INTERVIEW I

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INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM R. DESOBRY

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: General Desobry's home, Lampasas, Texas

Tape 1 of 3

G: General Desobry, would you begin by giving us something of your professional background and education before you came to Vietnam in 1965?

D: Yes, I came to the army in 1941, like a lot of young people, just before the start of World War II, a graduate of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., through the ROTC program. And [I] participated in World War II with the 10th Armored Division, which fought under General Patton in the Third Army. In those days I was an armored infantryman, and ended up the war commanding an armored infantry battalion.

G: Did you know General--I guess then-Lieutenant Colonel [Creighton Williams] Abrams [Jr.]?

D: No, I didn't know him. General Abrams was in the 4th Armored Division, but I had fought at Bastogne with the people that were surrounded there. There was a combat command, the 10th Armored with the 101st Airborne Division. And Abrams was the battalion commander in the 4th Armored Division that relieved the garrison at Bastogne. He was the one that made the penetration through the German lines and got a lot of notoriety, publicity because of that. I had never met him until he was a general after the war, and got to know him quite well when he was vice chief of staff. But it was much

later years. It seems to me that on that rotation-overseas-back-to-CONUS [Continental United States] business, when I was overseas he was in CONUS, and we were just crossing paths that way. So I really didn't get to know General Abrams until later on.

Anyway, after the war I served in Europe in various staff assignments, and then went to the Command and General Staff College, and was an instructor at the Command and General Staff College for four years. Then I went back to Europe in the 1950s, and was a combat commander in the 2nd Armored Division, and chief of staff of the 2nd Armored, and then G-3 of V Corps. I came back to the States, went to the National War College, and served a tour in the Pentagon in legislative liaison, and then went up to the Army War College, and was on the faculty for three years. And it was from the Army War College that I went over to Vietnam, supposedly to go as a senior advisor in the III Corps, but just before I was to go over, a coup took place, and the senior advisor in III Corps had been a great buddy of General Khanh, who was involved in the coup. And when Khanh got kicked out, they brought him back to the States, and the senior advisor came with him to escort him around the States. So they replaced him with somebody else, so I lost that job. So I went down to IV Corps later on.

G: Were you given any special training, any special briefing for this new assignment?

D: Yes, in a way. Having served on the faculty of the Army War College for three years during that period, we watched the Vietnam War quite carefully. My last job on the faculty was chairman of the department of strategy, and also had the communist world in the department. And as a result of that, I was exposed quite a bit to what was going on in Vietnam. And then just before I left, they sent me down to Fort Bragg for a two-week

orientation course, really a basic course on tactics and how to survive in the Vietnam environment and things like that. So I did have a little bit--I had good background at the Army War College, I'd say, then I had this two-week course at Fort Bragg before I went over.

G: Still, I suppose there were things in the Vietnam environment that were unexpected or that took you by surprise or that took you a while to learn to deal with. Is there anything particularly significant in that regard?

D: Oh, yes. I don't think anybody can go into Vietnam, no matter how much they've read or heard about it, and really have a feel, a real gut feel, for what's going on. That became obvious to me as I stayed there. For example, Americans usually went over there for a one-year tour and came home. I don't think they learned a great deal in the one year. They learned something about the little area they were in or the job they were in, and became quite expertise, but to learn what was going on, why, and all the in-depth part, no. As a matter of fact, after two and a half years I felt I was still learning; in fact, I learned every day. And if I'd gone back there for seven years I still would have learned.

(Laughter)

G: Do you agree with General Maxwell Taylor [who] said, "We don't have fourteen years' experience. We have one year's experience fourteen times"?

(Laughter)

D: I think that's probably well said, yes. In fact, you could see it when the American troops started coming into Vietnam, particularly in the Delta. They would come in with a lot of confidence, as you might expect, and they knew how to do it, and they were ready to do

it; they were quite prepared. And then after about thirty days the letdown would take place because they'd realize how little they knew, and then they would dig in and do quite well. That would happen anyplace in the world, I don't care where you are. If we went into any other foreign culture you'd have the same experience. It's just the nature of the business.

G: Who was your immediate superior?

D: Well, if you look at the efficiency report route, my immediate superior when I got there was the deputy to General Westmoreland, General [John A.] Heintges, and then General Westmoreland. But I dealt mainly with, directly with, General Westmoreland. That was the nature of the chain of command. It went from MACV [Military Assistance Command Vietnam] straight down to the senior advisor in the corps areas. Now keep in mind this was before the American troops came in and so forth, and that was basically the chain of command you had. You didn't have a U.S. Army, Vietnam in those days. The deputy to Westmoreland, Heintges, early in the days, and then later General Abrams, visited a lot, and I saw a lot of those two. But whenever I needed a decision, which wasn't all that often, I would go to Westmoreland. And he worked directly with me when he issued orders. And so it was really Westmoreland to me.

G: I see. He endorsed your efficiency report.

D: That's right.

G: Can you give me an idea what--let's put it this way. If you had to write a job description for the senior advisor in IV Corps, what would it say?

D: Well, we lived a little bit different life than the senior advisors in the other corps, because really we were the only thing that the American army had down there, the advisory effort, as opposed to up in the other corps, where the American buildup took place, in the main. We often thought that the word "advisor" was wrong, because we weren't advisors. I was given the job to sit down and, many times, to write up job descriptions and new titles and so forth, and I found it was almost an impossible job. What you have to look at is this: we paralleled the Vietnamese chain of command. That chain of command went from Saigon, the JGS [Joint General Staff], to the Vietnamese corps commanders, and from the corps down to division, to province and to district. And our advisory chain followed that same structure. That's why it went from me to Westmoreland, because it went from General [Dang Van?] Quang, who was the corps commander to start with, to General [Cao Van] Vien, who was chairman of the JGS. And you could say Westmoreland was the advisor to Vien, if you wanted to use that thing.

I think most people feel that the advisor did just that, that I sat next to General Quang, the corps commander, and advised him to go around the left flank or the right flank, or do this or that. Really, that was part of it, but was a minor part of it. They consulted with me all the time on military matters and pacification matters and other things. But really what we did, we controlled those assets which the Vietnamese required in order to do their job. The primary example of that is helicopters. Under me was the 13th Aviation Battalion, which was under my operational control, and that was the helicopter unit that supported the Vietnamese in the Delta. As a result of that, any operation that we were going to go on--and all of them entailed helicopters when you

went on larger operations or some of the small ones, or helicopter support--Quang and I would work out the scheme together. Because of the importance of that, I had quite a say on what the tactics were going to be, because if the helicopters, or my people, the Americans, were misused, then I wouldn't approve it. We just flat wouldn't go on it. That's a theoretical more than a practical approach, because we always worked out any problems that we had together. But that forced the Vietnamese to--they liked consulting with us, but if they didn't want to consult they still had to, because (laughter) we held a sort of a big stick over them. And that went into all sorts of things: supplies, fuel, assets of that type.

So I think really what you would call me would be an assistant to the corps commander, because I was involved in the operations just as much as any Vietnamese was. I was part of the Vietnamese army, is what I'm saying. We couldn't come out and say that, because publicly that would be not acceptable. Much better to be an advisor, and then the publicity wouldn't be as harsh. But we did, we actually participated--I'd say an assistant or a deputy to Quang, or whatever. See, he was a three-star general, and when I started out I was a colonel, and then got promoted to a brigadier general, and so I was always junior to him.

It was the same in the Vietnamese divisions. You would have a division commander, who was a general officer, and the senior advisor would be a full colonel. And you'd go down to province, and normally the province chief would be a colonel, or equivalent to the rank of a colonel if he was a civilian, and his American advisor would

be a lieutenant colonel. So you always went down one step. And it worked extremely well.

G: Just in passing, I note that Secretary McNamara visited Vietnam in July of 1965, which I think was very soon after you arrived. Were you involved in that at all?

D: I vaguely remember that. I'd just gotten there, and was actually the deputy senior advisor. And I remember his visit because they came down to--some of that party, I think McNamara, came down to Can Tho, which was our headquarters. But to be involved in it, no. Later, I think it was in 1967, I think he came over on a trip and I was involved quite deeply with him; I spent the equivalent of two days personally taking him around the Delta. So I did have one contact with McNamara, that's all, over there.

G: What was his reputation and standing with the senior officer corps at that time?

D: I think that we figured he was the big roadblock, at least I did, in conversations with my peers. I never talked to Westmoreland or Abrams about it; it wasn't any of my business. But we felt that if there was anybody that was keeping us from doing what we knew had to be done, it was McNamara and people of his stature in the government, who kept us from doing what we thought was necessary in order to win that war. So we had very little respect for him. We had very little hope that his visits would do anything. We knew, for example, that McNamara had his preconceived notions before he came over there, and the visits he made to Vietnam were a *façade*, where he could merely go back like a lot of politicians and say, "Well, I visited there, and this is what we're going to do, because I visited and I know what's going on." So I don't think we held him in much respect, really.

G: That confirms something that I had an impression about.

D: Well, I can remember I told General Abrams after a visit [of] McNamara, I said, "Boy, I sure convinced him [of] what we need to do down here in the Delta." And Abrams laughed and said, "Hell, you didn't any more convince him than the man in the moon. He made his mind up before he got here of what he's going to do."

G: Have you got any specifics in mind when you say that he was one of the people who were keeping the army from doing what needed to be done?

D: Well, I think that probably goes into the whole strategy of the thing. We were fighting a war of attrition on the Asian mainland, and that's the worst way to fight a war, particularly on the Asiatic mainland, with their manpower and their disregard of human life and so on, as opposed to our cultural background and our goals and so forth. We were prevented from destroying the enemy, which is the goal of--destroying the enemy or his will to fight, which in any war is the goal of the military man. He knows he can't win unless he can do that. We can go into it later, the strategy; roll out the map and I can show it to you quite easily. But our inability to pursue a defeated enemy and destroy him so that he could never return kept us from ever winning that war, in the Delta or Vietnam as a whole. I can speak for the Delta, because I knew how to do it but was prevented from doing it. And all of us knew. I wasn't any military genius; any officer down there of any ability knew how to win that thing and get it over with in a relatively quick time. But we couldn't, under the ground rules that were placed on us by the hierarchy; I guess it goes from the President to his agent, McNamara, and straight on down. So I don't know, we always put that on--

G: I have a feeling that this is going to come up again as we get into this. Critics of our involvement in Vietnam, or critics of our performance in Vietnam, often said that one of our chief failings was that we didn't really understand the nature of the war. How do you feel about that?

D: Well, I think those of us who were over there fighting--and I would say that for the people that I knew, and I knew most of them. I'd either served with them at one time or another or been associated with them, and we met frequently. In fact, we met formally once a month up in Nha Trang. And I believe sincerely that those who were fighting the war over there understood the nature of the war thoroughly and had a grasp of it, and were doing tremendous things under the rules [by] which they had to operate. I think the people who didn't understand it were the press, the McNamaras, and the rest, people who weren't professional in any sense of the word, but who were either criticizing it, as the press was doing, or running it, as McNamara and his people were doing. They didn't understand it, no. That's so obvious in the silly things that they did. These cease-fires that they would have periodically were a joke; the pause, the signal that they would send, they thought, was just a joke and had no bearing on the war whatsoever except to give the Viet Cong a respite every once in a while when they wanted one. So they didn't understand it, no.

G: When you arrived in 1965, what was your evaluation of the situation once you got your feet on the ground and were able to take a knowledgeable look around? Who was winning? What was the state of the enemy and the friendly situation?

D: Well, in that instance I was extremely lucky. I came into Vietnam in the early summer of 1965, and in those days General Westmoreland interviewed every senior officer, and I guess you could call a colonel a senior officer, because he interviewed them, and above, that came in. So I stayed in Saigon for about two weeks before that interview came about--he was busy--and had a chance to listen and visit and do all the things you do for a couple of weeks with a staff up in Saigon. And then when I went down to the Delta--I had originally come over to be the senior advisor in IV Corps, but when I got there I was made the deputy. And the reason for it was that George Barton, who was the senior advisor, a full colonel, had been there a year, and he told me that General Westmoreland thought that if he stayed another year, he could get him promoted to a general. Therefore, I was blocked; he [was] extended. It didn't turn out that way. I got promoted and he didn't. (Laughter) That's just the fate of some people.

But it was a lucky thing for me, because when I got down to Can Tho, the headquarters down on the Bassac River, a deputy senior advisor had very little to do. That is, structured. You had a lot to do, but you could pick and choose what you wanted to do. Well, it became obvious to me that the most important thing [about] American participation from the corps level was in the use of helicopters, pacification, things of that nature. So for the first six months that I was there, I joined up with the 13th Aviation Battalion. And I'm not a helicopter pilot, but I joined up with them and flew with them. And they had a battalion commander by the name of [William J.] Bill Maddox [Jr.], who was an absolute genius at his job. In fact, he later in his career became the head of army aviation, retired as a major general, commanded Fort Rucker and so on. But this man

was extremely good, and he had just gotten there. So for six months I flew every part of the Delta, and went into every operation without any immediate responsibility. I was just watching and suggesting and having a lot of fun doing it. As a result, I got to make an estimate during that period, and I would say it goes something like this: In 1965, as I recall, there had been an incident just before I got over there, where a couple of Vietnamese regiments had been overrun up in the--I think it was the 5th Infantry Division.

G: Was that Song Be?

D: Could have been there. It's so long ago. Anyway, what had happened was, they were about ready to go out on an operation, and as they were gathering their forces early one morning, the Viet Cong had surrounded them, unbeknownst to them, and overran them. Killed all the advisors.

G: That was Song Be.

D: And it really took them apart. In the two weeks I was in Saigon that I mentioned, that was the topic of conversation. I think at that point in time I would have to characterize the mood as being one up there that the Vietnamese army couldn't cut it. They were about to get licked. There was also talk of a lack of military presence and capability up in I Corps, which worried everybody, because that was up on the DMZ[Demilitarized Zone]. And so I would say in the Saigon area, that they felt that the Vietnamese army was not capable of winning the war, and probably would lose it if things stayed like they were.

When I got down to the Delta, I found that things were different. They had a very dynamic corps commander, and they had some damned good division commanders, and I would say the thing was at about parity in the Delta. You could go out on an operation in the summer of 1965 and in the fall, a large operation, and if you in fact did run into the Viet Cong, it would be nip and tuck who was going to win that operation. And they would be tough battles, I'm talking about real nasty ones. They didn't get any publicity because--whatever it was, the press was not particularly interested in the Delta. In fact, they sort of characterized it--so did McNamara--as a phony war, which was far from--in fact, I had a knock-down-drag-out discussion with McNamara in later years on that. They felt that not much was going on down there. But it was. I went on a number of operations in the summer and fall that were as big as any that I went on in World War II in Europe. I can remember one operation where the Vietnamese really got the heck beat out of them, and the next day, when we were bringing the wounded and the dead into Can Tho, I stood at the airfield and I stopped counting when I had counted two hundred dead Vietnamese, in one day-and-a-half battle. So these were pretty rough battles. I would say it was sort of nip and tuck, who was winning. I think the Viet Cong probably thought they were winning, and we thought we were winning, an emotional judgment rather than a professional judgment. Those things change, and we'll get into them later on, I'm sure. But that's about the way it was. And that, I think, was what set the stage for bringing the American troops in, because they started to come in about that time.

G: Yes. What was the overall enemy situation in the Delta; how would you describe that?

D: Well, the enemy structure had been built over many, many years. First off, you have to take a look at how they organized and what the missions of the various levels were. They started out at the village level with their village-type guerrillas, and that varied, depending on how strong they were in what part of the Delta. Some villages had absolutely none; most of them had none. But in the Viet Cong areas and the contested areas they had some. And then at district they usually had about a company that operated around in the district. In the province they had a provincial mobile battalion. Just about every province had one. And then, sitting above them, were the Viet Cong main force battalions. They were organized into regiments, but the regiment really never played much part in it; it was mainly battalions. I've forgotten the total number--the estimates fluctuated back and forth--but say they had fifty thousand, something like that. That's a heck of a guess, so if you're researching this, don't use that figure, for goodness' sake. It's too long ago to remember.

Now, the way they operated was, the guerrillas were obviously in place in the vicinity all the time. They were homegrown boys, so to speak. The district [was] the same thing, because districts geographically are quite small. Now the most important battalion in the early days was the provincial mobile battalion, and, contrary to what a lot of analysts think, they were the most proficient of all of the Viet Cong units, much more proficient than the main force battalions.

G: That's an interesting statement. Why do you say that?

D: Oh, that's so obvious, because--I'll get into how they operated. The main force battalions had the best equipment. They were extremely well equipped, with AK-47 rifles, B-40 rockets, the most modern machine guns, mortars.

G: Even at this early stage.

D: Oh, yes. Oh, they were far superior to what we had. I can get into that if you want. This is another one of McNamara's farces. But they had the most modern equipment, Soviet equipment, East German equipment. The machine guns were East German, some Czechoslovakian. A lot of the medicines and other things you could see from the--when you captured them; we captured a heck of a lot of it--you could see on the markings, were from East Germany, Czechoslovakia, places like that, China, and so on.

But the main force battalions were the sledgehammer guys. In most operations, the main force made every effort to stay out of the fight. The fighting was done by the local guerrillas and the provincial mobile battalion. Whenever you had an outpost attacked heavily, or a village attacked, and the provincial mobile battalion was involved in it, or the guerrillas, you knew darn good and well there were main force battalions also in the area. Their tactics were to bring them in for essentially two reasons: one, to back up, in case the provincial mobile battalion and the guerrillas needed help; and to stiffen the backs of the provincial mobile battalion and the local guerrillas. They wanted to keep them out if they possibly could, because they didn't want to lose them. Because they had problems just as we did, of manpower, training, equipment, and the rest. They were their Sunday punch, because they were the most powerful. As a result of that, the provincial mobile battalions did one heck of a lot of fighting, and were darned good. The best

battalion in all of the Delta was the Tay Do Battalion, which worked in Phuong Dinh province.

G: How do you spell that?

D: T-A-Y D-O, two words. I've forgotten what it means in Vietnamese, but it has something to do with the western--they called that the western province, or something. Western Capital, that's it; it was like a capital battalion. That battalion--I researched it, because they gave us so much fits in 1965, they were my target. I took them on as a personal target. In fact, General Quang used to laugh at me, because every morning I'd ask him, "Where's the Tay Do Battalion?"

But anyway, that battalion was formed, and fought under the Viet Minh. When the Japanese were driven out of Vietnam in World War II, some Japanese noncoms and officers stayed, and organized and trained the Tay Do Battalion, and it went from that structure into the Viet Minh, and they fought under the Viet Minh. Some of the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] people had been in the Tay Do Battalion when they fought against the French, but then--Quang, for example, had been in that structure, and people like that thought it was great to join them because they were going to liberate Vietnam. But they discovered, and I'm quoting these Vietnamese, they discovered that they weren't interested in that; they were communists, and these fellows did not have any love for communism. So they left and got out, and then later--in fact, Quang hid for a couple of years as a young man because he was a deserter. And then as a last resort [he] joined the Vietnamese army and came up that way; fought with the French against the Viet Minh, and so on. But there were a lot of them like that.

Well, as a result, that Tay Do Battalion trained for years, and you know, they stayed low for a long time, because they could control things without having to fight. But when it heated up, they started fighting. So they trained for a heck of a long time before they really got into what we knew as the war. And I would say in 1965 the Tay Do Battalion was as good a battalion as I've ever seen under any circumstances. The Soc Trang Dynamic Battalion, over in Soc Trang, which was on the coast, was of the same, but not quite as good as Tay Do. But they were the same--later on, we got to calling them the Soc Trang Not-so-dynamic--(laughter)--but anyway, that was a provincial mobile battalion.

Now, I don't want to leave the impression that the main force battalions weren't good. They were, and particularly in 1965, they were darn good, well led, very brave. But they did not have the combat that these provincial mobile battalions had. Now over a period of time, in this war of attrition, what took place was that the provincial mobile battalions became less and less effective because of their losses. By the time I left in 1968, as I mentioned, the Soc Trang Not-so-dynamic Battalion--that was a joke, to fight them. If we could find them, we'd just wipe them out, and they'd have to rebuild again. In 1965 if we caught them, we had a bear by the tail. The same with Tay Do, and when I left in 1968, Tay Do was relatively ineffective. In fact, we caught them in an operation about a month or so before I left, and overran them easily; did it with Regional Forces. In 1965 it would have taken a regiment to just contain them. So that'll give you an idea of that.

G: That's good. How would you characterize--we've done some of it already--how would you characterize the friendly situation? And you can break it down if you like into ARVN and local forces, National Police, and so on.

D: Oh, yes. Well, the ARVN was organized very similar to the Viet Cong. You had--and I'll just take IV Corps--you had a corps headquarters at Can Tho, which was on the Bassac River just in about the center of the IV Corps area. You had three ARVN divisions. They were located--one in the upper part of the corps area, on the Mekong River at My Tho, the 7th ARVN Division. The 9th ARVN Division was in the center of the IV Corps area, located at Sa Dec. And then in the lower part of the Delta, located at Bac Lieu, was the 21st ARVN Division. Now, those divisions controlled the provinces in their division sector, and in the province you had Regional Forces, which were comparable--they were Regional Force companies. We tried to organize some battalions, and did in some instances. But those would be comparable to your provincial mobile battalions. The divisions would be comparable to your Viet Cong main force battalions. Their regiments were not located at these headquarters towns that I've mentioned to you. They were located out in the division area at other places. They had three regiments with three battalions. They also had a division reconnaissance company, which was normally located at the headquarters.

Then, down in the villages below the province--the Regional Forces, you had the Popular Forces. They would be comparable to your district guerrillas. The Self-Defense Force, that I noticed in your notes as mentioned, would be similar to your village guerrillas, and so on. They were poorly armed, old people, stuff like that. Sort of home

guard, not effective at all in the true sense; did not go out on operations. They were merely in case a tax collector came in, or a raiding party. Hopefully they would be able to do something until somebody could come and help them.

So we paralleled in the sense that we had the same type of organization from the top on down. And that's not odd, because that's the best way to organize in order to fight a war. So the Viet Cong did the best they could in organization and we did the best we could; we came up with the same solution. (Laughter)

G: What about the National Police? Did you have any responsibilities where they were concerned?

D: No, not really. Vietnam was really taken up, the whole thing, with centralized control, in a stovepipe-type organization. The National Police were controlled from Vietnam [Saigon?], where they had National Police advisors. They had some damned good ones. I met some of them, Americans, people that had been chiefs of police in such cities as Los Angeles and so on, and retired and came over and worked on them. They were damned good men; called them the white mice.

So that structure then came from Saigon down to the province, through that civilian-type structure, province down to district, and not many white mice out at district, mainly at province and so on, and at critical places, checkpoints, crossings of the Bassac river, crossings of the Mekong river, various places like that. And in the early days there weren't enough of them. They were very scarce. But the Americans put a big effort into it starting in about 1965-1966, and increased the number of white mice immeasurably. And I thought they were very effective, extremely good in their police--and they were

strictly police; they were not going out looking for Viet Cong and all that sort of thing. They were strictly a law-and-order type operation, but I thought very effective, whenever we had them, wherever we had them, in sufficient numbers.

G: What was the state of what is commonly called pacification--although it went under a different name just about every year, when they would--at least, on the American side it did. When you arrived in 1965, how secure was the country [inaudible]?

D: (Laughter) That was a terrible, terrible thing. We have an awful penchant in our society to quantify everything. We've got to put it--you can see it in computers these days, everybody's got to quantify things, and they get mesmerized by numbers and charts and graphs and so on. And we were caught up in that something fierce in Vietnam in the pacification business. So we came out, if you'll recall--some magazine started it, I think, and they had certain colored circles for pacified, and then semi-pacified, and so on. There were globs that you put on a map, and we were required to go through that drill all the time, and we always kept a map showing what areas were completely pacified, what we thought were Viet Cong areas, and so on. The funny thing is--we used to die laughing--the Viet Cong got caught up in the same damned thing. And we used to capture--that was one of the things that I got a big kick out of. We would invariably, after a big fight, within a month or so, overrun an outfit and capture their after-action reports. And they were good at after-action reports. Boy, they told you exactly what went on, right down to the last weapon and so forth. And we started capturing their pacification maps, and they used the same system. And we would compare their maps with what we had for our maps, and boy, there was no similarity. And it was obvious

that they were having the same damned political problems we were (laughter), that they were trying to convince their bosses up in whatever that headquarters was in Cambodia--

G: COSVN [Central Office for South Vietnam]?

D: Yes, COSVN--that they were doing a great job, and the Americans were all trying to show why we were doing a great job, and to me they were sort of worthless, but it was a drill we had to go through. When [Robert] Komer came in it even got worse. In fact, it got ridiculous. But, be that as it may, the only way I could describe it was if I took the map--there were some provinces in Vietnam that were more peaceful than any place you've got in Texas. An Giang province, the Hoa Hao province, for example, you could go anywhere in that province except the southern tip, where the Viet Cong had to use it to run supplies down into the Bac Lieu/Ca Mau area. They had completely--the Hoa Hao themselves had completely pacified that area. We never went on an operation in that area the whole time I was there. The Viet Cong never fiddled with them; they were scared to death of them. And it's an interesting story if you want to get into it for that particular province.

The Hoa Hao were dissident Buddhists. A few years before 1965, I've forgotten which year, the movement started when a charismatic leader broke away from the formal Buddhist church. Basically he was a Protestant, I guess you'd call him. His thesis was that you didn't have to go to the temple to pray, or go see one of their monks. You could do it at home. The temples were all right, but they weren't absolutely necessary; you could go to both if you wanted. Well, this just split the doggoned Buddhist hierarchy all over, because they lost control and so forth. But this fellow got their people together, and

they were very aggressive people. If you didn't watch out, the Hoa Hao--they had their own army--they would take over provinces all around them. They really knew they were right, and so on.

Well, they were not--the Saigon government, Diem and those people and so forth, fought them. They were against these guys, and there was friction there. The Viet Cong tried to get the Hoa Hao to join them, put pressure on, in this fight against Saigon, and the Hoa Hao leader was negotiating with them, with the Viet Cong, and he went off to a meeting, a secret meeting, with the Viet Cong and never came back. Obviously they murdered him. This set the Hoa Hao against the Viet Cong completely. But they were still against Diem, the Catholic, in Saigon. So they sat there, almost in the center of the Delta, against both factions.

In 1965, I went to a meeting in their capital--I'm trying to think of what the name of the capital was; I can look it up on the map here. I went to this meeting with [Nguyen Van] Thieu and [Nguyen Cao] Ky, and at that time Ky was number one and Thieu was supposedly number two. But I discovered at this meeting that that wasn't necessarily true, because in the protocol at the meeting--(reads from map) it's at Long Xuyen, the town of Long Xuyen--at this meeting that was to make up with the Hoa Hao, Thieu carried the weight in the meeting as opposed to Ky, for what reason I don't know. But Thieu, protocol-wise, was accepted by the Hoa Hao and Ky sort of sat on the side. And at the meeting was the mother of the Hoa Hao chieftain who had been murdered by the Viet Cong, and she was the one that signed the documents which brought the Hoa Hao in under the Saigon government and ended that animosity. Thieu and Ky swung that one.

From that moment on, they were on our side and did a good job. The Vietnamese were always suspicious of them and did not--they had plenty of military force there, but were very reluctant to bring those Hoa Hao Battalions out of the Long Xuyen province, that area, without another [inaudible].

G: Were there American advisors with the Hoa Hao?

D: Yes, just like we had with others.

G: They got essentially the same kind of arms that the ARVN did, then, is that right?

D: Identically, we supplied them exactly the same way. They had American advisors. The American advisors up there were always worried. You know, the combat infantry badge was the way you get promoted in the infantry, and they couldn't get the combat infantry badge up there, and none of them wanted to go--(Laughter)--to that province. So--

G: This was because there was so little going on?

D: Oh, there was never a fight. I don't recall in two and a half years over there that there was ever a fight up there, really. Oh, there were some scares, but never a battle up in there.

So, you'd have that extreme. Now, then you would go--

G: Let me interrupt you and ask you about the other sect, the Cao Dai. Did you have anything to do with them?

D: There were some Cao Dai down in our place, but they were--that was mainly up in II Corps area. I've forgotten the name of the town up there, because I never visited up there, but it was outside of Saigon.

G: It was Tay Ninh, wasn't it?

D: Yes, Tay Ninh was the big Cao Dai area. That's right.

Another thing about the Delta, while we're on it, take a look at this thing. I'll show you something very interesting about this.

G: You have a large map here. Was this an operational map, or something--?

D: Yes, this was the operational map.

G: I see.

D: I took it off the wall and brought it home. I'll show you something peculiar about the Delta. I can show you what the Viet Cong strategy was, if you want. That was also easy.

Take a look at these names. Let's take a look at Bac Lieu, right there, and you'll notice it's got Vinh Loi in parentheses.

G: Yes.

D: All right, Bac Lieu is a Cambodian name, and the Vietnamese name for the same town is Vinh Loi. You can go--let's see--Soc Trang. There's Soc Trang. Soc Trang is a Cambodian name. Khanh Hung is the Vietnamese name. The Vietnamese names never took hold. What happened was the Delta had been part of Cambodia, and when the Cambodian empire dissolved and the Vietnamese took over, they ran the Cambodians out, but an awful lot remained. In fact, some of our units were mainly Cambodian-extraction people.

So the names of the towns, like Bac Lieu, Chau Duc--and Cambodia sits right there (indicating on map)--Soc Trang, Can Tho, all these names were Cambodian names. President Diem decided that he wanted to Vietnamize everybody, so he changed all the

names to Vietnamese names, and that's why they're shown in parentheses on the map. But nobody ever used them.

G: I had never encountered it before.

D: Yes. That's what it is. Every once in a while some correspondent from Saigon would say, "Down in Vinh Loi such-and-such happened." We would wonder, "What the heck is that?" And the guy had been told by the Vietnamese that was, you know, trying to play this game. But we had always called them by the names of--of that.

Now, in the Delta the main artery from Saigon is Highway 4. It comes down [inaudible].

G: You have it marked in red, here.

D: Down this way, all the way down to Ca Mau. That's the main highway. You've got to realize that except for a very few small, almost dirt roads--I don't know how you'd compare; we don't have any of them left in the States, they're so small. They're almost cart tracks. The only highway is this one. Now the produce from the Delta, and it's the food-producing area of Vietnam, main food-producing area in Vietnam, everything from the Bassac River--and this is the Bassac (indicating), the Bassac River north, went to Saigon by road. Everything else went by canal. Now, I'm talking perishables, because they had no refrigeration [inaudible].

G: You're not talking about rice, now.

D: No. Rice would go normally by canal as much as you could, but then even when you got up into here, it would have to--and I'll explain that to you--it would have to go by the highway.

The Mekong River, which is this one, was navigable and you could come from Saigon down and go on up the Mekong. The Bassac, which is really an offshoot and parallels the Mekong, was just as big as the Mekong--in fact, in many places, bigger--but silt had covered the mouth to the river. Therefore it was not navigable. So any commerce coming--for example, we were supplied a lot in Can Tho, which is here on the Bassac--by boat [which] would come down and go all the way up to near Cambodia, cross over, and then come back down here.

G: All the way up the Saigon River, nearly to the Cambodian--

D: No, the Mekong.

G: The Mekong.

D: Yes, almost--in fact, we had a couple of ships go into Cambodia and get captured, commercial ships, so on--poor navigation. Coming down--

G: And turn around and come all the way back down.

D: That's right. Now, the reason for that, and we'll get into some tactics later, is that the main artery from the Delta was a large series of canals up to the Muong Thiep River [?] and My Klei Canal [?], which ran across Vinh Long province up here, through Kien Hoa [province], up the Mekong, and joined over here, you go up that route, it would join--

G: Here's Go Cong.

D: --yes, the Cho Gao Canal, and it would go on up. And then this canal across Kien Hoa was also used. But early, before I got there, the Viet Cong took over and controlled the Muong Thiep River-My Klei Canal here, and also the Cho Gao Canal.

G: So they controlled Vinh Long, more or less, you would say.

D: They controlled right along there. And they controlled the Cho Gao Canal, up into III Corps. Now that choked off supplies going by water, and forced it onto the roads or the secondary canals, which made it real difficult. And then they controlled, up in III Corps, above Go Cong, up in here. And My Tho, in here. They controlled all this area, and that's where the U.S. 25th Division had a hell of a time fighting, up in there.

G: And this is near the town of Tan An.

D: Yes. So you really couldn't send your commerce up the traditional routes, and so on. So Highway 4 became your thing. Now I would tell you that in 1965, I sure as hell would not travel from Can Tho anywhere on Highway 4, get in a jeep and go. There were some that did it and showed off. By 1968 I could tell you that you could go from Ca Mau to Saigon, eighty-nine days out of ninety, you could go with no problem at all. But I never knew when that ninetieth day was.

(Laughter)

That might have been the first day, or the third day, or the fifth day, you see.

Now, the various provinces were different. You could go almost anyplace in Phong Dinh province. Chuong Tinh--and the town of Vy Tranh sits there--this province was no man's land, so to speak. This was really not a province that grew up in history like the rest of them did. No Vietnamese ever wanted to go down to Chuong Tinh. That was like really being put out into Siberia. Boy, it was sparsely populated, very little agriculture in this area, and this was a Viet Cong seat. So President Diem created the province of Chuong Tinh, made Vy Thanh the provincial capital, and then put his people in there, and that's why they didn't want to go there. And that's where we operated out of

in the 21st ARVN Division most of the time. We brought some Hoa Hao in--you couldn't get many Regional Forces down there; everybody was fighting for the Viet Cong--so we had to import people from Kien Giang province, Ba Xuyen, some Hoa Haos, and so on, to be the Regional Force, which is a bad operation, because they don't have the respect of the townspeople, they have fear. Particularly the Hoa Hao, who would--when they came in, they'd just take over and run it their way. So that was a very unsettled area.

This is--An Giang is the Hoa Hao area. Probably the toughest of all the provinces from a Viet Cong point of view, meaningful province, was Kien Hoa.

G: Over on the coast.

D: Yes. You see, this is all fingers of the Bassac going in, right there. The reason for that--I say it was the toughest--was that was the richest province, agriculture-wise. Coconut groves, pineapples, rice, the whole shmear. Everything that could grow and grow well in Vietnam grew in Kien Hoa, probably the richest of all the provinces, and I'm not just saying in IV Corps, I mean--I doubt if there was a richer. If there was, they were comparable. And that's where the Viet Cong movement started. The Vietnamese claim it started there for all of Vietnam. Others will say it didn't, but the fact is that it was one of the early ones, and was very strongly pro-Viet Cong.

Now, I'd like to get into that a little bit, because I think that can be very misleading. If you take a look at the Vietnamese structure and the Vietnamese people and their moods, and what really dictated how they felt and so forth, you have to go back a little bit into their society, their history, and so forth. The life of the Vietnamese starts

with their Confucius philosophy, with the family, the village, and from that bottom structure, the head of the family being the dominant man in their culture. And then in the village, the village chief, the village elders, that structure. They had always been oppressed, terribly oppressed, whether it was by the Chinese or by the French, and you know the Chinese ran this country for many years. In fact, these are a Chinese people; they were driven out, or came--whether they were driven out or not I don't know--but they came from China and migrated down here.

And there had been that animosity with the Chinese, and the Chinese conquered them a number of times and ruled them for as much as five hundred years at a crack, and so forth. So their religions and the rest stemmed back to that Chinese base. But it became a matter of surviving, in opening up this part of the world, and they were strictly agricultural. And taxation--that's the key to the whole thing, taxation. Under the Chinese, under the French, they were severely taxed, and those taxes came from whichever were the bigger towns where the tax collectors, the province chief, whatever, he lived. That's the way the structure went.

Hanoi had been the big area of control most of the time; as sometimes Hué [was]. Saigon was a Johnny-come-lately, really, because this was the last place the Vietnamese went into. And then Saigon was really built up by the French. It had been practically a little village but [was] built into a huge city. You could call it the Paris of the Orient, I think they called it. But that was due to French culture and the way the French operated.

The French themselves did not make their presence that much felt out into the countryside. There were some, but they mainly used Vietnamese who came over to them

to do that type of thing for them. So you had the French sitting on top--and I'm using them, you could use the Chinese, you could use Vietnamese, or anything--structure, and then below it you had the Vietnamese who did their dirty work. And the guy who caught hell at the bottom, in the form of oppressive taxes, regulations, and the rest, were the villagers.

So to say that--and this was a mistake that Americans made all the time--why doesn't Thieu or Ky have the loyalty of the people, the hearts and minds and so forth. I doubt if anybody was going to get that, because there was always that suspicion of the peasant in Kien Hoa of the structure, and it didn't make any difference to him whether it was Ky, Thieu, or whatever, he still had to pay those damned taxes, which were breaking his back. For example, if they had--and as I say, it was agricultural--if they had a drought, a bad growing season, they never changed the taxes. The taxes remained the same. So to subsist was a hell of a thing.

Then stemming from that governmental structure you had your large landowners, the rich people. And the peasants toiled for them. And it was a never-ending struggle just for that family and the head of that family to exist. So you had this suspicion, this distrust, this dislike. Oh, yes, they'd smile and bow and this, that and the other. But my God, whoever it was was their oppressors. So whether it was the Viet Cong doing it or the Saigon government doing it, really didn't make all that much difference. They couldn't differentiate between them, a “who was the worst,” not “who was the best,” syndrome. So Americans who didn't understand that; couldn't understand why Kien Hoa was so hard to pacify. Well, it was because this had been going on for years. For

example, every province and every district except for a few--no, An Giang had a colonel in it. I'm trying to think--I think Go Cong at one time had a civilian in it--but the province chief was a military officer, and the district chief was a military officer. Seldom, and it would be awfully rare, that that guy was from that area. But he was given the job. So he was a symbol of this sort of thing. Do you follow me?

G: The bad old days.

D: Yes. The bad old days were right now. So this is the struggle that was going on: who was going to be the guy who ran the districts, who ran the province, who came out of the central government, wherever that was, which was some nebulous thing. Ninety per cent of these people had never been to Saigon, I'm sure. Over 90 per cent, I'm sure. Most of them had never been to their provincial capital. It was all local. So the Viet Cong promised them all the goodies, in the political sense, and so did the Vietnamese government, but the Vietnamese government was in charge and the Viet Cong were merely the protesters.

G: It's always easier to be the critic, isn't it?

D: Oh, hell, yes. Yes. And Thieu and Ky had a horrendous job. Now I guess you could say theoretically what they should have done is had elections and gone from the village on up and elected the district chief and the elected province chief, but I don't think they could trust those--they had to put somebody in there who could administer it, who was loyal and so forth, so they were kind of stuck with that system, and the only place they had to go was the military, and that's why--the only place they had to go from an educational and an ability-to-administer capability was in the military, and that's where they went.

G: That was your choice.

D: So we were stuck with it.

G: Well, how do you go about turning that situation around, now, which is what I guess pacification is supposed to do?

D: Yes, that's true. Well, we sort of got off the track there.

G: That's all right.

D: So I would say this on pacification: we drew our little circles. I guess I could still draw them. This would be under our control.

G: That's Phuong Dinh.

D: Phuong Dinh; and that's under our control.

G: An Giang.

D: And I guess out around these provincial capitals, in all of the provinces under our control. Under Vietnam control were these base areas--

G: Do you mean Viet Cong control?

D: --the mangrove--yes, Viet Cong, every place along the coast, you can see it. Go Cong was completely under our control. But the mangrove forests of Kien Hoa, Vinh Binh, Bac Lieu, An Xuyen province, all of this was completely under the Viet Cong control. This is the famous U Minh Forest, the Black--what did they call it, the something Black; I've forgotten what U Minh means. That was all Viet Cong.

Now, the reason for that was nobody lived in these areas; you couldn't. You flat couldn't live in those areas. In fact, the Vietnamese had a hell of a time, the Viet Cong. They're swamps. Every disease known to man. Water was a hell of a problem, and the

reason for it was that--in the dry season they'd come out of those places because all this was saline, being so close to the coast. As much rain as we got in the Delta, and good God, it did rain, water was a hell of a problem, because in the dry season you had to go to well water, and one of the things to win the hearts and minds of the people was go down to the village and dig them a well. Boy, you really made friends when you did that. And this is a part of the world that for six months out of the year is completely under water!

G: That's an interesting and ironic point.

D: Oh, it is. I used to just shake my head. You see, during the rainy season this whole area was under water. In the dry season--I'll go to the middle of the dry season--the rice paddies are just like concrete. Hotter than hell, dirty, nasty. Disease, a lot of disease: cholera, all of those, and diseases we've never heard of. That inhibited the Vietnamese, too, malaria, although we--

G: I've heard that there was a particularly nasty kind of malaria around the U Minh Forest that was a particular problem. Did you run into that?

D: Well, I don't think we had the malaria problems that they did in the Central Highlands, in the jungles up there. They had it, and we had it. We all had to take the pills and so forth, and guys would get it every once in a while. But I don't think we had that. We had severe--every year that worried the hell out of me--we had diseases such as cholera and the rest. We had cholera epidemics that ran through the area, particularly in Can Tho, the hospital. I visited the hospitals, the provincial hospitals and so on, during that season, and seen these people, and God, that's a miserable damned thing. You bloat up,

somehow, and boy, it's a terrible one. We've forgotten many of the diseases that they had.

G: So you'd go dig them a well; that would--

D: Oh, we'd do a lot of things. You dig wells, you put up dispensaries, build bridges over canals, do all those things. We were constantly doing that--build schools. The most remarkable men to me were the youngsters that were out in the districts, the district advisory teams. Usually there'd be two officers and three enlisted men, one of which would be a paramedic, one of the enlisted men. And they lived the village life. They were involved in helping them with agriculture, helping them with mainly dispensary-type work, all the things that go with it. Getting the medics in to fix the harelips, they had an awful lot of harelips. Getting sick kids flown to a hospital in the province or something, doing all sorts of things. Setting up schools. Most of the schools that were set up in these district places and village places, the desks were made out of American ammunition boxes. We always gave them the ammunition boxes, and then the advisors would make the desks or get somebody to make them. And then the advisors would participate in teaching them to speak English; they all wanted to learn to speak English.

G: Excuse me a second, but now the duties that you've described, all under the heading of pacification, or whatever name we choose to place on it--it strikes me that this is not the traditional role for a military officer.

D: That's right, and I had a very odd one happen in that respect. In 1967 they decided to strengthen the participation of the State Department in Vietnam. That was one of

Komer's things. Up till that point we had had a Colonel Jackson, and I've forgotten the name of the organization he worked for, but it was from Saigon; it was from the ambassador on down. And he was on loan to the State Department, a lieutenant colonel working in civilian clothes. He was supposedly the civil affairs type, and he had a lot of civilians working for him. He had a separate headquarters from mine. My headquarters was right in the Vietnamese army corps headquarters. My office was right next to the corps commander's; my chief of staff's office was right next to the ARVN chief of staff, and we did it all the way through. But this guy was set off to the side, and he worked with some nebulous guys up in Saigon. He'd come see me about two or three times a week, paddle on down the street, tell me about all the pacification that was going on, and they had their sort of what they wanted to do, and we were fighting the war, and we paid lip service to what they did and so forth, because they weren't all that effective.

But they strengthened this, and they sent down a man named Cottrell.

G: Is that C-O-T-T-R-E-L-L?

D: C-O-T-T-R-E-L, or C-O-T-R-E-L-L, one or the other.

G: We can look it up.

D: He was a tremendous guy. He was a professional foreign service officer; he'd been in the foreign service. I guess he was an FSO 1, very senior guy, had been in the State Department since the end of World War II. During World War II he'd been a naval flier, and mustered out after the war and went into the State Department and served in various State Department jobs, mainly in Latin America. In fact, they sent him over because I

think he'd been involved in insurgency-type things in Venezuela, places like [that]. He'd seen a lot of it.

And Cot came down, and was my deputy for CORDS [Civil Operations Revolutionary Development Support], and we hit it off right away. He was a very energetic man, a very intelligent man, and, boy, patriotic as he could be. Just the type you like. And he was a Stanford graduate.

So the first month that Cot was there, he went with me and the corps commander; we just went all over. And after that he came in to see me. He said, "You know, you guys are doing everything--90 per cent of what you're doing is civilian-type things." I said, "Yes." He said, “Down in the district”--he made the same observation you made--"Heck, that's what those guys are doing. They're doing that, and then they pick up a gun to fight when something happens." I said, "That's right. It's been going on long before I got here. This is not my idea; this is just the natural way of doing it." So he sat down and--he showed it to me--he wrote about a ten-page letter back to the State Department saying that the State Department was letting the services down, that we were doing jobs that youngsters in the State Department ought to be doing, who were trained for it and so forth. As a result of that, the State Department set up a school in Alexandria, Virginia, and started training guys and sent them down to get into province and districts. And boy, those guys--they bucked that one something fierce. They didn't mind coming over, but they all wanted to stay in Saigon; they sure as hell didn't want to go on down.

But the State Department did, in about 1967, start a program to try to get their people involved more than they had been, and were quite successful at it. And I imagine

by the time we pulled out of Vietnam, there were quite a few of them all around. In fact, most of the places, at least 50 per cent of the places when I left, of the provinces, the provincial senior advisor was a State Department-type guy, down to that level, and a few out in the districts.

G: My comment would have been something similar to what you've said, which was these young captains and majors were thrown in a rather alien environment--

D: Oh, they were.

G: --and given a mission they really had no experience in accomplishing, right?

D: That's right, but you know, I think we think in terms of these guys were not qualified because they didn't have the training, and this, that and the other, but they did. Most of them were university graduates, had served in various foreign countries on a tour, and so forth, and it was a matter of common sense and adapting to it. To train somebody to do that in Vietnam would entail, I guess, language, learn the culture, and all the rest. Well, my gosh, it would take you two years to train a guy up to the standard that we're talking about there, and we couldn't afford that. A man couldn't stay out in a district much more than a year. That was stretching it pretty far. Province was the same thing.

G: What were the problems involved with leaving them longer than that?

D: Loneliness. Some of those damned places--well, I'll give you an example, an extreme example, up in Vinh Binh province. Let's see if I can find this place, Cao Khe. See that little town of Cao Khe?

G: Yes, right near the river.

D: All right. There's a district town in there, and the Viet Cong ran supplies from the Bassac up by Cao Khe all the time in there, and they were always fighting the guerrillas in there. Five guys, two officers, a sergeant. They had a volleyball [court] right outside the little district thing. And they'd be playing volleyball and so forth, and maybe one day out of seven a damned sniper would start shooting at them. They'd have to quit playing volleyball and go in. They were involved in these pacification things I'm talking about. They were out at night trying to get the Regional Force--and that's all they had in the town--out there to patrol at night and zap these--they were only up against fifteen-twenty guerrillas in the whole damned district, but those guys would give them fits when they wanted to, because they had the choice. Now there they were, stuck. They only way to get out of there, really, was by helicopter. Well, we didn't have enough helicopters. Look at all the districts we had in Vietnam. So I would try to drop in to Cao Khe as much as I could and get guys to [inaudible], and go in and make sure they had beer, and coke, and so on. But they were sort of isolated out there. Now the only people, their friends, were the five. They got to know the village people, obviously, but that's an alien environment to live in for over a year, the same thing day in and day out: write your monthly report, your weekly report, fight, take care of the babies and stuff. Well, a year of that, away from your family--hell of a long time.

Another extreme down here, way down in the U Minh: Son Duc [Song Ong Doc?]. We had an advisory team--I put one in there; there wasn't one. I guess I put [one] in there in 1966. The Son Duc River runs right up in through the U Minh Forest, and this is all Viet Cong country. They're completely surrounded by Viet Cong. Their district

town's on that side of the river, and the Viet Cong would sit over there with machine guns and shoot at them, try to snipe at them, and they'd fight back and forth. When the navy finally came in, the navy would touch base with them with their patrol boats about once every two-three days, come in and talk to them.

The only mortar they had in town to defend themselves was a homemade mortar. We always thought the Viet Cong were the only ones that had that kind of weapon; that's a lot of baloney. Down there they had a--but it took me six months to get them a--when I discovered this--to get an American 4.2 mortar in to them and some fifty-caliber machine guns. And they lived in that life down there. Twice a year a big white ship would come up and anchor off Son Duc from Singapore. And what they did, they had a certain kind of dried fish that they had, and they would sell it to this thing. That's how they made their living down there, and I'm sure the only reason the Viet Cong never overran it was that they were getting the tax--

G: Off the fish trade.

D: Off the fish trade down there, and left it alone. Why disturb that, you know. So that town wasn't disturbed. Now, what did I use it for? I used it as an intelligence center. That's the only thing we had for this whole area of the U Minh Forest. But that's an isolated place to live. You couldn't even step outside that damned village and you'd get your head blown off.

Then you could live in Long Xuyen, and heck, you'd go on a trip out and go on a picnic down here, or go fishing or whatever the hell you wanted to do. You'd have more

damn fun in Long Xuyen than you would anyplace. So you'd go from one extreme to the other.

G: That makes it kind of hard when somebody asks you to characterize the Delta.

D: Oh, you can't.

G: You can't do it.

D: You can't do it, no. There's absolutely no way you can characterize the Delta. You can speak of it in generalities, and that's what you did when we first started. I said, "Yes, I got some training, some background." And people who visited had a general idea of the Delta. But that is very superficial, extremely superficial. This province down here, Ca Mau, [was] entirely different from this one. Kien Phong, up there, a great big huge province on the Cambodian border, and Kien Thuong, those two provinces, that's the Plain of Reeds, up there, and I don't think there are more than, in those two whole provinces, more than twenty thousand people living up there. It's too hard, you can't--we called it--I guess you'd have to call it, most of the year when it did rain and it filled up, "sour water." You wouldn't find any rice growing up there in that. You couldn't grow anything. Where you see a little bit of green, those are tram forests, those are scruggly trees that grow out of the swamp. That's all what you and I would--they called it the Plain of Reeds; we'd call it swampland up there, along the Cambodian border.

Chau Duc, up here, you see this string of mountains--that's Cambodia. Those are the Seven Mountains. That's the only high ground in the Delta. Everything else is either sea level or just a few feet above sea level. And that posed a hell of a problem up there, because the Viet Cong used that as a base area, and I'll go into base areas with you in a

minute. And the Khmer Rouge, that we now all know about, but hell, I fought the Khmer Rouge back in 1965-1966-1967. They would come down into here, they'd come down into Kien Phuong, they'd come down into Kien Thuong, hole up. They'd get driven out up here and hole up in the Seven Mountains. We captured a lot of them. Some of them--we had a couple of Khmer Rouge Battalions come over to us, stay for a while, and then infiltrate out and go on back to Cambodia. They were almost like bandits, is really what they were.

Tape 2 of 3

(Interruption)

G: --already a cliché in 1965 that the war in Vietnam was a political war. How did that affect the way the war in the Delta was fought?

D: Oh, I don't think that was necessarily a cliché. You've got to remember that the Viet Cong, the Russians, the communists, the Chinese and so forth, in any war that they go into, the political angle of it, to them, is the predominant factor. Everything they do militarily has to support their political goals. Their whole strategy, their tactics and the rest, is geared to that particular facet.

As a result, everything we did in IV Corps in Vietnam was to try to offset their goals, what the Viet Cong were trying to do. I think we have to realize that because of the way we set ourselves up, we were tactically on the offense, but strategically we accepted the defense. Strategically the Viet Cong, the North Vietnamese, were on the offense. That came about because we were not permitted to pursue them or to go into their base areas and to defeat them once and for all. We played their tune, strategically. I

can explain that in the Delta, and I'm sure that this explanation goes for other areas of Vietnam, within the context of how they had to operate in their geography, against their enemy, and so on.

First off, I might make it clear that in IV Corps, in the Delta, we fought only Viet Cong. There were no [North] Vietnamese units at any time in the Delta when I was there, before, and I don't think after, as I recall. As a matter of fact, we picked up very few North Vietnamese when we captured people and so forth. It was a rarity.

G: There were a few fillers, or cadre around, were there?

D: The main ones that we would get every once in a while would be technical people: doctors, we would get political guys. But fighters, no. Now I think there were many reasons for it, but one of the reasons was that the North Vietnamese knew they would not be popular down here in the Delta. They're a different type of people. The South Vietnamese would never accept them. So from their point of view, the best way to fight this war would be with surrogates; that would be, their people. There were stories, for example, after the defeat of the French, Ca Mau, which had been a--it's way down here in the tip of the Delta, near the U Minh Forest--had been a hotbed of Viet Minh activity. There were literally hundreds of people from this whole area, in the Ca Mau area, who were taken up to North Vietnam, trained in the Hanoi area, and then were brought back, and they were the Viet Cong infrastructure in the Ca Mau area. But they were all South Vietnamese.

Now, that was a prevalent story and the Vietnamese used to joke about it whenever we were down in Ca Mau, because they knew that all through that area were

people who were against them. Other provinces [were] the same way; you'd hear the same story, where people had been taken up and trained and brought back. But basically the whole thing, the whole Delta region, the war was conducted [as] Vietnamese versus Viet Cong. The military, the infrastructure, everything, was South Vietnamese Viet Cong.

The whole scheme of the Viet Cong, working under COSVN [Central Office for South Vietnam] directives, was to take control--physically take control, eventually--of the Delta, and their strategy and their tactics were quite obvious. The key to the Delta was this Highway 4 that I showed you, that ran--it started in Saigon--down to our area, Dinh Thuong province, and then all the way through it down to the tip down at Ca Mau. And the reason for that was that that's where your commerce, your line of communications, ran. We knew that, and we defended it, and we ran supplies and our commerce. We kept it open, except for periodic times when it would be closed because of military action. We forced the Viet Cong to live and operate out of base areas. Their major base areas were--and now I start out with 1965--their major base areas were along the coastline, on the South China Sea. The mangrove swamps of Kien Hoa province--these little tips, right? Right through here, were Viet Cong base areas. Vinh Binh province, [inaudible], Bac Lieu, An Xuyen, the U Minh Forest. The Seven Mountains up here was a base area, and then up here in Dinh Tuong and up in Kien Phong province to the north, that being the Cambodian border, the Plain of Reeds, were base areas. Now we called those major base areas. The toughest part of the Delta was the 7th ARVN Division area, particularly along Highway 4 in Dinh Tuong province, from the Mekong to the

corps boundary, and then [as] that extended they had the same problem on up to Saigon. Now the reason for that was simple. Kien Tuong, being a local base area, the Plain of Reeds, sat just above Highway 4; you can see it. From the province town of Muoc Hoa, which we controlled, going by canal--we've timed them--the Viet Cong could move in about four hours down to--we're talking time and space. By the way, you could always tell a Viet Cong sampan. They always had two outboard motors. If they had one outboard motor it was a friendly one, but if it had two, you just went and picked him up; that would be Viet Cong.

Now, the Viet Cong also used Cambodia, all along that Cambodian border, as a base area. So they would operate down through here, particularly against Highway 4, and if they were defeated they would pull out and go over into Cambodia where we couldn't get them. I've seen them many a time just across the border with their camps, drilling, flags up and all the rest. We couldn't touch them. Sitting over there, and we knew damn good and well when they decided they wanted to come back and fight we'd have to fight them. We couldn't touch them over there.

Now, what they wanted to do--well, I'd better go into some more bases. Those were their main base areas. Then throughout the Delta they had local base areas. For example, right in this area, which later the Mobile Riverine Force of the 9th U.S. Division--

G: This is in Dinh Tuong.

D: In Dinh Tuong province. This is the Cam Son base area right there. There's My Tho. And they had a local base area here. So they fought out of this base area. Out of this

base area what they wanted to do was cut Highway 4, right there. And these were normally--when we had our big fights on Highway 4, which was, oh, gee, every month or so, they were trying to blow bridges, cut the highway, they would be main force units. And invariably they came out of Cambodia, and out of this area, and they also would--what they'd do, they'd infiltrate down into the Cam Son, and get set, and then they'd have their big attacks along here, and we'd fight them like mad, drive them off. They'd come in at night, take over a village, they'd take over a district town, cut the highway for a few miles, blow the heck out of the highway, all that sort of stuff. And then we'd chase them, defeat them, chase them out, and they'd go on up into Cambodia, regroup and come back. So that was the idea there.

In the central part of the Delta, right through here, things were relatively quiet. Vinh Long and Vin Binh, they did very little. But there was a huge base area, a local base area, right in here, which we went into all the time. Right in the--

G: That's right around the highway in Vinh Long.

D: Yes. And just above Can Tho, on both sides of the highway. Down in the lower part of the Delta, everybody, the amateurs, always said that we had to go into the U Minh Forest because that was the area. Well, I'd been in the U Minh Forest, and to me that was the stupidest thing in the world, because large units couldn't survive there. The mosquitoes alone would drive you out of there. How the people that did live down there functioned, I don't know. I really don't know. They were poor, miserable people. Very sparsely populated. The area cannot take many people because of the lack of water. You just can't survive down there. But it's next to the coastline, so it's a base area.

Now the real base area in that part was around the town of Vy Thanh, which I described a little earlier. There it is.

G: That's in Chuong Thien.

D: Chuong Thien province. That's the provincial capital that President Diem established long before I got there. Now the reason that was so important was that they had the twin rivers down here. You see those rivers? We called those the twin rivers. And right in that area where there was plenty of water, outside the U Minh Forest, was a local base area and that's where the Viet Cong stayed. And we raided that monthly. In fact, in 1965-1966, our biggest battles, outside of up on Highway 4 up there, were always in the Chuong Thien area.

Now, trying to cut Highway 4 up here, and using these base areas, and trying to control Chuong Thien province, around Vy Thanh, they tried to cut off this part of the Delta from the remainder. They tried to cut it up here. Then the center would take care of itself. And that was their whole strategic purpose, and it never changed. The funny thing, I talked to General McChristian about it when he came over. After I'd been there a short time, relatively short time, it became obvious to Bill Maddox, who was the aviation commander, and myself, that contrary to published reports and thoughts, the Viet Cong were the most inflexible fighters that I've ever been up against in my life. They always attacked certain areas; they did certain things at certain times of the year. You could just count on it. They set up what we called patterns. They did it locally and they did it strategically through the Delta. So Maddox and I set out to document that, not for historical reasons but so that we could anticipate what was going to happen in March,

April, May, June, rainy season, dry season, things like that. And we did that, and it was unbelievable, it was almost like clockwork, that, say in May, they always attacked a certain town in Vinh Long province. Come May, sometime in May, they sure as hell would. And so we set that.

They were called great night fighters. That's a lot of baloney. The reason they got the reputation was, during the daytime they were pretty much suppressed because of our air superiority and superiority on the ground. So they were forced to fight at night. But if you ever caught them at night, and that was one of the things I was trying to do over there, is catch them at night, you just--they went into chaos. They just couldn't handle it. We had big victories at night when we would catch them about to attack an outpost or a town or something like that.

G: Was it a problem to get the ARVN to do that?

D: Yes, and that was one of the things that really bugged me later on. We were criticized, and rightfully so, in the Delta, for sort of holing up in the areas. The Vietnamese got that from the French. For example, the ARVN main force units, the regiments, battalions, were all in province towns, headquarters and so on. Their families lived there right with them, and they would go out from there to do their fighting. The Vietnamese built forts, big mud-log forts and so forth, at just about every critical canal intersection and along the highways, along Highway 4. Those were Regional Force. And that's where the Regional Force would get, and they would stay there with their families. Their families were right alongside of them, either in the fort or in the village that was right next to it. The Popular

Force, which were the village guys, they stayed in the village, normally, in a fort, during the daytime. Maybe they'd go out into the village at night. But that's the way it was.

That, then, gave the Viet Cong the run of the Delta, particularly at night and a lot of times, frequently, most of the day. So one of the things I tried to convince people at the early stages was, "All right. Let's get out of these forts, let's get out of these towns, and let's disrupt them." And that was part of this pattern intelligence; we could figure out where it was going to happen. And we made great strides.

We were also criticized, and the Americans learned the hard way that the Vietnamese were right, when the 9th Infantry Division came in, that we would only go out on a big operation at the most, at one extreme, five days, maybe a week, normally about three days, and then come back in. Now the reason for that was basically the conditions: the water, the climate, all of that brought together. No human being, including the Viet Cong, could stay out much longer than that. You had to dry out. If you saw a Vietnamese battalion in the evening on an operation, you'd nearly die, but the Americans learned that they had to do it too. They would stop maneuvering or doing whatever they could, if they could, along about dusk, and they would just strip off to their shorts, and you'd see their uniforms hanging on lines or in trees or whatever, drying. And they'd be barefooted. They normally went with sandals and sometimes jungle-type boots and so forth, but they had those off and they'd be barefooted. Those things would be drying out. So we were criticized for short length of operation; we were criticized for being in these forts, a fortress mentality. Well, we really started maneuvering starting in

1966. In 1967 we were a going jessie, I mean all over the damned Delta. I'll tell you a funny story in a minute if I can think of the number of the operation.

But anyway, when the Americans came in, for example, up here, they said, "We're going to show you." They came in up near My Tho, on the Mekong. They went out for weeks at a time. They'd go out for a week, two weeks, and all of a sudden the casualties they were having from what we called trench foot or immersion foot or whatever were unbelievable. And they stopped that sort of thing, and they were going out for two or three days at a crack--(Laughter)--and coming back in and listening up. But all of that went on. Now, just at the time that we had them really going, and I thought, "Well, we've really got it made," Komer and his gang came in with what they called, I think it was called Revolutionary Development or some damned thing.

G: CORDS, wasn't it?

D: CORDS, yes. And they had decided--oh, before that, I had another problem, because the Americans came in up north, and built base areas and operated out of base areas. And the Vietnamese said to me, "Well, what's the difference between operating out of a city and a base area that you built? You're doing the same damned thing; where do you get all this mobile operations-type thing?" Well, I had a little bit of a problem there, explaining the difference to them.

But the one that killed me, flat-out just set me back unbelievably, was Komer and--I guess his name was Thanh [Thang], a Vietnamese, came out with this Revolutionary Development thing, in which they declared that 50 per cent of the battalion, at least 50 per cent, had to be on what I call static duty. They took 50 per cent

of my mobile battalion, half of a division, and those battalions had to go to an area and pacify that area, just stay there. Well, this is a huge damned thing, and there we were, set right back to worse than we were in 1965 when we started, because what was left wasn't strong enough to do the mobile operations.

G: Was this when "search and destroy" became "clear and hold," was that--?

D: Something like that; I don't know what it was. Search and destroy and all that was unfortunate. We were victims of our own attempts to publicize or be dramatic or something. Search and destroy is nothing but reconnaissance in force, attempting to find the enemy with those tactics, and once you did, then it became a full-fledged, all-out battle where you used tactics just like you did in Western Europe or wherever the heck it was. And we hung this fancy name on search and destroy, which the newspaper guys took to the cleaners.

Another one that we were required to do, which to me was absolutely absurd, was body count. But that was forced on us because people wanted to quantify. They were looking for some measurement on whether we were winning or losing. They weren't willing to accept military judgment, judgment of people like me on up through Westmoreland, and say yes, this is true; you had to quantify.

I'll tell you why body count was lousy. The Vietnamese are very superstitious people, and if a man dies or something, they've got to be sure that his spirit goes to whatever, a good place instead of a bad place. The Viet Cong, if they lost people on the battlefield, because of their cultural background, would always get their dead off--that was a high priority--and give them a proper burial. Nobody would fight unless they were

assured of that. The next thing was, they learned a lot of their lessons from the Chinese and so forth, and the Chinese always did that, because then the enemy can't see whether you won or lost. So for those reasons they did that.

But we were required, after each battle, which was tough, to go in and count the bodies and the weapons. They also took their weapons out of the dead and the wounded, because of their supply system. But you had to, within twenty-four hours, report after a battle what the body count was, what the weapons count was. Well, it was always wrong. But we established a system in the Delta where we could find out what happened, but it took sometimes weeks. By the time we assembled the data of what had actually happened, it was no longer of any interest. We told them we'd report it; they couldn't care less. Every once in a while we'd report it because of something spectacular, but nobody paid any attention to it.

Now, how'd we do it? It was very easy. I said the Viet Cong always gave their people a decent burial, and they did. So after a battle, we would get the district chief, who would work through his infrastructure down to the villages to find out in the areas, and we could pinpoint them, generally speaking, how many coffins were ordered. And the burial parties and the Viet Cong would impress people to dig the graves and do the burying. How many graves did you dig? How many did you bury, and all that. And we would get this information, but it would take time. Invariably, within a few months after a big battle, we would overrun an outfit or on a raid or something we would get an after-action report. And we would translate it, and we would have those two to check. And it was amazing how our first impressions the day after a battle were usually not all

that correct. Lots of time we didn't kill half as many as we thought we did. But many times we killed many more and wounded many more. And let's face it, if you wounded a Viet Cong seriously, he was going to die, he wasn't going to live. Their medical structure--they had plenty of medicine, I mean they had medicine, my gosh, we captured it by the ton. But they didn't have the doctors and the rest to go with it. So a man seriously wounded was in tough shape.

(Interruption)

G: That'll come a little later, I think.

D: Okay. That's that infrastructure thing, too, you know.

G: Yes, sir. General Desobry, what part in the picture did the infrastructure occupy in the Delta when you first arrived? What was your picture of that?

D: Well, I gather there you're talking about the political-civilian side of it. They had an extremely strong, viable infrastructure that was visible in some aspects but mainly invisible. To explain that: I don't think people realize it, but under the laws of Vietnam, Vietnamese law, to be a Viet Cong was not a crime. And they had their rules of law just as we have ours, different but they have them. Now you would suspect that people were engaged in infrastructure and so forth, but you had to catch them at it. This is where we got into trouble later on with the Phoenix program, and--at least some of us thought we were in trouble, and maybe we weren't. The most visible part of it were the tax collectors, and they went from the subtle guys to the brazen type. I have seen myself during an operation, a military operation, where the village people would get out in the canals to get away from where the fighting was going on, in their sampans, and be sitting

out there or moving from one area to another, and a Viet Cong tax collector collecting taxes, hauling them in to the side of the bank and actually collecting them. Not once, but many times. You would spot them from helicopters, and you'd see these sampans gathering, and you'd send somebody over there and you'd catch him, or he'd get away, but it would be a tax collector, Viet Cong, who would be doing it right in the middle of a damned operation in broad daylight.

You'd be in a village like I was with Senator Kennedy, showing him a--in 1967, when he and Senator John Tunney, Gene Tunney's son, the senator from California, visiting what we called a contested village the Senator wanted to see, and while we were there visiting this village, a firefight took place on the outskirts, and I'm talking about only three hundred, four hundred yards away. And when the thing died down, what had happened was it was not an attack thinking that, "Ah, we're going to get Senator Kennedy," which was the first thought. What it was was a tax collector coming to town to collect taxes, and his bodyguards, which were about a squad's worth, ran smack into our security forces and we had a firefight and caught him. So you run into all sorts of various things like this.

They had a pipeline of moving people and goods, through their infrastructure, and we could sort of follow that and try to stop it. You'd do it with--in some areas we'd set up free-fire zones. For example, certain canals would--at night, anything that moved along the canal we'd shoot at. But we'd have to put out the word. It was rather difficult to stop that sort of thing, because in the Delta, with no refrigeration and so forth, your produce moved at night on the rivers and canals, and the village marketplace opened at daybreak,

and that's where the wives went down to buy their things. That's very interesting, to go to those, because that's where the rumors were spread, and you'd get a lot of intelligence, just go down there and see it. I remember taking General Abrams into an area that we had pacified that had been a strong Viet Cong area, and walking down the street of a village, and I pointed out a hut alongside the street. I said, "You see those two gals sitting there? Those are Viet Cong. See them smiling and so on?" He said, "Yes." I said, "They're there. They'll report that you've been here in this town. We know they're--but we can't grab them because we have no evidence of it. But we know it."

I spent many times, I know, sitting in villages talking to village elders who were Viet Cong, having tea with them, and knew it before I went in to talk to them. But there was no direct evidence; they couldn't be picked up and so forth. In fact, there probably was a lot of that that went on in the jails in Can Tho and other places. I avoided them because they were full of people, and the terrible part about it was, there was no way for those people to get out, because they never tried them. They just left them in there, and then you'd hear of guys bribing their way out, and then you'd capture them again someplace. Mainly, the White Mice, the Vietnamese police, and the CIA were involved in that type of counter-operation. The military was interested in it, we supported them, but we were not involved to the extent we were in other military operations.

G: I've heard that initially the advisors down at perhaps district level were responsible for keeping that kind of intelligence, and then CIA took it over at some point in 1967. Is that approximately right?

D: Yes, I think that's true. The district advisors were completely involved in it in their district, because that's what they were fighting, mainly, the local guerrillas, the tax collector, the infrastructure, the recruiters, people like that. So they had a constant, twenty-four-hour-a-day struggle against them. The CIA came in, I guess it was in 1967, and took over most of that through a program--wasn't that called Phoenix? What was Phoenix?

G: Phoenix was the program that William Colby took over, which was the active, the clandestine operational side, primarily. I think it was where they would go out and either try to capture these people or shoot them.

D: Oh, yes, that's right. And they went into that and the others. But you could never divorce the district--the only Americans in the district town were the advisors, really. Because your level of CIA civilian CORDS-types stopped at province. So when you got out in the district the only ones you could rely on were those five Americans. So they did it all. In fact, they had more responsibility, albeit in a smaller vein, but a total responsibility for everything, than anybody else in Vietnam, more so than I had, more than Westmoreland had. The little guy down in the district, he was the only fellow. So you name it, he had it. And that's why they were such remarkable young men. Probably the best training, the best experience, any young man ever had in his life would be that. They didn't like it, and they didn't realize it at the time, but it was, yes.

G: Well, as long as we're on the subject of the infrastructure and Phoenix, let's pursue it. It's one of my categories down here. Do you remember something called Provincial

Reconnaissance Units, PRUs? They were used in somewhat similar fashion to the Phoenix squads later on.

D: Well, now you've got to help me a little bit. There was a time, I think it was in 1967, when instructions came down that through the CIA, units were to be formed which would be CIA people, army people--military people, there may have even been some navy and air force types, I don't know. [These units] would be operating in the area, and they would operate under the CIA fellow there, and we were to help them. And I remember one of the first things that happened. We were on an operation, but they came to me, and they said they had an area they wanted to go into up in Ba Xuyen province, which was the Soc Trang area. And they needed helicopter support, and because of this directive that had come down--at least I accepted it as a directive--I did support them. And what they did, they had discovered that in an operation some high-ranking local Viet Cong personages had been killed, and in this village there was to be the funeral. And at the funeral all the guys were going to gather, the buddies, and they were going to raid it. And they had all the information.

G: Sounds like the FBI going after the Mafia somewhere.

D: Yes, that's right. And this is the type [of] operation they went on. So I supported them and they went in, and they got them, lock, stock and barrel. And they wiped out the infrastructure for that area, and some of the bigwigs from Ba Xuyen province, which was a hell of a good thing, and I was jumping up and down with joy. A few weeks later, in briefing General Abrams, I told him about this great success. You know, you always have to brag to your boss; I guess I was doing a little bit of that. And he just took my

head off and told me to get the hell out of that type of operation. We, the army, had no business in it, and he forbade it. So that's the last time I ever participated. And thinking back on it, he was right, because that was not something that a military man, living under military law and so forth, should be doing. I just wonder if he wasn't a hundred per cent right on it.

So we didn't do it. Now, we did one heck of a lot of raids, the whole time I was there, going after people like that, trying to recover prisoners that we would get information on. You would think that that would be mainly the Special Forces, but it wasn't, although they lived that sort of thing--they felt they did. We used ARVN troops, ARVN units, and we used Navy SEALS, did a lot of operating for us. We recovered an awful lot of Vietnamese prisoners, both civilian and military, very successful operations in many instances. But we never recovered an American, although we tried. We constantly followed intelligence and we constantly followed rumors about American prisoners. There were about, as I recall, eight or ten of them we thought were in the Delta, mainly down in the U Minh area. But we never did recover any of them, not once.

And it was sort of a hobby with me, because I'd been a prisoner of war in World War II, and I had a soft spot--

G: Oh, really?

D: Yes. I was wounded at Bastogne, and the ambulance I was in was captured.

G: How long were you--?

D: About five months.

G: Oh, really? I had no idea.

D: I spent a month in a German hospital, and then I was up in Belsen, the infamous Belsen concentration camp, where Anne Frank was, as a matter of fact. So I had a soft spot in my heart for trying to recover prisoners. So we did a lot of it, but we never--

G: The intelligence was never good enough or timely enough, or--?

D: No. I understand we came close. You remember there was a major that was liberated down in the Delta. In fact, he came to see me in the Pentagon. He was liberated down in the U Minh Forest, and in talking to him we came awful close to recapturing him, but we missed him each time. And we were looking for him, and we'd get rumors, but--

G: Was he a Special Forces guy, been in hock for about five years or something like that?

D: That's right.

G: Yes, I remember that story. I can't remember his name.

D: Yes, neither can I. He wrote a book, and so on. But we never were able to get him. But I'll tell you, that's a huge area, and to try to do it was--just luck, if you happened to land on him.

G: As long as we're on the subject of intelligence, what kind of problems confronted you regarding intelligence? How good was the ARVN system, and so forth?

D: Depended on the commander. I'll describe some of the commanders. I started out with General [Dang Van] Quang, who was the corps commander, and we got along fantastically well. I'll give you some interesting sidelights into that, if you want.

G: Sure.

D: He was very capable, a very capable military man, and extremely good at intelligence. He had a good intelligence structure. We relied on them because we were advisors to the

military. He had a lot of agents out in the field under his pay, and he had a special fund for it. General [Tran Van] Minh commanded the 21st ARVN Division, which was the southernmost--

G: Excuse me, was this "Little" Minh, the one they called Little Minh?

D: Little Minh. I guess Little Minh was my favorite, because we got along so well, and he was a charger. He would fight at the drop of a hat. And [a] very personable, very likable fellow. Then, in the 9th ARVN Division, which was the center division, at Sa Dec, was General Thi, who was an entirely different personality. He was very proper, hard to get to know, blew hot and cold, fight like heck and then quit for four months, you couldn't get him to do anything. Why, I don't know. We had bitter arguments, but when I left we were extremely close friends, but in a different sense [than] with Minh.

[At the] 7th ARVN Division, General Thi was first there, and he got promoted and went up and took a corps, and then General Thang--which most people would pronounce "Tong", but actually it was closer to "Tang"--was a tremendous division commander, a very proper, courteous individual, very hard to get to know, quiet, stayed by himself, lived very austerely.

G: Was this the same Thang that ran the Rural Development cadre school?

D: No.

G: No, a different man.

D: This man had been the Go Cong province chief and had completely pacified Go Cong, and was promoted and given the job of division commander because of the success in Go Cong. And I guess he had the toughest job. He later became the corps commander after

I left, and was killed in the invasion of Cambodia. He was a three-star Vietnamese general, and was killed when two helicopters collided in that thing. But a tremendous guy.

Now, we relied on those people, mainly, for our intelligence input. We did have, and this got me into trouble, this was the aircraft listening, the radio intercept-type operation going on. We had the aircraft, and we had the ground and all the rest. But that was a separate American intelligence network. And oddly enough, the laws on the use of that, who could get to see it and so forth, regulations, are extremely restrictive. They were afraid, I guess, of compromises or something. So we in the Delta got versions of what they got. They cleansed them up pretty good. And it wasn't all that timely. We needed timely intelligence, not three days old, two days old. That wouldn't do us a damn bit of good. McChristian and his people up in Saigon never understood that. They thought they were great, because they'd send us the weekly report or something. Well, that was all history. I call that historical intelligence. A lot of times, radio intercepts were way off. I would get information that the 514th or the 306th Battalion was in a certain area, and everybody'd expect me to go get them. Well, that's a lot of baloney. I'd know that they weren't there, they were in another place, because I'd just fought them. I'd fight a unit and I'd hear from radio intercepts that they were forty miles away. That was because the Viet Cong would remote, and a lot of people didn't understand that, either.

So I tried to get permission, for quite a long time, to get the real version of that intelligence on a daily basis, and I was denied. It would go all the way back to Washington, and then some bureaucrat would deny it, because they would say I was an

advisor, and advisors are too close to [the] Vietnamese and they might do this or that, so they'd chop it off.

Well, we had a funny one down in--what brought it to a head was we had a funny situation going on in the 21st ARVN Division area. General Minh would be fighting, quite frequently, and the Viet Cong commander would come up on General Minh's radio net, and call him everything but the kitchen sink, and tell him to come on down and fight, and if Minh would come down and fight he'd kill him, and they'd have this childish conversation. And Minh would bait him, and this, that and the other. And I tried to get the radio guys, I told them, "Hey, we've got this going on, and if we can just put somebody up there and zero in on this fellow, radio direction, we can get him." And they wouldn't do it. So I got with my helicopter guys and my intelligence advisor, and I said, "Well, if they're not going to do it, we can do it." And what we did, you could do pretty well with two helicopters, with their transponders. You can sit up there and you can zero in. So I started doing that, and a couple of times--not a couple, numerous times--we thought we had this guy, and we landed, and we never caught him, because we weren't that good at it. It was a jerry-rigged operation that we had. Well, they found out up in Saigon what I was doing, and boy, I really was in hot water. They were debating whether to court-martial me or what.

G: What was their beef?

D: Well, I was breaking regulations. I was getting into something that was strictly prohibited, and some damn thing that I didn't know about. I thought it was pretty good. But anyway--(laughter)--they made me stop doing that.

G: Were you stepping on General McChristian's toes when you do that sort of thing?

D: No, it was the guys back in Washington. They had an access list, and I wasn't on it, and they had their systems and I wasn't supposed to do this. We can laugh about it now, but it was rather serious back in those days.

Our intelligence, I thought, was extremely good, particularly when we went into that pattern intelligence, and the Vietnamese became interested in it, and we sat alongside each other and worked it out, and everybody had it. As a matter of fact, McChristian later adopted that same system up in Saigon that he picked up from us, and he elaborated on it with his stuff. And probably in the intelligence field that was the best. I wasn't there during the--I had left about a few weeks before Tet, the big Tet operation, but I visited a little over a year later; I went back to Vietnam on a visit. And I was asking General Abrams what happened in the Delta, [to] get his version. And the corps commander, [Nguyen Van] Manh, he said--who I knew was a big crook--and he said, "Yes, he was a big crook. They discovered that the reason they were surprised down there was that Manh had pocketed all the intelligence money and didn't have any agents out in--

G: Didn't have any agents.

(Laughter)

D: So if you want extremes in intelligence--(laughter)--and for me to say that it was the greatest in the world; those are the extremes on it, from zilch and crookedness to real good operations.

G: How about security; how about the other end of it? How good was the VC network?

D: (Laughter) They were extremely good. Let me get into that a little bit.

G: All right.

D: When I got to the Delta, we had four aviation companies, helicopters: two in Soc Trang and two up at Vinh Long. The Vinh Long people, as you can see from the map, up on the Mekong, supported the upper part of the Delta, and the Soc Trang gang the lower part. But we also married them up and they all fought together on occasion. It wasn't isolated that much. Every province capital had an airfield except Chau Duc. Chau Duc for some unknown reason didn't have one. Later we built one for them.

In 1965, if you were going to go on an airmobile operation with ARVN--we'll take the 21st Division as an example. A couple of days, maybe three days before they were to go on their operation, the division commander and his staff would fly up to Can Tho to the IV Corps headquarters, and you'd go into a big conference room, and they would lay out what they wanted to do. Our aviation people would be there, our advisors, the Vietnamese corps commander, me, and so on. And they'd say, "All right, three days from now we will run an airmobile operation along these lines out of either Soc Trang, Vinh Long, Can Tho, or Vy Thanh in Chuong Tien." Those were the airfields they were using for this type operation.

After the thing had been approved, the aviation guys would go off and do their briefings and all they had to do, and here's the key. The G-4 types would get hold of the--let's say we were going to go out of Vy Thanh--get hold of the ESSO [Executive Support Staff Officer] local representative, and say, "I need so many hundreds of gallons of aviation fuel by Friday in Vy Thanh." And the guy would say, "Fine." And he'd

deliver it. They'd just take off from wherever they did with their trucks, go down and load up the airfield. Well, off you'd go. And chances are you wouldn't hit nothing. I think it's obvious to you, sitting there with a grin on your face, what was going on. As soon as you went through a drill like this, you'd had the schnitzel, because the word was going to get out.

We changed that. Maddox and I got our heads together; we were tired of this, and tired of the ESSO system and dealer, so we surveyed what we thought we would want to do at all the airfields throughout the Delta, and at the key ones, at Can Tho, Vinh Long, Soc Trang, Vy Thanh, and I think one or two more, I've forgotten now. We put in enough ammunition and enough fuel to run a two-day airmobile operation without resupply. We prestocked. At the other airfields around the Delta, and all the airfields were at provincial capitals, we prestocked one day. We could go down there and start one and go one day before we had to be resupplied. All resupply came by C-131 through the air force by air.

The way we handled ammunition and the fuel at these outlying airports was, we hired the women and children of the Regional Force soldiers, or if there were ARVN, they were ARVN, and the way we paid them was with food and ammunition boxes, crates, and the leftovers. And they handled it for us. The guarding of it was a Regional Force responsibility. The provincial--we called them sector, same thing--advisors didn't like it, because we told them if we came in for an airmobile operation into their airfield, they had to drop what they were doing and go out and help handle ammunition, wounded, and this, that and the other. So the S-1 and the S-2, who thought of themselves as

personnel officers and intelligence guys, suddenly found themselves ammunition supervisors and so on. So they didn't particularly like that. It was, I guess, an old frontier type of operation, but it was the most efficient, and it worked great until they created U.S. Army, Vietnam, and they tried to give us logistical elements to do it, and we fought that off like mad. They felt we were terrible; it was very inefficient and not safe. It was the most efficient and safe system I've ever seen. It worked like a charm, and we held onto it.

So what that meant was, then, that we did away with this warning that we were obviously putting out because of fuel. It was already there; you could just come in and go like that. (Snaps fingers) Now, things progressed and the techniques got better and better until just before I left. I'll give you an example of how to overcome this, probably the best, the most efficient, that they ever had. They lost it when Minh left, and when I left. Now, I'm not doing [a lot of] bragging; I'm just saying that it happened.

We had gotten to the point in airmobiling with the 21st ARVN Division that we could go with just a few hours' notice, we could go--in the amount of time it takes a regiment to get from their barracks out to the airfield, we would have the choppers there and go. And the way we did it was this: we ran a map of the 21st ARVN Division area, an overlay, and we changed this about every week. It was a template-type operation. We would divide this whole area up into squares and we'd give them a number. And I would visit Minh or he would visit me, and my intelligence the way I looked at it, and his intelligence would say that there's a concentration down in the twin rivers area, below Vy Thanh. And I'd say, "Let's go after them tomorrow. I've got the choppers and you've got

the people." And he says, "Okay. I agree. We'll go." So I would tell the aviation battalion commander, "We're going to go to Vy Thanh, and I want two companies and four gunship platoons," something like that, "down there, at daylight on the day." Minh would go back and he would tell his regimental commanders and his province chiefs, "Get all the intelligence from squares forty-two, fifty-three, thirty-four, and so on, and be ready to move tomorrow at a certain time." They would go to work; they wouldn't know where the hell the thing was going to be. About three o'clock in the morning he would radio them, "We're going to Vy Thanh." They would assemble in Vy Thanh. He would start his ground cavalry squadron, located at Bac Lieu, up towards Soc Trang, which would be away from the battlefield. When the troops assembled at Vy Thanh, we would meet them, and he would then say, "We are going here," which might be square thirty-two, as opposed to square forty-four, which was up here. That's the first the Vietnamese commander who was going in knew where he was going, but he had a chance to study these areas.

The cav squadron, which you wouldn't use the first day, once we had landed would then change its direction and come on back down and go across country and come on up and join us and be ready. And we would operate that way to overcome this thing.

Little tricks the Viet Cong had--I'm sure they had infiltrated a lot of these headquarters. In fact, at one time the 9th Infantry Division had a hell of a mess, because they discovered some on their staff were infiltrators, and boy, they were tight-lipped about it, but they had a housecleaning. There was one trick the Viet Cong had that I thought was damned good, and it'll show you how good those people were. Canals, if

you'll notice on the map, are extremely straight. And here's Soc Trang. If you took off and were flying toward Vy Thanh, the canal up here, the wash would turn a certain way, and then it would come down this way, and this way, and it would follow you right along, the women out there hanging their wash would hang it--

G: (Laughter) Turn it a certain way?

D: Yes. And down the canal it would go, and it would just follow you.

G: Like a semaphore.

D: Yes, that's right. And hell, you turn your wash out here, and the next village down and the next hut, a half-mile, you could always stay ahead of the helicopters. (Laughter)

G: That's marvelous.

D: Oh, yes, you could see it. They did things like that.

I guess the biggest bugaboo I had on intelligence was my fight with the CIA. I always felt the CIA spent too much time on business that we could do internally. They were after these little guys here and there and so on, part of the war of attrition. I was worried mainly about where the supplies were coming from.

Let me tell you a little bit about Viet Cong operations. They're just the opposite from--I think the North Vietnamese did it, too--they're just the opposite from what we do. We tend to fight with a front line, and behind us we build up our supply depots, our MSR, main supply routes and stuff, and we fight that way. They do it just the opposite. They've got a base up here (indicates on map) in Cambodia, or one down here in this forest. And before their operation starts--and we'll use Kien Tuong against Highway 4--they will start bringing supplies down the rivers and the canals at night, and they will

start putting in small caches all over this area. If they're going to operate against, say, Cai Le, they'll spend a month or so setting up ammunition supply points, weapons caches, medical, and so forth, dug in the ground in holes at key points along canals and so forth. And that was one of the most remarkable things they did. Their packaging was beautiful, better than ours. I'm talking about being able to bury ammunition, rifles, machine guns, in the Delta in the mud in a hole, and then lifting it out and using it. Beautiful.

G: What did they use?

D: Oh, they used paper and stuff, boxes, but imagine the moisture problem. But they'd come out, boy, you could just take them and bang-bang-bang. Beautiful, because we captured them by the thousands. What we did, we went on a lot of intelligence things where the Vietnamese picked it up, where they would find a cache and then we'd try to find the others, because we knew something was going to happen, and if there was one here, there were going to be others. And we tried to get informants on the rest, and we were out looking, and so on, for these caches, because we could nip an operation before it got started if we could clean out their caches.

But once they got their caches, then they would come across the Cambodian border and do the fighting, and use those, and then withdraw. They'd do the same thing from Vinh Binh-Kien Hoa base areas, build it up and then once it's built up, then do the fighting and then pull back. Do you follow me?

G: Oh, yes.

D: Now, Cambodia. In the early days, an awful lot--and I'm talking 1965-1966--an awful lot of Viet Cong supplies came in from the sea, into these base areas I've already mentioned

along the fringes. And then a lot came down from Cambodia. But the U.S. Navy, working with the Vietnamese navy, finally set it up so that it was almost impossible for them to do that, except in the most remote areas. We knocked off one hell of a lot of sampans and trawlers. I personally got involved in at least four or five incidents where trawlers were chased ashore by the navy, that got through their screen, and we then had to come down on the beaches and, working with the navy, get the stuff.

G: Was this operation Sea Dragon?

D: I guess that's what it was called. But we shut that off extremely well.

The next thing the navy did which was good, they put in their naval forces on the Bassac at Can Tho, at Sa Dec, and at My Tho, and those were the fellows that mainly were PBR [Patrol Boat/River] patrol boat-type operations. And they patrolled the rivers, not the canals. The canals they didn't do too much because that was much too dangerous; they couldn't maneuver in the canals at all. Canals [were] the same thing as [being] canalized; we very seldom fought sampan-type--neither did the Viet Cong, really, because you're too canalized; it's no good.

But they cleaned up the Viet Cong traffic along the rivers and along the coast, and what that left was Cambodia. Well, I used to go up to Muc Hoa, particularly on Sundays, and times when things were not too hot. Muc Hoa--there's your Ap Bac (points to map)--

G: This is Kien Tuong province.

D: Yes, that's the famous battle of Ap Bac, there. And let's see, Muc Hoa is there. That's the provincial capital. This was a special forces province, and then there were special forces camps spotted all along the border to Chau Doc and over to Ha Tien over here on the

coast. And I would go up on Sunday, and it gave me two things to do: one, I got to visit the special forces, and the other thing was, I flew the Cambodian border all the way down to Chau Doc, all the way down to Ha Tien.

When you fly that border, you can see it here, see that canal?

G: Yes, paralleling the border.

D: That's right. And up here, really the same thing, namely, a canal. You could fly and you would see, looking into Cambodia, you would see roads come up to the Vietnam border and stop, and nothing on this side. And nothing where the road stopped, just roads.

Then in Kien Thuong, and up here in Kien Phong, this is the Plain of Reeds. Now a canal is a straight line, but a sampan track--there's no man in the world that can fly a sampan in a straight line; it goes like this. And when you go through that water, you make a trail that stays. So you could fly along here, and you'd see these roads, and then you'd see these sampan trails. Well, what was happening? The Viet Cong were bringing supplies by road up to the edge of the border, bringing it across, and then the sampans were taking it on down into the interior. So it was obviously coming in from Cambodia.

Now, at Phnom Penh, they had the Canadians, and the Canadians were reporting that no, there were no supplies coming from Cambodia, that that was not true. The CIA, when I'd go up and make my reports, I'd go up verbally, I'd write them, and I'd say, "For God's sake, let's knock this stuff off in Cambodia. Let's stop it." They would say, "No, there's no supplies coming in from Cambodia." My point was, we'd blocked this (points to coast), now let's block this one. No. Nobody would do a damn thing about it; the most frustrating thing I ever went through. I took Joe McChristian and flew the border with

him; I took anybody that would go with me, and I'd say--I'd point, "Look at that damn thing. Look at that." "Oh, yes, yes, yes. You've got a point." Nothing ever happened.

Well, Bill Maddox agreed with me. He was my aviation battalion commander. He went back to the states about 1966--he went back the start of 1967. I went back in 1968. Bill came back to Vietnam and at the time of the Cambodian invasion was the brigade commander of aviation in the Delta. They'd built it from a battalion up to a brigade, and Bill was the brigade commander. And when he went off on the Cambodian thing, out of curiosity--Bill was the damnedest operator you ever saw in your life--he took off for Sihanoukville--(Laughter)--and flew into Sihanoukville, and do you know what he found? He found warehouses full of Viet Cong materiel. And the system was, it came from China all the way around into Sihanoukville, and then the Cambodian army, which had been bribed, was taking it in Cambodian army trucks up to the Delta, coming down these roads, dumping it, and then it came on into [Vietnam]. And Maddox found the documentation and everything else, and the warehouses, and that was the operation. And that's the way, all along here, they were being supplied. So you can see where I might be a little bit angry with the CIA people, because I thought they should be--we had no way of doing external intelligence. They had, they did. But we had plenty of operations, internally. We didn't need these Fancy Dan raids and the rest, as I call them. We needed the help in these areas, to stop this sort of stuff.

G: Did CIA ever give you any rationale behind the--

D: No. I think it was political. I think they knew it as well as I did. They're not that dumb; they're brilliant men. I think that we were trying to keep Cambodia out of the war. We

didn't want to touch Cambodia; Prince Sihanouk was here and there, and this, that and the other. So the game was played.

G: If you don't know what's going on, you don't have to do anything about it.

D: That's right. If you accuse Sihanouk of doing that, you know how explosive he is. He'd use it, in that Oriental way of using it. So I guess their hands were tied, too, is what I'm saying. But that's all conjecture. The fact is that that's where the supplies were coming from, right up there, towards the end. Not down here. The navy had this pretty well blocked. Now, that's not to say that an occasional sampan, maybe a small trawler, would get through. Nothing's perfect. But for all intents and purposes, any large scale-type supply that they needed was blocked off the coast by the U.S. Navy and the Vietnamese navy.

G: Let's talk about the Phoenix thing a little bit. That's come up a couple of times.

D: Well, I'm not an expert on that.

G: Well, that's all right. You probably know that Phoenix was one of the more controversial programs in Vietnam.

D: I do, and that's why Abrams got me the hell out of it, I think. He was smarter than I was. I was just a dumb country boy trying to make a living, but he got me out of that in a hell of a hurry.

G: Were you ever asked to provide support for Phoenix operations?

D: Yes.

G: What sort of support would you--

D: Well, I mentioned one, is--

G: Yes, you provided helicopters in that instance.

D: Yes, that's right.

G: How about security?

D: Yes, they asked for that. And we did, occasionally. You know, the Vietnamese army, ready to come in and so on.

G: Yes. Did you ever meet these guys who were running the program?

D: No, just the CIA types who would come and see me from Saigon. But the guys out in the field--oh, I'd meet them at province things. Yes.

G: There were Phoenix centers in what, each province, I guess, had a center?

D: Yes, they worked out of province headquarters.

G: Did you ever visit those?

D: Yes.

G: There's a lot of speculation about what went on in those Phoenix interrogation centers. Did you--

D: I wouldn't know.

G: You don't have a feel for that.

D: I had no responsibility and I stayed away from it. The Vietnamese did all the interrogating of prisoners captured in combat, and some of their methods, I imagine, were not all that great. I saw some of that, yes, and I objected to it when they used electrical things and so on. But I did it I guess more *pro forma*, because I had to. You know, you get involved in a war, things get kind of tough, particularly when you've lost friends and see guys die and [inaudible]. You do it.

But you pick up a lot from prisoners. In our initial tactics, before the Cobra gunship came in, we had a damned good system. We used the B-model gunships, which were where you have the door gunner hanging out on the skids, and those things flew at slow speeds, ninety miles an hour, I guess, maybe a little lower, because they were so heavily laden with guns and ammunition. But they flew right on the deck, and they could do that because the door gunners swung out onto the skids and could fire to the rear. They were our close-in reconnaissance, and served as gunships. And then on the outer ring, in the early days, we used the Mohawk aircraft, and those were in the days when they were armed, and they were much faster. But they also flew right down on the deck. We lost a lot of Mohawks, because even though they flew fast, they apparently were fairly vulnerable to ground fire. Now by 1966 the army took the guns off of them, and we lost the use of those. They became nothing more than radar-type aircraft.

So we got an awful lot of help from that. For example, one day we picked up--gunships were always doing this--we were going into an area right outside Can Tho that we thought where the Viet Cong had assembled, and a gunship picked up a suspect, a rice farmer, and brought him in. And he turned out to be a runner between two Viet Cong Battalions, and they weren't where we thought they were, they were in another place. So we just changed the airmobile operation over there, and we caught two battalions right out in the open, and just knocked the hell out of them. So with things like that, occasionally, we would do quite well.

G: Did you ever know a man who had been a province chief by the name of Pham Ngoc Thao, a lieutenant colonel?

D: No, I don't recall him.

G: Okay. He had been a province [chief] I think, in Long An, but I'm not sure. No, it wasn't, either, I think he was [in] Kien Hoa. I think he had been in Kien Hoa. In any case, there's some controversy about who he really was, currently, and since he's not with us any more they can't ask him.

D: That sort of rings a bell, yes.

G: Well, the story is that he had been the most effective province chief around for a long time, and got into political trouble eventually with Thieu, and Thieu put the word out on him--

D: Did away--yes, I think I remember that, too.

G: --and then it supposedly turns out that the reason he was so effective was because he was a VC double--

D: Oh.

G: --and they didn't have to do anything in his province because they had it.

D: Yes.

G: And I thought you might have some insights into it.

D: Well, that sounds familiar. Kien Hoa was always--oh, God, that was a tough province. That was a very tough one, yes.

G: Okay. Let's talk about pacification a little bit and see if we can focus on it. That was what Lyndon Johnson called "the other war" in a number of places, and it seems to me that pacification underwent more changes in name than policy, really. Can you give me

an idea of some of the highlights of pacification during your years over there? What were the noteworthy changes; what worked and what didn't work?

D: The only thing that worked was to control an area, where you had cleaned the Viet Cong out, and they just couldn't operate at all. This business of winning the hearts and minds of the people is a platitude, a generality. The people lived in a real world. Their real world was survival, being able to survive. As a result, if you were militarily able to get an area to the point where you were in control and the VC couldn't do anything, then that was pacified. All of the other things that you did in agriculture, the building of bridges across canals, building canals, things of that nature, building dispensaries, helped, and were visible evidence of your good will, and that you were on the side of the people. Anywhere you could help them physically, or you could help them economically, obviously that helped.

But nothing worked if the Viet Cong could come in and terrorize them and rip them up. There was a war of pure, unadulterated fear going on, and it went on twenty-four hours a day. In more areas than none we were terribly successful. The things that our Americans did have never been publicized. On days that they weren't in actual operational flying, helicopter guys were going out to remote villages, taking things to people where they may have done an operation there, and they liked them, they'd go back and they'd help them out, bring in goods, clothes, any way you could. This was going on constantly all over the Delta, working through district advisors, village chiefs, and so on. That was a part of pacification. When Quang was the corps commander, I convinced him that--I'd go into his office and I'd say, "General Quang, we haven't been to

Rach Gia in three months. I've never been to"--and I'd name another town. He said, "Oh, we go." I said, "Why don't we put a chart up? I'll have one in my office and you have one in yours, and every time we visit a place we'll put a check mark and the date, and when we get blanks, we better go there." Great idea. And he did. We traveled all over the Delta when we weren't operating. You know, the Vietnamese and the Americans had--the Vietnamese learned it from us--we have the damnedest things. An army takes your character--the Vietnamese army took the American army character, and it's got a lot of strengths. Under the French, they took the French character; they copied them. Under the French, if you visited, they tell me, a place, you were met by a drum and bugle corps and pomp and ceremony, and went in and had cognac and talked and this and that and you left the province. Under the Americans, it's briefings.

(Laughter)

They drove me absolutely wild. These Vietnamese guys would go to Benning, and they'd go to Sill, they'd go to Leavenworth, and they learned "briffings." So you would go visit a district town or you'd go visit a province, and you wanted to find out what the heck was going on, see, and you just want to talk to them. But the minute you arrived they took you into their headquarters and always started out, "Now, General, we give you briffing." And the first guy to get up and "briff" was a Vietnamese. And he got up there and he gave you a "briffing" in Vietnamese, and it lasted a minimum of a half-hour. You're lucky if you got away with a half-hour. Then you had the translation, which lasted another half-hour, and so on. So you were shooting your damned wad every time you went out, and so on.

Well, in IV Corps they had the same damned system. At eight o'clock in the morning was the "briffing" for the corps commander, and in you'd go. And up would get the Vietnamese and they'd give it all in Vietnamese, and then an American would get up and give it all in American. That was the team that had been on duty the night before, going off duty after it was over. And to me they were absolutely worthless. And it was nine-thirty before we could ever get out and get in a chopper and get going. So after I'd been with Quang for a number of months, I said to him, "This is stupid. Why don't I, at breakfast, get my duty chief or his representative to sit down and tell me what the hell went on the night before, and why don't you do the same thing? And then I'll meet you at the airfield at seven-thirty, and we take off." And he thought that was a hell of a good idea. And so we did that every damned day. So we got to visit and see the whole damned Delta, constantly, and get in and talk to the province chief, talk to the district chief, and work that way.

Now, when Quang got fired--which is a great story, you'll want to hear that one; make a note of that--they gave me a guy named [Nguyen Van] Manh. And Manh--[he] was a lazy, dishonest jerk--immediately went back. He was safe in briefings, and he didn't like to get out where the bullets were flying, so his briefings went on forever. He had them in the morning and he had them in the evening, and so on. He never saw anything. He didn't know what the hell was going on

G: I heard he misbehaved at Tet a good deal.

D: Yes, he got fired at Tet. He did exactly--one of your notes says, "Did you ever try to get a Vietnamese fired?" And he's one I tried, I tried my best. And how did I do it? I went

strictly through the American chain of command and tried, and I had no success. I think the Vietnamese generals--I know Minh wanted to get rid of him, and Thang would have nothing to do with him. Minh would go to the extreme--one time I visited him; I flew down to Bac Lieu to try to convince him to go on an operation, and he met me at the airfield, and I started to get in his car, and he opened the door on the right seat. And you know protocol, the senior sits on the right and the junior sits on the left. And I said, "No, General, I'm a brigadier general and you're a major general. You sit on the right." And he said, "No, you corps commander." (Laughter) "You sit on the right." Now, that's what they thought of Manh, you see.

But the guy was absolutely worthless, and I couldn't get him to do anything. The only thing he ever did was protect his rear, steal, and go to parties up in Saigon. That's about all he ever did.

G: How did he get to be a corps commander?

D: I'll never know. And do you know what Abrams told me they did with him after they fired him? They made him the inspector general.

G: Well, that's a do-nothing kind of a job, wasn't it?

D: Yes. (Laughter) But Abrams said, "I guess it takes a crook to catch a crook."

(Laughter)

G: Well, what was the old saying they had, "Screw up and move up?"

(Laughter)

Back to pacification, I have a note here about Vince Heymann. Was he--

D: He was the CIA guy, as I recall.

G: Oh, he was?

D: Yes, I think so.

G: Well, I have a note here he was regional director for the Office of Civil Operations, which was what pacification was called under Ambassador Porter when he was still--

D: Yes, that's--I guess Heymann--as I recall, he was only there a short time. Bunker was there, was the most effective in there while I was there. But Jackson was the pacification guy; he was the IV Corps regional--

G: Do you have his first name; do you remember his first name?

D: No, he was a lieutenant colonel on loan to the State Department, got promoted to a colonel. I know he ran the civil affairs school at--was it Fort Rucker? Down in one of those areas. Fort Gordon, I guess it was, after the war. But those were the guys that had it made. He was a lieutenant colonel on loan to the State Department, on duty in Saigon with TDY [Temporary Duty] to Can Tho. Now that meant he got his army pay, State Department allowances, plus TDY. And he had an apartment in Saigon and a house in Can Tho, and his wife lived in Bangkok and he visited her once a month.

G: Plus he got combat pay, I'm sure.

D: Oh, yes, got the whole shmear; ten thousand dollars tax-free, in addition.

G: Yes, that's right, was it the first five hundred [a month] was tax-free, I think?

D: I don't know what it was, but he was on that one. He was a lieutenant colonel, and he was equivalent to me in rank through the State Department.

G: Through the State Department.

D: That's exactly right.

G: You said you had a story about how General Quang got fired?

D: Well, I'll tell you a number of stories. Quang was a tremendous personality, and a tremendous fighter. He was a fairly tall Vietnamese, but very roly-poly, with a great sense of humor, always cracking jokes and pulling practical jokes. We'd go to a province dinner and he'd always save me the eye of the chicken or something, because he knew that would ruin me, and then he'd sit there and howl when I'd refuse to eat it. But he was very, very cooperative and one hell of a fighter, and good at it, and very energetic.

On this pacification side that we were on, I got him involved completely in getting interested in what went wrong, and where to do better, from the Vietnamese side. I'd go to places and we'd point it out. Filth. (Laughter) One day I came in and I said to Quang, "You know, I don't understand you Vietnamese. I've lived in Can Tho and as I go up to Saigon, there's garbage all over the streets and dirt and stuff, and the stench. And your people are so clean, they bathe every day and wear their white *ao dais* and all this sort of stuff. Why in the heck don't you clean this damn town up and get all the district towns; get some pride built in your people?" "Good idea."

Sunday morning I'm getting in the jeep to go down to the headquarters, which was about a half a mile away, and I couldn't get on the main street of Can Tho. There's a big parade, on Sunday morning. The whole town, parading, and their banners and so on. Cleanup week! Quang had turned the whole damned town out, started it out with a big parade with all the bands, and then the whole town proceeded to clean the garbage and everything else off. And then you know how he kept it going? He cleaned the jails out,

all the jails where the guys had been sitting there, every day they were going around under guard--

G: That was his cleanup detail?

D: And that was cleanup, and that's how he kept it going. And every place we'd go in the Delta, in the village, Quang would get the province chief or the district chief or whoever and just chew his butt, because he had found garbage in this town. Can you imagine that? You've been to Saigon; you know how--well, we did.

Well, he was a Delta fellow. Quang had sort of followed Thieu. Quang had been the J-4 up in JGS, had been educated at Fort Lee, Virginia. He was an armored guy, oddly enough, but had gotten into the logistical business. Thieu had been the 21st ARVN Division commander, and got promoted and came up to Can Tho and was the IV Corps commander. Quang came down from J-4 and took over the 21st ARVN Division. When Thieu moved out and went up to Saigon, Quang went up and became IV Corps commander.

Now, there was a distinct rivalry between Ky and Thieu. It was the funniest thing in the world to watch, and I got close observance because I went everywhere with Quang. I have been to parties in province capitals where I'm the only American there, and Thieu, Ky, Loan, all the mafia are there, and I'm the only one. I did that countless times. And to watch Ky and Thieu vie with one another was unbelievable. Ky was completely the opposite personality from Thieu. Ky was a North Vietnamese. In fact, I remember in one election I went around with him when he was campaigning, and an old woman and he got in a big heated argument in a little tiny village, and after it was over I said to Ky,

"What in the hell were you all arguing about?" Ky said, "Well, she didn't know who to vote for because she didn't know who I was. I kept telling her to vote for the man with the mustache." And Ky thought that was funnier than hell. Later I found out that the gal, who had no teeth, couldn't understand Ky, his accent; he had a North Vietnamese accent.

Ky was very flamboyant, [a] party boy. His wife was absolutely beautiful. He flew his own chopper. Hell, one time we took off chasing him, and he flew into Cambodia before we could get him to turn around and come back. He didn't realize it.

But anyway, Thieu was a quiet, reserved-type man, who moved very cautiously. Quang and all the Vietnamese generals didn't know which side to really play, because you'll remember Ky was going to run, and then he didn't run, and Ky was going to be number one, and so on. And if there's anything you've got to be in Vietnamese society, you've got to be on the winning side. For God's sake, don't get on the losing side. So they were playing that.

In the meantime, Quang became extremely popular and extremely powerful in the Delta, to the extent that you could hear it from Americans. They called him a warlord; he wasn't cooperative, he was running his own show. Which was a lot of baloney. But I would hear this up in Saigon, from these professional Saigon types, military and civilian, and I would refute it. But they knew I was close to Quang, so whatever I said they would not accept, and I knew that. They felt that I'd been taken in by this guy.

Well, it was either *Newsweek* or *Time* [that] came out--this really gave us the tip--with a blast against Quang, saying he, number one, was a warlord; number two, he was a crook, he was stealing them blind. They quoted things that came from Saigon.

Mrs. Quang wore fancy jewelry. Bill Maddox's wife was half-Japanese, half-American. By the way, she was the daughter of the Japanese ambassador to the United States at Pearl Harbor. And her brother--she was interned in Japan; her mother was American, her father was a Japanese--her brother was a kamikaze pilot. (Laughter)

G: That's quite a history.

D: Yes. So Bill understood the Orient, and because his wife was wealthy he understood jewelry. In fact, we went to Bangkok together once, and went through all the stuff, and he was laughing at the cheap junk we Americans were buying, and he could tell. So I said, "Bill, go look at Mrs. Quang's rings and tell me, what is it? Are they wealthy or not? Are they stealing or what, because they're using this as an example." Well, Bill did, and he came in to me--he thought it was funnier than hell. He said, "All that stuff is, is junk you can buy in Johnny's Gems over there."

Well, anyway, I saw no sign of Quang being dishonest. But this kept cropping up, cropping up. I heard it from Americans; I heard it from Vietnamese. Quang was worried about it. This was in late 1966-early 1967. I was scared. I didn't want to lose Quang, because he was fighting, and he would accept--he would listen. We had been through a lot together; we'd been through a lot of battles together, and so on, hard times. What was happening--now, this is in retrospect--people were planting things, rumors. Vietnam is a great place for rumors. It might have been--

(Interruption)

Tape 3 of 3

G: All right, sir. You were talking about being worried about losing General Quang.

D: Well, as these rumors grew, and more reports were coming in that he was a warlord, a crook, and they were going to have to get rid of him, it became obvious to me that it was getting pretty serious. And I talked to him about it, and he was worried about it. In fact, he would get quite angry, and he would ask about libel laws, because of what the American newspapers were saying, and so forth.

G: What was the nature of these accusations, aside from being a warlord? What did that imply?

D: That he was running his own kingdom down here, taking money, bribes, taxing, all sorts of [inaudible].

G: Corruption.

D: Corruption in general, yes. And of course, that was the name of the--the press was always worried about that, and they reasoned that the Thieu government was no good; it was corrupt, and all that. So they were very sensitive to this.

I began to get more concerned as I could see it was wearing him down. And he was taking off to go to Saigon for meetings quite frequently, and the reason I knew he was going [was] he had to use my choppers to go, and so I knew wherever it was Quang went. Normally I went with him, but whenever he went without me, I knew where he was because my choppers took him there. And he had to get permission, by the way, to use my choppers.

Then he did a crazy thing because the heat got on him. He had been commanding the 21st ARVN Division, and it was quite loyal to him. And the best units in the 21st ARVN Division, or associated with them, were the 44th Rangers and the 42nd Rangers,

extremely good outfits. Both outfits had won the Presidential Unit Citation. And he moved the two ranger battalions up to Can Tho. They were normally down in the Bac Lieu-Soc Trang area, but he moved them up to Can Tho. I got hold of Minh through Maddox, and said, "Hey, what's going on?" Minh was very evasive about it. Minh was very loyal to Quang, but he was on the hot seat. I could see it coming. We all worried about coups. If you pushed this man--he was a fighter, if you pushed him to the wall, I was afraid he'd do something drastic. And he had his own little army, you see.

I got hold of Minh and said, "Look, things are obviously coming to a head. Let's put a big operation on way down in the Ca Mau area." And he grinned and agreed. And so we put most of the 21st way far away as we could, including, as I recall, one of the ranger battalions. We euchred it out somehow.

Then we had a real scare when the infamous General Loan--

G: Is that L-O-A-N?

D: L-O-A-N [Nguyen Ngoc Loan]. He's the one that on television shot the guy--

G: Yes.

D: The police--the Gestapo head. He was Ky's man. He came down and took a hotel room in Can Tho, along with his thugs, which had never been done before. Just slipped into town, and we knew he was in town, and we knew he had his thugs with him. I knew Loan. So we knew things were really getting rough.

G: You were suspecting that Loan was--

D: Out to kill Quang.

G: I see.

D: Quang suspected that Loan was out to kill him. So you can see, things were getting kind of hairy.

So I sat down and I drew up, as I recall, it was a page and a half memo on what was going on to General Westmoreland, me to Westmoreland. And in the memo, after describing what was going on, I made the point that I was not in position to intervene in Quang's behalf. They had to make that decision in Saigon. But I knew that if they pushed him to the wall, and if they fired him chances were he was desperate enough that he would try something. I don't know what it was, but he would try something. But if in fact they were going to fire him, I suggested they ease him out, and give him a job, like the Orientals do, a face-saving job.

And I wrote this thing up, and I started to put it in a pouch and send it, and I said, "Hell, no." I jumped in a chopper and asked to see General Westmoreland and I went in to see him. He read the memo, and he said, "I want you to go see Ambassador Lodge. I'll call him." So he called the Ambassador. The Ambassador's number two guy said, "Yes, send Desobry over."

G: Was this [William] Porter?

D: No, this was another guy. I've forgotten his name. He's a famous guy, too, a sort of an Italian name, a Middle East guy.

G: Oh, [Philip] Habib.

D: Yes, it was Habib. So they said, "Come on over." And Westmoreland said to me--we all wore IV Corps buttons, a little round button with the IV Corps [emblem]--"Take that off, put it in your pocket, and go on over." I went over, and Habib met me and read the thing,

and said, "Well, we've got to see the Ambassador, but he's taking a nap. So you'll have to wait." That went over like a lead balloon with me.

Anyway, I waited, and finally Habib came and said, "The Ambassador's in his office. We'll go in together, but don't you say a word. I'll do the briefing." He had my memo in his hand. So we walked in, and Lodge was sitting at the table, obviously irritated at this thing happening, or me coming to see him, and Habib tried to calm him down. And then Habib proceeded to brief him. And he took all the teeth out of the memo; it wasn't nearly as strong as what I had said. And Lodge got up from his desk and walked over to the window and looked out into the street, and made a long speech, and I remember vividly he said, "I refuse to be a French proconsul to the Vietnamese, and I will not interfere in this at all. Good day." And I walked out.

So I went on back to Can Tho, figuring, "Well, I've warned them. If they have a coup (Laughter) it ain't me," and so on, "or if something happens." Well, within a couple of days, Quang took off to a meeting in the JGS compound, and he spent the night. And the next morning I got a telephone call from his aide that he wanted to see me immediately, in the JGS compound, which is strange. I flew up in a chopper, and I told the guys, "Just get up in the air occasionally--(Laughter)--and open up your radio, and if there's a radio there I'll let you know, if I can, what's going on. But I don't know how safe this one's going to be." So I landed in the compound, and each of those corps commanders had their own private house there. Whenever they'd go to Saigon they would stay there; they were old French Army officer's quarters. So I went in there, and

there was his aide, and that's all. And then in came Quang. And he was on trial, and he wanted my advice what to do. And his advisors were his aide and me.

So I tried to get a feel: what were they asking? There were all these generals over there, and--I don't think Thieu or Ky were there. But he said this was it: either he passed or he didn't. Anyway, I just gave him fatherly advice, you know, like you would a kid, nothing substantial, because I didn't have a feel for it. But I stayed there all day, and late that evening, before dark, he came and said, "Well, I'm going home." So we called out to the airfield and had the chopper brought over, and we piled onto the chopper together and we flew to Can Tho. And he sat there very quietly and never said a word. And he went off to his house and I went off to mine.

The next morning I went in and he was in his office, and he had been there all night. He was a broken man; he just cried like a baby. He had been fired. So I immediately got in touch with Saigon, and somebody did something up there, because they followed the advice of the memo. They fired him, but they had a change of command, with Manh, which I conned Westmoreland into coming to. They sent--instead of Ky or Thieu coming down, it was that guy Cao, or whatever his name was, [who] came down. I guess Vien came down. They decorated him; they decorated me, and [had] a normal change of command. We took Quang out and flew him with an escort [of] gunships up to the border, to the IV Corps boundary, and he went on to Saigon and he became a special assistant to Thieu, special assistant to the President, and actually accompanied Thieu to the Manila conference. And I'd see him occasionally. He came back ostensibly for dental treatment--like all Vietnamese, he had terrible dental

problems--for a while, and then he didn't come back. And I'd see him every once in a while in Saigon. But that's how close we came to a damned coup. To this day I've always felt that Quang was not a crook. When I went back I asked Abrams if he thought Quang was a crook, and he said, "Yes." But he would never tell me--

G: He wouldn't give you specifics?

D: No, nobody would. The CIA claimed he was a crook. He got out of Vietnam and went to Canada, and I got some pitiful letters from him and from some Americans who were supporting him. The Canadians tried to deport him, and the Americans wouldn't let him in the United States. The CIA blocked him. As far as I know, he's a day laborer up in Canada. I wrote a lot of letters supporting him to the State Department and to the Pentagon, trying to get them to help, as did others who had been in the Delta with him. General Hemingway, who had been my deputy, is now over here and is a local judge, he's tried. But as far as I know--I haven't heard from him in a couple of years, but as far as I know he's still--

G: Well, if he was a crook, he didn't get his money out of the country.

D: That's one of my points. He's working in a factory up there as a minimum wage laborer of some kind.

G: Do you ever see any of the other people that--

D: No, Minh, I've heard, is in New York as an accountant, of all things. He left the 21st ARVN and went up and was promoted to three stars and was the head of the Saigon area, whatever command that was, as three stars.

G: Yes, Special Military District.

D: Whatever it was, yes. And as far as I know, finished the war there. He did very badly up there; people complained about him. When I saw him a year after I left, instead of a thin little guy he was a fat little guy. I asked Abe about him, and Abe said, "Well, we just wore him out down in the Delta and he was burned out." And he never functioned up there the way he did down in the 21st ARVN.

Thi I flew up to Dalat to see. They made him the head of their war college-Leavenworth complex up at Dalat. I understand he made it out and is living above a restaurant in San Francisco, a Vietnamese restaurant, apparently friends of his. Thang, the other one I mentioned in the 7th ARVN Division, was killed in Cambodia. General Quang's aide--another little interesting story--when I was in Germany on a visit, the Germans had a television program on their news business, showing these rehabilitation camps in Vietnam, and I saw the aide. He was sitting there, he was a great guitar player, and he was sitting there in this television film playing a sad Vietnamese song, and I could see he was dying, in his eyes I could tell that he was gone.

The others, I don't know what's happened. Vien is up someplace in New England. What was Westmoreland's--one of his mafia buddies, a major general that worked with JGS all the time? Now the adjutant general of Rhode Island, Connecticut, or one of those New England states up there.

G: Not [William] DePuy?

D: No, not DePuy, another guy. Anyway, Vien joined him and he's up there someplace. But that's all I know.

G: Throckmorton, maybe?

D: No, it wasn't Throckmorton; I wasn't talking about that. This was one of his inner circle. Throckmorton, [inaudible], DePuy were staff officers, but he had a little inner circle that lived in the same villa with him and this guy was one of them. Fly Flanagan was one of them, and they were his household advisors, like--

G: Kitchen Cabinet?

D: Yes, like Harry Hopkins was for President Roosevelt. That's where those guys are.

G: We heard a lot of stories about ARVN being an obstacle to pacification because they alienated the people; they stole chickens; they abused women, and so on and so on. Was this much of a problem?

D: Yes and no. It was when I first got there, but the Vietnamese became quite sensitive to it, the commanders, and really stamped it out. Now that all came--you've got to remember that the Vietnamese Army was brought up by the French. The French are a live-off-the-land type army. We are the only army in the world that I know of that does not live off the land. The Germans did in Russia; the Russians live off the land. The Chinese live off the land; the French live off the land. The British not too much, but the French taught the Vietnamese. Now, what does that mean? You go into enemy country, and if you've seen a Vietnamese battalion go into operation, when they're going aboard the choppers, they are carrying their rice pots with them and all the rest of it, and so on. They have to; that's the way their rations worked. They loved chickens and things.

Now, when they get into a Viet Cong area, and there are chickens, pigs, or whatever the hell around, that's going to be their dinner. They'd learned it. To them, that is not a crime. That is part of war. Now, we stomped that out. Occasionally we would

get reverberations. The worst one at it was the 43rd Ranger Battalion, which was located up at Vinh Long. We really had problems with them, throughout. It'd be spasmodic, but they would have--

G: I've heard that the rangers tended that way more than any other troops.

D: Only that one. The rangers, by the way, were the best units that we had, they and the ones that we jerry-rigged, which were reconnaissance units. We gave each regiment--had a hell of a battle with JGS, and Abrams fought our battle for us and we won. We didn't ask permission because we knew their bureaucracy. We just created reconnaissance companies for each regiment, to supplement the division reconnaissance company. Those companies and the five ranger battalions we had were our best fighters, probably better than any Americans that I ever saw, at that type warfare. Whenever I'd put the 42nd and the 44th Rangers with the 9th U.S. Infantry Division, they were amazed at their ability to move, bravery, and everything else. They were superb units, but they were tough. They were extremely tough, and well trained, beautifully trained.

That's one that Manh pulled on me. Right after I got there, we had a battle outside of Can Tho in which the Tay Do Battalion just overran the 44th Rangers something fierce. This is the one I told you about, where I counted two hundred bodies and so on. This literally destroyed the 44th, their morale and everything else. At a big meeting after it was over, all their officers came in to Can Tho, and in shame had shaved their heads. These were the survivors.

The battalion commander, a famous guy, was relieved and sent off as an assistant district chief someplace and forgotten, down in Kien Giang or someplace. And you may

remember the stories. His wife was called the Tiger Lady, and the 44th had a tiger as a symbol on their helmets. She went into combat with them, and fought right alongside her husband. He went down to this district town, and like all Vietnamese--or like many Vietnamese; "all" is too all-inclusive--he had a second wife. She was pregnant, and she stayed up in Can Tho. But she went down to visit him, and busted in on [him] and his second wife. And she pulled a gun to shoot him, or the wife, I don't know which, and he wrestled it away from her and killed her.

Well, he went on trial for murder, and the battalion was all upset because Vietnamese are very superstitious. In fact, that was part of being an advisor, you had to learn their superstitions. And under those circumstances, if the Tiger Lady's spirit was angry at the battalion because this guy had done this, on the ninth day the spirit would come back and something horrible would happen to the battalion, or something good. If something good happened, then the spirit was in [inaudible]. The ninth day came and nothing happened. The 44th Rangers weren't worth a damn; we couldn't even use them in combat. The forty-ninth day came, and I was up at Soc Trang and we were on an operation, and the 42nd Rangers caught the Tay Do Battalion and just clobbered the Tay Do Battalion, and recaptured one heck of a lot of helmets with the tigers on them, and a lot of their weapons, brought them back to Soc Trang and the 44th was sitting there on the thing, and they went wild, just completely wild. I watched them. What a celebration, because the spirit of the Dragon [Tiger?] Lady was favorable, and from then on the 44th was just great.

You had to learn these. Americans never understood this. You know, we fought on Sunday morning, anybody in the place. You know why? We could always get the choppers on Sunday. Americans don't fight on Sunday, but they always claimed the Vietnamese were lazy. And we would just--we dreamed up more damned operations on Sunday than you ever thought of.

Feast days. If you knew it was going to be a feast day, don't put the Vietnamese into an operation. The reason: on a feast day, they will not kill anything, and they will not eat meat, because that's against their religion. And you learned that. You might have the damnedest operation that you could come up with, you know, but don't go, because they won't fight. You can put them in, but they won't shoot anything. So there's no need to buck that.

I'll give you another one. The doggone 1st Infantry Division was getting all the credit up there, with DePuy running it. And they took all our choppers and they'd go out on these big monstrous damned things and publicize the hell out of them and go on for weeks. And so I went up to find out what the hell this was all about, because I knew how to fight, and you just didn't do it this way. Well, what they were doing was, they had all these choppers, and they'd start an operation and rotating units in and out. But they were saying this was--they'd give it a long name, and they'd brag: "We've been out in the field for a month." Well, they hadn't been out in the field for a month; they'd been going in and out, in and out.

So I came back; I got hold of Minh and I said, "Minh, these Americans say they do all this. We can do the same damned thing." And this was in September. He said,

"Oh, I can't do that." Well, in the Delta, you had to study the Viet Cong. When they concentrated, you concentrated. When they split out, you split out. So you went big operation, small unit operation. Well, they had split out. They hadn't been doing anything. This comes from this pattern intelligence.

So I said to him, "It's the ninth month"--and they named their battles successively. We were up to Dan Chi [Can Chi?]--which means long life--279. This was going to be the next number. Nine is a lucky number. I said to Minh, "It's the ninth month. You're at Dan Chi 279. Two and seven makes nine, and the other nine, that gives you three nines. Three times nine is twenty-seven. Two and seven makes nine. That's four nines. Four times nine is thirty-six. Three and six is five nines. Five times nine is forty-five, and four and five is nine; that gives you six nines." And I went right on up. And his eyes got bigger and bigger and bigger. So we went on Dan--

G: (Laughter) You're a pretty good astrologer.

D: (Laughter) We went on Can Chi 279. And what it was, we split up in small units, and we would put--we took all the choppers, and we had them all over the damned Delta. We found more damned caches, we had a body count, if you want to go by that, that was astronomical. But it was five here, six there, eight there, and it was working. And do you know what happened? After about three plus weeks of this, just going Jessie, the JGS stepped in. We had screwed up their sequential numbers business, and ordered to stop. They said that we would have to do a Dan Chi 280, and go on up that way. We couldn't keep the same number.

(Laughter)

And I protested, and I lost, and so we stopped the operation because we ran out of nines.

(Laughter)

Now, that's a true story.

G: That's marvelous.

D: That's part of being an advisor. You've got to learn to understand these things.

(Interruption)

G: Let's talk about the media a little bit. The media is a prominent part, of course, in the war. Was there any kind of a press policy for advisors to follow when dealing with members of the press?

D: Yes, we were supposed to be absolutely honest with them and tell them what we thought was the truth and not hide anything from them. That came directly from Westmoreland. And Westmoreland, as a matter of fact, about once a month, made a tour, and he would come down in a U-8, and he would have one or two of the top press guys with him, and he'd come in and make you brief with those press guys there. We always used to cringe, because we always went up to at least Secret, but he said, "No, go ahead and brief them." I always had the feeling that Westy felt he could get along with the press, and the way to do it was to tell them everything. Or another way some people would put it is that he thought he could manipulate the press. I got over that in a hell of a hurry. In fact, Abrams was just the opposite. When I left, I was called by the PIO [Public Information Officer] up there and told I had to have an exit interview with the press, a press conference, and I refused, and they came back at me and said they had seen

Westmoreland and he ordered it. I went up and had a knock-down-drag-out with them in Saigon.

A couple of days later I was up just the night before I left to come home, and Abrams had a party with all my buddies in to say goodbye, and when I walked into his house, he took me by the scruff of the neck and took me in a room and said, "I understand you had a press conference. What in the hell did you do that for?" And I said, "The great white father ordered me to." He said, "Oh?" And that dropped that one right there, and that'll show you the difference between the two men.

I never got along with them. We had one guy--I was trying to think of his name when I saw your question. He was supposed to be the Ernie Pyle for *Army Times*, it was, stayed in Can Tho with us and he tried to write that time, but he was a complete drunk.

G: It wasn't Lucas, was it?

D: Yes, Jim Lucas. Wonderful guy, but he'd get the bottle and he'd be out for days and we'd have to sober him up. He lived there in the compound, traveled around, and they were trying to get him to write the Ernie Pyle type, which he did; he did quite well.

G: He wrote a little book called *Vietnam Diary* [*Dateline: Vietnam*] I think, didn't he?

D: Yes. But the poor guy died of alcoholism, and very unstable. The others--what's his name, the famous one that came over? You've got his name there.

G: Let's see. [Joseph] Alsop?

D: Yes. He also was quite an alcoholic, and he spent weeks with us, and he told interesting stories because he had been over there during the French time, traveled all through the Delta, got captured by the Viet Minh one time, told stories of how the French operated.

For example, the compound that we had as a headquarters was an old Foreign Legion outpost there in Can Tho, and he said the only time they ever went out [was] about once every month or so, they'd go out and walk around the countryside for half a day and come back in. That's about all they ever did.

Under the French, the Viet Minh government ran the whole area. They had their whole government structure, which later became the Viet Cong structure.

G: Did Alsop get special treatment? I've heard that he did.

D: Yes, he did.

G: Where did the word come to--?

D: Well, if he was a big guy like that, Reston and those guys, you knew from Saigon. You took care of them. Ward Just I never had any respect for at all. We had one incident with him that was typical. I was leaving Soc Trang one morning, we'd started an operation, and Ward Just bummed a ride to Can Tho. It was about noon, so we got in the airplane and he was saying, in the helicopter going up to Can Tho, "This is a waste of time. You put all these choppers out and you haven't gotten anything," and so on. And I listened to this tirade, and I said, "Well, I tell you. The way we work, the first day we're on a reconnaissance in force, and we won't find much, but we'll find a little. The second day we'll get closer to them, and the third day we'll find them. We'll just develop the situation. Now, you come back on the third day and I'll show you a hell of a battle." And he laughed, "Bunch of baloney," and so forth.

We departed, and sure enough, the third day we caught the Tay Do Battalion, and we overran them, and so forth. And Jackie, my wife, sent me a clipping, days later [from

the] *Washington Post*: "A senior advisor says there's going to be this and that, and it won't be true; this is a waste of the taxpayer's money, and they can't catch the Viet Cong," and so it went on and on and on, the whole damned thing. It continued on the next page and went over. A little squib at the bottom of the article: "And on the third day they allegedly caught the thing, and claim that a hundred or so killed," and forth. Bang, end of article. So Ward Just and I don't see eye to eye.

He's the one, I think, who came to the 1st Armored Division, came to Fort Hood and wanted to write a book, and they sent word that he was coming down to interview me, and I told General Powell, the corps commander, that I wouldn't do it. He said, "You have to. The DA has said you've got to help him." And I said, "No, I'm an American citizen. I've got constitutional rights, too, and I refuse. He can come down and see the division." And he did, he came down. I refused; I didn't even see him, and he later told Jack Norton--who was also stationed at Hood he said, "I think Desobry thinks I'm a communist." And I told Jack, "No, I think he's worse. I think he's been duped by them and there's nothing worse than that."

Up in Washington Jackie and I went--no, Jackie wasn't there, but Ky came in and they had a big celebration, Independence Day or something like that, over in the Vietnamese embassy, and Just and all these guys tried to get me off in a corner and I refused to go with them, didn't shake hands or anything, and they wrote me up something fierce. I just said, "Hell, I won't have anything to do with you guys. I don't have to play your game." Just, in his book, had me as one of the--as I recall, he wrote me up as one of

the West Point airborne types that were sent over there to go up the ladder. Number one, I'm armor, and number two, I never went to West Point. He's quite accurate, that guy.

(Laughter)

G: Do any of these other names ring a bell?

D: They do, but I don't remember them. They kept coming through all the time. You see, it was so obvious. In 1965, for example, the *Los Angeles Times* in their editorials was all for--they were backing things and so forth. And then all of a sudden, whap. They changed, and that was their editorial policy and they came out against it. I often had conversations with the guys; you give them a drink or something and they'd talk, and they would admit that they had instructions [as to] how to write from back in the states. They even told me that if they wrote good articles they'd get a wire from the editor saying, "Stop that stuff. We don't need that; we're not going to publish it. You send me the other type articles." They would readily admit it.

(Interruption)

G: In the press conference that you gave when you were about to leave--and as I recall, that the gist of it was quite optimistic, upbeat.

D: That's right.

G: Some people have pointed to that as one more “light at the end of the tunnel” type of statement. And then of course two weeks later the Tet Offensive broke--

D: Sure, I agree.

G: --and they point at that as another example [of] false optimism and so on. How did you react to the news of the Tet Offensive?

D: Well, I shouldn't have been surprised. I left just before the Tet Offensive, and my sensing of what was going on in the Delta was, we could move quite freely through the Delta--except for this syndrome of ninety days, and I don't know which is the one day--in any of the valuable areas of the Delta; you couldn't in the U Minh; you couldn't in the Kien Hoa base area, and so forth. There were places, no. But generally speaking, you could go through on out. And any time we met the Viet Cong, we really waxed them.

Now just before I left, we had an operation. It was a strange one. I got word that down in the 21st ARVN Division, in the tip of the Delta, at the little town[s] of Nam Can and Dam Doi--did you ever hear of Dam Doi?

G: No, I don't think so.

D: Well, Nam Can is way down here. See it? (Indicates on map)

G: Way down near the tip, yes.

D: That's right. And Dam Doi is right there.

G: Up a little further north.

D: Yes. All of this area, Nam Can was surrounded, Dam Doi was surrounded. Dam Doi was the first town in the Delta to go under Viet Cong control. That was the start of the big operation, that was the first big operation. And we had gone back and restored the town, and so on. Cai Nuoc was under attack; they'd attacked it and they were about to give out. I didn't believe it, but what worried me was the helicopter pilots that were flying down to resupply Dam Doi, Nam Can, and Cai Nuoc told me that whenever they flew in they'd get a lot of ground fire, and they were very nervous about it. So you had to

fly gunships in with them and everything else, which is quite unusual. It meant somebody was there. Something was going on.

Minh got quite upset about it, and so did Manh, the corps commander. I made the point, no, that my intelligence had them in the twin rivers, and whenever they were in the twin rivers-Vy Thanh area, and that we thought they were moving on up this way, then Can Tho was threatened. And I said, "That's where they are."

G: Around the twin rivers.

D: There around the twin rivers, not down there. But Minh and Manh wouldn't go along with me. I got a compromise with Minh. I said, "I will support you on a Nam Can operation down there, provided you will leave a regiment at Chuong Thien, at Vy Thanh. And if in fact we get down there, and we discover them up here, we'll shift everything up there," which we could do just like that (snaps fingers) with helicopters. He agreed, and he did me one better. He announced in Bac Lieu to the division that they were going on a Nam Can operation, and he wanted supplies taken for five days. He estimated five days. Now when you do that, you've told the Viet Cong you're going on a five-day operation. Because they go out and they buy supplies from the people. So sure enough, we went down there. When we got down there what we found was, yes, they were, but they were local guerrillas. In fact, they landed, and they just scruffed them right up. They were old men, and kids and so on. They just cleaned them out.

Minh picked up intelligence that I was right, that they were up in the Chuong Thien area, and he came to me and said, "I have finished the Nam Can. Let's go tomorrow to Chuong Thien." Great. Up we went, and we hit them right off the bat. And

we hit them on a--we went on Thursday and hit them. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday we were still fighting, which was terribly unusual. Usually you--

G: That's a long time to maintain contact.

D: That's right. And we had contact. They couldn't get away; they weren't that good. And that was probably the biggest kill that we--and [we] had a big press conference and so forth.

Well, in retrospect, two things: one, yes, they were easy to take, much easier than they were in 1965. This was their Delta main force units in that operation. The press had Minh up for a press conference; they took him apart and so forth. I went on up for my press conference, left, did the same thing in Honolulu for the navy, at the headquarters there, and came on home. Tet hit. What this was was the gathering of the clan for the Tet operation. These were the troops that were moving up to isolate Vy Thanh and Can Tho, and we hit them. And just before then, Westmoreland came to see me, because Highway 4 was under tremendous pressure. The 9th U.S. Division was there; their mobile riverine force, and the 7th ARVN Division. And he asked me, he was worried about it: "Can you hold out without help?" And I said, "Yes. It's a hell of a fight"--the 7th ARVN was a tired division--but I said, "We can handle them." And they did.

What Tet was, was exactly what the--I'm not saying anything new. That was their last gasp. And so I will to this day say I know damn good and well I was right. I did not call the Tet Offensive, didn't come close, because I was like everybody else, I felt that when Tet comes, nobody moved, and the three Tets I went through, nobody would move a muscle, the Viet Cong or ourselves. Nobody ever said that historically that had been a

time to do it. But they caught them by surprise. And one of the reasons they caught them, as I told you earlier, Manh had scruffed up all the intelligence money and stuck it in his pocket, and he didn't have any agents out there.

No, I won't back down a bit from that analysis. In fact, the war was won in the Delta, and when I went back a year later and visited, there was no fighting in the Delta, absolutely none. They couldn't scruff up a fight. The 21st ARVN Division was all parked down here in Kien Giang, Chuong Thien, An Xuyen. They were just sitting, right down there.

G: Nothing to do?

D: Just cleaning it up. They weren't doing any of these big operations; there wasn't anybody to fight. The Viet Cong units were down to fourteen, fifteen, thirteen-year-old kids. The Tay Do Battalion was gone, nothing left. They couldn't fight, and to this day I'll believe that. They were just--they had gone to the extent where they were forcibly recruiting guerrillas out of their guerrilla structure into their main force units. The intelligence guys had made a mistake; they said there were two Tay Do Battalions. There were two of this, there were two of that. But what they did, they took companies, they used the old Chinese system--they take companies and name them Tay Do A and Tay Do B. They weren't battalions; instead of two battalions there were two companies, [they] called them battalions. They did all sorts of things to try to hold on. They were dead in the water.

G: Were you able to keep track of what was going on in the Delta during your subsequent assignments; were you able to talk to people?

D: Well, when I left I went into--I was the deputy director of plans in DCSOPS [Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans, US Army (US Department of Defense)], so I had access to everything there, and then I even had more access because after about nine months there I became director of army operations, and I ran the Army Operations Center. In fact, Don Bolton, who was my deputy--had been in Vietnam, and was my deputy in DCSOPS--and I were the ones that were given the job of redeploying the troops. And we ran operations worldwide. So yes, I had access to everything. And there was no doubt in my mind that thing was all finished--for the Viet Cong; now, the North Vietnamese I don't know. But the Viet Cong structure was gone. They shot their bolt in the Delta; they just flat shot it.

And you know, it's interesting too, I understand [from] rumors or little reports here and there, there are still people from the 9th ARVN Division fighting against those people. They've gone and they've reverted roles, and that's the last division of the three that I would think would do it, but they did. They're doing it, apparently. They're continuing to fight a little bit here and there.

G: Do you remember your reaction to the President's speech on March 31, 1968? Do you remember seeing the speech?

D: That's the one where he quit?

G: That's the one where he--

D: I saw it; I saw him give it. I mean, I saw him on television. I thought it was terrible, end of a--I thought they'd given up. The worst reaction I had is Kissinger in that peace drive where he went off and he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize and his counterpart refused to

accept the other half, and it was obvious the war wasn't over. They hadn't quit; they hadn't achieved any peace.

The worst thing we did, though, was probably promise the Vietnamese to support them and then Congress wouldn't appropriate the money for the ammunition and the rest to go on. That's a black mark in our history, yes.

G: What has been the effect of Vietnam on the army, do you think, if you had to sum it up?

D: Well, I think we always think in terms of morale. It obviously had a very severe impact there. But what happened--the army was used up. President Johnson and McNamara refused to call up the reserves, although the JCS had recommended that time and time again. They just flat refused to do it. By refusing to call them up, not only didn't we get a sustaining base that we needed, but we also--if you're going to fight a war in a democracy, particularly our democracy, the country has to be behind it. The whole country has to get involved. You can't have a little segment.

The Vietnam War, and I guess you might have had the same observation, was a poor man's war. There were so damned many outs for the draft and this, that and the other that if you took a [look at?] the little fellows that came over, they were the poor kids, and so on. So it was not only that they didn't call up the reserves to make the sustaining base; it was a small segment of our population that actually got involved.

The treatment of those people when they came back--when we came back from World War II there were parades and speeches, and [when] they came back they were a number. They got off an airplane in San Francisco or someplace, and were processed out and given a physical and sent on home, and a pat on the back, and that's about all. They

weren't treated at all well. I felt it over there, and everybody else did. I got over when the press hadn't started this campaign against the war, but people who came in would tell me about it, and then they started sending articles, and then I got tapes of TV clips, and I couldn't believe what in the heck I was reading. I went back on leave a couple of times, and finally my wife wouldn't let me listen to the TV news commentators, because I'd get so damned angry it'd ruin the evening. Because I'd just left, and it wasn't the truth that was coming out. This had an effect.

But I think the main thing that happened to the army was that it was used up in the sense that noncommissioned officers had to go over and over and over again. They'd come back and go over, come back and go over. Officers, back and over there. I was over there a long time, but mine was continuous. Theirs was--had this thing in there. Europe was used as a sustaining base. The units that were back here, that the noncoms and the junior officers tried to run, were all torn to bits, because there was this constant turnover. The divisions back here except for the 82nd were a sustaining base, and the unit integrity, the morale went down.

Right at that time we were hit, the country was hit, with the drug problem and the racial problems. Those infiltrated into the army in the states and Europe, and over in Vietnam. And you had the horror stories coming back, which I wasn't part of, of drugs over there and the fragging of officers, and things. Obviously there was a lot of truth to--that was going on. So you could tell that the guts of the army had been torn out. It had nothing to do with winning the war or losing the war. They didn't lose the war over there. There wasn't--suffered a lot of casualties, but there weren't any battles, I don't

know of any battles up north that the Americans lost. They won every damned one they went into. Some they won more than others. Down in the Delta, by 1967, all of 1967, part of 1966, 1967 and into 1968, we won every damned one we got into. So the tactical war was won. That's what we army officers I think tend to say. Strategically, we lost. Tactically we were on the offensive; strategically we were on the defensive, by the conditions laid down under which we could fight. We could not destroy the enemy. Therefore it was a war of attrition, and it just went on and on and on. We told our superiors that. They certainly understood it, but they either wouldn't believe us or felt that they had a better solution to it.

And it did--it just tore the hell out of the army. And it's taken a long time--I participated in that. My last tour as corps commander in V Corps, I could see the army changing. The units were coming back, noncoms were doing their jobs, the junior officers were doing their jobs. But in all military units, you can lose a military unit, its efficiency, overnight, but it takes months and years to build it back. I don't know why, but it does. It's just a fact, it's not an opinion. And that's what happened. I understand it's back now, I hope it is.

(Interruption)

G: You had said that the mention of Mr. Komer's name put you in mind of some comments that you would like to make.

D: (Laughter) Well, my association with Mr. Komer was friendly, but not all that rewarding. I first ran into Komer when he was in the White House; he was an advisor to President Johnson. He sent a lot of messages over, and he came over on a visit, and his kick in

those days was that he couldn't understand why in the Delta--and I can only refer to the Delta--he couldn't understand why the rice bowl, the rice production, had gone down. And I had written answers to these things, and pointed out as professionally as I could that there was a war going on in the Delta, and that those young rice farmers that weren't fighting for us were fighting for the Viet Cong. And all that was left out there were the women and old men and the rest, and they were growing as much rice as they possibly could. I also pointed out that the transportation system had been just about knocked out, and to get the rice and the produce from the Delta up to the markets in Saigon, and so forth, was no easy task. And as a result, it appeared to me that--I thought that they were doing quite well in rice development.

Another thing I said, I didn't believe the figures, because there was quite a black market in rice, and rice that came up the legal way had to be sold for the legal fee in Saigon, and the rice that wasn't counted was sold on the black market, and there was a hell of a lot of that that was going on, beknownst to the province chiefs and so on. In fact, I used to get a kick out of their--this is an aside--out of their budgetary process. They would come out with a budget, an annual budget, and they'd break it down into four quarters. And you'd go to province meeting to see how they were going to allocate the first-quarter money; nothing about the second, third, and fourth. And so when they asked me for my great advice, I would say, "Well, we've got to have long-term planning. We just can't do the first-quarter, we've got to plan out into the second, third, and fourth." And they wouldn't touch it. And the reason for it was they would allocate from Saigon and from the province and the rest the first-quarter stuff, but they would put the second,

third, and fourth-quarter stuff in the bank and draw interest and pocket the damned interest. So--(laughter)--there were a lot of problems in connection with commerce--(laughter)--and how monetary things were handled in that society.

Well, anyhow, Komer came over, made a visit, and I remember vividly he came to Saigon and he stayed with the civil affairs people, and he wanted to see Quang. And so I took General Quang over to see him, and he kept us waiting for well over an hour, cooling our heels. And then came traipsing down the stairs, and proceeded to insult General Quang again by telling him he was not doing his job, and they needed more rice, and this, that and the other, and Quang, in his polite--he was a very polite man; all Vietnamese tried to be polite--and it didn't work. And so we had sort of a bad relation, and emotionally it didn't sit well with me, so emotionally I'm not all that constituted.

But anyway we had a running battle with him for quite some time. And then he came over and took over up in Saigon. I didn't go into this, but one of the tactics that we used, that we discovered worked extremely well, was we would pick an area that we knew was vital to the Viet Cong, and this kept the search-and-destroy thing down quite a bit. We would pick out that area and we would announce to the world that in a month or so we were going to go in and take it over. And we did that on purpose, to let the Viet Cong know that we were going to do it, and the people. And we'd let them stew in that, and then we would go in and we would take the damned thing over. Well, the Viet Cong would then have to challenge us, or we would prevail and they would lose the thing. And what they'd have to do was attack us, and when they attacked us we found them. And we were ready for them, and invariably we whipped their butts.

One of the ones I had dreamed up, as I mentioned earlier, the Mon Thiep [?] River and My Klei [?] Canal, which went along the Vinh Binh province line, which was a link of the canal system up to Saigon from the lower Delta, which had been cut by the Viet Cong. So we picked out the Mon Thiep River and My Klei Canal. And I went to the Vietnamese and agreed to do it, but one of the weaknesses of it was the fact that the canal was the border between Vinh Binh province and Vinh Long province, which meant that the province chief who would have to run this operation, would fight right up to one side of the canal and stop, and the other guy would run up to the other side of the canal and stop. So there was no coordination there.

So I had to get the Vinh Binh province-Vinh Long province boundary changed. Now try that, in that Vietnamese society or government, and that's no easy task. So Komer had to come into it, and he did a good job. He worked with me on that, and we got the boundary changed. Well, that then became Komer's pet idea; that was his idea, to open up the Mon Thiep River and My Klei Canal. But we did; we went in there and we put people in, we strengthened the Regional Force. We took it over, and we got the commerce flowing. You could go down there and see it. So the Vietnamese decided to have a big celebration. They invited Komer down, and we rode a boat, Komer and I, and Komer was bragging to everybody how his strategy was working, and the Mon Thiep River was now open thanks to Komer, and all this, and we rode up with ferryboats and guns shooting and bands playing, and we rode the length of the Mon Thiep River.

Well, Komer then decided that the system was wrong. Corps commanders were warlords, and division commanders were warlords, and they had to change the system,

and get the provinces out from under the divisions and have them report direct to Saigon. Imagine this: all these provinces, all through Vietnam. And advisors would report not through--and the provinces, that means district, province and so forth--not through corps, not to me, or the division senior advisors and so on, but direct to Komer and his people.

Well, if you study guerrilla warfare, you've got to take a look at the guys who were successful. And there are many of them; I'll just take one: Lawrence of Arabia, and his book, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. And in that you'll find, in his advice, he says you always--and that's what he was in the Middle East, an advisor to the Arab people--you parallel whatever their chain of command is. You parallel theirs; you don't deviate from it. And that we had assiduously done in Vietnam, protected that. We followed right along that chain of command. I pointed this out to Komer, and he said, well, the only way he could get the Vietnamese to change was to change the advisory setup, and that in turn would force them to change. And I said, "No, they won't change. I know these guys. They know they're right and you're wrong, and they don't like your reasons. Therefore they're going to continue this thing. Politically it's sound to them, and loyalty," and all the rest of it.

But he ordered it; he and George Forsythe ordered this change. Not only that, they ordered that the--and this came from [John Paul] Vann--they ordered that the Regional Forces and the Popular Forces, which came under the division senior advisor, province senior advisor, corps senior advisor, would come under the CORDS side, under the civilian. That really was fantastic, because most of the fighting, day to day, at night, and so forth, was done by the Regional Forces and the Popular Forces. That meant that

the control of that fighting would not be done by the military man, but by a civilian, in my case, a State Department guy.

So I protested this thing vociferously, and I went to see Abrams and the rest, and Abrams said, "Well, do the best you can." Abrams obviously didn't agree with Komer, in fact, didn't get along with him. Komer always demanded--he wanted aides, and star plates on his sedan, and all this sort of stuff. He was an irascible type and a very irritating type. But this was my bread and butter he was playing with, and I had nurtured this thing and gotten it to where I thought it was working smoothly, and now he was destroying it.

So I worked around the system. I'd learned from the Vietnamese [that] the indirect approach is much better than the direct approach. So having lost the direct approach, I then went to Cottrell, the senior civilian advisor, a State Department guy, and I said, "Cot, I'll give you the RF/PF [Regional Forces/Popular Forces]. And Jack Hemingway, who's a military deputy, will have the big operations and that, and that's what Komer wants." And Cot said, "Yes, that's right. That's what he wants. That's what it is. I'll take it." I said, "Fine. Now you've got to know that you're now responsible for all the military operations that are conducted by the RFs and the PFs, which happens just about every night. About three o'clock in the morning you're going to get a phone call, and there's going to be an outpost attack someplace in this huge Delta. One, two, three, maybe. You're going to have to decide: are you going to move in with your Provincial Forces? Are you going to send gunships? Are you going to send Spooky? How are you going to handle this? How are you going to relieve this outpost? Are you going to fight

tonight, or are you going to try to get in there tomorrow? And if you try to get in there tomorrow, what are you subject to? What ambushes? Are they sucking you in?" And all this thing. But I said, "If you feel that you're militarily qualified, it's perfectly all right with me." And Cot said, "I don't want to do that. The hell with that crap!"

(Laughter)

And I said, "Well, Cot, we can do this, then. We'll organize with all the military under the deputy, Jack Hemingway, and all the pacification civilian stuff and so forth that we work under you. And then everything'll be fine." He said, "That's the only way I'll operate. I'm going up to see Komer." So he went up to see Komer, and lost his battle with Komer, came back. Well, Cot was just as bull-headed as I was, so we said, "To hell with them. This is what we're going to do." Abrams came down on a visit, and I told him this was what we were going to do, and he said, "Stick to your guns. Do it."

Well, boy, all hell broke loose, because we didn't cover it up. We just said this is what we're going to do.

Now, when it came to the provinces no longer coming under divisions, this was terrible because in the Vietnamese system, the division commander was still over the province chief, but his advisor wasn't over the [province] advisor. If you went on a battle down in the province, the province senior advisor then became the division senior advisor. And that wouldn't work. The division--Vietnamese--would never go along with that; he wanted his own advisor. This meant helicopter support, this meant supplies, this meant all sorts of things that had to be done.

So I put out a regulation saying that we were going to follow the CORDS. However--and this is where the however came in--in a province, whoever the senior guy was, Vietnamese, the senior advisor would be his advisor. If the senior man fighting the battle, Vietnamese, was the province chief, the province senior advisor; if it was the division commander controlling and commanding the battle, then the senior advisor was the division senior advisor. Which meant that we went right back to where we were. And this blew their lid up in Saigon, but we stuck to it.

The bad feature that kept going, and a lot of the province guys loved it, [was that] they worked direct with CORDS. Some of the bad things that happened was they complained, and they had a justifiable complaint, [that] they didn't get enough choppers. Well, there were seventeen provinces and four airmobile companies. I couldn't give them a chopper every day; that's seventeen choppers gone just on administrative stuff, hauling guys and their supplies back and forth. But I was ordered to do it; I had to send a chopper every day to the provinces. That cut down on our airmobility in the Delta something fierce.

So these things went against the grain. What he did, he came in with his preconceived ideas and imposed them on us. The way we operated was built up over years of experience. What worked, we kept, what didn't work, we threw out, that sort of a thing. And we were forced to change. I think he set us back severely. That's my personal feeling.

Vann--you've mentioned Vann before--he was behind a lot of that, advising Komer, and that was because Vann was the type that wanted to run everything himself.

And he resented, you see, the military. He was now a civilian; he thought they were a bunch of bums, the military. And if he could get hold of Regional Force and Popular Force, then he could run it himself. He was ex-military. He did that up in III Corps. I refused to accept Vann; I got Cottrell, and Vann then took III Corps.

G: You had been offered Vann?

D: Oh, yes. He was the first choice to come to the Delta.

G: Why did you turn him down?

D: Because I didn't think he was qualified. He had too many axes to grind; he wanted to do it all himself. He was very insulting to the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese--he had been in the Delta--didn't like him.

G: Where did you have this from? You didn't know him personally, or did you?

D: Oh, I had met him a couple of times. I got it from Vietnamese that had been there. They didn't want him, and wouldn't have anything to do with him. But he did this up in III Corps, and he was quite successful at it. He later, after I left, came down to IV Corps. And he was a very energetic man, apparently, and apparently was very successful at what he did, extremely successful. But he was a one-man show, and I've seen one-man shows in the army, in my career, that do great. They're like a burning star, but there's no depth to it, and while the guy is doing it himself and forcing things, everything's going fine. But the minute he lets up everything falls. You don't have a strong base there, and I would much prefer the less spectacular but the sustaining effort throughout with a simple, sensible system. And that's what I wanted and that's what I got.

I was able to get away with my deviations only because I had been there so long, and I got away with it. The others didn't; they had to knuckle under.

G: That explains something I read in the 1968 report on the war that General Westmoreland put together, when he described the change in organization that took place when CORDS came in, and he laid it out, and he said, "Except for some exceptions in the Delta, which needn't concern us here," and then he went on.

D: Yes, and that was me, I was fighting my own--

G: And that's what you were talking about?

D: That's right. I was a little bit different. I could get away with it not only because I'd been there a long time, but we were the ones fighting the war, except for the 9th Mobile Riverine Force, which was in that small area up at My Tho. The rest of it was all Vietnamese. In III Corps, II Corps, and I Corps, the bulk of the fighting was U.S., but we didn't have that. We were entirely different.

But people back in the States and in Saigon often overlooked that. Westmoreland didn't; Abrams didn't, but the low-level staff guy who was there a year and left and came and went--it wasn't his fault; there was no way for him to get down to the Delta; you had to go by air and it wasn't easy to do--they really never understood it. Frequently they would put out regulations applying to all of Vietnam that wouldn't work in the Delta, and so we just threw them out. They did crazy things. I woke up one day and I found out they were sending in a civil affairs group with a full colonel, and thirty-some officers, plus all the enlisted men and jeeps and the radios. And one was going into each corps area. And I said, "My God, we can't take them." In the Delta there's very little land in

the rainy season that's high enough to put stuff on. A lot of people have found that out the hard way. I put out that nobody could come to the Delta unless I personally approved it, because we were chock-a-block. We didn't need any more people down there. But they ordered these guys in, and I finally made a trip up and I explained this to [John A.] Heintges, I guess it was, or maybe it was Abrams. And he had never heard of it, and he laughed and they diverted them. I said, "What the hell are they going to do? We're doing all that now. And why impose a civil affairs group from Fort Lee, Virginia, on us? What are they going to do?" Well, nobody had thought of that.

(Interruption)

D: Yes, on the question of the American forces coming to the Delta. This came up in the first few months I was there, and we'd study it, and we said no. Our premise was--and I think if we'd ever been able to do this throughout Vietnam, we'd have been much better off. Our premise was, this is a Vietnamese war, and if we get them to fight it and win it, then they've won the war. If we fight it for them, even though we win it, they haven't won it, so it's not a victory.

Another angle is that they're human beings like anybody else. If it's a war and you come in and take it over for them, they'll stand back and watch you. You go out and get killed. So let's let them do it. And this wasn't something that we Americans talked about behind their backs. I talked to Quang about it, Minh, Thi, Thang, and they were against it. They said, "No, we've got to fight our own war. And we've got to win it. We don't really need American troops."

Well, later on, the 7th ARVN Division, which was in that tough battle up on Highway 4--it was just a constant, day-to-day operation. And it was what I would call a tired division. It wasn't beaten, but it didn't [have] the zip. The division commander didn't have the zip; it was losing its stuff because of this constant fighting it was in. The main effort of the Viet Cong was on cutting Highway 4 at Cai Le-Cay Be [?], which I mentioned to you. It was obvious that they needed help. Westmoreland brought this up. And I said, "Well, what I would prefer would be Vietnamese units to come in." And they tried to get Vietnamese. They went to JGS [to] get marines or--and they wouldn't do it, they wouldn't cut them loose. Thieu had a passion for a reserve around Saigon, one, to protect his skin, and the other, to protect Saigon. And he would not release this JGS reserve, which was quite large. And we couldn't get them.

When I was asked about it, I said, "Well, if we do it, let's go helicopter. Bring more helicopters; I can do much more with more helicopters." Well, apparently they would have liked to have done that, but they had a problem of production, pilots, and the rest, and priorities in other [places], and they couldn't bring those in. Some naval officer came up with the idea, that he sold to DePuy, of a mobile riverine force. The navy had always wanted to get into the Delta. They nibbled into it with their PBRs and had a little naval establishment. Zumwalt was one of those, by the way, for a while, not while I was there, after I left.

The marines always wanted to get--they were madder than heck that they were up in I Corps; they should be down in the Delta with the canals and the rivers and so forth, but the early war plan had them going in the I [Corps] from Okinawa, and that was the

area, and when they got in there they were stuck. But General [Wallace] Greene, the marine commandant, would come down every time and visit, and then he would go away making these speeches about how much better the marines could do if they were down there than the army was doing. In fact, they ran an operation down there once to prove it, and it was the worst operation you've ever seen in your life. They came in, they landed at Kien Hoa. They took a month to prepare it and they went through the marine planning or reconnaissance and so forth, which tipped everybody and his brother off they were coming. They brought in marines from the Vietnamese, who announced in all the bars up in Saigon that they were going to Kien Hoa to fight with--they even bragged about it. It was common knowledge.

They went in; they spent about three weeks in those swamps, and just took more damned casualties than you could shake a stick at. They came in with those big tractors and flubbed around down there with all their heavy equipment. The Viet Cong, what few were there, got out of Kien Hoa and went down to Vinh Binh. We put the 9th Infantry Division down there about a week after the marines opened their operation, and we killed about a hundred and some of them that had congregated down there on a three-day operation and got the heck out of there.

Later, when we went back into Kien Hoa after the marines had gone out, we overran a Viet Cong provincial mobile battalion and picked up an after-action report. They had captured the marine order about--it had fallen out of a chopper or something--about two weeks before the thing, and they had the whole damned operation. They were sitting there, following it.

Anyway, those are little sidelights, not critical, but they always want to do it. Well, Westy was worried about the situation there. Abrams wasn't all that worried, but--he didn't talk all that much about it--but Westy called me in, and put me up against the wall and said, "I can create this mobile riverine force. The navy has agreed to it. We'll have to dig a huge bay there for them at My Tho; that's where they want to go." DePuy picked the place where they would go; never asked me, but that didn't make any difference. He came close; I probably would have gone into the same area. But I wasn't as imaginative as DePuy, so I wouldn't have done what he did.

But anyway, he said, "How do you vote? Do you want Americans or not?" And I went through sort of the analysis of the tired division. I said, "We've got to have something. If this is the only way, yes. But I say, let's keep them out of Kien Hoa, and let's keep them operating on the Mekong and up in the Plain of Reeds as far away as they can go, and in the Cam Son base area." And the reason I said that was not only didn't--I wanted the ARVN to have to do that work, but the Americans wouldn't be able to operate too well in Kien Hoa. The terrain down there was very vicious. The infrastructure was very strong. It was a much better place for the Vietnamese to operate than it was [for] Americans.

That was the time George Barton was leaving, and I told him what I had recommended, and he got madder than hell, and he went up and made a plea to keep Americans out. He was leaving and he said the usual pitch; he said the Vietnamese should do it, and Westy turned him down. And the decision was made to bring that brigade of the 9th Division down there. It couldn't come under me, because I was a

brigadier general, so it came under their division commander, whose headquarters was up near Saigon someplace, because the rest of the division was operating up there. So you had the split, then, in the responsibility of the 9th brigade [Division?] there, but I had nothing to say. Fortunately, we had the best senior advisor that I've ever experienced in my life, a big Georgia Tech football player named Jake Lance. Jake was the senior advisor to the 7th ARVN Division, who was one hell of a fighter. When he retired--never got promoted--but Abrams was chief of staff, and when he retired as a colonel from Fort Meade, Abrams called him on the telephone to congratulate him on his retirement. Now that's something. That shows you what respect he had.

I mention Jake because he could handle the 9th situation with his division commander, very easily. That division commander, General Thang, was very reserved, very quiet, very withdrawn, would listen to Americans but went his own way. A very proud man. He wasn't anti-American, don't get me wrong, he just felt that he had to do the job. Lance was the only one I ever saw that he would sit down with and seek his advice, counsel, and so on. Thang had bad ulcers, and occasionally during an operation they would get him and he would have to go back, and he would leave the command of the division under Jake Lance. He would say, "You command the division," and he'd go on home. Now that's unusual. I've never heard of that [in] any unit. I used to kid Jake, because they started--when the 9th would come over from the states on reconnaissance, I remember I took George Eckhart, the division commander, up to where we were going to build his base for him, and we landed, and there was a hell of a firefight going on about a thousand yards away, and no Jake Lance. And I said, "Oh, God, we've flown right into a

trap," because it was right in the Cam Son base area, and here we were, two chopper-loads of generals and colonels, with our .45 caliber pistols. And all of a sudden old Jake came, his helicopter came crossing in and landed, and "What in the hell are you guys doing over here? We just chased the Viet Cong; we've got a big fight going on. I'll see you later." (Laughter) And old Jake goes flying off to fight them.

We put the rangers up on the Cambodian border one time on a big operation, a sweep, and Jake went with them, and their reconnaissance units. Their reconnaissance units were--most of them were ex-Viet Cong that had joined us. They were good. And they had a hell of a big victory, so they had a big party. And Jake, who was six feet five--he played end for Georgia Tech--he was out there dancing with those damned rangers, and they were having more fun with him, they just thought he was God.

But anyway, they decided to put that in, and we had to build this big basin, and we put the Vietnamese 7th ARVN Division there to protect it, because we had to do all the work up till the U.S. accepted it. Now this basin was monstrous; you could take these landing craft, big things and so on, and they brought in what the Vietnamese called the dredger, and the dredger was the third largest dredger in the world. And oh, boy, we knew that wasn't going to last. So every time I'd fly over the area--it took months to build this thing--I'd call Jake and I'd say, "Hey, Jake"--on the radio I'd say, "I'm flying over your headquarters out here and I can't find the dredger. Where the--?" "What do you mean! I'll be out there in a minute!" He was scared to death he was going to lose the dredger. And that became a joke with us. (Laughter)

Well, one morning about three o'clock the phone rang beside my bed, woke me up, and it was Jake. All he said was, "The dredger." I said, "No." He said, "Yes." So I got dressed and flew over there. The damned Viet Cong, what do you call them, these scuba diver-types?

G: Frogmen?

D: Frogmen. They got it. They got it good. (Laughter) And it was down on the bottom. I caught hell for that, jeez, I caught hell for that. So did Jake.

Well, they finally raised the dredger, got it up, and they towed it out the mouth of the Mekong up to Saigon, and it broke its rope and sank--(laughter)--about five miles offshore. So the dredger is sitting out there someplace.

But we finished that thing, and the mobile riverine force moved in. When they were afloat they were under command of the navy, and when they were ashore they--the Vietnamese or whoever went with them, the Americans were under--all afloat were still under navy and all ashore were still under army, and they never did get that straightened out. They were quite effective; they took a lot of pressure off Highway 4. They cleaned the hell out of the Cam Son base area; it became absolutely useless to the Viet Cong. They went up and had some severe fights up in the Plain of Reeds. They were a monstrous force. They put their artillery on rafts, because they had to, they felt. They wouldn't go to war without their artillery, so they had to do that. The tide would change on them fifteen, eighteen feet. You can imagine an artilleryman--you're an artilleryman, and--

G: Tear your hair out.

D: Yes, but that's what they did. They fired artillery off barges; they would build platforms, take them in by Chinook helicopter, put them down in the rice paddy and put the artillery on top of those. A very ingenious outfit, and very good.

Talking about flooding, yes, the Delta flooded. The rainy season started, as I recall, in about June--May, I guess, and went on into the fall. And then we had the dry season, so we had a dry season plan and a wet season plan. Contrary to what the public thinks, we fought just as hard in the wet season as we did in the dry season. In fact, the Viet Cong liked it better in the wet season, because they would fight--if they could avoid contact with you until about four in the afternoon, they would then accept contact, because they figured you couldn't get your aircraft in. And every [day] in the wet season, along about three or four in the afternoon, it was raining like hell. I mean, the visibility was down to zero, and you had to fly around rainstorms and so on. So they were quite operative, and that meant we had to be too, and we had to adapt to that.

The worst one we ran into, I think it was in 1967, when the big flood came. And what happened was, we got word from Phnom Penh on the Mekong. If the water in the lake starts backing up and going out another inlet, that's the tip-off that the Mekong is going to have a big flood. And we got that word early, and we were as ready as you can be for it, and when it came, it really came. The Mekong flooded--(indicates map)--this was a great, huge lake, all the way from up in here down to Highway 4, across Sa Dec, all of this province, all the way to the ocean, all through here.

G: That looks like practically the top half of the Delta.

D: It was, and I'm talking water fourteen, fifteen feet deep. The Mekong down through here, and the Bassac, we got ships that could not go more than three knots because the water would flood. It didn't flood too much down in here, but up in here it did. That chased the Viet Cong into Cambodia. Those that stayed lived in tram [?] forests. So what we did, we took the navy PBRs and we put them right up in the Plain of Reeds, went right up the canals, and--we could go right out cross-country.

The special forces camps there were up on stilts. We landed our helicopters on rafts. We brought the airboats in, that they had out at the mouth of the Mekong, with the LSTs [Landing ship, Tank], we brought them on up and put them up there. We then had sampans, and then we had gunships, helicopters, and tac air [tactical air support]. And it was the damnedest operation you ever saw. We would surround a tram forest with our sampan fleets and our airboats. They were the infantry. The light tanks were the navy PBRs and the heavy tanks were the airboats. And then we had gunships and we had helicopters, and we would bring tac air in.

All of this was water, with forests sticking up. And the Viet Cong would be in what [could be] called tree houses, I guess, on platforms up in the trees. And we caught them, we would get them and chase them, the sampans, and corral them in and surround them and then zap them, and we really had a field day out there.

We would check out sampans. We had patrols, and we would put boat hooks in the helicopters, and we would see a sampan we suspected, and if it had two engines we always did it, come in, lower the helicopter till it was right over it, the blades would rip all the cover off so we'd see the Viet Cong hiding underneath the rice or whatever the hell

it was. We'd take the boat hooks and reach down and pick them up and put them in the helicopter and take them on in.

(Laughter)

It was quite an operation. It lasted for well over a month, until the water receded. We had a hell of a refugee problem; cities like Chau Doc and the rest were all under water. Muc Hoa, up in the Plain of Reeds, was under twenty feet of water. Every place you went in there was sampans. Just the bare tops of the roofs in the town showing. But that was for--I'm talking hundreds of square miles.

But most of the Viet Cong--we got an awful lot; we got an awful lot of bandits that a lot of people called Vietnam [Viet Cong?], but they were just plain bandits who didn't go. But the Viet Cong went into Cambodia, to the higher ground up in Cambodia. Then they came back. That's how they overcame that.

G: That's fascinating.

D: Yes. That was up in the special forces areas. They had camps along the border that I think were built, as an estimate of what was going on in the early days, very expensive to build, and they were to block the Cambodian border. So you had them all along the border. Well, you can't block a border like that. So they were useless. And so I tried to divert it, but we didn't have the money. I wanted to face them in rather than out, and surround the base area in the Plain of Reeds. We started doing that before I left; we built a number of them, and we operated in this direction instead of out. And things operated; we got much more results that way.

A tough area to operate in. The CIDG [Civilian Irregular Defense Force] were tough to work with. That system was a system where they hired contract soldiers, and they were free to leave any time. And I think they hired as many bandits as they did good people. [Inaudible].

G: That was a Montagnard program up in the Highlands.

D: Yes, but down in the Delta it was with Delta people. You see, the Cambodian border has always been a smuggling operation. So what they did was, they hired the smugglers, the bandits, to stop the smuggling and the banditry and the back-and-forth across the border. Well, that's no way to run a railroad. They just continued, and got paid by the U.S. Government. So they weren't all that effective, in my--oh, they had some bitter, spectacular battles. Quite frequently, you'd have a special forces outpost where they'd wake up in the morning and half the people had left. Well, that meant that they'd gotten word that the Viet Cong were coming in, and they'd leave with their sampans and everything and take off. So it was a hairy operation. I felt sorry for those green beret types, because they were really isolated and had a tough row to hoe. It was not easy at all, living out there with--see, they were in an advisory capacity too. They were fortunate in that they had the A team, the B team concept, so they had enough of them so they could take care of themselves. But the foot soldiers were Vietnamese CIDG, and they weren't all that loyal.

G: Scary.

D: It was very scary. I used to worry about that a lot. But that was the way they operated.

End of Tape 3 of 3 and Interview I

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