INTERVIEW I

DATE: May 2, 1984

INTERVIEWEE: CHARLES M. SIMPSON (with occasional comments by John McCarthy)

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Colonel Simpson's residence, Annandale, Virginia

Tape 1 of 1

G: Colonel Simpson, would you begin by just a brief overview of your earlier career? When did you go into special forces?

S: In 1959, out of Leavenworth. I was going to school and volunteered for Special Forces, was assigned to the 10th [Special Forces] in Bad Tolz, Germany, stayed there four years.

G: In Bad Tolz?

S: Nice place to get stuck four years.

G: That's in Bavaria, is it, in South Germany?

S: Oh, yes. South of Munich, in the mountains.

G: In the mountains. I see. When would you say your career first became involved with Southeast Asia specifically?

S: In 1964 when I was on the PAC desk of NMCC, I was very much involved in Southeast Asia. That was the focus of it.

G: What was the nature of your duties there?

S: I was the PACOM desk officer in the National Military Command Center. I read all the traffic that was made available from all the embassies. The cable traffic you showed me, for example, part of the daily fare would be a stack of it. Some of what you showed me was SI, was back

channel, which was the planning conferences for future air operations. We weren't privy to much of that.

G: You weren't privy to the ground operations in Laos, for example?

S: Yes. Yes. Very little to do with U.S. involvement though. Well, as a matter of fact, in 1964 there was none, there was no U.S. involvement except CIA with the tribes.

G: Right. So you had primary--

S: And we knew nothing about that.

G: So air operations were more in your line then?

S: Starting in November of 1964. Those cables you sent me talking about future operations, the thirty-nine target list, twenty-two from Vientiane and seventeen from MACV, was our starting point. The captain and I got us a big map of Laos and put those thirty-nine targets on.

G: What was the nature of the targets?

S: Mostly in a north-south line following the highway on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, parallel to it. There were truck stops, barracks. We had made available to us some photography, and it was the kind of stuff that was taken by these "Yankee Flights," U.S. reconnaissance aircraft over Laos, which started in the middle of 1964, the first U.S. tour of operations.

G: These were the Yankee Team operations?

S: Yes.

G: Okay. Okay.

S: And you see a little area photo with a piece of a roof sticking out. That was a barracks, so they told us. We had very poor photography of all these thirty-nine targets. It was all, as I describe it, in the jungle, under trees. Once in a while you'd see a photograph that'd show some trucks, but very rarely. I don't know yet what those targets looked like.

G: You sound a little skeptical about the validity of some of these targets.

S: Well, I always had the feeling that someone was kind of straining to come up with as many as thirty-nine. They were all in the panhandle of Laos. The U.S. operation that eventually attacked these targets was called Barrel Roll. Now this is contrary to some of the official air force and PAC history you'll see that says the panhandle was Steel Tiger. It was not, it was Barrel Roll. I never thought the targets were terribly important.

G: What was Steel Tiger then?

S: Okay. Steel Tiger was--you drew a line across the panhandle and everything south of that was Barrel Roll, in the panhandle of Laos itself. Steel Tiger was to the north up along Mu Gia Pass, Route 7, Van Ken Bridge, that area up there.

G: I see. Okay.

S: Plaine des Jarres.

G: Would you describe your role in planning or laying these operations on?

S: Yes. Neither the navy captain--my boss--nor I had ever been to Southeast Asia. He at least was an aviator, so he knew something about airplanes. I didn't, except, you know, what's common knowledge with an army lieutenant colonel. They gave us this list of targets and they gave us a great big list of "thou shalt nots," and they said, okay, starting in the end of November of 1964 with operations to start, as I recall, the first week in December of 1964, write a cable that authorized CINCPAC to start off with attacking two targets a week and two missions, say, Tuesday and Friday specifically. And you'd sit and say, okay, on Tuesday the umpty-umpth of December you are authorized to attack target number thirty-one at Ban Xuan, the truck rest stop, with no more than two U.S. fighter bombers, escorted by no more than two CAP [combat air patrol], using the following route into the target and the following route out from the target, during the hours of daylight. Then on Friday you are authorized to attack target number seven, which is a refueling point at the following location, coordinates, name, with no more than two fighter bombers, no more than two escort CAP, during the hours of daylight. En route to and going from the target, you may engage enemy targets that are clearly identified as enemy. In other words, you have to be able to look at them and say those are North Vietnamese. They had to be moving. They can't be more than two hundred meters off the road on either side and so on. Big long list of what they could not do.

G: Was their ordnance restricted as well?

S: No. No.

G: They could use napalm?

S: I don't recall any restriction on ordnance.

G: Maybe this is too strong, but it sounds to me like you put the pilots in quite a straight jacket.

S: Well, we did. It was ridiculous. We'd draft this message up. We had to get it approved by all four services. So I had me a big map board with the photos on the side, arrows pointing to the target, the route laid out in tape on it, and the message, take it around to the army, navy, air force and marines for approval, then [to] the director of the joint staff to the chairman of the JCS to the secretary of defense for international affairs, Mr. McNolly.

G: [John] McNaughton, was it, McNaughton?

S: Yes. McNaughton. Then go across the river to the State Department and the White House.

G: Who would approve it at State?

S: Different people. Usually I dealt with an old friend of mine at the State Department named Cleland, John Cleland. He became a major general before he retired. He was a lieutenant colonel assigned to the State Department, detailed to it, and he was the outside man, the executive officer, for the director of Southeast Asia, Under Secretary [Marshall] Green. He would take the message and take it somewhere, then bring it back approved.

G: How about at the White House? Who did you deal with there?

S: Situation Room.

G: Is that Art McCafferty?

S: I don't remember anybody from the Situation Room. And then and only then could we send it out to CINCPAC.

G: How long did this take?

S: Two days. It went to CINCPAC. The Ambassador at Vientiane had veto power. If he didn't like it he could veto it.

G: Do you remember who that was?

S: [William] Sullivan. Oh, yes, I do. Field Marshall Sullivan.

G: Field Marshall Sullivan?

S: Yes, that's what we called him.

G: I heard a story that the way he kept control was that he kept the fuses. Did you ever hear that?

S: He kept the what?

G: The fuses for the bombs.

S: He couldn't have. These missions were flown from Thailand one time. There were two missions a week. The air force would fly one from Thailand on Tuesdays, and on Friday the navy would fly one from Yankee Station.

G: So he couldn't have kept the fuses?

S: No, no way.

G: Okay.

S: Now he might have kept the fuses for the Laotian air effort. I don't know. I don't know anything about that. It had nothing to do with us, strictly Sullivan and Laos, State Department.

G: What kind of feedback did you get from Ambassador Sullivan?

S: Oh, considerable, considerable.

G: Can you tell us about that?

S: Yes, I recall one mission. It was at the end of--this is on a weekly basis. Every week a message would go out for the following week. Now this gave them four or five working days to decide who was going to fly the mission and get the flags out and so forth. Navy flew a mission from the carriers up Yankee Station. Then the result of the mission was they did attack a bus on the road en route to the target. It was daylight. And they attacked and they killed a bunch of civilians, women and children who were the dependents of Royal Laotian Army people. Sullivan sent a message outlining in great detail what I described. At the very end of the message he put two words: "Tecumseh weeps!" He was a Naval Academy graduate.

G: Well, the Academy graduates will know the significance of that.

S: Yes.

G: How could the navy identify these targets of opportunity, I suppose is the way to describe them, on the way in? For example, now they attacked--

S: Well, they violated their instructions. Their instructions clearly said it has to be a military target, it has to be North Vietnamese, it has to be moving.

G: How could they tell if they were North Vietnamese?

S: I don't know. It was ridiculous. I was really embarrassed. I was embarrassed to be doing this, really embarrassed. I felt like a fool.

G: Did the pilots often strike targets of opportunity?

S: Well, I don't recall any other instance of any other target of opportunity being struck. There were so many restrictions. If I were a pilot, I wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole.

G: Well, now, these routes into and out of the target that were specified, what was the purpose of specifying the route?

S: I don't know. As I told you, we were conducting crossborder ground operations with SOG [Studies and Observation Group]. I didn't know that in 1964 and they didn't really start on a large scale until 1965 anyhow. There were some crossborder operations. None of our targets were within thirty miles of the Vietnamese border, in Barrel Roll. Steel Tiger was different. Mu Gia Pass, for example, was a target when they started that.

Okay, the whole month of December was like that, two missions a week, four sorties a mission, alternating navy and air force, very closely regulated. Then they--the JCS--started stepping it up in January. I don't recall exactly how many, but essentially doubled it. Then in a few weeks they doubled it again. It finally got to the point where they were authorized so many missions, they increased the target list to a hundred targets from thirty-nine. We just physically couldn't keep up with the cable traffic. We couldn't get the cables out, authorizing a whole bunch of missions. We did through January and much of February. I believe it was the end of February and we started Steel Tiger, because it coincided with Rolling Thunder in North Vietnam. Right across the room from me, another desk in the PAC division of J-3 did exactly the same thing for Rolling Thunder that we

did for Barrel Roll and then later on Steel Tiger, mission by mission, sortie by sortie.

G: Did you get any feedback on planes coming under antiaircraft fire?

S: No.

G: You weren't sure if they were or were not?

S: Didn't get any feedback.

G: You just authorized the missions.

S: We read cables saying they dropped so many bombs and they make a wild guess at what they hit. They couldn't see any more than an aerial photoplane could. And of course we had post-strike assessment recon recce photographs. It's just jungle. Made holes in the jungle.

G: The aerial photos didn't improve as time went on then?

S: The place just doesn't lend itself to being photographed from the air. It's jungle.

G: How long did you go on with this particular operation?

S: Well, we finally got to the point--we started Steel Tiger; we were doing Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger together I believe in March and April and May--we said, "You got the target list the same as we have. You pick the targets." So many missions a week, one a day, no more than one a day, and they still had restrictions about it being about off the road and moving, that sort of thing. But they vastly increased the number of strikes. As far as the effectiveness is concerned--

G: You don't know that?

S: No.

G: Did the volume of traffic from Ambassador Sullivan increase along with the increased missions?

S: I think he was kind of overwhelmed, too.

G: He was?

S: Yes. Because they went through the hundred [targets]--well, by the time they started Steel Tiger they were adding a whole bunch of targets all over Central Laos, the passes, targets along Route 7. I remember one thing very clearly. You remember in the traffic you sent me, there was mention of the Van Ken Bridge.

G: Yes.

S: Okay. That was my baby. My boss told me, okay, "Find how many airplanes it takes to destroy the Van Ken Bridge with a very high assurance"--that means 98 per cent assurance--"they'll get it in the first mission. We don't want to fly another mission and we don't want a whole bunch of American airplanes over Laos." So I went around to the navy and the air force and the Marine Corps and asked all their air experts to help me out in this thing, so many for high altitude CAP, so many for low altitude escort, so many for antiaircraft guns that were around the Van Ken Bridge, so many fighter bombers, and the whole figure came to a hundred and sixty-five. They presented that figure to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I got some big smirks out of them, even [Maxwell] Taylor. And they talked about it a while and said, "You can have fourteen."

G: How did they arrive at fourteen?

S: I don't know. You know what happened? First airplane knocked the bridge out, first fighter bomber knocked the damn bridge out.

G: What did the rest of them do?

S: I don't know.

(Laughter)

G: That's funny.

S: You don't know how many hours I spent writing that doggone message and coordinating, trying to get these guys to come up with circular error probability for the airplane, for the pilot, for the bomb itself. Oh! A two hundred foot long bridge, two lanes wide.

G: What kind of a bridge was it? Was it a masonry bridge?

S: It was a highway bridge, Route 7 highway bridge.

G: Okay. A good bridge then?

S: It led from the Vietnam Mu Gia Pass east-west to the Plaine des Jarres. It was the principal supply route for the communist forces fighting on the Plaine des Jarres.

G: Did destroying the bridge effectively cut that route?

S: I don't know.

G: (Laughter)

S: I doubt it. I doubt it. They were doing the same thing in North Vietnam by this time. Numerous times you'd knock a bridge out, and they would have a bypass in within 24 hours; we had a much larger target list. But again, we were very selective, you know. No power stations were allowed to be struck, no water works, dams, irrigation

projects were allowed to be struck. They were bridges, military targets, airfields and so forth.

G: How did you get that information?

S: Oh, the North Vietnam JCS planner sat across the room from me. They were my friends. I was interested in North Vietnam. They had all the pictures over there. We spent a lot of time, give and take. We were the experts on air operations because we started first. (Laughter) It was funny. It was really almost funny.

G: All right, now, you knock off work in the afternoon and presumably you'd on some occasion go someplace and have a drink and talk about it.

S: Not with that crowd.

G: No?

S: No. Not in the Pentagon. No. Did not.

G: What did you do?

S: Went home.

G: And you were skeptical of this whole operation? How long were you in this position?

S: Well, I got out of it in July of 1965. I went to the Army War College. I had exactly eighteen months to a day in the JCS, which is the minimum that they allow.

G: How would you summarize the progress or lack of progress during those eighteen months of these operations? You started out with--

S: One of escalation.

G: --four sorties a week. What was it like at the end of the period?

S: Oh, maybe a hundred sorties a week on both Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger. We ran out of targets in the Barrel Roll area. Even though they increased from thirty-nine to a hundred, they had to scratch to find thirty-nine. You can imagine what the other sixty-one were like.

G: And they were still flying mixed navy and air force sorties?

S: That was CINCPAC's business. We didn't tell him who had to fly them. He took turns with them though.

G: You remember when Ambassador [Leonard] Unger came in? Was Sullivan there the whole time you were there?

S: Sullivan was there the whole time I was there.

G: Okay. Now you went to the War College then in July of 1965. This coincided with the big commitment of troops, combat troops, to Vietnam. What were your classmates making of all of this at the War College? What kind of talk was going on? What kind of opinions were being expressed about this?

S: Amazingly, not much interest in Vietnam, Southeast Asia. We all read the newspapers and we got briefings periodically, intelligence briefings. But there wasn't a whole lot of interest in it. The curriculum of the War College was just not directed towards that type of war.

G: Focused on Europe?

S: Yes.

G: Was there a counterinsurgency course or block of instruction?

S: There must have been, but I don't remember anything about it. It didn't make any impression on me. See, I had been in Special Forces when they picked up the counterinsurgency mission under Kennedy and

organized--the 10th Group went from two hundred and fifty officers and men to twelve hundred and fifty. When they formed B, C and D Companies, I became the commanding officer of C Company. I was the first guy in the company and built the whole thing up from scratch, two hundred and fifty officers and men. It was a counterinsurgency company for the Middle East.

G: What kind of qualifications did the personnel have to be designated as Middle East--targeted I suppose for the Middle East? Did you have Arabic speakers?

S: Well, first of all, we got all the school-trained people that had Middle Eastern language capabilities, and there weren't a whole lot of those, maybe, oh, there might have been twenty that spoke some dialect of Arabic or Farsi or Hindi or. . . .

M: Urdu.

S: Greek. I don't remember any Turkish speakers. There might have been. Yes. Yes. Got the officers and noncoms. Aside from that, these were just Special Forces A detachments. We got them all deployed to their areas of interest in the year and a half I commanded the company, to Iran, to Pakistan, trained Jordanian special forces, trained the Saudi Arabians, formed the Turkish special forces, trained with the Greek special forces. It was a Greek detachment at the time. They all got exercised, including all B detachments and my own C detachment, went to Iran.

G: I'm interested in this concept of counterinsurgency. Aside from tactics and weapons, that is I'm sure you conducted training in ambush

techniques and patrolling techniques and that sort of thing, what other content was there in this idea of counterinsurgency? Was there a political content?

S: I'd call it more of a psychological than political. Great emphasis--really you emphasize the same things in counterinsurgency you do in guerrilla warfare, getting the people on your side, intelligence, a knowledge of how the enemy operates. Well, we were guerrilla trained, we were guerrillas, so we knew how guerrillas operate. This was a tremendous advantage in counterinsurgency. You can think like one and you know what they have to have. Things that don't even occur to most people that are very simple, very basic. They have to have water for one thing. If you're looking for guerrillas, you start with water, and so on. You've got to be within a certain distance of the target, because you have to move on foot. It's really--I became a counter-insurgency adviser to an American unit and was playing aggressor against a number of our units that were playing guerrilla in the mountains. We all knew these mountains like the back of my hand.

M: This is in Bavaria?

S: Yes. A hundred kilometers on either side of Bad Tolz. I could tell that counterinsurgency U.S. commander, "Don't waste your time down here. That's where you want to go," and "This is a side of the mountain you want to look at." Because they're communicating with France and they've got to be on this side of the mountain to do it. "Send your people out in small patrols," et cetera, et cetera, and we killed them, we just blew them away. Got so mad, I phoned the company

commander in B Company--the guerrilla force. He brought all his guerrillas down and attacked this battle group in this base camp. It was suicide.

G: You might as well take some of them with you I guess. How long did that course last at the War College?

S: Nine months.

G: Where did you go from there?

S: To Vietnam. Deputy commander of the Special Forces group.

G: Was that the only Special Forces group in Vietnam at the time?

S: That was the Special Forces group in Vietnam.

G: Who was the commander?

S: Francis Kelly for the first nine months and Jonathan Ladd over here in Watergate Apartments for the last three months of my stay.

G: What was the mission of Special Forces at that time in Vietnam?

S: The mission of Special Forces was basically CIDG, Civilian Irregular Defense Group, which was a CIA concept started about 1963 in the Highlands up around Ban Me Thuot, and then spread out from there to have covered all of Vietnam, working mostly with minorities. The idea was to teach these minorities to defend themselves against Viet Cong, in those days, which would deny that manpower to the Viet Cong, and add pro-government fortified villages to our side. This became an effort that had--by 1965 we had a hundred camps up and down the country from north to south. I was the deputy for counterinsurgency, which meant CIDG. Because my job was to go up and down the country and inspect these camps.

G: What were the chief problems that you were encountering in fulfilling this mission?

S: Americans.

G: Can you explain that?

S: Yes. Basically we were there first in the more remote areas back up along the border back in the jungle, and when they deployed the Americans into our area, well, one of the first fights the 1st Cav got into was outside of Pleime because the NVA had entered the country and attacked Pleime, hoping to get the ARVN to come down from Pleiku so they could bust them, which they did. Then when the Americans--it was nice to have the Americans there because they're big, heavy, mobile, but their commanders were so "move over, dumb squat, I'm taking over." They'd take control of our areas of operation, confine our patrolling to the camps, we thought misused our assets.

We gave them a lot of help with--we had forty-five thousand of these civilian strikers we called them, troops, armed minorities, Montagnards, down south Cambodians. In addition, the CIDG camp strike forces were organized into Mike Force companies, a hundred and twenty men each. Almost every one of those forty-five thousand guys was a rifleman, no big logistics organization or anything like that, cooks or--everybody was a rifleman. When you went to the field, all hundred and twenty of them went. But the problem was, we'd give these companies to an American unit that was operating in our AOs [areas of operation], so they could act as guides, patrol for them and so on, and the Americans would break them down to the point where they were

ineffective. We'd only have usually one translator per company of CIDG. We had two Americans that went with each company, and I had only one guy who could translate. Okay, you take that company and break it down into platoons, you don't have anybody they could talk to. That's what the Americans did. There are many other incidences of the misuse of CIDG forces. So I came home kind of anti-American at the end of a year of that because of the rude disregard, not just for the people of Vietnam, but for we Americans who were working with them.

G: Was there a lot of antagonism, a lot of animosity between Special Forces and the regular American formation?

S: Not as a rule because of the differences in rank involved. We'd have a captain out there in a camp with thirteen other Americans, a couple of lieutenants and there were some sergeants and maybe six hundred strikers. The kind of people he was dealing with were brigade commanders and assistant division commanders.

G: What particular assistant division commanders were you just thinking of?

S: Well, I can name several of my favorites. One was a guy named Bernie Rogers as a matter of fact.

G: Bernie Rogers?

S: Yes. Who I went back and served under when he was commandant of cadets and I was regimental commander at West Point after that. I had known Bernie for years and he was a brigadier general, ADC, of the Big Red One. He gave us a lot of problems.

G: Was that when Bill DePuy had the Big Red One?

S: Yes. Yes.

G: He gave you what kinds of problems, or have you already described them?

S: Well, for example, they moved in--one of my favorite camps was a place called Soui Da, right at the base of a Black Virgin Mountain in III Corps. It was a beautiful little camp. They moved their brigade headquarters in there and Rogers came in on top of them with his little staff and tent and so forth and he knocked the whole doggone wall out at Soui Da, opened it up, so their camp was right next to and adjacent to it. Their artillery was shaking our place to pieces all the time, put it right next to the camp. That kind of stuff. They didn't ask, they just brought the bulldozers in and knocked the wall out. It was a big berm, like fifteen foot, earth wall.

G: Was that the beginning of Operation Attleboro?

S: Operation Attleboro took place while I was there. It started out of Soui Da with a couple of light Mike Force companies from A Company, who went into War Zone C.

(Interruption)

G: This was a recurring problem then, the way the Americans misused--?

S: I can only recall one instance where the Americans piled in. In almost every case, one, we were operating outside of artillery fans, which we did routinely, and the Americans never did, never. In one case down in III Corps where a brigadier from the 25th Division was flying over a daylight fight that we had, we put a couple of CIDG

companies across the Saigon River up as it approaches the Plain of Reeds and it caught a VC battalion out there. I had two lines, a company on one side, the VC battalion, and a company on the other side, in a big firefight. But the other end was open. And so a brigadier general--named Shaw--gets on the horn from his chopper and he calls the battalion up and air moves one of his battalions in, put that battalion commander under the command of the Special Forces captain on the ground who was conducting the fight.

G: That's kind of an unorthodox arrangement.

S: And got himself a real kill. They ruined that VC battalion because of this brigadier's reaction.

G: That was the exception.

S: That was the exception. I remember it because it stands out. In every other case the American generals always had some reason why they would not reinforce. They'd extract the CIDG task force rather than reinforcing it.

M: The sister elements, like the U.S. Marines at Khe Sanh reinforcing Lang Vei.

S: Well, the Special Forces and marines just don't mix very well anymore.

G: How long was your tour in Vietnam with the 5th Special Forces then?

S: I was there thirteen months.

G: You went about when?

S: The end of July, 1966.

G: Until?

S: Came back the end of August.

G: 1967?

S: 1967, yes.

G: I see. You said you remembered Operation Attleboro?

S: Very well, yes. We started it. Two of our Mike Force companies moving out in the Soui Da area into War Zone C, went into the jungle and bumped into a regiment of the VC 9th Division. We know this because the leader in the operation later captured a film that was taken by the VC at the time that showed our companies coming into the jungle. You could see the scouts out and the whole thing. The VC had laid an ambush for them. Then the firing starts and everybody drops to the ground. We reinforced those two companies with another couple of companies and they fought for two or three days. We took a lot of casualties. We lost about eight American Special Forces killed, but a very heavy casualty list for us because we always had two guys to a company, and another fifteen of them wounded. We lost a lot of Mike Force strikers, sixty, seventy killed, something like that, another greater number wounded. And finally the II [Field] Force V [Vietnam] commander acted, brought the 196th Infantry Brigade in, and by the time they finished, they had had something like eleven, twelve brigades of infantry in that fight. We pulled our Mike Force out. We started that though basically. We initiated it. They started it.

G: But your involvement with that operation more or less ceased when you pulled the Mike Force companies out, is that right?

S: Yes.

G: I was wondering if you knew anything about the--?

S: We followed it, yes.

G: Could you make some kind of estimate or overview of how the situation from Special Forces' point of view evolved in that thirteen-month period that you were in Vietnam?

S: You mean their effectiveness?

G: Yes.

S: Well, I thought we improved our effectiveness by a factor of two or three during that thirteen-month period. One of the reasons for it was a ten-fold increase in Mike Force companies, which I did. We brought the Mike Force up to strength, airborne qualified them. And then we started adding Project Omega, Project Sigma, each of which had a thousand Vietnamese in them. We increased the numbers of battalions of Mike Force until where when we had about fifteen hundred Mike Force, when I got there in July of 1966, and we had over ten thousand when I left there in August of 1967. They were very good. If we had had those kinds of people in 1965 we wouldn't have needed the Americans. Need helicopters to put them in.

[I answered only in terms of the Mike Force, while a more complete answer would have included Colonel Kelly's particular brand of leadership, the support by American forces in reinforcing and adding infinite combat power to our remote locations, the effectiveness and responsiveness of American air power, and great support from MACV in making the many improvements that were so long overdue. Letter from Charles M. Simpson to Ted Gittinger, July 1, 1984]

G: Did you know Bo Gritz?

S: Oh, yes. Bo Gritz was our Mike Force commander down in III Corps.

G: He had Cambodians I think down there, didn't he?

S: Yes.

G: What do you make of his latest exploits in Southeast Asia?

S: Well, let me go back and say Bo is probably the best combat infantry captain I've ever known, extremely effective leader. Knew how to fight, knew when to fight, knew where to fight, and would fight. And he usually won. Very, very, very effective troop commander. He got to be a couple of grades over his head in my estimation. He was an old Special Forces NCO, had eleven years service as an NCO before he got commissioned, direct commission, as captain in Vietnam. There were three or four of those guys right around Special Forces, and they were all damned good, very good. And he was the best of them. He just had the background, he had the experience.

I think what he's trying to do now with POWs and MIA is very worthy, but I think he's way over his head. I think what he's trying to do is beyond his capabilities. When he operated in the army he always had plenty of support and equipment and all that kind of stuff. He doesn't work on his own. On top of that, he's twenty years older. I think that his goal is great. I think the way he goes about it is the only way he knows how to, fight his way in and out, that kind of thing. He came out very highly decorated, multiple Silver Stars and Bronze Stars for valor, DSC [Distinguished Service Cross] and that kind of stuff. It went to his head a little bit.

G: Well, he gets two or three pages in [William] Westmoreland's memoirs [A Soldier Reports] I think--

S: Yes.

G: --which I don't think anybody else does, including Westmoreland's division commander--

S: As a matter of fact--did you read my book [Inside the Green Berets]?

G: Yes.

S: I took that story about Gritz and the black box from Westmoreland's account of it because I didn't remember this happening. It didn't happen.

G: It didn't happen? Well, where does the story come from?

S: Tom Huddleston was a classmate of mine, who was company commander of A Company, 5th SFG, Bo Gritz's company commander, a lieutenant colonel at the time this happened, with the mission to recover the black box from the downed U-2. And he said what happened was Gritz let his people move in through the jungle, they found the airplane, which was no mean accomplishment, and they were looking for the black box. They hit a bunch of "wait-a-minute" vines and they had to really get down on their stomachs and crawl to advance any further in the jungle. And one of these little Mike Force guys came up against the black box.

G: Right up against his nose.

S: Hey! Tell me! Yes. And they evacuated. All this crap about fighting their way into a VC camp and out again never happened.

G: Who told the story first?

S: I don't know. I perpetuated it.

(Laughter)

G: But Colonel Huddleston--

S: Colonel Huddleston, Huddleston told me it was his helicopter that flew out to recover the black box. It was a triple canopy jungle. They had to drop a line down through the jungle, they tied the black box to it, had a hell of a time getting it up to the airplane. It got hooked on the skid of the helicopter. They finally had to move the whole thing out somewhere else and land and bring it into the airplane. But he said that business of capturing a guy on the trail who led him into a VC camp, and they went charging through the VC camp firing all their weapons and they found the black box and they brought it back never happened.

G: Where were you when President Johnson came to Cam Ranh Bay to--?

S: Where was I?

G: Yes.

S: I was on the road somewhere. A good friend of mine named Paul Gorman, who's four-star CINCSOUTH now, was a battalion commander in the Big Red One, and among others, DePuy had a predilection for relieving officers, battalion commanders and brigade commanders, large numbers of them. He even relieved the ones he brought in himself. Gorman told me this story; I saw him right after. He came from Cam Ranh Bay to Nha Trang before he returned to his brigade and battalion in the field, and he'd gotten this word in the field, "Go back to base camp, division rear." He did, and they said, "Get cleaned up, get on an airplane and go to Cam Ranh Bay." Didn't tell him why. And he

figured he was being relieved. Next thing you know, he's standing there in this rank of heroes and the President of the United States put the DSC on him.

G: Let me ask you a general question. What has been the overall effect of our experience in Southeast Asia on Special Forces and the concept of counterinsurgency?

S: Well, it tremendously expanded prior to Southeast Asia the size of Special Forces. It went from--there weren't three thousand of them worldwide--to I think there must have been about fourteen thousand at one time. So it was a huge expansion in numbers. Put a lot of fresh blood into SF. And a lot of them were damned good men. We also got our share of what I call "killers" during that time, the guys who perpetually volunteered for Vietnam, kept going back. They drew TDY pay, combat pay. They liked it. Enough action to satisfy them, keep them happy. We gave about as good as we got, most of the time. At the end of the Vietnam War, they contracted Special Forces back down almost to the three thousand mark again, it's thirty-six hundred today. They just expanded it again, just authorized the expansion of Special Forces by another group, and they're going to add another group next year, so it's coming back up. But for ten years, from 1971 to 1983 they drove--a lot of the experienced people went out of the army because there weren't enough slots for them. They created a lot of Special Forces slots to take care of these people. Now they're faced with a monster of having to fill the slots, and they don't have the experience, they're hurting for experienced people. So Special

Forces today is mostly inexperienced, very young, second lieutenants, detachment commanders, E5s, detachment members used to be E8-7-6. And they're spread very thin.

G: There's beginning to be--

S: They've got a lot to do now in the counterinsurgency field. They don't have the same kind of experience that they had.

G: The old-timers are gone.

S: The old-timers are gone. They're aware of this problem, they're taking various steps to ameliorate it, such as putting the space for a warrant officer in an A detachment in lieu of the lieutenant executive officer, hoping to get some of the old experienced noncoms to take that warrant to come back into Special Forces. Well, this is a paste-and-cut operation. If they ever get to the point again, you know, your detachment commander's experienced, your platoon or your team sergeant's experienced, to have that warrant stuck in the middle is going to foresee a lot of problems. So it's one of those things you can do to try and get an immediate fix on a problem.

G: There's kind of general agreement that the army, as an institution, underwent a rather precipitous decline in morale because of the Vietnam experience after 1968, let's say. That the army in 1969 was not the army it had been in 1966. Is this in any way true of Special Forces?

S: I think you started a little bit early. I would have said 1970, 1971. No, it's not true of Special Forces. It was not true of Special Forces.

G: The expansion of Special Forces did not dilute the quality?

S: No. Well, yes, of course it did. But the people who came into it came in voluntarily and wanted to be there. They worked very hard to catch up. They were good people, most of them. And the ones who weren't got cut at training camp; all the ones who couldn't cut it or didn't want to cut it, didn't want to work as hard as they had to work, got thrown out. You hear a lot of old-timers say that the expansion of Special Forces ruined it. It did not. Special Forces was a superior outfit, in my estimation, through the sixties, all the way through the sixties.

G: To go from that to something really specific, do you have any insight into the famous case I think involving Colonel Rheault and the alleged VC double agent that was killed by I suppose his case officer that made the papers? Never came to trial. Do you have any special insights into that?

S: I was CO for South Asia on Okinawa at the time--June-September, 1969. I got a letter from his wife, Nan. Bob Rheault is my closest friend, has been for years. I more or less recruited him for Special Forces. He followed me by a year at Leavenworth. I went to Bad Tolz and wrote back and told Bob about all the good skiing and mountain climbing and rock climbing and the rest of this kind of stuff, and he volunteered for Special Forces. So I more or less got him into it. His wife Nan wrote and said, "Something terrible has happened. I don't know what it is, but Bob is being held incommunicado." We had people on the telephone calling down and going down to Vietnam trying to find out

what was going on. No one in Special Forces would talk about it in Vietnam. I had no idea what happened until I got down there on the fourth of August, [1969]. He was incarcerated on the twentieth of July, and his six other guys involved before that spread out between twentieth of July and twentieth of June when the alleged disappearance of the agent took place.

As soon as I got off the airplane on the fourth of August I was met by a lieutenant colonel commanding the liaison detachment in Saigon, his sergeant major. First thing he said is "We found Colonel Rheault. Do you want to go see him?" "Yes." And we went directly from the airplane to Long Binh. There was Bob Rheault sitting on an army cot outside of a trailer with an young unarmed soldier, in his running shorts, just come back from a run. I was a full colonel. I had my sergeant major with me, who's a very large, imposing man. A lieutenant colonel from Saigon detachment was there. He had his first sergeant with him who was a very large, imposing man. We had Rocky Nesom, who was a civilian--

G: What was that last name, sir?

S: Nesom, N-E-S-O-M, was a long-time Special Forces, an old friend of both of ours, had gotten out and was flying for Air America. He was there and he's a very large man. And all these guys came walking up to this poor little private who had no instructions on what to do if anybody found them. They figured no one would find them. It was hidden. I went and talked to Bob and he told me the whole story, or he told me whatever. And then I said--I had to go up country to see

some detachments that were on TDY to SOG doing long-range recon--[I] said, "I'll come back tomorrow, the day after, and spend the night with you."

So I called back from up in Nha Trang down to Saigon, said, "Notify the Provost Marshal, on the night of the sixth I'm going to spend the night with Rheault in his trailer. I'm going to take a bottle of Scotch and a box of steaks." And my plane was met by an MP officer who said, "The Provost Marshal wants to see you," who was a guy I knew, a classmate of mine from the Army War College. He tried to tell me that I couldn't do that. I said, "What's Rheault's status? Is he under arrest?" "No." "Well, what's his legal status?" and he said, "Well, protective custody." I said, "I'm not going to hurt him." "That's his status." "I'm going out there and there's nothing you can do to stop me." The guy picked up the telephone, talked to someone, came back and said, "Okay, you can go see him. You can take your steaks and Scotch but you can't spend the night in the trailer. We got you a trailer right next to it."

While I was gone, MACV publicized--they had also been very secretive up to this time. The day I was up north they probably thought I was going to go find the press and tell them all about it. Farthest thing from my mind. The worst thing that could have happened, in my estimation, and they went public. So when I came back, all the newspapers were after him, onto the story. Then I went back to Okinawa, talked it over with some friends, and we decided that one of the problems was nobody in the Pentagon knew what was going on in Vietnam

with Rheault, because the other six guys were being held in Conex containers, while Rheault had the relative luxury of this guarded trailer.

G: What did Colonel Rheault tell you about the incident that night?

S: What did he tell me?

G: Yes.

S: That's something I'll never tell anybody.

G: All right. Fine. So what did you do about--?

S: I went back to the States, took my two daughters, college-aged daughters, escorted them--although I had only been in command of South Asia two months I took two-weeks leave, three-weeks leave, took the kids back, ostensibly to escort them back to school. I went right to Washington and walked the halls of the Pentagon, buttonholing everybody I could get my hands on, told them a story of these guys in Conex containers under charges for conspiracy to commit murder and murder. How [Creighton] Abrams had brought this about himself--I failed to mention the fact that I talked to Abrams' deputy for two hours before I left Saigon the first time, Lieutenant General William Rosson. And it became perfectly clear that General Rosson had absolutely no say as to what was going to happen. This was Abrams. I never talked to Abrams about this. He was out of town. But General Rosson, very sympathetic, an old friend of mine, and very nice, let me talk for two hours, and from what he said it was very apparent nothing he or anybody else could do was going to change Abrams' mind to court-martial these guys for murder. I was thinking about the impact on Special

Forces, the impact on the troops in Vietnam, the impact on the U.S. Army as a whole. It all came about, that impact. There was quite a furor when MACV went public. Among the troops in Vietnam, back in the States, mothers of kids in Vietnam, "What are you trying these guys for murder for? All they did was kill an enemy agent," and so on and so forth. Then I went back--oh, while I was back in Washington I found out that CIA Director [Richard] Helms had told a closed meeting of the intelligence community that he had been aware of the plans for the agent, and that he was responsible. He said, "I am responsible." Well, obviously once he said that there could be no court-martial. But Abrams kept plowing ahead. I saw Haig when I was back there.

G: Who?

S: Al Haig, who was President Nixon's security adviser, and Haig knew all about it and Nixon knew all about it. Haig told me they sent word to Abrams through General [Bruce] Palmer that he was not to have this court-martial, they were to drop it. Abrams came back to the President and said, "If you want a nice, quiet withdrawal from Vietnam, orderly withdraw, I'll give it to you. But keep your nose out of my business!" Abrams was going to court-martial those guys up until the end of September, when Secretary [Stanley] Resor overrode him, which was his prerogative. It was not Abrams' business; he was the joint commander. It was army business. And Resor announced, undoubtedly by order of Nixon, the charges had been dropped and they went through the Article 32 but never went to court-martial. But they were out of there, they were gone.

G: What effect did this have on the careers of the men who were involved in this situation?

S: I'd say it had very little effect on six of them. One of them is a full colonel right now, [Leland J.] Brumley, and the rest of them, the ones that stayed in the army went on, went to schools, got promoted. Rheault retired.

G: On time?

S: Voluntarily, yes. Oh, I thought there was very little--it was the only thing he could do. I'd have done the same thing.

(Interruption)

I suppose making the point again was the fact that we benefited from the French experience and that most of us knew that the French had a successful program going with the Montagnards in Laos and North Vietnam, and when the French withdrew after Dien Bien Phu, they had to walk off and leave these guys, and this made many of the Frenchmen associated with that counterpart special forces very bitter against their government. They fell in love with the Montagnards, just like we did, and they had to leave them cold. That bitterness showed itself in Algeria and the revolt of the army there. It was the same group of people.

Okay. We knew about this. One of the few things I was able to do when I was deputy of the 5th [Special Forces Group] was get written into the campaign plan of MACV the fact that Special Forces should withdraw early, Vietnamize the program, turn it over to the LLDB, the Vietnamese Special Forces, and start withdrawing. So I started in

1966 the planned withdrawal in 1967, 1968, and 1969, pulling back so only American money and supplies would be supporting the effort and all of our A teams would be out of there and most of our Special Forces would be out of there. So this would not happen to us. One of the first major units out of Vietnam was the 5th Special Forces Group, in 1971. A lot of people in Special Forces say this was because Abrams doesn't like Special Forces. I don't know if he did or didn't. That's not why it happened though; we planned it that way. I planned it that way, got it written into the plan, and I personally briefed Abrams on it. I know he knew it. I also personally think it's probably the best thing I ever did, because there is no bitterness in Special Forces about Vietnam. We left them in about as good shape as we could.

G: You would summarize I guess by saying that Special Forces did what it was paid to do in Vietnam?

S: Very much so and a lot more, a whole lot more. I think they did a magnificent job, that's what I think.

G: Do you have any comment on the few members of Special Forces who were soured by their experience and wrote antiwar books? I'm thinking of--

S: That sergeant, Donald--the guy out on the West Coast?

G: Donald Duncan?

S: Duncan, Duncan. Yes. I don't know where he's coming from, I really don't. Most of the people--I see a lot of old-timers, lot of time in

Vietnam--have nothing but good memories of it. We fought a good war, but we had a good war, too.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

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