

LBV L. Beech

Excerpted from Keyes Beech Oral History with Ted Gittinger

G: Did you cover the activities or the mission taken on by the Americans after Dien Bien Phu when General O'Daniel I believe had charge of the refugee program there, did he not?

B: Well, I was just trying to recall what Iron Mike O'Daniel's role was there. Of course, at that time we had General [T. J. H.] Trapnell instead of the MAAG, I believe, but Mike was there as a sort of--well, he must have had a specific role. I really should know. This sounds a little bit ridiculous, but I do remember seeing a lot of him. I had known him first in Korea during the Korean War when he had the 3rd Division, I believe, there. Mike was a fighter, of course, and he was a very good one. But Vietnam was not quite his cup of tea. I remember him telling me one day--we were having lunch--about how sensitive the French were, how proud they were, and he said, "You have got to be awfully careful dealing with the French." And he said, "I can understand why they're sensitive, but I don't know what they've got to be so proud of."

(Laughter)

He said, "I've got to be a diplomat. I shouldn't be talking to a reporter about these things." Of course, I never quoted him on these things. It would have gotten him into trouble; it would have created a diplomatic incident. And there were times when Mike would say, "What we're going to do, Beech, we're going to organize four divisions. We're going to get a lot of tanks. We're going to start rolling north." Well, I was no expert on Vietnam, and I don't consider myself one today either, for that matter, but I said, "Well, I don't think that it's going to work out just that way. I think the French have already lost this war." Mike was a very determined man, but unfortunately he didn't make any difference. It was too late for that sort of thing.

G: He got Ed Lansdale, I believe, to come over, didn't he, from the Philippines?

B: You know, I don't really know whether he did or not. If he did, I was unaware of it, although it is very possible that he did. Certainly he had a lot of influence there. Shall I tell you about Lansdale now?

G: Sure.

B: I did not know Ed in the Philippines when he was operating there except I might have met him. I knew his work, but I didn't know the man. It wasn't until 1955, I think thereabouts, that I got to know Ed pretty well, and he came over there in 1954, of course. He and his boys were the Saigon military medical group or something like that.

G: Military Mission.

B: Military Mission, as they called themselves. They were doing a little last minute sabotage effort up north before the Viet Minh came in to take over. A lot of it, in retrospect, was sort of schoolboy stuff, you know, like putting sand or something like that in all of the oil that was supposed to go into the tanks of all the buses and things like that. And what difference it was going to make in the final outcome, I wasn't entirely clear, but anyway, they were doing things up there. Then I knew Ed principally in his role as an adviser and confidant of Ngo Dinh Diem. I used to go to Ed's house on Rue Pasteur, I believe it was, quite often. He had lots of parties out there, and Madame Nhu would be there, and her husband [Ngo Dinh Nhu] would be there. It was sort of the place to be, you know; it was where the action was.

Then it was in 1955 that Diem had his finest hour, and that was when he cracked down on the Binh Xuyen. They'd lobbed some mortars into his front yard at the palace, and he had to do something or else throw in the towel, so he did something, and to his great surprise, there was one battalion that was loyal to them, and they went up and beat the hell out of the Binh Xuyen. During that whole thing, why, a Cao Dai general--that was one of the religious sects, as you know--[was killed], General Trinh Minh The. I was having dinner with Lansdale that evening at his house and the phone rang, and a voice said, "They just got General The." Some of the riverboat pirates, who were Bien Xuyen people, had shot him as he was going over a bridge over the Saigon River into the port area. Ed said, "Oh, well"--after he sat down--"that's too bad. Trinh Minh The was a good man. He was moderate, he was a pretty good general, he was on our side, and he cost twenty-five thousand dollars."

(Laughter)

I've told that story a number of times since, and Lansdale says he remembers everything except the twenty-five thousand dollars.

G: I heard it was closer to three million.

B: (Laughter) I don't know. I don't know. Maybe Ed knows.

G: Well, twenty-five thousand is not too much to pay for a good general.

B: Well, you know, in those days--that was 1955--twenty-five thousand dollars was twenty-five thousand dollars. That was a lot of money, of course.

G: He got Lansdale into hot water with the French, didn't he?

B: Yes, I guess he did, but I don't know enough about that to talk about it. I do know that I had a clean beat on the story, because I was there when Lansdale got the word, and then after I had filed, I went down and I told Abe Rosenthal, who just happened to be in town--he had come over from New Delhi. The man who was normally in Saigon had gone away to the Bandung Conference in Indonesia, and Abe had moved in there to fill in. He and John Roderick of the AP were both there at the Continental Hotel and so I told them about it, and they got very excited about it.

(Interruption)

G: Are you going to stop with that?

B: Yes.

G: Okay. Do you remember any of the other people on Colonel Lansdale's team? I'm thinking of--Lou Conein was on and off, I believe.

G: Yes. Well, Lou, of course, I knew. I didn't know Lou so well at that time. I knew him very well later on when we had our war there. As you know, he's here in Washington now with the DEA, I assume he's still there. As I say, I knew Lou quite well. I knew Bohannon. I don't know what his name is.

G: Oh, I don't think I've got his name either. [Charles Bohannon]

B: Bo. I knew Rufe Phillips. Yes, I knew him. I didn't know [Ray] Wittmayer. I don't think I knew these other people that are mentioned here.

G: Do you remember what Rufus Phillips was doing? I had heard that he was accompanying the ARVN out into the countryside when they were re-establishing the governmental presence in the wake of the Viet Minh pulling out.

B: Well, as I recall, Rufe Phillips was sort of their rural affairs expert. He came back later in that role, too, but I don't recall too

much about what he actually did except that, as I recall, it had a good deal to do with land tenure, but I'm not sure enough of myself to really comment on that.

While we're on the subject of Ed Lansdale, well, I consider him a very good friend, and I hope it's mutual. But, you know, back in the sixties when they brought Lansdale back out there as head of this special team to win the war, I happened to hear about this early on, and I had read a piece in Foreign Affairs magazine that Lansdale had done. There was something, it seemed to me, wrong with this piece because Lansdale was very critical of the war effort, and justly so, the way we were fighting the war, but it was very plain to me at that time that the Vietnam that Lansdale was writing about no longer existed. Everything had gotten big; they had gotten organized. So when I heard that Lansdale was coming back out there as head of a special team, my personal reaction was, "This is not going to work very well, because everything's organized, and Ed Lansdale is a broken-field runner."

I was having a drink with the then-CIA station chief--

G: This would have been in what, 1965 or so?

B: Well, about that, maybe a little bit later, 1966 or thereabouts. 1966, 1967--I think probably 1966 would be close to it. Anyway, I was having a drink with this fellow one evening, and I said, "What do you think of Ed Lansdale coming back out here?" Well, he damn near dropped his martini. I will never forget that. I had assumed that he knew. Well, he didn't know. He swallowed, and then he immediately ordered another martini. (Laughter) And I said, "Well, I thought that you knew everything." I was very pleased with myself. He said, "When is he coming? When is he getting here? Who is he going to work for?" I said, "Well, you're supposed to--you have these immense intelligence resources at your command." You know, I was rubbing it in.

G: Who was this, do you remember?

B: Let's call him Georgie.

G: Okay.

B: Yes. We first met in Hanoi, but I didn't know who he worked for then. A nice guy. In any event, he said, "You know, I used to work for that broken-field runner." I said, "Yes, I know you did. That's why I assumed that you knew that he was coming back out here." Well, I could see what was going through his mind right away. He was throwing up the barricades to protect his turf, and that's what everyone was doing out there at that time. There was a great deal of empire-building or turf-building or so forth.

But what happened to Lansdale and his team--and he had some good people. He had a Boston lawyer, a Choate man, Choate and Yale, whom I met on the plane coming down from Hong Kong, who was telling me what a great opportunity he felt that he had to perform a public service in

Vietnam and that he had a letter of introduction from the Boston bar association to the president of the Saigon bar association. And I was thinking to myself, "Jesus Christ! This is going to be very, very interesting." But he was going to be their lawyer; he was going to keep them out of trouble. But he was a nice fellow. He didn't stay very long, I don't think, but--