INTERVIEW I

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Tape 1 of 1

G: I believe that you took over the Saigon, or the Hong Kong bureau, as it was called I guess, in the fall of 1963 after--

M: Late fall, right after the Diem coup. Actually the date of my arrival in Saigon was early in January of 1964. We got to Hong Kong, as I recall--I don't remember the date--but some time before that, late in 1963. I think my first trip to Saigon then was--I'm not sure whether it was late 1963 or early 1964, but anyhow in that time span, post-Diem coup.

G: Did you receive any special instructions in the wake of the [Charlie] Mohr departure?

M: No, only that the problem with Charlie had existed, and that it was my function to go out there and restore the credibility of the bureau in the eyes of the editors and the eyes of the rest of the journalistic world.

g; I gather this was a problem, a credibility problem that existed not just with Time but throughout the media.

M: It did indeed. Yes, if I may elaborate on that, I think there were two or three closely related reasons. I think the basic one was

that the war, the kind of war that was fought in Vietnam, was totally outside the American context, totally outside the American experience. Editors who hadn't been there, or who were there briefly, wanted to see it in terms of the conventional wars that they understood, had been in their own experience, that they had written [about] or participated in. Secondly, the nature of the Vietnamese society itself was totally removed from the American context and the American understanding. And again, brief visits didn't do anybody any good in absorbing something so complex, both as to the nature of the war and the nature of the society. So you had in effect correspondents trying to communicate from the back side of the moon to people whose frame of reference was just totally different. I think that's where the basic problem was and remained until the end of the Vietnam War.

That was not unique to journalism. I think that the entire U.S. command structure had exactly the same problems. You would discover, for instance, that young agency [CIA] or State Department or military people at the district level or lower had a pretty shrewd grasp of what was going on. But by the time their reports had reached Saigon, that warp had set in, and the communications became more and more difficult. The further the reports moved, the more difficult it became, the less effective the communication was.

G: Of course, the editors would maintain, and did maintain, that the correspondents were just as a group inherently critical, overly critical of the situation and cast everything in an overly critical light.

M: I think there was certainly an element of that, in which I would include myself.

G: Do you feel that there was a lot of pressure among correspondents to see everything in the same light, or was it--?

M: No. You mean pressure on correspondents, peer pressure?

G: Peer pressure.

M: No. We'll have to back up here and break the war out in parts, too. First, let's go to the advisory war, the war during which time the American role was solely advisory. The press corps at that time was very, very small. The number of people who were either permanent or semi-permanent in Saigon was twelve or fifteen. Now, with a group that small, there was not so much peer pressure as there was simply a gathering of reporters, lunch conversation, beer conversation, shared experiences. I don't think there was pressure as such, although that tended to be a commonality of view. I'm not sure that's true either. As a matter of fact, in that small press corps there were about four or five totally different views of the war. How it was going, for instance, what--

G: Did these reflect the editorial opinions of their various newspapers or magazines?

M: If so, it was coincidental.

G: Really?

M: Yes. If so, it was coincidental. I can think of one or two cases where it had happened, but I think that was coincidental. News reports ranged from the totally pessimistic to--I can remember the quotes--

"all we have to do to straighten this thing out is bring a regiment of Marines here and let them clean it up." Keep in mind we're talking about the advisory period now, before the commitment of American combat troops.

G: Even before the end of 1963, there was contemplation of pulling out a thousand troops.

M: That's right. Mr. Kennedy announced that, the Kennedy Administration did. I can't remember whether it was McNamara or Kennedy, but one or the other announced that there would be twelve hundred troops pulled out before the end of 1963.

G: For you, was there a turning point in your own view of Vietnam?

M: No, it was a very slow evolution, and I think it was for most people. I've written this on occasion, but it was valid then, and I think it's valid now. I think that Americans, including journalists, generally speaking, passed through about five stages. The first was a thoroughly conventional American position of "can do, will do." We arrived with a general if not certain [feeling] that a little American know-how and good will and all the other nice things that Americans bring to bear would do it. Then it gradually became can do, might do. Finally they came to the conclusion that, hey, we are not doing as well as we thought, and then, hey, we are doing very badly, and you guys--always somebody else--are screwing it up. If you were in the army, the air force was screwing it up; if you were in the Agency, the State Department was screwing it up; somebody else was screwing it up. So you arrived at the fifth stage,

which is everybody is screwing this up, we're losing it. No matter what the officials say, we are losing this thing. And you could watch that evolution. Sometimes it came rather quickly, sometimes it took months, sometimes it took years.

G: I gather at the time of your arrival there was a very cordial dislike for the Diem regime among journalists.

M: Yes, not so cordial.

G: Can you elaborate on this?

M: Oh, I think in retrospect--and I don't think I recognized this at the time, I don't think I would have been anywhere wise enough to see this then--but in retrospect, once again, that was a different frame of reference. American journalists, even those with a lot of time in Asia, saw Diem in an American political context and were absolutely persuaded that given the authoritarian nature of the regime, given the corruption that obviously beset it, given its nonresponsiveness, its unresponsiveness to social changes and political changes that were taking place, there was no way for that regime to function properly or effectively. Therefore, Diem should go.

Now again, with the help of hindsight, I think that was somewhat wrong. Largely right, but somewhat wrong. The regime, putting that another way, was not quite as far out of touch, out of kilter with its own society as it appeared to all of us. That's hindsight, I emphasize again.

G: Was there a considerable amount of repression of American correspondents by the Diem regime?

M: No. There was an occasional roughing up by police, all of which I think--keep in mind I was not there until after Diem was dead. But there was an occasional roughing up and there were threats of withdrawal of your visa, which would throw you out of the country. Sometimes cables mysteriously failed to move through the cable office. That sort of thing. But I think repression is too strong a word.

G: Did the journalists, to your knowledge, have extensive forewarning of the coup?

M: No. Not extensive. I'm reasonably certain that even the individuals I'm now thinking of wouldn't be quite certain to this day how much they knew in advance. But I'd say that several had good reason to believe that an abrupt change was coming, whether it be a coup or what, probably no more than half a dozen newsmen had a hint that change was coming. Now keep in mind, the press corps was very small then, too. There were no more than twelve or fifteen people. But I'm pretty sure Bob Shaplen knew something was coming, I'm pretty sure Neil Sheehan knew something was coming, I think Mal Browne probably knew something was coming. I think Lee Griggs, probably Charlie did, Charlie Mohr, and that would be about it. Now I shouldn't speak for them and can't, but I doubt that any of them would have been able to identify specifically that it would be a coup and certainly I don't think they would have been able to say that Big [Duong Van] Minh and Tran Van Don would run it. But there was an awareness among the more "in" correspondents in Vietnam that something was coming.

G: Let me ask you to describe the correspondents' day when you arrived in Saigon. How normally would you spend your day there?

M: That varied according to what your requirements were. When I arrived, the daily follies hadn't been founded yet. There weren't daily briefings; there was no need for daily briefings. As a consequence, again in the early days, during the advisory stages, there was much more field time. As the war evolved into an American war, for a lot of the larger newspapers and wire services, somebody had to be in Saigon to attend the official briefings and cover them and do the pro forma coverage. That took a lot of time, a lot of energy, and a lot of their resources. Other people got to the field, but that did limit it. In the advisory days it was largely a matter of field work. You had to go find the story. There was very limited American reader interest. If you couldn't find an American angle to it, you knew your readership in the United States would be virtually non-existent.

G: So you would be out in the field most of the day?

M: Yes. Or most of the week in the case of Time correspondents. See, there's a difference here in the requirements of the kind of journalism that was being practiced. A daily journalist has to be back to meet daily deadlines, and therefore tended more to go in and out in a day. A weekly journalist--Newsweek and Time--could go out and devote two or three days to a story in the field before he had to come in and write it.

G: Sure. We're talking here about the advisory period. Were there many restrictions on your travel?

M: Not really. Transportation only, the availability of transportation was really the only thing that limited it.

G: How did you usually get around during that period?

M: You went to MACV, the military command structure, and made arrangements to go from Saigon to a principal military base: Danang, Ban Me Thuot, Pleiku, or wherever. From there on you largely hitchhiked, i.e., resupply missions, attack missions, whatever, and you made your way to wherever you were going simply by going to the nearest unit that was in motion and hitched a ride. It was usually air transportation. Well, that isn't quite true. As a matter of fact, again, going back to the early days of advisory, you were able to move the length of the country by ground transportation with only limited risk, which I think was largely due to Viet Cong willingness--I think we got by at their sufferance. But you could move, especially in daylight hours, just about anywhere you wanted to in a normal day. Now as the war progressed, that became increasingly dangerous. If your driver was a Vietnamese, generally you had better listen when he said, "No, we won't cross that bridge." But again, for any substantial distance, simply for purposes of time and convenience, you generally went by helicopter or airplane.

G: Let me ask you about any informal sources. Did you develop a network of people that you could rely on within the military and the diplomatic corp?

M: Yes. But keep in mind again, there were two levels at which you were dealing. Let's confine it now to the military and the State Department. There would be the Saigon level, which is the official level, and that was very valuable. You needed access there. You needed access to the ambassador or the chief political officer, you needed access to the commander of MACV or his principal deputies. You also had to learn, in moving about the countryside, to establish effective communication at the district level, company commander level, both with Americans and their Vietnamese counterparts. Because there were usually three different views of the war. That was also true within the State Department or in the CIA. The view in Saigon was always different than it was at the province level. The province level was different from the district level. Then you went from the district level, which is essentially battalion level, down to company or platoon level, and it was really different down there. It was really different.

G: Can you elaborate on the differences here?

M: I don't know how clinical you want to be about it, but the closer you got to Saigon, the more optimistic the view was. It didn't make any difference what province you wanted to check out, but in Saigon the maps would show this was a secured area, and that this many hamlets had been returned to government control, the rice production was back up, and the roads were open. Sure enough, you'd go out there and you could indeed make your way over the roads with no great danger--seldom if ever shot at. Most of the time as a matter of fact

you never even heard shots fired in anger unless you stumbled across a fire fight between military units. So it would all look like the maps showed in Saigon.

But then let's go off the main roads and let's go to a Vietnamese unit, particularly a regional forces or popular forces unit. So you went from the district advisory level down to one of those and you spend the night with one of them. You find that instead of a platoon, there are really only eight people there. You're dug in maybe in a cemetery. Actually, I'm using a small case history now. In our "platoon" of popular forces, underequipped, there are only eight men. The reason there are only eight is that over the previous two and a half years they've had no replacements, and the others have either deserted or been killed. During the night, what you discover is that most of the fire you're taking--and it's sporadic, an occasional mortar round, an occasional small arms round, every now and then an automatic weapon--is coming out of the very hamlet that you were in that day and that you believed was secured. Now you say, now wait a minute, this doesn't fit. The fire coming in here is coming [from] where I was this afternoon in what appeared to be total security. So you say this is not at all as it appeared back in Saigon. So those doubts begin to set up. That's what I meant when I said the lower you dropped down in level, the grimmer the war looked. It was the same story when you dealt with young political officers, State Department political officers, out at that level, province or district level. Officially they didn't drop below

province level, but in fact some of them functioned at district level. Boy, they had a different view than their superiors in Saigon.

G: Can you elaborate on their view?

M: They were much more concerned, for instance, with the fragmentation, the political fragmentation of Vietnam, following the Diem coup. They had no particular brief for Diem, but they believed that the chaos or the fragmentation was complete, and that the communists were indeed taking full advantage of that fragmentation. They were right.

G: Were there restrictions on their being able to talk to journalists?

M: Officially, sure. But first, just out of a sense that you were sharing something together, you were out in the field with them, and, secondly, frequently out of a sense of utter frustration that they couldn't get anybody else to listen to them, they did talk to journalists. And then, good journalists can usually get most people to talk to them.

G: Well, let me ask you about your views of Vietnam in this early period. First of all, let's talk about what is a theme that seems to be running through the Time stories of this period, the sheer frustration of the U.S. in an advisory role, not being able to get the South Vietnamese to respond to the Viet Cong as they wanted. Can you elaborate on this?

M: Yes. And again, let me emphasize that I'm having trouble this far removed in sorting out hindsight and what I really thought at the time. So I'm afraid I'm going to mix them, but I don't know how [to avoid it].

There were two broad elements that I think were very important. One was the legitimate criticism by American advisers of the South Vietnamese military as it then functioned. It wasn't very good. It lacked aggressiveness. When most of your company officers became company commanders by dint of bribery or by dint of buying their commands, you're not going to have a very good army. Desertion rates were high. They didn't respond aggressively. The Vietnamese could not seem to grasp the concept that you save lives by being more aggressive.

On the other side of that coin, what the Americans didn't grasp was that these people had been fighting twenty-five years, and they know full well if they did what the Americans wanted them to, they wouldn't be there three years later. So once again, you're coming out of different frames of reference. It made it very difficult for either to respond either honestly or effectively to the other.

G: But on the other hand, the Viet Cong seemed to have been quite aggressive.

M: Now we come to a very, very troublesome political question: why is that? I spent a lot of agonizing hours examining that, as did just about everybody else who was in Vietnam. I think, again, there are several factors involved. First was the simple fact that very effective internal disciplines are built into every communist system. Those operate largely on one kind of fear or another. All military operates to some degree on fear, but the Viet Cong internal disciplines were better and much more ruthlessly enforced. I think there was that.

The other element was that those were better motivated people. Now why was that? Well, certainly in relative terms, communism is a much simpler thing to explain, to grasp, at a peasant level, than an abstraction like democracy. Democracy is almost a foreign concept; it certainly was then, in that land. Basically what most peasants wanted was assurance that there would be recourse in event of abuse. They didn't really care much whether they got to vote for the president or not. That really didn't change their daily lives. But recourse did. If somebody stole a pig or assaulted their wives, they wanted to have somebody to go to, and they wanted responsiveness. Now communism, at least on the surface, seems to be able to provide that, and in many cases did. It also provided physical security, as the Viet Cong were able to demonstrate over and over and over again--that they could indeed provide security. They also talked persuasively about remedying land abuses and other things wrong with the existing political system.

Now against all that, we could say only: "Well, all that may or may not be true, but we have something here called democracy, which we like in our country. What it means is that you can vote and you can have a voice." Those concepts simply didn't register. So, this may be nothing more than a rationalization, maybe an American trying to explain to himself why communist soldiers were so much better motivated than those on our side. I also think that as regards the elements of corruption, the communists were absolutely ruthless with corrupters or corruptees. On the other hand, corruption was

simply a part of military life in the ARVN. All of those things interacted, and they gave the Viet Cong a much more aggressive army.

What it boils down to is this: for whatever interrelated reasons, the Viet Cong believed. There were two elements: one, they believed; secondly, they were fearful. In the ARVN, there might have been a little fear, but not much. I mean of their own commands. And they certainly didn't believe. And that I think was the fundamental difference.

G: Did the ARVN seem much affected by the strife between the Buddhists and the Catholics in 1964?

M: Sure. Absolutely. In the first place, the strife gave rise to coup d'etats--constantly more coups. So as an ARVN soldier, you never knew who your commander was going to be. And now the wrong kind of fear does set in. Not only that you may lose your job as company commander--you may wind up dead if you make the wrong political move.

Secondly, there was genuine concern among maybe 70 or 75 per cent of the ARVN about Buddhists. The soldiers themselves were Buddhists. And while that's a "Lesser wheel" Buddhism, and not very rigid, they felt that concern, and they were distressed by it. It was a distracting factor. But most of all, it was a practical thing. What are the political implications of this strife, and how are they going to affect me when they reach down here at battalion or company level? Uncertainty.

G: You examined some exceptions to this rule in some of your writings. I think one province called Hoa My, a village. Can you elaborate on this? Was this one in a million or did this. . . ?

M: Well, this pains me, but from a distance of fifteen or sixteen years I'm not sure Hoa My was what I thought it was.

G: How would you analyze it now?

M: I'm not even sure that the political and military leaders I was so impressed with were on our side. A lot of people who I thought were, turned out not to be.

G: You mean they were Viet Cong sympathizers?

M: Viet Cong officers. That's an extreme. I use that only to demonstrate what I mean. Probably closer to reality was that what impressed me then was a shell, with no real support. Under any pressure, it would collapse, as was demonstrated in April of 1975. It was all shell. Once even minor supports were pulled out, the whole thing went down. I suspect that was true in microcosm at Hoa My, and it was true obviously at the national level. Now again, that's hindsight. At the time--

Let me back up and try to explain why I thought Hoa My was an exception. It had what appeared to be an honest and effective district commander, which is a good starting point. The military units under his command were reasonably aggressive. They seemed to patrol effectively. Civil administration seemed to be responsive. And all of that put together--and here's where we get again into an American frame of reference--seemed to be the way to go. What strikes me

in retrospect is that all may have been a non sequitur. It may have had nothing to do with what the people there needed to function effectively in their own society. But that's hindsight.

G: Another theme that seems to run through your reports was the dichotomy between Saigon on the one hand and the backlands or the rural areas in another. Saigon was really far removed from the war.

M: It sure was.

G: Will you talk about that?

M: Well, we've already touched on it in some sense, in that as reporting, whether it's journalistic or State Department or military, moved up, it became increasingly removed from [reality].

(Interruption)

G: We were talking about Saigon being removed from the war, and here what I'm referring to is not so much in terms of information, but in terms of just the attitude of the Saigon population in general.

M: Right. The thing that struck me over and over again then seems to be reflected in stories that are coming out of there now, from Ho Chi Minh City, by AFP or by the occasional American correspondent who is allowed in there. There's a recurrent theme, that Saigon has managed to corrupt the people, the North Vietnamese, the Viet Cong, who now run it. Saigon is a highly seductive, highly corruptive place, attractive, sophisticated people, but callous, really callous.

The social strata in Vietnam are far more than it's easy for an American to grasp. The difference between the Sorbonne-educated military and other professionals in Saigon and a peasant has nothing

to do with the difference between people in Washington and the people in say, Arkansas. There's absolutely no relationship there. The consequence was that until the day before Saigon fell--now this is a stereotype and a cliche, but it is also absolutely true--Cercle Sportif was still swarming with privileged Vietnamese playing tennis, swimming, and being served sandwiches at the side of the pool. Saigon managed very, very well to separate itself emotionally, and to a somewhat lesser degree, physically from the war. People there didn't give a damn about the war, except those who had sons out there fighting. There was sort of a cool withdrawal from it, a cool and almost deliberate withdrawal from it. Incidentally, the greater the American investment became, the greater that withdrawal became.

I remember the first time I encountered this. The first time it struck me what a bog we were getting into, we were at a dinner for some visiting editor in some restaurant in Saigon. The visiting editor had a typical American view of what was going on, and a Vietnamese dinner guest who hadn't said very much all night finally burst out and said, "Listen, if you like this goddamned war so much, you take it and fight it." And that began to happen. It became an overlay on the cultural differences that existed between Saigon and the countryside, and it added to the insularity of Saigon.

That was what Maxwell Taylor called the plimsoll line. He said that at some point--and he guessed that it lie between one hundred twenty-five and one hundred fifty thousand American soldiers, which was a minimal holding force as he saw it--at some point right

around there, for the investment of every American soldier, you were going to lose one, maybe two, South Vietnamese soldiers. I think he was right.

G: Let's talk about the various factions in Saigon, the Catholics, the Buddhists, the military, the civilian. How did each of these contribute to the instability of the government? Of course, I realize that one group would come in and another one go out, but just in analyzing the. . . .

M: I think if I can rephrase your question, or answer it in a different way--there was absolutely no consensus in Vietnam. One reason there was no consensus is that it was not yet a society ready to deal with the political process as we know it. So because there was no consensus, no political or economic or even religious consensus, because the Buddhists weren't as militant in any sense as the Catholics were, there was no common meeting ground, nowhere to go where Vietnamese could center on any one thing. They had lost their culture, or they felt they had, to the American presence and twenty-five years of war. So to use a stereotype again, it was a revolving door. As each group's turn came up in the revolving door, it changed the entire command structure. There was no common ground; I never found anything that Vietnamese would agree on.

G: One article described a quote "end of the world view" in Saigon, that people were behaving as if it were the end of the world.

M: You mean the war?

G: Yes.

M: Yes. Let me emphasize again, I'm really having trouble sorting out hindsight from fact. I'm almost certain that much of what I've said today represents a wisdom I didn't possess then. But anyway, there was an end of the world view articulated mostly by my intellectual friends in Saigon, most of whom had very little directly to do with the war. They turned out to be right, at least as far as their world was concerned.

G: Can you elaborate on the neutralist position? Was that basically "let the Viet Cong take over" philosophy?

M: No, not quite. I think there was a valid neutralist position. It was that as rational men we've got to seek a consensus, a place to meet and a place to work this out, and that in any government that is truly Vietnamese, there will be room for you and room for us.

What was impossible to discern, and I don't know now and I didn't know then, how much of that was a genuine conviction and how much of that was a Viet Cong political tactic. As far as I was personally concerned, I was always uneasy about the neutralist position for those very reasons. It could have been an enormous tool for the Viet Cong, and I'm sure it was used that way. But I'm also just as convinced that there were a lot of genuine neutralists who really believed that it would be possible for a coalition government to function.

G: Ambassador Taylor, and I guess before that Ambassador Lodge, and when Secretary McNamara would come on his visits, it seemed to have been a

constant effort to prop up the government, particularly Khanh. Did you have any insights into this effort, if in fact it--?

M: That was what we were doing?

G: Right.

M: Sure, but I think it was perfectly [understandable]. Even today I can't suggest what the alternative should have been. By the time [Nguyen] Khanh was in office, we were already paying a severe price for having helped them in the removal of Diem. The last thing that we could tolerate or stand in Vietnam was more turnover, more tumult, more chaos. So what was the option? The option was to try to stabilize.

I think where we made an error was that with typical American hyperbole, every time we got a new premier, a new president, a new leader of any kind, we proclaimed him the new Messiah. "This is the guy who is going to do it." And it was pretty easy to get very cynical about that kind of crap very quickly. On the other hand, to repeat, I don't know what the options were. You had to settle somewhere. You knew you couldn't play the revolving doors game forever because every time the doors spun, the Viet Cong took advantage of it, militarily and politically.

There's an argument that can be made for instance that [Nguyen Chanh] Thi might really have been the man, had he been able to sell himself a little better to the American establishment. Or [Pham Ngoc] Thao, both of them with peasant origins. Thao particularly was strong. His brother was in the Viet Cong command structure, very high in it.

Thi, on the other hand, was a genuine populist. Maybe we should have gone in that direction. But that's hindsight again.

G: But did we have the ability to influence significantly the selection?

M: Not really. Only in the threat of withholding of resources, and that obviously would have been a negative force.

G: How would you characterize Khanh as a leader?

M: Khanh possessed very little--well, I hesitate again, fifteen years removed, from making absolute statements--which I was greatly given to doing then. But Khanh possessed nothing of the personal characteristics that I believed South Vietnamese respect most. He was not a scholar. He was not a hero. He had no credentials to make followers out of any of the South Vietnamese. He simply happened to be in the right place at the right time and led a military coup. There was no way that I could ever see that Khanh could establish a political base of any kind. On the other hand, he spoke English very well. He seemed to do, or seemed to heed, what Americans told him. You know, there was a great confusion in the American mind between a Vietnamese's ability to lead other Vietnamese, and the ability to speak English and drink bourbon. A lot of Vietnamese military careers during the American period were made on the ability to speak English pretty well and drink a lot of bourbon. I say that dead seriously. If I could understand the guy when he spoke to me, he was bright, right? "That's a bright young general." "That's a bright young commander." "Why do you say that?" "Well, listen to him." If I could understand what he was saying, he must be bright.

G: How about Big Minh?

M: Minh--you know, these are glib observations, but I might as well go ahead and say them. I think Minh possessed everything that Khanh lacked except for one thing, steel. Minh was a soft man. He simply lacked the steel that it took to combat an enemy like the Viet Cong. But he had the other qualities, the diffidence, the peasant origin, the mannerisms, and even a good family background. But he had no steel.

G: You during this period talked to a number of Viet Cong defectors, I think at some length.

M: Yes.

G: Can you recall these discussions and what you learned about Viet Cong from them?

M: Yes. Now, since obviously to get to the defectors, we had to go first to the government, I'm not at all certain how carefully those defectors had been handpicked. Also, we had to use interpreters, and I always distrust interpreters, even though they're my own, even though they're employed by me. It's always very difficult in Asia to know whether your question was asked as you asked it. I think, generally speaking, the translation of what the subject had to say was reasonably accurate, but if you asked a rude, blunt American-type question of a subject, even a Viet Cong prisoner, the interpreter tended to smooth the edges out, so the answer you got back sometimes was entirely misleading.

What you learned first was how delighted the defector was to be in a prison camp, how he had seen the light, how he really didn't have to surrender but threw down his arms in order to join the new movement. We were all going forward from here to victory. What you learned almost subconsciously, or with the help of a good interpreter, a quasi-journalist out of your own office, was that the guy really was inside this camp to organize it for the Viet Cong, which was frequently the case, or he would be gone at the first opportunity. So there were always two levels. Was either of them legitimate? I don't know.

I tell you one thing we did come away with, and I think the important distinction here is the difference between information, which really tended to be pretty superficial, and gut feel, which even in hindsight stands up pretty well. The thing you came away with in terms of gut feel was that these were really tough, disciplined people, and that they knew how to handle themselves with you or anybody else.

Now obviously you might find exceptions to that. You might get some ignorant peasant kid who hadn't been in the Viet Cong company more than a year and was terrified, but you also didn't learn very much from him because he didn't know much. When you got cadre, as you frequently did, because the South Vietnamese government liked to show you cadre, you got only what he chose to tell you.

Now we also occasionally were able to meet with people I suspect were probably still in the Viet Cong and were not prisoners.

G: How did this opportunity [present itself]?

M: Usually through a feeler. It would come to you very obliquely through a series of layers among your Vietnamese acquaintances.

G: Was this more common in the advisory stage of the war than later on?

M: Yes. Much more. In fact, it vanished after the American buildup.

G: Can you go into detail on a specific [case]?

M: It only happened to me once.

G: Well, start from the top and tell me the whole story of it.

M: The original contact came through a highly sophisticated, highly educated Vietnamese in Saigon who did not work for me, who worked for another journalist. I personally was still--I say now with some embarrassment--pretty much in my can-do, will-do, gung-ho, let's-go-get-them stage. He was arguing with me one day about a version that I had accepted--I say this also with some embarrassment--about a Vietnamese special forces attack on a Viet Cong platoon. I had gone out after the battle was over and saw the bodies and accepted pretty much at face value how those casualties had occurred. He was suggesting that I had been pretty well taken in. And out of that conversation came his assertion that "You really ought to hear some other things from other people!" He knew of a fellow who perhaps would agree to talk to me. He was not a Viet Cong, of course, but he understood very well what was happening in the Viet Cong, and he was a good man. And I said well, sure, I would be willing to do that. I would be happy to do that, and how would it be done? Well, he didn't know, perhaps it could be done, perhaps it couldn't.

We met again a week or ten days later and the arrangements were made for our driver, our bureau driver, to take me out to--I can't remember the name of the little village between Saigon and Bien Hoa, about halfway from Saigon to Bien Hoa and off the main highway. The driver and I were to go in and sit down and order a beer and a man would join us. I remember being a little puzzled when a man walked in and my own driver knew him instantly.

G: Your own driver?

M: Knew him, obviously recognized him, and invited him over to the table to join us.

Then we had a long conversation about the war as it was and what the American role was to be, and why were Americans intruding themselves? Wasn't this an internal Vietnamese problem that Americans should let Vietnamese sort out for themselves? He directed more questions to me than I did to him. I suspect he spoke very good English, or at least he spoke adequate English, because most of the time I noticed that he didn't require the guy from my office [to translate] before he was ready to start answering. Most of the conversation was directed at "What are you Americans doing here?" "What do you think you're going to accomplish?" and "Why are you doing it?" When I got a chance to ask my own questions about who are you and what do you do and how do you know that, his answers simply veered away. And again, I came away with a sense of an enormously complex intelligence, a very, very tough mind, and a very, very disciplined human being. I got nothing out of him I could use.

There was nothing of any journalistic consequence. It wasn't even the kind of thing you could file as a "Gee, editors back in New York, I met a fascinating man the other night while I was on a story, and let me tell you about him. . . ." It wasn't even that, it was just background.

Subsequently, in making inquiries every place I could, not among the journalists, but with the CIA, State Department, others, I came to think that might have been Thao's brother. But I am convinced, whether it was Thao's brother or not--because Thao's brother did this frequently, it turned out. As a matter of fact he's in [Frank] Snepp's book [Decent Interval]. He's identified in Snepp's book as performing this role on occasion, so that may have been him. Anyway, I am convinced that it was somebody in the Viet Cong command structure.

Now other journalists, I think, had much more penetrating interviews. I'm pretty sure Stan Karnow did. I think Bob Shaplen did. I mentioned this one only because it was my own case history.

G: I was going to ask you about your sources for stories on the Viet Cong and, say, problems in North Vietnam as well. I know at one point you said Ho Chi Minh seemed nervous about stepped-up war or stepped-up U.S. support and that sort of thing.

M: Purely hearsay. What do I mean by that? You did the only thing you could do as a report in South Vietnam, which was call embassy political officers, embassy intelligence officers, embassy agency officers, and you went over and you talked to six or seven of them. You would

then do your best to get some triangulation. You would probably go to the British embassy and go through much the same thing, and if the French would talk to you, which they sometimes would, you'd go over and talk to the French. Then out of that you would try to draw some sort of composite. Let me be honest, because the communications were so much easier, 80 per cent of what you got was from U.S. sources. You might get some tempering out of other intelligence sources, but you seldom got any specific information from the British or the Aussies or the French. You might have heard a note of caution there, but that was about all. I don't think it tempered my files nearly enough. So in all honesty, what it tended to be was an American view. I don't think many people from the American Mission consciously lied or dissembled. I think it's really what they believed, too. But it was an awful limited view.

G: Well, one of the Time stories in the fall of 1963, before you got there, made the point that a lot of correspondents out there believed that U.S. officials constantly lied to them. To what extent do you think this was true?

M: I think to about the same extent it would be anywhere. I never got outraged about that. I assumed I was going to be lied to, and I assumed that was what I was there for--to remedy it. But consciously and unconsciously lied to. I think the unconscious lie was a lot more insidious than a blatant lie, because you can always catch people in an outright, flat-out lie. If you got out of Saigon, you spotted the deliberate lie very quickly. Maybe the unconscious lie wasn't

even a lie. That's really the way Cabot Lodge, for example, thought by the time information filtered all the way up to him. He had a clear view, which I think sometimes didn't resemble reality.

G: He was never disillusioned before he left?

M: Yes, he was.

G: He was?

M: Privately. Oh, yes, he was.

G: Can you recall it?

M: His second tour, yes.

G: Can you recall--of course, we'd be jumping ahead.

M: Yes. Maybe we can let that one go. But he was, well, disillusioned. I don't know whether that may be a semantic hairsplitting, but he had a lot of doubts and he wasn't at all certain that the official view--as a matter of fact, he was beginning to write that to Washington--reflected what actually was going on out in the field.

G: This is the first time, however?

M: The first and the second, both, but mostly the second.

G: Can you recall any specifics of this? Any occasions when he seemed to express doubt. Were you there or were others present during this period? This would be 1964.

M: No. I'm going to have trouble recalling specifics, and I don't want to create any that I don't really possess. Strangely enough, I can remember more from Maxwell Taylor, in specifics, than I can from Cabot Lodge. But I do remember clearly an impression that privately, very privately, Cabot Lodge would express doubts that he sure wasn't

expressing officially, or even on a nonattribution basis. But I can't remember the specifics.

G: How about Paul Harkins? Did he have doubts?

M: The only honest answer I can give to that is I don't know, but if he did he was a magnificent actor. He showed none whatsoever, not a trace of doubt.

G: I wanted to go back to that discussion, the initial discussion, with the Vietnamese journalist. Did he convince you that your report on the special forces combat was in error?

M: Not until about five years ago. But when I began re-inspecting it, it troubled me, it troubled me. Even when I got down to the simple question of tactics it was much later. I never really inspected it very seriously at the time because I was absolutely sure I was right. But the damn thing kept cropping up in my mind, and even when I got to inspecting the tactics, where the Viet Cong had been caught, it began not to make much sense. And I think essentially he was right.

G: What was his interpretation of it?

M: That there were only eight killed. It wasn't a big thing, but now I think the Viet Cong beat these people off. The official version was that the--I can't remember whether it was the popular forces or regional forces--had come boiling out of their camp, cornered a Viet Cong platoon or company, as the case may be, in intersecting tree rows. At the point of a triangle [they] swarmed around them and practically obliterated them, but a few of the Viet Cong made

off dragging their bodies behind them. Only these eight bodies [were found]. And this was clear proof that given good command the South Vietnamese were capable of doing this. All that was the official version. The truth probably is they were killed by American gunships, helicopter ships.

G: I see.

M: Which should not have been engaged in that point in the war.

G: Well, did he have any evidence to back that up or was that just--?

M: No. It was the Vietnamese grapevine.

Now let me stand down on that. He may have had evidence. If he did, I didn't hear it. But he was pretty sure of his ground.

G: Another thing that's very common in this reporting is the number of captured weapons by the Viet Cong. No matter how many men they killed or had killed, they always ended up with a whole lot of weapons. How do you explain that?

M: Now what do you mean, we always took a lot of weapons from them?

G: No.

M: In reality, that's not the way it was.

G: No, it was the other way.

M: Well, because South Vietnam had a badly disciplined army, which goes back to what we said about the ARVN earlier. The ARVN was not a well-disciplined, tough army. All too often the ARVN tended to break and run. They were all so careless. My God, I've seen circumstances there where ARVN would go off on Tet or some other holiday and leave all the weapons behind them. The Viet Cong simply would

walk in and take them, at a virtually deserted military camp. Now I'm not saying that happened often, but I did see it happen once, and I'm sure if I saw it happen once, it happened again.

G: Where was that, do you remember?

M: It was near Ben Cat, that's northwest of Saigon about sixty miles, over toward the Iron Triangle. Again, it was a special forces camp. The regional forces were there. Or was that regular forces? In any event, a special forces camp. When Tet came they just evacuated; they all went to Saigon, went somewhere, and they left nobody behind. The weapons were all hanging up, automatic weapons, all hanging up in plain sight. Somebody went through and swept the camp, just took them all out one night without a shot ever being fired. Now that's an undisciplined army.

G: Sure. It must have been a Viet Cong strategy early on though to get as many weapons as possible, too.

M: Sure. Sure. You know in the early days, again, the advisory days, you'd go out on an operation with an ARVN unit, you'd get in a fire fight and you'd hear French weapons, you'd hear American weapons, you'd hear weapons you didn't recognize. It wasn't until, I'm not sure, late 1964 or maybe even into 1965, before you began to hear the AK-47s. Those were really rapid fire. So there was a whole assortment. They even sounded like shotguns on occasion. They seemed to be firing anything they could get their hands on. I've forgotten the name of that little French submachine gun, that makes

sort of a double sound, boop boop. You'd hear a lot of that. So that those weapons obviously had been held ever since the days of the French.

G: During the spring and summer of 1964 there was increasing talk about taking the war to the north, particularly Khanh and his military people kept making noises, I guess to the embarrassment of the Ambassador and U.S. people. Can you recall this?

M: Oh, sure. I can remember talking to Khanh about that personally.

G: What was his explanation?

M: He used the analogy of the serpent constantly--I don't know whether constantly, but I can remember talking to him about this at Nha Trang, that there was no point, in the kind of serpent we were dealing with, in cutting off its tail. The tail would grow back. If you're going to kill that serpent, you had to sever its head. The way you would sever its head would be to invade the origin from which it came, the North. It was all very brave talk. There was absolutely no capability to do it, no capacity to do it.

G: Did you point this out, the difficulty involved here?

M: I wish I had. I don't know whether he would have listened. It probably would have been regarded as simply impolite. Whether I considered it as more of a certainty--I'd like to believe I couldn't believe that. But I'm not certain that I didn't partially believe it.

G: Do you think that it was just talk or that he was really trying to implement this sort of policy to widen the war or draw the U.S. in more?

M: I think the latter.

G: Do you?

M: Oh, yes. Khanh understood the American line pretty well. Khanh understood us pretty well.

G: Anything else on that aspect?

M: Well, I was going to make a point about it. I don't think you can deny the logic of Khanh's or Ky's position--they both took that and so did Thieu. At one time or another every South Vietnamese leader said that we must go north. Setting aside what the broader implications of American policy might be, there were always two basic questions about going north. One was capability. That was never there. There was no chance of doing it. We weren't holding the ground we had in South Vietnam.

The second was, if you did it, would you have the Chinese down there, seven hundred fifty, eight hundred thousand, nine hundred thousand, a million Chinese a week later? That was a very scary proposition. Especially if you knew anything about Korea.

G: Was there any way to gauge the risk here?

M: I took it as very real. I was not in Korea, but, you know, I was scarred enough by my fright over what the Chinese did in Korea so that it was a very real spectre to me. Particularly when then I'd go talk to various American intelligence types and be told that--we'd already taken the bombing now to the north--that there were sixty to seventy-five thousand Chinese laborers already at work, mostly on the rail lines in North Vietnam. As fast as we'd chew

those up, they'd put them right back together again, practically overnight. Or carry the stuff on their backs. So the spectre that was always in my mind was that the logistical base was already laid if the Chinese chose to move into Vietnam. I sure took it as a very real prospect. Now from this distance, it doesn't look anywhere near that real, but it sure did at the time.

G: The pattern that the military seemed to use for their strategy seems to have been the British fight with communism in Malaysia. Was this applicable?

M: No. Well, there was a point at which it might have been. But there were two basic differences that would have made it very difficult. In Malaya the British were in an extremely limited war, limited by the topograph of the Kra peninsula. There was not a single access which they could cut off. The Kra peninsula up there is only thirty miles wide, and they could throw a cordon across that and make it reasonably effective. The second thing was, it was a highly identifiable, very small minority that they fought--five thousand Chinese, out of a total population of several million. Highly identifiable, highly isolated, and with no land bridge to supply them. South Vietnam was porous by sea, porous by land, and the enemy was not an identifiable ethnic minority. Now those are two really big differences.

Now as far as tactics go, as far as learning the difference between political and conventional military warfare, sure, the Malay experience was applicable. But I suspect strongly that those two other factors more than offset what could have been done. Although

I will say in the next breath, if there was any chance to quote, "win," unquote, in Vietnam, it would have had to be done the special forces way. That was the only chance. There was no way with conventional military--unless you want to go all out and destroy Vietnam in order to save it. But within the limits of the war as it was fought, I think the only chance to win was through a special forces-type approach or a marine CAC [civil action company] approach, in which small units of Americans patiently and at great cost built up both a political and a military base in South Vietnam that would be capable of sustaining itself. But once you passed Max Taylor's plimsoll line, you had deprived yourself of that option. You had done what my Vietnamese friend in the restaurant said that night, "If you Americans like this goddamn war so much, here, take it." I don't think the American public, incidentally, would have been patient enough to abide an effort like that.

I can remember people at the--oh, what was his name from Singapore, Bob--not Templeton--Sir Robert Thompson, Bob Thompson. Thompson and the Aussies, that's the two I remember saying, "Now, you folks understand that you are making a thirty-five or forty-year commitment here, don't you?" Everybody would say, "Sure. Sure, we understand that." No, we didn't understand that. No, we didn't understand that at all. That's what they understood and what we didn't. But again, the applicability, I think, would have been really limited by the difference in land contiguity factor and by the non-identifiability of the enemy.

G: [David] Halberstam in his discussion of this describes a dinner where Henry Luce came out and a lot of you went to dinner. The question there was raised, how long would it take to win the war. And people were saying twelve, twenty, forty years. Do you recall this discussion?

M: Oh, yes.

G: I don't know if you've read the book [The Powers That Be] yet, but--

M: No, to be truthful I can't quite work up enough courage to tackle it.

But I remember the dinner. I know the restaurant, I know exactly who was there and everything.

G: Well, can you--?

M: The mix was by some coincidence just about what I've described. There were Australians there, there was a West German, there were French, the British, there were Vietnamese and there were Americans. The Vietnamese didn't say much, but to a person what they all sought to tell Luce over the course of the evening was that this was not Europe in 1944, this was a vastly different circumstance, and we hope that you Americans understand that if you want to do this, and if you're going to do it, and if you're going to bring us with you, then you're making a very long-term commitment. It would take a very, very long time because this was indeed a political war, and that's different. Luce rejected that out of hand. He would have none of that then. His answer to that was the appointment of an American proconsul who would shortly bring order to this troubled land, and we would take care of it all that way.

That's the occasion when Luce suddenly spotted Jim Wilde, a Time correspondent whom he really didn't recognize very well, sitting across from him. Wilde had been sitting there getting drunk and had said very little. Suddenly he jumped to his feet and screamed at Luce, "The day that the war could be won would be when a Vietnamese battalion with fire in its guts got out there and fought." Luce was taken aback; it shocked him, and it disturbed him. But it didn't change his position any. He really thought that what we had to do was bring to bear American know-how and American power. Mind set. Frame of reference again. There was never a meeting ground.

G: Did he ever become convinced?

M: No.

G: During the early days, the advisory stage, were there problems with statistics, say, the whole numbers thing of troop levels and body counts and this sort of thing? Were they always inflated upward?

M: Well, one up and the other down. The American position consistently was that we neither had as many nor--this is once again the [advisory days]? Are we going back to the advisory days?

G: Yes.

M: Okay. The count of American advisors was always reasonably accurate. There weren't more advisors there than we said. That didn't happen until later, when Lyndon Johnson really didn't want the American public to know how many people he was committing. But the body counts were really suspect.

G: Really?

M: Yes. First place, they were always inflated because that's how promotions were won. The American advisors would tell you one thing privately, but they would go along with the inflated figures because he was their guy. They would even help their company commander inflate the figures because they knew very well that in the South Vietnamese command structure that's what would work. That's what was demanded in Saigon.

Second place, you counted anything that was out there: chickens, hogs, old women, kids. They all became Viet Cong. Once they're dead they're Viet Cong. That shouldn't be exaggerated, but it was there, too. Basically it was a multiplication factor. If you have five dead, call it ten. If you have ten dead, call it thirty.

G: Was this something that was practiced throughout the military?

M: Throughout.

G: Really?

M: Yes. I don't think there was any exception to that.

G: Was there, on the other hand, any effort to downplay our casualties?

M: Sure. Sure. Same thing. Although the multiplication factor wouldn't be nearly as [great]. And incidentally, that's a little more troublesome. You don't kid the enemy when you've killed five of them and you announce you killed fifteen. He knows better. On the other hand, you might indeed kid him and keep him from attacking you two days later when you say your casualities were only ten when in fact they were thirty. That's a little more justified.

G: Sure. What about the size of the enemy strength during this period?

M: Well, I think what's clear now, increasingly clear as the literature becomes available, is that it was vastly underestimated. Every piece of literature we have, whether it be from Hanoi or elsewhere, indicates that it was just very badly underestimated.

G: Do you think this was intentional?

M: No. I think the intelligence wasn't that good. In all fairness though, there were a few in the military and a lot more in the agency who had a closer fix on enemy strength than the official position. There tended to be--and I say that carefully--a split between military intelligence and CIA intelligence about the size of the enemy forces. There also tended to be a split between military intelligence and CIA intelligence in terms of the presence of North Vietnamese units as opposed to North Vietnamese individuals. And again, generally speaking, the agency was much closer to being right than the military was.

G: How do you account for this?

M: I asked Westmoreland one time how he remained so cheerful--it was some bad period, I forget--and he said, "You ought to remember one thing, that if I weren't a practicing optimist I couldn't be a four-star general." I don't think there was any necessity to be a practicing optimist in order to be a four-star general in the CIA, and I think that's the essential difference.

G: I see.

(Interruption)

G: While we were talking about earlier the factionalism in Saigon, I wanted to ask you about the student role. This was a time of massive student demonstrations. Did you have a key into the student factions? Did you have sources there that you relied on?

M: No. I'd be lying if I told you I had them personally. There were students to whom I talked but they were always provided by Vietnamese in my office. I was never quite sure, again, how genuine what I heard was and how much to believe--and up to this day I'm not sure. I don't know whether the students were being manipulated, whether some were indeed communist agents, or whether neither was true and the students were genuinely doing what they appeared to be doing. To this day I'm not sure.

G: Did the students' philosophy seem to mirror the various factions in Saigon society as a whole or did they seem unique in terms of idealism?

M: Well, let me confess with a lingering prejudice that I never got rid of that I thought that an awful lot of the student fervor was derived from the fact they didn't want to get into uniform. They had no stomach for going out and fighting. And again, you see, these were the bright young sophisticates who were still in Saigon. As long as it was a peasant war--but maybe that does a disservice to them. There were kids who were genuine about their dislike for war or for the corruption of whatever regime was then leading them, all that was there, too. But I think by far the largest factor was simply not wanting to get shot. I think there was also a large factor of

communist manipulation, and I think there was a large factor of genuine concern. I'm not sure the students themselves were in any position to sort those out.

Now, again, my access to students came from other people who dealt a lot with students. I would ask the Vietnamese in the office to find students to talk to, or Ted Britton, who was out there with Rand then, and worked with the students. I'd call Ted and say, "Listen, can you get four or five kids together and we'll sit down and talk?" and we'd do it that way. So I had no--nor did anyone else at the bureau that I can remember--have any working day-in and day-out contacts with students.

G: I wanted to ask you about the Buddhist monk who was in the U.S. Embassy for so long. What was his name?

M: Thich Tri Quang.

G: Right. Did you have a chance to get to know him?

M: Well, I had a chance to spend a lot of time with him. I'm not sure I got to know him at all. At one time or another, in one circumstance or another, I probably spent--I don't know, I can't remember--but a lot of hours with Thich Tri Quang. Sometimes only with an interpreter, sometimes in somewhat larger groups. The adjective was constantly attached to him, enigmatic, and he was an enigmatic man, believe me. I never was sure I knew him. I suspect Thich Tri Quang was among the first to die after April [1975--fall of Saigon], although there were all kinds of reports that he was taken out to Tay Ninh for re-education. If those aren't from the department of disinformation

in Saigon, then we were all wrong in our suspicions about him, that he really was not a Buddhist monk at all. That was not universally accepted, but I would say a majority of Americans in the intelligence community really believed that of him. Again, unless the post-April, 1975 reports were from the department of disinformation, we were dead wrong. I say "we" in the very broad sense. He was a very persuasive man. I did a Time cover story on him one time and I came away convinced that he was certainly no communist agent. He might have been a communist tool in the sense that what he was doing led to further chaos. But I came away convinced that the reading of him as a communist agent was absolutely wrong.

G: How influential was he in the Buddhist community?

M: Oh, enormously.

G: Really?

M: Yes. Yes. But when you go from March, 1965 to March, 1966, to pick up arbitrary dates, his influence begins to fade because we're now in the process of Americanizing South Vietnam. There was one more big confrontation, which was up at Danang--memory fails, 1966, summer of 1966?

G: Yes.

M: --when the so-called Buddhist war broke out in Danang. That was the end of his influence, because after that there was no point in his protesting against Americans, that went nowhere. But up to the point of Americanization of South Vietnam, he was an enormously

influential man. For two reasons incidentally: I think Vietnamese Buddhists generally respected him as a Buddhist, and he was a very adroit politician.

The other influential Buddhist was Thich Tam Chau, who was constantly described, and I think rather accurately, as more moderate. I never did think, don't think now, Tam Chau had anywhere near the broad political influence throughout South Vietnam that Tri Quang did.

G: Was his position essentially a neutralist position?

M: Yes. That's what he articulated. That's certainly what he said, and my judgment is that that's probably where he was.

G: How about Tran Van Huong? My pronunciation--

M: Tran Van Huong.

G: H-U-O-N-G?

M: Yes.

G: Yes. He didn't last long, did he?

M: Well, he came and went in one, two, three incarnations. One was prime minister, then briefly at surrender again. I think he had three prime ministerial incarnations as I remember. He was a very tough, straightaway, humorless, literal little man, an absolute walking epitome of a bureaucrat.

G: I suppose he would not have been held in esteem by Saigon society.

M: No, not by society. But Huong had a pretty good political base because he was all those things I said. Keeping in mind that everything's relative, Huong was a very, very honest man.

G: He had been mayor of Saigon?

M: That's right, mayor of Saigon.

G: Well, why was he unsuccessful in holding the government together the first time?

M: I think you could have put either Buddha himself or Jesus Christ himself and they probably couldn't have held it together at that point. And certainly a man as unsettled as Huong couldn't do it.

G: Did you anticipate the emergence of Ky? Did you see him as a potential leader?

M: No. Let me say in all honesty, a lot of other American journalists did, and I dismissed Ky, and I was wrong. I thought he was a flamboyant fly boy who had no means of delivering what he said. I didn't recognize the extent of the support he had elsewhere in the military. To me, he was the antithesis of what Vietnamese would support. I may not have been wrong in that. You know, without the military I doubt that Ky would have. . . . But the truth is I underestimated Ky. A lot of American journalists had a much shrewder view of him than I did.

G: Well, I don't want to keep you past your. . . .

M: All right, Mike.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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