

Narrator: Gen John W. Vessey, Jr

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor, Ph.D.

Date of interview: 14 August 2012

Location: Vessey residence, enclosed porch, Garrison, MN

Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, September 2012

Edited for clarity by: Thomas Saylor, Ph.D., January 2013 and January 2014

(00:00) = elapsed time on digital recording

Avis Vessey comments at times during recording. Identified: AVIS

(noise throughout: birds and cicadas, later lawn service – interview takes place on porch)

TS: Today is Tuesday, 14 August 2012. This is interview #17 of our ongoing cycle with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor, and we're here at the Vessey home, right outside of Garrison, Minnesota.

General Vessey, I want to go back today briefly, at the beginning here, to Laos and just to have you clarify briefly from your perspective the presence and the roles in Laos at that time of the Soviet Union and of China.

JV: An interesting question. First, they were counters to the United States obviously, and supporters, both the Soviet Union and China, were supporters of North Viet Nam in the war in Southeast Asia. But at the same time the tension between the two was rising, or it appeared to have been rising, at least somewhat. Certainly by the end of the war in Southeast Asia it had risen considerably. China of course bordered on Laos, and strove for influence in Laos. In fact there was a large part of Laos that was occupied by Chinese armed forces, and the Chinese were building a road to the Mekong from northern Laos.

The role of the Soviets was less evident in Laos. They were there. They had a military attaché in Luang Prabang. There were rumors, and I don't know how much truth there was to the rumors, that they were assisting the Pathet Lao. But the main assisters of the Pathet Lao were certainly the North Vietnamese. So they were two of the panoply of players in Laos. Everybody on the border of Laos had some sort of an oar in that pond.

TS: From the American perspective, did we view the Soviets and the Chinese with equal trepidation or concern? Or did we have a hierarchy of what we were really working on?

JV: While the war was going on, and you had to assume that it would continue to go on despite the negotiations in Paris, the Chinese appeared to be the larger threat because they were occupying more and more territory and moving toward the Mekong. Actually had built a road right up to the Mekong by the end of 1972.

TS: Outside of these main actors on the Cold War stage in Southeast Asia, were there other nations that were part of this equation that we should make sure to talk about?

JV: Of course we've already talked about the Thais and the Thai volunteers, and certainly Thailand had a major interest in Laos. In fact each nation had a claim on a chunk of the other nation at some time. Burma nationally was not a major player, but of course the northwest part of Laos was the so-called Golden Triangle, a major source of drugs for the outside world. So all of the westerners had some concern about what was going on there. A guy by the name of Chao La was considered to be the major kingpin of the drug business, but he was also a fellow who controlled a large part of Laos. Well, not a large part of Laos, but a chunk of Laos that included a number of different tribes.

TS: As such did we need to have conversations with him?

JV: We did. We did indeed.

TS: What was the nature of those conversations, given the fact that he's a non-military actor, or a non-state actor?

JV: Yes. Non-state actor. I wouldn't say he was a non-military actor, because he was a military actor. And before we get into Chao La, you had the remnants of the old Chinese Nationalist forces that were up in the northwest of Laos and Thailand.

TS: He's a non-state actor, but the weapons, are we supplying some of the weapons to him as well?

JV: I don't think we supplied weapons to Chao La. I think the weapons had already arrived. But our interest was in seeing that Chao La supported the Lao government, and that people who went into armed forces went into the armed forces on our side and not on the other side. So that was the main reason for dealing with Chao La. And of course the drugs, cutting off the drug supply. Whether we ever did that or not I don't know, but I know that Chao La said that he wasn't doing it.

TS: Thinking about weapons, and we're talking about a non-state actor and in a situation that is fluid, the *New York Times* at the time had a number of reports of the amount of materiel that was going into Laos that was misappropriated or lost or couldn't be accounted for. Is this the kind of stuff that could have somehow ended up in the hands of someone like Chao La?

JV: Indeed.

TS: Intentionally or unintentionally?

JV: Unintentionally.

TS: How would he have acquired those things?

JV: With money that he had acquired by selling drugs and paying somebody, whether they were members of the Lao government or members of the irregular forces or members of the Thai volunteers, and offering money for arms.

TS: Was corruption, what you're just describing here as an example, something that we simply knew about and had to accept as part of playing the game in Laos?

JV: We did everything we could to prevent it. As long as the weapons and ammunition were in our control, we kept solid control of it. But you can't have allies without arming them, and once you're involved in a war like we were there, and once that goes out of our hands, some of it is applied in the right way and some of it probably the wrong way.

(09:30)

TS: And that's something that we as the United States knew about at the time, that this was happening?

JV: Yes. We knew it was happening and tried as best we could to prevent it.

TS: With mixed success it sounds like.

JV: Obviously. I would say that's true here in the United States today.

TS: What do you mean by that?

JV: Just read the headlines about the Justice Department's gun program, providing guns to the drug people in Mexico.

TS: Right. Accountability questions again.

JV: Yes. Sin is a universal sort of thing.

TS: Touché. I want to ask a couple other questions kind of along the same line, a number of topics that came up as I was researching.

JV: The other thing when we're talking about that, in those days if you traveled around up into the nether regions of Laos, as I did several times, and you see the influence of the westerners from years gone by. For example, if we had time I'd dig out some slides and show you some pictures of these villages on the Lao-Burmese border. And the women with really beautifully decorated costumes, and decorated primarily with pieces of silver that had been hammered into jewelry. If you look at those pieces of silver closely, you'll see that they're old British coins from many years gone by, when the British had influence in that part of the world, Burma particularly.

The other thing you'd see is, you could travel through those villages and you'd see shops in the village and the shops looked fairly uniform. That is, you'd see a meat shop with everything from dead rabbits to sheep or whatever hanging by a hook with flies swarming around. But occasionally you'd run into a village where there were signs, and usually they'd be in Chinese characters. It was a particular tribe that had some roots to

China, and obviously a village that had a written language and people who understood that. The cross-border business between Laos and Burma particularly at that time was interesting, at least very interesting to me, because you'd see villages that got their water from springs in Burma and the water came via an aqueduct built from bamboo into the village in Laos. You think of how the rest of the world of nation states – certainly that doesn't happen. That sort of thing doesn't happen in Europe, or at least it didn't happen for most of Europe's history. But here's how little the concept of nation state influenced the daily lives of the people.

TS: That was an imposition of the colonial period and of the arrival of Europeans in the 19th century.

JV: Yes, yes. We drew borders for them.

TS: That was our game not theirs, right?

JV: Right.

TS: Thinking about Laos, you had business to do there, but you also it sounds like had a chance to travel somewhat extensively through that country.

JV: Yes. Part of it was seeking support for the war effort of the Laotian government.

TS: Apart from your job, if we can step aside from that, what did you appreciate most about a country that really very few westerners knew or even know today?

JV: The resilience of the people. The Hmong are a good example. But their situation was not unique to that particular ethnic group. Most were slash and burn agricultural people. They used the land as long as it was good. None of it was particularly good. But they made it useful and lived on that land, and then moved on. There were some terrible natural disasters that happened. Huge rainstorms. You watch the whole sides of mountains with huge mahogany trees, and these big rainstorms would come and the mountain would be denuded with the trees uprooted and sliding down the mountain. We'd be begging for disaster relief from the federal government, and there the people just pulled up their roots and moved on and camped somewhere else.

TS: When you traveled like this, talking with or communicating with people and looking for support, how do you remember being received by people in these outlying areas?

JV: Generally well. And you don't know whether that's the social custom, that they welcome strangers. They could have been totally disappointed with what we were doing, but they would never show that. You were always welcomed and given food.

TS: Did you wonder which of those it was?

JV: Yes. You always wondered which it was, and of course we had our best intelligence that we had at the time that would indicate to us that this place is semi-hostile or borderline or supportive or whatever it happened to be. But the results were fairly uniform hospitality.

TS: Whom did you typically travel with to these outlying areas?

JV: Often with the CIA station chief, Hugh Tovar, and then some of his people who knew the situation well, and then with native people who worked for the intelligence organization.

TS: Are we talking a team of typically four Americans, or forty Americans?

JV: Oh, no. Four or five.

TS: And were you armed when you went to these places?

JV: It's hard to remember whether we were. We never used them. Yes. But I would say unobtrusively – we didn't carry muskets over our shoulders or anything like that.

TS: Right. And would you hope to leave with some result or was it more public relations and building relationships?

JV: All of the above. Certainly a commitment for continued support of the Laotian government and its military operations would be the most important thing we'd want to get, and we usually got it. Now the results were mixed. I mean, you'd get a commitment for support but not much support.

TS: Could it also be the case that the Pathet Lao or the Soviets or the Chinese or any of these are also visiting the same places looking to extract the same commitment?

JV: Oh, sure. Yes. Right.

TS: And you probably knew that as well, that you were not the only ones.

JV: Right.

TS: How often did you ever encounter any of these other actors, the Soviets or the North Vietnamese, the Chinese.

JV: The only time I ever did was at formal occasions. Usually in Luang Prabang. At the king's boat races or something like that.

TS: And I think as you mentioned last time we talked, each side knew of the others' presence and personnel to a point as well.

JV: Yes.

TS: It's an interesting situation. Are we obeying the spirit or the letter of the non-military presence?

JV: We're not obeying either one, to tell you the truth. We're faking obeying the letter. *(chuckles)*

TS: And the spirit, forget it? And everyone knows the game that's being played.

JV: Yes.

(21:00)

TS: Part of the game that's being played, I read an article in the *New York Times* from October of 1972, by Seymour Hersh,¹ called "How We Ran the Secret Air War in Laos: the Laos Bombing Bosses," published on October 29, 1972. In this rather long article Hersh details what he calls the Project 404 mission. Now this predates you, I think.

JV: Project 404 was still alive.

TS: That's what I wanted eventually to get to. Hersh mentioned, and I'll ask you to confirm or correct, that Project 404 worked with the 4802 Joint Liaison Detachment at Udorn Air Base in Thailand. The article calls this "the main headquarters unit for CIA personnel in the area." Does that sound right or –

JV: I'm not a great fan of Seymour Hersh, *(chuckles)* so I think that his knowledge of what was going on was less than complete. But Udorn was a major support base for the war in Laos. No matter who the actors were in the war in Laos, whether it was the Laotian armed forces...their aviation school was at Udorn, Thailand. The shipments of arms and ammunition and so forth, most of it came through Udorn, whether it went to the CIA supported forces or to the Thai volunteers or to the Laotian armed forces. So everybody that was supporting the war in Laos had some operation in Udorn.

TS: You mentioned it was a very busy place by the late '60s, early '70s.

JV: Yes. Right. Right.

TS: So the Project 404 is something you knew about before or after you arrived?

JV: I knew about it before.

TS: From your perspective, can you explain how Project 404 worked? What was it supposed to do?

JV: I don't know how much of this has been declassified and how much hasn't. But let's just say Project 404 supported the war in Laos. It was the source of ammunition, arms,

¹ Seymour Hersh (b. 1937); U.S. Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist and author.

strategic direction for the irregular forces and had a top notch set of American advisors working there.

TS: Were these specifically CIA operatives?

JV: Yes.

TS: You don't arrive until 1972. Is Project 404 still part of what you just described, or has it been phased out or reconfigured?

JV: No, no. I worked closely with the people in Project 404.

TS: Do you want to name any of the people that you worked with?

JV: The guy who headed it was a fellow named Pat Landry, at the time. His deputy was a very competent former Army officer.

TS: By this time, by the time you get to Laos in 1972, the role of the United States in Laos has already been publicized. It's no longer top secret anymore. And yet what was the role of the CIA in Laos during the time you were there in 1972-73? Had that changed from the '60s, or was it business as usual?

JV: They were supporting irregular forces that fought alongside the Laotian government forces against the Pathet Lao.

TS: And those extended to include what kind of forces specifically?

JV: They were irregular forces, but they were organized into military regions and battalions. They call them mobile groups, Groups Mobile was the title, and they were numbered. But they were just military forces that were advised and supported by the United States.

TS: Does advising also mean that we trained these groups as well in Laos or in Thailand?

JV: Yes.

TS: When we talked that time of arms that provided, was it mostly small arms or did we provide other weaponry as well?

JV: They were organized as regular military units. They got mortars, machine guns, rifles, even some artillery.

TS: So as an artilleryman, can you comment on the type of artillery? Was this state of the art stuff, or was this World War II surplus? What were we providing?

JV: It was state of the art in that at that time, in the war in Viet Nam, we were firing World War II howitzers by the American forces. They weren't antiques.

TS: I remember when we talked about Quemoy and Matsu that it was...was it 280 millimeter guns that we provided there?

JV: 240s.

TS: And those were things, I think you mentioned, that we had phased out.

JV: We had phased them out, but they were still very good cannons. Nothing wrong with them.

TS: Was this the same idea, that these were things we had phased out or was this the same stuff ...

JV: No. This was stuff common to the American armed forces.

TS: Did Project 404 survive throughout your time in Laos?

JV: Yes.

TS: Did it survive after your time in Laos?

JV: I don't know how the CIA was organized after that, after the cease-fire. Generally our support was withdrawn.

TS: As were you, for example.

JV: Yes.

TS: How aware were you when you were in Laos of reporting like this Hersh story, which came out during the time you were there?

JV: We were privy to [it]. In the Pentagon every day there's somebody in the office of the Secretary of Defense, makes a sheaf of – in those days actually using duplicating machines; today I'm sure they do it on the Internet – but it's a catalog of everything that's said about the United States and its interests and what's going on in the wars. Whether it's the *New York Times* or the *Anzeiger*.

TS: So being at Udorn or in Vientiane or in Luang Prabang, you'd know what was being said and written about.

JV: Yes. At least it was sent to us. Whether we paid attention to it or not, you couldn't possibly read everything that was sent. So if there were a choice between doing something

that needs to be done for the war in Laos or reading what was being read in the Pentagon, you went ahead and did something that needed to be done for the war in Laos.

TS: Did you find yourself or the team that you worked with adjusting or adapting or modifying because of the level of publicity for what was happening in Laos?

(31:20)

JV: We may have discussed this example before, but in the last year of the war it was clear that the North Vietnamese were going to try to run an offensive to take Laos out of the war. And we knew that, and it was probably the thing that made that year of '72, early '73, a very busy year for me and for everyone else who was involved in it, because the North Vietnamese brought in some heavier armament that they hadn't brought to Laos before. Some T-34 tanks, they brought in some 170 millimeter Russian cannons, and it was clear that we needed more forces to deal with what we were likely to face.

So we worked up a plan to increase the number of Laotian army battalions. We needed training for them. I didn't have people available to me and the Laotians didn't have people available to me, so I went to the Special Forces group in Thailand and asked for some help, and was given some help. We knew that bringing the Special Forces into Laos was not something that would be looked upon with favor, so the idea was to bring them in in the daytime and take them out in the evening, take them to the other side of the Mekong. We were training them near Pakse and Savannakhet, in the central and southern part of Laos.

But when they first came in they spent the night, and I think it was the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* reporter in Pakse or Savannakhet, I've forgotten which, saw the Green Berets and promptly made the headlines in Washington or New York. I had a special means of communication through the [REDACTED], and the next day an officer came with a message. It was from Dick Stillwell, who was then the Army's deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, and said that Secretary Laird had seen the news reports of Special Forces in Laos and he was quite upset about it and threatened physical harm to my body, (*chuckles*) and whatever I was doing I should stop doing it immediately.

TS: Does that mean the training stopped or the training was moved?

JV: It meant that the Special Forces stowed their green berets somewhere else, and that they paid attention to the first edict that they not spend the night in Laos, that they go across the Mekong each day. So it was sort of a dumb game, but it was absolutely necessary. Then what I would point is that the North Vietnamese were not successful and that those eleven battalions we trained fought particularly well. When the cease-fire came all of the rice growing land in Laos, or most of it, was under the control of the Laotian government.

TS: The war in Southeast Asia as you know generated a lot of press, a lot of it about Viet Nam, but increasingly there are stories about Thailand or Cambodia or Laos. Fewer, but still an increasing number. In the *New York Times* again in July 1973, an article, I hate to

² NSA: National Security Agency

say it, but it was Seymour Hersh, and this time Mr. Hersh is writing about something called Operation Menu.

I just want to read a couple sentences of Hersh wrote here and this is from the *New York Times* of July 29, 1973, front page. [The headline reads:] Secret Air Raids Extended to Laos, Senators Believe. "The Senate Armed Services Committee has evidence that the falsification of the records of bombing missions in Southeast Asia extended to numerous raids on Laos and continued into last year, well informed sources said today. The sources said that most of the newly discovered raids took place in Laos from 1969 to 1972. The missions, which involved B-52 flights and attacks by smaller tactical aircraft, were apparently conducted under the same procedures as the fourteen month secret bombing campaign in Cambodia, the sources said. Almost all the falsified missions were flown over northern Laos, but were deliberately and incorrectly reported to the military's own operations sections as having been carried out over the panhandle areas of southern Laos, sources said."

And furthermore, skipping down, "In a related development sources close to former Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird confirmed today that the orders for the falsification of records in the Cambodian raids came from the National Security Council headed by Henry A. Kissinger, President Nixon's foreign affairs advisor."

And then towards the end of the article, "the B-52 missions in northern Laos were given the code name Menu, the sources said, similar to that used in the Cambodian raids. A separate code name was used to describe the falsified tactical raids they added. Specific information on the number of falsified missions into northern Laos could not be obtained, but one source said that 'we bombed the hell out of Laos.' He added that the total bomb tonnage dropped there would easily match the 104,000 tons dropped on Cambodia during the 3,630 secret missions there in 1969-1970."

Concluding then, "in statistics about the air war that were declassified and published by the Senate Armed Services Committee last month, the Pentagon listed a total of 2,646 missions in 1972. More than 680,000 tons of bombs were dropped during these B-52 missions. Fighter bombers dropped more than 884,000 tons of bombs during more than 350,000 sorties over Laos in the same four years, statistics show."

Again that lengthy excerpt there from Hersh's article. Many of these raids are before your time, but he mentions 1972 and the number of raids and clearly that is the time that you were in Laos, and I just wanted to give you a chance to comment on the information that is presented there.

JV: I don't know anything about falsely reporting the raids. I've forgotten the Air Force officer's name who got into trouble and was relieved. In fact there had just been a big move last year to restore him to the roles. He was reduced in rank.

But that was primarily reporting missions over North Viet Nam. There were rules; the rules of engagement for the Air Force in Viet Nam were sort of strange. I've forgotten what the issue was, but it seems to me they had to be fired on before they could return the fire, and apparently the bombing campaign was designed to take out the enemy air defenses whether they fired or not. The Chief of Staff of the Air Force, his name was Ryan at the time, relieved this particular officer; it was more because he had asked his subordinates to lie about what went on in these raids.

Concerning the war in Laos, we did have regular B-52 raids into Laos and how they were reported in the Air Force channels I have no idea, but as far as we knew there was regular Air Force support for the war in Laos. So frankly I'm not familiar with the Hersh article, but Hersh made a business out of building ghosts where real bodies existed (*chuckles*) and we certainly didn't send any false reports about what was going on in Laos.

TS: That's good that you have that on the record. So something code named Menu?

JV: That rings no bell.

TS: The sorties flown over northern Laos, were you aware that we were flying sorties to northern Laos? Or were you under the impression they were be flown in the southern region?

JV: No, no, no. The ones we flew into northern Laos we knew were going to northern Laos, and most of the B-52 raids went into northern Laos.

TS: Okay. So this is something that Hersh was reporting but was known to you at the time and would say was known publically at the time as well or was declassified information. Certainly we knew it by 1973.

JV: Yes. Whether it was declassified or not I don't know.

TS: Okay, so you weren't under the impression that you were being misled or...

JV: No.

TS: Let me move on to the Hmong, because that's something we didn't touch on last time. I want to give you a chance to talk about, to compare the conflict in Viet Nam, which had been going on for a number of years, with that in Laos, which also had been going for a number of years, especially relating to the use of indigenous personnel in both countries. So ethnic Lao, yes, but for instance the Lao Theong or the Khmu people or the Yao people, the Yu Mien. Can you kind of frame this for us and how we sought to use or to employ ethnic peoples in this conflict?

JV: You start with how we sought to employ them. I think as we saw it we were helping ethnic people defend their own country. We had better intelligence than they had, so we could help them understand what the North Vietnamese were trying to do and were likely to do. We could arm them with more modern arms than they were able to provide for themselves and we did that, and gave them some advice on how to use them and how to protect themselves. But it is often suggested that we used these people as tools, and you could make a pretty good argument for that, I guess.

TS: The argument is made.

JV: Yes. But on the other hand, it was their country that was being attacked by foreigners and we were helping them protect their own country. The war in Laos looked very similar to the war in Viet Nam except the terrain was a little different in Laos, but not a great deal different.

TS: The stage with actors was similar, but not the same either, with how people acted and interacted. U.S. advisors, for example, were out of uniform and had to observe different rules than in South Viet Nam.

JV: Yes. Right. Right. And were far less numerous than in South Viet Nam.

TS: Of course.

JV: South Viet Nam was a five gallon jug and Laos was a teaspoon.

TS: As far as American commitment, for sure. We had far fewer personnel committed. As you learned about the ethnic peoples of Laos, what impression did you get? What reputation did they have for you as far as being a piece of the puzzle the United States was trying to construct?

JV: Again, I'm not sure that the United States was trying to construct anything other than a Laos that was free from influence by the North Vietnamese and the Chinese and the Soviets.

TS: If we take that as our goal.

JV: Yes. The second point is that Laos as a nation, if you look at Laos as a nation and look at the various ethnic groups, it's not like the United States with the Irish and the Germans and the Swedes and the African Americans and so forth who live and mix with each other regularly and freely, and who acknowledge local governments and central governments. Laos, at least at that particular time, was a big piece of geography with a border drawn around it that bordered on some significant and some not so significant national entities. But that border surrounded a group of almost autonomous independent ethnic groups, some of whom supported actively the king and the central government but many of which ranged from indifferent to semi-opposition to the king and the central government.

TS: How was that both opportunity and challenge for the United States?

JV: It was the way it was. It was the situation that existed, so it probably dictated us having people with those ethnic groups to advise and assist them. And particularly the Hmong first, because of their geographic location in northeast Laos close to the North Vietnamese border and parts of Laos that the North Vietnamese wanted to have particular influence in.

TS: How much did you know about the Hmong people, for example, before you went to this job?

(51:20)

JV: Very little other than [that] I knew that the Hmong had provided a major part of the fighting force that we were advising and supporting against the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao. And I knew of Vang Pao³ and I had met him on my trip through Laos with Dick Stillwell earlier.

TS: Right. He's a central actor, especially in Minnesota here too with the Laotian community, the Hmong community, that built here after the war was concluded. How do you want to characterize Vang Pao, the person you met in the 1970s?

JV: Very personable, respected by the people of his ethnic group certainly, all the way from respected to adored – although there certainly was some opposition to Vang Pao. In a way he was almost regal.

TS: Did you get that impression at the time as well?

JV: Yes. But certainly a reasonably good military leader, brave, personally brave. I got along well with Vang Pao.

TS: How would you characterize his importance to the United States in the early 1970s?

JV: He was important to holding that stronghold in the northeast of Laos.

TS: Just for the record, or for the lay person, tell us briefly what this position looked like terrain-wise and why it was so significant.

JV: The headquarters at Long Cheng was a fairly well developed installation with a good set of buildings for the westerners supporting the Laotians, and it had a good sized mountain ridge on the north and east side of the valley. The valley itself supported agriculture. I've forgotten how many people lived there, but it was a significant number of people that lived in Long Cheng and the area.

TS: Was there an airstrip there too?

JV: Oh, yes. Yes. A perilous approach to the airstrip. If you've ever gone into San Diego or Tegucigalpa,⁴ they are the two airstrips in the world that are sort of like Long Cheng.

TS: Mountains right there.

JV: Yes. You're flying down the mountainside as you're approaching the airstrip. In the case of both Long Cheng and Tegucigalpa, more in Long Cheng at that time because of the

³ Vang Pao (1929-2011); Royal Lao army general. Later a leading personality in Hmong-American community in the U.S.

⁴ Tegucigalpa: the capital city of Honduras.

war, you could look out the window of your airplane and see the relics of the airplanes that didn't make it.

TS: How reassuring. *(laughter both)* Do you remember your first trip into Long Cheng?

JV: Yes. That was on the trip with Dick Stillwell. We went in in a twin Otter,⁵ which is a very good short takeoff and landing airplane, so certainly there was no risk involved.

TS: Holding onto this position or losing this position would have meant what?

JV: The first thing it would have meant for the United States is a reduction in the ability to rescue downed airmen in Viet Nam and all around on the way to Viet Nam through Laos. The route to Hanoi was over Laos, obviously, from Udorn and the other bases that were flying there. And it would have meant a major loss to the Laotian government in territory. We actually anticipated that we might lose it in '72 when it was clear that the Vietnamese were going to make a major attack and we built a base south of there where Vang Pao and the Hmong could fall back on. Unfortunately it was all but wiped out by one of these tropical storms that we discussed earlier. But fortunately we hung on to the base at Long Cheng, primarily because of the preparations we made for that North Vietnamese attack.

TS: How closely involved were United States advisors in preparing for this expected attack?

JV: I'd say we were closely involved. We trained what I call tank killer teams to be prepared for the North Vietnamese introduction of more tanks. The Laotian forces by and large, whether the regular forces or the irregular forces were, I don't want to use the word terrified, but judiciously frightened by enemy tanks.

TS: For foot soldiers I suppose tanks can be intimidating, right?

JV: Yes. Right. And so we put a lot of extra effort into training what we called tank killer teams and promising them bonuses if they killed a tank.

TS: I'm just thinking of the terrain you described, the rains, the communications network. How well suited are tanks for this kind of environment?

JV: It's lousy tank terrain.

TS: Okay. So I wasn't off track with that.

JV: It is terrible terrain for tanks. In fact if an American tank commander tried to use tanks in that fashion, we'd probably sack him quickly. On the other hand, with the North Vietnamese understanding the psychological effect that their tanks had, it was a logical thing for them to do.

⁵ De Havilland Canada DHC-3 Otter: a single-engined, propeller, short take-off and landing (STOL) aircraft.

TS: What kind of anti-tank weapons could or did we provide?

JV: The basic light anti-armor weapon, the so-called LAW,⁶ which was a single shot, rocket propelled, shaped charge grenade.

TS: Kind of like a German *panzerfaust*⁷ from World War II?

JV: Yes. Same thing.

TS: Disposable, one shot thing?

JV: Disposable, one shot thing. German *panzerfaust* or the Soviet RPG7 or 9.⁸

TS: And these things are light to carry around?

JV: Light to carry around.

TS: What's the effective range for something like this?

JV: A couple hundred yards. And the closer you get the better off you are in terms of assuring a hit in a place where it will do some real damage to the tank.

TS: The tradeoff of course is the tank is closer to the person using it as well.

JV: Indeed. Indeed.

TS: Did you yourself provide any hands on weapons training in Laos? You're an artillery guy so I probably should ask you.

JV: No. No. I didn't provide any. But for example, one time when the Laotian armed forces were withdrawing – the tanks were PT-76s at that time, which was a light Soviet amphibious armored vehicle and not particularly effective – I heard that we were withdrawing because of the threat of tanks. I got the Chief of Staff of the Laotian army, General Buomphon, and I told him, "You and I are going to the front, and I'm bringing a couple of cases of LAWs, and we're going to pass them out to the soldiers and get them to return to their original positions."

TS: Did you and he go with this?

⁶ M72 LAW: Light Anti-Tank Weapon. Generally deployed as an anti-tank weapon.

⁷ Panzerfaust: a German single shot, recoilless anti-tank weapon, used during World War II.

⁸ RPG7 and RPG9: models of Soviet shoulder-launched, rocket-propelled grenade launchers.

JV: He did indeed.

TS: Talk about that experience.

JV: I've forgotten the name of the intersection that we went to, but it was on the road from Vientiane to Luang Prabang. The troops were in disarray and needed to have somebody like Bumpong come up and get their commander and say, let's put them back together again and make some effective units here. We brought some LAWs up.

As I remember, Broadus Bailey,⁹ who was then the American attaché to Laos, and I were there together. He and I used some UN¹⁰ vehicles [that were] around, painted white with big signs for UN on them. Allegedly they were not supposed to be shot at, but Broadus and I took the UN Jeep and went to find the tank that was threatening the Laotians. We did indeed find it and pointed out where it was and got some of our tank killer teams to move forward and get into position. As I remember the tank disappeared and went to the rear and the units were reorganized and occupied their original positions that they had retreated from.

TS: Weapons, training, funds...we're putting resources into the Laotian army. To what effect, from your perspective?

JV: Again I'd say the effect was, when the cease fire came we had almost all the rice growing land. We had, I've forgotten the exact percentage of the population under the control of the Laotian government, but it was most of the population. Militarily, when the cease fire came, we left Laos in pretty good shape.

(1:05:50)

TS: There was indeed a 1973 cease fire agreement, and there are a number of articles about the agreement. It was some time in coming and being cobbled together, and so there was a lot of discussion about when and how soon and different drafts and models. As it turned out, the coalition agreement of 1973 that was to end the twenty year civil war had a number of main points, and I'm just going to sketch these out so we can talk about them.

Reported by James M. Markham in the *New York Times* on September 16, 1973: "The coalition agreement has the following highlights: first, formation of a coalition cabinet headed by Prince Souvanna Phouma. Second, creation of a national political consultative council, which will be equal to the cabinet and to which it will furnish advice on the main lines of national policy. Third, neutralization of the two main cities of Vientiane, the administrative capitol, and Luang Prabang, the royal capitol. Fourth, withdrawal of all foreign troops and advisors from Laos within sixty days of the formation of the new agreement. This applies to North Vietnamese troops, some 15,000 Thai irregulars, and several hundred American technicians and advisors." And I guess just to confirm, that means you.

JV: Yes.

⁹ Broadus Bailey (b. 1930); U.S. Army colonel. Army attaché in Laos, 1972-74.

¹⁰ UN: United Nations

TS: "Fourth, demarcation of the current cease fire line with twenty-seven so-called hot points, which will separate the two sides and lessen the chances of clashes. And finally, the return of prisoners and a search for those missing in action. There are more than 300 Americans officially labeled missing in action."

So five points here: coalition, national political consultative council, basically pulling the sides apart, pulling out the foreigners and returning POWs, et cetera. How did that agreement sort of sound to you when you heard the terms of this, when you were there?

JV: What it did in that political consultative council or whatever it's called, gave back to the Pathet Lao what they'd lost on the battlefield.

TS: What do you mean by that?

JV: It gave them equal authority to Souvanna Phouma's cabinet in setting policy for Laos. When the cease fire came, the Pathet Lao was whipped. If the North Vietnamese hadn't intervened in 1972, if the North Vietnamese had gone away, the Pathet Lao were done. They were practically nonexistent as a military force. The forces under the royal Lao government and supporting the royal Lao government were far superior to anything that the Pathet Lao could muster. What this did is, it gave them back this political authority that they had lost on the battlefield. Gave it back to them politically. And that was the foundation for the collapse of Laos in 1975, when the North Vietnamese successfully took over the south.

TS: After all the hard work you've described and the results that you've detailed, how did that agreement make you feel? It sounds like we just tossed everything away.

JV: Yes. Indeed.

TS: From a position of strength, why would we enter into an agreement like that?

JV: You'd have to ask Nixon and Kissinger¹¹ and those folks. We didn't have anything to do with the agreement from Laos, and it eventually turned Laos over to the Communists.

TS: Did you feel that way at the time as well?

JV: No. I had more hope. It looked like a bad agreement in terms of giving the Pathet Lao politically more power than they deserved, but I personally had hopes that some of these very bright people with whom I had associated would take Laos into the future in a democratic and open society.

¹¹ Henry Kissinger (b. 1923); U.S. diplomat. Secretary of State, 1973-77; National Security Advisor, 1969-75.

TS: The skeptic might say hey, come on: Viet Nam seems to be coming apart at the seams. The situation in Cambodia seems all but stable. How is Laos is going to be the exception here?

JV: That's right. When you look back on it, it could only come to that conclusion. That was a dream, for those of us who were in Laos had our blinders on and I'm sure that perhaps I had mine on more than others. Just to go back to the situation that we were in, that is to say we had this rag tag military force made up of disparate groups, none of whom particularly thought well of the others. Yet we turned back that last major offensive of the North Vietnamese. We talked about the fight on the Bolovens, where the Thai volunteers actually eventually prevailed and the Bolovens not falling into the hands of the [Pathet Lao].

TS: Right.

JV: And that was a major hard currency earner for Laos at that time. That's where the coffee is grown. Although we don't use much Laotian coffee in this country, there are other parts of the world [where it's seen as pretty good] and they're eager to buy it.

TS: From this coalition agreement in 1973 how would you interpret in Laos then between 1973 and 1975? You weren't there anymore but I suspect you were watching.

JV: No. And I must confess that the jobs that I had after that were the sort of jobs that had you looking much broader at the rest of the world than at Laos, and that my attention to Laos was only a passing interest because of the friendships that I believed that I had with people in Laos.

TS: The friendships you had or the friendships you believed you had?

JV: Both.

TS: I'll ask you to explain that, because that's pretty interesting.

JV: The interesting part is that the ones I had I kept contact with and the ones I thought I might have I was unable to keep contact with. Unfortunately most of those people wound up dead when Laos fell.

TS: Why did Laos finally fall in 1975? You described a situation in 1973 when we left, we left it in pretty good shape.

JV: The Pathet Lao was able to use more leverage in the political arena than our people. Again I would say that my observations are probably pretty shallow.

TS: They're your observations.

JV: But they're my observations, and I would say part of it is what we described earlier, that is that Laos was not a national entity. It was a geographic entity.

TS: Sure. Ultimately a French colonial construct.

JV: With these disparate groups in it, and the superimposition of a western political system that was only I'd say observed in the breach, sort of guaranteed that the people who knew how to attack the political system, the actual political system as it existed, were able to come out on top and particularly because of what was happening in their neighbor, Viet Nam. They had this huge and effective military force in Viet Nam that was able to take over the whole country, and certainly Laos was in the shadow of that.

TS: Right. Do you remember where you were or how you got the news that you were declared persona non grata and ordered to leave the country?

JV: I don't remember the exact details. It came about with I think Mac Godley telling me that the peace agreement had been signed and that my position would disappear. Now it didn't actually disappear.

TS: What does that mean?

JV: A U.S. Army brigadier replaced me and actually took on the duties of the attaché as well as the advisory group, head of the advisory group.

TS: Does that mean that we obeyed this truce by moving people out but essentially replaced them?

JV: What we did was make sense out of the way we organized the military part of the embassy. I'm ashamed to say that it was the only example that I think we've ever used where we did that. It provided diplomatic cover for the fellow who replaced me. He became the military attaché as well as the head of the advisory group.

TS: It sounds like for political reasons you couldn't be kept on in that.

JV: Yes.

TS: But they just replaced you with someone. Did we attempt to do the same things we had been doing, simply from a different angle?

JV: I think we attempted to support the Laotian government within the terms of the agreement that was made.

TS: Are you aware of the Soviets doing the same thing, attempting to keep their own military people in country in order to keep their fingers on the pulse of Laos?

JV: I'm sure they did. In fact the Soviets were in a position to do that from the very beginning. They didn't have the big organization that we had supporting the war.

TS: What happened when the U.S. officially leaves in 1973? What happens to the Hmong?

JV: Their direct support from the U.S. waned of course, diminished sizably, but also their support within the Laotian government waned. They were outsiders to both Vientiane and Luang Prabang, from the Laotian side of Vientiane and Luang Prabang, beforehand and I think there were people in the Laotian government who saw arming the Hmong to the extent that we had armed them as a threat to the Laotian government itself, whereas there was no threat.

(1:21:45)

TS: This base at Long Cheng and the Hmong presence there, what happened to that in the aftermath of 1973 and 1975?

JV: It collapsed in '75. The Hmong became refugees by and large, except for a few who hung on and continue to hang on to this day and are viewed by the present government of Laos as armed opposition.

TS: Much like you described a few moments ago, in the middle 1970s.

JV: Yes.

TS: From your perspective, what responsibility do we have in the United States for the Hmong and what happened to them after 1975? This is a political hot potato, and I know that.

JV: Yes. I would say refuge here in this country for the Hmong who want to come here, respect for what they did – and I think that's generally shown – then diplomatic support in the larger diplomatic community for the Hmong as an entity in Laos. And I think we do all those things. One can argue about to what extent, for example, the issue of whether Hmong soldiers should be buried in U.S. military cemeteries or not. It's a question that's raised. I don't know the answer to that. I would like to see a respectful recognition of the Hmong support for the U.S., because it was unique and perhaps the U.S. could set aside a piece of land for a Hmong military cemetery for the veterans of the war in Laos. I would certainly support that sort of thing. I think burying them in U.S. military cemeteries is something that's too big a change. Then you start having to ask yourself okay, how about the other irregular groups? How about those in Viet Nam? How about those in Iraq or Afghanistan?

TS: Fair enough. I just want to fast forward on this issue to when you were Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, in the Reagan White House, and ask, did Laos reappear as an issue? Did the Hmong reappear as an issue that you had to deal with when you were the Chairman?

JV: No.

TS: This was in the past and not brought up?

JV: Right. The only issue was accounting for missing Americans.

TS: I remember you said that has a long history.

JV: Yes.

TS: But Ronald Reagan as President of the United States¹² was not interested in Laos or the...

JV: I don't remember it ever being raised to him at that time. The refugee issue, the Southeast Asian refugee issue, was an issue with him because that was one of the things I was charged with in my negotiations with the Vietnamese at that time, was normalizing the flow of refugees, to reunite separated families. We had a lot of parts of the family in this country and parts of the family in Viet Nam, and the only way they could get together was either try to escape Viet Nam by boat and deal with the pirates in the South China Sea and then try to make it to a refugee camp in the Philippines or Indonesia or someplace like that. So Ronald Reagan charged me with getting those people out of Viet Nam easily and freely and getting those families reunited. So we were able to do that for the families in Viet Nam. I was neither authorized nor supposed to engage with the Laotians at that time on missing Americans or the refugees in Laos.

TS: Was there any discussion about the Hmong, on possible Hmong in Laos and either negotiating with them or dealing with them or arming them or anything like that?

JV: No. Not that I was involved in.

TS: Okay, good enough. You are exiting Laos. You're essentially being shown the door, as it were. How did you personally feel when you realized that the job in Laos – I'm done?

JV: It was over. The war was over and I got a set of orders, General Abrams had told me that I had to get to Washington because, he said, "Nobody knows your name. You'll never get promoted until they know your name in Washington." (*chuckles*)

TS: You had one star by this time, right?

JV: I'm a one star. So I was sent back and put into a two star job.¹³

TS: That just made me think, they weren't talking about a secret war, we're talking about a war that wasn't very well illuminated. This period in Laos, you were there nearly two years and it made me think about what your family knew about what you were doing in Laos.

¹² President of the United States from 1981-89.

¹³ U.S. Army ranks: one star = brigadier general; two star = major general.

JV: Ask her.

TS: I want to ask you first about how you talked about what you were doing?

JV: Not much. Not much. During the time I was in Laos we didn't spend very much time together. When we did it was family matter.

TS: You have children that are grown up or growing up by this time.

JV: The kids are in school in Bangkok.

TS: Your son was in college, right? The oldest.

JV: Right.

TS: Did he ask? As a college student. The fighting in the Viet Nam is still a topic on college campuses. Here he is with a dad in Southeast Asia.

JV: He came out there one year on an internship and then shortly after the war was over he finished college and took the Foreign Service exam and was accepted by the Foreign Service. Then his first post was in the U.S. consulate in Udorn, Thailand.

TS: No kidding.

JV: No kidding. Right. And he was there in 1975 when Laos fell, and of course a number of the Laotians coming out recognized his name on the name tag. John finally wound up in charge of the whole refugee program coming into Thailand, not only out of Laos but out of Viet Nam and Cambodia.

TS: And you were in Washington by this time.

JV: Right. I'm in Washington.

TS: How curious were you to get to hear from him what was going on?

JV: We were indeed curious and interested. But of course he had his hands full. He had more than he could handle with the duties assigned.

TS: I can imagine. Something else occurred to me. By 1973-74-75 this aftermath of Laos, it's also the aftermath of the Southeast Asian conflict in many ways as the U.S. extracts itself, leaves. A number of references in books, papers too, quite frankly the reputation of the United States Army and the United States military in the aftermath of this conflict ...

In just reading through newspapers, I mean this is one example. This is not by Seymour Hersh, but it is from the *New York Times*, from August of 1973, talking about essentially the military under fire and the reputation of the military. And this author [William V. Shannon] calls for, "there's a need for an impartial review of military conduct of

the last ten years,"¹⁴ and to see how we can sort of adapt the military and change it going forward. You're a one star general. You're in the upper echelons of this U.S. military. How did you internalize this attack on the reputation of the United States Army?

JV: As far as attacks on the Army are concerned, there have been attacks on the Army, had been all through my military career. Sort of raining – you put your poncho on and let it rain. But we had serious things to deal with it.

TS: Well, the My Lai¹⁵ aftermath and all that, as just one example.

JV: Yes. Right. What I would rather do is deal with how we saw the problems, the Army staff at that time, and what to do. I didn't read that one either. (*motions to the newspaper article*)

TS: I know. And I picked this one really not because it was the best, but because there were a number of articles I kept seeing as I read the papers that talked about the reputation of the Army or the need to review the military and its role and its leadership, and I thought okay, this is something that you must have felt.

JV: Oh, we were up to our armpits in it. We'd come from almost ten years of war. As the war moved on, some really damaging instances. You had the My Lai thing and you had the pictures of the napalmed Vietnamese girl;¹⁶ in my own experience I didn't see any soldiers abusing Vietnamese civilians while I was in Viet Nam. I saw soldiers helping them, keeping them alive, protecting Vietnamese civilians from the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese. So those were anomalies and they were clearly anomalies that affected the American public opinion and we had to deal with that because the only Army the American people are going to get is the Army they support.

But what we faced at the end of the war was severely reduced budgets. That's item number one. I think of the Army budget that we were dealing with in 1973, it would have bought about two of the present Air Force airplanes. Of course the dollars were worth more in those days, but that gives you some indication of the size of the budget that we had. We faced a major enemy in the Soviet Union in Europe, and that was heating up more and more in those days. The Soviets were dabbling in western European politics and you had an increasing number of socialist governments in Western Europe. The Soviets are strengthening their forces in Eastern Europe and particularly in East Germany. And the Army was broken. We had sent people on multiple tours to Southeast Asia, and for many of the regular Army soldiers, both officers and noncommissioned officers, they were rotated from Europe or Korea to Viet Nam, back to Europe or Korea with little chance to spend any

¹⁴ William V. Shannon, "Military Under Fire," in *New York Times*, 14 August 1973.

¹⁵ My Lai village, South Vietnam: at least 347 unarmed civilians were killed here by U.S. Army soldiers, on 16 March 1968.

¹⁶ Napalmed girl: Pulitzer Prize-winning photo, taken 8 June 1972 by Nick Ut in Trang Bang, South Vietnam, of naked girl fleeing napalm attack (see below).

time in the United States. So we were losing particularly captains, people who were experienced junior officers or company commanders, sort of the basic rock of leadership in the Army, at a great rate. The West Point classes were graduating and leaving the Army at the end of their five years of service rather than continuing in service.

TS: It's a morale issue.

JV: We were short senior noncommissioned officers. We discussed earlier, when we talked about the last time I was in Europe, we had tank crews that were commanded by corporals. We had howitzer sections in the field artillery that were commanded by corporals on their first enlistment, who weren't professional. Maintenance was difficult for all the equipment. The equipment was becoming more complicated, yet the soldiers' experience with it was less and less. So it was costing more to maintain the equipment. We had a lot of problems to solve. And about that time we went to the all-volunteer force. And there were many people both inside the Army and outside it that thought that that would never work. We'd been operating on a draft, really since 1940.

TS: The question of joining service too. I know from my high school class, which graduated in 1976, I know one person in my class of a hundred and fifty that went into service and for the rest of us it was not even something we seriously talked about.

JV: Yes. It wasn't.

TS: That's a huge change.

JV: Indeed.

TS: From your side of this table, now you have a recruitment question.

(1:39:35)

JV: Right. Exactly. So we had a lot of problems to solve. The job I was put into when I came back was Director of Operations in the Army's Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Operations. It had a number of facets to that job, but one of the main facets was making the force size of the Army match the budget of the Army. And that I'd say called for fifty percent of my work at that time.

TS: What you mentioned earlier was radically shrinking budgets. What we're talking about is moving people out of the Army to bring this about.

JV: Yes, right. Right. Reducing the size of the Army drastically.

TS: Is this akin to what happened in 1946, where we had to shed people very quickly?

JV: Yes, but the relationship of the number of people that we then had in the Army and the jobs that the Army had to do at the end of World War II were much different. There was a lot more, I don't want to use the word slop in the Army, but we had plenty of people. When you've got eight or nine million people to deal with, in contrast to about two with this

major force in Europe that we had to maintain. Fortunately at about that time [Gen William] Westmoreland was replaced by General Abrams as Chief of Staff of the Army and he had a pretty clear vision of what needed to be done and gathered some really smart people around him to help set a course.

The course was partially set by the outside, by the move to an all-volunteer force, which is a huge change. That happened just before Abrams took over as Chief of Staff. I was just recalling some of the sort of dumb things that we did. We got a lot of advice from the outside world. One of them was to make the barracks more home-like. So I remember that we spent money hanging curtains on the barracks windows to make (*chuckles*) it look like your bedroom at home, and an effort to make the food in the mess hall more like mother's cooking.

TS: And to what impact? I mean as this switch to an all-volunteer force comes, how well would you characterize the Army's response to that? I mean did they make this change?

JV: We did make the change. It took a little while for us to do it, but I think the armed forces of the last twenty years have been a testimony to the fact that we did make the change and made it quite successfully. The other thing that I would call attention to is in the outside world, if you called attention to the sort of anti-military tones we'd see at least in the media, I'm not so sure that it necessarily existed among the American people, but to some extent it had to exist with the American people as well. But also you had the changing political climate in the United States. Watergate¹⁷ came about and the election of Jimmy Carter¹⁸ [in 1976] and the mood in the Congress. All those things had an influence on what was going to happen.

TS: President Nixon resigns in August of 1974. Jimmy Carter is elected in 1976. How did these political earthquakes really, changes, impact the United States Army from where you sat at this time, which was in Washington?

JV: The Defense Department can't spend a dime that isn't authorized and appropriated by the Congress and approved by the President.

TS: Right.

JV: So what's happening on Capitol Hill and happening in the White House has a huge influence on what happens in the armed forces and the Army, and it did have a huge influence.

TS: Did you find yourself, given that background, paying attention or noticing politics or the political aspect to the United States military more than you had previously?

¹⁷ Watergate scandal: a 1972 break-in of Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate office complex in Washington, D.C., and the attempt by the Nixon administration to cover up their involvement. Ultimately Nixon resigned the presidency over this issue, in August 1974.

¹⁸ Jimmy Carter: President of the United States, 1977-81.

(1:46:15)

JV: Yes. Certainly. Relationships with the Congress in terms of the budgets that we were presenting and trying to get approved. And of course at that time there's the question about not just the Army, but what happens to the armed forces of the United States after the Viet Nam war ends? It's the same question that's going on today. Where's the money going to go? Are you going to buy F-35s¹⁹ or are you going to have soldiers on the ground or ships in the sea or what are you going to have? So the people in Washington today are going through the same sort of problem solving and arguments and debates that we went through in 1973-74. But we were blessed at the time with great leaders, I must say, that did indeed have a vision.

TS: What was that vision?

(background noise: lawn service)

JV: It was reconstructing the Army with a focus primarily on central Europe, but its focus on re-equipping and retraining – and more on the training than anything else. We had the lessons learned from the war in Viet Nam. We came out of the war in Viet Nam with problems, some of which I cited before, that is the diminished supply of NCOs and junior officers, but at the same time we came out with combat experienced people that stayed. They had been to war, understood war. You could say the same for what's happening in the armed forces today. One of the strengths is that you certainly have hundreds of thousands of soldiers, sailors and Marines who've been to Iraq and Afghanistan, have been under fire and know what war is about.

But back to Abrams' vision. He had chosen what the Army called the Big Five at that time. It was the new tank, which eventually wound up being called the Abrams tank; the Bradley fighting vehicle; the Apache attack helicopter; the Blackhawk utility helicopter and the Patriot air defense missile system. Those were the five.

His idea was to take the 'bang, bang you're dead' out of simulated combat training. Up until that time, for very understandable reasons, the combat training did not involve actual live fire shooting at each other. But Abrams became convinced that we now had electronic means of dealing with that issue. It all came about because another simplified training system, called the Miles Training System, and it had soldiers in active opposition maneuver training with numbers on their helmets, and if you could see the number of the soldier that was opposing you, you could kill him. You could shoot him with your rifle. So that was the basic concept of this system.

From there it was built up into electronic means, where with an anti-tank weapon, if you fired at another tank, if you hit it you could make the smoke grenade that was attached to that tank go off and that tank knew it had been hit in combat with a lethal round and was dead. That was carried on to a much broader extent.

So we had the framework for much better pre-combat training, because up until that time the best pre-combat training that a rifle company got was the first day or two of actual combat, which meant that you had high casualty rates in the first days of combat. And of

¹⁹ Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning: a single-seat, single-engine fighter plane, first flown 2006.

course the goal was to reduce the casualty rates in the first days of combat and make the units far more effective.

Then it was getting rid of extra headquarters that we had and using the manpower for combat units, organizing a cohesive training command that supervised all the training to make it cohesive so that we came up with what was called the Training and Doctrine Command. Put one of his most trusted generals in charge of it, General Bill Depuy,²⁰ and then organizing the rest of the forces in the United States under what was called the Forces Command and putting another trusted subordinate, Dutch Kerwin, whom I have mentioned several times in the past, in charge of Forces Command. Thus simplifying getting rid of a number of subordinate area commands in the United States and reducing the size of the headquarters and the number of people involved in headquarters, reducing Army headquarters in Panama and Hawaii.

TS: In what way did your duties at the Pentagon change over the years that you were there this time? It sounds like the Army is in a period of flux, of change.

JV: The duties were involved in making that vision come into reality, and that's why it was an exciting time to be there and an exciting job to have.

TS: You've been in the service a long time now, how much thought did you ever give at this time to leaving the U.S. Army?

JV: I didn't give it any thought to it at that particular time, because the Army had a lot of problems to solve. I was in a position where I could help with those problems. I was working for people that I admired and wanted to work for. I didn't like the idea of being in the Pentagon, but I suddenly began to enjoy it because we were working very hard.

(1:56:30)

TS: As you thought about your time in the Army, at this point by the mid-1970s you're approaching fifty-four, fifty-five years old, how did you see your trajectory in the U.S. Army? You've got decades of service.

JV: I knew I was in a major general's job. I was very happy to have made brigadier. I thought if that was as high as I got I had reached my Peter Principle peak (*chuckles*) and was perfectly happy with it. The sort of amusing thing is that after I'd been there about a year, there was a promotion board – I was in a major general's job – when the promotion board for major general met I thought I might have a chance, but I didn't make it. Both General Abrams and General Cowles, Don Cowles, who was a long time protégé of Abrams and was then the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans, called me to tell me how sorry they were that I had not made major general. In fact my deputy made major general. (*chuckles*) But they told me that they wanted me to stay, and stay in that job, and I would surely be promoted. I was almost overcome with the kindness of these people calling me

²⁰ William E. DePuy (1919-92); U.S. Army general. First commander of the Army Training and Doctrine Command.

and telling me that I hadn't made it and they were sorry that I hadn't made it. At any rate, it was over.

TS: This time, your service in Thailand and Laos, could you tell, was that viewed as something positive on your record or not so much?

JV: It was out of the mainstream. Completely out of the mainstream. And that's what General Abrams said. He said, "Nobody knows your name."

TS: You were gone for a while.

JV: Yes. Nobody knows your name. Generally the route for promotions are through the ordinary command lines. That is, if you're a brigadier general you ought to be an assistant division commander for one of the combat divisions and then ought to have a job on a major staff, either one of the combatant commands or the headquarters of the Army staff or something like that. So I'm sure that most of the people looked at the assignment titled Dep Chief JUSMAGTHAI and said, you know, what in the world is that?

TS: So you think that people might not have really known what you did?

JV: Yes. They did not.

TS: Did you feel any kind of resentment about that? I mean, let's face it: you had done what you were told to do.

JV: It was the way it was. No, I didn't feel any resentment. In fact had a wonderful experience in Laos. I wouldn't have traded that for any of the routine Army promotion [paths].

TS: You've mentioned more than once your let's say ambivalence to Pentagon assignments and that you felt constricted by these kind of desk-bound jobs in the past. Still feel the same way in the '70s?

JV: I would have been happy to go to a field assignment and eventually wound up going to one. And the next year I was on the promotion list for major general. Had not yet been promoted, but there was a wonderful line one of the books about Abrams, one of the big things the Chief of Staff of the Army approves every year is new commanders for the Army's divisions. At least in those days it was. The divisions don't seem to be as important today as they were then. But for a major general a plum assignment was commanding a division, if you're in the combat arms.

A fellow named Bill Livesy, who was General Abrams' aide, reports that he took the list that had been prepared by the staff and approved by the various senior staff people for commanding divisions, and he took it to General Abrams who was then dying of cancer and was spending his time in his quarters at Fort Myer. Livesy reports, as reported in this book

by Lew Sorely²¹ and later confirmed by Livesy himself to me, that he took the list to General Abrams. Abrams came down the divisions and came to the 4th Division and looked at the name and crossed it out and wrote in Vessey, and turned to Livesy and said, "He's a fighter." (*chuckles*) So that's how I got out of the Pentagon and went to command the 4th Division.

TS: What year was that?

JV: That was '74.

TS: So you spent a year in the Pentagon or so.

JV: Yes. A year and a half.

TS: And what were some of the lessons learned for you, leaving the Pentagon again then?

JV: We were at the height of all the big to-dos about the all-volunteer Army and the introduction of more women to the armed forces. In fact we didn't expect to be going any place. We had been living in the house in Falls Church. I had brought Avis up to our old cabin here [in Garrison, Minnesota], and the kids were still at home. I guess David was still at home. Sarah was still at home then too. No, she graduated from high school. Anyway, Avis and David at least were up here at the cabin. We got quarters on the post at Fort Myer, which is very desirable because easy to the Pentagon and so forth. In fact we moved into that house. I think it was a month later, when she was up here, that I got word that my assignment would be 4th Division, in the fall. So we had made a move that wasn't going to last very long. We moved into the house; I don't think we lived in it more than a few weeks at the most.

TS: And the 4th Division would take you where?

JV: Fort Carson, Colorado. The 4th Mechanized Division. So it was an exciting time for us, moving to Colorado. David was the only one still in K-12. He was in high school and by that time Bill Livesy, the fellow who had been General Abrams' aide, was out there as an assistant division commander in the 4th Division. I think we were supposed to report in October, and Bill Livesy took David out and provided him a bed and a place to catch the school bus until we got out there.

TS: Anything else that we should add or you want to add about Thailand and Laos? I fleshed out a number of things today that were kind of my agenda and I want to make sure that we add lessons learned, things like that.

JV: For me, it was working with a different group of people in the United States government, the ambassador in Laos and the two different deputy chiefs of mission were

²¹ Lewis Sorely, *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992)

there, who I got to work with later on in life. Monte Stearns was later ambassador to Greece when I was Chairman and of course the Greece-Turkey situation was as it is today.

TS: Yes. The military dictatorship was over in Greece, but the Cyprus issue was still ongoing.

JV: Yes. Then John Gunther Dean followed Monte Stearns as the Deputy Chief of Mission in Laos. Later on he was ambassador to Lebanon and then to India, in fact finished his career in India when son John was consul general in Bombay. So I still hear from both those people. Mac Godley died some years ago, but we kept in close touch after the war. Hugh Tovar, the CIA Station Chief, has stopped here to visit a number of times since then. I think we colluded to help get Vang Pao out of his legal troubles when he was accused of nefarious activities a few years ago.

So it was actually working with the CIA there helped me later on in all the jobs I had after that. Not so much in the 4th Division, but when I came back later as Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans and then Commander of Forces in Korea. Working with CIA and with the State Department people in Laos had given me a good foundation for doing it in these other jobs and gave me a much greater respect for responsibilities in both those departments and the very competent and loyal American people we have serving in those departments.

TS: I think next time we can talk about your time with the 4th Mechanized Division and then move on then from there to Korea, where you had some interesting years.

JV: Okay. I went back to the Pentagon after Ft Carson.

TS: After the 4th, right. So you have more Pentagon, Colorado, Pentagon and then Korea, right?

JV: Right.

TS: But this seems to me a good place to stop. Is this a good place to stop for you too?

JV: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

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Photo referenced: taken 8 June 1972 by Nick Ut in Trang Bang, South Vietnam.

