INTERVIEW I

DATE: November 12, 1982

INTERVIEWEE: LUCIEN CONEIN

INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger

PLACE: Mr. Conein's residence, McLean, Virginia

Tape 1 of 1

G: Would you begin, sir, by giving us some of your biographical background? The usual details.

C: Oh, the usual details. I was born in Paris, France, November 29, 1919 and came to the United States at the age of five years old, settled in Kansas City, Kansas, and went to school there.

G: Your parents were French?

C: Yes. My parents were French. That's about it. And in 1939-1940 I left Kansas, I went to France, and I joined the French Army.

G: What prompted that, the war?

C: The war! Hell, adventure and things like that. I returned to the United States in 1941--

G: How did that happen? Why did you come back to the States?

C: It was very simple. I went to Africa, from Africa I went to Martinique, and in Martinique, from Fort de France I had a ship going to New York, and I went to New York, got in New York and found out that a lot of things had changed. That was July of 1941, I think it was, when I got back. I didn't know anything about a draft, what have you, so I volunteered. I went and registered for the draft. Then in September of that year I volunteered to get in so I could go to school.

G: You volunteered so you could go to school? What school did you want to go to?

C: I volunteered to get in the draft so I could go to college. I wanted to go to college. Well, I got in in September of 1941. Ha, ha! Little did I know that there was going to be a war starting December 7, so I was in for the duration. I was in Hawaii in 1942 and one day somebody asked me if I wanted to go to OCS. I hadn't thought about it, and I said, well, why not? So I went in infantry OCS. While I was there somebody said, "There's some people want to talk to you. You have to report to a certain building," and I went there. Here was a Marine Corps officer and a navy officer and an army officer. They were the nicest officers I'd ever met in my life. They weren't like the ones down in Fort Benning. And they asked me if I wanted to volunteer for a dangerous mission. My name had come up on a list of some sort that I had been to Europe recently and that I'd been in France during the war. And I said, "What's more dangerous than making a beachhead?" They said, "Well, this is special." They represented the Office of Strategic Services. So I filled out a bunch of forms, put them in, and when I graduated from OCS I was assigned to the Office of Strategic Services. And I was assigned to the French section of OSS. That was, oh, I think June of 1943 when I was assigned to [OSS].

October 1943 I was sent to Scotland and proceeded to undertake training for a special mission behind the lines. I was assigned to an operation called Jedburgh, which was a group of chosen individuals

from Allied nations who were to parachute in behind the enemy lines to existing resistance movements. So I went through all the necessary schools, commando school, demolition school, espionage schools, sabotage schools, all kinds of schools.

Then one day I was picked for a mission into France. I parachuted into Gers, a small town--

G: Would you spell that for me, sir?

C: G-E-R-S. It's a province of France, north of Toulouse, France. Parachuted in for the invasion of the south on the fifteenth of August, 1944. I was assigned to a group led by a British officer who had been in France for two years building up a resistance organization known as the Special Zone of Pimento [?].

G: What was that last word?

C: Pimento. It was a code name that the British had given to this area. It was in the region of Toulouse. So I stayed with them and we moved all through the areas. Finally I left my group in 1945. They were holding the pocket north of Bordeaux and the port of Royon [?]. The Germans held some pockets there, pockets of resistance. And I returned to the United States, still with the OSS. I was assigned by the OSS to go to China, and I took special training, Catalina Island. I don't know why they picked Catalina Island, because I can tell you truthfully it's nothing like China. And I was sent to Kunming, China. One day the commanding officer of the OSS detachment in Kunming came up to me and said, "You speak French?" and I said yes. He said, "Well, you're going to go to Indochina." I asked him, "Where is

that?" He said he didn't know, so I had to go down to the French Mission No. 5 that was in Kunming, China, and that I was assigned to them for briefings and that I would be parachuted into Indochina.

G: Now, you said Section 5. Is that French intelligence?

C: That's French intelligence, Section 5. It was headed by Commander [Jean] Sainteny, who later became the French representative to Indochina and was one of the individuals that the Viet Minh arrested or detained in Hanoi in August of 1945.

So I parachuted in. My job was to rally the French forces that had managed to escape when the Japanese had attacked the French forces on March 9, 1945. Some of the people on the outposts had managed to get on the Chinese border. My job was to parachute down to them and get retrained, re-equipped and go back into Indochina, which we did.

G: What was your mission going back in?

C: Our mission was to attack the Japanese divisional headquarters in Lang Son. So we played cowboy and Indian up in the hills with the Montagnards, the Muong tribes. We infiltrated into and went and hit the Japanese divisional headquarters on a commando-type raid.

G: Were all your troops French?

C: No, not all the troops were French. Well, they were under French command. I had the Autotung [?], which were the Vietnamese, which some of them later on were very close friends of mine that were with them at that time, and later on became very important people within the Vietnamese government later on in the sixties.

G: Who in particular do you recall from those days?

C: Well, there was Nguyen Van Vy, who was minister under later governments. Well, in the beginning, in 1954, at the time of what you're vitally interested in, he was the commander of the imperial guards of the Emperor Bao Dai. Later on he was exiled to France and came back after the coup of 1963 and became a minister of national defense in several of the governments. There was General Pham Van Dong--same name as the--who became a senior military officer in later regimes. There were several others. Of course, after I got into Hanoi--well, after the mission had came out, I went into Hanoi and was there assigned to the Patti mission.

G: That's Archimedes Patti?

C: Archimedes L. A. Patti. The Patti mission was an OSS mission. We were not allowed to accept the armistice from the Japanese who had already capitulated and it was to maintain our presence there. There were six thousand French officers imprisoned by the Japanese and they were kept in prison after we arrived and we didn't have an armistice signed in Hanoi until the twenty-eighth of September of 1945. The American representative, as an observer--we did not participate in the actual signing--was Brigadier General Philip E. Gallagher [?]. The Chinese Nationalists had sent the pirate troops from Yunnan Province, General Luong Lu Han's [?] troops, General Lu Han, to accept the armistice from the Japanese. And the armistice was signed in Hanoi. I was present when it was signed on the twenty-eighth of September of 1945, about two weeks after we had signed [?].

I stayed in Hanoi awaiting further orders and I eventually left Hanoi when--gosh, I don't know, I can't recall exactly. Anyway, I got back here by Christmas Eve of 1945, that's all I know. I got back here. In 1946 OSS was disbanded, but there were certain elements left with the government. The Strategic Services Unit was under the Department of Defense, and the Office of Personnel, Office of Plans and Policy, was under the Department of State under Frank Wisner. And I was assigned to Germany.

G: Which one did you go into, SSU?

C: SSU. And I was assigned to the SSU mission to Germany. There I saw the formation of the CIHE and later on the CIA in 1948, and I stayed with the CIA mission in Germany until 1953. When I returned it appears that my name had a little flash or something to it, said "Indochina." So when the CIA was sending a mission into Indochina called the Saigon Military Mission under Ed Lansdale, I was assigned in the early parts of 195--I think March 1954, I don't know exactly what date it was, I was assigned to the mission in Indochina.

G: This would have been about the time of Dien Bien Phu.

C: At the time of Dien Bien Phu. I was assigned by Ed Lansdale to Hanoi with the mission of attempting to create a resistance movement or a stay-behind movement in--

(Interruption)

G: --Hanoi.

C: My mission in Hanoi was to establish a general sabotage, laying the groundwork, if I could, to build a resistance to what eventually

was going to happen with the Viet Minh takeover and to establish stay-behind organizations.

G: Were you very successful in this?

C: I established stay-behind organizations that lasted for five years until they were rounded up, which was inevitable. The sabotage was very minor. I was not permitted to do what I had already had in place, to blow up after the Americans had [inaudible]. I think there were about four Americans up there altogether. But we did have a consulate who stayed there--was it Sainteny, he came back. I saw Sainteny when he arrived in Hanoi.

G: Why are you smiling?

C: No, he was not smiling. He said, "You see, Lou, what we have cultivated for not cooperating a long time ago." He's talking back to 1945. He asked me to stay with him. I said, "No, I don't think that it would be very wise to stay," and I went on up to Haiphong.

But General J. Lawton Collins is the one who was the special emissary of President Eisenhower. I was in Saigon during this period prior to my pulling out of Hanoi. I told him I was instructed to inform him on what I had developed for the big bang, and I was instructed in no uncertain terms to not do that, that we would not blow up anything in North Vietnam, that we would leave the Standard Oil and Shell alone; I would not blow up the communications systems. So I had to undo some of the things I had done.

G: What about the port facilities at Haiphong? Were those targeted as well?

C: The port facilities in Haiphong and also the coal mining, Hongay coal mine. But, see, it was a very simple thing to do, but if you had to undo it, it was very difficult. I did leave two separate groups behind. Like I say, we were in communication with them for five years.

G: How many people were involved in this?

C: Oh, about a hundred altogether. I did leave caches of arms, demolition equipment, radio sets in different places in North Vietnam. That was a very difficult job to do, to get the places, to cache things, so that--I wonder what will happen one of these days when somebody is going to be digging and all of a sudden run into a bunch of arms, radio sets.

G: It seems to me, as an amateur, that it would have been rather difficult to avoid being penetrated in an operation like that by a Viet Minh.

C: Well, yes, that's true. But you build in a security system. You also hold the people who are doing it for you responsible for certain things. For example, discipline and security breaches are handled internally among them, not us, and breaches are very severe. It happened on one occasion.

G: What happened to the individual involved?

C: He's no longer alive. They took care of it. They're a very vicious race. They look like nice, mild individuals--baloney! Treacherous as. . . . Anyway. . . .

G: Did you have anything to do with shipping any transportation out of Hanoi or Haiphong to the South?

C: Doing what?

G: Shipping any automobiles, things like that?

C: Oh, sure. I shipped automobiles out. We tried to get as much as we could out of the places. See, we had no Americans there. We had all this--well, we had equipment up there, we had to get it out. I shipped vehicles, I shipped all kinds of things out. We didn't ship--oh, I shipped people out. I was very good at shipping people out.

G: What sort of people?

C: Oh, we had all kinds of people. We would ship them out to--I had ten airplanes, part of the evacuation program of shipping people out from the North, and I used these aircraft also to bring equipment, arms and what have you, up north. It was easier. They'd bring it up for me, and I'd ship things back down. The automobiles I didn't airvac. Four automobiles I believe that one time I had shipped out; I made arrangements with one of the ship captains. An American ship captain was evacuating refugees, and I shipped the American vehicles--except one was not an American vehicle, one of them was a French vehicle--shipped it down because--beautiful vehicle. Unfortunately when I got it to Saigon I found out that it had been stolen in Saigon three years before. (Laughter) And had been shippped north. And I brought it back for them, for the police.

G: They came and claimed it, did they?

C: Ah, they came and claimed the vehicle.

G: Too bad. You came down then when the refugee program--?

C: I came down when the refugee program ceased.

G: Do you think everybody got out who wanted to get out?

C: Oh, no. No, no. Of course not. See, they had the navy task force evacuate them, they had American ships evacuate them, they had aircraft evacuate them. It was a round robin thing going on all the time. I have seen C-46 aircraft, I have seen over a hundred and fifty people put into them. Of course there were no seats in it, anything like that.

(Interruption)

Of course no seats in it. Then of course you'd get them down, everybody would be sick, so they'd have to wash out the thing all aboard [?] and fly back up. Because it was a four-hour flight in those days--they weren't jets--a four-hour flight from Saigon to Hanoi and a four-hour flight down. So I used to yo-yo back and forth. When Ed would want to see me in Saigon, I'd fly down with a load of refugees and then go back up the next morning. We'd leave early and I'd get in about noon. Within twenty-four hours I'd be back up in--same plane--[Hanoi]. Eight hours, bzoom, bzoom, bzoom, flying up and back.

G: Why didn't everybody get out that wanted to get out?

C: I don't think that all the people who wanted to get out got out because of their tradition of being close to their ancestors and things like that, family reasons. It's mostly like that. Because when the Viet Minh came in on I forget what day, 8 or 9 or 10 of October, 1954, I was in Hanoi and watched it right from the very

beginning and right to the last. They had a very efficient system. They would take sectors of the city, street by street, and they would have one man, one Viet Minh, go to each house and immediately take a census of everybody that was there. Period. That was the amount of people. And they were told to watch the people on both sides of them. If there was anybody new come in, they have to be reported. So they installed a system complete in one fell swoop. I watched it, and it was quite effective. And of course then they established a police system and what have you.

They took over the city of Hanoi starting about seven or eight o'clock in the morning, and we pulled out, I pulled out the final part going across the Pont du Mer--that's the bridge across the river--about six o'clock in the evening. And as I was going across the bridge I saw airplanes landing at the airport in Hanoi--it was on the other side of the bridge. That's when I saw that it was an official delegation of white people. I thought maybe something has changed. That's when I saw Sainteny again and had a little chat with him, and then I took on off and went on up to Haiphong. Haiphong was full of rumors, what have you. The French were trying to get their equipment out. They had priority on getting their equipment and things out. They were quite something. It was quite a period to live in.

G: You came down then in about October?

C: About October. I came down and I went to Saigon. During that period of time Diem had already been assigned I believe. He'd been assigned by Bao Dai to act [?]. Ed was in contact with Diem right from the

very beginning. He had quite a relationship with him, in fact, that he would be able to listen to his long talks and his thoughts and pick out the best part and bring it back to him, get him back on the point and advise him on what to do, because he had to establish base and all that sort of thing.

G: What new duties did you pick up then when you came south?

C: When I came south my main thing was to keep the groups I had in the north alive, also I was interested in getting some replacements, and if we could possibly get some people in to infiltrate them back to North Vietnam. So I was concentrating on that mostly, and I did get some additional people and did train them in preparation and sent them up to North Vietnam.

G: How did you insert them? Were these air drops?

C: Well, I had two systems. One of them would be to use motorized junks and the other one would be air drop. But at that time it was very difficult for us to get an aircraft just for air drops. The thing is, every time that we would propose to have a person air dropped we had to go through all the rigamarole of out-of-training [?]. And the problem of out-of-training is that--well, the way I see it--the risk of having a good man injured in training where if you can build him up to the point where he'll jump the first time, [have that] be his operational jump--what we call the cherry jump would be in operation--then if he gets hurt, well, he's hurt on the thing, but the chances are a lot less than if he [has jumped before]. Because the first time he doesn't know what happens to him. Then after about the third or

fourth time he says, "Hey, wait a minute, this isn't the best means of transportation invented by man." The more he jumps, the greater the chances that he realizes, "Wait a minute, I better bend my legs a certain way," bawoom, then he breaks them. No, I am of the opinion that if we could have gotten by to make the cherry jump their operational jump--this has been done before--then we would have been better off. But we had time lags in approving of things and what have you, so. . . .

G: Well, with the security system as efficient as it was in the North, what was your success rate?

C: Zilch!

G: Really?

C: As far as I have been able to determine from [inaudible] later on, the success rate was zilch.

G: But the stay-behind teams did all right for a while?

C: For a while. But then eventually they were rounded up.

G: Have you ever seen one of those people again?

C: No. I haven't seen any of them. Oh, I've seen some of the people I trained to go back up there that never went. I've seen them. In fact I had one call me about three months ago. He wanted me to do something--oh, he wanted me to get his son out of one of the camps. I think it was Indonesia. Little does he realize that I can't get anybody out of any camp of anyplace.

(Interruption)

G: You were primarily a case officer, is that an accurate description?

C: Oh, a case officer of the two programs I had, yes. So I was not really involved in the political action and what have you. I was aware, for example, of the Operation Brotherhood. I was aware of the Maryland State University program. I was aware of them, but I was not involved with them.

G: What about when the government troops first started going out into the vacuum that was left when the Viet Minh pulled up stakes and went north? I think Rufus Phillips was involved in that at the same time.

C: Yes. There was somebody else. Yes, Ruf Phillips was involved in that. I had nothing to do--

G: Did you help set up any of the South Vietnamese security agencies?

C: No. In fact, the way I understand it that was a different program, a public safety division of course of the USA [?] program. Michigan State did a lot in the police and security program. There were other poeple who were specialists in internal and external security doing that type work with people like Dr. [Tran Kim] Tuyen and Domal [?], all the rest of the individuals involved in security.

G: Did you know Mai Huu Xuan at this time?

C: Mai Huu Xuan, yes, I know him.

G: He became very prominent, didn't he?

C: He became prominent. After the Diem overthrow he became more and more prominent.

G: There were some anticommunist programs Diem set in motion, I think beginning about 1955 or 1956. It seems to me one of them was called the denunciation of communism or some of its equivalent, I'm not sure.

And the purpose was to root out whoever had not pulled up stakes and gone north.

C: I'm sorry. I know about it. I don't know who ran it or--I do know that was a program also about the same time he was having an agroville program. He had an expert on crops and things like that, and he was going to make him--

G: Was that Ladejinsky?

C: Oh, yes.

G: Wolf, wasn't it?

C: Wolf Ladejinsky. Yes, that's right. He was there then about that time.

G: Did you know Ladejinsky?

C: I met him. I don't know him.

G: Let me clarify something. You were employed by CIA at this time, that's--?

C: Oh, yes. I was in the army. I'm in the army on military detail to the CIA.

G: Well, I couldn't figure something out. The last time I'd seen your name in connection with the army you were Captain Conein, and then somewhere or other you got to be Colonel Conein and I said, now, I don't understand the situation.

C: No. I stayed in the army until 1961. My gosh, if they're going to make me play cowboy and Indian, I might as well stay in the army. I knew where I stood in the army. I didn't know where I stood with the CIA sometime. (Laughter)

G: I see. Well, the army had an establishment over there I guess, a MAAG. General O'Daniel was there I guess beginning about 1954.

C: Let's see. The first one we had was Iron Mike O'Daniel. Well, that was the first one in that period. There were others before that. After him, in 1955-1956, we had Hanging Sam Williams.

G: Did he know you? Did you know him?

C: Oh, I've met both of them.

G: It occurred to me that as an officer in the army, General Williams might have occasion to wonder what it was that you were up to. Did he ever--?

C: Oh, he wondered what I was up to, but he was told not to ask any questions, and he was close enough to Ed for Ed to say, "He's my man. Lay off." I'll never forget though Hanging Sam. This is a story that's funny. One of the people assigned to Ed Lansdale working at the Saigon military mission was a civilian.

G: Do you remember his name?

C: No, it doesn't matter. I'm not going to say who it is. It's just a funny story. And this civilian was disguised as a military officer. So he went and parked at the MAAG headquarters out in Cholon, and it was monsoon rain, so he takes his umbrella and he walks into MAAG headquarters under an umbrella.

G: And of course a military--

C: Hanging Sam saw this. He says, "Who is that?" They found out I was one of Ed's people. So Hanging Sam told Ed, says, "Look, what I want you to do"--of course I was in civilian clothes--"is get your military

officers that are in civilian clothes into uniforms, and get these goddamn people that are civilians out of uniform." (Laughter)

G: Well, I guess that was part of his cover, wasn't it?

C: Yes. (Laughter)

G: What kind of relationship did, well, then Colonel Lansdale have with General Williams? Were they on pretty close--?

C: He was much closer to Iron Mike, they were very close. It was much more an official relationship with Hanging Sam. It wasn't the close friendly relation they had before.

G: How did the departure of Colonel Lansdale affect the situation from your point of view?

C: Well, first, I don't think there was any American--and I don't care who they be--that had as close a relationship and a friendly relationship with President Diem as Lansdale did. I know this personally, that President Diem admired Ed a lot and admired and respected his counsel. He wouldn't do everything that Ed would suggest, but he respected him. It was a mutual respect, and I think that his leaving at that time created a vacuum that was not filled for several years, and I don't think it was ever filled. Because later on when I was there in 1960-61-62, when Ed or a representative of Ed's office from the office of the secretary of defense would come there, I could always get a meeting for this person with President Diem. Where people would wait for months to talk to him, I could do it within a half a day.

G: Did you have a direct communication with Diem or did you have to go through--?

C: I went through the Minister of the Interior, who was in charge of all security and police and was supposed to be watching people.

G: I see. And they had his ear, I presume?

C: Yes. The Minister of Interior was a personal friend of mine, so I had an ear and he could always communicate with the--

G: This is the same man you referred to earlier, who you had in your first unit when you came out?

C: The what?

G: The unit that you brought down from China and raided the Japanese?

C: No, this is another one.

G: Oh, this is another one.

C: This is I believe Van Luong, who was minister of the interior for Diem.

G: Could you spell that last name?

C: L-U-O-N-G. Bui Van L-U-O-N-G. He was minister of the interior, very staunch Catholic, very devout individual. He's here in the United States someplace I believe.

G: Who replaced Colonel Lansdale, or was he replaced?

C: He wasn't replaced. There was nobody who at that time could have replaced him.

G: Well, who ran the CIA station?

C: Well, of course then they had the CIA stations. I don't know who took over immediately in 1956 because when I came back to the United States

I had been on detail to the OSS and the SSU, CIG and CIA since 1943, and here it was 1956. I had not had troop duty in the proper sense, so the army informed me that if I was to get promoted from a major that I had to go back to school and I had to go and take troop duty. So in typical army fashion, they wanted me to get away from everything that has to do with the CIA or anything like a special operation or anything like that. I'll be darned. My orders come up, I had to go down and take the advanced course at Fort Benning, which I had not taken. Then I was assigned to the 77th Special Forces Group. I said, "What? They got me out of what I'm doing so that I wouldn't do this anymore and do strictly military and here I'm going to play hide the weinie with troops with green beanies on their head."

G: This was the first Special Forces unit I think?

C: Yes, the first Special Forces unit, the 77th.

G: Where were they at?

C: They were at Fort Bragg. The 10th was in Germany at the time.

G: What was the mission of that unit?

C: Well, when I got there I became battalion commander of the STRAC unit, which is the Strategic Army Command unit. Believe it or not, in 1959 my unit was alerted to go to Laos, and all of a sudden somebody said, "Who's the commander?" They said, "Lou Conein." They said, "My God! We can't send him! They're not supposed to go as a military unit. We have to get somebody else to take it, because Conein, the moment they hear his name in Southeast Asia they'll know it's not kosher." So Bull [Arthur D.] Simons, Colonel Simons, took my unit and I was sent

over--I'm not supposed to do anything in the intelligence or anything like that. The U.S. Army sends me over their undercover unit, intelligence unit, to Iran for two years! (Laughter)

G: Well, you're a marked man, Colonel Conein.

C: Well, I was marked.

G: Colonel Simons was the man who led the Son Tay raid.

C: That's right. He was the Son Tay raid and he was also the one that worked for Ross Perot that got people [out]. He died a couple of years ago, three years ago. Quite a man. He took my unit over, and the only reason I didn't get to take it was because I was too well known.

G: Was this the unit that formed what became known as the White Star team?

C: Yes. All those things, [inaudible] up there.

G: So you came back in 1956, is that right?

C: I came back in 1956 and I went to Fort Benning, and from Fort Benning to Fort Bragg, and there I stayed in Fort Bragg until 1959, at which time Bull Simons took my unit to Laos, and the army assigned me to their ACSI team in Iran to play cowboy and Indian in Iran. So I stayed there until 1961 and I retired from the army and immediately went back to my parent organization, the CIA, and immediately they said, "Lou, it seems that they need somebody like you in Vietnam." I'll be a son of a gun. I get Vietnam, Iran, Vietnam. So I'm sent back.

G: And you went back to Saigon?

C: I went back to Saigon.

G: William Colby was station chief.

C: Bill Colby was the station chief. Bill Colby and I were in the same parachute unit that parachuted behind the lines in the Jedburgh Operation. I've known him since 1943. We were handsome young paratroopers in those days together, and Bill Colby was the boss man.

G: Can you talk about what your duties were then?

C: Oh, very simple.

(Interruption)

In 1961 when I arrived there, I had been there about a week or so and there were rumors of things going on. In February of 1962 of course the two pilots went and bombed Doc Lap Palace.

G: Did you know that was going to happen?

C: No, I didn't know it was going to happen.

G: What kind of rumors?

C: Oh, rumors that there was dissatisfaction, that kind of thing.

G: What was the source of that?

C: Well, first thing, in Vietnam you could pick up any rumor you wanted.

G: Oh, I understand. I believe that.

C: You could pick up anything. The source of that is just people yakking, the military.

G: What I wanted to get at was what were they dissatisfied about? What didn't they like about Diem?

C: The running of the war and commanding units from the palace instead of letting the unit commanders command their own units. And also the

fear if they took losses that they would be personally chewed out by President Diem.

End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I