Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, beginning an oral history interview with Lt. Col. Allan J. Lavelle. Today’s date is the 5th of May 2004, and both Al and I are here in the interview room in the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech. Good afternoon, Al.

Allan Lavelle: Good afternoon, Dr. Calkins.

LC: I would like to begin just by asking you when and where you were born and maybe you could tell me something about your childhood.

AL: Well, I was born in 1920 in Denver, Colorado. But I must tell you, my father and mother were married in Leadville and they headed for the town called Climax where they spent their first night, where I think I was conceived.

LC: That would make sense.

AL: (Laughing) And they traveled to the town Naturita where my dad was ostensibly an engineer in the mines. And in those days, the mines were producing pitch blend from which they extracted radium.

LC: Yes.

AL: Which was needed back then. Later on in the same area, they found a trash ore called uranium, which nobody wanted and the town became a ghost town. But I started out life in Colorado. My grandfather was a doctor and insisted my mother return to civilization, at least to give birth to me. So I was born in Denver. But shortly after
being born, I was taken down to southwestern Colorado to Naturita. Little Joe Junior
Mine was a mine that I told you mined pitch blend and mostly they were Irish miners. So
it was kind of an Irish mining camp.

LC: Okay.

AL: And I guess I spent maybe six years there and my father, who eventually
became an electrical engineer, began looking for better jobs and we moved all around the
country as he—not because he was a will-o-the-wisp, but because he was ambitious and
looking for something better—moved us from Colorado to the state of Maine. From the
state of Maine to Chicago, where the Great Depression caught him and where he lost all
his money like so many people did.

LC: Sure.

AL: We went back to Colorado for a couple of years and then my father
reconnected again and we moved to Pennsylvania. So I grew up as a teenager in
Pennsylvania on the Philadelphia Main Line.

LC: Yes.

AL: Very nice part of the world where actually people lived just about the way
people do in suburbia today, except we didn’t have TV. But other than that, I had a
rather prosaic childhood.

LC: Now did your father ever have military service?

AL: He was in the National Guard, but never served overseas. But he got
interested—he had a lot of friends that were in the National Guard, and he got interested
in flying in about, well, about 1926 and used to take me out to Lowry Field. In those
days it was just a grass field, but he had a lot of buddies that flew in the National Guard
and reserve and I became acquainted with airplanes. My poor father wanted to learn to
fly, but he was too busy supporting me and my mother. (Laughing) And it was
something he always wanted to do. [Fly, that is.]

LC: Now were there other children as well or just you, Al?

AL: No, I have three sisters and I have a brother named Mike and I’m twenty-six
years older than Mike.

LC: Oh, really?
AL: Born to the same mother. So I have three sisters and a brother. Still, they are all hale and hardy and still alive.

LC: Really? And you were the oldest then?

AL: I’m the oldest. I’m the oldest of eighteen grandchildren, too.

LC: Hm.

AL: As a matter of fact, I come from a large Irish clan and I’m the oldest member of the clan and today I’m the patriarch of that clan.

LC: You’re the patriarch now.

AL: I’m the patriarch.

LC: Do they all listen to you then?

AL: We have gatherings every couple of years. Oh yes, as long as [I’m] not senile, they listen to me.

LC: (Laughing) Yeah.

AL: And of course, the big advantage is always tell them, you know, stories, which we all love to do. And when I was young, my grandfather and my father and his sisters, they often kept up a round robin of correspondence. They were great writers and entertained one another, probably to out do one another’s writing. And that’s why even today, I’d rather write a letter than do anything.

LC: And you’re a very good writer. We have some of your materials.

AL: Well, everything you have is rough. I have nothing that’s really polished like we’d have to present to a publisher, but I just love to write and I’ll write to anybody about anything anytime, even today.

LC: Wonderful. It’s a dying art.

AL: Yeah.

LC: It’s been superseded in so many different ways by the cell phone and telephone, of course.

AL: You’re right, yes.

LC: Al, tell me about your mother.

AL: My mother is named Mary Scholastica McDonald. Her father was a doctor in Leadville, Colorado. He was a chief doctor and surgeon at Saint Elizabeth’s Hospital,
I believe. And my mother, it seemed to me, always had delusions of grandeur because she was the doctor’s daughter.

LC: I see.

AL: But her mother died when my mother was probably about twelve years old and my mother was sent to a boarding school, Loretto Heights Academy, where she became a very proficient violinist and played professionally. Until this one day she met this one guy named Jack Lavelle, my father, and because he was such a handsome guy and a lovely dancer.

LC: Aha. That works.

AL: There was an attraction and they married and I guess I was the happy result.

LC: Now did your dad go to formal schooling as an engineer?

AL: My dad went to college for two years in Boulder.

LC: Okay.

AL: And then he finished up by International Correspondence School. At one time, a lot of people would look down their nose in that kind of a degree, but I found out since it’s harder doing that than just going to college. But he was a very proficient engineer and worked as a graduate engineer all the rest of his life. He even got, obtained jobs because he was a good engineer.

LC: Can you tell anything about the pitch blend, the industry? What was it being used for? Do you know?

AL: Well, the pitch blend is an accumulation of fossil trees.

LC: Okay.

AL: And you can actually see the trees in the rock strata and this was during the period when Madame Curie developed, [radium] I guess helped develop the industry.

And Madame Curie and her husband supposedly went down to Naturita and my mother entertained them. Not very lavishly because they lived in a typical miner’s home with wooden walls up to about eye-level and then it was a canvas roof. But my mother entertained them with dinner and violin [music]. She often talked about meeting Madame [Marie] Curie.

LC: I gather that she, Madame Curie, did go on a tour of the United States at some point there.
AL: Yeah, I guess that was when she [my mother] met her.

LC: Yeah.

AL: And then as I told you, later they found this uranium, which nobody wanted.

LC: Right.

AL: And the town became a ghost town. And so in World War II, when uranium was wanted by the industry and the town boomed again, but again, it has died. And now it’s only—the only people you see up there are big game hunters because there’s still a lot of elk and bear, I guess. But the whole area’s polluted now, I’m told.

LC: Now this is the Leadville area?

AL: No, it was down around Nucla, Colorado. There’s a town called Naturita, Nucla, and I forget the name of the other towns. It’s about eighty-six miles south of Grand Junction.

LC: Okay.

AL: Very scenic area, but it’d be hard to earn a living there, I believe.

LC: Tell me a bit about your schooling. Where did you actually graduate from high school, I guess? Was it in Philadelphia or the Philadelphia area?

AL: Philadelphia Main Line, St. Catherine’s High School [Wayne, PA].

LC: Okay. What year?

AL: Nineteen thirty-six, I believe.

LC: And what kind of student were you, Al?

AL: Well first of all, I was always educated by the Irish nuns. (Laughing)

LC: Yes, yes.

AL: And generally, I was an A student in everything except math.

LC: Really?

AL: And I just hated math and years later when I went off to—well first of all, my dad wanted me to go to college right out of high school. I didn’t. I wanted to get out and work for a while, but he insisted I go. And I was afraid to even apply because I failed algebra four times. Seventy was passing, I used to make grades like twelve, thirteen. (Laughter)

LC: (Laughter)
AL: But I had this dear old Irish nun, I went to see her and said, “Sister Rita Josephine, I’d like to go to college.” “Then you should go to college. You’re a bright boy.” And I said, “But I failed algebra four times.” I took it one year, and then took it in summer school and failed, took it the second year and failed. I took it the fourth time. The highest grade I ever made was a twenty-eight and the teacher wrote across the top of the page, “Much improvement. Keep up the good work.” And I came home and I said, “Dad, Dad! You know, I really think I’m getting the hang of this algebra.” He says, “Thank God.” And then he says, “Let me see that paper. Oh, for cripes sakes! A twenty-eight? Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!” (Laughter)

LC: (Laughter)

AL: Anyway, I was a good student except for math. Later on when I—oh, and I went to tell Sister Rita Josephine. She said, “Well you know, if you get down to your knees and pray, miracles can happen.” And she said, “Will you do that?” And I said, “Yes.” And I guess I did a time or two, but I applied for Penn State and I found out later that not only had I finished algebra and geometry, I was in the upper third of the class. (Laughing)

LC: Really?

AL: Yeah. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) That is weird. Took care of that.

AL: Yeah. Anyway, my concept of college in those days—I’d go through the catalog and try to find out which of those courses didn’t have any math.

LC: No math.

AL: Yeah.

LC: Right. (Laughing)

AL: And I picked the worst course in the world. I don’t know how I did it, but I picked a course called agricultural education. It was designed for boys who came from big [whose parents had] prosperous farms and go back and manage their farms. And I took a course called mensuration, which is the measurement of number of board feet in a forest, leaves and all. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)
AL: And even feeds and feeding was nothing but math to me. And I did very miserably. I didn’t fail the year, but I flunked several courses. My dad wasn’t too happy with me. And then the following year, I went to St. Joseph’s in Philadelphia and there, I was doing fine, except that—I guess by this time, somebody knew that World War II was in the offing and they decided to offer pilot training to kids in college who were qualified.

LC: Yes.

AL: And I was offered a chance to become a pilot in the CPT (Civilian Pilot Training) Program. They only selected five people from my college and I was one of them. So anyway, after my second year of college, I had my private pilot license. And by then I got really interested in flying. With a couple of other guys, I bought an old airplane and got enough time for what they called a limited commercial license where I could fly for hire within fifty miles of my home.

LC: Okay.

AL: I developed more time. And so over a period of time, I had quite a bit of time for that day and age. Eventually, I got my commercial license.

LC: About when would that have been, Al?

AL: This is probably about 1939. And I was touted as being one of the youngest commercial pilots in the United States, and I think I was. And I somehow made connections with a guy who owned Aero Service Corporation, did aero mapping and surveying, [Philadelphia, PA] and I got a job with them. I flew with them until World War II came along and then I went into the Navy and became a Navy pilot.

LC: Al, there’s a couple of things in there I want to ask you a little bit about. First of all, when did you first start flying, and do you remember Lindbergh and Lindbergh’s flight?

AL: Oh, absolutely.

LC: Can you tell me about that?

AL: Yeah, this is 1927.

LC: Okay.

AL: And everybody in the country, not just, you know, our school, were on pins and needles, and wondering what happened to Lindbergh. And when word came down finally that he landed in Paris, why everybody in the school just went wild with
excitement. I don’t think we got the day off, but the rest of the day was kind of, you
know, talking about Lindbergh.

LC: Sure.

AL: And a few months later when Lindbergh made his tour of the United States,
I think on August 14. He came in, he flew into Denver and my dad and I were parked at
the end of the runway. And in those days, Lowry Field was just a big grass field and the
cars were parked everywhere except on the runway itself. And Lindbergh came in and he
had a crosswind. He was crabbing his airplane into the wind. Nobody knew anything
about flying. He’s just, you know, [crabbed] heading into the wind to keep his track on
the ground straight.

LC: Sure, yup.

AL: And they said, “Look at that, he can fly an airplane sideways! Not
everybody can do that.” “No!” Anyway, he put the airplane in a hangar. And there’s
just a rope across the hangar and the people were up there gawking at the airplane and he
was wiping off the grease and what not. And he came over, shook a few hands, one of
which was mine. And I was so proud to have had this hand, you know, shook the hand of
Lindbergh. And for a few days I was a hero of my neighborhood. (Laughing)

LC: I bet you were a star.

AL: Yeah, but I remember that very vividly.

LC: Do you remember him, how he looked that day?

AL: Oh, yes.

LC: Can you describe, what was he wearing, what did he—?

AL: He was wearing a, kind of like khaki knickers with kind of leather, not spats,
but leather—well, I really forget what he was wearing. But he was dressed like many of
the aviators dressed in those days. He had on a light jacket and khaki clothes, and I think
he had on a white shirt and a tie. He looked very presentable.

LC: Was he a hero to you?

AL: Oh, he was a hero to the whole world. Absolutely. Yes. You know, I think
shortly thereafter I decided I, too, was going to follow in his footsteps. I was living in
Colorado, as I mentioned. There was a place called Inspiration Point, where the young
lovers would park their cars at night and engage in God only knows what. But there’s a
steep hill on there and I got to thinking, “I wonder if I can put wings on my bicycle and
build a takeoff place on that hill and fly over the valley and wave at all the girls?” I had
one cousin who was just putty in my hands. His name was Dick Linsemair. All my
cousins were Irish and had Irish mothers and Irish fathers. But Dick’s father’s name was
Fritz Linsemair. (Laughing)

LC: So he was a good German, ja?

AL: Oh, yeah.

LC: (Laughing)

AL: We called him “Protestant Dick.” (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: Or “Dickey the P”, I think we called him.

LC: (Laughing)

AL: Anyway, “Dickey the P” was putty in my hands. And he could work—he
was clever with his hands. And anything I’d want to do, why he was there to help me.

Well, we stole [took] some sheets out of my mother’s linen closet and we stole some light
laths that they used—light woods they used [supports] to put plaster on, and wires and
whatnot. And we put wings on the bicycle, built an outrigger and he put a rudder and tail
on it, had the handle bars hooked to the rudder. And of course, it didn’t have any
elevators and the chain was all out of balance and whatnot, but it looked pretty good to
us. And then we spent a week or more stealing railroad ties and lumber and we’d drag
them over up to Inspiration Point and we’d built, for all practical purposes, a ski jump.
And I just know that when I hit that ski jump that I was going to be a second Lindbergh.
And I remember Dick and I had a little spat at the top of the hill. He wanted to go first
and I was a little bit bigger than him and it was my bike, so I got to go first. I shoved off
over the hill and immediately I’d reached terminal velocity for whatever bicycle, what is
for a bicycle. I couldn’t even put my feet on the pedal. And I hit this ski jump with one
wing dragging. What I did, I went out, oh, fifty feet in the air and stalled.

LC: (Laughing) I mean, I’m laughing, but it was probably—

AL: Yeah. Well, but I think the mass of those wings on, that kind of slowed me
down. I fell to the bottom and rolled and the bicycle and the wings was all wrapped
around me. I was hurt, but not seriously. I should’ve been killed.
LC: How far a drop?
AL: I’d say I dropped thirty-five feet and hit the bottom of the hill and kept rolling. You know, kids are pretty pliable and whatnot.
LC: Right.
AL: But that was end of my bicycle.
LC: (Laughing)
AL: And years later, I went to Colorado with my kids and my kids never quite believed the story. But my cousin Dick, who was alive then, came out to Inspiration Point with me and I said, “Dick, tell Toni about what we did here.” And he told her the story essentially as I told you. And years later when she was in Hawaii, she had somebody who was handy with their hands, build a little model of that bicycle with wings on it, which I still have in my study.
LC: Really? Commemorating your great adventure.
AL: Yeah, yeah. But I remember Lindbergh and he had a big impact on kids my age.
LC: Sure, absolutely.
AL: About every guy I ever met in the Air Force was influenced by Lindbergh. Just a few years ago, I was in Hawaii and I went out to visit his grave. You know, he was buried in Hawaii.
LC: I didn’t know that, no.
AL: And he was alienated from his kids.
LC: Yes.
AL: But in the last few years, the few days, months of his life, he became well acquainted with his kids and they dug his grave and he was buried in Haleakala Crater on Maui. But I went up to his grave. And I was on a tour bus that was fitted up to make that journey because it was tough. He needed four-wheel drive to do it.
LC: I believe that.
AL: I was surprised to learn that half the people on the bus didn’t even remember who Lindbergh was. (Laughing)
LC: Well, I noted that you had written just a brief piece about him and I wondered what role he had played. That you met him is fabulous.
AL: I’ve been disappointed in [his] life. I thought he and Ann Morrow Lindbergh were the ideal husband and wife. She was miserable. He couldn’t stand being at home. He wandered the world just to keep away from home responsibility. He had another family in Germany. I didn’t know if you ever heard about that.

LC: I have heard that. I didn’t know it was true.

AL: Ann was a mistress of the Saint Exupéry, the famous pilot and poet.

LC: Really?

AL: Yeah, plus his doctor in New York. And this is all—

LC: Quite a lot going on there.

AL: Yeah, this is all well known, so I’m not snitching on him.

LC: Sure, sure.

AL: But I admired Anne for her own accomplishments. But I don’t look upon them as an ideal for married couples to aspire to be.

LC: Right, and they had problems that weren’t of their creating as well, obviously.

AL: And they had wonderful kids, too. Their son John became a world famous oceanographer and diver. And they got another one who was as famous as an animal nutritionist. They were worthwhile people.

LC: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. And they’re very important influence on America in the time we’re talking about.

AL: Yeah.

LC: Tell me about your first successful flight. When did you begin to actually fly in airplanes?

AL: When I was in college at Penn State, I took lessons in what they called an Aeronca C-3. It was a little, high-winged monoplane with a two-cylinder engine, about thirty-seven horsepower.

LC: Yeah.

AL: And it had such huge wings it was more like a glider than an airplane. But two adults could take off in it and get the feel of flight. And you learned a lot about thermals because it was very sensitive to air currents and whatnot, and you could wheel and fly with the buzzards and the hawks and it was very exciting. You could fly over a
plowed field in the summer. The heat from the field, it kind of—the airplane just kind
of—like flying over a washboard to massage your back. (Laughing)

LC: Really?

AL: And then I flew in what they called—it was an old bi-plane with an OX-5
motor. OX-5 motors were made during World War I. They were water cooled, about
ninety horsepower, and they were very cheap, you know, on the surplus market. Most of
the old planes had that engine. So, that’s the kind of plane I started flying. And then I
got in the CPT program just before World War II and got my commercial license and
went to work for Aero Service Corporation. But when I was with Aero Service
Corporation, I had a very unfortunate accident and it wasn’t my fault. The boss sent me
over to—well, first of all, it became the largest aerial mapping outfit in the world.

LC: Yes. What kind of work did you do for them, Al, before you tell about the
accident?

AL: What kind of work did—?

LC: Yeah, what were you doing?

AL: Well, I was a grease monkey.

LC: What does that mean?

AL: That means I greased the rocker arms and put gas and oil in the airplanes
with the promise that I’d get a lot of flying time.

LC: Uh-huh.

AL: And I did, I did. But I did a lot of greasy work, too. But I eventually got a
lot of flying time and initially I flew a smaller airplane with the door off with a camera
mounted. I would fly to highway intersections or housing developments or industrial
sites and bank by banking and taking the camera. I’d use the camera to take pictures,
what they called oblique pictures, from an oblique angle.

LC: Yes, yes.

AL: I did that here and there and everywhere. I flew to a lot of interesting places
and I loved it.

LC: What were they using those photographs for? Were they selling them to the
places that a photograph might have been taken of?
AL: Yes, yes. And we did a lot of work for the government too, photographing farmlands and whatnot.

LC: Okay.

AL: And highway intersections and they had a lot of orders. And then I was being trained for a high-altitude work and I ferried airplanes here and there. And I got to fly some of the bigger airplanes they had. But the boss sent me over one day to fly old Number One. He had it stored on a farm in New Hope, Pennsylvania and he loved it. He had oil paintings of it in his office, and models and pictures of him standing by it. He just loved that old airplane. It’d been sitting in a barn for two years and was full of bird droppings and mice had gotten in the wings and whatnot, but we cleaned up as best we could. And they had a mechanic named Bob Scott that was new to the company. He came out with me and we started to clean it up and it ran fine. He said, “Okay Red. It’s okay, take off.” And I said, “Okay.” And I took off and I flew down the—they’d mowed the runway down for the wheat. And there were big cherry trees down there and I got over them and the engine stopped. And I had no place to go down except in this tomato field. And to keep from going into a gulley, I ground-looped it and I just took out an awful lot of tomatoes. They eventually got in there with a row-crop tractor and towed me out. And fortunately this airplane had folding wings. They were [thinking of] cutting down some of the trees, but then they folded [the wings]. We got back in the wheat field and tried to start the engine and it started right up. And this mechanic said, “I’ll tell you, Al, what’s wrong.” He said, “You notice that little tip on the primer is broken off and you couldn’t lock the primer and the engine flooded out.” And so he broke off a straw and stuck it in there and jammed it and he said, “It’s okay now.” Well, years later when I was flying Navy planes, I tried to—like when I was taxiing, I’d take the primer and try to flood out the engine. You can flood an engine out when it’s idling, but when it’s full and running at full power, you can’t.

LC: Right.

AL: Anyway, he says, “It’s okay.” I took off and this time I cleared the cherry trees and the engine stopped again and there’s no place to go except down. And there’s a gulley with trees in it and I purposely tried to hit the ground before I hit the gulley. The landing gear came up in the fuselage and tore out the seat I was sitting in, the back of the
seat. It went sliding on its nose and belly through these trees that were slowing me up.
But I still hit the side of the gulley with such force it pitched me through the cabane
struts. (Laughing) When I came out, my head was actually between the cylinders.
(Laughing) And I had a big stick, like a baseball bat, that when I hit and I came to a stop,
it kind of acted like a fulcrum, but it dug into my chest and into my throat. I couldn’t talk
for the rest of the day and I was stunned. And I heard Scotty and the other guys coming
over on the tractor saying, “Red, Red, are you alive, Red?” Well, I was alive. But I was
so mortified that I left the company. Well, I think I had a letter in one of those things I
gave you.

LC: Yeah.
AL: Kaufman [the owner] wasn’t mad at me at all. And I found out later it was
not my fault and their planes—they just gave you enough gas in the center tank to get
from where I was to where I was going, which was about twenty-five miles. And in
those old planes, the gas outlet was about to the middle to the tank and when you were
climbing like this, if the tank wasn’t full—

LC: You tip back—
AL: The airplane didn’t get gas. Now they have outlets here both front and back.
Not only that, they found that mud daubers had clogged the air vent in the gas tanks.
They’d build a mud—

LC: A mud wasp plank?
AL: Yeah, they think I might’ve got a vapor lock from the mud daubers. And
Scotty should’ve caught that. I didn’t have enough knowledge to know all these things.
But anyway, I left the company and went in the Navy and then the war started.

LC: Al, I’m going to ask you about that maybe tomorrow morning, but I wonder
if you have memories of being in air shows?

AL: Yes.
LC: Do you remember flying?
AL: Oh yeah, absolutely. I flew [in many air shows.]
LC: That’d be great if you could tell us anything about how those were organized
and what you did.
AL: They weren’t organized at all. I was known as “Wild Red” Lavelle.

(Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) Okay, “Wild Red.”

AL: And “Wild Red” taught himself how to do slow rolls and spins and loops, and I did them with no great precision. Later on, I learned how to be a real, you know, precision pilot. I should have been called “Lucky Lavelle.” And every time there was an air show, somebody would contact old “Wild Red,” and I’d come over there and put on my demonstration and never wore a parachute and now you have to—you have to adhere to all the rules. But I flew in a lot of air shows where I just took off and flew.

(Laughing)

LC: It was just a wide-open thing where no rules really—you could go up and do what you wanted?

AL: No, no. The only time I remember getting in trouble, I flew—that’s when I worked with this company with a guy named Ed Canfield who was touted as being Worlds Champion Coyote and Hawk Killer, I guess. And he used to go up in an airplane and release about twelve balloons and then with a shotgun, he’d come down and hit all the balloons.

LC: (Laughing)

AL: And I was the pilot. You know, I’d go after the balloons and he had a shotgun that held six cartridges, I guess. And we’d go after the balloons. And one time we—the last few balloons were, I guess, shooting into the crowd. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: And somebody got on us for that.

LC: Yeah, I would think.

AL: (Laughing) But I used to come down and cut ribbons with my wheels and do all sorts of things. As a matter of fact, on the videotape you’re going to look at, just before you get to Vietnam, there’s a yellow plane. That’s the last air show I flew in up here at Georgetown.

LC: Here in Texas?

AL: Yeah, that was probably about 1974.

LC: So you were still—
AL: Oh, I was flying aerobatics till year before last. And I was just married to Margarita.

LC: Yes.

AL: And I’d ordered this acrobatic plane, one that I always wanted. And it finally arrived, and just so I could get her out of the way so I could have two weeks of getting reacquainted with my airplane, I sent her on a trip out to California to meet my sister—well, she knew my sister. Anyway, she was out there and I took off. I’ll send you the report on this.

LC: Okay, great.

AL: And it wasn’t my fault because an FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) guy was watching what happened and plus the airport operator. But anyway, I’ve owned a lot of airplanes. This is the only one I had insurance on, and I made one payment and the payment was for about one-third a year. It was very expensive—

LC: Sure.

AL: —to have insurance. Anyway, I took off in this neat little aerobatic airplane. And when Margarita saw it, she thought it was a toy. I mean, they’re so small. You can touch the ends of the wings and touch the tail. (Laughing) And it was a very calm day, but there had been storms the night before and some of the pilots were complaining about dust devils and some of them were pretty big, like a strong tornado.

LC: Yes, for sure.

AL: Anyway, they’d torn up the runway and I was using a taxiway, which was six-thousand feet long. Plenty long, but there’s road machinery on either side, tractors and earthmovers and whatnot. I checked the wind sock and it was hanging limp. I swung out of the runway and as I did, a dust devil picked up behind me and was following the airplane. By this time, I was doing about sixty miles an hour, doing quite well, but then this dust devil enveloped me and with a rush of wind over the air, it picked the airplane up and it was flying—I wanted to keep it headed down the runway. But the dust devil was making it difficult for me to keep my track over the ground and I applied more power and I was trying to climb—well, to make a long story short, the dust devil quickly enveloped me and passed over me, but left me high and dry. I really wasn’t flying and
the airplane spun over the top into the ground and I was doing about sixty miles an hour. It just tore it all to hell.

LC: What about you?

AL: I was banged up. There’s a transponder that dug into my leg, but I had a tight safety belt and shoulder harness and I was black and blue for weeks. But—and it didn’t go upside down. It had a fiberglass tank that leaked to begin with, but I would’ve been incinerated. But that was the end of that.

LC: Well, Al, so just in the time you—

AL: But I still have an airplane.

LC: You have one now?

AL: Well, I’m part owner of one, yes.

LC: Okay, and you’re still actively flying?

AL: Not actively, I—

LC: You fly a bit?

AL: Not quite a bit, no. Every now and then.

LC: Uh-huh.

AL: I met him when he was sixteen years old. His name is Matt Vanderwall, from a prominent farm family in San Antonio. I taught him to fly and I taught him aerobatics and he went on to become a chief pilot at Kelly. He’s a chief C-5A pilot.

LC: Okay.

AL: He’s a great pilot, but he also loves small airplanes and we fly together now. And I recently bought two more airplanes at an estate sale. I don’t know whether their junk or whether their worth anything. I haven’t retrieved them yet, but I still mess around with them. But I probably shouldn’t.

LC: But you’ve owned your own planes for—?

AL: Many, many, many, many.

LC: Yeah, and you bought and sold them as time went by.

AL: Yeah, I’ve owned—in my lifetime I’ve owned about twenty. I’ve owned as many as two at a time. All the time I was in Vietnam it just drove my wife crazy. I was paying hangar rent on two airplanes all the time when I was in Vietnam and she just kind of got incoherent when she thought about it.
LC: Now this is your first wife that we’re talking about.
AL: Yes.
LC: And what year did you marry her?
AL: I married her in 19—just a minute, 1945.
LC: Okay, so right at the end of the war.
AL: We were married fifty-four years.
LC: And what was her name?
AL: Grace Beatrice Mankin.
LC: How do you spell that?
AL: M-a-n-k-i-n.
LC: And she was from Texas?
AL: She was from northeast Texas, and a very lovely girl from a farm family, cotton family. And she was just a wonderful wife and mother.
LC: Yes, of course. You left Aero Service Corps—
AL: Yes.
LC: —after that crash.
AL: Yeah.
LC: Did you think that you would fly again or did you—?
AL: Oh yeah, I immediately enlisted in the Navy and became a Navy pilot.
LC: Okay. Tell me about enlisting. What year did that happen? Was it—?
AL: It was right after Pearl Harbor.
LC: So Pearl Harbor had happened.
AL: Yeah, that sent me into the Navy.
LC: Al, tell me what you remember about the first time you heard about Pearl Harbor and what happened. Where were you, do you remember?
AL: I was with Aero Service Corporation when I heard about it. And I was in a movie in Philadelphia with Bob Scott, the mechanic I mentioned, and it was flashed on the screen.
LC: Really?
AL: Yeah. And now we were at war with the [Japanese] and everybody got kind of excited about that.
LC: You had already been at that point in the Civilian Pilot Training Program and you said there were a couple of other guys, I guess from St. Joe’s who also got in. And one of those men was killed right around this time.

AL: Vavinsky got killed. The first one was named Jim Bevloc and this is interesting.

LC: Yes.

AL: He’s an Italian boy; his original name was Bevlocano.

LC: Okay.

AL: And we were both on the boxing team at St. Joe and I knew him very well. And he got—he went in the old Army Air Corps and he was flying P-40s.

LC: Okay.

AL: And he got killed the second day after, or the day after Pearl Harbor. And he was shot down by Sabaru Sukai, a leading Japanese ace who I know very well. I met and got to know him very well. And I’ve talked to Sabaru about the day he shot down my friend, Bevloc. He was taking off from Clark Field on a P-40 and Sabaru, who had been flying for years in China and was a superb pilot, came in and just knocked him out of the sky. And the way I met Sabaru Sukai, when I was a teacher I was in charge of the foreign students, a lot of them were Japanese.

LC: Now about when would this have been?

AL: Well, I started teaching school in ’74, I guess.

LC: Okay.

AL: And one of the girls was named Michiko Sukai, but I never put two and two together. But she finished high school and matured and went on to college and she went through a fine college there in San Antonio. And she used to often invite me to some of the parties that foreign students had.

LC: Sure.

AL: And, of course by this time, she was quite a young lady and whatnot. And I said to her one day, “Michiko, did you ever hear of a guy named Subaru Sukai?” And she said, “I guess I have, he’s my daddy.” And I said, “I heard about him in World War II.” And I said, “Yeah, I’d love to meet him sometime.” And she said, “Well, you can,
he comes out here to Fredericksburg every year for that meeting of the Japanese and 
American World War II aces,” or people who fought one another.
LC: Sure.
AL: Anyway, by this time—I mean, this just sounds unbelievable. There’s a 
comedy on TV called “Get Smart.”
LC: Yes.
AL: Do you remember that?
LC: Sure do. (Laughing)
AL: Uh, let me get this story straight, now. Anyway, Michiko married an 
American Army captain whose name was Smart. What was the name of the guy that 
could—anyway, she named her baby—
LC: After the star of the show?
AL: After the star. Anyway—
LC: Oh, boy. I can’t quite call it up, but I know Don something, I think.
AL: Anyway—
LC: We’ll think of it.
AL: Yeah, and it just so happened that two weeks before that my youngest 
daughter—now I spent a lot of time in Japan, twelve years, I guess. And I knew a lot of 
American men that had Japanese wives and girlfriends and whatnot. I never knew any 
American girl that married a Japanese man, but my youngest daughter did. (Laughing)
LC: Is that right?
AL: And she married a guy by the name of Mitzuiki Miazaki. Anyway, Michiko 
introduced me to her daddy, Sukai, and she was talking in Japanese. And I said, 
“Michiko, I can speak pretty good Japanese. Let me talk to your daddy in Japanese.” 
And so we talked in Japanese, which impressed him.
LC: Yes.
AL: Anyway, I said to him, “Isn’t this strange, Mr. Sukai, that you were raised in 
the spirit of bushido, and you are a Samurai warrior, and your youngest daughter Michiko 
made an American named Smart, and you have a baby named—” I forget the name of 
the baby. And I said, “And just two weeks ago, my youngest daughter married a guy
named Miazaki.” And he said, “Oh gosh, you know, I’ll tell you all, it’s a strange world, isn’t it?” But anyway, he was Japan’s leading ace.

LC: Yes.

AL: He weighed about, I’d say, ninety-eight pounds, bald with one eye.

LC: Really?

AL: Yeah, he didn’t look very formidable. But in World War II, if he got on your tail, you were dead meat. He was a good pilot.

LC: Did you ask him about that day at Clark Field?

AL: Oh, yeah. I asked him, I said, “I had a friend.” And I told him the story, and he said, “Yeah, that was me, I remember it very vividly.” And he said, “I had him before he was taking off, and I nailed him.”

LC: Was that tough for you?

AL: No, not—well, these things happen.

LC: You had already—

AL: The years had passed and whatnot. But God knows how many other people he knocked out of the sky, but that’s what he did.

LC: Sure.

AL: And he was good at it.

LC: Do you remember some of those other guys that were in that training program?

AL: Oh, yeah. A guy by the name of Dollinburg. Fred Dollinburg. Dollinburg was the big man on campus in college. During World War II he made quite a name for himself flying B-24s, I think. And he had a wife who was in the newspaper business who gave him a lot of publicity.

LC: Aha, good.

AL: And so I read about Dollinburg for years after World War II and he started a business called Wing Cargo, which ostensibly was to tote cargo gliders from the United States and Puerto Rico. I think they tried it a time or two and didn’t work out too well, and then they just had the Wing Cargo Transport Company. And what they were doing back then were transporting Puerto Ricans from Puerto Rico to New Jersey.

LC: Wow.
AL: And they worked on Seabrook Farms and in then in the wintertime, went to New York where they became a problem for the relief people. But Dollinburg died a natural death, I think. And there were a couple of other guys who started flying, but they all got killed during World War II.

LC: Most of them were lost during World War II?

AL: Yeah.

LC: And the purpose of that pilot training program, that Civilian Pilot Training Program was—?

AL: Get a nucleus of people who were vaguely familiar with flying and push them through the training.

LC: Anticipating a conflict.

AL: That’s where the pilots came from, mostly.

LC: Yeah. And in those years right before Pearl Harbor, say 1940 and ’41, were you paying attention to world events? Were you watching?

AL: Not really.

LC: Yeah?

AL: You know, I was a typical young person.

LC: Yeah, young man.

AL: I couldn’t see the forest for the trees and all I wanted to do was fly airplanes. I was so—when I was young, I was so stupid and non-political. And even after World War II, another guy and I tried to get a job flying with the Jews or the Arabs, whoever would pay us the most, you know that sort of nonsense. And we got offers from both of them, but we couldn’t pin them down to the exact amount and then went off to do something else. But, no, I was non-political and I was non-knowledgeable about most everything.

LC: So when you were in that movie house and the news about the attack on Pearl Harbor flashed up there that must’ve been an amazing shock.

AL: Not a shocking, but, “Oh good, war!”

LC: “Oh good, war?” (Laughing)

AL: Yeah. Well, when you’re young and dumb. You know, I wasn’t concerned about horrible aspects that was going to follow and I was just thinking, flying more
airplanes to more places now, drop more bombs. I guess one of the biggest—you’re always asking me about my military career and I can probably tell you, my military career was not spectacular. I was a pilot and I wanted to get out in the Pacific and kill Japanese like every young and dumb guy did. But because I had so much experience for that day and age, I was always retained as an instructor. And eventually I was sent to the Flight Instructors College in New Orleans where all we did was teach accomplished pilots how to be better pilots and acrobatics. So, most of my flying experience was just rolling around the sky doing aerobatics and seeing if I could tear an airplane apart. And although I went through various instrument training programs I never liked flying on instruments. And the company I flew for only flew on cloudless days, so the only kind of flying I ever enjoyed was acrobatics. And the rest of the flying always bored me, and still does. (Laughing)

LC: Because you were an instructor rather than kind of, as it were, out where the action was?
AL: Yes, yes.

LC: Did you feel sort of, I don’t know, like you missed the war?
AL: I did initially, but now I’m so happy that, you know, I would’ve hated to go. To think now that I was either killed or had killed somebody.

LC: Yeah, yeah.
AL: To me, it was a blessing and I learned to enjoy myself and the kind of flying I was doing. And of course, after the war, between World War II and Korea, there were no great—there were no careers. I never knew anybody that had a career. Everybody’s looking for a job.

LC: Absolutely.
AL: And there weren’t many jobs around and I became a crop duster.

LC: And where was that?
AL: This was in New Jersey.

LC: Up somewhere—?
AL: I was flying out of Pennsylvania, but I flew mostly in potato farms in New Jersey. Flying an old rickety overloaded airplane a foot off the ground.

LC: And that was the job you could get?
AL: Well, that’s the job I got, yeah.
LC: Yeah. Okay.
AL: And in those days, crop dusters, even if they had the money, couldn’t be
insured. And had I’d been killed back then, my wife wouldn’t have had a penny.
LC: Right.
AL: And I’d take off in the dark, fly to, you know, just knew there’d be a light in
the sky to fly to the potato fields in New Jersey. I started dusting this high off the ground
(gesture), flying between houses and barns and under wires and between trees, and do
that until about ten o’clock in the morning when the convection currents, because of the
sun, wouldn’t have let the dust adhere to the plant. Then they’d supply me with a pickup
truck and I’d go out and sell farmers on dusting jobs. And in the afternoon when the
wind died down, I started dusting again until dark. And then in the dark, I’d fly the
airplane—I had no instruments other than altimeter and tachometer and that sort of thing.
And generally I was no further than fifty miles from Philadelphia and normally I could
see a glow in the sky. I knew that was Philadelphia. (Laughing)
LC: So that was your orientation was—?
AL: Yeah, the glow in the sky. And I would fly and head for the glow and then
when I’d get to east side of Philadelphia, I recognize a Philadelphia Electric sign and
another sign that I knew at the time. I knew that somewhere in there, there was a field
and they used to leave a light bulb burning on the tool shed on the field. Generally in the
evening, you know, I could see because it was not that dark if the moon was out, but
sometimes it was really dark. I had to actually come in and fly between the signs, and
look for that light and start feeling for the ground with my airplane, pull up [to the]
hangar, get the airplane in the hangar all by myself. And get up again at four o’clock in
the morning and load the airplane and grease the rocker arms, load the truck and takeoff
before the truck did to start dusting as soon as—oh, it was an awful job.
LC: Hard, hard, hard work.
AL: I should’ve been—yeah. And no respirator and the stuff we were using was
dangerous, I know. It used to corrode the tail of the airplane.
LC: What was it?
AL: It’s an old Travel Air with a 550 Wasp engine.
LC: Any idea what kind of stuff you were scattering?

AL: I think it was DDT, which, you know, killed birds and people and everything else.

LC: It sure did. Al, let’s take a break.

AL: All right.
LC: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing the oral history interview with Lt. Col. Allan Lavelle. Today’s date is the 6th of May, no I’m sorry, it’s the 5th of May 2004, and both Al and I are here in the interview room on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections Building. Good morning, Al.

AL: Good morning, Laura.

LC: I want to ask you a little bit more about your experience during World War II. You were a flight instructor.

AL: Yes, I was.

LC: Where were you stationed, Al?

AL: Well, I regret to say, how disappointed I was. I was trained as a typical Navy pilot, but because I had a lot more experience in time in those days than most people, I was retrained. I mean I was not retrained, but I was made a flight instructor, as the primary and later a basic flight instructor. And initially I was sent to what they call, it was called the Flight Instructors College in New Orleans, where graduate Navy pilots were trained in aerobatics, mostly. And our primary job was to retrain pilots back from the fleet, combat pilots who, of course, were great pilots, but they knew little about, not much about aerobatics and flight instruction. And I did that for a period of time and then I was sent to Norman, Oklahoma. And I said, “Oklahoma? What’s the Navy doing in Oklahoma?” But it was our primary base. And I remember the first day, I met one of my friends—no it was Dallas, Texas, I was sent. One of my friends met me and said, “Al, have you been out to the base yet?” And I said, “No.” He says, “You won’t believe it.” And he said, “They’re like bees swarming through a hive.” And I didn’t believe him. He said, “They blot out the sun.” And then I thought he was exaggerating, but I went out there and I soon got involved in what he was talking about. They had, I think, about 1800 airplanes; none of them had radios. These were Stearmans, a biplane.

LC: Wow.

AL: And they say we’re training pilots. And although I was an experienced pilot for that day and age, when I went up for my first flight and the flight instructors took me around patterns, “Okay, land it.” I couldn’t see a place to land because the landing mat was full of airplanes and there were airplanes behind me, on either side of me, and in
front of me. (Laughing) And so I went around again and he says, “Damn it, I thought I
told you to land this thing.” (Laughing) I came around the second time and it didn’t look
clear to me because there are planes on the mat, and along side me, and on either side and
behind me. And I went around again and finally he just took it and we plopped down,
you know, the airplanes would move out of the way.

LC: They’d kind of move out of the way?

AL: Yeah.

LC: A little?

AL: Gently. Sometimes, you talk about accidents; there were a lot of accidents
over a period of time. I remember one day, the winds changed drastically and a lot of
these planes had pilots flying for the first time, you know, the first solo and whatnot and
there were 176 accidents. They were all minor, nobody was killed or anything like that.
But they had two mats, and—oh, and while I was instructing in primary, we had to keep
current in service-type aircraft, too. The bigger, heavier Navy planes. And I became
checkout pilot in the afternoons for that type of flying. But my primary job was teaching
primary flying. And eventually, because I was a good acrobatic pilot, I was just used to
acrobatic checks, I became the acrobatic check-by pilot.

LC: Now by that, what do you mean? What did the flyers have to accomplish in
that?

AL: By this time, they had to be able to take an airplane up and put it upside
down and go in an inverted spin. They had to be able to do swirls to the left and the
right, keeping their nose on the point, not losing or gaining altitude. They had to learn all
the snap maneuvers, every one of them, snap rolls and whatnot. It was a pretty extensive
workout, but most pilots got this in basic training and they never got a chance to do it
again. But this area I’m talking about and I guess many of the primary bases are like that
today, octagonal mats. And every hour-and-a-half, hundreds of airplanes would takeoff
from one mat and they’d fly out between two pylons that were separated by maybe a half-
mile. At the same time, airplanes are coming in through the same two pylons, but at 500
feet instead of 300 feet. And they were landing on this other mat. And then they’d use
the service runway to taxi up to their parking area. But it was, you know, it was like
today’s traffic jam, except these were airplanes instead of automobiles.
LC: And nobody had radios?
AL: Nobody had radios, no. What we taught more than anything was how to swivel your head. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)
AL: And before you do any aerobatics, we had to clear our area, but usually I used to roll the airplane upside down to look around. But a lot of people just went into those tight, tight turns here, there, and everywhere. And of course, there were areas for aerobatics and areas for landings and this sort of thing. But there were any number of occasions when an airplane would spin down through a formation, passing underneath. That happened a time or two.

LC: I believe it.
AL: And a lot of people don’t realize this, but more planes and pilots were lost in training than were lost in combat in World War II. But anyway—
LC: I didn’t know that.
AL: A lot of people don’t. And later on, I instructed people in basic flying. We each flew what's in the Navy called an SNJ. It had retractable wheels and flaps and whatnot, to turn, to fly more—a sophisticated airplane. Well, I was stationed at Dallas, and then I went to Norman, Oklahoma, and back to New Orleans. And I was in the Ferry Command for a while where I flew all kinds of airplanes here, there, and everywhere. And in New Orleans—but my Naval career as far as flying was concerned was not spectacular.

LC: Now the Ferry Command, go head and tell me a little bit about that.
AL: Well, that’s where the pilots would pick up airplanes at the factory and fly them to wherever they were going to be shipped out or needed. And it just meant going here, there, and everywhere and picking up different kinds of airplanes and getting them to their destination.

LC: So you had a chance over time to fly a number of the newest aircraft?
AL: I flew everything the Navy had, just about [at that time].

LC: Yeah.
AL: Well, I had a little, some twin-engine time, mostly single-engine airplanes. I flew all the single-engine airplanes and a lot were antiques even then. I flew the old JRF [J2F], which is an old biplane with the big pontoon, where the photographer would sit.

LC: Yup.

AL: And I flew SNCs, which predated the SNJ. But I flew just about everything they had. I flew TGs, these were torpedo bombers, like the Fairey Swordfish, big fabric covered biplanes that—but I just ferried them here to there, I didn’t—I never saw combat at all.

LC: Sure. Did you go up and down the East Coast or back and forth across the South or—?

AL: I went back and forth across the country.

LC: Okay.

AL: I remember, a lot of pilots flying down into the Grand Canyon and not knowing there were cables across and doing stupid things like that. And sometimes they’d get out over West Texas and get that high off the ground (gesture) and scare the antelope and whatnot. (Laughing)

LC: You never did anything like that though, did you, Al?

AL: I did.

LC: You did? (Laughing)

AL: Well, I was young and dumb and I got—I did a lot of things that I wouldn’t do now.

LC: Was there an incident around this time that changed your thinking about taking risks like that, or did that come later on?

AL: I never considered what I was doing a risk because I still believe that, you know, flying airplanes was designed for aerobatics and it’s far safer than me driving from San Antonio to Lubbock. (Laughing)

LC: Why do you say that? You can go head and—your opinion on that is straight clear, but why do you say it? Because other drives making decisions all over?

AL: Well, yes.

LC: Uh, yeah.
AL: And usually when they do it—I was not foolhardy, but if an airplane had a
reliable engine and I knew that it had good wing spars and sturdy in the tail and whatnot,
had a good reputation, I’d take it up and do anything with it.

LC: Wow.
AL: As a matter of fact, I was a test pilot for the Navy. They had a unit called
A&R, assembly and repair, and a huge tornado came through Norman, Oklahoma, and
the airplanes were rolling around like tumbleweeds.

LC: Wow.
AL: And after it was all over, the airplanes, they looked like they might still fly,
we took them up to see, and deliberately tried to see if they’d come apart.

LC: And you were doing that?
AL: Oh, yeah. I thought nothing of it.
LC: And did any of them have critical failures or—?
AL: Yes.
LC: They did?
AL: (Laughing)
LC: I’m thinking you have—how many lives do you have, Al? I’m thinking you
have—
AL: Yeah, well, that was nothing, you know, compared to what would happen
later.
LC: (Laughing)
AL: But I had this one—I had some funny things happen. This one friend of
mine picked up a SNJ here, a North American T-6, I think the Army Air Corps called
them. And the guy tested it and he said, “There’s something wrong with that wing.” And
they went out and shook it and checked it and they couldn’t find anything wrong and he
said, “Well, I’m going to prove to you there’s something wrong with that wing.” He took
it up and pulled the wing off. And this was in Dallas. (Laughing) He jumped out and
landed safely, but the wing came down like a falling leaf.

LC: No kidding.
AL: And hit the roof of the gymnasium, slid off, and crushed somebody’s car.

(Laughing)
LC: And the guy who was flying this, he had a chute on, I’m taking it?
AL: Yeah, he jumped. Oh yeah, he got out with no problem.
LC: When you were test flying some of these aircraft that had been damaged or there was a possibility they were damaged, were you always in a chute?
AL: Oh, in the Navy, you were required to wear a chute, yes.
LC: Okay, had you had chute training?
AL: No.
LC: (Laughing)
AL: No, but we always wore a parachute, and before I got in the Navy, I used to fly and I never wore, you know, nobody could afford a parachute.
LC: Well, sure.
AL: Or would want a parachute. But I thought nothing when I’m doing my acrobatic routine with no parachute. And I want to mention, you know, I’ve been flying now for many years.
LC: Yes.
AL: And I’ve only had two accidents and one was that one with Aero Service Corporation.
LC: Yeah.
AL: And the other one was the one I had, my last airplane. The wind devil picked me up and spun me out of control and whatnot, but there were only two accidents I’ve personally ever had. I’ve had engine failure a time or two, but got down okay.
LC: Al, what’s it like to go down in a crash? I mean, what’re you thinking when that happens? Are you thinking, “How do I get out of this?” Or, “This is it,” or something in between—?
AL: No, I remember one—oh, the night before I was married, I was a flight instructor and three aviation cadets were taking their first cross-country and I was a chase pilot. You hang back and we didn’t have radios, or they didn’t have radios, and we would just keep an eye on them as they got off course, fly up alongside of them and herded them back on the course. But I had been on a flight like that and I was flying a T-6 [SNJ] and it had a radio, but the guys were flying Stearmans. So I had to stay way back and fly real slow, it really got monotonous and whatnot. But I finally got back to
the vicinity where we were going to land and as I came down to pattern altitude, had my
wheels and flaps down, the engine stopped there.

   LC: It just cut?

   AL: It just cut out, and right in front of me was a lake and I didn’t want to go
down in that lake with my wheels down. I’d flip over upside-down. I mean, you think all
these things very rapidly. But for flying over this general area, I knew it quite well and I
knew there were open fields behind me. And against all the training I gave myself and I
gave to the time when the engine quits, you know, just go straight ahead, don’t try to
turn. I knew better than that because I would’ve gone down in the middle of that lake. I
bent it around and got it straightened out and I hit the ground where there were a lot of
open fields with gullies between them and I had enough speed to fall over a couple of
those gullies. But I skidded right into it a rickety old barn that had a fence around the
barn. I went through the fence and the nose of the airplane ended up in the barn. And
this was the night before I was to be married. And I said, “Mayday! Mayday! This is
6908. I’m going down. I’m going down.” And they heard it of course in the tower, but
the maintenance officer was going home for supper and he had a radio in his car and he
heard it. And so I ended up with the nose of the airplane in the barn, not much damage
was done to the airplane, and suddenly a deadly silence and a kid’s sitting in the back
who didn’t know what was going on. And about that time I felt the airplane shake and it
was the operations officer climbing up on the wing. He said, “What in the hell
happened?” And I told him. (Laughing) But the WAVES (Women Accepted for
Voluntary Emergency Service) in the—my wife, the girl that I married was a WAVES
and worked in the Navy.

   LC: Oh, really?

   AL: And the girls and the officers, “Oh, Al has gone down.” And they told
Grace. And so she was all bent out of shape and worried until I showed up on the scene.
But yeah, I remember, that was the night before the night I was married.

   LC: Was she a little bit angry with you, Al, for taking chances or just so glad to
see you?

   AL: No, no, she was glad I was alive and could still marry her. (Laughing)

   LC: Just so glad to see you, yeah. (Laughing)
AL: But she always hated airplanes.
LC: Really?
AL: I used to fly her home and I’d get bored flying from here to there and sometimes just to relive the monotony I’d roll the airplane upside down, because she hated that. And I’d put on a wild acrobatic demonstration over her farm with her in the airplane.

LC: With her in the airplane. (Laughing)
AL: And she always advised [my children] “Never fly with daddy.” None of my kids ever did. (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing) She had a lot to put up with, didn’t she?
AL: My so-called Naval aviation career was primarily as an instructor, much to my deep regret at the time. I’m so glad now that I didn’t get sent to the Pacific, to shoot down Japanese, but—

LC: Did you ever think about some of those kids that you trained who did get sent out there?
AL: No.
LC: You didn’t think about them?
AL: No, never gave them a thought, to tell you the truth.
LC: Really, okay.
AL: Because, really, most of them I don’t think ever, ever got out to the Pacific. A lot of them became aviation pilots, but I don’t think many of them got combat experience.

LC: How good did you have to be in order to get out on a carrier out there in the Pacific?
AL: You just had to finish Navy training. Everybody got the same kind of training and once you’re qualified as a Navy pilot—one thing through that struck me as strange was that when we’d get in, like when I was flying service-type aircraft and checking other people out in it, I was required and they were required to study the operations manual for a couple of weeks and take blindfolded cockpit checkouts, and that sort of thing. Then suddenly in the Ferry Command—I remember I flew an airplane called a PQ, which is not designed to carry a pilot, but was designed to be shot down, a
radio controlled airplane where they—it was a Culver, rigged up with controls so the
pilot could ferry it around.

LC: Right.

AL: And I flew that little tiny airplane from someplace to someplace. Then I was
sent to Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, and I looked at the flight schedule and I saw I was
scheduled to fly a PV-2. I had never seen a PV-2, never heard of PV-2. Well, I guess I
did. And I thought to myself, “Well, I guess I’m just going to be the co-pilot. They have
some guy who knows how to fly one of these.” And about that time, some ensign came
up and said, “Are you Lieutenant Lavelle?” And I said, “Yeah.” And he said, “I’m your
copilot.” (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: I said, “Co-pilot!” And then I went up to the operations officer and said,
“I’ve never flown one of these before.” He said, “You’re a Navy pilot, aren’t you?” And
I said, “Yeah.” He says, “Read the operations manual. Be ready to go in the morning.”
The operations manual was like that book I just gave you. [A big thick book.] (It had
warnings like) Don’t do this, don’t do that. Warning. Warning.

LC: Oh, sure. And you had about what, twelve hours to—did you even try? Did
you read it that night?

AL: Oh, yeah. I read it all night long.

LC: Did you?

AL: I was exhausted in the morning and half scared to death from reading all the
things that could go wrong. But in the Ferry Command, it seemed to me that men
became pretty good pilots or they killed themselves.

LC: Yeah.

AL: And I remember, I was so blasé towards the end, that very often I’d get in an
airplane, I couldn’t find the master switch because things were not standardized.

LC: Sure.

AL: And I remember one time, I had to fly this old PBY from someplace to
someplace. And you know, I swear I couldn’t find the master switch and I finally called
the mechanics who knew the airplane, the master switch was under the navigator’s table
in the back. (Laughing) And that sort of thing. But I say we got blasé, I just—as long as
the airplane was full of gas and I knew where the gas handles were that said “on” and “off” and the gas was on and the engine was running pretty good, why, we’d take off and go our merry way. And I’d been in formation where other pilots were not too familiar with the airplane they were flying. We’d take off and I’d wait for them to join up on me and they’d be lagging back and lagging back and I’d look back and their wheels would still be down, there flats would be down and I’d slow down and get along the side of them, tell them to pull up their wheels and you’d see them looking for the lift.

(Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: But by and large, they were competent pilots and they got where they were going and for that day and age, you know, they did a good job. For a while, it was kind of wild.

LC: Yeah, it sounds wild.

AL: Yeah.

LC: Particularly the part about so many men flying in such close ranks with no communication, no radio.

AL: Yeah, flying formation—I used to fly at night and I’d fly so close, I’d keep myself aligned with the other plane’s exhaust and the instruments in his cockpit. My eyes were better then, I could read it. I could read his instruments. (Laughing)

LC: Wow. Al, you told about after the war, that you had taken a job as—that very hard job of crop dusting where you were working very hard. How did you decide to go back into military service? How’d that come about?

AL: Well, when I was in the—first of all, before World War II, as I told, there were no great careers, there were just jobs and the average job back then paid fifteen to twenty-five dollars a week. I mean, I’m talking growing men working in steel mills and this sort of thing.

LC: Sure.

AL: And even those jobs were hard to get. And I’d forgotten how well-off I was in the Navy. In the Navy, I had three square meals a day and you could go to the movies for free and each day counted towards a day of retirement. Well, I never thought of these things until I got some of these horrible jobs.
LC: Yeah, yeah.

AL: And not only that, my wife became pregnant and ill. She got toxemia, followed by edema, which is—I didn’t know it then, but it’s very dangerous and sometimes leads to permanent brain problems. And no doctors cared other than what I paid for and I couldn’t afford to pay for anything. I had to borrow money from—banks wouldn’t lend money to anybody that needed money. They’d lend money to people that had money.

LC: Sure.

AL: I had to borrow money from loan companies. Borrowing 100 dollars and pay back 500, something like that.

LC: Yeah.

AL: But I never thought, with all the great benefits—plus, the fact I was under pressure all the time to come up with a certain amount of money each week no matter what.

LC: Right.

AL: And taking a job crop dusting, it pays a little bit more than the factories, but not really. I guess the factory guys were making maybe twenty-five dollars a week and I was making thirty-five, but working a lot longer than they did and taking greater risks, and not always being paid what I thought should be paid.

LC: And you also had to go out and sell the next job, right, so there’s the pressure there, too?

AL: Well, yeah, there was several of us doing that. But yeah, we had to—even when we couldn’t fly, we had to keep active; trying to do something to bring money into—I flew for a contractor who worked for some dusting company. But it was not—so I began to think, “Yeah, I wish I could get back in the Navy.” And I couldn’t get back in the Navy because the Navy didn’t need any pilots at the time. And I did have a chance to go into the Army artillery flying a spotter plane. But I was told that if I couldn’t fly anymore, I’d be in the artillery, and I didn’t want to be in the artillery without an airplane. I didn’t want to have anything to do with guns on the ground.

LC: Right.
AL: And later on when the Air Force came into its own, a couple of Navy pilots and I flew down to the Pentagon. None of us had ever been in the Pentagon before. And two of us, we got separated from the other guys, ended up in the basement of the Pentagon and there was an office for Navy officers desiring to transfer to the Air Force, something like that. I went in there and I still remember talking to the little girl behind the counter and she said, “Well, all you have to do is fill out this form and in about six weeks, you’ll get a letter saying that you have relinquished your Navy commission and then been given one in the Air Force.” The only thing is to transfer in grade, you had to have that grade for a year-and-a-half. I think I was a lieutenant commander in the reserve. That meant not going in the Air Force reserve as a captain. You know, some of that, that’s all right because I was just interested in flying. And at that time, I could—after I got my Air Force commission, I could go to an Air Force reserve unit and check out and start flying, and which I did. And then the Korean War came along and they called people back to duty.

LC: Right, so you were in the reserve, the Air Force reserves—

AL: Yes.

LC: —starting what year?

AL: I imagine this is probably about ’67.

LC: Forty-seven?

AL: Forty-seven, yeah.

LC: About then?

AL: Yeah.

LC: And where were you based, where was your reserve unit?

AL: I was living in Philadelphia.

LC: Okay, so your reserve unit was there?


LC: Okay.

AL: But, I didn’t have much experience flying there. I flew the old T-6 for a few hours, and then got in a P-51 for a few hours and then that was it. And I got overseas and fortunately, for me, they found out I had night blindness.

LC: Yeah.
AL: And I had night blindness—the Navy never caught it and I didn’t know it. And the reason they didn’t catch it was that in the Navy, the night flying we did was close to the airport and generally the moon was out and wasn’t like flying blind from one place to another. You know, we even I think flew formation at night. But in the Air Force, I found out real fast that I had night blindness because they’d ask me to do things that I wasn’t qualified to do, didn’t have the—I finished instrument training in the Navy and whatnot. But I always avoided instrument flying because I was teaching aerobatics and whatnot.

LC: Right.

AL: And I didn’t have the experience I thought I needed to do that kind of flying. Plus the fact, I was relieved when they found out I had night blindness because I’d had a few scares, and not being qualified and whether get killed.

LC: Sure.

AL: So I wasn’t as stupid. (Laughing)

LC: No, sir.

AL: And that was the end of my flying career.

LC: That was the end of your flying career as far as the Air Force was concerned.

AL: Yeah.

LC: And when did they find that out, what—?

AL: Well, almost as soon as I got over there.

LC: Okay, so—

AL: And the weather was a lot worse over there, you know. All the flying I did, I picked the weather, over there—

LC: So this is in Korea, you were—?

AL: This is in Japan.

LC: Oh, Japan. Okay. What base were you at?

AL: I think I was at Johnson Air Force Base. And anyway, I guess I had other potential that somebody realized and I was made the public information officer.

LC: What was that job? What did you have to do?

AL: That was advertising the great work done by the Air Force, here, there, and everywhere, and meeting celebrities and—(Laughing)
LC: That doesn’t sound too bad.
AL: Well, it’s all right, but it can get onerous, too. I remember when Marilyn
Monroe and Joe DiMaggio came to Japan all the guys that worked for me were just
almost hysterical, wanting to go down. I said, “You go, I’ll stay here.” And they went
down to spend a whole day with Joe DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe, taking pictures and
pictures of them with two celebrities and whatnot, that sort of thing.
LC: Now that didn’t appeal to you?
AL: No, no.
LC: Why’s that?
AL: Well, I was never impressed by celebrities, and it was just too much
commotion for my nature.
LC: Who else showed up over there, celebrity-wise, during your time in Japan?
AL: Well, a lot of people, a lot of senators and congressmen would come over
there for tours and whatnot. And Vietnam was even more—we called them tourists.
LC: Yeah.
AL: But a lot of the—you’ve never seen a sight like all this. I did a lot of work
with Japanese celebrities.
LC: Like who?
AL: Like Kyo Machiko and Mufini Toshido.
LC: Who are?
AL: The stars, the greatest stars in Japan. They made *Rashomon* and the *Seven
Samurais*, something like that. But Mufini Toshido, I think he’s dead now, but he was
the god, to all Japanese moviegoers and a great actor; didn’t know any English at the
time. Kyo Machiko was, like I said, was the star of *Rashomon* especially. And Toho
Studios wanted to come out to the Johnson Air Force Base, which was a former Japanese
base, to shoot some kind of a movie and they had to go through me.
LC: Okay.
AL: And so I got to interrelate with them and I was with them one day when they
were trying to decide, “Where will we eat?” And I told them, “Well, you can come home
and have lunch with me and my wife.” And they were happy that I invited them. And so
I had them as my lunch guests, oh, about three times, I guess, and got to know them, because I know Japanese fairly well and we got along fine.

LC: Now, Al, let me ask you, when did you learn Japanese?
AL: I learned Japanese just by living in Japan for as long as I did.

LC: Okay, so you started picking it up?
AL: And I worked at—yes, and I was interested in learning Japanese. I’d say after about three years, you know, I was fairly proficient. But after eight years or so—and I went, oh, I went to a university at night, Sophia University, which is a Jesuit university.

LC: Yes.
AL: And I was taking Japanese grammar lessons at night. And I got so proficient in Japanese, that later on, years later, I even taught spoken Japanese at a junior college here in Texas. And a lot of my students were the wives, Japanese wives who married Americans who knew Japanese, but they knew nothing about the grammar and they couldn’t explain things to their husbands. And I knew a lot about the grammar.

LC: That’s amazing.
AL: Yeah, and you know, I performed a service for a few people doing that and I did fine teaching Japanese, even with Japanese in the class.

LC: Now, Al, did the Air Force subsidize this? Did they put this in front of you as an option or did you do it on your own?
AL: No, it was part of their educational training program. If you wanted to go to college—if they were night courses they would pay, yeah, they would pay for it. The University of Maryland sponsored most of it.

LC: But they didn’t say to you, “Al, you’ll now go through language training.”
AL: Not then, later on they did. Later they said, “Al, you’re going to learn Russian. Al, you’re going to learn Arabic.” And later on, I was sent to the Air Force Institute of Technology, at Syracuse University where they had bona fide Russians that somehow escaped from Russia at that time as our instructors. And we were given an intensive course, which lasted over a year, and you had to study all day and do about five hours of homework every night and work on weekends and whatnot. And they told us at
the end of nine months we had to pass the same written examination the regular college
Russian majors took. And it was true, we did. So—

LC: When did they put you through that? When was that study period?

AL: That was ’53, ’54, I think. And then I was sent to the National Security
Agency doing work in communications. But part of my job there was to use what
knowledge I had of Russian to teach—I had to conduct Russian, basic Russian classes
part of the time I was there.

LC: Now that’s—

AL: And at the same time, take further training wherever I could.

LC: Now, when did you learn Russian? When did that happen?

AL: That was at Syracuse University

LC: Oh, okay. Syracuse is where you learned Russian, and then you went—when
did you actually go to NSA? When were you on their payroll?

AL: I was on their payroll all the time I was in Washington.

LC: Which was—?

AL: No, I was on the payroll of NSA, but at NSA, they had a lot of military
officers and Marines and Air Force. And our job was to report to NSA to do whatever
we were doing.

LC: And what years was that that you did that?

AL: That was ’54, ’55, ’56 in that time.

LC: Okay. So you stayed as a—you maintained your position in the Air Force?

AL: Yes.

LC: But were assigned, you were assigned at NSA?

AL: Yeah.

LC: And you were instructing in Russian?

AL: Part of the time, yes.

LC: Can you say what else you were doing?

AL: I was what they called a cryptoanalyst. And they called us language
intelligence officers. We’d use what little knowledge we had of the language to try
[understand] when Russian communications were intercepted and encrypted, we’d try to
unscramble them. And it sounds exciting, but it was boring. (Laughing)
LC: Yeah. What was an average day like doing that?
AL: Well, first of all, you got up in the morning and you started decorating yourself like a Christmas tree. You had to put this one badge on that allowed you to get into the main gate.
LC: Okay.
AL: And you had to put on another badge that allowed you to go in this direction, and another badge which would allow you, once you got on that first floor, to go down in the basement. (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing)
AL: And the room I worked in was a big room with no windows, and to get in it, they had like a dial telephone and they were always changing the dial on you and if you weren’t privy or missed getting the—you had to stand outside the door and be embarrassed by somebody telling you you’re stupid for not having it. (Laughing) But in this room, I had a bunch of linguists like myself, and this is before computers.
LC: Yes.
AL: What we did could be done on a computer now and probably in a matter of seconds. (Laughing) And on the other side of the room, there were the engineers, who didn’t have calculators. They had slide rules and maybe adding machines. And between the linguists and the mathematicians, you know, we picked up a lot of information. And one thing that I found interesting there was that we found out that Russian operators they’re like American GIs, they use a very profane language. And sometimes when they’re setting up their cipher machines, they have to get them in sync before they throw the lever that puts them into a cycle. And they say, “Can you hear me?” “Yeah.” “Give me a long count.” (Speaking in Russian) Long count or they would get tired of just saying, (speaking in Russian) and start singing a song or a little diddy like, (speaking in Russian). “While Czar Nicholas was off to the front, do you know what Rasputin was doing to his wife?” (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing)
AL: And they’d say something like, “Shut your damn mouth.” And, “You better stop that or I’m going to report you to the supervisor.” But I—with other people compiled a dictionary of Russian foul language, foul communication because it
sometime was a tip-off because communications were kind of cut and dried. Once you
get into the rhythm and the swing of it, like a certain combination of letters, it’ll tip you
off so you know what’s going to follow it.

LC: So you could, if you got the same profanity three or four different times or
maybe three or four hundred times, then you figured that one out, it might lead you to be
able to unlock some other word or some piece.

AL: Yeah, oh yeah.

LC: (Laughing)

AL: And when these guys tried to get their machines in sync, they’d forget to—
one of them would forget to throw the lever to put it in cipher and you’d pick up what
they call plain text. And if you had enough plain text, you can recover the rotor that was
used in that message.

LC: Yes.

AL: But they changed the rotors all the time. (Laughing) And it was—

LC: Now, Al, was this diplomatic traffic or military traffic? Any idea?

AL: No. Do you remember— you probably read a lot about this, so what I’m
telling you can’t possibly be classified.

LC: No, I don’t think so, not anymore.

AL: The CIA dug a tunnel from West Berlin to East Berlin and they began
tapping into the Russian land lines. The lines ran between Moscow and whoever,
Vladivostok and whatnot. And then they thought it was so fantastic that they’re getting
such good information, they enlarged a little bit, and a little bit, and began adding people
and pretty soon you had an underground chamber area that was tiled and had heaters and
air conditioners and whatnot. (Laughing) And one day, in East Berlin, the snow fell all
over and it stuck to the ground except in this huge area that was warmed up because of all
the—(Laughing)

LC: Did you ever visit that room in Berlin?

AL: No, no, but I—

LC: You heard about it.

AL: I heard about it all the time. And supposedly touted as being one of the great
intelligence coups and of course the Russians began probing it and eventually fell into it.
And that was the end of that, except I found out later, the Russians knew all about it all the time. But we were working on traffic picked up, you know, that way.

LC: Okay.

AL: And from there I was sent to an intelligence gathering outfit overseas again and I spent the rest of my life in intelligence gathering.

LC: Did you go back to Japan?

AL: Yes. I went back to Tokyo and then a place called Misawa, on the extreme tip of Honshu. And I often worked up in Hokkaido at Wakkanai, which is on the extreme tip of—Wakkanai is on the extreme tip of Hokkaido. On a clear day, you can look across and see Korsakov Air Base. You can see the Russian fighters. But we were picking up information from that part of the Russian world.

LC: Listening to electronic communications?

AL: Yeah, and listening to Russian pilots on a daily basis and as they talked to their radar operators and the people on the base, you have an idea of who they were and where they were and what they were flying. We kind of kept tabs on the Russian air force. And the Navy did the same thing, the Naval Security Group and the Army Security Agents were investigating Army and Navy affairs the same way, but this is not classified by any stretch of imagination now.

LC: Sure. From their own bases, they were doing this and—?

AL: Well, we had bases all around. We had [intercept sites] all around the Soviet Union.

LC: And the Air Force had a number of bases—?

AL: All around the world, yeah.

LC: Yeah. And you stayed in Japan how long?

AL: I was there over eight years I guess, and then I went back there many times TDY (temporary duty).

LC: Okay.

AL: I imagine nine years, all totaled.

LC: Okay. So the late fifties for the most part you spent in Japan?

AL: Yes, yes.

LC: And was Grace with you?
AL: When I was first sent to Japan, the Korean War was in progress and families were not allowed to travel for a year. So we were separated for a year and eventually she came over. And we were husband and wife again, and by that time I had a daughter, we had a daughter. And then the next time I went back, I had three daughters. Yeah, Grace was—

LC: And did she pick up Japanese as well?

AL: Poor Grace had trouble with English. She was—forgive me for saying this, she was a Texan. (Laughing)

LC: That’s okay with me. (Laughing) Not with everyone, but it’ll be okay with me.

AL: And I remember—well, one of the reasons I was attracted to Grace, she was so unique to me for that time. Her folks were from Tennessee originally and lived in east Texas and were cotton farmers, and I really at first could not understand them, nor did they me.

LC: Really?

AL: I remember when Grace and I first got married, I was sitting on the front porch with her mother one day and she said, “Well, I reckon it’s a fixin’ to come a blue northern.” And I said, “What did you say Mema?” She said, “I said, it’s a fixin’ to come a blue northern.” And I said, “I know what fixed means and blue, but I don’t know what you’re talking about.” And she turned to Grace and said, “You married a deaf man?” (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: And when I brought Grace home when we got married to introduce her to my family, she said something about ready to get off the train and I said, “Grace, don’t talk like that.” And she said, “I just can’t hep it.” And I said, “Darling, don’t say can’t hep it, can’t you say, ‘I cannot help it.’” She said, “I say can’t hep it just like you do,smarty.” But it took me a long time to—Grace was a smart, a lot smarter than me, but she had an accent that—well, when she joined the WAVES she was with a bunch of girls from Oklahoma and Texas and they went to Hunter College up on the East Coast. And they all had a similar background, you know, country girls and cotton farmers and whatnot. She fit right in. She got appendicitis and her class moved on and when she
recovered, she was put in with a bunch of New Yorkers, who made her life miserable because they’d say, “Stop talking like that! Nobody talks like that!”

LC: Really gave her a hard time.

AL: Yeah, and gave her an inferiority complex, for one. But eventually, (laughing) I guess I started talking just like her and I could understand everything.

Except when I’d go to her home, I got in a lot of trouble with all her relatives because when they all got together, it seemed to me they’d reach a crescendo that kept getting louder and louder and I couldn’t understand a word. Or very often I’d be sitting on the front porch and they’d drive by in the car and say, “Hey Allan, will you tell mama that—” (Mumbling),” and then they’d drive on. What they were saying was, “We’re going off to church, but after church we’re going to come back home and have lunch with ya’ll, tell Mama.” So, I didn’t understand a word and they’d drive off, and later we’d be eating lunch and they’d come in and Mama would say, “Well, I didn’t know you were coming.”

“Well, we told Allan.” (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: But they always referred to me as that Irish Catholic city boy. (Laughing)

Even to this day. And I wasn’t a city boy at all.

LC: No.

AL: I was raised on the edge of town and I had as much country experience as they did. You know, I drove tractors and whatnot when I was a teenager.

LC: Sure.

AL: But there’s always kind of a cultural gap between all of us. And my children, they never got close to their relatives on that side because they couldn’t understand them.

LC: Yeah, that’s interesting.

AL: And it’s sad to say.

LC: That’s interesting. That language and inflection and accent thing is very important.

AL: Well, when I was in Russia, they wanted to learn all about the English language. My job was to answer their questions and whatnot. And they’re only interested in actual American, you know, I was having to brainstorm. And I had to think
hard because I really knew some, but I didn’t know it like I should. And then I told them,
“Well, you know, my wife is from a part of the world where they talk a little bit
differently than you’d expect.” And they said, “Well, give us some examples.” And I
said, “All right, all right. Now phonetically in English, what they were saying, and you
tell me what it means.” And I was like, “Wahl,” w-a-h-l, “I’m a fixin.” “It’s a fixin to
come a blue northern.” (Laughing) And they’d try to figure it out, but they got a big
kick out of that. And then later on, I ran out of examples and I guess I made up a lot of
them. I did a big disservice the people of east Texas. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: But, they found this so interesting. You know, like I did when I was first
married.

LC: Sure, sure.

AL: I think Grace and I were from two different worlds. I never—I was raised in
an Irish Catholic community and later on, although there were Protestants around, they
lived in their own communities, had their own churches and schools and there was no
inter-relationship except snowball fights, I guess, after school.

LC: (Laughing)

AL: And then meeting somebody like Grace, to me it was kind of exotic.

LC: Yeah, it was a completely different world.

AL: Yeah, yeah.

LC: Yeah.

AL: But then I never regretted a minute that I spent with her and her family
because they are wonderful people. And I can understand them better now.

LC: Well, yeah, your ear has become tuned over the years probably.

AL: Yeah, they’re all good people.

LC: Al, the Texans who listen to this will be glad that you concluded that way.

AL: Yeah, well let me say this, for many years, I disliked Texas. It’s too damned
hot, you know, and I didn’t have much in common because I was never interested in
football because the schools I went to, they didn’t—we were athletic and we had all kinds
of activity, but nothing formal. I was just never deeply interested in football or
basketball. I never liked barbeque. So anyway, I was kind of a poor Texan.
LC: Sort of—yeah.
AL: But I’ll tell you and tell your Texas friends this, I read two books, which changed my whole attitude. One of them was *Lone Star* by Fehrenbach, and the other was *The Comanches* by Fehrenbach. I know when I read those books. I read and reread them to this day all the time.

LC: Really?
AL: And that gave me an appreciation of Texas and the Texans and its history and I can’t think of no place in the United States where I’d be any happier.
LC: And you live in San Antonio now.
AL: Yeah, and it’s hotter than hell in the summertime.
LC: Sure.
AL: I might sometimes complain in the summer. But normally it’s delightful and the people are wonderful.
LC: Very nice people.
AL: Yes.
LC: Very nice. So that’s two northerners agreeing on that. (Laughing)
AL: (Laughing) We don’t agree politically, but by my, you know, very nature I guess I’m kind of a liberal Democrat.
LC: Right.
AL: My grandparents and uncles and whatnot were in the labor movement and fighting for labor rights and whatnot and fighting for safety in the mines and social security and things like that. And they told me that all the Republicans were ever interested in was capital gains taxes and laissez faire and that’s all. And of course, this is not true, but it was a big part and it is a big part of their platform. I think the Democrats were always interested in programs that meant more to working people. But whether, you know, you can’t generalize. There’s all kinds of—
LC: And there are a few Democrats here in Texas, it’s a minority.
AL: Oh, yeah.
LC: But there are a few.
AL: You know, one time in Texas, it was all Democrats.
LC: Yes, that’s right.
AL: And changed over civil rights movement.

LC: That’s right, yeah, in the sixties a little bit later, too.

AL: And of course, more people are prosperous.

LC: Yes.

AL: I know that if I own oil wells and had a lot of money, I’d be a lot more conservative than I am. (Laughing)

LC: Well, it could still happen, Al. You know, you don’t know. (Laughing)

AL: No, no, no.

LC: No, you don’t think so?

AL: This is more than the twilight of my life and I have to be content with what it is I am.

LC: Well, you are extremely interesting to us. You’ve done so many things. I want to ask you a little bit more about that time in the fifties in Japan when you were on those bases and monitoring the Russian air force. What was—?

AL: Wait a minute.

LC: Okay.

AL: Let me tell you an interesting thing that happened in Japan before this.

LC: Sure.

AL: When I left Japan the first time—and you’ll find this in some of the data I gave you—180,000 Japanese wrote letters to Eisenhower to keep me there or send me back.

LC: How did that campaign get started?

AL: Well, I was a public information officer and I could speak Japanese fairly well. And I got interested in—and my job was to build good will, good relations between the Japanese and the Americans, which was pretty bad at that time.

LC: Yes.

AL: But I traveled all over Saitama prefecture and I found a lot of background—and a lot of Japanese are extremely poor. [This was not long after World War II.]

LC: Yeah.

AL: I found kids who couldn’t go to school because they couldn’t afford the food there or the pen or paper; didn’t have shoes, didn’t have clothes and whatnot. And I
organized all the Protestant and Catholic and Jewish women on the base to write home
for old clothes and useful items. And over a period of time, I had a warehouse near town
like a thrift shop with dresses and clothes and whatnot. I’d find people that were destitute,
I’d see to it that they got decent clothes. When a house burned down—oh, which
reminds me, just the day I came up here, I received a very sad letter from this colonel I
worked for, it was from his wife, he’d just died. His name was Col. Tom Barrett.

LC: Barrett?

AL: Barrett. He gave me permission to use anything in a salvage yard to help
Japanese that needed help. I could get steel to build towers, what they called fire towers.
Back in those days, every little village needed a fire tower to call the people to action and
whatnot. And it was largely at his urging that I did all these things. And then we started
the Japanese-American Cooperative Council, where Japanese and American officials
would get together once a month and iron out our problems. Sometimes, GIs would be
drunk and disorderly and do damage or whatnot. I had Buddhist priests complain about
the whorehouses operating right next to the temple and this sort of thing. And so the
Japanese-American Cooperative Council, I received a lot of publicity. Plus the fact, I
wrote an article and was translated and given to, oh, about five newspapers and they were
called “Captain Lavelle Says.” It was all in Japanese. But yes, this is how I became well
known to the Japanese, and when it was time for me to go home, I personally received
30,000 letters in one week. I still have some of them, I think.

LC: No kidding?

AL: Yeah. All in Japanese from little children, old folks, and whatnot.

LC: And what were they praying for, what were they asking for?

AL: That I be, I think, the military keep me in Japan or if I had to leave, send me
back as soon as possible because I was—

LC: Helping them.

AL: I got a lot of publicity in the newspapers about this, too.

LC: Absolutely, I saw the clipping.

AL: Not only that, and this is a sad story to me. I was given a samurai’s helmet
and I really didn’t want it, it was kind of big and ungainly, but I accepted it. And then I
got interested more and more in the samurai stuff and I wrote an article about how I was
interested in Japanese history and samurai. And a guy by the name of Saboro Otake, who
collected armor and had to sell armor, I guess, to stay alive, donated to me two sets of
armor. One of them belonged to Akechi Mitsuhide who ruled—even every Japanese knows
who he is. He ruled Japan for several days before he was assassinated. Now I have their
original and I have what they call origami tsuki, which is golden papers of authenticity.
Anyway, over a period of time, I was given something like twelve sets of armor, all gold
armor. And an each set came in a box about as big as that. (gesture)
LC: Yeah, what did you do? Have you still got it?
AL: Well, let me tell you.
LC: Okay.
AL: And my wife was going crazy because I had these boxes in the living room
and the bedroom and the bathroom and whatnot. But I shipped them home and we were
living at that time, we were sent to California, Hamilton Air Force Base and we lived in
what they called Wherry housing, which is small bungalows and a carport. I had them in
the carport and I had them in the living room and the bathroom and everywhere. She
was—she said, “You got to do something about that.” So I began searching around. I
found out that there was an organization called Japanese-American Society and I thought
these were just people that were interested in Japan. And I finally made contact and these
were big businessmen that had interest in Japan and the man in charge of everything was
named George Killian I think his name was. I went up and met him and somehow or
another, you know, you meet people all your life, but sometimes there’s just people you
automatically like. He liked me and I liked him and I told him about this stuff I had and
he contacted the Crocker Art Gallery in Sacramento and over a period of time, I loaned it
to them. And they built a place, it must’ve been fifty feet wide and maybe a hundred feet
long and they built mannequins for this armor. It was a beautiful display and it was
called Lavelle Hall. I have pictures of this somewhere.
LC: No kidding? Yeah, yeah.
AL: Anyway, it was touted as being the most—oh, and they gave me clocks that
were made by the Japanese when the Portuguese were there in the fifteenth century.
LC: Yeah.
AL: Beautiful brass clocks. They gave me Tanegashima *teppos*, these guns that were modeled after the Spanish and Portuguese of the time, and beautiful samurai swords [now worth] a fortune. I had all this stuff, and of course, to most people then, it was, you know, it was junk. It bothered my wife and whatnot, but I had it all—gave it all to the museum and it was supposed to be the finest collection of Oriental art west of the Mississippi. And there it stayed. Then when I was in Washington working at NSA being bored to death during the week, on weekends, I got into sailing. Of course, I had a little monoplane on pontoons that I shared with another guy. But I got interested—oh, and I built a sailboat while I was there. It was twenty-two feet long and it was called the *Cape Cod Seagull* and it was a pretty sturdy little boat. But I got interested in a commercial sailboat and it cost 2,500 dollars, which is, you know, 2,500 dollars [then was] like $2,500,000. [I did not have twenty-five hundred dollars.]

LC: Sure.

AL: And I said, “Oh, I wonder if the museum would be interested in that armor?” I called and I wrote them a letter and I said, “Would you be interested in buying that armor?” And they said, “What do you want for it?” And I said, “Twenty-five hundred dollars.” And I got a check, you know, immediately.

LC: I’ll bet you did.

AL: (Laughing) Well, years went by and Grace and I went out to—you can check all this if you want, the Crocker Art Gallery. And the guy who was running it at the time was named Charles Muskovitz. I remember his name. And some of it was on display, but most of it was so valuable, they kept it locked up and they just exhibited, you know, like the Hope Diamond. And this was twenty years ago. That collection was worth a million-and-half dollars, at least.

LC: Oh, I’m sure, I’m sure.

AL: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

LC: Easily.

AL: Oh, and the sailboat I had six weeks before it sank, before I got it sunk.

LC: You sank it?

AL: I sank it. We were out on in the Potomac River and the Potomac River has a channel for the big ships.
LC: Yeah.

AL: And I was out with a bunch of guys from NSA and whatnot and we were out in the middle of the channel and we’d been drinking and we were addled. I remember I was on the tiller and we’d forgot to put down our centerboard.

LC: Whoops.

AL: Yeah, and then I had the rudder [but could not make any headway as] a big, like an ocean liner going, “Whoo, Whoo,” bells ringing and people running back and forth. You know, they [could not get out of their channel.] Well, the bow wave pulled us alongside like that.

LC: Yeah.

AL: And we were sliding and you couldn’t touch—you know, it was like a freight train going by. If you put your arm out, it’d be ripped out of the socket. And it caught on the ring and broke the mast and went this way. And finally after the boat [was almost] past, the big screws—I remember, I see another guy out of the corner of my eye with those screws you know, about twelve feet [away.] And they just churned everything up. And none of us except one guy, a black guy named Ernie Lauer, he couldn’t swim, so we had the good sense to give him an inner tube over there. He’s the only one that had an equivalent of a life preserver, but they ruined the boat and the boat sank. And I got arrested. I had to go through small boat training. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: But for that million-and-a-half dollar coats armor I sold for twenty five hundred dollars and then shortly thereafter sank the boat and I was left with nothing.

LC: The only thing I can think of is that the people who gave you that stuff gave it to you as a gift.

AL: Yeah.

LC: And it’s in the public domain now.

AL: Yeah, and the one set that belonged to Oda Nobunaga, I think Japan found out about it and declared it a national treasure. I remember writing a letter saying, “Fine,” but it’s on display in Sacramento where there’s more Japanese per capita than any place in the United States. And they said, “As long as it’s there, helping to build a good will, it will stay there.” But sometime—
LC: That’s very interesting.
AL: Sometime, would you contact that—
LC: Sure.
AL: —that Crocker Art Gallery and—
LC: I’d be happy to.
AL: —and tell them that you talked to the man who originally owned the armor
collection and—
LC: See if I can get you a little premium there or something? (Laughing)
AL: Meaning what?
LC: Well, I don’t know. It would be wonderful to have a letter from them that
verified all that.
AL: There ought to be somebody there that could verify that.
LC: Oh, I’m sure they have a record, a file on every piece of—
AL: I’ll find some of these slides if I can.
LC: That would be wonderful. We’d love to have those here.
AL: You can actually see Lavelle Hall. There must be about eight of them. Boy,
mannequins, big Japanese—very ancient flag and the swords and miniatures of Japanese
houses and brass clocks and guns and swords.
LC: You know, they probably couldn’t believe their good fortune. I mean—
AL: I knew it’d be worth something someday, but I just wasn’t thinking. I
wanted, you know, when you’re young and dumb.
LC: You wanted the boat. (Laughing)
AL: I wanted the boat. So I can say I had the potential of having been a
millionaire.
LC: Well, that’s right. That’s closer than I’m sure I’ll get. (Laughing)
AL: Well, but this George Killian. He’s the president of the American Presidents
Steamship Line.
LC: Wow.
AL: He called me in one day and said, “Al, do you ever think of divorcing
yourself from the military?” And I said, “All the time. What do you have in mind?”
And he didn’t say exactly, but he said because I got along so well with the Japanese and
had the ability to write and this sort of thing, they were thinking of making me American
Presidents Steamship Line Far Eastern [public relations] representative with offices in
Tokyo, Hong Kong. And I said, “That sounds pretty interesting.” I said, “But, you
know, I just put in for Russian school. If I get it, I want to go off and learn Russian
because I think the Cold War is going to be with us for a while.”

LC: Yeah.

AL: “But if I don’t get it, I’ll contact you.” Well, I got Russian school, so that
was the end of that.

LC: Right.

AL: But my wife who is smarter than I am said, “Al, I advise you to stay in the
military.” She said, “I know you and you’d be put in positions that you wouldn’t like.”

You know, a big job like that.

LC: Business job.

AL: And when you work for a big company like that, they can get rid of you in a
minute. She said, “You only have a few more years to go in the Air Force and get a
pension, so you better stay in the Air Force,” which is good advice. I might have done
very well, but you know, I might have been one of those people hired and fired a week
later, who knows.

LC: Right, right.

AL: But the guy’s name was George Killian, a big businessman. Oh, the reason
we got along so well—I guess there were many reasons—but he was from Colorado, too.

LC: Oh, is that right?

AL: You know, “Where are you from Al?” “I’m from Colorado.” “Oh, I’m
from Colorado.” And then he was interested in Oriental art and whatnot and he’s the one
that sponsors the Crocker Art Gallery, I think.

LC: Or was a big supporter, certainly.

AL: Yeah.

LC: He certainly did them a favor by getting that collection, getting your
collection to them.

AL: I’d like to know the current status of all that stuff I gave.

LC: I’d be happy to write them a letter. Sure.
AL: Wealthy people buy that stuff and take it off their income tax, that’s—
LC: I’m sorry?
AL: Wealthy people buy it; collections like that.
LC: Oh, yes.
AL: And donate them in a museum.
LC: And donate them. Sure. Yeah.
AL: Who knows what happened to it.
LC: But I’m sure that a well-known, a well-funded museum like that, this stuff will never go back into private hands, I would think. But, we can check up on it.
AL: Tell them whatever happened to that darn collection that belonged to Captain Lavelle that sold to the museum.
LC: It would be very interesting to follow up on that. I’d be happy to write them a letter and see what the status of it is.
AL: Yeah, I would, too.
LC: My guess is that they’re very carefully preserving that, not letting it out of their sight. (Laughing) Al, let me ask you a little bit about your daily work when you were in Japan that second time and doing the intel work, monitoring the Soviet air force. What did an average day look like? What did you do?
AL: Well, first of all, it was a big operation.
LC: Sure.
AL: We had several hundred intercept operators who would tune into the radio spectrum and pick up whatever they could and sometimes they’d latch onto a frequency being used by the Russian air force and then they’d stick with them.
LC: Right.
AL: On a twenty-four hour-a-day basis. You know, they had shifts, a guy would work eight hours and so on. And they all were trained in Russian, they had Cyrillic typewriters, and they listened to this stuff and they’d print it out. Then it was given to analysts. And it would be like if I tied into your telephone at home twenty-four hours a day for several years, I could sit down, I could write report after report about who you were, who your friends were, what your plans were, where you were going and whatnot. And so they stuck with these frequencies and we picked up all kinds of information, tail
numbers of airplanes and whatnot. And generally we knew where every airplane in the
Soviet Union was and where it was going and who was flying it, and this sort of thing.
But my job was putting out timely reports, which means if something exciting comes
right now, it goes straight to the—well, it’s a chain of command, it would go from us to
the security service in San Antonio to NSA, DIA (Defense Intelligence Agency), and
eventually, I guess, would get up to the president. But my job was timely reports, daily
reports, weekly reports, monthly reports, and yearly reports and so on. After the analysts
would do their job, it was my job to check and double-check everything and I was
responsible for the reporting.

LC: Were you promoted in rank along this time?
AL: I was—in the Air Force, I was promoted, you know, along with everybody
else in my age and rank in the time period.
LC: So were you a major during this time period?
AL: I was a major, yeah. Eventually I made lieutenant colonel. And when I was
with CORDS (Civil Operations Revolutionary Development Support), CORDS was a
joint military-civilian operation like (John Paul) Vann. Vann was lieutenant colonel
when we got out of the military, but he retired, with the rank they gave him and he was a
brigadier general. I had the same equivalent rank of a full colonel, a senior full colonel,
because I had colonels and lieutenant colonels and majors working for me.

LC: At CORDS, yeah.
AL: Yeah.
LC: Al, how long did you stay in Japan when you were doing this?
AL: Four years at a time, I think.
LC: Okay. So, you would have left there about 1960 or so, something like that?
AL: Yes, yes.
LC: Okay. What was your next assignment?
AL: My next assignment was Headquarters Security Service, San Antonio.
LC: Okay, and how long were you there?
AL: Until I retired, which is in ’63 I think.
LC: Nineteen sixty-three.
AL: And my job there was to plan some programs.
LC: What does that mean?
AL: It means, we wrote contingency plans for, “What would happen if the Arabs or somebody went berserk and threatened the oil?” Or, “What would happen if an American pilot bailed out over Kyrgyzstan because all people over there are Muslims and whatnot, would he be well-taken care of or would he have a chance of surviving and whatnot?” But it was just writing plans about, “What if, what if, what if?” And one program I worked on I thought very little of was called Cudjoe Key.

LC: Cudjoe?
AL: Cudjoe Key. Cudjoe Key was one of the islands off of Florida. You know, you had Key West and all of that.

LC: Sure.
AL: And the next thing I knew, the Russian pilots were in Cuba and I was sent down there as the AFSSO, Air Force Specialist Security Officer. And I was in a van connected by a secure line to intercept site at Cudjoe Key, where these intercept operators could keep track of the Russian and Spanish pilots as they took off.

LC: Right.
AL: And of course, from Jose Martí Airport to American mainland in modern airplanes was only a matter of what, three minutes, four minutes?

LC: Right.
AL: And as long as they patrolled without making any hostile moves, why, we let them do their thing. And we also had what we called an ACRP, Aircraft Reporting Platform, a big C-130, I think it was, that patrolled part of the island that they couldn’t reach the intercepts sites at Cudjoe Key. But anyway, we kept an eye on the Russian and Spanish pilots through the Cuban Crisis. And I was tied in to what they called a SACLO, which is SAC Liaison Officer (Strategic Air Command Liaison Officer), the guys with the radars.

LC: Sure.
AL: And also, no I mean the TACLO (Tactical Air Command Liaison Officer), tactical. But also with the SACLO who was in contact with the U2s they were fixing in Texas. And between the three of us, it looked like we were getting hostile intent from these aircraft. We scrambled F-4Bs on them and scare them a little bit, or scare ourselves
a little bit. And if you’ll read that article I wrote for this friend of mine, he said, “Al, did you go see that movie *Thirteen Days*? It’s about the Cuban Crisis.” I had frankly forgotten about the Cuban Crisis, but suddenly I remembered. I saw in there and some of the funny things had happened. I’d been told beforehand that, “Al, there’s going to be a Russian plane in the air,” a T-104, I think it was. “It’s going to fly from Cuba and on that plane, there’s going to be some of our—some of our spies are going to be returned for some of theirs. So don’t get too excited.” They didn’t tell me when it was, but (they told me) to not panic when I saw them. And one day I was going to work on my bicycle. (Laughing) To my little van out in the end of the runway. Here’s a T-104 that had the wheels and flaps down and I knew what it was. And anyway, I went into the TACLO and the deputy commander was on duty and because he hadn’t—I think his name was Whyzatisky or some name like that. He hadn’t been briefed on—the commander was briefed and the commander just assumed he’d be there on duty when this had happened, but he wasn’t, his deputy was there. And it was just like in a movie setting, this guy was sitting in what they called a dais, a big chair and the radars up [in front] and [his] feet up on something reading a comic book. (Laughing)

LC: Reading a comic book?

AL: Yeah.

LC: Okay. (Laughing)

AL: Yeah, you know, he was a very common [relaxed] officer, but you know, sometimes there are dull moments.

LC: Sure.

AL: I said, “Ski, what in the hell’s going on?” And he said, “Same old shit with a new crust on it.” I said, “Ski, there’s a Russian airplane about ready to land on the runway.” He said, “Oh, don’t give me that.” I said, “Come on.” And I actually had to pull him out. I pulled him physically out. I was bigger than him, I pulled him out, you hear, “Phew!” A big airplane landed and the front of his face, you know, I can see it, [CCCP], well he called it CCC, Russian [letter for], Union, Soviet Union. And it landed, but stopped in the middle of the runway and a big black limousine came out and joined it. People got out of that limousine, into the airplane, out of the airplane, the limousine came
back and the airplane came back right in front of us and took off. And he, (laughing) he actually ran around in circles saying, “Jesus Christ, God!” He was—

LC: It freaked him out.

AL: Oh, yeah. He was freaked out. Well, what had happened, the T-104 took off from Jose Martí and these F-4Bs flown by CIA pilots, tucked in with it. [close formation]

LC: Sure.

AL: So the guy on the radar saw our planes going out and they saw them coming back, not knowing that the T-104 was tucked in, they were flying at very low altitude.

LC: What base did they fly into?

AL: They were flying into Boca Chica.

LC: And—

AL: Oh, they were flying out of Jose Martí.

LC: And in the States—

AL: In Cuba and they came to Boca Chica, which is our Navy base.

LC: Which is in the Keys?

AL: At the Key West.

LC: Okay, at Key West. And this was during the thirteen days period sometime?

AL: Yes, yes.

LC: Toward the end of the crisis you might say?

AL: Well, yeah, sometime—the crisis lasted I guess, you know, well, it was thirteen days.

LC: A couple of weeks, yeah.

AL: And that was about the end of my tour there, but another funny thing happened to me. One evening I was sitting outside the van just getting ready to go home when I saw this big Russian biplane called an AN-2, come skipping over the waves and plop down right in front of me on the runway. And what it was, it was a Spanish pilot who was flying for the, you know, the Russian airplane and they used these airplanes for all sorts of utility purposes; pipeline patrol and crop dusting and whatnot. But this Spanish pilot has his whole family in there, including the family cat and dog. And, of course, the airplane was impounded and I guess he flew to freedom. And that was the first AN-2 I’d ever seen on the ground. And later on—I get a lot of aviation magazines—
I saw it up for sale and then later after Russia collapsed, some even began importing
them. There’s still quite a few of them here in the States now, but this one I saw was the
first, I guess. And the guy got away from the Russians and I guess the guys, he was
flying so low that the people didn’t see him on the radar and he flew to his freedom, yeah.

LC: Al, did you get to climb up in that aircraft and take a close look at it?
AL: Not only that, when I was in Russia, I got to fly one.
LC: You got to fly one later on?
AL: Yeah.
LC: Yeah. How long did you stay down in Florida that time around?
AL: You know, I really don’t know. It was probably six months.
LC: Really?
AL: Yeah. Well, one thing I—this is not official.
LC: Sure.
AL: But when my—if you read that article I wrote, this is all in there. When my
replacement came down, the guy I knew and who didn’t really need any training at all,
but when he was ready to take over, I said, “Well, now I can go do a few other things.” I
wanted to go scuba diving and doing this and doing that.
LC: Right.
AL: And—what was I going to say? But I got a chance to do some of the things
that I longed to do. Oh, I was going to tell you about the submarine. I had a friend—
there are a lot of submarines down in [Key West] in those days.
LC: Sure, yeah.
AL: And I had a friend that was a submarine officer and I asked him, “Is there
was any chance of me getting a ride on your submarine?” Because as a kid, I was always
fascinated by submarines. He said, “Yeah, I think we can arrange it.” He said, “You’re
an intelligence officer, you know Russian and we’re intercepting the Russians, at least
when the Russians are bringing missiles into Cuba.”
LC: Right.
AL: Anyway, I went aboard the old submarine, *Picuda*, and I was only on it for
thirty-six hours or so I guess and we were on the surface most of the time. And I was—
because I could read and write Cyrillic and whatnot, I did, you know, read the name off
the fantail and whatnot, but I got to spend that time aboard a submarine. It was an old snorkel submarine that when the sea was calm, it was okay when it was submerged. But when the sea was rough, the valve would close and the diesels would suck and it was like clapping my hands through my ears all the time.

LC: Oh.

AL: I had a headache all the time. And I was deeply impressed by everybody, but especially the cook. On an oven about the size of a microwave, he fed twelve officers and I think eighty-four men three times a day.

LC: Wow, wow.

AL: And the reason I remember this so vividly, the last—well, I came back from my trip on the Picuda, I checked into BOQ (bachelor officers’ quarters) where I was staying and there were headlines about the Thresher. The Thresher went down the same day that I came back, but I have more of a feel for the terrible thing that happened in just my thirty-six hours aboard that submarine. I thank God I never had to serve aboard one.

LC: Yeah, that to me is pretty frightening. Did you hear either at the time or later any details about the Thresher accident?

AL: I’ve read a lot about it, yeah.

LC: Okay.

AL: But I really can’t say.

LC: Okay.

AL: Have any privilege information.

LC: Yeah.

AL: It just—

LC: Was a tragedy.

AL: Went to the bottom and was crushed by pressure, yeah.

LC: Whatever actually happened, it surely was a great loss.

AL: Oh, yeah.

LC: Al, lets take a break for a minute.

AL: Okay.
LC: Al, I want to ask you a couple of other timeline questions since you had
some very interesting things to say about the Cuban Missile Crisis. Do you remember the
news of the launch of Sputnik?
AL: Oh, I do.
LC: What do you remember about that and what impact did it have?
AL: I just remember that we were all amazed and dumbfounded and the overall
opinion was, “We’re falling behind.”
LC: Yeah.
AL: And, yeah, but Sputnik is what really gave emphasis to the space program.
Yeah, so—
LC: Were you in Japan when that happened?
AL: No, I was in San Francisco.
LC: You were in San Francisco?
AL: Yes.
LC: Doing—what were you doing there?
AL: I was with Public Information with the 4th Air Force.
LC: Okay, so you had spent a little bit of time in the Bay Area then posting there
before you went to San Antonio?
AL: Oh yes, beautiful area.
LC: Absolutely. Yes, very nice. Did the launch of Sputnik have any particular
impact that you remember on—?
AL: Yeah, it stimulated the intelligence services to train more Russian linguists,
which I became one. (Laughing)
LC: And did you do—you did some further language instruction then? Where
you were teaching, more teaching?
AL: Yeah, right after I finished—yes, after I finished the language training and
was sent to NSA, I was expected to teach other people what I knew of Russian and the
same time take more advanced classes myself. And then you know, later on after I
retired, I spent twenty-three years teaching Russian in high school.
LC: Here in Texas?
AL: Yeah.
LC: Yeah.

AL: And then, of course, I married a Russian wife and I’m learning more.

(Laughing)

LC: Yeah, and I want to ask you about her, too, and include that story here, as it’s a very interesting one. We’ll come along to that. Al, do you remember the president, President Kennedy being shot, that assassination?

AL: I do.

LC: Where were you?

AL: I was in San Antonio.

LC: Okay. What happened that day? Did you go to work like normal, were you at work?

AL: I went to work like normal and I remember the first thing I said, I said, “Where was John Sweezy?” He was a friend of mine who hated President Kennedy.

(Laughing)

LC: Okay. So once you cleared that?

AL: No, it was, you know—

LC: Kind of a joke, yeah.

AL: But I was appalled like everybody else.

LC: Did the intelligence agencies get busy that afternoon? Did you see any activity?

AL: They were busy before that.

LC: Okay.

AL: And a few things happened that even today I’m kind of reluctant to mention publicly.

LC: Okay, okay.

AL: But I’ll tell you privately.

LC: Okay, that will be fine. But you were—

AL: I was working on plans and programs.

LC: And did you feel a sense of loss at the president’s—?
AL: Oh, of course. All these tragedies, there for awhile, I was like everybody else, you know, after the president got shot, and then Dr. Martin Luther King got shot—I thought we were coming unglued as a nation, yeah.

LC: What was your opinion of Johnson at that time?

AL: Well, I disliked Johnson, but I liked some of the things he did. I knew he was a ruthless person that would walk over anybody in a minute who opposed him or got in his way. But at the same time, he had a feel for people because of his own hard scrabble background, I guess.

LC: Yes, yes.

AL: And had it not been for him, I don’t think the Civil Rights Movement would have gotten off the ground as well as it did. But I admired him in a lot of ways. And I’ve been to his ranch, oh, I guess twelve times and every time I go, it gives me a more—well, I guess I’m getting older and more understanding, but I learned to appreciate Johnson more and more, but never really liked him, you know. On a personal basis, I think him and me wouldn’t be compatible. As a president, he did all right.

LC: He did all right?

AL: I think so.

LC: Okay. The Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964, did you have any professional relationship through the intelligence agencies with that?

AL: Not really, no, no. In ’64, I was out of everything, but I heard of the Gulf of Tonkin, and I wondered if that’s really true or not. (Laughing)

LC: Yeah, new research is showing that there’s some problems around—

AL: Yeah, we antagonized them, antagonized them.

LC: What was presented, yeah.

AL: But I had a lot of thoughts about Vietnam as it happened, before it happened, and while it was happening. But I was never a fervent hawk or what do they call a dove?

LC: Dove.

AL: I was mostly curious, and I went to Vietnam, I’d say more out of curiosity and greed than anything else.

LC: Of greed?
AL: Greed, yeah. I was curious, but when I found out—I never even thought about those people who came to my house to recruit me.

LC: Who came to your house?

AL: God knows. They were from the State Department. Probably the CIA, I don’t know who they were.

LC: How many?

AL: Two.

LC: Nice guys, in suits, the whole bit?

AL: Nice, yeah, they were retired from their jobs of wherever they worked. And they told me about Vietnam. I was curious, I thought, “Well, I’ll go over there and just take a look for myself.”

LC: What year would this have been?

AL: This was in ’65, I think.

LC: Sixty-five?

AL: Sixty-five. And I asked them how much the salary would be and they told me. And I was drawing my retire pay as colonel; I was teaching school at the time.

LC: Sure.

AL: And I wasn’t getting rich, but you know, I could pay the bills and whatnot and I wasn’t especially hurting for money. But then I asked them, “How much would I make?” And they said, “Oh, your salary will be,” and they told me. “In addition to that, you’ll get a housing allowance and you’ll get what is called separate maintenance allowance, and you can continue collecting your pension.” Well, so I add it all up, what’s coming to me, and it came real close to—I think it was $87,000. Eighty-seven thousand, which in that time and day, was a lot of money.

LC: That’s a pretty good sum now.

AL: Yeah. And I thought, “Hm.” And my wife said, “Hm.” (Laughing)

Anyway, I was under the mistaken impression that salaries weren’t taxed. They weren’t if you worked for a private company, but if you worked for the government, taxes take out, you know, about forty percent. I didn’t make as much money as I thought. But Grace and I started talking about, “Well, we can pay off the house and put money aside to send the kids to school when they were coming along and give it a try.” And so, out of
curiosity, but mostly greed, I signed up. And even during the war, I was never on one
side or the other. I thought as soon as I got there that we shouldn’t be here. And our
national unity was never really threatened by—and I doubted everything I saw just about.
But I still worked hard to do my job, which was working with the refugees.

LC: Now, when those guys came to talk to you, Al, did they explain to you that
what they wanted you to do, what they were thinking of for you was refugee work?
AL: Well, and I think they let me know that they knew that I’d been in
intelligence reporting.

LC: Sure.

AL: And that I had a history of getting along with foreigners, getting along with
gooks. (Laughing) Well, I shouldn’t say that.

LC: That’s okay.

AL: No, getting along with foreigners.

LC: Sure.

AL: And they didn’t say, use that word, but—and yeah, I had a vague idea of
what I was to do, but I don’t think they really knew. And when I got to Vietnam, I
thought nobody knew anything about anything. And what happened when I finally got to
Vietnam, I was putting in a holding pattern.

LC: Right.

AL: All these people just like me sent from God knows where to this
headquarters in Saigon. And you’d ask what your job was (mumbling). And just to keep
you out of their hair, they’d say, “You’re going to be the refugee operations officer. And
any time we have trouble anywhere, we’re going to send you there.” And this is what
they did. And I, well first of all, lived in a very posh hotel, which I couldn’t believe and
when I went to pay the bill, they said, “There’s no bill to pay. You know, the
government pays that.”

LC: Which hotel was it?

AL: The Regina Hotel.

LC: The Regina.

AL: But from there, I was eventually given a beautiful villa on Pasteur Street. It
had an iron fence around it and guards in the front and in the back and it had three or four
bathrooms and a living room and dining room and it came with two maids. And I couldn’t believe it, and I hated it. I’m in a big beautiful—well, before I hated it too much, you know, I eventually made a few friends. I remember we had a few parties in my house. It had beautiful tile floors. We had bicycle races in my living room.

(Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: And it was so unreal. All this time I was supposed to be the refugee operations officer and there would be someplace two hundred miles away with death and destruction and whatnot.

LC: Sure.

AL: And they said, “Al, a limousine will pick you up tomorrow morning and take you Tan Son Nhut Airport and you’ll fly off to so and so and so and so, we’ll meet you and so forth.” So I’d get up in the morning and the maids would have a big breakfast and food bought off the black market, you know, bacon and eggs and toast and coffee and whatnot. A big table all by yourself and exactly at eight o’clock or whatever a big black limousine would pick me up and take me out to the Tan Son Nhut Airport. I’d go winging off to God knows where. And usually I’d be met by the province senior advisor or refugee advisor and they’d take me another twenty-five miles in the hills where there’d been a ground attack the night before and people killed and whatnot, and I’d come back and write my reports. And after awhile, I got to be kind of a problem. I never knew who my boss was. I’d call him my boss of the day. I’d find somebody who would accept my report and I don’t know what they did with them. Anyway, it was kind of like that and I didn’t come over here to live like this and do this. I began agitating, I went down to personnel and I’d tell them this. I think as an act of meanness, they said, “We’re going to fix this bastard’s ass. We’re going to send him out to see if John Vann can use him because John Vann,”—I didn’t know John Vann, but I was beginning to hear about him—“and John Vann will send his ass out to get it shot off. Man, that’ll take care of him.” Anyway—

LC: We won’t be hearing from him again.

AL: Yeah. Anyway, eventually, I was sent out and John Vann was looking for an activist kind of guy and he’d interviewed quite a few people and I came along, and he
hired me and we got along famously. And from then on I had a real job. But all this that
I was doing was really good training because I got to see all of Vietnam.

LC: Yeah.

AL: I got up in the Montagnard areas where I later worked, but I had a good feel
for the DMZ (demilitarized zone) to the Delta and from the China Sea to Laos and
Cambodia, I just covered it all.

LC: You were all over the place.

AL: All over the place and I got into a lot of dangerous tight scrapes that I didn’t
have sense enough to avoid and whatnot.

LC: Now, Al, the year that you arrived over there was what year, ’66 or—?

AL: Sixty-six.

LC: Okay, about what month, do you remember?

AL: December.

LC: Late ’66.

AL: And the reason why I remember is because I’d been reading all these reports
about the terrorists in Saigon and throwing hand grenades and so forth.

LC: Yes.

AL: And I was met by—they appoint people called your sponsors; I even forget
who they were and whatnot. And I was—it was a thirty-three hour flight to get to
Vietnam and all I wanted to do was go to bed anywhere.

LC: Yeah.

AL: But I was met by my sponsors who thought the best way to introduce a new
person to Saigon was take him out on the town. Now we went to this garish nightclub
where they had these beautiful Vietnamese gals doing bumps and grinds to the song of
“Silent Night, Holy Night.” (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: I appreciated it, but I still wanted to—I finally got to the hotel or wherever.
So that was my first night in Saigon and it was kind of, to me, it was kind of eerie.

LC: Surreal almost.

AL: Surreal, yeah.

LC: Especially when you’re sleep deprived.
AL: Yeah.

LC: (Laughing) Al, you said that in the period before you went up to work with General Vann that you went all over the country on different observation missions, I guess.

AL: Yeah.

LC: To write summary reports of what had been going on. What was the security situation in general? Can you describe what was happening late '66, early '67 and what were—?

AL: There were isolated terrorist incidents all the time and it was always a concern. These automobiles we drove in were always, especially when you go into USAID (United States Agency for International Development) headquarters was inspected with mirrors, for bombs and whatnot. And now and then things happened, but generally not. I was always a little bit concerned driving around like that, but after a period of time, you know nothing happened, you just accept it and—

LC: Get on with it.

AL: Yeah, nothing happened.

LC: Did you have a couple of tight times, tight scrapes during this period?

AL: No, not in Saigon.

LC: How about outside?

AL: Oh, all the time.

LC: Can you name one or two and tell me what you remember about it?

AL: Well, there’s so many of them that—in that tape and the book, I tell about them, but tight scrapes I was in, well, let me just start with Tet. Everybody’s heard of Tet.

LC: Okay, now this is when you were—this is later when you were working with John?

AL: Yeah—okay, you want—

LC: Yeah.

AL: But no, nothing happened to me in Saigon.

LC: Okay.
AL: Well, and on these trips I made I usually went to very bad areas. But, generally, I was flown back to my home the same day.

LC: Yeah, weird.

AL: It was like surreal. And I’d be back home and have a nice big bed to sleep in and my maid would have supper prepared and whatnot.

LC: Did you have your own helicopter that you were moving in and out with or—?

AL: Not then, no.

LC: Okay.

AL: I never had my own helicopter, but John Vann had his and very often I’d use his when he wanted to have me investigate something that was like more than a hundred miles away.

LC: So for most of ’67, is it true to say you were living in Saigon, but flying out on these—?

AL: Not mostly, I was only in Saigon maybe four months.

LC: Okay, four months, and that’s when they decided to—

AL: And then I went out with John Vann.

LC: In III Corps?

AL: Three Corps, and that’s when the bulk of the enemy activity was centered on III Corps and I ran into one bad area after another.

LC: One thing after another.

AL: But most of them that I flew out on were right after Tet.

LC: Al, tell me your first impression, do you remember the first time that you met John Vann?

AL: Yes.

LC: Can you tell me what happened that day?

AL: I was insulted by Frenchy. (Laughing)

LC: Okay, Frenchy was his secretary.

AL: Yeah, Frenchy McDaniel. Frenchy had been with John, well, a total of fifteen years, but she’d been with him all the time he was in Vietnam.

LC: Right.
AL: Frenchy was, I found out, a very sensitive, efficient, beautiful, wonderful person. But she put on this front, especially when she’s under stress that would make you think otherwise. (Laughing)

LC: Okay. (Laughing) But she’s a charming gal.

AL: She is. She’s a wonderful woman.

LC: What happened that day?

AL: Well, I said, “Excuse me, Miss, can I see John Vann?” And she said, “Who the hell are you?” (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: “What the hell are you doing here? Can’t you see I’m busy? Get the hell out of here.” And at that moment, I think John Vann was again being interviewed by David Halberstam.

LC: Okay, yes.

AL: And not only that, she had an awful lot of responsibility and things to do all the time.

LC: Oh, sure.

AL: And she always had these people from God knows where stumbling into the office and now I can understand her position. But nobody had ever talked to me like that, and I said to this guy, “Who in the hell is that bitch?”

LC: (Laughing)

AL: And he said, “Oh, well,” he said, “That’s Frenchy.” He said, “You’ll find out, she’s really not like that.” Well, eventually, I had to go through Frenchy again and she got me an appointment with John, he was expecting me. And he spent half a day talking to me.

LC: Now he was interviewing you for that job?

AL: Oh, yes, yes.

LC: And what kinds of things did he throw at you, how did it—?

AL: Wanted to know where I came from, and what my politics were and he wanted to make sure that I was somebody that—well, let me first of all tell you, he had a refugee officer who was a career State Department employee.

LC: Yeah.
AL: A very tall, distinguished looking man that had a great white mustache and wavy white hair. He was a good employee, but he was—Vann called him a dilly-dallier. There’d be refugee problems somewhere and Vann would tell this guy, “I want you to go here and do this.” And the guy would have to make a staff study, and he had to make charts and graphs, and then he had to get briefings about where he was going and what he was going to do. And John Vann, it drove John Vann crazy. Oh, and this guy had a white mustache, a white watchband, white socks, white shoes. I mean, he looked like a State Department, Foreign Service officer’s Foreign Service officer. He was a good man, but he wasn’t what John Vann wanted.

LC: Not for that job.

AL: Vann wanted a guy who’d immediately go where you might get your ass shot off and come back and tell me what the problem is and then solve it. “Think you can do that?” “I’ll try.”

LC: (Laughing)

AL: Well, after the first week of working with Vann I sat down and said, “This is insane. Nobody can survive doing this.”

LC: Do you mean the pace or the types of things or—?

AL: No, the places where you went and the things you had to do. You know, working with people who not were suspected Viet Cong, but were Viet Cong. You knew it, you were going in areas that were sometimes there are ground attacks and sniper attacks and roads mined and just driving in III Corps was worth your life.

LC: Yeah.

AL: And I got to thinking, “Jeez, how can anybody survive?” But over a period of time, I guess I was like John Vann, I got used to it and I accepted it. But I wasn’t there a steady—every three months, I came home for a month.

LC: Really?

AL: Yeah. And I didn’t realize it, but I was under an awful lot of stress and didn’t realize it because every time I’d come home, I had to calm down.

LC: Calm down.

AL: And I found this out when I went to renew my commercial pilot’s license after the Tet Offensive. The doctor said, “Your blood pressure’s terrible, your eyesight’s
not what it should be, your heart is this,” and went on and on and on. And I said, “Well, I
can’t understand it because—” And he said, “I can’t understand you passing the last time
if you’re like this.” And I said, “Well, I never seem to have any problems. I get regular
checkups.” And he said, “Well, what do you do for a living?” And I told him, and he
said, “Well good God!” He said, “That could be it.” He said, “Why don’t you just take it
easy for a couple of weeks and then we’ll try it again?” And after three weeks, I came
back and I had calmed down and my blood pressure was normal with everything else.

LC: Right.

AL: And I passed, but I was under a lot of pressure and strain all the time.

LC: And that started right away?

AL: Oh I’m sure it did.

LC: Like the first week you were working for Vann.

AL: Yeah, and then it stayed with you all the time you’re there.

LC: When, Al, if you remember, as historians are very interested in General
Vann, when did you, if you remember, actually begin working for him?

AL: That day that I was interviewed.

LC: And was that in—it was in late ’67?

AL: It was ’67, yeah.

LC: Late ’67 sometime?

AL: Yeah.

LC: So—

AL: And I started that very day.

LC: Do you know what happened to this fellow with the State Department getup?

Do you know what happened to him?

AL: Let me tell you something else that happened. He was supposed to give me
an introduction to what I was going to be doing. His main preoccupation was raising
orchids.

LC: Oh, boy.

AL: He lived in a nice air-conditioned apartment in Saigon and he took me out to
some wild places, I mean where we shouldn’t have been and where I found out later, we
should’ve been killed. But what he was doing, he was spotting buffalo dung here, there
and everywhere. He had a little sack and he’d get down, get this buffalo dung and bring
it back for his orchids. (Laughing)

LC: Okay, being kind: was that, do you think, his way of calming down or do
you think he never, he was—?

AL: Well, I don’t want to be too hard on him.

LC: Sure.

AL: He was a good man I’m sure, but he was not the activist John Vann wanted
to go here now and do it and come back and go back and fix it.

LC: Was John Vann someone who had high blood pressure and was going all the
time and never slept?

AL: He was going all the time. He was a dynamo, yeah. He was here, there, and
everywhere. And John Vann knew more about Vietnam and its people and its problems
than anybody I ever met.

LC: Where was your headquarters, where was the base in III Corps?

AL: Well, when I first worked with John Vann, I lived in this ridiculous house,
you remember me telling, and I had to drive to Bien Hoa every day.

LC: To Bien Hoa.

AL: And that was onerous and eventually I moved out to Bien Hoa and I lived in
a house next door to Frenchy and this was a typical Vietnamese house. It was probably
about as wide as this room, but had this living room, dining room, kitchen, and bedroom,
bedroom and kitchen. And this is where we left, as far as working out of that house. But
generally I was traveling so much, I wasn’t home much and I stayed in these villages at
night.

LC: Yes.

AL: And sometimes I’d go out and stay for two or three days. But when I was
home, I lived in Bien Hoa, and I was in Bien Hoa when the Tet Offensive started and the
brunt of the Tet Offensive was in an area around my house. (Laughing) But that’s where
I got to know Frenchy, too.

LC: Okay, because you lived next door. What about your other counterparts in
who have responsibility for other areas like police and civic action and those? Do you
remember any of those guys?
AL: I remember them all.

LC: Can you name some of their names?

AL: Oh, let me think. The guy in charge of health was Dr. Pasachia, I remember him, in charge of health. Who got stalled during the Tet Offensive, he couldn’t fly out of the United States to his job in Vietnam.

LC: I heard about that.

AL: And I was the director of refugees and Dr. Rose was in charge of education. And I forget the name, the guy’s name in charge of the police. But Vann had these, I think five or six directors; refugees, police, education, health, medical care, and civil engineering. And he’d have a staff meeting almost every morning, where we all would discuss what we were doing and everybody did their best to keep Vann apprised and nobody could pull the wool over his eyes because he knew more about what we were all doing than we knew. Not only that, he could tell you were doing this and doing that and when you’d leave and be maybe a hundred miles away and he’d drop in on helicopter and see if you’re—anyway, so he knew. But all these people, we would meet occasionally like that at the staff meeting, but then you’d never see them any rest of the day and a lot of them—I worked with a lot of people I’d see and not see and then just forget.

LC: Right, well, it sounds like, as we’ll discuss this afternoon, you had your hands full with plenty of things that you were up to.

AL: Yeah, and don’t forget, Vietnam had forty-four provinces.

LC: Yes.

AL: Each province is patterned after the old French system. Each province had several districts, two to four districts. And in most of these, there was a Vietnamese Province Senior Advisor, this is American counterpart, and they also had a refugee advisor, American advisor for the Vietnamese counterpart. And generally speaking, people in the areas where I worked and were responsible for, who do what had to be done. Occasionally, they didn’t and then John Vann and I would take further action.

LC: Right.

AL: But it was a big organization. I think John Vann probably had 6,000 people that he was responsible for and I guess I was responsible for all the refugee advisors in
the provinces and districts in whatever the corps I was in. But normally, they were
competent and did their job and I wasn’t as hard on me as you might suspect.

LC: Now let’s take a break here, Al.

AL: Okay.

LC: Okay.

LC: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech continuing the
oral history interview with Lt. Col. Al Lavelle. Today is again the 5th of May 2004 and
Al and I are together in the interview room. Al, can you tell me where you were when
you realized that an offensive by the VC/NVA (Viet Cong/North Vietnamese Army)
forces was imminent around the time of Tet in 1968?

AL: Yes I can. I was working out of the headquarters of Bien Hoa and as you
know, I was one of John Vann’s staff members. And all of us working out in the field
knew that something was in the offing, but we suspected it would be after Tet. We never
dreamt that it would be happening during Tet.

LC: How did you know something was coming?

AL: Well, a lot of activity in the village and strangers in the village and that.
And of course, all the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese had relatives here, there, and
everywhere and were here, there, and everywhere. And also, there was an inordinate
number of funerals here, there, and everywhere.

LC: Really, funerals?

AL: Um-hm.

LC: What was that about?

AL: Yeah, that’s one way that the enemy brought in weapons into the town and
whatnot that will later attack.

LC: How did that happen to you?

AL: Well, somebody in Saigon, one of the Vietnamese police, I think, discovered
this. And of course, we suspected that what we were seeing in other places might, you
know, match what was happening there. But anyway, Vann was concerned and he got us
all together as he often did and said, “Let’s just discuss where we’ve been and where
we’re going and what’s going on.” During Tet, generally, we had time off and badly
needed time because we all worked pretty hard and the Vietnamese help would disappear
and you couldn’t get in touch with anybody a week before Tet because it was too close to
Tet. And after Tet, nobody was there because it was too soon after Tet, so we just kind of
relaxed. And we were told to go home and relax, which we did. I know I did. I was
living all by myself in this house I had in Bien Hoa.

LC: You had decided to read or something as a kind of some downtime.
AL: Well, I was writing a letter.
LC: Writing a letter.
AL: I think one of the letters I began was there. But you know, the North
Vietnamese made plans to attack here, there, and everywhere, testing the defenses. And
this lasted for about three days, and then all the firing stopped and it was quiet, we
thought everything was over. But what they were doing, they were making battle plans
to attack here massively and there. One of the places they decided to attack massively
was right in and around where I lived, in Bien Hoa. And they decided to attack during
the height of Tet. And during Tet, the Vietnamese, like the Chinese, loved to shoot off
firecrackers. They’d buy them in untold millions, no matter how poor they are, and the
enemy decided to come in under the cover of all the firecrackers. And a lot of people got
killed before people began to realize that something was up. Well, once the attack
started, everybody was overwhelmed and dumbfounded. I was sleeping during the night
and heard a lot of activity and I got up and I started writing one of these letters and it got
increasingly worse. And when daylight finally arrived, I cautiously went up the stairs to
the—we had a flat roof—to see what was going on and there were dive-bombers in the
neighborhood, there were bodies on the street. There was small-arms fire here, there, and
everywhere. There’s an alley alongside my house with a lot of firing going on. I
thought, “Oh my God! They’re going to come in this house!” I had about six bags of rice
in the house, they’re going to find out I have rice and they’re going to kill me for my rice.
But anyway, I was scared to death and everybody else that was living in the complex was
gone. I guess they realized sooner than—I was asleep, I guess, when a lot of it happened.
But anyway, I decided to make a run for it up to III Corps. This is where the Vietnamese
military and John Vann usually were meeting. I got up to III Corps and it had been
destroyed.

LC: The buildings were gone?
AL: Well, they weren’t gone, but they were full of big holes and you know, they had been shattered and whatnot. And I wanted to find John Vann. Finally somebody said, “Go to the Franz Plau Apartment.” And this is a big complex with an apartment house built with Vietnamese money, but rented to Americans. It was right at the end of—almost the end of the runway of the Bien Hoa Airbase.

LC: Inside or outside the perimeter?

AL: Well, it was part of the perimeter. You looked down the wall here and there’s a fence there, but the wall of the building was—it was right next to it.

LC: Okay.

AL: And the runway, you know, was in an, oh, I’d say eighth of a mile.

LC: Okay, wow.

AL: And everybody’s up on the roof watching what was going on and there were gunships in the neighborhood and dive-bombers. I remember seeing this dive-bomber come down and a lot of VC were holed-up in this temple and church; put a bomb right in the front door. Just an awful lot of activity and about this time, the VC sappers had crawled in there at Long Binh Airbase and they touched off the ammunition dump. It was about ten, twelve miles away. And suddenly this big mushroom cloud came up and everybody that had any sense got down flat and I remember telling this lieutenant, “Get down, get down, get down!” He said, “Why, why?” About that time, the shock wave hit him and knocked him down.

LC: Really? Wow, wow.

AL: But from the top of that roof, the VC, and North Vietnamese were trying to cross the runway and they’re being—napalm was being dropped on them and the gunship was coming and working them over and whatnot. And there’s just a lot of activity and killing going on everywhere. Well, I finally make contact with John Vann. He said, “Al, get in my—” He had a little helicopter; I got a picture of it here. He said, “I want you to fly all around this area and see what’s going on and bring me back a report.” And so, with his own personal pilot, I flew at treetop level all around. I was hoping that when we got close to Long Binh Airbase, there wasn’t another portion of the ammunition blowing up because it would’ve knocked us out of the sky. But I flew—I saw the Tet Offensive in that area, where it was most intense—at treetop level everywhere it was happening. I
knew exactly, you know, it was—it impressed me the number of people that were involved and the damage being done and whatnot. But anyway, this was after the third day of Tet. Yeah, we thought things were over and we had our radio network going out to all provinces.

LC: Yes.

AL: And people were on the radio saying, “For God’s sake, get Lavelle down here. We have refugees and houses being burned and we have no water and no food and we need help here, there, and everywhere.” And Vann would study the situation and send me to where it was worst, and where he thought it was the worst. And he said, “Al, I want you to go down to Phuoc Le. I don’t know what’s going down there, but something big is going down there and go down and see what you can do and bring me back the report.” Well, what happened was Phuoc Le was a little village, sometimes called Baria. Some of the towns had the old French name. And it was on the road from Xuan Loc to Vung Tau. Generally, you could drive that road without, with impunity, but sometimes it was dangerous. Now it’s very dangerous, so I had to fly down there. And generally when I’d go to a place, I had a PRC-10 radio. I could usually contact my refugee advisor on the ground so he knew I was coming. But not always, and when I couldn’t contact them, we’d buzz the house, and we buzzed the house and buzzed the house real low and nothing happened. Because what had happened, the people in town got the word through the grapevine from peasants in the field and whatnot that the enemy was closing in on the town. Well, I didn’t know that and the helicopter pilot didn’t know it and I said, “Oh, well just drop me off on the airstrip.” And I said, “I’ll walk to town.” It wasn’t a very far walk, but it was out in the country. And he dropped me off on this airstrip and immediately took off. Suddenly I was all by myself, out in the open country and it just—I think you develop a sixth sense when there’s danger around because I suddenly realized something is wrong. I mean, normally you hear birds singing and dogs barking and I noticed in a situation like that or even in the wildlife takes cover, I guess. And anyway, I had an eerie sensation that this was not very good, but what could I do except go to town? And the people in town knew that something was going to happen and the people closing in on the town, I guess, were apprehensive too about what’s going to happen to them. And somebody started shooting in my direction. You can tell when
small arms come rather close to you, they make a snapping—you can tell when bullets
are coming near you or are near you. And I heard all this snapping sound around me and
the next thing I knew a mortar landed about, oh, a half a block away in a field and this
scared me. And then the small arms fire got heavier. I don’t know whether it’s coming
behind me or in front, it was everywhere. And there was no place to go because this was
rice paddy country in this area. And I just ran to the ditches that separated these rice
paddies where there were reeds and whatnot growing, this had about six inches of water,
I got down in that water and under those reeds. And by this time, there was a lot of
activity and I was scared to death and blubbering and probably wetting my pants,
although my pants were already wet. But I was quite concerned. And in a situation like
that, your heart makes so much noise. Well, I remember nervously trying to button—I
had a shirt like this on and it was wet and damp, it wasn’t making any noise normally, but
just trying to button my shirt almost shattered my eardrums.

LC: Yeah.

AL: And my heart was beating so loud. Anyway, I heard voices and I started to
investigate and I was going to get out of the ditch. But again, to get out of the ditch there
meant jumping across the ditch or down away from it.

LC: Yeah.

AL: And they had those pith helmets like I saw today in khaki and these are
North Vietnamese going into to attack the town. (Laughing)

LC: Yes. How many did you see, Al?

AL: Oh, I only saw two. I don’t know how many there were all total, but I just
sank back into the water and I remember calling for my mother. (Laughing) I often said
I think I can die as gloriously as anybody if I had an audience, but when you’re alone, it’s
different. And when I was alone that time and scared to death, I was crying for my mama
really. Anyway—

LC: I believe it. I believe it.

AL: The activity increased and there’s small arms. And this area was TOAR,
Tactical Area of Responsibility, with guys from New Zealand. And they had equipment
with a red kangaroo painted on the side and they had this vehicle that’s like a tank, but
it’s not, it’s lighter than a tank. It’s an APC (armored personal carrier). And two or three
of these APCs had, I guess, stopped some of these guys coming into town and was then
pursuing them. And they were—people started running in the opposite direction and then
jumped across and ditched the other way. And then I heard the machinery and although I
knew it was dangerous to stick my head out of the ditch, you know, I guess you’re
curious right up into the moment you get killed, and I saw these kangaroos and I thought,
“Ahhh!” I jumped out of the ditch and got in front of those things and waved my arms
and whatnot. I was so happy to see what they were. Well, the men inside of these
machines, I guess, when they’re involved in enemy activity, you know, motion is the only
thing that means something to them. And I’m motioning out in front of them and one of
the guys opened up on me, I guess with a heavy caliber machine gun; but I’m sure that
the thing hit a little hummock because he fired and hit the ground in front of me. But it
tore up the turf and a big chunk of turf hit me on my chest and knocked me down and my
hat came off and knocked me to one side and he went about his business. Well, I picked
up, went and got my hat and I had my suitcase. And by this time, one of the machines
had turned around and was coming back and they saw that I wasn’t an Oriental. They saw
my pink bald-headed head. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: And he opened the back doors and let me in. They took me down into town
into Phuoc Le. And the man I was supposed to contact up there was named Billy Joe
Johnson. Billy Joe was a contract employee for the CIA, I believe. He was involved in a
program called the Phoenix Program. And I guess he caused the Viet Cong, maybe the
VC, some problems. And I found out later, I don’t know if it is true or not, but the main
idea behind attacking Phuoc Le was to get Billy Joe Johnson. And I was in the same
town wanting to contact Billy Joe Johnson. But he was holed-up in this house all by
himself, well fortified, and I think the Viet Cong were attacking his house and Billy Joe
Johnson had a good supply of M-16s and hand grenades and whatnot. I don’t know how
many of the Viet Cong he killed but he killed quite a few. One of these armored
personnel carriers went to get him, they backed up to the house, opened the doors and as
he ran from the house to jump into the APC, he got shot. I heard that he was killed; I
found out later he wasn’t killed. He might even be still alive, I don’t know. But I finally
got back to Bien Hoa and told Vann what was going on and he said, “Well, in this job,
you got to keep your head down and your ass [too].” No, “Your ass down and your head up.” Or, “Keep your head—” Yeah; he had some kind of smart remark like that. It’s happened to him all the time and he expected it to happen to you and when it did happen to you, he didn’t consider it extraordinary. “Keep your head down—keep your head and ass down.”

LC: (Laughing) I’m thinking that was probably pretty—

AL: I heard that expression all the time when I was—let’s see, came back from Vietnam the second time. The only contact I had with the guy I was replacing—I got off the plane; he’s getting on. “Got any advice you can give me?” “Keep your head down; keep your head and ass down.” He was on the plane, gone. (Laughing) That’s the only advice I got.

LC: (Laughing) Was there a significant number of refugees at Phuoc Le?

AL: Yes there were.

LC: What was happening?

AL: Well, because of all the activity, the refugees left their houses and they’re without food and whatnot, and I think some of the refugee village was damaged and destroyed. But the Australians, yeah, the Australian, some of them were from New Zealand; they took care of the situation. There wasn’t too much that I could really do down there.

LC: Okay.

AL: So, that’s what happened to me during Tet. Vann was always sending me to the worst places and very often these were the places that the North Vietnamese decided to really attack.

LC: I think earlier, Al, you had told me that there was some movement of US troops before the Tet attacks actually began. Some redistribution of troops during that—

AL: Oh, no. I think what I said was that Vann and we guys that worked in the field knew that something was up.

LC: Right, right.

AL: We didn’t know what, but we suspected that they’re going to increase enemy activity. Well, we didn’t dream it would happen during Tet. We thought it would be after Tet. And Vann, before he released all of us for a couple day holiday because of Tet,
wanted us to give him an appraisal of the situation and what did we see that was unusual.
And we all mentioned the fact that we saw a lot of strange people in the villages that we
hadn’t recognized before. And you know, normally you can tell when somebody’s kind
of friendly to you; you can tell when they hate you.

LC: Yeah, right.

AL: And a lot of people in the villages that you just couldn’t quite make contact
with. And Vann wanted to tell Westmoreland, but Westmoreland hated Vann, considered
him a troublemaker and warned (Gen. Fred C.) Weyand—when Weyand (editor’s note:
Westmoreland) said, “Who should I have for an advisor?” And Weyand said, “Vann.”
And Westmoreland said, “He’s a troublemaker. If you want him, you can have him.”

But anyway, Westmoreland wouldn’t listen to Vann, but he’d listen to Weyand. And so,
we all got together with Vann and gave him our opinions and Vann got a hold of Weyand
and Weyand went to Westmoreland and convinced Westmoreland that something was up.
And because Westmoreland was a search-and-destroy man, he had most his troops out
away from the urban areas and he better, by God, pull in some troops closer to home to
defend Saigon. And eventually, I guess Weyand convinced Westmoreland to do that and
I think as do some of the others, had he not done that, Saigon might’ve fallen. So, we
advisors pride ourselves on the fact that we helped Saigon by advising, helping Vann
make up his mind to tell Weyand who told Westmoreland who did what we said, but you
know, we’re probably kidding ourselves. Westmoreland probably knew more than we
thought he did.

LC: Al, let me ask you about another trip that you took for John Vann. I think it
was right around the time of Tet to Song Be out by the Cambodian border. Do you
remember that one?

AL: I remember many, many trips to Song Be.

LC: This one—

AL: And Song Be was overrun time and time again.

LC: And this was a really bad one, this was really bad.

AL: It was bad and Song Be became the first North Vietnamese headquarters
when they invaded the south.

LC: That’s right.
Let me tell you, this one trip to Song Be that I’ll never forget. I used to work in and around Song Be in Montagnard hamlets and villages nearby, twenty, twenty-five miles away. And this one day I landed at a village called Bu Nard. Bu Nard was a bad place, always being intimidated, attacked by North Vietnamese. Even the kids there had weapons and it was a bad place. And the people there were CIDG (Civilian Irregular Defense Group). These were Montagnards who were recruited and trained by the CIA, mostly, I guess out of Vung Tau and they’d come back as village defenders and scouts and be sent on forays here, there, and everywhere. But it was a tough place. But every time I’d land in a Montagnard village, if I spent more than a few minutes, the lame, the halt, and the blind would come over and want help and so forth. You’d see horrible things, horrible diseases and things you couldn’t do anything about and whatnot. Well, this one day I just stayed there too long and they brought a young Montagnard woman who had started to give birth to a baby, but it breached in her womb. The baby, I didn’t know it was dead. The shaman, medicine man had sacrificed a pig or two and goat and did what they could, but they gave up and brought her to the Pilatus Porter. And not only that, there were three Montagnard soldiers that had diarrhea and over there diarrhea kills. You get dehydrated and within a few days you’re dead. And so I had these three soldiers with diarrhea. I had a young lady with a baby hanging out of her womb and somebody brought another girl over who—I didn’t know what it was, but she was so tragic, I just couldn’t turn her down. She was out of her head, wildly acting like a crazy woman. But her eyeballs were actually rotating and going back and forth. I found out later, it’s a condition called nystagmus. It was associated with cerebral malaria that she had.

Okay.

I just—anyway, I had all these people in a small little airplane. And when you go to the hospital, you have to remember the hospital was dirt floor and tin roof and the shelf [held] iodine and gauze and sometimes there were American doctors who were up there just to observe what was going on out in the boonies. They were put up in a MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam) compound, but they would sometimes pitch in and do what they could and see what they could. And I was hoping against hope that that day there would be somebody there. And there was a young man, I wish I knew his name, but he was from Hershey, Pennsylvania, a doctor. Anyway, thank God he was
there. So we take off and this was during the monsoon season and the monsoon season, if we had to travel any distance up country, we’d find a hole in the clouds and climb through it and fly on top [calculating] time, speed, and distance. There were no navigation aides this way that I knew of. But we were just going to Song Be, which was twenty-five miles away. And even during the monsoon season, the clouds were usually, had a base of about 500 feet.

LC: Okay.

AL: And here we had a triple-canopy jungle, you know, big tall trees here and smaller trees here and even smaller, you know, you had big trees. They called it triple-canopy because it’s like that. You have big trees, medium-sized, small trees all fighting for life and light and light and whatnot. It was a triple-canopy jungle. And flying that short distance, we flew very close to the ground because a lot of VC, North Vietnamese were down in this area and when your flying low and fast, they can hear you and you’re gone before they can react; we hoped. And if you go down in that area, even if you survived, you’d be in trouble. But anyway, we’re skimming along the trees. I mean, the trees are right there and this girl with nystagmus malaria was thrashing about and screaming and the soldiers were defecating and the girl with the blood and the puss was stinking up the airplane and everybody who had—most of them had never flown before and they were throwing up. (Laughing) And if they weren’t throwing up, they were chewing beetle nut and spitting all over the plane. But to keep this girl from hurting herself, I had to actually—her seat was right next to the sliding door, I had to straddle her to hold her arms down. And while she was thrashing around like that, she hit the latch on the door and the door slid open in the airplane. And when the door slid open wide, a rush of air came in there and the pilot who was sitting right here said, “Jesus Christ!” And turned around to see what was going on and tried to get the door closed and do something. And in that moment of inattention, the right wing hit one of the big trees and damaged the right wing considerably.

LC: Okay.

AL: I don’t know if it tore it off, but the right wing was damaged. And he turned this way (gesture), which the centrifugal force kept me from going out the door. If he had turned this way (gesture), I just would’ve gone flying off into space. When he hit the
tree like that, he had enough speed to put the nose down and pick up a little speed and get
over the next tree and pick up a little speed—airflow was damaged enough that we
couldn’t fly quite normally and we—but by diving down where the trees were low, we
flew in and out of the trees to Song Be. And we landed on the main street of the town
where we always landed. And I personally had to carry the girl with the baby hanging
out of her up to the hospital, which was, oh, about a half a block away; because there was
nobody there to meet us or anything. And eventually I came back and got the girl with
nystagmus. I had to leave the three Montagnard soldiers, but somebody got them up to
the hospital. I guess somebody put them on a jeep or something. But anyway, this doctor
who was all by himself, he had no technicians or aides said, “You’re going to have to
give me a hand.” Give him a hand? I had to do a lot of things over there, but I never had
to take part in an operation. Well, she was so far out of it, that he didn’t—I don’t think
he gave her—he didn’t have to give her any anesthesia. He just cut her belly open and
began cutting that baby up and cutting up and throwing it off in the corner.

LC: Jeez.

AL: And to make a long story short, that young girl, you know the baby had been
dead in her, survived because I flew her back to her village, you know, a week or so later.
The three poor soldiers died. I flew their bodies back to their village a few days later.
And the girl with nystagmus, there was not much they could do and I flew her back. But
that young doctor that came was very unusual. But I couldn’t do anything except kind of
gag and stroke the girl. I wasn’t much help, but I had to be there and see what was going
on.

LC: Wow.

AL: And he said, “I’m going to write this up to the American Medical
Association.” And whether he did or not, I don’t know. But he was from Hershey,
Pennsylvania, and maybe someday he will be here—he was young enough, he’d probably
still be alive, but I’m sure if that was him, he’d remember that day.

LC: Oh, probably.

AL: Yeah.

LC: I’m sure he would.
AL: But Song Be was an interesting town and it’s right on the border and like I said, it became the first North Vietnamese—town occupied by the North Vietnamese as they pushed into Saigon.

LC: Al, maybe this will be a good time to ask you about Dak Seang and about the atrocity there.

AL: All right.

LC: First of all, tell me the background to the village. You had helped set up the—

AL: It was not too far from Song Be.

LC: Okay.

AL: And a group of Steing, S-t-e-i-n-g Montagnards from Cambodia had petitioned whomsoever, asking if they moved from Cambodia, will they work for the North Vietnamese, because they could come into South Vietnam and be given assistance as refugees. Of course, I got involved, too, and I was part of the group that made the decision. And there were several refugee villages in this area, Dak Seang being one of them. Well, the North Vietnamese didn’t think much of all these laborers leaving them and they intimidated them very often by mortaring their village at night. Not many people got killed because they were used to this sort of thing, they got down in bunkers; that was always the first thing they build before they built a house. But they were being intimidated and Viet Cong or, yeah, Viet Cong and North Vietnamese agents would actually come in the village and harangue the people. They put out, they gave them several letters, which I had translated and one of these documents saying, “You’re just running dogs of the imperialists and wise up and come with us, and if you don’t, you’re going to be sorry.” And we were told all this and whatnot. I guess the North Vietnamese decided to teach them a lesson. They came in one night and they isolated the Montagnard defenders. They didn’t kill them all, but they isolated them. Then they went through the village and they threw hand grenades down in the bunkers and then they used flame throwers, which doesn’t always burn a person to death, but sucks out the oxygen and their lungs collapse. And it just so happened, I was going up to Song Be that morning and the Air America pilots had received word somehow or another that an attack had occurred at Song Be just hours before. So I said, “Land me at Song Be.” And he did.
And I landed there as the North Vietnamese, the VC—and I couldn’t say this in Vietnam at the time. But I was told that some of the people were Chinese advisors, because I know later when I started to say that in front of an Army information officer (he said), “Sh, sh, no, no, you can’t say that.” But anyway, I landed in the village as they were fading into the surrounding jungle and even then a few shots were coming in our direction, and I was appalled at what I saw. The entire village was smoldering ruins. There’s pictures of it here (referring to photos) and in the video tape you’ll see. And hundreds of mostly women and children were killed. I spent many days doing what I could to help them and get relief supplies and to do what I could. It was a very sad period of time and the thing that impressed me so much, that when there’s death, I don’t know where they come from, but suddenly the flies are so thick, you can hardly breathe. I never noticed that. You know, a tropical climate, I guess these creatures live somewhere, but as soon as there’s death there, they’re there. And they’re so loud, you couldn’t talk to another person, there was so much flies there. But I spent days pulling people out of the bunker and—

LC: Al, let’s take a break for a minute. Al, did you have to write some kind of a report on what happened at Dak Seang?

AL: Oh, why, yes.

LC: Can you tell me the rest of the—?

AL: Well, there were a lot of reports written about Dak Seang, but one interesting report and it’s in one of these things I gave you. There was a young man up there; he was a province advisor. His name was Jim Teague.

LC: Yes.

AL: And I’d like for you to try to get in touch with John Teague or his family.

LC: Okay.

AL: Because John Teague—I was one of their last, I guess I was the last American to leave that area when Teague and some of the other people knew that something was up. They were talking about these agents being in the village, haranguing the people and leaving these threatening letters and whatnot. And they asked to leave and they were told they couldn’t leave, they had to stay for the good of the program or whatever it was. They weren’t getting much satisfaction by getting more security or
getting more people concerned. He said, “Al, something terrible is going to happen
here.” He said, “I want you to write a letter if all we Americans get killed. I want you to
write a letter and give it to my dad.” And his dad was a high-ranking politician. I don’t
know whether he was a senator or congressman, but you can find out.

LC: Sure.

AL: In Austin, Texas. I know he has a brother down there. I just missed his
brother at Castroville Airport. One day he was down there and I just wish I could’ve met
him and given him a copy of this report. Anyway, he said, “We’re going to be overrun
here and there’s nothing we can do about it. We’ve been told to stay and I know it’s
going to be hard on everybody, but I want you to write this letter, indicting the officials
responsible for our security.” And I wrote the letter or we wrote it together, I forget
which, and they all signed it and I signed with the understanding that if they were killed,
I’d release this letter to Jim’s father.

LC: Okay.

AL: Well, after the massacre, as terrible as it was, there were no Americans of
this group killed.

LC: So Teague was not killed that day.

AL: So I just—no, Teague was not killed and I destroyed the letter. But he could
verify this, I’m sure, if he’s still around.

LC: We’ll try to find him.

AL: Yeah, Jim Teague.

LC: Al, you were also interviewed. CBS News sent somebody up there to talk to
you. Do you remember that?

AL: I do and there’s a videotape of it here. I was in the village and Marvin Kalb
came whistling in [by helicopter]. I didn’t know Marvin—I met a lot of correspondents
who were there, but I don’t remember if I met him before. But he saw me and he came
over to ask me who I was and what I was doing there. And I told him, and so he said,
“Do you mind if I interview you?” And I said, “No, go ahead.” So he interviewed me
and I told him about what had happened. I’ve seen that same tape several times on the
Walter Cronkite show, Vietnam series. But another interesting thing that happened
during this period of time. There was a senator from Illinois named Senator (Charles H.)  
Percy.

LC: Yes.

AL: I had a man assigned to me as my assistant, his name was Dennis Smith. And I never thought much about it at the time, but I think Dennis Smith was planted there by the Kennedys. I think he was a Kennedy person who was there to do what he could to find out all he could about refugees. But anyway, Dennis Smith would never do anything that I told him to do. (Laughing)

LC: Really?

AL: And he was kind of strange guy, but he did his own thing. And he met Senator Percy. I said, “Dennis, I’ll meet you up in Song Be tomorrow at such and such a date.” And he said, “Okay,” and so forth. And somehow or another, he got sidetracked with Senator Percy and he decided on his own to take Senator Percy up there. You saw it in the newspapers at the time. You can find it.

LC: Yeah.

AL: And supposedly they came under attack while Percy and Smith were looking over Dak Seang. And Percy ran and hid and Dennis Smith threw Percy his revolver to defend himself and that revolver is hanging in Percy’s office today.

LC: Oh, is that right?

AL: Yeah, I’m told, yeah.

LC: Huh.

AL: From Illinois. Remember, he was the one whose daughter was murdered?

LC: Yes, and it is Senator Percy from Illinois.

AL: Yeah.

LC: That’s who—I mean, he’s no longer in office I think.

AL: Oh, no.

LC: But yes.

AL: But that was part of the Song Be story, number two. But the saddest part was the funeral of all these people that were massacred. The Montagnards are animists, and they have a vague idea like we all do of what’s going to happen in the afterlife, but they do believe in an afterlife, and they want few worldly goods to take with them in the
afterlife. And I don’t know how much money I spent for brand new objects to put in Montagnard graves, but when I asked the people, “Oh, you lost three kids. What can I do to be meaningful?” And they would tell me. And I never saw a bicycle in my life in the Montagnard village, but the kids, I guess, in a Ranger compound or someplace would pick up magazines and newspapers, they all knew what a bicycle was and yearned for one, but never had one. And many of the Montagnard people told me that the best thing I could buy for their kid was a bicycle.

LC: You did that, didn’t you?

AL: I bought more than a few bicycles and buried them with the Montagnard kids and I’m glad that I did. I had what was known as AIK funds, Assistance in Kind. When there’s a refugee operation, sometimes you had to get something done immediately. And sometimes the things you needed like firewood or cooking oil or roofing or blankets or something, you could buy, you know, in a local Vietnamese area. And so these funds were to buy refugee supplies as needed, when needed. And I always carried along a lot of these AIK funds that do just that. And I bought more than a few things for the Montagnards who had died and I was supplying them with something to take to the afterlife, and I was always scared to death that some of the bureaucrats in Saigon would find out I was spending money for bicycles, new bicycles that were being buried in the dirt. But none of them ever did.

LC: And you think it was a good thing that you did?

AL: Pardon?

LC: Do you think it was a good thing that you did?

AL: I would do it again and again and again.

LC: How many bikes?

AL: Oh, I don’t know really?

LC: A hundred?

AL: Probably. Someday somebody’s going to find the rest of the bicycles. (Laughing) I wonder what the story would’ve been. But anyway, it was sad.

(LC: Very sad. It’s very sad.

AL: You know, one of the saddest things that I think happened over there. I used to sometimes attend the movies at night out in these Ranger compounds and Green Beret
compounds and they’d show movies. And the Montagnards would sit around and watch them, too. And in Pleiku, they’re always showing these horror movies. (Laughing)

LC: Scream, scream films.

AL: Oh, yeah. And the next day, all the little Montagnard kids would be—

(Laughing)

LC: (Laughing) Making faces.

AL: And there’s another village I landed in where it was an isolated place and filled with a lot of sweet naked kids and whatnot. And I don’t know, somebody gave me thousands of Bic pens, I think they were. I just accepted them, I had them handy and I didn’t have anything else to hand out that day, and I gave all the kids in the village a Bic pen. Well, they’d never seen a pen before and they didn’t have any paper. (Laughing) I didn’t think a thing about it. So the next day I came up there to give them, you know, bona fide refugee supplies like rice and cooking oil and whatnot, and every little kid in that village had graffiti all over his body. They had nice brown smooth bodies and you’d think that people who ran around naked with their genitals hanging out for the most part wouldn’t write pornography. And all over their bodies, they had male and female genitalia. (Laughing)

LC: Did they really?

AL: Yeah, that was almost on all of them.

LC: Isn’t that funny?

AL: Yeah, they weren’t nasty. They were just being people, I guess.

LC: Right, right.

AL: But the next day, I brought back reams and reams of paper for them.

(Laughing)

LC: Did you do that kind of thing often, Al? Did you try to get them, in addition to not just the Montagnards, but all the different refugees that you came in contact with, not just food, but other things, too, that might be helpful or—?

AL: Yeah.

LC: Can you remember other—?

AL: With these AIK funds, I used them for diverse things. Sometimes I’d use them for a little lumber or roofing or cooking oil. I’ll tell you a story about that.
LC: Sure.

AL: In III Corps, one of the worst areas was Highway 13 and the village from say Lai Thieu to Phu Cat. It was always heavily infested with VC and North Vietnamese and whatnot. And there’s this ceramic factory there called Thanh Le or Le Thanh, ceramic factory. And this was such a bad area, that when the Army drove through it, they drove through very rapidly with flak vests and helmets and whatnot because Highway 13 was sometimes mined and sometimes there were snipers. And most of the people in this area were either Viet Cong or Viet Cong sympathizers. It was a bad area. And there was what they called a halfway house. Halfway between Lai Thieu and [Phu Cuong] where the American garrison was, that his job it was to patrol the area at night and set up ambushes. And they were very often engaged in activity like that. And there was a Sergeant Hildebrand there; he was a good friend of mine. He said, “Al.” He said, “You can wander around these villages. We can’t. You know, we’re under a lot of stress and it’s dangerous for us to wander around in the daylight down there.” But because I was a refugee, you know, no sense in killing me because they found out over a period of time I could get things done. And so he said, “Keep your eyes open because we suspect that that Le Thanh factory is more than just a ceramic factory.” And I said, “Okay.” But I went down to the Le Thanh factory and I began buying cooking pots and cooking utensils for refugees and I gave them a lot of business. And they also made big ceramic elephants. I either bought two elephants or they were given to me and they were a pain in the neck because I had to haul them back home and I had to wrap them and I had to take them to the post office. Anyway, I sent two of those elephants home to San Antonio to two—I sent them to my wife who gave them to two of her friends and I forgot all about them. But anyway, this story, I can update it until about three weeks ago or four weeks ago. I was with my—I have a friend in San Antonio whose wife received one of these elephants from my wife. And he was going to give me some cedar wood. I was making a rocking horse for some kid. And we were going back to his lumber pile and I stepped over something and I saw it was that elephant that I had sent home to my wife and she gave to his wife. I said, “John, what in the hell is this?” He said, “Oh God, I don’t know.” And then I pried it up. I said, “Well that’s the elephant I sent Grace. I guess Grace gave it to Klare.” He said, “Yeah, that’s what it is.” I said, “Can I have it?” He
said, “I don’t want it.” So I took it home and cleaned it up and now it’s right beside my
couch and coffee table and it’s beautiful. But it brought back memories I haven’t had for
years.

LC: Yeah.

AL: Anyway, back to the Le Thanh factory. I got to know the people down there
and I used to interrelate with them. And there were few Vietnamese restaurants in that
area that only, you know, the locals could go to unless they were in the company of
somebody that was quite important, I guess. And I met this young lady, I wrote the—
well, let me just tell you. I went over to my friend, Ed Davis, I said, “Ed, can I have that
elephant on your porch?” He said, “Sure, haul it away.” And I went to haul it away and
his wife said, “Leave that elephant alone, that’s my elephant. Grace,” my wife, “gave that
to me and that reminded me of Grace. You keep your hands off that elephant.” And I
was a little bit taken aback, but not really. I said, “Okay, Virginia, you can have that
elephant, but I want you to remember—I’m going to write you a few words. To you, that
elephant’s an inanimate object, but to me, it brings back memories you can’t even begin
to imagine. I’m going to write and tell you what those memories are.” She said, “So go
do that!”

LC: She said that?

AL: Yeah, I’ll send you the letter. I’ve got a copy of the letter.

LC: Yeah, please do, please do.

AL: Oh yeah, it’s called “The Ceramic Elephant.”

LC: Please do.

AL: Anyway, I became very friendly with this young woman and I knew she was
a Viet Cong, like I suspected everybody, of at least being sympathetic, because the
villages I worked in were all Viet Cong or former Viet Cong or—and her husband was a
VC and was killed in Operation Cedar Falls. She had two kids she had to support. Her
job was to paint the elephants and whatnot. And in my letter I said, “If I was a free
young bachelor when I met that woman,” I said, “I would’ve pursued her because I just
admired her.” Well, it turned out that she—Sergeant Hildebrand, and I’ve got another
letter I can prove this guy, I got it for Ed. There was a guy by the name of John Strong,
who was a newspaper writer for the Illinois paper that I took in that area, and we got
ambushed along near the Le Thanh factory. And a few days later, there was another
ambush and this Sergeant Hildebrand got killed. We found out later, it was this young
woman that I was so intrigued with. And I really liked her and she said she liked me, but
hated the fact that I was an American and we just had lunch together and just kind of
strolled about and whatnot. And I didn’t give her any information, she gave me no
information, but I just—I liked her. And also in the same area, I don’t know if you’ll find
this in any Army reports or not, I’ve never seen it, but two American Army tanks
disappeared a few months before that.

LC: Yeah. Tell me about those tanks.
AL: Okay. This was on Highway 13, just before you get into the village of Lai
Thieu.

LC: Okay.
AL: And the tanks just disappeared.

LC: They were American tanks?
AL: American tanks.

LC: Okay.

AL: Well, during the Tet Offensive, two tanks appeared, operated by God knows
who, you know, being used against the Americans. The crews had been killed and buried
somewhere and the tanks buried somewhere and then they were dug up and used by the
VC against the Americans and this young woman was involved in that operation, too.

LC: How did you find out that she was involved in these things? Was it intel
from someone?

AL: Well, after the Tet Offensive, they captured those people who knew. And
one of the men that was there when Hildebrand was ambushed, said, “I’ve seen her
somewhere, the woman. She killed him, it was her that killed Hildebrand.” I saw her—I
think it was around the Le Thanh factory. But she was actively involved with all of them.
And it turned out, this Le Thanh factory was the headquarters for all the Viet Cong and
North Vietnamese coordination in that area, which is the heaviest part in Vietnam. And
another thing associated with that, the next town up from Lai Thieu is called Phu Cuong.
This was Binh Duong Province, Phu Cuong. And I got involved. I forget whether exactly
when it was, but it was during this period of time when Vann said, “Al, I want you to go
up to Phu Cuong.” And he said, “Have you been sending cement up to the refugees?” I said, “I sure have, by the tons.” He said, “I’m getting reports that the cement is disappearing. Go up there and investigate.” So he sent me up to Phu Cuong and again, this is where the airplane landed at a little airstrip right in the middle of town. And I was walking—I was going to contact the province chief to find out what happened to the cement. And unbeknownst to Vann and me and even to the province senior advisor, the province chief had been taking all the cement and he was using it to build a bunker deep underground. He lived in a compound that had mines all around it and guard towers at each post and whatnot. But he wanted something even more secure and he used all this—I found out this later, he used all this concrete to build that bunker. And he knew that the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese were going to attack and he was down in his bunker and he called in the gunships. Not only that, there’s an Army captain by the name of Colonel Alfred Kitts, who reminded me of Colonel Potter in the “M*A*S*H” program; a feisty little guy, that was a superb artillery man and he had an idea where the VC would be coming from. And with his artillery, he took care of a lot of them, but there after, the province chief, think he’s in his house in town and when I saw people in town—the town was being attacked by this time, I tried to make my way to the—I was there two occasions when something like this happened. One time I hid outside of town. This time, I made my way to the province chief’s house and I found there thirty Filipinos in the house and then a lot of Vietnamese. We had about, oh, six carbines amongst us and I had Swedish Kase machinegun. The next thing we know, the house is being attacked.

LC: And how many of you all together?

AL: There were a lot of Vietnamese and Filipinos in the house. Filipinos are civic action workers up there. And I think I was the only American, and you know, in the movies you’re calm and cool and collected. But nobody was calm. Everybody was running around like they’re crazy inside the house. And the North Vietnamese were coming over the fence, practically. But the province chief down in his bunker had called in the gunships and I always hated gunships, but this day I thanked God for them. One gunship would come in and work over the area like that, and then he’d fly off target, another one would come in, three gunships came in and worked over the area. “Colonel
Potter” with his artillery was being effective. But those gunships and “Colonel Potter” saved the day at Phu Cuong. And when I came back home to the United States, I was asked to speak on KLRN, to tell them about Vietnam and the Tet Offensive.

LC: Was this local TV?

AL: Yeah. And I was talking about the battle of Phu Cuong and I said there was a colonel up there by the name of Alfred Kitts who really saved the day and I want all to know about Alfred Kitts. When I got home, I received a phone call saying it was Alfred Kitts’s mother who lived in Boerne. And she said to me, “Could you come out to Boerne and tell me more about my son?” And I said, “Sure, I’ll be happy to.” So my wife and I went out and they were a retired Army couple and I remember my wife was kind of shocked because the woman kept saying, “We’re artillery. We love artillery.” (Laughing) But what she was saying, she loved the friends she’d made and whatnot. I don’t think she ever saw what artillery does. But anyway, I went out there and when I went back to Vietnam, Colonel Kitts looked me up and he said, “You sure made an old lady happy.” But I say he’s the savior of Phu Cuong. Anyway, I told Ed Davis, the guy whose wife wouldn’t give me the elephant, all these stories. And I said, “So when I look at those elephants, it brings back a lot of personalities of people I knew and liked and interrelated with.” And I told them about Kitts because I said, “You write for the newspaper here, see if you can look him up.” Well, he was older than me, so he’s no doubt dead. And his parents, I know they’re right outside of Boerne there, and he looked them up in the phonebook, but didn’t find them. But I want to prove to him that I met them there. God knows where they are now. But that was a very active area and I had a lot of things happen in that province and on that highway.

LC: Al, let me ask you another piece of the experience that you’ve been talking about. John Vann—this is a difficult piece, so you can say whatever you’d like to say or not. John Vann called you and told you that he had a job that he needed you to do.

AL: Yes.

LC: Can you tell about that?

AL: Of course. This was a few days after Tet, and there were—in some of my reports, we said I sent eighteen, nineteen, I’m really not sure of the number, but I think it turned out to be about 16,000. He said, “Al, I know you’re up to your ass in refugees.”
He said, “But we’ve got a problem and you’ve got to solve it. I don’t know who else is going to be able to help you.” He said, “With all these bodies laying around here, there’s going to be, you know, plague will break out. And so you’re going to have to do what has to be done to get rid of those bodies.” Well, what do you do, for God sakes? And in a tropical climate, a human body goes to pieces in a matter of days. They turn to mush. Well, to make a long story short, I had to contact religious leaders; the Catholics, the Hoa Hao, the Buddhists, the Cao Dai. I had to contact the American authorities, the Vietnamese authorities. Who’s going to pick them up? Who’s going to supply the trucks? Who’s going to dig the graves? And it just went on and it took a couple of weeks. Well, again, we got some of the religious leaders to give us plots near cemeteries. The Americans gave me one bulldozer and a lot of quick lime. The South Vietnamese gave me the use of their trucks; they were American Army trucks that had been given to the Vietnamese. But who’s going to pick them up? Nobody wants to pick up a stinking body. And they eventually gave me a lot of, well I say gave. I was responsible, I didn’t actually touch any of these bodies, but I had to see that it was done.

LC: Right, sure.

AL: I had Viet Cong and, I guess, North Vietnamese prisoners, heavily guarded, to do this terrible job. They were loaded in trucks and taken to these grave sights. One of them was a grave about as big as this room, deep as this room. There was a field behind John Vann’s house and in front of my house with an artillery unit there. We dug a hole like that and the truck comes in and fills it full of—and it was very sad because most of these guys were probably eighteen, nineteen years old. The bodies had been stripped of anything valuable and all they had nearby were empty wallets and whatnot. And I thought, “God, how sad.” Somebody should, you know, do something about, you know, trying to identify, but you couldn’t. I wanted to, but I couldn’t. And all I could do was just kind of close my eyes and hold my breath and say a few prayers because I watched a lot of this.

LC: Al, were these mostly, the young men who were killed, were they mostly VC and NVA people?

AL: They were both, but a lot of them were local VC.

LC: Local VC?
AL: Because a lot of them were—you’d see people coming around town looking for their sons and there’s pictures of people coming with handkerchiefs over their nose to see if my boy is here or whatnot.

LC: Yeah.

AL: But it got so—it became such a nightmare, that you’d want to do something humane like find out who, but you couldn’t.

LC: There’s no way to identify someone that’s been—

AL: Yeah, and I think from some of these pictures, there’s faces that somebody somewhere could identify.

LC: Were there photographers around?

AL: I didn’t see. When these were taken, I was the only photographer.

LC: You took a couple of pictures?

AL: Yeah, it’s on the tape, too.

LC: Yeah, yeah.

AL: Yeah, that was the beginning of it. But eventually it got done and the reason I had to take over was because Dr. Pasachi, the doctor in charge of public health, was stalled in San Francisco. But that was—and I used to think to myself beforehand, “How could a human being remain rational in a concentration camp where you saw things like this?” And I found myself in the same situation. The only consolation was, I had nothing to do with their death. But, you know, if anybody should have nightmares about Vietnam, I guess something like that should affect me, but it hasn’t. Thank God.

LC: You haven’t had nightmares or upset or—?

AL: No, no, no.

LC: That’s—I’m very glad for you because it’s a very vile thing that you were involved with there, although you were trying to do a humane thing for these people who had died. Al, I want to ask you about—change the tack a little bit. I want to ask you about some VIPs. People that you came across or knew. And you can say whatever you want because most of these people are no longer with us, so they’re historical figures.

(Laughing)

AL: (Laughing)

LC: But I wonder—
AL: Well, some of them are.

LC: Some of them are. Some of them keep hanging around.

AL: Well, let me tell you about Ted Kennedy.

LC: Well, tell me about Ted Kennedy.

AL: And he’s around and he—

LC: He is around, yes.

AL: And if you ever come face to face with him, he might not even remember me, but—

LC: What do you remember about him?

AL: Ted Kennedy was head of the Refugee Subcommittee.

LC: Yes.

AL: Every year he’d send his young staffers from Washington into Vietnam to investigate. They were there to make sure that he could see everything, you know, nobody was hiding anything; they got the real picture.

LC: Right.

AL: And in all fairness to Senator Kennedy, I know that every time that he was due to arrive in Vietnam, things picked up in the refugee program because refugees were a big item because people back in the United States were interested in that as much as anything.

LC: Yes, sure.

AL: So he did a very good job of stimulating and working with the refugee program. And when the great man himself would arrive, why John Vann would take him in hand and take him here, there, and everywhere and very often I was with them. I remember we took him out to Ben Cat where he—and of course while he was there, the gunships were circling around and there were a lot of security and whatnot. And he was interviewing a woman whose husband’s head had been cut off the night before—blood was still on the ground there—for not cooperating with the Viet Cong or something like that.

LC: Yeah.

AL: But he went here, there, and everywhere and investigated things like that.

And I think that night, John Vann had a dinner for Kennedy. Kennedy was sitting at the
head of the table and Vann was sitting here (gesture) and I was sitting here (gesture) and we were just kind of talking, interrelating and whatnot. Kennedy heard that they had captured some VC recently and wanted to know if he could go out and see them, talk to them.

LC: Really?

AL: Well, this was after dark and it was dangerous to travel after dark.

LC: Sure.

AL: Well, Vann said, “Yeah, we’ll take you out there.” And so Kennedy and John Vann and me and Vann’s interpreter and two other people went out there and went to this prison outside of Bien Hoa, where they had several captured VC, but we zeroed in on one. It was, you know, a grim situation; an iron cot, and whether they’re shackled or not, I forget. But he had been wounded the day before and he was nervous and scared to death and suddenly there were flashlights in his face. And I remember somebody had a flashlight and here’s Kennedy’s big face and my face with a beard and John Vann telling the interpreter what to ask him and Kennedy was saying, “Ask him, ask him why’s he a Viet Cong. Why did he become a Viet Cong?” And at that moment, I thought, “My God.” It’s kind of like asking a dog why he’s a dog. This poor devil lived out in an area where he did what anybody who stuck a gun up your nose told you to do or for a few bags of rice a year. And I was suddenly internally embarrassed just to be there. But that was a night—I’m sure if Kennedy is honest, he’d remember every single word I just said.

LC: I’m sure he probably does.

AL: In all fairness to Senator Kennedy, he was an asset to the refugee program and I guess I was a little bit mean thinking about this. But there was an area not too far from Bien Hoa, not too far from Long Binh where there were a lot of houses of ill repute with catchy names on them and whatnot. And one day I noticed that one was called Bar Jackety, Jackie Kennedy and in parenthesis it said, “Sexy.” (Laughing)

LC: Is that right?

AL: Yeah.

LC: This is near Bien Hoa?

AL: Yeah, it was near Bien Hoa and I wanted to take Kennedy by there. And I went back to check and either I couldn’t find it or somebody had removed it and whatnot.
But I remember Kennedy very well. Senator Jake Javits used to come over a lot. And of course, we had a lot of correspondents. Halberstam was there when Kennedy—in John’s office very often, interviewing John.

LC: Did he ever interview you?
AL: No, no, but I saw him there a lot. No.

LC: And Javits from New York?
AL: Javits from New York, yes.

LC: He came out as well on a tour of some kind?
AL: Yeah, and so did his secretary. His secretary was heavily involved with doing work with Vietnamese orphans. She’d come out occasionally. But I’ve been around a lot of people who were senators and congressman. Of course, John Vann knew the value of publicity and when some figure like that was coming out, well he would generally take care of it. But sometimes even he, too, was overwhelmed and then I had to help.

LC: Sure.
AL: For example, Raymond Burr came over there.

LC: Oh, yes. I was going to ask you.
AL: And he was doing a documentary on Vietnam. And he wanted to go to Lai Thieu, which is kind of a bad area. This is where the people from Ben Suc re-settled. And he was staying in a hotel in Saigon and he’d been picked up and taken out to the airport and helicoptered. It wasn’t too far, maybe fourteen miles.

LC: Right.
AL: But all the time something like that was going on, the gunships were circling and we had pretty good security. Vann said, “Al, I want you to go over to Lai Thieu and help Perry Mason,” the star of the—no, his name was—what did I say?

LC: Raymond Burr.
AL: Raymond Burr, the star of the “Perry Mason” show. “He’s doing a documentary on Vietnam and he wants to know all about the refugee program, and this would be good for all of us.” And that morning at the staff meeting, and I’m quoting Vann verbatim, he said, “Now listen, anytime you people are interviewed by the newspapers or media, don’t refer to this organization as USOM, because it’s not USOM
anymore.” That’s US Overseas Mission. And about this time, they brought in (Robert) Komer, who was going to make it a joint Army civilian organization called OCO, which stood for Office of Civil Operations. Later on, it was changed to CORDS, Civil Operations Revolutionary Development and Support, which sounded all communistic to me. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: But anyway, he said, “And if any of you bastards call this USOM,” he said, “You’re going to lose your job. From now on, it’s OCO. You got it? OCO, OCO.” “Okay.” Anyway, he said, “I want you to take Hardy with you.” Bill Hardy was a young Army captain with a lot of agricultural experience and was an agricultural advisor for the refugees. And I told Hardy, “Well I’m going to drive over to Lai Thieu.” And he said, “Well, I’ll be there too. I’ll meet you over there.” And I said, “Fine.” So I drove over to Lai Thieu and I didn’t see how Hardy got there. And then I got briefed by Raymond Burr. He said, “Al, I want you to come out from behind that refugee house and then you’re going to meet Major Anh, who’s a Vietnamese refugee man, and you’re going to meet and shake hands and then you’re going to come towards the camera and I’m going to grill you about the refugee program. You got that?” And I said, “Fine.” Well, I was ready to do my part and Major Anh was a very fine Vietnamese officer, he was very slightly built. And a lot of the Vietnamese men, in fact all of them, would hold hands.

LC: Yes.

AL: And it doesn’t mean a thing except they’re friends.

LC: Yes.

AL: But he was lightly built and walked with a—he didn’t walk like a lumberjack. (Laughing)

LC: Okay, okay.

AL: And he didn’t quite swish, but you’d hear, “Oh, Mr. Lavelle, I’m so happy to see you.” And he was nervous because Burr had these big cameras on both of us.

LC: Yes.

AL: And he came over and he took a hold of my hand, which is all right. But you know, he wouldn’t let go of my hand. (Laughing) So there I was strolling with Major Anh and I was trying to get my hand loose. (Laughing)
LC: But carefully, because this is all on—
AL: These big cameras were rolling and whatnot.
LC: It’s all on film, right.
AL: And I got to thinking, “God, my friends are going to see this and they’re going to think I’m one of those.”
LC: Right.
AL: And Raymond Burr said, “Well, this is Mr. Lavelle. He helps direct the refugee program here. Tell me, Mr. Lavelle, who do you work for?” And I said, “Well,” you know, I was trying to get my hand out. “I work for an organization called USOM—no, no, no. I work for—this company—called—OCO, OCO, OCO!” (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing) You forgot.
AL: Yeah, I know. And he said, “And what does OCO stand for?” And I said, “Well, it stands for—” I couldn’t think of what it stood for.
LC: Right.
AL: Because this guy wouldn’t let go of my hand. (Laughing)
LC: Yeah.
AL: Anyway, he made his documentary on Vietnam and happily he left that section out.
LC: He did? Okay.
AL: But we stayed in that Lai Thieu pretty late in the day and going down Highway 13 after a certain period of time was touch-and-go because there were often snipers and mines on the road, and these people of the Le Thanh factory are the ones who were doing it.
LC: Organizing it, yeah.
AL: Yeah. I didn’t know it at the time. But anyway, I said to Hardy. You know, I said, “I don’t want to go down Highway 13.” I said, “I think I’ll cut through the back country.” Because you could go through the back country, which is a bad area to be in, because very often there’s activity out there or air strikes and all kinds of things. But there’s a road used by the lumbermen who would come down from jungle areas who paid their taxes to the VC and whatnot.
LC: Yes.
AL: And you could take your life in your hands and maybe get through there, but it was faster than going the other way, which is even more hazardous. And I told Hardy, “I’m going through the back country.” He said, “I’ll be right behind you.” And I said, “Fine.” Well, he wasn’t right behind me because the roads were so dusty over there that you had to stay back at least a quarter of a mile so you could see the road yourself.

LC: Sure.

AL: And I came up behind this lumber truck that was stopped right where kind of—and by this time, it was kind of a valley, and there wasn’t room for me to get by. And I thought, “God, this is a VC ambush.” I was a little bit worried. And it wasn’t. There were just lumbermen who were getting ready to go home at the end of the day and the engine of the truck was running and they were getting ready to pull out, I guess. But I couldn’t get around them. I took the time out to put my International Scout into four-wheel drive. So I got back in the car, I noticed two men to my right dressed in black pajamas, as all the peasants were.

LC: Yeah.

AL: But sometimes, you know, the VC, the peasants were VC, too. But I saw these two men’s heads coming up the bank and then I looked to my right and there was another one that came down the bank. In the tape, I said right-hand side, but it was the left-hand side. And he got to my car, the International Scout, and in perfect English, he put his hand on the sill like that (gesture). I opened the door and he said, “Hey you, come with me,” in English. Well, I just knew this was a bad situation, and I always had a Swedish K submachine gun. I’d pull out the ashtray on my car and I had a Montagnard strap with me. And a few times before that, I was frightened by something and I’d go for the Swedish K and usually get it wrapped up around the gearshift, and then you know, it was useless. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: But I also had hand grenades hanging there and I also had—

LC: Did you—you had hand grenades?

AL: I also had a magnum gun between my legs. When that guy did that, you know, when you think you’re being—when your life’s being threatened, you’re a lot more fast and more perceptive and everything else. I pulled out the gun right in front of
my face and I fired, and I don’t think I hit him, but he ducked and went down and
whatnot. But what I did was I stunned myself for a few moments. But the guys in the
truck heard that shot and started pulling the truck ahead. It gave me enough room to get
up on the bank. And my vivid recollection is driving that thing at probably a thirty-
degree angle, sliding along these logs; it had big logs with chains around them and that
was supporting the vehicle. And then I came up to that section between the cab of the
truck and the trailer itself, and there was a space, you know, where the rear end of the
Scout fell into it. Because I remember this way, leaning on the side like this, staring at
this big winch on the back of the truck. But eventually with the truck moving and pulling
me, some of the wheels grabbed and I went sliding by the cab of the truck. And I
remember looking up at this Vietnamese’s face looking at me with a horrified look as I
was scraping by the side of his truck and I think I pulled off his mirrors. Oh, and one of
the boomers on this truck that cinch the chains—I ran through the handle and it went
through my windshield, and then it caught, but I was in four wheel drive and it pulled the
roof of the car down a little bit.

LC: Oh down, pulled it down.

AL: So I couldn’t sit up straight, you know, after I got back on the road. And as I
pulled around the front, my bumper hung up on something on the side of his truck, but I
was in four-wheel drive and he jammed on his brakes and something gave, it was my
bumper, I guess.

LC: Yeah, probably.

AL: And I made it back to Bien Hoa. And I didn’t think much about it because it
seems as almost as bad as happened very often. But after a couple of days, Vann said,
“Al, where’s Hardy?” And I said, “Well, I was with him in Lai Thieu.” And he said,
“We haven’t seen him for a couple of days.” And I said, “Well, maybe he went to Saigon
or something like that.” So, we weren’t too concerned because we all disappeared for
days at a time and nobody knew where we were.

LC: Right.

AL: And it was no big deal. But after about three or four weeks, we began to
worry about Hardy. And they found the body of a black man in a river nearby with his
hands behind his back and the back of his head blown out. We assumed it was Hardy.
We found out later it wasn’t Hardy. A year later, Hardy had a Vietnamese interpreter with him. The Vietnamese interpreter turned up in Saigon and being interrogated, we found out that Hardy was captured in the spot where I pulled away from by three or four VC police. He was taken to Cambodia, he and a scout and the interpreter. After a year, they let the interpreter go, but Hardy was kept a prisoner by the VC for five years. And I think I saw him on TV when they were releasing prisoners. I wasn’t sure that was him, but I thought I saw him.

LC: He’s an African American man?
AL: Yes he is. Bill Hardy, he was from Mississippi.
LC: Okay.
AL: And recently when I got in touch with Benge. Benge, he knew of Hardy and said he had his email, but he found out he no longer had email. But he said he’d send me Hardy’s address if he could find it, because I’d like to get in touch with Hardy and just remind him of that day that we were together.

LC: He may very well have wondered, as the time went by, what had happened to you.
AL: Probably, but things like that happened and none of us were really that close to one another.
LC: Yeah.
AL: We just knew one another and occasionally worked with one another.
LC: Everybody was—
AL: But I wondered about Hardy, but there was nothing I could do about it. But I was appalled when I found out that he’d been taken as a prisoner for so many years and I was happy when I heard that he was released.
LC: Of course.
AL: And I, just out of curiosity, I’d like to find out what happened with the rest of his life.
LC: Of course.
AL: He might not even remember me, I don’t know.
LC: There was another body that turned up, as you said, another African American man who had clearly been assassinated.
AL: Yeah.

LC: Do you know anything more about that?

AL: No, no. Nothing. I don’t even know if the story is true or not.

LC: Oh, okay.

AL: But I heard that.

LC: Let me ask you about some other VIPs, people that I gather you either worked with or worked under at some remove, like Ambassador Komer. Did you meet Bob Komer at any point?

AL: Well, I met him several times.

LC: Can you tell me what your impression was of him?

AL: He was the bureaucrat’s bureaucrat.

LC: Yes, yes.

AL: And he was very efficient and didn’t suffer fools easily. And yeah, I know a little bit about him. But I remember most vividly is his HES report, and I hope you have a copy of the HES report here.

LC: I don’t know that we do.

AL: It stands for Hamlet Evaluation System.

LC: Oh, oh yeah. I think we have some information about it.

AL: Well, it was about—this thing was a machine, IBM machine running. It had listed every town and hamlet and village in Vietnam and the people out in the provinces were supposed to fill in all the data; number of Catholics, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, so forth and so on. Number of people Viet Cong associated, level of education, children in the Boy Scouts, on and on and on. And it just took up an awful lot of our time once that thing appeared on the scene. And I used to—when I first went over there under USOM, we were almost free agents. We could do what we thought had to be done. We had the keys to the commodities.

LC: Right.

AL: And we could move out and do things as we thought. Then when OCO became OCO, combining the military and civilians, suddenly I found I had Army lieutenant colonels and majors and sergeants working for me and whatnot. And then it
became CORDS and it became even more military than anything else and I had to go
to—after morning briefing, had to stand formation with the troops out in front.

LC: You did?

AL: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, we all—yeah, we stood formation every morning
after, before or after a staff meeting. We had a staff meeting every morning and we had
to have briefing with charts and graphs and it became a big bureaucratic—that plus the
HES report. I found all my time in the office taking care of bureaucratic—writing
commendations, which some of the guys did things that were worth commendations.
That if they worked for me, when it was time to write commendations, I was writing
commendations and writing up reports and giving briefings and attending briefings. And
pretty soon, I thought, “Jeez. If I knew it was going to be like this, I should’ve just
stayed in the Army longer.” (Laughing) But Komer was the father of the HES report and
a lot of people claimed it was the best thing since Grape-Nuts. But to debrief out in the
field, it took a lot of our time and really wasn’t worth it because a lot of the data in those
reports were of villages that were so insecure, that it’d be worth your life to even try to
get in there. So a lot of the information put in there was guesswork.

LC: Guesswork.

AL: Some of it was very good, but I didn’t like the HES report. Some people I
guess did, but I didn’t.

LC: You didn’t think that the outcome was worth the amount of time that you
had to invest in it?

AL: Not for me.

LC: And how much confidence was there in the numbers that were in those
reports about pacified, not pacified?

AL: Well, I know that—I often said, to do that report properly, I’d have to have
the mind of an accountant and have maybe an accountant working with me. It was, for
me, it was a bureaucratic nightmare, but for some—there was some people that liked it
and thought it was well worthwhile. I mean, it was that thick (gesture), and we spent a
lot of time. I guess, basically, what was said in that report had to agree with the overall
policy of, “Think we’re getting better? Think we got better enough?”

LC: I see.
AL: And then Komer is probably still alive, he’ll probably not agree with what I’m saying, but—

LC: I in fact, do not know if he’s still alive. But you get to say what you want to say now.

AL: Yeah.

LC: You’re not on the payroll anymore. Al, let me ask you about another high-flyer, that would be Bill Colby. Did you ever come across him?

AL: Yeah, I met him a time or two, but I never had any—

LC: No dealings with him?

AL: No.

LC: Okay. Do you remember the circumstances?

AL: I remember when he died.

LC: Yeah.

AL: It was the day I started writing one of these reports. I said, “You know, with Colby being gone and many of the other people I knew being gone, if I have anything to say about Vietnam, I better start doing it today.” And that’s when I started writing the report.

LC: And some of those are going to be deposited here so that people who might be listening to this can make reference to them. And I don’t care what it took, I’m very glad that you’re interested in helping us document this because you’re right, it would be lost otherwise.

AL: Yeah.

LC: You’re right. Al, you had mentioned to me both yesterday and this morning, just informally, that there were tensions between the civilian workers and the guys from the military. Can you say anything more? Can you give me details on that?

AL: No, not really. It’s just that occasionally you’d run across GIs, and yeah, everybody thought civilians were fat cat civilians living in Saigon.

LC: Right, living it up.

AL: Hanging out at the PX (post exchange).

LC: Sure.
AL: With maids and whatnot. And, of course, there was a lot of that was the majority of the criticism.

LC: Yes.

AL: But they had no conception at all of people like myself who lived on the ragged edge of extinction everyday, doing things that even they would sometimes not want to do, even with their buddies. And sometimes some young, unthinking kid would say or do something that would—say somebody up on a convoy going by, would throw, a loaded can of Coke at not only me, but sometimes the Vietnamese kids. They were very antagonistic towards the Vietnamese and towards civilians. And what they didn’t know was that even the convoy commander worked for John—John Vann and the generals he’d work for were running the show. And if we ran into problems with, say, a convoy commander, we’d say, “All right buddy. Contact your boss and tell him who you got here and then he’ll tell you who, he’ll let you know that they work for John Vann and John Vann is your general’s boss,” or something like that. Anyway, we could—I never had to do it, but I knew that if I had to, I could. Some people I know did, get in tiffs with convoys and put some cause in the problem, got a little problem for themselves. But, one story I tell, Laura, and you’ll see what I’m talking about, this is the part that we’re all—I’m going to tell it to you because—very often I’d be out in the boonies and I’d see a cloud of dust in the air and I’d feel the earth trembling. And it would be a convoy behind me and convoys don’t move slowly, they move pretty fast when they’re moving. There’d be a tank, an ammunition truck, a fuel truck, another tank and so forth coming along the road that quick and you’d have to pull off the side of the road because you’re supposed to get out of the way of convoys and not stop it. You’re not supposed to interfere with it. And even a convoy, when it’s moving like that, if it runs over livestock or even a person, it keeps going. You don’t stop a convoy.

LC: Right.

AL: But sometimes I’d have to pull off to the side of the road and wait maybe fifteen or twenty minutes for the convoy to go by. And some of these tanks had bridges on them. And then later on, I’d pick up an *Army Times* and I’d read about the operations that these tanks were involved in where they killed six VC or something like that. And I thought to myself, “The VC they killed must’ve been deaf, dumb, and blind.”
LC: Right.

AL: And I said, “No wonder it cost a hundred thousand dollars to kill one VC.” Because most of the VC that I came in contact with are little skinny, scrawny guys and what they’d generally have is a bicycle tube filled with rice tied around their middle and an AK-47, and we were going after them with, you know, something like those tanks. And I know that there’s a place for tanks and in some cases tanks did a good job. But I thought, “No wonder it cost so much money to kill one VC,” that sort of thing.

LC: Yeah, yeah.

AL: But that was just an idle observation that—oh, but the interesting thing about that, one time one of the convoys ground to a halt right next to me and I looked up and there were three kids that I taught in high school in the tank, or two kids that I taught in high school. I met a third one later at the PX reading comic books. But he said—when I first retired, I was altruistic and I wanted to teach in the worst place where I could do the most good and that sort of thing.

LC: Right.

AL: I taught down in the barrio in San Antonio and they used to call me pelon which in Spanish, can mean a lot of things. It means baldy, for one thing.

LC: (Laughing)

AL: They said, “Are you el Pelon?” (Laughing) “Yeah, I’m el Pelon.” And I got to meet some of the kids I taught in high school in some of those tanks that I’m complaining about now. I’m not complaining about them, but it was just an idle observation that sometimes they spent too much money trying to do something that wasn’t worth it.

LC: Al, I want to ask you just briefly about a couple of other people and then I want to come back to some of those bigger questions about whether it was worth it or not. You indicated yesterday that at some point, maybe during Cedar Falls, you knew Al Hague or knew of him.

AL: Yeah.

LC: What position was he in and what was happening?
AL: Well, Cedar Falls was considered a big operation in that day and time. There was an area called the Iron Triangle, up around Phu Cat, I believe it was, or Ben Cat. And it was known to be a haven for the VC.

LC: Sure.

AL: [Undermined with] tunnels and whatnot. But the military decided that they’re going up in the Iron Triangle. There’s a beautiful little village on the bend of the river called Ben Suc. And it’s true that a lot of the people in Ben Suc were VC and sympathetic to the VC, but a lot of them were just simple farmers, too. Anyway, Operation Cedar Falls was to strike at the Iron Triangle and to eliminate the village of Ben Suc. And long before the operation, anytime there’s an operation generating refugees, I had to be privy to it because I was the guy that was being asked the questions about refugees and whatnot.

LC: Sure.

AL: So I got in on all the Army briefings and I had heard General Hague brief and many of the others. And they—I guess they gave the people in Ben Suc like twenty-four hours. They had airplanes with loud speakers telling them what was going to happen. They tipped their hand. They had to for humanitarian purposes. Say, “Your village is going to be attacked tomorrow and everybody should gather down at the river and get on the barges or be at the place where the helicopters can pick you up and fly you to Lai Thieu where we have a resettlement camp for you.” And you can imagine the consternation of people, a voice comes out of the sky and of course they’re all apprehensive and angry and whatnot.

LC: Sure.

AL: And there’s a lot of old people that just don’t get the word and scared to death and whatnot. But the military went in there, a huge operation, and killed quite a few VC. But a lot of them disappeared and they found out later that the tunnel system up in the Iron Triangle was so extensive. It came out of Cu Chi, which was miles and miles away. A lot of them just disappeared in the ground and resurfaced somewhere else. And the military agreed to do a lot for the refugees, and did, but they didn’t do it long enough. Now this is one of the problems with war. You know, I think the American military is a wonderful military and it can do what a military has to do, which is win wars. But not
enough thought is given to “What do you do after the war?” And this takes as much money, if not more, to really solve the problem. And so the military was a big help for a few weeks. But after that, they had to go onto more serious problems and I was—the military had the refugees for about six weeks and we had them for years. And Lai Thieu, during the great Tet Offensive, was the main gathering point for North Vietnamese and VC. It’s where they got their last minute instructions and when they got shot up, that’s where they got bandaged up and sent back home. What they did in all—excuse me, my voice is giving out.

LC: Sure.

AL: I didn’t recognize the importance until later.

LC: Well, it must’ve been—

AL: And I was just an anonymous civilian.

LC: That must’ve been funny for you later.

AL: Yeah, later. Well, Alexander Hague, I saw a number of times. I think he was in charge of what they call Rome plows; knocking down the jungle. He’s a skinny lieutenant colonel. And I found out later that we could’ve had a lot in common because he was raised on the Philadelphia Mainline and he was Irish-German extraction. But anyway, I’ve listened to his briefings and I’ve talked to him several times about this and that and same with (Gen. Norman) Schwarzkopf. I met him up in a place called Bong Son. I doubt if he’d remember me, but he was a lieutenant colonel, I think, up there involved in, I think, Rome plows or something like that. And if I’d known they were going to become famous, well I would’ve—

LC: (Laughing) Latched onto them, maybe.

AL: No, no, no, not really.

LC: What kind of a guy was Schwarzkopf when you came across him?

AL: Oh, he was a remarkable guy. He was not, you know, some people are outstanding and you know it the minute you meet them.

LC: Sure.

AL: He was one and Alexander Hague, too.

LC: Too?

AL: They were good officers. Yes they were.
LC: What about General Weyand, who of course was above you?

AL: Weyand.

LC: I’m sorry.

AL: I liked Weyand very much.

LC: Yeah, he was—

AL: The guy before him was (Gen. Creighton) Abrams, and Abrams was bruff, gruff and—

LC: A tough guy.

AL: Tough, yeah, and I didn’t feel comfortable—and I doubt if he remembers me. But Weyand was a gentleman. He—

LC: Yeah, tell me more about him.

AL: Well, I didn’t know much about him except that he and Vann were very close because Vann was his advisor.

LC: Sure.

AL: And the two times I met him and briefed him, he was a gentleman and he asked descent questions and didn’t try to embarrass me or anything. He was a nice man. Westmoreland, I didn’t like because I knew he didn’t like Vann and I liked Vann.

(Laughing)

LC: Well, yeah, that was reasonable.

AL: And I considered was—I thought Westmoreland had a lot of fortuitous circumstances that elevated him to where he was because he was so good looking.

LC: You think that was the main drive or a driving fourse?

AL: Well, I think it didn’t hurt anybody to be handsome and articulate.

LC: Tall.

AL: Yeah, he no doubt was an outstanding man, too. But just because he didn’t like Vann, I didn’t like him. (Laughing) I’m a Vann loyalist.

LC: Yeah.

AL: ( Laughing)

LC: Excuse me. Al, how long did you actually stay over there in III Corps as a refugee operations director?

AL: I say from ’66 until ’70, maybe.
LC: Until 1970?

AL: And I finished out my tour, whatever it was, and I went back home and I was teaching school again.

LC: Right.

AL: And I had forgotten all about Vietnam, or I, you know, I didn’t consider it. And one day out of the blue, I get a letter from Vann saying he’s being moved to II Corps and he’d like me to come back as his refugee advisor. And I talked it over with my wife and kids and they were all for it. They said, “Daddy, we want to,” because I was told my family could move anywhere they wanted. The State Department would pay for the move and they could live in Taipei or Hong Kong or Manila or Tokyo or anyplace. They all wanted to live in Taipei, China. And I asked for China and they gave me a beautiful home in China. We lived in a big beautiful home up on a hill behind Taipei, in a place called Paitou, which is the garden spot or the orient for the Japanese. A mountainous area and that’s where they film all of Chinese films. My kids went to the Chinese-American school and learned a lot of Chinese and when your kids finish school, you could send them anywhere in the world for further training. My wife had her own Chinese cook, a masseur, masseuse, and it was gracious living. My wife belonged to the State Department’s Ladies Club and often had lunch and dinner with Madame Chiang Kai-shek.

LC: Really?

AL: And a lot of her friends were Indian maharanis. One of them gave her a beautiful scarf that was heavy because it was loaded with gold thread. And it was interesting for the wife and kids, in a way. But so many of the women spent their time in frivolous pursuits and going to the club and playing the slot machines, some became alcoholic and they were all getting reports that their husbands were misbehaving with the Vietnamese girls and whatnot. So there were a lot of women there who were frustrated and unhappy and just killing time. But it was gracious living.

LC: Did you go back there much, Al?

AL: Yes.

LC: How often?

AL: Every ten weeks I could go home for two weeks.
LC: Okay.
AL: And my wife, in fact, could come to Vietnam in, you know, like Christmas and times like that. And I have movies of this. At this time I was up in bloody Binh Dinh, a very bad province. And she got to Saigon somehow or another and I couldn’t get down to Saigon and there was nobody to meet her. And somebody finally, thank God, took her in tow and got her up to Binh Dinh where we spent some time. I took her out to some of these villages where I worked and there was one up near Binh Khe. While I had her in the village, we got word that a North, VC squad was closing in and to get the hell out of there and we flew out under an artillery barrage. We flew down the bed of the river and I got her back to Qui Nhon. And the next day I went back to the village where I had my dear wife and shortly after we left they killed about eighteen VC in and around that village. But I got photographs of her on that day, flying [down] the bed of the river. And another time, I lived in a trailer and there was an air conditioner at the far end of the trailer and the bedroom was at the back end of the trailer and a mortar landed nearby and the concussion blew the air conditioner out, slid it down, down the floor and banged into the side of our bed. And the VC used to get up on the mountain behind the town and lob mortars into the town and the gunships—this was a nightly occurrence. And then the gunships would come over and—at nighttime, it looks like somebody has a red water hose just watering down the area. And what you’re seeing is every sixth bullet is a tracer bullet, but the gunships would come in and it looked like somebody had a red hose and was hosing down the mountain.

LC: Wow, wow.
AL: And—
LC: Now is this Binh Dinh Province?
AL: In Binh Dinh at Qui Nhon.
LC: At Qui Nhon.
AL: Qui Nhon. And my wife was fascinated. We were watching an outdoor movie in an Army camp nearby and mortars landed nearby and about killed everyone and she was kind of fascinated by everything that was going on.
LC: Did she get rattled?
AL: No.
LC: Really?

AL: No. She really didn’t know—she’ never seen the ragged end of shrapnel, what it does. Once you see that, it’ll shake you up for good, I guess. But no, she wasn’t too perturbed. And she helped me. At that time, I was delivering supplies to a lot of orphanages. So she was good with kids and the nuns and whatnot, and we’d go out to the orphanages. I got pictures of her helping me in the orphanages, yeah.

LC: She sounds like a pretty special gal.

AL: Oh she was, yeah. God love her.

LC: Yeah.

AL: I came home from the gym one day and found her dead in the bed.

LC: Had she had a heart attack or something?

AL: Yeah, well, her aorta. We found out it’s genetic. Her father and all three brothers died of the same thing. It’s just the aorta gives away.

LC: How old was she? When did that happen Al?

AL: That happened in nineteen—I’ve been married for eight years now, and it happened probably about two years before—yeah, about eight—’79 I think. Does that sound right?

LC: No. Eighty—

AL: No, ’97, ’97.

LC: Ninety-seven, okay.

AL: We had a—the last day we spent together, she had a good friend who was in a—not a nursing home, but a retirement home nearby and she invited this friend over for a dinner on Sunday and she said, “You do the salad, I’ll do the rest.” And we did, and this woman had such a delightful personality, we spent all day talking. She was a very nice lady, a widow lady. And towards evening, Grace said, “Well, I have to take so and so back to the retirement home. I’ll be back in a few minutes.” So she came back and I was watching a TV program, but she wanted to watch another one. She said, “Do you want me to cook you some popcorn before I go upstairs and watch TV?” And I said, “No thanks.” That’s the last I ever saw her alive. But during the night, I heard her get up and that’s what I—I heard her get up. The next morning, I always get up every morning at five; I go to the gym. In those days, I was playing racquetball for an hour and swimming
for an hour, and she’d come up to the gym at eight. I’d leave the gym at about 8, 8:10
and she’d come up—because she had to get coffee for her girlfriends. So I saw her every
morning in passing. If I didn’t see her in the club, I’d see her on her way to the club
every morning. And this one morning, she didn’t show up at the club and I said, “Well,
I’ll see her on the road.” And I didn’t see her on the road and I got home and I saw the
car in the driveway and I knew immediately something was wrong. I went in the house
and yelled, “Grace!” And of course, silence, and I found her dead in the bed. And
evidently she had got up and went to take a Tums. She must’ve felt uneasy and she died
peacefully in her sleep, the coroner said, because she still had the Tums on her tongue
and the covers were pulled up to her chin and weren’t disheveled. She just died in her
sleep.

LC: She just fell asleep.

AL: I consider it a reward for a very good life.

LC: Yes sir, she sounds like a wonderful person who served her country. She
served her country.

AL: Oh, yes she has. Grace was a fine wife and a mother.

LC: And I think she probably felt very lucky to have you, sir.

AL: Not really.

LC: I’ll bet she did. (Laughing)

AL: A lot of people say the thing that saved our marriage was the fact that I was
gone so long.

LC: Well, sometimes that’s what works for people.

AL: Yeah, but I’d say we had as good a marriage as anybody I know. But I wish
now that I didn’t go to Vietnam and be as gone as long as I was. Even though I came
home every three months, that’s not good. And it was harder on her than on me because
she was there with teenage kids, you know, and how they—and I was there doing my
thing and not bothered much about—

LC: What was going on at home.

AL: Yeah, going on at home. Well, I was concerned—like Vann, I knew Vann
had a family that was all screwed up.

LC: Right.
AL: But they had more reason to be screwed up. My kids were not screwed up.

LC: You mentioned yesterday that you hadn’t known a whole bunch of dimensions to what John Vann was involved in until you read, *A Bright Shining Lie*?

AL: No, I knew John—I knew, you know, a little bit about John Vann.

LC: You had an idea.

AL: Well, I had an idea, yeah. And there was a woman that lived in his house who was supposed to be the housemaid, but was I imagine—

LC: Probably.

AL: No, but there’s so many people there that fell in that category, that you just didn’t—I ran across people there who had been brain surgeons and got tired of being brain surgeons and become pilots for Air America. I ran across men who had been priests who now had mistresses. (Laughing) You ran across—and you just didn’t, it wasn’t too wise to get too nosy because who knows who was doing what to whom.

LC: Right, right.

AL: And it was none of my business.

LC: Right.

AL: But I knew Vann on a daily basis and we laughed and joked and got along— I think one reason he hired me was that he kind of liked me. He probably suspected that I would do the things that he hoped I would do and I did. So we got along fine.

LC: And so well that he actually called you back when he went back.

AL: Yeah he did, he did, yeah.

LC: And Al, were you over there when he was killed?

AL: No. I’d left before that time. I’ll tell you something interesting about that.

LC: Yeah, yeah.

AL: There’s still speculation—well, maybe I shouldn’t even because this is kind of a conspiracy sort of theory. It’s probably—I can’t prove anything, but—

LC: It might be of interest in the future, though, that people talked about these things.

AL: Well, Vann was killed when the North Vietnamese came, were coming down from Kontum and Vann had his own personal helicopter. And Vann was notorious for taunting the Viet Cong, the VC and whatnot. And he was probably cowboy...
around, doing just that maybe. But also he was out near, I forget the name of the village, it’s in my book, but the Montagnard villages had like totem poles in some areas and he hit one of those poles and that was the end of Vann, or so I thought. In about—after I left Vietnam, I was teaching school, I was called in the office one day and said, “There’s a young Vietnamese guy here that wants to talk to you.” And it turned out, it was Vann’s—what’s did Frenchy call them? Aide-de-camp, who went in and recovered Vann’s body.

LC: Really?
AL: Yeah. And I asked him, “Who killed Vann?” Because some people—I think the Viet Cong claimed they did it.

LC: Yes, that’s right.
AL: And the North Vietnamese claimed they did it. And Vann, General Dzu was the general in charge of the central highlands at one time, and Dzu was involved in a lot of things. Like, I think his father would get a hold of heroin and bring it up around Qui Nhon and it was distributed to the NCOs (non-commissioned officers) and whatnot, distributed to the GIs—something like that. And I heard about it the same time everybody else did and the next thing I knew, Vann was defending Dzu and later on I asked Vann, “Was General Dzu involved?” And he said, “Yes, but I didn’t let it be known.” Because he was after Dzu for other reasons. And I thought, “What?” What Dzu wanted to do was get a hold of the Montagnard lands, which were full of timber and whatnot. And I soon forgot about it because narcotics I knew about, but considered it none of my business. But this young Army captain said he didn’t know what happened. But he said it might’ve been the South Vietnamese might’ve done it. And I never thought of that before. But he was the one that recovered Vann’s body.

LC: What made him think that? Did he tell you?
AL: I don’t know.
LC: He just had an idea that—
AL: Yeah.
LC: It’s certainly a mystery.
AL: Vann started the Office of Highland Affairs to work only with Montagnards and Dzu didn’t think much of that idea because Dzu was about like Custer and the Sioux Indians. You know, he didn’t have their best interests at heart.

LC: Well, Al, let me ask you a little bit more about the Montagnards. You spent a great deal of time with this minority group and some of the sub-minorities, the ethnic minorities.

AL: Yeah.

LC: And one of the things that you brought us was that wonderful flag, which you said you carried around. Can you tell a little bit about that?

AL: Yeah. There were a group of young—you know, people think of Montagnards as being unsophisticated and savages, but they aren’t. There’s a lot of—especially among the Rhade who lived down near Ban Me Thuot and had the advantage of going to high school and some even went to college somewhere. And there’s a group of Montagnard intellectuals, who when the French were there, founded an organization called Forces United for the Liberation of Races Oppressed, I think it was called. Which was a group formed by the Montagnards to oppose oppression from the people in charge, be it in Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, anywhere there’s Montagnards. And FULRO (Forces United for the Liberation of Races Oppressed) was an organization that if the Vietnamese found out you belonged to it, it would be like somebody finding out you were a member of the Communist Party back in the fifties. It was not a good idea.

LC: The South Vietnamese as well, not just VC.

AL: No, no, the South Vietnamese, especially.

LC: South Vietnamese particularly.

AL: I didn’t know what the North Vietnamese thought. But I understand that the people who were non-Montagnards, there were a few number who were brought into the FULRO organization, and I think Dr. Hickey was one of them, but I’m not sure. And I know that Vann and I were, too. And there may have been others, maybe some Green Berets, but I don’t—there weren’t too many of them. But when the word got out to anybody who was a Montagnard, that you were sympathetic to them and you could show evidence by having in your possession that flag, your chances of being harmed were very slight and your chance of being helped were very good. And you could go into areas that
were hostile because they were working with the North Vietnamese and liked the North Vietnamese better than the South Vietnamese. But being a member of FULRO, you could do your thing and nothing would happen.

LC: Did you carry that flag then?
AL: Kept it all the time in my suitcase and as soon as I landed in a strange place, I took it out and showed it to them.

LC: And it worked like a passport, like a key to the city, like—?
AL: Yeah, when you see a gun sticking out of the side of a house, when you take out your flag, the gun disappears. (Laughing)
LC: Really?
AL: Yeah. A couple of times, I was in areas I knew that were hostile. But once it was known that I had that flag—and not only that, the Montagnards took pretty good care of me because if there was danger around, they’d let me know, “Al, don’t come here tomorrow because of this or that.” Or, “Don’t go down that road, it’s mined. Beaucoup min,” and that sort of thing. (Editor’s note: beaucoup min translates to, “many mines” in English) But they took care of me and I had a lot of friends amongst the Montagnards in all ages; men, women, and children and whatnot. And I was called various names, but in one Montagnard group I was called (speaks in Montagnard), which means “Big hairy bear with no hair on his head.” (Laughing)
LC: (Laughing)
AL: And in some of the Vietnamese villages, they called me (speaks in Vietnamese). (Speaks in Vietnamese) is old man, (speaks in Vietnamese) is fat, “dien” is crazy, and “soi dow” is baldheaded, “Fat crazy baldheaded old man.” But because Vietnamese is a tonal language, the way they say it means a lot.
LC: Yes.
AL: If I—sometimes if I’d just kid around with them, I’d say (speaks in Vietnamese) “How about giving me a kiss?” (Speaks in Vietnamese) “You dirty old man.”
LC: (Laughing)
AL: But after they got to know me, they’d say, “Om dya.” They make motions, “Om dya, om dya, om dya.” Which means, that you know, they accept you and they
respect and whatnot. And so I was known by almost everyone, “Om dya, om dya, om dya.” They liked to see me arrive and they were sad when I had to go, especially when I was going home. But I got so I really could interrelate, you know. You know, I took a course once in other languages and there’s ways to speaking other than speaking, it’s mostly body language. And when you’re with unsophisticated people, you know immediately whether they like you or hate you or whatever because they do what they feel like doing.

LC: Sure.

AL: If they love you, they’ll kiss you and hug you and slobber all over you. And if they don’t like you, they’re likely, you know, to spit on you. (Laughing) But I learned a lot of pidgin Montagnard and Vietnamese. And with pidgin and acting out, drawing pictures in the sand and dirt, you know, I could occupy myself all day. For example, when you tried to move a village, you had to meet with the village elders and tell them why they should move and they’d say why they shouldn’t move because that mountain is their father and their father didn’t want to see the children go away and so forth and so on. But they do a lot of things with their hands. They way you and I are sitting now is very offensive to many people in the world.

LC: Yes, right.

AL: But you never sit with your leg crossed and pointed to the other person.

LC: Right.

AL: And the only thing that drove me nuts after I found out about it, the average American when he has nothing to do, goes like this (clapping his hands). You know, which is the nastiest thing you could do. (Laughing) And here’s some poor Vietnamese colonel with this American advisor and the advisor said, “Now listen colonel (claps), tomorrow morning we’re going to (claps).” (Laughing)

LC: It’s just so offensive that—

AL: It would be me like talking to you (claps). But the Montagnards had a hand motion. They only do it when you’re walking away from them; they go (gesture). “I hope a cobra bites you on the ass.”

LC: Is that what it actually means?

AL: Yeah, yeah.
LC: (Laughing)

AL: They’d talk and they’d listen respectfully to somebody and turn their head
and go (gesture). But a person who’s empathetic to other people picks up all these
nuances.

LC: Sure.

AL: And I generally—of course, we weren’t discussing philosophical problems.
It was how many people were killed? How much roofing do we need? How much rice?
And by drawing pictures in the sand and dirt, why you could get ideas across. For
example, when I was working up above Kontum around Dak Pek, I heard tanks at night.
Well, I heard something, I didn’t know exactly what it was, and I’m sure that the
intelligence people somewhere were picking this up. But back in Pleiku, I remember
telling some guy, an Army guy, that, “You know, I’m hearing something at night that
sounds to me like it might be trucks or tanks.” He said, “Oh, there’s nothing like that up
there.” Well, shortly thereafter, it was proven that there were tanks. But anyway, the
Montagnards, when I asked the Montagnards when I’d hear this noise, they’d draw
pictures in the sand, like a tank or whatnot. And I told them back in Pleiku that I was
hearing tanks, some people were incredulous at first, but it was soon proved to be they
were up there.

LC: Now would this be in ’72?

AL: Yes.

LC: Before the Easter Offensive?

AL: Yes, I guess so. Anyway, pretty soon these tanks began rolling down the
Central Highlands.

LC: Right.

AL: And there’s one story that you can probably—would know about or hear
about eventually. I don’t know if it’s true or not. There’s a place north of Kontum called
Kon Horing, and to me, it was an oasis in the desert of death, because the Belgian priests
and nuns were taking care of all these orphan Montagnard children. And I was supplying
them with wheat and other things as often as I could. And I always, like I say, felt like I
was in an oasis of peace and love because the Belgian priests and nuns were—I mean, if
there are saints, these people seemed to me to be saints. And I heard that when the North
Vietnamese came down—I forget the highway, Highway 14, passing Kon Horing to go into attack Kontum—that they crucified the priests and nuns and made women and children get on the tanks as they drove into attack Kontum. And if they didn’t get on the tank they were shot, and if they rode into Kontum and came under fire, they got shot. And it seems to me, I read that in like *Time* or *Newsweek* too back in those days. I don’t know if the story’s true or not, but I hope it wasn’t. But I figured that there might be some truth to it. And in your investigations, if you ever hear of Kon Horing and what happened to it, I’d sure like to know.

LC: Okay, I’ll make a note that we’ll look into it.

AL: And I have pictures of Kon Horing, too, in some of these films. And some of the poor Montagnard women, they look like they’re ninety-five years old, and they’re actually probably about forty.

LC: And why is that? The hard life?

AL: Well, they live such a hard life and have miserable lives. Some of them were actually going around babbling, they were crazy.

LC: Because of hard conditions and—?

AL: I imagine, yeah.

LC: Oh.

AL: Who’d had a lot of adorable kids there that are just full of life and I don’t know what happened to them. And do you ever hear of Pat Smith?

LC: No.

AL: She was a surgeon that had a hospital in Kontum. She and her staff took—find out where she is and that’s somebody that could give you a wealth of information. She’d even adopted some Montagnard children. Her name is Pat Smith, had the hospital in Kontum. If there’s a saint on earth, she’s one of them and I hope she’s still alive.

LC: I want to ask you about the priests. You said that—these are the Belgian priests.

AL: Yeah.

LC: That it was an oasis. Is it because of the work they were doing and the attitude they had or can you tell a little more?
AL: Yeah, these were kind, gentle people taking care of children under terrible circumstances.

LC: What kind of a place did they have up there? Can you describe it, the orphanage, or the buildings they were using?

AL: Well, it was a typical, kind of—it was more than ramshackle, it was pretty substantial as I recall. And you could tell by, you know, just a cursory glance that the—
you know, people are trying to keep it clean and whatnot, and the children didn’t seem to be too depressed and were happy and whatnot. I really don’t know too much about the physical plant there. But I just know that every time I was there, I felt like, “Thank God there’s somebody doing this good work here.”

LC: Were you able to get them supplies on occasion?

AL: Oh yes, I kept them supplied with flour and rice. I’d give them anything I could and sometimes it was easier than others. The people that I got a lot of my things from were with Catholic Relief. There were a lot of relief societies over there. They’re all good, but the Catholic Relief could be relied on to give you anything they had at anytime. They just wouldn’t deliver it.

LC: You had to somehow get it moved?

AL: Yeah, yeah, but I had a great admiration for people in CRS (Catholic Relief Services), amongst others.

LC: Who did you work with in CRS? Do you remember any names, any of those people?

AL: No I don’t, no.

LC: Where were they based that you were working?

AL: They were based mostly in Saigon.

LC: Anybody up further north?

AL: I’m sure there were, but I don’t know.

LC: Not really. Okay. And, Al, how did you get freight from one place to another? How did you arrange that kind of thing?

AL: Well, sometimes it was very difficult. I’ll tell you about one place that bothered me especially.

LC: Okay.
AL: It was called Dak Pek, very far north. And a lot of people that have been in Vietnam don’t even believe me when I tell them this, but the mountains went up to nine thousand feet. In the winter, it was bitter cold; might even see ice up there. And this is where the Jeh lived, J-e-h. Dr. Hickey knew all about the Jeh. And during the winter months when supplies couldn’t be dropped to them or flown in, you know, people suffered from malnutrition and whatnot, but mostly from the cold. And young and old died from respiratory diseases. All the kids had, as I recall, was a brass ring around their neck. And I’ve got pictures of them, absolutely naked with this brass ring. Some might have a few raggedy clothes. But a sweater could save lives and they also had scabies. And scabies is a horrible skin disease, but soap will cure it, just soap. And I thought, “God, I’ll just get sweaters and soap up here.” Anyway, getting up there is a problem. Air America did outstanding work over there. But they were not allowed to fly civilian clothes or civilian goods to civilians or something like that. Although we used them for massive airdrops and everything, but it was difficult getting an Air America plane. And there were American Air Force Caribou, or I guess the Army was flying them, Caribous that we could occasionally get. But it was hard to do because getting up—the pilots took their lives in their hands. You’d have to fly around the mountain and down the valley and around another mountain and everything and finally land at the base of the mountain at Dak Pek, where sometimes they’d come under fire from the North Vietnamese or VC.

LC: Oh, I’m sure.

AL: And Dak Pek was a bad place.

LC: I’m sure.

AL: And everybody has to live underground all the time. But I had a man that worked for me by the name of Captain Farrell, who was a very important cog in my life because he knew how to get things done. And he’d get things done sometimes by bribery. And you know, I think everybody is subjected to bribery if conditions are right. But there are a lot of troops in Saigon who wanted to go home with a communist weapon. Somehow or another I came by oodles and oodles of communist weapons and he’d take a truckload of communist weapons down to Saigon and over a period of time—we’d get the clothes from the Catholic Relief, but we would also somehow or another to get a
Caribou to fly up in there when the weather was nice. Sometimes the weather was never
nice, but we got a few loads up there, but it was by that messenger.

LC: You had to do it however you could.

AL: Yeah, yeah. Probably go to jail for some of the things I did.

LC: (Laughing) Do you know what happened to Captain Farrell?

AL: I wish I did.

LC: Really? Do you know how to spell that name?

AL: Yeah, F-a-r-r-e-l-l.

LC: E-l-l, okay.

AL: He’s a—oh, Hickey hated him, I don’t know why. But Hickey would know
Captain Farrell, and I think Captain Farrell was saying something about the Montagnards
one time and Hickey overheard him. (Laughing)

LC: You know, I wanted to ask you a little bit about the—a little bit more about
the relationship between the Montagnards and the South Vietnamese military and
specifically the Montagnards who had been recruited by American Special Forces people
and had very close ties to Americans. I gather anyway, sometimes did not get along with
ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam). Did you know about incidents like that?

AL: Oh yes.

LC: Can you remember any of those?

AL: Well, first of all, the relationship of the Vietnamese and Montagnards, you
know, I’m generalizing, there’s all kinds of exceptions.

LC: Sure, sure.

AL: But I remember taking Vietnamese colonels and majors up to Song Be and
they’d see these Montagnards and say (speaking in Vietnamese), “savage barbarian.”
They looked down with their nose at the Montagnards and the Montagnards resented this.
They might do some things that are primitive and that, but they weren’t barbarians and
savages at all. On the other hand, I met Montagnard or not Montagnard, but Vietnamese
who had great sympathy for them and did what they could for them. But by and large,
the Montagnards didn’t like the Vietnamese and the Vietnamese had no use for the
Montagnards or knew nothing about them.

LC: Right.
AL: And the average Vietnamese I talked to in the United States doesn’t know what the hell I’m talking about.

LC: Really?

AL: I said, “I worked with the people called (speaking in Vietnamese) Montagnards,” their name for them. They’d live up in the hills and the people in Saigon, for example, in Nha Trang, seldom if ever saw one. But if they did, they were kind of like a real curiosity. There are over a million Montagnards in Vietnam and not many Vietnamese knew much about them. But you know, in the old days, the people who became the Vietnamese came out of China.

LC: Right.

AL: And they settled along the coast and they came in contact with aborigines in the mountains. Some of the Montagnard tribes like the Jarai and the Bahnar are Polynesian people. They came from Polynesia in the early days and I guess they settled in the lowlands. But when the Chinese who became the Vietnamese came down, they moved them up into the hills. Another strain was coming byway from India, byway of Burma and Thailand. And these were Mon-Khmer people and they tend to be darker and curlier hair, but they’re a different strain altogether.

LC: The Mon, M-o-n, the Mon-Khmer.

AL: M-o-n-Khmer, collectively, they were Mon-Khmer.

LC: Yes.

AL: Because they go back I guess to Dravidians of India.

LC: Right.

AL: They’re dark people with curly hair, as opposed to Polynesian who have straight hair. And in the old days, there were tribal enmities and they fought one another and whatnot.

LC: Sure, sure.

AL: And there’s thirty-nine tribes in Vietnam I know of and some of them—occasionally I’d run across some people who could speak two languages, but not many more than that. There were people there called the Cham Bahnars that were a mixture of Bahnar and the Chams. And the Chams in the eighth century were the Viking raiders of the area. They raided through Vietnam and then settled there. And in some of the areas
where I worked, these temples came up out of the jungle, these Cham temples and I don’t think they have ever been investigated or back then by anybody. But [the Chams were] interesting people.

LC: Al, did you take a lot of photographs when you were over there of things like this?

AL: Well, what I took you have.

LC: Really? Too busy or—?

AL: I had a Super 8 video camera that mostly I took pictures of my feet and the inside of my briefcase. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: And every time I ran across something that really needed documented, the batteries were dead and I had a little cheap camera that I used. I wish I had taken more with a better camera, but I didn’t. What I took you have. And in some of those cases, there’s old slides and whatnot. I don’t think any of them are any good, but those are the pictures that I took.

LC: Well, I bet they are pretty good actually. But we’ll see as soon as we get them scanned.

AL: Yeah. And I forget what could be on that film, it could be—probably a lot of Montagnards and Vietnamese, but maybe family, I don’t know.

LC: Okay, okay.

AL: Whatever.

LC: Okay. Al, what point on your second time and your second tour, as it were, in Vietnam did you actually leave the country? When did you leave Vietnam?

AL: Okay, yeah. By this time, Vietnamization was taking over. And all the time I worked in Vietnam, I was never personally threatened. I was intimidated a time or two, but never to the point where if I was threatened by, say, the South Vietnamese soldiers or by anybody. But after Vietnamization, things began to break down. And I always had in the back of my mind, some Army base [where] I could spend the night or eat, have dinner with or something like that, and they’d began to disappear. And I was becoming more and more isolated. And I guess just before I left there, I was intimidated a couple of times. I was flying refugees—oh, at Pat Smith’s hospital. I’d make arrangements with—
Kontum is being attacked and later on Pleiku is attacked, but I didn’t know it was going to be attacked. Pat Smith’s hospital in Kontum had an area for the helicopters to land. I had a helicopter and I had a jeep in Kontum, but I forget the details now. I had this guy working for me that was going out in the villages rounding up family members and staying with a group and be ready to be picked up, flown to Pleiku. Which really didn’t help them because Pleiku came under attack and then they had to walk back to Kontum, I guess. And somebody stuck a gun in his ear and took his jeep or something like that, and so we lost the jeep. And I get a load of Montagnards to fly back to Pleiku and Vietnamese soldiers were getting panicky. There’s like anarchy and everything was breaking down and they’d threaten us with weapons and whatnot and fire shots off in the air and whatnot. And so the time that they tried to run me off the road and I guess robbed me and whatnot. But after Vietnamization, then they turned everything over to the Vietnamese and the only Americans that were over there were air support.

LC: Right.

AL: Things got—probably like in Iraq today. Everybody seemed to turn against us.

LC: And all the American military people had to be out after a certain time.

AL: Well, the American military was pulling out and the military left there were mostly the pilots and the people that could provide air support to the South Vietnamese Army, who was now supposed to be taking over, but it was pretty hairy. But John Vann stayed there until he got killed. And towards the end, it was John Vann himself who was directing the war. I mean, he was the one calling in the bombers and whatnot.

LC: Yeah.

AL: And I don’t know the details, I wasn’t there at that time, but John Vann was still the top man in Vietnam and was doing a general’s job. I think he got buried as a general, didn’t he?

LC: I believe he had full military honors.

AL: Well, he—

LC: And as a BG (brigadier general).

AL: Yeah.

LC: I think it was a brigadier.
AL: I was told I had the same rank as a full colonel and I was told and I know that whatever rank, we were called active duty, another rank we had and while you’re CORDS, it was still valid.

LC: Right.

AL: And your promotions meant something. But you can only receive a pension from one government service and you had to, if you wanted to take advantage of the State Department retirement, you had to forego your Air Force retirement and military benefits and whatnot. You’d make a little bit more money and I guess some people, maybe Vann did it, I don’t know. But I get along fine now. I’m not concerned about rank or any more money and I never applied for it. But I think technically because Vann was called a brigadier general, I can be called full colonel if I, you know, pushed it. But I never pursued it.

LC: So you wanted to, just to be clear, you wanted to stay with the military retirement benefits and all that rather than the State Department.

AL: Yeah, because I was told some people tried to do this and they eventually got it, but there for maybe a year or year and a half, they didn’t get anything.

LC: Really?

AL: And that would have really screwed things up. (Laughing)

LC: Yeah. (Laughing) Now, how long did you stay in Vietnam? Were you there in ’74, did you leave in ’73?

AL: No, I was home in ’73.

LC: Seventy-three, okay.

AL: Yeah. I went back to teaching school.

LC: Okay. Al, when you left you, I’m sure, had to say goodbye to people. Was that tough?

AL: It was, you know, especially with the Montagnards I knew and worked with. But saying goodbye to the bureaucracy is—

LC: Not so much.

AL: You know, there are a lot of people involved and everybody’s doing their own thing and close friendships were few and far between. I don’t remember even saying goodbye to Frenchy, though I guess I did.
LC: Was it tough to leave Vietnam under those difficult circumstances in 1973?
AL: Pardon?
LC: Was it tough to leave Vietnam itself and not know when you could come back or under what circumstances?
AL: No, I don’t remember any problems associated along those lines. I was happy to leave. My job, as I mentioned before, was kind of meaningless because I was just sitting in the office working with the HES report and other reports, listening to briefings and sometimes giving a briefing that I really didn’t think much of. (Laughing) And I was not un-happy to leave. In one of these books I say, “If things don’t get any better, I’m going to leave.” And I was happy to leave.
LC: And you came back to San Antonio then, is that right?
AL: Yes.
LC: And the family all came back as well, I assume.
AL: Yes.
LC: And then you began teaching again.
AL: Picked up where I left off.
LC: Okay.
AL: I taught Russian and world cultures at the high school level and I taught spoken Japanese at night.
LC: In the community—?
AL: At the junior college.
LC: At the junior college.
AL: And then because in 1975, the government of Russia and the United States came up with the idea of detente, let’s ease tensions a bit by cultural exchanges and I was one of the first picked. I went off to the Soviet Union to teach in the university.
LC: Where did you go exactly?
AL: I went to the city of—Americans call it Kiev, but it’s Kyiv in the Ukraine. And there I might a lot of really nice people that all were dedicated communists at that time. They all were suspicious of me. They knew I had been a former military man and they couldn’t envision anybody having two careers. They thought I was an agent provocateur.
LC: Yeah, I’m sure.

AL: And the administration didn’t want the three of us there. Didn’t want us there, but had to because it came down from on high. And all the teachers were told to be nice to the Americans, but don’t get too close to them because they’re always provocateurs. We were told, “Don’t get too close with any of the teachers because some of them have connections with the KGB.” So we were nice to one another and formal and aloof and whatnot. But over a period of time, none of us could keep it up because to keep an eye on us, there was a duty roster. [They escorted us] to the opera, the theatre, the ballet or whatnot. Margarita Petrovina will take so-and-so. So even at night, we were kept busy so they could keep their eyes on us.

LC: So you weren’t off having any kind of secret meetings.

AL: And so during these sojourns at night, you know, we interrelated and they’d meet us in front of the hotel where we stayed and we’d go off to the theatre and the ballet and they’d drop us off in front of the hotel with no chance for any complicated maneuvers.

LC: Right.

AL: And what was I going to say about the—

LC: That they were keeping a watch on you and—

AL: They kept a watch on us and anyway—

LC: That broke down the—

AL: Oh, what we really—where it broke down was in the teacher’s lounge. All the teachers would bring in goodies from home and we’d kind of picnic together in the teacher’s lounge. And we didn’t become friendly with all of them, but there were groups there that we got to know very well and there were four, especially. And I remember saying to them, “If you ever get a chance to come to the United States and get to New York, send me a telegram and I’ll send you a ticket to Texas and back.” Not knowing, you know, well, if I thought about it, I’d probably know, but I wasn’t expecting the Soviet Union to collapse. But when it collapsed, I started getting telegrams and three of these people were in New York. One of them was named Rimma Putilina who came over with their Ukrainian Children’s Choir and she was given two-week leave of absence and I had her down in San Antonio. And another one, a KGB man named Slava
Ponomorenko contacted me and he was one of our mentors. But his job was to report on us. But he did it with grace and whatnot and he was a sensible sort of guy. I invited him down. He’s living in the States now.

LC: Is he? Whereabouts, do you know?

AL: In Minnesota, Minneapolis. His daughter married an American and they both have good jobs. And then there was my now wife. Her name was Margarita Kudoshova Kalishnikova Belous and she was the oldest teacher of the group. But she was a lively little lady that intrigued me because she was so interested in everybody and everything and seemed to be so kind and whatnot. We never had any kind of a relationship other than I taught her classes and I knew her and she knew me. But after my wife died and after about a year, I was not designed by nature to be alone, and I was getting very lonely and I was getting morose.

LC: Yeah.

AL: And I bought that airplane, and then I cracked up. I think subconsciously I didn’t want to commit suicide, but I didn’t care if something happened. I mean, I was in that frame of mind.

LC: Yeah.

AL: But somebody told Margarita that my wife had died and she sent me a letter of consolation. Because by this time, you could send stuff back and forth.

LC: Sure.

AL: Before, we’d try it and it’d be confiscated and whatnot. And I began, “I wonder if that little lady I met would like to take a trip with me out to Colorado,” because I wanted to visit my old stomping ground and whatnot.

LC: Your old haunts.

AL: Yeah. And I wrote her a letter and I invited her over here. I know that she was a proper, old-fashioned lady and I said, “Well, as long as you’re staying in my house, you’ll have your own bedroom and bath. And I certainly won’t pose a threat to you and when we’re on the road, you’ll at least have your own bed.” And anyway, she talked it over with her family and they said, “Go for it, Granny.” (Laughing)

LC: And she was how old about this point?
AL: Well, about as old—two years younger than me and at that time, this is in—well, I’m eighty-four now, so I guess I was seventy-four or seventy-five.

LC: So she was in her early seventies?

AL: She’s a little gray haired, wrinkled old lady, yeah.

LC: (Laughing)

AL: And I forgot what she looked like and I wrote to her and I asked her to send me a photograph of herself.

LC: She’s gorgeous. (Laughing)

AL: And yeah, but she sent me a picture of her with three other old ladies and I didn’t know which one was her.

LC: Oh, really? You couldn’t pick her out.

AL: And I thought, “Gosh, she’s going to forget how old I am,” and so forth. Anyway, I was worried to death and she got here with no trouble at all. I got lost going to the airport in San Antonio. I went to the upper level and she was getting off on the lower level and we had trouble making contact and I lost the keys to the car and dropped them in the dark. Anyway, I finally—(Laughing)

LC: Were you nervous?

AL: Finally got—oh, I was nervous, yes. I even had a sign written in Russian, “Margarita, (speaking in Russian) [here I am.]” And I had my name in Cyrillic. And she spotted me finally and came over laughing because I made a mistake.

LC: (Laughing)

AL: But then I was apprehensive about, you know, “I wonder how long she’s going to be here and can we stand one another for a whole week?” Anyway, we started on our trip and suddenly I began to relax and I began to see America through her eyes.

LC: She had never been to the States before.

AL: I was the typical, spoiled American. I took a lot for granted and criticized when I shouldn’t, I guess. And all she saw was beauty. It makes me sad to think about it.

LC: It’s okay, Al. Do you want to continue?

AL: Yeah.

LC: Okay.
AL: She couldn’t get over the beautiful roads and the fact that militiaman didn’t stop us every so often. And no matter how far we drove, there’s always a decent place to stay and a decent place to sleep. You know a place with a swimming pool and a place to eat. And she said even the livestock over here are happy because in the Ukraine, they hobble their cows and their horses to keep them from wandering and the poor things aren’t happy.

LC: Of course.

AL: And here, she’d see cows under the trees and in the shade and chewing their cud and whatnot. And I began to appreciate what I didn’t before. And she’s had that effect on me. I don’t know what I would’ve done without her.

LC: She made you happy again.

AL: Yeah. So happy I’m crying.

LC: (Laughing) Al, let’s take a break.

AL: Yeah.
Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University, continuing the oral history interview with Lt. Col. Allan Lavelle. Today’s date is the 6th of May 2004 and again, both Al and I are here in the interview room in the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech. Good morning, Al.

Allan Lavelle: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Al, I want to ask you a couple of questions that refer to material that you have given us.

AL: Yes.

LC: First of all, in the questionnaires that you filled out, there was a question about animals, about wild animals. And you made a reference to a story about wild buffalo and in seeing them, the water buffalo. Do you remember that and what guys did?

AL: Yes, I do.

LC: Can you tell us anything about that?

AL: Well, you mention wild animals and this is interesting because Vietnam when I was there was—I had the mistaken impression like a lot of people that weren’t familiar with that area, that it was teeming with people, [overpopulated] and crowded and whatnot. But there’s vast open spaces in Vietnam and it was not overpopulated at all. And they have immense jungle areas with beautiful hardwoods of all kinds.

LC: Oh, yeah.

AL: Will soon be exploited by probably the Chinese or somebody. But the jungles are full of wild animals. There’s some areas like down around Ban Me Thuot and around Song Be, where there’s still herds of wild elephants. I’ve seen them many, many times.

LC: Really?

AL: And in some parts in it—there’s tigers that you’d have to be concerned about if you were unarmed and wandering around at night and they were hungry. Pheasants, huge deer like the American mule deer.

LC: Wow.
AL: And creatures of all kinds. And of course, the Montagnards lived by slash and burn farming, but by trapping small animals, too. There’s a lot of small animals of one kind or another. And of course, there’s reptiles. I never saw a live snake that was threatening me. I’ve seen them, but I wasn’t being threatened. But I’ve seen many of them dead and hanging, you know, around the village and whatnot; like cobras, I think. And there’s another snake called the boomslang I think it was called. It was a green viper that sometimes—I think the vipers, if not fatal, almost so. But Vietnam was teaming with wildlife. And of course, Vietnamese peasants, like peasants all over the Orient, used the water buffalo. And water buffalo were interesting creatures. I’ve been observing here, there, and everywhere. They vary in size and length of horns and this sort of thing from one area to another, like say from the Philippines to Vietnam. But they’re huge beasts that evidentially are very docile because the children in the villages will watch other water buffalo out grazing. They have a family buffalo that will follow the child around, kids lay on their backs, sleep on their back and whatnot. But yet when strangers come around who evidentially have a different smell, they become uneasy and I guess they could be very dangerous. And they were dangerous sometimes when a village was moved and the people couldn’t move all their water buffalo. They’d stay in the wild for a while and become feral. Once they’re feral, they’re almost as dangerous as the Cape buffalo of Africa. I mean, they could do tremendous damage. And sometimes to help the refugees with them, we [contacted] through the Army and people who were contacted, would round up American soldiers who had cowboy experience. I imagine a lot of them came from this area (West Texas).

LC: Probably.

AL: But I’ve been out a couple of times when the American cowboys were helping the villages round up their wild buffalo. And like I said, when they’re around strangers, they can be very formidable and very dangerous. I was always very careful. I’ve always been afraid of buffalo, but I spent many nights in the buffalo shed. Sometimes, that’s where I had to sleep along with the buffalo and the insects of all kinds. Not very often, but I’ve had that experience. But Vietnam, to answer your question, it was teeming with wildlife and I guess you consider fish wildlife, too.

LC: Sure.
AL: There are many areas of Vietnam that were bombed heavily by the B-52s.
LC: Yeah.
AL: Flying over those areas, even back then, you’d look down and you’d see a huge crater maybe fifty, sixty-five feet across filled with water. Just you know it looked like the surface of the moon, only these craters had water in them. I’ve learned later that those have become a real asset to the Vietnamese. But one time we had a project we introduced in several places of building a fish pond for the people, and then putting a bridge across the pond and putting outhouses on the bridge. And the people used the outhouses and the fish thrived on human feces and the people thrived by getting all that protein. And I’ve been told—I don’t know if it’s true or not, I haven’t been there to see it—but a lot of these bomb craters now are just that. They have bridges across them with outhouses in it. And they’re—fish cultures are very big business now.
LC: Right.
AL: And I hope that’s true. And I always thought it was a good idea.
LC: That’s very interesting, and you were helping to build some of those over bomb craters?
AL: I didn’t help build them myself.
LC: But you organized—
AL: But I was involved in the project and mentioned to people and eventually somebody built them and I saw them, yeah.
LC: Through the USAID was doing some of that?
AL: Probably, yeah. But, you know, there’s so many agencies over there. I was impressed by all of them, but especially the IVS, International Volunteer Service These were young idealistic kids who would come over and actually live out in villages and raise chickens with the people and do this sort of thing.
LC: Right.
AL: And they should always be, I think, praised for the fine work they did, but they were a pain in the neck to the ordinary bureaucrat because they were kind of single-minded. You know, “This is my village and these are my chickens. And I don’t need any advice from you,” this sort of thing. But I personally admired almost all of them
because they lived at ground level, they all spoke fluent Vietnamese and they were—
some of them knew a lot about agronomy and this sort of thing.

LC: Did they—?

AL: If you haven’t interviewed IVS people, you should.

LC: Yeah, I haven’t, and I was just thinking that we really ought to try to find
some of those people. Were they primarily Americans or were there other nationalities?

AL: They were—at one time, they were mostly Americans and there’s one you
can probably still contact. He lives in Connecticut. He was involved with the
Montagnards probably at the same time Benje was. His name was Tracy Atwood. He
speaks fluent Vietnamese. He’s got a wonderful sense of humor. The Montagnards and
the Vietnamese loved him. He had a very—and he was one of the few survivors present
at a village that was massively attacked. As a matter of fact, that National Geographic
magazine I gave to you, I think he’s mentioned in that article.

LC: Okay.

AL: But that would be a wonderful contact for you.

LC: Yeah.

AL: And he was so young even back then, that I’m sure he’s still young.

(Laughing) He’s probably fifty now.

LC: Now what area was he—was he in the Central Highlands?

AL: Well, yes. You know, Vann formed this organization called OHA, Office of
Highland Affairs.

LC: Yes.

AL: And we recruited all the people like this that we could. OHA had a very
short existence because the Vietnamese didn’t approve of it and things were coming
unglued at that time.

LC: Sure.

AL: It eventually dissolved. But Atwood was one of the first people we talked
about and I guess invited up there to join us.

LC: Did he accept?

AL: Tracy Atwood.

LC: Did he accept?
AL: Oh, of course. And there were a couple of others. I’ll think of their names.
LC: Sure.
AL: Between now and the time I go home.
LC: And you can always write them down and email them to me.
AL: I will, yeah.
LC: Yeah. Al, I want to ask you a little bit about if you had any R&R (rest and relaxation) time in-country. Did you have any—I know that you were leaving the country with relative frequency to go and see your family.
AL: Yes, I always went home, but when my family moved to Taiwan, I went home to Taipei.
LC: Did you visit, for example, China Beach? Did you ever go there?
AL: I know where it is.
LC: Okay.
AL: Up Da Nang.
LC: Yes.
AL: Yeah, that was a big recreational place for the GIs, and Nha Trang. And every time I went to places like that, I was amused at the cleverness of the thieves.
LC: The thieves?
AL: Yeah. I’d be on the beach at Nha Trang and all these secretaries from Saigon or whoever they were, were stretched out on the beach with their purse nearby and here were these Vietnamese with fly casting rods. (Laughing)
LC: Is that right? (Laughing)
AL: And they were good.
LC: Did they get away with it?
AL: Oh, of course.
LC: (Laughing)
AL: But they were clever.
LC: Did you ever go down to Con Son Island?
AL: Many times. I can tell you all about it.
LC: Do tell me about it, I’m very interested in that.
AL: Con Son is off the extreme tip of South Vietnam, and has a series of prisons down there. It was built by the French.

LC: Sure.

AL: Just like Devil’s Island in Central America. And it was full of prisoners and they used the old French system like they did in Devil’s Island where the prisoner would serve out his sentence and then he’d be freed in the area to support himself where he was worse off than ever.

LC: Right.

AL: And there were a series of little islands that were formed by obsidian, you know, volcanic rock that turned into sand, black sand that wouldn’t stick to your feet and there were palm trees and the China Sea out here. It was just like an island paradise. And a lot of these prisoners who were now free, but still had to stay in the area supported themselves by whittling attractive canes and you know, doing handicrafts of one kind or another. And very often, myself and other guys, we worked with CIA and NSA and whatnot, would make arrangements to fly down to Con Son on Sunday and just loll around on the beach. I personally have never liked sand and the sun and you know, being red headed and freckled, I hate sand in my crotch and whatnot. But down under the [palm trees], it was always cool under the trees and the sand didn’t stick to you and it was relaxing. And then these people, I guess Viet Cong prisoners and political prisoners and whatnot would come over and a lot of them were very nice guys. We’d buy, some guy I bought a lot of things from him, I’m sorry to say I gave them all away I guess—and not only that, they’ve originally found oil loft off that coast.

LC: Yeah.

AL: And it’s a hot [area] now. But that prison was just like, if you’ve ever heard of the one down in Central America where Rene Belbenoit escaped from and whatnot. That’s where the tiger cages were, where they put prisoners down in these cages and there were bars up at the top so the guard could shoot them if he had to, but keep an eye on him. It was a penal colony.

LC: Did you go into the old French prison building?

AL: I never went to it, no, I never went it. That was on another island.

LC: It was on another island?
AL: You know, it’s right there, but no, I never went to that.

LC: But you could see it?

AL: Yes, it was right there.

LC: How, I mean, can you give any sense of how big that old French prison must’ve been?

AL: It was a big prison.

LC: Big, big—

AL: Big French prison there.

LC: Yeah.

AL: And that’s another thing that’s impressive, the architecture of the French. You know, you go to a place like Da Nang or Nha Trang or Saigon, there’s beautiful villas with big thick walls and very attractive architecture and a lot of them looked like the Spanish architecture.

LC: Sure, yeah.

AL: And I was given one of these homes when I first went over there and I couldn’t believe it. It was a big, beautiful tile floors and all this sort of thing.

LC: Wow.

AL: Indoor plumbing, a couple of bathrooms, three bedrooms, came with two or three maids. But there’s a lot of beautiful buildings over there and there’s places like that that I’m talking about. If you wanted to make a film of, you know, taken back in the 1890s, you wouldn’t have to erect any props at all, it’s right there.

LC: The sets are already in place.

AL: Yeah, yeah.

LC: When you went down to Con Son, where did you stay? Was there a villa there for you to stay at or—?

AL: No, we just went down for the day. We’d fly down and come back the same day.

LC: Okay, okay. So—

AL: And when there was no place to stay, we just stayed on the, you know, on the—I stayed under the palms trees. Some of the other guys fished and whatnot.

LC: Right.
AL: And I think I told you about this rock ape I had at one time that somebody gave me. His name was Jo-Jo, Jr., I think. That I used to take with me on trips out in the boonies where I’d be all by myself. He was a lot of company, but he got so hard to manage and he just hated kids and nuns.

LC: Who was this, who hated—?

AL: The rock ape hated kids.

LC: Oh, and what was the ape’s name?

AL: Jo-Jo.

LC: Jo-Jo, Jr. Is that what you called him?

AL: Yeah, I had a leather collar (for him) and he was chained to the doorpost and he loved to go on trips with me and seemed to be interested. But if we went to a place where there was children and if there were nuns, he was like a mad Doberman Pinscher. He was dangerous, you know.

LC: He didn’t like the nuns.

AL: Yeah, and he didn’t like kids, either. But anyway, the reason I mentioned him, I eventually gave him away and I gave him to some GIs down on Con Son Island. There was another island that had a radar facility and these guys manned the radar facility. They were all young guys and they all had Vietnamese girlfriends.

LC: Oh, I’m sure.

AL: And all of them stayed out in the sun all day long, they were just as brown as dirt. (Laughing)

LC: And that’s where you left—

AL: And I would have killed for the life those guys were living.

LC: Yeah, yeah.

AL: But I gave Jo-Jo to them and he became too hard for them to handle and I think, I heard later that they shot him.

LC: They had to put him down.

AL: Yeah. But I had Jo-Jo with me—I made the big mistake one day, I was out with Jo-Jo. I had to drive through, I think it was the Americal Division. It was a big Army base. I’d come in one side and drive through the base and go out the other. And on this base, like many of them, you know, they had swimming pools; officer swimming
pool, NCO swimming pool. They had a cleaning place to get your laundry and cleaning and whatnot. It was just kind of like a small American town, but they also had a place where you could buy ice cream cones. And I made the mistake one day of stopping and buying Jo-Jo and myself an ice cream cone. (Laughing) And I of course enjoyed the ice cream cone, but he even more so. Well, a few weeks later, I was out in that same area and it was rather late in the day, and from this base, I had to drive down Highway 13, which after 5:30 was after curfew and this is where bad things happen.

LC: Yeah.

AL: And they often did. And I was in a hurry to get the hell out of there and get home and I went through the Army base and Jo-Jo became so excited and when I passed the ice cream cone place, he became absolutely vicious. (Makes ape sound)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: And he was powerful. If he wanted to tear my head off he probably could. But I was a little bit more afraid of Jo-Jo being displeased than I was of being shot on Highway 13. So I had to turn around and get Jo-Jo his ice cream cone. He said, (makes an ape sound.) He was like a spoiled kid.

LC: He liked the cold, the sweet—

AL: Yeah, well, I don’t know, but he liked the ice cream cone, you know, whatever it was. But he loved ice cream.

LC: So you had to take him through the drive-thru sort of and get him the ice cream.

AL: I’m sure that—I think he had the intelligence of probably a five-year old kid. He was a smart creature.

LC: How big was he?

AL: Oh, maybe about three-and-a-half feet in height.

LC: So he was a pretty big guy.

AL: Yeah.

LC: And how did you get him?

AL: I forgot how I got him. I think I got him from some GIs at Pleiku who had the same problem with him I always had. The reason I got him, formally I had a monkey, a little monkey, a Capuchin monkey that I just loved. And the monkey lived in a banana
tree outside where I was living. And he was cute and playful and he loved to travel with
me, but he insisted on sitting on my head. (Laughing) And he’d do nasty things on my
head from time to time and I thought, “Well, maybe this is good for it. Maybe I’ll get
some hair on my head.” I never did, but I eventually got rid of him because he became a
nuisance and some GI was telling me about Jo-Jo. In a moment of weakness, I said,
“Yeah, I’ll take him.” And I did enjoy him for a few weeks, but—

LC: But he was a—

AL: And I couldn’t, you know, I had people working for me like guards and
whatnot, and I couldn’t foist him off on them because that would be an imposition.

LC: Yeah.

AL: So I gave him to these people at Con Son. I didn’t want to divert from
Con Son, that I brought this story back to mind.

LC: No, that’s fine. It’s very interesting. And just to follow up, what was your
first monkey’s, the little monkey, what was his name? Did you give him a name?

AL: I think I called him Ti-Ti or To-To, something like that.

LC: Where did you get that?

AL: I got him from a missionary.

LC: Okay.

AL: Who got disgusted with him because he played with himself too much.

LC: Okay, so the missionary didn’t want that around.

AL: He was a nasty little monkey. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: When I said he did nasty things on my head, very often he—(Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: But, you know, the Montagnards loved him and it kind of helped break the
ice in some of these villages.

LC: I’m sure, I’m sure.

AL: But Jo-Jo didn’t break the—he scared everybody half to death.

LC: He was big.
AL: He was big and powerful and dangerous. Even sitting next to me chained, he had long arms. He could still do a lot of damage beside me or grab the wheel or the wrong woman. (Laughing)

LC: Al, one of the things that you’ve brought to the Vietnam Archive is a very beautifully made crossbow and I wonder how you came by that?

AL: Well, remember, there’s thirty-nine different Montagnard tribes over there and they all have their own way of doing things. Some of them did them better than others and some had better woods. I’ve seen a lot of cheap crossbows that I think were made deliberately to sell to GIs and whatnot. But the one I gave you was made from beautiful hardwoods and was actually, you know, I guess helped some family maintain itself. And the Montagnards even today, in later years, they had access to M-16s and other types of weapons. For small game hunting, they still use them and they’ve very effective at close range. They shoot a very flat trajectory with great force and they kill small game with them still. I don’t know about now, but back then they did. It was a very common item that you could see anywhere and barter for. And in some areas where the people were hard up for items, for cash, I used to have them make extra crossbows and I’d gather them up periodically and take them down to Pleiku or some place like that where I knew somebody in the PX and they would take these items and sell them. Not make a profit of any kind, just to help the program and give me the money and with that money, I would either give it to the Montagnards or buy items they wanted. Which reminds me, in some of these films, you’re going to see pictures that might look obscene to some people. But way back then, even these remote Montagnard villages had young men who worked for the CIDG (Civilian Irregular Defense Force), I guess, and they all had American friends who had access with the PX and they all had portable radios. And the most popular—the song that all the Montagnards were humming and singing was, “Hey Jude, don’t let me down, (humming.)” Anyway, very often at night after we’d all go down to the river and take a bath and come back and lay around the long house.

There’s different kinds of long houses; some are five family long houses, some are two, some are ten. They’re like big dormitories and they have sleeping racks. And I’d be on a sleeping rack and there’d be men, women, and children, you know, laying along side of me. It’s kind of a—before they go to sleep, it was kind of a time where people just chat
and talk and tell stories and get together and drink rice wine and whatnot. But I got a few
pictures. You’ll probably see them in some of these things or in the movies of me laying
around with these people rubbing my chest, my back, and whatnot, and they’re singing,
“Hey Jude.” And every time I hear that song, I’m back in one of those long houses. And
the Montagnards are like, you probably heard about the Eskimos. American troops made
contact with the Eskimos and they were amazed at how, you know, they could—they
never saw a watch before and pretty soon they’d take the watch apart and put it back
together. They’d do the same with outboard motors. We found out in recent years they
make superb pilots and mechanics. But people who can’t read and write or illiterate have
other capabilities.
LC: Sure.
AL: And the Montagnards are just like that. And I know, they love these Chinese
puzzles. And every time I went through Hong Kong, I bought and got as many puzzles
as I could because they just loved them. And I’d take them back and before I’d give
them to the Montagnards, you know, I’d try to do them and most of them I couldn’t do it.
I’d pass them out to the Montagnards and in a matter of seconds, they could do it. They
were good at that. And later on they were so sophisticated that (they would say), “Hey
Al, would you get me a radio? I want a four-band radio.” (Laughing)
LC: Really?
AL: Yeah.
LC: Wow.
AL: They catch on fast.
LC: Very smart, yes, very smart.
AL: And another thing that you have to get used to, I guess, if you worked like
some of us did. They can’t read or write, but they study your face like a roadmap. You
know, they’re looking in your eyes and up your nose and in your ears. And they can’t
read or write, but they have other attributes that we don’t have.
LC: That’s interesting.
AL: And yeah, they can read body language and—
LC: Was that common across the different minorities or just the Montagnards
would you say?
AL: Well, I noticed it especially with the Montagnards. You know, when you first—I was like a circus coming to town.

LC: I’m sure. (Laughing)

AL: I was twice as big as most of them and I have a lot of body hair. As a matter of fact, when I was young, I kind of looked like an orangutan in my bathing suit. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: And, you know, I know a hairy man very often disgusts a woman back in my own culture, but the Montagnards seemed to love hairy men.

LC: They thought you were very interesting.

AL: Yeah, and I remember one time I was in this village and the word went around about that hairy creature that had descended on them and there’s some blind woman that two people were leading in my direction. She just had her hands up like this (gesture). (Laughing) She finally reached me and started to touch me and then I couldn’t get away from her from the rest of the evening. She just loved it. But anyway, even people that had a modest amount of hair on their hands, their fingers, you know, the Montagnards would come up and look at it. But I had more than than I have now. Like I said, I was the circus coming to town. But they got used to me and I had no problems at all with it.

LC: Were the Montagnards at the time that you were up in that area in the Central Highlands in the late sixties and early seventies, were they becoming—could you see them becoming then more westernized? Could you begin to see them relying on radio and wanting to have a jeep or all that?

AL: Oh yeah, yeah. Of course, we had an impact on them. But I never—I think the Montagnards had a natural affinity for the French and I think they liked the Americans. They got along well with the Green Berets, but I never ran across Montagnards who said they liked the Vietnamese. And of course, there were exceptions.

LC: Sure.

AL: And I never ran across many Vietnamese who knew anything about the Montagnards or if they did, they didn’t like them.
LC: Were there ever to your remembrance, friendly-fire incidents between the
CIDG and the ARVN?
AL: Yes. (Laughing)
LC: Do you remember any of those?
AL: Yes. (Laughing)
LC: Can you tell me anything about them?
AL: Back to Song Be. I was up in Song Be one day and I went down to a see a
guy named Frank Young. He was the province advisor. Frank Young was an interesting
character himself. His dad was an American engineer and his mother was a Moro
princess, she really was. And this guy was a good briefer and John Vann loved him.
And he had a house down in the center of town made of scrap lumber and whatnot, a
two-story house. They had a briefing room and whatnot and sometimes when tourists,
like senators or congressmen would come to Vietnam, we would always take them up to
Song Be to meet Frank Young. And Frank Young would take your name and address
and brief people all day long.
LC: Really?
AL: But anyway, down below his house, there’s a concrete stall, it was a shower.
And I was up visiting Frank Young one day and a lot of small arms fire started and it got
closer and closer and a lot of us ran downstairs into the shower because it seemed to be
the only place that you were a little bit protected. And we were all huddled in the shower
and it kept getting worse and worse and louder and louder and I remember the name of
the guy, Jim Leach came in and he was a CIA guy. He said, “Al.” I had a Swedish K.
He said, “If anybody comes in that door, shoot them.” I said, “Okay.” But I was still in
the shower and people were running back and forth. In the shower, there’s a door here
(gesture) and a little alley and people running back and forth. What had happened was
the Vietnamese Rangers were in town and they think they’re the baddest of the bad. And
the CIDG were in town and they thought they were the baddest of the bad. And one
group or the other was dominating the whorehouses outside of town and so they got into
a shooting match and they used small arms and whatnot. And the next thing—I don’t
think they—yeah, they dropped a few mortars, too. But I had it all prepared if—oh, and
Jim Leach said, “Al, you know, the Rangers and some guys are Viet Cong sympathizers
and they’re going to use an occasion like this to come in and kill us,” or something like that.

LC: Right.

AL: And I was fully prepared and was scared to death that one of those guys would come in the door, but none of them did, thank God. But about that time, an American Ranger captain went out all by himself, got between them and stopped them.

LC: Really?

AL: And to me, that guy was a hero. Yeah.

LC: Do you know who he was?

AL: I don’t know his name, no I don’t. But this was all friendly-fire that came too close for comfort. And a few people got slightly wounded, that I knew got slightly wounded. There was a fight between the CIDG and the Rangers over the girls. This is life, you know, [in the raw.]

LC: That’s right, yeah. Were there other incidents or things that come to mind?

AL: During Tet, I was with the New Zealanders, New Zealand Medical in Bien Hoa when the firefights started and you know, bullets whizzing everywhere. We all had to get down on the floor and hope that we didn’t get hit. You know, it would happen every so often.

LC: Is that right? Yeah. Was this something you had to kind of be aware of the potential for?

AL: Yeah, and I even caused some of it myself. One time a guy named Charlie Brown and I were down in a laterite [pit] near Lai Thieu. Laterite is a clay that we used to—that we didn’t do it, but we introduced the concept and the people did it. You mix laterite with cement and you get a brick called Cinva-Ram. And they had little presses where the people would mix water and mud, clay together and sun-dry these bricks to build houses. And we were down in the laterite pit and we always had C4 plastic with us to, you know, blow up more laterite and this sort of thing. We were down in the laterite blowing up so they had more soil to handle.

LC: Right.
AL: Also, somebody had given Charlie Brown two captured VC weapons and a lot of ammunition that happened to be handy, you didn’t have to stop. And we started shooting the AK-47s down in the pit, you know, shooting at a can or something.

LC: For the hell of it?

AL: Just for the hell of it, yeah. And they make a different sound. The M-16 goes (imitating a gun noise) and they go (imitating a gun noise) and you can tell the difference. And there’s a local reaction team, the Vietnamese province team that assumed that we were VC over in that area and they tried to drop mortars on us or near us. And we were like, “Do they know?” (Laughing) Yeah, friendly-fire.

LC: How close did they get to the pits with the mortars?

AL: Oh, I’d say a hundred yards, something like that.

LC: It was enough to—

AL: They could walk them in closer if they knew exactly where we were.

LC: So they would just—

AL: They fired at the sound.

LC: They fired at the sound, huh.

AL: And yet strangely enough, I found a lot of Vietnamese working with the Americans and even a few Americans themselves that at one time, before they improved the, you know, hardened the breach or the bolt of the M-16, some of those guys carried AK-47s, too.

LC: Yeah, I’ve heard that, too.

AL: Yeah.

LC: Because they felt it was more reliable.

AL: Yeah. It was at one time. I think after they casehardened the bolt of the M-16, it solved that jamming problem. Before that, a few guys had AK-47s.

LC: You know, Al, you were mentioning that the Beatles song, “Hey Jude” and that it kind of brought things back, is there other music that makes you think of your time over there?

AL: Yeah, my own mandolin. When I lived at Plei Jut, I mean, in Pleiku, Plei Jut was a Montagnard village nearby and a lot of the Montagnards worked in the Ranger camp and so I had more contact with them than some of the others. And sometimes I’d
be sitting around playing my mandolin just to entertain myself and they just loved that sound. And the only musical instruments I saw the Montagnards having back then was every single village had a set of gongs. And every month they have parties for the dead where everybody goes out to the cemetery and drinks rice wine and beat the gongs and get drunk. And even the livestock, like the dogs and the pigs get drunk and the kids, too. This rice wine is made out of a mash, which is activated by pouring in water and you can drink it and drink it till it gets weaker and weaker and then you throw away the mash and you get some more mash. But the dogs and the pigs would eat this mash. (Laughing)

LC: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

AL: And the kids would drink the rice wine given half a chance, and little kids smoked cigars and cigarettes, too, in some areas at some times. But there’s not many inhibitions over there. What the animals do, the kids do, too. When there’s a party, the pigs and dogs are just as interested as anybody else. And one group over there, I think the people of Plei Jut told me that if I were to get killed in Vietnam, that they would take my body and cut it up and give it to nine different groups so every month I would have nine parties. And I actually wrote home, I wish I could find that letter. I wrote home to my wife telling her that, “If I get killed, don’t go through the ridiculous routine of trying to get my body.” I said, “I can be buried here and have nine parties a month and I doubt if I’d have any back home.”

LC: Yeah, that sounds like a better deal. (Laughing)

AL: And she agreed and she promised me.

LC: Really?

AL: Yeah.

LC: Do you still have some of the letters that you wrote back to her?

AL: I probably do, but I have no idea where they would be or if I could ever find them. But yeah, this interview brings back a lot of memories I haven’t thought of for years.

LC: That nine party thing sounds pretty good to me. (Laughing)

AL: Yeah. Oh, and one of these—in that film you’re going to see, you’ll see—we’re having a party for this guy who works for me, a Montagnard and he wasn’t working for me when this accident happened. He was setting a mine. There was a—
well, he was setting a mine in the road and it went off and it blew off both his hands and
blew off his lips. Can you imagine that?

LC: No.

AL: And the poor guy was having an awful time, you know, he just couldn’t do
anything. But I took him down to the Canadian Rehab Center in Qui Nhon and they got
him fixed up with an artificial—you’ll see it in the movie. You’ll see it in the movie.
And you’ll see us drinking some of that rice wine and then you’ll see a disgusting scene
with this man who is vomiting. And I’ll tell you what the story is on that. We had this
bureaucrat come from Saigon who wanted to go out and see the real thing. And we took
him out to a Montagnard village where they were having one of these parties and he
drank, I think, two cups of that rice wine. And the way they do it, they have these clay
jars and they’ll take a stick and they’ll peel the bark off so that piece of bark is hanging
down like that and then put it over the neck of the jar and when you drink, you have to
drink until that stick is exposed. By that time, you’ve had, you know, a quart, to be very
potent, liquor.

LC: Yeah.

AL: And not only that, but (laughing) some of these people at a party, especially
if they like you, say they’ll get a chicken and they’re not too fussy about the way—they’ll
throw it in the fire and it gets burnt like a piece of coal. And eventually when it cools
down a bit, they’ll put it apart and start eating. But they’ll masticate it for you and then
come over like they’re going to kiss you and—

LC: Hand it over to you.

AL: You get your chicken already chewed. (Laughing)

LC: Now is this just a custom that they have?

AL: Some of them, yeah.

LC: Not everybody.

AL: Some of the guys who worked with Montagnards, they’ve had this
experience, maybe not. But this poor guy you’ll see in the movie, throwing up, had gone
through that routine and he couldn’t walk. He was throwing up and we had to take him
back to Pleiku or wherever it was and he was sick for—they had to air evacuate him back
to Saigon. (Laughing)
LC: He probably did come up to—
AL: He spent a couple of hours doing what we did day after day, it seemed to me.
LC: Yeah. (Laughing) He probably didn’t come back up again for a while.
AL: He saw enough of the life in the boonies, I guess.
LC: Now that the man that you spoke about earlier who worked for you who had this horrendous injury—
AL: Actually, he didn’t work for me, he was a Montagnard that, you know, when I’d sometimes bring a load of wheat or something or whatever up there, he’d be there to help unload it and distribute it and whatnot. And he wasn’t on my payroll. He was a guy that I knew and he helped me once in a while.
LC: And he had this terrible injury. Do you know what happened to him?
AL: No, I don’t.
LC: He went to the Canadian Rehab Center?
AL: In Qui Nhon, yeah.
LC: Can you tell me about that center? Did you ever go there and—?
AL: Oh, I took many people to them and I praise them highly. Everybody I took down there, they helped them as much as they could.
LC: Were these Canadian?
AL: They were Canadians and they had a workshop there where they made prosthetic devices, you know, artificial limbs of all kinds and whatnot. I even took a Montagnard girl I knew named Plaih. She had a young daughter named Hoani that had a clubbed foot. I even took her down there and they made corrective shoes for her, which helped somewhat and promised that if she grew and her foot grew, why they would keep changing it. But I took several people down there for arms and legs and whatnot. And you see a lot of tragic things in there.
LC: Oh, yeah.
AL: I saw one Montagnard man that his son got his spine broken. The kid was totally paralyzed from some kind of explosion and the father stayed with him month after month after month while they were doing their best to help him. But the people down there never turned me down when I brought in a patient and they had a lot of patients that they were taking care of themselves.
LC: Was it a private venture by some Canadian physicians?
AL: Probably, I just knew there was a Canadian Rehab Center and a lot of great Canadians down there.
LC: Okay. Do you remember any of their names Al?
AL: No, I wish I did.
LC: Were there men and women working there?
AL: Yes.
LC: Really?
AL: Yes.
LC: Did they have like a surgery there that—?
AL: Oh, I’m sure they did.
LC: As well as wards?
AL: Yeah, yeah.
LC: Wow.
AL: Yeah, they did great work.
LC: Can you remember where it was located with, say, regard to Qui Nhon?
AL: It was in Qui Nhon down on the beach because I remember sometimes while waiting—I’d fly somebody down and they’d be tending to them, I’d go outside and sit under a palm tree on the beach and watch some of the kids climbing the palm trees and you know, playing. It was down near the beach on the east side of Qui Nhon.
LC: Okay, okay. And how would you get in and out of a place like that? Did you have your own helicopter or a helicopter that you were using?
AL: I had available airplane and helicopters any time I needed it.
LC: Okay.
AL: And I’d have somebody pick me up in a Montagnard village and fly us down to Qui Nhon. We could land right nearby this center I’m talking about.
LC: That’s amazing.
AL: They’d take off and do somebody else during the day, come back and pick us up and fly us back at the time I would ask for them.
LC: Yeah, wow. And you were able to help a number of people that way, I suppose.
AL: Yeah.
LC: How much incidence of let’s say what we now think of as birth defects, things like clubbed feet and misshapen—
AL: In some villages, it was tragic. I guess harelip was an iodine deficiency. There was some villages I had been where all the kids had cleft pallets.
LC: Really?
AL: And split lips and a lot of those were helped by various organizations, too. And I’ve been at a lot of villages where I’d see kids have a horrible, horrible skin disease called scabies.
LC: Right.
AL: Scabies can be cured with soap, just soap.
LC: Yeah. I’ve heard other physicians say this.
AL: And I’d go in a lot of villages where the kids are blonde and red headed and it’s not because they had Caucasian fathers, but it’s a vitamin deficiency. But when you go out in any of these remote villages where there’s no sanitation, no doctors, no roads everything’s fetid, raining and molding and whatnot, you see, well, you see what I guess is cancer of the face and cancer of the throat and leprosy. A leprosarium was there in Qui Nhon, too, I think.
LC: That’s right.
AL: And it was a beautiful place down on the beach I remember, and big substantial buildings.
LC: Did you visit there?
AL: Many times.
LC: That leprosarium?
AL: And mostly I visited with a group of friends down on the beach that I used to go swimming with and the poor lepers would come over and beg and whatnot.
LC: Did you meet any of the personnel or ever see them that were working at that?
AL: I saw them, but I never interrelated with them. I think they’re mostly nuns.
LC: Yes.
AL: There were a lot of nuns over there. They man the orphanages and whatnot, and that’s why I say that rock ape I had came in contact with a lot of nuns like that and I just had to either not go that day or leave him at home.

LC: Right.

AL: Because he had a thing against nuns. (Laughing) He thought they were big penguins or something. And they were the nicest, sweetest people, really. And the most saintly person I ever knew in my life was a sweet little Vietnamese nun. I thought to myself, “If there’s a God and if there’s saints, this is one of them.” She used to come in my office in Qui Nhon and ask for a little help, one orphanage or another. Every time she showed up—(gets emotional)

LC: It’s okay. Why don’t we take a break for a minute?

AL: She lived in Kontum and I think I met her father and mother from time to time. But Kontum was shortly overrun after that and I often wonder what happened to her. But she was sweet, [kind, saintly.]

LC: Any idea what order she was in?

AL: No, I wish I did. The Buddhists used to come into my office all the time and they always had these little Buddhists with them. (Laughing) And I’ll never forget, here I am talking to the mother Buddhist, I guess, or the head Buddhist and she couldn’t see what was going on and one of the little Buddhists was pinching my rear end. (Laughing)

LC: Pinched you on your rear end? (Laughing)

AL: Yeah. (Laughing)

LC: Did you a laugh, or what did you do?

AL: Oh, I thought it was so funny, yeah. He was just being coy and cute.

LC: Right.

AL: You know, just a mischievous little boy.

LC: (Laughing)

AL: Not only that, I had a lot of Vietnamese working that office; there must’ve been fifty or sixty of them. And they made for me an ao dai, an old Vietnamese man’s costume. And we’d have parties occasionally and they always insisted that I dress up like a Vietnamese and I did. (Laughing) I wish I had that.

LC: Yeah, I wish you did, too.
AL: There’s pictures of it in here somewhere.
LC: Well, that’s good. At least we have some photographs of that. Al, on the other end of things with so many Vietnamese in and out of your office, did you ever have security concerns about that some of them may have been sympathizers passing information?
AL: I could care less. Half the people I worked with were either active VC or—we set up camps for the Hoi Chans.
LC: Yes.
AL: They were called the Chieu Hoi Program. Chieu Hoi means rallier and when a man becomes a Hoi Chan, that means he’s rallied to the side of the government with little, just normal education and training, why he’d be loyal to the government from then on somewhere and somewhere. But most of them were I think until the end, I guess. But no, I personally, until after Vietnamization, never felt threatened by anybody. Sometimes people would be a little bit cold, but that’s before they got to know me and whatnot. I seemed to be well accepted and I got along fine with everybody. And I think I mentioned a number of times, I’ve worked with a lot of Orientals, like say the Koreans and the Japanese and whatnot, and I just liked the Vietnamese very much. The women, of course, are beautiful for the most part, dainty, petite and tough as steel. And I liked the men. I had a lot of many good Vietnamese friends. A lot of them were poets and, you know, deep thinkers.
LC: Sure.
AL: And out in the villages, I just loved the kids and they loved me. And I could get a feel for the general attitude just between—if you go in a village where the kids start getting near you and the parents say, “Come back, come back, come back.” And come out and grab their kids and pull them in the house, you know, you better get out of there. But if you’re in a place like where the kids all gather around you and the mothers seem relaxed and whatnot, you feel reasonably certain that nobody’s going to do any harm to you, at least when all the kids are around you.
LC: Right.
AL: And I was always happy when kids gathered around me because I like kids. But I was kind of comfortable because they were kind of shielding me from anybody
doing something. But I guess I had thoughts like that initially, but after I got to know the people and they knew me, I felt completely at ease everywhere. And even after Vietnamization, I’d go into areas where I was known and I didn’t have any great fears. But when I go into or just be around Vietnamese who never saw me before in a Vietnamese town, soldiers especially, at that time, they were using their guns to impose their will upon everybody.

LC: That’s right.

AL: Including me.

LC: Al, I want to ask you a couple of big, sort of big-picture questions and sometimes these kind of questions will bring out stories rather than an actual answer, which is fine. Should the United States have been in Vietnam in the way that we were? Should the United States have been committed to Vietnam, South Vietnam in the way that we were?

AL: Well, I was like everybody else at the time. Before I went to Vietnam, I hardly knew it existed. You know, I had heard about it, I knew the French were there and they were defeated in 1954. But I do vividly remember the French pleading with the United States to help us in Vietnam.

LC: Yes.

AL: And I remember some of the debates in which it was said by almost everybody, “We have no interest in Southeast Asia, getting bogged down in a land war in Southeast Asia was foolish and so forth and so on.” Then, you know, over a period of time, we found ourselves in Vietnam. And by that time, I was more curious than anything else. I wasn’t making any big decisions in addition to wanting to make more money. I was interested in seeing for myself just what this was all about.

LC: Right.

AL: But I can say that almost from the time I arrived in Vietnam, I began to have my doubts about a lot of things. I never became anti-war. I wasn’t—I guess by this time, Americans were getting a bit polarized; they’re even more so now. But back in those days, you could weigh both sides and nobody would get angry. And I remember just debating within my own mind if nothing else, “Should we be here? What’re we doing here?” And it wasn’t long after that that I decided, “What in the hell are we doing here?”
And even after I was there a number of years, I tried to reappraise what we had done
there. And I realized that working with refugees as I did, seeing the misery caused by
war and then realizing that what they spent on refugees in one year is what they spent on
the shooting war for half a day. And I saw the rich Vietnamese getting richer and the
poor getting poorer and dispossessed and whatnot. And I saw the big construction
companies that came over there making a lot of money. And one thing the construction
companies did I thought was wonderful, they built a good highway north to south and
east to west, and Cam Ranh Bay and we spent a lot of time and money and effort over
there. And eventually we’re out of there and we gained nothing except spent a lot of
money and fifty-thousand Americans got killed and God knows how many North
Vietnamese and VC. Their whole society was torn asunder. And I was sorry, looking
back, I’m sorry that the Vietnam War occurred. I’ve done a lot of research and studied
how it came about and that’s an interesting story, too, and I know you know. But there’s
a lot of people who profited from it and more and more people who suffered for it. So,
looking at it in the broad perspective, I don’t think it was worth the lives and the money
we put in it. I’m sorry we disrupted the lives of so many people and I guess that’s about
all I can say about it. But I was never critical, except within my own mind, of the people.
I realized that everybody made mistakes. I made mistakes. Komer didn’t know much
about Vietnam. McNamara, his people up in—I figure the higher the person was, the
higher in the bureaucracy hierarchy, the less he knew about what was going on. And if
you read some of my letters, I say, “Well, the great man McNamara is coming over and
why can’t he understand blah, blah, blah.” But one of my private thoughts written at the
time are in some of these things I gave you. But to answer your question briefly, I’d say
I’m sorry Vietnam happened. And of course, there’s a reason it happened.

LC: Sure.

AL: But John Foster Dulles and his brother, Allen are two people we could blame
and of course, our fear of communism, which was a real fear at the time because the
communists were atheistic and aggressive and whatnot. And we believed that if Vietnam
fell, there goes Southeast Asia, and I don’t think that necessarily would’ve been true.
Plus the fact that one time Ho Chi Minh himself was an ardent supporter of democracy.
If you read his constitution, it’s word for word, like the one we use. But we made so
many mistakes that eventually, well we, I guess we didn’t gain the objective we thought we would. And that’s the same thing I worry about in Iraq today. 

LC: Tell me a little bit about that. What do you think about that?

AL: I think we went in a little bit prematurely. Now I like George Bush and he’s done much better than I thought he ever would and people like a decisive kind of guy, especially when it comes to military action. But I think he should’ve tried to build a coalition and use diplomacy far more than he did and at which he’s trying to do now. I think what’s happened recently with the prisoners in Iraqi prison is doing untold damage to the whole effort and if things go bad over there—and they’re bad enough as it is—I’m afraid George Bush is going to find himself in trouble. I hope that in June, when they turn the government over to whomsoever or I don’t know who they’re going to turn over to, that the moderates who are sitting on the fence now will take matters in their own hands and salvage the situation. But if Fallujah goes from bad to worse and the war itself kills more and more soldiers and Bush may lose, I don’t know.

LC: Do you have, and again, this is just whether you want to say or not, any opinion on candidate (Sen. John) Kerry who did serve in Vietnam and has made great public showing of his veteran status, but who also, he took public positions against the war when he came back?

AL: Well, the whole argument is pro and con and I think right now, maybe tonight or this week, there’s going to be a big debate about this. But I would say this about that matter. Let’s forget Kerry served in Vietnam. According to the records, he served honorably and George Bush was in the National Guard and he served honorably in the National Guard, but that’s past. Iraq is now.

LC: Correct, correct.

AL: Let’s talk about Iraq and forget this nonsense. And I never was one to believe that military service, especially fit you better for public service. You know, that’s nonsense. We’ve had generals who’ve made poor presidents and we’ve had—like (Ulysses S.) Grant, for example. We’ve had good presidents who never served a day in the military like (Franklin D.) Roosevelt. And instead of dwelling on the past in this election time, I think we should dwell on the present and the future. That’s all I have to say about that. (Laughing)
Okay, and we certainly have enough problems to face, both domestically and overseas. Al, let’s talk about something else for a little bit.

Al: All right.

LC: Let’s talk about your wife.

Al: Oh, okay.

LC: Now, as you mentioned yesterday, Grace died in the 1990s.

Al: Ninety-seven, right.

LC: And a woman that you had met when you were in the Soviet Union teaching in the 1970s and you had a correspondence.

Al: Yes.

LC: And at some stage later on, you asked her if she would like to come over. And can you first of all say again her full name in Russian?

Al: Yes, I can. Her name was Margarita Kaleshnikova Kudoshova [Tyagun] Belous.

LC: And she goes by, now that she’s here and she’s married to you, she goes by Margarita.

Al: Rita.

LC: Okay, Rita. She goes by Rita. Okay, now we’re getting down to it.

Al: No, Margarita [or Rita].

LC: Margarita, okay. And tell me about Margarita’s background, if you will. Where she was born and the circumstances surrounding her family’s life.

Al: She was—yes. Margarita was born in a little village called Izhevsk and it’s in the Urals and it’s near the Oka River. And even today, it’s probably a rather primitive village. She was born probably a child of peasants. Her father and her father’s five brothers were early Bolsheviks.

LC: How early?

Al: Prior to World War II.

LC: Okay.

Al: And they’re very idealistic and wanted to change things in that part of the world. The five brothers were killed in World War II, but her father, though wounded, survived.
LC: Any idea where they were killed or under what circumstances? Have you learned any of that?

AL: They were just killed fighting the Germans in the East.

LC: Okay.

AL: But anyway, because her father was a wounded war veteran, he was given the opportunity to become educated.

LC: Okay.

AL: And he was sent to school and while he was sent to school—he was married by this time and had two children—he was given a stipend to support the family and they lived in barracks in Leningrad. It was rather grim, a rather grim existence. It was cold in the winter and hot in the summer.

LC: I’m sure.

AL: There was a bathroom of sorts at the end of the hallway used by everybody. But at least it was shelter and her daddy was getting an education. But the thing was, the children went to schools in Leningrad, which at that time had the finest [teachers] in the world, where she learned theatre, ballet, literature, and this. She said, “That’s where I became a literate person.” I think she said. And it’s true. She knows more about English and American literature than anybody I know.

LC: Is that what they were reading when she was growing up?

AL: Oh, yes, yes.

LC: They were reading Western literature?

AL: Yes. They had quite an academic program. But anyway, they didn’t have much to eat, but they had a good education and whatnot. Well, by the time she was a teenager, World War II had come along and all—and don’t forget, Russia lost twenty-four million men, which meant there were a lot of widows and orphans. And teenagers during this period of time were pressed into some kind of government service and Margarita and a few other teenagers were put in charge of orphans. And they’re allowed—she’s told me and it’s true, it was a liter of bread a week or something like that. She was on a starvation diet and even if food came along donated by peasants who sometimes went to the orphanage, they were not allowed to eat any of the food for the kids and whatnot. And at the same time, they had duties to the government when called
upon to go out and dig tank traps and whatnot in the cold, frigid soil with a pick and a
shovel, no gloves, no, you know, inadequately dressed. If you didn’t show up on time,
you went to jail and this sort of thing, even if you were a teenager. Anyway, she spent a
lot of time digging tank traps while taking care of kids and this sort of thing. She says
that this is one reason today she’s so slightly built because she was just malnourished and
maybe she was, I don’t know. But she tells me a lot about these days and of course, that
diary she has I guess will tell more. I talked to her last night and she said, “I’m not
giving [up my diary.]”

LC: She said no way, huh?
AL: Yeah, but I’ll get it.
LC: Okay. (Laughing) Okay, Al. I hope that you do it.
AL: Anyway, she became a mature young woman and got a chance to become a
communist. And being a communist wasn’t just automatic; you had to earn it.
LC: That’s right.
AL: And really, these people were idealistic. They thought (Josef) Stalin was a
great man, their godfather, father, something like that, and that they were making for
themselves and others a better world. And she went through the Konsomol program.
LC: Konsomol.
AL: Yeah, it’s kind of like super—well they live in—it’s like going to summer
camp or the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts where they have different programs; athletic
program, academic programs and whatnot. And [she] was a good Konsomol member and
she got nominated to go to college and she wanted to be a chemist. Especially, in a
communist society, you don’t decide what you’re going to do; you do what the
government thinks you should do. They needed more linguists. They said, “You’re
going to become a linguist.” And so she got a chance to go to college and she graduated
from—she went to Gorky first and then she went to Taras Shevchenko in Kiev and
graduated. In the mean time, she met a young Ukrainian soldier back from the war who
had been badly wounded and because he was a war veteran, he was given the chance to
select any place in the Soviet Union to live (he could live) in any apartment he could find.
LC: Anywhere in the Soviet Union?
AL: Anywhere, yeah. I didn’t know that they were that liberal, but they were.
LC: That’s interesting.
AL: And he picked Kiev for one reason or another and the only apartment they could find was half bombed out and half the roof gone, the windows gone and whatnot. But then they started out their married life like that. And the other day, not too long ago, we went to a wedding and it was a young couple. It was magnificent, you know, food, dancing and they had parties for the parents and they’d send you a gift list of all the things that they, kind of like a piggy list. Just everything we want, buy it for us.
LC: Wow, yeah.
AL: And she said when she got married, they wouldn’t give her time off from work. She had to work late at night and rushed to a hair dresser nearby to get her hair fixed and go home and prepare the dinner and then they’ll get married, or something like that and had to be back at work the next day. It was a tough life. But she loved her job later on as a professor at the University of Kiev and that’s where I met her in 1975. Now, you know, it’s not that we ever had a romance of any sort.
LC: Right.
AL: It’s just that Margarita, I got to know her in the teacher’s lounge where the teachers would bring in snacks from home and we’d all kind of interrelate. And I met her and a lot of other people on a more informal basis. And she was the oldest teacher there at the time and the thing that impressed me about her is she’s so energetic and so interested in everything. But there was no romantic interest at all. Anyway, years, and this was 1975, my wife died in ’97, and after about a year—oh, Margarita did write me; a few letters got through. Back before the Soviet Union collapsed, people would send letters and they’d be confiscated.
LC: Right.
AL: But she got one or two letters through asking me about my family and my daily life and the United States. She had a deep interest in the United States. I got in the habit of, I like to write letters, so I wrote her letters about my life and times, thinking that she was interested in me and my family. And she was, but she was using my letters as teaching aids in her class.
LC: Oh, really?
AL: Yeah, this is the way Americans express themselves and whatnot, which was fine, but I was a little disappointed when I heard that. But anyway, after my wife died, I had a very good marriage of fifty-four years and I became rather morose, as I told you yesterday.

LC: Yeah.

AL: As a matter of fact, I think I was depressed.

LC: It sounds like it.

AL: And one of these days, somebody—it was strange how it came about. My wife had a niece that lived in Farmington, New Mexico, who said they had a Russian boy going to their school. And it turned out this Russian boy was Margarita’s grandson who won a scholarship to the United States. He spent his last year, her other grandson won a scholarship, too. Anyway, he was out in New Mexico and one day my niece and her mother were in HEB (supermarket) shopping and they heard this boy that had a little accent. And they went over and started talking with him and they said, “Where are you from?” And he says, “Kiev.” They didn’t know where that was. The Ukraine, they didn’t know where that was. He said, “Russia.” “Oh. I have an uncle that worked in Russia.” “Is that right?” And then he said, “What’s his name?” And she said, “Lavelle.” He said, “My granny knows him.” And then my niece told him that my wife had died and he wrote a letter to his grandmother telling her.

LC: That’s how she found out.

AL: That’s how she found out.

LC: That’s so strange.

AL: And then she sent me a letter of condolence.

LC: That’s so strange.

AL: Yeah, she sent me—yeah, that’s the reason why we say its fate.

LC: Yeah, yeah.

AL: Anyway, she sent me a letter of condolence and in a moment of I guess loneliness, I began wondering, “I wonder if that little old lady,”—the Soviet Union had collapsed and her husband had died fourteen years before, I knew that.

LC: Sure.
“I wonder if that little old lady would come over here and go out to Colorado with me.” And I wrote and asked her. Of course, she was interested but a little bit timid and afraid. And although she’s retired, she still had to work to stay alive.

AL: But I told her I’d pay for the trip over here and the trip back and she didn’t have to worry about anything while she was here and I’d respect her age and that I was no threat and that she’d always have her own bedroom and bath and this sort of thing. And she had trouble getting a visa, but finally got the visa and arrived. And then I became apprehensive because I’d forgotten what she looked like. (Laughing) I wondered if she could stand me, you know, for a two-week trip up to Colorado, or a two day trip to Colorado. (Laughing)

AL: But she arrived and we went on a trip and I found out that I enjoyed traveling with her because she’s so interested in everything. And the hours would pass very rapidly. But to make a long story short, I took her not only all through Colorado, but I took her out to the West Coast. My sister lives in La Jolla and we had parties and whatnot for her there. And then another sister’s son was getting married down in Miami and I took her down to Miami. I had a friend in Pennsylvania that lent me his two-engine plane and we flew all over the West Coast.

AL: Anyway, I showed her the whole United States. Pretty soon it was time for her to go home and initially I asked her, “How long is your visa for?” “Like six months.” “Six months, gosh. But you go home right after the trip or something.” But she was getting ready to go home and I said, “Margarita, why go home?” And I said, “Your country’s collapsed.” And she said, “Well, I have to help my son and grandson.” And I said, “Well, how can you help them? You told me your pension—” You know, at one time, she was paid 120 rubles a month, which was adequate for paying for the apartment and food and whatnot. Now they get like twenty dollars a month. And they had none of the protections of communism and it’s a tough, tough, brutal home. I said, “I’ll tell you
what. You stay here because I’ve enjoyed being here and I’ve been happy while you’re here. Why don’t you just stay?” And she began to think, “Well, I miss my family.” And I said, “I don’t want you to be estranged from your family. As long as we are married and I can afford it, you can go home every year for as long as you want. Not only that, I’ll share with you the same as I would have with Grace. I’ll share what I have with you and that way you can help your family.” This was the big selling point. (Laughing)

LC: Well, sure. You were very generous with her.

AL: Well, we’re both mature people. We knew it was no young love affair.

LC: Right.

AL: But she was useful to me and I was useful to her. And I said, “I’m more than happy to give you your share of whatever it is I have and you can do what you want for your family.” And so this meant a lot to her. And I’ve done that, I’ve helped her son buy an apartment and I helped her daughter-in-law, whose family lives out in the western Ukraine. They have a beautiful farm but they have to work themselves to death. They don’t have machinery, and you know when you’re farming with a pitchfork and a spade, you do so much. They built their own home and built their own furniture. They never have any ready cash and every year when Margarita goes home, I insist she give her daughter-in-law a thousand dollars for her family in the Ukraine. Which a thousand dollars is like twenty thousand dollars if somebody had it. It goes a long way.

LC: Oh, I’m sure. It can change everything I’m sure.

AL: They can’t understand, you know, why I would—

LC: Why would you do that, yeah.

AL: Yeah, but anyway, and I help her two sons as their getting started. Well, we sent them both through college for a couple of years and I’m subsidizing one now as he’s looking for a new job in Moscow, but to me, it’s worth it. To me, what little money I have is now going a long way. I don’t forget my own kids either. They need help from time to time, but when her kids need help, I give them help, too. And so it’s been a very good relationship and I often say I’ve been very lucky because I’ve had two wonderful women for wives. Grace was the best and Margarita is in her own way, is just a fine wife. And my kids like her, too.
LC: And that’s important, too.
AL: Yeah.
LC: I’m sure they do, they probably can see a very good effect.
AL: She might had been a godless atheistic communist at one time, I don’t think she ever was really, but she was—
LC: Well, um, she wasn’t godless. We know that, right?
AL: No. Oh, she’s very spiritual.
LC: And she—
AL: She’s far more spiritual than I am.
LC: She took a big risk at one point, too, in the Soviet Union.
AL: She had herself baptized a Christian and if the authorities found out about it, she would’ve lost her job and her apartment or her husband might’ve lost his job, too, I don’t know.
LC: When did that happen, do you have any idea?
AL: About in ’75.
LC: Really?
AL: Yeah. And even in 1975, in private conversation with Margarita and other people, I’d be told things like this, “You know Al, I don’t know what you think of our country, but you know, compared to what it was at one time, for us, it’s better. My parents were peasants who were treated like dogs and at least I’ve had the benefit of an education. I do have a roof over my head and I have food and whatnot. But we know it’s not the greatest system in the world. And if things don’t change soon, it’s going to collapse.” And then they always said, oh, and they say, “And one reason is that we spend most our national treasure and our resources on the military equipment and it’s destroying us and we’re going to collapse if this system doesn’t change soon.” And then several added this, “And when our country collapses, your country’s going to collapse, too. Maybe not right away, but maybe in fifteen or twenty years.” And I often think of that because it could be true, too. God knows what the future holds for any of us. I mean, if the whole world suddenly goes berserk and things get terribly out of whack—and I’ve seen too many countries where people thought, like military people especially thought, “I’m pretty well set. I have a nice pension and whatnot.” I found Japanese
admirals out in the rice paddies planting rice. And you look at the poor Iraqi generals
now one day at a job, and the next day, no job.

LC: Right.

AL: But because of mistakes the countries have made and then sometimes
because of overextending themselves financially, God knows, you know. I hope we last
forever and ever, but who knows?

LC: Al, I want to thank you for the time you spent giving us this oral history
interview. Thank you very much.

AL: You're welcome. Laura, you asked me the funniest thing.

LC: Yes.

AL: Laura, you asked me one time, “What was the funniest thing that ever
happened to me in Vietnam?” Well, a lot of funny things happened too, but to me, the
funniest was the time I was living in Pleiku in this Ranger camp I often mentioned. And
Sundays were sometimes a drag. You know, it was kind of lonely.

LC: Yeah.

AL: You know, I just had a bare room there and although I had a few Ranger
friends like—I was looking for a little diversion and there’s this Montagnard village not
too far away from Pleiku called Plei Jut. And I very often worked in Plei Jut. As a
matter of fact, I was there so often, that one day I hauled a footlocker out there, not a
footlocker, but a metal locker where I kept spare clothes and whatnot. And the people
out at Plei Jut, because they worked in and around the Ranger camp, knew me and heard
me play the mandolin and they loved the mandolin. I was out in Plei Jut one Sunday and
had been drinking that rice wine. I’m not a drinker. I’ll drink socially, but left to my
own devices, I will never drink, but in a situation like this, there’s nothing else to do.

(Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: And so I was drinking and this rice wine is sometimes more potent than
other times. It tastes like anything from kerosene to vodka, usually more like kerosene.
And I was a little bit addled, shall we say. And there’s this Montagnard girl who worked
in the Ranger camp. A very beautiful girl named Plaih and she said, “Al.” She knew I
had a mandolin because she heard me. “Al, go get your mandolin.” (Laughing) And
they just loved the mandolin because the only musical instruments they have are gongs
and the Jeh had flutes they’d play with their nose.

LC: Really?

and her brother got in the seat next to the door and we were heading for the Ranger camp.
And you came out of the hill, winding road out of the hill and there’s this what they call
CPO Highway. It was a big dirt road where these big Army trucks used going from the
warehouses somewhere to firebases or wherever it could go. And it was heavily rutted
and occasionally there are mines in the road and they didn’t fill in the holes and whatnot.
And this old International Scout I had, when I’d used that road, the frame would twist a
little bit and the door next to the driver would pop open. And normally when I was sober,
it was no problem. And when we came down, we hit that CPO road. Now, maybe I
shouldn’t tell you these things because it’s a little bit raunchy.

LC: That’s okay.

AL: But this is real life.

LC: That’s right.

AL: All along this CPO road in this area, Pleiku had a lot of GIs and they had an
air base there and Army bases and whatnot. And there were a lot of these bordellos on
either side of the road. You know, little tin ratty places with beautiful girls out in front
who got cracking whips. (Laughing)

LC: No kidding.

AL: Oh, yeah. Petting animals and doing all kinds of sexually explicit activities
like that and luring the GIs in. And I can honestly say I never had any business dealings
with them, but they used to see me a lot. (Speaking in Vietnamese) You know, “Come
on.” I never knew any person, but they knew me and I knew them to see. Anyway, here
I come out of the hill with these two Montagnards and I’m on this road and driving
slowly and the frame I guess is twisting and I turn right to go up to the Ranger camp and
as I turned right like that (gesture), the door came open. (Laughing) And I fell out of the
Scout and I fell actually fell on my—I was going slow, but it was hard gravel.

LC: Ouch.
AL: And I was stunned for a few seconds, but the International Scout was on an elevated road with these two Montagnards in it went down the road, and then it went off the bank.

LC: Uh-oh.

AL: And they knew nothing about driving, you know, steer the car, step on the brake, they just sat there and it went off in the rice paddies. So when I gained my senses, I couldn’t find my car. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: And I was baffled. I knew I was driving the car. “Where’s my car?” (Laughing) And so while I was laying on the ground stunned like that, these prostitutes came over and they lifted my watch, they took my wallet. You know, everything that they could take, they took from me. Anyway, when I stood up and kind of regained my senses, I saw these girls giggling and laughing and whatnot. And at that time, I was still concerned about, “What happened to my car?” Well, they knew what was going through my mind and that’s why they were laughing. And finally it dawned on me, that you know, something like that must’ve happened. About that time, the Montagnards got out of the rice paddy and they came up the embankment and I saw their heads, “Al, Al.” And so I walked down there, I was reunited with these two Montagnards and my car was out in the rice paddy. And I was wondering, “What in the hell are we going to do now?” And I was thinking of walking up to the Ranger camp and getting help, but about that time, a big Vietnamese truck came by, there were a lot of lumber trucks in this area, this is a big lumber truck that had a winch on the back of it. And without me asking anybody anything, one guy got the winch and he walked out in the rice paddy and hooked on to my International Scout and they winched it back. But it was moving backwards through all this muck. Unbeknownst to me at the time, it tore out the brake lines and it tore off the muffler. And they finally got it up on the embankment and then they wanted to be paid, and I didn’t have anything. You know, the prostitutes had taken everything I had. Well, these two Montagnards knew Vietnamese better than I did and they said, “Al, you’re in trouble.” They said, “They’re talking about killing you if you don’t pay them.” And I said, “I can’t pay them, I don’t have anything.” And they said, “They’re going to kill you if you don’t pay them.” “Fine, let them kill me.” I was just that goofy.
LC: Right.

AL: Well, they had a better grasp for reality at the time than I did and they gave those truck drivers my spare tire. They gave them my tow chain; they gave them my jack. I had a PRC-10 radio in there. That’s how the VC got radio; they took them. They took my PRC Radio. Not only that, I had a carton of, I think, Korean C-Rations in there and they took that, but they still wanted to be paid and I didn’t have any money and they were still being kind of threatening. And finally they got in their truck and drove off. And we all got in the International Scout and it ran, but it didn’t have a muffler.

(Imitating car noise)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: But I was going up a hill and while the engine was—while we’re lugging up the hill, I didn’t have to use the brake and we just drove up normally into the Ranger camp making a lot of noise, but you know, the car could get us where we wanted to go. And I went in and got my mandolin and then I went back in the Scout, we were going to drive back to Plei Jut and by this time, it was downhill. (Laughing) And there are a lot of people on that road too; people carrying things on their back and whatnot. I went down that hill and found out it didn’t have any brakes.

LC: Oh, boy.

AL: And I was lucky I didn’t hit somebody, but I somehow—I couldn’t downshift either.

LC: Oh, really?

AL: Yeah, I was going too fast and it was just grinding the gears and what not. I think I was out of gear and no brakes and going downhill. But anyway, I finally got out to the CPO road again, which wasn’t too bad, and then going up to Plei Jut, I was going uphill, it wasn’t bad. But in Plei Jut, I spent two or three hours playing my mandolin and everybody’s singing and dancing and whatnot. And then I had to go home in the dark coming down the hill with no brakes. Somehow or another, I got from Plei Jut back to Pleiku, but I was lucky. But the feeling of driving a car and losing it while you’re driving it struck me as one of the funniest things that ever happened to me. (Laughing)

LC: (Laughing)

AL: So, that’s the funniest thing that ever happened to me.
LC: Thanks for adding that Al.