

INTERVIEW II

DATE: June 2, 1983
INTERVIEWEE: LUCIEN CONEIN
INTERVIEWER: Ted Gittinger
PLACE: Mr. Conein's office, Washington, D.C.

Tape 1 of 2

G: In the summer of 1963 the coup rumors, I gather, began to fly pretty thick and fast.

C: Well, they were flying thick and fast because part of that--I'll backtrack slightly. In February of 1962 what had happened was that the two pilots had attacked the palace, and I think I've already stated this, that what happened, we got a message from Washington. They wanted to know if this was an isolated instance or if this permeated through the military ranks, the air force, because these were air force pilots that flew. [They wanted to know if] this sign of dissent, if it went any further. So I was ordered to--I went from Hue all the way down to the point of Ca Mau to all the provinces, saw the province chiefs, saw all the important corps, division, unit commanders, including the officer school in Dalat, just talked to all of them. Not by myself, there were two of us.

G: Were a lot of these people that you had known previously?

C: Some of them I had known previously. That was very easy in the I Corps and the II Corps and the parachute school and the NCO academy. I had known them before, but then they gave me leads and I went to other people to talk. There were two of us doing this.

G: Who was the other man?

C: Russ Miller, Russell Miller. We made a report to the effect that there was some dissent but it was not an organized dissent, that there was a dissatisfaction with the central government specifically and the interference of the Ngo family into military affairs and military decisions. For example, President Diem was noted for blowing his stack. He was also noted for lengthy conversations, four or five-hour harangues. And if a unit commander was called down to the palace because he had suffered too many casualties, he'd catch holy hell from Diem and, depending on his mood, he might be relieved on the spot, somebody else put in. And they were all afraid of that, that one thing, because they felt that the palace, as they called it, the seat of government, was not really aware of what was going on out in different areas of the field, specifically in the areas around Zone D, what was happening up in the Montagnard country.

Then what came about was in May of 1963 in Hue, the Buddhists--I was in Hue that day, the day before it happened. I was up there with the Minister of the Interior, a guy by the name of Bui Van Luong, who was the minister of interior for Ngo Dinh Diem. And I was working out of the Ministry of the Interior's office. I had an office in the Ministry of the Interior, which facilitated my traveling around and also gave me an official sanction for going different places and visiting province chiefs, visiting military leaders and whatnot.

G: Was the Minister of the Interior a confidant of Diem? Was he a trusted man in the government?

C: He was a very trusted man in the government because he was an extremely staunch Catholic. In theory he was responsible for all police activities. He was also responsible for the government administration, province and district levels, all through South Vietnam. But that didn't work that way. The province chiefs, most of them, were military officers appointed by Diem himself or his brother Nhu. Recommendations would be made by other people, and if they passed on it, they'd be all right. So in actuality he didn't really command anything. He was administratively responsible for the administration of the civil authorities to the central government. And he was responsible also for executing the orders of the central government as it pertained to, for example, the different programs that they had such as strategic hamlets, the research in areas in destroying the quote, unquote "VC" infrastructure, and bringing the people from the outlying areas into fortified--well, they weren't fortified, they put a bunch of barbed wire around it, put a couple of tires, and sat a guy up there with a shotgun. That was supposed to be a fortified hamlet. But he was responsible for administratively implementing Ngo Dinh Nhu's program in the strategic hamlets.

In May of 1963 we went up to Hue with the Minister of the Interior, and there were the I and II Corps commanders at a meeting. I never did know what happened at this meeting. All I had was the aircraft with the Minister and his entourage. I did not partake of the meeting because the meeting was called by a brother of Diem who was considered as a warlord.

G: Was this Can?

C: Yes, Ngo Dinh Can. Brother Can, he was a warlord in the Hue-Danang area.

During this meeting I wandered around Hue and found out that there was going to be a celebration of Buddha's birthday, and that night they were going to take the boats with candles on them and go down the Perfume River. And I asked the Minister if I could stay and he told me no, I'd better come back. I wanted to see it. It was very calm in Hue, nothing really going on. So I know that the I Corps and II Corps commanders left rather early, about four o'clock in the afternoon. We didn't take off until quite late, about six o'clock in the afternoon. One thing that was interesting about it was that we were taking off, we knew that we would have to land in Saigon, Tan Son Nhut, after dark, and in those days, 1963, that was not permitted. So of course the Minister got yak-yak on [the phone], got the things cleared, and they were waiting for us when we got there.

I did see that the Buddhists had paper flags strung up all over the place and there was nothing going on. The next day we learned that there was a demonstration [in Hue], and the military province chief and the military reacted to this Buddhist demonstration. People were killed, and of course this one factor, I believe, was probably the catalyst to jell any dissension they had because of the way that it was handled by the government. They had made certain demands on the government after it happened, and one of them was to be compensated for the deaths and punish those who were guilty of that. And

the more that the government hesitated on meeting any demands, the more that the Buddhists became a political power. Up to then nobody had paid very much attention to them as a group. Now, from this there emerged certain Buddhist leaders. Of course then we had the famous burning of the bonze in Saigon, and that was another shock.

During this period of time I did from time to time run into certain corps commanders or divisional commanders or the parachute unit commander. I'd run into them either when they were coming down to meetings in Saigon or I'd run into them in their favorite haunts, restaurants, in Saigon. And it became apparent to me that there was something going on among the military. Now, I wasn't the only one who had contacts with the military or with the Buddhists or with other elements of the Vietnamese government. There were other people also reporting and of course it became evident that there was quite a dissatisfaction. All of a sudden people who never thought of being Buddhists--they ignored the religion--became staunch Buddhists. And while it was always considered sort of a woman's religion, for the women, they started getting Buddhist, if you want to call it Buddhist, propaganda, giving a Buddhist side of the story in their grievances against the government.

So by the time of July of 1963, and I remember this very distinctly because it was the Fourth of July and on the Fourth of July the ambassador always threw a great big party for everybody. So it was not suspicious for the military leaders to be with Americans that day. I had been told to present myself at the Caravelle Hotel, and

while there I saw most if not all of the important military leaders of the government of Vietnam, including the navy, the air force, the army. It was at that time that I was informed by General [Tran Van] Don that there was a plan afoot.

G: Let me ask you something here. Your boss was, I presume, Jocko [John] Richardson?

C: Jocko Richardson, yes.

G: Who was reputed to be very close to Ngo Dinh Nhu.

C: Yes. That was his reputation, yes.

G: Weren't the generals afraid that if they approached you, you might turn them in?

C: No. Not at that stage when they were just talking, friendly talk. It was all done in a big nightclub where they all were in the Caravelle Hotel, downstairs in the Caravelle. So there wasn't anything out of the ordinary. So that's when I first learned that they were considering this.

G: Did they ask you to do anything?

C: No, absolutely nothing, just informed me of it. Of course, I did inform the chief of station about this, and over the period of the next few weeks it started heating up. I wasn't the only one saying it, other people made contacts of their friends and it was obvious there was something afoot. Now, the national day in those days was in August, about the twentieth, I don't know exactly the date, between the twentieth and twenty-fifth, maybe it was the twenty-sixth of August, I forget. I don't know whether it was the eighth or ninth of

August I talked to Big [Duong Van] Minh, I don't know the exact date, but I did talk to Big Minh one time, and he was the leader of the coup plotters. He was the figurehead. But he was the father symbol of all the rest; I believe he was a senior general and he was dissatisfied because he had no function.

About the middle of August it became obvious that there was really some serious planning or a hell of a lot of talk, and we thought at first that it would probably be pulled in August. That was the famous aborted coup. They were not in position at that time to do the job. One, they did not have their ducks in order and they had not gotten all of the important units lined up. So this was the time of the aborted period. It did not come off.

In September it was off and on and on and off, thing like that, and finally we got to the point where we said, "Look, they don't have the wherewithal, they don't know--they're not organized or anything like that," and forgot them. Not forgot about it, but just monitored them.

G: [Henry Cabot] Lodge arrived around the end of August, didn't he?

C: Yes. Well, you see what had happened, after the national day, the central government, because of the Buddhists--there were more burnings, more bonzes and some of the bonzesses, females that burnt themselves. That wasn't only in Saigon, it was also in other parts of the country. And every one of these self-immolations had a very strong psychological reaction on not only the people but also the military. So the central government decided to establish martial law, and when

they did this they had a curfew. One time during the curfew period I was called over to the general staff headquarters during the night, escorted over, because if you were caught on the street they'd shoot at you. And I had quite a lengthy conversation with General Don, who outlined, not in detail, but the overall idea of the plan and things like that, stating that the military definitely had a bitch against the government and they were planning on doing something about it. Their big interest was no longer that this was going to happen; they had decided.

Well, during this period and right before Lodge came, units under the control of Ngo Dinh Nhu, which were their special forces under command of Colonel [Le Quang] Tung, attacked the Xa Loi Pagoda. Then immediately after the attack on the pagoda, the rumor went out that the military had done this. Well, they were paramilitary. So General Don, Minh, [Le Van] Kim, all of them got quite upset that they were blamed for something that they did not do and they wanted to make it clear to the United States government they had nothing to do with it. So I don't know exactly at what time that [happened], but there was a strong representation made by the Ambassador. I don't know, it was within two or three days. But I had another meeting with Big Minh at the general staff a day or two after the Xa Loi Pagoda raids, and at this meeting Big Minh wanted to assure me that they hadn't done it and they would like some sign from the United States government to say that they were not involved.

I reported back to the U.S. Embassy and I verbally reported this to Jocko Richardson, and to the Ambassador. It's the first time we ever met.

G: Did Richardson take you in to the Ambassador?

C: Well, no, it was in a room next to the Ambassador. The Ambassador knew that I had gone to the meeting. He had been informed. When I came back he wanted to listen to my debriefing of just what had transpired. It was at that point that I think that there was a first indication of the tension between the Ambassador and Jocko Richardson. For my own part, Jocko Richardson is one of the fairest, squarest, most honest chiefs of station I've ever served under and it was a pleasure serving with him. One of the things, his greatest strength was he might not agree with what you say but he'd always allow you to say it, and he'd so put it in his message. It wasn't all one-sided with him. He wanted a well-rounded report from everybody. We'd have weekly wrap-ups, and he would say, "Now, members of the so-and-so disagree with this."

As we went back into September and October it then started really getting serious. One of the things that they had to contend with was the ones within the military establishment which they thought would have to be neutralized in anything. What they wanted to preclude was the 1960 fiasco over again. Ton That Dinh, who was formerly the general commanding II Corps, was military governor in Saigon-Gia Dinh and responsible for the security of Saigon-Gia Dinh. He was in the beginning a doubtful element but they needed him.

The other doubtful element was the special forces units because they were highly organized, very well trained, praetorian guard for the palace. Between them and the actual palace guards, they would be a very serious force to contend with. Also they had means of communications that the other services didn't have, the ground forces, the marines, the airborne, the air force. The armored units played a very important part. They wanted to be sure that they would be [inaudible].

So what they did--[by] they I'm talking about the generals: General Big Minh, General Tran Van Don, General Le Van Kim and General Tran Thien Khiem--what they did was start information in that the situation was very bad with the VC in and around Saigon. And they used General Ton That Dinh as a channel to communicate this to Ngo Dinh Nhu and the President. In so doing they arranged to commit certain doubtful units, including the special forces units, outside of Saigon so they didn't have to worry about them. The Ambassador was kept informed at all stages of--

G: And you were the liaison?

C: I was the liaison. The Ambassador had talked to Colonel [General] Don at one point, I don't know what day it was, but he had talked to him and Colonel Don asked him if I was speaking for the Ambassador. He said yes. There were certain doubts of different Americans in the official family. The two people who the General suspected the most were Jocko Richardson, wrongly, and General [Paul] Harkins, wrongly. The reason that they suspected General--well, first, the reason they suspected

Jocko Richardson was because he was too close to Nhu. That was his job to be close to Nhu, like my job was to be close to the General.

Then they were worried about General Harkins because General Harkins would ask his military advisers in the field, regimental, division, corps, senior officers to check in, and of course they'd go and say, "Hey, what's this I hear you're doing? General, you're planning a coup?" Everybody is going coup, coup, coup, sounded like a bunch of pigeons, everybody's couping all over the place. And of course they'd say no. General Harkins would have to reply back to the military here, and of course there would be questions asked of him, from Secretary [Robert] McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Maxwell Taylor, everybody was asking questions of this poor guy. Here you see we're in a situation where one group is saying one thing, and the other group's going coup-coup like a bunch of pigeons, and they say, "Oh, no, we never heard of it." They wouldn't hear anything about it because the [Vietnamese] military officers say, "Hey, what the hell are the Americans asking us about a coup? What is this? Are we blown?" A thing like that. So they won't say anything. And here on the other hand would be a small group of individuals, including myself, who'd be reporting what they were talking about.

So you could see where there was a big mix-up here in Washington on that on the highest level. And I'm sure President Kennedy was just as confused as everybody else. Just what the hell was going on out there?

G: That reminds me of a story when he sent Mr. [Joseph] Mendenhall and General [Victor] Krulak on a visit.

C: Oh, yes. (Laughter)

G: Did you talk to either of them?

C: I talked to both of them. I know Mendenhall, Krulak. They went out in the provincial areas, they went out in the boondocks, some of them went to the urban area, and finally they couldn't even figure out what the hell was going on. I understand that famous thing the President said after they reported, "Are you sure you two went to the same country?" (Laughter) Because it was really confusing.

They [the coup plotters] were highly suspicious of any break in security. They were so doggone afraid that too many people would know about it and they would be picked up, because if Nhu had really known what was going on he would have arrested every one of them.

G: Now that's the part I have a little trouble with. Mr. Richardson, it seems to me, is put in a very difficult position with this knowledge.

C: He is.

G: Does he have a responsibility to Nhu to tell him what's going on or not?

C: No, he wouldn't have the responsibility to Nhu to tell him what was going on, because, you see, the chief of a cookie factory mission--oh, you'll have to explain what the cookie factory is to these people.

(Laughter)

G: [inaudible] CIA.

C: The chief of the cookie factory mission is a member of the country team. The chief of the country team is the ambassador, and even the military, General Harkins was under the ambassador. The ambassador ran the country team; he was the chairman of the country team. So they executed his orders.

G: Okay, but as an adviser to Nhu?

C: If the ambassador told him to keep his mouth shut, he would do it.

G: Did he tell him to keep his mouth shut?

C: I don't know. That I do not know. I wasn't privy to very many conversations between Hydrochloric Acid and Jocko, I really wasn't.

G: Did Lodge give you directions personally or did he have Richardson tell you what he wanted?

C: Personally. For example, he would approve every meeting I had. I would tell him and get his permission. I was told what I was to say and what I was not to say. I was told what I was trying to find out.

G: Did you agree with your instructions? Did you think you were being guided properly?

C: I agreed with my instructions because if I disobeyed my instructions, just deviated one way or the other, I knew what would happen to me and I had no doubt: good old Cabot Lodge would have seen that I would never work for the United States government again and I would never know what had happened.

G: What was the other nickname you gave him yesterday?

C: Cabbage Head.

G: Cabbage Head.

C: Also called him Hydrochloric Acid, HCL. Sometimes he could be very mean. But he would approve all meetings, he'd get a report on all meetings, and sometimes when he would be sending a message back--I don't know if he was sending it to McGeorge Bundy or who he was sending it to, wherever it was, State Department, I don't know what he was doing--he would show me, but he wouldn't show me the whole message, he'd show me just the part where it pertained to me, and he'd fold over the message. Or sometimes he'd receive a message and he'd show me the part that pertained to me. Those were instructions.
"Yes, sir." I went out like a good corporal; I did exactly what I was told.

You see, there was no intriguing. What I was basically, because of the contact, I was a reporting officer, I was reporting back what one group said. Now there were other people with the Catholics, there were people with the Buddhists, there were people with the Hoa Hao, the Cao Dais, the bare-ass Montagnards up in the mountains. They had people with everybody. They were reporting, too, so mine was just one little part so that people back here could make up their judgments, I don't know.

G: But your little part was right at the top.
C: Yes, toward the end I was right at the top.
G: You were in a kind of a dicey position, too, aren't you? What would happen to you if they suspected you were going to blow them?
C: Well, you see what happened was that about ten days before the coup I talked to General Don and he told me, "Next week we want you to stay

home at all times, twenty-four hours a day." Well, I knew that things were getting hotter, so I had a plan to get the funds, get the pistol, get a jeep, get my radio communications established so I could talk to the embassy, also be on the net. I had two nets. I had to do all that. Also I had made arrangements, because my daughter had been born in July and was very small, I made arrangements that when I gave the signal, which I made up myself, the sound right here, that the coup was on that I was to have a U.S. Special Forces FA team come directly to my house and take over and guard my house, because I figured that if something happened and it aborted that I would not get out of the general staff. In fact, that was confirmed later. And that their responsibility was to get my family lock, stock and barrel, and barrel through and put them on an airplane and get them out of the country. They were not responsible for anything I did.

G: What was going to happen if the thing aborted? What was going to happen to you?

C: Well, I'll lead up to that.

So I had all this done. I disobeyed Don's orders. The security police had a post not too far from where I lived and I knew the people, and every once in a while they'd station themselves out in front of my house, just to let you know they were there. So I figured if I changed any of my habits, you know, leave every morning in a sedan with my driver and went to the embassy, if I didn't do this then they'd be more suspicious, unless I was sick. And then everybody

would find out because everybody yaks. The maids say, "Oh, he's sitting there," you know.

So I informed the Ambassador that it was going to happen, and at the crucial moment before it happened, the President of the United States asked for Henry Cabot Lodge to come back to the United States and sent an aircraft to bring him back. I don't know whether it was Air Force One, [inaudible] a U. S. government-owned thing. So Cabot Lodge called me in and he said, "You know, I'm to go back. The President has called me back." So that happened. He said, "I don't want to take that airplane." I said, "Mr. Ambassador, you don't have to worry. You'll never get on that airplane." Well, I don't know if it was through the press or how, [but] the generals found out that Cabot Lodge had been called back. The mere fact that he wasn't going to move--because I told him he wasn't going to leave, because if he left he'd be in the air when this thing happened. So they wanted me to tell him to go ahead and leave, don't change anything, just make it normal. He could always come back. But he wasn't going to leave. If you know Henry Cabot Lodge, when he makes up his mind, he's quite a determined man.

So what happened was on the crucial day Harry the Hat Felt arrives and decides to talk to them with Cabot Lodge. Again, Cabot Lodge accompanies Admiral Felt. General Don, who was responsible for implementation of the goddamned coup, had to be present. They're ticking off. In the meantime, I had been sent. But like everything the Vietnamese do, they screw things up. They were to cut communications

at a certain time for the PTT [?]. They were to leave certain communication lines open, and one of them was my house. Well, they were playing around and they cut communications to my house, so General Don sent one of his aides over to my house to tell me to get my fanny over there. He says, "We're going." In the meantime we could see the troop movements coming in, the coup troops that we knew of, moving. So I went home, put on my uniform, strapped on my gun, took my little satchel full of dough and put it in the jeep and told my bodyguard driver, "We're going out to the general staff." In the meantime Harry the Hat was out at Tan Son Nhut ready to take off. Don had to be there, knowing that it was moving. What's going to happen? (Laughter)

So he rushed back. I got there about ten minutes before he did, at the general staff headquarters. They were all there. So I'd given the signal that it was on, the FA team moved to my house. I checked my communications; they were back up then. I checked telephonic communications to the U.S. Embassy. And I didn't, but we confirmed that the palace still had communications, because we wanted to keep that line open. We were afraid that the palace would use their radio communications like they did in 1960, so we had that cut when it happened.

The purpose of having the coup at that day, they called a meeting of all the corps commanders. Let's see, II Corps didn't come down, that was General Nguyen Khanh, because his specific job was to keep the house in Pleiku as a safe house so that they could take the

President and Nhu to the safe house, close to an airport, until they could evacuate him later. That was the plan.

G: I wonder why they wanted to take him so far.

C: They didn't want him to get down close to Dalat. There was another communications system set up in Dalat. Not only that, some troop elements were not committed. You had the officers school in Dalat. See, that was another thing. So it would be very easy for him and his communications. . . . So Pleiku cut off his communications, holed him up in that big lodge they had up there on a hill. There was an airfield there in Pleiku, a large one, where they could get an aircraft.

G: Is that II Corps headquarters?

C: II [Corps] headquarters. That was Nguyen Khanh headquarters. That was Nguyen Khanh's job.

G: That's an old French villa.

C: Oh, that beautiful villa up there. You saw that beautiful log villa? I always wondered how in the devil the termites kept from eating that poor thing up.

G: Well, a lot of it was tile and brick. I was in it.

C: But the outside, you know, a thing like that. Well, they had one down in Kontum also, a beautiful place. That used to be Bao Dai's hunting lodges.

They also sent down and arrested the I Corps commander. They went to get the naval commander and they shot him on the way.

G: Why?

C: Don't know. Never did--they shot him. Don't forget that the navy is the one that fired against the aircrafts in 1962. Their navy was the one that was trying to shoot down the aircraft that attacked the palace, because they'd swing around the palace, go down the river, and the navy just fired away like mad.

G: They may have remembered that.

C: They have long memories.

Colonel Tung was present at the meeting. They arrested him, and his troops that were next to the general staff headquarters, a small unit commanded by Tung's brother was firing. They were firing in between general staff headquarters. So they forced Tung to call his brother, got him to come over to general staff, cease fire immediately. So Tung's brother arrives. So they had the brother and Tung. I was told they were there by Don or Big Minh or somebody. Somebody told me, "Lou, everybody will recognize your voice. You've got a loud voice. Don't talk too loud, they're in the next room there."

A little later Big Minh came up to me and he said, "Lou, you know that if we lose you're not going back, you're coming with us. We're going to take to the maquis. We're going to go into a--" So that confirmed what I thought would happen.

G: Is that why you had the gun?

C: Well, everybody else was armed, why shouldn't I be?

So we got into communications with the palace. Diem attempted to tell them to come and talk, but they'd gone around that race track before and said no, they were prepared to accept his surrender and

everything like that. What they had done is what you're doing, they had taken a tape recorder and got every one of the generals and every one of the unit commanders and had them speak into the tape recorder that they were for a coup. Then I was told, and now confirm, but told later that they had made several duplicates of this tape. They rushed one tape and put it over to the radio station and several others were hidden, so that somebody couldn't say that he didn't say this. Only I was present when every one of them spoke to Diem. They were tape recording it at that time. I watched this. And gave their name, their unit and what have you. The only person we didn't have at that meeting that was important was an individual who commanded youths, Republican Youth, Cao Xuan Bi [?]. He wasn't there. They made an appeal to the Republican Youths to rally to the cause and save the Republic and what have you, and it was ignored, first of all. In the provinces the other people had neutralized them. They didn't fight; they just laid down their arms.

Well, there were several telephone calls, and every time that Diem would call they would say the same thing, about three I think. Then as we went into the evening--oh, one of the things that always happens, there's always 10 per cent that--the word had been issued and they had emphasized under no circumstances was an American to be--an American adviser--where their units [were]. Of course, here was some guy sitting up there in his jeep with his senior adviser, and he was bouncing down the road, and they reported it and we had to get the embassy to tell MACV to tell these people that he's to get off at the

next stop, if not sooner. He is not to ride in. They wanted no American participation overtly. This is why they limited it to me. They could always--the embassy was ready to deny me. I acted--just what some people would have loved to have seen--on my own without instructions, that this was not theirs. In case it flopped I was going to be made steak [?]. Cabot Lodge told me he was going to deny me. I felt like, well, what is that program? You know, "If you decide to accept this mission. If you fail"--"Mission Impossible." That's before the program started. I felt just like that after I saw that. I knew that I was in a hell of a bind.

But we got the police stations, the radio station. Our only problem was in town itself. We neutralized the units in the Delta by changing the commander and putting it on our side. General Thieu--he was not then a general, he was Colonel Nguyen Van Thieu and later president of the country--moved with his units. They were a little doubtful of him but--he came a little late, not a little, he was I think an hour late on it, but he came anyway. The other unit commanders all rallied, and they broadcast over the air who all was involved. Well, it was everybody, except Tung and his brother, and Cao Xuan Bi. Then they decided--there were other units coming into town from our outskirts. They had the NCO academy, they had--everybody and his dog was coming in. Everybody was getting in on the act, too.

We were held up for a while by the presidential guards, very well armed, very well disciplined. They were one of the units we were afraid of. We had them surrounded and started firing artillery into

their unit, into their area. But for all the firing, there was not a hell of a lot of damage of personnel and what have you. That I was surprised [at].

About nine or ten o'clock that night there was a lull and Big Minh came over and said, "You know, we're going to call in the government." Diem's government hadn't all reported in, all the ministers and things like that. "If they don't report in by midnight, we're going to arrest them." That was a good idea, but a little late. But since there was this lull, I was talking, I said, "You know, once you're successful in your attack you should keep pursuing it. Don't have a chance, because you still have very strong opposition in the center of town, continual." I don't know, that was the only advice I ever gave him and he ignored it. So it kept [on] intermittent firing, oh, till about one or two o'clock in the morning. Then the air force got into the act and flew around with their aircraft, buzzing the town, things like that. That showed that the air force was completely on our side by that time. That was maybe the second or third time I'd seen Nguyen Cao Ky.

G: Was he in the command center?

C: He was not in command, he was a lieutenant colonel at the time, but he came to the joint general staff. They started bringing in the civilian members of the cabinet and they brought in the Vice President, too. They had quite lengthy discussions.

G: In Vietnamese?

C: In Vietnamese, [among] themselves. About four or five o'clock in the morning, that would be the second of November, they started yakking about what to do. They started organizing the armored car elements that were at the general staff. They got Pham Ngoc Thao ready, because he knew the palace better than anybody else, and he knew the--there were not tunnels; I wish people would quit talking about it. They had a passageway between the palace and the city hall, used to be the city hall, and all it was was just like between the Executive Office Building and the White House. You can go underground there, you don't have to go across [the street]. That's all it was, it was not a tunnel. The reason being that that used to be the French governor's palace and the administrative [offices], and so the French governor would go underneath instead of going out in the street, and he'd go into the city hall away from. . . . Because Diem, remember, had moved from the Doc Lap Palace in the center of town; he moved to the old French governor's palace. And there was a tunnel or passageway between--hell, it wouldn't be over a hundred feet long.

So they wanted to be sure that they got the palace. So Pham Ngoc Thao and Colonel Bong [?], one of the armored commanders, had been set up at the right moment; they were to go directly to the palace. About six o'clock in the morning, we get a telephone call and this was from Diem. I don't know if it was six-ten, six-twenty, but it was after six o'clock in the morning. This was the first time he asked to speak to Big Minh. What we didn't know at that time--we always assumed that all telephone calls were coming from the palace--we didn't know he was

out in Ma Tuyen's house. We didn't know any of this. So he told Big Minh that he was going to surrender, and that he would like to surrender with all the dignity and like that. Big Minh said he was ready, but he would not accept the surrender until all Vietnamese quit firing at one another. So he said all right, he would give an order. At ten minutes to seven there would be a cease fire; there would be no more firing. And true to his word, at ten minutes to seven it stopped. Boom, just like that. Well, immediately Pham Ngoc Thao and Bong took off directly with the armored cars to the palace. Big Minh took off with an MP escort and a jeep through the back road by the golf course to go the other way.

When we'd gotten this telephone call, we all stood up in the thing and everybody knew it was over with. There was no discussion, except by one general, General Le [Van Kim?], who was the first chief of police of Diem in 1955. He was the only one who talked at that time about knocking off Diem.

G: What did he say?

C: He said that he should be killed, a thing like that. But nobody really paid any attention, everybody was yakking and whatnot. Big Minh came over to me and he said, "Lou, I want an aircraft." This is before he took off. All this was happening within base, after the call from Diem. So I called the embassy, I got hold of the acting chief of station, and I told him that they needed an aircraft to take Diem and Nhu out of the country. I was informed--I don't know where this came from, who said it; I know that Cabot Lodge was not at the

embassy when I called, I know that--that it would take twenty-four hours to get the aircraft, that the United States government would fly them, after they asked for asylum, to the first country that granted asylum. But they were not going to fly to a country at which they'd have to make a stop. For example, if France gave asylum first, they would fly directly to France. Therefore they needed a KC-135. The nearest place was Okinawa. For example, if Taiwan gave it to them, they didn't want to land in Hong Kong, they didn't want to land in India. They didn't want to go someplace where Diem would rally. If he would be granted exile, he would go there. If we had known, say, for example, that the Philippines would have been the first ones to grant them asylum, there would have been no sweat. I told Big Minh it would take twenty-four hours for us to set it up properly. So he said, "Twenty-four hours. Fine." He took off, like I said, when he went back, and he had Bong and he had Pham Ngoc Thao. They all went to the palace.

In the meantime, while they left, there was Kim, Le Van Kim. I talked to the Vice President. I talked to a couple of the ministers, not all of them, I talked to a couple of them. And Thieu [?] was going to play the part--not play the part, he was to receive Diem's resignation. So they brought in a big table and they put green felt on it and they started sweeping up the place and cleaning. We had cigarette butts and Bireley bottles, it was orange juice. To this day I can't drink orange juice without thinking--there was no beer, nothing to drink during that period, but, boy, did we drink that Bireley,

B-I-R-E-L-E-Y, orange juice. Ran out of orange juice. They were cleaning it all up.

They had taken--because out in front of the general staff there was a bus--a large bus to Diem, so they had taken canvas and put it over the bus. General Don tells me, he said, "Lou, we're going to call the press in. We're going to have the television, everything is going to be here." I said, "I think I better get the hell out of here. This is all I need." And he said, "Okay." So all this was going on, and they had sent buses to pick up the press.

I went home, taking a shower. Oh, I felt miserable. I wanted to sleep more than anything else. I get a call: report to the embassy. So I get my uniform back on, strap on my gun, and I go to the embassy. I get there and I'm shown a cable--obviously it was highest authority--wanted to know where Diem was. Oh, God. I didn't know where he was. I'd assumed that they'd picked him up at the palace, I didn't know. So I went back out to general staff, and here were all the rest of the ministers, including--one minister came and surrendered to my house, that was Bui Van Luong, minister of the interior. I had him taken out there to the general staff. So I went back out there. All the ministers were sitting down. Big Minh, Le Van Kim, Khiem, all of them were talking to them, you know. I went over and I shook hands with all the ones I knew and what have you. People were running around. People I'd never seen before all of a sudden were getting promoted. It was a mess.

I went up to Big Minh's aide--oh, I had two messages. I had one, I was to find Diem. I had to do that right away. Secondly, I was to advise Big Minh that we, the United States government, were not going to be the first country to recognize them. So we were not going to do anything like that. But if they wanted U.S. recognition, they'd better release the labor leader, a guy by the name of [Tran Ngoc] Buu, that they had arrested, because they would need all the brownie points internationally that they could get, and one of the things they didn't want them to do is get in trouble with the international labor unions, because that would create a big mess.

I told this to Big Minh. He looked at me and he said, "Lou, you're already making conditions, aren't you?" I said, "No. But I do have to report where Diem is." He said, "They're here." I said, "Where are they?" I thought they were in the general staff headquarters. We were at the officers club; this is where they were talking to the ministers and what have you. He said, "He's at general staff, over at the headquarters." I said, "Well, how are they?" He said, "They committed suicide." I said, "Where?" He said, "Oh, they were not at the palace. They had escaped through a tunnel. We found them at the Catholic church in Cholon." I said, "They committed suicide there?" "Yes." I said, "General, I'm a Catholic. You're a Buddhist. I refuse to see them because if [there's] a one-in-a-million chance that anybody believes your concocted story, and there's a Catholic newspaperman who goes out by that church tonight and sees a priest holding mass, he knows that that is not true. So I don't want to be

the only one who actually knows in case the people believe you. I'm not prepared to have a VC incident now." So I think that really did shake him up slightly. I told him that. So they changed the story. And I knew that they were in the armored truck. I didn't know right then who had done the actual killing.

What had happened, they had used the telephone system in Cholon that was still in existence and branched into--like they were calling from the palace--and told where they were. They told them to stand fast, that somebody would come pick them up. Now, Big Minh at the time that this was supposed to have happened was supposedly at the palace looking for Diem. I found out later on that as they were bringing Diem and Nhu back, first of all Nhu objected to going into an armored car, said that wasn't dignified enough for the chief of state, he'd like to have an escort, that they wouldn't go in there. They put him in there anyway. And on the way back they were crossing the railroad tracks coming into Saigon, going to the general staff headquarters, when Big Minh's aide stopped, got on board the armored car, which had Diem and Nhu alive, and then killed them.

G: On whose orders?

C: This--I'll always say what General Don [said] when he was asked that question, "Why don't you ask Big Minh?" Why, I don't know.

G: Who do you have this story from? How did you piece this together?

C: Well, the people who were the liaison with the armored units, they got the story. Hell, they had the pictures of them dead that afternoon. So that's the way we got it. Later on of course I was told; there

were a lot of us knew who did it. I did not find out. All I knew was where they were, and I reported that they were dead, period. I also reported that I was asked to see the bodies and that I had refused, but I got a message back from McCone right away that I acted properly by refusing to see the bodies.

Well, later on the following day there was a lot of celebration. Ambassador Lodge asked me to bring Don and the junta to the Embassy, which I did. And this is the time that they had decided not to have a civilian form of government that was going to have a--that was told directly to Ambassador Lodge. Since we had not recognized the government they were told that I would be the liaison between the Ambassador and them until recognition. After they left and I was left behind, if I had any special orders. One of the best stories, and I'll never forget it, Lodge says, "Lou, you know what? There's only one U.S. ambassador here. That's me. And until you are appointed by the President of the United States you're not the ambassador! You understand?" "Yes, sir!" (Laughter)

G: Don't make policy is what he was saying.

C: "You are not going to make any policy and nothing is changed. You are going to execute my orders without hesitation or murmuring." So I don't know how many days later we recognized them. I didn't keep track of that. I was more interested in writing up my final report and getting it forwarded. That was all there was to it.

Then of course as everything happened, we had a series of coup-ettes afterwards, little coups, the first one being Nguyen Khanh's.

That happened when I was back in France, on the way back to Saigon. I'd come here in January. I had to talk to Governor [Averell] Harriman, McGeorge Bundy. I was supposed to see President Johnson, but he had the Italian Prime Minister here. There was snow on the ground, I'll never forget that. And he also had the Davis Cup team in there, and they were taking pictures and everything like that. I wish I had thought of this line. I go back out to the cookie factory headquarters, they said, "Did you see the President?" I said, "I saw him, but I didn't talk to him. I was with McGeorge Bundy." I told them that there was this great big bowl. I didn't know the Davis Cup was nothing but an overgrown punch bowl, and he was getting pictures taken of that. Then he had to leave right away; I was told he can't see me because he has to leave right away to go see the Prime Minister of Italy, and they took off like big birds. Oh, boy, a thing like that, slush and everything. Somebody looked at me, he said, "Lou, you know what? You were the eight ball caught between the tennis ball and the meat ball!" That was a good line. (Laughter)

G: There was something to laugh about anyway.

What happened to Colonel Tung?

C: Colonel Tung had been killed by the junta that night of the coup, along with his brother. Both of them were killed.

G: Why did they go to all of those elaborate arrangements to fly Diem to Pleiku if they intended to kill him all the time?

C: I have a theory that I think, in my mind, is the only way I can rationalize it. When [inaudible] slipped out on them, they were going

through--because I had asked what their orders were when they were going to go through the palace and stuff: "We were not to fire until we were fired upon." I think that when they got there and they found out--Big Minh found out--that Diem and Nhu were not there and that he had pulled one on them and they were gone, they had taken and deflated his--I think that the thing was "get them."

G: They won't pull this again?

C: No. He had lost much face. That's what I think; I have no proof of this. And we swore at the time not to say anything, even to speculate. Among ourselves we said, "Look, it's no use. It will come out one day. It will be known exactly what happened." But like I say, Big Minh gave the order, he gave it to his aide. And what did Nguyen Khanh do to the aide? When he had his little coupette in January of 1964, he arrested, what is it, the neutralist generals? Put them all up in Dalat. Guess who was the first person to die after he was successful?

G: The aide.

C: The aide. You know, he committed suicide by hanging himself with parachute boot laces. That's the story. And I can understand why Khanh did that. He lost face, too. One of the conditions under which he was to participate in the coup was if Diem and Nhu would not be harmed, especially Diem, not Nhu as much. But Diem was not to be harmed. And that's why he stayed in II Corps to assure that there would be a place. He got his units to rally, but he stayed there to be sure that they were properly taken care of when they would be

brought up to Pleiku. So he lost much face, too. So what does he do? Choo-ee, (makes throat-cutting motion) hangs the guy. Oh, he didn't do it, somebody else did it for him.

G: So what was the atmosphere in Saigon now that--?

C: The atmosphere was jubilation.

G: General?

C: General jubilation. People were tired of the--well, we always called it the non-sex laws. You know, you couldn't dance, couldn't fraternize, oh, all that stuff, all those things. The students would be released from jail, the Buddhists would be back in their pagodas, all those things. So that it was sort of like a lot of pressure taken off at one time.

This was good for a period of time, but there was one thing wrong. These people who had won originally didn't know how to govern. They wanted to run things as--what they thought was democratic is everybody agrees. Well, not everybody agreed on certain things. So Nguyen Khanh planned his coup out. I wasn't there. I had been told about it; he told me about it. I didn't believe him.

G: You were there in December?

C: Yes. I was there in December. I left January 7 or 8 of 1964 to come and report to the State--I had to report to the cookie factory and the State Department. I had to talk to Governor Harriman, and I had a talk with McGeorge Bundy and then the tennis ball and all that sort of thing.

G: What did you tell them?

C: I told everybody that wanted to listen that I didn't care, [that] if the individual--the junta I'm talking now--had a very close American friend, whether he's army, navy, Marine Corps, CIA, State Department, get his best friend, send him out there. So you would have maybe twelve or fifteen people under the ambassador, and so when they started talking to their best friend in the evening or something like that, or going out there, the embassy wanted to sell an idea, every one of these people would [have contacts]. So when they'd have their weekly staff meeting, that if something was mentioned, electrical clocks, I don't care what it was, everybody had heard about electrical clocks so they'd be on the same wavelength. Well, this was knocked out.

G: You wanted to put advice on a personal basis.

C: I wanted to have personal advisers: the best friend of Big Minh, the best--

G: Who would that have been?

C: Oh, somebody who used to send him--I forget what his name was, an American who--

G: A general?

C: I think he was a general later, a colonel when he knew Minh. But he sent him orchids, because Big Minh loved to play with orchids and he liked birds, to have birds in bird cages and everything like that. He liked that sort of stuff. This friend of his would send him orchids, and he [the friend] doesn't even grow orchids. He [Minh] cultivated orchids. I don't know who all were the best friends, because over the period of time they had their closest American friend. I wanted them

to be all brought in under the ambassador, whether they were military or civilian, and get their instructions from the ambassador, what we wanted done. [That's] the only way we could do it until we got people to working together, over maybe four or five months, and [to] understand how this process would work, and then let them on their own. It's just like turning little children loose. They [the Vietnamese] didn't know what the hell was going on. Militarily some of them were very, very good, but politically, except for maybe one or two who understood something about politics--Big Minh didn't know anything. Don didn't know. Le Van Kim did, so did Khiem. There were others that had a little knowledge of what the political process was, but the majority of them didn't know.

G: What was the atmosphere at the embassy after the coup?

C: My impression was that, well, they've done it, now let's see if they can handle it. Now of course the Ambassador was [able to establish a] very good relationship with the junta after we recognized it and things like that. The military command was backing many of the programs and all of that. AID was doing everything. And of course Cabot Lodge changed a lot of people out there and he got his team there. They had the possibility of doing it. I don't know if we fouled it up or. . . .

G: Did you have anything to do with McNamara's visit in December, when he went out to assess the situation?

C: December of when?

G: 1963.

C: 1963, that was--December of 1963. I was with him and Phan Huy Quat, former--in fact, I rode in their helicopter. We went down along the coast in II Corps. I was there but I had nothing to do--I was just there along with some of the generals there, that's all. But I had nothing to do with their discussion. I did not know. The only discussion I ever participated in with the junta and an official of the United States government was after the coup of Nguyen Khanh's of January of 1964, of which John McCone came out and had quite a talk with them, wanted to know what proof they had of neutralist tendencies that Nguyen Khanh claimed.

G: Didn't McCone bring Peer de Silva out about this time?

C: Yes, about that time, because Peer de Silva then took over from Dave Smith, who had been acting chief.

G: Who had? What was his name?

C: David Smith. He was the acting during the period that Jocko Richardson was relieved until Peer de Silva came out. I'd known Peer de Silva before. He's dead now. I'd known him back in Germany in the fifties.

G: Have you read his memoir [Sub Rosa]?

C: I didn't think it was good, but I think it's well he wrote them. See, there isn't very much you can say in those things. You take all the books, I don't give a damn whose they are, whether they're Bill Colby's or Dick Helms', any of those books, or Ed Lansdale's. They're generally extremely dull books because they can't say anything.

G: Have you read Thomas Powers' biography of Helms [The Man Who Kept the Secrets]?

C: Helms, that's one of the better ones. It explains a lot of things in there, and then there are some things that I know of that I'd forgotten all about that were explained in that book. Yes, I've read that.

G: I've been told that of all the books that's the best one, although it's still not very good.

C: It's the best one, and like you say, it's like everybody touting the books on Wild Bill Donovan. It's nothing. It's not going to be anything because what can they say? Wild Bill Donovan was a character who fought tooth and nail to form an intelligence organization for the United States government. That's all they can say. Well, he did. He antagonized the FBI and a few other people in the process, but at least he got something going. It was only later that the military really came in to form their own intelligence-gathering units, besides attaches and things like that. But really you have an intelligence-gathering and an analysis unit, that's what DIA is. That's all the cookie factory is is one great big group of analysts. Sure, there's information--

G: Well, you hope a great big group of operators, too, though, weren't they?

C: Well, I don't know anymore. I think there are. But most of them have been gotten rid of.

Tape 2 of 2

G: [You were] in Europe at the time of the Khanh coup, is that right?

C: Yes. Then I flew immediately into Saigon and I talked to Khanh.

G: You had known him before?

C: Oh, yes, I'd known him for a long time. I didn't understand his coup at all, though he had told me about it prior to my departing in January. When I got back he had already done it, and I was sort of upset by the fact that he had arrested some of the generals of the Big Minh coup.

G: Some of these men were friends of yours.

C: Some were very close friends of mine. And he had arrested Don, he arrested Ton That Dinh, he arrested Le Van Kim, he arrested Nguyen Van Vy, and he arrested Mai Huu Xuan.

G: Mai Huu Xuan was the last name?

C: Mai Huu Xuan, yes. And they were put in a palace in Dalat. I used to go down there and see them.

G: The excuse for this was that they were neutralists?

C: That's what they were accused of, and this is what--John McCone, when he went out there to talk to Khanh, I was with him, and all that John McCone wanted was the proof, and Khanh said he would furnish it. He never did.

G: He didn't have it?

C: I don't think he ever had it; I think this was just his ploy. But he could have succeeded, too. And Khanh, very intelligent man, very dynamic at the time. He's still a dynamic man.

G: Where is he, do you know?

C: He's in Orlando, Florida or something like that, I think, I don't know. I know where he is. He's--

G: Well, I can get it from you later, that's all right.

C: Yes, you can get it from me later.

So Khanh asked that I be assigned to him as his security adviser.

G: Personal security?

C: Personal security. So I made arrangements to have his personal bodyguards, his personal escorts, trained by an expert in the Secret Service techniques, you know, the weighting of the cars and the follow-up cars, the whole thing. We armored two of his passenger vehicles. We didn't do the fancy job but we took the armor plate out of Diem's bubble Cadillac that he never rode. We did that and then we took the doors apart and we put this nylon bulletproof material in the doors and all like that. Best we could do over there because we had no facility to really do them. It would stop a grenade, it would stop small arms fire. It wouldn't stop machine gun fire; it could shoot right through the damn thing. We didn't have puncture-proof tires or things like that, but it was enough to give him a sense of security. So we also equipped his personal bodyguard group with arms, .38s, and they were taught to fire [using] Secret Service methods and things like that.

So I was sort of a handyman to Khanh. Any time he wanted to go someplace, Lou would go with him. I went several times to see the generals in Dalat, the ones that were under arrest. I also was taken there the day that he tried them all. Khanh came and got me in Dalat and took me to see them. We broke out a bottle of champagne and celebrated that they. . . . Then I'd go with Khanh down to Vung Tau when he'd go down there on the weekends.

Then he tried to take over dictatorial powers by getting rid of Big Minh. That didn't go over so good, but he tried it. He issued a Vung Tau charter. That didn't last.

G: You said something yesterday that interested me. You thought that there might be a parallel with Egypt, that first would come General Naguib and then would come Colonel Nasser. Did you think Khanh was Colonel Nasser?

C: I think that if you try to compare Big Minh and Khanh, you'd have to say yes, because he was much more dynamic, very intelligent. Big Minh--nice guy, slow in many ways. He'd procrastinate a lot. I don't think that Big Minh even really wanted to be in the position he was, but he liked it, he liked all the honor and stuff that went along with it. But he didn't like the administrative responsibility that it entails, you know, going to receptions and doing all the normal things that he has to. There was a lot of hope when Khanh had taken over, "Now we'll see something different." But of course--

G: Lodge liked Khanh, didn't he?

C: Well, yes, Lodge liked him very much. (Laughter) I got a good story. When Lodge was being relieved and Ambassador Taylor was coming out, right before Lodge left, Nguyen Khanh gives him the biggest gong that they can give to anybody, with a big sash and things like that, and made him an honorary citizen of Vietnam. So the day of his departure, they'd had people out waving goodbye to Ambassador Lodge. Ambassador Lodge was dressed up as a mandarin, with the pointed shoes and the wrap-around hat and these robes and everything else. I was out at the

airport on a security detail when here comes the Ambassador and Nguyen Khanh and his entourage and everything like that. And I heard, and I don't know who made this statement, one of the press people says, "You know, when Lodge came here he looked like a president. When he's leaving he looks like the doorman at Ruby Fu's."

(Laughter)

He was really dressed up in all get-out.

G: I don't remember seeing any pictures of that, but it must have been a sight.

C: Oh, it was a sight.

G: Maybe you want to tell the transcriber what Ruby Fu's was.

C: Ruby Fu's was a restaurant.

(Laughter)

G: Good. Were you with Khanh when McNamara came over and they toured the country?

C: Yes, I was with Khanh there where--the famous "moun nam" story, "Vietnam moun nam," "[Vietnam] a thousand years" or something like that. I was with Khanh and I rode around in another helicopter. I had to do something for Khanh, something special. We finally got up to Dalat. I had to do something for him. You know, I was an errand boy. I had to arrange that certain people would be on his airplane, and certain people who had been on his airplane couldn't ride back with him. Instead of him doing it, I had to tell some of the big shots, "Hey, sorry. You take the back-up plane. The wheels are going to go up in the first plane." I was with them, yes, and we flew with

the helicopters and airplanes, and we went and took a whole tour down there. General [William] Westmoreland was there, too, I think. Yes, he was there with the entourage.

G: The purpose of this I understand was to convince everybody that Khanh was our choice and we wanted--

C: He was our man, yes. That was [the purpose], and he was doing all right.

G: What happened?

C: Well, about August or September of 1964, the latter part of August, beginning of September, I don't know exactly when, Khanh got a depression of some sort and so he went up to Dalat and started contemplating his navel. That was what we used to say because--this was the first time he'd ever done it--every time he was in a deep funk he'd just isolate himself and didn't want to see anybody. During this period he sent for me. This is the time that we sat down and we had quite a long chat about everything. I was there to listen; I wasn't there to advise or anything like that. The only thing I'd ever advised him on was taking care of himself from the physical security [standpoint]. He was mad during this period at Ambassador Taylor. So he told me his feelings, which was quite remarkable. And I copied his words down on a little notebook. I read them back to General Khanh. I said, "Are you sure that you want me to tell this to my ambassador?" He said yes.

G: What was the burden of his remarks?

C: That he was dissatisfied and that he had asked for an ambassador to replace Ambassador Lodge, and all he had, one of the dirtiest things, was that he'd received an unheralded trumpet and that he'd like to get rid of him, that he would like to have an ambassador--he was just mad, and I don't know the real reason he was mad. So he was using me as a conduit to tell the Ambassador.

I left that morning about eleven-thirty, twelve o'clock, and with notes in my hand I reported to the chief of station, Peer de Silva. I told him what had transpired with Khanh. Peer de Silva said, "You come with me. We're going to see the Ambassador and you will tell him." Well, we went to the Ambassador's residence--it was on a Sunday--and after about a half-hour or so, Ambassador Taylor and Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson came in after having played a set of tennis. They were still in their shorts. And Mr. de Silva explained that I had seen Khanh--the Ambassador knew that I had seen him because I could not do these things on my own, even under General Taylor. He had to be informed every time that I. . . .

Well, I read off what the Prime Minister had said, including the part he was dissatisfied with him and that he had asked for an ambassador. Ambassador Taylor, I could tell right then, he stiffened when I got through. He asked me only one question, "What language was this conversation in?" I said, "In French, sir." He said, "Are you sure you understand French?" I said, "Yes, sir." He [Taylor] didn't speak to me in French, he just asked me this, [and I said], "Yes, sir." He turned around to Peer de Silva and said, "I need your special plane."

This is the one I had just got through using, the Vopar [?]. And he and Ambassador Johnson took off to Dalat. What they did not know, which I had not [told them], because I was not asked, [was] that at that period of the day the clouds roll in in Dalat and you can't get in. You have to get in in the morning and get out in the morning, or you have to stay overnight, because there was a monsoon there and the clouds really rolled in.

Well, they flew up there and they couldn't land. What I learned later was that General Khanh's brother-in-law had brought a newspaper reporter by the name of Beverly Deepe, who worked for UPI, or I don't know where she worked. She might have been a stringer. I did not know her; I knew who she was if I'd see her, but I didn't know her, never talked to her. And he [Khanh] had told the same thing that he'd told me to Beverly Deepe. Of course she puts it on the wires. By the time that Ambassador Taylor and Ambassador Johnson had gotten back from not being able to land in Dalat, the story was on the press wires. Well, needless to say, and I respect Ambassador Taylor for this, because he's an honest man, he wrote a message out on yellow paper, a draft, sent it to me, and the gist of the message was that I had outlived my usefulness in Vietnam and that he was requesting that I be recalled.

G: He assumed that you had leaked the story?

C: It's the only thing I can imagine. I hadn't done it. Because we were strictly forbidden to discuss anything with the press that wasn't authorized for us. We were not permitted--oh, all of us knew press

men. I knew [David] Halberstam, I knew Neil Sheehan. So did Ambassador Lodge. Everybody knew all the main newspapermen. But we were not permitted to talk to them. So I had not leaked the story, but I was caught in one of these squeezes of which there was no way.

Well, the next day Ambassador Taylor flies up in the morning with the aircraft and he lands, and Nguyen Khanh had gotten it off his chest to me first and to Beverly Deepe, who put it on the press lines, and he was a happy little devil. So after the Ambassador had shown me the message, I had no objection.

G: You were ready to come home?

C: I was ready to come home; I didn't want to stay out there. A message came right back, and the Ambassador was kind enough to show it to me, said this was from Director McCone saying that he approves my being withdrawn and approves the Ambassador's decision, but this in no way is to reflect on my capabilities, period. It was a very nice message and the Ambassador was nice enough to show it to me. So he had granted me thirty-days stay of execution so that I could pack up my family--I had a young daughter--get my family ready to go home and what have you.

Well, what happened next was crazy. Ambassador Taylor had been called back to the United States for a conference with President Johnson, and Ambassador Taylor is alleged--I don't know--to have stated that there would not be any other coups. I had in the meantime received a message that somebody was planning a coup, and about the time that that message got to Honolulu, Ambassador Taylor said I am

not to wait thirty days, I'm to leave immediately. So I left on a Saturday, my wife, my children and everybody, the house unpacked and everything like that. I flew up to Hong Kong. The next day there was another coupette, a general by the name of [Duon Van] Duc had come in and taken over Saigon. Of course he was kicked out within twenty-four hours, but it was another incident. Well, I waited until my family joined me in Hong Kong, transferred back to the United States, and I'm sitting fat, dumb and happy, going to FSI [Foreign Service Institute]. [For] eleven months I went to Spanish language school.

G: What were you retooling for? What were they going to do with you?

C: They were going to send me down as assistant military attaché to Caracas. I was ready to go.

G: I think I know what you're going to get into, but before you do, let me ask you: in addition to being I think in the trade they call it the babysitter with Khanh--is that accurate?

C: Yes, I was a babysitter.

G: Was that your full-time job?

C: That was my full-time job.

G: Okay.

C: I didn't play any hanky-panky, I didn't go around--if he wanted to see me, I'd see him; if he didn't want to see me, I'd get away. No conspiracies, nothing. I wouldn't discuss anything.

G: Okay. I'm sorry I interrupted you. Go ahead.

C: No, that's all right.

G: Okay. You were studying Spanish for eleven months--

C: Eleven months, and all of a sudden I had--I was ready to receive my military orders, I was ready to buy my thousand dollars of PX, commissary things to take down to Caracas. I had bought the refrigerator. I hadn't bought the stove yet. I was told to report to the cookie factory. I reported in and I reported to Director Helms then, and he said, "Lou, you are going to Vietnam. You will report to Mr. William Bundy at the State Department," the next day or something like that. And I told him I didn't want to go back.

G: How strongly did you put that?

C: I told him I didn't want to go. And he said, "This is a directed assignment and you cannot refuse and you cannot let the agency down," period. I liked Dick Helms very much. He tells me that, you know, [I say], "Yes, sir, put me in, coach."

So I reported to the State Department. There was Ambassador Lodge, Ed Lansdale, Bill Bundy, Bill Colby, Napoleon Valeriano, I don't know who all. Dr. Deutsch [?]. A whole bunch of people. They had a meeting. Oh, Rufe Phillips was there at the meeting, too. Daniel Ellsberg was there, too, as I recall. And we were told that we're going to Vietnam. What was obvious was that we had no money, so we couldn't do anything.

G: Well, what were you supposed to do? What was the mission?

C: I couldn't figure it out. I don't know if we were out there to win the hearts and minds of the people or get the government going in the right direction or what we were going to do. We were to go out there.

Ambassador Lodge was coming that night. [I] talked to the Ambassador. I went several times to the State Department, talked to him.

G: You mean they were in effect telling Ed Lansdale, "Go out there, Ed, and do your thing"?

C: Well, that's what they were saying, "Go out there and do your thing."

So I went back via Paris, and I stayed in Thailand for about thirty days, because Nguyen Van Thieu was by this time prime minister with Nguyen Cao Ky as air vice marshal and deputy prime minister.

Thieu had stated, or word had come back that he approved of Ed Lansdale's team, everybody except Conein. Ed Lansdale went to see Thieu and it was obvious that he'd gotten a wrong message, and Thieu said, "Sure Conein can come back." Well, that took about three weeks before they got that straightened out. So I went in there and here was the team.

G: So what did they put you to doing?

C: Nothing. I didn't know what I was doing. I received no instructions. Ambassador Lodge did say that he wanted me to stay close to him. So I stayed close to him. I didn't have anything to do.

G: Did you renew old acquaintances?

C: No, I didn't renew old acquaintances. I saw people, but it was nothing. So after about six months of doing nothing, I asked to be relieved and to return to my parent organization. This was approved by the Ambassador; in fact, he talked to me about it, wanted to know what I wanted to do in my career, what I really wanted to do. I wanted to go back to my parent organization. So I was relieved from

the Lansdale team and I went back to my parent organization, and after a few weeks I was made the regional officer in charge for what used to be the III Corps or third military region under Thieu. The reason that was done was because they wanted me to be close enough to Saigon in case they were going to play cowboy and Indian again, that I could get to Saigon, obeying the Ambassador's wishes that I not. . . .

G: So you went back under the station chief then?

C: I went back under a station chief.

G: Had you been in Saigon?

C: I had been in Saigon, I had been there for a while and I'd traveled in some of the provinces a little. I went on trips up into the Central Highlands. I went down to the IV Corps, of course the III Corps. I didn't go up to I Corps--that was the Danang area--except for a couple of trips with Ed Lansdale when I went up.

G: What was Lansdale doing?

C: He was a special adviser to the Ambassador. Want to know the truth?

G: Yes.

C: I don't know what he was doing. Nobody knew what they were doing.

G: Well, I've been trying to figure it out, and I still don't know what he was doing.

C: Nothing. Had no money, had no logistical support, except what we had glommed onto from the cookie factory in the beginning. Nothing. We'd have VIPs like [Jack] Valenti come by, and we'd have things like that and would sit down and sing songs. Nothing. I can only take so much

of that. But I stayed on. I left--let's see, that was 1964-65.

1966-67 I was transferred from III Corps to the II Corps.

G: In 1967?

C: In 1966-67. And I returned to the United States and reported in, I stayed with the cookie factory until June of 1968. Then I was retired on medical disability and that was it.

G: What were you doing at II Corps?

C: I was in Phu Elba. There was one province between Pleiku and Phu Yen that was called Phu Bon, and it was such a lousy place that even the VC wouldn't go into it. The province chief was exiled by the government, the police chief was exiled by the government, the aid chief was exiled, everybody there was in exile. And I was in exile, so we called ourselves Phu Elba. We were all there for the duration in a place that not even the VC wanted.

G: Now I know how to spell Elba. All right. We might have crossed trails. I was in II Corps in 1966-67, only I was moving in different circles.

C: Really? I was playing cowboy and Indian in Phu Elba, and we flew up every once in a while at night, didn't have anything to do, we'd go hunting. Have you ever shot jackrabbits--they weren't jackrabbits, the big rabbits they have over there--with an '03? That's what we did. We'd go at night through VC territory with our lights on and see the eyes, in a three-quarter ton truck, shoot us rabbits, shoot us deer, go back and have a feast.

G: I did shoot a couple of pigs from a helicopter once for a--what do you call the Hawaiian parties, a beach party?

C: Luau.

G: Yes, where you bury the meat.

C: Yes, bury the meat there and cook it, have a big party. That's fun.

G: Bunch of pineapples, as we called them, were rotating and they needed a couple of pigs, so we went and got them pigs.

Well, what was the CIA's mission in Phu Elba?

C: They were one of the regions where we had a regional officer in charge, and he had a CIA representative in each one of the provinces. And you kept liaison with the security elements. Of course in Phu Elba they had no security.

G: Was this when CORDS was about to kick off?

C: Yes, CORDS. Well, they had kicked off already. We had CORDS and then we--first we had OCO, then we had CORDS.

G: That was Ambassador [William] Porter's program.

C: Porter's, yes. Then Colby took over as CORDS adviser. That was during that time.

G: Were you responsible for implementing CORDS in your province when it came in, or how did that work?

C: Oh, well, I was responsible to coordinate everything with CORDS. There was nothing doing in my province. I had a good war. The VC didn't even care for us.

G: You weren't worth the candle, was that it? There wasn't anything there?

C: There wasn't anything there. There was nothing. We'd either go to Nha Trang or go to Pleiku. There was nothing in Pleiku. Nha Trang, yes, at least we could get lobster, and every once in a while we'd find some Frenchman who had wine he'd sell you at ten times the price, but it's a good bottle of wine. There was nothing.

G: So you came back in 1967?

C: I came back in 1967 and retired on June 15, 1968.

G: Did you ever look back?

C: Did I ever go back, ever look back on it? Ah, the hell with it. Let me see. Actually I spent quite a few years over there, and to be very honest with you, I knew more in the first six months than I did the day I left after years and years over there. Oh, God! The more I learned the more confused I got. I couldn't understand--the people themselves are very difficult to understand. And I had a lot of friends over there but even my friends I didn't understand. I couldn't understand what motivated them. They would say yes, yes to everything and not do a darn thing sometimes. Sometimes they'd surprise you, they'd move out before you could give them an idea. Wham, they're off running like jackrabbits. Never knew what. . . . Oh, I'd gone out on patrol sometimes just to do something. I'd go out at night with some of the BAMs, the bare-assed Montagnards; I'd go out with them and set up ambushes, just to have something to do.

Boy, what they used to get in. They did this on purpose, I know. Nha Trang, see, once a week they'd fly up a courier plane to hit all the provinces, give you the new instructions, all the paperwork and

junk that went along with it, and you would send back your reports. [There was] not very much to do, but you had to keep track of how many bridges you repaired and things like that. I think we repaired more bridges a month than had ever been built in all of Vietnam. Anything that was longer than three feet--they went over a little thing of water and you replaced a plank, that was repairing a bridge.

Anyway, they had a female courier fly in this airplane, and they'd let the door down and she'd step down, and she had the longest, most beautiful legs, and I'd hand her an envelope and she'd hand me an envelope, and the door would slam and the airplane would take off and go to the next province. They'd do this once a week, driving us up the wall. The only good-looking female that was ever in Phu Elba.

G: Was this an American girl?

C: Yes, an American girl.

G: I didn't know the CIA used girls in a combat zone for couriers, but I guess why not?

C: Who in the hell wanted to fight in Phu Elba?

G: Okay.

C: Phu Yen, that would be worse. Or even in Pleiku. In Kontum, every once in a while people would get shot up in those places. Nobody ever got shot up in Phu Elba.

G: So what did you do when you retired?

C: I enjoyed life for a while and did nothing. Then all of a sudden during President Nixon's administration, I was asked to report to the White House. I didn't know anything about it, but they were interested

in Daniel Ellsberg mostly, what I knew about him. Well, I didn't know very much about him.

G: Who did you talk to?

C: I talked to Howard Hunt the first time, then later I talked to Egil Krogh. I found Bud Krogh one of the really top-notch men, intelligent, dynamic. Then of course I knew--I didn't know what was going on as far as the Plumbers and things were going on.

G: You must have been curious that they wanted to know about Ellsberg.

C: Well, yes, they wanted to know--they had asked the cookie factory to order me to come down there and talk to them, and of course I was out of the cookie factory but I got a little message, "Go down and report." I went down there and here was Howard Hunt, I had known him back in 1943 and back in 1951 when I was back here and he was working in the cookie factory in the old buildings. But I didn't have anything to tell them about Ellsberg. I knew what he had done, but I didn't know what the hell made him do that, because when I first knew him he and John Paul Vann were the most gung ho individuals I knew out in Vietnam. They were going all over the damn place, dressing up in black pajamas with a submachine gun across their shoulders and taking off on a Honda, all the damn things. And Daniel Ellsberg was really gung ho. So I don't know--when I first realized that something was wrong was when the Supreme Court [made the] decision to allow the publication of the Pentagon Papers, and of course who was number one on the hit parade, me. So I had a lot of trouble with the press for a while.

G: What kind of trouble did they give you?

C: Oh, the press was after me. They wanted to know what this was all about, what did I--what was really my involvement.

G: How many times have you told this story?

C: Oh, you, and to--the true story? To you and to Bill Rusk of U.S. News & World Report. I wouldn't tell the true story to a lot of people because all they wanted was sensationalism or they wanted one facet, they wouldn't try to understand the whole thing. I still don't understand the whole thing, but they wouldn't even try. They wouldn't make an attempt. So when I would run into a situation where somebody was--after a while I would know that they were trying to get something that they could make hay out of, I'd start running them around a Maypole. I'd tell them all kinds of fantastic stories, so when they started checking it they'd go round and round and round and they'd find themselves back at square one. I think they call it disinformation. I'd give them all kinds of--any goddamn thing.

G: You think they call it disinformation?

C: I call it goddamn lies. (Laughter) But it's true. When you get to know that something is serious, like for example your program here, it's going to be disjointed by the way I talk, but this sort of program is not for tomorrow. Long after I'm gone it will be there, so if somebody wants to do research, and of course they read all the phony stories in books and things like that, but they can come up to a decision on the thing.

G: I think I asked you yesterday, but just to make sure, about Bob Shaplen's version of the coup. I'd heard that that was one of the best or maybe the best version of it.

C: Bob Shaplen had a good in with the individuals, Vietnamese politicians on both sides of the thing, and he did a lot of homework out there, but he knew a lot of the people who were involved in different facets. I know Bob.

G: One newspaperman said that since he didn't have to file every day, he had time to double and triple-check his facts and get things straight before he wrote something.

C: That's right. What he did--you see, because he was writing for the New Yorker, he'd write letters from Saigon or letters from here and letters from there, and he was always interested in the political aspects of a lot of things. But once you read several of his articles, they'd all be the same thing, different characters but it's always the same. Like his book The Lost Revolution is a good book. He had a theory about lost revolution, but he never lost that theory. Everything he wrote was always--I think he was trying to prove that the book--I like Bob. I spent many hours with him and his Viet Cong.

G: With Viet Cong? What do you mean?

C: Oh, he had an interpreter that briefed all the press out there, a guy by the name of [Pham Xuan] An, who later on became a--after the Viet Minh took over, the northerners had taken Saigon, he comes out as a lieutenant colonel.

G: An, yes.

C: Ah, yes. Well, that was his--he and Vung were the best sources that he had.

G: Well, he worked for Halberstam for a while.

C: Oh, sure, he worked for all of them; he briefed every newspaperman that came out there.

G: And he was a deep agent? That's interesting.

 Tell me about John Paul Vann. Now, you've mentioned him; how well did you know him?

C: Oh, John Paul Vann, I didn't know him very well. You know, Daniel Ellsberg was very, very close to him. John Paul Vann was a very dynamic, extremely intelligent, articulate rebel, in a certain sense. He was a mover, he was a doer, he had a hell of a lot of good ideas, but he also had that adventurous thing about him. Like I say, going off at--when I was at III Corps one time he told the commanding general, he said, "Where are the VC?" He said, "Well, they're not evident in the daytime but at night the road between here and Long An is closed." John Paul thought that over, gets his carbine, his black pajamas, gets on his little putt-putt, and he drives to Long An that night on his little putt-putt motorcycle and drives back.

G: Opened the road?

C: And the road was open. So the commanding general, Vietnamese corps commander, same thing, since he was CORDS [inaudible] and say, "General, is the road between Bien Hoa-Saigon-Long An, is it closed at night?" "Yes, sir, every night the VC patrol that." He said, "That's

a goddamn lie. I just was down there last night and I came back this morning." He was that type of guy.

G: Doesn't make you too many friends among the Vietnamese I guess.

C: Oh, they knew that he was that way. Well, look, he got killed flying his own goddamned helicopter instead of--he had no more reason in airevac, they had experts to do that.

G: He couldn't keep out of the action.

C: He had to get into the action.

G: Did you know a little professorial full colonel who was his boss in the Delta by the name of Daniel Boone Porter?

C: No, I did not know him. I know of him. I know of him.

G: He was a senior adviser in the Delta IV Corps I guess, and he left sometime in 1963.

C: I didn't know him. John Paul Vann, I admired him.

G: He became a senior--when he went back as a civilian--

C: He was one of the senior civilians out there, III Corps, yes.

G: On pacification, CORDS?

C: I don't know.

G: Did you have anything to do with the Phoenix program?

C: Nope, that I didn't. I left there in 1967 just as they were going to start the Phoenix program. I know about it but I don't know the details about it, I don't know where the concept came [from]. A lot of people blame Bill Colby. I don't know. I know that there was always a program to eliminate the infrastructure, the VC infrastructure.

That was one of the objectives of the government, central government, and the United States government was there to help them.

G: Did you know anything about some of those earlier attempts, what were they called, PRUs, Provincial Reconnaissance Units?

C: I had some of them in III Corps. I used to go out with them from time to time. PRUs were--well, they changed the names on them. The original idea was counterterror team, to counter terrorism, because of VC terrorism, the propagandizing and the tax collection and the assassinations, and that was what the idea was, was to have a quick reaction force to go into any hamlet or village that was being [inaudible] and to deny them. Same concept that they had in one sense when they had the strategic hamlet programs, was to deny access of the VC propagandists and tax collectors and recruiters from--

G: How did that work? Can you give me an instance, a typical action or engagement by a PRU?

C: Well, they would get a report--generally too old--that the VC in a certain area were heading for somewhere, so they would go there and try to set up ambushes to catch them. Or they would go in where the local hamlet chief or village chief had reported that there was a VC sympathizer, they'd go in and haul him out. They were also to do reconnaissance type of intelligence and report back anything. Well, generally when they moved--and I've been out with them on night patrols on several occasions just to see, because they were part of my organization assigned to me in III Corps. You would go to an area where you'd been reported that there were VC. By the time you got

there they were gone. Oh, the chickens were there, the [inaudible] thing, but they had their own intelligence system that was twice as good as ours and they had their trail watchers. They had their people. So all of a sudden after you've gone to some of these fruitless exercises, you're standing there with an M-15 in your hand, at four o'clock in the morning sweating like the devil. You're tired, been walking all night, you say, "What in the holy hell am I doing here?"

G: You'd had your war.

C: I had my war. But you had to go out and see what it was. Now, when they were used in conjunction with a military operation as a blocking force, something like that, they were pretty good. That's not bad [?]. But we had the civil guards, we had all kinds of paramilitary units.

G: Were they ever used to strike a VC hamlet or turn the tables on the VC, use their own weapons on them?

C: Oh, yes, that had been done in certain instances but never in the III Corps. See, III Corps, we had that very hard redoubt which they called Zone D. Now that was a complete set-up there with tunnels and what have you. You'd go into one area, they'd move into another area. We've gone in there in force, we've gone in with armored units. I've gone in with them when they've--just observe what the hell they were doing. They'd bring in these big bulldozers, tank bulldozers, and just plow up the whole damned area.

G: Oh, yes, the Rome plows, as they called them?

C: Then they'd take all the people and they'd move them someplace else,

resettle them. Going into those things you couldn't tell. I don't think we won very many hearts and minds doing that. (Laughter)

G: What haven't I asked you that you'd like to talk about? What have I missed?

C: Nothing. You'll think of something after you hear this and read it and say, "Why in the hell didn't I ask him a question?" Well, why don't you write, maybe I'll send it to you.

End of Tape 2 of 2 and Interview II