Interview with Mac Thompson

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We'll start with the obvious. Your name, sir.

[Chuckles] MacAlan Thompson or more commonly known as Mac.

And where were you born?

Eleven June, 1941. Just made it as a prewar baby.

All right. Where did you grow up and go to school, that sort of stuff?

Well, grew up—born in Portland, Oregon and grew up in all that immediate area. High school at Lake Oswego just outside of Portland and the first two years, ’59 to ’61, off to college in Colorado—Colorado School of Mines.

Which is in Golden, Colorado, which, coincidentally, is where the Coors Brewery is.

Right. I've been there.

Which contributed to my only staying two years at that school, I think, that …

[Laughs] OK.

Transferred back to Oregon State University then, the fall of ’61 and in ’63 graduated in forest engineering.

OK. So, how did you get from there to signing up for IVS and going overseas?

Well, ROTC at Oregon State—the fall of ’63, November of ’63, off to the army. Three months engineer offered basic course in Fort Belvoir, Virginia. And I was assigned to—oh, Fort Devens, Massachusetts for my two years. While we were at Fort Belvoir the—somebody from personnel came down in the Pentagon and said, ‘Hey, you're all second lieutenants. You all have the same
MOS [Military Occupational Specialty]—1331. You're combat engineer platoon leader. So you're basically interchangeable. If you find somebody you want to swap with, swap—let us know before the deadline; whatever that was. So I put my notice on the board—I'm not interested in Fort Devens. Anybody want to swap? One guy didn't want to go to Germany, but that was an extra year—a three-year commitment. I said, ‘No.’ Another guy didn't want to go to Korea, but—ooh! Wintertime—that didn't sound good. And the day before the deadline a guy comes running up and says, ‘Hey, hey, Thompson, I've been looking for you. Well, I want to swap.’ ‘Well, where are you going?’ And he says, ‘Well, I'm from Fort—50 miles from Fort Devens and my wife is seven months pregnant. And swap, swap, please.’ ‘Well, where are you going?’ Well, he's going to Korat, Thailand. I knew where Thailand was, so, ‘Well, OK, given the deadline, what the hell? I'll go to Thailand.’ That was February 1964, showed up here in Thailand. And I'm—here I still am.

[Chuckles] You know, one year up at Korat and February of '65 off to Dugway Proving Grounds, Utah, until I got out of the army in November of '65. And then just wandering around job hunting back in Portland, not doing very much and just had run across a 3x5 card on a—where was it? Down at the Southern Oregon College of Education. I was just traveling through there and paying for breakfast at the cafeteria. I just wrote down—you know, it said International Voluntary Services, positions in Vietnam and Laos and found that note a few weeks later. And I had lots of job applications out and sent one off to them. And on towards April '66—this would have been December of '65. Along towards April of '66, got two phone calls the same Friday—one from Bureau of Land Management in Fairbanks. I had already been rejected for smoke jumping up there for that summer. And they said, ‘Hey, you know, we've had some no-shows. Can you show up on Monday?’ But just before that, I'd got a phone call from the IVS traveling interviewer and said, ‘Hey, coming through Portland Airport. Could I come out in the airport and we'll talk?’ I said, ‘OK. Well, I'll call you guys back on Saturday.’ So, talked to the IVS guy and said, ‘Hey, it doesn't pay very much, but it sounds interesting.’ And so, he said, ‘Well, it looks like a lock.’ Called the BLM and said, ‘Oh, I won't go there.’ Then June '66, off to Washington D.C. for orientation. And we had—our group had seven weeks of Lao language training at Foreign Service Institute in Arlington. And then, in September of '66, you know, we went to Laos. But right after the flood. The water—the flood waters had gone down, but not enough to open the airport. So, we went in by helicopter from Udorn into That Luang there in Vientiane.

(4:48) I'm going to check this for just a second. My guess is that we're OK.

[Interviewer turns off recorder to check microphone, new track begins]

(0:00) OK. So, you hit the ground where here?

[Confused]

I'm sorry, in Laos?

In Laos, it was September '66 right after the flood, and I was in Vientiane for about a week. And oh, the—parts of the runway at Wattay Airport, you know, the subsurface dried out enough so they had little airplanes flying in and out. So at that time, we had two people—myself and another guy—John Vantine who were going to be assigned up in Hongsa. So we got on the Dornier airplane—little twin engine STOL [short take-off and landing] airplane made in Germany that was flown by Continental Air Services, Inc. And we flew up to Hongsa. And—which is in Sayabouri Province.

(0:43) So what was your job description?

Well, that was—at that time, USAID had a program that was a cooperative with IVS, called the Forward Area Team Program—USAID funded. Well, the whole USAID—or IVS program in Laos
(1:52) OK, so, I'm sorry. I'm distracted by bugs here—so if you would, just describe the work that you did there and how successful it was.

Well, it's hard to say how successful. [Chuckles] You know, I was there—only there up until about January of '67. IVS stayed in, you know, with different people, stayed in the valley there up until at least 1971, I think, '71 or '72. In fact, one of the guys who was there—Jim Archer, a Canadian, he's been back in Laos for eight or nine years, working out east of Savannakhet for a Canadian development agency. And I've e-mailed with him fairly often and kind of rarely, with a couple of the other people that have been in Hongs. And there—Hongs was mostly an ethnic Lao valley—or the valley parts of it were. There were some Hmong that came through—more Yao, it seemed in the hillsides and—that were down in the markets, you'd see now and then. A very isolated valley. Now you can drive to it. But, in fact, Tony Zola, a couple years ago drove from Hongs Valley down to Sayabouri town. He was up there on a—I think, on a World Bank sponsored trip in a four-wheel drive pickup. But that is accessible to the Mekong River by road and the Mekong then from—either from Thailand, Chiang Khong, Houei Sai or Luang Prabang. But after Hongs, a guy named—was transferred up to Nam Bac, Lima Site 203, up north of Luang Prabang. And that was a relatively hot area. Then, taken back—let's see, in spring of '66, it was taken back from Pathet Lao forces. And there was an IVS guy up there named [Kyde Levitt] and he was finishing his two years. And so I was assigned up there then to replace him. And got up there and should be, oh, probably mid-February, late February 1967. And we were there just a few weeks. We had a tent there, lived in a tent, which was maybe 100 yards from the local Lao army camp. And had a pretty good shootout one evening and so I and my field assistant, we walked over to—scrambled over to the army camp and stayed there through the night and then through parts of the morning. And there was still sporadic shooting going on, so no evac airplane came in until—what, late afternoon, mid afternoon. You know, I had my radio—ground air radio talking to the pilots. And the mid afternoon, got a H-34 come in on the west end of the runway because it was all quiet down there and picked up the wounded—you know, a couple trips of wounded and a little bit of re-supply, and then myself and the field assistant went out. And after that, normally I did not spend the night at Nam Bac. USAID didn't want me to and the IVS didn't want me to, so I lived, for the most part, down at Luang Prabang and commuted back and forth in the daytime. And...

(5:10) Well, let me back you up to this exchange you made with this desperate fellow who wanted to be near his pregnant wife.

Oh, back at...

How much did you know about the situation in Laos when you made this change and suddenly found yourself heading in a direction you hadn't anticipated?

[Pauses] The situation in Laos—virtually nothing. Oh, I had read in, you know, Time and Newsweek, back when I was in college, you know, the Kennedy era when he sent the Marines into—oh, Udom—the helicopters and I forget—Larry Fraser, the guy you met yesterday—if he was part of that early Marine group or not, but …

No.
Well, you know, we didn't talk as much about Vietnam as we did about Laos, so I'll just say...

Well, it wasn't Vietnam. They went into Udorn in Thailand.

OK.

He didn't mention it.

... I forget what month it was in 1962, where a Marine helicopter wing or a couple of wings went in and that's actually when the U.S. military buildup kind of started in Thailand. The U.S. Army buildup, not Air Force. And they—oh, that was played at a bit in the newspapers. But you know, in *Time* and *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report*. So, I knew about Thailand, but not very much. And I knew, essentially, zero about Laos. And then, when got up to Korat in Thailand—this was—

we got there in February of '64 to February of '65—heard again very little about Laos because we didn't get much in the way of newspaper up there at that time and there was no U.S. TV as it came in later to the U.S. forces up there. About the weekend I arrived, there was a coup d'état in Laos and we were all on alert. And then the weekend before I left, there was another semi-coup d'état in Laos and we were on—restricted to base and loading up our trucks, you know, getting ready to evacuate American civilians, if need be, from Vientiane, which didn't come off. Everything quieted down in Laos. But that was about all I knew about Laos.

(7:22) So, what was your sort of learning process as you got into first one village and then another about the status of things in Laos, about the role of ethnic minorities in the campaign and things of that nature?

Well, again, up country in places like Xieng Lom, prior to Hongsa, where I first was the first five months, there was no news except what you might be able to pick up on your own personal little shortwave radio, maybe VOA or a station like that—BBC. We had electricity, say, 15 minutes to 30 minutes a day. You know, a radio check to crank up our little three KW generator in the morning in the morning and in the afternoon, 5:00, make radio check with Luang Prabang. You know, just said, 'Hey, everything's still OK.' Because the rule was if you missed two radio checks, they were supposed to send an airplane out to see if there was a problem—if you were wandering around in the bush or not. So, we had no news except now and then an airplane would come by and, you know, a couple of the pilots were nice. They'd say, 'Hey, there's some activity'... We were just talking to them on the radio, they might not land. But, 'Hey, there's some activity to the east of you guys. Sleep gently the next night or two.' So, on the geopolitics side, absolutely nothing. You know, living in the Lao Valley, we saw a few of the highlanders, but had no interaction with them. The only things I did with the Yao there—I used to buy—get some brass from 105 Howitzer shells from Muong Soui, one of our other guys who worked over there. And they'd pound them into bracelets and then take the bracelets and they'd sell them to Americans down in Vientiane and then take the money back [Chuckles] to the villagers and, you know, a little producing some income, cash income. And—but there's no real insight into the war. What I got into later at Xieng Lom and other places, I found on my little shortwave radio, just again a personal GE portable shortwave, you know, the frequencies that were used—a couple of them were used by the airplanes, the Air America and Continental airplanes for the various odds and ends of position reports, and if you had your map and you listened long enough and you got down to Vientiane every now and then, you could—and you had the site book, the Air America field—published field—the air field site index for Laos, you could kind of follow the war from what was going on, just from a lot of the radio chatter. And you got so you could recognize voices oft times. And ... [Chuckles]
(10:14) So, to what extent did you rely on Air America or Continental Air or, you know, other services to get your work done?

Well, to get to work. We—they were used to get in and out of places. If we were staying for an extended period of time, they brought replacement food up from the commissary because often there was not very much available locally to buy or not very much I really wanted to eat. And in a couple of the places I worked, like Nam Bac, there was only either—well, primarily Air America at that time, you know, air available to get cement roofing sheets or whatever else I needed up to Nam Bac itself because the river—the Nam Ou River was closed, you know, by the bad guys. And Hongsa, for—at that time, the river was often open so we could get cement down from the Thai border at Chiang Khong, Ban Houei Sai by riverboat, and then hauled over the ridgeline by, you know, elephants. And I guess that was one of the early contracts was elephant hauling contracts…

[Mr. Thompson's cell phone goes off. Recorder turned off, new track begins.]

(0:00) Coming through loud and clear.

All right. No, they, well, just brief background. I was in Vientiane. I moved from Ban Houei Sai down to Vientiane in June of 1970. And until June of '75 I was based in Vientiane. And I spent 99% of my time in Vientiane. You know, with some trips up country, oh, several trips up to Long Tieng and up country from there just checking on security things for our C-46 program. But I did the organizing for the logistics part of it and the gross drop schedule each month for that period.

And they—come, oh, April '75—that would have been mid-April—myself and two other guys—three other—two Lao and one other USAID guy—we went to Manila for a food storage conference, mostly for an appeal for aid, you know, U.S. donated food overseas, which we had quite a bit of in Vientiane. And while we were there in, again, mid April '75, Phnom Penh went down the tubes. And that was April 17, I think, when it went down. And at that same time, the evacuation of Saigon had started, kind of a—not a panic evacuation as yet, but people would be showing up at—in the evening at the Seafront restaurant, kind of a U.S. mission restaurant bar complex on, oh, on the main drag. And you know, ‘What are you doing here?’ ‘Well, you know, we’re from Vientiane.’ ‘Well, we just got evacuated from Saigon.’ ‘Oh, OK, well, interesting.’ And then, myself and the other three people, we flew back to Vientiane. And then April 29, 30, Saigon went down the tubes. And I’m sometimes kind of a thinking guy. So, I think it was the next weekend, my Volkswagen camper—I had a '71 VW camper I had bought secondhand in '73 in Vientiane. And it needed a little bit of work done on it, too, and the Volkswagen dealer in Vientiane didn’t have much for parts. The people in Udorn did. So I loaded everything I owned from my house, except a bit monster stereo cabinet that might have fit on top of the car, but everything except a suitcase to—and the clothes to live out of and spayed the wheels on the car and drove it down across the river over to Nong Khai that weekend. Monday, back in Vientiane and—by taxi, and some of the people in the office—‘Where's your car?’ ‘Well, I took it down to Udorn for maintenance.’ ‘Oh, you’re—chicken shit.’ [Chuckles] I said, ‘No, no, I'm not.’ Anyway, oh, see, that was early May—May 10, something like that. And I don't remember the exact date, but about May 23, '75, when the leftist students and not really the PL [Pathet Lao] soldiers, but leftist students and USAID protestors surrounded the USAID compound in Vientiane, locked it up. And also the large, you know, the housing compound out at Kilometer Six, just north of town. And prior to that Savannakhet had had, you know, problems and USAID in Savannakhet and USAID in Luang Prabang and USAID Ban Houei Sai, which I personally wasn't that much aware of. You know, we'd just hear rumors of it in Vientiane. I was very low on the totem pole at that time, you know, within the USAID hierarchy. But anyway, I lived outside the compound—outside of the housing compound at KM Six. Probably, oh, I don't know, maybe 20%, 30% of our people did, some with families, other bachelors like I was. And
about—it took about a week before we got back into the compound and the negotiation with the
PL. But for that last month, my job was going around with a car and a crow bar and bolt cutters,
going to a house and—formerly leased by USAID, busting into it and then loading up the personal
effects of the occupants and getting it out to our packers and then delivered to the airport to be
either flown down to Bangkok or later we started flying things to Udorn. It was just a closer haul.
And I was going to be staying on. And day by day, we had people leaving, you know, small numbers
of people. I forget if we actually chartered the Air Lao or Thai Air International plane or not, but
[there were] numbers of people, worker people and their families, wives and kids, leaving every day
until mid June we were down to a fairly small number of people. And my plan was to stay on for
another month, you know, continue working on household effects. But June 26, ’75, I believe it
was, I had gone in—I had taken some cars across the river to Nong Khai already that morning—
personal cars. And came back in to say good-bye to our USAID director Gordon Ramsey and his
secretary Bea Perez, who were leaving, early afternoon on a Thai International flight.
And they said, ‘Hey, you’ve got to go, too. We've all be PNG’d.’ You know, persona non grata. I
said, ‘Well, hey, but I was planning on staying.’ And ‘Well, no you can’t. You've got to be out.’ And
Chris Chapman, the DCM or chargee was there—we didn't have an ambassador at the time. He had
already transferred down to Bangkok with Charlie Whitehouse. But they said, ‘No, no. You've got
to go.’ You know, and I said, ‘Well, I can’t. You know, all my stuff is—I haven’t packed a bag.’
And they said, ‘Well, OK. You can go out on the 4:00 DAO—defense attaché airplane, the C-47.’ I
said, ‘No, I got my car over at Nong Khai. You know, I'll just go out 5:00, 6:00 tonight.’ ‘No, you
can’t do that. The road's blocked in between here and Thanaleng.’ I said, ‘No, it’s not. I’ve been
down there twice this morning and I took 17 cars across.’ So it was agreed I would leave, you know,
that—before close of business, roughly. But the main reason, I had something like 21 cases of
Foster beer [Interviewer laughs] down at my house I had picked up from the Australians. They
owed me some beer. And I wanted to get that to get it back. Anyway, I got out—went over in the
Australian forestry office and got my buddies there and we went down and loaded the beer up and
got that back, got my money back and they delivered me down to Thadeua and took a long tail boat
across the river. But anyway, so that was sort of my end of official stay in Laos. That was 26 June.
I think, you know, spent the weekend there in Nong Khai and then drove on down to Bangkok.
And here in Bangkok, we’re on the Sukhumvit Soi 11. Sukhumvit Soi 1 is where our USAID Lao
Bangkok liaison office was that had been in existence since about 1963 or ’64, I think, right up and
through, well, through late ’75, early ’76, there was a, oh, a contract in our office where a lot of the
Thai goods, like rice, you know, and salt and things that we bought in Bangkok and transportation
for shipping up country, meeting and greeting people when they transited Bangkok. And I reported
in there. They said, ‘Well, what’s up? I've been tossed out. Are we supposed to go back to
Washington?’ They said, ‘No, no. You stay on here for a month TDY—temporary duty.’ And we
worked out at Quang Tri Port at the big warehouse where the furniture we had evacuated from Laos
was just stacked in long, long piles, and rows, all mixed up. It had not been packed very well. It was
an evacuation of furniture from Laos. And you know, we had encouraged people to try to put their
names on things. But to try to sort it out. That was about the time—that was July ’75, about the
time the refugee program was starting. And the counselor staff here at Bangkok from the embassy
was working on some of this. You know, primarily, it was the Vietnamese that were flying out.
Some of them flying out their airplanes out to U Taphao Air Base. Others—there were a few
Cambodians on the border. You know, there was no—there was still a Vietnamese refugee program
at that time. And why does—I guess, I don’t know, one of the—some of the embassy people heard
that I was down here. And they asked if I would go back up to Udorn and help crank up a program
there. You know, do some interviews. So, ‘Well, fine.’ You know, June—no, August 5, I drove
back up to Udorn, '75, and checked in with the consul up there. And that was sort of the start of
my time in Thailand on that program, detailed to state from USAID.

(9:08) Now, as I understand it. This is—when I was talking to Lionel Rosenblatt, there was
you, there was Jerry Daniels and there was John Tucker?

John Tucker came a bit later. Jerry was there living out what they call the JLD—joint liaison
detachment, which is also called AB1—administrative building one, when we're out at the air base,
which is the CIA office building. Kind of a bunkhouse upstairs and their offices downstairs.

Taj Mahal.

Right—well, not quite. But anyway …

As it's referred to.

Yeah. Right next to the, oh, Air America ramp and the Continental hangars—Continental or CASI
hangars. And I didn't know Jerry at that time. I had not met him in Laos. When I worked out of
Sam Thong, I think he was off and back in Missoula getting a degree, '69. But anyway, I saw him a
couple times, but the first thing there in Udorn was cranking up or interviews of the Thai Dam
refugees, maybe 600 of them or so that were up in [Wat Nun Pranau] in Nong Khai that we got
there for Thai Dam, you know, the older people from North Vietnam into Laos and actually some
into Thailand, too. And the—some Tai Nung, another ethnic group from North Vietnam. And we
got those people processed out under the Vietnamese quotas. And they all had to be in the U.S. by
30 September 1975, the end of the fiscal year. And that's what I was talking with Jerry about—you
know, the Hmong are here. Well, and there were lots of Lao, too. There were Lao up in Nong
Khai and Lao—there were no camps, really, at that time. You know, quite a few Lao in Udorn. Lao
Air Force people in Udorn. Some—a few had even flown their planes out. Yeah, one of them lives
in Portland. I had to go down to the governor's office and sign a receipt for the guy to get him out
of jail. But I wish I had kept a copy of that. [Interviewer laughs] But it would be good to show his
grandkids. [Takes a sip of beer] Sipping a Singha here at the moment.

Yes, absolutely.

Anyway, the [Pauses] at Nong Khai, I had seen the Hmong encampment area, which is off on the
north side of the road in what they call the [Sogo Toa]. It was the old border police detention
center, primarily, I think, earlier for Vietnamese. And at that time, UNHCR did not exist at the
Nong Khai - Udorn area, so there was no support for any of the people who were in camp. One of
the Thai Chinese guys in Nong Khai, a guy named [Kim Gai], who had, over the many years, had
many, many USAID contracts and transportation contracts in Thailand with the U.S. military, he
started providing, you know, some water and things of this sort, I think, out of his own pocket. I
don't know if he ever got reimbursed for it or not. But anyway, the—we had an INS guy, the
district director from Hong Kong, Sam Feldman, came in from Thailand and he came up to Udorn
and he did the processing on the Thai Da, you know, approving for U.S. immigration. Now we
also, of course, at that time, we were talking about all the other groups that were in Udorn and also
other camp—other places in Thailand, in Nan and Chiang Rai provinces primarily. And you
know—and I was not—well, I was here and, again, low on the totem pole. I don't know what the
politics were back in the U.S., but my understanding in talking with Lionel is that decisions had been
made that the Hmong—the Meo—were not eligible for U.S. resettlement, no real need to send them
to the U.S. And that was sort of blanket for all hill tribes. Sam was on the phone every now and
then, through his headquarters, central office. What mainly sticks in mind is Saul Eisenstein, who
was not the director of INS. The director's name escapes me. It was a retired Marine general of one
grade. But anyway, Sam decided he wanted to see what a Hmong is. So Jerry set this up and the
Hmong were encamped at that time down at Namphong. And so Jerry spent quite a bit of time
down at Namphong. He went down there and must admit it was a bit of a sandbagging, I think,
because I went down with Sam and Tucker may have been there—probably was there by then. It would have been September '75, down to Namphong. And you know, it starts out kind of with, you know, fanaticize a little bit, talk, you know, with Yang Dao. And Yang Dao says, ‘Parlez-vous Français?’ We all said, ‘Duh. Who's this yo-yo?’ ‘Well,’ they said, ‘Well, he's the only PhD Hmong we got in the world.’ ‘Oh, well, he doesn't speak English. Don't need to talk to him.’ And then there's USAID medic this and then there's major that and captain this and, oh, nurse this—everybody's speaking, you know, decent English to fantastic English, down the line for 50 or 100 people. And that—we were back to Udorn that evening and Sam's on the phone at the consulate calling back to central office saying, ‘I will personally pick 1,200 Hmong for the U.S. program.'

(14:37) Now, Sam, again is in what position?
He's the INS district director for—out of Hong Kong that included Thailand and Korea and, you know, not Guam, I think, but at least Southeast Asia. And that was approved and the central office and Sam then spent a few days doing it. At that time, we had, of course, no idea that there would be any future program going on. So an extremely restricted family structure. You know, husband, wife, kids.

Yeah, which to the Hmong is anathema.
If—you know, no dependent parents, you know, things of this sort. If you didn't want to go, that was OK. And I remember one family—well, at that time, we did telegrams and on bios from—a brief bio, cabled it into Washington and went to the ACVA, the sort of joint voluntary agency headquarters and they farmed it out to the six, seven …

And how's ACVA different from [JVA] or …
Oh, no, JVA is a local thing here in Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong. You know, doing the in-processing, if you will, the out-processing interviews. And the ACVA—and I forget exactly what it stands for. The VA—voluntary agencies. But kind of an over blanket group with—of the six or seven. And they would farm the bios out to the different VOLAGs [Voluntary Agencies] in the U.S. And then we would get a cable back, you know, OK, Ying Yang Phu has been sponsored to Minneapolis. And the first, if I remember correctly, the first—I don't remember the guy's name, but the first Hmong who got a bio or got a sponsor down at Namphong and we went down there—Namphong or Nong Khai, anyway, because we picked a few from Nong Khai, too. But down there, gave them the bio. They had to sign and agree to go. And well, one of the guys said, well, that's OK. So, you know, ‘How many Hmong are there in Minneapolis?’ ‘Well, zero.’ ‘Oh, who's there?’ ‘Well, a lot of Americans.’ ‘Oh, how many of those people speak Hmong?’ And this guy had been a USAID bulldozer operator. He didn't speak English. So …

Is it Leng Vang, perhaps?
Huh?
Leng Vang?
No, no idea what the name is.
OK. Well, that was the first guy who came to the Twin Cities area.
Well, it may have been, you know, Kansas where this guy went, too.
Oh, OK.
But anyway, so, ‘Well, how many of those American people speak Hmong?’ ‘Zero.’ ‘Oh, well, I'm not sure if I really want to go.’ Said, ‘Go. Go. Get out of here.’ So, anyway, I hope he did OK, but …

(17:16) So this was September?
It would have been September of '75. Yeah.
OK.
So, and unfortunately, I didn't keep a—oh, kind of a daily log. Starting in 1977, I did. You know, a little—it's not enough to—that you feel bad writing three or four lines, but it's enough—it's easy enough to do. So, I've got good dates after that. But I'll, you know, then—regress just like we were talking earlier about Namphong, you know, and the air evac from Long Cheng, which was, what, 12 to 14 May, 1975. And I was down to Vientiane then, numbly, happily working away and not—

things not all that busy in those days, but didn't know what was going on. And I don't know how closely all that was held, you know, what USAID people, country team people probably knew about it. But it didn't filter down the pipe very much. But anyway, talking with Les Strouse, who you'll see tomorrow, flying one of the C-46s, and his logbook and Al Rich's logbook—Al died. He was flying the other 46. And I—looking at the C-130s and that, you know, the number of trips it made and I figured that rough—between 3,000 and 3,500 Hmong were flown out of Long Tieng to Namphong and to Udorn. They didn't all fly down to Namphong. They decided to shorten it up somewhat and fly to Udorn and then a bus or truck from Udorn on down. And then another roughly, say, 8,000 showed up at Nong Khai and they were trucked down to Namphong.

(19:07) Now, you know—I realize this isn’t something you are intimately involved with, but I know you’re also a man who’s studied this pretty intensely. There were the ones who were flown out by the CIA because of the list that they asked Vang Pao to put together. And then, there are the planes that came in because Aderholt made a phone call and a general approved and he called pilots and more planes came in.

I don't see that VP could have handwritten a list and, you know, 3,000 people. Now, especially with talking to Les, the mob scenes and everything that showed up and if there were 10,000 people—20,000, 15,000 people in the Long Tieng Valley and looking at people getting on airplanes. And if I was a captain or a lieutenant or a sergeant who wasn’t on the list and I've got my wife and kids there, I would have tried to scramble on an airplane, too. And I might well have made it. You know, I—it may have been an attempt. But we had, for the USAID Lao side and we had—they had it for Vietnam and Cambodia, too, they called the KIP list, which is key indigenous personnel. You know, these were the ones who were really priorities. If things go down the tube, we have to get them out. Well, they didn’t do that in Saigon and in Cambodia, talking to Les and others, you know, so many people just—he said, ‘Well, it won't be that bad.’ They’d just decline to get on any of the airplanes. So they missed the evac there. And in Laos, when I hear the term KIP list, I thought that was appropriate because that’s the Lao currency. I didn't know it meant key indigenous personnel for several years. [Interviewer laughs] And I never saw a list. I've got a—I've got the last, oh, printout of the USAID Laos personnel roster for the locals and the TCNs, the third country nationals. And I just sent that off to Steve Maxner and company at Texas Tech. It’s in Oregon now. It should be mailed. My sister will send it off FedEx tomorrow along with a bunch of other stuff. But the—now, I don’t see that there was any—there would have been maybe like for Ly Tou Pao and a bunch of the—you know, the colonels, the higher ups and all that, but get on the first airplane because after that it's going to turn into a goat fight.

(21:33) Well, the—I mean, the story is that Jerry came to Vang Pao and said, ‘You have to leave. Who do you want to go?’ And there's a man named Yang Long who was in Long Tieng at that time. And he said basically VP put together, I think, a list of 96 officers and their families.

OK, yeah. That's not 3,500, but that makes sense. Yeah, and I—well, I think the last plane out was—have you read Gayle Morrison's book? [Sky is Falling] Yeah, I skimmed through it. I read it awhile ago, but now I really should go back and sort of go through it a little more carefully.
Yeah, because I don't—I forget who was on that—the jet ranger. You know, Jerry, VP and Glassman [Yang See] might have been on it, too. Glassman was, you know, Jerry’s sort of right-hand man at that time. There was another Hmong guy in Missoula—Lucky, Yang Lu—that I e-mail with now and then, but he was sort of our main man at Udorn, because Glassman had left already with VP. So, yeah, 90 people, 90 heads of families with their families is not 3,500, but that may—that's a more reasonable number.

Yeah. Although …
Eminently believable.

Yeah. Family, by Hmong standards, one never knows. [Laughs]

Well, all right.

I don't know.

Well, we used to have the problem interviewing in the camps. You know, says, ‘OK. Well, great. You know, line up a family.’ And you know, just checking the family relationships and said, ‘OK. And he's your brother, right?’ ‘Yeah, he's my brother.’ ‘Same mother, same father?’ ‘Well, no, but what that's got to do with it?’ And we also had—Lucky had a good way with words—Yang Lu. We'd bring—he'd bring lists of people over to me, you know, by family, you know, to send bios out on. And I'd say, ‘OK, Lucky, here we go.’ You know, Hmong moms are much better than American moms.’ ‘Well, what do you mean?’ He says, ‘Well, here's baby born in January. OK. And here's another baby born in April. And here's the third baby born in November.’ Hoi Yo, Hoi Yo. [Hmong for “Oh no!] OK? ‘Well, I'll come back tomorrow.’ So, some people's birthdays as, you know, under—those current social security records are kind of out of the blue.

(24:10) Oh, I met a young man who's an artist who's probably all of 28, 30 years old. He looks 12. But he said, yeah, his father's birthday is January 1. His mother’s birthday is February 2. His oldest brother's birthday is March 3. You know, right on down the line.

[Chuckles] No, we—I'll—there was one young couple we interviewed in Nong Khai or Namphong, wherever. It might even been Ban Vinai. But a young couple with their two kids. Mom was pregnant again, I think. And the boy was named Pepsi and the daughter was named Cola. Well, you're going to pop another one. What is that? Green Spot or—definitely anti-Communist. You have to go to the U.S.

(24:58) Now, you mentioned the visit where this deputy INS guy came in and said we're going to take 1,200 Hmong.

Well, not deputy. He was the INS district director from Hong Kong.

Fortunately, we've got the right title on here.

Yeah, Sam Feldman. Right. He's dead now, but …

That is separate and distinct from Lionel's visit to Namphong, I assume?

No, no. This was prior to that. Lionel—that's when I first met Lionel. He—and it seems to me it was November—October or November. We were interviewing down at Namphong. And maybe with INS at that time. And this scraggly State Department guy with frizzy hair and wearing sandals shows up [Interviewer laughs] and, ‘I'm Lionel Rosenblatt.’ Well, BFD. That's great. You know, let us get back to work. And …

(25:48) So, he didn't come by your invitation. He just sort of …

No, he …

…happened in.

He does that. But he's in Phnom Penh now. But he doesn't tell me when he's coming, usually, because he knows I'll ask him to bring peanuts or homebrew beer kits or something or other. But
anyway, he’s due back here—due into Bangkok Thursday, I think. But anyway, that’s—you know, Lionel sort of, what would you say? Thanks to Lionel, the refugee program kept going. And he went back and he was working for Julia Taft, the head of the program at the time. Said, ‘Hey, we've got numbers left over from the Vietnamese program. We've got to save those numbers for—there's refugees still in Thailand and … [Chuckles]

(26:36) So probably the same impression that was made on Sam was made on Lionel. As he meets all these people who speak English and who have code names and …

Well, Lionel, I think, was a whole hell of a lot more broad-minded than that. He had previously worked—he was a consular officer in Bangkok in ’69 and he also had, I don’t know, three month or six months TDY up in Udorn at the same period, you know, while the Air Force and the war was going on. So, he knew what was going on. And that’s why he wanted to come up country a bit, having been in Bangkok and to see what's going on up there—this little Udorn office. And that's where we got the numbers for the spring of, actually, May, June 1970 program was like 10,742 numbers were reserved from the old quota to use in Thailand. Well, maybe Thailand—maybe some of them might have gone to Malaysia and Singapore, too, for Vietnamese, but…

(27:35) So, Jerry Daniels, obviously, a very important figure in the Hmong community, probably, other than Bill Lair and Vang Pao himself, a name that gets thrown around a lot.

Right.

What was your working relationship like with him and what do you think people should know about him?

Oh, well, my working relationship was quite excellent. You know, just sipping suds in Udorn. It turned out we were born, you know, the same day, month and year.

Oh, you’re kidding me! [Laughs]

Yeah. 11 June ’41. So, but, yeah, Jerry had a nice way of talking. I don't know if it was smoke jumper or Missoula talking. One brother is a PhD in physiology, writes for—what—running magazines and the like. The other, I think, owns a bar, or at least used to own a bar there in Missoula. And I forget which the order—you know, who's younger and who's older. But anyway, in Udorn in ’75, ’76—I left Udorn in the end of May ’76, came down to Bangkok and replaced Lionel. And then, end of October of ’76, left Thailand back to Washington. And I came back in August ’77 down to Malaysia for a couple months and then to Thailand for two months. And then in December of ’77 back to Washington. And then June of ’78, Lionel is out here and says, ‘Hey, get your ass out here.’ He says, ‘Well, hey, I'm in this very good, you know, hard-to-get-into USAID training program—two-year OJT training program.’ And, you know, ‘It doesn’t matter. Come out here.’ [But I said] ‘Hey, but it's kind of career destroying, but …’ ‘I don't care. Get out here.’ He says, ‘I don't care. Get out here. I need some help.’ So, anyway I, with some difficulty, quit the USAID program and came back out here in June of ’78. And Jerry was here already at the time. And then, we got more formally organized as the refugee section of the U.S. Embassy and assigned slots here—permanent slots. So I ended the temporary duty in November of ’78. And Jerry also goes into a State Department slot. I was in a State Department slot. Tucker was in a state slot. And at that time, when we got formally organized, I started writing Jerry's efficiency reports for a few years. For two or three years. Anyway, not on the real form because it was probably classified. But I would do like a memo to the record and send it over to his office, and then, oh, they would put it in the proper format and send it back to the head shed. And the son of a bitch got promoted to GS-14 before I did. [Interviewer laughs] So …

(30:33) You should have written your own efficiency reports.
Right. Well, he was an easy one to write them on.

How so?

Well, this very, very dedicated in his work and his approach to the work. And the problems, that the Hmong and other hill tribes came up with in their family relationships, particularly multiple wives, and recommendations on how do we handle this problem and how to—well, from his personal relationships with a lot of the Hmong leadership, how to calm things down when people got pissed off at what we were doing. And like on the multiple wife thing, our policy was to—well, we had everybody, since we had so many people wanting to apply for the U.S. program of all ethnic groups, we had a one-year in camp rule. If you're a new arrival, we didn't even interview you or JVA did not even interview you until you'd been in a camp for a year. And then you'd get into the processing system. Then we had—at various times we had a point scale. You know, we had to have a cut line and—do we take a samlor driver over a, you know, Lao government official or a Hmong lieutenant or a Lao Theung sergeant? How did it work out? So that became kind of complicated on occasion. But on the multiple wife thing, we came down with the policy finally that, OK, the head of family, he would choose, OK, who is his wife that he's going to apply for the U.S. program with? OK. And then if he had one or two or three others, we said, ‘OK.’ They had and—they and their children had to come up with a resettlement solution on their own before we would process the original head of family, the guy. And whether that resettlement solution is going to France, going to the U.S. on their own, remarriage in camp or whatever, you know, if that took one or two or five years, was the rule. Once everybody else got taken care of, then we'd go back to the head man and he'd get processed. And you know, I understand on occasion, some may have gotten—rumored to have gotten back together in the U.S., but that's life.

I imagine that's true.

My last year in the Army or nine months in the Army was in Utah, so I understand that somewhat, but … [Interviewer laughs]

(33:11) So what were some of the other things that the Hmong may have been a little less than happy about?

Well, one thing that was not so much surprising to me, but it was opium addiction. It was my experience in Laos, my four years up country in Laos, is that I ran into extremely few opium addicts. The other villagers, you know, one village might have one or two, but the other villagers would see what a rotten way that is to die and stayed off it except for medicinal purposes—you know, gout, or other people may have been on kind of a chronic bit, you know, smoking, but not to the point of real addiction. But you know, we came up with the peeing in the bottle, the nanogram. You know, you had to pass that before you go. And lots of people did not like that program. And—well, OK, but that's the rule. You know, it's your choice. I had one good Yao friend, you know, former, I don't know, captain, (** Wun Chien). You know, a captain ended up in the Yao program was more like a colonel in the Long Tieng program. And this is up at Ban Houei Sai and Nam Yu. And he—I don't know if he had a stomach ulcer or what, but for years he could never pass, you know, the nanogram. And our policy again, at the time, was even if the wife and kids wanted to go onto the U.S., we were pretty hardnosed. We did not split families. So, no, you've got to wait. You've got to wait. And it wasn't until, I don't know, '86, maybe or so, when [Wun Chien] finally passed the nanogram, the peeing in the bottle thing and they may—I don't know if he faked and had somebody else pee, [Interviewer laughs] but he went to Seattle and I was happy, you know, to see him and his family get out of here. Nice family, but …
(35:14) Were there proposals made by representatives of the various clans on what the
United States should do for the Hmong besides just sending them off to the United States
or someplace else?
None that I ever really got into. I was never a real strong proponent for U.S. resettlement of the
Lao or the Hmong or the Yao or the other highlanders. My more concern was, say, first asylum,
that people who fled Laos for decent reasons should be allowed a first asylum in Thailand. And
then the ideal situation in my feeling for the bulk of the people—Lao—whatever ethnic group—was
that resettlement in Thailand was really the best solution—you know, common language, no snow
like Minneapolis, whatever. And—but to ensure first asylum in Thailand, a certain number of
people had to leave—to leave Thailand. You know, keep the Thai government, their embassy, their
ministry of interior happy. To allow an influx of the 5,000, you know, 1,000 had to leave, you know,
sort of showing the flag. So—and this is a particular—I put a problem in quotation marks in the
Hmong camps and the camps up like in Nan province with the Yao, the Mien refugees—is that we'd
announce that JVA is going to go up and do a prescreening. OK. So 3,000 people, counting the
wives and kids and everything, would come up for the prescreening. And they were getting in the
process, OK? Then a few months later with all the files and computerized files and folders, another
team would go up with INS—a JVA team with INS. And out of those 3,000, maybe 2,000 would
show up for INS. And the bulk of those people would all be passed by INS, approved for U.S.
immigration. OK. And then they'd get their medicals and get sponsors in the U.S. and a month,
you know, two months later the buses would show up and only 1,000 would get on the buses! And
we've got lots of our American people and the Thai are really upset. And on the American side,
'Oh, look at all this wasted money, the wasted resources we've blown, you know, for only one-third
of the people that came up for prescreening have gone. And my attitude was 'We are not running a
forced U.S. resettlement program. If somebody wants to go, fine, they can go. But I'm not going to
go up there and, you know, dynamite them out of their hoochies, you know, to get on the bloody
bus. And if they're not ready to go right now, that's OK. So, they'll be around later—if there's a
continual program. And …
(38:16) What were some of—’I'm sure there must have been kind of unofficial
responsibilities that came with the job of being a resettlement worker or a refugee worker. I
mean, obviously, you're doing interviews and you're counseling people. But what kinds of
other things did you have to do to keep yourself and the people you work with sane?
Well, we had our JVA, you know, the contract staff—Joint Voluntary Agency—which for Thailand
was NGO—the International Rescue Committee, which I still hold in a very, very high regard.
Do you know Jim Anderson, by the way?
Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. And Liz, his wife, yeah.
He's in St. Paul as you must know.
Right. Well, say hello to him when you get back.
Well, in fact, I'm going to interview Liz and her sister when I get back. So …
Which sister—Sue?
Patricia.
Oh, the younger one. OK. Yeah, Sue is another good—the older sister, you might want to …
Well, I might get all three. I'm not sure.
Yeah.
(39:09) So, anyway, I'm sorry. You were talking about IRC and what else type of things you
were doing.
Yeah, the—we had the JVA side, which were pre-screeners and processors. You know, those
decision-making things. And above them, before them, we had our—what we call our EAOs—
ethnic affairs officers. And those were our U.S. government officers, which—it was Jerry and John
Tucker and at different times we had one or two other people in that job and also maybe for the
Vietnamese and for Cambodians. And for—from '75 on to at least about '81—'80 maybe or '81—
our EAOs were kind of the decision makers. We—and then myself, after we got reorganized in the
refugee program starting about '79, I was kind of the boss of the EAOs. We split our—Lionel split
the program up into the Cambodian-Khmer Affairs that were at the border of Cambodia, and then
the refugee processing side, which was kind of my side, the deputy for refugee program, and EAOs
under me. And the EAOs would select which cases were going to be presented to INS. And for
the most part, they interviewed every family in the camps to, some extent, verify their stories. It
varied at different times, at some times early one, when we had these point systems and severe cut
lines as to who we could process, somebody claimed to be a colonel and he turned out to be a
samlor driver—you know, he didn't make it. But we took the tack that lying to us was not lying to
INS, which is a reject type thing for immigration, you know, 212 A19 of the Act. But we [Pauses]
you know, problem cases and if they got referred to me sometimes for decisions, yea or nay, you
know, very rarely for an up country interview. Jerry could do that much better on the Hmong and
some of the other ethnics and he put an awful lot of study into particularly the other ethnic groups
because he had never really worked in the other areas in Laos. And John Tucker spoke Lao or still
speaks Lao better than I do. I still do pretty well at it. But, anyway, I'd end up with sometimes
stacks of files on my desk and—you know, for yea or nay or reject. And—but …

(41:50) I don't know that much about John Tucker. What was his background coming into
this?
He was Peace Corps in Thailand—1970, up at Khon Kaen, northeast Thailand. And then he hired
on with USAID and was in with several other guys in the Vietnamese training center back in
Virginia in Arlington. He was going to study Vietnamese when, I guess, USAID saw the
handwriting on the wall and decided not to hire a bunch of people—you know, for Vietnam. And
Tucker, since he already had northeastern ties from the Peace Corps, you know, quite similar to
Laos, he switched over to USAID Laos and came and worked in Savannakhet and Pak Se in
southern Laos. And that's where I met him. I never worked with him at all. But he was evacuated
out of Savannakhet in [Pauses] from May—early May '75, mid-May '75 to Udorn and then back to
the States. And then all the Vietnamese showed up, so he ended up working in Guam for a month
or two. And then, when the program got started in Udorn, he showed up in Udorn in September—
I'm thinking September of '75.

(43:06) OK. Did you have to deal with any Hmong who were sneaking across, trying to go
back to Laos and fight and then sneak back again and …
Well [Pauses] By 'deal with them'—I don't know what your—I knew—I knew several and several,
you know, quite a few Lao that were doing the same thing. And it was sometimes kind of a joke in
Nong Khai camp and Ban Vinai and the other parts where they had Lao refugees like at Nakhon
Phanom where, you know, they'd come back to the Thai side, you know, turn their guns into the
Thai army security people, come back and visit their families in the camp and sometimes pick up a
bag or ten bags of rice or whatever—that and pick up their guns from the Thai army people and
then back to Laos. So, I was—well, not so much deliberately. It was not my job, so I just sort of
stayed out of that program and later, when we got involved, to some extent with the POW-MIA
business, I contacted those people a little bit more often, you know, looking for information and
false information. [Chuckles] And then, later after August '78, when the yellow rain thing came up, I
was in more contact with them, looking for that smoking gun. And …

(44:30) Did you ever find anything close to [a smoking gun] or …
No one ever did. No, we kept asking the guys, 'Hey, come on.' You know, the Commie Lao are no
two better secret keepers, I think, in general than the old Royal Lao army were—people were—Lao
government people were. So, there's got to be a hand grenade, a rocket, an artillery shell. Even if an
artillery shell weighs 40 pounds, you can pull just the head out of it or the guts out of it and bring it
out in a bag. And CIA put money into that search. The State Department put money into it, a
consulate up in Udorn. DIA—Defense Intelligence Agency—had a lieutenant colonel working on it
quite extensively for '82, '83, anyway, traveling around, spoke Thai. And as far as I knew, absolutely
zero came out of that except, you know, Matt, was it Meselson's bee shit theory [that “yellow rain,” a
chemical agent that the communists allegedly sprayed over the Hmong in the jungle was really
massive amounts of feces from Asian bees] and I interviewed with Meselson, the Harvard
biochemist whatever. I interviewed with him back in '85 or '86, back in Virginia. And I got a letter
from him, I don't know, six months ago. He said he was coming out with another paper on it and
haven't got it as yet, but …

Interesting.
Yeah, they—Lionel and I and another guy—we did what may be the first official U.S. government
reports on the yellow rain and that was in August of '78. Jerry was up in Nong Khai and he set up
several interviews for us and Lionel and I and this other guy, we took the train up to Nong Khai and
spent the day interviewing Hmong with interpreters about what they'd seen, what they experienced,
and came back to Bangkok and Lionel wrote a two-page cable about, you know, yellow rain. A few
months later, Reagan's in, Al Haig's in, you know, the great anti-Communists are in government.
You know, so we're really down on Russia and the yellow rain. Well, OK. That was the policy at
the time.

(46:45) Mike Carroll said I was supposed to ask you if you knew anything about a plan to
turn Ban Vinai into kind of a Hmong—a permanent Hmong enclave, a Hmong village. He
said something like 71 square miles of land were supposed to be set aside to make that area
permanently Hmong. Do you know anything about that?
No, I don't.

OK.
It would have made sense that somebody might have been thinking about it, but one of the
problems we had—problems on one side, benefit on the other side, is when somebody asked what
is the Thai government policy for Hmong or for Indochinese refugees, say, 'Well you've got to
specify which part of the Thai government.' You know, administrative interior has one. The police
have another. The Thai army on one side may have some. The Thai army intel on another side will
have a different policy. The Thai NSC will have a different policy. And they're not talking to each
other. So …

Well, supposedly, Jerry Daniels was all hot and bothered because the Hmong had been
guaranteed that and it didn't come through and so, anyway, he said ask you about it, so
there, I asked.

Yeah, right. No, it may have just been an idea that was floated. You know, hey, this is a good idea.
Let's do it. But then somebody else in the government said, 'No, no. We don't want them here.'

Just like they're saying now. We don't want them here.

[The two take a break and re-convene shortly thereafter. New track begins]
(0:01) When did you meet Xuwicha?
That would have been with Jerry or via Jerry in probably, I don't know, early 1980s.

Oh, OK. So …
Late '80s.

They shouldn't make the front of this thing so doggone small. So, between the time that you—when you left—it would have been '76, '77?
Yeah, I left November of '76 and came back in—back to the refugee program in August '77, but two months down in Kuala Lumpur to help get that program started. And then, in November or December of '77 here back in Thailand.

Was there—I mean, I realized there was sort of a greater influx of Hmong, but were there any other specific reasons why you think Lionel basically said to you, ‘OK. I don't care about your career. I don't care about your prospects. Get your butt up here’?

Well, we worked well together. In '76—Lionel came back in January of '76, you know, for this real push on the refugee program. That's when kind of the JVA concept for Thailand got started. He went to IOM, which is International Organization for Migration. State Department money grants to IOM to hire American staff. And he just hired a whole bunch of Peace Corps—people that just got out of the Peace Corps because they had language, said, ‘OK. Now, you're working for me. You're going to be working here in the refugee camps in Thailand interviewing.’ And he sent two of them up to Udorn to work with us. And Lionel and I were in—well, Lionel in Bangkok with one other guy and Jerry and John Tucker and I up in Udorn. And you've not met Lionel as yet, but [Thompson's cell phone rings, Interviewer pauses recorder] Hold on. I must not have my name programmed into his phone because he said, ‘Who's this?’

Oh, well, then.

But at least he's returning the call. Anyway …

OK, you were …

… with Lionel. Lionel showed up, you know, Jerry and John and I are up in Udorn and, of course, by then we're experts on refugees, INS matters and all this other stuff. And Lionel is—it can be kind of a 'blow them out of the water' battleship-type thing when he approaches problems. And usually he's right and usually he wins. And he came out with all sorts of strange—to us up in Udorn—to me up in Udorn—ways to implement the program and things to do and some of them we implemented, like the point system, when it got developed. And some of them, he said, ‘Hey, we've got too much going on up here, you know, covering for Ubon and Nakhon Phanom and Udorn and then Jerry up north also. We just …’

(3:00) I'm sorry. Give me just a second here. My microphone has drooped on me, so I'm going to point it back where it needs to be.

All right.

OK. Now it's just behaving badly.

OK. Need a stiffer collar.

I guess. Well, you know what? We'll just make do. All right. Sorry.

Anyway, some of the things he directed. Said, we just can't handle this, so we'll ignore it.

So, what were some of Lionel's ideas that didn't pass muster? I'm not trying to make Lionel look bad. I'm just curious.

No, no. Well, I don't really specifically remember. But, you know, timelines to do some things, numbers to get things done, deadlines. You know, it just won't work, you know, for our program
up in Udorn. And it may work in Bangkok. We had John, Jerry and I and two former Peace Corps, Patty Culpepper and Sally Maxwell, I think. And covering a pretty good sized territory. And we did something right because out of that 10,000 some hundred-odd numbers, you know, for that May-June ’76 program, we had something like 7,500 of them out of our office. You know, the INS approval. So, something worked anyway. And I’ve told Lionel, in later years, that if I had worked in Bangkok for him, I probably would have quit and gone back to work for USAID. [Interviewer laughs] But when I got back to Washington, Lionel—that was in ’76, Lionel was back in Washington and was this through spring of ’77, then again in ’78. Once a week, Lionel’s—I forget—I think he was in Chinese language at the time, but once a week I’d drive over to Lionel’s house in DC—I lived in Alexandria—and we’d get on the phone and we would call John Tucker in Bangkok to see what’s going on. And we’d split the cost. You know, Lionel's a concerned individual, willing to do things—do what he thinks is right. And we’d get information because the embassy did not really want to report on the refugee situation in Thailand and Tucker was not really allowed to send out the sit rep—situation reports at all. Anyway, we’d get it on the phone and then Lionel would start, you know, lobbying around with Julia Taft and Congress and the State Department, you know, and all these other folks. And as I said, you know, blowing people out of the water when they objected to what things he was proposing. So later in ’78, when he phones ‘Get you ass back out to Bangkok,’ I said, ‘Well, why not?’ [Interviewer laughs] It may not be career enhancing, but it worked out quite well for me. I mean, in spite of USAID, if you will, but … Considering you like Singha, you like Thai women, I think it worked out just fine. [Both laugh]

Right. So like I said, you know, Lionel, we’re still very, very good friends and I’d probably go work for him again on some program. Some things I wouldn’t just because I’ve retired now and I’ve got a family here. But—too busy, but …

(6:07) Obviously, there must have been a tension between your work as kind of an advocate for refugees who, at least in some cases, would choose to resettle somewhere else and INS people.

Ooh. Now, are we taping? I guess, yeah, I guess we have to.

You just—well, you can edit out for public consumption anything you want.

OK. Good. Yeah, in general and not on some specific people, but in general, the INS people I worked with were a bunch of cretins, Neanderthals. And some of them just too—some—many—they were too glorified in their authority, you know, in approving and rejecting people to go to the U.S. And they, well, I mentioned earlier when we had our—up until about ’80 or ’81 when we had our EAO system going—well, we always had the EAO system. But Jerry and John and I probably rejected more people than INS did. We rejected or selected not to present to INS at this time because of, you know, the cut line in the quota system or different ethnic groups or whatever, you know, trying to make a balance in the program between Yao and Hmong and Lao Theung and Akha and Vietnamese and Cambodians. And later, INS got in a—well, 1980—the Refugee Act of 1980 passed, which—probably it would have been ’81—Joe Surek was the INS director in Hong Kong at the time. And things got a whole lot tighter and then INS decided they were in charge. And the State Department did not have the authority to select which refugee applicants got to see INS. And I was still kind of the deputy for immigration side down here in Bangkok. But the EAOs—and at that time, we had a lot more numbers, so the EAOs were in a position of being less selective or not even having to select who got to see INS. But I guess, kind of a loss in authority at that time on our side, but still, many of the INS people were, you know, sitting there just happy—happily rejecting people—and God, I—it still bothers the shit out of me. [Chuckles]
Oh, I'm sure. I'm sure. I suppose they imagined themselves to be the gatekeepers for American citizenship. Many of them, as opposed to, say, hey, these—whatever may be additions, you know, better than some of the illegals we have in the U.S. They're coming in legally.

(8:58) At what point—this is something I should remember because I talked to Dennis Grace and I know he mentioned this, but at what point was there discussion of trying to get some kind of official dialogue with Laos to discuss resettlement of those who may have wanted to resettle or …

You mean, voluntary repatriation?

Right.

Oh, I don't even remember. That may well have come after—I left in August '83. And I know after that Dennis went up with, you know, a couple meetings in Laos—Luang Prabang, particularly, I think where he met his current wife. You know, where the UNHCR, you know, what triparteid meeting, you know, UN, Lao government and Thai government meeting. But …

OK. So, that was after your tenure there.

I think so, yeah.

(9:50) OK. So, let's see. '78, Refugee Act of '80. Were there significant changes that sort of took place in the refugee camps over that period that made life for people in them easier or worse or was it more of a static situation which people just had to either qualify or make a decision about whether to stay or go?

Well, things got better in the camps and such with massive funding coming into UNHCR and more NGO presence in the camps, whether it's hospitals and public health services, schools, English teaching, French teaching. Still not particularly pleasant places to live, but maybe I got a little bit jaded in seeing too many refugee camps. But like when I was up at Huai Nam Khao, just sort of—it was described to me earlier by people who had been there—you know, hovels alongside the railroad. And we were driving into it and they're—they were indeed fairly—it would seem to me fairly nice hovels on the side of the road—not wooden buildings, but, bamboo shacks with blue plastic sheeting, keep the rain off and the—I said, 'Well, OK, I've sort of spent nights in places like this up in Laos in the old days. You know, it's livable, not really nice, but it's OK. And when they get into this new stalag thing, it will be nicer, but restricted. You won't be able to get out. [Chuckles] Now, changes in the camps, just internal camp politics. I'm thinking like on the Hmong side, like the Ban Vinai. You know, lots of heartburn when different camps closed. When Ban Vinai closed and when the camps in Nan province closed and when Nong Khai, it will be a residual move to the Nam Pong camp up in Nakhon Phanom province. And I'll send you or scan and e-mail to you the camp stats—statistics for all those years. Or maybe I'll snail mail them to you. It would be just as easy.

But …

(12:07) Is there a site somewhere that has a map with all the Lima sites on it? That's one thing I've never really been able to …

That's one of the ones I sent you today.

Oh, wonderful.

There's a friend—the Thai-Lao-Cambodia Brotherhood Group. And back in 1998—the group just started in '98. That's when Les Strouse and I signed on with it. And this guy, Jim Henthorn, whom we had met, but we met on e-mail, he started a—his project map scan and …

Oh, yeah. You were telling me about that.
Yeah, the 1:250,000 maps for Thailand—or for Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and, say, eastern Thailand where the, you know, the airbases were. And he ran out of maps. And so, I sent him all of my maps, which were, you know, were a pretty complete collection and Les sent him his. So Jim finished his scan project. And so some of the maps on Laos, anyway, still have—and a few on Thailand, have my writing on them still because they were the old operational maps from those days. [Interviewer laughs] Anyway, that one, when you open up a map of a particular area and then it's broken into—you scan it—each map is about ye size. Scan it in eight sections. So you can click on one section and then that blows up and then, of course, you can go plus, plus, plus and get down to it. So they're a hell of a lot easier to read than the originals. Plus Jim went through and—for Laos, not so much for Thailand—put down our—almost all of the Lima sites. And …

Excellent.

So that goes along with you've got the Air America site books for Laos. Do you have those?

No, I'll have to get them.

Yeah, you can—Back in 1988, I think it was or early '89, when I was in Khartoum. One of the good books services—Dalley Book Service—George Dalley was a USAID for a couple years up in Paksane in Laos, '62, '64. And then, you know, left the foreign service, but amongst—he was working for a living, but also had a book service out of his basement on southeast Asia, particularly Laos. And I loaned him my site books from Laos back in '88, '89 and he got them copied in the same, you know, flip format. Another 12 bucks or $17.00 or something or other. But at least they're there. And then he's still selling off his website. You can Google—d-a-l-e-y—Dalley Book Service, you know, it will pop up. And …

(14:47) Were there many internal Hmong political problems that you or other staff had to intervene in, in the camps?

[Pauses] Well, not me. And I'm really not aware of others. Jerry—well, the great boiling pot of Hmong was, particularly Ban Vinai, as opposed to the northern camps, you know, up in Nan province. Two camps in Nan—Nam Mieu and Maejarim [or Sobtuang]. And there were lots of politics in, you know, the Ban Vinai camp, which I'm not really very familiar with. You know, the Chao Fa movement, which is still going on and other people like my friend Lee Lao, who got pissed off and took his group out.

(15:35) Well, go ahead and tell that story because you told it this morning, but of course, it wasn't on the record. So …

Which one?

Lee Lao.

Oh, yeah. Yeah, Lee Lao just—one of the kind of unfortunates, in some ways, who missed the resettlement boat. He was—I had worked with him in the spring of '69 when I—out working on Sam Thong. And Li Lau was the commander as a captain up at Houei Tong Ko or way up north of the PDJ, Lima Site 184. And good guy. You know, not a real strong military commander, but he was the—kind of the leader of the Sam Neua Catholic Hmong. You know, not a real large group. But anyway, he was in Ban Vinai—or in Namphong and I think he was part of the groups that got flown out down at Namphong. And then up at Ban Vinai. And I'd see him on occasion, but he—along toward 1979 or '80, he took about 500 of his people out of the camp—out of Ban Vinai, up to—I think it was Udorn province to kind of locally resettle and work with the Thai army on anti-Communist projects. And sometimes I think they got in fighting with the PL up in the Lao border in Saraburi province. And here about two years or three years ago, kind of out—well, I left in August '83, a couple days before I left, he must have got the word that I was departing. Because he bopped into my office here in Bangkok to say good-bye. So, OK. And then the next time I heard
from him was two or three years ago—like 2003—a phone call. He tracked me down and
probably—maybe through relatives in the U.S. or something. But anyway, we had lunch a couple
times and now he wants to go to the U.S.—well, with his wife and kids. And he's got a couple kids
in the U.S. already. And say, 'Hey, there's no refugee program. You have to go on the normal
immigration. You know, one of your sons has to file an I-130 petition for immigration. And I just
don't know if that's been done or not. I kind of suspect it has not been done. But…

(17:52) Maybe it's just an outsider's perspective, although I think I heard both Dennis and
Jim [Anderson] talk about this. But there seemed to be a real reticence on a significant
number of the Hmong's part to not want to go to the United States and to really want to go
back to Laos. Did you pick up on that?

Oh, yeah. But back to Laos under what circumstances?

Oh, for sure. Sure.

And I talked with—Jim, you know, worked for IRC in Seattle for quite a few years. And [there
were] no direct flights from Asia to Portland at that time, so I'd bop into Seattle. And a couple
times, Jim would come out by the airport and we'd BS a little bit. And I talked with some of the
Hmong there in Seattle and, of course, in Portland. And a lot of the older people. And I talked to
ethnic Lao, too, that I know in Portland and in San Diego. And they'd say, 'Yeah, we want to go to
Laos.' Well, I said, 'Well, yeah. But you're the 50 year-old. You and your wife are. And you've
been in the States for six years now, something like that. And can your kids give up Big Macs? Can
your wife give up her washing machine? You know, can your four-year-old who was born here, give
up what—the cartoons or whatever on TV? Can they learn how to squat to take a shit again? Yeah,
you'd be happier back, but not them necessarily. And a lot of it was tied up to the resistance,
whether it was the ethnic Lao folks or the Hmong and the Yao—Lao Theung were heavy in the
resistance up in outer Ban Houei Sai area. But yeah, you know, dreams to return. How about the
Cubans down in Florida?

How's that working out?

Right. Or the Hungarians.

So, what …

Oh, and then also, you know, the thing absent, you know, voluntary repatriation to a new Laos or an
old Laos. The longer, again, part of my viewpoint, the longer they stayed in Thailand maybe the
better for them because maybe the Thai government would open up a local resettlement program.
They never did. And they may never will. I say may never will, you know, not not never will—
double negative there, but if there's let's say, just Hmong in Thailand—there are 6,500 up at Hui
Nam Kau in Petchabun province. And who knows how many more in Northern Thailand, you
know, sort of self-resettled. You know, 20,000, 30,000? How—untold number of ethnic Lao in
northeastern Thailand and just sort of melded in. Yao, Yumian refugees or migrants from Laos, you
know, not refugees from Laos necessarily, in northern Thailand. Never hear anything about them.

(20:50) So what ultimately took you out of this line of work in 1983?

Well, it was decided that I had been here long enough.

By whom?

Well, we were on State Department detail. Actually, it came up kind of as a result of the Cambodian
situation down at Kamput camp on the Cambodian border. Fall of 1982—summer and fall of '82—
the INS down on the Cambodian camps were just going wild with an 80%, 90% rejection rate. And
their viewpoint, which had a viewpoint of sorts—we didn't happen to agree with it. But they said,
'Hey, the Cambodians fled Pol Pot. Right? OK.' And December '78, January '79, the Vietnamese
invaded Cambodia and basically knocked Pol Pot off the map. You know, he and 400,000 refugees
are up on the Thai border. OK. Just east of Bangkok three hours. OK. So these people left—fled
Pol Pot. They were refugees. But now Pol Pot's out of power, they can go back to Cambodia.
So—you know, extremely high rejection rate. And you've not talked to Mike Highland as yet, but
anyway, Mike—as the—he had replaced Lionel in June of '81 as the refugee coordinator. And
anyway, Mike sent me down to KAMP. He said, 'Try to keep the lid on things.' And talk to Jim
Anderson. He was down there then. Keep JVA and INS—or JV—keep JVA from killing INS.
Extremely high tension factor down there. I was down there for about seven weeks and I lost a
little over 20 pounds. And it was not a—that was the most difficult working situation I've had in my
life. But out of that, you know, sort of sandbagging INS, if you will. I'd call back to Mike and Mike
would call back to a buddy of his back to the NSC, and out of that came NSDD93—early in '83.
From the U.S. National Security Council—NSDD—National Security Decision Directive, signed by
Ronny Reagan—by him, not by a machine—to the head of agencies—you know, State Department,
justice—which includes immigration—and several others basically to say, 'I hear there's a problem
with Cambodians in Thailand. What is this problem going on? It doesn't sound good, so please
straighten it out and report back.' That may have been late '82 when it came out. And it's—yeah, it
would have been late '82. But that's only the 93rd for that whole year. So, it got everybody's
attention. And yeah, it would have been late '82 because Mike was leaving in August '83 anyway. I
was going to extend for a year from my normal departure time in August '83 to August '84. And
right—just before Christmas time, our State Department refugee program bureau boss was here and
he said, 'Well, you know, Mike is leaving on schedule. You'll leave on schedule, too. Extension
curtailed.' But at least three of the INS guys that were here were given something like two weeks to
choose their next post. And the district—or the OIC—officer in charge—was allowed to finish his
tour, I think. And they moved—and a very good plus, they moved the district directorship from
Hong Kong to Bangkok because this is where most of the immigration action in the whole region
was going on. A guy named John Schroeder, who turned out to be a very, very good guy. I mean,
he was one of the pluses to the program. So, not all INS are Neanderthals, definitely, but—so
anyway, Mike and I felt somewhat vindicated in that the INS guys were sort of semi-tossed out and
we were allowed to finish our normal tours. And I must say, after, you know, seven out of the
previous eight years, it was just kind of a—almost a relief. You know, a fairly high-tension job. You
know, an intense job for seven years.

(25:31) I would imagine that you'd spent a decent amount of time doing work that
determines the fate of scores of human beings on a weekly basis. That's got to take its toll.
Yeah, well, it did. And you know, I was adding up that the State Department, well, the U.S.
government who were getting, what—six hours in annual leave, you know, per pay period, 26 hours
for 26 days a month. Twenty days a month—whatever that comes out to be at that time. And
during the refugee program—and that's also on a use or lose. You got your annual leave ceiling,
which for foreign service is 360 hours, which is a whole bunch of days. But anyway, during that
period, I lost something like 600 hours just because things were busy. Well, it was not really
appropriate to take off for a week or two weeks.

(26:31) Yeah. [Pauses] Well, are you hungry?
[The two make plans for lunch, recorder is turned off]

Mac Thompson 6
So, you were about to tell the story about how Xieng Khouangville had just been recaptured in ’69.

Yeah, May of ’69, when I was working over at USAID out of Sam Thong and, oh, the—it was mostly the Hmong and some of the Lao Theung who took it back. They had been working out of Padong, Site 5. And up …

This doggone thing. I’m going to just put it over here and be done with it. OK. Sorry.

Yeah, they had been working out of Padong, Site 5 and, oh, for quite awhile. Anyway shelling the place from, oh, Site 19 area, a kind of mountain ridge between five and Xieng Khouang. They had a 105 Howitzer up there. And they recaptured the place in the morning and I had been—I guess, in Sam Thong, probably. We got the word on it. So, you know, jump in one of our Porters and we flew over and—to the runway east of the town. And Her Tou, and I then—my Hmong naikong. And I went over there and we were—got a ride downtown and such as the town is. And there were all sorts of civilians around and it seemed to be a kilometer or two kilometers or a bit more from town out to the airport. And the families didn’t know if they were going to be able to hold the place or not. So, decided to move the civilians out. So, we had, oh, Hughes, the Sky folks had their Hughes coming in with more troops and ammunition resupply and all that, coming into the soccer field downtown. And so we loaded up—on the back haul, we’d load them up with civilians and fly them out to Padong Site 5. And then, we had Porters—USAID and Sky Porters come and—

Well, we had the Sky and USAID Porters, you know, coming into Site 5 were coming into the airfield, Lima Z03. But no people there to back haul. So, Her Tou and I found a couple of trucks. There was a Russian, [sounds like “Le Dusinam”, perhaps a French language reference to the “Deuce and a Half”]-sized truck I drove. It didn’t have any brakes when I took that one. And Her Tou took the Russian-style jeep. And so, we were, for an hour or a couple hours, we had people from the soccer field starting walking out to the airfield so we could move people faster out of the airfield. And then we started shuttling, you know, several loads of the truck in the Russian style jeep out to the airfield so we could make use of the empty quarters. And—but I’ve got a photo of us on the jeeps and all that someplace in the archives. And then, oh, the town itself, I’ve got some other photos where—in a helicopter—

Whoa, that was quick. Well, maybe we’d better turn it off and I’ll …

(0:04) Well, we had the Sky and USAID Porters, you know, coming into Site 5 were coming into the airfield, Lima Z03. But no people there to back haul. So, Her Tou and I found a couple of trucks. There was a Russian, [sounds like “Le Dusinam”, perhaps a French language reference to the “Deuce and a Half”]-sized truck I drove. It didn’t have any brakes when I took that one. And Her Tou took the Russian-style jeep. And so, we were, for an hour or a couple hours, we had people from the soccer field starting walking out to the airfield so we could move people faster out of the airfield. And then we started shuttling, you know, several loads of the truck in the Russian style jeep out to the airfield so we could make use of the empty quarters. And—but I’ve got a photo of us on the jeeps and all that someplace in the archives. And then, oh, the town itself, I’ve got some other photos where—in a helicopter—

[Food arrives]

[Recorder turned off, the two eat their lunch. New track begins]

(0:01) Now, I don’t know where you want to start, but we were in the middle of that story about …

Right. Middle of Xieng Khouangville and Her Tou and I had—we were shuttling civilians from downtown—out from the downtown soccer field out to the airport for—so the Porters could shuttle them on down to Padong, Site 5. And at the same time, helicopters, the Hughes, were picking them up downtown and running them out to, oh, the—directly on down to Site 5. And I’ve got some photos from the airport. They had—the friendlies, the SGU had drug up, I think it was three or four of 37-millimeters anti-aircraft guns and they were all lined up and I got photos of those. And down at the—or just off the airfield. And one thing I’d like to go back. We were talking about caves in northeastern Laos a bit. But right close to the airport, there was also called the hospital cave. And when they—some of the guys—some of the SGU troops told me when they
got into the place and inside the—I've got some photos of the outside of the cave. But they had
gone in and the hospital cave had a parachute over, you know, kind of the operating room table and
there were some of the metal bowls, you know, doctors use during operations still had soggy
bandages in it. You know, they had taken over so quickly. And I had—when I—in the evening,
when I got back to Sam Thong, I radiated down to Vientiane to Dr. Pat McCrudy, you know, Dr.
Weldon's wife. And she came up the next day and we took her back out to the hospital cave. And
we had a couple flashlights. We wandered around a bit with just stacks and stacks of medicine, you
know, going back in the cave. And we don't know how far away because we only had one flashlight
each. And you know, the rules say have at least three sources of light when you're underground.
But we talked to a couple of the troops that had—were walking out here. They just wandered
around back further in the cave and said it went back a hell of a long way. Well, I don't know how
far a hell of a long way is, but Pat took samples of odds and ends of the medicines to take back and
here some of them were marked for the Iraqi Ministry of Health and just got diverted in the
shipment. And that Russian truck that I had been driving the day before, the dashboard
information, you know, like the gear shift levers that, you know, designate this were in Spanish. So,
it probably got diverted in a shipment also to Haiphong and ended up in Laos. And—but, anyway,
one—I think the first or second day, I was flying around town in a Hughie and I've got some aerial
photos of the town. And you know, between the 105 Howitzers and U.S. Air Force, it was just
rubble. And I don't know if it's been rebuilt since then or not. If you go along for tours in Laos you
see all these guest houses up on the PDJ and that, but I don't see any guest houses down in Muong
Khoun, in Xieng Khouangville. And so there is a way—it's fairly close. I know, 30, 40 kilometers
from the PDJ, so it's easy to visit. And the road’s supposed to be pretty good. And—but it also—a
couple places between town and the airport where I stopped and I was looking at—well, the road
went through kind of a small cut bank area. And on the vertical part of the cut, where the road had
been made, there was a—a kind of a people-sized hole going back into the side hill a little bit. And I
asked a couple of civilians what was that? And they said, ‘Well go take a look.’ I didn't want to—
snakes or whatever. But they said, ‘Well, it goes in two or three feet and then turns into kind of like
a T. So, if you're walking along and the airplanes come over to do some bombing, you scoot in
there, you know, for safety reasons.’ And anyway, I ended up with all these several, well, I don't
know if it was several thousand or several hundreds. Quite a few hundreds anyway, of those
civilians down at Padong, in Site 5. They didn't have any food, so, you know, radioed up for C-46,
you know, to come in for a rice drop for them, you know, for a day or two of food, anyway. And at
the same time, the Sky and helicopters refueling there. They also had a couple 123s coming over
dropping fuel and some—and dropping ammo. And I don't remember what site it was. It wasn't
there I think—maybe you could ask Les Strouse about it. One of the Air America C-123 pilots had
a record, I think, for—kind of like they did in World War II or whatever—or the Vietnam War, too,
when you shot down an enemy airplane, you got a little star on your airplane. This one Air America
123 pilot had two Air America H-34s painted on the cockpit of his 123. He had dropped parachute
bundles into friendly helicopters. [Laughs] Whoops, right.


But anyway, the others— Xieng Khouangville —that was that kind of spring and summer of '69
offensive by Vang Pao that I think kind of surprised everybody. People weren't really expecting that
things would go so quickly and so well. And quite—just a few days afterwards. And again, I wasn't
keeping a diary in those days, unfortunately, but by late May, early June, they got into the, really, the
south end of the PDJ. And I was—I forget where I was, but anyway, I had heard that the friendly
were right on the south end. So they took a helicopter up there—one of our USAID H-34s and
landed. And again, there was a whole bunch of civilians around and the troops were kind of, you
know, wandering around. You know, what are we doing here? You know, there's no bad guys.
And we didn't know, again, what was going to happen. So, we got a C-46—it was out of my ground
air radio to HD2 and heard a C-46 dropping in the area and talked to him and say, ‘Hey, come on
over to these coordinates, we need a drop here for holdover for the troops and for the civilians.’
And I can just sort of him—see him thinking and looking at his map and, you know, say, ‘Oops,
wait. We haven't been on the PDJ for several years. You know, who's buried in Grant's tomb?
What is your name? Who's Babe Ruth?’ Anyway, he came over and dropped OK. And then, oh,
that afternoon we were shuttling with the helicopters, shuttling civilians out to Site 72—Tha Tam
Bleung, the one Preecha had mentioned yesterday because the closest friendly place anyway. And
that was the only time in my life I've ever fired an M-16. It was almost—like the last load of the day
and sun going down and had the civilians loaded on the airplane. And their pig jumped out of the
helicopter. And you know, the husband and the wife jumped out of the helicopter, the kids still in
the chopper. And they're going after the pig and getting dark and the pilot's getting low on fuel and
we got to get back to Sam Thong and everything. And I grabbed an M-16 from one of the troops
and zapped the pig. It took a whole bunch to stop the little pig anyway and the owner of the pig all
kind of bent out of shape. And I said, ‘Well, at least this way you can cut it up and maybe sell to all
the other civilians there to eat with their rice this evening.’ [Chuckles] Well, I never shot an M-16
after that or not before.

(8:07) So, it seems to me when we were talking the first time we got up to your transition
from IVS to USAID. And I know that maybe we should focus on those specific periods you
talked about where you were working with the Hmong in Laos.
OK. Well, they—I went over to USAID in—well, I finished IVS in June of '68 and prior to that I
had worked in—well, in Hongsa—had never specifically worked with the Hmong. But in Hongsa, it
was largely a Lao ethnic group. And in Nam Bac, that was more of a kind of a hot place and
everything. And it was kind of restricted in travel. And when I went, it was out with—you know,
we used the helicopter with some of the troops. And just supplies out to an outlying school,
something of this sort, or some medical supplies, and no real time on the ground. And those were
ethnic Lao and a couple villages were Tai Dam from the Diem Bien Phu area that we just stopped,
we settled in—north, in Nam Bac area, not even as far south as Luang Prabang or Vientiane. There
were Hmong in the area, but they were some of the SGU troops had outlying paths to the north.
And so I wasn't working, really, with the Sky people at that time. They had their units—the SGU
down at the east end of the Nam Bac runway and I was over on the west end where the Lao army
folks were. And that—oh, Nam Bac, as I say, or about February through June when I left Nam
Bac—that was '67. And the summer of '67, I don't remember what happened. In the fall of '67,
along towards September, I got transferred to my favorite valley, which is Xieng Lom Valley, up in
northern—northern Sayabouri province. It kind of borders on Thailand on the northern
Nam—way at northern Nan province. And that valley was some Lao, but largely ethnic [Lu] people.

And Lao Theung were in and out and the Hmong were in and out, not living in the valley. There
were a couple of Hmong, oh, airstrips—the one strip in—to the south of the Thai border. And Nan
province, of course, and they were able to—they had quite a few Hmong. But at least in Xieng
Lom, there were not too many of them. That was through the end of '68 when Sky decided to turn
Xieng Lom into a training base and they moved in quite a few Thai. And then, they built a Sky
compound, another small airstrip for porter or twin otters. And the Sky folk moved in there and
that's when I moved out. So that was—that was fall of '67 through December of '67 and I had also
been working in a place called Muong Met.

I left my camera at the restaurant, didn't I?
Oh, well, shut down and …
[Recorder turned off, the two go retrieve the camera and come back. New track begins.]

Mac Thompson 9

(0:00) All right. Good. Now that the camera's been recovered …

Yes, all is well.

The—fall of—late '67, December of '67 when I left Xieng Lom, the Sky folks were moving in there making a training base. And for a few months I had been working also a place called Muong Met, east—through north—northwest of Vang Vieng. That had been recovered back in 1964 by the Lao army, what they called the Triangle Operation, which is Muong Met, Muang Kasi and I think over to Vang Vieng also. And covered in Conboy's book, Shadow War. So, this was four years afterwards, but still, the valley was interesting. Again, didn't have much in the way of highlanders there except coming into trade now and then. Ethnic Lao valley. But they were still, it seemed, mostly Pathet Lao sympathizers. And they—well, when I first went in there to work, another IVS guy had been in there and had left. He had started a five-room or a seven-room school that wasn't complete. So, I was in—sent in there to see about finishing up the school with the local villagers doing the work and USAID supplying the cement and roofing tin and the like. But I went in and as I kind of normally do, go up to the local army commander and just ask—check the security. And there was the town and then the airstrip and the IVS house, a little two-story bamboo place right next to the airstrip.

And then, walk on up to the head of the airstrip and up a small hilltop is the local army camp. You know, maybe a platoon or—a large platoon or a small company ensconced there in their positions. And just talking to the commander. ‘How’s the security situation around here?’ You know, just normal things. ‘Oh, no problem. Hey, we're all OK. No bad guys around at all.’ ‘Oh, fine. Great. Sounds good to me.’ And I had been there in Laos 18 months at that time already and said, ‘Well, good.’ And I said, ‘I'll be down at the house.’ He said, ‘OK, and every evening about 1800, we'll send a half a dozen troops down to sleep around the house on the ground or around.’ And I said, ‘Oh, the security's that good, huh?’ I said, ‘Well, I don't want to inconvenience your troops, so do you have a spare bunk up here on the hill?’ So, I, during the time I was there, in and out, I'd usually spend every week or two weeks at Muong Met and then, say, two to three weeks up at Xieng Lom and fly down to Vientiane, you know, for a little R&R and then do the circuit again. But I never did spend the night in the local IVS house there. [Interviewer laughs] They also had a village about two or three kilometers away. We were doing a small one-room school over there. And it was a nice village and it was known locally with the local Lao officials and the army as a good party village. And if there was a particular wedding or something or other they wanted to go to, they would put the word out two or three days ahead of time that they and I, if I wanted to go—and I did a few times—were going to go over there and get drunk and spend the night in this village two, three times. And the reason for putting the word out was so the villagers could tell their husbands, their fathers, their elder brothers that, don't come home—you know, the guys that were still in the PL army, don't come home because there might be problems. And there was—the only time I was ever there—when I was in Muong Met where there was a problem was when a couple of the new Lao soldiers from the Vientiane area had been over there, staying in that village, stayed late, were walking back to the army camp and they ran into a couple guys coming home for R&R and there was a little shootout and one of the PL guys was killed. And then there's apologies all over and hey, these new guys didn't know the rules. There was a—it was sometimes kind of a strange war.

Muong Met has a—the Lao army had a barber who was also kind of a village medic also. But he had been a PL soldier, had been recruited back in the early '60s, whatever, been sent up to Hanoi
for, supposedly, for some medic training. Then he was in the Pathet Lao army as a medic. And he
had been coming back to—sometimes—I was up there in late ’67 and early ’68—so, sometime, I
guess, ’66 or ’67 he had been coming back to visit his family and he didn’t know that the valley had
changed hands and he got captured. [Interviewer chuckles] But they did not turn him into the
Vientiane authorities because they needed a medic—local army did and he was also a barber. But I
let him give me a haircut, but I didn't allow him to give me a shave.

No razor.

Yeah, the summer of ’68—June of ’68, I finished IVS and was job hunting that summer and then
August ’68 over at our ACA—the American Community Association Club in Vientiane, which was
in the USAID compound and just having lunch and a couple beers with some of the USAID guys
from the USAID refugee office—refugee relief branch. And I knew several of those guys pretty
well. And one of them said, ’Well, he’s going on home leave and then, or training for a couple
months in France and he’s going to be gone for four months.’ Why don't I take his job? Well, fine.
I got nothing else to do. And so, back over to the office—well, they said your first exercise is to
figure out how to fill out this form—USAID form to authorize hiring a person. And if you can
figure that out, maybe you'll get hired. [Interviewer laughs] So the salary I proposed for myself was
too high. That got cut down, but I did that. That was my introduction to the refugee program on
the logistics side of it. You know, the C-46 rice drop program that another guy handled—Jack
Williamson did that and I did all the pots and pans and blankets and rice and salt, you know, the
requirements and movements upcountry. Then, January ’69, went up to Luang Prabang with Joe
Flipse for a few days—well, a few weeks—three or four weeks. And I think it was February ’69 is
when I moved over to Sam Thong to work with—for Pop Buell for an indefinite period. And that's
when I got into more Hmong than anything else. Hmong and Lao Theung, that's basically all that
was up there.

(6:47) Well, what was your relationship like with Pop Buell? Obviously, he's been described
by many people in many ways. What's your take on the man?

Well, I don't know him half as well—a third or a tenth as well as people like Ernie Kuhn and Paul
White and Carol [Mills] and Tom Ward and other know him. But I—one of the reasons I think
the—well, Joe Flipse was sort of my mentor for many years. Yeah, he was up at Houei Sai at the
time. And a guy named Bob Dakin was at Luang Prabang. But he and his wife were on home leave.
And Joe was also working in Luang Prabang and he wanted me to come up to work at Luang
Prabang for a month or so, work for him to learn, to some extent, as Joe described it to me later, to
learn kind of Joe's way of doing business. So, when I went over to Sam Thong, I would not be Pop-
ized. [Interviewer laughs] P-o-p-i-z-e-d. You know, everything with a grain of salt or whatever.
But Pop was a super great guy and everything, but there are other ways of doing business. And I did
this—when I worked for him, I did business his way. But he was very liberal on what he wanted
done. Oh, up at Bouam Loung one time there was a whole bunch of military activity right near
Bouam Loung and Pop said, ’Well, go up and evacuate the civilians, dependents and refugees from
Bouam Loung.’ OK. We go up there to Porter and we got the USAID Porters and a couple of
helicopters and the Sky airplanes coming in and out and just get it done however you want to do it.
And there were—that's where I first kind of ran into kind of a Lao Theung-Hmong/Meo conflict is
that people [were] mobbing the airplanes. So, I went up and talked to Cher Pao Moua, the
commander there, a super good guy, a strong guy. And they said, ’Hey, look. I've got to separate
the ethnic groups down here on the runway.’ And he said, ’OK.’ ’And I need a couple troops to
help me do that.’ ’OK.’ ’And have them—Lao Theung on one side and Meo on the other side.
And every other airplane, you know, load them up. And I need the troops with the guns to maintain
order.’ ’OK.’ So it worked. It was cooperative, but at least it quieted things down and …
Did you have any sense of what the nature of the conflict was between the Hmong and the Lao Theung?

Well, the conflict was—well, not so much on—based on ethnicity or as were bad guys were around. And at nighttime, this would have been probably March, April of ’69. There was a lot of military right around. And at nighttime, the civilians would have to filter off into the underbrush because the bad guys were coming in and shooting up the positions all around Site 32 and they didn’t want to get killed. So, when their airplanes show up to get out, I think there were somewhat more Hmong than there were Lao Theung. And they were just people who were trying to mob the airplanes. And the Lao Theung weren’t getting their fair share of the evacuees, so that’s why I did the separation.

We’ve talked several times now about how it’s always the Hmong and not the Lao Theung and how it’s Air America and not Continental Air. What would you like the uninformed person such as myself, to know about the Lao Theung and maybe how they compare with the Hmong?

Well, they—over the years, talking to some of the Sky guys and as you talk to more Sky guys and talk to Ernie, particularly, you’ll get a little different—well, maybe the same take on it. But in the earlier years, I think, the Meo army was primarily a Meo army and took heavy, heavy casualties. And they started getting more ethnic groups involved in the SGU program. And the Lao Theung, by the time—at least—and I was out of Sam Thong by this—well, Sam Thong was gone by this time. I was down at Vientiane. But ’71 or so, Redcoat, who is the case officer for Site 32 area, who said there was fully 50% Lao Theung. And you know, they were taking their heavy hits, too. But it’s kind of—they very rarely ever get a mention into [staches] as being participants in the war, up in Military Region II. Region I, you know, the Yao are the ones that, just being a monster, killed a million of them in the southern Yunnan province and shed a couple hundred thousand or whatever in Laos, but you know, they get more mention than the Lao Theung do. But the Lao Theung did some hard fighting up in the—out of site of Nam Yu, up in northwestern Laos. And it’s like Continental. Air America is sexy, you know, CIA-owned, proprietary. And, you know, Bird & Sons started up as a bit of competition and then Continental bought them out in ’65 and right through ’75, but hardly ever mentioned. So, kind of a much smaller operation and, to a large extent, a friendlier group of pilots to work with. And they had fewer restrictions than Air America did and no union. As Les may mention, FEPA—Far Eastern Pilots Association—a union of Air America pilots really screwed things up for a lot of Air America folks.

Yeah. I think Heinie [Aderholt] talked about that a lot.

Yeah.

I think they’re still working on trying to get retirement to some for some of these guys or something.

Good. But anyway, oh, I—Professor Bill Leary, doing his long book, which never got done before he died, you know, I kept trying to say, ‘Well, tell Bill or ask Bill. At least at the end, you know, include a chapter on the other airlines and—but …

So, you were in Sam Thong for how long?

Just about February through June. At—when we got down to the—earlier I was mentioning when we got down to the southern end of the PDJ, when we had the rice drops in there and moving the civilians out to Site 72. And there was a grass runway there. And they started bringing in Caribous, you know, to resupply the food and the ammo and that. This would have been like day two or day three. And one of the Caribous—I got some photos of it turning around. And one of the gears
went off the hard pack of the runway and sunk three foot into the dirt. And I left before they got it out. But we've got some pictures of the trench they dug and, you know, 100 troops with a rope trying to help pull it out. But right after that one I finished—that was on a USAID personal services contract. And I left to go back to Portland and then back to DC to hire on as a direct hire with USAID. And when I came back in September of '69 and I forget exactly where I went the first month, but anyway, shortly thereafter, I went up to Ban Houei Sai from about October '69 through June of '70 when I got moved down to Vientiane.

(14:31) So were your responsibilities in Sam Thong and Ban Houei Sai essentially the same, providing …

Pretty well. Oh, USAID—well, USAID refugee relief program in southern Laos—Takhet, Savannakhet, Pakse—or Pakse, Savannakhet, we had people assigned there from a refugee relief branch. And they did refugee relief and resettlement, primarily resettlement. In northern Laos, Houei Sai, Luang Prabang and Sam Thong and later Sam Thong out of—Ban Soun after Sam Thong was finished. We were—USAID was doing the feeding for the SGU—the basic rice rations for the SGU and all the paramilitary dependents. So, we had—we were funded, probably, oh, 50% or 60%. I don't remember the exact percentages. Say, 40% USAID budget and 60% CIA money filtered through DOD that filtered down through USAID RO—requirements office—then over to our office for procurement of rice and salt and pots and pans and blankets for the paramilitary dependents. So we—on our C-46 drop program, for example, we just had split rice contracts. A bag of rice would go—100 kilo of rice would go up to Luang Prabang and 40% of it was USAID funded and 60% was the filtered funding. And then, it went out to whomever, you know, the dependents and the refugees and the paramilitary. And for special combat rations or team rations, the—Oh, CIA had their own—they did their own funding and procurement for those rations. But we had basic rice, canned meat, we—Dr. Weldon decided, on a public health basis, particularly in northeastern Laos, Region II, that the refugees and dependents needed more animal protein. So we started the big canned meat procurement thing. It started in Singapore and then procured down there and then moved up to Bangkok and basically canned water buffalo. And it got up to something like 25,000 cases a month. And it's expensive stuff, but it's what's needed to keep people alive, I guess. That was one of my inventions. When we first started getting the canned meat, we were using helicopters to deliver it. Helicopters are humongously expensive and USAID did not have that much in the way of helicopters on contract. Joe Flipse and I up at Luang Prabang, we invented a parachute out of—we had PL-480 program, which provided for—from the U.S. Department of Agriculture—food, wheat, cornmeal, wheat soya blend, bulgur wheat. But they also had large amounts of excess cloth that I guess U.S. manufacturers made. It was sort of an agricultural subsidy program. And we got that stuff cheap and everybody needed cloth upcountry, too, for making clothes. You know, red and blue and black, you know, for the Hmong and black and maybe other colors—when I left Laos, I left something like, I don't know, 100,000 square meters of good quality denim in the warehouse, so the PL must have been selling jeans. They've had the Levis for years. But Joe and I invented a parachute up in Luang Prabang. So, you know, locally made out of some of the cloth we had and just buy rope and use rocks and slipknots and tie everything together. And five cases of meat, drop it out of the door of a Porter and we were having about 70%, 80% success rate with the parachute opening. And if it didn't open, the cans on the ground they could eat that day. If they were both—and you just peel the metal out between your teeth. But still, that was—and we did that over Sam Thong a little bit, too. And then, the meat requirement—the delivery requirement went way up. By '70, I was down in Vientiane then and we invented what we called a hash. For the C-46 program, we dropped, oh, 40 kilo of rice. We dropped 40 kilo salt and we also dropped—we ended up making noodles out of this PO-480
program as a rice substitute. And then, to deliver the canned meat, I would just try different
combinations of kilos and cans of meat and different shapes of cans. You know, come up with a
new shaped can, you know, from our Bangkok people. Go out to the airport and we'd—you know,
the Air America people would bag it up for me and go out and we'd take a porter and just drop it on
the Vientiane runway. Then run out and open up the bag to see what survived. And we ended up
with one—or half a kilo—454 gram—you know, one pound, kind of a flat can—maybe six inches
diameter and inch-and-a-half thick that survived the drops better than anything else. So we ended up
with maybe with eight cans of meat and 32 or 33 kilo of rice per drop. So depending on the drop
zone, our people at Sam Thong or Luang Prabang and Ban Houei Sai was they all—you know, we
need, X number of bags of rice at this drop zone, X number of bags of noodles and X number of
bags of hash. So, that was Les Strouse’s job for several years with Continental was dropping C-46
loads.

(20:19) So, if I heard you right—and maybe I didn't—you said it was in Sam Thong where
you sort of had your big exposure to the Hmong.
Yeah.
At least lots of Hmong experience.
Oh, right. Yeah. For a relatively short period of time.

(20:33) What do you think you picked up during that period of time about how they were
organized, maybe some of the cultural traits or the ways that they behaved towards each
other or towards you? Just any stories or recollections about them from that period that you
can recall...
Not particularly, just because there was so much activity going on work-wise. You know, work
three or four weeks straight through and then take off a few days down in Vientiane. And I was
working, as I said, mostly the northern area. Ernie Kuhn had gone on home leave and I had
replaced him on home leave. There was a site—well, north of the PDJ, from Site 50, 32 and north
of there up to what was left of Sam Neua province at 184. And then, for a period, I was working
around Xieng Khouangville and Site 5 and then down over southeast of the PDJ for a week one
time and never a day off unless you left town and you went down to Vientiane. Now actually, I had
more—a hell of a lot more contact with the Hmong after I was down here on the refugee program.
Udorn for ten months in '75, '76 and then another seven years—or six years in Bangkok. But you
know, traveling fairly often, say, with Jerry and others up to Namphong and then Ban Vinai and up
to the northern camps. And I got to know more—several of the leaders fairly well, like Vue Mai,
Vang Neng and others, not half as well as people like Mike Carroll would have known who lived in
the camps. But I—courageous people. Lao Theung and others, too. You know, humongous
hardships during the war and not necessarily real pleasant experiences in the refugee camps. Plus I
still look at the Hmong that are up there at Huai Nam Khao now, you know, the 6,500. Again,
what's going to happen to those folks? And many of those have been there for several years now
and many of those would pull out their papers from Ban Vinai—you know, UN registrations when
they were in Ban Vinai in 1976. You know, 30 years, 31 years in and out of the refugee camps and
they could have gone to the U.S. if they had just happened to be in Wat Tham Krabok in August
2003 when the Thai army did an inventory and a name list. And for some reason the U.S.
government and the Thai just said, 'OK. Everybody who's on the name list is eligible.' And if
families—and this happened quite often, when husband, wife—or father, mother and younger kids
are at Tham Krabok and the younger kids, you know, 20, 35 years old married and might have been
up country farming—a labor—contract labor services, and didn't make it on the list. So, a lot of
these split families were just sort of created by that August 2003 list.
(23:55) So, I think we started our sort of first big chunk in the last days of Vientiane. So, we'd better talk about your duty in Vientiane and …

Vientiane was June of '70 through June of '75, which was, to a large extent, a paperwork shuffle—a juggling of things: determining the rice requirements we needed, talking with our people upcountry, you know, how many refugees are we going to have and, for the first couple years, Jack Williamson was my boss.

(24:36) What, technically, was your job title in Vientiane?

Logistics—logistics management, something like that, and kind of the middle man between our contracting office in Bangkok for commodities that were purchased in Thailand and our folks upcountry who determined the individual needs for drop zones and for Sam Thong or for Ban Houei Sai or Luang Prabang. And then determining how to—well, simple logistics stuff, and how to get stuff up to them, when to order the rice and pots and pans and blankets and salt and canned meat, so it gets in the proper contracting sequence for competition—you know, two months, three months for competition, and then delivery, and delivery into Vientiane. On the rice side, we had a very, very small warehouse down at Kilometer 4 in Vientiane, were we did all of our rebagging. The rice came in at 100 kilo rice and we had a rebagging contractor who turned it into 40 kilo, a triple sack rice for an air drop. And oh, that was—a phone call in the morning out to the Air America—ATOG—their Air Transport Operations Group. How much rice and canned meat and hash and salt and what do you have in the warehouse now? OK. And then, to the FIC—Air America Flight Information Center—what did we drop yesterday? If I can mark it off and, you know, what's it look like for today and then check my lists. And then, OK, a phone call down to the rice warehouse. OK, tell the people in Thailand to bring in 50 tons of rice or to bring in 300 tons of rice. Our warehouse—it had to be turned over, basically, daily. Coordinate the cars. [Thompson’s cell phone rings, recorder is paused]

Oh, yes.

Yeah. Are we back online?

We are back online.

OK. That was turning over the goodies in the warehouse on a daily basis on a pretty highly fluctuating thing. That was just part of the juggling to make sure that the airport did not run out of what they should have. Empty airplanes don't make any money for anybody. You're wasting time, especially in the rainy season when you have windows to get up to certain drop zones. There were quite a few of them. Pots and pans and blankets—steel bars. We used to buy steel bars in Thailand, which were fairly soft, oh, say, what—a quarter—a quarter or three-eighths inch thick at about an inch-and-a-half, two inches wide and maybe two feet long—18 inches long. And to send those up country for the refugees and they can pound out the style of knife they want for themselves, you know, for cutting brush and the like. And USAID at one time had always said—and that makes sense—'Buy American. Buy American.' So, they said—I was getting hit, you know, buy U.S. Don't buy—spend all this money in Thailand. OK. So, we ordered in, I don't know, a ton of steel bars from the U.S. from GSA and they—I guess I wasn't specific enough in the spec because some of the poor refugees who got them up there are probably still shaking. When they heated that steel bar and whanged it with a hammer and the hammer rebounds and their arm is vibrating and—so, we went back to the relatively soft steel and easy to sharpen parts from the States—or from Bangkok. Plywood—we used to get all of our plywood for the C-46 rice drop program from Thailand. And …

(28:17) Now why do you need plywood to drop rice?
The C-46s and the K-123s that we used—the pallets held—the old-style pallets held 13 bags of rice and a bag of salt at roughly 100 pounds a piece. That's 1,300 pounds per pallet. But it's on a track—rollered tracks in the airplane and leading up to the door. And you drop, say, two pallets on the old style and then the plane would come back around and drop two more pallets—so, six or seven passes. And the plywood was sort of the interface between the rollers and the rice bags strapped—tied onto the pallets. And the pallet went out the door with the load at that time and, you know, the people on the ground could use the pallets for making houses or whatever else—furniture or whatever else they wanted. Again, ‘Buy U.S.’ So, you know, I ordered up a whole bunch of U.S. plywood and they loaded it up out at the airport with 1,200 pounds of rice and they couldn't move it on the tracks. It was Douglas fir or pine plywood and it was just too soft. And the wheels from the track just ate into the plywood. So that was the end of that project. But the Air America admin guy, a former 123 pilot—yeah, a 123 pilot—copilot—Jerry McPherson. He never got proper credit for his bright idea. He and a Philippine parachute rigger there—worked Air America, Ramon De Mesa, came up with an idea of using what we call—end up calling a tilt trap. And they called me about it. ‘Come up and take a look at what we're working on’ and ‘Hey, it looks good to me.’ With my support, very little credit on this. You know, ‘Keep working on it. I think it looks good.’ They developed a system where we ended up going to a larger pallet, but when it hit the door, it stopped, the track tilted forward and the—at that time, probably about 20 or 25 bags of rice slid off the pallet, you know, under the left horizontal stabilizer of the airplane. And the pilot pulled—dropped back into the airplane, the kickers pulled it off. So, we went for using a—I have to check the numbers, but went for using like 2,000 or 3,000 pallets a month to using ten pallets a month. And the cost difference was significant, plus the logistics when they had to have pallet contracts and steel roller pallets contracts and rope contracts, you know, to have all these pallets for the old style drop system in place at the right time. A very simple thing. And Pop Buell chewed me out on that one time. Again, this would have been 1972 or so. He said, ‘Hey, what are people going to be using for tables and roofs and everything up country?’ ‘Well, Pop, what could I say? They've had all this free plywood for ten years already. Maybe they saved some of it.’ [Interviewer laughs] That's the only real complaint I got out of it, but McPherson—he's not on e-mail. I've been thinking of writing up something, anyway, and get him to fill in the details and send it into the Air America quarterly log so at least he gets some credit for it.

Absolutely.

Yeah.

(31:52) Did you have any time in the midst of all this busyness and logistical planning to sort of get a sense of how the war was going between ’70 and ’73?

Well, the sense, yes, in that we also—well, I did the C-46 drop schedule. So as places were lost, they dropped off the schedule. And as people moved, they—a drop zone might have five drops a month and suddenly it's up to ten drops and 15 drops a month. Well, that's more people. And I only have one copy of a drop schedule. It was May of '69, I think it was. October of '69. And I notice one place in it had something like—I was just skimming through it the other day. I sent it off to Texas Tech, the Vietnam archives, but I made a copy of it. And one place that was taken—it was way the hell up on the rice drops and I don't remember particularly why. I think it was Site 271 [Hat Khon], which was southwest of Site 50, Phu Khum. But—and I don't remember specifically any hard battles that would have moved people down there. But I—want to ask around about. Ernie would probably know. Well, actually Ernie wouldn't. He was up at Houei Sai by then. But …

(33:18) So, from—I mean, '73 comes, the ceasefire, but your job doesn't really change that much, does it? You're still feeding people and …
Well, it changed markedly.

Oh, OK.

One reason being that USAID had built a road from Route 13, from [Hui Promone] up to Ban Soun and then the road was continued one up at Long Cheng. And Ban—Sam Thong had gone down the tubes in March of 1970 and the USAID operations moved down to Ban Soun 272. Though the—many of the drop zones along that area came off the C-46 list and we started sending things up by truck—food items up by truck. Also, with the ceasefire, there were much less movement of people around, so there were in a more stable situation. They were able to plant rice. And to harvest their own rice rather than getting kicked out of home and letting the PL come in and harvest it. So, things—oh, and then we started dropping airplanes—C-46s off the contract. We didn't need 20 drops a day, you know, 500 drops a month—down to 400, 300 drops a month. And then, Air America left in summer of '73 and we're down to Continental 46s. And I think they may have had five 46s at one time but went down to just one or two, and then even dropped those. And there was—I think the last drops we had was one Papa Bravo Whiskey or Victor, was a—supposedly a Royal Air Lao C-46 given by the U.S. government. And I don't remember the date on the last USAID paid for rice drop, but probably 1974. So things slowed down. It was sort of less fun.

(35:20) What was the sense from your office and your area about how the political situation was developing once the provisional government was established?

[Chuckles] The PGNU—the Provisional Government of National Union. I was low on the totem pole. I didn't think much about it. You know, I did see one big—kind of big mistake that, I think, we, the U.S. government had made was no provision for demobilizing soldiers from both the Lao army and the SGU. One of the things that was mandated by the U.S., was that the SGU would be—to some extent, would be melded into the FAR—the Forces Armee Royale. But it also meant that large numbers of troops on both sides were demo’d. And that young guys, maybe with—well, not so young—30 years old and a soldier for ten years and got a wife and a couple kids and he hasn't been home for many years and there's no rice paddy for him to work. What is he going to do? And we had no demo [demobilization] program to speak of. And we didn't fund one on the USAID side, and the CIA didn't either. It was something that we should have and banditry went up. You know, just thievery went up, which was understandable, but—and kind of acrimony, of course, on the side of the former troops. Personally, I didn't get into this very much, but I remember—well, your guy Fue Her her, his father Her Chai and I used to talk about that when Her Chai would come into the office looking for rice for VP's house and for the house in Vientiane, where they had people coming down from—well, Ban Soun at that time or Long Cheng. And ‘Well, we need some more. We've got extra troops here. You know, they're hungry. Former troops.’ They'll get an authorization and we can do this.

(37:33) So, the news—I'm sorry. Please, go ahead.

I was going to say that back to—on the geopolitical side, again, I was low on the totem pole and I guess pretty naïve about the whole thing. But USAID was looking at—maybe in the embassy, too kind of upbeat that the ceasefire, the peace, the PGNU would hold. And then, of course, Cambodia and Saigon down the tubes and things started falling apart. But I'd been in—with USAID in Vientiane—or in Laos at that time from summer of '69 to summer of '75—OK, six years. That was overly long. And for the—a little longer term future, USAID was planning on opening up another liaison office down in Thailand here at the Port of U Taphao, a large industrial port. And I was sort of tagged and moved down there, south of Pattaya would have been great, you know, down on the beach, you know, to possibly run that office or be number two in that logistics office. They were planning on bringing in cement and things for more reconstruction in Laos. So another thing I'll
fault the PL on. You know, they screwed me out of that job. [Both laugh] Everything went down
the tubes. But I remember one day in June of '75, when we were moving— I was moving
household furniture. When we'd go into a house, I was working with a PL police captain who was a
very nice guy. And there were usually two or three of either the USAID protestors or the leftist
students lawyers were with us. And we had two trucks—two USAID trucks. Or maybe one was—it
might have been a Lao army truck. We had some Pathet Lao army coolies, and I had a USAID
truck. And we'd—Id bust into a house and we had an inventory of the rental contract—and on the
rental contract, it would show what was provided by the owner of the house and what was provided
by USAID. And anything that wasn't on that list would belong to the individual house owners. So
maybe we'd had three air conditioners—one provided by the owner of the house that stayed there.
The other two air conditioners that were provided by USAID. That would go on the PL truck
because that belonged to the government. According to the leftist lawyers and students—the PL
captain didn't care. But if they had two refrigerators—one on the USAID list and the other not
listed, well, obviously, the not listed one was the personal property of the American who lived there.
The PL captain supported me—no, no, that goes on my truck to go out to the warehouse for
shipping down to Thailand. And that was sort of my daily job for several weeks. And one day
we're—you know, hot day, we're just having some cokes, taking a break, waiting for the trucks to
come back and a couple leftist lawyers were pulling my chain and said, 'Hey, how much money do
you think you people or USAID is leaving here in Thailand?' We said, well—we had heard this at a
staff meeting. You know, $100 million worth of warehouses and vehicles and heavy equipment and
PL 480 food in the warehouse out at Kilometer 9. It's hard to say. $100 million, something like
that. And they said, 'Oh, boy. Don't you feel pretty bad about that?' And we said, 'Well, a little bit.
But we look at the bright side of it.' 'Well, what's the bright side?' We said, 'Well, you know what
the USAID budget was for next year?' Well, the guy didn't know. I said, 'It was $65 million for
Laos.' 'Oh, great. Hey, that sounds good—$65 million.' 'Well, how much of it do you think you're
going to get?' 'Well, what do you mean? We're haulin' ass.' 'Oh, oh.'

Nothing.

Right.

(41:34) Now, maybe it was—someone suggested that General Vang Pao and some of the
other higher ranking generals were essentially forced out of the country so that the United
States could get these USAID people back that had been taken hostage.

No, no.

Have you heard anything about that?

No. Vang Pao left on May 14 and the USAID compound—office compound—in [***?] Vientiane
and the housing compound out of Kilometer 6 did not get invested and surrounded and taken over
until May 23 about. So no connection with VP and his people at all.

That's what I thought, but …

Yeah, none whatsoever.

I just sit and listen.

And on the Lao government side, leadership side—the FAR military leadership side, they left on
their own at different times—either in May and June and I don't know if anybody left in April. But
others left later in the year. I can't see any connection at all because there's no organized exodus of
the FAR generals and the like.

(42:44) Well I think we've come full circle and caught up with the first part of our interview.
But let's talk a little bit about the here and now and some of the issues that interest and
occupy your time now.
Well, I'm 100% retired. I retired in January of 1992. That's quite—15 years now, yeah. And I did work for 22 months in Moscow between '94 and '96 on USAID contracts. But since '96, I've had no gainful employment. I haven't looked for any. But then still been involved unofficially in refugee issues and it's come more often that the Hmong are the problem than the other ethic groups that are in Thailand. I think the other ethic groups and probably the bulk of the Hmong are just seemingly integrated into Thai society already and lay low and aren't making problems.

(43:44) What would you describe as some of the reasons for the continuing problems with the Hmong non-integration in Thailand?

Well, you say non-immigration, we're talking … Integration.

If there's 30,000 Lao-Hmong in Thailand, there's only, what, 22% of them are up at Wat Tham Krabok. The rest are seemingly disappeared into the woodwork in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai and Nan and Mae Hong Son provinces, the other provinces. So, you've got 25% less than that at Huai Nam Khao in Petchabun. Many of those people will say at least 5,000 of them were either Wat Tham Krabok residents or were former residents of different—one or more UNHCR sponsored camps. You know, go back all the way to 1975—who missed the boat on U.S. resettlement. And who for, to a large extent in the last several years, would like to go to the U.S. now. You've got the Wat Tham Krabok population estimated at one time back in, say, 2000, 2001, 2002, to be up to 20,000 or 25,000 or so, but people coming or going, out working as contract labor. You're moving up to Nan province for a year or more and then maybe coming back for parties with the family, marriages and the like. But when the Thai army took the inventory on August 2003, there were 15,000 there. So, there's at least ten or more thousand absent. And many of those are ones who are at Wat Tham Krabok. And of the 15,000, who were on the inventory list, there were also people in Wat Tham Krabok at that time who declined to be listed at that time, but they were, 'Hey, this is another Thai army trick. They're going to get a name list and photos and then they're going to send us back to Laos.' So they were legitimately there, but not on the list, so they were ineligible for U.S. resettlement per the rules that were set by state and by the Thai. And then, out of the 15,000, there were others that declined to go to the U.S. and ones that were even INS approved, after that declined to go. And just a real mish-mash. Part of that—after August 2003, there were the phone calls from Thailand and the phone calls from the U.S. to Laos, to the jungle people, but also to Vientiane and Luang Prabang and the KM 52 and said, 'Hey, you all come now. This is your opportunity.' And that's roughly, say, 1,500 of the people that are in Nam Khao, some of whom, if they got hit with a decent UNHCR refugee qualification interview and one by the U.S. government, too many of those people would flunk it. And many of those people could go back to Laos without any real problems. But it's kind of questionable to me if somebody had been out since 1975, and even if they were, well, 15 or 10 years old when they came out, they're 40-some now and how they would do back on Laos, whether the Lao government would even acquiesce to having them back. Since they've been out so long, there might be an argument made of presumption of refugee status because of the long-term presence in Thailand in a first asylum country. And then, there's the jungle people who've legitimately come out in the last several months—six months and more—who are, I think, without a doubt, legitimate refugees, who are not—some in Wat Tham Krabok, many not in Wat Tham Krabok, like the 152 at Nong Khai. And then there's the people still in Laos who, against the Lao government, would finally allow UN, UNHCR or ICRC or almost anybody to do some monitoring and resettlement program, the jungle people would probably, largely come out, too. The impression I get talking to some of the foreigners, the Americans that have been up there and talked with them and, you know, kind of getting away from the rhetoric of [Chuckling]—and the bleeding heart side is that, you know, they're not a real resistance movement. They're more of a
defensive posture and they want to be either left alone or, if they could be guaranteed a safety thing, ‘Hey, come out of the woods. It's nice they're living in a village complex.’

(48:56) So, do you see any hope of some kind of constructive addressing of this refugee situation or do you think it's—we're in it for the long haul?

Well, as opposed to forced repatriation, I'd prefer the long haul.

Yes. Quite true. Quite true.

And at least for now, I don't see the U.S. government moving back on the State Department side. It's not so much an embassy problem here, an embassy problem in Vientiane on the U.S. side. It's State Department side and attitude problems in RP—Refugee Program Bureau. And ‘Hey, all these folks, they're not refugees.’ So, I guess if it gets to a point of forced repatriation, then we're getting back to what I was talking about yesterday, a first asylum case and first asylum is important. But it takes more than me retired out in Bangkok to turn the State Department around. [Both chuckle]

(49:58) Yeah, especially post-9-11, I'm sure. I mean, that's complicated matters considerably.

Well, the bureaus—the State Department bureaus have their responsibilities and I—OK, they're taking 9,500 [Karen], I think, this fiscal year off the Burmese border and I don't—I've not looked into, researched at all what association the Karen had with the U.S. government, you know, since World War II. Well, World War II they did, OK, with the OSS and that and the British. But since then, was there any particular association? You know, they've been in Thailand—refugees in Thailand for 20 years, 30 years. It's a real problem for the Thai, problem for the refugees up there on the border. But why are 9,000—and I don't want to sound too much sour grapes here, but why are 9,500 Karen qualified for the U.S. refugee program when several thousand at Huai Nam Khao—many of whom did have a direct U.S. association with the SGU, were not qualified? The one reason is Thai and, I guess, probably state, too, are worried about the pull factor, the magnet factor. More go to the U.S., more will come out of Laos. Well, if anything new comes out of Laos, if they're a Hmong shopkeeper in Vientiane, send them back. And if they're jungle people, take them to Wisconsin or take them to the Twin Cities.

(51:33) All right. Well, it's probably getting close to time for you to …

All right. Well …

… take off and …

Oh, yeah. I've got Lee Pao …

[Mr. Thompson is going to visit a Hmong man imprisoned in Thailand. Interviewer expresses his thanks, interview is over]