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Interview with B. Hugh Tovar

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Bernardo Hugh Tovar was born on December 27, 1922 in Bogota, Columbia. His father was Columbian and his mother Irish. His family moved to Chicago in 1924, but his family frequently visited Columbia in his early youth. As a result he grew up bilingual. He attended Portsmouth Priory School in Rhode Island (1941), before attending Harvard, where he also learned French. His ROTC class was called to active duty in June 1943, though he was awarded a degree in 1944 because he passed his comprehensive exams. He graduated as a second lieutenant. After various assignments and training in Infantry, Artillery and Communications, he was selected to join the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in 1945. He was flown to Kunming, China, and was active in the search for prisoners of war held by the Japanese forces in various parts of Asia. In late 1945 he parachuted into Vientiane in French Indochina to try and keep the French from re-entering the region (unsuccessfully). In September the OSS was disbanded, and he returned to Illinois, taking up graduate studies in political science and economics at Northwestern. Though he knew of the OSS's successor organization, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), he accepted a position with Sears, Roebuck, and Co. to open new operations in Latin America. But the CIA came calling again, and he accepted a position in Manila in 1950, traveling there with his wife and one-year-old son. He served in posts in Malaysia and Indonesia in the 1960s, Laos, and Thailand in the 1970s, retiring from the CIA in 1978. He served as an advisor, scholar, and resource for many years thereafter.

Interviewer's note: I was very kindly connected to Mr. Tovar by his friend and colleague, General John W. Vessey, who served alongside him in Laos. Our conversation took place over the phone on two successive nights. A third conversation to clarify a few points occurred on July 27, 2009. There were occasional problems with our phone connection that made a few passages throughout the interviews difficult to decipher. Mr. Tovar helped clarify some of these passages, but some remain indecipherable, at least to me. Small talk at the beginning and ending of both phone calls has been redacted from this transcript.

(6:13) OK. Well, let's just talk about …
I have your notes. They were wonderful notes.
Well, thank you. Let's just go ahead and talk about where you were born and raised and educated and things that sort of pushed you in the career trajectory that you ended up with.
OK. Well, I was born in 1922 in Bogota, Columbia, South America. My father was Columbian and my mother was Irish from Chicago. And I grew up mostly in Chicago, but I went back and forth. I had a number of trips down there and went down there for a year to learn Spanish in 1937, '38. And my mother insisted that we learn Spanish. I did pretty well on that, but then back up here and I didn't go back after then for years. I went to school—I went to boarding school in my early years. Then I went to prep school in Rhode Island at Portsmouth Priory school then, a Benedictine school. And then, I went to Harvard and I went into the Army before I graduated, but I graduated after I was in the Army. A little hard to explain. I was in the ROTC. And I was eventually commissioned at Fort Sill as a second lieutenant for field artillery. And let's see, then I was in the Army, you know,

in the artillery for a couple years and then OSS reached out and grabbed me and brought me into the field there. And why, I don't know. Maybe because I was young and, you know, a whippersnap and I could go anywhere and do anything. And they gave me a little more training and sent me off to China. And from China, because I spoke French, I spoke schoolboy French, they sent me down to Indochina in a parachute and I ended up in Vientiane in late '45 and got my first direct involvement in what became later on the Indochina War.

Yes, indeed. I didn't realize you were there so early.

Oh, yeah. No, I had lots of good stories from the 1945 period.

(8:10) Well, please tell as many as you'd like. [Laughs]

They really aren't relevant to my (***) now, but I did have a—you know, I got my feet wet in it and then was interested in it, but never thought of going back there again. But finally I went. I was sent home and was initially discharged from the Army and I went back to Illinois—I was living in Lake Forest, Illinois then and decided to go to graduate school. Oh, I forgot to say that in about—when I was in the Army, somewhere in OCS, I guess, I got a letter, my mother called me and said I had a letter from Harvard saying that I had graduated in February of 1944. So that was nice to know, but I didn't really care because I didn't—I didn't think I'd finished and I had planned to go back afterward. But after I got out of the Army, I went home and decided to stay there and go to graduate school in Illinois. I went to Northwestern for a year or two. I didn't get a degree there because I got sort of fed up with my—the head of my department. Kenneth Colgrove—I don't know if you ever knew him.

No.

Well, he was the head of the department, you know, the international relations at Northwestern. He was a fine gentleman and all that, but we didn't see eye to eye and he was no help to me. He didn't give me any sort of advice what I should do with an MA and all that. So, I said the heck with it. Meanwhile, I was getting soundings from Washington because they—the National Security Act of 1947 had been passed. And the CIA was formed, established. And they invited me down there to come to work. So I thought it over and went back down there. This was in '48 that I went—mid '48. Let's see. [Pauses] And then it took awhile before I passed all the barriers they have and in August of '48 I signed up, you know, in CIA from then on, for the next 30 years.

(10:12) My goodness. Now, if you don't mind me taking you back to Vientiane in 1945 for just a minute. Was this after the Japanese had been defeated that you first arrived or were they still occupying at that time?

Well, I arrived in China before that, but before I went to Laos they had been—they had surrendered and I was sent down on a POW rescue mission. There were rescue missions going on in China and I was only one of, I think, two in Indochina. And we didn't know what the Japanese were going to do because we weren't sure how—whether they knew about or—and/or accepted the surrender. And some didn't up in north. But my Japanese were like fine young men. They did exactly what I told them to do. I had no problem with them at all.

(10:58) And just—well, what was Vientiane like in 1945?

Well, it was very delightful little, sleepy little town. And the people that I met there were very, very nice. When I landed in by parachute, I bounced off the airstrip and ended up in the mud. And a very sort of messy situation there. And I was sort of pulling my—tried to help me up. And looked up and it was a very—a young man who was from Vientiane. He was a Lao and he said he was the mayor of Vientiane—*Chao Meuong* as they called him. So, that was a nice beginning.

Indeed.

And Vientiane itself was—the French were already coming back in. The British were bringing them back in. And some are coming in by parachute on British aircraft. And they were trying to get themselves established again in Laos. My boss then was a Major Aaron Bank, who later became one of the sort of cofounders of the Special Forces. A pretty tough guy who had—his instructions were, to us, as conveyed to us, under the Potsdam agreement, the Chinese would occupy Indochina—or Laos and Vietnam down to the—what, the 15th or 16th parallel, I forget which. And the French were not to come back in. So we are to tell the French they are not—they didn't get back in. So, he, you know, he—let us be with him, confronted the French being brought in from Thailand by the British. And there were very nasty confrontations with French who were determined to get back in. The British wanted them to get back in. And—can you hear me?

Yes. . . [Small edit]

Well, anyway, that was the essence of our situation here. The Lao we met in Vientiane, all the key people there—the—I can't think of all their names right off the hand, but the ones who were, in effect, in charge and half the Japanese sort of bugged out, were very, very—French educated, very nice people, but they didn't want the French back in. Some of them were connected with the—what do they call them—the Lao Issara.

Yes, with Phetsarath?

Yeah, and they were very Francophile in many—in a true sense, but they said they didn't want them to come back. They wanted to be independent. Well, I—to make a long story short—my boss called me in—he didn't call me. We were all there together. He said, 'Look, I'm sending you down to Savannakhet in the south.' He said, 'I'm going to Hanoi tomorrow to see Ho Chi Minh.'

Oh, my.

Which threw me a bit. I didn't know what that meant. But he sent me down there because I could manage in French and I had a Chinese captain who was in our jump team and he spoke good French, but no English, and he spoke all the other local languages. So, he and I were going to go down there and tell the French, 'No, you can't come in.' But I had met some of the British who were involved in the southern operation, too, and so I dealt with them all at the time. And they insisted that we let the French go in. 'In Savannakhet,' I said, 'my orders are you must not come in. I cannot agree to you coming in.' And for a while there, you know, for a week or two, it was all right. The French didn't go in. I forget how long I was there, but maybe a couple weeks, but the French stayed out. I mean, I was just talking to a French colonel. Here I'm a second lieutenant telling him that you stay the hell out of this place. You don't belong here. You know, it was sort of an ironic situation. But it was OK and then it broke down, not on my part, but when Major Bank had gone to Hanoi, he left the rest of the group under his deputy and major—also a major, but not a very bright one. And they let them in a place a Thakhek, which is more or less midway between Savannakhet and Vientiane. And I don't know why they ended up there, but they were doing the same thing I was doing—telling the Vietnamese—or telling the French they could not come in. Well, the Vietnamese were very strong—the Viet Minh—in the Thakhek area. They were in my area, too. But they didn't bother—they didn't cause me any trouble down there. But they did up in Thakhek. And the British major who was in—sort of leading the French into Thakhek began to push them very hard and say, 'Look, I'm Major Kemp of the Eighth (***) and these French officers are with me and they are to come in.' And the Viet Minh told them very bluntly that if, 'You can come in any time. But if a Frenchman comes in, we're going to kill him.' Well, about two or three days later they did just that. He—Kemp brought them in and they stopped him at the edge of the Mekong. And he tried to bluster and go through by pure bravado. And they killed the French officer, which was a very unpleasant thing because they felt that our people who were right there nearby could have stopped it and did nothing to stop it. And all hell broke loose between Kunming and Kandi, Ceylon [Allied Headquarters for Southeast Asia]; Paris and London and Washington as

they, in effect, were being—our people were being blamed for the murder of the Frenchman. So, not long after that were—sent message via the Thai side of the border to get the heck out of there. And we did, finally. But after I left, the French went in and the shooting began in Savannakhet as it did in Thakhek, too. So it was a very unpleasant situation. It was not really the fault of our people there. But the French saw it differently, and I guess Washington didn't want to argue and said, 'Get the hell out.' Which we did.

My goodness. So, when …

It's been written about quite a bit by Arthur Dommen, whom I'm sure you know.

Oh, yes.

Arthur Dommen was a good friend. He and I don't always agree—before he died, but he's an excellent guy. He's the best man on Indochina that I've come into contact with. But he felt that our team should have—either should not have been there or if had been there, they should have kept them from happening. He's right—I forget where to refer to you—and Peter Kemp, the British major there has also written on it. So, it's become a very emotional issue. And we people have set out of it except that I've talked about it when I've had occasion to bring up the subject.

Sure.

As we're doing now. Was that take—is that enough for early Laos?

(17:49) Yes. So, at least according to what I've read, your first sort of official CIA posting was in the Philippines, is that correct?

Oh, yeah. That's—there was no reason why I'd ever thought twice about the Philippines. I had never thought twice about going back to Asia. Because I had Spanish and French, I thought logically I'll go east or southeast or something. But I ended up on the India desk, oddly enough because they were the ones who sort of recruited me as—it was among the young officers coming in. They said, 'He's our man.' And when I was on the India desk, sort of re-reading in on India, I suddenly got word I should report down to the chief of the Philippine branch and he had discovered that I spoke Spanish and therefore I would be great in the Philippines. Which is an odd sort of thing. Spanish was nice to know, but it didn't really help very much. So, I—we ended up going out there in 1950—January of '50. So that was my first overseas assignment with the CIA.

(19:03) Well, do you think there were things that you picked up, maybe about the CIA, but also just about the region you were in, in the Philippines and Malaysia and Indonesia that helped you when you finally set out for Laos?

Pardon? When I set out for Laos—what?

Do you think—did you gain any experience in these other places that you think helped you prepare for the situation that you landed in in Laos?

When I went to Laos back in 1970.

Right.

Oh, yeah, I think—well, first of all, I had worked, in the meantime, on all of Southeast Asia, starting with the Philippines and Malaysia—Malaya when it was still Malaya—Indonesia and I was well versed in affairs and events in that area, and having had that background in Laos—limited as it was, it was better than almost anybody else had. They—when the then chief of station left the end of his tour, they thought, 'Well, why not you?' So they invited me in and said, 'How would you like to go to Laos?' And I said, 'Sure.' I mean, by that time, I only—we only sent senior people to Vientiane as chief of station because it was obviously one of our more important places and getting bigger all the time. So I was, by that time, a fairly senior officer and with just the right background, so that's why they sent me over.

(20:18) So you had a pretty strong sense of sort of the historical and other forces that had been taking place in Laos prior to your posting there.

Well, yes. I mean, I used to—I read a great deal. You know, I read what I could about it. And I didn't—I had other things to do so I couldn't spend my time boring right into it. But from the Philippines I heard more about Vietnam than about Laos. Although I knew what was going on over there, and I knew some of the people who were there. When I went to Malaysia—Malaya—it—you know, my focus then more toward Indonesia other than in Malaya itself and it was just a matter of being generally oriented toward almost everything happening in Southeast Asia and being, at that point, senior enough and also having had at least gotten my feet wet there 15 years before. They said, 'How about going?' And I said, 'Great. Ready to go.'

(21:14) Well, of course, a lot of people look back at that era now in hindsight and have all sorts of ideas of why we were there and what we were up to. As you were living the time forward, as normal people do, what did you see as the most important objectives that you were being sent to take care of in Laos?

In Laos, I could tell you that very simply. I was sent there with two requirements, two objectives in mind. Our effort in Laos was designed to A) sustain the Royal Lao government in the face of what was obviously a Vietnamese—North Vietnamese invasion. My second objective was to do what we could to help the effort and the American effort in Vietnam. That sums it up in, you know, in two or three words. That was it.

(22:05) How much do you think that first thing that you mentioned—supporting the Royal Lao government—was subservient to the second objective of supporting the war in Vietnam?

No, I don't think so.

OK.

I think once the Geneva Accord was completed, even though we disliked the Geneva Accord, I think for some of its obvious impact on Vietnam, it—the Royal Lao government was there and it was accepted in the international community and it had to be preserved. But there were two things going on at the time. The local Lao government, the Pathet Lao, about whom I can say more later, were being—excuse me—were being—the Pathet Lao were giving the Royal Lao government a hard time in the central part of the country, in the Plaine des Jarres, thereabout. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese had not removed their troops when the Geneva agreement was finalized. They had a large force in there backing up the Pathet Lao and pursuing their own objectives of making sure they had a good foothold in the place. So, I think the two things—they were really joined. The Lao government was being very badly—very—it was having a hard time sustaining itself against either the Pathet Lao or the Vietnamese. The Royal Lao Army—the FAR, as we called it—the Forces Armees Royales, was—anyway, had all the advantages of U.S. training and so on, but they could not get their act together. They were doing badly. And it was very important to back them up. The military assistance effort to the Lao government was limited. It tied in with the agreement in Geneva, I guess, to let the French provide—continue to provide some support to the Royal government. But the Royal government was not utilizing it. What was happening there was the Hmong, who were in—right there in the Northeast, affected directly by both the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese, were reacting spontaneously and willingly and effectively. They were fighting a low-key guerilla war against those two enemies. So you had this problem. The Royal government, which we were committed to sustain, not being able to do the job, the FAR, its own army not being up to snuff. And this other indigenous group—we call them Meo in those days—ready and willing to do it. So it seemed like some support to them was called for. The problem of secrecy and the

idea that we could not intervene in Laos, well, that was a problem for everybody and Averell Harriman in particular. And I guess they decided that keep in touch with these people out there, initially keep in touch with the Hmong or the Meo. And there was no question, initially, of providing a lot of support to them. But in—I don't recall whether it was late '62 or early '63, the prime minister then, Souvanna Phouma, on a trip back here to Washington, asked President Kennedy to give support to these people who were willing to fight under his flag—The Meo. And he asked that if it could be done and would be done, could it be kept secret? Well, Kennedy assented to this. I don't—I can't give you a chapter and verse or the documents that show it, but it's pretty well accepted he went along with the idea. And there was nobody else to call into question here but CIA. The military couldn't do it. They could not have uniformed military there. So our people went in there out of uniform—and only a couple at the beginning. And they were—they had been—they had been in contact with, not only the Army people, but also the regulars of the Hmong. But they were pulled out after Geneva and they kept a, you know, sort of an open door with access in case it became possible to the people. They didn't know Vang Pao, I don't think, very well. But when finally the word came via both state and our headquarters, 'go in there and maintain contact with these people and see if they—how they're doing and if they needed to be helped.' Well, it turns out they needed to be helped very badly. The more they—the more you could give them, the more they wanted. But it was not a case of going in there primarily to help them on behalf of the effort in Vietnam. You can say that whatever happened in Laos had a bearing on Vietnam. It did. But there—Laos, as an objective of assistance, was a legitimate endeavor, so called. That was our understanding of it in the Agency. And I was never told to go in there and do everything you possibly could in the trail or anywhere else—go in there and—first of all, support the Royal Lao government. And I got those verbally, from my boss and Richard Helms, who I think has written about this in his own memoir. I'm not sure whether he set it out that way, but I think he did. So, that was—those were my marching orders. The final thing he said to me, 'Don't get yourself killed.'

[Laughs] Good advice.

Gave me, he thought, food for reflection.

(27:16) I hear, of course, the title chief of station bantered about, but I'm not really clear on what a chief of station's responsibilities are, and I'm sure it's different from country to country. But …

Absolutely.

… what was it like to be chief of station in Laos?

Well, Laos was a station like other stations. It was an installation including a number of people. And there was one in Vientiane before there was anything really significant in the paramilitary field. And they were collecting intelligence in various ways about the political situation there, the military situation, the works. But it was primarily the intelligence collection outfit. And to some extent, there was interest in seeing the right people get into power out there and that was an issue with the State Department. But essentially, it was a general purpose station then. After this—and I might also add that, you know, there had been contract out there previously with the Meo, the Hmong. And that was when the—during the earlier pre-Geneva period, the U.S. Army was out there as part of the military assistance program. And they—the White Star teams—have you heard that term?

Yes.

Well, they were the, in effect, Special Forces types who were helping anybody they could and they were helping Vang Pao and his irregulars at that time. So they were gone at the end of the—Geneva. And so, after that, that was, in effect, a window into the contacts we later on developed. Now, after—let's say, after the political period in Laos, in Vientiane, up until '62, it was a standard brand, politically-oriented station: intelligence collection with also Russian Soviets and Chinese

targets, so to speak, to use that kind of verbiage. And that was—that remained the same all the way through. We always had those targets. But in '62, I think, '63, I think the chief of station, then Doug Blaufarb, it began to become more oriented—at least a little bit more oriented toward the paramilitary possibilities when these contacts with Vang Pao had been picked up and had been, in effect, given a green light by the Souvanna Phouma-John F. Kennedy contact in '62 or '63. So, there was then to be given some form of assistance, if it could be arranged and if it could be done clandestinely. So that changed the nature of the beast somewhat. And at the beginning, it was comparatively limited, but it gradually became larger as the whole U.S. effort and all became bigger. Does that make any sense to you?

(30:02) Sure. So, to …

By the time I got there, it was a station that did all those things, but were much more involved in the paramilitary side. And that was my daily primary concern. But we had the other concerns, too. We were keeping and eye on the Soviets and on the Chinese. The Chinese didn't matter too much, but the Russians were more significant to us. And they had a general collection. Then later on when narcotics became a hot issue we got, you know, stuck into that. And so there were—it was a variety of things on the plate. But for my purposes, I was more concerned with the—immediately concerned with the paramilitary side. But that's, I mean, my time was, say, 50% the latter and 50% all the rest.

(30:51) So people who reported directly to you on the paramilitary side would be like chief of ground operations, chief of air operations, people like that?

No. The way it was—the way we were organized there, by the time I got there, the station, you know, the headquarters, so to speak, of the office was Vientiane where the chief of stations sat. Now, over in Udorn we had the, in effect, the center of the paramilitary program and that was a paramilitary support and guidance program. Then in Laos we had installations, smaller installation up in the north in Nam Yu and Nam Houi Sai at one time. Then the big one became Long Tieng and later on Pakse and Savannakhet. These were, you might say, sub-bases. But they were the point from which the troops were organized, trained and directed and supported in the field. So the dirty work had to be done via Udorn. They were the ones who handled the details. But they did nothing of any significance without my foreknowledge and approval and with my—my contact with the ambassador was the key that made this whole thing go. The ambassador was in on everything we did and my association with him was intimate. Daily we met. Daily—we worked daily on this. We did nothing without his approval. Sometimes we did things at his direction. So there was no question of the rogue elephant business here. That's, you know, crap and nonsense from the Washington press. But it was the ambassador—a wonderful boss and he didn't come in and tell me how to, you know, how to count the numbers of the troops and all that. He wanted to know what we were doing, when we were doing and did he approve it? And if he didn't, he told us. If he did, he said go ahead. It was a very intimate relationship.

(32:45) Now, that was already Mac Godley when you arrived in '70?

Mac Godley. Yeah, he'd been there for I think a year and a half already when I got there. I'm not sure exactly—a year and a half. And he was a superb guy. I just—he's still a great personal friend as is, as you know, Jack Vessey.

Yes.

And Vessey, too, became a close friend. Vessey—he came—he was there—he overlapped me within my tour of about a year and he was really to replace by, I guess, Trefry at that point. I can't remember exactly. But Jack was superb and he was a great help to me, too, because he—you know,

I didn't need him for daily advice, but, I mean, his knowledge and his wisdom and his common sense, which I brought to very much as I could in my own program, was absolutely ideal.

(33:36) How would you sort of mentally draw—I don't know if you want to call it a chain of command, maybe a chain of responsibility, but those three figures—you and Vessey and Godley—how did you work together and how would you …

Well, Godley was the boss. Vessey was—he was in a unique capacity called Depchief JUSMACTHAI, which was the support element for the assistance given to the Royal Lao government. But he was beyond that. I mean, he—there had always been some concern that in Laos we had a CIA station, you know, a civilian installation in contact with the ambassador, in effect having a lot to say about what was done in Laos and particularly what was done in the air in terms of air support. We needed air support for our operations. We got it in two different ways. We had the Royal Lao Air Force, which were then T-28s in my time, which were good for tactical air support, bombing of close end targets and infantry support and so on. Then, as the war in Vietnam became bigger and bigger, you know what happened over there. The support came out of Udorn, backing up what was done in Vietnam itself and out of the Gulf of Thailand. So there were all kinds of air support coming in against targets within North Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh Trail. So the people in Udorn—the—I think, it was called deputy chief 713th Commander—or the commander of 713th Air Force—he was responsible to COMUSMACTHAI in Vietnam. But he also had to keep an eye on what was going on in Laos, because he was being called upon to support things in Laos. When we couldn't get help from—or couldn't get enough help from the Royal Lao Air Force, they didn't have the force to—the bomb way to get in, we often called upon the 713th to give us fast movers. And they did when they could. This became a constant problem of adjustment. How much do you need? How much can you get? How much is available? And satisfaction or dissatisfaction on both sides were the net impact of all this. But there'd always been a certain resentment on the part of the air force over there, that they didn't have enough of a say so in this daily operation and manipulation of the forces available. Well, they couldn't be over there to be any closer to it than they were because the Geneva Agreement proscribed their coming over. They were uniformed military. So it was always a bit of a tussle there between them. Now, when Jack came in, I don't know how—I think the ambassador first of all agreed with him come in as a brigadier instead of a colonel, which had often been the case before. And that gave him more stature in general. And somehow or other it just worked out that he was closer to us than any of the military had been before. It has always been somebody as dep chief, but he'd been a colonel. And he'd come over to Vientiane periodically and take part in some of the discussions and so on. But he—we did not include him in our tactical planning. If an operation was under way, we were, say, sending in—oh, I have to talk a little more about the way we were organized with chief, but we and the ambassador and our headquarters were in charge of what we did on the ground. We didn't ask the air force permission or—there was coordination back there, but it wasn't enough for them and they wanted more. So, with that later on we got into trouble—or the troops got into trouble—and we came asking for more help. They would tend to say, 'Well, god damn it, why weren't we brought into this picture earlier?' Well, the situation was such that it couldn't be done any differently. But somehow, when Jack got there, it worked out better. We were all a little more mature by that time and the ambassador and he—the ambassador and me—Jack and I—we—just—this thing worked famously under our—under the ambassador's authority and our collaboration. Does that make any sense to you?

(37:47) Yes. I remember General Vessey telling me the story that he first arrived in Vientiane and kept trying to get an appointment with the ambassador and he kept being told, 'Well, wait. Wait. Come back later.' Finally, he said, 'I'm not leaving the office until I

see him.' And he said Godley came running out and yelled at him and said, 'I don't want you here and …'

Really?

Yeah.

Well, I—this was carefully cushioned. I knew there was tension. I didn't know it got that bad.

Well, it sounded like it was just right at the top, that perhaps his earlier experiences had not been very positive.

That's right. The ambassador's earlier experience has a bit—and some of the—he knew about these frictions. He knew about the complaints. The people in Udorn and the air force people were in constant contact with Saigon, I suspect. And there was always this sort of strain there. And it was a thing that—I—this was new to me when I got there. I soon picked up the frequency it was operating on, but my sympathies were entirely with the ambassador because, you know, he was no dummy and he knew the rules that he had and his rules were the same as I had. No uniformed military. It didn't make any difference to me because I wasn't inviting any in. But it could have been important to him. It was important to him. He—later on, when things got easier and it's hard to say when this transition took place, but we began—he began to invite some of the military in from Saigon. When we talked to General—he just went up the line. I forget who the first one was, but there were two or three who had come over there before my time just to talk to the ambassador, you know, in civilian clothes in the office, but they weren't involved in any of the operations. They just talked. But later on, he invited General Abrams over, and we had a wonderful time with Abrams. And showed him the works and he was very impressed with what he saw and he ended up by sending General Vogt over after—[joined] the Air Force and that worked very well, too. And with Jack—and Vessey inside the loop, it—from then on, we had very, very good relations with all of them. And of this—Abrams-Vogt infusion, we got the full weight of the F-111s in the last few months of the war. The F-111s, are you familiar with them?

Not as much as I should be, I have to confess.

Those are the hottest aircraft. You know, they carried a massive bomb load, but they were a fighter aircraft, too. And they could also, after we worked out something for them, we developed, with the help of General Hughes over in Udorn—this is where we began to be very friendly with him—they developed a certain type of—I don't know what they call it—a ground-to-air communications device, which would enable them to change targets in flight for the AF-111s because they normally operated on a computerized program. They didn't change direction for anything. And with this, they could communicate with the troops on the ground. The troops on the ground were getting hit by the enemy [signal breaks up] contact. They could be signaled [signal breaks up] where the enemy troops were [signal breaks up]…

I just lost you there for a second.

… to that point. It was great for us and the Air Force liked it, too. So things were—they got very much better in the last year of the war. And that was really the last—that was almost Jack's last year. And it did—he had a lot to do with this because he was such a smooth—you know, he was with us all—we felt that he was part of the team. He wasn't somebody complaining about things being run by a bunch of civilians. He was with the civilians, he worked with them, he helped them out. He never hesitated to say what he thought. And we just loved him. This may be very chaotic in the way I presented this to you, but…

(41:58) Oh, it was quite all right. You'll have a chance to look it over and you can move it around however you like. You mentioned this before and, I mean, I know roughly what White Star is. I mean, it seems like it's Special Forces, but it's not special forces. Was there some significance to that designation White Star?

I really don't know. That was before my time. That began in the late 50s under General [John] Hentges, who was the—I don't know what they called him, but he was the guy in control of the assistance program to the Royal Lao government. He had these Special Forces people that were [signal breaks up], but they also were deployed in the field in the northeast especially and they had contact with the Meo and they—I don't think they went into combat with them, but we were not, incidentally, we did not go into combat with them. We often got hurt because we were pretty close by, but we didn't actually deliberately go into combat. But I think the White Star may have, I'm not sure, but they were—I think, as I recall, Special forces and some of those stayed behind [signal breaks up] Laos. And after the military—the regular military program was depleted, I think, but they—we often drew upon the Special Forces in Thailand for training—for training of our irregular forces. We then, at the end, as we began to send over to Thailand for training.

(43:31) Let's see. Did you—I mean, Bill Lair would have left by the time you got there, but did you know him or at least know of him?

I met him first in 1965 and just—I went back to Vientiane just coincidentally. I was visiting Bangkok on business in December of '65 and I had some time on my hands up there, so somebody said, 'How about going up to Udorn and seeing your old friends up in Laos?' Bill Sullivan was the ambassador there and Doug Blaufarb was the chief of station. I knew him. He was an old friend. So I went up to Udorn and met Bill Lair for the first time, I met Pat Landry and his people. And they gave me a ride over to Vientiane and I met Sullivan and spent some time with the then-chief of station. But that was my first real contact with Bill Lair, who was then out of Laos and working in Udorn. He later on left Udorn and went—I guess he went back to headquarters.

(44:29) What was your impression—I mean, I realize it was long time ago and it was a brief visit, but do you have any remaining impressions of your visit in '65 and what was going on there?

Yeah, the—I had a distinct impression. The program was getting bigger, but not by too much. It was still a comparatively limited, restrained program. Have you ever read Blaufarb's book on counterinsurgency?

I've got it on my desk.

It's a great book and he's a good fellow. Very old dear friend. I mean, you could see that he was writing not only about what he saw, but what came later. I think it was published in '72 or '73, I can't recall. But he saw the thing getting bigger and he was not too keen on the way it was being done or that it was being done, but that same theme was echoed later on when he was replaced by Ted Shackley. Are you familiar?

Oh, yes. [Laughs]

Are you there?

Yes. Yeah, I'm …

By that time, the thing had grown quite a bit.

Well, it seems like Shackley is sort of the man in the black hat in this story.

He is accepted—if you read what I've written about him, he's not. He's—Shackley's a very able—tremendously able guy. He's not a—he's not a pushover for people who are not sure of themselves. He went out there and I guess—and we had just recently introduced US forces into Saigon, Vietnam. And he saw it was going and I think he was given a much more brusque injunction to get out there and get things moving and see what you can do to help these people. But he wasn't out there to change the actual movement of the forces out of the northeast central part of Laos into the Vietnam area. He was out there to do what he could, but not to do more—well, the point I'm getting at is the whole effort—as the American effort in Vietnam got bigger, the American effort in

Laos got bigger and Shackley was the instrument of it. And being an able guy, he may have cracked a lot of knuckles in the course of this. But it did get bigger and the Hmong were delighted that it got bigger. It was only some people outside who were not quite so pleased. Now, Bill Lair, at the time, did not object to that, I don't think. Later on, as it continued - this went on in 1966, '67, '68, '69, '70, '71. So, you can see the operation got bigger and the Lao loved it. The Lao government loved it, because it was bringing their sort of chestnuts home to roost and roast and all that. And we did some things in the Ho Chi Minh trail, but not very—not an awful lot. But generally speaking, it was pleasing to both sides—the American side, the Lao side and the—internally, the CIA side. But Shackley, I do not—I don't think he operated alone. He did what he was told to do and he simply did it very well. And that entailed rubbing some people the wrong way. He was that kind of a guy. But extremely able. Have you seen his book—his book he wrote?

Yes, *The Third Option*.

Huh?

***The Third Option*, it's called.**

Well, you know what I said in that, in the preface? I spoke very well of him.

Oh, that's right. I had forgotten that.

Yeah, I was asked to do a preface for him and I said it as I saw it. And I criticize *Backfire* and the thing about the - what is it—the sequel to it.

Oh, *Shooting at the Moon*.

Shooting at the Moon. Because I think they made a mean ogre out of Shackley. He was not—he's not that bad. I think he—they overdid their character of him. That was helped no little by that awful book by David Corn.

I don't think I know that one.

You don't know—well, it's—David Corn, as far as I'm concerned, he's beyond the pale. But it's a book he called the *Blonde Ghost*.

What—how do you spell his last name?

C-o-r-n.

Oh, Corn. OK.

And I think he's just awful. I think he—that book is—contains a lot of half-truths and untruths. But, in any event, Shackley, I think—one thing I took exception to in the—in *Backfire* and I met Roger Warner and told him so. I think it's page 353 or something like that. He was quoting Bill Lair about the period of the refugees coming down into Laos. And they were pouring into the camps up in the north and Bill, it said, was sent up to north by the chief of station to take care of the situation out there and told to do what? To take a broom and sweep it under the rug. And you hold the broom. He said that. He quoted. That came from Warner. He didn't name the chief of station, but I was he. So, I called up Bill right away and I said, 'Look. Have you read this thing? I know you didn't say this, but this is what he said.' He said, 'No, that's wrong.' He said, 'I didn't say such a thing.' So, I saw Warner not too long after that and I gave him hell over it. And he said, 'Well, well, well.' He hemmed and hawed and he said—he apologized. And when the new book came out, *Shooting at the Moon*, he changed that section.

Very good.

Yeah. He changed the wording to a much less obnoxious wording. So, but—my objective on that is—and I've said this to the guys involved—our guys— Whitehouse and Landry, Bill Lair and all the rest of them—they were talking about things that are still very heavily classified internally. And I don't think they should have said it, but they did. Well, the deed is done. They couldn't—you couldn't—you know, you couldn't put the egg back in the chicken or whatever. [Chuckles] But they were speaking of classified stuff and I think it was wrong. OK. That's done. So, I talk about it

because it is, in effect, a *fait accompli*. But I didn't care much for that whole *Backfire* approach. It goes on even now.

(50:45) Do you think, looking back now, is part of it that we never really understood just how many casualties the Vietnamese were willing to take in order to try to accomplish their mission or were there even bigger issues than that …

I've had no illusions about the Vietnamese there. I felt the Vietnamese were in it to go all the way and take Vientiane if necessary. They tried. You know, and—just an example. You know what happened in '71 and '72? In '71, Vang Pao went back across the Plain like a thunderstorm. And we built up the whole program out there and the infusion of artillery and the Thai volunteers and everything else, and a very major effort was underway. The Vietnamese hit it with a ton of bricks in December.

Hello? Oops, I'm sorry, we—you just cut out for a second. I think the last thing I heard was the Vietnamese hit it with a ton of bricks in December. [Long pause] Hello?

Yeah?

Oh, sorry.

Are you there?

Yes.

I thought you were cut out.

Oh, well, I think—yeah, I think we cut out for a minute, but you were just talking about how the Vietnamese launched a counter offense against Vang Pao after he took most of the Plain of Jars.

Yeah, they did. They hit very hard and knocked it back and it was a very—a major defeat at the time. Well, that went on and they kept the pressure up and Vang Pao did a number of things there which were very effective in keeping—in slowing down the pressure. But by January of '72, the Vietnamese were still pushing very hard against Long Tieng. And Long Tieng was the heart and soul of the Hmong effort, civilian life and Hmong effort militarily. In, let's see, December 13, I think the day was, there were 22 North Vietnamese battalions surrounding Long Tieng. I mean surrounding. They were in the terrain all around. Their pressure was on us very heavily, they were probing all over the place. And it looked to most people like the end was coming. I mean, it was clear to me there that the Vietnamese <u>wanted</u> it and if they'd gotten in, they would have gone into Vientiane, too, I think. If you look over the history of that area, the Vietnamese—whoever was in charge of Tonkin and the Northern Vietnamese had a very basic interest—political interest in the Plaine des Jarres. And the third elephant of the—you know, the Lao flag? One was in the Plaine des Jarres area. That little dynasty up there paid obeisance to North Vietnam. At the same time, they were friendly with the rest of the Lao and the south Lao effort. The Vietnamese wanted that and they maintained that, in effect, control over it. So with this new effort on the part of the Lao and the Hmong to keep the Plaine des Jarres area within the grasp of the Royal Lao government, they began to hit harder and harder and harder. So, I think their objective was to go as far as they could. Now, they didn't want to go into the point where they're getting slaughtered, but they wanted to go as far as they could gracefully. They had two divisions up there. Two line infantry divisions. They had three independent brigades, which are large regiments. And they had forces of sappers and forward artillery—superb artillery all the time. This was a <u>major</u> operation up there. Now, this continued into '72. Now, if you think back to Vietnam in '72, it got very quiet between January and March or April. And what was happening at that time was the press had nothing to do in Vietnam and they all began to flock into Vientiane to see what's going on over here. So, the word got out that the CIA headquarters up there was being evacuated. Nobody was left up there and everything is being pushed apart and the clandestine army is being shattered and so on. So, it was a very critical

time. But at that point, (how to put it?), the Vietnamese were shocked by something that Vang Pao did in February that just—and it hit them in the height of this effort on their part. He took a force of his beleaguered troops—5,000 of them—and he marched them on the ground, through the forest, south of the Plaine des Jarres, up around to flank the Vietnamese out on the plain. And he went there with no air support. That was the only condition in which we let him go. No air support, no communications. No—no nothing, no contact. And he did it. And within three weeks he pulled out 11 of those Vietnamese battalions. He cut the force in half. So the heat was off him for a while then and it was—what am I getting at here now? [Chuckles] I'm getting at—how did we start talking about this?

(56:10) Let's see—we were—oh, we were talking about—I said I thought maybe one of the CIA's mistakes and maybe Shackley's mistakes in places like Nam Bac was that they didn't think that the Vietnamese were willing to take the heavy casualties that they did.
I don't know how much thinking and reading Shackley had done about that part of the country. I mean, he was a pretty thorough guy. I'm sure he had a pretty good idea what he was doing. But as far as I knew from my own experience out there, I knew that the Vietnamese were very deeply concerned with Laos. And it was very important to them that they had a foothold on it. They couldn't do with the Pathet Lao who were not very effective. They would do it themselves. And everything I saw out there sort of weighed that out. Now, on the Pathet Lao—you mentioned these a couple of times. Everybody brings that up. When they talk about CIA's effort against the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese, the Pathet Lao during my almost three years out there never took part in any single important engagement. They were not a military factor at all. Everything we did, every time we had the enemy at our throats or whatever, it was the North Vietnamese. The Pathet Lao didn't count for a hill of beans. And it always bothers me to see them get credit for it. They did smart things so the Vietnamese let them be support troops and administrators and they learned how to keep house and do things that the Lao don't normally do very easily, readily. Certainly the Hmong don't either. But they were saved for the day later on when they could be more effective, as they were. When they didn't capture the place, they were there and they sort of set up housekeeping all over again when the war was over. I don't know what more I can say about my assurance and my conviction that the Vietnamese were very serious about it and I think the Hmong do that very well, too. Now, how many—how much in the way of casualties that the Hmong could stand. Nobody knew that. I didn't know it. All I knew was the Hmong, under their commanders, were charging all the time. We had to hold them back. And that's another thing, too. We—going back through Shackley's period—well, I can't say for Shackley's period, but through the Devlin period after that—Devlin was there for two years after Shackley and I replaced Devlin. Through his time, the impetus for action came from the Hmong. They were always trying to move ahead, move ahead. And when they—when we did this—when we said, 'No, you're not ready. Stop. Stop.' Oh, god, they would raise hell. Vang Pao would plead and pound the floor and pound the table. And so they were very dynamic forces in this thing. Now, the Hmong soldier, the young punk there, you know, who didn't know what he was doing half the time, except when he got trained pretty well, he didn't have much to say about it. Vang Pao ran the place because he was a simple and military leader. So it was very hard to say no to them, to <u>him</u> at that time. He had plenty of support and moral support from the Thais, as you know.

(59:33) Yeah. What do you remember about your first impressions of seeing the Hmong people and meeting General Vang Pao?
[Chuckles] Well, when—my first time to Long Tieng is a place where you had to see to believe it. A little—have you ever seen pictures of Long Tieng?

Oh, yes.

Photo overlooking the northern "backside" of Long Tieng. The old runway is hidden behind the second hill from the left. (Paul Hillmer, June 2015)

Well, you know what it's like. You see those mountains there? What it's like to fly in there? You flew in around the right-hand plank, you did an immediate left turn, tried to drop in over the peaks there, settle down on that landing strip, and before you got to the end of it, turn right. And it—I mean, I flew in there with civilians and other people from Saigon and they sometimes came close to wetting their pants in the dark. It was a town of about 25,000 people, I think. And the Hmong soldiers generally had their families there. That was one thing with the Hmong. They wanted their families there and the defense of their families was critical to them. And [Pauses] what am I saying? It was a military encampment, no question about that. We had our own installation up there, a small unit, comparatively big by comparison to others, but still a very small place. And we kept people there all the time. And when it looked like the Vietnamese were going to break through the whole thing in January of—December or January of '71, '72, I kept our people there. I kept somebody from our place there all the time, day and night, to give the Hmong the kind of moral support they needed. And it worked and there was no threat. Now, the soldiers, they had various sort of installations out. They had supply installations, they had a training camp, they had a place reserved—a little palace and wat for the king when he came up there. And it was a, in many respects, a simple civilian town. The people lived everywhere around, scattered around, their little houses in the usual style. Vang Pao had a decent headquarters up there where all the visitors came in to meet him. And—but, you know, at times when you go there—at least the first time you wondered, 'Wow, how did I come to be here?' It was—almost everybody has had that feeling. But we had—he had had bacis [string-tying ceremonies] for people when they came in, little parties, you know. He'd bring out Scotch and offer them little shots of Scotch the first thing in the morning when they came in to [Interviewer's laughter]. And, you know, [Chuckles] it's a little hard to get used to that. Most of us don't have Scotch for breakfast. But it—you know, I saw under many different conditions, it—when things were going well. But I've gone up there within months after that of seeing it under fire and of the Vietnamese shooting artillery right over our heads. And even when Vietnamese were—had ground forces trying to come in from the corners and so on, it's hard to believe that a place like that could have lasted as long as it did. We, you know, the forces were generally made—you know, his—when he made large movements, he had other places around where he sort of collected his troops and had them all ready and organized and equipped for departure. But it was essentially a support base. And for us it was a control point for everything. We had our air support operations up there. The air—they had an air attaché representative up

there who worked with us to communicate with the air force up above. We had direct contact with the air force elements and we had the AB-Triple C—do you know what that is?
(1:03:23) No.
The airborne control and command ships that flew over the trail. We had the spooky gunships up there, C-130 gunships, which could provide sometimes support to the troops on the ground. And we had the Royal Lao Air Force support in the air and the air attaché up there could help greatly with that. That was another thing that Udorn didn't like—the Udorn Air Force people. Here's a junior air force colonel who, with his colleagues, the CIA civilians, could call for fast mover support for little irregular forces on the ground. And it was dismaying to see this massive, highly technical—technologically-oriented air force be deployed for such mundane purposes.

(1:04:14)[Laughs] Did you have a sense of sort of the leaps, if you will, that the Hmong people were making from being mountaintop people, slash and burn farmers, animistic people and now fighting with modern military technology and techniques and things of that nature?
Yeah, did I have any sense of the Hmong response to that attitude toward it?
Well, just how they were managing to make this rather remarkable leap from being sort of isolated people to being …
I think I can tell you a few things about that. Let me think. First of all, the Hmong, of course, as you know, they were mountain people. They had no experience of—they didn't all speak Lao. They sometimes spoke—the more educated ones spoke French. English was a rare thing. They had never driven a car, much less a truck. And the airplane was a thing that they saw come out of the sky. And that's how our name—did you ever hear our term Sky?
Yes.
The sky—well, they tell me when I say, 'How did we get called Sky?' Well, because they saw this stuff come out of the sky. Rice came out of the sky. Everything came from the sky. And we provided that, so we were called Sky. But they liked it. I mean, they had these little people, you know, who had no experience with anything modern or the West. Some were smart enough and selected carefully, ended up learning over—going over to Udorn and flying—learning how to fly T-28s.
Right.
And some of those Meo flyers were incredible. Some of those pilots flew 3,000 missions before they all hit the ground, as most of them did in time. Now, they—you know, they adapted to modern life. They liked it. Now, this speaks for a fairly small minority, but the older men, the ones who were Vang Pao's major leaders—of course, of an awful lot of them were killed, too. It's very hard to keep, you know, maintain your leadership. Think of us in Iraq the same way with the same problem. It—they adapted, they took to it because they liked it. I mean, they were—the crest of the military wave when they were winning was wonderful. But over time, as they saw the losses and it was—it was no fun for them. Let me go back a little bit and talk about impressions—first impressions. When I first got there, I mean, I'd already been up to Vientiane to pay my respects and made my first speech in schoolboy French, which was not easy—and then, back to work. And in—I think in November, early November or December, I got briefed on an operation which was already being discussed with Vang Pao and everybody else up there. And the ambassador was—really needed to be briefed on it. And I had the guys over from Udorn and we put it forth. Now, this was the thing which Vang Pao <u>wanted</u> to do. Why did he want to do it? Well, for a lot of reasons. He wanted to do it—he wanted to go to a place called Ban-Ban. Now, that's in the northeastern part, farther northeast than where we were. You can probably find it on the map there. It's a critical, you know, verge junction and point where the North Vietnamese were strong then and

have been strong ever since. It was a focal point for their movements in and out of Laos. He wanted to go in with a combined force of airbornes, partly airborne and ground and really hit them hard and take it. And there were lots of Hmong people living around there who wanted to come out. It was too far for them to walk and it was too dangerous and so on. So, this—it was a big operation, which Vang Pao was promoting and, you know, it did seem like a rational thing to do for Vang Pao, but nobody else was quite sure of it. OK, the ambassador would shoot it over and we presented the thing to headquarters with his support and finally headquarters approved it. But things began to get complicated after that. They began to move out from the place up called—LS32, it is—Bouam Loung, north of the Plaine des Jarres. They're moving out troops from there. They're moving a ground force which we bring in by chopper and drop south of Ban-Ban. This was a two-pronged assault. And this became a complicated thing. Headquarters was yelling back and forth and asking the State Department to get into the act and they were upset about it. And I was getting awakened in the middle of the night, you know, at two or three in the morning. 'What about this?' They want to know about such and such. 'What about the refugees?' This was, you know, a screaming fest. But, you know, I was offering it as what we had proposed on the basis of what we thought we knew. The ambassador had accepted it and the Hmong were eager to go. The Thais liked it. Everybody liked it. And it became a very sticky thing. But the point I'm getting at, this was a Vang Pao-promoted idea. I learned that he had grown up there, had been born there or something years before. He wanted to get it, too. And the Hmong were all for it. Well, it turned out to be not a fiasco. It didn't work out very well. We got—we got in, not all the way, and we got out with most of the troops intact and there weren't many casualties. But it was a very sticky thing. And if I, in the middle of the night, try to keep my head in the face of all these messages back and forth, queries and screams and whatnot, it—I began to wonder at that point—this is a very messy affair, maybe. Do I really want to be here? But I was there anyway. But here's the point I'm making is—different Hmong were pushing and Vang Pao pushed every single thing we did thereafter. Now, what's one little guy? You can say, well, Vang Pao is a very impressive guy and he appeared to have the support of his own people. They were eager to go and he never failed to be able to muster troops and he had good commanders up there, and it went all the way through the next two years in my time—two and a half years.

Was there any …

Where were we before I …

(1:10:25) Well, that's quite all right. Was there any point in which you—well, maybe you saw it at the beginning, I don't know. But there are lots of tales, of course, of how the population of Hmong troops got younger and younger and younger.

Well, you know, that's a hard thing to produce. I can—I was with them and I was, you know, looking at those, talking to those Hmong troops again and again, talking. I mean, not talking with them, but meeting them, saying hello to their bosses. Little more than that. I couldn't speak Hmong, but I saw mostly the sort of guys you see in <u>our</u> army. I mean, young guys, 17, 18, 19 years old. Now, what about the 14-year-old kids, the 13-year-old kids, how many were—now, you see a Hmong. You know, I'm not very tall—5' 8", but I'm comparatively tall compared to most of those guys. But if I see a young Hmong who is 5' 4" and he's tough and he's got more muscles than I have and he's carrying a pack and swinging an M-16, can I tell that he's not a 14-year-old guy? Fourteen-year-old kids to me look much bigger than he does. It's very hard to tell. We used to remonstrate with Vang Pao on this, 'Now, look. No kids.' He said, 'No kids. These boys.' And in one specimen we were moving an operation in '72 up around the plain again to try to take the heat off the Vietnamese on us. And we flanked—that was what we did—we flanked them and tried to make them fall back. But we had about four or five battalions moving out of this one place. And I

was up there, you know, with Vang Pao, looking over the troops and they were getting ready. And they were bright fellows, nice looking. And I saw one guy, a young guy, and I couldn't believe it. Instead of a backpack, he had a little kid back on his—a little baby. A six-month old child. And I said—I went over to the General and said, 'You know, what is this? Look at this.' He went and talked to the kid and said, 'What's that?' And it turns out the boy said his wife had died. He had the baby. He had no place to go. He had nobody, no sister, no mother. So, he said he would take it with him. Well, you know, this was a kid about—probably about 20 years old. But a little guy with a baby on his back. He could be any age, but there aren't many 14-year olds—if they could carry an M-16 [Pauses] a 13-year old would have a hard time handling an M-16. They weigh about nine pounds or so. And I don't think there were very many. I never saw many. Where if I—where in that one case where I did see something odd and out of line, I'd get Vang Pao and he assured me again and again that he would not put those young boys in. He needed them for tomorrow. So, I think there's a lot of myth in connection to this. I don't think—not very many first-hand accounts are extant on that issue. I feel fairly confident about—the soldiers were—you know, I feel the same way. When I was a kid, I saw one of the Lehrer shows tonight—last night. A 17-year-old boy—no, God, is that a boy who should be getting killed in Iraq? If my son was 17, I wouldn't like it. I can't assure you or reassure you, I'm sure, that because you've heard all the legends and the stories and there may be truth somewhere in it, but not very much.

(1:13:58) OK. Well, let's go through some of the sort of different aspects of your job as station chief and maybe just talk about each one of them in more detail.

… other jobs besides.

Well, some of your responsibilities as station chief. Like, in fact, I think Jack Vessey may have given me a lot of the things on this list. But obviously, I don't know if you want to talk about it in terms of daily or weekly routines or just different aspects of the job. Whatever works for you, but…

It's hard to give a rational picture of a daily routine. Everything's so chaotic that …

But just in terms of maybe interfacing with other people concerning the prosecution of the war itself.

Well, it—whatever I did didn't deter me from prosecuting the war—you know, for being concerned about prosecuting the war. I had some good people working for me up there, some very good people. I had some wonderful people on the paramilitary side. And I also had some good ones on the—what we would call the operational side. I mean, we had—you know, the traditional targets, the hard targets, which we call the Soviets and the Chinese. The Chinese were not important there because they weren't—I don't think there was an embassy in Vientiane. And there wasn't much we could go about it. We worried a lot about the Chinese on the building the road over into northeast Laos—northwestern Laos. You know about that China road?

Yeah. I think Vessey talked about it a little bit.

Well, that was the thing that the Chinese began building way before my time. It went down—all the way down toward Ban Houi Sai toward—almost to the Mekong [aimed pretty], if it were extended, into Thailand. Now, that road became the most heavily defended piece of real estate, I think, in Indochina. It was a—they had antiaircraft there. There were—you know, we were seeing it by air and satellite. And we did not go in there. We simply could not take a chance. We had other ways of approaching the Chinese target, not by going anywhere near that China road. We had teams we sent up way around the back side up in—up toward the border area. But, you know, intelligence collection teams. But they were—nothing to do with the China road. The—we had the narcotics targeted—target, that is—This is a thing which I dislike intensely. I think it's a big—it's an absurdity, really. When everybody I've ever seen who had to do with it felt that it was a non-winner.

The problem is here in the United States, it's not—the opium producer up in the Triangle—if we can't keep it in or out of the country here, how can they keep it from getting out of their country there in their half-assed situations they have? It—but we were ordered to work on this thing and devote a major portion of our efforts to it. Well, we did politically work with the prime minister and minister of defense in persuading—the ambassador led the pack on this. I mean, I backed him up with my limited efforts—to get the Lao government to pass a law proscribing any trafficking in narcotics. And they did it. And we established an inspection team on Air America. I haven't said much about Air America, but of course, that was fundamental to our whole program. Or do you know it?

(1:17:21) Well, I'd certainly be interested in your comments about it. I'll put it on the list at the end here and I'll bring it up again when we're talking about these other things.

They were a marvelous organization and without them we could not have lasted one week out there, I don't think. But when we had the inspection system with their planes, I don't think we ever—I can't remember a single case where we caught narcotics being smuggled out. I thought that we were doing everything reasonably we could. Now, one of the issues that came up on this contact was one of the—not Hmong, but—what did we call them, the …

Lao Theung?

Huh?

Lao Theung?

No, no. Not Lao Theung. The people over in the north, in the western part of the country.

Yao?

Meo. Meo. Meo. Not Meo. What do you call the Meo. The Yao.

Yao, yes.

And one of their top Yao boss over there was—I've forgotten his name now, but he was alleged to be a major trafficker in narcotics all over the world.

Oh, Tony Poe?

Huh?

Tony Poe?

Oh, no. Tony Poe's an American. He was one of our guys.

Oh, you're talking about a Yao person. OK. Sorry.

He wasn't in Laos, in my time in Laos. He was in Thailand.

OK.

He was moved out of there long before. But the Yao chief in Ban Nam Kun, the town over there. There was a lot of opium produced over there. But this—the Yao boss was said to be trafficked heavily in narcotics. And there was some evidence there to that effect. But we were supposed to put the screws in him. Well, he was supplying us with about a regiment of troops and there was a conflict there between our interest in keeping our forces on the ground effective and dealing with this ridiculous (***) narcotics. I think it's ridiculous in the sense that if we can't keep it out in the United States, it's pretty hard to keep it inside Indochina. And I sort of resented this thing in a way because there was so much made of it. And I'll tell you one more story about this, too. I'm sure you've heard of Alfred McCoy.

(1:19:27) Oh, yes.

Whom I think is a bum if I ever met one. I haven't met him, but I—in his book—I don't remember the page—he talks about his time in Laos. He went over to Vientiane in '71 and he talked to people and so on. And he said he talked to—he had heard that General Ouane Rattikone, the commander-in-chief of the Lao army, was a heavy dealer in narcotics. He had his own refineries and factories and whatnot. He went to see General Ouane and he talked to him at length and Ouane said, yes, indeed, he had these places. He told him all about it. He had these places—I don't know where he

said he had them. But this came mostly in a footnote and he named this visit to General Ouane. And it so happens that, at that very same time, I think it was July—it may have been early August of '71—we had been asked to receive a visit on one of the [Codells—a] visitation from I think—I'm not sure which committee. It wasn't the Armed Services Committee. I think it was the House Foreign Relations Committee. And they were sending two men out to talk to the embassy and the mission, including us, and they wanted to talk about narcotics and so on. Well, a man named Brady—Tom Brady, I think his name was—came out to the embassy and he came to see the ambassador and the ambassador—he introduced him to me and asked if I would talk to him. And he said to me, yes, he would like to meet this General Ouane. 'OK,' I said. I told him that I had talked to Ouane myself on a number of occasions and Ouane had denied to me anything to do with narcotics. Even though some people on the mission believed that he was dealing in it, other people didn't believe him at all. But he had told me, swearing up and down, that he had nothing to do with it. OK, I told that to Brady. He said, 'I'd like to meet him.' So, I arranged to have an appointment with him. I told Ouane that this guy from Congress would like to talk to him. And I forget where he received him, but he met him and he denied this to Brady, too. Now, are you going to tell me that some two-bit junior academic—he's going to, like McCoy's going to come out there, and you wangle an appointment with the commander-in-chief of the Lao Army and get him, through which language, I don't know—French or Lao—get him to deny—or to say what he denied to everybody else, the U.S. mission, including the chief of station? I actually think that McCoy is an out-and-out liar. I think that it's just awful to see that the attention and acknowledgement that book has received.

(1:22:16) He's on the warpath again ever since General Vang Pao's arrest. He's…

I heard about the Wisconsin school naming business, too.

Yes. So …

I'm sure he's tickled to death over this. Free publicity. Well, I've talked to people—I used to work in the—after I retired, I was at the National Strategy Information Center in Washington. My immediate boss, Roy Godson, was—I saw him a couple—some years later after I retired, I had lunch with him. And he said, 'Oh, this book is terrific. That's the gospel now. My goodness. That's right.' I told him the story I've just told you. He said, 'Well, people don't accept that. He's accepted as the authority.' Now, I don't know. I think he's awful. But anyway, that—narcotics took a lot of time and it took a lot of manpower, which I think got us absolutely nowhere. This continued later on. You know, I was in Thailand for three years after Laos and it continued down there. I had just as much trouble with the narcotics there as I ever did in Laos. But that wasn't important. Now, normal intelligence collection, we have means of collecting information of everything that's going on, and we did that. We had good people working on it and we knew, literally, I think, everything that was happening in Laos. The Soviets were a target to us. I mean, I had contact with the Soviet—in effect, my opposite number on the Soviet side. We would meet at functions, at parties and whatnot and fence a little bit, compare notes, and exchanged a few limited ideas. That takes some time and great care. But we watched those people very carefully and they watched us pretty carefully. We had one Soviet defector out there, which was very interesting. Now, we had, you know, I had also to supervise these other installations in Udorn and in Savannakhet, Pakse, not only Long Tieng and Nam Yu. And that took time, that took trips. I must have gone at least twice a week by air up country to every one—to get to some of these places, to get close in with the guys who were doing it and get more immediate on hands awareness of what they were doing, even though I knew what they were doing. They were reporting to us regularly. We were putting out intelligence on this stuff very, very actively and, I think, quite well. Let's see, what else? And spending a lot of time with the ambassador (***), I mean, we met with the ambassador every single day. It was our first order of business in the morning to meet with the

whole country team. And we called it the operations group then and I'd talk with him or the DCM, too, and with the attaches, the army attaché. We were very close to him. He had—the army, you know, the army—you know about that. I forget what they called it. The 404 program—the expanded attaché system. The army attaché who was there, basically in uniform, did a lot of things that verge on pushing the edge on the uniform presence not being in Laos. They didn't got out, you know, flagrantly, in uniform unless they were acting as the attaché and so forth. But they had to get around and we used to go with them to look at our troops and their troops that they had—if they had FAR operations. We dealt with FAR, too. I mean, all those guys. Ouane and the rest of them—[Phoui] Sananikone. They were all, you know, my contacts and associates. All these things take a lot of time. And this is, you know, sort of day-to-day internal liaison. I don't know where the time went out there. It was great fun. I enjoyed every hour I spent. And working with Mac Godley made the whole thing an unmitigated pleasure. So, any bad days I had, when things went badly and the worst days were when we lost some of our people, which we're not supposed to do.

(1:26:32) How often did that happen, as you recall?

Well, we had different kinds of accidents. We had some people who were hurt, injured, some were killed in airplane crashes. We had others who were killed—you know, our system was—and to give you an idea how we worked with the troops—if, let's say, it could have been in Long Tieng with Vang Pao's troops or in the south, a little easier to illustrate. The—let's say we were sending out regiment troops. That is four battalions. These are four mini battalions. A regiment would be about 1,200 troops. Into an area to cover and sweep that area and go after the Vietnamese we heard were infiltrated in there and that sort of thing. Well, we would sometimes walk them in from their own base. More often we would take them into a forward point and plant them down there by air in a position where they could move out on their own and then pick up contact with us. Well, sometimes our—I mean, our case officers with the units would go in with them to the point where they were put on the ground and then guided as they were going forward, and get any last minute needs and expressions for help and so on. And sometimes we'd get hit on the ground as we got in and one of our men was killed in that kind of a thing. He was hit very hard on the ground and they made a couple of attempts to get out. The helicopter was hit and went down. And he had been hit by—shot by a bullet before he went down and had not been able to get out and the plane blew up before he could get away. That's one. Another case down in the Pakse area where we put in a new set of troops in a forward position—Pak Song, which had been fairly well cleaned up before, but we knew the Vietnamese were trying to get back in. We put a battalion right in there by air—or by helicopter. Dropped them. I left our case officer with them until they could get settled. They normally try to stay with them until they could get settled and then get picked up and brought out. Well, a mortar attack hit almost immediately and our case officer and the commander of the troop was killed. That type of thing.

(1:29:04) Now, would it be the case that you would have to—you would have to put out some sort of cover story that he died in Vietnam rather than Laos?

I can't hear you.

Would it be the case that you would have to state that this person was killed in Vietnam rather than Laos in a case like that?

Oh, no, no. They were killed in Laos. We didn't—I don't know how that was handled. The word usually got out that somebody had been killed and it was fudged, I mean, there was no—the press simply didn't answer questions—our press up there were not like the Saigon press. They were pretty good. I could tell you a few stories about the press, too. I've got a couple of pretty good ones you might want to hang onto.

Well, go right ahead.
Well, obviously, I'm easily distracted by… [Interviewer laughs]
That's quite all right.
I don't know. The casualties, anyway, as I was saying about them, were terribly tragic for me and I had to go to young brides and tell them that their husbands had just been killed. It was not the way I—don't like going to work. But for the most part, our guys did everything they could to avoid breaking the rules. They could not go in. They didn't—they wanted to go in. If I'd let them go, they would have all gone in. But they—often they would—some of these acts and near misses, for example. I would get a [rec rocket] from headquarters saying, 'Look, we understand these guys are not supposed to be an incumbent. Why are they getting hurt? Why did that plane get knocked down?' I sent back, 'Look. I'd pause a but understand one thing. These guys, when they go to work in the morning, they're flying over enemy territory. Now, if you—when something happens, you can't be surprised at that. They take a risk every time they get in an airplane.' I could say the same thing about myself. I did, too. But they just, you know, they [harped] and didn't get it, but they have to say something because the reverse domino effect. Officer says, 'What happened up there? Why did that happen? What happened? What happened?' And it comes out to me in the field, so I have to shut them up. They always accepted my explanation.
My goodness.
Well, anyway, where were we?

(1:31:17) Well, one other responsibility—I don't know if this fell more on your shoulders or on the ambassador's shoulders, but I would assume that you had to deal with the surrounding border states as well as Laos—Burma, Cambodia, Thailand.
I mean, I'm not sure I understand you.
Was that part of your responsibility, dealing with either governments or military from these other countries, or was that more the ambassador's?
No, I knew the ambassadors. The ambassador. Vietnam ambassador—who else? And you know—I knew the Cambodian ambassador. But the Vietnam ambassador was the only one I knew in that category. But I had no business with him. We didn't have any discussions with him at all. If there was any business, then the ambassador would—for example, when Lam Son 719 hit—you know that? April '71?
Right. [A limited offensive campaign into southeastern Laos conducted by ARVN troops between February 8 and March 25, 1971 logistically supported by the US.]
Well, you know, we knew about that. We heard—saw it, all the cables coming on. But that was not my business. The ambassador had to go to the prime minister and explain to him what was being done and make sure he understood it and so on. That was not my territory at all. I would go to see the ambassador—more often I would go to see the prime minister and the minister of defense more often when they wanted to see me. One example, the—when Luang Prabang was being attacked, as it was repeatedly up there—that's why you say, you know, that's an end run, way run from Vientiane. It's a sharp hook that threatens both the royal capital and the administrative capital. And when that was up there and would be in trouble, the airport being shelled or whatnot, mortared, and the ambassador would call me, 'Let's go—we've got to go over and see the prime minister. He wants something done up there. And we'd go over and see him. And, you know, we would say, you know, 'There are two FAR regular—FAR battalions up there in the north. Can't they go in' 'No, they come—we want some of your troops.' And we would say, 'They're your troops, not our troops.' And that—and we had to eat our words when he said, 'OK. Your troops from Savannakhet are the best ones we've got. Get some—get two Savannakhet battalions up to Luang Prabang right away. Must do it. Must do it.' Well, we did it and I didn't ask headquarters for

permission to do that. I just did it. The ambassador wanted to do it and we got them up there. We'd fly them up there. Here's one rule on air movement. If we could use our own air, either Royal Lao Air Force or our Air America planes, I could move any amount of troops I wanted, as long as the ambassador wanted it and it was in conformity to the Lao. I didn't have to ask headquarters for that. And I usually told headquarters what we were doing. I didn't try to run around them. But they asked us again and again for—this is something that a lot of people have a hard time grasping. Vang Pao's troops were not the best in the country. Now, you can quote me and nobody—other people may deny it, but by the time I got there, Vang Pao's troops had been hit hard in many ways. They were a little tired. And after '71 they were very tired. But in the meantime, we'd been pushing harder at the troops in the south in Savannakhet and Pakse. And the Savannakhet troops were particularly good and they were more Lao—lowland Lao—not Lao Theung. In the south, in Pakse, there were a lot of Lao Theung [Khmu] and Kha. Very few—no Hmong. Very few actual Lao. And we often drew upon—I've tried to mention in the things I've written about the military side, that we drew upon FAR for help. We got—we had the cooperation of the FAR regional commanders in MR2, three and four and one, too. And—oh, Vang Pao was the regional commander for two. But one, three and four, we got them. Five—we weren't working in so we just worked—we talked to five regional commanders, but didn't negotiate with them. But the others—we also borrowed non-coms [non-commissioned soldiers] or officers, so we had good battalion commanders who were FAR officers who we trained. Now, the difference is we—I've been asked again and again, why could they do it in your forces and why couldn't they do it in FAR? Well, they knew that we were supporting them. FAR, you know, couldn't do it. FAR's forces were, I'm sure, Jack [Vessey] has told you about some of this. They were very ragged. Their officers had been trained in the United States, many of them—gone to Fort Benning, Fort Bragg—I mean, Fort Benning, primarily. And that was fine when they were back there. They knew the books very well. But out here in their own system, they couldn't count on support. They couldn't count on logistic support. They couldn't count on financial support for their troops. Often troops would not get the money because somebody up the line would filter it out. They knew, in our case, that they were paid directly. They saw the money, they had it. They could do what they wanted to with it. They knew that in their absence, their spouses, their families in that same region would get rice, and that if they were injured, they'd be evacuated to a good hospital and treated. If they were killed, their wives or their families would get death payments, benefits and their bodies would be brought back for burial. That type of support did make a difference. So these guys would do it very well for us, by and large. Now, you know, soldiers in combat are—they're different from everything else and they don't always work according to Hoyle when they get out there at the end of the ride and somebody's shooting at them. But it worked pretty well and it worked best in Savannakhet and pretty well over time in MR4. MR1 we had more difficulty with, but they provided troops, too, and at times they helped.

(1:37:29) How …

Did that make any sense?

Yes. Absolutely. How many Thai troops would you estimate were brought in as mercenaries to fight?

You realize that's a very delicate subject. The Thai are still classified, not by the Thais so much as by the US on the grounds that Thai don't want to admit that they were involved in Laos and we have tried to honor the Thai. I mean, I—recently I had—I forget what the question was put to me by Washington about saying something about the Thai. And I said, 'My advice is you'd better ask the Thai about it because if you do this and you don't have their approval, they may get very upset. And I think we simply have to play it straight with the Thai. They played it straight with me in every way

that I can think of. And they don't want that to come out. Has Jack talked to you anything about this? He's …

No.

… under the same constraints that I have.

Well, it could very well be. I was in Bangkok in January and I spoke to a couple of Thai who fought over there.

Well, [Pauses] the outright numbers are very difficult to say. I mean, I … [Long Pause]

Well, I mean, if …

Let me think. I'm just thinking what I can say without—but I regularly talk about the Thai volunteers. For example, when—I mean, where I've had to speak on this subject, dealing with people like—and somebody else that I despise. I'm sure you know him. I can't remember his name now.

Is he Thai?

When I talked at the Texas Tech conference in October. He was the guy who wrote the biography of Colby?

Oh, um …

I know the guy's name like it's my own, but anyway, when I talk to people usually in the media or in academia about this, I refer to the Thai volunteers and I say the Thai volunteers were a tremendous help and I just decline going into detail about it, about how many there were. A lot of them were killed. And how volunteers—how fully enthusiastic they were about their position there or their work in Laos, you have to talk to the Thai about that. The Thais that I had anything to do with were honorable soldiers and they fought well. I call them volunteers.

(1:40:06) I spoke to one man whose code name was Spotlight and, in fact, I think …

What?

Spotlight.

Spotlight?

That was his code name.

What do you mean?

That was—well, he must—I don't know if he was a radio operator. I'm trying to remember. It's been awhile now. But I'm pretty sure that was the code name that he used was Spotlight.

Spotlight. Oh, I see what you mean. He may have been a FAG.

There you go.

A forward air guide.

Yeah, guide. Right.

Yeah, we had a lot of Thais. They were our own independent recruitment of Thai individuals. That—those people—that, you know, in a sense it's, I suppose classified that they were there, but they are not the same as the Thai volunteers that I'm speaking of. They were volunteers, but they were working for us and they were paid and they were good, too. Some of them were excellent. But Spotlight. I don't remember that name. Where did he work?

I'd have to go back and look at the notes. I haven't gotten that interview transcribed yet. His English was good, but with the accent, it's very hard to transcribe. So …

Very likely in the north. There were more of them up there. They were good soldiers. I'm simply reluctant to—my oath, just that, you know, we've been—we made an effort to keep this thing at the Thai level, the Thai official level. And I know, some Thais have blabbed about this all over the place. I can refer you to people who will talk even more. Did you ever hear of General [Depp]?

No. At least, can't remember the name.
[Inaudible]?
I can't remember the name off, at the moment, anyway.
I'm sure Jack met him. Well, he was the one we dealt with on that matter—on those matters. And he himself, I guess, in a moment of panic back in Thai—after it was all over, in response to heavy heat from the press, the Thai press, told all about it, including all about me and so—but I've never held that against him. He was in a very difficult position then. But if you look up anything …
General Depp.
Well, Depp's a funny name. The code name we used for him—not a code name. Perhaps he was *nom de guerre* or whatever. But anyway, his name was Vitoon (***), spelled alternately V-i-t-o-o-n or W-i-t-u-n in different ways.

(1:42:35) I'll see if I can track him down. Well, you were talking earlier about Air America and said that you'd like to say a few words about their role.
Well, of course, the Air America had their office in Vientiane, their head office. I mean, their field head office. And then they had other people. But without Air America, this whole Lao irregular program could not have functioned. They were superb people. They, you know, had all kinds of human beings in this category. You had, you know, hot shot pilots and wild young men—buffalo—[Chuckling] all these—you know, cowboys and all this stuff—we had some very sober men. And I had great respect for everybody I ever flew with out there. And I'm thankful to the Lord for the success of their efforts in flying me. They were wonderful. They provided the logistics, primarily logistics. They flew fixed-wing and helicopters and small—mostly fixed- wing. Some helicopters, I guess—I forget which ones, but they also flew—I should also let you know there was Continental Air Services was there, too. And they were—they were smaller, but they were very important. They flew some wonderful planes called—God Almighty, I forget the name of the aircraft—two of them. But anyway, they all—they dropped the rice. They flew—people flew the Caribous and open-ended—open tail-ended plane. And they flew 123s and 46s—C-46s. They flew the big C-130s. And they landed on the little bitty airfields, you know, that were about the size of a football field, broken at both ends and the sides. And they did incredible things. They went into rescue pilots, American pilots into hostile territory, near the Ho Chi Minh and Vietnamese—North Vietnamese territory on occasion. They rescued American pilots. They rescued Lao pilots. They did everything you could want to do. And they delivered arms, ammunition, food, water, you name it.
Services for USAID.
Pardon?
USAID personnel into villages and …
Serves the person—well, they would, you know, they would deliver—we relied more on helicopters, I think, for personnel, and H-34s which would carry a limited number of our own personnel. Let me think. I can't remember how many—how often we used Air America flying. Certain special helicopters we had we—they did fly, but it was primarily support. But when they were—when necessary they went in with helicopters and they rescued pilots. They rescued American CH-53 pilots who had been shot down. They went after the fast movers, you know, jet pilots who had been knocked down. Sometimes they'd save them, sometimes they couldn't. They lost their own lives in these things. Let me think. What else could I describe? You know, these are—every one of these tasks looks, in a sense, very mundane and banal on a day-to-day basis. But in the aggregate, there's a fantastic effort with the—it gave us the flexibility which our own air force has not had and never has had and I'm sure now hasn't got the way it should have.

(1:46:24) Did you work with Fred Walker at all?

Pardon?
Did you work with Fred Walker at all?
I can't—wait a minute. Say it again?
Fred Walker.
Fred Walker.
Wasn't he chief pilot for Air America?
I can't remember him.
OK.
If he in the Air America, I haven't got a copy. I can tell you, well, let me look up in the name of the Air America. Just a second. [Long Pause]Are you there?
Yes.
I was afraid I dropped—just—you know, I thought I had their index of members. I don't have it. I could look him up, but I don't recall the name.
OK. No problem.
I have—you know, often there's this curious thing. When I'd go out to fly, I'd be maybe out at the airport airfield, to meet me I'd go out. And sometimes I was alone. Sometimes I took somebody from Udorn or sometimes I took Vessey or I took somebody from the embassy with me. And we'd—he'd—in fact he'd report for duty. I shook hands with him. He'd tell me his name and finally we take off and he'd drive us back that night and 'thank you very much' and all that. But I wouldn't remember the names and, you know, I would the next day, but a week later I'd be having somebody else out and I simple couldn't keep up with all those guys. The one I do—have you heard of Jim Rhyne?
(1:47:58) No, I don't think I have.
Well, he is one of the great pilots, great flyers of all time. He was an Air America pilot. He often flew the Volpar. He flew everything. He was a guy—I think he was born with wings. He was somebody that was incredible. He—a bit of tragedy occurred in, I think, in '71 or '72, I can't recall. A C-123 flown by Air America was flying over into northeast Laos and they were apparently—they may have been deflected by somebody. They weren't directed to go where they were. They ended up near the China Road and their plane was shot down. And nobody ever explained how they got there because they didn't say, and there was nothing—no reason, no explanation for it. And where they ended up, nobody knew. So, one day Air America sent its own pilot out. They were Air America pilots who were loved. And Rhyne went out with one of the Volpars, which I used to use a lot. And they'd drop leaflets over—in the area or in the China Road vicinity. And they were hit by an antiaircraft shot right away. It hit the bottom of the plane, went right through it, took off most of his leg. And the pilot, while flying the plane was able to get a belt around him and get a tourniquet on him and keep him from bleeding to death. They got back to Udorn. He was evacuated. Well, to make a long story short, it hit—he lost his leg, but he was saved. He went back to the States—evacuated. Six months later he came back ready for duty.
Oh, my goodness.
He came back flying his own airplane for fun. He had a little flying wing plane. He used to fly around in his [tandis] in late '72. He used to fly around Vientiane on Sunday, fly around—he loved—he'd take the plane up into a huge climb until the engine conked out. And he could fly—he would then go sailing down, spiraling all the way down and then pull it out at the last minute and take off. And of course, crowds would be out in the street watching this. One time, he—one Sunday I was out in my house on Sunday and trying to have a bit of rest and sitting out in the grass in front of my house, which was right on the Mekong River. And I heard a noise of an airplane. And I looked up and it was coming closer. And I looked up and there was Rhyne in his little—flying over the Mekong about 25 or 30 feet above the water. And he wiggled his wings as he passed

me. Fifteen minutes later the plane came back again. He was upside down. He passed my house all the way out. But anyway, this guy was a—I can't think of any military efforts after that, but later on in Desert One, you know, they sent a small plane in to reconnoiter where the big planes could land. He went in by himself. All alone. Close to the ground all the way and did what he had to do and came out. A marvelous guy and he was a fun guy to be with. He was not a cowboy, but he was a handsome guy, married to a beautiful Thai girl. [Chuckles] And I saw him last at one of the reunions about five years ago. But he was killed a year ago. He and a friend of his had built an aircraft and they were putting it into action. He lived down in North Carolina. He was testing it out the first time and he flew off the airstrip and it just sailed right over and around and he went in the forest and he was killed. And they think that he may have had a heart attack, because the guys—nobody could believe that he could make a mistake like that. Flying was so utterly under his control. But it was a great loss to the human race and the United States.

(1:51:53) How do you spell his last name?

R-h-y-n-e.

(1:51:59) OK. All right. Well, you also mentioned that maybe you'd like to share a story or two about the press that you worked with.

Oh, I didn't work with the press. [Chuckles] I avoided the press like the plague.

OK.

I refused to talk to the press. But for years that was the policy. The prime minister issued the edict. No journalists will be allowed to enter the combat zone. We thought that was just lovely. I won't say whether we had anything to do with that, because the law and the press were mad and frustrated with him. And a couple of them sneaked in. A couple of smart guys sneaked in over land and got into Long Tieng before they were picked up and chased out or—not in chains, but they—but, no, we didn't talk to them, but I don't think I told this story to too many people. If I ever write my memoirs, I'll write about it. But—where was I? In '72, I told you how things were very quiet in Saigon and the press were over—flocked into Vientiane. And they were driving the embassy nuts. The embassy press guy would chase us every morning. These guys are demanding this or that. And it was—the ambassador would look at me and say, 'Well, what do we do?' and it was really getting very tense. And nothing was happening in Saigon to take them back. This was before the Easter offensive. And this …

(1:53:29) Hello? Oh, sorry, I think I lost you there for a second again.

This was the 13th of January, which I remember the date, I remember in '72. I remember it for a number of reasons, which I may tell you about. But I had been thinking about this thing. So I thought, I'm going to do something. I'm going to—I went to see the ambassador and said, 'Mr. Ambassador, look. These guys are hot on our heels, aren't they?' 'Yes, yes, indeed.' 'Well, how about this? Suppose we let the press go up there and I take them up and I control their visit up [and within]?' 'Ah! Would you do that? And what about headquarters?' I said, 'I won't tell headquarters a word about it. As long as you say OK with you, I'll do it.' 'Wonderful.' He was just thrilled to death. So, the next morning at our ops meeting with the press attaché and the people there at DCM, he said, 'All right.' He was volunteered to take the press up there. 'We'll make them pay for the helicopters that they use, huh?' 'Absolutely.' They weren't paying me, but they were paying somebody. And the press attaché almost fell over and he said, 'OK. Fine. All right, let's just keep this. Nobody talks about—this is—all right now. You can have them.' He said, 'We'll have them out there whenever you want them. Let's say tomorrow morning at 9:00—8:00 and I will brief them on the airstrip. I will lay down the ground rules if they promise to obey the ground rules.' And 'OK, fine,' they said, 'Anything you want. So the next morning I was up bright and early out there at the airport at Wattay and here was this flock of photographers coming over to devour me, all

excited. 'Well, well, well. This is wonderful.' I introduced myself. And they wanted to talk about everything. First of all, 'Why are you agreeing to this now? What's behind this?' They couldn't see anything straightforward. And it was completely straightforward. And I said, 'Look, this is between me and you guys and there's nothing behind it. I just want to show you one thing. I'm going to show you that we're not fighting this war.' Because they were building the case up, you know, the CIA's clandestine army is getting kicked out by the CIA, pulling out his people and et cetera, et cetera. I said, 'We're not fighting this war. The Lao, the Hmong people are fighting this war. It's their own. I'm just showing—we're helping them if we can, but it's their war.' And I said, 'When you go up there, you've got to promise me you will take no head-on pictures of any of my people. Back picture is OK. But you will name nobody by name. You can talk about their position if you want, but you won't call anybody by name. You can talk about their position, if you want, but you won't call anybody by name.' And they agreed to it, except for two guys, one who, it turns out, didn't—he was afraid to fly and he couldn't do it. The other guy was so mad at us—he hated us anyway. He didn't want to give into this. So we took the rest and there were about, God, I think about 18 and I can't remember. Eighteen or 20. The helicopter was Stage 34. And we flew up to Vientiane and we got there and we were met by people from Vang Pao's headquarters and then (***) my unit chief up there and he said, 'Now, our first stop should be over at Vang Pao's headquarters. We'll pay our respects there and the General will talk to these men.' Oh, they thought that was great. Well, meanwhile, we march up the hill to—it's on the east—well, it's the southeast side of Long Tieng where Vang Pao had his headquarters, up near the king's house, which is not a king's house. Sort of a special headquarters up there he had for briefing people, and—nice place, a good room for them. But on the way up, there was shooting going on all over the place. I mean, there were some shooting that was going up on the cliff, the peak right across the valley. You know, you could see it up there. You could see shots being fired at a—bombs were being dropped there by the—by the RLAF—the Lao Air Force. They were bombing. You could see the damn thing, big—what do you call it? A recoilless rifle. It was propped up there in the rock and you could see it being knocked off when the bombs hit. And then, off to the left, there was ground action going on. It was infantry fire back and forth. These guys were all getting very nervous. So we're in there with the general and he talked to them. And he told them about the war, what he'd been doing, some of his problems. He kept them going and they were making notes right and left. And 'What about the Thais we figure are helping you?' He said, 'Oh,' he said, 'Thai people. Thai people come from very plain country, down low. They don't like big mountains. But up here, Thai soldier—very good soldier.' That's all he would say. And they were ooh and ahhing that. And …

This was General Vang Pao who's giving this …

Vang Pao himself was telling them.

OK.

And let's see. Then he said, 'You want to come out and see the outside? See what's going on and see? Sure, come on out.' So, he let them all out. And the shooting was going on and meanwhile, big noises were coming out from way up on the other northeastern end of Long Tieng. And there were shells going overhead. And these turned out to be the 130 millimeter recoil—the rifles which had wrought such havoc with us before during the big defeat up in the Plaine des Jarres. You know, the 130 is the biggest thing in the Vietnamese head. It's like our 155 millimeter howitzer rifle. Huge, big weapon and it shoots a long distance. One thing is it has a hard time depressing. It can't go below a certain point because it doesn't have the arc that it has to have to drop in, you know, in a closer-in place. It has to be trussed to recover the distance involved, but then it can't be depressed. It will fly right over. So, these things were flying over our heads. And the press were listening to this and he's looking around. And Vang Pao had a mortar brought out right in front of him where we were standing. And he decided—he pointed out that down on the other end of the airstrip—

and we knew this from—I knew it before I got out there that a Vietnamese battalion was coming in down through the end of the strip where we had the ammunition dumps and storage room back there. And we had a—one of Vang Pao's battalions at our end of it, fighting back out across and there was fire back and forth between the two. And you could see soldiers running back and forth out there. It was a wild scene. And so Vang Pao gets up there with his own 120 millimeter mortar. This is a big U.S. mortar. Horrible. It's got a weapon that makes artillery sound quiet. And shoots this damn thing out. He's firing the thing and all these guys were holding their ears and I was hard pressed from—to keep from laughing. One little guy from New York—some little squirt of a guy there was covering his ears. The man is shaking. And I sit there and look at him and keep my ears uncovered and unmoved. He was practically wetting his pants. Anyway, he said, 'Where is the big enemy? Now, up there on that ridge across …' He pointed to the skyline ridge. 'Can we go up there and see them?' They wanted to up and see them. So, I said, 'Yes, if the general says you can go up, you can go up.' The general said, 'Yes, yes. We take them up.' So, they took two—we got smaller helicopters, the Huey, I guess it was. And took two loads of them up. [Pauses] Was it two loads? I can't remember it for sure. Anyway, flew them up to what we called the Charlie Whiskey Pad. It was where the regimental commander had his headquarters right there. And this was a sharp, sharp rig, pockmarked with shells and bombs and B-52 strikes and everything. And the dead meter coming up the long end of it and they were stuck up there by this GM from Savannakhet we had up there. See, we brought these up to help our own people, too. And they were holding the Vietnamese back up there. Well, they—we checked in. We said hello to the regional commander and he said, 'Where …' He asked him where the men were. 'Right—see that little place up there where that rock? Right there, behind there is where the …' 'Can we go up there?' 'Yeah, sure.' So, not all, but about half these guys when scooting out on up the ridge. And you know, this was really—meanwhile, overhead you could see the Soviet and the T-28s flying around and the—we heard fast movers. You could just barely hear them. And there were the C-130—or the C—the 707 refueling ships began flying over. And behind them came a bunch of F-4s sucking up gas, up at about 35,000 feet. You could barely see them sucking up gas to go on their next mission. And the press looks up there and they think all this has got to be canned. This can't be happening naturally. All this was just events that were taking place on that sort of normal, but really extra-normal day of work. So, the guys who took off go up there and they ran them out and then it was quiet for awhile. I sat down on the edge—I stayed just out there on the edge of the cliff and looking out over this thing, wondering—again, wondering how in the name of heaven did I happen to get here? And the rest of my group, I—my main officer and then the commander were sitting in this hut there or in this little cave right there. And I was sitting and looking out along the way. And I could see all this taking place. I could see down below where Long Tieng was. And the T-28s were taking off and coming back. And all of a sudden I looked back to my left and I saw a puff of smoke right over about 10, 12 yards away. And I said, 'What the hell?' That looked like a mortar. And then another one came and then one of the guys came running, Hey! Get down here, get your ass down here [inaudible].' And I got down in there and they were mortaring us because they'd seen where the helicopters landed. And to make it even worse, the commander himself got a rack, a nick on the back of his head by—whether a piece of the mortar explosion or the—or a concrete from the bunk or whatever. Anyway, he was bleeding from the back of his—so we had a call up for help to get the helicopter back up there because, number one, we said, number one, it could have been either me or the commander. ['Doua Se! Doua Se!'] and they got a helicopter in, five minutes right up there. And meanwhile, the press guys from up on the hill way up ahead came running back like bats out of hell. And we were trying to get the—Major Shan, this good guy into the helicopter. But these guys came running and jumped into the helicopter. Jumped right over him before he could get in. Do you remember that famous picture of Lam Son 719 when the Vietnamese troops were quaking

under attack and they were hanging to the skid of the helicopters trying to get out?
Oh, yeah.
It's a famous picture. This was just like that. I got my camera out and I didn't have any film in it. I almost died. I had the picture of the year, but we had to wait until the second helicopter came to take off the commander. And the press all got out. Well, it was all thank you very much. They were very pleased that they all got out alive, but they were pretty sad. One thing came out of this. The press accounts back in the U.S. were very good. The guy from the New York Times was excellent. And one from the Washington Post—I can't remember his name. There were two or three very, very good comments on this. So generally speaking, they were all very pleased and they thanked me very much. And they honored the rules. They didn't—and one of them was Bob Rogers. You probably don't remember him. He had a program called Travelogue or no, it was something like that. He did, you know, documentaries. On this time it was on war. And he wanted to do this later on. I totally checked with headquarters. They let him do a documentary of our people up there. It worked out pretty well. But I didn't deal with the press except to give them an opportunity to see the war firsthand. And then, maybe stay there after in a few cases. And they were in trouble. I—actually I did that again in March with another group. But it included a lot of the Agence France Presse people who were a pain in the neck. And they were pro-Vietnamese and they were pro-North Vietnamese. And it went off pretty well then. But I, finally, after the event I told headquarters about it and I got back a cable from Helms saying, 'Splendid.' I told him, I said 'I had to do this. I didn't want to discombobulate you. But it had to be done. The ambassador was in an impossible position there and I thought they were going to drive us nuts and we'd forced into—and if you put this on the air between headquarters and Washington and the field, you know, everybody was reacting. You'd hear all kinds of objections.' So, it was done and it worked out well and there's my relationship with the press. [Both laugh]

(2:06:55) My goodness. Well, how much longer would you like to go?
Let's see. What time is it?
It's a little after ten.
It's getting—I'm probably running out of steam. We could do this again.
Oh, absolutely.
All right. We haven't covered everything on your …
Oh, not even close, I'm afraid. How about one more question and then we'll decide on another time to …
OK.
One of the questions I had on there dealt with Jane Hamilton Merritt's coverage of Bill Sullivan's comments to a closed door senate meeting in October of 1969, where he said we had no written, stated or understood commitment to the Lao government. And your comment in your review of her book was that she hadn't consulted him and that she really didn't place his comments in an appropriate context. And I was wondering how <u>you</u> would try to place that in the appropriate context.
That we have no moral obligation. Well, I can't—I wasn't there when Sullivan spoke. But I think it was completely mistaken. I can tell you [Pause] a moral obligation. What is a moral obligation? It doesn't exist in, you know, in Machiavellian parlance. It—but I think it exists, certainly, in the minds of men. And—now, let me—how to explain this. If Sullivan was quoted correctly, I think he was being very carefully legalistic by his sights and meant that there was nothing that could be proved to that effect. If he was asked did we have a moral obligation and he would say, 'No.' I would say, 'Well, there I think you're wrong, Bill. I think you do.' I'll give you my own—an example of my own experience. There was a lady in Laos, a very lovely lady, the Lao lady from Luang Prabang.

She was a very close relative of the king and I knew her husband, an—a very charming person. You know, knew her socially. No—nothing operationally. But I don't know how many times I saw her and spoke with her. Not too many. But one day, it was long after—oh, this was maybe 10 years ago—a friend of mine, who was the daughter of Souvanna Phouma, married to an American, lived in the same building my mother lived in here in Washington. And we used to see them socially often. And one day she said, 'Hugh, I'm having a party here for [Cha Souvannakan], this lady and I know she would like to see you and can you and your mother come?' 'So, fine. I'd love to come.' And there was other—you know, a mixed group. And we met and then we finally met and hello. How are you? We exchanged greetings. And we had no sort of—had no sort of settlement. She took me by the arm and said, 'Hugh, can I—I want to speak to you. Can you come over here?' That makes me nervous when that happens. So she takes me over to a corner and sits me down there. Knee to—knee to knee we're sitting, looking at each other. And she said, 'Hugh, now you told me that you would never leave us in Laos. Now, why did you leave us?' Well, those are pretty tough words. I, you know, I had to think as fast as I could and think, 'my God'. And this is a person who I respected greatly and I finally said—I said, 'Cha Souvannakan, I think what I can say is this. I don't—I say I don't remember ever saying to you that we would never leave Laos. But if you think I did, then your memory is probably better than mine. All right, I did. All I can say is if I said that to you, it's because I believed in my own heart that we would never leave you.' And honest to God that's what I believed. I mean, you couldn't go through that kind of a thing out there without believing that. You felt you were in this thing to the death of your friends and your associates and yourself maybe. It's not something you could just do lightly. So, I felt that that was my position out there. And so, she, in effect, she raised her arm and said, 'Well, very sad and very sorry.' And then to sort enlarge on that. That was a very tough evening, but she was very sweet to me afterward. She took what I said at face value. And so, what the hell was I going to say now after this? Oh, I believe that up until December of '72—and I know—I can't remember—Jack was still there then. I think he was at the dinner. The ambassador gave a big dinner for a prime minister and for (***) in Champassak and three or four or five of the big Lao, some of the military and our key people and we had—who did we have? Bill Sullivan and [Pauses] Kissinger wasn't there, but I think that—what's his name—the one who is the military assistant to Kissinger and would later became Secretary of State.

Oh …

You know who I mean. He was there, I think [inaudible]. At that point …

Haig?

Sullivan and this guy—and I guess Kissinger, too, and he was there earlier. And then putting the squeeze on Souvanna Phouma to accept the ceasefire agreement that was being negotiated. This—maybe this is January of '73. But I think it was still in December of '72. They had just come back from Hanoi, these people. And they were working—they knew the negotiation was in train and they were trying to get it straightened out here, get the ambassador in, you know, the picture, and keep the heat on Souvanna Phouma to accept this because they knew they had their problems in Saigon with the Thieu, those people. And we were, in effect, ramming this thing down Souvanna's throat. And it became clear to me. And using all the arguments, you know, the troops were quick and Vang Pao—the Meo were being lost, et cetera. So, all of a sudden the prime minister looked down to me and he was farther down the table. Monsieur Tovar, tell me what do you think? I said—well, I thought to myself, Holy Moses. What did I do to deserve this? I had—I said, 'Well, (Autess) we called him 'your highness,' (Autess), I have to tell you that your troops are very tired. They've been fighting so long, very, very tired. It's very difficult for them. They're still going because they're brave.' And I, in effect, bullshitted my way through that. I couldn't contradict the ambassador or the—and I had to support U.S. policy. And I—but, boy, my heart wasn't in it. But after that, I

thought to myself, boy, these guys are—we're leaving and these people are being left behind. OK. Then it went on from there and, you know, when the ceasefire finally came through, I guess, at the end of January, then the word was, 'OK, get Thieu to agree with this and get Souvanna Phouma to accept the coalition government, which was a government with—the Lao government, the Royal government and the Pathet Lao sitting there enjoying all their new-found wealth. And we were—they were pressured, yeah, I'd say, use the term it was pushed down their throat. I knew then we're not going to be in—I didn't foresee what happened in 1975. But the only reassurance I had later on when I went to Thailand—I know even before I left we had an incident where Vietnamese violated the agreement. You know, we kept saying 'If they violate this agreement, we will hit them. We will hit them. B-52s, everything.' The Vietnamese did it a couple weeks later and we went, bingo, B-52 air strike and we gave it to them. And they blasted that place. Hit them right in the head. And the Vietnamese pulled out and went away. So, that was a good example of what we could and said we would do if it happened. All right. So, we were all cooled off at that point and then I went out to Thailand in four or five months—when was it? Two years later, I guess, or a year-and-a-half later, the '75 episode took place. We left everybody, which gave my friend from Laos a very good argument to put me up against the wall and try to throttle me. It was a very sad experience, though.

(2:15:47) Yes, I'm sure.

Well, I can't think of anything else about—the moral, I mean, I felt that we had a moral obligation. I still do. I think we had a moral obligation to, in effect, help Vang Pao against himself. If he's screwed up with this thing. He could have done it. He could have—a big deal that might have solved his problems. We'll get this stuff over to you. You won't have to handle—we'll send it from Timbuktu to God knows where. He might have been—he was sucked in. He doesn't know the nomenclature. You think it was much better now than it used to be. But when I first knew him, I talked to him in French, bad as my French was. And so, I think that he could easily have been sucked into this thing, especially if it were an American whom—I don't know this guy who was said to have been in Laos.

Oh, Jack Shirley?

If he endorsed it, it might have been as easy for Vang Pao to accept and make a gross mistake. But I think we should do everything we can to help him.

Absolutely.

What we can do, I don't know. I mean, I know Jack [Vessey] has just weighed in on this up there to the extent he can. And we've been trying to push people in—the people we can deal with in Washington. There aren't very many of them.

Oh, yeah. It's rather sad when—I said it's pretty sad when you have an ally living right in your same country and you still can't find the time to give them the attention they need when something like this is going on.

That's true.

(2:17:18) Well, can we set a time to pick up our conversation a little later?

[The two discuss another time, settle on the following evening]

(2:19:08) Well, you know, as you can see, I sort of enjoy talking about it once I get wound up. But I did have a problem of memory. My old memory is pretty good, but my new memory is bad…

[Chuckling]

Well …

…usually. But a lot of this stuff is very vivid and then one thing leads to another. You know, if we talk about one thing, I think of something else.

That's perfectly fine. I'm happy to follow wherever you go.

There was one other thing I was going to tell you. I'll probably forget—I'd better tell you now.

OK.
I was talking about that press—the business with the press? You know, the first time I took them up in the helicopter and what was going on then. And I may be wrong on that date, too. I have to look that up again. After that was over and they had all gone home or wherever they had gone—I have to think what happened. [Long Pause] And I think I'm trying to ruffle my own memory here. [Pauses] Oh, it was the—yeah. It—to give you an idea about Vang Pao and how he rushed and he pushed us to do what he wanted to do. And he always had the support of Souvanna Phouma, the prime minister. OK. After the collapse up in the Plaine des Jarres at the end of December and later part—you know, the Vietnamese push went on and on, 'til they got us down here. They had Vang—had Long Tieng, in effect, surrounded with these 22 battalions. That's a lot of troops, you know, even for—Asian forces are not as big as ours, but they're very mobile. And the Vietnamese had everything. They had superb artillery—much—our side could never match their artillery. Anyway, it was a very tough time and Vang Pao had been—he'd been sick with pneumonia, he was discouraged and mad and upset with us because we couldn't give him the air support that he needed and wanted and asked for. And it looked—it was bad. But then, all of a sudden, he seemed to take a little bit of life with—when he performed before the press and he impressed them so greatly. But he pulled another cat out of the bag a day or so later and he told us that he wanted to run an operation without any support from us. He wanted to take a big force—5,000 men, he said. That was his number. And he wanted to move them from their staging area south of Long Tieng. You know, saw in territory easily controlled—and move them eastward, beneath the Plaine Des Jarres, around in a flanking movement, going around to threaten the Vietnamese rear. And he said he would do this with no support from us, no air support, no communications, no food, nothing. And we said, 'Oh, General, you're out of your mind. Not that! You can't do it. Your troops are too tired. You're beaten up.' 'No,' he said, 'They're bad. They're in bad shape. However, if I don't make them work, they're going to quit and go home'—you know, words to that effect. 'We have to do something to build them up, to give them a sense of being able to fight and,' he said, 'We will not look for the enemy. We will simply just go, go.' Well, to make a long story short, he did. We didn't have to provide anything, except what he took on his back and on their backs over there. They moved 5,000 men on that—through the forest, the jungle, if you want to call it that, over to a crack—I could almost point to on the map. And the Vietnamese—there were no communications to listen to on their part, but they knew—they can tell when there was movement. And we could see from their communications, they were reacting right away. One by one, they began to pull their own troops out. They'd pull one battalion after another—pull way back toward the [inaudible] rim of the plain. And in the end they got it done. And it relieved the pressure. He brought them all back out. Everybody was happy. There was less pressure on them. Well, after this, you know, the war was going on. Mac Godley and I went over to Saigon—a week or two [signal breaks up] OK. A little after the end to ask for more air support. And we talked to General Abrams. And to brief Abrams that he holds staff with. We had a big map showing—our gloom and doom map, as we called it. Jack was a member of that, I think. And we briefed him on how the attack was developing over there and what was going on. In the meanwhile, Vang Pao, whose help we were coming to ask for, had done this remarkable operation moving all over. He said, Look, he moved 5,000 men?' He took a cigar out of his mouth—'without radio contact, with no resupply?' Yes, sir, he did. And then, he said, he'd react. He'd say, 'Hey.' He called to some officer out there. Said, 'Go out and get me that newspaper you saw the other day you showed me.' He brought in a big sheet of newspaper and it was a map in The Nam Daily—the Vietnamese—the North Vietnamese daily newspaper with the party line in it. And this map showed a great big diagram of the very map—or like the map that we had shown in our briefing with Long Tieng here. To get repositioned, all these arrows going in where they were hitting. And it was a—you could see it was identical. Somebody had seen the same

person did both of them. And he was so amazed by this. He said, 'Vang Pao is a major general by anybody's standards.' Because—I got in a dig there saying that some of the American officers don't think major—that Vang Pao is major general by American standards. You see, I don't give a damn. General Vang is a general by anybody's standards. He was, you know, just excited. That's why he came over. As I told you earlier, he came over later and brought General Vogt later. But that—the fact that he saw two examples—and first of all, our briefing was true. He saw it from the name. Another thing about The Daily, too, the paper. It was printed on the fourteenth. The last attack had been on the thirteenth and it had failed and pulled back and then this maneuver out of a—a zone of danger developed and the paper itself was printed on the fourteenth and it said today, today. So, it was obviously a propaganda coverage of an event that they had performed and intended to perform on the thirteenth and it had failed and they hadn't gotten their signals straight on that and they reported it as having succeeded. And it had actually failed. Does it make any sense to you?
Well, that's propaganda for you.
I can't hear.
I said that's propaganda for you.
Wait a minute. I've lost you.
Oh, I said that's the way propaganda works.
Propaganda works. Yeah. Well, anyway that's enough. I'll say no more tonight.

[Interviewer thanks Mr. Tovar for his time, says he will look forward to speaking with him the next night. Recorder is turned off.]

INTERVIEW DAY TWO

(0:00) [The two greet each other]
(0:18) Well, let's start about when you first arrived in Laos, you must have conducted some kind of assessment of where the pro-Royalist forces were, how they stacked up against the enemy, what their status was, what their strengths and weaknesses were. Do you remember anything like that?
Yeah. Now you're talking about pro-Loyalist forces.
Right. [Thinks Tovar said "Royalist"]
What do you mean? There were no pro-Loyalist forces.
Royalist. No, I'm sorry. So, fighting for the king of Laos is what I meant. Royalist.
In other words—oh, the Royal Lao government's forces.
Right. Exactly.
Lao forces. OK. Called the Forces Armees Royales.
Right.

And—well, what I saw there—what—was what I had heard, essentially. They were not being very effective. They were doing very little in the ground war. Their greatest assets were they had manpower. Their [lab doolies] were the manpower. Even when trained, it didn't have the internal cohesiveness and internal support that enabled it to function in the field. Now, there were exceptions to that. But essentially, in the north, it was not very, very promising. There was a lot of—oh, I don't know what you call it. You know, for example, in MR5, the young—the commander there was much like a tribal chieftain. The forces really reported to him. They were his men. And it was he who, in effect, sustained them in the field or did not sustain them. There was no national effort to this. The National Ministry of Defense, for example, might try, but it had no way of really conducting the backup that any of those forces needed to stay in the field and fight. Now, in the south it was a little different. In Savannakhet, there was a good regional commander and in MR4 there was also a good regional commander. And you got a little more—much more cohesiveness. And as we chipped in with our contribution to those people, we had much more to work on. In the north, there was very little. Vang Pao was the only real defense of the Royal Lao government into Laos.

(2:42) And how—how did you assess how the Hmong were doing at that time when you first arrived?

Well, when I got there, it was, you know, I sort of picked up where my predecessors left off. They were doing all right and they were—I got there in, say, September or October and it was still pretty good weather. And they were preparing to march. And shortly after I got there—I think I mentioned last night that Vang Pao had this great big determination to head for Ban-Ban. And the Ban-Ban operation got a 'go'. So, it was gung ho right away from the beginning, which, you know, I didn't like it too much because I was new to it and I had a hard time getting myself sort of [signal breaks up]. But we did and that's what we decided to do. So, that showed at least a lot of feistiness and a lot of willingness to fight. And now where were they going? They were going to the North Vietnamese map in lower junction in the Ban-Ban area, which was northeastern Laos, this side of the—our side of the North Vietnamese border. They were pretty good. I don't know whether that tells you what you're looking for or …

(3:51) You know, that's fine. You hear a lot of Hmong veterans saying that the Hmong helped fight on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. If the maps that I've seen are correct, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, for the most part wasn't in Military Region Two.

Absolutely. You're right. It was not. And the Hmong didn't fight in the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They sometimes were over—like this Ban-Ban operation. If it had succeeded, it would have put them over in the direction of the Vietnamese—North Vietnamese border and [signal breaks up] a little bit over there. But the trail itself essentially plugged into Laos further south as I remember. I forget the name of the pass—Mu Gia—I can't remember exactly. But it definitely, as you say, it shipped in further south and then went on, picking up speed as it went down into Laos and into [inaudible].

Into where, I'm sorry?

They didn't contribute there at all. Every so often, you know, we found need to pull out some special guys to do certain things and run in and chase some particular objective. But it wasn't really the trail. And it was not—there's no way [signal breaks up] the trail is over here [signal breaks up] the trail. Who's going to question that? He did his job in the war, but he fought the enemy where it was. It wasn't quite on the trail.

(5:25) Yeah. Your voice is breaking up a lot. I don't know if …

Is it? Is it worse or different from last night?

Yeah, I mean, it happened a couple of times last night, but just in the last five minutes or so I've lost you maybe five or six times.
I think I'm letting the telephone get away from my jaw.
Oh, well, it sounds almost more like some kind of interference.
Well, I don't hear anything from here.
Yeah. Well, I'll just try to keep track of it. If it gets really bad and I can't understand you, I'll let you know.
I'm accused of mumbling, so don't …
No, I don't think it's you. I think it's something with the phone. I don't know what it is, though. Well, let's go ahead. We talked about Mac Godley and John Vessey last night. How would you describe your working relationship with Pat Landry?
Oh, very good. He worked for me. I mean, our relationship was excellent. He did exactly what I told him to do. [Interviewer laughs] He was very good. No, I know there have been, I mean, not everybody liked Pat. Pat was sort of a special kind of a guy. He was Bill Lair's man, Bill Lair's deputy. And I don't know. He and [Larry] Devlin didn't get along quite so well, but Pat was a very good guy. I knew him from long before Laos. I knew him from his Indonesia days. His—the earlier days before I was involved in Indonesia. And he is a very smart guy. He—I found he knew a great deal. And he had his own way of functioning in Udorn and Laos and he adapted very readily to my particular style. And I had nothing but good things to say about him.

(7:03) How would you describe him just as a person? You say he had his own unique style. How did that manifest itself?
Well, it's hard to say, his style. I mean, I'm told that before I got there, he rarely used to go forward to the advanced bases and where the troops were in contact and so on. But with me, when I took him along, he was happy to go anywhere. And he was very responsive to what I—to my style, that's the thing. Now, my style is probably different from other people's, but his style was—he was an old line paramilitary guy. He'd worked in Indonesia. He worked in Tibet and now he's in Laos and he worked there under Bill Lair. And he was one of the boys and I found the boys to be very good. They're tough, smart and generally responsive to the leadership. So whatever you may have heard about him before, he was an excellent guy. He was an—handled the Udorn base there very well. Now, the Udorn base as you probably—you know. It supported our forward bases in Long Tieng, Savannakhet, Pakse and Nam Yu. All that stuff got its—and the personnel were sent up in there. They reported to there usually. Not many of them stayed in Vientiane, but they were under Landry's jurisdiction right there. He was their—you know, essentially their administrative boss. But I—beyond that, he did what I told him to do and I don't think he ever tried to run [them on] because they were strong. He was a good guy.

(8:43) Do you think he and Vang Pao had a good working relationship?
Oh, yes, he did. Very much. You know, let's see. Where did I hear that? I was told once that hid between sheets he wasn't too popular with an earlier chief. And I think he was ready to move him out, but Vang Pao interceded for him. I've heard that said. Now, I don't know that at face value. But in my experience with him, he had—he worked with Vang Pao very, very well. He didn't <u>handle</u> Vang Pao in that conventional word which is really thrown around a lot in our circles. He worked with Vang Pao and usually he worked with him—hand in glove with me. And often, when Vang Pao went over to Udorn, for example to the hospital on a couple of occasions, Landry was right there with him and he was right there going to Landry and telling him his troubles and it was a very good relationship. Have you heard otherwise?

(9:42) Oh, well, there are times that I've heard that they got into a yelling match every now and then, but I think, in general …

You mean Vang Pao and …

And Pat Landry.

Well, you know, we all got into yelling matches.

Oh, sure.

There were a lot of things going on there and there were points of view expressed and disagreement and so on. And I never heard Vang Pao being yelled at by Landry, but it may have happened before. But Vang Pao liked Landry, I know that.

I think …

He wanted him to stay on.

I think, too, probably Roger Warner in his book makes it seem like, you know, Pat Landry always played second fiddle to Bill Lair so that when Lair left, Vang Pao perhaps felt like he got stuck with second best.

Well, you know, Vang Pao had a hard time, really. He was working with a system that operated on its own terms and Landry was Bill Lair's deputy for a number of years, I don't know how many years. But he did what Bill told him. You know, a deputy tends to do what the boss says. And they got along very—they were close friends, intimately close friends and had been up until Pat Landry's death a year or so ago. And no, I had no problem with that at all. But whatever—I don't know what Warner had or maybe somebody else told him that there was a problem. I don't know.

Well, it may just have been something someone told him.

Pat Landry was his oldest friend. No question about that.

Yeah.

And Bill Lair loved—I mean, Vang Pao loved Bill Lair and Bill Lair loved him. And when Bill Lair had to leave, I forget why he had to be transferred. You can't stay forever in these posts, you know. None of us can. And they were afraid of people sort of taking on the ways of the host country. And when they transferred Bill Lair to—I don't—it may have been Bangkok after …

I think he went to the war college for a year.

Oh, he went to the war—oh, that's right. He went to army war college.

Yeah.

Well, that was to give <u>him</u> a break. You know, there's a general feeling that if a man stays forever in one of these places, he can become wedded to it and it's going to damage his objectivity. And I think maybe they felt that they had to give him a break. On top of that, you know, it's a hell—it plays hell on the family life. And Bill Lair married a lady from Thailand, a lovely lady. And I'm sure she didn't want to have him up in Laos all the time as if— his family. They had children eventually. So, I wouldn't place much stock in that as a problem. In my time, it was no problem whatsoever. Now Bill wasn't there. Bill had gone. And when I went to Bangkok later, he had already been assigned to Bangkok. So, he was working for <u>me</u> there. But—and he was great for me. I mean, he was—Bill Lair is a soldier. He's a yes, sir and he does what he's supposed to do. He'll tell you what he wants, what he thinks and he'll give you an honest opinion. But there's no insubordination there. It doesn't work very often in our system that way. The way—I had great regard for Bill and Pat, in a different media they, you know, a different level, a different field of interest, Bill knew things that Pat didn't know. He was much more immersed in the Thailand picture than Pat was. Because Pat had had more diverse experience elsewhere in Indonesia and in Tibet. So, I don't—I think that's a problem, a non-problem, really.

Sure. OK.

I don't remember—I've never talked to Warner about anything specific of this sort, so I don't know what he would say. But I would question his, you know, his insight into the real picture there.

(13:48) Well, and it may have been more an impression that I got than anything specific he wrote in the book. I'd have to double check that myself.

The book has—the book has nothing in it about Landry that I can remember. I mean, he talked to Landry at great length. Landry's one of those up there at—in Thailand, in Bangkok—sitting down with Roger Warner in the bars and, you know, shooting the breeze for days on end. And if I'd been there, I would have put a crimp in his style somewhat because they were all getting a little bit out of line and talking about things that, on the Agency's book, were still classified.

(14:23) Right. How well do you think the military operation and the USAID operation worked to together in Laos?

The military operation. You mean the—our operations?

Yes.

The irregular program.

Correct.

Yeah. Now, AID supported everybody, you realize that.

Yes.

AID provided the, through their requirements office, they brought in the beans and bullets for the Royal Lao Army, the FAR, to the extent that they were required. They brought in everything for us. So, they did very well and we got along famously with them. They provided what we needed. If we needed weapons, ammunition, artillery, they brought it all in. Do you have any contrary thoughts on that or …

(15:13) No, I just—I find it fascinating that we have this multilayered operation in Laos that you have the ambassador, you have the chief of station, you have the dep chief, you have the chief of ops. You also have this humanitarian operation going on. You have the Royal Lao government. You have all these different things. And from what I can tell, it operated with great precision.

It did. We had tough ambassadors, good ambassadors and, you know, they're not the standard State Department type. These guys are very—they're activists and they were in an environment which they adapted to very well. They had good people out there who stayed a long time. Now, see, AID could keep them out there for years. It was hard for us to do. We did it with some, but—and there was continuity and people knew each other over a long period of time. They worked closely together and every day this crowd, this bunch of apparent, you know, ostensibly disparate elements met in the ambassador's bubble upstairs in the, you know, this special room and talked and talked and thrashed out things. And it was very, very good. It—the ambassador got his points across and everybody got their marching orders and raised their own points and then, whether an objection or an endorsement and I was amazed when I got there and found this. Every morning at a quarter to eight we were at it again and again, year after year. But it was remarkably good.

I'm trying to—I'm sorry. Go ahead.

The guys on the field, for example, the AID guys were very close to our guys. And our young case officers, just like the young AID officers, they were out there working—we were dealing with bullets and guns and they were dealing with rice and equipment. And they were friends, they worked together. They often backstopped each other, you know, by shifting back and forth and helping the other out, being on the ground. And it was—it was, to me, and incredible operation. I've never—of course, I haven't seen too many of these operations, but this was very, very good. I give the ambassador primary credit because he is a leader and he had to assert himself. And if it weren't—if he weren't a man as he was, the thing could get out of hand or you could have fights with people

down below. Now, I can't speak for Bill Sullivan's tenure, but I gather he was a—you know, they make the crack that he was the field marshal. Well, he was, in a way. I guess he was. And he set the criteria down for what went on. We picked up where he left off. Godley did and Devlin did and I came into the picture and we all did. And it had a great amount of continuity. And it was also a lot of fun. I mean, it was—they were wonderful people to work with.

(18:04) I think the only thing I've heard repeatedly that's a negative about Sullivan was related to Phou Pha Ti.

Well, I don't know what you heard about that. Have you read Tim Castle's book on Phou Pha Ti?

No, I haven't. What's the name of that one?

Oh, what—it's—I can't think of it right now. I'll dig it out for you.

OK. Well, I'll look up the author.

Timothy Castle. He was in the air force—enlisted man in the air force. He came out—he had a varied career. A scholar and an airman and he had been out there in Laos, in Thailand, worked on MIA, w worked on everything. But he was down at the air—what do you call—the air university.

Oh, Air America? Or no.

You know, down at the base in Alabama. I forget… And he was working there in research. And he wrote a book called At War in the Shadow of Vietnam. Have you not seen that?

I've heard of it.

Well, you ought to get it and see it. I mean, it's a book—I—he and I have tangled with it. I criticized it a bit for a number of things. You'll know why when you read it, what I've told you. But he was good. And later on he wrote on Phou Pha Ti. And he described that thing, I thought, with exquisite skill. And everything I've ever understood about it came into focus right there. Phou Pha Ti was not a Bill Sullivan baby. It was the United States Air Force all the way. They rammed that down the mission's throat. Now, Ted Shackley, our predecessor out there, was opposed to it. And once they said, Oh, we're going to do it', well, everybody said, 'OK. Here we are. What do we do next?' But it was not Sullivan. It was not CIA, as sometimes it was. And it was not anybody on the ground. It was the U.S. Air Force who said, 'you will do it.' And Castle tells that, I think, very, very good.

(20:04) OK. Well, the criticism I heard was from Dick Secord and he said they had aerial photographs saying that the Vietnamese were building a road towards Phou Pha Ti, but then Sullivan wouldn't let them bomb the road and then he wouldn't let them bring Special Forces people in to protect the technicians. And then, when the road was so close that they knew the enemy could send mortar fire in, they wouldn't let them evacuate.

Well, some of that may well be true. I don't know. I know Secord and he's an honest guy and I respect him. But I've never heard that particular story about the road not being bombed. Sullivan had his—he may have had reasons to—not to do it, but I don't know what they were. Look it up. Look up Castle and see what he says. If that doesn't satisfy you, I don't know what else I can suggest. But my understanding of it and I wasn't there, of course, and I'm operating from hearsay and what I've read. And I think it had had the alleged by, I think, by Corn—David Corn—that Shackley was partly responsible for that. I'm not sure. I may be mistaken, but I think he did contend that. And—but Shackley felt that it would not last and they did not want to do it, but they were told it will be done. Now, how it was managed out there, I don't know. I know that some of the irregulars were detailed to protect the place. But you know, how that was to be handled on the ground, I can't tell you. I'd look carefully at what Secord said and see what else had been said. See what Castle said, in particular. I think he should know more about it than anybody else around. Maybe I may eat my words, but try it out that way.

No, I will look it up. I will definitely try to track it down.
The other book by Castle, *War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, is a good—it deals primarily with the military relationships and some of the things that I've talked to you about. The 7th/13th Air Force in Udorn being—rankling over the fact that air operations in Laos were controlled by the ambassador with a civilian CIA chief and a comparatively junior air force officer calling the shots. And he takes a lot from General Hughes' end of tour report and that sort of thing. And he's got some pretty strong things to say. I argued against it. Hughes is the guy he talks with. He was a good friend of mine, too. He and I had some interesting adventures, too, I'll tell you. But I hesitate, you know, just to shoot off too much on things that are not directly things are not directly in my own personal experience. But Phou Pha Ti is one of them. But I sort of took what was generally alleged when I came through feeling that our guys were fully exonerated from this. It was a terrible event. I mean …
Oh, yes.
Now, can you hear me?
Yes. Perfectly fine.
All right.

(23:15) Well, let's—one of the questions I put on the sheet may not really apply, but I'll at least ask it and we'll see, but were there times when initiatives from Washington maybe couldn't reach you in a timely fashion to be executed properly or that you needed permission from Washington to execute a plan and it was slow in coming that you ever experienced some frustration in trying to get an operation and running?
Well, not very much on the whole, I'll tell you. I told you how my first weeks of this Ban-Ban operation had me sort of rattled because it was—we were having all kinds of trouble and Washington was getting us up in the middle of the night and saying, 'What about this? Somebody said—somebody at State said the following. What do you say about this?' Back and forth. And it was weird. But that's the only time that ever happened. I mean, I found—the support I got from Washington was just absolutely outstanding. They would—I mean, I can't think of anything where they stopped me from doing something I felt we had to do. As long as I had the ambassador aboard, they said, 'OK. Fine.' They gave me personnel support. They—there was no problem with money. At one point, I'll tell you this. I'd been there two or three months when we were—the visit—upcoming visit of General Cushing was announced. Do you know General Cushing?
The name's familiar, but I couldn't tell you anything about him.
He worked for Central Intelligence and he was a Marine, who later on became commandant. But he came out to see us and to spend eight days with us. Well, now, eight days with a super boss is not fun. And he stayed with me the whole time. [Chuckles] Now, but—he was out to see what these damn civilians are doing out here. Do they know what they're doing? They got their butts in a sling out here and they don't know how to get out. And he was very polite, very nice. And he went along to see this [signal cuts out]. And it was interesting. We got down to the south of Pakse, in the middle of some pretty heavy stuff down there. We were having a hard time over on the Bolovens [signal cuts out] and that's overlooking the Trail. Now, [signal cuts out] because we do occasionally send troops from down there in the trail. But we had observation points all along the way and we had Vietnamese attack and we would counterattack and this was really a tough time. So, he took me—I took him to see it. Well, he'd shake his head and shake his head. He didn't open his mouth and didn't say anything. And he didn't like the way it was being done. He couldn't see why these bases were defended the way they had to be defended by U.S. Marine Corps [some]. And we went through a couple more of the experiences like this. And we were leaving Pakse to go up to visit one of our training bases down there we used to call Whiskey Three. And as we got in the airplane, my

guy in Pakse came running out with a whole bunch of cables. He put them right in my lap there in front of General Cushing. Well, as you can imagine, the proper way would have been to put it in my hand before I got in the airplane and let me see it before I had to contend with my boss. But it was right there. Cushing was all alert. And I showed them to him and he shook his head. 'God,' he said, 'This is awful. We're going to lose PS-22.' But he kept his mouth shut after—he didn't say do this or don't do that. And we got out of the plane and we were walking up toward the base and he was muttering to himself, 'God, if I were here, I would get out of that place.' You know, he was muttering out loud, obviously, for my benefit. And I just ignored it and I said, 'OK. You're here.' I'm going back to Pakse and I'll see you this afternoon.' And I went back there and got in front of— our guys had held off the Vietnamese and the place was in great shape. The commander down there, the Pakse commander of the irregulars—a superb guy, General Soutchay. He just got decorated by the minister of defense. Everything went just according to Hoyle. And got there—Cushing back into see the medal pinned on, and he was reassured. You know, it was against his judgment, but OK, he recognized that things didn't always work according to the Marine Corps handbook. But anyway, went through this eight solid days and at the end of it he said, 'OK, I want you to do one thing. Lay out for me in writing your plan for the next six months of your irregular operations.' 'Fine, I'll do that.' And he went off and I said goodbye to him. And I got back by the end of the week or so. And at the end, he wrote back to me and said, 'I want to thank you very much and congratulate you and your people for the superb job they're doing out there.' Now, this was a case where headquarters could have intervened because they weren't sure, didn't quite understand. But they let the guys in the operational field do what they knew how to do best and it worked and they were prepared to say, 'OK. You're right. Carry on.' This was—all through the time out there, I had no trouble with anybody. I got promoted out there. Everything worked just swimmingly. And it was sheer fun to work. The—it's [Pauses] I just can't say more about the—how much I enjoyed having the people behind me there and I loved every day because I could do anything I needed to do. The ambassador and I, I think we made a good team, and things worked. And when Vessey got there, it was wonderful because Jack, once he got sent in there, he took the steam out of the Udorn complaints and all that sort of thing because he was a real soldier. He was no civilian, but he was an unusual soldier. And he didn't interfere with anything, but he was there to help and to talk and to be talked to. And we - I felt that he was part of our team all the way through that last year. And the ambassador, too. He loved him dearly.

(29:33) Do you remember General Vessey initiating a tank assault team?

[The two have some problems hearing over the phones, make some adjustments]

(32:05) I was asking you if you remembered anything about General Vessey starting an anti-tank group.

Anti-tank group?

Yes. I know that I think there were some Russian T-76s that the Vietnamese brought in.

Oh, we had the PG-76s. We also had the T-34s. And they were—well, we—you know, we knocked out a couple of them and we captured another one. And I don't remember any tank—anti-tank group. We had something call the LAW [Light Anti-Armor Weapon] rocket. Do you remember that?

Was that a shoulder fired?

Yeah, a shoulder-fired rocket. Yeah. And it was anti-tank and we had a problem there because the irregulars—when they didn't see tanks, they were happy to use it on troops or on buildings or whatever else they felt necessary. But they were expensive and, in fact, I have, in my possession, a

window—a Lao—some Lao house window, which has been shattered by probably a LAW rocket with a note from—a card down below from Jack Vessey saying, 'This may have been one of the tanks knocked out in MR3.' But I don't remember any kind of an anti-tank force.

(33:20) Well, I just remember him saying that he grabbed some Hmong soldiers and taught them how to use these weapons and they actually gave the Hmong a bounty when they took out a tank.

Oh, well, that may be. I mean, he talked the Hmong up and we didn't interfere with that. The only time in Hmong territory that we got any tanks were in '72, late in the game when they were—final attack on Long Tieng, really, in about March into April. We mined the road on—leading up to Long Tieng from the back side, from the northeastern side, really. And we got—I've got—I can show you a picture of two knocked-out tanks right there. That's the only time the Hmong were ever involved. We got—we captured the tank whole down in MR3 and it got stuck in a ditch, you know, in a big riverbank or something like that. And we wanted—I wanted to get it up there to Vientiane, if we could, for the Armed Forces Day, the showpiece for the Lao. And Jack looked and said, 'You need two T-18 tank removal something or other to pull that out.' And I said, 'Well, give us a try.' So, we got our Filipinos in there and a few other—and we brought the tank out and put it in operating order. So, we won that one. But I'm sure that he may have taught these guys how to fire them. It's very—the trouble—you had to stand up to the tank, you know, to fire it. It had to be fairly close. But when you stood up to face a tank, you were surely going to get shot to death yourself. And they couldn't do it. We had one final operation up on the plain and we went back to the plain in late '72 and one of our best commanders from MR3, whom we had up there operating along with the Hmong. And he was killed using a law rocket against the Vietnamese tanks coming because he had to stand up. So, that a—that's sort of a story, I think, Jack tells. I don't want to—don't say it against it.

(35:28) Another thing that I think you discussed in your review of *Tragic Mountains* and that I'm certainly interested in. I get different opinions on this. Is whether the façade of neutrality was a handicap or whether it really didn't make any difference in the way that you prosecuted the war in Laos.

Well, I think it's the only reason we did prosecute the war if we did because it—the handicap, you know, the neutrality required Souvanna Phouma to demand that the effort be made in secret, as he called it secret. That meant something he could deny and didn't have to be made to look foolish about it. Now everybody used it. We never called it the secret war. That's the press. But it was simply part of the landscape. If it hadn't been a question of neutrality, we would have had the United States Army in there with three or four divisions, I suppose, and that would have been a different ball game.

Oh, yes.

And there were a lot of people who would like to have done that. You know, I'm sure you've seen some of the—I forget the name of the book by a very good guy, [Palmer Satabrunn], who wrote about putting in three divisions in the trail, I mean, right across southern Laos. I can't think of the name of it now. That would have been different. So you know, it had nothing to help or hinder us. It was simply what we dealt with.

(36:49) OK. You did mention in your review, though, that it probably made it easier for Congress to start scaling back funding because it was so low profile.

Well, it was in the beginning pretty low profile. You know, what we would spend in a year, Vietnam would spend in a day. But it got bigger. By '71, end of '72, it was a pretty big operation. And it was

costing much, much more. And that's when they—that's when Symington got up on his horse and, you know, claimed that he didn't know anything about this. And he'd been up there visiting and spent the night at the house of the chief of station and got briefed thoroughly on everything, and liked it and thought it was great. But I guess it was easy for a time, but the profile got bigger and that may have been the factor. I tell you, I'm not a good one on the money side of this business. I can't give you chapter and verse on how we handled that funding. It went very well and we did what we were told and we reported as we had to and we were pleased with the results.

(38:01) Well, as long as you brought up Symington, why don't we talk about the Symington ceiling and about, obviously, you and most people there must have been quite offended that here was a man who had been there and then acted like he'd never been there and also that he'd taken such pains to start chipping away at your funding.

Oh, absolutely. Nobody was more offended by Symington than Richard Helms. I mean, Helms was just shocked by that. He, you know, he felt that Symington was lying through his teeth in the whole thing. He knew exactly what was going on there and, you know, for us out in the field, we didn't—the ambassador went back there in '71 and testified before the senate committee and Symington there and they worked him over. But he held his own reasonably well. But we didn't worry about that. The ambassador was our first line of defense as far as Symington was concerned. And we—it was no real problem to me.

Now, I can't remember …

It could have been, but it wasn't.

(38:58) I can't remember reading anyplace. Did anyone happen to leak or to mention that Symington had been in Laos? Was this a—did this ever become public knowledge during this period?

Well, I don't know at that time, I don't know what was being said in the press because I wasn't reading the U.S. press in Laos and I would think that Helms would have said so. And Helms, I think, had to go down there and testify. And I don't know they would have handled it otherwise without saying that this was the way it was. But maybe Helms, in effect, was sort of 'keep your mouth shut and keep out of the picture or you'll make it worse.' He may have had the politics of it to cope with. I don't know. But I know—he's talked to me about that in the last year or two working on his book. Did you ever read <u>his</u> book?

I think it's another one that's on my desk in the pipeline that I haven't gotten to yet.

You should read chapter 27. That's called The War We Won. And it's Laos. He doesn't mention me—he's covering—he was out there at the time Devlin was still chief. I went out there just for the overlap, but it was Devlin who he speaks of there and he just loved it and he talks about all the boys and he loves those kids. It's a good, good book.

(40:15) Excellent. Well, I'll put that toward the top of the pile, then.

Pardon?

I will put that toward the top of the pile.

You've got a lot of reading for the rest of the summer.

Oh, yeah. Well, fortunately, I'm on sabbatical, so I have lots of time.

So, what are you doing with all of that? What are you writing, a book?

I'm trying to write a book, but one that's aimed more towards high-school age. You know, we have 60,000, 70,000 Hmong people in the Twin Cities and most high school and college age Hmong kids really don't know much of this stuff.

Oh, I'm sure they don't.

So, there's—I mean, there's lots of literature out there already for the military enthusiast and for other sorts of people. I'm trying to write something that's a little more approachable.
Yeah, that's great.
Well, let's see.
I wish you well and …
Well, I'll send you a copy.
All right. Wonderful. Well, much of the stuff that's being written these days on these things is unreadable in many ways.
Well, mine may end up being the same way, but I hope not.
Oh, I hope not. I'll see if I can help.

(41:15) Well, I appreciate it a great deal. Let's just talk about—I mean, we've sort of addressed this from one point or another a little bit, but there's been a lot written about the Hmong irregulars and how over time they were forced to fight more conventionally and that this didn't suit them particularly well. How did you see the situation with the Hmong irregulars during your time there?
Well, when I got there, the change had already been in effect. That began under Shackley. It climaxed under—well, it grew under Devlin. I would say it climaxed under me because of the Thai volunteers. But it—the Vietnamese had generally—they often had larger forces and more fire power than our guys. And our guys were—in the early days, they were using M-16s—not M-16s—carbines and M-1s. You know, an M-1 is a big thing for a young, small Lao to carry. And they finally got the M-16s. Then it bigger. And then it became a question of men, numbers of men. And as the war—simply the war got bigger. But which came first, the chicken or the egg is very hard to say. The Warner crowd contends that by making ours bigger the Vietnamese became bigger. I would say essentially one of the Vietnamese became bigger first and ours had to match them. But it was on that, back and forth, back and forth. And the Hmong, I think, Vang Pao liked it. You know, in the early times, his little guys were his—they were his scrappy little guerilla platoon or a, you know, [call waiting beep] in disguise, somebody in charge and so on. That got bigger. He finally ended up in a little company with a bigger person in charge. The captain in charge of that company—the [Hmong] captain, he was a bigger guy than the guys he worked. He was more of a personage in his village. There was a social advancement along with this. So, Vang Pao had Chinese commanders, some of whom were excellent. Of course, so many of them got killed. And he almost got killed on a number of occasions. It happened that the attrition rate, nobody foresaw it because it was really pretty hard to predict what was going to happen. You had to fight the battle that was on the next hill or the attack that came last night and the residue is there in the morning. But it got bigger and it taxed the Hmong very heavily. But even worse, I think, was the social disruption, the uprooting of the families from their lands where they lived. The Vietnamese were taking over those lands. As I think I mentioned, Ban-Ban was where Vang Pao came from originally and later on his family was in Long Tieng. All those things happened over time and when I got there, the attrition had been heavy. I don't now how many. We didn't have a morning report which you could check every day and see how many were dead and how many were fit for duty. You had to pick it up and take it from them as they gave it to us. And usually we knew. We had a pretty good record of the killed in action, wounded—because we had to treat the wounded. And it was a heavy, heavy load. But it happened elsewhere in the country, too. It happened in the south, the deep south—Pakse—and so on. It—the difference in the MR2 was that it involved a measured dislocation and social disruption of the population. So, the attrition in that total sense was very heavy, probably too much for them. But on the other hand, they were fighting hard until the very end. And some of them have been fighting ever since.

Oh, yes.
Pardon?
I said, oh, yes. Absolutely.
It—one could say that it shouldn't have been done that way. You know, if all things were equal, I would agree. But all things were not equal and the war was getting bigger and there was sure pressure on everybody—by the administration, by the government, to do more and do it better. I can remember, to give you one example, when I was getting briefed on Laos before I got out there, I was shown by [our guest] a memo—a letter that had been sent over to Kissinger, giving him a briefing on a couple of things I guess he had asked about. There were some operations into the trail area, little disruptive things. Not too much, but interesting. And there was a note on the sideline and it said 'HAK—that's Kissinger—tell Helms to double, treble this effort. Signed RN' in blue pencil. You know, call it what you will. That's policy. And when you've got that as a marching order, you're inclined to take it pretty much at face value. And that was—it was evident, too, during the course of this whole thing, say, '71 and '72 when the war was at its height. The demands were made for support, for equipment, for artillery, for troops. But above all, for air. And we had a constant fight for air power with the Air Force. We kept demanding more and the Air Force [Pauses] sometimes gave what we wanted and sometimes just very well did wonderfully. Other times we didn't get what we needed. The collapse in December of '71, part of the trouble we had there was there was no air—not enough air to go in and knock out the 130 guns. It—the infantry had no real protection. So they had this on again, off again. And we were always asking for more. And I told you how we got involved with General Creighton Abrams and General Vogt. And at that point, we were given all the air we could swallow and it was great. Wonderful. It was the best thing that could have been done for us. But that's a sign of the kind of pressure that was available to back us up.
… one could say that it shouldn't have been done that way. You know, if all things were equal, I would agree. But all things were not equal and the war was getting bigger and there was sure pressure on everybody—by the administration, by the government, to do more and do it better. I can remember, to give you one example, when I was getting briefed on Laos before I got out there, I was shown by [our guest] a memo—a letter that had been sent over to Kissinger, giving him a briefing on a couple of things I guess he had asked about. There were some operations into the trail area, little disruptive things. Not too much, but interesting. And there was a note on the sideline and it said 'HAK—that's Kissinger—tell Helms to double, treble this effort. Signed RN' in blue pencil. You know, call it what you will. That's policy. And when you've got that as a marching order, you're inclined to take it pretty much at face value. And that was—it was evident, too, during the course of this whole thing, say, '71 and '72 when the war was at its height. The demands were made for support, for equipment, for artillery, for troops. But above all, for air. And we had a constant fight for air power with the Air Force. We kept demanding more and the Air Force [Pauses] sometimes gave what we wanted and sometimes just very well did wonderfully. Other times we didn't get what we needed. The collapse in December of '71, part of the trouble we had there was there was no air—not enough air to go in and knock out the 130 guns. It—the infantry had no real protection. So they had this on again, off again. And we were always asking for more. And I told you how we got involved with General Creighton Abrams and General Vogt. And at that point, we were given all the air we could swallow and it was great. Wonderful. It was the best thing that could have been done for us. But that's a sign of the kind of pressure that was available to back us up.

(47:32) So how does that relationship work between the CIA and the Air Force, when …

I'm losing you now.
How does this relationship between the CIA and the Air Force work when you're sort of caught in this battle to determine how much air support you're going to provide to the irregulars in Laos?
Say that again slowly, would you? The beginning of this.
Sure. You were just describing this process where you were asking for more air power and the Air Force may or may not have wanted to provide it. Was this kind of a difficult relationship?
Well, in head-to-head contact, no, it was not. I mean, General Hughes over there was a prince of a guy. I liked him very much. I took him over in civilian clothing. I took him up into Laos and showed him things that no uniformed general should ever have been able to see. We took him and walked all over some of the terrain and showed him the, you know, the holes in the ground, the bodies and everything else. And I think he did his best. But there was something about this system which galled him. He was a major general in command of a—half of a huge Air Force. And it was a highly complex technical Air Force. And he simply felt that he ought to be directing that operation against the ground. Now, I would ask—I would ask him and everybody else this. How much does a major general in the Air Force know about good ground combat? Probably not an awful lot unless he's been through a lot of it. None of them had. None of the people we had had been through it. So, there was that kind of tension between us. Now, Vessey was a great help in that because he could talk to these guys on their own terms better than we could, I think. And they would react to us a little better knowing we had a very competent senior ground forces officer, they had to work with us. And it was better. So—but as I read from Castle's first report. You'll read this as you get his book, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, how some of these resentments were cherished and kept a long time. Before Hughes, his predecessor said, 'Yeah, the only time they called and told me what was going on when they—was when they needed our help.' Well, that's an exaggeration. But that's how he felt. And so this is an ongoing strain, but it was a problem that people—all—everybody dealt with. We did get lots of air—there were F-4 pilots who were shot down in supporting our operations. But we lost people going in to pick up downed Air Force personnel, too. But it—General Vogt was the commander of the Air Force, you know, deputy COMUS MACV. And he loved us and we loved him in the sense that he said these F-111s are dedicated to you. They were the most powerful weapon the Air Force had except for the B-17s. And they came into us and we—you know, the relations blew hot and they blew cool. They didn't really blow cold. They were generally warm, not as hot as we would have liked them, never as cold as they might have reported to the rest of them. Does that help you at all?
Yes. Yes, thank you.
Jack could give—Jack Vessey could give you a good picture of this, I would think.

(50:55) OK. Well, I'll ask him about it the next time I talk to him, which I hope will be soon. This must have at least at times taken quite toll on General Vang Pao to be in the midst of what had to have been …
A little bit slower, please.
Did you see the war taking a toll on General Vang Pao?
Oh, indeed. Indeed. I mean, he was—you know, he was like the rest of us. He puts on his pants one leg at a time. He—after the collapse up there in December '71, yeah, on the plain, he disappeared. Nobody knew where he was. Somewhere up in Laos. So, I got ahold of Pat Landry and said, 'Get over here. We're going up.' We went up there and we got in a helicopter and we landed here and there and elsewhere, looking for him. We finally found him on a little mountaintop, way the heck to the east, and we got in there, landed, walked up the hill and said, 'Where is the

General? Is he here?' 'Yes, inside.' And he was in there and he looked like hell. He was sitting there and wearing a big old overcoat that somebody gave him. It was cold up there, too, and it was nasty weather. He was sitting in front of a fire. His guys or his—most of his officers were around him there. They weren't saying anything. He didn't speak. He got up and looked at us, 'Oh.' And I shook hands, you know, put his hand. He shook hands and sat down. He—his nose was running. He looked terrible. And he said, 'War all over. America has no give us help. We cannot fight. We go to Sayaboury.' You asked about Sayaboury, I'll tell you about it. He said, 'I go to Sayaboury. This—I can no can do.' And we just sat down and he tore into us. I mean, you know, me as the target. He pounded the table and stomped his foot and everybody else was sitting there quietly. And I just let him beat up on me. You know, there was nothing. He needed to get something out of his system. He was crushed. He had been defeated up there and he was sick on top of it. I mean, his nose was running and he was coughing. And finally after—this—an hour or two of this, he quieted down. 'So, OK, General. We've got to take you back to Udorn. You're sick and have to go to the hospital. And we'll talk more about his war afterward.' So, by that time, he was, 'OK. We go.' So, we got in the helicopter and we flew back and we got back to Vientiane and I left him with Pat. Pat took him over to—they put him in a hospital there and he had pneumonia. So all this was, you know, this was close to a breakdown. He was having a—something that could have been a nervous breakdown, except that he was a terribly tough guy. And he pulled—snapped out of it. A week later or two weeks later, back in the field, 'Let's go.' That's when I brought the press up to meet him in Vientiane. You remember that. The thing—the toll was there. He—two or three times it happened, not that dramatically. You know, literally, we didn't know whether we could find the guy. We thought he might be—where could he have been? Where could he be hiding. And you know, this is enemy territory. You've got—one of them—Hmong [trap?] occupied the NVA and we were over here. And you can throw rocks between these places. And there he was. And if I hadn't gone up there, I don't what would have happened. He might have stayed there until he got sick and died. Other times—a couple other times he—his health showed up. He got colds and, how to put it—he showed it in different ways that he wasn't really up—he—other time I saw him—earlier than that. Back in February of '71 when they had the Valentine's Day Massacre. You've never heard of that?

Yes.

Well, on the night of February—when's Valentine's—February 12?

Fourteenth.

Fourteenth. Well, it must have been the night of the 13th. We got—the cables were screaming in, 'Vang Pao is under attack. The NVA are pushing from the south—from the north up at the King's house. They've overrun the artillery there and etc.' So, right away I get down there. Landry got over there and we barreled up to Long Tieng. And I found him there over in his house, his office. And he was shaking his head. And what had happened, some terrible thing had happened. This attack was a ground attack and our guys were there and they called for the—to the air—at the air representative. They got in touch with the air people up above and called for fast movers. 'We've got to have some fast movers.' And they dug—they flagged—two F-4s were coming back from Vietnam and they sent them around. Gave them the coordinates to come in on us and told them where the enemy was and they came zooming in. They—I forget what kind of attack they had up on the east side of Long Tieng and they could guide on that. And they went to put their bomb load where the enemy was at that time. But they missed. They somehow had got screwed up. They put the bomb load right down on us, our headquarters, Vang Pao's headquarters, the whole operating end of Long Tieng. Well, you can imagine the state that Vang Pao was in then. The Americans had done this. It was an accident, but it happened. The place was scattered with—what do you call them?

Cluster bombs?
Mmm?
Cluster bombs?
Cluster bombs. Yeah, that'd be—the little bomblets. You know, there were little grenades all over. And we had to be careful where we were walking around there. And Vang Pao—he was not quite—he wasn't sick at the time. He was just angry and dejected and the thing over the Air Force and he talked about Sayaboury. You know, and we said, 'Forget it, General. We're—everything's there. We're here. Your—our guys are alive.' One of the guys had been wounded. But our headquarters is established because we were in intact. So, we were able to cheer him up. But it was a very tense moment for him. And by his sights, he had good reason to be discouraged. He lost men in it. They captured one Vietnamese up there and we—the Hmong, when they got a Vietnamese, the first thing they wanted to do was hose them down with an M-16. They didn't believe in this prisoner-taking. And I sat in a jeep for two hours with this guy, guarding him while the Hmong soldiers walk up and down, clicking their [Pauses]—you know, the hammers of their guns, and showing their venom for this poor kid. And we saved him. We got him out. Took him out for interrogation. But there was tremendous hatred up there and Vang Pao shared it. But he got his licks in there. They killed more Vietnamese in that action than the—his men had been killed. But he had taken, if you can believe it, in his house—his house was right—you know, maybe 100 yards away from where our headquarters was. And what did they call the rocket? The big F-1—I forget. The rocket—the great, the big huge rocket had been dropped in right at his door and almost blew the place apart. But a B-40 rocket was fired into his house and went right through his bedroom, right over his bed and out the opposite wall. Now, he wasn't in the bed because when the attack was on, he was up and out. But I don't know whether his wife was there and she probably got up, too. But he could have been killed by that because the enemies were that close and they—so, times like that, he did show pressure. But mostly he was gung ho. And at times, you know, a week or two after this, he could be, 'We got to do this. We got to do this. We got to go more and get more heavy, more air, more artillery.' And he was, you know, demanding more help from us. No, the—I try to emphasize so much. This was their war, too. Before it was our war, it was their war. And the Hmong, his Hmong people were fighting against the Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao earlier, much earlier, in the '50s and going back—Vang Pao was up there. You know, he was—with the French there he almost went to Dien Bien Phu. Did you know that?
Yes.
He was on his way in with a battalion when …
Right before it fell.
Huh?
Right before Dien Bien Phu fell. Yes.
But the Hmong had been involved operating up there and they hated the Vietnamese with a terror. Now, the Hmong, then as now, they were split. Where some Hmong [were] close with the Vietnamese and got along with them OK. Other Hmong, like his, were—hated the Vietnamese and just like in this country now, there are Hmong that are pro-Viet—pro-Vang Pao and Hmong that are against him.

(1:00:01) Oh, yes. So, was Sayaboury just something that you heard from him when things went—
Sayaboury was a place—it was a fairly secure area. We had people down there, our own people, working. There were Hmong there—there were Hmong who lived in Sayaboury. It became like, you know, seventh heaven to them. If things are bad here, we can always go to Sayaboury because it was Hmong territory, more or less. They were good people, but they weren't too much involved in

the war. They had some contribution to make. But every so often, when things got difficult, he'd shake his head, 'No, no can do this, go Sayaboury.' And you had to take him by the hand and, you know, cajole him a little bit. And it was a—I think he figured in his mind if things got too bad, he could always go there. But it would have been not much better off than he was then with us, because the war would have come to him then. Sayaboury is right down towards the end of that China Road I told you about. And that had implications you were never sure about. But the word Sayaboury as a haven was mentioned every couple of months in some context usually in reaction to pressure. Pressure not from us, but pressure from his own problems in the field, his own social problems and his own political problems. He did have political problems, too.

(1:01:25) Oh, yes. That was my next question was …

Pardon?

That was my next question. Sort of his position, not just with …

I'm losing you again.

OK. Vang Pao must have had some difficulty dealing with leaders in the Lao army, I assume.

With who in the Lao army?

With other generals and other leaders in the Lao army.

There were, well, no. Vang Pao was Major General Vang Pao, Region 2, Military Region 2 Commander. So, he was part of the armed forces of Laos. But he was a newcomer. And obviously, there were also—and that territory had been Lao territory, too. The third kingdom, as I think I mentioned, was Lao and so, with the war settling on the Plaine des Jarres, the Lao who had been there before were more or less out of the picture. But there were some Lao living there, there were Lao officials and so on. And there was some tension at times, but mostly they went along with him because they had to be defended and they knew it. And he was their only defense. Now, Vang Pao knew this problem. He tried to respond to the needs of the Royal side of the Lao government. He built a special house for the king up there where the king was invited and welcomed. I think he went up there once and they socialized, they paid obeisance to the king and they did all the right things. Now, he had his forces, not just Hmong, but he had Lao Theung, he had Yao and he had—who were the other ones, I can't think of the fourth one.

Iu Mien?

They—then often when he had a big party up there and when he had a big military review, which he did—he put on shows there. And he had all these people with their different respective commanders. And at the parties afterward, the ladies all came out in different pretty costumes and so on. And he gave full, you know, attention and recognition to the other Laotian people who were there with him. And let me thing now—oh, also, have you heard of the—he headed Lao Races Radio?

Yes, I talked to Vint Lawrence about that.

… do it, of course. But that was his contribution to building up on Laotian people as opposed to Lao people. And the prime minister of Laos, Souvanna Phouma was responsive to this, but he, you know, he was an old Lao, a lowland Lao and he felt they were all beholden to him, which they were. But he did everything he could to back Vang Pao up on these efforts. And I think it was a very commendable side of the operation, which nobody's ever give us any credit for. But the radio functioned and it operated regularly. And the people were helped. They got their—the Lao Theung and all the others got their share of the, you know, rice and everything else that was distributed up there. So I think the relationship was generally very good. Vang Pao had a house in Vientiane, which he tended to frequently. He attended meetings down there, you know, the Prime Minister, the cabinet—not cabinet, what am I saying? The legislature, when they met, he often attended

down there. And another thing, too. When the push came on, on the narcotics issue, Vang Pao threw his full weight behind it. He was down in Vientiane, backing up the prime minister and getting that stuff passed. And he backed up the enforcement of the law once it was made law. So I think that Vang Pao really did commendably. He wasn't just a Hmong, a Meo, as we called them in those days. He considered himself a Laotian.

(1:05:11) Well, I think we may have talked about this next question, but I'll ask it in case there are other things.

About what?

Talk about sort of the defense of Long Tieng, given the fact that, as you said, so many of these other places have been overrun by the Vietnamese, were there sort of specific efforts that the Hmong and that other irregulars may have taken to try to reinforce the security at Long Tieng?

Oh, yes. Yes. That was done. I mean they did that themselves. That was his MR2 headquarters. And his commanders were based—the families of many of his people were there. I can't say most of them. I think most of them were, but I can't prove that. But Long Tieng was a population of 25,000 people and they were all Meo—Hmong in every stage. They even had—you could see poppies growing in their backyard. I mean, they lived very naturally up there. But the thing was protected on all sides, you might say. The Meo were surrounded by mountains and it was fairly easy to protect and very difficult to attack as the Vietnamese found. There were other places. We didn't settle only for that. Long Tieng was the main sort of stronghold, if you want to call it that. Go up in the—take a—look at the maps of Plaine des Jarres. Go sort of northeast from Long Tieng, you come to what was known as LS-32 Bouam Loung. And that was Hmong and the commander there was Cher Pao Moua, who was—they were there. They never left that place throughout the war. They were attacked frontally by the Vietnamese again and again. They fought them, they branched out, they attacked the Vietnamese from there. They were very much of a regional force for Vang Pao. And the Ban-Ban operation I told you about? We—they mounted two battalions out of Bouam Loung to make that trek over to Ban-Ban. No, that was very much a part of it. Now, Ban Na was another place very close by. There were a whole series of strong points around, you know, within—I don't know what kind of distance—not shooting distance, but hiking distances. Then after the big advance in '71, when Vang Pao went across the Plain and brought in the artillery and they fortified the whole place. At that point, Long Tieng was still the capital, so to speak and the—but they had their major force deployed way out, thousands of people deployed all the way across the plain and up toward Bouam Loung and north and south and east. So, it—there was no—but there was no preference given to Long Tieng in any sense of the term. But it was—it had to be protected because that's where <u>our</u> people were. And we had a—to make sure we weren't overrun there ourselves!. And so, what else did you have in mind about Long Tieng?

(1:08:23) Well, I was just trying to get a sense. You know, it seems like by '71, certainly, Long Tieng was sort of under the gun and there were the—we've already talked about the offensives and counter offensives and things of that nature. So, I don't know if there's anything else we need to cover.

Well, it was under the gun all the time. And periodically, the Vietnamese would send sappers in. They were very good with these little sapper attacks where they'd be creeping under the wire and get in close and single out some target, go in there and blow the heck out of it. And they were always a threat in that sense. Now then, later on when the siege was on heavily in the '72 period, there was much more of a conventional ground attack. They would send in battalion-strength forces attacking positions which we had up beyond—along Charlie Whiskey, that whole long range of mountains up

there. And we had defense points up there and they were coming in sometimes along the flank, sometimes along the end, work their way up. Sometimes they'd try and circle around into Long Tieng proper and work up that way. They were operating a big-scale war then. No longer could find a sapper attack. And their artillery was always a threat because they could cover—I forget how many kilometers it was, but the 130 could go, I'm sure, a good 30 miles or more. And it carried a lot of weight. But they simply had a hard time getting it to get high enough to drop into Long Tieng, because that big mountain range out there, you know, it was up, probably, what—say, 3,000 or 4,000 feet over Long Tieng on both sides. And to get in the ground there, which dropped it down another 2,000 feet. You had to be able to go up high and drop down, you know, in defense of a big border. And they had a hard time making that drop. For a time they did early, but later on—and I showed up there, you know, and hours on end listened to those things. It sounds like an express train going over your head and they'd fly right by and go pow somewhere way over. It was a marvelous place in many respects, but we had our—at the April—the February 14th attack that I mentioned, we were in the process of rebuilding our barracks from a little primitive thing into a decent place for our case officers to stay, because it was better if they could stay up there overnight if it were safe then fly back down to Vientiane or Udorn. You know, it was a tough thing for them to do at the end of a long, hard day. But in that attack, our barracks, which were just about finished, were demolished. So from then on it was down to one or two people living in the rocky—rockbound headquarters. Very hard to keep people up there.

(1:11:22) Well, how would you evaluate Nixon and Kissinger's efforts to sort of get the United States out of Southeast Asia? Do you think things should have been handled differently? Do you think, by and large, their efforts were the best that could be managed at that time? What's your opinion?

Well, you know, I didn't see it from inside.

Sure.

I looked at it from the outside, far away, looking—hoping—wondering about the results. And of course, we all had the talks with the Vietnamese over in Paris—the Paris talks. They went on again, off again. And sometimes it seemed like they were going well. And we all hoped that it would be resolved and the idea of a ceasefire was attractive to us. I mean, people up there were getting killed and everybody else getting killed, that was, you know, quite a bit of warning. It was a lot of fun up there if you don't get killed. It had to be over and had to be ended somehow. They seemed to us to be doing a decent job of it. Now, how they went about it, I think they wanted pressure kept on the enemy in the field. And [Pause] I think that's why were given the Air Force [case] what we needed when we needed it. And you remember one thing that broke down in Paris—after the ceasefire had pretty much been agreed to—the Vietnamese backed off at one point and the Christmas bombing took place. And it changed things immediately. They came back to the table and so it was that kind of pressure which I think was desireable and necessary and it worked. So I thought the whole [inaudible] and myself the idea that were going to have to leave, it would be a very imperfect show when we left. And as I told you yesterday when I watched the final act of the [***] curtain call and saw us ramming the coalition government down the throats of the Royal Lao government, I had my misgivings then. And—but I was reassured by what we were told by Kissinger, told by Sullivan, told by—I can't think of my other friend's name. He actually ran for president a couple years later. It's one fellow—he was a colonel in the Army in the White House and later on became a general.

Haig?

Haig, yes. Haig and the last thing he said, 'We're going to back you up. If they violate the ceasefire, we will give you.—we will bomb them with B-17, B-15—B-52s.' And they did. Well, by that time we were reconciled to it. We thought they were doing it right. I did not expect to happen what

happened, but within two or three months of the ceasefire acceptance that we were cutting in half the AID program and be cutting off all support to the Lao government, aid to Vietnam and Laos cut in half and then a few months later cut in half again. There was nothing left. And the irregulars were abolished. We left—we couldn't keep them up. Were not allowed to. And so, Vang Pao was on his own. We tried even a little [riding] up there by helping him out and, of course, in an economic sense, giving them—help the farmers and all the sort of thing. But, you know, that was chicken feed [inaudible] them pretty soon. So, I did not think that would happen. I thought, when I saw those first responses to violations that we would do the right thing. But when '75 came along and it all happened then, I was really very discouraged. I don't know what else I can say to—I think Nixon—I never liked Nixon, but I think he planned, you know, it's in writing, it's been written about and reproduced. I mean, he did promise Thieu that there would be full backup if the North Vietnamese violated the ceasefire. And I think he would have done it and I think it would have worked. I think the South Vietnamese army was not so bad by that time, by '73, '74. They had pretty good armed forces. I don't care what Neil Sheehan and other people say. It—some of those [inaudible] squads did wonderfully. Because when they realized they were fighting alone. They had no [spot to fill], no papers, no assurance of follow up, no air support and no artillery support. They [inaudible] get out [inaudible] Nixon.

I'm starting to lose you a little bit. You're a little muffled.

I have—I can tell my telephone is dropping down to my chin. OK. Are you back up now?

Yes.

OK.

OK.

I think Nixon was doing the right thing by his rights. And he—Kissinger, I don't know. Kissinger was pretty Machiavellian. But I don't know. I shouldn't pontificate about things that I know only indirectly.

(1:16:27) [Laughs] Well, let me run a couple names past you and see if you spent much time with either of these gentlemen. The first is Tom Clines.

Tom Clines? No, I knew him. He was the chief of Long Tieng unit, I think, before I got there.

OK.

And he had gone by the time I got in. But I had met him in headquarters. I met him—I think I met him back in headquarters. I didn't know him. He never worked with me or for me. But I knew him. I know he got into some complications later on, but he was—I mean, he was simply one of the guys out there. I had no reason to say he was good, bad or indifferent.

(1:17:02) Sure. How about Jerry Daniels?

Oh, Jerry Daniels I knew intimately. Jerry Daniels was a wonderful man and one of the best people we had out there. He threw himself into this whole thing body and soul. And he lived up there at Long Tieng. Now, Vang Pao loved him dearly. He stayed with him all through the critical period. You know, when we were pulling people out, he was there. And I could count on him for everything. He—I can't sing enough praises for him. He spoke the language. He was completely at home up there. And after it was over, he was pulled out. You know, he was—he was one of a—the troopers—the paratroopers. He was, you know, a rough-and-tough guy, in a sense. But he was also an educated man. And he was a thoughtful person. And he had a career in the Agency that would have been beyond—way beyond paramilitary. And that's what I wanted to—after the war, in effect, was over, I wanted him to get in and do something a little more broad-gauged for him. So, he went along with that very well. And he came out shortly—well, by the time I went down to Bangkok and I saw him last then. And he was on his way home and everybody thought well of him and he—I

forget what he was assigned to do back there. He was—oh, I know what. After the collapse in '75, he was sent back out to help out with the refugees and I saw him in headquarters at that time. And I was sorry to see him go back out there because I was afraid he'd get mired in. And he ended up, in effect, getting mired in. He—you know how he died in the end?
Asphyxiation.
Asphyxiation. Now, he drank a lot. I mean, he—but he didn't drink on the—it didn't interfere with his work, in my recollection. And he may have gotten drunk at that affair. I don't know. But it was a tragedy when he died. I saw him back in headquarters and I encouraged him to go ahead and, you know, drop his spurs and put on a better uniform. And I thought he would, but no, he was a great loss and a wonderful—I think nobody contributed more to that program than he did. Now, Bill Lair is—I don't know if Bill has ever—I know Bill had thought highly of him. He worked with Bill a long time. I've never talked about him to Bill, but I think Bill would probably give him a pretty high rating, too.

(1:19:49) Yeah. What was—what was his title exactly when he was working in Long—
Pardon?
Yeah, what was his job title at Long Tieng?
Well, at Long Tieng, during the—you know, the active time before the, you know, breakup and all that, up to '72, he was simply the senior case officer there at Long Tieng. He stayed up at Long Tieng most of the time right through. And we had a chief of unit up there by that time—Clines was succeeded by—I can't think of the name right now. A very good guy. Another very good guy. And Dick Johnson and somebody after that. And …
Oh, let me see if I have his name here. It's not Jim Glarum, is it?
No, Jim Glarum was Pat Landry's deputy in Udorn.
OK.
He's another superb guy.
Vince Shields?
Pardon?
Vince Shields?
Vince Shields was chief in Long Tieng after Clines, I think. Or—I'm not sure that they were after what, but when I got there Vince Shields had finished and was replaced by Dick Johnson. Dick Johnson was an outstanding guy. Vince Shields was a superb guy. Dick Johnson was one of the best people we ever had out there. We had some really remarkable men there, honestly. Talk about having a bunch of deputies that supported at the caliber of these guys, it was a rare privilege for me. Jim Glarum was, for a long—he was out there for a long time as, I think he worked there—back in—when Bill Lair was there, I think, but I'm not sure. But he was Pat Landry's deputy all through and he was there all through my time there. Then he came back around the time I came out because were cutting back, obviously, then. And he went back to headquarters. And he had another very good—he was in the paramilitary division there. And he ended up by being at personnel and various other things. He had very, very good jobs back there and retired a very senior officer. Anybody else?

(1:21:58) Well, let's—was Jerry Daniels behind the trip to take Vang Pao to Montana in 1972?
He might have been. Jerry was from Montana.
Right.
He'd been one of those smoke jumpers out there. And they were recruited widely into the agency at that time, in those early days. I think some of them were included before Laos became famous. And whether—I don't know. I suppose he was—I know Vang Pao went back there and Jerry

Daniels was probably his host. And I think his parents hosted Vang Pao back there. And I think some of the Hmong went back there later and settled in. They liked that cool—of course, it's not cool in summer, but they liked that mountain climate. And they had friends there, so they—but later on they found that California with the welfare situation was much more… They like other places like Minneapolis and Providence and other places, too. But Jerry—whether Jerry brought Vang Pao or not, I suppose he may have taken him and gone back there with him if that was his territory and hosted his arrival there. But that all sort of disappeared, you know, after a couple years.

(1:23:14) Well, I don't think I need to ask you the second part of the question because it sounds like your opinion is that Vang Pao remained very dedicated to his people and to fighting the war with all his strength until the very end.

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. You know, Vang Pao just cried to see us go and, in a sense, we cried to leave him. Of course, I didn't leave him. I left when it was still OK and I went to Bangkok. And—but I wasn't there for the final departure from Long Tieng. But he was dedicated completely and if we went back there to help, he'd be the first one to enlist. Now Vang Pao is a wonderful man. He was an imperfect guy. I mean, he was a—came out of a competitive, primitive environment and he rose to the occasion and showed his ability to go ahead. He was, you know, as a soldier, God, he was so good. He understood—I'll try to give you one example. He used to drive some of the Air Force people crazy because when he'd—after a B-52 strike on—the enemy was concentrated. You know, most people look at a 1:50,000 contra map and they see a lot of lines and it's hard to know, for the layman, to know what he's looking at. Vang Pao could, knowing where the enemy was in general, where the enemy wanted to go, where he had to be and so on, he could pinpoint the enemy's undoubted location just through his own soldier's eye. He had a funny little thing in his pocket. He had an old Kodak camera film box. You remember these old 120 cameras? They were …

It was before the brownie?

Take off one side of that little film box and it was exactly the size, the dimensions of a one by three square kilometer marking. And he'd put that down and outline it and that's where he wanted the B-52 strike. Well, some of these air guys would see that and they'd go, 'What in the hell is this guy doing? What does he know about this?' Well, you know, he knew. He read maps like he read terrain. He knew what soldiers did. Well, when I took General Abrams—the ambassador and I took him, but I [can't] say I took him. The ambassador went up there and had a wonderful visit. And I was a little worried because he hadn't met him before and I wondered whether some of his sort of basic soldierly ways would go over with this big shot from Vientiane—from Vietnam. Well, the two hit it off like a couple of troopers. They were all but bosom buddies at the end of this afternoon up there. And he showed General Abrams how he wanted these arc lights. And 'if I am'. [Probably in French ['En ?'] And Abrams would pound him—hit the table in the same place and mark him down and it was like two boys who discovered each other were immediate, instant friends. It was something to watch. And then, later on, a month or so later when he sent General Vogt over and I took Vogt up there. Well, Vogt—you probably didn't know him, but he was a big fierce looking sort of an Erich Van Stroheim countenance, big—heavy big man, bald head, powerful. And I thought this little guy is going to meet him and wonder what am I going to do with him. But they hit it off very well, too. I guess he got his marching orders from Abrams and it worked out very, very well. And when he left, he said, 'OK, the F-111s are yours.' It was a great thing. But no, that visit with Abrams. I've got a picture of him in my room right here. It was a pleasure to watch. And Mac Godley was just a prince with him. We all—the three of us flew up and back and sitting in the Volpar coming back we sat there cracking open a bottle or two of beer and relaxing after the strain. It was really sheer fun.

(1:27:15) Well, I remember reading in one of your articles this story about Vang Pao visiting Nixon and Kissinger.

Oh, yeah. Did I say that in one of my articles?

Yes. Where did you hear that story?

I didn't hear the story. I was there.

Oh, you were there. Well, then, please.

I took him …

More details, please. That's fascinating.

I don't know whether I reported this to headquarters at the time. I went over with my division chief. I took them to Bill Nelson. But I took Vang Pao—I didn't take—I met him back there in Washington, I think it was July of '72. I had been back there on leave to take my family back and I might drop off my kids and so on. And I met him in Washington and we went very, you know, going around and doing all the big things in Washington. We went to a great big luncheon that Alexis Johnson gave for us over at the State Department. And all the people were there from State and the Agency and so on. And then we went over to see Kissinger. So, Nelson and I took Vang Pao over because there was a—and he had, of all people, namely very, very much lately—the recent director of national intelligence. What's his name? I forget him now. It's an Italian name.

Negroponte?

Negroponte, yeah. Negroponte was there. Well, that was an incredible—OK, you can use this. I may use it if I write something about it yet, though. But, yeah, we went in and sat down. Kissinger was there. Negroponte was there. So, Kissinger started talking in French. Well, Vang Pao expected he'd have to talk to him in English. He happened to talk French better than English. But Kissinger insisted that what he—how was it that he put it?—how he spoke something he wanted in English, Negroponte would translate it into French for Vang Pao. He wouldn't have me translate it or Nelson, but he went back and forth, this peculiar thing. So, babbling on and chitchat back and forth his own way now. 'How are things going on the Plaine des Jarres?' Then right away he said, 'Now, what's holding you up, General? Why aren't you moving ahead in the Plain?' 'Now, at the time, the dry—the wet season. It's your time for an offensive. Why aren't you moving?' And the general was stunned because we had been putting the heat on him all through those months of March, April, May, June not to move, not to—He wanted to charge. He had an operation planned on paper and he had—God, a huge force ready to go across the plain—north, south, east and west. I mean, it was a major thing, which we didn't want to do, because we thought he was too weak and his forces weren't strong enough and it just wouldn't work. But he wanted to go. So, we said, 'Slow down, slow down. We'll try. Just wait a minute.' So, Kissinger said, 'What's the matter?' He said, 'What's the matter? Why isn't the general moving ahead on his rainy seasonal offensive?' So, Negroponte translated it. And Vang Pao looked at me. His mouth dropped. He said [speaking in French C'est no de pan de la politique internationale]. And Kissinger says, 'What? What does he mean?' Well, that's what he says when orders, policy, Washington says. That's the international pun. And I said we've been holding him aback. He wanted to go. We said, 'No, we must not go. He cannot go. We are here. He's poised. He wants to go.' Oh, he said, 'No, that doesn't count now. Go forward.' [Interviewer laughs] Well, you can say who the hell is Kissinger to say this? But, you know, as far as we're concerned, Kissinger was the voice of Richard Nixon. And I don't care about the National Security Council or the Joint Chiefs of Staff and so on. Nixon gives command through his subordinate there. We took that as reasonable. I wrote it up and we put into a cable back to Vientiane and around our circuit. I went back out there with my marching orders in my hand and Vang Pao, too. He was tickled to death when Kissinger said, 'That doesn't count. Now, go.' Oh, he was all smiles and all.

(1:32:20) And what was <u>your</u> response at the time?
Huh?
What was your …
I said, right then and there, I said, 'We have been telling him that he must not go. He's not strong enough to go.' We've been holding him back. He's wanted to go.' And Kissinger said, 'No, that doesn't count. Now, go. Tell him to go. Go ahead, General.' It was incredible. And the military out there, the people in Udorn, you know, the 713th didn't like it. CINCPAC didn't like it. CINCPAC then had admiral—what's his name? God, these names—they slip and they— He'd been head of NSA at one time.
I don't think I'll be any help with that one.
Oh, I could—I could get this back somehow. But he was a pain in the neck. I got along with him all right when I went through—he came out to Vientiane. I took him out to Long Tieng, actually, he was very pleased, very happy. But then later on he went back to be CINCPAC. And then all this came out. This thing—in effect, things happening over his head. And these orders being transmitted directly from the horse's mouth to the field. I don't know what—who told him what, but he didn't like it when they had the—he came out to Udorn a couple months later and we were already moving then. And he was—I'd never seen the guy so nasty. Never felt like slugging a major general. He was not nasty to me. He—we were invited over to Udorn to talk, the Ambassador and I. Vessey was—well, he can tell you about this. Has he mentioned this?
No.
Well, talk to him about it. Ask him about the conference in Udorn when Admiral [Geiler] came up from CINCPAC and came over and raised hell there with us and pounded on the table. He chewed the hell out of his—some lieutenant commander who was doing the briefing. You know how the Navy always has somebody come up and—a younger officer does the briefing. And he didn't like what he was being told and he pounded the table and he was nasty to the ambassador, too. And I had to throw my two cents in, I said, 'Admiral Geiler, we've got our marching orders from Washington. We were told that this is coming from the White House and we're doing what we're told.' He said, 'Well, I take my orders from the chairman of the JCS.' 'Well, OK, fine. But I said, 'We don't. We're—take our orders from the people who give us orders in Washington.' And it's an incredible thing. Jack will remember about this. I don't remember that he said very much there, but it was a heck of a—anyway, that's—OK. Those are the latest anecdotes which I—remembering.

(1:34:57) So, at the time, if you'd been able to speak freely, would you have told Kissinger to lay off and to continue to stand down? Or was your thought, well, OK, this guy maybe knows something I don't know and …
No, I was quite happy for it, I mean, in the sense that, you know, Vang Pao wanted to do it. We had been told, were encouraged by—I forget. Our own headquarters very rarely told us anything, you know, in effect of hard—in terms—they wanted to be sure this is in conforming to the State Department and our own headquarters and what they do in the White House. They wanted us to go slow on this. I mean, because, you know, he had been beaten badly only four or five months before in December. And even though he was showing a lot of feistiness, they were holding up. So we held them up. Now, in my heart, I'd like to have seen them go because he thought he could do it. I was not sure he could do it, but, you know, much of what you can do is what you think you can do. And he wanted to go. And so when Kissinger came out with this, I saw no reason to say, 'I don't want him to go.' No, I said, 'Fine with me.' If the President wants us to go, in effect, I forget whether he quoted the President, but it was the President speaking as we saw it. That was, in effect, satisfactory to me and I was happy to go along with it.

(1:36:18) OK. Well, let's see here. General Vessey said that when he left in 1973, he thought that the Royal Lao Government and the Hmong and the other irregulars still had a pretty good chance of holding things together and at least forging a coalition or having some control of their own destiny in Laos. Did you have that same feeling?

Yes, I did. I did have that feeling. Even though, as I told you about the table conversation with the prime minister, they were beaten heavily. They were hard hit, but they did have—Vessey had been able to make a lot of influence felt on the FAR, on the—they were doing better. We were able—I mean, we could work with those guys. We sometimes had a FAR battalion attached to our irregular force in the south. That worked very well. We had a very good general in command down there and he could take these FAR battalions, so he used to command and operated them along with the irregulars and it would work well. They were—FAR was doing better. They had a sense of spark. They were seeing good things done. They were—they felt that they were improving. The irregulars were—when they weren't being depleted all through, say, February, March, April, into May, they were gaining—regaining their strength. You know, they were—every time we had a force depleted, we were able to recruit and fill it up again. It—there were plenty of recruits to go into the Army. Not that—you know, the Army was life and a career. It was pay for the family, too. Things were looking much better, but that was predicated upon U.S. support to them. Well, the first thing that happened was the irregulars had to be disbanded. They could not be integrated in the FAR system. And that meant that the primary fighting force that Laos had was no longer available to them. So, you know, take the vote then and it's a different picture entirely. When Jack was—I forget what—he left in, what, about February, so…

I think that's right.

… '73. He left a couple months before I did. And I would have said, 'Yeah. This can be held together as long as we're here to back it up.' I'd feel the same thing about Vietnam, too, if we were there to back it up. But no, I didn't mind the go-ahead being given. I had misgivings about it. Every time we had an operation I had—and I prayed and hoped that it was not going to be a fiasco. But anyway, there were a lot of problems with that operation when it took off. But they kept on moving and fighting and they kept shaking up the Vietnamese and getting them to react and to pull out of their chosen positions. And it worked moderately well. And not many—we didn't have very many casualties at that time.

(1:39:12) OK… I think, again, when you were reviewing Jane Hamilton-Merritt's book, you said that there are those who accuse the Lao government of being unable or unwilling to defend the country properly and that Souvanna Phouma really just sort of exploited the Hmong and then sold them down the river. And you said that's obviously an oversimplification of a very complex situation.

I don't—you know, I don't know how that quotation would read today. I can't remember exactly what I said. Souvanna, he had—he went through a period of political sort of transformations then. He, let me think, going back to the time of the Kong Le Coup, you know, in 1960, I guess that was. And he was in the picture around that time and he was a neutralist. And he, I think, became tied in with Kong Le for a time and Kong Le up was up on the Plaine des Jarres and the neutralists were up there, too. And Vang Pao, I think, was politically involved with them. And I know a lot of our people didn't like Souvanna at that time. But he became more and more of a political factor there and pretty soon he sort of came out on top of the heap. And whether the quotation said that they would not do what had to be done to make the Lao forces in to a viable defense of the country? Is that what you were saying?

Well, the Laos—I mean, you've already said that you thought the FAR was in pretty good shape by 1973.

Well, you know, it' a very relative consideration. You know, FAR basically couldn't find its way out of a paper bag. Not because they didn't have the weapons, they didn't have the stiffening in their command level. They—there were two excellent commanders who worked in MR3 and MR4 with our people. Soutchay was in this country. Have you ever heard of General Soutchay?

Yes.

Have you ever met him?

No, I haven't.

You ought to meet him. He's lives in Chantilly, Virginia. He's a wonderful guy. He's the most thoroughly Americanized guy you ever saw. He's got kids that—one in the Air Force, one in the Army and, you know, he's a wonderful guy. But he was a very first class—he was a Lao irregular. And we, in effect, coopted him with approval and his willingness. And he could have read anything and made it fight well. But the one up in MR2—or MR3, rather, I haven't got his name right now either, but he was also very, very good. But some of the guys up above—[Khouprasith] was a good political general in MR5, the Thakhek area, but up in Luang Prabang, the people up there just—they could never get the [fields] moving. And whenever there was an attack on Luang Prabang, the prime minister immediately called me and the ambassador in and said, 'I need your forces from Savannakhet.' And we almost always—we, you know, we have other things to do with those forces, but we generally got them up there for a couple of weeks, cleaned things up and won his approval. But a lot of the irregulars didn't have that backstopping. They might get paid on time. They might get paid. They might not. If they were under attack and they were being hit very hard, they could not count on reinforcements ever. Ours usually could or we could—they would be extricated. They couldn't. They'd be left to walk home if they survived. But you know, look—they looked better because they were usually working in conjunction with either Vang Pao or with us. And we had a little more of a handle on their movements and their sort of logistical support. But I wouldn't give them, you know, I wouldn't say that they were very, very decent forces. I mean, Jack would have—you know, they were the best that they had to work with on the irregular side. But—and in conjunction with the kind of guidance we could give them plus the irregulars, they could have combined them in a useful, very effective force. Now, against the North Vietnamese on it, is that he had to bear that in mind. The North Vietnamese were not a guerilla army. They were a superb army, a modern force. They had—they did everything we did and they often did it—usually did it better. They knew how to do it. They knew ground operation maneuver. They knew artillery support and to say that the Lao FAR and irregulars without our presence and our full backing could have withstood the Vietnamese, well, I'd have to say a few more prayers on that to [make them helpful]. But again, with our backing, moral as well as political and physical and they did it again and again in the past and they could probably have done it again.

(1:44:57) I think maybe what Jane Hamilton-Merritt was trying to say was that, given that sort of inability of the FAR to perform well in the field, that Souvanna Phouma and some of the other Lao leaders were more than happy to exploit the Hmong and sort of let them jump into the vacuum and do the fighting and the dying for them.

That's fair enough. You know, that's—when Vang Pao came to us, came to the United States. He came—spoke to the ambassador. He came to see the President. And he asked for support to be given to these irregular guys up there—Vang Pao's people up in the hills were scurrying around and playing guerilla warfare and holding their own against the enemy when his own regulars could not do it. Now, if that's exploiting—I suppose you could say it's exploiting. But he didn't stint in offering the regulars up for whatever they could do if they could do it. And what I did—the thing I

told you about General Cushing when we were down there in PS-26 in Pakse, the—when Soutchay was the commander there and he had a FAR battalion—I forget which battalion it was. In that area that we were focusing our attentions on and the defenses which Cushing or General Cushing thought were so bad were FARs, but there were up [for] one of their own commanders who also had the irregulars. So, he was a—you know, they were doing their share of the job. And they helped and the victory was won as much by them as by anybody else. It could work. I mean, it sometimes did. And, you know, they were the same kind of people. And some of these Lao that we had—these guys from Savannakhet, I mean, I tell you, they were superb this—the time I almost got killed up on the mountaintop, sitting dreaming as I looked out over the valley, that major there, the regimental commander, was a terrific guy. Other people like him in Savannakhet were—they were just ordinary Lao, but they'd been trained and whipped up and given the spark and the tools to fight and they could do it. But well, it could—a question that could be asked is—well, it <u>was</u> asked. Could our regular system of military assistance and support and whatnot work the same way and be as effective with the regulars as we were with the <u>ir</u>regulars? Well, I won't answer that question because I'm prejudiced, in fact. But our own American system doesn't lend itself to that kind of very irregular activity. Now, the advisors of Vietnam—I went to the Naval War College once to speak, years ago, and one of the questions asked was, 'Look. What about the advisors in Vietnam? Were they any different, any better or any worse than your advisors in Laos?' And I said, 'No, they were the same kind of guys.' 'Well, why could yours do what you were able to do?' Because we had more flexibility and we had more latitude to work, which is what it was. The military doesn't have that kind—now, they're getting it. They're doing better, I guess, in Iraq and places like that. There's definite operations command of doing all the things we've ever done. And I'm sure they're getting that stuff now. But they didn't—hadn't had it. They have never believed in an elite force. You know, the old slogan was, they said, 'An elite army? The army is <u>all</u> elite. We don't want any specialty guys.' You know, the rangers are always at a bad time. The special ops people have gotten high intent as the saying goes, you know. It—they just never liked it. So, I don't know whether it could ever have been as good as we made it, but I shouldn't—you know, again, ask Jack on that. I mean, he's a very honest observer and he knows more about that side than I will ever know. And I would have faith in his judgment.

(1:49:13) All right. Well, what do you remember about the days leading up to your departure from Laos?

Who was declared persona non grata?

I thought all—I thought all military and CIA staff were declared persona non grata before they left Laos.

Well, I certainly wasn't.

OK, well …

They sent me away with—let's see, I left in May and they were—they stayed on there. Many of the people—most of our people left, but there were some that stayed on for the next couple years until '75. But if some—if—I don't think the word persona non grata was ever used.

OK.

I mean, if it was, I never heard it used. Now, maybe it was heard in circles that I didn't move in. But when I left, I left because we were cutting or curtailing the program. And our assistance to the irregulars, our military assistance was stopped, being stopped. They were stopped, you know, help was given as you went along. But it was being curtailed and there was no reason for me to be there. I was asked to go down to be chief of station in Bangkok after that. And that seemed like a good place for me, too, because it was very close to what was happening in Laos and I could see it and I

could be with the Thais and, you know, it seemed like a very plausible thing and I was happy to do it. But I never heard that term persona non grata ever used.

OK. I probably was imagining it. I think maybe General Vessey talked about that and maybe I just stuck it on you as well by mistake.

It may have been used in casual parlance. 'Oh, time to go now. You can't stay up here. They don't want you around'. Or 'you can't stay around because the program's not working, so leave before they catch you and throw you out or something'. But I never heard it.

(1:51:07) So, how did your responsibilities change once you got to Thailand?

Oh, entirely. The war was over. You know, for me the war was over. I still had—I kept my eye on Laos. But I was focused entirely upon the operations of the Bangkok station, which were radically different.

And what did those responsibilities entail?

Well, they're—to back into the standard brand functions of the chief of station, locally oriented operations, political intelligence, collection of intelligence of all kinds, intelligence against hard targets—Soviets, Chinese and all that stuff. And then, of course, we had liaison with the Thais. Sure, that's another story. We formed a liaison with the Thai. And then some of the people I knew—you know, the—by that time, I knew lots of people in Thailand. The former prime minister, [Thanom] and [Prabat]. They were, you know, I've got little gifts on the circle in the wall here which they sent me and that sort of thing. We were all very good friends. So, it was a plausible way for me to get on and continue my liaison. But I really can't describe their operations down there because they were simply classical intelligence collection we had. And there was a Communist operation situation down there, too. You know Thai Communism was very strong there for a time. And we were concerned about that and we worked for the Thai on dealing with that problem. No, it was a great tour.

(1:52:44) Did you work at all with Harry Aderholt when he came to help sort of demobilize the Air Force?

He was in the embassy. He was part of the country team then. And he came to the ambassador's meeting and I knew Harry from before. I met him—I can't remember when I met him. But I knew him all through that time there and saw him regularly. He was up every week for staff meetings and I knew him socially, too. I'm going down there next month to Washington to see him—no, not—I'm sorry, I'm getting mixed up with Jack Singlaub. Aderholt, yeah. I knew Harry. He was a nice guy. I liked him very much.

(1:53:27) I think it was Secord who eventually recommended Aderholt for duty in Laos—or in Thailand, I should say.

Oh, is that right?

(1:54:26) Yeah. You mentioned earlier that you worked with Bill Lair in Thailand. What kinds of things were you working on together?

Well, Bill Lair was—he was simply a part of my station and he dealt with Thai liaison. And he kept, you know, when the refugees were out, well, he had to go up there to look after them and help sort them out and so on. He's a very much of a right-hand man on Thai matters and on Laos matters.

I would think so.

Yeah. Bill Lair—he's a prince of a guy, you know, a very [signal breaks up] guy. I talked to him once—Vang Pao's growing predicament. He doesn't think anything is going to happen. He thinks it's going to work itself out. He's more optimistic than I am. I'm quite worried about that, frankly.

I am, too. I did get a chance to talk just briefly with Bill Lair in Wisconsin last summer when they dedicated that war memorial.
Oh, yeah.
But he's a fascinating guy.
Which Thompson?
I'm sorry?
You said with Bill Lair and Thompson?
Oh, no, just—I was—just had a chance to talk with Bill Lair in Wisconsin.
Oh, Wisconsin. Oh, yeah. You know, it's—speaking of Wisconsin and Minnesota, I got a message from—e-mail from Jane Hamilton-Merritt. And you know, she's always crying and telling what we've got to do and what we've got to do. And she's—went to a meeting they had there on the second of August. A bunch of people who were going down to worry and try and lift support for the 8,000 refugees, Hmong refugees in Thailand. [Huai Nam Khao] And I asked her—well, she told me about that and I said—well, she said it was going and I—later on I wrote back and said, 'Oh, you didn't tell me who was there or what happened. Did they talk about Vang Pao at all?' And she said that Congressman Rohrabacher mentioned him. That was the only reference to Vang Pao or anything. I couldn't believe that. Vang Pao is a Hmong and you'd think that he would be easy to talk about in the context of dealing with 8,000 Hmong up north in Thailand. But—and one thing she went on to say was that referring to the anti-Vang Pao Hmong in this country and she singled out Yang Dao as a primary person to represent that. And she said that after Vang Pao's predicament was publicized, Yang Dao got up, stood up and got on the Lao—the Hmong radio and declared that Vang Pao was finished and was now the chief of all the Hmong and they should stay out of any contact with him and stay out of this issue …
I don't recall hearing anything like that.
I knew that Vang Pao doesn't like, I mean, that Yang Dao does not like Vang Pao.
Well …
There was a lawsuit against one another three or four years ago.
Yeah. I think it's a very complicated relationship.
Say again?
Oh, I'm sorry. I think it's a very complicated relationship as you might guess. But Yang Dao actually kept a very low profile for weeks after Vang Pao's arrest.
Oh, did he?
And then, I think he got some advice to—that he should say …
I'm not hearing your voice again.
Oh, I'm sorry. I think after a few weeks he got some advice that he should say something. And I think he probably said more than he should have about how, you know, Hmong people need to be peaceful and law abiding and all of that. But no, I don't think he said anything like, you know, Vang Pao's days are over and I'm the Hmong leader now or anything even …
I suspect this was out of—this gal is very emotional and—but again, I can't see why some Hmong aren't speaking up on this issue, frankly.
Yeah. No, there have been, I think, three big public demonstrations here in the Twin Cities.
In the Twin Cities?
Yeah.
I mean, for him or against him?
For him.
For him.

Yeah, I think even people, excuse me, people who may not be his biggest supporters were very upset, not just when he was arrested, but then when they denied him bail at first.
Yeah, yeah. That makes more sense to me than what she said. And well, she's one of the few sort of windows into that side of the community that I have.
Well …
Actually, other people in Washington who were—who don't like Vang Pao and then, in fact, they had ties with Minnesota, too. When I went up there in ninety—whenever it was—'97, so for that big conference, I was escorted up there by the people from here. Paul Herr—have you ever heard of him?
Yes, I met him.
Yeah, he—I hear from him all the time. He calls me up periodically. He's a nice guy. I like him. But he's—he wishes Vang Pao would be quiet and stay out of the limelight and maybe go away. [Chuckles]

(1:59:27) Yeah. Yeah. I think there are, especially in the younger generation, more people who question what he did and it doesn't help when Vang Pao sort of gets up and says every one of you who are here has me to thank.
Oh, yeah. Yeah. I'm sure it doesn't. You know, apropos of this a little bit, I don't think I ever told you the story of when I was up there I was being treated by various groups and I was at a—I guess it was a party, a dinner or I'm not sure what—mostly young Hmong, students and non-students and all kinds. And while there, I met them all. And a young girl came over to me, a pretty little girl. And she was introduced to me as then a PhD candidate at the university. I've forgotten her name. I had it somewhere. But she said, 'I'd like to speak to you, sir. Could I talk to you?' You know, these—the first time I've gotten cornered by ladies from that territory. And she said to me, 'I would like to ask you, sir, a question. Now, I know you Americans came to Laos and you helped us in the war and all this and we're here now and I'm happy and healthy and I'm going to school and so on—but let's say—suppose you had never come and I was still a girl growing up in Laos. And I wouldn't know anything. And wouldn't my life be any worse, any better than it is now? Any different? In other words, should I go through all this or should I have stayed?' And I said, 'Well, you'd be under the control of people who don't respect the Hmong people and maybe Vietnamese would dislike them and so on and it would be very, very tough and maybe a Communist government.' 'Oh, but if I were there and I grew up that way, I wouldn't know any different. Wouldn't that we all right?' And it's a difficult thing to deal with. Here was a sharp young kid and, obviously, she's thinking of these questions. That thing you just mentioned. The young people are thinking about this and wishing—maybe wishing it weren't so. Maybe liking it, but not liking it quite as much. I know the boys had a much harder time than the girls in this type of thing. They've been much less adaptable. I met some of them, too.

(2:01:52) I actually interviewed a young man who's in prison for murder, who was …
The one from Wisconsin from that shooting…
From Minnesota, who was a gang member.
Oh, a gang member. After shooting …
Yes.
Of the hunters who—out in the field who were killed?
Oh, this was earlier than that. This was—yeah. This was a gang-related shooting, but he—I mean, he talked a lot about how difficult it was for him to adjust to life in America. That's certainly a widespread problem.

The old soldiers, the older guys that had a very difficult time and they don't learn the language well. They sit around and play cards and drink beer, I guess. I mean, some of them have done fairly well. But it's a tough life. I mean, I—that's why I say we have an obligation. That's where the moral obligation comes in. It has many facets and this is one of them.

(2:02:47) Well, I think I just have a few more questions for you here. We've already talked about this phrase, secret war. How would you describe the sort of public face of the war? Obviously, it didn't get nearly as much attention in the United States as Vietnam did. But it wasn't secret, either, technically. How should we—how should we describe it?
Well, it wasn't very widely known, I don't think, in Washington, certainly. There wasn't much—every so often you'd see some blurb in the paper. But there wasn't—to my recollection, it was a fairly, not a kept secret, but it simply wasn't publicized. And out in Laos—well, I heard about it all the time of course, 'cause I was in the middle of it. But the press, you know, had nothing else to do and they loved to dig it up and make it as unsecret as they could. And static was going to rise from that side periodically. Then, when there was some trouble, it—you know, the crescendo rose greatly when Long Tieng was in deep trouble there in December or January of '71. Oh, boy, and the press was, you known wallowing in delight of this whole thing. The super secret spy bastion and Long Tieng is being overrun by the People's Liberation Army and all that stuff. And it—but I didn't have any social—but everybody knew me, knew who I was. And my social life, you know, out in the embassy, in the international community, most of them knew who I was. I mean, the—some of them liked to talk to me about these things and, I mean, the Australian Ambassador I knew very well, and I've always had a very close relationship with the Australian services. So, and I was—the secret war was—we didn't talk about what kind of war it was. It was going on. They knew. They were happy, occasionally, to talk about it. But I don't know how else to answer the question. There was not a big deal made of it except in the press.
Yeah. Well, we've …
It never interfered with me in any way. And I even had some friends among the journalists—mostly people—journalists that I've known. And they're all dead now. People like, oh, cripes, I can't think—now, Neil Sheehan was a good friend of mine, too. You know, in Indonesia, he was down there. He was a friend of mine. I gave a party for him when he got married down there. Bob Chaplin was a very good friend of mine. Gee—I'd have to think back and scratch my head, but they were journalists who were not out for sensation. They were serious journalists who were trying to establish what needed to be established and what it meant to the United States and so on. And they weren't out to expose secrets for the sake of doing so and having a little scalp on your doorstep, you know.

(2:06:00) Yeah. Well, we've kind of talked around this question a little bit, too, but I'll ask it again. I think people who have lived in the United States all their lives who first learned about the Hmong people and learned that there are so many of them here in the United States, ask why they're here and, you know, why do we owe them or even do we owe them anything? And based on your experience, how would you address that issue?
Well, I'd address that by saying that they were involved in a war with us assisting them in the war. It was their war as well as ours. And I would say they needed help and we needed help and we were able to provide help for them while helping ourselves and we worked with them. This war went on and we all paid a heavy price for it. They paid a very heavy price because when they left, we cut off our assistance for them, and they were then left behind in a situation where the people we'd been fighting against, both they and we, were in a position to call the shots in their country. And most of them felt they had to leave to stay alive. And they left. So, we feel, since we share that long period

of warfare with them and we suffered with them and they suffered grievously, more than we did, because it affected our families and our social environment much less than theirs was affected. Theirs was, in effect, disrupted and virtually destroyed. So, I would say we can certainly provide them more help in their time—their present time of need than we are doing so because of this obligation we developed jointly at a time of mutual need. That's what I would say.

(2:07:53) Sure. This is sort of a peculiar question, but did you know anything about Ross Perot's attempts to use the Hmong to engage in some sort of POW rescue mission?
No, I barely knew that Ross Perot existed until that awful election he ran and ruined the election as far as I'm concerned, and let Clinton get elected. Now, I'd do that—I've—this was long after my time, so I heard about it roughly, but I heard about it in the context of Iran, too. But I never knew what it was all about. I never paid any attention to it. I never saw any reason to and it's a name that I—when I hear now I sort of rankle because he was a disaster for us. But I really can't speak for him vis-à-vis the Hmong. I didn't know he'd ever used the Hmong.
Well, I don't think he did, but I think he was trying to.
Well, he might have, but he—I guess he may have had his own good causes to fight for, too, I don't know. I don't mean to denigrate him any more than I have any justification for.

(2:09:04) Well, I want to return just for a minute, too, to this longstanding issue of the drug trade and we already talked about Al McCoy, but this, I mean, this is one of those things that just proliferates across the Internet. It just doesn't seem to die.
I know.
Is there anything in particular that you could point to that might help people who are looking for a more reasonable approach to this?
I don't know what a reasonable approach would be. And I really don't know what—if I were king and I could say, 'All right. Now, I have all the forces I need to deal with the drug issue.' I don't know what the devil I'd do. I mean, I don't think that anything we do here is going to stop the production of opium in countries where it's gone on for a thousand years. It—I mean, it can be curtailed. And of course, we have a history. Not we, but the West has a history of the opium wars and so on where we went in viciously to support our own interests. I mean, the British did it, but we tailed in on the victory in the opium war and got things out of it that we needed. But in Laos, the amount of opium produced in Laos, I saw very little of it that I could point to and say that is opium. I saw it grown in little backyard plots about the size of, you know, my kitchen. You know, very small things where they grew opium. And they used it all the time for their own use. And you'd see old men looking sort of—why, what's the matter with him? 'Oh, he takes too much opium.' They were used to it. Now, in the northwest in which [inaudible] over there toward Ban Nam Kun in the so-called Golden Triangle there, there it was different. I know, I mean, I have to accept other people's contention that it was there in great amount. I didn't see it. I saw a few places where patches were. But I didn't see opium fields growing in the morning breeze and that sort of thing. I have the stories about—what's his name—the one I told you. I think I named him for you yesterday. But one of our commanders of the irregular forces out there.
Oh, yes, yes.
Let's see. He was the Lao chief, the village chief for the Lao. And through his auspices, we were able to recruit a couple of battalion forces over there. And you know, our access there was very limited. We had no people stationed out there permanently. And if we were, what would we do? What would we do? Go in there and put a gun to the head and say, 'I'm going to burn this stuff to the ground'? You might try the old remedies. Teach them alternative crops. Grow coffee. Grow betel nut or something. But I don't think those things would have worked. Now, how much traffic

went through Laos, I don't think anybody knows. I don't think anybody's figures are really valid on this. They change every time somebody speaks. I couldn't see it going through Laos. I couldn't see enough in Laos—my Laos that I knew, to go anywhere. And when we did, at the behest of our own government, get the government to pass a law out there prohibiting the traffic in narcotics, we saw to it that it—we had inspections set up for Air America and I don't—I wouldn't say that no Air America pilot could ever have done anything. Maybe so. I don't know all the—I don't know what they did in their spare time. They may have spent most of the time in the whorehouses of Bangkok or something. But they—I don't—I feel confident in the integrity of the system, of our system, to feel that I can say no, we did not allow it. We protected against it and it did not pass through our hands. I don't know what else one could say about it. The whole problem—not the problem for Laos—the problem for Columbia, for Burma, for Afghanistan, for Pakistan, you know, that area dwarfs whatever problems there were in Laos. [inaudible], I'm sure, swarming up in the north of Burma. And I don't know what one can do about that. I've never heard anybody come up with a rational solution. You—can you think of anything that I'm missing?

No, I was just thinking more of, you know, it seems to me that the accusations themselves are quite irrational when you look at people like McCoy.

What's irrational?

Just the accusations themselves made by people like McCoy.

The agitation?

Yes. That …

Actually, I agree. But when people like McCoy come in and promote this thing, it's irrational. I think it's—he made a career out of this thing.

Oh, absolutely.

And it's got him higher in life than he ever would have been without it, I'm sure.

Absolutely.

I'd still like to have somebody ask him the question what language he debriefed the Lao general who told him that he had refineries.

Well, I'll have to see if I can get that done for you.

Give it to him. No, he'd say, 'I had my interpreter.'

Of course.

He had an interpreter up there one time, an Australian, who spoke some Lao, but he didn't get that information from General Ouan. General Ouan is dead now, so he can't defend himself anymore. Most of those guys are dead, most of them. And you know, the people who—I've been back to Bangkok plenty since I had left it the last time [signal breaks up]. I didn't want to back to Laos because everybody I know is either dead or they're in France or the United States. So, no point in me going back. I have no friends there. Actually, I mean, I'd feel sorry for the Hmong. My kids have gone back. Two of my kids have gone back there. You wouldn't believe it. They haven't got back to Long Tieng—they want to go. But the first time they went, they were having a good time in Vientiane, but they wanted to go up and see Luang Prabang. So, they hired a taxi and they drove up Route 13 all the way to Luang Prabang.

My goodness.

Imagine that. I used to fly up there in a helicopter. And never on the road there. My God, never. But times have changed. But I don't think—I don't know what is being done today out there [signal breaks up] myself to do out there. They're not interested in the refugees. And they'd be talking about narcotics. But has anything come out of that circuit that you know of?

(2:15:56) Not that I'm aware of. So, it sounds like, I mean, do you see the Hmong who are still in the jungles today very much as sort of carrying on the same war that Vang Pao and the Hmong were fighting in the 70s?

[I've lost you] completely.

Yeah.

Hello, are you there?

Yes.

Would you say that again? I didn't hear a word of it.

Oh, sorry. There's lots of talk about the Hmong who are in the jungles today. And from your perspective, they are—they are really sort of the legitimate heirs of the war that Vang Pao and the Hmong were fighting in the 70s.

Well, I'm sure there's—most people—they're a generation later, of course.

Yes.

They're like these kids you see up there in the universities in Minnesota. They were Hmong who were left behind by society. And I supposed they inherited from some of the older guys in the earlier days the will to resist. And I don't know to what extent they'd been harassed up there in earlier days; I hear they're being harassed very badly now. Now, as legitimate heirs, I would say they're, in effect, illegitimate heirs. I mean, they're the bastard children of something that went on—you know, the big warfare situation which people they have hardly heard of were involved and had to leave the country and they're left behind and nobody loves them and nobody's helping them. And the local people just don't like them. Now, another thing, too, there are, as you know, Hmong who are in the government out there and some of the old Hmong who came in with the Pathet Lao not as soldiers. Really, I don't know what they're—they may have carried a gun, but they weren't real soldiers. But they were anti-our kind of Hmong going back to the '60s, probably into the '50s. So, there are Hmong of different stripes.

Yes. I think that goes back to—I think that goes all the way back to 1945.

I think it does, too, yeah. And who can identify all these people, I don't know. But I would feel that the people up there are probably desperate if half the stories about them are true in the attacks on them by the locals. I would say I think the embassy could at least do something to intermediate there between them and the government to be able to—some kind of protection. But they aren't going to do that. I don't make that policy now. But the ones who have come out, the 8,000, I would say let them come in. 8,000 more—I mean, I see we're getting in another bunch of people—refugees from the Ethiopian-Eritrean War of 1980 or something like that.

Oh, yes. A lot of them are here.

Yeah. Yeah. A lot more coming in. They're lovely people. But I would be happy to see some of our Hmong get the same kind of treatment.

Yes.

I wish I could help them. I don't know what to do. I mean, all I can do is write an occasional letter and complain to somebody.

(2:18:54) Did you ever hear of any attempts by the CIA to keep track of Vang Pao once he came here to the United States?

Do I know of any occasion to—something about CIA?

What—if the CIA tried to keep tabs on Vang Pao here in the United States?

Did the CIA try to keep tabs on him?

Yes.

When he first came back over here, I think there may have been somebody in contact with him. Sort of a liaison kind of thing. And there were some friends, of course, that he knew. But most of

them were out of the CIA by the time he got back here. But as far as CIA itself, as an agency, keeping in touch, whether covertly or overtly, in the official sense with him, no I've never heard of anything like that.

OK.

I don't—I really don't think they—you know, this—we're getting like other government agencies. We used to have a great, long institutional memory, but it—we've lost a lot of that. And I don't think people in CIA give a damn really about these things now. I'm not—I don't have any reason to think that they do. I wish they did, but …

Were there …

… that's the best I can say on that subject.

(2:20:18) Sure. Understandable. It's—sometimes I ask things way out of left field. [Pauses] Do you know if there were ever any discussions of trying to go back and help Hmong who were still in Laos after 1975?

Well, certainly not before I left the agency, before my wife left the agency, there were—there were—you know, I've had a lot of contact with agency people, including people who get involved in our whole programs. That's—some of them are old friends and I've gone to reunions and, you know, talked about that. So, I've never heard a glimmer even of that sort of thing. I think you'd probably find a few volunteers to do it, but, you know, all the old soldiers are ready to back and re-fight their wars, but—including myself, I guess. No, I've never heard any—I doubt that very much that anything like that ever transpired.

[The two wander into a broader conversation, finally end, interviewer thanks Mr Tovar.]

On July 27, 2009, Hillmer spoke to Mr. Tovar on the phone once again; he provided a few supplemental comments.

William Colby said that the Hmong represented an important force in Laos because between 1962 and 1972 they kept at bay a growing number of North Vietnamese troops, and I think the numbers he cites are around 7,000 NVA in 1962 and by 1972 there were 70,000 or so.

I question the 70,000. I can tell you exactly what was there were the 312th and the 316th divisions. How much or how big a Vietnamese division is, is hard to say. I'd say a conservative figure would be about 10,000. If they approached our divisions you might [raise] that a little bit. And there was another division down in the south, and then they had about three independent brigades up in the north. Now they weren't like our big brigades of 4,000, 3,000 men; they were probably one and a half or two thousand at the most. I mean yeah, they were goodly numbers, but they weren't 70,000. . .

I don't think Colby really dealt with the numbers that closely to have that figure. Well, anyway, I give him credit for whatever he wanted to say. I couldn't muster the numbers to reach a total of 70,000. To me the important thing is we kept three—at least three major Vietnamese line divisions, really tough, excellent, divisions, as good as our divisions, first-class troops, plus a bunch of the independent brigades were pretty good, too. The main thing is they kept them bottled up in Laos when they could have been in Vietnam, and they could have hurried things along over there. And the fact that—I can't conjure the precise date, but I know when the big push to the south began in Vietnam in '74, when I think they pushed into Ban Mee Thoua, it was the 312th Division, I think, that was a major force in capturing that city. And the 316th appeared over there, too. So by the time the ceasefire in Laos took place, those troops were free to go over and add to the weight of the

impact of the North Vietnamese as they pushed south. And that to me is a mark of success. You know, the sad fact is, and nobody laments this more than I do, it all collapsed in South Vietnam. But it collapsed, I think, because in the first place there was a very competent, very effective army moving against our Vietnamese troops. But the fact that we cut back the support to the Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, cut back 50% that first—I think it was the summer, and more that fall, they had nothing left and their morale was destroyed, and it was all over then. But I think looking at it in the short term, what I was sent out there to do, and I think I said this to you before, was to do whatever we could to sustain the Royal Lao Government, help them against whatever pressures were on them. The Pathet Lao, I contend again and again, did not amount to a hill of beans without the Vietnamese behind them, but together they were a major threat to the Lao government, and the government was essentially sustained. It didn't collapse until the whole thing collapsed around it, the whole Southeast Asian, Indochina scheme of things, So I think in terms of morale about what I did, what we did, we were told to do that. We were also told—whatever we could do to help the Americans in Vietnam, our forces over there, do what you can. We weren't in any way expected to diminish our effort in Laos, but we had to try to help—we **did** help. We didn't send any major forces over there, but we kept the Vietnamese at bay in the north, and pretty much at bay in the South. And granted, they (***) when our war ended. . .

I don't think anyone contends that they [the Hmong] accomplished wonders over there. They did wonderfully well in terms of what they put up on behalf of that joint struggle that we carried out. I'm sure I've said this before: I love the Hmong dearly. I needed them and they needed me, too, but in most discussions about the war up there and what the Hmong did and how well they did and such, I thought of the many times that we failed to give the Lao themselves credit for some very great efforts. Souvanna Phouma was a wonderful support to our effort out there. Whatever we wanted he backed us up. But the Lao military contributed greatly, too, in the south particularly, in the central, Savannakhet and Pakse, in the northwest. We drew upon them for non-coms, for generals, we had a lot of help out there and a lot of freedom of action. And nobody ever worries about them. A lot of good, good Lao, I mean lowland Lao, lost their lives in fighting against a common enemy. And some of them lost their lives in the north, too. In the last big campaign up in MR-2 we had the Savannakhet troops up there, and they were great until they got battered into destruction.

Soutchay, in MR-4, was a great soldier. He had guts, he was brave and he was steady. He was a real soldier, a lowland Lao. We owe him a great deal in the south. And we trained a lot of troops there, the irregulars, and we had some good officers there with them, but he was the power that kept the thing together down in the south. In MR-3 it wasn't quite—I can't think of the name of our general there who we owed a lot to. But again, we owe a lot to the Lao. But when all the writers get on this issue of war and they mention the Hmong and how great they were, and they never, never mention the Lao. It's too bad. They're all considered to be gentle people and they never liked to fight. Well, like most soldiers, they fought when they were armed, equipped, trained and led. And they became leaders. Most of those guys came back here to Fort Benning and places like that and they learned a lot. They—Soutchay, he was a great soldier

(10:27) I think I told you I went down to the Vietnam Center Conference—I think it was in February or march, and they had a Vietnamese graduate student there who was talking about North Vietnamese support for the Pathet Lao, and he basically said, 'our own records prove that the Pathet Lao could never have done anything without us.

They couldn't have

So it's nice to see that—

They were smart; I'll give them credit for one thing—the Vietnamese were smart. They kept them in the rear area. They learned how to administer things and do things and make things go locally. And then when their time came, they were there in Vientiane, the rest all came in and they owned the place. If they'd all been out getting shot it would have been very different. You know, I hate them for it, but [Interviewer laughs] that's the way it went.

(11:19) Well one of the things that got brought up a couple of times and Ernie [Kuhn] kind of shot down was—I think it was Dick Secord said was 'one of the roles the Hmong played was they served as a buffer between North Vietnam and Vientiane, that without them, perhaps it might have been possible for the North Vietnamese to march all the way to Vientiane. Do you think that's--?

Yeah, I think that's quite possible. Whether it's likely or not is hard to say. I can't read the minds of the North Vietnamese—

Oh, sure.

But I felt there were times when—after December of '71 when they pushed in and we were thrown back, I mean it looked very bad up there. I was never convinced they were going to break down. The press all tried to build it up as though we were on the point of pulling out on Long Tieng and so on. But I was worried that they could come through. And they tried, they kept pounding away at us. And I think if they had once overcome the initial obstacle, which was Long Tieng, they could have easily swept down there; there would have been nothing to stop them. They might have come down there and said 'here we are, goodbye, God bless you all,' and gone back home, [Interviewer laughs] but I think they could have done it. Now other people disagree with me but they never—they went around the north, too. I think they came down Route 7, swung around Luang Prabang, and they were very troublesome up there, and several times, different times, I'd get a call or the Ambassador would get a call and Sisouk—or Souvanna would call and say, 'Look, you've got to send some of your troops up to Luang Prabang, 'cause they're threatening,' and we'd pull out a couple of Savannakhet troops and they were the fire brigade. You know, the Hmong were not the ones, it was the Savannakhet troops who, again, were lowland Lao, mostly, and fly 'em up to Luang Prabang, turn 'em loose, and they'd hold back the Vietnamese coming in. So the Hmong were part of it—you know's it's difficult to differentiate between the Hmong and the rest of the guys. They were all the irregulars, and they were all equipped by us and trained by us and so on. But I don't like to give anybody all the credit, because it was a very combined effort. And the Thai—surely no one realizes how important the Thais were.

(13:40) Well there's a wonderful dissertation—in fact if you have seen it I should send you a copy—

What?

A dissertation written by a Thai graduate student named Sutayut Osornprasop.

I know him, yeah.

OK. So I've relied on that quite a bit to try and bring in some of the Thai connections.

I feel guilty about that. He sent me a copy and he said, 'I hope you will go over this,' and it came to me at the wrong time and I never did—I had talked to him before and I didn't feel too badly. Of course, it was a big, long paper and I just never got to it. So I feel—that's one of my sins. [Interview laughs] But the Thais, you know, when you consider the numbers of troops up there, when these idiotic journalists in the United States bring them up and say, 'Ah, you guys won't tell us,' my answer to them was, 'go talk to the Thais. They'll tell you a lot about it.' But they never seemed to do that. But when you consider the effort they put in, the Thai, whatever the circumstances were, the number of people who came in there, and the number of guys, Thais, who

lost their lives up there, it was a tremendous effort. I feel so good that we had that support up there. It would have been awfully hard without it.
Yeah, in those late stages of the war there wasn't much else.
Exactly.

(15:02) Did you have any interaction with Chao Saykham?
No, I did not. I met him, but I didn't fool around with the political side. We had too much to do. I knew he was a respected figure. All I ever heard about him was good, except that he and VP didn't get along as well as we would have liked them to.
I think there was a sense that Saykham had been kind of a guiding force in Vang Pao's early life, that was the one who sort of encouraged him to go to school and make something of himself and that Vang Pao didn't perhaps convey the respect that he had coming. I don't know.
I wouldn't be surprised. I'd never heard that before, but I could understand it. Vang Pao, of course, go carried away. He had the bit in his teeth most of the time out there, and he loved it, except when things were bad. When things were Vang Pao could—oh, boy. [Recounts same story of finding Vang Pao up in the mountains with a runny nose] I felt like a heel but I just let him pound on me, and it worked.

(17:16) Well, this is one of those questions that probably in hindsight isn't fair to ask, so please forgive me for asking it. The idea of sending some of Vang Pao's people to Sayaboury as a place to flee, backed up against Thailand, a place they could defend should the war go badly. You mentioned, and other people have mentioned, too, that when Vang Pao was in a black mood, he would say, 'OK, it's all over now, it's time to go to Sayaboury." But that never seemed to be a viable option by the time he brought it up to you or—
He might have gone. He was so demoralized. He used it to pound us and threaten us in vain, but I think he might have tried to do it if it went really bad. Now what it would have amounted to then, I don't know. I don't think it was a very viable thing for the Hmong to do. They wouldn't have been any better off—or maybe they would be better off. It's hard to say. But he threatened it again and—well, not again and again. Things weren't always that bad. Three or four occasions when he began to talk about it. And we didn't think he could do it. First of all, Sayaboury was not unoccupied; there were a lot of people there already. Many of them were Hmong. I forget where a lot of the other Lao elements fit in there, too, but it would have been very difficult for him to get his people, his population, into that spot. Even the Hmong forces—what did we call them? We had some installation down there where we trained the local Hmong, but they weren't really a major part of the army. I doubt that it would have been of much use to fall back. Short of what happened in the end, the whole collapse of the US position out there and our defense of Indochina as a whole, short of that, assuming we were still viable allies, say in Thailand or elsewhere, it would have been theoretically possible to move Lao down there, for him to retreat and bring the army with him, and keep the army viable then. But once the great big collapse took place, there was nothing left. I mean, Sayaboury would have been as bad off as anywhere else. I think he would have wanted them to go where they did, the United States.

(22:05) Well, there were weren't really many options left for Vang Pao by '71 or '72, I would think. It was either fight or surrender at that point, wasn't it?
Well, surrender was never really an option he considered.
Oh, no.

It wasn't a matter of staying on because we didn't think it made any sense, because we felt, except for the defeat in December, which was a traumatic experience, but he did fight back and once he got over that, he fought back with—I think I told you about march on foot back up around the Plain. Yeah, that was a military feat that—if you get the United States forces to try that, they might have a little difficulty. When I told (***) about that, he pounded the table and said "God—" he chewed his cigar, he was impressed. So VP had fight in him, but without our position there to back him up, I think it wouldn't have been very promising. I never let myself think beyond saying, 'No, I'm sorry, forget it. I don't know, would there have been anything good about that? Would anyone have survived down there?

I don't think he [Bill Lair] expressed a really strong opinion. I think he was making the point that it was a longstanding idea [moving to Sayaboury] that maybe earlier could have been a viable option.

I think Vang Pao probably meant it. Surely—I don't think it ever occurred to him that he would end up in the United States until the very end. I think in the days when things were rough, he may have felt that inside Sayaboury he could make another stand if he were forced out of the northeast and he could bring his people down there with him it might be possible for him to stand on, because he wouldn't have given up, he would have fought as long as he had some support. I donlt know if **we** would have supported him or not, I like to think we would have.

Maybe the Thai would have. I think that was the hope, anyway.

The Thai? Yeah, the Thai were there, and he got along very well with the Thai. People used to think there was trouble between him and the Thai, but he knew how to get along with them and I think they essentially respected him. And of course I knew where their outer marshes were, what they had to do to maintain them. See, I'm out of touch with the Thai now. I'd like to talk to some of the old guys and know what they think about how it looks now.

I'll bet.

Have you been over there and talked to them?

Just a couple. I worked primarily with a fellow named Mac Thompson.

Mac Thompson, yeah. Well, he knows a lot of people out there. But did you meet one of the old commanders, the generals?

(23:12) No, not the generals, I met more of the so-called volunteers who were part of the defense of Long Tieng.

The working-level Thais, it would be important to talk to them, see what they really thought. Of course, I never really had the opportunity to talk to them.

Well, at least the few that I've spoken to probably thought they were signing up for one thing and ended up being in something very different.

It may have been. It may have been.

Have you read any of this stuff that was recently declassified and put out by Thomas Ahern?

No, I've got the—they sent me the disc and I really haven't had time to do it. . .

(24:32) He talks a lot about how the Thai were brought in essentially to b defensive soldiers who would support the Hmong soldiers, and it turned out on more than a few occasions that the Hmong would retreat and leave the Thai on the front lines to do a significant amount of the fighting.

Well, that happened, essentially, up in December of 1971 when they—the Hmong did collapse there and the Thai then collapsed right afterward. You could argue that they were left in the lurch there but, but they were backed up when they came out. It's not an easy thing to draw a picture of who did well and who did ill and. . . I have to read Tom's work. I have a lot of regard for Tom. He's—I wish they'd let the whole darn thing come out.

Yes! It's quite annoying reading over all these whited-out sections.

I haven't really looked at it all that much, but you can be sure that they whited out the parts on the Thai. [Chuckles]

Oh yes, absolutely, absolutely.

That probably comes through very clearly.

Well, I would say for those who have done a decent amount of reading in the rest of the literature, you can fill in 80 to 90 per cent of the blanks.

Oh, I'm sure you could. If you ever get a chance to get over there, talk to some of those people a little more directly and you can fill in a few more blanks [Chuckles]. . .

(26:12) Going back to Sayaboury, I sort of got the impression that Bill Lair, after all those years driving truck after his time in Laos, concluded that if only Vnag Pao, in the early stages of the war, had sent a bunch of his people to Sayaboury that things would have turned out differently.

Well, it might have turned out differently, but I'm not sure that differently would have been so important to the Hmong. You know, I've never talked to Bill about this. Somehow we never got around to this, because when I arrived, bill was not there any longer. And then, of course, he was with me in Bangkok, but them it was in the downhill skid, and we talked about what to do about picking up the pieces. But tis idea of how he would have viewed it, I would have been interested in his view.

Well this is something that he told me, that Vang Pao made a mistake, because he kept telling him very early in this whole process that he should send people to Sayaboury and get that ready to be his back-up position, but Vang Pao never believed that he would lose and never did anything about it.

That makes sense. I know that he had one or two installations down there. He had some troops there and some of his buddies as commanders, but they were never really part of the war effort. But I wish I'd talked to Bill about that. I would have had a more intelligent point of view on it. I think you should—whatever Bill told you I would respect. The other big problem with—we've talked about this before, the [Pauses] what's Roger Warner's book?

Oh, *Shooting at the Moon*.

Shooting at the Moon, yes, and I took issue with Warner, I took issue with everybody that he couldn't blame Shackley, you couldn't say that he did the (***) the Hmong society. He didn't. He did what he was told to do down there, and everybody else went along with it. And those who came after picked up the same marching orders and so on. A lot of people didn't like him. At times I had battles with him myself, but he was an extremely able guy, and I respected him, and in the end I liked him. [Chuckles] He was not a bad guy at all. People were sort of afraid of him. He did take a — well, I think it was a lot of that animosity that gave rise to the feeling that he did it, that he loused it up and made it impossible for the Hmong people. But such is life.

(29:06) What do you think at least the perceived role of the Chinese, and particularly the road they were building, played in the conflict?

I've never really thought through it. It was a very peculiar thing, because as early as we determine from air observation and everything, that was a very heavily fortified peace of real estate. And every time a plane went near there it was attacked, and some were shot down. And what they were trying to do, I'm not sure. I think [Pause] Put it this way: I think the Chinese had a very complex sort of approach to this war, as you well know. They backed up the North Vietnamese in their effort over there, did a lot to contribute there to it, and I think that they visualized and wanted to see the North Vietnamese victory. But when it came to Laos, which was kind of in-between territory, I think the Chinese figured they had a hand in this. They were not going to let the North Vietnamese or any

Vietnamese have a hand up there, and they swung around the back there and moved down form Chinese territory all the way down to—almost to Thai territory, at the very minimum to say, 'Hey, look, we're here. Don't forget, you can't count us out, we're part of this equation.' Now this is pure speculation. I never liked it, we never went near it because every time we—one big plane went down there in, I think '71, and then an Air American plane got blasted up there and almost went down. Things were awfully dangerous. I think it was the Chinese presence saying 'We're here and we're not going to be counted out of the final picture. 'Whatever it is, we're going to have a lot to say about it.' That's pure speculation on my part. But they had a huge investment in anti-aircraft defenses up there, and things set up for basketball courts and that sort of thing. They looked like they planned to be there for a while.

Interviewer thanks Mr. Tovar for his help in clarifying certain ideas. Mr. Tovar wishes him well as he prepares to publish his book. The phone call ends.