INTERVIEW I

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INTERVIEWEE: BRUCE PALMER

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: The Cosmos Club, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

G: General Palmer, would you describe a little of your professional background in the late fifties, leading up to the time that you took over the XVIII Airborne Corps?

P: Shall I start with mid-fifties, or early--?

G: Late fifties. I think you were a liaison officer--

P: I was deputy SGS [secretary of the general staff] to General [William] Westmoreland, and the army liaison officer with the White House. At that time the services were authorized direct liaison with the White House.

G: Could you give us the year on that?

P: [From] 1957 to 1959. Then I got promoted to BG [brigadier general] and became deputy commandant of the Army War College from 1959 to 1961, then assistant division commander of the Eighty-second Airborne Division in 1961 and 1962, then chief of staff, Eighth Army, 1962-1963. Then assistant DCSOPS [deputy chief of staff for operations] and DCSOPS when I got promoted to three stars, 1963 to 1965; ordered to Fort Bragg, and I got the orders in I guess it was March, but I wasn't supposed to go until June. When the Dominican Republic thing broke in late April, I took off for Santo Domingo instead of Fort Bragg, and the family later went to Fort Bragg. (Laughter) That created quite a problem for me.

G: So you had not assumed command of the airborne corps.

P: No.

G: I see.

P: There was Kay, sitting in Quarters One. (Laughter) And a fellow named Jim Lawrie, commander of the Eighty-second Airborne Division, who followed Bob [Robert] York. He was sort of the acting commander of Bragg and the Eighty-second, what was left of it. At one time the whole division was in Santo Domingo. He was trying to run Fort Bragg, and I had the corps headquarters and most of the troops in Santo Domingo, and I never got to Bragg, well, for almost a year. It was quite a story.

G: Why were you named to command the U.S. forces in Santo Domingo?

P: General [Earle] Wheeler told me--he gave me my orders direct; they came very suddenly. He said, "The President has especially selected you," which I didn't quite believe, because he didn't really know me from Adam. "And I recommended you, and so did Secretary of Defense [Robert] McNamara. You're going to go to Santo Domingo and take command of the forces." The press later said that the President had told McNamara and Wheeler to send "the best goddamn general we could find" to the Dominican Republic. I didn't believe any of those stories. Basically, I think what Wheeler wanted--he had a fair-haired guy named Phil Mock--

G: M-O-C-K?

P: M-O-C-K, yes. He wanted to promote Mock into the DCSOPS job, which I was in. That's why in the first place he had talked General Harold K. Johnson, the chief of staff--Wheeler was the chairman--into sending me to Bragg, so that he could promote Mock into the DCSOPS job, because Wheeler was very high on Mock. (Laughter)

At any rate, when this opportunity arose Wheeler said, "Hey, I get rid of Palmer, and they can promote my boy Mock." And H. K. Johnson, who didn't like Mock any more than I did--but, you know, he'd been Wheeler's DCSOPS--so the chairman has pretty good clout, still, in the army, and he had to play the nice guy. So Mock got promoted and Palmer went to Santo Domingo. So that's the real story.

Now that's sort of off the record, but it's sort of fun, though.

G: It is fun. What sort of--?

P: Oh, wait a second. There's another part of that story. Johnny [John W.] Bowen commanded the XVIII Corps at Bragg, and he was scheduled to retire that summer. Well, his nose was very much out of joint. When the thing broke, he wanted very much to go to Santo Domingo. Well, Wheeler sends me down and says, "Take the first airplane you can find, go down to Bragg on the way to Santo Domingo, take whatever you need from Bragg in terms of a staff, take the whole damn XVIII Airborne Corps staff if you want to, communications, and go on to Santo Domingo. But don't waste any time; I want you in Santo Domingo quickly."

When I got to Bragg, Johnny Bowen didn't know anything about this. He said, "Who the hell are you and what are you doing on my post?" I said, "Sir, I have orders to take anything I want."

(Laughter)

About that time the phone rang, and it was General Johnson, who I hadn't seen. He was in the dentist's chair when I got these sudden orders, and I left within an hour.

G: Isn't it a little unusual for you to get orders directly from the chairman?

P: Well, he called me up direct on the squawk box and said, "Palmer, get up here," and gave me my orders. [Andrew] Goodpaster was there, and he was his special assistant; Dave [David] Burchinal was the director of the joint staff, and he gave me my mission and said, "I'll tell Johnson later; he's not available. He's in the dentist's chair." So I rushed by DCSOPS, threw my notes from the morning JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff] meeting at Art [Arthur] Collins, who was my deputy, and said, "Art, you are now the deputy chief of staff for ops. Bye bye. So long." (Laughter) I said, "I'll be back maybe in a few weeks." Went home, got into some fatigue uniforms, and grabbed a toothbrush and took off. I left a note for my wife; she wasn't there. My son was in school. I said, "I'll be back in maybe two or three weeks." I didn't get back. I never got back. A year later I got to Bragg.

It was a funny story. Whenever I tell this story to War College classes, they just break up. They think it's the funniest thing. They say, "What a way to run a railroad." I say, "Well, you gotta be flexible."

G: Well, we didn't create the crisis after all, we were just trying to deal with it.

P: That's the funniest thing of all of course, because really, I'd been at a DCSOPS meeting before the JCS meeting, and none of us thought that we were going to intervene. The Eighty-second said they'd been alerted nineteen times in three years to go to the Dominican Republic, and after crying wolf so many times, they were sort of relaxed. (Laughter) And so were we. We knew that Wheeler was over at the White House, and we knew that this thing was brewing, but none of us thought that the United

States would intervene. We said, "Oh, hell, another crisis." (Laughter)

G: What did you expect to find? Were you given any kind of briefing at all?

P: Almost zilch. No one, either in the joint staff or the army staff, had a glimmer of what the situation really was. The army G-2 gave me a lieutenant colonel military intelligence-type who flew with me to Bragg. He briefed me. He didn't know as much about it as I did, which was pretty little. He gave me a cast of characters, which meant nothing to me, and the names of the Dominican chiefs and this famous [General Elias] Wessin y Wessin, but basically he gave me a lot of stuff about where the landing beaches were and the railroads, totally irrelevant and worthless. I, of course, didn't want to hurt his feelings, and I said, "That's fine." I got to Bragg; they had a little more about what was going on because by that time they had a brigade on the way to the Dominican Republic and they were in direct contact with some people there. They had a little better information about this very fluid situation. But actually, I guess I knew more about it than anybody, which was almost zero. And as I told you, I didn't realize how serious it was. So when I got to Santo Domingo, I was literally starting from scratch.

G: What did you find?

P: I arrived at about midnight at the end of April--the thirtieth of April--very close to the first of May. Bob York was asleep in the hangar there at San Ysidro Airfield, which is about twenty miles east of the capital city. The Eighty-second had a bridgehead on the Duarte

River, which lies on the eastern outskirts of the city. They held this bridgehead; the rebels held the downtown part of Santo Domingo, and the marines were in what they called the International Security Zone on the other side of town. And there was this big gap between the marines and the bridgehead; the rebels in between. So the U.S. forces were not linked up and were in no position, really, to influence the situation.

Wessin y Wessin also came within the Duarte Bridge area; had made a half-hearted attack against the rebels that preceding afternoon; had been driven back, and was inside the Eighty-second bridgehead, and he withdrew unexpectedly during the night. Because what they had hoped was that Wessin y Wessin might fill in this gap. But that didn't happen; Wessin y Wessin pulled back and he went back to San Ysidro, where he had this CEFA [*Centro de Entrenamiento de las Fuerzas Armadas*], they called it. It was the elite army force. It was the only armor-mechanized force they had. It was under Wessin's control, not the chief of staff of the army--autonomous and so on.

And I found out that there was sort of a spurious cease-fire which the Papal Nuncio had arranged. York claimed he hadn't signed it. Tap [W. Tapley] Bennett [Jr.], who I saw later--I found out later--claimed he hadn't signed it, and I said, "Well, I don't recognize it, and we're going to close that gap just as quickly as possible." I wanted to order the Eighty-second to move out and link up with the marines. The marines didn't want to move; they said they had their hands full, all they could handle. [They] only had one battalion ashore at the time, and the Eighty-second had three battalions at the time, this leading brigade.

I asked Wheeler for permission; he said, "No, you can't do it until you get the OAS' [Organization of American States] permission."

The first so-called OAS commission was there. I got their permission quite quickly. I then asked Wheeler again, talking to him directly in the White House--Rusk and McNamara were there. Wheeler said, "No, it's too risky." I said, "Sir, we've just got to do it; we can't do a damn thing here." He said, "When do you want to do it?" I said, "I want to do it tonight. I figure we can catch these guys unawares and we can do it with minimum bloodshed. I've already made this reconnaissance in force"--I had to tell him that.

(Laughter)

G: Had you, in fact?

P: Oh yes, we had, and I did that without permission. I'd sent the cav outfit, and they tested for gas, and they'd found some opposition, although they got almost all the way to where the marines were, before they blundered. Part of the U.S. force took a wrong turn and blundered deep into town and ran into some rebels who shot them up, and they lost about three or four men killed. But the rest got back safely, and they told us, "Here is a feasible route." So I said, "That's why I say, about now, it's actually linked up," knowing what the situation was. I caught hell for that, but that's another story. I found out later that Goodpaster had finally talked Wheeler into it. He said, "Look, Palmer knows what he's doing. You've got to trust him." So finally I got permission, and the President got on the phone and said, "You can't go until midnight." *Jawohl*. We went one second after midnight.

(Laughter)

And in about less than three hours Bob York--a beautiful operation--leapfrogged battalions--

G: What was so important about midnight?

P: I don't know; never found out. Caught them with their pants down, and that sealed off the rebels, and we had the whip hand then. We knew then we could confine the rebellion to downtown Santo Domingo, where we figured out later they had about 80 per cent of [Francisco] Caamaño [Deño]'s forces, the best forces, and isolated him from the rest of the country. He couldn't get arms out or in. He couldn't organize the rebellion in the countryside, which he was trying to do, and he tried real hard. And that was another story, nip and tuck: the use of the Radio Santo Domingo and so on, to try to whip up the rebellion.

In the meantime, though, I'd sent a bunch of helicopters; I called them Green Hornets. We painted them green--everybody knew they were U.S., but we claimed they were neutral. Their job--they had special forces medics, intelligence, and at least one Dominican along. They went to key cities all over Santo Domingo to test the temperature and so on. They found everything quiet, but tense. The security forces and national police had things under control, and there was no real danger of that revolution spreading. They were watching Santo Domingo. Now if Santo Domingo went, then the whole country would have gone. It was that kind of a country.

So I knew then I'd really got over the hump in terms of my mission.

G: What was your mission?

P: The mission I got orally was--these are the words of the President, according to Wheeler--"I don't want a second Cuba. Here I am about to go into Vietnam with all four feet, and I don't want another war going

on in my back yard. I don't want a second Cuba, nor do I want this to spread and become another Vietnam." My written orders never said any such thing. The closest thing was the back channel, a mealy-mouthed thing which said, "You know what you're really supposed to be doing is protecting U.S. citizens and property. But if things get bad, and the wrong people get in control, your mission might be changed to prevent a communist takeover."

G: Who were the wrong people?

P: What had happened, the original revolution was led by PRD [*Partido Revolucionario Dominicano*] Party members; this was [Juan] Bosch's party. Incidentally, [it has] now won the last election. Bosch had won the previous election fair and square, and then the military had thrown him out and a civilian triumvirate took over, and then a lot of plotting, continually plotting anyway. And then the rebellion broke out sort of like spontaneous combustion; nobody really knew why. There were all kinds of legitimate reasons for a rebellion, there were legitimate grievances. The extreme leftists were in the country, and they had about three different communist-Marxist groups. One was a Castro-type, one was Chinese-type, one was a Soviet-type, and then you had the PRD, who were playing footsie with all of them. And Bosch basically was a Marxist, though he claimed he wasn't. And the Dominican chiefs and the conservative element were scared to death of them, and they didn't like the constitution that Bosch wanted to put in, and so forth.

Then we did notice an awful lot of East European-type card-carrying communists appeared. Caamaño surfaced as Bosch's man and declared himself president of the constitutionalist government, they

called themselves. Then all of a sudden the PRD people, led by a fellow named Molina Urena, lost their nerve when they realized what was happening. They lost control of the leadership, and they all went into hiding and took refuge in various asylums in various foreign embassies, the whole bunch. They had previously gone to Bennett and asked for help. Bennett by that time had returned to the United States--that's another story--and Bennett turned them down, said, "You guys started this, you've made this mess; I'm not going to help you." That might or might not have been a mistake, but nevertheless, that's what happened.

Then the fat was in the fire. Who we felt [were] a handful of the wrong people, definitely Marxist-communist oriented, and trained in either Russia or in East European countries, had taken over the leadership, and they started--we had the word that they were organizing the city in these little cells, and that's exactly the way the communists organize things.

G: This is a kind of a controversial point. What was the evidence on the communist influence there?

P: Later we had all kinds of evidence. I think that's been pretty well documented, and as a matter of fact, some of the communists' publications later admitted their error, said they surfaced too soon, and if they'd just laid low longer they probably would have been in control. And they wrote about their own plans and aspirations and so on, and named names. I think that's pretty well documented.

But at the time there wasn't any evidence other than what the dossiers that the FBI, CIA, and service G-2s, army attachés had. They had quite a list of people. I would say they had about twenty names who

were identified in the country, and they had a few of their own agents telling them these things, who they had dossiers on, who they knew were communists, and knew where they were from, and they'd been slipping quietly into the country just before the revolution, and then took advantage of the revolution to surface. And I think their problem was they surfaced too soon and scared the hell out of the United States. You could probably argue that Bennett and others might have gotten overly excited and moved prematurely, but nobody knows. It's easy to say, but I would say in hindsight I'm just glad they did, because I don't know. All I can say is that they didn't take over, and the Dominican Republic today has enjoyed the longest period of stability they've ever had. The PRD, the same party that started the revolution, is now in power, and the Dominican military let them take power, and they're beginning to act like a responsible people. I'll just have to let the record speak for itself.

G: What did you make of the stories--I think some presidential hyperbole may have been present--about the thousands of beheaded corpses and--?

P: Overstated and exaggerated, very much so, and I think some of the American civilians were a little prone to get excited and the embassy was under fire quite a few times, and when you aren't used to that sort of thing--you know, people are shooting at you--and I found the embassy blacked out, in a state of siege, just scared to death.

They were on the front lines. They'd drawn this International Security Zone and they'd put the U.S. Embassy right on the eastern edge, and the rebels were shooting at them, right point-blank from across the street. I told Bennett, "To hell with this." He said, "What do we do?"

I said, "We're going to move this line out." He said, "Oh, but that's the OAS line." I said, "That's all right. We'll tell them about it afterwards." So that first night the marine commander moved that line about three blocks out, quietly in the night, and in the morning when the rebels woke up, the group that was right there was trapped. And then we moved it out again. We finally got it about ten or twelve blocks away. And in that way we also included practically all the foreign embassies; I think the only one that was left outside of the ISZ was the Japanese. And of course, the embassies were delighted they were safe. And the OAS--they rubber-stamped it and said, "Great." (Laughter)

Thereafter I was very careful to get their permission.

G: Their embassies were involved too, weren't they?

P: Oh, sure. Absolutely.

G: What were the political complications involved that you had to deal with in this situation?

P: It's a very difficult situation, because our mission kept changing and the political situation kept changing. When we first came in, our orders were: stabilize the situation and find a government and support it. And so through the efforts of Ambassador [John Bartlow] Martin, who came in to help the special presidential emissary, who was the previous ambassador to the Dominican Republic, and Bennett, they found a guy named General [Antonio] Tony Imbert [Barreras], who'd been one of the heroes of the assassination of [Rafael] Trujillo [y Molina]; a self-styled, self-appointed general, he didn't know anything about the military. At any rate, they persuaded him to form a government of--what

did they call it? National Reconstruction. And he got some pretty good civilian technicians to show him, and they proclaimed themselves the legal government and the United States supported them.

So that occurred for about the first two or three weeks. We were told to support them. Then a second OAS commission arrived headed up by Ambassador [Ellsworth] Bunker, who was our ambassador to the OAS, with an ambassador from Brazil and an ambassador from El Salvador, and their mission was to negotiate a political settlement, negotiating between the loyalist side and the rebel constitutionalist side. Our mission changed then to one of neutrality; it was to keep these two sides from fighting. And by that time I had linked up and was able to physically do that, although it was pretty--we had some problems, because Imbert, as soon as he was declared the new government, took his troops and swept the northern part of Santo Domingo, which was also some of the poorest part, although where the Eighty-second was was probably the poorest. Oh, I caught hell. Everybody, the UN--not the OAS people, but the UN people, who were there--had an observer team, and the press said, "Why aren't you stopping this fighting?" And I said, "What do you want me to do? Be the ham in the sandwich? Be caught between the two forces? I've already got most of them bottled up to stop this thing." They said, "He's sweeping up there, and he's killing innocent people and everything." I said, "Well, I've got some people from the MAAG [U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group] with him, told them to behave themselves. But my mission right now is to support this government. It's the only government we've got, and we don't recognize the constitutionalists."

Well, it's funny. After the President changed the mission to one of neutrality, then I caught hell because the President wanted me to sign in blood--[Cyrus] Vance by that time was there, Vance and McGeorge Bundy, and Jack [Hood] Vaughn and Jack Mann [Thomas Mann?], all big shots from the United States were there. By that time Bennett and I were under great pressure--and Vance--to sign in blood to the President that we had not helped Imbert in this drive. And I said, "We did help him. We gave him some walkie-talkie-type radios; we gave him some rations; we gave him some armored vests, and we gave him some .50 caliber ammunition. I don't know whether they used it or not, but they probably did." (Laughter) "And that's all we gave him. And we gave it to him under what we thought were our orders."

That finally blew over, so then the third phase, or third shift, was at the end of this political negotiation. Bunker was the real hero there. They agreed to form a provisional caretaking government; they got an act of reconstitution, I guess they called it. Under the act, the city would be demilitarized, install the provisional president in the palace, and hold elections a year later--this was September of 1965. Nine months later, in July of 1966, they held the elections. Then Garcia Godoy was named the provisional president; he was acceptable to both sides. So we installed him in September, and we got away with that pretty well. We had a heck of a time demilitarizing the city, however; that's another story.

But then our mission changed to one of supporting that government and making sure that the Dominican chiefs understood that, and there weren't going to be any coups: they were going to behave themselves.

The IAPF [Interamerican Peace Force] was going to support this provisional president and maintain law and order in the country, and allow the campaign to start and get this election going in July.

Then the fourth and final phase: [Joaquin] Balaguer won the election. He beat Bosch handily, and then our fourth mission was to support the new government and get out of there. The new government immediately issued a proclamation that the troops should go home, and we agreed. We got everybody out of there by September, in less than ninety days. So you can see it was a shifting political situation, a very difficult one. The press knew what was going on, but they made it just as tough on us as possible.

G: I think one of the ***Washington Post*** reporters came back and did a long, long piece on the Dominican Republic. I don't know if you were familiar with that piece or not, or his analysis of what had happened.

P: There were all kinds of books and stories written. I guess we'll never know the whole story. I'm sure that I'm biased in what I could see. But on balance, I thought that in such a very uncertain situation I don't fault the President for what he did. We were accused of using too much force in the beginning, overwhelming force, but all I can tell you [is] you don't send a boy to do a man's job. It's better to have too much in the beginning. At the peak we had about 22,000 troops: the whole Eighty-second and four battalions of marines. But as quickly as possible we reduced that force to one brigade of U.S. and one brigade of Latin American troops when OAS came in. That was a very interesting story, too.

G: How did the arrival of the OAS forces change the situation?

P: Of course the United States agreed that the commander of the new force, which would be called the Interamerican Force--later changed to the Interamerican Peace Force--would be a Brazilian, a fellow named Hugo Panasco Alvim--quite a character--and I would be the deputy commander. So technically--and I followed it to the letter--he was the commander. But he was very deferential; he listened to me, and almost always he would agree. But he was very anti-communist; he saw them everywhere, and he had a direct line to President Castelo Branco in Rio. He didn't know it, but we were reading his mail, and he was giving everybody hell--U.S. He said Bunker was a sly fox, and he thought maybe Bunker was a communist--

G: I'd heard that.

P: --and that Palmer agreed with him, but he had to watch me, too. And of course we got a big kick out of this. I told Bunker one day, "You know, I'm getting sort of tired of this guy. Why don't we"--we had cut the force down to a small force, I said, "You don't need a three-star general American general and a"--he was a three-star Brazilian general, which is like a two-star in our army. I said, "Why don't we reduce this overhead and let my chief of staff, Robert Linvill, take over, and get another Brazilian in here in lower rank to do as commander of the force, and get old Alvim out of here?" And Bunker said, "That's a great idea." So the next time he was in Rio--he went to some OAS conference down there--and he knew Branco well. And Branco said, "Well, I got a problem with that guy, too." So on that rationale, we were both relieved and sent home. Another fat little--Brazilians tend to be a little chubby--fellow took over, a nice little guy, Alves da Silva Braga, as the IAPF

commander. Linvill took over as the U.S. commander. I left in January of 1966, and went to Bragg and finally took over XVIII Airborne Corps. And they took it to the finish. They got the election and got the troops out and they did a great job.

G: So how were you occupied then between the time you took over the corps and the time you were--?

P: At Bragg, and of course there was another thing I used to kid Bunker about. I said, "You know, sooner or later--you've done such a great job here--you're going to end up in Vietnam to settle that little job." (Laughter) Ambassador Bunker and I used to joke about who was going to get there first. I knew that Westmoreland had asked for me about seven times; the first two or three times while I was still in the Dominican Republic. Every time he would ask for me, he'd tell me; he'd send me a back channel that'd say, "I want you over here; I need you." And I said, "Well, I've got a job. But I'm ready." (Laughter) And H. K. Johnson, he was using me, I guess, as sort of leverage with Westmoreland. He didn't agree with Westmoreland's organization, and neither did I. God, he had everything under himself. He was the theater commander; he was the tactical commander. He was the strategic, the tactical commander, and hell, they ran every battalion in Vietnam, including the Vietnamese and Free World forces, and so on. He was the adviser to the ambassador; he was the political-military guy; he was the senior adviser to the--he was the MAAG chief to the Vietnamese. That was far too much for one man and one staff.

What I wanted from the beginning--as a matter of fact, when I had been DCSOPS, I objected violently to--as a matter of fact, I guess I was

assistant DCSOPS, and H. K. Johnson was still DCSOPS--when they folded the MAAG up and made it part of MACV [U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam]. And I think this was back in May of 1964. I said, "They're doing it wrong." Because I'd served in Korea after the war as chief of staff of Eighth Army, and--KMAAG [Korea Military Assistance Advisory Group] was still the thing in Korea--I could see what a tremendous job they had done in building that ROK [Republic of Korea] army. And the way they did it was that Eighth Army fought the war. They just directed the war. But the chief of KMAAG, he was a senior guy; he really built that army from the ground up, and he was practically a commander-in-chief, emperor, and everything else. And that's what we needed in Vietnam. There should have been a four-star guy MAAG chief, totally separate. He had to be under the nominal control of the COMUSMACV [Commander, U.S. MACV], but full-time staff, full-time senior commander; do nothing but ride herd on them and really do something with them.

Then I think there should have been a field army commander to operate the operations in the field, and then Westmoreland could have been the theater commander, the political-military guy, and God knows, there was enough to do there. I had the same thing on a smaller scale in the Dominican Republic. I let Bob York, and later Ed [Edward] Smith, be the tactical commander, because it was wrong to expect him to have to deal with these sticky political problems where you sometimes had to swallow your pride, but let me take the heat there, and issue--because one time they had a hell of a fight in June of 1965, when Caamaño made the mistake of trying to attack our forces in this LOC [line of communication] we had through the middle of town, and the Eighty-second--I

turned them loose, and they beat the hell out of them. I had to stop them, because they were about to overrun the whole thing. I said, "No, you can't do that," because that would have really screwed up the political negotiations had we been accused of crushing the poor little rebels, and so forth. I said, "No, you can't do it."

So I had to go personally out with York, right out to a fellow named Ed Viney, [who] was the brigade commander, down to the leading battalion and finally the leading rifle company, and I said, "You've got to stop. By dark tonight you've got to establish a new line into the city and no more advance." They said, "Won't you just let us go through the city?" I said, "No, you're goddamn near there; you're far enough. You're not going to go any further." And it was the hardest thing I ever had to do, was to tell these young paratroopers they had to quit beating hell out of these rebels who had started the fight, and they were going to finish it. Later Bunker and Bennett said--they used to kid me about it--"Why didn't you let those guys go?" I said, "You know goddamn well if I had, you'd have been the first ones to say I'd screwed it up. I wasn't going to let you blame this on the military."

Anyhow, getting back to Vietnam. Johnson wanted that same kind of organization, although it was too late for the MAAG. He wanted a field army commander; he wanted him to be four stars, and that's the job he wanted me to have. So he was playing a cat-and-mouse game with Westmoreland. In the meantime, Abe wanted to raise his deputy to four stars and, in effect, sort of make him the MAAG chief.

G: This was General [Creighton] Abrams.

P: At that time he didn't know who it was, although of course Abe would have been his, and was his, choice. But then of course you know what

happened. The President selected Abe to be the deputy, bought Westy's solution, and McNamara bought it. The air force wanted very much to have the four-star deputy job, but McNamara said, "No, it's a ground war basically, and whoever succeeds Westmoreland should be an army guy." And so Westy won his battle. By the time I was ordered to Vietnam, it hadn't been settled.

I was ordered to Vietnam, I guess it was February [1967], with no job. I didn't know what I was going to do. And the Guam conference was going on while I was en route, and it was settled there, I guess. And it was a crazy situation: they couldn't issue official orders. So I proceeded all the way to Hawaii, and I had to sign a poop sheet that says that if your orders are never issued, or revoked or something, or are never issued, you're stuck with paying for the travel of your family, and private automobile, and they let you take a few things over to Hawaii, where I was going to put Kay and my son. I signed the damn thing, and so I finally got to Vietnam, spent about a week in Hawaii finding a place for Kay to live and so on, and Westy said, "We want you to take over II Field Force from Jack [Jonathan Owen] Seaman." I said, "Great. I'm delighted. Great job." And by that time, I knew what the situation was. Abe was going to be the deputy; Bunker was going to come in and be the ambassador, and Bob Komer was going to be the civilian deputy for CORDS [Civil Operations Revolutionary Development Support], they called it; a whole new organization. But I didn't think it was a very good organization. I told Westy at the time; I put it in writing later. I didn't like it worth a damn.

G: What was wrong with it?

P: I said, "I still think you should turn USARV [United States Army, Vietnam] into a field army. You've got too much under one headquarters." And at that time USARV had the logistic advisory effort, which was rather important, and one of the things we failed [at] in terms of advisory, we never did set up a good logistic setup. And hell, when you pulled the U.S. logistic thing out, the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] would damn near collapse. It was primitive compared to ours. And we were working awfully hard on it when, I guess it was, Abe made the decision to relieve USARV entirely of any advisory thing and put it all back in MACV.

All I can tell you is we had the logistic expertise. We had everything, and we were well along in showing them how the hell to organize their logistic organization, and turn their philosophy around. They had the wrong philosophy. There was a war-lord philosophy, where the corps commanders hoarded everything and they parceled it out to their favorite commanders, and the guys they didn't like, they starved them. And we were trying to modernize it. So I thought that was a dumb thing to do, and I told them. I'm on record on all these things, incidentally. That's one thing you ought to get hold of. Get hold of my exit interview.

G: Who's got that?

P: There ought to be a copy up at the Carlisle Barracks. Because I laid it on the line there, what I thought should have been done. I covered this in this draft manuscript I have in the book, too, not in great detail, but--and incidentally, I tried to tell this to Abe when he visited, before he took over as deputy, and after. But Abe said, "No, it's too

late to do anything. This thing is in concrete. Westy's the commander; I have to support him. I basically agree with you, but it's too late to change this now." He was a very loyal guy and wasn't about to buck Westy on any of those things. I guess I was dumb enough to buck Westy, but I didn't get very far. Got nowhere. Although Westy did do this: he sympathized with--I'm getting a little ahead of the story. I just raised hell when he wanted to put me in USARV, and that's one of the questions I think you asked me. I had only been in II Field Force for three months when he said, "You're going to go take over USARV from Jean Engler." I said, "Jesus, I--"

G: Would you repeat that name, sir?

P: Jean Engler. I said, "I'm no logistician." And Jean was probably the most respected logistician in the army. I said, "Hell, I want to stay with the troops, with the operational side." And he said, "No, I've got reasons for it. I want the senior three-star general in Vietnam"--and at that time I was--"I want him to be the USARV commander because I want you to have not only influence over the logistic side of it, but I want you to have some influence over the divisions." So he changed the efficiency report system so that I rated the division commanders, even though they were not under my opcon [operational control], and he endorsed them. So I had a little bit of control over the division commanders. And incidentally, I think that's a very unsound organization, to split operations from logistics, because up to division commander, he was in command of everything, but beyond that, the corps, the field force, they had some troops of their own, some engineers and some corps artillery. Later when I was USARV, I persuaded Westy to give them a lot

more engineers of their own. But USARV had the bulk of what amounted to field army resources. Most of the engineers, for example, Signal [Corps], MPs [military police], medics, that whole logistic command, was not under the control of the field commanders. They were under the control of MACV, but through USARV. So it was kind of a, I thought, crazy damn organization. You were splitting logistics away from operations.

It did help to have some control over the division commanders, because I could make them--I'd say, "I'm making out your efficiency report, and you'd better damn sight shape up and do what I think you should do in terms of your logistic support." I guess it worked pretty well, but I didn't like it.

G: That is kind of an unusual setup, that--

P: It was a crazy setup.

G: What did the division commanders think of it?

P: I don't think they liked it much either, because they were sort of working for two bosses. The field forces had opcon over them, although MACV would often bypass that and go directly to divisions, and I had command over them, less opcon. (Laughter) Kind of a weird setup. But the logistic troops I had complete command of, including operations control; it was a weird setup.

G: And yet Westmoreland is credited as being one of the bright graduates of the Harvard Business School.

P: I don't understand it. It sort of grew like Topsy, though. That's the way it started, and every man, woman, and child that came in there, MACV--Westy made damn sure he controlled it. He just was unwilling to delegate it. Although he did start delegating more and more to me, and

he did let us do some things that were field army in nature. For example, we really acted as the artillery section of a field army, and I actually formed one, because we had to do such things as to try to establish a counter-battery setup along the DMZ [demilitarized zone], and we had to find resources here and there from various artillery groups, and form this thing up in I Corps. And we did get around and try to do some work in terms of switching artillery between the corps, and ammunition allocations, that sort of thing. That's really all that the field forces were. There wasn't a hell of a lot of maneuverage; it really was a small-unit war, and the corps headquarters were more in the business of allocating resources: helicopters, engineers.

G: Who was the most expensive outfit in Vietnam?

P: How do you mean, the--?

G: In terms of eating up available resources.

P: What unit?

G: Yes, sir.

P: I guess the aviation was the most expensive. Boy, that takes--

G: What about combat units?

P: The First Division went first class, particularly under Bill [William] DePuy, and his successor, John Hay. Abe wanted to relieve him. Anyhow, Bill DePuy and his successors, they didn't want to do anything unless they could get all the ammunition and tanks and helicopter support they could possibly muster, and they really went for great big preparatory fires. They were kind of expensive. Perhaps overly so, I don't know. Is that what you meant?

G: Yes.

P: The First Cav, of course--any airmobile outfit, they burn up the resources, no question about it. They're the most expensive kind of division you have in your force structure, even more than an armored division, I think. As you know, we had to set up a vertical sort of a pipeline for aviation support. But it worked pretty well.

G: How do you react to the charges you hear once in a while that our logistical tail was just too long in Vietnam?

P: I thought that Jean Engler had done a hell of a good job in trying to streamline that tail. We piled too much stuff in there in the beginning; same old mistake we did in Korea and World War II, of automatic supply, and stuff just poured in regardless of whether they needed it or not. The computer said when you reach this inventory level, you send some more. And God, we had enough paper plates and railroad ties and stuff like that, we had mountains of this stuff. So one of the jobs we really had was to try to straighten out the mess in those Saigon depots.

Anyhow, we got that straightened out, and we built Newport--Newport was up near Long Binh--and built enormous bases. But I think our base structures were larger than they needed to be, and the level of construction was too lavish; we were very wasteful there. And the priorities were all out of whack. Here was the Fourth Division building concrete sidewalks in Pleiku, and goddamn it, their own ammunition dump, that is, the one that they depended on, which the First Log Command ran, was in a mudhole and it was practically impassible in the rainy season. Our priorities were screwed up. But we had Red Cross girls and librarians up there, but in the winter time or wet season we couldn't get the ammunition to them. (Laughter)

(Interruption)

G: President Johnson has been quoted--of course, he's been quoted as saying a lot of things, but he was quoted as saying that one of the reasons he sent you to Vietnam was because you had proven diplomatic skills, and he wanted diplomats as generals.

P: I wasn't aware of that, really. It probably stemmed from some of the things Bunker was saying. He was running around telling everybody what a great diplomat I was because I could get along with that crazy Brazilian General Alvim, and helped him get rid of him without hurting his feelings too much. I wasn't any great diplomat, and I'm sure that's not what Westy wanted me for.

G: I guess he was his own diplomat.

P: Right.

G: What trends in the war became evident to you, favorable or unfavorable, as the months passed after you arrived?

P: I guess that in II Field Force it began to dawn on me that it was a very difficult mission first of all, to figure out just what the U.S. troops were supposed to be doing, and then how you do it. But I began to realize that the depth of the insurgency was much deeper than I'd thought, even in III Corps, and of course in some places, like in Binh Dinh province, where you were, and up there in I Corps--I found out later, in places like Quang Ngai province and all--the VC [Viet Cong] had been dug in for going on a generation, more than a generation. I remember visiting the ARVN Twenty-fifth Division, and the division commander wouldn't talk to me in his office. He went outside, away from everybody, and then he said, "You know, I suspect that my own G-2 is a VC agent." Then

it began to dawn on me what the problem was. They were subverted, penetrated, from the palace on down.

And then I discovered they would give fictitious orders in writing, and then the real orders would be issued out in the field verbally. The commanders themselves, regimental and battalion commanders, didn't know what their orders were until they finally got the real order; trying to fool the Viet Cong. And it was also obvious, I'd get these reports from the advisers at the province and district level of the undue corruption going on, signs of accommodation, avoiding each other deliberately. Sometimes we used to wonder why didn't they shoot up our POL [petroleum, oil and lubricants] dumps and so on, and then began to think maybe they didn't because that was their POL dump, too. (Laughter)

G: There may be some truth to that.

P: Yes. In III Field Force, which was smaller in area, but terribly important, of course, with Saigon located there, some of the worst divisions at that time--I think they got better--but the Fifth Division, we knew the division commander was in cahoots with a French rubber plantation, was using ARVN trucks in the black market, selling rubber.

G: Was that the Michelin plantation?

P: I think it was the Michelin, yes. And things like that; I was kind of disillusioned to find the low caliber of ARVN leadership; understandably so, I guess. One of the reasons, I was told, that [Nguyen Van] Thieu wanted people he knew he could trust--he was afraid of coups and things like that. There was a General Khang; it was a funny setup, he was commandant of the marine corps, but he was also commanding III Corps, and I was his counterpart.

G: How do you spell his name, sir?

P: K-H-A-N-G. A funny little guy; he ran around in his marine camouflage suit, very cordial and cooperative until I'd start boring in on him on some unpleasant things, like black market and stuff, and misconduct of his troops. Then he'd get very, very agitated. He'd almost jump up and down, and wouldn't talk to me. He wasn't leveling with me. It was obvious that he was there because he was loyal to Thieu, and Thieu could trust him. And anyway, then in Gia Dinh province, that surrounded Saigon, that guy reported directly to the palace too, that province chief. It was a coup-proof setup, I guess.

The mission of the U.S. forces seemed to be to concentrate on the main force units, and the idea at that time was to drive them back to the border. And we were in the process of doing that, and I was encouraging the First Division and the Twenty-fifth to become less dependent on their base camps. I never succeeded, although I did get the Twenty-fifth to put an advance CP [command post] up at Tay Ninh, and the First Division finally put their forward CP at Lai Khe and kept it there. But basically those huge base camps were just good places for flourishing black markets. They helped pacify the area, but heck, most of the troops were gone most of the time. That huge thing at Cu Chi. And then it began to dawn on me that I guess damn near a third of the effective fighting force was always back there at the base camp guarding this mountain of stuff they didn't need, because all these units had brought stuff over. Some of them even had sawmills. They had containers, hundreds of containers full of extra parts and things. When I got to USARV, one of the things I did was scarf up a lot of that stuff;

I didn't want it all over damn Vietnam, confiscating these containers, which they couldn't use. And then they had all kinds of stuff like, you remember, those big recoilless rifles mounted on jeeps? They didn't use those half the time.

G: The 106s?

P: The 106s. And then later we changed the TO&Es [tables of organization and equipment] to try to streamline them and make them lighter and so forth, and that was one of the things we accomplished at USARV. But at II Field Force it struck me that we were just not fighting a very sensible kind of war. It was a strange war. The troops did well, I thought, but the base camp syndrome was a problem.

Then I realized at Tet, finally, here we were driving the main force units up to the border, but before Tet what had happened was that the main force units had slipped by us and slipped through our screen and were at the outskirts of all the big cities, including Saigon, and we didn't know it. Now II Field Force did have some intelligence and did get very concerned.

G: Was that General [Frederick] Weyand?

P: General Weyand. And Westy got concerned. But they didn't have nearly as much intelligence as they should have had. They told a different story later; they told the press that they knew all about it and they were ready, and that was a lot of crap. They weren't. And damn, we just got plain surprised, and most of our forces were deployed well outside of the main force units of the enemy, and had to be brought back to rescue these places.

We weren't surprised by Tet in terms of--we knew there was something big going on; we just couldn't figure out what the hell it was.

We weren't surprised by the timing; we thought it would occur at Tet or very close to Tet. But the nature of it, that is attacking the big towns, and the scope of it--we didn't think they had that kind of capability. We underestimated them. And we were surprised in that way. I would call it a tactical rather than a strategic surprise.

Then of course we were helped by the fact that the enemy did screw it up and attack twenty-four hours earlier, as I recall, in II Corps. That should have alerted us, and some of them didn't catch on very fast, particularly the ARVN. Overall, we should have done better in III and IV Corps with twenty-four hours warning like that. I'm getting a little off the track--

G: No, that's fine.

P: --but it occurred to me in II Field Force that our strategy was faulty. I thought then, and in hindsight I'm absolutely convinced, that the strategy was unworkable. You can't just sit there in Vietnam and let those people come down the trail, get all set in their sanctuary bases in Laos and Cambodia, then infiltrate into South Vietnam at will, attack at the time and place of their choosing, and there's not a hell of a lot we could do about it. We couldn't possibly cut them off at that border. What was it, nine hundred miles?

G: At least.

P: No way. So it was a defensive strategy that was doomed to defeat. There was no way we could win that war, unless you could kill them all, and I was convinced that, almost from the beginning, there I began to realize that this war of attrition wasn't going to work because first of all, they could control the tempo of the battle, and therefore the

casualties. They were willing to take heavy casualties when they wanted to. They had the larger manpower base, you know, about sixteen million people compared to twelve million that were available to the South. They had no material problems; anything they lost was replaced. We knew they were being beefed up, upgraded constantly in terms of weapons; they outgunned the ARVN. I just couldn't see any way of winning that war.

And I told Bunker, who came to see me--I think it was the first visit to the field that he made, and that was another story. It was funny, kind of. But what happened was they broke every rule in the book, and he flew out without a chase ship, sitting in the copilot's seat, which was against the law--

G: He wasn't a pilot, was he?

P: No, he was seventy-eight years old. And they had this Time-Life correspondent with light meters and cameras hanging all over him, and he was taking pictures. The camera hit the fuel switch, and the pilot didn't know what the hell had happened, and they suddenly had to go into auto-rotation; landed on that very busy Highway 1, which the U.S. had built between Long Binh and Saigon, and full of trucks and those little Vietnamese things, and just disappeared. And of course we didn't know what happened. He was supposed to arrive at such and such a time, and no sign of him. And we were about to send out search teams when a Jolly Green Giant showed up. There was a Transportation Corps pad near us--we had a nice concrete pad; they had this oil pad--and on a hunch I said, "I'll bet you that Bunker's in that thing." So I tore down there in a jeep and [they] deposited him there. He came with a panama suit and a white panama hat, and flowing--this oily dirt all over him. He was a

funny guy; he laughed, and he told me the story. The air force had done a great job. This Jolly Green Giant was on a routine training flight, when they heard this "Mayday" (Laughter), and went down there. They didn't know who the hell Ambassador Bunker was, and they didn't know where--they had never heard of II Field Force, much less where it was, but they managed to get within a mile of it. They did a good job.

When Westy found out the story, he just raised hell. Because they had done something like this similarly, and Lodge had gone down in the Delta and they could have easily lost Lodge. I told Bunker, "You know, the U.S. Army really isn't as stupid as this. This was a bad show. The next time, I promise you, we're not going to rely on those yo-yos in Saigon. We're coming down to get you with two ships, and we will take care of you."

I briefed him privately. I just told him that it looked to me like we had a long stalemate ahead of us; I couldn't see any way of attriting the enemy. Fighting the war this way, I'd say, the only thing I can see is we've just got to get permission to go into Laos and cut the thing at the waist and physically stop the infiltration. I said, "Our troops are in the wrong damned place." We had troops all over the goddamn country, and I said, "The Vietnamese have got to fight this war, in terms of mopping up in the South, like the Koreans did in Korea although they never had a real guerrilla threat. And the U.S. troops and the foreign troops belong up north, blocking those bastards so they can't come down here. And then the VC will wither on the vine, and the Vietnamese should be able to handle it." But he said, "I agree with you, and Westy's been wanting to go into Laos, and I want to go into

Laos, but it doesn't look politically possible." I said, "Okay, we'll. . . ." I found out later that apparently Westmoreland had told him the same thing at Guam. He just said to the President, "If we can't stop this infiltration, this war can go on indefinitely, and in order to clean them up in the South, fighting this kind of war, it's going to take a hell of a lot more troops than we've got now."

G: He had the contingency plans, I think, for going into Laos.

P: Oh yes, we wrote up some, very detailed. In fact, one that I particularly always liked was the one where we--as a matter of fact, it's the one the ARVN really used when they went into Laos, for an extension of Highway 9, we established the--remember the big fire and logistics base in Khe Sanh? In fact, I visited the South Vietnamese I Corps, and Bob [Robert] Cushman, I think it was at the time, the III MAAF [Marine Amphibious Assault Force] up there, and went over some of those contingency plans with them and got their ideas on how it might work.

Anyhow, I don't think--Bunker hadn't been in the country long enough; he didn't realize what the hell I was talking about. But I said, "We may in the end have to negotiate a compromise and accommodation, because I don't think we can kick them out of here." And of course, that's precisely what happened. We weren't able to kick them out. I get ahead of the story there, but basically the strategy of Nixon--and it was a good strategy--was to put the pressure on the other side to negotiate by simply withdrawing U.S. troops and building up the ARVN, and trying to show the enemy that the ARVN could handle it, and that the longer they stayed away from the conference table, the worse it

would be. But of course a whole series of events stymied that, and I don't think, given what happened, there was a way we could have won that war.

The first big mistake was when [Ngo Dinh] Diem was assassinated. That lost us four years. It was four years before we could find a leader who was strong enough to hold the country together: Thieu. Four damn years. And then Tet was the second big turning point, because Tet was the end of any major U.S. effort. From there on it was obvious that we had to turn it over to the Vietnamese, which I think we should have started earlier. Westy claims that that was the plan right along, but we sure as hell didn't show it very well. [The] poor old Vietnamese still had the big, heavy rifles, the M-14s, or that little M-2 carbine, and we had the M-16s. Of course, we never did give them what they really needed, in the end. We left them with an air force that was totally inadequate.

Then the next big turning point, I guess, was Cambodia, because from there on that started us on the downhill with congressional support, Cambodia. Although I think you can argue that militarily it probably gave us maybe two years, as much as two years in terms of throwing the enemy back so that he wasn't able to really pull something in III and IV Corps for about two years. It set them back that much. But the cost at home was that we lost the support of the people, and that's when the Congress started prohibiting U.S. combat operations, and started cutting out funds.

And of course the coup de grace was Watergate. After that we had no president, and although Nixon had promised Thieu that we would come

and retaliate, and come and help him, and if the enemy broke the ceasefire agreements, which of course they did almost immediately--and that's all she wrote. And by that time, the Congress had cut everything off, and the United States simply abandoned a hapless, hopeless, helpless ally. I remember Warren Nutter, when he was alive, he'd been Laird's ISA [international security affairs] assistant secretary; he visited Vietnam in August of 1973. This was a year before--we knew of Watergate, but it was a year before the President resigned. He told me, "The morale of Thieu and the people is one of resignation. They think the United States has abandoned them, and they think it's just a matter of time before it's all over. It's very bad." That was almost two years before the final debacle.

I guess I'm getting ahead of the story, but the special insights, I'd say, yes, very early I decided that we were in a hell of a fix. I didn't see any way out of it. I supported, of course, everything Westy was trying to do, because I didn't know what the alternative was. If the President wouldn't let you take the fight to the enemy--but anybody who knows anything about strategy at all knows that you have to have an offensive kind of a strategy. You have to be able to threaten him, so that he can't just attack you at will. What the President had said, he had told the world and had told Hanoi specifically, "All we want you to do is to cease and desist in the South. We do not want to overthrow your government. We aren't going to invade North Vietnam; we're not going to threaten you in any way. But we are going to punish you with air bombing until you cease and desist in the South." I didn't believe in that, either. When I was DCSOPS, I violently disagreed with that. I

said, "There's no way that you're going to bomb this tough communist crowd to quit. You don't know the oriental mind. We found out with the Japanese in World War II; we found out with the Chinese in Korea: they don't mind losing horrible losses that we couldn't possibly stand. They're tough people. You've got to remember what the Chinese did in their Long March, you recall. Bombing--all they're going to do is dig in, and they'll build tunnels and every goddamn thing else. The orientals love to dig. They'll turn world propaganda against you."

I said this in 1964. I think Johnny Johnson agreed with me. The navy didn't think it would work, but the chiefs went along with it because they said, "What the hell else can we do? We've got to be unanimous, and we've got to show the President that we're behind him." The only people that really thought it would work was the air force and marines. They thought that bombing would work. And of course it didn't work. So it was a pretty hopeless strategy.

G: Would it have worked if it hadn't been gradually escalated?

P: Of course, that made it even worse. It had a much better chance, you're very right. The chiefs recommended that they hit them with everything--we had, I've forgotten, ninety-four targets or something--that we hit them hard and that we maintain a sustained air offensive. I think it would have been a different story in the sense that they wouldn't have time to get used to it; they wouldn't have had time to build the most formidable air defenses that were ever built anywhere. And in the end, although we dropped something like four times as much tonnage as we dropped in all of World War II, we also were up against the toughest air defenses we'd ever [seen] and the price of admission was getting higher

and higher. It was beginning to be very questionable. Even with the advent of the "smart bomb," it was very questionable how long we could keep that up.

G: Someone asked the question--toward 1968 and 1969, it became a question of who was bleeding who.

P: Yes. Even then though, I think that we could have set them back. There's no question about it. Maybe they might have been more amenable to negotiating, but when you look at the record, at how those people--they never gave a goddamn inch. They've said from the beginning, "We're tougher than you are; we can outlast you, we could fight for generations, and we know you can't." So I have to say that even if we had done it the right way, the war might have been fought in a different way--but I just don't see whether it would have ended any differently. Because sooner or later we had to turn that thing over to the Vietnamese, and we left them without any air force to speak of, and they'd become over-reliant on our firepower, particularly our air, and when the U.S. troops finally got out of there, Abe's basic view of strategic reserve were those B-52s. And he used them very, very well.

But once that was turned off, then what was going to save South Vietnam from the North? A tougher enemy; they had more people, they had everything they wanted or needed, they were getting supplied. And we cut their damned supplies off. I do think this, though: if it hadn't been for these turning points, but particularly for Watergate--if Watergate hadn't occurred, I think there still was a fighting chance that if we'd have been willing to support them, that they might have hung on. They might not have been able to hang on to all of the

country, and of course that was one of the problems. They should probably have given up part of I Corps and II Corps, because they didn't have enough troops to defend the whole country, and they didn't have enough ground strategic reserves, and in the end that's what was their undoing, as you know. But I'm getting ahead of your story here.

G: Well, sir, I'm going to have to cut us off here, I'm afraid.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

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