INTERVIEW I

PRIVATE

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INTERVIEWEE: CHARLES J. TIMMES

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: General Timmes' office, Washington, D.C.

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T: . . . to the 101st Airborne Division, March 1959 to May 1961. I was assigned to Vietnam in May 1961, arrived in Vietnam July 7, 1961. I had been previously, about July 4, promoted to two stars. My first job was to be deputy to the chief [of] MAAG [Military Assistance Advisory Group], General [Lionel] McGarr. He left in March of the following year, that is 1962, and I became the chief. I stayed as chief of MAAG until it was deemphasized or rather decapitated, May the 15, 1964. That's when MACV [Military Assistance Command Vietnam] took over the responsibilities of the MAAG.

G: How do you compare the advisory effort in Vietnam with the advisory effort in Korea?

T: I was in Korea November 1956 to about March 1958. At that time, of course, South Korea was not at war. Of course, this makes the extreme difference. Also, Korean officers I thought were much more capable than the Vietnamese at that

time, because of the experience they had in fighting a whole war, that they were very strong, much stronger, in carrying out their duties than the Vietnamese officers were at that time.

G: Did you think it was possible for the Vietnamese to get up to that level?

T: Oh yes, I do, and I think generally they did, toward the end.

G: All right, sir. What are the chief problems facing American advisers in those very early years in Vietnam?

T: First of all, we didn't know--which is obvious--we didn't know the language, but maybe more important, we didn't know the culture and the customs of the people. Such things as Confucius' system that you never offend your friend; this is (inaudible) to do that. We didn't understand that. We didn't understand when they were talking to us, they were under the influence of this Confucian policy, so they wouldn't tell us bad news, because this was bad for us.

This was a very primary difficulty, not having the language, being subjected or being a slave to what they told us. We could not find out for ourselves very much, because we didn't know the language, couldn't talk to the people, couldn't even know much about the VC [Viet Cong]. I'm thinking of the infiltration of VC, infiltration into the hamlets and the provinces. How could we check that? And this was part of our report.

Another great difficulty: I think the advisers had--to be a good adviser, of course we had to win the confidence of our counterpart. We had to sell him, as it were, on our ideas. It was often difficult for us to realize to do that. As soldiers, we felt they had to do what they're supposed to do, and they didn't need us to

command them to do it since we had no command. That was one problem.

The second problem was that--let's see, how will I put this?--that we expected the Vietnamese units to perform comparably to the U.S. units, and when they didn't, the advisers were terribly discouraged. Of course, it was our job to go over there because they weren't effective; if they were like our units, they wouldn't need us. I kept emphasizing it, emphasizing it, but so many advisers felt down in the mouth because they weren't doing as we would have done under those circumstances.

So those two things: difficulty to overcome that, and the second was the matter of culture, the language, not knowing the people. And the third thing: when we first went out there, we didn't get the proper training. We didn't get the language. Actually some got the language, but we didn't know communist customs; we didn't know their culture. Our training often was not effective in the sense that it was not for that place. We were still fighting the Korean war.

Then another, maybe the most important, maybe I should have mentioned it before. The formation of the Vietnamese units into armies, corps, into divisions, was entirely the wrong kind of security forces to have in their country--I'm thinking of 1955 to 1961. During that period the threat to South Vietnam was the first part of what kind of warfare do you call that?

G: Insurgency?

T: Well, yes. Insurgency. The first part was that the communists first tried to win their objective by propaganda in the hamlet, the country-side, to infiltrate their infrastructure, the communist cadre. That was the threat, practically all the way to

1961, except for the fact that they were beginning to have a possibility for guerrilla warfare. They were having this possibility; they didn't use it much. This was all the way up to 1961 and beyond that.

This was the actual threat that we should have been thinking about in 1955, when the armed forces were being forged. We formed divisions, seven divisions, and then by 1961 I think it was nine divisions. We should have been doing something like building up the local police, building up the local hamlet and village forces. They are the people that could counter the communists in the countryside, in the village. They are the people that would know infiltrators that came in. The police especially would be effective in this, and then the local forces to help them. But it had to be done at that level. That's where the threat was; the threat was at the village and the hamlet, not invasion from North Vietnam. They had that capability, no question about that, and you needed some divisions to be prepared, but at that time they were not using that capability. They had that capability since Dien Bien Phu, since they defeated [the French], but their troops were up there. But the immediate threat was right in the hamlet level and countryside, and because we had no means of stopping that, we didn't help the police; we didn't build up the police or the local forces. All we had was building divisions. Divisions were absolutely ineffective against the VC infiltrators into the hamlet.

We were faced--I didn't know this at that time, it's only reflection after this, and a lot of reading, that I realized that we had the wrong kind of units that we were advising. The Vietnamese division commanders were imbued with the

idea of facing a North Vietnamese, the NVA regular forces. They formed these divisions and they wanted to fight divisions; they didn't want to operate down into squads and platoons, and send them into the hamlets and the villages. They just refused to do that. They were trained by the French, and by us I suppose, to be division commanders and regimental commanders and battalion commanders, and as a result of this, by 1961 the VC, the communists, were making such infiltration, getting so much control of the hamlets and the village side, that the war was going to go down to the end rapidly.

Therefore in 1961 Kennedy, as you know, sent General [Maxwell] Taylor. I happened to be the man that briefed General Taylor on the situation. I had only been there about three months, so with the expertise of three months' traveling around the country, I told him all about it. (Laughter) All wrong, too, incidentally. Not entirely. But out of that meeting came [the decision] to build up two more divisions. Still concerned about invasion from the North, and hoping that two more divisions maybe could take care of the countryside, which they could not do at all.

But the other thing was to start the pacification program; that's the big thing that I think General Taylor did, starting the pacification program, which means--I suppose has been mentioned to you many times--that we began building up a hamlet militia, the SDC [Self Defense Corps], I guess you called them, and also a force for the district chiefs and the province chiefs, to come to the aid of hamlets. Also, I think it was the CIA that started the support of the police, the local police.

G: I think it was at this time that the CIDG [Civilian Irregular Defense Group] program got under way, wasn't it, or was it later?

T: I think it was a little later. But shortly after that, yes. Let's see, do you think I've answered all of that question?

G: I think so, yes.

T: But the big thing: first, we had the wrong kind of organization. We as advisers weren't prepared for this. We didn't know the language or the customs of the people. We were expecting them to operate as we operated back in the States, and when they didn't do it it was frustrating. The pacification program was the proper thing. You might want to ask later. And we made a tremendous effort, up until May 1963.

G: We can talk about that a little bit.

T: Yes. Of course, then the helicopters and the APCs [armored personnel carriers] were a tremendous factor in aiding the pacification program, also against building up of small unit attacks by--I mean the building up of VC small unit attacks. They were attacking in battalions by that time. But by having the helicopters and the APCs, they had a great advantage over them. And by the summer of 1963, we were making great, great strides. As you know, Sir Robert Thompson said he saw the end of the tunnel, that we'd be able to get advisers out, which we stupidly did send out the following year, when the situation was really going down the drain. But the helicopters and the APCs were very effective. And it surprised the VC, and the VC were stunned and surprised for about a year and a half until we fell away from the pacification program because of the Buddhist crisis. Ninety per

cent of the people are Buddhist, and naturally that was the one force, unified force, against communism but against the government.

G: Speaking of religion, what was the role of religion in the Buddhist crisis? You hear both sides. Now, were the Buddhists being oppressed as Buddhists or not?

T: Well, I don't know if I can quite answer all your question, but let me start with this. I think President [Ngo Dinh] Diem, on May 8, 1963, when that eruption started in Huế, he was very stupid about how to react. You know, they stopped the Buddhists from having their flags, and the Buddhists resented this very much. Then there was a little combat, and some Buddhists were killed by APCs. From then on it built up right to the end, and then when they went into the pagoda in Saigon, that really sealed President Diem.

Now, as far as religion is concerned, it is true that some of the division commanders were Catholics, but certainly as far as I remember not an overabundance. I can only think of about two or three. Province chiefs, some of them were Catholics, but it didn't seem to me to be an overabundance. However, I must say it would seem to me that President Diem would try to favor the Catholics if he could. I happen to be Catholic myself; I didn't think he was going overboard, but then I might have been myself too sympathetic to him. But that was generally my impression.

Now as far as antipathy to--did I have any trouble with the Buddhists or Catholics? Not the slightest. My best friend, I guess, over there was Big Minh [Duong Van Minh], and he was a powerful Buddhist, a very strong one. I certainly revered him--I'm using the wrong word. I mean I had respect for his

[religion] and he had respect for mine. He knew I was a Catholic, and we were the greatest of friends. We talked about this; he talked about how strong he was about Buddhism and how extremely antagonistic he was to the President.

G: Tell me about Big Minh. He's a very interesting character.

T: Big Minh, as you know, was successful in suppressing some of those small units, the pirates around Saigon. And President Diem put him in charge of this, and Big Minh apparently did a very good job. Then the President became aware of the fact that Big Minh was opposed to the President. As taking out at that time the parachute[?]--what was that, in 1959 or 1960, when there was this operation against [Diem]? Big Minh then was kicked upstairs, and made the commander of the field forces. The field forces should have been like the army command over all the corps, but he absolutely had no command; he couldn't leave his headquarters or he couldn't leave Saigon without permission. So antagonism built up terrifically. How effective Minh would be as a troop commander or as an army commander, all I can say is he had the loyalty of his troops, and they liked him throughout the country. I got this all over. Tactically and strategically, I'm not sure that he would be effective at all.

Then about the coup, when it came about. I used to see General Tran Van Don; he was the corps commander of the First Corps. Then he became the army commander. But he was very much kept under wraps, I believe, when they planned for the coup of course, I was not aware of this, although at the parade a few days before the coup, of all people I was sitting between Big Minh and Tran Van Don. (Laughter) They often laughed, they tell me, after that, they laughed

about it. Here they're planning the coup and I'm sitting in the middle of them. When Big Minh, and I think it was Tran Van Don, and it was especially Kim, General Kim--

G: Le Van Kim?

T: Le Van Kim, who were the brains behind the coup, and it was effectively done. Then Minh of course was the head of the government until January. The reason given for his overthrow was that he was ineffective. I don't think they could tell in that short a time if he was effective or ineffective. [Ambassador Henry Cabot] Lodge used to travel around with Big Minh, and help Big Minh, so I would think from that that he should have been effective. At least, I have no way of knowing if he was ineffective or not. I don't believe that in that period of time that he proved to be ineffective, but the reason Nguyen Khanh ran the coup, I think, is personal aggrandizement; that he just wanted to be the big power, and I know Khanh quite well and often saw him after that. But I think this was a matter of a power play; he wanted to be the big boss, and I think he used this excuse of ineffectiveness. I don't think that's valid.

G: Did you know the Khanh coup was coming?

T: No, not at all, had no idea about it. No idea.

G: Did any American, that you know of?

T: Not that I'm aware of. Yes, yes, his poor adviser was.

G: Jasper Wilson, I think.

T: That's right. Jasper Wilson knew about it, because Jasper Wilson arranged for a helicopter, or airplane at least, to take out Khanh in case it didn't work. Now, did

he tell the Americans or not? I'm not clear about that. If he did, it came as a very last minute surprise.

G: Tell me some more about Big Minh. What sort of a man was he?

T: Extremely religious, as far as the Buddhists are concerned. A kindly man, probably too kind, not given to too much introspection or reading or a brilliant mind, by any means. A very average sort of a guy, but because of his stature, because of I guess some bravery, and his standing with the Buddhists, he built up a reputation and a loyalty. I saw him constantly from 1967 to 1975, and I actually saw him the last day that we left, on the twenty-ninth of April. He still at that time had confidence that he could influence the communists; that there would be possibility of a compromise. I think he was hoodwinked completely, but even the French Ambassador, I believe from talking to Minh, seemed to also believe that Minh could pull it off.

G: I think he surfaced in Paris recently.

T: He is in Paris. We'd get Christmas cards, and I'd write to him. If you want to go over there, I think I've got his address.

(Laughter)

G: I'd love to. I have heard from another source that you were forbidden from contacting Big Minh in the last year or two of the [Nguyen Van] Thieu regime. Is that not true?

T: That's not true at all.

G: I'd heard that Graham Martin--

T: As a matter of fact, I was his only contact. I believe I was. Frank Snepp in his

book [*Decent Interval*] criticizes the Ambassador, our people there, maybe [CIA station chief, Thomas] Polgar, that I was the only contact, that they should have had maybe a more experienced agency-type person. No, I saw him all the time. As a matter of fact, if anything I was encouraged to see him. I was certainly never stopped, and at the end I was seeing him constantly, particularly--they asked me to see him, or they knew I was constantly going to see him. I got some instructions, come to think of it.

G: All right, sir. I think it's inevitable that I should ask you about John Paul Vann, who perhaps made more headlines than most advisers.

T: Yes. John Paul Vann: very intelligent, very bright guy. Extremely energetic, extremely brave, brave almost to the point of foolishness. Extremely brave. I would say that he had a little difficulty at the beginning with his counterpart, Cao Van Vien [Huynh Van Cao?]. The one job that Vann should have had was to win the confidence of his counterpart. John was kind of irascible, a little bit, and impatient, and this militated against really gaining the confidence of his division commander. John Vann, brilliant as far as tactics, how to advise, except to gain his confidence. But he learned that later on, with General [Ngo] Dzu, at the end he was commanding Dzu's corps for him; that's how he knew how to win over the counterpart. He won them over by the respect they had for him. Even General Cao had great respect for Vann, but I think he feared him. But had great respect for Vann.

I think [he was] a most outstanding man, and then when Vann became the commander of U.S. units in II Corps, or maybe it was in the IV and II--at least in

the II Corps--most capable, most--I can't say highly enough for--his personality at the beginning irritated the Vietnamese, at the beginning. At the Ap Bac incident prior to that, I think he kind of irritated some of them. On the other hand, Cao was not an effective division commander by any means. He was a favorite of the President, where he should not have been. He was not capable, but being so close to Saigon, the President wanted to be sure he had a man loyal to him. Therefore he countenanced Cao. So maybe you can't even blame Vann for not gaining the confidence of Cao, because Cao was in something. And Vann probably did the best he could do under the circumstances; tried to push him, tried to push the other commanders to do what Vann knew they should do.

G: You mentioned Ap Bac, which was a famous incident. What was your vantage point for observing those events?

T: Well, I got there shortly after the time that I guess John spoke in the tent and the press was outside. And I talked to [General Paul] Harkins, and I talked to Vann. It was over at that time, or it was at the time when we were there. I heard about the battle and I got there as quick as I could.

G: Did you think Vann leaked to the press deliberately?

T: I really can't answer that question, because I know how I would feel about it, and I certainly would never do anything like that. So I must feel that he was an honorable man who wouldn't do that. I don't know.

G: You say the press was outside the tent when he was giving his briefing?

T: I wasn't there exactly at that time, when he gave the briefing to Harkins, but the press was certainly all around when I got there. And John Vann had a very raspy,

penetrating voice, always when he'd talk to you it was really full-blown.

G: You're saying that it wouldn't have been difficult to overhear--?

T: (Laughter) Right, not to overhear him. Particularly when he felt dynamic about this.

G: And he was exercised about Ap Bac.

T: Oh, very, very exercised. The fact that they seemed to leave an avenue of escape, that they attacked in places where they knew they were not, that they definitely were not soldiers and General Cao was not doing his job. Probably purposefully so. Cao, you know, is still in Vietnam. He had a wife and eight children. I don't know if any of them got out, but he didn't. He elected to stay.

G: Could he have gotten out?

T: I would think so, sure. I would have done anything to get him out.

G: But he didn't ask you?

T: No, and I didn't see him, you know. He was senator at that time, so I wasn't seeing him at all.

G: What were relations between Colonel Vann and General Harkins like?

T: Up to that point Vann worked for me, and General Harkins didn't have too much contact. I think it was good. But after that it was very poor. General Harkins actually wanted to relieve him, and I talked him out of that.

G: Why did he want to relieve him?

T: I guess he felt he was disloyal to Harkins, wasn't effective in his job.

G: Disloyalty? In what way would he have been disloyal? With the press, do you mean?

T: Yes, I would think so.

G: I see. How did you talk him out of it?

T: Well, let's say I talked him out of it.

G: All right, sir. We'll leave it at that.

A lot has been made of the reporting system.

T: I could go on. I said to General Harkins, "I don't think you should relieve him. He's effective. He's irritating a lot of people, but he's very effective. Suppose you relieve him or I relieve him as adviser and send him around the country as my adviser and looked around?" And that's what happened.

G: I see. Why did he take early retirement, do you think?

T: He felt that our side was not listening to his complaints, or were giving false pictures back to the States, according to his viewpoint. He was just disappointed. He was disappointed in the way the Vietnamese army was operating, and didn't think we were pulling them up enough.

G: What was your opinion?

T: The Vietnamese certainly were operating poorly, but I thought we were making great strides countrywide, looking at the overall picture, looking at the pacification, how much of the countryside was being regained, also realizing that you couldn't expect the Vietnamese forces to operate like the U.S. We had to be patient; we had to train. If we were failing in our training, it was our fault. I think we were doing it, but we had many handicaps: the language, those that I mentioned before.

G: You said that we were making strides. Now, the strategic hamlet program was I

guess maybe the first--

T: Sure, we made a lot of mistakes. We learned an awful lot. But despite all that, by the summer of 1963 a great part of the countryside was under our control. After that it just fell away. There were many defects in the program. If you want me to mention some of them right away I can do that.

First of all, the province chiefs were anxious to compete against other province chiefs as to the number of strategic hamlets in each one of their provinces, because Mr. Nhu was bringing pressure on them. In order to comply, they would put the barbed wire fence around each hamlet, show the adviser this hamlet is strategic now, or what you wish to call it. And a lot of the other things weren't done. The hamlet militia were being trained; our advisers were there seeing to that. But as far as eradicating the VC infrastructure, or as far as getting the country team to teach the people, to sell the government's program, to help them with their agriculture and things like that, that program was failing entirely. There's nothing we could do about that, the army. I mean, we weren't trained in that. We were trained in training their people, and of course we didn't know about the infrastructure. Then that was one problem. But still, there were considerable strides made.

The second problem was that the province chiefs were failing to go after the hard hamlets, the hamlets that were communist, that were VC infiltrated, strongly. They were sidetracking those and going all around them, and it is from those hamlets that the VC again pushed out against the other hamlets after the coup, going around after the coup, many hamlets reversed back, reverted back to

the VC, very much. For many reasons in the summer of 1963, the government, instead of following the strategic hamlet program, suddenly fell away from it, because they were all concerned about the Buddhist crisis. It just [was] going back. And then of course you know when Big Minh came in he changed all the province chiefs, the police chiefs and all of that. And the unity was all lost. The VC took tremendous advantage of that, and we only got back effectively in the strategic hamlet program by the time 1966-1967, when [Robert] Komer came in and they had, I think, a very effective strategic hamlet program, building on the lessons and the mistakes that we made.

G: Were you involved in the discussions at that time as to whether Diem had to go or had to stay?

T: No, except I can say this: Harkins was absolutely opposed to deposing Diem. He said, "What is going to follow?" and I think his words were prophetic. What did follow? One terrible, poorer government than the next. There was no leadership in Vietnam after Diem left, until Thieu came in, certainly no leadership. At that time I personally don't feel we should have had our troops go in there. How could we expect the country to take care of itself if they had no leadership and could not take care. Without leadership what could they do? As Kennedy said, they had to win back the country with our assistance. Putting in troops I think was the wrong thing at that time. We should have tried possibly for another Geneva convention, but I think President Johnson didn't want to be the first president to lose a war.

But this is all hindsight, way, way back, you know.

G: Some people have accused General Harkins of being too optimistic.

T: Let's talk about that. Of course, he was dependent on our reports. We in turn in making our reports could go around and observe how well the troops were trained, how well the defenses were around. But as far as the real guts of the program, were the VC in there or not and what influence did they have on the people, we were subject to what the province chief, what the Vietnamese told us. It was too much to expect of the advisers without knowledge of the language or the culture. How could we find out those things? Therefore our reports were erroneous to that extent.

But despite that, there was so much progress made up until the summer of 1963. Then it all fell apart.

G: How long did your first tour last?

T: July 1961 to July 1964.

G: July 1964. All right.

T: And I came back in July 1967. But I left on April 29, 1975. I wanted to stay until July. They wouldn't let me.

G: You wanted to stay and see the thing through?

T: (Laughter) Right. I was still optimistic, foolishly so.

G: Were there many people like [that] who wanted to stay?

T: Oh, you misunderstand what I mean. I'm being facetious. (Laughter) I certainly didn't want to stay; I was happy to get on that helicopter.

G: The reason I ask is because I have talked to a few people who claimed that they wanted to see the final act.

T: Well, the communists were obviously coming in. You would be captured and

what would be the point? It doesn't make any sense to me.

G: That's true. Let's skip ahead. You mentioned Frank Snepp a few moments ago. What is your overall impression about his account of the last days.

T: He knew quite a lot about it, and it is better than in most of the books, the reports in there. It's better than most of the books. I think he's entirely too hard on [Ambassador Graham] Martin, too hard on Polgar. Some things that I saw myself are a little different than in his book, but as a whole, it's better than anything I read.

G: What were your duties in those last days; what were you doing?

T: The very last days? I was still traveling around the country, to where I could, to go to the corps commanders or the division commanders and find out what the situation was. That's what I was--find out the situation, and then I was to have arranged for the President to get out, at the behest of the Ambassador. I went to Khiem's house, Tran Thien Khiem, the prime minister, and from there we called the President, made an arrangement, and he left on that Friday. That was--well, whatever. Tuesday was the 29th. Might be the 24th of April, 24th or 25th.

In the last few days that's what I generally was doing, seeing Big Minh a lot.

G: Why do you think the Vietnamese collapsed so suddenly?

T: One of the reasons, as you know--you've heard this, I'm sure--the families lived with the troops. When the troops had to withdraw, especially at Pleiku, Kontum, and those areas, the families went with them. As you can understand, the soldiers that have such a strong family feeling. That's what I think happened in the I

Corps that followed after what happened in the II Corps. And I think it was just a stampede, everybody looking for their families and forgetting their military duties. This goes for the soldiers as well as the officers. It doesn't go for General Ngo Quang Trung; he was up there in the I Corps really trying to do his best. But it certainly doesn't go for [Pham Van] Phu. Phu left, as you know, he left his headquarters, left his troops, and went down to Nha Trang when they started coming down.

But I think one of the principal things was that the families were living with the soldiers (inaudible), but the unity of the family of the soldiers just--commanders lost control of them. Some other things were starting in the summer of 1974, when our Congress cut down the aid from a billion and a half to seven hundred million. I was going around the country to see what the situation was. Everybody was complaining to me they had so many rounds of artillery to fire. The air force was saying, "We've only got so many rockets. We're out of gasoline. At the point of contact the enemy has more troops and more guns than our troops." The morale was just going down. It was harder to regain, making a counter-attack, the land that they lost because it was at the expense of blood. The communists were outmanning and outgunning our people at the point of contact. The morale was going down and down.

Officers would talk to me, as a matter of fact I was even told better look out--and I'm thinking about November, long before the end--I'd better look out for my own life, because people are getting angry at the Americans for letting them down. A major told me that when I was in Saigon. "You ought to be careful

where you're living. They might get you." I didn't take that seriously at all. I stayed on. My wife was there; I got her out about two weeks before, because I was concerned for her. I was still traveling around. Let's see, did I fully answer the question?

G: Yes, I think so.

T: The morale went down very, very much, and then the family syndrome did it.

G: How far ahead of the communists did you get out? Were you on the last chopper?

T: That night, on the 29th, I was on the last chopper. The ambassador left early in the morning, as I understand it, and so did the [CIA] chief of station, with the marines [?]. And I guess they [the North Vietnamese] got in that morning. Sure, they came to the palace. Big Minh was ready to meet him, as I understand it, and they cast him aside, no food, no water, no nothing.

So we got out maybe twelve hours before, less than that, I guess. Frank Snepp was on the same helicopter as I was. We were sitting together.

G: Did you know George McArthur?

T: Sure, very well.

G: He got out pretty late, too, didn't he?

T: I don't know. He married--what's her name? Kim?

G: Eva.

T: Eva, yes. Eva Kim.

G: What do you think we should have done differently in those last days?

T: Probably looked at the situation much more realistically.

G: Could we have gotten more Vietnamese out than we did?

T: I would think so; I would think so. But to play this hindsight, I don't know.

G: The argument was that Graham Martin was trying not to precipitate a panic. Do you agree with his strategy?

T: Sure, sure. That seems to make sense to me, and you have to pay a price for all of this. I don't know if I would have been able to do any different than he did, being an optimist myself. I would have hoped that they could still hold on. Right before the end I saw the division commander of the Twenty-second Division. He's the one that was up at Quang Ngai, and he was forming up units right below Saigon and beyond, quite effectively. So it seemed reasonable there would be a few divisions, the 25th Division, 5th Division, that might have been able to work up some-- But we forget the tenaciousness

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(Interruption)

G: You have just said you were optimistic to the end.

T: To the end.

G: You stayed on your first tour, then, until the summer of 1964.

T: Right.

G: What was your assessment of the situation when you left? How did you feel things were standing?

T: Obviously, after the coup, and when Khanh took over and the government appeared quite ineffective, I wasn't too optimistic. Some of this might be flavored by hindsight on my own part.

First of all, among the Americans there was a euphoria that maybe now

that Diem is out that things will pick up again. The Buddhists crisis will be over and maybe we'll become more effective. That euphoria still, I think, existed, even though Khanh took over. They felt that Khanh was now being supported by Lodge, being supported by [Secretary of Defense Robert] McNamara. When he came out, he went with Khanh around the country, that things might look up. I don't think we realized exactly how serious the situation was. I should have left there discouraged, but I'm afraid being the optimist that I am, [I thought], "They'll still pull through." (Laughter). But that's not good judgment.

G: Do you think there's anything to the idea that the previous experience in Korea encouraged us to think that we were repeating that process?

T: Very much so, particularly by the fact that we organized the divisions, the units, to fight the communists the same as the Korean [army], where the situation was entirely different, as I mentioned before. The threat was propaganda and infiltration into the hamlets and village (inaudible). We didn't recognize this at all, or not to the extent that we should have, and to do something about it. People from the administration used to come out and say, "This is not the way to fight." We'd show them how a regiment was making an attack, and fighting the VC battalion--several were organized at that time--(inaudible) if we could. But the way was to go into the countryside, but we wouldn't listen to some of those people.

G: Let me jump ahead again a little bit. Now you came back in 1967.

T: Right.

G: How did you find the situation (inaudible) then? A very different kind of war, I

expect.

T: Yes. In 1967 already there was the strategic hamlet program. Komer was there, and putting in a lot of extreme energy. Reports I think were much more factual than in our day, because by that time we had enough teams besides just the one adviser with a few (inaudible) to find out. We had Vietnamese teams that were working for us, and I'm sure we got lots more--they could have been infiltrated, but we got lots more valuable information actually on what was happening. And the situation with the U.S. Army; the U.S. Army coming in turned defeat, from the Vietnamese falling apart in 1965, quickly it got reversed. 1966-1967, the situation was much, much better.

G: In what capacity did you go back, in 1967?

T: With the CIA.

G: And what were you supposed to do for them?

T: Same thing as I did at the end; travel around the country. The thing was, the reason they asked me to come back, I had two stars when I left. Ngo Quang Trung was a major; the President was a colonel; the Prime Minister, Cao Van Vien [?], was a colonel; the corps commanders were majors, captains, so I had a very good *entree*, and the province chiefs, I knew all of them. So I had a very good *entree*. I could go and talk to them, and try to report how they saw the enemy situation and what they were doing about it.

G: They trusted you. Is that right?

T: Not entirely, but considerably. They also knew I had the ear; they could try to get things through me to Washington.

G: Were they right?

T: That they could?

G: Yes.

T: Unless I was taken in, they were right. Of course, they tried to take me in, but traveling around, comparing one province with another, I would hope that I had a better perspective by comparison.

G: Let me ask you about Tet. Everybody has a point of view; where were you when the attacks began?

T: Let's see. I was in town at our house; I can't just think of the name of the place. When we heard it, I got up on the roof and just tried to defend our own house (inaudible).

G: Was Mrs. Timmes there then?

T: No, no. She came in 1969. And that morning, of course, we were trying to keep the guards in place and just defending ourselves. We had some information, but very little, by telephone with headquarters. Very little information. I went in to the embassy early in the morning. I went with the acting chief of station at that time, Hugh [Lewis] Latham [?].

G: What was his name, Latham?

T: Lapham. L-A-P, Lapham.

G: How did you go, by jeep?

T: Yes.

G: Have any problem getting to work?

T: No, we managed. Maybe stupidly, but we got there.

(Laughter)

G: What did you find when you got there?

T: At that time, the VC already had been driven out of the embassy. General chaos in the town, but order at the embassy.

G: How much were you expecting something to happen at Tet? Everybody says that they thought something was going to happen.

T: Yes. I'd been to the Fifth Division, which had their headquarters right near Saigon, or in Saigon, I guess. And the G-2 was telling me, "They're going to do something; they're going to do something." I'd been reporting these things, and he called it quite accurately, not to the extent, of course, to what they would do, but he certainly was able to alert everybody. Not as exactly to time, either, but just generally. So I was very much concerned.

G: How difficult was it for you to find out exactly what was actually happening as the attacks were going on, and then presumably counterattacks, and--?

T: I would listen to the briefings, and I would keep aware. I was traveling around, too.

G: Were you?

T: Yes, particularly in the Saigon area, to the province chief of the province that takes care of Saigon; I can't think of the name. I saw him a lot, and went around. But anyway, that's not--

G: A special military district [Gia Dinh].

T: Yes, the special military district. I was going around there.

G: I've looked at it a hundred times on the map and I can't remember what it is.

T: I was going around there.

G: What were you finding? How long did it take us to get the enemy out of there?

T: Gee, I've forgotten the details, but not too long, not too long. And Komer was particularly energetic in getting [the] word out to everybody: "Don't sit back; go after them." And I think the fact that they did this so rapidly and eliminated practically all the VC units was highly commendatory. And I'm only an observer, now; they're not under my command, so I'm not boosting my own people. I think they did a very quick and valuable job. Up in Huế was the big problem, that you remember. I even went up there too, to observe.

G: Of course, it was North Vietnamese in Huế.

T: That's right, regular units in Huế.

G: Did the character of the war change after that? Were the VC really badly hurt by their losses?

T: Very badly hurt, very badly hurt. That was the time when we should have really counterattacked. We really should have gone out after them; we should have gone to North Vietnam. At that time they were so weak, they were defeated, and when an enemy is defeated that's the time to go after them. That was a mistake we made, a very serious mistake. But I think we were held down, I believe, by our headquarters. I'm thinking of Washington. Not the Pentagon, either. (Laughter)

G: We were just too cautious?

T: Much too cautious. I think that was the opportunity; we missed the opportunity of a lifetime, I think.

G: Why didn't we get that across better to the American public?

T: I hate to say it, but I suspect the press had something to do with it.

G: Now, you knew a lot of newspapermen.

T: Yes. I'd rather not talk about the press. I didn't know them too well. When I was MAAG chief, I invited them over; used to come with me in the helicopter when I went downcountry, tried to let them know where I was going. Only on one occasion do I remember any correspondent going with me, and that was a girl correspondent--I forget who she covered--and she went along. But I don't have too much praise for the press.

G: Were there some good reporters, in your opinion?

T: I suppose, but that was not my job, there. I was so busy [with] what I was doing. All I knew is where I thought we did awfully well in different places, that wasn't mentioned. But when we goofed off or things didn't work out the way we had hoped, that was highlighted. The mistakes, the errors, and maybe not even errors, the situation in the countryside was highlighted, any bad situation was highlighted to the negation of anything good we did.

G: One of them said once that a rice farmer plowing his field is not news.

T: Yes, I can understand that. I can understand their viewpoint. That's the way our press has to operate. They wouldn't make it otherwise.

I think I've covered the last page, the press (inaudible).

G: Yes, I think so. Has Neil Sheehan talked to you about his book?

T: Yes, about the book. But that was some time ago. George Jacobson tells me he's still working on the book.

G: That's right.

T: I saw him once or twice, possibly twice, right here.

G: You knew him in Vietnam.

T: Yes, I did.

G: And [David] Halberstam?

T: Yes. Yes.

G: You're not going to add to that?

T: I'm not going to add.

End of Tape 1 and Interview I

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