 screen out the non-refugees and Lao speakers from Isan [NE Thailand] who were claiming to be
1375 refugees from Laos. We had people from Taiwan who claimed to be refugees from Laos. And ...

1376
1377 **(7:56) How did they get there?**

1378 Through Vientiane. That's an amazing family. So we learned a lot about the current regime in Laos
1379 as part of our screening process. For example, we would show samples of Lao currency to people
1380 whom we thought might not be real refugees without showing the denomination—without showing
1381 the number. 'Identify that bill.' And we would ask people to complete certain slogans that were part
1382 of the liturgy of the Lao government. Every government document has a certain slogan that
1383 appears across the top of it. And we would ask people to name movie theaters in Vientiane. And
1384 we would ask—and we would use these terms that only people who had been in Laos since '75 and
1385 had been exposed to the terminology of the revolution would understand. For example, "What's a
1386 boun meeting" and other examples of the lexicon of 'new speak' that had come into force. And so
1387 we devised all these different screening mechanisms. Jerry Daniels' role was to validate the claims of
1388 military service, because that was a separate category for refugee admissions. '...In which unit,

1389 where were you stationed?'. He had photographs of people and places and so forth. 'Name this
1390 person,' etc. Part of our job also was the care and feeding of the refugees and keeping track of how
1391 refugees were treated by the Thai authorities, both at the border and in the camps, in order to get an
1392 accurate picture of what was going on that the embassy could then intercede with the Ministry of
1393 Interior for better treatment. And so that was very interesting because it allowed us to keep up,
1394 keep abreast with what was happening in Laos. And the interviews of the refugees then painted a
1395 picture of life in Laos, which was part of the rationale for the basis of the program: that this was a
1396 nasty, brutish place where people were treated badly. We also tried to find out about the "seminars,"
1397 what was going on there and so forth. So a lot of the interviews with refugees contributed to
1398 reporting cables on life in the LPDR. We saw that the Vietnamese were trying to impose their
1399 interpretation of Marxism and Leninism through their Lao counterparts. And it just didn't fit. I
1400 mean, like so much of the ideology, it didn't work with the Lao culture at all. The whole guilt trip. I
1401 mean, self confession and self criticism sessions. You stand up in front of your peers and describe
1402 your sins and why you should be flogged and drawn and quartered. The Vietnamese were trying to
1403 introduce the concept of guilt to a society that knows shame, but not guilt. I'm sorry. And that—
1404 and the Vietnamese maybe. I don't know enough about Vietnamese. I had the impression that they
1405 actually have a concept of guilt. These people don't. And it just doesn't work at that fundamental
1406 level. And of course, it originated with Europeans who understand guilt very well. Out here it
1407 doesn't fly. And the Vietnamese and Pathet Lao tried to impose this whole collectivization concept
1408 and this very onerous top-down system of quotas and taxes on your production. In the old days in
1409 Laos, government really was very ineffective, which was a great benefit from the standpoint of the
1410 village. The village, if it existed, would almost by definition be prospering. People survived. And
1411 government stayed out of the way. But the Pathet Lao, using the Vietnamese model, didn't operate
1412 that way. They wanted to be involved in everything and so you got this heavy hand of government
1413 getting involved in their lives. Not very pleasant. People spying on each other and so forth. And
1414 then, of course, then the graphic accounts emerged of people getting shot trying to get across the
1415 river and punished when they get caught and so forth and so on. And to this day, the Vietnamese
1416 are running a policy of genocide against the Hmong in Laos. It's a grudge. I think—I can't explain
1417 it any other way than it's just a grudge against the Hmong and VP in particular, but all these
1418 innocent people are getting caught up.

1419 **Well, I think, too, from what little I know, also sort of a grudge against these so-called Chao**
1420 **Fa who lasted for so long after the Americans left and continued to live off the ideology that**
1421 **remained after VP left.**

1422 Yeah. But it's really criminal. And that's something that Vieng Say and the people at RFA could
1423 help you out on. They really keep up with that sort of thing. [Food comes] Go ahead. While it's
1424 hot.

1425
1426 **(15:30) I guess so. I see now. This looks like syrup. So we mentioned Jerry Daniels before**
1427 **and that you got to know him pretty well during this period. How would you describe him?**

1428 Jerry was [speaking in Thai to waiter]—Jerry was—he, [Pauses as he listens to waiter speak to
1429 manager] I don't know. (I'm just—I'm trying to get the fan turned off for the sound, the noise.)
1430 Very knowledgeable about the history of the Hmong insurgency because he—to the best of my
1431 knowledge, he didn't have a specific area of responsibility, geographically, with Vang Pao. He was
1432 sort of all over the place. And he'd been there a long time, so he knew the leadership. He knew the
1433 history.

1434
1435 **(17:04) He spent a decent amount of time in Na Khang, didn't he?**

1436 Na Khang, yeah. He was in the Sam Neua operation.

1437 **Well, with all the traveling he did, did he learn to fly or was he...?**
1438 No, but Frank Odom did. Frank Odom is another case officer who got interested in flying and
1439 ended up as a CIA pilot, actually, and got shot down and killed in the Congo, I think it was. He got
1440 blown apart on final approach by some friendlies. But Frank—no, Jerry didn't fly, but Frank did
1441 and actually made a new career out of it.
1442 **Anyway, I was interrupting your train of thought. You were talking about Jerry.**
1443 I—yeah, Jerry's just a great guy, even-tempered and held very few prejudices. I mean, sharp, savvy
1444 guy. He understood, to a certain extent, the folly of the whole exercise, but wanted to help the real
1445 bona fide refugees and try to protect the program from the fakes. And [Pauses] yeah—he—his
1446 death was really stupid, really a tragedy. [Food arrives] Wow. [Speaking in Thai] Anyway, I won't
1447 get into his death because it's irrelevant.
1448 **But it was asphyxiation from a faulty heater, right?**
1449 Yeah. A pilot light went out. The room was sealed so the gas continued to flow out through the
1450 pilot light and it was asphyxiation. It was an airtight, air conditioned room. [More food arrives]
1451 Wow. My God.
1452 **Holy moley. [Laughs]**
1453 We can share the salad. I'll put it right here. So feel free to dig into that.
1454
1455 **(19:58) All right. Well, I'll clean my plate over here first. Now VP went to Montana, I**
1456 **assume, largely because of his friendship with Jerry.**
1457 I believe so. I believe so. First, I think, as part of the recuperation. He got shot in the arm and I
1458 think he ended up buying some property there or acquiring some property there somehow. That's a
1459 rumor. I don't know that for a fact.
1460 **I think that's right, though. I think he lived there for maybe two, three years and tried**
1461 **farming and raising cattle and all that. And I've got to go back and study that story again,**
1462 **but I don't think he was particularly welcomed in the community and things didn't pan out**
1463 **and maybe the farming didn't go as well as he had hoped and so he ended up in the**
1464 **Sacramento area.**
1465 OK.
1466
1467 **(20:53) So I would imagine you heard more than your share of harrowing stories about what**
1468 **is happening to people across the border.**
1469 Yeah. [Pauses] But what we really couldn't find out much about was the seminar, what was going
1470 on in the seminars because not that many people were released, particularly in the early days. And it
1471 was very hard to get a picture of what—how bad it was.
1472 **Now technically speaking, is seminar distinct from a reeducation camp?**
1473 I don't think there's any distinction. I think the seminars were broken down by type of inmate.
1474 They had the one—they had an island for Done Xao and Done Ying or Done Xai and Done Ying
1475 and some island or islands in the Nam Ngum Reservoir were low-security seminars. And then
1476 officers—I don't know what—if there was a cutoff of rank or not where—at a different seminar.
1477 **And probably local politicians as opposed to military and...**
1478 I have the impression that they were segregated by rank and position and perceived, perhaps,
1479 perceived threat.
1480
1481 **(22:44) So what was the relationship like between the case officers who were taking these**
1482 **stories down and getting refugees ready for application, first of all, I suppose, just to be**
1483 **classified as a refugee and secondly for possible relocation elsewhere and the INS officers?**

1484 It could—it was—it could be testy. In other words, every time INS rejected a family, we would leap
1485 to their defense. And we naturally thought that a lot of the INS decisions were arbitrary
1486 —but they could be appealed. The head of INS was Jack Fortner - - a very capable guy. Very smart.
1487 He had some cowboys under him. And so we were often able to take a case to Jack and get it
1488 reversed or get another hearing. And so the onus was on us and JVA. We had this group called the
1489 Joint Voluntary Agency...

1490 **In Thailand, the International Rescue Commission.**

1491 Yes. Who hired people to do the real scutwork, the detailed interviewing and development of the
1492 families and they had a—they had a hard time. We all had a hard time because the INS definitions
1493 of brother and sister are narrow. The Lao definitions of brother and sister are quite broad. And you
1494 get into cousin and that's another world. So family structure was always a big issue and who's real
1495 family and who's not real family and so forth. And there was a natural tension in the relationship
1496 between INS and the Ethnic Affairs Officers.

1497
1498 **(25:07) For the average American who's never spent time in a refugee camp and even for**
1499 **young Hmong who may not really understand what their parents and grandparents had to**
1500 **go through, what is life in—and I realize there are differences from camp to camp, but what**
1501 **would life be like for a person who crossed the border and found themselves in Ban Vinai or**
1502 **Chiang Khong or ...**

1503 Well, first they'd be put in a Thai jail and they might be sent back to Laos. They'd probably have all
1504 their money taken and be stuck in this jail for awhile. If they made it to the camp, they would be
1505 protected. The Volags [voluntary agencies], who had the contracts to provide relief to the camps, did
1506 a pretty good job. So people had medical care, they had food. From the refugee standpoint, the
1507 most frustrating aspect was not knowing what was going to happen. Were they going to be turned
1508 down by the U.S.? Should they apply to France? Should they start out by applying to Australia?
1509 Who really made the decision? Could they pay somebody off? I mean, the social norms—the
1510 mechanisms that they were used to dealing with just didn't apply.

1511
1512 **(27:24) Were there—here again, I suppose there was a pretty wide variety of possibilities,**
1513 **but was there really much opportunity for any kind of meaningful work—**

1514 No.

1515 **—or was it mostly just kind of sitting around waiting for your number to come up or waiting**
1516 **to make a decision?**

1517 A lot of sitting around. Now maintenance of the camp and your own structure and whatever
1518 community projects people could organize were important, of course. But I mean, nobody had any
1519 real commitment to those because they were not going to be there, they hoped. So...

1520
1521 **(28:09) Now did you work with Jim Anderson at all from the IRC?**

1522 Jim Anderson. Probably.

1523 **He's in St. Paul, so ...**

1524 Was he a Cambodian language speaker, do you know?

1525 **I don't think so, but, well, I think he—then again, we worked with Cambodians, so maybe**
1526 **he was.**

1527 OK.

1528 **He married one of Fred Walker's daughters.**

1529 Oh, yeah. The doctor or ...

1530 **No, the Air America chief pilot.**

1531 Oh, no. But I mean, one of Fred's daughter is a ...

1532 **Oh, no. It's her older sister. Patricia is the doctor. Elizabeth is the girl he married.**
1533 Did she work for this French VOLAG?
1534 **Oh, yeah. I think she did. And then she came to work for JVA. In fact, she worked for Jim.**
1535 **That's how they met.**
1536 OK.
1537 **And then there's another sister still—Susan, maybe?**
1538 Susan Walker is the one I'm thinking of who ...
1539 **OK.**
1540 She's the one who worked for [Speaks with waiter]. Yeah, she worked with the French VOLAG.
1541 **I'm trying to get all three sisters to sit down and chat with me, but it's a bit of undertaking**
1542 **given how busy they all are, especially Pat. I would imagine this had to have been a rather**
1543 **delicate situation for the Thai government to have refugees from three or four countries**
1544 **streaming across their borders, their own citizens quite upset that here are these people**
1545 **taking up land and maybe resources, at least from their perspective, even though most of**
1546 **them are coming from the outside. And then having to deal with the governments from**
1547 **which these people are from.**
1548 Yeah. Land wasn't so much of a problem, but the perception of the communities near the refugee
1549 camps could become jaded, that the refugees were simply a bunch of people hanging around getting
1550 fed, sometimes with better medical attention than the people outside the fence got. Then of course,
1551 the perception on the part of the Volags was sometimes that the people on the outside of the fence
1552 were exploiting people on the inside by charging them abnormally high prices for staple
1553 commodities and so forth and so on. And it was a situation sort of designed for exploitation of one
1554 sort or another.
1555
1556 **(31:11) Thai guards perhaps assaulting women in the camps. Things of that nature.**
1557 That was—I don't—I can't think of an episode of that. I mean, I ...
1558 **That may have been more rumor in the camps than a reality?**
1559 There were some examples of Pathet Lao trying—a Pathet Lao tried to kill the abbot of the Nong
1560 Khai camp. I don't know if he was called the abbot of the Nong Khai camp, but he was certainly
1561 the senior monk. He ended up running the Wat in Virginia outside of Washington and west of
1562 Washington. He's a very—he still has a hatchet mark on his forehead.
1563
1564 **(32:06) My goodness. So did you see any evidence or hear any rumors of Hmong refugees**
1565 **slipping back over the border trying to participate in the ongoing rebellion against this new**
1566 **government or was that ...**
1567 Oh, I think so. I think that—I think that happened, indeed. I think that whatever resistance groups
1568 were operating on Thai soil had ties with the Hmong at Ban Vinai. They probably asked for
1569 donations, I'm speculating, but I'm sure that there was some communication. That was always the
1570 very vocal claim on the Lao government's part that Ban Vinai was nothing but a staging area for the
1571 Hmong resistance. But it really wasn't. I mean, it wasn't overt.
1572
1573 **(33:18) It was (***), as it were. Did you see many cases in which Hmong families, say,**
1574 **applied to go to the United States or elsewhere, asked everything and had their shots, had**
1575 **the orientation and then just couldn't bring themselves to leave? Maybe they thought the**
1576 **situation in Laos would change to make it go back or they were waiting for family to come**
1577 **over or whatever the case might be?**
1578 I can't think of anything. Not to say that it didn't happen, but nothing comes to mind.
1579

1580 **(34:09) So you worked out of Vientiane and visited numerous camps or were you designated**
1581 **to certain ...**

1582 Bangkok.

1583 **Yeah, at Bangkok. Yes. [Chuckles]**

1584 And—mainly Nong Khai—the big Lao camp in Nong Khai, Ban Vinai, the Hmong camp, and later
1585 Nakhon Phanom. There was a camp there—Hmong camp in Nakhon Phanom. And occasionally
1586 Phanat Nikhom, which was a processing center. And a couple gigs in the Khmer camps just
1587 because they were short of people. But—and then, one trip to Chiang Kham. There was a Mien,
1588 predominantly Mien camp, Mien camp at Chiang Kham. And Ubon. There used to be a fairly large
1589 Lao camp at Ubon. Yeah. Quite large, in fact. And after most of them got processed then the
1590 residual Lao went to Nong Khai and eventually everybody ended up near NKP. But the Ubon
1591 camp did indeed have fairly close ties with the Lao resistance in southern Laos. That was—I
1592 remember interviewing guys from the—in the resistance in the Ubon refugee camp.

1593
1594 **(35:53) Do you remember any particular details they shared about what they were up to?**

1595 No. I was trying to find out what life was like on the other side, obviously, and the taxation and
1596 the—how much of their rice harvest had to be handed over and how it was enforced and so forth
1597 and so on. And in that same camp, [name removed] was given yellow rain. . . The fact that he
1598 handed it over to the CIA and they threw it away and never did anything with it. It got lost and
1599 unbelievable.

1600 **He said that the fellow that he went with to get it decided not buy it,**

1601 Yeah

1602 **that they saw it, but that they didn't actually get it.**

1603 Yeah. Yeah. I mean, they threw away the chance to—you got the proof.

1604 **So it wasn't bee shit, as it were.**

1605 I mean—which reminds me of another case officer, Bremer is his name up at Pha Khao, Site 14,
1606 who got ahold of a senior captain, North Vietnamese captain, who was a walking encyclopedia on
1607 EOB—enemy order of battle statistics, the structure and force levels of all of those units up there.
1608 And a gold mine. Bremer had made his career, his next promotion—because he was not contract.
1609 He was from Langley. He was a career intelligence officer. And after a month of all day, all night
1610 sessions with this guy, they finally decided to box him, and—the guy was lying through his teeth. I
1611 mean, everything he said was a complete fabrication and Bremer almost killed himself. He almost
1612 killed the guy. And it was fascinating to watch, to watch him just crumble. The guy literally fell
1613 apart and slinked away and left MR-2 never to return. He left Site 14 and we heard that he left
1614 Vientiane. That he was—that he had a breakdown, a mental breakdown.

1615
1616 **(38:57) That story sounds remotely familiar. I can't remember—I can't remember. Did ...**

1617 Well, one guy—his boss, Jack Shirley, was at Site 14 at the time and I met Bremer several times
1618 because I was talking to the same guy because I was interested in the North Vietnamese occupation,
1619 the civil administration of Xieng Khouang Province. Why the North Vietnamese were so
1620 involved—what were they doing. We gradually developed the thesis that they needed the land
1621 because Nghe An Province is dirt poor next door. And the Plain of Jars is called the Tranninh.
1622 Tranninh Plateau in Vietnamese. It's had a Vietnamese name for a long time. And right after the
1623 Second World War, according to [Xieng Khouang provincial governor] Chao Saykham, some 10,000
1624 Vietnamese from Nghe An province settled on the Plain of Jars, just came in and squatted and
1625 started growing stuff. And he was able to organize enough army trucks to expel them and get them
1626 out. So here's this irredentist claim against the Tranninh Plateau, known in Lao as Thong Hai Hin –
1627 the Plain of Jars. And at the provincial level of the Xieng Khouang Pathet Lao administration the

1628 Vietnamese have advisors in agriculture, education, public health and, you name it, civil works, etc.
1629 which is a normal advisory structure at each line office in the bureaucracy. But then they also had
1630 the “959” group. What the hell was the 959 group? The 959 group had the same kind of
1631 bureaucratic line ministry organization, but not as advisors to the Pathet Lao government in Xieng
1632 Khouang Province. It was independent. It turned out the 959 group was the shadow government,
1633 the advance government of the Vietnamese community that would move and live in Tran Yin.

1634 **So this was part of ...**

1635 Occupation. This was the part of the plan. That's right.

1636

1637 **(41:34) Do you know roughly when this was that these 10,000—maybe you said and I just**
1638 **didn't ...**

1639 Right at the end of the Second World War.

1640 **OK.**

1641 This is right—this is in '45 when the French pulled out, the Brits pulled out. There was this power
1642 vacuum. The Japanese were gone.

1643 **So probably right about the time that Ho Chi Minh was pronouncing his Republic of**
1644 **Vietnam or maybe shortly before.**

1645 I don't know the timing. But, yeah. But this Tranninh business—these are interviews that I did in
1646 the late '60s. That's what they were doing. They were preparing for—and Saykham talked a lot
1647 about, well, if you'd ask him, he'd talk a lot about the problem of keeping the Vietnamese out of
1648 Laos. In fact, when we were—during the PGNU era, '73 to '75, there was a hot rumor in Vientiane
1649 that Souphanouvong had successfully resisted Vietnamese attempts to bring in 100,000 Vietnamese
1650 settlers to live in Laos. Because apparently Nghe An is really dirt poor. And so there is this
1651 irredentist *lebensraum* aspect to the Vietnamese role and national interest in Laos.

1652

1653 **(43:16) When we look back at the number of times that Burma and Vietnam and, I think**
1654 **China as well, invaded Laos over the centuries before all of this, it's not surprising in a way.**
1655 **I mean, it's sort of a consistent theme that Laos is the poor cousin stuck in the middle and**
1656 **landlocked between all of these more dominant powers.**

1657 But back then they did it for really important reasons, like great elephant shit war where the—Chao
1658 Saykham told me this story where the Mandarin of Hue was used to collecting tribute from the
1659 principalities in the area, including the principality of Luang Prabang. And ‘what can you send me
1660 this year?’ ‘I can send you a white elephant from Luang Prabang to express my deep respect’ for the
1661 Mandarin at Hue. He said, ‘How am I going to take care of a white elephant? It’s—but to show
1662 you’re—that you mean business, cut off his foot. Send me his foot and I will accept that. It's a lot
1663 easier to deal with.’

1664 [Laughs] **Unless you're the elephant.**

1665 Unless you're the elephant. So the prince of Luang Prabang cut off the white elephant's foot, put it
1666 in an ornate silver box, shipped it through the good offices of Xieng Khouang, Chao Saykham's
1667 father and grandfather, en route to Hue. Well, Saykham's father or grandfather didn't like either one
1668 of these guys very much, took out the elephant's foot and replaced it with elephant shit, which
1669 arrived at Hue—and so the Vietnamese invaded, they dispatched an army to rape and pillage Luang
1670 Prabang and went through Xieng Khouang en route and raised havoc in Xieng Khouang. This was
1671 when wars were fought over important foreign policy.

1672 **Like insulting, yeah, foreign potentates.**

1673 Yeah. So you're right. I mean, this part of the world, the Emerald Buddha here was hidden in a
1674 stupa here in town for 43 years because, if you have the Emerald Buddha, it's like the king in a game
1675 of chess. You win. The war is over. And they hid it from a potential Burmese invasion. And it was

1676 so well hidden it was lost until that stupa downtown here got hit by lightening. And when they
1677 repaired it, they found it inside. I mean, yeah, this part of the world has been torn apart by war for a
1678 long time.

1679
1680 **(46:25) So as you were gathering these stories, what accounts did you hear about yellow rain**
1681 **and what opinion have you developed over the years regarding what it was or was not?**

1682 The U.S. army sent out their chemical warfare experts from, I think, Fort Detrick, Texas, I think, or
1683 Maryland. Anyway, four or five of these guys came out here and I was assigned to take them to Ban
1684 Vinai to interview Hmong who had been exposed to yellow rain. And I spent about a week with
1685 these guys. And they came out here totally [speaks in Thai to waiter], very skeptical. But they went
1686 away true believers. And these were guys who, independently—I sat in on these interviews where
1687 they took people apart, different guys interviewed them. They all came up with—and they were
1688 asking for—they were doing medical histories and gathering symptoms. And they said there were
1689 two chemical agents involved. One was a blistering agent and one was a nerve agent. And they
1690 came away absolutely convinced that the victims were telling the truth. No question. And then
1691 there's Bill Garrett's story in the *Geographic*, slightly less scientific. (Have some salad—if you want it.)

1692 **Oh, I'm pretty well stuffed.**

1693 Well, and then this episode with [name removed]. It sounds like—it sounds like it was for real. It
1694 sounds like maybe some Russians wanted to experiment with a delivery system—and this was a
1695 convenient theater to do the experiments in. But those two things—the [name removed] story and
1696 my experience with the U.S. Army bacteriological warfare experts. And that's me, anyway.

1697
1698 **(48:59) I forget the fellow's name. I should remember. He runs a program called**
1699 **MINORS. He's a photographer. Too many names in the last three weeks. But he said he**
1700 **was on a hillside when—the Lao plane went over an area where he was pretty sure there**
1701 **were Hmong people and he saw a little burst of yellow.**

1702 No kidding.

1703 **And he was convinced at first that it was his imagination and so he didn't say anything even**
1704 **though he was standing there next to someone else. But apparently not that many weeks**
1705 **later his friend brought it up and so they realized, no, they really both had seen the same**
1706 **thing.**

1707 This was a Hmong fighter?

1708 **No, this was an American photographer who was just out shooting photos and they saw**
1709 **this.**

1710 He was up near Phu Bia someplace?

1711 **Yeah, I forget exactly where he said he was. This was literally just a casual conversation we**
1712 **were having.**

1713 God Almighty. Christ, they still have this stuff?

1714 **Oh, no. This was years ago that he was there. No, I'm sorry, this wasn't recently.**

1715 OK. Wow. So I think there was no question about it. There was something there. It's like the
1716 MIA thing. The odds are that some of these guys survived. Jiggs used to say 600 guys had—are
1717 missing in Laos out of roughly 2,500. About 600 in Laos. A certain percentage had to survive their
1718 parachute. A certain percentage had to have survived whatever reception they got, particularly if
1719 they fell into regular NVA units, they're going to be taken care of. How come zero have—but the
1720 politics of it in the U.S. The head of the League of Families, a woman, was sleeping with Richard
1721 Childress who was the U.S. State Department—was he State or Pentagon, head of MIA. So talk
1722 about lobbying. [Interviewer laughs] And Charlie Salmon, who was DCM in Vientiane several years
1723 back, a couple decades back, tells a story of one—a *farang*-looking guy came out of—a photograph

1724 appeared. A photograph shows up. A guy looks like he's Western. 'Anybody know this guy?' And
1725 so this photograph circulated among the MIA families of the U.S. 'There's Dad.' So they come out
1726 to Vientiane. The embassy finally locates this guy. He's up near Ban Ban someplace. They get him
1727 down to Vientiane. 'That's Dad.' Dad could speak no English, but he's been brainwashed. They've
1728 brainwashed him so that he's totally lost his ability to speak English. They do DNA tests. It's not
1729 Dad. This is the product of some union. He's a half French, half something guy living—that's been
1730 living as a farmer from Ban Ban. This family could not believe otherwise. 'I'm sorry. That's him.
1731 He's just been—they've messed with his head.'

1732 **Genetically altered.**

1733 People just won't face reality. Astounding.

1734

1735 **(53:02) So what finally took you out of your position of helping refugees?**

1736 Well, let's see. Oh, I got a chance to—that was a two-year—there was a word for it. PASA—
1737 participating agency service agreement, under which we're seconded from AID to the State
1738 Department. So I got a chance to get back into my field, which is public health, as the deputy of the
1739 public health office in USAID Thailand. That lasted one year. I was supposed to come back, but
1740 the new director needed an extra slot to bring out his girlfriend to be his executive assistant. So that
1741 didn't work. So back to Washington. And then later I finagled an assignment back out and I ran
1742 that office, public health office for five years. And also several other the projects. We had—this is
1743 irrelevant to your subject,

1744 **That's all right.**

1745 but it's interesting that we had—well, first something that is relevant. Thailand beat malaria. They
1746 did a very nice job and Thailand did a very nice job in their family planning efforts and so forth.
1747 And all of these programs would be so easily replicated by the Lao. In fact, by Lao-speaking Isan
1748 former health workers. But—and in fact, the Thai government is trying to do that—they have a
1749 foreign aid program of their own and they're trying to do that, but I don't know how successful it is.
1750 Anyway, one of the interesting things about the Thai program was the science and technology grant
1751 program that we had to set up for the bilateral mission because the worldwide grants were all being
1752 won by Thai scientists and they were beating out scientists from virtually every other country in the
1753 world. So we set up a parallel but bilateral program just for Thailand. These are grants in material
1754 sciences, applied electronics and biotech. They have to be commercially—have commercial
1755 implications. At the higher echelon of education, Thailand is in very good shape. The problem is, at
1756 the high school level, only about 50% of high school aged kids finish high school in Thailand.
1757 There aren't enough slots. There aren't enough schools. It's a scandal. It's really terrible. So
1758 after—so my involvement in Laos really ended pretty much until '97 and I went to a part of Laos I'd
1759 never worked in, which was northeast of Ban Huai Sai, up in Nam Tha on the China border,
1760 doing—looking at the social impact of this road project. And this was part of the Asian
1761 Development Bank's loan requirements. They have to have an environmental impact statement and
1762 so forth. And so I got a chance to work with Jim Chamberlain and look at—and the people up
1763 there. And that is a really fascinating part of the world. Very, very large number of different
1764 languages spoken up there and it's really interesting. And you get up into China at Yunnan and you
1765 can—I can speak Lao and can get along quite well, in southern Yunnan. What they call Sip Song
1766 Pan Na, which is the old—they call it Xi Xuong Pan Na or something like that. But it's Sip Song
1767 Pan Na. And the name of the Mekong River in China is Lane Xang.

1768 **Interesting.**

1769 Lane Xang.

1770

1771 **(57:27) So what was it like to be back in Laos again, sort of ...**

1772 It was a very different experience because we were dealing—our counterparts were all Lao
1773 government officials and they're trying to do a job. Bureaucrats like every place else. But—and I
1774 met some Hmong. One of the senior officials in the Nam Tha transportation department was a
1775 Hmong engineer. And we talked a little bit about Sam Thong, Long Tieng in the old days. He
1776 wasn't involved, so—he'd been—he was Hmong from way up there. But they wrestled with—the
1777 bureaucrats wrestle with the imposition of the party. The party is a pain. The mandatory education
1778 sessions that you have to go to, to listen to policy is a pain. And at every structure of government,
1779 you see, you have the regular bureaucratic structure and then you have the party. And so they have
1780 to clear on everything. And they're hacks. They may not really understand what's going on with
1781 road design or anything else. So it's a pain. And that part of Laos is being sold out to China and the
1782 Chinese built the TV station in Udom Sai. They now call it Udom Sai. It's the big town north of
1783 Pak Beng. And part of the deal is the 10-year exclusive right to do the programming. So they're
1784 going to Sinocize that—and they're—as late as, I mean, as recently as 2002, I went back again to
1785 Luang Nam Tha and a number of Chinese speakers who spoke no Lao, and the market was
1786 enormous. These people are just flooding in and getting papers. Plus investment by a lot of
1787 Chinese in rubber plantations, which contributed the last couple of years to a tremendous amount of
1788 smoke all over this part of the world, big clearing operations to grow rubber up there. So it's China.
1789 China agreed to fund half of the cost of the bridge between Chiang Khong and Ban Huai Sai. This
1790 a bridge between Laos and Thailand. But because they view that road as such a high priority road,
1791 they're paying half the cost of the bridge, which is going to be around \$30 million, \$40 million. And
1792 it's so important because it will put a container at the Port of Bangkok in two day from Kunming
1793 instead of one week to Shenzhen or Zhuhai. It's faster. They can be at the border in a day and they
1794 can be in Bangkok in another day with a container. So fortunately, it's not going to come right
1795 through here. It will—it goes—the route goes slightly east of here. But people around here, the
1796 new Mae Fah Luang University north of town here has a Chinese language center—beautiful place.
1797 They have native teachers. A bunch of kids from Beijing teaching Chinese. People in town here are
1798 learning Chinese, getting ready for the flood, the SUVs, the heavy smokers coming down. It's—this
1799 is the Chinese century, the 21st century.

1800

1801 **(1:01:57) Oh, no doubt about it. No doubt about it. It's—I've heard people say this. Do**
1802 **you think it's fair to characterize sort of the end of the war period as Vietnam trying to**
1803 **clamp onto Laos and China trying to clamp onto Thailand?**

1804 No, I think that—no, I don't—I don't buy the latter part of that because the Thai negotiated with
1805 the Chinese and end the Chinese support for the Communist part of Thailand and peripherally, end
1806 to support for the Communist party of Burma, and on the basis of commercial interests. So the
1807 Thai and the Chinese came to an understanding that stuck. But the Vietnamese indeed want to
1808 hand onto Laos for whatever reason. Part of it is irredentist, I believe. Part of it may be paranoia.
1809 Part of it may be the knowledge that the way the Vietnamese populated South Vietnam was through
1810 Laos, through Thakhek and straight down the river. But for whatever reason they want to maintain
1811 their influence in Laos.

1812

1813 **(1:03:28) Were there—do you think there were hopes by Vietnam that they might have more**
1814 **influence in Bangkok or in Thailand that they ended up having?**

1815 In Thailand?

1816 **Yeah.**

1817 I wonder—I don't know how much influence in Thailand. They're probably smart enough to realize
1818 that the Thais would never—I mean, what does Vietnam have to offer Thailand? China, yeah, but, I
1819 don't know. The Vietnamese influence in Thailand [Pauses] Now there is—there are a lot of

1820 Vietnamese around Sakon Nakhon. There are a lot of Vietnamese from Dien Bien Phu across from
1821 Vientiane. But politically, I mean, in the absence of the Communist movement, which is pretty
1822 dead, I don't think... [Pauses] Vietnam is interested in getting investment from everywhere,
1823 including Thailand. That's really—that's what people want now. But politically, the real question is
1824 when or how will the Vietnamese ever loosen their hold over the Lao government? That's the real
1825 question. What do you hear from the Hmong about their—the Hmong diaspora about their
1826 relations with the Hmong in China, in Kuang Shu?

1827 **Well, I think it's starting to develop as a generation of Hmong scholars begin to emerge. If**
1828 **you look at—I think there's more than 180 Hmong PhDs in the United States now. A lot of**
1829 **them are interested in studying their own history, their own culture, developing sort of an**
1830 **anthropological paradigm for the Hmong people, all these kinds of things. So a lot of them**
1831 **are looking to China. And a lot of them are sort of searching for their roots in China. After**
1832 **all, the Hmong were relative newcomers to Southeast Asia. So I think most of them sort of**
1833 **look to China more as their home, particularly, I think, in the wake of some of the scandals**
1834 **and some of the difficulties that have come about with General Vang Pao and Neo Hom**
1835 **and some of the rhetoric that's accompanied that. That's safer political ground, if you will.**

1836

1837 [McKeithen & Interviewer talk about issues related to the Hmong in Minnesota]

1838

1839 **(1:17:24) So you said you came back here to visit Doc Weldon and that's when you sort of**
1840 **decided this might be a place to ...**

1841 I was—I was—he had—he was working for Bechtel in Korea and he had married—well, he had
1842 worked in the refugee camps, actually. He had—he was the medical doctor working for Catholic
1843 Relief Services in charge of Nong Khai, in Nong Khai camp. After he left Laos he went to the
1844 Philippines and then he did emergency room work in New Orleans for three years, as he put it, to
1845 get his hand back in clinical medicine. And then he went to work in Saudi Arabia with Bechtel.
1846 And at a certain point, and I've got these—I don't have the sequence right, but at a certain point he
1847 ended up, while I was in the refugee section—'79 to '81—working for CRS in Nong Khai, living in
1848 Nong Khai. My wife introduced me to his wife, who just passed away. And he then went to—and
1849 Becky, his daughter moved to Thailand, did some work in the camps, did a lot with a lot of the
1850 French speakers doing histories with the elite people in the camps. Becky still lives here. So he
1851 then—I don't know how he ended up in Chiang Rai, but ask Becky—oh, Becky married the owner
1852 who just died—former owner of the Golden Triangle Inn, whose brother now runs it. And she
1853 built, on her father's instructions, she built him a house—she's a good builder—on a piece of
1854 property that he bought here south of town. He was working in Korea and came back from time to
1855 time. And the house was finished. We were still in Bangkok [Pauses] and when—and whenever—I
1856 can't remember exactly when that house was finished, but I think it may have been mid-80s when
1857 we came back to Thailand—yes, in '84, '85—and visited him, he was fully retired at that point. And
1858 liked Chiang Rai and then bought some land and built on it. So that's how he ended up here. But
1859 he had done work in the Lao refugee camps in Nong Khai, specifically. I think—I don't know if he
1860 ever went to Ban Vinai or not. I'm not sure. But he was the—and then, CRS made him—put him
1861 in charge of their country-wide medical program for all camps, which he hated because it was very
1862 bureaucratic. He preferred the clinical stuff. So he worked with CRS for a couple years in Thailand.

1863

1864 **(1:20:53) Vint Lawrence said that he visited Doc Weldon not that long before he died, if I**
1865 **remember correctly.**

1866 Yeah, I wasn't here. I was—I can't remember where I was, but probably in the States. But I know
1867 Vint came out and—yeah.

1868
1869 **(1:21:10) He said Doc Weldon literally refused—he just did not want to go back to Laos. He**
1870 **was kind of embittered about the experience he had there. Do you recall him...**
1871 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
1872 didn't want to travel at all. He never went back to the States. Never went anywhere. Made
1873 furniture and hung out here. Traveling was not his thing.
1874 **I'm sure he'd done enough in a way.**
1875 He had an endless stream of visitors coming to talk to him, which he enjoyed. And he stayed active
1876 and busy. But he didn't treat himself. He finally admitted that he ignored the advice that he
1877 routinely gave his patients about routine checkups and this and that. He had a stubborn streak,
1878 particularly with regards to his own health. And he just let it go much too long.
1879
1880 **(1:22:20) So when you get together with people who shared some or most or all of these**
1881 **experiences with you, when you kind of get beyond the funny stories about people who did**
1882 **silly things or things of that nature and maybe you've had a few drinks or whatever, and you**
1883 **start reflecting on the broader experience—if indeed that happens.**
1884 It happens, yeah.
1885 **What kinds of themes come out of ...**
1886 What a waste, particularly in the context of the national interest, what a waste. Because it really was.
1887 It was—the whole—I don't know. We just—we don't seem to learn.
1888 **Is there—I'm sorry. Please go ahead.**
1889 Part of our job was—in those days the press was the enemy. Reporters were—Sam Thong existed
1890 to deflect attention from the existence of Long Tieng. So anytime reporters came even to Sam
1891 Thong, it was something to be viewed with great apprehension. And we had a secretary named Ann
1892 Bradley, who went on to become an administrative officer in AID. A very good career. She was
1893 sitting by the desk in Sam Thong and Vientiane called on the radio and said that a planeload of
1894 reporters was en route to Sam Thong. And she said, 'Hey, there's a planeload of reporters en route
1895 to Sam Thong. What do we do?' And somebody said, 'Fuck 'em.' And she said, 'But that's not in
1896 my job description.' [Interviewer guffaws] Which was perfect. Perfect response. But there were
1897 reporters and there were reporters. Henry Kamm worked for the New York Times—K-a-m-m.
1898 Really smart. He was a reporter who knew the answer to the question before he ever asked it. He
1899 did his homework. He was really savvy. And he wrote a lot about the—you'll see his stuff in the
1900 New York Times archives, his articles from Laos. They are spot on. Very sharp. Good French
1901 speaker. Very sharp guy. Robert Shaplen, not bad. I mean, so—but Laos did tend to attract the
1902 Tammy Arbuckles and the people that—the real amateurs. They were just looking for sensation and
1903 so forth. And we were not in a very good position to give, really, an accurate picture of what was
1904 going on because we were sort of at a very low level of things. We knew nothing, virtually nothing
1905 about the air war except the sequellae, which we saw enough of to realize that it was pretty bad. I
1906 mean ...
1907 **Sequellae?**
1908 Well, the consequences—I mean, I saw the result of an air strike where the pilot misread the
1909 coordinates. He was in the wrong map quadrant -- instead of TG it was TF. He was off by 100
1910 kilometers. Blew apart a village. He was 100 kilometers off. And the Air Force couldn't hit
1911 anything because they were going so fast and it was all instrument work. They all relied on this
1912 TACAN—Tactical Air Navigation navigation aids. And when Phu Pha Thi, site 85 fell, two days
1913 later Johnson announced an end to the bombing of North Vietnam. The Vietnamese, for whatever
1914 reason, whether it was coincidental or not, naturally assumed that it was because of a technical
1915 reason. The radar operators at Pha Thi could tell the pilots where to go. They could vector them

1916 through weather to bomb targets in North Vietnam. And so under those circumstances would one
1917 ever think that the Vietnamese would ever give up that site? No. Yet we supported VP's attempts
1918 to try to retake Phou Pha Thi. It was crazy.

1919
1920 **(1:27:32) Have you kept track of VP's career and what he's been up to in the United States**
1921 **or is that something you...?**

1922 No. Only recently because my brother is a lawyer that knows this attorney that's taken on his case
1923 pro bono, John Kecker. And so he sent me the briefs. And Paul White told me, disclosed about a
1924 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
1925 this right, but a Hmong Air Force reunion.

1926 **That had to be a very small gathering.**

1927 Anyway, it was a gathering of Hmong. It was in—somewhere around Minnesota or Michigan. Paul
1928 was there. There were a lot of photographs of him and VP. And he gave a little—VP asked him to
1929 say a few words and he disclosed that he had turned down an ambassadorial appointment to Laos.
1930 That Madeleine Albright—he was USAID director in Mexico. Madeleine Albright had asked him to
1931 be ambassador to Laos and he said, 'I can't do it because I can't work with the PL.' And he never
1932 told anybody about it. And this was amazing. Here's a guy, not independently wealthy. USAID
1933 career officer. The chance to be an ambassador. That's a big deal. And he turned it down on
1934 principle. It's huge. That is really, really, I mean...

1935 **They didn't say—**

1936 Well, I think he made a horrible mistake. I think he would have done a fantastic job. But in his
1937 soul—we roomed at Sam Thong for a couple years. Yeah. In his soul, he said, 'I can't work with
1938 these people. They've done too many bad things to my friends.' That is really—you don't find
1939 many people make a decision like that. And Wendy Chamberlain got the gig instead. That was the
1940 timing.

1941
1942 **(1:29:55) Interesting. I sat down with Paul and Tom Ward and Carol Mills all at the same**
1943 **time.**

1944 Oh, wow.

1945 **And then Paul got up and left kind of in the middle, so I'm sure there are other tales he**
1946 **could have told, but Tom says he has a way of getting up and leaving in the middle of**
1947 **things.**

1948 Did you—Paul also has a great set of photographs.

1949 **Yes. In fact, I think I've downloaded all of them or at least most of them. He donated them**
1950 **to the Hmong Cultural Center in St. Paul and I made a tiny little documentary about the**
1951 **Hmong resettlement to the Twin Cities.**

1952
1953 [Small redaction to conversation here.]

1954
1955 Well, I'm looking at the watch also.

1956 **Oh, OK. So it's about that time.**

1957 Yeah.

1958 **Well, I think we've covered pretty much everything.**

1959 Yeah. I wish I had a better memory. That would be nice if I could remember this stuff.

1960
1961 [Small redaction]

1962

1963 I can't thank you enough. This has been great. I really appreciate it a lot. And let me turn
1964 all this junk off first.