Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

I'm beginning an oral history interview today with Korean War era veteran and retired Foreign
Service officer, Thomas Barnes. I am in the interview room in the Special Collections Library on
the campus of Texas Tech and Mr. Barnes is in Austin, Texas. Today's date is the 11th of February
2004. Good afternoon Mr. Barnes.

Thomas Barnes: Good afternoon.

LC: Sir, I'd like to begin just by asking you some basic biographical details. Could you tell
me where you were born and when, sir?

TB: St. Paul, Minnesota on the 18th of June 1930.

LC: And your parents were...were who? Can you give me their names please?

TB: My father's name was Ralph W. Barnes, Ralph Weikert Barnes and my mother's name was Helen O'Connor Barnes.

LC: Now were they both from Minnesota?

TB: Yes, surely. They were both born in Minnesota.

LC: Tell me a little bit about their educational backgrounds. How had they done as
students?

TB: My father attended one year at the university and dropped out because of illness and
never went back. My mother did not complete high school.

LC: Now, your father went to...was it the University of Minnesota?

TB: He went to Macalester. Macalester College, as far as I remember.
LC: Yes, sir. A very good liberal arts school there in Minnesota. And your mother did not finish high school. When were they married, sir? Do you know?

TB: They were married in 1929.

LC: Ok. And do you have siblings?

TB: I have no siblings.

LC: Ok. Sir, can you tell me a little about your childhood? What was your socioeconomic status, generally, as a child?

TB: My father worked for the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad as a passenger agent for 38 years. My mother was a cloth coat and not a fur coat but a cloth coat and a great women’s apparel buyer for a series of specialty shops in downtown Minneapolis: Goulds, Bjorkman’s, [Jackson Graves], and so on.

LC: And how did your mother come into that line of work, do you know?

TB: I haven’t the slightest idea.

LC: Really? Ok. And your father worked as a passenger agent. For someone who didn’t know, what kind of work was that?

TB: Well, essentially, he started out in an office selling train tickets. He had the choice in 1930, when I was born, of either going with Northwest Airlines or going with the railroad. He made the wrong choice.

LC: How did your parents do during the Depression, sir?

TB: Well, they were very, very badly off before I was born but by the time they were both employed things…things were…we did not live in poor circumstances but we were never suffering.

LC: Now, did you attend public school?

TB: I attended a mixture of Catholic and private – public schools – throughout my grade school era. There are two factors involved. One was, as a boy, I had severe eczema in the pits of the arms, and my aunt, my paternal grandmother’s sister, was the superintendent of the Preventorium. It was a place in Ramsey County where St. Paul is located that treated children of indigent parents who were likely to contract tuberculosis. And the Preventorium built them up physically so that they could escape a life after catching tuberculosis as a child.

LC: Which was greatly feared then.

TB: I beg your pardon?

LC: That was greatly feared at that time.
TB: Yes.
LC: Yes.

TB: But anyways, one of the features of this Preventorium was a solarium with ultraviolet light. And I stayed with my aunt during the week, for in effect fifth and sixth grade – or fourth and fifth grade – and took daily baths under this ultraviolet light trying to dry up the eczema. The eczema was so severe that to prevent me scratching we took Good Housekeeping magazines and wrapped them around my arms so that I couldn’t bend the arms to scratch them. If I could bend the arms, I couldn’t get up to the location where the eczema was. And then on weekends I would go home, but I attended school in this location and lived with my aunt at this Preventorium for two years.

LC: Was that difficult, sir, on you? Going back and forth?
TB: No. Not particularly.
LC: Was that cure or that treatment successful?
TB: It was successful in reducing the intensity of the eczema, but when I reached puberty, about eleven or twelve years old, the eczema disappeared and it was replaced by asthma. One allergy for another.

LC: Yes, yes sir. How did you control your asthma?
TB: Through a medication that Squibb produced called Hydroline. But when I started running in earnest when I was thirty-nine years old in 1969, it disappeared. I’ve never had a problem with asthma since.

LC: Huh. Sir, were you able to play any sports as a child or as a youngster?
TB: I was never particularly inclined to team sports.

LC: Did you do well in high school and where did you actually attend high school?
TB: I went to [St. Thomas Military Academy], largely because a lot of my friends from eighth grade [did so]. Incidentally, I skipped third grade.

LC: Ok.
TB: A lot of my friends from eighth grade went to St. Thomas Military Academy, which was renamed during the anti-military effort [phase] of the ’60s to St. Thomas Academy. It’s still a military school where the cadets wear uniforms but… It was excellent academically. It was an all Catholic – well, not all the students are Catholic – but it was a Catholic boys’ school, a military boys’ school.
LC: And is that in St. Paul’s? St. Paul, I mean?

TB: It’s in St. Paul now. It was in St. Paul then. It’s really in the outskirts of St. Paul now. It’s been moved to Mendota, which is right across the Mississippi River.

LC: Ok, yes sir. And your…what was your academic program like there?

TB: Well, I concentrated on languages and took as few sciences as possible. And when I was graduated I won the Language Award. I had taken four years of Latin, two of Greek, and one of French.

LC: Which of those was your favorite?

TB: French.

LC: Why?

TB: Because it was a pleasure to listen to.

LC: You thought you might be able to do something with that or because it was more vibrant to study?

TB: Yeah, it was just more interesting. And it was much less complicated than Latin or Greek with their tenses and moods and so on.

LC: What year did you graduate, sir?

TB: 1947. I was…out of a class of 125 I was ninth academically, if you discounted religion and military science. If you included military science and religion, I dropped to thirteenth place. In other words, my scores in religion and military science were not stellar.

LC: Yes, sir. What kind of courses were you required to take in the military science element?

TB: Oh, I don’t…frankly I don’t recall. I remember it from ROTC and college but I don’t remember much about it in high school.

LC: Did you think at that time you had a particular aptitude for languages?

TB: Well, I had a regular interest. Whether I had an aptitude I don’t know, but I had a great deal of interest in them.

LC: Did French come particularly easily to you?

TB: I got very high grades in it because of the background in Latin.

LC: Yes, sir. Were you working outside while you were attending school?

TB: Yes, I did part time work. I worked as a pageboy and in a Radisson hotel in Minneapolis, which was before Radisson became a chain. It was the only Radisson hotel in the
country. So, I would finish school, go down to the Radisson hotel, change from my military uniform to a pageboy’s uniform with a cap, and deliver the laundry. And occasionally we’d get a ten or fifteen cent tip for delivering the laundry. My most memorable experience as a pageboy was...we had a machine, which the operator wrote on from some remote location, and one client – not one client, but one guest – at the hotel asked for a big white gardenia. So, I went to the hotel flower shop when bellboys are not around, got a gardenia, went up to the room, and the woman opened the door clad only in a mink coat, and she gave me a tip for the gardenia and I left. It was the most interesting delivery that I made during my years there as a pageboy.

LC: Did you formulate a theory as to what the background for that incident was?
TB: Well, the woman was drunk. So, I don’t know...she was all by herself and was hankering after a gardenia, but that’s all I know about her.

LC: Ok. Sir, do you remember much about World War II when you were just a young man.
TB: I certainly do. I read the English paper constantly about the advances in North Africa, and then onto the D-Day invasion, and the final days of the war. I read these with great interest. I think I kept a notebook with excerpts from the newspaper on where the Allied forces were at any given time.

LC: Why did it capture you so?
TB: Well, it was the news of the day. It was the most fascinating events that were taking place at the time.

LC: Were other young men your age similarly captivated by it?
TB: I have no idea.

LC: Ok. Did you have a sort of social circle that you were familiar with? Friends that you, as they say now, hung around with?
TB: Oh certainly.

LC: Who were your friends? What kind of...
TB: Well, mainly fellows from school.

LC: Were there particular groups of young men there that you were drawn too.
TB: Well, there was a group I had been in seventh and eighth grades with, and we more or less stuck together for ice skating, skiing, and that sort of thing.

LC: Did your parents have to pay some particular fees in order for you to attend this academy?
TB: Yes. They made some sacrifices themselves. They had to pay more than they had to pay when I went to the university.

LC: Is that right?

TB: It wasn’t much more but it was a sacrifice on their part, I’m sure.

LC: Now, at the end of your high school years were you thinking particularly of attending college or was that not necessarily what you were looking for?

TB: No. That was expected.

LC: Ok. Who was particularly driving that – your father or your mother or both?

TB: No, they never inquired about my academics. I mean, they were pleased when I came home with good grades but they never seemed to express much interest in what I was studying or anything like that.

LC: So, college was your plan?

TB: Yes. In fact, by the time of my second semester I had devised my entire program for the period and was able to graduate in three years by taking extra courses in summer school.

LC: Sir, how did you decide to go to the University of Minnesota?

TB: Well, I don’t recall now. I guess that was, again, sort of expected.

LC: Were there any alternatives that you considered?

TB: Looking back, I don’t recall considering any at the time. Nowadays, with my own children, one samples a great number of universities, writes letters, applications, and so on, but I don’t recall my interest in any other place than the University of Minnesota at the time.

LC: And there are other colleges, obviously, in Minneapolis, St. Paul.

TB: There was a wonderful one in Northfield called Carlton. It has a very high reputation.

LC: Yes, it has for many, many years been a very good school, and that was not one you considered?

TB: Frankly, I don’t recall enough about it, but I just drifted into the University of Minnesota.

LC: Do you remember making an application?

TB: I don’t remember.

LC: What did you intend to study when you began?

TB: English literature.

LC: Is that what you eventually majored in?

TB: That’s correct.
LC: Why English literature? What did you think you would do with that?
TB: I didn’t have any notion of what to do with it.
LC: It was for the love of subject then?
TB: Yeah. My interest was in – principally in – reading novels.
LC: Had that been sparked…
TB: I wrote as an objective in my high school yearbook that I wanted to be a novelist, but I
wasn’t able to achieve that until after I finished my professional career and then it was a bad effort.
LC: I don’t think it was that bad, sir. I’ve read it. It’s not that bad. Sir, English
Literature…was that a field that had grasped your interest as a younger man? Was there a
particular teacher in high school, say, who was instrumental in pointing you in that direction?
TB: Not in high school, but at the university there were a number of excellent professors.
One who specialized in the eighteenth century called Samuel Monk and another one named
Robert Moore who did a survey of English Literature course in a splendid fashion. These were
learned scholars who were quite impressive as teachers.
LC: Did you have access to those men in your early years as an undergraduate? Of
course, you were only there for three years, but right away in introductory courses?
TB: I had access to Moore. The other man was more recondite.
LC: And so, did you, over the course of your studies, specialize in a particular period or
author?
TB: Eighteenth century. The last century in which man considered himself capable of
greatness.
LC: Is that why you were drawn to that time?
TB: No. It was just an interesting century. That’s all. And I was put off by the romanticism
of the nineteenth century poets.
LC: Why?
TB: I preferred a more logical and a more rational approach to literature.
LC: And the sort of waxings of the poets of the 1800s were less interesting to you?
TB: That’s right.
LC: Sir, did you have other interests while you were at the university as a student? Of
course you must have been studying quite a bit to get through in three years, but I wondered if
there were other things you were pursuing as well.
TB: Well, I was interested in girls.
LC: Ok. Were there any in particular?
TB: Oh yes.
LC: Ok, there was someone special there?
TB: There was someone special who did not return my affections.
LC: Was she also an English literature student?
TB: No, she wasn’t at the university.
LC: Oh, ok. Were you heartbroken for some part of this time?
TB: Oh, I was heartbroken momentarily.
LC: And then you moved on, as they say.
TB: That’s right.
LC: Ok. Sir, the height of the Cold War parallels your time at the university. Certainly the Berlin crisis and so on, and I wonder if you were paying much attention to those world events as well.
TB: Probably not so much.
LC: Ok. Were you in an ROTC program at this point?
TB: Yes, I was in the ROTC program. When I was graduated from the university, I received a reserve commission. I was entitled to a regular army commission, but I was not yet twenty-one years of age, so I went in the summer of the year I graduated to Ft. Benning, Georgia. I had just turned twenty, and took the basic infantry officer’s course at Ft. Benning for three months.
LC: Now, this is in 1950, is that correct?
TB: That’s right. And then I went back for…I, initially, was assigned – I thought I’d be continuing in the Army, but I decided to go to graduate school instead. I was assigned initially to Ft. Ord, California, preparatory apparent to going over to Korea, apparently. But I asked to defer my service so that I could do a year for a Master’s degree, which I did. And then when I was twenty-one I got the regular Army commission.
LC: And you were commissioned at what level, sir?
TB: One starts out in the Army as a second lieutenant.
LC: And let me ask you about that summer course you took at Ft. Benning. Do you recall much about that now?
TB: I was impressed by the thoroughness of the lectures, not so much by the substance of them, but the Ft. Benning instructors informed me they spent forty-eight hours of preparation for one hour of class and it was fully believable because they were superb in presenting their subject.

LC: What kinds of subjects did you take there, sir?

TB: One of them was on weaponry and I had the genius of being able to get the machine gun apart but never get it back together again.

LC: So, from that, did you conclude anything about the possible direction of your career with the Army?

TB: Well, I decided that I didn't know whether I was going to have a career with the Army. I knew I had to have Army service because the Korean War was in progress, or about to be – it was in progress at the time. And I knew I would have to serve, but I didn't have any notion of lifetime service at that time.

LC: That course lasted just during the summer of 1950?

TB: That's right.

LC: How did you do with the military discipline that was probably reinforced there?

TB: That doesn't bother me.

LC: Did you see people whom it did bother?

TB: Not there, but during the previous summer, between the junior and senior years in college, the ROTC had a six-week summer camp. I was commissioned in the Transportation Corps and the center of the Transportation Corps was and is Ft. Eustis, Virginia. We were assigned at the University of Minnesota – I'm going back a year – we were assigned to barracks with Southern A&M, which was an all black university from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. My roommate…because alphabetically I was in a room that could be at the opening at the barracks rather than the open hall part, was an ex-Marine sergeant from World War II, black as spades, named Alex something. He was instrumental in getting me through the machine gun course because he could get the weapon back together again. But in any rate, we got along. We were interspersed alphabetically – this is 1949 now – we were interspersed alphabetically with the students from Southern A&M and the white students from other southern colleges told us that if they had been barracked with Southern A&M they would have resigned their status immediately and gone home.

LC: Did you hear that from more than one person?
TB: No, I heard it from several.

LC: How did you feel about that?

TB: I thought it was silly because I was really benefiting from sharing quarters with this hulking ex-Marine called Alex.

LC: Had you had much interaction with minorities at all?

TB: Well, throughout grade school, the last two years of grade school, at a Catholic school called Incarnation, there was one black girl in the class. At St. Thomas Academy, there was one black student, about four Jewish students at a Catholic school, and two or three Protestants. I guess they were the token representatives or something, but we never thought it strange or unusual to have them among us.

LC: So, it didn’t... so when this incident happened in 1949, you thought the people who were overreacting or reacting oddly were the white southerners that you...?

TB: That’s right.

LC: What about the African-American young men? For example, your friend Alex. How did he feel about the policy by, under which, everyone was living together alphabetically without regard to race?

TB: That’s a very interesting question which I never broached to him but it would have been nice to know his attitude toward being barracked with the white students.

LC: Did you ever get a sense from those young African-American men that they were uncomfortable in any way?

TB: No I didn’t, but in those days one didn’t get that sort of sense very easily.

LC: But for you, this was just kind of business as usual and didn’t seem out of the ordinary.

TB: I had no problem with it.

LC: Did you appreciate that this was the result of a particular declarative policy of the U.S. Army around integration? Were you aware of that?

TB: No, I think the integration had just taken place, didn’t it? Around ’47 or ’48 or something like that; a much very belated occurrence. But it really wasn’t a problem, as far as we were concerned.

LC: Did you observe, when you went down to Ft. Benning, any racial issues or incidents that come to mind?

TB: Not a bit.
LC: Were there any African-Americans in your officer course?
TB: Certainly there were. But I, again…it’s an issue that really wasn’t a problem for me.
LC: Ok. And were you, that summer, as I imagine a number of young men were, paying close attention to Korea?
TB: Oh certainly. We were following the events there very closely.
LC: Did you have an opinion, sir, about those events? Either the Chinese incursion into…at that point, the Chinese weren’t involved…
TB: They weren’t involved directly.
LC: Yes, that’s right. North Korean, that what I mean to say, into South and the U.S. response. Did you have an opinion?
TB: Well, I had no objection to the U.S. intervention, if that’s what you mean.
LC: I was just wondering how you felt about it; how you were processing it.
TB: It was my duty to go there if I was called up.
LC: Did your father serve in the military at all?
TB: Interestingly enough, no. He was too young for World War I and too old for World War II, but I did go with him to some miserable place in Missouri when we were on a trip down to New Orleans by car. Way back, we went to this town in Missouri and registered for the draft. If I recall, he was forty years old or over forty at the time.
LC: Did that leave an impression on you?
TB: Only because I had just contracted amebic dysentery from tainted lettuce from Hattiesburg, Mississippi.
LC: So, that was the impression that was left rather than…
TB: Yeah.
LC: Ok. I was wondering where this sense of duty of your came from. Can you theorize about that for a moment?
TB: I think it was largely because of the military training from St. Thomas Academy.
LC: And there were both, I presume, patriotic and religious values being instilled in that curriculum?
TB: Yeah, sure.
LC: And, it maybe worth asking whether any uncles or grandparents had military experience.
TB: My grandfather was too old for World War I but he volunteered for the Red Cross and served the Red Cross in France.

LC: What did he do, do you know?

TB: Well, he was director of something or other but if you ask me what he did, I don’t know.

LC: Did you hear any stories about that when you were growing up?

TB: Only that he was absent from home for a long period, but that’s about all I heard.

LC: Did that spark an interest in France, in your mind, or was it just sort of remote?

TB: I think there were…the interest in France resulted from the principal factor that I found the French language charming and the French accent charming. I find only the French and Irish accent of English pleasing. All the rest grate on my nerves.

LC: Yes sir. And there are very pronounced accents, of course, up north. I’m from Michigan and we definitely bare a rather harsh accent. Did you develop an ear for those kinds of things?

TB: Oh yes. And, incidentally, I was conceived in Flint, Michigan.

LC: Well, I think I was probably not too far from there, a little place called Clio. Sir, I want to ask you about your graduate work. Can you tell us what field you chose?

TB: Again it was English literature.

LC: Ok. And for the same purpose as before?

TB: I just wanted to learn more about it

LC: Whom were you working with during that graduate experience?

TB: Well, there were two possibilities for a master’s degree. One was eighteen credit hours and a thesis, and the other was forty-five credit hours. So, rather than write a thesis, which I was not particularly inclined toward at that time, I did forty-six hours, as a matter of fact, and was given a degree based on course work rather than on written.

LC: I see. Were you thinking that you might like to teach?

TB: Well, I had had that in mind as a possibility, but not immediately.

LC: Did it appeal to you as an intellectual engagement?

TB: I always liked teaching. I’ve done a lot of lecturing.

LC: Were you able to teach at all as a graduate student?
TB: No, I didn’t do any teaching in that respect, but in the Army I did quite a bit of teaching.

When I was assigned in 1951 to Ft. Riley in Kansas, I was teaching leadership to officers quite senior to me.

LC: Sir, I want to ask you about that in just a moment. You graduated with your Master’s degree then, am I correct in thinking the spring of 1951?

TB: Yeah, it was June of ’51.

LC: Ok. And at that point, your deferment expired, I assume.

TB: Well, I don’t know if I had a deferment, I just didn’t go on active duty before. I had applied for the regular Army commission and was held up for three months on the grounds that I…I stupidly checked the fact that I had chronic sinusitis and they wanted a panel of doctors to determine whether that would incapacitate me for regular Army service.

LC: When you say you stupidly marked that box, what do you mean?

TB: They asked you whether you suffered from so many diseases — such and such disease — and I made the mistake of checking chronic sinusitis.

LC: Was it true?

TB: Well, it wasn’t chronic but it was… I was a victim of the harsh Minnesota climate in the winters.

LC: Yes sir. Where these things just keep coming up every four or five weeks.

TB: That’s right.

LC: And the doctors examined you, I take it?

TB: Yeah, they had some sort of examination and decided it wasn’t a disqualifying characteristic.

LC: Where did these examinations take place?

TB: I think, if I’m not mistaken, it was at the VA hospital at Ft. Snelling in St. Paul.

LC: Do you remember that? Do you remember those exams?

TB: Not really.

LC: Were you at all concerned that you may not be able to serve the country?

TB: I was concerned because I had no honest employment and I had graduated and… I went to work, for example, expecting a regular army commission at any moment, but I had nothing to finance my excursions on dates, for example. So, I went to work in a steel mill from midnight to 7:00 A.M. chipping excess steel off of grater blades. I lasted three nights.
LC: That sounds extremely unpleasant.

TB: Particularly, in the midnight shift when you’re eight people in a cavernous steel mill.

Anyway, I decided after three nights that life was too short to work in a steel mill so I went to work selling cigarettes at the Minnesota state fair for half the wages. It was a lot more fun.

LC: How long did you keep that up?

TB: Couple weeks. And finally I got orders to report for active duty.

LC: And where were you meant to report, sir?


LC: Did you know when you got your orders what your assignment was likely to be?

TB: No, I had no idea at that time. I was assigned to a unit, I think it was the 10th Mountain Division, and we did some maneuvers, and then I was assigned to the leadership school where I taught leadership. And then I was again finally assigned to the interrogation of the prisoners of war course, which I think lasted three months. And that was preparatory to overseas assignment.

LC: Let me ask you about each of those in turn, actually, particularly about the leadership school. How was it arranged that you were transitioned from the Mountain Division to that assignment, do you remember?

TB: Well, it was because of my academic qualifications. There were very few second lieutenants with Master’s degrees in the Army.

LC: And you were very young as well, yes?

TB: Very young.

LC: What, twenty-one maybe?

TB: That’s right.

LC: And you…so they thought they’d put you in front of a class.

TB: Yeah. And initially I did very badly. I was quite strained.

LC: Why was that?

TB: Because of inexperience.

LC: Were you...

TB: I was too taut and…but, T-A-U-T, in that sense. But I had a supervisor, a first lieutenant, who recognized that I could improve myself and he talked to me at some length about my approach to the class and he made it possible for me to get my points across without antagonizing the audience.
LC: Do you remember his name, sir?

TB: I don’t offhand, no.

LC: And tell me about the audience.

TB: Well, these were officers, mainly...most of who had overseas experience. They were company grade officers, captains, and first lieutenants.

LC: Sir, what was the content of the course, in general terms?

TB: There were ten principals of leadership, as I recall. I can’t recall all ten, but – forcefulness, decisiveness...I don’t know, selflessness, so on and so forth – we taught these ten principles.

LC: How were you able to get them across? What tools did you use? Were you using case studies or examples or did you have to sort of just repeat things over and over, what was the technique?

TB: I frankly...it’s too distant a memory to honestly tell you.

LC: Ok. How did the transition from the teaching at which you were improving to the POW interrogation course come about? Do you remember?

TB: I don’t know. My number just came up and they needed people to be interrogators of prisoners of war so that’s how it turned out.

LC: And did your qualifications, academic qualifications, also serve as a kind of springboard into that area?

TB: I believe they did.

LC: Do you know anything about, or did you subsequently find out, about the shortage of qualified interrogators in Korea at that time?

TB: No, I didn’t.

LC: Ok. Tell me about the POW course. First of all, was it also held at Ft. Riley?

TB: Yes, it was.

LC: Ok. And was it part of a larger school or was it an ad hoc institution?

TB: As I recall, it was an ad hoc institution. I remember one anecdote about Ft. Riley when I first went there. The place was rather run down and the standard explanation was that General Custer, riding out to the Battle of the Little Big Horn, said 'Don’t change anything until I come back.' And he never came back.

LC: And is that how it felt being there?
TB: In some senses, yes.

LC: What was your billet like?

TB: It was a wooden structure with a rather Spartan room, with a table, a bed, and a lamp.

LC: How crowded was Ft. Riley when you were there?

TB: I don’t remember it being very crowded, but there were two satellite towns, Junction City and Manhattan.

LC: And did you get to get off base very much?

TB: Oh yes, on weekends. Sure.

LC: And were you pretty much on your own because you were an officer? You were able to call your own shots in your free time?

TB: Yeah, sure. No problem.

LC: Ok. What kinds of things did you do when you went into either of those towns for entertainment?

TB: I went to movies.

LC: Ok. Were you a movie buff?

TB: Yes.

LC: Ok. What kinds of things did you like?

TB: Well, I don’t recall what particularly appealed to me in those days.

LC: Ok. I just wondered if you made a point to see a particular genre or stars or just what was on. You probably didn’t have a lot of choices, I’m thinking.

TB: Not so many. No.

LC: Sir, can you tell me a little bit about the POW interrogation course? Give me a sense of the contours of the curriculum.

TB: Well, they emphasized that one does not use torture; one uses the civilized approach to interrogation. You establish a rapport with the person you’re interrogating….

LC: Were you in classrooms, primarily?

TB: Yeah, sure. There were practice interrogations also.

LC: And did the practice elements come at the end of the course after you had done a lot of bookwork?

TB: I don’t recall just how it was. I would imagine it was toward the end, but I don’t remember exactly.
LC: Ok. Were you introduced to particular case examples from experience acquired during World War II?

TB: I'm sure that was the case, but my memory of it is quite dim.

LC: Ok. Did you take to this work or was it something that you didn’t really feel drawn to?

TB: No, I found it interesting. The main thing that I learned from it was that you don’t ask yes or no questions. You phrase the question so that you get an answer.

LC: Were you being trained specifically to work within the Korean theatre?

TB: No, it was in general for either Europe or Korea. I find it interesting that I have a friend who also was an interrogator who spoke German fluently. I had gone through high school, not high school so much as...yeah, through high school and part of college with him. He majored at the university in Japanese, which was almost unheard of in those days, to be sent into Germany instead of to Japan or Korea.

LC: Yes, because I gather that a number of interrogators who were active in the Korean theatre were primarily speakers of Japanese, and that there...

TB: But that was because Japan occupied Korea from 1910 – 1945 and then enforced the speaking of Japanese and the Japanese language and non-speaking in Korean. And Japanese, at least in 1950, was a quite useful language in Korea.

LC: And of course the United States had developed a good supply of Japanese speakers/interpreters.

TB: I don’t know how good it was, but it was certainly better than the supply of Korean speakers.

LC: Did you have any language instruction in the course of this POW interrogation course?

TB: Not at all.

LC: None?

TB: None.

LC: Ok. In terms of the instruction in developing rapport, did you recall any of the tricks or secrets that you were told? For example, offering cigarettes or that kind of thing, was that the sort of level that you were being instructed at?

TB: Well, that was the technique we later used in Korea. We had tea and cigarettes available, but I don’t recall whether it was part of the course.

LC: Ok. Do you recall any of the instructors?
TB: Not at all. Not a one.
LC: Really? So, the course lasted approximately three months?
TB: That’s right.
LC: Would you have concluded then, somewhere in the fall or near the end of 1951?
TB: It was either May or June of 1951, or probably 1952.
LC: And what happened after that course’s conclusion?
TB: I was assigned to the Far East Command. The 500th MI group.
LC: In what capacity?
TB: As an interrogator of prisoners of war. That was my MOS, military occupational
specialty.
LC: And did you ship to Korea then soon thereafter?
TB: Well, I arrived in Japan and was informed I’d be going somewhere up in the front lines.
And as I walked out the door the personnel officer came running after me and said, ‘Wait a minute,
I think we have an assignment for you just north of Pusan with the 510th Military Intelligence
Service Company,’ which handles strategic rather than tactical interrogations.
LC: For someone who wasn’t clear on that distinction, could you go over it?
TB: You mean tactical and strategic?
LC: Yes, sir.
TB: A tactical interrogation is one for immediate battlefield information whereby the person
who is captured is expected to give information about his unit, his unit’s attack plan, its morale, and
so on. Whereas a strategic interrogation is one that looks to the longer term – market conditions in
the country of origin, what is the state of politics in the province/district from which the fellow came,
what was his indoctrination of the Communist Party, if any, what long range goal has his superiors
had entrusted to him, and so on. In other words, with a strategic interrogation you get after all the
battlefield information has been soaped off the individual, and then you keep him for a prolonged
period if he’s a valuable source of information and you interrogate him at your leisure.
LC: Were you then sent to this location north of Pusan?
TB: That’s right.
LC: Ok. Did that facility have a name?
TB: It was the 510th Military Intelligence Service Company.
LC: And were there prisoners housed at a particular facility you were…
TB: There was a POW camp that was controlled by the Republic of Korea soldiers and we visited it twice a day. And there was a series of tents in which the interrogations took place. And the officers were assigned as team leaders. I had a team of about ten people, which included two Korean officers, captains, American Nisei, who used Japanese as their language of interrogations, a Chinese Department of the Army civilian, who in reality was a [lieutenant] colonel back in his home ground in Taiwan, and an American enlisted man trained in Korean. So there were about ten people per tent. Now, this situation was superceded, whereby we got our own POW camp, constructed with prefab buildings, again with about ten interrogators per building and an officer supervising. So, that's how it was set up.

LC: How were potential targets of interrogation divided between those who very likely had tactical information and those who might have strategic information?

TB: Well, we didn't bother ourselves with tactical information.

LC: So, the discrimination between those two groups had already occurred by the time they reached the POW camp?

TB: Well, they're not necessarily two groups. In other words, you might get a prisoner who is exceptionally well-versed in his party or his party doctrine or his...the politics of his home location. We would then keep him for a prolonged period, talk to him daily about conditions, the province from which he came, and going into harvests, market conditions, weather, and so on, but it wasn't necessarily somebody different from the tactical...in other words, he might have given us a great deal of tactical information when he met the first interrogators coming off the line. But these were people who were theoretically sent to this new location because they had long-range information.

LC: Ok. Sir, you said that at the first POW camp that was controlled by ROK personnel, that you went there a couple of times a day.

TB: Yeah, we used to ride over these miserable roads, wallowing in dust, in the back of a two and a half ton truck. We’d go back for lunch then come back to the POW camp for afternoon interrogations. So, we’d take about an hour, hour and half, at noon time...half of that time for travel back and forth. It was five kilometers away.

LC: Did you see the same person morning and afternoon?

TB: Yeah. We would sometimes keep people...we had a Chinese general, for example, a political advisor, whom we interrogated for months.
LC: Did you work exclusively with him or…?

TB: I didn’t work with him myself. It was another team that worked with him, but we had
some people that we would continue with, going several weeks, and then there were others who
had very little information at all.

LC: How were you able to determine whether they had any information and were just being
circumspect or actually had no information?

TB: Well, you can detect that fairly easily, just like when you have a conversation with
someone you’ve never met before.

LC: Ok. So you treated it that way. That you could just sort of pick up signals about their
potential usefulness.

TB: That’s right.

LC: Ok. How many POWs were at the first camp, the one controlled by the ROK
personnel?

TB: I don’t know. It was a lot. Not all of the POWs were those we were interested in, but
when we had established this new camp there were only those that we were interested in. There
was also control by the Republic of Korea Army. I mean, that is the perimeter defense system set
up.

LC: And that new camp was established roughly when?

TB: Roughly, February of 1953. January/February of 1953. And just about that time the
number of prisoners being taken at the front line diminished greatly, and we were getting
people…when we had an ideal situation for strategic interrogation, we were getting more and more
people who had nothing to give us.

LC: Were you getting fewer people overall as well?

TB: Well, that was the main problem.

LC: Ok. And then also within that, their information was less useful?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Ok. Can you estimate at its greatest number the camp’s…?

TB: I would say, when we had the new camp, it was around 200 or 250, but I’m not sure.

LC: Do you know how many POW camps were either controlled by the ROK or under the
Commonwealth?

TB: They were all [ROK-controlled]
LC: They were all controlled by the ROK?
TB: In the sense of perimeter defense yes.
LC: Ok. Do you know how many POW camps there were under the Allies?
TB: I don’t know. We had the only strategic one, but they were all over the country of course, and the principle one was on Cheju Island. That was a real problem because they put too many hard-core prisoners together and they rioted in one occasion and took over the camp. They had to send in General Boatner to straighten it out, and my roommate, Wal Odronic, had to go down there – he’s a Japanese speaker – to help Boatner straighten out the situation.
LC: How long was that situation precarious?
TB: It lasted two or three months.
LC: Ok. And your roommate’s name was what?
TB: I beg your pardon?
LC: Your roommate’s name again?
TB: Walter Odronic.
LC: How do you spell his last name, sir?
TB: O-D-R-O-N-I-C.
LC: Ok. Where was he from?
TB: Pennsylvania.
LC: Ok. And he was…was he a career military person?
TB: He was a first lieutenant like me, but he was sixteen years older than me.
LC: Oh really? Had he been a warrant officer or something…
TB: No, no. He was a professor in civilian life.
LC: I see. Was he a professor of Japanese?
TB: He studied Japanese but I don’t know what his field was.
LC: Ok. Sir, you mentioned the team that functioned together around the strategic interrogations and I want to ask you about the position of the Chinese person on the team. In general terms, what were they there for?
TB: Well, they were there to interrogate the Chinese prisoners.
LC: Ok. And was this strictly an issue of language or was there also some political reason for attaching them?
TB: I’m sure there was Taiwanese political interest in the process. They were brought in as Department of Army civilians but they held commissions, many as lieutenant colonels in the Chinese army. And…

LC: Go ahead.

TB: That’s it.

LC: I wondered if you could give a rough estimate of the number of POWs that you or your team that you were affiliated with interrogated over the time that you were there.

TB: I really couldn’t. I don’t know. But you can estimate there were something like ten teams of ten interrogators each, that’s about a hundred interrogators.

LC: What was the longest time you ever worked with one individual?

TB: As I recall, we had one fellow for four or four and a half months.

LC: Now, was he Korean or Chinese?

TB: I think he was Korean.

LC: Was there a, I don’t know…if you will, a more important source, Korean or Chinese, or did it vary by what they had to say?

TB: Well, I think the Chinese were basically, I think in terms of strategic interrogation, one was more interested in Chinese intentions than Korean intentions.

LC: Yes, sir. How did you feel about the actual work you were doing? Did you feel that it was important?

TB: Well, I think I thought it at the time. Whether I feel it was important now, I don’t know.

LC: Ok. Was the information that you were able to develop of an order that you thought it had significance?

TB: It had significance initially, but as I mentioned toward the end of the stint of my stay there, the number of prisoners and the quality of information they provided was considerably reduced.

LC: How long did you actually stay with the 510th, Sir?

TB: It was for a year. Two months of that year, I was assigned to headquarters.

LC: In what capacity?

TB: In sixteen different capacities.

LC: Do you remember any of them?
TB: Yeah. Repair and Utilities Often, officer’s club custodian, information/education officer, motor pool supervisor... What else...?

LC: Sir, did this come near the end of your year?

TB: It was in the middle of my tour there and I was assigned solely because I was one of the two, only two regular Army officers, in the outfit. And the colonel in charge of the company was convinced that regular Army officers would get the job done as he wanted. I expressed no interest in what he wanted me to do and got into open conflict with him.

LC: How did that resolve itself?

TB: By my being rated that I should be eliminated from the service as soon as possible. He kept me in these jobs exactly sixty days, which was enough for an efficiency report.

LC: And did his opinion carry any weight subsequently?

TB: It didn’t because it was so atypical of the other ratings. I was promoted to captain on time.

LC: And when did that actually happen?

TB: In the summer of 1956.

LC: Ok. Sir, when did you leave Korea?

TB: I think it was July of 1954...1953, sorry.

LC: 1953. And that’s at the time of the conclusion of the ceasefire, is that right?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Ok. Were you able to pay a lot of attention to the negotiations? Although, of course, there wasn’t a lot to know, I suppose.

TB: We didn’t get much information on that, but the most interesting aspect I recounted in this book on Korea is that [President] Syngman Rhee didn’t want to have to repatriate pro-South Korean, Korean prisoners from North Korea. So he told his guards on a certain day – I think it was in June of ’52, ’53 – that they were not to use force to restrain any large exodus from the camp of prisoners. On the other hand, if any group of five or less tried to get out they could be shot at. So, this led to one of the most bizarre instances in my lifetime, in which the prisoners lined up in front of one of the three circular barbed wire enclosures, cut a hole in the barbed wire, and started marching through or walking through the barbed wire. They got to the outer barbed wire, cut a hole there, started out through there. We had a U.S. MP – we had two or three [U.S.] MPs per camp – and they stood outside this second hole and they took their rifle butts and hit the prisoners over the
behind with their rifle butts. The prisoners got up, saluted, smiled, shook hands, and disappeared.

So here’s the case where our enemies, POWs, become our friends, become our allies.

LC: Just by walking through the fence?
TB: That’s right.

LC: Sir, did you actually observe this happening?
TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Where were you in relation to the point in which the wire was cut? How far away?
TB: Oh, I’d say a hundred yards.

LC: Did you know that this was going to happen?
TB: I had no pre-warning of this. So far as I know, our esteemed colonel didn’t have any warning of it either.

LC: And were you just agog when this happened?
TB: I found it amusing.

LC: About how many former POWs walked through the fence that day? Do you know?
TB: A couple hundred.

LC: Really? And did the same thing happen elsewhere, to your knowledge?
TB: It happened throughout the country.

LC: Sir, when you were in Korea, I know you were in restricted areas and so forth, but I wonder if you got off base such that you saw anything of the country at all.
TB: Because I objected so much to this riding over the dusty roads, in the afternoon, at the close of business, I found a route through the mountains and I gradually built myself up so that I could run the entire length of that route and get to the officer’s quarters before the truck did. And I went up through the hills so there was no dust. In addition to that, I visited, on Sundays, several temples; Pomosa frequently, which was not too far away, and I got up to Kyong-Ju, where the ancient Korean Shila dynasty capital was located. I was able to travel into Pusan two or three times.

LC: Did you find yourself attracted to some of these cultural points that you were able to visit?
TB: Well, I love Korea. I enjoyed it very much.
LC: Did you have a camera?
TB: I took several color slides of that.
LC: Did you pick up any Korean?

TB: Now, that’s one of the greatest failings of my life. I was there for a year, and if I had my wits about me, I would have studied Korean from day one and come up with at least some minimal knowledge of the spoken language. I regard that as a waste of time, in that respect.

LC: Sir, you picked up a few other languages later on though, so…

TB: Yeah. Right now I’m studying Korean, as a matter of fact.

LC: Oh, are you really?

TB: Yeah. My wife and I started a Korean course three weeks ago.

LC: Oh, how wonderful. How’s it going?

TB: It’s going quite well.

LC: Very good. Sir, let’s take a break here for a moment.

TB: Sure.

LC: Ok. Sir, you told about your, really, lack of accomplishment in the Vietnamese language when you came out of the nine months of training. Did you recognize at the time that your facility was not as great as it should be?

TB: Certainly.

LC: Ok. Did you have some kind of personal plan as to how to make up this deficit – you were doing other things, taking other courses on the side, to make up deficits. I wonder if you had a private plan?

TB: Not in Washington, but I took daily instruction as soon as I got to Vietnam.

LC: When did you complete the Vietnamese language course, do you remember?

TB: It must have been August of ’58.

LC: And at what time did you learn that you were going to be assigned in Saigon?

TB: I don’t recall.

LC: Ok. You don’t remember whether it was before or after your completion of the language course?

TB: It must have been before.

LC: Ok. And you arrived out in Saigon, roughly, when?

TB: It was either August or September.

LC: Ok. So, almost immediately?

TB: Yeah, sure.
LC: Sir, do you remember flying out to Vietnam the first time?
TB: Certainly.
LC: Sir, can you describe, first of all, your route and your impressions upon arrival?
TB: I think it was via Hong Kong, and in those days, the Foreign Service traveled first class. It seemed to me they just changed the regulation in May of ’58 and you went business class or something.
LC: So, I assume there was no military transport that was available to you. You flew on a commercial…
TB: Oh yeah, it was a commercial flight. It seemed to me there was a stop over in Hong Kong.
LC: Did you depart then from the east coast?
TB: From Washington, D.C. No, wait. Let me recollect. It must have been the west coast somewhere.
LC: Ok. And do you remember getting off the plane the first time, sir?
TB: I remember the heat and going to the Majestic Hotel, which is on the banks of the Saigon River. The hotel was not modern at all but it was air conditioned, had a balcony, and it faced the river.
LC: Was it beautiful, sir?
TB: Sorry?
LC: Was it a beautiful place?
TB: Not particularly beautiful. No.
LC: Ok. Can you tell me what kinds of impressions you had?
TB: I wish I could recollect with greater detail, but I can’t.
LC: Ok.
TB: I remember being excited by being once more in Asia.
LC: And you reported to the embassy at some point.
TB: The following morning.
LC: Do you remember that day?
TB: I don’t remember circumstances.
LC: Sir, who was the Ambassador when you arrived?
TB: Elbridge Dubrow, he was quite a character.
LC: Did you meet him right away?
TB: I met him shortly thereafter. I don’t recall if it was the first day. I was assigned as a vice consul in the consular section.

LC: For someone who doesn’t understand what consular affairs are, could you give a general description?
TB: One, you’re occupied with taking care of Americans who find themselves abroad. That’s essentially the duty. And you issue passports, renew passports, give foreigner’s VISAs to the United States, so on. You do notarizations; you take care of Americans who die abroad. If Americans are jailed you look after their interests, you don’t try to get them out unless…what you try to do is you try to make sure they’re treated right.

LC: Did you have much training in consular affairs back in the basic FSO [Foreign Service Officer] course?
TB: I don’t recall. I’m sure there was a considerable portion on consular affairs, but I don’t recall.

LC: When you arrived in Saigon to take up these duties, were you pretty much learning on the fly, on the job?
TB: That’s right. And I had a woman boss named Helen Lyons with whom I continued to correspond until she lost her mind two or three years ago.

LC: What was her last name, sir?
TB: Helen Lyons. L-Y-O-N-S. She was a very genteel lady. I remember she came in one morning in a panic because a chinchook, a small lizard, had perched on her toothbrush.

LC: And that was upsetting to her.
TB: Yeah.

LC: Sir, how long had she been in the Foreign Service when you first met her, do you know?
TB: A long time and she retired long before I did. But I last saw her in someplace [at her home in Palo Alto] in northern California, just south of San Francisco, about four years ago, and we corresponded annually at Christmas time.

LC: Was she a Southeast Asian or Asian specialist, as it were?
TB: Not at all. Consular officials don’t tend to specialize in an area.

LC: What other posts had she had by the time you knew her?
TB: I don’t recall offhand. She’d been…she wanted to go to Paris, and I think she went to
Paris after Saigon and found it not as dreamy as she expected.

LC: Was she unmarried, sir?

TB: Yes.

LC: What was it like working for a female boss?

TB: I had no problem with that.

LC: Were consular officials, consular affairs people, in general, not attached, would you
say, as much as political officers, to a country to which they were posted?

TB: Not attached?

LC: Attached. That is they had less interface with local officials, that kind of thing.

TB: Yeah, that’s correct.

LC: Can you tell me one or two things that happened to you while you were working
consular affairs there in Saigon that you recall particularly?

TB: Yeah. Particularly, I’m thinking of the case of the Mayaguez [the ship] which I have
written up in one of my books, whereby an ignorant – ignorant in the sense of [having] little
schooling – seaman made a declaration of currency that he held and put the decimal point in the
wrong place and was found to have much more money than he originally declared because of the
misplaced decimal point, and the port customs man tried to fine him a very large sum of money
and confiscate his wad of money to begin with because of the wrong declaration. I tried as much
as I could to persuade this fellow to let him off without penalty, and he did end up reducing the fine
considerably. This was a case of a man of little schooling who was victimized by his own
ignorance. Another case that I got involved with was the death of an American traveling with his
wife around the world. The wife insisted that the husband accompany her to the final leg of their
world trip, which was in Japan. In other words, the coffin carrying the corpse had to go through
Japan. I worked with a very brilliant Chinese vice consular who later – Japanese vice consul –
Nishiyama Takehiko, who later became the ambassador to Brussels. He and I arranged for the
flight of the corpse via Japan, and the problem was that the death occurred on a Friday evening
and the very few government offices were open on Saturday. I had to type the export permit at the
ministry of, whatever ministry handles it. I can’t remember if it was interior or what. And typing this
up I was given a French typewriter where the Q’s are where the A’s are and so on. And I mistyped.
I put a Q in the wrong place in several locations, but we did get the export permit. Then the
amusing part of this was, we went out to the airport to seal the coffin and Nishiyama seized a wax-seal, which was made in America, and stamped – pardon me, made in Japan – stamped the coffin with the American seal and I stamped it by mistake with a Japanese seal. Anyway, what I did during the orientation for newcomers, I gave the consular a briefing for Helen. I urged those Americans who were going to die on their round the world trips to do so on a night other than Friday or a weekend – the time on Monday through Thursday – because of the problems of getting the export permit within forty-eight hours.

LC: Do you think your advice was heeded?

TB: It didn’t work.

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

TB: Ok.
LC: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech. I’m continuing my
oral history interview with Thomas Barnes. Today’s date is the 12th of February 2004, and I again
am on the campus at Texas Tech and Mr. Barnes is in Austin. Sir, I think you recalled a couple of
things about your time at Ft. Dix that you might want to share.

TB: One of the techniques that we used aside from marching back from training areas for
this particular exercise of basic training, eight week course. After the first four weeks – in other
words it took a week to fill and then four weeks of training – the trainees were first eligible for leave.
They couldn’t leave Ft. Dix until the end of the fourth week of the training cycle. The regimental
policy was that fifty percent of the trainees had to stay behind. Sergeant Groller and I established
a policy whereby they all were released except for eight. There were four barracks and we
required there be two people per barracks so that when one was out for a meal somebody else
was covering the possessions in the barracks. So, this policy of extremely hard work during the
week and complete liberty on the weekend for all but eight people out of 240 contributed to their
morale. What do I want to mention about that in addition? There were a couple of cases that were
unusual. One of the boys who went on…went AWOL, absent without leave, I went through his
papers and he had a considerable stock portfolio, this being 1955 or ’56. 1956. It must have been
twenty or thirty thousand dollars. And I developed a correspondence with his mother who was off
achieving enlightenment in India. It was an interesting case, but the poor fellow was AWOL, which
earned him no credit with the Army. There was another fellow who went AWOL periodically whose
mother would call me from New York saying Mortimer, or whatever his name was – it began with
an M – is home without leave again. I would give her the number of the military police to call to
collect him.

LC: And this happened a couple of times?

TB: It happened two or three times during the cycle. (Laughing)

LC: Well, what about the other AWOL case with the fellow whose mom was in India? How
was that resolved?

TB: I don’t recall in entirety, but he did not finish the cycle with the group that he was
inducted in.
LC: Now, Tom, how did you decide which eight fellows had to stay?

TB: They got on my list during the week when I observed their performance.

LC: Was it a stimulus to perform better or a punishment, would you say?

TB: Well, as I recall, we asked for volunteers if there were any volunteers, which there were none. We did – Sergeant Groller and I – kept a list of people who didn’t seem to be performing.

LC: Did any of your fellows take too great a liberty while they were on those weekend leaves?

TB: Well, this is the one stipulation. Whereas [for] any other company, they had to be back for duty at 8:00 A.M on Monday, I required that everyone be back by 5:00 P.M. on Sunday so they’d be in good shape for the following training day. Anyone who arrived after 5:00 stayed in the next weekend.

LC: Ok. So that potentially provided the next weekend barrack guards then.

TB: That’s right. There was one other…when I spent this year as information/education officer I was very fortunate to have an enlisted man as a, not so much as a helper, but as a co-worker. This was Stephen Marcus who had come fresh from Cambridge with a Ph.D. at the age of twenty-two. He’s been for many years a full professor at Columbia in English literature and he’s the author of *The Other Victorians*, among several other scholarly works. He’s an authority on Freud. But this is a remarkable person to be associated with.

LC: How long did he work with you and you with him?

TB: For a year.

LC: Ok.

TB: One of the most memorable things that he said to me was that the books at the college at Cambridge that he was located in, he was assigned to, were located [shelved] by color and size and not by author and title.

LC: Do you know which college that was, sir?

TB: I can’t remember offhand. I want to say Magdalene, but I can’t say for sure.

LC: Ok. Well, it’s probably distinctive enough such that that reference would flag someone who knew.

TB: Sure. Anyway, that’s all I wanted to mention at Ft. Dix.
LC: We were talking this morning about your arrival in Saigon and a couple of the interesting things that happened to you and that you observed as a consular officer. I wanted to ask, Tom, where were you living in Saigon?

TB: I was living initially in an apartment building of two or three floors, I think.

LC: Was it housing for other Americans as well?

TB: There was a vice consul in the economic section – a third secretary of the economic section – who lived above me.

LC: So, this was in effect, some approved housing?

TB: It was housing rented by the embassy.

LC: How close to the embassy was it?

TB: Well, it wasn’t very far away, but in terms of a taxi ride about twenty minutes.

LC: Let me ask you a little bit about the embassy. Was the building that you worked in on this first assignment, the building that most people will visualize from the TET Offensive or from 1975?

TB: Not at all. It was an old building at a corner in downtown.

LC: Ok. Was it a French era building?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. Can you describe…

TB: It had five floors and a rickety elevator.

LC: A rickety elevator.

TB: One of the single… I mentioned that Ambassador Dubrow was quite colorful. He organized, every Sunday evening, an open house to meet local people. He had a system, which was established with a loudspeaker at the entrance to the house, which was on Doan Thi Diem Street, which has since been renamed. At any rate, the person in charge – the announcer – when the individual whose car was due to pick him up, would come out, he would present a number to the announcer. The announcer would then call out the number and the chauffeur would then drive up and pick up the individual. And one of the duties as junior officers like me was to make small talk with those individuals who emerged from the ambassador’s residence there after spending an hour or so of the afternoon cocktail and social hour. The first one – one of the ones that I remember talking to, was walleyed, a walleyed Vietnamese. I knew that I had met a Deputy Mayor of Saigon who was walleyed. So, I thought I would flatter him by saying, ‘I’m sure you’re the mayor
of Saigon.’ And he looked at me and laughed and he said, ‘Je suis le vice-président,’ – ‘I'm the vice president,’ he said, ‘if there’s a Nguyen Ngoe Tho.’

LC: And his name was…I’m sorry.

TB: Nguyen Ngoe Tho.

LC: Oh ok. Sir, did you ever speak with him again?

TB: No, but he at least took it humorously.

LC: Ok, good. (Laughing)

TB: Then there was an Australian ambassador who came out and (I will not mention his name, but he handed me the ticket, which I handed over [to the announcer] to call his chauffeur, and it was number thirty-five. I'm supposed to be making small talk so I said to him, ‘Do you know what the number thirty-five signifies in Vietnamese?’ He said, ‘No’. And I mentioned to him that there were forty animals in the Vietnamese zodiac and the number thirty-five was the goat, which was the symbol of sexual excess. He looked at me in astonishment and said, ‘Who gave me that number?!’ And I said, ‘I imagine you were the thirty-fifth person to arrive.’ And he said, ‘Let’s talk about something interesting, shall we?’ And he stalked into his car, which just appeared. In any rate, it turned out that this Ambassador’s family had not yet arrived in Vietnam and he had a female first secretary who told us that he chased her around her desk in the office before his family arrived. So, he had a bad reputation to begin with.

LC: He suspected that maybe you had some inside information on his non-work activities.

TB: Apparently. Anyway, for that reason, or for whatever reason, the embassy decided I would be more diplomatically placed upcountry and they sent me up to Hue as consul, where I would be out of harm's way.

LC: Now sir, how long were you in Saigon before they shipped you up to Hue?

TB: I was there two years. Four months in the political section and the rest of the time in the consular section. However, in the consular section, I had the daily task of translating headlines from the Vietnamese press to indicate if there was an article that might be of interest to the political section. So, the first thing I did every morning was to scan eight or nine Vietnamese newspapers for headlines that might be of relevance to the political section. And one day, I came up with a title – 'Thailand Bombs Cambodia' or 'Cambodia Bombs Thailand', I don’t remember which was the perpetrator. This was quite interesting to the Deputy Chief of Mission who called me up and asked for a full translation of the article. So, I went back to the article and discovered that I had mistaken
the tone for mien, the M-I-E-N, which was little [had a high] tone for mien dinh, which was Burma
[instead of an even tone, meaning Cambodia]. In other words, the bombing had taken place
between Burma and Thailand, and not between Cambodia and Thailand by a simple difference in
tone of the word ‘mien’. The DCM took this – and I had to apologize – but he took this in good
stride.

LC: Who was the DCM, sir?
TB: Francis Cunningham.
LC: Ok. Can you tell me a little bit about his background and your impressions of him?
TB: I don't know. I guess his background was mainly European service, like Dubrow.
LC: Yes, uh huh. What kind of a man was he?
TB: He was a very effective Deputy Chief of Mission.
LC: Did he stay in Saigon for more than the usual FSO appointment?
TB: No, no. Not very long.
LC: Who replaced him, do you remember?
TB: Bill Truehart. Truehart was brought in by Fritz Nolting, who succeeded Dubrow as
ambassador. And they were friends in Europe and then parted irrevocably over the issue of Ngo
Dinh Diem.
LC: Sir, that is something I would like to ask you about. Can you discuss the contours of
the disagreement between Nolting and Truehart?
TB: Nolting was an ardent supporter of Ngo Dinh Diem. Most people in the Mission, not
the CIA station chief, Bill Colby, but the political counselors, Joe Mendenhall and [DCM] Truehart,
felt that there was no possibility of a winning situation for the U.S. government with the continuation
of Diem in power. But Nolting felt quite differently, and that was the conflict between Nolting and
Truehart.
LC: That conflict took a little while to bubble up, I'm sure.
TB: Yeah, because they were old friends from Europe, you see.
LC: Yeah. And did Nolting really bring Truehart right along with him at the time of his
appointment?
TB: I think so. I don't know if it was exactly the term co-terminus, but an ambassador has
the right to choose two people, his secretary and his DCM.
LC: Did Nolting bring a secretary as well?
TB: That I don’t remember.

LC: Ok. Were you upcountry by the time Nolting arrived?

TB: Yes.

LC: Ok. I’d like to ask you a little bit about your own impressions of Ngo Dinh Diem. Can you shed any light on his personality? Did you ever meet him or see him?

TB: I was at the…approximately in April of ’61 there was a dedication of the Nam Son Coal Mine in Quang Nam Province. It’s southwest of Da Nang, of Tourane. I was seated behind – I met him before so I never entered into any substantive conversation with him – I was seated behind and to the right of Diem, just behind him, on the platform. I discovered – I was consul in Hue at the time – and I discovered three weeks later through a CIA report that was funneled to me that a bomb had been placed under the platform, just under Ngo Dinh Diem’s chair, and had been removed; had been found out and removed about half an hour before the ceremony began.

LC: You found out about this some weeks later?

TB: Three weeks later.

LC: Can you describe your feelings when you found this out?

TB: I was glad that somebody detected it.

LC: Did you wish that you had been told at the time?

TB: Had what?

LC: Did you wish that someone had told you at the time that there was a strong possibility that you were in danger?

TB: Well, that would have been helpful.

LC: Yes, sir. You said that you had seen Diem earlier, perhaps in Saigon?

TB: No. This is the only occasion I can recall having met him.

LC: Oh ok. What were your impressions of him? Did you form an opinion?

TB: This is all second hand, but he was a man of great integrity and he would go on a monologue for three or four hours in meeting with his interlocutors. He would accept no advice. One could admire his nationalism and his dedication to his job, but he was certainly an ineffective president.

LC: Did he have particularly close ties to anyone in the embassy?

TB: You mean any one person? I think the CIA station chief had a reasonable rapport with him.
LC: That would be William Colby?
TB: Yes.
LC: Did you know Bill Colby?
TB: Quite well but I met him in Saigon and associated with him in Saigon, but I principally
knew him when he was in the CORDS role later on. And he stayed overnight with me in Binh Long
one night in '67 or '68.
LC: Before we get to your experience with CORDS, speaking of the time that you were in
Saigon, what impression did you have of Mr. Colby?
TB: Well, he was a non-pretentious, quite intelligent individual. I was not privy to his
particular operations, but…
LC: Did you think of him as a person of integrity as well?
TB: Of great integrity.
LC: And what about his appreciation of the Vietnamese people? Did you form an opinion
about that?
TB: So far as I know, he had a great affection for the Vietnamese people.
LC: Ok. Would you say that Ambassador Dubrow had that same feeling?
TB: Not at all.
LC: Ok. What makes you think that?
TB: He was mainly European-oriented. I heard them say one time, ‘If they ever want to
break relations with any of our little brown brothers in America, in the Americas, just send in
Dubrow and he’d deliver the ultimatum and get out of the country.’ He was a man of Vesuvian
temper and very colorful.
LC: Did you ever see him get upset?
TB: Yeah, particularly with his wife during receptions. ‘God damn it, Emily!’ he would say if
something wouldn’t march right.
LC: I’m sorry, what was the context for that kind of remark?
TB: I don’t know, maybe some lack of arrangement for the cocktails or something. Also, I
met him one time, many years later, in an elevator in the State Department. I said, ‘My name is
Tom Barnes. I was your man in Hue.’ He said, ‘Yes I know.’ I said, ‘What are you doing these
days?’ He was over at the American Enterprise Institute at Georgetown. He said, ‘I’m just helping
you boys fight Communism’.
LC: Did you say, 'Thank you, sir'?
TB: I don't recall what I said.
LC: Sir, there may be people in the future who might be interested in Emily Dubrow. Do you remember anything about her?
TB: She was...she died early because of some, what disease I don't know, but she was a thin, pale, very pleasant woman.
LC: Where was she from? Do you remember, sir?
TB: I don't remember.
LC: But she struck you as a pleasant girl?
TB: Oh yeah. Sure.
LC: Were there...can you describe, in general, the embassy's relations with the rest of the diplomatic community in Saigon? Were there usual suspects who turned up at all U.S. Embassy events?
TB: Well, I was manning the consular section, so I wasn't in the political/economic/social world, but there was a wide acquaintance within the international diplomatic corps and with officials in the Ngo Dinh Diem regime at that time.
LC: Do you remember any incidents around those relationships that you'd like to talk about?
TB: I mentioned my association with a very competent Japanese.
LC: Yes, you did. The vice consul?
TB: Yes.
LC: And you gave his name earlier, I believe.
TB: Yes. Also, I had very close relations with the Thai...with three people in the Thai Embassy. Ambassador...what was his name? Phairoff? No. I forget the Ambassador's name. He was very genial. Then there was Phon Wannamethee, who was the first secretary. He later became secretary general of the Foreign Ministry in Thailand. Then there was also Chinda Athonda, who was the official, a Thai official, that I had relations on and off with over the years. And Phramote Konsumuth was the third secretary. I also had good relations with the Cambodian and Lao Missions. Particularly, the Lao, there was...heavens...what was the name? Let me think about the name for a minute. That'll come back to me. [Sichat Sithibourn at the Lao Embassy.]
LC: Sure, that's fine. You had very good relationships with those people?
TB: Yeah.
LC: What about the French?
TB: The French were…I didn’t have much dealings with the French except when I went to Hue because there was a French Consul General in Da Nang whom I was relatively close to named Jacque Boizet. What amused me about Boizet was his sense of humor. He had protested that since he’d been a consul general here he was being downgraded by being sent to a consulate in Da Nang, and Couure de Murville, the French Foreign Minister, had assigned him particularly. He said, ‘Vous serez a la charniere des deux mondes’ – ‘you’ll be at the hinge of the two worlds’ in Da Nang.
LC: And that’s a reference, sir, to what?
TB: That’s the reference to the zone dividing North and South Vietnam.
LC: That’s actually a nice turn of phrase, I think.
TB: But he was trying to pep up Boizet’s morale.
LC: (Laughing) Did it work? Was it successful?
TB: No.
LC: Sir, what, in general, if you know, was the relationship between the U.S. Embassy and the French diplomats in Saigon? Was it tense, or…?
TB: No, I think it was quite close because Dubrow was, for example, so pro-French, and his predecessor, Heath, whom I didn’t know…
LC: Yes, Donald Heath.
TB: …was very pro-French.
LC: You did not know Don Heath?
TB: I didn’t know him at all. Never met him.
LC: Ok. Sir, you’re in the consular affairs section for most of the time in Saigon, and I wonder if you can give a broad-brush picture of, for example, the number of VISAs that you issued for people from Vietnam going to the United States.
TB: The main number of immigrant VISAs we issued were to Yemenis who had a racket going through Saigon.
LC: Can you describe how that racket functioned?
TB: We stopped…put a stop to it, but it was a series of relatives somewhere, if I recall, in Ohio, who kept sponsoring Yemenis, not directly from Yemen, but via Saigon.
LC: Ok. So, there was an investigation, I'm sure.

TB: Yeah.

LC: Were there a number of Vietnamese, what people might now look at as 'elite' Vietnamese or government people, who were traveling to the United States?

TB: No. The main thing that I had to face was pressure from the Chinese – Nationalist Chinese Embassy – to bring in Chino-Vietnamese or pure Chino...well, they'd be Chino-Vietnamese in the sense that they were born in Vietnam, trying to escape the limitations on the

Chinese. And I remember, there was a very talented Chinese consular there who invited me to a dinner at which one of these girls, who was about fifteen or sixteen, whom he was particularly trying to get to the U.S., played the piano for us to show her artistic achievements. And he turned to me and said, 'Now, why won't you give this girl a VISA?' And so on.

LC: Right. How did you as a junior diplomat handle that kind of thing?

TB: By ignoring it.

LC: Did you just turn and walk away or change the subject?

TB: No, no. I just stonewalled it.

LC: What was the quota for people from Indochina, generally, but specifically Vietnam, to get into the United States at that time?

TB: I don't recall there was much of a quota. The one peculiar case I had was a woman who came into me and was going to marry a Naval lieutenant, a U.S. Naval lieutenant. So, I called her in because on her application she had listed that she had been born in Saigon and in Beijing. So, I called her in and said it's a little difficult to have been born in two such distant locations at the same time. And she said to me, 'Actually, I was born in Tokyo.' So, it turned out that she was an illegitimate daughter of a Japanese colonel and a Vietnamese mother, and all the Chinese or Vietnamese or Japanese or whatever in this category were, by Ngo Dinh Diem's decree, required to have Saigon birth as a location. So that was added to their dossier, but because this woman had not been straightforward with us in the beginning I did not issue her a VISA. So, the lieutenant who was going to marry her flew back from the States in high dudgeon. I don't remember how this eventually turned out, but one turned down the application on the basis of false testimony. The other thing was, among those prohibited from entering the United States, was anyone who had been a prostitute. So, on the VISA form, there was a question – ‘Have you ever been a prostitute?’
Nobody in my entire year and eight months in the consular section ever put ‘yes’ after that in that
category.

LC: Were there other questions on the form that you recall? They probably weren’t as
interesting as that one, but was it straight biographical detail?
TB: Yes. Yeah, sure. Well – ‘Were you a member of the Communist Party?’ You know
that sort of…

LC: Yes. Ok. And were people also asked for family information of people in the United
States to whom they might be related?
TB: That I don’t recall.
LC: Ok. Sir, did you also play some role in facilitating visits to Saigon of Americans that
you feel…VIPs or politicians?
TB: I did an awful lot of that in Bangkok but not so much in Vietnam.

LC: Ok. Did you ever have a load of Congressmen show up or anything like that?
TB: Well, frequently in Thailand.
LC: Ok, but not so much in Saigon?

TB: Not so much in Saigon. Now, one of the things that the political section asked me to
do when I was still in the consular section was to undertake visits to the countryside on the grounds
that the government was very sensitive about having political officers go out of Saigon, whereas a
consular officer had as part of his duty to maintain contacts with the Americans in the provinces.
The principal Americans in the provinces at that time were members of the Christian Missionary
Alliance, a fundamentalist group which was quite extensively stationed throughout Vietnam. I had
very cordial relations with them. I found them very pleasant to deal with.

LC: Were they scattered throughout Vietnam or concentrated?
TB: All over. All over. And I traveled once in the Delta, for example, through Vinh Long,
Long Xuyen, all the way to…heavens…Rach Gia and places like this. And I would stop and visit
with these families and talk with them and so on about local conditions. So, I would file reports,
which the political section made use of.

LC: How many trips did you take like that, Tom?
TB: Three or four.
LC: Were those sort of evenly spaced over your time?
TB: Yes, but this is all in the consular section.
LC: And at one point did you actually go out towards the Cambodian border?

TB: I did. I tried to cross into Cambodia at one point from Ha Tien in order to get back to Saigon by a very short route, but I arrived around 1:00 P.M. and the Cambodian district chief was taking his nap. And one of the things that I learned was never wake a district chief from his afternoon siesta because he was not at all receptive of traveling through his territory, no matter how brief that would have been, but it would have saved me an enormous amount of road travel if I had been able to hook through Cambodia.

LC: Your timing just wasn’t very good.

TB: That’s right.

LC: Do you remember that official?

TB: I don’t remember his name.

LC: But do you remember...how was he dressed and what was that border crossing place like?

TB: He was wearing a sarong. That’s the one just opposite Ha Tien.

LC: Was it pretty ramshackle or was there a proper barrier there?

TB: Everything has always been ramshackle in Cambodia since the Twelfth Century.

LC: Visiting the missionaries, did you utilize that, for lack of better word, a pretext to get a better sense of South Vietnam and the countryside?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Tom, what kinds of places did you visit when you were off on one of these trips and you had some time? What were you drawn to?

TB: I was drawn to the historical – not so much in the delta, which doesn’t have so much of it – but the historical remnants of the Cham Empire along the central Vietnamese coast.

LC: And had you been doing reading on your own such that you had a context for doing these things?

TB: Yeah, sure. Particularly, The Hinduized King – George Coedés’ The Hinduized King – of what is it...Indochina or Indonesia or whatever it is. [George Coedés’ The Hinduized Kingdoms of Southeast Asia.]

LC: What kinds of places did you actually visit? Do you know the names of some of the places you went?
TB: Well, there were Cham towers in various locations. One in Phan Rang province and...on the road between Phan Rang and Dalat, and the Po Na Gar in Nha Trang.

LC: Was there a protocol over visiting these sites? Were they shrines at all or just kind of sitting by the side of the road, no one paying any attention?

TB: Most of them were abandoned but the Po Na Gar at Nha Trang was under active worship.

LC: And did you view any ceremonies taking place there?

TB: Not really, no.

LC: Did you go up to Dalat, sir?

TB: Several times. I love Dalat.

LC: It's beautiful. Can you describe it for those who might want a picture of how it looked in the late '50s?

TB: Well, it's clustered around a series of natural and artificial lakes, and is mountainous and the climate is quite bearable compared to Saigon. There was a grand hotel there, which was not so grand later on, but at that time it was the principle hostelry in Dalat. The embassy also had a villa it had rented from the family of Nguyen Huu Hao, who had...whose daughter had been married to Bao Dai, among other women. And this house was reputedly haunted. It was three stories. And the rumor was that the mistress of the household had tossed a servant down from the top floor to the bottom and the servant had been killed. And at night you could hear this spirit of the servant walking along these creaking wooden floors along the corridors.

LC: And when...I presume you stayed there at the villa. And did you ever hear the floorboards creaking?

TB: Every time.

LC: Sir, can you describe the inside of the villa?

TB: As you went in there...immediately to the right there was a small room called the Chinese Room, which was done in red lacquer. It was quite bizarre. Then there was this sort of open corridor with the main corridor. The kitchen was at the back. And as I mentioned there was a lower floor and an upper floor, and it overlooked the lake from an expansive piece of ground.

LC: Was it a beautiful setting, would you say?

TB: Yeah, lovely setting.
LC: What was the actual purpose of the villa? Was it to provide, like in olden times, a place of relief for hard-working bureaucrats?

TB: That's right. It was considered a sort of treat to be able to go there on the weekends.

LC: And how would you get up to Dalat?

TB: Driving. It was a, if I recall, five hour...about a five hour drive. One went up Route 20 then went through Xuan Loc, then Bao Loc or Blao, as it was [formerly] known, and then Dalat.

LC: You did this when you were stationed in Saigon?

TB: Yes.

LC: And at that time did you have security concerns about making that kind of a drive?

TB: Not really.

LC: Did incidents ever take place on that road?

TB: Not at that time, no.

LC: That's quite astounding, really. That tells something about the time that you were there. Tom, can I also ask you about the Cao Dai? Did you ever...

TB: I went to the Cao Dai temple at Tay Ninh.

LC: Say a little bit, if you know, about the history of the Cao Dai sect.

TB: The Cao Dai, if I recall, was founded in 1926 by Ngo van Chieu who was a mystic who was exploring contact with the spirit world, and allegedly, the invention of the religion centered around the ouija board. But the interesting aspect of the religion is its eclecticism. It concludes among its saints Victor Hugo, particularly; Nguyen Binh Khiem who was a fifteenth century Vietnamese mystic, and who else? I can't remember offhand...the organization is like that of the Catholic Church, with a Ho Phap who is the equivalent of the Pope and several cardinals. There are three branches – the Buddhist, the Daoist, and the Confucianist. The Confucianists wore red, the Daoist blue, and the Buddhist...did I say Buddhist?

LC: Yes.

TB: Yellow.

LC: Sir, either at the time or now subsequently have you perhaps given this some thought, what did you think it was in the Vietnamese psyche, particularly in that part of Vietnam, that was attracted to this, as you said, extremely eclectic religion?

TB: Interesting question, which I have not really reflected on.
LC: I'll give you time later, maybe. And we can come back to it if you like. I've always wondered that and I think there are many ways to attack it but none...

TB: It's the love of soothsayers, among other qualities.

LC: At that time, did the Cao Dai sect have any kind of police or paramilitary aspect?

TB: They had their own military force. They were a considerable military force.

LC: Of what sort of order of magnitude?

TB: I'm trying to remember offhand, but I don't recall.

LC: Ok. Were you...what was the purpose of your trip out there?

TB: My purpose was tourism. It was a weekend visit. It's quite close to Saigon.

LC: What was your impression of the actual temple itself?

TB: It's very horrifying. You've got a picture, as you go in the main door, of Victor Hugo talking with Sun Yat Sen and Nguyen Binh Khiem in some language, which nobody is privy to. They're having this conversation. There's a statue of somebody or other with the infant Jesus on his back. It's a, as Norman Lewis describes it, a 'hugger-mugger' of symbolism.

LC: Is that sort of how you felt about it too?

TB: It's too gaudy.

LC: Too gaudy. Yeah.

TB: Have you seen pictures of it?

LC: Yes I have, sir. Did you take pictures while you were there?

TB: Certainly.

LC: And do you still have those pictures?

TB: I do.

LC: Did you ever have occasion to visit there again in later years?

TB: I was most recently there in 1999.

LC: And how did it look to you then, sir?

TB: Just as bad as it did originally.

LC: Did it sustain much damage over the course of the war?

TB: Not at all. It was never...I mean, the paint may have faded at one point or another, but it was never in disarray or...what would you call it...disuse or desuetude.

LC: And is it still a center of worship?

TB: Yeah, but there's no more military content of any kind.
LC: When you were there in the late ’50s, did you see evidence of the paramilitary and the military force there?

TB: No, I didn’t.

LC: Ok. Sir, you mentioned that the older and wiser heads at Saigon decided that they should ship Tom Barnes to Hue…

TB: Which, what, sorry?

LC: That the older and wiser heads in Saigon had decided that they should send Tom Barnes up to Hue. And when exactly did that happen, sir?

TB: The reason for that was that a man had been assigned, Tom Conlan, to Hue, but he had something like six or eight children, and they couldn’t imagine somebody with six or eight children during school, their needs being taken care of in Hue so he was kept [in Saigon]. And to his chagrin I was sent up in his place.

LC: Now, sir, you were the principal officer, is that right?

TB: That’s right.

LC: And was this, to your mind, a promotion?

TB: Well, it was an FSO-4 slot and I was an FSO-7 at the time. So, it was three grades above what I was theoretically holding.

LC: Ok. Why do you think, in all honesty, that you were selected for this?

TB: Because I spoke Vietnamese.

LC: You think that was the principle issue?

TB: And that I had been operating for the political section in various capacities.

LC: Yeah. What had you been doing in your four months as a political officer in Saigon?

TB: I did the…I was in charge of doing the [monthly] security, the internal security report, which up until that time had been issued six or seven months after the month in which they covered.

LC: In other words, they were coming out very, very late?

TB: Yeah. And I brought it up so that they came out within five days of the conclusion of the previous month.

LC: Did you fulfill that duty, that those four months, right at the end of your time in Saigon?

TB: That’s right.

LC: And were you noticing, sir…
TB: So sorry, I may be mistaken. I can't recall whether I was interrupted from the consular duties for four months [and returned to them] or whether it was the tail end [of my time in Saigon]. I somehow think it was toward the tail end.

LC: Ok. I was just wondering whether, in that capacity, you saw increased evidence of Communist activism in the south?

TB: No, when I really detected it was in Hue because when I arrived in Hue in July of ’60 there were seven province chiefs – there were seven provinces in the consular district. Six of them had civilian province chiefs. Kontum, the hairiest one, did not. By the time I left, eleven months later in June of 1961, all of the provinces except for Thua Thien [encompassing] Hue had military province chiefs.

LC: Let me ask you about your arrival up in Hue and then we'll talk about the security situation also. Sir, how did you actually go up to Hue?

TB: I had driven to Hue on my own previously, but I don't recall, in order to assume the office, whether I went up by plane to Phu Bai or not. I don't remember whether I drove up or not.

LC: Ok, but you had driven up there at one point?

TB: Yes.

LC: And did you just follow Highway 1 or how did you go?

TB: Yes, you follow Highway 1. That's right.

LC: And did you experience any difficulties or any kind of security issues on that drive?

TB: Well, several of the river crossings were on pontoon bridges and one had to wait, you know, in a queue before you could cross because the traffic could be only one way at a time. This is also true of Hai Van Pass between Da Nang and Hue.

LC: That you had to go across on a pontoon?

TB: No, not on a pontoon. I'm sorry. For the going across Hai Van Pass there was traffic one way for an hour and a half and then for one way for the other.

LC: Oh, I see. I see. Of course. And what were you driving? Were you driving an embassy vehicle?

TB: It was, if I recall, a jeep of some kind when I was assigned to Hue.

LC: And, regardless of how you actually got up to Hue, when you arrived there, what was the situation at the consulate building?
TB: Well, there was myself, a CIA officer under the guise of a vice consul, and an administrative assistant. In addition, in Hue, as far as official Americans were concerned, there was a USIS Public Affairs officer but he had his office in the library, the Vietnamese-American Association library, rather than in the consulate.

LC: And where was the library building located in relationship to the consulate? Was it...

TB: It was in a different...it was on the same side of the river, but perhaps a mile away.

LC: Did you have much to do with the USIS officer who was there?

TB: Yeah. John Rhodes. We interacted quite frequently. There was also an AID technician, Anita Hill, I think it was, who was quite competent.

LC: She was with…?

TB: She was with AID.

LC: Ok. And what was her background? Do you know?

TB: She was a nurse.

LC: How long had she been with USAID?

TB: That I don’t know.

LC: Ok. How long had she been in Hue?

TB: Longer than I had and she was still there beyond my departure.

LC: Is that right? What kinds of programs was USAID running out of Hue at that point?

TB: I think they were mainly medical, but I’m not sure.

LC: For civilians, I assume.

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: And you said that the USIS man was John Rhodes?

TB: John Roads.

LC: His background, what do you know about it?

TB: Well, he was a highly, literate individual. His wife’s name was Virginia. I don’t know much about his education, but he was obviously well schooled.

LC: What were his principal duties?

TB: Getting across the message of America to the local population.

LC: Was the library actually utilized, do you know?

TB: Yes.

LC: It was? By whom?
TB: There were a lot of Vietnamese who came to it to read.

LC: And what kinds of materials were in the library? Do you know?

TB: That I can't recall, but I can recall the USIS libraries, but I've been mixing them up.

LC: Did you actually go over there and spend much time at all?

TB: I, of course, visited all the locations there where we had people. We had a MAAG detachment, a Military Assistance Advisory Group attachment, fifteen kilometers out of town to the south on Highway 1 at Phu Bai where the airport was.

LC: And how many advisors were attached there?

TB: As I recall, there were seven or eight. Maybe it was bigger than that.

LC: And you went down there to visit them with some frequency?

TB: Yeah, certainly.

LC: While you were at Hue, you mentioned that there was a vice consul there. Was it the same person over the entirety of your posting?

TB: Yes.

LC: Ok. Do you know his name?

TB: I do, but I don't know whether I should be…

LC: I see. Ok. That's fine. And sir, what was the rest of the diplomatic community in Hue like? Who else had offices…

TB: In central Vietnam there were only three, there were only four, diplomatic entities. I was the first to arrive among the four so I was the Dean of the Consular Corps although only a vice consul. And then there was Jacques Boizet in Da Nang, there was a Chinese, Nationalist Chinese, Consul in Hue, and then there was the esteemed Archbishop Urrutia, who had formally been the Archbishop of Hue but had retired to a monastery in Quang Tri, La Vang. He was an impressive, very impressive, man with a long white beard.

LC: About how old was he, sir?

TB: He was ancient. How old, I don't know. But when a dignitary would arrive from Saigon, the Consular Corps had to be present at Phu Bai to greet them. I always ceded my theoretical primacy as the first to arrive to the Archbishop and put him first in line.

LC: And was that appreciated, do you think?

TB: He never expressed to me in one way or another. I imagine he did.
LC: Ok. Sir, I want to ask you a little bit about the city itself. You arrived there in the middle of 1960. Can you describe, for example, what was the state of repair of the Citadel?

TB: I arrived there in July of ’60. The Citadel was in considerable disarray, particularly the Thế Miếu. On one side [the right] of the Citadel, if you’re facing it from the river, it’s a Thế Miếu, which is to the ancestors of the Nguyen Anh, who founded the Nguyen Dynasty, but he wasn’t the first emperor or king but he was the Nguyen Lord. [The first Nguyen Lord was Nguyen Hoang.]

Then on the left hand side [of the Citadel], was the Thóc Miếu, which had a big temple and altar for each of the emperors in the Nguyen Dynasty, starting with Nguyen Anh [except for Bao Dai]. They also had an urn, a bronze urn, for each of the emperors from Nguyen Anh through [Tay Ginh?] [except Bao Dai]. There was nothing for Bao Dai and there never was an altar for Bao Dai in that complex. The queen mother’s quarters were intact and in good shape, and her pavilion is in good shape. Most of these buildings were badly damaged during the TET Offensive of ‘68.

LC: Yes, Exactly.

TB: But at that time, several of the minor buildings were preserved. On the other hand, a compound that I know, which used to contain over a hundred structures, was reduced to twenty or thirty.

LC: And, sir, did you spend much time at the Citadel?

TB: I found it a fascinating location. And at that time the Royal Ballet was still functioning. I have some prized pictures I took with a National Geographic photographer who later became Editor-in-Chief of the Geographic, Bill something [Garrett].

LC: And he been sent there by the magazine?

TB: Yes. And he and I…well, he took some extensive pictures which were published in the, I think, March or April ’61 issue of the Geographic. I got a lot of pictures alongside him at the time.

LC: Did you spend a little bit of time then with him while he was in Hue?

TB: Quite a bit of time.

LC: What was your impression of him?

TB: He was a very capable individual. He was a good photographer, and later on a good editor for the Geographic.

LC: Did he tell you anything if you recall, about why National Geographic was interested in Vietnam?
TB: No, he didn’t.

LC: What kinds of things did you speak with him about? Did you talk to him about Vietnamese history and things that you knew?

TB: Yes, definitely.

LC: And were there other places that you visited with him?

TB: Well, we visited some of the royal tombs, Minh Mang’s and Tu Duc’s were the two best examples of royal funerary architecture.

LC: And what was their state at the time?

TB: They were in relatively good shape.

LC: Were they seriously damaged later on?

TB: Yes, they were.

LC: And I suppose that you and he took photographs up there as well.

TB: That’s correct.

LC: Sir, you mentioned the retired archbishop of Hue. I wonder if you can talk, in general terms, about the Catholic presence in the city.

TB: Well, the main Catholic presence, of course, was [Archbishop] Ngo Dinh Thuc, the president’s older brother. And he was an ebullient man. The real eminence grise, however, of Hue was Ngo Dinh Can, the president’s younger brother, who was really the – he had a special title, the Ong Cô Văn. That is, the High Counselor for something or other. I don’t remember the entire title. But his presence was felt throughout central Vietnam and people feared him. They talked about him in a whisper. I remember my…the first consular, Bob Barber, that I mentioned to you, had seen Can on one occasion. He’d been at one ceremony, was on the platform, sitting next to this man who he did not know, and discovered later on that it was Ngo Dinh Can. Then, my predecessor, immediate predecessor, Ted Heavner, if I recall correctly, had met…had been offered to view Ngo Dinh Diem’s mother who was in her late 80s, early 90s and somewhat enfeebled. The same offer was made [to me, which I declined]…I never saw Can while I was there but at Tet time [in 1961], a messenger arrived by car at my home, handed me a gift of cinnamon, and said ‘This is from Ong Cô Văn.’ He whispered it. This is from the counselor. So I said, ‘Here’s a box of chocolates, please take it back to the counselor [Ong Cô Văn].’ He [the messenger] said, ‘I can’t do that without a card.’ And I said, ‘Well, he sent me this without a card.’ So I said, ‘Alright, I’ll give you a card. That’s the only contact I ever had with him, except I got one feeler just before I left.
[Hue] from the family that I would be allowed to visit the mother and I said I don’t want to
inconvenience her. Anyway, he [Can] was the shadow ruler of central Vietnam. Ngo Dinh Can.
Now, you talked about the Catholic presence.

LC: Yes.

TB: There were fourteen predictions that I made when I left Hue. Thirteen of them turned
out to be correct. The fourteenth was that the Buddhists would never amount to much of a political
force in central Vietnam, and of course, the Buddhist movement started in Hue; the Buddhist
uprisings started in Hue brought about the downfall of Ngo Dinh Diem. I was obviously dead wrong
on that prediction. Nobody has ever credited me with the other fifteen [thirteen].

LC: Perhaps this would be a good venue for you to get the credit you deserved. Sir, did
you ever see Ngo Dinh Thuc?

TB: Yes, I met him at one or two occasions, but my main dealings with him was with Cao
van Luau, who is the rector of the University of Hue.

LC: What was the relationship between those two men, if you know?

TB: I think they were really close but I can’t really measure that. One of the things that
struck me was Cao van Luau used to delight in inviting foreigners to dinner and serving roast dog.
Another thing that disturbed me about Luau was that when you went into his house there was a
piano, and there was a picture of him and the piano, a painting of him on the wall, and a bust of
him. This is a Catholic priest now who was head of the university. I’ve talked to various professors
about – at the university – about this situation, which I find bizarre for a priest to sort of immortalize
himself in sculpture and painting and pictures, but he claimed that these were probably gifts from
devoted students and he just put them on display.

LC: In order to be a gracious receptor of the presents.

TB: That’s right.

LC: You said that you did on one or two occasions see Ngo Dinh Thuc. You said that he
was an ebullient man. Can you give a further description at all?

TB: Not much, except he was quite outgoing and ebullient. Now, he later got mixed up
when he left Vietnam in the movement to restore Latin as the language of the Church. And he
had…he became the focal point for various priests who were in favor of Latin Mass. I think the
Vatican excommunicated him, but that’s all several years after this event, this time in Hue.
LC: Let’s just talk for just a moment about Ngo Dinh Can. Can you talk about how he exercised power?

TB: Well, for example, after the failed coup where the pilots tried to bomb the presidential palace and take out Ngo Dinh Diem in the process, a brother-in-law, one of the pilots, who was perhaps my closest contact [in Hue] in the Vietnamese community, Tran Dinh Anh. He was the owner of a bookstore on the other [left hand] side of the river and was president of the Rotary. His brother-in-law was one of the pilots and he [Anh] was standing outside the Rotary [Building] and he invited several people to lunch one noontime and a car took him away and he disappeared for about two and a half months. When he emerged – he was a very outgoing individual beforehand – he had one useless arm, left arm, he couldn’t use, and he did not seek out any foreign contacts. Obviously he’d been put in an underground cell or something like this and tortured.

LC: Sir, did you ever speak to him one-on-one again?

TB: Yes, but I never referred to his disappearance.

LC: And I take it he did not either.

TB: No.

LC: Did you have any other source of information about what had happened to him? And I know you probably can’t comment on the source but...

TB: No, I didn’t, really.

LC: Ok. Alright, Tom, let’s take a break.
LC: This is Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I'm continuing my oral history interview with retired Foreign Service officer Thomas Barnes. Today's date is the 13th of February 2004. Again, I'm on the campus of Texas Tech and Mr. Barnes is in Austin. Good morning, Sir.

TB: Good morning.

LC: Sir, I believe there were a couple of Frenchmen about whom you'd like to speak a little bit.

TB: Yeah. One was named Poilane. He was located in Huong Hoa district of Quang Tri province, in the northwest corner adjacent to the Lao border and the zone separating – Ben Hai River separating – North from South Vietnam at the time. Huong Hoa district was extremely fortunate agriculturally because it had a soil, volcanic soil, which was almost identical to that in the Bolovens Plateau in southern Laos in Saravane province. If you planted vegetable seeds or fruit seeds they would proliferate rapidly in the soil. At any rate, there was a Frenchman there who, originally, had three hundred hectares of coffee plantations. That got split up because of his series of marriages, first to a French wife and then to a series of local Vietnamese wives. Poilane was quite a character. He was a retired French Army or Foreign Legion man, I don't know which; enlisted man, who had no formal education beyond either greater high school. However, he traveled the mountainous areas of North and South Vietnam and Laos extensively, and apparently published several learned articles about the peoples who inhabited those areas. Now, the legend that grew up around him was that his wife was once confronted by a tiger and a Montagnard appeared who speared the tiger, and in her gratitude she gave herself to the Montagnard, after which Poilane took up with a series of native women. Well, how much substance there is to this I don't know, but I did meet Poilane on one occasion and I did stay overnight with his son and – his French son – the son by the French wife and the son's wife at the plantation. They [their holdings] had been reduced to...the three hundred hectares that had been reduced to plots of eighty hectares each, and their son controlled one of them and the [various] Vietnamese wives controlled the other. The thing I remember most about Poilane was he was clad in nothing but a sarong, and he was picking plums off the tree without washing them or anything else and consuming them.
And he...I knew his cardiologist...he had a heart problem. I knew his cardiologist in Hue, Dr. Le van Diem. And the cardiologist told me that Poilane would accept any medication, except to abstain from his latest wife. At any rate, the cardiologist also told me that Poilane had one recurring nightmare that recurred about once a month and that really complicated his cardiac condition because he’d wake up screaming in the night. He had dreamt he was being sent back to France. He got shot by some – shot and killed – by some Viet Cong at one juncture, for what reason I don't know. The son, unfortunately, during the Battle of Khe Sanh was riding in an American plane, which was loaded but not carefully – it was a cargo plane so people were not buckled in – and, I don't know how many passengers there were, but he was killed during the landing. The son was [the only casualty aboard the plane]. But so much for Poilane, who was quite an interesting character.

LC: Now, you said that he had some military service behind him.
TB: The father, yes.
LC: Yes, the father. Do you know whether he fought against the Viet Minh?
TB: I imagine he had. Yes.
LC: And do you know about when he was killed?
TB: Well, it must have been...let’s see...I went there in ’61 to Huong Hoa district. It must have been three or four years later, but I don't know the exact year.

LC: Did you ever see Poilane in Hue?
TB: No. Never. He was not a city boy.
LC: So, did his cardiologist go and visit him up at the plantation?
TB: I don't know how that arrangement was, whether he came down or vice versa.
LC: And was it still a functioning coffee plantation although it was reduced in size when you visited?
TB: Yes. It certainly was. But there were several – the plantation was split up into various satrapies. I remember his very accurate remark about Vietnamese women. ‘Comme elles sont travaieusers les femmes indigenes,’ – how hard working are Vietnamese women.

LC: Was that with respect to people who were working on his plantation?
TB: Respect to his wives and his workers.
LC: Ok. Tom, do you know anything about the people who would have been working on that plantation whether people worked there in family groups or how that was organized?
TB: I can give you some information on how it was organized in the rubber plantation areas of Binh Long province, but I don't know exactly how it was distributed, whether there were tribals employed or whether it was an exclusively Vietnamese [labor force] or however it was operated.

LC: Ok. Well, go ahead and tell about the other plantation at this point.

TB: This isn't another plantation. This is a Frenchman in Da Nang called Eugene De Bettigney. He was quite a character. He operated a small hotel, and I think he was a paid informant of the CIA, but I have no idea. At any rate, he died several years ago so it's irrelevant. But in the hotel grounds, what he advocated for the defense of the hotel grounds, was to have one dog chained at one end of the yard, another dog chained at the far end of the yard, and a dog let loose so there were three dogs guarding the property. That's about all I have to say about him.

LC: What about his plantation?

TB: He didn't have a plantation. He had a hotel.

LC: Oh ok. I see. And this was the other Frenchman that you wanted to mention?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Did you stay at that hotel ever, sir?

TB: Once or twice.

LC: And did you see the dogs?

TB: Oh yeah. I avoided venturing out during darkness.

LC: Yes, I would think. Were they quite menacing?

TB: No, they were mongrels, but...yeah, they were menacing. Certainly.

LC: Sir, I wanted to ask you a little bit more about your time in Hue.

TB: Let me mention one other thing. There was a concessionaire for the cinnamon trade who was quite wealthy who was based in Hue and Da Nang, and I stayed with him one time when I was visiting Da Nang or at least went to dinner. I can't remember whether I spent the night there or whether it was just for dinner. But I can't remember his name – it was Nguyen something. Of course, half the Vietnamese are Nguyen something. Nguyen van something...but he clearly had the favor of Ngo Dinh Can.

LC: Wait. How did you know that?

TB: Because he wouldn't have been able to operate otherwise.

LC: Was there any other evidence?
TB: There was no evidence but I’m sure Can was getting a portion of the profits from the cinnamon trade, which came out of one district of Quang Ngai.

LC: Sir, do you know a little bit more about the cinnamon production and how that was organized or the distribution…?

TB: Well, the cinnamon trees were scattered in Batta district of Quang Ngai, but I can’t swear to the [name of the] district, and they’d be out in the jungle. And tribals – I’m trying to think of the tribe at that point, Cua, C-U-A – would go out and gather the cinnamon, and this fellow would warehouse it in Da Nang and ship it abroad and so on.

LC: And so, in the cash flow around this production and distribution, it seems that Ngo Dinh Can probably had a piece of the action, as they say.

TB: I’m quite positive.

LC: Tom, did you have a sense of other legitimate economic ventures that he was probably profiting from?

TB: Not really, no.

LC: Just the cinnamon? Ok. I want to ask you a couple more things about being in Hue. First of all, can you go over, in general terms, the security situation and how it changed over the course of your time there?

TB: Well, in the city of Hue there was no perceptible difference.

LC: But in your district?

TB: In the district, I think as I mentioned before, when I arrived, of the seven provinces, six of the province chiefs were civilian. And when I left six of the seven were military. Now, traveling in the remote regions of the province became more and more chancy. I recall one time we got stuck with the jeep or whatever it was in a remote area off of Quang Nam province, and it took us about half an hour, forty-five minutes to free the vehicle from the mud. And it was a tense time – nothing really happened – but it was just tense trying to get out of there before dark.

LC: And that was because why, sir, for someone who didn’t understand your reference?

TB: Because the outlying areas of Quang Nam province were increasingly being used for infiltration.

LC: From the North?

TB: From the North.
LC: Were there other points of, in your consular district, where supplies from the North were arriving safe, for example, by sea?

TB: There was one point in Phu Yen – pardon me – yeah, Phu Yen province, which was just outside, just south of the consular district, which I obtained on one occasion special permission from the embassy at my initiative to cover. And there were incidence against the train, which proceeded from Saigon to Hue. There were incidents along the highway, Route 1, but the main problems were further inland toward the mountains where the tribal areas were.

LC: And Tom, did you go out there during the course of your time as the political officer in the area to make inspections?

TB: I was not the political officer. I was the consul.

LC: I’m sorry, as the consul, to make an assessment of the security situation inland?

TB: Yes, I did an awful lot of reporting on the economic and political [situation] – although the office in Hue was called a consulate, it had no consular function. It was a political and economic reporting post.

LC: And when you would make these trips inland, what kinds of information were you looking for, say to compile a situation report on economic issues?

TB: Well, one of the key economic reports that I did upon earlier arrival in Hue was on the leafhopper, which was destroying a good share of the rice crop along the central Vietnamese coast. This got the embassy’s attention, particularly the [US] AID portion.

LC: What did they do in response to reports?

TB: They sent out spray teams and looked into the problem in some detail.

LC: Do you know what they were spraying?

TB: They were spraying probably DDT, but I don’t know.

LC: And was there an improvement that you saw, over time, as a result of that action?

TB: Yeah, certainly. Less infestation of crops.

LC: What was the economic impact, either observed at the time or potentially, of the damage that was being done to the crops?

TB: It was devastating because it was such marginal rice farming along the central Vietnamese coast that even a small infection can be disastrous.

LC: Because of the loss of even a small proportion of the diet?

TB: Well, the...yeah, sure.
LC: I mean, in terms of caloric intake or whatever...yeah. Sir, can you talk about other
economic issues that you observed in addition to food supplies and crop issues.

TB: Well, the main thing that was going on economically, if you counted it as economics,
was road construction. And Route 19 was being established by – not being established – being
redone in asphalt from Ninh Hoa, let me try to remember...it’s from [Route 1 along] the coast north
of Qui Nhon – I think at Ninh Hoa, but I'm not sure of the district, N-I-N-H H-O-A – up through An
Khe, A-N capital K-H-E, which is the midway point toward the highlands, and then arriving in
Pleiku. Johnson, Drake, and Piper had the contract for redoing this road and it enormously
speeded up travel between the highlands and the coast when it was finally finished. Also, near An
Khe, it passed by a very famous French cemetery, French military cemetery. But it just stood
there.

LC: Can you describe the cemetery? Does it have a name?

TB: I can’t…it undoubtedly did but what the name was I don’t know.

LC: Now, was this, I’m guessing, French and Vietnamese soldiers who fought against the
Viet Minh?

TB: I’m not sure there were any Vietnamese buried there. It was primarily French.

LC: Did you ever visit the cemetery?

TB: Certainly.

LC: In an official capacity?


LC: The road construction is an interesting thing and you mentioned the company that had
the contract. Were there other U.S. contractors active in your region?

TB: I mentioned in the book the man from...named Feinstein from the Bishop Museum in
Hawaii who was contracted by the Army – the Bishop Museum was contracted by the Army, not
Feinstein directly – to trap animals in Vietnam in order to see what insects they carried and
whether those insects had potential of infecting human beings. This was in Khe Sanh. This is
1961 in case the U.S. should ever send troops to Vietnam.

LC: Was it clear from your knowledge of reading, perhaps the background of parts of the
contract, that that was the motivation for the contract?

TB: Well, I was told that was the reason for it.

LC: Did you meet Feinstein himself?
TB: Feinstein wandered in to the consulate after a week or so. I got this telegram saying ‘Where is Feinstein?’ and I sent back one saying ‘Who is Feinstein?’ Anyway, he wandered in but he’d been up on the Laos-Vietnamese border near a stream, a small river, defining the river between Huong Hoa district and Lao Bao trapping animals.

LC: But he came down to Hue at some point?

TB: Yeah. He evidently passed through Hue on the way up but didn’t check in.

LC: And when you met him, did you have some message for him from the Embassy or what was the reason they were interested in finding out where he was.

TB: Because they hadn’t heard from him for some time.

LC: I see. He just hadn’t checked in.

TB: That’s right.

LC: Ok. And do you have any idea how long he was in the country working on this project?

TB: Haven’t the foggiest.

LC: Ok. Did he check out, as it were?

TB: He did when he came back. He checked out of Hue at any rate.

LC: Were there others besides him, other Americans there, working on contracts that you know about?

TB: Not working on contracts but I mentioned Bill Garrett, the name just came to me, of the National Geographic.

LC: Oh. The photographer.

TB: Yes.

LC: Ok. Others, sir, that you might remember?

TB: Well, there was Arthur – heavens, [Gardener] the head of AID. He and I used to quote Housman together. Arthur – well, he later became head of IVS in the United States.

LC: What was his function with USAID?

TB: He was the director.

LC: And what was he up in Hue for? Do you know?

TB: He came up on the leafhopper issue, initially.

LC: And did he remain there or did he come back for other issues?

TB: Oh no, his headquarters were in Saigon. He just came up from time to time.
LC: I see. On various USAID projects in the area.

TB: That’s right. He and I got along very well.

LC: Ok. Did he stay at the consulate or in a hotel or where did he…?

TB: Well, we didn’t have quarters or guest quarters. So he stayed in a hotel. Or perhaps he stayed with – I remember the last name of – I said Anita Hill, who I think was involved with Clarence Thomas.

LC: Yes, I believe that’s correct.

TB: Her name was Anita Smith.

LC: Ok. She was the nurse who was with USAID?

TB: Yeah. Arthur Gardener. Arthur Gardener. He was a very intelligent man, very bright.

LC: Sir, did people from Johnson, Drake, and Piper come and see you at any point?

TB: Not in Hue. That was too far away from their area, but I saw them frequently and stopped at their camps along Route 19. Now, they were also building Route 21, but that’s where it starts [on the count] at Ninh Hoa, [north of Nha Trang]. In Qui Nhon it’s a little bit north, and Binh Duong province is a little bit north of Qui Nhon, but it was not Ninh Hoa. Route 21 was built from Ninh Hoa to Ban Me Thuot, also by Johnson, Drake, and Piper. Now, I remember the engineers telling me there were only three lessons in building a road: drainage, drainage, and drainage.

LC: Sir, did you – I’m sure you must have at some point – driven on the completed roads that they built?

TB: Many times.

LC: And in a country where monsoon weather is an important factor, did you observe whether the roads drained properly?

TB: They were very well constructed. My only regret was that the elephants that used to ply the trade stayed away from the roads.

LC: Sir, did you see elephants on any occasion?

TB: In Cam Lo district of Quang Tri province, just before one gets to Huong Hoa along Route 5, I think it was, leading into Laos, there were work elephants.

LC: Really? How many would be…?

TB: There were a couple. I’ve got a picture of one or two of them in Cam Lo, C-A-M L-O, district.

LC: Have you seen work elephants on any of your subsequent trips?
TB: Certainly, in Thailand on several occasions, particularly in Kanchanaburi province.
LC: But not inside Vietnam or southern Vietnam?
TB: No. I saw a tiger one time in the Prenne Zoo near Dalat down in the bottom of a pit in the zoo, but never an elephant.
LC: Can we talk about Dalat for a moment, and now that you recall the zoo, I wonder if you remember anything else about that facility?
TB: About the zoo?
LC: Yes.
TB: It was very small.
LC: Was it well run?
TB: It was right next to Prenne Falls.
LC: Was it something that was well run as an institution, would you say?
TB: That would be ludicrous if it were well run.
LC: Do you remember anything about its administration or how the animals were treated or anything that sticks out in your mind?
TB: Well, I don’t know how they managed to clean up after this tiger. It was at the bottom, cement lined bottom, of an enormous pit.
LC: That sounds a bit sad, actually.
TB: Yeah.
LC: Sir, I want to ask you a little bit about Phu Yen province. You said that at your initiative, that area was added to your watching brief.
TB: I just did a one-time analysis of it.
LC: Ok. Why did you initiate that request?
TB: Because it was having security problems and the Phu Yen rightfully should have been part of the consular district.
LC: Why wasn’t it?
TB: That I don’t know. Maybe they wanted to limit the number of provinces, but the point was that there was an escarpment at the northern edge of Khanh Hoa province where Nha Trang is, in order to get into Phu Yen. And you round a promontory, and you come upon this magnificent bay called Cap Varella that... crystal blue waters, it’s magnificent. There’s a natural mountain barrier there.
LC: Was Cap Varella used as an entrepôt for North Vietnamese supplies?
TB: Definitely.
LC: Ok. How did you know that?
TB: We got reports to that effect. CIA reports to that effect.
LC: Sir, can you describe your trip in and around Phu Yen province, and when did that take place?
TB: Phu Yen, you mean?
LC: Yes.
TB: Well, it was essentially north to south coverage, and if you look at...I don't know exactly how to describe it but if you have a series of squares, the three provinces, the three districts along the coast are parallel to the three districts toward the mountains. So there was fairly regular carving up of the territory. But one of the characteristics of Phu Yen was that it was the scene of where a lot of North Vietnamese cadres had gone north in 1954/1955 during the partition. They left behind a lot of cadre. Before leaving, many of the men were married off to local girls and engendered children so it was part of the revolutionary complex that Binh Dinh has always – Binh Dinh the province mainly to the north – has always been a center of revolution. And this was part of the Binh Dinh complex, really. If you go from Phu Yen through Binh Dinh to Quang Ngai, you've got a sort of a cradle of revolutionaries in there.

LC: And so this was a place for security reasons and because it was part of, really, what was happening with Binh Dinh that you thought it ought to be...or you said rightfully should have been included in the Hue consuls' area responsibilities.
TB: Sure. A lot of Americans for touristic reasons got to Nha Trang whereas in province immediately south of Phu Yen called Khanh Hoa, where Nha Trang was located. So that was less involved with insurgency and so on.
LC: What was the state of South Vietnamese political and military control in Phu Yen?
TB: Well, they were not doing too good a job because of ambushes and guerilla attacks and so on.
LC: You remember reports on some of those instances that were Communist inspired?
TB: Well, I don't recall specific reports but there were attacks against the railroad, particularly because it was the tunnel that one went through by train entering from Khanh Hoa to Phu Yen province.
LC: And that tunnel was...how were attacks engineered there, do you know?
TB: I think explosives were placed in the tunnel.
LC: Ok. Was there a provincial chief with whom you met?
TB: Oh definitely. I always checked in with the province and district chiefs.
LC: Ok. Do you remember the province chief of Phu Yen?
TB: Not a bit.
LC: Did you form an impression about the effectiveness of the troops and defense forces
in that area, aside now from individual Communist instants which might have been high profile but
not strategically important?
TB: Not at that time. I had subsequently, when I was assigned to Military Region II in '71
and '72 I had some concentration on Phu Yen, which we'll discuss later.
LC: Ok. Now, I gather that Phu Yen has a greater tribal population in its interior and more
ethnic Vietnamese toward the coast, is that accurate?
TB: That's right.
LC: Where were the Communists most successful in organizing? Where was their home
base, if you will?
TB: I think their bases were toward the mountains but their effective attacks were along
Route 1 and the railroad.
LC: Was there friction between the tribal populations in the interior of the province and the
Communists?
TB: That I don't know.
LC: Ok. Sir, were there other U.S. personnel in the province when you visited?
TB: There were no U.S. personnel at all in Phu Yen.
LC: Really? How did you get around when you went on this visit?
TB: By jeep. I think it was a jeep. It certainly was not a Land Rover and it was before the
Toyota Land Cruisers, my favorite vehicle.
LC: Why was that your favorite?
TB: They were so adaptable.
LC: Pretty rugged?
TB: Rugged, sure.
LC: Sir, let's go back and talk again a little bit about your time in the consul, the consulate. You mention in your book an anecdote about the janitor. Can you talk about him, the man that worked at the building?

TB: He was a man in his sixties, and what surprised me was – I didn’t know what he was saying because it was a word I had not learned in Vietnamese. He would address me as Cu with a heavy tone. Cu in other terms has different meanings. And some of them salacious, but in heavy tone I didn’t know to whom he was talking when he used this term. Ordinarily, they would address me when I was the consul as ‘Ong Anh Su’ – Anh meaning grandfather. But ‘cu’ is great-grandfather. And he was twice my age addressing me as great-grandfather so it took me awhile. I finally asked somebody, ‘What is he talking about?’ Or, ‘Who is he talking to?’ and they straightened me out on the score.

LC: Sir, can you describe this man? You mentioned his age. Was he an ethnic Vietnamese then?


LC: Ok. And how did he come to be employed at the consulate?

TB: I don’t know. He was there when I arrived.

LC: And was he there when you left as well?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. What about other…?

TB: I wouldn’t fire anybody who would address me as great-grandfather.

LC: No. That would be kind of harsh. What about other, local people who were employed by the consulate?

TB: We had a driver named Ho who was very helpful to me.

LC: Did he go with you on some of your travels?

TB: Virtually all of them.

LC: Really? Ok. And how was he helpful to you, in what way?

TB: Well, he was…if there was a mechanical difficulty with the vehicle, he could address it immediately. If I had to address it I would still be in the jungles of Vietnam.

LC: (Laughing) Are you saying, Sir, that fixing cars is not your forte?
TB: Mechanics in general are not my forte. Another factor...he had a habit of racing through populated areas and honking his horn very loudly expecting people to get out of the way of this great dignitary who was passing through.

LC: That would be you.

TB: Yeah. So, I persuaded him that the best tactic was to go slow whenever, and I had to caution him frequently, to go slow when we’re passing [through] villages, and I taught him how to use a gentle, continuous beep of a horn as a warning. But the notion there was that it’s up to the pedestrian to get out of the way because the vehicle has dominance, has priority.

LC: And will win any confrontation.

TB: Yeah. I don’t share this philosophy.

LC: Did you drive yourself, ever?

TB: Occasionally.

LC: Ok. Were there particular times when you chose deliberately not to take Ho with you?

TB: Yes, when I didn’t want him to find out what I was doing.

LC: Did you have any inclination or suspicion that some information might travel via him to some other people about your activity?

TB: I was relatively convinced that he was reporting to Ngo Dinh Can, not necessarily through the record [directly] but through some agent about my travel.

LC: Was he also employed at the consulate before you arrived and afterwards?

TB: Yes. I corresponded with him afterwards on some occasion trying to get him to the U.S. or something. He was a very good man, very loyal.

LC: Did you have any luck in that regard?

TB: No. Not really.

LC: He did not come to the United States?

TB: Not that I know of.

LC: How old was he?

TB: I would say he was in his thirties but I’m not sure.

LC: How was his English?

TB: His English was useable.

LC: Did you speak to him in French primarily or Vietnamese?

TB: Vietnamese.
LC: Ok. What was his family background, do you know?
TB: I have no idea. He was married but I don’t know what…
LC: Did he have children?
TB: I think he did.
LC: Ok, but you didn’t meet them or…
TB: No.
LC: I want to ask you also, sir, about the elections in the spring of 1961. Am I right in thinking that the incident you mentioned yesterday about President Diem sitting in front of you on a platform occurred during that election process?
TB: Not at all.
LC: When did that happen?
TB: It was a dedication of the Nam Son Coal Mine, spelled S-O-N.
LC: And that was not a campaign appearance on his part at all?
TB: Not at all.
LC: Ok. How were the elections organized in Hue?
TB: Well, I don’t know how they were in Hue but I looked at them in three different provinces. I drove all the way down to Binh Dinh during the day and stopped at three polling booths. One in Quang Ngai…well, I guess there was one in My Xuan district of Binh Dinh, [one in] Quang Ngai, and one in another place. They were rather festive occasions where the locals who were voting would dress up. They were closed booths. I don’t know how they were – trying to remember how they arranged it. One did not see. When one voted there was some privacy. And as I recall there were…there was a ballot. Nobody showed me the ballot but it was a ballot of some kind. But the point was that the vote for Diem was something like 98% or something, and that there was American insistence that elections had taken place rather than a Vietnamese desire.
LC: Was there another name on the ballot besides Ngo Dinh Diem?
TB: There was a man of…superannuated man of some dignity, no reputation, nobody knew about, who was also a candidate.
LC: Sir, can you describe what happened at the polling booths when you arrived? You said there was some festivity associated with this.
TB: Well, there was this sort of carnival atmosphere and the market stalls were set up to sell foods like roast chicken and that sort of thing.
LC: And I take it that this was an unannounced visit by you to the polls.

TB: It was totally unannounced and the people welcomed me, but I found out later, as I mention in a book, that the Embassy had forbidden consular, its staff, to go out of the house at all in Saigon on election day for fear that we'd be accused of influencing the elections. Thus I went blithe, we went parading through central Vietnam and filed a dispatch describing my discoveries. I never got reprimanded for it but they probably realized that they had not informed me to be discreet.

LC: Sir, you also related in the book an anecdote about the heavy one-sided vote for President Diem and you concluded by saying, ‘So much for democracy.’ And I wonder, sir, do you think at that point in the political development of South Vietnam, democracy in a voting process as understood in the United States was possible in South Vietnam?

TB: Not at all.

LC: Why do you say that?

TB: The electorate just hadn’t been schooled in that sort of thing.

LC: There was no real concept of participatory process, would you say?

TB: No, not at all.

LC: Ok. Were…

TB: Well, there was a concept at the village level of participatory government where village elders expressed their opinion to the village chief or a designated village chief. But there’s not a sense of national choice for president.

LC: And the consequences for selecting one person as opposed to another.

TB: That’s right.

LC: You said that the elections were really driven by American pressure on President Diem specifically did you mean or South Vietnamese government in general or is there a distinction?

TB: I think on both.

LC: How was that pressure exerted, do you know?

TB: I don’t. I wasn’t privy to the….

LC: Ok. What kinds of cables did you actually get up from the Embassy? Ones that were telling you what to do and what not to do, clearly…

TB: The Embassy more or less left me alone, which I delighted in. But as I mentioned, there was one very silly message that came through one day by code, one time pad saying, ‘Don’t
issue any Cuban VISAs.’ I’d never seen a Cuban in Vietnam, let alone in Hue. And secondly, I
didn’t have the power to issue VISAs as the consulate in Chiang Mai [Thailand] and the consulate
general in Jerusalem. The three of us were not consular, consular posts in name only, but we’re
political and economic reporting posts.

LC: How did that distinction arise? Why was it applied in Hue?

LC: Because the consular function was centered in Saigon and the reason for having an
upcountry post was not to have a consular function but to have a political function.

LC: Ok. Sir, did you know why the message had been sent? Obviously, there was no
immediate impact on you since you couldn’t issue a VISA.

TB: It ruined a good party for me.

LC: Oh yes. Tell about the party, please.

TB: I was at a party at Phu Bai, fifteen kilometers south of Hue, that the Military Advisory
Assistance Group was hosting. And I was interrupted to go back and decode this urgent message.

So that’s the story behind that.

LC: Now you mentioned that it was a one-time pad message. How many of those did you
actually get in the time you were there?

TB: I very rarely received coded messages, thank heavens, from the Embassy, because
they’re a nuisance.

LC: You didn’t find that intriguing or interesting or any of that.

TB: My own reporting was mainly by dispatch, which I dictated to the administrative
assistant and corrected and then sent in by dispatch to Washington, and a copy to the Embassy in
Saigon.

LC: How was it transmitted?

TB: I sent my stuff directly to the chagrin of the Embassy, which preferred to edit them and
have read everything beforehand.

LC: Did you send it by – what’s it called – diplomatic pouch?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Ok. Can you describe that for someone who wouldn’t understand that reference?

TB: Well, a pouch contains classified and unclassified documents and it’s escorted by a
courier, a State Department courier, who sees to its proper voyage. Sort of like a FedEx
monitoring, only personal monitoring.
LC: And as you say, you were reporting to directly to the State Department in Washington with a copy to the Embassy.

TB: That's right.

LC: And that did not make people in Saigon very happy?

TB: No. They would prefer that the dispatch be sent to the Embassy in Saigon and they would decide whether to forward it.

LC: How was it that you were able to maintain this arrangement?

TB: I just did it.

LC: Did they ever say, 'Tom, you need to stop doing that'?

TB: No.

LC: Really? Wonder why. Do you know why?

TB: I don't know why. I got a good deal of praise from Washington on the reporting.

LC: Who was on the desk reading your material in Washington?

TB: I think it was the fellow who was well off in the Foreign Service. In other words, he was well off to a marriage to a rich wife. I'm trying to remember his name offhand. I can't...it doesn't come to mind for the moment. Maybe it will later. Ben...Ben something. He was on the desk back in Washington.

LC: Yes. And how was the...how were the desks in Washington established at that time? What was the organization?

TB: Well, it was under the East Asian Bureau, and the bureau had offices. And there was undoubtedly an office of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

LC: Together? All in one office?

TB: I would guess. I know that was later the case, I think....So, the reports would go to a desk officer for Vietnam. For example, if you had an officer for Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos there would be a desk officer for each one of those entities.

LC: Do you know any of the other officers, FSOs, who were sitting on the Lao, Cambodian, or Thai desks for that matter at this time? Do you know who they were?

TB: I don't remember.

LC: Ok. But in general terms, you were getting some positive feedback about your reports that you were submitting?

TB: That's right.
LC: And was Washington’s interest, again now within the State Department and the Bureau of East Asian Affairs, primarily on economic information?

TB: No. Political.

LC: Ok. So security situation reports?

TB: That’s right. I would say I was the only one really doing active security reporting. In other words, the function that I had briefly served in in the Embassy in Saigon in the political section was to produce monthly security reports from documents. What I was doing was live reporting on security situations from my own personal witnessing when I was in Hue.

LC: So, really, it was first order evidence, in a way, for Washington of the situation on the ground?

TB: That’s right.

LC: And were your counterparts in Saigon doing the same thing, obviously for their area?

TB: At that time they weren’t getting out. Later on, the political section was organized with a field section, but not at that time.

LC: Ok. And that was, that thinking that American Foreign Service officers were not out in the field, was reflected perhaps in that order that the FSOs were not out observing elections; sort of of the peace.

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: The actual telegram that you got that ruined your party down at Phu Bai and demanded that you return to Hue was about Cubans. And I wonder if that was occurring at the same time as the Bay of Pigs.

TB: Yeah. It was just about the same time.

LC: Ok. Did you…were you following the Bay of Pigs?

TB: There wasn’t much available newspaper coverage in Hue. So, what I chiefly depended upon at that time was a *Time* magazine, which at that time carried international news instead of pop star culture.

LC: Yes, it used to be a good magazine. Is that what you’re saying, sir?

TB: I discontinued my subscription several years ago.

LC: Yes, I would second that. *Time* magazine was your best open source, as it were?

TB: That’s right.
LC: Ok. Was there reporting coming to you through diplomatic channels about Kennedy administration with regards to Cuba and what was happening?

TB: Not much. No.

LC: Did you get very much traffic at all coming to you from Washington?

TB: Virtually, very little.

LC: So, almost everything that you got in terms of diplomatic traffic came from Saigon?

TB: Came through Saigon.

LC: Through Saigon, yes, that's what I meant. And they would pass on to you what they thought might be useful for you to know?

TB: I'm not sure there was a conscious decision on that regard.

LC: So, memos would come with a particular distribution on them and you were either on them or not, is that right?

TB: That's right. In general, I suffered from benign neglect, which I welcomed.

LC: Can you clarify that a little bit, sir?

TB: The less direction I receive and the more I am allowed my own initiative, the happier I am.

LC: I see. And would you also that the more productive and efficient and engaged you are?

TB: I'd like to believe that.

LC: Ok. Alright, sir, let's take a break for a moment.
LC: This is Dr. Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archives at Texas Tech University. I'm continuing my oral history interview with retired Foreign Service officer Thomas Barnes. Today's date is the 18th of February 2004, and I am on the campus of Texas Tech and Tom, again, is at his home in Austin, Texas. Good morning, Sir.

TB: Good morning.

LC: Tom, I want to ask you just a couple more questions about Hue and then we'll move on to your language training. I wonder about an instance you mentioned in your book that you've written, Anecdotes of a Vagabond, when you talked about going out to the far western edge of Quang Tri province and actually crossing over the border into Laos. Do you remember that incident?

TB: Yeah, certainly.

LC: Could you tell a little bit about what happened that day?

TB: I met with the district chief – the Vietnamese district chief – of the Huong Hoa district who offered to bring me into Laos. Theoretically, I shouldn't have been doing that, but it was an interesting adjunct to the work there and I had never been to Laos. So, I went into Ban Houey San – Ban means 'village' in Lao. Houey San was the name of it, which is located along Route 9, which runs from Savannakhet in southern Laos all the way to the Vietnamese coast. It goes through Cam Lo and Huong Hoa districts of Quang Tri province, or what was then those districts of Quang Tri province. I don't know the current makeup. Approximately five, six, seven kilometers into Laos we encountered Ban Houey San and I asked to visit the school, which...schooling always interests me. And it was a great school with thatched buildings, thatched roofs and so on. But they were teaching French and it was out in the middle of nowhere. It was far more accessible from Vietnam than it was from Laos because the North Vietnamese had interdicted much of Route 9 from a town called Tchepone, T-C-H-E-P-O-N-E, which was roughly ninety kilometers east of Savannakhet. As I recall, there were three districts [along route 9] in Laos. Savannakhet being on the Mekong River and another thirty kilometers or so was Kaengkok and then there was another one, which I've forgotten, and then about ninety kilometers in was Tchepone. Ban Houey San was probably in Tchepone district but the government, Lao government, had rather minimal control over the district.
The school itself – what struck me most was the fact that they were teaching French in this extremely primitive [remote] environment. And you heard the story of Africans being called upon to recite, ‘Nos ancêtres le Gualles,’ ancestors of the Gauls, and learning French history. Anyway, the sentence for the day on the board, which all the students were required to memorize, was ‘Les dahlias sont fanées comme après une nuit de bal,’ the flowers, ‘the dahlias are withered like after a night at the dance,’ which I found [the sentence] peculiarly unsuited for this hard scrabble village.

LC: Yes. Was it almost surreal?

TB: Certainly.

LC: Sir, did you find out anything about the teacher who was taking the class?

TB: I don’t remember. It was a man. I don’t remember details about him.

LC: Did you…were you able to speak with anyone during your visit across the border?

TB: I was able to speak in Vietnamese because the Lao were so close to the Vietnamese border and so separated from their own district headquarters, they were forced to speak Vietnamese in order to communicate.

LC: And was your purpose that day just to take advantage of an opportunity? You had been issued an invitation and you just kind of took it up, is that kind of how it happened?

TB: It was satisfaction of my exploratory bent.

LC: Ok. And why were you out in Quang Tri province?

TB: It was my perceived mission to explore as much of my consular district as possible.

LC: Ok. And this is part of that traveling around you did for observation?

TB: Yes. In fact, we got to the stage where I traveled so much that the Political Counselor in Saigon came up for a visit with his wife and told me to spend more time in Hue, a prescription which I minimally observed.

LC: And why did he want you to stay there, sir?

TB: He thought I was traveling too much. Why, I don’t know. I only learn things through travel.

LC: Yes, I wondered if he was thinking there were things going on in Hue that needed more reportage or things in the districts and provinces were not as interesting. He didn’t really explain though, huh?

TB: No.

LC: Ok. But as you say, you observed to the degree necessary, this admonishment.
TB: Yes. I had a similar injunction in 1967, which I'll tell you about when we get to Binh Long province.

LC: Ok. Also, this comes from a mention in the book that intrigued me and we have already talked to some degree about your observations of Ngo Dinh Diem's family members who lived in Hue while you were there, but you mentioned in the book – one person that we haven't spoken about – and that is one of Diem's sisters. And I wonder if you know anything about her. Apparently, she lived in Hue at that time.

TB: She was a very cordial woman, the wife of a pharmacist. My later boss in Geneva, Andre Nguyen van Chau was also from Hue, wrote a theoretical novel, which is based on her life, called *A Lifetime in the Eye of the Storm*. Let me get the title, let me get the book and I'll….It really is a story of the Ngo Dinh family. It centers on Ngo Dinh Thi Hiep, who was Diem's sister. She was cordial enough to take me on a visit of the Ngo Dinh family tomb area. What was interesting about it, although they were Catholic – I think they were converted to Catholicism in the seventeenth century or maybe later, maybe eighteen. They had a tomb in the Western tradition more so than the Chinese, a white marble, and the sign, the current sign of the time, Ngo Dinh Kha, who was a famous minister who opposed the French, was buried there along with Ngo Dinh Diem's older brother [Ngo Ding Khoi] – I forget the name offhand – Nguyen or Tuan. I think it's Ngo Dinh Nguyen, but don't hold me to that. [The tomb] It was nestled in a hillside and there was an elaborate garden at a lower level and its enclosure that was the Ngo Dinh family burial ground. But what was interesting about it, as I mentioned it was an imitation of the royal tombs in Hue on a much more moderate scale and with the Catholic or Christian bent rather than an Asian one.

LC: How did you come to be invited to go with her that day to that, to the tomb area?

TB: I'll never know. She was very cordial.

LC: Do you remember anything about the circumstances about how you came to be in her company that day?

TB: I don't. I'm sorry.

LC: Sir, I want to ask you just a couple more questions also about her brother, Ngo Dinh Can. You mentioned that you had a friend, or an acquaintance anyway, who was a fairly popular figure in Hue, a bookseller I believe, who after spending a couple of weeks away, you know not where, was unable to speak with you again. And I wonder sir, did you know either in an official
capacity or just kind of from scuttlebutt that you might have heard where Ngo Dinh Can’s detention center was? Do you know where that was?

TB: I hadn’t any idea.

LC: Was there at any time an official or even unofficial expression of American disapproval of his methods, his treatment of people with whom he did not agree?

TB: Not that I know of.

LC: Do you think there should have been?

TB: I don’t know that it was really our business.

LC: Ok. Why do you say that?

TB: Because this is interference in local politics.

LC: Ok. And as the consul there, your mission was not to interfere, is that fair?

TB: I was just to report on economic and political development.

LC: Ok. Sir, when did you find out that you would be leaving Hue?

TB: I got a notice from the Department of State. I had to fly…I knew the term of service in Vietnam was [two years]…I had been extended from two to three years, and I got notice after I’d applied for Chinese, Japanese, or alternatively Thai or Indonesian language training, that I had been, according to the department, selected for my choice, which was Thai. So, it must have been about April of ’61.

LC: And you knew that soon thereafter you would be departing?

TB: Yes.

LC: And going back to Washington, I assume.

TB: Yes.

LC: How did you feel when you were leaving Vietnam?

TB: Sad.

LC: Can you explain a little bit about those feelings and why they came to you?

TB: I had a very active and independent role, which allowed me to exercise my initiative in Hue. And the thought of…any time one of the states was a Washington assignment, it’s a disappointment.

LC: Were you also disappointed about not having been assigned any of your higher choices in terms of language instruction, Chinese particularly?
TB: I was upset by it and I went to the – after a month of Thai language training, in which I found remarkable similarities in structure but not in cognates with Vietnamese. I was put in a separate class with the basic instructor for an hour a day and two hours a day with Witthaya Wechujiva Witthiya, Wejajwga with three and three initially for the first month. He later became Thai Ambassador to Washington, but he was a student at that time – a very extremely bright Thai foreign ministry official. At any rate, after a month [at six hours a day], I persuaded [the Foreign Service Institute], since I was covering the same amount of territory as others in the class or more so in three hours a day, to let me study Chinese in the mornings for three hours. So for nine of the ten months I was assigned to Thai language training, I had three hours of Chinese a day and three hours of Thai.

LC: Was it at all difficult to secure that kind of arrangement?

TB: It's always…bureaucratic differences are always a problem.

LC: Was it that you were basically innovating against the established structure, was that the problem or was there some resistance to you…?

TB: There's always resistance to what is an established pattern.

LC: Ok. Did you feel, Tom, that any of this was directed at you or was this just the juggernaut grinding on?

TB: Oh no. I don't think anybody had any personal grudges.

LC: And how did you do with Chinese?

TB: My regret was…you see the department trains in Chinese and Japanese and Arabic for two full years. It's one year, or nine months in Washington, and then a year in the field. For Japanese there was a school in Yokohama, for Chinese there was a school in Taipei at the time and later in Beijing, for Arabic it was originally, if I recall, in Lebanon and then for obvious reasons had to be moved. So, there was emphasis on the earlier stages on speaking, but to gain a, as you know yourself, a real grasp on Chinese one has to delve into the characters and I never had time to do that while I was – never had much time to do that while I was actively employed.

LC: Now, Tom, you referred to being able to make fairly rapid progress in Thai language and noting some interesting parallels with Vietnamese. Did Thai come then fairly easily to you?

TB: I found Thai much easier to learn than Vietnamese, largely because I had Vietnamese first.

LC: And what about the script?
TB: The script is another issue and is very peculiar. The Lao script is much easier to read than the Thai script. Thai script is like British English where you pronounce ‘Chumly’ what looks like ‘Chol Mondely.’ There are a lot of dead letters at the end, mainly at the end of a sentence or a word.

LC: By dead letters you mean unpronounced.

TB: They’re not pronounced [or are pronounced differently]. Like ‘the king’ is ‘nane phumidol’ – again, a final ‘L’ and so on is pronounced ‘n’. But because the words are longer than those in Vietnamese, there’s an easier retention. Now to give you a sample: there are no cognates, very few cognates, [but word order is similar] but if I want to say ‘I can’t go’ in Vietnamese I say, ‘Tôi de khong duoc.’ If I want to say ‘I can’t go’ in Thai I say, ‘Phom pai mai dai.’ Now those are totally different phrase except that the words for ‘I’, ‘go’, ‘not able’ are exactly the same order in the two languages. ‘Toi de Khong Duoc,’ ‘Phom pai mai dai.’ ‘Toi’ and ‘phom’ are ‘I’, ‘de’ in Vietnamese is ‘pai’, and ‘not able’, ‘khong’ [in Vietnamese], and ‘mai’ [in Thai] are the same meaning. ‘Dai’ and ‘de’ are the same meaning. So, this is a little abstruse, but because they fall in the same order, or similar order, it makes it easier to learn the second language you study in the theory.

LC: Yes, because you don’t have to rethink the structure.

TB: That’s right. Now, there is a slight difference. If you say ‘I want a [small] bottle of beer,’ in Thai – ‘Phom yak dai beeh khuad lek, khuad nong.’ – ‘I’d like to get a bottle of beer, [a small bottle], a single one’, you say. In Vietnamese you don’t repeat the ‘single one’ – ‘toi miôn bia chai nho,’ ‘I want a [small] bottle of beer.’ But this is a minor difference.

LC: But, particularly perhaps for declarative sentences of the kind that you’ve offered as examples, there was some structural parallel.

TB: There’s a great deal of parallel.

LC: And, Tom, can you tell me how many people were taking Thai when you were at FSI?

TB: I think FSI has a maximum of six in a class, but I think there were only two or three others at the time.

LC: Do you remember any of those other students?

TB: I’m trying to…I certainly, if I went back in time, I could probably identify them because they were assigned to Bangkok like I was, but I can’t recall offhand.

LC: Ok. How many were in the Chinese class?
TB: There were three Chinese students at the time and I was the fourth.

LC: Who was the instructor?

TB: We had three instructors. One was a man named Ma who was a former newspaper editor in Beijing. Another was a very competent woman, [Nam Xiang?], if I remember, also from Beijing and who was the third…the third was…the third escapes me offhand. There were three different instructors.

LC: Ok. Did you have much opportunity to speak with them about their time in China and under what circumstances they had left?

TB: Not really. We did see each other socially from time to time, but the reason they left was the advent of the Communist regime.

LC: Tom, in addition to attending classes and doing all the coursework that came with those courses, did you spend much time at the State Department at all?

TB: You mean in addition to the language classes?

LC: Yes.

TB: No.

LC: Ok. So your only brief at this time was language study?

TB: That's right.

LC: Ok. And where were the language courses held? Were they out in Virginia again?

TB: They were at the Foreign Service Institute in Arlington, which has moved to a different location. They used to be in Arlington. Now, one of the problems at the Thai…I had been singled out specifically for Thai language training [theoretically to be followed after nine months in Washington by six months in the field without other duties], and Al Francis – who preceded me by a year, was a brilliant Thai speaker, so far as I know – was given six months…or no, he was given a year in Thailand and [pursuing] nothing but language study. I was promised six months and I’d picked out going to Pitsanoloke [Province], which is the northern limit of the central Thai dialect. I was supposed to spend, when I got to Bangkok, six months perfecting the language. I’m trying to remember who was before Al Francis, but that personnel thought I’d had a year in country with no duty but learning the language. When I got to Bangkok in – when was it – 1962, I’m trying to remember whether it was in August but it may have been September, I started to work the next day. So, I took Thai language classes and later on Chinese language classes, but it was nothing like being able to have been out on my own where I could have really developed the language.
LC: Tom, when did you find out that the State Department wasn't going to make good on its, essentially, a promise to you?

TB: I don't remember the exact timing.

LC: But when you arrived in Bangkok you started in as a political officer right away?

TB: The next day.

LC: Ok. Can you describe your arrival in Bangkok? Do you recall that?

TB: I think we went to the Erawan Hotel.

LC: And did you have your family with you then?

TB: Yes, I did.

LC: And how long did you stay at the hotel, do you know?

TB: I'm trying to remember. We got a house, eventually, on Soi Watawa Wong, which was in a quarter of Bangkok not too far from the Embassy. You could walk it in half an hour, although the climate was not terribly favorable for walking in a suit and tie because of the humidity.

LC: Yes, sir. Did you have your children with you, Tom?

TB: I had one, two… I'm trying…three of them.

LC: And were they old enough to be going to school?

TB: The older one was… the older one, yes.

LC: Ok. Is that Chris?

TB: Yes. He went to the American School of Bangkok.

LC: Can you describe the curriculum there?

TB: Well, it was an ordinary grade school.

LC: Ok. And taught by whom?

TB: American teachers.

LC: Ok. Were they employees of the State Department?

TB: Not at all.

LC: Who did they actually work for?

TB: They worked for the entity of the American School of Bangkok. They'd get State Department subsidies.

LC: Ok. Tom, can you… where was the Embassy actually?

TB: The Embassy was on what was called Thanon Witthayu, which means 'Wireless Road', and is still there.
LC: Can you describe the building for us?
TB: There was a, not very distinguished, concrete structure of, as I recall, three stories. I
don’t know what the current state is, but there were two ways to get to it. One was by Soi Ruam
Rodee, which ran behind the Embassy – a Soi being a narrower street. And Thanon Witthayu was
a double street with an island in the middle of the street. That’s the main entrance.
LC: And how big was the Embassy staff roughly at the time you joined?
TB: It was roughly modest then, though it became, within a few years, the largest Embassy
in the system, in terms of personnel, after Vietnam.
LC: Yes, sir. But when you arrived in 1962 it was still relatively small?
TB: It was relatively small.
LC: And how many in the political section?
TB: I’m trying to think. There were I think five or six of us in the real political section.
LC: In the real political section as opposed to…?
TB: The augmentation by CIA people under cover.
LC: Ok. About how many of them were there? How many of these CIA people?
TB: You mean assigned to the political section?
LC: Yes.
TB: I don’t know at that time.
LC: Ok. But there were just a handful of you who were actually fully fledged State
Department FSOs?
TB: Five or six in the political section.
LC: Ok. Do any of the people that you worked with there stand out in your mind now?
TB: The political counselor was Ted Tremblay and the deputy was Al Selligman, who was
a Japanese expert. Al Francis was also in the political section. He was, as I mentioned, an
outstanding Thai speaker.
LC: Al Selligman. How long had he been there? Do you know?
TB: I’m not sure whether he was there when I arrived or came with it shortly thereafter.
LC: Did you have a chance to talk to him much about Japan?
TB: I later lived in the same area, Holland Hills, of Alexandria, Virginia, as he did. So, I did
discuss Japan with him on several occasions.
LC: Ok, but many years later?
TB: It may have been all the time; in other words, when I first knew him and later on.

LC: Right, I see. Who was the ambassador and also the DCM when you were there?

TB: Leonard Unger was the ambassador. No, wait a minute, let me...I know he was ambassador later on; I'm trying to figure out...I'm not sure.

LC: Ok. I gather you're not sure if he was there when you arrived but he was definitely there at the later part of your tour.

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. And you were there for two years, is that right?

TB: Three years.

LC: Three years?

TB: Two.

LC: Oh, I'm sorry, yes – two – until the middle of 1964?

TB: ’64, yes.

LC: Tom, can you give an overview of what you were doing and how often, for example, you traveled outside of Bangkok?

TB: I carved out a niche for myself in provincial reporting and the main area I devoted effort to was northeast Thailand.

LC: Why did you choose that?

TB: Because that's where the insurgency was flourishing. And also, it had a significant Vietnamese population, so I did an overall analysis of northeast Thailand politically and economically of what was then fifteen provinces and are now sixteen or seventeen. I also did analyses of the Vietnamese community, which was largely Hanoi directed.

LC: Can you tell a little more about that? Are you taking about Vietnamese, ethnic Vietnamese, who were living in Bangkok or the ones who were up north, or both?

TB: Well, the situation there in Vietnamese and Thailand is very complicated. There were some who came in at the eighteenth century during the Tay Son Rebellion and they went largely to Chanthaburi province. My then Thai instructor in Washington, Witthaya Wejajiva, had a Vietnamese grandfather from Chanthaburi, which was unusual. Then, shortly after – I think it was 1946 – shortly after World War II, when the French returned to Indochina, a great many Vietnamese who had been living in Mekong riparian towns in Laos moved across the river into Thailand – Nakhon Phanom, Nong Khai, Udon, Mukdahan, etc. The Thai never really wanted to
assimilate them although most of them [the younger generation] became indistinguishable from Thai because they don’t look that much different and because they grew up speaking Thai, but the Vietnamese community...there was a re-patriation movement to North Vietnam. There were very few who opted to return to the south because they came from areas in Vietnam like Dong Ha and Quang Binh Province right across the dividing line between North and South Vietnam – came from then areas like that. So, they were north central and northern Vietnamese to begin with in the vicinity. One encountered [Northern] Vietnamese communities, of course, in Savannakhet and Taket, not so much in Taket than in Pakse. Those two communities were more inclined toward South Vietnam, but the Thai government regarded them as a subversive source although there was never any real evidence that the Vietnamese community in northeast Thailand had anything to do with the Thai insurgency.

LC: Were you able to develop information about links, though, that they may have had with Hanoi and with the Communist regime?

TB: Well, it was obvious visiting their houses in northeast Thailand. There was the inevitable picture of Ho Chi Minh, but many of them were Catholic so one would go into a house and see on a wall the picture of Jesus with the heart exposed, Ho Chi Minh, and then male American movie stars like John Derek on the pillars. So, it was an eclectic assemblage of photographs.

LC: I take it, Tom, that you did spend a good deal of time up in the northeast then.

TB: I spent an awful lot of time in the northeast. Now, one of the reasons why I traveled minimally to the north was because we had a consul in Chiang Mai at the time who covered the north. Also, as before, we had a consulate in Songkhla in the south and I traveled the south quite a bit also. Within that two years I’d visited what were then [all] seventy-two provinces in Thailand, and I’d done provincial reporting on west Thailand, the Kanchanaburi province, where the Bridge on the River Kwai was, on northeast Thailand, and on south Thailand. I also did one on southeast Thailand including Chanthaburi.

LC: Were you at liberty to more or less select the places and topics upon which you would write?

TB: Yeah. I had a very understanding boss named Ted Tremblay who encouraged me in this work.

LC: What interests did he hope that you would pursue or did he encourage you to pursue?
TB: I don’t know. He was just generally enthusiastic about what I wrote.

LC: Ok. And gave you, if you will, freehand?

TB: Yeah. I had quite a reasonably freehand. This led to some conflict with the deputy section chief, Al Selligman, because he felt I should be developing more contacts in Bangkok. For example, there was a coup attempt and he said, ‘Go out and talk to your contacts in Bangkok and find out what the attitude is toward the coup.’ I really had very minimal sources in Bangkok because I’d concentrated so much on the provinces.

LC: When did that coup attempt take place, Tom? Do you remember?

TB: I don’t recall offhand.

LC: And this was one of the unsuccessful ones during that period?

TB: I guess so.

LC: Ok. And did Ted Tremblay basically let you continue to do what you had been doing?

TB: Certainly.

LC: Were you able, Tom, to develop any information from the more far-flung provinces about their responses to events in Bangkok? Was that one of the things you tried to look at?

TB: What they needed was an immediate analysis for Washington’s consumption and that wouldn’t have worked out because it would have taken too much time.

LC: In other words, it wouldn’t have been in real time.

TB: That’s right.

LC: And events move fairly quickly during a coup attempt, as we know. What kinds of sources were you able to develop for your studies of the ethnic Vietnamese communities?

TB: Well, I had extensive contacts in the Interior Ministry, which staffed all the provinces and districts with its officials. So, I developed as close a rapport as possible with governors in the field and district chiefs in the field. One of the things I concentrated on was trying to identify [outstanding] district chiefs if they had merit. I’d recommend to USIA, USIS for [international] travel grants to the United States.

LC: Can you describe that program?

TB: I beg your pardon?

LC: Would you describe a little bit about that program about having…?

TB: There was a program, the USIA, the USIS had – I think it was universal throughout the system – of sending key officials on U.S. orientation tours. I remember there was one district chief
in northeast Thailand that I arranged for this and then in the itinerary I arranged a visit to my
parents in Arizona.
LC: And did that actually happen?
TB: Yeah, sure.
LC: And was the Thai gentleman able to sort of say he had seen you and that everything
was ok?
TB: Oh yeah, sure.
LC: Do you know much about the orientation tours that these officials were taken on?
TB: There was always a Washington component, but they could more or less set up the
tours they wished – what they wanted to see – for something like three weeks. All expenses paid
tour.
LC: And, Tom, if you would, just give an overview of the political thinking behind the
arrangement of such tours.
TB: Well, the notion was to make the individuals favorable with the United States by giving
them a free excursion, and to particularly learn something about U.S. processes, political
processes.
LC: About how many officials were you able to recommend for this program?
TB: I used to recommend several a year, and I think the quota was somewhere around ten
or twelve.
LC: Did you ever follow-up with any of those gentleman after they returned to Thailand?
TB: Certainly.
LC: And what kind of feedback did you get from them about their experience?
TB: Well, the Thai are enormously fun loving people without, pardon my saying so, much
depth of philosophical speculation so they largely judged the tour on the basis of how much fun
they had. Whether the thing is sa-nook is very important.
LC: Can you explain that?
TB: Sa-nook is a concept, which is difficult to explain. There are two main outlooks that a
Thai has. One is to be sa-baay, which means ‘comfortable’ and ‘at peace with oneself’, and then
sa-nook means to ‘have fun’. I was traveling with a team – oh, that reminds me. One of the
principal things I did during the tours in Bangkok was participate in mobile information teams, which
I should go into, but let me explain. I was traveling with a mobile information team, which consisted
of an inspector from the Ministry of Interiors as chairman [as team leader], a Thai doctor, a
representative of the Information Ministry, and then an American. I'll explain that in a minute. So,
we’re traveling on a train from Bangkok to Chiang Mai to go to Chiang Mai province and we’re
sitting down in the evening in one of the compartments having a drink and I said to the man from
the Ministry of Information, ‘This is very sa-nook’. And he said, ‘It isn’t sa-nook. There are no
women present. It is sa-baay.’ In other words, it’s comfortable but it’s not fun. Anyway, I don’t
know whether you want me to go into detail.

LC: Yes, please. I think this is very interesting. Please do.

TB: What we did was travel…the main notion this was…the only experiment that I’m aware
of in the history of the U.S. government was the USIA or USIS tried to advertise the government
where it was working rather than the U.S. government. So, USIA would print up color portraits on
poster paper of the king and of the prime minister, and these teams would go two to three weeks –
I still have some of the reports – two to three weeks in remote areas like Chiangrai province. At
that time the roads were primitive to begin with. You’d go on a dirt road from one district to another
and you’d be immersed in dust. Right now they’re all paved and modernized and so on, but the
Thai used to describe it as a thale foon, meaning ‘a sea of dust’. You’d go stay in a village, usually
at the school, sometimes at the wat, the temple, and in the evening with a projector and a
generator, you’d put on films showing films of Thailand. We would pass out pictures of the king
and the prime minister, again all printed by USIA. The Ministry of Interior inspector would give a
speech. I would give a speech in Thai by pointing out U.S. support for the current government.
The notion was to nip insurgency in the bud before it got started. This was a quite interesting
program. It was conducted in many, many provinces in the country, and mainly USIA Thai
language officers went along, but occasionally the Embassy would – they didn’t have enough of
them – the Embassy language officers would take their place. So, it was an unusual circumstance.

LC: Would you say that it was something of a pro-active pacification effort?

TB: Exactly!

LC: What did you see in the way of an impact of these kinds of programs or was it very
difficult to judge?

TB: Well, the one impact was the effect on the government of spreading the government’s
message to the boondocks and the insurgency never really got a hold in Thailand. This is, as a
friend of mine, Mark Pratt, illustrated, [this situation was]largely a result of the leadership of Prime
Minister Sarit Thanarat, who, according to my friend, did not shoot many people but he sure shot the right ones. There was a leader of the insurgency in the northeast, Kroong Janthawong, whom the Thai government captured and Sarit had him shot. Sarit was a very... oh, that's another factor. I know who the ambassador was now. It was Ken Young. I used to go with Ambassador Young each time that he met with the Prime Minister, which was frequently, and I would take notes on the meeting. This was on the grounds that I could understand in Thai what Sarit was saying to his aide. This was not always the case because I could only gather about fifty percent of it. Sarit had a northern, a northeastern, accent – a Lao accent. Anyway, I'm diverging from the subject, but what was fascinating about these sessions with Sarit was that he was in very bad health at the time. He had cirrhosis or something of the liver – he had an early history of [heavy] drinking – and he would sometimes fall asleep [during the meeting]. While he was sleeping, Thanat Khoman, the Foreign Minister would pick up the conversation with Phya Siwasan, the senior advisor, and then Sarit would wake up and join the conversation again. The one thing that would wake him up, however, was the mention of the word ‘Cambodia’. He would spring to life cursing Sihanouk. It was quite amusing to watch him.

LC: What was the basis of the enmity between those two, do you know?
TB: Well, they [Thailand and Cambodia] fought over Khao Phrai Wihan [a Khmer temple]... no, they hadn’t really fought over that; they let the World Court decide that [it belonged to Cambodia]. But there had been border clashes and at one point Sihanouk publicly declared that he hoped that Thanat Khoman, the Foreign Minister, Thai Foreign Minister, would acquire amoebic dysentery; a particularly scabrous wish.

LC: What, as a political officer, were you observing about the state of American policy on this tension between Thailand and Cambodia, or at least between the two leaders?
TB: Again, I was not at that time concerned with Thai-Cambodian relations.

LC: Let me ask a little bit about the insurgency. Tom, how much information was there that there was an independent Thai Communist party actively leading the insurgency?
TB: We had quite thorough information on that score. [But the insurgency never amounted to much.] It never got much... it had some implantation [insurgency activity] in Kalasin province in northeast Thailand and in Sakon Nakhon [province], but it didn’t have much substance. And it was laughable compared to the insurgency in Vietnam.
LC: What kind of order of magnitude are we talking about? Was there a strength estimate
that you were kind of going by in those days?
TB: There was, but I don’t recall it offhand.
LC: Ok. Did the insurgency either in tactics or in activity change over the time that you
were there and observing?
TB: It weakened considerably. The government put out this— I did some
reporting on this also— series of mobile development teams. They’d take an Army officer—a very
dynamic one in one case where I accompanied the team— send him up [with his team] to a remote
district like in Kalasin province. And the team would dig a well, deep water well, five hundred feet
sometimes, [giving the area pure drinking water]; they would give the propaganda lectures [similar
to those] that the mobile information teams gave, they would support local merchants. One of the
signal things that I noticed when I was later consul in Udorn [in the Northeast], which is ’70 to ’71,
whereas in 1962-1964 in the Northeast, which was considered then a hotbed of insurgency, there
were fifty percent of the districts were inaccessible during the rainy seasons. When [after] I arrived
in Udorn in ’70 and ’71, I visited [each month] every district [in a province], a hundred and fifty
districts in the consul area. [In all], only one was inaccessible during the rainy seasons. There had
been an enormous Thai effort to put in all weather roads and enable farmers to get their produce to
market in all seasons. That act effectively destroyed the insurgency.
LC: Can you talk a little bit about the process by which those roads were built? Was that a
U.S. or foreign contractors who were doing that work?
TB: I think it was mainly Thai contractors but I don’t know for sure.
LC: And the roads themselves, apropos of the security situation, were those roads
defended in some ways?
TB: I can’t recall any particular need to defend a road, except there were areas in Kalasin
and Sakon Nakhon province which one did not travel at night, but I don’t recall, like in Vietnam,
where every bridge had a Popular Force soldier [contingent] willing to be sacrificed, unwilling to be
sacrificed to Viet Cong nocturnal attack.
LC: Tom, for somebody who doesn’t follow the transition that you’ve made, can you sort of
connect the dots between road construction and improved internal security?
TB: Well, one of the principal exports in the northeast was what the Thai called ma-noot,
was human laborer. It’s a traditionally very poor area, and farmers could not get their product to
market in the rainy season. When you get your product to market you can develop more products, you can make more money, you can expand your agricultural base, and so on. So, the improvement of the infrastructure was fundamental to the clearing up of minor insurgency problems in the northeast.

LC: Ok. Were there other infrastructural improvements beyond the roads that also helped? For example, was there an electrification program or communications or something?
TB: I believe there was but I’m not familiar with it. The main thing was bringing drinkable, pure water to the populace.

LC: And that was the, I take it, the purpose behind the sinking of the wells that you mentioned.
TB: Yeah.

LC: And the mobile development teams, you mentioned they had a military component.
TB: They had military leadership whereas the mobile information teams had Ministry of Information, pardon me, Ministry of Interior leadership.

LC: Ok. And were the mobile development teams exclusively Thai or would occasionally also a U.S. military advisor go along or another…?
TB: Occasionally there’d be an American to accompany them but they were exclusively Thai in leadership.

LC: Ok. And would the Americans who went along, I was supposing that they might be military advisors, but were they civilians in some cases too?
TB: Well, there certainly wasn’t like a…

LC: Did you then, Tom, go along on some of the mobile development teams as well as the…?
TB: Well, I went along on one of them, which had a very impressive leader. But we had another section in the embassy entitled this counter-insurgency or something like that, so that was their principle task.

LC: Do you remember any of the fellows who were assigned to that section of the Embassy?
TB: The head of it was a fellow named Bill Stokes when I was originally there.

LC: What was his background, do you know?
TB: I don’t know.
LC: But the activities of this counter-insurgency section, were they coordinated with other
initiatives of the Embassy?
TB: The Ambassador had weekly country team meetings and this...I was not privy to these
country team meetings until I was later assigned as political counselor, but during that effort in '73-
'75 there was intense coordination within the U.S. mission on these problems.
LC: Was the success that the U.S. had in backstopping Thai efforts to put down or put a lid
on the insurgency, was that success seen as any kind of a beacon or marker or a template for what
might be done elsewhere, and I'm thinking specifically of Vietnam?
TB: I doubt it because if you take a look, I'm just coming through now to page seventy of
my book, I belittle the Thai Communist insurgency. Particularly the third paragraph when I deal
with the...
LC: Population size and...
TB: Well, if you had taken the whole northeast of Thailand in 1970, which had a population
of fifteen million, there were fifteen hundred insurgents, which makes one for every thousand
fifteen people, and I mentioned the contrast with Binh Long where there were sixteen hundred local
force [cadra] there living among an eighty thousand population. Fifty to one.
LC: So the scale of things was just so completely different.
TB: Yes.
LC: Ok. There was no sense of Thailand functioning as a kind of pilot project for what
might successfully work in...
TB: Now, to get back to Sarit for a moment.
LC: Ok. Sure.
TB: I mentioned he didn't shoot many people but he shot the right ones. The Chinese in
Bangkok had a habit of burning their stores at the New Year in order to collect the insurance, so
there was a Chinese portion of Bangkok whom Sarit, in his capacity as Chief of the Fire
Department – he was Prime Minister and also head of the Bangkok Fire Department – he arrested
this Chinese and shot him in the head and after that there were no more Chinese burning up their
houses or businesses. Also, I've grown [cited] the contrast. We have Marshall Sarit, who when he
died there was a newspaper scandal...there's a newspaper called Kiartisak in Thailand. So,
everyday for sixty-five days they printed a picture of a [different] Sarit mistress with the house,
Mercedes, and so on that he kept the girl up in. The best estimate is that he milked sixty-five
million or so from the Thai government, but in my view every penny of it is worth it because Thai, Thailand, never became Communist or had any danger of becoming so. Whereas you have the contrast of Ngo Dinh Diem in Bangkok, I mean Saigon, who gave up marriage for his country, slept on a pallet, and led a very abstemious, monastic life and ruined South Vietnam. So, I don’t, as a consequence, draw any particular conclusion about the morality of a leader and his effectiveness.

LC: Yes, sir. Sir, you said that you attended a number of meetings between the Ambassador and Premier Sarit.

TB: I recall now the DCM was George something – George…I can check that later on. But it was Ambassador Kenneth [Todd] Young.

LC: What was your impression of Ken Young, sir?

TB: He was a very idealistic individual but not, in my view…he’d been in the department but not, I think, as a Foreign Service officer. I don’t know how he got in but he had been head of the Southeast Asia desk; he was succeeded by Graham Martin.

LC: Yes. And that was during your time there, is that right?

TB: During my time there. I went with Martin one time to see Sarit and after that Martin went on his own.

LC: Did Martin have a facility with Thai language?

TB: Not at all.

LC: Ok. He went by himself though?

TB: Well, yeah, he went by himself. So, I didn’t play the role with the central Thai government that I had with Young.

LC: Can you talk a little bit more about Sarit’s management style? You mentioned that he had this little sinecure in Bangkok, the Fire Department. Did he have other posts within the government that you know about that he utilized to consolidate and keep his power?

TB: I don’t recall offhand.

LC: Ok. What do you know about the functioning of the Thai cabinet at this time?

TB: Very little. I was exposed regularly to Phya Siwasan and Thanat Khoman, the Senior Consular and Foreign Minister.

LC: But your observations were some removed, basically, from the workings of cabinet?

TB: Then, I was specializing except for this one function of recording conversations in the countryside rather than in the capital.
LC: Tom, at some point did you receive a different assignment? I think you mentioned becoming political counselor.

TB: That was later on.

LC: Ok. That was at your later stationing in Bangkok or in Thailand?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Oh ok. I apologize. Did you say that you did or did not attend the country team meetings that happened every week?

TB: I did not in the ’62-’64 period because I was the junior officer in the political section.

LC: Ok. But only later on, when you had become a political counselor were you sitting in on those.

TB: That’s right.

LC: Sir, did you enjoy your time in Thailand between ’62 and ’64?

TB: Certainly.

LC: Was it a good posting?

TB: I thought it quite fascinating because I was given such free reign by my boss.

LC: Yes, and again, that kind of thing suited you well.

TB: Yeah.

LC: Yeah. By the time you were leaving Bangkok and the posting in Thailand, the Embassy had begun to change I take it.

TB: They switched ambassadors. Graham Martin was a much more abstemious type, less outgoing – much less outgoing than Ken Young.

LC: Had the staff also begun to grow at that point?

TB: Slightly, yes.

LC: While you were posted there, of course, Ngo Dinh Diem was removed from power in 1963. Do you recall that?

TB: I followed events in Vietnam quite closely. During the ’62-’64 period I tried to establish some rapport between the embassy in Saigon and the embassy in Bangkok, particularly over the issue of Vietnamese in northeast Thailand. But those efforts were not very successful.

LC: Why not?

TB: Because an embassy tends to focus on its own country.

LC: And so things that are kind of messy like refugee populations and so forth…
TB: And a regional policy falls aside.
LC: Ok. Do you recall the time period when Diem was removed from power?
TB: Do I recall what, sorry?
LC: The time period in 1963 when Diem was removed from office and then killed?
TB: It's a little...I don't recall so much from my service in Bangkok but from the extensive reading I've done on that era.
LC: Ok. I wondered if you recalled that day. But sir, a little over a month later...well, actually in fact, less than a month later President Kennedy was killed and I wonder if you remember that and finding out about that?
TB: Certainly.
LC: Where were you? Do you remember?
TB: That I don't recall. I think I was upcountry in Thailand.
LC: Was there any professional impact? Anything that you saw that indicated to you the government was experiencing a crisis or were things not affected in, out in Southeast Asia?
TB: You mean in the U.S. government?
LC: Yes.
TB: No. Not really.
LC: Ok. How did you feel personally? Do you remember? Can you say?
TB: I had a great admiration for President Kennedy's oratorical skills and for his general humanity. So, I was like most American, quite upset.
LC: Tom, let's take a break here. Tom, when did you find out that you were going to be posted out of Thailand? Do you know?
TB: I don't recall the exact month.
LC: Ok. Do you remember getting orders though that would send you to the Embassy in Laos?
TB: Yeah, sure. But I don't recall just when it occurred.
LC: But it probably wasn't unexpected after a couple of years in Thailand, is that right?
TB: Well, the expectation was either two more years in Thailand or going elsewhere. I was happy to be staying in the Southeast Asian complex.
LC: Right. Had you been studying Laos at all?
TB: Not yet.
LC: Ok. When you actually made the move from Bangkok to Vientiane where did you live at first?

TB: The first house belonged to Oun Sananikone, one of the leading Lao political figures. Then, later on, I moved to a house of Chao Saykham, who was the governor of Xiangkhoang province, but actually spent little time in Xiangkhoang because it was largely under Pathet Lao control.

LC: So, initially, you lived in a house that belonged to Sananikone


LC: How did it come about that you had occupancy of his house?

TB: It wasn’t his house. He owned the house. It wasn’t where he was living. My predecessor, Jere Broh-Khan, in the embassy had lived there. And then I remember this…coming down shortly after moving in, coming down with measles. I went to the Embassy doctor, who was a magnificent German called Prannamueller, Pannamueller with a P. And he said, ‘I’ve never seen a man of your age with measles.’ Incidentally, a story I’d like to revert to in Vietnam. There was a doctor in Saigon named Crozafon. He had a Sino-Vietnamese staff member – she wasn’t a nurse, she was an interpreter. While I worked in Saigon I went periodically to Dr. Crozafon for amoebic dysentery, among other maladies, and he thought everything – all disease – sprang from the liver like many French do. But instead of letting me speak to him in French, he would always have his Sino-Vietnamese woman interpreter ask me questions. And then I would respond to her and she would translate to him. When I was switched to Hue, where I spoke almost no French at all, I learned a great deal more about Vietnamese. I went to see him after several months – I was down in Saigon. I went to see him on a social call. He had, for some reason, dispensed of the services of his interpreter and we had to speak in French. And he said to me, ‘Mr. Barnes, your French has improved enormously since you’ve gone to Hue.’ I said, ‘I barely use it there. This is the first time you let me speak to you in French.’ He later died of cancer. I don’t remember – pancreas or something – but I used to see him in the late ’60s at the house of the Cexo manager in Saigon.

LC: At the house of the…of which manager?

TB: The Cexo. That’s the…it’s nothing to do with sex. It’s Cautchouc d’Extreme Orient, which is one of the two main rubber plantations [companies] in Binh Long province where I was in ’67-’68. Philippe Piechaud was the head of it. The sign on Crozafon was such an unconsciously pompous and amusing man. But I’m getting way off the subject.
LC: No, it’s fine actually. I was going to ask you whether, upon your arrival, in Laos you were able to employ your French to greater degree.

TB: Yeah. The language of the government was largely French.

LC: Sir, can you describe the U.S. Embassy when you arrived there? And this would be in 1964.

TB: The last time I saw it was about ten years ago and it was in the same place. It was near a no longer worshipped stupa, or shrine. And it was a single story building, very cramped quarters. No, sorry, there were two stories. Two story building.

LC: How old was the building?

TB: Well, everything in Laos looks older than it is because of poor maintenance, but I don’t know how old it was.

LC: Who was the ambassador at the time you arrived?

TB: Bill Sullivan.

LC: Ok. And where did he live?

TB: He lived in a house near the Mekong River – not on the banks – about a block away.

LC: Ok. Was that property owned by the State Department, the U.S. government?

TB: I don’t think we owned any property in Laos, but I’m not sure. But we had Kilometer Six, which was the USAID compound where a lot of USAID people lived and that’s where the American school was. That later became the housing for the Pathet Lao regime when they took over in ’75.

LC: The housing for the central…?

TB: The Communist government.

LC: Right. For the central figures in the government?

TB: Kilometer Six.

LC: Ok. And I know that you had an experience out there that you’d written about that I’d like to ask you about. But first, Sir, if you can, tell me a little bit about the staff in the embassy. How many people were there?

TB: It was very small. It was the ambassador, it was Bill Sullivan, the deputy chief of mission, Coby Swank, Bill Chapin who was the political officer [section chief] – he didn’t have the title of [political] counselor – Mark Pratt, and one other political officer who handled targeting. Mark
dealt with the central government and I dealt, as usual, with the provinces. I also dealt with the National Assembly.

LC: Were those the two main watching briefs that you had?

TB: That's right.

LC: Ok.

TB: And there was one economic officer, Bill Maynes, who later became Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs in the Department, and he was later with Foreign Policy Magazine for a while.

LC: And he was there when you arrived? Bill Maynes?

TB: I think he came in later, but I'm not sure. We must have had a consular officer.

LC: But you don't recall who that was at this time?

TB: I don't.

LC: Ok. Tom, you were initially to be at Vientiane for two years. Is that right? Was that the expectation?

TB: I think so, yes.

LC: Give me a sense of other Americans who were…?

TB: There was a military attaché, man named Colonel Law, and there was the AID contingent. One of the…a friend who had been a political counselor in Bangkok [actually Saigon] and for whom I'd done reporting, Joe Mendenhall, became the AID director. He later became the administrator for AID for Vietnam in Washington.

LC: Would that have been yet in the late sixties? Do you know?

TB: Yes.

LC: Ok. Were there other civilians in addition to the AID personnel?

TB: There was the Air America and Continental Airways contractor presidents. These were CIA contract airlines.

LC: About how many people? Do you know?

TB: Well, the main group was in Udorn, just sixty kilometers to the south in northeast Thailand where I later was consul. But there were contingents of I don't know how many in Laos. Smaller groups.

LC: Private contractors? Businessmen?

TB: No these were pilots there.
LC: But in addition to Air America and Continental people, were there other Americans in and out of Vientiane?


LC: Ok. Anyone whom you remember specifically?

TB: Well, the best-known one was a woman called Estelle Hope. There was also Tim Page who's written books on Cambodia, subsequently.

LC: Did you meet with either of them or see them around?

TB: Yeah, sure. Everybody saw everybody in Vientiane. And my colleague, Mark Pratt, who everyone thought was the CIA station chief because he had such extensive contacts in the Lao hierarchy would hold periodic Chinese meal suppers. He trained two Chinese truck drivers how to cook Chinese food. And he would have gatherings of the leading Lao officials periodically.

LC: Was there a CIA contingent there as well?

TB: Certainly.

LC: About how large when you arrived? Do you know?

TB: I don’t recall offhand.

LC: Ok. Were they occupying space in the Embassy or were they elsewhere?

TB: Oh yes. Well, both.

LC: Both. Yes. Ok. Can you tell me anything about them?

TB: The Deputy CIA head was Jim Lilley who later, because of his connections with President Bush, became Ambassador to China.

LC: And he was there when you were there?

TB: He was there when I was there.

LC: Ok. Ok. Let’s take a break, Tom.
LC: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech. I'm continuing the oral
history interview with Thomas Barnes. Today's date is the 17th of March 2004. I am on the
campus of Texas Tech in the interview room of the Special Collections building and Mr. Barnes is
in Austin. Good morning, Sir.
TB: Good morning.
LC: Tom, I want to begin by talking a little bit, if you don’t mind, about the external security
situation in Laos when you arrived at the embassy in Vientiane in the spring of 1964. Can you talk
a little bit about the relationship between Laos and North Vietnam, particularly?
TB: Well, the Pathet Lao, the Lao Communist movement, was heavily influenced by the
North Vietnamese Lao Dong Party. There was intermarriage between leading Lao officials and
Vietnamese officials. For example, Chau Souphanavong, the theoretical Vice Prime Minister,
Deputy Prime Minister, Souphanavong, who was Souphana Phouma’s half brother,
[Souphanavong] had a Vietnamese wife, and Kayson Phomvihan, whom I believe was the leader
of the Pathet Lao at the time, was half Vietnamese.
LC: Do you know anything about the specifics of those marriages? Who the women were,
for example?
TB: I don’t know. I don’t.
LC: I never met any of these people because they were often in their own zone up in the
north, northeast corner of Laos. I did get up to Houaphan province, which borders Vietnam, but in
a zone controlled by the government.
LC: Yes, and I wanted to ask you about that visit too. Maybe a little bit later on.
TB: Sure.
LC: But you were talking about the intermarriage and family relationships that crossed the
border there.
TB: All I know is…I didn’t know the people individually, so all I know is the existence of the
fact.
LC: And the Pathet Lao’s political relationship with Lao Dong leadership?
TB: Yes. And I know there were two scholars from the Ran Corporation, Paul Langer and Joe Zasloff, who did extensive studies on the Pathet Lao and their books are probably in your library on that score.

LC: Yes. Two very famous books by them, and really, some of the only open literature at least that covers that relationship in any detail.

TB: There was a British journalist, or maybe he was Australian, named Arthur Dommen, who also wrote a book on the Pathet Lao. It was quite good.

LC: Now, when you were there, when you arrived in 1964, was the Pathet Lao actively engaged in insurgency efforts?

TB: They were engaged in insurgent actions up in the northeast. But the main adversary, of course, was the North Vietnamese who were ensconced in the western regions of Houaphan province. Sorry, the eastern regions of Houaphan province.

LC: Was there any, to your knowledge, Communist-led activity in or around Vientiane?

TB: Nothing that was particularly detectable. All the folly was committed by rightists.

LC: Actually, Tom, I want to ask you about that. In April 1964, there was a coup attempt within Laos. Do you remember anything about that?

TB: I think I detailed some of the circumstances [in my memoir] whereby the Phoumi Nosovan attempting to regain power or gain power exercised a coup in conjunction with the police under Police General Siho. It was a sort of comic affair which ended in government triumph and where I was implicated, in the sense that I was dispatched to bring back those who had surrendered among the police [and] Phoumi groups at Kilometer Six, where the USAID compound, where they'd taken refuge in the USAID compound, and bring them down to the river at the government/military headquarters at the king’s palace or near the king’s palace along the river. That was a rather harrowing experience, as I described.

LC: Yes, sir. Can you go ahead for someone who doesn't have access to your book and just sort of outline what happened to you?

TB: Well, we had…Mark Pratt was my close associate there and a very good friend. [Mark] and I went out [to Kilometer 6] to pick up those who had surrendered, and a colonel who was from Luang Prabang, a royalist and a loyalist, had a jeep and then there was a truck. So Mark, who is quite garrulous, got in the jeep with the colonel, and I was left with – I don’t know – something like nineteen or twenty-one of those who had surrendered. There was a full colonel
from Phoumi’s staff who was also with Mark in the jeep. I had all the rest nineteen, twenty, or
twenty-one people including a lieutenant colonel named Thammakanti of the police. Sorry, I've got
this slightly confused. The full colonel from Phoumi’s staff rode in the cab with a truck driver. I
stayed in the back with the other prisoners or surrenderees or however you want to describe them.
As we were proceeding past a series of checkpoints, the government-manned checkpoints, where
machine guns had been set up alongside the road, a truck suddenly appeared from behind bearing
down on us and there were people standing in the bed of the truck, soldiers standing in the bed of
the truck [behind the cab], with rifles aimed straight at us. I motioned to the group of people who
were riding [with me] to sit down on the truck bed where they couldn’t be seen over the back barrier
of the truck. The truck hurtling toward us obviously wanted to insist that we stop. So, the
circumstances were that I finally forced the driver of the truck I was in over to the side of the road
and [our captors] ordered all the people to get out. They were meanwhile bearing down on us with
their rifles pointed straight at my head. I was standing up in the back, just above the raling of the
backdrop of the truck. They stopped and I looked in vain for Mark, who was so busy talking to this
colonel from the palace that he didn’t see what was going on behind him and he was way, way
ahead on the road. And the colonel in that – the loyalist colonel in that jeep – was the one who
was gaining safe passage [for us] through this nest of roadblocks. At any rate, once we stopped,
whoever was driving the truck behind pointed rifles at us and said, ‘Get up there on that hillside.’
There was a slight hillside to the, just to the side of the truck. So, this police Lieutenant Colonel
Thammakanti said, ‘Ils vont nous tous fusillés’ – they’re going to shoot us all. And I again urged
them to calm down and settle down up in the hillside while I spoke with the people who were
controlling this. Fortunately, about this time somebody looked out, either Mark or the colonel
driving the jeep, to see that the truck was no longer attached to this two vehicle convoy and they
turned around and came upon us just as the pursuing truck, the people in the pursuing truck, were
about to take action. What action they would have taken I don’t know, but at any rate this colonel
negotiated our release and we proceeded on to the riverside with our cargo.

LC: Tom, were you a little bit shaken up yourself?
TB: No.
LC: Not at all? You didn’t…
TB: I was concerned a little bit.
LC: Sure. Ok. Did everything kind of quiet down from that point on?
TB: Yeah. Once the colonel had come back and explained the situation, all went well.

LC: Were there asylum seekers who did come to the embassy at that point, either before or after that particular incident?

TB: I don’t recall any doing so. Anybody who was seeking asylum went to the king’s palace along the river where the loyalist military headquarters were.

LC: Do you know about the fate of any of those people?

TB: Several of them were exiled in Thailand afterwards and never or rarely returned to Laos.

LC: Do you know the names of any of those people or their stations?

TB: Well, I’m trying to remember the name of the colonel that was Phoumi’s deputy. It escapes me offhand. I remember Lieutenant Colonel Thommakanti was the police lieutenant colonel with me. And I don’t know the name of the colonel from Luang Prabang who was leading the loyalist forces. I’d never encountered him before.

LC: Did you ever see him again?

TB: I don’t recall having done so. No.

LC: Tom, just to refresh, your position within the embassy at this point was what?

TB: Broke up.

LC: I’m sorry, Tom. Are you still there?

TB: Sure.

LC: Ok. I was just asking to refresh the minds of the listeners, what post did you hold in the Embassy at this point?

TB: I was the second secretary. I was a political officer. I was dealing principally with provincial developments and the National Assembly.

LC: And I want to ask about the impact of the coup attempts in 1964 and ’65 on assembly politics. Can you talk about that in general terms?

TB: Well, the National Assembly was not much of a functioning entity, so I don’t think it had any profound…most of the delegates were rightists, but I don’t recall the National Assembly having any major influence in the country.

LC: What did they do, even if it wasn’t influential? Did you attend any meetings of the National Assembly?
TB: I attended one, of which I have no memory. All I remember is I was wearing a suit and it was an intensely humid day and there was no air conditioning in the National Assembly, and I emerged completely soaked in sweat.

LC: Tom, where did the assembly meet? Or did it vary?

TB: It had an assembly hall in Vientiane.

LC: Was it a historic building or was it something that was new? Do you remember?

TB: I don't remember it. I have the one in Saigon in perfect memory because it's right next to the Continental Hotel.

LC: Was that an older French era building or…?

TB: It was a French opera house.

LC: Was it really?

TB: Yeah.

LC: Oh ok. When you were in Saigon, did you go to an assembly meeting once or twice?

TB: I didn't deal with the…I wasn't in the political section in Saigon except for a couple of months.

LC: Did you ever go in the opera house?

TB: I think I've been inside it, but not for any cultural event of any kind.

LC: Just to look it over?

TB: Sure.

LC: Could you describe it at all in any kind of way?

TB: It had this sort of seashell-shaped exterior, but I don't recall much about the interior at all.

LC: Ok. Back in Laos then, I wanted to pursue a little bit further the events of spring of 1964. Most of the literature seems to confirm that in June of 1964, Souvanna Phouma approved the flying of unarmed reconnaissance flights by the United States in northern and northeastern Laos. Did you have any awareness of that?

TB: No. We had one man, Mike Connors, in the political section who was called the 'Mad Bomber'. He handled all the targeting and I didn't have anything to do with that.

LC: How well did you know Mike?

TB: Oh he was a friend, but I didn't know him all that well.

LC: Where was he from, Tom?
TB: I don’t know. He was a Foreign Service officer who later beat me out of the role of political advisor to the, to CINCPAC [Commander-in-Chief, Pacific]. When I was in Hawaii from ’77 to ’78, the sign of Diplomat in Residence, and the CINCPAC Political Advisor position came open. I was one of two candidates and Mike was chosen on the grounds that he had known Admiral Felt beforehand and had been involved with him in this targeting in Laos.

LC: And that kind of gave him a leg up with CINCPAC?

TB: Definitely because then they were acquainted with him.

LC: Yes. Was that a job that you had particularly wanted?

TB: Well, that was in ’79 when I was completing the tour as Diplomat in Residence and it would have meant staying in Hawaii another year, which would be a pleasant business to look forward to.

LC: Yes, absolutely. And instead, at that point, you went…where did you go?

TB: I went back to Washington and was assigned to the Refugee Program Bureau and became director of the Kampuchean Interagency Task Force.

LC: But you were working on Cambodian refugees but you were in D.C.?

TB: Working on the whole Cambodian refugee situation, yeah.

LC: And we’ll come back to talk about that, but it’s interesting that you and Mike crossed paths later on. But you considered him a friend?

TB: Sure.

LC: Were you aware of the – I mean just in general terms, obviously not in connection with your particular work within the embassy – but were you aware, in general terms, of the influx of American personnel, both civilian and military, into Laos in the later half of 1964?

TB: Well, the presence of Air American and Continental Air services, which were contract airlines under the CIA, was quite obvious. However, most of their personnel were in Udorn.

LC: Yes, but during 1964 they were opening and enlarging that base up at Long Jeng?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: And how was it obvious to you that more people were coming to Laos? Did you see them in a café or did they come to the embassy for business or…?

TB: No, they rarely came to the embassy. There was the Continental pool, swimming pool, and I’d take my children there on weekends and there was a considerable gathering of people. There was a fellow who headed Continental Airlines. His name was Dutch Brongersma.
LC: How do you spell that, Tom?
TB: B-R-O-N-G-E-R-S-M-A.
LC: Ok.
TB: What impressed me about him, he always had, when he was traveling, an enormous
wad of five hundred piaster notes in Vietnam that stuck out of his rear pocket.
LC: What was he using those for? Do you have any idea?
TB: Well, he was in and out of Vietnam quite frequently.
LC: And he just had his cash hanging out of his pocket?
TB: That's right.
LC: That was either brave or silly. I can't think which. Were there other Continental or Air
America personnel?
TB: There was the famous Skip Bryant who was a mustachioed Continental pilot. I was
supposed to go, along with, one of the top eight officials – his name escapes me offhand – from
Luang Prabang to Ban Huai Xai, which is in the northwestern – not northwesternmost –
westernmost province of Laos, Houaphan. No, it isn't Houaphan, it's...I can't remember the name
of the province offhand.
LC: That's ok.
TB: At any rate, we were schedule to go what was supposed to be a one hour, maybe
forty-five minute [half-hour] flight, maybe less, from Luang Prabang to Ban Huai Xai, which is on
the Mekong also. It's opposite Chiang Khong in Thailand, Chiang Khong district, right across the
way river. At any rate, we are flying what's supposed to be say a thirty or forty-five minute flight.
After about an hour I'm beginning to have some wonder about what's going on and I got the map
out. I noticed these paths, two bends on the map where the Mekong is quite pronounced. We had
just flown across Burma and flown into China, which at that time was not the wisest step to do.
Just at this point Skip Bryant noticed that the...that things had gone awry and he made a swooping
180-degree turn, bringing us back over Burmese and eventually over Lao territory. Apparently,
there was a beacon of some kind at Huai Xai and there was also a beacon somewhere in China,
and he was following the wrong beacon. Anyway, his career was abrupt after that. It was
Continental. I understand he no longer worked for them.
LC: Do you know under what circumstances he left them and went somewhere else?
TB: Pardon me?
LC: Do you know the circumstances under which he left Continental?
TB: I understand it was because he had flown us into China by mistake.
LC: And how was it known that that had happened?
TB: That I don’t know. We had mentioned it of course.
LC: Sure. Did that give you a kind of a thrill?
TB: Yeah. I liked it.
LC: You did?
TB: Yeah.
LC: Did you make…Did it look any different to you? Was there anything observable in the way of a border defense or anything like that?
TB: No, this is pretty wild territory along the Mekong. Incidentally, during that three years in Laos there were sixteen provinces in Laos at the time. I got to fifteen of them. I never got to Phongsaly, which is in the northwest corner of Laos and it borders China. There was a great deal of speculation about China, which built a road from its border into Phongsaly province. Now, CIA had some sort of operation up there which I was not privy to, and the only way I could have gotten up there was to have gotten their indulgence to visit whatever they were doing, which they were not about to grant.
LC: Did you ever ask?
TB: I never asked specifically, but I got to all the other provinces except Phongsaly. I’d like to go back someday. Also, one of the key issues in Washington they posed to us [at the time] was, ‘Why is China building this road into Laos? Is it going to invade?’ And Mark was quite non-plussed about the situation, saying that it was just a road; let’s not assume an invasion is going to follow.
LC: Do you know anything about the status of that construction project, say, when you arrived and when you moved on from the Embassy in Vientiane?
TB: I don’t recall any details. One of the singular aspects of the Chinese presence in Vientiane, the Communist Chinese presence, was that at the end of every month, the whole Chinese Mission would call in a group of Vientiane prostitutes, keep them for the night, and release them the following morning. This event occurred monthly at the end of the month; interesting exercise in Communist solidarity.
LC: Tom, did that go on pretty much the whole time you were there?
TB: So far as I know, yeah.
LC: Had it been going on beforehand?
TB: I have no idea.
LC: Do you have any idea what the compliment of personnel at the PRC Mission was, and I'm speaking here in terms of the open personnel?
TB: It was quite hefty in Vientiane but I don't recall what it was.
LC: Did you ever come across them or a representative from their mission at any diplomatic function?
TB: We were enjoined to avoid them.
LC: By whom? Was that an embassy policy or a State Department policy?
TB: Probably both.
LC: So, as far as you were aware, there was no either official or unofficial contact?
TB: Well, there must have been contact. Probably CIA contact, but I wasn't privy to it.
LC: Do you know what kinds of above ground activities, again speaking about things happening in the open, that Chinese Mission personnel were doing in Vientiane besides entertaining the prostitutes once a month?
TB: Not offhand.
LC: Do you have any clue as to whether they had a member of the staff who was doing the same kind of thing that you were? Provincial politics and monitoring the National Assembly?
TB: I never ran across any in my travels.
LC: Did you have a point of contact with the National Assembly? Was there a particular person with whom you were to stay kind of more or less…?
TB: There were several delegates, whose names now no longer linger in my mind, with whom I had social relations. I'd invite them over for meals and that sort of thing.
LC: Were they representatives of particular parties? Was that why they were important or from particular provinces?
TB: Both factors. The landlord of my house was Chao Saykham, for example, who was the Governor of Xiangkhoang province. Actually, much of Xiangkhoang province was under Hmong control.
LC: Was under what control?
TB: Hmong.
LC: Ok. Yes.
TB: Or else CIA control or else North Vietnamese control, so he didn't have much of a role in Xiangkhoang but he was the hereditary governor there; a pleasant man.

LC: A pleasant man. Which provinces were most heavily populated by the Hmong?

TB: That would be Houaphan and Xiangkhoang.

LC: And you did visit Houaphan, is that right?

TB: I visited all of these areas.

LC: Oh ok. I'm sorry, Tom. Of course you said that before. I was just sort of trying to ineptly segue to your trip to Houaphan province.

TB: The memorable aspect of that, and I have a photo of it, was this landing strip on...the Houaphan district at that time was on a mountain top and it had a very short runway that was tilted up like a boomerang would be, so that when you landed you landed flat initially and then went uphill to decelerate. And then to take off you turned around and started going downhill like a skier would and you'd just gather up momentum and you'd take off over a void. It's quite spectacular.

LC: And breathtaking.

TB: Yeah.

LC: How many times were you able to visit up there to...were you flying into Houaphan, is that right?

TB: It was...I can't remember the name of the base offhand, but it was a makeshift...it wasn't a regular village. But I recall the district chief, who was later killed, who had five wives and eighteen children, and was making more money than the Prime Minister because of the family allowances.

LC: Can you talk about those allowances? How was that structured? Do you know?

TB: That's under the French system whereby you get so much for each child, and when you have so much – I don't about so much for each wife but for each child at any rate. So with eighteen children he qualified for a rather major chunk of monthly allowance.

LC: Did he perhaps have other sources of income as well?

TB: I'm sure he did.

LC: Do you have any idea what they were?

TB: Well, the CIA was keeping him going.

LC: I was wondering if you had been up there more than once.
TB: I don’t recall being up there in Houaphan more than once because one of the memories I have of it is this very spare [slender] Lao lieutenant colonel who was later killed trying to rescue a downed American pilot in Houaphan. And also, I recall dancing the Ramwong for four or five hours. The Ramwong is not the most scintillating dance in the world. You imitate a chicken. And the succession…all the girls were married after thirteen or something so one was dancing with twelve-year-olds.

LC: Where did this dance fit into a ceremonial rite? Could you explain that for someone who doesn’t get that reference?

TB: It was after an elaborate dinner in which I made the mistake of assuming that this red-colored liquid was pepper sauce. It turned out to be pig’s blood that I dipped the meat in. When I got back to Vientiane I was in bed for two days with stomach distress. I don’t know if it was psychological or otherwise, but drinking raw pig’s blood is not my idea of bliss.

LC: No, sir. Tom, I want to ask you a little more about Houaphan province. In the book you mentioned that when you visited it was really…the town that you flew into was the only town in the province that was held by the government.

TB: That’s right. It wasn’t really a town; it was sort of a makeshift village.

LC: Right, sort of an airstrip village arrangement. About how far did the government’s writ extend around that base?

TB: Not far.

LC: Was this area then Pathet Lao-controlled? Is that a fair estimate/inference?

TB: It was North Vietnamese-controlled, really.

LC: North Vietnamese. Did you have a fairly good sense of that security situation when you flew up there?

TB: Well, it wasn’t particularly tense in the location, but it was used as a base for forays into North Vietnamese-held territory in Houaphan. That’s how the district chief eventually got killed.

LC: Do you know what happened? What the circumstances were?

TB: I never got the details on the circumstances.

LC: Was that a matter of regret to you, since you had met him?

TB: I feel sorry for any child whose parents are…one dies or one disappears. When eighteen of them are bereft of a father it’s a real depravation.
LC: Do you have any clue what happened to that family? Were others lost? Do you have any idea?

TB: Not at all.

LC: Ok. Do those kinds of things haunt you at all, Tom? Those kind of I don’t know what happened to XYZ, this person, that person?

TB: Yes, particularly people I was closely associated with in Vietnam.

LC: Yes, I could believe it. And Tom, later, perhaps in the incident where the chief was lost, that town or that landing strip area fell completely to the NVA/Pathet Lao, is that right?

TB: That’s right.

LC: And was it ever recovered by Vientiane?

TB: Not to my knowledge.

LC: Ok. Tom, I want to ask you about the fall of 1964 and whether you have any particularly memories around some of the events that – for the Vietnam, the United States involvement in Vietnam – are certainly catalytic, and I’m talking here about the Tonkin Gulf incidents and the air strikes on North Vietnam. Do you remember that happening?

TB: No, we weren’t particularly involved in that in Laos.

LC: Did it have any impact on what you were doing as a political officer?

TB: Not really. It may have had an impact on Mike Connors in his role of assigning targets in Laos.

LC: Did you feel that what you were doing, your assignment in monitoring provincial affairs, was equally as important as what he was doing?

TB: What he was doing was completely different from the normal political officer’s role. I didn’t feel that my work was all that important, regardless of what he was doing.

LC: Why is that?

TB: Because the National Assembly was not particularly influential as a decision-making body and because provincial reporting is not as essential as central government reporting like Mark was doing, as far as our relationship with Laos is concerned.

LC: Were you beginning to long to do something that you felt was more important or were you satisfied with the interesting experiences that you were having for yourself?

TB: I much prefer traveling in the provinces and experiencing the country as it exists. I felt no resentment or unease because of this.
LC: Tom, along that same line, did you have any personal experiences with the Hmong population while you were there?

TB: Well, I, of course, met General Vang Pao at Sam Thong and at Long Jeng, but I was not involved in directing him or anything like that.

LC: What was your impression of him, Tom?

TB: He was vigorous. He still is as far as I know. Vigorous and assertive and not really Lao in the sense of being able to relax and enjoy any culture. In other words, he was a dynamic individual, perhaps the most dynamic, the only dynamic general in the Lao armed forces.

LC: Under what circumstances did you have those two opportunities to see him and talk to him briefly, however briefly?

TB: Well, I'd see him in Vientiane upon occasion, socially, and at his headquarters in various locations.

LC: When you saw him on some certain social occasions in Vientiane, were those at receptions or dinners?

TB: Yes.

LC: Do you remember any of those?

TB: Not a bit. All I remember was the splendid Chinese meals at Mark Pratt's house.

LC: That Mark himself cooked, is that right?

TB: He trained two Chinese truck drivers [from Yunum] in how to cook Chinese food, but he supervised them closely, especially with imported from Hong Kong special mushrooms that had been raised in the Gobi Desert in camel dung. They all had a gritty – they imparted a gritty taste [but gave] an ineffable flavor to his dishes.

LC: And you remember those particularly?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: On some occasion, Vang Pao was present at one or more of those dinners?

TB: I'm sure.

LC: And when you saw him at Long Jeng, do you remember the circumstances for your having gone there?

TB: It seems to me he had just been wounded. That wasn't the reason I went up there, but it seems to me that he had just been wounded and was wearing his right arm in a sling. Somebody had seen him standing on a hilltop and shot him.
LC: Do you recall why you were in Long Jeng? Was it a provincial capital as well as a base?

TB: No, no. It was the CIA alternative to Sam Thong. Sam Thong was for public consumption.

LC: In this more or less ‘secret base’ what business did you have that brought you there?

TB: It’s like I just happened to stop there. I think I went on a food distribution mission where they shove palettes of rice out the cargo door of the C-47 or whatever plane they’re using. It was a rice drop exercise.

LC: Was that something that you had had a part in planning or…?

TB: No, no. I just wanted to see how it worked.

LC: Oh ok. How did it work?

TB: Well, provided you weren’t underneath the palette when it landed on the work ground, it worked pretty well.

LC: Now would those be standard size palettes? I don’t know if it was what we might think of today as, I don’t know if they were four by fours or what?

TB: Like you’d see at Home Depot or…

LC: Exactly. And how much rice? Do you have any idea how much rice they could put on there?

TB: I don’t recall what the total was, but they’d load several bags on a palette and shove them out there through, out the door of the plane.

LC: How did it actually stay on the palette? I mean now we use shrink-wrap kind of things but how did they do it then?

TB: It was roped down.

LC: Really? And was that plane being flown by Air America personnel, do you think, or…?

TB: It was either Air America or Continental.

LC: Any idea who the intended recipients were?

TB: Well, there were various village locations where there were Hmong fighters.

LC: Do you know what province you were over?

TB: It was Xiangkoang.

LC: Ok. Was that…did you do things like that with any frequency like try to find out what kind of aid programs were being run by non-embassy personnel in the provinces?
TB: No. I’ve run one marathon in my life and I’ve run on one rice drop mission. That’s
enough for…
LC: When did you do the marathon, Tom?
TB: In Honolulu in 1978.
LC: And that was all she wrote on that one, huh?
TB: That’s right. Three hours and forty-nine minutes.
LC: Well, that’s not too bad.
TB: The winner came in at 2:06.
LC: Well, that’s…you know…you didn’t have to win. As you say, all you have to do is do it
once.
TB: All you have to do is finish.
LC: That’s right. So, I just want to clarify that, let’s say in the spring of 1965, ROLLING
THUNDER campaign began in North Vietnam. It didn’t have any particular impact for you either as
a political officer or as an American in Southeast Asia in general.
TB: That’s right. Besides, the singular event that was most effective was the flooding of
Vientiane by the Mekong River.
LC: Can you tell a little bit about that?
TB: I think this was the summer of ’66 but I’m not sure of the date. It was May or so of ’66.
Nick Thorne was the administrative officer at the time and the administrative section worked very
hard to bring in sandbags and reinforce the banks of the Mekong.
LC: Now this would be outside Vientiane?
TB: Around Vientiane. And the house that I was living in just on the outskirts of the city,
the house of Chau Saikham, the governor of Xiangkhoang…there was a lower, sort of a lower
[floor] base, to the house in which I had my library in a room and there was [also a long] bath down
there and a garage/sort of a stable, depending on whether you had a horse or a car. Then most of
the living room was from the first floor up. When the Mekong spilled over its banks, we had to
evacuate the house and the water came up the steps toward the main floor almost to the top of the
main floor. There was a great deal of embassy activity devoted, in the administrative section, to
preventing the city from flooding. We personally moved in with some friends in the political section,
John Reed, is the nephew of the John Reed of Russian fame.
LC: Yeah, Ten Days That Shook the World, that one?
TB: He was also a political officer in the embassy. We moved in with him and his wife and
two daughters up on top [high ground] there near the temple [That Luang], for a couple weeks, ten
days or so. Anyway, what was amusing about this was that there was a SEACORD [Southeast
Asia Coordination] meeting periodically, once a month, in which the ambassadors from
Cambodia...American ambassadors from Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos would get
together. And the dominant...Ambassador Sullivan in Vientiane was the dominant factor in
proposing [regional] plans because he was imaginative and wrote brilliantly. His cables, which I
wasn't exposed to while I was in Vientiane but later when I was on the Lao desk, were the best-
drafted cables and funniest and full of wisdom that I've encountered in the Foreign Service. At any
rate, the other ambassadors sort of resented what he was trying to accomplish in terms of
coordination, and during this flood in Vientiane, Ambassador Martin who was then in Bangkok, not
in Saigon, sent out a SEACORD message saying that, 'Perhaps Vientiane because of its flood is
not the best place from which to direct the affairs of Southeast Asia.'
LC: Tom, was there any remedial action to protect Vientiane over the longer term from the
periodic flooding?
TB: I don't know. I doubt it because it was the U.S. Embassy that was shoring up the city
and the USAID.
LC: And to your knowledge it didn't become a larger AID project to protect the capital?
TB: Not that I know of. One of the most interesting events in regard to this flooding of the
Mekong, was the wife of the – the cheap Chilean wife of the French Ambassador. The French
Ambassador had a villa along the banks of the Mekong and this Chilean wife was very [melo]
dramatic. She decided one day that she was going to commit suicide so she went to the bank of
the river just opposite her house and threw herself down [the embankment], and it turned out
nothing happened because it was the height of the dry season. There was no water below [where
she fell].
LC: So she just fell on the sand?
TB: That's right.
LC: Did she break an arm or anything?
TB: I have no idea.
LC: Ok. Was that kind of a story that went around the diplomatic circles?
TB: That's right.
LC: Ok. Who was the French Ambassador while you were there?
TB: I don’t recall.
LC: Was he, perhaps your answer already responds to this, but I was wondering whether
he was a figure of any influence there?
TB: The French always had influence because they were running the education system,
and education in Laos at that point beyond sixth grade was all in French.
LC: Now, by running the education system, what do you mean?
TB: They had their experts advising the Lao Ministry of Education.
LC: Did the U.S. Embassy have anyone who was speaking with the Ministry of Education
as well, although in an obviously less influential passing?
TB: I think the [US] AID did.
LC: Ok. Do you know who that would have been?
TB: No, I don’t.
LC: Ok. Did you have much interaction with USAID generally?
TB: I did, because I was constantly bumping into them in traveling in the provinces.
LC: Did you as the political officer responsible for provincial affairs have an overview of
what AID was doing in the provinces?
TB: Well, they certainly were, certainly to AID programs, and one of the… My last year
there, the AID director was a Foreign Service Officer named Joe Mendenhall who remains a friend
today. He was the Political Counselor in Bangkok from 1959 to, I think, 1962 or 1963. He and [Bill]
Colby were close friends. Colby being the CIA station chief from about ’59 on. Joe Mendenhall
became the AID director in Laos. And while we were paying Air America fantastic amounts of
money to transport supplies up to Long Jeng and Sam Thong, Joe had a road built [to Long Jeng]
through AID funds, thereby greatly than diminishing the amount of air transport necessary for
carrying in of rice to these two locations. The road, I have a picture of, is like a roller coaster in
some respects. It was carved through virgin territory. Quite spectacular. I don’t know whether it
still exists.
LC: Can you tell me a little bit about that contract if you know anything about it? Who was
the contractor, for example?
TB: For the road, I don’t know. It must have been some Thai, American or Thai, company.
LC: Ok. And what was Joe’s general plan for the road? Was there some…?
TB: He was trying to reduce expenses.

LC: In terms of the carrying of rice by air?

TB: That's right.

LC: Was there any broader strategic sensibility to the planning of the road and its route?

TB: I'm sure there was.

LC: Ok. But you're not aware of it, in general?

TB: That's right.

LC: Any idea how long the road was?

TB: I don't offhand, but I can call him and ask him. He lives in Boulder City, Nevada.

LC: Ok. That would be great and perhaps the Vietnam Archive should contact him as well.

I wonder…

TB: Later on, he was the administrator for AID in Washington for Vietnam.

LC: Do you know the years of that? Tom, do you know what years that was?

TB: I don't know, but he retired as ambassador to Madagascar. He sends me his views from time to time and I once commented to him and I found him a little bit to the right of Chiang Kai-Shek.

LC: What was his response to that?

TB: Nothing in particular, but I've asked him whether he's gone back or would like to go back to Vietnam and he said when the Communists leave he'll go back to Vietnam.

LC: Yeah. It won't surprise you to know that a number of people who served over there say the same thing: just as soon as the Communists are no longer in power.

TB: Anyway, the various…he's eighty something…let's see, he was born in 1920, if I recall correctly, so he's eighty-four years old or about to be eighty-four. He's quite vigorous.

LC: And you're generally in contact with him still?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Was this the first time that you had met him was when you were in Laos?

TB: No, no. I worked for him in Saigon when I was briefly brought into the political section. I mentioned traveling as a consular officer to avoid being conspicuous. In other words, if a political officer had been sent out to the provinces obviously the Diem government would have been apprehensive. So, they assigned me…when I was still assigned as a vice consul they sent me out
on provincial reporting in Saigon back in '58 through '60. And from '59 on, he was my boss in that

LC: Oh ok. I see, I see. I’m looking back over this general outline of your CV that I have in

front of me and that makes sense. So you had known him for quite awhile, and now you’ve known

him well over what…forty years?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Tom, I want to ask you about the National Assembly elections that came near the end

of the time that you were in Laos. Well, actually in the third year that you were there, I believe.

The first of January 1967; the National Assembly elections. Do you remember…?

TB: I wrote an airgram, or a dispatch – whatever it was called, airgram – that became quite

famous because I built it on…I did a parallel of the story of Beowulf, and Ambassador Sullivan

initially cosigned it in one of the corners of the airgram and everybody thought he was the one that

had written it. But it was a parallel [parody]of English literature. I don’t know. I didn’t keep a copy

of this, unfortunately. But it was written in serial comic fashion, actually making fun of the

Assembly.

LC: And did that reflect, did that style you adopted of reporting on the Assembly, reflect

your thinking about the Assembly itself?

TB: That’s right.

LC: And did people on the desks in Washington get the joke?

TB: Some of them did. Paul Langer was particularly appreciative at the rant. I’ll see if I

can get a hold of a copy of that.

LC: Well, I’ll see if we have one here. It’s a possibility that it may have been deposited

here at some stage, but I’ll have a look. Tom, let’s take a break for a moment.

TB: Sure.

LC: This is Laura Calkins continuing the oral history interview with Thomas Barnes on the

seventeenth of March 2004. Tom, you were telling me this morning about your time in Laos and

this afternoon you found some material you’d like to add.

TB: This is a letter written in late '64, apparently to my parents.

‘There are brief isolated pockets of soldiers and refugees in this mountainous and virtually

roadless land. We start out with helicopters, encourage villagers to build short landing

strips, and then graduate to single engine planes called helios that carry only three
passengers in the minimum takeoff and landing space. A few weeks ago I went to Hua Phan, pardon me, Hua Muong district of Hua Phan province by one of these planes. Hua Phan is more popularly known as Xam Neua and it has a long border with Vietnam, a longer border with Vietnam that it does with Laos. Hua Muong’s airfield is twenty seven hundred feet high on a mountain top with a short drop on one side and barracks on the other. The village itself is a good mile down the mountain alongside a river below. A battalion of troops garrisoned the airfield. The battalion had started off in the jungle as a handful of guerillas five short years ago and now has over a hundred villages under its control. Xam Neua is seven districts. The government can claim only the two western ones, Hua Muong and Huang Nan. The latter holds some twenty-four thousand people, many of them refugees from Communist-held areas of Xam Nua, and all of the dowdy male tribespeople [Hmong] who are proving, in terms of fighting skill, to be the Gurkhas of Southeast Asia. The Maile number several million, like to live at elevations of at least five thousand feet and are principally to be found in southwest China, besides being in Laos, North Vietnam, Burma, and Thailand. Their language, which has a resplendent seven or eight tones, is related to Chinese and their physical features are closer to those of the Chinese than to the Lao except that they have the broad, thick chest and short legs that I’ve seen in pictures of Andean peasants, who are also built for high altitudes. The Hong Non landing strip is even more breathtaking than that of Hua Muong. It’s on a mountain top, too, but it’s forty-six hundred feet high and begins at a sheer precipice and soon tilts uphill to encourage a quick stop on landing or give a running start on takeoff. The day of our arrival we were greeted by a male district officer, a spry young fellow with five wives and eighteen children. Under the Lao civil service family allowance system, his take home pay equals that of a cabinet minister, about eighty dollars a month. He served us a sumptuous lunch, which featured uncooked pig’s blood and cold fried pork fat. The new diplomacy bears scant resemblance to the old. After such a diet I was even more grateful than usual for your gift of [spritz] cookies, the spritz have their equal nowhere else. It was extremely thoughtful of you to whip them up, what with a misbehaving back that I trust is no longer troubling you.’ And so on. That’s not relevant. Anyway, this is a little more thorough description of Hua Muong than I gave you this morning.
LC: And Tom, that really demonstrates the incredible value of the letters that you have, that you’ve written, and that’s something that I hope to eventually include here but thank you very much for adding that. And the date on that letter was sometime in ’64?

TB: Late ’64.

LC: Ok. Now, Tom, in addition to that material, and as a book end to it, can you talk about what was the determining factor in setting the length of your assignment at the embassy in Laos?

TB: I don’t recall why it was extended for a year. I don’t recall what the circumstances were.

LC: Ok. But in effect you had that one additional year extension through what would have been the spring of ’67, is that right?

TB: Roughly spring or summer.

LC: Ok. When did you find out you would be getting a new placement?

TB: I really don’t remember.

LC: Did you actually go home…I mean, by that I mean the United States, although I don’t know how you felt about it as being home, but did you go to the U.S. in between?

TB: I’m quite confident that was the case.

LC: I’m sorry?

TB: I’m quite confident that was the case.

LC: Ok. But no real memories of that?

TB: No.

LC: When you began your next assignment, which was in Vietnam, how did it begin?

TB: I reported to Bien Hoa, which was…there were four military regions in Vietnam. The third military region’s headquarters was in Bien Hoa, just north of Saigon. I reported to John Vann, who was the deputy for CORDS at that time.

LC: Was this the first time that you had met John Vann?

TB: No. I had met him – I’m trying to recall when initially – it was probably in the delta when he was…I can’t remember now whether he went to the delta after Bien Hoa or before. I think it was after, but at any rate I had met him. I just can’t recall the circumstances, but he was impressed with my knowledge of spoken Vietnamese and tried to recruit me for the program in Vietnam.

LC: Is that how your placement to CORDS came about then, do you think?
TB: Yes.

LC: Ok. Can you give just kind of a broad brush sketch of John Vann when you saw him in 1967 in Bien Hoa?

TB: Well, I was not particularly forthcoming and he told me later that he wondered what he’d gotten into in hiring me, because our initial meeting at Bien Hoa was cordial enough but I was not gushing over...I was not being very extrovertish.

LC: Why was that? Just because that’s how you were feeling at that time or was there something...?

TB: Generally, when I first meet people I’m not particularly gregarious. And he told me later he wondered what on earth he’d gotten into.

LC: What did you take that to mean? He had expected you to be more virulently excited or something?

TB: I suppose.

LC: What was his demeanor? How did you assess him?

TB: I was terribly impressed by John Vann throughout my acquaintance with him. He was a singular, probably the most – certainly the most – outstanding leader that I’ve ever encountered. He exemplified all the principles of leadership, chief among which is loyalty to subordinates and a desire to speak frankly about everything.

LC: What did you know about his background?

TB: I didn’t know an extreme amount about his background, although as we became closer, when I was his deputy for CORDS in Military Region II, in '71 and '72, he was quite open about various events that had occurred in his life. I once spent forty-eight hours with him non-stop in – twenty-four or forty-eight, I can’t remember – mainly in Pleiku, and I was so exhausted afterwards I went to sleep in mid-morning. He required, like Henry Kissinger, only four hours sleep a night. It’s been my fate to work for people who need minimal sleep in comparison to myself. Anyway, he went on sheer energy most of the time, but required only four hours of sleep.

LC: Would he, in your estimation, had been that way, even had he not been in a war zone, a critical situation like he was?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. That was just who he was. As they say now, how he was wired. When you met him at Bien Hoa, generally, what did you discuss, do you remember?
TB: I had met Ambassador Komer in Saigon the day before and he said ‘Barnes, I’m
sending you to a non-priority province. Don’t ever ask me for anything.’ So, John Vann was a little
more positive about the province. It turns out, of course, that the VC, the North Vietnamese, were
much more desirous of the province than the hierarchy in Saigon expected.

LC: Tom, let me ask you for a moment about Robert Komer. Had you met him before?
TB: Not before going to Vietnam.
LC: Ok. Not before that day in Saigon in ’67?
TB: No. When he arranged a reassignment, I had a very capable Army major who was
serving in the USIA function, as information officer, and who’d arranged for the surrender of a VC
propaganda team, and all of a sudden, in realigning assets, he took this major…he was about to
take this major away from me. And I wrote a memo to him, which I don’t believe I have a copy of,
calling this move ‘the height of computerized bureaucratic folly.’ He summoned me to Saigon,
gave me a dressing down, and said, ‘I’ll rescind my order to transfer this major out. I’ll assign him
to both Binh Long and Phouc Long province.’ He said, ‘But I want you to attend a three day
computer course here in Saigon.’ So, the next time I saw him, which was at a dinner – one at
General Weyand’s house or some place like that – he said ‘Barnes, I forgive you the computer
course,’ so I never took it.

LC: So you avoided taking it? Was he, in your estimation, trying to get you to learn
computers or trying to teach you a lesson?
TB: He was trying to show me that computers had a valid role [in producing] the Hamlet
Evaluation Survey and so on, but I contended that in terms of effect on personnel that there were
certain drawbacks.

LC: Well, like what?
TB: Transferring this major out when he was just about to get this surrender arranged.
LC: Some things, in other words, computers couldn’t account for?
TB: That’s right.
LC: Tom, I wonder if you can talk about your first trip as the province senior advisor out to
Binh Long.
TB: Well, the first night in Binh Long I spent in a hamlet, and – rather than at headquarters
– but I was merely following John Vann’s example who liked to do that sort of thing.
LC: Had he told you it might be a good idea or did you just think, having learned that he
had done it, it was a good idea?
TB: The second.
LC: Ok. Do you know where you stayed?
TB: I can’t remember which hamlet it was offhand.
LC: Was it a secure area though?
TB: No. None of the hamlets are secure in Binh Long province.
LC: Ok. Can you describe in general what you knew about the security situation at that
time?
TB: I can recall going to a hamlet called Soc Be, which is a tribal hamlet five kilometers
north of An Loc, the province capital, and there had been regular VC incursions into that hamlet so
I went with one of my Cambodian guards – they were Khmer Krom, not of Cambodian nationality
but of Vietnamese nationality – and with an Army captain and we sort of hunkered down in a bush
at the north end of this hamlet and spent the night there. Nothing transpired, but this is a sample.
There was another hamlet that I stayed in that was all Vietnamese and we talked with the Rural
Development Cadre there. There was another occasion, which I think I documented, whereby a
hamlet was rumored to be attacked near Quan Loi where the 1st U.S. Brigade – the 1st Brigade of
the 1st [U.S.] Division – was stationed. And this hamlet was rumored to be attacked that evening,
but the district senior advisor who was on my staff informed me that the district chief was not going
to do anything about it. He was afraid to go out. We had what was then called a MAT team – I’m
not sure of the initials, Military Assistance [Team] or something like that – and there was a young
lieutenant, American lieutenant, with a couple of sergeants and I got two of them together and just
at dusk we drove to this hamlet, which was, I would estimate, twelve kilometers away over paved
roads, and went into the Popular Force post at the edge of the hamlet and the lieutenant
immediately set up fields of fire from the various lookout points [corners] in this PF post. And the
chattering of machine guns to detect the fields of fire apparently discouraged the VC from entering
into the hamlet that evening because we spent the night there without any problems.
LC: On these kinds of excursions out to stay in hamlets, how many people did you take
with you?
TB: Very few. Maybe one or two. And this one case there was a whole team, which was
an officer and two enlisted men.
LC: Now, were these American?
TB: They were, in that case.
LC: Oh, in that case, but not always?
TB: No. Usually not.
LC: Why would you usually not take American forces?
TB: Well, you don't need a big force. You could just exhibit a sample presence.
LC: Ok. Would you yourself be armed?
TB: I carried an AK-47.
LC: Where did you get that?
TB: I don't know. Some booty of war somebody had obtained.
LC: Was this the first time that you had carried an AK-47?
TB: Certainly.
LC: Did you get much practice at firing it?
TB: I never fired it.
LC: Ever?
TB: Never. I'm not a gun enthusiast.
LC: I know, I know. I think that's probably a good sign though that you never did have to fire at.... Tom, if you can, sketch out Binh Long province as you saw it in 1967 and, if you can, talk a little bit about the population.
TB: It had a little over eighty thousand people. It was very small and was divided into three districts running north to south from Loc Ninh in the north, An Loc in the center, and Chon Thanh in the south. What was characteristic about it but not a characteristic of most of the provinces in Vietnam was that it had sixty percent, it could produce sixty percent of the rubber that was exported from Vietnam, and two of the major French plantations were there, Caout Chuoc D'Extreme Orient and Terres Rouges. I worked quite closely with the French managers and staff of these two organizations.
LC: Let's talk about the plantations for a moment. How long had they been there?
TB: It must have been established in the twenties but I don't know.
LC: Yes, I think that sounds right. What was the complement of French or other European staff?
TB: Well, the Cexo, based in Loc Ninh – and they also had a small patch at Ming Thanh down in Chon Thanh, had only four or five Frenchmen in place at that location. The Terres Rouges operation was a little larger. I would estimate it had around fifteen but I’m not sure.

LC: Would those persons have had family members there as well?

TB: They were…Terres Rouges in particular had family members there. The Cexo people did not. [Had more in province but its director, Philip Piechaud, had his Tahitian wife and their daughter at a house in Saigon.]

LC: What was the closest French diplomatic representation?

TB: Saigon.

LC: Ok. And did the plantation personnel communicate in any degree of regularity with the diplomats from France and Saigon?

TB: I doubt it, but I don’t know.

LC: Were they, as it were, closer to you than to the people in Saigon?

TB: I would think so.

LC: Ok. What was the business that you had with them…?

TB: Well, for example, when the 1st Armored Cavalry Brigade came storming into Loc Ninh, the French plantation manager of Terres Rouges, who’d been a prisoner of war of the Germans, incidentally, during World War II, was a little shell-shocked. He was a little sensitive about warfare, came to me in great dudgeon one day because the 1st Armored – one of the U.S. military units had placed its tanks [and artillery] on a hillside south of Loc Ninh where he’d just planted a young rubber trees. It’d [rubber trees] take eight years to mature and it’d been planted only three or four years, and I went to the commander and tried to get him to move his vehicles [and artillery] to another hilltop [an adjacent implanted] and he explained that this is the only place in which he could cover the fields of fire [toward Loc Ninh] or something like that. But they came to me and…trying to see if I could intercede. Also, there was another U.S. military tactic, he used rome plows to cut down vast amounts of rubber trees to clear fields of fire. For example, just south of An Loc, the provincial capital, there was a rubber plantation extending to the south, and in order to avoid ambush on Highway 13, which is the road leading up from Saigon, they cut down – cut back – the rubber trees that had been producing rubber trees way back from the edge of the road. Now, I don’t know if you’ve ever seen a rubber plantation, but they are quite orderly and you can see deeply into the rows of rubber trees. They keep the foliage cleaned out, the rubber plantation
owners. So, I didn’t see any necessity for this particular action. I tried, one time, when a whole section of the road was going to be rime-plowed to get to Bien Hoa at night. This was when John was escorting Teddy Kennedy around somewhere and I started out around 11:30 at night – pardon me, around 9:30 at night and soon as I got out of my province into the one in the south the U.S. military hauled me in, what was really an ambush, and wouldn’t let me travel until the morning. So by the time I got to Bien Hoa John had left already and the rubber trees had been cut.

LC: How did they get hold of you and kind of detain you?
TB: I was going, riding by myself, at night down Highway 13 and where they were located – the 1st Division headquarters, just north of First Division headquarters – they dispersed, disported themselves on the Highway and stopped my vehicle.

LC: And what happened to you that night?
TB: I went to sleep.
LC: Were you…?
TB: I got up at dawn and started on the journey again.

LC: Tom, was it your sense then that they had foreknowledge of what you were going to be talking about?
TB: No, I don’t know if they had any knowledge at all. The question was over the airwaves, ‘Is he drunk?’ And the other question was, ‘Has he got a girl with him?’ And both questions, both situations, were negative.

LC: Yes. Was Route 13 safe at night?
TB: Not at all.

LC: Ok. Can you give examples of what makes you say that?
TB: Well, for example, there was no settlement [hamlet] between Chon Thanh district headquarters. There was no village between the south of the Binh Long border and in the northern part of Binh Dinh province, which is the next one to the south. So there was about thirty or forty kilometers where there were no villages.

LC: Was it well known to you, as a PSA in that area, that there was VC activity in among that stretch of thirty, forty kilometers?
TB: Oh certainly.

LC: What kinds of activity? Do you have any recollections?
TB: Well, interdiction of vehicular traffic by mines and so on. One time when I was driving north just after the TET Offensive, I was north of 1st Division headquarters, and there was a U.S. patrol out on the road with mine sweepers and I was trying to get back to Chon Thanh and as I drove towards them, one of them shook his fist at me and said, ‘Slow down Frenchie!’

LC: (Laughing) Did you disabuse him of…?

TB: No, no.

LC: Ok. You just kept going. Tom, can you talk about the minority ethnic populations in the province?

TB: Well, there were principally Stieng, S-T-I-E-N-G, which is a minority that one finds in adjacent area of Cambodia. They made up about, as I recall, about twenty percent of the province population, mainly Stieng, and there were other tribal groups whose names escape me offhand. [Like the Ta Mou]

LC: How did their presence, the presence of these different minorities, affect the security situation, if it did?

TB: Well, I was grateful for, for example, these Khmer Krom guards that guarded the compound that I was living in. They were…you could go out at three in the morning and they would be awake, whereas a Vietnamese would be long since asleep. That’s why I would take a Khmer Krom guard with me when I visited, when I spent the night in villages.

LC: What did you attribute that to?

TB: I know they were very loyal and very conscientious.

LC: Had, to your knowledge, had that ethnic minority been cultivated by the French earlier?

TB: Not the Khmer Krom so far as I know. Certainly, when you get into the other highland tribes, particularly the Rhade up in the Ban Me Thuot [Darlac] province. That was the case.

LC: Ok. But as far as you know, there hadn’t been a distinctive, administrative policy towards these different minorities in this area.

TB: Not that I’m aware of.

LC: Did they have any particular relationship to the plantations or to…?

TB: I think there were plenty of Stieng workers on the plantation.

LC: Were they valued?

TB: I don’t recall whether they were thought of as more efficient than Vietnamese or not.
LC: And can you tell me about their language?

TB: Well, the tribal people in Vietnam have two distinct language families. One is Malayo-
Polynesian and the other is Indonesian, and one like Indonesian. I don’t recall which group the
Stieng belonged to. I’ll try to look that up. I’ve got a brochure on the Stieng someplace.

LC: Ok. Good. I was just wondering if you could, you know, say anything about the
peculiarities of that group and perhaps give us a bit of an education on that. Tom, I also wonder
about the team that you were supervising. Can you give an outline sketch of what your
responsibilities were and the size of the team that you were working with?

TB: Well, they were province wide in every aspect of provincial administration. In other
words, they covered military tactics, intelligence gathering, what was called refugee relief – I later
learned to question [that description] even HCI [the High Commissioner for Refugees defices a]
refugee as somebody outside the country of his origin. These were really displaced persons,
displaced by warfare – agricultural development, police training, supplies, military supplies. We
had about eighty people, twenty of whom were American, on this team, and in my view, it was
overkill.

LC: How’s that?

TB: Because there were just too many Americans and too many people on the advisory
team.

LC: Was it that there wasn’t enough to do or was it that they were…?

TB: Well, there was plenty to do, but why do it for the Vietnamese when the objective is to
get them to do it for themselves?

LC: Was that something that over the course of your tenure there you raised with John
Vann or others in CORDS?

TB: Well, that’s what we aimed for when we were cutting down in Military Region II in 1971
and 1972, and we were forced to do so, but that was salubrious. And then again in ’73 when I was
in the Delta, there was a drastic reduction in the number of Americans and then the military
disappeared, the American military disappeared. This could only be salubrious in terms of getting
the Vietnamese to act on their own.

LC: Let me ask you about a couple of different pieces of the team. First of all, in the book,
you mention that there was a Filipino radio operator.

TB: Yeah, that was Fernando Balmas.
LC: Last name spelled…?
LC: And what was his background? Do you know anything about him?
TB: All I know is that he operated the radio very well, but he was hired as a third country national.

LC: Was he stationed at the compound where you were in An Loc?
TB: I’m trying to remember whether he had…we had, I had a house to myself. There was another house next door, which had four rooms in it. Rooms with baths, separate. These were pre-fab. And then there was a trailer in which one fellow – what did he do? I’m trying to remember what he handled. He was a military, U.S. military enlisted man. All the rest stayed at the compound in the provincial headquarters with the military.

LC: Was your family with you, Tom?
TB: No.
LC: Where were they?
TB: In Taipei.

LC: And under what circumstances? Where were they leaving? Were they leaving on an American base there or…?
TB: The U.S. government rented a series of houses in an area of Bei Toui outside of – just outside of Taipei city.

LC: And the reason that they weren’t with you was what?
TB: The reason being that Vietnam was too insecure for families. There was no schooling and so on.

LC: While you were province senior advisor, did you go to Taipei at any point to visit them?
TB: I went for five days every two months.

LC: Ok. Were those…can you describe those visits in general? Was it difficult to come back to Vietnam?
TB: It was difficult to leave Vietnam.

LC: How is that?
TB: Because it was a much more active environment than Taipei.

LC: Ok. Were you generally pleased with the pace of work that you were doing?
TB: The pace of it?
LC: Yes. I mean it must have been fairly intense with this number of people that were basically reporting to or through you.

TB: Yeah. I tried a system of delegating responsibility and so on so that only a few people would be reporting to me. It didn’t work at all.

LC: Why didn’t it work?

TB: I don’t know. I just found it much better to deal directly with individuals on various problems. I had a fellow, Roger Cranse, an AID officer who gave me a mobile, which had a series of arrows or fingers or something pointing in all sorts of direction. You hung it from the ceiling and it floated around the room pointing in every which way and that was much more the style of leadership that I preferred. He said he gave me that in hopes that it would give the effort some greater direction.

LC: What was he actually wishing for you there?

TB: I don’t know. But he was absent…he was the district senior advisor in Loc Ninh. He happened to be in Nepal during the attack on Loc Ninh. If he had been in his house, he would have been killed because there was an American medic who was trapped to death in his house.

LC: Yes. Before talking about the battle for Loc Ninh, I wanted to ask you about the medical team. They were part of the Air Force, is that correct?

TB: That’s right. There were three surgeons, an administrator, and two nurses, plus various enlisted men.

LC: What was their function?

TB: Their function was to treat civilian casualties.

LC: How did it come about that an Air Force team was busy doing that on the ground in this part of South Vietnam?

TB: I wish you could answer that question for me. I was certainly grateful to have them there because they treated civilian casualties very well.

LC: Was that team still assigned to provincial, to the provincial PSA, as it were, when you left?

TB: Yes, if I recall correctly.

LC: Was the medical officer who was killed, was he eventually replaced?

TB: Yes. He was an enlisted man.
LC: Oh he was?  Ok.  Do you remember anything about the personnel themselves?  Did you meet them?

TB: Yeah, they were very cooperative.  They offered to have me assist [in an operation].  There was a girl about ten or eleven who had been hit by several mortar fragments.  They offered to let me assist at the cutting her open to get out the fragments.  They dressed me in this green outfit that you see in emergency rooms, a mask and cap and so on.  So, the guy took out his knife – she was on the table – and cut her open from the breastbone down to the pubic bone, at which point I turned green and left the room.

LC: Yeah.  I would’ve been with you.  I might’ve been out the door before you.

TB: Anyway, seeing her intestines billow out…she survived and they sewed her up and so on, but it was…I’m grateful for the fact that I never studied medicine.

LC: Yes.  Absolutely.  Was there any secondary purpose for that team being there?  For example, if there were flyers downed, brought over the border, something along those lines, did that ever occur to you or was that part of what was happening?

TB: Not at all.  They were designed for civilian casualties.  In fact, the ARVN, the Army of Vietnam, had its own surgical team for ARVN wounded in the province.

LC: Tell me a little bit if you can about the civilians who were working under you, and I'm thinking particularly here of, for example, the USIA.  What representatives did they have in the province?

TB: Actually, I had an Army major filling a USIA function that I had and two AID officers, one in Chon Thanh district as a district senior advisor and one in Loc Ninh, as I mentioned, as a district senior advisor.  Both of them were succeeded by majors during my tenure there.  The fellow from Chon Thanh was quite – Bill Miller – was quite entrepreneurial and he was a, I don't know whether he was continue or not, but he was a political, on the political staff of Senator Jay Rockefeller in West Virginia.  Roger Cranse, who was up in Loc Ninh married a Nepalese stewardess.  So far as I can understand, the marriage held.

LC: Tom, tell me about, if you can…

TB: Oh pardon me.  Then Hervey Clark, who was both a friend and a fellow Foreign Service officer, was a district senior advisor in An Loc.

LC: And how do you spell his last name?

LC: What was his background?
TB: He was from San Francisco, from northern California. His father was an architect.

LC: Was he a Southeast Asian specialist as you were?
TB: He had taken…he was later my deputy in the political section in Bangkok.

LC: Had he been in Vietnam before?
TB: Yes.

LC: In what capacity? Do you know?
TB: I think he was in the economic section of the Embassy but I’m not sure if that was before or after An Loc.

LC: Tom, can you tell me anything about the Central Intelligence Agency people who were in the province?
TB: There were two contract people assigned and they were incompetent, and I talked to the station chief in Saigon and had them removed. He replaced them by an Army major who was under CIA contract who was much more efficient.

LC: Only one replacement?
TB: Oh, he had an assistant.

LC: What made these two contract people less than serviceable?
TB: I don’t remember. They were totally unsatisfactory and I asked that they be replaced.

LC: And was it your move to get them replaced that actually kicked the bucket over and had them removed?
TB: That’s my impression.

LC: Ok. Can you tell me anything about your relationship generally with the agency people while you were with CORDS?
TB: My relationship with what?
LC: With the agency people, for example either the station chief or his subordinates, did you have correspondence back and forth with them or…?
TB: No, no correspondence. I would see them on occasion.

LC: Ok. How often did you go down to Saigon?
TB: Probably once every two weeks.

LC: Ok. And did you also tack on to your trips back and forth to Taipei stops in Saigon at various offices that…?
TB: There was no other alternative because you couldn’t leave from An Loc for Taipei.

LC: Ok. Of course. I just wondered if you used those trips also to handle any business that you had down in the capital?

TB: That’s true.

LC: Ok. Tom, can you tell me about your relationships as the province senior advisor with U.S. military personnel?

TB: It was not terribly harmonious. I got along very well with the 1st Brigade commander at Quan Loi, which was seven kilometers away.

LC: Who was that?

TB: ‘Brick’ something [Krause]. I can’t remember the last name. His nickname was ‘Brick’.

LC: Was ‘Brick’?

TB: Like Brick. But the… I had tendentious relations with General Eichenberg who was one of the two deputies of [Major] General Hay [Commander of the U.S. 1st Division]. Eichenberg was not the brightest individual and one time he invited me, when we were both in Saigon together, for lunch at the restaurant in Dakao. He was presented a bill in Vietnamese piasters and was amazed to find that they wouldn’t accept military payment certificates. So, I ended up paying for the meal.

LC: Did he pay you back?

TB: Never.

LC: What was the point of his invitation to you?

TB: He just was assigned by General Hay to keep me under control, which he found impossible to do. For example, there was one project that the province had which was the improvement of that portion of Route 13 that ran directly by province headquarters through the town. The U.S. military launched some sort of offensive in which they brought in tanks and other large vehicles tearing up the road and I rerouted them around the main road to get back onto Highway 13. One of the lead vehicles got caught in some barbed wire somewhere and held up the whole convoy, and the style for the military at that time was to fly overhead. The battalion commander would fly overhead in his helicopter. The brigade commander would fly over the battalion commander and the division commander would fly over all of them, all of them directing from the air. They tried to land and I would drive away from them and so on. Anyway…

LC: You would drive away from them?
TB: Yeah. So they were probably stuck in this province capital unable to move. One time I was going south to look into an area that had just been resettled because of an attack against a village. The villagers had all moved to the highway, to Route 13. We were distributing zinc sheeting for roofing and so on. I tried to pass a tank going down the road and they [the driver] refused to move over so I ended up getting caught on the barbed wire on the exterior of the tank and wrecking the International Harvester Scout that I had to leave by the side of the road.

LC: How did you get out of there?

TB: We had another vehicle. There were two vehicles involved. [Two scouts in our group.] But the reason this had happened was that some soldier sticking out of a tank [standing up with his head and torso outside the tank] had tossed an empty Coca-Cola can or beer can or something at me as I tried to pass, so the whole convoy – this is about five in the evening when it was starting to get dark – the whole convoy was stopped and the captain that was in charge of that portion of the convoy said, ‘Let me, let us go ahead because it’s getting close to dark and we want to get to base before dark. We resolved [the mischief] separately.’ So, it was resolved in the sense that all the soldiers in the lead tank swore that they had never tossed anything at us. There was no case. But this came up…the successor to ‘Brick’ as 1st Brigade commander was another colonel whom I took for a ride down Route 13 and as we were coming back north trying to enter the province capital, a U.S. tank nearly forced us off the road. They didn’t realize that sitting in the right hand side was this brigade commander, their brigade commander. He stopped the tank and gave them a royal chewing out.

LC: Were you within earshot?

TB: Oh certainly.

LC: Can you give a little bit of the flavor of that?

TB: Well, he was highly...first of all, they put us in danger and, secondly, he was highly incensed. Anyway, what bothered me about U.S. military travel through the province capital, and they had to go through it in order to get to Quan Loi, where their 1st Brigade base was, they’d go down the main road at fifty miles an hour. All buttoned up and there was no threat to them at all in the province capital, but there was a great deal of threat to civilians who happened to be walking alongside the road.

LC: Were there casualties, Tom?

TB: That I don’t know. Probably not.
LC: But anyway, a threat, a risk, of that. You weren’t an especially popular figure then with…?

TB: General Hay called me down one time and said, ‘What can we do to reconcile ourselves? I sent General Eichenberg up and apparently it doesn’t work.’ I said, ‘I’m quite willing to cooperate with you but there are certain things that should be observed in terms of treatment of the civil population in An Loc.’

LC: How did that conversation end?

TB: Well, it ended in the general feeling of euphoria among the both of us.

LC: Did the situation change after that?

TB: No.

LC: Was that the only time you ever spoke to the general on the phone?

TB: I think so, yeah. [I spoke to him in person.]

LC: Ok. Tom, do you remember the second of the two brigade commanders? The guy who was with you in the car?

TB: I somehow think his name was Smith. He went back to Washington to become Chief of Infantry, which meant that he would never be promoted to brigadier general, but he was a decent man.

LC: And his rank was…he was a colonel?

TB: He was a full colonel. Brigade commanders are full colonels.

LC: Sure. I want to ask you about your International Harvester Scout. Was that…were you sort of known for being in that vehicle? Was it well known that that vehicle was you?

TB: Not necessarily me because the International Harvester Scout was the, what USAID procured for the provinces.

LC: Ok. So they were fairly common?

TB: They were quite common.

LC: But they were, of course, generally driven by civilians?

TB: That’s right. Or the military assigned to the provincial advisory teams.

LC: Ok. Right. For example, the major who was assigned to the CIA.

TB: Well, now they sometimes had…remember in Vietnam they had distinctive vehicles. You could always tell who the CIA man was because they had a central purchasing agent who ordered the same vehicles for them.
LC: Do you know what the vehicle was?
TB: I don’t remember.
LC: But it wasn’t an International Harvester then.
TB: No, it wasn’t.
LC: The vehicle that you were in that got caught up with the tank and they had to leave beside the side of the road, was that the only one that you ever, as it were, lost?
TB: Yes.
LC: Ok. Because I recall from your memoir that you did drive quite a bit while you were the province senior advisor. You drove around a lot.
TB: Yes. Well, the times of the greatest tension in the province, I rented from a civilian in town, a Deux Chevaux, which the French plantation owners used for traveling around.
LC: Would your being in that vehicle, in effect, mark you as a French person rather than as an American?
TB: The passersby would automatically assume that I was French. But this was to the chagrin of the French plantation owners because they certainly did not want me in an identical vehicle.
LC: Yes, and I recall that, however at one point I think in your memoir, you mention that a French national was shot getting out of his car. Was that a similar vehicle?
TB: That was during the Battle of Loc Ninh, so it was an unusual circumstance.
LC: Oh ok. Were the French in any way considered particular targets by the VC or was there a stand-away policy a little bit?
TB: There was somewhat of a stand-away policy because there was some sort of collaboration, but I know at one point the Cexo hierarchy – Piechaud, Gauduel, and so on – were captured or taken into custody by the North Vietnamese and held for a matter of weeks. Apparently some ransom was paid for them but I’m not sure.
LC: Was that when you first arrived up there or later on?
TB: It was later on. Gauduel lost...Gauduel had a market potbelly and he lost something like thirty pounds during his [incarceration]...whenever I went to Loc Ninh, he would have a sumptuous dinner and he lived very well, but when he was in the jungle for two or three, I don’t know whether it was months or weeks or whatever it was, he lost thirty pounds.
LC: Wow. Tom, I want to ask you about your travels within the province and here I’m asking in general, exempting times of particular military conflicts about which we can talk about perhaps tomorrow, but I wonder how much travel did you actually do? You spoke earlier about sleeping in various hamlets. About how much time did you spend outside of An Loc?

TB: As much as possible.

LC: Ok. Can you talk about, first of all, what was your thinking behind being away from the provincial capital so much?

TB: Well, the action was mainly outside the provincial capital and what we were trying to do was reinforce the countryside.

LC: Can you talk a little bit about that mission, in general terms again? The mission of reinforcing…

TB: Well, John Vann’s theory was that you don’t bring people into a secure area. You bring security out to where they’re living and working.

LC: And what would be the means for doing that?

TB: The means would be sending these rural development cadre teams to reinforce villages, putting out Popular Force and Regional Force units, particularly Popular Force units to enhance their security. For example, one example I can give, when we were able to issue, the M-70, M-71 grenade launchers – what do you call them – M-70 rocket or whatever [in mid-1968]. The tribal cadre that we gave this to repulsed a North Vietnamese attack that same evening.

LC: They were given it, trained on it, and then they used it that night?

TB: That’s right. And they repulsed the entry. I was flying above that at this juncture.

LC: What part of the province was that, Tom? Do you remember?

TB: That was between, somewhere between An Loc and Loc Ninh in a tribal hamlet just to the west of the highway.

LC: Were the tribal cadre that you’re talking about integrated into the RF and PF forces? Were they part of that structure or separately organized?

TB: There were tribal cadre teams which were separate from the other, what do you call that, RD teams – Rural Development or Revolutionary Development teams.

LC: Tom, tell me a little bit if you can about your relationship with the local province chief.

TB: Well, it can best be described as cordial but not close.

LC: Ok. Who was he?
TB: His name was Lo Cong Danh. Lo Cong Danh. L-O C-O-N-G D-A-N-H.

LC: Was he…did he have military rank?

TB: He was a full colonel.

LC: What was his background? Was he from the province?

TB: Not at all. I don’t recall what province he was from offhand, but I think he was close to President Thieu.

LC: In terms of being inside Thieu’s political clique?

TB: Probably, but I was not privy to much inside information on it.

LC: How long had he been…I mean, do you know how long he had been there in the province?

TB: I don’t know. I know later on he went on to be province chief of Tuyen Duc where Dalat is.

LC: Ok. What was his military experience? He was a colonel, but what did that actually mean in terms of experience?

TB: A good question, which I never answered.

LC: Ok. I’m assuming now that he held both a political and military posts, is that fair?

TB: That’s right.

LC: In his guise as a political appointee in the province, what was he responsible for?

TB: I suppose for loyalty to the government, its constituents.

LC: Was there an administrative structure over which he…?

TB: Yeah, sure. As a deputy province chief and various staff members like the military has for supply and logistics.

LC: Was that political and administrative bureaucracy, over which he presided, active in intelligence activities as well or police activities?

TB: I think he was more responsible for police than for intelligence.

LC: I see. Within the military structure, again over which he presided, was there an intelligence function there?

TB: Certainly.

LC: Was there a liaison between that intelligence function and any of the offices over which you presided?
TB: Yes there was. I had an intelligence...a lieutenant, as I recall, a U.S. Army lieutenant, who was the intelligence officer who had direct liaison with his counterpart in the provincial headquarters.

LC: How useful was that liaison for you?

TB: I think it was a useful exercise because, as I mention, they were able to identify a number of cadre in the province and target them.

LC: Ok. Meaning here, members of the Viet Cong infrastructure?

TB: Yes.

LC: Ok. Was there some success in that initiative against the infrastructure?

TB: My memory is too hazy and as close as I recall there was.

LC: Ok. Can you tell me a little bit again, if you know, about the Regional Force or Provincial Force strength that the colonel commanded in the province?

TB: I'm trying to remember the number of companies. I don't recall offhand. There were five or six.

LC: Were they actually at company strength? I mean, were they ghost companies or were they real...?

TB: I'm sure they were what the Lao called 'battalions de phi' meaning ghost battalions, so I'm sure there were some ghost soldiers among them. But my complaint about them is that they were assigned like the Special Forces units and in compounds surrounding the province headquarters in the province town. He [the province chief] moved, for example, against my advice, a Special Forces team which was located outside the province capital's boundaries, not far away, right next to his headquarters [in the province line]. This made it [province headquarters] an additional and tempting target.

LC: And did it turn out to be that? Was it targeted?

TB: Apparently, in the '71, '72 offensive, yes.

LC: Ok. But not while you were there?

TB: No.

LC: Ok. That opens the question which you addressed to some degree in the memoir about your differences in thinking with the province chief about tactical questions of the defensive territory. Can you talk a little bit about that for someone who might not have access to your memoir?
TB: I, personally, did not find him aggressive enough in terms of trying to forestall enemy action against these villages.

LC: What did you advise?

TB: For example, I tried to set the example in this one case of this village that was about to be attacked, but there were – all the intelligence reporting indicated that it was going to be subject to attack this particular evening. Instead of hunkering down and letting the place be attacked, [I opted for] trying to forestall the attack itself.

LC: And his sense in that question was what?

TB: I'm sorry?

LC: His approach to that question was what? What did he respond to you?

TB: I didn’t deal directly with him. I dealt with the district chief in this particular point.

LC: But did they take your advice?

TB: No. We had to take initiative on our own in that particular case.

LC: Ok. And did you then recommend to the U.S. commander of the brigade, I assume, that some U.S. troop should be sent to that hamlet?

TB: No, no. We had our own teams.

LC: Ok. Can you tell me a little bit about how that reinforcement then took place? Who was sent up there to that hamlet?

TB: As I mentioned, it was this U.S. Army lieutenant and his two enlisted assistants and myself.

LC: Oh ok. I'm sorry. And that was the extent of it?

TB: That was the extent.

LC: How long were you up there?

TB: Overnight.

LC: And nothing untoward occurred, I take it.

TB: Not a bit.

LC: Ok. Was that a failure of intelligence?

TB: No, I’m sure the attack was forestalled by the preparation…by the arrival of this MAT team and the Popular Force compound and the clearing of the fields of fire shortly before dusk.

LC: So, in other words, the proactive approach that you had suggested probably paid some benefit on that occasion?
TB: That was my illusion, anyway.

LC: Ok. Can you tell me just a little bit about the certification of hamlets of the size of village and below that resulted in their being classified as pacified hamlets? What was that process like?

TB: There were both tribal and Vietnamese rural development teams. When a team finished a particular village, it theoretically provided a certain amount of security to the village or at least ability to resist other than major attack. So, one could certify that the village was upgraded in terms of its test rating and hamlet evaluation survey rating.

LC: Ok. And the certification of hamlet as certified – oh, I'm sorry, as pacified – signaled what?

TB: Well, it wasn't necessarily a certification as pacified. It was certification that was either an A, B, or C hamlet.

LC: So it was a classification of the hamlet?

TB: Yes.

LC: Ok. Can you just outline the differences between A, B, and C?

TB: Well, A is complete government control, B is more or less thorough government control, C is a little iffy.

LC: Ok. And what was the purpose of this classification system?

TB: This was to measure…this was Komer's great contribution to the program in Vietnam, in which he tried to measure the degree of security throughout the country. And you could from month to month and see whether particular hamlets had improved or worsened in terms of security.

LC: Tom, in your opinion, as someone who watched this from the point of view of a provincial senior advisor, was the classification system actually a useful system?

TB: Yes, I think so.

LC: How so?

TB: Because it brought Vietnamese and American advisors together in making a judgment on a particular location. And there were efforts where the classification would say C or even B-C to improve the situation by addressing the security concerns of those particular areas.

LC: And were the classifications – I think you've alluded to this once – given…they were malleable, they could be changed?

TB: Oh, they changed all the time.
LC: Ok. So you could, by watching these indicators, watch the VC move in and move out?

TB: Well, it was mainly moving out. Particularly by '72, there was, actually, an excellent pacification picture for most of the country.

LC: One inspires you to know that other people with military intelligence background who've talked about those numbers also agree that things were actually improving for the South Vietnamese government out in the rural areas.

TB: Yeah. There was great improvement by '72.

LC: Yeah. And we'll have a chance to talk about that. Let's take a break here though,

TB: Sure.
Interview with Thomas Barnes
Session 6 of 14
March 18, 2004

LC: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive continuing the oral history interview with
Tom Barnes. Today’s date is the 18th of March 2004. I’m on the campus of Texas Tech and Mr.
Barnes again is in Austin. Good morning, sir.

TB: Good morning.

LC: You had a few things you wanted to note.

TB: Yes, when I reported in to John Vann to assume the duties in Binh Long province, he
sent me – as was his custom – to four different provinces in Military Region III to spend one night in
each before going to my own posting. I’d forgotten that fact.

LC: And those were the trips out to the staying over night in the hamlets that you…?

TB: No, these were staying at provincial headquarters of the four teams that I went to. I
know Long An was one of them, L-O-N-G A-N, but I don’t remember…Bien Thuan may have been
another but I don’t remember the other two offhand.

LC: Do you know how the selection of where you would go was made? Was it proximity
or…?

TB: No, it had nothing to do with proximity. It just was…I guess he just called up and said I
was coming. I don’t know how it worked.

LC: Ok. I’m glad you added that.

TB: Again, the 1st Brigade commander of the 1st Division who took that position
approximately in February or March of – what was it – ’68 – was ‘Brick’ Krause. I remembered
‘Brick’ but I didn’t remember the Krause.

LC: And that was spelled…?

TB: K-R-A-U-S-E. He was chief of staff of the 1st Division up to that point and then
became the 1st Brigade commander. He was also a collector of Chinese art and was a very
interesting person.

LC: Really? Had he been a sinophile before that? Do you know?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Did you keep track of him at all, Tom?
TB: No. I lost track of him after he left. Now, another thing, I mentioned my tendentious relations with the 1st Division. I've got a letter of 6 January '68, which I'll quote a few passages from.

'The old bugga-boo relations with Americans is cropping up again. I'd been quite critical of the 1st Infantry Division on several problems. Convoy control, interference in provincial operations, and lack of support of pacification. All these criticisms were reduced to writing and sent directly to the 1st Division commander, Major General John Hay. He finally felt it was too much and called my headquarters in Bien Hoa where I was attending a meeting with the province chief. He didn't know I was there and wanted to see me in Hon Quan [the Binh Long province capital] that morning.'

Bien Hoa being a considerable distance in Third Corps, you know?

'I instead arranged to go to his headquarters the following morning where I spent an hour with him while the president of Mutual Broadcasting Corporation, who also arrived that morning but unexpectedly, was kept waiting in the wings. General Hay explained his several province commitments, his dislike of my memos, the lack of praise for some of the division's positive accomplishments. I apologized for the negativism and stated my case on several issues in dispute. He's an eloquent man but rules every detail in the division, which has lost the aggressive combat reputation that had enjoyed under his predecessor. We parted with greater mutual comprehension.'

Anyway, that's...

LC: Do you recall any of the, even in general terms, the kind of critiques that he took issue with?
TB: I don't recall.

LC: And did he stay in that position until you actually left and went back to D.C.? Was he still there?
TB: I think so. They may have changed [military commanders tended to change] every six months or a year.

LC: In the letter, you mentioned that your – I'm sorry I lost my train of thought. There was something I wanted to ask, but perhaps it'll come to me. Was there an additional correction or other material you wanted to read in, Tom?
TB: Well, I've got a further elaboration on several points.
LC: Sure, great!
TB: But I don’t know how much we want to go into it. I’ve marked several passages.
LC: Please. Let’s go ahead and things that you’ve marked, if you feel you can contribute
them, let’s go ahead and do that.
TB: We had discussed the tendency of U.S. military units to clear rubber trees when I
thought that clearance was sometimes needless. I’ve got a letter of Christmas Day in 1967.
‘Security has been relatively quiet but the biggest new development is that a U.S. armored
cavalry regiment has moved into Loc Ninh, apparently to stay for several months. The
commander, a relatively young full colonel, at least six feet, six inches tall has not so far
proven very responsive to civil feelings to his protocol area responsibilities towards the
province chief and the French plantation management. He planned to cut down a
substantial number of rubber trees to secure his perimeter, for example, but fortunately the
II Field Force commander, Lieutenant General Weyand, shares my view of the
inadvisability of that tactic.’
There’s some more about Colonel Peach, which I won’t go into.
‘It will probably be impossible for you to guess this, but I spent an hour Christmas Eve
doing a Ramwong. The Montagnard school, which has a lot of Cambodians, put on a
performance at the Returnee Center, Chieu Hoi Center, which featured that immortal and
repetitious dance. They do it in a somewhat livelier fashion than the Lao but Sam, Major
Milton, and myself managed to keep pace.’
LC: For an hour?
TB: For an hour. Let’s see…I had marked some others here.
LC: Sure. You can go ahead and read them in.
TB: This is the 16th of November ’67.
‘The U.S. is pulling out of Loc Ninh and the VC are returning. If the moon wasn’t so bright
these nights I’m sure the place would have been attacked again. The refugee relief man
brought supplies by helicopter to Loc Thanh, a village three kilometers north of Loc Ninh
on Route 13 at 1530 November 14. The VC came in at 1600, assembled the refugees,
and took propaganda film showing the people liberated in the Battle of Loc Ninh. The
French plantation people drove all the way down here to let me know so we wouldn’t lose
the helicopter by making any more trips to Loc Thanh.’
Let’s see…what else here. This is 6 or 7 November. The Loc Ninh attack effectively ended about
the 3rd…2nd or 3rd of November.

‘The French have decided after all not to close down their extensive plantations there and
the Cexo manager, a bright, wiry fellow named Piechaud,’

I misspelled it in the letter,

‘Stopped by the office this morning for holding some of the looting of French villas by
ARVN troops and for Major Fuller’s cancellation of the ARVN plan to dynamite his
[Piechaud’s] villa in order to have clearer fields of fire for the military camp. In case you’re
confused there, there are two of the four French rubber companies in Vietnam that operate
in this province. Mark Contó heads Terres Rouges and Piechaud, Cexo. Terres Rouges
is entirely in An Loc, the district around the capital, while Cexo is mainly in Loc Ninh. But
also in the other two districts. Both men are bright, friendly, and hospitable, the kind of
French that you would enjoy. None of the cultural superiority approach.’

Let’s see…this is the 1st of November, which is in the middle of the attacks.

‘It is impossible to recreate in print the excitement, tension, and exhaustion of the past few
days. I already recounted the VC attack on Loc Ninh last Saturday night. The same
insanity was repeated Monday evening when Major Fuller was on the spot rather than
directing artillery and bombers from Hon Quan.’

Hon Quan was An Loc.

‘If he hadn’t been there, the district camp would have been overrun. I arrived Tuesday
morning to a scene of unbelievable carnage: VC corpses strewn over the runway, hands
clasped over their head in final futile protection, black hippy sandals, cans of cooked rice
strapped to their backs, propaganda leaflets strewn in abundance and printed in both
Vietnamese and English directed at both their enemies. The district town of Loc Ninh is
now virtually empty at night and we are helping feed some twenty-five hundred of the
thirty-five hundred or so that fled Loc Ninh for Hon Quan. For again, last night
Wednesday, the VC launched major attacks against Vietnamese and U.S. positions at Loc
Ninh.’

Now, one point that I wanted to make is that I didn’t have these letters organized when I wrote the
memoir. They were all in envelopes and I didn’t have access to this detailed data. I assembled the
letters after I wrote the memoir and it’s unfortunate that I didn’t have them available then because I
could’ve made sections of it much more vivid.

LC: Well, as a reader and also as a student of the subject that you’re writing on, I think you
did quite a good job. It’s amazing that you didn’t have reference to the letters actually because the
account is, as I said to you yesterday, very detailed.

TB: Anyway, let me continue with this.

‘Captured documents reveal that they had been ordered to take the district at all costs, but
U.S. reinforcements are now so heavy that that dream has become an impossibility. Their
losses so far outnumber ours, almost entirely Vietnamese about 10:1. The VC have never
before to my knowledge hammered away with ground attacks so consistently at one target.
I’ve had one civilian so intimidated by this uncustomary military activity that he quit on me,
but the rest are holding up admirably. The excitement has also stimulated John Vann, who
spent Tuesday night here to drain the provinces of five captains and seven NCOs so our
military staff is at last beginning to flesh out. And whereas we’ve had use of a helicopter
one half day per week up till now, we’ve had one all day long everyday since Sunday. I
spent most of my time evacuating wounded and today in seven trips extracting Popular
Force soldiers and tribal Revolutionary Development Cadre from a hamlet surrounded by
VC troops.’

I dealt with that in the story.

‘Visitors have descended on us in flocks and our humble province has suddenly become –
if even for a short time – the focal point of the war. I even cancelled my English class
Tuesday night, almost as bad as skipping my exercises.’

Anyway, there’s more of this. I don’t know how much.

LC: Tom, it’s all valuable. I know that you realize that and that if you wanted to take the
time to read more in I think it’s a very good expenditure of our time. And again, if you want to look
those over between now and our next session and make further judgments about what to read in,
that would be fine, too.

TB: Let’s see. I’m just scattering through…sort of leafing through here where I marked
[passages] with paper clips. This is an interesting account that I had forgotten about. Major Fuller,
he was my deputy initially until Colonel Suarez replaced him. A very competent military man,
Major Fuller was. Took me in the command helicopter for a Regional Force company sized heli-
born landing Sunday morning.

‘Vietnamese and U.S. artillery bombarded the landing site from 0930 to 0945. U.S. jets
bombed it in graceful dives for the next ten minutes, then helicopters armed with rockets
sprayed the surrounding forest.’

This was in the province, in Binh Long province.

LC: At what time? At what point?

TB: This was around…I’ve got a question mark…the tenth of October of ’67. And this was
at a suspected VC site.

‘Exactly at 1005, taxi helicopters brought in troops at the landing zone, took off, and five
more arrived on their heels. Their happened to be no enemy around but they would’ve
found the situation quite untenable if they had been there. Sunday afternoon, I had
another marathon afternoon with the French: Lunch at Conté’s house with a good share of
the staff and their wives. I met a couple of very interesting men; lasted from twelve to
almost four. Food almost as good as last time but you would’ve enjoyed the liveliness of
the conversation above all. Many of them are quite anti-De Gaulle and recall with
fondness their home leave trips via the U.S.’ Anyway, it’s just a comment on the French.

LC: Absolutely. Yes.

TB: This is the fourteenth of September of ’67.

‘We have four Special Forces camps in the province run by an American team and each
containing several guerrilla companies made up of Vietnamese, tribal and Cambodian
mercenaries. Although Special Forces do not come under my jurisdiction, I’ve asked to
visit all their sites and tonight I’m spending the night at Chi Linh on the southeastern border
of this province Phuoc Long. I have a bunk and a bunker, which I’ll soon be retiring to if
the rain ever stops.’

Let me check if there’s anything else. A letter to my parents on the second of September ’67.

‘I realize you’ve long felt that Southeast Asia is in the middle of nowhere, but now your son
finds himself in the middle of nowhere of that nowhere. I’m the senior American advisor in
Binh Long, ‘Peaceful Dragon’ province, the capital of which is a hundred and ten
kilometers north of Saigon on Route 13 that leaves Vietnam for Cambodia in the northern
part of the province and eventually makes it way through Laos to Vientiane and Luang
Prabang where it stops. Road travel to Saigon by commercial bus takes only four hours on good days. Since the Viet Cong frequently stop the busses to collect taxes, Americans travel by air not only to points outside the province but also between its district capitals. Besides An Loc, which surrounds the provincial capital, there are only two other districts – Loc Ninh to the north and Chon Thanh to the south. My principal task is to advise and coach the province chief, a lieutenant colonel – he was later promoted to colonel – a few months younger than myself, and coordinate the American advisory effort both civil and military in the province. There are civil advisors to various Vietnamese government offices, usually agriculture, police, information, returnees, development, and health. The last, however, is a sixteen-man U.S. Air Force medical team that has three doctors and many technicians. There are military advisors on tactics and intelligence at province and district level. Although the total resident American staff and this low priority province of some 75,000 Vietnamese'
I later used a figure of eighty thousand or eighty-two thousand 'is now 52. It should go to over seventy in the next two months. The most highlypopulace province, Gia Dinh, [in the region] which surrounds Saigon and has twelve districts has over a hundred and fifty Americans on the advisory staff. Besides Americans there are some forty Vietnamese on our payroll.' Of course there was one Filipino, as I mentioned. ‘When you think of similar staffing patterns for Vietnam’s other forty-odd provinces you can begin to realize the enormity of the effort we are making through…’ something…‘to be responsive to popular needs.’ I mentioned that Binh Long has originally produced fifty percent, it’s actually sixty percent, of Vietnam’s rubber exports.
‘…I had lunch yesterday at the home of the director of Terres Rouges, which has the largest plantation nearby and is the largest producer in Vietnam. He still lives in the grand manner, an enormous three-story house, flocks of competent but ancient servants, and spacious grounds. The plantation has a club, swimming pool, and an eighteen-hole golf course. The elements of the 1st Infantry Division has taken over most of the airstrip and have bivouacked on part of the golf course. The Viet Cong have harassed some of the outlying plots of trees so that they are no longer tapped.'
[2 Sep '67] M. Conté, the director for Terres Rouges plantations, the largest rubber company in Vietnam, had me to lunch at his James River style house along with two Japanese businessmen yesterday. I met him at his office at eleven, accompanied him to the club for scotch and ice, and then went to his mansion. The club has lanai style open walls on two sides, a swimming pool, and an 18-hole golf course no longer in use. The house is three stories, high ceilings, and open straight through so the breeze cools off the interior. They have a staff of impacable if ancient Vietnamese servants, and a cook of remarkable talent. The heavy wood plank floors of the house are burnished mahogany. We had a digestif upstairs afterward, and the size and airiness of the salon are staggering living in the grand manner.

Conté’s four teenage children are here for the summer, and return in late September to France for further schooling. His wife is most of the time in Vietnam, but she is accompanying the kids to the motherland and spending a month there before coming back. They came to Quan Loi by plantation plane every Friday afternoon, and stay until the following Wednesday morning. The rest of the time they spend in Saigon. Wish you could have joined us for lunch. I know you would enjoy both the company and the house, and would have fitted with ease into the elegance of the surroundings.

Last night was election eve, and the VC celebrated the occasion by landing 14 mortar rounds on the helicopter landing field next to the provincial headquarters. U.S. and Vietnamese artillery, expecting trouble, was booming most of the night, and both long before and long after the incident. Flares shot up to illuminate the surrounding countryside, an observer plane flew overhead, and a couple jets bombed the outskirts. The noises kept waking me up so I had a long nap this afternoon.

These incidents are little cause for convert. The capital was mortared four days running in July and once in August, so everyone has sandbagged bunkers built beside the house (Bob has two – one in front and one in back) and one can take refuge inside. Being in a brick house, I just stayed in bed. Artillery response is rapid, and the VC usually disappear for the night after a minute or two of harassment.]

So, I don’t know whether we should continue or if that should be enough for the time being.

[26 Oct '67 letter] [Having worked night and day to get our version of the Binh Long Pacification Plan for 1968 ready by October 25, a 34-man group of mixed Vietnamese and
Americans descended on us yesterday to check the Vietnamese edition. The session was led by Colonel Tin, deputy III Corps commander, and energetic and decisive older Vietnamese from Hanoi. The Vietnamese 5th Division commander was also present for the morning, a one star 'support' general who has his headquarters in Binh Duon, a regiment here and tactical response for those two provinces plus Phuoc Long to the east. The province first presented its revolutionary [illegible] plan — which hamlets were to be scheduled as 'New Life,' 'Fortified,' or 'Pacified.' The amount of work done on each of those goes down in scale. To qualify for the first, three major projects (like building classrooms or a dispensary) have to be planned and completed, as well as at least 70 of 98 tasks — eliminating village bullies, identifying and eradicating the VC infrastructure, establishing a youth self-defense group, conducting literacy classes, and so on. A Vietnamese team of a maximum of 59 members stays in a hamlet normally six months while the tribal teams usually stay a year or so. They can have as many as 65 cadre. I'm having the leaders of all 6 Binh Long teams [illegible].

After lunch, the various Vietnamese service chiefs — education, public works, youth and sports, public health, refugees, social welfare, agriculture, animal husbandry — presented their 1968 plans. The colonel could then call on representatives of Saigon ministries that he had brought along to comment on the feasibility of the proposals. Their American advisors were also asked to give their opinions. This is the first time in Vietnamese history where planning has been decentralized to province level, and the whole exercise was a constructive one in public administration.'

LC: Ok. Well maybe we could do a little bit of Q and A, as it were, to sort of catch up to and explore some of the things that you introduced, if that's ok.

TB: Sure.

LC: Tom, I want to come back to some of what you talked about in the letters first, but I think in order to set the groundwork for much of the fall of '67 and your time there, it's important to talk about the Battle of Loc Ninh and just kind of put that, kind of flesh it out a little bit. Again, for people who may not have access to a copy of your book. The battle as you described it developed between the twenty-eighth of October and, perhaps as you said, the second or third of November 1967.

TB: I think it was the twenty-ninth of October.
LC: Twenty-ninth. Ok. And Tom, I want to ask you, thinking back to the beginning of that whole series of events, did you have any, as the senior advisor for the province, did you have any intelligence that suggested that VC combatants were present in the strength that it turned out they were actually present in the province?

TB: I think III Corps may have had that information and General Weyand’s staff somewhere, but I wasn’t aware of it myself.

LC: What makes you think that perhaps the military structure had that information or something to that affect anyway?

TB: Well, they had various devices for monitoring increased North Vietnamese and VC activity.

LC: Can you say anything about those devices at all?

TB: I was not privy to them, but I’m sure it was under the National Security Agency.

LC: I see. But you as the senior advisor, really…you were blindsided, is that fair?

TB: I was not informed.

LC: Ok. In the memoir you mentioned that Barry Zorthian came up to the province that weekend.

TB: Yes, sure.

LC: Can you tell me a little bit about him?

TB: He was a flamboyant man, quite expansive, very pleasant to deal with, very intelligent, amusing.

LC: Had you known him before?

TB: I think I’d met him in Saigon, but I didn’t know him in any detail, no.

LC: And what was the reason for his visit to Binh Long at this particular time?

TB: I think he made periodic visits to the countryside, to the provinces just like Bill Colby did. Bill Colby came when he was deputy for CORDS and spent a night with me also.

LC: Do you know when that fell during your year?

TB: I don’t recall offhand. I may be able to trace it down.

LC: Ok. Well, I’ll ask you about that visit at a later point. What was Zorthian’s position?

TB: He was head of the JUSPAO, the Joint U.S. Public Affairs office, which was a combined military and USIA structure.

LC: Which had the job of what?
TB: Job of selling Vietnam to the American public and selling Vietnam to its own people.

LC: Is propaganda a fair description of what they were doing?

TB: Sure, depending upon what your definition of propaganda is.

LC: Ok. Can you provide one that seems more or less accurate for what JUSPAO was doing?

TB: Well, it was essentially advertising the cause that we believed in.

LC: Ok. And he was headquartered in Saigon?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: How long had he been out visiting Binh Long with you that weekend?

TB: I just don’t recall.

LC: And you left with him from An Loc?

TB: Yeah. This was a unique opportunity to get on top of Nui Ba Den.

LC: Yeah, can you talk a little bit about that?

TB: It’s a really imposing structure because of the surrounding plain in Tay Ninh province. It’s perfectly flat for miles and miles and you see this enormous mountain in the distance. How it got isolated geologically would be a fascinating story. I visited it in 1999, went up partway by cable car to a series of temples. Even then the road to the top – or not road, really, but pathway to the top – was not advised for travelers because there were bandits along it. I can’t recall the height offhand though one could obtain this, I’m sure, from a map, but the structure was such that the Special Forces camp on top was surrounded by barbed wire and so on and the whole central part of the mountain was under VC control.

LC: And the opportunity that was presented to you was to visit the top?

TB: Yeah, this was irresistible.

LC: Can you describe actually being on the top and what you saw?

TB: Well, you see for miles in every direction, of course, because of the extreme height and you can see into Cambodia without any problem. But it was just a military emplacement with bunkers and…

LC: Was there a wireless station up there?

TB: I think there was.

LC: Was that manned by ARVN forces?

TB: I have no idea.
LC: Ok. Did you just land and walk around and visit for a bit and then leave?
TB: Yes. That’s exactly the case.
LC: And did the helicopter that you were in with Zorthian then go back to Saigon?
TB: That’s right.
LC: Why didn’t you go back to An Loc?
TB: Because there was no transportation from the top of the mountain to An Loc.
LC: I’m just wondering why the helicopter didn’t stop back at An Loc and let you off.
TB: Because it was way out of the way.
LC: Ok. So they wanted to fly back directly to Saigon?
TB: That’s right.
LC: Ok. During that flight were you, as it were, talking shop with Zorthian or were you…?
TB: Yeah, sure.
LC: Ok. Do you remember anything about those conversations?
TB: Not a bit.
LC: Tom, when did you find out that there were serious problems at An Loc that evening?
TB: When I got to the airport early the next morning, Saigon Tan Son Nhut Airport, early
the next morning and tried to get back to An Loc.
LC: What did you find out?
TB: That there had been an attack on Loc Ninh.
LC: Did you have any notion of its severity at that point?
TB: I had no idea what it was all about.
LC: What happened next?
TB: Well, then we, as I recall the situation, we tried to land at An Loc – pardon me, Loc
Ninh – and then the landing was not possible because of military activity. And, I think this is the
time the pilot got lost.
LC: Now, this is a helicopter that you’re in, correct?
TB: No, no. This was probably a Pilatus Porter. But I don’t remember the aircraft. It was a
single engine plane built by the Swiss.
LC: And who was flying it?
TB: An Air America pilot.
LC: Ok. With regard to getting lost, what happened?
TB: Well, when we saw this plantation, rubber trees below, and I spotted the sign Mimot, M-I-M-O-T, on top of a shed, I realized we were over Cambodia instead of Vietnam and the pilot realized it also, but that gave him his first clue of location.

LC: Was the disorientation due to the fact that you hadn’t been able to land at Loc Ninh and then weren’t sure where your bearings were? What was the cause of the…?

TB: I have no idea what his problem was. But it wasn’t the first time I’d been misdirected.

LC: Yes. I remember you were yesterday talking about wandering over China so…were you gravely concerned at being in Cambodian airspace at all?

TB: I was apprehensive. Sure.

LC: So I would guess that you figured out what direction to go and beat it back over to Vietnamese airspace.

TB: That’s right.

LC: Were you able to get into An Loc?

TB: No we were not…yeah, An Loc we got into.

LC: When you arrived on the ground…presumably near the compound, is that right? At An Loc?

TB: That’s right.

LC: What happened next?

TB: I got a…we had a helicopter assigned to the province so I flew that to [Loc Ninh]…instead of landing on the airstrip which is adjacent to the district compound, the military district compound at Loc Ninh, we landed right in the compound itself.

LC: Ok. And what was the situation there?

TB: It was…all the bunkers that formed the perimeter of the district compound had been overrun and there were corpses of both sides in the bunkers and there was a horror of devastation. The team house of our district senior advisor had been pretty well blasted up.

LC: Were you under fire actually coming in and landing?

TB: There was some firing, distant firing. I don’t think the helicopter was under fire but there was some distant firing coming from the plantation area.

LC: From the memoir, I understand that John Vann was actually there in Loc Ninh.

TB: That’s right.
LC: Can you talk about your meeting with him and what passed between the two of you in terms of assessing the situation and deciding what to do?

TB: Yeah. We were trying to prevent the panicky retreat to An Loc. The citizens of Loc Ninh were streaming out of the town heading south, the thirty-eight kilometers south to An Loc.

LC: What could you do about that?

TB: Nothing very much.

LC: What was…what did you learn about the military situation, leaving aside the displaced civilians for a moment?

TB: I don't remember the details except I did mention later on when we visited this tribal hamlet where the cadre team still was that there were North Vietnamese troops in place along a streambed to one side of the hamlet.

LC: Was it your sense at that time that this was a combined VC and NVA attack?

TB: Well, that was fairly evident because the VC couldn't have done it on their own.

LC: Ok. And can you tell me a little bit about the tactical deployments and the military conflict that makes you say that, Tom?

TB: Well, it was just the size of the force and the relentlessness of the attack.

LC: That lead you to suppose or to conclude that NVA was involved?

TB: Well, we got intelligence information that was involved also.

LC: Did you have a sense of the strength of the enemy force that was deployed against Loc Ninh?

TB: Not personally, no.

LC: Ok. Did you later see a number or have any…?

TB: I may have but I don't recall it.

LC: I see. Ok. And just for reference, which troops or which forces – ARVN, RF/PF, U.S., or local cadre – were actually confronting and resisting?

TB: Well, initially it was the RF/PF, but within the first day after the attack there was the 1st Armored Cavalry division and the 1st Brigade of the 1st Division up there.

LC: And were they mobilized from their base located next to An Loc?

TB: The 2nd was. The 1st had a base somewhere near Bien Hoa.

LC: Ok. The 1st Cav?

TB: Yes.
LC: Ok. Tom, you mentioned in the memoir, just briefly, that with the evacuation of the wounded there was some attempt by people who were not wounded to board the helicopters. Do you remember that?

TB: I remember it quite vividly.

LC: Can you tell anything about that?

TB: Well, I personally pushed two ARVN lieutenants, second lieutenants, off the helicopter because they could produce no certificate from the district chief that they'd been released and they were not wounded.

LC: Was this a MEDEVAC helicopter?

TB: It was a helicopter just devoted to general purposes in the province and as many people as possible tried to swarm onto it.

LC: Ok. And what did you think was the rationale behind all these people trying to jump onto it?

TB: Fear.

LC: Ok. Thinking that the military situation was dissolving and they were likely to die? Is that fair?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. Was there only one helicopter moving in and out?

TB: There were several as I recall, but I only had one assigned to me, or assigned to the province rather.

LC: And where were the wounded being taken? Do you know?

TB: I don't know.

[30 Oct '67 letter] [During the early morning hours of the 29th, Hon Quan, the capital here, was mortared again, all rounds striking the artillery compound. A few minutes later, two battalions of the VC 273rd Regiment attacked our northern district (Loc Ninh) military compound, while shelling the nearby Special Forces camp. They broke into the district compound, burned the military headquarters to the ground, and fought the defenders in the outlying bunkers. The district chief remained safe in the command bunker in the compound's center, and by dawn the fighting was still going on. The bunkers weren't cleared out of VC until 1100, and fighting continued 100 meters away until 1500. The compound is a shamble but the VC never took it.]
I got in about 1300 and stayed until 1600 to help load the wounded, military dependents, and corpses onto helicopters bound for Hon Quan. Major Fuller is staying overnight to coordinate and command the ARVN and U.S. reinforcements that were rushed in. There were 12 friendly soldiers killed in action, there were also some civilians killed and wounded, while 30 ARVN soldiers are missing from the district compound. The whole scene was grisly, but the VC defeat should discourage other adventurism along this line. We had heard rumors of an impending attack against Loc Ninh for several days, but odds favored November 1 as the day.

'It is impossible to recreate in print the excitement, tension, and exhaustion of the past few days. I already recounted the VC attack on Loc Ninh last Saturday night. The same insanity was repeated Monday evening, Maj. Fuller was on the spot rather than directing artillery and bombers from Hon Quan. If he hadn’t been there, the district camp would have been overrun. I arrived Tuesday morning to a scene of unbelievable carnage. VC corpses strewn over the runway, hands clasped over their heads in final futile protection, black hippie sandals, cans of cooked rice strapped to their backs, propaganda leaflets strewn in abundance and printed in both Vietnamese and English, directed at both their enemies.

The district town of Loc Ninh is now virtually empty at night, and we are helping feed some 2500 of 3500 or so who have fled Loc Ninh for Hon Quan. For again last night – Wednesday – the VC launched major attacks against Vietnamese and U.S. positions at Loc Ninh. Captured documents reveal that they have been ordered to take the district at all costs, but U.S. reinforcements are now so heavy that that dream has become an impossibility. Their losses so far outnumber ours (almost entirely Vietnamese) about 10 to 1. The VC have never before to my knowledge hammered away with ground Popular Force soldiers and tribal Revolutionary Development Cadre from a hamlet surrounded by VC troops. Visitors have descended on us in flocks, and our humble province has suddenly become – if only for a short time – the focal point of the war. I even cancelled my English class Tuesday night. Almost as bad as skipping my exercises.

I’ve had one civilian so intimidated by this uncustomary military activity that he quit on me, but the rest are holding up admirably. The excitement has also stimulated John Vann – who spent Tuesday night here – to drain other provinces of five captains and seven NCOs,
so our military staff is at last beginning to flesh out. And whereas we’ve had use of a
helicopter ½ day per week up till now, we’ve had one all day long every day since Sunday.
I’ve spent most of my time extracting wounded, and today – in seven trips – extracting…]

LC: Ok. Can you tell about the trip that you took in the helicopter with ammunition that day
to resupply an outpost?

TB: There was an outpost right next to the hospital at Loc Thanh. The hospital was, I
would say, a hundred yards from the post, a little tiny place with three ARVN soldiers, maybe
Regional Force soldiers, in it. And they desperately needed some 60 mm mortar ammunition, or
they asked for mortar ammunition. So I managed to scrounge mortar rounds, a box of mortar
rounds, and personally went in the helicopter, landed in the circle just above the post, handed them
the mortar rounds, and zoomed off. I discovered that I’d given them 81 mm instead of 60, which
they needed, and they were absolutely useless. In addition, they [the 81 mm] were perilous for
them. They were a danger to them because if a round had hit them it would have detonated the
entire, tiny outpost. Also, as I mentioned in the book, the hospital, which was so close by, was
being used for treatment of NVA and VC wounded. And the reason they probably didn’t shoot
down the helicopter I was in was that they didn’t want to draw attention to that fact.

LC: But that fact was known by ARVN forces, is that right?

TB: It was not known till later.

LC: Ok. Later in the day or later the next day or two?

TB: Next few days.

LC: Ok. How big was this dispensary?

TB: It was a regular hospital.

LC: Like twenty beds or…?

TB: I don’t know. I didn’t go inside it. Fortunately.

LC: Yes. Not at that time, at any rate. And am I right in inferring that the VC and NVA had
set up, had basically taken it over, to meet their own requirements, battlefield requirements?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Ok. How far from the small outpost that you re-supplied, however futilely, was the
dispensary? How far away?

TB: I think a hundred yards, a hundred fifty yards or something like that.

LC: Did you actually see it? I mean could you see it?
TB: Oh yes, certainly.
LC: And could you see any activity there?
TB: Not from the exterior, no.
LC: Ok. And you didn’t take any fire during that resupply mission? And why actually, Tom, did you get in the helicopter? Was it something you personally had to do, there was no one else to do it, or…?
TB: It was a request from this outpost and I felt we should supply it. That’s all.
LC: I’m just curious as to why you had to go. I mean you’re the senior advisor, not an expendable person in the situation at all as a potentially, extremely dangerous situation. Did you just do it on impulse and get in the helicopter and go?
TB: Yeah, sure.
LC: Wow. Can you tell me a little bit about what happened later as the battle continued to develop the next night and so on? What was the situation?
TB: Well, again, the district team and Major Fuller and the province chief survived because of a Japanese bunker built something like fifteen feet underground below where the district compound was located. I haven’t the foggiest explanation to why the Japanese built that in the first place, but we were grateful to them for having done so.
LC: Can you describe it? This bunker?
TB: It had a series of cement steps, a rather wide stairway, leading down into this bunker, and it wasn’t very spacious on the inside. But it was sufficiently below ground so that Fuller could call in air strikes on the compound when it was being overrun.
LC: And the people inside there were safe?
TB: They survived. Sure.
LC: Were the walls lined with concrete as well?
TB: I don’t recall.
LC: Were there any facilities in there or was it just a big empty room?
TB: That I don’t recall either.
LC: Yes, it’s very curious as to both its construction and its location. Why it was there. No ideas on that?
TB: I don’t offhand, no.
LC: That’s fine. The battle continued that next night but now the local forces had been reinforced with, as you suggested, American military forces.

TB: Yes. At the south end of the runway, Loc Ninh airstrip, there was a U.S. artillery company, which instead of firing overhead, leveled its guns so that it fired directly across the airstrip, which the North Vietnamese were using to attack the…were crossing in order to attack the district compound. So the number of North Vietnamese fatalities was enormous.

LC: I’m sure. Yes. Did you ever see an estimate of enemy losses in this engagement?

TB: I did but I don’t recall what it is. [See “Slaughter at Loc Ninh” Newsweek. November 1967, p28. Tom Barnes adds, ‘The Special Forces camp was never subject to grand assaults. They were all concentrated against the SVN post. Time made the same error.’]

LC: Ok, but your sense is that it was fairly heavy.

TB: Yes. Extremely.

LC: Yeah. Tom, can you talk about the arrival of General Westmoreland?

TB: Well, I found a letter to that effect. If I can look it up this afternoon…

LC: Ok. And we’ll come back to that.

TB: The main point was that I reported directly to him that the VC had not disturbed the villagers in Loc Ninh. They’d drawn into the village – into the town – during the night but had not entered into any houses. In contrast, the ARVN the following day, after most of the citizens of Loc Ninh had fled down to An Loc, had looted some of the houses and Westmoreland said, ‘That’s awful,’ or something to that effect, which I agreed with. But his staff members were absolutely enraged that I brought this up because they said, ‘Let me have something in writing about this. We need proof in writing.’ They did not like my having raised an unpleasant fact to the general.

[10 Nov ’67] [The Loc Ninh battle has brought us swarms of visitors, but their culmination the other morning was Thiệu, Ký, and Westmoreland. I made one effort to recall to Ký our encounter with harm in Bangkok in January 1964, but he obviously didn’t register me. I traveled with Westmoreland into the town of Loc Ninh, and took the occasion to illustrate my view that the battle was a military success, but – for the Loc Ninh population – an unfortunate psychological defeat. They had been intimidated by the attack, and above all the ‘friendly’ artillery and air reaction to them that leveled – along with Viet Cong mortaring some 89 houses in the town itself, not to mention destruction in outlying hamlets. The French had at one point decided to close down operations, but are now willing to keep
open at least until the traditional 60 day Tét break when they let the rubber trees rest
during their weak deciduous time of the year.
Another factor depressing the population was the general looting by ARVN forces of all
descriptions not of American advisors and French planters so much, but of the
townspeople themselves. While the VC remained hidden in the key Loc Ninh spots all day
long October 29, soldiers looted civilian homes rather than pursuing the enemy. In the
village of Loc Tan, some five kilometers along Route 13 to the north, some 800 VC stayed
from October 29 through November 1. The VC, except for the retaliation they brought on,
never bothered the population.
The general was quite disturbed about all this, and some of his subordinate commanders
have become quite upset with me for raising the topic because they themselves had
minimized it anyway. I’ve been ordered to put my money where my mouth is, and produce
lists of what was stolen.
I found this military reaction typical – a concern with face rather than truth, but John Vann
and my own personal convictions would invariably back up the stand I took.’]
LC: Do you remember any of those staff people?
TB: I can remember this sort of eager faced, young looking full colonel but I don’t
remember his name.
LC: Ok. And did they try to part you from the general?
TB: Oh yes.
LC: Were they successful?
TB: Eventually.
LC: Ok. Well, yes, obviously, but I just wondered if they kind of hustled you away and kind
of put the screws to you for some kind of documentation. Is that how it felt?
TB: Yeah. That’s true. Yeah.
LC: What did you respond to them when they wanted a piece of paper?
TB: I gave them a stony silence.
LC: Did that have any affect?
TB: Well, I never wrote anything up on this.
LC: What was your impression of...well, first of all I should ask, had you met Westmoreland
before?
TB: I don’t think so. I think that was my first encounter with him. I’d seen him giving talks
to groups and so on, but not personally I hadn’t met him. I had dinner at Abram’s house one time
and General Weyand’s of course, but never at Westmoreland’s.

LC: What was your impression of him that day?

TB: Well, he’s a very impressive looking man. He’s very tall, soldierly, serious…I’d never
joined the Boy Scouts myself but I understand he was an Eagle Scout at one juncture.

LC: Yes. Why was he actually…why was he there?

TB: Because this was a major event, military event, of the season.

LC: Did his presence make any difference to events at Loc Ninh?

TB: Well, I’m sure his personal inspection of the area brought about an increase in U.S.
military presence in Loc Ninh.

LC: Which you refer to in the letters later that you’ve already read in to us. Tom, was
Westmoreland there at the same time as John Vann?

TB: No, John had left already.

LC: Ok. And were you in regular communication with John about the continuing situation?


LC: And you talked to him several times?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. What kinds of questions did Vann have for you? Do you remember anything
about those conversations?

TB: Not really. No.

LC: Ok. But my sense from what you said before is that you respected him and his
methods of working.

TB: Fully.

LC: Did you have the same kinds of feelings about General Westmoreland, although
obviously you did not know him as well?

TB: Not at all.

LC: Why? What was the difference?

TB: Well, for one, Vann knew what was going on in Vietnam. I don’t know that
Westmoreland ever did.

LC: Is that right? What makes you say that?
TB: Because of his policy of search and destroy and moving populations to settled areas rather than vice versa. His emphasis on body count, his system of which is an army, why insist on putting a brigade commander to get his ticket punched in place for only six months. By the time he got acquainted with what he was doing and with the terrain he was covering, he was transferred out. This was to give him maximum number of people the chance of combat leadership.

LC: And that turnover was problematical?

TB: Yeah. John Vann used to say that we didn’t have nineteen years or twenty years of experience in Vietnam. We had one year twenty times.

LC: And is that what it felt like?

TB: It did for many of these people. Now there are exceptions. I don’t know whether you’ve talked to Ed Metzner or whether you met him at the…he wasn’t at the Diem conference but he was there at the prior one.

LC: No, I have not met him.

TB: He spent seven years as a province senior advisor in Vietnam, which was highly unusual for a military man. He’s written a book – he’s written two books, as a matter of fact. I’ve lent…I don’t have it with me. I lent it to a friend. Oh here! I kept the jacket. It’s More Than A Soldier’s War: Pacification in Vietnam by Edward P. Metzner. Should be in your library.

LC: Yes. I’ll double check to make sure that it is. And his career there and the longevity that he held as a PSA was obviously an aberration.

TB: A real aberration.

LC: Ok. Was your experience as a one year PSA much more typical?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. Was there any kind of standard tour for province senior advisors?

TB: Well, the civilians, particularly those in AID, kept staying on and on and on, but it was highly unusual for a military man to do so.

LC: Right. Ok. And that was because of…why was that actually?

TB: Because then in the military to be a general you’ve got to have a combat command and an advisory role was sheer death for stars, for eventual stars.

LC: Ok. So, anyone on a flight path to higher command level had to be out with the troops and not in provincial level offices.

TB: That’s right.
LC: After things had basically gelled in some form of stability around the second or third of
November ’67 at Loc Ninh, you told us that – from one of the letters – that the French decided to
keep the plantations open. So, that had clearly been in question at some stage?
TB: Sorry. Keep what open?
LC: Keep the plantations operating. That had been in question then?
TB: Oh that had been in question by the French.
LC: Yes. Not just because – I presume…was there more to it than that the U.S. military
was cutting down their trees? Was there more to it than that?
TB: Oh yes. Just the general insecurity in the province.
LC: Do you know anything about discussions between the French, the two plantation
operators on the ground, and their home offices? Did they tell you anything about their own reports
back to home offices?
TB: No. I wasn’t privy to that information.
LC: There was also mention in one of the letters that there was a plan at some point to
dynamite a Cexo villa. Did you know anything about that?
TB: I wasn’t aware of that. Major Fuller took care of that from Loc Ninh.
LC: And let me ask you a little bit about Major Fuller himself. This is James Fuller who was
your deputy PSA, is that right?
TB: That’s right.
LC: How well did you know him before this battle?
TB: Well, I had not met him of course before arriving in Binh Long.
LC: And he was U.S. Army, I take it.
TB: Yeah, sure.
LC: Can you tell me anything about him as a person? I know you have respect for what he
did during the battle.
TB: He was exceptionally qualified militarily. He was sort of limited scope intellectually, not
that he was stupid or anything like that, but he was not a broad based…well, you couldn’t discuss a
great number of subjects with him.
LC: Sure. But he was good at what he was doing. Do you know where he was from?
TB: I’ve forgotten.
LC: Ok. Did you have a chance to sort of debrief and recap with him the whole series of events?

TB: Certainly. We went over them in great detail.

LC: Ok. In doing that, did you two talk about the future and what might happen if a similar attack were made? How things might go differently?

TB: I don't think so.

LC: Ok. You mentioned in one of the letters that you read in this morning, that captured documents showed that the Viet Cong had been ordered to take Loc Ninh at all costs. Tom, do you know what the thinking was either from documents or other intelligence sources? What was the thinking behind the attack itself?

TB: The obvious objective was to occupy a district capital in South Vietnam and claim it as VC territory. There's no question in my mind that they had any other objective than to establish a political base within the South Vietnamese borders.

LC: For propaganda purposes, as a home for the NLF government, or…?

TB: Just to show that they had territory, a district territory, in South Vietnam.

LC: Ok. And another point that you mentioned Tom that I found very interesting in the letters was that you said that your English class had had to be cancelled. What were the classes?

TB: There was – I've got another letter on this subject – there was a lieutenant in the organization and myself who taught English once a week each, there were two English classes a week, to the six or eight members of the ARVN staff. This was just a gesture on our part to try to make them more fluent in English and deal with their counterparts, American counterparts.

LC: And you were just doing this kind of on your own?

TB: That's right.

LC: Who was the person with whom you were team teaching?

TB: Lieutenant whose name I'll have to look up, whom I don't recall offhand.

LC: How did you structure those classes?

TB: I don't recall. When I was in Korea I taught a survey of English literature course. This course in Binh Long was not a survey course or an English literature course. It was a conversational course, but I don't remember what text I used.

LC: Were you trying to get them to know conversational English or…?

TB: Right.
LC: Ok. I just wondered if you were trying to also give them military terms. Anything specific like that?

TB: I’m not particularly inclined toward military terms.

LC: I thought not. Tom, how did the students come to be in the class? Were they self-selected, did you invite them, how did it…?

TB: We invited members of the province chief provincial staff and there was eight or nine who signed up, [plus two CORDS employees] and six who sort of held out till the end. [I held the class to a maximum of 10.]

LC: Ok. So you had a few stalwarts then in the class?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Was that something you enjoyed doing?

TB: I enjoy teaching.

LC: Were any of those men who were in that class in any way implicated in the looting incidents that you talked about? Obviously they themselves didn’t go out and do it, but…?

TB: No. They were all in An Loc, you see, rather than Loc Ninh.

LC: Did you know whether anything ever came of your mentioning the looting by ARVN troops?

TB: Nothing ever came of it.

LC: Ok. Were you disappointed by that?

TB: Well, I wasn’t about to document it and get statements and so on and so forth. I had other things to do, which was…the main thing to do was to get Loc Ninh back in livable shape and restore the market.

LC: Can you talk a little bit about the destruction of the market and the impact of that?

TB: It was burned to the ground and we developed a pacification project of rebuilding the market.

LC: What were the parts to a project like that?

TB: Well, you have a series of stalls and a structure with a roof over it, which is fairly open on the sides like a sala in Thai, in Thailand. So, you have a fairly large structure with a series of outbuildings and so on, but all with roofs to protect from the rain.

LC: Were you able to get the redevelopment of the market going while you were still there?

TB: Yeah, sure.
LC: Was USAID involved in that?

TB: Certainly.

LC: It was their project?

TB: It was the principle project aside from the road running...part of Route 13 running through An Loc. It was the highest budgeted item in the provincial budget.

LC: Tom, I want to ask you just for a moment about kind of a big picture aspect of the impact of the Battle at Loc Ninh. According to Neil Sheehan's biography of John Vann, at the end of 1967, Vann was in Washington giving a number of briefings to people in the Defense Department and the State Department and he was, again according to Sheehan, giving essentially negative appraisals of the political and military situation in the south and, of course, that was contradictory to official policy.

TB: The official line.

LC: Yes. And I wonder, having known him, having spoken with him so many times about, both during the battle and undoubtedly afterwards, was Loc Ninh an experience there part of John Vann's thinking in late '67 about the course of the war?

TB: It couldn't have escaped not being an influence.

LC: Ok. Can you...do you know anything or can you say anything about his, the message he was carrying to Washington and his approach based on what he observed in III Corps?

TB: Well, he used to write a periodic letter addressed to 'my friends'. I don't know that I have any copies of these things, but periodically he would come out with his own assessment of the Vietnam War. If you can obtain any copies of those messages then you'll find a revelation of the actual situation versus the official line. But I don't recall whether I've got any in my files anywhere.

LC: What was the distribution of those letters? Was it in South Vietnam and Washington?

TB: Yeah. He sent them to Senator Kennedy, to Daniel Ellsberg...when he'd go back to Washington he used to enrage the government by saying 'I'm going to visit my friend Dan Ellsberg in Washington.'

LC: I think in fact, if Sheehan is correct, this visit he did stop in California and see Ellsberg if I remember correctly.

TB: Yeah. I stopped to see Ellsberg one time when he was still at Rand. We had at the beginning what was a dialogue. After three, after five minutes it turned into a monologue on his
part. I saw Ellsberg again at Lubbock some time ago. I think it was either...I guess it was the first triennial conference that I attended, which was the third one, and he was a keynote speaker at one of the lunches and he went on and on and on about the government and its lying to the public and so on. He's still somewhat of a crank.

LC: Did it sound familiar to you?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. I think Jim Reckner has made similar observations. Tom, let’s go ahead and take a break here.

TB: Ok.

LC: This is Laura Calkins of Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Thomas Barnes. Today's date is the eighteenth of March 2004 and again, I am on the campus of Texas Tech and Tom is in Austin. Tom, you found some additional material that you thought might be good to add.

TB: I'd like to read a few excerpts from some letters here.

LC: Please do.

TB: [16 Nov ’67] [Meanwhile the US is pulling out of Loc Ninh and the VC are returning. If the moon wasn’t so bright these nights, I’m sure the place would have been attacked again. The refugee relief man brought supplies by helicopter to Loc Tan, a village three kilometers north of Loc Ninh on Route 13, at 1530 November 14. The VC came in at 1600, assembled the refugees, and took propaganda films showing the people ‘liberated’ in the battle of Loc Ninh. The French plantation people drove all the way down here to let me know so we wouldn’t lose a helicopter by making any more trips to Loc Tan. Conté has also been over to see me. Increased US troop presence at Quan Loi – his plantation headquarters a few kilometers to the northeast – has drained his tribal rubber tappers. I’m working on a scheme with the province chief to move a tribal village in an insecure area in the southern district to a site near Quan Loi where the government can establish control and Conté can have some laborers.’]

This was something we had not discussed which was my first bribe offer in Binh Long. A Chinese came who happened to be the uncle of my chief local employee, a very competent woman named Co Dung [pronounced yoom] said that her uncle wanted to talk to me but could come only in the evening to my quarters rather than to the office, which began to make me suspicious. I said,
'Ok, fine'. He came to discuss the shipment, which he was making, of six hundred to eight hundred 50-kilo cakes of ice per day to U.S. units at Quan Loi in Loc Ninh, the cavalry regiment in the 1st Brigade at Quan Loi. He was so [he said he would charge]…either placed 140 Vietnamese piasters per cake, plus ten dollars [piasters] per cake set aside for the ‘MACV Social Welfare Fund’. Figure seven hundred cakes [per day] times ten Vietnamese piasters equals seven thousand per day times thirty days equals 210,000 Vietnamese piasters, at the official exchange rate, $1779 per month, more than my monthly salary. I told him I never heard of a MACV Social Welfare Fund, that I would mention his 140 Vietnamese piaster price to the 1st Brigade and the 11th Cavalry. I prepared a memo of the conversation, sent a copy to John Vann, and the two mentioned units went to bed with a clear conscience. Think of the IBM we could have bought. That’s just an illustration of the sort of thing that could come up.

LC: When did that happen?
TB: January of ’68. The seventeenth of January ’68. Now my district senior advisor in Chon Thanh had been approached by his district chief to open a laundry in Chon Thanh headquarters and take a percentage of the profits off the charges of the laundry. He told him that if the province [district] chief wanted to do business with pacification he was anxious to cooperate with him but he would not cooperate with him on a laundry.

LC: Another great idea down the drain.
TB: I have a couple points with my relationship to General Hay, who was the 1st Division commander. I said, ‘In many ways he is a foreigner. We’re not on the same track. Anyway, the big secret is out that someone of broader comprehension is replacing him next month. Meanwhile, till he goes I’ll be discreet. I have yet to plumb John Vann’s views in our conflict but I know from before that he despises the man.’

Let’s see. The 1st Brigade soldier…this was an incident we found very embarrassing. We did a monthly report on the state of the advisory effort and sent it in to Bien Hoa and of course to Saigon. ‘A 1st Brigade soldier found an almost complete copy of our December monthly report’ – This is reporting in February.
‘…in a local laundry. We traced it back to Sam’s wastebasket.’ – He was a man, first in the district office, an American in the district office of An Loc.
'We traced it back to Sam’s wastebasket and his maid, who sold it to the laundry proprietress for the An mimeograph, rear side is scrap paper.’ – Scrap paper was short. ‘The thirteen missing pages have already been cut out for laundry tickets and apparently are all over town. Luckily, we have no Marine guards around.’ The Marine guards in the embassy police up after you go to leave work to make sure you’ve locked up your classified material. Anyway, that was a minor scandal.

LC: Did any heads roll because of that one?

TB: No, no.

LC: Ok. Good.

TB: Just a strong lecture on safeguarding because the copy was given to the province chief. Pardon me, that is not correct. We did a monthly letter to the province chief based on what we were saying in the monthly report. So, ‘Dear Colonel so and so….’ There’s some very funny poems that have emerged from the Vietnam conflict based on the monthly letters to the counterpart. Anyway…

LC: Do you have any of those, Tom?

TB: I’ve got one somewhere. I’ll try to find it and give it to you next time.

LC: Super.

TB: This is the dated the third of February.

‘As you’ve probably gathered by the news reports, things are in a hell of a mess these days. Saigon and its environs are so far receiving the brunt of VC attention and we remain one of the only four out of twelve province capitals in III Corps that has not yet had a ground attack. We’ve had no…’

– this is right after the TET offensive –

‘We have had no Air America service for six days. The first two because of Tet and the last four because the Saigon airport still isn’t open to civil traffic. The only comfort about this spectacular VC propaganda victory is that they haven’t the gas to keep it up much longer. Ambassador Komer who has been on the national intelligence estimates business for a long, in the national intelligence estimates business for a long time, feels that the VC are building up to a rapid conclusion to the war, that we have now to abandon our former theory of a long, protracted struggle.’
This change in VC tactics all started with Loc Ninh. Now, of course, he proved to be wrong on that score but it’s interesting to know what he was thinking at the time. This is a letter dated the tenth of February of 1968. This deals with Bill McCoy. I must explain this somewhat. John Vann came to me and said that he had an old friend that he was entrusting to me to indoctrinate into the system who’d signed up for CORDS. His name was Bill McCoy. This proved to be a failure on my part and certainly on McCoy’s part. McCoy arrived here just before the Tet Offensive.

‘He received daily heart-rending tapes from his Japanese wife in Anaheim, California, and in the tapes she threatened to commit suicide if he was ever killed over here, thus apparently abandoning their six-year-old son to some southern California orphanage. And McCoy put in his resignation asking for immediate release, but in no case later than seventeen February. I sent him out the next day. He was terrified. He wouldn’t stay in the civilian compound, he insisted on going into the military compound. I moved Bill Miller up from Chon Thanh to New Life Development spot, which McCoy was occupying and welcomed John Vann for lunch.’

John…he didn’t take this very well.

LC: What happened?
TB: Let me get to the page.
‘John said he’d had a long talk with McCoy the night before, told him he was giving the impression of cowardly desertion under fire and talked him into coming back. Since John personally recruited the man he felt besmirched by his defection. He had it half right that he was wondering about my leadership ability what with Dilts walking out in October…’

– this was another problem we had –
‘…and now McCoy. Apparently, no one has similarly left out of provinces in this corps area. Anyway, McCoy is back almost useless in job performance, itching to leave again and saying thirty days is the absolute minimum [maximum] unless the crisis has not yet resolved itself by then. Meanwhile he’s mouthing the necessity for a public administration, the futility of our efforts here, the impossibility of pacification. He got another tape today that tore him apart and he tells me he’s going to erase it because he can’t stand to hear it again.’

Anyway, this fellow…the main effect to me was not the fact that I couldn’t do anything with him but that he told John when he exited that I was taking too many risks and John personally counseled
me to stay less frequently in the hamlets at night. I followed this advice for about a week and then
reverted to my former habits.

LC: Tom, do you have some additional letter that you wanted to read or…?
TB: Yeah. On eleven February…
LC: I’m sorry. The eleventh of February?
TB: Yeah.

‘I neglected to give you John Vann’s interpretation of the Saigon events in yesterday’s
epistle so I thought I would pass them on to you for their novelty rather than for their
validity. He incidentally has the reputation of being optimistic when everyone else is
pessimistic and vice versa. He analyzes the Saigon and other metropolitan attacks as a
grave military and psychological VC defeat.…’
– but that incidentally came to be the considered wisdom.

‘They went into the fray armed with all sorts of extra weapons to pass out to the citizenry
whom they were told were anxious to join in to root out the government. Instead the
Saigon bourgeoisie was stirred out of its detached air and complacency into anger at the
VC. Several city blocks and different parts of town have reportedly been razed by
American air and artillery because the VC took refuge in civilian houses there. The
citizenry is not too clear about who caused the direct damage but allegedly are enraged at
the VC for being the ultimate, if not the suspected, cause, and they have become
intimately involved in the war for the first time. The VC death toll is enormous, though I
have yet to hear of any civilian casualty figures and suspect that some of them may be
included in the statistics. The VC are also probably highly disorganized in localities where
they concentrated their attacks.’

My impression about this is that this is the exact analysis that came into being afterwards.

‘There is no question, however, that regardless of their losses they have made a significant
international, psychological score. The very night of our last road trip, the VC treated us to
a thirty-man…’
– this is seven March but not the date of the attack, it was a few day’s before.

‘…treated us to a thirty-man attack in a downtown market area [of Hon Quan, the province
capital]. We had advance warning and had moved all the Americans up to this, or the
military compound.’
– this being the civilian compound.

‘I didn’t want to sound alarmist in my letter so I didn’t mention that Ian Sutherland [the Army major under CIA contract], his cook and his eleven noon guards, had joined us for the evening.’

He was a CIA contract man.

‘Local Regional Forces were ready for them, so although the VC banged up a few buildings, friendly forces and local civilians took no casualties. Three VC were killed and three badly wounded.’ This was right downtown. We could watch it from the hillside where the civilian compound [was located]. We watched the fireworks. ‘Meanwhile, VC entrance into surrounding hamlets is growing more flagrant. We are trying to stimulate the province chief into more night patrols. Tomorrow I go to 1st Division headquarters to attend a change of command ceremony and since the new man, Major General Keith Ware, is a Congressional Medal of Honor winner, perhaps he will be more aggressive along the lines we think best. Colonel Blazey, the new military deputy to John Vann, spent the day and night with me yesterday. His visit really revealed the inadequacies of two of my three district senior advisors. And Lieutenant Colonel Suarez and myself were in the act of planning changes.’

Suarez was Major Fuller’s successor.

‘The one FSO I got has proven to be an enormous personality problem. His last province senior advisor found him undisciplined and that’s why I got him. Another FSO of reputed higher caliber is not working out in Lam Khanh, and I’m getting him too.’

I got all the problem faces. Anyway, let’s see…there’s one or two more. Is this too much for you?

LC: Not at all. It’s wonderful.

TB: This is dated mid-March ’68.

‘I just discovered that another Frenchman saved my life about two hours before I left here to visit you last time. I had planned to go to a tribal hamlet in an insecure area where there were supposed to be four wounded from U.S. artillery. The Frenchman stopped me en route and I learned a few days ago that there were four ambushes en route. As an example of this newfound caution I’ve gone to two areas in the last two days escorted by a platoon of troops each time. Caution is slowing my reaction time, however.’

Here, Sunday evening, this is dated the nineteenth of March ’68.
‘Had a high power visit from Bill Colby, the new Assistant Chief of Staff designate for CORDS. He will be number three after Komer and Major General Forsythe. Jim Grant, the AID Washington Vietnam Bureau chief (he incidentally was Joe Mendenhall’s predecessor in that role), Mr. Robinson, the AID deputy director in Vietnam, and John Vann. Bill Colby proved to be both perceptive and warm during the after dinner briefings. We gave [kept] the group up until midnight. He invited me to stay with him if I ever got to Saigon and I think he meant it. The late hour had me nodding around eleven.’

I tend to fade out about that time.

‘But when the briefings were over John Vann asked to talk to me privately, which he did with customary gusto until 0130. He told me his temporary promotion to R1 had been approved and that combined with his military retirement pay he was probably going to get more than any other civilian in Vietnam: $43,000 a year with allowances. He said he would be forty-four in July and originally hoped to be Army Chief of Staff by then, but now he has adjusted his sights to becoming Secretary of the Army within a few years. He said he regarded me, because of the Southeast Asia experience and Vietnamese language ability, as his most valuable province senior advisor and he renewed his offer to write [Nicholas] Katzenback, who was then Deputy Security of State, [to seek] a better job for me.’

I was about to leave for Washington in a few months. Then, twenty-third of March ’68.

‘This is visitor’s week. Yesterday for lunch was my old friend General Hay in his new capacity, the 2nd Field Force Deputy Commander. Colonel Blazey, his former 3rd Brigade Commander and now John Vann’s military deputy, escorted him. The cook put on an excellent lunch, the general was most cordial. He is convinced we need more troops to get the job done. John Vann wants to send home a hundred thousand American soldiers – gives the contrast. I didn’t contest the general even on the issue of the French, whom he regards as VC collaborators. The general is a foreigner, at least to the Vietnamese scene, and he got five medals for heroism at his change of command ceremony. The next day was Colonel Carl Swarmer, 1st Division Chief of Staff and now 1st Brigade Commander at Quan Loi.’

The one who looks like Gert Froeb and insists I call him Brick. The man who collects Chinese art, as I think I mentioned to you.
LC: Yes, you did.

TB: ‘The province chief was there for lunch also with the provincial council chairmen, social welfare chief, public works chief...a good spread with this spectacular meat pie baked in a bowl that you crack open as you consume the container along with the contents.’

This is a French cook that I had picked up. This is twenty-five March.

‘Had a...at Loc Ninh in the morning...had a discouraging Sunday at Loc Ninh in the morning. Discovered that a stray mortar round had landed in the heart of town, burned up five houses, killed three, and wounded five. It apparently came from the Special Forces camp as one more example of their notoriously bad aim. Their target was three kilometers to the northwest. These five make forty-two houses destroyed in Loc Ninh by ‘friendly’ fire since January. Eighty-one had already been knocked out during the Loc Ninh battles, so this makes a hundred and forty-three houses.’

Pardon me, a hundred and twenty-three houses.

‘I tried to urge the Special Forces camp commander to pay restitution, but he refused on the grounds of by doing so he would be admitting guilt, which he felt was not his.’

My point was that the payment would be a good psychological move. Who was guilty was irrelevant.

‘Then the afternoon, driving back from a piglet distribution ceremony at Miwe Thanh in Chon Thanh district, we passed the U.S. tank convoy moving south.’

This is the incident that I mentioned to you.

‘I saw a soldier on the back of one tank aim and toss a shiny object, possibly a tin can, at me. It struck my roof. I immediately turned around and gave chase. While drawing even with the tank and trying to motion it to stop my Scout got caught, its treads and tracks, until the Scout was pulled around in front with a crippled axle and dented side. Basil Scarles – ’

He was a Foreign Service officer in Chon Thanh district.

‘Who was in another Scout just ahead of me also was struck on the hood by the same soldier in the same tank as he had gone by. Seeing that I had turned around, Basil followed suit and went off the road trying to pass another tank. His front windshield was shattered. Nobody was hurt.’
Anyway, that’s a better description of that incident than I’d given you before. And let me
see where there’s one or two final…is this ok?

LC: Absolutely. Yes, it’s wonderful. This is like being there. I mean it’s first hand. It’s
wonderful.

TB: Alright. This is the fifteenth of May. ‘Bill Colby sent me to Hue because I had been
consul there before to see what could be done to revive the spirit of Hue.’

So, this is before going.

‘A few hours in Saigon on the fifteenth of May trying to unearth as many Hue-ites as
possible. Read Embassy files, lunches, Bill Colby…he defines my mission as determining
what programs could be undertaken in light of current political and psychological attitudes
in Hue to revive the will to stay, live, rebuild. Over one thousand people were apparently
led away by the VC and executed. Many leaders, many foreigners – about one half of
them were buried alive, tied up, cloth or dirt in their mouths. Dr. Krainick was shot through
the back of the head – ’

He was the person I knew.

‘Not only loss of leadership but much distinction of structures. Destruction of structures.
Homes, bridges, public buildings, mass exodus of population for Da Nang and Saigon.
University paralyzed, professors want to leave. I found Le van Diem, the doctor that had
treated Poilane, the cardiologist – ’

this is still in Saigon –

‘ – at the Clinique St. Paul where he now has an office. So has brother Dam, who used to
be Chef de Cabinet when I was in Hue. Thanh Trai,’

Who is the wife of the secretary general of the University of Hue when I was there,
‘…in a legal office. She’s a lawyer just opposite the Presidential Palace grounds. She and
Chau,’

Le Thanh Minh Chau, who was the Secretary General and later Rector of the University of
Hue –

‘Returned from the U.S. last October. He has a doctorate in political science, hers is in
English literature. He’s back there [in Hue] now, his father Luan, the director’s spokesman,
trying to draw public and private support to rebuild and revitalize the University of Hue. All
three gave me names. On a 14-30 beachcraft [fopar?] for Da Nang. After a stop in Chu
Lai I arrived at 1730. The city was transformed.’
Talking about Da Nang.
‘One of the few places in better shape than when we left. National police field forces are
living in the Cham Museum, stringing their hammocks from the phalli.’
It was really horrifying. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen the Cham Museum in Da Nang, but it’s
magnificent.
LC: Yes, I’ve seen photos. Yes.
TB: ‘A new bridge crosses to the beach area. The Grand Hotel has been repainted.
Population now 270,000 versus about 120,000 when we were there. De Bethgne, the Frenchman
who kept the dogs on patrol, died in 1964. There are two Korean restaurants in town run by
Koreans.’ Let me see if there’s anything in here. This is visiting Hue.
‘Today, among others, I went to see the Archbishop, the Buddhist abbot who led the attack
against the consulate several years previously, and the Queen Mother. The Archbishop is
the only person so far…’
The Queen Mother being the mother of Bao Dai.
‘The Archbishop was the only person so far here who refused to see me and I was
similarly stubborn about confiding in his priest-secretary who first explained that the abbot
was first sick and then busy, and later that he stayed aloof from politics. I then bicycled out
to Thien Mu Pagoda, a short way out of town on the road to the tombs. Most of the
CORDS vehicles were badly damaged during the VC occupation. I’ve been trying to avoid
troubling them for transportation. The young bespectacled abbot there turned out to be a
highly intelligent and rational man who mentioned having been in the forefront of the attack
against the consulate several years before. I’d gone to see him because he was supposed
to be one of the only two communists abbots in town. I found him sipping tea with three
revolutionary development cadre and capable of at least talking a good anti-Communist
line. His stated objectives for Hue are identical to those of the highly nationalist and
articulate information chief. He too at least says he wants the government to show that it
will not let prey fall on North Vietnamese hands. But you would have enjoyed the old lady
the most.’
This is a Korean mother.
‘At least eighty, short and thin, mouth full of betel, which she discharged on my arrival and did not persist with.’

You’ve seen perhaps South Pacific where Bloody Mary spits betel all the time.

‘She has unsuitable mother of pearl benches, furniture jumbled in confusion, but her mind and voice are clear and firm. She criticizes the servants for something I couldn’t detect that was apparently wrong with the first cup of tea they brought me. She was vociferous about the blackness of the liquid in the second cup. ‘Why did you bring chai when it should be tra,’ she says. She wants the buildings in the dai noi covered with tin sheets where there are –’

Let me just see…

‘– where there are holes in the roof, just as a temporary measure to protect those interiors from the rains until the buildings can be restored in their classic style. American soldiers are thieves and leading our girls astray. The imperious men are not unlike Nana’s…’

That was my wife’s grandmother.

‘In another setting she would have hated Roosevelt, too.’

This is perhaps the last one that I’ll trouble you with. 20 June 1968 in Bien Hoa for a meeting.

‘I rushed off the plane into a large rural development meeting. The Vietnamese colonel from III Corps says Binh Long is first in pacification of all eleven provinces. Like an eagle in Hoa setting most of our teams are hard to work. We spent far more of our budget than the others, but pacification is quite remote. What shape must the others be in if we’re first?

While I was gone, a hundred and twenty mortar rounds – the most we’ve ever received – landed shortly after midnight of the 12th or 13th.’

This is June.

‘And the 14th in mid-morning we had our first daytime barrage other than 6:00 A.M.

Besides these noisy diversions, everything else runs smooth. John Vann is back to full-time duty.’

He had malaria. So that’s about it for this. Oh and I mentioned…one other thing…I mentioned my problem with Komer over his attempting to transfer out a psychological operations major in my staff.

LC: Yeah.
TB: This is memorandum for Mr. Thomas Barnes, province senior advisor, Binh Long, 13
July ’68.

‘As you know I’d already accepted your rational argument for retaining Major Koziatek as
PSYOPS advisor for Binh Long/Phuoc Long, on grounds that these two provinces together
had about as much population target audience as Long Khanh.’

He was going to be transferred to Long Khanh.

‘However, I do take considerable umbrage to characterizing a proposed transfer as the
height of ‘computerized bureaucratic folly’. You apparently knew nothing of my policy
determination that we would put the weight of our effort where the people were. That’s
what pacification is all about. Nonetheless, your case remains a good one and I presume
you gave CORDS my decision to leave the major where he is. You have done a good job
in Binh Long but I’m going to lay on a two-day cram course in computerization for you
before you leave. I don’t want to let you loose into Washington scene without realizing that
we only use computers and adding machines to save clerical expense at the U.S.
taxpayer.’ Signed R.W. Komer.

And I’ve got a footnote I penned in: ‘And in a good mood on the 26th of June in Bien Hoa,
Ambassador Komer excused me from the two-day course.’ So anyway…

LC: When he was in a good mood.

TB: Yes. Now, you have questions I’m sure.

LC: Yes I do. Tom, those are amazing documents. In the main, were those letters that
were written to your wife or your other family members?

TB: Mostly to my wife.

LC: Ok. To sort of go back and fill in some of the background, at least to the earlier letters
that you read, I wonder if you could talk a little bit for a moment about your visits to the special
forces camps, which you said there were four in the province.

TB: Yes.

LC: Do you remember where they were located?

TB: They were on the borders. One was on the border of Phuoc Long, which is the
neighboring province to the east and was the first province overrun in 1975. And another one was
on the Cambodian border – Tong Le Chanh, I think it was called. We had assigned to the
province, not under my jurisdiction, an aircraft spotter. I can’t remember the name of the type of
plane but it was this single engine plane where this individual spotted enemy troop movements.

And the fellow that I flew with to Tong Le Chanh, who dropped me there and picked me up the next morning, was later killed. His plane crashed in a province somewhere.

LC: Do you know roughly when that happened?

TB: I don’t recall. It was sometime during my tenure there, but I don’t know.

LC: Ok. As you noted, the Special Forces camps were not within your administrative purview, but what was your purpose in going to visit them?

TB: They were in my province and I wanted to see how they were set up.

LC: And what was the mission of those camps, generally?

TB: Harassment of the enemy and interdiction of troop movements into Vietnam.

LC: Were they doing any training of local combatants?

TB: Well, they were made up of tribal and some ethnic Vietnamese. They were a pretty fearsome force. There was another group of irregulars called ‘The Mike Force’. They were not based in the province, except they came in occasionally. Whenever they did we got advance notice. We shuttered all the shops in the downtown area, locked up all the girls, and so they had an absolutely fearful reputation.

LC: Where were they based?

TB: I don’t know where they came out of, maybe Bien Hoa or someplace. They were a menace to society.

LC: I can understand locking up the women and even the shops, but can you describe what kinds of things they were noted for doing such that you guys had to take this kind of precaution?

TB: Well, they were just too handy with their weapons.

LC: So, civilians could get involved when they really oughtn’t to be?

TB: Sure.

LC: Ok. Tom, you mentioned several different occasions on which friendly fire came from inaccurate aiming at those camps. Can you give any more details on that? Do you remember anything about it?

TB: Well, friendly fire was basically what destroyed the Loc Ninh market and many of the houses in Loc Ninh, but the fire was directed...there was a North Vietnamese occupation of the town, but is this the best way to cope with the situation?
LC: And my sense is that you thought it was not.
TB: That’s right.
LC: Do you recall your discussion of the reparations or restitution issue with the Special Forces commander?
TB: Well I just mentioned that one incident there.
LC: Did you talk with them or with regular military officers at other times about that issue?
TB: I talked to the Special Forces commander for III Corps– I can’t remember the colonel’s name. Incidentally, I did run across the name of the colonel who preceded Brick Krause and became Chief of Entry. His name was Newman. N-E-W-M-A-N. He was very good to work with. So was Krause, incidentally. He’s the one that was riding with me when one of his tanks tried to run us off the road.
LC: Right. And he gave them what for.
TB: Yeah. I did have a real conflict with this Special Forces commander based in Bien Hoa. He came to the province one time – he was an old friend of Colonel Danh, the province chief – and between the two of them, without any knowledge on my part, they moved the special forces camp from outside the province capital perimeter, about three kilometers outside, to right next to the headquarters. In my view, an extremely bad move because it attracted fire on the center of the province town. I shouted at this colonel. I felt this was a stupid move, and he went back to Bien Hoa trying to get me replaced. So, Wilbur Wilson – John Vann was out of country, I think he was sick at that time around, home leave or something – called the two of us in for a reconciliation.
LC: How’d that go?
TB: Not well, as I recall. Anyway, I forget that colonel’s name. If I run across it somewhere I’ll let you know.
LC: Super. Ok. Tom, that anecdote that you just told leads me to ask whether, in most cases where you had a disagreement with U.S. military officers, either within the brigade that was assigned there or the cavalry division or Special Forces, did you expect John Vann to back you up?
TB: He always did.
LC: He did? And you knew that… I mean, as time went on, you began to know that kind of going in that you would have his support?
TB: Yeah, certainly.
LC: Can you talk a little bit about how your relationship with him was evolving over…?

TB: Well, it evolved very rapidly into one of extreme cooperation and that's the reason that when he became senior advisor or whatever the title was in II Corps that he insisted on bringing me in up against the wishes of that hierarchy as his deputy for CORDS.

LC: Can you say what the animus was against bringing you in as a deputy, as his deputy?

TB: Well, the position was for an FSO 1 and I was an FSO 3. For example, there was an ex-ambassador who was the deputy for CORDS in Military Region III, and a man of…a man and his deputy both FSO 1s in I Corps.

LC: For someone who doesn't understand the distinction between FSO 1 and 3 can you clarify that?

TB: Well, the military equivalent of an FSO 3 is a full colonel whereas the military equivalent of FSO 1, at that time – the grades have changed somewhat – was a major general, if you're thinking in military terms.

LC: So, the animus was less against you personally than against the idea that you were leapfrogging to some higher level than you deserved?

TB: That's right. I, also in Military Region II, I supervised an FSO 2 who was very understanding about the situation. He was one grade higher than I was but he was one of my province senior advisors.

LC: Who was that?

TB: Chris Squire. He was later consul general in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg again.

LC: Did you know him before you arrived up there?

TB: I did not know him before I arrived, but we became good friends and he was helpful to me when he was in Personnel in Washington later on.

LC: Ok. Tom, going back a little bit now, I want to ask you about the time just before and during TET and…specifically I'm referring this morning to a letter that you read this morning dated around Christmas of '67 in which you said that a U.S. cavalry regiment had been brought back to Loc Ninh. Was that based on intelligence reports? Do you know?

TB: See, I'm sure it was.

LC: Ok. Can you just describe what happened during TET? Where you were and what happened to you?
TB: I'd be glad to. I had no knowledge, foreknowledge, of the TET Offensive so I spent the night before…the day before I went down to Vung Tau on the coast.

LC: For what purpose were you down there, Tom?

TB: For escape or for relief.

LC: Where were you staying?

TB: I stayed in the house, the villa that the Cexo had rented or owned in Vung Tau.

LC: Can you tell me a little bit about that villa?

TB: Well, it was nothing very fancy but it was a pleasant place to stay.

LC: Ok. How far from the beach?

TB: I suppose a block and a half.

LC: Ok. So that was quite convenient.

TB: Yeah. Any rate, the night of all the fireworks I retreated with my current wife and our daughter – this is a very complicated situation, which I'll go into sometime – to Saigon in my International Harvester Scout. We'd driven down there from Saigon. I'd driven to Saigon from Binh Long. We were in a house, her house, which was down an alleyway off of Yen Do Street behind a police station. As soon as…almost as soon as it got dark, there was these rocket explosions that came into the city and there was a night of fireworks and we could hear firing on the alleyway where we were. The police station had transformed itself into a bunker and was firing out into the street. So, like…I had been absent for the first night of the Battle of Loc Ninh. Here was TET and I had no idea what was going on in my province. So, at dawn, I tried to get out of this alleyway and I couldn't get by the police roadblock, so I took a different avenue. I went toward Bien Hoa and the main bridge to Bien Hoa was crowded with truckloads of soldiers coming back, some of them bleeding and so on because they'd been under attack. I went to the Gia Dinh province headquarters, which is just a part of metropolitan Saigon. Dr. Dick Kagy there, Rich Kagy there, who was the Province Senior Advisor, he had no information on what was going on. So there was one other avenue to get back to where I was going and that was by the Binh Loi Bridge. The Binh Loi Bridge leads to Binh Duong province, which was immediately south of Binh Long at that time. As I got to the bridge there was a Popular Force, or Regional Force corporal rather, who had been told not to let anybody across and he was quite firm in refusing me passage. Meanwhile, an ARVN colonel drove up with a major at the wheel – major and the colonel, he was a regimental commander – and he wanted to rejoin his forces in Binh Duong, which is natural. The corporal
refused to let him go so he [the colonel] sent the major back to find the corporal’s supervisor to get permission. Eventually, the permission was granted and I was parked right behind this colonel and his jeep. The corporal lifted the metal barrier across the entrance to the bridge and the colonel started his jeep and it didn’t start. It coughed and didn’t start up. So, I immediately started my own, rolled the window down on the left hand side, and started pushing the colonel so he could get his engine revolving. We picked up momentum and just as I was getting to the barrier the corporal intended, not intended, but lowered the barrier. I reached out with my left hand and grabbed the barrier, pushing it upwards. And from that time on both of our vehicles…I tried to follow him as closely as I could at breakneck speed thirty kilometers to Thu Dau Mo, which is the Binh Duong capital. There was nobody there to give us any information, although I think he rejoined his unit then. I, at that point, decided to go onto Ben Cat, which if I recall is forty kilometers further up the road, and the principle district town in Binh Duong. When I got Ben Cat, the province senior advisor, Colonel Kitts, and the province chief were there. There were a lot of ARVN casualties and being treated in a hospital, in a makeshift hospital of some kind. And there was a picture, which I still have, of forty Vietnamese corpses, North Viet Cong corpses, which were displayed in the marketplace. I asked Colonel Kitts and his province chief how the road ahead lay and nobody knew, so I was still struggling to get back and driving by myself to my province. I started north of Ben Cat, just a few kilometers there was a Popular Force roadblock. The Popular Force man in charge was a very mild corporal, said he’d been ordered not to let anybody through, but since I was a foreigner I could take my own risk. So, I went through this roadblock and after a while, not very far, entered the south gate of the location where the 1st Infantry Division was located. I saw nobody manning the south gate; this is the day after the TET offensive. I eventually ran across a sergeant in an open jeep just parked by the side of the road. I said, ‘What’s going on?’ He said, ‘We’re being rocketed and mortared.’ I didn’t see any rockets or hear any mortars so I went on to division headquarters, went into the office of division headquarters where I’d been several times to see General Hay, for example, and a sergeant there informed that the 1st Division staff was meeting in a bunker down below the headquarters. My old friend, General Eichenberg, entered at this point, stared at me, pointed at me, and said, ‘Get that man a steel jacket and a….a steel helmet and a flak jacket!’ Then he disappeared. So, given this tremendous reception, I got back in a jeep [the Scout] and drove north again. I went out to north gate of 1st Division headquarters – mind you again, this is the day after the TET Offensive – nobody is at the north gate. So, I drove
from then on another forty kilometers or so through absolutely nothing. There was nobody around
at all till I got to Chon Thanh district. Where I made my mistake was that I decided it would be best
to call for a helicopter and take me from Chon Thanh the thirty some kilometers to An Loc because
I did not know what the state of the road was ahead. I’d already taken enough risk. On the other
hand, in retrospect, if I had driven it I would have encountered nothing. But at any rate, it took me
six hours to get back a hundred and ten kilometers by this system of driving to Chon Thanh and
then going by air.

LC: Was there a helicopter there or did you have to get one to come and get you?
TB: I had to get one.
LC: And how did you manage to make that call?
TB: I don’t recall. I think the district senior advisor arranged it for me somehow.
LC: Ok. Tom, thinking now about the time when you were in Saigon and trying to get out,
other than the police station which you said had become a defense bunker that was right near the
house, did you see exchange of fire elsewhere in the city?
TB: Well, you could see when the rockets came in, you could see by the rockets’ red glow.
(Laughs)
LC: Did you see any street fighting or looting?
TB: No, I didn’t. I heard the street fighting because the police post was so close.
LC: Sure. But as you were driving, making your way around, things were fairly quiet?
TB: They were not quiet in the sense that there was a great deal of vehicular traffic headed
into the city.
LC: Did you see U.S. or ARVN troops moving in the city?
TB: I mentioned I saw some ARVN wounded coming in from Bien Hoa.
LC: But other than that no troop movements, as far as you saw?
TB: No.
LC: And driving across...across the countryside, you’ve described stopping at the various
bridges but while you were driving by yourself what was going through your mind? Do you recall
any of that? Can you share it?
TB: Well, what I was principally concerned with was that I had been absent from my
province, although on official leave. I wasn’t absent without leave, but I was absent from my
province when another great event had occurred. As it turned out nothing happened in Binh Long because all the forces were directed toward other targets.

LC: And I think you mentioned in one of the letters written soon after the conclusion of the TET Offensive, or at least in the immediate push, that An Loc had been one of the few provincial capitals that had not been a target.

TB: That's right.

LC: Did that surprise you? Once you got up there, assessed the situation, recognized what was happening elsewhere in the country, and started to synthesize it, did it surprise you?

TB: Not at all because the main effort was against the more crucial metropolitan areas like Hue, Da Nang, and Saigon.

LC: When you arrived…well actually I should clarify. When you took the helicopter did you go to Loc Ninh?

TB: No I did not go to Loc Ninh.

LC: Ok. Did you go to An Loc then?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. Can you describe what you saw when you got up there?

TB: Well, it was just a normal situation.

LC: Nothing out of the ordinary really?

TB: That's right.

LC: How did you get information that day and the next couple of days as to what was happening elsewhere in the country? What were your sources? Reports coming in…?

TB: Just the radio.

LC: Just the radio?

TB: Yeah. There wasn’t much news that was made available to us.

LC: Were you at that time talking on the phone to III Corps headquarters of CORDS?

TB: I really don’t recall.

LC: Was John Vann in the country when this happened? Do you know?

TB: I don’t…yeah, sure. He was.

LC: Ok. Yeah. I think I recall reading that he was also, although I'm not a hundred percent sure. But you don’t really remember speaking with him during this time period?

TB: No because it wasn't the focus of the problem at that time.
LC: As it turned out, was it a problem for you that you had been away these two different times?

TB: Not really.

LC: It really wasn’t as serious as you thought it might be?

TB: Well, I was upset at not being on hand when these events occurred, but there’s nothing I could’ve done about them if I’d been there.

LC: Sure. And at this point was Major Fuller still your deputy?

TB: Yes.

LC: Ok. Was he on station there in An Loc?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. It’s extremely interesting to me that this is one province where virtually nothing happened when it had been so active before and, as you note from the letters, was active again later on.

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Tom, can you talk about the months after the TET Offensive? Were you, for example, concerned about what you were hearing from Hue? Were you concerned about friends that you had up there?

TB: I didn’t get much news about Hue except from the international press, but I certainly was concerned once I was assigned to do a special report on Hue.

LC: Yeah, I’d like to ask you a little bit about that. William Colby gave you that assignment, as your letters indicate. Can you talk about what plans you made, what recommendations you advanced?

TB: I wish I had a copy of that report. I might be able to find something in my files on that score.

LC: Ok. So you eventually produced a report?

TB: I produced a report, the main thesis which was that the spirit of Hue did not need reviving. The people were so enraged by North Vietnamese and Viet Cong actions – the burial alive of the population and things like this, the destruction of the city – they were so enraged by these acts that they were inspired to act on their own behalf to improve the situation. I talked to at least fifteen different opinion makers in the city, except for the Archbishop who didn’t see me – the Buddhist monks, the information chief, the province chief, Mr. Anh, my former friend who’d been
tortured by Ngo Dinh Can. What I found especially impressive about Hue was, compared with the
time I'd been there, was the freedom of expression – except for the Archbishop – freedom of
expression of the population. When I was there before they had all been afraid of Can and the
secret police. That atmosphere of the boogeyman had disappeared. People were talking quite
willingly, openly.

LC: Your friend, for example, was able to meet with you?
TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: And can you give a sense of what it was like to see him again and this time under
circumstances where he was able to talk?
TB: I was overjoyed that he had survived this ordeal.

LC: Yes. He was again a book dealer, is that correct?
TB: He had a bookstore but he was a, sort of, storekeeper. He also owned the theater in
town, which the American artillery fire destroyed during the TET Offensive.

LC: Tom, tell me a little bit about the university. You mentioned it in the letter and it piqued
my interest that some of the professors wanted to leave their posts, that the university was
paralyzed. Did that situation abide as time went by?
TB: No. The University of Hue recovered its aplomb and started to function right until the
end in ’75.

LC: Were you interested in making contact with one or more people up there at the
university to include their views in the report?
TB: Yes, certainly, I did. Le Thanh Minh Chau.

LC: Who was not the Rector?
TB: He became rector later on but Cao Van Luan, a priest, was the Rector. This is the
unusual man I mentioned several times ago who liked to serve roast dog to his Western invitees
and who had a picture, a bust, and a painting of himself in the living room.

LC: Is there anymore you can tell us about him particularly?
TB: That’s…he was a genial sort, an open, very open, and approachable individual.

LC: How much damage did you see to the city’s fabric? You mentioned public buildings
destroyed and some bridges as well. Was your impression that Hue had been really rocked?
TB: Yeah, certainly. If you looked at the Citadel, which I had known in better days and had
pictures of in better days, it was a shell of its former self. A lot of the roofs were badly damaged. If
you looked at the Phu Cam Cathedral, which was a large structure, it was roofless. There were
several damaged houses and so on. There was an estimated two hundred people living in my
former house.

LC: Just in your house?
TB: Yes.

LC: Displaced from their own homes?
TB: That's right.

LC: And now, thinking back about developments in Binh Long, were the displaced people
from the Battle of Loc Ninh in October and November, were they back in Loc Ninh?
TB: Most of them went back to Loc Ninh.

LC: Ok. I wonder how many of them were able to return to some semblance of normalcy.
TB: So far as I know the majority of them went back after things calmed down.

LC: Ok. During the same period after TET, were there other VIP visitors who, perhaps
didn't come to Binh Long, but who came to the III Corps that you knew about? I think at one point
you mentioned that John Vann was entertaining Senator Kennedy. Were there others like that
perhaps whom you met?
TB: I had relatively minimal protocally functions after the Loc Ninh Offensive.

LC: Ok. Because the situation on the ground demanded that you be there?
TB: Yes.

LC: In your memoirs you spent not too much time talking about events in the province after
TET. Does that reflect the quietude in the province over that time period?
TB: It certainly did.

LC: Ok. Before leaving the province and returning to Washington I wonder if, as it were,
went the rounds and met again with people whom you wouldn't be seeing again for a while, like the
French plantation operators, the….
TB: Yeah. I have a letter somewhere about my final days in Binh Long where the province
chief offered me a dinner just before departure and the 5th ARVN Division commander gave me
some medals which I had to promptly turn over to the State Department.
LC: Why was that, Tom?
TB: One doesn’t accept foreign medals in the Foreign Service.
LC: Ok. So those went straight to Washington?
LC: Ok. Did you know that…did you already know what your assignment in Washington would be or did you simply know that you needed to go back?

TB: John Vann claimed that he had arranged an assignment with me on the staff of the White House Coordinator for Vietnam. An alternate source of information but I was slated to go to the Lao desk.

LC: And in fact that’s what ended up happening?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Alright, Tom, let's take a break.
LC: This is Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech continuing the oral history interview with Thomas Barnes. Today’s date is the 19th of March 2004. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the special collections building and Tom, again, is in Austin. Good morning, Sir.

TB: Good morning.

LC: There were a few things that you wanted to add.

TB: Yeah. I wanted to mention that the four provinces I had visited before going to Binh Long in August of 1967 were Binh Tuy, Long An, Gia Dinh, and Tay Ninh. Because I was not clear on that point before.

LC: That’s right. And there was no particular rhyme or reason as far as you knew as to the selection of those provinces for your visit?

TB: I don’t recall any.

LC: Ok. Well, thank you for that additional…

TB: Now, let me see…yeah, that explains that item that I wanted to bring up. I have an account of 26 October ‘67, which is curious because it’s three days before the Battle of Loc Ninh. This was…I’d just like to read it to you.

‘Having worked night and day to get our version of the Binh Long pacification plan for 1968 ready by October 25th. A thirty-four man group of mixed Vietnamese-Americans descended on us yesterday to check the Vietnamese edition. The session was led by Colonel Thien, Deputy III Corps Commander, an energetic and decisive older Vietnamese from Hanoi. The Vietnamese 5th Division commander was also present for the morning. A one star aspirant general – ’

Had to be a brigadier general –

‘Who has his headquarters in Binh Duong, a regiment here, and tactical responsibilities for those two provinces plus Phuoc Long to the east. The province first presented its revolutionary development portion of the plan. Which hamlets were to be scheduled is ‘new life’, ‘fortified’, or ‘pacified’. The amount of work done in each of these goes down in scale. To qualify for the first three major projects like building classrooms or a dispensary
has to be planned and completed as well as at least seventy of ninety-eight tasks, among
those tasks are eliminating village bullies, identifying and eradicating the VC infrastructure,
establishing a youth self-defense group, conducting literacy classes, and so on. A
Vietnamese team of a maximum fifty-nine members – ’
That’s a RDC team, revolutionary development cadre –
‘Stays in a hamlet normally six months while the tribal teams usually stay a year or so.
The tribal teams can have as many as sixty-five cadre. I’m having the leaders of all six
Binh Long teams over for lunch Saturday. Narrow down to seven stalwarts who are quiet
faithful…’
Oh sorry, I’m missing a page here. We had discussed this English language course I was
conducting along with a fellow named Mancini.
‘Mancini is a military intelligence agent in civilian clothes who works in this province. He is
a good English teacher in the FSI tradition. Our class has narrowed down to seven
stalwarts who are quite faithful in attendance plus a couple of drifters. They’re making
good progress but some of the pronunciation problems are horrendous.’
That was just a comment on that English course. Now…this is the 10th of November ’67,
after the Loc Ninh Battle had died down.
‘The Loc Ninh Battle has brought us swarms of visitors in culmination. The other morning
was Thieu, Ky, and Westmoreland. I made one effort to recall to Ky our encounter with
him in Bangkok in January 1964, but he obviously didn’t register me. If you had been
along, I’m sure the recollection would have been instantaneous.’
He tried to put the make on my wife.
‘I traveled with Westmoreland to the town of Loc Ninh and took the occasion to illustrate
my view that the battle was a military success but for the Loc Ninh population an
unfortunate psychological defeat. They had been intimidated by the attacks and above all,
the ‘friendly’ artillery and air reaction to them at a level along with Viet Cong mortaring
some eighty-nine houses in the town itself. Not to mention destruction in outlying hamlets.
Another factor depressing the population was the general looting by GVN forces of all
descriptions, not of American advisors and French planters so much, but of the
townspeople themselves.’
In other words, the forces looted the townspeople, not the American compound or the…
‘While the VC remained hidden in tricky Loc Ninh spots all day long, October 29th, soldiers
looted civilian homes rather than pursuing the enemy. The village of Loc Thanh some five
kilometers along Route 13 to the north, some eight hundred VC stayed from October 29th
through November 1st. The VC, except for the retaliation they brought on, never bothered
the population.’

Maybe I read part of this before.

‘The General was quite disturbed about all of this and some of his subordinate
commanders had become quite upset with me for raising the topic because they
themselves had minimized it. Anyway, I’ve been ordered to put my money where my
mouth is and produce lists of what was stolen. I found this military reaction typical, a
concern with face rather than the truth, but John Vann’s and my own personal convictions
invariably backs up the stand I took.’

That’s… I just have a few more here. If I can find it – the dinner with General Abrams.

‘There have been heavy Vietnamese troop movements going south through this province
lately. The 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment arrived yesterday.’

‘To fend some of them off and we could feel the reverberations from four several B-52
strikes nearby yesterday. There’s been one already this morning, Sunday the 14th.’

Again, 14 July ’68.

‘So far military action has been unusually quiet on the local front, but we expect to be
heavily mortared when they hit Saigon.’

This is the 15th of July ’68.

‘We have four Popular Force soldiers, three tribal cadre, and one civilian killed at Soc Be
this morning. This Stieng…’

I mentioned the Stieng minority in Binh Long.
'The Stieng hamlet is only two and a half kilometers north of the provincial capital. I had
for three months signaled it as the most vulnerable hamlet in the province to the province
chief and have tried several devices including sleeping on its northern skirts with a U.S.
lieutenant and a Cambodian guard to draw An Loc district and provincial attention to
fortifying it. Two VC companies attacked us between…'

– This would have been the previous evening on the fourteenth of July '68.
‘…0700 and 0730 as the cadre and Popular Force are returning from their night…’ Sorry,
in the morning of the 15th –
‘…were returning from their night bivouac about a half a kilometer to the south. Reaction
from province was paralyzingly slow…'

Keeping in mind it was only two and a half kilometers away –
‘…two badly wounded PF needed medical attention at 0730. The ambulance jeep arrived
at 0923, fifteen minutes after one had died and while the other was still coherent but
writheing in pain.’

I remember him saying to his lieutenant, ‘Dau gua trung uyoi,’ meaning, ‘Very, very
painful.’

‘The vehicle ride from province takes only seven minutes but the ambulance had not been
notified in time. The second soldier died after loss of blood after he got to the military
dispensary.’

I mentioned this incident before, but I have it here described.
‘I later watched two American doctors operate on a wounded girl of about six or seven at
the provincial hospital. I wore a green surgical mask, cap, and gown. They slit her open
from high on the belly to below the navel and her stomach and intestines billowed out. I
must have been as green as the gown and you were right. Medicine is not my profession.
When I choked back the nausea and returned to the operating room they were burrowing
under the intestines and discovered that a shell fragment had ruptured her colon. I fled the
room at this juncture, never to return. I understand she’s doing alright now but while she
was struggling under the ether mask I could recall all too vividly my four-year-old self
fighting those nurses preparing me for a tonsilectomy.’

I think there are only one or two more here.

LC: That’s fine. Take your time, Tom.
Oh, this is the fourth of August of '68, just before departure.

‘General Abrams, whom I've seen a few times before in province turned out to be a most human and expressive individual during the course of the Saturday night dinner. Other guests included Ambassador Komer, Bill Colby, John Vann, Major soon to be Lieutenant General Kirwin, the new II Field Force commander replacing Lieutenant General Weyand, three other generals, Colonel Kitts, the Binh Duong PSA, Lieutenant Colonel [Rider?] the Phuoc Long PSA, and Colonel [Leech?], the 5th ARVN Division Senior Advisor who looks like Ralph Jansen whose area of responsibility covers our three provinces. The meal was superb, one of the best I've had in Vietnam, fortified by two pre-dinner martinis in generous glasses. I became unusually articulate after the meal and for a while General Abrams was addressing almost all of his remarks directly to me. I threw an unfortunate wisecrack to Ambassador Komer at one point and his reaction bordered on paranoia. He announced at a later cocktail party to Hervey Clark, the An Loc District Senior Advisor, who was also in Saigon, that he had fired me but then repeated anytime I wanted he would be glad to take me back. The real pleasure of the evening was listening to General Abrams express himself, however. He is neither brilliant nor witty but he comes on strong and depth of feeling, forcefulness, and above all, common sense. He identifies the problem and knows how to solve it. One of his most interesting comments amid the cigars and profanity was that in terms of educational level and civilization, the Vietnamese are far ahead of the Koreans he knew in the early fifties. I countered that will and determination seemed to be much stronger in the Koreans than in the Vietnamese and perhaps that was why Korea had forged so far ahead. I cited Korean soldiers in t-shirts breaking the river ice in mid-winter for their early morning ablutions. Fine evening.’

That's an interesting slice.

Very. Yes, Sir.

Finally, 6 August '68. It must have been about the time I was leaving.

The Sunday noon promotion party for five of us officers at the French club in Loc Ninh.

Major Cong...

C-O-N-G

…the district chief gave a farewell speech in my behalf and presented me with two hideous, semi-lacquer vases. As my former maid, the gabby Cambodian, had gotten
married the day before, I presented them to her when I returned to An Loc. She seemed
entranced. Sunday night the local employees had a dinner for me at our principle
restaurant, a Chinese establishment that recently flunked its sanitation test. We ate well,
drank much, and sang heartily. Monday night the American staff had a farewell dinner at
the MACV compound. Most of our Vietnamese counterparts were there. Several people,
including me, gave sentimental speeches dripping with insincerity. My staff presented me
with a sizeable lacquer tray with a subdued map of Binh Long in the center and an
inscription on the back. It was a very thoughtful gift. I’ll show it to you when you come. It’ll
make a handsome addition to our new home. They also started out with a toy armored
personnel carrier in memory of the battle of my scout with the 1st Brigade and a picture of
the collapsed superstructure for the extensive bunker complex commonly known as
Barnes’ folly at the civilian compound.’
I had an underground bunker built, reinforced by rails from the former railroad.
LC: You did?
TB: Yeah, that was very useful during the ’72 Offensive, but during my tenure there it was
largely a question of ridicule.
‘Tuesday morning I flew down to 5th ARVN Division headquarters where Brigadier General
Thuan decorated me with two medals. Honor Medal First Class, highest award that can be
given to a mere civilian and an equivalent to the U.S. Army’s Legion of Merit, and the Staff
Medal. Alas you’ll never be able to see the gaudy things because I have to turn them into
the State Department. General Thuan also talked with me for an hour about rural
development and criticism of ARVN in the U.S. Press. I missed my return plane but got
back to Binh Long in time for lunch with John Vann on a flying visit. In the afternoon the
Vietnamese staff gave me some extremely tasteful Thanh Le lacquer plaques with the four
seasons. They are square and exquisitely done. The province chief gave a farewell
dinner at the province club on my last evening and gave me a Thanh Le ceramic pitcher
set with six glasses. It’ll be good for cold beer.’
So and so on.
‘I have a T-39 seat for Udorn in the morning of the 13th.’
I had to go to Laos because I was being assigned to the Lao desk. So that’s the end of
what I wanted to quote.
LC: Ok. Thanks Tom. There are a couple questions that I’d like to ask just to see if you
recall any more detail, but first of all you mentioned there just at the end that you did visit Laos in
between your time as the provincial advisor and then reporting to the desk in Washington. How
long were you in Laos?
TB: Oh, just a few days.
LC: Just to do some reading at the embassy, or…?
TB: Yes. I didn’t travel upcountry at all.
LC: There are just a couple things I wanted to pick up on and these come from the earliest
of the letters that you just read from October and November of ’67. First of all, there was brief
mention in one of the letters of policies towards uncovering the Viet Cong infrastructure, and we
haven’t really talked about this at all, but I wonder if you can give your appraisal of the utility of that
effort that really began in earnest in mid-’67.
TB: Well, as I mentioned, we had this Major Koziatek, who was the JUSPAO
representative, Barry Zorthian’s representative in the province and in Phuoc Long province. He [Koziatek] was quite energetic and working on this and had reconnaissance
teams that were able to go into hamlets of doubtful security and by establishing some rapport with
the population being able to identify some of the cadre. They had this squad of cadre who were
about to defect. They were negotiating for the defection of this group. They hadn’t defected at the
time I left, and so far as I know took place later on.
LC: So there were some successes with the program, at least as far as you knew.
TB: Yeah.
LC: Was implementation of that program, what later became known as or at least in part
as Phoenix, was that…how much of your time did it take?
TB: Not very…there was somebody assigned, a military enlisted man, assigned to the
program and a number of Vietnamese on the provincial staff.
LC: What was the distribution, if you know or can say, of the reports that he would have
been writing and distributing?
TB: Well, I think they went through me but eventually ended up with the Phoenix Operation
in Saigon.
LC: Did they also go to John Vann? Do you know?
TB: Well, I’m sure he…the regions were set up to do monthly reports, just like the provinces. The regions consolidated information that came in from the provinces, and put them into a specific format.

LC: So, synthesizing details from all the different provinces in the region would have produced a comprehensive report. Did you ever know of any excesses that accompanied that program?

TB: Well, there were a great number of cadre identified and arrested or eliminated in one fashion or another.

LC: Is there anything else you can tell us about that program?

TB: Well, I wasn’t terribly concentrating on that. I was mainly concentrating on provincial development.

LC: Did the two, in your mind, go hand in hand?

TB: Well, certainly that was a worthwhile objective trying to identify and target the Viet Cong elements in the province, but we were really more preoccupied with military events.

LC: Ok. And I wonder Tom, just stepping back from it, and with all the experience you had even at that point, would you say it was a wiser policy to use the carrot than the stick to address the problem?

TB: They had to use both.

LC: I just wondered how you felt the balance ought to have been.

TB: I really wasn’t…the Phoenix Program was a sort of new idea at the time.

LC: Yes, yes it was. The other thing I wanted to ask you a little bit about was immediately following the Battle at Loc Ninh we did discuss Westmoreland’s visit but the letter reveals that also present, Thieu was there.

TB: This was a subsequent visit on the date that I listed.

LC: Oh ok. This is subsequent visit by Westmoreland in the company…

TB: He came with Thieu and Ky.

LC: And you mentioned that you had met Thieu before.

TB: No, Ky.

LC: Oh, I’m sorry, Ky, and that he had met your wife before. Had you met Thieu?

TB: Sorry?

LC: Had you met President Thieu before?
TB: No. I had not.
LC: Did you form any kind of impression of him that day?
TB: I don't recall it standing out.
LC: Ok. Were you in some regard escorting them and informing them on that visit as to the situation?
TB: Yeah sure.
LC: Ok. Were they there primarily to get an on the scene report from you?
TB: They were there primarily to show the flag.
LC: Ok, by that you mean what?
TB: To illustrate that the leadership of the country had gone to the sight of a significant battle.
LC: Was that effective at all, do you know, in…?
TB: I'm sure that was their intention.
LC: Could you tell as someone who stayed on the ground afterwards whether it had any appreciable impact on the local population?
TB: I doubt it, but of course it would be written up in the newspaper, very few of which reach Binh Long.
LC: What newspapers did get out there?
TB: I don't recall. There was very little newspaper circulation. Of course there were, at that time, something like twenty different newspapers published in Saigon but they did not make great headway in the provinces.
LC: Tom, if you don't mind, I'd like to ask you a little bit about your work in Washington, D.C. over the next couple of years.
TB: It was a year and a half, and it was fairly dreary.
LC: When did you actually leave Washington?
TB: It must have been the summer of '70.
LC: Ok. So from the…
TB: Sorry. It was earlier than that because I went in advance with my family because all the children were in school.
LC: Ok. So perhaps sometime in the spring?
TB: It was sometime in the March – March, February, March, April timeframe. I can look it up exactly from my records.

LC: And you arrived there perhaps in August, late August or September, of 1968?

TB: No. You’re talking about Udorn now.

LC: No actually I’m trying to figure out when you arrived at the desk in Washington.

TB: Oh. Since I left in August, it must have been September of ’68.

LC: Ok. First of all, can you talk a little bit about the position of the Laos desk within the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, for someone who’s not familiar with the internal structure?

TB: There were various offices in the East Asian Bureau. There was a deputy assistant secretary for Northeast Asia and one for Southeast Asia. We had a political appointee, Jonathan something [Moore]. He was at [headed] the Kennedy school at Harvard; he had been brought in from civilian life. Very bright fellow. Jonathan what? The name will come to me in time. Then under the deputy assistant secretary for Southeast Asia there was an office for Thailand and I believe Burma at that time – these components change all the time – an office for Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam or perhaps a separate office for Vietnam at the time, and then another office for Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Then of course in the Northeast Asia there’d be one office for Korea, one for Japan, one for Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific, so on…China.

LC: And you were one of how many people assigned to…?

TB: There were two country officers for Laos and we worked under Tom Corchran, who was sometimes dubbed the ‘living Buddha’. He was our last consul in Hanoi in 1954 and 1955. He was the last American presence, diplomatic presence, in Vietnam before the war. He was a very bright, lethargic individual who was very good to work for. He gave maximum liberty to his subordinates. He later became ambassador to Burundi before he retired. He died several years ago. But he was the Office Director.

LC: Ok. So there were two country officers, yourself and who?

TB: Mark Pratt, whom I’d worked with in Vientiane for three years.

LC: Ok. How did your responsibilities differ from those of Mark?

TB: I’m a little hazy on recalling that right now.

LC: Ok. But you were both essentially political officers.

TB: That’s right.

LC: Ok. Tom, can you tell me who you replaced on the Laos desk? Who was outgoing?
TB: It was Bob…Robert…heavens. [Slutz] I'll come back in a minute.

LC: Sure. Do you know where he went from there?

TB: He was scheduled to go later on as consul or something in the Marianas Islands.

LC: And did Mark Pratt stay on the Laos desk for the entirety of the time you were there or did he rotate out?

TB: Yeah. He was there before me and after I left.

LC: Ok. And where did he go after that? Do you recall at all?

TB: Well, at one juncture he was consul general in Guangdong and Guangzhou in Canton.

LC: So, many years later obviously.

TB: But it seems to me that he went to Paris after that because I encountered him in Paris…oh, that was later on. He was the East Asian man in Paris.

LC: Ok. I wonder if you wouldn't mind me asking about a couple of…well actually several events that occurred while you were on the desk and just kind of running them past you and if you recall anything about these events. Tom, the first of them was in October 1968, Vang Pao actually came to Washington. Do you remember that?

TB: I don't remember it.

LC: Ok. I know that it was a more or less clandestine visit and I don't know whether the Laos desk was involved in that at all.

TB: Probably not.

LC: Ok. Also, that fall, Bill Sullivan, the ambassador in Laos, came back to Washington. Do you remember that?

TB: Yeah, sure. He was the Deputy Assistant Secretary handling Vietnam affairs at the time.

LC: Did you have a chance to meet and talk with him?

TB: Certainly.

LC: Ok. Was he, to your recollection now, was he glad to be back in Washington or would he prefer to be out…?

TB: In my view, nobody is ever glad to be in Washington.

LC: And that of course includes yourself, I know. He was replaced by a new ambassador. Did you know anything…?

TB: Mac Godley.
LC: Yes. Can you give me a kind of pencil sketch of Godley – his background and his approach to…?

TB: Godley made his reputation in the Congo as I recall, in what is now Zaire, or what became Zaire. He brought with him a CIA station chief whose name escapes me for the moment, brought to Laos with him. Godley is a flamboyant fellow who had been a deputy assistant security for Southeast Asia prior to Jonathan Moore. Jonathan Moore is the name. And the Lao desk officer who went to the Marianas is Robert Slutz, S-L-U-T-Z.

LC: Ok. Great. What kind of an administrator was Mac Godley?

TB: I didn’t work for him but I got the impression it was sort of a freewheeling embassy.

LC: You recall any incidents or stories that make you think that?

TB: No, but he was not an oppressive leader. He was open and exuberant.

LC: Was he someone that you had known?

TB: No, I had not.

LC: Ok. But you saw, obviously, his reports coming back to Washington. What kind of a report writer was he?

TB: Nothing to compare with Bill Sullivan, who wrote brilliant air grams and telegrams. A pleasure to read. As an English major, I really appreciated them.

LC: To your mind though, Mac Godley didn’t measure up at least in that category?

TB: Not in that respect. Incidentally, these telegrams that I was able to read in Washington…I had been going out when I was in Laos but I had never seen them because I was not privy to the ambassador’s correspondence.

LC: Why was that? Should you have been?

TB: No, this was dealing with Southeast Asian matters in general and I was handling a rather minor aspect of the Lao problem at the time.

LC: Ok. Can you talk a little bit about the things that you were concentrating on?

TB: In Laos?

LC: Yes.

TB: I thought we covered that...

LC: Well, actually I meant while you were on the desk. What areas were you particularly responsible for?
TB: Well, the main thing was that we could not admit... in fact, Bill Bundy called me by phone one time... no sorry, Marshall Green who was then assistant secretary for East Asia, called me by phone and said ‘Why aren’t we admitting that we’re bombing Laos?’ Now, his office was one floor above mine and by the same staircase and why he didn’t call me up and ask me I don’t know, but asked me over the phone, a non-secure phone. So, I explained that since the North Vietnamese did not admit they were in Laos we also did not admit that we were bombing Laos. I mean that was the question. One of the most interesting things; I’d gone with my family on home leave, not home leave, on leave to India and I had purchased air conditioned tickets from Udaipur back to Delhi but without reservation, and when I discovered later I’d gotten on the train that there was no space, I had to travel second class because there was no space under the air conditioned tickets. So I went to the refund office of the Western Rail... the Northern Railway in Delhi when I got back trying to get my refund for the tickets and I got this [sing-song] about, ‘Ordinarily you have to apply for air conditioned tickets sixty days in advance and you have to wait sixty days for a refund, but since you’re a foreigner and you’re just visiting our country we’ll do our best for you. Please wait in the outer office.’ So, I go in the outer office and it’s filled with four or five desks and one of the Indians strikes up a conversation with me says, ‘What are you doing?’ I said ‘I’m working in the [American] Embassy in Laos.’ He turned to me and said, ‘Why aren’t you bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail?’ This is a guy in the refund office of the Northern Railway or Western Railway of India, and of course I couldn’t say to him we are bombing. At any rate, that was amusing. The one thing that I found most rewarding during the year and a half in Washington was being on the speaker circuit, and, for example, I appeared before the Los Angeles World Affairs Council along with three ambassadors. I dealt with Asia and they dealt with their own fields. Sam Westerfield for Africa, the fellow who was killed in Cyprus by a bullet, Ambassador – his name escapes me offhand – and Spike Dubbs who was later assassinated in Afghanistan. Of the four of us, three were dead within two years presenting this program to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council. The most intriguing session I had was with... it was at Cornell, not at Cornell [at Grinnel]. What’s the other college in Iowa that’s so well known? Although, I talked to Cornell also.

LC: I think it does start with a C.

TB: Yeah. Anyway, it’s not Carlton. Anyway...

LC: Co College?
TB: No. It’ll come to me in time. Anyway, they set me up. They had a Marxist professor talking and they had two history professors and so on and a hippie demonstration in the front row. The whole program was designed up on a platform and it was open by this group of hippies who, the leader of which was carrying a flag and he stood up and said, ‘Death to all pigs!’ He was so high on grass or whatever that the previous week’s speaker had been the police and he confused me with the police, so he and his group made a statement against pigs and walked out of the room. Then there was another guy with a Viet Cong flag and then there was this [intense] student called ‘Stranger’. Anyway, the Marxist professor got up and said, ‘This man who is about to talk to us…’ – pointed at me – ‘…is immoral. He’s working for an immoral government which is fighting an immoral cause.’ So this was his introductory speech for me.

LC: That’s nice.

TB: Then there were two other…most amusing. Then there were two others who were talking a similar vein. They finally gave me the floor after the pigs and everything else and I said, ‘I’ve been immoral long before I joined the U.S. government and had no influence on my immorality.’ This immediately attracted the laughter of the audience and I never convinced them that we had a just cause in Vietnam but at least they were more tolerant of it, except for Stranger, who kept posing these very complicated, abstruse questions, involuted questions. Stranger was one of the brighter students.

LC: And you got away from the building safely.

TB: No, they were quite a cordial group that I talked to.

LC: They were probably much more cordial after they realized you had a sense of humor as well.

TB: Also, I went to Iowa State University at Ames, and for the first time I had Vietnam veterans in the audience and I got a hundred percent support as I did in my aunt’s Kiwanis or Rotary Club or something in Nixon territory in California. In other words, I would get the resounding approval of U.S. efforts in Vietnam from these various rightist sources and extreme disapproval from the left.

LC: Tom, what was the major attraction for you in participating in the Speaker’s Bureau?

TB: I enjoyed jousting.

LC: Were you also glad to be out of Washington and having a look around the country?

TB: Delighted.
LC: About how many trips did you make for the Speaker's Bureau?
TB: I think it was four or five.
LC: But it sounds as if they were all quite memorable.
TB: Well, I don't remember some of them but I do remember Stranger and the Marxist professor and...what's the name of the place? You and I both know what it is.
LC: Yes. And I do believe it starts with a C and I had a very good friend in Atlanta when I was living there who went there as an undergraduate but I can't call it up right now. But yes, it's a very good school whatever...
TB: It has very high standards of admissions.
LC: Yes. A very good liberal arts school. Tom, in general, how many people in the State Department participated in the Speaker's Bureau? Was it just a handful?
TB: Well, there is a Speaker's Bureau in the Department and they organize, they sign up people, for these sessions.
LC: Is it voluntary?
TB: Yes.
LC: Ok. And I take it that Tom Corchran didn't have any trouble with you taking off for a few days.
TB: Not at all.
LC: Ok. I want to ask you a little bit about the revelation of the bombing of Laos, which took place in, I gather, February and March of 1970. Were you...how did you feel about its revelation in the New York Times in February of 1970? Did you think it was a good idea that it was above board at this point?
TB: Certainly.
LC: Why was that?
TB: Because, why carry on the subterfuge?
LC: President Nixon made a public statement about the bombing that was drafted I think in the National Security Council. Were you asked to review the President's statement?
TB: I don't recall.
LC: Ok. Is it likely that the State Department at some level checked off on that speech?
TB: Yes, I would think so.
LC: The person who drafted it was Winston Lord. Was he someone that you knew?
TB: I had talked to him on the phone. What bothered me about people like Winston Lord and Marshall Green and so on was communication by phone when I could have gone to their office, which was two minutes away.

LC: What was missing in speaking to someone on the phone?

TB: Well, first of all, I was uneasy about discussing classified information over the telephone.

LC: Ok. Was there also an interpersonal element that was missing?

TB: Yeah. I felt it was always better to talk to someone directly if there’s no inconvenience.

Another opposite situation occurred one time when Bill Bundy was assistant secretary. I think he preceded Marshall Green but I don’t recall the sequence. He had some stance on Laos that he was preparing. So we had to sit in his office while he dictated to a secretary what he was about to say as though he were taking great pride in his work.

LC: What did that tell you about him?

TB: That he needed approval.

LC: Tom, let me also ask you about the secret talks between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho in Paris. Did you have any knowledge of that when it was going on before…?

TB: Not at all. Bill Sullivan handled that sort of thing.

LC: And his bill was the Deputy Assistant Secretary, is that correct?

TB: Yeah.

LC: So you learned about it when everyone else did?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Ok. In March of 1970 – these events of course coming very quickly, one on top of the other in March of 1970 – Prime Minister Sihanouk was ousted from office by Lon Nol. Was that something that you, sitting at the Laos desk, had access to the reports on? Were you looking at traffic about that?

TB: I think that we had another officer, if I recall, who dealt with Cambodia.

LC: Were you on the distributions of those kinds of airgrams?

TB: I really don’t recall. I presume we were.

LC: I should ask you also whether you had ever met Sihanouk at this point.

TB: I’ve never met Sihanouk. No.

LC: You never have?
TB: No.

LC: Ok. What about Lon Nol? Did you ever have a chance to meet him?

TB: I traveled to Cambodia on personal pleasure to see Angkor Wat on two occasions in 1959. One time wasn't really personal because I escorted a one-legged U.S. Congressman.

LC: Who was...do you remember his name?

TB: I don't remember his name. But I never got involved with the Cambodian hierarchy.

LC: Did you meet Lon Nol though at that time?

TB: Never.

LC: Oh ok. Soon after this, at the end of April 1970, the President announced that it was necessary for the process of Vietnamization that the United States participate in military activity in Cambodia. Did that affect what was happening in Laos?

TB: I don't recall any particular effect, no.

LC: Ok. And of course, just a few days later there was a shooting at Kent State. Do you remember that, Tom?

TB: Yeah, sure.

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

TB: Well, it was an excessive use of force due for...it was essentially a stupid thing to have done.

LC: And soon after that there was a huge demonstration against the war in Washington, in fact, within that week. Did you encounter protesters going back and forth to work?

TB: I did only on the Iranian issue.

LC: I'm sorry, meaning...?

TB: Down with the Shah.

LC: Oh ok. So much later but not during the war? There weren't protesters around the State Department?

TB: I don't recall any, no. It's a pretty unforgiving building to protest in front of.

LC: It's an unforgiving building in many ways I think, but yes, you're right. Can you tell me a little bit about relationships with Congress? Did you ever go up to the Hill to sit in on testimony or to actually testify yourself?

TB: I did on the refugee issue in later years.

LC: Ok, but not while you were on the Laos desk?
TB: Not while I was on the Lao desk.

LC: Ok. Was managing congressional relations one of the things that happened at a higher level within the bureau?

TB: Yeah. It wasn’t necessarily within the bureau because there was a special…there is a special branch of the Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations. But at the assistant secretary and deputy assistant secretary level there’s a great deal of interaction with Congress.

LC: But for you, your eyes were basically on events in Laos?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Ok. And as an officer in D.C. I’m going to guess that you were invited around to a number of Embassy parties, is that right?

TB: Yeah. From time to time. Sure.

LC: Ok. Can you tell me a little bit about the personnel in the Laos Mission in Washington?

TB: Frankly, that’s drawing a blank.

LC: Ok. Did you go over there on occasion to different parties and so on?

TB: I’m sure I did.

LC: Anything stand out in your mind about receptions that were given, not necessarily just at the Laotian Mission, but for example at the Republic of Vietnam’s Mission or…?

TB: Well, I renewed my acquaintance with Nguyen Dinh Hoa, who was the Cultural Counselor at the Vietnamese Mission at the time.

LC: You renewed your acquaintance just by saying hello or did you…?

TB: No. We saw each other socially.

LC: Was that connection important for you in terms of keeping in touch with Vietnamese people?

TB: Well, Nguyen Dinh Hoa was the author of a dictionary, Vietnamese-English dictionary, which is the most useful one that I ever found. I’m sure André Van Chau’s successor [dictionary] will be more comprehensive, but he [Hoa] was an early publisher of the dictionary.

LC: Tom, how anxious were you to get out of Washington? Go ahead and be honest now.

TB: Terribly.

LC: Were you scanning the horizon for any kinds of opportunities or were there certain things in terms of protocol that you would want to have in your next placement?
TB: I was entranced with the idea of going to Udorn; being independent again. I enjoyed being my own boss in a remote area, much more so than working in a section in an embassy.

LC: And how did the opportunity at Udorn come about? Who did you replace and where did they go, for example?

TB: I replaced Al Francis who was an exceptionally talented Thai language speaker. He was later consul general in Da Nang during the debacle in ’73 [’75]. He had… but it was essentially Ambassador Unger with whom I’d served briefly in Laos who got me into Udorn. Now, Nick Thorne, who was his Administrative Counselor [in Bangkok] and a very close friend who had been the Administrative Officer in Laos when I was there – he [Thorne] was a retired lieutenant colonel, retired Marine lieutenant colonel who came in the Foreign Service. He told me that Ambassador Unger kept a list of Foreign Service officers on whom he could depend, and would like to have serve under him and that my name was on that list. So this is how it occurred.

LC: Any idea how long the list was?

TB: I have no idea.

LC: Did you ever speak with him either formally or informally about that?

TB: Not about the list. I met him on several occasions of course.

LC: Did you talk to him about how you, as – was it Consul General?

TB: As a Consul.

LC: As a Consul. How you as Consul in Udorn would relate to the Embassy? What the relationship would look like while you were there?

TB: I'm sure we discussed it.

LC: And he gave you a lot of rope, is that fair?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Ok. Do you remember arriving at Udorn?

TB: Certainly.

LC: Ok. Can you describe that trip? How did you get up there? Did you fly in or did you go…?

TB: I took the train.

LC: From?

TB: From Bangkok. It’s an overnight train.

LC: Is it a beautiful train ride?
TB: There’s nothing very attractive in scenery in the northeast except for Loei province, and the train doesn’t go through Loei. But what is interesting about the northeast is its human resources. It provides…it traditionally provides much of the manpower for labor in the country.

LC: About what was the population of the area that was now going to be under your purview?

TB: Roughly fifteen million.

LC: How many provinces?

TB: At that time there were fifteen. Now I believe there are seventeen.

LC: In that area?

TB: Yes.

LC: And can you talk just a little bit, again in general terms, about the distribution of minorities in the northeast where you were going to be living now and where you would have responsibility?

TB: Well, there were very few – excuse me – tribal minorities. There were a few Hmong in Loei province but mainly they were ethnically Lao. There were a number of Vietnamese in the littoral cities, riparian cities, of the Mekong like Nong Khai, Nakhon Phanom, Ubon, and what is…Mukdahan, which is between Nakhon Phanom and Ubon. So, these individuals that come back into Thailand, these Vietnamese, in 1946 when the French returned to Indochina.

LC: And they came under what circumstances?

TB: They were fearful of French retaliation for their support of Vietnamese independence.

LC: And about how large was the ethnic Vietnamese minority there when you were there?

TB: It was…when I was there it was very difficult to estimate because so many of them had gone underground or assimilated, but it was in the tens of thousands.

LC: Tom, let’s take a break there for today.

TB: Your voice fades out from time to time.

LC: Ok. I’ll try to do a better job. This is Laura Calkins continuing the oral history interview with Thomas Barnes. Today’s date is the 19th of March 2004 and I am again on the campus of Texas Tech in Lubbock and Tom is in Austin. Good afternoon, Tom.

TB: Good afternoon.

LC: There were a couple of things that you wanted to address.
TB: I wanted to mention that in my conversation this morning I gave an inaccurate figure for my estimate and it was purely an estimate of the number of Vietnamese in northeast Thailand in 1971, and my estimate was around ninety thousand. Again, I arrived in Udom for assignment as consul there in northeast Thailand in early March of 1970. En route I visited the Delta in Vietnam and also my former province in Binh Long. I’d like to read into the record a letter of 27 February 1970 in which I described those visits.

LC: Yes, please.

TB: Should I go ahead?

LC: Yes, please do.

TB: ‘Binh Long has a detectable ambience of relaxation, [except for a] road ambush in the traditional spot just north of Soc Be…’

Remember the hamlet that was just two and a half kilometers north of the province capital?

‘…the morning of my arrival, but people in the streets and buzzing around on Hondas in the provincial capital and so close to midnight, versus the former terror [curfew] hour of 8 P.M.’

The province capital when I was there shut down easily by 8 P.M. but it was going till midnight when I revisited it at this time.

‘John Sylvester, a former fellow Foreign Service officer, a Japanese specialist, who had succeeded my successor as Province Senior Advisor, and I drove on a plantation Deaux Chevaux to within eight and a half kilometers of the Cambodian border along Route 13 north of Loc Ninh. We visited Village 9…’

This is the…villages for the rubber plantation were numbered.

‘…which I had never been to before even by helicopter. It now has a Regional Force company for protection for the first time since 1966. The CORDS compound has sprouted grass, bushes, flowers, and palm fronds. My underground shelter has been improved on but has yet to be put to urgent use. Gaudeau of Cexo served a resplendent meal over the tasty fish three times the length of this page. Several of the Vietnamese employees of course were convinced that I had gone to Phuoc Long for Ray Suarez’s funeral.’

My [former] deputy, Ray Suarez, applied for another year’s assignment in Vietnam and was transferred [as Province Senior Advisor] to neighboring, Phuoc Long, which was overrun while he was there and he was killed, leaving a widow and eight children.
LC: Now this is the deputy PSA under you who replaced Major Fuller.

TB: That’s right. This is just speculation here.

‘John Vann has not been back, was not back yet, but Wilbur Wilson, his deputy, took ample care of me including transportation by special helicopter around the Delta. I went to Kien Phong first, three hundred and fifty thousand people, heartening return of security. Thousands of people are resettling along its many canals as Regional and Popular Force outposts are being established. Started coming back in October and November of 1969 after having been gone since 1962. Americans were everywhere, waved and smiled at me with enthusiasm, never had there been any American troop presence in the area, only advisors. Real contrast from Binh Long. Province now carries only three VC hamlets…’

That’s Kien Phong.

‘…and a battalion executive officer and two company commanders from the unit recently infiltrated from the north defected to the government the day of my arrival. En route to Kien Tuong, flew over My An where a Cham tower had once stood and where Ngo Dinh Diem had built a Vietnamese replacement only to see the VC blow it up a few months later. Greeted on arrival by Walter so and so [Martindale] who used to be the Binh Long Civic Action Platoon leader…’

His name was Martindale.

‘…as an Army captain, and for whom I had written a recommendation to get into USAID. He has Bill Miller’s job in Kien Tuong, New Life Development. Bill Faulkner, the Deputy Province Senior Advisor, was also on hand as was Colonel Terrell, his boss. Province has only forty-eight thousand people. [There has been] less return to outlying areas in neighboring Kien Phong. These two provinces are along the Cambodian border. In pleasant proximity to the Cambodian border which is only eight kilometers from the provincial capital and less than a kilometer from one of the district capitals, a dusty, dumpy town of no attraction. On way to Ben Tranh, helicopter developed rotary trouble and we set down at one of Kien Tuong’s even more desolate district towns. An American lieutenant there however had already volunteered for a six month extension to his one year tour and planned to ask for an additional six months when that was over. The people were receptive and hospitable. The district chief was excellent and he was getting the job done. After my rescue by another helicopter, [we] went on to Ben Tre, which Diem renamed Truc
Giang, the capital of Kien Hoa, the Delta’s largest province with five hundred and fifty thousand people…’

And so on.

Anyway, the situation, after a year and a half absence, had greatly improved throughout the Delta and in Binh Long, is the essence of this story.

LC: That was not only apparent to you from your visit but was it also generally apparent within the State Department? Was that the general appraisal at that time?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. What was the purpose, if there was a stated purpose for that stopover in Vietnam?

TB: I’ve generated my own interest in the developments in Southeast Asia. I circulated, you see, for years among Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. I felt that I should be up to date on what was going on in all three areas.

LC: So you organized that on your own rather than being instructed to make that visit.

TB: That’s right.

LC: Ok. And Tom, just out of interest, would a trip like that have counted as work for you? Did the State Department recognize that as work or was it…did you have to take time off as it were to do that?

TB: I don’t remember whether it was on leave or not. It probably was. I don’t recall.

LC: Can you give me your evaluation of John Sylvester?

TB: He’s a very bright individual. He worked extremely closely with a province chief who was a great deal more dynamic than the one I had. Together they made a signal improvement in the security of the province. The province chief was a Marine colonel whom I’ve met at Lubbock at the triennial conference, not the last one but the one before that. I think his name was Khanh or Thanh or something. I can’t remember offhand.

LC: But he was here?

TB: He was there.

LC: Did you take the occasion to speak with him at all?

TB: Oh certainly.

LC: Sure. Can you give me a flavor of what you discussed?
TB: Well, he’s quite upset about what’s going on in Vietnam and was not as militant as General Thieu for example, but was…made several bidding remarks to the North Vietnamese interlocutor during that conference.

LC: Tom, did you follow or keep in touch with John Sylvester?
TB: Oh yes. He’s a close friend. I’ve traveled with him in West Texas.

LC: Ok. So does he live down here now?
TB: He lives in Durham, North Carolina. When he retired from the Foreign Service he went to North Carolina where he was assigned…he had a job as the Japanese, in charge of drumming up reports with Japan for the University of North Carolina at Raleigh. I can give you his coordinates if you’d like to get in touch with him.

LC: I think that would be very helpful. Tom, did you then go from Saigon to Bangkok?
TB: Certainly. I’m not sure that…yes, sure I did.

LC: Ok. I just wondered whether you spent some time at the Embassy before going up to Udorn.
TB: Yes, a few days – two or three days.

LC: Do you remember much about that time?
TB: I remember staying in Nick Thorne’s house but he had been in the hospital with a viral pneumonia.

LC: Who was Nick Thorn?
TB: Nick Thorn was the administrative counselor of the Embassy in Bangkok and the most efficient administrative officer in the Foreign Service. He’s a retired colonel from the Marine Corps that I mentioned to you. He was a unique individual. For example, at one point in Udorn I had a series of breakdowns of the Land Rovers that we were assigned and I sent a message off to Bangkok asking for a sedan to pick up important visitors at the airport and squire them around Udorn and so on, not for field travel in the northeast. Well, the next day the sedan arrived.

LC: The next day?
TB: The next day.

LC: That’s impressive.
TB: He had a system when he was administrative officer in Laos – he didn’t have the title of counselor because it didn’t exist there. No other Political Counselor exists in Laos as Chief of the Political Section. He had a vast crew of people and he would call them in at nine in the
morning or nine thirty in the morning and give them all assignments and dismiss them. Then he’d
go out and have a beer. He was a little heavy on the sauce. Then he’d call them back in at three
‘o clock and say, ‘What have you done?’ Anyway, he achieved miracles in the administrative field.

LC: And did he also remain an ally of yours during the time you were the Consul?

TB: Oh yeah sure. He, later on, was stationed in Manila as the Counselor for
Administrative Affairs. One time he was the Mission Coordinator in Saigon and in charge of the
field political reporters…the field…the political section for the field.

LC: And his background was that he was a Marine Corps?

TB: Marine Corps colonel.

LC: Ok. And then he changed from there to the FS…to the Foreign Service?

TB: He died in the Philippines of, I think, a pancreatic cancer a few years ago.

LC: Had he retired there?

TB: He had retired there. I visited him there on two or three occasions.

LC: Oh really. Tom, let me ask you a little bit, if I can in the way of background questions
now, about northern Thailand, and these are issues that we didn’t really cover in speaking about
your earlier posting to that country. But I wonder if you can give a general sense of social
organization and village organization in the northeast, and I know there would be variants but I
wonder if you could guide us through how the people lived.

TB: The villagers elected their own phuu yai baan, which means ‘village chief’, but aside
from that the officials were appointed by the Interior Ministry. The most powerful ministry in
Thailand was Interior, which provided all the governors and district chiefs and deputy governors
and vice governors and so on for the country. It was quite an impressive organization.

LC: Was Ministry of the Interior also in charge of domestic security? Is that fair? Internal
security?

TB: Not really.

LC: Ok. How were those issues organized?

TB: Well, the governor was responsible for events in his province and in that sense,
Interior had a major role to play, but the military were stationed throughout…Thai military were
stationed throughout the northeast and their mobile development units were a signal contribution to
pacification.

LC: Now the Mobile Development Units you had described earlier.
TB: I mentioned Mobile Information Units.

LC: Oh ok. Can you distinguish the two for us?

TB: The Mobile Information Units were sponsored via USIA, or the U.S. Information Service, and they were designed to acquaint the Thai population with their leadership and to establish an identity of the population with the leadership. The mobile development units went to extremely difficult districts of the south, the northeast, even the north in order to bring fresh water, particularly, and temporary medical care. They had a doctor in their teams. This was the mobile .... But the main thing was to drill fresh water sources. They went down five hundred feet in many spots in the northeast. This was the first time in many of these villages had an unpolluted source of water year round.

LC: And was this funded by the central government?

TB: Yeah sure.

LC: With supplementary funding from the United States?

TB: I'm sure we supported the program.

LC: Ok. Were there a number of USAID teams in Thailand as well at this second time in the early 1970s?

TB: Yeah. The USAID mission in Thailand was huge.

LC: Tom, can you give us an outline sketch of their operation?

TB: Well, they were traditional operations, agricultural improvement being one of the primary functions of USAID.

LC: Did that mission vary up north where you were, as opposed to...?

TB: I was in the northeast, not in the north around Chiang Mai.

LC: Oh I'm sorry. In the northeast. In the northeastern provinces, were there special emphases within the AID program?

TB: I don't recall offhand but there certainly was support for rural development. There was also support for the University of Khon Kaen, which was in the unofficial capital of the northeast.

LC: Can you talk a little bit about the university and the assistance that went to it?

TB: I don't know all the details about the assistance that went to it but there was considerable financial support and encouragement of the university.

LC: Were there any exchange programs between U.S. universities and the one at which you're speaking?
TB: I don’t know at that time but the one program which was effective, of course also in Laos and in Vietnam, was the USIA program for designated...for people we identified as upcoming leaders of the government or of the society. I personally nominated several outstanding district chiefs for trips to the U.S. We did this in Laos as well as in Thailand.

LC: And I think you said before that you felt that those programs were fairly effective at least in introducing people to America, as it were.

TB: Yeah. It left a good impression on them. I corralled my parents into hosting various people that I designated...that I had submitted for selection for travel to the U.S.

LC: And did they do this with increasing willingness over the years?

TB: Yeah. They were enthusiastic about it.

LC: Good. What kinds of things did your parents treat their guests to? Was it just simple hospitality or did they take them around?

TB: They took them around and also...my parents were living inland for a while and then near Tucson. They took them to places like Old Tucson to give them a flavor of the corniness of American life.

LC: Tom, raising the issue of the university makes me wonder if you can describe the state of the educational system in the northeast where you were in the early 1970s.

TB: I’m trying to remember details about it because I looked into it at some length. It was basic primary, [because of high primary and] middle school grade dropout rate. I think if I recall correctly, the first four years of schooling when I first went to the northeast in 1963 was four years. That was compulsory. Then by 1970, if I recall correctly, the minimum time in school was raised to six or eight years. But there was a sharp drop off of...for people who finished primary school going on to [middle and] high school and a similar sharp drop off for movement to college, to university.

LC: Can you give an overview of how many universities there were in Thailand when you were there in the early 1970s?

TB: Well, Bangkok had Thammasat and...who was the famous Thai King?

LC: Chula...Chulalongkorn.

TB: Chulalongkorn. Thammasat and Chulalongkorn, and then there was an experimental, a sort of open university, whose name I no longer remember. [It was Ramkhamhaeng]

LC: Now that open university, did that have a political reputation of any kind?

TB: Not so much as Thammasat did.
LC: Ok. Can you talk about that for a minute?

TB: Well, the students revolted – not revolted – but brought about changes of government from time to time and Thammasat was particularly volatile in this respect. I’m trying to remember the name of the open university. Then, in the north, there was the University of Chiang Mai and the University of Khon Kaen in the northeast, and I don’t remember where the one in the south was or whether there was one in the south.

LC: Did you make visits to any of these and particularly to the ones in the north and northeast?

TB: Not in the north because it wasn’t my area.

LC: Ok. Did you ever go over there?

TB: I went to the University of Khon Kaen, certainly.

LC: Ok. Khon Kaen. Can you describe…who did you meet with and what was the purpose of your visit?

TB: Well, the rector, and it was just a sort of courtesy call.

LC: I see. What was your impression of the school?

TB: It was pretty basic. Not terribly…it was not a stellar academic institution.

LC: What kinds of students would actually attend university in Thailand?

TB: Well, there was a heavy emphasis at Khon Kaen on agricultural development. That was a very strong element.

LC: Did you have to be very wealthy where you had to be a member of the regional elite?

TB: No. Not really. As I recall there was no tuition or very minimal tuition, but of course you had to support yourself.

LC: Can you talk in general terms about the state of the economy in the northeast in 1970 and ’71?

TB: Well, the chief economic resource from the northeast was labor. That was exported to the rest of Thailand and, of course, somewhat abroad to the Middle East.

LC: Were there many distortions that you observed?

TB: The principle problem when I first went up there in ’63 was the lack of road access during the rainy season.

LC: Ok. Was that remedied by 1970?
TB: It certainly was. In 1963, fifty percent of the some one hundred and fifty districts in the northeast were inaccessible in the rainy season, so any produce that the farmer had could not move to market or could not move expeditiously to market. By 1970 with the Thai infrastructure being so greatly improved, there was only one district which was difficult to access out of a hundred and fifty. And I know this because I visited every one of the districts in the northeast during my stay there.

LC: And when you did this, did you drive yourself?

TB: I had a driver who occasionally fell asleep at the wheel that…

LC: At inopportune moments or is…I suppose there may never be a good moment for that.

TB: (Laughing) There's never a good moment.

LC: I guess. If the car's in motion it's not a good time.

TB: His name was Phairot.

LC: What was his background?

TB: He was a…I don't know what he did other than drive. A mechanic, I suppose.

LC: Had he been an employee of the consulate before you arrived?

TB: Yes.

LC: Ok. Tom, can you tell me a little bit about the consulate itself? What kind of building was it in?

TB: It was a modernized…a modern house converted into an office. What was called the city reservoir, on the edge of the city reservoir where the residence was also located. The city reservoir was called Nong Prajav.

LC: How far away was the residence?

TB: From the office? Oh, I would say…if you’re walking, about seven minutes.

LC: Did you walk that usually?

TB: I ran around the reservoir, it had a raised berm. It was quite extensive, so I used to run around it in the morning before work.

LC: What was the security arrangement at the embassy building? I’m sorry, the consular building?

TB: Well, there weren't any except that we locked up our documents. That was the only thing.

LC: Did you have MPs assigned to the consulate?
TB: No, no. Not at all.

LC: What was the personnel staffing there?

TB: There were...there was myself, two vice consuls, and a very capable head local employee, political local employee, named Wongphan Na Lomphon from the north of Thailand.

LC: Now will you forgive my ignorance. Was that a man or a woman?

TB: It's a man.

LC: And how did he come to be employed by the U.S.?

TB: I got...he had worked for one of the CIA branches in Ubon and had come to the attention of Terry Schroeder, who was the branch public affairs officer in Ubon with whom I traveled a great deal in northeast Thailand.

LC: And he was recommended on to the consulate then?

TB: Yes. We were looking for someone who could have excellent contacts with the Interior Ministry, and Wongphan attended some school. I think Assumption College in Bangkok and his English was absolutely fluent.

LC: Were his contacts with the Interior Ministry based on family background or his own...?

TB: Well, he was after the Prince of Lamphun, which is the province in the north south of Chiang Mai. He was the hereditary prince or something like that so that gave him some sort of status.

LC: Sure, absolutely. What kinds of things did he do for you and for the United States?

TB: Well, he knew the Ministry of Interior very well and he knew the officials there and he had a very pleasing manner of addressing people so he would gain their confidence very rapidly. I was convinced that he was reporting on what we were doing to the Thai government, either clandestinely or overtly, but that didn’t disturb me.

LC: Why wouldn’t it?

TB: Well, we weren’t doing anything that was secret. We were supporting the Thai efforts...insurgency...we’re trying to keep base community relations considering the great number of U.S. Air Force and smaller number of U.S. Army personnel in the four bases in the northeast.

LC: Sure. Would he have had contacts with any particular faction or clique within the government?

TB: No, but he knew the Ministry of Interior quite thoroughly.

LC: And now Tom, can you tell me who the vice consuls were?
TB: Well, they varied. The first one was Lee [Bigelow?] and then Harlan Lee, a Sino-
American from Hawaii, very bright fellow.

LC: And were they on station when you arrived?

TB: They were on station when I arrived and then there were some replacements. A fellow
named Dave Ruther who later came to the Embassy in Bangkok and looked for me there was
assigned.

LC: And where was he from? Do you know?

TB: I don't recall. I think from Washington State.

LC: Ok. And what were the vice consuls to be doing?

TB: What I did was divide the northeast in two and assigned one of them to the southern
tier and the other to the northern tier, and asked them to travel as much as possible.

LC: Ok. And when they would travel were they able to be in communication with you while
they were out in the field or did they just have to come back to the consular building to meet with
you?

TB: We didn't have really any expeditious means of communication.

LC: So they would come back and essentially give you an overview of what they had seen
or observed?

TB: Or write a report, sure.

LC: And what kinds of things, Tom, were you detailing them to observe?

TB: Well, the main thing that we stressed was harmony between the Thai hierarchy and
the U.S. military in those bases, those cities, and areas where there were substantial quantities of
Americans. For example, Harlan and I traveled together to Korat where General Vessy, at that
time a brigadier general – he was later Chief of Staff of the Army of course. We took General
Vessy to a series of bars and nightclubs in civilian – we were all in civilian clothes, obviously Harlan
and I were in civilian clothes…

LC: And this was where again, Tom? I’m sorry.

TB: This is Korat. To show him how his troops were behaving informally to give him some
idea. I remember before going he served an excellent martini and a nice dinner.

LC: Was he a pleasant guy to…?


LC: And what was the outcome of that particular trip?
TB: I don’t know. We were trying to leave an impression with him of what his troops were up to so that in the event friction arose he would be disposed to try to resolve the situation.

LC: And that he would understand the situation from which it arose? That was probably very smart. Did you do that kind of thing with other, either military officials or visiting Americans…

TB: The other two bases were Air Force rather than Army. In fact, Korat had an air force base also. We did take commanders around town in the night entertainment industry just to see, just to show them how their people were behaving.

LC: When I was asking you earlier about dislocations to the economy, I wondered if you might mention this particular industry, if you want to call it the entertainment industry, that cropped up around the bases that U.S. personnel were assigned to.

TB: The irony of the situation was that they were our great defenders. When people would whip up anti-American enthusiasm all the bar girls would get together and oppose the demonstrators.

LC: Actually face them down?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Did you ever witness something like that?

TB: I stayed away from that sort of thing.

LC: I would think so. Tom, let’s take a break.
LC: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive continuing the oral history interview with Mr. Thomas Barnes of the Foreign Service. Today's date is the 14th of April 2004. I am in the interview room on the campus of Texas Tech Special Collections Building and Tom is in Austin.

Good morning, Tom.

TB: Good morning.

LC: Tom, I wonder if we can just review for a moment the time of your arrival at the consulate in Udorn. When did you actually arrive?

TB: It was the spring of 1970.

LC: And you were coming from Washington, D.C., in assignment with the Laos desk as we talked about earlier.

TB: Yes. With great relief.

LC: With great relief, yes. Were you actually happiest just to be out of Washington or was Udorn a good placement for you? Was it something you looked forward to?

TB: I looked forward to it very much because it was a great deal of independence of action possible.

LC: And you had discussed earlier your relationship with the ambassador to Thailand, and that that was a...you had a favorable situation there.

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Tom, major international development involving Southeast Asia that spring of course was the U.S. dispatch of troops into Cambodia. Can you talk about, first of all, what impact that had on your position in Thailand and then more broadly the impact on strategic relationships with Thailand?

TB: In terms of northeast Thailand, which was my responsibility at the time, there was virtually no impact whatsoever from the U.S. incursion into Cambodia.

LC: So nothing really changed?

TB: Nothing changed in northeast Thailand. Well, let me put it this way. There were four U.S.... four Royal Thai Air Force bases there were U.S. Air Force planes stationed and crew, so
undoubtedly some of them were used in that respect but I was not running military affairs in
northeast Thailand.

LC: Sure. Did the Thai government or local officials with whom you might have been in
contact have much to say about what’s called the ‘incursion into Cambodia’?

TB: The subject never came up.

LC: Really? Were you seeing traffic, and here I think of diplomatic mail that discussed
preparations for that…diplomatic preparations that might be put in place to handle any potential
response?

TB: No, not a bit.

LC: Ok. Were you surprised?

TB: Not at all because I had been, if you recall from ’67 to ’68, in a province on the
Cambodian border and that…I was pleased that there was an attempt to root out the source of the
problem across the border.

LC: Was the movement of troops into Cambodia something that Foreign Service officers in
the region knew about before it happened?

TB: I doubt it.

LC: Ok. So, in general, it was…

TB: We knew that there were things going on in Cambodia, not necessarily troop
movements unless it was Special Forces, but when I was in Binh Long in ’67 and ’68 we could
upon occasion sense or hear B-52 strikes in neighboring Cambodia.

LC: So it really wasn’t much of a shock to you.

TB: It wasn’t a shock whatsoever. I looked on it with some relief because at last the
sanctuaries were being attacked, the North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia.

LC: So, from a geo-military standpoint, did you think it was a good idea then?

TB: Yes. From a political standpoint it was a disaster but that’s another issue.

LC: Absolutely. Yes. Maybe for a moment we could talk about those disastrous
consequences. First of all, how closely aware were you up in Udorn of what the reaction was
inside the United States?

TB: Very little. We got the International Herald Tribune a couple of days late, but that was
our main source of news.
LC: So was that the way... the means by which you found out about, for example, Kent State or the huge protest the following weekend?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Did you just privately have any view on what happened at Kent State?

TB: Well, I think that was an overreaction of force and was an extremely unwise event to have occurred, but from the distance I was located, there was nothing I could do about it in terms of action.

LC: Oh sure. Yeah. Tom, can you tell me a little bit about what you might have observed in the way of increased U.S. activity, military activity, in and out of the bases that were being used by the Air Force in northern Thailand, northeastern Thailand?

TB: I really... the planes were landing and taking off at all hours. The one thing that galled me the most was that [the cost of] one plane, an A-4 – or I can't remember what it was that the U.S. Air Force was principally relying on at the time – at the take off and return to base, one of those planes equaled the entire annual budget for the consulate for the northeast.

LC: How did you find that out?

TB: Somebody informed me about that.

LC: Yeah. And what did that make you think, Tom? I'm sure I could probably guess but...

TB: Well...

LC: Did you have a concern about allocation or misallocation of resources or...?

TB: It just seemed to me an awful waste of money.

LC: Did you need more resources than you had?

TB: No, no. I'm not complaining about how we were set up. We were adequately staffed and we were adequately supplied with vehicles and so on. No, I'm just comparing what military extravagance is compared to State Department stinginess or economy of performance.

LC: Right. Tom, I had a chance to look through some of the correspondence that you've deposited with the Archive and I wonder if you can explain to listeners how, and if you remember, when discussions started about moving you out of Udorn?

TB: Well, John Vann paid a visit to northeast Thailand and I took him on a two-day tour from Udorn through Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom, and down to Ubon. At that time he said that he would try to have me reassigned to Vietnam in a different capacity.

LC: Was that trip... do you know when that trip was? When did it happen?
TB: I don’t know if I can document it. I don’t think I can document it exactly.

LC: Do you have any sense of how long you had been?

TB: I must have been there over six months by that time, six or seven months.

LC: Why did Vann come to northeastern Thailand?

TB: He came at my invitation. I had traveled with him in the delta at his invitation en route to Udorn.

LC: So he was returning the visit, as it were?

TB: That’s right. He knew nothing about northeast Thailand or about Thailand in general.

LC: And what kinds of things did you want him to learn in the course of that visit, and I’m absenting here any discussion of your own future, but what did you want him to know about the situation in northeastern Thailand?

TB: How comparatively calm it was in terms of the insurgency.

LC: Ok. Can you talk a little bit about that briefing, the kinds of materials that you would have gone over with him and the places that you visited with him in order to get that message across?

TB: Well, we did visit en route Sakon Nakhon and Kalasin, which were the two most insurgent[-impartial provinces], it really wasn’t significant, but they did have some insurgent activity, particularly one district of Kalasin province in the northeast. So we went through there without encountering any particularly untoward incidents.

LC: What was his reaction to seeing the much lower level of civil and paramilitary disturbances in Thailand? Was he relieved to know that that area was much more secure from Communist upset?

TB: I don’t recall frankly what his reaction was.

LC: What, if anything, do you remember about his…the information he gave you about what was happening in South Vietnam at that time?

TB: Again, I don’t recall. He filled me in in great detail on the insurgency.

LC: Now, where was he posted at that time?

TB: I believe he was in the Delta at Can Tho as the deputy for CORDS. Because I had visited him in the Delta up through to the northeast.

LC: And, Tom, what if anything did he tell you about the kinds of things he might like to have you do with him?
TB: He mentioned he might soon become the Senior Advisor in II Corps and that he would like me to become his Deputy for Civil Operations.

LC: Was that prospect one that attracted you, Tom?

TB: Well, it’s a job with enormous responsibility.

LC: Absolutely. And your relationship with him had been very good?

TB: Yes. It was very close.

LC: If you can look at yourself through his eyes, what was he seeing in you that made him want you on his team?

TB: I think that the one thing that fascinated him was my Vietnamese language ability, which he did not possess and he swore that one of my subordinates who ran into him in Bangkok or some other location said I spoke Cambodian as well as several other languages. I never spoke a word of Cambodian unfortunately, but he was quite assertive about this.

LC: So, was this someone who was on your press team, Tom, or…?

TB: No. He was my…one of the two vice consuls in Udorn when I was there.

LC: Well, I wonder what he was thinking in telling John Vann that.

TB: I don’t know.

LC: But nonetheless, as we’ve established, you did have facility with a number of Southeast Asian languages, and no doubt were seen as valuable for that. Was there anything else do you think in terms of your administrative capabilities or background that he, meaning Vann, was particularly interested in?

TB: Well, he liked the way I ran the provincial operation in Binh Long.

LC: What elements do you think of that experience were particularly important from his point of view?

TB: I just assume it’s the manner in which I conducted myself.

LC: Ok. Do you know whether John Vann made other stops on that particular trip? Did he, for example, go down to Bangkok or elsewhere?

TB: I think, as I recall correctly, he came in by, I want to say U-2…but it wasn’t a U-2. It was some very fast, four passenger planes that were used for couriers from the various bases, among the various bases in Thailand and Vietnam. I used this on two or three occasions to go back and forth to Vietnam.

LC: This very fast plane?
TB: Yeah. It’s a five hundred and fifty mile an hour plane, but it has only four passenger seats. It was used for courier purposes. I can’t remember the name of it offhand.

LC: That’s ok. So you were thinking he was in and out of Udorn by that plane?

TB: Yeah. He came into Udorn and then went out of Ubon, which is…Udorn is at the northwest corner and Ubon in the southeast corner of the northeast. So we drove the distance from Udorn to Nakhon Phanom, which is in the northeast corner and then south to Ubon.

LC: Tom, while you were at Udorn, did you have any other visitors of note? Congressional delegations or military, ranking military, officers coming to visit, whom you had to entertain or perhaps Southeast Asian officials?

TB: The main entertainment that I was involved in were the quarterly counter-insurgency meetings, one of which was held in Udorn. Another time it was held in Nakhon Phanom. And Governor Yong of Nakhon Phanom was a guest speaker at one of these counter-insurgency meetings for the whole U.S. counter-insurgency apparatus. There was a separate section of the Embassy devoted to counter-insurgency called the Political Military Affairs. George Tannen was the head of that when I first arrived and then Bill Stokes, I think, succeeded him. So, there…when these quarterly meetings were held in the northeast, you’d have a whole panoply of people coming up to attend them.

LC: And did these include people who, I’m guessing, from South Vietnam as well?

TB: I don’t recall there being any from South Vietnam in this gathering. It was mainly a Thai based affair.

LC: And so, on occasion, they were held up in your area – Udorn or NKP?

TB: Well, they were held in the northeast every three months.

LC: They were always held in the northeast?

TB: Yes.

LC: So, people from the Embassy and presumably from some of the military bases would come and visit with you.

TB: The U.S. military Air Force presence was not involved in these counter-insurgency meetings.

LC: Ok. Was there any military representation? U.S. military?

TB: Yes, from JUSMAG in Bangkok.
LC: Ok. And you mentioned that the governor of NKP, the province, was there one time giving a talk?

TB: Yes, in which he attributed all the troubles in the northeast to the Vietnamese community.

LC: Right, which is the old canard that you had spoken about earlier.

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: How much actual cooperation was there between provincial Thai officials and the U.S. counter-insurgency apparatus? How active was their cooperation?

TB: It was very close.

LC: Can you give any details on that?

TB: Well, I think I mentioned before these Mobile Development Teams, which were run by a Thai military colonel. Not the same colonel, but somebody of that rank for the Mobile Development Units. And they checked in very closely with the governor and his staff before operating in a particular province.

LC: Tom, if you could, give me a sense of how high on the bilateral relations priority list between the United States and Thailand the counter-insurgency effort was.

TB: It was very high because there was this desire on the part of the U.S. government to avoid a Vietnam-like situation in Thailand, but as I think I mentioned previously there was very little risk of that because the insurgency was such a feeble effort in northeast Thailand. But it’s unusual for, I think it was unique to have a counter-insurgency section in an embassy, and that persisted for several years.

LC: When, if you know, was it shut down or reduced?

TB: I don't know. When I was in Bangkok from '73 to '75, Cal Miehlert, who was a close friend, was the head of that section, which was called Political/military affairs. Now, you’ll find in some embassies around the world a political/military section, but not one that is actively involved in promoting counter-insurgency in the country where it’s operating.

LC: How big was that element within the Embassy in terms of personnel at its biggest?

TB: Well, I think that Cal had three or four people with him. I don’t recall exactly what it was, but he [Cal] cooperated closely with the JUSMAG, Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group. So that amplified the number of people involved in the effort on the American side.
LC: Tom, how long did you stay in Udorn?
TB: It was a year and a half.
LC: Ok. And so the date of your departure from the consulate was what? Mid-1971?
TB: Sometime in September of ’71. I think it was the nineteenth.
LC: Ok. I’d like to ask you about a couple of events in early 1971 and whether they had
any impact on relationships that you were viewing or on the duties that you had to discharge, and
one of those came in early February 1971 with the introduction of the LAM SON 719 initiative into
Laos. First of all, do you remember that?
TB: I remember it. Sure.
LC: Sure. Can you outline that operation for someone who’s not familiar with it?
TB: Well, as I recall, it was launched across Highway [9] – what’s the number? I can’t
recall it.
LC: I don’t know. I’m not sure.
TB: But it’s a highway that runs from Dong Ha on the Vietnamese coast, which is just
south of what used to be the parallel, the dividing line between North and South Vietnam. It runs
through Cam Lo and Huong Hoa districts.
LC: And what was the purpose…
TB: …of Vietnam and then enters into Laos. It goes through Tchepone and then from
Tchepone on to I think Xhau Kaeng Kok, but I’m not sure. And then Savannakhet on the Mekong
River. It must be Route 9, huh?
LC: That sounds right but I’d have to actually look it up. And Tom, what was the…what did
you understand at the time was the objective of the operation?
TB: Well, I suppose it was to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail.
LC: Was this operation something that you knew about in advance?
TB: Not a bit.
LC: Ok. Did you look with favor on this development? Do you think it was a good idea?
TB: Well, it was very poorly executed and another theory on this score was to build …you
remember the McNamara Wall that was supposed to go across? That was never implemented but
if it had been better organized perhaps it might have had some effect, but the effect was quite
minimal. I think it ended in disaster if I remember.
LC: I think you’re probably right. I think that’s not too strong a term. Certainly, the troops were withdrawn within about six weeks.

TB: But I was very much…would like to have the chance in visiting Southeast Asia in the near future to travel that route.

LC: Is that area open, the border crossing there?

TB: So far as I know, it’s open.

LC: Ok. Tom, if you recall, was there any…or any activity that gave the appearance of a coordinated effort in the Thai insurgency to coordinate with the heavier fighting in northeastern Laos that accompanied the LAM SON 719 operation?

TB: None whatsoever that I’m aware of.

LC: Ok. You didn’t see any changes.

TB: No. Now, I saw a number of Thai casualties from battles in northeast Laos who were treated in the Udorn military hospital.

LC: Was that a Thai hospital?

TB: I believe it was a U.S. military hospital, but I can’t recall. I remember seeing lots of wounded in there.

LC: Were you over there on inspection walk through or a visit?

TB: I just don’t recall how I happened to stumble upon them, but there had obviously been a severe military action in northeast Laos and there were a lot of Thai wounded.

LC: Ok. Later that summer, the United States began to draw down some of the bombing missions that had been running from northeastern Laos, or northeastern Thailand over Laos and I wonder if you recall that.

TB: I don’t recall that particularly because I wasn’t involved in handling that aspect at all, but the one item that I found disturbing was that our political section in Laos was always convinced, and Ambassador Sullivan was convinced that using non-jet aircraft to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail was far more effective than using these very fast – it was the A-4, that’s it – A-4 jet airplanes. And I would read these…I remember back in Vientiane, but not in Udorn because I didn’t get copies of this anymore, of the daily action report and they would say so and so many military structures destroyed. Well, I can imagine these A-4s firing at huts and all sorts of other things, which were always called military structures in the after action report. I suspect that most of them were dwellings.
LC: And were you therefore sort of suspicious of the results claimed by some of the missions?

TB: Yeah. As I mentioned, I don’t think these were military structures in most cases but they had to be reported as military structures.

LC: Tom, were you also paying any attention to the larger issue of the quantification of damage by some accounts was driving Defense Department policy, for example, body counts and, as you point out, the destruction of buildings, military structures? Did you have suspicion about those figures and how useful they might be?

TB: Well, this was later on when I went back to Vietnam I had had a great deal of suspicion about it.

LC: Why were you suspicious?

TB: Because the body count includes civilians.

LC: So you thought there was over reporting?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. And did it make you wonder whether the system that the U.S. was using to account for damage was in fact functioning well?

TB: Well, it certainly didn’t function well because the greater the body count, the worse the situation became.

LC: So there seemed to be some disconnect there?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Another of the large, you know, geo-strategic developments of 1971 that I wonder whether you have any memory of is the July 1971 revelation that Kissinger had visited Beijing. Do you remember that?

TB: Certainly. I was informed by the French as a matter of…my French friends in Vietnam.

LC: How did that come about?

TB: I was ignorant and I had received no official notice of it, and they brought up the subject to me.

LC: In a letter or…?

TB: No. When I was in Saigon I used to visit the house of…I went there in July, if I recall, of ’71 on a pre-assignment mission and I used to go in Saigon to the villa of Philippe Piechaud, who was head of Cexo. Cauoutchouc d’Extreme Orient for a drink in the evening before going out
to supper and he, during the course of this cocktail hour, informed me about Kissinger’s trip to
Beijing.

LC: Did you ask him how he knew this?
TB: No. I never questioned his sources.
LC: And what did you make of the news?
TB: Well, it’s a move that I found, that I personally was in favor of it. Basically, when you
can achieve détente with a major adversary, that’s an enormous accomplishment.
LC: Did you think that it might have ramifications for U.S. involvement in South Vietnam?
TB: Certainly.
LC: Ok. Can you outline what you thought the possibilities were or…?
TB: The great fear of massive military action on part of the U.S. throughout the Vietnam
War was that China might intervene, and since China had intervened in Korea to our great dismay
this was something to be avoided at all costs. So this was a great advance in terms of tamping
down the hostility between the U.S. and China and also reducing the possibility of Chinese military
intervention against the U.S. on behalf of Vietnam. Of course what occurred later was Chinese
intervention against Vietnam for its own sake.
LC: You mean in 1979?
TB: Yes.
LC: Right. Right. How aware do you think the Foreign Service was of the tension between
the Vietnamese Communist and Chinese Communist leaderships?
TB: I really don’t know. I mean I’m not qualified to comment on that. Somebody in the
Intelligence Bureau would be better equipped to answer that question.
LC: Ok. Tom, how long did you stay in Saigon during that pre-assignment visit?
TB: I didn’t stay…maybe a day in Saigon. I went principally through the Military Region II
and toured several provinces.
LC: And were you meeting with John Vann at that time?
TB: I met with him initially and then traveled on my own to several provinces and at the
conclusion of the travel met with him in Nha Trang and gave him a briefing about the travel.
LC: Do you remember what provinces you visited?
TB: That’s a good question. I think it was Darlac, perhaps Phu Yen…I know it was Darlac,
which is where Ban Me Thuot is.
LC: What observations, in general if you can recall, did you make during that trip, during those visits? Were you comparing what you were seeing in mid-'71 to what you had seen when you were in Binh Long?

TB: Yes. The pacification program seemed to me much farther advanced and favorably advanced than in '68; the situation seemed much better.

LC: How could you tell?

TB: From the briefings, the number of hamlets that were rated relatively secure or secure, the reduction in the number of VC rated hamlets, the general reporting system that existed throughout the country...

LC: Did you have confidence in those numbers, Tom?

TB: I have absolute confidence in no numbers, but in my own view it's usually that two and two usually equals five, but confidence is relative. The figures, the statistics, the reports indicated a much calmer situation in terms of the insurgency than existed before.

LC: And to what did you attribute that or to what did...?

TB: Well, these programs are finally working.

LC: Ok, which ones?

TB: The whole pacification effort.

LC: Were there any parts of it that seemed to be more, you know, particularly, especially effective? Things that were working very, very well?

TB: Well, basically security was being provided to people in villages so that they could remain on the spot instead of displacing large quantities of people to so-called secure government areas. In other words, security was increasingly being brought to the village site.

LC: At this time, Tom, did you have any information? Were you being given briefings about the effectiveness of the Phoenix program?

TB: Well, the Phoenix program was always a component of a provincial briefing.

LC: Ok. And what evaluation did you make of that program or observations on its effectiveness?

TB: Well, by that time it had become relatively effective.

LC: Did it seem to you to be a necessary component of the broader pacification and hearts and minds efforts that had to do with improving agriculture, getting supplies out to villages, and obviously reducing military upset? Did the Phoenix seem to be an integral element of that?
TB: Yeah, certainly.

LC: Ok. I just wondered if it was something that you knew much about?

TB: Well, I was familiar with the techniques but it was nothing that I was deeply involved in. That was mainly a CIA action.

LC: In MR2, if you can say, in the middle of 1971 when you went on this pre-assignment trip, what was the general security situation? Can you give us an overview of how things stood at that time?

TB: Well, as I mentioned it was much improved over previous and was improving steadily. One could travel, for example, by road to...from Nha Trang to Dalat without being ambushed. One could travel by road in a number of places where three years previously it would have been extremely dangerous to attempt it.

LC: And did you do that Tom? Were you driving or were you going by helicopter?

TB: I think I went entirely by helicopter or plane on this occasion. I don't recall exactly, because I had a limited amount of time and had to visit several provinces.

LC: Then, as you mentioned, you went to meet with John Vann again at the conclusion of your travels. Can you tell us anything you recall about that meeting?

TB: This is summarized in one of his efficiency reports on me but I don't recall the...I just gave him an overview of my impressions, which were generally quite favorable about the developments in the region.

LC: Now, my sense from your having called this a pre-assignment mission was that the decision had already been taken that you would be moving to South Vietnam, to MR2.

TB: That's right.

LC: Ok. Who was to replace you at Udorn, do you know?

TB: I replaced Al Francis. Who replaced me? I'm trying to remember.

LC: It's ok if you don't recall now. Tom, were you looking forward to getting back to Vietnam?

TB: Definitely.

LC: Can you give listeners a sense of what was driving your interests, your...what was your motivation for getting back to Vietnam?

TB: Working in Vietnam produced a certain level of adrenaline in the system and there was constant excitement about what you encountered in the countryside in Vietnam.
LC: Did you know where you were going to be based?
TB: Oh yeah, sure.
LC: And where was that?
TB: Nha Trang.
LC: And Tom, did you formally have to change your affiliation with the Foreign Service at this time?
TB: No, no. I was detailed to AID but then I'd been detailed to AID in ‘67 and ‘68.
LC: Ok. So it was the same sort of arrangement where this kind of temporary duty with USAID?
TB: That’s right.
LC: Ok. So administratively, there was no change in your FSO rating or anything like that?
LC: Ok. Actually, could you just outline the relationship between AID and the Foreign Service?
TB: Well, the AID is the Foreign Service but the AID officers do not take a competitive examination. So, they are sort of in reserve status like you would be…not being a regular Army officer in the Army.
LC: Ok. Do Foreign Service officers in general sort of see USAID as kind of a stepchild or red-headed stepchild or something like that?
TB: I don’t know about in general. I certainly never regarded them in that fashion.
LC: Ok. And you left Udorn then in September of 1971?
TB: As I remember, it was the 19th of September.
LC: Ok. And did you go directly to Nha Trang?
TB: I went to Saigon for initial briefings with Komer.
LC: For how long, do you know?
TB: I don’t remember how many days. It was a minimum number of days before…how much I don’t know.
LC: Ok. And you were meeting with Komer and other people in CORDS?
TB: And also at the Embassy.
LC: Ok. Can you tell us anything about those meetings if you recall?
TB: Well, Komer in the south said to me, ‘Barnes, you’re going to a non-priority province. Don’t ever ask me for anything.’

LC: Yeah. He was pretty clear with what he told you, wasn’t he?

TB: Yeah. It became a priority province when it was invaded a couple of months later. I’m sorry, when…I’m losing my track of time. When I was invaded back in ’67.


TB: Yeah. No. Sorry, now I’m confusing this with…

LC: It’s ok. I understand. Komer had said that to you when you went to Binh Long.

TB: Yeah.

LC: ‘Barnes…don’t ever ask me for anything.’ But Tom, you saw him again in Saigon on your way to Nha Trang.

TB: I’m trying to remember if he was still there or whether Bill Colby had replaced him.

LC: That I don’t know, right offhand.

TB: I think he was still there.

LC: Had you met Bill Colby on occasion before this?

TB: I had known him because he was the CIA station chief in Saigon starting in 1959 when I was in the Embassy.

LC: Ok. So he was someone that you had seen around and had dealings with.

TB: We had very cordial relations.

LC: Ok. Can you give me a sense of Bill Colby when you knew him?

TB: He’s a modest…he was a modest, quite bright, very cooperative individual. I found him less decisive than Komer. For example, I would bring problems to him from MR2 and he would – Komer was still there at the time, unless I’m confusing with ‘67/’68 – and he would try to get Komer on the phone, be unable to, and so on and the issue would not be resolved, whereas if you went to Komer with a problem it was immediately denied or implemented.

LC: And then on to the next thing?

TB: Yes.

LC: Was it that Colby was less, would you say, personally decisive or was he in a different position such that he couldn’t…?

TB: No, I think he’s less personally decisive.
LC: To what do you attribute that? Was he thinking through parameters and potential
problems or was it just a disinclination to sit down on a particular issue?
TB: I really don’t know the psychological background for that.
LC: Ok. Tom, when you went to Nha Trang where did you live?
TB: I lived, first of all, in a villa which has become the Au Hai Hotel, which has…it had…let
me try to remember…something like eight rooms to it. So when a delegation would come from
Saigon, I’d have to put up the whole delegation.
LC: They would all stay at your house?
TB: Yes. So what I did was wait till the admin officer moved out and moved into his villa,
which was a duplex side by side. It had one guest bedroom so when a delegation came, I could
put up the head of the delegation and the rest stayed elsewhere. It was a more satisfactory
solution.
LC: Yes, it sounds like a superior arrangement.
TB: But I had to wait several months until this fellow moved out. At any rate, when I visited
the area in 1995 – Nha Trang – my office and John Vann’s office in the Grand Hotel had been
reconverted to a hotel and the first residence that I lived in, which was half a block from the beach,
was an eight room hotel, the Au Hai Hotel, and had been converted into a sort of mini hotel for
tourists in Nha Trang.
LC: And that’s sort of what it was when you lived there, at least when a delegation was in
town.
TB: That’s right. I put up Douglas Pike one time.
LC: Did you?
TB: Yeah.
LC: What was the occasion?
TB: He was traveling through the area.
LC: And he was with the Foreign Service at that point?
TB: I don’t know what he was but he was the authority on the Viet Cong.
LC: Absolutely. And he stayed with you a day or two?
TB: He stayed with me one night.
LC: Was that the first time you had met him?
TB: I believe so. He had a good sense of humor.
LC: What else do you remember about him?
TB: Rather wild hair.
LC: And as you know, his papers are now deposited here. Tom, did you give him briefings or was he…?
TB: Oh yeah, sure.
LC: Ok. And did you have kind of a standard…did you develop a standard briefing that you would give most visitors or did you have to vary the information by who they were and what they needed to know?
TB: One always tailors a briefing to the audience, but for example if it was somebody in the military then you’d get the military staff to do much of the briefing.
LC: Tom, you mentioned that the villa that you stayed at was just a short walk from the beach. Can you describe the physical terrain to us?
TB: Nha Trang is on a half moon beach, which extends for seven kilometers. I used to go running on there in the mornings.
LC: It sounds as if it was probably beautiful.
TB: It’s a really lovely setting. There was a restaurant there called – what was it – Jacques, which had these enormous lobsters. Now the site of the restaurant shifted to the north end of the beach while I was there, but originally it had been more toward the center of the crescent and I remember going with Mai one time to dinner and Jacque appeared, took the order, disappeared, and apparently did the cooking, and then served the lobster or whatever it was we ordered and he had the gall after all that to charge us fifteen percent for service, and he was the sole employee of the establishment.
LC: Tom are you still there?
TB: Yeah, sure.
LC: I just had a little static; I wanted to make sure. Tom, did you have local Vietnamese employed in the office where you were working?
TB: I had an enormous staff. We had over a thousand…throughout the region, we had over a thousand local employees.
LC: Were there any of those Vietnamese with whom you had a special relationship – for example, a driver or a personal assistant or secretary, someone that you worked closely with?
TB: I had –you mentioned Vietnamese – I had an American secretary named Tina Kapsanis.

LC: How do you spell her last name?

TB: K-A-P-S-A-N-I-S. Kapsanis, who was of Greek origin. She was the most efficient secretary I’ve ever encountered in the sense she could type at breakneck speed with no grammatical or spelling errors if you dictated something to her. Now, in terms of local employees, I had a system of asking each of the constituent posts – there were twelve provinces and so on – to nominate a xuat sac, an outstanding employee, and I invited the outstanding employee from each province collectively to the house for dinner on one occasion. I’d had such good experience with a local employee, Wongahin, in Udorn that I wanted to stress the role and utility of these individuals.

LC: Have some kind of reward system, if you will, or acknowledgement system?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: And what if anything can you tell us about the security checks that would have been done on the Vietnamese who worked for MR2?

TB: I have no idea how those operated.

LC: And describe if you will Tom the office setup within which you worked. Where were you located?

TB: We were located in the Grand Hotel in Nha Trang.

LC: And how many in the office?

TB: Oh, there were at least a hundred. I don’t recall the exact total but they were the various sections that you have for the pacification program. There was a police advisor who was extremely reluctant to visit his constituents in the field. He once arrived in Pleiku saying, ‘The only reason I’m here is Tom Barnes made me go out of Nha Trang.’ We had an administrative officer who said he could never travel because he always had to be on hand to sign documents. We had a New Life Development, that is like a conventional development officer, in AID who was a very conscientious individual but who was distressed at the U.S. role in Vietnam. I encouraged him to get an assignment elsewhere because the staff, the regional staff, at Nha Trang would get together everyday and discuss why we should be in Vietnam, whether we should be in Vietnam, and I sort of ignored these meetings or didn’t organize the regional meetings, regional headquarters meetings, for some time until they came to me and asked about it. But I emphasized during the first session that we were not there to debate whether we should be in Vietnam, we were there to
accelerate pacification. Anyway, this one fellow was very conscientious. He and his wife adopted
a Vietnamese orphan girl who was very, very...about four or five years old...and he eventually
transferred to USAID headquarters in Saigon and I replaced him with one of the province senior
advisors at Cam Ranh Bay.

LC: Who was that province senior advisor that you brought in?

TB: I’m trying to remember. I can see the face, the glasses, and the round face but I can’t
remember the name offhand.

LC: That’s ok, Tom. You were describing the heads of the different offices underneath
you.

TB: Yeah. There was CIA component which had one of those phony names like ‘Special
Studies Group’ or something like that. There was a large administrative section. I visited, on one
occasion, the warehouse. I’d been impressed with Graham Martin when he arrived in Rome. His
first request at the Embassy was to visit the warehouse, so I was imitating Graham Martin in that
respect.

LC: Ok. What was in the warehouse?

TB: Oh, just goods. But normally the person in charge doesn’t occupy himself with details
like that.

LC: Absolutely, yes. And, Tom, can you estimate, you may not have mentioned this
already, the size of the staff that was working at the Grand Hotel?

TB: Well, it was over a hundred.

LC: Over a hundred? Ok.

TB: Yeah. The total component of the CORDS staff at MR2 was 2,280 including a lot of
third country nationals, Filipinos particularly.

LC: And were they under contract with USAID?

TB: I don’t know. I think so. Yeah.

LC: Ok. And what kinds of positions or duties did they discharge?

TB: Radio operators, clerical, accountants…

LC: Was there any interaction between USAID office and some of our other non-
Vietnamese allies? For example, Australians or Kiwis?

TB: We had no Australians in MR2 but we had two Korean divisions, South Korean
division. John and I worked very closely with the leadership of these divisions.
LC: To affect what?
TB: To try to influence the Koreans to be a little more aggressive, and the one thing that
dismayed me the most was the Korean decision to withdraw its company from a remote location in
Phu Yen province. As soon as it did that the two Regional Force companies of the Vietnamese
government withdrew and we had a full flight...the villages that were protected by the Koreans and
by the Regional Forces, everybody, this was in a remote area of Phu Yen province, got on the road
and started walking back to Tuy Hoa, the provincial capital. They abandoned their homes. I
approached the Koreans about reversing their policy and Colonel Kim, who was our intermediary –
the division commanders didn’t speak very good English – Colonel Kim informed me about twenty-
four hours later that the decision had been made by the president in Seoul and was irreversible. I
remember flying above this column of fleeing people and seeing a grandmother being carried in a
sling. I had the OH-1 helicopter, which could seat three people besides myself, and I had the pilot
land it near the grandmother. I took the grandmother and her granddaughter to the Tuy Hoa
hospital and then flew the granddaughter back to the [column] so they’d know where she [the
grandmother] was, and then flew back to the column and deposited the granddaughter so she
could...when they got to Tuy Hoa on foot, locate the grandmother. But emotionally, I was
extremely upset by this displacement because we [should have] had brought security to the
countryside rather than having the village brought in, but it was a failed effort.

LC: Tom, what was the reason for the ROK troops to leave the area?
TB: I don’t know. They were drawing down quite a bit. ROK...my criticism of them was
that they would button themselves up in a camp surrounded by claymore mines and if a village half
a kilometer away was being attacked they would not go out at night. There’d be no aid. Another
thing that we had an American colonel who was the advisor of the ROK units in Nha Trang and
they would periodically display weapons they’d captured and this colonel became convinced they
were the same weapons each time and not the result of new skirmishes. But there was one
occasion on which some ROK units took very heavy casualties, and this did not sit well back in
Seoul. So...

LC: So they were drawing down?
TB: Yes.

LC: Ok. And Tom, when, if you remember, did this series of events including the refugee
exodus take place? Do you remember at all?
TB: I don’t remember. It was during the period I was in Nha Trang but I don’t remember exactly when.

LC: Ok. Let’s take a break, Tom.

LC: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive continuing the oral history interview with Tom Barnes. Again today is the fourteenth of April 2004. I am in Lubbock and Tom is in Austin.

Tom, we were talking this morning about your time in Nha Trang, and I wonder for those who weren’t clear on the placement of the CORDS office for MR2 within the larger CORDS structure if you could just talk about where it was placed.

TB: There were four military regions in Vietnam and therefore there were four separate CORDS operations reporting to the single CORDS entity in Saigon.

LC: Was there any further reporting on from CORDS to Washington, D.C. and if so what was the channel?

TB: I don’t know what the channel was but it must have been through the embassy, but the reporting…we received monthly reports from the provinces, which were consolidated within a day or so into a regional report. So far as I know, the regional report was the one that went to Washington. Each of the four regions produced a regional report.

LC: And those regional reports, do you have any sense of how they were distributed in Washington?

TB: I haven’t the foggiest.

LC: Ok. But would you have been a primary author at least of the civil operations element of that for MR2?

TB: Not personally. I had a very competent man named Russell Meerdink who, when I arrived, was the province senior advisor in Phu Yen.

LC: How do you spell his last name, Tom?

TB: M-E-E-R – two Es – Meerdink. D-I-N-K. Obviously of Dutch background with a name like that. At any rate, he was a statistical expert and John was dissatisfied with the monthly report coming out of region so he said we should use Region IV as a model. Of course he had devised the model for Region IV so we did that and he was quite pleased with the results, but I brought Russell up to head the plan section which produced the consolidated provincial reports and produced this regional monthly.

LC: I see. What were the distinctions of the new guise of the report?
TB: Well, there was a lot of statistical comparison with the past, and this enabled one to show progress or the decline, as the case might be, but in our case it was mainly progress because the pacification program was proceeding reasonably well in MR2.

LC: Was there a comparison done, either formally or informally, of pacification successes in MR2 with those in the other military regions?

TB: Yeah. MR2 was the weakest of the four provinces in terms of hamlets that were government controlled.

LC: Had that historically been the case?

TB: Yeah. That was the case.

LC: What was it about MR2 that left it in that position on a regular basis?

TB: Well, the great number of highland provinces – Pleiku, Kontum, Quang Duc, which was south of Ban Me Thuot, and Darlac, which included Ban Me Thuot. But there were four highland provinces and four semi-highland provinces like Phu Yen and Binh Dinh had highland areas in them. So these areas were typically wild and wooly.

LC: And can you, Tom, as something of an expert on the ethnography of Southeast Asia, say something about the different tribes who resided in these provinces?

TB: Well, the ones that the French had favored the most were the Rhade and secondly the Jarai. The Frenchmen named Sabatiea compiled a list of oral laws of the Rhade, which is quite interesting. It specifies how much fine you have to pay for killing your neighbor’s elephant, for example, but it’s called [Kwoo-twoo-may-prat-teek?] or something like that – the Rhade. It’s quite an interesting study.

LC: And when was that compiled? When does that date from?

TB: If I recall, I have something in mind of 1928 but it may have been the ‘30s.

LC: What, if you can say, were the particular tribal or cultural characteristics of the Rhade?

TB: There were two ethnic – pardon me – two linguistic groups among the tribal people in South Vietnam. Quite different from the tribal people in North Vietnam, which are…you find in Vietnam, Laos, southern China, and Burma, and Thailand. These individuals either spoke an Indonesian based language or something akin to Cham, which was a totally different language family. It was in the Malayo-Polynesian and the Indonesian strains.

LC: And were there also cultural differences that separated some of the tribes from ethnic Vietnamese?
TB: Well, communal living was one of them in the sense that the Ma tribe for example, which are found in Darlac where Dalat is...sorry, Tuyen Duc where Dalat is – Tuyen Duc was the name of the province at the time. The Ma lived in long houses whereby several families would occupy the same dwelling, each with a separate entrance and a separate fireplace, but inside it was one continuous long hall. Then there were other groups, which had individual huts, some of them quite skillfully woven with very nice entrances, very aesthetically designed entrances. It depended upon which group you encountered. One of the funniest, this has nothing to do with Vietnam, but there was a book by Nhouy Abhah who is a Southern Lao who wrote the book called _Elle est Formidable la Belle Mere_ in which the mother-in-law – they weren’t married yet – but the prospective mother-in-law overheard her daughter making arrangements for an assignation in the evening, so the girl said that she would tie a bangle around her left ankle because you would go in the longhouse at night and it was very, very dark so to find her you’d have to feel the ankles til you came to the right person. So the prospective mother-in-law waited until the girl fell asleep, took the bangle off, and put it on her own. Hence the title _She was a Wonderful la Belle Mere_, mother-in-law. Anyway, that's the type of humor that the Lao engaged themselves in.

LC: I see. Tom, when you were assigned in Nha Trang, I take it from your memoir that you did not spend all your time at the headquarters.

TB: No. As little as possible.

LC: Ok. As per your usual operating procedures, I guess, you were busily visiting the provinces.

TB: Particularly the districts. Occasionally the province headquarters would...I tried to get to virtually all the – there were fifty some districts where we usually had an Army major as an advisor – and I tried to visit those. I visited most, virtually all of them, but not all of them.

LC: And were you able to, as you had in earlier postings, spend time with the civilians in the areas that you were visiting or were you all business at this point in having to monitor the advisors as well as the South Vietnamese officials?

TB: The main contact was with the advisors and their counterparts – the district chief, and district cases, and the advisor, and the province chief, and the province senior advisor.

LC: Can you recall if there were particular provincial advisors who as individuals were impressive enough for you to try to promote them or to try to aid their cause?
TB: Yeah. I mentioned already Russell Meerdink who had been in Phu Yen. The most capable of the twelve province senior advisors was Dan Leahy, L-E-A-H-Y, who was in the largest province and the second from the bottom in terms of pacification in the country just after Chuong Thien in the delta. That was Binh Dinh province.

LC: Was it about Mr. Leahy that you thought was most admirable or that struck you particularly?

TB: He had an outgoing manner and a sort of commanding personality. He also had a superb province chief to work with.

LC: Do you remember his name?

TB: Yeah. Let me just think. Thuc, Nguyen van Thuc. T-H-U-C. I later saw him in Sacramento where he established a gasoline station, ran a gasoline station, but he was at one time after leaving Binh Dinh province the head of logistics for the ARVN.

LC: How did you happen to meet with him in Sacramento?

TB: I followed him, kept in contact with him, after Vietnam collapsed and I have two first cousins in Sacramento. Also, when I was in the Senior Seminar I brought him from Sacramento to San Francisco to address the Senior Seminar about the refugee experience.

LC: And that was in the mid 1970s?

TB: That was '77.

LC: Ok. Tom, can you talk about Thuc's activities at the provincial level?

TB: Well, he was an inspirational leader who was wounded, oddly enough, by grenade blast from a Viet Cong cadre, fairly young man whose name was also Nguyen van Thuc, it turned out. John rated him as the second best province chief in the country or, after a man I never met who was commander of the 18th Division at the collapse of Saigon and kept fighting to the very end.

LC: Do you remember his name?

TB: I don’t remember it offhand. Unfortunately, I never met the man, but John rated him number one and Thuc number two.

LC: In terms of his effectiveness?

TB: Oh it was something like Dao.

LC: Ok. The other man's name?
TB: Yeah. But he was one of the two whose units fought to the bitter end. He and Ly Tong Ba, who...I was his counterpart. He was the pacification deputy for the ARVN side in MR2.

LC: Ok. From your memoir I understand that one of the things that you were trying to do with the staff who reported to you was to get them to think creatively and introduce new ideas into the flow of work. How did you do that, Tom?

TB: I would pick up ideas mainly from district senior advisors during these visits and then invite them to present it at one of the staff meetings there, their theories.

LC: Was that generally successful? I mean did you feel like...?

TB: Well, I don't want to overemphasize the program, but it worked on a modest scale.

Sure.

LC: Ok. What is a hamlet evaluation survey?

TB: That's a monthly exercise in which, there's something like ninety factors that are weighed, and that determines the score, A through E, N or VC. And such questions as, 'Does the government provide security night and day?' 'Are there VC incursions during the night?' 'What development programs have been undertaken?' It was a very lengthy questionnaire that had to be filled out each month.

LC: For every...?

TB: Every hamlet.

LC: So that's a huge amount of work.

TB: Well, it is initially, but once you get it organized you monitor only changes.

LC: Ok. So you're not starting from scratch every month. Was that...was the purpose of that survey to provide some kind of index to pacification effectiveness?

TB: Yeah sure.

LC: And how useful was it as a tool?

TB: Well, Komer of course invented it. He found it extremely useful. I think it was quite worthwhile.

LC: You do?

TB: It had its detractors and its drawbacks, but in general it was a reasonable measure of the state of security in South Vietnam.

LC: If you hadn't had that tool what could you have done? What would you rely on, anecdotal evidence or impressionist evidence?
TB: You’d rely on the joint opinion of the district chief and the district senior advisor.

LC: In each of the provinces where you had the PSA reporting to you, can you talk about
the structure below them. Had it changed at all since you had been a PSA?

TB: While I was there, thankfully, the number of advisors was diminishing. For example,
Binh Dinh, the province I mentioned to you that was the largest in the Military Region II, had two
hundred and fifty Americans as advisors. Now that’s overkill. So that when there was…at the
beginning of a drawdown I was quite grateful for that.

LC: Now was that drawdown parallel to the larger force reduction?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. And that was en train while you were in Nha Trang, is that correct?

TB: Yes.

LC: And what impact did you see on the staff that you were supervising, this RIF
production force as it were?

TB: Well, individuals whose terms, whose tours had been curtailed, were unhappy. But in
general it was a salutary approach. I recall John Vann’s comment because the advisors were
changing each year that the U.S. did not have eighteen or nineteen or whatever it was, twenty
years of experience in Vietnam. It had twenty years…one year experience twenty times.

LC: Yes, and that has become actually quite a famous sort of tagline for what happened in
Vietnam, applied to troops as well. Tom, can you talk a little bit about the economic situation in ’71,
’72 in Military Region II?

TB: Military Region II…the whole coastal area of Vietnam is not particularly flourishing
economically because one of the factors is the distance between the sea and the mountains is
extremely abridged and therefore planting crops is restricted. You don’t have the vast irrigated
territory of the delta, for example. So it’s a relatively minor area in terms of rice production. There
are certain valuable commodities like salt, which is not terribly remunerative, but salt raked up from
the sea. There was also cinnamon in one district – I think it was Ba To district of Quang Ngai
province. Cinnamon was a worthwhile crop. But in general, and up in the highlands, there was
some timber harvested, but the highlands were not particularly – except for coffee plantations in
Darlac province where Ban Me Thuot was and somewhat in Quang Duc – there wasn’t much
economically viable about Military Region II. Fishing of course was a major industry or profession
or whatever you want to call it and the production of nuoc mam along the coast, particularly at
Phan Thiet in – what was it – Binh Thuan province, the southernmost province of the center and the southernmost province of MR2.

LC: How much of the standard and normal economic activity in the region was disrupted because of military operations or sabotage?

TB: Well, as I mentioned earlier this morning, the road interdictions – the VC road interdiction – had diminished enormously by this time. One could travel up and down the coast up to Dalat, for example, or on Route 19 to Pleiku without being ambushed. So, before when the roads were much more – road travel was much more restrictive – naturally, commerce suffered. But what little commerce there was prospered under the gradually increasing security of the countryside.

LC: Tom, you mentioned Dalat a couple of times but it’s a place of particular interest historically and I know that you must have been there on a number of occasions. Is that correct?

TB: We…at the Embassy when I was first assigned in ’58 through ’60 had a villa they rented, belonged to Nguyen Huu Hao, who had been the father of Bao Dai’s second wife or first wife or third wife or something, and this villa we would go to to escape the heat of the plains. We could make reservations and so on for the weekend so I had been familiar with the city before.

LC: Did you have occasion to go up there when you were based at Nha Trang?

TB: Yes because it was one of the districts in my Military Region II. Tuyen Duc province was included.

LC: Were there particular or special security considerations in Dalat because of its position or its historical importance?

TB: No. It was relatively calm even during the height of the insurgency. The city itself was never much of a problem.

LC: Ok. Was there still a resident French population there?

TB: I assume there was, but nothing of any great quantity. There was a Jesuit seminary in Dalat and, of course, the Couvent Des Oiseaux, the girls’ school as it was so well known.

LC: Did you during this time when you were based at Nha Trang, make connections with educational institutions in MR2 at all?

TB: Well, one of the things I regret is that while I was in Nha Trang, Francois Nguyen van Thuan was the Bishop. I wasn’t aware he was Ngo Dinh Diem’s nephew. I wasn’t aware that he was there nor did I make any approaches to the church. I should have at least called on him. I
grew to know him when I was at the International Catholic Migration Commission because he was
on the board or head of some official capacity and we traveled side by side in a bus up in Brazil
near Sao Paulo for a conference one time. He had been a prisoner in solitary confinement for
eight years in the North and he was a man of great simplicity [and integrity]. He was rumored to be
one of the candidates to succeed John Paul but he died of cancer about a year and a half ago. I
had met his mother when I was in Hue.

LC: And he was the son of which of the Ngo brothers?

TB: He was the son of Diem’s older sister and a pharmacist that she’d married. Both of
them, the father and mother of Thuan, lived to their nineties. The mother just died about a year
ago also.

LC: Did he tell you much in the way of detail about his time as a prisoner in North
Vietnam?

TB: We didn’t discuss that at all.

LC: Ok. But you came to know that he had been held?

TB: Yeah, sure. Andre Nguyen van Chau, whom I worked for when he was the secretary
general of the International Catholic Migration Commission in Geneva, has written a biography of
Cardinal Thuan, which is…I read his biography of the Diem family but I haven’t read this one yet.

LC: And is it available in English?

TB: It’s available in several languages. It was written and published first in English. It’s
been translated into German if you have knowledge of that peculiar language.

LC: I do not.

TB: I don’t either.

LC: I will stick with English for this particular purpose. I have not seen that book so I’m
grateful for your mentioning it. Tom, I want to ask you about a particular incident that happened in
January 1972 in Qui Nhon at a youth rally. Perhaps you recall that there was a, what seemed to
be a VC grenade attack on the rally at which a couple of hundred people were injured. Do you
remember that event?

TB: Where did it take place?

LC: At Qui Nhon.

TB: Pardon me?

LC: Qui Nhon.
TB: In Qui Nhon?
LC: Yes.
TB: Well, that's the one in which General Chuc was wounded I believe.
LC: Yes, I think so. Do you remember that happening? I know that you probably were not there.
TB: I remember going up to see General Chuc at that time...Colonel Chuc the following day and he was recovering from the wound he had received by fasting. He would take only tea and he did that for about ten days. He also, in his characteristic candor, informed me that he was abstaining from his wife during the recovery period.
LC: And was that meant to accelerate the recovery or not?
TB: I guess.
LC: (Laughing) I'm just wondering whether he liked his wife. Tom?
TB: Yes.
LC: Did you have a sense of that incident as being part of a larger sabotage effort or was it a single incident?
TB: No, it was a single incident. But that was a...Binh Dinh as I mentioned was the, has been historically the scene of revolution. And it was a perfectly understandable event. I just found this book on Cardinal Thuan. It's called The Miracle of Hope and subtitled 'Political Prisoner, Prophet of Peace, The Life of Francois Xavier Nguyen van Thuan' by Andre Nguyen van Chau.
LC: And do you have it in your hands, sir?
TB: Yes I do.
LC: What was the publication date?
TB: One second please. 2003, daughters of St. Paul, printed and published in the USA by Pauline Books and Media. 50 St. Paul's Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02130.
LC: I will want to make sure that we have that in the collection here. Tom, can you talk a little bit, if you recall, about President Nixon's worldwide presidential prayer breakfast. Do you remember that event?
TB: I don't remember that event, but I know that Jean Dewey who was the Deputy High Commissioner during part of the time I was in Geneva was an ardent attendee at various prayer breakfasts. I think I had addressed one one time.
LC: Yeah. I think maybe it was this one in 1972 at Cam Ranh Bay. But I wondered if you recalled that.

TB: I don’t recall it.

LC: Not really. Can you talk a little bit about whether the MR2 CORDS headquarters entertained visiting dignitaries and politicians who might have been on informational tours of South Vietnam?

TB: Well, we had a constant stream of visitors, some of whom were political figures. One of them was John McLaughlin who at the time was the special assistant to the president for speech writing, President Nixon. I don’t know exactly what he was trying to achieve in Vietnam but he later…he had a seventy-seventh birthday according to the Austin-American Statesman about ten days ago, but he was a Jesuit priest working in the White House. After leaving the White House he also left the priesthood. Got married, later divorced, and so on. But there’s one example of a visitor.

LC: Were there congressional leaders who came through as well?

TB: I believe there were but I don’t recall any offhand.

LC: Ok. Within the office reporting to John Vann, your counterpart for military affairs was a brigadier general. Who was that?

TB: Ly Tong Ba. L-Y T-O-N-G B-A.

LC: Can you tell me a little bit about him, his background and anything…?

TB: He later became the division commander at Kontum but I can’t remember the number of the division, 19th or something. The division had been…the division headquarters had been overrun and the colonel whose – I can remember the face but not the name offhand – had been killed, the division commander. John had a great deal of faith in Ba and he’d been a captain at the Battle of Ap Bac, and he arranged, talked a Vietnamese into appointing him as division commander. I think it was the 25th Division but I’m not sure. He acquitted himself quite well during the Battle of Kontum and at a surprise visit by President Thieu, among others, Cao Vai…no…. I can’t remember the chief of Staff of the Vietnamese Army at that time but they appeared and John immediately put them all in a helicopter and took them up to Kontum. Most of them were quite nervous about this, particularly when they heard all this artillery and John assured them it was incoming – pardon me – outgoing artillery. But it was actually incoming. During that time he
suggested that President Thieu promote Ba to ‘Chuan Tuong’, which is brigadier general, which he
did.

LC: He did?
TB: Yes. But then he was, as far as my counterpart is concerned, he was replaced by a
general from the Delta, a brigadier general from the Delta, who later cooperated very closely with
the Viet Cong. He was a – I wish I could remember the name offhand – but he was a totally
unassertive personality. He had something like twelve or fourteen children.

LC: Tom, John Vann also commanded troops, is that accurate?
TB: You can’t use the word command unless you’re a military officer but that’s actually the
case. They change it from…the title of the senior American in MR2, which he was, was changed
from commander, usually lieutenant general, to senior advisor or something like that. And the
unit’s name was ‘SRAC’.

LC: Spelled?
TB: S-R-A-C and I’m trying to remember what the initials meant, but the other ones were
commands and this was not a command. Actually, he was the most effective military man in the
country.

LC: Yes. I want to ask you a little more about him, but first the troops – let’s say that he
advised with authority – consisted of which troops while you were there? Do you remember the…?
TB: Well, there were…two divisions. One in Ban Me Thuot, one in Kontum or two in
Kontum.

LC: Who was the…? Go ahead, Tom.
TB: Go ahead.
LC: I was going to ask who was the senior, actually, commander within the military chain of
command?
TB: That I can answer. It was General Nguyen Du when John arrived in MR2. But I had a
rather dismaying session in which John totally humiliated General Du when they had a visiting
congressional delegation in Pleiku, and I was attending the session. And General Du got up and
proposed a plan and John got up afterward and said, ‘Actually we should do it this way,’ and it was
a completely different approach.

LC: And what was the purpose of doing that in public?
TB: I was upset that this occurred in this fashion. Anyway, General Du was shortly
afterward removed. Then he was replaced by Nguyen van Thuan, a major general, Nguyen van
Thuan, who had come to...he'd been up in Quang Ngai and had a reputation as a lady killer and as
a being on the dole on the cinnamon trade. On the other hand, he was totally fearless, and soon
as he got to MR2 he determined to open the road between Pleiku and Kontum and he got on the
lead tank, exposing himself, sitting on the lead tank and they moved forward and opened the road.

LC: And did he survive that particular escapade?
TB: Yeah, sure. Also, he came to MR2 with a reputation that he had raped a fifteen year
old girl in Quang Ngai and...he was a very handsome man. Tall, imposing...and he once said to
John, 'You think I really need to rape a girl? They come to me naturally,’ and so on.

LC: Tom, what can you tell us about the corruption and allegations of corruption and graft
within the South Vietnamese Army leadership?
TB: Well, I can deal with this more in Military Region IV when I was Consular General in
Can Tho because I was more aware of the payoff system at that time.

LC: Ok. Well, we'll come back to it.
TB: I really don't know. I know that in MR4 the province chief had to pay for his job and
the district chief had to pay the province chief for the job and so on.

LC: Ok. Well, we can come back to that a little bit later. Tom, I want to ask you about the
EASTER Offensive and, first of all, about the precursor intelligence to that offensive. How much
was known before, say, before the actual operations began?
TB: This time a great deal because the offensive was greatly delayed and we had quite a
bit of information that it was about to occur. We expected it earlier than it inaugurated.

LC: Yes. Can you talk about what was supposed to happen around the time of Tet in
1972?
TB: Well, this was a complete difference from the TET of '68 in the sense that it was an
invasion by North Vietnamese and military units and not an attempt at insurrection through Viet
Cong cadre in the south. There were very few Viet Cong cadre left after the '68 TET Offensive,
and because of the advance in pacification it was very difficult for the VC to make a local, to
establish a local presence of any importance.

LC: What role did MR2 play, if you can tell, in the offensive planning of the North
Vietnamese?
TB: Well, that was the main scene...there were two main scenes of that offensive, two or three. One was a little bit up in Quang Tri in the Khe Sanh area, the other was my former province of Binh Long, which was heavily attacked from Cambodia, and then in MR2 there were...the greatest attempt was made in Kontum and secondarily in Binh Dinh in the western part of Binh Dinh province.

LC: Was Binh Long province within MR2 at this point?
TB: Which one? Sorry.
LC: Binh Long province, your old province?
TB: No, no. That's MR3.
LC: Ok. How much did you know, if anything, about what was happening in Binh Long while, of course, the offensive was developing? Were you able to keep track of the rest of the offensive operations outside MR2?
TB: In my visits to Saigon, I had nightly cocktails with Piechaud, who kept me informed about what was going on there.

LC: Ok. And, if you don't mind, review what happened in MR2 and particularly what happened to you. What did you do?
TB: Well, I tried to visit...there was one point where in Binh Dinh province in the northern part – I'm trying to remember – Hoai Nhon district I think it was, where there was an ARVN unit completely surrounded by VC. John was very busy up in the Kontum area and I was flying along the coast in Binh Dinh and I debated...the problem was there was no U.S. Air Force attention to this besieged location. I debated for some time whether to land in the compound where the ARVN holdout remained in the middle of the sea of being surrounded by the Viet Cong. I debated for the longest time and I finally decided against it, which is probably a good thing because I think the ARVN made an accommodation with the VC to let them sneak out of the compound and safe haven to the coast, but if I had gone in I would have disrupted that plan. I just hovered up there for quite a while trying to make up my mind, whether I should go in and then help them call in U.S. air support or by my presence attract U.S. air support, but I didn't do it. The other events occurred in Kontum where I went to visit the district chief during the Battle of Kontum. In flying above one particular area I came under fifty caliber machine gun fire with tracer bullets and we, the pilot, took evasive action by going...gaining altitude. Then, I landed in Kontum district which is five kilometers from Kontum city and as I was going – I talked to the district chief – and I was going out to get to
the landing strip for the helicopter, just as the pilot was about to land, a mortar round landed smack on the landing strip. He caught it just in...I mean he veered away just in time. And I took a path a little bit away from the landing strip and asked him to come in at a streambed to pick me up. Also, there was one outpost – reminiscent of the event in the Battle of Loc Ninh in '67 – an outpost, which needed some M-79 grenades. I mean, not the grenade, it's sort of like a grenade that you put in an M-79. I don't know what they call the...it's not a bullet. It's more like a mortar. Anyway, they had run out and they were – again, it was an isolated post – so I went back to Kontum city and got a case of this M-79 ammunition. We had to wait quite awhile. When we finally got it we flew to the outpost, landed at the outpost, and gave them this crate of ammunition.

LC: Did it make a difference?
TB: I think so, but I never got back to that location.
LC: Tom, when you were flying around – and all this travel I take it was by helicopter.
TB: Yeah, I want to correct. I said OH-1. It's an OH-58 called a 'Bell Jet Ranger'. I made a mistake this morning.
LC: Ok. Thank you very much. Were you accompanied by helicopter gun ships or were you just...?
TB: No, no. Never.
LC: Only on your own?
TB: That's right.
LC: And did you have a pilot assigned to you?
TB: I did.
LC: Who was the pilot?
TB: There were two of them. One was an Army captain and the other, the second, was a warrant officer. The last name escapes me offhand. They were both extremely capable pilots.
LC: And did they...were they assigned exclusively to you, Tom?
TB: Yes.
LC: Ok. How did you communicate with them when you wanted to go somewhere? Did you hand them an itinerary or did you call them and say 'Look, we need to go here and here and here,' how did it happen?
TB: They very rarely knew where I was going until we left the roof of the Grand Hotel.
LC: Can you talk a little bit about that? I know you mentioned it in the book about the
helicopter pad there on the top of the hotel.

TB: Yeah. Incidentally, the day after I left Nha Trang, Colonel Kerby, who was the senior
military man in MR2 at the time had the helicopter pad dismantled on the grounds that it was
insecure – not insecure, but unsafe. But the...John had – trying to save time, avoid going to the
Nha Trang airport, which took ten minutes of driving time – wanted to implant a helicopter landing
pad with lights so it could be used at night also on the roof of the Grand Hotel and he ordered this,
the military to get it done. A week past, which was a long time for him to tolerate anything, and
nothing had occurred, and the [military] answer was that the roof would have to be reinforced with
[a cost of] five thousand dollars in order to, so that the helicopter would not sink through the roof.
So, he immediately adjourned the meeting and told some thirty people to clamber up to the roof
with him, everybody at the meeting. And there was an iron staircase going up from the third floor
to the roof – second floor or third floor, I can't remember. He then gathered them in one corner of
the roof and said, ‘The OH-58 weighs twenty-six hundred pounds, but collectively we weigh at least
four thousand. Is the roof collapsing?’ And they had to agree that it was not collapsing. So he
ordered Howard Jones, who was a General Service Officer from AID, a man of great practical
achievement and minimal education, and within less than forty-eight hours he had a square landing
platform with flashing red lights at the end established, and from then on we took off from...both of
us took off from there and landed there.

LC: And Tom, you knew John very well at this point. What did this incident serve,
underscore for you how he operated and who he was?

TB: Well, he was an impatient man who was oriented toward getting results.

LC: And what was the point, if you can make a surmise about it, that dismantling the
helicopter pad?

TB: I'm sorry?

LC: What was the point of having that helicopter pad dismantled after you left?

TB: On the grounds that it was unsafe. On the liftoff...the liftoff time is the crucial moment
for a helicopter and it might have plummeted to the ground as one took off.

LC: But you had never experienced any problems at all, had you?

TB: Not at all.
LC: Ok. When you were traveling around, and this is -- the time I'm speaking about is during the EASTER Offensive -- were you making decisions sort as it were on the fly as to where you needed to go next based on the situation as it developed?

TB: Well, I always do that.

LC: Ok. What were your sources of information about what was happening? How were you getting information?

TB: Well, people were constantly visiting the headquarters from the provinces. That was the main source of information.

LC: And what were you hoping to accomplish by going up to Kontum?

TB: Well, I was merely trying to show interest in the teams which were exposed who were under my jurisdiction.

LC: And was John Vann also in Kontum most of the time?

TB: He was…every day during that offensive, he was up there. He had four helicopters shot out from under him in one particular day, three or four helicopters. They were shot down and he got picked up by others which were shot down and so on.

LC: Did you and he have a chance to talk about those events?

TB: Yes. He told me about them.

LC: Do you remember any of the other instances that he related to you about what was happening at Kontum?

TB: Well, he would...[after] a B-52 strike which he had plotted would land, would go in, and he would ride through in his helicopter right after the B-52 strike and talk about how stunned the North Vietnamese soldiers were by the impact of the force of the bombing, the thunder-like experience…it really stunned those people who were not killed by the bomb.

LC: Right. How effective do you think John Vann was in bolstering morale during the offensive?

TB: Well, he was virtually running the war up in Kontum. His enthusiasm and his presence aided a great deal.

LC: What, if you can say, was the end point of the offensive in the Kontum area? When did it end?

TB: It was shortly after...sometime in late June it petered out.

LC: But it continued all the way from April through to June?
LC: Ok. During that time period were you going up there with him on different occasions?
TB: We mainly...mainly traveled separately. Sometimes we would cross paths going the
same area but it would not have been a wise use of resources for the two of us to travel to the
same place at the same time.
LC: And were you and he also either independently or together making trips to Saigon?
TB: Certainly.
LC: Ok. Do you recall any of those? I'm sure you recall the one on the 9th of June, but
before that, do you remember what kinds of trips you were making and who you were meeting
with?
TB: I remember at one point when General Weyand, who was by then a four star general,
took over as Deputy for CORDS because this is...I think Colby had left and there was some
discussion whether Jake, George Jacobson, would take over or whom would be, so General
Weyand assumed the role. And he would have periodic meetings of the CORDS organization,
CORDS leadership, in Saigon.
LC: Now, this is Fred Weyand?
TB: Yeah, sure.
LC: Who had previously been, I don't know, Deputy Commander, if I'm not mistaken, of
MACV?
TB: Well, he was then Deputy Commander of MACV but he also took on the additional role
as Deputy for CORDS.
LC: Ok. Can you give a just a brief sketch of Fred Weyand?
TB: He was a remarkable, quite prescient general who was not a West Point graduate but
had a very informal, non – I want to say non-military – non-protocol approach to life in general. I
found him infinitely approachable.
LC: And you had known him earlier, is that right?
TB: He had been my endorsing officer for my efficiency report when I was in Military
Region III.
LC: And when he sort of stepped in at the head of CORDS did anything change?
TB: Not really because whoever was running CORDS like Jake kept on running it.
LC: Ok. So it was more or less a figurehead position at that...
TB: It was to avoid…it was set up that way to avoid controversy. I don’t remember. There was some contention about whether Jake should be head of CORDS or something.

LC: But in effect he continued to exert the greatest influence.

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. Tom, can you tell me about the 9th of June 1972?

TB: Well, John and I left Nha Trang early in the morning and he had three appointments – General, I imagine it was General Abrams, the ambassador, and somebody else, maybe the AID chief. He managed to sandwich in during the, between the appointments, assignations with three different girls, which he told me about on the trip back. We brought back with us on the U-21 General, then Colonel, Kingston who was scheduled to take over from General Ware as John’s military deputy. Now with John’s death what happened was that Mike Healy was sent up to replace John, and Kingston, shortly thereafter – they both became brigadier generals – but Kingston did not become the commander of Military Region II. Both of them ended up…I know that – what was the fellow’s name? Mike Healy later became a four star general and I know that Kingston was at least a lieutenant general, but he rode up on the plane with us. I took the plane then from Pleiku to Nha Trang and John…no General Ware had been replaced earlier. This is another general who was John’s military deputy who was leaving and Kingston was to replace him.

LC: And you flew…the three of you then flew from Saigon to Pleiku. Am I right?

TB: That’s right. And then I went alone with the pilot, of course, to Nha Trang.

LC: Ok. And when did you find out that John Vann had crashed?

TB: It was about midnight when Blackey, his enlisted aid, called in tears.

LC: What can you tell me about Blacky?

TB: He was devoted to John, but he was a very uncomplicated individual if any individual is uncomplicated.

LC: And he phoned you with the very bad news that night?

TB: That’s right.

LC: And Tom, what did you do?

TB: Well, I don’t know how much of this should go on the record but John kept what was called a black box, which his closest friends were privy to, which had a number of rather risqué photographs he’d taken and it also contained a homographic will leaving his, a certain amount of money – insurance money or whatever, his possessions – to his Vietnamese wife.
LC: Now he had divorced his American wife at that point?

TB: I'm not sure whether the divorce was final at that point. May have been. The book also contained some journals – the box also contained some journals. So, I thought that this was probably a felony and it would be best to purge the box of the pictures he’d shown me. So, I went to the Grand Hotel – this is about 1:00 A.M. – and the bewildered guy and I, guard and I, carried the box down and put it in my vehicle. I drove back to my quarters, my house. I broke the hasp on the box, took out the pornographic pictures, dated the holographic will because it was undated, and restored everything except the pictures to the box except for one picture of John which I saved for my own use. Then, I got the box back in the jeep, in the car, went back to the Grand Hotel, pounded the hasp back in, and called the guard again. We restored the box to its position next to John's desk. The next morning I got a call from Jake, who told me the details of what, the funeral arrangements and so on. And he said, ‘By the way, there’s that box.’ I said I’d taken care of it. He said, ‘Thank you.’ So, the next day I was flying to Dalat by helicopter and over the highlands I scattered these pictures. Some Montagnard must have been delighted at receiving them.

LC: Tom, what was your motivation in taking care of this, these potentially embarrassing photographs?

TB: To avoid embarrassment of John's reputation.

LC: Ok. The journals that you mentioned that were in the box, were those his private diaries?

TB: Yes.

LC: And those survived then?

TB: They survived. Yes. I don't know. They were not as extensive. They didn't cover everyday. He lamented that he didn’t write up each day but they covered some period.

LC: How many were there? Do you remember?

TB: I don't remember.

LC: Ok. But it was, as you intimate in relaying the information about the phone call from Mr. Jacobson, it was sort of known that he had this potentially compromising material?

TB: It was known among people close to him because he’d shown them the contents.

LC: Why did he do that?

TB: Why did he do that? That's an interesting question.
LC: Ok. I just wondered if you had any insight into that. Tom, did you then contact his wife in Vietnam?

TB: I waited till early in the morning and Tina Kapsanis, my secretary, and I went to where she was living and woke her up. She got out of bed, came out to see us, and we, I explained the situation to her and she fainted. She's a girl, not fat, but of substantial size so it was good to have Tina there because I don't know whether I could have supported her.

LC: And did Tina stay with her then?

TB: For a while. Yes.

LC: And was Tina good with taking care of this, obviously extracurricular issue that she had to help with?

TB: Oh yes.

LC: She was a team player then?

TB: Certainly.

LC: Is Tina still with us?

TB: The last time I saw her was at a CORDS reunion in Washington or in Virginia, northern Virginia, about three or four years ago. She was in bad health at the time and I talked to her once more on the phone. I've got her...let me see if I've got her name and address here.

LC: Ok. Well, perhaps I can get that from you a little bit later, and maybe we should take a break now, Tom.
Interview with Thomas Barnes
Session 9 of 14
April 15, 2004

LC: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive continuing the oral history interview with
Thomas Barnes. Today’s date is the 15th of April 2004. I again am on the campus of Texas Tech
in Lubbock and Mr. Barnes is in Austin. Good morning, Tom.

TB: Good morning.

LC: There were one or two things that we might clarify about your time as consul in Udorn.

TB: One of them is a memo that I wrote on March 16, 1970, which I’ll send you a copy of,
that dealt with a crash on take-off of a plane from Nakhon Phanom Airbase. [The Memorandum of
March 16, 1970, written by Tom Barnes, U.S. Consul, Udorn, Thailand, is available in the Thomas
J. Barnes Collection, Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.] Nakhon Phanom Airbase was the
headquarters of the 7/13 Air Force and it was the nerve center for the Southeast Asian air war.
The amusing thing about it is that there was never any formal or written agreement with the Thai
government to place the 7/13 in Nakhon Phanom and the only testimony to the fact that it existed is
a silver tray that Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn gave the commanding general as a gift saying
‘To The Commander of 7/13 Air Force at Nakhon Phanom From Prime Minister Thanom
Kittikachorn’. So a silver tray represents the agreement we had with the Thai government on that
score.

LC: Tom, just as a matter of comparison, were the U.S. units placed at the other airbases
at Udorn and Ubon…

TB: And Korat.

LC: …and Korat, did they have written agreements?

TB: No. There was no written agreement whatsoever.

LC: Really. Ok. That’s quite unusual. Yes?

TB: Yes. It’s quite unusual. There’s no Status of Forces Agreement, for

example.

LC: So when something happens like a crash, were Thai investigators, were Thai
military, involved in evaluating the causes or cleaning up the problem?
TB: Not to my knowledge, but the problem in this particular case was that some villagers
went into the site of the accident and some ordnance exploded and killed one of them. Now they
had been warned not to go in the area but that didn’t discourage them from doing so.
LC: Ok. And you were noting also that you had arrived as a consular officer, as the chief
consular officer there, then at least by early March.
TB: It was very early in March and Lee Bigelow was the Acting Consul. Lee Bigelow had
arranged a very large reception for me and I almost didn’t make it. The Army got us by plane, a U-
10 – whatever that is – from Korat to Udorn about an hour before the reception was to take place.
LC: That was cutting it fine.
TB: Yes. Then I have, in a letter dated the 8th of March, described the trip from Sakon
Nakhon to Nakhon Phanom.
‘The following day where we met the governor and attended a party he gave that night
from 6:30 to 12:30 in honor of General Thong Cherm, who recently acquired his fourth star and has
been 2nd Army Commander, covering the northeast until a short while ago. The 2nd Army chief of
staff was a Thai military attaché in Laos much of the time I was there and he brought his wife who
has a Master’s degree in education from Columbia.’
LC: Do you recall whether she was Laotian?
TB: No, no. She was Thai.
LC: Thai. Ok.
TB: ‘The governor’s daughter spent five years in school in England and speaks English
with a pronounced British accent. The Lao deputy governor from across the river – that’s
at Thaket – joined the party. Khammouane province. Today we crossed…’
This is interesting.
‘Today we crossed at noon to Savannakhet.’
That’s as I was traveling with Lee Bigelow and saw so and so.
‘Jack Foisie, Dean Rusk’s brother-in-law, a Southeast Asian correspondent for the Los
Angeles Times was on hand. He privately observed to a friend of mine that Lee and I were
CIA men and registered in his notebook, the ‘new development at CIA being given a
political role such as consul at Udorn.’ Jack Foisie has never been known for accuracy but
this story will probably appear in the Times as a sign of increased U.S. involvement in
Southeast Asia. I hate to be identified with that group. Then, I mentioned this afternoon, we drove over ox cart trails to reach the site of the inadvertent B-52 bomb release.’ That is described, I think in some detail, in the chron files. If it isn’t I’ll try to fill it in for you later.

‘But the main thing is we’ve persuaded the Air Force to dig up what they could and bury the rest [to create] fish ponds, and it was quite a successful operation.’ The entire load of the 108 bombs from B-52 landed in a remote area of…let’s say it was Ubon and, can’t remember the province next to Ubon. Of the 108 bombs the only casualty was one woman with a broken arm, and that was because it was in a rural area. Gives you some idea of the B-52. Ok, that’s…I think that’s all the comment I wanted to make.

LC: Ok. Tom, if you don’t mind, I want to clarify one thing. Dean Rusk’s brother-in-law’s last name was spelled how? Do you remember?


LC: Ok. Was he someone that you had met?

TB: I met him in Laos or Bangkok. I don’t know which.

LC: Ok. But he was around in Southeast Asia obviously. And was this the first time that you know of where someone had thought that you were CIA?

TB: And my children when I had a picture taken with sunglasses on.

LC: Did you disabuse them or did you think that…?

TB: No, no. I disabused them.

LC: I don’t know. That might be useful in raising kids. ‘I’m Agency.’ – You know – ‘Don’t mess around!’ But in any event, did you ever talk with Jack Foisie about the issue of who you actually worked for?

TB: No, I didn’t bother.

LC: Ok. And actually, in the chron files that you were depositing here, speaking of correspondence, there was also a letter from, I think, Mr. Alsop in Washington to you. Was he someone that you knew?

TB: Well, he would visit me whenever he visited Asia. So did Bob Shaplan. Bob Shaplan was the most sound, most reliable correspondent in Southeast Asia.

LC: Why do you say that?

TB: Because he was.
LC: Ok. What makes you think that then, Tom?

TB: Because he knew...he had very good sources of information and he was quite pessimistic about the eventual American triumph in Southeast Asia.

LC: Did you come to share that pessimism as well while you were over there?

TB: No.

LC: Looking back on it do you feel differently?

TB: Certainly. By '74 my thoughts began to change on that score. But I was fairly confident in '73 that things could make their way successfully in South Vietnam, which was a naïve approach.

LC: Why?

TB: Because it wasn’t true.

LC: What did you base your thinking on at the time, in 1973 when you were still...?

TB: Well, this was when there was still a possibility of U.S. air intervention in the event that North Vietnam got testy in the south.

LC: Did you have any inkling or intuition about whether, in 1973, the United States made some kind of promise to President Thieu about that?

TB: Well, I was under the impression that that was the case. Yeah.

LC: Tom, let’s – if you don’t mind – return to your time as Associate Director [of AID] or Deputy for CORDS in Nha Trang and, I’m thinking now about the late spring of 1972. Can you tell me what the effects were of the loss of John Vann? And perhaps you want to speak of that personally or in terms of the American effort.

TB: Well, he had successfully staved off the North Vietnamese attacks in Kontum by the time of his death. So, the offensive was over or virtually over by the time he died. The effect on the structure of the U.S. advisory effort was quite pronounced in the sense that the MR2 reverted to a military command structure.

LC: An exclusively military command structure? In other words, Vann’s position as a civilian advisor sort of, I don’t know, atrophied?

TB: Well, he was replaced by a lieutenant general – a fellow who became, Mike Healy became a lieutenant general.

LC: And I’m sorry, that’s name was...I think you mentioned it yesterday.

TB: Mike Healy, H-E-A-L-Y.
LC: Yes. Ok. And what was Healy’s background?

TB: Well, he was a career military man.

LC: Did he have much experience with managing the civilian end of or results of military operations?

TB: Not really. No.

LC: Ok. You worked for him then, for a little while?

TB: Very brief period. I had planned before John’s death to leave in July of ’72, chiefly because my wife had contracted melanoma and had an operation for melanoma and it was not wise to continue in Southeast Asia from that time, so I had planned to leave in July anyway. Now the man that John had selected as my successor was not Healy’s choice, he chose somebody else. Hatcher James, who was a career AID man, capable career AID man, but it had originally been a fellow named Jerry – I can’t remember the last name offhand – who was a USIA officer. And he had been John’s choice for a successor. So, what I’m trying to say is that his death did not determine my departure. We had planned on that beforehand. He had also told me – John had also told me – that he planned to leave in July of that year and go with his Vietnamese wife to Hong Kong. He had a contract with Martin Marietta, but he was personally dismayed at the government of Vietnam, the ARVN’s inability to confront the North Vietnamese; the fact that they needed so much help from his quarter.

LC: Tom, do you know what the outline of the work was that John Vann was supposed to do while he was in Hong Kong?

TB: I have no idea. He was a consultant for Martin Marietta. I don’t know what he did for them.

LC: You said that he was dismayed by the ARVN’s lack of responsiveness. Was that a feeling that you think had been growing for him over time and was galvanized by what happened in Kontum, or…?

TB: I imagine that’s the case. Yeah.

LC: Ok. It wasn’t something that he was coming to all of a sudden?

TB: No, no.

LC: Ok. You mentioned that your wife had been ill so you were making preparations to go elsewhere. Where did you want to go?

TB: Well, somewhere where there could be competent medical care.
LC: Where had she been being treated?
TB: In Bangkok. Immediately upon discovery of this the operation took place within a few
days, and it was fortunate that there was no recurrence.
LC: Did you then inform the Foreign Service that you needed to be posted elsewhere?
TB: That’s right. Yeah.
LC: And what response did you get?
TB: Well, they like to plan quite a bit in advance. They finally came up with the possibility
of Tangier.
LC: Tom, before that there was some discussion about Paris, is that right?
TB: Yes, but the person who was…the Paris Embassy always had somebody with an
expertise in Asia, and that individual stayed on so the vacancy did not occur.
LC: Was that a matter of disappointment to you?
TB: I really prefer working in Asia but I would have much preferred Paris to Tangier.
LC: I would imagine. There was also, I believe, from looking over the chron files that you
sent us, some discussion about your being placed at the War College. Do you remember that?
TB: Well, that would be as a student in the War College.
LC: Yes. Would that have been an appealing alternative?
TB: Not at all.
LC: Why is that?
TB: I had been to the basic infantry officer’s course at Ft. Benning in 1950 and I was not
entranced with military instruction.
LC: How then did the position in Tangier come to be offered to you and when? Do you
remember?
TB: I don’t know but I went to…let’s see…in late ’72, I don’t recall the exact date.
LC: That’s ok. Was that satisfactory in terms of the motivation for leaving Asia, which was
to get good competent medical care and attention for your wife?
TB: There was not particular medical care in Morocco but that was closer to major medical
centers than Southeast Asia would have been.
LC: Tom, can you tell me a little bit about your time as Consul General in Tangier? First of
all, what was the size of the office and how many personnel did you have under you?
TB: There were two Americans, vice consuls – or one American vice consul – and several local employees who were quite competent.

LC: Do you remember who you replaced?

TB: Dan Newberry, I believe, but I may be mistaken on that score.

LC: Ok. Was the Foreign Service interested in providing you with language training?

TB: Well, I… I don't know whether the Foreign Service was but I was interested and I took Spanish because three of the four provinces that were under the consular district had formerly been part of Spanish Morocco so Spanish was spoken in Tetouan, which is the largest province to the east of Tangier. Then Moroccan Arabic or Maherebian Arabic spoken in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco was also an essential, particularly for Al Houceimo province, which is the one to the farthest east at the Algerian border. So I undertook lessons in both… the posting in Tangier was one of the few boring, the only boring assignment I ever had in the Foreign Service.

LC: Why was it boring?

TB: There was just nothing to do. I'd get a couple routine telegrams in the morning and that was it for the day.

LC: Where there other consulates in Tangier?

TB: Oh there were a lot of them. The French one was – I had a very good friend there that was the French Consular General, his name escapes me, but he had been a district officer for the French in Vietnam at one point. And he was very enthusiastic about Vietnam. He said when he was district officer in Phan Rang province the locals had provided him with une fille sur l'oreiller chaque soir – a girl on the pillow every night. So he had tender memories of his service in Vietnam.

TC: It would seem. Yes. And I imagine that was a point of connection between the two of you then. I mean the fact that you were both in Vietnam. And Tom, can you describe the extent of French influence?

TB: Well, the language was the principal thing because there is a secondary language for Tangier but Spanish was the secondary language for Tetouan, which is a larger province. There was very little of interest except there were three things of interest to most people who arrived in Tangier. That was tourism, hashish, and little boys. And once one got exhausted of those three there were no more interests in the post.
LC: Although it’s something that doesn’t interest, or didn’t interest you at the time, I wonder if I can just pursue for a moment the fact that...well, actually, can you tell me about the Moroccan government with either the officials with whom you probably had some work to do or the government in general? Can you describe its orientation and policies?

TB: Well, it’s a monarchy of course and an absolute monarchy in many facets. There was its...my counterpart, the consular general in Casablanca, who – trying to remember his name offhand [Cliff Sanethave] – I stayed overnight with him in the house that he had in Casablanca, and Winston Churchill had once been there for some sort of negotiation.

LC: Yes. There was a big conference there.

TB: The government’s...this Consul General had been attending a party at the palace when there was a coup attempt against the king. A lot of people were killed but the king survived and so did the Consul General. And the provinces were, as in Asia, staffed by Ministry of Interior officials. I remember paying my courtesy call on the governor of Tangier and he had a guard outside with swords. Each member of the guard was about six feet five inches tall and I’m 5’7”. So I went up this long stairwell to the building in which his office was located with these enormously tall guards with their swords at the salute – you know, straight up. I found it rather humorous.

LC: Was the governor of Tangier an honorific position?

TB: No, no. It was an Interior Ministry position, but the one...one of the things that Tangier was known for was that Malcolm Forbes had a villa there and on one occasion he flew in on the Capitalist Tool, his private plane – a whole group of people for an overnight party. I was invited to attend, and I saw Moroccan officials that I never would have had contact with, I never would have had access to, under the course of ordinary business because of Forbes’ name.

LC: Did you meet Malcolm Forbes?

TB: Oh yeah, sure.

LC: What was your impression of him?

TB: He was very cordial.

LC: Really? Ok. And had he had that villa for quite a long time?

TB: Yes.

LC: Was he in and out of there as far as you know?

TB: Not very frequently. I was there only a few months but he came in only once during that time.
LC: Tom, can you talk a little bit about the economy of the area? I mean you’ve mentioned hashish.

TB: Hashish was up in the mountains in the Berber areas.

LC: Yes. What was the structure of the economy like, and if you can say anything about the level of poverty or otherwise?

TB: Well, all I remember...I used to drive down every two weeks to attend the Embassy staff meetings, they were held weekly but I went down every two weeks, and I remember sitting in this air conditioned car with the windows rolled up at a particular stop sign and a boy, I would judge about twelve or fourteen years old, came up and spat on the window of the car. He was in rags. So, one gets the impression there was not a very flourishing economy. It consisted principally of tourism, particularly in areas like Marrakech, Casablanca, Rabat and Tangier.

LC: Tom, can you tell me anything about the rest of the consular community in Tangier at the time you were there? For example, I’m particularly interested in asking about the Soviet Union’s representatives and those from Eastern Europe.

TB: I don’t recall either of that. All I remember is my French friend.

LC: Ok. Were you supposed to be monitoring internal developments? Was that part of what you were doing as consulate general?

TB: Not much. Not much was expected of me in that role.

LC: Who was the ambassador?

TB: Stuart Rockwell. He had an extremely competent Arabist as a deputy, Richard Parker – who later became ambassador to Algeria and perhaps elsewhere. He was fluent in Arabic. Rockwell was the Department’s protocol officer at one point.

LC: And he didn’t demand very much of you?

TB: There wasn’t much to demand in that post.

LC: Did you take the opportunity to travel over to Europe?

TB: I attended a consular conference in Madrid that Barbara, who was the black woman that was so effective as secretary for – Assistant Secretary of State – for Consular Affairs?

LC: From Texas?

TB: I don’t...maybe.

LC: Jordan?
TB: Oh Jordan. That’s the one.

LC: Yes? Ok.

TB: She was most cordial. I only went to Madrid on one occasion.

LC: Ok. Were you relieved when you received orders away from Tangier?

TB: I was delighted. I spent only three months. It was from November to January, and my

assignment continued through June and I came…I left the consular general in the hands of Jerry

Keathley, my vice consul.

LC: How do you spell his last name?


LC: And was he sad to see you go or relieved that he would now be acting, the acting

principal?

TB: I don’t know about his personal feelings on that score, except that he resented the fact

that my children were running all over the consulate grounds because the official residence was

back to back in the same compound with the consulate, consulate general.

LC: And he wasn’t too happy about having the kids around?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Ok. And what ages were the children at this point that you had with you?

TB: Ross must have been thirteen, or twelve or thirteen, fourteen, somewhere in there.

But I can pin it down. He was born in ’58, so this was – 1972 and ’73 – so, fourteen.

LC: How was there schooling being managed, Tom?

TB: That was the principal function of the consular general was advising or having some

association with the American School of Tangier. We brought in a principal from the school system

in Greece, the American School system in Greece, he turned out not to be terribly effective. We

then selected a principal teacher from Joe – what was his name? Joe Mc-something. A very

competent man who had given my son, Ross, private lessons in Latin or some other language.

Joe McPallios, McPallios, or something like that. The problem with the functioning of the American

school was that of the hundred and twenty or so students, a hundred and…over a hundred were

Moroccan students on a dole. So, it was not…the schools office and [it was not the] State

Department, the American Schools office, and this one was not paying for itself, obviously,
because so many scholarships had been given. So that was a problem that had to be managed.
LC: Was it part of the arrangement for, made by the State Department, that the American
Schools would provide those scholarships to local children so that they could access the American
education system?

TB: Well, I think it just got out of hand. Also, there was a pronounced foreign homosexual
community in Tangier, and there was a son of an English aristocrat named David Herbert, who was
known as the 'queen of Tangier'.

LC: So, I'm taking it he was quite a flamboyant character.

TB: Yes. He told me one time that I must come for dinner because in twenty years he had
never had dinner alone.

LC: So, he was what? Just a wealthy ex-pat who…?

TB: I don't know how wealthy he was because there is a photograph of him taken in front
of his ancestral estate in which he's standing on a step leading to the doorway and the whole
background, the yard, is in terrible shape and everything.

LC: Oh ok. What more can you tell me about him?

TB: That's about all.

LC: Ok. But there was this community, gay community, of Europeans primarily or
Americans as well?

TB: Well, there were some Americans. Now the most distinguished American, of course,
was Paul Bowles whom I went to call on in his apartment, which is right across the street from the
consulate residence.

LC: In what way was he a figure of note?

TB: Well, he's a noted author. Paul Bowles. B-O-W-L-E-S.

LC: Yes. And what was your impression of him?

TB: Modest man of humility and competence.

LC: And he had been living in Tangier for quite a while?

TB: He lived there for most of his adult life.

LC: What had originally brought him there? Was it something other than the boys and the
hashish or do you know?

TB: I don't know.

LC: Ok. But I take it he was still there when you left.

TB: Yeah sure.
LC: Tom, can you discuss the circumstances of…

TB: Oh and one other person that was there was Evelyn Waugh’s brother, Alex. Evelyn Waugh was my favorite British author. And Alex, I think, had an American wife. So we saw them socially on one or two occasions.

LC: What was your impression of him?

TB: I liked him very much. He mentioned that Evelyn in his later years had begun to see visions, maybe because of alcohol or some other factor. Incidentally, I have my favorite Evelyn Waugh novel and I have most of them. This *Vile Body*, and Evelyn Waugh appeared at St. Thomas College to give a lecture on Edmund Campion’s *The Saint and Martyr* sometime when I was still in Minnesota. Everybody else presented *Brideshead Revisited* to him, and I have his signature on *Vile Bodies*.

LC: While you were yet a college student you went to see him?

TB: That’s right.

LC: And you were already clearly a fan of his and deep into what he had been writing by that time. So it must have been something of a thrill to meet his brother.

TB: Yeah. He was a very pleasant, very sociable individual.

LC: What about his wife? Do you remember anything about her, where she was from?

TB: Somewhere in the U.S. but I don’t know just where. Incidentally, this is an aside, which may be irrelevant…

LC: No, nothing’s irrelevant. Go ahead.

TB: But my favorite paragraph in twentieth century fiction is Waugh’s description of the isles…let me just…this is a single paragraph.

‘The Isle of Mug has no fame in song or story. Perhaps because whenever they sought a rhyme for the place they struck absurdity, it was neglected by those romantic, early Victorian English ladies who so prodigly enriched the Balladry, folklore and costume of the Scottish Highlands. It has a laird, a fishing fleet, an hotel (erected just before the First World War) in the unfulfilled hope of attracting tourists and nothing more. It lies among other monosyllabic protuberances. There is seldom clear weather in these waters but on certain rare occasions, Mug has been decried from the island of Rum in the form of two cones. The Cabrtras of Muck know it as a single misty lump in the horizon. It has never been seen from egg.’
I love that paragraph.

LC: When you presented *Vile Bodies* to Waugh, did he say anything?

TB: I didn’t actually speak to the great man but the sole questions that Americans who brought up *Brideshead Revisited*...several of them asked him how long it took him to write it. He replied three weeks.

LC: Tom, when did you actually leave Tangier?

TB: I left at the end of January for...January of '73, but I went back twice for a few days each before packing up in June.

LC: Where did you spend the months then from January to June?

TB: In Can Tho.

LC: So, can you talk about the circumstances under which you received or learned about your transfer back to Vietnam?

TB: Well, the U.S. military was withdrawing from Vietnam so in the place of the poor military command in Vietnam they decided to create consulates general in each of the military regions and they asked me to go back to head the one in the Delta at Can Tho.

LC: Just quickly for reference, the other con-gens were located where?

TB: Bien Hoa, Nha Trang, and Da Nang.

LC: Ok. And these were all brand new offices as you point out.

TB: No, not the one in Da Nang. The one in Da Nang had been a consul general or consulate, I don’t know which.

LC: Why was there no office opened at Hue? Do you know?

TB: Well, there was one for each military region and the headquarters, the military headquarters, for Region One was in Da Nang.

LC: Ok. So that was what was driving the decision?

TB: Yes.

LC: Ok. But there was still a consulate at Hue...

TB: No, no. The consulate had been moved from Hue to Da Nang.

LC: Oh ok. And made into a consulate general?

TB: Yes.

LC: Ok. Tom, was it...I’m sure that you were glad to be going to Vietnam. Were you glad to be going to the Delta?
TB: I was, because I had had been stationed at all the other three military regions but I had never been stationed in the Delta.

LC: Did you have a reading-in period or did you arrive and open the office right away?

TB: The latter is the case.

LC: And how many people did you have under you eventually?

TB: Well, there were over two hundred if I recall correctly, but what was amazing about this assignment was there was sixteen Foreign Service Officers. Fifteen of them were then currently or had previously served in Vietnam and spoke Vietnamese on at least three level, which is a business level – fifteen out of sixteen Foreign Service officers speaking Vietnamese. The CIA base in Can Tho had eight officers, only one of whom spoke Vietnamese, which again shows the myth of CIA language competence.

LC: Was that something you had observed earlier inside South Vietnam, that CIA people usually did not have language proficiency?

TB: Well, let me point out that there was a CIA officer in Thailand who was very fluent in Thai. One occasionally encountered this, but the myth that they're all trained in the local language is a myth.

LC: Tom, did you have any say as to who was assigned at Can Tho underneath you?

TB: Yes. For example, Frank Wisner was scheduled to go to Military Region II and he and I appealed to Jake, who was heading the organization that he [Frank] would come down as my deputy in the Delta. Frank has become a career ambassador, which is the highest rank in the Foreign Service, and he later became ambassador, first to Zambia then to Egypt then to the Philippines then to India. He was in the running for ambassador to France, but Felix Rohaytn or however you pronounce his name – a political appointee of great competence – beat him out for that role. And he's now the Director [Vice Chairman] for International Affairs of AIG, American International Group. At any rate, he's a man of extreme competence. His father, Frank Wisner's, was involved in the establishment of the OSS, along with Desmond Fitzgerald and Bill [William] Donovan.

LC: How do you spell Frank's last name?

TB: W-I-S-N-E-R.

LC: And where was he from?

TB: He's from Mississippi, although what that means I don't know.
LC: Right. He’s probably from a lot of different places. And he had Vietnamese language competence?

TB: Yes.

LC: And also I’m thinking probably French?

TB: Yeah sure.

LC: What other languages? Do you know?

TB: I don't know whether he had any Magigarbian Arabic, because when I was in Tangier I visited him in Tunis.

LC: Ok. So he had already been…he had been North Africa as well?

TB: Yeah sure.

LC: Ok. What position did he have in the consulate general?

TB: He was my deputy.

LC: Ok. And to what duties was he assigned?

TB: Well, managing the office when I went back to Tangier and just general rating of the other thirteen FSOs and so on.

LC: Can you talk a little bit about the organizational template of the consulate general?

TB: What we did was station the various FSOs out in the…most of them out in the provinces as vice consuls even though some of them had the rank where they could be called consul. We had, instead of province senior advisors, interprovincial advisors, which some individuals would cover more than one province. The vice consuls who went out were charged with reporting. We had to submit a daily sitrep [situation report] on the ceasefire situation. Eventually, we were able to drop the Sunday sitrep. But for the first month or two, it was a daily affair, but it reverted to six days a week after that.

LC: Who managed the assemblage of the information for that sitrep?

TB: I don't recall exactly who it was on the staff, maybe it was Frank, but I proofed them quite thoroughly.

LC: And they then went to Saigon?

TB: They went directly to Washington with a copy to Saigon.

LC: And who was on the, if you recall, the Saigon desk or – I'm sorry, the South Vietnam desk in Washington?

TB: I don't know.
LC: Who was the ambassador that you were reporting to?

TB: There was in…Saigon had a peculiar structure of an ambassador and a deputy ambassador. So upon my arrival, Ellsworth Bunker was the ambassador but he came in for a farewell call on General Nghi, [who at] one point was presented with an elephant tusk, and he was succeeded by Graham Martin, for whom I’d worked in Bangkok. But Charlie Whitehouse was the deputy ambassador at that time.

LC: And did you have more interaction with the deputy ambassador?

TB: Yes. Sure. At one point Sam Berger was the deputy ambassador, but I can’t recall whether that was back in ’67 and ’68 or…that’s the father I think of the Sammy Berger who was Clinton’s national security man.

LC: Can you tell about your impressions of Ambassador Bunker, if you were able to form any?

TB: Well, he was a Christian. Very dignified individual, very approachable. I recall when he came down to Can Tho for his farewell call. He was getting in and out of the car rather stiffly and he was having some arthritic problems, I think, at the time. Now, I can sympathize with him because I’m having the same thing.

LC: Aging is tough and it just doesn’t get any easier. That’s all there is to it. Tom, how often, when you were in Can Tho, did you go into Saigon?

TB: I went frequently.

LC: Were you meeting with representatives of the military attaché’s office as well as defense?

TB: Yeah. Oddly enough the military attaché was my fellow company commander at Ft. Dix in 1955 and ’56, Richard McMahon. He had M Company and I had L Company in the 354th Training Regiment. So this is a pure coincidence.

LC: Very odd.

TB: Yeah. He’s been a good friend. I’ve known him ever since ’54 and we visit…I visit him in Hawaii every time I go there.

LC: And I take it then he’s still with us?


LC: Ok. Can you give a brief outline of the kinds of meetings you attended?
TB: Well, I also saw General Murray who was assigned, not as JUSMAG – er, pardon me – not as COMUSMACV or whatever it was, but as a logistics man who was to supply the ARVN with as much equipment as possible. He was a bright fellow also.

LC: What was his first name?

TB: I think it was John, but I don’t know. Then I would see the deputy ambassador or the ambassador. I remember going in one time to see…I thought I was going to see Ambassador Whitehouse, but he was out of town. I saw Ambassador Bunker about the fact that every single province chief in the delta was about to be replaced and I was afraid it was another money making scheme for General Nghi, the 4th…Military IV Region Commander, but I pointed out the instability that might create if all of the province chiefs were replaced at once.

LC: I take it from that – and I may be wrong, please correct me – that the thinking was the offices were going to be put up for sale?

TB: That’s my theory.

LC: Did that in fact take place?

TB: I don’t recall what the outcome was, whether part or all of it or whatever.

LC: Ok. Tom, let’s take a break.

LC: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive continuing the oral history interview with Tom Barnes. Today is the 15th of April 2004. I am in Lubbock and Tom is in Austin. Hi, Tom.

TB: Hello.

LC: Were there a couple of clarification that you wanted to add from our earlier talk this morning?

TB: I’m trying to find my way in the morass of paperwork here.

LC: Ok. But we did agree, I think, that the woman whose name we were struggling for this morning was…

TB: Barbara Watson.

LC: Watson. Yes, that’s right. And I have made a note that she was with the Bureau of Security and Consular Affairs.

TB: That’s correct.

LC: Ok.

TB: She was the assistant secretary for that function. I’m trying to find where I’ve gone awry here.
LC: Take your time. In fact, we’ll take a break for a minute.

TB: 13th of April ’73 when I was assigned to Can Tho, I went to Binh Long on the thirteenth of April.

‘Piechaud and Gaudeul…’

They were the Cexo managers, the national manager and the local manager. ‘…arranged a sentimental return journey to An Loc for me today. It was a chastening Good Friday experience. I flew to Saigon in the morning once Gaudeul drove me to Long Binh near Bien Hoa. At 1100 we took an ARVN helicopter to An Loc, flying at what I consider to be an irrationally low 2500 feet. The province chief, Colonel Thanh…’

Whom I subsequently met again at Lubbock a few years ago for one of the triennial conferences, not the most recent one but the one before that.

‘The province chief, Colonel Thanh, was on hand to greet us. He drove us in his jeep along Route 13 to the southern limit of his control, eight kilometers away. The highway, so little traveled, has excellent unbroken asphalt except for occasional monstrous bomb craters. All around were disabled Soviet tanks. Most of the rubber trees are broken or topless.

Then into the city from a civilian population of 6000 there remain only 320. The main…’

This is the offensive of ’73 against Binh Long.

‘The main market on the hill was empty and gutted out. Route 13 through the city was blocked off by barbed wire and disabled tanks and trucks. That portion of it running past my former house is overgrown with weeds. The exterior wall and the cement platform are all that remain of my prefab. The slab serves for ammunition storage. The bunker is intact, however, and the province chief said that it sheltered many civilians during the height of the attack.

Most of the buildings of the provincial hospital were destroyed and the city abounds with memorials, as well as single and mass graves. One can drive four kilometers to the north, four to the east, and apparently not at all to the west. Province headquarters is badly damaged. My camera rebelled at the sight; the shutter refused to work. But Gaudeul took several pictures with his Leika, and gave me the black and white roll.

The province chief and his wife gave an extensive lunch, we took the helicopter back to Long Binh, a car to Saigon, and I reached Can Tho by plane before 1800.’
Anyway, it’s a glimpse of what happened during the ‘73 offensive there.

LC: Was the offensive specifically targeted at Binh Long province?

TB: Yes, it was that and Kontum.

LC: And again Tom, can you just sort of sketch out the strategic reasons why that was a particular point at which the communists had pushed…?

TB: Well, in ’67 and ’68, the northern districts of Binh Long, Loc Ninh, had been the object of an all out attack by the North Vietnamese launched from Cambodia, and the objective, in my view, was to have a district in South Vietnamese territory they could claim as their base. So again, they returned to Binh Long in ’73 during the massive offensive that took place in Kontum, western Binh Dinh, and the northern part of MR1 as well as Binh Long.

LC: Would you say again with the same or similar political objective?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok.

TB: Let’s see now. This is dated the 15th, dealing with work in Can Tho.

LC: 15th of April?

TB: Yes. ’73. ‘The famous Symington team…’

And this is under Symington team of Lowenstein and Moose…

‘…chose today for a visit. Frank and I…’

Frank Wisner and I…

‘…briefed him for a couple of hours and then he took Jim Lowenstein to Ca Mau and Ba Xuyen. I took Dick Moose to Chau Doc, Hong Ngu, and MyTho. We returned to Can Tho for an 1800 call on Major General Nghi…’

The corps commander…

‘And I gave a dinner at 1930. Had only eight – Nghi, the regional police chief Colonel Son, the Can Tho University dean, and the faculty of Law and Social Sciences, and a newspaper publisher beside we four Americans.

We had lunch in Chau Doc with that and the An Giang province chief. The 9th Division Commander Major General Di…’

Spelled D-I –

‘…briefed us at Hong Ngu on current ARVN operations there.’

Something about ‘…drive North Vietnamese forces back across the Cambodian border.’
'Our principal preoccupation this last week has been trying to get a ship convoy to Phnom Penh. It has been stalled by North Vietnamese forces inside Vietnam along ten kilometers of the east bank of the Mekong just before the border. It finally got off this morning. A lucky mortar hit and sank an ammunitions barge but seven other vessels got through. At My Tho we called on the ICCS.’

That’s the International Commission for Control and Supervision.

‘The Pole was droll. Dick asked him when the Poles would be dispatched to the Hong Ngu border control entry team. He said next week, provided the GVN could guarantee a hundred percent security. When I retorted that there was no where in the world that had a hundred percent security he winked at me.’

Let’s see what else here now. This is the 16th of April.

‘Drove this afternoon two hours from My Tho to Cao Lanh, the capital of Kien Phong province in the Plain of Reeds. The highway’s at first excellent because it’s part of National Route 4 from Saigon to the delta. The driver of the U.S. Development representative in Cao Lanh was nervous on a small section of the good stretch. His tires had been shot out two years previously and the memory of the ambush spurred him on to high speed. The bad road apparently offered no security problems and speed was not possible anyway.’

This is 18 or 19 April’ 73.

‘Ken Quinn…’

Who was later ambassador to Cambodia, incidentally.

‘…the vice consul in Chau Doc with the Cambodian border came with me to Phnom Penh today on an Air America Volpar. Our principal objective was to ease the passage of convoys going up the Mekong.’

The supply to Phnom Penh was up the Mekong.

‘The Embassy was in more contrast to my visit a couple of years ago. Phonetically busy, frightfully frightened, wives had been given the option to leave. Meg…’

Meg is Colby Swank’s wife, he was the ambassador.

‘…plans to go April 24th and is packing their prized belongings. After twenty-two months of mounting tension, she has had enough. Colby looks drawn and is pessimistic. He says the situation is worse than at any time in Laos…’
He had been the DCM in Laos when I was there.

‘...even given the ’65 Phoumi coup and the ’66 Ma bombing, that you averted by taking refuge in the Embassy. The DCMs tried to pick us up. Enders is on holiday in Europe.’

Tom Enders is the DCM.

‘...had thick plastic...’ – something – ‘...mounted on the inside of the windows to repel grenade and small arm fragments. Colby, flags still fluttering, goes along at breakneck speed with a bodyguard in the front, preceded by a motorcycle escort and a jeep full of soldiers to the rear. The soldiers sleep at the house, and a U.S. Marine guard with an FM radio sleeps in the house on the top floor. Colby wants a full company of Marines to defend the embassy in case the city collapses, which he believes is an early eventuality. The government is ineffective, the army crumbling, and the city is lovely and serene as ever. It’s hard to partake in the American panic after having been through Vietnam, but I never had any direct attempt on my life as Colby and the DCM have. Nevertheless, the local fear seems exaggerated.’

This is the 20th of April. ‘Ambassador Whitehouse, Major General Murray, the defense attaché, Joe Bennett, came down for a session with Major General Nghi, the IV Corps commander, who is the nearest thing to my counterpart. They are interested in improved liaison for the next convoy to Phnom Penh scheduled for the 23rd.’

This just illustrates, this is an aside, how preoccupied we were with getting goods up the Mekong to Phnom Penh.’

We later took a helicopter to Hong Ngu to talk to Major General Di, the 9th ARVN Division commander who also controls convoys. Hong Ngu is a district of...’

Spelled incidentally H-O-N-G capital N-G-U – ‘...the district of Kien Phong province along the Cambodian border. Hong Ngu has been a scene of the heaviest fighting in the Delta since the ‘ceasefire’.’

21 April ’73. ‘My successor has been named. Wolfgang Lehman, an FSO-2 who speaks German and has never served in Asia. He once headed the office of Aerospace and Atomic Energy Affairs in the Political Military Bureau. The Embassy was not consulted and is protesting.’

23 April ’73. ‘Ambassador Bunker came to Down for his farewell call today.'
He addressed the regional staff, some visiting development officers, and key Vietnamese employees. The Delta team then presented him with some Ming Dynasty teacups that Frank Wisner got from a My Tho source that he has been plumbing ever since he was first stationed there in 1965. He’s had several pieces appraised in the U.S. and they turned out to be all genuine.’

There was, incidentally, a Chinese migration during the fall of the Ming Dynasty to the south through the southern delta.

‘I remember seeing the display at his house in Tunis but didn’t guess at the time that they had been purchased in Vietnam. Thought they were family heirlooms. Gave a lunch to the ambassador with a new twist. The food was uninspired and the wine had turned, but the conversation was lively because I had not invited a traditional agency and office chief but a cross section of some of their subordinates. There were ten at table including a token woman, one token black, and one token consul general. He then went for the farewell call and General Nghi presented the ambassador with a gracefully carved elephant tusk, bulky but not run of the mill. Thank God there was no military plaque.’

Let’s see. I’m getting near the end of this. Let’s see. This goes back to my time in Korea in ’52 and ’53. I took two of my children to Korea in July of 1974.

‘Like the rest of Korea, Onchon…’

Where I lived –

‘…is completely transformed, many more so. We revisited the old compound where I used to live and the main Japanese style building which still brewed in the foreground beyond the vaulted oriental gate. Two enormous and vulgar three story concrete buildings, one going up in the southwest corner of the garden however. That tiered stupar from my photograph almost blocks the front entrance of one of them. There are at least thirty hotels in town including the dreary New Tong Nar Tourist Hotel, where we stayed. The roads are paved, the pathways still twist between houses that increasingly mount the hill and now surround the entrance gate to the hillside park which has been fenced in and contains a clutter of merry-go-rounds, Ferris wheels, mechanical boats, airplane rides, and soft drink stands. You have to pay to get in. The prime attraction is the cable car that goes up Kim Jong Mountain. Hundreds of people can now enjoy this splendid view of the valley, which is one consolation, but the pristine quality is gone forever. The Tong Nag
Expressway, a four lane toll highway, runs perpendicular with the bridge leading to
Onchon, which has been transformed to a sort of Coney Island, with lots of restaurants
and bars. It was a hot springs resort. I visited the Catholic Church to enquire about the
Irish priest I used to know, the one thread of human continuity I thought I might be able to
trace. I was eventually ushered in to the study of Father Ahn, who blithely informed me
that there had never been any foreign priest in the diocese, let alone an Irish man in
Onchin. He was such an amusing fellow though, perhaps he was a leprechaun. There
was no point in arguing with Father Ahn so I left.’

Let's see.

LC: And that trip was in July 1974?

TB: That’s right. The first time I had been back to Korea in twenty years. Twenty-one
years. One of the…this is, again another aside, we were able to take American President Lines
because it wasn’t filled up and they allow U.S. government employees, to travel across the Pacific
on American President Line. The one virtue of it was that you made your hourly changes day by
day rather than all at once when you crossed the International dateline or when you made, from
one time zone to another. But I got increasingly bored at the staying on ship for, at one point, up to
seventeen days. But this one I think was – this is the summer of ’74. Let me see.

‘We eat at the second sitting at a round table with six other misanthropes, including the
bashful ship’s doctor on his maiden voyage. Our waiter is a cheerful Jamaican Negro with
a lilt like Harry Bellefonte who claims to be as soon emancipated from medical school. At
any rate, he insists on shoveling food into us. I got the impression that he is specializing in
obesity and is using us as data samples for his thesis. Last night, he brought for the
captain’s reception and the midnight buffet of turkey sandwiches. I so far gained seventy-
three pounds, but no matter. Come the first typhoon and I’ll be down to normal again.
Also, at the table, a retired couple and their traveling companion, a grey-haired Belle Dame
who may or may not be related to the husband. She bears the incredible name of
Tischauser. I thought I heard her husband, the next Cadillac dealer, call her 'Mother,’ but
then it may have been Martha and he’s deaf anyway. They’re from St. Petersburg, Florida,
wherever that is, but eleven years residence has failed to make any inroads on the chubby
wife’s Brooklyn accent nor alter her hairstyle and those Shirley Temple curls so popular in
the late ‘30s. They boast of having a marriage for the forty-nine years, an experience that
has been disastrous for both of them. The remaining couple are Foreign Service headed
for two years of Japanese language training in Yokohama. Their earnestness is
particularly commendable as the wife of a civil servant, but somewhat difficult to face
before noon. I thought of feigning nephritis, taking to bed, and having all meals brought to
the room, but I need that long walk back and forth to the dining room in order to keep trim.
Amidst all the names, bingo, mileage, lottery, shuffleboard tournaments, and costume
balls, I turn to the ship paper for further hilarity. My favorite is the daily safety item. Today
they caution me not to wear hi-heels while playing deck games.’

Anyway, that’s a complete aside.

LC: Ok. Tom, and that’s all from your trip in 1974?
TB: Yeah. I think that’s enough but I just wanted to get some…
LC: Well, it gives certainly the flavor of being on the ship too long. Tom, can I ask you a
couple questions about the letters that you’ve read in?
TB: Yeah, sure.
LC: The visit that you made to An Loc revealed the presence of Soviet tanks. Would that
kind of evidence important in documenting external support to the North Vietnamese?
TB: Oh I think so.
LC: Was it something you were paying attention to?
TB: No. Not particularly.
LC: Ok. Can you give me a sense…you mentioned that the town itself was heavily
depopulated. Was it strange for you to come back there and see the extent of the damage?
TB: Yes. Particularly since when I visited there when John Sylvester was the province
senior advisor there had been in relatively much more secure shape than when I had left it in ’68.
LC: You had seen an improvement and now you saw things very much damaged.
TB: I went back in 1999 and it is repopulated.
LC: And in what kind of shape at that time? Can you describe it?
TB: It was…it seemed to be quite vigorous economically. Little rubber plantations were
back in vogue.
LC: Did you make a point to go up there in 1999?
TB: Yes I did because I have a nostalgic feeling for the location.
LC: Yeah. And it couldn’t have been all that easy to get up there.
TB: No, it wasn’t so bad from Saigon because you could drive. You mean when I went up to visit Gaudeul?

LC: In 1999.

TB: Oh ’99. No. We rented the vehicle and driver in Saigon and that was fairly accessible. After all, An Loc was only ninety kilometers as I recall.

LC: Right. And that area was all open in 1999? No checkpoints, no problems internally?

TB: No, no. No checkpoints whatsoever. No military on the roads or anything.

LC: Ok. Later that week you mentioned the arrival in Can Tho of the Senator Symington team. Can you just give a little…?

TB: They were…Lowenstein and Moose were both former Foreign Service officers who worked for the Senate and, particularly I periodically encountered Moose in one capacity or another visiting Asia. I remember he came to Thailand on one or two occasions; probably to Laos [too].

LC: And was this…were they doing committee work, committee investigations, that kind of thing?

TB: Yeah, that sort of thing. Now Moose was later appointed Undersecretary of State for Management.

LC: Was that relatively new post?

TB: No, no. It was not a new post but it was unusual to bring somebody in from outside, although you really…like Holbrook had been a Foreign Service officer at one point.

LC: I see. Ok. Tom, can you give a little additional information about the convoys that were arranged going up to Phnom Penh?

TB: These were convoys bringing supplies into Phnom Penh, principally food. And they would have, perforce, to go up the Hau Giang and the other branch of the Mekong that extended through the Delta.

LC: Can you sketch out the general political situation inside Cambodia such that the U.S. Embassy had been the target of attacks or was potentially the target of attacks?

TB: Well, the whole city was edgy and the whole city of Phnom Penh was edgy, but it was nearing the collapse of the regime in Cambodia.

LC: And how strong, if you can make such an estimate, was the Khmer Rouge at this time?

TB: I’m not an expert on the Khmer Rouge.
LC: I know. But was it primarily the Khmer Rouge that was the source of the difficulty?
TB: Yeah, sure.
LC: Any idea how close armed Khmer Rouge units were to Phnom Penh?
TB: I haven’t any idea.
LC: Ok. And you were just up there for a couple of days?
TB: Just…yes. I spent overnight.
LC: And the purpose of your visit up there was what?
TB: Trying to improve convoy security. We also made some suggestions for areas where
B-52 strikes might go in – Ken and I did.
LC: Typically, who was making the target selections decisions?
TB: It was the U.S. military unit attached to the U.S. Mission or whatever it was called –
Embassy – in Phnom Penh.
LC: Can you say anything about the recommendations that you made?
TB: WE made a number of recommendations, which this particular unit later rejected. We
were making our recommendations on the basis of our knowledge of Vietnamese forces, North
Vietnamese forces, on the ground and in the Delta.
LC: And the reason for the rejection of your recommendations? Any idea?
TB: They thought they knew better than we did.
LC: Did they?
TB: I’m not convinced they did, but that’s…
LC: But the point of debate still in your mind. Tom, how frequently would officials from
Saigon come out to Can Tho?
TB: Well, we had visitors constantly. We had one member of the political section named
Dan Colin – Dan Colin, pardon me – who was assigned in the political section to look after affairs in
the delta. He came quite frequently. He was very helpful.
LC: And Tom, were you continuing the practice that you had adopted in earlier postings
where you were frequently away from the central office and out in the provinces?
TB: I traveled a great deal but not with the extreme frequency as Nha Trang or Binh Long.
LC: I wonder if you can give me a sense of the popular attitudes in the spring of 1973
toward the ceasefire, popular attitude in the Delta area or did they vary by area?
TB: Well, there wasn’t a ceasefire first of all.
LC: Ok. I'm sorry. Please clarify.

TB: I mean there was supposed to be a ceasefire and one of our objections was that ARVN was expending a great deal of artillery fruitlessly.

LC: Were there instances where ARVN was, shall we say, fabricating incidents?

TB: Not to my knowledge.

LC: Was the United States trying to in some way restrain ARVN military operations under the terms of the ceasefire?

TB: We would counsel the reduction of activity.

LC: And what was the rationale behind that?

TB: Because…for example, John Vann had always opposed indiscriminant artillery fire because it was a way of illustrating that you were there in some force and would be ineffective in terms of destroying the adversary and it would occasionally take vengeance on the civilian population.

LC: Were you effective in making these representations, for example, to General Nghi?

TB: Not particularly.

LC: Why not?

TB: I think…General Nghi was a man who traveled quite a bit in his area of responsibility and he was an individual who took an active role in advising his staff and his subordinates.

LC: And he was not so much interested in taking advice as giving it? Would that be accurate?

TB: Yeah.

LC: Ok. And just to clarify, Nguyen Van Nghi was obviously an ARVN general but he was holding a civilian post. Is that accurate?

TB: No, no. He was the corps commander. He was not holding a civilian post and he in effect was the government in the Delta.

LC: Did he have a civilian counterpart who may not have been as effective obviously as he was but…?

TB: No, no. There wasn't a civilian counterpart. There was the…whole administration had been so militarized. Every province chief was a colonel, for example.

LC: Speaking about politics and the politics of the ceasefire period, can you give a general evaluation of President Thieu's activities during this time period?
TB: He came down to the Delta on one occasion at some ceremony that I attended. I can’t
remember what the purpose was, but he and Nghi were very close.

LC: What was the basis of their relationship? Do you know?
TB: I don’t know.
LC: Not sure whether it was familial or otherwise?
TB: That’s right.
LC: In any event, was…did the United States expect President Thieu to be moving toward
elections at this point?
TB: This was the…at U.S. urging. The elections were always a preoccupation of the U.S.
LC: And not so much for the South Vietnamese government?
TB: You mean not so much of the South Vietnamese government’s preoccupation?
LC: Yes.
TB: Well they understood our interests in it and carried out elections to satisfy international
opinion.
LC: Were you…were the FSOs below you paying a lot of attention to party developments
and party activities? I mean, not Communist party but Democratic party.
TB: No. We were principally interested in the state of the ceasefire.
LC: Ok. And on that note, Tom, can you just flesh out for people who might not be familiar
what the International Commission on Control and Supervision was?
TB: Let me read you an excerpt from the 5 April ’73 letter.
‘This evening air conditioners all working. Had a dinner for sixty in honor of the ICCS.
Major General Nghi, the IV Corps commander, and Dr. Sun, the Can Tho University
Rector, attended. Had two each Canadian, Hungarian, Indonesian, and Poles, or CHIPs
as the acronym has it. The Polish colonel is a warm and intelligent man. The Hungarian
captain who acts as an interpreter for his colonel spoke excellent English. Understand he
teaches English literature at the University of Budapest. Both Indonesians spoke English
quite well also and the senior man was remarkably perceptive. He’s worried about what
he perceives as a lack of commitment on the part of the South Vietnamese in the
ceasefire. I spoke…Nghi spoke to me a good deal in Vietnamese. Got a surprisingly
warm congratulatory letter from Ambassador Sullivan. He concluded by saying he hoped
to be in Manila soon. He was about to be named ambassador to Philippines.’
So, that’s it. So you get the composition of the ICCS.

LC: What was their mission?

TB: To monitor the ceasefire and make sure both sides were conforming to it.

LC: Can you talk a little bit about the politics behind the composition and when…?

TB: They had to be balanced between east and west, that’s why you had a Pole, a Hungarian, who theoretically were Communist but in fact weren’t Communist at all, and a Canadian – pardon me – what was the other?

LC: Indonesia?

TB: Let me get back to CHIPs again. Canadians and Indonesians. The Indonesians were presumed to be pro-Western.

LC: Was that in fact the case?

TB: Well, the Indonesians I encountered were the case, but it isn’t necessarily true of Indonesia.

LC: Sure. And were these representatives of the military? Structures of those countries?

TB: Yes.

LC: Ok. And detailed to South Vietnam. Was there a structure of several different…?

TB: There were different teams in each....

LC: Yes. Different teams in each…?

TB: Military region.

LC: Ok. And were they active at province level?

TB: They were mainly active regionally but they were based…well, this particular group was based in Can Tho.

LC: And about how large was the personnel complement for ICCS?

TB: I don’t remember.

LC: Ok. Was it big?

TB: It wasn’t an enormous complement. No.

LC: And their mission was to investigate incidents? Is that accurate?

TB: Yes.

LC: And who could bring an incident to their attention?

TB: Anybody.

LC: Including civilians?
TB: So far as I know.

LC: Ok. And, Tom, there was another multi-partheid group called the Joint Military Commission. Can you describe that?

TB: That was a combination of the PRG and the GVN. The GVN rarely let the PRG out of their quarters.

LC: Which were where?

TB: I don’t remember in Can Tho, but they were located… I think there was one group in My Tho and one group in Can Tho and another group somewhere else.

LC: Did the…what kind of people did the PRG structure put forward as their representatives who were going to be basically under house arrest?

TB: I never encountered any of them so I…

LC: Ok. I think that’s quite telling. Tom, were the DRV and U.S. Government’s representatives represented at any point on the JMC as well?

TB: No, no.

LC: Ok. Tom, for those who might not be aware can you talk about the system of numbering the days during that early part of the ceasefire period, the X plus system?

TB: Well, the… I can’t remember the exact date when the ceasefire occurred but we would file a daily report which was to say ‘X plus’ so many days. And I did an air gram at one point for the department, ‘X plus forty-five’, giving the state of the ceasefire as I saw it in the Delta in forty-five days after the ceasefire.

LC: And this is the one which you mention in your memoir, I believe, in which you make your predictions although you were loath to do so.

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. And this is extremely interesting. Maybe we can talk about those predictions in a little bit. That system of counting was counting toward what?

TB: It was just an increasing count of how many days since the ceasefire had occurred.

LC: And was the U.S. set to withdraw personnel at a certain point?

TB: Well, it was phasing down all the time, and I was welcoming the phase down. As an example, AID was reducing drastically its staffing in country.

LC: How many AID personnel did you have in your region at the beginning?
TB: At the beginning...I think I've got the number in the book but I don't recall what it was offhand.

LC: But in your estimation it was a bloated number?

TB: Yes. It was always bloated.

LC: What were they doing?

TB: They were advising on everything – agriculture, police action, education...

LC: As they long had been?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. Were there any specific twists to the their mission during the ceasefire period?

TB: By...what do you mean by twists?

LC: Anything special that they had undertaken, any expansion of their activities?

TB: You mean from the time of my arrival?

LC: Yes. From early – [1973]

TB: We tried to cut down on their activities.

LC: Ok. And was there a highway project in the Delta that was particularly significant at that point?

TB: I frankly don't remember.

LC: Ok. Speaking about the other American personnel in the region, you mentioned this morning that the CIA station had some eight officers.

TB: That was based in Can Tho. They had people in the provinces also.

LC: Any idea how large the CIA complement was in the area?

TB: I don't know what the total strength happened to be.

LC: Were you seeing any of their reporting, Tom?

TB: I saw their reporting up in Hue, for example, after being exposed to my theoretical vice consul, who was about twenty years older than me and he adjusted to me after a couple of months in Hue and began sharing his reports he received with me. I worked quite closely with the CIA contract team of two men in Binh Long. The initial two I had to get rid of. I talked to the station chief in Saigon about that, but the two subsequently sent cooperated very closely with me. And...

LC: Go ahead.

TB: The team in the Delta was identifiable because wherever they were, whichever province they are, had the same vehicles. And there was one fellow named Martin who was being
assigned who was theoretically being part of my staff, but when he arrived in Can Tho by plane he was actually a CIA man and he was met by his CIA counterpart. He came to me and he was furious because they had blown his cover. He was supposed to be, theoretically supposed to be, part of my vice consular staff.

LC: And he was angry with you for having allowed CIA people to greet him?
TB: No, to pick him up at the airport.
LC: And yet were they all driving in the, whatever the standard issue vehicle was?
TB: That's right.
LC: And Tom, just out of curiosity if you recall, what was the vehicle?
TB: I don't remember what it was.
LC: But whatever it was that's what they were driving?
TB: Same color and the same make.
LC: Tom, was the hamlet evaluation system still in use?
TB: I can't recall. I really can't recall if it was still being used.
LC: Ok. I know from the chron files that you're depositing with us that when you first took over, first arrived and were organizing actually the consulate general, that you advised your personnel not to use 'Tarzan lingo'. Do you recall that?
TB: Yes, sure. It bothered me particularly when an advisor would use slang like 'same
same' or 'number ten' or whatever. I cautioned them to speak English instead of Tarzan lingo when they were dealing with their counterparts.
LC: Did they heed your advice?
TB: In my presence I never heard it. I can't account for what happened when I was not there.
LC: Of course. I wonder, Tom, if there was any sort of sublimated tension between people who had previously been assigned to CORDS and people who were working for USAID.
Elsewhere it's been written that there was some tension in the '73 – '75 period in Vietnam between these two different groups. Did you have a sense of that?
TB: I don't...you mean the ones who had been in the CORDS program?
LC: Yes.
TB: Yeah. A lot of them regarded themselves as special, ordained by divinity, but I don't know about the conflicts between them.
LC: Ok. Tom, was there any U.S. military presence in your, in Region IV while you were there?

TB: When I first arrived, Frank Blazey who had been one of John Vann’s, on John Vann’s staff in Military Region III at one point when he was a full colonel. He had been by that time promoted to brigadier general. He was the ranking military, U.S. military, man in the Delta but they all left within – I don’t remember whether it was fifteen days or thirty days or something of the ceasefire.

LC: So there were no defense liaison officers or…?

TB: No, we had visits from the military attaché office and from the Logistics Command in Saigon. Major General Murray, I think I mentioned, had come down on one or two occasions.

LC: But those were attachés to the Embassy rather than U.S. military forces, per se.

TB: That’s right.

LC: So military forces had to leave as I think I generally know.

TB: Yeah. The ones that were left were principally in Saigon and principally devoted to logistics.

LC: Ok. And Tom, just thinking back on the period that you were in Can Tho, did you and…well, was it a realistic U.S. expectation that VC/NVA forces would comply with the terms of ceasefire?

TB: No.

LC: Was it actually a held expectation or was this more of a kind of pantomime?

TB: Well, it certainly wasn’t…one would be naïve to think that it would occur with a hundred percent compliance. There was partial compliance. One thing about Can Tho I mentioned earlier this morning was the quality of the people assigned to the consulate general. I mentioned Frank Wisner, who later became an ambassador of four countries. There was also Art Kobler, who was DCM in Singapore before he left, retired from the Foreign Service at the appropriate age, and became the head of AT&T China. But he’d been DCM in Singapore, that’s Deputy Chief of Mission, Singapore. Desai Anderson was Mike Mansfield’s Deputy Chief of Mission in Tokyo for many, many years, the chargé d’affaires in Hanoi in ’86 or ’87 before Ambassador Peterson arrived, and there was Ken Quinn whom I mentioned who became ambassador to Cambodia. Peter Thompson who became ambassador to Armenia and to the Mujahideen in Afghanistan before that, a special role, not to a country but to the Mujahideen. John
Mallot who was…had a Japanese wife and who became ambassador to Malaysia. I remember his wife wearing a badge when she traveled in the Delta saying ‘[in Vietnamese],’ ‘I’m a Japanese,’ because wives, Vietnamese wives, of Americans, and many of them had Vietnamese wives, were universally assumed to be bar girls, and she wanted to distinguish herself that she was not in this crowd.

LC: That she was not Vietnamese?

TB: Yes. But she was obviously oriental with her Japanese birth and so on. So let’s see who else in that group…it was a great accumulation of talent, unique in the Foreign Service.

LC: Yes. And Tom, they were brought from many other assignments as you were.

TB: Yes, that’s right. Some were in country but most were coming in for a temporary period from abroad.

LC: And so, if I’m following this correctly, most of them were TDY as you were?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: And were you formally assigned to both Tangier and Can Tho during this period?

TB: Yes, several thousand miles apart.

LC: Yes. And you made a number of trips back to Tangier?

TB: Quite. Twice.

LC: Ok. And how long did you stay when you went back?

TB: Oh, I think a matter of four or five days but I don’t recall exactly.

LC: Would that have been as briefly as possible?

TB: As briefly as possible, yeah. When I went back I did not assume any managerial role in the consulate general, not that there was much to manage, but left it to Jerry Keatley to continue the business.

LC: And was your wife staying up there at that time?

TB: Yes.

LC: And your children as well?

TB: Yes.

LC: Ok. So the household sort of stayed up there?

TB: That’s right, except since that had been something like six or seven permanent change of stations in six years whereby we had packed our household goods and moved and so on and so
forth. When I left Tangier, my wife stayed in Malaysia with a very good friend, in the Foreign
Service friend, and said it was my turn to supervise the packing.

LC: And so that was one of the duties you discharged when you were in Tangier?
TB: That's right.
LC: Ok. And the children were where?
TB: They were there.
LC: Ok. Attending school as you said before.
TB: That's right.
LC: Ok.
TB: Our oldest child was in university.
LC: Where did he go to school?
TB: Pitzer.
LC: I'm sorry?
TB: Pitzer.
LC: Ok. And, Tom, it was also clear to you that the job in Can Tho was a limited time
period job.
TB: Yes, sure.
LC: Ok. And that prompted you, of course, to need resolution about where you would go
next.
TB: Yeah, which happened to be Bangkok.
LC: Yes. And when did you find out about that posting?
TB: I think it was in June. I had been rumored for it and then posted for it but one of the
prerequisites for the DCM laid down was that I be promoted to FSO-2 before assuming the job.
LC: And can you explain, for someone who might not get the distinctions of the FSO
system, what class two was?
TB: Well, that's...there were at that time – they've been changed now – but at that time
there were FSO one through eight. You started out as an eight and worked your way up the line.
The position of political counselor in Bangkok was an FSO-1 position, and I, at the time I
interviewed for it, was still an FSO-3. I was promoted FSO-2 however while I was in Can Tho. So,
that solved that particular problem.
LC: Who was the DCM in Bangkok?
TB: Ed Masters.

LC: Ok. What was his background?

TB: He was primarily had experience in Indonesia and he was an extremely competent DCM. Probably the most competent I worked for.

LC: He was an Indonesia specialist?

TB: Yes. He later became ambassador of Indonesia – Bangladesh and Indonesia.

LC: Ok, Tom. Let's take a break.
LC: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Thomas Barnes. Today’s date is the 13th of May 2004. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in Lubbock in the Special Collections Building and Tom is joining me by telephone from Austin. Good morning, Tom.

TB: Good morning.

LC: Tom, there were a few things that we wanted to add to the record about your time in Can Tho.

TB: You had asked before about the reduction in AID staff in Can Tho. I found a – excuse me, I’m digesting the end of a piece of toast here.

LC: Go ahead and take your time, Tom.

TB: This is a letter dated the 1st of April of ‘73.

‘Went directly from Chao Doc to Saigon this Sunday morning. Jake called in all the consuls general and the directors of the office of resettlement reconstruction. USAID is scheduled for an approximate eighty percent cut by December 31st. I told the assemblage we could settle for a minimum of three and a maximum of thirteen spaces by that time. We currently have forty-three, not counting seventeen technical advisors under our operational control. They cover five fields: engineering, agriculture, public health, land reform, and refugee relief. I said we could cut down to three. The end of an empire.’

So that’s the comment that we had earlier discussed about the cutting down.

TB: I really don’t recall my feelings at that time. I’m sorry.

LC: No, that’s fine. I just wondered what your perspective was now looking back. But was there some additional material too that you wanted to add?

TB: There was a farewell call. This is a letter dated April 23rd 1973.

‘Ambassador Bunker came down for his farewell call today. He addressed the regional staff, visiting development officers, and key Vietnamese employees. The Delta team then

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presented him with some Ming Dynasty teacups that Frank Wisner got from a My Tho source that he has been plumbing ever since he was first stationed there in 1965. He’s had several pieces appraised in the U.S. and they turned out to be all genuine. I remember seeing the display at his house in Tunis but didn’t guess at that time that they had been purchased in Vietnam. Thought they were funeral heirlooms. Gave a lunch to the ambassador with a new twist. The food was uninspired and the wine had turned, but the conversation was lively because I had not invited the traditional agency and office chiefs but a cross section of some of their subordinates. There were ten at table including one token woman, one token black, and one token consul general. He then went for the farewell call and General Nghi presented the ambassador with a gracefully carved elephant tusk, bulky but not run of the mill. ‘Thank God there was no military plaque.’

So that’s the end of that. Let me see if there’s one other thing. A letter dated twenty April, which is three days earlier.

‘Ambassador Whitehouse, Major General Murray, the defense attaché, Joe Bennett came down for a session with…’ – Joe Bennett was the political counselor – ‘…came down for a session with Major General Nghi, the IV Corps commander who is the nearest thing to my counterpart. They are interested in improved liaisons for the next convoy to Phnom Penh scheduled for the twenty-third. We later took a helicopter to Hong Ngu to talk to Major General Di, the 9th ARVN Division commander who also controls convoys. Hong Ngu is a district of Kien Phong province along the Cambodian border. Hong Ngu has been the scene of the heaviest fighting in the Delta since the ‘ceasefire’. Stimulating day even though I had previously taken Dick Moose over the same route.’

So, I think that’s all the catching up I wanted to do on Can Tho.

LC: Tom, were the convoys you were referring to there, were those over land or water?
TB: They were by the Hau Giang, one of the two branches of the Mekong that empties to the sea. They were by river.

LC: And do you remember much about what kinds of things were being carried in the convoys?
TB: I think it was principally food.

LC: The situation in central Cambodia having deteriorated to some degree?
TB: Particularly in Phnom Penh. Yes.
LC: Tom, you were on your way at that point to Bangkok, and last time we talked you told a little bit about, I believe, was it Ed Masters who was the DCM over there who had actually asked for you to be placed in that position of Political Counselor? Tom, when you got to Bangkok this time, where did you live?

TB: The Embassy owned one, two, three houses that were side by side in vast compounds. One for the Economic Counselor, one for the Political Counselor, and I'm trying to remember – oh, the other was the DCM, the DCM's house. These were properties along Rajadamri Avenue that the Embassy owned.

LC: And they were inside a compound?

TB: They each had a separate walled compound.

LC: And did you have security there?

TB: No security.

LC: Ok. Including at the DCM's house?

TB: Including there.

LC: What was the house like? Can you describe it?

TB: Well, it was a vast rambling Victorian style mansion with not very good modern planning in the sense that there were only two bathrooms upstairs and the rooms were quite chopped up, but it was…it had very little…the ground floor had wooden floors, much space, porch area, it was very gracious but not particularly efficiently organized in the interior.

LC: Sometimes that's the tradeoff, isn't it?

TB: Yeah, sure. There was an outbuilding with servant's quarters.

LC: And did you have local staff?

TB: We had a cook, a laundress maid, and a…a laundress, and a sort of general maid. We had three.

LC: Was the cook exceptionally skilled or…?

TB: Not exceptionally but she was tolerable.

LC: Ok. And did she have any specialties that you remember?

TB: Oddly enough one of her specialties was a Mexican tortilla dish of some kind.

LC: Really? Do you remember her name, Tom?


LC: Was she from Bangkok or elsewhere?
TB: I think she was from the outlying area but not far from the capital.
LC: And she had worked as support personnel on the Embassy staff for a while or…?
TB: Well, she was…no, she was a personal employee of the inhabitant of the house.
LC: Ok. So you paid her directly rather than her being paid on the payroll as it were at the
Embassy?
TB: Yeah. We paid all three of them.
LC: Ok. Tom, let me ask you a question about the larger pictures that you were, as
political counselor, moving into. Where did Thailand fit in U.S. regional or strategic priorities?
TB: Thailand was a very high priority because it was the home of the major Air Force
bases, or the major Air Force contingents – they were Thai bases – and principally in the northeast
in four locations: Nakhon Phanom, Ubon, Udorn, and Korat. And these…most of the sorties in the
Vietnam War were flown from these bases and after the Vietnam Peace Agreement it was
expected that Thailand would continue to tolerate the American presence and serve as the Air
Force, U.S. Air Force, presence would serve as a warning to North Vietnam not to over violate the
accords reached in Paris. Now, such did not turn out to be the case, and another predominant
theme that emerged was that Thailand was, after years and years of close collaboration with the
United States, which began really with the Korean War where there was a Thai contingent in
Korea, Thailand was reevaluating its foreign policy and trying to open its doors to its former
enemies and was growing increasingly less tolerant of the American presence so it was a sea shift
in Thai political aims.
LC: And Tom, was there a particular person or faction who was driving that reevaluation
within the Thai political context?
TB: I think it was a group of very young, or comparatively young, and extremely bright Thai
Foreign Service personnel who were leading the change.
LC: Do any names come to mind?
TB: Well, there was Witthaya Vejujiva, there was Nit Piburl Songram, and…I’m trying to
think of some others offhand.
LC: Were those people with whom you had dealings?
TB: I was very close to Witthaya because he had taught me Thai back in Washington and
back in ’61 and ’62.
LC: And had you kept up a correspondence over the years or had you seen him when you were posted up north?

TB: No, I hadn’t really kept up a correspondence with him. When I was political counselor in Bangkok he was, first of all, private secretary to the Foreign Minister and then after that he became head of policy planning, if I recall correctly.

LC: Was the private secretary position an honorific, or was it what we think of as a chief of staff, or can you describe that position?

TB: I don’t exactly know how it functioned but he was privy to most of the developments in Thai foreign policy.

LC: And what was your relationship with him like?

TB: Well, I would call on him once a week or once every ten days or so. We would discuss various issues.

LC: So you saw him with great frequency?

TB: Yes.

LC: Who else did you see on a regular basis, perhaps not as frequently as that but on a regular basis?

TB: Well, the most important ministry in Thailand is the Ministry of Interior, and it furnishes all the governors and district officers for the country. And the undersecretary for – I can’t remember the exact title – Department of the Interior or something of that nature. Winyu Angkhanarat I saw with relative frequency, maybe once a month or so. I know what it was called. He was undersecretary for the Department of Local Administration, DOLA, and we had an informal arrangement between the Embassy and what was called the ‘Interior Gang’, who were a group of Interior Ministry officials. We met periodically and non-substantively – we never discussed business – for social events about once every three or four months. This is one way of contacting the essence of Thai government, which extended into the provinces.

LC: Were those social events the, something on the order of reception or did it tend to be…?

TB: Oh, sometimes there we took a cruise down a portion of the river, visited the rose garden, or just had an informal dinner.
LC: And since you weren’t talking business can you explain a little bit more for someone who doesn’t really have a feel for the Foreign Service what the purposes of that kind of interaction would have been?

TB: Well, it was more or less to have smooth relations between that aspect of the Thai government and the American Embassy.

LC: Personal relationships?

TB: Yeah. Just to have so that you could refer to these people at moments of crisis.

LC: So, when there isn’t a crisis you’re building a stronger foundation for interaction in a critical period.

TB: That’s right. Now another individual I saw from time to time but not with great frequency was General Krit Siwera who was head of the Thai Army and also Minister of Industry.

LC: What kind of a…very important person, what was your impression of him?

TB: I found him to be eminently reasonable and filled with common sense. I didn’t find him as the most intelligent or perspicacious Thai that I met, but he certainly was one with good judgment.

LC: What about his connections? Was he well connected?

TB: Well, he was head of the Thai Army which is a prestigious position in a country and very influential politically.

LC: What about family wise?

TB: I was not privy much to his family life.

LC: Ok. I just wonder if he was part of an extended family that was influential and that had something to do with his having attained the position that he did.

TB: I don’t think so.

LC: Ok. That it was more merit based.

TB: It was judgment based on common sense that brought him to the floor.

LC: While we’re on the topic of officials, in your memoir you mention a little bit about the king, King Bhumibol. Can you tell a little more about him? Did you ever see him, for example?

TB: Twice we presented credentials – once for Ambassador Kintner and once for Ambassador Whitehouse. So we were presented formally to him on that occasion and had to wear coat and tails.

LC: What was he wearing? Was he wearing a military uniform or do you remember?
TB: He was wearing a uniform but I wouldn't describe it as military.
LC: Ok. How would you describe it?
TB: Well, regal.
LC: Ok. But modern?
TB: Yeah, sure.
LC: And where would you have been received? Do you remember?
TB: This was at the Grand Palace. It was the place for the presentation of credentials. He didn't live in the Grand Palace, he lived in Chitralada Palace, but…
LC: This was where for formal occasions were arranged?
TB: Yeah, sure.
LC: Ok. Tom, I want to ask you about…
TB: I would like to make the comment that the king was extremely well traveled in the country and had…he had palaces in each of the regions, and when he visited these regions he would receive the populace and, in my view, he was the best informed man in Thailand about what was going on in the country.
LC: Was he able, if you know, to get outside of the obvious social and political constraints of being a reigning sovereign to actually get out and test the waters, see what was happening out on the grounds?
TB: He was doing that all the time.
LC: Was he really?
TB: Remarkable man.
LC: Was he doing this, if you will, off his own bat or at the advice of the counselors that he might have had?
TB: I imagine it was his own initiative.
LC: And did you meet other members of the royal family, Tom?
TB: Well, his…one of his daughters, his second daughter, was sort of an official hostess also.
LC: What was her name? Do you remember?
TB: I'm trying to remember offhand but…the son was Vajira, Vajira Vot', but I can't remember…Vajiralongkorn or something like that but I can't remember the daughter's name offhand.
LC: Tom, I want to ask you about the student protests in October, after you arrived, that would be October '73. Can you tell me about that?

TB: That was the result of the Mayaguez Affair where Thailand had asked us not to use Thai soil for any retaliation or any operations in Southeast Asia and the Whitehouse ordered a recapture of the Mayaguez crew of a merchant vessel that had been captured off the, by Cambodia. And the rescue operation was launched from Thai bases against the wishes of the Thai government so the Foreign Ministry therefore orchestrated a major three day demonstration against the Embassy.

LC: And how far were the living quarters from the Embassy proper?

TB: By foot about fifteen minutes or twenty minutes, by car about five minutes.

LC: So I take it that you were in and out of the Embassy during this period of crisis?

TB: Mostly in.

LC: Mostly in? Was it in fact at your own peril that you would leave?

TB: No, because there was a back gate to the Embassy, which they thoughtfully left open and we could travel in and out by that route. We couldn't get in the main gate.

LC: How big were the protests? This would be in the spring of '75.

TB: I think it was…yes, it was in…I'm trying to remember the month. It must have been May '75.

LC: April or May. Yeah.

TB: May. Sorry. It must have been May '75.

LC: How many students were out there, or young people?

TB: I don't know, but they clogged the streets.

LC: Really? What was the feeling inside the Embassy when this was going on?

TB: Well, it was uncomfortable because they aimed this terrible music at the Embassy building and it was in a frightful den. I went out to talk to them on one occasion but it was a very brief conversation because there wasn't much reasoning going on.

LC: But it was, to your mind, an orchestrated event?

TB: It was orchestrated by Chatichai Choonhavan, the Foreign Minister.

LC: And how did you know that Tom? Did the Foreign Ministry let you know somehow?

TB: I don't remember how we found out but we did find out.
LC: Ok. Can you give a little more detail on the American decision to utilize forces based in Thailand and any more formal Thai reactions to that?

TB: Well, there was a very sharp Thai reaction because I went with the Chargé Headmasters at the request of the then Prime Minister who was Kukrit Pramoj, a very influential Thai figure who is the author of a long romance novel called *Si Baen Din*—‘Four Regimes’, ‘Four Reigns’— among other things. At any rate Kukrit called us in and asked us whether there was any intention to use Thai territory and we said not that we knew of, and the next we went back to the Embassy and then discovered that same day that these forces had been launched from Utapao.

So, we were summoned again the following day by Kukrit who presented us a formal protest, and the great mystery to me was whether they had – Washington – had deliberately decided not to inform the Embassy of what was going on because it wanted us to give us the, what’s called, plausible denial that we weren’t aware of what was the case. Of course, we weren’t aware of it.

When I was assigned to the National Security Council the following year I looked up the history of this case to see whether that had been the government’s intention – Whitehouse’s intention — not to inform us so we had plausible deniability or whether they simply forgot and I discovered they simply forgot to tell the Embassy what they were doing.

LC: And who was they?

TB: That’s Brent Scowcroft and company.

LC: So, the National Security Council.

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: And I want to ask you about your year on the NSC staff later on. Tom, the Mayaguez incident, of course, had the potential to explode into another phase of conflict in Southeast Asia. Did you see it that way as it was happening?

TB: No. It was merely an attempt to show that America still had bravado.

LC: That’s how you read that response?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. Was the American response…

TB: It was a macho gesture.

LC: Ok. That’s kind of where I was going to go next. Did it actually enhance American prestige at all?

TB: Not in my view.
LC: Why do you say that?

TB: Because there were over forty lives that were lost in a helicopter accident, as I recall — the Air Force helicopter accident.

LC: So that sort of put the edge off of any victory, as it were. Tom, let me go back a little bit. I want to ask you a couple of things about a couple of developments that occurred while you were assigned in Bangkok. One of these had to do with the changes in Thai foreign policy that you alluded to earlier, and particularly the overture that Thailand began to make to Communist countries, and I'm thinking now about China. Can you talk about that for a moment?

TB: Well, the Thai were welcoming delegations…I think it was a Thai. They started out with a ping pong match between Thailand and Beijing, between Thailand and China. Then they welcomed North Korean trade delegation and they also extended an invitation to the North Vietnamese, but they were still quite pointedly critical of North Vietnam’s stand-offishness.

LC: What was, if you recall, the reaction in Hanoi to the overture from Thailand?

TB: Well, I have no way of interpreting what the reaction was.

LC: Ok. I just wondered if you saw any traffic or if you remember anything about that.

What about Thai relations with Cambodia during the period now before the fall, as it were, of Phnom Penh?

TB: Well, historically Thailand and Vietnam have shared [control] over Cambodian territory. The relationship during the Sarit era, ’62 to ’64 and earlier, was quite poisonous between the two countries. I remember one time Sihanouk made a public statement that he hoped Thanat Khoman, the Thai Foreign Minister, would catch amoebic dysentery. When I was serving as interpreter to Ambassador Young when he met with Sarit, periodically if Sarit fell asleep during these sessions, but if the word Cambodia came up it would immediately wake him up and he’d start cursing Cambodia. So, the relationships were not what one would call cordial between the two countries.

LC: And during the period ’73, mid ’73, to April ’75 did that continue?

TB: Well, it wasn’t quite so bitter and there was a Cambodian Embassy in Bangkok at the time.

LC: Do you remember who the ambassador was?

TB: I had a close relationship with one of the, I think, the 2nd Secretary of the Embassy whose name for the moment escapes me. [Sam Saay] But I don’t recall the ambassador’s name offhand.
LC: What was the tone of the relationship that you had with this Cambodian official?
TB: Oh, it was a very cordial one. I saw him after the fall of Cambodia.
LC: Where did you see him, Tom?
TB: I think he came to me for asylum in the U.S. but I can’t remember all the circumstances.
LC: Were you able to help him?
TB: I think so.
LC: Ok. What about Thailand’s relationship with Laos during this period?
TB: The relationship with Laos was cordial because the Thai Foreign Minister before Carticah was Charunpan Ayuthaya or something like that, his name was Charunpan, had been the Thai Ambassador to Laos when I was stationed in Laos. I had met him and known him there.
LC: And so he had a particular interest in the bilateral relationship with Laos?
TB: Yes. That’s the case. Yes.
LC: And, Tom, if you can just step back from the people for a moment, can you give an overview of how Thailand, how the government of Thailand, was situated and how it was coping with the changing strategic situation in the former Indochinese countries during ’73 to ’75?
TB: Well, as I mentioned, it was welcoming delegations from its former enemies like China, North Vietnam, and so on.
LC: And the point there was what? They were playing a sort of realpolitik sort of approach?
TB: Yeah. Thailand has survived because of its diplomatic skills, the only country in Southeast Asia that had never been colonized. Now, another item, another organization that they were using at the time was the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN, which at that time had only five members.
LC: And was Thailand boosting ASEAN because it was potentially a kind of counter pole to American influence, which seemed to be declining?
TB: I think so. Yes. And again, we’re going on the European community model in the sense, not in the strict sense of having edicts published in multiple languages or anything of this nature, but as a loose coalition of like-minded states interested in neutrality of the region.
LC: And also was there a common economic program that was developing at this time for ASEAN for the region, economic development of the region?
TB: The principal and initial stress was on economic affairs.

LC: And at this point in the early seventies, was that beginning to broaden to other areas of cooperation?

TB: When you cooperate economically a naturally political cooperation follows suit.

LC: And was ASEAN perceived as being an independent entity, free of the colonial powers, free of the United States?

TB: I don’t know. I imagine that was the vision but I can’t positively state that.

LC: Ok, sure. There were other areas though within which the Thai government continued obviously to cooperate with the United States, you mentioned the bases, and another area I wonder if you can tell me anything about has to do with cooperation against international narcotics trade in Southeast Asia.

TB: There was a section of the Embassy that devoted itself to trying to reduce the traffic of heroine and, particularly heroine, which emerged from Burma and from some of the northern Thai locations, Laos also. There was a considerable DEA, Department of – what is it – Department of…

LC: Yes. Drug Enforcement Agency.

TB: Ah, Drug Enforcement Agency presence in Thailand. And one of the Embassy counselors was charged with supervision of this issue. In fact, Cal Mehlert was the counselor for Political/Military Affairs at the time.

LC: How do you spell the last name Tom?

TB: M-E-H-L-E-R-T. He was the interpreter for Wang Ping Non and U. Alexis Johnson in the Warsaw talks between China and the U.S. back in the ‘60s – ‘50s or ‘60s, whenever that took place.

LC: What was his position with Ambassador…

TB: He was the interpreter for the U.S. for Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson.

LC: So he was a Chinese specialist?

TB: He was a Chinese language specialist and probably, by his own admission, the second best Chinese interpreter in the Foreign Service after Chaz Freeman. The two of them were very excellent Chinese language officers.

LC: And he at this time was working with narcotics control?

TB: Yeah. He was working with narcotics control among other issues, political/military issues. And he took a tour of the former KMT opium producing areas and was able to take films of
the traffickers and so on, but he was also famous for having crossed the Pacific on a raft with one
Chinese fellow accompanying him. The two of them went all the way across from Taiwan or
someplace to the Pacific coast of the United States by raft in one juncture.

LC: And that was for what purposes? Was it under duress or was it to prove that it could
be done?

TB: Just for the hell of it, I guess. You might want to talk to him someday. I'll give you
his…

LC: I think yes, I would very much like to talk to him. That would be great Tom, and we
can do that a little bit later. So, Mehlert was one of the people involved in, United States anyway,
efforts to control opium trade. Now, you mentioned the KMT opium producing areas. That would
be in the northeast of Thailand?

TB: No, no. The north.

LC: North. Ok. And Burma was involved in this initiative to some extent as well. And
Tom, did you actually go to Burma in December of…

TB: I went to Burma at the invitation of the political counselor [section chief] of the
American Embassy in Rangoon. That was in '73 or '74, I don't recall exactly which.

LC: I think in the material you've given us it indicated that it was December of '73. Tell me
about that trip, Tom.

TB: Well, the most interesting encounter with the Burmese was with a fellow named Monty
who had been a Supreme Court Justice, and he…the political counselor [section chief]...it was the
DCM who invited us over there. The political counselor was hosting a dinner for us which Monty
was attending, and as I entered the house, Monty was there and he said, 'Mr. Barnes, what brings
you to this wretched country?' I said that was quite amusing.

LC: Did you have a snappy reply at hand?

TB: I don't recall offhand. I was too…

LC: Taken aback.

TB: Taken aback by it.

LC: Tom, what was the purpose of the trip? You mentioned that you were invited, but did
you have a greater purpose? Was it to find out…to just keep in touch with what was happening in
Burma?

TB: Yeah. That was the main thing and it was curiosity also.
LC: Had you been to Burma before?

TB: I went once one other time and I think – I don’t remember whether it was before or afterward – I think it was before.

LC: I don’t remember whether we talked about it or not. Did you get outside of Rangoon?

TB: I got to Taunggyi up in the northeast and that’s one of the Shan states.

LC: And what did you do, Tom, on that excursion?

TB: I wandered around. I went on a long walk outside of town and ran across a buffalo tender, a boy who was looking after buffalo. He invited me to his house. I met his parents and they offered me a glass of…it was a glass of milk straight out of the buffalo.

LC: And I’m sure you drank it.

TB: I drank it but it was clotted with cream. It probably clogged up my arteries for several weeks thereafter.

LC: Tom, did you find your quite extensive Southeast Asian language skills, any of them of any use to you in the Shan state?

TB: In Burma? In Burma did you ask?

LC: Yes.

TB: Not at all. I did discover that ‘kien kow’, which means to eat rice, to eat, in Thai is ‘jing gok’ in Shan, but that’s about the extent of my linguistic endeavors. Burmese is a totally different tonal language.

LC: And Tom – I know you’re a student of these things – can you say anything about the background of the language itself?

TB: Well, the written language is Pali based, Sanskrit and Pali based, but I don’t know anything about the spoken language except that it’s in a different language family.

LC: Ok. Did you enjoy your time in Burma? Was it somewhere that you wanted to go back to?

TB: Yeah. I always wanted to go back. We went to Pagan, among other places, which of course is one of the greatest Buddhist sites in the world with the temple of Ananda and so on.

LC: And did you take your camera with you, Tom?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: I’ll bet you did. Have you ever been back to Burma since that trip?

TB: As I mentioned, I can’t remember whether I went first before this trip or afterward.
LC: But those are the only two occasions?
TB: That's right.
LC: Ok. Tom, another trip that you took, again according to some material that you were able to provide us with and that's on deposit here at the Archive, indicates that you went back to South Vietnam in early 1974, in February in fact. Do you remember going back to South Vietnam?
TB: I don’t remember the specific circumstances.
LC: Ok. I believe you went to Ban Me Thuot, Nha Trang, Darlac, and back to Can Tho.
TB: When was that?
LC: February of ’74. I think it was quick visit where you went to a number of different capitals, but if you don’t recall that’s fine. I just wondered if you might. Also, in the spring of 1974, Tom, I think you got a couple of awards, and I won’t test your modesty too much but can you just describe, for example, the AID Award that you got in the spring of 1974?
TB: I think that was for my service as Deputy for CORDS in MR2.
LC: Did someone throw you a party to give you this award?
TB: No. Ambassador Kintner was the DCM. Ambassador Kintner called me in to present to me. He said, ‘Stop the flow of these awards.’
LC: Stop the flow?
TB: Yeah.
LC: Because you were getting too many of them?
TB: That’s right.
LC: Ok. Who was responsible for arranging that kind of recognition?
TB: I think it was largely Jake in Vietnam.
LC: Ok. Jacobson. And did you send him a letter telling him to stop the flow or…?
TB: No, no. I just let it go.
LC: Ok. At this time also, Tom, meaning the spring of 1974 or sometime during that year, Phil Habib became the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia. Did you know Phil?
TB: Yeah, sure.
LC: Can you tell me a little bit about him? Where you might have met him or on what occasions? Did you meet him in Washington or…?
TB: I don’t know where I first met him but I’d traveled with him to Asia when I went with President Ford in December of ’75 for his Asian trip.
LC: What was your impression of Ambassador Habib?

TB: He is probably one of the most effective Foreign Service officers I have ever encountered.

LC: And how do you make that kind of judgment, Tom?

TB: He just had extraordinarily good judgment, was not at all reserved or stuck up about it.

LC: He, of course, later had a number of special missions including missions to the Middle East. Were you following his career? Did you meet with him when you were in Washington? You said you went out to the Far East with him when you were on the NSC staff, but did you have occasion to meet with him?

TB: When I was on the NSC staff I had occasion to talk with him by phone on several occasions.

LC: And you had a good relationship with him then?

TB: Well, it was not a close relationship but he was one of the people who introduced me at a session of the U.N. when I was attending the meeting between Kissinger and Tommy Cole, the Singapore ambassador. Phil was there also and he introduced me to Kissinger, said, ‘This is your man in the White House on the NSC.’ I think I mentioned previously that I made such an impression on Kissinger that I was introduced to him three different times.

LC: And each time it was like it was just like the first time, huh?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Tom, I want to ask you a little bit about the spring of 1975. We’ve already talked about the Mayaguez incident but I’m interested in your own position as political counselor in Bangkok watching the events…let’s talk about South Vietnam first. The rolling of North Vietnamese troops, first of all, across the central highlands and then directly south towards Saigon. As that was happening in April of 1975, what was the impact, if you recall, on U.S.-Thai relations? Were the Thais deeply concerned about this?

TB: Oh certainly.

LC: Do you remember any meetings or…?

TB: I don’t remember any meetings specifically. I do remember going with Ambassador Kintner to Saigon in March of ’75 and we had a briefing from Frank Snepp of the CIA who was famous for his book, *Decent Interval*, which came out right after the fall of Vietnam.

LC: What kind of material, if you can say, did the briefing include?
TB: The main point that Snepp made was that the North Vietnamese could cavalierly leave all their divisions outside North Vietnam because there was no fear of an American invasion. In other words, they could put their forces in Laos and Cambodia and in the South, and as a matter of fact they had no complete division in the North. They didn't have anything in reserve in the North.

LC: And Tom, what was the mood in Saigon? I don’t know how long you might have been there, but were you there long enough to pick up some sense of what the feeling was among FSOs, or…?

TB: It was nervous but not…nobody seemed to have a sense that things were going to collapse so rapidly.

LC: How long were you there, do you remember?

TB: Oh, it was a matter of two or three days.

LC: Really? Where did you stay?

TB: I'm trying to remember where we stayed. I don't recall offhand. I know we had a meal with Ambassador Martin, we had meetings with him, but we were at the residence for some meeting, some dinner or something.

LC: And, I don't know whether you recall how he seemed to be. No great sense of urgency or impending doom or any of that?

TB: No, not at all.

LC: Really? Tom, did you have a feeling, any kind of feeling, that things were going south, as it were, very quickly or did you in fact think the opposite?

TB: I was not aware that things would collapse so rapidly. In fact, I think I documented in my book that I gave a speech to the American Chamber of Commerce in mid-April of '75 in which I predicted quite inaccurately that the South would hold out through the rainy season. The speech...I gave a number of caveats, of course. The speech was published in the journal the day after Saigon fell, which…

LC: And that took you out of the prediction business entirely, is that right?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Tom, I'm sure that you also had information about developments inside Cambodia, and particularly the push of the Khmer Rouge toward the capital. Can you tell anything about that, remembering anything about that?
TB: All I remember was that I was going to attempt to go to Phnom Penh via roads from Aranyaprathet and Tom Enders, who was then the charge d’affaire in Cambodia, nixed the trip.

LC: By saying, ‘You know, look, Tom. You need to not do that,’ or…?

TB: Yeah. It was too dangerous, he said.

LC: Ok. What was your plan in making that trip?

TB: I can’t recall accurately now why I was trying to do that but I was trying to get a picture, I presume, of what was going on in both countries because I did go to Vietnam.

LC: Yes, you had just been there in March ’75, so you wanted some kind of parallel look at what was happening in Cambodia?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Were you, Tom, as political counselor in Bangkok, seeing at least some of the traffic that was coming from the embassies – political reporting from the embassies in Saigon and Phnom Penh?

TB: Yes, certainly.

LC: And so you had a sense at least as it moved through the latter part of April of what was happening?

TB: I didn’t again realize the extreme rapidity with which the South would collapse.

LC: And when the last couple of days did arrive, what was your best source of information?

TB: I think it was news reports.

LC: Really? Did you see on television some of the film?

TB: I didn’t have a television set.

LC: You had no television?

TB: No.

LC: Ok. What news then did you have access to?

TB: Wire service, FBIS, Embassy cables…

LC: Tom, as you’ve mentioned FBIS, I wonder if you could say where some of that monitoring took place. Did that happen inside embassies or where were those monitoring stations?

TB: I frankly don’t know but I thought it was mainly done somewhere in Washington. Now, they had the…sorry, let me revise that. When I was in Udorn there was a listening post just south
of the city with those towers in a circle. You could see these in various locations, but one was particularly prominent in Udorn.

LC: Any idea where other ones were, if you recall?
TB: I don’t recall offhand. I know there was one in Taipei – not in Taipei, but in Taiwan.
LC: And FBIS, I should clarify we’re referring to the Foreign Broadcast Information Service.
TB: Which is the non-covert branch of the CIA.
LC: So the funding for that runs through that budget?
TB: I assume it does but I don’t know.
LC: But it’s not a State Department function?
TB: No, no.
LC: Ok. But one would see FBIS output every day?
TB: Daily. Yes.
LC: Tom, can you describe the mood in Bangkok in the embassy when finally it was learned that the embassy in Saigon had been abandoned?
TB: Well, it was a mood of gloom but I don’t recall it with great detail.
LC: Were there any statements, for example, by the ambassador to the embassy personnel or anything like that?
TB: We were between ambassadors at the time, but there was no gathering of the staff to mourn the collapse of Vietnam.
LC: Or for any other purpose, as you recall?
TB: No.
LC: Ok. And who was the DCM during that time?
TB: Ed Masters.
LC: He was still there? And how long did he stay, Tom?
TB: He stayed until after I left but I don’t recall just when…he became ambassador to Bangladesh and then to Indonesia.
LC: Ok, Tom. Let’s take a break there.
Interview with Thomas Barnes  
Session 11 of 14  
May 14, 2004

LC: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive continuing the oral history interview with
Foreign Service officer, retired, Thomas Barnes. Today’s date is the 14th of May 2004. I’m on the
campus of Texas Tech and Tom is speaking with me by telephone from Austin. Hi, Tom.

TB: Good morning.

LC: Tom, were there a couple of additional items about perhaps your time in Can Tho that
you would like…?

TB: Yeah. I would like to read some for the record. Some short entries dealing with my
initial arrival in Can Tho in mid-February 1973. I visited all sixteen of the provinces during that
initial arrival period. This letter is dated the 22nd of February ’73.

‘Started out this morning with the chief of the province I’m located in, Phong Dinh.’ Spelled
P-H-O-N-G D-I-N-H. ‘He’s the most diffident of the lot I’ve met so far. Pleasant guy,
Colonel Dây…’

D-Â-Y, a circumflex –

…but militarily narrow. Wonder how he copes with the political complexities of a city like
Can Tho. He’s on limited duty because of five combat wounds. Then went to Vi Thanh,
the capital of Chuong Thien, the worst province in the Delta. It traditionally ranks 43 out of
44 in pacification progress. It’s the Binh Dinh of IV Corps. Met the 21st Division
Commander Brigadier General Quay…’

Q-U-A-Y –

...who drove me around the scarred capital in his jeep. A Nung from North Vietnam, he is
an urbane contrast to all the other Vietnamese I’ve met down here. He got a bad case of
malaria while serving in Ca Mau a few years ago and has recurrent attacks. Then on to
the Chuong Thien province chief, a toothy Catholic from Phat Diem, one of the North
Vietnamese refugee bishop rics that moved south in ’54 en masse. He had known John
Vann in the 7th Division in 1962 and had high praise for John’s accompanying squad sized
patrols. For lunch went on to Kien Hoa to the extremely repressed, socially ill-at-ease
Colonel Kiem, whose main virtue is advisory responsiveness [and pride]. And the final one
of the day, [acquaintance with Nick Thorne], Lieutenant Colonel Nghia in Go Cong, a
highly pacified province. He’s one of those rare Vietnamese leaders who reads books, overtly self-assured but obviously capable.’

And so on to exhaustion and insipient cold. Now, this is for the impressions here. ‘Finally finished up today starting out…’

This is 24th of February ’73.

‘Finally finished up today. Started out in Ba Xuyen. Colonel Nghia, a former Ranger commander, had just been on the job three days and had never personally served as the district or province chief. He was a pleasant fellow but bewildered by his new role. Then went on to An Xuyen, Colonel Tho…’

T-H-O –
‘…a nervous northerner with a volatile temperament. Finally to Bac Lieu. Elder activist and Colonel Diep…’
pardon me, Diep, D-I-E-P –
‘…not too intellectual, popular in province. In sum, of the sixteen province chiefs, half were born in the Delta, another quarter in and around Saigon, only three from North Vietnam, and one from central. Overall capacity seems better than those I knew in MR2, but then we only have three punishment provinces for wayward officials down here versus seven there.’

John Vann used to – this is an aside – used to define a punishment province as those reserved for ARVN officers who fouled up. They would be sent to these places like Chuong Thien.

‘I conducted all these meetings in Vietnamese, so my language got more and more fluent toward the end. The tour has taken its toll, however. My cold has gotten worse and I have slight diarrhea. Quite worn out because of frequent official lunches and dinners out every night this week but one.’

Now, let’s see. There are just a couple more here. This is the 26th of February ’73.

‘Went to the ARVN briefing today. The weekly review is held on Mondays. The other days either Bob Payette or Frank Wisner goes.’ Bob Payette was the AID ranking man at the time. ‘The corps commander Major General Nghi rarely attends except Monday. ARVN is not giving us the complete story on their operations. Since the ceasefire they have labeled them all security operations and there have been exactly twenty-nine each day.’
What that means is there are twenty-nine tactical areas where there troops are. They may be engaged in several contacts with the enemy at any given area.

‘The casualty rate is a better indication of what’s going on. The friendly and enemy killed and wounded were about the same for the week ending February 24th as for the week ending February 17th. After the meeting, General Nghi invited me into his office privately, leaving his advisor, Brigadier General Blazey, out of the picture.’

Blazey I knew from before and he was, he left on the 29th of March...no sorry, February.

‘We talked only in Vietnamese. He asked for my impressions of the Delta after my tour last week. I told him I thought his province chiefs were collectively of higher caliber than those of MR2 and that further more I was impressed that three quarters of them were from the South. He acknowledged the psychological advantage of southern origin for working in the Delta. He said that he’d picked his leaders for capacity rather than for what part of the country they came from. He stressed that province chiefs should have had prior service as a regimental commander and also have good will and the spirit to do the job. His evaluation of his best and worst province chiefs was remarkably close to my own. I hope to continue the occasional chats with Nghi but the situation is fairly delicate as long as Frank Blazey remains as his advisor. General Weyand has just extended Blazey from March 14th to March 29th.’

I was wrong a minute ago when I said February 29th. Ok, and one more. I don’t know whether I covered this. This was the trip to Phnom Penh with Ken Quinn.

LC: You mentioned it but you didn’t read anything about it for it.

TB: This is the 18th and 19th of April ’73.

‘Ken Quinn, the vice consul in Chao Doc…’

He was later ambassador to Cambodia a few years ago – ‘...at the Cambodian border came with me to Phnom Penh today on an Air America volpar. Our principal objective was to ease the passage of convoys going up the Mekong. The Embassy was in marked contrast to my visit a couple of years ago. Frenetically busy, frightfully frightened, wives have been given the option to leave. Meg...’

Who was the wife of the ambassador. He was the DCM in Laos when I was there, Coby Swank – ‘Meg plans to go April 24th and is packing their prized belongings. After so many…’
I can't read how many months –
‘...of maintaining tension, of mounting tension, she has had enough. Coby looks drawn and is pessimistic. He says the situation is worse than any time in Laos. Even given the '65 Phoumi coup and the '66 General Ma bombing that you averted by taking refuge in the embassy. The DCM’s car that picked us up, Enders, is on holiday in Europe, had thick plastic mounted on the inside of the windows to repel grenade and small arms fragments. Coby…'
That's the Ambassador, Coby Swank –
‘...flag still fluttering goes along at breakneck speed with a bodyguard in the front, preceded by a motorcycle escort and a jeep full of soldiers to the rear. The soldiers sleep at the house that they residence and a U.S. Marine guard with an FM radio sleeps in the house on the top floor. Coby wants a full company of Marines to defend the Embassy in case the city collapses, which he believes is an early eventuality. The government is ineffective, the army crumbling, and the city is lovely and serene as ever. It's hard to partake in the American panic after having been through Vietnam, but I never had any direct attempt on my life as Coby and the DCM have. Nevertheless, the local fear seems exaggerated.'
I think that’s…
‘Coby gave a lunch for me and the three of us, among others, went to supper at Don Soline’s, he’s the bachelor AID Deputy Director. His boss was also there and both were impressively bright. Back at Coby’s for a glass of water before going to bed. The windows rattled twice with nearby B-52 strikes, a familiar sound in Binh Long. Curfew is at 10:00 but all the shops were shuttered close as we drove back home shortly after 9:00.' That’s it.
That’s all I wanted…
LC: Ok. Tom, can I ask just a couple questions based on those entries, if you recall at all.
Do you know anything about the attempts that were made on Ambassador Swank and DCM Enders' lives? Do you remember anything about that?
TB: The...I'm sorry, the what?
LC: The attempts that were made on their lives.
TB: I don't recall any of the details.
LC: Ok. Do you, thinking back now, remember the rioting in the car with all the protection inside it? Can you describe the interior of the car, what had been done?

TB: It was just a thick plastic covering for the windows on the inside.

LC: And it was mounted somehow?

TB: It was mounted in one fashion or another. Yeah.

LC: Where were you traveling from?

TB: Just around the city of Phnom Penh.

LC: Ok, from the airport, presumably?

TB: Yeah.

LC: Ok. And when you went back to the airport did you travel in the same way?

TB: I really don’t remember but I imagine that was the case.

LC: Ok. And thinking back on the material that you’ve just read about, being in Can Tho and the tour, and your meeting with General Nghi, we’ve talked just a little bit about him before. Can you give your impressions of him? It sounds from the letter as if you were impressed with his rationality and his command style, but was there more to him?

TB: Well, he was a very conscientious commander in the sense that he visited his outlying areas frequently. I accompanied him on several of the trips. I did not like the technique he had of openly criticizing staff officers in public meetings. It was demeaning to the individual. If he had something negative to say about somebody he should have done it in private, but that’s my own bias on that score.

LC: Sure. And why did he…was there a reason that may lay in a cultural context or some other aspect of his experience that he was using that technique or was it just bad management?

TB: I would attribute it to the latter.

LC: Ok. Tom, tell me about the advisor, Blazey, who was assigned to him.

TB: Well, there were military…as you recall, there were military advisors in each of the regions and the military were phasing out of Vietnam and the consulates general were replacing the four CORDS groups in the Delta at that time. Not in the Delta, I mean in the country.

LC: And Blazey’s position was that he was a…?

TB: He was a senior – he was a brigadier general – he was the senior advisor in the Delta.

LC: Ok. And you had known him before this time.

TB: yeah. He worked with John Vann in Military Region III and I’d known him then.
LC: And what kind of a commander was he? Can you give a pencil sketch?

TB: Well, he was the colonel when I knew him before and he was sort of John Vann’s special military assistant at one point.

LC: Was he effective in working with General Nghi or was there, obviously there was some tension there.

TB: I really don’t know what their relationship or how close their relationship was.

LC: Ok. Tom, what, if you know, happened to General Nghi in 1975.

TB: I think he was in re-education for many, many years. Over ten or something.

LC: And any idea where he is now?

TB: I don’t know.

LC: Ok. Do you wonder sometimes what happened to some of these…?

TB: I know that General Ba, whom I was advising when I was deputy for CORDS in MR2, was…is in Las Vegas somewhere. He and his two children, two of his children, lived with me in Nha Trang in the first house I had there for…they lived with me for about two months.

LC: Any others about whom you…?

TB: Well, the one I was closest to was General Thuc, who had been as a colonel province chief in Binh Dinh, and I saw him in Sacramento where I have two first cousins. And I also had him address the senior seminar when the seminar went to San Francisco.

LC: So he was out of Vietnam then clearly before the final fall. Tom, if you don’t mind I’d like to go back to Thailand now and a few more questions if you’re amenable. I want to ask about the change of government in 1973. While you were there as political counselor there was a coup, and in the secondary literature the genesis of the coup is really attributed to, in place with, the students. Primarily I think at Thammasai University. Is that how you saw it?

TB: Yeah, sure. There was some disenchantment with the Thai way of politics, student disenchantment.

LC: And is that really sufficient to foment a coup?

TB: It was at the time.

LC: Ok. Can you explain or give a view on why it was sufficient or how that unwrapped, if you remember?

TB: Well, my personal view is the Thai don’t care for the theatrics of coup attempts, and the students carried the protest beyond normal Thai norms and therefore, because they sort of
violated the surface geniality of Thai society’s impression or conception of itself, they prevailed in
getting a change of government.

LC: And by what action did they go beyond whatever that line is that you’re describing?
What actions did they take that were different?

TB: It was just protests, protesting and demonstrations and so on.

LC: For day after day after day, that kind of thing?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. And Tom, I want to ask you a little more about the diplomatic community in
Bangkok when you were there as a political counselor. The Soviet Union at that point, I’m sure,
had an embassy in Bangkok. Did you have occasion to see Soviet diplomats around and about?

TB: The CIA contingent of the embassy was primarily targeted against the Soviet Union;
they were developing information. There was one occasion in which there was supposed to be a
grand reunion between the two embassies where there was a social gathering at, I think, the Dusit
Thani Hotel – I don’t remember which hotel it was for sure. A Russian at that point cornered me
and said, ‘How many people do you have in the U.S. Embassy?’ It wasn’t a very subtle approach
to gathering information, but I personally had very little to do with the Soviets.

LC: Since the question of the size of the embassy is raised, at least in the American
context, any idea what the size of the Soviet Embassy there was?

TB: It was a very good size but I don’t know what it was offhand. But the U.S. Embassy
was the second largest in the system, that is in the American system, after Vietnam.

LC: Can you give a sense of the number of personnel, aboveboard personnel, now?

TB: Oh, several thousand, but I don’t know for sure what the figure was.

LC: I remember from my own readings in the early ‘50s that the Soviet Embassy in
Bangkok at that time, for their system, was huge, possibly the second largest something like that,
third largest. Tom, what about other diplomatic representation? For example, did the People’s
Republic of China have an informal liaison office of some kind there?

TB: I’m trying to remember. There was a…during that period Taiwan was invited to leave
and China took its place, sometime during that period.

LC: I think, if I remember correctly from some of the material in the chron files, that there
was the Thai ambassador to Taiwan, or to the ROC, was moving to a new posting in Yugoslavia
and there was discussion about whether he would be replaced or not. Does that ring a bell?
TB: It does. I don’t remember about Yugoslavia but I remember there was that discussion.

LC: And that leads me to a broader question about the changing relationship between Thailand and the People’s Republic, it was something that we talked about a little bit yesterday. Can you, Tom, give an overview or shed some light on competition between the People’s Republic…?

TB: This was very amusing. The Nationalists, or the Taiwanese Embassy, was theoretically turned over to the mainland Chinese, but they left behind so many bugs, so many microphones in the wall, that the Chinese refused to occupy the building.

LC: Really? That’s funny. Did the PRC then set up an embassy at a different location while you were there before 1975?

TB: I believe so, but I can’t recall. I can’t assert that with certain…

LC: Ok. There was also, again this is impressions from the secondary literature, that at this point between ’73 and ’75 with the United States backing away from Southeast Asia, the hint, at least, of a potential for competition between China and the Soviet Union in Southeast Asia. Can you shed any light on that?

TB: Not really.

LC: Ok. I wondered if you thought that with the change in United States relations with the People’s Republic that that would have some effect on China’s thinking about Southeast Asia.

TB: I really didn’t go into that issue very deeply.

LC: Ok. How important for the Thai government at this time was the fear of a resurgence of the uprisings in the north and northeast, and particularly those led by Vietnamese exiles?

TB: I don’t recall there being much resurgence.

LC: Ok. No fear around that?

TB: No. Anything that happened in the northeast, of course, was the fault of the Vietnamese refugees who’ve been there since 1946.

LC: Yes. And with the advances that were made by the North Vietnamese against the South in the period, sort of ’74 to ’75, I wondered if Thailand had any peers around that…?

TB: Yeah. They were anxious to get them repatriated still but some of the wiser heads in the Thai bureaucracy though that there might be some way of eventual accommodation of the Vietnamese communities that had been there for God knows how many…let’s see…since ’46. This was ’75. That was what…going on thirty years.
LC: Right. So a generation. A full generation.

TB: And many of the so-called Vietnamese who had passed for Thai – they were totally assimilated – the virtue of Thai society is that it is, it absorbs people so readily. In fact, one of the reasons I did not retire there was I didn’t want to become a Thai. The saying in Bangkok is – where there’s a heavy Chinese community – is that all Thai hate the Chinese except their own grandfather.

LC: Tom, how much effort did the political section in the Embassy put into monitoring the ethnic Chinese in Thailand?

TB: We had one fellow, a very competent man, who actually was a CIA employee but assigned full time to my section, to the political section – he was very competent – and he monitored the Chinese community.

LC: And talking now about above board activities, what kinds of monitoring things could someone in that kind of position do?

TB: Well, he had extensive contacts within the community and wrote airgrams, which are like a dispatch, on the subject.

LC: So his sources would be his own social and other contacts. What about things like reading the Chinese press and so forth? Was there an organized effort to do that?

TB: We had a local employee in the political section who was ethnic Chinese and who gave us daily translations of key articles from the Chinese press in Bangkok.

LC: Now, was he or she trained such that they could not only do the translations but also determine what was key?

TB: Oh, I think so. Yes.

LC: Ok. And, Tom, as political counselor, did you see that kind of daily reporting material coming up from within the section? And then what would you do? Would you make decision on how to pass it on?

TB: Yeah. If it was significant. Sure.

LC: Ok. Do you remember anything of significance coming from within that monitoring effort or that observation effort?

TB: Not offhand.

LC: Tom, I also want to ask you just a bit more about the narcotics control effort. Was this an area that the Thai government was sort of...an area in which the Thai government was being
pulled along by the United States or were they as anxious to exert control as the United States was?

TB: Definitely not as anxious as the U.S. was.

LC: And Tom, can you talk a little bit about that difference of priority?

TB: Well, first of all, the areas where the smuggling of narcotics was going on up in the north, north Thailand, along the Burmese border were not fully under Thai government control. There were Guo Minh Dong [Chinese Nationalist] armies in these areas, on both sides of the border, and there would have been a military conflict of unpleasant proportions if the Thai military tried to clean out these KMT pockets.

LC: Tom, what about the strength of those KMT armed units or KMT remnants, as they were called, any idea of the force numbers that we were talking about?

TB: I think Cal Mehlert can fill you in on that because he was the expert on this.

LC: Ok. And was the presence of the KMT remnants there any, a source of any difficulty say between – or misunderstanding – between Thailand and Burma or not?

TB: Well certainly Burma even less, much less so than Thailand, could exercise…was unable to exercise any control over these areas.

LC: And what was the United States position on this? Was the United States interested in having Thailand use troops actually or was it a more subtle policy than that?

TB: I don’t know. I think you’ll have to ask somebody who was dealing with the problem.

LC: Ok. Sure. Tom, when you were in Bangkok in 1975 or perhaps late ’74 a discussion arose, I think, about your next posting. And if I remember correctly from the material that you’ve given us there was an initiative launched by the State Department to get FSOs who had been in one – identified particularly with one geographic area, a wider experience in other geographic areas.

TB: That was not necessarily a new initiative. That was an ongoing program.

LC: It had been in place then?

TB: That’s right.

LC: And Tom, did you think that this was going to affect you? That you would be moved out of Asia?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Did you anticipate that with anxiety or with happiness?
TB: I was sort of indifferent toward it.

LC: Really? I think one of the letters you wrote, and I counted this up, indicated between
1967 and '74 you had been transferred eight times.

TB: yeah, sure.

LC: And that's excessive. Is it not?

TB: That it is. Some people would say I couldn't hold a job.

LC: I wouldn't want to go there, but you were looking toward a new assignment and
hoping, I would imagine, for a placement where you would stay.

TB: I wanted a DCM job in a significant embassy.

LC: Ok. And you were an FSO-2 at this point, is that accurate?

TB: That's right.

LC: So DCM is the next place to go in terms of up the ladder?

TB: That's right.

LC: Did you have any placements in mind that you thought might be...?

TB: I campaigned...I wrote Ambassador Sullivan in Iran but he of course selected an
individual. He was very cordial in his reply, but he selected an individual who had been four years
on the Iran desk. That's understandable. I also wrote Ambassador Gleysteen in Korea and
mentioned my extreme interest in Korea and prior service there, but he had in mind Bob Rich who
was a Foreign Service classmate of mine – we came in at the same time – who had Korean
diplomatic experience. My experience there had been military, of course. Actually, he got neither
one of us. He got somebody else, but that's another issue.

LC: Ok. And was it the case that ambassadors made the call as to who the...?

TB: The ambassador has the right to choose two people: his DCM and his secretary.

LC: And he may leave the DCM behind but take the secretary with him, is that fair?

TB: No, no. He chooses those two.

LC: Ok. And how often...well, what's the term of service typically for a DCM?

TB: It depends upon how long the ambassador stays in his post and how well he gets
along with the ambassador.

LC: So there isn't really a kind of unwritten standard like two years or four years or
something like that?
TB: Well, theoretically one is assigned for that type of period. Yes. But if there's a change of ambassadors the new one can dispense with the former DCM.

LC: Ok. And this is all happening at the ambassador's behest. He can make that call?

TB: That's right.

LC: Without reference to Washington or…?

TB: No, no, no. Not without reference to Washington. He has to have Washington approve them.

LC: And so Tom, how did it come about then that you left Bangkok for Washington?

TB: The reason I left – and they had nothing in the pipeline for me – was that my wife developed melanoma and this came up in the spring of 1972. So, we were advised for immediate operation, she was immediately operated on – this was on the right thigh – was immediately operated on, and it was best to go back to Washington in order to handle ongoing treatment. As it turned out, she was operated on in time and has never had a recurrence, but it was already in the lymph nodes and the right groin and so on.

LC: So it was an extremely serious situation?

TB: Yeah. So that…they weren't anticipating that I would be returning at that time and they were having a grave shortage of places for senior officers.

LC: And before you actually reported to Washington, I believe, if I remember correctly, you went to Korea briefly.

TB: Yeah, I went by there.

LC: Tom, what was your visit like?

TB: Well, I brought two of my children. I visited an area where I'd been stationed back in 1952 and '53, which had been totally transformed into a Japanese resort, unfortunately.

LC: Really? You say unfortunately. What was missing? What had been lost?

TB: Well, what had happened was this mountain that I used to like to climb took an hour and a half to get to the – not to the summit – but to the viewing point from the mountain. There had been a cable car installed from the park at the base of the mountain to this location and one could get up by cable car in ten minutes. There were pop bottles strewn all along the route whereas it had been a pristine mountain trail before, so it's like the impression I had when I used to go canoeing in northern Minnesota, southern Ontario. We'd be canoeing for four days portaging over rough trails and then some Chicago businessman would fly in on a pontoon plane and go fishing,
get into the same area in twenty minutes from Ely, Minnesota. So I had resentment of this modernization of access. Also, the hotel that we had lived in, the officer’s quarters, in the walled compound there were three very ugly concrete structures under construction. And the most mysterious one of all, I went to call on the catholic priest – I had had a very close social relationship with the prior Irish priest in On Chon. When I went to call on the parish there was a Korean priest there who swore to me that there had never been a foreigner in charge of this parish. I began to wonder whether I’d had imaginary conversations with this Irishman.

LC: Or landed in the wrong part of Korea. It sounds almost like it was unrecognizable. Did that experience or those experiences cure you of your desire to return to Korea?

TB: Not at all.

LC: Ok. And Tom, have you been back subsequently?

TB: I went back the following year and then one time, flying back from Vietnam a few years ago, there was a plane, some problem with the plane, and we landed unexpectedly in Seoul and spent the night there.

LC: Is it a place that you would again like to return to?

TB: Yes. I’d like to take my wife there because she’s never, except for that overnight in Seoul, has never been there.

LC: Never had a chance to experience it. Tom, when you did arrive back in Washington, your assignment was to the National Security Council staff.

TB: That’s right.

LC: Can you give a sort of quick sketch of the organization of the NSC?

TB: Well, Asia was divided…Dick Solomon was responsible for Red China, for Communist China. I covered all the rest of East Asia from Burma through Japan, Taiwan, so on. Australia, New Zealand, etc. So there was this principal division in the Asia Bureau. The Near Eastern Bureau under Bob Oakley was co-terminus with the Near Eastern Bureau in the Department. The European Bureau was headed by a fellow who was not a Foreign Service officer. Bob Oakley, of course, was later ambassador to Zaire, Somalia, and – what else – Pakistan.

LC: And Tom, describe if you can, what sorts of staff support you had. Obviously the NSC is not the size of the State Department.

TB: I had two deputies. One for Southeast Asia who was ken Quinn who had been with me in the Delta in Chau Doc when – he was the one I traveled to Phnom Penh with. The other was
another fellow classmate like Bob Rich called Jay Taylor who was a Chinese specialist and has written a book on China.

LC: An FSO...?

TB: They’re both FSOs. He handled Northeast Asia.

LC: And Taylor was class of ’57 in the same way, I think, you were?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Ok. And what was your daily routine?

TB: The daily routine was to read enormous quantities of intelligence reports. It would take at least an hour and a half to go through it and then after that to have occasional meetings with the NSC hierarchy, Brent Scowcroft and so on.

LC: Now, Scowcroft was the advisor to the president, is that right?

TB: He was the...when I first started there it was Kissinger, but then he got the dual role of Secretary of State and so on. So I had, as I may have mentioned, rather minimal contact with Kissinger. I also had rather minimal contact with Scowcroft. Scowcroft was a man who worked seven days a week, dawn to midnight, and it was very difficult to get to see him because he was always busy. I did not have a particularly close relationship with Scowcroft.

LC: And was he busy to effect or busy to be busy?

TB: No, he was constantly occupied.

LC: And so when you had a presentation to make or something that needed attention higher up, who did you take it to?

TB: I would take...I took it to Bill Hyland, who was his deputy.

LC: How do you spell his last name?

TB: H-Y-L-A-N-D.

LC: And what was his background? Was he FSO?

TB: I think he was CIA in background.

LC: And did he have a regional responsibility or...?

TB: No, he was the overall deputy to Scowcroft. Like Scowcroft before was a deputy to Kissinger.

LC: And so Hyland was sort of the entrepoinete for materials getting up the chain?

TB: Sometimes I dealt directly with Scowcroft, but if I wanted to see him on an issue I’d have to wait till 8:30 or nine o’clock at night to get to him.
LC: And did that set well with your own personal calendar and time frame?

TB: My wife wasn’t very particularly appreciative of my late arrival for supper.

LC: I would have thought. Yes. Tom, where was the NSC housed at that time?

TB: In the Old Executive Office building which is one of the only places in Washington where you can… I had a balcony where you could open the windows. The State Department is totally hermitic.

LC: Yes. Were there any security concerns around having the windows open, for example, hearing conversations?

TB: No. Because the opening of the balcony went on toward the White House compound.

LC: And so it sounds as if you had a very nice view anyway.

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Tom, what kind of security procedures were in place in the OEB at that time?

TB: Well, it was… you had to have an identity card to get in with a picture on it and the… you couldn’t leave any classified documents out when you left the office. There were nightly inspections to make sure that everything was put away.

LC: In that way, was it similar to working at the State Department?

TB: It was similar in that respect except that one was not allowed to keep any files from the NSC.

LC: Ok. Everything had to stay there when you left?

TB: Well, my unclassified chron files I brought out as I recall but I couldn’t bring out anything sensitive.

LC: And Tom, can you give a sense of the major issues in the time period you were there, which is I gather late ’75 through ’76?

TB: One of the major issues was the proposal, trumpeted by the Department of Defense that a Foreign Service officer there who later became a career ambassador, Mort Abramowitz, to extend the jurisdiction of the Japan’s Self-Defense Forces to a thousand miles around Japan or a thousand leagues or whatever it happened to be.

LC: And what issues did that raise? What points of tension?

TB: That raised the whole issue of Japanese neutrality and the renunciation of warfare as an instrument of national policy and so on.
LC: And developing military capability or policing capability. What was the United States view of that?

TB: Well, that was precisely the problem. What we were supposed to do in the NSC was to reconcile the opposing views of Defense and State and come up with a recommendation of our own. Kissinger had this system of presenting options. He wanted options always and not the statement that one favored such and such a course of action. He wanted to make his own judgment on options. This was...I was so trained in the option paper that when I went to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees I presented an options paper to Paul Hartling, the High Commissioner. He sent me back a note saying, 'I don’t want to choose. Tell me which one you think is best.' So much for the options.

LC: And in the Kissinger style of working he didn’t want to know your opinion?

TB: No. He could guess it in most cases. He said, ‘I think you were going along option B,’ for example.

LC: Right. Tom, were there other security issues, if you remember, around the fact that the OEB is such an old building? Any updates that have been made to the infrastructure of the building that you can tell us about?

TB: I don’t recall anything on that score.

LC: I remember when I had a security briefing for working at the State Department – this would have been in 1980 something, ’83 or something like that – we were told not to hold any conversations near, in the outer ring of offices because equipment could be used to pick up the vibrations from windows and that sort of thing

TB: I’ve never heard that.

LC: Really?

TB: Yeah.

LC: Well, that’s very old technology I guess, even now, but I wondered if there was anything like that. So, you simply had an I.D. card and of course became familiar to the staff, the security staff, I’m sure. Tom, where did you live? Did you buy a place in D.C. or...?

TB: Well, it was rather complicated. I was in the middle of a divorce so I was staying in an apartment in downtown Washington.

LC: And this would be the first year of the Ford administration. Can you give a sense now, stepping back and greatly removed from that time, how did it feel to be in Washington at that time?
The elected president had resigned, we had a president who had never been elected, and that was a unique situation in American history. Do you remember any kinds of feelings around the sense of stability and guidance…?

TB: I don’t remember any sense of instability because of the succession problem, but I’ve never enjoyed working in Washington.

LC: Yes. It’s not your favorite place, and a lot of sitting at the desk and a lot of meetings also you’ve made clear that’s not your métier. Tom, were you thinking during the time that you were on the NSC staff there about where you might be going next and trying to…what kinds of things could you do to secure your next placement? Writing letters and speaking to people or…?

TB: Yeah. Indicating one’s preferences. I indicated them for years without any results, however.

LC: But I’ve read material that you kindly provided which included reviews that were prepared by ambassadors and DCM and your rating officers over time and they’re glowing on you so I don’t know there was any fault on your part. The record is what it is and indicates that you were doing a very good job. Tom, did you accompany President Ford on his trip to the Far East?

TB: Yes. We went with Air Force One to…sorry, it was a backup to Anchorage then it was on Air Force One from Anchorage to Tokyo. Then I was supposed to go to China but as I may have mentioned before, I was bumped off the plane in Tokyo for Mrs. Ford’s hairdresser.

LC: No, you didn’t tell me that one before but that’s…

TB: She…some secret service agent whose function was unclear to me and myself were bumped off in Tokyo. But I used the occasion to go to Taiwan, and then I went back from getting up at 3:30 or 4:00 in the morning, went from Yokoto to Beijing airport, which was at that time the only time I’d ever been in mainland China and picked up Air Force One again for the trip to Jakarta, and then the trip from Jakarta to Manila.

LC: Were those the primary stops then? Beijing, Jakarta…?

TB: There was a political stop – that is the campaign stop in Anchorage – then there was a foreign policy stop in Tokyo and Beijing and Jakarta and Manila.

LC: Tom, how long were you actually in Beijing?

TB: About three hours.

LC: Ok. So did you ever leave the airport?

TB: No.
LC: When you picked back up with the entourage and flew to Jakarta can you tell about that trip? You were then on U.S., on Air Force One – I’m sorry – is that right?

TB: That’s right. They serve a good tuna sandwich.

LC: I was going to ask what amenities came your way as a result of being on the plane; a good tuna sandwich.

TB: Sort of like constant availability of snacks and so on.

LC: And were there members of the press corps on the plane as well?

TB: Yes, there were.

LC: And did you or did they take the occasion to speak with you or…?

TB: No.

LC: Were they separated from the staff people?

TB: They were riding in a different portion of the plane.

LC: Ok. And not much mixing back and forth?

TB: Not that I know of. No.

LC: Tom, what happened in Jakarta? Do you remember that trip?

TB: Well, we had meetings with the government and it was just a sort of love fest between the two sides.

LC: Ok. And Indonesia has, certainly for the last thirty-five years or maybe more, been of principal strategic importance to the United States in Southeast Asia. Would you agree?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: And was that part of the point of making the trip, you say it, a love fest to kind of underscore and convey to the Indonesian establishment the United States attaches to that relationship?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. Did you go to the embassy? How long were you there?

TB: Twenty-four hours.

LC: Oh, is that all? And so the President would have met the Prime Minister, is that…?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Do you remember anything about that reception?

TB: I don’t remember much about the details. I had a more active role when we went to the Philippines.
LC: What happened there, Tom?

TB: One of the people who’d cultivated me on the NSC staff was Kokoy Romaldez, who was Imelda’s brother. He was theoretically the ambassador to Beijing but he spent most of his time in Washington. When we got to the Philippines he alerted me that he wanted me to talk to Marcos directly about the Status of Forces Agreement and about the Defense Agreement. So, the morning after our arrival, after about three hours sleep or something like that, he picked me up at 5:00 in the morning and brought me to Malacanang Palace. He sat me down on a wooden bench, sort of love seat, in the hallway outside Marcos’ bedroom and said that the president was calling his provincial governors, and when he finished he would like to talk to me. Now, Ambassador Sullivan, who had been and I had been with him in Laos, was the current ambassador to the Philippines. He did not know that I was seeing Marcos nor did my boss, Brent Scowcroft, which came up suddenly. And President Ford and his wife were sleeping in Malacanang Palace at the time. At any rate, after sitting there for about half an hour, Imelda [Marcos] came downstairs and invited me into the living room. She didn’t show me her shoe collection but we had a pleasant conversation in which she complained about Ambassador Sullivan as being more representative of an ambassador from an enemy country. He couldn’t stand Imelda. But that’s another issue. Then I was summoned and Marcos was at a long table and he sat eating breakfast without offering me anything and brought up the questions of the Defense Treaty and the Status of Forces Agreement. I pointed out that the mood of the U.S. Congress at that time was not at all in favor of either renewing the Defense Treaty or continuing the Status of Forces Agreement. He wanted to update the Defense Treaty. I said, ‘This is not the moment to play around with that. You’re liable to get a negative response. Just leave it as it is.’ And then on the Status of Forces Agreement I urged caution also. Anyway, that’s the contact I had with the Philippine hierarchy. I reported this to Scowcroft by memo as we were flying from Manila to Honolulu, but I’d never mentioned to Ambassador Sullivan that I had this meeting.

LC: And that was fine because you reported to Scowcroft. And although you were a Foreign Service officer, your assignment was National Security Council.

TB: That’s right.

LC: Ok. Tom, let’s take a break there.

TB: Sure.
LC: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Thomas Barnes. Today's date is the 10th of June 2004. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections Building and I’m speaking with Tom who is in Austin, Texas. Good morning, Tom.

TB: Good morning.

LC: Tom, last time we reviewed your experience traveling with the presidential party, President Ford, to the Far East as a component of your work with the National Security Council and I wondered, Tom, if you could tell me about the concluding time period of your service on the NSC and your transition to your next position.

TB: The principal issue that I remember dealing with – we were not allowed of course to bring any classified material with us when we left the NSC so I don’t have files to refer to – but the principal issue was whether Japan should expand its military reach beyond a certain distance from its shores, and the Department of Defense was advocating a thousand mile expansion as I recall. That issue was never fully resolved during the time I was on the NSC but that was one of the principal issues we were considering.

LC: What was the State Department position on that?

TB: The State Department was more reluctant than the Defense Department to go along with the expansion.

LC: And what was the basis for that division between the two?

TB: I think the Defense Department was interested in having greater Japanese participation in Asia in various programs.

LC: As a matter of some way alleviating the military cost and burden on the United States?

TB: Yeah, that’s right.

LC: And the State Department feeling emanated from what concerns?

TB: Well, the fact of Japan’s record in World War II.

LC: Yes. I thought you might say that. So concern then about some kind of…

TB: And of course in the Japanese constitution the renunciation of war as an instrument of national policy.
LC: Ok. And obviously the constitution that the United States had crafted for Japan. And as you say that, that issue was unresolved. Do you remember, at least during your time on the NSC, do you remember how it floated to its conclusion as one of the priority issues?

TB: I really don’t.

LC: OK. Tom, what about your own assignments? How did you come to learn about your next posting?

TB: The next…it wasn’t really a posting, it was attendance at the Senior Seminar, which I looked forward to because I had spent so much time abroad in the Foreign Service and to be an effective for the U.S. government abroad one should be much better acquainted than I was about domestic political and economic events. The Senior Seminar was a wonderful opportunity to get involved in local politics in various cities in the United States. We went with…met with Governor Dukakis in Massachusetts, with the mayor of Atlanta, with the mayor of Indianapolis, with various officials around the country. We met with leaders of businesses, Cargill [in Minneapolis], the largest private company in the United States, for example. We met with the individuals in Detroit, including the mayor, who were trying to revive, economically revive, the city.

LC: Who was the mayor at that time? Do you remember?

TB: I can’t remember offhand.

LC: Ok. Was it the African-American there?

TB: I think so. Yeah.

LC: Coleman Young?

TB: I think that was it, yeah.

LC: Do you have any impressions of him particularly that you remember?

TB: Not particularly. No.

LC: Ok. So, if I’m right in thinking then Tom, the purpose of the Senior Seminar was to give you both an overview and then some in-depth structural knowledge of particular sectors and issues that were driving domestic concerns?

TB: That’s right. And this, theoretically, once you went abroad again would put you in a better position to defend U.S. interests.

LC: And Tom, how many seminar members were there in your class?

TB: If I recall the total was twenty-six, but don’t crucify me on that.

LC: Ok. No penalties for error. Tom, were…
TB: About half were Foreign Service officers and the other half were from various sectors of the government.

LC: Ok. But people primarily who had overseas responsibilities?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Department of Defense personnel?

TB: There were two Department of Defense civilians and then there was a representative from each of the services – Marines, Navy, Army, and Air Force. The Air Force man, Leo – can't remember the last name [Smith] – eventually became a lieutenant general in the Air Force but he was a lieutenant colonel at that time.

LC: Ok. Tom, were there any speakers or experiences particularly on this whirlwind cavalcade that stand out for you as having been especially instructive?

TB: Yes. There was a fellow [named Bromley] who was an expert in physics, which is the subject I sedulously avoided at the university. He was so articulate about explaining physics that I bought a book on the subject.

LC: You became intrigued?

TB: Yes.

LC: I'll be darned.

TB: I must confess that I've never finished it but at any rate I was attracted enough to try to penetrate an obscure subject. He was very good.

LC: Where was he from?

TB: Somewhere in the Northeast.

LC: Ok. Tom, you mentioned, I think in the memoir, that the seminar had particular utilities but it also had some shortcomings. Can you, for someone who doesn't have access to your book, just give a sense of those?

TB: The shortcomings. I don't recall mentioning that fact.

LC: Ok. In terms of who might have been included as speakers that…

TB: Oh, I see. I felt there was an overemphasis on academics, who despite meeting with them in prominent places like Berkeley or – what is it – Tufts…Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, I found their grasp of reality somewhat insubstantial. I would have recommended… I tried to line up William Buckley. I had corresponded with him and he, unfortunately, had a conflict
of dates so he couldn’t make it to address the group but it would have been helpful to have seen,
listened to, more of the leaders of various movements than strictly academics.

LC: For example, opinion makers rather than analysts?
TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Since I’m sure most of the people in the seminar were themselves analysts. Why
Buckley particularly? Can you…what relationship, you said you had had correspondence with
him?
TB: Well, I had written…he had written something on Thailand…
LC: Had he? That’s interesting.
TB: Some article which was published in a newspaper and there was a factual error in it,
which I wrote him about.
LC: Did he appreciate the correction? Do you know?
TB: Yeah, sure. But that’s what I used as an excuse to trying to entice him to address the
seminar, and he had addressed it on a previous occasion it turned out.
LC: What about people from religious institutions or the arts? Were those sorts of things
included?
TB: I’m trying to recall. We concentrated on the black community in Atlanta and Lonny
King, who was the leader of that community, was the person who got us in touch with a lot of key
officials in Atlanta. I had been responsible for the Atlanta program as well as the one for San
Francisco.
LC: By responsible, what do you mean?
TB: I had to set up all the meetings and I’d worked chiefly through Lonny King who lined up
people for us to talk to including the black mayor of Atlanta, Julian Bond, and so on.
LC: Any contact with the then I think quite incipient King Center or the King family?
TB: To what? I’m sorry.
LC: The Martin Luther King Center for Non-Violent Social Change in Atlanta?
TB: No. I don’t recall that, but we did go to the Carter Center at Emory University. And we
went to the Center for Disease Control.
LC: Do you remember much? Did you go for a tour or…?
TB: Well, we had an orientation from the director general of, whose name was – began with an F. I can’t remember. Fogel. Something like that. He had been instrumental in the Vietnamese refugee situation at one point.

LC: I see. Tom, thinking back over the seminar, its organization and so on, what would you say was its greatest utility for you personally or just structurally?

TB: Indoctrination on the United States and knowledge of how things ticked in the U.S.

LC: From which, as you say, you had been separated for a good long time at this stage. And Tom, was…you’ve intimated that the seminar had this preparatory value. What were participants looking forward to in terms of assignments coming out?

TB: They were supposed to be considered for the top jobs in the Service but the problem was when we were graduated from the Seminar there were no top jobs available. The class president who was a black was appointed ambassador to Trinidad and Tobago or Tobago. I asked him when he was about to go there whether he was going to spend most of his time in Tobago or most of his time in Trinidad. At any rate, the rest of us had no assignment or had nothing very promising. Although, Jim Bishop, who later became ambassador, unfortunately, to Niger to Liberia and then Somalia – he had to be evacuated from both Liberia and Somalia. The Marines took him out of Somalia.

LC: That would be in the late ‘70s during the civil war?

TB: Yeah.

LC: Tom, can you just give a sense of why there seemed to be few openings at this particular moment?

TB: Well, I think there was a change of administrations and the government of course, all the political appointees, were named ambassadors and the tradition is, the custom – not the custom – but the consequence is that toward the end of any given presidency of the four year term, several of those posts are filled by professionals, by Foreign Service officers – ambassadorial posts – but the beginning of a presidency when the heavy contributors are rewarded with ambassadorships there are very few openings available.

LC: To what extent is this phenomenon accepted by career Foreign Service officers as just part of the game and to what extent does it tend to rile up resentment?

TB: There’s not a damn thing they can do about it.
LC: Ok. So it’s just resignation, acceptance, tough luck kind of thing. Tom, what did you do between the end of the Seminar and your next posting? I don’t know if there was a gap in there or not.

TB: No, there really wasn’t. One of the interesting aspects of the program in San Francisco was to organize a meeting with the gay community and I had the lesbian professor from – was it – University of San Francisco who was very well-known [Sally Gerheardt] and two male psychologists who were homosexuals. Now, one fellow, my good friend George Rubley – who was an AID official of some prominence and used to be…his father or uncle or something was in the Atchison and Rubley Law Partnership in New York City – he refused to attend. But the Army man, a Greek-American named Pattakos, although he objected strongly to this session, he attended. He and the lesbian ended up calling each other by their first names by the end of the session.

LC: How do you spell his name?


LC: Ok. And they ended up hitting it off at least socially or within the context?

TB: Yes.

LC: And Tom, what, if you remember, was the content of the meeting? Any idea?

TB: It was just exposing these individuals as human beings and their natural concerns. Sally Gerheardt, I think her name was, the woman…

LC: So, sort of demystifying who the members of the gay community were?

TB: Yeah.

LC: Ok. Tom, also during this time period did you begin the case study work that you did as part of the Seminar?

TB: Oh yeah. I did that, completed it during that period.

LC: Can you describe how this project fit within the structure, what was the point of the project, and then what did you actually do?

TB: Well, we can do any project that they would approve of. I know Jim Bishop did one on Samoa, for example, but the Indochinese refugee issue, because of my personal involvement with my family and so on, interested me greatly and I traveled to at least ten, twelve locations in the U.S. all the way across the U.S. interviewing various refugee workers and the refugee community. I found it adopted generalizations on this – did I send you a copy of that study?

LC: No, I don’t think you did.
TB: I should do that.

LC: That would be wonderful. Tom, what did you...first of all, can you characterize the American policy of dispersal of the refugees? Can you talk about that for a moment?

TB: Well, the main point was to scatter them around the fifty states but they tended to agglomerate – is that a verb?

LC: I believe it is. We'll say it is for today's purposes. Honorary verb.

TB: And they were particularly attracted to California because it paid good welfare benefits. Texas pays very poor welfare benefits but it has a lot of, or had at the time a lot of, job opportunities. So, California and Texas ended up as the principal destinations for these individuals.

LC: And so was there a certain time period that they had to live in their assigned communities, and then after that they could relocate?

TB: Not to my knowledge.

LC: Ok. What was behind the purpose of the policy of dispersal?

TB: Well, so that no particular state was overburdened with the refugee community.

LC: Ok. So it was a financial consideration for the states?

TB: It was more of a consideration...financial was one of the principal reasons. Yes.

LC: What about potential xenophobic reactions on the part of 'Americans' to...?

TB: That may have been an impulse also. I don’t know that it ever would have been stated as official policy.

LC: Ok. When you were interviewing and traveling around did you come across or recall hearing about incidents of, maybe not violence but rejection on some level – cultural rejection – of the refugees who were coming to the States from Indochina?

TB: That was quite rare but you may recall the Louis Malle movie _Alamo Bay_ where there was a rivalry between Vietnamese and Native...I mean, white American shrimp fishers, fishermen.

LC: In south Texas.

TB: In Beaumont or Beaumont area. That's kind of a coincidence in the sense that I met Andre Van Chau there and he was in charge of the refugee program in Beaumont. And then when he became Secretary General of the International Catholic Migration Commission in Geneva he hired me to be his program coordinator.

LC: So you actually met him in the course of the project research that you were doing?
TB: Yeah. This is called serendipity.

LC: It certainly is. Tom, what was the overall conclusion that you came to about the refugee experience that you were studying? Did you come up with policy recommendations or what was the focus of the research?

TB: I was exceedingly impressed by the academic achievements of Vietnamese children in middle school, high school, and grade school. And, for example, some would be able to be first in English after a year in country. There was a great deal of emphasis by Vietnamese parents on education and it showed up in the academic results of the children.

LC: As a matter of interest, was that emphasis by Vietnamese parents something that is also true in traditional Vietnamese society?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: So just applied them within the American context?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Ok. And were you actually seeing data on this, Tom, or was your information anecdotal based on interviews or…?

TB: Both.

LC: Ok. Do you remember the source of the data or where it came from?

TB: Not offhand.

LC: It would be very useful to have a copy of that report. Certainly. Tom, to whom did the reports go once concluded?

TB: Well, they were essentially part of the lure of the Seminar but my own was taken…another Senior Seminar pair, Wever Gim and Tyble Litwon, took up on that same theme two or three years later and did another report.

LC: Ok. Do you know whether that produced policy recommendations or…?

TB: I don’t.

LC: Ok. And Tom, did members of the Seminar present their research to each other? Was it a sort of colloquium kind of?

TB: Each of us gave an oral presentation and a copy of our study to each other.

LC: Now, aside from yourself, whose presentation – aside from your own – whose presentation did you find most stimulating? Do you recall?

TB: I can recall some that were not stimulating but I can’t recall. No.
LC: Ok. And Tom, how did your next posting – your actual posting with the State
Department – as a regional refugee coordinator come about? Was it as a consequence of your
study or was this a position that was already open?

TB: At that time Dick Holbrook was Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs. I was not
high on Holbrook’s list.

LC: Why is that?

TB: I went in to his office when the opportunity came up and he chewed on his tongue for a
while and decided he would recommend me for that position.

LC: What was the source of the love lost between you two?

TB: That I’ll never know.

LC: Really? Ok. Given that there’s this issue there that we really can’t get our hands
around, stepping aside from that, what was your impression of Holbrook? Obviously he’s still a
diplomat of various escalated…

TB: He’s an exceptionally intelligent, essentially heartless person.

LC: He was at the State Department, I think, maybe not DAS, maybe Assistant Secretary
for East Asian and Pacific when I was there very briefly in 1982. I went to a couple of meetings
with him. He was very authoritatively managerial. That was my impression. Does that sort of jive
with yours?

TB: Yeah, sure. He’s not personable.

LC: No. I think that’s probably fair. He probably would endorse that also.

TB: For example, when I was in Binh Long in ’67 and ’68, John Vann went out of his way
to write a letter to Holbrook, who was at that time the Special Assistant to Nick Katzenbach, the
Deputy Secretary of State. He wrote him a letter about me saying that I should be used in going
back to Washington in a major capacity. Holbrook never answered that letter or did anything about
it.

LC: As far as you know, did Vann have a decent relationship with Holbrook?

TB: Yes. He had a good relationship with Holbrook.

LC: And do you know any details on the background between them or where they had
come in contact?

TB: They had been together in Vietnam. I don’t know exactly how they coalesced but
remember Holbrook was an FSO-5 and then he left the Foreign Service in order to edit Foreign
Policy – not Foreign Affairs but Foreign Policy. He was a good friend of Frank Wisner’s. They
used to play squash together or handball or something.

LC: And then when he returned to the Foreign Service?
TB: Then when he returned he came back as assistant secretary at the age of thirty
something or other.

LC: Tom, this is probably a matter of record but it’s something I don’t know. Do you know
if Holbrook has ever held an ambassadorial position? Like Indonesia or something?
TB: No, no. Not overseas. He might have had the title…
LC: With some administrative position?
TB: Well, when he was the ambassador to the U.N. for a while.
LC: Ok. That could be. I don’t recall. Ok. Anyway, he decided after some cud-chewing
that he would go ahead and appoint you as regional refugee coordinator?
TB: Yeah, sure.
LC: Was that position one that pre-existed your appointment?
TB: No. It was invented for the refugee issue and it wasn’t a permanent position of any
kind.
LC: Ok. Were there any analogues of this position in other regional…?
TB: Not at all.
LC: Ok. So this was unique?
TB: Yeah. And it was quite fascinating. The series of assignments that I had in Vietnam
prepared me for this in the sense it was a highly operational job, and to me more interesting than
political reporting. It was a managerial job of some complexity.
LC: Can you give an overview of those complexities, both internal and then external to the
position?
TB: Well, we were trying to interview refugee populations in three [four] different languages
– Cambodian, Lao…four, really – Hmong, and Vietnamese. So we had to work through individuals
who were fluent in these languages. We had a shifting staff because people were there on
temporary duty. Then we were working also principally through a very competent voluntary
agency, the International Refugee Committee in Thailand. In Malaysia, I believe it was Church
World Service but I forget what it was in Indonesia. But they were the lead agencies in their
respective countries.
LC: Tom, can you give an overview of where the refugees were being held – where they were coming from, where they were being held, and how they were processed to the states?

TB: The land refugees in from Laos were coming in to Nong Khai and Nakhon Phanom. There was a holding camp [at Korat], which principally held the old Vietnamese who were problems for the Thai government that had come in to the northeast back in the late ‘40s. The boat refugees came to two locations initially – to Lam Saeng in Chanthaburi province and to Songkhla in the south. There was a transit center at Din Daeng in Bangkok where the refugees were transported immediately prior to being moved abroad for resettlement. There are a number of places where one…then in the north, in – I’m trying to remember – Chiang Rai province and another northern province of Thailand there were Yao, Hmong, and other tribal groups that came in. Then there were the Hmong in Loei province of northeast Thailand.

LC: And Tom, were you based chiefly in Bangkok?

TB: I was based chiefly in Bangkok but I did make two trips to Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore. One of them with Sam Feldman, the INS head for Southeast Asia, was based in Hong Kong.

LC: Was his position sort of roughly analogous to yours in that he had regional responsibilities?

TB: Yeah. He had regional responsibilities. He was quite an interesting character. A few years later he committed suicide while stationed in Honolulu. Anybody that’s stationed in Honolulu commits suicide I find rather peculiar. Anyway, Sam apparently would haunt the cable room in Hong Kong where he was based. And if a cable came in from me he would answer it in five minutes, and I would frequently have to correct his answer or try to straighten out his answer because he didn’t do any reflecting at all.

LC: Tom, what was in general the relationship between the State Department and the INS in handling the refugee issue? Can you characterize it?

TB: Well, INS had the sole authority to approve resettlement in the United States, to admit a refugee for resettlement.

LC: So was the State Department acting, in a sense, as an adjunct or what was the role of your office?

TB: We prepared through the voluntary agencies the dossier on these individuals and made recommendations.
LC: How many individuals are we talking about?
TB: Oh, we’re talking about thousands.
LC: Tens of thousands?
TB: You mean refugees? Yes. Tens of thousands.
LC: And Tom, what was the complement of staff that you had available? I know that
people were rotating in and out.
TB: Well, you’ve got to consider the staffing on two levels. First of all, there was a
voluntary agency, which had about forty employees. It did most of the paperwork for this. Then,
there were Foreign Service officers who prepared or sort of got the cases ready for endorsement
by the INS and travel of INS officers during that, during their interviews in the various camps.
LC: For Thailand specifically where you were spending time, what was the impact reaction
feeling around the influx of refugees? Can you characterize that?
TB: The Thai government was not enthusiastic about the refugee influx, and there were
several occasions when in cooperation with Leslie Goodyear, who was the UNHCR representative.
He and his men and mine would mount watch in a camp to make sure nobody was forced back out
to sea. For example, there was a group of [Vietnamese] refugees that came into Songkhla who
were immediately separated out from the main group in Songkhla and sent to an area about five
kilometers away. Graham Lean, who was the UNHCR man in Songkhla at the time – or he
happened to be sent down to Songkhla, he was actually based in Bangkok – and I personally took
turns staying in this new location and we made arrangements, joint arrangements, to have them all
moved quickly to Bangkok in this group.
LC: Were there problems with local officials having a different take on managing the
refugees then? Some local officials being less amenable to the presence of the refugees than
others?
TB: That’s quite true. The local authorities were quite upset by the presence of refugees,
particularly in Songkhla. The deputy governor whom we were dealing with was not at all
enthusiastic about their presence.
LC: And was that based on assessments of the security risks or was it just a personal
resistance or…?
TB: This particular individual had been stationed in northeast Thailand where all difficulty
was ascribed to the old Vietnamese who came in in the '40s. Anytime there was a problem of any
kind it was always the fault of the Vietnamese.

LC: So there was a predisposition there to be suspicious at very best?

TB: That's right.

LC: Ok. Tom, were there agencies other than the ones you've already mentioned – State
Department, UNHCR, the private groups, INS – were there other agencies that were, for example,
combing through the refugees for intelligence information?

TB: I'm sorry, other agencies that what?

LC: That were combing through the refugee population trying to obtain intelligence
information?

TB: Not intelligence information that I was aware of. No. But there were other...there
were Canadian interviewers, French interviewers, Australian interviewers, and so on.

LC: Were these press people or academics or who?

TB: Oh, it was a great mixture.

LC: Did their presence cause any problems?

TB: No. We cooperated as closely as we could with them. We were trying to, in order to
get Congress to accept more Vietnamese refugees and more Indochinese refugees, rather, we
tried to encourage as much absorption by other countries of the refugees as possible.

LC: Who in the Congress was leading the fight for more resources and who was most
actively against influx of Indochinese refugees? Do you remember?

TB: I don't remember.

LC: Ok. Were you pretty much removed from what was happening in Washington and
focusing on events in the region?

TB: I was called upon once to testify.

LC: Yeah. Can you talk about that? What committee was it, Tom?

TB: I don't remember, but the Congressman Wolf, who was then head of the Southeast
Asian – no, East Asian Committee, the sub-committee of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the
House – made the point that Australia was the first to make an offer ahead of the U.S. ‘Wasn’t
Australia first on the scene?’ He asked me. I said, ‘Yes, but that wasn’t really the point.’ The point
was several countries were taking prisoners but this particular objection on his part was that we
were not ahead of the Australians in making an offer.
LC: And we should have been?
TB: That was his view.
LC: I see. Can you just give a comparative overview of the other countries that were
taking in refugees and what their quotas were compared to the United States?
TB: Well, the ones in the most generous quotas beside us were Australia and Canada, but
Canada emphasized the taking of refugees with talent. In other words, those who had
demonstrable skills and could contribute to Canadian society. The American program was much
more democratic. The principal qualifications were relationship to an American, American citizen,
or having worked for the U.S. government in Vietnam or whatever country. There were very few of
course that qualified from Cambodia or Laos on this grounds but a lot in Vietnam. And a third was
association with the U.S., which could be defined as being a member of the ARVN, the Republic of
Vietnam Army, or having worked for the government. But the point is that France – pardon me –
Canada took a great number of people but insisted on highly qualified individuals.
LC: So people with degrees, people with particular skills?
TB: That’s right. And then Australia was…I don’t remember the criteria for Australia.
France of course was, if you could speak [speaks French].
LC: And how many Vietnamese did France end up taking in. Any ballpark figure there?
TB: I have a….well, I don’t know overall the final analysis but I went to look at the French
program and…
LC: You went to Paris?
TB: Yeah. It was part of the study I….I wanted to compare the French and American
programs. That’s part of the study, which I’ll send you a copy of. It is pure calumny that I went to
Paris solely to have dinner at Max’s Restaurant.
LC: Ok, Tom. I’m going to leave that one just where you’ve placed it and not pursue that,
but I did wonder about the documentation protocols that were required for validating claims to
either relationships with American citizens or service in organizations that were useful to the United
States like ARVN. What kinds of protocols were in place in the camps? Obviously these were
refugees, how were the claims substantiated?
TB: Well, one…there was always a security check. That was a prerequisite. I don’t know how useful that was but that was a prerequisite.

LC: And who was conducting that, which agency?

TB: The voluntary agencies prepared the paperwork for sending in telegrams to Washington on the security check.

LC: And would the State Department then run those or…do you know?

TB: I frankly don’t know who ran them but it wasn’t in the State Department.

LC: Ok. Alright. And did the refugees who were approved for entry to the United States, if you remember, come in to the United States en masse or was there a graduated program where some were held for longer periods even though they’d been approved? Do you remember that part of the process?

TB: Well, ICMC had this program in the Philippines. Once a person was approved he went to sort of English language training and orientation on the U.S. They had a mock up of the U.S. House showing the kitchen, the washing machine, the stove, and so on and so forth. This was a several month program.

LC: Ok. And where was this conducted in the Philippines?

TB: Near Bataan in the Philippines.

LC: Was it at a U.S. base or…?

TB: No, no. That one wasn’t. No.

LC: Ok. Were there more than one of these?

TB: That was the principal location for people going to the U.S.

LC: Were there similar facilities in other places like Guam or…?

TB: No, no.

LC: Through the Philippines then primarily?

TB: That was it.

LC: Ok. And I gather then that the U.S. government would arrange for their transportation to the United States?

TB: Well, no. It was ICM, which used to be called the International Committee for European Migration, but just changed its name to the International Committee for Migration.

LC: And they would make the arrangements for transportation?

TB: That’s right.
LC: Ok. And what about reception in the States?

TB: Reception was, theoretically, in the hands of the voluntary agency. It could be HIAS [Hebrew Immigration Aid Society], it could be international Rescue Committee, Catholic Relief Services, Lutheran [Refugee Service]...whatever the refugee, immigration refugee service, Church World Service. The sponsor was responsible for greeting the refugee to the refugee family and placing them, initially. They were really...as I recall, each voluntary agency received something like five hundred bucks to get the refugee oriented.

LC: And provide them with what kinds of services?

TB: Well, that was rather ill-defined. I had a...some of whom I knew personally in Vietnam who was highly critical of his reception by Church World Service virtually pocketed the five hundred dollars and told him to go off on his own.

LC: And what part of the country did that happen in?

TB: That was New Jersey, I think. But this was not traditionally the case. Traditionally, it was pretty good treatment.

LC: And were you from your position as the coordinator bearing some kind of managerial responsibility for everything from what was happening in the camps through the transportation process all the way to resettlement? Or how far did...?

TB: Once they left Southeast Asia they were out of my hands.

LC: Ok. Tom, what was your relationship during this time period to the Embassy at Bangkok?

TB: Why I worked very closely with the Embassy in Bangkok.

LC: Who was the ambassador?

TB: Initially it was Charlie Whitehouse and then it was Mort Abramowitz.

LC: Ok. And I think you've talked about Mr. Whitehouse before but what about Ambassador Abramowitz? Did you form an impression of him?

TB: Well, I'd met him in Hong Kong back in the '50s.

LC: So he was an old acquaintance then?

TB: That's right.

LC: So you worked well with him?

TB: Oh yes.

LC: Did you report directly to him or how did you...?
TB: No, I reported to the deputy chief of mission whose name was Dan O’Donahue.

LC: And what was your relationship with him, Tom?

TB: Formal, correct…I had no particular problems with him.

LC: Did…thinking back over that time period, did the program that the United States put together to assist the refugees work as well as it could have or were there things that now you think could have been done more effectively?

TB: Well, obviously the initial situation whereby refugee admissions were approved by Congress in stages did not…was unworkable. What should have been done was having a greater allocation to begin with. Part of that problem was solved by the mission of the Citizens Commission the International Refugee Commission organized – International Refugee Committee organized, IRC, particularly Leo Cherne.

LC: How do you spell his last name, Tom?

TB: C-H-E-R-N-E. He was president of the IRC at the time, but he organized the Citizens Commission, which I discussed in some detail in the book.

LC: Yes. Tom, during the time period that you had this assignment, how aware were you of what was happening inside Cambodia?

TB: In Cambodia?

LC: With the Khmer Rouge regime?

TB: Well, we were filled in mainly by press reports.

LC: Ok. What did you see in the way of Cambodian refugees during this period? Large numbers, very small numbers coming into Thailand?

TB: They were coming across the Thai border to Aranha, principally to Aranyaprathet.

LC: Were the numbers large at all?

TB: Yeah. They were significant, about only twelve wall-to-wall zoos in the tens of thousands.

LC: And Tom, did that introduce a special set of circumstances or were those refugees handled in much the same way as those from Vietnam? Obviously there were language differences, but beyond that.

TB: Well, the Thai kept them at the border, not only in Aranyaprathet but in some areas in – I can’t remember the name of the province that’s next to Chanthaburi and south of Aranyaprathet
and then… the attitude was that they should be right on the border and they could be forced across at any moment. So, the Thai were reluctant to have them as refugees.

LC: And was that based on the general, the background situation of already having taken in so many, were there special problems around having the Cambodian refugees there?

TB: Only in the sense that they were not welcome in Thailand.

LC: And Tom, do you remember, although this may have been after your assignment had been concluded December 1978, when Vietnam actually invaded Cambodia?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: What impact did that have on the refugee work, if any?

TB: I don't recall offhand.

LC: Can you give a sense of what the Thai appraisal of this new development…?

TB: Not really.

LC: Ok. Had you left Bangkok by that point?

TB: Sure.

LC: Ok. And you had gone to the University of Hawaii?

TB: That's right.

LC: Can you tell me about how that posting came about?

TB: Well, they didn't know what to do with me.

LC: What was your level at this point, your FSO level?

TB: I was an FSO-1, which is the top grade below career minister. The numbers have now changed. It was a minister…I think it's a minister counselor now.

LC: At this point, late 1978, then your next diplomatic posting would logically have been what position? DCM?

TB: Yes.

LC: And were you lobbying or looking for a particular posting again?

TB: I lobbied strongly for Korea but someone who…the man who was already there – I wrote Dick Gleysteen – the man who was already there as DCM when Gleysteen became ambassador stayed on for another year and he was a Korean expert. I was no Korean expert although I'd spent a year in Korea with the Army.

LC: Right. And as you've mentioned before you had been trying to get back there in one capacity or another.
TB: But then I was also interviewed to become DCM in Auckland, or whatever the capital of New Zealand is.

LC: Wellington?

TB: Wellington, I guess. At any rate, the appointee was a former Congressman from a southern state. He was quite enthusiastic when we were discussing the possibility until I mentioned I had a Vietnamese wife and he just turned, almost turned blush at this, turned aside. I never heard from him again. I was not anxious to go to New Zealand however. It’s too much of a backwaters. No insult meant to the New Zealanders but it would not have been a very gripping assignment.

LC: And meaning for you personally, you didn’t see it as an action posting.

TB: That’s right.

LC: And Tom, to what did you attribute his reaction to your mention that you were married to Mai?

TB: Prejudice against interracial marriages.

LC: No kidding. And not Vietnamese people specifically or the war?

TB: Nope. No.

LC: Just the idea?

TB: The idea. Yeah.

LC: Wow. And I’ll just reiterate this is 1978 or ’79 that we’re talking about. So, Tom, tell me about your time in Hawaii. You were assigned at the university?

TB: I was assigned at the university, had a desk in the History Department.

LC: Now, was this within the East/West Center or…?

TB: No, it was not. It was part of the university structure there.

LC: So, were you an adjunct professor or member of the faculty fully or how did administratively the arrangement work?

TB: I don’t know how the…they didn’t know exactly how to classify me.

LC: It sounds alright to me, University of Hawaii faculty position. Did you then teach?

TB: I didn’t teach a specific course but I gave about forty lectures over the one year period that I was there.

LC: So other faculty got a day off when they drafted in Tom Barnes to give their lecture?

TB: That’s right.
LC: Ok. And what impression did you form of the students that you were speaking to –
graduates, undergraduates…?

TB: Well, the students were bright enough and the University of Hawaii campus…I made
trips to the campuses at the University of Hawaii at Kauai, Maui, and Hawaii. What dismayed me
about Kauai was that I didn’t get…no matter how hard I tried I didn’t get a single question about
what I was presenting. I don’t recall what I was presenting on and just read it. I usually got
innumerable questions. There was nothing there. So, I attributed this to the natural beauty of
Kauai.

LC: That you were unable to compete with the…

TB: That’s right.

LC: Tom, how did you feel about your position as diplomat in residence?

TB: I loved it.

LC: Would you have liked to have that go on for another bit?

TB: No, no. I expected to be appointed the political advisor to the Commander in Chief
Pacific because the incumbent that had been there three years was leaving about the time my
assignment as diplomat in residence was terminating, but I think I mentioned to you previously that
the commander had worked with Mike Connor on Laos at one point and wanted Mike Connor as
his olad. So, we were chagrined at having to leave Hawaii after only a year.

LC: Tom, while you were there did you have any contact with the diplomatic or consularr
communities in Honolulu? Did you get invited to parties and all of that?

TB: Not particularly. No.

LC: Ok. And where did you live Tom?

TB: In a place called Foster Village. We bought a house.

LC: Can you describe the location?

TB: It’s on a hillside – it’s on an elevation – on the road to Camp Smith where the
CINCPAC headquarters is. The houses are rather flimsy, single, wood construction. They had
louver doors and windows so that we had no furnace, for example. We had a hot water heater but
no furnace. We had no air conditioners because you could get a continuous breeze through the
louvers in the doors and the windows year round, and it was a little chilly two weeks in the winter
and a little humid two weeks in the summer, but aside from that it was delightful.
LC: I was going to say you could bear up under that. It sounds idyllic and yes, it’s a
difficult thing, I’m sure, to leave. And Tom, if you don’t mind, we’ll talk about the next posting next
time. So thank you, Tom.
Interview with Thomas Barnes  
Session 13 of 14  
July 15, 2004

LC: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the
oral history interview with Thomas Barnes. Today’s date is the 15th of July 2004. I am on the
campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections Building and Tom is speaking to me by telephone
from Austin. Good morning, Tom.

TB: Good morning.

LC: Tom, you may recall that last time we were talking about the end of your time at the
University of Hawaii and you were looking forward to a new assignment. And I know that you had
been looking around for some time at this point for a DCM posting but that was not coming through
according to the sort of specs that you had in mind. You talked about Wellington, for example.

How did the posting in D.C. actually come up?

TB: It was because of the emergency in Cambodia where a great number of people had
fled – great number of Cambodians had fled – to the Thai border in western Cambodia. The Thai
were reluctant to admit them as refugees and kept them in a sort of holding status along the
border, although physically a lot of them spilled over into Thailand, theoretically they were being
held within Cambodia at the border.

LC: Now, this new surge of refugees was caused, if I’m right – and please help me here –
by the invasion by Vietnam. Is that accurate?

TB: That’s one of the principal factors. Yes.

LC: Ok. What else was going on, Tom, that caused this new crisis?

TB: Well, the problem of course was the Khmer Rouge, who had been in control, were also
among the groups that fled toward the border.

LC: And bringing along with them as they retreated out of Phnom Penh, I’m thinking the
same practices that they had become so notorious for.

TB: That’s correct.

LC: And, in terms of area of control of the Khmer Rouge, what sort of percentage of
western Cambodia did they have under some kind of rule at this point? I mean did it fluctuate
greatly or...?
TB: They were located in a spot whose name I can't...Pailin, which was a gem mining area. I think they had a lot of sapphires there, and that was north -- pardon me -- southwest of Battambang, which was sort of the western principal city in the western part of Cambodia.

LC: Ok. And Pailin is very close to the Thai border, is it not?

TB: Quite close. Yes.

LC: And had they set up some kind of temporary -- sort of the organization of the Khmer Rouge called themselves -- set up a kind of temporary HQ there. Is that fair?

TB: That's correct.

LC: Ok. And tell me about the formation, if you can, of the working group that you were assigned to.

TB: Well, it consisted of a miscellaneous gathering of people from several government agencies who were in what is called floating status or corridor stalking status who had no fixed assignment, and it was remarkably cohesive group considering the miscellany from which it was drawn. What was particularly interesting about it was the chaos in which we operated. We started out in the Operation Center of the Department but we were very quickly displaced by another crisis. I think it had something to do with Iran or Iraq or whatever -- I can't remember what it was -- but we lost our seating there and we were confined to a single room on the second or third floor of the State Department. So, while people were conducting press interviews we were getting reports from the field and it was an atmosphere of pure chaos where there was nothing but the echo of voices all around you and we were dispersed in various locations around the same room and one had to train himself to tune out the other conversations that were going on. Despite this chaos we operated, I felt, quite well.

LC: What were you supposed to be doing and what was your role here, Tom?

TB: That main task as I saw it was to allocate financial resources, which eventually totaled 114 million dollars, to the various agencies trying to cope with the refugee crisis. These would be voluntary agencies, the United Nations, and so on.

LC: And this money was being used on the Thai side of the border? I mean, eventually that was the target area?

TB: I mentioned it was theoretically the Thai side of the border. Actually some of the camps were in, partially in, Thailand. They were right on the border.

LC: Ok. And Tom, just to clarify, your position within the working group was what?
TB: I was the interagency working group director.

LC: Ok. And tell me, if you can, some of the both government agencies and volunteer agencies that had people associated with the working group. Obviously there was State, probably AID, but who else?

TB: I’m trying to recollect. There was somebody from the Department of Health and Human Services, and there was one voluntary agency but I’m ashamed to say I can’t remember which one it was.

LC: That’s ok. Did the working group have, through you, a relationship with the Thai Embassy in D.C.?

TB: No. The Thai Embassy in D.C. was not particularly involved in this issue.

LC: They weren’t? Why is that?

TB: Because the action was going on in Bangkok.

LC: Ok. So rather than running through, interference through, the Embassy everything was having with Thai officials actually in the capital, in Bangkok?

TB: That’s right. The Thai were not very pleased with this situation.

LC: I’m sure. Now, from their point of view, was this a security problem? Was it an economic problem or both and more?

TB: Well, there’s a long standing antipathy between the Cambodians and the Thai and they just didn’t want a major Cambodian presence on their soil.

LC: Did they see this as a Khmer Rouge incursion? Was there ever that feeling behind the refugee influx?

TB: I don’t know. I just really can’t interpret how they viewed it.

LC: Ok. Now, did you have occasion to go out to Thailand during this period?

TB: Yeah. I went to the…there were three areas where the Khmer came in or came to the border. Two of the camps were in, if I recall, Chanthaburi or Rayong provinces in the southeast of Thailand. The main location, however, was the border town of Aranyaprathet, which means ‘border of the country,’ literally, and that’s where the major concentration of Khmer was located. Not in Aranya itself but along the border radiating out of Aranya.

LC: And Tom, when you went out there, did you fly in to Aranyaprathet through Bangkok?

TB: I think we drove because there was a serviceable all-weather highway at that time.

LC: And what did you see when you arrived?
TB: The most amusing thing was the various voluntary agencies who were providing curative care to the Khmer refugees. For example, the International Rescue Committee was there with a considerable team headed by one doctor. There were several other American and foreign voluntary agencies. Médecins Sans Frontières was again headed by one doctor. The most amusing was the Japanese approach to the problem, which is in typical Japanese collective sense. There were four doctors and as they visited patient to patient, when I visited the Japanese ward, they collectively came up with a decision on each patient. All four toured the ward simultaneously in the early mornings.

LC: How large were these wards?

TB: Well, they were not...one doesn't vision a major hospital. It's sort of a clinic. Maybe, I'm just guessing, twelve, twenty beds, something like that; twelve to twenty beds.

LC: Ok. And can you give an estimate as to the number of Khmer refugees?

TB: I've forgotten what that figure is. It was in the several tens of thousands but I don't recall what it was offhand.

LC: And Tom, when you were there, was there a sense of organization and kind of a settled routine that the refugees were in or was it more of a chaotic situation where the pattern wasn't quite so clear?

TB: Well, there were clashes among the refugees, particularly those who were trying to get back at the Khmer Rouge for various actions, so the camps were not scenes of domestic tranquility in many cases.

LC: How much of that kind of retribution went on? Do you remember particular incidences or were you getting reports about that generally?

TB: I'm sorry I can't.

LC: Ok. Tom, back in Washington, I gather that you had occasion to go up to the Hill to talk about the work of the group and the situation along the border in Thailand, is that right?

TB: That's correct.

LC: What committees? Do you remember? Was it House or Senate?

TB: I think it was the subcommittee of the House Committee on East Asia, Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on East Asia.

LC: And was this a fact-finding set of hearings? Were they monitoring what was going on?

TB: Yeah, sure.
LC: Ok. And Tom, what generally, if you remember, was the mood in Congress on issues of Southeast Asia, generally?

TB: Well, I think they were being quite helpful on the Khmer issue. There was one congressman whose name escapes me and I don't recall where he was from who was seemed to be indignant that the Australians had gotten in with aid before we did.

LC: Really? How prominent were the Australians in working on this issue?

TB: Well, they were a contributing factor like the French but they were not a major...the major presence was American in terms of voluntary agency.

LC: Ok. And in terms of money?

TB: Yes. Obviously. America was by far the greatest contributor to the relief of the refugees along the border. What they were technically called was 'displaced persons'.

LC: Did that technical description have bureaucratic importance in some way?

TB: To the Thai it did.

LC: Why is that?

TB: Because they didn't want any more refugees on their soil.

LC: Oh ok. So this was a distinction that served them in some way?

TB: That's right.

LC: Tom, do you remember your actual trip to the Hill and making your remarks before the committee?

TB: Not very much.

LC: I just wonder if there were actually representatives in the room or...?

TB: Oh yes. There was full panel.

LC: Was there? Ok. Were you one of several people testifying that day?

TB: That's correct, and I don't recall who the others were offhand.

LC: What was it that you were trying to get across – the general outline of the situation or the State Department's position or what was your message that day?

TB: The message was that there was a justifiable cause for the expenditure of U.S. funds for Kampuchean relief.

LC: Tom, did you also have other opportunities to make public statements about what the working group was doing?
TB: I was on the McNeil/Lehrer Show when they were still a pair and it was featured with some journalist whose name escapes me offhand.

LC: What kind of an experience was that?

TB: I found it quite enjoyable.

LC: Did you have to go down to a studio or…?

TB: Yeah. You go down to a studio. I was…the next person on was a famous director – I’ve forgotten who it was – movie director, who I exchanged words with in the waiting room before either of us appeared on the program.

LC: Were you actually interviewed by McNeil?

TB: By both of them.

LC: Really? Were either of those two gentlemen people you had known before? Had you come across them?

TB: I certainly was aware of…I was familiar with their names but I had not known them.

LC: Ok. And Tom, moving on a little bit in time, in May 1980 there was a large international conference on the Kampuchean issues in Geneva. Were you in some way tasked with preparing the American participation?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: What was the point of that conference?

TB: To generate international aid to the Khmer and draw attention to the Khmer displaced persons situation on the Thai border.

LC: How much work did you have to do?

TB: I frankly don’t recall.

LC: Really? Did you go to Geneva for that conference?

TB: Yeah. Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. Do you remember anything about the session that you can tell us?

TB: I don’t.

LC: Do you remember where you stayed?

TB: I always stayed at the Ascot Hotel in – I’m trying to remember the street. It’s fairly near downtown Geneva.

LC: Were there other diplomats hanging at the Ascot Hotel?

TB: No. It’s a relatively obscure place.
LC: That’s what I thought. How did you come across that place? Word of mouth or recommendation?


LC: Tom, overall, was the time you spent with the working group on Kampuchean issues a positive assignment for you? Was it something you enjoyed?

TB: It was quite a stimulating experience because we had some exceptional people who were on that working group. I’m thinking particularly of Marianne Bader, who was the press officer. She was exceptionally effective. And an FSO, young FSO, named James Syster who handled the personnel recruitment for the Kampuchean working group’s KEG, Khmer Emergency Group, staffing in the field. In other words, rounding up Foreign Service Officers who spoke Cambodian for service in the field.

LC: And Tom, in your memoir you relate that in early 1980 you had to begin thinking about retirement or retirement from the Foreign Service at any rate. Can you tell me a little bit about that process?

TB: Well, one can qualify for retirement if you have twenty years service and reached the age of fifty. I reached the age of fifty in June 1980 and had something, counting a year of unused sick leave, something like twenty-nine years of service accumulated.

LC: Was this something that you wanted to do? You could have, of course, remained in the Foreign Service for…

TB: I was offered a position on the transition team for what must have been President Reagan at the time, which was a…it would have been quite an interesting job. But I was a political naïve and I wasn’t particularly a member of any Democrat or Republican Party. I always voted for the person I favored rather than for a party candidate solely because of party, so I may not have been terribly successful in rounding up good Republicans for the Republican Party.

LC: Was that what you were invited to do?

TB: It was John Lehman, who was Secretary of the Navy at one point, who lined me up for the State Department portion of the transition team.

LC: And what was your relationship with him?

TB: I don’t know. I don’t know where we’d encountered each other but we had done so in some seminar or something, some something where we had been together.

LC: And he had made a note of your name, I guess.
TB: I guess so.

LC: Do you remember the meeting with him when he talked to you about this?

TB: I don’t, but I wrote him a letter saying that I would like to remove myself from consideration because I was contemplating retirement from the State Department.

LC: Ok. Thinking back, was this a good decision that you made?

TB: It was in the sense I had three children in college at the time and the State Department does not pay for, does not have any allowance for college, whereas the U.N. does and the service in the U.N. helped me materially, financially, in that sense.

LC: When did you start considering the U.N. as a potential next employer after the Foreign Service?

TB: It was in the spring of 1980.

LC: How did it come about, Tom?

TB: Well, the Department nominated me for a UNHCR position.

LC: Oh they did? Ok. You then would leave, I take it, the employ of the State Department and would no longer be a civil servant? Is that right too?

TB: That’s correct. Be an international civil servant.

LC: Right, as an employee of the U.N. itself.

TB: That’s right.

LC: Did you have to move to New York?

TB: No, this was Geneva because it was the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, but I didn’t move to Geneva, I moved to Somalia.

LC: Right. You went to Somalia. I just wondered if there was any breaking in period where you had to be in either New York, or as you mentioned Geneva, for any length of time.

TB: I think I spent two or three weeks in Geneva before going to Somalia.

LC: Ok. And how did you learn about the appointment to Somalia? How did that come about? Was it simply an assignment or was there a negotiation or an offer?

TB: There was an offer. Yes.

LC: And what about this offer appealed to you, Tom?

TB: Well, it was a reasonable salary plus all sorts of allowances that made it financially attractive, and I was looking forward to the challenge of a new area with the assignment is Somalia. It turned out to be quite a challenge.
LC: Tom, tell me about getting to Somalia. Did you go to Mogadishu right away?

TB: Yes. Well, after a short period in Geneva. It wasn’t very long. I don’t remember just how long it was. A couple of weeks I think, two or three weeks.

LC: And what was the position they had for you? What was your title? Do you remember?

TB: I was Deputy Representative.

LC: And who did you work for?

TB: I worked for a Swiss, very estimable man named Otto Hagenbuchle.

LC: What can you tell me about him? I know that in the memoir he certainly comes across as a figure of some importance for you, but for someone who doesn’t have access to your writings on this, what would you tell them about him?

TB: Well, he was a man of immense self-taught learning who was indefatigable in terms of his service to the U.N. He struck some people as a little bizarre and he has a distinction in the United Nations and UNHCR of never having served in headquarters, and he would have been out of place in headquarters in many respects. But to illustrate his character he’d been the secretary to the Swiss delegation to the Korean armistice in 1952, I think it was – ’51 and ’52 – and he had puzzled over what to do when he was replaced in that role by Jose Lambelei after Otto had finished his tour so he went to Hawaii and worked in a pineapple canning factory for a year trying to make up his mind what his next career step would be. He worked as a common laborer in a pineapple factory.

LC: What else can you tell me about his background and his service with the U.N.?

Clearly he had worked for other elements of the United Nations Organization besides the High Commission…?

TB: So far as I know he worked only for UNHCR for the U.N. But he had been representative in Zaire and, I believe, in Rwanda.

LC: And he was someone that you had not known before?

TB: I had never encountered him before.

LC: And how did your relationship with him evolve? How did it start off and of what importance was he to you overtime?

TB: Well, we started out harmoniously. I did find him reluctant to confront the government on key issues like the size of the refugee population, which was at least double…at least half…it was about half of what the government claimed it to be. He was not interested in challenging the
government at all, and I was much more confrontational. In fact, I almost got declared persona non
grata.

LC: Because of your persistence in?
TB: On the refugee numbers issue.
LC: And Tom, just to clarify, what difference did the numbers game actually make in terms
of UNHCR's work?
TB: Well, it was a considerable extra expense to use inflated numbers because everything
is multiplied: your food supplies and your humanitarian aid in terms of tents and things like this.
LC: And the government would...the government of Somalia had what interest in inflating
the numbers? Were they trying to siphon off some of the aid?
TB: They were...yes, sure.
LC: Which I imagine is an endemic problem but probably made worse by having the
government actually behind it.
TB: There are some governments that are not anxious to have refugees and to minimize
the extent of the dimensions of the refugee problem but those governments are rare.
LC: Tom, where did you actually live in Mogadishu? Can you describe it?
TB: I lived at Kilometer Four in a house that had a wall around it and a gate. The sands
would periodically drift so much that you would have to go out and shovel in the way to get the gate
to open and shut.
LC: Was this a U.N. owned property?
TB: No, no. It was rented from Haji Ibrahim, the next door neighbor.
LC: Ok. And what was his position?
TB: He was a merchant.
LC: Ok. Tom, tell me about just basic things like food. Did you go to the market, did your
family eat on the economy as it were, were you entertained or...?
TB: We got most of our food locally. You couldn't get pork, of course, unless you went to
Kenya and flew it in, but what was amusing – amusing to some – I put in a substantial liquor order
to Peter Justesen in Denmark and there was a port strike when the ship arrived. And my entire
case of Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon was consumed along with eleven of twelve bottle of
gin by the crew, which waited outside the port for something like thirty days before discharging.
LC: So you got a box mostly empty?
TB: That’s right.

LC: Tom, did you create or take an opportunity to do some language study while you were there?

TB: My wife and I took, I think it was something like fifty hours, of Somali during which we made minimal progress.

LC: Why is that?

TB: Well, it’s a very difficult language for a Westerner and the instruction was not particularly enlightening.

LC: Who were you seeking assistance from?

TB: Well, there was a local Somali who taught us.

LC: And how was that arrangement made? Did you make that arrangement?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. But this person had less facility with teaching than might have been?

TB: That’s right. All I retain is ‘Subax wanaagsan,’ which is something like ‘good morning’ or ‘good day’.

LC: And that’s about what you got out of it?

TB: That’s about it. Yeah.

LC: Would it have been useful for you in the course of your duties to have a greater command?

TB: Knowledge of the local language is always extremely useful, but I didn’t have any sufficient command to make it worthwhile.

LC: Ok. Tom, tell me if you can, just in general terms, about the refugee situation that obtained in Somalia when you arrived there. This would in the fall, I guess, of 1980.

TB: These were refugees from the Ogaden, many of whom were ethnic Somali, and the contention was since they’ve been drifting back and forth across the border – depending upon the seasons, that upon the need of their animals, their goats and their camels – they really weren’t refugees at all. This was the contention. But most of them were ethnic Somali, of which there were a great many in Ethiopia. Of course there were Cold War implications also in that Ethiopia – pardon me – Somalia was originally befriended by the Russians who abandoned Somalia when the greater, more highly populated Ethiopians made common cause with the Soviet Union.
LC: This whole horn of Africa area had been one of the set piece battles in the Cold War throughout the, at least, 1970s, late 1970s. And when you arrived in 1980, the situation was essentially that the United States was supporting the Somali government to some extent?

TB: That's right.

LC: Ok. And did this larger context create difficulties for UNHCR personnel trying to carry out your missions?

TB: Not particularly. No.

LC: Ok. So this is sort of happening up above?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: What kinds of programs did UNHCR have in Somalia to deal with this mobile group of border crossing refugees that you described?

TB: It's principally food aid, principally food aid, and medical assistance. There were a great number of...something like thirty-three voluntary agencies in Somalia at the time.

LC: And UNHCR was trying to coordinate some of what they were doing or...?

TB: That's the principal role I took was chairing monthly – pardon me – weekly meetings at the voluntary agencies producing minutes and circulating the minutes and trying to get some common cause.

LC: How difficult is a project like that trying to impose some kind of cohesion where maybe that's not what every voluntary agency wants?

TB: Some voluntary agencies are more resistant than others and the particular problem I had was the Sven Lampel of the – what is it – the Red Cross, the International Red Cross, not ICRC but the League of Red Cross Societies.

LC: And what was the difficulty there?

TB: Well, he preferred to not coordinate and so on. Interesting guy. We became friends. His wife was Eva Dahlbeck, who was one of Ingmar Bergman’s principal actresses, you might recall.

LC: I do actually. And was she down there with him?

TB: No. He had a Thai mistress down there with him and it annoyed him terribly because I could communicate with her in Thai and he couldn’t.

LC: Yes. You had a back channel, as it were. What kind of strategy was he pursuing?

You said he wasn’t so interested in collaboration.
TB: Well, he would go ahead and move into the countryside, move his teams, without any coordination.

LC: How problematical was something like that? Was it more of an annoyance or was it actually...?

TB: Yeah. It was more of an annoyance.

LC: Were there particular effective voluntary agencies or teams that you remember?

TB: Yeah. The most effective was the Mennonite Central Committee because they trained their people in Sia- – in Siamese – in Somali, Somali language, and they stayed in place for four years in that miserable country.

LC: The same people?

TB: Same people. Where they were in remote area of Gedo, a province to the southeast.

LC: And Tom, I’m sorry, did you say these were medical teams?

TB: No, they were sort of overall...the agriculture was the principal emphasis if I recall of the Mennonite Central Committee, and that was basic agriculture. It was not a fancy approach.

LC: It was subsistence level, low intensity farming or something like that. And in terms of not programmed organizations or structure but actual effectiveness for refugees in terms of providing relief, how good could a program like the one you’re describing that the Mennonites were doing actually be? I mean were the problems intractable and not really subject to relief or could some margin of improvement, marginal improvement, be made?

TB: Marginal improvements are possible. The only thing I found intractable was the Somali.

LC: Meaning the government?

TB: Yes.

LC: Ok. Did you have to go and actually meet with government representatives, government agency people?

TB: Well, the Representative saw the President from time to time but...Siad [Barré] – what was it – but I traveled with the refugee commissioner on occasion and would meet with him regularly. We invited, incidentally, to the weekly coordination meetings a representative of the office of the refugee commissioner.

LC: And what was the importance of those meetings?
TB: The weekly meetings, as I mentioned earlier, were an attempt to coordinate the
refugee effort in country.
LC: And Tom, were you actually, you know, more or less, running these committee
meetings?
TB: I didn't get the question.
LC: Were you actually running the meetings?
TB: Yes, I would chair them.
LC: Ok. Did you also have occasion to meet with national diplomats including U.S.
diplomats resident in Mogadishu?
TB: Yeah. We worked quite closely with the German, French – less so the French – but
very closely with the German and British diplomatic representatives.
LC: Ok. Were there bilateral aid programs from some of those countries also being
deployed in the country?
TB: Well, there was Diakonischwerk there, whatever that means in German, which is one
of the many languages I know nothing about, was a German voluntary agency. Diakonischwerk or
something like that. It was just sort of a religious voluntary agency, fundamentalist of some kind.
And then of course Medécine Sans Frontières was there for the French.
LC: Were there any conflicts or tensions between the multilateral aid that UNHCR was
trying to developing and coordinating and then some of these bilateral programs?
TB: There was considerable tension in some instances, but I don’t recall the play right
now.
LC: But some of that cropped up from time to time.
TB: Yeah, sure.
LC: Ok. Tom, tell me about your, the conclusion of your tour as it were in Mogadishu?
How did that come about? Was there a posting time of around two years like the Foreign Service
had or was there a different pattern?
TB: Well, I don’t know exactly what the length of time was supposed to be. I was there a
year and a half, but a position opened up at headquarters on the Pakistan, for the Afghan refugees
in Pakistan and Iran. So I was nominated for that position and obtained it.
LC: Do you know how that nomination process unfolded?
TB: I think Dick Smyzer, who was the Deputy High Commissioner and whom I succeeded on the NSC had a considerable role to play in that regard.

LC: Ok. Did you initiate any of that?

TB: It was a complete mystery to me.

LC: Can you tell me what your feelings were on leaving Mogadishu for Geneva?

TB: I was delighted.

LC: I suspected that might be the case.

TB: I don't think I would've lasted that much longer because I had challenged the government on the census issue.

LC: Meaning the enumeration on the number of refugees?

TB: That’s right.

LC: And you were making yourself quite unpopular then?

TB: Definitely.

LC: And how did you actually feel about the work? Was this a posting that you had enjoyed or were you just as well moving on to the next thing?

TB: Well, I would have welcomed a return to Southeast Asia, but as it turned out I went to Southwest Asia or dealt with Southwest Asians then.

LC: Am I right in thinking that you had to actually live in Geneva but you spent quite a bit of time in Pakistan?

TB: If I recall correctly I made eight, during the four years, made eight trips to Pakistan, each time bringing back a rug or two from the local carpet salesman.

LC: And do you still have those there in Austin?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Tom, where did you live in Geneva?

TB: We lived in a commune of Geneva, hyphenated commune, called Pregny-Chambesy, which is just above where the U.S. Mission to the U.N. is located.

LC: And what kind of a housing did you have?

TB: We bought a house.

LC: Was it an older building?

TB: No, it was a brand new one.
LC: Really? Wow. And did you have your entire family living with you then or your kids were still in college?

TB: Well, we had our younger children. Our older daughter was in the university at the time.

LC: Was she in Geneva?

TB: No. Well, she was in Geneva in the summers but she was in Minneapolis, probably St. Paul, at Macalester College or at Waseda University in Tokyo.

LC: Oh ok. Tom, as...I'm reconstructing from your memoirs that you were the head of the Southwest Asia section of the Middle East in Southwest Asian Bureau, is that accurate?

TB: That's right.

LC: Ok. Tell me what an average day was like. Where did you go to work?

TB: We were in a, what was then, UNHCR headquarters in a building shared with the World Trade Organization on the banks of Lake Geneva, Lac Leman, which is the alternative name for it.

LC: And how new was that facility?

TB: Oh, it must have been built shortly after World War I, but I don't know what date it actually began.

LC: Ok. And tell me about your staff within the Southwest Asia section. How many personnel did you have?

TB: I think it was only three. Probably four. There was a program officer, a protection officer, and two secretaries, so four or five people.

LC: Ok. What were the national backgrounds of the people that worked with you?

TB: The program officer, first of all, was a Swiss and he was replaced by a Colombian. The protection officer was from Bangladesh, and the secretary was English. She died of leukemia during her service however, a very sudden attack of leukemia. We went to her funeral in Bath, in England, as I recall. Then another contretemps, the Swiss program officer committed suicide but this was after the Colombian replaced him. He had another job at that time, so there were two deaths on the staff, from the staff. A very minimal staff.

LC: Well, that's quite upsetting and makes for great discontinuity to say the very least. Tom, can you describe where your section fit in to the larger...?
TB: The Bureau for the Middle East and Southwest Asia had two offices. They [the Bureau] was headed by Hassan Arnaout, a Syrian, and working for a Syrian is quite a challenge.

LC: Why is that?

TB: Because of the deviousness of approach. Anyway, he and I got along quite well. The other office head for the Middle East was Kamal Morjan, who has since become a deputy assistant high commissioner, or something like that [and was also detached from UNHCR to become the Tunisian ambassador to the UN in New York, and even later Tunisia’s Foreign Minister] – deputy high commissioner – he’s a very, extremely competent Tunisian, very high principles and a real credit to the U.N. Anyway, the two of us, we operated separate offices in the bureau. Now, he took on the responsibility for Iran from me and the Afghan refugees in Iran because it was felt that an American should not be dealing with the Iranian government.

LC: And this is in the wake of the revolution there.

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: How long did you actually have that responsibility before it was transferred?

TB: Four years.

LC: And during that time, Tom, did you have difficulties working with the representatives of the Iranian government?

TB: I didn’t deal with them at all. Morjan took care of that.

LC: Oh ok. And this was part of the buffering that you were talking about to sort of insulate an American from having to deal with this. Could you have done it anyway? Would you have been effective had you been allowed to do it?

TB: I don’t know. I can’t answer that question.

LC: Ok. Tom, if you could, just sort of sketch out the refugee situation in Pakistan. We’re talking about Afghani refugees.

TB: Well, they were located...there are four states in Pakistan, and the Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan held the great majority of refugees. In order to get some balance to the situation there was a movement during the four years that I was there of bringing refugees into the Punjab, Lahore being the capital of the Punjab. There were also Iranian refugees in Karachi.

LC: In the south of Pakistan?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Can you give me the sense of the numbers that we’re talking about?
TB: Well, I don’t recall offhand. It was the greatest refugee population in the world at that time, but the government would claim a million and a half and there were perhaps nine hundred thousand or something like that. I don’t recall the numbers very clearly. I’d have to look them up.

LC: In the larger strategic sense, was the cause of the refugee movement very much the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan?

TB: Definitely.

LC: That was the principal?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. Can you tell me a little bit about the actual work that you did in Geneva?

TB: Well, the principal task was to plan an annual budget. This was UNHCR’s largest program and we had to establish a budget along with various line items for expenditure. And then we would go to see how that money was being expended in the field.

LC: Those were the trips that you made?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Ok. Do you remember any of those trips particularly or are there incidents that you can convey?

TB: Well, one amusing…we had a tent supplier in Karachi whose name escapes me offhand, it’s probably in the book, but one time we had ordered…they were the lowest bidder on – it was Northwest Tent Company, something like that, Northwest Frontier Tent Company, I can’t remember exactly. There were two brothers who were in charge of it. I visited their factory which was…the air of which was loaded with cotton fluff and I asked why none of the workers had masks to prevent from inhaling this stuff and they were quite taken aback. ‘Why would they need masks? They never complained about the cotton.’ Anyway, as they left me off at the hotel at night they gave me a plastic sack and said, ‘This is for your wife.’ So, I didn’t pay much attention to it. When I got up to the room I opened it up and it was a gold necklace, gold earrings, and so on. So, on the way back the driver picked me up the following morning to take me to the morning – I was leaving the country – and I wrote a note saying that I couldn’t accept this sort of thing and I appreciated their gesture but I couldn’t accept it and I sent it back with the driver to the individuals.

LC: Do you think it ever made it back to them?

TB: Oh yeah, sure. Sure it did.
LC: Ok. Tom, what was the position of the Pakistani government at that time on this enormous U.N. program? What were the relationships like between UNHCR and the Pakistani government?

TB: The Pakistani government had an overall coordinator, a very competent man, in charge. They also had Brigadier Azar – is it Azar? I’m trying to remember the name, who was the National Refugee Coordinator. Then there were refugee coordinators in each of the provinces or principally in the Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan and these individuals would come to Geneva periodically. One time I had a Swiss friend over, one of these private bankers whose wife was Chinese and who taught me Chinese in Geneva at the U.N., and I had him over for dinner and he whispered to me ‘What are all these Pakistani doing here?’ I said, ‘That’s my job.’

LC: Tom, how much did the UNHCR aid programs, food aid particularly, programs lose to graft and people taking a cut along the way? Any idea of the losses during this time period?

TB: Well, I did find out that the head of the World Food Program in Somalia, the local director, called me one time and said that he would like to substitute dates for sugar. The Somali drink tea with vast lumps, or not lumps, but spoonfuls of sugar, so I said I had not objection to trying out the dates for a change, but they were a little difficult to stir into tea, but I found out later that apparently – this is a six hundred and eighty five thousand dollar contract – he got a kickback on the dates because I remember some of them being spoiled and they had them replaced immediately. Some sort of influence with the supplier so that they would, if there were any spoiled dates there they would pick up the slack and replace them.

LC: If you had to make a comparison between that kind of thing in Somalia and the frequency of which that kind of thing happened in Pakistan could you do it?

TB: I don’t know that it happened in Pakistan.

LC: Not to that degree anyway?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: In the spring of 1984, then Vice President Bush went out to Pakistan. Do you remember that?

TB: I don’t.

LC: Ok. While you were there, did luminaries…?

TB: They said that one aspect that I do remember which was he presented a check, if I recall, for several million dollars – eight million or something like this – to the UNHCR
representative, and what we did was break our backs to get it deposited by Friday evening in
Germany so that we would get fifteen thousand dollars worth of interest over the weekend. The
UNHCR representative, Gerald Waltzer, carried the check – he was coming back on leave anyway
or on consultations – he carried the check to Germany at which point somebody met him at the
Stuttgart – Frankfurt, Frankfurt Airport, picked up the check and rushed it to the bank so that we
profited. We were able to get fifteen thousand dollars in additional interest.

LC: Not bad. Tom, let’s leave it there for today.

TB: Sure.
Interview with Thomas Barnes
Session 14 of 14
July 16, 2004

LC: This is Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive continuing the oral history interview with Tom Barnes. Today’s date is the 16th of July 2004. I am again on the campus of Texas Tech in the Special Collections Building and I’m speaking with Tom by telephone. Tom is in Austin.

Good morning, Tom.

TB: Good morning.

LC: Tom, we had – last session – talked about your work in Somalia and also in Southwestern Asia, particularly working with the refugees from the Afghani upset in 1979 – ’80 and the following years. Tom, after your work in Pakistan primarily with UNHCR, you then had a new position, which I believe took you back to Geneva. Can you tell me about that?

TB: Well, I was actually based in Geneva from 1982 on.

LC: Yes, I’m sorry. That’s right. Yes.

TB: But I traveled to Pakistan frequently.

LC: And were you offered a new position then? Tom?

TB: Hello?

LC: Yes, Tom? Were you offered a new position?

TB: I wasn’t offered, I was dragooned into a new position entirely foreign to me, which was head of the Procurement Unit for UNHCR because there had been certain allegations of corruption and mismanagement directed against the Procurement Unit. So essentially I took that over along with the liaison with the World Food Program in Rome.

LC: Now Tom, why were you selected? Any idea?

TB: Well, Gene Dewey was the Deputy High Commissioner at the time. He’s currently the U.S. coordinator for Refugee Affairs or head of the Refugee Program Bureau, rather, in the State Department. And he had some faith in me.

LC: Ok. So he thought essentially you had both the experience and the management skills and probably weren’t on the take, something like that?

TB: I trust that was the assumption. At any rate I had never had any procurement experience, so I made it clear that I was bringing in a procurement professional from outside and that I would not do any personal – my predecessor had personally done procurement. My
predecessor’s head of the section – and I announced that I would do no procurement myself but I
would organize the system, hold weekly meetings, give more power to the various procurement
officers, and so on. We developed a system of relying more on the judgment of the subordinate
staff.

LC: Who had some specialization in this area?
TB: Yeah. There was specialization and some people specialized in vehicles, some in
commodities, and so on. So, this is a sort of natural drifting.

LC: Now, Tom, who did you bring in as your oversight person, your specialist, or was there
someone already there?
TB: Well, the chief, eventually, the chief deputy was Roman Urasa, an African who was
very upright and competent, and he succeeded me when I left that job but I did bring in some
British specialist for awhile who worked out reasonably well in terms of procurement because he
knew the procedures but he didn’t fit into the culture of the peculiar international culture of the U.N.
very well.

LC: Can you describe that culture generally?
TB: Well, there’s a certain tolerance of inefficiency in the U.N. system.
LC: Ok. And this particular individual that we’re talking about did not do well with that?
TB: That’s right.
LC: Ok. Tom, how long were you in the job?
TB: I think it was a little over a year and a half or about a year and a half, but another task
came up because the High Commissioner fell under heavy criticism for augmenting posts without
approval of the executive committee, the UNHCR Executive Committee, which is composed of
forty some nations that act as a sort of board of governors of UNHCR.
LC: Now by augmenting missions do you mean adding personnel or…?
TB: Adding posts. And also letting out contracts without competitive bidding, so eventually
the High Commissioner had a rather short term and felt it best to resign. When he resigned, there
was some sweeping up to do in terms of tightening up the staffing, and my unfortunate task was to
go around the world and cut posts, which made me very popular in the assignments section.
LC: Oh, I’m sure. Tom, tell me about that process. How were the decisions for cuts made
and how did you actually implement them?
TB: Well, I wasn’t the only one. I was, I think, the principal one who did these what were
called ‘staffing assessment missions’ and we were part of an organization, very tiny entity at
headquarters called Organization and Management, and there were three or four of us depending
upon the time. And we would visit a post, analyze every staff position – by post I mean an
overseas location or a domestic location, not domestic but a Swiss location. We would attempt to
find positions that could be eliminated to reduce by a hundred and – I don’t recall what the goal
was, it was a hundred sixty or hundred and eighty or something – extra posts that the previous
High Commissioner had committed and established, and we were trying to get back to that number
from which he’d started because of Executive Committee pressure. Anyway, where there were
deputies, for example, in a district we eliminated the deputy position. Where there was a refugee
emergency that had passed its peak, as in Sudan at that time, we would eliminate positions
because there was no need for the quantity of persons.

LC: Who had been, obviously the personnel numbers had increased at the height of the
crisis and now…

TB: And there were rare occasions when we augmented the number of posts, Malawi
being one principal exception because there was a very large influx, principally, of Mozambicons
into Mali – Malawi, pardon me. You asked about the procedure. We would complete a report en
route and have it ready the day of my arrival in Geneva. Then the Post Review Group would meet,
which I chaired, and the Head of Personnel and representative of one or two other branches of
UNHCR headquarters, and we would take immediate action on discontinuing or establishing posts.
Now this procedure worked quite well until people began to realize that only the High
Commissioner should have – contend – that only the High Commissioner should have the power to
do this, but by that time we had more or less gotten back to the previous figure. But there were
people who resented the power of this particular organization.

LC: And how did you manage tensions around that, Tom? Did you just sort of ignore them
and continue with your work?

TB: That’s right.

LC: How long did you stay with O and M in this?

TB: I was there until just shortly before I retired from UNHCR.

LC: Which was in 1990?

TB: It was at the end of 1990.
LC: What was the best part of your job with UNHCR as you look back on that ten year period? Actually, eight year period I guess.

TB: Well, I suppose the exposure to so many different nationalities and so many different points of view and a real lesson on the attitudes of various nationalities toward the United States, probably the most beneficial lesson I got out of that.

LC: What, if you can convey this because it certainly would be complex and would vary with the different groups, but in general what was the sense that you got about the appreciation of American power and American policy?

TB: Well, like I said, there wasn't very much appreciation.

LC: We're using that as a neutral term. What was the view, if you can convey that?

TB: Well, it depends upon which nationality you're talking about. Most countries regard the U.S. as a sort of bullyboy who tries to enforce its will without much diplomatic flair or skill and compromise.

LC: As a career diplomat, how did that sort of perception affect you?

TB: Well, I agreed with it. I was on the receiving end of message from Washington to often say 'Go in and tell the government to do this or tell the government to do that,' while visiting Congressional delegations said, 'We won't give you U.S. AID money unless you do x or y or z.'

LC: Tom, as you know very well there's a long standing debate about the utility of the, sort of, carrot and stick approach in American foreign policymaking. It's come up over and over, for example, with regard to human rights in other countries with whom we might have some fundamental disagreements about the importance of individual liberties. Just in a broader sense, is the U.S. effective in using this approach – 'We will reward you for good deeds and punish you for bad deeds'?

TB: I don't think it's effective at all.

LC: Really? Can you think of any instances that demonstrate that position?

TB: Well, I remember the one I was most personally involved in was this controversial Mayaguez affair whereby we violated Thai instructions not to use Thai soil as a base for any military operations in Southeast Asia and the White House National Security Council, of which I was later not a member but a staff member, did not inform the Embassy of what it was doing. It purely went ahead on its own without any check to see whether we would think the Thai would accept or not accept what they had planned.
LC: In other words it didn’t matter.

TB: That’s right.

LC: Ok. What was, if you could say Tom, the greatest difficulty that you observed in the actual operation of, or bureaucratic position of, UNHCR? It’s operating as a wing of the United Nations but in a complex political and economic circumstances in very divided areas of the world. What were some of the greatest difficulties you saw for UNHCR’s effectiveness?

TB: Well, the greatest difficulty that I encountered in both the Pakistan, but principally the Somali program, was the gross inflation of refugee statistics, which distorted all aid. For example, the…I think the Pakistani claimed there were three million Afghan refugees. We said, ‘Fine, you take your figure of three million and we’ll provide food for 1.8,’ or something like that or 1.6, but it’s this gap between reality and the twain that makes for problems.

LC: And did UNHCR have the resources to make its own presumably more accurate determination about the numbers of actual refugees?

TB: Well, you can’t get away with that very frequently. The one instance is Somalia, where we could prove that the government figures were exactly twice as much as the number of refugees in there in one camp, in one minor area, whereby the American voluntary agency had gone from house to house and done a census unbeknownst to the National Refugee Commission.

LC: So you actually had an accurate number, albeit, of a particular…?

TB: Well, it was actually…you couldn’t defy it.

LC: Sure, in field positions. Yeah. Tom, what were the circumstances under which you left the United Nations?

TB: Well, there’s compulsory retirement at the age of sixty unless you’re secretary general or under secretary general or something like that.

LC: At the age of sixty? Did that seem to you a bit premature?

TB: It did then. It doesn’t now.

LC: And what has changed?

TB: Deteriorating health, but not before sixty-five anyway.

LC: Ok. And I know because you were able to secure an additional position that you didn’t feel your working life had come to an end at sixty.

TB: That’s right.

LC: Tell me how you were able to move to a voluntary agency. How did that come about?
TB: In 1997 – pardon me, ‘77 – as part of the Senior Seminar operation, I did a monograph on Indochinese resettlement. Incidentally, did you ever receive it?

LC: Yes, I did. Yes. We have it here now.

TB: Indochinese resettlement in the United States. And during the course of that I met Andre Van Chau in Beaumont, Texas. He was heading the refugee program there. He later became Secretary General of the International Catholic Migration Commission so we had a previous acquaintance and mutual respect. So he hired me for that coordinator position.

LC: Can you tell me a little bit about Van Chau’s background?

TB: He is from Hue. He has a Ph.D. in English literature from the Sorbonne. He wrote his thesis on Virginia Wolf. He was deputy head – in addition to being university professor both in Hue and Saigon, he was deputy head under Nguyen Beof the cadre training program at Vung Tau. If you like I can sound him out and see whether he...he’s living here in Austin now.

LC: Yes. That would be a very good thing to pursue. See whether he might be interested in becoming part of this project.

TB: If you like I can sound him out to see if he’d be interested in it.

LC: Ok. Yes, we would like that, Tom.

TB: You may recall that he gave a presentation on Ngo Dinh Diem at the recent, at last year’s conference.

LC: The conference here at Texas Tech in 2003. Tom, where were you to be based as an employee of ICMC and what was your position?

TB: I was Coordinator for Operations and Program Development, and I was based in Geneva. I make some point in the book about divisional slice. We had only one person at headquarters for several hundred in the field, which was quite a bit of contrast from UNHCR which had a ratio of – I can’t recall what it was offhand but it was close to 50:50 headquarters and field. And I recall a training film when I was in the Army starring General Walter Bedell Smith in which he said, ‘Warfare is simply a question of logistics,’ and he pointed at the divisional slice whereby it took sixteen or eighteen military, sixteen or eighteen soldiers and officers to put one man on the front line with a rifle. What I liked about ICMC was that we had so few in headquarters and so many in the field.

LC: What was the mission of the organization generally for someone who’s not familiar with it?
TB: It was designed to aid, give relief or aid, to refugees and migrants around the world.
LC: Without reference to…?
TB: Creed. Yes. Without reference to creed. It had nothing…
LC: So is it an agency, an independent agency, that receives funding from some elements of the Catholic Church or can you give the…?
TB: As I recall there was no funding from the Catholic Church. The funding depended upon – I don’t know what the current status is – but depended upon income from contracts and I brought in a few contracts with UNHCR, one for interpreters in Southeast Asia, and there were contracts with the Refugee Program Bureau, State Department. We ran the ODP program under Vietnam, officers based in Thailand in Bangkok and we’d get all the organization for the ODP program. And we had a training program for refugees going to the United States at Bataan in the Philippines.
LC: For Southeast Asian refugees generally?
TB: That’s right.
LC: Can you talk a little bit about the ODP program?
TB: Well, that was designed to bring people to the United States who fit certain categories: those with relatives in the U.S. with certain restrictions, those who had been at least three years in what were called ‘trai cai tao’ – what do you call them…reorientation centers or whatever it was. Reeducation centers, trai cai tao, in Vietnam. Reeducation centers. Actually they were labor camps. And also we brought in a number of, great number of con lai, the Vietnamese – half-Vietnamese, half-American children.
LC: Tom, what did an average day look like for you? What kinds of things were you actually doing at the headquarters in Geneva?
TB: Well, we were…I was largely supporting the field. We had a program in Pakistan, small one in Pakistan. We had one in Istanbul. We had major programs in the Philippines and in Thailand. We had one program in Vietnam for returnees to Vietnam. Also, we had a small grant program, just a few thousand dollars each to various, mainly Catholic, organizations in Africa and Latin America who needed funding for minor projects dealing with refugees. For example, training, buying sewing machines for training refugee women in sewing, things of this nature.
LC: And those were small grants?
TB: Very small.
LC: Ok. Was the hope in granting those that the program would have an immediate impact and perhaps attract follow-on funding?

TB: That's right.

LC: Ok. Tom, I gather from the memoir in the course of your work you were able to travel back to Vietnam and Cambodia as well in 1991. Is that right?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Can you tell me a little bit about your trip to western Cambodia in 1991 and what you saw, what you observed while you were there?

TB: Well, the road network was chief in mind because I’d driven that road in 1959 in a Mercedes 180 without air conditioning and without a heater. The road had deteriorated considerably since that time, between Battambang and Phnom Penh.

LC: Really? By deteriorated can you describe…was it just that it was crumbling for lack of repair or was it actual damage?

TB: It was full of potholes and the asphalt surface that the French had put on had entirely disappeared.

LC: Sure. What other observations did you make during that trip, if you remember?

TB: Well, I traveled with a woman whose husband and children, if I recall, had been killed by the Khmer Rouge and she lived in marvelous fortitude in face of this personal family disaster.

LC: Was she functioning as an interpreter or what was her position?

TB: She was really more of a program initiator. Trying to remember what organization she was working for, whether it was the government or a voluntary agency. I think it was the government.

LC: Did she share with you much about the experience of the family or did she know very much about it?

TB: She didn’t. She wasn’t terribly disposed to discuss it.

LC: I see. I’m sure that’s probably true. What about the economy? What were you seeing – people well-fed, people going about their usual business by 1991?

TB: This was true in Vietnam to a large extent, particularly in the...well, I didn’t get to the Delta at that time but the Delta was beginning to prosper again. Cambodia was a very marginal economy, subsistence level economy.

LC: Were you in Phnom Penh at all?
TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Can you give a sort of quick sketch of life in the city then - restaurants functioning, newspapers, foreigners, all of that happening just as one would expect or were things rather slowly recovering from the 1980s?

TB: They were slowly recovering in Phnom Penh at the time; it was not a particularly bustling city. There’s a French film – I’m trying to remember the name of it – that has Gerard Depardieu as a manager of a scruffy hotel in downtown Phnom Penh. It appears on television, on satellite, from time to time.

LC: I haven’t seen it.

TB: If I ever get the…if the name ever comes to mind I’ll signal it to you, but it shows you how Phnom Penh looked back in 1991. Very scruffy atmosphere.

LC: Ok. Was it the same trip, Tom, that you visited Ho Chi Minh City?

TB: Yes. I think so.

LC: Ok. And I think in the memoir you mentioned that Cardinal Law visited at the same time, is that right?

TB: That’s right, while he was still famous.

LC: Yes. Rather than infamous?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Ok. And tell me about that experience. You actually attended a mass.

TB: Well, I stood on the outside of the cathedral, which was filled to the gills, that’s the one main cathedral in downtown Saigon, so I actually couldn’t get inside but I mentioned an encounter with a mother and daughter from Hue.

LC: Yes, for those who don’t have access to your book could you recount that episode?

TB: Well, I was maintaining a prayerful attitude gazing downward instead of upward toward Heaven when I noticed a pair of ten, I noticed ten pink toenails standing next to me and when I left, when the mass adjourned, this mother and daughter – the daughter having the ten pink toenails – followed me and showed me their registration certificate for movement to the U.S. I couldn’t figure out what had happened because they got no notice, so the processing office for our Bangkok based ODP program was just about fifty feet away so I took the mother and daughter over to the…our team, which had just flown in from Bangkok (they used to do that periodically – stay two or three days and then go back) and had them look into the case of the mother and daughter. She
was obviously a con lai. I asked the mother what her husband’s name had been and all she could remember of his name was Romeo, which I thought was amusing. Anyway, they, I think, got the couple out of there fairly expeditiously after that.

LC: But you mentioned that she was from Hue.

TB: Yes.

LC: Did you find anything else out about her experience or any difficulty?

TB: No. Not really. I just had a brief encounter with them.

LC: Can you describe the atmosphere around the cathedral at the visit of the Cardinal?

TB: Well, it was…the Catholic faithful were attending in large numbers, obviously, every…they were sticking out all the doors of the cathedral.

LC: Any police presence that you noticed?

TB: What? Sorry?

LC: Police presence that day?

TB: I didn’t notice any but I’m sure there were undercover policemen there.

LC: Undoubtedly. But no visible street presence?

TB: No, no.

LC: Ok. Tom, can you tell me whether the work that you did for the commission was gratifying work? Did you think it was important?

TB: Well, I thought it was very gratifying in terms of these small grants that we gave to small organizations throughout Africa and Latin America.

LC: Where you could actually see an impact?

TB: Certainly the ODP program was a very worthwhile effort and the training in English, in the English language, of all those refugees going to the U.S. in the Philippines was significant.

LC: Tom, you stayed with the commission until when?

TB: Till I reached the age of sixty-five in June of ’95.

LC: Now did they also have a sort of mandatory…?

TB: No, I could have continued but I left there because I felt that my usefulness was growing to an end and I wanted to enroll in the University of Geneva to take Japanese, so I left the commission at retirement time, the end of June of ’95, and went to the University of Geneva to qualify myself in French so that I could take Japanese during the regular term. The reason for
staying on – I could have stayed on as an employee of ICMC but I chose to go to the university instead.

LC: How long did you stay at the university then?
TB: I qualified in French during the summer session and then enrolled in the Japanese course, which extended from October, if I recall, through May.

LC: And what were you thinking you would do? Was this just for your own pleasure, did you have a plan for the employment of your new language capabilities?
TB: No. I’d been fascinated by Japanese ever since 1953 but I never had the occasion to delve into it in any depth.

LC: Did you take a certificate or anything at the end of the school year?
TB: I flunked the course because I’m not very good at remembering strokes, characters. But I was principally interested in speaking, which the course of course did not emphasize. They emphasized reading.

LC: Was it a disappointment to you?
TB: No. Not at all. I enjoyed the… I had the company of about fifteen twenty-year-olds who were very sprightly and quite stimulating.

LC: And what did they make of you, I wonder?
TB: I wonder too.

LC: Tom, how long did you remain in Geneva?
TB: We left on the 22nd of May or June – 22nd of May of 1996 because that’s when our son, who had been in the same school – Colleer Du Léman – for eleven years finished his twelfth year. That’s the reason we stayed on another year in Geneva. That’s the principal reason and I used that year in order to study Japanese.

LC: And your home there then did you go ahead and sell your property?
TB: Yeah. We sold our property and moved into an apartment in Versoix.

LC: Ok. Did you in 1996 then move back to the States?
TB: Yes. We came directly…we had visited several locations in the U.S. looking for a place to settle and we wanted a state that had no state income tax.

LC: Ok. So that narrowed it down considerably.
TB: We looked into Seattle, we looked into Honolulu where we lived and enjoyed the climate very much, we looked into North Caro- – not North Carolina – Florida and also…we did not
look into Alaska which has no tax up there. Two of the… I had three requirements: a good university, no state income tax, and no winter. Oh, we looked into Nevada, some ranked also, but I was so turned off by Las Vegas that I wanted to stay away from there.

LC: I guess that I would have to agree with that. So, Austin ended up as your choice then?

TB: That’s right.

LC: Now, your requirement around having a university nearby, what functions would that fill for you?

TB: Well, I had originally intended to go to the university to take Korean but for health reasons I was unable to do so and it has proven to be quite helpful in the sense that I’m a member of the American Foreign Service Association of Central Texas, which has periodic speakers, mainly – not mainly – but occasionally from the university. Example, the last session we had was with a former chancellor of the University of Texas. So the intellectual resources here are great for having monthly lectures of some intellectual import.

LC: Tom, are you happy in Austin then?

TB: Yes. That’s fine.

LC: You had occasion I know to return to Vietnam from your home here. Can you tell me about those trips, one or more of them that you recall?

TB: Well, there…essentially one of them was, involved a great deal of the historical sites in Vietnam and I gathered very good information for a novel that I completed prematurely back in 2000 and have redone completely as of current date. It’s with an agent right now. I don’t know whether…the agent’s reaction is yet.

LC: Tom, are we talking about Tay Son?

TB: Yeah, we’re talking about a complete revision of Tay Son from the standpoint of… I’ve switched it to first person narration on the part of eight different narrators, all of whom lived during that time. And unlike a novel like Shogun, it does not depend on a significant foreign observer to develop the plot. In other words, of the eight narrators, one happens to be a Spanish missionary but he only contributes in a minor fashion to the development of the story.

LC: And you say that it’s under consideration at this point, under submission?

TB: It’s under consideration. The previous one was self-published and has many flaws in it. The revised edition is twelve [eighteen] thousand more words and is considerably more reader-friendly.
LC: Do you have other projects that you’re working on, Tom?

TB: I’m revising another one that I published prematurely on Korea.

LC: This would be *Coping*, the book *Coping*.

TB: Yes.

LC: Did you self-publish that as well?

TB: Yeah, sure.

LC: Oh you did.

TB: As well as the memoir and the portraits.

LC: Of which you have donated a copy here. Tom, I wonder if you can state just in general terms your observation on the current status of U.S.-Vietnam relations. Do you have any observations to offer?

TB: I’m really not up to date on that.

LC: Ok. You’re not keeping up. Is there anything else that you would like to add to this interview? I know it’s been exhaustive in some cases but I wonder if there’s anything else you’d care to add.

TB: Well, I appreciate having the opportunity to put on the record some of these personal viewpoints, which may not represent truth in every case – the truth, as far as I’m concerned – but may not represent actuality.

LC: Well, I want to thank you for the large investment of time that you’ve made in the Oral History Project and we’re very grateful for your participation, Tom. Thank you very much.

TB: Ok. I look forward to your paper addition.