Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I am beginning my oral history interview with William Laurie. I am in the Special Collections interview room on the campus of Texas Tech University. Bill Laurie is in Mesa, Arizona. Is that right Bill?

William Laurie: Correct.

LC: Today’s date is the twentieth of January 2004. Bill, I just want to start off with some general biographical background information. Where were you born and when?


LC: Was your dad in the service at all?

BL: Yes.

LC: What service was he in and where did he serve?

BL: United States Army, World War II, Guadalcanal.

LC: What did he do, do you know? Was he a gunner? Was he infantry?

BL: Yeah, he was infantry and he was a tank-killer platoon.

LC: Tank-killer. Can you tell us what that means?
BL: They were to knock out Japanese tanks. I actually don’t know if they had any armor on. I don’t think the Japanese did have armor on the Guadalcanal, but it was pretty bad as it was.

LC: Yeah, it was terrible. Do you know what weapons your dad was using?

BL: I have to presume an M-1.

LC: Do you know your dad’s unit number?

BL: He was in the—let me think. He was in the, I believe, the 132nd Regiment of the Americal Division.

LC: Americal, okay. What about your mom? What did she do? Did she do anything doing the war special, do you know?

BL: Actually, that’s how they met. She was a recreational worker in a Red Cross Hospital and he had been sent back with a near-fatal case of malaria. While he was recovering, that’s where they met.

LC: Wow. Where was this, in Illinois?

BL: No. It was in Oregon, or California, I believe. Then they got married in Oregon.

LC: What was your dad’s name? First of all I should establish that.

BL: William, first name. Middle name is Wilbert, W-I-L-B-E-R-T.

LC: Your mom’s name and maiden name?

BL: Harriet Elizabeth Scott.

LC: Was she a Californian or a westerner?

BL: Yes.

LC: Okay. How was it that you came to be born in Illinois?

BL: My dad’s from northern Michigan. When the mines closed during the Depression as second-generation immigrants usually did he went where his uncle and sister and other people had found work in Waukegan, Illinois. This is before World War II. When he got out of the service, he went back to the job he had.

LC: You mentioned the mines, were those iron mines?

BL: Copper.

LC: Copper and this is in the UP (upper peninsula) of Michigan?

BL: Mm-hmm.
LC: What city?

BL: Calumet.

LC: Okay. After he left the mines what was it that he did down in Illinois?

BL: He started out as a helper on a Coca-Cola truck. By the time he retired he was a corporate mustanger. He worked his way up into corporate sales and regional management and all that kind of stuff.

LC: Oh, okay. After the war did your mom stay in the work place or did she stay at home?

BL: I was a latchkey kid before they even came up with the term. She worked at the VA (Veteran’s Administration) hospital for a while and taught school.

LC: Did she attend college?

BL: Yeah, she was a college graduate.

LC: Okay. Where did she go?

BL: University of Oregon.

LC: Wow. What did she study there?

BL: Uhh, ooh. Got me there.

LC: She, though, had an interest in working with people in hospital settings, though, it seems.

BL: Not really an interest. It was an available job. She liked it, but it wasn’t her primary interest. Most of her working career was as a schoolteacher.

LC: Oh, okay. Did she teach there in Illinois in Waukegan?

BL: Yes.

LC: Oh, okay. Did you have brothers and sisters, Bill?

BL: Two sisters and one brother, I’m the oldest. Sister is five and a half years younger, a sister eight years younger and a brother nine years younger.

LC: When you were growing up did you hear much from your dad about his military exploits in the Far East?

BL: That was a subject that was very touchy. If he wanted to say something he would, and if he didn’t you didn’t want to bring it up.

LC: Okay. So it was kind of at his discretion whether it came up or not?
BL: Cutting right to the quick, he’s quite fortunate to be alive. In fact, the most
telling conversation I had with him was when I went in the Army. At the time, I told him
and I was, I was thinking about applying for Special Forces. We had a real long sit-down
with a few beers into the wee hours of the morning. He basically said, “You’ve got to
understand what this war business is all about.” He told me what had happened to him. I
knew it was not fun before I went in.

LC: You were really an adult, then, before you got a full sense of what he had
been up against?

BL: No, I knew that as a kid. My mom would tell me, and every once in a while
she’d say, “Don’t ask your dad about that.” It wasn’t a problem. He wasn’t a brooding,
malevolent zombie around the house. He was not an alcoholic or anything like that. He
was pretty much, a very well-respected individual. I was always proud of that.
Everybody’s telling me, “Your dad’s a really good man,” and that. There were some
very deep and very dark and very unpleasant memories. As I said, he’s lucky to be alive.
Basically you flipped a coin, if it came up heads you lived, if it came up tales, you lose
and die. He came up heads.

LC: He’s lucky to be alive because of his combat encounters or because of the
illness that he suffered or both?

BL: Combat. He went through some extremely hairy stuff, I mean, really bad.

LC: Were there other people in the family who had had military experience
besides him?

BL: One of my uncles, who was quite a bit younger, the younger generation. He
was in the Army in the early ’50s. Another uncle was retired career Navy. In my
hometown just everybody went. That’s the way it was. My neighbor, when I was a kid,
the neighbor guy next store was at Normandy. That’s just the way it was then.
Everybody had been in the war. One kid’s dad was there one day and the next day he
was gone off to Korea. So that was just a presumed backdrop of life, you go in the
military at one time or another.

LC: Other veterans that we’ve spoken to have talked about this same thing about
how endemic the military experience seemed to be when they were growing up. A lot of
guys talk about the just background influence that had on their thinking about the military
either as a beacon to them or as something that they just didn’t want any part of. Do you
feel that having men around in your life who you knew had served in the military kind of
influenced your thinking about it as you were growing up just as a young man or even as
a student, your student days in high school and the rest?
BL: Yeah, influenced it as an underlying assumption or grand assumption of life,
a fact in life. Implicitly, although it was never pounded in my head in an articulate,
exhaustive argument, implicit in the whole thing was it was quite common for people of
my generation, when it’s your turn, you go.
LC: Now where did you go to high school?
BL: Waukegan.
LC: So you did grow up there the whole time and did you graduate there?
BL: Yes.
LC: What year did you graduate high school?
BL: 1963.
LC: Okay. What kind of a student were you in high school?
BL: (Laughs) I did all right. I think I was in the top, maybe, twenty percent of
my class, but I had an easy time with the academics. I was not a serious student, but my
grades were just fine.
LC: Now you weren’t a serious student because it wasn’t really interesting or it
was too easy or you had other things to do?
BL: Actually, it wasn’t too easy. I did have to work and I had good teachers. I
wasn’t completely lackadaisical. I certainly didn’t attack it, with my studies, with a
vengeance. I put some effort into it, but I had a fairly easy time with it. I had learned by
then that sometimes you just have to beat your head against the book and study hard. So
if push came to shove and I was having problems then I would beat my head against the
book and I’d come out just fine.
LC: Okay. What subjects did you like?
BL: I’m not sure I actually liked any of them insofar as I was enthusiastic about
them. I didn’t dislike any. I enjoyed them to a certain degree. There was no primary
appeal to any one subject.
LC: Okay. What about other things? Did you play sports at all?
BL: Yes, I did.
LC: What did you play?
BL: I wrestled.
LC: You wrestled?
BL: Yeah.
LC: Okay. Did you letter in wrestling?
BL: Yes.
LC: Okay. Why wrestling?
BL: When I was a freshman, this is kind of a goofy story. When I was a freshman, one of the kids I knew from junior high walked into English class before school started. He sort of mockingly dared me to go out for wrestling. I thought, “Well, hell, if I don’t go out he’s going to come back tomorrow and get me again.” So I went out. I didn’t like it because it was more difficult than anything I’d ever done before. I never even knew that that level of physical exhaustion could be reached. But the other thing was that I was good at it, which kind of surprised me because I really was small when I was a kid. I’d never really been good at sports. Halfway decent at baseball, but that’s about it. Here all of a sudden I was good at it. I still didn’t like it that much, but I ended up being a top guy. In fact, as a freshman I wrestled on the sophomore team. It was a real big sport at our school. Not in terms of general popularity. It was an orphaned sport. Nobody went to wrestling. Actually, they all went to the basketball games and stuff. We had a team that was among the best in the state and by the time of my senior year we were state champions. But I still didn’t like it until I lost to a kid and it really made me mad for some reason. I thought, “I’ve got to get back in the practice room. I’m going to get that guy.” No hard feelings, it wasn’t that he was a bad guy, it was just he beat me and I wanted to beat him. Then I ended up being called up. There were so many kids out for wrestling that they had two wrestling rooms. They had about a hundred kids out for wrestling. So then I got called up to practice with varsity. That’s a pretty big feather in my little freshman cap. I thought, “Wow, this is amazing.” So I was really starting to get into it and all that, but it’s very technical. People don’t understand that. They think it’s just a bunch of guys rolling around and all that stuff. It is a mental and physical chess game that has to be played in six minutes. There’s thousands of
combinations, counters, set-ups. It’s just incredible. It demands an incredible amount of
practice and skill development, this and that. So anyhow just as I was really getting
gassed on this, I’m really starting to like this I’m going to come back and beat that guy
then I broke my collar bone. That really frustrated me. From that point on that’s
basically what I lived for in high school. Summer, I went out for cross-country in the fall
just to get in shape for wrestling. All summer long we used to lift weights, run, practice.
That’s actually one of the most important experiences of my life to this day. I’m still in
contact with a lot of the guys from our team.

LC: No kidding?

BL: Yeah, we were very, very, very good. It wasn’t a matter of just being very
good. We had to work for it. It was hard. Our coaches were true gentlemen. It wasn’t
this “nice guys finish last, win or die kind of stuff.” They taught us lessons in life that
really apply to this day to me. Work hard, plan out what you need to do, find out what
your deficiencies are. Find out what you need to do to correct them, work on them.
Forget the showboating. Hard work and intelligent hard work pays off.

LC: Do you remember any of those coaches’ names?

BL: I remember all of them.

LC: Can you tell us some of their names?

BL: Yeah. My freshman coach was a guy by the name of Larry Tempest. He
was a graduate from our high school. He was a two-time state champion (passage
removed per interviewee’s request). He saw that wrestling could take him somewhere.
He wasn’t very good at first. This guy is a picture of single-minded dedication. This is
the way I’m going to make it. Get my way, do something in life. Two-time state
champion, he’s an NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) college champion.

LC: At what school?

BL: At the University of Illinois. He was fourth in the Olympic try-outs. He was
my freshman coach. Here’s an NCAA champion that’s your freshman coach.

LC: Yeah, that’s amazing.

BL: The sophomore coach was Homer Hankinson and he was an older guy, but
he was very quiet. But between the two of them, they were in the one wrestling room,
the freshman/sophomore wrestling room. Between the two of them, the enthusiasm and
the ebullience of Larry Tempest and this tempered maturity of Homer Hankinson, they
allowed us to or showed us how to attain a level of maturity, I think, that’s far advanced
in kids. Hell, I see thirty-five-year-old people that weren’t as mature as we were when
we were sophomores in terms of dedication that we applied in impressing them. The two
varsity coaches and the assistant coach was Jim Krumpelstaedter.

LC: Can you spell that?
BL: Yep. Believe it or not. In fact, he taught drivers ed and as an extra credit
point on the final exam if you could spell his name right you’d get another point. It’s K-
R-U-E-M-P-E-L-S-T-A-E-D-T-E-R

LC: That’s impressive.
BL: He was an impressive guy.
LC: Okay. Tell me about him.
BL: He was the younger of the two coaches. He was no-nonsense, but he had a
very wry sense of humor, very encouraging, just an incredible guy. In fact, of all the
guys I know, myself included, when we eventually wrestled in college and I’ve talked to
guys since. We found out that all of us share one thing, our college coaches were huge
disappointments compared to these guys. They were brain surgeons. You have to attack
your wrestling improvement program as a brain surgeon. This is all precision. This is
dedication. This is think, think, think, think, think, think, work, work, work. Combine
thinking and working. Where are your weak points? What are your strong points? It
was just this constant analysis, re-analysis improvement. Work on this, work on that. At
the same time there was never any of this false macho ebullience. “You’ve got to kill
that guy.” You were not allowed. You’d get chewed out for showboating. If that’s what
you were going to do, then find another sport. This is all about your ability to apply
discipline to yourself, to improve yourself and set high goals and objectives in whatever
you do. He was just an incredible guy. I’ve talked to, again, the guys on the team since
then. One of the questions that we’ve never really been able to answer is how they were
able to do it. “It” means that you had this burning fire within you to do as well as you
could not for yourself, not so that you could gloat over others, but for the team. You
owed it to yourself to give maximum effort. If you were going to do anything, do it right.
You’re a member of a—even though you’re out on the mat as an individual you are a
member of a team. Your team’s relying on you. Somehow, I don’t even know if you
could give seminars to duplicate it. I think it was just the chemistry of personalities and
probably the chemistry of the times, because I don’t know if that would work today.
These were blue-collar kids had nothing else to do.

LC: By chemistry of the times, what do you mean?
BL: Okay. Waukegan is a lot of blue-collar kids, factory town, immigrant kids.
When I was a kid I thought every other person’s grandparents talked funny because there
were so many immigrants in Waukegan, Armenians, Yugoslavians, Croatians, Finns.
There were people talking funny all over the place. So you had that blue-collar work
ethic, respect for authority. The awareness—and I’m sure that some social psychologists
and child psychologists would jeer this today, but I still think it’s applicable. We knew
we were kids and we knew they were adults. We knew they knew more than we did.
Despite the fact that, of course, we’d act like kids sometimes and do stupid things. But
underneath it all, we knew that we weren’t miniature adults. We were kids. Well, we
were in a way. We deferred to their judgment ultimately. So there was a respect for
authority, a willingness to listen. Also, you take kids that don’t have anything else to do
or any other way to do well in anything, because wrestling is a unique sport insofar as
you can take average athletes, I mean just completely average. If they’re willing to work
hard they can improve more in that sport than any other sport. It’s simply the ultimate
test of prolonged will and dedication. So you’ve got kids like myself who never really
dreamed that they could be good at anything and all of a sudden you reach this awareness
that, “My God, I could really be good at something.” All these little things add up. You
go to other schools and people you don’t even know say, “Hey, you really had a good
match against so-and-so.” God, I don’t even know these people. They know who I am.
It kind of inflates your little ego. So you had a very dedicated and very willing group of
young people. Basically, the worst—they never yelled, hardly ever yelled and screamed
or any of that stuff. One of the real zingers they could get you with, though, and it didn’t
come out very often was they would pull you aside and say if you’ve done something that
didn’t measure up. They’d let you know and it wasn’t an act. They’d say, “You’ve
really disappointed me.” That just cut right to your heart. “I got to do better now.”
LC: Right. There’s an incredible pressure, but also call to improvement in that voicing of disappointment if you respect the person.

BL: Underneath it all we never said anything and even to this day we don’t really use the word pride. There was just an electric team cohesion.

LC: Do you think that these exemplary coaches taught you about leadership?

BL: About what?

LC: About leadership.

BL: Not so much about leadership and to the extent it did. I just think in terms of my being a leader, but it did definitely teach me that if you identify any reasonable goal and are willing to really work and work beyond the point that most people quit and give up, you can attain far more than you initially thought and that people in general are capable physically and mentally of far more than they think or even know, and perhaps far more than they’re willing to work for. I learned that.

LC: During the summers you said that you continued to kind of work toward the next season’s competitions. Did you also have jobs during the summers?

BL: Pick-me-up jobs, caddies, day labor, stuff like that

LC: Did you just have to do it for money or was there anything in the job that you came across as a teenager that interested you?

BL: Say again, please.

LC: Was there anything in the jobs that you picked up as a teenager that was interesting to you?

BL: No.

LC: Just the paycheck. Just the money.

BL: No. I hated work.

LC: You hated work? Because it wasn’t wrestling?

BL: I don’t like being paid to do anything. I like to do what I like to do. In fact, one of our—we manufactured a job of sorts. There was a huge pier that stuck out into Lake Michigan. There used to be scores upon scores of people out there fishing. They’d drop their minnow bucket over the side or they’d drop a fishing rod over the side. So a couple of us would be up at the golf course waiting to go out and caddy and every once in a while you’d say, “To heck with this nonsense.” So we had these diving masks and
swim fins and we’d go hang around the pier. These guys would come up and say, “Hey, my minnow bucket fell in. Would you go down and get it for me?” “Yeah, sure.” You’d get a buck here and a buck there. That was kind of a ruse really, because we never made that much money. But you could tell—and then your parents would say, “Did you make any money today?” You’d say, “Nobody was golfing so I went down to the pier and made a few bucks,” when actually we were down there goofing around.

LC: Your parents didn’t really mind that you weren’t hauling in a bunch of money and saving it for some future purpose?

BL: It wasn’t for that, but it was understood that you’re going to get the basics. If you want these other things then hustle your little butt out there and earn the money.

LC: But you weren’t too concerned about that, it seems.

BL: Half and half. I did make enough money where I could buy a new fishing rod or things like that from caddying.

LC: A lot of guys, though, are motivated by, “I want to have a car.”

BL: I bought a car. I wasn’t into that. My life was basically absorbed into wrestling and my social circle was other wrestlers. It cut across racial lines. I mean we had Armenians, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, blacks, Jewish guys. We hung around together, basically. So given the fact that a lot of those people were blue-collar most of them didn’t have cars. They weren’t into really the social swirl, such as it was. So I wasn’t really driven to get a car. Of course, you could use your folks’ car. Then I bought an old beat up Model-A my senior year and drove that around. It didn’t really matter to me.

LC: Did you see wrestling as something that could persist for you after graduation?

BL: Yeah, because I was really consumed by the sport. Then I got a scholarship, which is why I went to Arizona State.

LC: Can you tell us how this scholarship came about?

BL: Yeah. Our team was known pretty much nationwide, at least by coaches who followed such things. Chicago area wrestling, most people say Pennsylvania is good and it is, and Oklahoma, they’re really good and they are. Chicago, not the city proper, but the Chicago suburbs in northern Illinois, ranked right up there with the toughest high
school wrestling in the whole country. Our team had the coaches in the know realize
that, “Boy, this guy puts out a good team every single year.” Then, of course, our senior
year we were undefeated state champions, never even came close to losing at all. As it
turned out, I didn’t even make the tournament team because we had five guys at my
weight. We had the top dogs wrestle. You’d have challenge matches. So it comes time
for the challenge matches for the tournament team, for district, sectional, and state. There
is no substitution. The district team is it. The season is over for the rest of the guys.
Well, I lost to one of the guys. So I’m off. I’m a spectator now. But during the year I’d
wrestle with a couple of guys and I’d wrestle the guy who eventually was the state
champion. He was one of these guys that just pounds and thunders everybody, just
throws people all over the place. Well, he only beat me two to one. He barely did that.
Then I pinned the guy that beat the other guy that took second in state. So going by
comparative scores I was right up there at the top. The coach from Arizona State called
our high school coach and said, “You’ve got any good prospects up there?” He said,
“Yeah.” He told me about it later. He said, “I’ve got a kid that’s really improving and
came within one point of beating the state champ,” and-so-forth and so-on. So on the
basis of that, he gave me a scholarship.

LC: So Waukegan was sort of a feeder-school for good college programs that
were out recruiting?
BL: Yeah, it was definitely attracting people. Kids got scholarships all the time,
all the time.

LC: What was the recruitment process like? How did you find out about the
offer of the scholarship? Did it come in the mail? Did somebody call you?
BL: Coach told me that he talked to this guy and he said, “You’ll probably be
hearing from him.” Sure enough, I got a letter and a form and all that. This sounds great,
filled it out and sent it back and didn’t hear anything. Not hearing anything and being a
dumb high school kid not following up I just sat there like a passive Buddha. Nothing
happened. Then I was going to go to another school and I get this call out of nowhere,
“Where are you? Are you coming here?” “Well, I didn’t hear from you.” Anyhow, I
ended up at Arizona State.

LC: Where else were you thinking about going?
BL: Colorado State. I didn’t get a scholarship offer from them, but I thought about going there. University of Illinois coach was asking about me, but I didn’t want to go there.

LC: Did the academics of the institution drive any decision making there or was it the scholarship primarily?

BL: Just the scholarship.

LC: Okay. Did you have a discussion with your parents about the financing of college and the scholarship was like a dealmaker?

BL: Big help.

LC: Okay. Were you excited about going to Arizona?

BL: Yeah. I always wanted to go out west, mountains and all that good stuff. Colorado State was another one of that. I thought Illinois was the epicenter of boredom of the entire universe. Not realizing that I had never been bored a minute of my life there. I had a great, great time as a kid.

LC: What made you think that Illinois was boring? Just because it was where you were and there had to be something different?

BL: Mountains and all that kind of stuff always appealed to me. As a kid, I always read mountain man books. I like fishing, hunting, camping, all that stuff. Fortunately, in Illinois where I lived we had this massive, huge fifteen-square-mile swamp, gully-ridden area which was basically if you were there you owned it at that time because no one else went down there. So I had this massive place to just roam, Huckleberry Finnish type. But I always thought, I had been out to visit my grandparents in California, just marveled at the mountains and all that stuff. Boy, you could go into those mountains and disappear for days on end. That’s great. You can’t do that in Illinois. There’s always you walk three miles and there’s another road or something. So the west had that appeal.

LC: Where did your grandparents live in California?

BL: Sacramento.

LC: Sacramento. Okay. Had you done much other traveling outside of Illinois besides visiting relatives out west?

BL: No.
LC: Okay. Do you remember the summer before you left for Arizona?
BL: Yeah.
LC: That would be the summer of 1963, I guess?
BL: Yes.
LC: What did you do?
BL: I got my first actual working job, which was a helper on a Pepsi truck.
LC: Did your dad help you get that position or did you find it on your own?
BL: It wasn’t any help. It’s just, “You’re going to work.” By that time he’d
switched from Coca-Cola to Pepsi. After about the first couple of weeks after I graduated
I wasn’t really doing a heck of a lot. I was just immersed in delightful lethargy. One day
he said, “It’s time to get yourself to work. Get up at six tomorrow and come with me.”
So it wasn’t a matter of helping me get the job. It was, “You’re going to go to work.”
LC: It wasn’t a negotiation?
BL: No, no.
LC: Okay. How did that work sit with you?
BL: It was fine. I expected to work. I was eighteen and you’re supposed to pay
your way. I’d had a nice two or three weeks doing nothing after graduation, but all good
things come to an end. It was time to face reality.
LC: So you must have worked a couple, three months or so?
BL: Yeah.
LC: When did school actually start down in Arizona? Do you remember? Was it
early?
BL: The first week in September, something like that.
LC: Do you remember your trip down there?
BL: Yeah.
LC: How’d you get there?
BL: By train.
LC: By train, okay. Do you remember that trip?
BL: Yeah, little bits and pieces of it. I’ve always like riding on trains, still do to
this day. So that was kind of fun. It was an adventure and it’s something new. It’s a new
stage in my life, all that little tingle of excitement.
LC: How did you parents feel about you going so far away?
BL: They never said anything.
LC: Really?
BL: They probably would have liked it if I were closer, but it was a scholarship and they knew I wanted to go out west. So there was never any questioning at all. Maybe they had reservations, but they never expressed them.
BL: You know just younger brothers and sisters. It didn’t matter what they think. I don’t know. We had a—I don’t know if you want to call it an *Ozzie and Harriet*, or *Father Knows Best* family, but everybody got along. It was like, “Okay, bye.”
LC: They were much younger than you, really?
BL: Yeah.
LC: So it wasn’t a difficult departure for you in any way? You were just kind of looking forward to whole thing?
BL: It was to the extent that you’re leaving familiar stomping grounds. You’re leaving friends. The things that you like to do, you won’t be able to do anymore. I couldn’t walk across the street and disappear into that swamp that I always had done all my life. The swamp was not an option anymore, so all that stuff. It was also offset some of the grief by the tingle of a new experience. This is something new.
LC: Where did the train actually let you off, as it were, in Arizona?
BL: Phoenix Train Station, sometime in the wee hours of the night or the morning, it was very dark. The wrestling coach picked me up and drove me back. That was it.
LC: Where did you live that first year?
BL: In a fraternity house.
LC: In a fraternity house? What fraternity?
BL: Sigma Chi.
LC: Had you had any information about fraternities and how they operate before you got to Arizona?
BL: A little bit, a little bit. I never gave a thought one way or another. I didn’t think they were all snobbish geeks, and then I didn’t think they were the greatest thing in the world. They were just the same. The way I got in there, was one of the other wrestlers was a Sigma Chi. The coach had called him up and said, “Can you put this guy in temporary housing?” He said, “Sure.” I was in there for temporary housing. What surprised me was the people in this particular fraternity were not at all like any stereotype I’d ever envisioned or thought of. They weren’t all Joe College guys. They were very, are you ready for this word, diverse.

LC: Sure.

BL: A group of very unique, imaginative, funny, intelligent people. In fact, that’s another—I ended up staying there. That was another unique time in my life, because I have never since then seen anything like that particular group of people. The golden age was only three or four years and then they went on and the collective personality disappeared. Yeah, really profoundly intelligent, profoundly funny, decent people for the most part. Of course, you always have your bozos.

LC: But when you say the collective personality, that you’re describing in very glowing terms, sort of disappeared, was that because of attrition or was it because of changing circumstances in which college students find themselves?

BL: I truly think that there was a collection of people there that you’re probably never going to get assembled again. It was all circumstance and good fortune. Again, I’ve never seen anything quite like that since in terms of unique personalities, which of course is exactly opposite of the way most people characterize fraternities, as cardboard cut outs.

LC: Yes, that’s right.

BL: They were truly unique people, truly intelligent and funny. I had never seen anything like this before. So that, the uniqueness of it would rule out what is it, entropy or something? This can’t go on forever. All good things come to an end and, of course, changing times. By the end of the ’60s things were getting really insane.

LC: Let’s stay with your freshman year for a minute. First of all, when did your training for the wrestling team begin?
BL: Our practices ran from I think 2:30 to 5:00, 3:00 to 5:30, or something like that.
LC: That was in the fall term?
BL: Yeah.
LC: You were actually in competition in the following term, correct?
BL: Yeah. No, we had our first competition that first semester.
LC: Okay. About how many meets would you have in the course of a year?
BL: Oooh. Well, you’ve got to distinguish between regular dual meets where you’re wrestling in a team and then tournaments. Probably twelve, fifteen dual meets, probably two tournaments.
LC: You got to do some traveling then?
BL: Yeah.
LC: With the team?
BL: Yeah.
LC: Was ASU (Arizona State University) part of a conference at that time?
BL: Western Athletic Conference.
LC: Okay. So your competition would be schools like what?
BL: Long Beach State. We actually wrestled outside of the conference quite a bit because the budget wasn’t such. I think at that time the Western Athletic Conference had schools up in Idaho and Montana and stuff like that, Utah, Texas-El Paso. It was easier and cheaper to wrestle teams like Long Beach State and Cal State Fullerton, San Louis Obispo and things like that, U of A.
LC: How did you gel with your teammates there at ASU?
BL: I really didn’t. (passage removed per interviewee’s request) The coach was definitely not my type. He was just, in my own view and I didn’t realize it at the time, it was only retrospect that I was aware of the fact that he was inferior in terms of his coaching and teaching abilities. I also think, if I may say so, inferior from a character standpoint.
LC: Sure.
BL: Eventually I heard later in his career he was the athletic director at some college. He got in a big stink. I think he was fired over recruiting violations.
BL: I heard from a lot of people that his ethics were flexible in terms of juggling scholarships and all kinds of goofy stuff, promising them this. I was not a happy camper.

LC: Right. Even in the mid-1960s there were strict rules about the management of scholarships.

BL: Yeah.

LC: So your kind of social home was the fraternity rather than the team?

BL: Yeah, definitely.

LC: What about academics? What did you decide to study or was it general ed for the first couple of years?

BL: That was the time when engineering is it. So bowing to my parents wishes I started out in engineering and that lasted a year. My grades were fine, but it just didn’t ring my bell. So I changed majors at the end of my freshman year.

LC: To what?

BL: Political science.

LC: What was it about political science that you thought you would find that you couldn’t find?

BL: Well, I didn’t know anything about political science.

LC: Oh, okay.

BL: I’d read the paper and they’d talk about conservatives and liberals and I’d go, “What’s that?” I just didn’t know anything. So I thought that would be more interesting. There’s another thing to that. I quit wrestling after my freshman year. I said, “The thrill is gone, I’m out.” Then my social life, such as it was, was focused around and on the people in that fraternity. Little male chauvinist pig that I am, there weren’t many girls over in the engineering department.

LC: This is true.

BL: Over in social sciences, political science and history and all that, that’s where everybody used to sit and talk out in front of the social science building. That’s where all the girls were and everything else. I thought, “Well this is kind of neat.”

LC: This is a little better.
BL: But that wasn’t the driving force. That was just a tangent benefit to the whole thing. I actually did want to know more about “What is this political science stuff?” I knew that engineering just wasn’t my bag.

LC: In the fall of 1963 you also presumably observed a major political event, which was the assassination of the president. Do you remember that?

BL: Just like everybody else, I know exactly where I was. I had come back for lunch. Somebody came running in the dining room and said, “Kennedy’s been shot.” Then boom, everybody like flies on watermelon zooms over to the TV and the next couple of days that’s all we did.

LC: How did you feel? Do you remember?

BL: Surprisingly detached. It was sad, of course, and I recognized and acknowledged that. I didn’t feel the crashing doom that everyone seems to remember they feel. I just simply thought that this is one of those bad things that happens in life and it’s terrible.

LC: Had you been any kind of a follower of Kennedy’s, supporter or did you have any interest in what he was doing as the president?

BL: I really didn’t know and I was not—I thought he was okay. I was not a follower of any, either Nixon or Kennedy in the ’60 election.

LC: You were reading the paper, though, and curious about political events. Do you remember the first works of or the impression that you had of the early days of the Johnson administration?

BL: It was a totally impressionistic, unarticulated impression. The first day or year or whatever I thought, “Well, he seems to be doing okay.” But, of course, I didn’t know.

LC: Were you actually reading the paper much in that first year?

BL: Yeah.

LC: What paper did you read?

BL: Arizona Republic.

LC: Were you paying any attention to Arizona politics?

BL: Very little and, of course, Goldwater ran in ’64. But as far as state politics, I didn’t know squat about the state politics.
LC: Did you have any particular feelings about Goldwater?
BL: Yeah, I liked him. I liked him and I was amazed, literally shocked and
dumbfounded at the magnitude of his loss. I simply couldn’t believe that that many
people would vote for Lyndon Johnson. Of course, by then I started learning about or
hearing about his looming Great Society stuff, you know, all his social programs. I
wasn’t vehemently opposed to them necessarily, but I just felt in my bones that in the
long run this is not a good idea where you have the great government day care center
taking care of all of us.
LC: You just had some intuitive feeling that there was something wrong with
that?
BL: Yeah.
LC: Okay. Okay. Did you work for any candidates during ’64?
BL: No. I did not.
LC: Did you stay at home that summer after your first year down there? I’m
sorry, stay in Arizona or did you go home?
BL: I went back to Illinois for the next three summers.
LC: Were you working during the summer?
BL: Yes.
LC: As you had before?
BL: Yes.
LC: You’re changing majors, then, in your sophomore year and then beginning
over time to get a little more detailed study of political science. Did you maintain your
wrestling scholarship throughout those later years?
BL: No. I just walked away from the sport after my freshman year.
LC: Oh, is that right?
BL: Yeah. It was too much of a disappointment for me. The thrill was really
gone. It meant everything to me and I had such high expectations. I thought, “Now I’m
really going into the big leagues. This is college athletics. This is it.” There was nothing
there. We didn’t learn anything. Everything was different. I didn’t realize how much of
the value I placed on the sport. I still greatly appreciate it for its intrinsic characteristics,
no question about it. But I didn’t realize how much my personal enjoyment was
associated with everything that was associated on the team and the coaching and all this stuff. Then, of course, in high school your world is much, much, much smaller. You win a couple of big matches over the weekend and you come back Monday and kids come up and say, “Hey, I heard you really did well this weekend.” You just say, “Oh, yeah, I did okay.” In college it’s totally anonymous. So, all of that stuff was gone. Although that wouldn’t have been the determining factor if the coach and I had been more similar personalities, I guess, then I would’ve stayed with it because I really did like it, still do. But there was just nothing there. Almost got to the point where I saw him as somewhat of a repulsive individual.

LC: Okay. Others in your situation going a long way away for college, primarily because you’ve been offered a scholarship, now you’re not interested in doing what the scholarship allowed you to do, might have changed schools. Why did you stay on and continue to go back?

BL: The people that I knew.

LC: Okay. So friendships you made?

BL: Yeah. I have to underscore the fact that these are really some extremely unique people. In fact, two of the guys, one of whom is still living, I suspect have IQs that are probably 180. I mean they’re just profoundly brilliant and outrageously funny. But at the same time they were gentlemen. That’s what I really appreciated about them and other people like them. Their fun was not at the expense of other people.

LC: They didn’t presumably ram their intelligence down other people’s throats in inappropriate ways.

BL: Oh, no, never, never. Although they didn’t suffer fools gladly. If you pushed it too far, you would all of a sudden see this transformation. You know, dumb freshman kid in college it was amazing to me, here’s this funny jocular person all of a sudden just boring into somebody and telling them either literally or figuratively they’re full of fecal matter and explaining why. “This is rather interesting.” Amazing people, I’ve never seen anything like them before or since. It was just nuts. These two individuals I cited with many others it seemed to be one of these magical places in time where there’s this cluster of eccentrics—true eccentrics, not manufactured posing eccentrics, but true free spirits and all that kind of crap that everybody says they are, but they aren’t. They
clustered together and, of course, likes attract likes. So you had people were also drawn
to this group. It was just too much to pass up.

LC: Tell me about the political science curriculum. What kinds of things were
you most interested in? Of course, there are different sub-fields in political science.

BL: I didn’t even know really what the subject was. So the whole thing was
brand new to me. I later on developed an interest in Third World politics and
developmental economics and things of that nature.

LC: Do you remember any particular professors there that—?

BL: Oh, yeah.

LC: Okay. Can you tell me about one or two of them, their names and what you
got out of their instruction?

BL: Okay. Professor of political science taught government politics of the Soviet
Union, also my academic advisor, which means I saw him probably all of twenty minutes
the whole time I was there. Douglas Dalgleiche.

LC: Dalgleiche?

BL: Dalgleiche, yeah. Frighteningly brilliant man.

LC: Yes.

BL: Just amazing brilliant. Did everything wrong in terms of contemporary
educational guidelines in that he simply lectured. His lectures were like the same,
generated the same interest as when you were a little kid listening to the “Shadow” on the
radio. He was so well informed, so well organized. He told a story and it would unfold
before you. Basically he covered the Soviet Union from 1900 to, I think, 1950 or
something like that. It was just amazing, just amazing. He was also unique in that he
was politically conservative without being acerbically so. He had a very funny, dry wit.
He wasn’t to-the-manor born. He was this poor kid that worked his way up as a carpenter
and this and that. He’d been in the military. He was just an intriguing, interesting, funny
guy, very inspirational. Another guy I had for international economics, Dr. M.E.
Vaughn. He also was well organized, presented the material very coherently in a
rational, logical, sequential fashion and made what could be a very boring subject quite
fascinating.
LC: Was it in your opinion a strong curriculum? A strong department or were you really able to evaluate that? You were just kind of taking class after class and soaking it up?

BL: It was there and it seemed okay.

LC: As you moved toward your junior and senior years, which would be 1966 or ’67 and then ’68, can you describe what was going on, on the campus in the terms of politics? Were their student groups? Was there an active political life on campus?

BL: There was. I remained distinctly and by preference remote from it. Not only in the circle of friends that I had, but of course—I really enjoyed getting out in the mountains and hiking and camping and hunting and stuff like that. So when the possibility presented itself I was gone. I was up in the Superstitions or I was doing this or doing that. But the anti-war stuff began to simmer in ’65. There just wasn’t much that you paid attention to there. People would put up booths and this and that and, of course, you’ve got those Bohemian morons. Although they weren’t hassled or harassed, you just carried around your internal opinion, but we never did any of that stuff. Never beat up hippies or anything like that. Then by ’68, of course, you’ve got much more tumultuous. Then, of course, in ’70 you had Kent State and this and that. It was irrational mayhem. People say well, “We were ending the war.” It was mob theatre. It was insane.

LC: When did it change from people sitting at a table and being pretty much ignored to it becoming theatre?

BL: I think probably the seeds of that were probably planted in 1967. Incidentally, that’s the year the hippies in San Francisco buried, they had a memorial service for the true hippie. Did you know that?

LC: No. Can you tell me about it?

BL: They decided—the original hippies decided that so many wanna-bes and copycats and brainless morons were forging themselves into automatic hippies that the true spirit of hippie-dom had already died. They actually had a funeral and buried a mock corpse of the hippie and said “This is the end of the hippie era.” They were pretty much right. The wanna-bes, the idiots, the morons, the bozos—I really divorced myself from the mainstream thing. I thought, “You people are nuts. You want to protest the
war, protest this or be for that, or anything else that’s fine.” But this is all idiocy. The
interesting thing was is I had known people early in my time at ASU who were the
archetypal cinematic gung-ho fraternity guy in other fraternities. I looked at them and
would go, “Yeah. My fraternity has got some nice people, but you’re pushing it way too
far. You’re a bozo. You’re taking yourselves way too seriously. It’s just not that big a
deal in the greater cosmos here.” So here you’d see this person and they’re Joe College,
ra, ra, razzmatazz and you look at them and think they’re mentally deficient or
emotionally stunted. Four years later they’re on the other side of the spectrum. They’re
running around with raggedy-ass hair saying, “Let’s burn the school down.” You realize
that they had simply changed one uniform for another one. They’re the same idiot, just
different clothes on.

LC: Looking for something to follow?
BL: Yeah.
LC: Looking for a cause to be a part of or something like that?
BL: Yep, the appeal of the herd, the mass man. What is it Gustave Le Bon wrote
that book about the crowd how it appeals to people who have little lives and all of a
sudden they can become part of some grand monster and all this. That’s a very
informative—that’s a very interesting book. I don’t know if they still read it anymore,
but that really describes a lot of the characteristics of the latter part of the ’60s. That
crowd electricity spurred a lot of people on.

LC: So your sort of assessment of some of the larger demonstrations and crowd
activities from the anti-war movement at ASU would be what? That a lot of people were
there just because it was happening not because there was a happening?
BL: It was a contagion, no doubt in my mind. I knew and had known some
people on the left and I could sit and drink beer with them and talk and we could disagree
without raising our voice. Apparently once in a while laughing at each other and saying,
“Oh, you’re full of shit,” or something like that. This was not reasoned discourse. This
was not rational debate. This was mob contagion. It was very evident to me that rational
discussion was not the issue. The issue was I’m going to—I hate to say this, but it’s
nonetheless true—a lot of these people had seen themselves as life’s losers. They
weren’t popular. They weren’t athletes. They weren’t this. They weren’t that. They
weren’t cute girls. They weren’t handsome guys. I had no reason to think I was popular.  
I had a lot of friends, and a decent social life, but I certainly wasn’t popular and I wasn’t  
a great athlete besides from wrestling. I was just a nobody. But I never saw myself as  
that. I said, “Okay, I’m just me and I have these limitations and these assets,” and so  
forth and so on. They had these people that—actually, it’s a rabid and perverse example  
of revenge of the nerds, in some cases. In some cases and I know that for a fact as much  
as you can determine it to be a fact. There was just way, way, way too much of that.  

LC: So a lot of the people who were going to protest had not probably in your  
estimation clue one about what was going on in Vietnam?  
BL: No. Not at all, nor did I for that matter, really.  
LC: Were you continuing to read the paper?  
BL: Yes, I always did.  
LC: Okay. You said that you didn’t have much of an idea of what was going on  
in Vietnam, do you base that on your assessments now of what you know or at the time  
were you trying to pay attention?  
BL: Yeah, I was. I thought that eventually I’d probably end up having to go  
there. So I did follow it. Of course, guys from my high school were over there and stuff.  
So I did try and follow it. I didn’t know at the time that you could not understand what  
was going on over here. It was impossible.  
LC: Did you have contemporary knowledge about people from your high school,  
men from your high school who had been drafted, for example?  
BL: Not at the time. I’d get letters from guys and they’d say so-and-so went in or  
this or that. Then after 1966 I didn’t go home for the summers anymore. So I had less  
and less contact with people that I knew in high school.  
LC: Was the draft much discussed, say, amongst your friends?  
BL: Oh, yeah.  
LC: What kinds of things were said?  
BL: Fear, trepidation. “I don’t want to get drafted.”  
LC: So let’s separate the things. The draft as a policy from the draft as it might  
affect you and your friends. Did you guys talk about whether the draft was a good idea  
just in broad terms, as a policy?
BL: It was accepted even though you acknowledged it was an imposition on your life. “Is this a free country or what?” Then you realize, you’ve got to have some way of marshalling the forces necessary for national defense. It was acknowledged and accepted, much the same way that you have to dedicate a whole weekend to installing a new toilet. It’s just one big pain in the butt, but it has to be done.

LC: Then discussions about how the draft might affect you, do you remember some of those talks?

BL: I don’t remember the specifics of it. I just remember that “Hey, I’m going to get yanked out of a familiar environment and I don’t want to leave right now.” I was still having fun in college and so forth. Sort of an existential inertia. I’m here. I want to stay here.

LC: Right.

BL: But as long as you were in college, of course, in those days and your grades were okay, you didn’t really worry about it. It was always something that was waiting at the door after you graduated.

LC: Okay. So you were all aware that deferments were yours as long as you were enrolled?

BL: Yeah, and your grades were okay.

LC: Right. Did you at some point become affiliated with the ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps)?

BL: Yeah.

LC: Can you tell me when and how that happened?

BL: I took it the first two years and I hated it. I just didn’t like it at all. In fact, I flunked it one semester because I never went at all.

LC: Oh, really?

BL: I just didn’t go at all. That was my sophomore year. I went to get my uniform two or three times. Both times the line shut down for lunch before I was issued my uniform. So I said, “All right. I gave you two or three tries, that’s it. I’ve had it. That’s it. I’m not going.” So I flunked it. I didn’t go back in until I graduated in ’68. I knew I was going into the military. I knew I was flat broke because I had taken out school loans and all that sort of stuff. I was self-supporting after 1967 entirely. So I
thought I simply cannot go into the military as an enlisted man. Not that I’m better than
they are or anything else, I have to have money to pay off these horrendous school loans.
By then I had done quite a few things outside of school. Hitchhiked around the country, I
worked on the Alaska Railroad, just rambled about. Had some growing up experiences
and this and that. I thought I simply don’t belong. I’d seen what basic training was like
because I ran Pepsi routes at Great Lakes Naval Base. I’d see these Navy chiefs yelling
at these eighteen-year-old kids from Alabama. I thought okay, it might be elitist, but I
don’t belong with an eighteen-year-old kid from Alabama, who’s going to show me
pictures of the alligators that his daddy killed. They’re nice guys. God love them, but
there’s no reason for me to be there. I’ve grown up too much. I’ve been around the
block too many times, and I had. Hitchhiking around the country and all these
experiences you have, working in Alaska where guys have shovel fights and all kinds of
stuff. I viewed myself as older than my years. For those two reasons and combined with
the fact that I was really starting to develop a greater interest in economics, I thought I
might go for a master’s in econ, go to ROTC and I’m killing a couple birds with one
stone. As it turns out, that worked. So I went to graduate school and went through my
two final years of ROTC.

LC: Tell me about this hitchhiking trip that you went on. Was that during the
summer?

BL: No. The end of my sophomore year, actually my sophomore year was pretty
much a wash. Some of my goofy friends and I decided that rather than go to school we
were going to go down to South America and float rivers. So I dropped all but two
courses, one of which was Spanish. We were planning this trip half way through the
semester and then we realized that that wasn’t going to work. So I spent the rest of the
semester periodically going to Spanish and econ classes and hiking mountains and stuff
like that. Then after the first semester, to this day I can remember I asked myself, “Why
am I here?” I really didn’t know. I actually hadn’t changed majors yet. I had just
dropped out of engineering. I asked myself, “Do I really want to be in college? The
answer was no, I’m just here because everyone tells me to.” So I said that’s just not good
enough. I’ve always had a bit of wanderlust. So I just took off.

LC: What are some of the places you ended up? Did you have a plan?
BL: No. The first time I tried to hitchhike to Alaska, that didn’t work. They wouldn’t let me into Canada because I didn’t have enough money. So basically I followed my nose for a couple of months. I just would get up and I might want to try and see the Black Hills, so I might want to go through Yellowstone. But if someone’s going this way or that way, well, I’ll go there, too. So I started sort of—the line from that old song, “Cast my Fate to the Wind,” just rambled about for a couple months.

LC: That’s sounds like a pretty amazing thing to have done in the mid-’60s. Were there any particular places that you came upon that resonated with you particularly?

BL: It was all magic. Because it was new it was all—everything was new every day. I made a point to go to states I’d never been to before and see things that I wanted to see. I even stopped by at different colleges where I knew people. Up at Morehead State in Minnesota, Indiana State and places like that, just dropped in to see my friends, Utah State. That was kind of funny, though, because if you’re big on surprises you just show up at their door and they go, “What the hell are you doing?” I thought those were all very funny. Every day was new. Places were new. There was an actual word, I’ve read it in a book about hobos once. Some psychologist came up with a word to describe the obsession for seeing the other side of the hill. I have to confess I’m probably afflicted with that. I love going places I have not been. That’s what I did.

LC: Is that part of why you went to Alaska, then?

BL: Yeah.

LC: Was to get up there because you had never been there?

BL: Yeah.

LC: You worked up there on the railroad, did you say?

BL: Yeah.

LC: How did that come about?

BL: Really, the first month and a half up there it was really tough. I could not find a job. I was living in a homeless shelter. Well, they called them rescue missions back then. So I was living in a rescue mission.

LC: Where?

BL: In Anchorage with all the alcoholics and winos and ex-convicts and all this other stuff.
LC: That was interesting.
BL: Oh, yeah. But what I did was I, just like a salesman has a route, I established a job application route. I just went to places, and I kept going back. Some of them were, “Are you here again? We don’t have anything for you.” They got to recognize my face. I would walk all over Anchorage and finally I got to know the town and these places and everything else. I would just go round and around and around. Finally I got a construction job and that didn’t really pan out because they worked some days and then other days you wouldn’t work. In fact, it got so bad that I actually went to the Army recruiter because I was self-supporting at the time. I can’t even afford to leave Alaska. If I don’t go back to college I’ll get drafted so I’ll just go to the recruiter and join the Army because they’re going to get me anyhow. But I walked into the Alaska Railroad where I had been dozens of times before. The lady said, “You still want to work, huh?” I said, “I still want to work.” She said, “Sign here.” They had these huge rains up by Mount McKinley National Park, which had seriously deteriorated the roadbed there. They needed extra hands big time. So we went up there. It was all very 19th century because the roadbed was so mushy that they couldn’t even get regular railroad cars with all their heavy equipment. We’d have to go out there in these little putt-putt motorcars. Twelve miles down in a river canyon and worked there with shovels and picks and spike malls all day long same as they did in the 19th century.

LC: Where did you live?
BL: In a railroad car.
LC: Oh, really?
BL: Yeah. There’s a whole social hierarchy of railroad laborers. There’s the section gang. They live in an area and maintain that area permanently. The extra gangs are the ones that are like the railroad SWAT team. You go here. You go there, wherever you’re needed. Of course, extra gangs refers to the last to be hired, first to be fired because they’re usually—when your section gangs can’t handle it, then you need extra gang people. As a consequence, a poor man’s excuse for the foreign legion. You get sociopaths. You get college students. You get drunks. You get everything, ex-convicts, sociopaths literally. We had guys in knife fights and shovel fights and all kinds of stuff. We were the extra gang. So we lived on a railroad site, in these railroad cars.
LC: How long were you up there?
BL: All summer.
LC: Your actual time of working was how long?
BL: About a month and a half.
LC: Were you happy to get out of there to go back to school or were you a little bit sad, maybe both?
BL: Very, torn. Very, very mixed emotions because I did want to go back to school. I actually did enjoy—I had found a purpose at school. I really enjoyed learning about political science. I was enjoying educating myself and becoming less stupid. That was a positive. I really was torn because one of the Indians on the extra gang, a pretty good guy. His name was Alexi, I can’t remember his last name. I got to know him fairly well and he said, “Hey, you know what? If you want to throw in with me we can run a trap line this winter.” I thought this is the grand Jack London adventure of all time to be able to run a trap line in Alaska in the winter.
LC: Can you explain what that means?
BL: Yeah, you trap animals. That’s what the Indians and Eskimos and stuff, especially the Indians that’s how they earn their money in the winter. Dog sleds and the whole route, you set traps hither and yon across the Alaskan wilderness and you run your trap line all the time. You’re out there in this frigid weather and the northern lights blazing in the snow and the ice and everything. I thought, “Good Lord, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity,” but of course I couldn’t accept it, because if I didn’t go back to school I’d be drafted. So there was no point to it.
LC: You were just absolutely sure about the draft?
BL: No question. No question.
LC: Why was that? Not everybody was drafted. Why were you certain?
BL: Well, if you weren’t in school you’d lose your student deferment.
LC: But you might have gotten a different number, a number that wouldn’t have made you go.
BL: They didn’t have the lottery then. If you were out of school—and this is when the draft was really picking up in ’67. So if I had not, if I had dropped out of school it would have been a matter of months to get drafted, no question.
LC: You were only twenty-two or something like that?
BL: Yeah.
LC: So you had to say no—that kind of was heart breaking, yes?
BL: Heart break is probably a little bit too strong and to this day I look back and go “What?” Again that other side of the hill syndrome or adventure whatever you want to call it. What the experience of a lifetime? To actually challenge the Alaska winter. Hey, you could be Jack London all over again. What an adventure.
LC: Did you keep up with Alexi after you left?
BL: No, never heard from him again.
LC: You graduated in the spring with your BA in political science in the spring of 1968?
BL: Correct.
LC: Did you pay any attention to, for example, the Tet Offensive in Vietnam?
BL: Oh, yes.
LC: What do you remember about it?
BL: Same reaction that most people had over here. “What the hell is going on? Good lord. This is crazy.” That kind of stuff.
LC: Did you watch television?
BL: Mm-hmm.
LC: Where were you living?
BL: At that time I had moved out of the fraternity house and I was living in a house with three other guys.
LC: You remember some of the television coverage?
BL: Not specifically. I remember the reaction to it. Again, what the hell is going on? I thought we were winning.
LC: That spring of graduation then, you had general plans about continuing to study.
BL: Yes.
LC: You wanted to specialize in economics?
BL: Yes.
LC: Can you just talk again about your growing interest in that field?
BL: Yeah, I had minored in economics after I had changed to political science. I enjoyed my economics courses. It explained a lot of things that I never understood before and I never knew to be understood before. I appreciated the analytical rigor that you have in economics that you don’t have in political science or to some degree you have analytical rigor. It’s not a perfect science, of course. I began to see how economics affects everything, absolutely everything from individual decision making processes to the price of cars and this and that. It was interesting. Then the one professor I mentioned, M.E. Vaughn, taught international economics and was really inspirational. Again he was a very intelligent, extremely intelligent guy, very cordial, yet professional. I guess I like people with wry, witty senses of humor. He was that way also. I thought, “You know, he’s smart guy and I’m liking this economics stuff. I want to learn more.” So that was basically it.

LC: When you started your, this is your post baccalaureate study in econ, you also then began again, really, with the ROTC?

BL: Yes.

LC: This is at really precisely the moment when on campus the political protests concerning the war really gathered steam and getting bigger and bigger.

BL: Yes.

LC: How did you kind of negotiate that divide? You’d gone into the ROTC and yet probably most days you’re walking to class, you’re seeing some kind of anti-war, anti-military displays. How did you negotiate that?

BL: By that time, because of my previous life experiences and hitchhiking around and all this other goofy stuff, I basically developed the ability to establish my own turf and anything that’s external to that, just exists whether I like it or not, or agree with it or not. I certainly didn’t deny anybody the right to express any opinion whatsoever. Although I question whether they were responsible enough to know what they were talking about. By then some of the extreme radicals were obviously just in it for the show. They were, I thought they didn’t give a rat’s butt about people in Vietnam or Americans or anything. They were having fun being sociobrats. “I’m going to ruin your party.” So basically even though it was not pleasant people, kids today they look back in the ’60s and decide from Kent State and all this stuff, “Oh, it was so neat.” It was getting
sicker and sicker. I saw the drug thing start. I saw people go to hell on drugs. I saw
people—I saw little sorority girls who were three years prior were buying this little
sorority—nice kids mind you, but again even though I was in a fraternity I never thought
it was God. It was just a neat place to be with people. I don’t love my fraternity. You’d
see some of these sorority girls, “This is so groovy.” Here they are three years later and
they want to burn the campus down. In the meantime some other bozo is using
revolutionary rhetoric to—there is no other way to put it—to get in their pants. Those
people discredited the anti-war movement.

LC: Was there on the campus a group of true believers who you think actually
had a reasoned opposition to the war or had that kind of receded, too?

BL: Well, there were naive people that actually believed what they were told. I
feel sorry for them because they were exploited. But I certainly don’t say that they didn’t
have the right to express their opinion. They do have the responsibility to know what
they’re talking about. That’s their shortcoming. There were some others. By that time
the whackos had taken over. These are the people who were having fun being snots. It
gave them a license to vent their frustrations and anger. It made them cool where they
weren’t cool before. It was actually very much competitive theatre. If you could cause
more trouble then you’re the dude of the moment.

LC: Were there any actual threats to buildings or to property on the ASU campus
like there were at other universities?

BL: Not that I know of.

LC: What was the feeling inside the ROTC meetings that you attended? Did you
talk to other guys about what was going on, on campus?

BL: Keep in mind that ROTC is, here’s that word again, diverse. There was such
a wide range of people in there. There was people that I didn’t like because I thought
they were stupid. There were people that I kind of hung around with because we were
always the jokesters. We tried to learn everything and everything else, but hey if you can
get a laugh once in a while, why not? Then there were the people that took it too
seriously. So there wasn’t what you’d call a consensus, I don’t think, in the strictest
sense of the word. But most people looked at it as a plague of locusts. This is just what
happens in life sometimes, bizarre, goofy things happen. This is a bizarre goofy thing
that really doesn’t add up. There was very little—I don’t think I ever heard anyone say,
“Yeah, I’d go out there and crack their skulls,” or anything like that. It was just, “Boy,
these guys are nuts.”
LC: Can you describe what training you were getting within the ROTC program?
What were some of the things you did and classroom work that you had to do?
BL: General military science. Of course, all the professors will laugh, “Ha ha ha. Military
science.” We studied fundamentals of tactics and maneuver, military principles,
the professional and ethical requirements for a responsible officer and leader, world
affairs, history of the military, technical things, how to shoot this weapon or that weapon,
how to adjust fire for this, how to adjust fire for that and so forth, basic stuff.
LC: Had you paid much attention to the presidential election in the fall of ’68?
BL: Yes, I did.
LC: Okay. Did you have an opinion about the candidates?
BL: Yes, I did.
LC: Did you work for either of them?
BL: No, I did not.
LC: Can you tell me what your opinions were?
BL: I thought that the Democrats were succumbing to mob hysteria. I wasn’t
sold on the war in Vietnam, but something in my gut told me that it wasn’t quite as bad as
what the critics were saying. I simply didn’t think it was all quite that sick. Even though
I didn’t have Nixon’s picture on my wall I felt that we needed some sort of structure. I
thought that Hubert Humphrey, God bless his sanctimonious soul, but I thought he was
just totally disconnected from reality, totally at the mercy of the popular contagion of
herd behavior and all this sort of stuff. Completely out of his element.
LC: Had you felt the same way about Robert Kennedy?
BL: This will earn me a lot of scorn. I thought Kennedy was a good guy, Robert
Kennedy, but I also thought that he was an opportunist in some respects. Not an
opportunist in an evil sense, but I thought he’d been mesmerized and hypnotized by this
stuff because he was such a proponent. I even knew then our initial involvement in
Vietnam. All of a sudden it gets hard. Well, if it gets hard that doesn’t change the
justification for the policy.
LC: You felt that he was kind of back peddling away from—?
BL: No question because he was one of the strong, strong supporters. He was one of the guys and I knew he had been involved with, “We’re going to get Castro,” and all this sort of stuff. I knew he was a tough guy and I really admired him for going after Jimmy Hoffa and the mob and all that. I mean, he was a tough guy. All of a sudden he’s Mr. Warmth. I thought, “What’s going on here?” It seems to me that again the mentality of the country had lost its moorings. It was now ensnared in these moods and passions, which weren’t based on or connected to reality.

LC: So he wasn’t really the same guy in 1968 as he had been in, say, ’62?
BL: I didn’t think so.
LC: That you felt was a fault?
BL: I’m sorry?
LC: That you felt was a fault, his having kind of appeared to have changed?
BL: Not in a moral sense, but in a grander sense it was almost a worse situation because I saw that—to me, the country was being memorized by this mass hysteria. The mob has unleashed itself and it’s now inventing stuff day in and day out. It just comes up with this. God forbid that you should question the mob. You can’t do that. Rational discussion was gone and here’s all the people now catering politically to the political disaffection in the country regarding Vietnam and civil rights and so on and so forth. But it seemed to me almost like a Ted Mack amateur hour contest where you’re trying to get the most applause. If you’re going to have a leader you’ve got to have someone that stands up and says, “Folks this is the way it is. This is the way we can do it, how we can do it, and I’m not going to promise you everything because you can’t do that, because it’s not real.” They were peddling too much pie in the sky. That, while I couldn’t articulate why, and explain why, that sent off red lights in my mind. Something’s wrong here. This is just song and dance.

LC: Do you remember either the King or the Kennedy assassination in 1968?
BL: Both.
LC: Can you tell me about your recollections of Reverend King’s assassination?
BL: Yeah, I was really upset. I was really, really and remain so to this day. I didn’t agree with King on Vietnam at all ‘cause I don’t think he—of course, I disagree
with him more now than I did then. I didn’t know. But keeping in mind that I was
brought up in a town with a lot of black people, guys on my team were black. We didn’t
look at it as, “Oh, isn’t this nice? We accept diversity.” If you would have said that to
us, we would have wondered what the hell you were talking about. “You’re white. I’m
black. So what? We’re on the same team. That’s it.” We hung around in summer. We
went over to each other’s houses. I mean, it wasn’t like it was in Alabama or anything
like that. I had hitchhiked through the South in ’65. I had seen the whites only signs. I
had heard the way people talked. Then halfway through the South I realized that I was
possibly at risk because my hair was shaggy. I had a beard. That was my Gordon
Lightfoot period. It looked rather Bohemian and I thought, “Wait a minute, they kill
people down here for voting registration and stuff like that.” So I took the matter of
the—I didn’t call it racial discrimination. I called it idiocy. I took the idiocy
intellectually and emotionally, personally. I still do. It’s grossly offends me. I will make
no excuses for black people who won’t work. All I ask is they don’t starve to death in
my front yard, but I agreed with what King said. Our children should be judged on their
merits. So I thought King offered a tremendous voice of moral and rational reason. It
was all quite American. It was red, white, and blue. What did he say? All men are
created equal. What’s hard to understand about that? So aside from all the stuff I knew
was going to erupt because of that I thought we’d lost a voice of reason. We’d lost a
voice of moral restraint. The forces of darkness had killed the forces of light and all that
kind of stuff. It was terrible, horrible. When Kennedy was shot, I was sad for his family,
but I didn’t feel as badly as I did about King.

LC: Can you compare the two and say why you felt the greater loss around
King’s assassination?

BL: Because King was black and he could say things that Kennedy could not.
King, even though the competition between himself and the militants, he was becoming a
little bit more outspoken. But King’s words were this is non-violent. Don’t kill people.
It’s not just killing people, it’s unleashing the forces of madness and idiocy. It’s just a
bloody tragedy that he was killed. Again, he could say things because he was black.
Kennedy could get up there and say, “No, no, no don’t burn down Detroit.” The guy
would say, “To hell with you, whitey.” King could say things and people would go,
“Wait a minute. Martin told us not to do that. It’s not right.” It’s not right not only because it bothers white people, but people get hurt. You’re throwing more gas on the flames of idiocy. Violence begets violence and all that sort of stuff. So that was tremendous logic.

LC: What were your initial impressions of the Nixon administration? Do you remember, committed to law and order and all that stuff?

BL: Positive. I mean, again it wasn’t an emotional fascination, but I thought somebody’s got to do this. We have to have some law and order.

LC: Did you believe he could do it or would do it?

BL: Say again.

LC: Did he have the credibility with you to actually give policy backing to his claims that he would—?

BL: I thought so at the time, yeah.

LC: To control the cities?

BL: I thought so at the time.

LC: Did you think much about his policies on Vietnam?

BL: No. I knew by ’69 he started pulling troops out. Beyond that I really didn’t know. I didn’t know all the intricacies of it at all.

LC: You completed your ROTC when?

BL: June 1970.

LC: You did not take a degree at that time, is that right?

BL: That’s correct.

LC: You instead went actually into the military at this point, yes?

BL: Not until November.

LC: Okay, November. What did you do in between?

BL: I worked on a tuna boat.

LC: I knew it had to be something like that. Whereabouts?

BL: Everywhere from Astoria, Oregon, to Mexico.

LC: Where did you sail out of?

BL: Got the job in Astoria, Oregon.

LC: How did you hook that up?
BL: When I had hitchhiked back from my 1969 summer camp at Ft. Lewis for ROTC, I hitchhiked back to Arizona, pocketed my travel money, he-he. I was going down the north coast of California. Again, I wanted to see that. I had never seen that before. I got a ride from this guy who was a very funny and witty guy. We hit it off conversationally. “Let’s go eat lunch and have a couple beers.” We talked some more. He was probably in his mid-thirties. Found out he was a tuna fisherman. I guess I am ashamed to say we drank a lot that afternoon. He didn’t drive recklessly, but he was driving drunk. We just had this prolonged alcoholic discussion all down the coast to northern Arizona about how people are stupid. He invited me to his house to see his wife and kid. So I ate dinner there. He had this house on stilts over at Bodega Bay. You could open the top of this Dutch door and see the waves coming in beneath your feet. There was this happy Bohemian guy, very intelligent, very eloquent, articulate. There was no formal education whatsoever. So he offered me a job on his tuna boat right there. I said, “No, I’ve got to go back to school.” Anyhow after I got out the following year I said, “I’m going to go back up there and see if I can find him.” I eventually did run into him several times, but I got a job on another boat before I got on his boat.

LC: Did you have a good time that summer?
BL: Very interesting.
LC: What about it appealed to you?
BL: Well, I hate to sound like I’m eleven years old again, but the adventure.
LC: That’s a real thing.
BL: It was a small boat. It wasn’t one of these big things. A thirty-four-foot boat so you’re out there sixty miles offshore. Maybe the perverse cousin of the adventure appeal is the adrenaline thing. I don’t know. It was very demanding. It was sometimes very scary, always interesting. You meet all kinds of interesting people, some disgusting people. I think half, well not half. A third of the tuna boat fleet at that time was drug heads and I’m not big on drugs. There was a lot of that going around, but every other day there was something else. You’d see sharks. You’d see dolphins. We buzzed a Russian troller about twenty-five miles off the California coast and they didn’t wave.
LC: Really?
BL: No.
LC: By buzzed them what do you mean?

BL: We just sailed around them, did a circle around them.

LC: I take it you think they weren’t really trolling for fish.

BL: Yeah, they were.

LC: Oh, they were?

BL: At that time, no, they weren’t trolling. They went from one place to another putting nets out. We actually didn’t buzz around them. We went back and forth and they did not wave. We could see their faces and they just looked at us. There was a hammer and a sickle right on their funnel. I thought, “Wow, there really is such a thing.” You just meet all kinds of interesting people. Some rambunctious adventures, guys getting thrown in jail, bailing them out and all this sort of stuff. Crazy stuff.

LC: You knew that at the end of the summer, well, really into the fall, you were going to be reporting to Ft. Benning?

BL: Yes.

LC: You said, though, that you had been to Ft. Lewis over one summer. Do you remember when that was?

BL: Yeah, 1969. We did our six, eight weeks of basic training for ROTC guys, I guess you’d say, which is roughly akin to basic training for Army guys.

LC: Right. How did you do in that basic training kind of environment?

BL: Not too badly. I did better on my peer ratings than I did with my platoon evaluator who was a pretty strait-laced guy. He and I were just on different frequencies. I did all right.

LC: The discipline at this point was something that you were getting accustomed to, the military discipline?

BL: Yeah, I didn’t know the ins and outs. I’d never been one to pay attention to those sort of things. A couple times I got caught doing the wrong thing or not doing the right thing and I’d get chewed out. I thought, “Okay. That’s to be expected. I haven’t paid attention and that’s what happens when you don’t.”

LC: That was just kind of the price you paid for thinking your own thoughts or whatever?
BL: Yeah. Well, not paying attention. I knew I should learn this stuff. I just—well, I’ll get to it later. The first day I was at Ft. Benning we were in our barracks and this major walks in and I said, “Hello, sir.” He goes, “What? Do you know what you do when an officer walks in the barracks?” “No, sir.” “You yell ‘Attention!’” Okay. Now I know. He chewed me out pretty good. I just simply didn’t know. I wasn’t big on the rules of formality. I’m not saying you shouldn’t know them, but I just had to pay attention.

LC: Your posting, I guess, at Ft. Benning was for what purpose?

BL: Infantry officer basic.

LC: Can you describe a typical day at Ft. Benning? What were you doing?

BL: Can we resume in about five minutes?

LC: Okay. Bill you had wanted to say something in addition to your earlier remarks about Dr. King.

BL: Yeah. The thing that bothered me at that time and I couldn’t articulate it at the time, but again his was the voice of reason. There’s a line from—normally he’s considered or remembered as being a painter, but Francisco Goya said that the sleep of reason brings forth monsters. King’s assassination was silencing the voice of reason. Anyone that appreciates the lack of violence and insanity and those are words from many people, but until you’ve seen people physically hurt, I mean really hurt, and you see the toxic bi-product of this madness. You can’t have the fear of that type of mass contagion and hysteria and irrationality that all people should have. When King was assassinated I felt this ominous thing come over me, like this is bad. Not only for the obvious reasons for the individual and his family and all these other people are so broken hearted and it’s so tragic in its own right, but the sleep of reason, if you don’t have reason, if you succumb to the passions and the rages and the insanities of all this, people get hurt. That really bothered me then. Even then I thought this is really bad.

LC: What did you think would occur in terms of people becoming hurt?

BL: I didn’t know. I mean, I already know that people got beat up.

LC: There were riots soon thereafter.

BL: All this sort of stuff and there was all this antagonism. You’d hear stories about, “We got this hippie and cut his hair off.” Well, hell, I knew some hippies and I
really wasn’t one, but some of them were pretty neat people. I thought this us-against-
them tribal idiocy is madness. Madness produces passion, rages and unleashed
animalistic tendencies in humans and people get hurt. Maybe you only get punched in
the face, but if you’ve been punched in the face you know it’s not fun. You might get
your teeth knocked out. It’s not fun.

LC: Someone becomes in a way the target of the passions.
BL: Mm-hmm. It’s usually the complete irrationality. Someone sees someone
else as the embodiment of a perceived evil so they attack them, stuff that “Bull” Conner
was doing in the south with black people. It was just maniacal. That’s ugly. Until
you’ve seen the ugliness in the human soul, you’ve really seen it, you don’t know how
scary that is, to me anyhow.

LC: When was the first time you remember seeing that kind of ugliness?
BL: When I was hitchhiking around the country.
LC: In the South?
BL: Well, yeah in the South, but you’d hear sociopaths and creeps and weirdoes
everywhere. It’s not like they abound in the United States. That’s the human condition.
If you go to Latvia, if you go to Nigeria, if you go to Indonesia you’re going to see the
same thing because this is Bill’s ten percent rule. When God or Buddha or whatever
omnipotent power there is made this cosmos and this earth with these people what he did
is he allotted each population for each race, each tribe, whatever you want to call it, ten
percent of your people, or maybe fifteen are going to be raving idiots that do nothing but
cause trouble. You’re going to have to learn how to deal with them. I had seen dark
spooky, scary things before and the dark side of the human soul and all this kind of crap.
That’s scary stuff and people are playing with fire and they don’t know it. That’s what
bothered me about the later half of the ‘60s. You’re unleashing this beast of irrational
vengeance. It’s bad.

LC: You saw King as one of the people who could or did attempt to restrain
some of that?
BL: Absolutely. No question about it. He was the voice of reason. He was a
voice of morality. I don’t care at all. People always say, “Well, he was fooling around
with his wife.” I don’t care. Just as I don’t care if Thomas Jefferson had a child by a
black slave. By the way, no one’s ever proven that for a fact. It’s possible, but it’s not proven. The question here is what he said and what he said was good. Again, separate from the Vietnam stuff. He had no idea what he was talking about with Vietnam. But what he said about this country was he was the voice of positive reason. By God, we needed it. Even now, too.

LC: Did you see anyone who could kind of step in and take that mantle?
BL: No.
LC: Either within the black community or more broadly?
BL: No.
LC: Why do you think that is?
BL: That’s a good question. You could probably get a doctoral dissertation on that.

LC: Probably, yeah.
BL: You know, just the fortuitous events of the times, and he was there and many, many other things. If he had been short with a squeaky voice he may not have been as photogenic. Of course, that’s when television was bringing this into the American living room. He had this dignity to him and this dramatic voice, and his means of expressing himself. All those things, which underscores the fact that life is oftentimes nothing more than a collection of circumstances. If they’re good ones you better thank God they’ve assembled themselves. That’s a good question. Of course, his assassination probably destroyed to a certain extent the mystique that a voice of reason and morality could prevail. After all, they killed King and what did it get him? I don’t know.

LC: Just following this for a minute. Did you watch developments with James Earl Ray as in later years he was found to have been the assassin?
BL: Yeah, I paid a little bit of attention to that. I think we’ve got a hell of a lot of people in this country who can imagine reality and then walk into that reality and pretend it’s true. I’m sorry. I don’t buy any of it. I guess Martin Luther King’s son even thought that Ray was innocent.

LC: Yes, I think he was in the forefront of asking for a new trial, anyway.
BL: I don’t know the evidence. I express a willingness to examine that evidence before making a final opinion. But as I sit here right now I think, again, we’ve got people
here that can imagine reality and just walk right in that imagined room and play the role. They don’t know the truth from fantasy. As far as I can see, Lee Harvey Oswald killed Kennedy. There was no conspiracy. James Earl Ray killed King. There was no conspiracy. Certainly not the United States government. That’s nonsense.

LC: Let’s go to Ft. Benning, then, in the late 1970. I’d ask you about some of the routine. Were you doing a lot of bookwork during that officer basic?

BL: No.

LC: Okay. What were you doing?

BL: It was in the field training.

LC: Can you describe?

BL: We had some classroom stuff, but it was mostly in the field training. Sit in bleachers with little chalkboards. “This is this. This is that. Here’s how you do this. Here’s how you do that. Go do it.” At Ft. Benning there was quite a bit of—there was more classroom time. There was a lot of field time, as well.

LC: You were actually learning how to command, yes?

BL: Yeah, learning how to run an infantry platoon.

LC: Go ahead.

BL: Everything from finances to inspections, all kinds of paperwork, maintenance, accountability, calling in mortars, calling in artillery, calling in TAC air (tactical air support), doing cordon search missions, ambushes, all kinds, everything.

LC: Were you qualified on weapons at this point?

BL: Everybody did. There wasn’t any—I can’t remember what, marksman, expert, sharpshooter. I can’t remember what the middle one is or even the top one anymore, but I qualified on the M-14 at Ft. Lewis as the middle one. Not the lowest and not the highest. After that I don’t remember having qualification, but we did have to zero in M-16s at Ft. Benning. We fired LAWs (light antitank weapon) and all this other stuff.

LC: How long did this course last?

BL: Three months.

LC: Were there any particular incidents during your time there that you remember, something about a tequila contest, I think?

BL: I shouldn’t even have mentioned that.
LC: Well, we can leave it aside if you’d like.

BL: All it was, one Saturday—of course, this in the new modern Army. So they gave weekends off. So we actually got off at noon on Saturday. We were sitting in one of these little bars. It wasn’t the main officers’ club. It was just Olson Hall Bar. Olson Hall was a BOQ, a bachelor’s officer quarters. They had a little bar there, which was only a little bit bigger than a two-car garage. So we got off on Saturdays. This other guy in my company was sitting there having a couple beers and talking. “So you’re from Arizona?” “Yeah.” “I went to school there.” He said, “You know that tequila stuff out there right?” “Oh, yeah.” He said, “What’s that like?” I said, “God, you don’t want to know.” He said, “Really? Why?” I said, “Well, it’s hallucinogenic. It’s crazy.” He said, “Really?” “Go ahead and try some.” So one thing led to another, about six hours later after—everyone was compelled as you walked into Olson Hall Bar you had to drink tequila or you left. I was a second lieutenant at the time. There was captains walking in there and some captains and first lieutenants from my company. I knew them well enough that I could joke around with them. I said, “Captain, I’m sorry. You either drink tequila or you’re out of here.” It was just outrageously funny. We were standing on the bar. We were going around shaking people down saying, “You either”—there was two bar maids there. There was Irma, a German girl, really a nice lady, just a wonderful girl. She was the main bar maid and then there was—I can’t remember her name—an Ethiopian who was married to an American who was the bar maid. We went in there and shook people down and said, “You either tip Irma or what’s her face or we’ll kick your butt,” jokingly. We emptied all the tequila, finished all the tequila in the whole bar, just outrageously raucous. I blacked out. I woke up the next morning and I thought, “Good Lord, what did I do?” I went with this other guy to the main officers’ club. We were going to have breakfast. He runs across a guy that he knew from another company, who I’d never seen before in my life. They were chit chatting around and this other guy says, “God, I hear they really tore up Olson Hall last night.” I thought, “Good God, I’m in trouble now man.” I asked him, “How do you know? Were you there?” He said, “No, but I heard about it.” He said, “It was really crazy I guess. Guys jumping all over tables and standing on the bar, craziness.” “Really?” “Yeah.” So on the way back from there it was about one or two o’clock and I thought, “I might as well see what kind of trouble I’m
So I stuck my head in the door of the bar there and there was Irma getting ready to open up the bar. I said, “Hey, Irma, I’m sorry.” She said, “Don’t worry. Don’t worry.” She said, “You wouldn’t believe how many tips we got last night.” I said, “Really? We didn’t cause any trouble? Nobody got mad or”—because I blacked out. I do that on tequila. I am still ambulatory, but I’m gone somewhere. She said, “No, there was no trouble, no nothing,” or anything like that. She said, “What a good time you all had and everything. Everybody was laughing and having fun. Thanks for all the tips. We made so much money last night.” So far so good. The next morning, Monday at company formation our executive officer Captain Kreutz, he had been in Vietnam. He was a helicopter pilot over there. So you’re standing in formation and they’re reading all this stuff. You know, “We’re going to do this today, we’re going to do that today.” A couple of guys had to go to personnel and so forth and so on. Then he says, “Okay. I’m going to dismiss you, but after you’re dismissed Lieutenant Laurie I want you up here front and center.” I thought, “Good God, this is it. They’re going to call me into company headquarters and they’re going to grill me. “You call that acting like an officer?” and this and that and everything else. I really thought I was in trouble. Nothing was damaged or broken that I knew of, there were no fights, but excessively rambunctious. But I went up there and I said, “Lieutenant Laurie reporting as requested, sir.” He’s sitting there writing on his clipboard. He looks at me, He says, “Laurie,” he says, “You almost got me divorced. If you ever get me drinking tequila again, I’m going to get you.” He said, “You’re crazy enough to be a helicopter pilot, now get the hell out of here.” That was the end of that. It was all in good fun.

LC: You’re crazy enough to be a helicopter pilot, huh?
BL: Yeah.
LC: You weren’t looking at that though? That wasn’t something you wanted to do, was it?
BL: I couldn’t. A, I didn’t want to stay in for the extra time. B, at that time, they were trying to find reasons to get people out of the Army.
LC: Yeah, that’s right.
BL: C, I need corrective lenses, so you can’t fly.
LC: Well, you were safe, then, from that anyway. You were at Benning for three
months?
BL: Yes.
LC: At what point did you find out that you were going to go onto another
training assignment?
BL: I was programmed for the first five months. I knew I was going to Benning.
I knew I was going to tactical, combat tactical intelligence school at Ft. Holabird and
after that I didn’t know where I was going, but I was to find out while I was at Benning.
That was Vietnamese language school.
LC: What was behind those assignments? Had you done very well on tests?
What had slotted you for combat intel?
BL: I was in the intelligence branch. Every intel guy has to take a combat branch
and I took infantry.
LC: At what point—go ahead.
BL: So after that you go to your branch, you go for basic combat tactical
intelligence, which is essentially oriented around serving as a district advisor in Vietnam,
the whole thing. Much of it involved combat.
LC: That training lasted how long?
BL: That was about two months.
LC: Who were your instructors?
BL: I can’t remember any of them. I don’t remember their names.
LC: They were people who had been over in Vietnam?
BL: Most of them, yeah.
LC: What was the content of the course?
BL: Which one? Benning or—
LC: Well, actually Holabird? This would be combat tactical intelligence?
BL: Just a brief overview of fundamental, military principles, mass maneuver, so
forth and so on, shock and surprise, economy of force. Then this is the stuff you have to
find out about using these means. Basically every and all means you have available
whether it’s photo interpretation, photos where there was running agents, whether it was
interviewing POWs (prisoners of war), defectors, and you can actually go through
scenarios where these guys would pose as a POW and this and that. You’d have to interview them. You’d have to set up an intelligence collection plan. You’d have to establish the essential, EEIs, essential elements of intelligence. That being that what you need to know about the situation you are in, whatever situation it may be. Of course, it changes if you’re at a strategic level or whether you’re in the district of Vietnam or Guatemala. There’s different essential elements of intelligence you need to have. So basically what it tried to do was teach you how to go to Vietnam, and find out what you needed to find out to provide to the operational people to achieve stated objectives in your district.

LC: Were you given detailed information about the current situation in Vietnam at this stage?

BL: Not in the formal classes, but you picked up an awful lot from many of the instructors who had been there, especially if you pulled them aside on coffee breaks. “Hey, Captain, what about this?” Or da-da-da-da-da. You’d get some pretty interesting stuff.

LC: What kinds of things were you finding out then sort of on the side?

BL: In general that what was being reported in the United States was not the entire picture. The other thing that amazed me a bit about Ft. Benning—keep in mind Ft. Benning is considered Rangers, Airborne, snake eaters. This is the real grunts, the animals and this and that, but there was more intelligent conversations in our classrooms and stuff, especially when you pull instructors aside. The whole course was not dedicated to Vietnam, of course, but during coffee breaks and what not you’d say, “Hey, Captain. What about this? What about that?” Even during the classes it dawned on me that there was more rational reasoned discussion with give and take opposing views than on a college campus, and it was more intelligent. Of course, everybody at that time, the prevailing view was that the military was all a bunch of troglodytes with an IQ of fifty. They kill people and they drool and they pick their nose, a bunch of scum. I remember sitting there in class and thinking, “This is the way college should have been.”

LC: Really?

BL: Yeah. Because it was based on rational interpretation of the information at hand and so forth and so on. There were people in the military that said, “You know, we
really shouldn’t have gone there and this and that.” You’d get a reasoned discussion
without this self-indulgent arrogance of “I know more than everyone else.”
LC: Were you studying either at Benning or Holabird particular engagements that
had occurred in Vietnam? Did you actually—?
BL: Not particular ones, but we did cordon and search up field training exercises
and things like that, which was replicated, of course, of what was done in Vietnam.
LC: So the sort of tactics that you were learning?
BL: Mm-hmm.
LC: But you weren’t necessarily studying, for example, Ap Bac or particular
battles?
BL: No.
LC: What role did they tell you the helicopter was playing in the war in Vietnam?
BL: I don’t think they actually told us because it was very, very evident. What’s
that cliché number 387? Ubiquitous symbol of the Vietnam War was a helicopter, and
you just knew that. You just knew. There was different—at Ft. Benning, of course, you
hear about all these other kinds of helicopters that they didn’t televise, the Chinooks and
all these others. You start hearing about Cobras. They’ve got Cobras now and this and
that. You knew it was a primary element of the entire package.
LC: The tactical intelligence package that you were learning about, can you
describe some of what you were taught in terms of, for example, POW de-brief? Were
there standard tactics that are just standard to any war or were there particular things that
you learned?
BL: Again, it was very intelligent instruction. There was nothing—they didn’t
even say anything about torture. I don’t know if it was because of the Calley and My Lai
incident, but at both Benning and Holabird we were told that you do not follow an illegal
order. An illegal order was one that violates the Hague or Geneva Convention on
treatment of civilians or POWs. If you follow an illegal order, you follow at your own
peril. You are obligated, we’re telling you, you are obligated to refuse to follow an
illegal order. There was nothing about torture or anything like that. As far as POW
interrogations there was great emphasis on trying to read the individuals psycho type,
what makes him tick or her tick. Why are they doing what they are doing? Where do
they come from? Really get inside their head and trying to appeal to them as a fellow human being, one way, shape, form, or another. Or even say, “Hey look, you’re a POW. Your career as a soldier is over. This can be very miserable for you because we can throw you in one of those solitary confinement things and you’re going to get rotten food. There’s nothing else to be gained. You’ve done your job, but we just need to know some of this stuff to corroborate some of the other things we know. But if you want to be stupid about it, well, fine we’ll just put you in a closet and forget about you,” but no torture or anything like that. You could be stern and harsh. There was nothing about hook them up with a telephone generator. We were told you don’t do that. We were also told that not only—even the guys who were instructors you could tell they weren’t saying it because it was a form of curriculum they were saying it because they personally subscribed to it. This is basically immoral while acknowledging in a combat situation if you have an immediate POW and you need immediate information they acknowledge that the unpleasant situation may arise where you probably can get information by slapping the hell out of somebody or threatening to kill them. This is an ugly part of it. There’s no getting around it. But in a controlled situation not only is torture immoral, but it’s stupid because they give you wrong information. If you can get into their head and find out who they are and what makes them tick and let them know a little bit about you, eventually they’ll spill their guts. They’ll tell you what you need to know, which is the way it worked in Vietnam.

LC: Now what information did you get about ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam)?

BL: Heard all kinds of stuff. I heard that they were hopeless. I heard they were very good. I heard they were okay. I heard enough to know that it wasn’t like the impression that formed. The media didn’t even tell you anything, but they let impressions form like scum on pond water. They never said that all ARVN was not crummy. That became the prevailing myth. But I heard from enough people that I realized it simply wasn’t true. Some were good, some were bad, and some were just okay. They’re coming along. They’re getting better, mixed bag.
LC: What did you hear about organization within ARVN and supply and leadership? Did you get information about those kinds of specific areas that would be important to you?

BL: No, nothing at all. By the way in your questionnaire one of the questions was, “Was your overall military training adequate?” I think I said, something to the effect of, “Yes, it was.” It was in a technical sense, but nothing, absolutely nothing in this country, military included—and the military is to be faulted for it—told you what Vietnam was about. It just didn’t. You’d get bits and pieces. If you tried to learn, you’d get bits and pieces. It would be like the same thing as getting pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, but you don’t have the picture on the box. You don’t even know how big the puzzle is or what it’s supposed to be about. You just get little snippets of reality here and there and so forth. So in that respect the American military was grossly deficient. There was no specific training for Vietnam and the kind of situations you would find yourself in, nothing at all.

LC: On the other hand, though, you felt that this sort of experience at Benning and Holabird was like a seminar that you ought to have had as a college student or even a graduate student.

BL: In it’s entirety, yes. That’s because of the sum of, not the course content or the instruction. It was the cumulative effect of your random discussions that you’d have with your instructors and what they called the lane graders on field training exercises. You’re out doing ambushes. You’re out rolling around in the back of Ft. Lewis doing sweeps and all this sort of stuff. You have lunchtime and you’re sitting around there out in the boonies. You talk to your lane grader, who is the guy that watches, observes and comments. “Captain, where were you in Vietnam?” You’d hear all these things. Together they’d form a picture in your mind. But again, it was not part of any one discreet formal block of instruction.

LC: So word of mouth and informal hook-ups were how you were getting the best information?

BL: Right. But again, during discussions as brief as they were in the classroom you’ve got 120, 150 guys out there students in these big auditorium classrooms.

LC: Sure.
BL: Sometimes students would have questions about Vietnam or one of the instructors would make a point about, “Here’s how this applies in Vietnam.” They’d run off on a little tangent here and there. You couldn’t help but contrast the atmosphere, the tolerated reasoned discussion and debate as opposed to the nonsense in college. It was just absolute idiocy. This flaming radicalism where people are basically getting their thrills acting a role that they drew up in their mind. It was very non-real.

LC: If you were re-designing the courses that you were taking at Benning and Holabird, not to talk about Ft. Bliss yet. How would you structure in some of that informal exchange of information that you thought was most valuable? How would you advise the Army to change its instruction?

BL: I would—all the military, and this should have been done from 1960 on. People say, “Well, they didn’t know enough then.” That’s nonsense. You could have known then. Anyone that’s going to Vietnam, I don’t care if you do it at Travis, I don’t care if you do it at Hawaii, wherever. You’re going to sit down two weeks minimum, maybe three weeks. This is going to be in your face. Here’s what we’re here for. Here’s why this is extremely difficult. Here is why we demand the utmost of you. Here is why we’ll throw your ass in Leavenworth or Article 15 you to death or fine you a zillion dollars if you don’t conduct yourself in an appropriate manner. This is of utmost importance and your behavior may not get you killed, your misbehavior, but it might get other people killed. But there was nothing. You got this little card with ten rules on how to behave in Vietnam. People say, “Well, I was in Vietnam,” and you talk to them for ten minutes and you realize you stood on Vietnamese soil, but you really weren’t in Vietnam because you don’t know what in the hell was going on. People make up, “By golly, those villagers knew where the booby traps were.” Yeah, well then why did they get their legs blown off with the booby traps? Some places that applied and some places it didn’t. There should have been some sort of pre-Vietnam preparatory conditioning seminar and it should have been harsh and it should have been demanding and no-nonsense. None of this pro forma, “Well, you do this and you do that.” It should have been—the intensity of it or the conviction of it should have been a manifestation of the conviction of the United States government, which existed in an administrative sense. There was no emotion, no
conviction, no passion. That’s what was demanded. That was demanded in Vietnam.

They didn’t even see that.

LC: What were you told about why the United States was there?

BL: I guess all this stuff about communist expansion, domino theory.

LC: Did you believe that at the time?

BL: Halfway, yes. Because some of the courses I had taken at ASU on government and politics in Southeast Asia and stuff it was quite evident there was a smoldering communist revolution attempt in Malaya, the Philippines, and all this stuff. It’s obviously not a stable area. There was obviously, of course, if you hadn’t taken these courses you wouldn’t know that. You wouldn’t even see it on CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) or Dan Rather couldn’t be bothered to tell you about it. There was an unstable area and there was definitely communist spots of insurgencies and they did seem to be in an expansionist mode. So I didn’t believe for minute, people say, “We’ve got to fight them here or we’re going to fight them in California.” I didn’t believe for a minute and logic just dictates that you have to recognize that Ho Chi Minh is not going to land sampans on Long Beach. That’s not going to happen. So that didn’t bother me in the slightest. In terms of expansionism and all that sort of stuff, all you had to do was look at a map, look at Eastern Europe. All the communist countries aside from Cuba were contiguous. Are they not dominoes? The burden of proof falls on those who deride and ridicule the domino theory. So, yeah, I did basically subscribe to its credibility.

LC: Okay, but there was nothing for you intellectually or emotionally to underpin U.S. involvement other than the explanation that if Vietnam goes, Thailand will be next, and that kind of thing.

BL: Could be. It wasn’t definite. I didn’t think it was definite. I thought it was enough of a possibility that would justify what we were trying to do. That, I guess, in retrospect, was one of the surprises of the whole thing was the conviction I developed based on what I experienced over there. Simply put, there were some wonderful, fascinating, decent, intelligent, honorable, moral people who had a passion for keeping the idiotic scourge of stupid Hanoi communism out of their country. It was a personal offense that their country shouldn’t be polluted by such mindless idiocy and such non-
Vietnamese imported political ideology. That has never, to this day, has ever been portrayed here in this country.

LC: Even in the era of Vietnamization, which is when you were going through your training, you didn’t get a sense that South Vietnam and its leaders had a political purpose at heart? Were they sort of ghosts in the whole matrix of U.S. involvement in Vietnam?

BL: I kind of lost that.

LC: I was thinking about what you knew about South Vietnamese leadership and the purposes of South Vietnamese government and participating in its own defense? Did you know much about—?

BL: Not really. You heard all this stuff about they were corrupt. But reason tells you that you cannot generalize any country or any group. You can’t say all blacks are this or all blacks are that. You can’t say all hippies are this or all hippies are that.

LC: Right.

BL: I can remember as a kid you’d have small town corruption in our hometown and somebody gets thrown out rather ignominiously. You knew there were corrupt people in government. So obviously there was some corruption. But not all of any one group are all one way. I just never have been able to accept that. So there was sort of a filter in my brain that said “Well, maybe it’s kind of crummy, but it’s not the nefarious band of evil lechers and corruptocrats that are leering and drooling and following this master plan and cackling away as their money piles up.” That’s the reverse image of the anti-Nazi propaganda, the stereotypical caricatures of the enemy and everything. I figured it was probably kind of crummy, but beyond that I didn’t know. There was nothing here to let you know. There was no news coverage whatsoever to speak of—you can document this—on the elections, which were the most free elections that have ever been held anywhere in Southeast Asia to that point in time and since then. There was nothing about any of that stuff. There was nothing about the people that didn’t like Thieu. He was just there and basically they almost blame the Americans for Theiu’s presence. There were many, many Vietnamese who have all the attributes that are ascribed typically only to Ho Chi Minh or the VC (Viet Cong). They loved their country. These guys loved their country and women in the civil service and stuff like that, they
were truly personally motivated to help their country withstand the diabolical nonsense of communism.

LC: You just didn’t know any of that during training?
BL: No, that was never portrayed over here. It’s an example of historicide. They killed the South Vietnamese, decent South Vietnamese, by not even portraying them. They’ve been eliminated from history.

LC: Did you say historicide?
BL: Yeah.

LC: Do you feel now that during this period of training before you begin your actual language training, do you feel now that you just weren’t told the right things?
BL: Absolutely, by anybody. Nixon, Fonda, and the whole spectrum. Nobody was telling me what I came to think would be important to know, nobody. The whole information system broke down. News media was dysfunctional. They were just hopeless.

LC: Yet Vietnam was on all the time?
BL: And nobody learned anything.

LC: I remember it being on every night.
BL: That’s the paradox. Look at it this way, here’s an analogy. Let’s say that you watch fifty-seven thoracic—I think I pronounced that correctly—abdominal surgeries. You watch fifty-seven of them, what do you know about surgery?

LC: Not a lot.
BL: What do you know about whatever ailment? You don’t even know what ailments they had.

LC: Or anything about the recovery process.
BL: Exactly. That’s the same analogy. So basically and you’ll get all these people who say, “Oh, no, you look and the press follows public opinion. No the press showed this and the press showed that.” The acid test to this whole thing is the collective memory of the country right now. The collective memory of this country right now and even then was the same fifteen-minute film clip which ipso-facto made the whole thing boring because we’ve seen this before. What’s happening? Nothing’s happening.
Haven’t we done anything? They didn’t learn squat, anything from the news media. The ironic thing is the news media thinks they actually told it just the way it was.

LC: Also there by repeating information that really wasn’t illuminating, maybe creating fatigue, as well, within the country?

BL: No question, no question. Not only was Vietnam fatigued and boredom, blended with a little bit of boredom because it was the same film clip. “I saw this before.” There was nothing. There was nothing about land reform. There was nothing about the collapse of the VC infrastructure after 1968. There was nothing—you could have had some tremendous human-interest stories of some of these former NVA (North Vietnamese Army), and former VC, the Chieu Hoi and there were Kit Carsons. These are amazing people, just amazing people. They had signed their death warrant. They hated it with a passion that’s hard for people to imagine. Here’s somebody that where the commie’s think, “Well, it got too tough for him. He quit.” No he quit because he realized that the communists were pimps that were whoring nationalism. They betrayed him and lied to him. Some of these guys were really, no other word in mind, they were totally ruthless. “Kill them all.” I’m not an advocate for unnecessary barbarianism, but there’s still the human interest around some of these people because they had again signed their death warrant. You could Chieu Hoi and then go blend in with the woodwork. But if you ratted, if you bore arms against your former comrades, you were on the list and you were going to get it. They knew that. There’s not many people in this country would have whatever it takes to stand up and I say, “All right, I’ve had it. It’s you or me.” That’s amazing.

LC: Let’s take a break for a second. Well, Bill, why do you think the press in subsequent years has loved itself very much for its performance in Vietnam, in your opinion missed the boat in terms of what the stories were?

BL: That’s probably two or three books in and of itself because the American public and to a certain extent America, it’s somewhat an analogous situation to the Vietnamese peasants at the time in that they didn’t know what was happening to them and especially what was around the corner. They didn’t know where this was leading and how it was working. They didn’t know the NLF (National Liberation Front) was lying to them. The Americans and the South Vietnamese did a rotten job of telling the truth.
They were the same as Latvian peasants in a 15th century plague. You don’t know what’s causing your problems, but it’s miasmas, it’s humors. It’s all this bizarre stuff. The United States has undergone profound changes in the last fifty years and those changes were well under way into the ‘50s. One of which was we changed to a different type of society. I know this is kind of convoluted, but I’ll try and tie it together at the end. You had in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, are you familiar with that?

LC: Yes.

BL: You had more and more people who were peering in or aspiring to self-actualization. You lose—there’s a degree of humility that’s lost when you become yuppies and all that stuff. Previous newsmen were more committed to get the facts, get the truth. You had these young, sometimes very, very arrogant people going to Vietnam. They were smug and they were impressed with themselves. Underneath it all I think they realized that not only that they could become a story, “I can become a Delphic oracle and get paid for it.” Peter Arnett has said that. “I was motivated by the prestige that my cohorts Neil Sheehan and”—I can’t remember his name.

LC: Halberstam.

BL: David Halberstam. “And I set my goals on that.” So they became part of this. They became the story, the Delphic oracles, the grand sears, the wise men. There’s an ego thing involved there. There’s definitely a money thing involved. Once it became popular to sell that story, it’s like a one-trick pony. “Hey, this works. I can sell it.” Newsmen have said, “You know what? The networks wanted blood, they wanted combat. They wanted gore. They wanted action because that’s what sells. They don’t want to know about the Vietnamese. They don’t want to know about political and economic developments or social developments. They don’t want to know this stuff.” Neil Postman’s Amusing Ourselves to Death and I can’t remember his name wrote a book called, News from Nowhere. It’s news media sells news like McDonald’s sells hamburgers. So you have to have your Jack-in-the-Box secret sauce to get those viewers so you can raise your advertising rates. Ultimately, although they proved quite adept at deluding themselves, the media was not interested in the truth about Vietnam. It realized if only subliminally that you can sell this voyeuristic, sadistic filth and make money and be called an oracle. You’re famous. You’re respected. You’ll go to seminars and people
will say, “What do you think Mr. Safer?” You’ll be accorded all this respect and this aura of omnipotent wisdom. It’s just a neat thing and you don’t have to know anything at all.

LC: In a way you’re through the looking glass because, for example, people like Halberstam were saying, “I’m going to give you the inside scoop. I’m going to tell you what’s really happening.” His analysis of the Kennedy administration for example, The Best and the Brightest, it purports to be an assessment of the inside scoop of the commitments that the United States made during that time period. Do you have any respect, really, for a reporter like Halberstam? He was over there early in the 1960s and sending reports to the New York Times? Have you gone back and read any of his reporting?

BL: Yeah. I’ll have to say—he also said by the way, he doesn’t say that now. But he also said in one of his books that Southeast Asia is one of the most important areas that’s definitely, definitely within the sphere of America’s world interest. He said that. He also said in 1963 that—or ’63 or ’60—’63 thereabouts. It’s printed in one of his books, or one of his articles. He said, “You know, two years ago Vietnam was in really bad shape. Is it in danger of falling now? No, it is not. There’s still a war going on here, but right now things have stabilized.”

LC: Yes, he did say that.

BL: He says things like that and he doesn’t talk about it now. I won’t judge him until I know him personally. I will judge—and I’m being respectful to him because I’ve already formed a personal judgment, but I don’t think it’s right to articulate it without talking to him personally.

LC: Sure.

BL: I don’t respect his work. They’re not—I hate to say it—balanced. Now that’s a loaded word now.

LC: Well, you can say what you mean by it.

BL: It excludes a lot of things that don’t contribute to his rendition of reality.

Neil Sheehan did a horrible job of that.

LC: Neil Sheehan?

BL: Yeah.
LC: In his reporting or in his secondary literature or both?
BL: I don’t know a whole lot about his reporting. Although I do know that at the
time even other people in news media said Neil Sheehan has gone overboard. He’s gone
beyond the pale. He has a psychic interest. They didn’t say this, but the message was he
has a vested psychic interest in seeing that the worst about Vietnam comes through.
LC: Because?
BL: Pardon me?
LC: Because—he has a vested interest because?
BL: Again it’s a psychic thing. “I was right and you were wrong. I was the
grand seer. I was the incisive mind who saw through the smoke and mirrors and I am the
wizard and I am the genius and I know all and all you fools are too stupid to figure out
what I know.” That’s conjecture on my part, but I do believe that’s one of the motivating
things. Then there’s a parallel to that—and I haven’t read this in any of his books, but
I’m sure it’s in there somewhere. There’s self-hypnosis where they actually end up
believing. If you put a lie detector on him I think he would believe what he’s saying.
He’s hypnotized himself.
LC: I think he’s quite authentic about what he thinks.
BL: But his book, *A Bright Shining Lie*, is a masterpiece of artful exclusion. It’s
just incredible what he leaves out and what he would have had to have discovered had he
done the research that he says he did. I know for a fact, I know a couple of people that he
interviewed. They’re ready to punch him in the face because he took from his interviews
with them what he wanted and excluded what he did not want. He cherry-picked. That’s
a cherry-picked book.
LC: I want to talk to you about that book, too. Maybe when we come back to a
later discussion. Let’s consider, though, the timing for your finding out that you were
going to do Vietnamese language training. I think you said that that information came to
you while you were yet at Ft. Benning?
BL: Yes, I think it was round December, yeah.
LC: December of 1970?
BL: Somewhere there, yes. It may have been January, I don’t recall.
LC: How did those orders come down? Where did they come from?
BL: On a bulletin board.
LC: On a bulletin board?
BL: Yeah, there it is. Okay.
LC: Did it surprise you?
BL: Not in it’s entirety but it was rather sobering for a day or two.
LC: That was why?
BL: You might get killed. I wasn’t so much anti-Vietnam at the time, but I certainly wasn’t enthusiastic about going necessarily. The reason being primarily because no one else seemed to care. I mean, really the government didn’t care that we were leaving. There was no emotional appeal. “This is important. This is worth doing. We’re doing well, come on.” There was just this giant vacuum of emotional incentive.
LC: The draw down in U.S. forces over there was communicating to you, at least, that this was becoming less and less a U.S. priority?
BL: Right. It was obvious that we weren’t in it to win. It was just a matter of negotiating our way out. Well, I shouldn’t say obvious because I had—that was my sense of things. So in that respect I wasn’t enthusiastic about going. After a day or two of pondering that I thought, “Screw it. Guys from my high school went. My dad went. Now it’s your turn. So shut up. Big deal.”
LC: The United States is going to invest a goodly amount of money in training you in the language.
BL: Right.
LC: Did you have any idea how long the language training would last?
BL: Yeah.
LC: You did?
BL: I think two and a half months and then Vietnam.
LC: When did you actually leave Holabird then? Do you remember?
BL: Middle of April, maybe.
LC: April of ’71?
BL: Yeah, somewhere in there.
LC: Did you go directly to Ft. Bliss?
BL: Yes.

LC: You haven’t gone home in a little while?
BL: I did. I stopped in between Holabird and Bliss. I did stop by to see my folks.

LC: For how long? Do you remember?
BL: It was a couple of days. It’s been too long.

LC: What was their reaction to your impending training and what it probably meant about your future assignments?
BL: I didn’t tell them.

LC: Oh, really?
BL: No.

LC: You didn’t want to worry them?
BL: Yeah.

LC: Did they ask you?
BL: I don’t recall. They probably did. Especially my dad because he had been in the military and I’m sure I came up with some sort of non-descript BS answer.

LC: You were trying to spare them?
BL: Yeah.

LC: Do you remember arriving at Bliss?
BL: Mm-hmm.

LC: Can you describe that? How did you get there, first of all?
BL: Drove.

LC: Really?
BL: Yeah.

LC: Did you have your own car?
BL: Yeah.

LC: When had you bought a car?
BL: My folks gave it to me. It was a family car. It was a pink 1960 Rambler station wagon.

BL: I wasn’t walking. I didn’t care.
LC: Yeah, a Rambler isn’t bad. You can get a lot of stuff into it. Cool. So you drove from Waukegan then on down to Bliss?
BL: Yeah.
LC: You had studied, I think, some Spanish earlier.
BL: Correct.
LC: But you weren’t really a language maven were you? Did it come easily for you?
BL: Yeah, because I thought learning language was fun. It was like a new toy. I took German in high school. I took Spanish in college. To me, it wasn’t work at all. Oh, God. Here’s another cliché, it expanded my horizons. I just—it was a toy. Hey, I have a new toy to play with.
LC: Did you learn in addition to the basics of language, something also about the culture?
BL: Yeah, actually prior to that we had a two-week orientation class at Holabird. There’s some generalities there. We had all Vietnamese instructors at Ft. Bliss. So again you could piece things together by talking to them, observing them. A number of the guys in class had been to Vietnam before. So between that you began to develop a sense, quite unarticulated and quite unstructured, but a feel, a sense, an intuitive grasp of some of the things. You knew there was other things that you would be learning and didn’t know yet.
LC: So the Vietnamese instructors were U.S. Army contract employees?
BL: Defense Department.
LC: Defense Department. Do you remember any of them? How many were there?
BL: Oh, boy, there must have been from the time I was there—I don’t know. I venture to say six or seven.
LC: How many people were in your classes?
BL: Each class—the NEA (National Education Association) would love this—classes were limited to probably twenty students at the most.
LC: Wow. Did you go all day everyday?
BL: Six hours a day with three or four hours of homework a night.
LC: That’s pretty intensive. But you were able to have sort of side conversations with the instructors?
BL: Sure we talked to them, as out of curiosity.
LC: Yeah. Do you remember where they were from? Were any of them from the North?
BL: No, I don’t. Although I think one guy Um Hopp, Mr. Hopp, he was one of the few older instructors that we had. He was from North Vietnam and he had a wealth of stories about this and that. He was a real owlish, funny man, wicked sense of humor. He’s the only teacher whose name I remember.
LC: Do you remember any of his stories that he told you?
BL: He just said the communists were really bad. When he would talk about them, his jocular way would evaporate and there’d be a stern set to his face. He’d say, “Very, very bad. They killed many, many, many people.”
LC: Wow. What impact did that have on you?
BL: It confirmed what everybody was laughing at by then. The communists were evil because by then if you were anti-communist you were considered a nut case. “Oh, you’re afraid. They’re just like we are.” He confirmed that.
LC: Did you feel like you were learning something that other people ought to know, people in the media, people on college campuses?
BL: No question, absolutely no question. That was one of the wonders I had, which was even going to hit me bigger when I got to Vietnam. But by this time, I’m going, “Why haven’t I heard any of this stuff before?” We’ve got TV. We’ve got radio. We’ve got *Time Magazine, U.S. and World News Report, New York Times*. This place is media saturated and I didn’t even know that you could find out about this. I didn’t even know that this was to be known. It’s not just that I hadn’t heard it. I couldn’t even imagine that you could find out this stuff.
LC: Right, it’s the case of you didn’t know what you didn’t know. So, right, it’s impossible in some ways to ask the right questions unless it’s put right before you.
BL: Precisely so.
LC: Which is what happened with this part of your training, it seems like.
BL: It was gradually, gradually opening doors. I wasn’t aware at the time of how that door would be blasted off its hinges eventually.

LC: You knew that the instruction period there at Bliss was just going to last a little while.

BL: Uh-huh.

LC: At what point did you get orders for going to Vietnam?

BL: I don’t remember when I got the actual paper. I knew I was going.

LC: You knew you were going right after the instructions?

BL: I knew I was going—wait a minute. I was there longer than that. I was there for four or five months, because I didn’t go to Vietnam until October, I think.

LC: October of 1971?

BL: Yeah, so I was there longer than that.

LC: Language courses last longer or shorter. So this was probably one that was a pretty good introduction. What level of capability did you have when it was concluded?

BL: I don’t recall what it was, but I do know that I exceeded what I was—I only completed I think two-thirds of the course because I was slotted to go to Vietnam. So “We’re not going to keep you here for another five months and send you to Vietnam for three months. You’re going at the end of the year so you can get your year in at Vietnam.” I do know that A, I studied very hard. I really, really studied. The motivation was fear because I was—not only because you never know what’s going to save your own life. That’s one thing. But I was so deathly afraid of making a mistake or not knowing something that I should have known that might get somebody else killed. That was extremely difficult to live with. “I have to know all this stuff. I’ve got to know this as well as humanly possible to lessen the possibility that I’ll do something dumb or not do something I should have done and get somebody else killed and have to live the rest of my life with that on my conscience.” That scares the living hell out of me. So I studied very, very, very hard. Having completed two-thirds of the course, I attained whatever it was that were the expected results in two-thirds of the time.

LC: So the proficiency was achieved ahead of whatever the training schedule was?
BL: Yeah. And it wasn’t a matter of knowledge. I made fewer errors so that got me over. I wasn’t as fluent as somebody that would have finished the whole course, but I had learned quite a bit because I did take it extremely seriously.

LC: Do you think you were exceptionally conscientious about the potential importance of this tool, the language, or was this something that was being drilled into everybody? You better take this seriously because lives depend on it.

BL: I would say I was more motivated and conscientious than others, and I don’t think it was adequately drilled in. Again by that time, it probably was the same way ten years earlier. The general atmosphere even within the military, I don’t know. It was just lack of all passion. I don’t mean passion in the even sense, but purpose and commitment and conviction. “This is important. Here’s why it’s important. Damn it to hell we expect something of you. You better do it. We’re asking you, we’re pleading you, we’re ordering you.” It was too much—I’m not saying in its entirety—but there was just too much of an element of the routine in this.

LC: Just kind of marching through?

BL: “Okay, take your language course, go to Vietnam for a year and come back and go to career course” and all this other—it was in that respect—it’s not something I sensed at the time, but looking back on it, yeah there was just an absence of—of course, by that time the whole country had Vietnam boredom which had affected the military, as well.

LC: Also the whole sense of drawing down and getting out, which President Nixon was playing very heavily.

BL: Yeah. I will say that my class leader in my class was a captain, Chris Wise, really I’d like to get in touch with him one of these days.

LC: Spelled how? Do you know?

BL: W-I-S-E. Really a smart guy, very well read. Philosophy major in college of all things, bright guy, funny guy, a perfect infantry officer, a perfect guy to have for a neighbor, a fishing partner, whatever. He had served a tour in Vietnam. In his own quiet, taciturn way made it known to those who would listen, this will benefit you if you learn this stuff. The more you learn, the better you are. He set an example, too, because he was a very good student.
He had done a tour already?

Mm-hmm.

What job had he had?

He had been a platoon leader. I don’t know with what infantry, American infantry unit, but he’d been a platoon leader.

Do you know where he had been?

No, I don’t.

But again the sense of the importance of the task was kind of coming from this informal source. He happened to be there and he happened to be wired the way he was wired, but it wasn’t an official sense.

Right, just being the kind of guy he was. He was one of those thoughtful people. If you do anything, you have a moral obligation to do it right. He was that kind of guy. He was not humorless by any respect. He was sensitive to and acknowledged the responsibilities that you have or anybody has that you have an obligation to show up and do the job right. Not just okay, but well.

That’s interesting because it sort of echoes things you had said about your coaches in high school. The point is not to just get it over with.

Right.

The point is to actually perform when you show up. Your orders for Vietnam, then, required that you go in October 1971?

Yeah.

Did you go home again beforehand?

Mm-hmm.

At this point did you tell your parents what the situation was?

Yeah.

How did they do with that?

Not happy.

Not at all?

There was no dramatic display of anything. They were pretty stoic Midwesterners, but there was just that tightly set lips, like, “Okay.” That sort of thing.
LC: Being from the Midwest I know what you’re talking about. What about say your sister? At this point she’s the closest one to you in age. She would have been in high school probably.

BL: My oldest sister by then had gotten married.

LC: Oh, really? Okay. You’re twenty—

BL: She was twenty then.

LC: Oh, twenty. Okay. I’m sorry. So she was married?

BL: Yeah.

LC: Was she still living in town, in Waukegan?

BL: Just outside of town.

LC: Did you see her?

BL: Yeah, I saw everybody. It was all, “Be careful,” and all that kind of stuff.

LC: How long did you stay home?

BL: A week and a half.

LC: Did you see any of your buddies from high school, from wrestling?

BL: Yeah.

LC: Anybody who had been over there?

BL: I actually did see someone who had been over there in my earlier stop between Holabird and Bliss.

LC: Do you remember that discussion?

BL: Yeah, very vividly.

LC: Who was that with? Can you say?

BL: His name was Tommy Holmgren.

LC: H-O-L-M-G-R-E-N?

BL: Right.

LC: He told you what about his experience?

BL: Bad, very bad.

LC: Where was he?

BL: If my memory serves correctly, he was with the Americal Division. I’m not sure—they were in Quang Ngai quite a bit. Quang Ngai was just one of the rat holes of Vietnam. The litany of booby traps and this and that and so forth. Tommy was a real
happy-go-lucky, nice guy in college. When I saw him then he was, I wouldn’t say
pathologically embittered, but he was a changed person.

LC: Really?
BL: Yeah and he drank too much. He had a job, a good paying job, but he had
changed and not necessarily for the better. He was more crass, more jaded. We drank all
night long. Back then some of the bars out in the county would stay open all night. We
drank until the sun came up. That was a rather interesting experience.

LC: At that point did you attribute the change you saw in him specifically to his
experience in Vietnam?
BL: No question about it.
LC: Because of the things he told you?
BL: No question about it. Some of the things, and again this is often exaggerated
as a common feature of the Vietnam landscape, but there were areas and there were units
that took horrible casualties from booby traps, absolutely horrible. Again, that didn’t win
the war. It was not everywhere. But that at the same time that’s of no consolation
whatever to any of those people that were in Quang Ngai and some of those places
where you had booby traps all over. No consolation to people that have lost limbs and
friends and sons and fathers. It’s no consolation whatsoever, for whatever value that’s
worth.

LC: That was part of the point of the booby traps, too, wasn’t it? It had this
intense psychological effect on the troops that were there?
BL: Absolutely, absolutely. And to create, and in this the communists were very
intelligent, they’re diabolically intelligent, achieving exactly what they wanted to
achieve. They created this distrust in the Americans towards the village people.
Sometimes the village people were enthusiastic supporters of the NLF, although they had
no idea how they were being manipulated. Sometimes the villagers didn’t bloody know.
Sometimes they knew, but they also knew that you weren’t going to stay there that night.
If you were seen talking to anybody, if they suspected you of collaborating with the
imperialists, you could very well die a horrible, painful, prolonged death. I remember an
old Vietnamese woman told me one time. (Speaks Vietnamese) “If you talk, you die. So
you don’t say anything. You don’t know anything. You haven’t seen anybody. You
haven’t heard anything. You just don’t because allies are not going to stay there and protect you.” We have the same thing today in witness protection. We’ve got gang areas in this country, dope areas where people are afraid to tell the cops because the cops don’t protect them.

LC: Sure, they can’t in a way. The situation just isn’t set up such that they can be protected.

BL: Right.

LC: What impact, if any, if you remember did that experience talking with Mr. Holmgren leave with you?

BL: It was very sobering. Because I realized that, again, he was an infantry grunt and in all probability I would not have anything to do with an American unit. I envisioned what a platoon leader, a horrible responsibility, a crushing responsibility, an infantry platoon leader has, your people. Of course, at that juncture it looked like I would be serving with a Vietnamese unit. To me it was irrelevant whether somebody was Vietnamese or American because I’m responsible for people. Good God, what do you do when you’re—what do you feel? Just horrible to have someone killed or injured like that. It was just an ominous, looming sense of tremendous responsibility.

LC: Right. I can only imagine. In October, then, can you tell me how your trip actually from the United States to Vietnam unfolded?

BL: Of course, that last week you’re going down to the final day. You have all those uncomfortable silences around the house. My mom was not happy at all. My dad didn’t say much. He dropped me off at the airport. I guess—well, you’re from the Midwest, you know what it’s like. You don’t get these “Father knows best” orations on the metaphysics of this or that. It’s just, “This is right. Do it. This is wrong. Don’t.” That’s it.

LC: Absolutely.

BL: For whatever that’s worth. But my dad wasn’t very talkative. Of course, aside from that one night we had a very long discussion, alcohol-fueled when I was talking about going in to the Special Forces. Anyhow he shook my hand and he didn’t let go at the airport there at O’Hare and he said, “You better come back.” That was very emotional.
LC: Yes, yes. He had processed all the things he was thinking and feeling and it came down to, “You better come back.”

BL: Yeah.

LC: So he dropped you at O’Hare? Is that correct?

BL: Yep, right.

LC: Where did you fly?

BL: I don’t remember all the details. I ended up at Travis and, of course, at Travis it’s get on board and fasten your seatbelts.

LC: Did you have any layover at Travis, a couple days or did you just go right through?

BL: I think I might have had a day or two. I can’t recall. I have aunts and uncles that lived down in Menlo Park, so I may have been down there for a day or two. I don’t recall it.

LC: What kind of flight did you take over? Was it a commercial or was it MATs (Military Air Traffic) or what was it?

BL: It wasn’t one of the MATs things where you’re all sitting in a cargo bay of the airplane. It was an airliner set up with the regular seats and all that kind of stuff. Whether or not it was Bird or whether or not it was one of those contract airline or U.S. Air, I don’t know. I don’t know. It was a reasonable facsimile to a regular airliner.

LC: Do you remember that flight? Do you remember how you felt?

BL: Bits and pieces because there were some buddies of mine from language school. We were talking about this and that. You don’t know who’s coming back or if you’re coming back. I don’t remember a whole lot, though. I remember being amazed and seeing what the Pacific Ocean looks like at thirty-five thousand feet. Other than that, that’s about it.

LC: How much did you know when you were on that flight about where you were actually going? Did you know you were going to MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam)?

BL: No idea.

LC: You had no idea you were going to MACV?
BL: I had no idea where I was going. The assignments weren’t handed out until you got to Vietnam.

LC: Did you stop over anywhere?

BL: We had a very brief layover in Hawaii. I think we had time for one drink. I’m not sure if we had one in Guam or not. I know I did one time or another I had a layover in Guam, but I don’t remember if we did. Arrived at RVN (Republic of Vietnam) in the dark of the night.

LC: At Tan Son Nhut or where?

LC: I’m not sure if it was Tan Son Nhut or Bien Hoa. I really don’t remember.

LC: Do you remember your first impression? The door opens and you’re filing off the plane.

BL: Yeah, it’s funny. People always say, “The smell, this and that.” I didn’t smell anything except aircraft fuel fumes and everything. I never did, that smell of burning latrine fecal. I never smelled that ever. It was hot and it was quiet. It was dark. They just hustled us in and said get on the buses. “We’ll take you to the 90th Repo Depot” or whatever that place was. It wasn’t all that exciting really. Of course, it was quiet as a tomb because they had a curfew there. In Vietnam there was no night traffic or anything of that nature. You got on the bus. They got those wire screens on there.

LC: I was going to ask you if you remembered anything about that.

BL: Yeah. Everybody says that’s so they don’t throw grenades in there. I thought that was—I don’t know. I said, “So what? You don’t need a grenade. I could set up a Claymore and it will go through the walls,” because I knew enough about military stuff by then. If I really wanted to get you, I could hide in the tree with a shotgun or a machine gun or anything. I thought that the whole thing was one of those Vietnam myths that had taken on ubiquitous proportions that was no longer applicable or true. It was obviously eighty-seven thousand other ways to hit a bus rather than throwing a grenade through the window. But of, course, the logic is that well, if you take the screens down and someone say, “Hey, that’ll be easy. I’ll do it.” So I can understand it, but I certainly wasn’t afraid that someone was going—

LC: It wasn’t a galvanizing moment for you to realize that?
BL: No, not in the slightest. Not at all. I mean, any good juvenile delinquent could think of eighty-seven different ways to do bad things. You don’t have to go to infantry officer basic or basic training to figure out, well, if you can’t throw a grenade through the screen, you can hit them with a Claymore. You can put a mine in the road. You can do this, you can do that. So what? It was not this, “Oh, my God. Now what?” Nothing like that.

LC: Other people have said that it was kind of a thing that made them recognize how vulnerable they were that they weren’t even safe in the care of military officials transporting them from one place to another.

BL: I didn’t feel that at all. I didn’t feel that at all. To some extent I think that some of the things that some of the people say nowadays are saying, “Oh, gosh those other guys are saying it, I’ll say it, too. It must have been true.” I honest to God think that’s true. Not in all cases, certainly. Some of these myths have taken on such proportion that they’ve become contagious. People realize, “Well, they expect me to say that so I guess I better say that.” Subliminally, subconsciously.

LC: Sometimes maybe people don’t remember what they felt, either, and they’ve read things subsequently.

BL: I have been in contact continually with Vietnam veterans since I came back. I never heard one guy say, “Yeah, I got on that bus and saw those screens and thought, ‘Boy, this is real stuff. We’re here now.’” I never heard anybody say that. I don’t know. Maybe I just have weird friends.

LC: Weird friends. That’s interesting. So the bus took you where and left you where?

BL: Out at Long Binh, where the 90th Repo Depot, I think it is.

LC: Mm-hmm. This is still at night?

BL: Yeah.

LC: What was going on there if anything?


LC: What happened in the morning?
BL: The next couple of days were simply administrative minutia. Guys check in, get your jungle green bags, jungle fatigues. You get your boots. You get your this, get your that and all that sort of stuff. I can remember just snippets of impressions and recollections of that whole administrative procedure. I remember practicing my Vietnamese with the “sweep mops.” That’s what we used to call the Vietnamese custodial staff anywhere in Vietnam, hooch ladies and all that sort of stuff. That was kind of interesting. I realized too, it was very evident to me that some of them were almost completely illiterate. They couldn’t write. They couldn’t spell. Okay, that tells me something.

LC: Did you feel a little bit of confidence growing about your facility with the language?

BL: No. As soon as I was there I talked to some of the waitresses in the officers’ club, which was a very ramshackle place, nothing fancy. I realized that “My God, this is one tough language.” I’d just had four months of this or five months of it. Everything and I can’t believe how much I’m missing, how much I don’t understand because it is a difficult language. I understand much more Spanish with much less study time than I did Vietnamese. That was to be an operating principle for the whole time I was there. It was just a tough language. So I realized I had a way to go yet.

LC: Did you feel the same kind of motivation that you had felt before?

BL: Oh, yeah.

LC: Maybe even more?

BL: Yeah, and again, I don’t know if motivation is the right word. That’s almost a conscious effort to do something. Maybe obsession is more like it. Again, language has always, intrigued, intrigued me. So from that day on I started carrying little notebooks in my pocket. In the right hand column I’d put the English meaning and in the left hand column the Vietnamese meaning. If I saw a word in a newspaper or on a sign I would write it down and look it up later. If I wanted to say something and I didn’t know how I’d write it on the English side and go back and look it up. To this day I still have four or five notebooks with thousands of words in them.

LC: Really?

BL: Yeah.
LC: Wow. What assignment developed for you out of this administrative period?

BL: First off, they gave you your choice. So they said you can go to this unit, that unit, this unit, that unit. So I basically started as far away from Saigon as I could because I’ve never functioned well close to the flagpole. Like I didn’t know to call the barracks to attention when that major walked in. I’m not comfortable in that atmosphere, that environment. I figured the real world stuff, there’s less nonsense, less of a fetish for spit and polish and everything else. So I geographically ranked my preferences based on their distance from Saigon. I ended up getting Saigon because I was not Regular Army. I was Reserve Army and I wasn’t career. I was active. The career advisor slots or career slots are going to guys that were regular Army, that’s what I heard. They actually told us, “We don’t need advisors anymore.” I later found out that that wasn’t necessarily true, but it was probably true that week. So they said, “We just don’t know what to do with you. We’re just going to send you to J-2 MACV.” So I went there and big Pentagon East offices, air-conditioned, all that stuff. This is a war.

LC: Right. Now, can you describe the compound of MACV?

BL: Yeah. It was by some sort of old area where the French probably lived before. Then America, with all its gift for ugly architecture, created this giant steel building. This horribly featureless, ugly building, but quite functional with little courtyards in the middle, which were inaccessible. They just let air and light in.

LC: Okay. So they were sealed. It wasn’t like a meeting place or anything?

BL: No. Then you had to walk through this old French residential area where Vietnamese now live. Then you’d go to the outer part of MACV where a lot of general officers had their trailers. They had a recreation area there. They had administrative center there, personnel was there and all this sort of stuff.

LC: What was the security like at MACV when you first arrived? Do you remember?

BL: Where?

LC: Say just compound in general.

BL: They had U.S. Army guards. Of course, it was on Tan Son Nhut, so you had to go through a VNAF (Vietnamese Air Force), military police or air police, Vietnamese
Air Force to get onto Tan Son Nhut. Then to get into MACV you had to go through
guard check where they had U.S. military personnel there.

LC: That was U.S. Army that was handling that?
BL: Yeah, I believe so. Yes, if I remember correctly.

LC: Were you issued paperwork and so forth that let you get through these
different checkpoints more easily? Did you have an ID?

BL: No. If you were American and you had American fatigues on, they
generally just let you in. They had little mirrors and stuff, if you came in with a vehicle
they’d check for vehicle bombs underneath and this and that. It was very routine.

Nothing happened so you could tell that this was an area that was not electrified with
fear.

LC: Yes, I’m getting that impression.
BL: It just wasn’t.
LC: You were J-2. If somebody didn’t know what that was could you explain it
to them?
BL: It’s intelligence.
LC: So standard military intelligence division?
BL: Yeah.
LC: Your thinking was that you were to be an advisor to ARVN units
specifically?
BL: Right, well, actually not ARVN, because ARVN strictly speaking is the
Army of the Republic of Vietnam. In a district you’d be dealing with your popular
forces, or (speaks Vietnamese). They are district militia. They are not ARVN, Army of
Vietnam. I want to make that distinction.

LC: In terms of their operational responsibilities can you describe what the
distinctions are?
BL: Yeah. An ARVN unit, of course, is a regular infantry. They did have some
specialized battalions that operated, but generally you’re speaking of an infantry division
where there were upwards of eight thousand, eighty-five hundred guys in it with all your
artillery, air, support branches, engineering, medical, signal, all that stuff. It’s almost a
living, mobile city that’s self-contained, self-sustaining and capable of attacking or
defending against major divisional elements of the bad guys. This is the big time, this is major combat stuff. Where as your PF (popular forces), depending on the district they’re in, they’re responsible for the security within their district which is the equivalent to a county in the United States except the districts are much, much, much smaller in terms of distance. A district might be ten by twenty miles or even six by eight miles in some of the smaller districts. But remember, because of the primitive transportation those ten Vietnam miles are equivalent to thirty or forty American miles in terms of ease of transportation and travel. But they’re responsible for the security of that district and maintaining a holding action, implicitly maintaining a holding action if subjected to a greater threat from without their district. Your district—they’re minutemen and they operate platoons and companies full time. Generally no artillery, generally no air support, light infantry stuff only.

LC: What about communications? What was the line of communication between the district forces that you’re describing and the main force ARVN units?

BL: Not a whole lot. They played different ballgames, generally. When ARVN divisions were in an area the district people were, basically didn’t have a whole lot to do, other than keep doing their job. There probably wasn’t as much coordination as there should have been. I don’t know in all cases. I mean, there was 244 districts in Vietnam. So God knows what happened in each one of those everyday. Of course, the Army of Vietnam was not in all of the forty-four provinces of Vietnam. There were many provinces that just had RF, regional force, provincial militia and popular forces, district militia without any ARVN at all. The Regular Army would get the local boys protecting the home turf. If you assume a situation in which there’s an enemy force which requires an ARVN presence you’re going to have to assume that the PFs don’t have much to do insofar as they’re dealing with that major NVA presence, which doesn’t mean they did not fight against them on occasion. On occasion they did and sometimes they did quite well to everybody’s surprise. But generally the PF mission in theory would be that they would deal with the local indigenous VC forces who might in someway be aiding and abetting NVA.

LC: What about the command structure of the PF forces? Can you describe that?
BL: District chief and then you had your S-1, S-2, S-3, S-4. Your administrative, intelligence, operations, and logistics staff officers. Of course, you had a whole province administration, or district administration just like you have a county administration here. Although, again, scaled down, it’s probably what we had in American counties in 1782, a little, small building. A lot of these districts are basically not all that far removed from the 19th century.

LC: Were the PF forces coordinated at a provincial level?

BL: Depends on the—generally, no, because the province chief was in charge of province-wide security. That basically fell to regional force units if there were VC or NVA. Most of the VC units by the ’70s were manned by NVA. They couldn’t recruit anymore. But it was assumed for the most part that the district people were supposed to do their job, keep the place secure, protect the bridges and roads and all this sort of stuff. If they didn’t get their job done then they’d get a new district chief or we’ll have to send the RF in there to clean it out. Sometimes the RF would be overwhelmed. They were not meant to nor equipped to deal with a main force or regional force battalion or regiment. They didn’t have the amount of crew-served weapons. They didn’t have artillery support, the RF did. So if things got out of hand because of the introduction of a larger force then, of course, the RF would be called or sometimes even ARVN. But given the three levels of combat, you had your sporadic so-called guerilla stuff. When you say guerilla, by communist definition you’re not talking about mobile units. You’re not talking about units with crew-served weapons. You’re simply talking about people that sit around and whittle punji stakes and make booby traps and do all these other things. Those are guerillas. The actual mobile full time infantry, those are your regional forces. So if the regional forces come in this is not a game for the PF anymore. This is a game for their bigger brothers because the communist big brother has come into town. There were so many different situations and everything was always in such a state of flux that I don’t know if there is such, there is a norm for what happened. It was just all kinds of things.

LC: Yes. Some of those provocations I want to explore with you. Let’s get a little bit more data kind of on the books about the PF forces if you can. Approximately
how many people would be in a PF structure in the average district? I know average is
difficult. Can you characterize the numbers that we’re talking about?

BL: A platoon on paper, the TO&E, table of organization and equipment.

You’ve probably heard that, TO&E thing before.

LC: Uh-huh.

BL: I don’t know exactly what it was. I’m sure it’s probably roughly equivalent
to the United States platoon where you’ve got about thirty-five guys. A company
probably would have three, maybe sometimes four platoons, maybe upwards of 150
people. They finally, finally got M-16s starting in 1970 or ’71, much to the dismay of the
VC.

LC: Now when you say “much to the dismay” do you mean that by that point the
PF forces could have been out gunning local VC with—?

BL: They had equal firepower.

LC: Equal firepower.

BL: Before that they simply did not. The AK-47, even the SKS, is vastly
superior to the M-1 carbine and even the M-1. The PFs were grossly under armed.
That’s one of the reasons they had the little RVNAF, Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
as a whole, were for the most part always grossly under armed, one way or another. They
never were adequately armed. The Soviet Union proved to be a much better benefactor
to their client state than the United States did. But the AK was superior to the M-1
carbine hands down. You can have a gun. The name of the game a lot of times is, “Well,
the ARVN’s are afraid, or the communists are so good.” Sometimes one unit’s afraid and
one unit’s not because the unit that has superior firepower knows it’s going to win. The
unit that doesn’t have superior firepower knows it can’t win.

LC: They have reason to be afraid.

BL: Exactly. This is not anything new. You go back all throughout history
whenever has the bigger stick—ceteris paribus, have you ever heard that before?

LC: Yes.

BL: Whoever has the bigger stick wins. People ascribe all these reasons for
perceived RVNAF shortcoming. “Well, they wouldn’t fight. The corruption.”

Sometimes they were dismayed by corruption. Yeah, sometimes they had lousy officers.
Sometimes they were poorly led, but sometimes they simply didn’t have the firepower and they knew it and the communists knew it.

LC: Why—go ahead.

BL: There’s an early example in the war where a local force battalion, the 514th, which was at Ap Bac, was assigned a mission to—this is before I got there, but I heard about it. They were assigned a mission to overrun an outpost. Well, at that time, the VC local force battalions did not have crew-served weapons. They didn’t have mortars. They didn’t have recoiless rifles. None of that stuff. All they had was their machine guns and light infantry weapons. So they just sat there and shot away at this outpost. If you make it worth my time and I do it for $1,000 a day just circle me with sandbags and you could shoot those sandbags all you want with small arms afire and nothing is going to happen to me, nothing. Sandbags and mud bags stop bullets from small arms.

LC: Handguns, right.

BL: So when the 514th went back and they said, “We can’t overrun this outpost. They keep shooting back. We can’t do anything. Every time we try and get an assault line they chew us up because they have machine guns.” So the powers that be said, “Okay let’s call in 261st.” Well, 261st was a regal force battalion. At that time that made a huge difference because they had crew-served weapons. They had mortars and they had recoiless rifles. So with your mortars you can drop rounds with indirect fire. It goes up and comes down right in the outpost, destroying it from within. Plus, your recoilless rifles simply blow the walls apart. So they made fast work of that outpost. So firepower determines in many cases morale, not vice versa.

LC: What circumstances, if you know, led to the distribution of M-16s to the local forces, district forces in 1970?

BL: Finally the prelude to that answer should be the fact that the manipulator of defense, and I’ll have to credit that term to a guy, a Vietnam veteran, John M.G. Brown, who wrote a book called *Rice Paddy Grunt.* It’s the best description I’ve ever heard of McNamara. The manipulator of defense simply did not see the need to equip RVNAF adequately. So nothing was done and then came the big Tet surprise and all this stuff. “Okay, we’re Vietnamizing. Oh, we’ve got to get out. That’s right. Those guys still have that World War II junk to fight with. Well, let’s give them some M-16s.” So that
came about in—I don’t know when the process was completed. It was around ’70, ’71
and it was near completion. In the first part of 1968, don’t ask me where I got this
number, but I have found it somewhere. Only five percent of RVNAF forces had M-16s.
The rest of them had World War II stuff.

LC: Can we explore that for a second? Do you know what by “World War II
stuff,” do you mean surplus U.S. military equipment?
BL: Exactly, M-1 carbines, M-3 grease guns, M-1 rifles, the Thompsons, BARs
(Browning Automatic Rifle). A BAR is grossly inappropriate for the Vietnamese. The
BAR is a big heavy clunker thing. It’s got a twenty round magazine, but it’s only 30.06
ammunition.

LC: It weighs like?
BL: Twenty-five pounds or something like that. It’s a big thing. It’s a great
functioning piece of weaponry, there’s no question about it. You’ve got a PF platoon, or
a PF company opposed with a local force VC company and they’ve got an RPD and
you’ve got a BAR, you’re going to lose. There’s all this stupid attended myth about,
well, the VC lived off captured weapons from ARVN. That’s absolutely stupid. It’s not
true. By early ’64 the new weapon—that happened to an extent. But by ’64 all this
infusion of new communist weaponry was coming into South Vietnam. Recoilless rifles,
AKs, SKSs. This myth about the VC captured all their weapons from ARVN is a joke.
It’s simply not true. It’s a tiny truth, but it’s not a big enough truth to be the whole truth.

LC: On the other side of the coin, wasn’t some of the inherited World War II-era
equipment that ARVN had in hand actually passed down from the French who had gotten
surplus stuff from the U.S.?
BL: I don’t know. To a certain extent I’m sure that’s true, but I don’t know to
what extent.

LC: Was the United States then before, say, 1970 or maybe even before 1968
primarily supplying kind of junk weapons to South Vietnamese forces at whatever level?
BL: Junk might be too strong of a word, but inappropriate is not. There was
something else to that, too. It was not just the weaponry. For whatever values there may
have been to search and destroy and all this sort of stuff and whatever necessities there
were at the time for something of that nature, pushing the South Vietnamese aside and
saying, “You take care of pacification. We’ll go get the big guys,” was a grievous mistake in my book. It delayed the South Vietnamese embarkation onto the learning curve. It sent a message to them, and I’m really not an adherent to the message sending school, but in this case it applies. They saw us better than we saw them. What they saw in all of this was that “You think we’re primitive, backward people who aren’t able to really shoulder the load.” There’s a degree of truth to that, of course. In doing that, you can’t coach a high school football team doing that. You can’t teach school doing that. You can’t run a landscape crew that way. You’ve got to, and do it well. So we never gave them the weaponry. We never gave them the encouragement. We never gave them the message that “Your country is important. We think it’s important. You’re going to have to shoulder this burden and we’re going to do everything we can to help you. We expect a lot of you. You expect a lot out of us. Let’s get on with it.” I’m sure that conversations of that nature took place at a higher level, but it just never filtered down. RVNAF always basically saw itself as a stepchild. I think even the former chairman of the ARVN general staff Cao Van Vien said, “Actually, we never even had a strategy because the Americans just came in and said, ‘Here do this. Here do that.’” In that respect I fault the Vietnamese for being too Confucianly deferential. I think the Vietnamese would have done themselves and us a great service if more of them on occasion would have stood up. They were restrained in some respect by the fact that “Gee, America is helping us. We have to be polite to them.” Some of them should have once in a while should have said, “You people are full of shit.” Excuse my language.

LC: No. That’s fine.

BL: That never really happened. When they would try and address American idiocy it would be in almost too convoluted a manner. They’re not confrontational. Asians in general are not confrontational. You’re speaking allegorical, or circumlocution and all this sort of stuff. The other person is supposed to infer and sense what the other person is saying. It’s almost considered rude to say, “This is stupid.” It’s too bad that constraint was there.

LC: So by 1970, ’71 when Vietnamization is suddenly United States policy the message has been drilled into those who were listening in the South Vietnamese hierarchy that you’re kind of second string.
BL: Yeah. Again, you won’t see that formally expressed. Well, sometimes you will. You’ll hear Vietnamese say that. Basically, it’s just “You guys get out of the way because you can’t handle it, we can.” That was the way it was perceived right or wrong.

LC: The weapons that they were given really kind of followed that overarching strategy.

BL: Yeah, exactly, as a manifestation. Again the Vietnamese a lot of times made suggestions that said do this, do that. A lot of times they said—we were told no, we can’t do it that way. The Americans were hidebound in some respects by administrative traditional inertia. “Well, this is the way we do it.” You just couldn’t get an overall program that was adapted and tailored to, as much as it should have been, the realities of Vietnam. Colby found out about that. He tried to get more weapons and better basic fundamental equipment for the district and the militia. Bundy said, “Well, we just can’t function that way. Our policies aren’t implemented in that manner,” or words to that effect.

LC: That exchange between Colby and Bundy you would date from about when?

BL: Had to have been—well, if it was Bundy it had to be prior to ’68. My recollection is that occurred somewhere in the earlier ’60s.

LC: I think that was probably right, too. Bill, you made an observation about VC recruiting that I just wanted to ask you about, too. You said that recruiting to the local VC units had fallen off substantially by 1970. And that some of these local units were actually being to the extent that they continued to be manned the positions, the slots, if you will, were being filled by people from the North?

BL: Uh-huh. Back up one minute.

LC: Sure.

BL: When you say “local,” you usually mean the provincial level. Provincial level units you did have, you still had most—they wouldn’t condescend to send NVA to a local force platoon or company.

LC: A local village.

BL: The VC main force battalions and regiments absolutely, yeah.

LC: Was that information that was available to you as an intelligence agent at the time you arrived in 1971?
BL: Yeah, it was all over the place. I actually remember being shocked. This was one of the first times when I began to feel a sense of air that I had been, excuse my language, bull shat by the United States in general because I was going down a list of country-wide VC and NVA units in the respective portion of NVA fillers or just sheer NVA units. It was clearly evident to me in 1971 that if there were no NVA there would be no war. That was a driving—people say, “Well, the VC were still there.” Yeah, there’s still a Ku Klux Klan still in Mississippi, but they aren’t about to take over. I’m sorry. There wasn’t enough VC to keep that thing going at all and their recruitment was down to nothing. It wasn’t necessarily because people said, “You know what? Thieu is a nice guy. I love him. Let’s support him.” It was that the Thieu government was stupid, bad, corrupt, and inefficient, et cetera and so forth. But the communists were just—they were bigger idiots. They were morons. They had shown their true colors in the Tet Offensive. As people really saw them they said, “You guys aren’t talking about nationalism or if it is nationalism it’s not the kind that I like. You tie people up and shoot them in the back of the head because you don’t like them.” The communists prior to Tet said, “Oh, we’re going to win.” People said, ‘Oh, okay, they’re going to win. They say they’re going to win. Let’s see what happens.” Then after that it was a catastrophic failure and they tried to recruit these people. You guys and from all accounts and I’ve even talked to—when I was in Vietnam I talked to former VC. You go into villages and people say, “Just get out of here. You guys are bad luck, go away.” So, yeah, they couldn’t recruit anyone. The war was not sustainable. Even if Hanoi would have armed whatever VC there were in South Vietnam, the war was not sustainable without Hanoi. Absolutely no question about it. It would have been over in three months.

LC: Can you talk about what happens in and after the Tet Offensive that you think sort of turned the tide for local VC recruiting within the south?

BL: Again, I wasn’t there. This is based on more than just book reading. I’ve spoken with a lot of Vietnamese, over there and here. Acknowledging the fact that fifty percent of ARVN was on leave because the VC said, “We’re going to have a ceasefire for Tet.” So they lied, which they do all the time. So, all these guys are home on leave. The insane audacity of this whole thing shocked people. Before, even if they were pro-VC, “Well, you’re homeboys and you’re a little bit crazy. You mean well,” and everything
else. Tet blew that. Tet also destroyed the myth of their invincibility. It was a
cataclysmic defeat in so many ways. These guys were told they were going to win. I’ve
talked to former VC who had said, “Yeah, they said we were going to win. We’ve just
got to go in there. They didn’t give us a route of withdraw. They didn’t give us
anything. We just got in there and got whacked.” Then you realize we’ve been lied to.
This is just a big hoax. Then they come back and say, “Oh, this is just the first part. Now
we’re onto the second glorious phase.” Some of the front line soldiers were saying, “You
guys are”—excuse me, “full of shit. You don’t know what you’re talking about. We’re
getting our ass blown away. And you’re saying go back and now we’re going to do it
again. You’re crazy.” In fact, the political officer of the VC 9th Division defected in
April or May of ’68 because he got the orders to resume the offensive. He said, “Look,
it’s not that I’m not a supporter, but this is carnage. It is senseless, mindless carnage. It
is a meat grinder. It is a butcher shop and I’m not going to try and send these young
idealistic soldiers into this carnal house of blood. You’re fools.” He defected. So the
whole mystique of the VC, the indigenous south, southern-born NLF, VC et cetera was
forever tarnished and corroded.

LC: The smallest—can we take a break for just a second?
BL: Sure.
LC: Bill, your initial assignment within J-2 at MACV was to what desk?
BL: They put me on a Cambodian political desk. Why? I don’t know. Well,
they needed somebody. So I had to basically get miscellaneous source intelligence and
present any pertinent findings regarding the political situation, as distinct from military.
So I got a little bit of exposure to that. I was not happy where I was at. The more I got to
know Vietnamese people—of course, I worked with people from the Joint General Staff
all the time. I got to know them and more and more—of course, when I first got to
Vietnam I thought, “Oh, they’re everywhere.” Really, they weren’t everywhere. They
weren’t going to kill me. I’d go all over the place and do things. I basically came to the
realization to my satisfaction that this was underneath the corruption that ended up at the
government and anything else you wanted to say. This still was a worthy cause became
the other side was disgusting. They were ruthless. The irony of it is that they were the
functional equivalent to the Ku Klux Klan of Asia. Here’s all these leftist hippies in
America saying, “Oh, the NLF.” They were ruthless. I mean, every day you’d get this report, “This person was assassinated here. This person was assassinated. This village, mortared, Lambretta, Tri Lambretta bus mined, blown up.” They were just butchering people all over the place, sending rockets. You can’t aim rockets. You just point them. No one knows where they’re going to land. They’d rocket province capitals and stuff like that for no other reason than to send the convincing message, “We’re out here. We’re evil and we’ll kill you. We’re nasty. We’re bad.” So I basically became a believer in the cause and I wasn’t happy doing what I was doing. Then they sent me down to, I say down because it was in what’s called tank, the secure section of MACV headquarters, exclusive entry. You had little spy, little button box to push. Only certain people could go in there. So then they put me on the Cambodia military desk doing the same kind of reports on Cambodia. My superior officer and I were—I’m not going to say bad things about him. We’re just different personality types. Overall, I was not liking doing nothing and I was not liking being in the headquarters environment and all this other stuff. The same guy—in fact, I was even more kind of spurred on because a couple people I knew, both Americans and Vietnamese, were killed. There was an urgency to this that I feel committed to that I cannot meet in this environment here. Then my class leader at language school, Chris Wise, got a hold of him. He was down in South Trang, down in the Delta. He said, “Hey, got an opening down here in Phoenix. Do you want to come down here?” I said, “You betcha.” I said, “Sign me up.” He said, “Okay, I’ll try and get the paper work through.” So I was going down to the Delta. Well, I kind of got in trouble for trying to arrange my own personal transfer and all this other sort of stuff, got in an argument with my boss. I went to the commanding colonel, who was real funny. He could have been in any movie in which you wanted a crusty veteran, combat veteran, cigar-chewing, lieutenant-eating. You know a colonel, Col. Cyril Mitash. God bless him. He was a great guy. He said, “What’s your problem Lieutenant Laurie?” I said, “Colonel, I want to get out of here.” I said, “I can get down to South Trang. They’ve got an opening in the Phoenix Program down there, I can get in that. I just don’t belong here.” I said, “I don’t care about everybody else, but I was language trained and I’ve come to know these people. I’ve come to know what’s going on in this country and I believe what we’re trying to do. I want to do more than I’m doing here.” He said,
“Well, Lieutenant, I’m sorry,” he was real nice about it. “This place, if you haven’t
realized, this place is being phased down.” Remember this is early ’72 now, somewhere
in ’72. He said, “Yeah, we’re closing up shop here, Lieutenant. All this kind of stuff is
just—I understand and I agree with what you’re saying.” He said, “You and I are caught
in a policy mood that’s not of our making.” But he said, “Maybe we can do something
else.” So what he did is he assigned me to the MR-IV Mekong Delta desk, which was
headed up by a Navy lieutenant commander, Roy Wallace. He and I were on the same
frequency. We did get along. He said, “I’ve heard what you had told Colonel Mitash and
I understand the way you feel.” He said, “What we’re going to do, I’m not going to keep
you trapped here. You’re supposed to know about the Mekong Delta, so I’m going to be
sending you down there to talk with people, meet with people.” So from that point on I’d
be going down to the Delta, corps headquarters, different provinces, different advisory
teams all over the Delta, finding out more stuff, bringing back information that they
needed to get to Saigon. Sort of a, I guess, liaison intelligence officer, also worked on
intelligence and intentions and capabilities of NVA units, checking with the advisory
detachments and RV units in the Delta to whether the views in Saigon corresponded with
their views bringing them information that they didn’t have and even leading up to
operational things such as targeting for air strikes and stuff like that.

LC: Bill, I want to ask you about the different pieces of these assignments kind of
in order. You were on the political desk for Cambodia at MACV for about how long, the
political desk?

BL: Two months, maybe, three. I’m not sure.

LC: What kind of things were you seeing in terms of reports coming across your
desk that you were supposed to absorb and generalize?

BL: Well, basically it was on the trials and travails of a Third World country
trying to survive in a war against a very skilled and maniacal opponent. Of course, then
it was mostly NVA. But you could see—Lon Nol had had a stroke already so he was
half in the bag. There was corruption this and that, but you see reports of—again, this
has never been in the news media. Some of these really decent Cambodian people who
were desperately trying to save their country, to make something of it, but of course it
was a gross effort in frustration. Well, they would have succeeded had it not been for the
communists. They were probably no better no worse than Thailand is today or Mexico,
but basically that sort of thing.

LC: Can you characterize American policy towards Cambodia at the time you
were sitting on that desk?

BL: I’m not privy to a lot of that stuff. But basically it was “Oh, boy now I’ve
got to take care of these guys, too. But we can’t send troops in cause Cooper-Church, so
we’ll just give them what we can and bomb where we can and hope for the best. Oh, boy
what have we got ourselves into?”

LC: The Cooper-Church Amendment, can you discuss that in a little bit of detail?

What were the parameters there?

BL: You couldn’t send—as I understand it now, the actual first attempt was to
deny American the president permission to send force elsewhere in Southeast Asia. As I
understand it, in fact, I just read this the other day, that somehow someway it came down
to you cannot send American ground forces into Laos or Thailand. For some reason, they
left out Cambodia, which is ironic after the Cambodian Incursion. But Nixon was so
constrained by American public opinion. He said, “I cannot send American units into
Cambodia.” Actually, the Cambodians had to come to South Vietnam. They had a
training camp run by the Special Forces down in Phouc Tuy, Ba Ria Province. I lost
track of your question, I think.

LC: I was actually asking in general what U.S. policy was towards the
Cambodian government at this time.

BL: Contrary to what a lot of people state in college classes, I’ve actually heard
this in the United States. I know for a fact that the—well, I wasn’t there when Sihanouk
was overthrown, but I’ve talked to a lot of people and everything else. Of course, I did
pick up some echoes of that when I was there. They had no idea that Sihanouk was going
to be overthrown. It was not engineered by the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency). So
all of a sudden here’s these guys and then Lon Nol stands up and says, “All right you
North Vietnamese communists, get out of my country.” Their response is, “Who in the
hell are you, you little wiener?” He sends this poor little fledgling army to attack the
NVA and, of course, they get pounded. So then the NVA turned westward to Phnom
Penh and the United States confronted the situation in which the NVA take over
Cambodia. I’m like, “God, now what do we do?” So their policy, such as it was, was completely ad hoc and well constrained by the limitations imposed by American public opinion. Here they are. We’ve got to try and help them somehow. There was no strategic map there. There was no grand plan or anything else. It was a policy of ad hoc-ism. They’re there and they’re fighting so we’ll give them what we can give them, what Congress says we can give them, and so on and so forth.

LC: You said that Lon Nol had already suffered the stroke that left him pretty much incapacitated. Do you know when that stroke actually occurred?

BL: I think it was early ’71, actually.

LC: Who had the United States sort of come to rest its hopes on given that he was pretty much removed from the picture?

BL: I don’t think there was any one guy. There was a number of intelligent, capable and competent Cambodian leaders and politicians. I doubt whether, that the United States put all its bets on any one of these particular individuals because basically they just wanted to get out of Southeast Asia. Really, it wasn’t a matter of “This was a guy that could save Cambodia.” It’s, “Well, what do we do to stay alive for this month? In Tam is a great guy or a is Long Boret a nice man or Son Ngoc Thanh is a charismatic leader, but we’ve got to be down to fifty thousand troops in Vietnam by the end of 1972.”

LC: Was that the tenor of the traffic that was coming across your desk was the sort of holding operation or backing out operation kind of—?

BL: Without any expressed or explicit description of that being the intent. It was, “Here’s what’s going on today. That’s all.” Or “The future doesn’t look real good or things improved slightly in this sector,” but it was all episodic stuff. I’m sure at the higher levels they discussed the long-term prospects, but again, Nixon had basically said, “We’re pulling out.” So this was just one phase and you knew it was all going to come to an end. You knew it was a policy that was only again ad hoc-ism and expected to apply only insofar if the United States was still there and that was coming to an end anyhow. So what the hell?

LC: This kind of the term limitation thing was kind of governing—?

BL: Yeah, that’s a good way to put it.

LC: Did you have any sense at that time about the U.S. appraisal of Sihanouk?
BL: I didn’t know anything then.

LC: Okay. Had you had any kind of familiarization with internal Cambodian politics before you got put on this desk?

BL: None whatsoever.

LC: That’s a lot to read into pretty quickly. Did you have any time to go back over old tables and look stuff up?

BL: Oh, yeah. Yeah, there was a training period. They didn’t just drop me there. I should have explained that. I’m sorry. It wasn’t a matter of “Here you are, go.” It was a matter of “You’re going to be an understudy for this guy for a month and a half, two months” or whatever, I don’t know how long it was. That was my job. You were expected to know this stuff and they’ll get you boy if you don’t know it. You’re in headquarters. You can’t just be, “Oh, this is wrong. I’m sorry.” It doesn’t work that way. It involved voluminous reading and a forced rate of comprehension, which you seldom encounter in a college course. Yeah, a lot of stuff.

LC: Were you consulting secondary sources as well as obviously internal traffic tables, documents and the rest?

BL: Not too many, no.

LC: So it was primarily classified data that you were looking at?

BL: Correct.

LC: What was your clearance at this time?

BL: I don’t know what it—it was to go up when I went down in the tank. I don’t even know what the code word was, but it was above top secret.

LC: When you transferred to the tank you had to go through some increased security clearance?

BL: Yes.

LC: What was that process like or don’t you even know? Do you know what it was?

BL: Oh, yeah. Well, first of all you’ve already been cleared, they’ve investigated you and all that kind of good stuff. You go down there and they say, “All right, here’s the deal. You’re going to be exposed to his kind of information, that kind of information, this kind of information, the source of which is extremely important and the revealing of
which would be extremely hazardous to the allied objective,” and so forth. “You will not
divulge this information. You will not take this information out of this room. You
cannot discuss it with anybody or how this information was obtained. You can’t even tell
what the code word for this information is. It is not to be discussed outside of this room.
When you get out of the Army, for a period of,” I don’t know three years, “You will not
travel to,”—they would—all the countries of Eastern Europe. “You will not travel into
Cuba. You will not go to Algeria.” I thought, “Boy, this is hip deep stuff here. This is
really secret stuff. I need my decoder ring for all this.” Again, I can’t remember what
the security classification was, but I do know that they did say that even the code words
for the stuff we were getting was classified. There were classifications above that which
I didn’t want.

LC: You didn’t want?
BL: I didn’t want to get any higher than I had to.
LC: Why was that?
BL: I don’t know. I felt I had enough to do already. Some of the guys that were
privy to it, they’d tell me a few things. It wasn’t critical for me to know it, for one thing.
LC: Being sent to the tank was part of, or was necessary in order that get access
to military intelligence about Cambodia?
BL: No. That was before—well, there was both. It was segmented. You had the
classified stuff that couldn’t exist outside of the tank. In the tank you had classified stuff
that did not leave, that went straight to Abrams and that was it or into Washington, D.C.
State Department and stuff like that.
LC: How long were you actually on the Cambodian military desk?
BL: Month, maybe, month and a half. I don’t know. I remember I didn’t like it
at all. I was really upset with it. I had real heated words with my superior officer, my
commanding officer. He was a nice guy. It was just a bad time for both of us, different
personalities. We had some rather nasty words. I just hated it, really hated it. But
fortunately I got put on the MR-IV desk with Wallace and then I got to go down to the
Delta quite a bit.
LC: Why did you hate it so much?
BL: I wasn’t doing anything.
LC: You just felt it was a waste of time?
BL: It was not a waste of time in the grand scheme of things, but I had
developed, underneath all the other stuff about corruption, all the bad stuff and
everything else I had realized this was a worthy cause. I thought, “Here I sit on my duff
doing absolutely nothing” and probably an egotistical thing, too. You want to be out
there and you want to see the elephant. You want to go out there. Well, I was a little bit
beyond that because I wasn’t—I had already seen enough dead people. I didn’t want to
see anymore. I wasn’t thrilled about getting killed or combat or any of that stuff. I
thought, “I can be doing something that’s contributing to this greater good, however
miniscule and I’m not.” But I wanted to. That was a neat thing. I wanted to be doing
something more.
LC: You had been prepared to do, you felt, something else, too?
BL: True.
LC: Where were you living during this initial period at MACV?
BL: The whole time I was there, the first year I lived at Army BOQ.
LC: I guess I want to ask you about the assignment to MR-IV. Do you think that
Chris Wise, who you mentioned before, in his invitation to you to come on down to Soc
Trang was instrumental in actually getting you on to the MR-IV desk?
BL: I have no idea. I have no idea. I do remember telling Colonel Mitash that
“Here is this chance for me to go down to Soc Trang and do what I’ve been trained to do.
I want to do it. I’m motivated. Get me out of here.” He just said, “This is bigger than
both of us.” That may have been a tie in. For all I know if they would have had a slot in
MR-III or MR-II—it wasn’t just a make work thing either because I was the only one on
the desk that had Vietnamese language training. So people were always saying, “What
does this mean? What does that mean?” This document here, “What does that say?” So
I was the only guy at the MR-IV desk. I think there was a Navy guy that was there for a
few months and then left. I was the only one that could go down there and sit down and
talk with the Vietnamese units and the provincial staff, the district people, so forth and so
on.
LC: You think the assignment to MR-IV desk was about what time?
BL: I’m trying to think. The thing is in Vietnam memories are hard to put in chronological order because you don’t have seasons. It’s just wet and dry. I’m trying to think.

LC: Do you think it was before Tet of 1972?

BL: No, it was after. I was thinking maybe May, maybe June, something like that.

LC: Did you again have to go through a reading in period for that desk?

BL: No.

LC: By that time you’ve been in-country for many months now.

BL: Right.

LC: You had absorbed a lot of, if you will, off the books information about what was going on in South Vietnam, generally in Saigon, probably specifically within MACV I’m sure.

BL: One other thing, too, when I was at the Cambodian desk and, of course, there’s a Lao desk. It was a whole Southeast Asia theatre thing. I’m hearing all this stuff from these people, other young officers like myself. In fact, when I was still on the Cambodian desk they sent me over to Thailand to talk with MAC-Thai and the U.S. Embassy about this smoldering insurgency in Thailand.

LC: You actually went over to—?

BL: Yeah, I went to Bangkok.

LC: Can you tell me about that trip?

BL: Yeah. I just flew over there. Abrams wants to know and would like to know what the hell’s going on in Thailand, not that it’s of immediate and pressing import, but what’s the greater picture here? Because at that time the Thai government was conducting some fairly large operations against the CTs, the communist terrorists, in what’s called the Tri-Border area. There had been, for the previous three or four years really, a moderately lethal brushfire war going on in the border areas of Thailand. People were getting killed routinely. It appeared that Thai communists, in fact Robert Shaplen, who is probably one of the most intelligent correspondents to ever set foot in Vietnam, far and above, beyond Halberstam and these other sensationalist gooners. Shaplen himself said, “It’s not that bad right now, but then again 1960s Vietnam wasn’t that bad,
either.” So there was definite concern, not a sense of urgency, but a desire to know where is this going? There were several books written. I think one was called *Thailand? Another Vietnam*. Anhow, I got his whole perspective of all of Southeast Asia. I just thought it was absolutely fascinating, but at the same time threatened by, what was it? Reinhold Niebuhr’s and *The Children of Darkness and Children of Light*, or whatever it is. In my own view, my own estimation, based on my contacts with Southeast Asian people, not just books, they were threatened by forces of darkness and evil. What you have after 1975 only proves it, as far as I’m concerned, that hunch that I had. It was just such a fascinating place. There wasn’t just one rice paddy. There was all these different tribes. There was Hoa Hao. There was the Cao Dai. There was the Hmong. There was the Sedang, the Stieng. It made *Star Wars* so pitifully boring. In retrospective comparison, you look and see how people see *Star Wars*, “Oh, that’s so great.” The Star Trekees are going to conventions. God bless them, they’re having, fun. They don’t hurt anybody, but Southeast Asians to my mind, to me, made it all pale in comparison. It was just a fascinating place. Plus, you had the sense that you were, I did and I still do, I was doing something that was very important, contributing to something that was very important or could be. It was a very energizing experience.

LC: How long were you over there?
BL: Over where?
LC: In Bangkok, TDY (temporary duty) over there for how long?
BL: Three or four days, five days or something like that.
LC: Was your trip organized at the behest of Creighton Abram’s? Was it really his?
BL: General Potts, William Potts, his J-2.
LC: Yes. Had essentially ordered you to go over there?
BL: Yeah, right.
LC: Why do you think they picked you?
BL: I don’t know. I have no idea.
LC: When you went over there you met with MAC-Thai people?
BL: Yeah, the people in MAC-Thai and I met with Lionel Rosenberg, who later became famous for taking unauthorized leave from the State Department in 1975 and going over on his own to get people out in the evacuation.

LC: From South Vietnam?

BL: Yeah.

LC: His assignment was, he was in the Embassy?

BL: Yeah, he was a political officer, political desk, something like that. He had been in Vietnam several years, a smart guy, good guy.

LC: What information, if you can give us a general overview, did you get about the insurgency and the Thai military operations against the insurgents?

BL: Just about what anybody would expect. Yes, it’s a problem. Is it going to get worse? Don’t know for sure. Could it get worse? It could. Are the Thais responding appropriately? So far they look like they’re doing okay. Of course, there’s instances of what the malfeasance, corruption, and incompetence there and so forth. Like you’re going to find in every single group that has more than eight people in it, basically. It’s just how many and how often. But so far at that juncture, I don’t think they saw any cause for immediate concern. I don’t recall them as seeing Thailand on the slippery slope. But it was a situation that certainly warranted attention and it certainly warranted measures to correct it. It wasn’t something that would necessarily go away. It had to be made to go away. That would demand competence from the Thai government, but it hadn’t got out of control at that juncture.

LC: Do you remember if there was any evidence or information about external support for the Thai insurgents?

BL: I don’t remember when I learned it. But somewhere along the line I learned—I don’t know if I learned anything or not—but that Hanoi was training, bringing Thais over to—I think they trained them at, I can’t remember the name of the training camp. They were training Thai insurgents in North Vietnam sending them back to Thailand. AK-47s were showing up, China was broadcasting the Voice of Liberation Thailand or whatever. There was definitely, definitely external assistance or support.

LC: The information about the broadcasting, do you mean that there was probably a transmitter in South China somewhere that was—?
BL: Yes, and there was one in Laos, too, for a while.
LC: Were the broadcastings monitored by U.S. military or civilian intelligence?
Do you know?
BL: I’m sure they were, but I didn’t have access to them.
LC: Okay. So that was happening in a different place or at a different level?
BL: Yeah.
LC: Did you write a report when you came back to Saigon?
BL: Yeah.
LC: Do you know what the response to the report was? Did you ever get called in to talk about it?
BL: Basically the Easter Offensive and other things were of such a pressing nature that I don’t think—I was never called to explain any of it. I think they looked at it and said, “That’s about what we knew anyhow, so.”
LC: Were you ever to go back to Bangkok?
BL: I went on R&R (rest and recuperation) later.
LC: Later on, but not on a TDY?
BL: Not on TDY.
LC: Let’s talk about the MR-IV desk just for a few minutes. What was the staffing like on the desk? Can you describe its structure?
BL: The tank is this huge room with no walls. There’s no windows. All the safes have locks on them. It’s like all that stuff in the movies, all these secret things and the wall-sized maps and places where all the good guys are and bad guys are and notes to what happened here and what happened there and all that stuff is going on. Basically a cluster of I don’t know, three or four desks, guys rotating desks you man it twenty-four hours a day, twelve hours a shift, seven days a week. You better know everything, whoever’s there. There’s, of course, the section chief, which was the name of lieutenant commander and then his underlings, whatever you want to call them. Even the NCOs (noncommissioned officers) that were assistants, but whoever was in there and when you had night duty sometimes you were the only guy there. You and over there would be the MR-III desk, there would always be somebody there. It was manned twenty-four hours a day. God help you if somebody came down there, some colonel or some general and
says, “What’s going on here?” and you didn’t know. So you really had to stay up with—
you had to know units. You had to know what they were doing. You had to know rivers.
You had to know counties. You had to be the master of all knowledge or as close as you
could be. It was really a crush to digest all this stuff.

LC: How long did you have to kind of get up to speed such that you could
actually man that desk by yourself?

BL: Well, actually the first thing they were sending me down to the Delta to
begin with. They sent me down to Can Tho or Can Tho. I can pronounce it like
Americans do when I used to call it Can Tho, which was corps headquarters and talk with
the people down there, the ARVN staff. Went over to where the Cao Lanh I think it was
the 9th Division and talked to their people. Seventh Division in My Tho, and then came
back and started getting a feel and then just gradually sort of oozed into it. They had
plenty of people there. I didn’t really have to do anything other than learn my stuff. Two
or three months later I was considered one of the guys that was front line as far as you get
briefings on what’s going on or “I’d better go see Lieutenant Laurie. He can tell you
what’s going on,” that sort of thing.

LC: When you went to Can Tho the first time, can you describe for example how
did you get down there and where did you stay?

BL: I can’t remember if I took—I took a whole bunch of different kind of aircraft
down in the Delta. I took CIA porters, flew on choppers, Hueys. I flew on some other
kind of Beechcraft aircraft. I’m not sure what. I don’t remember exactly what kind of
plane it was. I went down there and it was much smaller than Saigon, of course, but it
was a fairly big city. But by then Vietnam was not anything new or novel or alien to me.
It was just kind of what I expected. It was on the Mekong River, which was sort of
intriguing. I got to go new places, my fetish for that. I thought the Vietnamese personnel
I met, one of whom I still know to this day. I think he’s still alive. These people are
intelligent. They can tell you why they don’t want communism. You say, “Do you like
Thieu?” They go, “No, he’s a jerk. He’s a corrupt son of a bitch. But he’s still better
than these guys.” It just basically confirmed the suppositions that had been forming
within meaning. This is indeed a worthy cause, mismanaged grossly, but still a worthy
cause.
LC: Was that opinion of President Thieu pretty much uniform among the people that you were speaking to down in the Delta, Vietnamese now?

BL: I don’t know if it was the Delta, per se. Let’s just say he was not what you would call an inspiring leader. He was adequate at best. As time went on, of course, I went back later in ’73 and ’75 they were less willing to tolerate his errant ways than they were in ’72. In ’72 the ARVN emerged from the ’72 Offensive still standing, hounded, beat up, but still standing, but with the Americans pull out, the economy went to hell. The communists were gaining ground and consequently the toleration of Thieu’s shortcomings diminished. He was never what you would call a hero.

LC: No. In 1972 would you say the principle indictment of him was a belief that he was involved in corruption and diversion of resources away from the military?

BL: I wouldn’t call that an indictment, no. It wasn’t an indictment, per se. He seemed like he was okay. Like when you’re in high school, “What do you think of the principal?” “I don’t know. I guess he’s okay.” But he certainly wasn’t what you’d call—there was no Churchillian dimensions to him whatsoever, or aspects to him. Actually, overall I think his personality altered over time. I think he’s probably someone who belongs in a Greek tragedy. He’s just too small of a human being for too large of a position. I think that he initially started out okay. Especially after the American pullout I think his brain just started dissolving and his will and desire to do anything started to decay. He was certainly involved with some corruption before then, but I think after that I think he just didn’t care. Who cares? Why bother?

LC: A lost cause in a way?

BL: Yeah. This is really a stretch here to conjuncture this. I’m not sure that he was saying that in his mind. I think that mood was engulfing him. That’s my sense of it.

LC: He seemed to telegraph that, too, to people?

BL: By his non-action, by his non-inspiring behavior. Again, he was just the antithesis of a Churchillian leader. If nothing else aside from corruption he was profoundly bland. Scores and scores of Vietnamese people that I came to know or that I met, I never heard them—he was a non-entity. Actually, when he died here what a year or so ago, nobody said anything when he died either, whether he was good or bad. Of course, a lot of the soldiers I knew said, “Son of a bitch.” He could have led Vietnam had
he been corrupt and dynamic. Then people wouldn’t have cared, “Well, hell with it.” I
heard South Vietnamese soldiers say, “It’s not corruption necessarily,” because they’d
say, “Look I’m a private. If I get captured or if we lose they’re going to let me go
because I’m nothing. But that guy’s a general. He’s betting his whole life that he’s
gonna win and he make fifty or sixty dollars a month and that’s not very much. So if
makes a little bit of money, enough to provide a little comfort in his life, we don’t care.
It’s when they go overboard that we really get mad.” I heard that kind of thing a couple
times. It’s almost expected that someone in authority to skim a little off the top because
their salaries are so abysmally low.

LC: So there was a certain level of sort of take that might have been expected or
accepted?

BL: Yeah. There was no surprise.

LC: When you began going down to, let’s just take Can Tho to begin with.
Which forces of the South Vietnamese military and internal security structure were you
actually looking over and speaking with? Were you primarily looking at PF troops?

BL: No, I got to go around and see a little bit of everything. The 9th Division,
their fire direction center went to the, what is it, the air directional control center at Binh
Thuy Airfield? That’s air force, of course. The brown water navy people, which is all
Vietnamized by then. There was no American units in the Delta anyhow except for air
units, intelligence and supply detachments. So over the years again, by years I say
extending into my DAO (defense attaché officer) time. It was a little bit of everything. It
was a little bit of everybody. There was no one consistent thing. It wasn’t like I was
down, “Okay, you’re with the PFs in this territory. You’re supposed to be responsible for
PFs only in this province.” No, it was a generalist experience, I guess you could say.

LC: Sort of for you to get a feel of the different facilities and the people there?

BL: Yeah.

LC: Did you meet any Vietnamese leaders down in Can Tho at the beginning that
really stood out in your mind as good leaders and committed to the defense of their
country?
BL: Well, Colonel Binh, who wasn’t a leader necessarily ‘cause he was the intelligence chief down there. He was s fine man, a great guy. I got to know him fairly well.

LC: He was the intelligence chief of?

BL: The Mekong Delta, MR-IV.

LC: MR-IV.

BL: When I was in My Tho probably one of the most unsung, non-sung, unknown heroes of Vietnam was the commanding general of the 7th ARVN Division, Nguyen Khao Nam. That guy was just absolutely outstanding in every respect. He was militantly honest, people knew. It wasn’t just scuttlebutt that was confined to the ranks of the American advisors and this and that. You could go to noodle stands, which I did, and the common people would tell you, “General Nam he’s a good man. He’s not corrupt, he’s honest.” Just amazing. He’s a tactical genius, an extremely intelligent man, honorable man. Troops respected him. People respected him. This guy, he’s not good, he’s amazing. He’s incredible.

LC: What did you find out about General Nam’s background? Where he had been?

BL: Really, I still don’t know all of it. I pieced things together over the years. I’ve been meaning to order a book about him in Vietnamese and I haven’t done it yet. He was not from a wealthy class. He had been an Airborne colonel who was participating in Operation Pegasus, which was the relieve Khe Sanh. Of course, if someone is airborne and they’re colonel that kind of means they’re probably pretty good, airborne, tough guys. Good guys. He took over the 7th ARVN Division, which, of course, was the unit that was humiliated at Ap Bac. He set up—it was at the old U.S. 9th Division base at Dong Tam. Then he established this huge division farm. So the families of his soldiers could have less expensive food. He was very alert to their deprivations and suffering. He would tolerate no corruption. He would not tolerate malfeasance. He was the kind of guy that was famous for in his C&C (command and control) chopper flying over a bridge crossing. He looked down and he saw that the fields of fire had not been cleared. They let the weeds grow up and everything else. Here’s this 7th Division general and you might say “Well, he should order his subordinates to do that,” but in Vietnam it made an
image, an impression and mystique is sometimes more important than administrative procedure. So he had his chopper pilot put the chopper down and goes up to the outpost and says, “Who’s in command here?” This lieutenant walks out and says, “I am, sir.” He rips the bars off his collar and says, “Not anymore you’re not. Look at these fields of fire.” Slaps them on another guy’s and says, “You’re the lieutenant. I’m coming back here in one day. This place better be ready to go by then.” People knew that he was that way. They knew that he wasn’t just being a hard ass. He knew that they cared about Vietnam and all this other stuff. Amazing guy, just absolutely amazing. Everybody, every American that had anything to do with them says the same thing.

LC: Did you know whether he had ever been to the United States?
BL: I have no idea.
LC: Can you give a thumbnail sketch along those same lines of Colonel Ding, who was the intelligence chief?
BL: He was from North Vietnam. He saw the communists firsthand when he was a kid. He came up in that ’54 exodus. He was an intelligent guy, motivated guy, smart guy, courteous guy, polite guy. Wasn’t a whole lot bad you could say about him. He knew his business. He knew his stuff. He knew what the communists were, not only in the discreet technical facts, he had a sense for them. He knew who they were, what kind of animal they were. He did his job very adequately as an intelligence officer. The province senior or the Delta senior advisor and also his counterpart, who—I met Binh’s counterpart. He said, “Yeah, Binh’s a hell of a guy. He’s a good man.”

LC: Do you know anything about his background? How he had come from being essentially a refugee child, possibly had been orphaned, to becoming an intel chief of the region?
BL: I assume he was not an orphan because of that huge Catholic migration out of North Vietnam in ’54. I assume, but I could be wrong, but the assumption has been that he came down with his family. Northerners are—you’ve probably heard this before. Northerners are more disciplined, more motivated. The Southerners would say, “They’re more greedy. They’re more pushy.” But Northerners are a bit more achievers than Southerners are. That’s because of the climactic determinate. Life is fickle in the North because of monsoons, cold weather. In the South, you walk down the street eating
mangos, spit out the seeds, and come back two months later and pick mangos off the new
tree. So I have to assume he was an achiever from the word “go,” probably from a decent
family, Catholic. Of course, having been from North Vietnam he knew the communists.
As he saw it, he knew them from what they really were. So he was just one motivated
guy who did his job and no surprise.

LC: Do you think he had or do you know of any connection he might have had
with Diem family, also Catholic?
BL: I have no idea.
LC: Okay. Let’s take a break, Bill.
BL: Okay.
Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I’m continuing my oral history interview with William Laurie. I am in the interview room in the Special Collections Library on the campus of Texas Tech. Bill again is in Mesa, Arizona. Today’s date is the twenty-seventh of January 2004. Bill, you had said there were a couple of things that had come to mind that might enhance some of what you had already said in our earlier interview.

Bill Laurie: Two things that we touched on and there’s some other details that should go in just for the record, and one, which may anticipate some of your questions that come up. In the biography part, going way, way, way back when you went through the names of my high school wrestling coaches. I don’t think I named the head coach and history honestly dictates that his name is on the record. His name was Oscar Bay.

LC: Spelled how, his last name?
BL: B-A-Y. He was just an incredible man.
LC: Where was he from originally?
BL: I believe he was from Missouri.
LC: Okay. How had he come into wrestling do you know? Did you know any of that back story?
BL: As a matter of fact, he was hired and he taught at a couple of high schools prior to coming to Waukegan. I don’t know why he wanted to start up the wrestling program, but he did. As it turned out, he had never wrestled in high school or college because the program was not offered anywhere he went. So being the analytical type that he was, I think there was an old Bulgarian or Czechoslovakian adage that says “The work will teach you,” To start working, you’ll learn. He basically analyzed how you win and what you do not to lose. For someone who had never competed in the sport he became and he still is in the Illinois High School Wrestling Hall of Fame and everything else, a remarkable individual.

LC: He was self-taught?
BL: Mm-hmm.
LC: I mean, this is a highly-technical sport. That’s really quite a statement about his interests in and dedication to it.

BL: One thing I think he impressed upon us and that he applied then was that even though, and you’re correct in acknowledging the skill level that’s required. It is incredible and it’s probably more so than many other sports. There’s very few sports you have to make so many decisions in six minutes or eight minutes if you’re wrestling collegiately. You don’t have time to think. You have a half second to respond and if you don’t, well, then—

LC: It’s too late.

BL: Too late.

LC: It’s like a high-speed chess match, really.

BL: Yeah, true. He impressed upon us the value of fundamentals and basics. Once you establish the fundamentals and basics and always learning, it was very scientific. Our practices sometimes resembled a physics lab. If you have this angle on your elbow or your opponent is situated in such a way, then this will work, but if it’s not, then it won’t work. So it was much more intellectual than people suppose. They think it’s just a bunch of meatheads out there groveling away.

LC: I think it’s more and more, I think, broadly known that this is a sport that actually isn’t for meatheads because they can’t do it.

BL: Another thing was above and beyond the expertise that he manufactured for himself and passed onto us in the sport was the issue of character. He was straight, one hundred percent character. You act like a gentleman. You don’t cheat. You don’t smoke. You don’t lie. If you do any of those things, you’re off the team. Good-bye. In fact, he kicked a returning state champion off the team for smoking and never let him back on. The rules were if you smoked, you’re gone for the year, period. This guy was a senior and he’d taken state championship his junior year. There was no bending the rules for any of that. Because of his example and because of his encouragement and it wasn’t what you’d call the nurturing political correct stuff that we have today. He would challenge some kids, and remember this is a factory town. They’re fairly rough town. There were some dysfunctional families and all this sort of stuff. That’s nothing new. There always has been and always will be. Some of these kids that would get involved
with wrestling would come from these families and really have no pathway marked out in their life that they decided on. They showed some ability, skill and willingness to work. Every once in a while one or two of them would get into some minor trouble or this and that. He’d sit them down and he’d flat out say, “Do you want to be a bum for the rest of your life or do you want to make something of yourself?” He said, “You can go around being a bum and you can go around and run the pool halls right now and see these guys that are forty-five years old or fifty years old that are still bums or do you want to be someone that’s respected?” He turned around a lot of guys that probably at best would have ended up monumental beer drinkers and bowling team members. They not only went to college, but they became teachers. They became members of the city council all kinds of stuff. They flat out admit or assert that had it not been for the experience in wrestling and had it not been for—they called him Od Bay. His name was Oscar, but everybody called him Od. Had it not been for his guidance, which was sometimes quite firm and sometimes very challenging—“Are you going to make something of yourself or are you going to be a bum? You decide”—that they would never have been what they became.

LC: How long did he stay with the school system there, do you know?
BL: He died in 1966 from a brain tumor.
LC: But he had been coaching right up until that affected him?
BL: Yeah.
LC: He sounds like a very special man.
BL: Everybody that had any prolonged contact with him says exactly that. The funny thing is I sat down with a lot of the guys from the team, years and years afterwards and it’s like he cast a spell over us. We can’t figure out how he did it. He was just very low key, didn’t yell, didn’t scream, didn’t holler. He was not a big muscular guy. His hobby was art. He was an artist. He did a lot of pen and ink stuff. So here’s this person that ostensibly would be the last person you’d expect to be a wrestling coach, he’d never coached. His hobby was art. Here he turns out what was during that era the best team continually year-in and year-out in the state of Illinois.
LC: Not only that but also a lifelong influence on the students that he came in contact with.
BL: Absolutely, no question. It’s just an amazing thing.
LC: I’m glad you added some additional—

BL: Everybody that I know, and again, I’m probably in contact still with as many as fifteen, twenty guys that were on that team. They’ll tell you the same thing I told you.

LC: I’m glad that you put a little bit more detail about him in this interview because he’s clearly an important influence on your own growing up and becoming the person that we’re hearing about in this interview.

BL: I thought if I recalled correctly we had mentioned the other three coaches and we got hung up on my spelling of Jim Krumpelstaedter’s name.

LC: I think that’s right.

BL: I thought we got sidetracked and I didn’t remember so I thought, well.

LC: I’m glad you did. Good. Perfect.

BL: Then the other thing as far as going into the Army and everything else, I didn’t have to either go in the Army or go to Vietnam. I actually cheated on my physical because I had flunked it because I have a high-frequency hearing loss. The time I was going into the military they were basically trying to get rid of people. Vietnam was on the downswing and all this sort of stuff. They’re going to the draft lottery. So when I took the physical and flunked it, then I took it again and I passed it just by guess and by golly. I don’t know if you’re familiar with the hearing tests they give you. You sit in a booth and you put the earphones on and you’re supposed to press a button when you hear a little monotone. They vary the tone by frequency. Well, I cannot hear the high frequencies. So when I found out what the problem was, I went into the booth a second time at my request, I just simply pushed the button down whenever I thought it might be ringing and I passed. Then I went to Ft. Benning, they flunked me again. I said, “I wanted to stay in,” and the doctor said, “Okay, you can stay in.” Then they said, “All you guys that are here now that are not regular Army, are here for Reserve Army. We’re going to change you to active duty for training, ADT. You’ll do your three months of basic here in infantry officer’s school and then you’ll go to a reserve unit of your choosing.” I told them I didn’t want to do that. I said, “If you send me to a reserve unit I will go to Canada because I don’t want to go to meetings once a month. I’m either going to be in or not in the Army.” Then everybody laughs at the choices they give you, “Where would you like to be stationed?” Every once in a while they’ll do that if the
needs of the service can put up with your request. So I requested overseas duty thinking
“Maybe I’ll go to Germany or someplace like that, do a lot of skiing and drink dark beer
and have fun.” They said, “That’s fine, but you must understand that if you select
overseas duty there are two places you’ll go. You’ll either go to Korea or Vietnam and
we get to pick.” I said, “Okay, have at it.” So the only reason I’m saying this is future
students and historians have to realize that everybody—and my situation isn’t all that
unique—everybody was not rushing to find ways to get out of the military. In fact, my
actions were reflections of the repugnance I had for people that went to great lengths to
dodge the draft. I can acknowledge and recognize someone’s sincere belief insofar as
they don’t want to be in a war. They want to be in the military. That’s fine and good, but
there was so much sleazy activity. Payoffs, bribes, phony doctors, phony this, phony
that, and I thought that was rather smelly. I simply couldn’t bring myself to do that and
others were the same way.

LC: Your information about the different things that, corrupt or otherwise, people
were doing to get out of line so that they wouldn’t be sent overseas came from what
sources?
BL: It was commonly known at the time. You’d hear guys say, “Yeah, I went
down to the local National Guard unit and paid the sergeant two hundred bucks or
whatever and he put my name on the top of the list.” It was endemic. There were many,
many, especially in the latter part of the ’60s and early ’70s, there were many ways to
avoid the draft, many, many, many ways.

LC: That just sickened you?
BL: Yeah. I didn’t mind if someone would have said, “My conscience dictates
that I do not participate in a war.” That’s fine. That’s cool. That’s great. I have no
problem. I did have problems with people that were absorbed in the theatrics of it all and
basically were players on a stage, so to speak. But there are sincere people and I have
absolutely no problem with them whatsoever. I have no problem with sincere people
who willingly went to jail.

LC: Some of those people, Quakers and others, were actually given an
assignment within the military structure, but outside of Vietnam.
BL: There was two non-combatant classifications on top of the fact that you could get CO (conscientious objector) status. It wasn’t conscientious objector status. Then you had to serve two years of alternative service working in a hospital. You didn’t even have to go into the military. Then in the military you could—first of all, it was more difficult in the mid-’60s than in the later ’60s and the early ’70s. But you could put in for an MOS, military occupational specialty. Pretty much guaranteed you were not going to be in combat.

LC: Like which ones?

BL: Finance. Transportation. Quartermaster. Although some transportation and quartermaster people, especially transportation running those truck convoys they could have some very interesting times over there. Judge advocate general, this and that, so forth and so on. There were ways. You could get, what was it? There was two conscientious objector status. One is that you wouldn’t serve in the military at all. One was I think—I can’t remember the designation, but you would serve in the military, but you would not carry a weapon, you would not kill anybody. About seven hundred, eight hundred Seventh-Day Adventists served as combat medics in Vietnam under that designation. I think it’s IOY or something like that. It’s immaterial what the designation is, I suppose.

LC: No, it’s actually helpful if you can remember it. That’s great. It might be helpful for somebody who wanted to track this down.

BL: It’s I, the letter I, the letter O, either Y, I think it’s Y, it might be A. I’m not exactly sure. What that’s supposed to designate I don’t know. There was a designation that you could apply for which says “I will serve in the military. I will not carry a weapon. I will not kill anybody.” Again documented fact, it’s not rumor. Somewhere upwards of seven hundred, eight hundred Seventh-Day Adventists served as combat medics in Vietnam. That’s a very dangerous job.

LC: Absolutely, yes. Corpsmen and field medics were at great risks, obviously, there in combat operations all the time. That was their job.

BL: In fact, one of those conscientious objectors who served as a combat medic got the Medal of Honor.

LC: Do you recall that name? Do you remember that?
BL: No I don’t, but I know one of them did. This was after he’d already been recommended for a Silver Star. Of course, that had not been processed. By the time he was—it was posthumous because he was killed. In that incident, the later incident, he was recommended for a Medal of Honor and he got it.

LC: Bill, when you were presented with the either-Vietnam-or-Korea scenario did you have a reaction to that choice? It wasn’t really a choice, but those two options?

BL: I just said, “Go for it.” Well, that wasn’t even a cliché then. I just said, “Yeah, do what you want.”

LC: Just tell me which one.

BL: Yeah, just let me know where you want me to go. Then shortly thereafter my name was on the bulletin board for Vietnamese language school. I thought, “Well, okay. I guess you’ve made your choice.”

LC: Korea though would have been equally fine with you? It wouldn’t have been either greater or lesser evil?

BL: Yeah. It was just, “Okay, just let me know.” I didn’t have any burning hope that I’d go to Korea as opposed to Vietnam. It was simply a matter of “Well, I guess I’ll find out,” and I did.

LC: Were there any other additional bits that you had remembered?

BL: We can sidestep this if we’re going to cover it later. In the last session we discussed my going to different advisory teams and provincial people and ARVN units and things of this nature.

LC: Yes. This is a good time to talk about that.

BL: Okay. In addition to doing that, wherever I went and I ended up being TDY, temporary duty, in eighteen provinces. There’s forty-four in Vietnam.

LC: This is doing your first year there?

BL: No, in total. In total, but in the first year the process was the same. You would have off-duty time. I always wandered about. I’d go on these walkabouts. Sometimes I’d even rent, and talk with some little kid and he’d have a sampan and I’d rent a sampan for three hours and he’d take me around. I’d go to different places. So my exposure was not limited simply to official military, government channels, but with a real broad spectrum of Vietnamese people. I essentially lived in a Vietnamese dimension of
reality when I was not on duty. Those are the people with whom I had most contact. So
it’s not a matter of just, “Okay this guy ran around and he talked to the ARVN guys in
Rach Gia or Cao Lanh or here and there and see how he just gobbled up all the official
poop.” This is a lot of hours and time spent with people at noodle stands and rice farmers
and all kinds of stuff. So it’s not simply a matter of my absorbing the message conveyed
by the South Vietnamese establishment, such as it was. It’s an impression that’s
thoroughly leavened by an exposure to regular, normal folks.

LC: Given that background, can you talk in general terms about your
observations of the security situation in MR-IV in early 1972?

BL: It was not strategically threatened by the communists. By that I mean they
were definitely capable of killing people and they did so with some regularity. But it was
not uniform throughout the Delta. Chuong Thien way down to the western Delta, a nasty
place. Dinh Tuong province was a nasty place. Parts of Vinh Long and Vinh Binh or Tra
Vinh—the last two names are the same name for one province—could be bad sometimes.
It was very much a war in flux except for the near-constant level of hostilities in Chuong
Thien and Dinh Tuong. To a lesser extent Kien Hoa or Ben Tre, same name for one
province. But at any given time the communists could not have risen up and taken the
Delta. There was absolutely no way. There was a constant war going on, but it was a
war of mobility and harassment and periodic major engagements. But they were in no
way shape or form, they, the communists, were in no way shape or form able to dominate
the Mekong Delta. It should be pointed out that by ’72 many of the so-called VC units
were manned by NVA fillers. Here’s the most populous area in the country and the
communists could not recruit enough to sustain their forces in the Mekong Delta.

LC: So these were men who had infiltrated into South Vietnam from the North,
especially, and had main force training in the North?

BL: That is true.

LC: Were there actually to your information, either at the time or subsequently,
NVA units operating as such?

BL: Yes.

LC: Okay. Do you remember any of the numbers that could be associated with
those? What level of—?
BL: Regimental and above. It was metamorphosing the whole time. First you
started out with filling VC regional force battalions of the 261st or the 514th in the
northern Delta with NVA fillers. Then all of a sudden you have the Z-15, Z-18
regiments. There was a Dong Tap-1 regiment, which ostensibly was a VC unit, but was
manned—it would have fallen apart without NVA fillers. The NVA sustained—less so
than in I Corps. I don’t know if anybody can give you a precise number, even the
communists.

LC: And if they do, beware, probably.

BL: Yeah. By experience that’s what you should be prepared to do. The fact
remains, I think it can be well established, were it not for the NVA presence what was
left of the VC even if they were fifty percent of the main force. Now there were still
resurgent and local forces and this and that. There were still VC sentiments, pro-VC
sentiments in the Delta at Chuong Thien province, parts of Soc Trang, or Ba Xuyen, same
name, one province. They were here and there. It was like the Ku Klux Klan in the
south. The fact of the matter is, the Ku Klux Klan was very strong in the South, but it
also did not speak for every single white person that was there. So you still had a
military threat. Here’s something that’s never raised and it is a key point. It’s like I
forget the name of the Sherlock Holmes novel where the key factor is the dog that did not
bark. It’s not what happened that’s important, it’s what did not happen that’s important.
There’s two ways to get Mekong Delta rice to the rice warehouses and rice mills in
Saigon. Again, I think the Delta grew about sixty percent of South Vietnam’s rice.

Whatever that percentage is if you were to stop that flow of rice to the rest of the country,
the rest of the country is going to starve. You’ve got to go on QL-4 which is Highway 4,
a two-lane, rather primitive, actually, asphalt road or the Cho Gao Canal, which parallels
QL-4 through eastern Dinh Tuong, goes through Go Cong and a few other and then up to
Saigon. If you were to cut QL-4 and the Cho Gao Canal you would starve Saigon. Panic
would set in, I don’t know, within a month because that flow of food and all that
commerce, all your produce form the Mekong Delta is not going there. So on one hand
you’ve got farmers that are sitting on the rice in the Mekong Delta and aren’t getting paid
for it. On the other hand you’ve got people that are panicking and going hungry
throughout the rest of the country. The communists never once ever cut QL-4 or the Cho
Gao Canal for an extended period of time. They’d blow things up every now and then and traffic would be held up for a couple of days. But in ’72 it would have been much to their advantage to have cut both of those LOCs, lines of communication, during the ’72 offensive. You’re talking about a double-whammy panic here. You’ve got NVA up north that are almost tipping the country over. Now there’s no more rice coming from Saigon. This is really bad. They never, ever, ever did that, nor could they.

LC: Bill, let me ask you about two things that come up in that discussion I think are interesting. First of all, with regard to the areas in the deep Delta that you described as nasty or more likely to have VC military activity, were those by and large areas that had historically been held by the southern communists? Do you know?

BL: Yes, absolutely.

LC: Do you have any information or details or can you articulate a little bit more about that historical significance back into the ’50s?

BL: I don’t much unless they’re from the western Delta moving east towards Saigon. I don’t know a whole lot about Chuong Thien’s background, although it was not one of Vietnam’s traditional provinces. As I understand it, Ngo Dinh Diem or one of his successors made it a province out of adjacent areas of other provinces to administratively deal with a very serious problem area. So parts of these other provinces, as I understand it, were so bad that it made sense just to lump them all together instead of having terrible areas of three or four different provinces, let’s just make it one real bad province and leave it at that.

LC: And kind of maybe almost a no-go zone in a way? Go light on—?

BL: You’ve administratively isolated or compartmentalized a single problem. That’s my understanding. I’m fairly sure of that. I don’t know the specific history.

Again, I do know that Chuong Thien was not one of the traditional provinces. It was never a hundred percent secure in part because they had to hold it because an infiltration corridor came down through Kian Giang Province through the Tram Forest and a bunch of other places. It was also adjacent to the U Minh Forest. U Minh means “dreary and gloomy,” which is kind of a neat name. But it was adjacent to the U Minh Forest. So they had to have this Chuong Thien province and areas close to it to sustain themselves in those areas and the lower Delta because that’s where the supplies and stuff came down.
LC: That’s their line of communication?

BL: Exactly. There was an infiltration corridor, again it came from Cambodia, kind of parallel to the axis of Kien Giang province and then went down, I guess you could call it a stronghold. It was an area that was always contested so they had freedom of movement in adjoining areas of the Yu Minh Forest lower Kien Giang Province and in Chuong Thien. As far as Dinh Tuong and My Tho Province, the traditional name and Kien Hoa or Binh Tre, also the traditional name, Binh Tre is to the VC as Mississippi was to the Ku Klux Klan. Madame Nyguen Thi Binh, who was later the foreign minister of the National Liberation Front and the Provisional Revolutionary Government, *et cetera* was born there as was Nyguen Thi Dinh who was supposedly the deputy commander of the Viet Cong military forces in South Vietnamese. Any Vietnamese name that has T-H-I in the middle designates a female.

LC: Right.

BL: Okay, you know that. Most people don’t.

LC: No, that’s good.

BL: It was so renowned and again I can’t prove this, but I know I read it somewhere I just don’t know where that somewhere is. Binh Tre was so renowned for its revolutionary fervor that supposedly there’s a street in Havana, Cuba named Binh Tre Boulevard.

LC: Really? I wouldn’t be surprised.

BL: Yeah. Whether or not that’s true the fact is it did have mythic proportions in the annals of revolutionary fervor. Binh Tre was just crawling with VC. Incidentally, the other name, Kien Hoa, the new name, the South Vietnamese played on it because they said that the VC in Kien Hoa are like *con kien*, like ants crawling all over. You can talk to guys who were in the brown water navy. I forget which brigade it was. It was the 9th Infantry Division was down in the Delta. But places like Mo Cay District and everything else were just nasty, nasty, nasty. Interestingly enough, by ’74 the strategic threat, if you want to define a strategic threat to a province, had atrophied. There would have been a small-scale ongoing war left to it’s own devices for Kien Hoa, probably for another couple years and then they just would have said, “Why bother? We’re not winning.” They collapsed. It was a long-term collapsing process that began in the summer of ’68.
and was verified by the defection of some fairly high-ranking VC military leaders in Kien Hoa/Binh Tre. They said, “You know we can’t recruit anymore.” It’s not because these people love the government. It’s just that no one wants to be VC because you’ll die. You’ll lose. Even if you’re good guys, you’re gonna lose. So screw it. I’m not going to go with you anymore. So the military capabilities of the Kien Hoa/Binh Tre VC took a strategic hit themselves and were, again, you can’t say there was no war, but you can say that they were not anywhere near able to seize the province. It just wasn’t going to happen.

LC: What was the turning point in VC strength then?

BL: Probably ’68, ’69.

LC: You wouldn’t put it as precisely as, say, the Tet Offensive?

BL: No, there’s nothing—you’re really getting on thin ice if you say something precisely happened at this time unless it’s a discreet event. So-and-so did this and that, blah, blah, blah. But the processes in Vietnam, and this is why a lot of historians have problems with it, the process is historical forces changed—slowly maybe isn’t the right word—but within insufficient dramatic explosive impact that a lot of people could see it. A lot of historical processes are that way. I think it was Boris Pasternak that said, “You can’t see history. It’s like grass growing.” So they were probably placed on a downward trajectory in mid-’68 and it just kept going down. Somewhere for some graduate student out there, there is a doctoral dissertation for you that would just be amazing, the study of Kien Hoa or Binh Tre Province. Valhalla to the VC. Then all of a sudden it’s just—not all of sudden, but it ends up being, “Hey, I don’t want to join the VC anymore. You guys are okay, but you’re all getting killed. I think you’re a little bit crazy anyhow.”

LC: If you were advising this putative graduate student of the future, would you tell them to look for the sources of the decline in VC strength in that area, specifically? Would you ask them to look at VC structure and program or would you have them look at South Vietnamese and American military in clinical—?

BL: Both because they’re inextricably intertwined. You can talk, where you can scrape out some information. There’s some great stuff in the advisory team provincial reports that they sent out I think once a month or once every two months or something like that and all the things that were going on. It wasn’t just the war. They were building
schools, maternity clinics, dispensaries, resettling refugees. Not to say that all the
peasants in Binh Tre/Kien Hoa had Nguyen Van Thieu, the president’s picture on the
wall and worshipping it every night. The fact of the matter is, their life was improved by
A, stability and security, and B, by the programs that they had access to in which self-
elected villages councils would say, “Yeah, we need a school more than we need this. Or
we need this more than we need that.” Of course, you have this massive advisory effort,
which was not totally dedicated to the destructive aspects of war saying, “Okay, we’ll do
this and how about we get this school funded for you?” Great, super. You combine all
these things together and this is where a lot of people, I think, have problems with
Vietnam because it’s the sum of many factors. It’s not simply this happened, therefore
that happened. All of a sudden the people are aware of the fact that these VC showed just
how loony there were at Tet. They said they were going to win and they didn’t. They
got whacked. Now it’s dangerous to be a VC. This is not smart. All of a sudden there’s
security. So I’m Mr. Rice Farmer. I can make a little bit more money. Oh, here’s land
reform and now homeless, landless peasant families are getting some land. Here’s a
government program and by golly a veterinarian is going to come tell me why my pigs
are sick, which means nothing to too many Americans. But if your pig dies, you’re
hurting. You’re hurting.

LC: Right, that’s economically dead center for a peasant family.
BL: Yeah. Even though sentiments may have, and underline the word may have,
still remained pro-VC, I question whether that’s the case. Pragmatically speaking the
people basically said, “You know, I think at least for the visible future this is the way to
go.” So you can get these province reports and somehow, somewhere I don’t know if
Rand has them or who has them, but if you get POW interrogation and Chieu Hoi
defector debriefings, they’ll tell you a lot. Then you can compare that with the number of
incidents and the nature of incidents. You can have a hundred incidents one month and
fifty of those are ground attacks you’ve got a pretty serious problem. Then a month later
or a year later you have a hundred incidents, but they’re all low-intensity standoff attacks
by fire. You drop a few mortar rounds and then skedaddle out of the area. That’s a
totally different situation. You’re subjected to a ground attack by a VC regiment,
VC/NVA regiment. It’s a complicated interweaving of many, many, many factors with
many, many, many indicators. That would be—if I had time and inclination, I think
I’d—if I felt like getting a PhD, that’s what I’d do. That would be very fascinating.

LC: Some of what you said also kicks off the second area that I wanted to sort of
go back and see if you could say something more about. That was to do with Chieu Hoi
and defectors. Would that have been the best source of information about the infiltration
of NVA fillers into old or defunct or de-manned VC units?

BL: It would probably be a good one. I don’t know if it’d be the best. It
certainly would be a good one. Someone would have to be very, very careful if you’ve
got a hoi chanh vien, which is what they’re called in Vietnamese, from this province in
this year. Be very careful in trying to equate what he or she says with another hoi chanh
vien from another province in another year. You’ve got a totally different story, but that
would be a way to go. Incidentally, that was part of the problem with the implosion of
the VC. Nothing succeeds like success and nothing fails like failure. But with the loss of
the VC in ’68 especially their cadre, they started sending down northerners. Some of the
southerners didn’t take kindly to this. They didn’t really care for it.

LC: Can you discuss a little bit about the feelings and the animosity between
northerners and southerners and what that’s based on and how that played out?

BL: From my observation it’s nothing unique to Vietnam. There’s always
regional prejudices. If you go down to Alabama and walk around in some bowling alleys
and some taverns down there and say, “What do you think of Boston lawyers?” you’re
going to hear something. If you go to Boston and talk to lawyers and say, “What do you
think about rednecks down in Georgia who catch catfish with their bare hands?” So
you’re going to hear some other—that sort of thing. But it was very real. Northerners
would sometimes pull me aside and say, “Look, you speak pretty good Vietnamese, but if
you really want to speak it correctly you have to listen to northerners because
southerners, their accent is just primitive.” Southerners would then pull me aside every
once in a while and say, “You know, look, you’ve go to watch out for northerners.
They’ll always smile. They’re pushy. They’re aggressive. They’re pretending they’re
you’re friends, but they’re just trying to manipulate you and get what they want.” Then
the central Vietnamese, they’re these stereotypes, and again as with every stereotype
there’s a grain of innocent truth to it. Central Vietnamese are kind of viewed as these
abstract intellectual people who wonder what’s the sound of a butterfly wing and all that
dkind of stuff. They equivocate on everything because they look at both the northerners
and southerners as pursuing idiotic illusions and so forth and so on. So regionalism,
yeah, very, very much a factor.

LC: What other sources of information would, for example, you have had access
to about the infiltration rate of personnel from the North going to the Delta?

BL: We had that on the money. I’m not, probably not even sure I can go into
detail on that, but we had it on the money. There was just no question about it. It was
not a guesstimate. It was not conjecture. We had specifics. Then, of course, you get a
POW from such and such a battalion or searching for a Chieu Hoi from such a regiment,
“How many guys in your unit are from so-and so, from North Vietnam?” They go,
“Well, fifty percent or thirty percent or whatever.” Then sometimes the POW would be
an NVA in a VC unit. Well, that’s a tip off right there. It’s less frequently that *hoi chanh*
would be an NVA in a VC unit or even an NVA unit. There was what you’d have to call
hard information on the number of NVA coming in South Vietnam. Again I’m not—

LC: Did the trust and confidence that you and others had in that kind of
evaluation of the internal threat inside the Delta, did that figure in, in any way for
planning and meeting that threat either at the provincial force level or above?

BL: Because the Delta was reasonably secure, especially after the ’72 Offensive
kicked off, the Delta was pretty much an afterthought. In fact, one division and one
brigade from another division and one ranger group were redeployed from the Delta to III
Corps, taken completely out. So you’ve lost almost a third, or redeployed almost a third
of your main force military out of the area to deal with more serious threats elsewhere in-
country. Nothing much really happened. In fact, I recall stupid Stanley Karnow, you can
tell him I said that, too. He talks about the ’72 Offensive and he says something about,
“Well, they did this in I Corps and they did this in II Corps and then they did this in III
Corps.” Something about the, “inexorable arithmetic of war,” played out in the Delta.
That sounds so profound, but it means nothing.

LC: Right.

BL: Inexorable arithmetic of war? I take offense at anyone compelling me to
read such nonsense. But what happened in the Delta despite the fact that almost a third of
the ARVN regulars were moved out was really not much of anything. Some of the things they tried were absolutely stupid. They tried to take San Giang district town in Dinh Tuong province in the daytime. I don’t even know if they tried to take it, but they conducted a direct military assault on the district town, which isn’t much. If you went through San Giang district town or a lot of other districts you’d have no idea that this is the equivalent to a county seat. This is a gas station and a drug store on the Alaskan highway eight thousand miles from anyplace. Not much. They tried to take that in the daytime and there were no American units defending or counter attacking. They just were decimated. If an American commander had pulled off an operation like that, he’d be court marshaled or should be. Just ran up right in the face of all this firepower and just got mowed down. It was absurd.

LC: Do you remember the details of that particular engagement?

BL: I don’t know all the details because I wasn’t right in San Giang district town, but I was just outside of it.

LC: Can you say what you recall about, for example, the ARVN or was it provincial forces who were actually standing that?

BL: I believe it was ARVN 7th. I’m almost sure of that. But I was with one of the guys in the advisory team in Dinh Thuong province at the time. This guy comes wheeling up in a jeep and he’s another advisor and he’s all raggedy looking. He’s wounded in the arm and he’s got a pressure bandage on there. Of course, they knew each other so they started talking. The guy that I was with asked this other guy, “How are we doing?” We, as the ARVN 7th Division, the South Vietnamese. He said, “We are kicking royal ass.” He said, “It’s just incredible.” Then they joked about—the other guy joked to the other guy about learning not to stand too close to B-40 rounds or something like that because, of course, he’d been wounded. This is totally opposed to what you’d see on television here in the States.

LC: Yes, that’s right.

BL: It’s always despair and this, “Oh, God, it’s just terrible.” I mean that guy was laughing, “We are kicking bloody royal ass.” Then they joke about being wounded and all this stuff. I thought this will be interesting on TV, but they’ll never show it. Of
course, no one was down there to film it, either. They were South Vietnamese and
nobody cared.

LC: Right. Do you know what the VC assets were put into that daylight
operation, which was unusual enough?

BL: I believe it was at least a battalion and there’s probably some local force VC
that were support roles. I don’t recall. That was pretty heavy. They called in TAC air,
the fast movers. The jets were coming in and all this kind of stuff. It was a big thing. I’m
sure their objective was not to take San Giang district town itself.

LC: Probably not.

BL: But to divert attention from something else, probably to maintain sufficient
level of military activities to prevent further redeployment of MR-IV assets to III Corps.

LC: They certainly didn’t, though, anticipate getting chewed up in an operation
like that.

BL: I don’t even know if they ever anticipated some of the things they did. It
was not a matter of anticipating it, it was a matter of “We have to do this to keep the
cauldron of war boiling.”

LC: Can you say something more about that mentality and what you might have
learned about VC thinking, about operational objectives?

BL: Yeah, I didn’t really learn it until—well, I learned it in part when I was there,
but also in examining evidence—since I’ve returned here—evidence of events that took
place before I was there. Some of the attacks that VC/NVA units were committed to
were absolute nonsense. Attacking some of these, in ’69 and ’70 attacking some of these
American firebases and just getting mowed down, online assault, infantry assault.
Infantry artillery fire support base that has beehive rounds. It makes absolutely no sense
at all.

LC: You mean operationally it was not a reasonable risk to take?

BL: No. The only gain you can infer and people say, “Well, you don’t have
proof.” Well, you come up with a better explanation. I don’t think you can unless you
want to just assume they’re completely stupid.

LC: Which it’s obvious they were not and are not.
BL: Basically what they were doing, it’s called body count. It’s called attrition. It’s just kill more Americans, throw them into American living rooms through the TV screen, wear America down. It’s war over and over again. That’s the only explanation that makes any sense. I don’t know if they had any other plans, but they’re not going to overrun some of these places. They couldn’t have and they should have known better. It was really horrible stuff. In fact, in ’74 I believe it was, there was a little flurry of feints and preliminary attacks by NVA armor in parts of III Corps. These little armor probes and this and that and so forth and so on. So, of course, tank fever was spreading around. Okay, we’ve got to come up with new tank defensive measures and so forth. The thing was you were waiting for the other shoe to fall. Now what? They don’t probe and conduct some half-hearted attacks and then pull back. What are they diverting things for? Now what? The other shoe never fell. Nothing ever happened. What in the hell was that about? Later on I got a hold of some captured documents and they conducted these probing attacks, which their people get killed, ARVN gets killed, everybody else gets—people get killed, simply to test ARVNs anti-tank defensive measures. You know, if an American commander had conducted an attack just to experiment to test can you imagine the headline that would be in the paper? You’re not even trying to win. It’s not just a matter of take the hill and then give it back. It’s a matter of, “Well, let’s see what happens when we do this.” You’re using your troops for guinea pigs.

LC: Right, it’s just an experiment.

BL: Exactly.

LC: Right. Experiments can either succeed or fail.

BL: Yeah.

LC: The cost associated with failure can be quite high, at least in human terms.

BL: Yeah. The stuff they did probably from ’69 on was a calculated measure basically to keep the war going, wear down American resolve, what little there was left, without any hope. They certainly had no hopes of significant tactical victories in ’69 or ’70 or ’71. As a matter of fact, all their offensive, all indices of a transitive operation were declining in those years.

LC: What kinds of indices were those?
BL: Assassinations, terrorist activities, battalion-sized ground attacks, and the overall level of incidents whether they’re ABFs (attack by fire) or ground probes, everything that was negative was going from the standpoint of the allies, the people of South Vietnam, everything that was negative was going down. This is documented fact. Everything that was positive was going up. More people reported less military activity in their area. Fewer people reported any exposure to either allied or VC/NVA firepower. People say, “Oh, yeah, here’s just McNamara statistics again.” Fine. You can laugh all you want, but you find anything that refutes the suggestion, derived or in part supported by that data that things indeed were not improving in South Vietnam, and the evidence is simply not there, unless you want to cherry pick it, just go find something that proves your point.

LC: Right. Looking across these indices would the characterization that you’ve given be true just for MR-IV or would you say all of South Vietnam?

BL: I don’t know as much about II Corps and I Corps, especially III Corps because that’s where they attacked some of those fire support bases up in northern III Corps. In part they had to do that because at that time the allies were finally—and this is 1969 now—finally stumbling across some of these logistical aortas, base camps in War Zone C and D that they had never known about before. The whole series of trails and this and that. So in ’69 they’re stumbling across this thing and this had to be viewed very seriously by the communists. My God, this is the aorta, this is the lifeblood. This is what keeps this thing going. In part that was probably an effort to divert attention away from some of those allied operations. J.D. Coleman who wrote Incursion, he’s also a Vietnam veteran, he maintains and I think with good logic that they wanted to launch a major offensive in ’69, but they didn’t have the initiative and they had the rug pulled out from underneath their feet by all the logistical dislocations and disjunctures and everything else. They’re basically fighting to survive in ’69 and ’70, to maintain their viability.

LC: The movement of, I think you said main force trained NVA or PAVN (People’s Army of Vietnam), people down into the Delta was part of recovering from—it was like the quickest way to recover from the losses and the sort of gutting of the VC that you’ve talked about?
BL: Yeah, it was probably the only way they could have maintained a—well, logic dictates you ask, “Why else would they have done it?” If this is South Vietnam’s most populated area and has some of the highest, not all, but some of the highest population densities in the whole country. When there’s areas that have been traditionally VC supporting, why would they bother sending all these people down if they could recruit right there? Because you had a problem with NVA recruits because they didn’t know the area. People say, “The VC just knew everything. They knew where to hide and this and that.” Well, that’s true, but the NVA didn’t. They didn’t know the Mekong Delta. They didn’t. These people always say the jungles and the Mekong Delta. I’m not a jungleologist, whatever those people are, but if you’re talking jungle like you might have in III Corps and II Corps and I Corps, you don’t have that kind of jungle in the Mekong Delta. Ninety percent of the area is cultivated and it’s rice or swamp or this and that or coconut plantations or sugar cane. It’s not jungle.

LC: That’s the basis of its economic importance, really, is the productive, arable land.

BL: True. There was a different kind of war, especially in the northern Delta, well all throughout the Delta because of the nature of development where people lived along canals. You had this tree line warfare, which is totally different than what you encounter in I Corps and II Corps when you’re going up and down the highlands and in true jungle in these rugged mountains. The tree line warfare—tree lines are dangerous.

LC: Can you go ahead and just say a few more words about why that would be for someone who doesn’t get the distinction?

BL: Yeah, because you’re playing this lethal chess game. You’ve got to maneuver and sweep here and go here and go there. You don’t know what in the hell is in that tree line. That’s all you have for the most part in the populated areas of the Delta, these rice paddies, tree line, rice paddies, tree line, rice paddies, tree line, and along canals and stuff. So it’s not as if you’re in the jungles of the Mekong Delta. Not to say there’s not some pretty heavily-forested areas in the U Minh Forest and up around the Seven Mountains and places like that. It’s not the triple canopy stuff they always talk about in II Corps and I Corps. It’s just that these tree lines can contain extremely lethal threats. So you’ve got rather than send out point elements you’ve got to send out lead
flankers on either side. Make sure there’s nothing in those tree lines before the main
body of your unit goes into what might be a kill zone of an ambush. So it’s just a
different kind of war. It’s very fluid because the VC units always moved around. They
didn’t just stay in the village and then defend it. They’re on the move all the time. They
had to stay on the move. It was this floating crap game. You wouldn’t know from time
to time. There were exceptions. There were areas in south central Dinh Thuong
province, which basically remained nasty to the very, very, very end. They were just bad
places.

LC: Bill, can you talk for a minute or two about War Zone C and D and how the
identification of communist assets in those areas may or may not have shifted the military
situation and to a lesser extent the political situation in MR-IV?

BL: All I can tell you about War Zone C and D is basic—most of what I can tell
you is what I’ve read. I’ve been through—I haven’t even been through there. I’ve been
through parts of the Iron Triangle. War Zone C and D are up north. They were French
designations, basically expanses of very thinly populated areas by virtue of the foliage
and lack of population. You’ve got pretty much a free pass to move about as long as you
maintain some degree of stealth and secrecy. Where the C and D came from when they
got that name, I don’t know. For all I know, the Viet Minh named them. There were
always these giant black holes from which bad things would emanate. You’d never know
where or how. Bad things come out of there and they’re in there somewhere. But in ’67
they put a mobile guerilla force in War Zone C. That’s the first time. This is in 1967
now. This is the first time that the allies ever went into War Zone C after the other guys.
They had plenty of free reign. That was the beginning of a flow and a very disjointed
herky-jerky process that led to by ’69, again and I would refer everyone to Coleman’s
He lays out pretty convincingly that finally progress—again nothing succeeds like
success, nothing fails like failure. With the collapse of the VC and with the more
intensive probing and operations in the War Zones C and D they would stumble across
these logistical pathways that were vital to the sustaining VC/NVA military capabilities
in War Zone III. Really put them off balance. All the extending into especially after
1970, all the accounts that you hear are after, especially after the Cambodian incursion.
Well, things got real quiet in III Corps, big surprise. I don’t know if they affected things much in IV Corps until the ’72 Offensive because An Loc was so important and they deployed the 21st Division to An Loc. I’m not sure where they deployed a regiment of the 9th Division and I’m not sure where they deployed the Ranger group, but they took a hell of a lot of main force units out of the Delta in ’72 and that was to play out again in ’75. It started in December of ’74 the VC/NVA launched a very significant offensive in the Mekong Delta at that time. You could smell it coming. You just knew it was coming. You just knew a big shoe was going to drop here. I’m convinced the reason for that was simply to tie up the South Vietnamese so they couldn’t redeploy any ARVN regular units to III Corps where they were about to—guess what—attack Phuoc Long/Song Be.

LC: So the principle effect on the discovery and operational response of the C and D, the locating of assets there for MR-IV is really not until ’72?

BL: Say again.

LC: So it was only in 1972 that the Military Region IV actually began to feel the effects of the location in response to finding VC and NVA assets in the War Zones C and D? It wasn’t right away when they were first identified?

BL: Right and that wouldn’t have happened were it not for the ’72 Offensive and the threat to An Loc.

LC: You talked about just for minute there about the Iron Triangle. Can you describe that as a geographic location and then also maybe your visit there if you went there more than once?

BL: God, I can’t remember. It’s, surprise, a triangular place. It’s not that big. From Ben Suc to—where? I can’t remember. There’s a hamlet and then the juncture along the Saigon River. If memory serves correctly, it runs maybe twenty miles by twenty miles. It’s almost like a square cut diagonally. It is a triangle. When I went through the southern periphery of it there was nothing going on there. The fact of the matter is for all the stories of the Iron Triangle and the tunnels of Cu Chi and all that stuff, as brilliant as they were as tactical, almost strategic methods, but strategic in terms of mythology more than military capability. By ’72 the Iron Triangle and the tunnels of Cu Chi and all that stuff were incidental to the war. They did not win the war at all.
They were peripheral, epiphenomenal trivia. There were no NVA tanks or artillery that were ever in the Iron Triangle or buried in the tunnels of Cu Chi or anything else. All that stuff came from North Vietnam. It was still a tactical form. Cu Chi was still a bad area for smaller units. People still got assassinated and stuff like that. That was not the primary strategic element which contributed to the demise of South Vietnam unless you wish to acknowledge that the mythology of the unwinnable war was such that Americans gave up on it.

LC: Can you say a couple words about the place of the Cu Chi tunnel complex in the lore of the conflict and how you think that particular place emerged to the, if you want, the prominence and the mythology that it now has?

BL: First off you have to say that they were an incredibly ingenious, tactical device. I say tactical because it was not a strategy to tunnel all of South Vietnam. Aside from that, you have to conclude that this is really grossly exaggerated as a strategic, an actual real strategic factor in the war. The problem you have is that people are attracted to this romantic image of these mysterious people that tunnel and they have hospitals. They probably had drive in movies down there. It’s just everywhere. The fact of the manner is, the Cu Chi tunnels operate in such a miniscule portion from the overall land area of South Vietnam. It’s just a fraction of a percentage. Secondly, and contrary to what some college professors suggest, your regular NVA and/or VC units didn’t sit down there and didn’t just ditty bop and go hide in the tunnels when they wanted to hide. They were on the move. They were digging like soldiers have always dug, paid shovels, dig a foxhole here, dig a bunker there and move again. It was headquarters, hospitals, combat service support, combat support people that were in those Cu Chi tunnels.

LC: So what you might call auxiliary personnel?

BL: Well, they were very important as far as the headquarters. It was important, again, not to understate the tactical nastiness of it. Anyone operating in that area is not going to come away and say, “Oh, it’s no big deal.” It was a hell of a big deal because a lot of people got killed there because those tunnels were nefarious, ‘cause there were booby-trapps, but that was not all of Vietnam. The myth that all these poor high school kids get stuck with is everywhere there were tunnels, everywhere. No there weren’t. No there weren’t. Even to the extent that whatever tunnels were there, they were not
instrumental in winning the war because it was NVA armor, and NVA artillery and NVA
weaponry that won the war, not guerillas storming out of the tunnels at Cu Chi. There
was never once one T-54 tank. There never was a 130mm gun that was stored,
maintained, repaired, fired from, operated with out of the Cu Chi tunnels. It’s the same
as taking, draw a city map or take a county map of Los Angeles. I don’t know how they
divide their crime areas, but take out the three highest crime areas, gangs, and robberies
and all that stuff in the whole area and look at that and go, “Boy, that’s bad.” Are they
going to take over all of Los Angeles County? No. That’s kind of analogous to the
tunnels of Cu Chi.

LC: Why do you think that complex and the idea of guerilla fighters hiding
underground and so forth has become so emblematic in American thinking and American
teaching about the war?

BL: It’s fun to be entertained.

LC: Because it’s entertaining?

BL: The same as *Star Wars*. The same as *Lord of the Rings*. It’s fun to be
entertained. It’s so fun to believe in this. I don’t buy the argument that a lot of people
were really concerned about the people of South Vietnam, you know. Well, if they were
concerned then why didn’t they line up to try and help both people and political prisoners
after 1975? They didn’t. They didn’t. In fact, they were quite conspicuous and
disgustingly so by their absence in the assistance of refugees and remain so to this day.
Again it’s like a good monster movie. You don’t want a monster movie that’s blah. You
want one that scares the hell out of you, like seeing *The Exorcist*. “Wow, that’s great. I
want to go see that again.” Where as you won’t go see a Godzilla movie because it’s so
hokey. You might go watch it, “That’s funny ha, ha, ha.” Boy, *The Exorcist* now that
really scares you. I bet neurologists will someday map out cerebral brain activity and
find that this is a thrill which is just like any self-administered drug. Be it alcohol or
marijuana it gives you a little buzz, a tingle, a high, whatever. It’s simply fun to believe
this stuff.

LC: Also in some way with regard to the Cu Chi tunnels doesn’t it seem to offer
an explanation that it was hidden. It was underground. It was surreptitious. They
wouldn’t meet Americans on the field, that kind of thing. That kind of helps or offers
some balm to the idea that the United States, quote unquote, “Did not win the war.”
BL: Oh, yeah, and again assuming that’s all over Vietnam everywhere, all over it.
Never, of course, tell anyone there were places like Long Xuyen Province or Ho Nai and
places where if you were VC they’d kill you in a minute because they hated your guts.
There was a hell of a lot of people that did not like the communists. All of Vietnam was
not like the tunnels of Cu Chi. That’s like going to the very worst county of Mississippi
in 1961 and saying that this is the way the rest of the country is.
LC: It’s just a false prop, a false explanatory vehicle or something.
BL: I’m sorry.
LC: It’s just a false explanatory vehicle.
BL: Yeah, but it’s fun. It’s neat to talk about. It’s like a great horror story or it’s
like monster movies or something.
LC: Bill, can you talk a little bit about those areas within MR-IV? Again this
would be with regard to your first tour over there that actually were very solidly behind
the South Vietnamese government and anti-VC. Can you describe or name a few of the
areas?
BL: Yeah, there was Go Cong province. You can check this out and I would
encourage all future students who might listen to this or read it to look at the actual data,
the number of incidents reported. You’ll find—I don’t know about the mid-’60s or late
’60s there was nothing going on in Go Cong province, nothing. There was no war. They
might have an ABF now and then. They might have this now and then, but there wasn’t
much going on. People say, “Well, they were just hiding.” No we had pretty good
intelligence. We captured couriers and get all their documents and, “Okay you’re
reporting to this village party secretary here.” There simply wasn’t even a serious
terrorist threat in Go Cong province and to the extent there were VC supporters, they
were, “It was not the time to stick their heads out ‘cause it ain't going to last here.” Same
with Sa Dec Province. Same with Long Xuyen or also know as An Giang Province.
There just wasn’t any war there to speak of. Sa Dec and Long Xuyen/An Giang,
particularly Long Xuyen were predominately f course Hoa Hao. Of course the Hoa Hao,
they hated the communists, absolutely hated them.
LC: The general impression is that I think in the literature is that Hoa Hao were destroyed in the early 1960s.
BL: No, not at all.
LC: Okay. Can you talk about this —?
BL: Well, they had their wars with Ngo Dinh Diem. Tran Van Soai and Ba Cut and a few of those other Hoa Hao generals, one of whom was guillotined. In fact, across the river from Can Tho, across the Mekong River, I don’t remember the name of the town, there was a statue to either Ba Cut or Tran Van Soai, the one who was decapitated. There it is right there, the famous Hoa Hao general. They were defeated as—they wanted to remain and always did want to be autonomous. “We’re Vietnamese, of course. We’re Hoa Hao and none of the rest of the people can do things as well as we do. So just give us our autonomy and you won’t have any problem.” No they were quite significant, certainly in maintaining their own province. You talk to advisors down there and in fact in David Donovan’s book *Once a Warrior King*, he dealt with the Hoa Hao. There’s interviews, other interviews elsewhere with Hoa Hao. You realize that from a Hoa Hao vantage point it was either us or them. They’re going to kill us or we’re going to kill them. It started out, of course, when the Viet Minh massacred a bunch of Hoa Hao leaders in the mid ’40s. Hoa Hao, of course, were fundamentalist Buddhists. It’s interesting that a Hoa Hao temple is devoid of any of the ornate architecture one expects from Buddhists or Cao Dai or Chinese Taoists, a temple with dragons. They look like Honda repair shop or something.
LC: Really? I didn’t know that.
BL: Yes, because the Hoa Hao are fundamentalists. When Huynh Phu So started this back in the Depression era he was their leading, their founding prophet. He said, “Look, Buddha doesn’t care about”— and I’m paraphrasing here, but “Buddha doesn’t care about gold candlesticks and gold pictures of the statues of Buddha. He doesn’t care about this. He cares only about the purity of your soul. All this other stuff is peripheral nonsense. We don’t need it.” So they didn’t have ornate religious buildings. Of course, the Cao Dai had some really phantasmagoric stuff.
LC: Yes, very.
BL: Any regular Buddhist temples are rather ornate. Even your Cambodian, Suryavarman Buddhists temples were—I mean, I thought they were picturesque and interesting.

LC: Did the Hoa Hao have its own security forces?

BL: Unofficially. Long Xuyen was such a Hoa Hao stronghold that if you weren’t Hoa Hao you just went along for the ride because there was no sense in trying to—they had their provincial regional forces and then your district popular forces.

LC: What was the relationship between those forces and the ARVN military structure in the South Vietnamese governmental structure at the province level? Do you know?

BL: There wasn’t much, the reason being because Long Xuyen and An Giang and Sa Dec were basically so secure by then. I know earlier in the war, Sa Dec had some spillover from Dinh Thuong and a few other provinces. But in the ’70s Long Xuyen did not have a war. Consequently you had no need for ARVN regulars at all. There wasn’t much in the way of military activity. It was a very, very quiet province. In fact I spoke to one—I never had to go to Long Xuyen because there was never anything for me to do. Later on I talked to a guy who was an advisor there and I asked him, “What the hell did you guys do?” He said, “Well, we’d get up in the morning and run PT (physical training) and then we’d do some field training exercises or we’d go zero in our weapons.” Almost like being in a National Guard unit here, not quite that setting. There was still a war, but a lot of the war in Long Xuyen was a spill over from adjacent provinces rather than Long Xuyen itself. Again the Hoa Hao made no bones about it. If you’re a communist we’ll kill you. The communists knew that so they just stayed. Cost of living is just way too high in Long Xuyen Province.

LC: Right just by-pass it.

BL: Yeah, just forget about it.

LC: Don’t go in there. You mentioned VC couriers perhaps being caught and documents being captured. I wonder if you can comment at all on the Combined Document Exploitation Center within MACV. Do you know much about that center?

BL: I know of it and I know people that work there. I think they had some good stuff. Remember, none of it was what you’d call operational intelligence or it wasn’t
something you’d respond to at a minute’s notice. “Look at this we just got this. Let’s go
do this.” It was more of a compilation to prepare sort of an intelligence encyclopedia of
the *modus operandi*, weaponry, *et cetera* and so forth and so on. From what I know of it,
they did some pretty good stuff. Again, it was not operational for the most part. It was
vital in the long run to develop an understanding, an understanding of changes in
direction. So I don’t have anything bad to say about them from what I know.

LC: Right. If a document was seized, can you say if you know, what would
happen to it if it had short fuse operational information in it or operational impact
information?

BL: Documents by their very nature generally didn’t. Insofar as, here’s a
document that says they’re going to attack here, so we’re going to go there. Documents
might generate quick reaction response insofar as they identified, say, a meeting with
provincial-level VC or the location of the village secretary. That was pretty much at the
jurisdiction discretion of the provincial staff as opposed to corps or anything like that.
Your low-level couriers by definition probably aren’t going to be carrying around
satchels and stuff from COSVN (Central Office for South Vietnam) to the Z-15
Regiment. That goes another route.

LC: Did you as a desk officer see sort of compilation reports that the CDEC
(Combined Document Exploitation Center) might have turned out that would give a
broad picture of what was happening in the military region? Did those come to you as a
desk officer?

BL: I wrote them sometimes.

LC: Okay. When you were writing such reports, what sources would you bring
to bear on an analysis paper like that?

BL: Everything that pertained and by subject matter ranking from the most severe
threat potential down. By everything, literally everything because you wouldn’t have—
there was no set playbook. You might develop a hunch over time, for example, that
“You know what? They’re not conducting as many infantry probes. They’re using more
ABFs. Along with that they’re not using their big mortars,” which in the Delta were 120
millimeter mortars. “They’re not using as much of their big stuff. It seems as if maybe,
huh, I think they’re storing stuff up. They’re not storing it up for an inspection.” So you
developed these kind of hunches. It was a process that you underwent. All of a sudden your intuition would tell you something. Then you’d find information, or see if you could find information that would verify what your intuition was suggesting. In cases such as that, that actually happened, it played out. So you’d look at whatever was pertinent. It might be activity patterns, the nature and frequency of VC/NVA activity.

LC: Your hunches would come to you based on your reading of the flow of material that’s coming across your desk and also your trips out to the provinces?

BL: That and you tried to put yourself in the shoes of the bad guys. If I were a bad guy, what would I do to inflict maximum consternation and grief and cause the biggest problems? It’s both an analytical head-trip insofar as you’re trying to assign value or determine value of discreet bits of information. Also, these intuitive flights where you’re going, “Oh wait a minute.” You’ve got to think out of the box because they are. They’re not going to do something that you expect. So you do all kinds of things. Sometimes you’d get agent reports. Agent reports were, depending on the agent, a lot of them were just simply unreliable nonsense. Sometimes you’d get a lot of unreliable nonsense. You’d have to say, “You know, there’s not much going on here, but there’s lot of agent reports so there might be something,” just to alert people.

LC: There’s smoke so there might be fire kind of thinking?

BL: Yeah, the fact that there’s a variation in the pattern and the variation was in one instance. There’s just more agent reports that something was going to happen. As it turned out, nothing did, but you have to bring that out and say this is a change in the pattern, what to make of it is another question. Sometimes you get more discreet information. Some farmer would walk in and say, “There’s all those northerners over there in the other part of the district.” “Oh, okay.” You’ve got it. Stuff like that you would respond with air power and things like that.

LC: Bill, are you in a position to say anything about the networks of agents who produced information that came to the notice of people at MACV?

BL: I can tell you what I know and why I don’t know everything is because it was compartmentalized. We never knew who the agents were. All we knew was the numbers on the reports. One agent might be 146392. Pretty soon after a while you go, “You know this 146 guy, he’s making stuff up. He’s just getting paid for writing fiction.
Get him a job writing novels or something.” So because of that we never knew who these people were, but we could task the handlers. If so-and-so has been here and knows this, see if he or she, ‘cause you never knew, can find out about this.

LC: Would the handlers typically be U.S. military or U.S. civilian?

BL: I don’t know because they might have been sheet “sheep-dipped.” I don’t know. Some of them seemed to be civilians. If we went through CIA it would be totally different channels. They wouldn’t accept tasking from anybody else unless it was from MACV headquarters.

LC: Yeah, they were on their own pretty much. A couple of things that you alluded to make me wonder if you have any general comments to offer about the process of Vietnamization as you saw it as J-2 in MACV at the time you were there?

BL: Started too late and you can blame McNamara for a lot of that. For whatever other shortcomings Westmoreland may have had or others might wish to argue that he had, he tried to accelerate, tried to move Vietnamization forward well before ’69 when the term was invented. McNamara said, “No.” Westmoreland mentions this in his book. Other people mentioned it. Colby mentioned it in some of his places that he’s written it. When you go back to Washington, “We need this. We need that.” “Well, no, no, no, no, no.” The Vietnamization was started way too late. An integral part of that was when we really came in, we came down with both feet in the mid-’60s. He said, “All right you South Vietnamese, you take care of pacification, we’ll take care of the big guys.” Well, all you’ve done is delayed their march up the learning curve.

LC: You mean towards actually confronting the military threat that—?

BL: It’s a real paradox. If you have trouble with paradoxes you’ll never understand Vietnam. Every single year the South Vietnamese took more casualties than the Americans or anybody else every year and by a significant margin. So they were fighting the war, but it was the mobile infantry, lower-level stuff that they were fighting. They were never, or they were not placed on a learning curve designated route early enough to where they could operate divisions and even on corps levels with divisions functioning alongside with other divisions on a multi-corps basis. Of course, they did fairly well in the Cambodian incursion, but they never got a chance to really learn that stuff. They never got the equipment that was appropriate for the situation, ever. Frank
Snepp says, “Oh, they had plenty of stuff and munitions and this and that in ’75.” Frank
Snepp is not high on my list of people to respect. I ran into him a couple times in
Vietnam. I’ve dealt with him over there. Others, I might add, really question his sanity
in that state. So Vietnamization was started too late and they never did get enough,
march it all the way up right through the end. In the ’71 Laotian incursion they had M-41
tanks with a 76 millimeter gun and meanwhile that was inferior to the T-54 with the 100
millimeter gun. Their artillery, the NVA artillery was always superior to ours, always.
The 130, 122 millimeter guns. As far as dealing with the intermediate threat, you’re
going to have to conclude that Vietnamization was working because by 1971, the South
Vietnamese were dealing with the threat on their own. They were dealing with the threat
that had been precipitated the deployment of American forces to begin with. They were
dealing with it and containing it. So you’d have to say it was working slowly, clumsily,
awkwardly, frustratingly so in many respects, but it basically was working.

LC: When you say that it was introduced too late would you also say that when it
was introduced it was too abruptly brought down on South Vietnamese military
structure?

BL: Yeah, by definition saying it started too late and then all of a sudden, “Oh,
by the way, you guys are going to have to fight it all or fight more of it.” All the little
stuff, tank retrieval teams and logistics, engineers and stuff like that, they couldn’t—for
example, this is fairly well documented. You’d say, “Okay, South Vietnamese here’s
your airport now. It’s all yours.” Fine, they don’t have the electricians. Hydraulic
engineers to make sure the water runs. Fine run the airport. Planes are one thing, but
how do you make the airport function? That was never given adequate thought. So the
U.S. government had to contract with civilians. “Emergency, we’re going to contract all
you people to fly over to Vietnam and teach these people how to keep an airport
running.” People say, “The South Vietnamese are no good.” Well, hell, I can’t run an
airport unless I’m trained and they weren’t.

LC: Can you name some of the civilian contracting companies that were brought
in to sort of make up some of the technical shortfall that you’re talking about?

BL: Let’s see. I’d know if you said them, but I can’t think of them right now.

LC: Root and Brown.
BL: That was more engineering. Brown and Root, I don’t know if they actually did the advising training things as much as just run things on their own.

LC: Okay, but they’d send over a whole teams, right, and just kind of take over an operation rather than—?

BL: I just can’t think of anything offhand. That and with some of the communications and technical gear. We had a tremendous lack of foresight. What are we going to do? What’s our exit strategy? Your exit strategy, of course, should be predicated on well, we’re going to prevail and secure our objectives, which is independent Southeast Asia, external of North Vietnam’s communism. You just have to surmise that they never really gave it any thought whatsoever.

LC: By “they,” would you put that deficit or that failure in Washington?

BL: Yes. Absolutely, no question.

LC: Within the White House specifically?

BL: More so before ’68 than after because Johnson and McNamara did have the ability, did have the political leeway in domestic terms to have done things like that. They squandered it after Tet of ’68 and then things went down hill. To the extent people choose to criticize Nixon, they should also be reminded that his political options were much, much narrower than Johnson’s and McNamara’s. So the fault lies with Nixon and Kissinger, just as it lies on McNamara and Johnson.

LC: When you talk about the political options being narrower for the Nixon administration, is that because of how he ran the campaign or is it because it changed the operational situation in Southeast Asia or both?

BL: Primarily because of the domestic situation here, the anti-war element. Not only the people in the streets, but the anti-war or so-called, pseudo anti-war. They thought they were. God bless their souls, they really meant well, but they didn’t know what they were talking about because every anti-war message over here simply encouraged Hanoi. They knew they couldn’t win militarily. They’ve said, “We could not win militarily.” They’ve said it. “No way we could prevail militarily over the United States.”

LC: But they realized that they didn’t have to.
BL: Yeah, “All we’ve got to do is wear you down, wear you down domestically, wear you down in Washington, D.C. and the streets of New York and college campuses. That’s where we’re going to get you.” That’s exactly what happened. That’s another thing you can fault the government for. They should have foreseen that from 1968 on. You should have set down and said, “Where’s this thing taking us? What’s the worst that can happen? We’d better get ready for it.” They never did. It was *ad hocism* taken to an obscenely ignorant level.

LC: Could the Nixon administration given even those parameters have done anything to improve the implementation of the Vietnamization program in your view?

BL: I don’t know. You certainly can say for a fact that his options were limited. Whether he could have done more and he did quite a bit. He accelerated the flow of equipment, conducted the launch of the Cambodian incursion, which was extremely effective. Everybody thought the Cambodian incursion and, okay, fast forward over to Kent State as tragic and horrible as that was, but there simply were ramifications of the Cambodian incursion external to the United States and the turmoil that was generated here. That extended to the battlefield in Southeast Asia. It was incredibly effective, profoundly effective.

LC: Can you talk a little bit about that, Bill? In what categories were there actually achievements associated with the “invasion,” quote unquote, of Cambodia in 1970?

BL: First of all, it was fairly well coordinated. Secondly, and this is when people started talking about the drugs and the fragging of Americans soldiers, you think that there would have been AWOLs (absent without leave) and mutinies, but there wasn’t. “Finally, we’re winning the war. We’re not just sitting here. We’re doing something.” So it was conducted very well. Also the South Vietnamese performed and actually outnumbered. I think there was twenty-nine thousand South Vietnamese and nineteen thousand Americans that went into the Cambodian incursion. That’s the place where ARVN never gets credit. They do something reasonably well. They’d never operated on a corps level like that before. They performed quite well.

LC: Bill, can you hold on for just a second?

BL: Yeah.
LC: Bill, did the U.S. entrance into Cambodia for however brief a time change things in Military Region IV subsequently and particularly in the time you were there?

BL: Of course, this was—

LC: Many, many months.

BL: A year and a half before I got there.

LC: Like eighteen months, yeah.

BL: What it probably did is knock things down to a whole, to a lower level and they stayed there for the most part. From what I can gather in talking to guys who were there in early ’71, reading accounts of people who were there in III Corps in ’70 and ’71 is that one of the most immediate, visible effects of the Cambodian incursion was a distinct drop in American and allied casualties in III Corps and northern IV Corps. It was a very clear cause and effect there. Of course, we’re not simply talking about American soldiers, dear to my heart, of course, but also South Vietnamese and South Vietnamese civilians. All the supplies that they captured and everything else included rockets. Of course, the VC and NVA rocketed cities with abandon. You can’t aim those damn things. It’s like going to a crowded basketball game and throwing a smashed bottle across the gym. You know it’s going to hit somebody, you just don’t know who or where. But they’d rocket cities and stuff like that. So III Corps and northern IV Corps, everything I can gather, after the Cambodian incursion, settled down to a much lower level of hostility, nice abstract term, but also fewer dead people, which is really nice.

LC: Why do you think that fact didn’t really seem to surface and affect either subsequent appreciations of the Cambodian incursion or policy in the area in 1972, say?

BL: The answer to the first question probably answers the second question. In that so far the hysteria of this country. I’m not going to say, “Oh, well, those guys at Kent State, they should”—I think that whole Kent State thing just turned my stomach. If nothing else, it’s just unprofessional aside from the immorality. You don’t just fire wildly into a crowd. You don’t give people live ammunition. You give them riot control. It’s just wretched in every dimension of description. But that does not allow people to disregard the reality of what happened in Cambodia. The reality was the communists took it in the shorts for that brief period of time. The South Vietnamese played a significant role in that whole thing. They were not junior partners. They
conducted their own raids before and after Americans pulled out. For the most part, very
successful. So here was this basically by the allied actions people could have argued this
is taking things to a level that we hadn’t even known before that could be achieved. The
South Vietnamese are doing well. The communists got their butts beat. This proves that
the Ho Chi Minh Trail is an absolutely vital lifeline for tools of death and destruction for
the communists. This worked. The questions is, “Why shouldn’t it have been done
earlier?” You probe the memoirs of McNamara and those other people who ruled against
repeated, repeated from 1962 on in treaties to the hierarchy to the powers that be, let’s cut
the Ho Chi Minh Trail and starve this thing off. They always said no. That’s
documented time and time again.

LC: Right.

BL: So anyhow the story of the United States was such that you couldn’t tell
people, “Oh, by the way this succeeded militarily.” People would say, “Oh, you’re a
fascist. Who cares? You’re full of shit.” Excuse my language, but that’s what you’d get.
Again one of the victims of the Vietnam War or Hanoi’s war—that’s what it was—was
the ability to discuss things on a rational basis, however heated that discussion may be. It
became—it was the same mentality as a witch-hunt. “You can’t tell me. This is”—by
’69 or ’70 it was gone.

LC: It was just impossible to actually raise certain issues and talk about them in a
rational way because—?

BL: Absolutely, forget it. It’s just out of the question. Out of the question.

LC: Do you—go ahead, Bill.

BL: Nixon, and again I don’t have his picture on my wall. I think he, like most
human beings has his pluses and his minuses. I don’t enjoy hating him. Like I say, I
don’t have his picture on the wall, but if you look at it objectively he was trying to do
something at a very difficult time, but his options were severely limited. Again, not only
by the public protestors, but by what was evidentially and Laird, secretary of defense,
was more attuned to this than probably anybody. By the encroachment in Congress you
could see that congressional mandates for continuing the war so to speak, the war to stop
Hanoi’s war, was gradually going down and Laird foresaw that. I think he no doubt
parted that message to Nixon and you were operating in constraints, the likes of which
Hanoi never had to deal with, never. It stands to reason. People say, “Oh, well, the Christmas Bombing, that was so cruel.” Well, this is going forward a little bit to ’72. But Hanoi had admits to sixteen hundred fatalities in the Christmas Bombing. Well, simple math will tell you, if you look at a map of both Hai Phong and Hanoi you will see the actual area, the metropolitan areas of those cities, it’s rather small. You could have flat leveled, completely devastated both of those places with—and I actually calculated—typically a B-52 target box is a half-kilometer by a kilometer and a half. The bombardiers had these little plastic templates and these little boxes. They draw these little boxes and woe be unto you if you’re in that box on the ground. They could have leveled both of those cities and they didn’t. We truly did fight that thing with, figuratively speaking, one hand behind our back. Although I think that analogy is pretty feeble because we had our feet tied and blindfolds on our eyes and one hand tied behind our back on top of everything. There’s just no question that they could not have withstood the unleashed military might of the United States, or England for that matter probably, but it was never unleashed upon them. Nor necessarily should it have been to stop the war, by the way.

LC: Was the issue of Cambodia’s neutrality would you say a real issue or a false issue?

BL: Cambodia had no—it was a wonderful issue. Cambodian neutrality, I’m all for it. The problem is, how do you get the North Vietnamese out? From the early ’50s on, this is documented on the record, Sihanouk was complaining about Khmer Rouge who were trained by the North Vietnamese, who went to Hanoi and trained and about North Vietnamese interference in his country. So Cambodian neutrality did not exist insofar as the North Vietnamese basically annexed the eastern part of Cambodia. You know all these ding-dongs, this is not very civilized academic speech, but what else do you say about people who say, “Well, the United States exported war to Cambodia”? The war was already there, we just responded to it. NVA were there. The Khmer Rouge were there after having received their training in Hanoi, some of them. Some of them, of course, the Pol Pot and the Khieu Samphans were not Hanoi Khmer Rouge. They were a different faction. But I’d be all for Cambodian neutrality because that means a true neutrality, the NVA would get out and you wouldn’t have a war in South Vietnam. They
couldn’t feed it. Great. I loved the idea. What do you do if they’re not allowed to be neutral, same with Laos?

LC: Can you give an overview of your trips out to the provinces during this 1971-72 period? What would initiate one of those trips?

BL: Basically, I don’t know if Lieutenant Commander Wallace is ever going to hear this or anyone that knows him is ever going to hear or read this, but I thank him. He basically realized “Get this poor lieutenant out of here because he’s itching to do something constructive.” So he sent me down to the Delta. “Go down here, go down there and see what you find out. See if it squares with our opinion.” So I’d go down to—the first thing I’d do was go to Can Tho which, of course, was corps headquarters. Then after that I’d go to different provinces or divisions, their headquarters, or regimental headquarters. You know, find out what’s going on, how their view squares with what—I’d say, “Well, here’s how Saigon sees it? What do you see?” Also, this is not part of my official mission, nor necessarily was anything nefarious or covert or anything else. “But, oh by the way, let us know how the South Vietnamese are doing.” So I’d go back and I’d write my regular stuff up and then I’d also write up the stuff, “Well, they’re having problems with this or problems with that. They’re doing well with this, they’re doing well with that.” I’d just go all over the place and talk to people at the province headquarters, talk to some of the RFs and PFs. Of course, a lot of the stuff I would do after duty hours, I’d go out and walk around My Tho. I’d walk around Cao Lanh or I’d walk around some of these places or sit and talk with the guys on the advisory team for hours on end. Not only because it was my job—well, it wasn’t because it was my job. I was driven by this growing interest I had in what was happening and how it was so different from what everybody was perceiving in the United States. So the overall picture was typical thing, “How’s the province chief here in this or that province?” “Not bad. He’s okay. He’s doing alright.” “Is there corruption?” “Well, a little bit, but he’s doing all right.” This is different than what Walter Cronkite is saying, “It’s just terrible everywhere.” Or I’d go to a place, “How’s the province chief?” “The guy is outstanding, absolutely outstanding. He does not tolerate corruption.” I’d go to another province, “Yeah, that guy’s worthless.” But that variety was never conveyed to me in the United States and I took personal offense to that because I knew I was going to be going, or
thought I was going to be going. So I tried to learn everything I could. Here I’d made
the effort and no one told me. Again, I took very much personal offense to that. You
SOBs, all you people. What’s hard—you can’t do what I’m doing. You can’t go out to
the goddamn, excuse me, goddamn noodle stands along side the road or sit out and talk,
drink some rice whiskey with the a couple ARVN soldiers and see what they think.
That’s beneath your bloody dignity. Or some of these American advisory teams where
you’d find very nice decent human beings that said, “These people are all right. They’ve
got a right to a better life than what they have now and what they have under
communism.” Motivated people, not all these bundles of despair and drug-riddled
antagonism that you’d see in the media.

LC: One author writing about this time period, and I know you’re familiar with
Richard Hunt’s book on pacification, says that most of those military advisory teams
were scheduled to be pulled out after a CORDS (Civil Operations and Rural
Development Support) evaluation of their effectiveness by June of 1972, but that decision
at the end of ’71 had been reversed. Did you follow that kind of ebb and flow of whether
the teams were going to stay or whether they were going to go? Was that something you
were aware of or was that—?

BL: Yeah, and in retrospect, now that you mentioned that, I can see where some
of that is because when I first went there I was supposed to go to an advisory team. They
said, “No, we’re getting rid of them.” This is of course what, October or November of
’71. Then they did for whatever reason there were a bunch of early outs scheduled.

LC: By early outs you mean?

BL: Six months and go home. Then four months down the road, I know because
a lot of the guys I knew they contacted their wives and they were going back and signed
up for school and this and that. All of a sudden they reversed it. All the early outs are
cancelled. Oh, well, that’s too bad. There’s a war on. That dovetails with what I
experienced. I do know that the advisory teams were closing down and phasing out.
They were phasing out this and phasing out that, withdrawing assets and moving portable
buildings and all kinds of stuff. There were some advisory teams way down in the Delta.
LC: What was the effect, if you know, on guys who thought that their tour had
been prematurely ended because of a change in strategy and structure and then all of a
sudden they were told they had to stay?
BL: Not very happy. It’s not so much that they were—they didn’t mind doing a
year. What they minded was they were told to go there and do a year and then all of a
sudden they’re told, “You only have six months.” So now they’ve got to call back and
make brand new arrangements or even if they were single at the time, they still have to—
“Now I’ve got to replan things, because I planned on being here a year and now I’m
going to be here six months.” So they start replanning and then two months down the
road, “Excuse us. You’re going to be here a year after all.” So just that personnel
confusion and your personal life, these sorts of frustrations.
LC: Hunt suggests that the reason for the change in strategy was that things
weren’t going as well in the pacification effort and the Vietnamization. He sort of seems
to link those two together and that in fact the MATs were needed for a longer period of
time. Does that sound right to you?
BL: If I may ask first, what is Hunt’s background? Was he in Vietnam?
LC: I could quickly check. He has a Ph.D. in History. Yes, he did do a tour. He
was at MACV, but I don’t have the dates. He was in the Army as a captain.
BL: Again it’s one of those things that I’m not sure anybody really does know
because I’m of the opinion that if you’re going to say pacification was working or not
working, you’re going to have to set up some criteria and then evaluate every single
example by which those criteria might be applied countrywide and then add them up.
LC: Okay.
BL: It may not have been working perfectly, but that still doesn’t explain why in
many cases the VC were just on the complete defensive and why they were dependent on
the presence of NVA. I don’t know when he was there. If he was there, say ’66 to ’67 or
’68 to ’69, there’s way too many people that mold their Vietnam opinions based on
earlier experiences in the war. You cannot extrapolate. The road turns and if you miss
that curve you’re going off in imaginary land. Certainly the South Vietnamese was not
what you’d call the paragon of the 20th century proficient, well organized, highly
motivated all the time military. That’s not the question. The question is, “Were they
getting the job done?” I don’t know how you can say that pacification wasn’t working. It might have been working by default. But certainly by all indices it was working. People say, “Well, it wasn’t working.” If it wasn’t working then why in the hell did they need, what, eighteen NVA divisions to win the war, empty all their forces out of Laos, all their forces out of Cambodia, which they’d never done before and all but one reserve division in North Vietnam? If pacification wasn’t working they wouldn’t have needed to have done that.

LC: Right, because local support would have been much greater.

BL: They would have just gone down the road and said, “Hey, join the VC,” and everyone would have said, “Yeah, one ho, buck ho,” and all this stuff. “Cheers to Uncle Ho and I’ll join the NLF.” I have a problem. I’ll have to say that during my wanderings in Vietnam with different advisory teams USAID (United States Agency for International Development) people, CIA people, some people just didn’t get Vietnam. They just didn’t get it. They just didn’t sense it. They’d go over there and they’d see these backwards, little yellow and little brown people fumbling away and screwing things up and they’d go, “Oh, geez, these people will never do anything right.” Well, what the hell did they think the American Revolutionary soldiers were doing two hundred years ago or in the Civil War? People with second grade education screwing things up and fumbling things away. That was part of South Vietnam’s problem, not being a 20th century nation. Furthermore, you can go out in the districts and see some of these local force VC who are screwing things up right and left. So if you measure it by, in Hunt’s saying—I’ll have to read his book—he’s saying pacification doesn’t work. I would submit that I can probably still find forty or fifty former VC who would say, “I don’t know what you want to call it. Maybe it was working or maybe it wasn’t, but I was a hunted dog and I could get a better deal for the GVN (Government of Vietnam). I got tired of hearing communist bullshit,” excuse my language, “And I quit.” Now if that isn’t pacification working, then I don’t know what is. The Chieu Hoi rate in 1969 was two and a half times what it had been the previous three years.

LC: Those were figures that you had confidence in?

BL: Yeah. Of course, people say, “Well, that’s just a phony statistic.” Well, first of all, I don’t like the way the deck is stacked here. If I throw out evidence that
contradicts conventional wisdom, “Well, you prove that evidence true.” “You prove it’s not.” Okay? The fact of the matter is very few of these people, probably even Hunt—I’m telling you I knew people in Vietnam who were dumber than a box of rocks. They didn’t know what was going on right around them, couldn’t figure it out. If you can’t figure it out, you make up a story in your mind and explain that explains it. First of all you can say, “Well, that’s forty-seven thousand Chieu Hois in ’69. That’s all a joke.” Fine, you disprove it. A, you can’t. B, you can’t sidestep the issue by saying, “They were just low-level people. They just defected to take a break and they went back.” Prove it. Prove it. Of course, they were more low-level people because there’s more low-level people to begin with. You have to acknowledge that the political officers, the 9th VC Division defected in May of ’68. We had high-ranking VC people defect.

LC: From those people, presumably information was being developed about the situation including with regard to morale.

BL: Yeah, exactly. Yet none of these people have talked to and I have. I have sat and talked to people that were VC. “What was it like? Why did you defect?” Basically, certainly a process like this goes on for a long time in one’s life. You don’t see the turning point right away, but basically they realized that it was all crap. It was all lies and manipulated. All this nationalistic stuff that they warmed up to was a manipulated base used by the ideologues in the Communist Party.

LC: To draft people in?

BL: Exactly. They prostituted nationalism. The other thing is people say, “Well, pacification didn’t work.” Well, look at the indices and military activity. They’re all down. They’re all down. From ’68 to ’69 they plunge. Secondly, the instances of VC/NVA offensive activity decreased to a greater extent, percentage wise. I’m aware—watch out for statistics and don’t be McNamara et cetera and so forth, but it’s there. So you’ve got to look at it. Increased to a much greater extent, then the percentage dropped of VC/NVA forces, which tells you that their military capabilities were reduced to an even greater extent because they were not capable of doing what they were capable of doing proportionately before. They were on the run. Another factor that needs to be considered is the increase in tillable land, rice growing area and rice production from 1965 to 1973. Especially from ’68 on and that’s a documented fact. How could that be
happening if there weren’t more pacification, if there weren’t more security? It just 
doesn’t wash. It simply doesn’t wash. Another thing needs to be examined, pacification 
would have succeeded more, faster or better, or less crummy or whatever you want to call 
it, had the Ho Chi Minh Trail been choked off because the VC were sustained by supplies 
coming down that trail. They were sustained psychologically because when Johnson 
said, “Okay, we’re going to negotiate for peace.” The message conveyed was, “It’s just a 
matter of time, Americans are going to quit. Just keep going.”

LC: That resonated with the basically standard party line, which was we will be 
here. Eventually you will leave.

BL: Yeah. Exactly. I’ve read Jeffrey Record’s book. It was supposed to be an 
unwinnable war. You read all this stuff and no one ever really proves it. Let’s put it this 
way. If you had your choice of being a VC or RVNAF, Republic of Vietnam Armed 
Forces, I don’t care if it’s Navy, RFPF, ARVN. In 1970, you’d be a damn fool if you 
chose to be with the VC, simply because the odds were not really good. I don’t know 
what he wants to call it. But I will say some day I’ve got to read his book. I’d like to talk 
to him personally and discuss these things. But in all candor, I’ve got to say, it sounds 
like, smells like, feels like some of the people I ran into in Vietnam who just never 
understood what the hell was going on. You don’t have to agree with what one’s position 
is, but they don’t even acknowledge some of these things happening.

LC: Sure. There’s two things there I want to ask you about, Bill. First of all, if 
you had to explain to a student fifty years in the future what you mean by “getting it” 
about Vietnam, if you had to put that in a nutshell, what would you say?

BL: Oh, boy. I hate to go back to that Louis Armstrong thing about—he says, “If 
you understand it, you don’t need an explanation. If you don’t, I can’t explain it.”

LC: What are some of the parameters that somebody had?

BL: You have to understand the aspirations of people and what their 
_Weltanschauung_, their worldview or their cosmic view. Where is this country going? Of 
course, the Vietnamese were desperate even in an articulate fashion in some respects, 
desperate for an explanation of what kind of country they were going to be. Who were 
they? They knew they were going to come in the 20th century, but as what? The 
Vietnamese nationalism and this and that and so forth and so on and the technical
problems. Some people say, “Well, ARVN wouldn’t fight.” Well, hell, if they’ve got crummy up until 1968, if you’ve got an M-1 carbine, and your opponent has RPDs and AK-47s, I think you might run, too, save your butt, because you’re not going to survive. The only way to fight is to survive. All of those things entered into this. God, I don’t even know if it’s explainable in the Western logical, rational sense. You had to sense why some of these things were happening. If you didn’t you wouldn’t understand why somebody like say Nguyen Khao Nam could take over the 7th Division and turn it into this outstanding unit. You wouldn’t understand why a guy like Nguyen Van Tan could take the Hau Nghia and turn it from a horribly VC-infested province into virtually a killing field for the VC. There’s another province that has a doctoral dissertation and it is Hau Nghia Province. They actually pulled advisory teams out of two districts there in 1965 because it was so bad. Then by 1972 and after, the VC were on a run, they admit themselves. “We were running like hunted dogs.”

LC: That’s because of a transition in leadership and follow through by ARVN, would you say, or more than that?

BL: In part it’s due to the clumsiness and the lies of the communists had caught up with them. They promised everybody, “We’re going to win at Tet. We’re gonna win. This is it.” These guys go in there and they got whacked. Barely a few survivors come back and say, “You’re full of shit,” excuse my language. “You said, you said, you said and none of it came true.” These guys would say, “Oh, don’t worry about it, don’t worry about it.” Of course, at that time a lot of their commanders were in the rear area, so-called rear areas of Cambodia where they’re safe and secure. So these guys are getting the hell beat out of them, shot up and losing everybody. More and more after Tet even the villagers, they’d say “It’s just not safe to be around the VC. You guys get out of here. Stay away from us, because when you come war comes. So stay away.” If you’ve got an honest, decent province chief in there. He was getting things rolling so the VC, the NLF whatever you want to call them, are losing clearly which increases defections which in turn because they had a smart province staff, increases the response to the information provided by these defectors. Stuart Herrington wrote an excellent book on it and so did, oh, God I can’t think of his name. I’ll think of it—as Herrington said and I know Stuart and I’ve been to Hau Nghia. He said by 1970 it was standing room only in the Cu Chi,
Hau Nghia Chieu Hoi center. Forget it. This is over with. Again, success feeds upon success and failure begets failure. The VC started failing. When they did that they also started sending down northerners to take over some of these local force units and that met with a rather tepid response.

LC: Right. Bill, you mentioned if there was a good province chief, that was a stability factor for the South Vietnamese government. In MR-IV when you were there and we’re talking about your first time over in 1971 and ’72, about how many of the province chiefs in the region were what you would call good personnel? Because obviously there’s a perception of corruption.

BL: There certainly was. There’s no question about it. I’d be at a loss to sit down and rank all the province chiefs in the Delta from this distance in time. Of course, some of the provinces I didn’t get to. I never got to Kien Tuong province. Where else did I not get to? I guess I got every place else. Sometimes I had to go down to all of them. I do know that there were province chiefs that were just regarded as just hopelessly corrupt. I do know that some were adequate. I do know that some were considered very capable and competent, or some of them were adequate plus, but just not super stars. Kind of like if you walked in the dugout of any baseball team. You’ve got some guys that are good, some guys that are drunk. Nobody likes them. It’d certainly be weighted more towards the deficient capabilities if only because of lack of experience. It simply was not universal. That’s one of the tremendous huge errors. The higher up you get, the more corruption you’ve got. On the lower level there were some absolutely fine, fine, wonderful, honest decent district chiefs, province chiefs here and there, which does not deny that right down the road on the other province there was just the absolutely obscenely corrupt son of a bitch, incompetent.

LC: Did American military policy, either broadly or narrowly, change and adjust to the places where there were less than good indigenous personnel in charge?

BL: In a way. For example with the provinces it’s almost a non-issue because the province chief is in charge of the RF and under him the PF. He doesn’t have the assigned responsibility to deal with NVA regulars. That’s when he calls up corps and says, “I have NVA regulars. Send ARVN, regular army, to come bail me out.” If you had important provinces that were contested and where you did have problems generated by a
corrupt and/or incompetent province chief—now remember somebody can be corrupt and still be competent.

LC: Sure.

BL: There were instances—I don’t know if it was prevalent or prevalent enough. There were instances that where USAID or MACV would pass the word to the corps commander of the South Vietnamese government. “This guy is just exceeding the bounds of acceptable corruption.” Sometimes they’d be dismissed and sometimes they wouldn’t. Sometimes they’d be dismissed. It’d just be a lateral transfer kind of a thing, probably not a good enough answer to that question. I don’t know if I can do any more.

LC: No, that’s fine. I’m trying to get a sense of also how much information do you think and how good was the information that MACV had about South Vietnamese administration in the provinces in Military Region IV, obviously?

BL: I think they had a pretty good feel for it from what I can recall. This is an impressionistic thing. I can’t give you the type of proof that I would ask as historical proof. But I did have, as a very lowly lieutenant I did have a couple discussions in an informal atmosphere with some of the province senior advisory staff in IV Corps. As I recall—I’m sure I would have remembered something different if they would have said, “Oh, this is absolutely hopeless,” or “These are the greatest things. Everything’s fine.”

As I recall it was pretty much along the lines of my impression. Well, there’s some good guys and there’s some crummy guys. There’s some average guys and they’re getting better. It would be nice if they got better faster, but they are getting better. It’s just one of those things where it wasn’t terrible enough to bail out on. It wasn’t good enough to jump in the air and click your heels over it. But still, positive direction. In fact, a guy by the name of Don Colin, who spent several years in Vietnam, he was a USAID guy and he knows all about things down in Vinh Binh or Tra Vinh province. I knew Colin in Vietnam. He was candid to the point of being rude. In other words if you said something that he didn’t agree with, he’d tell you in specific terms that that was bovine fecal matter. He was that way. He’s also on record as saying that by ’71—and I don’t know where I read this. He sent a report, an excerpt within a book and he said by ’71 he had gained an optimism that he’d never had before because you had a very competent corps commander in the Mekong Delta, who was Ngo Quang Truong by the way, who later went up to I
1 Corps and saved I Corps in the ’72 Offensive. Things were working. Farmers were
2 beginning to prosper in that he had a degree of confidence and optimism he never would
3 have dreamed of in the mid-’60s.
4     LC: He was USAID?
5     BL: I think he was with USAID, yeah.
6     LC: Do you know how to spell his last name?
7     BL: C-O-L-I-N. Sounds like Colin, but his name was pronounced Colin. If he
8     said it, he believed it. He was crass and he was blunt. He was not the typical government
9     bureaucrat. He had a scraggly beard. He smoked horribly strong Vietnamese cigarettes,
10    wore sandals half the time or moccasins. He was just a gruff curmudgeon. His saying
11    that and, again, the times I talked to him in Vietnam, it’s pretty much an extension.
12    Maybe they’re not getting as better as everyone would like, but they are getting better.
13    LC: So it was judged against an ideal world, it was actually improving?
14    Although not there yet.
15    BL: I wish they would have been getting better faster, too. But still in all, the
16    thing is people have to stop and realize that we went to what was really an 18th century
17    society that knew how to turn on a radio. I’m not being derogatory. We were going to a
18    world that we don’t even know of anymore. It’s probably akin to what our ancestors
19    were like in the 16th and 17th, early 18th centuries. You go into the Mekong Delta villages
20    and there’s no electricity. There’s no lights. There’s no telephones. You might be ten
21    miles from a province capital, but a lot of people have never been there because you’ve
22    got to walk that far. Because the time demands are such for planting your rice, harvesting
23    your rice and all this stuff that you just don’t have time. If you were to have the means
24    and that would probably mean get on a sampan. There certainly weren’t any buses or
25    taxis or anything like that. We went over there and we’re trying to drag this society into
26    the 20th century in the span of ten years. That’s not easily done.
27    LC: Bill, let me ask you about another person that you’ve mentioned that you met
28    and that’s Frank Snepp. What position was he in when you knew him?
29    BL: He was—they call him the CIA chief analyst. I guess that’s what he was on
30    communists intentions and also part of his analytical work, of course, was dealing with
31    CIA agents if they had an agents meeting or assets rather, assets on the other side, some
of the GVN government and stuff like this talking to them and getting information from
them, interrogating prisoners, stuff like that, also.

LC: He was with the station in Saigon, I take it?
BL: Yeah.

LC: Did he spend time at MACV?
BL: Yeah, he’d come over there off and on. I didn’t know him at MACV. I
knew him when I was with DAO (Defense Attaché Office) in ’73 and ’75.

LC: You had some comments to make about his book, and things he’s probably
written and said in addition to that?
BL: He’s written two books.

LC: Yeah. Okay. Two books, right. Can you offer some observations on what
he’s written?
BL: Yeah, and I’d be happy to give you a list of people that will second what I’m
saying here. One of the things he says is, for example he says that the DAO people in
Colonel LeGro’s office are always preaching doom and this and that. That’s among the
many instances where he accuses other people of doing what he was doing. He was not
what you call a team player. I can understand why they’d want to control their assets and
protect their sources. But when we needed to know information he wouldn’t tell us. If
you’d ask him about it he would get very embarrassed, “How’d you know that? You
shouldn’t know that. You’re not supposed to know that.”

LC: When “we” needed it, you mean MACV?
BL: Yeah, well the Defense Attaché Office in ’73-’75.

LC: DAO.

BL: He never impressed me. It got to the point where he was judging everybody
on this one: “Do you care about these people over here or not, the South Vietnamese
people?” I never—to him, maybe I misread him, but he never gave me indication
otherwise. I’d be happy to confront him face to face on this. I never saw him actually
display any concern insofar as he manifested it. For example, MedCAPS (medical civic
action programs), I never knew him to even talk about MedCAPs, medical civic action
projects. He could have made time to have done things like that. He instead after hours,
he’d go down to the Duc Hotel and go up on the roof and hob knob with all the important
people and drink martinis or whatever. Maybe I’m wrong. I could be wrong, but all I’m saying is I was never impressed by the intensity of his conviction that the South Vietnamese people needed and deserved a decent life. He seemed to be very business-like. I do believe somewhere along the line he admitted that he joined the CIA to dodge the draft. He wrote some stuff I believe under the direction of Thomas Polgar, who was a CIA station chief. When he wrote it, he showed up and we laughed at him. We said, “Frank, you’re full of shit.” He said, “Come on guys. Polgar told me I had to write this.” He says that the South Vietnamese had enough military equipment to sustain themselves in ’74 and ’75. That’s absolutely emphatically false. It’s just totally and completely untrue. Even the communist captured documents saying, “Oh, boy, the South Vietnamese don’t have anything to fight with. This is great. Now they have to fight a poor man’s war and we’ve got weapons in abundance.” Hot stuff. This is great. Wow.

LC: What would be the motivation for, say, something like that?

BL: I don’t know. I think people are in different psycho dimensions of reality and from his vantage point, his psycho dimension of reality, he thought that was true. I really kind of take offense in his second book, almost more so than his first book he suggests that he has this great concern for the South Vietnamese people. I never saw that. I’m sorry. That’s just one big—if he can prove I’m wrong, I will apologize and I will publicly correct myself, but I never saw and the people that I know that knew him, never saw him evince any heartfelt emotional concern.

LC: Did you know anything about his background? You mentioned the issue of his relationship with the draft, but did you know where he was from or where he had gone to school or anything?

BL: No, I don’t remember. It’s in his second book, which I can’t remember the title of. It gives a little bit more of his background.

LC: I just wondered if you knew at the time, much about where he was coming from.

BL: No, I don’t. But again, the stuff—people listening in the future might say, “Well, you’re just one guy with an ax to grind,” but after his first book came out, I talked to some of the people I knew that knew him. Some of them flat out said, “The next time I see Snepp, I’m knocking him on his ass.” That’s exactly what they said.
That presumably would be people who had a little more care at least in the way you’re—?

Yeah, one guy I knew his name was Wally Moore. He’s since died. He was career military. He’d spent some time in the Defense Attaché in Cambodia. He was kind of an old Southeast Asian hand, pretty straight shooter, pretty blunt, flinty guy. He was the one that told that to me. He said the next time he saw Snepp he was gonna knock him on his ass. Simply for manufacturing a reality in which he, Frank Snepp, comes across as the soul bearer of truth and the soul person concerned for the South Vietnamese. Just never saw it over there. All of a sudden he’s saying things. He’s saying he said things that other people said or what he condemns other people for saying, he was saying. “Frank, what kind of mushrooms do you have on your sautéed steak this evening?” It’s really weird. It’s really weird.

Bill, did you come across any media people that you remember particularly?

Mm-hmm.

Can you talk about any of those guys?

Yeah. I met Donald Kirk one time. I was out talking to some Vietnamese and he comes over. This is ’74 when most Americans are gone. I guess his reporter ears perked up. Why is this American in civilian clothes speaking with these Vietnamese? Is he CIA? I don’t know. Anyhow he came over and started talking. I told him, “If you want a good story, go down the road to Dong Tau, 7th ARVN Division.” I said, “Those guys are outstanding. Commanding General Nguyen Khao Nam doesn’t tolerate any, any corruption, none. He demands the utmost out of his people and they know that he cares about them. They know that he cares about Vietnam. They know he’s not corrupt. They respond accordingly to his command and leadership. These guys are amazing,” and they were. They were just amazing. They went through and they cleared out the Tri Phap Base Area, which had never been cleared out ever before.

The which base area?

It’s called Tri Phap. It’s spelled T-R-I, second word, P-H-A-P, in the southwest corner of Kien Tuong Province, which is a long-held VC base area. They supposedly had concrete bunkers and all kinds of stuff there. They cleaned it out after 1973 all by themselves without any American help. I was telling—what was his name?
LC: Kirk.

BL: Yeah, I was telling Kirk, “You’ve got to go. There’s a hell of a story there. A division farm. On his own initiative he started a division farm so the families of his troops would have less of an economic burden. Everybody knows this. You can walk up and down the road here and go to any noodle stand. They might hate Thieu, but they’ll tell you that Nguyen Khao Nam is as honest as the day is long. He’s a fine man. He’s an honest man. He’s a good man. His troops will tell you the same thing. Everybody likes him.” He looked at me with all the interest of one who was being subjected to a sales pitch for aluminum siding. He just simply didn’t care. I know for a fact in the later book that I read by another reporter that was with Don Kirk when they were—they had met some NVA at a roadblock and Kirk was just—he said, “God, I wish I could have just talked to those guys. They seemed like such regular, regular guys. Boy, that would have been such a story.” They were held and released after a few minutes by NVA. So there was Kirk salivating at the mouth over the opportunity to talk to NVA. He just could not be bothered to talk to anybody of the 7th ARVN Division, didn’t even care, registered no interest whatsoever. To the best of my knowledge he never did anything about it. I don’t know of any bi-lines under his name, which talked about the 7th ARVN Division.

LC: Who was he reporting for at that time?

BL: I know he reported for the Chicago Tribune for a while and also some Washington newspaper. I’m not sure which.

LC: Can you—if you had to conjecture—offer a reason as to why he sort of glazed over?

BL: Because they don’t care. That wasn’t news. They were selling news like McDonald’s sells hamburgers. If you were to try and sell that to the American public, generally speaking you’re going to be met with this giant yawn or jeers of derision, “Oh, that’s not true. We know all ARVN general are corrupt.” It’s not marketable. It does him no good. There’s no feathers in his cap, no money in his pocket. It’s just a non-saleable item. It’s probably like trying to sell, I don’t know, some bland very healthy food, wheat germ pudding at McDonald’s. It’s just not going to sell. Nobody wants it.
LC: Would it be because editors had a particular slant that they were taking on the war such that a story that was commending ARVN accomplishments just wasn’t going to fly, that kind of thing?

BL: That certainly entered into it because there are documented statements—this is not my opinion. There are documented statements of editors in New York telling their reporters, “Americans don’t care about South Vietnamese. This is an American war, just report about Americans. Don’t report about South Vietnamese.” Peter Arnett in his book said we just ignored the South Vietnamese on and on and on. The South Vietnamese, despite the fact that they sustained almost six times as many combat fatalities as the United States, are perceived as never having fought the war at all.

LC: Bill, can we talk for a few minutes about the Easter Offensive?

BL: Mm-hmm.

LC: Can you give some background to that operation and how it affected what you were seeing in Military Region IV if at all?

BL: Yeah. It kicked off and, of course, it got kind of scarier and scarier. At first Quang Tri is tottering and then it falls. Now you’ve got Kontum and it might fall. Then you’ve got An Loc and they might be overrun. None of which happened, of course, at the time you just don’t know that. As it turns out Abrams sent, I think in early May, sent a message back to Washington to the effect that South Vietnamese leadership is tottering and this thing may just go down the tubes. It could just collapse. It was touch and go. In the Delta, because they’d given up the long term people, they weren’t going to win the war in the Mekong Delta. That was just bleachers from which people watched the war. Of course, they were intellectually and psychologically obligated to watch as much of the war as they could assemble in the Delta. One of which was the abortive attempt to overrun San Giang District Town, which was terrible folly. But there just really wasn’t a hell of a lot going on that was above and beyond the norm from that which had prevailed before. Actually it got worse not towards the end of the ’72 offensive. This is, I guess, part of the land grabbing thing where they apparently from all indications were going to actually try to cut QL-4. They moved in—God I can’t remember if it was another “VC” quote, quote, NVA-manned division from the Elephant’s Foot and were coming down
south. All the signs pointed toward they’re going to try and do it. They’re going to try and cut QL-4. They got beat, but this was in October.

LC: October of ’71?

BL: ’72.

LC: ’72. Oh, that late? Okay.

BL: Yeah. I think it was probably the land grab rather than the ’72 offensive per se. You know I wasn’t in all areas of the Delta, I don’t know what the hell happened or can’t remember what the hell happened in the lower Tra Vinh Province, for example or outlying areas of Bac Lieu or Kien Phong. But I simply don’t recall and nothing that I’ve read or heard since then paints a different picture that anything of significant import happened. They tried to raise some hell, didn’t get much done and keeping in mind in fact that four ARVN regiments out of twelve, plus a Ranger group had been deployed out of the region. So the regular ARVN forces were severely depleted or redeployed. The provincial forces, district forces, had to handle whatever it was the VC/NVA tried to deliver.

LC: Did those ARVN divisions come back to the Delta?

BL: Yes, they did.

LC: After about how long?

BL: I don’t know for sure. I know the 21st was up at An Loc and I think the siege there was lifted mid-summer or something like that. I don’t know, but they were out a good part of the time. You would think that the VC would say, “Oh, this is great.” Instead of having sixteen or seventeen regiments coming after us, now there’s only twelve. Boy, we can do all kinds of stuff.

LC: They’re vulnerable.

BL: Granted there were more attacks by fire. There was a little bit of heightened intensity of activity but nothing on any grand strategic scale. It was simply a matter of what you might see if somehow, someway all the drug gangs in L.A. said, “Let’s unite just for two weeks and cause all kinds of trouble.” Fine. They’re going to cause trouble and people are going to die and horrible things are going to happen, but they’re not going to take the city, much less the county. On a strategic level, Stanley Karnow’s inexorable arithmetic of war notwithstanding, not a whole hell of a lot happened.
LC: You were at MACV for most of this time period?
BL: All the time period, yeah.
LC: Although you might have made a couple of trips away, primarily?
BL: Yeah, right down in the Delta. The only scary thing down there was—well, among other scary things, one significant things was that before the ’72 offensive you could fly at fifteen hundred feet over the deck, fifteen hundred feet above the ground, and a lot of the helicopters didn’t even have doors. Some of them they never closed. You’re sitting there just watching everything just like a big ride. You’re safe from small arms fire at fifteen hundred feet. Until that summer they introduced that SA-7 missile. So then you’re flying and you’re looking down out the back of that helicopter and hoping you won’t see that spiral smoky corkscrew that everybody talked about that was shooting aircraft out of the skies. They had the SA-7 down in the Delta, those infrared things.

LC: When was the first time that those were used in the Delta? Was this the first time?
BL: ’72, yeah. First time they showed up in the whole war was in ’72.
LC: In the spring of ’72?
BL: Yes.
LC: How many were actually seen? Do you have any kind of idea on numbers down in the Delta, I mean?
BL: This is an impression of a memory, of a recollection that was never articulated and counted to begin with, okay? I don’t even remember seeing that there were X firings or X aircrafts of Y aircraft shot down. It seems like I recall there being twenty-some firings, three or four aircraft shot down, maybe five. Enough to where you didn’t expect to see them every time, but you were still scared of them.

LC: But they were making an impression?
BL: Absolutely. Again, in IV Corps, they didn’t have the 23 and 37 and 57 millimeter anti-aircraft they had up north. They just had the 12.7 or .51 caliber.
LC: Still lethal, but different weapon.
BL: But at fifteen hundred feet you’re pretty much safe. You just relax, because they’re not going to hit you. They’re just not accurate at that altitude, but when they got
that SA-7 that completely changed everything. Down in the Delta, finally people flying
down in the Delta had to worry about ground fire where they never had to before, really.

LC: That would be both ARVN forces using helicopters at that point and the
remaining U.S. forces?

BL: Yeah.

LC: You said there might have been several losses, maybe even as many as four.

BL: I know there were, yeah.

LC: Can you describe in general terms the atmosphere at MACV during the
Easter Offensive? What was the feeling, particularly in the first several days when the
magnitude wasn’t clear, but it looked big?

BL: Of course, they’d been expecting it more or less. It was just a matter of
when and how much.

LC: Can you talk about those expectations and what they were based on?

BL: Yeah, the logistical preparations. Logistics is so important in war. Most
people don’t realize that.

LC: Right, exactly.

BL: It’s so incredibly important. There was all this activity going on along the
Ho Chi Minh Trail. That wasn’t my purview so I only had indirect exposure to it and I
can’t recall with precision. Generally, the impression was that you’re smelling smoke,
there’s going to be a fire. It’s going to be a big one. Plus, there were people that keyed
into the fact that ’68, what year was that? ’68 Tet Offensive. And? Thank you,
presidential election. ’72, what’s going on? Presidential election. That’s not a
coincidence. So the feeling was that something’s going to happen and it’s probably
going to be pretty big and pretty nasty. Of course, when it did, I don’t know if they
anticipated all that occurred at Kontum, or at MR-III for that matter, but they knew
something was coming. I believe there were preemptive air strikes taken on parts of the
Ho Chi Minh Trail, parts of North Vietnam, I’m not really sure. Then when it hit, it
wasn’t instant panic, as I recall, but things kept on ratcheting a little bit worse, a little bit
worse and a little bit worse. Then Kontum and now An Loc. You won’t find this in
many examinations of the era, but there was a series of battles in Hau Nghia Province,
which were in retrospect probably quite pivotal.
LC: Can you spell that provincial name?

BL: H-O-U N-G-H-I-A (Hau Nghia). You’re thirty miles, more or less, center of province west of Saigon, bordering Cambodia. The ARVN regulars were tied up with An Loc and the main thrust of the ’72 offensive. So all of a sudden, ta-da, here comes three NVA regiments in sequence into Hau Nghia. Now Hau Nghia RF were good, but still in all their role and mission was not necessarily to deal with NVA regulars, but rather VC main force battalions and regiments, of which there wasn’t much left in Hau Nghia, believe it or not, Neil Sheehan, not withstanding. So here comes three NVA regiments and everybody talks about “the wily General Giap.” He probably didn’t have a say on anything at this level, but what they did was certainly not wily because they committed three regiments piecemeal in sequence. This is NVA regulars now, 101st, 24th, and 274th in sequence. The Hau Nghia RF just beat the hell out of them badly. In fact, the 271st got its butt kicked, the Hau Nghia RF launched a preemptive attack against the 271st in Cambodia and just really beat them up, bad. Actually for the first time, they didn’t have any air support for the first two regiments that I can recall or know of. Their little episode with the 271st they did get air support and they coordinated. They performed well. They did very, very, very well.

LC: Who supplied the air support?

BL: VNAF.

LC: Do you know why it was only at the third of the engagements?

BL: I would have to guess that it was the exigencies of the moment. They have so many aircraft and so many situations and they worked from top priority on down. I would assume that that particular day or those days there wasn’t quite the demand for TAC air in other areas. Hau Nghia RF said, “Hey, we’ve got 271st here. We’d like to pound them into the ground. Can you be of any help?” VNAF probably said, “Yeah, well, we don’t have anything else going on. Sure, we’ll be there.”

LC: Do you know any other tactical details of any of those engagements?

BL: I’m sorry?

LC: Do you know any of the tactical details of any of the other engagements, the earlier two that the NVA got pounded?
BL: They’re spelled out in Stuart Herrington’s book, *Silence was a Weapon*, which was reprinted as *Stalking the Viet Cong* so it would sell more because it has more of a phantasmagoric title. Again I talked to Stuart about it, because I knew him over there. The first battle is recounted. I forget, the An Thinh crossroads or something like that.

LC: Were you—go ahead Bill.

BL: They knew they had NVA coming in and that was it. The first battle was somewhat of a turning point because they’d never really dealt with NVA before. There was this fear that, “Hey, this is the big guy. This is show time. This is it.” Once they realized that the NVA were human, they just got on with the job. It’s like Herrington says, “Hey, we could do it. Let’s go.” But the thing is, the significance of that is had they broken through you’re thirty miles from Saigon. All of a sudden Saigon’s west flank is totally defenseless and confronted by three NVA regiments or remnants of three. That would have forced the redeployment down from up. Who knows what kind of chaos that would have engendered? It was certainly possible because there was no ARVN between, regular ARVN units, between those three NVA regiments and Saigon.

LC: This was RF forces that put up this fight?

BL: Yeah, exactly. Regional forces, yeah.

LC: Which in large part are generally dismissed as being militarily ineffective.

BL: Yeah. Well, that’s really easy to do if you haven't been a VC that’s had to deal with them. There were some very terrible RF and PF units. Three’s no question about it. There were also some very good, very effective RF and PF units. All this stuff is the standard line number ninety-three of conveyors of Vietnam gossip. “Oh, the rough puff’s, ho-ho-ho.” It just wasn’t that simple. You were playing Russian roulette if you assumed that the PF and RF were no good and you went in there and some of them would kick your butt. And they did.

LC: Right. As it seems it happened this particular time.

BL: Yeah, and they did. Yeah.

LC: Bill, thinking about MACV headquarters during the offensive, can you portray the level of activity? Were you on station or on the desk longer or were their longer shifts? Any kind of sense that during the offensive that this was a true crisis?
BL: I don’t remember spending more or less time because the whole time I was there was chaotic and demanding and time consuming. Basically twelve hours a day, seven days a week. But I do recall the, I don’t want to say an impending sense of doom, but the acknowledgement of the possibility of doom. Again, you had Quang Tri fallen. Now you’ve got Kontum and that’s dangling. Now you’ve got An Loc, and now you’ve got the stuff going on in Hau Nghia. It wasn’t like people were scared to death. In fact, if you had gone to the MACV tennis courts there probably would have been just as many people playing tennis at MACV tennis courts as before. But there was definitely some tension in the air. This is touch and go here. It was like Abrams’s message. Things are tottering here.

LC: Yes, I was going to ask you a little bit more about that message. Thinking back on it now, do you think that that message was premature?

BL: No. From what I can gather things were—in retrospect you get even a better view. Of course, I Corps that was crumbling. They overran Quang Tri province. Of course, no one ever says, well A, the NVA had artillery that would have blown the snot out of anybody including Americans because they had so many 131, 122 guns up there. It was just terrible. On top of the fact that there was a missing Air Force pilot that had gone down and there was a no-bomb area. Sure you want to rescue this guy, and I’m not arguing against that, but at least acknowledge that you have left open an open corridor for the NVA.

LC: Do you know that pilot’s name?


LC: Was he recovered do you know?

BL: In the movie *Bat 21*. By the way, he was not rescued the way it was in the movie. He was rescued by an American SEAL and a South Vietnamese SEAL. Why the South Vietnamese don’t get credit, I don’t know.

LC: I didn’t know that. How long was the area in which he was believed to be down off limits for bombing?

BL: It was a couple of days. It wasn’t that long, but you don’t need that much to move through an area. The South Vietnamese were a little bit upset about that. “Sure we
understand you want to save one of your pilots, but how many South Vietnamese are
going to die so you can save your American pilot?”

LC: Do you think that—go ahead Bill.

BL: So you can understand why there’d be some dismay there, basically. It’s
unfortunately true. South Vietnam was less important to the Americans in some respect
and what American life was, which of course didn’t make the South Vietnamese feel all
that good.

LC: Do you think or know that that argument of the relative value of the different
lives was actually put to American officials, either civilian officials or in the chain of
command in some way?

BL: Had to have been because later on John Paul Vann said—I don’t know the
details on this, but I know John Paul. There had been another evacuation of American
advisors at—God, I can’t remember the place. Up in the Central Highlands and then
Vann said, “That’s it. You Americans, American advisor, will not leave. You will stay
until the end.” Which tells you that there was some repercussions about, well, Americans
we’ll stay with you and support you until it gets tough and then we di di mao out of here.
I know that there was a cartoon, an editorial cartoon in one of the Saigon papers of
American advisors being evacuated by helicopter from a fire support base or something.
They’re waving “bye-bye” to the South Vietnamese who are getting pounded by NVA
artillery as if “thanks guys.”

LC: So that was definitely in the air in South Vietnamese thinking?

BL: Not real thick, but you could smell it every once in a while. It wasn’t a
constant atmospheric presence.

LC: Bill, do you know where that no bomb area was generally situated?

BL: Somewhere up in Quang Tri. I’m not exactly sure. Not too far south of the
DMZ (demilitarized zone). Of course, that was the area that was mercilessly pounded by
the NVA artillery.

LC: Let’s talk about the artillery for a second. You’ve alluded to it a couple of
times. Can you talk about the characteristics of the particular guns that were the big
problem?
BL: I don’t know for sure about the 152 millimeter. That’s one big fat howitzer. The width tells you, roughly corresponds to the explosive charge. The 152 was a nasty piece. The 122s and the 130 millimeters that had the accuracy and mobility and cyclic rate of fire. They were absolutely devastating. You can talk to the Marine advisors that were up there. You can read accounts of the Marine advisors because they were the last ones. A guy, what’s his name? Turley, the Easter Offensive. There were some other accounts. They all say that artillery was just absolutely devastating because you couldn’t do anything. You can’t fire a counter battery. That stuff has an explosive charge. It’ll go through, I don’t know like two and a half feet of concrete. It’s got a burst radius of two hundred meters and it sends out these finger-sized chunks of jagged hot metal like hundreds of little miniature chainsaws in every direction. I don’t know what’s worse, getting hit with a B-52 or a 130 gun. You’re just dead if you’re in the target box. All these advisors will tell you, and I’ve talked to a few of them. There’s just nothing. All you can do is find the deepest hole you can find and get in there because there’s nothing you can do.

LC: These guns were placed primarily where during the Easter Offensive?
BL: North of or in the DMZ.
LC: Which made them inviolate really?
BL: By that time, we’d finally wised up to the point if you’re going to do that, then we’re going to do it back to you, but we didn’t have the means online, I think, later on when American naval gunfire showed up. They could fire a counter battery, but when they kicked off that offensive there was no means to fire a counter battery. I think there was somewhere along the lines of twelve 175 U.S. supplied artillery pieces along the DMZ. They shoot a tad farther than the 130 gun. We’re talking eighteen, nineteen miles, something like that, but they’re not as accurate at their maximum range. Their cyclic rate of fire is half that of the 130. So once you’ve got your forward observer out there and he’s fired off the first two rounds and now he’s got you zeroed in. He said, “Okay, fire for effect.” You really haven’t even begun with your 175 before it’s blown to hell.

LC: Was there a goodly amount of accurate intelligence about these guns, the 130 and the 122 millimeter guns?
BL: No, and it’s real hard to do it. You can’t blame the intelligence community because the means to locate them were simply not at hand. You couldn’t get teams in there because the area was swarming with NVA, just like ants all over it coming through. The 130 gun is very mobile. You hook it up behind a deuce-and-a-half truck and off you go. So you can move these little puppies all over the place, any time you want. The NVA, giving the devils their due, masters of camouflage and concealment, they dig these holes or semi-tunnels in the sides of hills and mountains and stuff like that so you can’t see the muzzle blast from the air and stuff like that. Very, very, very tough to do.

LC: Where were these guns manufactured by in large? Do you know?

BL: All Soviet Union.

LC: All in the Soviet Union?

BL: All Soviet Union.

LC: Not Czechoslovakia or somewhere like that?

BL: No, to the best of my knowledge. I don’t think anybody made the 122s. All the references I’ve see, everything I’ve heard from people, all the information I have tells me that the 152s, the 122s, and the 130s were all made in the Soviet Union.

LC: Okay. Let’s talk about Bill Laurie for minute. Bill, were you in correspondence with family members and so forth during this tour?

BL: Yeah.

LC: How often did you write back and forth?

BL: Probably once every couple of weeks.

LC: No more often, really, that that ‘cause you were pretty busy?

BL: Yeah, yeah.

LC: Did you ever call home and speak to anybody?

BL: No.

LC: Was that how they say a “missing” for you? Did you wish you had greater communication or was there just no time to really think about that stuff?

BL: No, I was so absorbed in what I was doing. I was reluctant to really express my feelings, although I did more than I should have probably. I didn’t want to write letters that were bummers. But, of course, you couldn’t avoid a lot of it. I didn’t realize
until I’d actually read some of the letters that I’d sent home how bitter I was in some
places, in some things.

LC: Sent home to your folks?

BL: Yeah.

LC: What about them writing to you? Did your mom, for example, write?

BL: Yeah. It was basically “Hello,” and “How are you? I hope everything’s
okay. I read the stuff in the paper.” I suppose any amateur novelist could compose
basically what my folks wrote. We went on MedCAPs, too, those medical civic action
projects and I couldn’t get the supplies that we needed, hydrogen peroxide, bacitracin.
What are those, no-stick gauze pads, tape, and all that kind of stuff. So I asked my mom
who was a schoolteacher to see if she could get her kids to collect a bunch of stuff so they
did. She’d write back, “You’ve got some stuff coming.” She asked me to send pictures
of the kids at this orphanage where we ran MedCAPs and so I did and thanked the kids.
Let them know that their contribution was going to a good cause. There was that kind of
stuff.

LC: Did you feel good about that little thing that you kind of did on the side?

BL: When you first go out, you just think, “Oh, this is great.” Then you get to
hate it.

LC: Do you mean the MedCAPs generally?

BL: Yeah. The reason being is, first of all, my reservoir for patience was drawn
down completely to nothing. I had a couple of good friends that got killed when I was
there. I got dysentery really bad a couple times, couldn’t sleep. I was working long
hours anyhow. I was mad at a lot of things as I perceived them to be. I was mad
retrospectively at Walter Cronkite and all these people. I’d see the Stars and Stripes and
everything about Teddy Kennedy saying basically, “Give peace a chance.” I had some
wonderful obscenities for him. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” So I was
very, very, very, very bitter. In fact I was mad all the time. I didn’t know it until later
but a guy I knew over there during that time told someone else who knows me, who later
told me that he said this. “I saw him for a year and I never saw him laugh once.” That’s
probably pretty accurate. So anyway you go on these MedCAPs and it dawns on you,
“Good God. We’re never going to solve these problems.” That’s having your impotence
just rubbed in your face and an evil fate laughing at you saying, “You stupid idiot
thinking you can do anything good in this wretched world, which I control ha, ha, ha.” It
sounds bizarre, but you think bizarre things in that kind of environment. I remember
going out there one day and I realized things were happening to me. Somebody was
changing my software at night when I slept. I’d wake up and I’d do things, and go, “Wait
a minute you didn’t do that before. You didn’t act like that. You didn’t think like that.
What’s happening to you?” But I got to this orphanage one day. These kids would come
up and they all liked us. They thought we were great guys. This kid came up and he puts
both his hands on my arm and he’s laughing and everything. My first reaction and I’ll
never forget it, that’s when I realized something is really going on in my head here. I
must really be upset because I wanted to smack him. I just wanted to beat him up and
say, “Look, you stupid ass. Don’t you realize how miserable this stupid, wretched world
is? Why are you laughing? You can’t be a kid. You’ve got to be,” excuse me, “pissed
off and angry and hate. That’s the way you’ve got to be because that’s the way I am.”
God, what’s going on with me? Then I thought screw these MedCAPs. I said, “This is
stupid. This is just the fantasies of a do-gooder. You’re not doing anything.” You go
out there and there’s the same diseases and there’s the same injuries. There’s the same
this. Nothing has changed. So what? The only thing that kept me going was A, you look
back on your whole life and you have this image of yourself, everybody does. Somehow
you’re better. Somehow you’re a good guy, this and that. I thought “If you quit, you’re
just like everybody else that you have condemned in your life that quits when it gets hard
or even if it’s impossible. If it’s the right thing to do, then do it. But if you’re going to
quit then you’re like everybody that you have not held respect for. Then where are you
going to be?” The other thing was, which kind of sandwiched in, which dove-tailed
nicely with this, instead of doing good, I was destroying bad. In algebra a minus, minus
is a positive. So I envisioned myself when we would pour hydrogen peroxide on a boil or
a lance an abscess or something like this, I wasn’t doing good, I was killing germs. That
kept me going.

LC: You were visualizing it in a different way?

BL: Yeah, die you little bastards, you little microbes. “You making this kid sick?
Okay, take this you bastard.” You make up stuff to get you through the day. Whatever.
If it would have involved hopping on one foot and carving whales out of a bar of Ivory soap you would do that. Whatever it takes to get you through or get me through in that case. So that was the MedCAPs were not fun. What happened was some guys would go, and this is neat. You get to be a good guy. Then you realize it stinks. You start lancing a golf-ball-sized abscess on some kids head or shoulder and puss blows out. Ugh! I just don’t want to do this any more. Some people couldn’t take it because it was too depressing. I can understand that. But generally speaking, some guys would go and they’d go once or twice and say, “Oh, screw it. No, I don’t want to go anymore.” There was just a handful of us who kept on going.

LC: Bill, let’s take a break here for a minute.

BL: Okay.
Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I am continuing my oral history interview with William Laurie. Today’s date is the third of February 2004. Again, I am in the interview room in the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech. Bill is in Mesa, Arizona. Bill, I wonder if we could go back to 1971 just for a moment. Tell me if you remember anything about the release of the Pentagon Papers or the publication in the New York Times.

Bill Laurie: At the time, if my memory serves correctly, I was at Vietnamese language school. At that time, it had become or I had anyhow, almost inured to all these revelations that were appearing it seemed like every three months. Of course, there was the news about the Calley massacre at My Lai. That came out in ’69. It seemed like every other three months there’d be some other damning revelation. I didn’t pay a whole lot of attention to it. I had gotten to the point, perhaps unjustly, but nonetheless judging some of these anti-war people as being swept away and a myth of their own making or of their preferred subscription. I really didn’t see what bearing it had on things at that time. Of course, the Pentagon Papers did not go beyond ’68. By then, I had been at Ft. Benning. I had been at Ft. Holabird and I was at Ft. Bliss. I had an opportunity to talk with a number of people who had served in Vietnam prior, on earlier tours. I was becoming increasingly aware of the fact that there was another Vietnam that was not being discussed and was basically censored out of the national discussion. That’s what we’ve talked about before is that despite some of the very real and very serious problems it simply wasn’t as bad as everybody thought it was. I did pick up a copy of the little paperback, New York Times summary of the Pentagon Papers. I don’t know if it was at that time. It may have been later on. But I read through that. I have since read most of the—I guess it’s Gravel edition. Is that how you pronounce it?

LC: Yes, Senator Gravel. Yes.

BL: I always thought it was Gravel.

LC: I think it could go either way.
BL: I was corrected one time. People have to keep in mind that first of all it’s not simply a totally and thoroughly objective view. It’s compiled by Leslie Gelb and a bunch of other people at McNamara’s behest. A lot of that is the conclusions that they arrived. Some of which are quite valid. But at the same time, I think objective reading of that, I’m always puzzled by what everyone claims the Pentagon Papers prove and that the government’s lying and this and that. Certainly they weren’t being upfront necessarily. But among other things it certainly indicates that the communists were just not these super nice people. They weren’t all over the place everywhere. There’s maps in there that show that communist control was much more established in the North than in the South. People make too much of it. The other thing is, is they never bloody read it. They’ve never read the New York Times, little paperback, little four hundred pages, much less the Gravel edition. It’s cited as some sort of mystical symbol as it contains all that needs to be known. That’s not true at all. Of course, again it stops in early ’68. After ’68 is when some of the greatest changes in the war occurred. So in many respects it’s too much ado about something. It’s just not the end-all, be-all explanation of Vietnam by any stretch of the imagination, I don’t think.

LC: Did you follow the Nixon administration’s response to the publication in the New York Times? Did you pay any attention to that at that time?

BL: Casually aware of it. It really didn’t make a big impression on me one way or the other nor did it make a huge impression on the people that I was at language school with. It was simply another speed bump in the road. A number of people thought Ellsberg was bordering on treason in his revelation of classified documents. There’s an argument to be made there. But I really didn’t pay a whole lot of attention to it.

LC: Did it have in your mind as an intelligence officer later on, any bearing on the conflict at all, those revelations, the becoming public of the documents themselves?

BL: One, it showed me that basically the United States government never knew what was going on to begin with. If you were to make a medical analogy, it was an idiopathic disease. It was made worse by iatrogenic therapy or treatment. Idiopathic means a disease without cause. Iatrogenic means treatment which makes the original illness worse. The United States government somehow, someway, simply never got it, just didn’t understand. People should be well aware of the fact that if they’re going to
rely solely and exclusively on the *Pentagon Papers*, first of all they better read them and
most people don’t. They haven’t read them at all. They simply site the fact, “Well, this
proves the government was lying.” To the extent it was lying was in part because the
government was ignorant and didn’t know what was going on. Secondly, nobody
discusses that sort of thing in the public venue. It’s just not done. The Soviets don’t do
it. The Chinese don’t do it. The Vietnamese don’t do it. Nobody does it. You can’t get
up there and say, “Yeah, things are crummy.” We could have said that in World War II.
“Boy things aren’t going very good. Maybe we should just quit.” War by its very nature
is difficult. That’s an understatement. Again, I think it’s sort of much ado about nothing.
By the way, I was rather taken back by statements Ellsberg made just within the past
year. I did speak with him briefly at Texas Tech several years ago. I did more of
listening in on another conversation with someone else that was talking to him. He said
something on television which is completely false. He said, that from 1946 to 1954, the
United States paid eighty percent of France’s war expenses in Southeast Asia. That is
emphatically false by a tremendous margin. According to Bernard Fall, who most people
recognize as one of the preeminent Vietnam experts there ever has been, the United
States never spent more than sixty-one—spent, they budgeted more, but at the last year
they paid sixty-one percent of France’s war costs. They didn’t start paying a dime, or a
franc, until 1950. That was only a mere ten million or something to that effect. We
didn’t give them a dime prior to that. Of course, there were some fungible items because
they were assisting France in Europe, which allowed France to underwrite its expenses in
Southeast Asia, but according to Bernard Fall if you take all of France’s war expenditures
in all of Southeast Asia for the whole time 1946 to 1954, the United States picked up the	
(tab for something like six or seven or eight percent of that. For Ellsberg to stand up and
tell people the United States underwrote eighty percent of France’s war costs from 1946
to 1954 is a display of profoundly glaring ignorance.

LC: Where did you see this statement? Was it in print or did you actually see
him make it on television?

BL: He was on C-SPAN (Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network), I believe it
was.

LC: Would that be in connection with promoting his latest book?
BL: Yes, yes.
LC: I wonder if you’ve read that.
BL: I have not.
LC: Do you have a general opinion about what Ellsberg did in 1971 in terms of his transfer of classified information?
BL: All I know is that he had seven-thousand-some pages and that he was worried about going to jail and that sort of thing. A general impression view, I guess you’d say, nothing in specific detail.
LC: Bill, let’s go back to a topic that we talked about in the last session, which was the Easter Offensive. You were good enough to detail some of the troop transfers from Military Region IV out to the other regions that were more directly threatened by NVA invasions. I wonder if you would agree with the observation made by, again, Richard Hunt, that the transferring out of those troops actually allowed local communists who remained in the Delta area to increase their activities in terms of civilian kidappings. I think he also talks about the employment of coercion to obtain recruits to their units. Did you have any information on that?
BL: We really didn’t. We were looking at the bigger forms of activity, but in my travels around the Delta, and this is anecdotal and I’m as leery of anybody of anecdotal information, I don’t recall anyone and we’re speaking of a number of provinces here Chuong Thien, Rach Gia, all over the place. I don’t remember anyone saying, “My God, they’re just kidnapping everybody right and left.” I just don’t recall that. That could mean that they didn’t know it was going on. But with the Vietnamese I talked to and again we’re talking not just the officialdom. We’re talking about corporal and Nyguen Vinh Sam or somebody—just people—because aside from my assigned duties, I didn’t stay sequestered in whatever little American community there was. I’d go out and eat at noodle stands, talk to people, and I just don’t recall that. I don’t recall that at all.
LC: There’s also the suggestion that the offensive itself actually in some way backfired on the communists, that strategically it was an error that they committed main force troops and were attempting to basically blow the ARVN out of the water and were not only unsuccessful in doing that but also, in fact, lost ground. Is that an interpretation that fits with what you knew at the time or have learned?
BL: Yes and no. People should be advised. No one takes things in context and examines them over time. You see all this stuff in these textbooks that say, “Well, Vietnamization failed and the VC were strong as ever.” Well, why in God’s name, would they have to send all those NVA regulars? With all the armor and artillery they had, this was not a Tet Offensive. This was a blitzkrieg and that artillery was just absolutely, as we said before—in some instances I think along the DMZ, I think it was a determining factor in the initial setbacks that RVNAF experienced because the advisors up there, and I’ve talked to some of them and from what I’ve read, the artillery was absolutely devastating. Might as well have been hit by a B-52 Arc Light strike. So that’s an indication. If pacification wasn’t working, then why the need for the NVA? That’s a question that no one has come up with a satisfactory answer for in my mind. The other thing was is it showed that communists weren’t all that intelligent necessarily. They always talk about “the wily General Giap” as if he never made a mistake in his life. Whereas he made many, many serious mistakes and any American general who had his record would have been dismissed out of hand for cavalier deployment of troops in a tactically unsound manner.

LC: Can you give some examples of what you think Giap's misappropriations were?

BL: The big picture was they split their offensive up in three major sectors. You had the DMZ and I Corps. Then you had the Kontum-Central Highlands battle. Then you had also of course down in Binh Dinh, too. Then you had the An Loc Offensive in the little-known Hau Nghia RF battles with three NVA regiments. Had they committed those forces in one place, or jockeyed them around a little bit, it’s conceivable that they could have cut Vietnam in half. From Kontum on down because it was close enough as it was. Or they could have taken Hue, any number of things, but they deployed their forces in a dispersed manner on a countrywide basis. That wasn’t the smartest thing in the world to do. Secondly, in many instances they didn’t coordinate their armor with their infantry. This is a fundamental basic flaw. You learn this from the word ‘go.’ That infantry is needed to protect armor and armor is needed to protect infantry. There’s this mutual benefit, this symbiotic tactical relationship between the two. They committed tanks with no infantry protection, particularly in An Loc. They lost a lot of them. In fact,
the very first, here’s a little factoid for you. The very first NVA tank knocked out at An Loc, was knocked out by an eighteen-year-old PSDF (Peoples Self Defense Forces) kid with the LAW, the light anti-tank weapon. They sent that armor into An Loc in these probing attacks and in the streets of An Loc with no infantry protection and they were basically gone from this horrible destruction machine of armor to a vulnerable piece of junk. The RVNAF destroyed a lot of tanks at An Loc, upwards of seventy or eighty. Some of them were killed by air. There’s no question about that. When they went in there and once the South Vietnamese realized, “Hey, these little LAWs and some of these other things can knock out tanks, there’s no infantry protection.” Hey, it was open season. So they lost a lot of tanks. If an American armor officer or an American officer in charge of a battle such as An Loc had done that, he would have been dismissed. This borders on criminal negligence, really. Some of their attacks down in the Delta, like the one we talked about before at San Giang district town was profoundly idiotic. It was just moronic. You can’t help but develop the impression, that A, their own troops didn’t mean much to them, and B, all they wanted to do was use them as cannon fodder to generate as much consternation as possible, simply to keep the war boiling, just keep it going. They didn’t have a snowball’s chance in heck of taking San Giang district town. That was absolutely ludicrous. Their errors at An Loc were notable. They committed one division and then another. They were ordered to take An Loc. “You will take An Loc.” If you compare An Loc with Dien Bien Phu, as a South Vietnamese general has done, General Lam Quang Thi, he’s compared the area, the weapons available, et cetera, and so forth. If you compare the two, then An Loc should have fallen. It was an inferior defensive position compared to Dien Bien Phu. The South Vietnamese basically had no artillery. Their artillery had been destroyed by NVA artillery. So the swing factor, of course, was allied air power. It wasn’t just the United States. The South Vietnamese had air power there. Also there were elements of the 81st ARVN Airborne commandos, Biet Cach. They were going out. People say, “Well, you know American air power stopped and the South Vietnamese couldn’t.” Some of the targets at An Loc were developed by elements of the 81st Commandos that went out and did these little recon missions out and spotted targets and got that information back. I don’t know how many, but I know it did happen.
LC: Just to clarify a little bit, the point about the misallocation of armor and infantry units, can you talk a little bit more about that? Do you think there was any element in the decision making on the communist side that allowed the introduction of inexperience dealing with the deployment of armor on the battlefield that contributed to some of these gaffes?

BL: It would all be conjecture on my part. Armored people were not stupid. Most of their high-ranking armor officers had trained in the Soviet Union. I don’t know. I recall from the basic—I can recall when I was a kid my dad telling me that. That’s just from his experiences in World War II that you have to have—and I’d have little Army men out and stuff like that. He said, “No, no, no. You have your little tanks.” He said, “Oh, no your infantry has to be with your armor and your armor has to be with your infantry. If either one’s alone then you invalidate the capabilities of either.” So that’s just anybody that has any military training at all, should know that. I remember hearing that from the word, “Go.” Infantry and armor, infantry and armor, tanks protect infantry, infantry protects armor. It’s like eating with one chopstick. You just don’t do it or you shouldn’t do it. Of course, Hitler’s _Blitzkrieg_ and then his mechanized infantry and all that. I am really at a loss to explain that. They should have had the instruction. One developed the impression without having any knowledge whatsoever. One has to assume that well, they probably just went, “Well, let’s just throw those tanks in there and see what happens. ARVN’s going to run because they have tank fever and they’re going to panic.” Not smart. Of course, there were instances—I’ve heard and read enough of this. I didn’t see it with my own eyes to know that it’s true. Some NVA tankers were chained inside their tanks.

LC: Really?

BL: Yeah. There were instances in which tanks were left unprotected and they started taking heavy fire. Their crews just ran. The South Vietnamese captured running NVA tanks with no crews in them, engines still running.

LC: This was all within what’s generally called the Easter Offensive?

BL: Yeah.

LC: Not later on?

BL: No. In ’72, yeah.
LC: Wow. Can you comment a little bit about the deployment of airpower by the
South Vietnamese during this series of engagements of the offensive in the different
areas?

BL: To start out with, however you want to quantify it, the percentage of
firepower was, of course, greatly in favor of the United States. That’s in part due to the
fact that the South Vietnamese Air Force didn’t have the aircraft that we had, the C-130
gunships and all this other stuff. They had the A-37 and A-5s. The problem with those is
their tactical range is limited. But all in all, the general impression I got in talking to
people, some reading and this and that. From what I recall back there was that even
though they were a secondary partner in the overall allied air capabilities picture, they
performed admirably. The advisors up at Kontum, and Pleiku said ARVN and VNAF
was just miraculous up there. They were busting NVA tanks and this and that. Up in I
Corps, I know there were some instances where pilots didn’t want to fly low and they’d
release their ordnance too high. That was understandable because there was absolutely
murderous anti-aircraft up there. They could hit you from ground level up to twenty-five
thousand feet or higher. But I also know of instances of just outright audacious defiance
of some VNAF pilots up there flying TAC air missions and stuff like that.

LC: Do you know the names of any of those pilots or units that you understood to
have played a particularly important part?

BL: No, I regret to say that I don’t know for sure. Although I do know that one
of the VNAF pilots up there who was quite famous was the son of Dr. Phan Quang Dan
who, of course, was a South Vietnamese politician, way, way, way back when who ran
afoul of Ngo Dinh Diem and was put in prison and this and that. Then he was later
released and widely regarded as an impeccably honest man. Thoroughly established anti-
communist credentials, a native northerner, never heard a bad thing about him. But his
son flew Skyraiders. He destroyed five tanks up on the DMZ and then finally he was
killed by anti-aircraft power. People say that’s corrupt politicians and this and that.
Well, yeah, there were and I’m not excusing them, either. I really hate them, but here’s a
guy who had sufficient pull and influence to get his son out. His son wanted to fly
Skyraiders. You’re flying Skyraiders. It’s not C-130s or Caribous, or any of this stuff,
transport. You’re flying TAC air missions and you’re going to take fire. I don’t recall
his name. I have it written down in a book somewhere around here. People like that are
the ones that the news media and that the American public ignores or remains blissfully
ignorant of. But here’s a guy that could have avoided service. Instead he chose one of
the more lethal branches, or one of the more lethal positions that one could pick, flying a
Skyraider. You’re going to fly low. You’re going to be flying TAC air in combat and
you’re going to be shot at. There’s no two ways about it. He volunteered for it.

LC: That actually was the next question I wanted to ask. Why do you think a
story like that did not receive kind of publicity in the United States that perhaps it
merited?

BL: By that time, and even now nobody wants to hear that because it’s like going
to see The Exorcist and it’s not a scary movie. They want thrills and chills. They seem
to. I shouldn’t say they want. It seems like, smells like, feels like that people are content
to wallow in their barroom discussions about, “Oh, those corrupt ARVN generals.” You
take away their authenticity and their expertise by saying, “Wait a minute. This isn’t
true.” Then of course along with that comes the psychic cost of saying, “That was a good
guy and we kind of sold him out or we ignored him.” That’s just not fun. It’s more fun
to sit back and pontificate. It’s not as much fun and it’s rather tragic to contemplate
people like this individual and others who, they didn’t have Thieu’s picture on their wall
or maybe they did, but they didn’t care for him necessarily. They didn’t like corruption,
but the communists were even worse. The communists were just loathsome, disgusting,
stupid idiots who had the ignorant audacity to claim Vietnamese patriotism as their own
province. These people truly resented that. They truly resented what Vietnam would
become if the communists took over. It was their own personal individual decision.
They just never got media play.

LC: There were in your experience and observations officials and military
personnel who were willing to stand up against that on the side of the South Vietnamese
government?

BL: Absolutely. They say, “Oh, ARVN wouldn’t fight.” Well two hundred and
seventy-five thousand South Vietnamese died in that war and they weren’t all shot in the
back running away. Sir Robert Thompson said something to the effect that—what was
“The South Vietnamese kept more people under arms for a longer war than the United States has ever done or ever will.” That’s true. LC: Right, and that adds perspective to what’s often dismissed as the South Vietnamese side of the war.

BL: Yeah. Yeah. Of course, the myth dovetails and feeds upon itself by saying, “Well, they lost. It’s the same as 1963.” Well, they lost because they had more reliable allies. They had better weapons. They were not encumbered with an obscene excuse for a strategy.

LC: By obscene excuse for a strategy, can you elaborate?

BL: I could write a book if you want.

LC: Okay.

BL: You have to go back to 1960 or ’61. The United States government never understood. I think they were replaying war movies in their mind or something. They never understood the nature of the war. They never understood the three-phase guerilla warfare. They never understood the propaganda campaigns. They never understood anything. They could have. People say, “Well, it’s a new war.” There’s nothing new. Everything’s just a very different variation of the same fundamental factors. They could have and should have talked to people like Bernard Fall and Jean Lartéguy and others and Vietnamese and French. The few times they did, they wouldn’t listen. Jean Lartéguy and Bernard Fall actually met with people in the United States Embassy in Saigon at the embassy’s invitation. Lartéguy said, “Do not”—this is in his book The New Face of War. “Do not send millions of people here. Send people who are well trained, who understand this war, who care.” He said he might as well have been speaking to stone statues because the Americans felt that we won World War II. We’ve seen all these war movies. All we’ve got to do is just throw more hardware in here and we’ll have it in the bag. So there should have been an under—and Pike himself has said, the great Douglas Pike has said, “The most important thing about Vietnam is to understand it.” The United States government never did nor did the news media nor does the American public to this day.

They should have understood that all these factors. You have an infant nation, really. It was in its infancy. It was either Pike or Bernard Fall said, “The Viet Cong out-administrated the Saigon government,” which his true. In part because they assassinated
so many low-level government functionaries. But they should have realized that you
don’t want to send a massive presence. We do have something here other than just, well,
give them hardware and they’ll fight. You have to build all this stuff up and you have to
have people that understand the Vietnamese people that can speak their language, that
can talk to them and that care. If you don’t do that it’s the same as—and this is my
language—it’s the same as performing an appendectomy without antisepsis or anesthesia.
You can perform a perfect appendectomy insofar as you can hold down your screaming
patient, but he or she is still going to die, if not from the shock of the pain and everything
else, because of the failure to sterilize your instruments and sterilize the sutures and all
this other stuff. So you’ll therefore conclude that “Well, appendectomies kill people.”
No, they don’t. Dirty appendectomies kill people. We conducted again going back to
iatrogenic, we conducted a dirty appendectomy if you want to use a medical analogy.
The other thing is they should have realized that the Ho Chi Minh Trail has got to be cut
and it’s got to be held. You won’t find this in many places. The Thai government
actually was willing to throw in with us in 1962 to cut and hold the Ho Chi Minh Trail in
the Laotian panhandle with a multi-lateral force because this is their neighborhood. They
knew what was coming down the pike. Of course, the United States government didn’t
want to bother with that. They should have known that this is where this is going. We’ve
got to do this and we’ve got to do it now. In addition to that—and the United States
government never, ever did this—we are going to gear up a propaganda war that is just
going to devastate, not only the Hanoi government, but the people in North Vietnam, the
people in South Vietnam and world opinion. We’re going to shame world opinion.
Every day we’re going to come up with a list of the people that the VC have assassinated.
Everyday we’re going to build on the knowledge of Vietnam and tell them what
happened in land reform and tell them what happened in this and that. The United States
government never showed up for the propaganda war, which ultimately was critical,
probably more critical than anything else.
LC: Why would you say that the United States just didn’t participate? They
weren’t on the court, really, with regard to propaganda. Why was that?
BL: God, there’s probably thousands of reasons. One of which is—
LC: Pick one or two.
BL: One of which is you had the rise of elitist managerial types in Washington. These people had never, ever—now I know McNamara was in the Army, but he was a statistician or something like that. There was no passion. Do you believe in what you’re doing? And if you don’t, then don’t show up. Don’t go. You have to go to win and win by definition is simply stopping Hanoi’s war outside its own borders. How and why these people couldn’t grasp that is amazing. You had Colby going to one of the Bundy’s and saying, “Look, we need all this stuff for the territorial militia and the RF and PF and stuff.” Bundy said, “Well, we’re not geared up for that.” In the late ’50s, I believe it was, Tran Van Don, was a South Vietnamese general at the time, told the United States, “Look we don’t need right now, we don’t need a Korean type of Army. We need light, mobile well-trained infantry, small unit war.” He was told that, “Well, we’re not going to do that. We’re going to set you up for a Korean-type invasion with these heavy divisions and this and that.” They were not the only ones that tried to tell the Americans, “Look, you don’t understand. We’ve got to do it this way first.” It never sunk in. It’s just amazing. It’s just utterly amazing. The only thing, analogy that I can come up with is I remember on our MedCAPs, we’d be out. A lot of problems were just simply due to sanitation and stuff like this. You’d try to tell some of these village mothers and stuff like this, “Look you’ve got to wash. Here’s some soap. Wash your child’s infection or do this.” They just didn’t know. It just didn’t sink in. It just didn’t register. They would do things that were counterproductive. They didn’t mean any harm, but they were so locked in. Their mindset had ossified into an unalterable mental program. I’d have to compare that to the people in Washington.

LC: So things just kept getting worse?

BL: Getting worse in terms, cumulatively worse in terms of American stupidity because you have, and they saw this in the Korean War, you have a reservoir of public acceptance of your policies. You draw down on this reservoir and once you empty it, you ain’t putting Humpty Dumpty back together again. They should have realized that from the onset. They should have realized that this is really going to demand the utmost of our political, and managerial and economic skills, our military skills, our propaganda skills. By propaganda, everyone assumes that propaganda is, “Well, that’s a lie.” Propaganda is simply the message sent out by anybody to influence behavior or thought. Mothers
Against Drunk Driving conduct propaganda campaigns all the time, and well they should.
That’s propaganda. It’s honest propaganda with a noble objective. There’s evil
propaganda, but I don’t understand why we couldn’t have launched a propaganda war,
which would have made the North Vietnamese communists look like the fools and
deranged ideologues that they are.

BL: Bill, let me ask you about an infrastructure question that’s suggested by
some of what you said. You were talking about the early ’60s and that at that point any
military commanders who had a brush with Vietnam or in the United States military were
basically interested in throwing hardware at the problem and assuming that would solve
it. But beginning in 1972, perhaps even earlier, you’ve alluded a couple of times to the
fact that the United States wasn’t transferring equipment to the South Vietnamese Army
at the rate that it might have to have some good effect. Like for example, we talked about
aeropace and other sort of specialized weapon systems. Can you kind of balance those
things or pick apart that paradox? What was going on in the early ’70s such that the
United States was becoming more and more reluctant to transfer equipment in the
necessary amount and types to the South Vietnamese military?

BL: Actually, I think they became less reluctant because after ’68 the political
shock from Tet and everything else, they’ve come up with Vietnamization. We need to
come up with something to show the American people we’re getting out of this. Then up
until January of ’68 I think only five percent of RVNAF had M-16s.

LC: What did they have instead of that?

BL: M-1s, M-2s, M-3s. BARs, World War II junk. It’ll kill you. It still won’t
kill you as well as the AKs and SKSs and RPDs and B-40s and all that other stuff. If you
have two squads or two platoons or two companies and you give one the modern
weaponry and you give others the World War II stuff, the people that have the World
War II weaponry are at a distinct advantage. Of course, throughout the whole war the
South Vietnamese artillery, with 105, 155 and 175s, was inferior to the NVA artillery. I
remember talking with some veterans saying the NVA had better weapons and they fell
back, “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” Well, I’m sorry. In the early ’60s in
Binh Dinh province, that’s true. There was no NVA artillery there. But this war was a
space-time continuum and it should have been foreseeable because we knew they were
training their artillery and armor officers in the Soviet Union. We knew what their
document was in terms of deployment of artillery and armor. So you’ve got to figure it’s
very reasonable to assume that “Well, they have this now, but in another three years”—
then of course we knew they had tanks coming in on ships in Hai Phong Harbor and stuff.
This is where this thing’s going. They never realized that. But to answer the question,
after ’68 they did start giving M-16s to RVNAF. That was not well received by the
communists, either. In fact, in Herrington’s book, *Silence is a Weapon*, one of the Chieu
Hois there said, “Everything else is falling apart and then the PFs got M-16s. Oh, my
God. Now what?” So in that respect, they improved, but still in terms of airpower—
people talk about all these planes that VNAF had. There was nothing, nothing to
compare with the C-130s and B-52s. Again people say, “Well, see, they needed
airpower.” Well, guess what? American forces relied on airpower, too. The airpower
compensated for the relative artillery deficiency that the South Vietnamese had. I don’t
know if it would have been possible, but in your wildest imagination you could see the
American government taking a captured 130 gun and looking at it and said, “Make some
of these. These are good. These really work.” But in terms of the heavy weaponry it
was never—never, I don’t think what was demanded by the situation. Then, of course,
after ’73 it just got worse and worse and worse because of the cutbacks. They didn’t
have anything to fight with, contrary to what Frank Snepp says and other people have
said.

LC: The cutbacks imposed by the United States Congress?

BL: Yes. One other thing on the ’72 Offensive. Even though they did, it was a
catastrophic loss for them. They threw everything. They’ve never thrown as many
forces against the allies in the South as they did in ’72. In the matter of measure, there
was eighty-four thousand who were committed in the first wave of the Tet Offensive.
There was 150 and upwards of 200,000 by the end committed in ’72. So you’ve basically
got two and a half Tets thrown at you. That’s quantitatively, qualitatively when you
consider the weaponry. You’ve got three of four Tets thrown at you at once in terms of
firepower and devastation. So the ’72 offensive, they wanted to inflict some serious
damage and they were damaged themselves. What they did gain, however, was more
freedom of movement in remote areas of the highlands, which of course allowed them to
build the LOCs, lines of communications, and roads and stuff, that heretofore they had
not been able to improve. That was critical three years later. In terms of controlling
more people and stuff—if the United States had done that in ’72, if we had invaded North
Vietnam, and sustained the defeat the North Vietnamese and the press, people would
have gone crazy. “My God, we threw all these people and they just got beat to hell.”
Look at what happened at Lam Son 719 when ARVN went into Laos. “Oh, my gosh!
What a failure.” Well, it was a very, very, very bloody draw. Never even a peep was
said about it. That’s proof positive that people examine these things through different
lenses. They have a lens for examining the communists and then they have a lens for
examining the allies. When the allies run into some pretty serious difficulties in Lam Son
719 then everybody goes crazy. “Oh, look this proves nothing, blah, blah, blah.” Then in
’72, the North Vietnamese get thousands of their people killed for nothing, really,
politically in any sense. It’s simply dismissed. There’s no ramifications to it. There’s no
greater meaning to it. Again, just imagine what would happen if the United States had
tried to invade North Vietnam and met the fate that the NVA did in ’72 and what the
uproar would have been.

LC: Right. William Colby said, or actually wrote in his book that speaking now
in the fall of 1972, that the military attacks by the North Vietnamese over the past
previous six months or so and their outcomes had actually illustrated that the communists
had been driven off their own strategy. That people’s war was no longer what they were
pursuing. They were pursuing an all out main force engagement of a very conventional
type and that they had lost that main-force engagement, but had been driven off their
strategy and had nowhere to go. Does that sound pretty much right to you?

BL: I think it stands to reason. If all these VC were running around and no place
was safe and all that other Karnow-ian nonsense, there was a lot of places that were very,
very safe in Vietnam. But why bother with all these tanks and all this artillery and all
this? Why would you—that’s the same as saying, “Well, if I put ten wheels on my car
it'll will go two and a half times faster.” They wouldn’t have had to have done that had
the indigenous VC retained any strategic military capabilities in the South and they did
not. In fact, what VC there were survived because of the presence of the NVA. If you
were to take the NVA out, there simply wasn’t going to be any more war. You’d have a
smoldering terrorist problem for a while and some brushfire battles here and there, but
take the NVA out and the war is over with. That was what sustained the VC. We know
that the “great rear” as they called it, that’s going to get us through this. Absolutely.
Their people’s war strategy had a huge air bubble in it that they didn’t realize it. The old
wily General Giap says something to the effect, that one million small victories produces
a big one, major victory. That’s true, but that was turned around on him because after ’68
when the VC imploded, as a strategic force. I’m not saying there as no VC. You’ll see
people or read people that say, “After Tet ’68 the VC were through.” No, they weren’t
through, but they were through as a strategic force. Then you’ve got the Phoenix
Program. You’ve got land reform. You’ve got the training of the RF/PF. You’ve got the
mobile advisory teams going out. You’ve got better weaponry for the South Vietnamese.
Of course, the Tet attack really woke a lot of people up in South Vietnam. “Boy, we’ve
got to do something now. This changes the whole game.” The process began in ’68
whereby Giap’s one million little victories were—now you could paraphrase that and say
that 942 small defeats produce one big one. Yeah, they were strategically defeated as an
indigenous strategic military force in the South. I don’t see how anyone can argue other
wise. Again, why send two hundred thousand NVA with artillery and armor into South
Vietnam if you have an indigenous VC military capability?

LC: Right, if you’re cresting on a general counteroffensive that involves
everyone, right. Bill, let me ask you about one of the other fallouts, as it were, from the
1972 offensive and that’s the refugee problem. I don’t suppose that you saw very much
evidence of displaced personnel, civilian personnel in Military Region IV. Would that be
accurate?

BL: It was periodic. Generally accurate, yes. Nothing like in I Corps. There
were instances in which people fled areas where combat was breaking out. It was not a
major problem in the Delta. In fact, I don’t have it right in front of me, but I do have the
actual data on refugees and many of them were resettled by the end of the year, under Dr.
Phan Quang Dan, by the way.

LC: I was going to ask about the resettlement program. Can you discuss that at
BL: Not in great detail. I do know that everybody has to laugh at the GVN they were corrupt and inefficient. But sometimes they got things done. Dr. Dan, Phan Quang Dan, who I mentioned before, his son was killed, he was a director of a new refugee resettlement or refugee affairs or something like that. They did a reasonable job of taking care of these people.

LC: I’ve seen figures that said there were a million people.

BL: I think it was more than a million.

LC: Okay. So, that’s a pretty tall order to find even temporary shelter and services for that number of people.

BL: It was really, really bad in I Corps from everything I understand. Just, just terrible.

LC: Bill, let me ask you about your position on the desk again. Were you, as an intelligence officer specifically tasked with Military Region IV, were you looking at traffic that dealt with the other regions?

BL: Yeah, all the time.

LC: Did you participate in discussions that included strategic overview of the whole of South Vietnam or was your input contained to Region IV?

BL: The latter, although I certainly did listen in and pay great attention to what was going on elsewhere, but I had no contributions. When I went back with the Defense Attaché Office, in ’73 and ’75, I was also responsible for MR-III. That was not my primary assignment, but I was expected to know what was going on in MR-III.

LC: Were you primarily—now this would be your first tour—were you tasked largely with looking at civilian issues and security issues or were you also involved with assessing South Vietnamese, specifically ARVN military capabilities? Can you describe overall the kinds of things that you were actually responsible for?

BL: The big thing, of course, was enemy capabilities and intentions. That was primary. Then when I’d go down to the Delta, it was more or less expected. I don’t know how it came about. I can’t say for sure that I received expressed orders to this effect, but it eventually evolved into examining the bad guys. Their capabilities and intentions and making any observations and comments on significant aspects of the GVN
and RVNAF, which I did on a routine basis, without going into a tremendous amount of
research or anything, but just simply observations.

LC: I wonder if you can go over just in general terms the sources of information
that you had about enemy capabilities?

BL: Everything that there ever was. I don’t even know if I can discuss it now. It
was captured documents, POW interrogations, Chieu Hoi interrogations, technical
intelligence, the weaponry, document exploitation, aerial observation, everything.
Absolutely everything.

LC: You were responsible for, as it were, sort of collating all of that and then
drawing out from it analysis?

BL: Exactly.

LC: Did you write analysis papers?

BL: Yes.

LC: Okay. How often did you write them? Were there particular schedules?

BL: About once a week. Actually, they weren’t what you’d call really deep
analysis. They were more of a situation report on developments within the week and how
they might apply in the future.

LC: Were the papers that you were writing given a particular title, like Weekly
Summary for Region IV or was there a series of papers that you were actually writing
within?

BL: Yeah, I forget what they called it. The stuff went right to Abrams. I was not
the only one. When I was in the Army, when I was with the DAO, I was the only one for
IV Corps. What did they call that? There was some sort of goofy acronym. I can’t recall
what it was. I was never big on that kind of stuff. There was a weekly briefing for
Abrams and then later Wyand. Then when I went with DAO, there was a briefing for the
ambassador if he wanted to show up or his assistant. So there was a weekly reporting
format, generally, as well as—how do you want to call it? Periodic reports on wider
subjects. For example that overview of the insurgency in Thailand. There were things
like that, too.
LC: You mentioned the distribution, that the reports went to Abrams. Do you
know where else they went, for example, within the military structure of the Far East
generally and in Washington?
BL: Yeah, they went everywhere. They went to CINCPAC (Commander in
Chief, Pacific). They went to probably MAC-Thai and everywhere.
LC: And in D.C. as well, I presume?
BL: I’m sorry?
LC: Also in D.C., Washington D.C.?
BL: Yeah. Oh, yeah. State Department saw it. CIA saw it. Everybody saw it.
LC: At this point, this is before the Peace Accords, to your knowledge—and if
you can’t say, it’s fine—did the CIA have basically some kind of parallel structure where
they were also creating or developing their own intelligence sources and creating reports
and forwarding them on?
BL: Yeah. Yes, they did. Of course, they had their own agents and their own
assets, assets meaning sources within the GVN and places like that. Then they had their
agents who, of course, we never knew who they were and we couldn’t task them for
information and stuff like that. Basically what you’d end up with is, as you, said a
parallel intelligence and reporting system. Whereas MACV comes up with this report
and then the CIA comes with this report. The CIA very frequently had periodic reports
that would come in on a random basis, a couple of them every week on various and
sundry subjects. They would not present material to Abrams and these other people, but
they were part of the team, so to speak. Their information that they developed would be
used in our reporting and analysis and stuff that we developed would sometimes be in
their analysis, too. Sometimes.
LC: So you would see some of their stuff, but they would see almost all of your
stuff. Is that fair?
BL: Probably, although I wouldn’t know how to quantify that. I wouldn’t know
how, and I don’t know if it can be measured. Sixty percent of their stuff found it’s way
into our material as opposed to ten percent of our stuff into theirs and so on and so forth.
Conceptually that’s probably correct in terms of order of magnitude. Then you also had
the State Department and you also had NSA (National Security Agency) and all this other
stuff. So it was many in your agent networks that were separate from the CIA. So you had a lot of sources of information. Not everybody was privy to everything all the time immediately. Sometimes the CIA, and I know, they would sit on things and wouldn’t tell other people. At least to my way of thinking they had a courtesy of saying something in clouded terms. Mr. Frank Snepp just couldn’t be bothered with that. In fact, we called him on it one time. He was visibly upset that we had found out something that he knew that we weren’t supposed to know that he knew. His feathers were ruffled, poor boy.

LC: Do you have any idea when that was, when that came up?
BL: That was in ’74 when I was back with DAO.

LC: Can you give an estimate now—and I understand there’s no way you have full knowledge about this—but an estimate of the above-ground personnel attached to the CIA station in Saigon?
BL: I don’t know. I don’t know what the numbers were. I know they had people out in the provinces. They had people at corps headquarters.

LC: Is that where they were based? For example, where was Snepp’s office?
BL: It was in Saigon.

LC: But it wasn’t at MACV?
BL: No, it was at the embassy.

LC: At the embassy, okay. You mentioned also that NSA had a presence there. Were they also quartered, as it were, in the embassy building to your knowledge?
BL: I don’t know where they’d be. I have no idea. I’d see these people and I’d talk to them and I can’t even give you one name right now.

LC: They probably wouldn’t want you to anyway.
BL: Yeah, that’s true.

LC: Can we talk just for a moment about the State Department structure in Saigon?
BL: Sure.

LC: Did you as a military intelligence analyst have a fairly good relationship with the diplomatic personnel in terms of information sharing and so forth, or was it more guarded or can you describe it in general?
BL: Generally speaking and there were some outstanding State Department people. Believe me, there was just great people, super people. That includes USAID and some of this other stuff. They also had USAID people out in the provinces who were very good. Really knew their stuff, they were motivated people, intelligent people, decent people, but it seemed like the same with the military, the farther up the ladder you went, the greater the odds were that you would meet somebody who was, for lack of a more scientific term, a bozo. I, in general, did not get along. Not that there was any arguments, not that there was any tangible friction, but I just didn’t get along with the State Department people way up towards the top and even some of the lower functionaries in Saigon because in my view, they really didn’t care. I remember attending a function one time, which I very seldom did because I wasn’t a habitué of the American community. I remember attending a function one time, and hearing all these gooners talk about, “Another year here and then I think I can get Paris or I think I can get Buenos Aires.” I was boiling inside because people are dying out there and you, you stupid obscenity, obscenity. This is just one of your career ladder steps.

LC: Just the next posting?

BL: Yeah. I, internally detested people like that. You’re either here to do something or leave. Get out of here. Get out of the way. I, generally, had a dim view of the State Department overall, the exceptions being some of the fantastic people that I met. The ones out in the provinces were almost uniformly good people, but the closer you got to Saigon, the farther you went up the line and block chart the more unpleasant they were to me. In fact, one of my conclusions after I came back to this country was that to improve the situation you should fire the entire State Department, everybody from the top down and then go to Manpower and Kelly Girl and put in an order for 189 ambassadors and just start all over again. Because these people, they just sit around and pontificate. Their heart and soul wasn’t in it. If it isn’t, then get out of here. That was my opinion.

LC: State Department culture is a pretty heavy thing. It sounds as if you felt some of the negative elements of that culture were replicated and brewing up in Saigon.

BL: And to be fair, there was that kind of thing in the military. There were those kind of people in the CIA. It was basically, well, I’ve got a year here or two years. You don’t have to live there. You don’t have to forever. You don’t have to be a hundred
percent committed. You have a job to do, and do it to the best of your ability.


LC: Bill, I want to ask you about the summer and early fall of 1972. Can you describe your operations and any trips that you remember out to the provinces during that post-Easter Offensive period?

BL: Yeah, well, there was one when we talked about San Giang district town. That, of course, was contrary to what you expect Walter Cronkite to tell you entirely. I remember being at the 9th ARVN Division fire direction center, the FDC, in Cao Lanh and thanking God that I was not given an advisor slot because these people knew what they were doing. There was just no question about it.

LC: Do you mean the ARVN people?

BL: Yeah. I mean, they were fully capable and knew what they were doing and who am I? I’m sure I could have helped them with some organizational stuff and this and that, but these people knew what they were doing and they were doing it fairly well. But everywhere I went, Rach Gia, Chuong Thien, and places like that, the general recollection I have, and there were a few other provinces later on that weren’t this favorable, but the general impression that I recall is that everyone basically said, “Well, we’re dealing with it. We’re doing okay.” I heard that time and time and time again.

Then I’d be in Can Tho, which of course is the so-called capital of the Delta at IV Corps headquarters there and talk with other guys and other advisors would come in and this and that and talk with the Vietnamese. I just didn’t see this hopeless despair and all this other stuff. We’re dealing with it. Then just when I left, October, November of ’72, the NVA tried, I think, I’m pretty sure, they were trying to cut QL-4. Of course, that would put an economic stranglehold. If you cut that, then the rice doesn’t come up from the Delta. There’s only one road and there’s only one canal. ARVN handled them quite easily, really.

LC: How big—go ahead Bill.

BL: A couple of B-52 strikes.

LC: I’m sorry. Go ahead, Bill, the B-52 strikes.
BL: Yeah, they swarmed in around the neck of QL-4 at one of the narrower parts of the upper Delta and they were there. There was all indications that they’re not here for a picnic. They’re not holding anger management seminars or cultural exchanges. They’re here and they’re near QL-4, just add two and two and you get four. They were dealt with rather handily.

LC: What forces did the communists apply in that attempt apparently to cut under the road?

BL: Oh, man, I think they actually had moved in, if I remember correctly, they had moved in a divisional headquarters and another unit from Cambodia. This is going way back, so I’m not clear on this. But I do know it was an incremented force. The regiments there, the Z-15s, Z-18s, Dong Tac One of 24th, which is operated in and around Dinh Tuong in the northern Delta. It seemed more or less to operate on an independent basis. There was no divisional headquarters, but then there was indications that there was some organization going on here, a combination of forces, et cetera and so forth. When they do that, that means they really want to hit you, big time. That was just when I left. The only recollection that I have is they tried, but they didn’t get anywhere.

LC: Had you been observing some of the telltale signs of a potentially large move there and writing about it for a little while?

BL: Yeah, we had seen it coming, yeah.

LC: The other thing that you had seen coming, obviously, was your time to leave the country. Do you remember was that in October or early November?

BL: It was end of October, or first of November, I don’t recall which, right in there somewhere.

LC: How did you feel as you were coming closer and closer to the time for you to depart?

BL: I didn’t want to leave.

LC: Can you talk about why? Not everybody felt that way, as you well know.

BL: Yeah. I was convinced that we were doing the right thing. I had a personal commitment and I didn’t want to leave.
LC: Did you also have, at this point, friends that also sort of made it not just a political commitment but also on some level a personal one? Had you met people that you didn’t want to leave there in that situation?

BL: I don’t recall—some. There were some. Mostly people just wanted to go home. Of course, you got on an advisory team and it was an entirely different picture. You had people that wanted to extend and they wanted to stay and this and that. That was their personal mission in life. That wasn’t all advisory teams, or all members of advisory teams. That was not a totally—how do you want to say it—a surprising sentiment to hear expressed. I couldn’t quantify it. I couldn’t say it’s eighteen percent or thirty-three percent, but it certainly wasn’t anything that would shock you to hear somebody say that.

LC: Why is that?

BL: Because they got to know the South Vietnamese people and they got to know some good people. They’re the reason to be here. It violated your personal sense of right and wrong. “This isn’t fair. This is not right.” Of course, I think that reaction was even fueled by the antipathy in the United States. I didn’t feel this at that time, or I didn’t articulate it at that time, but I did flash on it when I went back with DAO. The whole rest of the world was basically against you, or certainly not for you. So here you are with people that you know. I remember one—of course, this is flash forward to DAO—but I remember one time thinking, “God, this is hopeless. Nobody in the whole world is on our side.” You think of individual people. I was upset with the corruption. I didn’t think it was necessarily and inherently fatal, but you’d get frustrated with the South Vietnamese. Probably just as much as some Union and Confederate generals got upset with their troops in the Civil War and the Revolutionary War prior to that. You’ve got these farm kids and they don’t know, but it just wasn’t fair. It just wasn’t right. What it came down to is, is that here’s all these people talking about peace and all this and that and you’re thinking, “What this boils down to is the biggest, dirtiest, meanest liar wins.” That’s not right. That’s not fair. Of course, it was not abstract because you talked to people. I remember one Vietnamese guy I knew. We had a long talk one night. He had come down for the North and he was very, very animated. He said, “You Americans, you don’t understand the communists.” He said, “I do. I’ve seen them. I know what
they’re like.” It was evident this man was speaking from the heart. He says, “I’ll tell you
one thing. If your country abandons us, I will kill myself and my whole family. We will
not live under those demons.” Ironically enough, years and years later I talked with
someone who had been a militant Buddhist neutralist. Instant cease fire, all Americans
out right now, South Vietnamese guy. He said the same thing. He said, “I thought they
were Vietnamese like us, but I was wrong.” He said. “They’re monsters.”

LC: Yeah, and that’s compelling stuff when you hear it from somebody who had
a front row seat to probably—

BL: Oh, yeah, he did. Again, he was a militant neutralist Buddhist. He said the
big mistake—and he felt personal shame because he had taken the position he had taken
before, which in some way contributed to the end. Again, the assumption was, “Well,
they may be a little bit crazy and okay, they do things that are bad sometimes, but they’re
Vietnamese like us. When it’s all over, everything will be fine.” Of course, the worst
manifestation and that was in Cambodia when they had all these people cheering the
Khmer Rouge. “Oh, the war’s over. Let’s cheer the Khmer Rouge.” Again, the surprise
was these people are monsters. They’re ignorant. They’re dogmatic, arrogant,
ideologues. They’re just like the grand dragons of the Ku Klux Klan. Reason, fact, truth,
is irrelevant. They’re brains are completely paralyzed with ideology.

LC: Regardless of what that ideology drives them and their compatriots to
commit.

BL: Yeah. The fate of the National Liberation Front and the indigenous VC after
’75 is proof that many people were taken in. You look at Truong Nhu Tang, Tuan Vinh
Tuy, Nyugen Tung Lai, a bunch of these people were NLF, VC, et cetera. Then when
quote “the war was over,” unquote, then they realized that, “My God, I have been tricked.
It’s a horrible obscene, vile joke.” But anyhow, the Vietnamese I knew—like I said I was
not thoroughly happy with the GVN government. They would do things that would
frustrate you and instances of corruption here and there. But I thought, “Okay, here it is.
I have two choices.” The American public and many other people seem to be ensnarled
in the myth of multiple choices. No, you only have two. You’re gonna have to support
one side or you’re going to support the other. Well, I’m sorry that’s what you got, that’s
it. Take one or take the other and then support it with everything you have. Other than
that, just quit equivocating. You didn’t have a choice. What am I going to do? Go into the presidential palace and tell President Thieu to eliminate corruption? That’s not in my lowly position. So my option was, okay, I know this person, that person, this person that person, this person, that person and if that’s all it is—this really didn’t hit me until I was with DAO later—but the seeds were planted in my first tour. You come to the conclusion, “Okay, if that’s all it is then I’ll side with these people because to do otherwise is to make a mockery of your entire life.” Everybody likes to think they’re a good guy. They believe in nice things. Most people do, anyhow. Underneath it all you’re a noble person and so forth and so on. Well, what do you do when nobility flies in the face of world opinion? What do you do when your perception of nobility is dangerous? Do you just bag it up and just walk away? “That’s too hard. I quit.” I was not able to do that.

LC: Right. Bill, what were you looking at in terms of your life after Vietnam as you neared the end of your first tour? What was beyond?

BL: I was planning on coming back. I wanted to come back with USAID.

LC: You wanted to come back with USAID?

BL: Yeah.

LC: Did you lay any plans to make that happen?

BL: Well, I tried. I applied and, of course, they said, “Well, get in the end of the line with all the other government career diplomats and stuff like this.” The same thing happened to Herrington and other advisors I knew. They were really doing well at the job, knew the area they were in. They spoke Vietnamese. “Oh, no, you’ve got to get back for career course. You’ve got to do this. You’ve got to do that.” There was no vehicle that you could jump on. You would think that the government would say, “Hey, this guy knows his stuff, is a good man. Let’s keep him there. He can really get the job done.” No, it’s “You’ve got to go to career course. You’ve got to do this. You’ve got to do that.”

LC: This was the military structure that was sort of sucking it out of—?

BL: Right, but it was the same way with USAID. I got my paperwork to go on with USAID and it went absolutely nowhere. There was no interest whatsoever. “Oh, you speak Vietnamese.” No, it was because they had their career guys, ready for career
rotation and this and that. Now it’s your turn. So then I knew a guy in DAO and he wrote
me and he said, “Do you want to come with DAO?” At first I said, “No because I’m
going to USAID.” Then that went nowhere. Hello?

LC: Yes, I’m here.

BL: Okay. That went nowhere. So I took DAO.

LC: Let’s talk about USAID for a minute. Who was the director at the time that
you were applying?

BL: I don’t know if that’s my phone or yours.

LC: Can you hear me, Bill?

BL: Yeah. Yeah. I just wondered if that little beep is a dying battery.

LC: That very well could be. Let’s take a break for a second. Okay, Bill, can
you tell me a little bit more about the USAID structure? Were you interested particularly
in being a provincial officer?

BL: Yeah, basically getting out and working with the rice farmers. USAID
people were the good ones, really doing a lot of good things. They really—it was in their
heart. They would take somebody who could be making all this money in the States and
enjoying all this stuff, the good life and all that. The fulfillment that they got when you
help rice farmers and improved their—it was not just rice farmers. It was veterinarian
stuff and all types of horticulture and fisheries and all this sort of stuff. You’ve got
people who really have had nothing their whole life. All of a sudden you open up the
possibilities that by golly, they might be able to be economically self-sustaining and
improve their life. They appreciate it profoundly. That’s a feeling that money can’t buy.
Of course, you begin identifying with these people. You look at these people and go,
“This poor guy has never had anything in his whole life, nothing.” Now they’ve got land
reform. Now he’s got his own land and this and that. There were all these guys coming
up with different inoculations for their ducks or chickens or pigs or this and that. You
think, “You know, this is, it’s very, very rewarding.” You like these people. You really
did. So some of the USAID people were bureaucrats and they didn’t really care. But
others, it was a passion with them. There was a guy I knew over there. His name was
Dick Burke, who was a USAID rice agronomist, economist or some sort of thing. He had
been over there, I think, six or seven or eight years. Wonderfully outspoken guy, Boston-
Irish, just candid as anyone could possibly be. He actually got in trouble with the U.S. embassy because he was critical of some of the corruption and some of the rice policies down in the Delta. So they pulled him out of the Delta and said, “You’re persona non grata. You have to stay in Saigon for a while.” He just really liked the Vietnamese people. He enjoyed having the opportunity to do something that significant in his life. I’ve lost track of Dick. If you ever get a hold of him, tell him to give me a call. He’s just a great guy, just a super guy. His life—certainly he had a college degree and he could have all this stuff in the States and everything else—but his life was dedicated, really, to seeing the rice farmers get a square deal.

LC: That’s okay. Can you hear me, Bill?

BL: Yeah, yeah.

LC: What would you say to critics who have alleged in the past that USAID was essentially a cover for U.S. intelligence development?

BL: Utter nonsense. It’s a joke. That’s not to say that the CIA or military people or whatever would not go over to the USAID folks and say, “What are you hearing? What kind of information are you getting?” They’d say, “Yeah, we’ve heard this or this or that.” So, of course, they were a source of information that any newspaper reporter would tap, but as far as being a discreet arm of the United States intelligence assets is a laughable joke. It’s a pathetic, silly myth. They wouldn’t have time. All of this stuff takes time. When you’re trying to help a province development council or help village councils with their self-help projects. They want a school. They want a maternity ward, et cetera, and so forth and so on. You don’t have time to be running an intelligence agency or gathering information on the sly. Certainly, again, you’d talk to the USAID people. They’d have information for you, but as far as being intelligence assets, it’s so pathetically ludicrous that you don’t know whether to roll on the floor in laughter or throw up. I don’t buy it. Maybe it happened. I don’t know. I never saw anything like it. They knew what I did and I knew what they did. They were just basically good guys that, again, had found out that you could go to the other side of the world and find great personal reward in helping a rice farmer have a decent life.

LC: Do you recall the name of the director of USAID while you were there that first tour?
BL: No, I don’t.

LC: Were there people in the USAID office in Saigon that you remember as being basically good eggs? You’ve mentioned Dick Burke, who was out in one of the provinces. I assume he was in MR-IV somewhere.

BL: Yeah.

LC: Do you remember what province he was in?

BL: I know he was in Chuong Thien for a while, which was really a nasty province. That was one of the worst in the Delta. I know he was down there. Where else he was, I am not sure.

LC: Were there other good people, in your view, associated with USAID whose names you recall?

BL: No. I can remember some faces. Wait a minute. Let me back up. There was a guy down in South Trang and this is with DAO. His name was Jaime Concepción. He was a Filipino guy, great guy, just a super guy. Very motivated, just enthralled with the opportunity to help the rice farmers have a good life. Just a super guy. Let’s see. Who else? Oh, man, no names are coming to me right now, but I do remember Jaime. He was a good guy.

LC: You said a bit about your frustration with not being able to move over to USAID without taking another step in between. So at some point you did actually leave Vietnam then, is that right?

BL: Yes. I left in November or October of ’72. I came back here and then I was here about a month and just calming down. Then I started to try to get the wheels turning to get back with USAID. I might as well have applied to be director of the FBI. As far as I was concerned the wheels were turning so slowly, no encouragement. The fact that I spoke Vietnamese and was familiar with the Mekong Delta just didn’t enter into it because of the career machine. It was sustaining the organization. There was no mission orientation. “Oh, yeah, we’re pulling out Vietnam. By golly we need some good people over there.” There wasn’t any of that that I saw. So my application went nowhere. I got no response. I think I may have even called a couple of times and just got the standard discussion of career selection choices and all that sort of thing. I said to heck with it.

LC: But you had had a connection there with someone with DAO?
BL: Mm-hmm.

LC: What was his name again?

BL: John Berwind.

LC: How do you spell his last name, Bill? Do you know?

BL: B-E-R-W-I-N-D.

LC: What was his position? Do you remember roughly where he was within—?

BL: Actually, he was the chief analyst for the MR-III, MR-IV desk. He had been with MACV J-2 before. I didn’t know him very well then. I knew who he was, but I didn’t know him. I don’t know exactly. I guess I knew him enough where he contacted me and said, “They need somebody over here.”

LC: He contacted you while you were in the States?

BL: Yes. Yes.

LC: Where did you actually go when you came back to the States?

BL: I went down to Southern California to see some friends. I went to Arizona to see some friends and then I went home to Illinois.

LC: Did you stay with your folks when you got to Illinois?

BL: Yes, I did. Yeah.

LC: What were you observing during this time period about the political climate within the United States? Did you see protests and that kind of thing?

BL: No, because the war was almost over. “Almost,” quotations around that because the war didn’t end.

LC: Right, right. But the climate seemed to be fairly calm, then, to your mind as you recall?

BL: Yeah, there were still some tension of post-’60s, which was really an unpleasant time for those who didn’t live through it. A whole lot of younger people today think that was great being a hippie. It was fun for a while in the mid-’60s and the music was kind of nice, but it got increasingly ugly and then exponentially ugly after, say, ’68 or ’69. I was repulsed by the whole thing. Anyhow, there was still the aftermath of that, sort of a sedated society and sort of relieved, they thought, that the war was over and this sort of thing. Of course, there was inflation and all this other stuff.

LC: Right. How long did you stay in Illinois?
BL: Three, four months maybe.

LC: So through the early spring, anyway, of 1973?

BL: Yeah.

LC: Of course, during this time period is when the Paris Accords were signed. Bill, what were your primary sources of information about what was going on with regard to Vietnam at this time?

BL: Well, then it was the news media and there were still one or two people I knew in Vietnam and I heard from them periodically. But what I fed off of was the, I don’t know if you want to say body of knowledge. It was some knowledge. It was some experience. It was some hunch, an intuition, and this and that. After a while you begin to sense things. You couldn’t explain why, but I knew that the accords were a joke. I mean, I just knew that. I remember people saying, “Well, the war is over.” I said, “Are you nuts?” I was surprised that people hadn’t learned anything and actually thought the war was over. This is not over. There’s no way. “Well, they signed the agreement.” I said, “You don’t understand. That agreement doesn’t mean anything. It means nothing.”

LC: Did the fact that you—?

BL: That’s what I felt. If someone would have asked me to have proved that, all I could fall back on is “Well, you’ve got to understand this gut feeling I developed over there for the bad guys and the whole situation and everything else.” I said, “They’re not giving up. They want not just South Vietnam, but I said, “Don’t you understand they want Laos? They want Cambodia. They’re not going to stop.”

LC: Did your strong feelings that the accords were not the final word sort of separate you from other people and did you feel that distance at all?

BL: Well, I separated myself to begin with. Of course, no one prepared you for this, but I remember coming back to the States and this increasing sense of alienation. There’s many manifestations of that, as well. It’s not just the war. It was the people. You developed an intolerance for whining and excuse making and all this other stuff. You just want to hit people on the head and get them to realize how good they have it here. For anyone to complain or whine is the height of folly. It’s the height of childish idiocy and you should be embarrassed at yourself for being such a moron. That began the divorce process I have with the human race.
LC: Did you have any fun that winter/spring that you were back in the States?
BL: No.
LC: Not really?
BL: No.
LC: Did you feel anxiety more or less? What would you describe—how did you feel about what was going on in Vietnam and you’re not being there?
BL: I knew it wasn’t over and I knew I wanted to be there. I’d get bits and pieces of stuff, information which just made it all the worse. I can remember the day I separated from the Army and here I am in downtown San Francisco having a cup of coffee and reading the paper in my wonderful PX (Post Exchange) clothes and my GI haircut and my GI shoes, which weren’t exactly what you’d call a fashion icon and reading the paper. Here’s this helicopter shot down over Dinh Tuong province in the Mekong Delta and I’d flown over there a number of times. Wow, that could have been me. It was a Chinook. It wasn’t a Huey, which I flew in most of the time. But I thought, “Man, that could have been me,” and that sort of puts a lump in your throat. Then about two weeks later I found out a guy I knew was on that thing. So that sobered my homecoming. Then I’d read about Tong Le Chan and some of these other things. They’re still holding out, these ARVN Rangers. I think it was the 92nd Battalion, I’m not sure on that. They were isolated, completely cut off, resupplied by air. They were under siege for, I think, around five hundred days. They wouldn’t surrender, ambulatory wounded refused evacuation. It was quite heroic, actually. I’d see these little bits and pieces on page six. To me that was a huge headline. “God, they’re still holding on at Tong Le Chan.” So it was very much a sense of restlessness to think I should be back there doing something, as if little old me and I’m not exactly the secretary of state or anything. But in the greater picture, I couldn’t probably do anything of significance, but I wanted to be there. I thought that was my time and my place.
LC: You thought it was your time and your place?
BL: Uh-huh.
LC: This sense of having one foot physically in the States, but really it sounds like you were pretty much invested in trying to follow what was happening in Vietnam. Certainly you were actively trying to get back to it. You said you didn’t have any fun.
Can you describe how you managed to make the arrangements to actually get back to Vietnam?

BL: When Berwind wrote me a letter and USAID had finally evaporated, I wrote back and said, “Go. Tell me what to do. I’m on my way.”

LC: USAID had pulled out of—?

BL: No, there were still USAID there. There were USAID prov reps all up through ’75.

LC: Okay. You said that they had basically told you that you were not going to get a position?

BL: They hadn’t expressly stated that, but it was apparent from the routine nature with which my application was handled. That’s mailing it into Washington, D.C. and so forth and so on. They didn’t share the sense of urgency that I had. As far as they were concerned, it was simply sustaining the organization and recruiting people and sending them to their various and sundry stations around the world and so forth and so on. The fact that one person or, for all I knew there were twenty more that actually wanted to go back, and I spoke Vietnamese as well as I did. You think they’d pull that out and say, “Hey, flag this guy. Let’s get him over there.” There was no indication of that being done. So the only alternative was to go back with DAO.

LC: Did you have advance knowledge of what your position would be at DAO or didn’t you care?

BL: Uh-huh.

LC: You did know?

BL: Yeah. They said, “Do you want to be on the MR-IV desk and MC-III, too.”

I said, “All right.”

LC: That sounded pretty good, I suppose, at that point.

BL: Well, it’s not what I wanted to do, but I was going back so that was better than nothing.

LC: How long did you have between the time you found out that you had actually had a firm place to go at DAO and the time you actually left the States?
BL: Probably a month and a half, two months. They had to process their paperwork, too. Then I had to go to Williams Air Force Base and get a physical and fill out some stuff, the usual administrative things.

LC: How long did it take you to handle those admin elements?

BL: It didn't take me a whole lot of time. It took the machinery a while to digest it. But actually once I gave Berwind the okay, or I agreed, I suppose they went as fast as they could and I heard back from him shortly thereafter. He says, “Okay, it’s a go. You’re going. You’ve go to get this filled out. You’ve got to do this. You’ve got to do that,” and so forth and so on.

LC: How did people who knew you, including your family if you like, react to the fact that you were going back to Vietnam?

BL: I think their silence was telling. Every once in a while you’d get a, “What for? Why?” The fact that nobody asked me much about anything told me, I thought, that they thought this is beyond explanation, just don’t even touch it. Don’t bother with it. Who knows?

LC: Did they think you were nuts or did they understand your dedication?

BL: Well, the people who knew me the best basically understood why. Other people that didn’t know me, they just, “Okay.” I did have some discussions with my parents about what was going on and my views on the subject. So they understood, but weren’t happy with it. “Why don’t you get your career started?” and all this sort of stuff. I told them I just simply—I had a problem, too, when I came back in that I wasn’t a very sociable person, which I had been before. I wasn’t what you’d call a social climber, or a social animal, but I never had a problem with groups or crowds. I liked going to parties. I was in a fraternity and all that stuff. When I came back, I found out that I just didn’t enjoy dealing with people. To the extent I did, I could be much more curt, blunt, and sometimes rude than I’d ever been before. My tolerance for what I perceived as nonsense was down to rock bottom. I didn’t get in too many confrontations, but I would be much more curt sometimes in my speech in dealings with random people than I normally would have been. I’d hold the door open for somebody and they’d just walk in and I’d go, “You’re welcome.” They wouldn’t say “Thank you.” I thought, “I’m a pleasant guy.” I had no—my social skills had atrophied, I guess. I considered them to have been elevated
insofar as I was intolerant of nonsense, but in the greater context it was viewed as a
deterioration.

LC: You were observing this about yourself at the time or people were telling
you, “Bill, what are you doing?”

BL: I don’t know if I was even observing it. There was this feeling, which I
don’t think I really was able to articulate even to myself until years later, of “I’m
supposed to be happy I’m home.” And I wasn’t at all. I wanted no dealings with people.
My folks did every once in a while—of course, my Dad had been in World War II. I
remember distinctly one morning I woke up and I was still laying in bed. I could hear my
folks talking in the kitchen. My mother was saying that she was starting to realize that I
wasn’t a smiling, happy guy, ready to go out and start my career, whatever that would be.
I was sort of sitting around doing nothing and drinking a little bit more beer than I usually
drank. My mom said to my dad, “Maybe he’s got malaria.” My dad, bless his heart said,
“Look, just let him be.” He went through bad stuff in World War II. He said, “Just let
him be,” but I know that was uncomfortable for them.

LC: Did your—for lack of a better wo rd—your attitude improve when you found
out that you could actually go back? Do you think you kind of turned around?

BL: I wouldn’t call it improvement. It was simply a welcomed recognition that I
was going to be going back.

LC: Was it a relief?

BL: Yeah, kind of. It really was. Yeah.

LC: So you went to Williams for some tests and you were there for a couple of
days or so?

BL: Not even that. I had to fill out some paperwork and I had to take a
perfunctory physical and that was about it.

LC: You left from there then directly to get back over to Saigon?

BL: I went back home. Williams is, of course, in Arizona. I had come back
down here for another month or two and then I went back home to see my folks and then
went from there to Travis and from Travis to Southeast Asia.

LC: Do you remember that flight?
BL: Yeah. I finally realized what you needed to do to, other than being—it was strange feeling. It was not good in the sense of, “Oh, ho, I’m happy I’m going back.” It was just, “Okay, finally. This is good.” A very subdued sense of satisfaction. From the strictly pragmatic standpoint, having flown back and forth once I realized what a drag that was. So I stayed up most of the night before. At the airport, I had two very stiff drinks so when I got on the plane I would go to sleep promptly.

LC: Is that how it went down?

BL: Basically.

LC: What kind of a flight did you take over there? You had a commercial flight?

BL: I don’t remember.

LC: You were sleeping.

BL: It was out of Travis. It was out of Travis so it had to be—it was a regular airliner. I don’t know if it was a military contract or what, but it was out of Travis.

LC: Did you stop along the way?

BL: I don’t remember. I’m sure we did. I think I remember getting off at Guam in the middle of the night, just hanging around a rather primitive lobby or whatever the hell it was for a while.

LC: Then back on the plane?

BL: Yeah.

LC: Bill, would this be in June of ’73?

BL: June or July.

LC: So maybe the end of June or early July?

BL: Yeah, somewhere in there.

LC: Tell me about arriving back in Vietnam.

BL: It felt great. I don’t remember getting there. I don’t remember the—I remember we landed at night and they said, “You can stay at his place, temporary housing for now.” So I went to this place where a bunch of other Americans stayed. I slept and woke up in the morning and started walking back to MACV headquarters, which was where DAO was. I just had this sublime sense of fulfillment when I got back, which would amaze a lot of people, but that’s exactly what I felt. Total contentment is not the right word. Discipline, positiveness, it wasn’t pleasant. I didn’t like the war. I
wish the damn thing would have ended. I didn’t like Hanoi’s War, but again that was
where I wanted to be.

LC: You were walking into a job at DAO and I’d like to ask you some structural
questions about that office. First of all, you mentioned that it was in the old MACV
headquarters. It was in the same complex?

BL: Yes.

LC: DAO had existed before the Paris Peace Agreements, is that right?

BL: Every embassy has a defense attaché office. I don’t know if they even
bothered with having one. I’ve never heard of that prior to ’73. It was MACV and
USARV (United States Army, Vietnam) and all that stuff, which performed in the role
that any defense attaché office would have performed in any other embassy. So
accomplishing that mission probably ruled out the need for a DAO. To my knowledge it
never was one. It was set up after the American pullout.

LC: In part because the elimination of MACV was part of the agreement.

BL: Right.

LC: Do you know if there were numerical maximums on the number of people
who could be attached to DAO under the agreements?

BL: I don’t know.

LC: Who was the attaché?


LC: Did you know much about his background?

BL: I knew he’d been in Korea. I knew he was a logistician, transportation guy
and he also was a very good man and still is. He’s still alive. We’re all better off for it.

He’s a very good man.

LC: He’s a good man, okay. Who did he report to? Did he have several
reporting tracks that he was operating within both military and then to the ambassador?

BL: Well, we did our thing and it went out to other consumers, including CIA,
State Department, CINCPAC, Pentagon, and all that stuff.

LC: What was his relationship with the U.S. ambassador?

BL: Sort of a right hand man regarding military matters. I don’t know the details
of it because I wasn’t that high up.
LC: The ambassador at his time was—?
BL: Graham Martin.
LC: Did you have a chance to form an opinion of Ambassador Martin as time went by?
BL: I formed an impression. I wouldn’t want to call it a definitive one. I have to—and he’s drawn a lot of flak, a lot of flak. I have to admire the guy because he said, “We’ve given our word to these people.” However irrational his decisions may have been in ’75 and the end of the evacuation and everything else, I personally respect people who say, “You’ve given your word. You can’t back down on this.” You don’t do things like that. So in that respect, I have a favorable opinion of him.
LC: Go ahead.
BL: His son or stepson was killed in Vietnam, too.
LC: I didn’t know that.
BL: He had served as ambassador to Thailand before.
LC: Yes.
BL: He and I probably wouldn’t be good neighbors. We’re probably different kinds of people, but again I respected his principled stance. He went back to Washington and tried to argue with Congress and this and that and so forth and so on. Whatever his flaws may have been, my opinion is he’s gotten a much worse wrap than he deserves.
LC: Yeah. He was in a bad place at a bad time. Within DAO there were a couple of different elements that were concerned with intelligence, obviously. There was an intelligence branch. Is that right?
BL: I don’t know if you’d call it a branch. There was a section. I’m very ignorant of all the organizational stuff. My view then was the Delta’s my thing, just let me go. All that other stuff was extraneous to me for the most part.
LC: So you were put on the Military Region III and IV desk?
BL: Yeah.
LC: You said before that your priority was going to be the IV Corps.
BL: Right, but I was expected to know everything, anytime about III Corps. So in some respects my job duties doubled insofar as the volume of information I had to go through, the places I had to go, and the things I had to do.
LC: How did you do with that huge expansion of what it was you were responsible for being on top of?

BL: It just came to me. I was, I guess you could say, obsessed. I will acknowledge that word without accepting any negative connotation to go with that word. It was not an ordeal. It was not a burden. It was something I simply couldn’t get enough of. I’ve never had a job since that energized me to such a complete extent, ever. It was just twenty-four hours a day that was my life, every waking moment, and some of my sleeping moments. It was just give me anything, everything, all the time, anywhere. I’ll do it. I’ll go.

LC: Bill, how much travel did you do away from DAO headquarters?

BL: A little bit more than I did with MACV. This time I went to some places in III Corps and then I actually took some in-country R&Rs to Da Lat and went to Nha Trang. I went to Vung Tao. Of course, people say that’s R&R, but everywhere I went I’d go around and talk to people because that was my fun thing to do, go to noodle stands and talk to people.

LC: Right. You weren’t exactly just kicking it on the beach or whatever.

BL: No. Well, I did some beach time in Nha Trang. It’s beautiful up there, but I was always, always, always talking to people and asking them about history and asking them about this and asking about that, finding out all this stuff that I could. Again, I guess you could fairly say I was obsessed with the subject, although I absolutely deny and refute and will argue against any negative connotations that are associated with that word. I had a purpose in my own view. I had a cause.

LC: And you were living it?

BL: Yeah, exactly. Also then, too, I didn’t live in the American community at all. I lived in a Vietnamese neighborhood. I ate more Vietnamese food than I ate American food. Once I was away from my formal responsibilities, I didn’t speak English at all. Even when I was on the job, a good part of the time I didn’t speak English or eat American food. So I basically had gone through the curtain barrier of cultural dimensions and was a privileged entrant into the Vietnamese dimension of reality.

LC: Bill, tell me about where you lived. You said it was in a neighborhood.
BL: It was down—it wasn’t too far from downtown Saigon. It was an old building. I lived in a second floor apartment. I had no hot water and no air-conditioning. It wasn’t too far from a South Vietnamese Marine—I don’t think it was their headquarters. It may have been though, but what they did is they’d reassign a lot of these guys that had been wounded and were recovering. They assigned them to this recovery duty. So I got to know all these guys. So I was always eating at these noodle stands and stuff and talking to these guys and occasionally drinking with them. I was in my little world, my little self-selected dimension of reality.

LC: How did you come by this apartment, do you remember? How was it found for you or did you locate it?

BL: I went and looked around. I had lived in a—actually Herrington and I were both in an American BOQ for a while. It was called BOQ then, of course, because it wasn’t officially military so it wasn’t bachelor officer quarters then. He and I both were discussing how disgusting and obnoxious some Americans were. I just wanted to get away from the American community. I didn’t enjoy it there. I wasn’t at home. So I went and got my own place.

LC: In intelligence, as you know better than I, there’s a thing called crossing over. I wonder if anybody ever talked to you about that? Said, “Bill, you need to keep a little closer to the coop”? Did that ever come up?

BL: It was raised one time when someone made sort of an indirect statement to that effect. I just passed it off. Actually the only time it was really raised to me was when I was at the conference at Texas Tech a year and a half ago. “Don’t you think you couldn’t see the forest for the trees?” I said, “The forest is the trees. You don’t understand. If you don’t understand what I understand”—I was very blunt. “You don’t understand Vietnam.” “Why are you so passionate about this?” “Well, if you’re going to have a war you better have a passion. You better have a deep conviction or don’t go. Don’t show up.”

LC: Was this an exchange with an academic here on campus?

BL: An academic to be. I don’t remember the guy’s name. I had said a couple of things at a couple of the conferences and actually it was one of the nights we went out to that reproduction. The old Texas—
LC: The cattle museum or whatever?

BL: Yeah. You walk around on these little paths and there’s little cabins and stuff and little houses. Then we had a barbeque after that at that place. I happened to be in line with this guy and he said, somewhat apologetically said, “Why are you so passionate about this?” I told him what I told him and he said, “Do you think you might have been too close to see the big picture?” I said, “No, not at all.” I said, “If you want to subscribe to that, go right ahead. I saw the big picture.” My response is all the rest of these other people don’t, speaking of the Karnows and this and that. I challenged him, “What part of the big picture did I not see?” He couldn’t come up with anything.

LC: That’s interesting that even that many years later that would have been just what, three or four years ago, that you had that exchange.

BL: That would have been 2002, I guess, right?


BL: But other than that, no. In fact, the guy I worked for, Colonel LeGro, who was just a fine man, just an outstanding gentleman and a decent human being and a few of the others would realize—well, I don’t know, for right or for wrong and I hope I’m not speaking too much for them. They actually, I think, I thought I had an insight that other people didn’t see. In this crossing over it doesn’t mean I exonerated people for corruption. In fact, I was more vehemently opposed to it because the South Vietnamese I knew were so fed up with corruption. Again, anytime you want to challenge me, “What don’t I see? What do you mean I’m going native or this or that?” Who cares? Argue on the merits of an argument, but don’t give me this *ad hominem* nonsense. Actually, there wasn’t much of that, no. In fact one of the guys I mentioned Don Colin, he’d gone about as far native as you can get. He smoked Vietnamese cigarettes. He wore sandals all the time, married to a Vietnamese woman. She had a farm down in Tra Vinh and his goal when the war was over was to go down there and raise chickens. There was a bunch of people like that. They were basically accepted and respected, really. That was the DAO, not necessarily MACV.

LC: Sure, right. Your arrival in late June or early July of 1973 means that there had been about six months or so when you were out of the country. Can you think back now about the changed situation since last time you had been basically reading the
traffic? Particularly I’m asking you to think about the effects of the cease-fire in strategic terms. Who benefited from the cease-fire?

BL: The communists did, obviously, there’s no question about it. The thing that hit me and it didn’t take but half a day, and I started smelling it and then it just became very, very evident to me that the economic situation was abysmal. They had about fifty percent inflation. Because of the American pullout, all these civilians working at Bien Hoa and all these places there was twenty-five percent unemployment. People were destitute. This is in ’73 and it just got worse. It was really horrid to experience. I, of course, didn’t have any financial difficulties to speak of, but to see these people that I knew and when I say “I knew,” not just people I knew directly, but the guys in the 7th Division, the 9th Division, the 18th Division, I didn’t know them, but I knew them, if you know what I mean. The poor bastards. This is just bad. Strategically at that time, I don’t recall any sense of impending doom. “We can handle it. It’s tough. It’s not easy. I wish it would go away. But so far, so good.” But economically, the economic situation was just horrid, really bad.

LC: Can you say a little bit more about the economic situation broadly? We talked a little bit about unemployment. What were food supplies like, say, in Saigon? Were there problems?

BL: Expensive but available. There was never any impending rice shortages and stuff like this. Of course, inflation was creating enough economic dismay as it was, but as far as actual shortages, no. There was a big scare when they blew up the big fuel tanks at Nha Be. Prices went up on everything. It was hardship, but it was not scarcity.

LC: How long did it take for the Nha Be blowout? What was it sixty million liters of gasoline or something?

BL: It was a lot.

LC: To have an economic effect? Was it immediate?

BL: That day.

LC: Do you remember that day?

BL: Mm-hmm.

LC: Can you describe what happened in the city?
BL: There was no overt panic. If you were just walking around you would never notice one change from the other. If you talked to people, they’d say, “This was bad.” You could take the most uneducated cyclo driver or soup vendor lady or whatever and they could tell you. I remember one guy told me this. He said, “Everything moves by gasoline, cigarettes, rice everything. So that means everything’s going to go up.” Someone that people would view as an uneducated, primitive perhaps, person, they knew right away this was bad.

LC: Were you aware of the fire when it was happening?
BL: Shortly after, yeah.
LC: Did you see reports about how it had actually been started? There was some controversy.
BL: Yeah, water sappers.
LC: Yeah, there was some controversy at the beginning as to whether it might have been a mortar attack or some larger push?
BL: They even got a couple bodies out of it. Their water sappers came in from the Saigon River.
LC: Is it known whether those were local or were they northern?
BL: I don’t know. I don’t know. But even if they were local, and here’s where so many people make a huge mistake. You can site the ’68 Tet thing at the embassy. People think, “Well, these are guerillas.” No, they’re not guerillas. Sappers are to guerillas as neurosurgeons are to hospital orderlies. Sappers are a totally different breed, whether they were NVA or southerners I don’t know. But they were highly, highly trained. They weren’t guerillas. Guerillas do everything.
LC: Right, and that become kind of an easy buzzword in a way to just apply.
BL: That’s like saying “germs,” which germs? Which germ?
LC: Bill, were you aware or did you hear about evidence of illicit trade between communist-run zones in the South and traders who were associated or living in South Vietnamese-controlled areas?
LC: You heard that stuff, but I never saw any proof. I’m sure it was going on. How much of it was going on, I don’t know. Was it a determining factor? No. It was
another straw in the myth on the camels back, but again, it was not the determining
factor.

LC: By myth—?

BL: I’ve heard people say, “Oh, yeah. ARVN generals were selling 105 shells to
the NVA.” What for? They don’t have 105s. They have 130s and 122s and 152s.
“They’re selling M-16s.” What for? They’ve got AKs and SKSs. They don’t need M-
16s. In fact, we actually did a study to refute that nonsense and surveyed all the captured
weapons in MR-IV for a period of a month or so. It was all AKs and SKSs, one or two
M-16s. All Soviet block weaponry. So I’m sure there was some going on and they were
buying pharmaceuticals and stuff like that. Was it a determining factor? No.

LC: So you would say that such trade as went on was basically strategically
unimportant?

BL: It was morally very important. Again, strategically none of that stuff was
instrumental in bringing those 130 guns and all that armor down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.
It was an associated factor but certainly not a determining factor.

LC: When you say it was morally significant in some way, can you talk about
that for a minute?

BL: Yeah. The government of South Vietnam should have cleaned its house.
It’s not simply a matter of corruption, it’s a matter of being dullards and uninspirational.
You could have been corrupt but still been an inspiring leader. That was totally absent.
In fact, in talking with my Marine friends, and I had many, many, many very candid,
blunt conversations. They were not always politically correct I would tell them,
“Vietnamese people treated the Montagnards like crap for all these years.” Basically they
agreed, “Yeah, you’re right. It’s not right up there.” They even told me one time, that a
guy—if a general takes some money they can live with that because he’s a general, he’s
put his whole life on the line, or a high ranking officer. You know a general made $60 or
$75 a month. All these responsibilities and he gets $75 a month? If bad guys win, he’s
dead. Maybe they’ll just put me in prison. They might kill me, but they might not, but
he’s dead. So if he makes a little bit to take care of his family, that’s all right. That’s
exactly what they told me. The critical factor is, “Do you know when to stop?” The
people that didn’t know when to stop were the ones they really hated. I mean hated. In
fact one of the Marines told me one time, and again these are late night sometimes alcohol-fueled conversations. One of the Marines told me, flat out. He said, “When we take care of the NVA”—and he didn’t say Viet Cong, he said, (speaks Vietnamese), North Vietnamese communists, he said, “When we take care of them we’re going to turn our guns on to Saigon. We’re going to clean this place up.” That’s what he told me.

LC: Did you expand your circle of acquaintances within the Marines there because you were living close to them?

BL: Yeah.

LC: Close to their headquarters, I should say?

BL: Yeah.

LC: Do you remember any of those men particularly? If so can you recall their names?

BL: I can recall some of them. I certainly recall their faces. Probably recall their names if they were mentioned. One I actually got in contact with about ten years ago.

LC: Really? Who was that?

BL: I put an ad in the Vietnamese publication saying that I’m searching for some friends and the two people I named both called me up within a week.

LC: You’re kidding?

BL: No.

LC: Where was this publication circulating, in California?

BL: No, it was a nationwide publication. The Marine came down that weekend, the next weekend.

LC: Wow.

BL: He brought down two bottles of glutinous rice whiskey, which we used to imbibe in on occasion. I probably aged ten years that weekend because he had to go on foot across Cambodia. He was thrown in a reeducation camp. He was really a hot head, a very intelligent man, very eloquent man. He hated the communists with such intense passion, it was very rational. It was well thought out. It wasn’t just some knee-jerk South East Asian redneck. He knew them for what they were as he saw it. I agree with him and he hated them. Not just because they were communists, but again, “They have the audacity to assume the mantle of Vietnamese patriots. What they really are is they’re
traitors to our culture. They’re traitors to our country. They’re puppets of a foreign ideology. They’re ignorant. They’re stupid.” He went on and on and on. His father was also from the Delta. His father hated the communists. When he got out of reeducation camp in three years, and I don’t know how he got through without shooting somebody and grabbing a weapon and stabbing somebody because he was such a hot head. But when he got out, his father had died in another reeducation camp. He had very, very, very carefully tried to make contacts with the anti-communist resistance, but that was peppered with so many entrapment operations run by the communists that he realized that “I can’t do anything.” Then he’s got to go report once a week and put up with all these insults. He hated these people. He said, “I just had to leave because I was going to die there because I’d hit one of them or something. And then back to reeducation camp and I wasn’t going to do that again.” So he and about seven other guys went afoot across Cambodia. I think three of them lived.

LC: Bill, what position did he hold when you knew him in South Vietnam?
BL: He was a sergeant.
LC: He was a sergeant. It’s clear from your story that he was not among those who left South Vietnam either in April of ’75 or afterwards?
BL: No. That’s really the thing that tore my guts out. A day or two before I was leaving—that last two weeks was just all turmoil and chaos. But while I was leaving I was trying to get some other people out and this and that. I went by. A lot of the Marines I knew were throwing all their gear on deuce-and-a-half trucks and they were going down QL-15, which I know there were two NVA divisions down there. You might have been thinking if you watched them, you’d think these guys are just moving some stuff to another building. It was the most nonchalant—they knew what they were getting into and they didn’t care. They just didn’t care.

LC: What kind of stuff were they putting on the trucks?
BL: Weapons, their rucksacks and everything. I was talking to them and I said, “Where are you going?” (Speaks Vietnamese), Highway 15. There was two NVA divisions down there. They had the facial expression of a plumber who’s got to fix an old rusty toilet. It’s just a dirty job and somebody’s got to do it. Boy, I hated that. I hated
that. Some of them would say, “Okay, now it’s my turn in the jungle. Now I’m going to be VC.”

LC: Okay, I see. Bill, let’s go back to ’73 for a minute.
BL: Okay.

LC: We talked a little bit about the economic situation. Were you tasked with keeping track of information on that area of developments in South Vietnam as well as enemy deployment and such?
BL: Not *per se*, but I was expected and everybody then knew that I spoke Vietnamese, got along real well. So they kind of expected to hear what I had to say. It wasn’t a formal request, but anything that might affect the capabilities of RVNAF, which in turn reflects the relative capabilities of the VC and the NVA. The worse capabilities are for the NVA, the greater the capabilities of the bad guy. So without having done any thorough economic studies, the fact that RVNAF was being gutted and castrated and bled to death was something that I wove into my reporting.

LC: How much of that gutting of the capability had been in place before you left and how much of it was new sort of post-the-accords in January?
BL: It wasn’t really apparent in ’72. Although, again, because of the relative superiority of weaponry with the NVA, specifically the artillery, it was evident that you’ve got a formidable adversary out there. But it wasn’t that bad in ’72. It wasn’t something that really stood out. But in ’73 it was getting bad and it just got worse every single day.

LC: What was driving this deterioration?
BL: Well, the economic situation, of course, was horrible. The cut backs, everybody knew about those. The communists knew about them. We’d get captured documents and they’d say, “Hey, this is great.” I’ve read these things. “This is really good. Now they don’t have anything to fight with.” The utter silence from the United States even before Phuoc Long/Song Be went down. There was never any saber rattling. There was never any credible threat. There was never any suggestion that the United States actually gave a damn about South Vietnam. That was very apparent to the South Vietnamese people and the military. Again, if there’s one rap against the whole cause, it’s the South Vietnamese government and specifically Thieu was profoundly
uninspirational. There was no Churchillian dimensions to the man at all. I’m convinced
that you could have had the corruption, but if you would have had a guy that would lead
the people they would have responded, but there was no leadership. Of course, there was
no leadership when Americans were there from Washington, either.

LC: All right. Tell me a little bit more about President Thieu. Did you ever meet
him?

BL: No.

LC: Did you ever see him at meetings?

BL: No.

LC: Was he spending a lot of time in Saigon or was he not there?

BL: I really don’t know. All I know is what I got from other people. The
argument would be that, “Well, these people don’t understand.” The counterargument
would be, “He’s the top guy. It’s his fault if they don’t understand.” There was just
absolutely no sense of trust or confidence in the man. There had been some in ’72, but it
was diminishing. Everyday just seemed to be worse and worse. “What is he doing?”
Some of the ARVN, not just the Marines but some of the ARVN I knew said, “If I had a
chance I’d kill Thieu. I’d kill him.” “Why?” “Because he’s no good. He’s not a
leader.” Corruption didn’t matter. The corruption beyond the bounds of acceptable
dimensions and the lack of inspiring leadership was just driving people nuts. Of course,
one of his buddies was corps commander down in the Delta, General Nghi. I think that
Thieu was probably understandable within the context of a Greek tragedy. Because I
think he was a small man. Everyone says he was pretty good when he first started. He
was okay, and he actually pushed the land reform, which was really a good idea. So it’s
not all minuses. But you have to think that Euripides or Aeschylus or Aristophanes had
written the book on Thieu two thousand years ago or twenty-five hundred years ago
because he was a small man in an increasingly greater situation. I think he was
internally, but that’s just my supposition. I think internally he just thought, “God, it’s
hopeless.” He struggled on in futility and then he put up with his buddy Nghi who had
been respected as a leader, but then the corruption started to get worse down in the Delta.
Thieu didn’t do anything and then he finally had to fire Nghi in ’74 because of
demonstrations and whatnot and they put Nguyen Quang Nam in charge of the Delta.
That was defiantly appropriate, no question about that. Nam was a leader. People, they felt trust and confidence when he was in command. But generally Thieu was nothing. Even when he died, which was what, a year and a half ago? I didn’t get any of the local Vietnamese papers at the time. I periodically pick them up. What was amazing was nothing was said neither good, nor bad. It was just as if he was nothing. In fact, he was nothing.

LC: Were there thought to be, in DAO or more informally in American circles, any alternatives to Thieu?

BL: (Coughs) Excuse me. I don’t know if it’s ever been answered, but I think it’s answerable and I think somebody would have come to the fore because we would get CIA reports on the domestic political situation in Saigon. There was many, many people who were really upset with Thieu’s lack of inspirational leadership. Then you had people like Dr. Dan and some of these other people who were really sharp guys. Whether or not there was or wasn’t I don’t know. I don’t know if anybody does. But there were some intelligent and smart people there, whether or not they could have pulled the fat out of the fire, I don’t know.

LC: You mentioned the anti-corruption drive that Thieu installed. This was laterally, I think, in 1974. He got rid of several senior corps commanders and field commanders. It’s been suggested I think by Herrington among others that this might have had some political impact in terms of increasing the respect that Thieu had for finally tackling this problem. But it also stripped away some experienced military men who could very well have played a role in 1975. Do you have any observations on that?

BL: It’s just hard to say. I basically think that the bottom line on that is for what Thieu seemed to—impression and, again, I never met the guy. I never talked to him. I didn’t know any of his close associates or anything like that. But the impression that you got and not just myself, the Vietnamese I knew and a few of the other Americans who were attuned to what was going on. This guy is withdrawing into a cave of delusions and defeatism. He doesn’t see a way out. Again, it comes from a Greek tragedy. He was a small man in a huge position and it overwhelmed him. Whether or not, that doesn’t exonerate his corruption or anything else. He just didn’t show anything. I don’t know if that answers your question.
LC: Sure. No, it does. Within DAO what would you say the mood was when you arrived in June or July ’73?

BL: So far so good. They’re holding on. I think even I forget who it was, Karnow or one of those unwinnable war druids, even acknowledges the South Vietnamese made progress in ’73. So it was steady as she goes. It would be nice if the war went away, but it isn’t, and so far so good.

LC: At some point during this period, and it may have been in the budget round right before you arrived out there, President Nixon requested, if my figures are correct, 1.4 billion dollars in military aid. Congress cut that in half.

BL: That wasn’t until ’75.

LC: Was that ’74?

BL: ’74 or ’75. It went from one point—I think, I’m pretty sure about this—I think it went from 1.4 to 1.1 to seven hundred thousand or seven hundred million.

LC: That’s in ’74, ’75?

BL: Yeah.

LC: What was the budgetary situation like in terms of allocations for military aid for South Vietnam when you were there starting up again within DAO?

BL: It was bad and it just kept on getting worse. Everything, not just weapons.

Trucks, spare parts. If you don’t understand spare parts, you can’t give someone a helicopter and not plug them into a spare parts lifeline. They were moth bailing and increasingly so, everything, tanks, trucks, PBRs (patrol boat, river), planes. I talked to one ARVN armored officer one time and he said they had three tanks in the junkyard just to cannibalize parts off to keep one tank going. That was towards the end. It wasn’t quite that bad at the beginning, but there were definite, definite constraints. Certainly it didn’t have anything close to the firepower that Americans had available to them on call. In ’73 they were doing okay. In fact in the Delta, the 7th ARVN Division completely overran Tri Phap and just really pounded the NVA there. They just nailed them. They finally said, “Enough is enough.” That place had never been cleaned up. So they went in and did it. Man, they just hammered them. Then the 1st NVA Division was also in the Seven Mountains down in Chau Doc Province down in the lower Delta. People say, “Well, the South Vietnamese were just a bunch of puppets.” They didn’t even tell Americans about
it. Just one day you found out, hey, they’re going to the Seven Mountains. They don’t have to get approval from us.

LC: This is in Chau Doc?

BL: Yeah.

LC: About what date was that roughly? Do you remember?

BL: I think it was around December of ’73.

LC: ARVN initiated an operation without—a major operation it sounds like without reference?

BL: Oh, it was. Very much so.

LC: For somebody who is having difficulty finding information on that battle, can you characterize what happened?

BL: I will add the only source that I know of. Of course, the wonderful U.S. news media couldn’t be bothered, righteous bastards, excuse my language.

LC: That’s okay.

BL: Is in Colonel LeGro’s *From Cease-fire to Capitulation*, which is the U.S. GPO (Government Printing Office) publication. He is the only source that I’ve seen in print, unless you dig through the recording in the archives or whatever, to describe both Tri Phap and the Seven Mountains Operation. But anyhow the 1st NVA division was in the Seven Mountains and they put together I think it was a task force of two regiments if, I recall correctly. I may be wrong, but I think it was two regiments from the ARVN 9th and a Ranger group. Conventional wisdom says, “This is bound to fail,” because when you attack an enemy in prepared defensive positions you must have a 3:1 advantage to prevail. That’s one of those rules of thumb. Well, they didn’t. They had about a 1:1 ratio. When we heard about it, they didn’t ask permission. They’re fully capable of making their own decisions. God bless them. They said, “We’re going to clean this place out once and for all.” The scuttlebutt was, God love you for your audacity, but this is not going to work. You don’t have the numbers. You don’t have the firepower and so forth and so on. About two or three weeks later the RVN flag was right at the top of Nui Giai, which is Giai Mountain in the Seven Mountains. They had totally destroyed the 1st NVA division. People say, “Well, you don’t know that.” I’m sorry. We had all kinds of intelligence. Everything, everything we had says the 1st Division is no more. In fact, it’s
the only VC/NVA divisional element that was ever completely disbanded after its defeat.  
It was no more. It was gone. They parcel out their surviving people to other units. It  
was completely finished. No one ever did that before with NVA/VC divisional-sized  
element. It was disbanded. It was gone.

LC: I have a couple of questions. How much did you, sitting on the MR-IV desk,  
know about this ARVN operation while it was happening?

BL: We’d get information and they’d hand us—we’re doing this, we’re doing  
that, this happened, that happened, so forth and so on. About two weeks later, boom, it’s  
over.

LC: So the best information you were getting was actually from ARVN liaison?

BL: Mm-hmm.

LC: Can you describe who the liaison was and how information actually flowed  
from presumably their general staff over to you?

BL: I’d go over to ARVN JGS, joint general staff, and I don’t remember any of  
the people’s names at all.

LC: That’s okay.

BL: I was talking with different ARVN officers and colonels. Because I spoke  
Vietnamese they would be more candid with me, I think, than with other Americans who  
hadn’t gained their trust and confidence.

LC: Yes, sir.

BL: They basically said, “So far so good. It’s going okay.” It should also be  
noted the 1st NVA Division was not what you’d call one of their best. It wasn’t shabby,  
but it wasn’t one of their real butt kickers.

LC: Do you mean that in terms of its experience or its armaments?

BL: Well, that weaponry, too, because the NVA had no artillery in the Delta.  
They had 120 mm mortars and 107 and 122 rockets, but they didn’t have any artillery.

LC: What, if you know, tactical approach did the ARVN unit, the Rangers use?

BL: I don’t know. I really don’t know. I got down to Chau Doc, which was in  
the Seven Mountains, or basically just outside of town, not too far. But I don’t know the  
details. They just said, “We’re taking it. We’re cleaning it out.”

LC: That’s amazing.
Yeah, and try and find that in the U.S. news media.

Right, exactly. I have to confess I didn’t know about it and I’m very keen to know more.

By the way on that, just as an added footnote, on the Tri Phap operation, that was so successful. We actually got captured documents out of III Corps on this. That was to be held under tight control because the news of that operation would demoralize VC/NVA soldiers if they heard that. There was no—within the VC/NVA structure that the Tri Phap operation was not to be made known. It was such a humiliating defeat.

This is actually quite amazing. It sort of turns the general perception of what was happening between ’73 and early ’75, just on its head.

Yeah. That was the remaining source of frustration with me because here are these goofballs who say, “Well, ARVN wouldn’t fight.” I’m here to tell you, there were some ARVN units that were pathetic, absolutely pathetic, but there were some ARVN units that were as good as anybody else ever was over there, right at the top.

Bill, you said that you reported to Colonel Le Gro, who’s the author of the book that you mentioned having some reporting on this. What was his first name?

Oh, my gosh.

That’s okay. I can find it. We can find it.

A huge air bubble.

That’s okay.

I’m embarrassed.

That’s all right, Bill, we won’t tell him.

Bill, Bill Le Gro.

Bill, okay. Well, that’s why. It was too easy. What was his background do you know? Had he spent a significant amount of time in Vietnam?

Yeah. He had been with I think the 1st Division before. 1st U.S. Division. Incidentally, he’d also been on, back when he was in Washington, he’d been on a contingency planning committee, if you want to call it that or task force, to assemble, develop plans for a Ho Chi Minh Trail incursion in the early ’60s. He told me personally in a letter that once the word was out on that, that the quote “nine hundred pound Democratic gorilla,” unquote, Averell Harriman, made it clear that no-such operation
would be planned or undertaken. Just “Don’t you ever even think of it.” Of course, Averell Harriman was the engineer of the same Laotian Accords by which all NVA were to have left Laos and they didn’t, which is why the Ho Chi Minh Trial is known by some as the Averell Harriman Memorial Highway. He had knowledge of Vietnam through his Ho Chi Minh project conceptual planning and was with the 1st NVA Division. Perhaps most importantly he was an intelligent, honest, decent man, just very inspirational in a very low-key kind of way.

LC: His rank was colonel at the time that you were working with him.
BL: Yes.
LC: Was he subsequently promoted? Do you know?
BL: No and the scuttlebutt was that he turned down a transfer which would have promoted him to brigadier general because he wanted to keep his family where his kids were going to school back in the States. That’s what I heard. Whether or not it’s true, it’s certainly in character with what I know because he was a very, very honorable man, quite aware of his responsibilities to other people and this and that. Even if that’s not true, that’s the kind of guy he was. He was never promoted.
LC: Did you consider him an ally in listening to you and your reports?
BL: Absolutely, absolutely.
LC: Was that helpful in giving you a little more slack, as they say, to express what it was you were seeing in the reports and the intelligence and write the kinds of analyses that you wanted to?
BL: Yes, absolutely. In fact, and this is fast-forwarding to 1974 when in December I—it was not just an intuitive gut feeling thing. It was based on information. It was based on patterns of activity. It was based on a lot of things. I thought I smelled a real offensive coming up in the Delta. This is going to be bad. It was shared by some other people down in the Delta, too. This smells funny. Something’s wrong here. By God, I just feel it in my bones kind of a thing, in addition to the pattern of analysis and all this other stuff. So before anything happened I wrote up a report. In fact it was in Herrington’s book.
LC: Yes, this is your late ’74 Mista report. That’s M-I-S-T-A.
BL: Yeah. Boy, the stuff hit the fan down at the embassy. They went ballistic. They just went nuts. Colonel LeGro came to me one day and here’s this report straight from Wolfgang Lehmann, the charge d’affaires, that’s the number two guy. It had red marks all over it and stuff like, “Crap” and, “This is nonsense,” and all sorts of things. He said, “What do you think?” I said, “Well, I wrote down what I thought.” He said, “Okay.” He said, “Do you want to respond to this?” It’s like, “All right.” I wrote something up and sent it back. Then of course about three or four days later, the roof fell in, in the Delta. Then as Herrington recorded we had to go down to the embassy and explain what was going on. I told you what was going on, but he backed me up all the way.

LC: How long did he stay in Vietnam? Was he there until basically—?

BL: The end.

LC: The end, okay. Where was he from originally, do you know Bill?

BL: I don’t know. He’s got the hint of a drawl. So some sort of Midwesterner, northern, southern area, homespun down home. You know what he really reminds me of is a Gary Cooper kind of a guy, his mannerisms, the lack of inflection in his voice, the straightforwardness of the man. He even bears somewhat of a facial resemblance. He’s very Gary Cooper-ish all the way. In real life, he’s that kind of a man.

LC: Were there other people assigned to your section or other sections of DAO, intelligence work, that you saw as essentially allies to your way of thinking and receptive to your reports, particularly people that stand out?

BL: Not really. I think to a certain extent they thought, well here I guess I’ll have to go back to that crossing over thing. I think some of them thought I was a little bit over-influenced by what some of the Vietnamese were telling me and this and that. I remember telling one guy and I can’t remember his name. I think it was early ’74 and that’s when the stench of abandonment really started to really permeate everything in my mind, anyhow. I said to him, “You know, if there’s ever a crack in the dam this place is going to go down so fast no one’s going to believe it.” He looked at me like I was nuts. As it turns out, that’s exactly what happened. They weren’t really adversaries, but I don’t know that they were allies, either. A lot of them—maybe I shouldn’t say this, but a lot of them, some of them sometimes, not all the time, it’s one of those ambivalent things. But
I just don’t think they put enough thought into it at times, sometimes. There were some
good people there, believe me. Good people have bad days and this and that. But every
once in a while I’d look at stuff that people were thinking or saying or writing and I’d go,
“You know you’re counting some of this surface activity, but you’re really not looking in
depth and in the future and all this other sort of thing.” I wouldn’t call it a problem. I
would call it a periodic perception contrast or conflict.

LC: Not there all the time?

BL: No, but when some of them did disagree with me, I still had credibility.

Again, I spoke Vietnamese. No one else spoke Vietnamese as well as I did, not even
close. They knew I was in constant contact with the Vietnamese people all the time and I
lived in a Vietnamese neighborhood and all this sort of stuff. So I had credibility that
could not be readily dismissed simply because of a disagreement.

LC: Bill, let’s take a break for a minute.

BL: Okay.
Interview with William Laurie
Date: February 10, 2004

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I’m continuing my oral history interview with William Laurie. Today’s date is the tenth of February 2004. I am again in the interview room in the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech. Bill again is in Mesa, Arizona. Good afternoon, Bill.

Bill Laurie: Hello.

LC: Bill, I wanted to start off today by asking if you recall in early 1974 an incident involving another Defense Attaché Office employee, Gerald Kosh.

BL: Okay. Yeah. First off I didn’t really know a lot of the people in DAO outside of my little circle. I just didn’t. I didn’t have any reason to. I was not within the government’s social crowd, if that’s what you want to call it. But in any case, to my knowledge I didn’t know Kosh and I don’t know anything directly other than what I heard and I’ll tell you what that is. He was with the DAO, I believe, up in Da Nang, which is way up north. He had gone out with the Republic of Vietnam Blue Water Navy, basically as an observer, which DAO people did from time to time. There was nothing nefarious about it. It was just to see how things were going, so forth and so on, all quite legitimate. Of course, the Paracels and Spratly Islands have long been contested by many countries of Southeast Asia. the Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam all lay claim to these places. I guess they’re pretty barren. They’re nothing much more than atolls covered with sea gull dung, basically, but the key is, is the suspicion that there’s oil in the area. So these uninhabitable atolls or reefs, basically, have a much stronger appeal because of that. In any event, the South Vietnamese—and I can’t remember whether it was the Paracels or Spratlys, which one. I think it was the Paracels.

LC: I think that’s right, yeah.

BL: In any case they had an installation there and they were claiming sovereignty. The Chinese communists said, “No, it’s ours and we’re taking it.” I don’t know all the details, but eventually they actually had a John Paul Jones-type sea battle with the Republic of Vietnam Navy taking on the Chinese communist ships with classic
World War II ship-to-ship battle, apparently. The South Vietnamese lost, but from what I heard and from some of the reports I read, that Kosh eventually wrote, the South Vietnamese acquitted themselves quite well. They didn’t panic. They didn’t simply surrender or try and get away. It was just very much a John Paul Jones-type thing. “Okay, man the guns. Let’s go.” So they slugged it out and they lost, but apparently they went down fighting, so to speak.

LC: Did you ever come across any information about a broader Chinese communist military mobilization there in the maritime area, off, say, around the Hainan Island or anything in ’74?

BL: Not that I know of. Not that I know of.

LC: Did Kosh ever come back to DAO after the incident? Do you know?

BL: I don’t know. I think he was held prisoner for a while.

LC: Yeah, I think so.

BL: I don’t know when he was released and I don’t know what he did after that.

LC: Did you, though, at some point see some report or hear about some report that he had written about the performance of the South Vietnamese?

BL: Yeah, it was just as I said. I couldn’t attest to their accuracy, but I do remember hearing and reading. I couldn’t site a specific report. I couldn’t even tell you who said what about it. It’s just a recollection I have of that time. The South Vietnamese slugged it out and they lost.

LC: Did you, Bill, pay much attention to that wing of the South Vietnamese military structure?

BL: Not too much. Actually the Blue Water Navy was not as essential in my way of thinking as the Brown Water Navy, which was being gradually moth-balled because of the lack of spare parts. They needed that Brown Water Navy down in the Delta. Of course, one could say that, well, the North Vietnamese overseas shipment of supplies had ceased. So there wasn’t a need for Blue Water Navy, but that logic might be stood on it’s head by saying that the reason it stopped is because of Blue Water interception, initiated by the United States Navy and Coast Guard. It picked up by the South Vietnamese. So in all probability had there not been a Blue Water Navy you might have had some off loading of supplies which had taken place in the early ’60s. But then
again with the Ho Chi Minh Trail being as developed as it was by then. It was pipelined
and grated and surfaced and everything else, I’m not sure whether they really needed
offshore logistics.

LC: Okay. I want to ask you a couple of other questions about—
BL: By the way that’s an area I am not at all well versed in. That’s are just
conjecture on my part.

LC: Are you talking in general about naval strategy?
BL: Yeah, the Blue Water Navy.

LC: I want to ask you a couple things about other events in early and mid-1974,
particularly the decline and then fall of the Nixon presidency. It’s been suggested, and I
just want to get your response to this, that because of the bombing runs that Nixon had
authorized in ’72 that the Hanoi leadership had really come to fear Nixon and, in fact, I’m
sure you’re familiar with the general theory of the mad man theory that’s been put about.
BL: Right.

LC: I wonder if you have any comments about that theory, first of all, in general?
BL: I think and again I’m not a Nixon scholar. But you have to look back and
Nixon believed, from what I can gather, in establishing some sort of stability and order in
the world. The fall of South Vietnam under the superior military might of an invading
country, be it North Vietnam or anybody, was not something that you would want to
encourage or tolerate. So I think he did want to preserve Vietnam. Of course, he made
those promises to Thieu in writing that the United States would intervene with massive
air power if Hanoi did not adhere to the Paris Peace Accords. I think it’s probably valid
that Hanoi saw Nixon’s demise as a critical event which opened doors to them that they
might otherwise not have opened. Ford was clearly not the established hard-liner
international tough guy that Nixon was. Ford had, to the best of my knowledge, very,
very limited international experience. So I’m sure that they probably looked upon that
with glee. I know you can find citations and interviews with some of these people where
they said, “Well, with Nixon gone, Ford”—in fact I think Phan Van Dong said something
to the effect that, “Ford is the weakest president America has ever had.” Yeah, that
certainly was beneficial to them, certainly encouraged them. I remember when I was
there and Nixon resigned. That was not a welcome event.
LC: What was the response generally, do you recall?

BL: That this is just another straw on the camel’s back. This is just another factor that’s operating against the viability of the Republic of Vietnam and Laos and Cambodia because they were all on the same strategic playing field. This was simply not good here. You’re a tough guy. He may have been—although a lot of people don’t realize that his dealings with the Soviets and Kissinger's dealings with the Soviets accomplished absolutely nothing. I think less than they could have in terms of detente, because the Soviets needed American wheat badly. They needed American technology and I guess the Comma River Truck Plant was built with considerable United States assistance or some sort of aid, I don’t know. So anyhow they needed us more than we needed them. To the best of my knowledge, neither Kissinger nor Nixon, and certainly not Ford ever went to the Soviets and said that they were displeased with seeing all these Soviet tanks in Hai Phong Harbor and that better stop post haste or we can just forget about the wheat deals and we can forget about the Comma River Truck Plant and all this other stuff until such time as you’re willing to accept detente in terms that we can accept. As it turned out, we sold the wheat to the Russians at bargain basement prices, really cheap.

LC: Right.

BL: They turned around and sold it on the international market.

LC: And made hard currency.

BL: Yeah, exactly. At a profit, a little capitalist Marxists that they were. So that’s always been somewhat of a mystery to me as to how and why Kissinger and Nixon didn’t play harder hardball with the Soviets and the Chinese. I don’t think that the Soviets and the Chinese would have dug their heels in because really South Vietnam didn’t mean or Vietnam and Southeast Asia weren’t that big of a deal to them. They were more opportunistic than they were lusting for greater geopolitical position in Southeast Asia. I think had Nixon stayed on and had he played hardball with the Soviets and the Chinese, just suspend wheat sales for a month or two or three months. Go to the American public, go to the world public and say, “Gee whiz, we want to get peace here, but here are these pictures of all these Soviet tanks and artillery pieces in Hai Phong Harbor, where else coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail?” That’s not nice. Let’s play
some blackmail, some public relations blackmail, like they did to us the whole time. Of course, none of that ever happened. I’m not quite sure why, unless you buy into Snepp’s decent interval theory where the United States simply didn’t care at all and just wanted to have enough time where the blame would not devolve on Americans shoulders again at this interval. I don’t know.

LC: Let’s sort of separate Nixon and Kissinger, for a moment. Do you think that they were acting wholly in unison in their approach to either the Soviets or the Chinese or both?

BL: I’m not an expert on that, I don’t know. I really don’t know.

LC: Do you think that Nixon and Kissinger might have approached the Chinese differently and obtained a different result?

BL: Again I’m stepping beyond any claims of expertise I might have with anything on that. This is just a general estimate based on things I’ve read. I’ve never seen anywhere where they, either Nixon or Kissinger, had gone to either the Soviets or the Chinese and said, “Look, we want to improve relations with our countries here. We want things to be better. We want trade. We want all this good stuff, but we expect you to adhere to certain conditions. One of which is quit giving war supplies to North Vietnam. Just stop.” These goofball historians that pass for college professors will say, “Oh, Russia couldn’t have stopped the North Vietnamese communists in their quest for patriotic reunification so and so forth.” They didn’t have to do anything other than stop giving them things, stop sending them tanks and artillery and petroleum and weaponry and munitions. That’s all they had to do. North Vietnam could have squawked all it wanted. “Well, that’s too bad, guys.”

LC: Bill, can we feed the Congressional situation into this as well? Still talking about 1974 if you can. Can you discuss what you remember of or have subsequently learned about the shifts in Congressional forbearance, for lack of a better word, about South Vietnamese independence?

BL: Of course, this is what prevailed in ’74 and ’75, and ’73 was simply the latest installment in a continuum that had begun in the mid-’60s and became increasingly if gradually anti-defensive Republic of Vietnam as time went on. I can’t give you details. I’m simply not privy to them. Although I do know that every once in awhile we’d see
something in *Stars and Stripes* where somebody like Teddy Kennedy would say something stupid like, “We don’t have to give them weapons. Let the Vietnamese solve the problem themselves.” That’s just pathetically impossible and stupid. The Soviets were giving the North Vietnamese all kinds of weapons and the South Vietnamese needed to have some means of defense against these things. This stuff about, “Let the Southeast Asian people or the Vietnamese solve it themselves,” was just absurd. It’s either his ignorance or his obscene posturing, I don’t know which. But we’d read things like that. You’d mumble obscenities and your blood would boil. If he were simply a Marxist and said, “The South needs to be bludgeoned into submission,” well, okay, you’re being honest. That’s fair, but he was posing as this rational peaceful guy. He was either A, a dunce, or B, a shameless opportunist. So he and people like him certainly incurred our wrath. There was not a whole lot we could do about it, but bitch and mumble and swear and everything else. Comment about his lack of either intellect and/or character. Then Colonel LeGro told us one time and I remember when Graham Martin had gone back to Washington to argue for increased assistance to the Republic of Vietnam. He had come back unsuccessfully, I guess, talked to LeGro about it and LeGro talked to us. He said, “It’s not looking good.” That was sometime in ’74, too, I believe. All these things were just more and more everyday there was one, seven or fifteen more straws on the camel’s back. It’s just getting worse and worse. But I can’t give you specifics, but they’re pretty much available in voting records. There’s a book the title of which escapes me at the moment. It’s about Congress from ’74 to ’75 and Vietnam. These people were just, “Let’s just get out of here and to heck with it. Blow it out and forget about it.” Congressional support was getting very thin and getting thinner. In defense of Kissinger and Nixon, Nixon before he resigned, they were operating within a very, very thin avenue of permissible, political options given the attitude in Congress and the country at this time. There wasn’t a whole lot they could do, I don’t think.

LC: Of course, the president was also under attack by the Congress.

BL: Exactly. Yep.

LC: Go ahead, Bill.

BL: Well, that’s about it.
LC: Okay. Let’s talk about events actually in Vietnam. You were good enough
to provide us with a copy of a report on ARVN servicemen’s economic status. Do you
remember how that study, which I think was done by DAO, was initiated? What led to
that study?
BL: I don’t know. Tony Lawson was the guy that was in charge of that. It was
evident to anybody that was tuned into anything that the situation was bad, even if you
didn’t speak Vietnamese, if you didn’t dwell in Vietnamese circles outside of work or
anything like that. It was very evident the situation was bad. I don’t know if Tony
initiated that project on himself or what initiated it, but it was sorely needed insofar as it
needed to be documented to outside sources, but it wasn’t needed for anybody that was
there. A couple of those ARVN people that were interviewed say, “Why are you doing
this study? Everybody knows that we’re destitute.” But it’s good. Its value is greater as
a historical document than it was as an operational item at the time because no one was
going to do anything then. But at least now, the historians can document that the South
Vietnamese were destitute not only in terms of military equipment, but in terms of
nutrition. I mean these guys, we’re talking about two meals a day some of them. I never
saw one ARVN soldier buy a pack of cigarettes. They’d buy one or two cigarettes at
these noodle stands along side the road. These guys were single. It was terrible. It was
horrible. You had fifty, sixty percent inflation and twenty-five percent unemployment.
The economic situation was just wretched. I hate to use this word because it’s an
overused word, but it was depressing. Good God, how can things get worse? Of course,
they kept on getting worse.
LC: Now it was a survey study is that right?
BL: Right, yeah.
LC: It involved several thousand ARVN soldiers, as I recall.
BL: I don’t recall that detail, but that sounds about right. They interviewed a lot
of people.
LC: Yeah, it was a big project. You mentioned something that is quite
interesting. Which is, why, in fact , was such a study conducted? It wasn’t surely for the
benefit of historians now sitting some thirty some years later. Do you recall anything
about the thinking or motivation behind it?
BL: I don’t.

LC: Bill, can you tell a little bit more about your feeling when you actually were reading the report or beginning to get foreshadowing of it’s content?

BL: Well, again, the year before when I had come back to Vietnam it was within two days that I realized that an economic catastrophe had befallen. It was just you couldn’t escape it, especially if you spoke Vietnamese. I went back and saw some of my Vietnamese friends from my first time around. I heard this stuff. I thought, “Good God,” it was terrible. So it came as no surprise to me when that report came out. It was no surprise to me at all, the findings that is. I was simply glad that somebody had done something.

LC: To document it?

BL: Yeah and we had tried to get the word out. You talk about this and that, but feeding incidental statements about destitute infantrymen in an intelligence operational report or something of this nature just doesn’t have the impact of, “Okay, here’s this subject examined as a single subject for all you outside consumers to look at.”

LC: What implications did you think the report had? What should have been drawn from it?

BL: That something had to be done. You have to give the South Vietnamese the means to defend themselves. People say, “Why can’t they do it themselves?” Well, why couldn’t the North Vietnamese do it themselves? They were doing it with Soviet and Chinese weaponry. It was a leveling of the playing field. Of course, you could have had a much harder diplomatic position vis-à-vis the Soviets and the Chinese again. “Do you guys want detente or not? Okay, if you want it, then I don’t want to see anymore tanks or artillery pieces come down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. That’s it. We know what you’re giving them.” We had aerial photographs of all this stuff. There was just no question about it. That was never done. I didn’t think at the time, as best I can recall, that anything would be done because I didn’t think the United States was either intellectually or morally capable of doing anything. I just figured, “Nice try guys,” and Tony Lawson and all his people deserve a world of credit for doing what they did, but the rest of the world just flat out doesn’t care.

LC: It was sort of like one hand clapping, in a way.
BL: Yeah.

LC: Bill, you mentioned your Vietnamese friends and that you had upon arrival back in the country visited, some people that you had known before. I wonder if you could just give some general characterizations of Vietnamese whom you considered to be friends and whom you saw more or less on a regular basis, and any names if you recall them and would like to share them.

BL: Let’s see. Of course, given my position I was not a colonel. I wasn’t a high-ranking guy. So I’m generally more exposed to lower-ranking people in terms as well as just normal folks, people running noodle stands and stuff like that. I can’t even remember a lot of names. I can remember first names, maybe. It was inescapable that economic catastrophe had befallen. It was just total utter disaster. Again, imagine what it would be. We’re talking—I think in the height of the American Depression there was twenty-five percent unemployment. So you’ve got that right there on top of the fact you’ve got sixty percent inflation. People literally were not getting enough to eat.

LC: What kind of telltale things did you see that signaled to you that this wasn’t just a one or two-month lull in economic activity, but was in fact a far-reaching economic depression or even recession?

BL: Basically having been an economics student through college, you learn that, contemporary politicians notwithstanding, you simply don’t have a magic wand that can turn around the economy on a dime. The government cannot really in the long run overall create jobs.

LC: If they could, they would.

BL: Sure. Yeah. Of course, you can do it, but you can also delude yourself into thinking you’re rich by having a spend-a-thon with credit cards. Well, that works fine until bills start coming in.

LC: Yes, sir.

BL: But knowing that the economy can’t be turned around and looking at the structural aspects of it. All the unemployment from American civilians, Brown and Root and all the civilians that were employed by the U.S. military and civilians establishments there, so they’re all out of work. There was just no way out, unless there were peace.

Then, of course, you’d have a problem with demobilization and all this sort of stuff.
Then you could have some sort of resurgence of the beginnings of economic
development that you saw in the late ’60s and early ’70s where they were actually
starting to—I’d be hard pressed to give you exact specifics on this, but I do know there
was an atmosphere of prosperity, if you want to call it that, or hope for the future. Really
there hadn’t ever been before with land reform and all this other stuff and greater security
in the Delta and throughout the country. You had a situation in which the Republic of
Vietnam could have climbed out of its economic situation over time. It would have been
painful. It wouldn’t have been fun. There was plenty of resources and assets in that
country. Of course, the people were very hard working. Look at South Korea and North
Korea, the comparison there. There’s no doubt in my mind, had the war gone away,
South Vietnam would have been in for a few more years of difficulty, but time heals all
economic woes if there’s adequate management. I’m sure the United States would have
stayed involved. There were some very capable and competent South Vietnamese
economists and planners and this and that. But given the war, given the continuing
decrease in the United States aid, there wasn’t any way out.

LC: It’s been suggested that the fact that South Vietnam had so many men under
arms combined with the, I don’t know, generally damaging effect, I suppose, of U.S.
military and economic aid, that those factors would have swamped virtually any economy
that was trying to function on a free market basis. Does that sound right to you or is there
more to it?

BL: Well, yes and no. Certainly that goes back to our earlier discussion on the
initial mistakes made by the United States government of not cutting off the Ho Chi Minh
Trail because had you done that, and launched a concurrent and effective and relentless
propaganda war, which would have to be based on truth. I didn’t mean propaganda on
lying, I mean propaganda based on truth. You wouldn’t have had the need, possibly, had
that worked for such a massive American presence in South Vietnam. That certainly did
shred the social fabric of the country. It was just massive. You had a population of what,
about seventeen million in the Republic of Vietnam. Then you’ve got over five hundred
thousand Americans and that’s not considering—then you start adding South Koreans,
Thais, Australians, New Zealanders, and everything else. You’ve probably got a million
people in the country that are not native. That’s just a massive presence. It causes
massive dislocations in the labor market and generates inflation. It creates opportunities for corruption. Again, go back to the medical term iatrogenic, where the treatment makes the problem worse. There’s a line of reasoning to that. Although even if you cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail you still have a large allied presence in South Vietnam and it’d still be disruptive. Then again, you can argue that the North Vietnamese was an alien presence with an alien ideology and it was alien. They proved during that time and after ’75 more disruptive than anything else.

LC: Bill, let’s change tack here for a moment. I want to ask you about the military situation in the South in 1974. At that time, as far as I know, South Vietnam was supposed to be operating in a state of cease fire with regard to the North and vice versa.

BL: Of course there was never one day of it.

LC: I’m sorry, never one day of it?

BL: Never.

LC: Do you recall incidents, say, before the summer of 1974 where there was evidence of violations of the cease fire by NVA or NVA filler troops in the South?

BL: That was just given. That wasn’t even a surprise. I don’t know how to express what a non-surprise that was. It was just all the time. It was not only military. If you go down the list of the clauses or sections, whatever it is, the Paris Peace Accords they weren’t supposed to replace—they could replace one for one and this and that, as could the South Vietnamese. Well, they didn’t adhere to that for one single day. They fired on—they committed just regular, normal war crimes, exclusive of the Paris Peace Accords, by rocketing and mortaring civilian areas routinely. I mean, that was all the time by putting mines in the roads where civilian buses would get blown up. I hate to cite one specific example because anecdotal history is, it’s a recipe for disaster. One thing I do recall when they rocketed Bien Hoa and, of course, you cannot aim rockets. Even Richard Falk, who was renowned as an anti-war spokesman back in the ’60s, is on record as saying the VC/NVA rocketing of civilian areas is a war crime because you can’t aim rockets. It’s indiscriminate bombing is what it is. Anyhow, one of these rockets didn’t detonate, but it went through the torso of some eighteen-year-old kid. These things are about seven, eight inches in diameter. He was just as dead and, of course, the house didn’t blow up. I remember thinking, “Why don’t they put that on the
evening news?” There was the picture of the napalm girl and there was the picture of General Loan shooting that VC assassin and all that stuff. If they’re going to show that, well, you want some nice gory thrills, here’s some more folks. But no one cared. It didn’t even make the U.S. news media.

LC: Bill, how did that incident come to your attention? Did you see a photograph or did you—?

BL: No. I think the Con Gen, the Consulate General, in Bien Hoa sent something out on that. I don’t recall exactly what form or method of report that was, but I do remember it.

LC: Do you have a sense of when that took place?

BL: Sometime in ’74, I believe. It could have been ’73 because it didn’t matter. They were doing it all the time. They mortared a schoolyard in Cai Lay district. They killed, I think, twenty kids and wounded about four. This is broad daylight. They dropped a mortar round in this little school in Cai Lay. Then about a month or two later they did the same thing at a place called Chung Phu in Vinh Long province which is next to the province that Cai Lay was in. They did this stuff all the time. It was just all the time.

LC: Not to overstate the case too much, but during the height of U.S. military intervention in South Vietnam, a number of people who have been interviewed talked about the mortars as kind of the throw away weapon that just were a nuisance more than anything else. I think you’re pointing to something different, which is their impact on civilians.

BL: I don’t know why anyone would say mortars are a throw away weapon especially people who have been on the receiving end of them. They’re just nasty things. They killed people. They make real loud noises. I wouldn’t call a mortar a throw away weapon at all. The difference between mortars and rockets is you can aim mortars with a great degree of precision if you’ve got a good mortar man. Rockets you just point them and whatever it hits, it hits.

LC: Almost treating civilian areas, would you say, as a free fire zone?

BL: Sure.

LC: Just no particular target in mind?
BL: I’m sure they would liked to have hit a military target. I don’t have any
documents and I can’t read their minds. I’m sure they’d rather hit a military target than
not, but they obviously, obviously had absolutely no regard for civilian lives to the extent
that they took precaution to minimize civilian casualties. They did it all the time.

LC: During the summer of 1974, I think you may recall that the NVA seized a
district capital of Thuong Duc I think. Do you remember that?

BL: No I don’t, as a matter of fact. Thuong Duc I believe was in I Corps, isn’t it?

LC: Yes, I believe so. I just wondered if you remembered that incident at all.

BL: No I don’t. If memory serves me correctly, and I don’t know I Corps or II
Corps as well as I know the Delta, but if memory serves me correctly Thoung Duc, when
you say district town people think in terms of this county seat, this big place. A lot of
district towns were nothing. You have administrative offices and a few of this and a few
of that and the crossroads with unpaved streets and this and that. If I remember correctly,
if my impression is right, Thuong Duc is a rather isolated district. I can’t even tell you
what the province is. I’ve seen that name. I remember that name. But other than that I
can’t really tell you anything about it.

LC: Okay, that’s fine. Can you characterize the military situation at the end of
the rainy season in 1974 in the Delta and sort of tell us what the state of play was
between ARVN and the enemy, not just ARVN, but RF and PF forces?

BL: Okay. You’re saying the end of the rainy season in ’74 which we’re talking
about the first part of ’74.

LC: Correct.

BL: Okay. I don’t recall it as being cause for great alarm. There was concern
especially in the lower part of the Delta. They just didn’t seem to be having their stuff
together, south of the Bassac, Soc Trang, Vinh Long, Ca Mau, Chuong Thien, places like
that. Upper Delta, as best I can recall, it was pretty much holding your own. Of course,
in early ’74 that was in the aftermath of the Tri Phap base area being overrun. So I’d
have to give the momentum to the South Vietnamese, basically at the beginning of ’74 in
the Delta. There was signs of some rot here or there. The corps commander was not
renowned for his integrity. He was later replaced.

LC: Who was that corps commander?
BL: General Nghi.

LC: Spelled?

BL: I can’t remember his family name and his middle name.

LC: How do you spell his name?

BL: N-G-H-I.

LC: Nghi, okay.

BL: Whether or not he was involved in a lot of this stuff is perhaps not a

certainty, but the fact of the matter is the flower soldiers, the ghost soldiers and these

other forms of corruption and stuff. There was just too much going on. There was some

notoriously corrupt province chiefs, all of which basically changed when Quang Nam

was appointed corps commander in the later part of ’74.

LC: The removal of Nghi was orchestrated by whom?

BL: By the anti-corruption movement, Redemptorist Catholic priests. I don’t

know what “Redemptorist” means or what that signifies but anyhow that’s what he was.

LC: I think it’s a particular order.

BL: Yeah, I think—what was his name? Father Thanh—oh, man. I can’t think of

it. But any case, he was leading demonstrations and this and that. He put out the white

paper indictment of Thieu and his corruption and so forth and so on. People would say,

“See. Why are you supporting a corrupt government?” My response is, “Well, ‘cause

ey they can protest. That’s why.”

LC: Are we talking about Tran Huu Thanh?

BL: Yeah, that’s him. Yeah. Any case, Thieu was back to the wall politically

and he had to jettison some of his cronies and he was one of those. They put General

Nam in—they appointed him. He went from the 7th Division to corps headquarters.

Again, he was militantly anti-corrupt, and I do mean militantly.

LC: Right. You’ve mentioned him before.

BL: Yes.

LC: Bill, you just briefly noted the issue of the ghost soldiers. I wonder if you

could just explain what that actually means.

BL: Ghost or a phantom soldier is someone whose name is on the books as being

in a unit, but who isn’t there. He may be AWOL. He may be dead. He may be this. He
may be that, but they keep him on the books so they can pocket or otherwise utilize his paycheck, the monies that comes into pay for the unit salaries.

LC: And food as well?

BL: Say again?

LC: Also the food that might have been distributed to the unit?

BL: It wouldn’t be the food because most of the South Vietnamese got ration cards and they had—what do I want to say—government outlets where they could buy their rice rations and stuff like that with these ration cards. Normally they didn’t have enough anyhow. No, it wouldn’t have been food. They may have had allotments for food at headquarters, where you have your centralized dining area. But other than—that wouldn’t have been the major driving force. It was simply a matter of pocketing the paycheck.

LC: Now the ration cards that you mentioned, when were those first introduced? Had there been a system of rationing for civilians in place for some time?

BL: I think the military always had them just like the American military had them. You could go into a PX and there was a little card and you could get so many cartons of cigarettes a month or so many cases of beer or this and that and so forth and so on. They’d punch it. To the best of my knowledge, and this is basically a guess on my part, the Republic of Vietnam military always had that rationing system.

LC: Was there anything that paralleled that for civilians?

BL: No. Not that I know of.

LC: Can you talk a little bit about casualty figures that maybe you were seeing on either the communist side or on the South Vietnamese side during 1974?

BL: I’d like to do that with the benefit of examining whatever reliable data is available, but I think a general comment will suffice. I hope it will.

LC: Okay.

BL: Especially in the Delta and pretty much the same in III Corps too, there was this constant offensive pressure on the part of the communists. Of course people like Garret Porter say that they were defending themselves against the Thieu regime’s incursions. In part, in ’73 and part of ’74 they did go into communists area. They did go into Tri Phap. They did kick them out of the Seven Mountains and they were trying to
push them out or destroy their capabilities in that area. But in many cases too, which is
to simply bleed, harass, bleed, harass, bleed, harass. My impression at the time was this
whole thing is a wretched mess. More VC/NVA are getting killed than are South
Vietnamese. But the South Vietnamese were taking a wretched toll here too. I don’t
know when it was, I spoke with the G-3 of the ARVN 7th Division, but he was very
disturbed, very upset, very capable man. I cannot remember his name. But he was a very
good man, very honest, very straightforward, very blunt. He was visibly disturbed over
having to send ambulatory wounded back out in the field. If you got wounded, you get
patched up and then back you go. So it was a non-headline grabbing meat grinder was all
it was. It was just this continual carnage on a relatively low level. In the grand scheme
of things it certainly wasn’t a low level if you were in that particular battalion or
company.

LC: Now the assignment of, as it were, walking wounded back into combat units,
what was the rational behind that?
BL: They had to.
LC: Because?
BL: Again I’m talking about 7th Division only. I can’t say this applies to the 18th
or the 1st or the 2nd or anything else. But the 7th they did have to send ambulatory
wounded back because he needed the manpower.
LC: There were not enough recruits coming in?
BL: I think recruitment was down. I think it was basically a casualty loss. They
had a problem with desertions and all this other stuff, but the primary factor was
continual carnage.
LC: When you saw casualty figures reported by South Vietnamese units or by the
government did you have confidence in those figures as being close to what was actually
happening?
BL: Yeah, for the most part because we were getting information that they
couldn’t control. For example, the case of the 1st NVA Division it’s destruction down in
Chau Duc province. We got information, just all sorts of information, everything. It was
not from avenues that could be again controlled by the GVN or IV Corps headquarters.
There were still some independent intelligence horses in South Vietnam. They were running some, I forget who it was, they were running some agent groups and of course the CIA had their agents and there was other things. They shared the GVN, did share POW interrogation and other reports. There was absolutely nothing, nothing that suggested the GVNs claims for success in the Seven Mountains were anything but accurate. Everything suggested that the 1st Division had been thoroughly, thoroughly battered.

LC: Okay. Bill, I want to ask about the—

BL: But in general to specifically answer your question. I’m sure there was some fluff on some of the numbers, but that was not anything we were concerned with because we didn’t rely specifically on the GVN. Then you’d go out yourself. You wouldn’t be getting information from JGS in Saigon all the time. You’d be out there on your own talking with the USAID prov rep or the CIA guy in some province or with the 9th Division or with the 7th Division or this and that. So sooner or later the truth is going to bubble up from all that. It’s a misconception that the higher levels of the GVN were all a pack of pathological liars. Some of them were very blunt and especially in JGS, some of them were very candid, very blunt and thoroughly honest. They’d tell you their counter parts in particular Colonel Lung who was J-2 over at JGS. His counterpart was Colonel Le Gro. To the best of my knowledge, Le Gro always felt that he was always getting straight stuff from Colonel Lung all the time.

LC: Okay. Bill, you’ve mentioned a number of different sources for compiling the view that you held and that was being circulated within DAO about communist strength and losses. I wonder if you can play into all of the sources that you’ve talked about so far. The role of aerial reconnaissance and photography, did you see that data or see synopses of that kind of data and feed that into what you were looking at from all the other sources?

BL: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Of course now your aerial photography isn’t going to really tell you much about the casualties unless they happen to be a digging a two hundred grave graveyard in the middle of the wide open. But, yeah, we did have access to aerial photography. It was rather limited. Certainly nothing like that you could get
your hands on during the American involvement, but there was stuff we got and from the GVN sources as well.

LC: This is another question again about intelligence sources, so I’ll completely understand if you can’t answer. But was the U.S. also in receipt or representatives of the U.S. in South Vietnam in receipt of intelligence material from other countries besides South Vietnamese?

BL: Yeah. There was still an Australian attaché over there if I remember. I know there was an Australian attaché when I was with MACV. I think—I can’t recall right off hand, but I’m sure we had some dealings with the Aussies in the DAO period. I know we used to get material on occasion from other sources who had not, that were not within the communist block themselves, but who had access to another—when there was agents reporting on what the Pollocks or the Polgarians as we used to call them, the Polish-Hungarian ICCS (International Commission for Control and Supervision) delegation were saying and reporting. That would be picked up possibly in Hanoi and this and that and then they’d get routed down to us.

LC: Were you also in receipt of monitored radio broadcast traffic? I’m not talking necessarily here about military signals intelligence, I’m talking about open broadcast from transmitters operated by communists that might have been located in the Delta or further up north? Were you watching that kind of stuff too?

BL: Generally the public broadcast you couldn’t read it because it was so offensive to any semblance of intellect and integrity you might have. It was the same caterwauling nonsense, Thieu’s air pirates and this and that. So I generally didn’t pay attention to it, but I did find one incident to be perversely funny. That’s probably not the right word, but when you’re in that environment, your sense of humor undergoes a change. But in any event, what happened was the VC/NVA had rocketed Bien Hoa Airfield. Of course they preplan and simultaneously broadcast in the clear an account of the valorous exploits of the people’s Liberation Armed Forces striking against Thieu’s air pirates, childish idiocy. Well, the problem is again you can’t aim rockets. So what happened was that one of these rockets hit a compound that was full of female, VC, prisoners of war, killed a whole bunch of them. Sure enough the next day and somewhere, I think I still have it. If I do I’ll photocopy it and send it to you.
LC: Super.

BL: The transcript. The next day they said that Thieu’s brigands went threw grenades in the prison compound where the valorous people’s armed forces were held captive by the nefarious blackies of Thieu. The funny thing was you’d sit there and think, you could just see these guys in the propaganda office and someone says, “Hey, you’ve got to stay up all night and write something to cover this one up,” because the next day here it comes. Thieu’s brigands kill valorous people’s warriors’ when it was a VC rocket. I didn’t pay any attention to that stuff generally that was in the clear because it was just such blatant, pathologically perverse political nonsense.

LC: Are you able to talk at all about the systems for getting a read on Vietnamese communists, non-clear broadcasts?

BL: I don’t know if I can talk about that.

LC: Okay. Bill, during 1974 and I’m gathering this from what you’ve said and also from Stewart Herrington’s mention of you in his book, Peace with Honor, that as 1974 rolled on, you were beginning to as he said, smell a rat, as far as the likelihood of a major military push by the North Vietnamese. Can you talk about what indicators you were looking at that began to suggest to you that something was brewing?

BL: Yeah. First off they followed a very distinctive clear pattern in the Delta. They hit a high point. They’d tail off for three weeks, another high point. It was like clockwork. You absolutely knew every fourth week, on almost the twenty-eighth day afterwards that they were going to launch a high point.

LC: By high point you mean?

BL: A military offensive or just heightened military activity. So that was a given, all the time. Secondly—and there were other things that fit into this. Number one, because the 7th ARVN Division had been constrained from the range of optimal operations by fuel cutbacks and munition cutbacks and all this stuff they couldn’t launch these preemptive raids up into the elephant’s foot up on the Plain de Jars and stuff or Plain of Reeds, which was a primary VC LOC and supply line into the upper Delta. So they could not do what they had been doing to preempt this type of thing.

LC: This was because of lack of supply generally?

BL: Especially fuel.
LC: And spare parts also?

BL: Fuel was the biggest one, but spare parts hurt them too. Spare parts was a big problem. The G-3 of the 7th ARVN Division himself told me that they were constrained. This is not scuttlebutt on the street. He said, “We cannot do this because we don’t have the fuel to take our helicopters, our APCs (armored personnel carrier) and stuff. We simply can’t. We can’t move them or move them enough.” So there was nothing that was blocking the flow of weapons and munitions across the Plain of Reeds. The next factor is this is the end of the rainy season. So the Plain of Reeds is one big, wide open amphibious supply line. You can go anywhere you want. There’s just no constraint. The whole Plain of Reeds floods. So consequently, you’ve got A, you’ve got your primary supply line wide open and unharassed. Okay. Now we go back to the fact that they had these counter high points every four weeks. The extent of activity had dropped more than there was any reasonable explanation for. In other words, why aren’t they doing more when their supplies are obviously coming through because nobody can stop them? Secondly the pattern shift, there was a shift from infantry probes, harassment attacks and ambushes and stuff like that to ABFs, attacks by fire. So they’re not committing their infantry. They’re using more attacks by fire. They weren’t using as many as what passed for heavy artillery in the Delta, the 120 mortars. There was a shift down to 60 and 61 mortars. So you look at all this stuff and the activity is way, way down. So you go, it’s not down because they’ve been reading Ghandi and had a change of heart here, they’re storing up. They’re saving up for a real big one. There was no smoking gun. It was all simply adding these factors up and saying this stinks.

LC: It was almost like you were seeing what wasn’t there after a while.

BL: In some respects. That’s part of it. Why aren’t they doing more? They weren’t doing more. The drop off was very pronounced, not only in terms of absolute numbers, but in terms of the nature of activity because again they were resorting to these standoff attacks by fire where you’re two, three, four, five miles away. Fire some rockets and mortars and that’s the end of it. What are they doing with their infantry? Why aren’t they doing more? Yeah. So any case comes the time for the next four week high point and you look at what had happened and what had not happened and all these factors and there had to be one explanation for it and that’s what it was.
LC: You put your thoughts together about this in would you say, November December ’74?

BL: It was December.

LC: Can you talk about the memo that you wrote, Bill, and who it went to and who had a reaction to it?

BL: I don’t have all the details on it. But I did say I remember the upshot was something stinks. Something really smells bad. It looks like the stuff is going to hit the fan. It’s going to be big. I cited the information that was just mentioned and other people that I knew down in the Delta all said the same thing. “Something smells. This is fishy.” Anyhow that report went out to all the consumers that we had CINCPAC and DOD (Department of Defense) and everybody, CIA and State Department. But when it went to the U.S. Embassy, the charge d’affaires there were ballistic, Wolfgang Layman who I mentioned before. Colonel Le Gro came over with a copy of the report with Layman’s comments on it. It was just, “Crap. What’s your sources?” and all this sort of stuff, just ripping it apart.

LC: Now was he going after the tone of your piece?

BL: Yeah, I think that’s the sad thing. He looked at any bad publicity as bad overall. I would agree with him there, but we can’t hide from the truth. Hell, I was more pro-South Vietnam than he was probably. So I understand his basic core sentiment. Then the other thing is, is he was not an old Vietnam hand. He was a European guy to the best of my knowledge who came over there and didn’t know really much about Vietnam. In any case, there was just all this stuff. I didn’t know what I was talking about. Then of course two or three days later was when this stuff hit the fan in the Delta. Colonel Le Gro said, “You have to go down to the embassy and explain all this stuff.” So I did.

LC: Now when you went to the Embassy, I don’t recall whether you said before, did you actually see Wolfgang Layman?

BL: Yeah.

LC: That meeting went how? Can you just describe that?

BL: Well, there was a bunch of people. He was there and there were some other people I didn’t know. They were asking, “What in the blaze is going on?” I said, “There
it is.” It’s not magic. It’s just death by a thousand cuts. They’re just maintaining
constant military pressure. These oscillations in military activity are more a function of
logistics than anything else if they could get the supplies down on a frequent basis, they’d
do it everyday. They could get enough people down there. But this is constant. This is
total war. As much any time, every time, everywhere as they can. What I did not see at
the time and I’m embarrassed in retrospect is that was the prelude to the attack on Phuoc
Long, Song Be because they didn’t want the GVN to have any means to redeploy assets,
units from the Delta to III Corps.

LC: Which had happened before as you pointed out.

BL: Exactly in the ’72 Offensive. That I’m convinced is the primary objective.
I’ve never seen the smoking gun document on that, but if there were a smoking gun
document I’d bet a $100,000 right now that’s exactly why the offensive was kicked off in
the Delta to tie up all the units there so they could not respond to the Phuoc Long attacks.

LC: Which came at the very end of December ’74?

BL: Exactly.

LC: Bill, you mentioned a little bit about Layman’s background. Do you know
anymore about how long he had been in Vietnam at the time that you spoke to him?

BL: I don’t know. My recollection is that he came over with—he knew Graham
Martin. This is my recollection, which may be false to begin with I don’t know. My
impression of the recollection is that he did know Graham Martin. Apparently Martin
had been impressed with his capabilities and said, “Why don’t you come with me to
Vietnam?” So he did.

LC: Did the memo as far as you know stir a reaction elsewhere besides the DCM
(deputy chief of mission)?

BL: Not that I know of. Not that I know of.

LC: Bill, how did you feel when the Phuoc Long invasion actually began at the
end of December? Did you see what it was or did it feel like part of what was happening
in the Delta too when they were connected? Did you see that right away?

BL: I don’t remember when that light bulb went off in my head. I don’t know if
it did then or not, but again it was part of the grand pattern. It was just as if the North
Vietnamese communists were one big giant boa constrictor and you could cut them here
and there and he’d back off. It was just this constant constriction. They were going to
get you here, get you there, everywhere, every time any place, anyway they can. It was
obvious that they knew—we knew from captured documents that they knew that RVNAF
was hurting badly because of the aid cutbacks and all this other stuff. So it just stood to
reason that we’re going to keep on pushing. Push, push. We’re never going to stop. I
don’t remember—it could be, but I don’t remember that as coming as any really great
surprise. Even though that was the first time they took a province that seemed well
within what you would expect from them, given the situation prevailing at the time and
nothing new, nothing new at all. More of it, bigger of it. We’re just moving down the
continuum here as the constrictor tightens things up.

LC: If you recall any details can you talk for a moment about the push by the
communists in the Delta in say mid December ’74? What did it look like? What
particular district towns do you remember being under attack, any details you recall from
that?

BL: As best I can recall and memory has a way of fogging itself over. As best I
recall, it was not like Tet of ’68 where they wanted to take the towns and bring maximum
havoc and wreckage and ruin into the urban areas at all. They basically wanted to engage
the South Vietnamese military and engage them on an extensive Delta wide basis and
accomplish several objectives, one of which is, is continue the bleeding process. Bleed
ARVN, bleed them, bleed them, bleed them, even if we take more casualties it doesn’t
matter. We’re just going to enforce them to use up diminishing supplies. Again I’ve
never seen the smoking gun on that, but I’m convinced that’s what they were doing.
Again and tie up RVNAF so they could not redeploy to III Corps or anyplace else. It was
again death by a thousand cuts and this was several of those thousands cuts.

LC: Were the intelligence reports that you saw about what was happening in the
Delta clear and definitive that this was a large push?

BL: Well, there were no reports until afterwards, then it was quite obvious.
There was no pre-reporting. We didn’t get anything that said, “Boy, we’re really going to
come out and bust heads now by golly.” There was nothing like that at all, no smoking
gun.

LC: Afterwards, well, how long did this major disruption last in the Delta?
BL: As best I can recall it took about two or three weeks for any sort of normalcy to be restored. There were places in some places in Tra Vinh or Vinh Binh I think that you just didn’t hear anything. It was just a black hole of non-information. Then after the dust settled well RVNAF had weathered the offensive. In terms of body count and casualties they came up on top. But I mean this was seriously cutting into their long-term durability and cutting into badly the supplies that they would’ve preferred to have husbanded, but they had to use them.

LC: Do you have any sense of how substantial the ARVN manpower losses were?

BL: No, I don’t.

LC: Bill, was the information about what had happened in the Delta coming to you primarily from ARVN sources?

BL: ARVN and the USAID prov reps and CIA guys. There was a CIA guy in just about every province down there. So there were some agent reports, but they generally weren’t too reliable from the U.S. agent network.

LC: From USAID and CIA people who were down there, were you seeing copies of reports then that they were filing within their own system?

BL: Sure, yeah. Basically we saw USAID stuff. They saw our stuff if they were cleared for it. We saw all the CIA stuff as a matter of routine. Although sometimes they sequestered things that they didn’t want us to know about for whatever reason. Not very often that I know of. There was multiple sources, U.S. and South Vietnamese.

LC: As the New Year turned, how were you feeling about 1975 in Vietnam?

BL: Bad. Horrible.

LC: Can you talk a little bit about what you were thinking then if you remember, Bill?

BL: Yeah, just the process. I think I mentioned before that in ’74, mid ’74, my gut feeling was that we were on the road to ruin. There was nothing that was going to save it. It was just a matter of time. Because of the cutbacks and because of the diplomatic abandonment by the United States they didn’t try to restrain the Soviets or the Chinese at all. There was just nothing in the favor of non-communist entities within Southeast Asia, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Everything seemed to be going bad and
seemed to be getting worse with absolutely no change to be expected whatsoever, steady
downhill. Of course by ’75, Phuoc Long had fallen. The economic situation was
wretched. It was just miserable and we knew what they were bringing in from North
Vietnam. It was an awful lot. You knew they weren’t bringing it down for anything else
but to use it. So yeah, it was just this big giant gathering storm. To expropriate Winston
Churchill’s phrase and it just looked bad.

LC: Bill, you mentioned that things were not going well for any non-communist
groupings. I wonder if you got any information at the time or have given thought in later
years to what’s been called the third force movement in South Vietnam? Did you know
anything about an attempt by politicians and Buddhist leaders to sort of try to find a
middle path between the South Vietnamese government of President Thieu and the
communists?

BL: I think there may have been more of an embryonic third force type of
movement in the mid ’60s. But by the end of that decade even the Buddhists people
never stopped to ask why there was no more Buddhists outbursts in the late ’60s or early
‘70s, because they realized that for better or for worse our fate is inextricably tied with
the GVN because we have no fate under the communists. They were correct in that
assumption because the United Unified Buddhist Church was disbanded forcibly by the
communists when they took over.

LC: Yes, sir.

BL: I don’t think—I’m sure there are people that might have fantasized about the
desirability of it. If you had a viable third force, boy, that would have been the neatest
thing in the world, but there wasn’t anything there.

LC: The question of course is whether the communists would have changed what
they were doing had there been?

BL: No, they wouldn’t have—they have never allowed and all you’ve got to do
and again as Pike noted, his studies of the Soviet Union served him well in Vietnam. All
you have to do is look at Soviet and Chinese history, communist history and realize that
so many North Vietnamese, not just Ho Chi Minh but scores of Vietnamese studied,
North Vietnamese Communists studied at the Lenin Institute. So you know that their
modus operandi is going to be the same. They’ll say anything that needs to be said or
they think you want to hear until they’re in a position of power. Then, “We don’t need
you anymore, too bad.” That’s what they did to the NLF after ’75. So third force
wouldn’t have made a bit of difference to them. It might have dictated the change of
tactics like in Laos. The communists took over in Laos like they did in Czechoslovakia.
They took over from within. They wormed their way inside in this so-called coalition
government. Then they devoured it from within and then they emerged on top. Unless
you have compelling force against people like that they’re not going to stop.

LC: Another point that has come up in the secondary literature is the question
about whether there weren’t plans being laid for a coup attempt against President Thieu.
Did you hear anything about that?

BL: I heard gossip. I don’t know if it’s true. The gossip didn’t surprise me
because it was a reflection of people’s discontent with Thieu. He may not have been as
bad as everyone said, but that’s not the point. The fact of the matter is you’ve got to get
out there and show why you’re not as bad. It was just this puzzling mystifying fury and
silence basically out of the guy other than the standard canned rhetorical speeches. I
would not have been surprised at all. I heard one rumor that—I’m not going to name
names because this is rumor says, but several people whose names would be recognized
did approach the United States Embassy and tell them we’ve got to get rid of Thieu. He’s
not a leader. They were told by the United States Embassy that we’ve got enough
instability as it is. We don’t need anymore and we’re not going to approve this or okay it
or anything else. This is going to jeopardize your country and our policies, so just forget
about it.

LC: Stewart Herrington has suggested that when Phuoc Long province was
seized by NVA offensive at the end of December ’74 that the failure of the United States
to what he uses the word re-intervene effectively green-lighted further NVA military
incursion in South Vietnam, sort of at the place and time of their choosing. Does that
sound right to you, Bill?

BL: Absolutely. Directly on the money, no question about it. Somewhere I do
believe—I know I’ve read it, reports from the communist side that the big guys in Hanoi
sat up there and watched Phuoc Long go down and then they saw nothing from the
United States and basically looked at each other and said, “We’ve got it.” They have a
good sense of the jugular and they know and knew that Ford for whatever other virtues he
has and for whatever other character attributes he has he was simply not in a position, he
was not an inspiring leader. He was not well versed in international intrigues and all this
other stuff. He just simply was not the man for the time as far as the United States was
concerned. Someone, I know I read it somewhere it might have been in Oliver Todd’s
book that said that Thieu is the weakest president or Ford is the weakest President the
United States ever had. So, yeah absolutely no question. No question whatsoever.

LC: I gather that one of Ford’s advisors at this time was our current secretary of
defense, Donald Rumsfeld. Have you given any thought to Rumsfeld’s role in the Ford
White House vis-à-vis the South Vietnam situation and his current position?

BL: That’s an interesting question. The answer is no I haven’t. I do wish he had
been secretary of defense in the ‘60s instead of the great manipulator of defense Robert
Strange McNamara.

LC: Well, I will ask you about that at some length though. But for now, let’s
take a break.

BL: Okay.
Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech. I’m continuing my oral history interview with William Laurie. Today’s date is the twenty-fourth of February 2004. I am in the interview room in the Special Collections building on the campus of Texas Tech. Bill again is in Mesa, Arizona. Hi, Bill.

Bill Laurie: Hello.

Laura Calkins: Bill, when we last spoke, we were talking about the sort of end game in 1974. We had talked about the memo that you had written and the reaction to it from the DCM at the embassy. Also we talked about the NVA attack on Phuoc Long Province. Bill, I want to ask you a little bit about the battle of Phuoc Long. Was there any study made in the DAO office of that battle?

Bill Laurie: I don’t know if there was a study. There was an after-action report or summary that was written up.

Laura Calkins: Did you see that?

Bill Laurie: I’m sorry?

Laura Calkins: Did you see that document?

Bill Laurie: I helped write it.

Laura Calkins: Okay. Tell me about your contribution to it.

Bill Laurie: Basically it was putting together an examination of what happened because no one really expected it to come there. We had to very quickly, given the way these people demand things, CINCPAC in Washington, we had to very quickly put anything we knew in this—write what the hell happened. What it was, was simply described the NVA outnumbered the RVN people about five to one. NVA had artillery. They had tanks. They had everything you needed. They started shelling the place in December. It wasn’t an overnight affair. It was pounded very heavily by artillery. Of course, when you say a province capital, native Americans, or native-born Americans, think of something like Springfield, Illinois, or Columbus, Ohio, or some big city. Phuoc Long is a tiny little place in the mountains, very primitive actually. So it didn’t take long for artillery really to blow the place apart. If I recall correctly, I may be wrong in this, but
they hit several of the radio shacks and communications went down. So they were just sitting there getting pounded. Eventually when the NVA thought they had softened up enough, here come the tanks. Now interestingly enough, they repeated the error they made in the ’72 offensive. They sent in their infantry or their tanks with no infantry protection, which that’s rule number three you learn if you ever go to infantry officer basic or armor school. You have to have infantry to protect your tanks and tanks to protect your infantry. It’s a wonderful military symbiotic relationship. No infantry with the tanks. So ARVN had sent in two companies of the 81st Airborne commandos. These guys were excellent, absolutely excellent. They were shooting at tanks with LAWs right in the middle of Phuoc Long town. There was a report that they’d hide in these little alleys and a tank would go by and they’d scramble out and try and pop the hatch and throw a grenade in, but the hatches were all buttoned up so that didn’t work. It was not—I guess that’s the best way to look at it—what it was not was it was not simply a collapse of the ARVN. They had been taking artillery for about two weeks prior to that. Then you’re outnumbered five to one. Nobody stands a chance.

LC: What was the defensive tactic of ARVN in this battle? Do you remember?
BL: I can’t really speak in too much detail on that. There wasn’t much available to them other than to hunker down and hope the next round doesn’t come in on you and shoot at whatever you could see because their artillery assets were minimal. There wasn’t anything in the way of sophisticated defensive tactics at all. It was just a matter of hope and pray, which is about all you can do when you don’t have the air cover, you don’t have the mobility, you don’t have the firepower. There’s not a whole lot that’s available to you.

LC: I want to ask you about airpower. I was just watching a documentary the other night that included a discussion of this battle. It said the South Vietnamese Air Force had been dispatched to lay down fire on the NVA masses of troops outside of Phuoc Long. But that they took anti-aircraft fire and were effectively driven off. Does that sound right to you?
BL: Yeah. Remember the NVA, they had heavy anti-aircraft capabilities from tree-top level to twenty-five thousand feet. Of course, they had the SA-7 missile and all this sort of thing. So ARVN, even though they sent aircraft in, they did fly high to
minimize the prospects of being shot out of the air. There’s not much they could have
done, really, because they didn’t have the aerial artillery that Americans had in terms of
the B-52s that would have massive destructive power and the ability to fly way, way up
there and avoid everything but the SAM-2 missile.

LC: Did the U.S. ever transfer heavy bombers to the South Vietnamese Air
Force?

BL: Well, they had a couple of C-130s, but those were gunships. They weren’t
really bombers.

LC: Why was that?

BL: I don’t know. That’s a good question. That’s another thing that should have
been done and it wasn’t or something. I don’t care if it’s a giant slingshot, but something
to fill the gap left by B-52s, which once again were compensatory for NVA artillery
superiority. The artillery they had was better than what we gave the South Vietnamese.
It was more numerous. So when you’re on the receiving end of this stuff there’s not a
whole lot you can do unless you have something like the B-52 that can fly high and has a
destructive power. The South Vietnamese had A-37s and F-5s and things of this nature,
but these are tactical fighter aircraft. They’re not capable of carrying the firepower that is
necessary to deal with two and a half NVA divisions or whatever it is.

LC: Right, because at this point you’re talking about troop concentrations rather
than a guerilla warfare.

BL: Yeah. Now later, just getting ahead real quick, up around Xuan Loc the
Americans gave the South Vietnamese these—what are they called—giant daisy cutter
bombs. They were pushing these out the back of C-123s on wooden pallets, these
massive, huge things. The reports were that when the NVA first got hit with it, the ones
that lived thought it was an atom bomb because it was so massive, but they didn’t have
enough to—we only gave them three or four, I think, which didn’t amount to a whole hill
of beans.

LC: At what point was this Bill?

BL: That was at Xuan Loc about four months later.

LC: So something like March or early April?

BL: Yeah, somewhere in there. Yeah.
LC: Was, in your mind, the battle of Phuoc Long pivotal?
BL: Was it what?
LC: Pivotal, for what comes next?
BL: It was pivotal insofar as Hanoi saw that as the green light. That was pivotal. South Vietnam could have stood had Phuoc Long and gone to the communists. Again, it’s remote. It’s not a key province. It gives you no clear and distinct geographic advantage or launch point that you wouldn’t otherwise have. They could just go around it because you’re essentially going to end up in a quasi-wilderness area, very thinly populated. So the town itself as a geopolitical factor, no, it wasn’t pivotal. As an indicator as seen by Hanoi it was very pivotal. They said, “We know Americans aren’t going to do anything. We took a province town and they didn’t do squat except sit in death’s bed. Now we’ve got them.”
LC: Bill, did you or others in DAO have information about Soviet supplies that were flowing to the North Vietnamese at this point?
BL: Oh, yeah. It was aerial photography. I don’t know if it was satellite or whatever, but there was another source of information. It was just obscene.
LC: In terms of the amount?
BL: Even in ’74 some of the information that we were getting was chilling because you knew they weren’t bringing this tonnage down for anything else but an offensive. There was just no way to get around it. This is disgusting.
LC: Most of this flow was coming down the now much-improved Ho Chi Minh Trail?
BL: Right, exactly.
LC: Where were you living at this time, Bill?
BL: I lived in a second-story apartment in an old building in a Vietnamese neighborhood not far from Marine Corps headquarters and the Grall Hospital in downtown Saigon.
LC: Is that the location you had been living in for the most part?
BL: Yes.
LC: So you never moved from that place?
BL: I lived there about a year and I had another apartment prior to that for about a year.

LC: Oh, okay. Do you remember the atmosphere in the early part of January 1975?

BL: That was one roadside rest area on the downward continuum. It was getting worse from my vantage point. Ironically enough, people that didn’t know things thought that everything was the same. There were Americans over there that worked for banks or whatever. They thought this is just the same old thing. Nothing is going to change. They didn’t have this information that we had. All this stuff was coming down the pike and, of course, they didn’t have contact with the Vietnamese people despite the fact that they were surrounded by them. You could go talk to them and they would tell you, “Yeah. We don’t have enough to eat. The soldiers don’t have enough gas for operations or jet fuel or helicopter fuel or anything.” There were two converging trajectories. You could see not too far off on the horizon that they were going to collide. Chances were the Republic of Vietnam was not going to survive the collision. Even the Vietnamese people didn’t know some of the stuff that I knew, but they knew the situation was bad.

LC: Was the—go ahead.

BL: Bad and getting worse.

LC: Right. Was the perception that the republic’s time was probably limited, was that do you think appreciated higher up in the chain, the people that you were reporting to, CINCPAC, Washington? Were they seeing and appreciating the same thing that you were?

BL: It was funny. We’d send these reports and, of course, some of them were quite pessimistic. We had a guy from DIA (Defense Intelligence Agency) come out in, I don’t know, February or March. He wanted to go down in the Delta so I took him down there. We went around here and there and everywhere. Of course, I put my two cents in. He wanted to talk to the Vietnamese and he did. While we were driving or flying or whatever, I talked to him. Despite all of that he was of the conclusion that, “Well, this is just the same old thing. They’ll weather this storm like they always have.” It’s no big deal. I couldn’t believe that this guy said he’d been on the Vietnam desk back at DIA for four years or five years or some such thing simply couldn’t grasp some very, very
ominous realities or that he could grasp them and so readily dismiss them. I suppose—I can’t read Graham Martin’s mind. I can’t read Wolfgang Layman’s mind. I can’t read Kissinger’s mind or anyone else’s mind. I suppose they knew the situation was bad. I don’t know if they were trying to, with good intentions mind you, trying to dismiss doom prophets, or dismiss public discussions, which would make it worse. If you say things are bad publicly, then they’re going to get bad or worse. I really don’t know. I suspected a lot of them didn’t really get it.

LC: Did you think with this DIA official that you were kind of through the looking glass in the sense that—?
BL: DIA, not CIA.
LC: Yes, DIA, that you were through the looking glass? By that I mean that they weren’t perceiving the urgency of the situation in the same way that you were and were for whatever purpose, either for your consumption or for the people that you were meeting?
BL: I might add that other people that I worked with in DAO told them the same thing. In fact, I became aware of his attitude and one of the other guy’s came over and said, “You better talk to this guy because he’s going back to Washington saying that this is more of the same old thing.” Yes, to answer your question, but by then it was nothing new. You just ran into it time and time again. In retrospect, I was beginning to learn, just beginning to learn the nature of our earlier involvement and all of this was fitting into place. Somehow, someway for some reason these people are living in a hermetically-sealed bubble and what they see as reality is their perceptions in their mind. For some reason, these perceptions are immune to rational contradiction.
LC: When you say you were just getting to have a broader idea of the U.S. involvement earlier, were you doing some background reading and stuff on your own?
BL: Yeah.
LC: Do you remember what it was you were looking at? Was it internal material?
BL: One of which in particular was Colonel William Corson’s book on the Marine Corps CAPs, combined action platoons. He wrote a book called, *Betrayal*. I
think that concept should have been applied on a countrywide basis, not just the Marine Corps, but the Army.

LC: Can you talk about that concept for a minute and what it entailed?

BL: Yeah. It was limited to I Corps where the Marines were. They drew upon their own history and when they operated in Nicaragua. When they were down there, I don’t know, turn of the century or early 20th century they realized running around here chasing bad guys, or what they thought were bad guys, doesn’t really work as well as if we had the people on our side. So why don’t we pair up our people with the natives here and operate jointly together? Anyhow, a combined action platoon there was other manifests, other forms of this concept. There was companies. They called them CACs, Combined Action Company. Then there was a CUPP (combined unit pacification platoon). I don’t remember what that acronym stands for, combined unit pacification something or other. But what you did essentially is you took fourteen Marine enlisted men put them in a hamlet or a village with thirty-six village PFs and said, “We’ll come back and pick you up in thirteen months when your tour is over.” No officers, all enlisted men with an NCO and a medic. They had to—they lived in that village. They stayed there. That was their home. They got to know the people, people got to know them.

Some CAP experience is entirely different from what you’d expect it by reading other histories of other Marine units. In fact there’s an excellent book—I can’t recall the name of it, but it was written by a Marine who wasn’t a CAP. He had been in a regular line unit for a couple of months. Flat out in the book he said he had no idea what he was doing. Nothing made sense to him at all. He transfers to a CAP unit. Then in the CAP unit he says, “You know, this is the most important thing I’ve ever done in my life.” So you can see the contrast there.

LC: Totally.

BL: The reason that was so effective in so many ways, not just, “That’s a nice story.” They got to know the area. That was like their village, it was. They lived there. The people trusted them. You weren’t going to bug out and leave them hanging if they gave you information and the VC found out. You were going to stay. They disproved communist propaganda that all Americans were wretched barbarians. God knows there was enough of them over there. By enough, I’m not saying all or most. Two percent is
too many. But when you have people living and fighting and working together like that, you get to know each other. So Americans are no longer evil, boogeymen monsters, imperialist rapist pigs. They were folks, just like the hamlet people were, the village people were. Of course, that really devalued communist propaganda.

LC: And changed the actual dynamic, as well, within the village.

BL: Exactly. If people don’t understand the three phase protracted warfare, they don’t understand another significant impact and that is that the VC propaganda teams couldn’t get a footing in some of these villages. That’s how you start. It’s just like in planting a cancer cell and it metastasizes. They couldn’t plant that in these hamlets, villages anymore. It was very important.

LC: How widely was this program utilized?

BL: It was only in I Corps. It was only the Marines.

LC: Within that how many villages, any idea?

BL: This is a rough guess. I’m not sure. I’d say no more than a hundred.

LC: You were reading about these successes.

BL: I hadn’t even heard of it until I was in Vietnam and I picked up a book just by sheer luck from a streetside vendor. It wasn’t part of the official history.

LC: So you hadn’t come across anything about this kind of programming in all the reading and all the documents?

BL: Never heard of it. If I had, I forgot. It may have been in Time magazine or something and it just didn’t lodge itself in my brain, but I didn’t have any recollection and I certainly didn’t have the depth of knowledge that you’d get from reading that book.

LC: Bill, you talked about going down to the Delta with the fellow from DIA and that that was probably in February or March of ’75. Thinking about that trip for a moment do you remember where you went?

BL: Yeah. I went to My Tho 7th ARVN Division. I went to Can Tho. I think we went to Vinh Long. I think that’s it.

LC: About how long were you out and about in the Delta?

BL: A day or two days, something like that.

LC: Do you remember visiting the 7th ARVN Division?

BL: Yeah.
LC: What was the status down there?

BL: It was pretty grim, really. It’s not as if they were ready to fold or they were wanting to give up. I already knew this so it was nothing new to me when I went down there in March of ’75. They didn’t have enough ammunition. They didn’t have the P, O, and L (petroleum, oil, lubricants) to conduct a helo-borne interdiction operations on infiltration corridor. I think it was I Charlie coming across the Plain of Reeds. They were basically hamstrung by all these shortages. In a reactive posture they could undertake no preemptive operations whatsoever. There were a lot of casualties and their troop strength was down because of hospitalized people and dead people. It was just rather grim and it was getting grimmer.

LC: What was their approach to you, the officers that you met with? What did they have to say to you as a U.S. government employee and official in the DAO?

BL: When they didn’t know you at first they would be very standoffish because, frankly speaking and as it’s very well put to me by the operations officer of the 7th ARVN Division when I’d come earlier, on an earlier jaunt down in the Delta. He said, “If the people in Saigon and the people in America want to understand the war, they can come and see my division hospital.” He said that with a rather, oh, bitter tone in his voice, I guess. But once I got to know them and once they knew I spoke Vietnamese and once they learned I wasn’t just some typical bozo bureaucrat then they’d open up, very frank and very candid.

LC: Was there any sense being conveyed to you at that time that there was an expectation of American assistance again?

BL: No.

LC: None?

BL: No. I’m sure there were some that entertained that as a helpful imaginary narcotic, but no.

LC: But in real terms?

BL: No. I didn’t see anyone expecting the United States ever coming back at all. I don’t know why they fought as long as they did, really. I mean I know, but it’s just amazing. Let me rephrase that. It’s amazing that they did.

LC: Go ahead and say why, Bill. Why did they?
BL: From January of ’73 to April of ’75 it was a constant descent into deeper and deeper and deeper into the misery index. Not only the war, but the poverty and borderline malnutrition. They didn’t have enough to eat, going hungry. I mean literally hungry, literally hungry. Even officers that were in Saigon would take night jobs driving cabs and stuff like that just for extra food money. It was just really getting miserable and it never got any better. By ’74 when the aid cut backs really manifested themselves operational limitations and how much fire you can call in, artillery fire and so forth and so on. The communists knew what was going on. You just wondered “Why are these guys—what makes them keep going? It’s not going to get any better. It’s just going to get worse,” but they just kept doing it. Honest to God, I question whether people in this country would have kept going.

LC: I think you would agree that the general sort of treatment of this time period is that the South Vietnamese military structure was just collapsed from lack of interest or lack of trying and that there was an enormous amount of corruption and that there wasn’t really a genuine effort being made. That’s kind of the portrayal that’s out there.

BL: There’s strands of truth in that statement, but it’s certainly not the entire— but yeah, certainly there were corrupt officers here and there. Certainly there were come strategic shortcomings and so forth and so on. But still in all, it wasn’t just a matter of they’re saying, “We quit. It’s too hard.” It wasn’t that at all. It wasn’t—it should be known—it wasn’t out of fealty to President Thieu or anything else. Guys in the 7th ARVN Division had a lot of pride in themselves. The 81st Airborne commandos, Hau Nghia RF. They had a lot of pride in themselves. They truly, honestly through and through thought the communists were bastard idiots. The presumptuous buffoons who have attempted to usurp the mantel of true Vietnamese nationalism. They really couldn’t stand them. They just thought they were stupid. They were arrogant northern doctrinaire ideologues. They couldn’t have put together some sort of articulated manifesto that would read like the Gettysburg Address or something, but they knew enough that they simply despised the communists, just despised them.

LC: Around the time that it seems you made that trip down to the Delta, there was a strategic change in ARVNs orientation up until, I gather, the middle of February or so. ARVN was under orders, ARVN commanders were under orders to defend all fronts.
in South Vietnam. Then after about the first of March 1975 when the first major attack began to develop in the Central Highlands, President Thieu changed the orders. Can you talk about that for a minute?

BL: Yeah. It caught everybody by surprise including the South Vietnamese that were in Pleiku and Kontum and places like that. Some of them were very upset, very, very upset. I didn’t like Thieu to begin with a whole lot. If they had anything to show for their wretched miserable lives it’s the fact that they had held their ground and kept the Highlands, or diminishing parts of it. Their capabilities were diminishing and with diminished capabilities came diminished control over terrain, much of it. It was the wilderness, but still in all. Then when he did that, I think a lot of people just—I’ve talked to some people since. Then I’ve read accounts of other Vietnamese officers up in Pleiku and places like that. They were just livid with anger. They felt like Thieu was a traitor, although his range of options didn’t really permit a whole lot more than that.

LC: Was that order given in the clear?

BL: No, not to my knowledge.

LC: How did that evolve? Do you know, Bill?

BL: There was a meeting in Nha Trang and Phu was there, the II Corps commander. I forget who else was there. He was not—I think he was ordered to take regular ARVN out and leave the RF and PF. Of course, in the Highlands a good number of those were Montagnards. Just get that military capability so it cannot be captured out of the Highlands. This is my understanding. It could very well be in error. I do believe that was the plan. It flat out didn’t work. All of a sudden everyone else is leaving and people are looking at each other going, “Why are they doing that?” So it became a contagion and everybody left or tried to. Most people did. Of course, the NVA capitalized on that. They had finally learned to apply some degree of tactical flexibility that went beyond their initial plans and they pursued them with a vengeance, especially down it was Route 7-B, which was really a holocaust in itself.

LC: Bill, do you know any details or do you have any impressions from the reporting that you were probably seeing about what was going on up there such that you could give an overview of what happened?
BL: Not a really good overview, just anecdotal stuff and things that I’ve heard from people since then and things that I’ve read since then.

LC: That’ll be fine.

BL: Basically it was chaotic because Thieu gave conflicting orders or vague orders. I think he told Ngo Quang Truong that he had to give up Hue City. Then comes back and countermands himself and says, “No, no, no we’re going to keep Hue City.” Then he says, “Don’t keep it.” So Truong is running back and forth trying to follow orders. You have to remember that it wasn’t just a matter of all of a sudden one day things collapsed. These guys had been under sustained combat for two years. They were hungry. They were running low on ammunition. It was as if you were trying to drive a thirty-five-year-old automobile at maximum RPMs up a steep hill. Sooner or later something’s going to break. It has to. Of course, on the other side the NVA were just gorged to the hilt with all this weaponry and stuff. There were cases where in I Corps that people would say, “Oh, they just collapsed.” No. There was these back and forth battles that went on for a couple of weeks. All of a sudden the ARVN ran out of ammunition. They just didn’t have anything. So if it would have been a boxing match, no matter how exciting the fight people would have said, “Stop the fight. This is just too bloody. No one’s going down for the count and they’re beating the hell out of each other.” But the most significant factor—among the most significant factors are, of course, the long run effect on RVNAF of two years of sustained war. They’ve been fighting for two years. They’ve been going hungry, literally going hungry. Two meals a day sometimes, running out of ammunition and they knew it. They knew that the situation would get worse, as did the communists. So it was inevitable that the collapse happened. It wasn’t attributable as much to the weakness of RVNAF or corruption or this and that as it was to these backdrop factors. You could have been corrupt as hell, but an efficient fighter and things would have been okay. The South Vietnamese military and the soldiers didn’t hold—I think we’ve discussed this before—they didn’t hold it against a guy who made a little bit of money, as long as he knew where to stop and he was a fighter. Well, okay. That’s all right. But given the capabilities of the North Vietnamese, given the condition of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, you could substitute either one of those armies with the Israelis or Afghans or Russians or Hutus or
Tutsis or anybody. You’d have the same result because it was just inevitable. The machine had been pushed too hard and it was burning itself out.

LC: Bill, when you were getting reports, as I presume that DAO was, about what was happening on Route 7-B and at Da Nang and Quang Tri, can you talk about the feeling inside DAO? You, the people that you were working with, was there a sense of resignation would you say, or a kind of giving over to what appeared to be then, an inevitable collapse of South Vietnam, or was there some sense that a rear guard action, the line at Tuy Hoa might hold and that kind of thing? Do you recall?

BL: There were some people that held to either one of those opinions or viewpoints. There were some people that held that it was salvageable and there were some people that thought that once the dam broke, that’s it. I found myself in the latter category because I simply didn’t see what they had to fight back with.

LC: How good would you say your information was, your intelligence reports were about, say, the situation of civilians in Da Nang and what was happening down—?

BL: It was pretty good. It wasn’t really intelligence. It was just straight communications between the people that were up there, the State Department and the CIA and USAID. I suppose there was a DAO guy still there. You didn’t have to strain your imagination to get a picture of the utter chaos and destruction, devastation.

LC: So communications were still pretty good at this point?

BL: Mm-hmn.

LC: There was still American personnel up there?

BL: Yeah.

LC: Bill, at what point do you remember, if you remember, was the word “evacuation” first used? Do you remember that?

BL: That was discussed among some people as much as a year earlier.

LC: Really?

BL: Oh, yeah. Somewhere, I don’t even know when—it might have been November ’74. It might have been August. It may have been January. I don’t know. But one or two guys that I know that I was very close friends with discussed this with just your average fellow worker. We’d sit around specifically with the idea of drawing up a Plan B in case the institutions failed us as to how we would get out of there.
LC: Really?
BL: Yeah.
LC: Do you remember much about what kinds of plans you had?
BL: We didn’t draw anything up officially. We were just batting ideas around about what happens? There were a few that held to the breaking dam theory. If the dam breaks, it’s just done. It’s just done. We thought about buying a boat and going down the Saigon River and all these other different ways. The one thing we did rule out was trying to go overland across Cambodia because we knew what the Khmer Rouge were doing. That was completely out of the question at all. Basically it boiled down to we should try and head down to the docks or talk to some fishermen. We never did anything with it in part, because there wasn’t really time when things really did happen. There was at the time reasonably good prospects when you could get out. Yeah, that was—
LC: But it had already occurred to people.
BL: It was not widespread.
LC: No? Okay.
BL: There were many, many people there that just thought things were business as usual until, really, Ban Me Thout fell. Then the Highlands withdraw. Some of the Americans there, there weren’t very many. Some of them thought, “Gee this is different.” They didn’t know how different.
LC: The fall of Ban Me Thout is what, in the second week of March or so?
BL: Yeah. I believe that’s what it was.
LC: Okay. That, of course, then provoked huge new streams of refugees going trying to get into the south and to Quang Tri and Da Nang.
BL: Right.
LC: Right. Bill, if you had to pick out one of the cities in that March, early April time frame, one of the cities whose fall was really kind of a signal, could you do that? Which city would it be?
BL: It would probably have to—from a geo-military standpoint it would probably have to be Pleiku because that was Vietnam adage number 183 or something like that. Whoever controls the Highlands controls Vietnam, South Vietnam. Once you gave that up, not only did you rule out the possibility of really, I think, of holding the line north of,
say, Tuy Hoa. You were riding off the top third of the country. You probably wouldn’t
have been able to hold your flanks down through even to Tay Ninh. So, that narrowly
defined in terms of geo-military significance that was pivotal. But what was even more
pivotal was the blow to morale and everything else. The South Vietnamese had already
been shouldered with a pretty heavy morale burden up till then. This has just made it
infinitely worse.

LC: When did Pleiku actually go? Do you know roughly that date?
BL: I don’t remember the exact date. It was probably the middle of March
something like that, towards the end of March. Middle of March, I think.
LC: Do you know whether it was before or after Hue, which I think, was on the
twenty-fifth of March?
BL: If memory serves correctly, it was before.
LC: Okay. Did the capture of Hue leave an impact with you? Did that have any
particular significance?
BL: No, because that was just one peanut in a giant bag of peanuts.
LC: You had already assume probably?
BL: Yeah. That was a reflection of a situation that I was already pessimistic
about. So as a reflection, as a manifestation it really didn’t mean anything except insofar
as it was yet another blow to South Vietnamese morale. That’s very important.
LC: So symbolically for Vietnamese?
BL: Yeah, right. But even if the morale factor had not been affected, you’re still
losing the top third of your country and you’re allowing them to bring more forces to bear
on a smaller target. So the situation, each deterioration causes further deterioration.
LC: Right. It’s been suggested that even up until the end of March, President
Thieu was still expecting the United States to provide some kind of airpower, some kind
of deployment of force to stem the flow of North Vietnamese troops from the Highlands
down to the ocean and then to the South. Were you aware of South Vietnamese
expectations around that or does the sense that Thieu was expecting help sound not right
to you?
BL: Well, I can’t read the man’s mind so I don’t know. I didn’t know then, as
I’ve learned later, that Nixon had promised him that America would retaliate against any
egregious violations of the peace accords on the part of Hanoi. I didn’t know he told
them that. Of course, by that it would have—a moot point at that time because Nixon
was gone. The mood in Congress in this country, even though I hadn’t been here for a
year and nine months or something, I was well aware of what the mood was. It was quite
obvious the United States was not going to do a bloody thing. I don’t know. If he did, if
he did—this is just conjecture on my part—I think it was a delusion that he wanted to
believe him, but I can’t see how he could have believed in it. He was getting words from
the South Vietnamese ambassador and other South Vietnamese. “You don’t understand.
Americans just don’t care anymore. They’re just through with this thing.”

LC: Do you know, Bill, whether Thieu was in Saigon all this time? Do you
know where he was?
BL: I know he went to Pleiku, or he went to Nha Trang for that meeting on
Pleiku. Other than that I don’t know where he was. I was pretty distant from that
echelon of power.

LC: Right. I just wondered if you knew of any meetings that were happening
between him and the ambassador or anything like that.
BL: No idea.
LC: Bill, can you talk about the defense of Saigon? What troops were deployed,
say, by the end of March in the Saigon area and what was their level of effectiveness?
BL: By then I was almost not keeping track of things. It was hard to know
because things were changing on a daily basis. You had, of course, the 25th and 5th
ARVN Divisions on to the west and 18th to the northeast. You had the 7th Division to the
south, although they were typically associated with commitment to the Delta, IV Corps.
But then again they also would defend QL-4 which is the only road linking Saigon with
the Delta. RF and PF, I can’t give you a real good picture. They weren’t abysmally
terrible and I don’t know that they were exceptionally great. In any event the driving
factor was, again, NVA weaponry because we knew that they were bringing 130 guns
within range of Saigon. If they cut loose with those things then it’s done. You’re
through. Not only because of the destruction they cause, but because of the panic and
mayhem that it would generate.

LC: In Saigon?
BL: Yes.
LC: What about defense against those weapons and how close were they? Do you know?
BL: I know we were within range.
LC: Really?
BL: Yeah. The reason I know that—I can’t tell you the reason I know it, but I know that I knew it because there were times that I’d think if those NVA guys start pulling those lanyards this is it. That was kind of spooky because you never knew if you’d get out. Just in the chaos there were all kinds of things that could have happened. You could have had some ARVN that was just drunk and fed up with everything. Irritated and understandably so at Americans and just cut you in half. So that was tense.
LC: In the first week of April was the beginning of what is now called the “Ho Chi Minh Campaign” took place. There was the great battle at Xuan Loc, which you referred to before. Can you talk about that battle a little bit?
BL: Again it’s not from personal experience. What little I know from then and what I’ve read and talked to other people and so forth and so on. It was the ARVN 18th Division, which had been horrible several years prior. It was now commanded by Gen. Le Nguyen Binh. Or wait a minute, correction Le Minh Dao. Le Minh Dao was widely regarded as just an outstanding individual, wonderful man, honest man, great tactician, true believer all the way, very candid in his denunciation of corruption and everything else. His troops knew that he was an honest man, a fighter. So when he was told to hold Xuan Loc he did. They were taking just incredible—also the parts of the 1st Airborne Brigade were there, as well. They were taking absolutely hellacious NVA artillery, just getting pounded. Then the armor came in and everything else and basically they held. Word went out that somebody from the State Department—why they did this, I don’t know—but they took a helicopter up there and went to General Dao and said, “Hey, we can evacuate you because if they win you’re going to be in big trouble.” He wouldn’t leave his troops. Eventually the NVA just simply got tired, I guess, of running against these guys and getting blown apart. I think ARVN killed about thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine NVA tanks at Xuan Loc. So it wasn’t just a matter of defending against artillery off in the distance. There were ground assaults and this and that. One of my
Vietnamese friends that I’ve come to know since then was at Xuan Loc with the airborne
brigade. Some of the NVA they captured were just kids. They were just canon fodder,
three or four human waves. Just get the warm bodies up there and on-line assaults and
stuff like this. He felt sorry for these stupid little, well, uneducated—I don’t mean stupid
in a derogatory sense. But these little North Vietnamese kids were just petrified with fear
and crying and everything else. But the NVA used numbers. Finally, they decided, well,
they weren’t even going to bother with that anymore. So they went around Xuan Loc.
As I understand it when the 18th realized that they were not needed there anymore
because they were there to kill NVA. They aren’t going to stand and fight. Well, then
they’re going to have to go where there are NVA. So they were running toward Saigon.
It’s my understanding that they needed to establish a blocking force to guard their flanks.
They were basically behind or surrounded by NVA. In any case, there were actually two
battalions that volunteered to stay and act as a blocking force to allow the 18th to
withdraw. They had, of course, no hopes of survival whatsoever.

LC: Is that actually what happened, two battalions?
BL: Yeah. What was left of them. They would take casualties, but what was left
of them.

LC: The action by the 18th Division actually did delay the onslaught against
Saigon? Is that fair?
BL: Probably so, yeah. Probably so. There may have been and that seems to be
reasonable conjecture, yeah.

LC: Bill, what were you up to during this time period?
BL: All kinds of—it was just utter chaos.

LC: Can you talk to the extent that you’re able to about what you were doing and
what was happening?
BL: Of course, our customers wanted up-to-date reporting on everything, which
was driving me nuts because you didn’t know. I mean, things were happening so quickly
so you just did the best you could. But then we were already thinking about the
evacuation, which was to come. We knew that, or some of us did, felt it was going to
come. Some Americans that were over there and weren’t able to—I knew a couple
people I probably shouldn’t name, but they were so tied up in what was going on. They
asked me if I could help get some of their people out for them, some Vietnamese people
and this and that. There was just all kinds of stuff happening. Then that C-5A crashed.
We went out and that was a miserable day. We had to haul wounded babies off a
helicopter from that thing and dead people and all kinds of stuff.

LC: Did you do that?
BL: Pardon?
LC: Did you do that, Bill?
BL: Yes. That same day, I’ll never forget it. That same day, there was this huge
fire and I could see the smoke from Tan Son Nhut. We were unloading these choppers.
It’s quite obvious there was one big fire going on. As it turned out, that fire burned down
the house. When I say house, normal Americans wouldn’t live there. It’s one of these
teaming urban areas of Saigon. These alleys winding around and houses, shacks if you
will, just jammed up close to each other, two or three stories high. The guy was a
northern immigrant. He lost everything that he brought from North Vietnam and
everything else, which wasn’t much. He lost all of his books except for one he had
loaned me to read. I didn’t even know his house was burnt down. I found out later in the
day. At that point, nothing—it was a total psychic overload. What else? Should I chop
my legs off? So what? I think your brain just decides to shut itself down to protect the
human from short-circuiting all together. This guy can’t handle this much in one day. So
it was just a matter of—just a strange feeling, this detachment from everything. Of
course, the greater backdrop is that all this effort, all this work, all these people have put
so much into it and it’s all being thrown away and now this. The Vietnamese have an
expression called “đają nout,” which means you could basically pour so much water in a
glass and then it starts overfilling. The analogy there is that your mind just handles so
much crap and then after that it just spills off the side.

LC: Bill, how was it that you came to be called to help out with the clearing from
the crash and trying to help people who had survived?
BL: Somebody just came running in and said, “Hey, we need help. A plane
crashed.” So I ran out.

LC: Came running into the DAO office?
BL: Mm-hmm.
LC: How many of you guys went out there?
BL: Everybody.
LC: Really?
BL: Everybody.
LC: It sounds like a very dark day, and there was no escape from it, really.
Would that be fair?
BL: Again, by that time as much as an imprint that would make on someone’s mind if it happened here, for example, it would stand out forever in their mind. There are times I even forget about that. I go, “Oh, that’s’ right. I forgot.” Within the context of what was going on, within the context of my views on what was going on, that was simply another drop in the bucket. So what? Big deal. It happens all the time. The strange thing is, and I haven’t forgotten this. These little kids and of course they were probably orphaned. Here’s these two, three, four, five-year-old kids. They weren’t dead. They were busted up pretty bad and bleeding and covered with mud and stuff. When we took them on the helicopter they weren’t crying. They were just looking at us, as if to say, “Why is this?” There wasn’t a cry, not a scream, not a nothing. They were just looking at us. It was not what you would expect.
LC: Bill, right before you left President Thieu resigned. Did that have any impact at all on what was going on?
BL: None. Not that I know of. I mean, it was irrelevant. The enormity of the situation was such that if Ho Chi Minh would have come back to life at Tan Son Nhut people would have looked at him, maybe shot him, but they would have said, “What else is new?” If Godzilla would have come down one of Tan Son Nhut’s runways or up QL-4—again it was this overload thing. So what? What else is new?
LC: I gather that President Thieu went to Taiwan, at least in the short term.
BL: I think he did, yeah.
LC: Do you know anything about that or how that was arranged?
BL: No.
LC: Or how he left?
BL: All I know is that it was at night and Frank Snepp took him to the airport.
That’s all I know.
LC: At that point, Tan Son Nhut was still in South Vietnamese hands.
BL: Yeah, and it was not taking fire. If it was taking fire then the runway would
shut down. They don’t have to lose control of it, but if they were taking artillery they
would’ve shut it down.

LC: Bill, what plans did you have and who were you seeing in those last days
that you were there? Were you helping to organize people getting access to planes and
helicopters out of there or were you still trying to do your reporting or both?
BL: Both. It was all catch-as-catch-can. If you can get this done, do it. If you
can’t do it—I don’t remember exactly how it went, but Colonel LeGro, who of course I
worked for, was very understanding. He took off for a while, went running out
somewhere and as long as you got your job he didn’t care. In fact, he was quite
sympathetic with anyone that was trying to help people get out.

LC: Would you say that the situation at DAO by the middle of April was
basically just chaotic?
BL: Controlled chaos. It wasn’t like anything you see in the movies where
people were running around screaming or anything like that. I always get a kick out of
that when they have all that. I know there was some tension down at the embassy. If you
would have been walking down the halls or talking to people anywhere around DAO, you
wouldn’t have noticed anything really out of line. You might have seen some pretty
somber conversations and seen people cursing quite colorfully. It just wouldn’t have
been good cinema fare.

LC: At what point, Bill, did you decide that you were leaving? Did someone
decide it for you?
BL: They decided.

LC: How did that happen?
BL: They just said, “Get. Go.”
LC: “You’re going now”?
BL: Yeah.

LC: Who told you that? Do you remember?
BL: I don’t. I don’t remember.
LC: How did it actually happen for you, Bill? How did you actually leave?
BL: Tan Son Nhut on a military aircraft.
LC: Where did you go?
BL: The Philippines.
LC: Did you stop anywhere in between?
BL: Nope.
LC: How many people were on that aircraft?
BL: Guess, best of my recollection fifty, sixty maybe. I don’t know. It was a cargo aircraft. It wasn’t like an airliner. You’re sitting around in the giant bowels of this giant aircraft. I don’t even know what kind of aircraft it was. By then I was just—I really didn’t want to leave. Had there been any vehicle to plug yourself into to do something I would have stayed. But I had one of the guys who I knew who wanted to get some people out was not able to leave at that time. So he asked me to get these people out. I really felt crappy about leaving. I thought, “Well, maybe if things hold out I can get these people to the Philippines and then come back.” He’s my friend and I said, “I’ll get them out for you.” I was afraid if I didn’t go with them, they wouldn’t go out. My stay would not have been a matter of bravery or any positive attribute. My staying would have been a matter of my being just a complete bastard. I don’t know. I just didn’t like running out.
LC: Would you say, Bill, that you weren’t done with Vietnam? Is that sort of how you felt?
BL: Yeah, I wanted to stay. I wanted to stay to the end.
LC: Were you in fact able to get the folks out that you committed to?
BL: Yeah.
LC: Can you tell me anything about them? How many people was it and where were they from?
BL: A bunch of people. There was one Special Forces guy I knew. He knew a whole family of Vietnamese. They were actually Vietnamese-Chinese, he knew them. They were just regular normal folks that had some little store in the bowels of Cholon. Then there was a couple of other guys. There was one guy who—he had already been an interpreter with Special Forces early, early in the ’60s. His whole life was war. He’d been shot three or four times. Then when Special Forces left, he got drafted into ARVN.
His wife and son or daughter or something got killed in Da Nang in the evacuation. He just said, “I’m out of here.” So I got him, he was one of the people. Anybody we could.

LC: Was there any problem, any paperwork, anything that you specifically had to do in order to get them on that plane?

BL: In the end, no. Up into a certain time there was just paperwork all over the place. Then in the end they just said, “Go.”

LC: Okay. It just kind of collapsed?

BL: Yeah.

LC: Did that happen when you were at the airport or had it already happened by then?

BL: It already happened. They just said, “Go.” “What about this?” “Just go.”

LC: Bill, when you arrived in the Philippines what happened? What happened to you first of all?

BL: I don’t know how you can feel worse. I’ll put it that way. I just don’t know if it’s possible. I don’t think it is. Again, you just get, you load up on so much anger and misery and sadness and everything else. After a certain point it just doesn’t register anymore. I don’t remember much of the Philippines, other than just being very mad and very miserable, very sad. We were only there, I think, two or three days. Marcos, Ferdinand Marcos, wanted to avoid any political stink about that. So they shipped everybody off to Guam. I was there for about four or five days then to Camp Pendleton.

LC: What about the Vietnamese that you had sort of overseen getting onto the plane, what happened with them do you know? Did they stay with you the whole time?

BL: Well, I stayed with them. I told this guy, “I’ll stick with them.” I had no idea—of course, in retrospect things are clearer, but at the time you don’t know if they’re going to say, “Who are you with? You’re going back,” or this and that. Plus, this guy had given me some contacts in the United States. “When you get to the States somehow get a hold of these people and they might sponsor these.” Of course, they didn’t even use the word “sponsor” then, I don’t think. So I had to stay with them. I did stay with them. The reason I was in the camp for that long is because—well, this is really crappy. As soon as we got to Camp Pendleton I called these two guys’ contacts. One of them, I’m not going to name him. One was his parents and the other was a very good friend of his.
Well, I called the friend first and I was abruptly informed that this friend would have nothing to do with war criminals and he couldn’t understand how his former friend had been involved with such a rough, disgusting thing as Vietnam anyhow. That ended that. I called the parents and they were a little bit more cordial and they said, “There’s just no way. Nine people. I don’t know how.” So there I sat. So I basically lied to these people and said, “I couldn’t get a hold of so-and-so’s contacts,” because I didn’t want them to be heartbroken or worry even more. You know, there’s all this rejection. They could hear the news and they could read newspapers. They heard from other Vietnamese that Americans don’t want us here and there’s all this crap about “Why are we letting all these drug dealers and corrupt bastards into this country and so forth?” So they knew they weren’t being welcomed. Then this and I thought that’s just too much. So I basically lied to them for about two and a half weeks. I said, “Well, I’m still trying.” I’d go up to these trailers, they’d set up this bureaucracy, and come back and say, “Well, we haven’t got anything yet, but we’re still trying.” Then finally they found out and that was not a nice day either.

LC: All of this was happening at Camp Pendleton?

BL: Yeah.

LC: Can you describe the camp, the accommodations? What was the set up there?

BL: Tents where I was at, all tents. They set it up. By the way, the military performed with unbelievable precision and coordination in that whole evacuation. It was just incredible. This is, again, you have chaos. It’s not as if someone said, six weeks earlier, “You are going to handle this deluge of refugees.” It was just all of a sudden, here they are. The military just did an outstanding job. I mean outstanding the whole way. The Air Force guys, guys in Guam and the Marines at Camp Pendleton just outstanding and unbelievable. The only wrinkle in the situation was some professional ding-dong bureaucrats in Guam who were with INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) or somebody. They had to—I don’t know what their function was, to be honest with you, but they of course had to set up a tent with tables and interview and this and that with a very unprofessional, very lackadaisical, very bureaucratic attitude. They almost came real close to getting their tables knocked over on top of them.
LC: Were there other guys like you who were with a group who were trying to
kind of help them through the maze?

BL: Yeah, there were some there. Well, yeah, there were some and then there
were the ones I was with up through Guam are basically people, some retired military,
there were some DAO people. There were some I don’t know who they were. They
were just Americans that lived in Vietnam. But after Guam they went their merry ways
and I didn’t run into many others that were shepherding over a flock of refugees like I
was. I’m sure there were I just didn’t see them. It was a very huge tent city in Camp
Pendleton. It was really big.

LC: About how big Bill? Is there any way to describe it?

BL: Sixty acres maybe. It was huge. It was really huge.

LC: Wow. How many people were in there?

BL: I don’t know.

LC: Do you have any clue?

BL: I have no idea. A lot. I mean a lot. It was an instant city in some back
corner of Camp Pendleton where there were no buildings other than some storeroom.
Even the Marine officer that ran the place was living in a trailer. It was all set up over
night.

LC: But it ran pretty well, basically?

BL: Beautifully, beautifully.

LC: Bill, just to clarify, you had no reason to, no sort of authority sitting on you
making you stay in this camp? Is that right?

BL: No, I could have left anytime I wanted.

LC: You were just trying to make sure that these people got settled somehow?

BL: Yep. This guy was my friend and he asked me if I could do it. I said,
“Yeah, I’ll do it.” So I was going to do it. There was just all there was to it.

LC: Did you have any communication with the fellow that you had made this
promise to?

BL: No. This was just sheer chaos. I didn’t have any idea where he was, even
what was going on. Of course, by the time I got to Camp Pendleton, Saigon had fallen.
That happened when I was in Guam.
LC: Did you know about it when it happened?
BL: Yeah.
LC: How did you know about it?
BL: The word came out. I don’t know exactly. I don’t remember listening to a loudspeaker or anything else, but somebody came in and said and I was with mostly Vietnamese. Then a day or two or three after that we started getting some more people. Some of them were VNAF guys, Vietnamese Air Force guys. They were still in their flight suits. I talked to them and they left either the day before or the last day. They knew there wasn’t going to be anyway of getting out. It was over with. So they just loaded up with ordnance and hit as many NVA as they could on the way out and made their way to Thailand or the South China Sea and the aircraft carrier out there. I don’t know. Talk to them.
LC: Bill, when you actually learned that it was over and that Saigon was in the hands of the communists was it like just a new wave of the upset and hurt and anger that you’ve already described?
BL: Yeah, it wasn’t a shock. It was just more of the same. Every day something else was going to happen. It’s just a strange frame of mind. You knew, or I did. I thought I knew. This is inevitable. There’s not going to be a negotiation. There’s not going to be all this stuff, “Well, we’ve got a third part or Big Minh is going to”—there’s not going to be anything. They’re going to come in here with their big iron hammer and flatten anybody who stands in their way. They’re going to set up their little Stalinist, stupid state of workers nirvana and make everybody as miserable as people were in Soviet Russia in the 1920s and ’30s. You already knew that or I did, I thought. I was right. When I heard that it was just, “Okay, no one else.” Something else will happen tomorrow or maybe by six o’clock tonight.
LC: Right. Did you think that you were just getting inured in some way?
BL: I suppose. I suppose, although it probably wasn’t the result of any conscious effort. I truly think that the human brain can stand so much stress, discomfort, anger, hate, however you want to mix it. Then after that it becomes numb. It just doesn’t generate the response that it would generate if that were to happen on a normal day in a normal lifetime if you didn’t have this horrible thing as a backdrop.
LC: Some kind of self-defense mechanism.
BL: Yeah. I know that happens. I absolutely know that happens. From personal experience I know that happens.

LC: Bill, under what circumstances did you actually leave Camp Pendleton?
BL: Finally got sponsors for these people and that was it.

LC: How did that come about?
BL: I don’t remember.

LC: But you apparently at some point felt that they were safe enough so that you could—?
BL: Yeah, they were spoken for. They had a place to go and everything else so I could leave in good conscious.

LC: Were you still employed? Did you have any idea what your relationship was to the DAO or the government?
BL: I knew that my contract had not expired and I didn’t pay—you couldn’t have invented anything more irrelevant to me. It just didn’t matter. I just didn’t care.

LC: Where did you go?
BL: I went back to Illinois.

LC: How was that?
BL: It was just the aftermath of misery. I did not like being back here at all. I’d see stuff in the paper, “The South Vietnamese wouldn’t fight,” or some of this stupid stuff and I was just livid with anger, just really not a happy person. I’d get news, of course, and that extended for years after that. You’d find things out that you didn’t know and it just renewed it everyday. Sometime in June or July I found out Nyguen Quang Nam died, who had of course been the 7th commander of the 7th ARVN Division and corps commander of IV Corps. He had died and you’d get bits and pieces and this and that. This person dies. You didn’t have to know them, but you knew of them or you may have met them and this and that. Again it’s just, “Okay, that’s it for today. What’s the kick in the face tomorrow going to be?”

LC: Can you describe this feeling of not knowing what had happened to people with whom you had worked and all of a sudden there was this chaotic break and then here Bill Laurie’s back in Illinois? How did that work? I mean, I can’t really imagine.
BL: I don’t know if it did work. All I know is I just needed some decompression time. Actually what was kind of funny as an indication of my remoteness from the United States, my brother and I were driving around and, of course, listening to the radio. The radio announcer said, he had some contest. If you won the contest you win tickets to a Barry Manilow concert.” Of course, he was very big in the States then.

LC: Sure.

BL: I turned to my brother and I said, “Who in the hell is Barry Manilow?” He said, “You don’t know?” I said, “I haven’t got a clue who Barry Manilow is.” It was surreal. It really was.

LC: I bet you didn’t care either did you, Bill, on some level?

BL: I didn’t care about life in the States at all, really. The psychic aftermath of all of this and, of course, people over here think it was bad TV and now we get to watch a different show. We don’t have to be bored with Vietnam anymore. I’m not thinking in those terms at all. I’m thinking in terms of all the misery and death and the doubts about the surviving of people that you knew and what was to come. I was wrong insofar as I thought I gave the North Vietnamese, I’d say, in ten years they’ll be in Cambodia. Well, I was off by six. They were there in four and a half or three and a half. But I knew in my own mind that this was the dawning of a dark age. Evil will reign and yet to most people, “Well, the war is over. Ha, ha. That’s good. Boy, I’m glad.” It didn’t take too long for you to realize that it didn’t pay to try and explain anything to anybody because they flat out did not want to learn.

LC: Was it that people didn’t want to know or that their experience just did not parallel yours at all and they couldn’t hear you?

BL: They basically didn’t want to know. They just didn’t. Essentially not only—and not to take away anything from people who for moral reasons, I think incorrectly and naively, were quote “against the war,” which means they were for Hanoi’s war like it or not. But for people I think it’s envy because you knew that people didn’t have to carry around the thoughts that you had in your brain. It was like someone taking a giant hypodermic needle and shooting sulfuric acid into your brain. This all pervasive constant thinking, thinking, thinking. You knew everyone else was just going around, “Hell, I won tickets to the Barry Manilow concert.” So that’s kind of hard.
LC: Bill, did you have a little bit of time that you had to serve out?
BL: Say again?
LC: Did you have a little bit of time yet with the government that you had to basically serve out?
BL: Yeah. I worked at Great Lakes Naval Base. They said we don’t have a position for anyone of your qualifications. So we’re just going to put you in personnel. So I basically hung around for another month and a half as a flunky in personnel department.
LC: Then you were done?
BL: Mm-hmm.
LC: Bill, have you ever worked for the government subsequently?
BL: No.
LC: I want to ask you if you know, or if at that time if you were getting any information about what was happening in former South Vietnam? Say, during the rest of ’75 or ’76 were you able or interested in trying to find out what was going on?
BL: Oh, yeah.
LC: Did you have any sources or access?
BL: I didn’t have any direct sources, but what little news coverage there was—I guess there probably wasn’t that little, either. It’s probably relatively speaking quite a bit compared to five years later. It simply confirmed what I had expected. There was no surprises. Again, it was you knew that the situation was bad and it was going to get worse. You knew there were going to be re-education camps and you knew there was going to be sporadic resistance. You knew that it was just going to be the dawn of a dark age.
LC: Have you learned subsequently in talking with people, particularly Vietnamese who might have been over there during that period about things that happened that maybe you can relay to us?
BL: It was horrid. Come in there and, of course, they tightened the screws over time just as the Soviets did, the Bolsheviks did, when they took control in Russia. It just wasn’t one big hammer coming down right away, but it wasn’t long before they summoned people to the re-education camps. Of course, off they went. At first they lied.
and said, “Oh, it’s only going to be ten days for NCOs and other people thirty days for
officers and government officials and stuff like that?” Well, that was, of course, a big lie.
That would get you in for ten days and let some of them go. They would go out and say,
“It only lasted ten days. It’s not bad.” When they called for them again, “Okay, get in
the trucks.”

LC: Everybody goes.

BL: Yeah. The insidious paranoia that develops when you can’t trust anybody
anymore, nobody. They have people going around and setting up these so-called
resistance cells. Well, you know a lot of people hated the communists, “Hey, sign me
up.” Well, the guy’s a communist.

LC: Sure.

BL: So off you go. All the papers were gone. The economy was going to go to
hell. It was bad enough as it was. With their voodoo economics it only makes it worse.
Kids go to school and you have to be careful about what you say in front of your kids
because at school they say, “Do you have any strange visitors at your house? Do they
have Uncle Ho’s picture on the wall? Do your parents ever say anything bad about Uncle
Ho?” I’ve heard this from scores of people, scores of people. So you can’t have a little
family dinnertime discussion about the communists being bastards because when you go
to school the next day, or when your children go to school, the teacher might say, “Have
your parents said anything bad about Uncle Ho or the Workers Party?” or this sort of
stuff. Then the poverty and all this other stuff. It was just a nightmare. Simple stuff like
basic medicine that you’d get from a pharmacy, they’re gone. That’s all gone. Horrible.

LC: Bill, you also mentioned or a couple of times have alluded to the Khmer
Rouge and what was happening in Cambodia. If we could just go back for a little bit
here, while you were on DAO desks how much information were you seeing about the
development of the Khmer Rouge military forces?

BL: We’d been following that, and I’m sure the U.S. military and the State
Department in general had been following that probably since at least the Sihanouk
overthrow. They weren’t much in ’71, the Khmer Rouge military forces, but they kept on
getting to be more and more and more. We got enough information, I wouldn’t call it
necessarily all comprehensive. We got enough information to know that they were
barbarians. They were doing the stuff that they did in Killing Fields long before ’75.

That was not a surprise at all, the so-called Killing Fields.

LC: Which is an allusion to for those who might not get that reference in the future?

BL: There was a movie named the *Killing Fields*. The generic phrase alludes to literally fields where they took people out and either suffocated them with plastic bags over their heads or chopped their heads off or shot them or whatever, fields of dead people, but they were doing that before. So it was very, very evident that the Khmer Rouge was just a satanically diabolical force. They were truly evil.

LC: Yeah, yeah. Agreed. How good was the information about the external political orientation of the Khmer Rouge leadership *vis-à-vis* the Vietnamese or the Chinese?

BL: We knew at the time—I’m trying to separate what I’ve learned since from what I knew then. I do know that, number one, there would have been no Khmer Rouge to speak of had it not been for Hanoi’s assistance, which extends back to the 1950s. Even Sihanouk complained about it, believe it or not, back in the ’50s. He said this was the biggest enemy to his country. This is Sihanouk’s words now. It’s not the Chinese or the Americans, but the Vietnamese communists. So Hanoi had its fingers in the Cambodian pie for a long, long, long time. There would have been no Khmer Rouge as they came to be had it not been for Hanoi’s assistance. Then you soon realized in Southeast Asia that there are certain Khmer and certain Vietnamese that not only don’t like each other, they hate each other. They enjoy hating each other. It’s an intramural sport. So there were actually—periodic is probably too strong a word—but every once in a while we’d get reports of an actual engagement between Khmer Rouge and NVA forces, didn’t appear to be anything else beyond. At one point, some people thought the higher up in the food chain that they thought, well, maybe this is a significant break in the political solidarity between the Khmer Rouge and Hanoi. Basically all it was, was somebody at some noodle stand was drinking too much and down by Kratie or someplace and saw an NVA or saw a Khmer and said something insulting.

LC: So some local incident.
BL: Yeah, exactly. Then it boils over. Then the higher authorities come in and straighten everything out. Then it happens again three months later. But as far as the orientation—I didn’t know, maybe I did and I just don’t remember. I wasn’t quite as aware of the strong Chinese influence, Communist Chinese influence on the Khmer Rouge. It really didn’t matter in a way at the time because you knew that they’d picked up some of this communism stuff from either Hanoi or from China and they decided they were going to do it this way and they were doing it that way. We knew then that they were doing in that way. It was not a surprise after ’75. Nothing was. No surprise at all.

LC: Was the information good enough to actually pinpoint within the Khmer Rouge leadership those people who were kind of driving the bus, as it were?

BL: We didn’t really know. There was some of the public figures like Ieng Sary and Sihanouk. Of course, he was not really part of the Khmer Rouge. He was a decoration on the hood of their ideological limousine. Other than Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan and a few others whose credentials go back into the early ’60s and they were known as communist then. In fact, Sihanouk chased Khieu Samphan out of Phnom Penh was going to arrest him and they actually thought that he’d been killed by Sihanouk, but that wasn’t true. But other than that I didn’t know. Maybe others did. I’m sure there were some Cambodian specialist on some desk somewhere that had all these bios on all these people. I didn’t really know.

LC: How much actual attention did DAO staff people pay to events in Cambodia? Was it like a watching brief more than anything else?

BL: I don’t remember. Insofar as it was or could influence the fate of the Republic of Vietnam was the extent the attention was paid to it, which means always some attention was paid to it because obviously if you lost your whole western flank to a communist entity you were in worse trouble than had you not. Of course, the other side of that is they controlled good portion of it anyhow. Many people like to laugh at the old Domino Theory, but that’s what you’re looking at. If Cambodia goes, this is bad and is another way it can go worse. That could be lethal, of course, because your whole western flank is now occupied by total utter belligerent as opposed to a passive belligerent or something of this nature. You’ve got a lot more problems.
LC: Did the paradigm of the Domino Theory, which as you note has been much maligned, did that sort of come home to roost for you and make it seem like what had been said in the early ’50s actually had some power?

BL: I think it’s better in retrospect then at that point in time. But first of all, this is one thing that will probably push me closer to being, approximating violence than anything else. If someone ever ridicules the Domino Theory to my face because it’s not a theory it’s a bloody syndrome. Get a world map, take all the countries that were communists in 1960 and color them green or red, I don’t care. You’ll notice, son of a gun, they’re all contiguous. Isn’t that funny? Then draw another map, take another map of the world in 1915 and say, “How many communist countries are there? There’s none.” Then fast forward to 1960, look at that. They’re all next to each other. Look what they were saying. Look what was going on. There was the insurgency in the Philippines. There was the insurgency in Malaysia. The Thai communists have been causing trouble since the 1950s. Sukarno was palsy-walsy with the National Liberation Front in Moscow. Then the Indonesian communists basically tried to figuratively and literally decapitate the leadership of Indonesia in 1965. That was not a theory. It was a syndrome, absolutely. Then you look at the public pronouncements of these people. You know, Ching—I can’t remember the guy’s name. Ching Hing, I believe it was, in Communist China openly said, “We expect to have a war in Thailand in 1965.” He said that. “We expect to have a war going.” They were building the Laos Road through northern Laos. The Voice of the People of Thailand had started broadcasting from Southern China. All these weapons started coming into Thailand. Take another step backwards and you’ll notice that China went communist with a good deal of assistance, not always the best or the smartest or the most adept, but with considerable assistance from the Soviet Union and their communism was subsidized by the Soviet Union after 1949 up until 1960 when the break came. People laugh at the Domino Theory and there’s four bloody dominos staring them right in the face. North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia. Had China not been communist, there’s every reason to believe that Ho Chi Minh and his pseudo-Viet Minh would not have won their war against the French. Realistically at that time, I mean, of course it’s a domino. There they are. They’re in Laos. They’re in Cambodia and they’re here. If Laos goes, it’s going to
be worse for Cambodia and Vietnam. If Vietnam goes then it’s going to be worse for
Cambodia, obvious. Obvious. Then you had the Thai insurgency that’s been bubbling
away. So that is the domino syndrome. It was an action plan annunciated and articulated
by the communists themselves. Publicly speaking, the North Vietnamese said, “We’re
going to take Malaysia. We’re going to liberate Southeast Asia.” It was their little great
Southeast Asian co-prosperity sphere. So, yes, of course, absolutely. Anyone that laughs
at the Domino Theory is either intellectually vacuous and/or presumptuously arrogant.
It’s not a theory, it’s a syndrome. A theory, of course, is an untested premise that has to
be proven or disproven by empirical data. It’s not a theory, a syndrome.

LC: Bill, just following that line of thinking, can you give your general
observations on—and this, of course, would be based on your reading and thinking about
it rather than having obviously having been there—but your observations on the 1954
Geneva Agreement that actually split Vietnam into northern and southern portions. Was
that a recognition by the Eisenhower administration that the domino had already fallen in
a sense?

BL: That’s probably a good way to view what their outlook probably was. I’m
sure they would have preferred that North Vietnam not be communist. They knew at the
time that Ho Chi Minh’s pseudo-Viet Minh which incidentally ceased to exist after 1951.
Then they became the Lien Viet, nobody knows that.

LC: That’s correct. Yes.

BL: North Vietnam, again, was the first domino. So I’m sure they didn’t look
upon that as a favorable development.

LC: But perhaps in some way as a confirmation of the strategic theory under
which they were operating, at least in the Far East.

BL: Mm-hmm. Again, it was no mystery that they weren’t totally ignorant of the
fact that there were—I can’t remember the name of an English scholar who wrote a book
about Southeast Asia. There’s another one—he has a Dutch name.

LC: Yeah. Wait. I think I know.

BL: Vandercrow or something like that.

LC: Mm-hmm.

BL: He wrote a book about communism in Southeast Asia.
LC: Yes, Vandercook, or something similar to that. Yes.

BL: If you don’t like people to be anti-communist that’s your privilege. But you cannot conceal information, which is detrimental to your argument. You can’t say, “Oh, there were no communists.” They were all over the bloody place. They would kill people and do bad things. If you think that’s okay, well, fine. That’s fine, no hard feelings. That was a very, very volatile area of the world. In retrospect it’s easy to laugh and giggle and chuckle. “Ho, ho they were afraid of dominoes falling. Oh, what a joke.” But come on, these guys had already seen dominoes fall not only to the communists, but they looked at what happened with appeasement in World War II in 1938 and all this other stuff. It’s easy in retrospect to say, “Oh, these guys are wrong.” You cannot deny that they had information which allowed them to reach an intelligent conclusion that was not based on imperialism or anything else. It was quite apropos. There was adequate justification for their decisions, both moral and political and pragmatic. Agree with the conditions, that’s one thing. But to deny the existence is just a disgusting departure from intellectual integrity.

LC: Bill, let’s take a break there.

DT: Okay.
Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I’m conducting an oral history interview with William Laurie. He is in Mesa, Arizona, and I am in the interview room in the Special Collections building on the campus of Texas Tech University. As I said, today’s date is the second of March 2004.

Bill, we were talking about a book that you came across in your research.

(Static, recording failed)

Bill Laurie: By equating us with Ghengis Khan and this sort of stuff is (recording failed) They said, “Well, cultural groups are coming over here and helping create empathy and understanding between the two countries.” We asked how that helped Catholic priests, Buddhist monks who were imprisoned. We asked how that helped rice farmers who were impoverished. They make one-eighth to one-tenth of the income of city-dwellers. They’re losing their land to development, in some cases. This is all documented by human rights groups, not some right-wing entity which may be biased and may distort its findings. They didn’t have an answer for that. They said, “Well, we’ll jeopardized progress.” They came back and said, “Name some progress.” They couldn’t come up with anything. We told them that Nguyen Chi Thien, who had spent twenty-seven years in Hanoi prisons, he knew them quite well and testified before Congress that the best thing that we could do, the United States, would be to end all aid and not even recognize North Vietnam until they adhere to some sort of civilized standard of human rights. They went back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. I asked the chief assistant, chief aid, whose name I can’t recall, if he would send me a copy of the draft bill. He said, “I will do that, and you should have it by the time you get back to Arizona.” I got back to Arizona. It didn’t come. I waited two weeks, or three weeks. I wrote. Nothing happened. I waited two more, three more weeks, wrote again. Finally I got another copy of the draft legislation. No note of apology, which would be, I think, common courtesy. That’s what I would do. I would say, “I’m sorry this is late.”

Nothing. Just here, busybody. I tried to deal politely and with courtesy with all people.
Now, I’m very capable of blowing my temper and getting very, very angry and confrontational if the wrong buttons are pushed, but until that happens, I try to act like a gentleman. I expect to be treated in the same manner. We conducted ourselves as polite, civil people, much more polite than Kerry’s staff was. They also told us that Senator Kerry answers every single letter that he gets in response to this matter. I told him that that wasn’t true because Greg Stock, who was president of the Save the Montagnards Foundation had written Kerry literally dozens of times, sent him information and books from human rights watch and other organizations documenting Hanoi’s cultural oppression of the Montagnards. Basically, it does amount to cultural genocide. It really does. He said he didn’t have an answer for that at first. Then he said, “Well, you know, I guess it must have been the scare about anthrax in the mail.” Then the rejoinder was, “Well, why do all the other senators write back? Is he the only one that has an anthrax zapper machine for mail?” They were left without an answer. I really don’t think they expected to run into the rhetorical difficulties they did. I think they really thought that they could shmooze us and say, “Everything’s fine and gee whiz, you know, everything’s getting better now.” They didn’t have facts to back up the facts that they were presented with. It was simply political rhetoric and it became more circular and more nonsensical as the time went along.

LC: Is that the patronizing attitude that you felt?

BL: Oh, absolutely. Then I met, actually, with the same individual one-on-one a day or two later. Again, I try to be civil. We were firm, but very civil and very polite. “Mr. So-and-so, oh, thank you, excuse me,” et cetera and so forth. I sat down and talked with him a little bit about a few other things. I think he ran out of patience, because he looked at me and he said, “You know, you people ought to find out what’s going on before you start doing this sort of thing.” I told him flat out, “If we don’t know what’s going on, it’s your fault because you have an ample opportunity to explain it, and you haven’t. You want to try it now?” He just looked away as if I were some beggar that came up trying to hustle him for a quarter. He simply didn’t—they were caught in an unfavorable light and they wouldn’t fess up to it.
LC: Bill, could you explain what you think? I mean, you’re implying it, but go ahead and say, if you wouldn’t mind, what you think was actually the calculus going on there behind keeping the bill from even being discussed?

BL: It’s really a mystery. It truly is because no one could come up with a good reason with Kerry’s staff and Kerry himself having failed to explain anything, other than falling back on this blunt instrument that jeopardizes progress. It’s beautiful rhetoric. It just doesn’t correspond to reality. Given the fact that there was no logical explanation, of course rumors started sprouting. Some people said he had a mistress in Vietnam, which I do not believe, or that he had an illegitimate child in Vietnam, which I don’t believe at all. But this is the scuttlebutt that was going around because nothing seemed to add up. There didn’t seem to be any rational, logical explanation for this. I think it comes down to money. Now his cousin is with Collier’s International, who just, it just so happens negotiated a multimillion deal to do a deep-water port in Vietnam. That’s a fact.

LC: Is this deal a new one, recently?

BL: No, I think it’s already done. I mean, done and completed. This was a couple years back.

LC: Okay. So this predates your visit?

BL: Yes.

LC: Okay.

BL: You’ve got Coca-Cola, you’ve got this, you’ve got that, you’ve got all these people like your Texas Trade Delegation, and they see money and opportunity. That in and of itself is not bad, but at the same time the U.S. State Department and other people are very critical of the government of Burma, and they’re saying, “No, we’re not going to trade with you guys.” Then years ago, there was this stink about South Africa. You know, the apartheid and we’re going to have an economic trade boycott on South Africa. Well, Vietnam is hardly better or worse than any of those two countries. If you go—it would defy anyone to examine thoroughly the human rights record of, say, Vietnam and Burma, and you’re not going to find that one’s any different than the other. You can check with Transparency International, which is an international organization that surveys governmental corruption, and Vietnam is way down at the bottom. Reporters Without Borders, Vietnam is way down at the bottom. Amnesty International, Human
Rights Watch, PEN, what is it, Poets, Essayists, and Novelists, an outfit out of England. Not too long ago, they ranked Vietnam as the worst country in the world. There’s no consistency. The calculus is such that if we make—and of course nobody cares about Burma for the most part. But a senator or representative gets a freebie if he or she says, “Well, I’m against trading with Burma because we’re going to have to crack down because they’re oppressive.” They cannot logically and morally and honestly say, “But let’s open trade with Vietnam.” The stuff about trade fostering democracy is not really a provable statement. In fact, Germany or England’s biggest trading partner before World War II was Germany. So what did that trade benefit anybody?

LC: The distinction between dealing with Burma and Vietnam, I gather, you would say flows from U.S. involvement with Vietnam and having had virtually no involvement with Burma.

BL: Well, yeah. This country has been psychologically blackmailed into thinking that we are evil, and underneath it all we’ve got to atone for our sins. You can’t say anything bad about Vietnam, because after all, we just—oh, my God, the horrible things we did and everybody loved Uncle Ho, and oh, gee whiz. They have a free pass. They’re exempt from criticism.

LC: If you could ask John Kerry, say you’re Dan Rather, and you can ask him a question at one of the many debates that have been held over the course of this primary season. If you were face-to-face with him and him on mike, what would you ask him?

BL: I would ask him how he—actually, I don’t think I would ask him anything anymore because there’s nothing more to ask. But maybe if you could turn a statement into a question, I would say that many people view him as a hypocrite for his failure to support the human rights effort in Vietnam, especially when, again, let’s go back to the text of the Human Rights Act. All it suspends is non-humanitarian aid. It doesn’t suspend humanitarian aid. It doesn’t change the terms of trade. It doesn’t do anything, really. It’s more of a gesture than anything else. I would—that’s the question to be put to Kerry along with the statement, if you want to put a question mark at the end, okay. He’s basically doing this as a matter of political convenience because it makes him look good. “Here am I, John Kerry sponsoring and fostering reconciliation with our enemy. Aren’t I a good guy? What a swell man I am. I can overcome the bitter memories. I’m a
big man. I have the character to look forward rather than dwell in the past.” So it’s a
total freebie for Kerry to take the position he has. Again I don’t know how much
corporate donations he’s got, but let’s face it, Coca-Cola, Ford, IBM (International
Business Machines), you name it, Visa. Everybody—not so much now, because—in fact
foreign investment in Vietnam has declined since people have found out that it wasn’t the
next Wild West, free open market that was just ready to explode. They found that there’s
corruption. There’s malfeasance. There’s inadequate infrastructure, and so forth and so
on. So foreign investment has not risen to the level as everybody thought it would.
Especially if you were to extrapolate for the first two or three years after Clinton opened
things up. It just doesn’t make any sense at all, really. But there’s still corporations that
want to get in there. One has to infer, unless Mr. Kerry himself would like to contradict
the inference that he, A, scores psycho-political image points as the big man who can
overlook the past, and as a footnote to that, of course, he’s helping America atone for its
horrible sins of interfering with democracy in Vietnam, et cetera and so forth. Then who
knows? McDonald’s, everybody else that sends him a check for how much money.
What would be—he would get no benefit at all from supporting it because the American
public’s not aware of the nature and extent of human rights violations in Vietnam at
present and Laos and Cambodia all brought to life in their present form by Hanoi’s
ideologues.

LC: But that’s a no-win, basically, for an American political candidate.
BL: Yeah. Who cares? Who cares? Even if he were to say that, it would fall on
deaf ears because people have, my opinion, this preconception of ignorance annealed and
 glued to the inside of their brain. They can’t see beyond their false impressions. They
don’t know that more Buddhist monks have immolated themselves in Vietnam since the
communists took over than during our involvement over there. They don’t know that.

LC: What’s your source of information like that? Where, if someone was
interested now in 2004 to find out that kind of thing, where do you steer them?
BL: Several. Of course, the human rights organizations, Amnesty International,
Human Rights Watch, Transparency International, Reporters Without Borders. There
was a foundation that is now, I think, defunct. It was called the Aurora Foundation,
which published a comprehensive, thorough examination of Vietnam’s human rights
violations from ’75 to I think ’85. If I can find a copy of that, I’ll donate. I have an extra
copy. I’ll donate it to Texas Tech.

LC: Wonderful.

BL: The other thing, which is always overlooked, is the writings of the
Vietnamese themselves. Some of it might be exaggerated, but a lot of it is not. It’s
just—in fact, in one book I sent to Texas Tech, memoirs of a priest in a reeducation
camp, come on. What kind of enemy of the—what can you say about a government that
says all clergymen have to go to reeducation camp for seven, eight, nine, ten years in
North Vietnam? That’s where they sent the real bad guys.

LC: Yes, the hardest-core problems.

BL: But if anyone has a sense of history, and I don’t know, maybe all seventy-
three people in this country that do, it’s exactly, it’s a carbon copy of the policies and
procedures that the Soviets undertook in Soviet Russia in the ’20s and ’30s. You’re
going to get rid of God. It’s a superstition. We cannot, cannot have anyone compete for
the mind. You have to have the whole thing, the mind and the soul. Religion, be it
Buddhist, be it Islam, be it Catholicism, be it Protestant Evangelicals competes for the
mind. You can’t have that. So the Vietnamese press, and unfortunately too many of
these books are never translated into English. That’s the continuation of another grievous
American policy flaw in Vietnam. We didn’t listen to the people that live there. Some of
them were stupid, just like some Americans are stupid, just like some Bulgarians are
stupid and some Fins are stupid. Every country has a certain percentage of stupid people.
But there was a heck of a lot of Vietnamese that were very intelligent and that knew what
was going on, and we never listened to them then, and we don’t listen to them now. The
American public doesn’t even know they’re saying anything because the news media
doesn’t cover everything because there’s no market for any books that they write. In fact,
Presidio Press did a book on the Boat People I think in the early ’80s called Wrapped in
the Wind’s Shawl. I got a copy of a book in Vietnamese about the life of a person in
Dinh Tuong province down in the Delta and what it was like and all this. I mean it was
just a horrible description of this blind, fascist mentality, this idiotic cadre and how their
ignorance and arrogance reached astronomical heights. I wrote Presidio and I said, “This
would be a really good book to translate. If you want, I can probably get it started, but
this should be published.” They wrote me back and said, “You know, we thought
Wrapped in the Wind’s Shawl was a great book, and you know what? It doesn’t sell
because apparently Americans really don’t want to know.” They said, “We’d love to do
it, but we’ve got to make a living.”

LC: Did they indicate to you how many had been sold at all?
BL: No, they didn’t, but they said it was very disappointing, or words to that
effect.

LC: Right.
BL: It’s just a dud.
LC: Wow. Bill—
BL: The central fact is, is that this type of information can be found out, but if
John Q. or Mary J. American citizen sits down and expects to have it delivered to them,
it’s not going to happen. They have to go root it out, and then they’ll find it.

LC: The internet plays a certain part in making it available, making information
available. Do you think that the internet is going to change American information-
hunting habits?
BL: Marginally.
LC: Why?
BL: Because the people that want to know—there’s probably a certain percentage
of people that will dig and root and poke around and look for things. Now, they simply
have another tool. The people that read potboiler fiction novels and go to Arnold
Schwarzenegger movies, bless his heart, aren’t going to ever do anything. They’re
opiated by their entertainment needs, and God forbid they should actually have to think,
much less worry or be concerned or have to write a letter or something like that. So I
think it will have a marginal impact. But, of course, it cuts both ways, because you
have—I haven’t seen any, but I’m sure there are websites and chat rooms. They’re
simply regurgitating the informational mythology. Now you have younger academicians
that they’ll really thrive on this because they can make a name for themselves, castigating
America for its evil, wretched, deplorable, immoral, disgusting involvement in Southeast
Asia. Then there’s careers to be made. There’s an ego to stroke there.
LC: As I think you might agree, there’s a growth industry there, slamming American policies in Vietnam.

BL: Oh, yeah. No, it’s a disease. It’s a contagion. It’s not—and I don’t again for one minute suggest that we should go back to—don’t they call it heroic histories? Isn’t that a subgenre where your history simply points out the greatness of your nation? I’m not advocating that at all. I’m just saying everything that’s true that’s known has to be on the table. That’s all I’m saying. It is not.

LC: In furtherance of that, Bill, can you tell me a little bit about the delegation that you went to D.C. with and with whom you were associated when you were making this demarche to John Kerry?

BL: I’m not at liberty. They probably wouldn’t mind if I divulged their names, but—

LC: Can you characterize—these are American? These are residents in America?

BL: Well, most of the people I went with were Vietnamese-Americans. In fact, all of them were.

LC: Of what sort of age group? Can you say?

BL: Anywhere from, oh, probably ’40s to late ’60s. Now there were also many Vietnamese used there, as well, but not in our particular contingent. There was probably on the first couple of days, and then after that people had to go home. But I think there was upwards of two thousand people there from all over the country.

LC: Now, Bill, how did you—can you describe for someone who might be interested in this particular event, can you talk about how you came to be part of this group that was going to D.C. and how that came about?

BL: Representatives of the local Vietnamese community asked me to go.

LC: In Arizona?

BL: Yeah.

LC: Okay.

BL: Can you talk about the Vietnamese community there? How large is it and can you characterize it at all and name any good restaurants or anything like that?

LC: Oh, dozens of them.
BL: I think probably eight to ten thousand Vietnamese in Arizona. There’s not anything close to a Little Saigon, like they have in Garden Grove or anything like that, but there are some Asian shopping centers where most of the stores are Vietnamese. There’s kind of little mini-pockets or little strip centers where the Vietnamese stores have more or less clustered together, often where the Asian stores, Korean, Thai, and stuff like that. You have these little Asian supermarkets, mostly.

LC: Can you get hold of Vietnamese publications there, for example?

BL: Some, but not as well as you can in California. They have one bookstore in California that is just frustrating to walk in there because you want to spend about three, four, five hundred dollars.

LC: Where is this?

BL: It’s in Garden Grove.

LC: What’s the name of it?

BL: I don’t recall. I don’t recall.

LC: Okay, but you can find your way there, huh?

BL: Yeah. In fact, I got—that’s where I got my copy of the book in Vietnamese that’s called *The Black File on Vietnamese Communism*, which is written by a Frenchman and translated from French into Vietnamese and then published here. It should be published in English, but it’s just this very well documented, damning indictment of not only the immorality and cruelty, but the idiocy of Hanoi communist ideologues. In fact, there’s one absurd statement in there that they told Hanoi cadre or the lower-ranking people are running around saying that now that we’ve defeated the Americans, which they didn’t do militarily, that within thanks to the glories of socialism, that within ten years Vietnam’s economy would be on a par with Japan’s. They actually believed it. What has happened is that thirty years after, the per capita income of Vietnam is one-tenth the average per capita income of the non-communist Southeast Asians, one-tenth. But yeah, that’s a great bookstore.

LC: Now *The Black File on Vietnamese Communism*, do you know the author’s name, Bill?

LC: You said that it was originally written in French, but you’ve got a copy in Vietnamese? Or the other way around?

BL: Yeah.

LC: It sounds like a very interesting work.

BL: Fascinating. It’s very, very well done. It reminds me in many cases I’ve been sorely disappointed with some, oh, pseudo-political, quasi-travelogue works of Americans to go to other countries. I found that on occasion that the British for some reason seemed to be more insightful and more logical and more rational, and include more relevant material in their works.

LC: Well, as someone who was educated in Britain, I will take that as a compliment.

BL: No really. In fact one of the more insightful books about Cambodia is Maslyn Williams’s what is it—oh, no. I can’t remember the title. It’s about Cambodia, and he went to Cambodia in 1970 or, earlier than that, actually, ’69, I think. It was one of those prescient novels that, or, present novels that—I don’t know. It’s not a travelogue, but current affairs books that you had read, or that I had read on Cambodia. Because his conclusion was, and it was very accurate, was that nothing is holding Cambodia together. It’s just standing there like bricks with no mortar. One big push, and it’s all going to fall down. No one saw that. That’s courtesy of Sihanouk, actually. I know that you’re not supposed to say bad things about Sihanouk because he wanted to maintain neutrality. I’ve never met the man. For all I know, he’s the nicest guy in the world, but the fact remains he didn’t get the job done. He didn’t prepare his country for the challenges the 20th century’s going to bring and was bringing. But any case, this *Black File of Vietnamese Communism* is in that sub-sub-subgenre of books that are well written and well researched and well argued.

LC: Bill, let me ask you about a couple of other books. I don’t know whether you might have seen a book. It’s an older thing, now, probably from about ’68 or ’69, written by a British academic. His last name was Smith, first name was Ralph. He wrote under R.B. Smith called *Vietnam and the West*.

LC: Okay. Does that sort of fit in the genre that you’ve talked about with British academicians?
BL: It’s been a long time since I read Smith’s book, but I do recall some of it. I do recall my final impression is that this guy has a brain and it functions, which is more than you can say for some of his American counterparts.
LC: That was actually my dissertation supervisor. I wondered whether you had come across his work.
BL: Oh, really? Wow.
LC: Yeah. He’s, I think, a great interpreter of Southeast Asia and particularly Vietnam, which is interesting because he was trained as a medieval British historian.
BL: Again, history is history. I think that when you have an honest and disciplined analytical mind, you can apply it to anything.
LC: I agree, and I think that’s what he was trying to teach me and other students that he had as well.
BL: Yeah. In fact, I didn’t really realize what his background was, but I do recall some of the insights that he had, which were really stunning. I mean, very profound and critical of the whole thing among seventy-nine other factors. But they were very, very insightful and they were equally rare in many American books to include Frances Fitzgerald’s *Fire in the Lake* and some of these others.
LC: Which is a book that I do want to ask you about, but since you had mentioned Cambodia, let me ask you about William Shawcross.
BL: Oh, wait. It’s *The Land Beyond*. I’m almost sure. Maslyn Williams’s *The Land Beyond*.
LC: Okay. That sounds right. The book that I thought maybe you might have a view on another British academic reporter, William Shawcross. You may be aware his father was one of the judges at the Nuremberg trials.
BL: I was unaware of that.
LC: He wrote *Sideshow*.
BL: Right.
LC: Do you recall that book enough to make observations on it?
BL: Yeah. He wrote *The Quality of Mercy*. 
LC: Yes, sir, that’s correct. Yes an also a more recent book on events in
Yugoslavia and ethnic cleansing and so on.

BL: Now he also publicly stated, in print, that writers and journalists should look
back with a sense of shame over what has happened in Southeast Asia and their
underestimation of the brutality and barbarity of the communist governments there. He’s
also said that. I don’t know how much longer that was after Sideshow, but that’s
something else. If people want to place credibility on Sideshow, I think that they should
also be reminded that he did say that.

LC: Yes. I think perhaps following in his father’s sensibilities about legal
tradition and hearing the other side, and as I say, his later work, which exposes some of
the horrendous problems in the 1990s in southeast Europe. He may have more to
contribute yet on Southeast Asia, I don’t actually know, although I haven’t spoken to
him. Let’s talk about Frances Fitzgerald for a moment, if you dare. Can you talk about
the—well, give me your impressions, first of all, of the book itself and then if you feel
like it, maybe broader observations on its impact.

BL: Well, I think we discussed this a little bit before.

LC: A little bit, yes.

BL: But I won’t precede this by saying it’s too bad that she mixed so much
nonsense in with some excellent commentary. I mean excellent, critical commentary.
Some of the stuff she wrote in that book, I agree with a hundred percent. It’s a damnation
of—oops, I’m getting a cup of coffee here—the American involvement. But this
mystical, mythical Vietnam, which was to emerge from the cauldron of revolution just
was a total, utter myth. It just didn’t exist. I’m trying to think of a great analogy. I’m
not coming up with one. But I guess it’s safe to say that an intelligent reader can go
through that book and pick out some useful things. If you don’t know what’s going on
when you read that book, you’re going to be suckered big time because you’re going to
believe all the crap that she talks about that isn’t true.

LC: What kinds of crap?

BL: Oh, that basically the whole thing was corrupt. The whole thing was against
the Vietnamese national ethos, and everything else. Now as perceived by the lower-
ranking communists and other people, that’s true. But it’s a Sorelian myth. It motivates
people even if it’s not true in fact. The acid test to this whole thing is a fourteen-point manifesto put out by the NLF in 1962, I think. This was their blueprint for what they were going to bring about in South Vietnam, fourteen points. They not only didn’t live up to them, they want the opposite way on all of them, every single one. It was a complete, utter hoax. Now this is worse than Enron. They promised all this. First of all, there’s all this democratic, “Oh, all religions and all people will come together and foreigners can still invest in Vietnam. Vietnam will be”—South Vietnam because they were still maintaining the myth that this was the southern insurgency—“will be neutral. It’s just going to be this really nice place where everybody gets along. We’ll just all sit around and talk and be democratic.” There won’t be any foreign bases there. Well, the Soviets were in Cam Ranh Bay before South Vietnam even fell. That’s a fact. They had to send a team in there, a site planning team or whatever into Cam Ranh Bay before Saigon fell. So everything they said was a lie. Those fourteen points are the legs of the table supporting Frances Fitzgerald’s book and everybody else’s book that is a similar mythological genre, if you will. If those fourteen underpinnings don’t exist, then the whole thing collapses, the whole bloody thing. There is nothing in those fourteen points that says, “Oh and by the way, there’s going to be some people that don’t like it here, so about two million people will become refugees.” There’s nothing that says that.

LC: Right.

BL: There’s nothing that says, “Oh, yes, and we’re going to clear-cut the highlands and sell all the hardwood timber to the Japanese so we can make hard currency so we can afford”—at the time—“the fourth largest military in the world.” For what? It is such a hoax.

LC: In your mind, was Fitzgerald a dupe of NLF propaganda? Was she or is she, still, a self-seeking, ambitious writer looking for a Pulitzer Prize? How would you characterize?

BL: Probably everything you could think of mixed into one. An interesting thing is her father was Desmond Fitzgerald, who was with the CIA.

LC: Is that right? What do you know about him or what can you tell us about him?
BL: He was—I don’t know his exact role with the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion, but he was involved with that kind of stuff. So if you really—people are reversing the Oedipus complex thing here. I don’t know. But she seems to represent the educated pseudo-liberal, and I do say “pseudo” because they’re doctrinaire. They’re not liberal in the classic sense. The pseudo-liberals that really are sometimes even motivated by a sense of sadism or trying to come up with something to fill in the blank, evil, disgusting, wretched, loathsome, immoral, putrid about the United States, about Western democracy. So that was—people and especially younger people now don’t realize. They think it’s bad now, but back in the ’60s, you could pick up stuff off the newsstand that said, “Senators should be shot and blood should run in the streets of Washington, DC. We’re going to have a revolution in this country,” and all this crazy stuff. I don’t know. It seemed to me really to be a contagion. Something that one would better understand, not reading anything necessarily out of current events, but reading Gustave Le Bon’s *The Crowd*. He wrote that in, I think, 1895 or something like that, but it’s—and Eric Hoffer’s oh, now I’m drawing a blank, *The True Believer*. It becomes an addictive factor. I bet you if I were a neurologist, that you could probably wire someone’s brain and see they actually get a tingling high from this ballet, this waltz, this posturing of revolutionary avant-gardism. It gives them a thrill. In fact, Hoffer says something to the effect that a lot of these true believer types get involved because their own lives are so boring and insipid. They need a holy cause to blind themselves from their own inadequacies. And Sudoplatov, Pavel Sudoplatov, who was a Soviet KGB guy, said that when you recruit agents of influence or people from other countries, he said, “Look for the losers, the disaffected, the people that have a grudge against life.” He said, “It’s cruel, but it works.” These are the people that life hasn’t treated them right and, by God, they’re going to get even. In some cases, and I’ve heard this expressed in Vietnam veteran circles on a number of occasions. In some cases, you can almost liken it to a very evil and diabolical *Revenge of the Nerds*.

LC: But on a big scale where people actually get hurt.

BL: Yeah. On a much grander intellectual, pseudo-intellectual scale.

LC: Now for Fitzgerald, I wonder if you had a look at her later book on SDI (Strategic Defense Initiative) and President Reagan.
BL: I haven’t. I have not. I would say that if I had it in front of me or had it here, I might read it someday, but I’ve read that kind of stuff for the last thirty-five years. I’ve read radical stuff before I went to Vietnam because I wanted to see what other people said. I got to the point now where I don’t read as much of it as I used to because I’m tired of it. It doesn’t tell me anything. It’s the same old shtick. It’s a one-trick pony. Find anything that’s bad, take it out of context, and say that’s the whole thing. I’m sorry. If nothing else, it bores me. That’s probably the ultimate insult to those people because they really want to shock and offend. Incidentally, some of those people—you can go back to some of the early Soviet modernists around the time of the Bolshevik takeover in 1917. People like Mayakovsky, and he was the Bolshevik poet laureate, more or less. He wrote a book or an article or something, and it was slap the face of common sensibilities, or something. It was just anything and everything. He was the Abbie Hoffman or Abbie Hoffman’s predecessor. Just be gross, shock, intimidate, disregarding any obligation or need for rational discussion based on whatever bits of knowledge we have. It was just shock theater, political and psycho intimidation. I’m tired of—I just hardly even read the books anymore because it’s the same old thing.

LC: Because you already understand what they’re saying?

BL: Yeah. There’s a danger in there, and I acknowledge that. I periodically read some of this other stuff. Some of it’s the other stuff about Vietnam. That’s just on a broader subject. But you get halfway through and it’s insufferably boring. Can’t these people come up with something different? It’s paint by the numbers history. It’s invalid from a factual standpoint. It’s nonsense. It’s mythology.

LC: Well, Bill, let’s change tack a little bit, and I want to ask you about some policy, some overarching policy metaphors, if you’d like, that characterize for better or worse the Vietnam era and get your reactions to them, if that sounds good?

BL: Your call.

LC: Okay. How about your appreciation now as a military intelligence analyst and also someone with a very particular take on the Vietnam conflict? Can you talk for a minute about the one-year U.S. military rotation policy and what kinds of effects that had? Was it a good policy from your viewpoint, or was it problematical?

BL: First off, and I’m breaching etiquette here, it was a war.
LC: Okay.

BL: It wasn’t a conflict. It was a war. (Laughs)

LC: (Laughs) That’s fine. There’s no breach.

BL: It’s one of those things that on the surface had a degree of sense to it, but it had a cost, and the cost was of course that as you gain skill, knowledge, and experience, you left. I think it was Bernard Fall that said that the United States was not in Vietnam for ten years, or whatever it was, it was in Vietnam for one year, ten times. That’s a valid critique. It’s especially valid and maybe you had the supply sergeant or infantry grunt that just did his two years and “Hey, you drafted me. I’ll go. Now my two years are up, I want to go home.” Fine. That’s good. What about people that really wanted to do something over there? Other advisors and even line unit guys that said, “You know, this is”—well, like myself. “Golly, I believe in this. I don’t care what Walter Cronkite says. I’m sorry, he’s talking about some fantasy in his mind, but from what I’ve seen and what I know, this is something that should be done. This is a war that should be stopped. This is injustice that should be stopped.” American policies made no allowances for that. You had guys that were advisors that would—and I know a couple that wanted to stay longer, extend, and this and that. “Nope, you’re going back,” sometimes because you got your three years in, or whatever. Even if you did, well you’ve got to go back for the career course. You’ve got to go back for this course.

LC: Yes.

BL: Overall, you have to say it made sense, but it sure seems like it could have been refined to have permitted people to stay that wanted to. I don’t mean the R&R, the sergeant that runs the R&R center that’s selling drugs and having a good old time in Vung Tau. That was, contrary to Stanley Karnow, every place is not dangerous in Vietnam. If you were in Vung Tau and places like that, it was cake. You’re getting combat pay for no combat. You got all you want. It’s great. But at the same time, I think we should have cut—parallel to that, we should have said for everybody, from Ellsworth Bunker on down, we should have said that, “Well, we’re going to hold most of your pay because all this money is going to tear up the economy of this country.” It was a traditional country, traditional agrarian country, rather undeveloped and everything. By golly, if we’re spending all our money here, it’s enough as it is we’re going to create
tremendous social and economic pressure. So everybody gets—you get fifty dollars a
month to spend in-country, the rest of it is banked back home, and we’ll give you a pay
savings catalog, and you can order stuff to your heart’s content, but it’s sent to your home
address.

LC: Right.

BL: Had we done that—it’s just another—there’s so many complexities to this,
it’s hard to thoroughly touch on all of them in a coherent fashion without having outlined
it before but ,yes, there should have—the one-year tour made sense in some respects, and
in cases where it didn’t, it should have been thrown out the window. “You want to stay?”
“Sure. Well, then you can go to career course next year.” Again everybody’s making
fifty dollars a month. While one of the more idiotic paradoxes of Vietnam was, you had
people in the field living like raccoons and muskrats and getting shot at at the same time.
Then you had people in Saigon and Da Nang and Nha Trang, especially after Tet ’68,
Nha Trang was not a hazardous place. It was resort living, almost. For those that were
so inclined, you had the pharmaceuticals that were readily available. Women were
readily available. Hey, why go back to the States? I’m getting paid money. I can live
like a king. Those people should have been thrown out.

LC: But in terms of the policy, your take on it is that with greater flexibility a
better application might have been possible?

BL: You said it much more coherently than I did.

LC: I had a chance to sit and listen to you think about it, but you led me in that
direction. Bill, what about the controversy over the emphasis on body count numbers?
Do you have any thinking about that that you’d like to contribute?

BL: Yeah. First of all, body count has always been taken as a factor of military
intelligence simply because you want to know what’s left of that battalion that you just
bumped heads with.

LC: Yes.

BL: So it’s not as if that were something new. Now, the attrition war from which
the body count thing arose was dictated by McNamara. That was not Westmoreland’s
decision. In 1966, Westmoreland outlined his long-term plan, which would culminate in
what was later named Operation El Paso, which would be an incursion into Laos, multi-
divisional, cut, hold, and block the Ho Chi Minh trail forever and ever. He was told that
by not McNamara himself, but by—oh, God, what’s his name. Actually, I think one of
the prime villains—John McNaughton and one of the Bundy’s, I think it was, one of the
prime villains of the malfeasance strategy. That no, you’re not going to do that. You’re
just going to fight this attrition war. Now if Westmoreland is to be faulted, he may be
faulted for going along with it and hoping someday they would change. I don’t think he
was quite as cold-blooded as some people suggest. He continued the planning process
for Operation El Paso and Operation New York, I think was a subsidiary to that, all the
way after. But in ’66, McNaughton said, “No, you fight a war of attrition.” Body counts
per se, several things have to be said. A, they were more accurate than not. Even then
the communists finally admitted that their death tolls—basically what they’ve said they
lost exceeds what our official body counts were. So in terms of accuracy and order of
magnitude accuracy, the stories of gross inflation are essentially not substantiated by
facts. Did it contribute to nefarious practices and sloppy tactics? It certainly did. Now
to what extent that happened is probably yet to be measured. You hear all this anecdotal
stuff, but I don’t know whether—oh boy, how do I say this? I just don’t know how many
instances there were. Certainly, there were some where the body count mania basically
became the driving factor. I know—I’ve heard of—I shouldn’t say I know because all
I’ve read and heard of—9th Division’s—oh, I can’t remember the operation down in Kien
Hoa province in the Delta in 1969. Basically, that was a real—printed accounts I’ve read,
and there was that was body-count driven. There’s certainly some question as to how
many of those dead people were really VC and how many were civilians. Of course, you
hear the anecdotal stuff. Well, if it’s Vietnamese and it’s dead, it’s VC. So it’s body
count. Did that happen? It certainly did. How many times? Who knows. You have to
step backwards and get out of the details and look at the big picture. If Hanoi says they
lost over a million people, that’s more than we say we killed.

LC: Bill, where did you hear about the Vietnamese communist losses exceeding
those estimated by the U.S.?

BL: James Webb, who, of course, is a Vietnam veteran author was over there
several years ago and talked to some of them. They told them that they—and then also in
Douglas Pike’s, I hope someday to be resuscitated Indochina Chronicle, he had Hanoi’s
official count. I wish I could cite you the volume and edition. I can’t, but I know I read it in there.

LC: Those are actually up on the TTU (Texas Tech University) Vietnam Archive website.

BL: Okay.

LC: So you can refer to that.

BL: But—oh, I’m sorry. Go ahead.

LC: Actually, I was interested in anything more you might want to say about the Vietnamese communist losses versus U.S. estimates and how that played into policy.

BL: Well, I think the greater factor is, again let’s step back, may take two or three steps back to get a broader picture, that shouldn’t have been a factor at all because it was symptomatic of the strategic malfeasance which emanated from Washington, DC, in attempting to stop Hanoi’s war. We didn’t try and win it, we tried to stop it. They knew—they were told by rather intelligent people early on, including people in the U.S. military, including Vietnamese, including Souvanna Phouma of Laos. Cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Cut it and hold it. People say, “Well, you tried that once, it didn’t work.” Well, all the plans for the Laotian incursion that had been devised called for something like sixty thousand troops going in there. Lam Son 719, which was a strategic raid, it was not anything like what Operation El Paso was to have been for the other plan was only sixteen thousand troops. So you’re sending in basically one-fourth of what had been called for. Again, it was a strategic raid as opposed to a strategic move to block, cut, and hold. Everybody misses this one. People say, “Well, you know”—and some authors say, “Well, you couldn’t have done it,” and they cite all this information that the American military didn’t have the units to do that. They’d take a logistical approach to it. You didn’t have the ships, the offloading, the road building, the railroads, et cetera and so forth and so on, it’s absolutely false. They did have those units, but they were in the Reserves. I have that straight from Colonel LeGro, who worked on the preliminary planning for what would later be called Operation El Paso. You call up the Reserves, you’ve already got the Freedom Road built across Thailand. You’ve already got QL-9, which runs from Quang Tri to Khe Sanh. That road continues going. You’re not going through totally undeveloped. You’re going through pretty rough country on very
crummy roads, but there is a road. There is a road. To suggest that we couldn’t do it and Hanoi could is absolute, utter nonsense. I mean, hell, just from scratch, they built the Alaska Highway across what, twelve hundred miles of total, utter wilderness in the most horrible weather imaginable with 1940s equipment. That’s sixteen hundred miles. If you’re going to cut and hold the Ho Chi Minh Trail, it’s only—and people should every once in a while look at a map. It’d be quite helpful for understanding. If you measure the distance from the shore in Quang Tri province to the Thai-Laos border, you’re going to see it’s just right around 180, 200 miles. To suggest that the United States couldn’t have blocked that with the allies is ridiculous. But the other thing that’s a key element there is, that would have, had we had an intelligent, enlightened leadership, they would’ve said, “Now the double benefit from this is now we’ve got the propaganda war on our side because we’re going to photograph, we’re going to interview all these captive NVA soldiers we have, and right above them is going to be a picture of the Laotian Accords of 1962, which Hanoi signed and which they promised to withdraw all their forces from Laos.” Now isn’t this strange. We have all these guys from Infiltration Group 7329, five hundred of them or we have a battalion of such-and-such a division. They’re in Laos. Isn’t that funny? It would’ve been very embarrassing for Hanoi, and the United States should have been very aggressive without necessarily being saber-rattling maniacs, but should have been aggressive in fronting the truth to the world. Look at this, people. You’re criticizing us. Why are these guys in Laos? They said they weren’t going to be there. Here’s Prince Souvanna Phouma. He’s the neutralist leader of Laos. He wants them out. We threw all that away, all that opportunity away.

LC: These are “propaganda opportunities,” quote unquote.

BL: By propaganda, I mean propaganda in the clinical sense, simply an effort to convince people to consider what you’re considering or to think in a certain way, not lying, not—there’s, of course black, white, and grey propaganda. People don’t understand. Then there’s propaganda education. People don’t understand that. But basically, advertise to the world, “Hey, look people. Here it is,” and embarrass Hanoi and embarrass their supporters overseas.
LC: Right. Speaking of their supporters overseas and staying with 1966 and the attrition strategy, Bill, can you give any observations on strategic thinking in Washington about China and its relationship to the war in Vietnam?

BL: Yeah. In both China and Russia, and if people will read the Pentagon Papers instead of talking about them and some of these other well-written books on the subject, they will find that—cutting right to the quick—that a Laotian incursion would not have been the tripwire to have brought in Chinese and/or Soviet troops. The Russians made that known to us. “As long as you don’t invade North Vietnam,” in some oblique diplomatic terms. As long as you don’t invade North Vietnam and try and overthrow the people’s government, okay, we’re not going to go after it. We’re not going to go in there. The Chinese, however you want to interpret Lin Biao’s 1965 speech, he threatened all these wars of liberation all over the world, but he said, also said, “But you liberation people are going to have to do it yourself.” So the threat that Johnson perceived and I can understand the responsibility the guy felt on his shoulders to precipitating nuclear war and this whole other thing, but all the indications were that if he didn’t try and overthrow, didn’t invade Hanoi with American forces, China and Russia weren’t going to do anything. Of course, in 1966 and the Cultural Revolution started, I don’t know what China could have done then, even though they were sending people and supplies to Hanoi. But a Laotian incursion would have been fair game. Never once, never once has the Soviet Union and/or Communist China demonstrated a depth of conviction regarding Vietnam that exceeded political realities. In other words, it meant something to them as much as the United States was bailing out. If it was easy, then they are the ultimate opportunists. If it’s not easy, then okay, we’ll back off. And that goes back to Lenin. I think he told Barry or some of those guys, “You probe with a bayonet, and if you hit flab then drive deeper. If you hit bone, then stop.” The Soviets have always been very pragmatic in that regard.

LC: And the Chinese as well?

BL: We would’ve said, “Look. We’re going to leave Hanoi alone, but we’re going to go in there to Laos and we’re going to stop this bloody mess, and I wish you guys would quit giving the tools of war to these people so we can have détente, trade and all that other garbage.”
LC: Is there any validity in your mind to the argument that with the Cultural
Revolution there was domestic instability in China and factions that the Chinese
leadership might have been emboldened to expand the revolution into South Vietnam if
the U.S. had done something such as an Operation El Paso in 1966?
BL: It'd all be conjecture, of course. No one will ever, ever, ever know.
LC: Sure. Of course.
BL: That is a good conjectural question. All you can do is look at the evidence
and information and of course in retrospect that often times doesn’t prove to be accurate.
LC: Doesn’t clear things up.
BL: But there wasn’t anything, there wasn’t any looming, smoking gun that
indicated flat out that, yes, there is this faction and we’ll do this and do that. I’m not sure
they could’ve pulled it off because the chaos in China from 1966 on was really
catastrophic.
LC: Absolutely. Yes, millions and millions of people.
BL: The other thing, people don’t realize. Mao learned a lesson in Korea. Mao
was irrational insofar as he really thought, and incidentally the Soviets were the same
way in believing their own propaganda, which has been cited pretty clearly by, I think his
name was Kalugin, a KGB general that was defected. He said, “Yeah, these guys
actually believed the propaganda.” Mao was afraid they’d get nuked. He really was
hesitant, I think, to take on the United States in this. Because it really didn’t pay off for
him in Korea. Again, that’s interpretation. Admittedly an interpretation. I would like to
think it would be true but really, nobody really knows. I guess all you can say is that the
evidence suggests that had we—of course, we were talking with the Chinese in Poland at
that time, through the Polish embassy or something like that’s going on. But if we
could’ve just made it clear to them, “Look, you can—Hanoi can be communist from here
to doomsday, but we’re not invading Hungary so it’s not fair for you guys to invade or
your client states to invade other countries. This is our little line here, and please
understand, no hard feelings, mind you, but geez, we just don’t want to get mad. You
know what happens when Americans get mad. Oh, it’s going to be awful. Let’s not do
that, okay guys? Please?” You know, hammer and carrot or carrot-stick approach. I just
don’t think it’s—I don’t think you can argue with certainty that there was a faction that
would have tried to deflect attention by an incursion into North Vietnam. Although they
did have the P.R.C (People’s Republic of China) forces in North Vietnam, as many as
sixty, eighty thousand every year, total of three hundred thousand plus over the whole
course of the whole war, engineers and road builders and this sort of stuff. They did have
Chinese communist troops building a Laos Road in north Laos. Who knows?

LC: Bill, you mentioned the more or less informal plot between the U.S. and
P.R.C. This is of course well before recognition in the mid-’60s. That leads me to
wonder if you have any observations to make about Secretary of State Dean Rusk and his
role or lack thereof in the Vietnam War and in the Johnson administration. He was an old
East Asia hand.

BL: Yeah, he was. I think—I’m going to criticize him, and I hate doing it,
reluctantly, with you because I think he’s a very honest and thoroughly sincere man. I
really do. I mean, there’s no indication that I have that he was anything but that. He
certainly wasn’t an evil schemer. He wasn’t trying to get Vietnam so the United States
could have the—what’s the famous Jane Fonda gaffe, tongue and (??). I don’t know if
you ever heard that one.

LC: Yes.

BL: I don’t see that at all. But again, he didn’t realize that a propaganda war was
being fought. You have to go out there and show up. You can’t—there’s no sense in
being—hiding your light under a basket or anything. You just go, “Okay, we’ve got a
war and this is why. Damn it to hell,” and be very forceful and very, very eloquent and
explaining to the American people and the world and the Vietnamese, North and South,
and the Laotians and the Cambodians, just what it is we’re doing. I never saw that out of
Rusk. I never did.

LC: What about his—obviously, he’s an old Asia hand with many, many years of
experience out there. Yes. What about his coming up against State Department inertia,
for lack of a better word? Did you ever get a sense of that in your own career? What role
do you think that may or may not have played in his own calculus and effectiveness?

BL: Again, it’s all conjecture on my part. I really don’t know. But I do know
that there is inertia in the State Department, and the “State Department Guaranteed
Employment Act” calls for as much diplomacy as possible for their statesmanship stuff.
Sometimes they, I think, and I think it can be argued, sometimes they simply are reluctant to say, “Okay, this negotiation stuff.” In case with Vietnam right now, why aren’t they telling Hanoi, “Look, you know, we want to be buddies with you guys and put everything beside us, but here’s human rights violations just generate a stench that is unavoidable. So we’re going to go home for a month or two. If you have anything you want to say, just leave it off at the embassy mailbox and then give us a call.” I think, and I’d love to see thorough documentation and an encyclopedic study on it, but I think they’re more prone to accommodate nasty governments because if you don’t accommodate them, then that means diplomacy doesn’t work. That means that they don’t work. They don’t function. So I’m sure there were elements of that in the State Department at the time. How specifically that restrained Rusk or influenced him is something I really don’t know.

LC: Now I have a feeling you’ll have a view on this. Rusk is often sort of paired off as the ineffective twin of Robert McNamara. I wonder if you can just talk about McNamara for a little bit.

BL: Oh.

LC: Or maybe quite a bit? You can start anywhere you like.

BL: The best—one of the best one-liners that I saw on McNamara, and once again the credit goes to the great Douglas Pike, after McNamara contributed to his second book, when he went back to that conference. I distinctly remember Pike’s review in the Indochina Chronology. He said that the next—words to the effect that the next follow-up book should be, Where is McNamara’s Mind? I don’t understand his head. I think he was completely out of his element as secretary of defense. Now, he might have been a great comptroller or something of that nature. God knows that the procurement procedures and so forth and so on, duplication of this, excess capacity of that did generate the need for somebody who could crunch numbers. There’s no doubt about that. But for him to be secretary of defense, it just boggles the mind. He should’ve been the chief comptroller bean counter, but there should’ve been someone there who understands what the Department of Defense does, and how it does it, and what it’s for, and what it costs. His brain is really a mystery. How he could send people to Southeast Asia and at the same time forbid and actually censor discussion on any proposals to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail is not something to be proud of. People would say, “Well, he’s a nice man, he
meant well.” I don’t care. Maybe he did mean well, but did he mean well enough to seriously question himself? There’s a key quote. The book author’s name is, last name is Hadley. I believe the book is titled *Straw Giant*. It’s about the American military, it’s recommended reading for anybody. But he quotes one of McNamara’s associates, and I’m not sure if we discussed this before. I think we did, but what the heck? He said, “The war in Vietnam is difficult for Bob,” so apparently he knew McNamara fairly well, “because it’s all about people and ideas, and he’s weak in those areas.” That’s just great. The whole war was people and ideas, the whole thing. He’s weak in that area. Just great. That’s like saying, “Yeah, sure. I can do pulmonary surgery on you. I’m only a podiatrist, and I’m weak in pulmonary anatomy, but I’m a podiatrist so I can do that, too.” It’s about that bizarre. He also is credited with, or discredited, with the manufacturing decision not to chrome plate the chamber of the M-16, which my sources, and I don’t know how firm they are, but it sounds reasonable, tells me was a $1.37 manufacturing option. Now the Ordinance Department also changed the designated powder. Stoner, who had designed the M-16, he wanted certain powder, and the Army materiel commander, whoever, said, “No, we’re going to go with this other powder.” But those two factors contributed to the jamming problems that we had when the M-16 was first introduced in the field. You had people killed because of that. For anyone who’s secretary of defense to bother with a $1.37—you’re spending billions and billions and billions of dollars. How many M-16s are there? Let’s play McNamara’s numbers game. What, ten million? So that’s thirteen million extra dollars they’re going to spend? Big deal. He had to be of a mind where he could go to the cutting edge. That Spec-4 out there right on the front lines and say, “What do you need? What do you need? How do you need it, and how often and in what quantities?” That’s not the only thing. His policies on bombing in the North? They dictated flight paths and got people shot down. They wouldn’t allow them at first, of course, to take out anti-aircraft sites, SAM (surface-to-air missile) sites. That got people killed. When they were doing this McNamarian quota bombing, you know where so many tons, they were running out of bombs. Now you’re secretary of defense. Right? That’s your watch. You’re running out of bombs? Well, here’s what we’ll do. This is fact now. This is not rumor. In the Philippines were bombs left over from World War II that were chemically deteriorated. Use them. The
guys who were loading these bombs said, “These things were not stable.” This is not
good. Some of them were oozing chemicals. I’ll give you a citation on this. I don’t have
it right off the top of my head. It’s written by a fellow that wrote the book on the fire on
the USS Forrestal.

LC: Okay, but that the munitions were so degraded that—
BL: Yeah, well, here’s the deal. Now when the rocket went off and it was
McCain’s A-4 Skyhawk, it went skidding across the deck, and that was accident number
one. When it hit the other planes, of course there was a fire started. But the kicker is, is
that the newer ordnance would not have cooked off and exploded so quickly. This older
stuff was so unstable that it detonated much, much earlier than the newer stuff would
have detonated. The explosions, it wasn’t the fire, it was the explosion. There it is again.
It seems to me, if you’re going to be secretary of defense and you have any knowledge of
the world you’re living in, you’ve got to say, “Gee, I could be sending guys out to go die.
I’m going to go down there and make sure they have everything—the best. I don’t care if
it costs money.” He should have been of such mind that, if he didn’t believe in Vietnam,
he should have left. You don’t know if the man’s really evil, but by God he ended up
presiding over evil things. His policies basically dried up the well of operational
flexibility for Nixon later on because the American credibility had diminished and
American popular tolerance had been drawn down to such a level that there was nothing
else to do. So his incompetence and malfeasance cast a shadow and extended limitations
on subsequent policy options of the Nixon administration.

LC: There’s a couple things in there that I’d like to peel away a couple layers on
it, if you don’t mind. First of all, what types of bombs were the ones in shortage such
that these out of date, unstable munitions—?
BL: Straight, high-explosive bombs.
LC: Okay. The big ones, like five hundred pound?
BL: Yeah. Something like that.
LC: Okay. These were the ones that were used for strategic bombing in the
North?
BL: I guess you’d call them, not really strategic, because strategic to me implies
that you’re going to take out Hanoi and end the war.
LC: Okay.
BL: They were used for the conventional bombing of LOCs and bridges.
LC: POL targets and all that?
BL: Yeah, there you go. I guess you’d call it strategic bombing if it’s in the context of a long-term strategy, which McNamara didn’t have.
LC: Which again, right. There’s a problem there, too. Bill, what about McNamara’s actual initial selection by Kennedy? You seemed to suggest that he had no business—well, I think you said, he had no business being secretary of defense.
BL: I don’t think so.
LC: Have you read much or formed an opinion about Kennedy’s selection of him? What was the source of that?
BL: I guess he figured, from what I know, and I guess it’s from the impressions that have formed in my brain. I’ll put it that way. He just figured McNamara was the bean counter that needed to straighten out the procurement and organizational mess in the Department of Defense. Maybe he would’ve been great for that job, because it was a mess, from what I gather.
LC: Okay.
BL: Here too, you’ve got the—oh, golly, if people would just study history a little bit more. You’ve got a rather benign, but nonetheless insidious example of hubris. We rational humans can engineer everything, in the bean-counter mentality. You have to have that, but you also have to have a fire, a passion, a purpose, a meaning. I don’t know if McNamara’s capable of that. Of course, now he’s ranting and raving in this new documentary and he’s very impassioned when he speaks, but what good does it do anybody?
LC: Now this is reference—
BL: Now certainly, someone that screwed up as badly as he has would be expected to try and atone somehow, someway, but even his atonement is clumsy. Both of his books are comically ignorant, I think.
LC: The reference there is to *The Fog of War* documentary, which have you actually sat through it, Bill? Have you seen it?
BL: No, I have not.
LC: But you have I take it looked at one or both of his books from the 1990s?
BL: I read both of them, yeah.
LC: In which he discusses his trip to Hanoi for example and confrontations with
PAVN and SRV (Socialist Republic of Vietnam) leaders. Does this look like an apologia
campaign to you?
BL: A which? I’m sorry.
LC: A campaign of apology in some way, or is this a campaign of justification by
him?
BL: I don’t know. I think he’s still groping. I really don’t think he knows.
Certainly, neither one of those books displayed that he has gained any knowledge. For
him to say he’s going to go to Hanoi to understand the war is an indication that he simply
doesn’t, first of all he admits now he doesn’t know what’s going on. Then to go over
there and be spoon-fed propaganda drivel and walk away believing it is just ludicrous. I
think he’s just grasping for some sort of meaning, some sort of vindication, get
expiation, exculpation from the world opinion or something. I don’t know. I think it’s
pitiful, really.
LC: He has portrayed himself recently, and particularly in the film as having
been the one who tried to tone down Johnson’s interest in pushing huge numbers of men
from the United States in to campaigns in Vietnam. Does that ring true for you?
BL: From what I gather, especially toward the time at ’67, he became I think
more and more dismayed. There’s some sort of benchmark there where he reaches a
point which, “No, no, no, let’s just hold on.” But a guy by the name of F. Charles Parker
IV, has written a book who is also a Vietnam veteran, a combat veteran. It’s interesting,
he has a Ph.D. He’s written a book called Stalemate: Strategy for Defeat. I think it was
published by Brassey. He documents—also, McMaster’s Dereliction of Duty, and he
goes through both of those books. You see that by 1966, McNamara was starting to put
the brakes on things. “Well, you know”—and essentially by ’66, Parker was correct.
McNamara decided that, “Well, we’re not going to win, we’re just going to do enough so
we don’t lose.” You can’t do that, send people out. Just leave. Again, it’s just—if I have
one thing to be thankful for, and I pray to God it never happens. I hope I never have to
bury guilt like he has. I don’t know how the man lives with himself. I’m not even—I’m
still not sure. For all his analytical brilliance, he seems profoundly dense in the realm of
people and ideas.

LC: Would you say that at this point in his life, it seems he’s grappling with
trying to deal with his guilt, for lack of a better word?

BL: You know, again, I haven’t talked to him, and I haven’t seen the
documentary. I’ve read his two books and I’m very hesitant to venture something that
might be taken as the authoritative view or the definitive read out on it, and I’m not a
trained psychologist or anything else, but you’d have to arrive at that conclusion. This
guy just feels horrible and he’s trying somehow, someway, to rub some kind of balm on
the gashes in his conscience.

LC: Okay, Bill, let’s take a break.

BL: Okay.
Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing my oral history interview with William Laurie. Today’s date is the sixteenth of March 2004. Again, I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the interview room of the Special Collections building. Bill is in Mesa, Arizona. Hi, Bill.

Bill Laurie: Hello.

LC: Bill, last time we talked we were discussing Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and I wonder if you had some additional thoughts on him and his service to the country?

BL: On him.

LC: Okay.

BL: A couple of things we discussed before some of the decisions he made which were detrimental to the formation of any strategy worthy of the name and any derivative tactical doctrine worthy of the name. But there were some other things that he did that need to be recorded.

LC: Okay.

BL: One of which was Project One Hundred Thousand. A lot of people have not heard of this. But I think it was about ’66. As I understand Moynihan, Senator Patrick Moynihan, was one of the instigators, but McNamara went along with it. Project One Hundred Thousand called for the acceptance into military service of people who previously did not meet the psychological and/or educational minimums to serve in the military. It didn’t stop—they inducted these people. It didn’t stop with one hundred thousand. It approached three hundred thousand. These people had a catastrophic effect even though their numbers were—can I put you on hold for just a second? I hate to do this.

LC: Sure. No, it’s fine. Okay, go ahead, Bill.

BL: The Project One Hundred Thousand people, again, were people that would normally not have been allowed to go into the military because of their psychological and/or educational deficiencies. Also, I don’t know if this exactly tied into it, but the
Army was required to take people who had not graduated from high school. This is somewhere in the mid-'60s. It’s all documentable. Now, I don’t know if McNamara was the driving force behind this, but he was the boss. This is a very significant decision to be undertaken. He went along with it.

LC: What was behind the decision? You said this was about 1966?

BL: Yeah, thereabouts. I think they had several purposes, one of which was to use the military as a social engineering machine by which you could school and educate and train people who otherwise might be dead-ended in life. Another, and it dovetailed quite nicely with Johnson’s and McNamara’s refusal to put the country on a war footing and say, “Folks, we’ve got a war.” Of course, the draft deferrals of these people got to go to college and so forth and so on, et cetera and what not. I think part of it had to be a political decision that Johnson didn’t want to irritate the middle class. That was based on his hopes for and political strategy for re-election in 1968.

LC: So the thinking—I’m just trying to get the picture here—was that manpower needs could be made up from this previously deferred class?

BL: True.

LC: What were the earlier deferments based on, or the earlier if they were deferments or not I’m not sure?

BL: They weren’t deferments. These people were simply not accepted into the military because they did not meet minimal, educational and/or psychological behavioral standards.

LC: Based on testing or whatever.

BL: Exactly. Yeah. So you’ve got people going into the military and people who only watch movies don’t realize what a good unit requires. It requires a personal initiative, integrity, intelligence, being able to think on your feet, teamwork and all this other sort of stuff. A good combat unit is a well-honed organization that can operate instinctively and reflexively and just function well. You throw these people in there and many people have said and a couple of guys I know had some Project One Hundred Thousand guys in their platoons. You were scared to death of this guy. So you had to watch for him. Rather than feeling at ease and secure with someone on your flank, you had your own guy on your flank that you were scared to death he’d do something stupid
or get you killed or anything else. I don’t know whether any data has ever been complied, but the bulk of anecdotal evidence is that Project One Hundred Thousand—which again eventually got up to three hundred thousand people that were inducted over the course of the war—caused a disproportionate amount of problems, fragging, drugs, behavioral problems. They just simply weren’t fit for the military. One or two guys in a platoon can affect the chemistry of that whole unit.

LC: Bill, do you know whether it was or have you heard whether it was possible to look at paperwork if you were a commanding officer and know that an incoming assignment to your, an assignee to your unit was within this catchment?

BL: Not to my knowledge. You just got the people. These people had a serious detrimental effect on the whole operation over there. Within the context of the hideously, obscenely flawed strategy, again, there’s no evidence. But I would surmise and I think it’s safe to conjecture that these people caused a disproportionate amount of problems, not only with the drugs and fragging and all that sort of stuff, but with abuse of Vietnamese civilians, just ratty behavior all together. This was something and the military was just furious over this. We don’t want these people. They can’t function and they don’t want to function and they cause trouble. There’s anecdotal evidence splattered throughout the literature on commanders and their comments and observations. They were very, very upset with this. That should not have been allowed. This at a time when the United States was engaged in one of the most complex wars it had ever been involved with and demanded the utmost of American performance, discipline and intelligence and so forth. Here McNamara, I don’t think he advocated it so much, but he did give the okay to dumping these people in the military.

LC: Now the animus for this program, you suggested was linked to Patrick Moynihan. Can you talk a little bit more about that end of things?

BL: As I understand it and I’m pretty confident of what I’m speaking, though I can’t document it right at this very moment.

LC: That’s fine. Go ahead.

BL: As I understand it, he did think that this would be good. In some respects the military does help some people grow up. I believe that he saw this as a way to get these people out of the permanent ruts they were in. They would receive discipline, education,
training, job skills, and they would be re-born as a functioning human being whereas
otherwise they’d be left to rot in the ruts that they were in. I suspect that was—on the
face of it, that’s a very benign and admirable objective. But you have to ask, does it
work? By all accounts it did not work. Again, I don’t know that any studies have ever
been conducted, but I think it’s safe to assume that these people caused a disproportionate
amount of problems and there are some statements made that the military determined that
Project One Hundred Thousand enlistees, or draftees, again almost three hundred
thousand of them, were something like twice as likely to die in combat than regular. I’ve
seen that cited in the literature and I can’t pin it down right now, but that stands to reason.

LC: Was there any indication that you’ve seen that enlistment standards going
forward from the time of this project were actually lowered, that is the thresholds were
lowered either in the psych tests or the functionality tests or capability evaluations for
incoming people as well?

BL: Yeah. That was the whole basis of Project One Hundred Thousand.

LC: Okay. So it wasn’t going back and getting necessarily people that had
already been reviewed and dismissed from entering the service, but this was going
forward from it’s implementation?

BL: As I understand it, yes.

LC: It affected at your estimate some three hundred thousand people over the
course of the Vietnam era.

BL: Almost three hundred thousand. It’s not my estimate. That’s cited in the
literature somewhere. Some people look at the name of it and they say, “Oh, that means
you put a hundred thousand of these deficient people in the military.” No, it wasn’t. It
was almost three times that many. (Dog barks) That should not—it’s not only
detrimental to the military, it’s detrimental to some of these poor people who were
thrown in an environment that they simply weren’t capable of dealing with. It’s just not
right. McNamara should have known better. Again, I don’t think he was the driving
force, but he was certainly aware of it or should have been. Apparently there’s no record
of him ever having any doubts or expressing any skepticism over Project One Hundred
Thousand. I’ve never heard him mention it at all. Here’s another thing. Early in
American involvement in the war, of course the war started in 1945 when the
communists started killing non-communist nationalists. That’s when Vietnam was
impregnated with war, 1945, not 1961 or ’50 or anything like that. They had a program
to send these North Vietnamese commandos into North Vietnam. They’d take them in by
boat and parachute a bunch of them in there. The people who were running the program
came back and said, “This is not working. Every single one of these people, they’re
being caught. We think they’re being turned. The program simply isn’t working. Let’s
stop.” McNamara said, “No, no keep going. We’ll send a message,” that favorite
mantra. “We’ll send a message to Hanoi.” This is in the literature as well and I can’t cite
the source at the moment. But here he is continuing with the program that is not
working, that is getting people killed and captured simply to send a message. I think it
was Colby that said, “If you want to send a message, use an envelope.” This is horrid.
This is a horrid calloused indifference to human life. You don’t want a commander-in-
chief up there worrying about every single fatality. I mean, people think that’s crass to
say that, but when I was there I didn’t want anybody that was in charge paralyzed with
worry over whether I would die. I wanted a guy that, “Let’s do it.” I think most people
would say the same thing. Then you feel comfortable. Lord knows, they did spend
probably some every uncomfortable moments in the wee hours of the morning thinking
of the fatalities and the deaths and everything else. McNamara’s indifference is really a
bit spooky. Of course, now I’m certain that he was not immune from his conscience, but
to continue going on with that demonstrates profound naïveté, which is not something
you’d like to see in a national leader.

LC: Now, by naïveté are you talking about his recent books and movie
campaign?

BL: They’re just an extension of that. I just saw him on television the other
night. He said, “Go read Chapter Seven in War Without End or whatever and that shows
why the Vietnam War couldn’t be won.” He’s in the same position as a 16th century
physician who was confronted with the plague. Doesn’t know what the bacteria is, has
no clue of anything. Again, it’s iatrogenic. The treatment makes the disease worse. He
just doesn’t have a clue or he does and he’s taking that protective coloration to hide the
fact that he does. I don’t think he does. Again I’ll go back to that statement. One of his
colleagues said, “Bob, the war is about people and ideas and Bob is weak in those areas.”
It’s just amazing, utterly amazing. But those two things are among all these other things we’ve talked about.

LC: Right, exactly.

BL: Which are indictments of the man. It is dangerous, too, to vent all of one’s wrath on him or anybody else or Jane Fonda or Westmoreland. We’ve got to go beyond that and think through what they were saying and determine why what they were saying did or did not work or did or did not make sense. What he was doing did not make sense at all. He was just completely out of his element as was Clark Clifford, no business being secretary of defense.

LC: Okay. Can you talk about Mr. Clifford, Secretary Clifford for a bit? Why do you say he really didn’t have any business in that position?

BL: A secretary of defense should have a somewhat a grasp of world politics and history, military matters. Clark Clifford was just an inside power broker in Washington, D.C. He’d observed all this stuff going back into the ’40s. He sat there with Truman and heard all the gossip and everything else, but he wasn’t well versed in that. That’d be the same as my walking over to the Chicago White Sox park in Chicago and saying, “I’ve seen two thousand baseball games so I think you ought to sign me up.” It just doesn’t work. Secondly, he was basically going against the orders of Johnson. If you’re going to be a commander-in-chief, you expect your people to follow through with you, but he was silently leading this velvet coup d’état within the bowels of the government. He should have expressed that openly.

LC: By what actions?

BL: In trying to just get out of Vietnam. To hell with it. Let’s get out of there.

Goodpaster, General Goodpaster went to Paris with one of the first negotiating teams. He went with Averell Harriman and some of these other guys who had the same mindset as Clifford did. They were basically saying, “We’re going to just get out of Vietnam.” Goodpaster and Harriman apparently had some words because Harriman said, the arrogant son of a gun that he was, “This is what we’re going to do.” Goodpaster said, “Those aren’t my instructions, sir. We’re not just bailing out.” Of course, Harriman was the genius who negotiated the wonderful Laotian Accords of 1962 by which all North Vietnamese were to have left the country and ten did, ten thousand stayed which is why
the Ho Chi Minh Trail is sometimes called the Averell Harriman Memorial Highway.

But none of those people, granted they probably had as they saw, good intentions. Here’s this mysterious quagmire that we don’t understand. Because they didn’t understand it, we’re not going to win. It’s tearing the country up. Let’s just get out. You have to acknowledge at that time, as John Kerry does now, that any signals that you’re going to bag it ad bug out only encourages the other side. They don’t have to win. In the case of Vietnam that’s what communists were doing after 1969. They were simply just keep killing Americans. It was their war of attrition, their body count. Just kill Americans.

Even if we lose two hundred of our guys to ten of theirs, which happened on occasion when they attacked some of these fire bases it was just idiotic. Now Saddam Hussein, not Hussein but the adversaries in Iraq, they don’t have to win. All they’ve got to do is kill enough Americans to discourage the American public and to fuel John Kerry’s political campaign and they win. If you’re not going to show up to achieve your objectives, i.e. win the war, however that’s defined you don’t have to occupy Hanoi. You don’t have to impose a Pax Americana on Iraq. But you must have objectives, you must have a route to those objectives that’s clearly foreseen and well thought out and then go for it or just don’t even bother. Clifford, all those guys, Averell Harriman, “Hey you’re half way in a war, let’s negotiate our way out.” All that did to Hanoi was saying, “Look we’re not winning this thing, but all we’ve got to do is keep killing Americans.” So Americans died because these people were doing what they were doing. If they acknowledged that say, “I know, but it’s for a better good. Fewer will die,” et cetera.

Okay, if you have some sort of rationale by that, but they have to acknowledge it publicly and they do not.

LC: Thinking about 1968 for a minute, if the presidential election that year had gone to the Democrats instead of to Nixon, can you kind of speculate as to who Humphrey might have surrounded himself with and what his path might have been?

BL: I don’t know who his people would have been. I’m not that well versed and my memory is rusty of the time. It certainly would have been people of like mindset. There certainly would have been an accelerated move to get out which would have spurred Hanoi on. One of the great mistakes that people make is saying, “Hell, we could
have got the same deal in ’69 that we got in ’73.” That is totally, emphatically and utterly false.

LC: Why?

BL: First of all the South, Hanoi didn’t agree to terms until they stipulated Thieu had to go. They didn’t agree to let him stay until Nixon dropped all kinds of grief on them. But the most important factor is is that because of McNamara’s policies, which retarded Vietnamization, I don’t even know if we got into that, but he did retard it. Westmoreland asked him early on, “We need more stuff for ARVN so they can become more capable and they can start climbing the learning curve,” and he didn’t get it. Westmoreland also said, “Look, we’ve got to have a people-to-people program here so the American public can understand the South Vietnamese as a people and see what’s really going on here so it means something to them.” McNamara said no to that, too. Anyhow, he retarded Vietnamization. Then it was only in ’68 that the RVNAF started getting M-16s instead of all the World War II stuff they had. They never got the firepower. They never got the armor or artillery, but had the deal been cut in ’69, Vietnamization’s growth process, such as it was—it certainly wasn’t perfect, but it certainly was there—would not have been allowed to continue. To say we could get the same deal in ’69 as we got in ’73 is profoundly idiotic.

LC: Bill, can you talk a little bit about the relationship between Westmoreland and McNamara? This, again, not based on your own personal listening of their conversations, but on your study of the period?

BL: I don’t think he cared for McNamara too much. I think the best inkling you can get from it is probably in Davidson’s book. Davidson, of course, was Westmoreland’s G-2. In that book, Davidson actually wonders why Westmoreland has not been more vocal in criticizing. Not just McNamara, but the Bundys and all these other people and the raw deal he got. Good question. I’m sure that Westmoreland was not happy with the restrains placed upon him, because he did continue with plans for Operation El Paso and Operation York, which two have culminated in the blocking and seizure and holding of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which the communists have now said would have stopped the war in its tracks. They’ve admitted it. But I can’t help but to think that he—I’m sure he and McNamara don’t play golf and never wanted to, either.
LC: Right. Do you have an appraisal to offer about Creighton Abrams’s management of the war after Westmoreland went back to D.C.?

BL: It pretty much conforms to what’s said in Sorley’s book, *A Better War*. Everybody disagrees with everybody on something somewhere, but in the main, you’d have to say that Abrams was a hell of a good COMUSMACV, Commander of United States Forces, Vietnam, and a decent person. He did care about our allies. It wasn’t just a war game for him. In fact, in Sorley’s book, they close out with an interview, which of course is written after Abrams passed away. They close out with an interview with Creighton Abrams’s son. I think Robert Chaplin said something to his son to the effect of, “Well, it’s too bad your father didn’t have a better war,” a war in which he received support from the American people and so forth and so on. Abrams’s son told Chaplin, “I don’t see it that way. My dad thought the Vietnamese were worth it.” I don’t have anything bad to say about Abrams, that I know of.

LC: Interesting. I want to ask you about a couple of other big figures.

BL: We’re getting out of my realm here. This is all peering through the fog of book pages and so forth and so on.

LC: Sure, but as a tactical intelligence analyst, then, I wonder if you can offer any kind of appraisal or evaluation of the Phoenix Program, the initiative to undermine the VC infrastructure in the South.

BL: It was to destroy it. It was to disarm it. The objective was to destroy it. Yeah. I wasn’t in Phoenix, but I worked with a bunch of people that were and have since come to know a bunch of people that were in Phoenix.

LC: Yes.

BL: Point number one, the thought that this is some sort of massive assassination program is just nonsensical. It is just sheer fantasy. The people that believe that should probably have more fun if they go to a Star Trek convention and dress up as Klingons or something. It’s just not so. I know people that were in Phoenix, and I met people that were “Phoenix” if you will, Vietnamese. It should have been started in 1960, but it wasn’t. It made all kinds of sense in the world. It wasn’t an assassination program *per se*. All it was was a combining of all intelligence sources to try and determine what this peer through the fog of ignorance and see this invisible infrastructure, the administrative
machine, the gears and the drive shaft that made this communist thing work, a
tremendous organization. The line and block chart of a VC organization is just amazing.
It would take a computer designer to understand what was going on because you’ve got
this tremendous organization. Then you’ve got the parallel hierarchies going back to
Stalin of the party members who are infused with each and every echelon of the
functioning organization.

LC: Yes.

BL: It’s very, very, very complex. It’s another example of when people say,
“Well”—like Phil Caputo has said, “The guerillas beat technology.” Morely Safer said,
“Oh, rubber sandals beat technology.” Absolutely not. That organizations was, in terms
of sophistication and modernity, it was vastly superior to anything we had. So anyhow,
you had to find out what the gears were, what this machinery was like and who the gears
were and who was making what happen. Of course, all of them had false names and
there was compartmentalization. One person didn’t know the party secretary in the other
district. It’s very, very tough. But once they got started—and of course you had a
shakedown cruise. It’s still not functioning until it started in ’67 when they formulated
CORDS, which was put together in May of ’67, which was only about seven years too
late. Incidentally in Thailand, they put together what they called CSOC, the Communist
Suppression Operations Command in 1965. We didn’t come up with CORDS until 1967.
It’s absolutely—it’s another example of an absurdity. But CSOC worked quite well for
the Thais, too. You have a shakedown cruise so even though they started in ’67, ’68, it
wasn’t really getting up to snuff. But later on it did, and the communists have since
admitted, “Yeah, that was very, very, very effective. Very effective.” You start
dismantling that infrastructure and you are taking the machine apart. We have no more
levers to pull. So all in all, it was very, very effective. Of the, I don’t know, eighty-
seven thousand VCI (Viet Cong infrastructure) that were neutralized, I think about thirty
thousand were killed and twenty-eight thousand were captured. The remainder twenty-
five thousand, twenty-six thousand defected. A lot of those that were killed, it wasn’t
like an assassination program. Hell, if you were a VCI big shot, Viet Cong infrastructure,
you have bodyguards. You don’t travel by yourself. You’re protected. So, some of
those guys were just killed in chance opportunity meeting engagements. One unit bumps
into another and they have a firefight and go through the documents and everything else. Son of a gun, this is Anh Ba, and Anh Ba is Nguyen Van Xam, and he’s the district proselytizing coordinator for da-da-da-da-da. You go, “Okay. Well, throw him in the Phoenix kill thing.”

LC: Right. Put that number over in that column.

JM: Right. Yeah. Was it abuse? Well, of course. Abuse is part of the human condition. I’m not excusing it. I’m probably more of a radical when it comes to punishing bad people and those that betray public trust the most. I mean good Lord, if you’re going to start demanding perfection in any form of human endeavor, then you’re just going to quit. Hell, close the school systems down. Let’s get rid of hospitals, no more police, the heck with this if it’s not perfect.

LC: Bill, I want to ask you why you picked 1960 as a year when something like a Phoenix or an (?) or whatever should have been organized?

BL: Well, actually, that’s when things started to boil over where they could see it wasn’t going to go away.

LC: Okay.

BL: Or started to start to see. If people were well versed and actually they should have done it in ’69 or ’59 or ’58 or ’57 as a preemptive measure, but of course, the South of the Republic of Vietnam didn’t have the administrative structure to begin with. It was this sea of rice paddies with island villages all over. There just wasn’t a machine in the administrative structure to handle this and to train people to do it. We were tasked with trying to bring South Vietnam into the 20th Century, screaming and wailing from the 19th Century, and it’s a tough thing to do, but the people that were in charge should have looked down and said, “Hey, this is a problem. Let’s spend a month really getting into this. We’re just going to—even if we don’t read ourselves or do it ourselves, let’s put together a task force to get this stuff for us.” Within a month’s time—and you can’t say, “Well, it couldn’t be done.” Bullshit. Excuse my language.

LC: That’s okay.

BL: I can do it right now. Give me a month and I would explain what has to be done as could many, many others, not just myself.

LC: Sure.
BL: Here is the nature of this disease. Here’s how it exists. Here’s how it grows.
Here’s how it attacks. Here’s how it thrives, and so forth and so on. Any plumber does
the same thing. You analyze the problem in all its manifestations. That was never done.
That was never done. “Well, send some more helicopters. Well, send some Marines.
Well, send some more.” Despite the fact that people in the lower levels were trying to
send word up. “Listen, don’t do this. Let’s do something else. It’s not working.” So
they should have had the wherewithal to see by no later than 1960 that, “Aha. This is
where this thing is going to go, and this is how it’s going to grow and how it thrives and
how it works.” Same problem-solving procedure that any mechanic undertakes, any
architect, any foot surgeon, anybody. What’s the nature of the problem? I forget who
said it, but the problem well stated is half-solved. I think it was William James. But we
never even got that. It was never well stated ever except in the lower-functioning levels,
where people would try to get the message up and it just—iron rule. If you have good
ideas, they’ll go max, absolute max, two levels up in the hierarchy, and that’s where they
died.

LC: Yeah.

BL: So that should have been undertaken in conjunction with more attention paid
to corruption in South Vietnam, civil abuses in South Vietnam, which is a tough thing to
do because Diem, he was self destructing and he was basically irrational from the ’60s on
or 1960 on. But short of that, short of attaining a degree of thrilling performance,
certainly there could have been more propaganda directed to the South Vietnamese, to the
North Vietnamese, to the American people. “This is what we envision. This is what
we’re trying to do. It’s not perfect yet, but by golly we’re working on it.” That was
never done. That was just nonsense platitudes about democracy and freedom and so forth
and so on.

LC: The program that you mentioned in Thailand, can you give a little bit more
detail on that, the program that was initiated in ’65? Who was the driving force behind
that, for example, or what do you know about its organization?

BL: Well, the Thais living in the neighborhood had a view of—again, in ’62 they
offered to throw in with us on the Ho Chi Minh Trail interdiction campaign which would
be block and hold. None of this go in there and spurn things and smash things and leave.
No, this is stopping right now. But they were beginning to see the results of Hanoi-trained Thai insurgents. Hanoi started training insurgents in North Vietnam at Hoa Binh training camp in 1962. Then they began going back. If you graph the fatalities and military activity, you’ll see from about the mid-'60s on, by God, it’s going up every single year. More policemen killed, there’s more abductions, more of this. It got to be a nasty brushfire war. It never made the headlines, but people were getting killed. It got worse and worse and worse, and it peaked around, I think, the late 1970s. But in any event, the Thais said, “We’re going to have to do something here.” So the Communist Suppression Operations Command was put together under a guy by the name of Saiyud Kerdphol, who by all accounts was just one hell of a good man, an intelligent man. He said, “Hey, this is a war and we’ve got to use our heads and fight it intelligently.” So he had, of course, the Thai border patrol police and the—oh, there’s another entity they had. I can’t think of it right offhand. You had this smoldering brushfire war going on in northeastern, northern Thailand. Then you had a separate spillover insurgency in southern Thailand, in the panhandle, and another mini-insurgency in northwestern Thailand. These people say, “Oh, everybody’s afraid of communism or the Domino Theory, it was a joke.” I’m sorry. It simply was not. If they don’t want to acknowledge that this may have boiled over and gotten worse and worse and worse. That’s one thing. But to deny people the information to conclude for themselves, and perhaps there was reason to agree that you had a domino syndrome in effect, not a theory. This is a smoldering tinderbox. Do you let it keep going, or what?

LC: What kinds of things was CSOC actually operationally doing?

BL: I think it was basically the phase one, early phase two type of counter operations. A lot of it occurred in northeastern Thailand, which is the poorest area of Thailand. I think, to the best of my knowledge, the government came up with agricultural programs and it trained cadre. They were able to administrate. They had a mechanism to deal with this, which the South Vietnamese did not. Because essentially, the Thais, you can go into rural areas in Thailand and say, “Boy, this is the Bronze Age.” But still in all, they have a functioning twentieth century government. They were able to put together an administrative mechanism to control and coordinate something like this. The Republic of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia have no such thing. They just didn’t have
that status of national administrative development. The Thais did. I don’t know all the
details, but they didn’t send divisions. Although there were some major operations up in
the tri-border area around ’72, ’73, but most of the nature of counter-insurgent activity
was the kind that was suggested by some of the South Vietnamese in Vietnam in the early
’60s, i.e. mobile, highly trained, highly skilled small units, just constabulary infantry
kind of a thing. We don’t need a nine-thousand-man division and go trade some thrill
here with APCs (armored personnel carriers) and all this stuff. Of course, the irony of it
is, is that that’s what they did need in 1973, or ’72 and ’75. But at that time, you needed
a very mobile, highly-skilled, highly-trained, highly-motivated, well-disciplined people in
small units that could respond quickly and intelligently to communist operations. For
lack of details, that to the best of my knowledge, characterizes what the Thais did and for
that and other reasons. Thailand was different. You have Theraveda Buddhism as
opposed to the Hinayana in Vietnam. It has much more of a hold on people than
Buddhism in Vietnam. You also had loyalty to the king, who was respected and loved.
You also had the fact that Thailand never had a period of colonialism, a holy cause. But
even Robert Shaplen said that in the early ’60s, Thailand looked very similar, despite
those other differences. But it still looked similar to what had happened in Vietnam in
the late ’50s. Though if you—you should be allowed the freedom to conclude that this is
a problem because it could very well, very well get worse.

LC: There’s another country in Southeast Asia that I want to just ask you about
quickly. This is a question about the same period, sort of ’62 to ’65 or ’66. The country
is Indonesia. There was, of course, a strong communist long-lasting like from the 1920s,
early 1920s, communist party organized there, and an important confrontation between
the communist and non-communist elements in the mid-’60s. Can you talk about that
and if in your mind that had any impact on American strategic thinking about the
importance of investing in South Vietnam?

BL: It did, I think. In the case of—people have to remember that there had been
insurgency in the Philippines. There had been insurgency in Malaysia or Malaya, at the
time. There had been insurgency and was in Burma. There was actually two communist
movements. There was a Red Flag and a White Flag Communist in Burma. So you’ve
got this stuff going on all over. Now again, if people want to say, “Oh, Domino Theory,
ha ha, what a joke,” they still have to say, “Oh, by the way, but you should know why
some people did place credibility in this.” They don’t do that. That’s what upsets me.
Now Indonesia, the communists had tried to take over in ’48, and they failed.
LC: Yes, that’s right.
BL: So again, you’ve got these smoldering fires all over the place and these still
hot coals. Then in, I think it was ’65, basically they tried to—communists have very,
very many ways to seize power. One of them is just simply a putsch like they used in the
Czechoslovakia in ’48.
LC: Yes.
BL: So basically, they literally and figuratively tried to decapitate the Indonesian
leadership and instantly established a communist government in Indonesia. Well, it
didn’t work, and they paid for it, a very, very high price. Hundreds of thousands of
people got killed. It was a pretty wretched bloodbath from what I understand. But
Sukarno was publicly supporting the NLF. He had NLF delegations coming to visit him.
He asked the United States for more military equipment. The United States said, “But
you don’t need any.” He said, “Okay, I’ll go to the Soviet Union,” and that’s exactly
what he did. Here’s—and Sukarno is another one of those megalomaniac flakes. He
even wanted to call the Indian Ocean the Indonesian Ocean, believe it or not. Then he
started a war with Malaysia, the Konfrontasi period.
BL: Of course, that didn’t make headlines, but once again—there were several
hundred people killed. These are people that died. Their families are not consoled by the
fact that, “Well, it’s not big news. It’s not a major war yet.” So what? Indonesia,
Philippines, all that whole—it goes straight across the board. There was the prospect for
increased communist insurgency. People say, “Well, there’s just another ideology.”
Well, communism has killed a hundred thousand people, and if you don’t think it makes
sense morally or pragmatically to be opposed to people like that, then I guess we’re
operating on a different moral scale. They have simply brought nothing but death,
misery, destruction, poverty, malnutrition, disease, and retarded development everywhere
they’ve gone. So I don’t see why anyone should be ashamed of any anti-communist.
Which is, again, contrary to what I might have thought when I was in college and I was
supposedly learning all this stuff because you just never heard it. This is stuff you’d find
out on your own. But no, Indonesia was definitely, up until the coup, the coup that was
defeated, was a problem, definitely a problem. Then people say, “Well, what the hell.
It’s just an island.” No, you get this Finlandization. What if Japan says, “Oh, geez, we
better not”—actually, Sihanouk is a case that verifies the domino principle and the
Finlandization concept because in the early ’60s he basically figured the United States
isn’t going to be able or won’t deal with this. I’m going to hedge my bets. I’m going to
be nice to Hanoi because they’re going to win in the long run. That’s how it worked.
Sihanouk had no confidence, rightfully so, apparently, in the American government and
its ability to formulate an intelligent policy and then implement it to the end.

LC: So your view is that there was indeed a larger strategic picture that was
informing U.S. investment in Southeast Asia?

JM: Absolutely. In fact, I think his name is Peter Lyon. He wrote a book in 1975
or thereabouts about the state of affairs in Southeast Asia, everything, a very well written
book, much superior to what you get in a lot of American-authored books about that.

LC: Yes, he’s a British academic.
BL: Yeah, impeccable scholarship. But he said that basically, that insurgency or
the seeds of insurgency are everywhere in Southeast Asia, even Singapore. It was
everywhere. He’s right. He was right at the time. If people want to say, “Oh, that’s
okay. They’re really good guys,” and they have to defend this thing. But again, for
people to smugly chuckle at the Domino Theory is an act of just outrageous deficient
scholarship. It’s profoundly stupid.

LC: It’s become—the Domino Theory has really become almost shorthand for
idiocy, or something along those lines.
BL: Yes. But the fact of the matter is that you look on the other side of the fence,
which nobody ever does, look what Che Guevara was saying. We went one, two, three,
four, five Vietnams. To them the Domino Theory wasn’t a theory. It was an operational
plan. To us, we should have seen it for what it was, is a phenomena, a syndrome. It
wasn’t a theory, a supposition that remains to be proven because all you have to do is get
a world map and color all the countries that are communist in green or purple or
whatever, and then you go, “Look. They’re all next to each other. Son of a gun.”
LC: Yes. Or countries that at one particular time or another had active or
growing communist organizations with military capacity of some kind, paramilitary even.
BL: In Southeast Asia?
LC: Yeah.
BL: All of them did.
LC: Exactly, yeah.
BL: All of them did.
LC: Bill, let’s change tack just for a moment. I’d like to just ask you to follow up
on some earlier comments that you made about the literature on the war.
BL: Can I go on hold for about—?
LC: Yeah. Okay, Bill, I was asking about the state of the secondary literature on
the war. I know this is something that’s been of concern to you, even to the extent that
you’re writing about it yourself. I wonder if you can talk about what deficiencies you see
in the secondary literature now, and if you want, the popular literature about the war that
has motivated you to actually sally forth and write about it on your own.
BL: You have to say that it’s intellectually and historically invalid. It’s a
compilation of mythology.
LC: Okay.
BL: As opposed to a hard, concise, tight, logical, rational, factual explanation of
what happened and why. These people are to me in many respects the same as someone
who tries to design a skyscraper and has no concept of structural engineering. They go,
“Well, put this here, put this there. It doesn’t matter if it holds, works, stands up over
time, whatever.” What seems to have happened is, the conventional myths were
established in the ’60s and they were in part true then in the early ’60s, but things
changed in Vietnam. No one picks up on that. In fact, Peter Braestrup, I think, had said
that David Halberstam was sort of right in the early ’60s, but all he did was write the
same thing over and over and over again. I think that’s a pretty succinct explanation of
what’s happened. There was a turn in the road. The historians and the reporters and
everybody else missed it. History went down one path and because of the news media,
because of bizarre predilection for communist adherence over here, or this romance of the
guerrilla war and everything else, it was like it was a late ’60s version of one of the Star
Wars movies with those little furry animals defeating the bad guys. “Oh, this is exciting. This is a good story,” but it was historically invalid. Now it seems to be mutating. There’s a competition, of course. There’s always this one-upmanship. “Well, I came up with something better.” So some of the books that have come out, and I’m not talking by a left-wing press or anything. I’m talking about Oxford University Press or some of these other companies are demonstrably larded with an abundance of total utter nonfactual, mythological occurrences, phenomena, syndromes, everything else. It’s just appalling. I’ve seen statements. This is not common, but it still illustrates the point that the United States Army tried to drain the northern Mekong Delta. That’s impossible. First of all, they never did. Secondly, there was only one brigade of the U.S. Army in the Mekong Delta, and that was only for two years. There were no American forces to speak of, aside from that brigade and the riverine forces, Brown Water Navy.

LC: Where did you see this reference? I mean, do you remember?

BL: It was actually in a natural history magazine. The ironic thing is, is after they said this in the magazine—first of all, you couldn’t do it, even if you wanted to, and they didn’t want to. You couldn’t do it. Not unless you put a giant umbrella over the entire Mekong Delta because you get eighty inches of rain there each year. You’re six or seven or eight feet above sea level. The Mekong River flows through there. So you have to put a cofferdam around the mouth of the Mekong River, dam the Mekong in Cambodia, build a giant umbrella over—you couldn’t drain the Plain of Reeds or the northern Mekong Delta any more than you could bring Pike’s Peak to Miami, Florida. It’s just, it’s totally, utterly impossible. The irony of it is, is a letter to the editor to this same magazine in this next issue came from a woman who said, “Boy, I read that, and I just got through reading Neil Sheehan’s A Bright Shining Lie. Now I really understand what we were doing in Vietnam.” If it weren’t so nauseating, it would be outrageously funny, that people believe this idiocy.

LC: Talk a little bit about A Bright Shining Lie. It’s a book that’s gone through many, many printings now. It’s now kind of an icon, really, of the literature. It purports to be, obviously, a biography of John Paul Vann.

BL: One of these subtle innuendos damning the American involvement as a parallel sub-theme. It just seeps in your pores like nerve gas. That, “Oh, God, I’m just so
mad that I belong to this country, to this evil, horrible thing.” Yeah, we’ll talk about it.

Sheehan is a cherry picker and he’s got his own agenda and he’s going to promote it, and facts, reality, logic is not going to stand in his way, a couple of anecdotal observations. Somewhere he talks about Vann’s career as a parallel to explain how this whole thing was just this wretched impossibility, and without any redeeming value whatsoever. It starts with when Vann was on Kien Hoa. He said that the Kien Hoa province in the Delta Ben Tre, another name for it, was just crawling with VC. It was. It was when Vann was there in the early years. It was. It was one of the worst provinces in the country. Ben Tre, I think we discussed this before, but Ben Tre is not just a province. It’s like Valley Forge. Nguyen Thi Binh is from Ben Tre. Nguyen Thi Dinh is from Ben Tre. They’re NLF, PRG big shots. The Vietnamese themselves used to make fun of the play on words, Kien Hoa, that word for “ant” is con kien. So it’s allegorically, Kien Hoa was just anthill. It was just crawling with VC. It wasn’t that way after 1969. People were defecting in droves. The identifiable, known VC forces were dwindling. They gave up. They quit. There was a terrorist problem there. There was continuing, residual pro-VC sentiments, and so forth and so on, but the Kien Hoa of 1971, ’72, ’73, et cetera was a far cry. This massive change, if Sheehan has any skills as a historian and the integrity and honesty that we expect from plumbers and historians, he should have said, “Oh”—just an asterisk, “Oh, by the way, in 1969 and thereafter”—he doesn’t do it. He doesn’t do it. Okay.

Then he talks about Ap Bac. Okay, the 7th ARVN Division did stumble and everything else. There’s things there that he didn’t—he interviewed a bunch of Vietnamese, two of whom I’ve talked to and both of them hate his guts because he misconstrued what they told him. But that aside, a year prior to that, the 7th Division had pounded one of those VC battalions. Pounded it. No credit. Nothing. 7th Division had pounded one of those VC battalions. Pounded it. No credit. Nothing. No, it’s not in the newspaper. No big headlines, “VC forces fumble and fail and are decimated.” Nothing. ARVN screws up at Ap Bac, okay. There’s another story to that, too, but we’ll let that one ride for now. A year later, the 7th ARVN Division hits the 514th Battalion, which is the one that they—elements of which they engaged at Ap Bac, and they hammered them. Did that make the news? No. Nothing about it at all. Nothing

LC: Where was that encountered? Do you remember?
BL: It’s in Dinh Tuong Province. The 7th ARVN Division was based in My Tho, and then Dong Tam was where the 9th Division, or elements of the 9th Division just upriver were stationed, northern Delta. So 7th Division did fairly well there. I’ve talked to advisors who were there early on and everything else, and the 7th Division like Vietnam itself in its national infancy did have its problems, but I’ve talked to guys who were there in ’66, ’67. One guy even told me, he said they conducted the armed mechanized infantry element of the 7th ARVN Division conducted a picture-perfect online assault on a prepared VC position and overran it. This was in ’67, couldn’t ask any more of them. This is perfect. Then fast forward to, I think, it was ’69 or ’70, when Quang Nam was appointed commanding general of 7th ARVN Division. From that point on, however good or bad they might have been before, there was no question they were basically the lords of the northern Delta. They just pounded the VC/NVA. It was increasingly NVA. People say, “Well, gee, why didn’t the war stop?” Well, because the stupid Ho Chi Minh Trail was open, that’s why. They keep on sending these poor North Vietnamese indoctrinated robots down to get killed. But Sheehan should’ve, again, just an asterisk, just an asterisk, just a footnote, “Oh, by the way, when Nguyen Quang Nam took over the 7th ARVN Division, everything changed. It was just—they became the dominant unit in the northern Delta,” and—here’s where, he’s a historian, he should say that when the 7th ARVN Division was hammered on New Year’s Day of 1963, they were opposed to—I don’t have the exact numbers, but order of magnitude is correct—they were opposed by five main force and regional force VC battalions in their AO, area of operations. At the time, when they were the dominant unit in the northern Delta, they were opposed by twenty-four, most of whom were manned by NVA.

LC: Right.

BL: In ’73, the 7th ARVN Division overran Tri Phap, which is a very hard VC/NVA base area, secret zone, whatever you want to call it. All these prepared defense positions, they went in there and just ran them out. Never made the news media, and Sheehan never mentioned it. You look in the index of his book, *A Bright Shining Lie*, 7th ARVN Division, there’s no entries after 1963. So he did in Kien Hoa. By the way, in the ’72 offensive, there were some fairly heavy attacks in northern Kien Hoa province. They were not put down by ARVN regulars. They were put down by, defeated by local RF/PF,
Field Force Police and everything else. That would not have happened in ’62, because the VC were smashing everything, including ARVN regular units. Now main force VC units with NVA fillers are defeated by what they called the little people, the little people in the hierarchy, the RF/PF, the National Field Force Police et cetera and so forth.

LC: Yes, exactly.

BL: So a complete flip-flop. Sheehan omits that. He does the same thing in Hau Nghia. He’s accurate when he describes how bad Hau Nghia was when Vann was there. In fact, there was even two district advisory teams that were pulled out. Get them out. VC controlled—it’s not just, they controlled the night. They controlled these daylight ambushes there. By 1972, everything had changed. The VC were on the run. They were hiding. They were scrambling for their lives. The Chieu Hoi center was packed with people. You can read this all in Herrington’s Silence as a Weapon. The Hau Nghia RF absolutely pounded three NVA regiments in the ’72 offensive. Three. Now, people would always talk about, “Oh, the wily General Giap.” Well, if he was so bloody wily, why did he send the three regiments in piecemeal, one at a time, rather than commit them all together? Probably because of logistics. But still in all, that was stupid, especially after the first one got it.

LC: Yeah, to keep sending after—

BL: Then he sent another one in. Then actually the third one, the 271st, they didn’t even get into Cambodia. They got the hell beat out—or, Vietnam—the ARVN RF went into Cambodia and got them there, really, really pounded them. So here’s three cases. Kien Hoa, 7th ARVN Division, Hau Nghia, where things changed radically in the span of four, five, six years. You don’t know that from Sheehan’s book.

LC: Is this an indictment more of his using Vann as a vehicle to explore or explain Vietnam? I mean, is that the basic problem, or is there something else going on with his authorship and his intentions, his, as you say, agenda?

BL: I don’t know what motivates people to do this. It has to be a willingness to disregard elements of the truth to concoct a story, which is, hey, it earned him fame and fortune as a writer.

LC: Right, and a Pulitzer Prize.
BL: Oh, my goodness, yeah. I mean, this is it. This is like a—I compare it to these monster truck contests or the old Big Daddy Roth bizarre hot rod contests. Well, these things are bizarre looking and everything else, but what good are they for pragmatic sampling? Nothing. It seems like the more outrageous you make them, the more horrible, so Americans can wallow in the self-loathing and masochism, “Oh, this is great. I love it.” I don’t know, but he doesn’t know what he’s talking about. He was on CSPAN about a year ago, live, he and Halberstam. Sheehan was coming up with some of the most outrageous nonsense. He said, “Oh, these reeducation camps, they didn’t shoot anybody.” I’m sorry, Mr. Sheehan, but there’s available, documented evidence suggests that the number of summary executions after the communists took over from 1975 to 1980 approaches sixty-five thousand. That was a study conducted by interviewing people who had been in reeducation camps and all the anecdotal evidence says nothing but suggest they shot a lot of people, a lot of people. He’s there on national television and says, “Oh, they didn’t shoot anybody.” He got called—there are other people in news media, Zalin Grant is one. In his book—God, I can’t remember the title.

LC: That’s okay.

BL: He peripherally examined or questioned the outlook of—well, in his case it was Halberstam. It’s just—and Sheehan. Even in a news media, people said these guys—Sheehan has gone over the edge. This is now an obsession with him. He’s possessed by this. When you’re obsessed/possessed, then adherency to truth is not a primary consideration. So he’s like, somebody is making this big monster truck, and he’s just putting anything and everything he can on it. Whether it’s true or not is irrelevant. If it’s phantasmagoric, so be it. Again, I talked to two Vietnamese who were at Ap Bac for some length of time, and they were livid with anger. Southeast Asians are not renowned for visible displays of anger. You have to be, oh, kind of attuned to their cultural body language and this and that, but in both cases, these guys were really mad that Sheehan just—he distorted it.

LC: Bill, tell me a little bit, if you can, about your observations of the Vietnamese community in the U.S. at this time. We talked a little bit about this last time when discussing your foray to Washington and discussions with John Kerry’s staff.

BL: If I can add one more thing on the state of the secondary literature.
LC: Please do.

BL: What it comes down to is at the present, if the average American sat down and said, “Boy, I’ve heard so much”—say, a thirty-year-old, forty-year old American. “I’ve heard so much about this Vietnam stuff. It’s so confusing. I’m going to quit my job. I’m going to dedicate five years of my life to discover just what it was all about.” If they’re not really lucky, they’re not going to be able to understand anything of find out anything, because the historians have done, pseudo-historians have done such a poor job of displaying the art of the historian and the means by which a historian discerns and explains the truth. So many of the factual ingredients are buried and smothered under layers of anecdotal goo that it is virtually impossible. Now think about this. If someone really said, “I want to find out about this,” they can’t. Even if they go at it a year, and I’ve talked to people who’ve become, oh, not obsessed with the subject of Vietnam, but sort of hooked on it. They read these books. They’ll still say, “Well, isn’t this true, that this was so?” I go, “No, it wasn’t. It might’ve been true five percent of the time, but not eighty percent of the time.” What if the contrary was true eighty percent of the time? What’s your definition of truth? If a grain of truth exists, does that make it the operating, driving truth, or is it part of a contradictory greater truth? Then hell, they don’t even know that Laos, Cambodia—“Oh, I didn’t know, really.” They think that the North Vietnamese went into Cambodia in 1979 to save the Cambodians. Well, guess who set up the Khmer Rouge in business? There would have been no Khmer Rouge without Hanoi’s training, arming, equipping, aiding, abetting, and direct combat support. It simply wouldn’t have happened. So it’s just amazing to me and many, many, many other people that I’ve talked to. We just shake our heads. Whatever goo this is should be put on the wings of the Columbia space shuttle, because it will never come off. It’s just this ultimate protective shield. It just sticks and it won’t go away.

LC: So what would be the remedy? What are you trying to do? What should future students of the war be trying to do to remedy this?

BL: Well, first of all, we have to go back not just to Vietnam, but the craft of history in and of itself. You have to start all over again with some of these people because they don’t realize that you have to approach things just as you would a structural engineer, just as a lawyer would. What’s the problem? Let’s get all aspects of it. How
do we have to deal with this aspect and that aspect and how does it fit together? What’s the linkage? What are the mechanics of history? What are the dynamics of history?

There aren’t any, according to most people. It’s just this random, anecdotal episodic stuff. “Oh, this happened. Oh, that happened. Oh, well,” and just throw it all in your book. “Okay, it’s good enough.” You couldn’t run a sports page the way the American community in to-to is writing the history of Vietnam, because in a sports page, you have to keep records.

LC: Right.

BL: You have to be honest. You can’t say that, “Oh, Barry Bonds is only hitting .233.” No, he’s hitting .372, whether you like him or not, whether he’s on steroids or not. You have to keep records. You have to follow through the whole season. One of the analogies that strikes my mind is that if the American public or somebody visiting from the moon or Mars or something came down here and they wanted to see the Chicago Cubs play in Wrigley Field, and they’re unique. Everybody loves the Cubs, win or lose. They go away thinking, “This is the greatest team in baseball. I mean, they’re just fantastic. Even they lost a few games, everybody yells, and you listen to the Cubs fans and they’re going crazy. Oh, these Cubs, you got to come and see the Cubs.” But you look at the sports page and go, “Huh, I wonder how come the pizzazz is greater than the reality?” And I like the Cubs.

LC: Sure.

BL: But it’s just amazing. It’s amazing. It’s a greater issue than Vietnam, which is an issue in and of itself. But good God, we’re throwing away the product of two thousand years of humanity’s climb out of the morass of barbarianism and superstition. Enlightenment, factual and logical interpretation, scientific evidence. I don’t need that. Is it a good story? It’s just incredible. The scary thing is, is if we cannot understand the mechanics of Vietnam, the dynamics and realities of Vietnam, how in the hell are we going to understand anything else? There’s every indication that we don’t. You look at economic policies and the Great Society was supposed to have eliminated poverty. Well, we’re five trillion dollars down the road, and what have we got? Nothing. Nothing to show for it. People apparently are going back into a pre-Enlightenment, or it seems like a pre-enlightenment pseudo-mysticism and phenomena wisdom. I don’t know if that’s
even a school of thought. But it’s as if there’s no mechanics to be studied anymore. A
structural engineer that tried that would not only kill thousands of people, but he’d end up
in jail. He or she would be in jail. Yet for historians and pundits, we don’t require that.
It’s as if again, what’s the best Star Wars movie? What’s the most phantasmagoric thing?
A disturbing parallel is, why is it the American public seems to like that? You can get
Vietnam veterans that will discuss this for hours on end. Just, why? What is the appeal?
Why do they like hearing about My Lai? Why do they like hearing about fragging
officers? Why do they enjoy in all this stuff and why don’t they want to hear anything
different? That’s a mystery. They really seem to like this stuff.

LC: It’s like the six o’clock news mystery.

BL: Yeah. So I don’t see any hope for a national awakening because the
American public, and you can look at people like Neil Postman, who was a professor of
mass communications at State University of New York. He’s written his books, Amusing
Ourselves to Death and all this other stuff. We seem to be in an opiated state of
consumerism. American isolation allows people to get away with this stuff, whereas in
Europe or other countries, you know that if you drive two hours any which way, there’s
another country.

LC: Right.

BL: So you may not agree with their reality, perceptions, beliefs, cultures, et
cetera, but you know it’s there. I don’t know. It’s just—this place is spooky. It’s as if—
and again, with conversations with Vietnam veterans, it’s when did they tell us to go get
lobotomies, and why didn’t I get one? I don’t know.

LC: Save yourself this difficulty. Well, speaking of veterans, I want to ask you
just some general ballpark questions about U.S. treatment of veterans. You’re one, so I
can ask you in general about your own experience, but also that of others to whom
you’ve spoken. Has the federal government taken care of veterans of the Vietnam era in
the way that it ought to have?

BL: I’m not an expert on that. I’ll give you what I think and what I’ve heard, and
I don’t think it’s quite as bad as people say. When I came back the first time, I had
contracted serious dysentery several times. I mean, really—

LC: Really ugly.
BL: Really knock you down. I mean, literally doubled you over and it really hurt. Because I’d done a little reading in a handbook of tropical medicine, I realized that there’s all these bizarre diseases, and hell, they were guys from the China, Burma, India Theater that were coming up with these diseases thirty, forty years later they didn’t even know they had, because these little microbes in intestines just colonize your intestines. Then one day, all of a sudden they’ve colonized to the point where your intestines don’t work anymore. I decided I’d get that checked out. I went down to the VA and they could not have been more accommodating. “Anything else? Any other problems? What else?” I told them, I said, “No, I’ve got this, and no I don’t have anything else.” “Are you sure now?” So I have no complaint there, and they did have to—I went to a VA hospital and I was there for about three days. They ran a battery of tests and everything else. They didn’t come up with anything, although I do know on one occasion I went to the VA and I had a question about melioidosis, which is another tropical disease. I brought my own handbook of tropical medicine. I gave it to the doctor who interviewed me. He sent me upstairs to get a blood test for something else. I came back and he said, “You know what? We’re going to do something else to check on this.” I said, “Well that’s kind of interesting, not everybody brings a medical book in here.”

LC: Sure. Sure.

BL: There are people, probably not many, but there are people who have died or may die or will survive a quasi-dormant infestation of melioidosis.

LC: Bill, how do you spell that, just for the record?


LC: Okay.

BL: It’s a verified disease. It’s not like those myths of the island where you go to if you get the black syphilis and it’s incurable so you have to stay there forever.

LC: Right.

BL: Actually, I heard a high school teacher tell his class that, believe it or not.

LC: Well, that was helpful. So you were at the VA and talking with this guy.

BL: Yeah. Everything was just fine and dandy. I have no complaints. Then one friend of mine, who was—I didn’t know him in Vietnam. I had come to know him
afterwards, very outspoken. He’s one of the politest persons you’ll ever meet, very
courteous, extremely intelligent, but he has zero tolerance for anecdotal nonsense.

LC: Okay.

BL: Someone was ranting. This guy, well, he’s blind. He’s the only guy in a
Special Forces team that survived when they were over the fence in Laos. He’s lucky to
be alive. So he goes to the VA back and forth. He told me one time that someone was
ranting and raving about the VA, and he basically said you’re full of, excuse me, shit,
“because I go to the VA all the time and they treat me just fine.” I know other cases
where care was not or is not the best. When you have so many thousands of people, I
don’t know how you can expect perfection, but I’m really not qualified to judge. All I
can give you is anecdotal stuff, and it’s just not as horrendous as some people say.
Certainly it’s not perfection, but I’ve had problems with regular, private hospitals, too. I
will say too, and this is something that’s politically incorrect. The times that I’ve been to
the VA, I think the very obnoxious, very ignorant, and very vocal, mouthy veterans in
there bitching and moaning and complaining, and I give them no credibility and I
question whether they’re not some of the ones who write letters to the editor and
everything else.

LC: Meaning that they may not actually be vets?

BL: Oh, I’m sure they’re veterans, but people have to realize that veterans are
just a slice of the American community as a whole. Out of the 3.5 million that served in
all of Southeast Asia, 2.6 million in Vietnam, if you’re going to suppose that some of
them are not idiots, you’re going to be wrong. They were idiots before they went. They
were idiots when they were there, and they were idiots when they came back. Vietnam
did nothing good or bad for them. There’s just people like that.

LC: Right. They were just on a—it’s a continuum.

BL: Yeah. It’s not at all to be critical of veteran status, but people have to be
realistic and realize that just because someone is a veteran doesn’t mean they’re either
intelligent or a saint or anything else. There’s just plenty of veterans that are, frankly
speaking, ignorant losers.

LC: Bill, are there other things that I, perhaps, haven’t asked you about that you
would like to add here to the oral history interview?
BL: I guess as a general backdrop, I’d just reemphasize the fact that from the
‘60s on, you can’t find any solid effort that filtered its way to the top in which the
collective horsepower of the United States, the news media, the government, the Defense
Department or anything really sat down and said, “What’s going on here? What”—you
examine these history books, and if you were to do a—and I haven’t done this, but I
know how it would turn out, declarative sentences. You’ll see it where the United States
is the subject. United States does this, United States does that, United States does this.
You’ll find that there’s more “United States does this, United States does that,” than there
is, “Republic of Vietnam does anything, Laos does anything, Sihanouk does anything, or
Hanoi does anything.” There’s this semantic loading which implants the idea that “Well,
if the United States hadn’t been doing anything, then all this other stuff wouldn’t have
happened.” But to this day, there isn’t much of an effort to ask, “Tell me about Vietnam.
Tell me about Southeast Asia. Then we’ll look at what America did.” It’s all, “Well,
send some more helicopters. Oh, send the Marines in.” It’s just amazing. The scary
thing is, again, I think most of us that have been there have overcome our frustration. We
just basically don’t—you can’t teach a pig to whistle, so don’t even bother trying. The
American public doesn’t know, and for most of the part, they don’t want to know. So
just forget it. All the people that are trying to do things and preserve history are doing it
for others like us somewhere out there or just to be irritants, and I’m using a very polite
word there. I know one guy that’s writing a book, and he says his only primary
motivation for writing this book is simply to get it on library shelves so one day some
college student will pick it up, read it, and then walk back into his classroom and say,
“Dr. Smith, what this guy says means you’re full of bologna.” It just—not going to let
them get away with it. Probably, they will get away with it, but it’s an amazing thing.
There’s many, many, many Vietnam veterans that are not living under bridges. They
have succeeded professionally, and they have Vietnam rooms in their houses and there’s
this little samizdat all over the country of people sending stuff back and forth, and books
and this and that and things they’ve written and all kinds of things. Somehow, some way,
an unmapped route to set the record straight. I don’t know if it’ll ever be done, but at
least now it is possible for the hypothetical American citizen to say, “I’m quitting work
and I’m going to go off on this sabbatical to understand Vietnam.” Up until three or four
years ago, it probably wouldn’t even be possible. Now there are such books as
McMaster’s *Dereliction of Duty* and others that link everything together. Before there
wasn’t enough stones to complete the archway and you couldn’t—the keystone would
always fall through and it’d all collapse. But now, it’s possible. Probable, not likely, but
it still is possible. So that’s a good thing.

LC: Well, Bill, I want to thank you for investing your time and doing what you
can to expand the record and help us out in documenting the war.

BL: Well, thank you guys for what you’re doing, because you’re the only hope
we have. There’s nothing else. If it weren’t for you people, we’d all be out here
whistling in the wind.

LC: Well, we’re going to keep on doing it. Thanks a lot, Bill.

BL: Okay.