INTERVIEW I

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INTERVIEWEE: FRANK G. WISNER

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Ambassador Wisner's office, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 1

W: I began my career in the Foreign Service in Algiers after completing Arabic language training in 1962. I ended up in Algiers in late 1962 and served there until 1964, when instructions were sent from Washington, in the name of President Johnson, that a group of young French-speaking bachelors were urgently required to report to Washington to learn Vietnamese. Others were sent directly to Vietnam. The other portion of them in August of 1964 were told to report to Washington to learn Vietnamese, to think and read and study Vietnam, to focus on the problem of the war for approximately one year's training, which included a stint at Fort Bragg in the special warfare school of the day. And in June of 1965 this group of about twelve to fifteen Foreign Service officers were sent to Vietnam. It was a particularly able group, smart young men who have remained friends in the years thereafter. We arrived in Washington in 1964 with very strict instructions that this was a program of the highest priority of the United States government, and success was important to one's future in the Foreign Service. Failure

was also destined to send you to a perpetual career of fever spots. So that is how I arrived in Vietnam.

On arriving in Vietnam I was told to report to a province in the Delta, the province of Dinh Tuong, capital city of My Tho, some forty miles southwest of Saigon. And there I assumed my duties as the assistant to the AID [Agency for International Development] representative, Mr. Thomas Letz. He was newly arrived, a professor of agronomy in Texas, and this was the first province in which two AID representatives were to be assigned.

We were assigned as part of an experimental program launched by the then-ambassador, General [Maxwell] Taylor, to integrate and thereby improve the effectiveness of the American support to the Vietnamese counterinsurgency or pacification effort. Up to that point in time, each American agency had been represented in the provinces of Vietnam with independent reporting lines to Saigon, to either the AID headquarters or MACV's [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] headquarters, or the JUSPAO [Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office] headquarters for information and cultural activities, or the office of the special assistant. And inside the provinces, everybody focused in his own way on the chief of the province and his key military and civilian staff, without what was understood--and in fact was the case--to be insufficient coordination between the team elements, with different Americans giving different kinds of advice, no particular structure of priorities, everybody's program being perceived by each practitioner as being of equivalent weight and merit.

Dinh Tuong had been a province of unusual activity. That was the province in which the battle of Ap Bac took place, the home of the Seventh Division that had been

involved in coup activities in Saigon, a great and old province, a province of rich ricelands, an early area of dissidence against the government, an area of long history of association with the Viet Cong and long association with the government, going back to the French times.

So it was a good province to get started in, and it was interesting. That province was picked to have as team chairman--or team coordinator, or the leader of the effort--the MACV representative, Lieutenant Colonel McFall. In the other Corps areas, different civilians ran the coordinated effort in their province of responsibility. I remember Mr. Richardson of AID ran the effort in Binh Thuan Province in II Corps, and so on; III Corps and I Corps had different leadership. But the Delta was designed to have a military top officer, and that officer was to coordinate the activities of the civilians as well as his own military staff, and establish guidelines and ground rules and priorities in dealing with the province chief and military and civilian structures that were focused on the pacification and civil administration of the provincial area.

So I became involved in the very first attempt to coordinate American activities in the pacification area in Vietnam.

G: Did you know Volney Warner?

W: I did, yes indeed. The senior adviser to the Seventh Division when I got there was future general Sid Berry. It was a fascinating time; I met a lot of the future leadership of the United States Army.

G: Jean Sauvageot, was he around?

W: Absolutely, and I first met him in My Tho. He was down training the propaganda teams, black-pajamaed propaganda teams. He was on secondment to JUSPAO.

G: What were your specific duties in this team?

W: I was assigned as an AID officer. My personal duties as an assistant AID development officer were focused on the full range of AID responsibilities of the day. AID had increased its allocation to provincial development budgets; we were involved in a wide variety of small self-help projects, assisting communities to come to decisions about bridges, rice-drying boards, storage facilities for agricultural commodities, new schoolrooms, dispensaries, the sorts of hard commodities that government delivers to improve the life of the people, and thereby generate some political support. That was the basic idea, and our role, while the budget was spent through the Vietnamese authorities and very little was spent directly by Americans, was to make sure that the projects were identified, covered in a timely manner, the Vietnamese budgets were well planned, that Vietnamese were encouraged to get out and civil servants were encouraged to get out in the field, put these projects into operation, that the resources were spent and correctly spent, to the degree that a small American staff could check that.

Shortly after my arrival there, there was an increase in the level of fighting in the north central part of the province, and the government decided at that point, having tried to secure some areas in the north central part of the province, to bring out populations that had otherwise for some time been under the control of the Viet Cong, and had brought them down to a district capital in the center part of the province, Cai Lay, and there they were settled as refugees. And I assumed or was charged with a very heavy responsibility of making sure that relief supplies, housing, medical support, was gotten to that community so that it could support this rather heavy influx of people being moved out of an area that had been contested by the Viet Cong. And I traveled out there quite a

lot and did my part in trying to make sure that this refugee population was stabilized.

There were many, many other duties, but those were the principal ones of a development officer. I arrived in June-July of 1965, and left when my father died in October. I returned about a month later and found that I was being transferred to Saigon to be the staff assistant to the Deputy Ambassador. Ambassador [William] Porter, who had been the ambassador in Algiers, where I had just worked, asked if I would come to Saigon to be his staff assistant. And that's a very nice way for a young officer in the Foreign Service to start. I had already gotten my feet on the ground; I'd gotten the sense and the smell of the countryside, and I went up to Saigon to join the Deputy Ambassador, who, like a DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission], was responsible principally for the management of the mission. However, that changed very quickly as he, Washington, and Ambassador [Henry Cabot] Lodge began to define some new purposes, and those purposes were called pacification.

G: Is [this] the birth of what was called OCO [Office of Civil Operations]?

W: No, this precedes OCO by quite a bit. We're now in December 1965, January 1966. OCO was officially inaugurated in the spring of 1967, if my memory is good.

G: Let's see. The Guam Conference was in April, wasn't it, of 1967? And that's when we got CORDS [Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support], wasn't it? Wasn't that when Komer came out? So this development in pacification antedates OCO by nearly a year.

W: That's correct. As the story proceeded, the issue of a coordinated American effort to support pacification remained a very lively issue after General Taylor's departure and after the arrival of Ambassador Lodge and Ambassador Porter.

The effort to coordinate was done in a number of ways, but increasingly responsibility was handed to the deputy ambassador, to make sure that the civilian side was working together, and that liaison with the military was functioning. This was done informally at first; there were several different instances inside the mission in Saigon. There was of course the major country team that met from time to time; there was a more informal secondary mechanism called the mission liaison group that met. All deciding strategies, deciding the best ways to work with the Vietnamese government, trying to figure out the programs, trying to put more energy, activism, into the system, trying to define priorities. And it was in the spring, if my memory is good, the spring of 1966 that Washington began to shape up in its own way to support a more intensified pacification effort. For the basic concept, one has to go back and recall, was with the increasing insertion of United States forces in the hope that you could break the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] offensive, relieve the pressure on ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam], strengthen the South Vietnamese Army, commit that army to push back, with the American forces, the main force elements of the enemy. The opportunity to expand control of area and population began to open up, and it was necessary to move forward with a pacification program that was going to do precisely that.

And there were a lot of elements to the pacification program. I described them briefly in the situation among Americans in a province in the Delta, but in early 1966 General Thang was put in charge of a ministry of pacification, called the Ministry of Revolutionary Development, and the first serious sort of coordinated concepts began coming out of the Vietnamese side.

So the Vietnamese were pulling together in a more active pacification-focused

mode; the Americans in Saigon were, and those who had been interested in the program, young officers of the day like Dick Holbrooke, went back and were pulled together in a staff inside the White House which was organized and run by Robert W. Komer. Colonel [Robert] Montague--the day [?]--was his assistant, and they began energizing the Washington bureaucracy to come up with more resources, higher quality, and greater numbers of people and a more coordinated effort from this end.

And as the Washington effort took on speed, and it took on speed because of the urgency of the situation, but also because of the very dynamic personality of Robert W. Komer, there were a number of discussions with Ambassador Porter, and he eventually came to the decision that he needed to organize almost a special pacification staff. That staff was organized, if my memory serves me well, in about May-June. He was backed up with a former ambassador to Congo-Brazzaville, Barney Koren--Henry Koren. And as his deputy for pacification--I was still his staff assistant, but increasingly sort of chief of staff of this small pacification staff. And that pacification staff had a representative from AID, Len [Leonard] Maynard; another very able Foreign Service officer, Paul Hare, William Stubbs [?] from JUSPAO; eventually, from the office of the special assistant, Vince Heyman, and a very able military officer, General Crittenden [?], an artillery officer who went on to a military career thereafter, representing MACV and MACV's substantial interest in pacification.

This small coordinating staff was really the origin of the Office of Civil Operations. And when we . . .

G: Let me just interject a question here. Do you remember when General [Edward] Lansdale came back out?

W: Yes, I do very well. General Lansdale came out in the summer of 1965, returned to Saigon.

G: What was he supposed to do, exactly?

W: General Lansdale is a remarkable man. He had a particular vision of how the Vietnamese, as he had had a feeling that the Filipinos could be energized to resist the communist problem that they faced, he had an almost mystical sense of how the war effort could be advanced, how pacification could be advanced. He surrounded himself with a small team of bright, rather original people, and he moved out in a most unconventional but assertive manner to carry out his vision of how he thought the Vietnamese should be energized.

G: What kind of backing did he have in this enterprise?

W: He had the force of his own personality, the support of Washington, which sent him out, a real sense that he could make a contribution. The Ambassador, others, supported him. Obviously, I'm being very careful in what I say; I've no cause to go on record to speak ill of someone and it's not my intention to do that. But I think by the time that General Lansdale returned to Saigon, the war had changed. It had become a very big and very complicated war; it had a very big and very complicated American presence. It was no longer possible to run an advisory effort to the Vietnamese government on the basis of close personal relationships, advice given in the quiet of the night, friendly contacts. It had gone beyond that. You were coordinating millions of dollars, very sensitive political policies that had an immediate domestic impact in the Unites States, in addition to the impact inside of Vietnam. A lot of issues were at stake, and that meant that the mission had to be run; it had to be run tightly and be run in a very disciplined manner. The very

essence of General Lansdale's approach was not to operate in a disciplined policy environment. And for that reason, General Lansdale very frankly entered into a great deal of friction with a number of the people who had major main-line responsibilities for budgets and lives and officers and personnel, and reporting responsibilities back to Washington in addition to responsibilities to the mission and to the Ambassador in Saigon. And so I would conclude by saying, on this chapter, that I think the war had really outgrown the kind of effort that General Lansdale had been able to deploy with President [Ngo Dinh] Diem or President [Ramón] Magsaysay in the Philippines in the years before, and that while he stayed and he was a source of advice and reflection, it was no longer possible to imagine him having a decisive impact on that situation that certainly he would have liked, and when sent there I think others would have supported him.

G: Who was political officer at that time? Was Phil Habib--?

W: Yes, he was. In late 1965-spring of 1966, Philip Habib was the--future ambassador to Korea, under secretary of state, and one of the great Foreign Service officers of this generation.

G: Knowing what little I do about the duties of a political officer, and knowing a little more about the *modus operandi* of General Lansdale, I would expect that there would be a collision there at some point or other.

W: And not limited to that part of the embassy.

G: He cut across department lines on occasion?

W: He cut across a number of lines.

(Interruption)

G: Just one more question: What were the biggest problems you faced in trying to accomplish your mission?

W: There were numbers of problems, and if you ask me, looking back over the years that have passed, I wouldn't want to pretend I'm going to give them in an accurate priority order.

But if one says that the first issue that we were addressing was how we got Americans to work together to support the Vietnamese, one of the first and earliest and toughest problems and one of the most persistent problems was divisions among agencies, very complicated to overcome. People came from different career systems; they had different bureaucracies they reported to in Washington. Each of those bureaucracies had a different set of demands that it put on people who represented them in the field. Pulling that together was a very complicated, nonstop act. People were terribly jealous and careful to try to preserve their turf, their responsibilities. Everybody always pays lip service to a coordinated activity if they don't feel they are, or seen to be, losing their authority. So coordinating the key elements of the mission was always tough, and getting people to hop over bureaucratic hurdles.

The second was working out concepts. What was to be the strategy for approaching pacification, and how was that strategy going to be negotiated and pursued with the Vietnamese? It came down to very fundamental problems. I remember, for example, one: roles and missions of security forces. Vietnam, by this point in 1966, was the [scene of] proliferation of different security contingents. There was the United States Army, with marines and airborne and all of that, and that was one thing. But the Vietnamese army was organized along corresponding lines; there was an airborne

division, there was a marine division--which constituted in effect a strategic reserve, an intervention force. There were the main-line ARVN divisions that had a territorial defense responsibility. There were regional forces, which had a provincial responsibility; there were popular forces that had, theoretically, a hamlet or village protection responsibility. There were police forces that had a security responsibility; there were police field forces that had an intervention responsibility in the pursuit of the infrastructure of the Viet Cong. There were armed revolutionary development cadre, that the Agency had been responsible for creating and putting up, who had a security responsibility. And I've probably left out six or seven different elements.

Now, different agencies of the United States government were supporting different ones of these entities. How did all of these mesh together? They didn't even mesh very well in the Vietnamese mind. What boundaries, what roles and missions for these security forces were to be defined so that you could figure out priorities and resource allocation, so that you could define areas of responsibility so that there was not overlapping responsibilities and friction? Very tough.

Bill Porter set out to try to organize such a think-session, and before you even faced the problem of what the Vietnamese wanted to do, you had to figure out what Americans wanted to do. MACV, I can tell you, resisted enormously that kind of inquiry, because it appeared to be detracting from the main-force role of ARVN. General [William] Westmoreland was very irritated by the existence of this sort of concept-study. Other studies about how Vietnamese forces performed in the night, the night/day war issue--very important to the prosecution of the war--produced a great deal of friction.

How you dealt with the Viet Cong infrastructure, how you focused an attack on

that problem, the overlapping responsibilities of security elements facing the infrastructure issue--that was another key area of concept development that needed to be undertaken. So all of these areas needed to be sorted out.

A second major problem was thinking through what we were about, what ought to be done, in what order. That was a tough, tough call. There were very serious and persistent debates among Americans about the issue of leverage: how did you pursue your objectives with the Vietnamese Government? What were the best ways, the best techniques? We never cracked that. It was always as relationships between people are complicated, relationships between powers are complicated when you mix national characteristics, across language barriers, trying to get governments with very different ways of looking at things to work together. It was hard to come up with the right sets of characteristics.

Fourth among the other issues was how best to organize oneself in the provinces. I described these coordinating efforts that were attempted during General Taylor's time. It was quite clear that Americans had to be organized in a better and more efficient manner in the provinces, and how best to go about that was one of the things that led to the origins of OCO. Presenting coordinated pictures of what the war was about, establishing measurable benchmarks, something that would give a descriptive assessment, a clear assessment of how you were doing: where had you started in the pacification effort, how much ground had you traveled, how much ground did there remain to be traveled? And agencies looked at the proverbial elephant, and some described the leg and the other described the trunk, and how did you describe the totality? I recall [Secretary of Defense] Mr. [Robert] McNamara's visit in, I believe if my

memory's good, September 1966, to Saigon--a great deal of frustration on his part with his inability to get out of the mission clear indicators, clear benchmarks for measuring how we were doing, what needed to be done, what resources were required to accomplish it. So this assessment problem remained with you for a long time.

These were the types of issues that we were faced with. Bill Porter had a small staff; obviously we'd augmented to study various things. Colonel Jake [George] Jacobson was brought in to do the roles and missions work. Pete Dawkins was brought in for that night/day war problem. Dan Ellsberg was brought in for one particular study. I think he found it uncomfortable working in a bureaucratic environment of organized studies and contributions and clearances. So we would augment this small team effort. Paul Hare was brilliant at the problem of assessments, a very tough job of how you measured what this war was about and how you described that measurement in some sort of coherent manner. Honesty was never a question in my mind, as much as it was understanding what you were trying to say.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I

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