

## Chapter Four

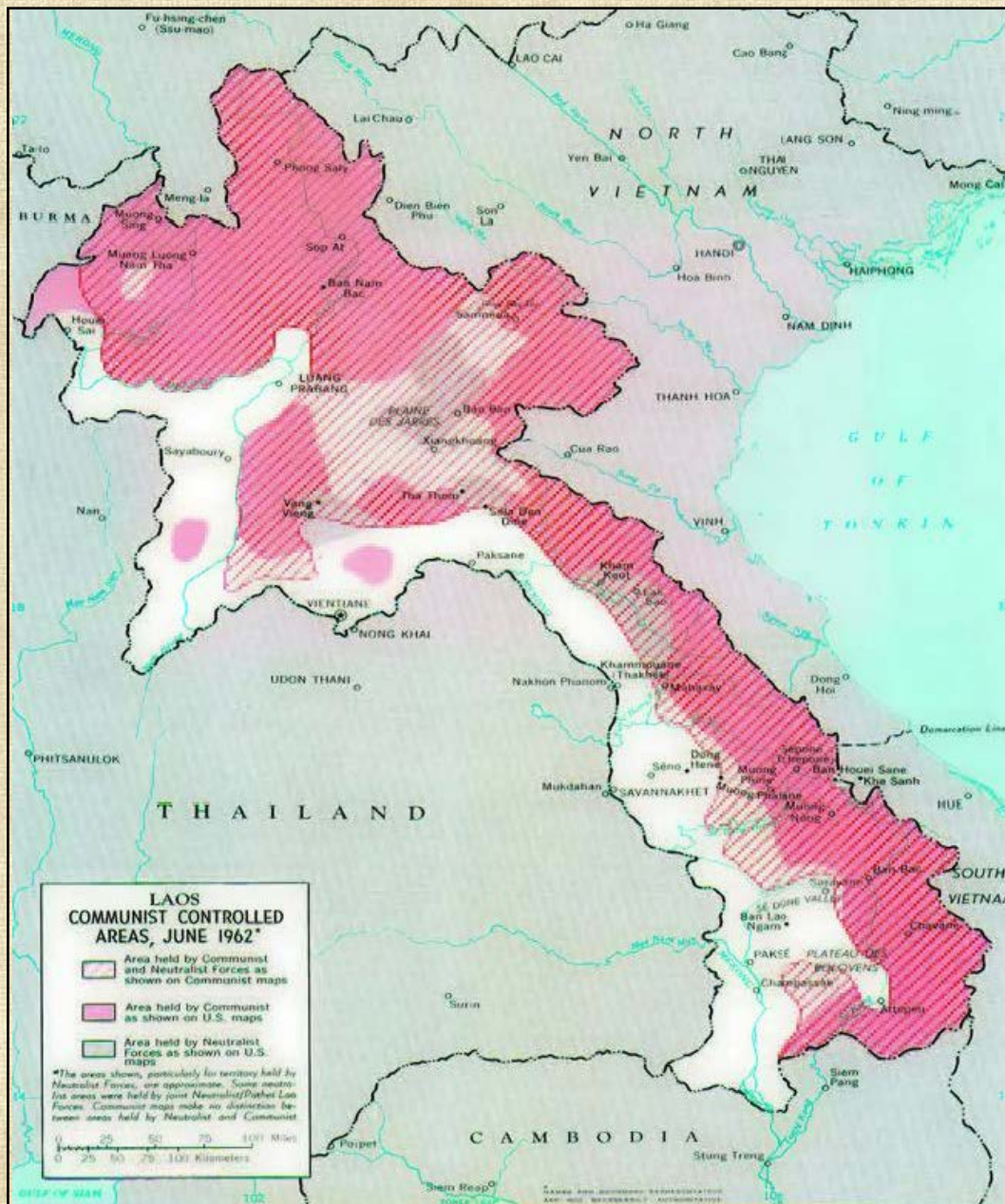
### *Into Laos and the Paramilitary World, 1960–62*

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**W**e were thus free to pursue the strategic concept behind the expansion of the Hmong resistance: Proceed to encircle the Plain of Jars with Hmong volunteers and the FAR units under Vang Pao's territorial command with a view toward preventing Hanoi from driving the Hmong out of the northeast and threatening the Mekong Valley.







This map originally appeared in my history of CIA's engagement in Laos, *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos, 1961-1973*. The Center for the Study of Intelligence published the then-classified work in 2006. It was released in declassified form in 2009 along with five other works on the conflict in Southeast Asia that, as a CIA contract historian, I had researched and written over a period of almost 12 years. They can be found on [cia.gov](http://cia.gov) in the Freedom of Information Act Reading Room under "Vietnam Histories."

**I**reported back to Headquarters in September 1959 and, instead of Japanese language training, was enrolled in fulltime French in preparation for assignment to Laos. Unlike South Vietnam, where English was rapidly becoming the country's second language, a working knowledge of French was indispensable in Vientiane. Indeed, French was the language of all education in Laos, and the US presence there was not big enough to have changed the culture of Laos as it was doing in Vietnam. Learning the Lao language would certainly have been an option as field work entailed dealing with people of little or no education and otherwise required the services of interpreters. In reality, however, the absence of Laotian speakers in any other country—with the exception of Thailand—made learning a language that would probably be used during a tour of two or maybe three years and then forgotten an expensive proposition.

The director of the language school at the time placed an interesting emphasis on pronunciation. He was not a linguist but practiced a specialty that emphasized phonics—I have forgotten the exact designation. Leaving grammar and vocabulary to the instructors, he spent hours with my small class in exercises designed to teach us how to make the sounds. Some of these had no meaning at all, allowing students to devote their full attention to imitating the noises coming from the director's mouth. It seemed a little childish at first, but it did facilitate a quicker mastery of the way the language should sound. The most difficult aspect of French, for an English speaker, is pronunciation, and this approach resulted in a very well-balanced program of instruction. Other than language training, however, there was no substantive preparation for the assignment to Laos, either as a place to live or in which to work.

My flight to Laos in late November 1960 coincided with a military insurrection in which the Royal Laotian Army's 2nd Parachute Battalion, a CIA-supported unit, rebelled against the Royal Lao Government (RLG). The unit's leader, a US-trained officer named Kong Le, seemed to have cause to complain of the demands placed on him by the government. It was generally agreed that Kong Le's battalion was the most combat-effective unit in the Army, but this had led to frequent deployments to put out fires, so to speak, while its companion units relaxed in their barracks. Now, having expelled the RLG, Kong Le and his unit were in charge in Vientiane, and the US government feared he might form an alliance with the communist Pathet Lao. He had not, however, interfered with commercial air traffic, such as it was, and my travel orders remained in effect.

## Chapter Four

Vientiane was ignored by all of the major airlines, and only local carriers connected it with Thailand and Vietnam. So it was that in November 1960, after a lay-over of several days in Bangkok, I found myself on an Air Vietnam DC-3 of WW II vintage, sharing seating with Lao passengers and a center aisle with chickens, goats, and other small farm animals. After several stops at towns on the Mekong River, we reached Wat Tay Airport outside Vientiane.

Regular military forces (FAR—Forces Armées du Royaume (Laotien)) having fled the city and the rebels having imposed no particular security regime, Vientiane had the look and feel of a peaceful market town, remarkable only for the massive Mekong River flowing along its southern edge. The quiet atmosphere was deceptive, for US officials were even then negotiating with Gen. Phoumi Nosavan, who commanded army forces deployed in the Laotian Panhandle south of Vientiane, to launch an attack on Vientiane to expel Kong Le. Phoumi was notoriously indecisive, however, and, while the standoff lasted, there wasn't much US officials could do but wait.

That's what I was doing when the shooting started. I was playing cribbage with a station colleague in an embassy annex called the Green House when we heard artillery fire. It was distant at first, but incoming rounds got close enough to drive us into the vault used to hold classified material. This went on for almost a day, and, during a lull on the second afternoon, the two of us emerged from the vault to continue our cribbage competition. I had just leaned forward to pick up or deposit a card when a sharp crack sent us both to the floor. Nothing followed, and rather gingerly we resumed our seats. That's when I saw the hole in my seatback cushion. In it, I found an almost perfectly formed 50 cal. bullet that had apparently been just about spent when it penetrated the Green House wall and lodged in the back of my chair. I was grateful to have picked the right moment to play a card, but I soon discovered that others had been closer to disaster than I. When I visited Jorgy's office a little later, I found the interior demolished. He had just left to confer with the ambassador when a shell pierced the wall and exploded.

Outgunned by Phoumi's forces, Kong Le fled north, toward the strategically important Plain of Jars.<sup>a</sup> When it was clear that he was gone and that Phoumi's troops had ceased firing, I climbed into my station-issued Volkswagen for a drive through what now looked like a deserted town. Not a single human being was to be seen. I had no way of knowing whether the townsfolk were still in underground shelters or had fled when the grapevine predicted trouble. The same was true of the stray dogs that normally infested market towns in Buddhist countries. I saw not one animal at any point in my tour of the city.

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a. The name Plain of Jars, or Plaine des Jarres, alludes to the prehistoric stone jars, some of them five feet high, scattered across the plain and adjacent plateau areas.



The Green House had suffered little damage, and life and work quickly returned to normal. My own portfolio remained, for the moment, as shapeless as it had been before Kong Le's coup. I was thus immediately available when in early January the embassy began pressing Jorgy to verify a growing number of press stories about Russian cargo aircraft landing at Phongsavan, which lay on the edge of the Plain of Jars, to bring supplies to the Pathet Lao or Kong Le—or both.

Jorgy commissioned me to go find them and ordered a twin-engine C-45 from Air America. With our Chinese-American pilot at the yoke, an embassy photographer—an Air Force NCO, I think—and I took off and headed northeast. We weren't more than half an hour into the flight when our pilot spotted the first Soviet supply plane. We saw at least one more on this run and spotted others on subsequent flights. Washington exploited our photos by distributing them internationally as evidence of unprovoked communist intervention in yet another innocent target country.

### *A Family Affair—Kind of*

My early career was something of a family affair, with visits from siblings at three of my assignments, two in wartime settings in Indochina and the last in West Africa. The first two were from my twin Betty. (right) Not counted in the above number, were the get togethers Betty and I enjoyed in Japan. She was serving as a civilian nurse at the US Army hospital at Camp Zama, Japan, and would visit me on occasional weekends while I was in Tokyo.



Later, while I was in Laos, still hunting Russian cargo planes not long after my arrival in Vientiane, the hospital ship *SS Hope* dropped anchor off the South Vietnamese coast near Hue. Having completed her contract service in Japan, Betty was on board as a nurse, helping treat medical and surgical cases and train local medics.

Project Hope was the brainchild of Dr. William B. Walsh, the physician who created the foundation to which the US Navy had in 1969 leased the hospital ship *USS Consolation*. The ship had been decommissioned five years before after service off Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. In 1954, she had been part of the US Navy's contribution to France's efforts to evacuate its soldiers and civilian refugees from North

## Chapter Four

Vietnam. By 1961, the ship was back in Vietnam, the first of her 11 deployments as the SS *Hope*.

Travel from Hue to Vientiane was more complicated than that from Camp Zama to Tokyo, but Betty managed one long weekend in Vientiane. We explored the city for a day or so, then, on the tip of a pilot friend of mine, drove to Wat Tay Airport in time to catch an Air America C-46 carrying aviation fuel to the royal capital at Luang Prabang. Caucasian drivers were apparently always assumed to be American or French officials and were exempt even from showing an ID card at Wat Tay. Once on the grounds, they could park anywhere except on a runway or the tarmac. This casual procedure helped get us there in time, and, predictably, we found ourselves the only passengers. The open seats allowed us to maneuver around the fuel barrels so that I could point out to Betty through tiny windows not designed for sightseeing the transition from the Mekong Valley to the first mountains of the Annamite Chain.

The C-46 was met by Campbell James, the station's resident officer in Luang Prabang and reputedly, in my memory, an heir to the Campbell Soup fortune—which led to the nicknames “Zup,” and “Soop.” Many years later, I would learn that he was from a wealthy family connected to the Standard Oil enterprise. Campbell was one of the two most colorful characters in the CIA contingent in Laos, then or later. His only rival was Anthony “Tony Po” Poshepny, a flamboyant paramilitary officer who worked for Bill Lair. Tony dressed his part, always in scruffy field clothes and bush hat, while Campbell created his own image, always elegant in jacket, tie, and vest, even in the hot season—and it was never cool. A British accent and a mustache completed the creation.

By the time Betty met Campbell, he had established himself as the embassy's, not just the station's, prime contact with the royal family, and he took us on a tour of the royal palace (though we did not meet the king). Campbell's affect tended to conceal a generous heart. I don't think he was aware we were coming, and I hardly knew him. Nevertheless, he provided a three-course dinner with a variety of French wines, as well as equally elegant sleeping arrangements. We would board the C-46 the next day with a feeling of having been extravagantly well treated. Betty still vividly remembers the event as a unique and exotic break from the medical routine on the SS *Hope*.

Betty would sail on the *Hope*'s second voyage, to Peru, then to Guinea in West Africa, before serving in the foundation's front office in Washington, DC, and eventually make her way to the Veteran's Administration as the coordinator of its HIV/AIDS response effort years later. Because of her Northern Virginia area location, we have been able to remain close.

## ***Creating Laotian Defense Capabilities***

After Kong Le's unit had joined the Pathet Lao—also concentrated in the north—there had been no more hesitation about bolstering the anticommunist position in Laos. With approval from Washington, Jorgy and Ambassador Winthrop Brown began to look for opportunities to create Laotian defense capabilities that would supplement the efforts of the US advisory team working with the FAR. It's worth noting that Ambassador Brown held Jorgy in the utmost respect, noting in an oral history interview conducted in early 1968 for the John F. Kennedy Library that he relied on Jorgy more than on anyone else in his staff for advice.

Jorgy knew where he wanted to start. The station had already met a FAR officer from the Hmong tribe who enjoyed a reputation as a genuine warrior, and his people were known for their hostility to the Vietnamese. Major Vang Pao was a rarity in the Royal Armed Forces, a commissioned Montagnard officer in an army of lowlanders. The king distrusted all of the mountain-dwelling tribes but especially the Hmong, who were not only combative but whose loyalty was in doubt. The Royal Laotian Government would not itself have undertaken to mobilize the Hmong, even against the hated and feared Vietnamese. Nevertheless, it accepted the station's proposal to explore a resistance program with Major Vang Pao and the implicit US commitment to help keep the tribesmen committed to the throne. By the time I arrived in Vientiane, the station, represented by paramilitary officer Bill Lair, had made contact with Vang Pao and had a presence at his command post in the village of Ban Pa Dong (Ban meaning "village"), south of the Plain of Jars.

That presence consisted of a team drawn from a Thai police unit that Lair had created in 1953, the Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit (PARU), which became his main instrument for the creation of the Hmong resistance. As a young, first-tour paramilitary officer, Bill had proposed creation of the unit to the director of the Thai National Police, Gen. Phao Sriyanond, to cope with internal subversion in the tribal highlands of Thailand and covert incursions from neighboring countries, at first China and then North Vietnam. Partly because of Lair's freedom from the US proclivity to tell foreign counterparts what to do—and, I think, Thailand's history of evading colonial domination—the atmosphere was entirely collegial. In my own dealings with my PARU counterparts, I was careful not to claim paramilitary skills that I did not have, and they, officers and noncommissioned alike, treated me as a peer.<sup>a</sup>

The principal order of business in early January 1961 was to prepare for an airdrop of weapons and equipment to Hmong volunteers waiting at Ban Pa Dong. With approvals from other US agencies in hand, things proceeded quickly; CIA's

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a. James W "Bill" Lair as told to Thomas L. Ahern, Jr., *An Excellent Idea: Leading Surrogate Warfare in Southeast Asia, A Personal Account* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, May 2022), available at [cia.gov](https://cia.gov).

## Chapter Four

reputation for speedy response to logistical requirements was well deserved. Personnel resources were another matter. Paramilitary staffing had been cut back after the Korean War, and the demands of the Vietnam War had not yet arisen. Lair therefore used what he had, which included me. Although most PARU spoke at least some English, he wanted to ensure clear communication between pilot and drop-master on this initial mission. None of PARU's fluent English speakers was available, so he charged me with guiding a C-47 to the drop zone and relaying to the "kickers" the pilot's command to shove the cargo out the side door.

This mission brought the second Hmong fatality of the war when the parachute attached to a crate of M-1 rifles failed to open. This altered the trajectory of the drop, and the cargo landed in free fall at the edge of the drop zone, killing a Hmong volunteer who had wandered too close. Subsequent drops, directed by PARU, proceeded without incident, and Lair ordered me to a new site, east of Ban Pa Dong and south of the road running from the Plain of Jars to the North Vietnamese border. Called Ban San Tiau, it was to serve as training site and command post for one of the new volunteer units charged with impeding the movement of communist forces into northern Laos. I flew there one afternoon in a single-engine, four-seat, short-takeoff-and-landing (STOL) aircraft, the Helio Courier, called simply the Helio.

The flight to Ban San Tiau took only about half an hour. The Air America pilot brought us onto the improvised airstrip that ran along the base of an escarpment, perhaps 200 feet high, where we were met by the PARU team and a longtime CIA adviser named Jack Shirley. They knew I was coming—I was to be Jack's assistant while absorbing the on-the-job training he was so admirably equipped to provide—but Jack's only greeting was the terse question. "You are staying, aren't you?" A PARU man had just been severely wounded in a training accident, and he and the medic would take up all of the Helio's passenger space on the return.

With the Helio on its way, Jack and I climbed the escarpment back to the command post, where a cargo parachute tied to tree branches served as his—now our—quarters. For the most part, my service at Ban San Tiau involved being a dutiful student, and I suspected that Jorgy, as COS, had leaned a little on Lair to take on a beginner. Shirley, a soft-spoken no-nonsense New Englander, nevertheless proved to be an attentive boss, taking the time, for example, to teach me the finer points of booby trap preparation. I would not have expected a veteran like Jack to have any interest in the company of a newbie like me, but on occasional R&Rs to Bangkok we would tour the bars of the seedy Patpong district, where he was already well known.

One of Jack's companionable gestures was to introduce me to one of the Savetsila sisters, who came from a prominent Bangkok family that included the wives of both Jack and Bill Lair. We dated a few times—I was, of course, only occasionally in Bangkok—and I admired her self-contained, cosmopolitan style. As a young



woman in a culture of casual sex, she had to set her own standards when on her own, which she did on our second date. I had not made a pass at her, but she said she wanted me to know that our relationship would not include sharing a bed. I replied that I liked her for her company, and she said she reciprocated the sentiment. I saw her only once or twice more, but even this casual association, sponsored as it was by a CIA colleague, contributed to a sense of integration—as had Hiroshi's wedding in Tokyo—into a foreign culture.

For someone who aspired to run a multi-national irregular warfare unit, I considered my main imperative in working with Jack to be watching the style that he brought to guiding both his PARU team and the mixed Lao and Hmong force at San Tiau. The Lao were FAR regulars, while the Hmong were either territorial militia or civilian volunteers. All three came under Vang Pao's command, although the military discipline of the Hmong volunteers depended on Vang Pao's authority as a tribal leader, while the Hmong militiamen had both tribal and military obligations.

As the source of both ordnance and funds, plus the occasional medical evacuation, Shirley was naturally positioned to influence what all of these people did, but he fully shared Lair's belief that we were there to encourage indigenous leadership, not to create a band of mercenaries. I never saw him issue an order. He phrased anything he thought needed to be done—or not done—as a suggestion or an opinion, and he almost invariably got what he wanted within the capabilities of a unit with limited training and for the most part illiterate.

Running the command post of a small, dispersed unit is something of a hurry-up-and-wait activity, and, between training cycles and crises like the accidental death of the PARU man, Jack and I had time to explore the area surrounding the landing strip. On one of these hikes, we found a beautifully clear pond. It was irresistible, and we promptly made our way into it. There was no animal or human life in sight, and we took the chance that the water was clean enough to drink. It was not just clean—at least, we suffered no untoward effects—but delicious.

We learned to navigate the boulders lining the nearly vertical slope, maintaining a jogging pace as we jumped from one to the next. The return climb took a lot longer. We limited our explorations to a couple of times a week, but they served to keep us in reasonably good condition.

Even that limited routine came to a stop one day, however. We were examining the megalithic stone jars scattered on the valley floor that contained the airstrip. Varying from waist- to head-high, these vessels were clearly ancient, but none of our troops could explain them. Only much later did I see accounts of their origin that varied from funeral urns to vessels for brewing a Southeast Asian version of mead (apparently for some really heroic drinkers).

On this day, Jack was boosting me up the side of one the larger specimens—the smaller ones were all empty, and we were curious about what the larger ones might contain—when a crushing explosion sent us flat onto the valley floor. It was followed by several more, all in the U-shaped concavity in the mountain that contained this group of jars, a confined space that multiplied the impact of the explosions. We decided that the better part of valor was to climb back up to the command post where, sometime later, word came back from Hmong scouts that our encampment was the target of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) gunners. They were firing 105mm howitzers, captured from the FAR, which they had dragged far enough south of Route 7 to deliver harassing fire. The communists did not immediately follow up with either artillery or ground attack, but we were now on notice that they knew we were there. Helio visits came to an end.

### *Implementing the Strategic Concept*

Our PARU team had completed the weapons distribution and basic training that was all we had intended to achieve at this point, and we were ready to react when reports started coming in that NVA infantry were approaching in a forked pattern that would eventually envelop us. Jack and PARU team leaders consulted with the various Hmong and Lao principals and quickly reached the obvious conclusion: We were running a training operation, not defending a fortified position, and we would apply the guerrilla warfare maxim about living to fight another day. The troops dispersed. Jack and I, the PARU, and our Hmong guides headed southwest, away from advancing units of the North Vietnamese Army.

It was about a four-hour hike to at least short-term refuge at a neighboring Hmong village, but it felt like a month. We had to cross a seemingly endless series of ridge lines, constantly going up and down, and I discovered, as the march wore on, that the burning pain of tortured quadriceps muscles became more excruciating going down a slope than climbing up. Had it not been for the conditioning conferred by those regular hikes with Jack from the command post to the valley, I might well not have made it. Our PARU troopers had not joined Jack and me in our treks up and down the escarpment, and a couple of them finally gave up and asked for relief from the burden of their M-1 rifles. Jack and I each took one, in addition to the one each of us was already carrying, and the challenge to stay on my feet and keep moving grew accordingly.

We finally staggered—well, PARU and I staggered; for Jack, maybe, and certainly for the Hmong, it was more a walk in the park—into the village our Hmong guides had led us to and waited for morning at the chief's little house. The PARU radio operator notified Vientiane of our location, and we were told to expect helicopters in the morning. By midmorning, however, there was no sign of a helicopter, certainly

nothing within range of our tiny emergency radio. We were getting a little uneasy when we finally heard the clattering sound of H-34s. When they came into sight, they were still too far away for us to alert them to our location by either radio or ground signal. We could hear them, however, and had several tense minutes after the lead pilot radioed his partner that he had come just about as far as he was willing to risk. Jack wanted to keep transmitting in hopes that he'd be heard but had to conserve the tiny battery in our emergency radio. We were lucky. An H-34 pilot did hear us, and Jack guided him to our makeshift landing pad.

Back at the Vientiane embassy, we got the wide-eyed reception accorded to people seen as having narrowly escaped a premature end and went back to work. At this point, Vang Pao did not yet have a full-time CIA adviser at Ban Pa Dong, and Jack, with me as sidekick, was assigned to assume that duty. I would have a more substantive agenda there than at Ban San Tiau because my French would fill the gap between Jack's Thai and the Laotian of Vang Pao and his Hmong officers.

We flew to Ban Pa Dong sometime in May of 1961. It was not hard to find out if the weather was clear because it lay just south of the Plain of Jars and west of Phou Bia, at about 10,000 feet the highest mountain in Laos. The helicopter landing pad lay at about 5,000 feet, and, when I exited the H-34 and the main rotor stopped whispering, it seemed that I had entered Shangri-la. The silence was total, and a bank of brilliantly white clouds below us completely obscured the valley floor. We were then almost overwhelmed by welcoming Hmong, headed by Major Vang Pao. His round, smiling face and hospitable style put us quickly at ease, and we set up our tent near his.

In those early days, Ban Pa Dong resembled Ban San Tiau in every respect except for the presence of the Hmong leadership and the number of volunteers. With the headquarters only weeks in operation, we sheltered under used cargo parachutes as we had at San Tiau. The mountains around Pa Dong were not yet completely cleared of enemy troops, and there was sporadic harassing fire, apparently from old French 75mm howitzers seized from the FAR and probably manned by Pathet Lao gunners. Reactions to this fire varied. The Americans usually stood outside their trenches while Vang Pao pursued our conversation from the partial cover of his own.

I half-expected to hear Jack and visiting Americans make fun of this practice—the artillery rounds did not get dangerously near us—but Jack commented only that most of us long-noses would be there for just the length of a single tour of duty, usually two years, while Vang Pao would be there for the duration. Jack understood that for the Hmong leader to take unnecessary chances in a macho display would have been pointless. For us advisers, by contrast, the whole enterprise was to a degree an adventure in addition to its more serious purposes, and a touch of nearly risk-free bravado was the order of the day.

## Chapter Four

In our dealings with Vang Pao, we were aware of Hmong-Lao tensions and of the tendency of our American compatriots to treat client peoples as subordinates. We didn't know much about the Hmong, however, and we were in uncharted territory when it came to developing working relationships with our new allies. Two self-imposed imperatives were to listen more than talk and to ask questions rather than issue instructions. PARU was a big help in this, thanks especially to the soft-spoken team chief, Captain Makorn, who almost immediately won Vang Pao's trust and soon became his de facto executive officer.

In the weeks I spent at Ban Pa Dong, we were spared any ground attack; the only enemy reaction was the occasional flurry of artillery fire. It was clear that none of our adversaries—neither the North Vietnamese nor the Pathet Lao nor Kong Le's insurgents—had artillery forward observers who could spot our locations because these scattered incoming rounds did no harm. We were thus free to pursue the strategic concept behind the expansion of the Hmong resistance: Proceed to encircle the Plain of Jars with Hmong volunteers and the FAR units under Vang Pao's territorial command with a view toward preventing Hanoi from driving the Hmong out of the northeast and threatening the Mekong Valley.

At this same time, the Agency began exploring means of tracking and perhaps impeding Hanoi's use of the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail, the network of trails that ran south through Laos from above the Demarcation Line separating the two Vietnams. This new supply route was provoking increasing concern as a conduit for logistic support of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces in South Vietnam. US and RLG concerns about preserving the fiction of Laotian neutrality ruled out the deployment of either US or South Vietnamese forces in Laos. The answer, similar to the one adopted in Hmong country, was to deploy station-directed irregulars into the eastern Panhandle to collect intelligence and, it was hoped, impede the traffic headed for South Vietnam.

### *Down to Thakhek*

I now became a beneficiary of CIA's shortage of experienced paramilitary officers. In June or July of 1961, I was ordered back to Vientiane. Jorgy had presumably heard from Bill Lair and Jack Shirley that I was ready for a project of my own. He wanted me to go down to Thakhek, capital of the northernmost province in the panhandle, and see what I could do there. The station had one contact, Colonel Sounthone, who commanded *Groupe Mobile 14*, a regimental-size formation charged with securing the western portion of Khammouane Province. A station officer and friend named Stuart Methven knew Sounthone (not even Campbell James knew as many people as the gregarious Stu) and took me in a Helio down to Thakhek to introduce us. Stu outlined what we had in mind: Insert a government presence in



the eastern part of the province to contest the Pathet Lao presence there and obtain intelligence on North Vietnamese activity along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Sounthone would provide personnel; we would take care of pay, radio communications, training, and tactical direction. With scarcely any discussion, Sounthone agreed, and Stu and I spent most of the rest of the session explaining the qualities we hoped for in the unit leaders he was to assign us.

The meeting was a lesson for me in the astonishing passivity that the Lao brought to the conduct of nominally joint activity. This syndrome was not absent in Hmong country, but traditional ethnic tensions between Hmong and Lao made it easy for the RLG to give the Americans *de facto* command without loss of face. I expected Sounthone at least to assign an officer to work with and keep an eye on me, but he kept our subsequent dealings between the two of us. Even later, when he had left Thakhek and I was conducting my liaison with the local territorial commander, I remained in full control of a body of irregulars that eventually numbered almost 1,000 men and was spread over parts of two provinces.

We operated very much on a shoestring in the beginning, and I started out with no staff, no quarters, and no transportation. Fortunately for the prospects of getting a running start, a US Special Forces “A” team was there to conduct training for Sounthone’s GM-14, and it found a room for me in the colonial bungalow that served as Thakhek’s hotel. More important, the team was taken with my project—it was the kind of thing, after all, for which the US Special Forces had been created barely a decade before—and the team chief, Capt. Sid Hinds, readily agreed to train my people in a program separate from the one with GM 14.

This odd arrangement—Special Forces supporting irregulars run by CIA—stemmed from our near-monopoly of personal relationships with tribal chiefs and FAR commanders. These were developed during routine local liaison activity and were always a priority. CIA’s advantage stemmed at least in part from the longer tours of duty its people served, which provided more time to develop relationships of trust. The formula had evolved in South Vietnam during the Diem regime, and we were now applying it in Hmong country and in Methven’s exploitation of his contact with Sounthone.

The merit of this arrangement was its flexibility. Its two weaknesses, one of them affecting me and the other my Special Forces collaborators, took some time to emerge. First was the risk it posed for junior Special Forces officers. Lt. Col. John Little, who commanded the SF detachment in Laos, visited Thakhek after my arrival, and wanted to see Colonel Sounthone. Sid asked me to serve as interpreter, and I agreed. It was a long and rather diffuse session, and at one point I could see that Sounthone was fading. It was clear that Little no longer had his full attention, and, at

a pause in the discussion, I suggested our host might be fatigued. Little looked taken aback but ended the meeting shortly thereafter.

I was scheduled to go to Vientiane and proposed flying back with Little. He agreed—I think it was an Air America plane and therefore a CIA property—and we took off. Almost certainly emboldened by my youthful appearance and presumed junior rank, he launched into a complaint about what he saw as my interruption of the meeting and concluded with a threat to expel me from any future meeting that featured such *lèse majesté* on my part. I anticipated no further meetings with him, with or without damage to his self-regard, but I did think he should know what had prompted my move. So, I described the groggy behavior that had caught my eye. Then, not wanting to give the impression that I was apologizing, I finished by telling the colonel he was never going to throw me out of anywhere.

Apparently unaccustomed to pushback from perceived inferiors, Little finished the flight without another word. He remained hostile to my program, however, and, although unable to terminate SF participation, he seriously damaged, if not destroyed, Sid Hinds' career.

### ***“Good luck with that!”***

Considering that I started in Thakhek with nothing but the goodwill of Colonel Sounthone and Sid Hinds, it took some luck to get underway as quickly as I did. First, I met the owner of a local bistro, a French-Lao *métisse* whose father had once governed the province and who was living in the residence on the Mekong that he'd inherited. For what seemed a very reasonable price, I could rent both the house—he and the family would move into the bistro's upper floor—and their rather decrepit Citroen Deux Chevaux (“two horsepower”) sedan.

More luck: Two excellent Thai interpreters who had worked for Special Forces “A” teams in the panhandle were suddenly available—I think because their teams were being withdrawn without replacements. As interpreters for training teams, they had learned the required military skills, perhaps not at the expert Special Forces level, but that lack was made up by their ability to inculcate basic skills directly with no time lost in translation. Amroong, known to English speakers as Mr. Ambrose, was a middle-aged former schoolteacher. Small and fragile in appearance, he had a strong personality and soon became the *de facto* head of my small team, which had another, but much younger civilian, Jimmy, and two PARU troopers, one of them our radioman.

The house was a modest edifice for a governor's residence, but my landlord made a point of showing me the flush toilet. It hadn't been used in years, he said, but he

promised to put it back into service. This proved impossible, and I, a little uncomfortable at being treated like a tourist, assured him that I was already competent with the hole in the ground that everyone else found natural.

Essential as it was to meet staffing and logistic needs, the basic imperative was adequate leadership for the Lao teams. They would be operating in territory claimed by the Pathet Lao, and my own access to the teams would be limited, perhaps impossible. I was aware of the Laotian reputation for aversion to combat; several of my Vientiane colleagues had sent me off with sardonic wishes of “good luck with that” when I left for Thakhek. So, I knew we would have to count ourselves lucky if we could find villagers who were not too risk-averse to join up.

By this forgiving standard, Colonel Sounthone came through very well. He sent me three men, two *nai ban* (village chiefs) and a senior FAR noncommissioned officer. All three were natives of the proposed operational area in eastern Khammouane Province, and the civilians were recent refugees from Pathet Lao occupation of their respective villages. They assured me, through Mr. Ambrose, of their desire to do what they could to undermine the communist presence in the area, partly by harassing the Pathet Lao and partly by obtaining intelligence on both Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese activity. With this understanding, we got down to business. I had learned in Vientiane how long it takes to train radio operators, so I began by getting a commitment to find literate men among their volunteers who could start training at once.

It was soon evident that the best of the three team leaders—so called because Amroong and I decided to emphasize the local origins and missions of these units by using civilian terminology—was the *nai ban* from the Na Kay Plateau. He was short, even by Laotian standards, and I never saw him without his Australian bush hat. At first sight, this suggested a flamboyant personality, but he had a dignified, matter-of-fact style that first emerged clearly through Amroong’s interpreting and, over the course of time, enabled me to understand a good deal of what he said during our personal meetings. In those sessions, despite the need for an interpreter (he had no French), I had an odd sense that we faced no cultural barrier, that we were always on the same page.

The other two, a middle-aged civilian and the NCO, were less impressive, but they did their jobs and led their men in enemy-contested country for the remaining year-and-a-half of my tour of duty. Amroong and Jimmy and my two PARU troopers—I say “my” because no PARU officer joined me in Thakhek, so I was the *de facto* chief of that outpost—trained about 300 volunteers whom we dispatched in late summer 1961. They left in Laotian Army trucks I’d borrowed from the local FAR command, cheering with all the enthusiasm of American soldiers celebrating graduation from training, and headed for the easternmost government outpost on Route 12, the unpaved road that ran east to the Vietnamese border. From there they

would proceed on foot—Team One going northeast to the Nakay Plateau, Team Three beyond that toward Napé, and Team Two southeast toward the Mahaxay area.

The prospect of seeing their families was one incentive for all my volunteers to return to enemy-controlled territory. It was never clear just why they had not brought their wives and children to Thakhek. Travel controls seemed quite porous, as demonstrated when the team leaders went in to exfiltrate their volunteers. This practice was very different from that in Hmong country, where volunteers brought their families with them to areas under Vang Pao's control. I think one difference was that, in the panhandle area, security was much more fluid, especially between the contending ethnic Lao factions. With less pressure on their families than in areas under Pathet Lao influence, my team leaders could leave their families in their home villages as they infiltrated eastward toward the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Their situation thus resembled that in South Vietnam, where the Viet Cong and the Saigon government contested nominally pacified villages until the advent of forced resettlement by Saigon in the late 1960s.

It took a week or so to establish radio contact, but all three teams did come up on the air, and regular reporting got under way. The intelligence, mostly on the Pathet Lao but also on North Vietnamese transiting the area, was nothing earth-shaking, but, given the previous near-total absence of information on this section of the panhandle, it was well-received in both Vientiane and Washington.

It took just a few weeks for the limitations of communication by hand-enciphered messages to become clear. We were using WW II-era equipment, the RS-1 radio and GN-58 generator, that was reliable but only as fast as our neophyte operators. I needed to talk to the team chiefs about enemy dispositions, about their reception in the villages, and about intelligence and military targets, and I wanted to do this without dragging them back all the way to Thakhek. I checked with Vientiane and was told that the H-34 helicopters of the US military's Project MILLPOND were still in-country, so I arranged for one to pick up Amroong and me and take us to a rendezvous northwest of the Nakay Plateau. The H-34 pilots were less hesitant than they had been at first to fly into territory of uncertain ownership, and we found the usual signals and landed without incident.

At this point, already after noon, the pilot looked at the surrounding limestone peaks—known as karst—and a cloud buildup north of our landing pad and gave me only an hour to complete my business. If I wasn't back by then, he would have to return to base without me. Amroong and I consulted with our two team leaders and learned that we were near the mouth of the Kong Lo Tunnel<sup>a</sup>, a five-mile boat trip

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a. Now known as the Kong Lor Cave.



on the Nam Hinboun river, through a karst mountain to the Mekong Valley. They assured us they could get us a boat, and we went ahead with my agenda.

The two team leaders, the NCO and the Nakay *nai ban*, seemed to be meeting expectations. The NCO was a little given to bombast but was apparently doing his best. The *nai ban* was more analytical and more forward thinking. Both said the villagers in their respective areas were receptive to a government presence, the local Pathet Lao were not a serious threat, and the NVA did not—at least not yet—have forces stationed there. I flew to Vientiane to report to Jorgy and Bill. Fully aware of the Lao reputation for aversion to combat, they were pleased with the teams' success in establishing themselves in even a nominally contested area. Ambassador Brown reacted in the same way when Jorgy briefed him on successful infiltrations into the three target areas.

In the context of communications, Jorgy noted our practice in Hmong country of clearing an airstrip wherever Vang Pao had enough volunteers to exploit and protect it. He thought I should do the same in order to be in direct touch with my team leaders. I pointed out the more indeterminate ownership of territory in government hands and told him I needed to consult the northern team leaders. Although I was not very optimistic about their response, I did consult them and found them positively enthusiastic. They set out to find a site, finally picking a level stretch in the uninhabited foothills between the Nakay Plateau and the Vietnamese border. Team 2, farther south in territory with a larger communist presence, was not a candidate.

It was a somewhat chancy project. For one thing, it did not enjoy the protection of high elevation. Hmong strips usually lay at 4,000 to 4,500 feet above sea level; the Nakay strip was at only about 1,600. The North Vietnamese could have destroyed the site at will, but they didn't. Their resources were, of course, no more unlimited than ours, and we did not yet pose any serious threat to the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The outcome was that the site remained operational until the Geneva Agreements came into effect in July 1962, and, for most of my tour, I could consult fairly regularly with the two northern team leaders. Whether or not by coincidence, the northern teams did, over time, perform better than their southern counterpart.

We continued to rely on airdrops to the southern team and to patrols that got too far from their regular bivouac to be resupplied on the ground. Adopted to improve efficiency, this practice had the added benefit of confirming that the receiving team was where it claimed to be. A smoke grenade or signal fire and a block letter of white cloth would mark the drop site, and there was just one pass over it before the drop to minimize the chances of compromising its location.

A new pilot, Bob Hamlin, worked for contractor Bird and Sons, which had a potpourri of military and civilian aircraft. One of them was a US Navy P2V bomber/

## Chapter Four

patrol aircraft introduced after WW II. Needless to say, it had no STOL capabilities, and we used it only for major rice and ordnance drops.

Hamlin developed a special fondness for conducting our drop missions with an aircraft that, in these early days, exemplified the impromptu quality of so much of the Laos operation. It was a twin-engine, four-seat Beechcraft Baron designed for executive travel. It moved twice as fast as the Helio but needed an airstrip probably four times as long. As landing at the Nakay strip was out of the question, we used the Baron for local airdrops of rice, munitions, and communications and medical supplies. This required removing the back seats to accommodate the cargo, which I would then lie on until Bob gave the signal for me to push it out the cargo door with my feet.

On our first drop, we spotted the signals on the first pass, eliminating the need to linger at the drop site, and I pushed the cargo out on Bob's sign. I couldn't see where it landed, but I heard his triumphant cry. He had already started a turn and was far enough out to see that one of the bags of rice had landed on and extinguished the smoke signal. He drew the conclusion that this was the prescribed result, always to be expected, and I could never persuade him to stop berating himself when, after subsequent drops, the signal went untouched.

The security situation in eastern Khammouane Province remained fluid throughout my time in Thakhek. Our flights to the Nakay airstrip usually passed without incident, but on one occasion—this time in a Helio—the pilot was just crossing Route 8 when we saw tracers flashing up past the right wingtip. He dived down and to the left in an evasive maneuver, and we saw no more tracers. The incident did, however, remind us to maintain a higher altitude and use more varied routes on those runs to Nakay.

Bob and I still managed to do a little experimenting with the flight characteristics of our various aircraft. Bird and Sons acquired a new STOL aircraft, the twin-engine Dornier DO-28, which boasted similar performance but offered more carrying capacity than the Helio. On one early morning mission, we dropped our cargo and started the circling climb away from the drop site. The peaks of the Annamite Chain obscured the sun until, still in shadow, we were completing a turn to the east when we found ourselves almost blinded by the glare of the sun reflected off the South China Sea. We were looking all the way over the waist of North Vietnam, but we decided not to court trouble by lingering so close to the border.

Having cleared contested territory, Bob displayed for me his ability to do a barrel roll in a way that kept gravitational pull completely neutral. At his direction, I held a microphone by a foot or so of its cord, and watched it stay pointed at the floor as he took the plane through its 360-degree roll. During all this time in the air, Bob

and Air America's pilots taught me the rudiments of flying, and later, while back in Wisconsin on leave, I took advantage of their lessons to earn a pilot's license.

From the start, one of the station's objectives in Hmong country had been to increase tribal identification with the Royal Laotian Government. Presumably because of the ethnic uniformity that prevailed in Khammouane Province, no one had thought to set this as a goal for my outpost, but it soon occurred to me that my *de facto* status as commander of the irregulars—even while in training in Thakhek, they had no formal contact with the FAR command—risked weakening their national loyalty and converting them into something more like the mercenaries we did not want them to be.

Hoping to avoid the appearance of any such intent, I undertook to fly the two most senior officials in Thakhek to the Nakay airstrip for a meeting with the units there. One of them, the provincial governor, required a little persuasion. On this front, I was helped by the more enthusiastic response of Bouahom Souvandy, a member of the national parliament and a thoughtful representative of the modest number of young, progressive Lao politicians. Without Bouahom's insistence, the governor might well have declined, but he finally joined us in the Dornier for the flight to Nakay. They both gave what sounded like standard political stemwinders to a respectably large crowd, but I had no way of knowing what their audience thought about them. I could be sure of only one thing: A civilian government visit to contested territory, however fleeting, was unique for Khammouane Province and probably unknown elsewhere in Laos except for Hmong country. Nevertheless, I think it's reasonable to think that whatever effect it had was probably salutary.

As was the case with my other assignments abroad, my preparation for Laos involved no instruction in intercultural communication. This omission brought me some embarrassment on the day that Bouahom drove me up the road toward Vientiane. We stopped at the bridge over the Nam Hin Boun, the river I'd traversed after the initial meeting with the Na Kay *nai ban*, and walked upstream to a swimming hole that Bouahom had known since childhood. Getting ready to jump in, I had started to lower my briefs when his urgent shout stopped me. I learned that Lao men never disrobe in front of each other and was glad to learn it from a forgiving friend.

My sojourn in Thakhek brought me French as well as Lao social contacts. Not far from the Nam Hin Boun bridge, a French firm was still operating a small tin mine. Probably at the instigation of Emile, my landlord in Thakhek, one of its engineers invited me up to the staff's celebration of Christmas 1961. The festivities featured no religious content, and the little colony seemed entirely at ease in an entirely secular environment. Likewise, although the mine had no security facilities of any kind, my hosts seemed as unconcerned about their security as were the teachers at the lycée in Thakhek. I never found out whether the mine was paying the Pathet

Lao to leave it alone or whether communist influence had simply not penetrated that close to the Mekong.

### *The Post-Second Geneva Agreement and withdrawal to Thailand in 1962*

As already mentioned, station management and I had never expected our volunteers to fight for territorial control. They could compete with the Pathet Lao but would never be a match for the North Vietnamese military, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). Having no formal disciplinary authority over my men, I was always alert to indications of the degree of their commitment to the mission. Their consistent observance of contact plans for air drops and our visits to Nakay were encouraging signs, but their willingness to engage in firefights remained to be determined.

The men had been deployed for several months when a member of Team 2, the southern element, limped into our Thakhek command post. He had been shot through the abdomen in a contact with the Pathet Lao, but he had escaped capture and, after recovering enough to walk, had made his way back to us. This isolated incident suggested that our southern element, at least, was willing to make contact with the enemy. It also demonstrated that there was enough unit cohesion to motivate this man to report back to our command post rather than simply take refuge with his family and sit out the rest of the war.

Whether my teams could have developed into light infantry along the Hmong pattern, I never found out. Recognizing the superiority of the North Vietnamese infantry and deeply averse to inserting US forces into Laos, Washington had begun to negotiate the withdrawal of all foreign military personnel in 1961. When talks in Geneva concluded in July 1962, both sides had agreed to withdraw. Although CIA staffing in Laos was entirely civilian and technically not required to leave, Washington, especially the State Department, judged that keeping us in place would look gratuitously provocative. Nevertheless, maintaining Vang Pao's confidence was deemed too important to risk withdrawing our entire case officer contingent from Long Tieng, so two officers stayed with him. The rest of us took up residence in Thailand.

My destination was Nakhon Phanom, across the Mekong from Thakhek. The well-connected Mr. Ambrose crossed the river, got Thai police approval for the move, and rented a house. The Thai asked us to cross the river at night to conceal our point of origin, but, after that, my presence became entirely overt. Visits by air to team leaders in Laos came to an end, however, and we became entirely dependent for communication on the tediously slow RS-1.





My parachute training at Camp Narasuan allowed me to meet the paratrooper ethos that preferred leadership of a jump-qualified officer.

I had indulged the hope that restaurants in Nakhon Phanom would offer cuisine that was, if not tastier, less likely to produce the abdominal distress that had been a constant nuisance in Thakhek. My landlord, although a true gentleman and a considerate landlord, must have been more or less untutored in kitchen sanitation. Things were not much different in NKP, as we called Nakhon Phanom, and our constricted communications with our troops made the job less rewarding. I no longer had an aircraft on call, and our airdrops now originated at Bill Lair's command post in Nong Khai. My team leaders took our reduced contact in stride, however, and, in the remaining weeks of my tour of duty, made perceptible progress in improving their intelligence on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The less hands-on agenda at NKP enabled me to respond to longstanding urging from Lair to go to Camp Narasuan for parachute jump training. My PARU partners liked me, he had said, but true to the paratrooper ethos were uncomfortable accepting the authority of someone who lacked a jump school certificate. At PARU Headquarters, I found Jack Shirley, who like me and the other case officers, had been withdrawn from Laos, and he gave me some individual instruction. As had been the practice since the inception of PARU, we had the use of an Air America C-47 for one week of the month, and Jack made the most of it, scheduling two jumps a day for what must have been nearly a hundred Hmong trainees—and me.

My only impediment as a parachute trainee was a common one, the impulse to straighten my legs and reach for the ground before landing. This posed a risk of injury, especially to the knees, but the best efforts of Jack and the Thai instructors failed to break me of the habit. I was spared injury, however, probably because most of our twelve jumps, all on the beach at Hua Hin, were made on dry sand.

## Chapter Four

My only brush with trouble came during one of the later jumps, when I landed in a massive thorn bush. Movement in any direction was excruciating, and I was paralyzed until a PARU sergeant came running up to check for damage. Finding none, except to my self-regard, he and the other PARU on the scene decided my plight was the funniest thing they'd ever seen, and I got the feeling that their enjoyment was actually slowing the process of getting me out of my predicament.

Otherwise, my reaction to jump school was like everybody else's. The 33-foot tower used to simulate exit from an aircraft was rather intimidating, I suppose, because it gave one the feeling of falling off a three-story building. Leaving the C-47 at a 700-foot altitude, by contrast, had an almost unreal quality, and the effect was strangely exhilarating, at least after the snap of the opening parachute promised a safely gradual descent.

All such programs end with a graduation ceremony, and all the new parachutists were introduced by name, with a round of applause for every graduate. The PARU camp commander saved me for last, and I was stunned by the roar that greeted my name. I wouldn't have thought so small an audience could make so much noise or even that the Hmong contingent knew whom I represented. It was clear that they did know, however, and that they were applauding, not me as an individual, completely unknown to them, but as the local presence of the great power that was enabling them to resist North Vietnamese occupation of their tribal lands. For that reason, it was a very touching moment. They were the ones, after all, suffering the hardships and casualties of war, while my Agency colleagues and I were merely furnishing the means.

My replacement, Richard Holm, was one of a contingent of new JOT graduates Lair had just brought in to accommodate the growth of the Hmong and the Lao projects. Bill's request for these young men was partly a bow to necessity, because there were so few experienced paramilitary case officers, but also a statement of preference because he had gotten such mixed results from the old-timers originally sent him. He had come to value the flexibility of the youngsters in dealing with PARU and local leaders, while the PARU troopers supplied the military skills they lacked. Dick soon confirmed the wisdom of Bill's perspective, serving with distinction at the Nakhon Phanom command post. He later had cause to demonstrate courage as well as competence when a Helio carrying him and his Cuban pilot crashed in the jungle in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The plane caught fire, and Dick suffered burns that required years of reconstructive surgery.<sup>a</sup>

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a. Dick told his story in his 2011 memoir, *The Craft We Chose: My Life in the CIA* (D Street Books, 2011). The story of his crash landing and injuries in aircraft is told in *Studies in Intelligence*, Winter 199–2000, "A Close Call in Africa" in <https://www.cia.gov/static/aa62741d6cf777a6abd61cd20fdc2820/Close-Call-in-Africa.pdf>. He recounted his experience in Laos in *Studies in Intelligence* 47, No. 1 (2003), "Recollections of a Case Officer in Laos, 1962–1964, No Drums, No Bugles" at <https://www.cia.gov/static/9260ea9fb9da7824977cf6a10ee7f8b9/Recollections-Case-Officer-Laos.pdf>



# Chapter Five

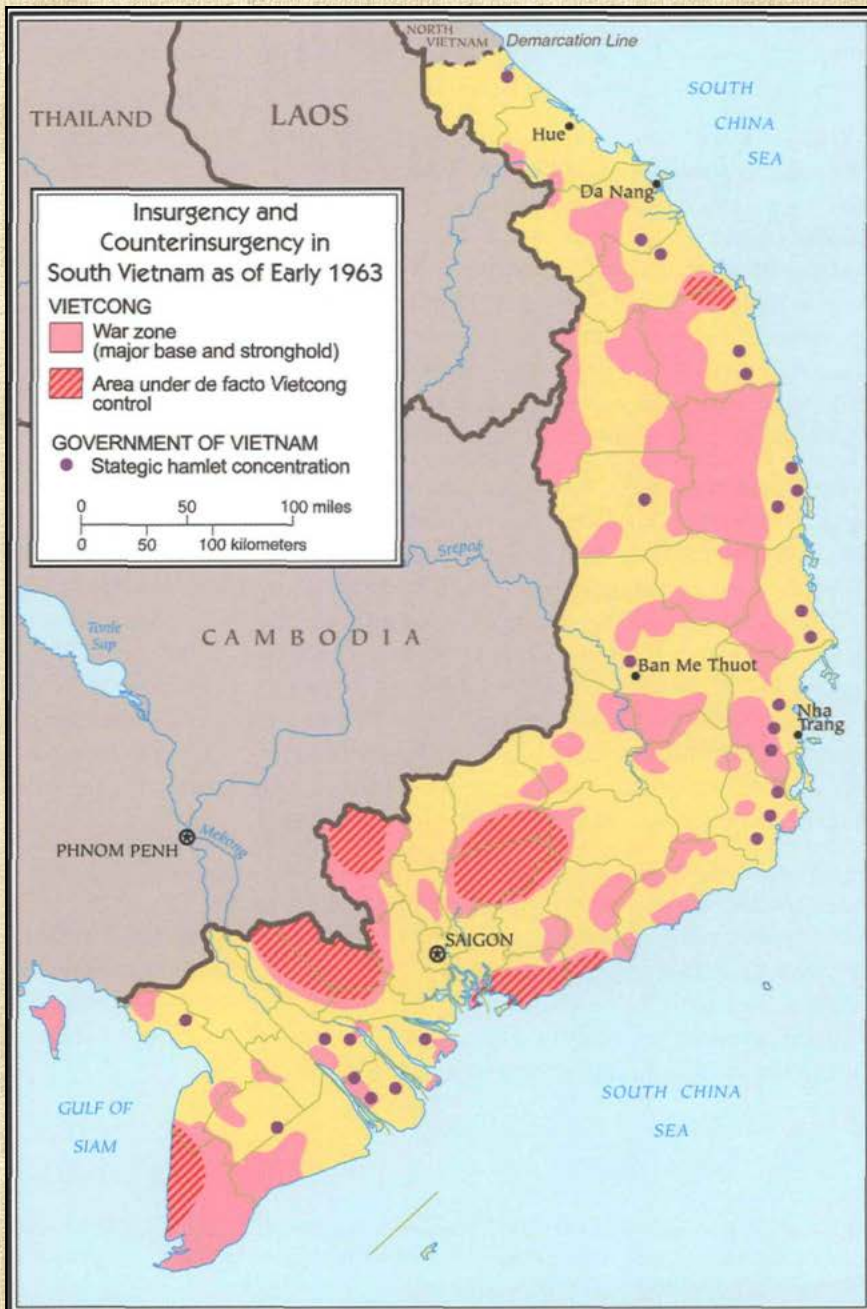
## *“Saving” South Vietnam, 1963–65*

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**I** had gone to Vientiane at a time of growing demand for personnel, and my tour there was ending when similar, but even larger, needs were developing in South Vietnam. The Viet Cong insurgency was beginning to threaten the Government of Vietnam (GVN), and CIA officers with relevant experience were in short supply.







Areas of communist control and allied counterinsurgent activity as of early 1963. CIA and US government definitions of GVN and Viet Cong control changed over time, and maps like this one only approximate the state of the competition in the countryside. The map appeared in the last of my book-length studies on CIA engagement in Vietnam, *CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*. It was published in 2001. The first two appeared in 1998 and 2000, respectively. All have been declassified for the most part and are available in cia.gov Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room under “Vietnam Histories.”



### *Hoping To Be a Station Chief, but Vietnam Called*

Although I had served in Laos at my own request and had found the work there exciting and deeply satisfying—no subsequent tour equaled it—an assignment doing clandestine intelligence collection now seemed more likely to serve my long-term preferences and, to be honest, my promotion prospects. I asked for a slot in a small station, but I was not surprised when, without discussion, Headquarters told me my next destination would be Vietnam, soon to become the largest CIA station in the world. I had gone to Vientiane at a time of growing demand for personnel, and my tour there was ending when similar, but even larger, needs were developing in South Vietnam. The Viet Cong (VC) insurgency was beginning to threaten the Government of Vietnam (GVN), and CIA officers with relevant experience were in short supply.

Home leave and a TDY at Headquarters filled my time from late 1962 to early spring 1963. I had no reason to stay longer. The rural security programs to which I was being assigned were for the most part new, and no relevant training or even briefing material yet existed. Operational management and planning were delegated to the station, and Headquarters did little but pay the bills, so there was not much for a case officer to learn in Washington. I did discover that my new assignment would be in Da Nang, not Saigon, and I arrived in Central Vietnam in March 1963.

My orders had originally specified Saigon as my destination, but a well-meaning friend who was then in Da Nang arranged to have them changed. He did not consult me, doubtless on the premise that, knowing nothing about Vietnam, I would have no preference. I probably wouldn't have, but the last-minute change of destination required re-routing my household effects. This task rested in the domain of the station's support element, which I discovered was not overzealous in the protection of its clients' property. It did not look for space in the hold of a freighter but took the easy way out, sending the stuff as deck cargo on a coastal carrier. The resulting saltwater damage was substantial, and my collection of vinyl records was destroyed.

It now seems ridiculous to have been so passive, but at the time it seemed natural, almost imperative, to button my lip rather than seek reimbursement. As I recall 60 years later, the CIA—or at least the Far East Division of the Directorate of Plans—of the period projected such a kind of you're-so-lucky-to-be-part-of-this-splendid-outfit self-image that complaining seemed almost disloyal. I don't know when the organization started paying more attention to the personal equities of its

employees, but it took considerable time, especially in places that permitted our support staff to claim the hazards of war as the reason for what looked like nonfeasance to those affected.

The base at Da Nang occupied a white concrete building, probably once a warehouse, on the quay at the city's harbor. One of its two projects involved the infiltration of agents by boat to intelligence targets in North Vietnam. Occasionally, those involved in one of these missions would launch a rocket attack for harassment purposes, but information was the usual objective. Collection was also the goal of the other activity, ground patrols aimed at monitoring North Vietnamese Army (NVA) infiltration of the South.

The maritime project employed Norwegian mercenaries as boat crews, while US Special Forces "A" teams conducted the ground patrols, which concentrated on the border with Laos. Like other CIA activities on South Vietnamese territory, the boat missions were conducted in liaison with Vietnamese Special Forces, an outfit whose commander, Col. Le Quang Tung, was less a military or even an intelligence professional than a servant of President Ngo Dinh Diem and his younger brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu.<sup>a</sup>

Da Nang Base's projects were compartmented from each other, and I knew nothing at the time of whatever successes the maritime side might be having. Border surveillance was another matter. When I arrived, the base and its Special Forces teams were already continuously frustrated by the absence of either enemy sightings or even evidence that communist forces had used the trails being searched. Management was more sensitive about this than I realized; it seemed that negative reporting qualified as a sign of failure rather than fulfillment of an intelligence requirement.

The issue became moot when the government of Ngo Dinh Diem was overthrown by a cabal of generals on December 1, 1963. The new junta promptly suspended the activities the Saigon Station had been running in coordination with Diem's Special Forces, and those of us who had been doing border surveillance were ordered down to Saigon. (The maritime contingent had to maintain the docking facility and the boats.)

We didn't have to hurry, because Saigon too was essentially paralyzed in the aftermath of the coup. It was almost instantly clear that the generals had devoted little thought to what they would do once Diem was gone. Chief of Station Peer de Silva was well aware of Saigon's deteriorating position in the countryside and wanted to help the new regime replace Diem's rural security programs and reverse communist

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a. See Thomas L. Ahern, Jr., *The Way We Do Things: Black Entry Operations Into North Vietnam, 1961–1964*, (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005) <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/5076e89c993247d4d82b62ec>

gains. The generals were so busy competing for pride of place, however, that they had no time for operational planning with their US patrons.

The government headed by Gen. Duong Van Minh never did develop a strategy to improve security in the countryside—“rural pacification” as it came to be called—and, when its incapacity became clear to De Silva, he adopted a practice launched by an earlier COS, William Colby: send people into the field in search of like-minded, activist contacts at the province level and ignore—or mollify, as necessary—the central government. It was a perfectly rational reaction to the situation facing him, and it was encouraged by FE Division’s proclivity to endorse self-generated action by people willing to shape their own job descriptions.

The paradigm of this sort of personality was Stuart Methven, whom I’d known in Vientiane and Tokyo. Stu had an enormous gift for creating relationships of trust with foreign contacts and exploiting them for operational purposes. His style was ideal for the Indochina of the 1950s and 1960s as the covert action programs the station intended to launch in South Vietnam needed indigenous leaders with genuine authority who were willing also to accept both US guidance on the conduct of these activities and our control over material and financial support.

After weeks of hesitation, the new military government approved the station’s proposal. Deputy Chief of Station (DCOS) Gordon Jorgensen, transferred earlier from Vientiane, assigned me to the branch charged with developing the new programs of rural pacification. In the spring of 1964, I began to survey the Mekong Delta provinces nearest Saigon. The first, and ultimately by far the most significant, was Kien Hoa, led by Lt. Col. Tran Ngoc Chau. The station colleague who introduced us was, again, Stu Methven.

Since 1941, Kien Hoa had been the cradle of the Viet Minh movement in the Mekong Delta, and it had survived French and GVN counterinsurgency efforts to remain the major communist center of action in the upper Delta. Its capital, Ben Tre, was not yet a VC target, and most of the district capitals were still accessible by road, at least during the day. Lieutenant Colonel Chau had recently returned to Kien Hoa from Da Nang, where Diem had sent him to put down Buddhist unrest. He discovered that the progress he had made had evaporated and that he was starting again from scratch.

That Chau did indeed have some way to go was brought home to me a little later when I was a passenger in the pickup truck assigned to John O’Donnell of the US Official Mission (USOM) of USAID serving as the provincial economic aid adviser. He was driving us from one district town to another on a supposedly secure road when a crack of rifle fire from a hedgerow told us we were in VC territory after all. The fire continued, and I told John that, with him at the wheel and between me and

the ambush, I would just hunker down in my seat in case I was needed. We—and the truck—escaped untouched, and we realized that, as ambushes go, what we had experienced was a very modest event, although it had been enough to elevate our adrenaline a bit.

On one of my first visits to Ben Tre—I remained based in Saigon, with day trips to the provinces—Chau told me that the VC had just assassinated his best district chief, and he was about to go to the burial. Would I like to go along? I thought I sensed something hesitant in the request but, not wanting to offend him, temporized until it seemed that he did, in fact, want me to go. I then assured him it would be an honor. I had never been to a Buddhist ceremony, and this was the first time I joined in the ritual of throwing a handful of earth into the open grave. Fifty years later I would be asked to identify a most “memorable” moment in my career, this graveside service quickly came to mind. It was a very poignant experience and a demonstration that we were engaged in serious, life-and-death conflict. The service was short, and afterward we returned to Chau’s French colonial mansion and took up our agenda. I didn’t know at the time that the incident represented half of a calculated VC tactic of assassinating GVN officials, targeting the best to deprive Saigon of their service and the worst to ingratiate the communist movement with peasants who were being abused.

Despite being a former Viet Minh and a Buddhist in a government that favored Catholics, Chau had somehow won the trust of President Ngo Dinh Diem. He was already renowned in both the GVN and US Mission for his creative approach to counterinsurgency strategy. I knew from the start that my role would primarily be to provide material support, monitor its use, and work up a plan for applying Chau’s techniques in other provinces—presumably with modifications to accommodate local conditions and personalities.

When I joined him, Chau had already established one of the three programs the GVN eventually accepted from the station as its rural pacification strategy. In the Census-Grievance Program, province officials such as schoolteachers would visit acceptably secure villages and conduct a census during which they would inquire about conditions including instances of governmental non-, mis-, or malfeasance. A worthy effort in its own right, the program also supported the main objective of eliciting information on the Viet Cong in a setting that provided source anonymity. The second program was designed to establish a government presence in areas contested, but not occupied, by the VC. It was called Advance Political Action (APA) and differed from the GVN’s civilian information service by arming its members against VC agents; it later joined the national program in an expanded form with more firepower and a new name, People’s Action Teams (PAT).

The third program, initially called Counter-Terror Teams, grew out of my association with Australian Army officers detailed to the Border Surveillance Program. Mostly veterans of the British counterinsurgency campaign in Malaya, they bemoaned what they thought was a dangerous lack of US attention to the vulnerability of Vietnamese villagers to coercion by VC terrorist tactics. “Do unto them” was their mantra, and it seemed to me, at a time of a collapsing government position in the countryside, that it would in fact challenge the VC’s access to the peasantry. I don’t recall whether it was Chau or DCOS Jorgensen with whom I first raised the project—I called it the Counter-Terror program—but both promptly agreed. I then proposed it to Headquarters, which also immediately approved it. Launched in Kien Hoa Province, the program eventually took root in almost every other province. It provided intelligence, mostly from prisoners, and disrupted province- and district-level VC organizations.

The use, even if only occasional, of lethal force against individual targets was legally uncertain at best, perhaps even when only a reaction to the enemy’s prior resort to the same kind of violence. I say “uncertain” by way of acknowledging that I did not then nor have I since researched relevant international law. At the time, station management was more concerned with the survival of South Vietnam than with legal specifics. Accordingly, we were content to leave such questions to the judgment of our superiors at Headquarters, and they raised no concerns.

On the other hand, we were not indifferent to the possibility of our resources being diverted to criminal or other improper activity. Beginning with the counter-terror teams in Kien Hoa, we retained a more direct hand in planning and conducting operations than our more conventional projects required. One feature of the program was our emphasis on capturing rather than killing VC cadres. This was continuously intensified for the duration of the program.

As far as I know, no untoward events ever occurred in Kien Hoa, thanks mainly, I’m sure, to Chau’s integrity and detail-oriented management. The collegial style he encouraged both between Vietnamese and Americans and among the various US agencies represented there meant that freelancing by any of his subordinates would have been hard to conceal. Maj. Tom Aaron, the chief military adviser, and his S-2 treated their CIA counterparts as full members of the team and were enormously helpful in training and in the planning, conduct, and evaluation of operations. USOM’s John O’Donnell was also well integrated into Chau’s strategy; he would, for example, service requirements for agricultural and medical aid identified by our Census-Grievance Teams.

Everett Bumgardner of the US Information Agency (USIA), the only man on the Kien Hoa team who spoke Vietnamese fluently, coordinated the work of his Vietnam Information Service (VIS) cadres with our APA teams. He would assign his people, all

unarmed, to reasonably secure villages while APA took on areas where ambush was a routine hazard. Ev's proficiency in Vietnamese also equipped him to monitor the work of APA when it preceded the deployment of his VIS cadres; he would interview villagers about their experience with my programs as well as his own.

### ***Needed: A Deep Evaluation of Prospects***

Like everyone else, Chau had his shortcomings. I told Headquarters at one point that he tended to value docility above competence in his staff officers, something that was impeding the development of at least one of our programs. Nevertheless, for all his strong-mindedness, even stubbornness, he could take advice, at least from his American advisers. When I raised the issue with him, his reaction was not at all defensive; instead, he moved to adjust his staffing. This resulted in very substantial improvements in performance. His approach to his ARVN superiors was less accommodating, and he later wound up jailed by President Nguyen van Thieu on political charges.

What I regrettably did not raise with Chau was the question of whether our efforts—and GVN pacification programs at large—would ever be able to compete with the Viet Cong for the allegiance of the rural population. I had sense enough to recognize that, at no point in our association, could I claim that our efforts had turned the tide and that we were winning. On the contrary, I remember a meeting with Jorgy in late 1964 when I bemoaned the inadequacy of our training agenda and the mediocre performance of some of its products. He did not contest my point; rather, he implicitly endorsed it when he insisted that the security situation simply didn't allow a longer, more intensive training program: "There just isn't time." Neither of us took the discussion to its logical conclusion: if our programs were essential to GVN survival and if they were failing and if enemy pressure precluded corrective measures, the war was lost.

In fact, like even the more thoughtful of my Vietnamese and American partners, I had no understanding of what had allowed the Viet Cong to gain such momentum. I was aware, of course, of the shortcomings of both the Diem and subsequent military regimes but was inclined to share the widespread belief that the Viet Cong relied on coercion for their influence in the countryside. It was only later, after I'd begun research for my history of the programs, that I began to consider the possibility that the GVN had never been able to evoke peasant loyalty and that the VC had from the beginning enjoyed a near-monopoly of political energy in the South (its Catholic minority being an exception).

It seems to me now that our thinking was tainted by the anticommunist fervor that we shared with most Americans, perhaps especially those engaged in crusades

like the one in Vietnam, and with the Vietnamese, mostly Catholics, whom we supported. The question remains: why, after the chaos of Diem’s overthrow and murder, did neither I nor my colleagues question the capacity of a military junta headed by undistinguished former servants of the French colonial army to compete with a movement that, under Ho Chi Minh, had defeated the army that produced them?

There was, indeed, intense frustration at the working level with many of the generals’ apparent preference to fight each other rather than the communist enemy. There was less of a need to rationalize ARVN reverses as remediable, tactical reverses. Within the station, at least, the mood in the first months of 1964 approached despair even as we worked desperately to stop the bleeding. As US efforts began to slow the pace of Viet Cong advances after the arrival of US combat units, however, some of us began to indulge in a typically American faith in our country’s ability to do what it decides to do. This somewhat uneasy confidence in the outcome was at the time supported by the analysts in the station and at Headquarters who were charged with evaluating the course of the war.

I think it’s fair to say that only the analysts were positioned to take a hard look at the evolving balance of forces in the fluid circumstances of 1964. Station management was under intense and continuous pressure from Washington to find ways—political and paramilitary—to help establish the legitimacy and authority of the new GVN, and operators like me were fully committed to the war in the countryside. Unfortunately, no one attempted a zero-based estimate of where things stood and where they were headed. Years later, one of our most knowledgeable and respected Vietnam analysts, George Allen, wrote to me after publication of one of the first volumes of my series on Vietnam. He bemoaned at some length the failure of the Directorate of Intelligence to undertake such an effort then or at any other time during the war.

I don’t claim that the seizure of Saigon by North Vietnamese tanks in 1975 was inevitable, and Allen wasn’t saying that the analytic product in 1964 reflected optimism either in the US Mission in Saigon or in Washington. Indeed, two Special National Intelligence Estimates in that year raised the possibility of the collapse of both South Vietnam and Laos; the second said that “the odds are against the emergence of a stable government capable of effectively prosecuting the war.” Both left open the possibility of a change of fortunes, however, and neither undertook the “balance of forces” calculation (to borrow a very useful bit of VC terminology) that might have permitted a more rigorous calculation of those odds.<sup>a</sup>

The sudden emergence of competent, charismatic, and determined leadership might have made the difference as it had in the Philippines in the early 1950s with

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a. See <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/collection/vietnam-collection>, which contains a collection of declassified estimative products on the situation in Vietnam.



Ramon Magsaysay. Nevertheless, looking at events as they actually fact transpired, it is hard to imagine how the GVN would have survived without the ability either to suppress the insurgency or—an intimately connected imperative—to win the loyalty of its citizenry, both urban and rural. Many Vietnamese were indifferent or hostile to the Viet Cong even though their attitude toward the military government ranged from tolerance to contempt. Such considerations, which now seem to me crucial to any effort to predict the outcome of such a conflict, went unexamined. In that atmosphere, the United States and the GVN settled, in effect, for half a loaf: a standoff with communist military forces and toleration of apathy toward the GVN in the countryside as long as the peasants paid their taxes and provided military draftees.

A later Saigon chief of station, Ted Shackley, purported to be summarizing the motivation of the peasantry when he wrote that only two things were required to assure its loyalty to the government: a rising standard of living and “a modicum of security.” This simplistic formulation ignored the fact that the VC had never promised the peasants material plenty, just comprehensive land reform and that only in return for commitment to the VC cause. The VC did not promise security, or even a modicum of it, except as the fruit of that commitment. In the first months after the fall of Diem, we in the station were not conceptually or emotionally equipped to offer a better assessment than Shackley would later make, so we just pushed ahead, expanding the programs and trying to increase their appeal in the countryside by refining their content.

### ***Bound to an Incoherent Strategy***

Looking back, it seems odd that, while representing what we saw as the cradle of democracy, we relied so heavily on Vietnamese counterparts to furnish the program’s political substance. The creation of a representative democracy in South Vietnam was our idea, not theirs—they were just emerging from colonial dependence and a decayed puppet monarchy—but we had no clue about how to bring it about. We tacitly acknowledged this in our eagerness to find indigenous partners capable of providing conceptual leadership. It was only after beginning my history of the project that I recognized the implicitly authoritarian worldview that Chau brought to our work. He did indeed want to see honest governance by a regime that took an active interest in its citizens’ welfare, but I never heard him say anything that suggested his aims included citizen involvement in genuine representative government.

I never met Nguyen Be, the other key figure in the construction of the People’s Action Teams curriculum. Like Chau, he was a field grade ARVN officer, but nothing I heard about his views suggested that they were greatly different. When brought together at our training facility at Vung Tau on the beach east of Saigon, the two

quarreled constantly, but their differences seem to have been more personal, a matter of style, than professional.

I could have asked Chau about his philosophy of governance, but, preoccupied with our joint Kien Hoa projects and their emphasis on countering VC influence, I never did. I do think I know how he would have replied: long-standing Viet Minh-Viet Cong influence in Kien Hoa and a succession of indifferent, and/or incompetent, and/or corrupt provincial governments would have produced a vote that might result in an embarrassing GVN defeat if the voters were given a real choice. I would not have disagreed, and I don't remember anyone, American or Vietnamese, who held any other view. The result was an incoherent US strategy in which American advice and support in the provinces focused on economic and security matters while essentially abdicating the effort to build the democracy that our policy declared also to be indispensable to success.

Meanwhile, the US Mission struggled to build national-level institutions, including political parties, but its effort lacked the active involvement of the rural—or even very much of the urban middle class—population. This paradox tortured US strategy for the rest of the war. We proclaimed democracy as the only acceptable form of government for South Vietnam but acquiesced in authoritarian military government as the only way to combat a burgeoning insurgency. The dilemma only intensified after I left the country in early 1965, after Hanoi committed major elements of the North Vietnamese Army to the war in the South.

With no answer to the fundamental political question, the station proceeded with what it had, relying for the political content of our programs on the few Vietnamese with whom we shared convictions that allowed us to work together. Major Mai, our Vietnamese chief instructor at the training facility at Vung Tau, preached a kind of mystical nationalism that our advisers there found almost incomprehensible but in which they saw nothing likely to subvert the effort to encourage peasant resistance to Viet Cong proselytizing. Chau's political program had no ideological content that I can recall, instead depending on a good-government philosophy that honest, if paternalistic, administration would win peasant loyalty.

I continued to visit Kien Hoa throughout the remaining year of my tour, although I did so less often after the arrival of John O'Reilly, a fledgling case officer whose good humor and good judgment more than compensated for his inexperience. With John in charge there, Tom Donohue, the station's new covert action chief, tapped me to set up similar programs in the swath of provinces that crossed the Mekong Delta just below Saigon. The station and Washington had concluded that preliminary results in Kien Hoa and a similar program in Quang Ngai—and, surely, the absence of alternatives—justified expanding these efforts.



Here I (left) stand with the Kien Hoa leadership team. To my left are Lt. Col. Tran Ngoc Chau; Maj. Andy Simko, MACV sector advisor for Kien Hoa; and John O'Reilly. Photo courtesy of Judy O'Reilly.

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### *Some Gains, Weak Vietnamese Leadership, and Influx of New CIA Officers*

When led by ARVN officers convinced of their potential, the station's programs materially improved the balance of forces in Saigon's favor. One of the best was Tieu Can District in Vinh Binh, a Delta province adjacent to Kien Hoa. The ARVN captain serving as district chief essentially eradicated Viet Cong political and military muscle in Tieu Can, at least for the duration of his tour of duty there. The remaining six of Vinh Binh's districts suffered from the province chief's inertia and the mediocrity of the district chiefs.

In late 1964, one of my new targets was Kien Tuong Province, home to part of the infamous VC refuge called the Plain of Reeds. My introduction to it came when I joined a party of GVN military and civilian officials traveling by boat up a canal to the provincial capital, Moc Hoa. Much of our route had been rated by GVN and US intelligence as a no-man's land vulnerable to VC attack, and at one point the ARVN complement on board began firing into the banks on both sides of the canal to forestall enemy ambush. Someone encouraged me to contribute to this storm of prophylactic small arms fire. I had taken to carrying an Uzi, a 9mm Israeli-made submachine gun, when engaged in surface travel outside Saigon and joined the fun. This did not, however, prevent the VC from detonating a mine—harmlessly, fortunately—as our boat passed by.

The fire halted as we approached the relative security of Moc Hoa, where local officials had set up a welcoming lunch. As we approached the outdoor tables, we

barely disturbed the largest assembly of flies I have ever seen. Protocol is protocol, especially for an honored guest, and I managed to make a show of eating something. I could only hope it would not lead to a bout of intestinal misery, which for me had usually come as an unpleasant surprise and not as the predictable result of a visibly toxic environment. On that day, I was lucky to have the rule hold. It had also held, albeit in reverse, during my Da Nang sojourn when the harmless looking oysters I consumed over a weekend at the beach at Nha Trang produced a case of hepatitis that resulted in two weeks in an Army hospital.

It was at Moc Hoa that I met Maj. Al Francisco, who commanded the provincial MAAG team there. We had enough time together for me to determine his sympathy for the programs that I was there to sell to the province chief. We soon built an informal partnership in which Al not only conducted training and helped supervise and evaluate the Kien Tuong programs—especially Counter-Terror—but also trained members of similar teams from neighboring provinces.

Al's collaboration with training, like that of Tom Aaron in Kien Hoa, represented a stopgap solution to the closing of the facilities we had operated under the Diem regime. The new facilities at Vung Tau were not ready for the first teams we recruited in 1964, but, with help from Tom and Al and various others, we deployed teams into a number of key provinces while work at Vung Tau continued. The structure of the program was now set, and my work in the final few months of my tour concentrated on further expansion of provincial coverage, contacting province chiefs and their US advisers and helping newly arrived CIA case officers become acclimated to their new surroundings.

This phase confirmed my early impression that cooperation from our military colleagues depended a great deal on rank. As I toured the provinces soliciting cooperation in our programs, I found that I could expect willing, even enthusiastic, support from advisers up through the rank of major. Lieutenant colonels were not to be taken for granted, but, despite occasional skepticism, they responded in a businesslike way, open to a description of our emphasis on the political dimension of our program. As a rule, full colonels seemed more concerned with turf questions: why was I, a civilian, running a quasi-military program not formally coordinated with MAAG or MACV? Above that level, there were few problems as our credentials were known to all general officers with relevant portfolios. The remaining complications seemed to stem from their spotty briefings of subordinates.

I remember arriving in My Tho, the Dinh Tuong Province capital, just as the MAAG adviser there got word that Col. Jasper Wilson, visiting from MAAG headquarters, was on his way in from the airfield. The reaction was stark terror for it seemed that Wilson's style emphasized intimidation—only of his inferiors, of course—and the My Tho adviser trembled at the prospect of having to explain my

presence in the compound. I pointed out that Col. Wilson had no authority over the movements of a CIA officer, but it was clear that, if I was going to win the provincial adviser's cooperation, I had better make myself scarce. This I did until he got word to me that the coast was clear. With his goodwill now assured—he had already agreed about the potential value of our programs—I could turn the My Tho effort over to one of the newly arrived case officers.

It was at about this time that Tom Donohue asked me to serve as his field supervisor for Delta operations. More young, first-tour officers were arriving to staff the expanding programs, and he wanted an experienced eye on their progress and problems. As with the first of such arrivals, John O'Reilly, whom I had sent to Kien Hoa, I was gratified to see the maturity and good sense they brought to what was a truly foreign work experience. They were all young and all volunteers. Although they knew that the government's hold on the countryside was perilously weak, they seemed to see themselves, like Henry V, leaping into the breach and exhibiting full confidence that they'd succeed. Only one of the first half-dozen disappointed me, a rather fey young man whose scatter-brained approach to his work was all the more conspicuous for its difference from the performance of the rest of his contingent. Most of them did an admirable job of dealing with the intractable problems they faced, the most frustrating of these being the incompetence, lack of commitment, and occasional fiscal dishonesty of so many of their GVN partners.

There were other occasional disappointments, such as the pair I saw on a visit to the training center at Vung Tau. A graduating class was about to start a ceremonial final five-kilometer run as students, accompanied by their Vietnamese instructors. Because they were about to be deployed to provinces heavily contested by the Viet Cong, their morale and esprit de corps needed all the support they could get. Unfortunately, our advisers had preferred to lounge on the veranda of their cottage, inadvertently but obviously demonstrating their detachment from the Vietnamese they were there to help turn into effective counterinsurgents. They weren't violating any station protocol, because CIA, like US government agencies in general, saw the Vietnamese not as partners in defense of a joint cause but rather as clients, fully responsible for the use, effective or not, of US advice and support. There were individual exceptions, of course, but these were not numerous enough to alter the tone of the overall effort.

This detached approach might have sufficed had we been working with an anti-communist regime as dedicated and disciplined as the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese sponsors. As I traveled the Delta provinces, however, I saw more clearly what I already had reason to suspect: leaders like Kien Hoa Province's Col. Chau were scarce, not just in the military but also in the civilian agencies. What I did not see was the reason for their lack of commitment. To the historian of CIA's role in the war that

I later became, it is clear they were influenced by their background as servants of the colonial French and that, as the nominal stewards of an independent country, they were driven more by bureaucratic self-interest than by any attachment to democratic ideals or national loyalties. Whether a more personalized commitment on the part of American advisers would have made a decisive difference is doubtful at best, but, in its absence, we unconsciously endorsed the disengaged attitudes of so many of our Vietnamese counterparts.

### ***A Life Changing Introduction***

Working in a war zone does not necessarily preclude romance. Not long after my move from Da Nang to Saigon, Stu Methven and Jim Henderson, a friend of his with the US Information Service (USIS), told me about Gisela Daschkey, a young German embassy employee who lived in the building in which Jim had an apartment. Jim had declared himself out of the running for her attention—he was at least 25 years older than she—and Stu was married. Accordingly, the two decided to try a little matchmaking, and they interrupted her lunch one day so they could introduce me.

I was struck by Gisela’s dark brown eyes and rich brown hair, and the glow of her northern European complexion enhanced her attractiveness. With no encouragement from her—she seemed quite indifferent to me—I followed up with an invitation to dinner in Cholon, Saigon’s Chinese quarter, at a popular Szechuan restaurant grotesquely named the Esquimaux. (The name may have referred to the gleaming floor-to-ceiling white tile, which was a little short on esthetic appeal but did suggest a concern for sanitation.) She agreed to go, and, as one Esquimaux date followed another, we gradually became an “item,” in the parlance of the period. We occasionally went to French movies, ventured out of Saigon to a frog-leg emporium in neighboring Gia Dinh Province, and once flew up to Hue, the ancient capital of Annam.

In mid-1964, we flew together to Cambodia to see the famous Buddhist temple at Angkor Wat. Although not yet threatened by either Cambodian or North Vietnamese communists, the once lively tourist trade was moribund, and, except for a few forlorn vendors of Cambodian snacks, we had the temple and adjacent tourist hotel to ourselves. Our ride on an elephant’s back in an elaborate seat on a rattan frame was a standard part of the tourist agenda.

I had never before been attracted to a girl as direct or matter of fact as Gisela or to anyone as adventurous, and her Prussian origins added a touch of the exotic to her persona. We gradually formed a connection such that, after she left for Germany in the fall of 1964, I felt a painful void. Female company, both American and Vietnamese, had always been readily available in Saigon, but it had now lost its appeal, and after about six weeks I went to Stu Methven’s house—one of the very few with a telephone—and called her.

Her grandmother answered, and the language barrier—I had no German at the time, and we wound up speaking French, which she had evidently not spoken in years—plus an extremely poor connection (there were no satellite phones in the mid-1960s) made for a tortuous minute or two as I struggled to identify myself. Gisela finally came to the phone, and I popped the question just as the connection went dead. I was left not knowing if she'd even heard me propose but was relieved of the suspense the next day, when I got her telegram saying yes. Our marriage the following April in Offenbach-am-Main, her hometown, marked the beginning of 52 years together during which she became not only wife and mother and expert cook but an American citizen and, later, a CIA case officer engaged in sensitive collection operations.

Marriage of a CIA officer to a foreign national must be approved in advance by the Agency. I knew this, of course, but, as I recall, I thought I could treat it as a mere formality. I procrastinated until probably around New Year's, when I went to Jorgy and told him about Gisela. His dismayed reaction was anything but what I'd expected. He saw Headquarters disapproval as a serious possibility and urged me to postpone my commitment until it was on board. I replied that I really couldn't contemplate such a gesture of inconstancy, for that was how Gisela would see it. He backed me up with a recommendation full of the conventional hyperbole with which we bureaucrats try to establish that we're serious, and approval came promptly.

In the six months between Gisela's departure from Saigon and my own in late March 1965, I watched the growth of the station's counterinsurgency programs. The communist hold on rural areas of South Vietnam was growing even faster, however. By the time I left, US policymakers and their intelligence advisers anticipated a humiliating defeat if the tide did not turn, and the Johnson administration had ordered the first of a series of major deployments of US ground forces. I thought that my own participation in the war was now finished. Colonel Chau came up from Kien Hoa to join colleagues seeing me off, and I boarded an aircraft that would take me to Bangkok and the connecting flight to Frankfurt.<sup>a</sup> I was then on my way to Offenbach and knotting the ties of the most important personal relationship of my life.



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a. I would see Colonel Chau again 20 years later as I researched the third of my histories of CIA's engagement in Southeast Asia. Over three-days I interviewed him about his experience in and views of the pacification effort in the 1960s. By then, having been imprisoned for four years by his own government and then for years more by the victorious communists, he had suffered much before managing to emigrate to the United States in the late 1970s, Chau's testimony thus figures prominently in the book *CIA and Rural Pacification* (CIA/CSI, 2021), which is available at [https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/3\\_CIA\\_AND\\_RURAL\\_PACIFICATION.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/3_CIA_AND_RURAL_PACIFICATION.pdf). Chau died in July 2020 at 96 years, a victim of the Covid pandemic. The *Washington Post* published a lengthy obituary, further testimony to the importance of his role in the Vietnamese civil war. See, Harrison Smith, "Tran Ngoc Chau, Vietnamese counterinsurgency specialist, dies at 96 of coronavirus complications" July 9, 2020.



## Chapter Six

### *A New Partnership—and Solo Tour in Africa, 1965*

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**M**y father's precarious health had kept the family from coming to Offenbach for the wedding, and I was happy to see what looked like his instant bonding with Gisela [in Wisconsin]. I wasn't surprised, however, as I had already seen her gift for effortless empathy with people of varying origins, and it held true with my family as well.







On Gisela's and my wedding in the spring of 1965. The smile I wore on my face that day would only be equaled by the smile I wore the day my freedom and those of my embassy colleagues was assured in January 1981.

Though we had a lovely honeymoon in Italy and sailed home via a freighter, my first assignment on returning took me to an unaccompanied, temporary assignment in the Republic of the Congo. Lake Tanganyika might have made a lovely honeymoon site, but it was the center of dealing with Cuban efforts to undermine democracy in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

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## ***A Honeymoon to Italy, and Freighter Ride Home***

A honeymoon trip to Italy followed Gisela's and my wedding in Offenbach. On the way, we stopped in Freiburg for a look at the city's cathedral and its stained glass, which turned out to be the most richly beautiful I have ever seen. We had both visited Rome before, but its wonders are endless, as are those of Venice, albeit on a smaller scale. We had already decided to return to the United States by sea and, in the absence of any passenger ships, had booked a cabin on a US-flagged freighter. The captain and his officers treated us—the only paying passengers—with great courtesy, although they sometimes gave the impression of wondering why anyone would ride a freighter for fun. The United States Lines prohibited its crews from drinking alcohol at sea, so there was not much by way of social life. The purser did offer to provide a nightly bucket of ice, a service that turned out not to be limited to the two of us. The captain, in particular, would show up at breakfast quite bleary-eyed.

Entertainment became the least of our concerns when the wind started to blow. For three days, we headed into it, steaming only fast enough for the helmsman to keep the bow pointed into the wind. The waves were higher than the ship, and, when we descended into a trough, it looked and felt as if we might just keep on going down. One of the officers had already let us know that our cargo included the body of a sailor who had died in Europe and was being shipped home. There was some unease among the crew—it seems that seamen really are superstitious—but the ship escaped damage, and we made it to Boston after eleven days, three more than scheduled. We were told that we had experienced the ship's stormiest spring crossing ever, and Gisela and I were congratulated on our more or less successful resistance to seasickness.

We had added one item to the ship's cargo, a Volkswagen Beetle that had come as Gisela's impromptu dowry. It took us from Boston into Canada and back to the States with the conventional honeymoon stop at Niagara Falls. From there, we drove to Chicago and up to Fond du Lac, where my parents were waiting for us. My father's precarious health had kept them from coming to Offenbach for our wedding, and I was happy to see what looked like his instant bonding with Gisela. I wasn't surprised, however, as I had already seen her gift for effortless empathy with people of varying origins, and it held true with my family as well.

A word about my in-laws: Gisela's mother, Elfriede, was born in East Prussia and married a young soldier from her home village of Neuendorf in 1939 or 1940. Gisela was born shortly before he was deployed in the invasion of the Soviet Union, but she never knew him as he died of pneumonia outside Moscow in late 1941.

A year or so later, a German unit arrived at Neuendorf, and its troops were quartered in and around the village. A communications specialist from Offenbach am Main, Hans Schaupmeier, found himself billeted on the substantial farm owned by the family of Gisela's father. She and her mother were living there too, and, when the time came for the unit to move on, Hans—perhaps already uncertain about the war's outcome—gave Elfriede his mother's Offenbach address and invited her and Gisela to take refuge there if they had to leave Neuendorf. In 1944, as Soviet forces threatened the German hold on East Prussia, the family abandoned the farm. Gisela's only recollection of their departure was the crashing of the artillery that signaled the Russian approach. They waited out the rest of the war with Hans's mother in Offenbach. Gisela remembered the arrival of American troops and the gift of an orange, the first she had ever seen, from a huge—from her perspective—Black GI.

Hans was less fortunate. He was captured on the Eastern Front late in the war and spent two years in a Soviet prison camp before being repatriated. He recovered from the ordeal but, remembering the prison diet, never again tasted cabbage. Gisela and Elfriede were still in Offenbach when he returned, and he married Elfriede and gained a stepdaughter. The three were in the same apartment when I arrived. Hans and I hit it off well somehow, despite our ignorance of each other's language. With Elfriede ("Tutta"), however, things were a little strained. She was a gracious hostess but unhappy at her daughter's impending departure, and I could see that I would have to work at being accepted.

Our immediate agenda once we were back in Virginia centered on Gisela's adaptation to a new home and mine to a new job in an unfamiliar component. With the sole exception of getting a driver's license—different rules of the road were the main challenge—I think she felt at home a good deal sooner than I did. Although she was devastated at failing her first driving test, she passed on her second try and soon knew the Northern Virginia road network better than I did.

Building a social life was not a difficult task. Gisela befriended a couple of about our age who lived in the apartment next door, and I had friends from my nearly 10 years in FE Division. Gisela knew several of them from Saigon and from our visit to Cambodia. I had expected as much from a girl who, as a single German Foreign Office employee, had thrived in wartime Saigon on her first tour of duty overseas, but it was nevertheless very gratifying to see her adapt so effortlessly to life as a housewife in the United States.

My own experience over the ensuing year was less satisfying. I would have been content to stay with FE Division as my “home base”—part of a now-defunct system of personnel management. Before I left Saigon, however, Jorgy, then DCOS, had talked me into joining him in the paramilitary Special Operations Division (SOD), which he was scheduled to head upon completion of his tour in Vietnam. On March 30, a couple of weeks after I left, however, a car bomb exploded outside the embassy annex in which most of the station’s complement was located. COS Peer de Silva, was seriously wounded, his secretary was killed, and two officers were blinded by flying glass. Jorgy replaced Peer, and his scheduled departure and impending tour as chief of SOD were canceled.

Press coverage of the attack and photos of the damage reminded me of the unease I had always felt when entering and leaving the annex. The street side of the building that contained the chancery and annex had turned into a parking lot for bicycles, any one of which could harbor an explosive. Neither embassy security nor the Saigon police had ever moved to guard the premises, however, and the blast, when it came, was much bigger than anything a bicycle bomb could have produced.

### ***An Unexpected Turn to Africa***

Back at Headquarters, having by then developed a reputation as competent in paramilitary matters, I was asked to help set up a string of paramilitary bases in Third World locales with an eye to providing quick reactions to communist insurrection or coup attempts against weak governments seen as likely targets of Soviet expansionism. These would be manned by third-country military veterans whose varied nationalities would provide the US with plausible denial wherever they might be deployed. I was to be the project’s point man, soliciting the indispensable support of the area division chiefs who would have to provide sites for quasi-permanent installations.

I quickly found myself trying to parry the objections of the area divisions to which I was looking for support. The more of these sessions I endured, the more I realized that, in their position, I’d be making the same arguments. These encompassed everything: problems of recruitment and cover, the location of base areas, possible international legal liabilities, and the care and feeding—and control—of units between tactical deployments.

The idea may already have been dying on the vine when the need arose to replace the chief of a paramilitary activity based on the shore of Lake Tanganyika in Joseph Mobutu’s Democratic Republic of the Congo. Fears of communist inroads into Africa in the early 1960s had been intensified by rumors of Cuban involvement that stemmed in part from reports of Cubans crossing the lake and infiltrating Congo from Tanganyika. (It became Tanzania in 1964.) CIA’s portion of the US response

included two entities assigned to intercept and liquidate such efforts. One was a small detachment of T-28 training aircraft modified for use in combat. The other was a pair of aluminum-alloy-hulled Swift patrol boats, designed for service on the rivers and canals of the Mekong Delta of South Vietnam, each of which had (literally) been cut in half for transport by air and welded back together at our base in Albertville (now Kalem) for deployment on the lake.

SOD had air and maritime officers on site to supervise maintenance and direct the assets' missions. The aircrews were drawn from among the Cuban pilots who had supported CIA's invasion of the Bay of Pigs, while the Swifts were manned by personnel borrowed from 5th Commando, the South African unit created and headed by Mike Hoare. The unit chief's job required supervising this motley organization, making sure its activities remained consistent with rules of engagement, and conducting liaison with the Congolese military and its Belgian advisers.

The intensity of US concern about communist inroads into the Congo was already on the decline when I was nominated for the job. This reduced its desirability as even a TDY assignment, and, of course, Gisela was not thrilled at the idea of being left behind for four months. I wanted out of what I considered the ill-conceived effort to build a third-country army, however, and she generously accepted my need for a change. Adaptable as always, she spent the separation with her family in Offenbach and got a temporary job in an international firm in Frankfurt. She told me later that her boss there suggested at one point that she stay with the company and say goodbye to me.

In 1966, I arrived in Leopoldville (Kinshasa), where Dick Johnson, a veteran paramilitary officer, was running provincial operations on behalf of station chief Larry Devlin. Unlike a good many other paramilitary types, Dick had a reflective mind and a considerate style that augured well for a productive relationship. He showed me around the city, and we had lunch at a well-appointed restaurant featuring *steak cannibale*, the Belgian version of steak tartare.

Having been briefed on the people and programs in Albertville, I boarded a station C-46 for the six-hour flight across the country. My predecessor had already left Congo when I arrived, and finding lodging was simply a matter of moving into his vacated room. The balcony, which overlooked Lake Tanganyika, featured an elephant tusk at least six feet long propped against the wall. I eventually traded it to a Belgian missionary for two much smaller, elegantly polished ones that, in those unenlightened times, I was allowed to ship home. The priest used the exchange to boost the stock of material used to teach orphans in his care how to carve ivory figures for sale.

My superiors in Leopoldville and Headquarters were still preoccupied with documenting Cuban collaboration, past or present, with local communist rebel leaders.



By the time of my arrival, no such Cubans had been identified, let alone arrested or captured, but a cable describing a new lead had an urgent tone that encouraged me to think we might finally be on to something. It gave me the identity of a Congolese operative reported to have had dealings with now departed Cuban visitors. He had just been determined to be in the Albertville prison on unspecified charges, and I was to interview him.

Fortunately, three or four of the purported Cubans had also been identified, and I received a photo of each, with a few dummies, to be shown to the prisoner for possible confirmation of the alleged contacts. Less fortunately, despite his apparent willingness to cooperate, he denied ever having seen any of the subjects in the photos, and the initiative died on the spot. It was a textbook example of the frustrations that accompany so many collection efforts dependent on untested sources: I couldn't be sure that my would-be source was telling the truth or whether he had ever actually had contact with any Cubans. Furthermore, he had turned down an opportunity to win favorable treatment by telling me what I obviously wanted to hear, whether or not it was true. I could only conclude that the lead was just what it looked like, a dead end.

Most of the little tactical intelligence I was getting came from conversation with Belgian officers who were presumably drawing on Congolese Army sources. Whatever the case, the Belgians took seriously a report about rebel activity near M'boko, a village on the lakeshore about two days north of Albertville by lake steamer. My communicator and I joined the party, sailing on one of the two boats that carried troops and advisers. I was ready to provide any needed air support, but the martial character of the expedition was soon diluted by a stop at Bukavu. We disembarked and made our way to the market, where expatriate Belgian shoppers seemed entirely unconcerned about their security. In fact, we encountered no "simbas" before the unit commander—whether Belgian or Congolese was unclear—gave up, and we returned to Albertville.

A subsequent experience with 5th Commando had not been on my agenda but nonetheless provided a valuable lesson. I was sitting outside the hotel one afternoon when a couple of troopers appeared with a handcuffed Congolese whom they had detained for reasons I no longer recall. They were about to turn him over to the police. The circumstances suggested that he might have useful intelligence, and, as he might well be moved out of the local jurisdiction, I undertook to debrief him on the spot. The session was well underway when we were interrupted by Sam Cassidy, a 5th Commando officer who was curious about why I would be interviewing a nondescript Congolese at the hotel. I said that I was seeking information the man might have and asked Sam to let us finish. He looked startled, as if being excluded from anything was outside his experience, but he moved on.



That night, Jim, the case officer for my little Swift boat navy, came to me, shaken by what he said was Sam's stated intention to kill me as punishment for the perceived affront. My first reaction was skepticism. It was not as if there'd been any kind of confrontation, and the proposed punishment really did seem disproportionate to the alleged crime. Jim knew Cassidy better than I, however, and viewed him as mentally unstable and possibly dangerous. We worked out a line of argument designed to soothe Cassidy's apparently wounded ego, and Jim took the first opportunity to engage him in private conversation. The result was his reluctant agreement that he might have overreacted, at least a little, and the issue disappeared.

It was not until after my return to Washington that I discovered that Jim's estimate of Cassidy's mental state had been right on the mark. The Swedish mechanics who serviced our T-28s had their own bar, and, when he visited one night, he got into an argument with one of them. He stormed out, returned carrying a pistol, and shot the offending mechanic dead. I don't know if the incident resulted in prosecution or imprisonment, but I learned sometime later that he had undertaken a vendetta against Chief of Station Larry Devlin. Devlin had by then departed Leopoldville, and, for a while, a substantial effort was devoted to tracking Cassidy's movements in order to prevent an attempt on Devlin's life. (How Cassidy knew Devlin's identity or would know his post-Congo itinerary remains a mystery, at least to me.)

On one occasion, my Cuban pilots proposed some out-of-school mayhem of their own. Their case officer came to me one day to say they had asked for permission to attack civilian boats crossing Lake Tanganyika. They had not specified—and almost certainly could not specify if asked—how they would determine that a given boat was suspicious enough to justify this, and I did not need any consultation with Leopoldville or Washington before responding with an emphatic no.

Generally, my experience in Albertville served to reinforce my earlier skepticism about Headquarters' proposed army of irregulars. The kind of unreflective activism represented by the Bay of Pigs operation, among others, was at least intermittently still shaping the selection of objectives and would continue to do so for another 20-odd years. The irony is that, by the late 1980s, when CIA had become burdened by a widespread public image as a rogue operator, the Agency had in fact adopted a much more prudent approach to covert action. Nevertheless, that spirit of can-do enthusiasm still exerts at least sporadic influence at the policy level. One example that comes to mind is Afghanistan. After 9/11, CIA led a successful campaign to close Afghanistan to international terrorists. The decision to follow that success with an attempt to install a democracy there was not the result of intelligence failure or CIA activism. Rather, it reflected the occasional spasmodic impulse by policymakers of both parties to treat nation-building as a US foreign policy goal.



# Chapter Seven

## *Respite in the Philippines, 1966–69*

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**A**s I prepared to move to the Philippines, no one mentioned limitations on the potential of military civic action or the effectiveness of our participation in it. Conventional thinking on the objectives of covert action almost certainly did not even see them as weaknesses, and neither Bill Colby nor other managers had expressed any concerns. Given CIA's practice of delegating the design of field work to its field operatives, I would be on my own to shape its development.







Gisela and I settled into a small house in Quezon City. Our daughter, Christine was born a year into the tour in the Adventist Hospital in Manila. Our Philippine household staff treated her as they would have their own children.

Stopover on Samar Island. Hilario “Larry” Mercado, AFP civic action chief, on the right.



## *An Opportunity in Manila*

My stint in the Democratic Republic of the Congo nearly completed my obligation to SOD, and I returned to FE Division in the summer of 1966. With paramilitary experience under my belt at a time of burgeoning demand for qualified people to serve in Vietnam, I faced the possibility of being tabbed for a third tour in Indochina. I felt I had paid my dues there—it later turned out I hadn't—but fortunately, another opportunity arose in Manila.

Military civic action, the use of military resources to promote economic welfare and political stability in a rebellious countryside, had a history in the Republic of the Philippines that dated back to the Spanish-American War (1898). In its contemporary form, CIA engagement originated with the early 1950s service of the famous CIA officer Edward Lansdale, who joined then Defense Minister Ramon Magsaysay in the creation of a program to suppress the communist-led rebels known as the Hukbalahap (“Huks,” pronounced “hooks”) and restore the government's legitimacy in the eyes of the peasantry.<sup>a</sup> Although the movement was under nominal communist control—the Manila-based party leadership had a strained relationship with Huk leader Luis Taruc—it was more a peasant revolt against the exactions of exploitive landlords than an ideologically based revolution directed by Moscow. As the violence faded during and after Lansdale's tenure, the Civic Action Centers operated by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) became one of the government's instruments for persuading an alienated peasantry of its constructive purposes.

CIA support of Filipino efforts was reinforced by the Kennedy administration's enthusiasm for what came to be called “nation-building.” This was a rather diffuse concept whose objectives varied with the perceived causes of a country's rural unrest but was always based on the imperative to support anti-communist governments in countries threatened by communist expansionism. These anti-communist Third World governments were usually intensely conservative and often led by members of the very landowning class whose abuses had sparked rural uprisings. That tension mandated a delicate balance in our dealings with such regimes. Washington tried to promote genuine representative government while maintaining a joint defense posture.

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a. Hukbalahap is an abbreviated form of the Tagalog term for People's Anti-Japanese Army and reflecting its formation after the Japanese invasion of the Philippines in 1942. As in many countries under Axis occupation, the leadership of Philippine resistance came mainly from the political left.

In the Philippines, the strategic equation was complicated by the presence of two important US military bases, Clark Air Base, in Central Luzon, and Subic Bay Naval Base. Americans—some of them, at least—might deplore the country’s reactionary land tenure system, but the need for a solid Cold War military relationship trumped any impulse to promote America as the champion of the common man. Civic action managers and advisers were thus obliged to avoid proposals that challenged the political and economic status quo. The work I was to support would emphasize useful but anodyne activities such as improving agricultural techniques and primary education. In addition, I was to run two other activities, unknown to Philippine authorities, that will be described a little later in this account.

FE Division chief and later DCI William Colby, an admirer of Lansdale’s work in the Philippines, welcomed the Kennedy administration’s interest in Third World development, and, when he endorsed my nomination to replace the departing case officer, I took it as a compliment. I soon found out, however, that he had his limits when it came to providing material support to the operation or venturing into politically sensitive terrain. In retrospect, it seems that Colby shared what I came to view as a typically American confidence in the power of our good intentions. In fact, the authority of the advice offered by a rich uncle depends a lot on his openhandedness, and, in this case, the AFP was providing all of the facilities and personnel and conducting the liaison with the civilian agencies that provided technical expertise. For its part, CIA was merely trading on the legacy of its role as adviser to Ramon Magsaysay at a time when it had had a real, if informal, role in policymaking.

That role had been reduced by the mid-1950s when Lansdale, looking to return to the Philippines, visited Manila from Saigon. President Magsaysay, with whom he had shared living quarters at the peak of their collaboration, declined even to see him. Magsaysay died in a plane crash in 1957, and, by the mid-1960s and after the restoration of more traditionally conservative government, the AFP was running a resources-starved program that faced the threat of being reduced to little more than a pro forma gesture by a government whose priorities lay elsewhere.

As I prepared to move to the Philippines, no one mentioned these limitations on the potential of military civic action or the effectiveness of our participation in it. Conventional thinking on the objectives of covert action almost certainly did not even see them as weaknesses, and neither Bill Colby nor other managers had expressed any concerns. Given CIA’s practice of delegating the design of field work to its field operatives, I would be on my own to shape its development.

### ***A Military Assignment—After a Fashion***

The mechanics of my move to the Philippines were straightforward enough. I would be assigned to the Joint US Military Advisory Group (JUSMAG) in Quezon City, adjacent to Manila. This arrangement provided for natural access to the AFP.

One administrative requirement involved Gisela's citizenship. She was still a West German national, and I was told that CIA policy discouraged sending foreign national family members on overseas assignments. I was also told that the office would make special arrangements to get her naturalized before we left. When we showed up at the immigration office on the prescribed morning, however, we were startled to find that Gisela was but one of 30 or 40 applicants, all government employees. She was the only one sponsored by the Agency. It was just another example of the insistence in those days on seeing even routine administrative procedures as something unique, something special. Indeed, so many components, large and small, had the word "special" in their designation that an outside observer might have thought it a synonym for "ordinary."

In the fall of 1966, Gisela and I settled into our new home in Quezon City. Howell Compound, named for the expatriate American who had built it, was a pleasant JUSMAG enclave containing six or eight modest houses and a small outdoor swimming pool. Our house was perhaps the smallest, but it was also the most attractively laid out. It had just happened to be empty when we arrived. Also available were the services of two Filipina house servants and my predecessor's driver. All three stayed with us through the three years of our tour. They were competent and attentive, and, after our daughter, Christine, was born something over a year later in Manila's Adventist Hospital, they treated her like their own family. In minor ways, our residence in the JUSMAG housing compound might have been seen as a departure from normal JUSMAG practice, but Gisela and I were always treated as bona fide members of the team.

Credit for this collegial atmosphere goes mainly, I think, to JUSMAG's deputy chief, a fatherly Air Force colonel whose style reminded me of Captain Cole at Ft. Devens, and the adjutant general, Don Dement, a major of about my own age. I must have met the chief, a major general named Gomes, but I have no recollection of any conversation with him. He was possibly among the few officers who objected to the assignment of our folk to military organizations, but he seemed just as distant with his own people as he was with me. His attitude may have inspired a reaction in kind; although he pronounced his name in the Portuguese mode with two syllables (as in Gomez), his subordinates sometimes referred to him with the one-syllable pronunciation "Gomes." The absence of a personal connection with me did not matter, as my own guidance naturally came from the station. The deputy chief there, Ralph

Katrosch, was a more active supervisor than many, but our views on ends and means nearly always coincided, an advantage for me as I could always count on his support.

My success in the Philippines would depend primarily on the quality of my indigenous counterparts and our relationships. My predecessor had already left, so I began by introducing myself to my new colleagues. As in Vietnam, when I had worked with Colonel Chau, I was lucky to have a local counterpart with whom a meeting of minds was easy, and Navy Capt. Hilario (Larry) Mercado and I almost immediately became partners. He introduced me to the civic action officers of the individual services, each of whom, like almost all the Filipinos I knew, had a Spanish first name but used an American nickname.

They began by taking me to the Civic Action Centers, several of which were located in Army posts in Central Luzon, the locus of the dormant Huk rebellion. The most memorable of the others was at the naval station at Batu-Batu, an island just 40 miles east of Borneo, which one can see on a clear day, as most days are. The importance of the location was the same for the center as for the naval station itself. The area's population was mostly Muslim and presented the same challenge to the Philippine government that it did to the Spanish colonial regime.

The centers' agendas consisted of instructional sessions in which peasants assembled for lectures on improved agricultural techniques and the—rather meager—offerings of civilian agencies responsible for supporting the peasant economy. Participation in these sessions was entirely voluntary, but attendance was large enough to suggest that the very fact of an expression of government interest had some positive effect on peasant attitudes. Nevertheless, I soon realized that the credibility of AFP efforts in this field was limited by their inability to offer much beyond good advice.

One factor was the abject poverty of so much of the rural population. The peasants could not be asked to contribute anything but their time because they had nothing to contribute even if disposed to do so. Their situation was obvious to the most casual observer. On the day that Larry Mercado and I visited a village (*barrio*) in Tarlac Province, another center of the Huk uprising, he wanted to consult with the barrio chief. We stopped at the man's home only to find him away. His wife greeted us in a polite but not at all servile fashion. While she explained to Larry where to find her husband, I looked at the surroundings. Her house was scarcely more than a hut, surrounded by bare earth that had been swept clean. Despite her desperate poverty, however, she had been concerned enough to decorate the house with something beautiful. Outside, she had hung a rusty no. 10 can containing a cluster of brilliant red flowers that somehow transformed her hovel into a home. I found the contrast very moving, although it challenged any optimism that what we were doing was likely to make a difference.



There were other moments that reinforced my sense that good advice was not enough, but it took me some time to devise a formula that would make up even a small part of the deficit. Meanwhile, I deepened my familiarity with the centers and the officers who ran them. A visit to Batu-Batu required air transportation, and Larry would usually requisition a Philippine Air Force (PAF) C-47. Such flights were dedicated to civic action purposes, and they carried little cargo and no other passengers. This left ample room for our wives, who were enthusiastically received by the families of base officers, especially in remote posts such as Batu-Batu. There were always little discoveries to be made. In Batu-Batu, one of these was a small, rather chunky, banana that had a pear-like sweetness and texture that won over even a lifelong banana-hater like me.

I regretted not being able to spend more time in Batu-Batu to see better how the civic action center and the naval station as a whole related to the local, mostly Muslim, community. At worst, there was no overt ethnic/sectarian hostility of the kind involving the Abu Sayyaf movement that erupted several decades later. Attendance at the center's instructional programs was good, and I came away with the impression, admittedly superficial, that civil-military relations were at worst mutually respectful.

It had been evident from the start that neither CIA nor the Philippine military was disposed to raise the civic action budget. Larry Mercado and I had agreed that the single most limiting factor was the lack of vehicles to haul material for the farmers' self-help projects. I fairly soon discovered two resources that would, I hoped, allow the centers to make a material contribution to the population they were serving and in so doing enhance the centers' influence. First was the retired-vehicle park at Clark Air Base. Some of the trucks sent to Clark to die were still in operating condition but had reached the mileage specified by the Air Force for retirement. I went to Clark to ask the officer in charge if he could release such vehicles to the PAF and, if so, if we could send mechanics to confirm their serviceability. The answer to both questions was "yes," and Larry arranged for PAF mechanics to go to Clark to see what they could find.

It was at this point that Larry discovered a little stumbling block: Before the AFP could take ownership even of vehicles acquired at no cost, the civic action program's TO&E (table of organization and equipment) would have to be changed to include them. Larry convened a meeting of the services' civic action chiefs, and we invited their views on their respective needs.

I think it was the Philippine Constabulary, the national police force, that proposed beginning with staff cars for Manila-based headquarters elements. I could have stalled on the pretext that Clark had no passenger vehicles, but, even if that was true (I didn't know), it would have left open a requirement that I didn't want to impose on the American side. I said truthfully that the complaints I was hearing at



the centers had to do with the shortage of transportation for materials destined for village self-help projects. It worked—no one wanted to admit that his own convenience trumped field work—and we settled on trucks as the addition to the TO&E.

Visits to Clark by Larry's people identified a number of promising vehicles, mostly three-quarter ton but also a few 6x6 two-and-a-half-ton trucks, which were duly delivered to the most active centers, especially in Central Luzon. It seemed—indeed, it was—a very modest achievement, but perspective can affect value judgments, as I discovered while talking to the JUSMAG engineer adviser I had invited to the TO&E planning session. More familiar than I with the JUSMAG style, Larry said that we had accomplished more that morning than advisers he knew who had completed two-year tours of duty.

In fact, one essential requirement remained to be filled. Larry and I recognized that, however thorough our vetting process, the vehicles being offered us were, by Air Force standards, simply worn out. We could therefore expect them to be expensive to maintain, but neither the PAF nor JUSMAG nor CIA was going to pay the bill. The answer came from USAID, whose local branch, the US Operations Mission, ran a program that made pesos available to Philippine government entities seeking to improve and increase agricultural production. I don't recall the exact details, which were worked out by the PAF and USOM, but, as I recall, they got the activity going with admirable dispatch.

### *Exerting Sub Rosa Influence*

One of Washington's purposes in sponsoring an assignment like mine in the Philippines was to exert sub rosa US influence on government policies in directions that it thought would advance the interests of both parties while bolstering our clients' resistance to communist subversion. Two of my assets<sup>a</sup> fell into this category, one of them a nongovernmental organization (NGO) and the other a one-man show, a self-styled expert in rural social and economic development. Both espoused policies consistent with US and Philippine goals for the country but were also committed to the more rapid and comprehensive agricultural land reform than Manila's conservative government endorsed. Another consideration was the practice of nationalist and communist organizations to expose US ties to such entities whenever they could, always ascribing imperialist motives to Washington's interests. Accordingly, our support to them, as to other such entities, remained covert.

The one-man band quickly turned out to be tone-deaf, at least as far as my interests were concerned. His self-professed organizational efforts in the provinces

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a. Asset<sup>o</sup> is a DO term of art referring to an individual or organization over which the Agency claims substantial influence or, ideally, control. It is often used in a more aspirational sense—although this is hardly ever acknowledged—to refer to an entity that has exhibited some responsiveness to Agency requests but remains uncommitted to formal collaboration.

never rose above the level of empty talk, and, using an agent I had inserted into his office, I discovered his hand in the till. I dissolved the operation. The DO phobia against termination was not a problem in this case as the directorate had been almost puritanical in its emphasis on financial integrity. I would probably have met greater resistance to its liquidation had it been based solely on lack of production.

The local NGO was quite different. Its leader, a professor at a local university, was a dedicated advocate of land reform, which he saw as much as a matter of social justice as of economic progress. The professor, who enjoyed the support of local clergy connected to a social justice movement, accepted no money for himself or for his organization and seemed to value our connection mainly as a token of US encouragement of his efforts. At our regular meetings, always at Howell Compound, he provided information on what to expect, especially on government and landlord attitudes toward land reform, that facilitated my efforts to encourage AFP participation in rural reforms.

I digress here for a word on the near irrelevance in Third World countries like the Philippines of the tradecraft designed to preserve the secrecy of a case officer's meetings with an agent or contact. The standard practice that had evolved in Europe relied on extensive public facilities such as parks, hotels, and railroad stations or the classic safehouse, attributable to neither of the parties at a meeting. Ethnic similarities between officer and contact also contributed to the anonymity of any contacts that local authorities might observe. Meetings at the home of either an agent or a case officer were considered bad practice precisely because they abdicated this anonymity.

The developing world offered far fewer such meeting sites, and, at least in countries that enjoyed cordial relations with the United States, meetings at one of the parties' homes were often the least vulnerable of the few options. The professor always came to my house; it had a gate on the street, so he could reach the house without having to walk through Howell Compound. An evening session was thus discreet if not totally secure. One risk that I overlooked was our dog, Fritzi, a small product of Doberman and terrier parentage, whom I left in the yard one night when the professor was coming. As always, my visitor reached in to open the gate on the inside. Fritzi, good-natured but protective of her domain, nipped his hand. The professor was understandably annoyed at my nonfeasance, and it took some time to restore his usual cordiality. (I often walked Fritzi through the compound, mostly to enjoy watching her possessive strut even as I remained unsure whether it was the compound or me to which she was laying claim. On Sunday mornings, knowing exactly what to expect from me, Fritzi would intercept the weekly *Stars and Stripes* newspaper and shred it before I could get hold of it. I would then chase her around the living room trying to slap her fanny with what was left.)

### *Awarded a Joint Services Commendation Medal*

Land reform in the Philippines had languished after the Magsaysay years, and any subsequent progress was taking place at the provincial level. The only move to expand it during my tour there was being contested in Laguna Province in southern Luzon. The professor had long had people working the issue there, agitating for more equitable land tenure legislation, but resistance was stiff, and obdurate landlords had been known to resort to violence. At one session, when he once again voiced his anxiety, I noted that he had not cited any specific threats in Laguna either to his people or to himself and said I hoped he would not abandon an effort that he had known from the start would spark resistance. To say even this much was an implied accusation that he was being timid, and I left it at that. He stayed the course, and within the next few months, thanks largely to the agitation of his provincial organizers, the Laguna legislature enacted a reform that met our joint objectives.

Victory sparked a rare congratulatory cable from Headquarters. Although I had long ago stipulated the peripheral nature of the CIA role in the professor's endeavors, it had at least produced a measurable success, and this evoked a real sense of satisfaction.

Unlike Laos and Vietnam, the Philippines was at the time free of armed conflict. Ralph Katrosh requested that I stay for a third year. The invitation was easy to accept thanks to the satisfying work, cordial relationships with both Filipino and American colleagues, pleasant living quarters, and, not least, the arrival of Christine, who was indulged by house staff as well as her parents.

At this point, my agenda was largely the refinement of existing programs. I was not unhappy with their results but was nevertheless fully aware of their modest scope when judged by the scale of the national-level problems they were trying to address. It seemed, however, that Larry Mercado and his superiors thought the JUSMAG contribution to civic action had exceeded expectations. As the end of my tour approached in 1969, they put me in for a presidential decoration. President Marcos presented it at an annual ceremony honoring Philippine military personnel, and JUSMAG followed up by awarding me the Joint Services Commendation Medal.



# Chapter Eight

## *Back to Southeast Asia, 1970–72*

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**B**ill Nelson, chief of FE Division, was reported to have called Phnom Penh the best of all his stations. It was certainly the best I ever worked in; not even Laos, perhaps because of its much larger staff, matched its harmony and efficiency.







President Richard Nixon announcing the US invasion of Cambodia May 30 1970. Photo © Everett Collection Historical / Alamy Stock Photo.

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### ***Ready for a Home Assignment, But . . .***

At this point in my career, I certainly shared the view dominant in the DO culture that assignments in the field were the most valuable and desirable for those below senior management. In 1969, however, after four consecutive overseas tours (two in war zones and one labeled a hardship post, the Philippines) and with a young family, Washington seemed at least a tolerable prospect for me. Before leaving for Manila, we had bought a small house in Bethesda, Maryland, and, with the Capital Beltway completed, I expected a tolerable commute to Headquarters.

It turned out that getting settled in Bethesda was more complicated than breaking in as chief of the DO's Philippines desk. Ralph Katrosh, my boss in Manila, was also back in Washington running the branch that included the Philippines desk. Our collegial association in Manila simplified re-adapting to the Headquarters environment. We quickly found that the country desk and regional branch levels still did little more than set the general direction of operational activity and handle finances, security, and administration. The field station did the rest.

With no real challenges to be met, the assignment could have become a bore, but, after only a few months, the FE Division front office pulled me out to join its new Cambodia Task Force. In mid-March 1970, Cambodian ruler Prince Norodom Sihanouk had been overthrown by his parliament at the instigation of the anti-communist military leadership—this without any US encouragement that I know of—and replaced by Army chief and Prime Minister Gen. Lon Nol. At the end of that month, alarmed by reports of stepped-up shipments of Chinese munitions through Cambodia to the Viet Cong in South Vietnam, President Richard Nixon ordered US ground forces into Cambodia to put a stop to this traffic and to destroy or expel the North Vietnamese Army headquarters thought to be located near the border with South Vietnam.

These events followed two major developments in US dealings with Cambodia. In early 1965, Prince Sihanouk became convinced that the United States had conspired in separate Thai and South Vietnamese attempts to weaken Phnom Penh's control over several border provinces. In response, he provoked Washington into suspending diplomatic relations, partly by his instigation of a mob attack on the embassy in Phnom Penh.



## Chapter Eight

Since 1966, Sihanouk had been allowing Chinese munitions shipped to Cambodian ports to transit the country into Viet Cong-controlled areas of South Vietnam. Unknown at first to US officials, this practice, when discovered, soured an already tense relationship with the prince, and in late 1969 the US had closed its embassy. It was now to be reopened, with two main tasks, first to negotiate and organize the shipment of military aid to the new Lon Nol government, and second to create an intelligence collection capability to fill the gap created by the interruption of diplomatic relations.

My work on the task force involved a lot of back and forth with the division front office, where I often had to wait for an ongoing meeting to conclude before my own session could start. I got to know the secretaries well, and they were quite uninhibited about sharing their frustrations. Tensions would rise toward the end of the workday as they hammered away at their typewriters on the third or fourth draft of a cable that management kept revising. One looked up at me at one point, moaning, "There's never time to do it right, but there's always time to do it over!"

Headquarters had the responsibility for staffing the new Phnom Penh Station. One day I saw John Stein, a fellow trainee from the 1950s who had just been named chief of station. John had no Asia experience, which for management was the point. It wanted to send someone with no CIA profile to a country in which armed US intervention was already producing intense opposition in the United States. John did have good French, however, as well as a wife who, like Gisela, was unfazed by difficult and potentially dangerous living conditions.

Management's concern for invisibility did not last long. FE Division had not yet approached me about following John to Phnom Penh, but I could read the handwriting on the wall. It was already clear that the priority assigned to the new station would reflect both the intensity of the Vietnam War and Cambodia's new role in it. As a French speaker and already an old Indochina hand by CIA standards, I was therefore not surprised when management told me it wanted me in Phnom Penh, the sooner the better. An essential element of the new station's agenda would be intelligence on communist order-of-battle, and I was to create the program to collect it.

Security in Phnom Penh had not yet deteriorated to the point that it posed a serious risk to families, so mine, like those of other officers who had children not yet in school, would go with me. In 1970, however, the Palestine Liberation Organization launched a terror campaign on what seemed almost a world-wide basis. Although our cross-Pacific flights would not have taken us over Europe or the Middle East, Gisela and Christine wound up effectively quarantined in Fond du Lac while I went on my way.

I had largely forgotten what Phnom Penh looked like and how little it seemed like a national capital. It had just a few major boulevards that were crossed at intervals by two-lane streets, not all of them paved. My quarters were for the time being a room in one of the two commercial Western-style hotels. I was the only Western guest, however; the others were South Koreans in Cambodia in some official capacity, albeit not one in which they would have dealings with the US embassy. The facilities were a bit spartan but not uncomfortable. The food, however, reminded me of the bistro in Thakhek; its taste was merely tolerable but its threat to digestive health considerable.

While I waited for my family to be cleared for travel to Phnom Penh—it took several weeks—I started organizing my office and getting to know my Cambodian counterparts. As in Vietnam, they were all police or military men and, also as in Vietnam, very territorial in dealing with their Cambodian compatriots. If there was a centralized analytical component, even one limited to the military, I never found it. I had the impression that the chief of each service reported to the head of state.

My counterparts were a surprisingly diverse lot, and not all of them were even ethnic Cambodians. The most interesting, and most helpful to me, was Brig. Gen. Les Kosem, the de facto leader of the Cham minority, an Islamic group with an extraordinarily complicated history in Cambodia and the highlands of South Vietnam. As I got to know him, Kosem came to remind me of another of my Indochina counterparts, Vang Pao, the Hmong general in Laos. Each represented a minority whose main concern was the preservation of its ethnic identity and a measure of autonomy in areas dominated by more numerous groups, especially the Khmer, in Cambodia, and the Vietnamese. Each man was a rare example of not just assimilation but the attainment of a position of real authority. Kosem's clout rested on the Cham predominance in his military command; his troops may have considered themselves Cambodian, but their loyalty was to him.

I established working relationships with two other services, the G-2 of the Armed Forces (*Forces Armées Nationales Khmères*, or FANK), and the national police. The station was small, and at first I had only one assistant, Charles, a highly capable young man who took on the handling of police intelligence. John had a deputy, Harry, another JOTP product and a French speaker with Asia experience similar to mine. The number of intelligence targets demanding our attention always exceeded our capacity to fully exploit them, but it was a businesslike, collegial operation. In time, I did get two more officers, both with the requisite language skills and operational experience.

Fortunately for us, the modest size of the Cambodian bureaucracy helped to mitigate the staffing problem. As in Laos, governmental institutions were so small that any business requiring the commitment of people or money went right to the top.

Having started with Les Kosem, I introduced myself to the G-2 of the General Staff, Colonel Kouroudeth. Like his counterparts in Laos, neither he nor anyone in his office asked for credentials. I was accepted as what I said I was, namely, a colleague of the officer he'd been dealing with before my arrival. My colleagues practiced a similarly casual approach to their contacts, including John's with Prime Minister Lon Nol. The rest of us covered other military and civilian cabinet ministers; mine was the minister of interior, an elderly man who seemed free of pro forma optimism and therefore disposed to give me a candid view of the government's security situation.

The basic task facing the station in the order-of-battle collection context was the construction of a collection mechanism. Although my intelligence targets resembled those I'd worked against in Laos and Vietnam, the circumstances were different, more on the US side than on that of our various Cambodian clients. In Laos and Vietnam, where we were deeply and directly engaged in creating irregular units capable of building village militias, intelligence was important but ancillary. By 1970, the United States, under the Vietnamization label, was actually drawing down in South Vietnam, and CIA, far from seeking another paramilitary account, was looking for a way out of an already unsustainable level of obligations. Accordingly, when John rather hesitantly asked me if I intended to imitate the larger programs, I could assure him that I didn't, even were Headquarters ready to support such a move. I wanted instead to infiltrate natives of our target areas, equipped with radio communications where feasible. I would have them exfiltrated for debriefing where it was not.

It would not be the kind of quick-reaction system that permitted real time exploitation of intelligence on bombing targets, for example, but it would partially fill the intelligence vacuum that then faced us. If refinements became necessary and possible, we would see to them when the time came. Having no experience with irregular military units and apparently doubtful about the relevance of what he'd heard about Laos and Vietnam, John accepted my proposal on the spot. I was then free to follow my own preferences in building an order of battle collection capability.

My early discussions with Kouroudeth made it clear that he had few if any controlled sources of information on contested or enemy-controlled territory. We would be starting from scratch, but—like Col. Sounthone in Thakhek—Kouroudeth gave me personnel and carte blanche to train and deploy them into communist-controlled territory. He also provided at least some of his own reporting, and it gave us a reasonably reliable picture of the government's own perception of its military position.

Kouroudeth was a strange-looking little man whose nose seemed as if it had been squashed in some kind of collision. He was always most cordial. When I entered his office, he would take me over to the sofa, where we would sit side by side like old friends. One foible that initially made me a little uneasy was his practice of resting his hand on my knee. It was just a collegial gesture, however, and I got used to it.

## ***A Willing US Partner***

In Laos, the station had been obliged to conduct a search for Vang Pao before it was able to discuss a working relationship. In Cambodia, Kosem was the one who took the initiative. He had been assigned by Prince Sihanouk to work with the North Vietnamese in the transport of Chinese munitions being sent to the Viet Cong in the Mekong Delta region of South Vietnam. Sihanouk was now gone, and the Lon Nol government had cut the connection with Hanoi. Like the leaders of so many tribal minorities, Kosem was always alert to the possibility of outside support for him and his people. At the moment, the only such prospect was the United States, which now had a military representation at the embassy in Phnom Penh. Using that conduit, he volunteered to give CIA the records of all the Chinese munitions and supplies sent to the Viet Cong through Cambodia.

Kosem could not have known that a highly contentious debate on precisely that subject had been roiling the Intelligence Community for the previous three years. CIA had adopted a relatively conservative model for estimating the quantities being delivered, while the Department of Defense had insisted that the evidence pointed to a far higher volume of traffic. Headquarters jumped at the opportunity to settle the issue once and for all and sent its most knowledgeable analyst to work with Kosem's officer to decipher all the Cambodian script. The result was an embarrassed CIA. The Pentagon's estimates, much larger than ours, were also much more accurate. Ours were revealed to have been the product of flawed assumptions about transportation facilities through Cambodia and about projected Viet Cong logistic requirements.<sup>a</sup>

Nevertheless, the episode was an intelligence coup in which Kosem had demonstrated both his access to information of high value and his willingness to share it with us. His first Agency contact, Bob Bodroghy, had left Phnom Penh before my arrival, so I walked in on Kosem, unannounced, and, simply by mentioning Bob's name, found I had an eager partner in a collection program against both Cambodian and Vietnamese communists. As I had done with Kouroudeth, I adapted my Laotian formula, using even smaller teams that, where possible, exploited Cham villages for support and security.

Kouroudeth had startled me with his casual willingness to leave full control of radio communications in my hands. I would have expected him, as chief of FANK intelligence, to take a more proprietary approach, but he did not even ask how I proposed to deliver the product to him. Kosem was less of a surprise. Our intelligence interests were identical, and what I assumed to be his essential objective for

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a. I addressed this topic in a monograph published in 2004, "Good Questions, Wrong Answers." It is available, though in heavily redacted form, at [cia.gov](http://cia.gov), FOIA Electronic Reading Room under "Vietnam Histories."

the collaboration—US support for the protection of Cham interests—reinforced his interest in cooperating with us. Even he had surprises for me, however. He occasionally volunteered privileged information on the Lon Nol government, some of it critical enough to be brought to National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger's attention. On one occasion, before a visit to Phnom Penh by the Commander-in-Chief Pacific (CINCPAC), Kosem spontaneously furnished us the talking points that Prime Minister Lon Nol intended to raise. Although Kosem had treated it as a routine feature of our collaboration, CINCPAC was duly impressed.

Order-of-battle reporting, almost all of which came from Kosem and Kouroudeth, was less likely than high-level meeting agendas to reach policymakers' desks. Nevertheless, it filled gaps, especially at the tactical level, and facilitated both military and civilian field planning.

I had only one opportunity in Cambodia to recruit an agent for direct guidance by the station. One morning, while sitting at my desk, writing up that morning's intelligence take, I got a call from the lobby saying that a uniformed Cambodian was asking to see me. He turned out to be an Army intelligence sergeant I had met in passing at Kouroudeth's office, and I invited him to sit down in the otherwise empty waiting room. He wanted to voice his alarm about the deteriorating military situation, going on at length about the reverses being inflicted on FANK by communist forces.

The sergeant said that he was about to be transferred to Siem Reap, the city near Angkor Wat, and he seemed disposed to work for the station when he got there. I was already getting a little nervous about spending so much time with him in a public—if still quiet—place, so I merely said I'd like to see him again. We made arrangements for me to pick him up that evening at an intersection a block or so from the commercial district, far enough to have little traffic but not so far as to make a foreigner conspicuous.

In our first meeting at my house, the sergeant reiterated his pessimism about the Army's performance and implicitly asked what he could do and how I could help him. I responded by describing the importance of intelligence on enemy activity, plans and capabilities and by asking if he would undertake to help me fill some of the gaps that were impeding our planning. Communication would be crucial, so, if he were to be of significant help, he would have to let me train him as a radio operator and provide regular reporting.

The reaction was enthusiastic, and I promptly arranged to get a communications instructor sent to Phnom Penh. I was aware of the obstacles to success in such an extemporaneous enterprise. The location and duties of the sergeant's assignment remained unknown, and even his access to enough privacy to prepare and send messages was not guaranteed. Furthermore, he had no training in CIA reporting,

and there would be no time to give it to him. I knew there would be a lot of back and forth with him to clarify individual reports, but a productive, controlled source in northern Cambodia—someone explicitly working on our behalf—could make a qualitative improvement in our intelligence on the area, hence the high priority that Headquarters assigned to supporting the effort.

Communications training went smoothly at first, with the sergeant always on time (a virtue not to be taken for granted, in the Third World) and always receptive to instruction. Then, in a freak accident on an embassy staircase one morning, I damaged a knee seriously enough to prevent me from driving. (I had a driver but using him in an operation undeclared to his government was out of the question.) I had scheduled the next training session for that very evening, and it was up to Gisela to save the day. She had some trepidation about finding on a dark corner someone she'd never seen before—I would have questioned her judgment if she hadn't—but I briefed her on the pick-up point and the man's appearance, and we worked out a quick explanation in French for my absence. She found him with no difficulty and drove him to the house, where he and the instructor completed a productive session. He attained adequate proficiency with the radio gear before his transfer north.

What did not go well was the operational phase. The sergeant and I had worked out a fully detailed contact plan that included alternative times, but our commo center never heard a peep from him. I don't think his own service caught him, as Kouroudeth would surely have complained about my out-of-school maneuverings. Maybe he simply couldn't find a place to set up the radio. There was also the possibility that a man who had seemed almost passionately motivated had simply lost heart. After John and I left in 1972, Headquarters mandated the stationing of officers in several regional FANK command posts. They presumably made similar efforts; I hope they had better results.

### ***Life in Phnom Penh with Family***

When my family and I were reunited in Phnom Penh in 1970, living conditions were a strange mixture of scarcity and near-luxury. The family quarters of all embassy officers were situated within a mile of the Presidential Palace in the neighborhood in which Sihanouk's coterie and other upper-class Cambodians had lived until he was ousted. Now, nervous about their future, they were all gone, mostly to France. Our house had a modest number of rooms, but the marble walls and floors, which were everywhere including the bathrooms, bespoke its owner's affluence.

Local wage rates, like those in other Third World countries, were low enough to permit us to employ household staff. In both Laos and Cambodia, the domestic help in foreigners' homes was almost exclusively Vietnamese. We found a cook and a



maid, both of whom were competent and a delight to deal with. The 1965 bombing of the Saigon embassy had prompted the assignment of a local driver to those officers serving in Indochina whose work called for stops at unprotected sites. Mouon (a Cambodian and therefore an exception to the rule about domestics' nationality) was with us until we left; he was then picked up by my successor.

When we arrived, the US military presence in Phnom Penh consisted only of the defense attaché and his modest staff. As a consequence, we had no access to the post exchanges or commissary facilities common in posts with major US military presence. Never one to tolerate inactivity, Gisela joined with another embassy wife to establish a small embassy commissary that stocked items such as canned food, toiletries, tobacco, and beverages, both hard and soft.

Most of our food came from the local market, and some of it, especially the fruits and vegetables, was superb (anyone who has not eaten a tree-ripened mango has not lived). Eggs were another matter entirely. In Cambodia, as elsewhere in Indochina, chickens are fed with fish, and the resulting taste is something that we never learned to tolerate. Gisela's solution was the acquisition of a clutch of Australian laying hens, which promptly took over the front yard. That meant, over time, no grass, and our Cambodian landlord would surely have deplored the way the place looked during our tenure. The feathers literally flew when one of the hens became the target of bullying by the others; they pecked at her until our cook put her out of her misery.

Entertainment facilities were among the scarcities. I can't remember seeing a movie theater in this national capital, and the golfers among us (I was not one of them) had not so much as a nine-hole course. The local zoo, no longer the Royal Zoo, but now the zoo of the Democratic Republic, had a modest collection of animals, and one Sunday afternoon we took Christine to see it. The only memorable animals were the elephants, a few of which were tethered so close to visitors that they could easily have reached us with their trunks. None of them did, but one took notice of us by blowing us the foulest-smelling breath we'd ever encountered.

### *The State of Security*

All local staff were subject to security checks, of course, but the reliability of those searches depended on the diligence of the local police and was always a matter of uncertainty. I don't know of any security incidents attributable to betrayal by local employees in any of the three countries in which I served during the Second Indochina War—the local work forces throughout Indochina were remarkably loyal to their American employers—but it seems impossible that there were none. Whether those in Vietnam received comparable consideration when the evacuation

began in 1975 is a separate question. The reluctance of Ambassador Martin and COS Thomas Polgar to reveal even a hint of American pessimism about the outcome delayed what could have been timely preparations for the departure of both US officials and their Vietnamese staffs.

I think it's fair to say that Foreign Service officers over the years have displayed reluctance to accept that bad things can and do happen to US facilities and people. A risk denied is a risk accepted, however, and the absence of a serious security program in Phnom Penh reflected the same attitude that had allowed the attack on the Saigon embassy in 1964. CIA's history has not been significantly better in its own area of responsibility, but, with respect to embassy security, that would include only such intelligence as might come to hand. Nevertheless, when the Khmer Rouge began shelling Phnom Penh in 1971, the attack generated some CIA and State Department concern about the security of staff and their families.

The frequency of these attacks—sporadic and scattered—did not seem to any of us, me included, enough to justify evacuating all families, and our response reflected this irresolute frame of mind. In late 1971, I think it was, the embassy assigned a civilian Cambodian guard to each residence. They were all unarmed, more like watchmen, and on duty only during the day. The one assigned to Gisela, Christine, and me became a regular fixture, watching the street from our front veranda. He seemed to welcome the company of Christine, who was not yet three when we moved to Phnom Penh, and we would hear the two of them conversing in what to us was just babble but must to them have been easy communication. She had already learned to banter with the household staff, and before long she knew at least as much Cambodian, Vietnamese, and kitchen French as she did English.

Shared danger promotes brotherhood, at least up to a point, and Phnom Penh Station confirmed that rule in spades. No one pulled rank, and we were all reminded it was Friday afternoon when COS John Stein would appear with the vacuum cleaner and proceed to clean the station's floors while the rest of us processed the morning's intelligence take. Morale was further enhanced by Washington's increasingly cordial reception of our intelligence product. Although it may have smacked a little of gamesmanship, we took advantage of the 12-hour time difference between the Phnom Penh and Washington to get most of our reports to Headquarters quickly enough for them to be received and distributed on the day before the Phnom Penh transmission date. Bill Nelson, chief of FE Division, was reported to have called Phnom Penh the best of all his stations. It was certainly the best I ever worked in; not even Laos, perhaps because of its much larger staff, matched its harmony and efficiency.

The station reflected John's irreverence toward bureaucratic niceties. Because of its small size, it required a disproportionate amount of assistance from TDYers, and on one occasion, this gave John the opportunity to treat Headquarters to a

demonstration of the station's independent spirit. At one point, we had with us two such visitors, both named Stein. Some kind of emergency at Headquarters prompted a cable to the station with a request to communicate with "TDYer Stein." Neither was in the station that morning, but John thought he knew which one was meant and sent someone to get him back to the embassy. This took some time, as he was working with our Cambodian liaison somewhere outside of town. When the man finally read the cable, he saw that it was in fact intended for the other Stein, John. The confusion resembled a Marx brothers' skit, and Headquarters reproached the station for the delay. John answered with a quasi-apology that ended, "Anyway, in Phnom Penh, a Stein is a Stein is a Stein." Whether or not his Headquarters correspondent got the allusion to Gertrude remains unknown, but there were no more reproaches.

Station and embassy morale was put to the test one Sunday afternoon in late September 1971, when two embassy softball teams, one military and one civilian, met on a vacant lot a few blocks from the mission. As I reconstructed it later, Gisela, Christine, and I were just approaching Phnom Penh's Pochentong airport, returning from a few days of R&R in Hong Kong, when two terrorists on a motorbike paused to fling hand grenades onto the playing field. The explosions killed a Marine security guard, a member of the Army attache's office, and local girl, in addition to wounding others. John Stein, a former member of the Yale team who was pitching for the civilians, escaped injury. The incident illustrated the powerful urge to deny risk when effective defensive measures are not at hand. I experienced it again in Tehran as anti-American feeling metastasized before the seizure of the embassy and its entire staff in 1979.

The shelling of Phnom Penh continued and, although obviously conducted without any forward observers, was obviously intended for the compound of the Presidential Palace. This meant that there was also some danger to the embassy housing in its vicinity. As in Siem Reap, FANK seemed unable even to locate the communist firing positions, let alone silence them. The resulting sense of being under siege was reinforced by the distant thumping of aerial bombs directed at North Vietnamese forces located to the east, toward the border with South Vietnam.

The tension increased with the addition of a new dimension to the security situation. Up the street from our house was a *lycée* whose students were beginning to emulate South Vietnamese students in their opposition to military government. It ended in gunfire one day, and I had to dash out and haul in Christine, who was playing in the front yard.

In mid-1972, instructions finally came from Washington to evacuate all embassy families—I don't remember there being any nonofficial Americans left in Cambodia at that point. This followed anxious deliberations by Ambassador Emory Swank and the Department of State as they tried to judge whether the risk to the families' safety

would outweigh the effect of their departure on Cambodian confidence in the US commitment. As usual in such circumstances, the embassy emphasized indigenous morale, and it was Washington that pulled the plug. Gisela and Christine flew to Germany, leaving me with a couple of months remaining in my tour of duty.

### ***Promoted to DCOS***

At this point, DCOS Harry Slifer had already left Phnom Penh, and John had asked that I replace him. The new title had two effects. One was the universally dreaded task of writing performance reports on other members of the station. The other was mandatory attendance at the daily embassy staff meeting whenever John was absent. The latter seemed at times an almost empty exercise. The younger of my Foreign Service colleagues used the occasion to display their command of State Department jargon with knowing references to “*tranches*” (French for “slices”) of foreign aid being delivered to the Phnom Penh government. Ambassador Swank, a genial enough man, was by no stretch of the imagination a forceful manager, and time that could have been devoted to planning and coordinating the mission’s activities was given over to chitchat about personalities, usually one or another of the embassy’s Cambodian counterparts.

All of the station’s contacts lived in Phnom Penh, and there seemed no need to seek new access to lesser officials in the provinces. Later, after John and I left, new management adopted some of the practices that I had helped develop in South Vietnam, installing resident case officers at the regional level. Meanwhile, I broke the pattern with a return visit to Siem Reap and Angkor Wat, eight years after Gisela and I had visited. The FANK officers I met there were cordial but not very open in their remarks about the tactical situation.

I got a hint of the reason for this reticence at the lunch served in the hotel dining room. The food was French—apparently standard practice for the local FANK staff—and, when we began to hear the thump of incoming artillery—perhaps mortar—rounds, I couldn’t help but think that we resembled the officers of an occupying army, strong enough to protect the amenities of urban life but challenged by a resistance force in the countryside. My hosts reinforced this impression by assuring me that the communists were always doing that and that there had been no damage or casualties. There was not a word about the enemy’s composition or strength or about any plans to silence his artillery, let alone to clear the area of communist forces.

In retrospect, I regret not having given Headquarters the benefit of my experience in Siem Reap. Having witnessed the decay of the allied position while I was still in Vietnam and aware of its similarity to what I was now seeing, I should have

commented on the apparent passivity of the FANK regional command and the resulting implications for the outcome of the war. I didn't. Despite my self-image as an independent thinker, I had bought into the DO's team-player culture enough to hesitate to rock the boat. Would it have mattered if I'd tried? No, at least in the short term, but it might have helped over time to encourage a greater working-level disposition to tell truth to power.

My tour in Cambodia ended in late 1972 in a setting very similar to that in Vietnam in 1965. The scale of American military and economic aid—though not, in this case, American troops—was accelerating even as the reverses inflicted on the Lon Nol government made its survival look more and more problematic. This holding action kept the regime alive until 1975, when it went the way of South Vietnam and Laos.

The ensuing Khmer Rouge bloodbath took Col. Kouroudeth among so many others, but Les Kosem survived, for the time being. He had complained to me about sinus distress, which he feared might be cancer, and I had brought in one of our physicians to examine him. The doctor saw no need for lab tests and proclaimed Kosem to have some insignificant problem, perhaps an allergy. Kosem died of a sinus cancer a couple of years later, and I wondered if his examination had represented best medical practice.

My driver, Mouon, fared better. Taking matters into his own hands, he somehow got himself and his family onto an evacuation helicopter at the last moment. They eventually wound up in northern Virginia, where his last boss in Phnom Penh, my successor as DCOS, sponsored him for Agency employment. Mouon eventually became the driver for a series of senior officials, including a DDO, before his own retirement.



## Chapter Nine

### *JOTP, West Africa, National War College, 1973–79*

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Nothing, it seemed to me then, could have been further from the operationally oriented work so prized in the DO culture and by me personally, and I felt that personnel management had gone overboard to make their point. They could, I thought, at least have put me on a DO staff. To my considerable surprise, the job developed into a challenging and fruitful experience that kept me absorbed for the next two-and-a-half years.







The National War College offered a respite from the stress of the operational tempo I had been experiencing in Africa. Its program of studies also opened a window to me post-retirement career as a contract historian.

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## ***Return to the States***

As my departure from Phnom Penh approached, Headquarters followed its usual, sometimes pro forma, practice of asking my preference for the next assignment. There was, at the time, only one reliable route to advancement for an operations officer, namely, becoming a chief of station. As I was still a GS-14, the only reasonable prospect was a small post in Africa or perhaps Latin America. I consulted with Gisela, who questioned whether assignment to a small station in a backwater country would be either interesting or career enhancing. I had no doubt about the selflessness of her concern; she had always been comfortable with so-called “hardship posts” and was in any case never timid about expressing her views. The COS pot of gold at the end of the rainbow still beckoned, however, and I followed my impulse.

The answer came back in a week or two: Headquarters would be pleased to name me the next chief of station in a small West African country. That was when the pot of gold lost its luster. I suddenly had visions of searching a miserable, landlocked backwater of no intrinsic intelligence value in which I would look for a Soviet or Red Chinese embassy official—probably a low-ranking misfit—willing to entrust his life to me in return for the promise of freedom from communist tyranny.

Gisela might have welcomed an environment more comfortable than she was likely to find in that country, but she did not applaud my change of heart. She had experienced enough bureaucracy in the German foreign service and in CIA to know that one does not reject the offer of something culturally revered—however trivial in a particular case—without paying a price. I decided to pay the price and turned down the offer. The result was my assignment to the staff of the Junior Officer Training Program, the same program that had hired me 18 years earlier. Nothing, it seemed to me then, could have been further from the operationally oriented work so prized in the DO culture and by me personally, and I felt that personnel management had gone overboard to make their point. They could, I thought, at least have put me on a DO staff. To my considerable surprise, the job developed into a challenging and fruitful experience that kept me absorbed for the next two-and-a-half years.

Once installed in the JOTP offices in Arlington, I encountered Don Gregg, an acquaintance from our time in Tokyo, who was performing some kind of advisory function with the Office of Training while assigned to the National Security Council.

Only a few years older than I, Don had benefited from CIA's rapid early expansion and was now considerably senior to me. (In 1982, he became national security advisor to then Vice-President George H. W. Bush, in which capacity, he had the misfortune of being involved in the notorious Iran-Contra affair). Always a helpful and gracious colleague, Don devoted substantial time to persuading me that being directed to help hire the future generation of operations officers and improve the process of doing so was an opportunity, not a curse. Knowing him to have an unusually broad outlook on our profession—and wanting, of course, to be persuaded that I was embarking on something useful—I listened with a degree of openness others might not have inspired.

Don deplored the DO's obsession with agent recruitments and the accompanying neglect of the health of the organization running them. He thought that, among other things, this had resulted in the abdication of personnel matters to the offices of personnel and training, which he thought were dangerously unfamiliar with the DO's unique requirements. In the area of case officer acquisition, the DO had adopted a practice of detailing two people to the JOTP staff to interview case officer candidates but was otherwise passive, neither specifying required qualifications nor judging program results against DO needs. Don was about to leave for the White House, and he was clearly trying to leave behind someone who shared his aspirations for the program's development. As I was the senior of the two DO program officers, he elected to put the pressure on me.

The JOTP chief, John Hopkins, though a permanent member of the Office of Training, had some DO experience—a tour in a Middle East station—and had a good sense for candidates who could work in the DO. As a trained academic with a Ph.D., however, he seemed most comfortable with potential analysts. The program hired for all four directorates, but it did substantially more for the DO than for the others, which relied more on direct hires. I soon discovered that, despite its emphasis on the DO, the program lacked any systematic guide to the evaluation of prospects for operations. The OSS-era psychological assessment tool was still there, and we saw its reports, but there were only rough estimates of some essential qualities—depth of interest in our work, adaptability to foreign climes, potential as a recruiter and handler of agents, and so forth.

Program officers like me, case officers had no experience or training in personnel acquisition, had to rely on their own experience as they tried to judge the potential of prospective colleagues. We were not, of course, trying to compete with the psychologists' expertise; we were working in the even more abstruse areas of adaptability and motivation and doing so with no expert knowledge. It seemed to me that knowing what our predecessors thought they had learned would increase our chances of



producing useful judgments. I therefore took it on myself to assemble such recollections as I could find and did a series of essays on how to get the most out of interviews.

One of the salient points that came out of this was the danger of accepting an applicant whose exceptional qualities in one or two important areas tended to obscure possibly disqualifying weaknesses. I don't mean things like intelligence or mental stability or financial probity; these were the province of psychologists and polygraph operators. Things like finding the depth of an applicant's interest in a career in intelligence were also important and sometimes defied determination by both specialists and program officers. I discovered a tendency among some program officers—perhaps even more pronounced among their Office of Training supervisors under pressure to meet hiring quotas—to invoke the mantra, “But he speaks *native Chinese!*” This would, for example, be used to rebut evidence of inability to adapt to difficult living conditions or to the prospect of making a living exploiting the weaknesses of an agent prospect on the way to recruitment.

Assignments of DO officers to administration of the JOTP were usually dead-end affairs that led only to retirement. That was one reason for the dismay mine had provoked. It turned out, however, that, when Bill Nelson exiled me from East Asia (EA) Division<sup>a</sup>, he did not intend it as an unconditional dismissal or even as rejection for promotion prospects. It took another two years—Bill had been replaced by the renowned Ted Shackley—but I was still with the program when EA Division promoted me to GS-15. In those days, that was regarded as a fairly substantial achievement, even for someone working in the sponsoring component, which at the time I was not.

With respect to recognition for a self-assigned task, my main satisfaction with my work came several years later, when I met an officer who had also completed a tour with the program. Like me, he had developed an interest in what we now call “lessons learned,” in this case the accumulated insights of DO program officers. He too had set out to collect whatever testimony he could find that in his judgment was worth preserving. He found, he said, that I had written nearly all of it. My efforts to develop a conceptual basis for judging applicants for case officer positions turned out to be of longer-term utility than I would have guessed when I returned to personnel management after my sojourn in Iran.

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a. In 1973, the Directorate of Plans had been renamed the Directorate of Operations and FE Division was renamed East Asia Division.

### *Looking Again at Africa*

Near the end of 1974, with no new assignment in sight, I went to see John Stein, then chief of Africa (AF) Division. I had by then belatedly learned that the personnel system was not a precision machine and that human intervention was a major factor. John was characteristically cordial and, more than that, disposed to give me what I wanted, a COS assignment. He offered me the leadership of one of his division's larger stations. Although it was only a little bigger than the one in Cambodia during my time there, its significance was enhanced by the relative economic importance of the country and its possession of substantial oil reserves. I was delighted.

My family and I arrived there in mid-1975 and encountered a world utterly foreign even to someone like me, with 11 years of overseas service that included several months in Congo/Kinshasa. Even the claustrophobic subway stations of Tokyo could not match the sense of being overwhelmed by the masses of people in this capital city. Where the Japanese managed their huge urban population with a system of rigid social protocols, these residents seemed to revel in a kind of willed civic anarchy.

Civil order existed of course, but it was one that sprang from tribal affiliations and family loyalties, an organizing principle hard for foreigners to see. My only exposure to it had come when the national police member of the ruling military committee invited Gisela and me to his house for dinner. His wife would serve it, and the children ate with us. Otherwise, we tended to think of the social mores we encountered more in terms of the conventions assumed in the following scenario. You approach an intersection, and an oncoming driver flashes his lights. Is that the equivalent of waving you on? Yes, sometimes. At other times, however, it is an assertion of right of way followed by a left turn in front of you. A foreigner has to learn to calculate the infinitesimal yet varying differences in distances and closing speeds that seem to determine such decisions. Caution was therefore always well advised. While we were there, a foreign contractor installed a system of traffic lights, all of which were still flashing yellow when we left. We wondered whether even a functioning system would alleviate the endemic traffic jams caused as much by the people overrunning the streets as by motor vehicles.

We got a demonstration of the country's political style only a couple of weeks after our arrival, when an Army faction seized power. Information on this country's domestic politics had not, at least in the recent past, been a priority for the Agency, and it had no sources with useful access at the time. I therefore had no advance warning of the coup, but Headquarters did not complain that all I was able to report was the atmospherics.

My home and that of my deputy were both part of an enormous housing project built by another foreign contractor some years earlier. The living experience was much the same for both of our families: chronic power outages, irregular water supply, and a garbage collection service whose trucks appeared only at New Year's. At that time, jammed with singing workers we had not seen all year, they would make their rounds, expecting the tips that would keep their goodwill until the cycle repeated itself. My deputy's house had a colorful waterfront view that also overlooked the slow currents that occasionally carried along the floating bodies of victims of accidents or violence.

Gisela and I kept my predecessor's house staff, and, except for the utilities issue, we were seldom really uncomfortable. Water had to be boiled, of course, and fresh vegetables disinfected, but we ate at local restaurants with no serious aftereffects. Christine suffered the only mishap, and this became evident only after the end of my tour and our return to Washington. At that point, she produced a giant tapeworm, probably picked up at the International School, that her mother disposed of.

As we had done in the Philippines, we acquired a dog from a departing colleague. Heidi was perhaps more affectionate and more cognitively challenged than most beagles. She once managed to fall off the 2nd story balcony. Although she somehow avoided injury, she did not necessarily become any more alert to her surroundings.

### ***Another Lesson in Speaking Truth to Power***

The capital city hosted embassies from the major communist countries, and I would eagerly have accepted local support for technical collection operations against any of their installations, especially Soviet or Chinese. Our chief contact, the police chief, directed internal security matters as well as criminal justice. In that capacity, he controlled the resources needed to protect such activity. I spent as much time as seemed prudent trying to talk him into helping me, but I didn't succeed. I didn't really expect to, because at the time the country's leaders were concerned about their position elsewhere on the continent. Angola had just achieved independence from Portugal under a Marxist-Leninist government immediately challenged by two rebel groups, one supported by the United States and one associated with the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The leaders there did not want to take sides, at least publicly, and any exposure of clandestine cooperation with CIA would have been embarrassing.

Nevertheless, I was on the record with the police chief about our interests, and it seemed to me that, if something I might do unilaterally were to be exposed, he would at least not feel blindsided. In addition, I was not without resources. When I



arrived, we had some agents with good access to the Communist Bloc countries of greatest interest at the time, but they had not led anywhere.

There being no indication that our activity against communist targets troubled the authorities in this country, I thought it only sensible to try to get what we could out of past efforts to lay the groundwork for recruitments. We would examine what we knew about the people in the Soviet mission and coordinate the tasking of our access agents to understand better those who seemed worthy of cultivating. Given its delicacy, this process took several months. In time, we began to focus on a possibility and set about trying to evaluate his vulnerability to a recruitment pitch and what we would gain if it succeeded. We duly reported all this to AF Division, which loved it.

Our reporting included knowledge about the man's standing with his superiors, which was as low as his regard for them. We became convinced that we were dealing with a psychological disaster looking for a place to happen. I cabled AF Division with our findings and, although ready for some pushback, was startled by the almost frantic tone of the response. Perhaps I should not have been surprised; it now seems to me likely that the DO's traditional timidity about approaching ten-foot-tall communist bloc targets had made any apparent low-hanging fruit just too tempting to resist. If necessary, Headquarters insisted, a station officer should just knock on the man's door and make a pitch on the spot.

In my judgment, the likely fallout vastly outweighed the probability that the man would have the qualities that would make such a case worth the unavoidable risks: self-discipline, a serious commitment to working with us, and a career that gave him access to protected information. None of these could be fully tested except in practice, but I saw little reason to believe that he would display any of them, let alone all. AF Division did not rebut my argument and did not order me to proceed, but it made plain its resentment at my stance on the issue. In the end, we in the station simply returned to the search for a more promising prospect.

The main lesson for me was that I had a lot to learn about conveying truth to power without antagonizing it—perhaps even about picking which truth to convey. In this case, I would have been hard pressed to reconcile acquiescence with my professional conscience.

### *Working the Soviet Bloc Target*

Other station operations against Bloc targets boasted more promising agent material. While I was still reading agent files at Headquarters, I was struck by one that described a diplomat of the country, then in the capital, who had ostensibly been recruited in the United States. He had also studied in the Soviet Union. The record was full of promises from him to his case officers and from the latter to

Headquarters about his desire and ability to exploit his diplomatic access on our behalf. The record also described the disappointing results of his return to the capital: little useful reporting and a rather casual attitude toward appearing at scheduled meetings.

This putative agent—I'll call him Wisp—was taking no payment, so I had no leverage there. He was, however, interested enough to maintain contact, irregular though it might be, and I thought his obvious potential merited more calculated handling than he seemed to be getting. A recurring theme in his agent file was repeated case officer invocations of the evils of world communism as a motivating device. Reminders of his duty to help defend the Free World were not inconsistent with his declared values but were having no visible effect. I decided to try my hand at finding some other way to reach him.

It took several meetings over a period of months, during which I too encountered his rather casual attitude toward making our meetings, to make a diagnosis. He was certainly as anti-communist as the next man; his student days in the USSR had disabused him of its claims to represent the working class. What revealed his motivation, however, was the glee he displayed when talking, say, about having maneuvered a colleague or a Soviet contact into disclosing classified information. I came to realize that he was a thrill-seeker, someone who got deep satisfaction from outwitting people in a game they didn't know they were playing.

My task, if I was right about Wisp, was to present myself as a teammate in his game without revealing my manipulative purpose. He responded as I hoped, and visitors from Headquarters later told me he'd become one of the division's prime producers on the Soviet target. Our implicit agreement expanded one night at my house. I was still hedging about levying requirements, but he saw what I was doing and interrupted me to say that he'd give me whatever I wanted.

Tasking became easier, and we worked for several months on expanding his access. Then, suddenly, Wisp announced that he was being transferred abroad and AF Division continued to track him there.

I regretted Wisp's departure. He was not just the source of the station's best reporting but also very satisfying to work with. He was responsive and imaginative, although, as already mentioned, a bit unpredictable. When he left, I took some consolation in the thought that I had succeeded in consummating the recruitment of an agent who had previously been no more than a developmental contact, however he might have been labeled in his file.

It turned out I was wrong. Although my handling of the case may have deserved AF Division's later description as "exceptionally strong," Wisp was still not a recruited agent. Incomparably more productive than before, he was at heart still the

willful little boy doing what pleased him. Whether it was a lack of empathy between him and his new case officer or something as banal as difficulty in arranging meetings, the contact lapsed, and Headquarters sent me to see if I could revive it. There were no emergency contact arrangements with Wisp, and I set up a meeting via the dubious device of a phone call to his office. Wisp was cordial when we met, offering apologies and assurances of reform, but so far as I know never followed through.

The case revealed the irony in my skepticism about the doctrine of rapport as the key to agent recruitment. If anything had turned Wisp into a productive source, it was surely our rapport, although not in the naïve sense of personal friendship or gratitude for material favors. Rather, I had been able to satisfy his psychological needs well enough to win his active cooperation in what we treated as a joint endeavor. When circumstances changed, so did his attitude toward his association with us.

### *On Political and Economic Issues*

Although Communist Bloc targets were of primary interest, political and economic stability was also of interest. At the time, we had no agents with first-hand policy-level access, but I had inherited an unusual case, one involving someone who worked in a high-level military deliberative body. He had no direct exposure to its discussions but provided documents that described its meetings.

The agent's case officer had recently left, and I thought his young and unimpressive replacement not ready to take over a sensitive operation. In addition, as had been the case with Wisp, there were unanswered questions about intelligence production. If he oversaw the files, why were we getting such fragmentary reporting? I decided to take over the case and at one of our first meetings raised the question of access. The agent then surfaced an arrangement previously unknown to the station: He was not the man who actually handled the files. It was a friend of his, or a relative, I forget which, who had the direct, physical access; our asset, it turned out, was not much more than a courier. The inside man was naturally already aware of the operation, and the obvious course was just to include him in our meetings. The agent was confident he would agree, and in due course—I must first have gotten him an operational approval—the man began joining us.

The question of a meeting site was already a delicate one. The tone of the relationship—the rapport—was essentially irrelevant as were political and ideological motivation. Money was their sole driver, and I wanted to minimize my exposure to them. I didn't have to acknowledge my distrust of their motivation to raise the issue, and after lengthy discussion we decided to hide in plain sight—although only at night, of course—on one of the country's ocean-front recreational areas. The agents

found one that was as deserted at night as the city streets were teeming during the day, and it became our meeting site.

The next stage involved exploiting our presumably expanded access. Copying documents and carrying them out was not, they assured me, an option, so I suggested photography. That got a more favorable reception, and in due course I supplied them with a suitably small camera and film. The results continued to disappoint. Their photography was fuzzy and the content, when legible, often too bland to merit reporting as intelligence. Refining and repeating my requirements usually got the response that what they were giving me on a given subject was all the files contained.

I was still working to improve production at the end of my tour. It was possible but seemed unlikely that the two were holding out on me, as the material they did give me was already enough to get them into grievous trouble if the theft were discovered. Another possibility was that they were right and that I was getting all there was in a culture accustomed to word-of-mouth transmission of information and indifference to record-keeping. I never discovered the actual reason but did learn something about the limitations of technology as a solution to problems of access.

Although not very productive, our meetings proceeded without incident until an abortive coup d'état, the second of my tenure, called into question the security of our rendezvous site, even at night. The author of the coup was himself assassinated. Those who had joined him were rounded up over a period of several nights in areas such as the one we had used for meetings and summarily executed. These arrests were broadcast on state television, which revealed a scene just like the site of my meetings.

### ***Working with Liaison***

In the absence of any joint operations, I cultivated our liaison with this country's national police mainly to preserve a cooperative atmosphere in case a unilateral case should be compromised. On occasion, however, the chief of national police would provide useful—in one case, blockbuster—intelligence.

The new communist-led (MPLA—People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola) government in Angola was vigorously soliciting diplomatic recognition around the world. Washington was equally eager to prevent this. It was in this atmosphere that the police chief called me to his home, where we always met, to tell me that the government was about to recognize the MPLA. The implied but clear message in using me, not the ambassador, as the channel for this announcement was that the leaders wanted to give us advance notice but did not want any discussion

with Washington. The decision was firm. My report sparked even more of a furor than I expected. The Department of State dispatched the ambassador to the Foreign Ministry on a weekend in a futile effort to forestall this communist victory. The ambassador had already displayed a certain reserve about clandestine intelligence—its value, maybe, or its morality—and, although the information itself was incontestable, this episode did nothing to make him more receptive.

Here in West Africa, my aspiration to master playing piano provided a bit of operational benefit. On this assignment, I had taken my piano and found a teacher, the wife of an embassy staffer. The hobby paid its modest dividends after I discovered that the British intelligence chief there was also a piano player and not much, if any, more proficient than I. Otherwise a rather difficult personality, he softened up perceptibly as we embarked on a regime of Mozart pieces arranged for piano four hands, and it seemed to me that the liaison relationship, a significant one because of the British legacy in that country, became perceptibly smoother.

Mention of the embassy reminds me of the way in which its working style resembled that in Phnom Penh, where the staff meetings had featured endless and, to my mind, aimless discussions of personalities and local trivia. In Cambodia, of course, there had been a war to be fought and serious matters to be taken up with the military regime. US interests in Africa were important but less urgent, and there were fewer obstacles to finding time for gossip.

In addition, the embassy staff lacked the strong leadership furnished in Phnom Penh by Deputy Ambassador Tom Enders. He was a tough-minded, no-nonsense diplomat, quite different from many of his Foreign Service colleagues, who exhibited a rather detached attitude toward the pursuit of US interests. In my African post, by contrast, the main objective seemed to be the preservation, more or less for its own sake, of cordial relations with the Foreign Ministry. Although certainly not a conscious policy of defending local preferences over our own, the emphasis seemed to me at best a rather feeble approach to Cold War diplomacy.

### *About an Onward Assignment*

Given my intransigence on the early Soviet recruitment case, I had burned my bridges with AF Division's leadership and could expect nothing by way of an interesting onward assignment. I was getting a little tense about the future when a book cable from Headquarters offered a year's study at either the Army War College or its Air Force equivalent. I was perfectly aware that, unlike some government components, the DO did not regard such appointments as a reward that signaled the rise of one's star. On the contrary, as it then seemed to me, the directorate's anti-intellectual



history led it to treat advanced schooling as, at least in part, a way to dispose of difficult personnel problems, and that is what I had become.

I recognize now, if I did not then, that the issue was more complicated. Unlike the military services, which emphasize career-long training, the Agency is continuously and nearly fully committed to its collection, covert action, and analytic functions. Its size, modest when compared to the military, does not encourage long-term investment in what may look like secondary, competing equities.

I had never shared the indifference to intellectual endeavor that then dominated the Agency, and, after more than 20 years in the trenches, the idea of a year of study at the strategic level was actually quite appealing. Aware of the DO's limited interest in the subject and the resulting shortage of competition, I decided to up the ante by making my acceptance contingent on an appointment to the National War College (NWC), preferable both for its broader perspective on national security matters and for its location in Washington. My calculation proved accurate. I was given the DO's NWC slot, and my family and I returned to the States in time to allow me to enter the class of 1977–78.

Instead of returning to Bethesda, which even then was at least a half-hour away from southwest Washington, we rented a town house on Maryland Avenue, close enough to Ft. McNair that I could jog to school and leave the car to Gisela. For my daughter, Christine, I found a Catholic primary school within easy driving distance. The director asked for documentation that she had been baptized, and with that the orderly progress of her education was assured. She was already accustomed to our peripatetic lifestyle and adjusted with no difficulty. Gisela became active in the association of student wives—there were just two women in my class of 160, and neither was married—and this helped greatly with our integration into NWC social life.

Ft. McNair's location at the confluence the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers, created an entirely appropriate university campus atmosphere at the base, which is home to the National Defense University, comprising the National War College and the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. NWC's Arnold Auditorium, a handsome amphitheater named for Air Force General "Hap" Arnold, hosted all-hands events, often guest speakers, and the regular classrooms accommodated the six or eight homerooms.

Once ensconced in Southwest DC, we had to get used to the nighttime cacophony of nearby public housing, which included the arrival of one or two screaming firetrucks almost every night. On one occasion, while walking toward the nearby Safeway, Gisela encountered a pistol-waving bandit fleeing the store, an experience she found somewhat unsettling. Despite these interruptions, life near Ft. McNair

was generally tranquil. The atmosphere on the campus was even more so, and I was promptly engaged in the academic program.

I had heard enough to know that the title “War College” was a bit misleading in its suggestion of a program devoted to the planning or conduct of warfare. In fact, the curriculum had practically nothing to do with warfare at the operational level, and I’d have been sorely disappointed if it had. What I expected and got was a broadly based, if compressed, graduate course in the political, diplomatic, and military aspects of international relations. The only serious omission was economics (shades of Notre Dame’s General Program!). The course content was admirably broad, much of it supplied by guest lecturers from various of the Washington area’s rich supply of universities and think tanks.

Numerous civilian academics supplemented the school’s military staff, and the best of both were truly excellent. As in almost any serious academic enterprise, we had to do a lot of writing. Some of my military colleagues found this a considerable challenge. An Army classmate whose name began with same letter as mine sat next to me throughout the program and drafted me into service as his editor. Civilian students were as a group more likely to be familiar with such requirements. As one of those, I could exploit the opportunity to refine my compositional style and learn something about the conduct of academic research at repositories such as the National Archives.

Course work sponsored by the George Washington University made up a substantial part of the program. Under George Washington University Professor Ken McDonald—a future chief of CIA’s History Staff—I took three courses in British and American diplomatic history, each requiring a substantial term paper. Because history had been another weak element of my undergraduate program at Notre Dame, I took special pleasure in Ken’s encyclopedic command of his subject and his emphasis on the influence of personality on the formation of both political and military strategy. His regard for the WW II leadership of Winston Churchill was especially appealing.

### *More Thoughts on Personnel Selection Processes*

One learns a lot about people through close association with them every workday for a year. I gradually realized that the selection standards of the individual services and departments were considerably different. The Air Force sent its best; their participation in class demonstrated a clarity of mind and interest in what the NWC had to offer that no other service or civilian department could equal. The Foreign Service may have been an exception, but the people it sent had the substantial advantage of a profession to which the NWC curriculum was more immediately relevant. It was

clear that the Army also took its selections seriously and, in so doing, contributed to the uninhibited debates that made the course both instructive and pleasurable.

The Navy contingent contained perhaps the most personable group of students in the entire student body, but promotion potential seemed not to have figured strongly in their selection. One was a former POW in Vietnam who made it explicit that he thought of his NWC appointment as recognition of his service; his approach to academic requirements was correspondingly relaxed. An important exception was a female officer who I believe was the only Navy member of our class to become an admiral. We shared the same homeroom, and our frequent seminars soon revealed that she had the best mind in the group.

Given the profound involvement of nonmilitary elements in the planning and conduct of warfare, it is not surprising that the NWC program called for civilian students. It did, however, startle me a little to find that we represented a full quarter of the student body. I once asked an Army member of the staff about this and was startled again at the vehemence of his reply. The point, he maintained, was to broaden the perspective of officers whose agenda at company- and field-grade level was far too restricted to enable them to meet the intellectual demands placed on flag rank officers.

In his view, the participation of civilian students was essential to a really instructive experience for our uniformed counterparts and the reason for our presence. I don't think he meant that his interest in our participation was merely instrumental and that military students were the only beneficiaries, but, even if he did, the experience remains one of the most valuable of my working life.

An important feature of the NWC curriculum was a study trip, either abroad or at a major military installation in the US. Having entered the NWC direct from a strenuous overseas tour, I had originally chosen a domestic itinerary, but I changed my mind rather late in the game and ended up in the group going to Vienna and Budapest.

Vienna was an education, or at least the introduction to one, in international diplomacy. Arms control negotiations with the USSR were then in progress, and we had a free-ranging session with Bruce Clarke (I think it was), who was leading the US delegation. His description of the US conceptual approach to arms control seemed to me to imply a zero-sum philosophy, with one party's gain being necessarily the other's loss. When I posed the question, one or two in my group made disapproving noises. Apparently, I was considered guilty of some heterodoxy, of questioning the basis for US policy. Whatever the case, Clarke responded with a lengthy, albeit what seemed to me, slightly stilted defense of the strategy's mutual benefits.

It would have been a foolish waste of an opportunity not to go to the opera while in Vienna. I no longer remember whether it took place at the Staatsoper or the Volksoper, but I do remember the performance of Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* for its overwhelming integration of plot, staging, and music. The transparency of the structure and intensity of the singing exceeded anything I had yet experienced and has only since been occasionally matched.

If I were to visit only one communist country, Hungary seemed likely to furnish the best exposure to genuinely held communist perspectives on the Cold War. In fact, our military hosts exuded cordiality. Nothing they said sounded like mere propaganda, and the relatively open atmosphere prompted me to ask a question about—as I recall—the ability of the military establishment to communicate bad news to its leadership.

I wanted to avoid giving the impression of being just a provocateur and took some pains to find the circumspect phrasing the occasion called for. Once again, my NWC colleagues got a little impatient with me, but our Hungarian military host engaged me on the point. He went no further than to acknowledge the limits of freedom of speech with one's seniors but gave the impression that the subject was of real interest. At the small reception before our departure, he approached me to say warmly that I would be welcome to return. I was left not knowing if I had succeeded in communicating on a delicate subject with this nominal adversary or whether I had come across, not as a provocateur, but as a naive soft touch.

### ***Back to Work: Near East Division***

Despite Ft. McNair's proximity to CIA Headquarters, I had no dealings with management during the school year, and, upon graduation in August 1978—after relocating our homestead to McLean, VA, a stone's throw from Headquarters—I had to find myself a job. Someone suggested the Near East Division as a likely starting point. After a little scouting around, I landed a job as branch chief for North Africa. The duties were considerably less demanding than the kinds of things the NWC had helped prepare me for. Indeed, they differed little from what I'd encountered in the Philippines Branch. There was the same atmosphere of operations officers interested mainly in getting back overseas.

A familiarization trip to Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco highlighted the differences among three countries that in my ignorance I had expected to be closely similar. There may have been a touch of confirmation bias in my reaction to Algiers, whose atmosphere somehow reminded me of communist Budapest. Neither Hungary nor Algeria looked like a fear-ridden police state, but the people of both did seem rather inhibited, and passersby lacked the spontaneity that I thought I had

seen in Rabat and Tunis. The latter featured the exuberant activity of retail markets that charmed me into making several purchases I could not easily afford. One of them, a large, richly embossed leather cushion, became an organic part of our household decor.

