

**Narrator: Gen John W. Vessey, Jr**

**Interviewer: Thomas Saylor, Ph.D.**

**Date of interview: 2 August 2012**

**Location: Vessey residence enclosed porch, Garrison, MN**

**Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, September 2012**

**Edited for clarity by: Thomas Saylor, Ph.D., December 2012 and January 2014**

(00:00:00) = elapsed time on digital recording

TS: Today is Thursday, August 2<sup>nd</sup>. This is interview number sixteen of our cycle with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor. We're here at the Vessey residence outside of Garrison, Minnesota, today.

*(noise throughout: birds and cicadas – interview takes place outdoors, on porch)*

General Vessey, today we're going to go back to 1970, continuing our fairly chronological march forward. One of the line items on your Joint Chiefs of Staff biography that stands out rather is that during that year you were "Student, U.S. Army Primary Helicopter School, Fort Wolters, Texas. Later U.S. Army Aviation School, Fort Rucker, Alabama." If one looks at your career path up to that time, one might expect any number of things. Helicopter training pilot might not be the one that stands out, so I'll give you a chance to provide some background for us. Why this course, and why now?

JV: The war in Southeast Asia was continuing unabated at that time, and in 1969 I was Chief of Staff of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division and was due for reassignment, and I wanted to do something interesting. I'd had most of the good and interesting jobs that a full colonel of my branch could get, and the Pentagon loomed large in my eyes and I really didn't want to go the Pentagon. *(chuckles)*

About that time the Army had complained about not having enough senior officers who were qualified aviators to hold positions that required somebody with aviator training. The *Army Times* had an article saying that if you were a lieutenant colonel or a full colonel and physically qualified for aviation training, send in a postcard if you were interested. So I sent a postcard and was accepted. Took my aviation physical exam and was accepted for aviation training.

In the meantime, I should interject that I was sent back to the United States on fairly short notice for my next duty station, being the Primary Helicopter School, but I was also selected for [another course]. The Army had an Advanced Management Seminar at the University of Pittsburgh, so I spent one semester at Pittsburgh on my way to the Primary Helicopter School, which was also a good experience.

TS: Did you see this helicopter training as a path out of a career in artillery, or simply a period of time where you wouldn't be doing that but you would go back to it?

JV: It was additional knowledge. The artillery had used helicopters and certainly that wasn't the only use for helicopters, and it wasn't simply being in the artillery. It was being

a relatively senior Army officer with positions of responsibility in combat divisions or in supporting combat operations.

TS: Describe for us the specifics of this training, or this position at these two schools. I think of the fact that you're about forty-eight years old at this point – are you older than most of the students?

JV: Oh, yes indeed. Most of them were twenty year olds, twenty-one year olds. So I was indeed certainly the oldest in my class by far. I think I was fifteen years older than the next oldest person in the class.

TS: From your perspective, how did the other students in this class adjust to having someone who is not only older, but a full colonel in this class?

JV: I think the general reaction was inspiring to them. That is to say that they looked at me, and it was a rigorous school. It was not easy. I think the reaction from most of the younger folk was that, if that old fud can do it, certainly we can do it. *(chuckles)*

TS: What were the specifics of this training? How does one, from a lay perspective, learn to be a helicopter pilot?

JV: It's a combination of ground school on aviation in general, everything from weather to air traffic control and maintenance of the helicopter, how helicopters operate, and then practical flying experience. So the first part of the course, you spend half a day usually and a good part of the evening, probably an evening session for most days, in the ground school and the other half of the day flying. You start out with an instructor pilot and you watch him, and when he trusts you to take over the controls you take over the controls and follow his instructions. Soon you're taking off and landing the helicopter by yourself. One day in the not too distant future, as in my case, the instructor pilot said, "Stop here. I need to get out and check something." He got out of the helicopter and then stood by the side and took his finger and pointed down into the wind and said, "Go." *(chuckles)*

TS: What was most challenging for you about this school?

JV: Flying the helicopter itself is a little bit physically challenging. It's a two hands, two feet operation flying the primary helicopters we were trained in. Piston engines of course. So it's keeping your eyes on the gauges to make sure that you're operating within the engine parameters, and also looking outside all the time to make sure that you've got the helicopter oriented the right direction, and safely, and then using your two hands and two feet to make it do what you want it to do. So if you can rub your tummy with one hand and pat your head with the other hand, you're capable of making it happen. *(chuckles)*

TS: I see. Good analogy. The younger people in this class are what, second lieutenants, first lieutenants, things like this, or are they enlisted men too?

*(telephone ringing in background)*

JV: Yes. Mostly second lieutenants and people aspiring to be warrant officers. They were warrant officer candidates, because the Army used warrant officers for pilots in aviation.

**(10:00)**

TS: Did people, candidates, wash out of this training?

JV: Yes. Yes.

TS: A skeptic might look at the situation and say, they're never going to wash a full colonel out of this training. True or not?

JV: That's untrue. While there we had other people that were senior officers. They weren't in my class exactly, but they were either just in front or the class just behind me or something like that and in fact one or two of those did wash out.

TS: Knowing that, was there for you personally a fear of failure?

JV: I didn't have any fear of failure. I was confident that I could do it.

TS: Because it is something new. I mean you knew artillery inside and out. This is something that could potentially, could be a challenge too far. You didn't worry about that.

JV: It could have been, but it wasn't.

TS: And you didn't fear that it would be.

JV: No.

TS: Did they rank the class at the end where you knew where you stood vis a vis your other candidates?

JV: No.

TS: Pass-fail?

JV: Yes.

TS: And you literally get a license?

JV: Right. Right. You take the FAA exam to become a certified commercial pilot for rotary wing aircraft.

TS: What different models of helicopter were you authorized or licensed to fly after this training?

JV: By the time you get out of Fort Wolters at that time, you're checked out only in the particular model that you train in, and they trained us in the OH-23, as it was called, which was an early Hiller two place observation helicopter.<sup>1</sup> Then I moved to Fort Rucker, Alabama, where I was checked out in the UH-1,<sup>2</sup> which was the basic utility helicopter that the Army used at the time. But then being the position that I was in by that time, the general officers, the brigadier general's promotion list had come out and I had been selected for promotion to brigadier general, so I was known to be on the list to be a brigadier. So by this time they expanded my training to make it more complete in the aviation field. So I got checked out in not only the UH-1, but in the 47, the Chinook,<sup>3</sup> and in the Crane,<sup>4</sup> and went through instrument training and completed the instrument training. So it was a rather complete introduction to aviation for me.

TS: Given your position as a colonel who is now on the list for brigadier, what chances were there that after you complete this training that you were going to be flying a helicopter as part of your duties?

JV: The chances are that I would be some sort of position supervising aviation units. That was the specific reason for training senior officers. But I wasn't going to be a front line combat pilot obviously. That's not a position for a brigadier general in Army Aviation.

TS: But in order to be able to supervise people it's helpful or necessary to have the knowledge of how pilots work.

JV: The knowledge to know what they're supposed to be doing.

TS: So did you envision that that might be something you could be doing in the not too distant future?

JV: Yes. Right. Of course that was my hope that I would be doing that.

TS: So how do you feel that the course, passing these courses and the training assisted or augmented your career options then?

JV: You say career options. For the Army that I was in, you don't have career options. You do what the Army wants you to do.

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<sup>1</sup> Hiller OH-23 Raven; an early helicopter model, developed in the late 1940s.

<sup>2</sup> Bell UH-1 Iroquois; commonly referred to as Huey. Used extensively in Vietnam.

<sup>3</sup> Boeing CH-47 Chinook; a twin-engine, heavy-lift helicopter, introduced 1962 and used throughout the Vietnam War.

<sup>4</sup> Sikorsky CH-54 Tarhe; a twin-engine heavy-lift helicopter, introduced 1962.

TS: Okay. How about career possibilities?

JV: It made me more useful to the Army.

TS: Because now something could come up in artillery and they could say, Vessey is your man, or they could say here's something in helicopter aviation and they could also point to you.

JV: Yes. Right.

TS: Okay. So you knew you now had multiple possibilities.

JV: Right. Right. As far as what I was doing, I was making myself more useful to the Army.

TS: What would you say was the most memorable experience in this kind of brand new chapter of your Army career?

JV: It was all sort of exciting. One was being a student with these young people. During Fort Wolters you get assigned to what they call a stick buddy, who is someone that you work with and fly with, not necessarily in the same airplane, but the two of you go and do the same thing. One of the things that helicopters can do that fixed wing airplanes can't do is go into restricted spaces. A fixed wing airplane needs a runway and a helicopter doesn't need a runway. One of the things that they have you do at Fort Wolters is fly into confined spaces. Now when you first go into confined spaces you do it while you're still flying with the instructor pilot. Then later on you do it solo and they'll assign you confined spaces.

As I recall there were three categories of confined spaces. One was easy to get in and out of, and the next one was a little more difficult, and the third one was quite difficult. It stressed your ability to fly the helicopter safely and get it into a confined space. You get all sorts of semi-amusing things happening. My stick buddy, he was a rare bird. He was a wonderful young lieutenant who had no fear of anything. But I think I can characterize his outlook on life by telling you that his greatest ambition was to graduate from this helicopter school and then buy a Corvette. (*chuckles*) And the flight pay would assist him in paying for his Corvette.

TS: I think we got it.

JV: But anyway, we were supposed to work together. One particular day we were both out doing confined area solo work and I'd kept in contact with him through the flight period. Those helicopters have two hours of fuel. And at the end of two hours you need to be back.

TS: Because you're done.

JV: You're done. You have run out of fuel. (*chuckles*) This guy, it was time for us to get back and I got back and checked with him, and he said he was coming back. He was on the way

back. I stayed on the ramp waiting for him to show up and he landed and then was hovering into the parking place and his helicopter ran out of gas and stopped.

TS: While he was hovering.

JV: While he was hovering. So he was shouting at maintenance because they'd given him a bad helicopter, when in fact he'd run out of gas is what happened to him.

TS: Did it just drop?

JV: *(chuckles)* It dropped the last couple of feet that he was in the air hovering. That was my stick buddy, and I had to keep track of him.

TS: How was it working together with someone who you're clearly superior in rank, but you're supposed to be training buddies? How did that relationship work?

JV: It was fun and a little bit amusing I must say. It was enjoyable. I enjoyed it.

TS: Did you keep in touch with this young man at all?

JV: Through the years I did, yes.

TS: Whatever happened to him?

JV: He got out of the Army. He was shot down in Viet Nam and was severely wounded, and got out of the Army and lived in Southern California.

TS: So he actually did fly in combat then.

JV: Yes.

TS: He was just a lieutenant. At the conclusion of this course, when did you get word of what you were going to be doing next?

JV: I was told while I was at [Fort] Rucker I believe that I would be the assistant division commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division. George Casey was the commanding general. George Casey, who was the father of the recent George Casey, who was Chief of Staff of the Army. Anyway, I had known George Casey at the Pentagon for a number of years. He was a handball player also. We played a lot of handball.

He was one of these really wonderful officers. I always envisioned the senior George Casey as having future Chief of Staff of the Army sort of stenciled across his t-shirt because I was convinced he would be. Unfortunately he was killed in a helicopter accident in Viet Nam, and then George Putnam, the other George, was assigned to take his place.

George Putnam didn't know me from Adam at that time and didn't want me to be his assistant division commander, or rather he wanted somebody else that he knew to be his

assistant division commander. So I was sort of en route, but then it was changed en route. I was to stop in Hawaii at the U.S. Army Headquarters in Hawaii. I guess I knew beforehand that it had been changed. I stopped there and I was assigned to be the next commander of the U.S. Army Support Command Thailand.

TS: And that's what your Joint Chief of Staff biography line says. "Commanding General, U.S. Army Support Command, Thailand." This is about the end of 1970 now.

JV: Right.

TS: At this point, the end of 1970, you're heading for Southeast Asia. From your perspective, how would you summarize the U.S. military position in Southeast Asia in 1970? What are you walking into?

JV: By this time the war had become quite unpopular in the United States, I think it's safe to say. '70 had been the election?

TS: [Presidential elections were in] '68 or '72. Kent State was May 1970.<sup>5</sup>

JV: Right. Right. Yes, you'd had Kent State. Negotiations had been going on in Paris with the North Vietnamese.

TS: You knew the level of popularity at home of this conflict.

JV: Yes. Right. The nation was already in a state of flux over this

TS: Politely put, yes. You're a military man nonetheless, and when we talked about your first tour to Viet Nam you had opinions about what was and what wasn't happening in Viet Nam. Do you have opinions now about 1970 about what is and isn't happening then in Southeast Asia?

JV: Clearly the Army was suffering. We had rotated people through the war in Southeast Asia for six years by that time. The major troop units for six years. The force had been built up to a huge size.

TS: More than half a million, right?

JV: Right. And it was consuming the Army. That was evident from the last tour in Europe, where we were hard pressed. We were short noncommissioned officers and officers of all grades, as a matter of fact, to fill out the units. Maintenance in the force in Europe was suffering because of the lack of money to support the force. The barracks roofs were leaking because the money was going to the war in Southeast Asia. Casualties were

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<sup>5</sup> Kent State: shooting on campus of unarmed college students by the Ohio National Guard, on 4 May 1970. Four students were killed.

mounting and the opposition to high casualty rates was mounting faster than the casualty rates were mounting.

TS: And those were going up pretty fast.

JV: Yes. The war itself was being pursued more with TNT than it was with actual tactical operations of troops on the ground. The bombings were intense, and increasing. We had B-52s<sup>6</sup> flying steadily.

TS: And yet even with all this ordnance there was still at best a stalemate.

JV: Yes. Worse than a stalemate. Actually the North Vietnamese looked as though they were succeeding in certain places, particularly against...it appeared to be against Vietnamese forces. The American forces never seemed to lose any battles, but they had some very difficult fighting, particularly in the area along the so-called demilitarized line between North and South Viet Nam.

I think a comment that General Abrams made to me a couple of years later, we were talking about the bombing. This was later on when I was supposed to be in charge of the war in Laos and had gone to see General Abrams, and he had said, "I'm killing ants with elephants." That sort of typifies the change in what was happening with the war. Certainly going into Thailand, where the Support Command Thailand did a number of things. It provided support to the air bases in Thailand – and Thailand by that time was a big stationary aircraft carrier for the United States Air Force.

**(30:50)**

TS: That was one specific thing I wanted to ask you about, as you start talking about this position. As I looked, we had bases at Udorn Thani, Ubon, Nakhorn Phanom, U Taphao, Tak Bai, Tak Hli. We had a large number of bases. What was the role in the conflict in Viet Nam, Laos or Cambodia of these bases?

JV: They were all supporting the war, and most supporting the war in Viet Nam and many were bombing North Viet Nam, particularly from Thailand. U Taphao was a B-52 base, flying B-52s every day to North Viet Nam and some into Laos. What the Support Command did, it provided support to those air bases. We did it a number of ways. It had an engineer command building roads, improving the roads in Thailand, particularly to these air bases, for hauling fuel and ammunition to the air bases. It had a signal brigade that provided communication to the bases in Thailand and tied into Viet Nam. Then we operated a couple of ports, three ports in Thailand. We had a general cargo port and had an ammunition port and a POL, a gasoline, aviation fuel, diesel and so forth from tankers. Then it provided maintenance support for the U.S. equipment that was being used by the forces in Laos, both the Royal Lao Army and the irregular forces that the CIA had organized in Laos. So that's what the Support Command did.

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<sup>6</sup> Boeing B-52 Stratofortress: four engine, subsonic, jet-powered strategic bomber; introduced 1955 and used throughout the Vietnam War.

TS: How visible was the U.S. presence at this time, from your perspective, in Thailand?

JV: It was very visible. The Thai government was a military government at the time. The Thai Prime Minister, Thanom Kittikachorn,<sup>7</sup> was an ex-field marshal in the Thai Army, and most of the senior leadership positions were held by former military people. The U.S. presence was very obvious. In Bangkok we had a large R&R<sup>8</sup> facility for troops out of Viet Nam that would come to Bangkok, both either in Bangkok or down on the beach in the Gulf of Thailand. Military hospital in Bangkok, plus an Army hospital in Korat.

TS: The photos of Udorn that I saw from the late 1960s, it's a massive base.

JV: Udorn was probably the busiest airfield in the world at that time.

*(brief pause in recording)*

**(35:30)**

TS: So you mentioned that Udorn was a busy base, yet I also heard you mention that we have port facilities which suggests the Navy and of course the planes and air bases suggest the Air Force. How much are you liaising or coordinating with other branches of service?

JV: A lot. Of course the Support Command Thailand was just doing the Army's portion of what it does in a major theater of operations, but the theater of operations was actually across the border in Viet Nam. The job was basically a logistic job, obviously. I certainly hadn't had any experience as a logistician, but I was a graduate of the Industrial College and I had gone to the University of Pittsburgh's Management Program for Executives, which also dealt with similar matters.

I replaced a wonderful artilleryman, David Ott,<sup>9</sup> who preceded me as commander of Support Command Thailand. I had known Dave Ott from Fort Sill days, back in the '50s. *(chuckles)* But when I found out I was going to this job, knowing that it had a couple of ports, I asked a transportation command compatriot of mine, I said, "How do I operate a port?" He said, "Just go in there and make your first inspection. What you want to do is find a box that just came off a ship, and it will say, 'box 2 of 3.' Then you demand to know where 1 and 3 are. And then it will have an arrow on it someplace that says 'This end up,' and the arrow will usually be pointed down, and you demand to know why that box is in the wrong position and why its two accompanying boxes aren't there." And it worked. *(laughter)*

TS: I was going to say it sounds like a throwaway line, but it actually worked.

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<sup>7</sup> Thanom Kittikachorn (1911 – 2004). Thai army general and military dictator of Thailand. He presided over military rule in Thailand, 1963 – 1973.

<sup>8</sup> R&R: military slang for rest and recuperation.

<sup>9</sup> David Ott (1922-2004); U.S. Army lieutenant general.

JV: It did.

TS: So you walked in there and they thought you knew about logistics.

JV: Thought I knew more. Fortunately I was assigned a wonderful executive officer. Nathaniel Gage was his name, and he was indeed a transportation officer himself, but was also a wonderful logistician. I probably learned more about logistics from Nate Gage than I did in all the schools I had attended that addressed the subject, because about the time I arrived a study had already been conducted indicating that the U.S. Army Support Command Thailand could be reduced in size. That is, we could reduce the number of U.S. military people. At that time we had I think close to 20,000 American U.S. Army people in Thailand.

TS: Just Army?

JV: Right. And it employed about 60,000 civilians, mostly Thais but with a lot of American civilian supervisors. So one of my early duties was looking at this study to see how we would make the reductions, and I think it called for fifteen percent reductions or something like that, which seemed to be quite sizeable at the time. But Gage and I together looked at what we were doing. We started seriously asking ourselves, what are we doing here? And what other ways can it be done? We proposed cutting almost all of the military people eventually over a period of a couple years from 20,000 to about 2,000, and cutting the civilian employees very substantially as well, and getting rid of a number of bases that we had. Which was a smart move.

TS: So this was your brief going in really, to look long and hard at what we were doing and how we were doing it with regards to staffing and expenditure.

JV: Yes. And we concluded that much of what we were doing was washing our own socks, and that if we looked at the specific support jobs that we had to do that there were ways to do them with less expense to the taxpayer and fewer Americans, American military people, in Thailand.

TS: With the kind of reductions that you're describing it sounds like the presence and the number of people working have become rather bloated. How did we get to that point?

JV: I wouldn't say it was bloated. They had done it the way we had always done it. For example, we hauled tons and tons of bombs to the airfields from the ports, from the ammunition port on the Gulf of Thailand, and we did that using a mix of American U.S. Army transportation truck companies manned by soldiers driving over the roads in Thailand. Now Thailand drives on the left and not on the right, so accidents with Americans at the wheel were a big problem in Thailand. What Thailand does is, it grows rice and it exports rice, particularly at that time to much of the other parts of Asia and to the world in general. So Thailand had plenty of trucks. They hauled rice to the ports. Nate Gage and I looked at that and said, "Why can't we use Thai trucks to haul bombs to the

airfields, and then they can haul rice on the way back and they get a payload both ways? Whereas we stick bombs on the U.S. Army trucks and haul them one way and come back empty. We drive on the wrong side of the road for us. Let people who know how to drive in this country do the driving.”

There was a fair amount of opposition to that in the chain of command because of the security situation and rightfully so, because you certainly didn’t want bombs falling into the hands of somebody else. So you had to have some reasonably reliable way of checking on these bomb loads to make sure that they arrived at their destination with all the bombs.

TS: Right. So how did you square that one?

JV: We did it with a system of audits that had a system of auditing people along the way to make sure that the trucks reported in at a specific time that was agreed in advance, and by cooperation with the Thai armed forces and the Thai police. So we had a good security system. At least we lost no bombs. That was the test.

TS: Yes. You learned about this job it sounds like when you were in Hawaii, that you were going to be dispatched here?

JV: I was told what it was before I left the United States, and I knew that eventually Avis would get to come. She and the kids were living in Maryland, because John was a student at the University of Maryland College Park at that time. I knew that she would come, but I didn’t know when. And I had never heard of the U.S. Army Support Command Thailand.

TS: You’d never heard of it?

**(46:20)**

JV: No. I didn’t know that it existed to tell you the truth, to say nothing of what it was. I reported to General Rosson, who was a wonderful soldier with the U.S. Army Pacific Command, commander of the U.S. Army Pacific, in Hawaii. I remember landing in Hawaii and the next morning reporting to General Rosson, where I was to have my brigadier general’s stars pinned on. I anticipated getting some serious instruction on U.S. Army Support Command Thailand, what it did and how I was to carry out those instructions.

TS: There you go – pre-departure briefings. *(laughter both)* There’s a chink in this story, isn’t there?

JV: *(laughing)* Right. Anyway, I reported to General Rosson at the appointed time and we had a little ceremony pinning on my stars, and I think they had some coffee and some cookies or something. Some of the staff members came in, and then I was to have some time with General Rosson after the little tea party. We went in and sat down.

TS: Did you know him?

JV: I did not know him. I knew of him by reputation.

TS: He didn't know you either personally?

JV: No, he didn't know me either. Anyway, *(chuckles)* I sat down and General Rosson said, "You know that the Support Command Thailand is a very important position. It's an important operation for the United States and the war in Southeast Asia. It's a complicated operation. Now what I want you to do is get out there and find out what it does and make sure that it does it correctly." And he saluted and I saluted and that was the end of my orientation. *(chuckles)*

TS: Now on the one hand one could feel relieved, or one could feel paralyzed. How did you feel?

JV: *(chuckles)* I didn't feel a bit wiser. He had said that we have great confidence in you and your ability to do it.

TS: How did you feel leaving his office?

JV: I thought I better take his advice: get out there and find out there what it's supposed to be doing and get it done. Of course I knew I was relieving Dave Ott, and Dave Ott was a very smart man himself.

TS: Did you call him?

JV: No.

TS: So when you landed in Thailand the sum of what you knew about this job was...

JV: ... was nothing. But I was well briefed by Dave Ott.

TS: What kind of information did he provide for you?

JV: I'd say a complete rundown of what the command did and what its problems were. He briefed me basically on this reduction study that had been underway. I pointed out that parts of that job had to do with the war, but one of the other parts of the job is that the U.S. Army garrison in Bangkok belonged to the command also, and in Bangkok lived the families of the senior officers who were serving in Viet Nam. By that time General Abrams had replaced [Gen.] Westmoreland, and so Mrs. Abrams and part of the family was there. One of the Abrams' children, still younger, went to school with David. Of course ostensibly the fellow in command was the Air Force general who commanded the U.S. Military Assistance Command Thailand, and he had an Army deputy, an Army major general deputy.

Then there were other Army outfits in Thailand; the 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces command was in Thailand, which did not fall under the command of the U.S. Army Support Command Thailand. It was a separate operational outfit. There was an Army laboratory in Bangkok that was under the direct supervision of the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Research and Development. But anyway, there were a number of people billeted in Bangkok,

soldiers billeted in Bangkok, the headquarters of the signal brigade was in Bangkok. So there were a lot of military people in Bangkok, and the commander of the Bangkok garrison had a big job. They had a number of hotels that were under U.S. Army supervision. We leased the hotels.

TS: So a number of different responsibilities of very diverse kind of things.

JV: Right.

TS: To whom did you report directly?

JV: I reported to the Air Force Commander of Military Assistance Command Thailand, who was sort of generally supervisory over all military people in Thailand, but not in an operational sense. In an operational sense I reported to the U.S. Army Commander Pacific, General Rosson. Then I was responsible to the people that I supported. For example, the commander of the Air Force, I've forgotten the title of the command now, but it was an offshoot of the air command in Saigon, commanding the air bases in Thailand. Of course I was responsible to him for providing fuel and bombs. [The Air Force command was 7/13 Air Force]

TS: That's a lot to coordinate.

JV: So in theory you had a lot of people that you answered to, whether they were your commanders or not, it made no difference. You had to satisfy their needs.

TS: The way you're describing this it sounds like a vertical chain of command but also it goes horizontally as well, that you have to take care of a number of people who are outside of that direct reporting relationship.

JV: Right.

TS: Did you like that kind of multiple coordinating of tasks?

JV: I don't know whether you like it or not. It was the way it was.

TS: Sure. Some things we feel more comfortable doing than others. Is that something you felt comfortable doing?

JV: I never gave it any thought about the comfort or not. It was just the way it had to be done.

TS: How successful do you feel you were at coordinating all these things that you've just described?

JV: We were very successful at reducing the size of the U.S. Army in Thailand and providing the logistic support to the operation of the war at less cost to the taxpayer. Now we got in trouble doing it.

TS: What do you mean by that?

JV: We made some drastic cuts.

TS: You described...almost 90%. Yes.

JV: We made a long range plan. One was to finish the road construction and then phase the engineer brigade out of Thailand. That would get the engineers out. The other was to change this transportation system, to move eventually to hauling it all by contract, hauling the ammunition and the fuel by contract. There was a lot of question about that and we finally wound up having to keep one truck company in case we had labor troubles or something like that and we had to use the U.S. Army trucks. We never did that in fact. But getting the soldiers out of there was important. And you recall at that particular time that drugs in the Army were a problem.

TS: Did you see that as well?

JV: Clearly. My friend Dave Ott had pointed this out to me, particularly that things like marijuana and heroin were easily available in Thailand. In fact one of my early inspections was inspecting the camp that the transportation command used for its truck companies down near the port, and I took the sergeant major and we went in and I said, "Sergeant major, what's that smell?" He said, "Sir, that's pot."

TS: Now is this something you had dealt with in Germany as well?

JV: Yes, but not anywhere near to this extent.

TS: Would you say you were surprised by the extent of it in Southeast Asia?

JV: I wasn't surprised – I was told by Dave Ott that it was a major problem. We had a number of major problems. Soldiers weren't particularly popular with the Thai community, with not understanding the culture. Dave Ott, to his credit, had taken that as a problem that he had to solve. So he had asked the Army Research Institute to help him provide a course of study. He never got to implement that before he left, but I got to implement what he had set in motion, which was bringing every new recruit or every new replacement that came into the Support Command in Thailand and putting them through I think it was a ten day or two week orientation course on getting along in Thailand, teaching them enough of the Thai language and Thai culture and how the Thai people lived, so that they didn't make fools of themselves in the villages in Thailand.

TS: What kind of tensions or conflicts were there between soldiers and local communities?

JV: I'd say that most of that revolved around sex at the time. There were houses of prostitution, and certainly prostitutes on the streets. Once teenage U.S. males, eighteen, nineteen, twenty year olds, are off on their own in a place where they don't know the language, they don't know the customs, and sex is on the agenda, it all equals trouble.

TS: That equation is cross-cultural, isn't it?

JV: It is indeed. Drugs compound that.

TS: Were the drugs something that you felt as the commanding officer impacted your ability to carry out your mission?

**(1:02:05)**

JV: Yes. It made it more costly. You had soldiers getting into trouble rather than doing what they were supposed to be doing in Thailand. To give you a small example: the main headquarters was on an air base, [at a] town was in the northeast part of Thailand. The Chao Phraya Valley is fairly rich agriculturally, and then if you move into the northeast you move up into a plateau where the rainfall is less and the farmers are poorer.

Khorat was the city and the base at Khorat. We had a major air base there, and then the headquarters of the Army Support Command was also at Khorat. And we had a major maintenance installation supporting the war in Laos from Khorat. I went again with the sergeant major, went downtown at night to see what happened in Khorat. It looked like Sodom and Gomorrah to me.

TS: That's pretty strong language.

JV: Yes. So I called in my command chaplain, who happened to be a Lutheran – not a Missouri Synod Lutheran but a Lutheran – and suggested to him that we put a little subset of the chapel down there on the street in which all these houses of ill repute and bars were located. I said, "Why we don't put something down there, where we can offer coffee and donuts and so forth to the soldiers?" The chaplain didn't want to do that. He thought that exceeded his role as a clergyman. He was one of these chaplains who thought that standing on the steps of the chapel and ringing the bell and calling the soldiers to worship service on Sunday was his role as a chaplain. So at chapel on Sunday I saw a bunch of eager young Christian soldiers there and I got the sergeant major to seek out some leadership among them and provide them an opportunity to do a little of the Lord's work and suggest that we man a place down there.

TS: So you basically bypassed the chaplain when he wouldn't do it for you.

JV: Yes. Right. He thought it would get him in trouble with his denomination, and I didn't want to interfere with his denominational problems. And I was sure that we could get this done anyway – and we got it done with young Christian lay soldiers, who did indeed man this place. What we did is, we gave them a car to use and if we had a drunken soldier or something like that they would bring him back to the base before he got into trouble, [and]

provide coffee and donuts. We had some Christian literature in the place, and Bibles. It turned out to be a good operation and one in which these lay soldiers were willing to volunteer at night beyond their regular set of duties to man the place.

TS: Because what you've described, this Sodom and Gomorrah downtown, there are bars and associated businesses around lots of military bases around the world.

JV: Yes. Right.

TS: So you can't do away with that.

JV: Right. No, no.

TS: But it's not all the soldiers either.

JV: Right. And it's not just in Thailand – you can find that around military posts in the United States without any trouble.

TS: Exactly. Right. You have some soldiers who aren't doing that as well.

JV: Yes. Most. Most soldiers aren't doing that.

TS: Yes, exactly. Right. You can't, or can you restrict soldiers to base and keep them away from that? Or is that not wise either?

JV: If you want a mad bunch of soldiers, restrict them to the base.

TS: You knew that much.

JV: Right. Right. I spent five years as an enlisted soldier. *(chuckles)*

TS: You've got some challenges here. What do you feel most proud about during your time? It looks like you were there a little over a year. What do you feel most proud about?

JV: I think that we reduced the number of incidents between Thais and Americans. We had fewer people in jail for those things. Substantially. And of course part of that is, we reduced the number of people who were exposed to Thailand. But the other thing is, we reduced the cost to the taxpayer by changing the way we did things. We consolidated most of the operations of U.S. Army Support Command Thailand at a base down near the Gulf of Thailand, where the heart of the logistic operation was in the ports. We finished the road construction successfully and got the engineers out of Thailand. We kept the communications operating and provided the air bases with bombs and fuel on time. So I think overall it was a good operation but, for example, it made a lot of people unhappy. We reduced the civilian employees substantially, which did not please the Thai government at the time.

TS: That kind of segs into something else I wanted to ask you about, which is describing the relationship between the United States military, which has this large presence, and the Royal Thai government and military.

JV: Yes. That was generally the responsibility of the ambassador and MACTHAI<sup>10</sup> commander. Of course for us we had to support them in doing what they wanted to do. For example, the then supreme commander of the military and prime minister of Thailand wanted to have a soccer game between the Thai military and the U.S. military. So we were sort of trapped into producing a soccer team. With the war going on and with what we were doing, providing a soccer team was not high on our agenda. Fortunately I had one officer who was a soccer player out of the military academy, and we put together a team. We were to play in one of the major stadiums in Bangkok, and of course the Thai military soccer team turns up. It also happens to be the Thai national team.

TS: Okay. At a time when soccer in the U.S. was not all that developed.

JV: (*chuckles*) No. Needless to say, our guys played their hearts out, but we got severely thumped and it was appropriately displayed in the Thai newspapers.

TS: So there are some things didn't go so well.

JV: And some things that went very badly.

TS: Talk about that. You leave this job – there must be frustrations that you had as well.

JV: The Army had built a new hospital at Khorat, and it was one of these things that was done with...somebody thought we were going to be in Thailand forever I guess, and built a nice new small hospital in Khorat. It was never really occupied by the U.S. Army in Khorat. First we didn't have the staff, and then suddenly this reduction in staff is underway and we had decided to move the headquarters out of Khorat and move it to Camp Samae San,<sup>11</sup> as it was called, on the Gulf of Thailand. So we had the new hospital there, and the best thing for us to do was to give it to the Thais. We did indeed give it to the Thais.

During part of all this my exec, Nate Gage, at one time saw some members of the Army Criminal Investigation Command, the so-called CID, police driving around with known prostitutes in the automobile with them. Nate Gage told the CID that they had to put their car in the motorpool and check it out specifically for specific uses, and this apparently didn't please the local CID folks. The next thing that I knew about this, I was summoned to Bangkok in the office of the MACTHAI commander, the Air Force commander. ... I was told that I was under investigation by the Criminal Investigation for bribing the Thai government, for giving them things that I was not authorized to give them.

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<sup>10</sup> MACTHAI: U.S. Military Assistance Command, Thailand.

<sup>11</sup> Camp Samae San: located approximately 90 miles South of Bangkok, near the city of Sattahip.

**(1:17:10)**

TS: Such as?

JV: That hospital. *(chuckles)* So it was a rather broad sweeping indictment, and everyone was quite serious about it. At first it appeared almost amusing to me, because we had clearly followed the instructions that we had been given, and the instructions were to transfer certain things to the Thai government, that is things that could not be moved back to the United States and were of some use. And part of it was the physical plant.

TS: Sure.

*(background noise: telephone call)*

JV: But anyway, I was informed that a team of investigators was coming into Thailand and that I was to cooperate with this team of investigators. And they came in. It was like *Law and Order*.<sup>12</sup> Soon it was clear that my phone was tapped and agents were looking at Avis and the family to see what they were doing. It turned out to be quite, in a way, depressing and disturbing but on the other hand, we hadn't done anything wrong so I wasn't overly worried about it. But it was annoying to have it happen. I don't know how many investigators came to Thailand, but it was fifteen or twenty.

TS: Fifteen or twenty?!

JV: Yes.

TS: Okay. This is not just routine.

JV: No. Not a routine thing. It was enough to make me think well, I'm not sure I want to stay in this Army.

TS: Is this the first time really that your character has been called into question in the Army?

JV: Yes. Yes. It was something new for me. At any rate, while all this is going on I got reassigned to the war in Laos. Turned the command in Thailand to somebody else. But to sum it all up, years later when the investigation had been completed and I was reassigned to the Pentagon, after the ceasefire in Laos, I was walking down the hall of the Pentagon and I met the then General Counsel of the Army, a civilian lawyer, Bob Berry. He stopped me in the hallway and said, "You don't know me, but I know you." I said "Oh?" He said, "Yes, as a matter of fact I've just come from a meeting with one of your great admirers." It was the commander of the Army Criminal Investigation Command. He said, "He told me that you're the most honest man in the Army." *(chuckles)* I told Bob Berry, I said, "Well, I

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<sup>12</sup> *Law and Order*: U.S. television police drama, premiered 2001.

wasn't really competing for the title. I'm sorry that he spent as much money as he has to find that out."

TS: So this investigation dragged on even after you were gone.

JV: Oh, yes. It dragged on for a year I guess.

TS: Holy mackerel. So you didn't have any negative ramifications because of that.

JV: No. Other than personal annoyance.

TS: You've mentioned a number of different people you had to satisfy and places you were looking at. When you think about an average week or month in this job, what did it look like? Were you staffing a desk? Were you on the road? What did you do?

JV: No. I was looking at things. We had this break-bulk port; this was pre-container days. Container ships were not really big business in those days. Most of our supplies came in what was called break-bulk ships. That is, there were pieces that were unloaded.

TS: With cranes.

JV: Right, with cranes. And then assembled and sent out. So it wasn't like today, when the container comes in and gets picked off the ship and put on a train and hauled somewhere. We had small pieces that we had to put together. When an ammunition ship came in, it was a big deal when an ammunition ship came in. Then of course we had these engineers constructing roads in the most dangerous part of Thailand. Thailand still had a Communist insurgency going on in the northeast of Thailand, and we were building roads in that territory and having occasional casualties from confrontations with the Thai insurgents.

TS: So you were going all these places.

**(1:23:00)**

JV: Yes. The whole of Thailand. So one of the things of course that I got to do is I got to fly the helicopter myself from place to place, which helped me refine a little bit my flying skills. But it also helped me get around and see a lot of Thailand that I might otherwise not have seen. So there was something new going on, and there was almost a new problem with some facet of this variegated command.

TS: I'm going to add one thought here, and that is that you've mentioned in the past how being at the Pentagon wasn't the top of your hit list for jobs.

JV: Right.

TS: So something like this where you're not desk-bound, does this appeal to you more?

JV: I wasn't a logistician, and would certainly not classify myself as a logistician today, but it was a very instructive job for me because I learned a lot about things that I didn't know much about, but also got to employ some management principles that I had learned and deal with soldiers that did a lot of different things than just shoot cannons or tanks or infantry weapons.

I think one of the more amusing things was in Bangkok we had a pretty good commander Bangkok. He'd been there quite a while and he was the mayor of Bangkok. He was respected by the Thais and got along well with the Thai police and worked hard for a good relationship with the Thai government in Bangkok with the many operations. Our major hospital was in Bangkok, plus these various hotels that we used for both R and R from Viet Nam and for housing people coming into Thailand. For example, when Avis came we lived in a hotel room there for about three months.

AVIS: The kids were in school.

JV: But one of the other parts of that was, you had the families of the senior officers from Viet Nam. Mrs. Abrams, Mrs. Weyand, the deputy commander, the Chief of Staff's wife. Anyway, making sure that their living was comfortable was important. Apparently an aide to Mrs. Abrams had reported that there were naked women seen in one of the NCO clubs, one of the American NCO clubs. Mrs. Abrams made some comment and it got down through the chain of command, so the MACTHAI Army deputy and I got together. He called me and told me about this report. He said, "Why don't you and I go have lunch at this place?" I agreed. We met for lunch.

TS: So even though it's an NCO club you can still go there.

JV: Oh, sure. We went with our two aides. My aide was a wonderful young man. He was a missionary brat. He'd grown up in India, home schooled in India. The first classroom he ever sat in was at Yale University, when he was enrolled at Yale. Very bright guy. This other fellow, his aide was a bright young captain as well. So went in and had lunch and everything appeared fine. Then as we were walking out, we were at the door, and one of the aides said, "Wow, did you see that?" (*chuckles*) Off in a dark corner there was indeed a naked woman sitting over there with a couple of U.S. Army soldiers.

TS: In this NCO club?

JV: Right. (*laughing*) So it turned out that what Mrs. Abrams' aide had reported was indeed correct, although it had escaped us almost completely. The place was dark as the inside of a mineshaft.

TS: So what responsibility do you have to do something about that?

JV: Certainly these NCO clubs were under the supervision of my commander of the Bangkok garrison. So we did indeed straighten it out. But we almost missed it frankly.

TS: It was dark you say. Something like that, is it best to do that, to sort of clean it up quietly or do heads need to roll? That's not regulation.

JV: No, no. The manager of the club got fired.

TS: That's a great segue to lunch I think. I'll pause these machines here.

***(break for lunch – interview 16 B starts here, with timer re-set to 00:00)***

TS: This is Thursday, 2 August 2012. This is a continuation of interview number sixteen with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor. It's afternoon now.

General Vessey, I wanted to just touch briefly on a couple of points before we transition from Thailand to Laos. You've been very helpful in the past in identifying relationships that were important to you at a certain time or place, so let me ask you here, what relationships were important to you that either you picked up in the future or that you linked to from the past?

JV: With the Thais of course, the relationships with the Thai military were important for the United States and also important for me in the jobs in the future. And it started with the next job, with the job in Laos, because the Thais themselves had a great interest in what was going on in Laos and were contributing more than was apparent to the world in general at that time. The Thais also had Thai soldiers fighting in Viet Nam at that time.

TS: And that was known publicly, wasn't it?

JV: That was known publicly. But they also had a major force of so-called Thai volunteers fighting in Laos, and that had just begun about the time I moved from the Support Command Thailand to the job in Laos, and of course at that time the job in Laos was restructured.

An officer named General Kriangsak Chomanan<sup>13</sup> at that time was the operations chief of the Royal Thai Armed Forces. I had met him and he had some Thai supervision over some of the things we were doing for Thailand, like the road building for example. But he was also later on in charge of the whole operation for the Thai support to the war in Laos, so we cooperated closely on that. Then later he was the commander of the Thai armed forces when I was Chairman of the JCS, a comparable position. Kriangsak and I had an enduring relationship throughout the years, and a fine officer. Then I don't know whether we mentioned it earlier, when I was a gunnery instructor in the gunnery department of the artillery school, I had two Thai officers in the section that I taught.

TS: That's right. Are we linking forward? Now we're seeing them again?

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<sup>13</sup> Kriangsak Chomanan (1917-2003); Thai army general. Also prime minister of Thailand, 1977-80.

JV: Right. We see them again. One of them, by the time I came to Thailand was deputy commander of the Thai Marine Corps and eventually became the commander, the commandant of the Thai Marine Corps, and the other officer became the Chief of Intelligence for the Thai army.

TS: Do you want to name either one of them, for the record?

JV: They're both names I should remember, particularly the Marine, because he and I were very close through the years and had a lot of wonderful exchanges even when I went back to Thailand later on trips. Of course later, when I was doing the negotiations with the Vietnamese for Presidents Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and a little bit for President Clinton, I had to stop in Thailand before I went to Viet Nam and brief the Thai Prime Minister, the then Thai Prime Minister, who always turned out to be a military guy that I had known during these years on what we were doing in Hanoi. And then when I came out of Hanoi I always had to stop and brief the chief of the Thai government again on what had occurred in Hanoi. So those relationships were important for a number of years in jobs that I had.<sup>14</sup>

TS: Relationships with American civilian or military personnel that you encountered here that you want mention that were important for you.

JV: The American diplomats in Thailand turned out to be important later on in life. Of course the friendships we made with the military families that were there in Thailand, like Mrs. Abrams, Julie Abrams, and one child they had that was still in school at home became a friend of David's. Then I wound up working for both General Abrams and General Weyand later on, so the fact that we knew their families from the time in Bangkok was important.

TS: You mentioned family life, families there. I know that Mrs. Vessey and two of your three children were with you while you were in Thailand. What aspects of life in Thailand as a family did you most enjoy?

JV: One thing about it was the church life in Thailand. Thailand was one of these places where the two main Lutheran bodies, the LCMS and the ELCA, had agreed to support mission churches for expatriate Americans, and it had been important to us in Germany. We had one in Frankfurt and we worshipped at the church in Frankfurt, and then when we came to Thailand there was one in Bangkok and as a family we worshipped there. In fact the kids were confirmed in these churches. Sarah was confirmed at St. Paul's, I think, in Falls Church, but David was confirmed in Bangkok and it was an important part of our life in Bangkok. They had worked out an arrangement with the Roman Catholic school, so we actually had the Sunday services in the part of the school building of this Roman Catholic school in Bangkok.

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<sup>14</sup> The Thai prime ministers Gen Vessey reports interacting with during this time were: Prem Tinsulanonda, Chatichai Choonhaven, and Anand Panyarachun. Gen Vessey: "Prem and Chatichai were former generals whom I had known; Anand, I believe, was a former businessman."

I'd say another part that was important for us as a family and for me personally particularly was it was my in the flesh encounter with Dr. Oswald C. J. Hoffman. He was one of the church personalities that came to Viet Nam during the war. Came regularly. I don't know how many times he came to Southeast Asia, but I met him in Thailand on one of his trips to Southeast Asia, it must have been the 1971 trip. But at any rate, I had been alerted by [Chaplain] Wil Hyatt that Ozzie Hoffmann<sup>15</sup> was coming to Thailand, and he wanted me to make sure that Dr. Hoffmann got an appropriate audience and good treatment in Thailand. I also got a call or a message from Pastor Kuhn, who was our pastor at St. Paul's, who also knew him, and told me that Dr. Hoffmann was coming. So indeed he did. We had him set up to come to Camp Samae San. It was typical for church leaders of all denominations that came to the war, they usually came with a pretty girl singer and maybe a comedian. (*chuckles*) It was sort of a Bob Hope with a Christian background.

TS: Now I can visualize it.

JV: But anyway, we filled the auditorium for Dr. Hoffmann, and he was certainly a hit with the soldiers.

TS: What kind of impression did he make on you?

JV: Of course I felt like I knew him, because I'd listened to the *Lutheran Hour* for years. And heard weekly sermon after weekly sermon from him. So I felt like I knew him when he came. But we hit it off very well. I think there was some sort of chemistry between the two of us, and we became friends and stayed in contact through the years until he died.

TS: Okay. Did you have a chance to meet him again in the future?

JV: Many times. Many times. He's been here [to Garrison], visited us at home. I went fishing with him almost every year during the latter years of his life, and had occasion to be with him many different times, when he was decorated with the Defense Distinguished Civilian Service Award and so forth. We stayed in close contact through the years. That was certainly one of the high points of my life was meeting him and having this wonderful association with him.

TS: Very good. You've mentioned a couple positives. What would you say were challenges, family-wise, living in Bangkok?

**(14:20)**

JV: You worried about the kids. Drugs were prevalent, and there were always rumors or incidents with American kids being involved with drugs, and you worried about your own children doing that. And of course you wanted to put your children into a little cocoon so they weren't in any of the dangers, but that wasn't possible.

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<sup>15</sup> Oswald Hoffman (1913-2005); U.S. Lutheran minister and broadcaster. Speaker for *Lutheran Hour*, a long-running radio program.

TS: You didn't have small kids. They weren't in grade school at that time, right? Junior high and high school.

JV: Junior high and high school. We went the other way. We let David go to the Gulf of Thailand and live with a Thai fishing family for the better part of a summer. It helped him with his Thai language, and he had some Thai friends and became part of a Thai water polo team. Sarah and her friends from school – I mentioned to you I think before we started the recording that she's off at her high school reunion from the International School of Bangkok. One of her very close friends was the daughter of a missionary family in Thailand.

But it provided some shocking illustrations. I remember one of the weekends that I came home from Laos to spend the weekend with the family, and I was getting a ride from the Bangkok airport to our apartment and I looked at this ad for women's clothing of some kind. I've forgotten if it was a bathing suit or something. But it was a big picture. Two attractive Caucasian girls on the back of this Thai bus. I thought, that blonde looks very familiar. Sure enough it was Sarah, our daughter, and the other one was Jill, the daughter of this missionary couple. But they had somehow been contacted by a photographer from a Thai ad agency.

TS: And they were advertising...

JV: Women's clothing of some kind.

AVIS: It was perfectly innocent.

JV: But shocking at the same time.

TS: I can imagine that moment where you look up, you're kind of daydreaming or whatever. You look up from this ride and there you see someone on the bus who looks familiar. Yes. The people that attended this Bangkok International School must have come from all over the world.

JV: They did. They did indeed.

AVIS: It was an unbelievable number. I kept trying to remember, because we said how many different languages...let's say thirty-seven different languages spoken at the school.

TS: Did you have a chance to interact with any of the other parents who went to this school, kind of learn who these people were?

JV: I didn't so much because I wasn't in...when I was in SUPTHAI<sup>16</sup> I was only in Bangkok on the weekends, and then only on occasional weekends. Then when I was in Laos it was once every three or four months, something like that.

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<sup>16</sup> Officially USARSUPTHAI, U.S. Army Support, Thailand. Military advisor group, active in the 1960s and 1970s.

AVIS: It was like being dumped in the middle of the Twin Cities, and there were no clubs or anything that you would be normally going to. Once every three months or so there was an International Parent's Club meeting, and that was it if you wanted to mingle. And there was an American ladies club. Like every place you go there's a bridge club or something or have a fashion show. That was it.

TS: And your apartment was on the economy, right?

JV: *(nods yes)*

TS: It wasn't in housing, so you didn't even have a military community that was all together.

JV: No. [There were] six apartments, with the landlord occupying one. So there were five. I think there was different nationality in each apartment.

TS: Wow! It's an education just walking outside your own door in your own building.

JV: Right. But we had a good chapel program. David was involved. At meal time we'd rotate the children, we had grace before the meal. I remember being home. It was David's turn and David leads off with, "Rub a dub dub, thanks for the grub, yea God."

TS: He's updating the standard table prayer.

JV: I said, "David where did you get that?" He said, "Chaplain Walker taught it to me."<sup>17</sup>  
*(chuckles)*

TS: Let me just sort of shift ahead a little bit and let me check a statement which, from consulting with another historian to prep for this particular interview. In the fall of 1971, General Stillwell, Army Deputy Chief of Staff at that time, undertook a tour of Laos, including Luang Thieng. Stillwell at that time proposes to recommend you for Deputy Chief of JUSMAGTHAI, with duty station in Laos. Can you affirm, that sound about right?

**(21:30)**

JV: Yes. That's right. Dick Stillwell came to Thailand to make this tour of Laos and ostensibly of the support that was being given to Laos. It turns out that what he was really looking at was how the U.S. was conducting its support for Laos in the war in Laos, and he took me along with him. So I went with him on this tour of Laos, and when we got back we sat down and he questioned me about what I thought needed to be done and so forth. And he suggested that, just sort of casually, what the U.S. operation needs in Laos is someone like you to take charge of it.

At that time, dating back from 1962 when the first multi-national agreement was signed on Laos, which was an agreement with the Russians – and I think the Chinese were

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<sup>17</sup> Gen Vessey adds: "Walker was later my staff chaplain in Korea and certainly had a lot of influence on our family there in Thailand." Written comments from summer 2014.

involved as well, and the French – and what who would do about the war in Laos. At that time we decided to take a U.S. Army colonel to advise the Royal Laotian Armed Forces in their then sort of continuing battle with the Communists in Laos. They actually took him off the rolls of the Army. At that time, as you will recall from our earlier discussion, I was in the Pentagon and I was assigning full colonels of artillery. The first officer that we put into that job was an artillery colonel, and we took him off the rolls of the U.S. Army and made him a civilian.

TS: Why was that done? Just to check.

JV: Because we weren't supposed to have any military people in Laos.

TS: So by taking him off the rolls of the Army we would be satisfying the letter the law if not the spirit.

JV: Right. Later on the restrictions were such that he operated out of Thailand and later on we put him back – not the first one, but the subsequent one – into the Army and made it a job that was on the rolls in the Army. He was called Deputy Chief JUSMAGTHAI, which is Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group Thailand. So he was Dep Chief JUSMAGTHAI, and then the job became Dep Chief, but really the chief of the military assistance to Laos was the actual duty.

Now eventually this guy wound up with his office in Bangkok, and he was part of the Bangkok society and he would make occasional trips to Vientiane<sup>18</sup> to coordinate with the ambassador, but basically it was providing materiel to the Laotian armed forces. And then once it crossed the border it came under the control of an extension of this office, but it was under USAID, the Agency for International Development, which was part of the State Department. So you had this cutoff between the Defense Department and the State Department, where the Defense Department paid for the materiel and then it went to the State Department, and the lines of authority were unclear to say the least. What happened to the materiel was unclear also, because it went through this USAID organization and then into the Lao armed forces.

TS: Is this the situation you're walking into at the end of 1971 here?

JV: Yes.

TS: How aware were you that this was the situation as you walked into this job?

JV: I knew what the situation was, but let me go on because I walked into it under different circumstances. After the Dick Stillwell trip, then Melvin Laird, who was then the Secretary of Defense, came to Thailand, and part of what he wanted to look at was how Laos was being supported. In fact that was the main thing he wanted to look at. We did some cursory looks at what was happening to the U.S. Army Support Command Thailand and he

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<sup>18</sup> Vientiane: capital city of Laos.

also visited several of the air bases, but part of his real focus was on how Laos was being supported. It turns out from conversations with Mel Laird years later, he will tell you that he came to check me out and to approve this proposal for the changes in supporting the war in Laos.

TS: Did you know Secretary of Defense Laird before this?

JV: No, no. Never met him before that. But I traveled for a couple days. I traveled around Thailand with Secretary Laird. Then years later Mel Laird stood up and said in conferences, "I came to Thailand to check Vessey out and I sent him to Laos." So it was clear that that was part of the plan. Then the plan was that the JCS would change the duty station of the Dep Chief JUSMAGTHAI to Udorn, Thailand, with an office in Udorn, Thailand, instead of having the office in Bangkok. The office would move to Udorn, which was just across the border from Vientiane.

TS: Where the air base was.

JV: Yes. Then I would have the authority and the responsibility for all of the U.S. money. It all came from the Defense budget. The money that went to the CIA for the war in Laos, the money that went to USAID for supporting the Lao armed forces and so forth, all that came from the Defense budget. I was to have total authority over the money that went to the war in Laos, and then I was to coordinate with the ambassador in Laos about the strategy for the U.S. war in Laos, with the ambassador and with the CIA station chief for the strategy of U.S. support for the war in Laos. I would have control of the funds.

TS: Were these appropriated funds that were tagged for activities in Laos?

JV: Indeed. Indeed they were, but it was a part of the Defense budget that was not...it was the black part of the Defense budget.

TS: So this wasn't publicly tagged money that said, it's going to Laos.

**(30:50)**

JV: Right. Right. But it was well known in the Congress, that is the committees in the Congress knew what it was. For example, Senator Symington<sup>19</sup> put a limitation of \$250 million that was to go to the war in Laos. There was no cap on money that was going to the war in Laos. But that excluded their Air Force bombing money that went into Laos it was excluded from that. That was part of the Air Force overall budget, so it was basically support to the irregulars through the CIA and to so-called Thai volunteer force and to the Laotian armed forces. It turned out to be challenging.

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<sup>19</sup> William Stuart Symington, Jr. (1901-88); Secretary of the Air Force, 1947-50; Democratic U.S. Senator from Missouri, 1953-76. Gen Vessey adds: "Before Senator Symington's restrictions there was no legislative limit on what could go to the war in Laos." Written comments, summer 2014.

TS: Now what kind of pre-departure briefings did you receive, whether it's about finances or who was in Laos doing what in order to prepare you for taking charge here?

JV: I had gone with Dick Stillwell and we made a thorough run of that, so I a good knowledge of who was doing what and who. I knew that Kriangsak Chomanan, for example, was the guy that was overseeing the so-called Thai volunteer force that went into Laos. They were organized basically as a Thai infantry division. They were organized as Thai infantry divisions, the so-called volunteers, whether they were volunteers or "You are now a Thai volunteer in Laos," or whatever it was.

TS: Do you feel you were completely informed of the actors and the funds and the activities in Laos by the time you went there?

JV: Well, I certainly wasn't completely informed. I would say that if you asked me that question I would say I was never completely informed. (*chuckles*)

TS: Is that because of the nature of what was going on there?

JV: Yes. Right. You had different actors with different bosses and different agendas, and people who had been there a long time. The CIA had been operating in Laos for many years and had their own core of very competent advisors who were working with the irregular forces that they had recruited in Laos and had a major support operation operating out of Udorn.

TS: There were a lot of actors in Laos. As I read and prepared for this today, there's the CIA, there's USAID, there's the State Department, there are the Thais, there are U.S. Special Forces, there are a lot of actors on this stage.

JV: Yes.

TS: How would you describe the intersection or the interface, the cooperation...I mean that's too strong a word...between these various groups or agencies?

JV: It was pretty good. We had a couple of very strong ambassadors in Laos who had a pretty good understanding. The guy that was there when I went in was G. McMurtrie Godley,<sup>20</sup> Mac Godley, who was a tough cookie and had a good understanding of what was going on.

TS: He was there when you arrived.

JV: Yes.

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<sup>20</sup> George McMurtrie Godley (1917-99); U.S. diplomat. Ambassador to Laos, 1969-73.

TS: There are a number of accounts of your first encounters with Godley, and I'll let you sort of describe that as you wish here.

JV: (*chuckles*) I got my orders from the Secretary of Defense through the Joint Chiefs to report to the ambassador in Laos on a certain date.

TS: In or out of uniform?

JV: Out of uniform. I went to Vientiane on that date and checked into the embassy.

TS: Point of information: Were you just traveling on a civilian passport?

JV: Yes. But nobody asked for a passport.

TS: When you crossed the border no one asked for it?

JV: No. The border between Laos and Thailand was porous to say the least.

TS: It could be just crossed casually.

JV: Right. Right. Yes. Flew in a U.S. Army helicopter into Vientiane.

TS: That's pretty casually.

JV: Yes. I went to the embassy and made my presence known. The Deputy Chief of Mission, Monty Stearns, came out and said that the ambassador wasn't there right now. He suggested that I get a room in Vientiane and spend a couple of days looking around and checking in with the other characters, the military attaché, the CIA station chief, and the AID chief, and then come back. No – he said he'd call me and let me know when to come back. I didn't receive any call. I did as he suggested. I had some time with Hugh Tovar,<sup>21</sup> who was then the CIA Station Chief, with the military attaché. I looked around and saw the chief of the AID mission and had a good chat with him, but heard nothing in a day or two and went back to the embassy.

TS: They knew who you were, right?

JV: Oh, yes. They had received the same orders. So Monty Stearns came out again and told me the ambassador wasn't quite ready to see me. I said, "I've been ordered to report to him, and I'd really like to carry out those orders." About that time Mac Godley came strolling out of his office and roared that he didn't want any blankety-blank Army generals on his territory. (*chuckles*)

TS: You didn't know Godley, right?

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<sup>21</sup> B. Hugh Tovar: CIA station chief in Laos, September 1970 – May 1973.

JV: No. I never met him. So I explained to him that while I didn't necessarily want to be on his territory, I had been ordered to come there and report to him. So after some argument ...

TS: What did the argument focus around? Was it a turf thing?

JV: It was turf. Right.

TS: Am I correct in interpreting this, that Godley thinks that with you, a brigadier general there, that you're going to usurp his authority somehow?

JV: We've talked about how complicated the circumstances were, where the money came from, but yet under the earlier Eisenhower Doctrine, he was the guy in charge in Laos, and he believed that he was in charge, and it was complicated enough for him with the various players that were already there and the various things that were going on. He clearly thought that one more guy with a spoon stirring the pot here in Laos is not only unnecessary but further complicates matters for me. I'm sure that was his look at things. We talked a bit about the funds, about who was in charge of the funds, and that it had been made clear to me and was clear in my orders that I was in charge of all the funds, the U.S. funds, going to the war in Laos except for the Air Force bombing that was taking place and suggested that if we were to make that work that we really had to find some way to cooperate.

TS: And what kind of understanding did you and the ambassador come to?

JV: The next thing he said was that he didn't want me communicating back channel with the Department of Defense. ... And I told him, "I really can't deprive myself of any means of communicating with my superiors, but one thing I will assure you is that I will not send any messages to the Department of Defense about the operation in Laos that I don't share with you, if we can have the same agreement, if you don't send any messages to the State Department about my operation in Laos that you don't share with me." Mac Godley looked at me for a minute and he said, "That's a deal."

TS: Okay. Did it work out the way you agreed?

JV: It did indeed.

TS: Who did you report to in the Department of Defense?

JV: In theory I reported to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. But the way the organization chart then came out I reported to the Commander in Chief Pacific, who was then John McCain, Sr., the present Senator McCain's father.

TS: This is in Hawaii still?

JV: He's in Hawaii. Right.

TS: Thinking about all these actors, and you're walking in end of '71, how would you describe U.S. operations in Laos at that time? What were we doing and what were we trying to do?

JV: It was sort of like McNamara's "keep the South Vietnamese from losing" objective that he announced when he sent the first American ground force troops into Viet Nam. We were trying to pursue the war, the very visible war, that was going on in Viet Nam. Of course the North Vietnamese were using the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos for supplying the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong in Viet Nam, through Laos. Then Laos itself had its own war going on with the Pathet Lao,<sup>22</sup> who were supported by the North Vietnamese. In addition to that, of course the Chinese had an incursion into Laos and in fact controlled a large part of Laos that was not under the control of the government, and were building a road down to the Mekong River. And the Russians of course are involved also providing support to the Pathet Lao.

TS: One could get the idea that if the Americans are there with military people out of uniform like yourself coordinating agencies, that the Russians are probably doing the same thing?

JV: Yes. And the Chinese.

TS: Were you aware of the presence of the Russians and the Chinese while you were there?

JV: Oh, sure. In fact one of the things we did one year was go to the king's boat races, to the royal capitol of Laos. Of course there you had the presence of the Chinese and Russians as well as westerners. It was interesting. Avis and I went. We were seated down in the front row, and I think both the Russians and the Chinese military attaches were there and they came around and stood right in front of us and took our pictures. I was there in civilian clothes.

TS: They knew who you were.

JV: In a white ice cream suit. Right. Of course they obviously knew who I was and came around and took a nice picture of me. I had my camera, so I went around and took a picture of them.

TS: This – I hesitate to use the word game but I'll use it anyway – game, of knowing that you're all there and sort of opening spying on each other almost.

JV: It's surreal.

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<sup>22</sup> Pathet Lao: a communist political and military organization in Laos, formed in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

TS: Yes. How would you describe that? It's like cloak and dagger, but without any cloaks.

JV: Right. Right. I'd say that's probably a pretty good description. On the other hand, where the fighting was taking place was very real.

TS: That adds to the surreal nature of all this, of this almost comic cloak and dagger routine going on in Vientiane, and this serious struggle in the countryside.

JV: Yes. Serious trouble in the countryside. But we're in Luang Prabang of course, which is the royal capitol, which is much farther north and it was questionable whether it was under government control or not.

TS: Control. You mentioned the Pathet Lao. What was your understanding at that time of the strength and the significance of the Pathet Lao?

JV: The Pathet Lao were not very good. Where they weren't directly assisted by the North Vietnamese, they did not fight very well.

TS: Were they an organization that needed to be taken seriously and confronted?

JV: They were an organization that needed to be taken seriously, because they got military support from the outside, and they were genuine political contestants to the Laotian government. Souvanna Phouma<sup>23</sup> was then the Prime Minister of Laos, and one of his brothers or half-brothers, Souphanouvong,<sup>24</sup> was the leader of the Pathet Lao or at least the government in opposition.

TS: Speaking of Souvanna Phouma, Prime Minister at that time, and the king of Laos really, how did you interact with each of them?

**(50:35)**

JV: Not much. I saw Souvanna when Mac Godley would have him for lunch or something like that and he'd invite me to sit on the lunch with him. What we eventually devised was a plan that tried to get as much of the productive agricultural land, the rice growing land and the coffee plantations and so forth, under the control of the Lao government. That is that we would, between the Royal Lao armed forces and the Thai volunteers and the irregular forces, that we would secure most of that land. By the time the ceasefire came we had, I'd say, 85-90% of the productive agricultural land in Laos under the control of the Lao government and probably 75% of the population.

TS: So you didn't interact with the king of Laos or the Prime Minister really.

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<sup>23</sup> Souvanna Phouma (1901-84); Lao politician. Prime Minister of Laos several times during the years 1951-75.

<sup>24</sup> Prince Souphanouvong (1909-95); member of Lao royal family and president of Laos, 1975-91.

JV: Other than on these special social occasions.

TS: Were you more likely to interact with Royal Lao Army figures, Soutchay Vongsavanh or people like this?

JV: Yes. But the Royal Lao Army was not a particularly effective force. At that time the major battles were being fought by the Hmong, with the CIA advice and assistance, and the Thai volunteers. But there were parts of the Royal Lao Army that were pretty good, that had fairly effective leadership and did well, and it was along the southern provinces around Savannakhet and Pakse. Soutchay Vongsavanh, I don't know whether we've mentioned him before.

TS: Yes. He's one person I wanted to bring up. He was eventually general and commander of Military Region 5, is that right?

JV: Yes. Region 4.

TS: So you knew him.

JV: Very well.

TS: Competent?

JV: Yes. Competent and a real hero, a real soldier. One of the ones that would have been a leader in Laos, if the Communists were not able to pull this great coup that they did in 1975.

TS: After the ceasefire had been in effect.

JV: Right. Soutchay eventually came to this country. He was a refugee in this country and showed up at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Falls Church on a Sunday, because he had heard that we attended that church and he was looking for me. The congregation was supporting refugees from Southeast Asia and the pastor was at that time just appealing for more support for some of the Vietnamese families that we were supporting. I looked across the aisle...

TS: You didn't know he was coming.

JV: No. I saw Soutchay sitting there and I jumped up and introduced Soutchay to the congregation and then we had a session afterward. He had a job in a filling station, and he was there with his wife Lily and their children. The day before the Communists really took over, after the coup had clearly begun, the government had ordered a meeting and had all the military leaders were told to show up and they were some of the brightest people in Laos. Soutchay said that he went home and he told Lily that he wasn't going to that

meeting and that he and Lily and their kids were going to cross the Mekong that night and go into Thailand. And they did.

The next day those other people were all arrested and eventually killed. Soutchay is the only one of that group who I had in my little black book as the future leaders of Laos that survived that. Anyway, Soutchay, we met that day at St. Paul's Lutheran and we got Soutchay a job on the guard force at Dulles International Airport and before long he was the deputy commander of the guard force. Somebody proposed hiring a contractor to write the history of the war in Laos, and I said, "I've got the expert that you need on that project." We got Soutchay involved in that project and eventually the Defense Intelligence Agency hired him. I don't know whether he's retired from the Defense Intelligence Agency now, but he spent at least the next thirty years working for the Defense Intelligence Agency. We met the winter before last, at a Laotian army reunion in St. Paul.

TS: No kidding.

JV: Yes.

TS: Excellent story.

JV: He came from Washington knowing that I would be there. Soutchay came from Washington to attend.

TS: That's excellent. Excellent story. So one of the interesting people that you met and stayed in touch with. You mentioned Mac Godley, U.S. ambassador. What kind of relationship did you have with, or interactions with, for example the CIA Chief of Station, Hugh Tovar, or CIA operations head Pat Landry?

JV: I had close cooperative relations with all three of those people. Mac Godley and I became fast friends by the time we parted ways in Laos. In fact we visited Godley at his retirement home in New York several times and I spoke at the memorial service for Mac. Hugh Tovar is still alive and still a good friend and has visited here. Sat in the chair you're sitting in a number of times. I'm sure that he'll be back again as long as he's able to travel. Pat Landry is dead now. Pat Landry was an ex-U.S. Army noncommissioned officer who had this job of supporting the irregulars in Laos, and did it out of Thailand for many years.

TS: These are disparate organizations loosely moving in the same direction but with different plans or ideals. How do you coordinate these without friction? Or was there friction?

JV: I think to talk about all of those people, they were all loyal Americans pursuing what they believed was the United States' objective as it had been outlined by their superiors in their own organization. You start from that common ground. We all had that common ground in doing it. You can start out with the idea, our team is smarter than your team, but that won't get you anywhere. You have to start out with the basic assumption that you're all pursuing the same objective maybe with a little different colored paint on it or

something, but it's the same objective. Cooperate in pursuing those objectives and recognize that each of you brings certain restrictions, like with me the big restriction was we had to stay within the amount of money that the Department of Defense had allocated. That was a law I couldn't break, no matter what.

TS: Your bank account had so much money in it.

JV: Yes.

TS: How did you physically transfer money? Was it actual cash that you delivered, or how was money delivered?

JV: No, no. We didn't change of the channels for the way the money came. What we did is account for it, and set up a separate accounting system to make sure that what was supposed to be charged to the Defense Department, and what was going to be charged to the Defense Department, was known by my people keeping track of the money because that was to be the accounting for it. So it put a little different color on the operations of the CIA and how they did things in order to stay within the limits.

For example, we had tremendous air support and we had Air America, which was an outfit that was built by the CIA to provide air support of all kinds and provide the pilots and maintenance and operations. They leased airplanes. They owned airplanes. Of course they were used...I don't want to say they were used inefficiently, but the efficiency wasn't a major part of the way they looked at it before that time. But once we had these monetary restrictions, the money that came from the Defense Department to pay for their operations had to be accounted for rather strictly. So instead of sending one plane that was going to a certain part of Laos and take a load of something there and another plane going to another part of Laos and come back to Vientiane, why not look and see if we couldn't put both loads on the same plane and fly from point A to point B and then back to Vientiane with one airplane instead of taking two airplanes to make just about the same trip in each direction. Things like that became far more important after these monetary restrictions were put on us.

**(1:05:10)**

TS: The war in Viet Nam in 1971 and '72 continues to be challenging for the United States.

JV: And we're withdrawing forces.

TS: We're withdrawing forces., right. The game is changing there.

JV: Right.

TS: The changing of the game in Viet Nam, how is this impacting the game, as it were, in Laos?

JV: Before that time many of the operations, or some of the operations that were conducted in Laos weren't simply for the security of Laos but they were to support the operation in

Viet Nam. For example much of the CIA irregular effort was aimed at interrupting the Ho Chi Minh Trail at various places. The importance of some of the things that the CIA had done with the irregular force in Laos to support the war in Viet Nam, some of it became more important, some of it became less important than it had been in the past. But at the same time, the North Vietnamese made it clear that they were going to make a major effort to take Laos out of the war.

For example there was a major attack on Vang Pao's<sup>25</sup> headquarters at Luang Thieng. It was a touch and go operation, and there was also a major attack on the Bolovens Plateau, which was a major source of income for Laos because it's the place where coffee grows. It's a big coffee plantation actually, and a lot of other things that grow there, but coffee was not big but an important hard currency earner for Laos.

The North Vietnamese brought in additional forces into Laos. Not a lot of forces by the standards that were used in going into South Viet Nam, but they were significant forces in terms of the war in Laos and the way the war was fought. For example, they brought in some [Soviet] medium tanks, some T-34s, and they had not been seen in Laos before. The main tank that had been used in Laos earlier was the [Soviet] PT-76, which was the amphibious light tank. It was a tank that would frighten Laotian infantrymen, but it wasn't in terms of usefulness on the battlefield, wasn't particularly useful. But if it scared your infantry out of their position, it worked. And they brought in the 170 millimeter guns. Long range cannons that could not be reached by any of the counterfire ground cannons that the Laotian forces had, and they made major attacks on Luang Thieng and also on the Bolovens.

We knew it was coming, and we worked hard to prepare for it, but within the budget that we had. We built additional battalions in the Laotian armed forces, which drew some criticism. I knew we had a short period of time in which to add some additional battalions, so I went to the 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces outfit in Thailand and asked for help in training these new Laotian battalions. They agreed to provide the support, but they were Special Forces soldiers that showed up in Laos wearing their Green Berets, and wouldn't you know that – I've forgotten whether it was a *New York Times* correspondent or a *Washington Post* correspondent – saw them in Pakse or Savannakhet. I've forgotten which it was, and immediately it showed up in the headlines of the newspapers in the United States. Of course it stirred up a little ire in the blood of my boss, Melvin Laird, who sent a back channel message to me threatening beheading or something like that. (*chuckles*)

TS: So he was a little upset. Yes. Because that would be a breach of the agreement, which was no uniformed personnel, right?

JV: Yes.

TS: It's ironic how that was seen as making a difference, when all the actors you've described, the North Vietnamese, the Americans and I assume the Russians and Chinese are all doing this with their forces.

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JV: It's façade. It's a Potemkin Village.

TS: But the whole country it sounds like was operating under this kind of, we know what's going on. We even take pictures of who the other side are, but we keep them out of uniform.

JV: And of course without owning up to disobeying my superiors, of course what I had the Special Forces soldiers do is take off their green berets when they came across the Mekong River and then go back on the other side of the river at night and put the berets back on when they went back to the other side of the river. Or we wouldn't have gotten those battalions trained.

TS: So there really is this charade, isn't there, in Laos during this time?

JV: Indeed. Indeed.

TS: Is it safe to say that if we didn't do it the other sides we suspect would have done it anyway themselves, and so we sort of had to play along this game?

JV: As we looked at it, the other side didn't have the restrictions that we had.

TS: What do you mean by that?

JV: We didn't have anybody like *New York Times* reporters up there reporting on what the Chinese or the Russians did. When we went along the Mekong River you could see where the Chinese were building this highway, and we sent spies up that road, or people to check on who the Chinese had it was clear that it wasn't Soviet engineers building that road, it was military organization. So people ask me, "Tell me about the war in Laos. How was it?" Well, my answer to them is, "If I told you, you wouldn't believe it and I'm not even sure I believe it myself anymore." (*chuckles*)

TS: What you're describing already is a really unique and almost bizarre. You used the word "surreal." That's good. A conflict that's really a great example of how the Cold War worked, with proxies and even more than proxies, it's the countries themselves. But not engaging directly with people in uniform, and working through various organizations.

JV: Yes, right. True. Surrogates.

TS: This being the case, outside in the countryside now there's a serious war going on. How often did you feel for your own personal safety?

JV: (*sighs*) Frankly I was too busy to even think about that. In fact, I hate to even say this, but I took people to be shot at just to show them that there was shooting going on in the war in Laos. In fact I took Mac Godley one day. And Mac was a brave man. He'd been ambassador in the Congo and all sorts of places. He saw the war from his office in

Vientiane, and trying to explain to him what was going on, I took him up into the Plain of Jars where we were engaged one day and had the helicopter drop us off so that we could watch a ground operation from the ground. In fact, we got caught out there with some mortar fire and oh, man, I thought, this is bad news if I'm going to get the ambassador in danger here, I'm in real trouble. But we eventually got out of there. But I think Mac actually enjoyed being able to say that he was under mortar fire out there on the battlefield.

When it was clear that the North Vietnamese were going to bring in tanks, we organized a tank killer training program. We brought in the U.S. Army LAW, Light Anti-Tank Weapon, which is basically a soldier, rocket fired anti-tank weapon. If you hit the tank at the right spot it will knock the tank out. In the past it had been decided that while the LAWs, which are quite expensive, the cost for each is fairly expensive, that it was too expensive to issue them to the Laotians because they will shoot at something other than a tank and there weren't very many tanks in Laos and we didn't want them to have them. When the Vietnamese were going to bring in tanks, we looked at the idea of building a corps of tank killers. So we set up a special tank killer training program and brought selected members of various units to this center where we gave them the tank killer training program. Then we offered a bonus: if they got a tank, they'd get a bonus. So we made braver people out of our tank killer trainees, and in fact it worked. When the North Vietnamese attacked Luang Thieng the battle turned. They had three T-34s.

TS: Those are Soviet made tanks, right?

JV: Right. Three T-34s attacking up this trail, and they had poor tank tactics on their part, using tanks where tanks weren't particularly effective and were particularly vulnerable, but I'm sure they knew what we knew, that the sound of tanks generally scared many of our Laotian troops away and understandably, because they didn't have any tanks and they didn't have the weapons that would kill tanks. Most of the outfits that were defending that ridge at Luang Thieng disappeared, but a couple of our tank killer teams stayed there and they hit the first tank and knocked it out blocking the road for the others, and they hit the third tank and knocked it out, pinning the second tank in between which the North Vietnamese abandoned. So we wound up with the big three tank force that the North Vietnamese had committed to the war in Laos and we saved the position – with a little ingenuity and a little special training and a few dollars of a bonus.

TS: Which was all part of your budget. Could be budgeted that way.

JV: Months later, when we had moved an outfit up between the Plain of Jars and Luang Prabang, there was a regular Laotian infantry unit and I was flying in a helicopter and saw a PT-76 approaching this position from some miles away. It was a lone single tank. I reported to the English speaking man who provided air support, close air support with the unit, that the tank was approaching and that I would report it to the air base and get some T-28s,<sup>26</sup> which were the Laotian Air Force's fighters. They were basically a trainer, but we

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<sup>26</sup> North American T-28 Trojan: piston-engine military trainer aircraft, introduced 1950 and used by the U.S. Navy and Air Force.

had them carrying 250 pound bombs. The Laotians did it very well, and made it into a good ground support weapon. I made that call to the, I've forgotten what they call these guys, the ground controllers, and I got a call back a few minutes later telling me to please cancel the T-28s because our tank killers want the bonus. (*chuckles*)

TS: This carrot is working. As far as having success or being able to chalk a success in working with local people to motivate them in terms that they could relate to, this is all fighting a war in a sense that was never a declared war. It was never even a war that was actually happening publicly. Because of the way that this war was never officially declared and was sort of worked out in this choreographed method where everyone understood everyone else as you've described it, how was that a handicap in prosecuting this conflict in Laos? You've got, if not a strait-jacket on, a set of handcuffs.

JV: Yes. Our resources were limited. The forces were limited. The objectives were limited.

TS: What were the objectives exactly?

JV: The objective that we agreed on was to give the government of Laos as much control of as much of the country and particularly the economically important parts of the country as we could. We knew that a ceasefire was going to happen sooner or later.

TS: By 1972 this was already on the horizon.

JV: Underway. Right. There was a ceasefire in Viet Nam before there was a ceasefire in Laos.

TS: Right. So is a clock ticking in a way?

**(1:23:50)**

JV: The clock is ticking in a way. So we're pushing to try and get as much done as we can get done in the time available. And of course the Vietnamese are pushing. As I said, they made these last attacks. They made another attack on the Bolovens later than that and were successful in the beginning. It was defended by Thai volunteers, and [they] actually kicked the Thai volunteers off the Bolovens. But we were able to re-equip the outfit that got kicked off the Bolovens and add reinforcements and the Thais, to their credit and the credit of their leadership, recognized that we can't let this happen and they went back and took the Bolovens back again from the North Vietnamese. That was just shortly before the ceasefire.

These were important operations and as I say, they weren't big operations but they were important. The North Vietnamese had brought in the 170 millimeter guns and were shelling Luang Thieng. We were limited in the amount of U.S. air that we could get. We may have discussed Charlie Gabriel earlier, but anyway, Charlie Gabriel was an Air Force officer that I had known before. Just casually. But he was commanding the F-4<sup>27</sup> wing at

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<sup>27</sup> McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom: two-seat, twin-engine, jet fighter/fighter-bomber. Introduced 1960 and used throughout the Vietnam War.

Udorn. He and I had played handball in the Pentagon and Jerry O'Malley, who was another Air Force officer, was commanding the reconnaissance wing at Udorn. The picture takers. So the three of us would play handball after midnight in Udorn.

And I had a good relationship with the Air Force photo interpreters. I would often go visit the photo interpreters at Udorn early in the morning before they briefed their own commander, who was ostensibly the vice commander, the 7/13<sup>th</sup> Air Force, which was the air component in Thailand supporting the war in Viet Nam and in Laos whenever they got authority to fly sorties for Laos, which wasn't often. But anyway, I went out and did a crater analysis of the 170 fire, which showed me at least at a general azimuth on which it was coming, and then I examined the maps and photographs and picked out a line along which, somewhere along that line, had to be the location of these 170 millimeter cannons. So I asked Jerry O'Malley if he wouldn't have one of his sorties that were going into Viet Nam save enough time on the camera to take pictures along that line. And they did it.

My relationship with the photo interpreters in Udorn got me a little photo interpretation of those particular photographs, and we picked out places that were clearly the places where the 170s were located. Then talking to Charlie Gabriel, to get him to reserve a couple of sorties, a couple of F-4s with their armaments that didn't go into North Viet Nam or that came back with part of the ordnance, to take these photographs. And we marked the photographs. By this time the Air Force gave the targets to the airplanes in terms of coordinates. But we went back to a World War II situation where you circled the target and said, "Hit that point." The fighter pilots love that when you say "hit that point" and identify it on the photograph and they can identify it on the ground. They can hit it. And that's what they did.

The next day we took another set of photographs after those strikes and you could see the remnants of the 170 millimeters cannons. They both had been destroyed. The trails were sticking up in the air. In fact a couple days later we went out there with a helicopter and picked up one of the shell casings from the 170 and that shell casing was used in the chairman's quarters at Fort Meyers as an umbrella stand for many years. I think it's now in the National Defense University Library being used as an umbrella stand.

TS: These North Vietnamese guns are manned by North Vietnamese Army soldiers?

JV: Yes.

TS: In uniform?

JV: Yes.

TS: A lay person might say, look, the North Vietnamese are committing soldiers, why aren't we? Why do we continue to play this game? So why did we?

JV: Because we didn't want to appear to be breaking the rules of the agreements we made.

TS: And the North Vietnamese were also a signatory to that agreement, right?

JV: Yes. There's no point in us arguing the politics of that situation, because (A) I didn't have any control over that at the time, and (B) changing it today. It is a little crazy.

TS: I know.

JV: But it was what it was.

TS: Yes. And you knew that there were limits to your influence and what you could command, and the fact was that even with the forces there you could only do so much.

JV: Yes. You had to do things in unusual ways. You could say if Charlie Gabriel and I hadn't met on the handball court at the Pentagon, those 170 cannons might have changed the war. But they didn't.

TS: True enough. All right.

JV: We had met and they didn't get to change the war.

TS: The war is changing. In fact the pressure at home is ongoing in the United States and the popularity of the war, even though we're decreasing troop levels, is not very popular. How did the pressure to reduce the U.S. presence in Southeast Asia, how did this impact your role and what you were able to do?

JV: Not really at all other than we knew that the war, that the United States' overall support for the war in Southeast Asia is going to wind down. Now we had our limits fiscally. We had some limits. For a while we had a platoon of UH1Cs, which was the first gunship that the U.S. Army had. It was before the Cobras. We had a platoon of those. But they were cut short. The time that we had them was cut short. I think we had them for only a short period of time anyway. The drawdown in Viet Nam didn't change us much except that it changed perhaps the outlook of the strategy. Mac Godley considered himself a strategist, and he might have been one, but I would have looked elsewhere for my strategic advice. One of the things he did each day was, they got a couple of sorties of B-52s. He would plot where the B-52 strikes would go in Laos and they were probably ineffectual as far as impacting the war in Laos was concerned. They certainly weren't ineffectual as far as the people of Laos were concerned, because it was as lot of bombs someplace. Anyway, Mac, bless his heart, decided that we were getting stronger in Laos, which we were. We were actually achieving some success.

By this time the DCMs<sup>28</sup> had changed. Monty Stearns had gone off elsewhere, and John Gunther Dean<sup>29</sup> had become the Deputy Chief of Mission. And John Gunther and I hit it off well. Hugh Tovar and John Gunther Dean and I were the ones who came up with this: "Let's get control of as much territory before the ceasefire comes along, and particularly the

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<sup>28</sup> Deputy Chief of Mission

<sup>29</sup> John Gunther Dean (b. 1926); U.S. diplomat.

economically valuable territory.” But Mac Godley decided that we were now probably strong enough to conduct a major operation toward Viet Nam, toward the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and disrupt things in South Viet Nam. So he, without consulting Hugh Tovar or myself, and I don’t know whether he consulted John Gunther Dean or not, called General Abrams and told him that he had this idea and that he would send me to Saigon to discuss it with General Abrams.

It was a dumb idea in the first place. It exceeded our capabilities and probably wasn’t going to have much influence on the war in South Viet Nam even if we were successful. But anyway, I got a call from Don Cowles, who was then Chief of Staff in Saigon, who had been commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored when I was Chief of Staff of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored. Don Cowles told me that General Abrams had gotten a call from Ambassador Godley and Godley wanted to send me over to explain this thing. I told Don Cowles, “I don’t want to come. General Abrams has more to do than talk to me about a dumb idea.” And Don Cowles said that General Abrams has said for me to make arrangements for you to come, that he promised Ambassador Godley that he would talk to you about this idea. So I said, “Okay.” Don Cowles said, “We’ll send an airplane over to pick you up in Vientiane and fly you in to Saigon tomorrow.” So I told Mac Godley, “I’m embarrassed to go over there because, as much as I like you, I think you’ve got a bad idea here.”

TS: So you talked about this with Godley?

JV: Yes. But Godley said, “I don’t think it’s all that bad. I want you to go over and explain it to General Abrams.” It was such then that you had to arrive in Saigon after dark, and it was considered dangerous enough to go into Tan Son Nhat that you had to make a steep approach. We flew in and a driver met me and took me out to General Abrams’ trailer. General Abrams came and said, “Now tell me about this idea that Ambassador Godley has.” I had some maps and I unfolded the maps and I told him what the idea was.

General Abrams said, “What do you think of that idea?” “Well, frankly, Sir, I don’t think it will work and I don’t think it’s worth the effort and I don’t think we should do it.” We were sitting around a coffee table, and General Abrams hit the coffee table with his fist, and he had a little canister with a bunch of swagger sticks were sort of things that were passed around in those days and these swagger sticks went flying and he said, “You’re damn right it’s a bad idea, and it won’t work. (*chuckles*) And do you know why it’s a bad idea?” I said, “It’s a bad idea because I don’t think it will work.” He says, “It’s a bad idea because it will require me to give you air support that I can’t afford to give you.” And he banged again. “And,” he said, “I want you to go back and tell Ambassador Godley that he’s not getting another blanket-blank sortie of air support for any nutty ideas like this. You understand?” I said, “Yes, Sir.” He said, “What are you going to tell him?” “I’ll tell him he’s not going to get any more air support for poor ideas.” He banged the table and said, “You’re going to tell him he’s not going to get another air support sortie for any damn dumb ideas like this.” And then he turned to me and he said, “How are Avis and the kids?” (*chuckles*) **(1:41:45)**

TS: So you had to break this to Godley too, right? That it’s not going to happen. Godley wasn’t a strategist.

JV: Yes.

TS: The punch line that General Abrams delivered there reminds me that you've living this interesting life here. You're undercover, but you're not really because they take your picture when you go places and they know who you are and all this. What kind of office did you have? Who worked for you? What kind of digs did you have here in Laos?

JV: I didn't have anything in Laos other than a room where I could sleep when I didn't get back to Udorn at night.

TS: So you basically spent nights in Udorn.

JV: Most nights I spent in Udorn. The nights I spent in Laos I can probably count on my hands, fingers and toes maybe doubled. Maybe thirty, forty nights. But many of those nights were spent in operational positions, like when the attack was on Long Thieng. I stayed in Long Thieng at night, which made Mac Godley I think mad and scared because he didn't want any American casualties that he'd have to report.

TS: Did we have American casualties in Laos?

JV: No. Well, we had CIA advisors that were casualties, and we had a few American military people that operated intelligence posts. And there were a number of casualties at an Air Force intercept station up north of the Plain of Jars. Yes, we had casualties but we didn't have fighting units, so they weren't like the casualties in Viet Nam.

TS: Do we have to cover up those casualties because then we have to admit to having them in Laos?

JV: Yes, we did.

TS: How did we do that?

JV: They were just reported as casualties in the war in Southeast Asia.

TS: Vaguely as opposed to...

JV: Yes. Right. In fact, there are still myths in stories that exist about some of these installations that were attacked and where we had casualties.

TS: You mean that there's like things that people say happened that didn't or...

JV: Yes. I think the truth has been disclosed completely, but the myths continue.

TS: I don't know about the myths. What kind of myths, as an example.

JV: The most famous one, an Air Force radio intercept station was attacked and there were a number of people that were killed and some allegedly captured.

TS: So because of the nature of this conflict we couldn't really openly say that this happened.

JV: Yes. Right.

TS: Can it contribute down the road to people using and misusing information for their own purposes?

JV: The answer is yes, but when you deprive families of the truth of what happened to their people you get yourself into trouble. It's like the general business of missing in action in Southeast Asia. [It's not] part of the oral history, but you and I perhaps discussed it earlier about looking for the missing in action, which I was involved in years after the period I was talking about now. We created a situation that caused people to be declared missing in action, when all the evidence pointed to them being dead. An airplane crashes with a load of bombs on it, and the other airplanes on the mission didn't see any parachute come out. The highest probability is that you had no survivors from the crew of that airplane, whether it was one or two or whatever it was. But because the way the remuneration structure was, if the person were declared dead the widow got the widow a stipend, which wasn't particularly large, whereas if the crew were declared missing in action the widow or widows would continue to get whatever pay had been allocated to them, until the final determination had been made about what happened to the person.

TS: And then they would get the widow's benefit anyway.

JV: Yes. So it was driven by taking care of families and most people elected to be declared missing. Of course that turned out to be cruel to the widows, because most of these people were young women who could have remarried and had another life and yet many, particularly those who had children, out of loyalty to the father of their children and to their former husband elected to remain true to the person missing in action. So it was a policy decision that drove cruel results in the society, and generally based on untruths.

TS: Yes. So not quite lies, but close.

JV: Yes.

TS: I supposed one could rationalize by saying until remains are discovered that proves...I mean one could I suppose legitimately argue that a person is missing, but like you just described with that example the chances are highly unlikely.

JV: Yes.

TS: With this U.S. mission in Laos such as it was, with the goals and objectives that you've described, how do you feel that you were able to bring any sense of cohesiveness to all these parts and actors?

**(1:50:00)**

JV: I would say that the best evidence was that the government of Laos, at the time of the ceasefire, was in better condition than it had been throughout most of the war in Laos, that is in terms of controlling people and territory. We stayed within our budget. We did as we were directed by the people that the people of the United States had chosen to represent them, both in the Congress and in the presidency, and followed the orders. And those of us who did it at that time have remained friends since then. I'm sorry that Laos fell when it did; it was a great tragedy, and I think that perhaps our withdrawal of support from South Viet Nam at that time had some contribution to it.

It was best represented by a trip I took years later as JCS Chairman. I went back to Thailand and Kriangsak Chomanan, whom I had mentioned here, was in charge of supporting the Thai volunteers and Thailand's effort in Laos was then the supreme commander of the Thai armed forces, comparable to the JCS Chairman. He had invited me to come to Laos as JCS Chairman of the U.S., and I accepted that invitation. We toured the country and one of the places that he wanted to stop at was a veteran's farming village near Chang Mai. If you know Thailand, Chang Mai is in the northwest part of Thailand and a very popular tourist location.

TS: Yes. That's how I know it.

JV: But anyway, I agreed that we should visit this place. It had been built with the advice of our Veterans Affairs Department and the U.S. Agricultural Department, and it was modeled somewhat after something we did in this country after World War I, where we provided farmland to veterans and some assistance and advice in farming. In fact right here in Minnesota, Orchard Hills, which is out near Buck Hill, the ski place. *(phone call; voices in background)* It's about halfway between Lakeville and South Minneapolis. But anyway, he wanted to visit this veteran's project, and we went there.

Now to this day I don't know whether what happened was a setup or whether it actually occurred spontaneously. But we came into this veteran's project and one of the first veterans that we saw sort of casually, or it appeared to be casually anyway, was a fellow with one leg and he recognized me. We talked a little earlier today about the last attack of the Vietnamese on the Bolovens Plateau. Before that attack I went there and stopped to see Soutchay Vongsavanh, who was the Military Region 4 commander, and then went out to this position that the Thai volunteers held on the Bolovens Plateau and visited several outfits. One of the outfits that I visited happened to be the infantry company with which this fellow missing a leg had been the artillery forward observer. He remembered that visit, and he remembered being re-equipped and having to go back out to the Bolovens and re-attack. The North Vietnamese had attacked a few hours after I had visited their position. So he went on to say that there were a number of other Thai volunteers from the war in Laos who would surely like to see me and he was sure he knew how to get them together. Kriangsak turned to me and said, "Can we change our schedule enough to permit this to happen?" I said, "Surely."

So we had a lunch that had been prepared in advance and then after the lunch these former Thai volunteers from the war in Laos gathered in a meeting room and we went into this meeting room. The spokesman was a fellow who had been an infantry battalion commander in the Thai volunteers and was now a farmer growing strawberries for the resorts in Chang Mai. As I said, many is the day I wrestled with whether this whole thing was a setup by Kriangsak or whether it actually happened as spontaneously as they tried to make it appear.

But this fellow got up and talked about the war in Laos. He said that the first thing that he wanted to do was to thank me as a representative of the United States for what the United States had done for Thailand during that particular time and then to thank me personally for what I had done during those last years of the war. He said, "We're standing on ground today that was controlled by Communist insurgents at the time of the war. At the time we were fighting in Laos, and we weren't fighting in Laos for Laos although we wanted a friendly Laos on our border. We weren't fighting for the United States. We were fighting for Thailand." And then he reiterated the fact that this project was on land that was controlled by Communists insurgents at that time. He said, "But today, we're here free. Thailand is free. We have a reasonably democratic government. We grow strawberries here. We ship them to Bangkok as well as sell them to hotels in Chang Mai, and they ride over roads built by the United States Army engineers. We get seafood from the Gulf of Thailand, and we have fresh seafood here. We Thais like fish with our rice." By the time he got done I had tears rolling down my cheeks. (*chuckles*) As I say, it put a perspective on the U.S. involvement in the war in Southeast Asia and the total outcome of what has happened in Southeast Asia that I hadn't appreciated up until that time, and certainly I think many Americans don't appreciate to this day.

TS: I think we still grapple with what to think about the war in Southeast Asia, don't we, as a society, and how to categorize it? It's not cut and dried.

JV: We do. Years later, in 1985, we went to China in January of '85, and I spoke at the Chinese Military Academy, which is the Chinese war college, the equivalent to our National War College. The students are senior colonels or brigadiers or rear admirals in the navy.

TS: You were Chairman [of the JCS].

JV: Yes. I was Chairman. So I knew that I had been invited to make this speech and I cooked up my speech long before we went to China and had it cleared by the Defense Department and State Department, and I gave what I thought was a very apolitical talk. My talk was how democracies build their armed forces. I centered it around looking at the United States armed forces, and I tried to say if you pop the hatch on a tank and look inside you'll find four people. Here's who they are generally; here's who you might find. And then I tried to describe age, education, family, ethnic backgrounds and so forth. If you pop the hatch on a fighter plane the two people you'll find might be these two, and described them

and so forth. So it was pretty pabulum, to say the least. I was accompanied by Xian Chin, who was then the Deputy Chief of the PLA,<sup>30</sup> and a Long Marcher himself.

TS: He goes way back.

**(2:03:00)**

JV: But still a fairly vigorous man. He was in good health and had his wits about him. And unusual – he was a big man; tall, well built. Anyway, I was to have a twenty minute lecture, which turns out to be forty minutes with the translation time at least and then we were to fill out an hour an half I guess. The rest of it was with a question period.

TS: Pretty straightforward stuff.

JV: Yes. Just like going to the U.S. Army War College with somebody from a foreign country lecturing. The first questioner said, “After the United States lost the war in Southeast Asia,” then he went on to ask some question. I’ve frankly forgotten what the question was, but I said that, “I’ll answer your question, but first I would like to address the preface to the question.” My interpreter was a fellow named Eden Wu, who was an American Air Force officer of Chinese extraction who later left the Air Force and was head of the Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong. Eden’s Mandarin was very good.

Then I went on to say that, “The United States didn’t win the war by any understanding I have of the word winning or victory as a military person. On the other hand,” I said, “when I look at the strategic situation in the world before the war, during the war, after the war and today, I come to the conclusion that the United States didn’t lose the war in Southeast Asia. In fact, this may be a cursory conclusion but,” I said, “as I look at the strategic situation today, I see only one real loser. For China, you now have one of your major opponents, the Soviet Union, with a naval base in the South China Sea.”

TS: Cam Ranh Bay, right?

JV: Right. “You’ve just recently had a border dispute with the nation that you supported throughout the war and it didn’t, according to the newspaper reports that I’ve seen, it didn’t come out well. So I see only one real loser to the war in Southeast Asia, and that’s China.” (*chuckles*) Well, I wasn’t sure whether an earthquake had set in or what had happened, but there was sort of a rumble in that auditorium and then there was some applause and then quite a bit of applause.

We had a few more questions and then Xian Chin said, “The time has come to end this session but,” he said, speaking to the audience, “I want you to stay in your seats. I need to talk to General Vessey for a few minutes.” We went back behind the curtain and he said to me, “This is too important for our people to end this right now. I would like to change the schedule and continue this question period until noon, if that’s all right with you. Then we’ll have some lunch and go and proceed with the rest of the schedule.”

TS: Is that indeed what happened then?

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<sup>30</sup> PLA: People’s Liberation Army.

JV: That is indeed what happened.

TS: So there were more people interested in asking questions of you for the rest of that period.

JV: Right.

TS: But I'm thinking of the mid-1980s. How common was it for Chinese military officers to have someone of your stature over there?

JV: That was the first time. That's the first time that the senior American had visited since George Marshall had been there in 1949.

TS: That was before the Chinese Communist Revolution, right? So this is a very big deal.

JV: Yes.

TS: That's a great story. That's also a good place I think, with your permission, to stop for the day. The next time I want to talk a little bit more about the ceasefire and the involvement of the Hmong and that chapter of the Laos experience. What else would you like to add today before we conclude?

JV: I don't think I have anything to add.

TS: Let me turn these machines off.

**END OF INTERVIEW**