July 3, 1997

Dear Rufus,

I ran into this the other day after years in a closet. I hasten to add it is not about me or any of my "exploits". But it does convey, as an Oral History interview, some of the spirit of the early VS days in Vietnam, and I thought it might have some nostalgic interest for you.

All best -

Ogden.

5:00
3:40
1900

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OGDEN WILLIAMS

An Oral History Interview by Harry Maurer, who was writing a book in 1988

His career in Vietnam spanned 20 years, from his first tour in 1956 until a visit just before Saigon fell. Now he is retired from the government and living in a small, book-strewn apartment in Washington.

"I had been in World War II in the Air Force. I got out in 1946 and went to Harvard Law School and became a lawyer in New York for about three years. About that time I got an invitation from an older friend who I respected greatly to come down to Washington to be interviewed by somebody for something. It was going to be very exciting, he said. I said I'd give it a try. Sure enough, it was the CIA. Now, CIA in those days was the most exclusive club in town and the most prestigious agency in Washington by far. That would have been 1950. The whole placed looked like the New York social register. The secretaries were liable to be Vassar graduates. It was like the OSS, all terribly on the inside track.

"I was attracted to the idea of the CIA. My father had been a very successful New York lawyer, and I knew what that life would be. It would be very disciplined, doing good work, riding the subway everyday, getting one month's vacation in the summer, making a lot of money in the end, and dying. That was what it was going to be. He'd

done that, and he'd done it far better than I probably could. So what was I doing there? Try something new."

* * * * *

After a tour in Germany from 1951-53, I had a chance to get out of Washington again in `56, which I welcomed. That was because a man named Ed Lansdale, who was a big figure in Vietnam in those days, was President Diem's primary adviser. Lansdale needed somebody, so I got a chance to go. I said, Great.

This was the Cold War period. The Cold War was not an abstraction or a theory or a psychosis. It was something we perceived as being very real and very physical and right there. For example, at the end of the war the Russians took over Eastern Europe. That was fresh in our minds. The U.S. reacted with the Marshall Pan. Then the Communists started to take over Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean, and we reacted with the Truman Plan. Then Truman ordered the Soviets out of Iran, and they left because he had the bomb and they didn't. Then, going down the line, there was Korea, 1950. So the issue of Communist expansion was not something people debated about.

The U.S. under Roosevelt had opposed French colonialism re-imposing itself in Vietnam. But by 1949, when the Communists won in China and opened up a flood of arms to Ho Chi Minh's people, we began to take a different tone.

After the French defeat, along comes little South Vietnam and says, in effect, "We fought against the French, too, and we don't want to be colonized. But we also don't want to be communized." They wanted to be a third force, and they turned to us for help. For the U.S., as the leader of the free world, it was entirely natural in the context of the 1950's to say, "Well, of course. Obviously. That's what we stand for. We have to man the ramparts wherever they are." Furthermore, we had a feeling in the '50's that the U.S., having come out of World War II the only really successful nation on earth, which totally believed in itself and was totally believed in by everybody else, that this was our normal mission in life. We had the feeling we could do anything. For too many Americans in Vietnam, the question wasn't, 'What is the reality here?" The question was, "What reality are we supposed to create here?"

There I was, brand new, never been to the Far East before, and knew nothing about it. They just put me on Lansdale's team. I suppose I was going to fit in where he could use me. It turned out he could use me for an interpreter. I speak French, and the Vietnamese spoke French in all their offices.

Lansdale was just the kind of man to learn from, because he'd had so much experience and insight. He had been successful in the Philippines working with

Magsaysay. Then somebody—it might have been John Foster Dulles—had handpicked him and said, "Do for Vietnam what you did in the Philippines." He was assigned there in 1954 and threw his weight behind Diem. In very short order he ingratiated himself to the point that he had Diem's full confidence. He also had a direct line to Washington and was able to pull strings fast. And he was quite the personality. He dominated the scene in those days.

Lansdale ran his own show with his little team—not more than 10 of us, maybe 8. Down in the embassy, there was also a regular CIA station. There was no love lost between them and Lansdale. He regarded them as a bunch of fuddy-duddies, and they regarded him as an uncontrollable wild man, not subject to them, which automatically made him bad. Furthermore, he had much more talent then they did. On the other hand, they had much more discipline. So there was a natural kind of bureaucratic confrontation.

Lansdale had the energy of two or three men, but in many ways the mind of a woman. I'm not talking about his sexuality. Women notice what you're wearing, what you're thinking, the little mannerism you have. Whereas when a bunch of American men meet, they look at the business on the table. All the thought is on the business, the plan, the concept. Lansdale hears that, but like a woman, he's observing these people. He's psychoanalyzing them and figuring out what makes them tick. He rapidly figured out that Diem had two passions. Probably the reason he kept Madame Nhu around was to guarantee a family dynasty. Diem was a bachelor, but his brother Nhu and Madame Nhu

had children. Diem was very dynastic. He no doubt thought that in due time he'd groom his family to succeed him in government.

The other thing he was interested in was photography. And I think Lansdale helped him set up a darkroom. That would mean more to Diem personally than getting a million-dollar loan.

Our idea in Vietnam was: This is a new nation being born. It has to be something. And naturally, we Americans were convinced that the "something" should be our system of representative government, the best in the word. Furthermore, we were the guys who were there. We had the sense of mission. We were the nation that had won World War II and was honored throughout the world. To serve the United States overseas was a dream in those days, because you had a very high standing—even low-level Americans did. We had enormous prestige in that period, which we didn't lose until everything blew up.

And Vietnam was an ideal place. It was enormously attractive in those days. It even stayed attractive to many people forever, including me. There was that sense of a young country, which was very inspiring. It was a small country, which meant you could identify with it as a project. There was a very graceful, traditional culture, an enormously pleasant way of life. Saigon was an elegant city. The beautiful tropical foliage, the flamboyant trees, the cabarets, the overly slim women in those gorgeous ao dais. The whole thing was just elegant and romantic as hell. It was a dream country if you left it

alone. Very seductive. So when you combine the seductive ambiance with the idealism of what people were trying to do—Well, my life in Vietnam was life in Technicolor, as opposed to black and white. It was always an enormous letdown to come back to the States.

South Vietnam had been a country, legally speaking for several years. In May, 1956 the last French troops marched down Rue Catinat and got in the boat and left. I saw that. It was the end of an era. Diem had been consolidating his power against the various warring factions. By '56 he was fully in control and there was no war going on in the country. You could go from one end to the other without anybody shooting at you. Picnic in Dalat, if you wanted to. The war hadn't been turned on by Hanoi yet. And in this period of peace, a hell of a lot got done. South Vietnam was recognized by something like 105 foreign countries. Embassies all over the place. Black-tie dances. I remember going in a black tie to hear Piatagorsky play the cello in the Dai Lam Theater.

But Diem had problems, obviously. He had to pick up the marbles and organize the country. Basic nation building. Lansdale said, "OK, what kind of government are you going to have?" We were trying to promote, among other things, something like an American legislature, a national assembly. This was a new to the Vietnamese. They had monarchies and colonial experience. Getting up a modern political state was a new ballgame. We had a lot of sympathy for that, and sometimes a out of frustration because it wasn't easy to put across. How do you do elections? How about a judicial system? Do you leave it just the way it was under the French? What do you do about agriculture?

What do you do about land reform? What about voting procedures? It wasn't just us—Michigan State University had all kinds of people there, political scientists. Very big on public administration. AID had a mission in there doing everything from teaching English to building hospitals and bridges to figuring out what kind of seed you should plant. Helping the young state get going.

I spent endless hours with Diem, because Lansdale did. I went along as a fairly second-rate interpreter. It wasn't too hard, because Diem was a mono-linguist. He would sit you down, and no matter who you were, from the janitor to the king, he'd talk for hours about whatever was on his mind. Some of those sessions were duller than hell, and it was hot as hell, and the president was a chain smoker. He'd sit there and smoke. When he wanted an opinion, it'd be: "Ah, Col. Lansdale, I wanted you to come in because I want to ask you something. What's your advice on this?" He'd get right to the point. Then: "Ah, yes. Now I understand. We'll do that." Very decisive. No problem. End of subject. All over in 10 minutes. Then after that: "Well, now, you see..." And he'd just start taking. Smoking going up, we're sitting there nodding: "Oui, M. le President." After two or three or four hours, he'd say, in effect, "Thank you very much, it's been really interesting, now you can go." So I didn't have to do a lot of interpreting. Just translate for my boss what was going on.

It gave people pause about Diem—he spent so much time doing this, they'd wonder how he could have time to run a country? He'd spend all day taking to anybody

who would listen. But Lansdale had great patience. He could go all night if Diem wanted to.

Lansdale did something else that was extraordinary for that time. He's an extravert from the word go. A great public relations guy. He was comfortable with the Filipinos, who are the same way—very outgoing, very warm, full of gimmicks. He brought a lot of Filipinos over to Vietnam, and he would try to get Diem to act like a modern Filipino politician. Being carried around by a crowd, shaking hands, doing all the things a Mandarin would normally never do. Trying to develop the popular touch. Diem tried and tried. He learned how to march and smile and pat babies and so forth, but basically he was not that type of man. He was more austere. Lansdale tried to make a Magsaysay out of him. You couldn't do that. But he went a certain distance. There was some nonsense in that, because the Vietnamese are not Filipinos. It was something of a cross Diem had to bear, I think. Lansdale would bring Filipino experts to help write the constitution, do this and that, but Diem at first regarded Filipinos as people who play in jazz orchestras, and that's all. Later on he learned better, because many of them were very effective.

I had mixed feelings about Diem. I didn't easily cotton to a very conservative, fanatical type. A man who if he hadn't been a politician would have been a priest or a monk. Very prissy. Very authoritarian. Rather pompous, as I thought. Though he also could be endearing and outgoing in a personal way. But I respected the man. I think in Vietnam he wasn't particularly popular, but he was always respected. He was a man of

courage, too. What he was, he was. But he was very narrow. It was evident even that early. He wouldn't reach out like FDR or a Jack Kennedy to try and win over elements who were patriotic but not Catholic, not from his background. He would treat them with suspicion, and they would resent it.

I remember him talking about the National Assembly. I can't remember the timing exactly, but I think it had just gotten elected and Diem was confronted with the reality of this thing. He said, "I'm worried about this. I know these people. They're a lot of dilettantes. I know what the country needs, and I know what we ought to do. I want to get on with it. These people are just going to sabotage the whole thing and cause me endless headaches." And Lansdale said, "First of all, M. Le President, it broadens your government. It gets more people involved. And as far as its difficulties, every democratic president has a problem with his legislature. Part of the art of being president is manipulating and leading and making deals and otherwise getting your way. Even Franklin Roosevelt had to manage his Congress."

Diem went "Hmm," and he had a little oriental smile. It seemed obvious to me that he was twisting what Lansdale said to his own mindset, which was, in effect, "Ah, we're taking about a puppet assembly. We're talking about something I can manipulate and control. It'll look good on paper, and it'll satisfy the Americans, but I don't have to take it too seriously." I mentioned it to Ed later. But we were overwhelmed with work, and nobody ever went back and said, "When we said Roosevelt managed the Congress, we meant he persuaded them." So there was undoubtedly slippage in these lessons in

democracy as you tried to translate them into an Asian framework. I dare say, though I can't prove it, that Diem's way of controlling the National Assembly was hardly the same as Franklin Roosevelt's. It was an autocratic state, which didn't make us comfortable, but nevertheless it was a hell of a lot better than what was going on up north.

Then there was the problem of the so-called elections. According to the 1954 Geneva Accords—which the South Vietnamese delegation had objected to—elections were supposed to happen in 1956 to reunify the country. But it wasn't one country. South Vietnam was already a country before the Geneva conference. Two years before that, they'd been given their autonomy and had their own government. They sent their own representatives to Geneva. It was de facto two countries, two adversaries, two systems. Diem would talk about this and say, in effect, "Look, we could have these elections if they're in our interests, and not if they're not. We're not bound to it. And I'm not going to do it for the following very simple reason. North Vietnam has more people than South Vietnam, and they're all under total control. They're going to rig the vote in the North. They'd have to win for that reason alone, even if I could control the voters down here, which I can't. So why should South Vietnam be asked to deliberately commit suicide? Why should we have elections?"

No Americans differed with him on this, as far as I could tell. Eisenhower didn't, nobody did. Quite the opposite. For one thing, the South Vietnamese had objected to the idea at Geneva. Secondly, the Americans had merely said we wouldn't object to it, but with the provision that this represents the will of the people. And it obviously didn't in

South Vietnam. So it presented no legal or ideological issues for us. I don't think anybody in Saigon gave two seconds' thought to it. It wasn't as though there would have been an honest plebiscite. The whole election thing was a farce, as far as we viewed it. Why kid ourselves?

We saw the real issue as a race against time—to get South Vietnam built up strong enough and get its institutions in place well enough for it to resist what was obviously going to be a threat some day. No question about that—it was just a matter of when it would come under attack. And in just the two years of my tour, '56 and '57, South Vietnam started to boom. It was exporting rice, which it had done before the French war. Rubber was going out. It was a free-enterprise state, so naturally along with the embassies came foreign corporations. Foremost Dairies set up a big milk-products operation. These gorgeous resort places like Nha Trang and Vung Tau were beginning to be eyed by people as tourist attractions. Everything was beginning to boom. The country was becoming so delightful, so prosperous, so well-recognized internationally that the Communists had to knock it off before it got too strong. That's why they started the war again. And that's why guys like me fought to the end to stop them.

In those days, when you had U.S. military advisers and that's all, no combat troops, these guys would fall in love not only with the country but also with their Vietnamese unit and their job. At the end of their tours, you had to take them out of there in chains, practically, because this was the best duty they'd ever had in their lives, and they believed in it more than anything they'd ever done. They were helping to build a

little professional army which had a mission against a ruthless, cruel, determined, well-organized enemy. It was quite clear that there were good guys and bad guys. And the good guys needed help. That appeals to something in human nature, particularly Americans in those days. It's not a good analogy, but why wouldn't a scoutmaster become deeply emotionally involved with the scout troop he's training? Or a schoolteacher with his students? Well, an American advisor would be entranced by the country and his job. You could have staffed the whole place with volunteers.

OGDEN WILLIAMS

An Oral History Interview by Harry Maurer, who was writing a book in 1988

(2)

My first tour ended in 1957, and I didn't go back until 1962. Kennedy was making a big push in Laos and Vietnam. As part of that, they greatly beefed up the AID mission and the MAAG. I resigned from CIA in early '62 because I got a better offer from AID, and I went back as a special assistant to the AID mission director.

In 1962 the Americans still had the same enthusiasm and sprit as in the '50s, but Vietnam had changed. The second Indochina War, starting in 1960, was going full blast. The Communists had realized the elections were not going to take place, so they had better start the war up. And the war they started—which was very effective—was a war of sabotage. They began with political assassinations at the village level. And they told people, 'This is a lesson. Don't get out of line." They'd kill the very good officials and the very bad ones. They'd leave the mediocre ones and say, "Ok, you just play along, but report to us."

So our idea was to get in there, try to strengthen Diem, and prevail. Those were the days of counterinsurgency. The theory was the guerrilla is somebody swimming in the sea of people. You try to win the support of the people. Therefore we had all kinds of projects designed to improve rural life. Hundreds, if not thousands, of schools were set up and furnished. Roads, bridges, medical facilities, agricultural projects, better seeds, better fertilizer, hog programs, corn programs, all designed to improve the lot of the local guy. And in many ways they did.

Now we come to a crucial point. One thing I learned – and it can be applied to El Salvador or anywhere else – is that you can take a country under siege like that, and you can first help it to install the most representative government in the world, and everybody has a nice school to go to, and they have social justice, agrarian reform, all the good things that are supposed to solve these problems – it won't do any bloody good as long as

that little guy can come out of the jungle at night and put a gun in the ear of the local official and say, "Listen, all this do-gooding stuff from the government, forget it. We represent the revolution, and unless you agree, something awful is going to happen to your wife and kids, not to mention you. Don't ever forget that. Don't ever think this government can protect you day and night, because we will get you if we want to. Go on doing your job, just don't do it too well. And keep us informed of what you're doing so we can take countermeasures.

That's exactly what happened in Vietnam. All the good government in the world was not going to take the place of security. It takes years and millions of dollars to build a bridge, and it takes 15 minutes to blow it up. Any idiot can blow up a bridge if he just knows a little about explosives. But building one is really difficult. That's true in every aspect of building a nation. So the poor South Vietnamese were constantly trying to build their institutions, train their people, and constantly getting sabotaged.

I suppose in the last analysis, unless everything had been in their favor, the South Vietnamese just didn't have what it would take to hold off the north. I had a friend named Henri Mege, an old Frenchman pushing 70 who'd been a French cavalry officer in Vietnam for 20 or 30 years. Now he was making his living as an artist. He said, "Monsieur Williams, you know, these Vietnamese will be very grateful if the Americans can win this war for them. They don't want to be taken over by the communists. But they won't make quite enough effort to do it for themselves. They don't have the *elan vital*, the energy. The dynamism is on other side. The fanaticism is on the other side." He said this in '64.

South Vietnam, God knows, was war-weary, and world-weary to a certain extent. Particularly the ruling class – not necessarily the young. It had been a quiet colonial backwater for a long time. Great permissiveness. When a society finds itself in that position, it deteriorates. And the North Vietnamese were a tougher breed anyway. The North Vietnamese were the hard Cromwellians against the Cavaliers. Dour types. Scots. And the other guys looked more like Italians. More fun, nicer. If you were a South

Vietnamese officer and you retired, you might want to go live in the delta, because the people were nicer down there.

I never had any ideological qualms about giving everything I could to the cause of the South Vietnamese. Because generally speaking, they were laissez-faire people who simply liked to live and be left alone. They weren't mad at anybody and had no desire to conquer the word. When they got violent or vicious, nine times out of ten it was out of hysteria and stress. Whereas the communists were just the opposite. They always did things for a purpose. They would come into a village and round up all the people, grab the village chief and denounce him working with this "fascist government" or some damn thing. Whatever their ideology said. Then they'd commit the most god-awful atrocities. Kill the children one by one and disembowel the wife and put the guy's eyes out and leave him alive. All in cold blood, not out of any hysteria at all, not even out of any ill feeling. Just to drive home a political lesson. Very effective stuff.

People often said that the most efficient, least corrupt guy in any given province was likely to be the local VC leader. And it may have been true. But that doesn't mean the cause they were representing was more humane at all. Quite the opposite. let's take France in 1940, at the beginning of World War II. France was a paradise for the American tourist. Everybody loved the place. Charm, everything wide open. Lots of corruption. No patriotic fervor. It was in a state of decadence. And into this came the Germans. Not just the Germans, but the Nazis – and not just the Nazi's, but the SS. A bunch of guys clean and disciplined to the core. Every cell in their body in perfect fighting fitness. Polite when they're told to be polite. Well-dressed. Correct. And fanatical. They went through the French like butter.

The moral is that fanaticism can be built around bad causes as well as good. Lots of people in the '30's said, "The Nazi's are great guys, look how efficient they are." Just like in the '60s, people who didn't know them said that the Viet Cong are great guys, look how dedicated they are. The best advocates in these causes, the best cadre, the best foot soldiers, may very easily be on the wrong side. Some of the communists were

undoubtedly imbued with a holy fire. But in North Vietnam, information was totally controlled. They actually thought they were coming down to help the Southerners drive out the colonists—us. That's why they were willing to fight, and that's why they were willing to die.

What does the West, including South Vietnam in those days, really want? What does it believe in? Well, what the South Vietnamese believed in, and probably what the United States believes in, except for some firebrands, is comfort and reasonableness. We want to be comfortable and reasonable. Comfort is a good thing, and reasonableness is a very good thing. But neither of them are fighting faiths. South Vietnam in 1960 had a political vacuum to fill, and basically they wanted to be left alone to enjoy one of the most lovely and pleasurable environments I have ever known. But no fighting faiths to speak of. These people had to try to preserve something far better than what the North was offering, and in the end it cost them 200,000 battlefield dead. It was Sparta attacking Athens. Sparta finally defeated Athens, but today who remembers Sparta?

OW with nephew, Dick Williams, Nha Trang, Summer, 1967

AFTERNOON WITH CHE GUEVARA

India

From May 1959 to June 1961 I served as a CIA officer working out of the American Embassy in New Delhi, India. Many people have a lurid image of CIA operations which does not correspond with my experience, particularly my experience in India, where my role was not much different than that of any overt political officer – largely keeping an eye on local events and sending back reports for the hopeful edification of policy makers in Washington.

One particular event was not a CIA operation at all, but just a chance encounter which nevertheless provided me with perhaps the most interesting occasion of my entire tour in India, my chance to spend a long afternoon closeted in "one on one" conversation over beer and cigars with Ernesto "Che" Guevara, legendary figure of revolution in Latin America.

It was late 1959 or in 1960 – a little historical research could confirm the exact dates – that Fidel Castro sent Guevara on an official visit to Egypt, India and China. After completing his meetings in Cairo, Guevara flew on to New Delhi. It was, I believe, on the first evening of his arrival that I happened to be in the lobby of the Asoka Hotel, a short distance from my office in the American Embassy, and noticed a group of Indian reporters gathered around a figure in battle fatigues and beret who was instantly recognizable as the famous "Che." They were all chattering in French, since Guevara spoke little English. Since I understood and spoke French I walked over to the group and soon found myself close to Guevara. As his impromptu meeting with the reporters seemed to be breaking up, I had the chance to speak to him directly and said that I was from the American Embassy, stationed in New Delhi, and it occurred to me that he might be getting rather fed up with official visits and sightseeing and that, if so, he might not mind a chance to break his routine, have a cold beer or two, and compare notes. I extended him this invitation. He was intrigued, said he was going off to Agra or somewhere in the morning and returned in to Delhi for lunch. Perhaps we could meet after lunch. He said to give my name to his secretary, who would confirm with me later.

From this brief encounter it followed that, about 2 p.m. the next afternoon I drove my car from the Embassy over to the front steps of the Asoka Hotel to pick up Che. He was standing at the top of the steps with another figure in khaki uniform whom I took to be a woman because of the shoulder length hair down the back of "her" neck. (Male long-hairs had not yet burst fully on the scene, at least not in my circles!) In fact he was a personal bodyguard. I offered Guevara to sit beside me in the front, while the guard sat behind us. I presumed the guard was armed.

We drove over to my flat in Jorbagh. It occupied the upper floor and roof of a building, which today houses the Embassy of Trinidad and Tobago. Mounting the stairs, I opened the door leading directly to a large living room with a sofa at one end and dining table at the other. I suggested the guard seat himself on the sofa. I then switched on a record payer and inserted a record of hot Cuban mambos played by Enrique Jorrin y su orchestra. The guard's eyes started to glaze over with joy. I told him my bearer, Thambi, to serve the soldier a beer, and motioned Guevara toward my study, a smaller room with comfortable chairs adjoining the living room. I ordered cold beers for us, but Che declined his at first. I privately guessed he was a little wary of being poisoned, but as I continued to drink mine, he changed his mind and accepted a glass.

As openers, I told Guevara that I was very interested in his optique on America, if he would be willing to share it. Very readily he said that he had been in the United States and had a high appreciation of our domestic democracy, particularly our strong and independent labor unions. Unfortunately, he said, these are not the aspects of America which it exports to Latin America, where the United States is represented almost totally by what he regarded as a rapacious big business sector which rode roughshod over the interests and rights of the local peoples.

I then asked him whether he was a Communist. He said he was not, but added that one must take note of the fact that the United States, a free and democratic country, was supporting anti-populist and repressive regimes all over the world, while the Soviet

Union, itself a closed society and a dictatorship, was in fact supporting popular liberation movements around the world.

Guevara then talked for awhile about himself. He was born in Argentina and was a licensed medical doctor. He had become interested and involved in populist struggles for justice and improved economic conditions in Latin America, and supporting such revolutions had become his main ambition in life. He was very candid in saying that his real emotional involvement had been in the failed revolution in Guatemala, not the Cuban. In Guatemala Jacobo Arbenz had been overthrown by Castillo Armas (Note: With copious support from the CIA), and his wife (or mistress) had been dragged through the streets by Armas's troops. That was where his heart still was. Guevara gave a clear impression that he had largely lost interest in Fidel Castro's revolution, and he specifically stated that he would soon be moving to Bolivia, Peru and other countries on the continent, to foment and support revolutions there.

Up to this point I had felt a strong measure of agreement with most of what Guevara had said, as well as a liking for his candor and apparent sincerity, but now he introduced a side to his character which was less appealing. He revealed a clear impression of love of power and violence for its own sake. As a striking, and I felt, less than flattering example, he commented (perhaps with the bravado of a few beers) that when he was conducting training exercises involving young recruits in the Sierra Mastre mountains, and someone fell asleep on guard duty, he just had him shot. He mentioned this with more satisfaction than remorse. This example resonated in me with the stories I had read of another handsome and charismatic warrior on Pancho Villa's staff in the Mexican Revolution (1910-20), named Rodofo Fierro. Guevara was surely no Fierro, who used to line up Federalista prisoners and see how many he could kill with one bullet, but the "macho" streak was there. In a other respects Guevara was a very attractive figure.

We talked for about three hours, consuming much beer and many cigars. I think Guevara enjoyed the interlude from his official duties. He may have been disappointed

that I had nothing more to offer him than sincere interest in his opinions, and was not acting as an emissary of the U.S. Government with official messages for him, but he did not confront me on this point. He eventually just said he had to go, so I drove him and his bodyguard back to the Asoka Hotel. When he reached the top of the entrance stairs, he turned to wave, and I said to him "buena suerte a Usted personalmente", which in my perhaps fractured Spanish was intended to mean "Good luck to you personally." He nodded and disappeared into the hotel.

Right away I typed up a report of the meeting for dispatch to Washington. There was never any comment back to me. I presume the report now gathers dust in some file, or perhaps was considered so "politically incorrect" that it was simply destroyed. I do recall that its final sentence said something like "It would clearly be in the interest of the U.S. to have this man as a friend rather than as an enemy." But all this was before the Bay of Pigs. In fact sometime later, Richard Bissell came through Delhi, and I by chanced ended up sitting next to him at a CIA lunch. I had no idea that he was at the time specifically assigned to planning the Bay of Pigs, or even that such planning existed. In the conversation I innocently said to him "I do hope no one in Washington would be so foolish as to invade Cuba." He seemed to stiffen a bit, and said "why not?" I replied that even if we pulled it off, it would outrage opinion against us in all of Latin America. He just commented, "Well there are many people in Washington who would disagree with you."

Guevara, for his part, was true to his word, left Cuba and tried to foment revolution among the rural peasants of Bolivia who were not yet ready for his message. He was captured and reportedly died bravely before a firing squad, preserving his romantic image to the last. One hand was then cut off so that the fingerprints could be checked, and any myths of his survival squashed.

A TIGER IN THE MOONIGHT

INDIA

PLACE: Kicha, Uttar Pradesh
TIME: December 26-27, 1960

Sir Iqbal Ahmed, retired Judge of the Allahabad High Court, had arranged a winter party. Staff had set up some twenty large white canvas tents. Provisions for food and every luxury had been collected. Not least, several huge elephants had been walked in to the camp from as far as 100 miles away- for this was not to be just a delightful "tamasha" in the open air and warm sun of the Indian winter, but also a tiger hunt.

The guests of honor were Brigadier (later Lieutenant General) H.K. Sibal ("Krishen" to his friends) and his brilliant wife Tara, formerly of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs. There were also more than twenty distinguished Indian guests and only two foreigners, namely myself and my friend Ann Gooch, both of us from the American Embassy in New Delhi.

Our camp was situated on flat, open ground which bordered the southern limits of the famous Terai jungle which stretched northward all the way to Nepal. Where we were it could be described as a scrub jungle of hardwood trees and thickets interspersed with small open clearings. Since time immemorial the Terai had supported a treasure-trove of wildlife, all protected by the malaria mosquito which effectively closed off the area from excessive human intrusion. After World War II all this changed, when the discovery of DDT spelled the end of malaria and opened the Terai to agricultural exploitation. This process was already under way when we came to Kichna.

Prior to our arrival at camp, small bullocks had been tethered at various places in the adjoining jungle to attract the attention of tigers. Eventually, it was hoped, one bullock would be killed. The tiger would immediately eat half of the carcass, and then drag the remainder off into some dense thickets where it would be safe from vultures or

A TIGER IN THE MOONIGHT

INDIA

PLACE: Kicha, Uttar Pradesh
TIME: December 26-27, 1960

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other scavengers, while the itself would sleep off its feast nearby, intending to return the next night for another meal.

Thus it was that on the morning of December 26, 1960 a Sikh tracker came hurriedly into camp to report that a tiger had killed a bullock during the night. Sir Iqbal immediately invited Krishen Sibal, as guest of honor, to go for the tiger. He, in turn, proposed that I take his place, as his friend and as a guest from the American Embassy. (Parenthetically I should insert here that even in those days of relatively plentiful tigers I was already very conservation-minded and would have preferred to hunt the tiger with a camera, had I had a suitable one. But I was also sensible of the honor being conferred on me which I could not lightly refuse, as well as being not insensible to the excitement of going after a tiger. So I accepted with much appreciation.)

Ann Gooch and I and several of the other guests immediately set off by car to where the elephants were waiting, mounted them and went into the jungle to the place where the bullock had been killed. Then, led by a Sikh tracker, we followed the trail of the tiger and its dragged prey some one hundred yards or so to a massive thorn patch. The tracker took a rope, crawled into the thicket and tied the rope to a leg and crawled out again, whereupon the elephant pulled the carcass out into the open and all the way back to where it had been killed – an open glade between trees. One tree had a horizontal branch about fifteen feet from the ground, and to this branch we tied a charpoy (an Indian bed of wood frame and string mattress borrowed from a village).

It was now about 4:30 p.m. Ann Gooch and I stepped from the back of the elephant and took positions facing the direction of the bullock carcass from which the tiger might come. Our elephant then disappeared through the jungle toward a spot half a mile away where its mahout would await the sound of my rifle, leaving us alone. I had borrowed a superb Rigby 450/500 double barreled rifle from another friend, Brigadier D.K. Palit, in preference to a lighter rifle of my own, as insurance against the possibility of a merely wounded tiger, the most dangerous creature in the Indian jungle except for killer bees.

As the hours of silent waiting went by, we watched the daylight turn to dusk and then darkness. Soon the moon rose as we listened to the forest murmuring of the Indian night and the occasional muffled beat of tom-toms from some far off village.

Finally, at about 8:30 we heard something to our left. It was the slow, measured tread of some soft-footed but heavy animal, creeping along the grassy floor of the jungle clearing. Crunch...crunch...crunch. Suddenly the tiger appeared, looming up in the dappled moonlight until he stood over the remains of the bullock. I slowly raised the rifle and aimed for a point behind his shoulder. I had attached a flashlight to the barrels. Wishing to be sure of my aim I flicked it on. As the beam sighted the aiming point, the tiger's unbelievable reflexes reacted, hurtling him forward even as I fired. Without a sound he loped off to our right and disappeared into the darkness of the jungle.

The roar of the rifle alerted our elephant's mahout a half-mile away. He immediately put the elephant in motion, in due course presenting us with the unearthly and unforgettable spectacle of the great pachyderm emerging like a ghost, swinging majestically and silently toward us through the mottled moonlight of the Indian night. Never will I forget that image.

The elephant stopped alongside our charpoy, and Ann stepped over to his back and took her place. I descended from his side to the ground, anxious to see where the bullet might have hit, or if I missed the tiger. I moved the beam of the light back and forth until finally I saw a red mist that looked as if it had been sprayed by an atomizer. This confirmed that the tiger had been hit, but where? It also meant that there was a wounded tiger nearby, and that the ground was no place for me to be. I quickly climbed up on the elephant for our trip back to camp.

On my arrival Sir Iqbal confronted me for a report. When I had finished he said that I might have hit the tiger in the lower leg, or foot, or higher up on the body. In either case I must return at first light in the morning, track down the tiger, induce him to charge,

if alive, and finish him off, as a wounded tiger would kill any herdsmen or villagers who might have the bad luck to pass by.

Accordingly, in the morning a party of three guns – myself, Krishen and another volunteer, plus Ann Gooch as observer – set out by car and elephant to the scene of the last night's action. We found to our consternation that a herd of goats had gone through, obliterating any sign of the spray of blood. The Sikh tracker asked me which way the tiger had run off, and I pointed my hand. H started down that track in a semi-squat, minutely examining every leaf, twig and blade of grass. After about twenty yards he stopped, shouted, and pointed to a single spot of blood on a bush at a level of about three feet from the ground. Clearly the tiger had been hit hard.

The trail continued for about forty yards further until it ran head on into a great wall of elephant grass about ten feet high. We backed off about fifteen yards, and I fired a spray of birdshot into the grass to induce a charge or growls from the tiger. No result, so the mahout took our elephant to the edge of the tall grass, seeing as he did so a cleared patch perhaps twenty yards ahead, and in it the tiger lying dead. The elephant dragged the tiger into the open where we attached ropes and with the greatest effort managed to pull and push his limp 600-lb frame onto the elephant's back for the trip back to camp, where our arrival stirred considerable excitement.

The tiger, lowered to the ground for inspection, turned out to be a male of about five years measuring 9 feet, 10 ½ inches over curves, and in perfect condition. One ear had been notched by a solid ball from a herdsman's shotgun, and it was said that he was a well-known "cattle-lifter." A tiger lives on deer and other wild prey, but when man comes in and destroys his habitat and food supply, he may have to live on domestic livestock. In that case he becomes a "cattle lifter" and target for destruction. Alternatively, if a tiger is shot and wounded, gets porcupine quills in his paws or is otherwise crippled, he may become a man-eater, since only humans are slow enough, weak enough and unwary enough for him to catch. I felt the tiger's forearm. It was like a 4X4 piece of oak timber, and could break the back of a water buffalo at a blow.

Sometimes tigers, passing through a line of beaters at full run, will tap one of them en route crushing his skull like an egg. Tigers have been known to kill a cow, seize it by the spine, toss back its head and jump over a eight foot fence, cow and all!

In accordance with well-worn procedures my tiger's whiskers were first pulled out, counted and given to me, lest they be stolen. It seemed the locals coveted tiger whiskers because they could be cut into slivers and sipped into an enemy's food, causing death, when eaten, by penetrating the intestines. Then the two vestigial collar bones which, in a tiger, float freely in the muscles were removed because of their great magical virtues and presented to me. The skin was scraped, salted and rolled up for shipment along with the head and cape. All this, including the whiskers, was sent to Van Ingen & Van Ingen of Mysore, along with Rowland Ward one of the famous taxidermists of the old British Empire. I wrote to Van Ingen's with instructions as to the tiger's expression. I said the head should be slightly turned, the mouth slightly parted, the expression alert, serene and noble. And that is how he looks today at my West Virginia farm!

Back in camp I apparently failed to exhibit the full measure of euphoria expected after such a memorable event, feeling again regrets that I had killed such a noble animal, and that I had not been able to hunt by camera instead of gun. This was interpreted by some as being lacking in appreciation for the great honor conferred on me. I asked Krishen to explain my true feelings, as well as my gratitude to Sir Iqbal and all the others, and I hope the misunderstanding was aid to rest.

In 1980 – almost twenty years to the day after the tiger hunt – I returned again to Kichna while on excursion with family members to Corbett Park. Alas, there was now no jungle to be seen – only sugar cane fields, tractors and bare ground. No more wildlife to be seen. No deer, no tigers, nothing. "Progress" had arrived.

THE FAREWELL DINNER

VIETNAM (1957)

In 1956 I went to Saigon, Republic of Vietnam, to join the staff of Colonel (later Major General) Edward G. Lansdale who was on loan to the CIA from the U.S. Air Force. Lansdale served as the principal U.S. advisor to President NGO Dinh Diem, having been picked for that job by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Lansdale had previously played a leading role in Manila in helping the charismatic Filipino leader, Ramon Magsaysay, to defeat the insurgency of the communist Hukbalahaps. Based on this victory, Lansdale was sent to Saigon in 1954 to render similar services to the fledgling Republic of Vietnam, which he accomplished with great success.

Ed Lansdale was one of the most remarkable men I have met. I used to say that he had the energy of three men and the mind of a woman. As an example of the former, when faced with an emergency task he could hole up in his room at 55 Duy Tan and work all day, all night, all next day and night, with only intermittent sandwiches and coffee. Then on the third morning he would emerge to attend a public ceremony in the hot Saigon sunlight, looking as fresh and bright as a young athlete, after which would return, order up a glass of bourbon, leave instructions not to wake him for 24-36 hours, and sleep right through. His "mind of a woman" refers to his quality of regarding persons as more interesting and important than concepts, abstractions or plans.

Lansdale gave me invaluable advice as to how to operate in Southeast Asia. First, he said, you must always remember that the individual is the key factor. In the U.S., when you wanted life insurance and an agent showed up from Prudential, you felt you were dealing with Prudential, not the agent. In Asia it was the reverse. You depended on the direct personal contact with the agent as the paramount factor~~, not on anything as distant as a valued American advisor from his sensitivity to personal factors~~. For example he intuited that Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu (the "Dragon lady")'s hold over Diem was that she had children and thus held out the potential of a Ngo family dynasty which he, as a celibate and ascetic bachelor, could not

(boyfriend)

otherwise have. Lansdale also noted that Diem's virtually sole hobby was amateur photography, and took pains to provide him with an equipped darkroom. Finally, Ed Lansdale was no doubt a showman and a "metteur en scene" as the French sneeringly (or anxiously) called him, but he was also unashamed patriot, a believer in human freedom and the dignity of the common man. He was known to approach a stuffy Vietnamese high official at a reception and say, with a smile "What have you done for your country recently, Mr. Minister?", leaving that eminence gasping with the shock of being confronted with such a novel proposition.

Lansdale was hated by the local French who, in 1954, were nostalgically still trying to hold on to their lost colonial role in Vietnam. One senior French officer approached him at a reception and came right to the point: "Colonel Lansdale, my advice to you is simple and clear. You should take the next plane out of Saigon." Lansdale replied, "General, I do intend to leave Vietnam some day, but certainly after you. You do not seem to realize that only my influence with the Vietnamese here now protects you."" A few days later, a grenade was tossed over the wall into an empty corner of the French officer's garden. Was it a mere coincidence? One never knew in the Saigon of those days. Books could be and have been written about the man who served as the model for Graham Greene's "Quiet American", but perhaps his close colleague Rufus Phillips said it best at Lansdale's funeral in the chapel at Arlington Cemetery in 1987, with the words: "We shall not see his like again, but his ideas will never die."

Returning now to the theme of this memoir which concerns only a minor incident of amusement to the author, it happened that when Ed Lansdale prepared to leave Vietnam at the end of his tour in the fall of 1956, he was invited by President Diem to a small farewell dinner at Doc Lap Palace, "en famille." As Lansdale's aide and interpreter, I was invited, too. We dined at a small, immaculately laid table. Besides Diem and ourselves, the only other invitees were Diem's brothers, Bishop Ngo Dinh Thuc and the "eminence grise' and husband of the "Dragon Lady", Ngo Dinh Nhu. The dinner was delicious. One course was served with the traditional "nuoc mam", in which were tiny rings of red-hot pepper. One of these inadvertently ended up burning a hole in my tongue, so I glanced around to make sure no one would notice and then surreptitiously removed one pepper with my finger and put it back on my plate. In due course the sumptuous feast was over and we repaired to a small drawing room where chairs were

arranged in a semi-circle, all facing a beautiful lacquer screen ~~which~~ with President Diem ~~was to~~ sit between Lansdale on my left and the President on my right. Then excellent cigars were passed around and lighted.

After a while it chanced that a little tobacco smoke got in my right eye, and without thinking I rubbed the eye with my finger – a great mistake. Some of the hot pepper oil still on my finger found its way into my eye, which immediately watered copiously and uncontrollably, with apparent tears streaming down my right cheek on the side facing Diem. He soon noticed and, being a man of sentiment, put his hand on my arm and said, in French, the equivalent of "There, there, Monsieur Williams, I know you are crying because your chief is soon departing, but you must not be so sad, etc. etc." No one on my left was so gauche as to inquire why my left eye was not crying at all, was I only half sad etc. in a time when I appeared to get my perceived sadness under control, feeling very sheepish!

It was a memorable evening, and although overworked trying to keep up with Ed Lansdale's pace I did feel sad that my boss was leaving, with his contacts turned over to me as necessary for the last six months of my tour in Saigon. Even after his departure he would take time to write notes to me. In one I recall he suggested that I enlist some nice American girl as my hostess and throw a monster party for all the children of our Vietnamese contacts. That was the kind of gesture only Lansdale would think of. The last time I saw him was in late 1986, shortly before his death at age 79. I still cherish the photo of us taken at that time, and the inscription Ed had written in my copy of his book "In the Midst of Wars":, which now resides on my Arlington bookshelf.

INFIGHTING IN HIGH PLACES

SOUTH VIETNAM – Early Summer 1966

In June 1966 I was reassigned to Vietnam for a third tour, this time to take over and develop the Chieu Hoi Program. This program, which had begun in 1964, was based on experiences of the anti-Communist struggles of Ramon Magsaysay in the Philippines, and the British in Malaya, Both very successfully persuaded communist insurgents in large numbers to surrender in exchange for amnesty and help in starting new lives.

From early summer 1966 until I left Vietnam again in March 1969, some 60,000 Viet Cong returned to the control of South Vietnamese government, of whom 48,000 were armed. Their removal from the battlefield, at the then prevailing kill ratio of 4:1, meant a saving of 10,000 Allied lives (American and South Vietnamese), not to mention the Viet Cong themselves. Chieu Hoi (roughly translated as "invitation to return", and sometimes called the Open Arms program) was considered to be one of the most successful programs in Vietnam. How the program operated is not the subject of this memorandum, which concentrates only on a brief interlude which illustrated the dangers of trying to operate at the upper levels of massive bureaucracies, where ambitions are enormous and internecine power struggles ruthless.

At the same time as I was taking charge of and reorganizing the Chieu Hoi Program, there was another program idea in town called "National Reconciliation." One observer at the time noted that the U.S. Government operated on a basis of permanent nervous breakdown as far as Vietnam was concerned and was constantly coming up with quick fixes, cure all's or magic bullets which would miraculously persuade the North Vietnamese to desist from their long-term aim of conquering South Vietnam. The U.S. had pushed the "strategic hamlet" program (another idea borrowed from successful British experience in Malaya), and now someone in Washington who had no knowledge or experience of Vietnam had the brilliant idea of "National Reconciliation", under which the North Vietnamese lion would be persuaded to lie down with the South Vietnamese

lamb, so that the U.S. could extricate itself without surrendering its basic aim of containing communist expansion which we had successfully done in Europe (Marshall Plan), Greece (Truman Plan) and Korea.

To this end Washington, among other things sent out Henry Kissinger (then still on the Harvard Faculty) to write a report on the possibilities of "National Reconciliation", and to make recommendations for the staffing and operation of this proposed magic bullet. Initially, he and others confused this with the existing Chieu Hoi program which, by contrast did not aim at national reconciliation but was rather intended to persuade Viet Cong to come over to the South Vietnamese side, the better to resist the communist aggression. Kissinger asked to see me, so I invited him and his young assistant and briefcase carrier, whose name I don't now recall, to have lunch at my villa. I recall telling him that the North Vietnamese had only one aim – victory, and the South only one aim – survival, and that national reconciliation was a different concept entirely from the Cheiu Hoi Program, and that in any case there was no will for compromise either in the north or the south. We did not discuss any hypothetical staffing of the misbegotten national reconciliation plan.

I gave the matter no further thought and went on improving the Chieu Hoi Program. My immediate superior at that time had come to be one Barney Koren, the no. 3 ambassador under Henry Cabot Lodge (no 1) and William Porter (no 2). After some months Koren ran afoul of Lodge and was banished to a senior regional assignment upcountry in Danang. His files on Chieu Hoi and on the now defunct national reconciliation scheme were now forwarded to me.

One day I casually glanced through these files and soon came across a copy of Kissinger's trip report to Lodge, written after his return to Harvard. In it, referring to the proposed staffing of the national reconciliation idea, Kissinger had said that I would be the wrong man to head up the initiative since I "lacked political experience in Vietnam." (In fact I had served two previous tours in Vietnam, the first one as assistant to Col. Edward G. Lansdale, the principal U.S. advisor to President Ngo Dinh Diem. In 1956-57

I had spent endless hours dealing with Vietnamese officials at the palace level, and in my second tour in Vietnam (1962-64) I had as a senior AID official dealt directly with a broad range of South Vietnamese officials, particularly with those directing civil affairs in all the provinces of the country. Lansdale was perhaps America's greatest expert in Southeast Asian psychology and how to get things done there, and I was confident that I had learned from him at least the basics of this art.)

I immediately wrote to Kissinger, explained how the files had happened to come into my possession by mistake, and admitted to some degree of hurt professional pride. I told him about my extensive previous experience in Vietnam and then said that I realized he had only spent two weeks in the country and perforce had to rely on others for his information, but I believed someone had misinformed him, for whatever reason. He replied expressing regrets and admitted that he had relied on others for his judgements, but of course he could not disclose his sources, etc.

I gave little further thought to all this, as I was entirely busy with the Chieu Hoi program which was becoming more important and successful all the time. Then, some months later, Kissinger's young assistant returned to Saigon, this time without Kissinger. I invited him again to lunch, during which I told him of finding Kissinger's earlier report to Lodge and my amazement at his conclusion that I lacked political experience and contacts in Vietnam, etc. The assistant said he would explain all. Sure enough, Kissinger had based his report on me entirely on what he was told by Philip Habib, then head of the Embassy's political section in Saigon. I expressed astonishment since I had only the briefest contacts with Habib of any kind, and vice versa. So how could he have formed any opinion about me? In due course the story unfolded, as follows:

While in Tunisia in 1965, where I was Deputy Director of the U.S. Aid Mission before reassignment to Vietnam, I had seen a report that Ed Lansdale was returning to Vietnam in some capacity. I immediately wrote to Ambassador Lodge and urged him to make full use of Lansdale, noting that when Lansdale had earlier served in Vietnam he had more contacts and influence among the Vietnamese than the entire political section of the

Embassy at that time. This letter, which Lodge acknowledged, was apparently routed to him through Philip Habib, who was by then Political Counselor. Habib, who was enormously ambitious and protective of his own turf, regarded Lansdale as a possible competitor and a principal threat to his career and influence. He was also an infighter without equal. He not only succeeded in neutralizing Lansdale before I ever returned to Saigon, but when I did, he already had me marked down as a "Lansdale man to be destroyed", of which I had no inkling whatsoever...

Kissinger's erstwhile assistant went on to tell me that in the top level discussion of Kissinger's trip report Lodge said that since Kissinger had found me to be politically inexperienced in Vietnam, etc.. Why not get rid of me? At that point Bill Porter, the Deputy Ambassador, objected. He said I was doing an outstanding job as chief of the US. Chieu Hoi Program support team, that my program was bringing in more Viet Cong returnees each month, whose debriefings provided the U.S. military with their best information on the enemy, and that there was absolutely no reason to remove me. Quite the contrary. So Lodge then said, "All right, let him stay."

I confess I shuddered when I heard of this narrow escape. If Porter had not intervened, I would have been removed from my job and returned to the U.S. as unsatisfactory, without ever knowing why. It would have been as if a complete stranger had approached me on the street, broke both arms and legs with an iron bar, and then walked way without a word. Unwittingly I had been caught in the middle of a high-level feud and almost paid for it with my career and future. As it was I was able to serve out my tour with good luck until March 1969 and leave with honors and reputation enhanced.

This experience helped me realize that the egos of the "great" are more tender than those of ordinary men, and that when elephants contend for turf, it is very easy to be crushed under foot. Thanks to Porter's adventitious presence and intervention, I was casually spared for future successes, as I would have been destroyed if he had not done so, a sobering lesson.

ONE DAY WITH TONY POE

THAILAND AND LAOS (1978)

Of all the victims of the North Vietnamese victory of 1975, perhaps the Hmong people of Laos have suffered the most – even more than the "boat people" of Vietnam. The Hmong had originally migrated into Laos from China in past centuries. They settled in the mountainous jungles, grew crops and livestock, and cultivated opium as a medical cure-all and cash crop.

The Vietnamese called them the 'Meo" – a derogatory term meaning "savage", and looked upon them about the way white Coloradans looked on the American Indians in 1860. Not unnaturally, the Hmong hated the Vietnamese in return, particularly when they invaded Laos. So when the U.S. became involved in the Vietnam War, it found willing allies among the Hmong and, through the instrumentality of the CIA, recruited, armed and paid them to hold the line in northern Laos against the common enemy.

In the spring of 1978 I went to Thailand to write a story on the plight of the Hmong (which was ultimately printed as a lead article in the Washington Post) I stayed with a young friend of Vietnam days, John Finney, who was then the U.S. Consul in Udorn. He was unstinting in support of my project with research and background materials, transportation and vocal expertise.

I spent most of my time interviewing Hmong refugees in Nong Khai, north of Udorn and directly across the Mekong River from communist-controlled Vientiane in Laos. Among these Hmong were many former soldiers who still retained ties of trust and affection for the CIA officers who had worked with them, whom they knew by such pseudonyms as Mr. Tony, Bamboo, Kayak, Black Lion and others. So it was that I first heard of "Mr. Tony", called Tony Poe by Americans, real name Anthony Pochespski (spelling uncertain.) It turned out that after the end of the war in 1975 he had retired and settled down on some land near Udorn with a Thai wife, raising crops and fruit trees.

John Finney, indispensable as always, knew Tony Poe and drove me out to meet and interview him one bright morning. (John said it was always best to visit Tony early in the day as he was often in his cups by afternoon, thereby losing in lucidity what he may have gained in local color.) I found Poe sitting on the floor of a raised veranda, wrapped in a pareu and bare from the waist up. I recall that he was of Hungarian extraction, had been a Marine in WW II and, for the CIA, had participated in the rescue and extraction of the Dalai Lama from Tibet. In any case, his authenticity as a soldier of fortune was enhanced by the clear stitch of machine gun wounds across his side and back, a souvenir, I believe, of Guadalcanal.

We spent hours discussing the Hmong and their plight, and his recollections of their war, but one story stood out among the others, engraved in my memory to this day. Here it is:

*Tony Poe had a Hmong counterpart, presumably a Colonel or Major, who commanded a fighting unit to which Tony was attached. This officer had a son serving in its ranks. It came about that a program was instituted to train a number of recruits in radio transmission at a CIA base in Hua Hin, Thailand, and the commander's son was one of these trainees.

When the young man reached the safety of Hua Hin and found himself exposed to the temptations of Thailand, he reacted as many others have done before and since, and came to place more emphasis on the girls and bars than he did on his radio to Laos, Tony happened to mention this to his counterpart, the boy's father – who said nothing.

A few days later Tony was unexpectedly summoned to attend a ceremony. He found the Hmong unit lined up at attention, their commander in front. Opposite and facing them was his son, standing alone. The commander addressed his troops in the Hmong language – which Poe could not follow – and then ordered his son to approach him, whereupon he handed the boy a coil of rope and pointed to a tree. Without a word the young man climbed the tree, tied one end of the rope to a branch and the other to his neck, and jumped off. *

Time erases all. One wonders whether Tony Poe is still alive, still on his farm in Thailand. Many of the Hmong now live in the United States. Some are no doubt still alive in the hills of Laos. The dictatorship in Hanoi still survives, but perhaps not for long. Meanwhile, back in the hills of Laos, the monsoons come and go as before, indifferent.